

THE ART OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY:

Aestheticization of Asia in Documentary Photographs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to show how Asian countries appear to be aestheticized in documentary photographs, often considered as reliable evidence of reality, and to understand to what extent this is influencing the knowledge “Western” countries have on Asia.

Starting from the analysis of current theories on photography and art, I will see how they can be applied to documentary photography, regarded as a practice that only aims at informing the public. Then, tracing back to colonial photography, I will show how documentary photography appears to present an aesthetic of its own, which has had a fundamental role in the structuring and circulation of fantasies, sentiments and ideas between “Western” countries and Asia. Besides, I will determine to what extent this aestheticization of Asian countries has been fostered by contemporary magazines, such as *National Geographic*.

Finally, through the analysis of some of the most iconic images by the documentary photographer Steve McCurry, I wish to show how in the name of artistry, the documentary practice is failing in providing the viewer with visual documents.

To Americo and Enza

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

In modern times, photography has become more and more accessible to the masses, being no longer associated with elites or adventurous photographers risking their lives in exotic and remote places. However, the attitude towards these places has not changed. Countries, such as India, are still considered exotic by many and regarded by most of the photographers as their ultimate career goal. Seemingly, audience tends to be more fascinated and moved by photographs taken in such places, according to the common assumption that these are more spectacular and valuable if shot in far-away countries. Photographic coverage of these countries seems to be an example of how certain races and their “traditions” can add something fundamental to the image, resulting in the creation of iconic photographs, widely known and appreciated.

Among all the types of photography, such a custom seems to be especially common in documentary photography. Despite the efforts to avoid any kind of intentional aestheticization, not useful to the social and political message they try to deliver, documentary photographs still appear to reflect the notions of art and aesthetic of the period in which they were created in. Through the aestheticization in picture of Asian countries, in an attempt to be recognised as “fine art photographers”, documentary photographers continue to perpetrate the custom of idealising such lands, contrarily to what should be their primarily *documenting* task.

Almost since its outset, photography has been perceived as an effective way to document and understand different cultures within societies. When the new technology was introduced, early photographers started using it to document reality around them, according to the perception of photography as something which ‘should register and give us documents’ (Newhall, 1982: 235). In the nineteenth century, pictures of foreign lands and people, such as the ones shot by Felice Beato and John Thompson, received most of the popular interest, in certain cases replacing personal accounts and travel diaries. *Egypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, one of the first travel books with actual print photographs, by Maxime DuCamp (1822-94), was the result of a photographic expedition to Middle East commissioned by the French Minister of Education, interested in monuments and sites in the Near East. Similarly, the Englishman Francis Frith (1822-98) travelled three times to the Middle East, in order to produce pictures that could have been later served as prints in books.

During these expeditions, all the hardships photographers had to endure, due to a medium which was far from being easy to be carried or used, clearly show the fascination, as well as political interest, for such lands. In his notes, Samuel Bourne (1834-1912), who travelled to the Himalayas several times, perfectly displays the viewpoint of the century:

“If our artists at home, who are crowding on the heels of each other and painting continually the same old scenes which have been painted a hundred times before, would only summon up courage to visit the Himalayas, they would find new subjects enough for a lifetime, or a hundred lifetimes; [...]” (in Buckland, 1974: 38)

This perspective was also shared by John Thomson (1837-1921), author of *Illustrations of China and Its People* who, by defining the camera as ‘the only accurate means of portraying objects’, presented the idea, widely shared in contemporary times, that photography is the only means which allows to have ‘incontestable pictorial evidence’ (in Buckland, 1974: 53) of reality.

In the case of documentary photography, this assumption is reinforced by the terminology used. Indeed, the definition of ‘documentary’ is ‘Factual, realistic; applied esp. to a film or literary work, etc., based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes.’¹ Therefore, due to its meaning, documentary photography has always been interpreted on the basis of its truthfulness, and any considerations of it as “a work of art” have been disregarded. However, more often than not, there appears to be in such photographs an aestheticization of such realities which appears to question the objective presentation of them. If the idea that representing means to aestheticize- and so to transform (Strauss, 2003: 9) cannot be changed, then in what way such aestheticization of Asian peoples and countries should be considered?

More often than not, photographers seem to be concerned with the compositional aspects of their pictures (Sischy, 1991: 92), putting effort into making their pictures look “visually pleasant”. However, in so doing they contribute to perpetrating an aestheticized model of those countries, referring to the shared discourse on Asia. Nonetheless, it seems to be nearly impossible to argue that the camera is recording something that does not, or did not, exist. If the process through which a photo comes into being is considered, it becomes clear that photography’s raw materials are essentially two: light and time (Berger and Mohr, 1982).

The way in which the scene in front of the camera is recorded on the film or sensor clearly indicates how to a certain extent physical reality is reproduced in the picture. While language is capable of

¹The Oxford English Dictionary Online. *Documentary*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56332?redirectedFrom=documentary#eid> [Accessed 16/05/2017].

negation, for a photograph is literally impossible to show what was not there. However, the way reality is shown can be changed in such a way that the subjects appear to have been manipulated. Therefore, stating that the 'camera never lies' would be incorrect. A photograph is always the result of precise aesthetic choices taken by the photographer. Choosing what to include in the photo is not a decision taken only on the basis of aesthetic pleasure as much as a result of social and cultural conventions and preconceptions. Although photography is believed to furnish evidence, it is not evidence of reality; it is an interpretation of it. Being a product of society and history, it brings meanings that are produced as the image circulates.

The main reason why documentary photography is believed to furnish objective evidence of reality is that it is wrongly assumed that the lens is making the decision, and not the photographer's eye (Price, 1994). Indeed, the camera cannot be considered as something having a reason of his own as it is being operated by something and more specifically, by *someone*. It is the eye of the photographer which chooses the subject, takes technical choices based on aesthetic pleasure and finally frames it. More often than not, when documentary photography is concerned, this seems to be neglected, leading to misconceptions of what photography *can* and *cannot* show. In the formation of a picture, the mind of the photographer and therefore the social and cultural background he has been exposed to, is crucial. This allows to claim that a photograph is more the result of a mental conception than of the mechanical operation of the camera (Price, 1994).

According to John Berger, the reason why the camera is thought unable to lie is because photography does not possess a language of its own. Instead of *translating* from what he calls appearances, the physical world, it *quotes* from them (Berger and Mohr, 1982). Indeed, the photographer has the ability to choose a precise subject or event, rather than others, the time-exposure of the picture and the framing, but s/he cannot intervene when the light is actually being imprinted on the film, or on the sensor. Therefore, no matter how good the photographer is at mastering photographic technique, one can never be too sure about the result as the image is seared with the event (Pinney, 2012). For this reason, even when quoting a lie, the latter is still perceived as truth, as if it had been legitimised by the photograph.

Nevertheless, the choice of the photographer who decides to take a picture of an event or subject, rather than another, the selection he makes, should be put in a wider context and be considered as a cultural construction which produces knowledge on its own. In this way, the photograph takes an active part and becomes evidence of such cultural construction.

This is particularly true for documentary photography of Asian countries, which is thought by photographers as an effective way of bringing home the absolute essence, but more often than not, results in showing an unquestioned ideological assumption. Such assumption is commonly shared by Western viewers, who in most cases are *expecting* to see in the pictures precise settings and subjects, responding to a common shared discourse about Asia.

Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to understand to what extent defining a documentary photograph as a “work of art”, and so its aesthetics, is influencing the truth-value generally associated with it. Do these photographs help in producing a precise knowledge? If so, how can it be related to contemporary practice of documentary photography in Asian countries?

METHODOLOGY

For this project, I will use different types of methodological approaches, ranging from Western theories on photography to social epistemology, as well as auto-ethnographic inquiry, by analysing my personal knowledge of photography. My primary source of material will be analysing collections of photographs, as they are found either in photography books, exhibition catalogues or online databases. Along with this, I will base my study on the existent literature on photography and theories related to it, as well as theories on aesthetics and definitions of art. Besides, I will also investigate what dictates photographers’ aesthetic choices, through the analysis of the topics discussed in photography classes I have participated in for almost three years. At the same time, inspired by John Berger’s book *Another Way of Telling*, I will take into consideration the results of discussions with people not strictly interested in photography, in order to understand their perception of Asian countries, and in particular the imagery they have of them. For this project, I will also rely on the fruitful exchanges with Italian photographers I had the chance to meet during the years.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This project will be divided into three main chapters, each dealing a specific topic. The Second Chapter will consist of a literature review of all the theories related to documentary photography. In particular, I will consider theories contributing to the debate about photography as art, starting from the analysis of the development of the art theory as explained by Noël Carroll. Then, I will discuss the mechanical nature of the medium and how it has been interpreted by Walter Benjamin. Moreover, I will refer to why documentary photograph is considered as evidence of absolute reality, based on the theories of Beaumont Newhall and partly Susan Sontag. Finally, I will also trace the history of the

early documentary photographs of Asia, in order to analyse in what way these countries were approached in earlier times. I believe that tracing back from the early photographic instance of this will help me to understand what are the reasons for such fascination in contemporary documentary photography.

