

Social Commentary Through Photographic Representation in Malaysia

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Abstract—Up to this modern and advanced era of technology, photograph is considered as a medium to record moments and events. Through social commentary photography artists produced photography artworks to represent their ideas through expressing their opinion, emotions, and sentiments for the viewers. However, most people are not aware that photography is an alternative way to convey messages to change people's attitude towards certain issues. In the Western countries, social commentary images have been accepted by their public since many years ago as a means of communication. Ideas and opinions were expressed through photographs for their public to create change and to trigger societal changes. Through social commentary, photography represents messages for the public to interpret the representation it contains as a conveyance from the photographic artists towards the public. However, some public in developing countries believe that, photography is not regarded as a means of communication but only consider it as a record and artwork. Hence, the message by fellow social commentary artists was not being acknowledged and understood by the public. As a consequence, a communication gap exists between the artist and the public in the form of acceptance and understanding. This study adapted qualitative method which revealed results from observations and interviews among social commentary photographic artists and the public. Since this study has not been conducted in Malaysia, hence, it was pertinent to understand the public's perception on photographic representation through social commentary. This study benefits the Malaysian government to realize the usage of photography as an approach to promote change towards its societal issues.

Keywords-communication; message; photography; social commentary

I. INTRODUCTION

Social Commentary involves art through images of photograph that are meant to expose the truth of a situation to promote change besides informing the public about social problems that arise. Some issues were portrayed through photographic for improvements in public's thoughts and action. Social Commentary images produced by social commentary photographers usually stunned the viewers with sensational issues, provocative evidence as they visualize the truth which the photographer had seen himself. Photographic artist turns reality into the form of art and urge viewers to interact with the

image to get the message that the photographer has conveyed through his photograph. Social commentary is the art of visual culture. It confines to fine artwork which contains technical proficiency that is filled with artistic with talent and creativity. However, social commentary opens our eyes to see the real world and it reminds us to do something other than remain as it is. Social commentary speaks out through visual culture. Visual culture could only be victorious if we allow ourselves to understand something more than what the eyes had seen (Davey, 1999). Therefore, social commentary images exist to consider critical thinking on social welfare standards and to promote human values individually and collectively.

II. BACKGROUND

Photography is the representation of reality and self-expression. It contains meaning, feeling, emotion, and brings unwritten message to be conveyed through it. Photography can be a friend, career, or hobby but it' remarkable function in multitude ways to resemble reality enhances its ability to act along in different capacities (Johnson, 1989; pg. 2). Lipkin (2005) stated that, 'photographs have been used by artists for visual expression, by journalist to record events, by scientists to gather data about the physical universe, and by nearly everyone else drawn by photography's ability to faithfully record the world, its low cost, and its ease of use' (Lipkin, 2005). In medical areas, photography is used to record the evidence of scientific cases and different types of molecules that exist on earth such as the photographs of nano particles known as nano-art. Nano-art has been used for advanced studies on nano medicines. However, the images represent to communicate the different functions of the nano-world towards humans in this macro-world. When photography represents communication, communication can be carried out in effective manner for everyone (Mustaffa Halabi, 2009). For the children, photography is considered one of the earliest tools of communication to express their thoughts and feelings in their own creative manner (National Center to Improve Practice, 1998). The idea of photography existed long before the camera was invented. For Riss, Hine and Lange (the FSA photographer), the camera is a means of analysis and persuasion as well as an instrument for social change (Rothstein, 1986). Barrett (2000) quoted that, "photograph is

described through noticing things about it and tell others what he notices” (Barett, 2000).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Photography as Message Through Visual Image*

Visual images are acknowledged to play a role as a medium of communication through various cultures. Understanding through the image involves a high capacity for perception and thinking ability. According to Berger (1998) “Our sensation and perception are estimated to received more than 80 percent of information through the eyes of seeing alone (Berger, 1998; pg.1). With the advancement of technology, the field of photography has become more efficient as before. Various types of cameras are available in the market at an affordable price and in every home, a camera is definitely available. Today, the camera is not an exclusive tool but it has been used in daily work. The camera is also used as a tool to reveal information and to convey messages through its picture. The motive behind the picture was able to reveal emotions, feelings and also to change a society and situation. For example images produced by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine had changed the life in United States such as in the Child Labor Law in Fig. 1. “Similarly, Lewis Hine (1907-1918) had opened the eyes of the public and government about the difficulties of life in their community, when injustice against under aged workers was not being realized. Children worked in factories to help their families earn a living. However, only with his pictures, the government rectified the social problem by forming labor law which prohibited underage children to work” (Quick, 2010; cited in Husaini, 2013, pg.131).



FIGURE I. ‘TWO OF THE HELPERS IN THE TIFTON COTTON MILL’, TIFTON, GEORGIA (HINE, 1909). SOURCE: WWW.NYTSTORE.COM.

