

The Unequal Trinity: The Photographer, The Audience, and The Woman

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“When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn’t know.

"Oh, sure you know," the photographer said.

"She wants," said Jay Cee wittily, "to be everything.”

(Plath, 101)

Introduction

Photography is commonly seen as the capturing of a moment in time as it occurs, but to truly understand the moment from all parts is to understand the relationship between the photographer, the audience, and the subject as the photograph is being taken. As novelist and art critic John Berger explains in his piece, *Understanding A Photograph*, “I have said that a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing X and Y, but between photographing X moment at Y moment.” (3) The “moment” he mentions is the dynamic interaction between the photographer and the subject, and what comes from that is the interpretation of the moment by the audience. As monotonous and simple as this process may seem, what is little considered is the intentions behind each part of the photographic trifecta. While the photographer may intend to show a scene in time, the audience might intend to consume the photograph with bias or expectation, all the while the subject may feel either empowered or exploited. With a focus on the subject specifically being a woman, how does the interaction between each part change or differ between the production, consumption, and interpretation of the photograph? Why is it that in the previous quote by Sylvia Plath from her book *The Bell Jar*, the audience and the photographer answer so confidently about what the subject wants? Through an in depth analysis of the relationship between the photographer, the audience, and the subject as a woman, this essay is meant to propose that the importance of

understanding photography lies within the intention of the photographer, the expectation of the audience, and the emotional connection with the female subject.

The Photographer

When categorizing what the intention of the photographer is when capturing a moment in a single picture, there are a couple factors that can define and explain their thought process. First, a photographer will choose what they want to take a picture of. Whether it be nature, architecture, or another person, the choice is critical in understanding why the picture was being taken in the first place. Next, the framing of the picture affects the meaning of how it will be interpreted. Perhaps an angle shown looking up at a figure shows a sense of power and authority, and the subject looks down at the camera lens both metaphorically and literally. Lastly, the photographer will then title the image to give a resounding, and yet open-ended in some cases, title that reveals the reasoning behind the photographic process. Berger sums up this idea in his own words in *Understanding A Photograph*, "What distinguishes one from the other is the degree to which the photograph explains the message, the degree to which the photograph makes the photographer's decision transparent and comprehensible... Photography is the process of rendering self consciousness." (2) When a person takes a picture, they want to reflect their own mental ideation to whoever then consumes the media they created. A photographer's reflection of this point could lie with Ansel Adams quote, "You don't make a photograph just with a camera. You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved." (*Ansel Adams: A Legacy*) To him, taking a picture is more than a mechanical process, it is about revealing what you value and sharing it with others.

The audience's connection to the intention of the photographer is intimate and boundless. So long as the picture is embedded with allegories and unanswered questions, the audience can do everything in their power to understand it. But sometimes the meaning of the photo does not always align with the interpretation of the audience. An example of this is with the picture *Afghan Girl*, a 1984 photographic portrait of Sharbat Gula, an Afghan refugee in Pakistan during the Soviet–Afghan War. The photo was taken by American photojournalist Steve McCurry and it made headlines and appeared on *National Geographic*. What made this picture stand out was the piercing eyes on the young girl and the still but intense expression on her face. While the intention of the photo was to humanize the impact of the Soviet-Afghan war through, the picture continuously transfixed the audience with its "unusual combination of grittiness and glamour," as the *American Photo* magazine describes.. The reaction he wished to draw from the audience reinstated a term made popular by David Hume in his piece, *Treatise of Human Nature*, called 'Spectators of Calamity.' This essentially describes how humans are engaged emotionally with horrible events like war, but they are not compelled to act physically and prefer to watch from a distance. As Susan Sontag also approaches the subject from the view of a writer of photography in her piece, *Regarding The Pain Of Others*, she says, "The photographers are a means of making 'real' (or more 'real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore." (4) Those comfortable with ignoring the reality of a picture will remain ignorant for as long as they can. From the perception of an actual photographer on the subject, the intention of McCurry was to cause an action, but the audience's reception only garnered passive empathy, again reinforcing the idea that an audience of a tragedy often remains simply spectators.

Despite the photographer intending to show a story that was understood differently by the audience, perhaps the most important interpretation lies not within these two sides, but within the person pictured. As with *Afghan Girl*, the subject, Sharbat Gula, was angered with the photograph being taken and published without her consent as it not only exposed her emotionally, but spiritually, “It is not welcome for a girl of traditional Pashtun culture to reveal her face, share space, make eye contact and be photographed by a man who does not belong to her family.” (The Wire) The photographer and the audience were both unaware of this perception of the famous image until the subject, an adult woman at the time of her interviews, spoke outwardly against it and shamed its creation, therefore completely changing the meaning of the picture.