In the Third Chapter, I will discuss in more depth the aesthetics of documentary photography, which are often dreaded and avoided by documentary photography theorists. In this section, the influence of Western photography magazines, such as National Geographic, will be examined, in order to understand how their contributions are producing and shaping the existent knowledge of such countries. Following the analysis of the magazine policies, I will proceed to a visual analysis of the most iconic picture of all time, *The Afghan Girl*, through a summary of the story behind it and by underlining the way it has been aestheticized.

In the Fourth Chapter, I will discuss the main aesthetic stereotypes found in documentary photographs. I will first investigate how aestheticization is tied to and producing knowledge about those countries and then I will proceed in the analysis of case studies consisting of documentary photographs of Asia by Steve McCurry. As influential documentary photographer, after his success with the above mentioned National Geographic cover, I believe his work is considered as a window on Asian cultures. However, I will argue, his worldwide famous aesthetically perfect images serve more to an exoticization of those countries than to *documenting* them. In order to prove this, I will measure the impact his pictures have had on the public. Finally, these case studies will be analysed in the light of the theories discussed and of the conclusions that have been reached, showing how documentary photography cannot be considered as solely true evidence but should also be seen in the light of its aesthetic values.

CHAPTER 2:

PHOTOGRAPHY AND TRUTH

2.1 Photography and Art

Until recent times, photography has been denied the status of “art” due to its technological nature. In its early years, photography was mainly celebrated for its ability to produce reliable images, which accurately depicted reality. Photographs were, and still are, considered to be mechanically produced by the camera with little, or no, human influence on the process. Indeed, the idea that if something is visible in a picture it must be true was, and is, widely shared:

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. [...] 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, 2008: 5)

For this reason, the photographic medium has always been considered for its technical features and for its capability of furnishing reliable evidence, more than for its ability to create “artworks”. In addition to this, photography has been denied the high status of art for its accessibility to the masses. Considered as a popular means of communication (Wells, 2004), it appears as a ‘mundane activity in which anyone can engage’ (Mackh, 2011: 31), denying human creativity and excluding it from the realms of art.

Most of the available literature deals with the idea of photography as an artistic practice, mainly focusing on other types of photography rather than documentary. Specifically, clearly manipulated photography appears to be accepted in the realms of art, because of its clear effort of creating something which does not represent the truth. However, in this context, documentary photography, usually associated with longer projects who are considered to be of public importance, rather than private, is often commonly neglected in the artistic environment, because its only aim is to record historically important events or to show the real walks of life.

Before analysing some of these writings, it would be appropriate to indicate what philosophy defines as “art”. According to Noël Carroll, the phrase ‘fine arts’ derives from the idea ‘Beaux Arts’ of Charles

Batteux, presented in 1747 in his treatise *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe*². Batteux argued that painting, sculpture, dance, music and poetry were similar as they were all ‘imitation of beautiful nature or the imitation of the beautiful in nature’ (Carrol, 2009). Besides, due to their theoretical/intellectual function, these designed arts differed from the merely mechanical ones in their approach. However, it appeared problematic to incorporate every shade of these arts under the same umbrella and therefore, in the eighteenth century, the aesthetic theory of art begun to develop.

As Carrol explains, this new idea precisely corresponded with the changes occurring in society, in particular with the way art was being consumed by the public. In premodern times, artworks were often commissioned by members of the aristocracy, the church or the municipalities. In these cases, patrons aimed to celebrate victories, instil loyalty to the monarch or to commemorate sacrifices. Therefore, aesthetics was not initially deriving from the personal taste of the artist and was not intended for a vast public, but instead responded to patronage, representing the wishes of the monarch, or aristocracy. Differently, the rising bourgeoisie usually interpreted art as a leisure activity to pass time. In this context, art, before associated with beauty, and beauty with pleasure, started to be seen as a source of pleasure, leading to the development of a new theory, better fitting the new modes of consumption.

Nevertheless, relating art to simple pleasure did not seem completely appropriate, as not all the artworks were created to provide that pleasure. Therefore, a new broader idea was introduced, that of aesthetic experience, which allowed to refer to different types of arts. In his book *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant claims,

Everyone must allow that a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. One must not be in the least prepossessed in favour of the existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect, in order to play the part of judge in matters of taste.

This proposition, which is of the utmost importance, cannot be better explained than by contrasting the pure disinterested delight which appears in the judgement of taste with that which is allied to an interest—especially if we can also assure ourselves that there are no other kinds of interest beyond those presently to be mentioned. (Kant, 2007 [1790]: 37)

²The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle.

This theory formulated by Kant allowed the distinction of artworks on the basis of the aesthetic experience they provided, which had to be an experience on its own completely disconnected by any other aim art could serve. Although such modernist idea of art, represented in the slogan “art for art’s sake”, spread in the nineteenth century, it is still used today as a cornerstone to decide what can be considered “art”. As a result of this ideology, the artist started to be considered more and more as a genius or a hero, and most importantly, as superior to normal people.

This philosophy of art mainly developed during the nineteenth century, while new photographic discoveries were made, resulting in a great influence on photography. According to these theories, the primary aim of photography did not appear to be the creation of a disinterested pleasure but instead, was to document and furnish evidence of real events and daily life situations. Moreover, every person was regarded, and still is, capable of using a camera, producing in this way a great quantity of photographs which seemed to have no distinction in quality among each other.

2.2 The Mechanical Nature of the Medium

As soon as the new Daguerreotype was commercially introduced in 1839, photography was welcomed as a scientific discovery and technological advancement. Since its outset, it is clear how photography was immediately associated with industry rather than with the arts. Photographs were not presented at the Palais of Beaux-Arts exhibition in 1859 and more often than not, they were seen as opposed to Realist paintings. Many were against the idea that photographic practice could have been considered an artistic practice, due to the mechanical and technical nature of the camera. Among them, Baudelaire strongly believed that photography should have been accorded the recognition of art, and on such a basis, he wrote:

“If photography is permitted to supplement some of art’s functions, they will forthwith be usurped and corrupted by it, thanks to photography’s natural alliance with the mob. It must therefore revert to its proper duty, which is to serve as the handmaiden of science and the arts.” (in Benjamin, 2008: 294)

Photography seemed, and seems, to be placing the photographer away from the subject, as the camera stands between them. The general assumption about photography is that the person taking the picture is doing nothing special, as it is the camera which appears to be doing all the work. Therefore, while paintings and music required a divine inspiration, and who was able to perform such arts was considered a genius, anyone is capable of taking a good picture, as the medium does not require any particular skill.

Emphasising the role of the camera, rather than the one of the photographer, is strictly related to the truth-value associated with photographs. Indeed, according to Heinrich Böll, 'The great deceit of photography lies in the prior deceit of 'objective reality'. It is not the lens which makes the decision, but the photographer's eye.' (in Price, 1994: 131) Differently, if the lens is considered to be making the decision, human creativity or imagination is then almost completely denied. While,

Locating the genesis of the photograph in the mind of the photographer rather than in the mechanical operation of the camera enables one to modify –not abandon- the idea of a camera without a hand. To propose an intelligence behind the camera is to entertain the possibility of invention that characterizes imagination. (Price, 1994: 35)

However, in scholar texts a contrasting view is mostly found. According to David Haberstick (1973: 113), photography should be used only as a support to arts, and specifically for three reasons: '(1) As a source of reference in making art objects, especially paintings, (2) as components incorporated in art objects and (3) as documentary records of art works.' In his opinion, it seems clear that photography has no right to be considered art on his own, and as Baudelaire had pointed out, it should just be used as a support to other artistic mediums. And indeed, it was used as a support ever since its outset, especially by anthropologists who used it to keep a record of all the ethnises in non-Western countries, as a support to their theory of race.

Another reason for excluding photography from the realms of art, is its reproducibility, as discussed by Walter Benjamin. Far from being something invented in recent times, artworks have always been reproducible in some way. However, according to Benjamin (2008), technological reproduction brings new patterns, not found before. First of all, differently from previous reproductions, this seems to be completely independent of the original. For instance, a photograph might be able to show something which in the original cannot be immediately grasped by the human eye. Secondly, it can help bringing a copy of the original in places in which it is not expected to be found. Again, in the case of photography, we might find a picture of a cathedral in a place where it would not be otherwise. All these circumstances, Benjamin (2008: 22) writes, 'devalue the here and now of the artwork', as they interfere with its authenticity, 'the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it'.

Such a change is interconnected with the change in the modes of perception, as also Noël Carrol argues, when the public seems to be more interested in getting 'closer to things', and ready to assimilate the uniqueness of each things as reproduction (Benjamin, 2008: 23). Therefore,

uniqueness is the intrinsic property of an artwork, which seems to be completely alien to photography, because of its missing rarity value.

