

Understanding Photography Representation: Humanism and Social Criticism in Social Media

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Abstract

Photography is a form of art product that has its own uniqueness. More importantly, it has been widely used in various media which include flyer pamphlets, newspapers, posters as well as digital media. In regard to this, photographs produced by a Chinese photographer known as Ren Hang clearly represent the medium of photography as a transmitter of social criticism as well as the message of humanity. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the meaning and message were displayed by the photographs. In the present study, the critical paradigm was adopted for the purpose of utilizing the qualitative method of semiotics analysis developed by Roland Barthes. The analysis of this study allowed the extraction of the meanings and messages contained in these photographs by conducting two levels of marking known as denotation and connotation, followed by their association with myths. The results showed that the meaning and message representing social criticism and humanism side were represented in the photographs. Finally, it can be concluded that the photographs of Ren Hang convey social criticism and portray the humanism side of man with the universe.

Keywords: *Photography, Social Critics, Semiotics, Instagram*

Introduction

The photos that are commonly uploaded on Instagram mostly contain the daily circumstances of users such as a photo of themselves which is also known as selfie (Zappavigna, 2016). The current research found that more than 300 million photos have been uploaded on Instagram which are marked with the #Selfie tags as can be easily discovered from the search results (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015). Moreover, it is important to note that everything is open and easily accessible in general. Apart from that, the limitations of distance and time have been overcome as a result of the advancement of technology, which then gives birth to freedom of expression in various forms such as art and media technology (Hogan, 2010; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011). In regard to this matter, it is crucial to understand that individual freedom is one of the values of democracy; hence, there are several approaches that are used in the study of global media communication which include an approach that explains how information can be freely disseminated through the media (McQuail, 1992; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Chaffey, 2016). Therefore, there have been several attempts to explain how the photos are shared on a social media site known as Instagram with the

purpose of maintaining the values of individual freedom and its meaning, particularly referring to the freedom of communication (Zappavigna, 2016). Photography is a branch of art that is full of beauty and it is also regarded as one of the effective communication media due to its visual power which is able to carry messages without requiring a huge amount of words (Zappavigna, 2016).

The present study is dated for a total of 3 periods, namely the year 2015, 2016, and 2017 which are based on the date of Ren Hang's first post on February 3, 2015 to March 10, 2017 (762 days). During that time, Ren Hang has uploaded a total of 645 photos on his Instagram account @renhangrenhang, including a photo on the announcement of his death. More specifically, there were 311 photos uploaded in 2015, 303 photos in 2016, and 31 photos in 2017. However, the present study will investigate 10 photos that contain the message of social criticism and humanism.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Communication, Meaning, and Signs

The emphasis of this approach is on communication as a means of meaning instead of communication as a process (Bryant & Miron, 2004). Hence, the message must consist various

signs to allow communication to occur (Dwityas & Briandana, 2017). Next, this message will then be stimulated to create meaning for oneself whereby the meaning is more or less related to the meaning that was originally created (Fiske, 2012).

The more we share the same code, the more likely we are to use the same sign system, thus ensuring that the two “meanings” will be more similar to each other. The commonly used terms include signs, significance, icons, indexes, denotations, connotations which are regarded as different ways of creating meaning (Fiske, 2012).

Photography

Photography comes from the Greek word “Photos” (light) and “Grafo” (painting / writing). Literally photography is described as a painting/writing produced through a medium of light. In general terms, photography refers to a process or method that generates images or photographs of an object by recording the reflection of light that is objected to it on a light-sensitive medium (Solomon-Godeau & Nochlin, 1991). The most popular tool for capturing this light is the camera. In other words, no images or photos can be produced without the help of the light. Moreover, the aid of a measuring

instrument in the form of a light meter can be used in generating the right light intensity to produce the image. Finally, a photographer can adjust the intensity of the light by changing the combination after obtaining the correct lighting size (Solomon-Godeau & Nochlin, 1991).

Humanism and Social Criticism

The purpose of humanism is to humanize other human beings. In this case, humanism aims to put forward the humanity in regard to their behaviour. According to Combs, Richards, & Richards (1976) humanism refers to feeling, perception, belief, and intentions which are regarded as the inner behaviors that differentiate a particular individual from the others. Hence, it is necessary for a person to understand how he thinks and feels about himself in order to understand others. In other words, one must change his perception in order to change the behavior of others. Humanism is a general term that describes different ways of thinking with the focus on general outward in regard to human issues (Combs et al., 1976). Humanism has been regarded as a type of ethical doctrine with an extended scope for the purpose of reaching all human ethnicity, which is clearly contrasting the traditional ethical systems that only apply certain ethnic groups

(Jay, 1978).

Social criticism is one form of communication within a society that serves as a control over the course of a social system or social process (Bagozzi & Lee, 2002). In this context, social criticism is considered as one of the important variables in maintaining the social system. More importantly, numerous social or individual actions that tend to deviate from social and moral-order order of the society can be prevented through the function of social criticism (Ritzer, 2004). Overall, social criticism serves as a vehicle for the conservation and reproduction of a social system or society (Bate, 2004).

Semiotics Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes is the successor of Saussure's thought. Saussure was interested in the complex way of sentence formation as well as the way that sentence formation determines meaning (Barthes, 1988). However, he had no interest on the fact that the same sentence may convey different meanings to individuals with different circumstances. Therefore, Barthes (1988) continued the thought by emphasizing the interaction between the text and the personal and cultural experience of its users by also taking into account the interaction between

convention in the text as well as the conventions experienced and expected by its users. In this case, Barthes's idea is described as order of significations (Barthes, 1988).

