On the Subject of Photographs:

An active (act of) collaboration with photography

Abstract

Over more than thirty years of photographic practice, I have often noticed remarkable disparities between the scenes, objects, events or 'moments' 'out there' I had attempted to record – and the images within the resulting photographs. These (sometimes subtle, sometimes drastic, but almost always unanticipatable) disparities are, I believe, the result of the significant differences between the way in which we experience time and space – and the way in which the camera does so. Despite the near-unanimous agreement that photographs are an accurate and objective record of things 'as they really were', several of my photographs continue to offer tantalising clues that there may, in fact, be something else going on here: something which our current conceptions of photographs (what they 'are', how they are produced and what they show us) may hinder our ability to recognise.

What photographs 'are'

Probably as a result of their mechanical origins, photographs are widely assumed to be an accurate, objective and truthful record of the scene, event or 'moment' in front of the lens.

How photographs are produced (made)

The axiom that photographs are 'taken' reinforces the notion that the scene, event or 'moment' depicted in the photograph already existed 'out there' independently of the act of recording it

What photographs show us

The 'subject of the photograph' (what the photograph is 'about') is understood to be the scene, event or 'moment' in front of the lens (or the photographer's opinion or interpretation of this).

Based on these assumptions, photographs are widely assumed to be the product of only three factors:

i.   The photographer's *intention*: what we want to achieve / what we want to show you

ii. Our *expertise* in manipulating the camera and the technology in pursuit of a desired result

iii. The appearance and/or behaviour of *the thing/s in front of the lens* (this will be distinguished from 'the subject of the photograph' or what the photograph is assumed to be 'about')

Through an investigation of two types of evidence: photographs (which will be investigated through a mix of methods) and the writings of practitioners, academics, critics and the authors of 'How-to' texts (which will be investigated through discourse analysis), this project will explore and consider:

- Whether the camera sometimes records/depicts scenes, events and 'moments' that did not exist 'out there' but which were instead created by the act of photographing them, and

- And if so, whether our ability to recognise this phenomenon is impeded by the conceptions resulting from the language we use to describe photographs and the photographic process.

Based on the results achieved, I anticipate that the outcome(s) of this project may offer new ways of thinking about and working with representative media, as well as new insights into the implications of our assumptions about the 'objectivity' with which they represent the world 'out there'.

Aims and Objectives

This project will investigate whether our traditional conceptions of the role and function of the camera/medium as a passive tool under the conscious control of the operator have shaped both photographic practice (what, how and why we photograph) as well as what we see in the results.

Exploring clues within existing knowledge in pursuit of new knowledge and a new understanding, this project will explore the implications (for our ways of thinking about and working with representational media as well as our assumptions about what their results show us) of the traditional conceptions of the camera as a passive tool which accurately and objectively records what was 'really out there' and endeavour to describe an alternative way of thinking about and using the photographic medium.

This project will answer the following questions:

1. Does the way in which the photographic medium renders / depicts *the things in front of the lens* produce, in some cases, an image (of a scene, event or 'moment') that did not exist 'out there' – but which was instead created by the act of photographing it?

2. Does the way in which we use language to describe photographs and photography hinder our ability to conceive of the photograph as a record of, or as a means to create, something else? (And if so, in what ways might this influence our assumptions about the relationship between what we see in representational media and what was 'really' 'out there'?)

3. How can these hypotheses be reliably tested?

Literature Review

As suggested by Davey (2006), one role of theory is to uncover the possibilities that remain inherent but unacknowledged within practices – and thereby liberate them towards futures already latent within them. According to Davey (2006), an examination of theory may serve as a 'midwife to practice'.

With its origins in the industrial revolution, the camera – like the telescope and the microscope – is understood to operate in accordance with the laws of physics (the pioneer of photography Fox Talbot described photography [1844] as "The pencil of nature"). we regard the camera as an objective instrument to record images which, in turn, are understood to be: an "accurate and objective record" (Genoni, 2002:137), "a faithful record of what has been witnessed" (Rogers, 1978:33), "a window on reality" (Bryman, 2012:427): a "natural and truthful" account (Fosdick and Fahmy, 2007:1) of what was "already there" (Barthes, 1984:55) describing things "as they really are" (Ross, 1982:12). Even when the camera is acknowledged to be a factor in the creation of the 'moment' recorded, its influence or contribution is understood to be limited to the effect of its presence (and the implied suggestion that 'a photograph may be taken') on the actions, reactions and behaviours of the individuals who may be thus recorded (Azoulay, 2010:11-12).

