

Photography representation of reality



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Introduction:-

When we look into a photograph; we often tend to forget that this is not an image taken by a camera rather it's a moment of a living being captured rather trapped forever. In china it's a belief that photographs trap soul of a person; maybe it's a myth or maybe it's true also. Isn't it true that it's stealing the very essence of your life for that particular fraction of time?

A photographer or a painter tries to tell the entire story of life, happiness, misery, joy, patience, grace and all the possible human emotions encapsulated in one frame. This is the masterpiece which he tries to recreate his entire life.

Photography emerged from Europe in early 19th century when concepts of positivist science came into focus. Positivism believes that the empirical truths can be established by visual evidence only. Empirical truths are facts that can be established through experimentation by recreating the circumstances for identical outcomes. In context of positivism the camera was taken to be a scientific tool for registering reality. Positivist theory believed that a photograph is not subjective to the psychology of the photographer but is subjective to the viewer who interprets the photo.

Most of the time we see an image and we always co-relate it with ourselves , how it is connected to us what is the relation it has got with our lives; these are the general questions which comes in our mind while interoperating any image shown on newspaper, magazine or Television. Every image tries to tell some story behind it and it is mainly depends on person to person how they interpret it , because it could carry different meanings to the different people

what kind of aesthetic values and taste they have got, what cultural, educational background they hold to understand its meaning and effects.

“ Photography transformed subject into object , and even one might say , into a museum object: in order to take the first portrait (around 1840) the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight ; to become an object made one suffer as much as a surgical operation ; then a device was invented , a kind of prosthesis invisible to the lens , which supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility: this headrest was the pedestal of the statue i would become, the corset of my imaginary essence.” – Roland Barthes (1982), Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography: (Fontana Paperbacks). p. 13

As said by Roland Barthes a French theorist; photography makes subject into an object and photographer always plays with his surgical devices like selection, framing and personalization to make it more attractive. It can be done through lots of technical knowledge and techniques. In this commercial world of advertisements, movies and magazines everything is sold by selling emotions shown in the images. The photographer has to perform as an art director who tries to sell the emotions through his graphical effects on masses. That is why success of famous brands and popularity of magazines and newspapers is mainly dependant on powerful images . The image values count on its being unique, powerful, strange, shocking, adventures, different, rare.

According to Roland there are two levels of meaning of an image; a denotative and a connotative meaning of an image. An image can denote

certain apparent truths. Denotative meaning means literal, descriptive meaning. However the same image can connote culturally specific meaning. Connotative meaning depends on cultural and historical context of the image which the viewers themselves have experienced. In other words it's the viewer's own interpretation of image based on their own experiences and beliefs in the cultural environment the viewer is living. Hence an image which is just a representation of reality actually invokes facts which are deeper than visible.

“ In Barthes model , in addition to the two levels of meaning of denotation and connotation , that is the sign , which is composed of the signifier and signified , which is the concept evoked by that word/image . in the Benetton ad, one interpretation could be that the burning car is the signifier and terrorism is the signified . The image (or word) and its meaning together (the signifier and signified together form the sign.

Image/ sound word – Signifier

Meaning – Signified = Sign”- Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright(2001), Practices of looking: An Introduction to Visual culture(Oxford: Oxford University Press), P. 19

So every image has got one signifier and its meaning which we interpret is a signified which is equal to sign that means every image make us think what is the hidden meaning behind it, and most of the time photographer try to give that sign in that image or text which we see in newspapers, magazines or in television commercials. In still photography photographer try to give these effects by showing certain degree of subjectivity and objectivity it

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directly hits the conscious mind and also try to hit the sub-conscious mind of the interpreter. In most of the advertisement emphasis is given on masculinity and genders like Marlboro ads they always feature a cowboy going on a horse they both are signifier of power and masculinity, where a cowboy is shown on top of hill taking drags of cigarette on top of hill, Most of the under wear ads man is shown as powerful by showing features of his body and masculinity it creates a kind of attraction, but in real world who wears underwear is not always as powerful as shown in these ads. People always try to co-relate themselves with these models. In female accessories advertisements model is always beautiful looking full of life wearing a good dress and using some products where they show she has become more beautiful after wearing certain product this image always leads to the kind of desire to look more beautiful. Photographer is always paid to create these kinds of powerful images to lure target audience.

Still photography can create shock, adventure, fascination, disgust, anger, confusion. The photograph taken by weegee in 1940s image of a school children who see a murder in the street captured a fascination in that child's eyes which fascinates the interpreter in a same way the child is fascinated by that scene. Still photography of nude woman or a man is always a simple object of sex; there is no subjectivity involved. It does not give anything myth it is never shocking or adventurous it is just taken to create desire to have sex.

