Reevaluating Silence and Visibility: The Philosophical Significance of Republishing Stephen Shore's Steel Town

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Abstract: Stephen Shore's Steel Town features a collection of his photographs of the Rust Belt, taken for the Fortune magazine, and now given visibility to Shore as a photographer after 40 years of silence. Some images had been previously published, while others appeared for the first time in Steel Town. This study interprets these images, drawing on the images of Fortune and Shore's earlier work, and analyzes the challenges he faced in photographing the Rust Belt. It examines the system of photographic power, ethics, and perspective, exploring how these factors, as well as the changing conditions of American society, contributed to the reappearance of these images forty years later. By situating Steel Town within modern philosophical discourse, the study highlights Photography as a cultural trace, which has the ability to respond to political, social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions across time. A paradigm-shift in Shore's perspective evoked the insider-outsider dichotomy in him and allowed him to let out the information through his photographs. Additionally, it underscores the potential for photography to offer both theoretical depth and practical analysis, suggesting that future scholarship should focus on the intersection of photography, philosophy, and the social sciences.

Keywords: Stephen Shore; Steel Town; Rust Belt; Photographic Philosophy; Visual Culture; Cultural Trace

1. INTRODUCTION

The American and Canadian landscapes during cross-country road trips have been widely captured in color photography (Stuber, 2021). Among most illustrious photographers Stephen Shore (born October 8, 1947) who not only pioneered color photography but also introduced a "neutral style" to convey visual information representing the aesthetics of "social landscape." His works include American Surfaces (Shore & Sammlung, 1999) and Uncommon Places (Schmidt-Wulffen, 2015), which are representative works of New Topographics, and which tend to be austere and documented versions of his contemporary fine art photography of ordinary scenes and objects (del Río & Delgado, 2020). Shore is mostly known for making use of color photography as an art form rather than making it a medium of expressing beauty, emotion, and point of view (Jenkins, 1975). His portrayal of the most banal and mundane beauty of

American highways has been acknowledged by several color photographers of his own and later generation including Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Martin Parr, and Joel Sternfeld (Matz, 2024). In 1977, Fortune magazine worked with Shore to publish a documentary on Rust Belt, an area of economic significance facing the threat of de-industrialization. As the name suggests, the Rust Belt was a center of steel and automobile manufacturing before it was decimated in 1970s by the penetration of Japanese firms, fall in international exchange rates, and the weakening of the regional businesses and labor markets by local labor unions (Alder et al., 2023), which led to mass unemployment, de-industrialization, and economic downturns. The area includes Great Lakes regions of Indiana, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania, and has been depicted in various films, television adaptations, and songs, all of which metaphorically portrayed the resilience of working-class Americans in the distressed industrial towns of this belt. Shore had also photographed many images of the Rust Belt as a press photographer, confronting it as a complex social crisis and disseminating the impact of de-industrialization of people's lives. In 2021, MACK the London-based independent art and photography publishing house, republished a series of photographs taken by Stephen Shore in the Rust Belt 40 years earlier, as a photographic art collection entitled Steel Town. Although Steel Town cannot be compared to Shore's masterpiece collections like Uncommon Place and American Surfaces(Palmer, 2014), but MACK succeeded in reinventing the reality of the industrial town through Shore's photographs taken 40-year ago. Owing to their unique value, Borghisani reviewed it not as an ordinary political book but rather a cultural trace which attempted to link two different times(Borghisani, 2021; Shore & Auping, 1981).

