Photography's Power to Shape our Realities

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Recommended Citation

Molinaro, Anna Catherine, "Photography's Power to Shape our Realities" (2016). Honors Theses and Capstones. 298.

https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/298
Photography’s Power to Shape our Realities

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May 20, 2016
“All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” - Susan Sontag

* * *

**Inspiration**

I studied film photography while spending a semester abroad in London, England, during the fall semester of my junior year. For our final assignment, we were told to go shoot images that have the same theme throughout the entire city. After spending several months in London, I had encountered numerous couples who were openly in love. Couples embraced on the streets through actions ranging from holding hands, to wrapping one’s arm around their partner, to kissing. I found their ability to express love to be beautiful, refreshing, and admirable; so, as I set out to begin my final assignment, I focused on couples throughout London. I walked about the streets of the Southbank, Regent’s Park, and Baker Street looking for couples who I could photograph. When I found a good couple, I would approach them, explain to them what I was doing, and take their picture. I would engage in conversations with them to make them more comfortable, while they helped me take some amazing photographs. All of the couples who I photographed were honored that I considered them photography-worthy because of their love.

Once I arrived back to the University of New Hampshire, I studied two courses entitled, “Psychology of Communication” and “Rhetoric of the Photograph”. I began to analyze images of the past as well as learn about how our society has socially constructed meanings into our lives. As a photographer, I was captivated by how we can
understand a photograph because of our social constructions. For example, we know to understand that my photography project in London of couples was to represent love and relationships. We have been constructed to know that when two people, regardless of race, gender, or sex, are photographed embracing one another, that there must be some sort of relationship between the two. We understand this regardless of how or where we were raised; however, depending on what past experiences we may have had in a certain situation, we will view that relationship from a different angle. For example, if someone sees an image of a couple with their arms around one another’s backs, someone may view that as an embrace of love, while another may view that as an embrace of dominance or control. Depending on our past experiences and discourses with a socially constructed idea, we view that specific idea in different ways. I was led to my senior thesis through what I learned in the aforementioned communication and photography classes. I have chosen to focus on how photography has the ability to preserve socially constructed practices and realities, as well as construct new realities about love and relationships.

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Theories

George Lakoff proposes the idea that photography shapes reality, as opposed to reality shaping photography, which I argue is correct. To further understand Lakoff’s idea, we must understand the concept of social constructionism. Social constructionism theory observes the development of joint understandings in social settings that the world begins to assume are correct assumptions of “Reality”. However, there is not one exact “Reality” because are all socially constructed through different smaller realities
that make us who we are. We live in a multi-reality world making the possibilities and interpretations of constructed ideas infinite. When images are photographed, we are only looking at one small piece of a socially constructed reality; however, depending on one’s past experiences with a societal norm, they will then come to different conclusions about an idea. We may look at an image of two people embracing one another and know that they are in a relationship; however, if we have negative experiences with relationships, such as abuse or deceptions, we will look at the image differently than someone who has the memory of love, joy and respect within a relationship. We have faith and trust in other’s that they are capturing the truth, so we start to believe that those images are accurate constructions of a reality. Thus, photography shapes what we chose to be real and what we chose to be accurate.

We begin to shape these realities by imagining how we would behave within the given frame. The theorist, James Elkins, states that photography has the ability to spawn imagination. Once we view an image, we begin to imagine ourselves in that photographed setting. Even if there are not any signs of life within the frame, we begin to imagine bodies inside it. The body becomes a sexualized and desired object within our photographic imagination (Elkins, 1999). We envision ourselves in that picturesque landscape, with the photographed group of friends, or sitting on the beach. Photography distorts what we are seeing within a photograph. After we have fantasied ourselves in the photographed situation, it then leads us to behave in certain manners so we can fit into the fictional framed-ideals.

