Two pioneers in advertising photography: Oliviero Toscani and David La Chapelle

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ABSTRACT

In advertising photography’s crowded and competitive world, creativity and originality of style are key distinguishers. Some photographers challenge conventions to assert their innovative ideas. Dealing with extremely delicate social issues and effectively using them is a rare and difficult task in this field. In this regard, Oliviero Toscani and David LaChapelle mark an era in advertising photography. These artists have started a new phase in fashion photography by inventing a revolutionary approach to business, communication, and public relations. Although both photographers worked with similar content, they applied different techniques and styles, and their work significantly differs in terms of implementation and execution of photographic projects. The following article aims to highlight such resemblances and differences in the works of these two influential 20th century photographers.

Introduction

Differentiation, and creation of an original style, are crucial to succeed in an increasingly competitive and fast-changing world. Photographers should not limit themselves to developing images of superior quality; they must also be able to develop a strong creative sense, to stand out. Recent technological advances make it unprecedentedly easy to take technically valid photographs, even for untalented or beginners. This establishes the key aspects for those who want to communicate through images: the concept and a good dose of creativity.

Many insist that creativity is a natural, innate gift, which cannot be easily developed. Others argue that creativity is something that can be improved and developed, is a capacity for innovation, and an ability to find original solutions not only in artistic fields but in all disciplines. To confirm this, one of the most interesting definitions of creativity comes from the mathematician Henri Poincaré:

"Creativity is combining existing elements with new connections that are useful." The categories of new and useful explain the essence of the creative act: to overcome the rules (the new) to establish a better shared rule (profit). Poincaré establishes a simple and general rule, which formulates the multiform of the creative gesture as $C = n*u$. In essence, creativity is the product of a quantity of new and of a quantity of useful. (Poincaré J.H, 1997, p.51)
“Inventing is discerning, choosing among all combinations. The most fruitful combinations are made up of elements drawn from very distant sectors. This is not to say that, to invent, it will suffice to put together as many disparate objects as possible; in fact, most combinations formed this way would be completely sterile. However, some rare combinations can be prolific. The most striking are the sudden illuminations that are the manifestation of previous, long periods of unconscious work. Such work is impossible, and in any case remains sterile, if it is not preceded and followed by a period of conscious work.” (Poincaré J.H, 1997, p.51)

The creative moment is not a casual fortuitous moment that occurs thanks to a "supreme gift" as Paolo Legrenzi, Professor of Cognitive Psychology, reminds us. With reference to the artistic work, he states:

"By adopting the energetic metaphor, derived from the physical sciences of the time, artistic creation was conceived as the result of a shift of forces in the field of desire, that is, in the unconscious. This was the gasoline that fed the artistic creation ... even a failed work or that of an inept amateur could be generated by the same forces of the unconscious as hypothesized for a masterpiece. (Legrenzi P., 2005, pp. 63-64)

Therefore, not only discipline but also unconscious forces contribute to idea generation. Elements such as imagination and inspiration play an important part in facilitating the workflow, as Paul Arden reminds us: "The most common idea of what creativity is and has to do with the arts. Absurd. Creativity is imagination, and imagination is for everyone," adding, "To be original, we need to look for inspiration from unusual sources" (Arden P. 2003, p. 32).

According to some, the photographic act should be direct and realistic, without manipulations or filters. In his seminal essay titled “The Photographic Message,” Roland Barthes (1961) clearly states that: “The deep and somewhat mysterious fascination of photography, is its condition of analogy with respect to the real. It is a message without code, and for this reason it is without cultural intervention” (p.17).

The work of a photographer is based on a continuous process of both technical and creative problem-solving and selection, often dictated or filtered by his cultural background. Technical perfection is not adequate by itself; it is also important to effectively communicate, generate and convey emotions. On this, Anne Geddes (2016) remarks: "I think the emotional content in an image is a very important element, regardless of the photographic technique. Most of the images I see lack emotional impact to cause a reaction of those are watching them, or to keep them in their hearts" (http://www.artquotes.net/masters/anne-geddes/index.htm).

As discussed above, the key ingredients of a winning image are, above all: a good idea, excellent technique, creativity, the courage to experiment and take risks, and insight into human psychology. A last, decisive variable should be added to these ingredients: the use of color. Appropriate use of color completely changes the visual impact of an image; it is a key factor that determines how an image will be read. An attentive photographer wisely uses color to highlight or minimize certain elements in his image. At this point, I will observe how two of the most influential contemporary photographers, Oliviero Toscani and David LaChapelle, use color in creating their images, which are characterized by their strong social content.

