



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Arts

AESTHETICS OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION; CHANGING VALUES OF MEANING, REPRESENTATION AND REALITY; AN OVERVIEW.

KEY WORDS: Art, Aesthetics, photography, printmaking.

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ABSTRACT

It is truly critical and crucial to analyze the revolutionary and radical role of technology in defining the aesthetic experience of modern man. Printmaking has initiated mass communication of visuals, and photography has re-defined realism, creating an alternate possibility of 'seeing' other than physically being with the object itself. Virtual reality and other artificial platforms are further facilitating this change in unpredictable ways. Inevitably, the criteria for aesthetic appreciation has transcended its traditional norms, related to concepts like 'originality' and asks critical questions addressing the newer problems of aesthetics, in the background of mechanical reproduction and the irrevocable alteration it has brought to the sensorial experience of the new age. This article attempts to trace the status of these questions by analyzing the historiography of photographs, graphic prints and its relationship with the new aesthetic idiom as well.

INTRODUCTION

The art of printing and the technology of printing goes hand in hand. The primal form of printing technology is known to be flourished in 3000 BC, in the early Mesopotamian civilization, where the tablet of the 'epic of Gilgamesh' was first presented. Even though, by inference, one can see how the Paleolithic cave artists of 15000 BC, whose ochre colored palms pressed against the lime surface of the caves of Altamira and Lascaux acting as a bridge between painting and graphic art. (As a situational comment, the Indian tribal 'artists' had always decorated their dwellings the same way, or in the Hindu culture, the inauguration of a new house is begun with a foot print!..)

The local fern leaves which children use to press against their forearms to make a fragrant 'print', the street tattoos made of colored wood blocks, or even the stenciled typos of *stick no bills* signs, adorning city walls... Every piece of kitschy and domestic prints lives a parallel life apart from the mainstream history of fine art printmaking and its paraphernalia. Academically, it is an exclusive medium which combines drawing, painting and sculptural tendencies in its making, and the act of printmaking demands technical knowledge as well.

Photography is another medium which shares a similar anatomy and aesthetics, where technique and creativity strikes balance. Both celebrate reproduction as its basic and ultimate facility. Similarly, the earliest functions of both mediums were documentation and mass dissemination of visuals, replacing or adding to the role of texts. They also interrelates issues like reality and manipulation. Both went through a historical process of maturation, living parallel lives in different individuals and cultural contexts. Interestingly, they are identical twins in nature, born out of the need to preserve and disseminate en masse.

The boon of having multiple existences had enabled these mediums to relinquish as 'common' articles, easily accessible to anyone and abundantly available without any worry on scarcity, as long as technology and resources are intact. For example, the Ravi Varma prints of early 20th century are still available, as framed gifts, as well as the smiling portrait of Mahatma Gandhi survives in a government office or the same in a currency note as graphic print. But this very vulnerability had invited both popularity and a certain *banality* towards them. Would it be just, if we compare this with the case of many domestic and industrial products and services? Like public transportation, internet, public toilets, rationed provisions and fast food, which often lacks qualitatively, when demand is increased in a rapid manner?

Even when photography and printmaking has been accused of having no plus value, it does not allow our consciousness to leave behind these mediums as mere products as such. They cannot be included into the category of 'supply and demand' that simply. The fact that its existence is free from traditional concepts of 'authenticity' and 'uniqueness', or more theoretically, its moving away from the *aura*² of objects, (especially art objects like painting, sculpture and other traditional art forms which has its singular and unique physical existence assured) does not imply its status as merely utilitarian. Yet there are questions; how can photography, prints and computer generated images become so called art? What has happened to the aesthetic criteria's of beauty, which was the episteme for art and aesthetic appreciation for centuries? Isn't mechanical reproduction artificial, similar to the man made Vs Nature binary, or the man made Vs mechanical binary?

This curiosity invokes us to contemplate on what the word 'art' signified a while ago or 10 years ago, or a century ago, and how it is in continuous flux while we talk about it ('post modern art', 'hyper reality', 'end of art', 'new old masterism').

It seems like the meaning is *arbitrary*³, or at least the relationship of the word 'art' and its signified meaning is. This is because 'the art of defining art' has always been a critical process, based on collective tendencies, which in turn is driven by intentions structured by a certain indigenous logic, relative to a geography and culture. Thus it is different and self evolving in each cultural regions or 'localities', i.e. contextual, and needs empirical analysis, even though the pangs of globalization is slowly and arguably affecting the local-global binary.

