

A bunch of urchins caught midair, jumping into the water at India Gate; A DTC bus with water upto the windows stuck at Minto Bridge (or Shivaji Bridge if you like); tourists ( I suspect from Bengal) clad for the Antarctic, enjoying the snow at Gulmarg; a couple of young women, holding their dupattas over their head and rushing to a shade while it is pouring.

You can add your own favourite to this list of course. All of these are pictures which one invariably encounters in newspapers, year, after year, after year! The captions remain the same-children enjoying a cool swim when the temperature hits 45C; traffic thrown out of gear with sudden rain; tourists enjoy the snow in Gulmarg; Rain brings down the temperature but commuters caught unawares with sudden rain etc etc. The captions remain the same. And so does the composition and the angle.

I encounter these “iconic” pictures every year with a sense of déjà vu. And wonder- how is it that year after year, different photographers; different photo editors always choose the same pictures? Are they reusing the old pictures, touching them up by using that saviour of bad photographers, good old Photoshop? Clearly not since the mise-en-scene is clearly changing (different cars etc) though even that is not impossible to do in Photoshop with the wonders of layering. Surely every photographer “sees” a different reality through the lens and so it is mind boggling how year after year, the same frames are repeated.

Could it be that the photographer herself has seen the scene being shot in that ‘iconic’ fashion that she can’t think otherwise? If this is the case, is it something that is done consciously (something has worked before, why bother to try out something new which could be risky etc) or is it a case of the eye seeing only what it has seen before?

Photography is, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, a work of art based on chemical and industrial processes of production. And yet, how is it possible to have the exact same photograph being taken by several different individuals, temporally separated? From the point of view of the photographer it seems completely incomprehensible to reproduce the exact same work of art- it is like an artist making an exact replica of the Mona Lisa. Where is the sense of artistic achievement or indeed pride, barring the purely technical virtuosity in imitation?

One can argue of course, that the viewers “reading” the photograph being distinct individuals will read different meaning into each such rendering of the image. I don’t think so. Of course the urchins jumping into the water are

different every time they are clicked, as are perhaps their expressions. Yes, it is a different set of Bengali tourists every year in the picture of snowball fighting in Gulmarg. But the dominant reading of the image, and surely the intended reading of the image ( if there is any such construct) is the message of snow, Gulmarg, tourists or scorching heat, cool water, reckless abandon. These are, I imagine independent of the figures in the photograph but only dependent on the overall effect- the gestalt so to say.

Thus, I remain puzzled about the how and indeed the why of endlessly repeating the same photograph year after year- does the photographer not realise this? Does the photo editor not realise this? Of course they do. And given that self respecting creative professionals would not want to be labelled imitators or hacks, how is it that this perpetuates? I don't have the answer. In the meantime, I am still waiting for the first picture of the unseasonal summer squall which will catch the citizens of Delhi unawares!