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# Framing the Uncertain: Exploring the Ambiguity of Photography

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**Abstract:** *This article proposes to use ethnography research and focuses on the ways in which photographs can be articulated, interpreted, and utilized in research, using the inherent ambiguities present in photographic imagery. Also explores how the perception that photography is inherently linked to reality contributes to its unique aesthetic impact and how it leads to diverse ambiguity of photographs. The differences in our reactions to photographs do not stem from variations in accuracy, persuasive details or compelling composition, but rather from our divergent beliefs regarding the origin of each image and our faith in the realism of photography.*

*Photography is often viewed as a means of objective documentation, with the photographer seen as presenting the world as it truly appears. Consequently, the fascination with a photograph such as converging railway track does not only lie in its depiction of a track in an unfamiliar or intriguing way, but also in its potential for being perceived as an accurate recording of reality of travel, despite being a transformed representation of the subject.*

*However, with the growing use of digital technology, photographers now have greater freedom to manipulate and alter photographs, turning them into constructions rather than just recordings of reality. This creative freedom comes at a cost, as it challenges the distinctive power of photography to capture and preserve reality, and raises concerns about the authenticity and reliability of photographic images.*

**Design/Methodology/Approach** - *Qualitative method used in photography research is visual analysis, which involves interpreting and analyzing the visual elements of photographs to gain insights into social and cultural phenomena.*

**Finding/Result** - *The findings suggest that ambiguity in photography is multifaceted, arising from both the metaphorical meanings conveyed within the image and the photographer's approach. Criticism in photography is lacking, and borrowing lingo from other fields cannot effectively analyze the medium. Responsibility for any falsehood lies with the viewer, not the photographer. Cultural education can be an effective measure to prevent ambiguity in photography, increasing awareness of context and promoting responsible photography.*

**Paper Type** - *Ethnography research*

**Keywords** - *Photography, ambiguity, Illusion, digital technology, Framing.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Roland Barthes has referred to the camera as a "visual clock" that serves to record and preserve events as personal history, while Susan Sontag has described it as a tool for predatory behavior. The term "photographic ambiguity" can be used to describe a variety of concepts, but it typically relates to the fact that images can be read in a variety of ways and that their meaning is not necessarily obvious or plain.

Photographs can be viewed differently by different people depending on their own experiences, beliefs, and cultural background, which is one part of this ambiguity. For instance, one individual might interpret a picture of a flag as a representation of patriotism, while another person would perceive it as a representation of oppression or imperialism. The fundamental moral ambiguity of the photographs manifests in the fact that they are as bound up in the reality that is repressed as they are in the reality that represses these other realities from view (Ong, 2012). [27].

Another feature of photography's ambiguity is that images can be changed or altered in a variety of ways, which might alter their meaning or raise questions about their veracity. Concerns concerning the accuracy of photos used in journalism and other contexts have been raised as a result of how simple it has become to alter and modify photographs as a result of the development of digital technology. Remarks also often imply that due to the possibility of digital image manipulation we can trust photographic images less today than we could trust them earlier in the history of the medium (Bátori, 2018)[1].

Photographic ambiguity can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness of the medium overall. On the one hand, it provides for a variety of interpretations and can encourage reflection and conversation. On the other side, if the veracity of the image is questioned, it might cause confusion or even be used to deceive others. In the same way, my visual experience when seeing the photograph is counterfactually dependent on the object photographed: if X's visible properties had been different, my visual experience when seeing the photograph would have been correspondingly different (Currie, 1991)[2].

Visual sensory perception is based on the functions of the eye – light enters the eye, hits the cells of the retina, and the brain interprets the impulses of those optical cells into coherent, understandable forms. Differences in the perception of images arise from the cognitive aspect of perception – the interpretation of what those images mean. For instance, people from different cultures will often disagree about what they see, and even those in the same culture can often disagree about the meaning of what they see (Mullen, 1998)[3]. Ambiguity is not a virtue in itself, nor should it be used as an excuse for poor design. Many ambiguous systems are merely confusing, frustrating, or meaningless (Gaver, 2003)[26].