Images are captured to target different audiences. Elizabeth Childs proposes that people respond well to images when there are other life-like figures, human or otherwise, within the frame. She also proposes that images can be taken for different
audiences. An image can actually be tailored to fit one specific audience, due to the fact that there are so many different audiences observing an image at one time. For example, in a photograph of a family having a picnic in the park on a gorgeous summer day, a bystander may look at the image and think what a wonderful, fun, caring and family. On the other hand, the director of that town’s Recreation and Park department may look at that image and feel as though the department’s hard work has paid off. This idea is imperative for my thesis. By combining the ideas of social constructionism, Elkins, and Childs, we can further agree with Lakoff’s suggestion that photography shapes our reality. When we start to see photographs, we envision bodies within the frame. We begin to further envision ourselves, our friends, our family, our colleagues, even our acquaintances along side us in the photograph. We see images that have been captured of other people’s realities and establish expectations of how we should behave in our lives. We believe that how other people are captured behaving is a form of reality. Within social construction, we are no longer an individual person; we are the product of socially constructed ways that we begin to implement into our day-to-day lives. We then start to change our routines, our appearance, our behaviors, to relate with others. We become curious and envious of what others are doing or what others may have that we do not. This leads us to start to behave in manners that will make us look similar to those photographed. This then changes how our realities are constructed. We change our actions to fit the images that we experience. Our actions, thoughts, and movements change based on the images that we are experiencing and who we are experiencing them with. Even if the captured images may not be “Real”, we begin to implement aspects of them into our realities (Gergen, 1999). Thus, photography shapes our reality.
Images create a set of societal norms for how we should behave. We look to other people to learn how they are behaving then we conform to them in order to look how they are and fit in with society (Arson, Wilson & Akert, 2013). In particular, we learn how to behave in romantic relationships by looking at other couples. We learn that by holding hands in public it can symbolize a sign of intimacy, happiness or possession. We also learn that holding hands while in public is looked at as a sign of public display of affection (PDA) and is accepted or frowned upon in cultures. In the following section of this paper, I will analyse five images to further understand how relationships have been constructed through photography.

* * *
Image Analysis
While walking through Regent’s Park in London, I was following this couple and instantly felt compelled to capture this moment. Despite not knowing who this couple was, how old they are, or where they’re from, I was captivated by them. They expressed their love so openly and naturally. Nearly anyone walking behind them, in front of them, or adjacent to them can contextualize that these two people are in a romantic relationship based on how closely they are walking and how they are embracing one another. We can understand this because we have been socially constructed to know that when two people are in love or involved with one another, they should be affectionate to each other. We recognize that when two people are kissing, holding hands or have their hands crossed behind one another’s back such as in Figure 1 that they are a couple. It is evident that this couple is in an intimate relationship from this image. As we observe this couple further we can see that there is no one directing them to walk intertwined, no one is telling them that as a couple they should be strolling through the park together, or that they even need to be together. They are doing it on their own. Or are they? From an innocent bystander taking this image we can see all of these positive aspects. However, what we as an audience are unable to see is the past experiences that have lead this couple to interact as they have been constructed to. Also, as the photographer of this photograph who has observed as well as been a part of healthy relationships, I saw nothing but happiness in this image. On the other hand, if someone who is a victim of domestic violence, a cheating partner or devoiced parents, they may look at this couple very differently. They could view the tight embrace as a sign of power, control or dominance. One’s past with relationships will construct how they view and behave in future relationships, whether they are in relationship or viewing
through a camera lens. This couple has learned from past couples, perhaps loved ones, popular culture couples, political figures or even just other couples strolling through the park as well. Because of couples in our pasts, whether it may have been family members, friends, celebrities, or politicians have expressed their love, we grow to understand, and eventually conform to the ways of those before us. Thus, we continue this tradition of “coupling” behaviors while in relationships of our own.

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Figure 2
In this the image of Hilary and Bill Clinton, Bill has his arm around Hilary’s neck and shoulder, which allows us to see his wedding band while his head is turned inwards to her. Both partners in this couple are smiling and appear to be enjoying one another’s company. They look like a picture-perfect couple standing in front of advocates. They are appealing to the majority of people in this image. We are envious of what a happy, strong, forgiving and persevering marriage should look like. In this image the world learns forgiveness of Bill Clinton’s affair and begins to trust that if the marriage of the powerful couple can push through hardship, then we too could push through hardship in our relationships (History.com). Their relationship represents resilience and perseverance. After two terms as the President of the United States, Former President Bill Clinton is standing along side and supporting his wife, Hilary, as she furthers her political career by running for the presidency (Berneson, 2015). Their presence, as well as their relationship, merges to gain public attention and support. While campaigning, the couple furthers Childs’ concept of photographing images for different audiences, the couple campaigns for difference audiences by empathizing with every community that they enter. While one person may view this image and believe that they seem to be a happy, motivated and powerful couple, another person may view this and believe that they are full of lies and deception. Depending on one’s political and relational background, they will view the image of Hilary and Bill Clinton differently. It is not to say that either point of view is wrong, the individuals have been constructed differently to view the images from opposing sides.