Oliviero Toscani, an Italian photographer born in 1942 in Milan, is the creator of some of the most provocative advertising images of all time. He is the genius mind behind many successful advertising campaigns for global brands and magazines, such as Diesel, Chanel, Fiorucci, Benetton, and more.
Toscani studied design and photography in Zurich from 1961 to 1965. He became famous for his controversial commercial campaign created for Benetton, between 1982 and 2000. On creativity, Toscani (2008) remarks:

"Creativity is genesis, birth, divine strength, energy, imagination, pain, commitment, faith, generosity. It must be visionary, subversive, disturbing" (p.48). He goes on to criticize bureaucratic censors and the "non-creative":

It's a huge army: a crowd of bureaucrats who, thanks to the position of power they hold, claim the right to block creative processes. They are there to level to mediocrity any idea that is not stupid enough to make everyone agree: so the newspapers are all the same, the cars all look alike, the television programs are interchangeable, the clothing brands design the same style. (p.49)

In his books, (2008) he reiterates his absolute contempt for conformity: "Creativity is something unusual, scaring, confusing. It is subversive. Be careful of what you see and hear. Doubt to doubt. It acts even if it is wrong. Penetrate preconceived notions. It disconcerts established certainties.

Toscani unceasingly invents new paths, new languages. It causes and changes points of view." His aversion to this superficial and leveled way of working towards mediocrity, leads him to attack the system. He states, “Artists should have the power to finally free themselves from their fears. The future needs to allow the artist, real power and responsibility in the world of communication. Creatives should break this circle, destroy these codes and help revive free thinking” (2015, p.3). His break with the status quo is extreme, and can be observed in his work to such an extent that he created the neologism “Shockvertising”: a combination of "shock" (traumatize) and "advertising." It all began when Toscani started working for Benetton…

Under Toscani’s watch, Benetton's advertising during the 1980s, increasingly evolves from shot of models of racially diverse models into issues-oriented messages. By 1990s Benetton's advertising had become even more controversial and often did not feature any of the company's products, focusing instead on shocking images, such as a priest kissing a nun or a black woman breast-feeding a white baby" ((Encyclopedia of Advertising, Vol 2., 2003 p.568-569.)

On Benetton’s company website, Toscani defends his images: "I'm not here to sell sweaters, but to promote a corporate image." The owner Luciano Benetton supports Toscani, “The purpose of advertising is not set to sell more. It has to do with institutional publicity, whose aims is to communicate the company’s values." (Encyclopedia of Advertising, Vol 2., 2003 p.569.)

Toscani supports the primacy of photography from the point of view of the message, placing it in a strategic position in the world of communication. "I believe that being a photographer is the most beautiful profession in the world: it is writing with light. Like God". (Argante, E., and Toscani, O., p. 29) He also emphasizes photography’s challenging role: "In front of the photograph we engage our conscience. When one looks at an image, we associates what we see with our culture, conscience, morality, and ethics. Stillness is the value of photography, not its limit. We must interpret a photograph, with a premise and a conclusion. For this reason, still images often cause crisis in society. (Argante, E., and Toscani, O., p. 29)

Walter Binder, Toscani’s teacher in Zurich, recalls: "Once, out of the blue, he ruled that political philosophy should also be part of advertising, because billboards on the streets are a place and a time more than opportune to show our beliefs. For him it was important to spread his message, his purpose was to arouse discussion and to challenge the public” (Binder, W., 2017).
A this point, it’s important to understand how Toscani applies his ideas, and how he chooses to approach his images from a technical point of view. Oliviero Toscani attended the Swiss school in Zurich, which was strongly influenced by the ideas of Gropius and the Bauhaus in terms of unifying art, craftsmanship, and architecture. Photography was introduced into this school by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and his approach was applied in the field. Bauhaus affirms the simplicity and clarity of the lines. This style characterizes a lot of Toscani’s productions, which use white backdrops to not distract the viewer and to emphasize the subjects.

Initially, his subjects were the colorful Benetton sweaters worn by models, but soon after, the photographer, with the support of Luciano Benetton, one of the owners of the Venetian company, decided that the clothes should no longer be the main subject of his advertising images, because the public already identified the product with the brand.

"Through the use of images from the photojournalistic field, chosen to deal with difficult subjects such as death or sex, Toscani's images continually skip the boundary line of advertising, occupying an area that until then was limited to art or information." (Salvemini, L.P., 2002, p.11)

One of the most controversial images among the various Benetton campaigns is the photograph of Theresa Frare portraying a young American, David Kirby, dying of HIV in the arms of his loved ones, in Ohio. This photograph was defined by the weekly Time, as the photograph that changed the public perception of the HIV problem. (http://time.com/4592061/colorization-benetton-aids-ad/)

It has a very strong impact, and shows the tragedy and the suffering of the terminally ill, as well as the pain and the tragic beauty of this family, which is helpless in assisting the death of the beloved child, with an almost mystical serenity. The emotional force of this image is so devastating that it has aroused the Church’s protest, as it was considered as an attempt to copy the classic image of the Virgin Mary embracing the body of Christ after his crucifixion. To make it even more pictorial, Toscani digitally colored the photo, which was originally in black and white. “When I saw Theresa’s image in LIFE, I said: ‘That’s the picture.’ [David] looks like Jesus Christ but he’s dying of HIV. It’s like a painting,” said Toscani. “The only problem was, it was in black and white and I wanted them to be realistic – color is realistic.” (Genova A., 2016 Time magazine http://time.com/4592061/colorization-benetton-aids-ad/)

It is clear that Toscani aims to provoke, to change the public mindset through emotional shock. Provocation generates passion, which leads to change. Toscani’s innovative approach marked the passage of an era. Thanks to people like him, today advertising offers more courageous, sometimes intelligent and intellectually stimulating messages. Other advertising photographers have ventured into the field of provocation, and have used social themes for artistic and advertising purposes.

