Semiotics of Photography: an Alternative Perspective on Active Spectatorship

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Abstract

Photography has become a professional as well as an artistic pursuit for many over the last series of decades. It has become a culture industry in its true sense because more and more millennials are getting attracted towards its glamourous call. The technology of photography has gradually evolved. Similarly, new media and social networking sites like Instagram, Pinterest, Tumbler etc. have opened new doors for the millennials to showcase their creative works with little efforts and hassles.

Photography is essentially just another act of communication. It is an arrangement of signs into a systematic structure to establish appropriate signified within the minds of the viewers. Photography is essentially a visual language, a text which not only constructs its messages based on the selection of frames and mastering camera controls but essentially a method of telling a meaningful story.

This article attempts to look at photography from the alternative viewfinder of semiotics and deconstructs the relationship between the elements involved into it e.g., event, photographer, post-processing and finally reading a photograph. Instead of talking a lot about technology, here the discussion is mostly upon the process of construction of signifier and deconstruction of a meaningful signified. It also recommends how a casual viewer may become an active spectator.

Key words: - *Photography, active spectator, semiotics, text, language, decoding, meaning.*

"One picture is worth a thousand words, one of the nation's greatest editors says" -that is how it was published in 1918 in *San Antonio Light*, a war photography magazine. The statement has become extensively popular to pronounce the merit of photography and photojournalism within the community of patrons who love and understand photography and its language. Even the popular photo co-operatives like Magnum Photos and others are still subscribing into this notion and maintaining the legacy. But a sad predominant observable reality is that this particular medium of communication, which serves the individual as well as public needs, is sometimes overhyped because it is controlled by the market economy of the producer of the technology and the newly emerged consumer culture (Chattopadhyay, 2010). The larger-than-life narrative needs of the individual and the sudden boom of the social media like Instagram, Pinterest or Tumbler etc. which have provided a platform to the individual to project a larger-than-life image of the new culture industry (Adorno et al, 1947) of the present time we are living in. There is also a huge market drive for attractive rather creative photographs for the advertisers to generate an appeal for their products, services or ideas (Sharma & Singh, 2006) to the mass consumer.

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Alternatively, the same medium is also underrated by a section of the society simply when it fails to establish a "signified" (Saussure, 1916). Because of its larger notional affirmation to the technological wonder of the 21st century and little recognition as a cultural artistic wonder (or product) by some section of the audience and at times it is judged as an uncouth endeavour. Most commonly, a painting enjoys superiority as an art form compared to a photograph. A probable reason might be that traditional painting is a much older medium of artistic representation compared to photography. Another probable reason may be painting requires less expensive equipment and more human effort (both physical and mental) whereas photography requires many expensive tools and lesser physical human efforts. Such an eye to view photography as an art form is flawed and outrightly denounces the mental effort (or a more appropriate word would be "involvement") of the photographer. It demands a critical re-observation. Such popular judgements are frequently delivered because sometimes photographs over-narrate or sometimes highly under-narrate to the common eyes and fail to maintain their aesthetic balance. Sometimes excessive consciousness to produce an aesthetic code (Fiske, 1982) from the end of the photographer also destroys the result he/she would have sought of. Often it happens because of the non-recognition of a photograph as a text. The spectator's non-recognition of him/herself as a reader of the text and therefore, loss of link between the *Signifier* and *Signified* (Saussure, 1916). For this article, since it is attempting to analyse photography from the purview of semiotics some popular words and phrases have been altered with other terminologies of the communication studies. For example, capturing a photograph has often been referred to as encoding and seeing a photograph has been referred to as decoding (Hall, 1973). Also, the word photographer often has been replaced with communicator/sender/encoder, alternatively and the audience of photographs have been often referred to as the decoders/readers/spectators. This article is chiefly expressing an alternative perspective upon how to read a photograph as an active reader and how it can help a budding shutterbug to transform him/herself into a photographic encoder of Art.

