

Reality vs. Actuality: A Construction of the Truth

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Rapid technological advancements and an influx of media in today's society have connected us in more ways than ever thought possible. Television, movies, newspapers, magazines, the internet, and other forms of the media all contribute to the highly connected global society. This intricate network of communication has vastly expanded our sphere of knowledge and understanding in the cultural context. Through television and the internet, we can access news and events in other countries minutes after they happen. Through pictures and stories, we can learn about the various cultures and practices all the way across the world. However, with this expanded access also come certain limitations. Often overlooked is the fact that the information has been filtered through numerous entities, only allowing us to see through the eyes of the creator, greatly limiting our perceptions of the world. Sometimes subtle and unintentional, other times blatantly obvious and highly structured, the influences of the media present society with a constructed reality, as each article, be it a news story, photograph, or even voice, is strategically selected and presented to convey a certain message. This process becomes destructive when it begins to shape our opinions, perceptions, and ideologies, especially concerning other cultures.

Cairo, Egypt, is only one of the many places affected by this limited scope, but will be used to illustrate the influence of the media on societal ideologies. The presentation of photos and images by the media end up defining what makes Cairo “beautiful,” or how the people of the Cairo “should” look and behave, greatly emphasizing that which is different from our own culture. This construction perpetuates a false reality and, as discussed by Anandi Ramamurthy, in her article, “Constructions of Illusion,” the inundation of photographs shape our experiences, ultimately limiting our scope of understanding and appreciation for that culture. Much is lost in the processes, as we become so enveloped in this misrepresentation of reality that we cannot see, understand, or appreciate the city or its people for what they really are, especially if they are not as we expected them to be.

The massive influx of images and photographs in today's consumer-oriented society has had an immense impact on our perception of reality. Ramamurthy thoroughly analyzes the influence of photographs on the construction of ideology, focusing on the commercialization of photographs. She discusses the utilization of photo imagery as the foundation of what she calls our “commodity culture,” where inanimate objects are imbued with false meanings in order to be consumed and sold (Ramamurthy 601). Photographs aide as “both a cultural tool which has been commodified as well as a tool that has been used to express commodity culture through advertisements and other marketing material,” and ultimately construct a fallacy, which is misrepresentative of reality (Ramamurthy 601). Because this is seemingly exclusive to advertisements, tourism is often overlooked. However, “tourism [also] creates its own culture for consumption” (622), and uses images to entice consumers, through travel brochures, postcards, and movies. In this context, society is presented with

an exotic and glamorized vision of many third-world countries, which is unrealistic. This constructed reality of the destination, in turn, has an enormous impact on the way in which tourists perceive and experience it; the influences are so embedded in the images that, unknowingly and unintentionally, tourists' experiences and captured memories revolve around the underlying ideology and perception of the place, which was created by the manifestation of the travel advertisements and images. Our reality becomes that of the presented photos and our experiences are shaped accordingly. In fact, "the dominant photographic language of the tourist brochure has also affected how tourists construct their own photographs" (Ramamurthy 619), as the preconceived notions of the destination and culture cause them to seek out the same pictures as those in the travel books. In this sense, the travel experience is solely confined to the constructed reality, and we do not even acknowledge the fact that we are only seeing a fraction of the city and people.

This constructed reality is created by means of what Ramamurthy describes as photomontage, where the photographer manipulates the pictures to conceal certain unappealing aspects (610). Photomontage consists of a number of structural devices and uses them to "create a sense of naturalness about an image" (Ramamurthy 610), influencing our perception of what is real, beautiful, and important. One strategy of creating facades is a simple "process of selection, emphasis, and presentation," known as framing. This works with another device, called mortise, which combines two separate images and creates a new meaning (Ramamurthy 607). Photographers use these structural devices, along with strategic and selective presentation, in order to entice the consumer. Often, the photomontage is so well established that the consumer reads them unwittingly (Ramamurthy 606), which further creates an ideology that is neither true nor realistic.

This, combined with a bombardment of similar images, greatly affect our perception of reality, further affecting our traveling experiences.

