
Photographs and Contexts

Terry Barrett

The meaning of any photograph is highly dependent on the context in which it appears. Gisele Freund discusses a photograph by Robert Doisneau that pictures a man and a woman drinking wine at a bar in a Paris cafe. Doisneau was fond of cafes and seeing the two together was charmed and asked if they would allow themselves to be photographed. They consented, and his photograph of them was published as part of a photo essay on Paris cafes in a mass circulation magazine, *Le Point*. Sometime later, without Doisneau's consent, the same photograph appeared in a brochure on the evils of alcohol abuse published by a temperance league. Still later, and still without Doisneau's consent, the photograph again appeared, this time in a French scandal sheet with the caption "Prostitution in the Champs-Élysées." All three presentations were convincing; the third convincing

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enough that the gentleman in the photograph sued the scandal sheet and was awarded recompense. Fourth and fifth contexts for the same photograph which Freund does not mention are the photography galleries of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a book, *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*, by the museum's photography curator, John Szarkowski. In the galleries the photograph hangs matted, framed, and under glass with the usual wall label of artist and date. In his brief essay accompanying the reproduced photograph in his book, Szarkowski offers an interpretation of "secret venial sins of ordinary individuals," reading the picture as "a potential seduction."

In the first three contextual situations the photograph functions as a press photograph, a piece of photojournalism. Roland Barthes made an important point about the press photograph and the context formed by the publication that surrounds it, what he calls its "channel of transmission":

As for the channel of transmission, this is the newspaper itself, or more precisely, a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph as center and surrounds constituted by the text, the caption, the layout and, in a more abstract but no less informative way, by the very name of the paper (this name represents a knowledge that can heavily orientate the reading of the message strictly speaking: a photograph can change its meaning as it passes from the very conservative *L'Aurore* to the communist *L'Humanité*).

It is not hard to imagine the different readings that a photograph of a hunter beside a dead deer would receive in this country if it were printed on the covers of both the *Sports Afield* and *Vegetarian Times* magazines.

The popular magazine, the temperance league brochure, and the scandal sheet are three very different presentational environments for Doisneau's photograph that in themselves determine how viewers are to understand the photograph, even apart from any captions or accompanying exposition. The surrounds of the popular magazine would probably give the picture an atmosphere of lighthearted innocence; the temperance league brochure in itself points a morally accusatory finger at the picture; and the scandal sheet automatically drags the photograph into the realm of outrageous and thus newsworthy gossip. The texts that surround the photograph eliminate any residual ambiguity and decide the meaning of the picture. As factual as journalistic photographs are commonly assumed to be, this one is shown to be readily amenable to three significantly different readings. Allan Sekula makes the same point about photographs of Patty Hearst taken by automatic bank cameras:

Taken automatically, these pictures could be said to be unpolluted by human sensibility, an extreme form of documentary. If the surveillance engineers who developed these cameras have an esthetic, it's

one of raw, technological instrumentality. "Just the facts, ma'am." . . . What is it that the photograph points to. A young white woman holds a submachine gun. The gun is handled confidently, aggressively. The gun is almost dropped out of fear. A fugitive heiress. A kidnap victim. An urban guerrilla. A willing participant. A case of brainwashing. A case of rebellion. A case of schizophrenia.

The same photograph of Hearst with a machine gun will carry opposing but equally persuasive connotations when it is printed on a wall poster distributed through a head shop and on an FBI wanted poster hung in a post office.

The fourth and fifth contexts present Doisneau's photograph as serious art. Hanging in an austere and quiet gallery of the Museum of Modern Art adjacent to other revered works of modern masters of the medium of photography, the photograph is framed with dignity and is uncluttered by captions, headlines, or mastheads, accompanied only by a label "Robert Doisneau, French, born 1912, *At the Cafe, Chez Frayse, Rue de Seine, Paris, 1958.*" The photograph's placement in the gallery is above all a tribute to the sensibilities of its maker, Robert Doisneau. It is there to be compared with other photographs and with the collected and preserved works of other modern masters in other art media. The practice of placing photographs not initially made as art into an art-world context is cause for concern among several contemporary writers, among them Martha Rosler, whose major complaint is that the specific content of such photographs is transformed into content about the artists who made them. "More and more clearly, the subject of all high art has become the self, subjectivity, and what this has meant for photography is that all photographic practice being hustled into galleries must be reseen in terms of its revelatory character not in relation to its iconographic subject but in relation to its 'real' subject, the producer." . . .

