

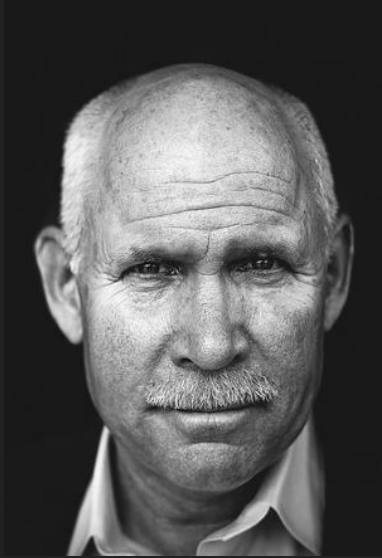
IB Comparative Study

Purpose: To consider and analyze the influence of cultural bias on perception, despite the universality of human struggle in the images of photographers Steve McCurry, Jimmy Nelson, and David Covarrubias

Process: Focus on culture of photographers, subjects, and locations

By: Rachna Deshpande

Steve McCurry (American, 1950-Present)



Steve McCurry self portrait
whattheyshoot.com/stevemccurry



Afghan Girl (1984) Steve McCurry
whattheyshoot.com/stevemccurry

Steve McCurry's photography career kicked off in the late 1970's during his travels to India and Pakistan. After achieving recognition for his frontline coverage of an Afghan war zone, McCurry was willing to risk his life to preserve the rolls of film which contained his images as he crossed the border back to Pakistan. Hiding the plastic rolls in his socks, underwear, and clothes seams, McCurry was determined to share the story of the Middle East with the rest of the world. It would later pay off big time. Russia's invasion of Afghanistan six months later catapulted the value of McCurry's pictures. With published photographs in Time Magazine, McCurry soon began work for National Geographic, the publication which published works which the photographer would later become a household name for.¹ His work is lauded for its striking colors, cultural perspectives, and emotion-evoking insights into the uncensored world of struggle for victims of war in countries abroad.

Smoking coal miner, Pul-i-Khumri, Afghanistan (2002)

Steve McCurry

The face of the mining industry has changed dramatically, as it is increasingly influenced by the developing world. Although the discovery of more than one trillion dollars in iron, cobalt, copper, lithium, and gold in Afghanistan did not cause a major reaction in the United States, its impact on the mining industry in Afghanistan was mammoth. While some American officials such as Jack medelin, the Asia and Pacific contact at the USGS, say that “afghanistan is a country with no mining culture,” McCurry proves them wrong with his 2002 photographs. In his images, McCurry captures the reality of a nation “ravaged by war, the opium trade, and an unemployment rate of 35%.” In Pul i Khumri, McCurry photographed miners collecting coal as they have for decades. “You know the thing that was so astonishing about these coal miners in Afghanistan,” McCurry told the BBC, is that, “they go underground for 12 hours a day. They've been breathing coal dust all day long, there's no protective gear except this sort of flimsy helmet.” One subject stood out: an older man with gray hair, dark eyes, and worn hands. “The first thing this man did when he came out to the ground, after breathing all this coal dust, is light up a cigarette. And I found it so amazing,” said McCurry.² This image captures the adverse effects of pollution and hard labor in Afghanistan, and reflects the lack of relatability that many Americans experience toward the struggles in other countries, such as this one. McCurry utilizes the dark color scheme of the man with the white smoke to highlight the willing neglect of health due to the grim prospect of prosperity in these countries. Additionally, McCurry brightens the man’s brown eyes and centers the image on his eyes so that the viewer first makes eye contact and relates with the sense of identity, but then contrasts this relation with naturally drifting focus down to the cigarette.



