

Photography and Catastrophe: Reading Photographs of the Disaster Event

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Abstract

This article analyses 24 selected photographs—organised into two photo series—about one particular catastrophic event: the impacts of Merapi Volcano’s eruption in Java, Indonesia, on October to November 2010. These photographs are made by two different groups of profession, professional photojournalists and volunteers, who worked in relatively same locations during the post-eruption. The analytical methods are informed by Roland Barthes’ thought on semiotics as well as critical theories in visual media specifically photography. This critical reading leads me to found distinctive representations constructed by each photo series. There are three elements that create this kind of representations, they are the relation of subject-object, visual codes, and visual perception. The first photo series made by professional photojournalists represent disaster event as a paradox: between “destruction” and “beauty” of the nature. Meanwhile, the photo series photographed by volunteers more focus on representation of the survivors in rehabilitating their lives. All these findings result in the conclusion that shows the role of photography—on perception and memory construction regarding time, space, body and mind—is exceedingly relative, particularly relating to catastrophe and disaster.

Keywords: *Catastrophe, visual code, meaning, memory, visual perception*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengulas 24 foto terpilih (terbagi menjadi dua kelompok seri foto) tentang sebuah peristiwa katastrofe, yakni bencana letusan Gunung Merapi pada Oktober-November 2010. Kedua seri foto tersebut dibuat masing-masing oleh dua kelompok profesi berbeda, yaitu pewarta foto profesional (jurnalis foto) dan sukarelawan. Secara terpisah mereka bekerja di wilayah terdampak bencana dan dalam jangka waktu yang berdekatan. Dengan meminjam gagasan pokok semiotika Roland Barthes serta mengombinasikannya dengan pendekatan kritis kajian media visual terutama fotografi, pembacaan penulis terhadap kedua kelompok seri foto ini menunjukkan adanya perbedaan representasi yang menonjol. Seri foto oleh jurnalis merepresentasikan peristiwa bencana sebagai paradoks: antara “kerusakan” dan “keindahan” oleh alam. Sedangkan, seri foto oleh sukarelawan lebih berfokus pada representasi penyintas (*survivors*) dalam upaya rehabilitasi. Temuan pembacaan ini menggiring pada kesimpulan bahwa peran fotografi terhadap pembentukan persepsi dan memori manusia akan waktu, ruang, tubuh, dan pikiran sangatlah relatif, khususnya terkait peristiwa bencana.

Kata Kunci: *Bencana, kode visual, makna, memori, persepsi visual*

Introduction

Pictures about a particular event taken by a camera and distributed later for mass audiences have always been interesting subject to discuss. This is due to their involvement with different issues spanning from photography and subjectivity, representation, to so-called reality. What if the particular event being photographed is a catastrophic event? I am interested in reading this kind of pictures: the published photographs about a disaster.

Photography has fascinated people since the beginning of its invention as the “light-writing” medium (Giblett, 2008: 56). However, in its further development the focus of analysis on photography has shifted from the technological-related issues to the cultural impacts of photography in human history and civilisation. Therefore, a series of photographs about a disaster that have impacts on human life is relevant to be analysed. This fascinates people, I argue, mainly because of two reasons. *Firstly*, disaster is the kind of event that can be categorised as a catastrophe, and it is a common response of humans to be curious about every event that affects them, especially a catastrophe or an event causing great and often sudden damage or suffering. The *secondary* reason for this fascination is the very characteristic of the visual media, i.e. still image. Photographs in their form as still images are created by the photographer and perceived by the

audience based on seeing. Arguably, this visual impression could convey as well as construct meanings in various forms and diverse interpretations.

This essay examines two series of photographs about the same catastrophic event that were created by two different groups of people. I argue that both of the series lead to different significations based on its subject-object relationships, the visual codes, and the visual perceptions. These different significations are also discussed in relation to the impact and role of photography on perceptions of time, space, human body and mind, especially regarding the catastrophic event.

Photography as Representation of Constructed Reality

The photographs being analysed here is series of photograph related to a volcano eruption, the Mount Merapi, in Indonesia. The eruption occurred from October until November 2010. The selected photographs are organised into two groups that are based on type of the photographers. The first group is a series of photographs taken by professional photojournalists, whereas the second group is a series of photographs shot by non-professional photographers. These amateur or non-professional photographers are volunteers who mostly come from outside the affected areas, but somehow a few of them are also members

of the communities in the affected disaster regions. These series of photographs are shown and analysed in the different section of the essay.

The analysis focuses on seeking a new insight of what *reality* means, the aspects that determine elements being framed in a photograph, in order to construct the meaning of the photographs to the viewers. The importance of understanding this constructed reality by photography is useful as an impetus for viewers or media audience to develop their critical thoughts on images exposed to them.

