

# PHOTOGRAPH-AS-SIGN

(1963)

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## *Do we really get photography?*

PEOPLE OFTEN SAY, “I don’t know much about photography.” This phrase usually means that they aren’t knowledgeable about the technical details of photography, or even without getting technical, they cannot tell whether a photograph is good or bad in the same way they might not understand the aesthetics of a painting. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that people toss out this phrase because they actually don’t understand what is being photographed. Unless it is a photograph of something totally alien—an image that was intentionally made unidentifiable as if to challenge the viewer to guess its content—most people should be able to understand what is being photographed.

However, the fact that there are various ways of understanding, or reading, a photograph poses an important question for those who use photographs, as well as those who view and read them. Physicist Terada Torahiko writes in his essay “Gazing at a Map” [*chizu wo nagamete*] that a topographic map is a treasure trove of valuable knowledge and a trusty guide for those who are familiar with the language of maps. For example, if one were to take a square inch of a topographic map and try to translate all its contained knowledge into words, it would be an enormous task, he writes. The same goes for photography.

## *Myriad ways of interpreting a photograph*

A SINGLE PHOTOGRAPH of a street corner in Ginza can be read as documentation of hairstyles, clothing, customs, or weather, depending on the reader’s interest and knowledge. It could also become photographic evidence of an alibi. A photograph of a snowflake or a micrograph of a mineral, plant, or animal is a valuable record and treasure trove of knowledge for a researcher specializing in that field, but for the layman, it might be nothing more than a pretty pattern. What may be a mundane photograph of a New York City landscape for a Japanese person could be a very specific corner of such-and-such street and such-and-such avenue in the eyes of a New Yorker. Photography is said to be an international language, and that certainly rings true in comparison with written text, but two people who come from different backgrounds and customs will not necessarily interpret a photograph the same way. Even the fact that every photograph becomes a record as

All footnotes in this translation are editorial.

time passes proves that photographs can be read in myriad ways.

In recent years, the increasing number of gravure prints in magazines and photographs in newspapers demonstrate that all kinds of publications have been expanding their visual elements. People think that today's humans tend to rely on visual information largely because they are so busy and prefer photographs that can be interpreted easily and instantly, but I argue that there is an even more important reason: readers want more knowledge. Readers often have the capacity to interpret even more than what the editor and photographer intended, and this has been recognized as the strength of photography. I have heard of a writer who drew inspiration for his novel from the *Iwanami Photography Library* [*Iwanami Shashin Bunko*].<sup>1</sup> Indeed it seems that more and more people are thoroughly reading between the lines of photographs.

## *A photograph cannot represent a dog*

PHOTOGRAPHY'S DEPTH OF INTERPRETABILITY is at once a great advantage and a significant downside. The fact that a single photograph can be read differently according to each viewer's knowledge and context can trigger all sorts of confusion when a photograph is used as a means of communication (though this is the most important usage of photography today).

For instance, suppose that monthly magazine *The Light of Home* [*Ie no hikari*] published a story with photographs about a farming village in Akita prefecture, focusing on the severe labor conditions for women in agricultural regions. The largely rural readership might look at one of the photographs and interpret it simply as a woman from Akita, rather than a female agricultural laborer. They would interpret the photograph as a woman from Akita and overlook its emphasis on the harsh labor conditions of rural areas. If the woman was beautiful (the graphic pages of magazines prefer to use images of women over men, and beautiful women especially, if they were to represent the same thing), the subject might be read as "Akita Beauty" [*Akita bijin*] instead, which diverts the reader's attention from the intensity of labor. A bit sassier reader would speculate that the photographer must have deliberately sought out the beautiful woman for his subject.

This troublesome quality of photography becomes even clearer

<sup>1</sup> *Iwanami Shashin Bunko* was first published in 1950 by the Iwanami shoten, and a total of 286 volumes were issued until its final publication in 1958. Natori Yōnosuke served as the chief editor.

when one tries to represent a dog by using photography instead of words. According to the dictionary, a dog is defined as “an animal of the family Canidae of order Carnivora; they are intelligent, valiant, and well-adapted to humans, with acute senses of smell and hearing, and are widely domesticated for hunting, guarding, military, police, labor, and pet uses.” However, representing this with a photograph is not as easy as doing so with words. Taking a photograph of a single dog is no problem, but we cannot capture the dog in its entirety as defined in the dictionary. It might be a Dachshund or a German Shepherd. Well, if the viewer knows how to interpret a breed of dog like Dachshund or German Shepherd, then that might be no problem; but those who are less familiar with such dogs may interpret it in their own way and have a very different impression depending on if the dog strikes them as strange-looking, strong, scary, or hateful. Alternatively, an expert on dogs may read the subject as a poorly groomed Dachshund, or a German Shepherd of lesser pedigree.