## II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this article is to explore the inherent ambiguities present in photographic imagery and how photography's link to reality contributes to its unique aesthetic impact. The article aims to use ethnography research to articulate, interpret, and utilize photographs in research and understand how our divergent beliefs regarding the origin and realism of each image shape our reactions to them.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Visual analysis is a qualitative method employed in photography research, whereby the visual elements of photographs are examined and interpreted to uncover social and cultural phenomena. To gain a profound understanding of the context and significance of the photographs, qualitative photography research utilizes various data collection techniques such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, resulting in rich and descriptive data.

## IV. THE ILLUSION OF REALITY: EXPLORING THE AMBIGUITY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH

The shift from analog to digital technology in the commercial sector started some time ago. This change has democratized photography, making it accessible to a wider audience. Photography could be interpreted as an allusion to the intricate connection between photography and truth. It emphasizes that photographs can be manipulated or modified to create a particular narrative or message, leading to questions about the authenticity of photographic images. Furthermore, it suggests that the truth of a photograph is not always transparent and straightforward, and that it might require careful consideration of multiple interpretations or layers of meaning. The causal basis of the photograph parallels the process underlying human vision: the photograph depends upon a direct causal connection between object and photographic plate just as what we see depends upon a direct causal connection between object and retina (Allen, 1993). [25].



Figure 1 Sunny beach shot

*With digitalization increasingly acclaimed and adopted, are we fated to have not only our image-making but also our very ways of perceiving images reengineered for us? The great success of exhibitions of original works in recent decades..(Maynard, 2001)[4]*

When we view photographs as reality rather than representations of the images they capture, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the characteristics of the original object and those of the photograph itself. As a result, we may overlook the differences between the photo reality and the actual object, blurring the distinction between the two. This loss of perceptual separation can lead to a diminished appreciation of the uniqueness and value of the original work. The ethics of photography and delves into the concept of the 'controlling image'. Our preoccupation with our appearance is intricately linked to our sense of self-identity, and this concern is not merely superficial but extends to how we are perceived and remembered by others. As photographs allow others to recognize and make judgments about us, our concern for our appearance naturally translates to these images. photography provides a way to see what was previously invisible or unnoticed. It offers a deferred sight, allowing viewers to see after the fact what was not initially visible in the moment. Whether it is analogue, digital, formal, vernacular, reportage, conceptual, social, or any other form, the properties of the photograph make visible something that was not seen initially. In other words, photography has the power to reveal hidden aspects of the world and bring attention to them (Wilkinson, 2015)[5].

The issue of the truth of photographic images and rejects the simplistic analogy between mirror images and those produced by cameras. Which in turn raises ethical concerns regarding the possibility of false representation or degradation of the subject through photographs. The photographer's moral responsibility is thus questioned. The emphasis lies in prioritizing an individual's right to control their own image over the photographer's right to control the images they create. This ethical conflict can be framed as a clash between an individual's rights to image control and an artist's rights to free expression.

The evolution of photographic technology has transformed the collaborative relationship between subject and artist that exists in painting and earlier forms of photography. Distinguishes between a "still" photograph and a "natural drawing" photograph to clarify this shift. If photography traditionally designates a concrete, palpable object, and projected film seems more abstract, video, an electronic image that circulates and is transmitted in ways more diffuse and widespread than its predecessors, is even more dematerialized (Blatt, (2011) [30]. A natural drawing photograph is created through the collaboration of the photographer and the subject, with the image presented in accordance with the subject's self-image. In contrast, a still photograph captures a moment of fluid motion, revealing details that would be invisible to the naked eye