Regarding the catastrophic event, on the 26th of October 2010 Mount Merapi, one of the most active volcanoes in Indonesia located in Java, erupted with a bigger magnitude and impact than its previous eruptions since 1930 (Global Volcanism Program, n.d.). A month later the volcano exploded many times and led to its volcanic materials spreading unstopably over the affected areas, mostly in Central Java Province and Yogyakarta Special Region. This natural event, then, became a human tragedy causing the casualties of 386 people and forcing more than 200,000 inhabitants living nearby the volcano to evacuate from their homes and could not go back for a month (for some people even for forever due to the destructive impact of the eruption on their villages). According to Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana/BNPB or the Indonesian

National Agency for Disaster Management, up until the 30th of November 2010 there were 61,154 people who could not go back to their homes and had to stay in temporary shelters that were far from their villages (BNPB, 2010).

Theoretically, this natural event became 'natural disaster' due to its impacts on humans and their lives caused by the linkage and sudden encounter between the natural and the cultural entity. The Merapi's eruption in 2010 attracted news coverage world widely, and many news reports were published or broadcast during the period. *New York Times* describes what happened in the affected areas as,

The latest eruption on Monday morning sent residents, who had returned to tend to livestock and fields abandoned after last week's volcano, back down the slopes in panic. The nearby city of Yogyakarta was brought to a standstill as motorists and workers stopped to gape at a grey plume of ash and superheated gas that shot into the sky and tumbled down the mountain's slopes. (Belford & Carless, 2010)

Most current affair reports at the time focus on the impacts of this disaster on the people living nearby to Merapi and, at the same time, delivers warning and invites awareness about the following impacts possible to happen and affect to wider people. A report in *TIME* wellrepresented this sense as they write,

Residents brave enough to venture outdoors have been warned to wear masks and goggles, and there

are now reports of ash drifting as far as west Java. The airport in Yogyakarta still closed on Friday. [...]Thousands of stranded travellers unable to wait around have been forced to drive as far as Surabaya, nearly 250 miles (400 km) away, to catch flights. Volcanic material in the air has also led hundreds to complain of respiratory problems following Friday's explosion. (Tedjasukmana, 2010)

Most journalistic reports of this disaster are illustrated with photographs, or on some occasions the photographs become the main visual report as well. Some of these are presented in large size in the print and online media and become the main headline news for several days during the period. A few of these photographs were compiled in *The Boston Globe's* network and re-published on their website in 'The Big Picture' section entitled "Mount Merapi's Eruption". There are 39 photographs taken by Indonesian photojournalists who work for international news agency, such as *Reuters*, *Associate Press (AP)*, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, and *Getty Images*. These photographs has been published and circulated in the global mass media networks as the headlines from October to early November 2010 ("Mount Merapi's Eruption", 2010).

Meanwhile, thousands of different photographs were created by ordinary people (not professional journalists or photographers) who stayed in the same affected areas at the same time. These non-professional photographers shot the

pictures mainly for their own record as personal documents, although some of the pictures were exhibited publicly in the end. However, there is an interesting point from these photographs compared to those intentionally produced by professionals. This topic is the primary focus of this essay in terms of the meaning-production process through photographs.

Actually, when an event, moment, or object is captured in a frame, the photographer creates a presumption about what they actually see or feel. For Barthes (1972: 91), "a photograph is a mirror". He proposes this idea after examining the French electoral photography that, for him, does not provide viewers with the complexity of an image, i.e. the message is very straightforward about well-known information regarding the purpose of the candidates and some ideal concepts.

Barthes (1972: 92) continues that the codes of photography are overflowing with signs. Understanding these signs, and interpreting them to gain and construct meaning, needs a specific approach. One of the most suitable approaches to understand this kind of subject that 'overflowing with signs', is *semiotics*. In general, semiotics is "the study of signs, with the object of identifying the systematic regularities from which meanings is construed" (Burgin, 2001: 66). Semiotics leads to the possibility of providing a comprehensive analysis of "cultural behaviour" and all aspects of

“human communication systems” (Price & Wells, 2004: 29).

Discussing photography using this approach leads to other important concepts: reality and representation. Representation is part of signifying processes of signs conveyed by an image, whereas reality is a quite difficult concept to define. Photography, especially in the digital era, becomes more sophisticated in mode of production and reception, and creates prolonged discussion about claiming what reality is (Alvarado, Buscombe, and Collins, 2001). They argue that photographs do not intend to show real life *as it is*, but for them, photographs were constructed, not found. Rather than focusing on its technological issues or actual references in social life, they suggest that photography analysis is better to “focus on the moment of reception” (Alvarado et al., 2001). Crowe (2003) echoes this argument by stating that what a photographer does is not just “documenting reality”, but “composing information” through a process of capturing images. Having said that, photographs are not identical to the “realities” by capturing social and cultural moments. These images are *constructed realities* through photography process, which have impact on the meaning-production among the viewers.