2.3 Early Photographs of “non-Western” People

In the nineteenth century, the first photographic representations of non-western peoples were mainly produced by anthropologists and voyagers, travelling to the Middle and Far East for a variety of different reasons. Anthropological photography, which can be interpreted as a form of documentary photography, was aimed at recording the physical and cultural characteristics of the different races, conformed to contemporary understandings of racial differences. Indeed, in nineteenth-century Europe, photographs of colonised peoples appeared to be a valid support to prove the scientific theories who saw race as ‘a material, historical, and biological fact’ (Poole, 1997: 15). Such a racial theory implied the categorization of peoples by comparing them with other individuals and assigning them a social worth, resulting in the creation of “superior” and “inferior” races. Accordingly, it was able to translate ‘the politics of colonial subjugation into the visual- and aesthetic- calculus of embodied “natural” differences’ (Poole: 1997, 14-15), supported by the evidence provided by photographs. As a consequence to the spread of this emerging idea, several attempts to document the different races started in each colony. Example of this was the work of Watson J. Forbes and J.W. Kaye, whose efforts to document the hundreds of ethnic groups in the Indian Subcontinent resulted in the creation of the monumental eight-volume work *The People of India*.

Compiled between the years 1865-1878, *The People of India* is a collection of 480 photographs, each accompanied by a letterpress, created in response to a call for photographs of the British government (Farquhar, 2016). The call for this photographic collection, fostered by the India Museum, was aimed at classifying, categorizing and mapping the people of India (Jenkins, 2003), on the basis of certain parameters such as race, caste, religion and ethnicity derived from current anthropological theories. Indeed, it requested that each photo had to be ‘large enough to exhibit the chief physical peculiarities and distinctive costume of each race,’ and should have been accompanied by ‘a brief written description of the tribe, their origins, physical characteristics and general habits’ (Falconer in Hight and Sampson, 2002: 58). The work, however, was poorly received, being commercially a failure. Despite this, it perfectly fit the theoretical framework of anthropological photography and the agenda of British government who, through a “better” understanding of the different ethnic groups, wished to gain more control over the country.

Nonetheless, while anthropologists' goal was to support their scientific research on races, photographers were usually travelling to far-away lands for political reasons. They were often employed by the government to document the life in the colonies, in order to have a better knowledge of the people colonised, as for instance the work of the French photographer Maxime DuCamp shows. Appointed by the French Minister of Education, interested in views of the Middle East, he photographed monuments and sites in the Near East, resulting in the creation of the successful book *Egypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie* (1849-50). Similarly, the English photographer Francis Frith made three expeditions to the Middle East, in order to shoot images that could have been used for printed books back home.

However, apart from a strict political interest, voyagers were also interested in addressing the public hunger for information on colonies, by bringing home photographs of exotic places and peoples. Through the use of a language mainly visual, such images served the purpose of exposing masses to the variety of racial difference, according to the political and cultural agendas of European Imperialism. Therefore, photographs provided a wide range of myths about the colonies, such as the depiction of cannibalism or prostitution, meant to make people feel mentally and physically superior while justifying invasion and exploitative practices in the colonies. Through this process of "misrepresentation" of the reality claimed in the picture, an unreliable depiction of the colonial world was successfully created and diffused for and by the European observer.

Although most of the photographic production of the time was influenced by colonial stereotypes, a minority of photographers tried to present images that empowered the colonised. For example, there existed some quite rare documentary pictures that tried to record the consequences it had leaving traditional lands on indigenous communities (Maxwell, 2000: 13). However, most of the photographs were not aimed at empowering the colonised, or at presenting them free from any stereotypical depiction. Instead, they had to inspire in domestic audiences a strong commitment to the empire, profoundly rooted in the opposition of civility against savagery.

This attitude in photography was not only limited to the territories of the empire, but was extended to other exotic lands, such as China and Japan, which were not directly related to Europe for colonial reasons. While the images shot by Felice Beato and Baron Raimund Von Stillfried contributed to spread the phenomenon of *Japonisme*- the European passion for anything related to Japan, John Thompson's *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1873) shows how photographs were widely used as evidence to demonstrate the savagery of such races. In his book, photographs are accompanied by descriptions written by the author in order to "better" interpret what was being visualised. Among

them, it is emblematic what the photographer has to say about a child represented next to old men in a plate of portraits (Figure 1):

“The fact is altogether a pleasing one, but as is common among children in China, it will gradually lose its attractions as it grows to maturity. The softness of the eye is then frequently replaced by a cold, calculating expression, and the countenance assumes an air of apathetic indifference which is so necessary to veil the inner feelings of a polished Chinese gentleman.” (in Maxwell, 2000: 60)

Through the comparison with other figures on the plate, Thompson seems to underline the violence of Chinese feudal society, opposed to an initial innocent childhood which will ‘gradually lose its attractions’ (in Maxwell, 2000: 60). In “Western” countries, this statement spread the belief that the Chinese ruling class should have not been considered trustworthy as it was composed by men capable of any type of violence in case their privileges were challenged.

Through this statement, Thompson, as many travellers in the nineteenth century, aimed at empowering British society, in contrast with the “primitive” Chinese aristocracy. Indeed, by representing “non-Western” peoples as savage and uneducated, these images provided Europeans the right to claim superiority over such races, and in so doing produced and spread a knowledge about those lands, which more often than not proved to be bias. In an age where only few people travelled, photos were the only reliable evidence to see distant regions part of the empire. According to the idea that photographic works have an intrinsic truth-value, these photographs were given the status of empirical evidence, which was also reinforced by the mechanical nature of the camera.

2.4 Documentary Photography in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, more and more photographers used the camera to document reality around them, according to the assumption that photography ‘should register and give us documents’ (Newhall, 1982: 235). Such ideology, completely disregarding any claim of photography to be an artistic practice, made it possible to consider documentary photography in terms of its capability of furnishing evidence, and not its aesthetic choices. As a result, this concern for documentary photographs’ informational content, rather than their visual pleasure, led to the thought that whatever appears to be vaguely reminding of any beauty in documentary pictures, is thought to serve a precise purpose- providing a visual document. More than ever, documentary photographers in the twentieth century tended to stress the anti-aesthetic feature of their practice, whose only concern was to be informing the public about real life situations.

