

Discussing Teju Cole's essays on photography, Lu asks: How should we approach a medium that readily lends itself to distortion? In response, she develops an argument that urges us to reassess our identities in light of the global community with which photography can bring us into contact.
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THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY ALL

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The camera is—and always will be—a tool, an instrument, a weapon. Whether it has a detrimental or beneficial impact is the decision the photographer must make. However, whether we let a photograph's message influence us or not is the decision we, the audience, must make. Teju Cole, a renowned writer and photographer, reckons with the positive and negative impacts of photography by relating the intricacies of the camera, the photographers, and the photographs themselves in a comprehensive ethical conversation. Cole takes his readers on a captivating journey through his collection of photo journals, using the camera as a lens to tackle cultural, technological, international, and personal issues. In doing so, he helps us rid ourselves of innocence and naivety and develop our own global perspectives. In such a diverse world, we need people with global perspectives, like Cole, to show us what we are doing wrong as brothers and sisters, as friends and strangers, and as human beings.

In his essay "Against Neutrality," Cole observes that in the eyes of many people, images "are often presumed to be unbiased." They are snapshots of the real world, but we cannot assume that they are necessarily true. We cannot say that a picture genuinely reflects the inner character of the captured subject nor that it reflects the accuracy of the situation portrayed. Hence, Cole believes that photographs can "conceal the craftiness of [their] content and selection" ("Against"). Any hidden motive would be the result of a photographer's style and intention. In support of this argument, Cole utilizes a portrait of Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, then a twenty-six-year-old French politician, photographed by Joel Saget. Photography historian John Edwin Mason

notes that this professional-looking image—“reminiscent of old Hollywood headshots” (“Against”)—makes the woman appear “attractive” and “desirable” (qtd. in “Against”). The way she looks away from the camera with her bare hands intertwined hints at innocence and purity. In addition, the black and white contrast and the solid background place emphasis on her earnest expression, her formality, and her uprightness. Meanwhile, the image shows nothing of Maréchal-Le Pen as a “nativist” politician with a “xenophobic vision,” someone who believes that Muslims are inferior to Catholics (“Against”). Hence, this “sympathetic photograph” is the result of “manipulation” (“Against”). Mason observes that it is made “instantly recognizable as that of a celebrity profile,” whose subject can be presumed to be a respectable, high-class exemplar instead of an enemy of moral principles (qtd. in “Against”). Essentially, Cole shows us how one image can make all the difference in our perception of a person, place, thing, or idea—it may even create the first impression of a subject we know nothing about.

As photo-manipulating technology weaves its way into our modern culture, Cole continues to warn that “the camera is an instrument of transformation” (“Against”). A manipulated photograph may filter its subject’s ugliness and darkness while the audience remains deceived. In the essay “Memories of Things Unseen,” Cole expands upon this idea, asserting that a manipulated photograph, or any photograph in general, “would be remembered by only this one angle, this single point of view, under [precise] lighting conditions” (“Memories”). Certainly, there are dangers to this single photograph, as it crops out the bigger picture. In her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Adichie contends that when only one perspective is considered, that perspective “show[s] a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” In effect, a photograph becomes a “single story,” one that is worth a thousand words. Hence, it can show Maréchal-Le Pen as a sympathetic leader in a single photograph, and that would “make [that] one story become [her] only story” (Adichie). Until we introduce another perspective, her story remains incomplete. For this reason, we must reject the single story because it has the potential to create bias and inaccuracy. Accordingly, we must realize that our

perception of the world cannot be based on a sole perspective “without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person” (Adichie).