### *Words-as-sign and photograph-as-sign*

PHOTOGRAPHY IS A SIGN, just as words are. A sign is not the substance of a thing itself, but a substitute for it. Even if there truly once were indigenous people who were startled when they mistook a photographic portrait for a real human, a photograph nonetheless meets this definition of “sign.” At least, if you are a civilized person, you would not look at a photograph of a dog and believe that there is a dog in front of you.

If that is the case, what is the fundamental difference between words-as-sign and photograph-as-sign? I contend that words are not related to the actual subject, while photographs are very intimately tied to the actual subject. Of course, a photograph, as mentioned earlier, represents a three-dimensional subject in a two-dimensional form, and in the case of a monochrome photograph, the full spectrum of colors is reduced to the scale between black and white. Nonetheless, the photograph and actual subject always correspond to each other in a certain fixed geometric relationship.

In contrast, there is no such definite correspondence in the case of words. Pictograms like Chinese characters, or *kanji*, may have corresponded to the actual subject at the time of their origin.

Nowadays, even though we know that the *kanji* for horse [馬] symbolizes the figure of a running horse, we do not necessarily conjure up the image of a running horse each time we look at the character. As soon as the character horse [馬] comes into view, we immediately understand it as the four-legged animal with a long face and a long tail. Photography has a unique quality that makes it difficult to represent the abstract concept such as a dog because photography is not an abstract sign, like words are, but a direct correspondence to the thing itself.

In other words, photography is also a sign that can easily evoke emotional reactions.

Humans are said to be the only animals proficient in the use of signs. A dog would react to a photograph of meat in the same way it does to a piece of paper, but humans are likely to have stronger reactions when they are shown an image that is close to the actual substance. In recent years, photographs have been used in advertisements for books, in addition to advertisements for groceries and clothing, because these visual signs trigger a stronger emotional reaction than words do.

On the other hand, photography's intimate relationship with the actual substance places a considerable limit on the viewer's imagination when confronted with a photograph. The words "*karatachi* flowers are blooming" make us think of white flowers in bloom. However, they also allow us to freely envision where and how they are blooming, whether by the still waters or along the fences of suburban houses, whether it is a single flower or thousands of flowers blooming all at once. You are not misreading the sign no matter how you envision it.

In contrast, photography limits the scope of imagination considerably. You would not look at a photographed image of *karatachi* flowers in full bloom along the fences of suburban houses and interpret it as a single flower by the waters. Film adaptations of novels often give an impression that is different from the original work, which is in part due to this quality of photography.

## *Photographs of humans are powerful*

A PHOTOGRAPH IS ALSO a very affective sign. We are more likely to have a perceptual understanding, rather than an intellectual



fig. 1

An uninteresting image of Mount Fuji; the distant view of the mountain range undermines the sense of magnitude, making it look like any other ordinary object.

Shimazaki Toshiki, *Shizen to kokoro*

[Nature and mind], *Iwanami Photography Library* 213. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1957.