Bordieu has argued that, because our knowledge of the conditions under which work was (conceived and) produced is after the fact and takes place in the domain of rational thought as shaped by language, the ways in which we employ language to describe the finished product (the "opus operatum") often conceals the actual process ("the modus operandi") by which it was created (Bordieu, 1993:158).

General Semantics (Korzybski, 1933, Hayakawa, 1949) argues that we 'see' only what the syntactic structure of our language allows us to see – and that, by shaping the meaning we make of what we see in the world(s) 'out there', the language(s) we speak has a profound influence over what we are able to think *of* (Boroditsky, 2009). Put another way: we make sense of the world (and our experience in it), not only through the language of our eyes (binocular vision), but through the 'eyes' of our language.

It may be however, that something else is going on in photographs – something which our binocular vision (which, in giving us the means to experience depth & distance, imposes an expectation of three-dimensions), our conception of time as a seamless continuum (as a result of which, we experience events as taking place within a seamless continuum, with a 'before', a 'during' and an 'after' [Van Voorst, 1988:14], imposing what Enkvist, [1995:123] called "the epistemics of cause and effect"), our language (which describes photographs as truthful records 'taken' from the world), and our conception of the camera as a passive and objective tool, all hinder our ability to IMAGinE: the possibility that the medium of photography is capable of an active (act of) collaboration in the creation of scenes, events and 'moments' which did not exist until brought into existence by the act of photographing them.

As a result of 'seeing' a very different world than the one we know, to the camera, time is a frozen moment which keeps 'happening' forever. Likewise, to the camera and its monocular eye, the world we know in three-dimensions is a contiguous series of flat planes which enables it to make visible the relationships it 'sees' between these planes (such as the photo of Aunt Edna with the telephone pole protruding from the top of her head) that we did not – or could not – recognise in the original scene.

Ballet, N.Y.C., 1938 - André Kertész

http://cloudfront.viewmixed.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/perfectly-Timed-Pictures-640x334

Promenade des Anglais #3, 2006 - Rutherford

Syrigos Selini submarine 4783, 2010 - Rutherford

This active (act of) contribution has previously been noted by a small number of photographers:

> I never have taken a picture I've intended. They're always better or worse. You don't put into a photograph what's going to come out. Or what comes out is not what you put in. The camera is 'recalcitrant'. You may want to do one thing and it's determined to do something else. (Diane Arbus, 1972:11 & 14-15)

> I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed [...] the photograph isn't what was photographed, it's something else. (Garry Winogrand, cited by Sontag, 1973:197 & Diamonstein, 1981:82)

If the camera sometimes records 'something else', why then, don't we see it?

Despite the 'objective evidence' provided by such photographs, the conceptual filters or 'blinders' imposed by language and binocular vision encourage us to 'recognise' (from Latin *recognoscere* to 'know again' or 'recall to mind') that, for example, the dancers and the water were never 'really' suspended motionless in mid-air, but what 'really' happened has instead been distorted inaccurately. (Note the ease with which we will set aside our usual conviction in the 'objective truthfulness' of photographic evidence when this conflicts with the maxims of our language and binocular vision.)

It is worth noting that, while we normally accept the 'objective truthfulness' of photographic evidence, when confronted with moments-in-time which differ from our experience (whether because they are briefer (such as a fraction of a second) or longer (such as time-lapse images of, for example, a flower blossoming before our eyes), it is the *'objective record'* which is assumed to be an inaccurate or misleading representation of the event(s) it purports to record. But what if the world as recorded in such photographs is equally 'true' or 'real'? That the camera does indeed offer us "an accurate and objective record" of the world "as it really is", but "as it really is" to photography – not to us? If the world "as it really is" that photographs show us can only be seen in photographs, does this not oblige us to concede that these 'moments' do not exist until they are brought into being by photography?

How the research will contribute to new knowledge

I believe that our current conception of photography is 'stuck' in its assumptions of what photographs 'are' and what they show us. While a small number of photographers have implicitly challenged these notions, I am not aware of any systematic effort to examine these conception or the questions they beg. In overturning a few of these rocks, I hope to find some insights which may help us become 'unstuck'.

