

Do Photographs Depict Reality?

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Abstract

Since the inception of photography, its relationship with reality has never been settled. There has always been a debate whether photographs are representations of reality or not. This debate further intensified with the digitalization of photography. Photography's association with reality stood threatened due to the use of digital manipulation by photographers. The present article focuses on this strained relationship between the two and attempts to strike a middle ground in the midst of the extreme view points surrounding photography on the issue of its relation to reality.

Keywords: Photography, Reality, Representation

Introduction

Photography has been hailed since its birth for its evidentiary qualities and its ability to depict reality. Photography has been believed to be a true record of reality and its objective representation. It is this quality of photography that has continued to fascinate us over the last 150 years, and still continues to do so. Stressing on the evidentiary qualities of photography, Susan Sontag says that, "photographs, "furnish evidence" and a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened [01]. Annette Kuhn & Kirsten Emiko McAllister also press on photography's strength as a proof of something that has occurred in reality, "as a visual medium, the photograph has many culturally resonant properties that it shares with no other medium. Above all, the photograph is widely held to be a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at sometime, somewhere in the time and place in front of the camera"[02].

Many great theorists like Andre Bazin, John Berger, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Arnhiem have unquestioningly supported the belief in the capacity of the camera to represent

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reality. The supporters of photographic realism, advocated photography to be an objective form of representation because of the lack of human involvement of the photographer and his subjectivity.

Andre Bazin in his early essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image (1945)" professes that, man's innate desire to reproduce reality with minimal human intervention lead to the birth of photography. This is evident from Bazin's following statement: "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" [03].

According to Bazin the lack of involvement of the photographer is responsible for the truthful representation through the medium of photography as compared to paintings. He says, "All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence" [04].

Similarly, Arnheim considers the minimal participation of the photographer as the reason behind the objective depiction through photography. He says: "What is uncanny about photography is that the picture materializes the moment the shutter is released, without any further involvement on the part of the photographer. Neither the hand nor the eye needs to do anything else. And since the participation of the camera seems so substantial, and that of the human being so minimal, one hesitates to call the outcome of this process "a photograph," should this be taken to refer to something created by humans"[05].

Susan Sontag also follows the same line of thought and suggests that photography enjoys a privileged position as compared to other forms of representation because the act of photography is independent of the subjective influence of the photographer.

"Photography has powers that no other image-system has ever enjoyed because, unlike the earlier ones, it is not dependent on an image maker. However carefully the photographer intervenes in setting up and guiding the image-making process, the process itself remains an optical-chemical (or electronic) one, the workings of which are automatic, the machinery for which will inevitably be modified to provide still more detailed and, therefore, more useful maps of the real" [06].

Roland Barthes an ardent believer of photographic realism argues that photography can be considered as a truthful representation of reality owing to its physical characteristics. Barthes says "Every photograph is a certificate of presence. Photography offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence; but this presence is not only of a political order ("to participate by the image in contemporary events"), it is also of a metaphysical order"[07].

Barthes believes that the photographic realism is based on the physical and chemical process that occurs in the act of photography: Roland Barthes declares: '[it] is at the intersection of two quite distinct procedures; one of a chemical order: the action of light on certain substances; the other of a physical order: the formation of an image through an optical device' [08].

Rudolf Arnheim in his 1974 essay entitled 'On the Nature of Photography' also bases his argument on the "mechanical" origin of photographic images.

"All I have said derives ultimately from the fundamental peculiarity of the photographic medium: the physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light. Because of this fundamental peculiarity, photographs have "an authenticity from which painting is barred by birth" [Arnheim, R. (1974)].

In his book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes dwells and builds on the idea of photographic realism. Roland Barthes supports the belief in photography being a true representation of reality. Barthes claims that "photography never lies: or it can lie as to the meaning of the thing...never to its existence" [10].

The quality of indexicality of photographs differentiates them from other forms of representation. A photograph is not a mere resemblance of its object rather it is the trace of the object. Like Barthes, Susan Sontag also believes that photography enjoys a privileged position of authenticity as compared to other images. She says, "The images that have virtually unlimited authority in modern society are mainly photographic images; and their scope and authority stems from properties peculiar to images taken by the camera. Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask." [11].

John Berger also considers photographs to be traces of reality. He says that, "Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way that a photograph does." [12].

Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag share the belief that the photograph is a true reproduction of reality. Barthes and Sontag believe that only photography can boast of an evidential force which no other form of art can, because photograph is an evidence of something that was indeed present before the lens of the camera. The congruence in their views is evident from the following statement:

"The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceeded radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" [13].