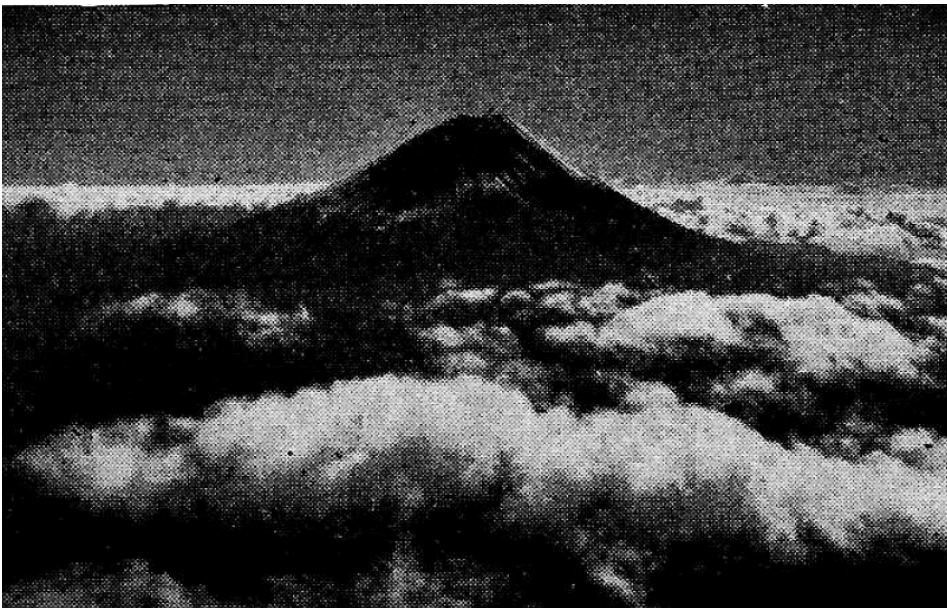


fig. 2

An elegant image of Mt. Fuji; the same mountain gives a completely different impression depending on how the sun shines, the way the clouds flow, and the vantage point of the photographer.

Shimazaki Toshiki, *Shizen to kokoro*

[Nature and mind], *Iwanami Photography Library* 213. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1957.

understanding, of a photograph. Shimazaki Toshiki says that photographs of the same Mount Fuji can be a sublime Fuji, elegant Fuji, or dull Fuji, depending on the way it is photographed, the presence of clouds, and its relation to the surrounding mountains. He presents another example of the high mountains in the Alps that can look either sublime or small, depending on the size of the trees in the foreground. Affective reading makes these mountains look different in various photographs even when they are technically always the same height.

This sign relies not on intellectual understanding but on affective understanding, and therefore, it naturally induces a more intense reaction when its content reminds the viewers of their past experiences. This is because their past experiences can expand upon the image they see in the photograph itself.

To put it in the opposite way, it is difficult to use the same photograph to elicit the same reaction from those who do not share the same experiences. *Iwanami Photography Library's Mind and Face [Kokoro to kao]* presents a case in which a nine-year-old boy, sixteen-year-old man, and twenty-three-year-old woman each interpret the same photograph in a different way, but this happens quite often whenever the photograph is a bit obscure. It would be rather uncommon if these three had the same understanding. Photography is said to be the international language, and yet it is not necessarily as universal as some believe because the readers of photographs do not share the same experiences.

In this regard, photographs of humans are most effective in driving emotional reactions. In general, we attach different feelings to our interpersonal relationships, which is universal across Japan and abroad. Photographs of humans, therefore, immediately draw the attention of the viewer. A photograph of a woman exhibits a particularly strong force of attraction because, as people often say, "a woman's presence alone is news." If there is a person in a photograph, the viewer's eyes focus on the person as they examine the image. Furthermore, because the emotions of humans are primarily shown in their facial expressions, the viewer's attention gets fixed on their faces. Photographs of humans have the greatest affective power, and among these the photographs of faces are the most powerful of all. Television and film both appeal to auditory and visual senses, but because the former is viewed in a

bright and distracting environment and can be easily turned off at any point, it requires far more attractive forces than the latter; this is exactly why television relies on the power of facial expressions through the abundant use of close-up shots. The major reason for the success of *Life* magazine's special issue on Hungary, despite its use of photographs that should have been read in the opposite way, as we shall see later, was because it deployed photographs of humans that did not appeal to reason, but directly to emotion rather, particularly with nondescriptive photographs that only expressed feeling. On the contrary, *Iwanami Photography Library* seldom uses photographs with large human figures in accordance with an editorial policy that aims to be objective and appeal to reason as much as possible.

## *Captions dictate interpretations*

COMPARED WITH WORDS, a photograph is an ambiguous sign. A single photograph can be read in different ways. Interpretations and receptions of the same photograph can vary depending on the reader's experiences, feelings, and interests. How can we control the ambiguity of this sign? Are there any good methods to precisely communicate to readers the intentions of the photographer and editor in their entirety?

One of these methods is to add a caption to a photograph. The caption can dictate how to read the photograph.

Ōya Sōichi went to Brazil and documented a small airport in a rural town; he took a photograph of a small twinjet and a naked child in front of it. The photograph could be interpreted in many ways according to each reader's experiences and interests.