The political couple knows that the camera has the ability to share their beliefs and ideas with the world. Due to their political roles and public connections, they have gained a role of celebrity. While in their celebrity role, or being on camera, they begin to
use their political power over the audiences without the audience being aware. Because we are accustomed to seeing political figures through popular culture means, such as through social media, we then allow the camera to serve as a cultural and political tool to target different audiences (Couldry & Markham, 2007). This image further breaks down the idea of gender roles. Photographs are able to display which partner appears to have more power or “who wears the pants in the relationship” (Arber, Davidson & Ginn, 2003). However, in this image, Bill Clinton is supporting his wife, rather than Hilary supporting her husband. This image, as well as Hilary Clinton’s campaign for the President of the United States, is advocating for gender equality in the work place and the media.

On and off camera, Hilary and Bill Clinton have learned how to frame their lives for the public sphere to gain support, trust, and envy from individuals nationally and globally. Depending on where the camera is influencing the audience that the Clinton’s are targeting and ultimately decides how they will construct themselves to appear to others.

* * *
In Figure 3, the audience observes The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Princess Kate and Prince William on their wedding day in April of 2012 (Skarda, 2012). The wedding had been much anticipated by the world, especially the gown that the new Princess would wear. Princess Kate wore a custom made Alexander McQueen wedding gown, which made future brides to be gush in envy and begin to envision their own wedding day (Skarda, 2012). This image holds more than the dress and more than the newlyweds however. The photograph gives the world nostalgia for the British monarch and love stories. Whether or not someone is familiar with the couple, someone is most likely familiar with the tragic death of Princess Diana, Prince William’s mother, or Queen Elizabeth, the young prince’s grandmother. This image calls for a retrospect of
the past, whether that may be in celebrity romance stories, family or personal. Audience members who look at this image begin to remember what their past encounters with romance were and then look to the future for where they want to be (Niobe, 2004). By looking at the happy and engaging couple, people start to have envy of them. People begin to plan their own weddings; what their wedding dress will look like, the transportation to the ceremony, where the ceremony will take place, what their guests will eat and, most importantly, who the person standing next to them will be. This image begins to socially construct what future weddings will look. This images makes people consider their previously constructed views regarding marriage, then begin to image their future.

Just as James Elkins argues, images cause a spawn of imagination. While viewing the image, people begin to imagine their own weddings. This causes people to behave in certain manners to achieve those wedding goals. This then starts to generate newly constructed views, beliefs and ways around weddings. Thus, the image further begins to shape our realities of weddings, couples, marriages and ultimately relationships. Viewers of the royal wedding and this image begin to create their own dreams of their wedding and eventually will execute those dreams causing this image to socially construct what we believe a wedding and a marriage should look like.

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Figure 4

The global power couple, Beyoncé and Jay Z, have been together for the past fourteen years, have a daughter together and serve as each other’s muses (Thompson, 2016). Due to the fact that the couple has been together for this amount of time, the couple has been in the heart of digital and social media realm. Due to the high volume of digital and social media and the desire to constantly be connected, we are always observing images of couples through Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and more. We begin to envy and look up to celebrity couples rather than look at couples in our day-to-day lives. We glamorize the idea of a relationship and the goals that we want to have
for our personal relationships. We look at strong, successful and happy couples, such as Jay Z and Beyoncé and long for what they appear to have. This power couple has been socially constructed to look and behave in certain ways while in front of the camera in order to satisfy multiple audiences. The first audience is the audience for the music industry and fashion industry. The couple looks sleek and sexy while on the Red Carpet in order to positively represent the labels and brands that they work with. The second and more important influenced audience that they tailor themselves to is the public. Jay Z and Beyoncé know that when they’re making a public appearance, millions of eyes are on them. They are creating the idea that their relationship is the perfect and ideal relationship, which they do very well. After constantly seeing the influential couple through social sites and listening to each of their music, people begin to want to be them. They begin to be the foundation of relationship norms and relationship goals. The public begins to look at Jay Z and Beyoncé as role models for their personal relationships. Because we are constantly digitally connected, we begin to base our relationships on those that we see in the media, such as Jay Z and Beyoncé.

