



## Visual Aesthetics Semiotics Roland Barthes Photography Journalistic Works Phenomenal World

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Documentary photography as a medium of conveying information and documentation can document reality and tell important stories with integrity and honesty. Where journalistic photography will continue to be a powerful tool in reporting the truth and influencing social change, giving us a window into a wider and more diverse world. This research visually analyzes the phenomenal works of world photography from the aesthetic side with Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. It tells that aesthetically the photograph is an embodiment of visual beauty immortalized by the photographer not only by chance in capturing a moment that once existed. This research is conducted qualitatively descriptively according to Bogdan and Guba and proves that the science of photography does not only rely on luck but needs to understand how to photograph, the concept of visual framing in one frame that can be accepted by the general public as a conveyance of messages, information, and impressions from a photograph itself based on photographic theories.*

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## 1. Introduction

Photography is one of the media for conveying information and documentation that has existed since ancient times. The development of photography from pinhole cameras, analog cameras to sophisticated digital cameras as it is today is part of the journey of the development of the world of photography (Athoriq, 2021). Understanding how photography can store the memory stories of human history is a very important knowledge in documenting visuals as stories that can be passed down from generation to generation until the present time (Wibowo, 2015). Many things in the world of photography have become phenomenal news to this day (Prasetyo & Sanjaya, 2023). Of the many photographic genres in the world, one of the genres that has benefited in creating a history and news is journalistic photography (Surahman, 2018), which reflects developments in technology, culture, and the way in which news is delivered to society. Also known as journalistic photography, this type of photography plays an important role in documenting events, providing strong visual evidence and often impressive about events that occur around it (Sudjojo, 2010).



**Figure 1.** Crimean War Photography, Roger Fenton, 1853-1856 (Source: google - IDN Times, 2024)

Journalistic photography began in the mid-19th century, shortly after photography was discovered. One of the famous early examples is the work of Roger Fenton, who documented the Crimean War in 1853-1856. The photos of Fenton give a new view of the battlefield and the lives of the soldiers. However, technology at that time was still very limited. Large cameras and long exposure times make it difficult for photographers to capture live action moments.



**Figure 2.** The Falling Soldier Photography, Robert Capa, 1925 (Source: The metropolitan museum of art, 2024)

As technology advances, cameras become smaller and easier to use, allowing photographers to capture moments faster and more efficiently. In the early 20th century, journalistic photography experienced rapid progress with the emergence of portable cameras such as the Leica in 1925. This camera gives photographers freedom of movement and the ability to capture images in more dynamic situations. World War I and World War II were an important milestone in the history of journalistic photography. Photographs from the battlefield, like the work of Robert Capa, became an icon of the events. Capa is known for his photographs that captured intense and dangerous moments in the field of battle, including the famous "The Falling Soldier" photograph taken during the Spanish Civil War. These works not only document war but also have a profound emotional impact on the public.



**Figure 3.** Magnum Photos Photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1947 (Source: Magnum Photos, 2024)

After World War II, journalistic photography continued to flourish with the emergence of photo magazines such as *Life* and *Magnum*. These magazines provided a platform for photographers to publish their work widely. *Life*, for example, is known for its in-depth and comprehensive photo essay, offering a powerful visual narration of various events and everyday life. *Magnum Photos*, founded in 1947 by famous photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and David Seymour, became an influential photography collective. *Magnum* not only promotes the work of photographers but also emphasizes the importance of freedom and copyright for photographers, giving them greater control over their work.

The digital revolution in the late 20th and early 21st centuries brought a major change in journalistic photography. Digital cameras replace traditional film cameras, allowing photographers to take lots of pictures without worrying about film costs and development. In addition, photo editing software like Adobe Photoshop gives photographers new tools to process and fix images. The Internet and social media have also changed the way journalistic photos are distributed and consumed. Previously, photographers had to work with print or broadcast media to publish their work. However, with the emergence of online platforms, the photographers are now able to publicize their work directly to a global audience. Photo-sharing sites like Flickr, Instagram, and photographic blogs offer photographers the opportunity to reach a wider audience without going through traditional media. From the development of photography in the present day it is evident that the works of the past have become a photographic documentation that is still discussed and displayed to the public because of the superiority of visual aesthetics and historical narratives behind the works.