But Ōya added the following caption to this photograph:

“Brazilian culture is unique in that modern civilization and primitive society exist side by side. Their transportation method is the airplane, if not the horse. An airplane can always be found wherever you go in the countryside, but one does not see many trains.”

In less than fifty words, this captioned photograph informs the viewer of what the photographer wants to convey, offering far greater detail than what words alone can describe, such as how old the local

Brazilian airplanes are, how the runways can get flooded, and so on. The same goes for Hanamori Yasuji's reportage on Urawa. As I mentioned earlier, his photographer went to Urawa and took pictures of the platform of the Japanese National Railways station, packed with salaried workers commuting to Tokyo, to produce a photographic representation of Hanamori's remark: "Urawa is a commuter town of Tokyo." However, the readers would have no idea how to interpret the photograph if the magazine published this image without any explanation. They can make sense of it only when the specific caption is added: "Without a glance at the passing train, the salarymen of Urawa wait to commute to Tokyo." This short caption allows the readers to understand that this ordinary photograph of the crowds on the platform and the passing train encapsulates the character of Urawa city. They may begin to wonder why trains don't stop at this prefectural capital, and finally appreciate the great suction force of the Tokyo metropolis.

In opposition to the idea that captions dictate interpretations, some argue that a good photograph does not require any explanation. There is no point in adding "how devastating" to the photograph of a person whose hair fell out due to radioactive fallout from nuclear testing at the Bikini Atoll. Most importantly, the photograph should convey this devastating quality in a way that is apparent to anyone.

This sounds more or less convincing. However, in this case, if there were to be an added explanation that many other people besides this man were on-board the *Fukuryu Maru*,<sup>2</sup> all of whom suffered the same symptoms, and one of whom eventually passed away, the photograph could have a powerful appeal to reason in addition to a strong visual and emotional appeal. A photograph that appeals to emotion packs a wallop. The degree of shock given by the photograph of a man's hairless head is far greater than that of the photograph of Urawa station. The shock given by the same photograph of the man would be intensified even more if readers could read the description and conceive that it was not only this man who had a terrible accident, but many more people suffered the same symptoms, one of whom lost his life for nothing, which, as a result, would effectively bolster the campaign against the "ashes of death."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, if we include the additional facts that many tuna were transported to Tokyo only to be

<sup>2</sup> *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* was a fishing boat with a crew of 23 men which encountered and was contaminated by nuclear fallout from the U.S. thermonuclear weapon test at Bikini Atoll in 1954.

<sup>3</sup> A common name for the radioactive particles produced by the explosion of a nuclear bomb or fission in a nuclear reactor, which have serious effects on human health, including radiation sickness and increased risk of cancer. The name was popularized in Japan after the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* Incident.



fig. 3

A magazine article titled “Looking at Japan: Urawa” with a caption that reads, “Without a glance at the passing train, the salarymen of Urawa wait to commute to Tokyo.” (*Weekly Asahi* [*Shūkan Asahi*], August 8, 1954)

discarded at the time of the fallout, and that no effective measures to prevent this deadly phenomenon have been taken for some time now, the same photograph of a hairless head can also be read as the symbol of Japanese people's protest against the so-called ashes of death.

## *From concrete expressions to abstract expressions*

BESIDES ADDING CAPTIONS, you can present photographs side by side to overcome the defect of photograph-as-sign, that is, their ambiguity due to various possible readings. When you place two photographs side by side, the common elements are highlighted, and the notion of uncommon parts is minimized. The idea is to utilize this effect to have the photographs read as intended.

A photograph of cold, for instance. It is not easy to represent the abstract idea of cold in a single photograph. It could not be more than “a person walking with his hands in his sleeves and pocket,” “a happy penguin,” or “a snowy landscape.” However, these three images together will evoke a sense of cold in the viewer's mind. Because the photographs remind the viewers of their past experiences, they interpret the common experience of cold in these three photographs. The same process, through which humans identify the abstract concept of cold from different and concrete events, repeats in one's mind when they look at a photograph and recall their past experiences.

Photography is not the only medium that utilizes this method. In the film *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin precisely demonstrated how he wanted the audience to interpret the crowd coming out of the subway by showing in succession two shots that were originally unrelated: a flock of sheep and a crowd coming out of a subway station. In his masterpiece trilogy *U.S.A.*, the novelist John Dos Passos collected several unrelated items for newsreel headlines, such as speeches by politicians, parts of newspaper articles, copies of flyer advertisements, and passages from popular songs. It goes without saying that the aim was to express the unique atmosphere of the age by gathering these seemingly disparate events that nonetheless belonged to the same era. When Samitarō Uramatsu made the claim “Aomori is a naked town” in “Looking at Japan,” he listed the facts that support his claim: “An express train from Tokyo slides into platform no. two of the Aomori



fig. 4

Pages on fighting in the *First Graders* [*Ichinensei*], *Iwanami Photography Library*.

