

On Authenticity in Visual Culture

How can images be discussed in terms of their authenticity or inauthenticity?

The quest for defining authenticity in the realm of visual culture has been subject to much debate. Human subjectivity is the primary reason for this, essentially rendering authenticity as a very fluid concept. It is, therefore, no surprise that different theories have developed in an attempt to explain why an image can be authentic. This essay will explore authenticity in terms of realistic and truthful representations. Inevitably images can act as a mirror to the ideologies of a society at the time they were created. The extent to which these ideologies can affect the accuracy of a message conveyed by an image and thus its status as authentic will be examined, in light of the possibility of ideologies evolving into conventions that subconsciously affect the way we understand the world. Experimental images will also be explored as an example of a late twentieth-century demand for inclusive and realistic representations that challenge deeply rooted ideologies that have the ability to blur reality. In doing so, Witkin's *Sanitarium*, 1983 (Witkin, J-P. (1983) *Sanitarium* [Photograph]. New Mexico.) and a still image from Alexander McQueen's spring/summer 2001 show will be explored in an attempt to analyse this opposition to man-made standards and the ability of experimental images to acquire the label authentic.

With the invention of the camera and the ability to create reproductions of original works of art, the value of a work has shifted from its technique to the meaning and information that it carries. As argued by Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972) the authentic value of a work is no longer restricted to it being awe-inspiring because it is an original. When an image can be seen by a multitude of people at different times, in different places, it can be argued that the element that can make it authentic has become the message and information it can reveal to an audience. Different images in different social contexts spark what Clarke (1997) calls 'authenticity as a photographic discourse'. Reproductions, therefore, have transformed the study of visual culture which begun to explore images similarly to texts and require the audience to read an image and disassemble it to find the ideologies communicated.

With the value and authentic status of an image been transferred to the message that it conveys, an ideological approach to visual culture has become more relevant than ever. Ideology is the study of systems of ideals, beliefs and social values that explain and justify the ordering of societies. According to Howells (2003) the study of ideology requires us 'to investigate the way in which meaning is constricted and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds'. Essentially, a descriptive approach to ideology in the visual culture seeks to examine how beliefs, values and systems of thought influence visual texts. Indeed, ideologies communicated through images operate as a way to make us understand how the world operates, and at the same time images are both consciously and subconsciously affected by ideologies.

Images, therefore, can be a mirror to the social and political state at a point in time. Panofsky, (Panofsky cited in Howells 2003) argues that a visual text is not just an artist's work but it is a 'portrait' of a society at the time the particular work was made. By using theories of ideology, authenticity could be explained in terms of the ability an image has to truthfully represent the world. As indicated by Goodman (Goodman cited in Barrett 2006), realism is a state where people can easily decode visual texts because the ideals that are portrayed in images are the very ideals shared by the majority in a society. Therefore, an image, as a medium that communicates ideologies but at the same time as a visual text that has been shaped by ideologies, can create an authentic experience because it has the power to depict the realities of the world.

However, such an approach to authenticity may be questionable. Ironically such argument suggests that realism is a construction of codes and conventions that are shared by a plurality in a society. Many ideologies, which are even shared today, are deeply rooted since the development of European capitalism in the 14th century, which is what Elias called 'the civilizing process' (Elias cited in Evans 2003). Quintessentially, representations of values, groups and beliefs through images are not neutral. They may indeed be a representation of the social and cultural situations at a given point in time which the image was created. However, this does not necessarily make the representation true. On the contrary, an image is the active engagement of an artist in the cultural discourse and if the artist adheres to the ideologies of a society then his work can act as a tool that promotes, either consciously or subconsciously, conventions.

At the end of the twentieth century with rapid social, economic and technological change and the focus being shifted on individuality, images had become a powerful tool to question ideologies and conventions. Contemporary anxieties were expressed through this new nature that visual texts have acquired, namely the ability to convey a message. More precisely experimental fashion images developed during 1990s as part of an attempt to question traditional belief systems through concepts not necessarily associated with fashion. This approach was described by Von Busch (2014) as a proactive form of resistance. The aim of experimental fashion images is to challenge the belief that ideologies conveyed through images are realistic and authentic, and so they wished to create an authentic experience based on providing alternative values and ideals that were more relevant to the modern society that claimed to respect the individual.

As argued by Evans, for the artists creating experimental fashion images it was hypocrisy to present 'happy, shiny images rather than exploring the entire range of human emotions and experience'(Evans 2003). Therefore, themes had become darker in order to communicate dissatisfaction with cultural issues such as gender inequality and sexualisation of the female body. Consequently, it could be argued that these images create a more realistic portrayal of the complexities of modern life. Essentially, the label authentic can be attached to experimental fashion images because of their purpose to question the norm and offer a more truthful representation of a society. This approach had been widely criticised and described as 'degeneration' by twentieth-century moralists (Arnold 2001). The authenticity of such images was questioned firstly because their purpose was to shock and secondly because pushing the boundaries was seen as inauthentic. However, the development of experimental fashion images marked the beginning of a more realistic representation of different groups. Alienated social groups by deeply rooted ideologies could use the power of images to challenge those conventions and offer a more authentic experience of the checks and balances of a society.

