

Different definitions of art and photography



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To test the validity of the statement ' All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. ' (Bazin 1967: 13), one has to first define what is meant by art. This commentary is going to examine this statement using three different definitions of art, Bazin's, Tolstoy's and Arnheim's definitions. Andre Bazin believed realism lies at the heart of art, and that art is the process of reproducing reality.

He believed that an artefact should ' helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death' (Bazin 1967: 10). He saw art as a way of immortalising mortal things; he compares painting and sculptures to the ancient practice of mummifying in Egypt, ' to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone' (Bazin 1967: 9).

I agree with this point that Bazin made, this power that artefacts possess, making long lasting legacies, can be seen all around us, take the great pyramid of Giza, built sometime before 2000 BC, was symbol of Pharaoh Khufu's power and greatness, and although Khufu and the society of ancient Egypt, as a whole, are long gone, their presence is still felt today through the pyramid. However it should be noted that many artefacts would lose their meaning if they are not accompanied with some kind of explanation, such as the Stonehenge, although a brilliant piece of art, no one knows what it stands for.

Therefore we can conclude that one cannot simply immortalise himself, so to speak, by creating a piece of art. Bazin explains that the only motive of plastic arts, at its creation, was to recreate reality, however they failed to do

so, and only produced an illusion, ' photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism' (Bazin 1967: 12), and therefore with the invention of this superior form of replication, the plastic arts should cease to exist.

Although this is an overstatement, as artists still make paintings and sculptures, there is some truth to it, since the invention of camera portraits, sculptures of men and realism in general, in plastic arts, has become less and less popular, and therefore now artists invest their energy towards other motives, which plastic arts can satisfy. For example before the invention of camera, a family would get a painter to draw a family portrait, so the family would not be forgotten in the future, however after cameras became common, a family would have their picture taken as it produces a more clear image.

Bazin also believed plastic arts are flawed, as they are the reproduction of an original subject based on the subjectivity of the artiste, and his interpretation of the object. Therefore a painting or a sculpture is a replacement for the object, where as a photograph is a detail for detail reproduction of the object, based on a non-living mechanism that does not influence the reproduction based on its subjective thoughts. Reproduction of an object through painting is based on the artiste's perception, and his ability of illustrating it.

It is influenced by his subjective mind and the decision he takes when recreating the object, the shade of colour he chooses, the size of brush he chooses or type of canvas he uses. At the end all we have is his expression

of the object and nothing more, where as photography is a relationship ' between the originating object and its reproduction, an intervention of only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. An image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. ' (Bazin 1967: 13).

Therefore a photograph produces objective reproduction of the object, where as a painting recreates the object with the influence of the painter and provides a replacement for the object. Forms of art, other than photography, are more about the artiste himself rather than object that is being reproduced. Artiste often use plastic art to express themselves rather than the object, therefore a painting is more about the artiste rather than the object. For example Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa tells us more about Da Vinci's ability to produce such a magnificent piece of art, than Lisa Gheradini, the woman in the painting.

Bazin would argue that the artiste can still express his personality in a picture, with the items he chooses to shoot, but in a photograph, as opposed to a painting, the central attraction remains the objects in the picture and not the artiste personality. ' A painting of a cart doesn't really refer to a cart but rather refers to the painters painting of a cart. The cart refers back to the painter and his paint,' (A. R. Duckworth, 2008) a photo, however, would offer a direct representation of the cart at that time.

Bazin fails to account for the editing and modification techniques that developed with the invention of photography. The artiste can use these techniques to alter the photograph, making the end result a subjective creation of his imagination; therefore a camera can too lie. This is where

photography can be considered risky, as opposed to other forms of art, people ' often accept cinematic worlds without question and often photos modified, or " photo-shopped", are accepted as true and real until people are promoted to believe otherwise' (A.

R. Duckworth, 2008), therefore one can be deceived by a modified photo, and believe it to be true, but a painting or a sculpture could never have the same effect, as we know they are the creation of the imagination of an artiste. An example of this kind of deception of modified photos is the pictures that were published in the Daily Mirror in 2004, where UK troopers were shown abusing Iraqi prisoners, if it wouldn't have been revealed that these pictures were false, no one would have doubted the genuineness of the stories.

Although modification of photos is possible, it is important to note that it is frowned upon amongst those who practice photography as an art, as the central idea behind the art of photography is realism, and being able to produce something that someone will look at later and admire. If we use Bazin's definition of art, a realistic recreation of an object or person, photography does benefit from an absence of man, as it is not influenced by minds of individuals, and produces an exact copy of the subject.

And although many artistes have tried to be as objective as possible, and have produced portraits of man and landscapes that resemble their subjects very closely, they still lack the clarity and detail that a photo can provide. The reason behind this is that no human brain can ever be as objective as a camera, as their illustrations is based on their perception and their view of

the world, which can differ from man to man. At the other end of spectrum lies Rudolf Arnheim definition of art, which states art is something that is a pure work of man.