Important considerations can be derived from these extended examples. The most obvious is that photographs made for one purpose are often used for other purposes. A photograph of the planet earth made from outer space by NASA as part of its space exploration program is used by the Mobil Oil Corporation to promote its petroleum products and enhance its corporate image: with the addition of a minimum amount of copy and a logo a scientific photograph has been turned into a glossy magazine ad. Images of fallopian tubes, a living fifteen-week-old embryo, and greatly magnified minuscule sections of animal tissue by Sweden's medical photographer Lennart Nilsson have been bound together into a lush book, aesthetic objects for coffee tables. Photographs of executed prisoners still strapped to their chairs have graced museum walls; once made as state documents, they are exhibited as items in the history of the art medium of photography in Ohio.

These and the various uses to which Doisneau's photograph has been put are instances of category displacements: with the addition of surrounding or superimposed texts, images are switched from the category of news to a moral indictment; by transferring a photograph from a laboratory file drawer to an oversized book, science becomes art. These gestures seem harmless enough or even beneficial, as many objects or images may be apprehended for the aesthetic pleasure they may yield. Displacements of photographs from moral categories to aesthetic categories, however, are cause for concern.

In discussing the photographs made by the late W. Eugene Smith of Japanese villagers' deformities which resulted from industrial pollution, Susan Sontag complains that the cultural demand for aesthetically pleasing photographs has caused even the most compassionate photojournalist to satisfy two sets of expectations, one for aesthetic pleasure and one for information about the world. Smith's photographs of the crippled and the slowly dying "move us because they document a suffering which causes our indignation—and distance us because they are superb photographs of Agony, conforming to surrealist standards of beauty." She makes similar claims about Lewis Hine's photographs of exploited children in turn-of-the-century textile mills; their "lovely compositions and elegant perspective easily outlast the relevance of their subject matter. . . . the aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions."

The German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin made the same accusation fifty years ago: photography "has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, in handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment." Sontag and Benjamin are concerned with the act of photographing and are not even addressing such contextual displacements as removing photographs from prisons and hanging them on museum walls. As Rosler observes, "When viewed in their new context, the museum or gallery, photographs cease to be 'about' their subjects in the same direct or primary way; they become studies in the possibilities of photography."

Douglas Crimp reinforces these points with an extensive example concerning the New York public library's recataloging of several books of diverse subjects under the single category of "photography." Crimp decries the decision, because he sees it as based solely on photography's recently acquired economic status which is connected to "the value that is now attached to the great artists who made the photographs. . . . What was Egypt will become Beato, or du Camp, or Frith; Pre-Columbian Middle America will be Desiré Charnay; the American Civil War will now be Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and others; the cathedrals of France will be Henri LeSecq; Switzerland will be the Bisson Freres; the horse in motion

will be Muybridge, while the flight of birds will be Marey." He does not see this as an isolated case: "And thus our list goes on, as urban poverty and immigration become Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, portraits of Manet and Delacroix become portraits by Nadar or Carjat, Dior's New Look becomes Irving Penn, and World War II becomes Robert Capa."

His conclusion is that "in order for this new aesthetic understanding of photography to occur, other ways of understanding it must be dismantled or destroyed." Here Crimp may be overstating his case in that one understanding need not necessarily negate another, but his point about the significance of context shifts in relation to understanding photographs is important.

Another significant observation to be drawn from the Doisneau example is that photographs, despite their usually great specificity of information, are relatively indeterminate in meaning. This finding runs counter to a cultural myth that has grown up around photography, namely, that photographs constitute a universal language. August Sander, the influential German photographer working in the 1930s, helped popularize this myth in a radio broadcast series, one of the lectures of which was titled "Photography as a Universal Language." In that address he made several enthusiastic and unbridled claims, such as "Today with photography we can communicate our thoughts, conceptions, and realities, to all people on earth; if we add the date of the year we have the power to fix the history of the world." Contemporarily, similar naive claims about photography and language continue to be made, including these: "Pictures can translate word symbols," "Pictures can clarify vague ideas," "Pictures make verbal descriptions clearer," "Verbal abstractions [are] translated [by pictures] into sharply defined visual images," "Pictures can . . . prevent the development of inaccurate generalizations," and pictures "concretize verbalisms."