A photograph is a text-

The photograph is a result of a photographer's attempt to freeze a frame of static or movable subjects/objects. An uninitiated reader of photographs would simply like or dislike a photograph because of his/her human stimulus-response organic system tells him/her to do so. An already initiated reader of text would like or dislike a photograph based on its narrative textual merit. There is a difference and to address this we must take a look upon the semiotics of photography. We start with Saussure's concept of the systems of a sign. Then we straightaway relook at the entire process of photo capturing method under the scope of George Gerbner's model of communication. Thereafter, we shall read the photographic text and its various functions as Roman Jakobson sees it from the perspective of meta-communication of linguistics and finally we would seek help from Roland Barthes to understand the connotative meaning a photograph can establish within the mind of a reader. For this entire analysis in the subsequent passages of this article, the very first thing we need to do is to acknowledge a photograph as a text along with its representational function.
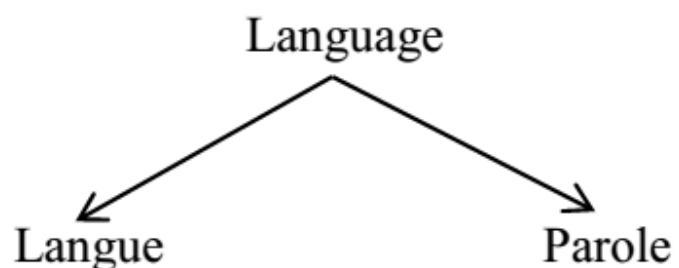
Photography is language-

Words are basic unites of any language, therefore, texts. As per Saussure (1916), texts are systematic arrangements of signs. Every sign has a visible *signifier* and a notional *signified*. The signified varies as per the cultural orientation of the spectator or reader. Therefore, a photograph carries both *denotative* and *connotative* meanings (Barthes, 1980). A sign is something physical or perceivable. It represents something other than itself (Fiske, 1982). Therefore, a photograph is essentially a sign because it represents something other than itself.

For Saussure, text or language has two intertwined components, *Langue* and *Parole*. Langue means the text or the language itself, its principles, its abstract or systematic or conventional system of signifying something. Whereas parole is the usage of the former in practical everyday situations. A simple analogy can be applied here; if the grammar and the technical aspects of photography can be held as langue then its sociological praxis can be held as parole. The sociological praxis more closely deals with the aspects of signifier and the signified or to be very frank, many signified.

For example, let us take a look at the photographs of Alan Schaller. In terms of Saussurean analysis of a text, we can pick up one of his photographic work and divide the same into langue and parole. The former would help us to analyse his works belonging to the broader genre of black and white street photography depicting the life of people and their actions. On the other hand, each of the photographs tells different stories of different people or object or event which the latter attempts to account. They create independent discourses for individual readers. Schaller's works are good examples of photography as a systematic arrangement of signs. One can simply visit his Instagram account and take up an exercise to critically looking into his photographs and determine their langue and parole and to check what kind of signified they attempt to establish.

Two-dimensional construction of a photographic message-

George Gerbner (1956), the notable American communication researcher and theorist had proposed with a two-dimensional model of communication which attempts to elucidate upon how an external reality or event blends into human psyche when perceived, processed and delivered to the end decoder. External realities or events either occur naturally or been organized as a cultural praxis by society. When a photographer records this event through his/her camera, he/she inclusively captures and records only the portion of the event he/she visualizes through the viewfinder of the camera. Similarly, the camera also records the amount of information carried through light onto its sensor. A large amount of information is thus omitted from the actual event and a very small amount of