Jimmy Nelson (British, 1967-Present)



Jimmy Nelson self portrait
jimmynelson.com/jimmy-projects



Goroka Tribe, Papua, New Guinea
Jimmy Nelson
neoscope.com

Beginning work as a photographer in 1987, Jimmy Nelson traveled on foot to Tibet seeking a different walk of life, following his 10 years at a Jesuit boarding school in northern England. Nelson's journey abroad lasted a year but his images would last a lifetime. His "unique visual diary featured revealing images of a previously inaccessible Tibet." Ten years after his internationally acclaimed publications, Nelson was commissioned to cover "more culturally diverse themes, ranging from the Russian involvement in Afghanistan and the ongoing strife between India and Pakistan in Kashmir to the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia." From 1997 onwards, Nelson has successfully accumulated images of remote and unique cultures photographed with a traditional 50-year-old plate camera, and many awards and decorations have followed.³

Maasai, Kenya and Tanzania (2010)

Jimmy Nelson



jimmynelson.com/people/maasai

When the Maasai migrated from the Sudan in the 15th century, they attacked the indigenous groups they met along the way and raided cattle. By the end of their journey, they had taken over almost all of the land in the Rift Valley. To be a Maasai is to be born into “one of the last great warrior cultures.” The Maasai’s entire way of life has historically depended on their cattle, following patterns of rainfall over vast land in search of food and water. To this day, the Maasai live in a “survival of the fittest” culture, in which Maasai women in particular are expected to nurture the family no matter the cost. Maasai women are often brutally beat by their fathers or spouses, whom they typically marry before the age of sixteen. In November of 2010, Jimmy Nelson travelled the northern desert near Lake Turkana and further south in graze lands by Great Rift Valley where he went on to photograph the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania.⁴ Nelson captured professional portraits of many of the tribe’s men and women. His focus on the women’s portraits utilized contrast of color, as well as strategic lighting. The photographer used a solid black background so that the focus of the image is on the subject. This eliminates all other distractions and forces the viewer to face reality head on. Additionally, this color choice contrasts with the signature white jewelry of the Maasai people. This draws the eye contact of the viewer away from the background and to the neck of the woman. Then, the subject is pictured facing away from the camera. This not only allows the light to especially shine on the scarred cheek of the woman, but also symbolize the lack of contact and relation between these people and others in different countries, as they are neglected.

David Covarrubias (Mexican)



David Covarrubias self portrait

eyeofdavid.cammotion.net/about



India, David Covarrubias

eyeofdavid.cammotion.net

David Covarrubias was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico where he grew up prior to immigrating to the United States. With an innate passion for art and robotics, Covarrubias naturally pursued a career in the film industry as a designer of animatronic characters and as a puppeteer for hundreds of films and commercials, such as: The Lost World, Iron Man, Instinct, The Muppet Movie, and more. For Covarrubias, his job allowed him the opportunity to travel around the world and to eventually discover his “passion for street photography and photojournalism of the impoverished people of the world.” Covarrubias’ most famous works have been images photographed from the slums of Mexico and India, as well as photography of animals, street life, landscapes, and architecture.⁵

“There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment in knowing that a photograph you took captures not just an instance in time, but an entire portion of a person’s existence.” - David Covarrubias⁵

India, David Covarrubias



The Beautification of India was a program of The Emergency called by Indira Gandhi in 1975 to remove poverty and slums from the public eye in India. Although this initiative was intended to help the lower castes, remove them from slums, and rebuild more “beautiful” buildings for them to live in, it only worsened the state of poverty in India. Slums were destroyed but few to no buildings were built. The Untouchables of India were left on the streets to fend for themselves, and became victims of gangs. The Beggar Masters, leaders of these gangs, forced amputations and burns onto the victims so that they would gain more sympathy from the public as they were begging. These beggars would give 90+% of their earnings to their Beggar Masters, but would grow desensitized to this extreme brutality. David Covarrubias captures this cruel cycle as he photographs the streets of India. In this portrait, he employs grayscale to evoke raw, solemn emotions. The initial feeling of pathos that the audience feels is underscored as the contrast between the light and dark colors. The woman begging is smiling with seemingly bright teeth, which contrast with her darker complexion and the dark discoloration of her eyes. In addition, her white scarf contrasts with her darker hands with show her fingers as stubs, most likely a forced amputation. This picture takes place in the natural setting, rather than a studio, to demonstrate the normality of this scenario in India. Additionally, this photograph focuses on the wrinkles and imperfections of the woman’s appearance, but hints that she tries not to show that she feels it. Instead, the photograph captures her smile and “happy” face, as she tries to gain empathy from tourists or the public who will give her money. The focus on the eyes is directly on the camera, creating the effect of following the viewer, just as beggars tried to maintain eye contact with the public for money.