While Sanders assumes that photographs are a global form of communication which transcends individual as well as cultural differences in presenting unmediated realities, the later authors seem to be adhering to some hybrid theory of meaning which combines a referential theory and an ideational theory. The claim that "pictures translate words" implies that words are being regarded as fundamentally the same as proper names and that the meaning of a word is that to which it refers. Pictures are being equated with things and things with words. But not merely words, ideas, too, are factored into the claim that "pictures can clarify vague ideas." There seems to be an implicit assumption at work here which posits that the meaning of a word or an idea is the picture it produces in us and that if we can match the right pictures with words or expressions, we have meaning. The formulation is a word-to-thing-to-picture-to-idea progression. The picture-as-idea notion, however, has been seriously criticized and generally replaced by a meaning-as-use theory. As with words, the meanings of photographs rest to a large extent on the uses to which they are put. Dois-

neau's single photograph has been put to five different uses which resulted in different meanings.

It is easy to alter the meanings of a photograph, generally by altering the contexts in which it is shown, specifically by adding text. It is surprising, though, how convincingly the same photograph can be used to support, and is accepted as supporting, different and even contradictory readings. Photographs are too easily seen as transparent, unmediated, mechanical transcriptions of reality—bare facts, as it were, that are infinitely mutable by theory or point of view, be it the temperance league's or the gossip editor's or the museum curator's. Once given a point of view by context, they are convincing as anonymous and authoritative facticity.

Lastly, something needs be said about adjudicating among the competing interpretations surrounding the Doisneau photograph or any others. The first thing that needs to be made explicit is that a photograph's presentational environment is a form of interpretation that is sometimes vague and lacks specificity—when, e.g., the photograph is hung on a gallery wall—and sometimes unequivocal—when, e.g., the photograph is given the headline "Prostitution." As any interpretation ought to be evaluated, so ought any picture's presentational environment. Is Doisneau's photograph equally about cafe life, alcohol abuse, prostitution, the art of photography, and seduction? Are any of these wrong? Are all of these fair? Which of these are the most plausible, enlightening, accurate? What follows are concluding considerations concerning photographs, contexts, and interpretations. . . .

In formulating interpretations or in adjudicating among implicit or explicit interpretations, three sources of information are available for examination: information evident within the picture, information surrounding the picture in its presentation, and information about the picture's making. Each of these intersects with the others and influences our experience of pictures; each of these contains potential evidence for positing meaning; each of these should be examined before final conclusions are drawn. These sources may be called the picture's "internal context," "external context," and "original context." Internal context includes the picture, its title, if it has one, date, and maker. External context refers to the picture's presentational environment. Original context refers to the picture's causal environment, namely, that which was physically and psychologically present to the maker at the time the picture was taken. . . .

When interpreting even the most straightforward and simple photographs on the basis of internal context alone, a working knowledge of codes is presumed. We are indebted to E. H. Gombrich and Nelson Goodman on this count, particularly because they remind us that we have become so inured to the invented codes and systems of representations operant within our culture that we are likely to have internalized these to the extent that pictures seem to be natural rather than conventional. . . .

Although one's understanding of any picture or sculpture would benefit from such interpretive scrutiny, contextual investigations of photographs are particularly important because of the nature of photography. Because photographs are segments excised from large real-world contexts, one ought to attempt to place the pictured segment back into the whole for several reasons. One needs to do this to realize what the photographer has done to the original situation by his or her excision in order to posit what the photograph is about. An understanding of the differences between the picture and the reality from which it was made is essential to understanding the photograph. When these distinctions are ignored, the photographer drops out, the photograph becomes transparent, and the viewer is led to mistake the photograph for a real-world object or event rather than considering it as a picture made by a photographer. Similarly, the appreciation of photographs is often dependent on recognizing and understanding the transformations the photographer has wrought in excising the segment in order to make it aesthetically noteworthy rather than routine or mundane. The viewer who wants to understand and appreciate the photograph needs to see what fresh and significant relationship the photographer may have brought about and the means selected to make them manifest. Goodman's remarks about "the eye" also apply to the "photographer's eye" as it is evidenced in photographs: "It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make; and what it takes and makes it sees not bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons. Nothing is seen nakedly or naked."

Our cultural tendency, however, is to see photographs as mirrors, or windows, or "the way it was," or as mere mechanical transcriptions unencumbered by knowledge and values. To miss the differences between the photograph and the object or event photographed is to miss whatever contribution to knowledge and experience the photograph may afford.

Because photographs are also segments of time excised from a temporal flow, one is wont to reconstruct, at least imaginatively, the moments before and after the one that is shown, much as if one were viewing a single frame from a feature-length movie. Precisely because photographs have an aura of credibility, we ought to investigate whether or not they deserve our belief. Because they seem transparent, we ought to investigate what the photographer, or the editor, or the curator has invested in the image, overtly or covertly or through the placement of the image for viewing, instead of naively accepting a photograph as showing "the way it was." Considering contexts will allow this.