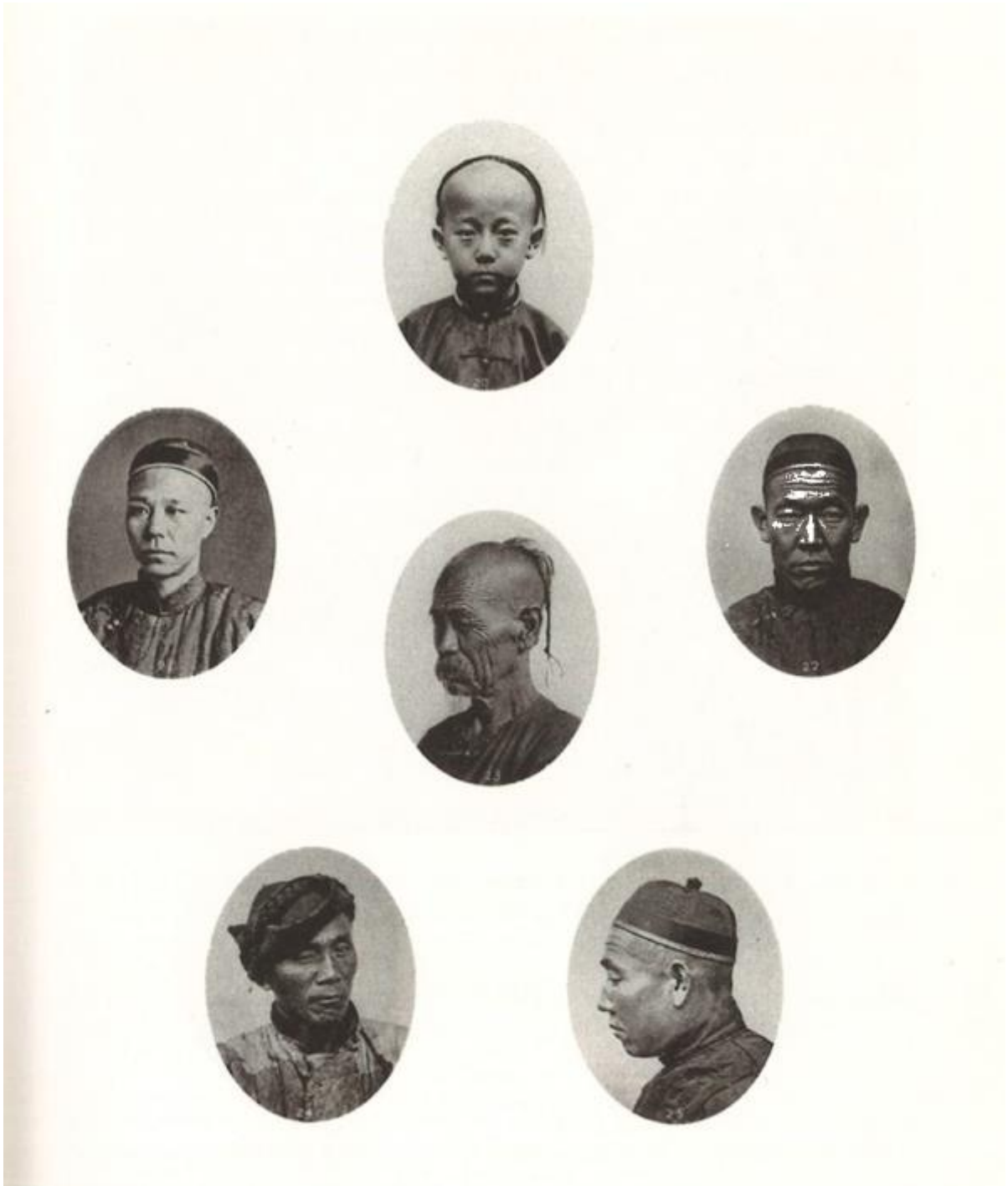


Figure 1. John Thompson's representation of Chinese types.

From: Maxwell, A. (2000) *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' and the Making of European Identities*. London: Leicester University Press, p.60.

As Roy Stryker, who launched the documentary photography movement of the FSA (Farm Security Administration) in the United States, pointed out:

Documentary is an approach, not a technique; an affirmation, not a negation... The documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work. It merely gives these elements limitation and direction. Thus composition becomes emphasis, and line sharpness, focus, filtering, mood- all those components included in the dreary vagueness "quality" are made to serve an end: to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the things to be said in the language of pictures. (Newhall, 1982: 245)

On such bases, well-known documentary photographers, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Margaret Bourke-White, explored Asian countries with the ambition of bringing home visual documents of their journeys.

Influenced by oil painting, Henri-Cartier Bresson is one of the most famous photographers of all time, as well as founder of the photographic cooperative *Magnum Photos*, who never considered his pictures as "art". By defining his pictures as 'reactions to moments'³, he always strongly stressed the importance of what he called the "decisive moment". Along with the idea that images are 'seared with the event' (Pinney, 2012), Bresson believed that the photographer had to wait the right moment during which all the elements were in the right place without intervening on the scene. Therefore, according to this, no matter how good the photographer could be at mastering the photographic technique, a well visually composed picture results from the "decisive moment" rather than aesthetic choices taken by the photographer.

Achieving high recognition after his trips to Asia, this idea led to the common belief that his photographs of Asia mirrored reality, without any artistic practice interfering. Indeed, his photographic reportage of Gandhi's funeral in 1984 was praised as 'unique visual record of the event'⁴, and resulted in the creation of the most iconic photo story in the history of photography. In his attempt to depict the essence of a country like India, Bresson's photographic work appears to

³Bernstein, Adam. (Thursday 5th August 2004) The Acknowledged Master of the Moment. *The Washington Post*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A39981-2004Aug4.html>.

⁴Magnum Photos. India and the Death of Mahatma Gandhi. *Magnum Photos*. [Online] Available from: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/religion/henri-cartier-bresson-india-death-gandhi/>

present a fascination for the Asian country which, to a certain extent, is affecting its aesthetics, through the depiction of classic views of India, as “exotic” religious traditions.

Participating in this documentary practice, Bresson’s photographic stories bear a certain historical continuity to the previous anthropological use of the medium. Even though the photographer appeared to be in search of the absolute truth, his photos still originated from a shared discourse on Asia, depicting the continent as opposed to the “West”, and whose traditions appear to be radically different and “exotic”.

CHAPTER 3:

THE AESTHETICS OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

3.1 Steve McCurry and the Aesthetic Practice

The claim that aesthetic choices can influence the reliability of documentary photograph is not new to debates about photography as beauty was, and still is, seen as a great danger to documentary photography. Indeed, aesthetic choices do not appear should not be of primary concern for documentary photographers, since their images should provide a social or political message.

According to its incapability of giving any aesthetic pleasure, Beaumont Newhall, claims that 'documentary is, therefore, an approach that makes use of artistic faculties to give "vivification to fact" [...] (Newhall, 1982: 238), refusing in this way any association of documentary photography with beauty or aesthetic. As he states in another article (1938) the documentary photographer should not be considered neither a 'mere technician' nor 'an artist for art's sake', but instead a 'visualizer'. Sometimes, Newhall admits, his images might be brilliantly realised and could be considered result of an artistic practice but this is not the point of documentary photography. Indeed, it should primarily be the result of the knowledge and experience the documentary photography has regarding its subject.

However, it appears unbelievable to argue that photographers are completely disinterested with the aesthetic of their photographs. They mostly use their tool with great consideration for aesthetic pleasure and with a high degree of skill. When framing their photographs, they appear to be still 'haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience' (Sontag, 2008: 6), considerations which make their photographs 'as much as interpretation of the world as painting and drawings are' (Sontag, 2008: 6).

In the light of this discussion, the truth-value of documentary photography appears to be problematic. In fact, trying to arrange and structure a shot, framing so that it is visually pleasant, is considered an 'illegitimate behaviour' (Wells, 2004: 73), that can alter the veracity of the image. Photography critics, such as Beaumont Newhall, questioned the possibility of documentary photographs of being equally "artistic" and reliable, as the two appear to be incompatible. However, due to the high demand for well-composed shots, documentary photographers have been trying to deliver images which are both aesthetically beautiful and real.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts to avoid any kind of intentional aestheticization, photographs still appear to reflect the notions of art and aesthetic of the period in which they are created in. For this reason, certain documentary photographers are often criticised, as they appear to be more concentrated on the compositional aspects of their pictures than the social message they wish to deliver, resulting in the 'beautification of tragedy' (Strauss, 2003: 5).

Especially in the case of Asia, the idealistic documentary photographers seem to be convinced that their task is to bring home the absolute truth. Instead, when travelling to "exotic" countries, which appear to stimulate their fantasy and fulfil their search for perfect composition, they do not realise the truth they are representing is a limited one. If it is true that 'to represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform' and that the photographer has no choice but transforming, changing or altering what is being represented (Strauss, 2003: 9), then in which way should documentary photographs of Asia be analysed?

In recent times, documentary photographers have been struggling to have their works recognised and appreciated by the art world. Traditional documentary photography seems to have now found a place in galleries, alongside painting and sculpture, being therefore partially accepted as a "work of art". As an example of this, more and more documentary photographers have started identifying themselves as "fine art photographers", by producing images which need to be more spectacular and beautiful.

In the struggle to be recognised in the fine art market, most of documentary photographs of Asian countries are mainly aestheticizing what is being documented and in so doing, they appear to fail in responding to the task of *documenting*, due to their incapability of expanding the viewer's knowledge on Asian countries. Indeed, through the aestheticization in picture of Asian countries, in an attempt to be recognised as "fine art photographers", photographers continue to perpetrate the custom of idealising such lands, without showing them as they are on a daily basis. As John Berger argues,

In itself the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth;
or rather, the truth it does tell, the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one.
(Berger and Mohr, 1982: 97)

In such a context, the aestheticization of these images, which later results in the creation of iconic images, can be utterly deceiving and misinforming and, it helps in perpetrating an ideology of such countries, which usually does not correspond to reality.

Taking part in this aestheticization of Asia through images, is the American photographer Steve McCurry, one of the most well-known documentary photographers of contemporary times. Creator

of some of the most iconic pictures portraying Asian countries, McCurry's contribution to the common knowledge of Asia in the "West" appears to be significant. After working for several years as a freelancer, McCurry left for India to work as photographer there. However, his career was launched when he managed to cross the Pakistan border into Afghanistan, before the Soviet invasion. His documentary reportage of the war zone was published on some of the most important magazines, such as TIME, and awarded him the Robert Capa Gold Medal. His interest for documentary photography continued throughout the years, when he continued to cover conflicts in Asia.

His interest in Asia, which mostly started as a fascination for India, led McCurry to produce images that could tell something about these countries. However, his photographs of Asia, and especially of India, result to be more often than not a depiction of an aestheticized reality, from which nothing in particular can be inferred. In an attempt to be recognised in the fine art market, his photos appear to reiterate shared discourses on Asia, which are common to the "Western" viewers.