In contrast, an important example of a more positive relationship between the subject and the photographer's intention that differs from McCurry's *Afghan Girl* is with Dorothea Lange's picture titled, *Migrant Mother*. Taken during the Great Depression in 1936, Lange traveled around poverty stricken areas while working for the Farm Security Administration to photograph real life moments of human suffering, all with the hope to elicit empathy for the people suffering and gain support for New Deal Relief Programs. The reason these two well known pictures best represent the entanglement between the three parts of photography is because they are easy to understand to outside and uneducated eyes, all the while continuing to elicit a ‘Spectator of Calamity’ mindset, where those outside ideas are of empathy but not enough empathy to cause action. When the photograph was taken, Lange's intention was to show a female subject, hard working and tired despite her surroundings, still being the best she could be. How this differs from *Afghan Girl* is that McCurry moved his subject into better lighting to glamorize the shot, while Lange took the photo in the moment all as it was with little intervention. Florence

Thompson, the migrant mother, at first was uncertain about how she would be seen by the audience, “Mrs. Thompson saw Lange’s photo as a bit of a curse. She was ashamed of revisiting the poverty she endured decades earlier, but her children came to a different conclusion. They were proud of the woman who sacrificed for her family and became a symbol of female strength in times of adversity.” (*The Kennedy Center*) The audience's interpretation of the photograph aligned a lot more with the photographers, showing a sweet example of how the connection between the photographer and the female subject was in favor of the subject's emotional response to the picture. The most important thing about understanding the intention of the photographer is to take into consideration both why they took the picture, and then also consider for which audience they will present it to.

The Audience

When a photographer shows a picture in a certain way, it is almost entirely out of their hands to force the audience to understand it in the exact way they wanted them to. No matter the title, the set up, the lense, the focus, or the subject; the audience will come into the situation with a preconceived notion of what they are expecting to take away from the photo. The interpretation of photography is shaped by audience bias, which can then distort the photographer's intent for recording a specific event. This idea can set up an assumption about something that can be hard to change, and can skew and misalign the meaning of a piece of work and cause it to become controversial or force it to adapt a new meaning. An aforementioned example of an audience going into a situation with a preconceived mindset that differed from the intention of the photographer is with Steve McCurry’s *Afghan Girl*. The portrait was meant to show resilience in

times of tragedy, but many audiences, affected by what called an ‘audience bias,’ relied on their cultural, religious, and political beliefs to understand the picture's portrayal of an ‘exotic beauty.’ An important thing to mention is that a large part of the comprehension and perceived meaning of the image was affected by the fact that the subject was a woman. This projection of views from a specific audience onto a woman as the subject is something called the ‘Male Gaze.’

This term is expanded upon with British film theorist Laura Mulvey, who wrote in a 1973 essay, “Male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.” (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*) What this entails is that a male audience will often see women in media not for who they are, but for how they are desired or imagined. Despite the photographer's intention of showing an image, the audience will see the image solely as a sort of fantasy projection, and in this case it can put unrealistic expectations on a subject and cause their wants and needs to be overlooked. As Susan Sontag describes in *Regarding The Pain Of Others*, “Whether the photograph is understood as a naive object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning— and the viewer's response— depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified...” (20) The way the audience sees the image and the reaction they have to it sets up a continuation of either healthy or unhealthy expectations on the subject. As women in media can be shown as symbols of femininity, sex, or helpless love interests, it's only natural to then have the audience of that material to then view them in the incorrect ways they are being portrayed compared to women in real life. It reestablishes this ‘male gaze’ idea, where there is a sort of dissonance between reality and fantasy, and the critique and blame would then be placed on the women for not meeting the expectations of the consumers of the media. As John Berger says, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (*Ways of Seeing*, 47) When women are idealized in photographs, they are reduced to passive

objects, valued only for how they fulfill the audience's fantasies rather than for their full autonomy as a person. The relationship between the subject, the photographer, and the audience is inherently nonexistent, as long as the expectations of the latter two misalign with the values of the subject. This objectification and disrespect to subject autonomy leads to a sort of voyeuristic nature that the audience continues to practice with each expectation they put onto others. But it is not just the misalignment with the audience, it is also the responsibility of the photographer to know when they are prioritizing a sort of market value over a human value. Susan Sontag elaborates on this, "To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are... to be in compliance with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing— including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune." (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 178)

This disregard for reality, and idealization of romanticized media, leads to a kind of transactional relationship between the photographer and audience; all while at the expense of the subject.

A point mentioned prior is that media is meant to be consumed. It is created for a specific market, showing an economic supply and demand relationship. Playboy, an American men's lifestyle and entertainment magazine, is one of the best examples of how the consumer's reason for demand affects the production, consumption, and interpretation of the supplied material. The supplied material in this case is the women on the cover of Playboy's magazines. As Natalie Coulter describes, "Playboy magazine's early success was predicated upon the unique marketing strategies... by aligning consumer desires with sexual desires as innate components of modern masculinity." (*Selling the Male Consumer the Playboy Way*) They provided a resource for men to expand upon their desires to consume media meant for them, and it often was then at the expense of the 'product.' As the consumer demands the product continue to evolve and meet their expectations, the product's value then is solely based on the reception from the audience; in

other words, a positive response of the photograph leads to more photographs being taken. With this reception, it circles back to the supply and demand trend, where the producer then makes more and the consumer buys more. In other words, Playboy's portrayal of objectified women doesn't focus on any emotional connection between the subject and photographer, but caters to the consumer's demand for an idealized product. This then supports the idea that women as a subject in relation to photography remains commodified and suppressed under the expectations of the audience. However, in cases when the subject being photographed understands their position as the subject and advocates for their autonomy, the outcome of the situation can change wildly.

