

Postmodernism and Photography

The theory of postmodern and postmodernity were later known to be defined as the postmodern era. British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee made use of the term postmodern era in his book *A Study of History* which was written before World War II but the book was not printed until 1947 to speculate on an extensive historical timeline that started in the late nineteenth century. Toynbee further speculated that the peak of the postmodern era would happen with the fall of Western power and the advancement of the non-Western communities. However, Toynbee's sweeping assumption was mostly forgotten in the late twentieth century when French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard mentioned in his compact, short book *The Postmodern Condition* that postmodernism is the next stage of Modernism.

Lyotard argued that the successor of Modernism was already in force, breaking down the long-established social beliefs of the rising quality of human plight was made possible by the increase of knowledge, especially in science. As these beliefs gradually declined, Lyotard claimed that they would not be succeeded by other affiliated ideas instead they would be challenged by opposing notions which would bring forth liberation from the control and influence of scientific knowledge.

In the art world, postmodernism was defined as the rejection of the ideas and subject matter that the Modernist artists were interested in for such as abstraction. Thus, artists in the postmodern era revived the use of human figures in their artworks. In addition to that, they relied on overused kitsch for image references. Likewise, photographers started working with human figures, often making their images based on commerce, advertising and film. Additionally, there were other photographers who delved into the possibilities of the blurred image whereby forms were suggestive but not distinctly defined.

Art historian, Douglas Crimp mentioned in the catalog of the 1977 New York exhibition *Pictures* that the effect of media has led to a generation gap between those who grew up in the era of television, movies and magazines that could be found everywhere and those who were raised pre-World War II where it was a less image-heavy society. He felt that our firsthand experience was trivialised by the experience we encountered by seeing pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in cinema. He added on by mentioning that the function of pictures used to be for depicting reality however, pictures these days seemed to be taking over the actual reality instead.

Further critique on the "Image World" that we experienced today were made by American writer, Susan Sontag in her widely publicised book *On Photography* (1977). Her views were similar to Douglas Crimp in which she mentioned that "photographs injured human memory and drained away the instinct to know the world at first hand". Essentially, she meant that because of human beings distant relationship with the reality, this led to us being "passive spectators at a spectacle of recycled pictures". She seems to suggest that human beings have lost their ability to judge what is genuine and authentic in the real world and they would rather choose to believe what they see in pictures.

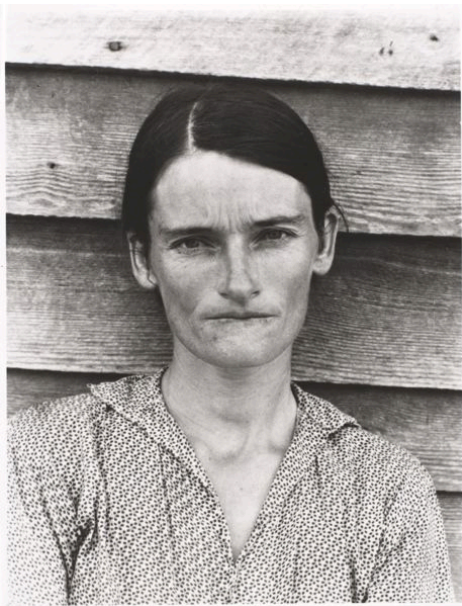
In postmodernist photography, re-photographing of images seemed to be a common technique done by many photographers. What I would like to discuss in this essay is the idea and concept behind re-photographing images in the postmodern era and whether re-photographed images can be considered an original art.



Diego de Velázquez (1599–1660),
Las meninas, ca. 1656



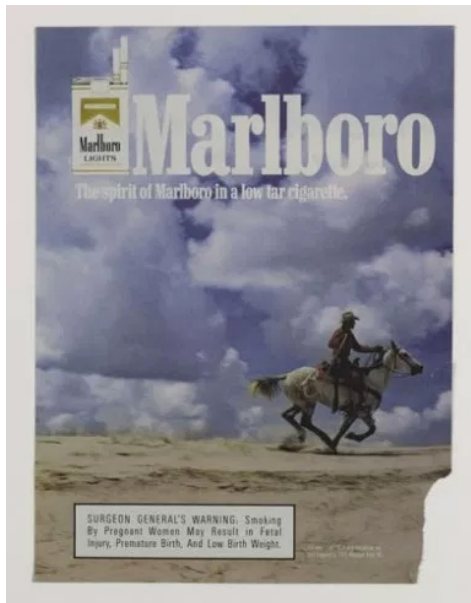
Pablo Picasso, *The Maids of Honor (Las Meninas, after Velázquez)* (*Les Ménines, vue d'ensemble, d'après Velázquez*), La Californie, August 17, 1957



After Walker Evans: 4
Sherrie Levine
1981
Gelatin silver print
12.8 x 9.8 cm (5 1/16 x 3 7/8 in.)