His type of documentary practice also appears to be influenced by the wish, common to almost every photographer, to shock his viewer. Interested in conflicts as well as in the everyday life of people living in war zones, Steve McCurry's photography tries to challenge the common views of Asian countries, by presenting "original" representations of them⁵. Nonetheless, in his search for the shock value, his photography appears to engage too much in the artistic practice, and less in the *documenting* one. Indeed, in an attempt to find 'something that we all respond to, a universal chord that speaks'⁶ to the public, McCurry's photographs succeed in being visually pleasant but not in informing the viewer, as the case of the National Geographic cover depicting the *Afghan Girl* exemplifies.

3.2 The Importance of Aesthetics in *National Geographic*

Throughout the development of photography, with the advent of new and advanced technologies, the demand for a culture based on images has grown. The capitalist society we live in appears to have the responsibility of furnishing great amounts of entertainment, in order to 'anaesthetize the injuries of class, race and sex' and to 'gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit the

⁵Horaczek, Stan. (Monday 4th November 2013) Interview: Steve McCurry on Street Photography and Change. *American Photo*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.americanphotomag.com/interview-steve-mccurry-street-photography-and-change>

⁶Khanna, Dinesh. (Saturday 2nd February 2013) Documentary Photography as a Fine Art. *The Hindu*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/documentary-photography-as-a-fine-art/article4369833.ece> [Accessed 30/05/2017].

natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats' (Sontag, 2008: 178). As a powerful public educational voice and symbol of "non-Western" images into the "Western" world, the magazine *National Geographic* well exemplify this.

Founded more than a hundred years ago, The National Geographic Society represents one of the biggest non-profit scientific and educational institutions in the world. The interests of the Society include the study of world cultures, and their histories, science, environmental conservation and geography. Accordingly, the Magazine, which was first published nine months after the Society was founded, presents articles on the same topics usually accompanied by photographic projects in order to make them more appealing for the public. Published in over 40 languages around the world in monthly issues, *National Geographic* counts almost sixty million readers every year⁷. As their slogan indicates, 'National Geographic gets you closer to the stories that matter'⁸, the National Geographic Society brings us in contact with every part of the world, which "is worth seeing". Through certain editorial policies, the magazine seems to produce images responding to a set of photographic conventions specifically used when representing differences, which as Parameswaran (2002) argues, contribute to intellectual and economic imperialism.

The magazine, in its fundamental role in the creation of images which belong to global culture, 'consistently beautifies and dignifies (at the same time that it exocitizes and objectifies) people and places that are not ordinarily perceived as beautiful in Western culture' as Lutz and Collins argue in their book *Reading National Geographic* (1993: 274). Indeed, ever since its foundation, the magazine seems to avoid "unpleasant" photographs, depicting terrible poverty, visible violence or unhappy people. Because of the anchoring humanism present in the magazine, the distinctive lines between facts and fiction vanish, resulting in the creation of aestheticized realism. This selective form of realism appears to exclude photographic works which seem to be more focused on the artistry of the shot, and therefore are not perceived as "real", while at the same time excludes realistic images if they appear to be too straightforward and real (Dominguez 1994).

In this way, the content of National Geographic seems to have been carefully edited, in order to avoid any kind of extreme images which seem to go against the humanist agenda of the magazine. This does not mean that pictures of war, poverty and unpleasant conditions are not present at all, as they can actually be found in the issues of the magazine over the years. However, while a discrete number

⁷Wikipedia. *National Geographic*. [Online] Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Geographic_Society#National_Geographic [Accessed 30/05/2017].

⁸National Geographic. *About us*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/about/> [Accessed 31/05/2017].

of photos document severe poverty or war, they are composed and then assembled in a way that the overall picture is balanced (Schulten, 1995: 525) and is not too strong. Therefore, this process results in an aestheticization of the reality which does not depict the absolute truth, as claimed. As a consequence, presenting beautiful images, which exoticize either Asian or African countries, results in the creation of iconic images which are then spread and consumed by readers all around the world. These photographs become iconic photos not only because they present something “pleasant” anyone can engage with but also because,

They draw on stock images and ideas of war and peace, poverty and the distribution of wealth, civic duty and personal desire, and other unavoidable concern of collective life, and they stay within the realm of everyday experience and commonsense. (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 30)

A clear example of what has been discussed in the paragraph seems to be the June 1985 cover of the National Geographic issue, which presents to the public *The Afghan Girl* by the photographer Steve McCurry, one of the most famous pictures in the history of National Geographic.

3.3 *The Afghan Girl*

Considered as one of the five most irresistible National Geographic covers⁹, the photograph that goes under the name of the *Afghan Girl* (Figure 2) is probably one of the most-known pictures of Asia in the “West”.

Shot by the photographer Steve McCurry in the Nasir Bagh refugee camp, an Afghan refugee camp in Peshawar (Pakistan) in 1984, this picture was used as cover for the magazine in June 1985, as visual support to the article “Along Afghanistan’s War-torn Frontier”. Even though other pictures were presented next to the article, the image of an unknown young girl became immediately one of the most reproduced images of modern times.

Not recording the name of the girl, probably due to the fact that the photographer did not expect that his picture would have had such a success among the public, led McCurry to do several expeditions in the 1990s in order to find the girl he photographed. After a series of unsuccessful attempts, in 2002 McCurry and the National Geographic team travelled to Afghanistan in order to locate the subject of the most recognised picture in the history of the magazine. During that

⁹Qiu, Linda. (Saturday 6th December 2014) 5 Irresistible National Geographic Cover Photos. *National Geographic*. [Online] Available from: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/12/141206-magazine-covers-photography-national-geographic-afghan-girl/> [Accessed 31/05/2017]

expedition, discovering that the Nasir Bangh refugee camp was about to close, McCurry and his team inquired the remaining residents, meeting in this way her brother who was able to send them to her hometown. However, before finding the “real” Afghan girl, a number of women mistakenly recognised themselves in the picture and numerous husbands thought that the girl depicted was their wife. Later, the team was able to locate the girl in a remote village in Afghanistan and once there, they were able to prove her identity through iris recognition. From that moment on, all her story which had been neglected before was finally discovered. Her real name is Sharbat Gula and she is of Pashtun ethnicity. After her parents were killed in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union bombings, she had to move with her whole family to Pakistan, finding a place to stay in the Nasir Bangh refugee camp.

This expedition to the refugee camp resulted in the creation of a new cover for the National Geographic Magazine in 2002. In this one, Gula is posing with her body and her face completely covered, according to Islamic traditional dress rules for women. In the photograph, the only thing that allows us to recognise her is the picture of the face of a young Gula, photographed by Steve McCurry many years before.

In the 1984 photo, instantly familiar to everyone, the face of a young girl and half of her chest take the majority of the frame. While she is facing the camera, her chest is not posing in front of it, conferring to the image a “surprise effect” as if someone called her and she had just turned to that person. She is looking directly into the camera, with a frightened or almost angry expression, as if disturbed by the gaze of the photographer. The colour of her eyes is an intense green, which almost manage to hypnotize the viewer. The colour palette of the whole photograph is matching with the colour of her eyes. The upper part of the background is of a darker green, which recalls the colour of the cloth emerging from the holes in her veil, fading into a bluish green in the lower part of the background. Her veil is dark red, perfectly matching the colour of her skin, and contrasting with her green eyes.

As described, the photo, who in theory is supposed to document the struggle and the pain deriving from wars, cannot be considered but beautiful. Everything in the picture is framed in a way that makes it captivating. The natural posture of the girl, her eyes staring at the camera, the restricted set of colours matching with one another, all the elements in the picture suggests a perfectly composed



Figure 2. The Afghan Girl.

© Steve McCurry

picture. When looking into her eyes, the aim of the reportage seems to be lost. As *American Photo* magazine pointed out, the image presents 'an unusual combination of grittiness and glamour and the ambiguity captured in the girl's striking green eyes'.¹⁰ Therefore, what seems to be evident from this image is the striking aestheticization of a poor condition which wants the viewer to empathise with by making it look "pleasant".

In the ongoing debate, considering if documentary photography should be aesthetic or anaesthetic (Strauss, 2003: 3), such attitude has been criticised as it can result in threatening the truth and political value of a picture. Dealing with the documentary photographer Sebastião Salgado, Ingrid Sischy (1991) argues in her article 'Photography: Good Intentions',

Salgado is too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures- and with finding the "grace" and "beauty" in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects. And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity towards the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action.

As further evidence of the research for beauty in the photograph of Sharbat Gula, it should be considered the lack of information on the subject portrayed in 1984 by Steve McCurry. The photographer who apparently was in a hurry, as his photographic expedition had to remain a secret to the local authorities, did not spend time at all to check the identity of the twelve-year old he was photographing. Probably not considering the effect such an image would have had on the public, his main concern appeared to be to record her picture, probably captured by the beauty of the shot.

