

Research Paper
Ben Sloat
March, 2017

Comparative Analysis
Sally Mann /Roland Barthes

In today's world, we are always surrounded by imagery. Yet, we never think about what these visual images mean to us. This is portrayed to be a very complex, and abstract manner of thinking; one that Roland Barthes and Sally Mann both contributed opinions to. They each have a very distinct way of looking at this abstract idea. Roland's approach is that each image is just a shell of the event that has occurred; a non-repeating visual of the true event. Sally's approach is different in that it she views each image and their subjects as a story; she portrays the visual images as a depiction of the true event as it was captured. Each of these ideas express very abstract approaches until one begins to understand why each individual has their own individual and distinct view.

In this quote by Roland, he states, "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: The Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." In this quote, one begins to understand that Roland was thinking about much more than just the photograph itself. He looked at the true mechanics and the processes of the image. He went on to express that each image is controlled or calculated by the subject, once the subject feels the presence of a lens is fixated on them. It is as though the subject "poses" for the photo, rather

than capturing the truth behind the lens just as it occurred. Therefore, expressing perhaps an altered image.

Roland expresses that each subject acts or "poses" for the lens. Therefore, hiding the authenticity of the moment captured by the lens. The best example of this idea is one in which the subject smiles when he/she sees the camera being pointed at him/her. He goes on to express that the subjects create a facade for viewers by posing for the camera. This is further clarified by the quote "I possessed only two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing." This quote explains in greater detail what the subject is really trying to express. This message can further be interpreted as, individuals mimicking what they see in an attempt to fit in with what may be socially acceptable by society.

Roland understood that our bodies are always signifying some kind of meaning, and it is this meaning that we as individuals may strive to portray; a meaning that we may not want others to see. This is why we pose in front of the lens. It is as though we are hiding our true feelings and imperfections because it may not be what is accepted by society. Therefore, creating a false depiction of the true Self. This act of posing is what Roland means when he says an image is a shell of the events. It is just an outside. The viewer does not get a sense of the true feeling of what is inside of that shell. When one looks at the image, one cannot depict the true emotion of the subject. He called this a photographic ritual

The following quote further confirms his belief, “I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) 'self'; but it is the contrary that must be said.” — Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*

In this last quote, one can see that Roland not only thinks about the immediate image, but also, about the longevity of the work. This parallel of the past is where both Sally and Roland come to agreement. Sally stated “Photographs open doors into the past, but they also allow a look into the future.” In this sense, both artists seem to agree that a meaningful image should be able to stand up to the test of time. They both agree that photos leave lasting impressions on viewers, regardless of what they portray.

Sally and Roland disagree on the process of how the meaningful image stands up to the test of time. Sally stated that “Every image is in some way a “portrait,” not in the way that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and draws (this is the semantic and etymological sense of the word), in that it extracts something, an intimacy, a force.” With this quote, Sally alludes that all images, regardless of their subject matter, hold some parts of the true

Self. Therefore, making the image more than just a shell. In this quote, Sally seems to make a defiance stance opposing Roland's thoughts in that an image can only be a shell of the event. Yet, Sally states that even her own work does not fully convey the full truth.

Sally considers a powerful image as one that is limited to both the viewer's knowledge of both types of works. One is the work itself and the other, their own personal experiences. This in turn causes a paradigm shift to occur. The viewer is left with the ability to fill in the gaps when looking at these images. The following quote affirms this belief "I believe that photographs actually rob all of us of our memory." — Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*. It is with this quote that one can see that photos do indeed fail to restore memories.

Sally goes on to tell viewers that memories do play a big role when experiencing imagery. In this next quote, she explains her views on memories in an effort to further confirm her belief. "I tend to agree with the theory that if you want to keep a memory pristine, you must not call upon it too often, for each time it is revisited, you alter it irrevocably, remembering not the original impression left by experience but the last time you recalled it. With tiny differences creeping in at each cycle, the exercise of our memory does not bring us closer to the past but draws us further away." — Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*

It was not until I read both Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Sally Mann's *A Memoir with Photographs*, did I begin to think about my own work and how it would stand up to the test of time. Like Roland, I agree that an image can never tell the full truth. One will always wonder what the subject in the images were thinking about or how they may have felt at the time the image was captured. Alternatively, looking at an image can cause oneself to see body language as a form of meaning and further formulate an opinion of the subject's feelings and/or emotions at the time the photo was taken. However, one will never fully know what occurred at that very moment in time.

I agree with Sally's view in that every image does hold more than just an astatic quality. My work tends to be an extension of the viewer; I rely heavily on the viewers understandings of their own experiences to interpret my work and perhaps relate to it in a way. It is their experiences that make my images that much more impactful. Yet, one does not need to have gone through the same experience as me in order to comprehend my work.

This is in turn due to the incorporation of both Roland's and Sally's thoughts on how individuals view images very differently. In my work, I have found a way to introduce the viewer's memories into my work. I am able to do this by using the catalog and association of memories of each individual person. It is in some way or another a very personal matter therefore, causing them to experience their own interpretation. This is also called meaningful learning.

Yoram Harpaz, Meaningful Learning internal and External Conditions. It is with this meaningful learning, that I am able to get my viewers to connect with my work. For example, in my images from Haiti, one will never need to travel to Haiti in order to understand that the people in Haiti are hungry and in need of help. One can see the images and understand a variety of messages conveyed by the images through application of emotion. Emotions are something that everyone experiences in their daily lives. It is something that creates that immediate connection to further help individuals connect with the emotion of the subjects. It is with images, that emotions can be triggered to further comprehend my work. These images stand up to the test of time because the feeling of hunger and the look of despair, will always be there. The expressions of despair and hunger are directly captured by the lens. One will never need to go to Haiti in order to fully understand what the people of Haiti feel and go through everyday. This empathy for the subject in the image comes from the ability to understand that the subjects' body or body language always signifies some kind of meaning.

In my work of abandonment, I have constituted that the viewer use his/her own memory bank of information filled with his/her own life experiences, traumas, gender status, education and even age, to help them resolute their own interpretation of my work. It is my goal for the viewer to discover their own meaning, by deciding what they believe is true within my work. By this method of self-discovery, my work finds it's own power; this allows the viewer to pull information from every avenue to try to fill in what it is he/she feels is missing.