Barthes's concepts are particularly applicable on examining the photographic truth; however it's not very much applicable on film images and television news images. As in those cases it is the music and the

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sequence of frames which decides the meaning rather than a particular frame.

Ideology plays a very important role in how an image is perceived by a viewer. Ideologies are system of beliefs that exists in all culture. It is a broad, shared sets of values and beliefs through which an individual lives in sets on complex social relationships. An ideology gives the viewer the perception to view image of a partially filled glass as ‘ half filled’ or ‘ half empty’. Ideology goes hand in hand with Barthe’s concept to denote the meaning of an image.

Ideologies plays major role in interpretation of images it is different for different cultures based on their beliefs and values the way they live their life in particular society. One particular image can be adopted by one society or ideology but it could be taboo for another group of people. Like a picture of a pig on school books or images is very normal for one group of society but it could be understood as a taboo in Muslim Ideologies. In this case I can say perspective of the people differs from one society or ideology to another and this is a major fact how it is going to control the success of that image. Beliefs and set of rules is the major factor in interpretation of images and videos.

“ Photography is a kind primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made up face beneath which we see dead”-
Roland Barthes (1982), Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography: (Fontana Paperbacks). p. 32

In old time people used to play the characters of the plays where they used to show their emotions by showing different expressions and the objective

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was to create drama in front of the public to bring out those emotions which was the requirement of the play but inside their make-ups and dresses they are not the same people which they portray in theatre . so as said by barthe's Photography is also kind of theatre where people poses and try to imitate themselves by showing best out of them the full smiling faces if it is a photograph of a family everybody will stand closer to each other holding hands hugging and kissing so in photographs people try to show what meaning in should convey to the viewer it does not matter how much do they love each other or hate each other in reality.

“ Charles Pierce worked with a somewhat different model in which the signifier (Word/ Image) is distinguished not only from the signified (meaning) but also from the referent , or the object itself . In addition pierce defined categories of signs based on different kinds of relationship between signifiers and signified, for instance pierce made a distinction between indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs.” Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright(2001), Practices of looking: An Introduction to Visual culture(Oxford: Oxford University Press), P. 20

Iconic and symbolic signs always plays a major role in Image world , For an example picture of mother and child always gives the straight meaning of motherhood , love and affection it is universal it is understood in all the languages and by all the people. Picture of famous actress Marilyn Monroe is an iconic symbol of sex and beauty since long time her iconic image hasn't changed.

In every picture the reality and representation is not necessarily same some pictures the way they are taken and how a photographer represents it in the front of viewers is entirely dependent on his skills how he is going to personalize the particular event and by doing selection and framing how it looks like; Here comes the manipulation part every picture is not presented just as an object to create subjectivity he has to understand the right angle positions and framing. This thing is very common in commercial world of advertisements and movie making, director always target some audience and he raises certain issues to think what impact it will give after adding sound and visual effects and graphical effects. In silent movies everything is expressed by showing emotions and body gesture of the characters. In Advertisement of Benetton where a black lady is nursing a white baby gives direct impact of racism where in connotes lots of meaning to different group of people and every time this picture says different stories some people might interpret it is based on unity, slavery or other general issues. In Advertisement of Hdfc bank they portray image of different people from different countries that means they are not catering one part of the world they are ready to serve people from different parts, cultural background and societies here comes the personalization. Every frame, color coding and background contributes to its meaning to different people. Manipulation of Images is very common now days so we cannot say that it is a piece of evidence , techniques are used to show the different things in different way emphasis is given how to create it more powerful the maximum impact on masses.

The value of image is mainly its authenticity, true emotions, and hidden meanings. In television and news papers its value is how fast an issue has been covered and the channels those show the latest news or current events before any other channel becomes authentic news channel; so success of every news, advertisement or movie is based on its authenticity how it impresses viewers and how real it looks.

Summary:

To interpret images we need to examine the visual language the image is speaking. The image contains layers of truth and it relies in the viewer's capacity to decode the language it's trying to 'speak'. Reading and interpreting images is one way that we as viewers contribute by assign our culture to the interpreted meaning. Hence an image is a composite of subjective and objective meanings as said by Marita Sturken

References: Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright(2001), Practices of looking: An Introduction to Visual culture(Oxford: Oxford University Press), P. 20

Roland Barthes (1982), Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography: (Fontana Paperbacks). p. 32