Among the artist discussed in Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* was Sherrie Levine who shook the art world with her re-photographed notable images of famous photographers such as Edward Weston, Walker Evans and Eliot Porter. The term to describe Levine's intentional borrowing and copying of other artists' works is called appropriation. Appropriation has a long history tracing back to Pablo Picasso's cubist collages. One such example of his famous work is *Las Meninas* (1957) where the idea was borrowed from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). However, Levine adopted the concept of appropriation in a more brazen way which could arguably be called plagiarism. One of her famous works titled *After Walker Evans: 4* (1981) was a re-photography of Walker Evans's famous image of Allie Mae Burroughs. She did this by taking photos of the replications of Walker Evans's work found in books. This act undermined the significance of the original work and challenged the importance of it. This act also brought up the question of how the aesthetic value of an artwork is appreciated based on the creativity and how the value is then given a price based on the uniqueness and rarity in the art market.

One of the most controversial and infamous appropriation artists is Richard Prince. He had created his own method of appropriation where he typically practice by cutting, cropping, manipulating and reprinting found images in advertisements. This method was done to prove a point which is to show how agreeable we are with the typical stereotypes in the marketing campaigns shown to us. Thus, he extracted the iconic images from the original context in advertisements and enlarged them. This allow viewers to absorb and analyse the content more clearly and enable them to question themselves the real purpose behind certain advertisements.



Untitled (Cowboy), 1989
Ektacolor photograph
127 x 190.5 cm

Untitled (Cowboy) (1989) is one of Prince's iconic works where he exposed the marketing strategy behind one of the Marlboro's advertisement. The Marlboro Man cowboy was a trademark of Marlboro cigarettes, it was a stereotypical symbol of the American West. The series of Marlboro Man advertisements carried on for almost 40 years. It was a conscious effort to rebrand Marlboro cigarettes as a manly product because they were formally thought to be feminine. In these series of advertisement, the photographs portray a aloof figure riding on his horse which is his only partner across a large, untamed land. Naturally, the portrayal of the cowboy as a lone hero was a booming success in the rebranding of the Marlboro cigarettes.

Prince then re-photographed the original advertisements, took down the text, blew them up to life-size and remade them into fine art. This causes viewers to rethink about the images that were in the original advertisements from a fresh perspective. By means of appropriation, Prince challenged the authenticity of the cowboy images and the hidden messages behind the Marlboro Man advertisements. This is because the cowboys starred in the advertisements were simply just actors posing for a fantasy of American history. Even though, Marlboro later began to look for real cowboys, their photographs were still meticulously and purposefully staged. Despite the fact that viewers can see that the cowboy was put against a whimsical sky riding on a horse across a broad land, we cannot deny the fact that this scene was professionally staged to sell a product.



Untitled Film Still #21, 1978

Another noteworthy photographer who practiced re-photographing in the postmodern era is Cindy Sherman who later became one of the most well-known image-makers of the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, Sherman's approach towards re-photography was much subtle, in the sense that she did not directly rip off existent images like the former two artists mentioned. She made a series of black and white images titled *Untitled Film Stills* based off 1950s low budget melodramas and film stills. These film stills portrayed stereotypical uneasy and worried women portrayed in movies. Sherman then made her photographs by putting on makeup, wigs and costumes to invoke a socially ubiquitous image of women. While Sherman did make suggestive photographs of film still poses, she however did not make reference to a specific movie. The public could pinpoint the origin of her images not because of her reference to old movies but because the poses she portrayed in her photos were constant stereotypical shown in films then.

To conclude, I do not agree with the claim that re-photograph images are unoriginal and simply just a copy of other artists' works. In my opinion, the art behind re-photograph images is the concept and idea leading to it. In Sherrie Levine's case, she was questioning how the value of art is determined and whether the value is dependent on the uniqueness and rarity. For Richard Prince, there was a deeper meaning behind the idea of his works as he pointed out the marketing gimmick of advertisements and urges the public to scrutinise advertisements presented to them. Last but not least, for Cindy Sherman, her works serve to highlight how gender stereotypes are prevalent in our society. The images that these artists create may not be originally their own but the message that they wanted to pass on by extracting these images from the original source is definitely authentically their own idea.

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