A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Photographs

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Abstract

Selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility are characteristics which distinguish photography from other picturing media and make our experience of photographs significantly different than our experience of other pictures. Photographs ought to be interpreted by an examination of three types of contextual information: internal, original, and external. Photographs are beneficially seen as functioning analogously to certain types of language statements: descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, ethically evaluative, aesthetically evaluative, and theoretical. These categories are a heuristic device to prompt interpretive discourse about photographs. Placement of any photograph in one or more of these overlapping categories demands supportive evidence drawn from contextual information.

Introduction

If photographs are not significantly different from other pictorial representations, then a sound theory of visual art would adequately account for photographs. If photographs are very much like paintings, prints, and drawings, then much of what we have come to know of paintings, prints, and drawings ought to be applicable to photographs. If such were the case, and if we wanted to increase awareness and understanding of photography, the most that would be required to understand and appreciate the newer medium would be increased familiarity with a larger number of photographs, an awareness of the medium’s history, and some factual knowledge of photographic technology. But if photographs are significantly different from other types of two-dimensional visual representations, and if we treated them as if they were essentially similar, then we would be denying the uniqueness of photography at the peril of misunderstanding photographs, losing appreciation for their differences, and miseducating those we teach.

This study is a theoretical discourse on photography. While recognizing that photographs share commonalities with other representational, expressive, communicative objects, this text argues that photography is different in kind from other pictorial media. The text is situated within the general discourse of aesthetic education and art education but accounts for all photographs, not just those made under the auspices of the art world. It is written to increase understanding and appreciation of photographs and to heighten critical response and dialogue.

Three main conceptions guide the text. First, selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility are identified as separate characteristics which distinguish photography from other picturing media and make our experience of photographs significantly different from our experience of other pictures. Second, based on these distinctions, it is argued that photographs ought to be interpreted contextually by an examination of three types of information: internal, original, and external. Third, it is argued that photographs, for purposes of interpretation, are beneficially seen as functioning analogously to certain types of language statements, namely, descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, ethically evaluative, aesthetically evaluative, and theoretical.

Selectivity

Photographs are different from other kinds of visual representations in matter of degree and kind. One characteristic which distinguishes photographs is selectivity, another is instantaneity, and a
third is credibility. Each of these distinguish photography from other media of visual representation, and all photographs share each of these characteristics to a greater or lesser extent. It is these three characteristics which make our experience of photography qualitatively different than our experience of other two-dimensional visual representations. Those photographs which share in these essential determinants of selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility to a greater degree are those we implicitly and correctly consider to be more "photographic"; and those which share in each of these to a lesser extent are those we implicitly and correctly consider to be more "painterly."

Certainly painters select, both subject matter and manner of presentation, as do photographers. But different kinds of selection are involved. Painting is an additive process; photography is a subtractive one. Painters come to blank canvases, whereas photographers’ viewfinders are never empty given any amount of light. Painters add to the blank canvas and perceive emerging forms as they paint and paint over, typically adding imagery to former imagery, mark to mark, stroke to stroke, brushing paint on top of paint. Photographers, however, are essentially engaged in a subtractive process, one of taking away, distilling. They select from the entire universe available to them, choosing a broad or narrow field of view, from very close to very far, and make the exposure that typically results in a single instant of time from a single point of view. The viewfinder is always filled with visual information, or stuff of the world. The photographer manipulates the camera, the subject matter in front of the camera, or both, until the viewfinder is deemed to be appropriately filled and the visual clutter seen in it has been satisfactorily distilled. This manner of working is different in kind than the manner of adding paint to a blank surface.

Photography is also a relatively easy method of image making. The ease of making stylistically realistic pictures with photography has been and continues to be one of its most desirable attributes (Arago, 1839/1980; Pitts & Stein, 1980). The ease of photography results in photographers being more selective than painters in the senses that photographers typically make many more pictures than do painters and typically make many more pictures than they ever present publically than do other picture makers.