The Analysed Photographs: The Series

Both series of photographs selected here have been published publicly, and each series consists of 12 photographs. The first series shot by professional photojournalists that made headlines in the global mass media networks (Figure 1, arranged in code Journalist [J]-1 to J-12). The selection is based on the similarity of object and location. By this I mean these 12 selected photographs could represent the pattern of pictures made by journalists that were published in mass media.

The second series consists of selection from a collection of photographs shot by volunteers (Figure 2, arranged in code Volunteer [V]-1 to V-12). These photographs have been curated and exhibited in an event called ‘A Tribute to Volunteers’ in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on the 28th of December 2010. The photographs, taken by volunteers who served in the major affected areas, were not intentionally made for exhibition. Basically, they shot these pictures for being shared in online media both their own social media networks and the Jalin Merapi’s website, a non-profit humanitarian network that organised these volunteers and delivered aids during the post-disaster. JalinMerapi is also the organisation that initiated the idea to arrange this massive collection of photographs and organised the exhibition. For the purpose of the analysis in this

essay, there are 12 selected photographs as well—the same number as the first series for consistency and comparability reason. I have managed to select 12 photographs that represent the similarity of the whole collection of these volunteers-made photographs in terms of the theme, the locations, the styles of composition, and the nuances.

Another similarity of these two series is that each photograph was taken

by an Indonesian regardless of whether he/she is a professional photojournalist or a volunteer. This similarity is intentional here for making the comparison is equal and unbiased in terms of the relatively the same physical and social obstacles in the location, and the understanding of local contexts. The series of these 24 photographs can be seen below.



J - 1



J - 2



J - 3



J - 4



J - 5



J - 6



J - 7



J - 8



J - 9



J - 10



J - 11



J - 12

Figure 1. The series shot by professional photojournalists



V-1



V-2



V-3



V-4



V-5



V-6



V-7



V-8



V – 9



V – 10



V – 11



V – 12

Figure 2. The series captured by volunteers

Both of the photographer groups—the journalists and the volunteers—worked in the same affected areas and stayed there during the same period. All of them were granted a similar ID card that allowed them to access all areas, including the most dangerous and most affected spots during the eruption. However, there is a distinctive difference between these two series. Apart from the technical issues, such as the camera and the additional instruments used, the significant difference is more related to the representation of the images.

The series from photojournalists represent two main ideas: *the damage* caused by and, at the same time, *the beauty* of nature. The series explicitly

informed its viewers about this by showing the images about effect of the disaster to human and environment. Examples include the house covered by volcanic ash and other materials, casualties, deaths, and tears are signs that signify the damage. The other pattern in this series is the representation of the 'beauty' of nature with literally exposes the volcano's minute-to-minute of the eruption. This natural event, then, is captured in the landscape format that put style and perfectness of techniques (composition, timing, colour, and depth-of-field) on hallowing position rather than on information that useful for viewers.

In contrast, the second series made by volunteers represents another sense.

Instead of being explicit in sharing images about the effects of the disaster, these photographs symbolise more the spirit of hope and rehabilitation. Unlike the first series, these photographs do not literally capture the sign of disaster (massive destruction, damage, sadness, losing family, death/casualties), but focus on the symbolic representation of rehabilitation process that represent the hope of people. Exemplifications of this include the image of helping each other in shelters and villages, pluralism and borderless, using any sources and capacity they have for other people and the environment, are major signs that represent hope and rehabilitation in the catastrophic situation.

Analogically with the first series created by journalists—capturing and describing a tragedy or a terrifying event—Barthes (1979) commented on the series of photograph about the execution of Guatemalan Communists in his essay entitled “Shock-Photos”. According to him, the way in which photography represents this kind of event is meaningless, as he says,

Now, none of these photographs, all too skill-full, touches us. This is because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us; the photographer has left us nothing—except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only by a technical interest; over-indicated by the artist himself, for us they have no history, we can no longer *invent*

our own reception of this synthetic nourishment, already perfectly assimilated by its creator. (Barthes, 1979: 71)

Barthes (1979: 72) argues that this kind of photographs create “pure signs” that provide no more opportunity of interpretation for viewers. In his word, “the literal photograph introduces us to the scandal of horror, not to horror itself” (Barthes, 1979: 73). On the other hand, images from the second series invite more interpretative efforts to their viewers. This interpretation is important in regard to develop a constructive and sustainable dialogue among people, which is the main purpose of communications, whether in the form of interpersonal communication or mediated communication (especially using visual media).

