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Photography: As a political tool

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Abstract

The invention of Photography cannot just be simplistically seen as a medium which has changed the ways in which we view the world but also the various ways in which the world gets represented. Photography is not just a medium of representation. It also serves as a powerful political tool which has changed the ways of perception as it captures what is invisible to the naked eye. It creates a “novelty” in the details that it captures, thereby rupturing the human understanding of what is truth and what is ‘apparent truth’. This essay attempts to understand the extent to which photography serves as a political tool by sometimes becoming the “event” by itself which it tries to capture and serve as an agent of change but at the same time it holds the power to manipulate the truth as well.

Keywords: Photography political tool simplistically seen as a medium

Introductions

Walter Benjamin in both of his essays “The Author as Producer” (1934) and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935) emphasizes the power that photography as a new medium of art holds and which possesses a lot of potential to bring about a change in the conventional ways of thinking and thereby bring about a kind of revolution. In the essay “The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin speaks of how the medium of Camera, an “apparatus” (Benjamin, The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 11) of mechanical reproduction has totally changed the ‘aura’ of a work of art by displacing its “cult” value to an “exhibition” value. He mentions that Eugene Atget, ‘who had photographed Paris for 30 years’ (Benjamin 6) added a new dimension to Photographs that is, it began to be used as a standard evidence for historical use and acquired a hidden political significance. He also said that the use of “captions” on photographs became obligatory. He further adds how camera has totally changed an actor’s relation to his very profession itself. He says that an actor working on screen is constantly directed by a camera. His performance is ‘composed of many separate performances’. He quotes Pirandello who says that an actor working in front of a camera feels a kind of “estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror” (Benjamin 9). Thus it could be said that the camera has not only created a quantitative availability of one original piece of work by reproducing as many a picture one wishes to, it has also created the medium of film which has totally changed the scenario of performance. Benjamin says that the medium of camera has also changed the reaction of masses towards art. He says that the mechanical invention of camera has also opened the viewership of art in the form of films to a larger audience of all classes as opposed to the earlier times where enjoyment of art was limited to the upper class aristocrats only. He further says that the “close ups of the things around us” (Benjamin 12) taken by a camera “by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects” (Benjamin 12) helps one to see things which otherwise misses our eyes. Hence camera in a way helps us see what we miss out in daily life. It in a way totally changes our perception of the world. Towards the end of the essay he adds that while Fascists try to use art as an aesthetic medium, communist tries to use art as a ‘political’ tool.

In the essay “Author as a Producer” (1934) Benjamin says that what art needs is not “reproducers” who uses the same apparatuses of production but “engineers” who adapt those apparatuses to political aims. He says that through the use of technical innovations like ‘captions’ in photographs, Photography could be used as a political tool to stir changes in the way people view the world and thus it could act as a revolutionary agent.

Susan Sontag in her book “On Photography” writes critically about photography. She presents us a very dialectical nature of Photography. She says that it is an art form which has the power to ‘furnish evidence’ (Sontag, *On Photography* 5), promote nostalgia (Sontag 15) or to ‘shock’ (Sontag 19) people by its unique and novel images yet she says that “Whatever the moral claims are made on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world

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into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an item for aesthetic appreciation.” (Sontag 110). Roland Barthes similarly says that Photography “transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into an museum object...” (Barthes, *The Camera Lucida* 13).

She says that while photographic images are a ‘miniatures of reality’ (Sontag 4) yet she adds “All that photography’s program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden” (Sontag 120). It is “More and more defined not as what is ‘really’ there but as what I ‘really’ perceive” (Sontag 120). She also says that photography may have the ‘imperial’ scope over art by being able to capture “the largest possible number of subjects” (Sontag 7) yet she mentions that it has become a ‘democratizing’ art form which “translated every experience into images” (Sontag 7).

Further, she says that “photography is an act of non-intervention” (Sontag 13) yet at the same time “photography gives the appearance of participation” (Sontag 10) by the sheer act of photographing some object and turning that object into an “Event: something worth seeing, therefore worth photographing” (Sontag 11). She says that photographic knowledge has limitations of its own. She says that “While photograph can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge

gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism whether cynical or humanist” (Sontag 24).

Roland Barthes says that “Photography is unclassifiable” (Barthes, *The Camera Lucida* 4). He says that “Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” (Barthes 4). He says that a particular photograph is never anything much more than what is limitedly depicted in that particular photograph. (Barthes 5). He mentions that: “Photograph is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences; it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don’t *take*, which *turn*, as milk does. Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.” (Barthes 6)

In the light of the above view points I would want to examine two photographs as an “Event” and how it could speak about the event by the sheer power of the image. The photograph below is representative of the event of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the Twin towers and which resulted in U.S led Afghan war in 7th Oct, 2001.



