

The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media (ISBN-13:978-1-78873-091-4)

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The practice of photography has always invited adequate probing and queries from such varied fields of scholarship as art history, visual culture and media studies which have each viewed the subject through its own unique lens and thus found something the others overlooked. Likewise, social media as an emergent phenomenon of any and every society has not escaped the piercing proboscis of social science theorists.

Jurgenson's book stems from a discontent over how photography and social media are never talked about in a single serious academic conversation that does not succumb to the temptations of either techno-cynicism or techno-utopianism.

In this remarkably well referenced work— one that is also highly ambitious—the author attempts to systematically dismantle the elite discourses that have thus far governed the study of photographs and instead focuses on the very raw and unvarnished modes of engagement with photography that social media is representative of. In doing so, his work also stands critical of the sniggering disregard for social media shared across academia, which is often blithely dismissive of it as being too banal and commonplace for serious

enquiry.

The book is divided into two quite hefty chapters, each of which runs in the form of a slightly discomfiting Twitter-speak series of threads woven together into a very long essay. It is followed by a tiny essay for a third chapter, the existence of which is questionable.

The first chapter, titled Documentary Vision, proposes new formulations that can help understand the phenomenology of the 'eye' as a photographic subject which shifts from being an erstwhile 'camera eye' to the contemporary 'Instagram eye', wherein the social media driven impulse to photograph has been discussed with great vim and clarity.

Jurgenson quite refreshingly departs from the age old critical discomfort with the technological anthropocene and proposes a new scope and scape of the eye that is enabled by and operates through a series of apps. Something that he finds particularly interesting is the frequent use of faux-vintage filters in photos taken today, which reproduce (or attempt to reproduce) the character of vintage photographs rendered obsolete today, diluting it all down into an aesthetically pleasing digital effect that is wilfully anachronistic. What follows is a cogent and effective series of

arguments that tie together the physical character of photographs, the category of nostalgia, and the ephemeral lives of photos today.

The chapter draws from the distinction between information and communication in any media and constructing the frame for documentary vision it argues that the shift from a skill oriented technical practice of photography to a more casual and ubiquitous practice of taking pictures of everything is a result of a shift in the purpose of the medium itself from informing to communicating. Further, the author uses this ceaseless desire to capture the various bits and bobs that make up the world immediately around us to provide a commentary on the temporality of the photos thus envisioned— where the present is always seen as a potential future past.

Through this formulation, we come across an interesting concept called visual literacy— which the author argues is above and beyond literacy as we understand it. The emancipatory potential of this visual discourse in the contemporary social media age lies in simply noticing the world around you and presenting it as a mechanism for communication that is then read and engaged with by the viewer.

The second chapter, titled *The Real Life*, is quite ironically a critique of the real - virtual duality. This is also the chapter where the author allows the sociologist in him to quit backseat driving that one could sense throughout the first chapter and take the wheel instead.

He takes on bunch photographic habits born of social media like clicking

selfies and candid, to put them to test very many core sociological theories, most notable of which is symbolic interactionism. He is in vehement opposition to the mainstream view that refuses to see possibilities of real authentic selves within our online personas and instead he urges us to realise the potential of the virtual spaces in being a part of the process of creating and curating our offline selves. Besides granting the online self-equal authenticity, the essay shows us how the virtual also becomes that space which allows us to peep at the in-between moments of a performance, the Goffmanian backstage becomes available for public viewing and scrutiny, and in turn forms a part of one's self-image. This book is arguably the most nuanced exploration of the 'selfie,' which is otherwise, ridiculed and scoffed at by academia.

The third chapter is a woefully short and inadequate exercise where he tries to extend the same arguments of still photography to videos and that mostly fall flat without the necessary support. One might be tempted to wonder why the chapter exists at all and I shall not delve into its specifics.

This is perhaps the first attempt at trying to understand the visual medium of photography through the lenses of the social, and not the other way round. It presents an exhaustive set of possibilities of reading photos socially and is thereby as much a resource for readers interested in visual studies as a delight for sociologists. Jurgenson puts together an extensive and enviable bibliography as throughout the book he borrows from a plethora of scholarship

spanning all across social sciences and media studies, and weaves together a beautiful tapestry that displays at once, the richness of these debates, and the profundity of his own arguments placed judiciously therein.

However, the book suffers from what I suppose is Jurgenson's restlessness to either stick to a central thesis of argument or analyse a reference sufficiently before hopping onto the next temptation of thought. Therefore, despite such rich references, the essays only end up looking like prestigious dinner parties where every notable name from the social sciences and cultural studies are in attendance, but who for some unspoken reason refuse to talk to one another or to Jurgenson himself and only blurt out pithy maxims out of turn - all of which gives rise to an unseemly and cacophonous chaos.

The essays that oscillate between exhausting and exhaustive, thus snatch away from other works, at least in the immediate future, every prospective perspective of looking at photographs in the social realm. Until a major technological breakthrough occurs that shatters all existing modes of interaction with photography, it is perhaps nearly impossible to present a point of view that Jurgenson hasn't touched upon already.

What might keep this work from being a notable mention in the academic reservoir of ideas is precisely what makes it exceptional. In presenting nearly every possible way of looking at the social photo, the author says all that can be said, at once, and thereby falls short of developing any of those ideas

fully through and through with as much time and rigour as the reader might require to process it.

He writes as though chased by a rash urgency that is somewhat typical of our times and presents a rapidly shifting series of spiralling thoughts without dwelling on any of those long enough to hook casual readers.

The book can, therefore, be an immensely fruitful repository for undergrad students to find a multitude of topics they can develop for their end of term thesis, or for sophomores to sigh in frustration and marvel at the extent of Jurgenson's thought and drop truth bombs about the social photo at parties they gatecrash, or perhaps even for a lover of reading to fish this paperback out of their personal library once every Sunday and amuse themselves with the tidbits of its content. Beyond that I find it difficult to see this book turn into a text or be inducted as a canon in itself. But perhaps it demands of academia a new way of reading- that is a shift from sluggish to bloggish; that is several nuggets of bite-sized wisdom which the reader is free to consume at once or over several helpings, depending on their appetite.

In the Indian context, an interesting point to dwell upon if one allows oneself to go beyond the obvious critique of the digital divide is how ubiquitous this visual literacy and its vocabulary is, whether the subaltern can finally speak, free from the elite discourses of literacy as we understand it and equipped with a visual mode of self-assertion, or if it will be just another new way of gagging the subaltern from participating in

this newfound democracy of photos through more easily available concrete filters.