The right side conveys the mood of the fight with two similar photographs, while the left side shows the progress of the fight from top to bottom. The photograph in the center plays the role of a cut.

Kumagai Motoichi, *Ichinensei: Aru shōgaku kyōshi no kiroku* [*First Graders: A Primary Teacher's Account*], *Iwanami Photography Library* vol. 143 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955).

station. The unloaded passengers, with heavy luggage in their hands, hastily walk on the platform in the same direction the train has been going. . . . these passengers, pushing each other along the platform, are the ones who are headed to Hokkaido.” “The only notable industries are lumbering and miso and soy sauce brewing.” “There used to be three department stores, but one of them went bankrupt and the building has been left in disrepair.” “Aomori is the only prefectural capital without a university.” The effect of enumeration seems to be aimed at by these supporting facts. By the way, Uramatsu’s writing is very photographic, so much so that if his passages were adapted into photographs as is, they would make a photographic reportage titled *Aomori: A Naked Town*.

4 Natori developed the editorial technique of *kumi shashin*, a combination of two or more different photographs to communicate a message.

## *Basic functions of the photo essay* [kumi shashin]

THE FACT THAT a series of photographs placed side by side can represent an abstract concept means that photography can now tell a story. This heralds the birth of a kind of photography that can be not only shown but read, very precisely, as intended by the photographer or editor. This is so-called “photo essay” [*kumi shashin*].<sup>4</sup>

Today, a considerable number of photographs we see are in photo essays. The graphic pages of weekly and general interest magazines are almost always composed of photo essays.

The most basic type of photo essay, in which two photographs are placed side by side and given a single meaning through their similarities or contrasts, has already been employed for nearly forty years in German photographic almanacs and other publications. The technique employed at that time was simply intended to break the monotony and provoke a bit of interest by placing a photograph of a gentleman spectator with a bowler hat next to a photograph of a sea lion sticking its face out of the water. But later, a combination of two photographs was often used on magazine covers, apparently intended as caricatures.

To omit and highlight is not the only function of photo essay. It serves to show with more accuracy, detail, and clarity. Describing a film montage, the Soviet filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin made the

following claim: “In order to receive a clear and definite impression of the demonstration, the observer must perform certain actions. First, he must climb upon the roof of a house to get a view from above of the procession as a whole and measure its dimensions; next, he must come down and look out through the first-floor window at the inscriptions on the banners carried by the demonstrators; finally, he must mingle with the crowd, to gain an idea of the outward appearance of the participants. Three times the observer has altered his viewpoint, gazing now from nearer, now from farther away, with the purpose of acquiring as complete and exhaustive as possible a picture of the phenomenon under review. An active observer of this kind is replaced by means of the camera.”<sup>5</sup> The same principle applies to photo essay. By showing a topic from different perspectives, a more precise representation becomes possible in a physical sense.

Mounting multiple photographs also serves to put a story in order, as well as to show transitions in time and distance. It was the original purpose of the photo essay, as demonstrated by the “process-of-completion photograph” [*dekirumade-shashin*] that simply follows every step of a manufacturing process, such as the making of caramel candies or the building of a bridge.

In this case, when several photographs are placed vertically from top to bottom, the one above temporally precedes the one below; in other words, the former represents the cause, and the latter represents the effect. If the book is right-bound, the one on the right shows the cause, and the one on the left shows the effect. The same rule existed for the Japanese picture scrolls [*emakimono*]. We look at a Japanese picture scroll from right to left, so a new screen always enters from the left. Therefore, the story naturally unfolds from right to left, while a new character appears from the left side, and the main characters, in principle, occupy the right side of the screen.

## *From a photograph that shows to a photograph that speaks*

ONCE A VIEWER of the photograph acknowledges the rule that the arrangement of photographs defines the sequence of the story, we can conversely utilize it and create an artificial order of things in the

<sup>5</sup> An English translation of the original text referenced here can be found below: Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, “Film Director and Film Material” in *Film Technique and Film Acting: The Cinema Writings of V. I. Pudovkin* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1954). 53–34.