For example, how might our understanding of photography be enhanced, extended or liberated by approaching photographs as if they are 'about' the ways in which the camera 'sees' the world – rather than 'about' the cultural significance of *the things in front of the lens* or 'about' the photographer's opinion or interpretation of these? How might our understanding be enhanced, extended or liberated if we were to accept the legitimacy of the 'reality' depicted in photographs such as those reproduced above? What might we discover about the limits imposed on our imaginations by the habits of thought reflected in – and reinforced by – the language we use to describe them? What might we discover about other ways to IMAGInE the world(s) 'out there' – or about how the prospect of establishing a more collaborative relationship with representational media might offer us a glimpse of these?

By applying (and, if necessary, devising) a reliable and robust set of tools by which the widely-held conceptions of photography can be articulated – and tested against – an equally reliable set of tools to identify and describe what photographs are able to show us, it is expected that the research will expand and enhance our understanding of both the nature of representational media and (if the hypothesis is substantiated) the opportunities for a more collaborative relationship between practitioner and medium. By securing wide publication for a new definition of photography as an active (act of) collaboration between practitioner and medium – and by describing this using new words and phrases (for example, that photographs are 'made' not 'taken'), it is hoped/expected that those who teach and/or write about photography will be both assisted and encouraged to 'see' photography in a new light. It is hoped that this will encourage them to contribute to the development of a new lexicon for discussing photography and practice – and this, in turn, will enable new ways of thinking about the medium and what it can do.

It is expected that the results of this research into the (active / act of) agency of the medium in the creation of the image will have applications in three domains:

- What photographers consider it possible to achieve with the medium

- The way in which photographs are described & discussed by practitioners, academic and critics

- The way in which photographs are described and photography is taught to aspiring practitioners

It is also expected that the research will compliment existing (and future) research into the ways in which our unexamined assumptions about the nature and role of technology shapes our perceptions about what it 'does', as well as our assumptions and beliefs about the reliability of its records of events.

Methodology

In an effort to aggregate the research to be undertaken into appropriate tools, materials and processes, develop and adapt them for an exploration of artistic purposes (Cornock, 1988) and do so in a manner that provides for "methodological innovation and academic clarification" (Renwick, 2006), this project will investigate two types of texts:

1. Photographic works and
2. Writings about photographs

Photographic works

Bodies of photographic works by three categories of practitioners (recognised masters, amateur photographers, and the researcher-practitioner) will be investigated for evidence as to whether the medium has contributed unique and distinctive features / characteristics / elements to photographs.

Challenges in selecting a research methodology

The first obstacle in selecting an appropriate research strategy is the assumption that photographs provide an accurate, objective and truthful record of the culture of which the photographs are both a product and a depiction (what Cobley and Haeffner, 2009:123 termed "the politics of representation") which leads to the assumption that photographs are the product of only three factors:

i. The photographer's *intention*: what we want to achieve / what we want to show you

ii. Our *expertise* in manipulating the camera and the technology in pursuit of a desired result

iii. The appearance and/or behaviour of *the thing/s in front of the lens*)

The second obstacle is that, as a consequence of the colonisation of photography by the social sciences (anthropology, ethnography and sociology), the design and application of visual research methodologies include a number of ontological and epistemological assumptions which are of concern for this project: that the purpose of studying photographs is to identify the social practices (the values & beliefs) and 'meaning-full' decisions that inform *why* the photograph was made, *how* it was made, of *what*, by *whom* and *when*. As a consequence, these research methodologies look, not *at* the photographs, but *through* them – as if through a portal – with no regard for the way in which the medium has rendered or depicted what it records. The usual visual research methodologies are therefore inappropriate for this project.

Phenomenology and synthetic phenomenology

Based on the premise that reality consists of objects & events ('phenomena') as perceived, interpreted and understood by human consciousness, traditional phenomenology is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*:

> Phenomenology is the study of experience and how we experience. It studies structures of conscious experience as experienced from a subjective or first-person point of view, along with its "intentionality" (the way an experience is directed toward a certain object in the world). It then leads to analyses of conditions of the possibility of intentionality, conditions involving motor skills and habits, background social practices and, often, language. (http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_phenomenology.html)

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, 'bracketing' taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasise the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions (Lester, 1999)