CASE STUDY: Confining Travel Experiences through Imagery

The following photographs illustrate how travel brochures and pictures influenced my own experience in Cairo. The pictures on the left column are from Cairo tourist information sites (all referenced on Works Cited page), while the photos on the right are my own.

Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



As illustrated, the constructs of which sites should be seen, and which photographs should be taken, were so ingrained in my head that I did not even realize how much they influenced my traveling experiences. The bombardment of images previously presented subtly constructed a certain “reality” of Cairo and my experiences and photographs reflected this. Like other tourists, “having already consumed an array of exotic and glamorized photographs of the place before arrival, [I sought] out these very images and sites to visit and photograph in order to feel that [my] trip [was] complete” (Ramamurthy 620), as illustrated by the almost identical photographs. The process was so natural and subtle that I was completely unaware that my experience, which was shaped by the constructed reality of the travel photos, in fact mirrored that of the travel books. I was confined to experience what they believed to be important, instead of having my own individual experience.

However, the confinement and influences of photographic images are not restricted to our experiences. Our perceptions of the city and its people are also confined, stereotypes are often perpetuated, and the ramifications of this can be very destructive to our understanding and appreciation of the city and culture. Though seemingly obvious, when people see photographs, they only see what is presented to

them; they do not see or think about what is *not* there, and the perceptions of reality become skewed. In this sense, photomontage is “crucial in [the] creation of meaning” (Ramamurthy 604), as it paints an illusion. This illusion often hides many of the “third-world” aspects, perpetuating stereotypes and preconceived notions of a culture or place. Because of this, the traveler’s scope of reality is limited to the constructed reality, which often conceals the poverty and other unattractive qualities. The traveler’s vision of the destination and its people lacks the elements of actuality, and when expectations are not met, the traveler is so concerned with what is not there that either they neglect to see what is actually there or cast it off as ugly or unimportant. Through this process, much appreciation and understanding of the city and its people are lost, as will be demonstrated further by my experience in Cairo.

CASE STUDY: Hiding Realities, Creating Stereotypes, and Confining Cultures

Before visiting, I envisioned a beautiful, exotic city, as presented by many of the photographs above. However, upon arrival, I found these images to be less than accurate. Cairo was dirty, poverty stricken, overpopulated, excruciatingly hot, and felt like an assault on each one of my senses—none of which had been conveyed to me through the photographs, as the strategic use of photomontage hid these aspects. The constructed reality did not reflect the actuality, greatly affecting both my attitude and experience. I did not appreciate the country for what it was, as I was overwhelmed by its actuality. Yet so much of Cairo’s essence lies in those very qualities, which are only seen negatively when the existing ideologies and preconceived notions have been constructed so glamorously. Creating stereotypes and hiding the realities of a culture confine

it in such a way that it becomes what we believe it should be, stripping the country and culture of both appreciation and understanding.

Many photographs “tend to reinforce the constructed and commodified experience of travel: what is photographed is that which is different and out of the ordinary” (Ramamurthy 620) or “the other,” and in the process of this, often unintentionally hide the reality. The following picture is a prime example, as it paints an exotic and alluring scene. The camels, the pyramid, the bright sky, all contribute to the illusion, hiding the reality. There is so much one does not see



from this picture: the horse was near death from malnourishment and clearly mistreated by its owners. The camels were also badly abused. Though not photographed, as it was not something “glamorous,” were the carcasses of camels and

horses. Trash surrounded our path. The combination of heat and biting flies made it almost unbearable. Additionally, the exploitation of these laborers is also hidden, as we paid around sixty cents for the three hour guide, and as Ramamurthy suggests, “[I]n many tourist advertisements, the image of work is so glamorized that we cannot perceive the reality” (619), which is the case with Egypt. The use of such imagery “denies the reality of resourcefulness and intense physical work which actually constitutes most [people’s] lives in the Third World” (Ramamurthy 619). The children working were all under the age of thirteen, many even younger than ten.