## V. PHOTO STORIES AND AMBIGUITY

The ambiguity of photography lies in its claim to 'truth' in representing reality whilst at the same time operating as a metaphor for desire and fantasy[28]. If photographs are based on the representation of visual appearances, and if their ability to convey emotions and messages can be improved by incorporating lengthy quotes, then it becomes feasible to design compositions with multiple quotes. This approach enables the communication of ideas and emotions not just through individual photographs, but also through groups or sequences. Nonetheless, the challenge remains in figuring out how to structure these sequences and whether a truly photographic narrative form can be envisioned. Adichie stresses the significance of seeking out diverse narratives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the world. She illustrates how stories can either empower or disempower people. To challenge the single story, Adichie advocates for telling complex and multi-dimensional stories that promote inclusivity and understanding. In summary, her talk underscores the importance of recognizing the power of stories and the need for diverse perspectives(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009)[6]. To understand photo stories in to social research, it is crucial to develop a framework that explains how both image creators (Photographer) and audiences interact with photo story. It crucial to understanding how they perceive the story and interpret photographic images is essential when using photographs as data.



Figure 2 Women on Street

Viewing photographic imagery is a patterned social activity shaped by social context, cultural conventions, and group norms (Schwartz, 1989)[7].

Photo story should not be considered as a conventional "message." Rather, it serves as a fundamental resource for constructing an endless variety of messages that each individual viewer can interpret in their own way. The photo composition does not necessarily provide new information, but instead prompts the viewer to associate their own meaning and significance with the image. All photographed events are ambiguous, except to those whose personal relation to the event is such that their own lives supply the missing continuity (Dyer, 2013)[8].

The criticism lies in the idea that photographs are often viewed as unfiltered representations of reality, rather than as independent entities with their own unique properties. This tendency to view photographs as projections of the subject's self-image, rather than as distinct images to be evaluated on their own terms, leads to a failure to consider the complexities and nuances of photographic imagery. The exploration of issues such as ambiguity, power structures, and multiple histories has led to recognition and re-engagement with British ethnographic collections. This recognition is not solely due to the interest in pictures, but also because the inherent ambiguities of the photographic medium align with the current crisis of confidence in representation (Edwards, 1995) [21].

## VI. FALSE REPRESENTATION AND DEGRADES THE SUBJECT

Sontag conveyed in her work, "On Photography." In that piece, Sontag characterizes the camera as a device that can "presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit," and in extreme cases, "assassinate" its subjects. Photography has the capability of generating inaccurate depictions of the subject, which may cause harm and humiliation. Such misrepresentations can result in severe consequences, such as tarnishing an individual's reputation or promoting dangerous stereotypes. Photographers should be aware of the influence of their images and the repercussions they can have on both their subjects and the general public. Ethical considerations should be a top priority for photographers while producing and distributing their work. Ultimately, responsible photography necessitates a dedication to precision, empathy, and respect for the subject's dignity.

### A. Misrepresentation of the Subject

The reputation and self-esteem of the subject may suffer if a photographer, whether on purpose or accidentally, takes a picture that inaccurately depicts them. For instance, a snapshot that misrepresents someone as being unmotivated or lethargic about their work when they are actually diligent and hardworking. Ambiguity is enhanced by factual omission when a photograph that seems to be describing one fact, is actually representative of another (Stuart Franklin, n.d.)[9].

Photographs have been used to misrepresent and degrade certain marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating misconceptions. For example, images portraying people with disabilities as helpless or dependent can reinforce ableist attitudes. Additionally, some photographs may exploit vulnerable individuals for profit, such as in "poverty porn" images that sensationalize poverty. Such misrepresentations can be harmful, perpetuating negative stereotypes and undermining the dignity of the subject.

The misrepresentation of subjects through photography is a complex issue that can take various forms. One such form is the use of Photoshop to manipulate images beyond recognition. This can involve excessive airbrushing or altering body proportions to an unrealistic degree. Such practices can create false and unattainable standards of beauty, leading to body shaming and other harmful outcomes.

Another way in which photographs can be misrepresented is through misleading captions or contexts that alter the meaning of the image. For example, using a photo of a peaceful protest to represent a violent one can create confusion and misinformation. This can lead to harmful consequences, such as misinformed opinions or unnecessary panic. Also any advertising that, in any way, including its presentation, misleads or may mislead the people it addresses or affects and that, due to its misleading nature, may affect their economic behaviour or, for these reasons, harms or is capable of harming a competitor (García-Nieto et al., 2021)[10].