The representations discussed here lead to the idea of “mediated memories” (van Dijck, 2007: 1). Every image, as well as the collection of images, on a particular event could form the mediated memories. Different memory relies on different representation of images or photographs that are exposed to people. By this I mean that the two series of photograph analysed here demonstrated the way in which mediated memories could lead to different memories based on the representation of the photographs. The perception on time and space, or here about the moment and place of disaster (the eruption), and the perception on human body and mind in the context of catastrophic event are

constructed by the type of images (photographs) exposed to the viewers.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of two different photograph series, actually, the photographer as the subject is still a determinant factor in representing and capturing the so-called reality. However, there are other important subjects: the subject *being* photographed and the subject *looking at* the photographs or simply called as the viewers. Looking or reception process is the essential part of the meaning-production through visual media.

The interpretation of the selected photographs presented here could result in various meanings from one to another. Price and Wells (2004) note that reading photography in regard to meaning-production process is a complex matter. For them, photography is in-between of three major areas: the scientific, social scientific, and the humanities. They remind us one of the most important Barthes' thoughts on photography:

Photography is never about the present, although the act of looking occurs in the present. In addition, the photograph is indescribable: words cannot substitute for the weight or impact of the resemblance of the image. (Barthes, cited in Price & Wells, 2004: 31)

Reading photograph is an interpreting process that leads to meaning-production. This lies on the subjectivity both in moment of creation and reception. Thus, the way in which meaning is constructed varies upon each person, it depends on his/hersubjectivity and contexts (background, frame of references or field of experiences and the moment of viewing). It is relevant to conclude this essay by remembering what Crowe (2003) says once he has finished his project for taking photographs of a Kalahari community in Africa, Ngwatle:

I still do not fully understand all the developments at Ngwatle or the entire extent or ramification of development projects for the community. Still, I took photographs. What these photographs tell is, then, a representation of my perceptions, not those of the community. (Crowe, 2003: 485).

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Captions and Credits of the Photographs

Figure 1: The series shot by photojournalists

1. "Mount Merapi volcano spew smoke as seen from Deles village in Klaten, near the ancient city of Yogyakarta, November 1, 2010". (© 2010REUTERS/DwiOblo)
2. "Lightning strikes as Mount Merapi erupts, as seen from Ketep village in Magelang, Indonesia's Central Java province November 6, 2010". (© 2010REUTERS/Beawiharta)
3. "Molten lava flows from the crater of Mount Merapi captured in this long exposure photograph taken from Klaten district in Central Java province late on November 2, 2010". (© 2010SONNY TUMBELAKA/AFP/Getty Images)
4. "Lava and ash spews from the top of Mount Merapi, viewed from Klaten district in Central Java province before dawn on November 6, 2010". (© 2010BAY ISMOYO/AFP/Getty Images)
5. "A view from a domestic flight from Denpasar to Yogyakarta that was subsequently diverted to Surabaya airport shows a plume of gas and ash billowing some 10 km (six mi) high from Mount Merapi, during an eruption on November 4, 2010". (© 2010CLARA PRIMA/AFP/Getty Images)

6. "Houses are in flames as volunteers rescue burned victims of an eruption of Mount Merapi in Argomulyo village early on November 5, 2010". (© 2010SUSANTO/AFP/Getty Images)
7. "Volunteers rescue burned victims of Mount Merapi eruption in Argomulyo village, devastated by deadly hot clouds of volcanic ash early on November 5, 2010". (© 2010SUSANTO/AFP/Getty Images)
8. "A kitchen is covered by ash in Cangkringan village off the Indonesia's Central Java province, November 6, 2010". (© 2010REUTERS/DwiOblo)
9. "A pair of shoes sits covered in volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Merapi in the abandoned village of Kaliadem, Yogyakarta, Indonesia on Nov. 2, 2010". (© 2010AP Photo/Trisnadi)
10. "A girl weeps at a temporary shelter for those who are affected by the eruption of Mount Merapi in Bawukan, Indonesia, Friday, Nov. 5, 2010." (© 2010AP Photo/AK Hendratmo)
11. "Villagers gather at the grave of the victims of Mount Merapi eruption for a mass burial at Sleman, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Sunday, November 7, 2010". (© 2010AP Photo/Achmad Ibrahim)
12. "Search and rescue team members from Yogyakarta carry a victim of Merapi volcano's eruption at the village of Ngancar in Sleman on November 8, 2010". (© 2010CLARA PRIMA/AFP/Getty Images)

Figure 2: The series captured by volunteers

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2. © 2010 Anggie Septa Sebastian and Sulistiyawati
3. © 2010 Probo Pramudito
4. © 2010 Probo Pramudito
5. © 2010 M Iskandar Tri Gunawan
6. © 2010 Muzayin Nazaruddin
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