Despite the comparative ease of photography, the photographer’s problem of making conceptually or aesthetically coherent images is more difficult than it might seem when one considers that the camera impartially records whatever falls within its view, much as a tape recorder indiscriminately records as equally significant the voice of the lecturer as well as the rustling of the audience and the sounds of the room ventilator. The photographer’s problem is one of selecting the significant from the insignificant and making that choice apparent. The ease of photography is countered by “the fact that a thousand other pictures of the same subject would have been equally easy” (Szarkowski, 1973, p. 134).

The history of aesthetic and critical discourse supports selectivity as essential to photography. A conceptual split regarding what is and what is not photographic has revolved around selecting photographs with the eye and camera (Strand, 1917/1966; Weston, 1943/1973; White, 1968; Arneheim, 1974) versus using the camera as an unrestricted means of making art pictures which allows for hand painting and other nonphotographic methods (Ward, 1970). Sides of the schism have been variously referred to throughout history as Pictorialism and Purism, or Pictorialism and “straight photography” (Hartman, 1904/1980), or “manipulated” and “straight” photographs. Some from outside the photographic community (Benjamin, 1939/1980, 1935/1979; Sontag, 1978) have criticized the medium for its inevitable distortion through selection, its inherent segment-
ng of the whole into misleading fragments.

**Instantaneity**

Photographs are instantaneous in different senses: they show any unbroken time span as if it were an instant; they are made in an instant; they are made of instants; they are made instantly. Photographs are made in an instant because in exposing a piece of film to light in order to make a photograph, the shutter of the camera is open to light for a certain duration of time. Photographs are also made of instants in the world because photographs are dependent on the reflection of light from objects in the world existing in time to the film. Photographs are also made instantly in the sense that they are made relatively quickly compared to paintings, prints, and drawings.

The photographer chooses an instant when the film will be exposed. He or she has several lengths of exposure to choose among, but whether the exposure is one-sixtieth of a second, 60 minutes, or a microsecond, the resulting picture will necessarily be of that time interval, whatever its duration. This is an empirical necessity.

Many photographs are dependent on time for their effects, particularly when their exposures are either of a very short duration, as in Greenewalt’s exposure of hummingbirds at one-thirty-thousandth of a second (Time-Life Books, 1970) or in very long “time-exposures.” In these cases the photographer’s efforts result in new visions in that we can see things we could not have otherwise seen.

Painters see what they paint as they are painting. Frequently, photographers do not see what they photograph as they are photographing it, often because of the speed with which the subject moves. Painters paint and paint over, seeing and evaluating forms as they emerge and relate to other forms on the canvas. Photographers, however, must learn to see the world as if it were made up of instants. Photographers must see objects, often as they are moving, as they are interacting with other objects, how the objects will be transformed into two-dimensional forms. Unlike painters who perceive emerging forms relating to other forms as they paint slowly, over days or months or years, or quickly paint and paint over, photographers strive to perceive all that is happening through the viewfinder as a would-be instant in an instant. It is not only the interaction of the visual forms which photographers must perceive, but also the implications of those interactions which must be perceived and evaluated in terms of expression and meaning (Barrett & Linehan, 1977).

Photography literature frequently refers to temporality and photography. Photographer Wright Morris (1982) euphemistically refers to all photographs as “time pieces.” Roland Barthes’s (1981) definition of photography is inevitably linked with time: he names the essence of photography “that has been” (p. 77). Rudolph Arnheim (1974) identifies instantaneous exposures as a unique character trait of the medium. Photography’s social critics accuse the medium’s rendering instants of time as miniaturizing experience and transforming history into spectacle (Kracauer, 1927/1975; Sontag, 1978) and photography of an ahistorical distortion of reality (Benjamin, 1935/1979; Sekula, 1981).

