

The Profound Madness of a Photograph

What do we see when we see a photograph, just the objectified subject or something beyond?

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Taking selfies or photographs on mobile phones is commonplace today. And, while we indulge in it for fun, vanity, shock or to memorialise an event, we also, in the process, make the subject (or the person or thing) that is photographed an object. In other words, we objectify even the object. “Objectification” is often used in a pejorative sense, especially when we reduce women to their gender, as if existing merely to serve the male fantasy. But, when we photograph something, objectification becomes not only a reality, but also a necessity. The “objectness” of a photograph springs from the body of the object, from the occasion the photograph represents. In fact, its body almost dramatically announces itself in the photograph, “that there it is.” In it, I (as the subject of the photograph) experience the feeling of becoming an object, of losing my living existence before I become a spectacle for others to behold. As I take leave of my body and before I adorn albums and files, I cross the threshold with the metallic click of the photographer announcing the little death of me as a person who lived once but who is going to live forever as an object through the photograph.

In *Camera Lucida* (1981), the semiotician Roland Barthes called this reproducing to infinity, something that has occurred only once and can never occur again. Therefore, a photograph fixes the event in time and makes it available for all eternity to behold. The drama of photography introduces three characters to the scene: the photographer, the spectator, and the subject. Accordingly, it has three performances, too, of actions and intentions: to do, to look, and to undergo. The photographer frames the image with the assistance of the little hole through which they look for “the take,” and surprise the spectator. The observed subject is cognisant of the fact that they are posing, and transform themselves into an image even before they become an image. They willingly play the social game of “I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing, and yet, I wish that the image coincides with my profound self.” Great photographers are able to capture this profundity. Any lack, therefore, emphasises the gap between what the photograph is and what it could have been.

A photograph makes the idea of oneself as the other an everyday event. It conceals within itself a rupture between how the object appears and what the object truly is. In other words, a split between consciousness and identity (if the object is a human being). The uneasiness that I experience

when I see myself on paper springs from the confusion that I experience about whether to consider myself a subject or an object. In the photograph, a marginalisation of the subject and autonomy happens as it commences its journey towards becoming an object. The culture industry and its associated commoditisation of every human need has transformed subjects into undistinguishable objects whose worth is determined only by their exchange value. Since photographs, aided by technology, are easier to transmit and exchange, they are becoming commonplace and ubiquitous, as paper is replaced by screens, as swiping becomes instant, and as the profound madness of photography takes over.

The photograph also transforms reality by ridding it of vacillation, duality, and disturbance. It acts as a certificate of the existence of that which has been, and emphasises the presence of that which is today absent. A painting may leave room for doubt of the existence of the object depicted. Similarly, a text that describes an object or an act is by nature fictional as it expects the imagination to construct reality.

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Photographs, on the other hand, assert the view from the camera and just about that. Journalistic photographs are good examples; they shout, but do not wound, blend seamlessly with the text, and hence are rarely recalled. They readily attain the unitary purpose of journalism. This is also the case with pornographic photographs. They are purely functional and serve only one purpose, and are also limited by it. As isolated images, they do not evoke relationships. The orgiastic scenes in Stanley Kubrick’s film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) present moving images of nudity in which only faces are covered. These images make the body an absolute image by removing from the scene the presence of faces which could have created meaning and invoked relationships.

When we look at a photograph, we never look at just one thing, said the art critic John Berger; we always look at the relationships between things and ourselves. The relationships that a photograph evokes represent something that is beyond its subject matter, be it a woman’s dress or a boy’s cap, a landscape, or an everyday object. A photograph emphasises the object in a particular form and moment. However, the relationships that the spectator perceives in it mask the particular and supply meaning. Masking of meaning too occurs through the noise and the delicate aesthetics that accompany a photograph, and leads to a weakening of its critical power. An excessive focus on aesthetics is reductionist. Photographs have the ability to make

objects speak, and, to some extent, induce a vague form of thinking; advertising, for example, is photography directing people's thoughts.

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) had lived his entire life with his mother Henriette, and was devastated by her death in 1977. He dealt with the idea of the photograph in distinction to photography in his last major work, *Camera Lucida*. In it, he philosophically analysed the idea of a photograph, with his mother's pictures as points of illustration. In them, he found evidence of the life of someone whose existence preceded his own. History, to him, thus became a time when his mother was alive before him, and time began with his birth. He recounts an incident of rummaging through her photographs shortly after her death, and not being able to recall her features despite the photographs being detailed. He refers to a photograph of her as a young woman, in which he was able to recognise her gait, and her health and glow, though not her face, which seemed too far away. No matter how many times he sorted them and tried to look at them in totality, none of the photographic performances were able to reconstruct her face.

A photograph has a structure of its own, a text that wants to be read. For Barthes, language was both meaning-giving and meaning-making. He read the text of the photograph as subject and object, so inextricable from each other that to see it well, one had to look away or close one's eyes. It will touch me only if I can withdraw from its reality, its technique, and its art. Only when I shut my eyes, its details will come to life and take me to a region that the photograph does not permit me to see—to the region of the subtle beyond.

Great photographers are those who are able to capture this profundity of the objectified subject, surprising the viewer by revealing that which was hidden. This is possible if that which is captured is rare, and the capturing is an act of prowess. Rarity is either that of the topics that the photograph deals with or a revelation of positions hitherto unseen, whereas the prowess lies in the freezing of an event at a decisive instant—like capturing the explosion of a milk drop in the millionth of a second. There are other more technical methods to spring a surprise too, like superimposing, deceptive perspectives, trick framing, etc. A serendipitous discovery or freezing a moment in time, though, remains the most appreciated element of photography. And so, the essence of the surprise continues to be a spirit of defiance against the laws of possibility and probability. Photography becomes art when it fulfils these functions subtly, but also goes beyond. Photography can become art that comments on people, objects and events, making “what has once been” shine in the light of new understanding.

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