When seen as a political commentary, it emphasized that when these photographs were taken 40 years ago, Jimmy Carter was the President of the United States, but when they were published as Steel Town, Joe Biden was the US president. It was an indication that if any photographs are published decades later, politically and culturally, one might infer that they were not accepted by the mainstream of that time. This is also true of Shore's masterpiece collection, American Surfaces, which was published after 27 years when the photographs were first taken (Morin, 2017). Many of the images in Steel Town were originally borrowed from Fortune Magazine, where they were first published as a part of a political commentary, or were a part of press reports of certain event .(de Pressigny, 1977) Though some of these images had only a few years of value, but

revisiting these photographs 40 years later is an attempt to re-evaluate the silence and visibility or the philosophical significance of these images of the Rust Belt, as seen through photographic lens. This study explores multiple factors that surrounded the production and publication of Steel Town, as a photographic project and compares its images with those previously published in the Fortune Magazine and elsewhere, in Stephen Shore's other works. The current study attempts to explore why these images were made visible after forty years of silence. This research question also aims to assess the value of photography as a medium to trace the significance of political, social, cultural, and philosophical spheres of any age and examine the potential of this domain for future research.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a combination of comparative and qualitative research within an ethnographic framework. Photographic images can be utilized as research tools to explore social issues, social processes and social interactions (Collier & Collier, 1986). According to Schwartz, the camera can be an important means to discover the social realities(Schwartz, 1989). The data of the current study comprised relevant images previously published in Fortune Magazine as well as in Stephen Shore's previous works. These images were used as references to compare with the photographic collection in the Steel Town. The specific research process involved selection of typical images and texts based on visual information of the images, as captured at the moment.

This is based on the premise that the medium of photography is open to interpretation and intertextuality, from all three dimensions viz., photographic power, photographic ethics, and photographic perspectives. The images selected were categorized into portraits, scenes, and architectural portraits which contain easily recognizable objective visual information as well as subjective emotional information. Each of these images and texts were interpreted and analyzed in depth. The visual symbols in each image were analyzed in terms of their deeper meanings hidden behind the images, and were extracted and summarized. Finally, all findings were integrated and summarized to highlight how these images regained visibility by breaking the 40-year long silence. The study also attempted to prove photography as a medium to track and revisit the past times to unearth traces of political, social, cultural and philosophical significance.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Photographic Power

The very first dimension of Steel Town's photographs is that of photographic power, which makes evident that the status of a photograph as a technological medium of expression varies according to the power dimension conferred upon it. This is based on the premise that a camera is a tool of power, and every single picture that is clicked is evident of people's trust in the domain which the picture belongs to. It is not the photograph that has any implied identity, but the socio-political domain in which it is situated grants the autonomy to it. Unlike Shore's personal projects, his photojournalism assignments were subject to more restrictions and control from the outside powers that governed him from the preparation of the shoot to their final publication. This impact of power was revealed transparently when Shore entered the area no longer as a freelance artist but as a photojournalist for Fortune magazine. At one instance, while Shore was shooting for an assignment, the local labor union that was contacted by Fortune staff for this shoot, provided Shore with a previously unavailable opportunity to photograph the workers and the sites in question. This undoubtedly makes it easier for Shore to do his job better; but it also means that when a photographer enters the scene of an event, he must feel empowered to take the photographs that he wishes to take. This is what we can call the institutional power of an agency in a profession. It is this photographic power that inevitably helps a photographer to choose what is photographable and worth photographing in any complex event. Young argues that the power of visual imagery inspires action, particularly when photographic visual representations shape people's collective action(Young, 2021). Taking the example of a socio-environmental movement in Cambodia, the study points out that photography as a medium of production empowers disadvantaged citizens in grassroots movements to aesthetically influence their goals and effectively communicate their needs. Similarly, Geise, Panke and Heck point out that under certain conditions, media images are effective carriers of political content that can motivate and empower citizens to protest(Geise et al., 2021). This was felt in the case of Rust belt workers as well. They realized that their photographs would be published some day and would have the opportunity to achieve wider impact on a larger scale. The workers' portraits in Steel Town echo their demonstrations; they are seen dressed unkempt and dispirited; it seems they wanted to look worse in portraits to illustrate their dire situation. Such a behavior of workers,

who were the direct victims of this incident, potentially influenced Shore's judgment of what was worth photographing and further reduced his control over the message of the content of the photographs (Shore & Sante, 2007).