After all, reproductive mediums like print making and photography are liable to paradigm shifts as far as the very nature of its representation is concerned. For instance, both mediums has its own aesthetic or metaphorical and political or realistic identities; shifting from one to another like a pendulum having no will of its own, other than locating itself at both extremes at the whim of physical laws entertained by its very 'form' itself. This is because the cause and effect (medium and method) is mutually tethered. Both can, at any moment, trespass the threshold of aesthetics (work of art) and become politics (work of act) or vice versa. This phenomenon of repetition or blasting away of the 'aura' (originality/ uniqueness) has caused vast undercurrents in the perception and usage of traditionally accepted artistic mediums which revolves around the notion of authenticity and uniqueness. As well as paving way to the reconstitution of historic and diachronic chronologies like classicism, realism, romanticism, naturalism, expressionism and all the parabolic

'movements' which proposed a linear-formal progression of art into a structural and synchronic understanding of art itself as a system of meaning making, which also has its intellectual origins in the 'structural linguistics' of Ferdinand de Saussure, in which he discusses the arbitrary nature of meaning, and how meaning is created and not pre-fixed, in language. His arguments had initiated a critical discourse in many fields of knowledge including linguistics, philosophy, art history, anthropology and cultural studies.

Avant-garde post modern artists like Andy Warhol (1928 -1987) is infamous and commonly cited for demonstrating this possibility, through the faculty of 'repetition' in many of his iconic images (figure 1).

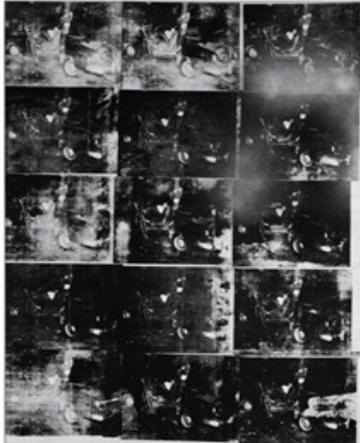


Figure 1: Andy Warhol, Silver car crash (double disaster), Serigraph, 1963.

Repetition or reproducing the original instance in increased quantity can potentially displace and disorient the sense of reality it initially held. For instance, the iconic photograph of Che Guevara by Alberto Korda (figure 2) has metamorphosed itself from its politically sensitive premises of pain and struggle into a more emotionally comfortable aesthetics of printed compact versions after its 1968 poster version by Jim Fitz Patrick (figure 3) and the innumerable versions of commodities adorning the same which flooded the different parts of the world since (figure 4).



Figure 2: Alberto Korda, Guerrillero Heroico, photograph, 1960.



Figure 3 : Jim Fitz Patrick, Viva Che, litho print, 1968.



Figure 4 : Converse All Star shoes customized (handcraft product,) www.amazon.co.uk, 2013.

The aesthetic effect of both print and photographic mediums is also different and unique in themselves. Comparing the woodcut prints done by Chittaprosad Bhattacharya on the 1943 Bengal famine (figure 5) and the photographs of Sunil Janah of the same event (figure 6) reveals this to us. Both imageries present the helpless beings in pain and hunger. But even the way reality is (re)presented is distinct in both representations. The prints involve an idealized setting, using pointers or metaphors to convey the situations outside the knowledge of the spectator, like the empty cooking pot lying abandoned and little away from the rotting corpse of a famine victim.



Figure 5: Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Hungry Bengal series, 1943.



Figure 6: Sunil Janah, Bengal Famine- Kolkata, photograph, 1943.

The photographs in turn are cocoons of its own subject matter, synchronically localizing and amplifying the particular lived experience within that time and space of the respective existence.

CONCLUSION

Of course, things get more complicated when we try to dissect what art means. Especially, in a post modern condition where uncertainty rules and no traditional value systems are effective to determine what art should be. On the other hand, this is a possibility- a gap- an evolutionary necessity where human reason and logic is questioned and challenged in scientific as well as existential realms. No answer is reason enough to settle down, in this rapidly growing situation where individuals are more aware; about their genealogical dependency, social conditioning and political interventions which affect one's personality in a deeper and unconscious level. Age old systems of aesthetics, morality, religion, science and philosophy is deconstructing it-self, not to find an answer, not to conclude, but to be in this process of 'being' i.e. seeking.

End Notes

1. *Banal* means to be obvious and indifferent, which in fact is a byproduct of repetition
2. *Aura* is a quality integral to an artwork that cannot be communicated through mechanical reproduction techniques – such as photography. The term was used by Walter Benjamin in his influential 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".
3. The Swiss linguist and founder of 'structural linguistics', Ferdinand de Saussure, describe the sign and its arbitrary relation to reality.

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