Susan Sontag says that “Photograph shock insofar as they show something novel” (Sontag, 19). In the above photograph, presuming that the spectator is unaware of the event of the terrorist attacks which happened in Manhattan, they might probably still feel a sense of awe and horror by looking at the photograph by the sheer ‘novelty’ of the photo. This is also something which I tend to think as the ‘politics’ of photograph because the photographer is able to show exactly what he captured. He is able to bring out the surprise and horror element in us as he himself felt while he shot the photograph and not a contrary emotion. In this photograph we feel a sense of horror by contemplating the enormity of the action that is about to take place. As Susan Sontag put it, regarding the utility of a photograph, she says: “A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.” (Sontag 5). This photograph not only shows an evidence of what actually happened but also authenticates the occurrence of the event. It is a photograph

which has in a way captured a historic event and thereby also compels us to think about the extent to which terrorism can take shape and change the world in a matter of seconds. It not only shakes us with the enormity of the event that took place but also changes our perception and becomes like a historical artifact which speaks as a proof of the event that took place.

Another important thing about the photograph is that, for the future generations to come it will be an image with which people might associate with the event itself because in a lot of way it captures the ‘action’ which led to the event. It is the image which not only depicts what actually served as the lever that triggered the event but also the symbol which carried out the event.

The second photograph depicts an event after a bomb was dropped in the village of Trang Bang, Vietnam, in the Vietnam war on 8th June 1972:



The above iconic picture focusing particularly on the naked and bare footed girl in the middle with her arms spread out helplessly depicts the picture of terrorized children who were screaming and running for their lives in a state of utter helplessness. Susan Sontag mentions this particular photograph in her book *On photography* and describes it as follows: “Photograph like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1972—a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napam, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the war than a hundred hours of televised barbarities.” (Sontag 19). This war photograph even though does not depict the conventional pictures of war like mutilated bodies or other bloodshed, it is able to strike a chord among the spectators because by the look of the picture, with huge black clouds mushrooming at the background and children running for their lives not only gives a certain amount of authentic spontaneity to the photograph but also makes one wonder at the ‘novelty’ of the photograph. It is also able to drive home the political message that children are usually the most pathetic victims of war.

Speaking about the need for a photograph to carry a political consciousness in order to justify the events depicted by photographs, Susan Sontag says that “It is never photographic evidence, which can construct—more properly, identify—events; the contribution of photography always follows the naming of the event. What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the evidence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs...will be experienced as, simply, unreal or demoralizing emotional blow.” (Sontag 19).

In my view point, Susan Sontag, very correctly points out that a mere photographic image cannot identify an event by itself, it needs politics or a political consciousness about the event which is photographed in order to be truly effective. Also Walter Benjamin, pointed out, the use of ‘captions’ along with the photographs which could serve as a way to add more affect to the photograph and also help one to impart the political message one may want to through the photographic image. But I also think that sometimes there are photographs which speak for itself without us trying to explicate the photograph’s background. For example: Photographs of war frontiers, famine or earthquakes etc, does not require any “caption” or a “political consciousness” on our part to understand what might have happened in the photograph. Sometimes even a simple every day image without any political caption or consciousness can impart a ‘political’ act as good as a photograph of a rally or mob protest against the government with “Captions” may effectively could. For example : the photograph of a

Burkha clad village woman riding a bike in a rural area of Afghanistan could impart a political act of ‘resistance’ against the conservative Afghan society, even though there may be no caption to describe the photograph. Even though this view may be limited in the sense that only those spectator who are aware of the conservative nature of the rural Afghan society, would be able to catch the political message imparted by the photograph, yet I see it as a possibility that sometimes even without any ‘political’ message, a photograph may still prove to be one. In yet another example, The terrified green eyes of a simple Afghan girl in a refugee camp, clicked by Steve McCurry, became an iconic photograph. Her face represented the plight of the war ravaged Afgan people, even though it did not have any caption describing the plight of the girl.

Susan Sontag says that “although no photograph is an original in the sense that a painting always is there is a large qualitative difference between what could be called originals—prints made from the original negative at the time...that the picture was taken—and subsequent generations of the same photograph” (Sontag 140). Yet photography by its sheer power of capturing a moment or an ‘event’ carries the power to either depict the truth or fabricate the truth (it could be either), but it still retains the power in terms of its ability to speak through images.

Sontag says that photographers are often accused for being ‘soulless’ and ‘mechanical copying of reality’ but she says that the photographers defend their work by saying that “it was a vanguard revolt against ordinary standards of seeing, no less worthy an art than painting.” (Sontag 126).

Martin Jay in his introduction to “Refractions of violence” points out that “there is a distanced violence in the penetrating stare” (Jay, *Refractions of violence* 2). He says that the “dominance of the eye as the most hegemonic sense has, of course, often been seen as a source of violence” (Jay 2). He speaks of the power of the gaze wherein he says that when anti-pornography images are used to stigmatize people for taking pleasure in pornography or violence, “in doing so, it testifies to the often erotic charge intensifying our feelings about violence, either pro or con, as well as the ambivalence of the ‘lust of the eye’ ” (Jay 3). Thus, photography in its ability to convey or hide facts, just as the ‘eyes’ can choose to view certain objects as pleasurable or displeasing or see it as an ambivalent thing, it secures itself as a tool which can “speak” and therefore could be used politically.

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