The photo pictured below also demonstrates this. Taken for its out-of-the-ordinary nature, the image depicts two children on a cart pulled by a mule. Though it is difficult to actually see, the animal is completely emaciated and bleeding from the constant whipping, and collapsed shortly after the picture was taken, most likely from fatigue or abuse. The picture was not taken to convey reality. It was taken because of its extraordinary characteristics. It was taken because the image was already imbued in our ideology and conceptions that this is what Cairo is like: the sole purpose being not to encourage an understanding of a culture, but to commodify and consume a place. In fact, so much of the truth is hidden through the photographs that it is difficult to even capture the reality. Furthermore, this use of photomontage hides the reality of the lives of these people, and in effect, we, as travelers, forget that this lifestyle is their means of survival, and not just there for our benefit and photographic opportunities. They lose their human qualities and become our souvenirs.



As illustrated in the previous case study, my experiences were greatly affected by the preconceived notions I had about Cairo, influenced primarily by the photographs presented to me pre-arrival. My scope of Cairo was limited to what had previously been introduced to me, and shaped my perceptions of what makes the city and its people beautiful—I was not able

to see the actual beauty of the culture. This topic is often known as a construction of the “other,” as it emphasizes the differences between our own society and those which are different.

Ramamurthy focuses the discussion of the “other” on people, describing the ways by which the East is often portrayed as exotic and fantastic, creating social stereotypes of culture. Rosina Lippi-Green, a



professor of linguistics, analyzes “the sociolinguistic aspects of the systematic construction of dominance and subordination in animated films aimed at children” (409), in her chapter, “Teaching Children to Discriminate.” Her discussion of the “other” focuses on how, through language, “cultural stereotypes for specific national origin groups are perpetuated in a systematic way,” thereby, narrowing the domain of life experience for these people (Lippi-Green 425). Regardless of the positive or negative stereotypes created, the mere creation limits our scope of reality. For instance, belly-dancing is an exotic stereotype of the Arabic culture, and is often depicted in pictures. When we see such images, while subtly and often unintentionally, we alter our ideologies of the culture. Upon visiting, we expect to see these images, and when these expectations are not met, we are disappointed. For instance, the women there did not belly dance or wear the traditional garb presented to me through the images, but instead resembled those in the picture on the following page. The women are not

looking erotic or bright, and would most likely be seen as ugly, poor, and dirty. The constructs of the stereotypes tunnel our perceptions of the women and their culture and they are ultimately stripped of their own identity and beauty. The implications of this are seemingly harmless, but problems arise when we begin to apply the stereotypes to our reality. Because of the narrowed scope, we would cast these women off as “ugly” because they do not reflect the glamorous image of belly dancers. In this sense, the women have become objects rather than people and are not appreciated for what they really are. We deny them their own identity.

It was only in retrospect that I realized the importance of appreciating Cairo for all of its qualities, even if they did not correspond to my ideology. Had I known these influences were so great, I would have taken more care to open my eyes. Unfortunately, the “commodity relations rule our lives to such an extent that we are often unaware of them as a specific set of historical, social and economic relations which human beings have constructed” (Ramamurthy 601), thus society will continue to see the world as the media portrays it.

The different culture in Cairo is seen as exotic through the photographs, which construct a certain reality, and when the traveler actually arrives, a much different view is presented: one that is much less exotic. Because of the vast differences, the traveler’s perception of the culture is skewed. They can no longer see and appreciate it for what it is, and instead overlook much of the beauty, because it is not the conventional beauty as portrayed through the tour books and post cards. Whether intentional construction, as seen through advertisements, or the more subtle and unintentional constructions, like language or imagery, media greatly influences our concepts of culture, ideology and reality. So much is hidden through the photomontage and structure of photographs. The uses of

various dialects and accents, especially in movies, misrepresent reality, constructing both stereotypes and ideology. Through the media, society is denied the truth. The public eye sees through the media and its creators, and consequently, society is denied the truth, denied reality. Perhaps the media should take more care and responsibility to more accurately portray reality, as their influences are so great. Perhaps an increased awareness in society would help reverse this process. However, while an increased awareness would help, in the end, it is going to be difficult to reverse this subtle and natural process, as it is already ingrained in our ideologies, so much so that it is difficult to even recognize the occurrences. Regardless of where the responsibility lies, something needs to be done before reality is merely an idea, rather than actuality, because if these effects continue to influence society, many cultures and people will end up losing their identities at the cost of a few pictures.

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