In his analysis of photography, Roland Barthes noted that photographs, unlike every other type of image, can never be divorced from their referents. Photograph and referent are glued together [14]. For Barthes photographs are casually connected to their referents. The former testifies the presence of the latter. Roland Barthes writes:

"The photographic referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call the 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and most often are 'chimeras.' Contrary to imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition of reality and the past" [15].

Barthes advocated that the indisputable quality of photography to depict the truth results from the fact, that camera records what is present before the lens, the reality as it transpired in actuality, it is not a figment in the imagination of the photographer. The idea of the indisputable quality of the photographs to depict reality was carried forward by the second generation theorists like Roger Scurton, Kendall Walton, and Scott Walden.

Roger Scruton contends that, an ideal photograph "represents" its subject by reproduction of its appearance. It is not as an interpretation of reality but a true presentation of things as they appear in actuality. He goes as far as saying that, "looking at a photograph is a substitute for looking at the thing itself" [16].

Scott Walden & Kendall Walton put forward the idea that the lack of photographer's mental state involvement makes photography an objective medium of representation as compared to other processes of image making, where the mental state of the image maker lends the subjective character to the representation of reality [17, 18].

While the realists supported the idea of reality being arrested in the photograph to be the ultimate truth, there was an equally vehement degree of opposition to this belief from theorists like Goodman and Snyder who opposed the idea of photographic truth.

Goodman and Snyder affirm that photography is no more inherently tied to the real than are painting, drawing, or, for that matter, language. Rather, photography is merely another way of constructing, ordering, and communicating meaning, and relies just as much on convention and construction as do other media [19].

With the advent of the digital technology the history of photography witnessed a huge transformation and the suspicion regarding the photographic truth grew stronger. The shift from analogue to digital technology facilitated the process of digital manipulation that raised questions about photography's quality to depict reality. Victor Burgin explains this suspicion as follows "As there are no original negatives to verify the truth of the image, the challenging idea of a photographic copy that has no original has circulated widely over the past decades [20].

With digital technology, it is arguably easier to edit and create images of objects that never existed in reality, thus casting doubt on the reliability of photography's connection to the real. Scott Walden questions the objectivity of the digital images. He says that, "analog images more easily facilitate the generation of thoughts that are true, thus increasing the viewer's confidence in the truth value of the images themselves. He doesn't deny that

digital images can also leave the veracity of our thoughts unscathed. But it will be much more difficult for the viewer to have confidence in such thoughts because it is much more complex to verify the degree of objective, mechanical creation of digital images than that of analog images [21].

Fred Ritchin blames digital technology for the raising doubt about the photographic truth. He remarks that digital interventions undermine photography's supposed inherently truthful status, and have thus come to herald the death of analog photography's most specific hallmark [22]. Ritchin laments that computer-imaging practices signal "the end of photography as we have known it" and suggests that digitalization of photography technology raises a suspicion about photography's ability of truthful depiction at the basic level of fact [23].

There are some theorists who believe that the whole idea of a photographic truth is a farce. One of them being W.J.T. Mitchell, who claims that "the concept of the 'genuine' image as a natural, unmanipulated entity is an ideological phantasm" [24]. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that, "Even within the most narrowly defined straight photography, which has often come to be understood as a norm against which to test manipulative deviations [25], it is common knowledge that it takes a lot of mediation by the photographer at various stages of the making process of the image.

W.J.T Mitchell's views are supported by American photographer and critic Martha Rosler, who declares that manipulation has been integral to photography from its very beginnings. In her essay entitled "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations" (1989), she points out that the success of digital developments within photography are the logical consequence of a cultural imperative to create perfectly tricked pictures, rather than vice versa [26].

Manovich has asserted that 'Digital technology does not subvert "normal" photography because "normal" photography never existed' [27]. Retouching and manipulation have always been inherent to the dynamics of photography [28].

Geoffery Batchen also argues that photography is nothing if not a history of manipulated images [29]. Geoffrey Batchen echoes Mitchell and Rosler views when he remarks that the production of any and every photograph involves intervention and manipulation [30].

Conclusion

A balanced way to approach the question of reality and photography requires that we question the objectivity of the photographer who created a particular image. The prerequisite for a photograph to be a representation of reality rests on the fact that the photographer who clicked it kept his prejudices at bay and became a witness and not a spectator. This thought can best be summed up in Ritchin's words, who says that "the value of the photographic image in a digital age would not be secured by tracing its truthfulness to its origins in a photo-chemical process. Rather, it must rest on the conscience and reputation of the photographer who made the image. Overall, Ritchin cast the difficulty for photojournalism in a digital age as a largely

personal and ethical problem - a problem for individual photographers and picture editors as they were pitched into a situation where truth and integrity became ever harder to defend against what he saw as an inherently unscrupulous and deceitful digital technology".

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