However, if the idea that representing means to aestheticize- and so to transform (Strauss, 2003: 9), cannot be changed then in what way should this shot of a young girl be considered? Beauty in this case seems to be the excuse for perpetrating a model of this countries, which has to be appealing to the "Western" viewer because part of his visual knowledge of those countries. Far from arguing that the documentary practice does not bear any connection with the truth, it should be noted that although there is something authentic in it, the aestheticized art seems to have a pivotal role in supporting this practice (Kester, 1987).

Therefore, the image of the *Afghan Girl* defined as 'more than just a photograph of a young schoolgirl' and as an image on 'the struggle of a nation at war, and the life of its people' (McCurry, 2013: 79),

¹⁰American Photo. (July-August 2002) Photographer of the Year: Steve McCurry. [Online] Available from: https://books.google.nl/books?id=Yunn27aRiFOC&pg=PA45&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

bear great of its success to the beauty that is depicted in it. If this aesthetic practice does not compromise the message sent, it should be however noted that it makes the photo respond to a particular framework which underlines the necessity of aestheticizing Asian countries. The result of this aesthetic art is the creation of a photographic imagery of such countries, which although it cannot be considered completely false, is utterly deceiving and misleading.

CHAPTER 4:

PHOTOGRAPHS AND KNOWLEDGE

4.1 Aestheticization and Knowledge

As showed in the previous chapters, since the nineteenth century, documentary photographs have had a fundamental role in the structuring and circulation of fantasies, sentiments and ideas between “Western” countries and Asia. According to the idea that a picture speaks a thousand words, documentary photographic coverage of Asia is rarely described appropriately by the photographers, entitling the viewer to see any kind of meaning in it. When official websites or photographic publications are taken into consideration, it can be noted how images are usually accompanied only by a caption stating the location the picture was taken in and the date. Far from being explicative, this attitude seems to rely only on the powerful composition of the shot, resulting in a large diffusion and perpetration of aesthetic codes, related to Asian countries, which sees such documentary reportages still rooted in the idea that the exotic subject is fascinating *per se*.

As some documentary projects on Asia show, these pictures seem to not add anything new to the knowledge we already possess, or at least we suppose we do, of those countries. Instead, they keep on reiterating stereotypes of Asia, which contributes to the spreading of a shared discourse about those countries. Indeed, in the name of aestheticization, documentary photographers frame their pictures with extreme attention to all the elements of composition, in order to create appealing images to which the public shows response to.

Starting from the assumption that representing is transforming, such attitude, typical of documentary photography of Asia, can be so interpreted as a form of intervention. Despite the ongoing debate on what extent the photographer can be said to intervene in the scene, the process of aestheticization of Asian countries can be considered as a way of projecting ‘the photographer’s inadvertent mask of sheer admiration’ for ‘subjects’ importance in the world’ (Price, 1994: 122-123). As Poole (1997:7) asserts,

Seeing and representing are “material”, insofar as they constitute means of intervening in the world. We do not simply “see” what is there before us. Rather, the specific ways in which we see (and represent) the world determine how we act upon the world and, in so doing, create what that world is.

In creating and acting upon the world, documentary pictures of Asia seem to rely strongly on aesthetics. According to this idea, interpreting in a new light Susan Sontag's fear that 'aestheticizing will destroy, weaken, or contradict the moral-political lesson' (Sontag, 2008: 11), it should be taken into consideration that aestheticizing not only weakens the political lesson but can also interfere with the truth-value of the picture, by sharing misleading discourses on Asia.

Indeed, by trying to find the complex ties among art and politics, it is often forgotten that 'images are also about the pleasure of looking' because 'visual images fascinate us' (Poole, 1997: 17). This is particularly true for documentary photographs of Asia, where the visual pleasure seems to exceed their depiction of objective reality. However, this pleasure works in complicated ways.

Although we tend to be fascinated by shocking and unfamiliar pictures, the peculiar ways in which we are able to experience visual pleasure are usually related to cultural and historical contexts (Poole, 1997: 19). For this reason, visual pleasure is found less in 'invention, shock value, and trickery' than in 'recognition of the familiar' (Price, 1994: 83-84). Recognition of the familiar is what contributes to the visual pleasure of a photograph. When the viewer is able to recognise the known visual elements in a picture and at the same time, new visual aspects are presented, visual pleasure results from it (Price, 1994: 83-84).

The pleasure that derives from documentary photographs of Asia is shaped by a set of aesthetic ideologies, responding to the cultural and historical contexts the photograph was produced. By fitting into precise codes of interest, images of Asia shock the viewers for their "exotic" and distant subjects while, at the same time they are expecting to see exactly the same subjects and settings. For instance, one does not need to know the history of India in order to appreciate and recognise a picture of the Indian spring festival, Holi, as no one would argue that a picture of young Buddhist monks has been probably shot in Tibet or Cambodia. However, this process of making the subject of a picture adhere to what we have in mind before actually having any information of it, fosters a shared discourse about Asia which, despite corresponding in some part to reality, still results to be stimulated by a domain of fantasy and imagination. As Proust already did before her, Mary Price (1994:152) asserts,

Our eyes neglect because they are charged with thought. They form the idea of the other both by constitution and omission. They literally do not see that which does not add to or conform to the idea that controls sight.

This does not mean that a photograph has completely no relation to the real essence of things, or that from it a complete arbitrary meaning can be inferred, but it certainly adheres to a set of beliefs which are held both by the photographer and the viewer. Although the meaning, or better to say the

interpretation, of a photo, needs to be restricted to what is actually represented in it, we tend to make the subject adhere to the idea we always had of it.

In sum, aestheticizing documentary photographs of Asia acquire rhetoric potential not only thanks to the message they are trying to convey, if it is clear at all, but also by representing events and situations in accordance to the conventions of visual pleasure practices familiar to a public audience. As a consequence of this process, the photographs perpetrate the spread of a discourse on Asia, which despite the truth claimed in them, is bias and representative of a “Western” point of view.

4.2 Framing Sorrow

During and after the photographic event, the photographer makes a number of choices which will later influence the look of the final product, the photograph. These choices, which can be very detailed and precise, never confer the photographer the total control on the image, which is not sure until its realization is completed. However, the decisions of including a certain person or event in the frame, to point the camera from a certain angle or to saturate the colours, are all contributing to the visual aesthetics of the picture which, if properly arranged, will be appealing to the public.

Conferring the picture an aesthetic value, so that it could be defined a “work of art”, seems to be a great concern for documentary photographers of Asia, who now struggle to have their pictures recognised as art. Yet, this effort of ascribing documentary photography of Asia to the realms of art results in a separation from the documentary value of the picture, which in name of more high aesthetic values loses its status of document. Despite not being explicitly admitted, symbolic documentary photos of Asia are not arbitrarily taken but instead, by following ‘familiar patterns of artistic design’, they seem to

[...] draw on generic conventions from the middlebrow art such as landscape or portrait painting, and they do not feature the sharp contrasts, double images, or other techniques of avant-garde photographic art. They also draw on other, similarly limited repertoires of design and response: popular iconography (mother and child, a soldier saluting), representational realism (everything to scale, nothing uncanny), journalistic conventions (balanced composition, a sense of decorum), visual grammars learned from film (establishing shots), advertising (image before text), and so forth. (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 30)

In this context, the shot of a Kashmir woman grieving (Figure 3) is a clear example of how the documentary value of the picture is sacrificed in the name of aesthetic pleasure.

Part of a photographic series about Kashmir, this image was taken in 1998 when the conflict between India and Pakistan over the control of Jammu and Kashmir was at its peak. Steve McCurry, who had previously been to India a number of times, visited the region determined to explore all its secret aspects, which had long been ignored due to the conflict. Indeed, during his several visits, he had the chance to witness the political and religious hostility, and even though the conflict was not his principle concern, he thought that it was time for him to create a story that would have put ‘a human face on a region that for many people was only name’ (McCurry, 2013: 116).

Initially inspired by the conflict, McCurry decided to portray the daily lives of people, as he had done before in other war zones, so that he could show how people continued their daily lives despite the conflict. For this reason, the project resulted in a collection of photographs of laypeople such as, fishermen, farmers and schoolchildren, living “normally” their lives.



Figure 3. Woman grieving in Kashmir, India.

© Steve McCurry

Before shooting, McCurry and his friend and journalist Surinder Singh Oberoi, known as Lovely, travelled the valley, across markets, villages and streets, in order to find 'potential subjects' (McCurry, 2013: 116). After what could be defined as a period of "scouting", McCurry eventually started his new project, shooting in different locations of the region, ranging from the market to the refugee camps. It was, indeed, in a refugee camp that the image of Sartha Devi, a Hindu refugee, was taken. In the foreground, the photograph (Figure 3) shows a woman dressed in a bright red saree, who appears to be grieving for something. The picture is taken indoors, in an almost empty room, which could be the woman's house. In the dark, sitting on the floor, there is a figure of a man (or woman?) who seems to have no interest at all in what is happening in the room.