The photographic works of the world's phenomenal photographer are still the subject of public and contemporary photographers, some of them titled: "Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de ville" by Robert Doisneau in 1950, "The Vulture and the Little Girl" by Kevin Carter in 1993, "Afghan girl" by Steve McCurry in 1984, "Tank Man" by Jeff Widener in 1989, "Heart of Voh" by Yann Arthus Bertrand in 1990, "The Terror of War" by Nick Ut in 1955, "The Agony of Omayra Sánchez" by Frank Fournier in 1985. Of the seven photographic works, it has historical value and a long story as a historical proof of the past that has been captured through cameras from the photographer's point of view.

This research is felt to be crucial in conducting a visual analysis of the world's phenomenal works of photography from the visual aesthetic side with Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. We need an analysis that can tell that aesthetically, photography is an embodiment of the visual beauty that the photographer gives not just by chance in capturing a moment that once existed. The science of photography is not only dependent on a fortune, but it is necessary to understand how the purpose of photographing, thinking the concept of visual alignment in one frame is acceptable to the general public as a delivery of messages, information, and impressions of a photograph. It is necessary for

photographers to grasp the depths of the theory and practice of training continuously for thousands of hours, so that experience can teach how the character formation and the style of real photography.

Photography visual aesthetics is the study of the beauty and visual attractiveness of images produced through a photographic medium. This esthetics involves the analysis of various elements and design principles used to create interesting and meaningful images (Setiawan, 2015). Some major aspects of visual aesthetics in photography include:

### **Composition**

**Rule of Thirds:** The technique described is the "rule of thirds" in photographic composition or visual art. This rule divides the image into nine parts with two horizontal lines and two vertical lines of the same size, then the important elements of the image are placed along those lines or at the point of their encounter. This technique helps create a more balanced and visually attractive composition.(Yekti Herlina, 2007).

**Golden Ratio:** Aesthetically considered proportions that can be used in the placement of elements in the picture (Yuliadewi, 2000).

**Leading Lines:** The line in the image that directs the viewer's eye towards the focus point. Light and Shadow: Natural and artificial lighting, the use of sunlight or artificial light sources to create the desired effects. It's like the perspective on the visual photography that directs the audience's eyes to the point of interest.

**Contrast:** Difference between bright and dark areas in photos to add depth and drama. Soft Light and Hard Light, soft light produces smooth and scattered shadows, while hard light produce a sharp shadow and high contrast (Novianti, 2023).

**Color:** Color palette, the selection of colors that are harmonious or contrasting to create a particular atmosphere. Color theory, an understanding of the relationship between certain colors and how they can be used to provoke a particular emotion or feeling. Saturation and Vibrance, intensity and richness of color in the image (Fajar et al., 2021). Pencahayaan pada fotografi tentu dipengaruhi juga oleh intensitas cahaya. Dalam pencahayaan fotografi, cahaya yang diterapkan berdasarkan jumlah lampu dan posisi lampu (Gautama Tanrere, 2021).

**Textures and patterns:** Textures, the use of textures to add depth and detail to images. Patterns, the repetition of visual elements that can create rhythms and structures in images. (Prasetyo, 2021a). Asymmetric, a balance that is not equal but remains harmonious, creating a dynamic and attractive impression (Prasetyo & Everlin, 2022).

**Picture angle:** Bird's Eye View, the high angle facing down. Eye level: An angle parallel to the eye of the viewer.

**Emotions and Narrating:** Facial and body language expressions, using a human subject to express a particular emotion or story.