So, then, there exists a parts-to-whole relationship between one story and a collection of stories, between one photograph and a collection of photographs. Cole explores this relationship in the essay “Serious Play,” in which he suggests that one photograph is like an immediate, trivial passing message, while a compilation of tens of hundreds of photographs is like “a conversation that unfolds gradually” over the course of weeks and months. Whether such conversations pertain to matters that are positive, disheartening, or serious, they all provide us with the chance to learn about the important aspects that impact a certain photographer’s life. In effect, these photographic elements reckon with one’s personal identity and life story. As we absorb new information from person to person, we begin to develop our own global perspective, which helps us assimilate in today’s diverse media. Take, for instance, Cole’s example of Instagram, a trendy social media platform designed for amateur and professional photographers alike. The more photos a user uploads onto his or her gallery, the more the work becomes a “continuity,” a string of individual stories that relate to each other under various themes (“Serious”). For example, in a series of photos, photographer Dayanita Singh uses the camera as a lens to zoom into and out of just one subject of her concentration—the sunset. She captures the sunset in multiple settings, during different parts of the day, and through specific aspects such as the sky or the water. When viewed together, the photos make up a serene sunset on the shore: the orange sky of one image is followed by the shallow waves of another. Beyond that view is the intangible, for when time itself comes into play, there exists a dawn, a dusk, and a sunrise in addition to a sunset. So, when all the pictures and their hashtags are sewn together, each photographic element “illuminates and is illuminated by what came before” (“Serious”). As a result, we come to see a past, a present, and a future, all of which join together to reveal a more complete story—one that is more logical and credible with the addition of chapters.

Therefore, to avoid creating a single story in the first place, we must reckon with the limitations of media. We cannot simply assume

that one depiction of a safe family in a war-torn country, or one confident smile on a soldier's face on government propaganda, is enough to characterize the subjects or the events photographed. Instead, Cole asserts that we need to see "what actually happens" in people's daily lives and "at the moment they happen" ("Against"). By doing so, we can see the world in all its brightest and darkest colors, in all its biggest and smallest moments. Especially when such news relates "to war, prejudice, hatred and violence," it "pursues a blinkered neutrality at the expense of real fairness" ("Against"). This pursuit, Cole insists, reveals that neutrality can be none other than an act of censorship. It hides the bloodshed and tears of its captured subjects when we ought to be sharing and carrying the subjects' burdens and sufferings. Regardless of who we are to one another, and regardless of race, gender, or background, we are all human beings; for that reason, we are destined to fall and rise as one collective unit.

Likewise, we should not overlook news that pertains to an insignificant person, a meaningless metro report, another car accident, or news from a distant land we will never visit in our lifetime. In his essay "Small Fates," Cole urges people to pay more attention to these seemingly trivial news stories, even if such news is not "of the kind that alter[s] a nation's course" ("Small"). No matter how local, unpopular, or unrelatable these stories may appear to us, they are nevertheless "the small fates of ordinary people" ("Small"). Hence, Cole argues that such stories are inherently powerful because they "reveal a whole world of ongoing human experience that is often ignored or oversimplified" ("Small"). And so, small news becomes what Susan Sontag describes as the "frankest representations" of any subject on the media even though such stories "seem most foreign" and "least likely to be known" (qtd. in "Against"). By immersing ourselves in these negligible stories, we will begin to understand other people, accept them for who they are, and build a community that welcomes differences, change, or just simple, ordinary individuals who are not Nobel Prize winners, politicians, or celebrities.

In a sense, "a good photograph is like a pinprick," as Cole suggests in his interview with *The Aerogram*: "It draws blood, it quickens, it's uncomfortable" (qtd. in Vikaas). In other words, the contents of "a good photograph" come as a "momentary shock to the

consciousness”—an anagnorisis, an epiphany—just like the feeling of a “sudden rush of blood to the head,” or a revelation (qtd. in Vikaas). In that sliver of time, we come to reckon with those in unfortunate situations, who may include those living in poverty, in underdeveloped nations, or under military rule. By doing so, we can come to see the world in a new light.

So then, how do we go about pursuing photography that is neither biased nor neutral nor exclusive? In her book of collected essays, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag argues that such a pursuit is not feasible because “photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention” (11). She implies that photographers cannot capture an action from the subject’s point of view unless they risk their health or lives in doing so. Especially when it comes to photographs relating to war, prejudice, hatred, and violence, there should always be, for precautionary reasons, a distance between the photographer and the event. Take, for example, Paul Schutzer, the photographer killed on assignment in the Third Arab-Israeli War. Take, as another example, J. M. Giordano, the photographer who was beaten by Baltimore police officers during a protest of the death of Freddie Gray. These photographers did not ask to be beaten or killed. They simply wanted to capture the heart of the scene but failed to do so. They have shown us that we cannot forgo the neutrality that Cole condemns. As an alternative, we ought to prioritize safety and pursue the most candid photography possible at a reasonable distance.

