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Where Meaning Lies



It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but maybe it ought to be that a picture provokes a thousand questions. A photograph represents a kind of reality, a fragment of time as seen by the individual behind the lens, but perhaps it requires further dissection and an active imagination to bring it to life and give it meaning. This photograph depicting a man and his dog on what seems like a grand expedition, exploring the vast unknown, inspires a sense of adventure and awe, but what led up to this very moment and what exists behind the camera and beyond the frame is completely mystifying. The viewer must rely on their own perceptions and inclinations to uncover the ambiguities and interpret its intent as the photograph presents more

questions than answers. Or does it? Could it be that the more we search for answers, the more we begin to realize there is no deeper imposing meaning at all? Or that the intended meaning begins to fade with every attempt to pick it apart?

This photograph is entitled “Father Hubbard pulling dog up an ice ledge on glacier.” As the title indicates, this action shot portrays Father Hubbard and his dog trekking across a glacier, presumably the first to ever step foot on this uncharted arctic expanse. Otherwise known as “The Glacier Priest,” Father Hubbard was a priest, geologist and explorer that photographed and helped popularize the Alaskan wilderness and other arctic territory during the middle of the 20th century (“Father Hubbard, Glacier Priest”). He was accompanied by dogs on many of his expeditions, speaking to the unique human-animal relationship between man and dog and the significance of their companionship while exploring the harsh and remote arctic wilderness.

There is so much to uncover about this striking photo in regards to what is depicted, and contrarily what is not. The icy barren surface with its profound craters and contours resemble the bleak and desolate landscape of the moon. The simplicity and the unknown aspects of the photograph make it that much more complex. Defining its meaning and exposing the obscurities that lie within is largely dependent on one’s external understandings and experiences, allowing for unending interpretations. But perhaps there is no underlying meaning, no grand opposition or secrets longing to be unveiled after all. Maybe the photograph was merely intended to document a segment of the expedition for research purposes, or to test out the camera equipment in the freezing climate. Maybe it was never intended to evoke a greater sense of meaning that calls us to act or to feel deeply moved and inspired. Or maybe it was. Perhaps there is an underlying reason for what is not depicted in the photo such as excluding the entirety of the landscape or the subjects facing away from the camera. Why was it important for the photographer to capture this

very moment exactly as it was? Without being explicitly stated, it is nearly impossible to really know the creator's true intentions behind the photo. While it does elicit many questions, the more we try to uncover its meaning, the less it seems to mean anything at all, and the further it strays from the photographer's original intent.

Deconstructing "Father Hubbard pulling dog up an ice ledge on glacier" is marginally complex. While the image itself is particularly straightforward given that the scene is rather desolate and the subjects are not difficult to decipher, the omission of certain details and the apparent blind spots potentially alters our understanding, or at the very least leaves us with unanswered questions. Ultimately, there will never be a single unified understanding or perception of the image allowing for endless ways of seeing and deconstructing its meaning. But if meaning is entirely subjective and contingent upon an infinite collection of ideas and understandings, is there any real meaning then at all, or does meaning constantly change as our perceptions of the world change? Could it be that the more we seek to extract significance, the less meaningful the photograph becomes and the actual underlying value and intention slowly falls apart? Or perhaps the meaning of a photo lies not in the intention of the photographer, but entirely in the viewer because of the dynamic and incomplete nature that calls for engagement of the viewer to give it unique meaning.

Works Cited

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