The photograph appears to be very well composed, with the subject slightly bent on the left of the frame. Indeed, following the rule of thirds¹¹, the face of the woman is placed on the intersection of the vertical and horizontal line, while her body is in the centre of the photograph. This composition compels the eye of the viewer to look from left to right, as it is normal for countries whose writing starts from left, conferring the image a certain dynamism, reinforced by the apparent bending of the woman towards the camera.

This dynamism is also reinforced by the fact that the viewer, in his reading from left to right, slowly discovers new aspects of the image, which were initially unnoticed. Indeed, the body of the woman is placed in a way that gives space to the other elements to be shown. The viewer can move from the foreground to the background on the line along the wall, where different objects are hanging. Otherwise, the eye can move from the hand of the woman, till the floor on the back, where a person is sitting while possibly writing something.

Again, the tones and the colour patterns are striking. Of the three principal colours of the pictures- red, grey and light blue, red appears to be the most important. The woman is wearing a red saree, has her nails painted red and her *bindi*¹² is red. The colours strongly contrast with the woman's skin, as does the colour grey of her hair. Not on purpose, the grey of her hair is matching the colour of her sleeves, which is appearing under her saree. Besides, the figure of the woman stands out in the general greyish tone of her house, helped also by a black shade at the four angles of the image which makes the subject stand out.

¹¹The rule of thirds is a guideline used to compose photographs and other visual images. According to it, the image should be imagined as divided in nine equal parts, by two horizontal lines and two vertical ones. The subject, instead of being perfectly cantered, should be placed along these lines or their intersections.

¹²A *bindi* is a red dot usually worn by Hindu women in the centre of their foreheads. Religiously, it is placed in the area between the eyebrows, where the sixth *cakra* is believed to be, and symbolises the third eye.

The colours and the visuals inform us. When looking at the picture for the first time, we see immediately the red of her saree, which inform us she is Indian, while her *bindi*, tells us she is Hindu. The grey atmosphere of her house tells us she is probably not wealthy, and so do her few light blue utensils, which we see at a second gaze. However, such picture, beautifully composed and aesthetically very pleasant, does not say anything precise about the *Kashmiri* woman. The way it is staged appears to be more important than what is documenting. And yet, what is it intending to document?

As mentioned above, Steve McCurry was not interested in the crisis of Kashmir; the conflict is not what he intended to show. Instead, he preferred portraying common people living their lives in the region, despite the conflict. So, why choosing as subject a woman grieving? The choice seems even more odd, when it cannot be said for sure that this woman is undergoing some kind of pain. She might be pensive, she might be on the verge of coughing as she might be about to cry; it is difficult to say, as there is no clear indication.

The paradox of the nature of the feeling of the woman appears to be even more striking when one sees the person at the back. Apart from an evident difficulty in identifying who is sitting on the floor - Is he her husband? Is she a woman instead? - the person in the background does not seem to share her grief. Seated on the floor, the unknown figure does not mind the presence of the photographer and of his camera. Instead, s/he is normally reading or writing something. Therefore, why McCurry, who apparently was looking for the everyday life, did not document the act of the person sitting on the floor? Why, to put it differently, the picture was framed in this way giving relevance to the woman with the red saree?

On the photographer's website¹³, the caption of this photograph reads 'Kashmir' and nothing more. Not new to documentary photography, it is a common practice to describe the photos just with the place they were taken in, which, however, does not add anything new to the photo/document. Nothing emerges from the photo, apart that we are looking at a traditional Indian woman, wearing the *bindi* and the saree. The viewer might wonder why she is grieving, even though s/he might not, due to an uncertainty in her feelings. Besides, apart from an indication of the place the photo was taken in, the image does not suggest that she is Kashmiri, or more, that she is living in a refugee camp. What we can see immediately is an Indian woman in a traditional saree of a bright red, who is probably grieving, or maybe not. We read she must be from Kashmir, but nothing in the face of the woman, or in the house, suggests it. We should know there is a conflict happening outside her house,

¹³www.stevemccurry.com

but again, we cannot really tell where she is. As the caption shows, the place here appears to be more important than what is happening. The place is documented in the photograph. However, at the same time, nothing in the photo recalls the place it is taken in. As far as the photo is concerned, that might be her permanent house and not a refugee camp. It might be any place in India and not Kashmir.

The interest of the photographer here seems to be placed on a visually pleasant shot and not on the story of the woman. However, the photo is presented as a glimpse of truth in the life of the woman. She is not looking at the camera, she seems to be in the act of something, as caught by surprise. And yet, the viewer cannot tell what exactly is the story of the woman. The photo appears to be separated from its documentary value, in the name of an aesthetic value. The shot is beautiful and that seems to be enough.

At first, the viewer will not notice the woman but her red saree, standing out in the photo. While wondering on what is happening in that woman's life, s/he will not even be able to assert for sure what she is doing. Besides, the place could be anywhere in India. It is the idea of India that is portrayed, not Kashmir. In theory, documentary photography should serve as a mirror of reality, but apparently nothing much can be inferred from the photo. The way it is framed, as in the case of the *Afghan Girl*, is almost perfect for an aesthetically pleasant image, but it appears to fail in providing the viewer with a document of reality.

4.3 Colour Patterns

As shown in the first two pictures, colours represent a very important part in documentary photography of Asia. Despite the existence of documentary reportages in black and white, photographers seem to be very attracted by the colours of "exotic" countries. In particular, Steve McCurry considers of utter importance the right choice of colour patterns, which result in capturing and keeping the attention of the viewer. To further analyse this, the following photo (Figure 4) taken in Kabul, Afghanistan, has been taken into consideration as a similar example to the ones presented above.

McCurry, who had been already a number of times to Afghanistan as a war photographer, took this shot at the end of the 90s, probably motivated by the same idea of portraying common people in their daily activities. Indeed, the photograph shows four women and a young girl, looking at shoes in a market in Kabul.

However, the first thing that the viewer would immediately notice are the colours of the women's burqas. Differently from the previous one, where colour was also important, this image presents a variety of different colours- with blue, red and green being the principal ones. The women next to each other seem to form a colour gradient, so that the viewer might wonder if this was not staged. The young girl does not capture the eye immediately. Despite being dressed in bright blue, she is not wearing a burqa, and in some way, her clothes do not really take part in the colour play of the women's burqas. After the gaze rests on the bright colours, the shoes with their different coloured laces catch the attention. Quite surprisingly, the red shoes of the young girl, and the one of the woman on the left recalls the background, mostly made of red slippers. Nevertheless, once the gaze moves on the background, the viewer can notice that there is a seventh person in the picture, a young boy, almost completely covered by the shadow.



Figure 4. Women shopping in Kabul, Afghanistan.

© Steve McCurry

Again, the photograph appears perfectly framed. The four women with their shining burqas are the point of focus and everything around them is just a frame. In the higher part of the image, the shoes

on the top perfectly surround them, as if they were placed paying attention to their different heights. And even the shoes falling on the woman with the green burqa are precisely in the centre of her back. The ground as well is neutral, of a light beige, not distracting the viewer from the principal subjects of the photo. Symmetrically, the shoes on the top and the ground are given the same space in the frame, and so is for the space on the left and on the right. The women are also part of this harmonious composition. Indeed, after a careful analysis, they appear to range from the tallest on the left to the shortest on the right, wondering if they were not aesthetically arranged one after the other.

As in the case of the image in Kashmir, there is nothing that tells us this is Afghanistan. Afghanistan is here not documented. What is documented, though, is part of a shared common discourse on Middle East: women and their burqas. We see women, and a young girl, but we know nothing about them. There is no particular story that can be inferred from the image. We might assert, considering the texture of their burqas, clearly visible in the picture, that those are rich women. This idea could be reinforced by the contrast with the young girl, who is carrying a dirty bucket. She is just looking at the shoes, as if something caught her attention while she was walking in the market. Where was she going though?

In wondering whose story is here documented, the answer might be no one's. This is a photo, beautiful in its composition but not a photo telling a story. It seems to be intended to document a contrast between tradition and modernity, delivered through its aesthetics. The striking colours are not just visually pleasant but are also stressing the contrast of having traditional women in front of sneakers. As far as we know, they may be looking at other types of shoes, but this information seems not to have fit the photographer's agenda.

Far from being casual, the photo's aesthetics are used to convey a particular meaning. Tradition is exotic and it contrasts with modernity. Middle East should present women in burqas, shining colours, young girls working, not globalization. The image presents us with a document of our expectations. It is documenting something that we can recognise. Through aestheticization, the radical binary between the "old and outmoded", represented by the women, and the "new and hip" (Parasmewaran, 2002), represented by the shoes, is stressed. In it, the colours serve the function of underlining the contrast between the two, in a very well composed picture. The shoes surround the women. The young girl appears on the side of the women. All the elements in the photograph, from colours to framing, are presented to the viewer not for their documentary value, as for their visual familiarity to the "Western" gaze.