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information is cherry-picked (Sharma & Singh, 2006). This cherry-picking of the frame is absolute of the encoder's discretion driven by his/ her own bias of the event or perception of the event. On the other end for the decoder (reader) of the photograph, it becomes the representation of the entire event. A small amount of signifier becomes a large amount of signified. Possibilities of variation in meaning between the readers are obvious each time.
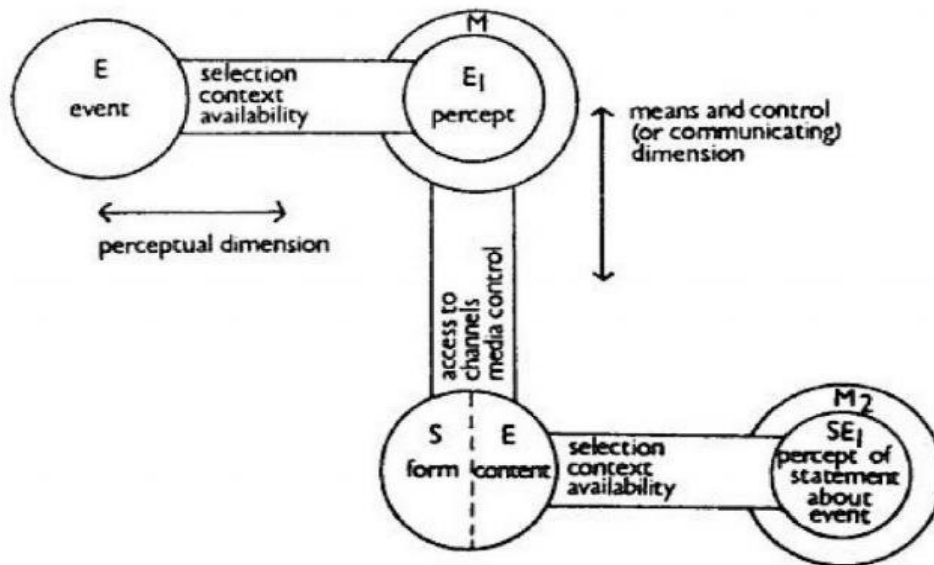
Gerbner's two-dimensional model is a good circuitry which enables us to understand a communicative structural route starting from capturing the photograph by the encoder of the photographic message and reading/ decoding of the same message by the audience at the end reception point of the complete communicative action process. E is an external event or location where any subject or object may dwell. M is the photographer (or the encoder) here. E1 is the semiotic perception of the subject/object and its relationship to the same event or location by M. In other words, we can say that the tiny, fragmented portion of the broader event as seen through the viewfinder of the camera he/she is using. This happens in the *perceptual dimension*. The digital RAW or JPEG files are created which is the E1 percept. The second dimension i. e. the *means and control dimension* (which is vertical as per Gerbner), is important for selecting the appropriate digital photograph file of the event out of many files captured at the same time and subsequently processing, editing or retouching is done in this phase. After the final output is given to the photograph, the final discursive formation (Foucault, 1972) of the object or event as an account of the same in the form of an encoded photographic message, is been obtained as SE. The complete linguistic formation to be transmitted to the audience. From this point, another perceptual horizontal dimension appears similar to the previous one and here the photographic message is read by the audience, M2. Again, the discourse of the photographer alters with the discourse of the audience as the meaning of the language is very much negotiated. E1 attempts to serve the representative function whereas SE1 attempts to serve the denotative or connotative function of the linguistic communication. The meaning is finally established.

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Photographs are structures to be aberrantly decoded-

As per John Fiske, aberrant decoding of the signifier is less if the encoding of the message is highly detailed and informative. Whereas, if the amount of information is already less at the encoding stage, it becomes an aesthetic code therefore chances of aberrant decoding of the photograph is extremely high.

"One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, Taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor. Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even understand it."
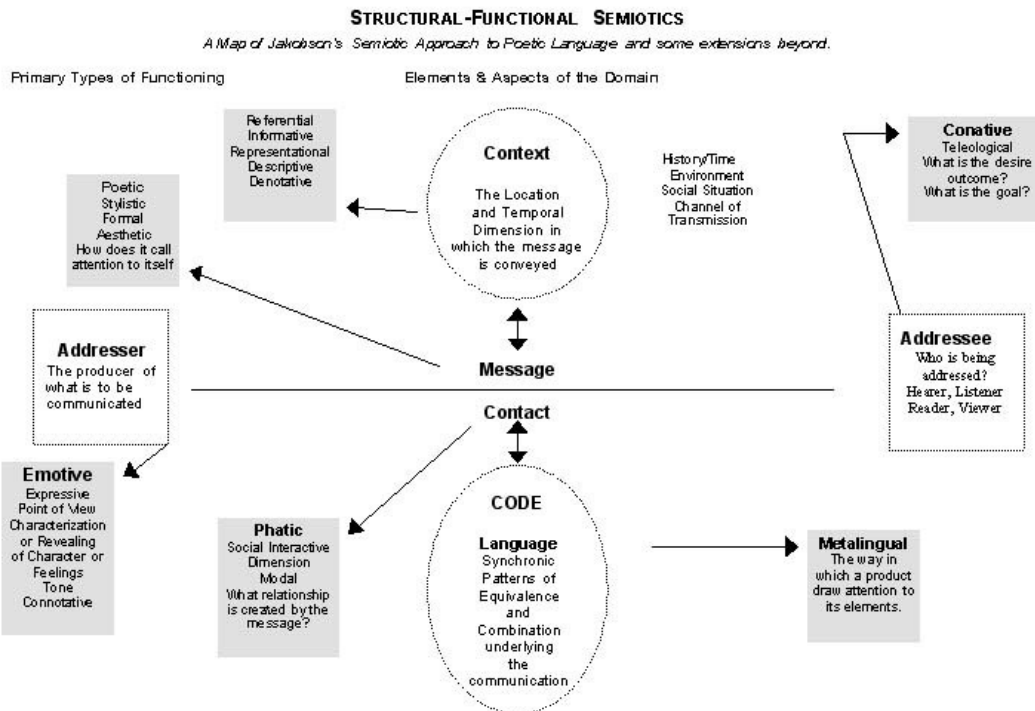
-Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. 1980. p. 3.