**Concepts and Themes:** Selection of concepts and themes to convey a larger message or story. Visual aesthetics in photography is not just about beauty, but also about how these elements can be used to convey messages, emotions, and deeper meaning. A good photographer understands and applies these principles to produce work that not only visually attracts but also has a strong emotional and narrative impact (Linando, 2022). The concept of photography is built on the objective that the photographer wants to (Prasetyo, 2021b), It can be said that every photographic work shows a meaning (Retno et al., 2013), In this case, of course, the suitability of the audience is also a matter of consideration. But in journalistic photography things happen naturally and produce a visual perspective that produces a narrative and a story behind a picture.

## 2. Method

Research will use qualitative descriptive approaches according to Bogdan and Guba. Qualitative research methods are scientific research procedures that produce data descriptively (data collected in the form of words, images/visual, and not with numbers), in this case producing descriptiveness data in written or oral form of observed phenomena. (Setyowulan et al., 2023). The author collected data by selecting some of the world-famous phenomenal photographic works that are still being discussed to this day, then these photographs were analyzed visually aesthetically using Roland Barthes' semiotics in terms of the balance of visual composition using symmetrical and asymmetric approaches. This Roland Barthes semiotic level consists of a signifier, a signified, and a sign, similar to the concept put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure. Further development of these markers will form a system called a sign system. This system of signs will form the basis of an explanation or presentation of the semiotic theory of the second level of Roland Barthes, namely denotation and connotation. (Ramadhan & Sari, 2022).

## 3. Results and Discussion



**Figure 4.** *Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de ville* karya Robert Doisneau (Source: Robert Doisneau, 1950)

Published in Life magazine in 1950, Doisneau's photo, 'Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de ville' (or 'The Kiss at the Hôtel de Ville') is considered one of the most romantic photographs ever taken. This black and white photo is also a symbol of the humanistic photography movement. This movement was driven by Robert Doisneau, who sought to capture the essence of humanity in the years after World War II. Since France was destroyed after the war, Doisneau's many works depicted the people of Paris in their daily lives, including school students, couples, and homeless people. Photographing the people of Paris in this way gave Doisneau the means to create a portrait of the French people at the time.

### Denotation Analysis

The Signifier obtained from the picture figure 4, is in the middle, there's a couple of lovers kissing friendly in the midst of a crowd of people walking. Photographed in black and white and showing the atmosphere of one of the corners of the streets in France. The signs obtained are in between, the atmosphere of the streets of the French city and the bustle of activity in the crowds. Couple of lovers, with one hand a man hugs a woman and performs romantic kissing scenes as the most romantic symbol of love and happiness.

### Conotation Analysis

**Objects**, there are several objects found in the picture figure 4, among them are formal clothes looking winter atmosphere, framing the front part is an empty chair on the left side there is the figure of the man in the foreground framing. There are some vehicles parked in the background. The street lanterns, and the backdrop of a large building with French European architecture in the 1950s, this moment occurred after the end of World War II.

**Body gestures**, the man who hugged his woman with one hand and kissed her partner's lips, the woman's hands seemed to be passive and followed her intuition in a romantic-looking love symbol against the backdrop of one of the cities in France, without caring about the crowd around in the middle of the street.

**Visual aesthetics**, in visual composition, this picture applies a symmetrical balance composition with the point of interest position of the two pairs in the middle of the frame.

**In color**, the black and white color in this picture does not show anything sad or frightening, but rather shows how romantic visual mood is during the day amidst the city's activity in France with the feelings and romantic acts of the couple in the photo.

**Angle of photographing** with eye level technique slightly below the point of interest of the subject's face on the photo. Looks like these photos were taken naturally without the initial knowledge of the two couples. So the profound impression that photography produces is the nuance of sincerity and romance as it is.



**Figure 5.** *The Vulture and the Little Girl* karya Kevin Carter, 1993 (Source: Kevin Carter, 1993)

This photo has been a subject of controversy for years. Captured in 1993 by young photographer Kevin Carter, the moment depicts the impact of the famine in South Sudan. Carter won the Pulitzer Prize for this photograph; however, he was accused of not helping in the situation and ended his life a few months later. Recently it was discovered that the young girl in the photo was found alive and healthy.

