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Photography in a Post-Truth Landscape

Hu Huiying

People often say that we should never judge a book by its cover, but what if the cover is all that we have to form our judgements? In the Digital Age, different facets of our world have gone online and on-air. As a result, the use of photography as a medium of communication has increased exponentially, and these images are widely accessible by the masses. As photography often serves as a window into the things we cannot see for ourselves, much of what we know about distant topics depend on it. Hence, the ubiquitous use of photography carries with it massive influence on our worldviews. Indisputably, when viewing photographs, we are often partial towards accurate information as our need to be accurate has been said to be one of our central motives. However, accuracy can mean many things, and some of these meanings are at odds with one another. In the article "A too-perfect picture," Teju Cole (2016) provides us with his take on accuracy in photography and its effects as he breaks down the issues surrounding photographing only quintessential aspects of India and her culture.

In the article, Cole (2016) first argues that the works should be able to bring out the unique blend of the country's culture, "a mixture not only of its indigenous practices and borrowed customs but also of its past and present," (para. 4) rather than a prejudiced view of the culture. In this line of argument, he emphasises the importance of preventing the indulgence of this resultant fantasy among western audiences. Furthermore, Cole is a proponent of the need for realism in photography. This realism encompasses the necessity to capture the more mundane and chaotic elements of our daily lives — "in-between moments of drift that make up most of our days," (para. 5) aside from just dramatic, picture-perfect shots. Cole also acknowledges that a Westerner addressing a non-Western subject is not necessarily "appropriation" as "some of the most insightful stories about any place can be told by outsiders" (para. 10). On the whole, the article concludes with the idea that photography's strength lies in its ability to do much more than conveying dissipating messages and emotions.

Cole's take on McCurry's one-sided attempt at encapsulating the whole of India is nonetheless an insightful one. However, it was unclear if Cole based his arguments in the context of photojournalism. This point is significant as I believe that only then would McCurry's work warrant the harsh criticism of Cole. The crux of photojournalism lies in the capturing of the truth, regardless of how ugly the truth may be. This definition seems to underlie Cole's line of reasoning that includes presenting a holistic view of what India truly is, instead of featuring bits and pieces of the most glamorous or tear-jerking imagery. From this, we can see that Cole believes in *objectiveness*, a concept which leaves no room for fantasy or misrepresentation. Yet, to be completely impartial is an impossible feat given the subjective understanding of the world by the human mind. Hence, what exactly is the truth, and how do we obtain it?

Cole's exploration of the significance of portraying an *objective truth* presents itself as a prologue to the idea of truth in the present day. In our global society, there exists an increase in incidences of expert opinions brazenly brushed off, rampant political misinformation, and reckless sharing of alternative facts. Moreover, with the rise of social

media, the spread of disinformation is proliferated through echo chambers and the effective facilitation of convenient sharing. This slow erosion of trust in evidence ushers in a new age — the post-truth era. So, how relevant is photography in a post-truth world?

In the article "Digital photography: Truth, meaning, aesthetics," Steven Skopik (2003) explores the concept of the *truth value* of photography. With the transition from film photography to digital photography, image manipulation brings along the inherent potential to result in the "erosion of the reportorial value of the photograph" (p. 264). However, Skopik notes that image-making has always been influenced by the subjective decisions of the photographer even before the rise of digital photography. This idea was further developed by referencing Roland Barthes, highlighting the figurativeness of photography in which "no photograph operates purely in terms of its denoted, literal content" (p. 264). One could easily look at a picture and think that it depicts exactly what happens in real life. However, even without digital manipulation, the photographer decides on settings such as the aperture, shutter speed, and most importantly, what should or should not be included in the frame. These have the power to influence our perceptions of what is portrayed, and what is shown may not be the full picture. For example, photographs of a political campaign in a newspaper may depict a stadium filled with people, when in reality, only thirty people were present. Therefore, illustrating the massive influence that a photographer has on the final image even without manipulating it. Skopik's eventual review of the situational and interpretive facets of photography stems from his belief in the assemblage of "connotative meaning" (p. 264) underlying images. Thus, any vehemently set belief in the veracity in photography is questionable. As a whole, Skopik believes that the disintegration of verisimilitude is not exactly unique to digital photography and questions the idea of photography as a way to determine the truth.