Selectivity and instantaneity are two of three determinants that variously combine to make photography what it is and that effect our experience of photographs as significantly different from our experiences of paintings, prints, and drawings. Not all photographs rely equally for their effects on selectivity or instantaneity. Edward Weston’s famous series of photographs of peppers, for example, are instantaneous but are not particularly effective because of their relationship to time. One would garner more interesting insights were one to consider aspects of
the results of Weston’s selection process in making these particular photographs.

When image makers use photographic techniques or materials or processes but deny or ignore the subtractive selection process of the photographer and the instantaneous nature of photography, their images are not less good or effective; rather, they are routinely, and rightly, referred to as being more “painterly” than “photographic.” Also, their images are less “credible.”

Credibility

There is a halo of credibility surrounding the photograph which has a significant effect on those who make, use, and view photographs for whatever purpose. Credibility ought to be considered an essential, distinguishing characteristic of photography. People believe photographs, whether for better or worse, whether with or without proper justification. That is, in general, people tend to grant to photographs more credence than they would to paintings, drawings, prints, or sculptures. In experiencing photographs, viewers blur distinctions between subject matter and pictures of subject matter. Photographs tend to be accepted as reality made by a photographer through the instrumentation of the camera.

There are several complex reasons why we tend to put faith in photographs. From the inception of photography and throughout its history, claims of representational accuracy and reliability and truth have been made on behalf of the photograph. Today, the electronic and print news media, in their particular uses of cameras, implicitly claim objective facticity and reinforce the public’s credence in the photograph. The conventions borrowed from painters by the inventors who fashioned the first cameras to fix a certain kind of pictorial image, and the conventions with which photographers work, and the determinations photographers make in taking their pictures, are all deemphasized in favor of seeing the photograph as a transparent and natural reflection of reality made by a machine, so much so that the photographic image is accepted as nature as well as natural.

Several and various discourses surrounding photography inevitably touch on issues directly or tangentially related to photographic credibility. Claims of credibility were made on behalf of the photograph from its inception and continue to be made throughout its history. Arago (1839/1980) claimed “exactness” and “faithfulness” for the camera. Daguerre (1839/1980) claimed that the daguerreotype gave nature the power to reproduce itself. Oliver Wendell Holmes (1839/1980) described photography as a purely mechanical, objective, and passive copying procedure—a mirror with a memory. Strand (1917/1966) held that the essence of photography was an absolute, unqualified objectivity. Moholy-Nagy (1936/1966a, 1923/1966b) also stressed the objective vision of the camera image. Henry R. Luce, founder of Time and Life magazines, made excessive use of photographs in Life to bolster the magazine with the authority of authenticity the medium enjoyed among his readers (Freund, 1980). Contemporarily, issues involving pictorial realism, faithfulness, truth, naturalism, transparency, and related concepts are current in the writings of several aestheticians and critics. The issues and arguments surrounding photographic credibility are complex but can be roughly grouped into three major stances: realism, conventionalism, and social criticism.

The realists (Walton, 1982; Barthes, 1981; Arnheim, 1974) grant photographs special status because of the causal genesis of the photographic image. Photographs are claimed to encode a unique chemical and optical relationship to reality because of the causal interaction of light reflected from objects to the light-sensitive materials used in photography. Barthes (1981) asserts that the photographic referent is not the optionally real
thing to which an image or sign refers, as in painting or language, but "the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (p. 76). The conventionalists (Goodman, 1976; Gombrich, 1969, 1980; Snyder, 1980) generally agree with each other in arguing that all realistic representations are much less natural and much more conventional than we have supposed them to be. Snyder, in particular, adamantly rejects any special ontological status for photography. The social critics (Berger, 1972, 1980; Sontag, 1978; Sekula, 1975, 1978) stress the invisibility of the medium, as do the conventionalists, but are concerned with the political and ideological implications of photography as a "mechanically reproducible image-making technology wholly assimilated to the apparatuses of consumerism, mass culture, socialization and political control" (Solomon-Godeau, 1982, p. 10).