4.4 The “Right” Subject

The exploitation of the wrecked, poverty and injustices are some of the favourite subjects of documentary photography. In an attempt to show the absolute truth to the viewers, documentary photographers travel the world to give voices to exploited people. As a result, this documentary practice participates in recycling a routine catalogue of images of poverty in Asian countries when, as the photographer Victor Burgin underlines, they could find exploitation and poverty next to their house (Bishop and Cubitt, 2013). In doing so, the search of photographers for the “right subject”, usually includes children, who are believed to best depict the struggle and move the viewer. As already said, the photographer Steve McCurry, who had long been fascinated by India, cannot be excluded from such a common practice, as the following picture shows (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Child working in a dump in Mumbai, India.

© Steve McCurry

In the foreground, the photograph shows a young boy, probably a teenager, in a dump in Mumbai, as the caption specifies. The boy appears completely focused, while the background, including the dump, ships and some other people, is blurred. The way the image is framed differs from the other

three, where the subject was either placed on the left of the image or in the centre. In this case, the photographer decides to place his main focus on the right of the picture, in the intersection of the vertical line with the other two horizontal lines, according to the rule of thirds. The choice, which might initially appear odd, is instead carefully studied.

As mentioned above in the case of the Kashmiri woman's photograph, it appears to be more aesthetically pleasant when the subject is not placed in the centre of the image. Instead, ideally, it should be placed on the left, in order to follow the movement of the eyes which tend to read from left to right¹⁴. However, in this special case, if McCurry had followed this non-written rule, he would have missed a great deal of the scene, conferring dynamism to the picture.

In fact, on the left there appears to be a diagonal line, probably taking inside a ship, on which several people are placed at different distances. The viewer can easily follow this line, either going from the background to the foreground or vice versa, discovering at different new elements in the image. In the background, almost completely blurred, we can recognise two figures standing and probably talking to each other. While we progress to the foreground, to finally get to the main subject, we can notice trash along the way and a man walking, as if he were coming towards the camera. After this, we finally get to the main subject, discovering a new part of the background behind the boy- a giant ship.

The choice of the main subject, however, needs further consideration. As showed, the young boy is not the only person in the scene but he is still the main focus of it. Was the man walking towards the camera not good enough? Or maybe he did not want to collaborate? And yet, the young boy does not look eager to collaborate with the photographer as well. He looks disturbed by the camera. At the same time, he looks as if he were posing for it. The fact that he is doing something is not in doubt, even though we cannot tell for sure what it is. However, it seems as if the photographer intervened in the scene so that the final product might have looked *better*.

The fact that he might be posing is not affecting the truth-value of the picture *per se*, as he seems to be actually performing some kind of activity related to the dump. Instead, what is affecting the truth-value of the photograph is that the young boy appears to be posing because, in the mind of the photographer, this looked visually pleasant. In some way, the aesthetics of the picture required the teenager to look straight into the camera. The expected result is that the viewer engages with the photograph because s/he feels compelled to by the gaze of the young boy.

¹⁴Especially in "Western" cultures where the writing goes from left to right.

Nevertheless, watching the photo, we are left wondering, what is exactly being documented in the image? What kind of issue is this picture addressing? It appears from all the images that the stress is not put on the documentation of something but instead on the way it is presented, on its *aesthetics*. The young boy could have had any possible story, could also not belong to the place he is depicted in, but he is “useful” in terms of visual aesthetics of the image. He is young. He deserves to be seen because young, that is the common practice. Moreover, the place he is depicted in, India, adds value to the picture, adds something exotic. Exotic makes photographs beautiful. They help in creating “work of art” and ascribes documentary photographers in the realms of “fine art”.

It is in the way presented that the intent of documentary photographers, such as Steve McCurry, does not seem to try and present reality as it is to show visually pleasant photographs, in order to have them defined “works of art”. In the light of this, Asia seems to present a space where the truth can be aestheticized, resulting in the creation of pictures appealing to the imagery of the “Western” viewers.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS

Documentary photographs of Asia do not work 'as we have been taught' (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 84). Indeed, the idea that the camera, as mechanical medium, cannot do anything but record reality needs reconsideration.

Ever since its outset, photography has been often disregarded from the realms of art, while it has been praised for its truth value. The main argument against the possibility of considering it an artistic practice has been the mechanical nature of the medium (Benjamin, 2008), denying any human intervention in the photographic practice. However, emphasising the role of the camera rather than the one of the photographer, has always led to the misconception that every photograph corresponds to the absolute reality. Particularly in the case of documentary photography, a type of photography believed to be able to give us documents, this idea has resulted in a complete denial of any artistic implications. Artistic concerns are often seen as incompatible with the real task of this photographic practice. As the term suggests, documentary photographers are supposedly aiming at *documenting* events, and any kind of embellishment should be avoided as it serves no function. However, in the case of documentary photography of Asia these premises appear to be problematic. The period the new technology was introduced had great influence on the way photography was interpreted. Being presented in the late eighteenth century, when colonialism was starting, photography was used as a means to justify the colonial empire. Starting as a practice associated with colonialism, the aesthetics found in the early photographs of "non-Western" peoples presented the colonised as savages, in order to create a contrast which had to empower the coloniser. Therefore, these early photographs clearly responded to a need of exposing masses to a variety of racial difference, according to the political and cultural agendas of European Imperialism. This practice was also strongly reinforced by the current scientific theories, which saw physical features as an indication of racial differences and therefore, as a sign for racial superiority.

Anthropological photography, whose aim was to document different peoples, later developed in an interest in the world events. Photographers from "Western" countries, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, started travelling the world in an attempt to grasp and bring home the absolute reality of Asian countries. However, their documentary works presented an aesthetics which, if not strictly related

to colonialist visions of Asian countries, still represented them as “exotic” and radically different from “Western” civilization.

In contemporary times, despite a fundamental denial of any artistic practice, photographs of Asia show how such views have not been abandoned yet. Although any kind of intentional aestheticization seems to be avoided, photographs still appear to reflect the notions of art and aesthetic of the period in which they are created in.

Given the new ambitions of documentary photographers, who now seem to be more concerned with exhibiting their works rather than presenting real life situations, Asia appears to be considered as the perfect place to show their artistic capacities, which result in an aestheticization of those realities. Imperatives of visual aesthetics are also emphasised by magazines, such as *National Geographic*, which represent the principal distributors of ethnographic material from Asia.

In an attempt to bring closer “exotic” cultures through the use of visual language, it appears to fail in showing them free from any stereotype. Indeed, ever since the *National Geographic* association was founded, the magazine has always avoided photographs considered “unpleasant”, depicting scenes of terrible poverty, visible violence and exploitation. Due to a distinctive humanism present in the magazine, the photographs proposed are result of a selective form of realism, which appears to exclude “too aesthetic” photographic works, while at the same time preferring not “too realistic” images, if they appear to be too straightforward and real (Dominguez, 1994: 69). In this way, the photographs in the magazine appear to reiterate a discourse on Asia, made of aestheticized realities, which the “Western” public perceives as truth.

Taking part into this practice is the American photographer Steve McCurry, one of the most famous documentary photographers of Asia. Through his pictures, in an attempt to show “Western” world the everyday life in Asian countries, McCurry results in strongly aestheticizing those countries, in order to produce visually pleasant documents. As a result, his photographs are far from informing the viewer on the topic and instead, visually represents the common shared discourse on what Asia is.

Through the analysis of some of his photographs, it has been shown to what extent the photographer is concerned with the aesthetic value rather than the truth-value, as his images all appear to fail in visually communicating situations and events to the viewer. Strikingly, in these photos, the primary task of documentary photography is neglected in the name of artistry. They bear a number of paradoxes, which appear to radically contrast the nature of documentary photography.

The pictures, beautiful in their composition, engage with the viewer without presenting any clarification on what is happening. In watching these photographs, the public might wonder if they were not staged, and if so why? The Afghan women shopping in a market in Kabul, or the Kashmiri woman in front of the camera, clearly shows to what extent the aesthetics of the photo are considered to be more important than the actual event. Rather than seeing a story behind the image, the eye of the viewer will rest on the beautiful colours of their burqas or on the red of the woman's saree. The women appear to be the "right" subjects for a visually pleasant photograph and so does the young boy in the dump in Mumbai. They allow the viewer to engage with the photograph. They, in their striking colours or young age, make the viewer stare at the image.

As this project intended to argue, the main tendency in all documentary photographs of Asia seems to aestheticize the reality in order to produce stunning images. However, such a practice appears to have influenced the views on Asian countries in the "West" because of their claimed truth-value, impeding any attempt to disregard common views of Asian countries. For this reason, it appears necessary a creation of an academic corpus reconsidering documentary photographs in the light of their aesthetic value, which prevents them from being solely considered as true evidence. In order to do so, other photographic works should be taken into consideration, to further analyse to what extent Asia is being aestheticized through pictures.

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