An aspect of photography's relevance to society lies in its lack of *absolute truth*, an intrinsic trait harmonious with the nature of the postmodern world. According to Skopik, the veracity characteristic of most photography lies in its ability to imitate real life more accurately than a painting, rather than the accuracy in its meaning. Although, photography's ability to capture real-life images excludes painterly photography in which a photograph is edited to mimic a painting. In a post-truth world, objective facts are less influential in moulding public opinion than information that appeals to feelings and personal values (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Examples of this phenomenon can be seen everywhere, from anti-vaxxers to climate change deniers. Furthermore, poststructuralist views propose that our perceptions are only indications of what we perceive, and they do not apprise us of the realities of our world (Grundberg, 1990). More specifically, our interpretation of the world and what is true varies largely from someone else's. This notion is evident in Cole's article, "A too-perfect picture," where Steve McCurry's one-sided approach in capturing the culture of India ignores the parts of the country in the present day. Thus, these pictures do not count as presenting an alternative truth. In the case of McCurry, his works are crafted in a way to satisfy stereotypes and expectations of what Indians should look like, especially to a Western audience and possibly himself. What he may have thought as "seeking out the picturesque" and "showing a culture in its most authentic form" (Cole, 2016, para. 4) only presents a partial truth, leaving out elements of India in the present day. Therefore, McCurry's works are a quintessential example of photography in a post-truth world — not entirely truthful, yet not wholly fantasy either.

Despite the congruence of characteristics between photography and the post-truth world, there exists a misalignment between the two as well. Another quality of photography and art, in general, is the presence of manipulation to reveal the truth or to reveal parts of society that go unnoticed (Mullen, 1998), an idea commonly seen in documentary photography. In a world where objectivity becomes secondary, greater value can be sought in unearthing an impartial truth through photography, as seen from a modernist perspective. In the article, Skopik raises a point about how "recent commentary on photography concerns itself more with issues of representation" (Skopik, 2003, p. 264). Thus, in the pursuit of authenticity, the accuracy of the photographic representation of the situation is what matters. However, the accuracy of representations is independent of the occurrence of manipulation. The basis of this argument lies within the correspondence theory of truth, a view that truth or falsity of something is determined by how it corresponds with the world and how precisely it describes it (Hanna & Harrison, 2004). For instance, if it were to be said that "the chair is on the table," it would only be true if the chair is, in fact, on the table. This is also evident in Cole's article where works that recognise the complexities of the subject's cultural reality are seen as the objective truth. The consequences of leaving it out only result in McCurry's undesirable romanticism of orientalism, done to "indulge in fantasy" (Cole, 2016, para. 4). This notion of representation following Cole's belief that "work that acknowledges their complex sense of their own reality" (Cole, 2016, para. 11) is what honours the stories of the people that we are trying to tell. Hence, photography's relevance to a post-truth world also takes the form of finding objective truth in a world with almost none to eradicate prejudices, biases, and other disadvantages of situationally coded truths when seen from a relativistic perspective.

However, the function of photography to disclose an objective truth is discordant with the realities of the post-truth world. This is said even with the pre-existing value attached to the presence of objective truth in a society with no definite answers. Post-truth finds interest in the idea of consensus to enfeeble common opinions of the truth, presenting a paradox known as the "Consensus Theory of Post-Truth" (Bufacchi, 2020). Underlying this paradox is Habermas' consensus theory of truth, where the act of conceiving truth is characterised by conjectured, logical consensus. In comparison to the correspondence theory of truth, the consensus theory of truth states that the defining properties of truth are propositions rather than objective elements of the world, aligning itself with the malleability of facts and truth in society. Furthermore, when viewing works in photography as a kind of individualistic, subjective truth, it is known that these works can attract various explanations. An example of such a work is "Cabbage leaf" by Edward Weston (1931), a monochromatic photograph featuring a splayed cabbage leaf against a dark background, its ambiguity opening itself up to multiple interpretations. Weston accentuates the graceful flow of the veins, mimicking the folds of a piece of fabric, causing mixed perceptions. Yet, the aim of interpreting art does not lie in the attainment of "single, grand, unified, composite interpretations" (Barret, 1994, p. 198). This, therefore, underscores the mismatch between photography's ability to disclose an objective truth, the subjectivity of its interpretation, and the consensus theory of truth in the post-truth world.