And yet, when it comes to general photography, the distance between the photographer and subject still remains, perhaps because, as Sontag puts it, “the camera is a sublimation of the gun” (14). That means that to point and shoot photographs of subjects is “to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves” (Sontag 14). Hence, when it comes to photography, there exists a personal, private space that a photographer should not invade. Whether an image captures a victim or a perpetrator, it is immoral to capture them without their consent. After all, there are ethical and private reasons that people have for not wanting to be captured in a possibly humiliating, embarrassing, or abnormal light. This logic ties in with Cole’s argument that “the photograph outlives the body,” and so “our faces are becoming not only unforgettable but inescapable” (“Memories”). In

contemporary society, digital photographs can never be deleted from the server, especially once they land on the Internet. As Cole suggests, this shows that photography is indistinguishable from surveillance. After all, the government may retain photographs for propaganda, and corporations or even individuals may exploit information captured on film. Soon enough, Cole warns, there will be “so much documentation of each life, each scene and event,” that we could not delete or retract this digital record should we wish to remain unknown to the media (“Memories”).

Now, if a camera is a “tool of power” (Sontag 8), what must we do to limit the media’s power to retain our information? One solution, as Cole proposes, is to develop “a technology that simply [does] not have the ability to save the images it was transmitting” (“Memories”). The closest example of this technology today is Snapchat, a mobile app that allows users to send pictures through instant messaging. Unlike Instagram, Snapchat destroys these pictures in a matter of seconds, but users still have the capability to retain images by screenshotting. Thus, the limitations of digital media depend on the technological platforms used and their ability to retain images. The more we upload pictures online, the more we are documented in the digital world—permanently—with or without our consent. Our digital records are also affected by a platform’s functionality. Because each platform has its own set of imaging tools such as filters, enhancements, and special effects, our public identity becomes vulnerable to inaccurate representations through photographic manipulation. Soon, the stories we tell may or may not cohere with the stories others think we are telling, thereby creating disharmony in our personal and public identities.

But then again, should all platforms implement software that restricts the retention of images as well as editing tools? No. In the end, regardless of how menacing the camera may be, it has just as much potential to do good as to do harm. We should not rush to constrain a camera’s capabilities and functionalities when, in actuality, Cole observes that imaging technology has the power to “aid conservation, epigraphy, archeology and art history” (“Memories”). It can preserve ancient artifacts “at risk of being destroyed for military or religious reasons” (“Memories”). For instance, Vincent van Gogh’s

The Painter on the Road to Tarascon is believed to have been burned during World War II, along with many of his other paintings. Fortunately, these paintings were previously captured on camera, so they have been made “visible to future generations” (“Memories”). Therefore, when a physical image or object fails to keep its form or is destroyed, modern technology may take over by preserving it so that it can still be a part of humankind’s history. Hence, rather than limiting the camera’s potential, we could, instead, direct our efforts towards implementing new 3D imaging technology to aid preservation.

All in all, the way that Cole thinks about the camera as a lens implies that there is more to photography than just filters or neutrality, followers or likes. What Cole strives to do with photography is not just to reckon with a controversial topic, but also to “find the language for all of what [his identity] means to [him] and to the people who look at [him]” (“Black”). This language is the universal language of all people, one that is ironically not a dialect, but a form of cognitive communication. Cole yearns to grasp this language that has the power to connect him with a person from another end of the globe. From New York City to Lagos to Switzerland, Cole has dragged himself “down into a space of narrative that [he has not] been in before,” and in doing so, has “attempt[ed] to untangle the knot of who or what belongs to us,” as writer Claudia Rankine notes in a 2016 review of Cole’s essay collection *Known and Strange Things*. I, too, believe that his journey and search for personal identity sets an example for us. It shows that we need to step out of our comfort zones in order to become active members of the global community. We are all human beings deep down in our hearts, and we ought to reflect that humanity on the outside just as much as on the inside. Through photography, we have the means to express ourselves truly because images have become the words in the language spoken by all.

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