Figure 1: Image of a Factory Worker (Source: (Shore, 2021))

For instance, Figure 1 portrays an image of a frowning worker with a cigarette pack in his shirt pocket with "More" written on the pack, which could mean that the pack contains more cigarettes than other packs, indicating that this pack was designed for buyers of limited economic means. It is also possible that this man placed the packs in his pocket to express his desire to get "more" cigarettes. However, it is certain is that, whatever is the case, the presence of a cigarette packet is no accident. This photograph was taken by Stephen Shore using a 4×5 view camera, which clicks the real and the mundane in each photograph through a process rather than capturing an image hastily. Campbell points out that Shore deliberately presented seemingly mundane things in his early life photo shoots(Campbell, 2023), making mundane details appear powerfully meaningful. Something is being shown to us, though it is hard to say exactly what. The meaning is in the details themselves; what is important is to understand the way it is presented, and the circumstances that contributed to the framing of the photographic scene. All these things make the final image memorable. Shore makes ordinary things extraordinary. On one hand, the photograph in Figure 1 shows the influence of the worker, who becomes extraordinary by its content; on the other hand, Shore shows his style of photographing mundane things and paying attention to smallest details. This complexity is perhaps the photographic power, which Shore dexterously relates to an incident; the power through which each photograph is born; the power that gives strength to his struggle to compromise between different positions in shooting an image. Reis points

out that the photographic power is also behind the camera's frosted glass, which forces the photographer to perform a thorough examination of his subject(Reis, 2021), prior to shooting. This proactivity provides finer control over the formal interrelationships established between each of the elements contained in the frame. In 1977 the photographs were published to coincide with Fortune Magazine's coverage of the Rust Belt, and therefore the number of photographs that appeared in Fortune Magazine at that time would not have been as high as the number of photographs that will appear in the publication of "Steel Town" in 2021. It was the political power in 1977 that directly determined which photographs should be selected for publication. These photographs do not represent Shore's personal position as a photographer or the public position of the viewer, but rather represent the position of the news industry as well as the political power system to a large extent. Smith rightly summarizes that the Rust Belt is the hardscrabble town, where only the strong and powerful people make their living from steel(Smith, 1977). However, despite this ground reality, the Fortune magazine at that time did not question the contemporary power system about the region's decline. Thus, the power dimension in photography was a tool which gave strength to the visual style that Shore exceptionally used in his works to express the powerlessness of the labor force of the town. The process by which these photographs came into being in 2021 shows how the influence of these power systems ended when they were finally published.

3.2 Photographic Ethics

   The ethical stance of the photographer also makes a potential impact on their photographs. In 1975, the United States held an exhibition entitled "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," in which Shore was one of the artists who exhibited his "New Topographics" photographs (Cornelius, 2024). Jenkins summarizes a photographer's ethics as "a medium to convey substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty(Jenkins, 1975), emotion, and opinion". This explains the main stylistic characteristic of New Topographics: ethical neutrality and a visual characteristic that are present in Shore's other more widely known work, Uncommon Places. Shore et al., also notes that it is difficult to see how Shore's ethics and subjectivity were projected onto the photographs(Shore et al., 2004), and since he always took a cool, objective, outsider's point of view, which is also Shore's label. What makes Steel Town unique is that these photographs pushed Shore, the representative photographer of the "New Topographics", into an

unprecedented ethical crisis where it was difficult for him to maintain his objectivity.

Figure 2: Image of a Cemetery (Source: (Shore, 2021))