The notion of subjectivity is intrinsic to the creation and interpretation of photographic works, as mentioned by Skopik. What underlies this quality is an alternative function of the art form — expression. Art has often been viewed as a form of representation, or even

imitation, in relation to the correspondence theory of truth. However, this notion has been on a terminal decline in some areas of the arts since the 19th century (Hospers, 2001). With its diminution, the perspective of art as a form of expression has gained momentum. In light of the Romantic movement, expressing emotions constitutes the making of art (Hospers, 2001). This is evident in the descriptions of tones in the romantic era and the neoclassical era which predates it. Tones of the romantic era are often described as spontaneous, while those of the neoclassical era are seen as balanced and calm. The expression theory of art postulates that emotions take precedence over ideas and thoughts. Hence, what significance do emotions in photography possess in a post-truth landscape?

In an article titled "Emotional truth," Ronald De Sousa and Adam Morton (2002) explore the idea of *emotional truth and accuracy*. Morton believes that an emotion's ability to provide precise expressions appropriate for its circumstances, and to represent a real situation as "rightly situated in the galaxy of could-have-beens and would-have-ifs" (p. 272) is what constitutes the idea of an accurate emotion. He further explains that unlike emotional truth, accurate emotions do not promise truth and likens it to "observational accuracy of a scientific theory" (p. 272) in which emotions can reasonably encapsulate real and possible observations. To illustrate this, a photograph may not portray the actual circumstances of the situation as a result of a photographer's subjective interpretations of it. However, this flawed portrayal could still fit the world that we live in. Thus, the work, a result of the photographer's expressions, still possesses emotional accuracy. Morton posits that emotional accuracy thus provides us with strong and trustworthy relations to various circumstances, paving the way for our subsequent actions and sentiments.

The overarching principle of Morton's analysis of emotional accuracy relates to how accurate emotions do not guarantee the depiction of knowledge acquired through positivist means as the emphasis is placed on the authenticity of the individual's emotions. In conjunction with Morton's analysis of emotional accuracy, expression as a function of photography offers a more idiosyncratic approach to the idea of truth as compared to that of representation. Thus, there is value in the search for personal truth in photography that may not be truthful in the grand scheme of things. Furthermore, in Tolstoy's association with the expressionist theory of art, he defines art as the expression of emotions or experience that allows the target audience to share those same feelings and experiences. Ergo, from this frame of reference, photography also possesses innate qualities of a post-truth world as emotions and wide-reaching influence form the crux of the era. In the context of "A too-perfect picture," the representational theory of art forms the basis of Cole's criticism of McCurry's work. However, when viewed from the perspective of an expressionist, McCurry's photographs would have garnered some merit as it is a representation of his emotional truths. McCurry captured possible observations of the world irrespective of how unrepresentative they may be, a contrasting view to that of photography's role of representation.

After considering various interpretations of the truth, the perspective of an objective truth seems to hold the most value in photojournalism. The term "fourth estate" has often been used to describe the press, relating to its duty as a watchdog that bears the power to frame political issues and influence the masses. Despite being seen as an outdated idea due to the growing distrust surrounding news coverage in the mass media, this concept still holds great importance as it maintains the impartial distribution of news (Hansen, 2018).

This characteristic of journalism is essential in helping the audience form their own opinions on issues based on the information provided. The act of allowing viewers of the work to make their own judgements is juxtaposed against allowing the pushing of specific agendas through images that are consciously skewed by an individual's implicit biases. Thus, photojournalism concentrates on uncovering truths which portray the fairest and most complete sense of various situations, a perspective in line with Cole's propositions. Ultimately, photojournalism leaves no room for images based on emotional truths, and erroneous ideas irrespective of whether they were derived from a logical consensus amongst the masses or not.

The very nature of our post-truth world shines a light on the dynamic landscape of truth in the present day. We see ever-changing consensus amongst the people, and increasing emphasis placed on an individual's interpretation of the truth. Consequently, every piece of information now exists in an unstable form of both falsity and truth. Perhaps this sense of objectivity advanced by Cole provides us with the anchor we so desperately need as we navigate through waves of falsehoods, misrepresentations, and lies.

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