

# PHOTOJOURNALISM: WHAT'S TRUE, WHAT'S BEAUTIFUL

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**W**earing a ripped red headscarf and standing before a vague green background, the Afghan girl from Steve McCurry's 1984 photograph sears your heart with her big, penetrating eyes. Her vigilant green eyes, both breathtakingly beautiful and breathtakingly haunting, tell stories of a refugee child suffering from constant war and conflict. McCurry, who was astonished at the horrible conditions in Afghanistan, expressed strong emotions in this photograph—when you first look at it, you too feel uncertainty and fear.

Since it was published as a cover of *National Geographic*, the photo has had an incredible humanitarian impact: people have been inspired to volunteer at refugee camps, and *National Geographic* created the Afghan Children's Fund (Simons). The photo is so successful that any criticism of it may seem malicious. However, in an interview, McCurry himself admitted that at first the girl put her hands over her face because she wasn't willing to be captured, and her teacher had to get her to put her hands down (Hajek). In essence, McCurry was so sympathetic to the suffering of Afghans that he staged his subject to make her look more "Afghan." His goals were humane, but he also violated the central principle of photojournalism—authenticity. Some of McCurry's defenders would argue that the image wouldn't be as touching if McCurry had not shot it this way, and since the mission of photojournalism is to raise awareness, staging a photo to achieve a stronger aesthetic and emotional appeal would not hurt. The problem is that photojournalism is a distinct form of photography where we worship fidelity to fact, not readers' indulgence. The Achilles' heel of McCurry's photograph is that it sets a dangerous precedent: that sacrificing authenticity to achieve a stronger visual appeal is justified, or even favorable.

Teju Cole, a columnist for the *New York Times*, reflects on authenticity in his essay "A Too-Perfect Picture." "You know a Steve

McCurry picture when you see one,” says Cole (971). Upon reviewing McCurry’s most recent volume, “India,” Cole points out that McCurry carefully selects subjects who evoke an earlier time in Indian history. Readers with nostalgia for images of British colonialism will quickly enter McCurry’s world of fantasy: “Here’s an old-timer with a dyed beard. Here’s a doe-eyed child in a headscarf” (Cole 971). McCurry did well playing with his subjects, but according to Cole, he is likely to be charged with “appropriation,” as he captures only people, not facts (974). In comparison, Raghbir Singh, an Indian photographer, strives for authenticity. Cole points out a picture Singh took in Mumbai, which captures the lively modernity of the city with a breathtaking compositional coherence: a middle-aged lady in red blouse and dark floral skirt, pedestrians walking on a dusty street, showcases displaying handbags (973). These seemingly unrelated subjects blend perfectly into the frame through Singh’s vertical division of the photograph and unique angle of shooting. As Cole points out, Singh gives us photographs charged with life: not only beautiful experiences or painful scenes but also those “in-between moments of drift that make up most of our days” (972). He shows us that you don’t have to compromise authenticity, the main metric for the value of a photojournalistic image, in exchange for aesthetics.

One would probably agree about the value of the in-between after close examination of Edmund Clark’s photo series *Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out*. Clark took the photos in the American military prison where the U.S. has detained suspected terrorists since the September 11 attacks. Guantanamo Bay is accused of dehumanizing its detainees, and Clark’s photos serve as a glimpse into that life. In a picture Clark shot outside a cell, he focused his lens on the window of the cell door, trying to capture what was inside: a man in an ordinary white T-shirt and olive-colored chinos lying on the floor. His face is blocked by the door, and the reflection in the window shows a man in camouflage—probably the guard. By omitting the prisoner’s face, Clark subverts the demonization of the detainee and gives audiences the chance to explore his human complexity. He may be a killer responsible for hundreds of deaths, but at the same time he may be a battered prisoner suffering from exhaustion, malnutrition, or abuse. Clark’s camera angle creates a unique visual: the separation of differ-

ent layers, mild contrasts, lights and shadows. Meanwhile, it is an authentic representation that leaves room for viewers to imagine.

One might ask: “Isn’t omitting the prisoner’s face and shooting from outside the cell window a way of ‘playing with’ the subjects and violating the law of authenticity, just as McCurry did with “Afghan Girl” and *India*?” The answer depends on how we see authenticity. With the “Afghan Girl,” McCurry picked out a subject from reality and placed her in a different context, while Clark sticks to the reality of the detainee but chooses a novel way to depict it. Simply put, McCurry changes the story, whereas Clark finds a new way to tell the story. This difference pushes us to a greater and deeper understanding of photojournalism. In essence, photojournalism is a lens through which we understand reality, but we should acknowledge that a photo is not reality itself. In the three-dimensional world, reality is very complex. The interaction between our sensory organs and what’s ‘out there’ isn’t the whole picture, nor is the interaction between the outside world and the photographs. Admittedly, photojournalism can never achieve a bijection between image and reality, a direct pairing of what happened and what the camera captured in its frame, but the glory of photojournalism is that it strives for better representation, a better lens for reality. And since photojournalists are not restricted in their representation of reality, they can craft an authentic representation that leaves room to create aesthetic values. Aesthetics are not a by-product of authenticity, but if authenticity is a must-have in photojournalism, then aesthetics are a complement that strengthen the photograph and make it a fantastic one.

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