The term "synthetic phenomenology" refers to: 1) any attempt to characterize the phenomenal states possessed, or modeled by, an artefact (such as a robot); or 2) any attempt to use an artefact to help specify phenomenal states (independently of whether such states are possessed by a naturally conscious being or an artefact). The notion of synthetic phenomenology is clarified, and distinguished from some related notions. It is argued that much work in machine consciousness would benefit from being more cognizant of the need for synthetic phenomenology of the first type, and of the possible forms it may take. It is then argued that synthetic phenomenology of the second type looks set to resolve some problems confronted by standard, non-synthetic attempts at characterizing phenomenal states. An example of the second form of synthetic phenomenology is given. (Chrisley, R. *Synthetic Phenomenology.* International Journal of Machine Consciousness Vol. 1, No. 1 (2009) pp. 53-70 1)

Many Analytic Philosophers, including Daniel Dennett (1942 -), have criticized Phenomenology on the basis that its explicitly first-person approach is incompatible with the scientific third-person approach, although Phenomenologists would counter-argue that natural science can make sense only as a human activity which presupposes the fundamental structures of the first-person perspective. John Searle has criticized what he calls the "Phenomenological Illusion" of assuming that what is not phenomenologically present is not real, and that what is phenomenologically present is in fact an adequate description of how things really are. (http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_phenomenology.html)

As *Synthetic Phenomenology* attempts "to characterize the phenomenal states possessed by, or modeled by, an artefact" – it might be adapted for my purpose in order to provide a means to characterise the phenomenal states modelled by the medium of photography as a means to define:

1. A set of criteria for selecting appropriate and representative photographic works (by established masters, amateur photographers, and the researcher) through which the hypothesis can be tested

2. The (kind of?) features, elements or characteristics of photographs which are not the result of the photographer's *intention*, the photographer's *expertise*, or the appearance or behaviour of *the things in front of the lens* – and so constitute evidence of the postulated contribution of the medium in the creation of scenes, events or 'moments' created by the act of photographing

3. A valid/reliable means (and/or set of tools) to investigate the selected photographic works to detect/identify such features (and possibly) determine their origins

Might this offer a basis to investigate whether the camera sometimes records/depicts scenes, events and 'moments' that did not exist but which were instead created by the act of photographing them?

Writings about photography and photographs

To identify and consider the effect(s) of language on our conceptions of photography (what it 'is' and what it 'does') and photographs (what they 'are' and what they show us), *Discourse Analysis* and (the principles of) *General Semantics* will be applied to texts by three categories of authors:

- photographer-practitioners discussing their own work,

- academics and critics discussing the work of others, and

- the authors of ('How to take better pictures') manuals discussing works yet to be created.

Based on the outcome(s) of the investigation of these texts, primary research may then be undertaken by interviewing a selection of photographer-practitioners, academics/critics, authors of photography manuals and teachers of photography to explore issues arising from the *Discourse Analysis.*

Ethical, Health & Safety issues

No ethical, health or safety issues are anticipated in the proposed research.

Proposed timescale

In the first year (2016):

- Commence review of the literature

- Finalise the selection of visual research methodology/ies, and begin to develop a theoretical framework and a plan for their application

- Identify the criteria for the selection of a range of appropriate/representative photographs (by recognised masters, amateur photographers, and the researcher-practitioner) to test the hypothesis

In the second year (2017):

- Continue review of the literature to identify (in the writings of photographer-practitioners, academics and critics and the authors of manuals for amateurs) data regarding the implicit assumptions made about photography/photographs

- Consider, and revise as necessary, the theoretical framework for the application of the appropriate methodologies

- Apply the criteria to the selected appropriate/representative photographs (by recognised masters, amateur photographers, and the researcher-practitioner) and begin the content analysis of the photographic materials to test the hypothesis

- Commence interviews among photographer-practitioners, academics/critics, authors of photography manuals and teachers of photography into the way(s) in which photography and photographs are described as a basis for identifying the assumptions made about photographs

In the third year (2018):

- Complete the analysis of the textual materials

- Identify (from both photographic practice and the literature) the widely shared assumptions of practitioners, critics/reviewers and academics about photography and the nature of photographs and, using the revised theoretical framework, apply appropriate methodology/ies to test the hypothesis

- Complete the analysis of the photographic materials

- Compare and interpret the results of the analysis of the textual materials in light of the results of the analysis of the photographic materials

In the fourth year (2019):

- Collate the information (while remaining open to the possibility of unanticipated issues or results)

- Write/revise the dissertation

- Investigate opportunities for publication and wider circulation

3,570 words (excluding indicative bibliography)

Indicative bibliography

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