### Denotation Analysis

The Signifier obtained from the picture figure 5, is one of them, a little boy lying on dry ground with a bird's corpse nearby. The skinny condition of the child and the rugged environment indicate a very difficult situation, indicating hunger and drought. The signs obtained are a feeling of sadness, compassion, smell of the situation in the photo.

### Conotation Analysis

**Objects**, there are several objects in the picture of figure 5, among them a small child without clothes, thin and hungry-looking, there's a bird's body behind it, with a dry and crumbling soil background, which is a portrait of the famine disaster in South Sudan.

**Body gestures**, little boy bowing, covering his face over dry, rotting soil. Without a cloth, in the midst of a hot day. The carcass looks waiting for the child as if it's going to wait for the boy to die of starvation.

**Visual aesthetics**, Visually composed, this picture applies asymmetric balance composition in the rule of thirds. Looks like a third of the frame is a portion of the point of interest as the main focus of the photo is the hungry little child figure. As the balance of the photo is a dead bird waiting behind him.

**In colour**, the colour is warm during the day and visible represents the natural colour conditions of the atmosphere in Africa, South Sudan.

**The angle of photography** with the eye level technique is directly parallel to the child's figure as the point of interest, it gives the impression of the similarity of conditions as if the audience saw the suffering of the hungry child on dry ground.



*Figure 6. Afghan Girl karya Steve McCurry, 1984 (Source: Steve McCurry, 1984)*

This photograph was taken in June 1984, the portrait of a young Afghan girl known as Sharbat Gula is one of the most famous in the world. The most striking part of this portrait is the girl's green eyes. Since McCurry took this photo while travelling in Pakistan, Afghan Girl could be used as an example of travel photography and also a very phenomenal portrait.

### Denotation Analysis

The sign (Signifier) obtained from the picture figure 6, is one of them, a 12-year-old woman who stared sharply towards the audience without expression with a flat face.

### Analysis Connotation

Objects, There are several objects in the picture of figure 6, including a 12-year-old woman with green eyes, wearing red covered clothes, with a green background.

**Body gestures,** a woman with a half-body face portrait, facing the front of the camera with a portrait face without expression and without a smile.

**Visual Aesthetics,** Visually composed, this picture applies a symmetrical balance composition, because the point of interest is that a 12-year-old woman is exactly in the middle of the frame.

**In color,** the dominant colors are red and green. Red is the color of the clothes and green is visible from the background color, and the eyes of the female subject.

**The angle of photography** with the eye level technique is directly parallel to the 12-year-old female figure as the point of interest, it produces a visual portrait that speaks directly to the audience and directly directs the camera.



*Figure 7. Tank Man karya Jeff Widener, 1989 (Source: Jeff Widener, 1989)*

Tank Man, taken in 1989, is a symbol of a student's rebellion against the oppression of the Chinese army. This photo was taken during a demonstration against corruption. As the number of demonstrators continued to rise, the Chinese government made a decision to use military force to restore order. The tank driver refused to keep moving forward, contrary to his commands.

#### **Denotation Analysis**

The sign obtained from the figure 7 photo, is one of them, a student is a demonstrator in China who is blocking the road of a Chinese army tank vehicle that is going to pass.

#### **Analysis Connotation**

**Object,** There are several objects in figure 7 photo, including a student wearing white clothes in black pants with four Chinese government tank vehicles right in front of him, the conditions of the highway above a zebra cross with white stripes. **Body gestures,** a man (student) dressed in white, standing firmly and looking brave blocking the tanks that are going to pass.

**Visual Aesthetics,** Visually composed, this picture applies an asymmetrical balance composition with the application of the leading line, because the point of interest is that the student figure in white is on the left side of the frame and diagonally forms a line with the position of the 4 Chinese tanks taken diagonally from the left angle to the right corner.

**In color**, the dominant color is the warm color, and the white color on the main subject as the focus of the visual photography.