For instance, Figure 2 depicts the image of a cemetery, decaying factories and depressed streets in the backgrounds. This picture was first published in 1977 in Fortune Magazine, which emphasized that there is no alternative to the decline of the Rust Belt area. Wilkins calls it an unethical practice, since President Carter had refused to provide relief for the area(Wilkins, 1979). Regardless of whether the factors contained in these photographs specifically had its own ethics, to make a positive or negative, unbiased or biased impact, it is undeniable that the images did convey the ethical message of the photographs to appeal to the viewing experience of the audience. From the ethical perspective, Fairey opined that a publisher would always examine two sets of images, one to publicly display and the other not to(Fairey, 2018). This exposes the emptiness and unethical biases that influence the editorial decisions of not publishing visual images and photographs depicting realistic pictures. It demonstrates how realistic voices that do not fit into the dominant visual frame are unethically silenced by the politics and ideology. However, unlike Shore's ethical portrayal of only the real images, there was also such photographic ethics of other photographers that made a hidden influence when the seemingly real photographs create the illusion of the real world in a transparent way to push the viewers to fantasize based on the false world created by these photographs (Fairey, 2018). Shore's many years of photographic practice, however, had made him ethically strong. He could immediately become aware of the complex power system in which he was operating as a photographer, and the rare stress he would face himself as a representative of the New Topographic photography. It was difficult for Shore to create

ethically strong photographic images with the relative freedom he used to have when shooting his personal projects, but instead he had to consider Fortune's reporting stance as well as the complexity of the situation on the ground. Although these photographs look visually very similar to his photographs of the scene, they implicitly diminish their ethics, since these photographs were compromised, and were taken without the option of a more interpretive space, and under the constraints of the unethical system, which rejected any type of photographic ethics. Of course, it is also possible that to a large extent Shore may have taken more interpretatively open photographs, but they were not selected for publication by Fortune at the time, as too open photographs could have compromised the stance of the coverage of the event. This is one of the reasons why this extraordinary work was selected for re-publication 40 years later, to prove the significance of photographic ethics.

3.3 Photographic Perspective

Looking at the third dimension of Shore's photography, it is quite evident that he was forced to shift his perspective from the outsider to the insider, to think about his moral stance as a photographer. As can be seen from his photographs, Shore still tries to stick to his previous objectivity and dispassionate visual style in this situation. For example, in his photographs of factory buildings, he still uses geometrical compositions to make factories look like monuments with a certain symbolic significance (Borghisani, 2021). However, when the viewer's eye passes through the illusion of objectivity and calmness presented by the photograph, it becomes clear that Shore is subtly mapping his own emotions into the photograph, Jacobs argues that as photography became more technically sophisticated, photographers chose the perspective which depicts the cityscape as a "void," for symbolic(Jacobs, 2006), aesthetic, and artistic purposes. The photographers adopt a perspective of a metaphorical level of personal expression to illustrate their point about things that have passed away and need a monument. Davis argues that the most meaningful photographs are those that transform ordinary and recognizable elements into cultural symbols; photographs that evoke larger patterns of human meaning(Davis, 1989). Stott (Stott, 1986) refers to Walker Evans' introduction of the concept of 'transcendent documentary photographs' (Huber, 2016), which produce a sympathetic response. This photographic perspective impacts our intellect and also touch our souls. There is no doubt that Shore's photographs can be called "transcendent documentary photographs". These seemingly objective and dispassionate photographs

are not really cold-faced photography. Shore uses the metaphor of these photographs to subtly convey the complexity of his emotions when confronted with this event, and in a way may have elicited the viewer's sympathy for the economy of the region and the state of the workers. This is a subtle way of saying that Shore did not entirely side with the workers and the decaying factories, but, as mentioned above, was more of a compromise between Fortune magazine and the local workers.

Figure 3: Image of a Factory Building 2(Source: (Shore, 2021))

To illustrate this photographic perspective, Figure 3 depicts one of the many photographs in Steel Town that capture the emotional character of the area in a more obvious way than the factory buildings(Ogrodnik, 2020). In these photographs, Shore shows the viewer that he was in a wavering state of mind when he took the photographs. Shore's perspective moves away from his usual outsider's perspective, to take an almost insider's view of the area by going into the workers' homes and photographing their protests. Hawker illustrates that the power of photographs lies in their resurrection of community-based and party-based celebrations and/or rituals(Hawker, 2013). In occupying public spaces, the turn to speak to the camera directly acknowledges the street and, by implication, recognizes the city as a space for negotiation. However, this perspective never worked when Shore had clicked these photographs 40 years before. Sontag argues that photography means supporting the continuation of what is happening(Sontag, 2005), and that interfering and photographing cannot be done at the same time. A very good example of the photographic perspective is seen in Figure 4, which depicts the image of a little girl attacked by an eagle. There is no essential difference between the two, since both were the victims of the crises in the Rust Belt region, where Shore photographed. It has to be admitted that Shore's perspective was that of a photographer who was under the influence of editorial authorities that