Smoking coal miner vs. *Maasai*



Both the *Smoking coal miner* by Steve McCurry and *Maasai* by Jimmy Nelson are captured in color, with focus on one single subject. Both photographs display a dark, black background--although McCurry's is not solid and Nelson's is. Both photographers use contrast of color to highlight the subject and use light placement to highlight the subject's face specifically. The coal miner is photographed in his natural setting, while the Maasai woman is photographed in the studio. This evokes different messages. McCurry's natural setting makes the photographed scenario more "real" as it is on-site and more relatable as viewers would be able to picture how a mine would look. On the other hand, the woman in the studio is isolated, but the dramatic stare from the camera is intended to create a mood of isolation so that the viewer realizes that the distance, both literally and figuratively, between nations should not separate humanity. Both photographers utilize light and depth to emphasize certain features of the subject's faces. In McCurry's coal miner portrait, the focus is on the light brown eyes and pursed lip mouth--where the cigarette lies. In Nelson's Maasai woman portrait, the focus is on the left scarred cheek and dark unphased eyes. Both subjects are shown with serious emotions on their faces--arguably blank faces--in order to remove the bias that may appear if they do show emotions. Both photographers use this tool so that the viewer can decide for himself or herself what he or she interprets from these people's emotions and experiences, as they are in different nations and cultures.

Smoking coal miner vs. India



The *Smoking coal miner* by Steve McCurry and *India* by David Covarrubias have stark differences in color, although with the shared focus on one single subject. Both photographs display natural backgrounds, contrast of color to highlight the subject, and light placement to highlight the subject's face specifically. The coal miner is photographed in color, while the Indian beggar woman is photographed in grayscale. This evokes different messages. McCurry's natural color makes the photographed scenario more raw and eye-capturing as it brings the attention of viewers to the face of the miner, showing the soot and dirt that he has dived in for 12 hours a day. On the other hand, the woman in the studio is edited in grayscale, creating a more dramatic and solemn mood. Additionally, these portraits demonstrate the gender roles of people in labor countries. Men were expected to work despite harsh conditions, while women were easy targets for manipulation and begging. Both photographers utilize light and depth to emphasize certain features of the subject's faces. In McCurry's coal miner portrait, the focus is on the light brown eyes and pursed lip mouth--where the cigarette lies. In Covarrubias' Indian woman portrait, the focus is on the bright smile and cloudy eyes. Additionally, both photographers strategically place the hands of the subject near the center of the image. The hands are able to tell the viewer how much labor and struggle the people have gone through, from wrinkled and callused hands to amputation and deformed ones.

Maasai vs. India



Maasai by Jimmy Nelson and *India* by David Covarrubias have stark differences in color, although with the shared focus on one single subject. Both photographs contrast color to highlight the subject, and light placement to highlight the subject's face specifically. The Maasai woman is photographed in color, while the Indian beggar woman is photographed in grayscale. This evokes different messages. Maasai's natural color makes the photographed scenario more raw and eye-capturing as it brings the attention of viewers to the face of the Maasai woman, showing the bright white jewelry and dark garments she wears daily. On the other hand, the Indian woman is edited in grayscale, creating a more dramatic and solemn mood. Additionally, these portraits demonstrate the gender roles of women in culturally different countries. Both Maasai and Indian women were easy targets for manipulation and brutality, demonstrated by the scarred cheek and amputated hands. Both photographers utilize light and depth to emphasize certain features of the subject's faces. In Nelson's Maasai woman portrait, the focus is on the brutal scars and unphased eyes. In Covarrubias' Indian woman portrait, the focus is on the bright smile and cloudy eyes. Additionally, both photographers strategically place the faces of the subject toward the top of the image. This influences the viewer to see the woman fully, focusing on the face and then drifting eye contact down to the garments and scars to see struggle that women have gone through.

Conclusion

Photographers Steve McCurry, Jimmy Nelson, and David Covarrubias utilize contrast of color and light to demonstrate the universal struggle that people go through for the trials and tribulations of life, despite their geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic, lingual, or educational backgrounds. The differences in culture of the photographers and the subjects influence the method of coping with struggle, from keeping straight faces and unphased eyes to faking happiness to gain sympathy from others. The photographs of these three artists give historical and social context to the impact of war and economic struggle on nations and their lower classes.

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