**Angles of photography** with Bird's Eye View technique, photography taken from a high angle facing down. Forms the leading diagonal line of perspective.



**Figure 8.** Heart of Voh karya Yann Arthus Bertrand, 1990 (Source: Arthus Bertrand, 1990)

The Heart of Voh (or Coeur de Voh, as it is called in French) is one of the world's most famous paintings by Yann Arthus Bertrand. Taken in 1990, the photo represents a barley forest, a forest between land and water in New Caledonia. This type of vegetation covers more than 75% of tropical land, representing 15 million hectares worldwide. While taking this photo, Bertrand, as a jelly landscape photographer, hoped to raise public awareness of the environmental problems in the area.

### **The Denotation Analysis**

The Signifier obtained from the picture of figure 8, is a ravine forest taken from a height where there is a picture of a unique heart formed from plants and ponds of different colours of green. The signs obtained are an image that appeals to the audience who sees it in order to have awareness and love for nature and the environment that exists in the forest area.

### **Connotation Analysis**

**Objects**, There are several objects in the picture of figure 8, including forests that have a certain vegetation, i.e. barley trees and ponds or lakes that appear to be striking in the shape of a brown heart in the middle as the color of the water. Besides, there are two rivers in the upper left with a fairly wide size and a smaller river in the top right. At the bottom there's one more oval-shaped pool.

**Body gesture**, a pretty strong picture of the heart with a brown color in the middle and a bright green color on the outside that borders directly with the older green color that fills the rest of the other fields.

**Visual aesthetics**, Visually composed, this picture applies a symmetrical balance composition with the application of the rule of third by placing the matching object in the middle. There are two streams of rivers at the top as if forming frames so that the picture of the heart in the middle looks more and more outstanding.

**In color**, the dominant color is the green of the plant that is fairly fresh in the eye. The other color is brown, although not dominant but still very eye-catching because of its position in the middle. Other color is white and the green gradation is more neutral but adds to the dynamics of the overall photo.

**Angles of photography** with Bird's Eye View technique, photography taken from a high angle facing down. Forms a leading line diagonal perspective with the main object right in the middle.



*Figure 9.* The Terror of War karya Nick Ut, 1955 (Source: Nick Ut, 1955)

The Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975, was highly controversial. People are campaigning for war and massacre (represented by this photo) that accompanies it to end. Phan Thị Kim Phúc, or Napalm Girl, had to undergo 17 skins after the incident depicted in the photo.

#### **Analysis Denotation,**

the Signifier obtained from the photo figure 9, is a naked girl running fast/half running on a street. Her facial expression looked very scary, with her mouth open crying screaming. Her hands seemed empty with her palms open. Signified is the fear of the children of war that is going on in their homes. They're victims of a war they don't understand.

#### **Analysis Conotation**

**Objects,** there are several objects in the picture of figure 9, among them five little children of war victims with very frightened expressions, especially a naked girl, walking fast/half running on an empty street. Behind the boys there are four soldiers walking relaxed but vigilant. In the back, there's black smoke.

**Body gestures,** a little girl who walks fast half running amongst the other kids on a deserted street.

**Visual Aesthetics,** Visually composed this picture applies an asymmetrical balance composition with the application of a leading line with the point of interest of a girl without costume that is in the middle of the frame. 1/3 of the top photo is like forming an imaginary line of black smoke in the background thus reinforcing the rule of third. On the left front there's another child-like object that's large enough to replace it with the object of two children and three soldiers in the middle right so that even asymmetrically this picture still looks balanced.

**This picture is in black-and-white format,** although it does not diminish its visual strength, black- and white instead has a more dramatic effect on what happens in this photo. The main objects without costume can still be the focus of this picture.

**An angle of photographing** with a viewing technique that matches the human eye level. This angle of viewing gives a fairly wide horizontal spectrum. The path in this photo also forms a leading line of perspective to one missing point on the back of the photo.