Images:



Figure I: Witkin, J-P. (1983) *Sanitarium* [Photograph]. New



Figure II: Catwalk Installation, Voss, Spring/Summer 2001, Modelled by Michelle Olley

To this point it has become evident that images have the power to represent groups and ideologies. However, such representations are not always realistic because very often images communicate the ideologies that dominate in a society. Therefore, representations are very often confined to man-made codes and conventions thus they are not necessarily authentic and true. Experimental fashion images however, serve to challenge our conventional understandings and thus it could be argued that they are authentic because of their ability to articulate contemporary anxieties. **Figure I**, is a photograph by Joel-Peter Witkin, titled *Sanitarium*, (Witkin, J-P. (1983) *Sanitarium* [Photograph]. New Mexico.) which shows a female with a body shape that does not fit into the conventional notions of beauty. Although the woman is nude in the image she is by no means eroticised. It could be argued that the choice to do so was part of Witkin's attempt to show that a return to a primitive state could ultimately prove that any perceptions of differences between humans can be eradicated. This image is an example of how visual texts can be used to challenge conventions, in this case the artificial standards of the ideal body. As argued by Celant, Witkin's work 'presents the life of marginalised or "different" persons as a testimony to the infinity of existence and aesthetics' (Celant 1995). **Figure I**, therefore, is an example of how experimental images can be used to destabilise ideologies in an attempt to create a more realistic depiction of body shapes.

However, one could question the suggestion that this image conveys realism. Firstly, similarly to the rest of Witkin's works this image aims at provoking and shocking the audience in an attempt to engage them in a critical process. With the shock element as his primary purpose, a representation could end up being overstressed, essentially rendering the message that the image conveys false and inauthentic. Its realism, however, rests on its ability to create a more truthful representation of marginalised groups and challenge the very fact that these groups are marginalised in the first place. Fundamentally, it could be described as authentic because of its very ability to convey a message and make a more realistic representation. This point is further emphasised by Celant who describes Witkin's images as 'frightening because they are based in pragmatic, real vein whose truthfulness involves the spectator in such a way that he cannot escape'(Celant 1995).

Figure II, is a still from Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2001 show titled *Voss*. This installation was inspired by Witkin's *Sanitarium* and it was the product of McQueen's desire to participate in the dialogue about conventional standards of ideal bodies and to challenge the fantasy of perfection and beauty. In this image Michelle Olley is trapped inside a glass box, reclining and

posing naked like Botticelli's Venus. She is connected by tubes and hides her face with a mask whilst her body is covered by moths. When these different elements are broken down to understand the meaning of the image it becomes apparent that it mocks the obsession with transcendent beauty. The mask for example can be interpreted as a symbolism of how society alienates people that are not 'conventionally' beautiful. If authenticity can be defined in terms of a truthful representation, then indeed this image is authentic in that it conveys the realities of how people are marginalised by society if they don't fit into the rigid standards that humans built themselves. It is a portrayal of the harsh reality instead of constructing lies and promoting conservative ideologies.

However, it could be argued that this very installation is constructed in an attempt to exaggerate the topic of commodifying human body and beauty and thus create a reaction. Fundamentally, it could be suggested that the image is inauthentic because such a representation is unrealistic. McQueen's aim, however, was to push the boundaries of acceptability, to convey through visual means the oppressive ideologies that we have come to adhere to and to show what could result from not being willing to give up conventions in the altar of a more liberated social arrangement that is accepting. Indeed, the visual aspect of the image can be described as unrealistic. What makes this image and other experimental images authentic however, is this exaggerated depiction of human imperfection and its treatment. As argued by Arnold (2001) such images have the potential to enable 'a form of liberation from fashion's perfected bodies'. Authenticity behind it therefore, is the reality and truthfulness in the message it wishes to convey instead of realism in terms of what is depicted visually.

To conclude, authenticity can be defined in terms of realistic representations made by images. When visual texts are explored through an ideological approach then one can come to the conclusion that an image has the power to depict the realities of the specific period an image was created. An image can then be disassembled in an attempt to find the values, beliefs and systems of thought that existed at a specific time. However, despite an image's ability to mirror realities it does not necessarily make the messages and representations that it conveys true. This is because images are themselves affected by ideologies, but at the same time they have the capacity to promote such ideologies that eventually become conventions adhered to by the majority. Experimental images however, purposively attempt to question conventions that develop in a society, quintessentially gaining a different status in terms of representation from images that are either affected or promote

ideologies. These images aim specifically at destabilising the norms because of the wish to make inclusive and realistic representations of different groups and situations. It could thus be suggested that the motives behind creating experimental images can attach to their representations a more realistic message, essentially rendering them authentic.

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