Although the relationship between these two artists may appear to be glamorous the camera could be lying to us. The couple themselves have been constructed of how to behave while on the Red Carpet or in front of the camera. We are unable to fully make a judgment about the couples love because are only seeing one fractions of their relationship through this image. While someone may look at it and instantly be full of envy, another person may look at the image and consider their song lyrics, especially Beyoncé’s most recent album, Lemonade, which has left fans and the mass audiences questioning whether or not Jay Z has cheated his wife and how happy they truly are. With the recent release of Lemonade, Beyoncé is using her role as the celebrity to create
a spectacle and stand up for the rights that she has (Gotham, 2012). Despite providing the audience with relationship goals, Jay Z and Beyoncé reinforce gender roles within a relationship. Both partners within the marriage are successful and have strong social influences (Levy, Taylor & Gelman, 1995). Not only do Jay Z and Beyoncé further the equality aspect in marriages for all couples, they specifically influence the equality for racial equality (Gray-Little, 1982). The influential, inspiring and powerful couple is far more than meets eye through the camera lens. Jay Z and Beyoncé have, and will continue to break the societal norms, create new ones and begin to construct the culture which we live in.

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In 2013, photographer Richard Renaldi completed his photographic project, entitled “Touching Strangers”. After traveling around the United States to complete other projects, such as “Fall River Boys” and “See America By Bus”, Renaldi asked
several people that he met while shooting and brought the strangers together. In this assignment, Renaldi played both the director and photographer. He asked numerous people to be captured within the frames while he directed them to pose in various ways that those in certain relationships should be interacting from his opinion. For example, he directed people to behave in fashion of a father and daughter, roommates and relationships. In Figure 4, Renaldi paired the man and woman together and directed them to act as though they were in a romantic relationship. The couple immediately intertwined their arms causing the embrace of a couple similar to those in Figure 1. Despite the fact that the subjects in the photograph were strangers to one another, when directed to act as though they were in a loving relationship, they knew to touch one another and look pleased. Even though the couple may look slightly uncomfortable in the image, they are still embracing one another in a coupling manner causing the audience who views this to understand that there is some form of relationship between the two. They knew this from being constructed by couples of the past. Whether the individuals in this image were thinking about their personal past romantic relationships, their parents, celebrity or political figures, they knew how to behave within the camera frame.

Renaldi’s project irradiates the social construction we have towards relationships. The subjects within a frame have the power to frame the audience’s understanding of an image by showing their socially constructed behaviors of relationships. Due to social norms, photographs enabling imagination and the access to photographs, photography begins to shape and construct the realities of our world.

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Conclusion

By analyzing the images of these five couples, we can contextualize that photographs of relationships shape how we will behave within our own personal future relationships. In Figures 2-4, we can observe how different couples behave while in the public sphere. We are able to see the framing that they are conducting in order to express to mass audiences that they are a happy, loving, supporting and successful couple. While in Figures 1 and 5, we recognize that ordinary, infamous, and the majority of couples, behave the same way in images. Their socially constructed ways are on display for the public and reinforce how we will construct to past experiences in our current experiences. We learn how to behave in front of a camera even when the camera is not around because we have socially constructed ideas of how to be in a relationship. We turn to others for their normative social influence then implement their behaviors into our behaviors.

Through these images, we learn that couples may be setting the standards for future couples. However, we also learn that these couples have looked towards past relationships to learn how to behave in their own. Relationships may be used for a various of reasons, including but not limited to; power, love, sex, companionship and tradition. These constant themes are always being captured in photographs; they may be personal or professional images, for the eyes of the public or just for family, images of couples will continue to live on even in a digital world. These images set the standards for how we should behave in a relationship. Photographs create a right of passage for us by showing us how people act in certain situations and how we too shall act in those given situations. Whether we may be in a relationship ourselves currently, have been in
the past, or will be in the future, we look towards past captured couples to learn how to behave in our own lives.
Works Cited