Speaking of aberrant decoding, the above lines as pronounced by Barthes (1980) clearly shows how difficult it is to determine a message with or without variation of several signified or connotative meanings even when it isn't simply an aesthetic code. Jerome's portrait simply denotes how he looked like. But how Barthes sees the portrait upholds another shade of the same photographic work. Every message whether verbal or non-verbal contains both denotative and connotative meanings. Needless to say, that photographs are of no exception.

Barthes went a step ahead of his predecessor Saussure. He refined the concept of the system of sign and added the concept of the *second-order signification* of the sign. It was not simply limited to the understanding of the denotative meaning of any text but extended up to the readers attempt to churn out the connotative meaning. Barthes had written two consecutive essays upon the semiotic analysis of photography; *The Photographic Message* was published in 1961, *The Rhetoric of the Image* in 1964 and the book *Camera Lucida* was published originally in 1980. In all three of his writings, Barthes elaborated that in photography connotation can be distinguished from denotation. In fact, in his latter observations, he argued that denotation pretends to be the first signified. To some readers, it is the last of the connotations (one which both establishes the meaning and closes it). Barthes presents a counterargument that it is the connotation that ultimately the illusion of a single denotative meaning. Thus, denotation is just another connotation. An illusion of a universal signified. Certainly, a photographic text cannot be limited to that.

Functions of photographic language-

Traditionally, professionals categorise photography into several fields of praxis. Say portrait, landscape, nature, wildlife, fashion, wedding, street, sports, photojournalism etc. and so on. They perform different functions of depicting stories. Any narrative communication chiefly rides upon the poetic and meta-lingual functions of it. How to narrate meaningful stories through photographs? If we are to find an answer to this question, we should take a look upon Roman Jakobson's model of communication in the subsequent passages.

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For Jakobson (1960) every communicative situation, whether verbal or non-verbal, has six elements; 1. Addresser, 2. Addressee, 3. The message, 4. Code, 5. Context and 6. Contact. In

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL SEMIOTICS
A Map of Jakobson's Semiotic Approach to Poetic Language and some extensions beyond.

photographic communication, the photographer is the addresser whereas the spectator is the addressee. The picture itself is the message of such communicative situation. Since it is also a structural arrangement of many signs, the photographer's intrapersonal idea of the visual language of fixing a frame along with the subsequent encoding with the help of a communicative medium of the camera; the photographic message is also a code. The event is the context and finally, the two-stepped communicative presence of the spectator at the event along with the help of the photographer's pictorial reference is the contact. The latter is two-stepped because the spectator in most cases does not remain physically present in the time-space situation when the photograph is clicked. He/she is mentally present in the event when the photographer delivers the discourse of the same event with his/her photograph.