For the publication in Japanese translation, see *Eiga Kantoku to Eiga Kyakuhonron*, trans. Sasaki Norio (Tokyo: Ōraisha, 1930).

arrangement of photographs. In the case of photographs in the cause-effect sequence, if you replace a photograph of the effect with another photograph, the reader will out of habit comprehend the latter as the effect, while in contrast, if you replace a photograph of the cause with another, the reader will understand the latter as the cause. Hence, the technique of combining photographs can change the story, regardless of the reality.

The following sequence demonstrates this phenomenon according to the Soviet film director Lev Kuleshov:

1. A man walks from left to right
2. A woman walks from right to left
3. A man and a woman meet and shake hands
4. A large white building with broad steps
5. Two figures walk up the stairs together

When the above shots were projected in sequence, they gave viewers the impression that they were all in the same exact location, even though each shot was filmed in a very different location (Marcel Martin, *Le Langage Cinématographique*).<sup>6</sup> The same applies to photography.

That said, these effects in photography are not as certain or as pronounced as they are in cinema. In cinema, a spectator is forced to view each sequence in a certain order. This constraint gave rise to montage theory and the technique of cutback, but the photo essay cannot force the viewer to look at the photographs in the same natural and definite order as in the case of cinema.

Photography is a quite a difficult sign to handle when it comes to a single photograph, but it can free itself from constraints to a certain extent when multiple photographs are used.

Nonetheless, a photograph's concreteness can be read in too many ways. A difference in the viewer's taste, education, cultural literacy, and political and social interests can change the way a photograph is read. Therefore, the photo essay particularly requires thorough preparation and meticulous calculation in order to accurately convey the intent of the author. Photo essays with different target audiences, therefore, require different methods of selecting and arranging photographs even when their general ideas are the same.

(For more specific examples of what is discussed in this section, please read Chapter III.)

<sup>6</sup> Information about this work's English translation could not be found as of publication. The original title in French was first published in 1955. For the publication in Japanese translation, see *Eiga Gengo*, trans. Kaneko Toshio (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō, 1957).



fig. 5

In the first volume of the *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans* [*Chōjū giga*], a rabbit leading a deer and a frog leading a wild boar emerge from the left in front of the monkey bishop.

## Personal photographs and social photographs

*ORDINARY* [*HEIBON*],<sup>7</sup> known as one of the most successful postwar publications, uses many photographs. If you look closely at the photographs, you will realize that they are very different from those in other magazines, such as frontispiece photos in *Central Review* [*Chūō kōron*].<sup>8</sup> Put simply, *Ordinary* uses personal photographs. They allow the viewer and the viewed to form a personal connection.

To use portraits as an example, the photos of famous figures in *Ordinary* smile at the readers. In contrast, the portraits in *Central Review* are never smiling. The latter magazine might use the same kind of frontal portrait, but the expression shown is not of a person privately talking to somebody, but that of a person looking at an audience from a podium.

The readers of *Ordinary* and *Bright Star* [*Myōjō*]<sup>9</sup> are older teenagers. They don't have the social consciousness of adults. The way they think about and look at things is very much personal and centered on themselves. They look at a frontispiece of a magazine not to understand the life of an actress, but to feel a kind of intimacy with her. They cannot be satisfied if the portrait is not smiling at them. If it is a photograph of Eri Chiemi visiting Misora Hibari's house, they want to see it up close as though they were accompanying her—or as if they were watching this scene from the front row seat of the theater. They even hope that the stars might recognize the presence of each individual reader. To this end, the last photograph of the star's home visit, which is one of the selling features of *Ordinary*, always portrays stars smiling or waving at the readers (in this story, it is the scene where Hibari is sending Chiemi off). This single photograph makes the readers feel like they have benefited from a personal service and leave them satisfied as though they were personally sent off by Hibari.

In contrast, the readers of *Central Review* are socially conscious readers. They are the readers who try to interpret the contents of photographs from an objective standpoint. Therefore, if you pay attention to the frontispieces of magazines with this type of readership, whether *Central Review* or *World* [*Sekai*],<sup>10</sup> you will notice that many of the portraits are shown sideways. Most of them are profiles. Even

<sup>7</sup> *Heibon* was a weekly popular magazine first published by Heibon Shuppan (currently named Magazine House) in 1959.