Another extremely controversial, provocative, and innovative artist is David LaChapelle, who, like Toscani, uses social themes for advertising purposes but creates images with a totally different technique and style. LaChapelle is an American commercial photographer and film director, born in 1963 in Hartford, Connecticut. Andy Warhol hired him as a photographer for the magazine Interview. He later worked for some of the most popular magazines as a fashion photographer, such as GQ, The New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, and Vogue. He is best known for his photography, which often references art history, and sometimes conveys social messages. His photographic style has been described as "hyper-real and slyly subversive," "kitsch pop surrealism." Once called the Fellini of photography,
LaChapelle has worked for international publications, and his work was exhibited in commercial galleries and institutions around the world.

His photographs are hyper-colored, surreal, chromatically violent, and very ironic. He frequently and irreverently uses religious iconography in a modern and pop style. His style is perhaps a tribute to Andy Warhol, and His book LaChapelle Land in 1999, consecrated him as one of the most original and creative photographers of our time, and with his book Hotel LaChapelle, he became the photographer of famous singers and Hollywood celebrities, making him one of the most expensive photographers in the world. His style is unique, visually noisy, often excessively redundant in color, accessories, and the number of subjects portrayed.

Like Toscani, he employs social themes with extremely provocative and strong emotional impact. However, his style is very different, with blinding colors, and almost unreal, bizarre locations and surreal subjects, often pointing to religious themes or strongly erotic images, or irreverently demonstrating the obsessions of American society. He is theatrical, and able to combine the history of art with pop culture. He can mix Leonardo da Vinci with Andy Warhol, as in the case of the opera The Last Supper, in which the apostles are visibly tattooed and wearing baseball caps and golf caps, looking more like Detroit rappers than the gentlemen of the Lord's word. Owing to this eclectic quirk, he was defined as the Federico Fellini of photography. His style, which is extremely pivotal in pop culture, is also aggressively criticized and blamed. However, it must be recognized that LaChapelle, like Oliviero Toscani, characterizes an era, by having invented an absolutely original style that mixes different eras in a hyper-visual, dynamic way, resulting in extremely effective and engaging images.

The turning point of LaChapelle’s career, from a creative point of view, was his trip to Rome in 2006, during which he visited the Sistine Chapel. The shocking vision of Michelangelo's work overwhelmed the senses of the fashion photographer, and directed him towards a new approach to photography. He moved away from fashion, and reinvented himself as a fine art photographer, turning to a different audience with different purposes. He began the monumental series entitled The Deluge, with which he criticized the loss of universal values, such as goodness and understanding, which are replaced with a growing desire for material goods and futile things. In his photos, there are men, women, and children, who are desperate to save themselves from an apocalyptic universal flood. In this creative phase, he draws inspiration from the history of art and religious themes, but always adorns his images with a strong appeal to pop culture. He intended to become an artist whose work can be viewed mainly in art galleries and museums, and he began a conceptually different production track on which he comments as follows: "I have reintroduced my personal ideas of transfiguration, conquest of Paradise, and the concept of life after death."

LaChapelle’s purpose is to reach the souls of those who observe his images, touching the depths of their heart, and generating an inner debate and reflection on the evils of our time, the weaknesses of men, prejudices, stereotypes, respect for nature, and spiritual regeneration.

Beyond the aim that the photographer set for himself in creating an image, it is clear that the role of photography, even the commercial one, is extremely important, and always takes on relevant aspects. Advertising is a creative form of communication to build messages and attract potential buyers. However, this is not its sole purpose, it is important not to underestimate this persuasive power of advertising and the role played in raising awareness on specific topics. We received a warning almost a century ago, by Edward Bernays, advertiser, he admitted in his book “Propaganda”:

"Those who have this mechanism in hand [...] constitute [...] the true executive power of the Country. We are dominated, our mind shaped, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, by people we have never heard of [...] They are the ones who maneuver the wires...
Photography, in its various applications, has always been a powerful weapon to create sensation, or to attract attention to specific themes. Photography is not reality; it is the representation of the point of view of the photographer or the commissioner.

"The numerous controversies associated with photography through its history, highlights the diversity of possible interpretations and the insoluble paradox of freedom and constraint of photography itself." (Girardin, 2009, p.58)

It is all a matter of interpretation, and attribution of meaning to images... A photograph is interpreted in relation to the cultural conventions associated with its creation or distribution. Each individual reads an image in tune with his own moral or philosophical convictions. A society does the same, with regard to laws and ethics that form the foundations of that culture in particular.

Bibliography