The Subject

Photographic representation of women reveals a power struggle between subject, photographer, and audience. The line between empowerment and exploitation is often blurred, contested, and redefined by both intention and interpretation. The photographer will frame the subject, posing them and positioning them to then reflect the implied meaning of the picture. This physical act of representation can look one way, but as mentioned before, there can be a sort of dissonance between the intention and the interpretation of the image. The dynamic between the subject and the photographer is incongruent when the ideals of the producers do not line up with the ideals of the models, or when they do not share similar beliefs about how the consumers will digest the media.

A well-known example of this disagreement is the 1992 cover photo of Demi Moore for Vanity Fair, where she posed nude while pregnant. On one hand, the expectation of the photographer was that the photoshoot would lead to a sort of empowering representation of

femininity and pregnancy. The other hand, most importantly the subject's hand, displayed different views. Moore initially supported the idea, but upon the creation of it, she expressed discomfort when speaking about the aspect of the intimate part of the shoot, "You're not supposed to remind anybody that you've ever had sex and that it's a shameful thing." (*InStyle*) Her discomfort at the parodies, imitations, and commodifications of the image shows how even an "empowering" image can feel exploitive to the subject, and how there is a sense of a loss of control over the narrative the picture is meant to represent. Audience interpretation can also distort the main intention of the photo. What may be intended as a celebration of femininity can be consumed voyeuristically or mocked in popular culture, further distancing the subject from her own image. This ties back to Laura Mulvey's view on the male gaze, where this systemic feeling of objectification, while intended to be empowering, feels the opposite when the subject's voice in the matter is not considered in favor of what the photographer and the audience wants. Susan Sontag elaborates on the feeling of exploitation, "To photograph is to appropriate (take (something) for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission.) the thing photographed." (*On Photography*, 174) Within this feeling like something of the subject's was taken from them, an audience's reaction, when in favor of the subject's agency, can spark feelings of empowerment. While most of the time this is the case when the relationship between the photographer and audience is positive, sometimes the subject has to remove themselves from their counterparts and advocate for how *they* want their media to be evaluated.

A way that women took control of how they wanted to be seen in the media was through the Miss America Pageant Protest of 1968. It was organized by members of the New York Radical Women group, which was connected to the growing Women's Liberation Movement. In this protest, hundreds of feminists gathered together to protest how beauty pageants reduced

women to objects valued only for their 'beauty.' They believed that the societal pressure of beauty standards was objectifying and misogynistic, and many related the pageant to a "Cattle Auction," where the women felt they were judged as livestock. There is a photo from this movement by Suzanne Giddens titled, "Atlantic City is a town with class, they raid your morals and judge your ass," (Duke University Libraries) that highlights the livestock comparison. In the photo, a beautiful young woman kneels and glances back at the camera, but her body is labeled with cuts of meat like something you'd see at a butcher. This emphasizes the way women felt like they were being portrayed in a metaphorical way. Robin Morgan, an organizer of the protest, stated, "We're not protesting the pageant, we're protesting the image of women that the pageant promotes." (*Miss America Goes Down*) This shows how the women of this movement advocated for their autonomy outside of the idea that they can only be valued for their beauty. Susan Sontag describes a way that within this movement, women felt empowered to stand up for themselves and their portrayal in the media. "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure." (*On Photography*, 177) The projection of beauty expectations on women were seen as undermining a women's ability outside of looks, and so this protest gives an example of how the subject actively took it upon themselves to change the narrative and make it empowering, fighting the idea that women should remain passive objects. They demanded that the photographs taken of them only showed the power behind the movement and forced the audience to interpret the images how the women wanted them to see them. This intentional recording of events by the subjects shows the real empowering side of photography, and John Berger reinforces this, "Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation... at its

simplest the message, decoded, means: I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.”

(Understanding a Photograph, 2)

Within this autonomy of photography when the subject is in control of the narrative and their emotional connection to the piece, it is important to mention how this movement has translated over into more recent events. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer women more direct control over how they present themselves by giving them the option to be their own photographer and subject, as well as being able to directly communicate their messages to the audience. However, there is a lingering influence of the male gaze and audience bias that persists in the form of beauty standards and objectification. What affected the women of Playboy continues to affect contemporary methods of media. As long as the power of representation is unequally distributed, the relationship between subject, photographer, and audience will remain unorganized when showing its importance in photography.

Conclusion

In examining the importance of photography through the relationship between the photographer, the audience, and the subject as a woman, it becomes clear that the more influential piece of representation is not solely within the intention or interpretation of the picture. Instead, the interaction between these three elements creates a dynamic space where control, agency, and gender converge and underline the most important aspect; the autonomy of the subject. It's crucial to understand that however important this triangular relationship is in photography, many times it is unbalanced. The takeaway is that to fully understand a photo, is then to fully understand each side of the story, and be able to critically engage with each part of a photo as it relates to the other parts, and to then see it as one unified message.

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