For Arnheim a piece of work would have to be made by man in every sense, the idea and the production process, to be considered art. Arnheim also believed 'film will be able to reach the heights of the other arts only when it frees itself from the bonds of photographic reproduction and becomes a pure work of man, namely, as animated cartoon or painting' (Arnheim 1958: 175). Therefore he did recognise that film has the potential of becoming an art, however he believed it needed development in the sense that it should stop trying to re-create the world and it should start creating a world of its own from the imagination of the artists.

Arnheim's definition would suggest that photography is inferior to other art forms, as it is nothing more than a mechanical reproduction. In photography the artist's fingerprint is not felt, a very well captured photo of a bird does not make us wonder about the photographers ability, but it is the bird itself that takes our attention. A painter can express himself and the subject being drawn much more in a painting, than a photographer can through a photo. For example Jacques L.

David's famous 'Napoleon Crossing the Alps' painting makes us feel power that Napoleon possessed at the time, even if one doesn't know who he is, through the features of the painting, the roar of his horse, the determination on Napoleons face and the intimidating background, one can know that he was a man of great importance. A photographer, however, would have a

much harder time in making a photo that could have a similar effect, as real life is much harder to control than a brush on a canvas, to create a feeling. It is worth while to refute thoroughly and systematically the charge that photography and film are only mechanical reproduction and that they therefore have no connection with art' (Arnheim, Film as art: 9).

We can see that Arnheim did not see photography as art, however like Bazin, Arnheim ignored the processes of photo modification. Photo modification offers a way for the artiste to influence his work and express himself, same as a painting; the end result is, something that has come from the artiste's imagination, a pure work of man. However it still basis itself on photographic reproduction, therefore whether he would consider photo odification as an art form or not is arguable. If we use Arnheim's definition of art, a pure work of man, Bazin's statement would be invalid, and photography actually suffers a drawback from the absence of man. If art is pure work of man, a mechanical reproduction cannot be considered art, although modification techniques could be used to influence it, it still remains partially a mechanical process. The last definition of art comes from the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, who defined art as ' a microscope, which the artist fixes on the secrets of his soul, and shows to people these secrets. '(Tolstoy, 1917).

Tolstoy here argues that for something to be considered art, it must contain a sign of the artiste's personality. It seems that he suggests something, such as a family portrait, made to keep the memory of a family alive, would not be considered art. Unlike Bazin and Arnheim, Tolstoy does not judge the artefact based on the process that had been used to make it, rather he focuses on the way the artiste has chosen to express himself, as he believed

anything can be art, a book, a painting or a photograph, as long as the artiste makes his presence felt through the artefact, it is considered art.

However using this method, as guidelines on figuring what is art and what is not can be problematic, as the same piece of work can be interpreted in great many ways. For example a video of trees losing their leafs can be simply interpreted as a sign of autumn, and it can also be interpreted as the artiste's fear of ageing. Although in photography the touch of the artist is not as clear as in the other mediums of art, the photographer can express himself through a photo by choosing what to shoot.

The man jumping over the puddle, by Henri Cartier-Bresson, is a great example of a picture that has a great depth; the artist expresses the uncertainty of the Second World War, especially for those of Jewish decent, the artiste shares a secret through this photo that can only be picked up by those who care enough to look for it. Tolstoy's definition of art suggests that photography neither benefits or loses from the absence of man, as it is not the process in which art is made that makes it art but what is produced is what makes it art.

Bazin's idea of art and Arnheim's idea of art are the most contradicting here. What Bazin finds art, reproduction of reality, Arnheim's finds a simple mechanical process, what Arnheim finds art, a pure work of man, Bazin finds flawed. As we can see there is no one definition of art, therefore, whether photography as an art does benefit from lack of the presence of man depends on how we define art. Bazin's statement can go from valid, based on his definition of art, to invalid, based on Arnheim's definition of art.

Therefore the validity of this statement will differ for different people, based on their perception of art. My idea of art is close to that of Tolstoy, I believe art is be something more than just a copy of an object, it should be something that makes its audience see the world through the artists eyes, I also believe film can be art, as it is the artiste's imagination that is in front of the lens, maybe not through drawing or sculptures but through the way that scenario is set up, the way that the actors act or the way the he/she decides to capture this with the camera.

Therefore I disagree with Bazin's statement that ' All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence' (Bazin 1967: 13), as I believe something can be called art only when the presence of the artiste is felt. I find a film such as *Le Grand illusion* (1937) art, as it carries a theme, the extinction of high class and increased equality, that the director has kept out of obvious sight for those who truly understand his vision.