Each element renders some amount of function as per Jakobson (Waugh,1980). The addresser renders *emotive* function whereas the addressee renders *conative* function. The message renders *poetic* function whereas the code renders *meta-lingual* function. The context renders *referential* function whereas the contact renders *phatic* function. Each of these functions contributes towards the semiotic deconstruction (Derrida, 1960) of the photographic message therefore helps the reader to understand what is the multi-dimensional meaning the message is trying to leave. (Andal, 1999)

To understand this in detail we can see and minutely observe the works of Olga Karlovac. She is a photographer of her kind. She clicks photographs in *greyscale* and most of her photographs are blurry, sometimes underexposed. For an average spectator, her photographs at the very first instance may signify nothing. The denotation may simply end right there. Now, here is the deal. It requires active spectatorship to read what Karlovac

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wants to convey with her photographic messages. Let us try to achieve such active spectatorship under the purview of Jakobson's model. If we observe deeply, we will see that Karlovac tries to use her camera just like a painter or a sketch artist who uses brushes to draw or paint. She captures expressions, not only of people but also of natural situations. She uses greyscale because light and shadow are two binary opposites which can properly delineate contrast of shades. Shades reflect mood, attitude and variations of responses to an external stimulus. The ambience is equally important similar to the subject or object. Pictures are blurry because a sharp focus normally represents a frozen time-space sequence. It represents a static event. But what Karlovac is trying to delineate with her work is that time and space are by nature not sharp or static. They are always dynamic, impermanent, constantly attempting to change themselves. Karlovac's pictures acknowledge this fact. Moods are not a permanent phenomenon. they constantly change and adapt to the environment. They are overlapping entities and different expressions represent different moods. Such overlapping can be appropriately resented when the pictures keep themselves blurry. Such poetic and meta-lingual functions any photographic message serves to their users when communicated as language.

Final thoughts-

We started with the semiotic analysis in this article by acknowledging a photograph as a text which eventually constructs a language. Do we need to be semiotic readers to master the art of photographic language? Most often some people ask this question and a very suitable answer to that may be – yes! Indeed, it is always a good choice to become an active audience than simply an ignorant passive recipient (Gerbner, 1956). It is always useful for both the photographer and for the spectator. Anyone with money can buy a mechanical device namely the camera and press the shutter button of it to click a photo. Yet, a few become a photographer. A semeiotic understanding of art is helpful for every artist to delve into the realm of unfathomable possibilities of creating something meaningful (Rustier, 1989). For photographers, it goes almost the same. Becoming an active spectator would produce a result that is something odd, something new, something contextual yet artistic in its true sense.

As a beginner of the active spectatorship, it is recommended that one should at first make a habit of seeing a lot of pictures. The next step is to Identify their elements. Then the number of subjects and their relationships with each other. What they essentially denote. For this part, the grammar of camera positioning, farming rules, camera settings, aspect ratio, shutter speed, aperture and ISO etc. are mainly taken into consideration. Also, whether the photograph is clicked to substantiate a news article, or it is a photographer's creative experiment of art is to be clearly understood in the first place. For the former, deriving a denotation of meaning would help the reader to set up the mental orientation of establishing signified. But if it is the latter than connotative meaning is very much important to dive into the deep inner meaning.

Before buying a camera, one consults many experts, read many kinds of literature, surf the internet to get an idea about the best camera device available in the market with better technical specifications. But a device is just a tool. One can only use the best of it if it is

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known and understood what is sought at the end. So, why not put enough effort to become an active spectator and understand the poetic and meta-lingual aspects of the photography? The question demands thinking in an alternative manner and that is the first step towards becoming an active spectator.

Photography is a relatively expensive business. It is highly dependable upon equipment and they vary in pricing from thousand to lac. You may think- *how do I begin?* Well, you may begin with a ten-year-old second-hand camera. Or you may begin with your smartphone. Just download a software application that can assist during the post-processing phase. With a little investment, you can get maximum output. Veteran Indian photographer Raghu Rai once said in one of his online interviews that it is the 'eye' of a photographer that matters most compared to the tools he is using (YouTube, 2017). What you click and show to others should make sense to others. Your readers must be able to construct signified into their minds.

Simply viewing a photograph is not enough but thinking of it as a text and deconstruct each of its elements as a sceptic reader is the final requirement. More the exposure of mind, more the exposed eye to observe events around. After these three basic semiotic initiations kicked up, it would further help a beginner to click praiseworthy photographs. First, consider in mind that you are a storyteller and your photographic work is going to be the text for your readers. To establish a proper signified within the mind you must be very clear and specific about your signified. It is a better idea of not to think about your audience at the very outset but think what poetic function you wish your photograph to serve. That is how good meaningful photographs have found their places in history.

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