**Figure 10.** The Agony of Omayra Sánchez karya Frank Fournier, 1985 (Source: Frank Fournier, 1985)

The work depicts a young Colombian girl trapped in the debris of her home after the volcanic eruption of Nevado del Ruiz in 1985. Emergency services could not save Omayra on time because she was trapped under mud and debris. The 13-year-old girl finally died, still trapped.

#### **Analysis Denotation**

The Signifier obtained from the picture figure 10, is a teenage girl trapped in the mud and debris of her house destroyed by the Nevada del Ruiz volcanic eruption disaster. This girl looks forward slightly bending up with one hand touching a wood. The sign obtained is a teenage girl who is in a state of despair and yet hopeful of being rescued from a terrible natural disaster.

#### **Connotation Analysis**

**Objects**, there are several objects in the picture of figure 10, including a young curly-haired girl with mature sawo skin and black-looking eyeballs all trapped in the blue-coloured mud and the ruins of her ruined house. In front of the girl was a wooden piece that she used to hold her left hand.

**Body gestures**, a teenage girl who can only see her head and both hands. Apparently, his expression is in tune with circumstances but still hopeful of safety. The rest of the gestures are invisible

**Visual Aesthetics**, Visually composed, this picture applies a symmetrical balance composition with the application of a leading line, because the point of interest is the young girl who fits in the middle of the frame. A piece of wood in front, even if it's not perfectly straight, still looks like a line of the rule of third.

**The dominant colours** of this picture are black and brown, derived from the object, namely the girl's skin and hair and the mud around it. Some white and gray objects can also be found in this frame, but the main color of the object remains the focus of the visual attention of this photo.

**The angle of photography** is basically with the human eye angle technique or normal eye level but a little from above but not a Bird's Eye View strain, the picture is taken from a high angle that looks slightly downwards. Forms the leading diagonal line of perspective.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Looking forward, journalistic photography will continue to grow as technology advances. To create a deeper visual experience for the audience, technological advances will not shift the fundamental

meaning of journalistic photography technically, the deeper meaning of visual aesthetics, and how to photograph. Because it's true that the science of photography of the past from now on has similarities with the same thing that distinguishes only the technology.

However, in the midst of all these advances, the basic principles of journalistic photography remain the same: document reality and tell important stories with integrity and honesty. Journalistic photography will continue to be a powerful tool in telling the truth and influencing social change, giving us a window into a wider and more diverse world. Thus, the evolution of journalistic photography over time shows how technology and culture play a role in shaping the way we see and understand the world. This research has produced how photography from time to time in the past, remains a learning that can be used as a visual aesthetic reference and how to capture important moments visually. The works of the world's phenomenal photographers of Robert Doisneau (1950), Kevin Carter (1993), Steve McCurry (1984), Jeff Widener (1989), Yann Arthus Bertrand (1990), Nick Ut (1955), Frank Fournier (1985) all seven photographers have in common in producing interesting photographic documentation of the sides of their work, namely, equally paying attention to the subject, object, and background of a photograph adapted to the theme of the conditions of the day in a real and honest manner. Not all of them are photographed on the basis of feelings of luck in capturing moments, but more of them show things that have messages and visually profound photographic impressions such as narratives of grief, conditions of happiness, natural and environmental conditions, war conditions that bring much suffering to humanity, the political atmosphere of a country, and conditions of natural disasters.

It is hoped that this research can be a reference for journal readers who will study photography in particular journalistic genres in order to generate messages, and visual impressions that are real and honest as they are. It can also be a visual historical proof of some time somewhere. Though journalistic photographs were always an integral part of the news, in their evolution they were able to stand on their own, to become free photographs with the same weight as the news. Therefore, photographs like this need to maintain the seven points that are called by the term "Faith News" i.e., important, actual, unique, proximity or basis of proximity, basis of familiarity, magnitude (having attractiveness) and human interest. So that the photo remains a journalistic work that has high news value and deserves to be handed over to the public.

Hopefully further research can deal with photography of the journalistic genre from the more in-depth technical side of photography, or discuss photography with other genres from the semiotic side and visual aesthetics of photograph.

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