silenced the voice of the photographer inside him. How did Shore deal with this tricky situation? Rather than rejection of his previous practice of not setting a clear theme for his photographs, he actively chose specific people, buildings, and interiors as his subjects. This paradigm shift in his perspective evoked the insider-outsider dichotomy in him and allowed him to let out the information through his photographs.

Figure 4: The Vulture and the Little Girl (Source:(Lorch, 1993))

La Grange questions the photographic perspective and the insider/outsider dichotomy(La Grange, 2013). In most cases photographers are not complete insiders or outsiders, and it is difficult to judge exactly which perspective would be better. Shore must not have been taking these photographs from the type of outsider's perspective, since Shore photographed not only portraits but also local factories, buildings, and homes. It seems as if the viewer can get quite a wealth of information from so many photographs, information that seems to give the viewer the right perspective to interpret the events. But it is also the medium of photography, which Sontag argues that the subject is given importance through photography(Sontag, 2005). In addition, Edwards points out that whether they are family photographs, official photographs or portraits, their edges are more or less touched(Edwards, 2001). This gives the viewer the illusion that the photographs offer the viewer the ability to see the essence of the event through a sufficiently large number of photographs. Another critic, de Pressigny argues that Shore was taking the photographs with an open mind, and that the photographs responded to the event on a variety of levels(de Pressigny, 1977). Regardless, Shore's approach to this photography has certainly stood the test of time over the past 40 years, and these photographs, which fall somewhere between the insider's and outsider's perspectives, perfectly document and present the complexities of the Rust Belt in the 1970s. This is one of the reasons why Steel Town

has regained its visibility after 40 years. At the end of Steel Town, Shore concludes with photographs of abandoned industrial buildings and barren ecosystems, a metaphor for the complexity of the local situation. These photographs of destroyed natural environments once again reverse the sympathy for the local inhabitants that the previous photographs evoked, and the complexity of the situation raises further questions: who should be primarily responsible for the local environmental problems? Is the revitalization of local heavy industry the best solution? In addition, does Shore truly have an insider's perspective? Although Shore did put his own emotions into the photographs, as a photographer, it is difficult to be able to acclimatize the subject to the presence of the camera in less than ten days, and it takes more time for the photographer to make himself a part of the group of people being photographed.

4. REEVALUATING SILENCE AND VISIBILITY

Shore's work Steel Town has given visibility to Shore as a photographer after 40 years of silence. The collection Steel Town should not be used only as an evidential tool of having broken the past silence, but also as one of the reasons why this work has been re-published. "These pictures are historical, but the story they tell is political, social, and continued on. They collapse into now." (de Pressigny, 1977). In other words, these historical pictures gained momentum after a long period of silence, not only making people think about the nature of historical experience, or understanding the potential in their content to recreate history. In 2016, President Trump declared his intention to revitalize the Rust Belt region's former industrial glory once again, and these photographs gained new significance. "Places like Pennsylvania, where some of the pictures were made, which had been in presidential elections reliably Democratic states, had swung the election to Trump. And I realized that they were the children of these people who were doing this" (de Pressigny, 1977). A period of forty years has allowed the people in the Rust Belt to grow up, and these photographs have become important cultural traces with broader value and significance. As Gansky points out, the photographs may not have generated any explicit political movement, and perhaps there is no art that can adequately reflect the suffering of a city(Gansky, 2014), but the images clearly show that what is left behind does not simply disappear. Even as those who still live in the city continue to disperse, their absence leaves a mark. Notteboom and Wesener argue that the construction of collective cultural memory is