Methodology

The current research is known to be critical; hence, a qualitative approach was adopted to conduct the present study. Critical research is a discourse on reality with a particular ideological orientation which include neo-Marxism, materialism, feminism, participatory inquiry, and equivalent understandings (Jankowski & Jensen, 2002). Ontologically, the critical viewpoint is considered similar to post-positivism, particularly in regard to assessing critical realism that cannot be properly seen only by relying on human observation. Reality is described as something "pseudo" that is formed through historical processes as well as social, cultural, and economic-political forces (Eriyanto, 2001).

Therefore, the current research employed the semiotics method developed by Roland Barthes. In this case, the present study chose to analyze photos uploaded by Ren Hang on his Instagram account as a form of social criticism and humanism value.

Results and Discussion

The results of the present study revealed that Ren Hang's photographs contain messages or meanings related to social criticism and humanism. The outcomes of this study managed to produce the following images based on Roland Barthes semiotics:

First, the culture of the society describes that human body must be covered (Mulyana, 2017). Hence, this taboo has caused the vulgar photos produced by Ren Hang to look strange considering the fact that it disrupts the conservatives who believe that the photos have violated the norm. Nevertheless, it was found that Ren Hang's photographs contained numerous messages on social criticism and even the offensive side of humanism.

Second, the criticisms of humans to reduce their egoism can be observed in the photographs of women whose eyes are replaced with peacocks. In this case, the photographs indicate that humans must have a broad view by looking at the other side of the view in order not to dwell on the side of human egoism that prefers to exploit the universe, make damage, and others. Hence, this particular message was to equate the point of view that aims to make individuals to be wiser, inter-fellow living beings, and other natural elements for the

purpose of realizing harmony.

Third, Ren Hang also illustrated the female dominance of men within the widely held patriarchal systems in his photographs. The dominance of women over men is depicted by the pose of feet that step on the heads of two men. Moreover, the strong, female models wore red clothing and shoes that represent courage, passion, excitement, confidence, and strength for the purpose of reinforcing the message of dominance.

In the semiology of Barthes (1988), the message is a sign of construction whereby an interaction with the receiver is able to produce meaning. More importantly, the interpretation of the signs means each object that is communicated does not only carry information, but also constitutes a structured system and a sign of finding meaning. In this case, the first level of signage (denotation), revealed that the reality of the photographs represented the messages to be conveyed. Next, the meaning and message of social criticism, humanism, feminism as well as harmony with the elements of nature, the relationship between humans shown by the photos act as the second order of signage (connotation).

In addition, myth managed to be identified as a cultural way of thinking about something as well

as a way of conceptualizing or understanding a thing according to the framework of Roland Barthes. In this case, it is important to understand that myth is not a concept or idea, but a way of signifying the significance of a form. Furthermore, myth is determined based on the way they are conveyed. The myths found in Ren Hang's photographs are described as follows:

1. The shape and the symbol of the eye is associated with the point of view, the worldview of a person or a being. A saying goes that the eye is the window of the heart, thus its association as a point of view also indicates a person's point of view that seems to reflect the content of a person's heart or creature. In addition, the eye is often linked with an organization called Freemason whereby many people have pondered about the organization considering that the eye may be identical with the eye symbol that is present in a reversed triangle that emit light known as "The All-Seeing Eye", which also reminds or symbolizes the existence of a higher (God) matter that is known to be all-seeing. The organization is often accused of doing everything conniving with extraterrestrials to sexual perversions which include occult rituals that are

performed for the purpose of running the world or trying to end the world. The opponents of this Freemasonry movement came from the actors of global theory, religious organizations such as the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Freemasons is also regarded as an organization that prioritizes friendship, mutual ownership as well as aims to help others through charitable activities.

2. "Trampling" is associated with power. Kneeling at the feet of a person is identical to the nature of submission which can be demonstrated by a slave who submits to his master, thus further indicating that the stronger tends to dominate the weaker. In addition, the Islamic beliefs state that heaven is under the soles of mother's feet which implies that a child must be obedient and respectful to the mother. Meanwhile, the people of Indonesia believe that the selection of red as one of the elements of the state flag also describes courage. Hence, red color is also believed to increase enthusiasm, spur energy, and stimulate self-confidence due to its close association with courage and passion. On the other hand, the Chinese culture which is the origin of Ren Hang associates the

red color with fire and luck.

3. Extending an identical hand by giving or splashing something. The symbolism of the hand has existed since the days of ancient cultures. In the language of Celtic symbolism, the meaning of the hand is connected to authority and power. Apart from that, spiritual powers are also issued by hand which is believed to be used by gods and goddesses to store energy.

Conclusion

The present study set out to examine the photos produced by Ren Hang on his Instagram account through the adoption of semiotics analysis developed by Roland Barthes. In the current research, several conclusions can be made based on the photos produced Ren Hang by looking at various signification process of the sign as follows: (1) this research produces the image of harmonious relationship between man and the elements of the universe with a common point of view, (2) the description of human relationships and its association with the existing social systems (feminism, patriarchy), and (3) the complexity of women as the creatures that are provided with privileges and important role in life.

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