<sup>8</sup> *Chūō kōron* is a monthly literary magazine first published in 1887.

<sup>9</sup> *Myōjō* is a monthly mass entertainment magazine published by Shūeisha, first launched in 1952.

<sup>10</sup> *Sekai* is a monthly political magazine published by Iwanami Shoten, first launched in 1946.

when the people being photographed are facing forward, their gaze is not directed at the reader. You can observe what is ahead of their gaze. The very few photographs in which the gaze is directed toward the reader are anomalous and seek to attract the reader's attention in this way. Otherwise, the photographs are used to give the readers a sense of superiority, with that imploring look on the subject's face, as though begging the reader for guidance.

### *The reader determines the photographic mode of expression*

AS THIS EXAMPLE SHOWS, different viewers have different requirements for photography, and therefore, there are various ways of photographing and various modes of expression in response to these requirements. This is a natural consequence of the fact that photography is a very ambiguous sign and that the level of comprehension can vary depending on the viewer's experiences, knowledge, and status; for the same reason, changes in the photographic mode of expression over time have been much more pronounced than with words. In this sense, it should be fair to say that the photographic mode of expression is the result of a compromise between the viewer and the presenter.

The most familiar example is the commemorative photographs of a new government cabinet at the time of its formation. Originally, all members had to be lined up neatly for the commemorative photograph, which appeared in newspapers each time a new cabinet was formed. The photographer usually waited for everyone to be ready since readers wanted every member in the right place, or the commemorative photograph would otherwise be a failure.

However, this requirement has changed as readers have become more familiar with photography and have begun taking their own photographs. If the photograph of a person who has finally become a minister is to be affixed to an album that will be passed on to his offspring, it must look proper as a commemorative photograph, in a true sense. Nevertheless, it's not interesting enough as a news photograph. In response to the requirement of a news photograph, based on everyone's concern with how they line up for the shooting after their first cabinet meeting, photographs are now taken before

they line up or just a few minutes after the tense moment. This is because the readers now find a greater sense of authenticity in these photographs, which would have been deemed failures in the past.

## *Authenticity is difficult*

IN WAR PHOTOGRAPHY, this endless negotiation between photographer and viewer is even more pronounced. This phenomenon has left a profound influence on photographic modes of expression even to this day.

I was in China during the war, working in the field of photojournalism, and what I really struggled with at the time was how to photograph a battle charge. Photographers were risking their lives to document a charge at the frontline where bullets were flying, but it was still quite difficult to take the kind of pictures that readers in the homeland were anticipating in the newspaper. Whereas the readers might picture a scene of hundreds of soldiers charging at once, not that many soldiers could fit in the frame when photographed on the battlefield. Nonetheless, readers back home would not be satisfied with a photograph of just two or three soldiers trotting toward enemy territory. Some photographers accepted the challenge and took the risk of rushing out ahead of the soldiers to photograph them charging toward the camera. Despite such efforts, these photographs were rejected because newsrooms couldn't believe that these images could be captured from the vantage point of the enemy and thus concluded that the photographs must have been faked.

From there emerged an idea to take a photograph of soldiers shouting *banzai* in an occupied city, with the hoisted Japanese flag [*hinomaru*] beside them. This would be more acceptable to the readers. But then, once the same pattern was repeated several times, people lost interest and demanded photographs of actual battles. Finally, photographers came up with a way to blur the image of charging soldiers (by using a slow shutter speed to make the fast-moving objects blurry) while also making the camera quiver gently. This indeed seemed authentic. Although the resulting images were not in focus, they made it seem as though the photographer was under extraordinary conditions; consequently, the readers accepted the authenticity of these images which was not present in sharp photographs.

In the US, too, various efforts have been made to make war photography look more real. One of the outcomes is “unclean” photography: unrefined photographs in which you can see the silver grains of the film. The photographs of the Normandy Landings by Robert Capa, who died in Indochina War last year while on assignment, are considered to be masterpieces of war photography even though their blurry and grainy quality barely reveals the soldiers crawling forward on the sandy beach.

Grainy photographs like Capa’s were defects inevitably resulting from unfavorable conditions on the battlefield, such as very bad lighting or tropical humidity unsuitable for photographic development. Nonetheless, the resulting unusual visual effects imparted to readers a sense of urgency and battlefield authenticity.

