

Mass Communication and Journalism

James McArdle*

School of Communication and Creative Arts Honours, Deakin University, Australia

A photograph is an enigma that compels us to ask: 'what, who or where, is it?' In doing so we are begging a visual question with words, as does Mitchell [1] in musing that we do not know 'what pictures are [...] and what is to be done with or about them'.

'One picture is worth a thousand words' might be a cliché, but such an outrageous equation begs to be questioned for its presumption that a quantifiable and qualitative exchange can be made of words with pictures. This problem of the equivalence between word and image is framed in this discussion of the fictional and documentary potential of photography in communication, of how we read photographs with or without words, and what right and capacity we have to read them for ourselves without intervention or interpretation. What possible correspondence is there between the meaning contained in a photograph and that transmitted, for instance, by 'a thousand words', which is roughly the amount contained in an average newspaper article [2], though the print versions are becoming longer as newspapers go online and make hard copy more 'exclusive' [3].

We are used to seeing photographs accompanied by text or captions, but where lies the point of comparison between text and image? We might, with imaginary examples, test the connection in three ways.

First, let us remind ourselves of images that may be illusionistic, 'set up' to deliberately deceive, pretending to be something they are not, some even that are 'apparitions'. In each is an inherent challenge to the viewer for interpretations.

Second; let us attempt to select a text to accompany an image. Let us not use for this a reportage directly connected with the image, but select small extracts from fiction, reversing the process of editorial illustration in which 'generic' images are sourced from an image library. The use of images for the covers of novels are intended to encourage and challenge the viewer to question the image and, seeking answers, open the book; but might the converse hold true?

And last; let us consider the corollary of pairings of text and image in which none of the writers intended their writing as a caption, and none of the photographers were illustrating the text, and it is we, the consumers who are sampling them to produce some meaningful bricolage.

These examples are forced, and instructive, confrontations between the 'dumb' image and the 'blind' text. The viewer may take issue with the connection between each image and its 'caption'. Such lack of exact correlation prompts the viewer to substitute it for their own reading, and for the media researcher raises questions about intentionality and aesthetic merit in both photograph and printed word.

If amongst our selection we include images which deliberately mislead or puzzle the viewer we may find that photography allows the possibility of 'constructing' a revelation; a moment when the viewer's memory is altered to include an episode created in the encounter of text and photographs.

Of the role of image in knowledge Cicero said; 'the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of the things that have been conveyed

to them and imprinted on them by the senses, but [...] the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight'. The most consumers of print media almost certainly have made and used photographs for themselves underline the well-known prophecy of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, in 1936: The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen [4]. Often used as a mnemonic, a means of assisting our fading memories, photography became 'the mirror with a memory', the 'Kodak moment' of the family album [5]. Sometimes though, our only recollection of an event is the published or broadcast photograph. Presenting still images with text allows reflection between images and other images, between images and text. It allows the possibility of reordering the sequence of reading. Cinema might be the model, a narrative comprising the spoken word and moving image, its flow of narrative taking editorial license in directing the arrow of time. Furthermore Lindsay et al. [6] suggest the photograph might even be used to supplant memory, replacing it with something that has equal veracity, but in fact being a persuasive fiction, to produce 'implanted memory'. Walter Lippmann presciently observed [7,8] that stereotypes are most usually volatile images which have bridged the mind/media gap to become 'mental images'.

Paul Cezanne was referring to painting when he famously said Art '...is optics, primarily. The matter of our art is there, in what our eyes think...Nature always manages, when it is respected, to say what it means..' (Doran:1978). Photographs also come from the eyes and as noted by Mitchell [1], are distinguished by their capacity to reveal, show, appear, while words describe, narrate, announce; but words can communicate negatives, propositions, and conditionals which pictures cannot [9,10]. There is a difference in their import, in their freight, in their intelligence. Words are read in sequence. Photographs can be taken in by the eye all of a piece, for which they may compose 'para-frames' in sub-clauses [11]. For instance they might present together in one image, a shattered wall with a blank window, a motion-blurred dog, the rusted iron fence around a grave. We are provided with alternatives for the very environment of this image. Will the propped wall fall away to reveal lush forest, or to the stark sky that the window frames? Which is the true time scale of this image; that of the departing dog or that which ages with the grave?

In asking 'But is not a photographer who can't read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate?' Walter Benjamin [12] reminds us that photographers themselves use words to explain, describe or title their images. When left to the fine art photographer the shared

*Corresponding author: James McArdle, School of Communication and Creative Arts Honours, Deakin University, Australia, Tel: +61392468234; E-mail: james.mcardle@deakin.edu.au

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sense between image and title, most often noun phrases, is left deliberately enigmatic, as in 'The Fall of the Shadow', while titles of documentary images reflect their indexical nature, mapping for us 'Cox and Rizzetti Foundry, Melbourne', characterizing 'Young Couple with Volkswagen', or explaining 'Imprisoned in Ice, January 1915'. However some titles deliberately confuse the conventions and we should beware of categorizing 'Corrugated Iron Fence with Hole' when it turns out to be less concerned with surface appearances than with the metaphoric void of the hole.

We expect our curiosity about journalistic images to be assuaged by a caption intended to whet our appetite for an accompanying article. Significantly such captions as 'Fierce Storm Strikes Horsham' are in the non-progressive present which denotes completeness; the situation is perceived as if externally, as a whole, and therefore not as a situation that is in progress. This tense characterizes photography. The use of the non-progressive form signifies that the photograph's relation to the context of an article providing information that goes beyond the 'borders' of the actual photograph. The writer of the caption sees the photograph instated in its media setting, as something that occupies a certain amount of space on a piece of paper within the context of an article-length story [13].

Letterforms in type mean little themselves except when sequenced in writing. What do photographs mean without our reading of them? Without this attention, they might be deceptions or stereotypes rather than truths, illusion rather than evidence.

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