

Social Impact of Photography - Notes

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Perhaps the greatest social impact of photography was that it made the world seem smaller. During the late 1800s / early 1900s only the 1% of the time were able to go on vacation or holiday. This was a rather elaborate affair that consisted of closing down the house and traveling anywhere from 6 months to a year. Huge trunks would carry clothing, house wears (dishes, forks, spoons, etc)., toiletries - you name it. Essentially everything in the house that could be easily packed up and moved was.

The destination of the time was to do the "Grand Tour" of seeing the major capitals of Europe: London, Paris, Rome, Athens, and Vienna. A month or longer was spent at each of the capitals, with side trips to locations like Naples, Florence, Vatican City, Morocco, and so on. People would naturally take the early cameras along with them, since it was a novel idea to be able to photograph where they were. Photojournalism was also taking off, with professional photographers roaming the planet taking photographs of the sights, such as the Great Pyramids in Egypt, which would then be printed in newspapers, flyers, and magazines that were inexpensive enough that pretty much anyone could purchase one. In this way photography brought the greater world to one's doorstep; now everyone could see the Pyramids, or the Parthenon, or the scenery of Tuscany, the ruins of Rome, or the canals of Venice.

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Some early images of locations around the world. Photography brought the exotic and the mysterious - the Sphinx and Edo, Japan - to everyone.

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For many American males, the first exposure to European culture was World War I. Most Americans at this time still lived in small rural towns where making a trip to the next town over was at least a half day trip, never mind places in the US such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. Many people were born, grew up, got married, had children, and died in either the same town or one close by.

World War I brought millions of young American males to the battlefields of France. Along the way many collected what was known as "French postcards" - postcards that had photographs of nearly nude or nude women in provocative or erotic poses. For many men this was the first time that they may have seen a nude woman. Magazine covers of the time also had illustrations of semi-nude women. Post World War I

there was a popular song that had the refrain "How do you expect to keep the boys on the farm when they've seen gay Paree?" – the exposure to a more free and open lifestyle changed the outlook on those that had spent time in Europe, and it was hard for the boys to return to their family farms and a more rural – and conservative – lifestyle.

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One of the side results of World War I was the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote. While the Woman's Suffragist Movement had been ongoing since the 1870s, it really only gained steam in the 1900s around the time of World War I (1914–1918). Marches and demonstrations were photographed and printed in papers. While part of this movement ended in 1920 with the signing of the 19th amendment, a large portion of this fight continues today with equal rights, especially in the workforce where women, in general, are paid only 80 cents to the dollar that a man would make in the same position doing the exact same job.

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The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression both had a great impact in American life. Farms failed in the midwest and the Plains states, causing a mass migration of people to other locations such as California, or the eastern seaboard. Photojournalists such as Dorothea Lange documented the plight of the common persons who were affected by the Dust Bowl and Great Depression.

The explosion of the Hindenburg was captured both by photography and in film. This explosion directly led to the end of the use of a dirigible as a means of commercial transportation over long distances, and allowed the airplane to eventually become the means of transportation, especially following World War II when there was a surplus of bomber aircraft that could be converted into passenger and cargo airplanes.

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Like Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein photographed the effects of the Dust Bowl for Congress. In one of his outings across the midwest and Plains states, he came across this cow skull. After taking the obligatory photography, he decided to "work" the skull, photographing it from different angles, moving it slightly (about a foot) next to the cactus, and the like. When this got back to Congress he was accused of manipulating the photographs to make the Dust Bowl appear worse than it actually was, which was devastating. Like any photographer, Arthur was simply working the subject, playing around with composition, light and shadows, etc. The original image that he sent in his report was taken without any manipulation – simply a snap shot of a cow skull on the parched earth.

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It should come as no surprise that war has a tremendous impact on society, and the photographs that arise from it likewise has an impact. Robert Capa was a photojournalist and had the uncanny knack of being in the right place at the right time. The Falling Soldier was taken during the Spanish civil war where Germany tested out some of it's military weaponry (tanks, dive bombers). Capa happened to take the photograph just as the soldier was shot. Many claimed that it was staged, but witnesses backup up Capa.

Capa was also embedded in the landing on D-Day in order to document the attack. He had a dozen rolls of film shot, but salt water destroyed all but a dozen or so photographs, with this one becoming one of the iconic photographs of the D-Day invasion. It isn't in focus, it's a slightly long exposure, but no one can deny the impact of the image.

V-J in Times Square is another iconic photograph from World War II, this time reveling in the jubilation of the end of the war.

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It is often said that World War II was the last "good war" – the objectives were clear: defeat Hitler, defeat fascism.

The Vietnam War had no clear objectives. And it was also the first war to be televised, so that the American audience could see, near real time, the horrors and terror of war. This in turn lead to protests, primarily on college campuses, about the war. These protests included a monk who lit himself on fire to protesting the cruelty of the South Vietnamese government, to innocents being shot at the college of Kent State, one of the witnesses a teenage girl who was touring the campus deciding if she wanted to go there.

War is a brutal thing. A Vietnamese general executes a captured North Vietnamese sympathizer on the spot, telling the photographer just before he fired to "Watch this." The use a napalm to burn the jungles where the North Vietnamese fighters hid often had collateral damage, such as burning down a village where the children are seen fleeing, the girl burned by napalm. It was scenes like this that were broadcast that led Lydon B Johnson, then president to declare that "If nominated (for president), I will not run." This would in turn have Richard Nixon elected president, which in time would result in Watergate, along with the opening of China to the West.

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Famine is endemic in Africa, and no picture so embodied this like the

Staving Child and Vulture. When this picture was printed, the photojournalist who took it got a world of grief for not helping the child. The photojournalist then filled in the blanks: he used a telephoto lens to compress the image – the vulture was dozens of yards away and no threat, plus, just outside of the frame to the right was the child's mother sitting at an aid station, so the child was in no danger. In part due to the blowback of this photograph, the photojournalist Kevin Carter took his own life.

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It wasn't all doom and gloom during the late 1960s / early 1970s. America was able to land multiple men on the Moon and were able to look back on the Earth in a completely different way.

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Many of the Apollo astronauts noted that how small and fragile the Earth looked from space, the only home that humanity has. Some likened it to a blue and white marble suspended in the darkness. Photography again has shown just how small the Earth is.