Photography image is a non-verbal communication to convey message through images. Images were used as communication since the ancient times. Drawings that were found in cave during Paleolithic era have shown that communication through images has established during the uncivilized era. Eventually when humans were civilized, communication was not a problem for the people to get in touch. Nowadays when digital photography is at the fingertips of almost every individual, some might forget that the social commentary through photographic representation is meaningful

to others. “Photography bring strong influence in informal education to the public” (Adzrool Idzwan, 2010; p. 327).

B. *Photographic Artist and Message*

A photograph can improve social issues related to human life and to protect the nature environment (Husaini, 2013). Not all artists have produced works on social message but definitely commentary artist has a specific message to convey. The artists “inform and reach beyond our initial horizons, art reveals that no matter the intensities of individual experience, when we understand we come-to-stand with others, exchange and perhaps share views of a subject-matter” (Davey, 1999; pg. 21). As Hine, a well-known social reform emphasized in his words, “There are two things I wanted to do, I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected and I wanted to show the thing that had to be appreciated” (cited in Chapnick, 1994; pg. 21). Therefore, in order to produce a specific message, the artist starts the issue from himself with his camera, about how he sees the situation and how he wants to convey the message to reach other people in his surroundings (Adzrool Idzwan, 2010).

The sophistication of the camera is not necessarily the strength of itself but it is the strength of the artist’s mind because according to Finn (1994), “The camera is a mechanical device with no brain of its own ...” (1994, pg.24). Many photographers now depend on the camera alone to record what is in front of them. Pictures were taken several times in a few angles to fulfill their satisfaction on what the camera produces. They feel gifted with beautiful pictures produced by the camera. However, they do not realize that the camera does not only record beautiful pictures, but it is also captures sentiment issues and able to change a situation, particularly in social issues for a better circumstances; taking an example the picture of children of various races and colours, hugging each other with smiles could deliver and foster the message of ‘unity’. Hence, each social issue being faced by the social commentary artist would require a deep observation for him to portray a proper visual image for the public.

C. *Malaysian Social Commentary Artists*

Malaysian social commentary artists were sought through a snowball sampling method. Through observation and interviews, this study have found whether the public in Malaysia realize and understand the social commentary photographs produced by the Malaysian social commentary photography artist. From a qualitative method, this study had listed various Malaysian social commentary artists.

Ismail Hashim, a well known Malaysian social commentary artist commented that “social commentary images are at the same time, a care and consent of it about social life, environment and nature. The underlying of all these was ‘hope’ on it. Picture is also a means of communication that has an element of art in it”. He added, “I hope that people in the society could develop a positive art and genre, even though in a small contribution but it means a lot. Therefore, the setback is, people has ignored the value and importance of current photographs for the future civilization. We must have awareness. I hope that people (viewer) will take or get something from the photograph for the well-being of the society” (Ismail, 2013; cited in Husaini, 2013 pg.131).

According to Norazmi Noor, a Malaysian social commentary artist, "I prefer the pictures with satire oriented because they have the value and message inside the story. It is a kind of communication. So, whenever (we) see the picture, we hope they can accept what we want to convey, because the interpretation of a picture is sharper" (Norazmi, 2013).



FIGURE II. 'VICTIMS OF DEVELOPMENT' (SOURCE: HUSAINI, 2008)

The photograph known as 'Victims of development' by Husaini (2008) in Fig. 2, portrayed 'the end' to the life of villagers as fishermen when the sea was reclaimed for shopping complex and exclusive condominiums by the sea side. The fishermen had lost their livelihood because of the development..

D. Challenges of Social Commentary Photography Representation

Through the photographs, public would see, interpret and understand. Pictures mean a thousand words. Many pictures that we saw in the newspapers, magazines, television and other publications would mean something to us. It touches our feeling and emotions. It also triggers our senses of anger and sadness. However, in this modern digital world, if the photograph had been manipulated by visual software to make the situation look real, whereas the situation does not exist, people would still believe it is true although in actual fact, the photograph is no longer authentic and the situation does not exist at all. This is a great challenge in the medium of photography in this digital age.

IV. CONCLUSION

Photographers have high expectations that public would understand their artwork. As pictures represents message, the

elements of interaction in photography contain images as the representation of communication on social issues. In visual culture, visual communication such as photography is for the public to see, interpret and understand what message it brings through. The representation of image in photography contains elements of interaction with the viewers. In the process of sending and receiving messages, the role of photography should be more aggressive in media relations to engage a two-way communication strategy with public for an effective communication strategy through social commentary photography.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Copyright of images remains to their copyright owners as this article is intended for academic purposes only. Acknowledgements to Universiti Teknologi MARA for participation sponsorship and Universiti Sains Malaysia for the ASHES sponsorship. Special appreciation to Professor Dr. Mustaffa Halabi Hj. Azahari and Dr. Adzrool Idzwan Hj. Ismail.

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