Selective framing or cropping is another way in which photographs can be misrepresented. This can involve cropping a photo to exclude significant portions of the context, leading to a distorted representation of the subject. For example, cropping a photo of a demonstration to exclude the large numbers of peaceful protesters can create a false impression of the event.

Finally, stereotypical representations can reinforce negative cultural or societal biases, leading to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. This can involve portraying people of certain races or ethnicities in a particular light based on prejudice rather than reality. Such representations can be dehumanizing and perpetuate discrimination and inequality. Frame that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with broader norms that determine questions of humanization or dehumanization (Butler, 2007)[11].

### *B. Exploitation of Weaker Subjects*

Photographers may take advantage of weaker people, such children or marginalized groups, by taking pictures that support stereotypical ideas or maintain negative narratives. This could prolong inequity and further alienate these populations. If we define photography as a medium that reveals previously unseen aspects of the world, then the interplay between the visible and the invisible in the photographs showcased here becomes even more significant. We must consider what is being depicted, what is being excluded, and how these choices impact the overall meaning conveyed by the images(Cressman, 2019)[12].

Photography has the potential to exploit vulnerable or weaker subjects for profit, such as in the case of "exploitative poverty imagery" images that depict people living in poverty in a sensationalized or voyeuristic way. This kind of exploitation can further marginalize the already disadvantaged and reinforce harmful stereotypes. The power dynamic between the photographer and the subject is also a significant factor in exploitation, particularly if the subject is in a vulnerable position or lacks agency.

Exploitative images can have severe consequences, including perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining the dignity of the subject. Such images can lead to further discrimination and marginalization of vulnerable groups. It is crucial for photographers to recognize the power of their images and the potential for harm that comes with them. This involves a commitment to accuracy, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity of the subject. A familiar repertoire of images on themes such as executions, famine, the demolition of houses, or poverty will include photographs of objects, places, dominant figures, key moments in the annals of the "field," demonstrations, posters, and the front pages of newspapers, all of which exhibit various aspects of the theme(Azoulay, 2021)[13].

Responsible photography involves a responsibility to avoid exploiting vulnerable or weaker subjects. Photographers must consider the potential impact of their images on their subjects and the broader public. They must be mindful of the power dynamic and work to ensure that their images do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or reinforce negative cultural biases. Ultimately, responsible photography requires a commitment to ethical principles and a dedication to accuracy, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity of the subject.

### *C. Subject Objectification*

It can be humiliating and disrespectful when a photographer takes a picture of a subject that emphasizes or reduces them to their outside look. For instance, a picture that only shows a person's face.

Subject objectification in photography involves reducing an individual to a mere object or commodity, devoid of agency and dignity, and treated as a means to the photographer's ends. Such objectification occurs when a photographer emphasizes a subject's physical attributes or exploits them as props in a contrived setting. It also occurs when a photographer imposes their vision or agenda on the image, disregarding the subject's wishes or perspective. When we look at representations of the poor, we always and inevitably look at imaginary constructs that function as aesthetic objects. This may look like a bleak conclusion, but the case may not be quite as hopeless as it looks. It is not hopeless because the photograph itself is never the only or even primary source of meaning anyway(Fluck, 2010)[14].

The consequences of subject objectification are detrimental since they can perpetuate damaging stereotypes and diminish the subject's dignity and agency. They can also contribute to a culture of objectification that fosters negative outcomes in social relationships and self-esteem. To avoid objectification, photographers should create images that respect the subject's autonomy and dignity and accurately represent their experiences and perspectives. Ethical practice and sensitivity to the power dynamics between the photographer and the subject are essential.

Ultimately, the responsibility of creating ethical photography lies with the photographer. It involves acknowledging the power dynamic between the subject and photographer and avoiding exploitative practices. By creating photographs that accurately portray the subject's experiences and perspectives, photographers can contribute to a more just and respectful society. Photographic and video images can reveal great truths, expose wrongdoing and neglect, inspire hope and understanding and connect people around the globe through the language of visual understanding. Photographs can also cause great harm if they are callously intrusive or are manipulated(Code of Ethics | NPPA, n.d.)[15].

