

The Secret Life of Images – Visible and Hidden Meanings Photographs for “Reading the Self and Reading the Others”.

This article on the secret life of images with visible and hidden meanings in photographs is the introduction of a series brought to you by the Irish Chinese Culture and Sport Association (ICCSA), with the aim of initiating a photo contest and exhibition for the coming Chinese New Year. This article touches on how images such as photographs can be used in an artistic sense to carry many hidden meanings that can be translated and transmitted for different purposes. These purposes are to communicate meanings and messages indirectly and sometimes with the intention to create alternative knowledge and to initiate discussions.

Recent understanding of visual images is that there are many levels of meanings within an image, and different viewers will form different readings or interpretations of the same image, influenced by many factors including viewer's own social backgrounds, cultural contexts, geographic locations and historical period. For example, the meaning that the viewer will take away from seeing the painting Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci will be different 500 years ago and now, and also will be different if the viewer is from Italy or Indonesia, or if he/she has been exposed to the tradition of oil painting. Similarly, a portrait of Mao Zedong will have very different meanings for the Chinese 40 years ago and now, and than those it would have for Americans.

In our series of articles we will use images chosen by guest artist-writers to explain how some of these images can be interpreted. These images are organised under various themes, for example, of deception, love, friendship or other concepts. Some photographs may seem like simple artistic expressions of talent and skill, and yet they can be interpreted by viewers to possess meanings not originally intended by the creator, and this may be said to be an expression on the subconscious level.

We would like to encourage readers to create your own images for this contest. All entries would be shown in an exhibition in the coming Chinese New Year Photo Show, which will showcase the creativity of and messages from members of the Chinese community in Ireland.



The first image that I would like to discuss here is “Milk”, taken in 1984 by American artist Jeff Wall. Most of our attention will be drawn to the unusual sight of the milk frozen in mid-air –

and fascinated by the upward splattered form and myriad droplet shapes, expressing swift movement – coming out of the brown paper bag held by the man sitting on the ground in a pose that is poised between action and inaction, with the body filled with tension, alertness and slight aggression. Some interpretations of this photograph will dwell on the technical aspect of how the photo is able to capture the motion of the milk. My personal interpretation of it is with the knowledge that Jeff Wall holds a critical view of the social pressure exerted by the authoritarian structures of society. Brown paper bag are normally used in intolerance society to conceal drinking alcohol in public spaces. Therefore I read the splattered milk and the man's awkward body posture as a way of creating diversion, in the form of a spectacle that draws all attention to itself.

Looking at the whole image, the man (poor, lives on the street?) and the splattered milk occupies only about 25% of the image surface and is positioned in the lower level of the image. When this image is shown as in the original, a viewer will be looking down at the spectacular part of the image. The larger part of the image depicts a monotonous color and the constructed pattern of a stark structure brick wall that is over bearing and project inflexibility. This I think represents the authoritarian system. The dark vertical shadow that obscures the structure is ambiguous as it is fleeting and does not have long lasting effect - similar to those of passing events - and therefore crucial changes are not visibly noticeable nor permanent. Access in the form of a staircase into this building structure as indicated in the left side of the image is formidable as the entrance is not in sight.



This reading of Jeff Wall's image opens up possibilities to reflect on the predominant social structure and the deployment of diversions such as spectacles to draw attention away from situations of cause and effect. Just as we do not know the cause of the splattered milk and the body posture of the man, as we are only allowed to see one tiny fraction of the entire story or process – in many social situations, we are also not privy to similar acts of manipulation of cause and effect.



The second image I have chosen uses the technique of 'photomontage' - a technique of combining images taken from different sources - often used in creating propaganda posters. Here is a magazine cover designed by the German artist John Heartfield, a pioneer artist and socialist at heart, created in the 1932 that showed his satirical approach against the Nazi who controlled Germany. He took a photo of Hitler saluting and combined it with an image of a fat capitalist to connote the greediness, cheap tricks and hidden agenda of Nazism. Inserted with the caption "The Meaning of the Hitler's Salute" the photograph belittles Hitler's claim that millions stand behind him. The subtitle at the bottom proclaiming "Little Man Begs for Large Gifts" also plays on Hitler's vanity for being a man of small stature and big greed.



The next image I will touch on is the work of Chinese artist Zhang Huan entitled "To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond". Here is a performance photo from 1997 with meanings hidden in a metaphorical expression and can be open to multiple readings. To me the photograph connects with China's tumultuous history as well as the experience of her people. One factor that comes to mind is the tremendous will and energy of ordinary people to accomplish the impossible, and in China's history, how many events that seem physically impossible have taken place, and

the Chinese people, with its sheer size, have been subjected to as well as made to accomplish seemingly insurmountable feats of grand proportions, to such extent that now everything is possible. The artist himself poses in the photo together with 'ordinary citizens' (*lao bai xin*) showing - at least at face value - a collaborative effort. This photograph can be read as a tribute to the efforts of the working class. It can also point to fact that "nothing is impossible" and provides motivation, hope and encouragement to its viewers.



The last image in this article that I will refer to is my own photograph which belongs to the series named "Signals from Burma" 2007. It was taken in Myanmar (Burma) where I worked for many years carrying out resource development work through cultural and art led activities. Myanmar (Burma) is a military dictator ruled country where citizens are not allowed to express their opinion openly, gather in a group in public spaces, nor freely interact with foreigners. Therefore the position of the man with his back against the camera, alludes to the difficulty of exposing one's identity in such sensitive situations. The photograph was taken on one of the beaches of the most popular seaside resort village for the Burmese, where thousands of people would gather during the water festival that marks the Burmese New Year. The traces of people's movements and activities are recorded in the sand. The Buddhist religion, much loved by the Burmese people, have in many instances contested the military rule and sees itself as representing and protecting the people. The person in the image could only send a signal to the object of his respect from a distance while keeping his identity secret.

After reading my interpretations, you may have your own readings that are different from mine. We welcome feedback from readers and we invite you to suggest to us which themes and issues you would like us to discuss with you, through appropriate images in our next article. For those who are interested to take part in a workshop on how to create interesting images, please give us your name and contact, e-mail to Sun Emerald newspaper, with information on which day and time of the week you are free to do so, and we will arrange a meeting with you.

All the articles in this series will be available online for readers' reference. We plan to organise a contest and an exhibition during the Chinese New Year to showcase the creativity of the members of the Chinese community in Ireland.

These activities and project is supported by the Arts Council's Artist in the Community Scheme managed by CREATE, the Sun Emerald and IFIMA - International Forum for InterMedia Art.