influenced not only by existing socio-cultural or material structures but also by the images of these structures(Notteboom & Wesener, 2012), which are produced and disseminated through means such as photography. The re-publication of these images captured by Shore forty years later went some way to influencing the collective memory of a generation. Now, forty years later, Steel Town is a work that has been given additional significance by time, and the re-publication of these photographs not only means that the economic conditions of the area and the situation of the workers have not been forgotten, but also serves as a visual index to emphasize the importance of balancing the development of the country with the well-being of its inhabitants. If in 1977 Fortune Magazine reported on the event with an attitude of mourning and powerlessness, in Steel Town 2021 Shore does not want to offer a solution or a clear attitude, but rather wants to open up the photographs to a more open interpretation in order to provoke a deeper reflection on a wider scale for the viewers and for all those involved. Shore's photographs are in some ways very similar to what Narušytė refers to as war photography - if photojournalists want to capture military action(Narušytė, 2021), they have to be "in the right place at the right time". However, the speed and unexpectedness at the heart of such events meant that war was mostly recorded after the fact. Rather than depicting dramatic action, most photographs focus on the numerous traces of war left behind in buildings. Hunt points out that photography need not simply illustrate the problem(Hunt, 2014). In doing so, photography may help to evoke a sense of place. This is another kind of documentary: it complicates the relationship between inscription and knowledge. The images are not only evidential, but also depict atmosphere and emotion wherein Shore presents the complexity of the local situation in these photographs, and a role that unites the emotions of the locals, rather than explaining or denouncing the local situation. Laroche states that if a photograph does not appear to be fictional, then it is only an appearance(Laroche, 2020). For at least 50 years, most scholars and critics have insisted on the socially constructed, coded, traditional and artificial character of photographs. No photograph should be read without considering its social, economic or ideological context. No photograph is innocent. Therefore, the information revealed in the photographs taken by Shore must be important, but this emphasis of importance is not necessarily what the viewer needs, or even what Shore needs. The emphasis on the importance of certain things in these photographs was needed by the local workers, the economy, and the Fortune magazine. Shore was invited by Fortune magazine and given permission by the local government

to take the photographs, so it is not the viewer who has the right to see the photographs but rather the fact that the photographs have been allowed to be seen by the relevant authorities and systems, after which the photographs can be taken. The same principle applies when Shore decided to break the silence and attempt to revitalize his photographs for their visibility.

5. CONCLUSION

This study identifies the challenges Stephen Shore encountered in making this photographic project, and further demonstrates that the publication of a photographic work is subject to multiple considerations. Hence, it makes the comparison and analysis of three dimensions, viz., photographic power, photographic ethics, and photographic perspective. The complexity of photographic power, the challenges faced by Stephen Shore, his ethical stance and perspective, combined with the current state of American society and the span of time shown in Steel Town, are important reasons why these images have regained their visibility. Photography as a cultural trace has the ability to respond to political, social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions across time. For Shore, this is a unique and scholarly work. It was also an important experiment in photojournalism for Shore, who to a certain extent had departed from the free-flowing photography of American Surfaces and Uncommon Places, as well as the objective and calm photographic style of New Topographics Photography. With his keen sense of professionalism, he perfectly dealt with the complex power system and moral standpoints that he faced in his photographs. For people in the Rust Belt, its significance is continuous and intensifies over time. This study also has some shortcomings such as only selecting one photographer, Stephen Shore, and one of his works, and not being able to conduct an in-depth interview with Shore due to regional and financial constraints. Further research could combine several similar photographers and compare the subtle differences between their works, which would allow for a more in-depth analysis of the broader political, cultural, and philosophical significance of photography as a medium, as well as in-depth interviews with the photographers in question if available, in order to gain a first-hand understanding of what was going on in their minds at the time of the shooting. This study also demonstrates the future potential of photographic research that balances theoretical depth with practical analysis at the intersection of photography, philosophy, and the

social sciences, and subsequent research could attempt to look beyond one work by one photographer and analyze photography more broadly, horizontally or vertically, for its significant value as a cultural trace in fields such as philosophy or sociology.

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