## *Reading has its rules*

THERE ARE MANY MORE examples of how means of artistic expression have evolved over time, though the purpose or intent behind the medium has remained the same. These changes include instances in which viewers move away from preconceived notions derived from painting (which does not always correspond to our actual experiences; for example, whereas we cannot clearly see the still image of a horse as it runs before us, it can be clearly depicted in a painting) and gradually get accustomed to something increasingly akin to what a camera actually captures: a sliver of time like several hundredths of a second, a duration too short for a naked eye to discern, or an innate quality of photography that derives from the structural disparity between the camera lens and the human eye.

When we photograph a tall building, the upper part of the building looks smaller. When we think of the Marunouchi building [*Maru biru*] seen from the front, a rectangle with many windows may come to our minds, but it will not look like this if we stand on the ground and photograph it. The building will look like a trapezoid with a narrow upper side. Whereas this is simply inevitable due to the nature of the lens, once we get used to this kind of photograph, we will start to think that an object with a narrow upper part must always be tall. Humans have gotten so used to the nature of the camera lens that we confuse cause and effect. We now use wide-angle lenses that give a strong sense

of perspective to make a short building appear tall, which is precisely the effect of this confusion.

There are many other examples like this, and each case speaks to the fact that there are always rules, no matter how implicit, between photographer and viewer. One rule is that a grainy and unclear photograph somehow gives a sense of truth, and another rule is that a building with a narrow upper part is indeed tall.

If you learn these rules and utilize these effects, you will be able to generate falsehoods with photographs. I mentioned earlier the ways in which combined photographs can produce a story independent of the content of each photograph; if we understand how photographs are read, we also know that a single photograph can be detached from reality.

## *Hitler and Cartier-Bresson*

IT WAS HITLER who utilized this in the simplest manner. He had his photograph taken only by Heinrich Hoffmann, his comrade-in-arms during the World War I, and his photograph was always taken from a low angle below his chest, essentially creating an image of himself on stage being looked up to by the audience, not facing someone on equal terms.

Human emotions are said to be intimately linked with physical responses, such as changes in the behavior of internal organs. The angle of a camera defines the position of the viewer, thus determining the human's perspective onto the photograph and inducing a particular emotional reaction. This explains why photographs taken from below invoke feelings of intimidation. Hitler knew this well and harnessed the power of this angle.

The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's photo book *The Europeans* is interesting in terms of camera angles. This photo book presents his interpretation of Europeans, so to speak. What Cartier-Bresson wanted to portray was not a special side of Europe, but a Europe that everyone knew—an ordinary Europe seen by anyone who lived there. To this end, he deliberately tried to look for things that were not unusual but mundane. That said, it is difficult to express things that are not particular but universal in photography. Based on our long-standing experiences, we have a preconception that

photographs capture unusual things. The knowledge we have gained from photographs is enormous, but most of it has been gained from images of the unusual or exaggerated. For example, photography from Egypt is dominated by pyramids. Journalism inherently finds value in the extraordinary, as indicated in the phrase “a dog that bites a human does not make news, but a human who bites a dog makes news,” and the photographs we see the most cannot be considered separate from journalism, which makes it difficult for us to understand photographs that are not unusual. As for Cartier-Bresson whose aim was universality, he struggled immensely with selecting subjects and seizing the right moment for the shutter release to capture scenes of the mundane. Cartier-Bresson’s challenge was to seize special and perfect moments to capture European life and still make it seem rather mundane.

Under these conditions, Cartier-Bresson chose to take photographs at eye level. This reduces the sense of unusualness because we are most familiar with this vantage point from our standing position. It is the angle that makes uncommon things look common. An exceptional and unusual image captured at the right, long-anticipated moment gives an impression of the quotidian that can be seen anywhere. In this sense, *The Europeans* is the outcome of Cartier-Bresson’s skillful use of a photographic lie.

The photograph-as-sign has been understood only in recent history of photography, influenced by theories of cinema. It will be increasingly necessary for humans to remain conscious of its nature to better understand the photographs of today, especially those we see every day in newspapers and magazines. There have been too many instances in which even photographs for communication are seen as works of art. Regarding a photograph-as-sign as a mere work of art is almost like assessing the quality of a voice without listening to what it is saying, or just gazing at the printed page without reading its content, which has already been taking place for too long without any careful consideration. It is imperative that the nature of photography as a sign be widely recognized so that we will not be tricked by photographic lies.

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