Fashion photographer who takes pictures of models that sexualize their bodies and focus only on their physical features, reducing them to objects of desire rather than full human beings with agency and dignity. Street style images of "real" people in "everyday" clothes did not challenge traditional fashion ideals, but rather began to show elements of catwalk photography, which has been seen as promoting an unrealistic and potentially harmful ideal of beauty(Maxwell,2011)[17]. The actions of photographers who post blogs, as well as in the comments posted by blog users, can be interpreted as acts of flânerie[18].

Travel photographer who takes pictures of locals in foreign countries without their consent or consideration of their cultural identity, reducing them to objects of curiosity or exoticism. Recognized in photography: photographed people, objects, and sceneries are what they are, and the meaning of the image is just an effect of their assemblage (Machaqueiro,2015)[19]. The meaning of an image is not solely based on the circumstances in which it was created, but also on the historical and sociopolitical circumstances in which it is viewed and interpreted. This ambiguity must be taken into account when analyzing images [20]. An sports photographer who takes pictures of female athletes in suggestive poses, emphasizing their femininity and sexualizing their bodies, reducing them to objects of male gaze and desire rather than accomplished athletes with agency and dignity.

Event photographer who takes pictures of attendees at a party or gathering without their consent or consideration for their privacy, reducing them to objects of documentation rather than full human beings with agency and dignity. Photographers can also objectify their subjects through the use of dehumanizing language or labels, perpetuating a sense that the subject is an object to be used for the photographer's purposes. For instance, referring to a person as a "subject" instead of a "person" can contribute to this dehumanization. Likewise, using derogatory terms or labels based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other factors can contribute to a culture of discrimination and objectification. By using language that reduces individuals to their physical characteristics or social identities, photographers fail to recognize their subjects as full and autonomous human beings, contributing to a culture of objectification and dehumanization.

## VII CONCLUSIONS

Ambiguity in a photograph can arise from the metaphorical meanings that the image conveys within its frame, as well as from the photographer's approach to capturing the image. The photographer's attitude plays a significant role in shaping the nature of the final photograph, but the process is far from clear-cut, with multiple factors contributing to the image's meaning and impact.

*She points out that there is no tradition of criticism in photography, and the lingo borrowed from art criticism, history, the social sciences, and news gathering cannot analyze the medium*(Vaczek, 1978)[16].

The idea that photographers are responsible for propagating falsehood through their work is not entirely accurate. While photographers can certainly influence how a photograph is perceived, the responsibility for any falsehood lies with the viewer who may bring inappropriate assumptions to their interpretation of the image. Snapshots are perceived as authentic because of their familiarity and predictability. Looking Away appears to be a genuine snapshot due to its common pose and setting, but the blacked-out face and arm of the any figure add an unsettling ambiguity. The ambiguity is intensified by the uncertainty of whether the gesture belongs to certain figure (Soutter,2018)[22].

The contribution of photographs in understanding geography should not be ignored solely on the basis of their social constructedness. Although it is important to acknowledge this aspect, it is crucial to recognize the potential of photographs as a valuable tool for education, research, and policy-making. Focusing solely on the issue of social constructedness can hinder our understanding and utilization of photographs. Thus, it is important to strike a balance between acknowledging the social constructedness of photographs and utilizing their potential in various domains[23].

To prevent ambiguity in photography, cultural education can be an effective measure. By increasing awareness of cultural and social context, viewers can approach photographs with greater sensitivity and discernment, reducing the potential for misinterpretation and reinforcing the value of responsible photography. While acknowledge that the material existence of the photograph prompts significant inquiries, I also recognize that its visual components can reveal "temporal contingencies" or "excessive details," as described by the Deborah (Poole,2005) [24]. These seemingly trivial details can offer valuable insights into the subject matter, and it is crucial to take note of them in addition to analyzing the more overt messages conveyed by the photograph. The multiplicity of looks in and around any photo is at the root of its ambiguity, each gaze potentially suggesting a different way of viewing the scene (Lutz, C., & Collins, J. 1991). [29].

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