Thus, issues of credibility have and continue to surround photographs. To approach photographs and to be ignorant of their natural, or conventional, aura of credibility is to miss much of what makes photographs what they are and significantly reduces the richness that the medium has brought to our experience of existence through pictures. It is neither categorically good nor bad that the photograph is imbued with credibility; rather, credibility is simply a very interesting given that comes with the photograph, that ought to be cause for wonder, reflection, interpretation, and evaluation. As with any unexamined belief, an uninformed belief in photographs might often yield effects disastrous to knowledge and sometimes ethically detrimental consequences.

**Context**

Implications follow the identification of selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility as the unique characteristics that distinguish photography from other media and photographs from other pictures. The interesting implications of the distinction bear directly on the interpretation of photographs. Photographs are inevitably selected from and linked to spatial and temporal aspects of real-world situations by their being causally dependent on light reflecting from objects to light-sensitive materials. The credibility attributed to photographs influences viewing photographs in ways that minimize awareness of the photographer's selective process. But photographs certainly are not the same as the causal real-world objects or events on which they are, to greater or lesser extents, causally dependent. The differences between photographs and their real-world counterparts or referents are crucial to our understanding photographs. To know that the referent and the photograph of the referent are different is to know that one is about the other. It is not the photograph that "speaks" or reveals or is revealing; it is the differences between the photograph and its real-world referent that allow the photograph to be about something. Comparisons between the referent and the photographed referent are necessary for interpretation, understanding, and evaluation, and such comparisons involve considerations of a contextual nature.

Three sources of a photograph's contextual information are its "internal context," "original context," and "external context" (Barrett, 1985). Internal context is that which is given in a photograph, that which is evident. Original context refers, broadly, to that which was physically and psychologically present to the photographer at the time the photograph was made. Given that the photograph is a limited segment excised from infinite time and space, one ought to consider what may have been beyond the photographer's particular, presented frame of view. Also, to consider the photograph's original context might be to consider the photographer's intent if it is available, the photographer's biography; the intellec-
tuai, imagery, and stylistic sources of the work; the relation of the photograph to others contemporary to it, both those of the photographer and those pictures by other photographers and artists; the social and political character of the times; and the philosophical and religious milieu of the times. External context refers to what has happened to the photograph after it was made; how and where it is being presented; how and where it has been presented; how it has been received; how other interpreters have understood it; and where it has been placed in the history of art if it has.

Contextual investigations of photographs are demanded by the nature of photography. Because photographs are excised from physical real-world space and temporality with mechanical origins resulting in a high degree of stylistic realism that tends to convince, for several reasons one ought to attempt to place the segment as pictured back into the whole. One needs to do this to understand what the photographer has done to the original situation by his or her excision in order to posit what the photograph is about. An understanding of the differences between the picture and the reality from which it was made is essential to understanding the photograph. Without these distinctions considered, the photographer drops out, the photograph becomes transparent, and the viewer is left mistakenly considering the photograph as a real-world object or event rather than considering it as a photographer’s picture. Similarly, the appreciation of photographs is dependent on recognizing and understanding the transformations the photographer has made in excising the segment so as to make it aesthetically noteworthy rather than routine or mundane. The viewer who wants to understand and appreciate the photograph needs to see what fresh and significant relationships the photographer may have brought about and the means selected to make them manifest.

The cultural tendency, however, is to see photographs as mirrors, or windows, or the way it was, or as mere mechanical transcriptions unencumbered by knowledge and values. To miss the differences between the photograph and the object or event photographed is to miss whatever contribution to knowledge and experience the photograph may contain.

Categories of Photographs

Because there is such a diversity of photographs, ranging from scientific to artistic endeavors, a category system that renders this diversity more conceptually manageable, without diminishing the differences among photographs, is desirable. An overlapping category system is presented here which posits that photographs are analogous to various types of language statements, namely: descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, ethically evaluative, aesthetically evaluative, and theoretical. The claim is not that photographs constitute a language but that photographs do function similarly to language statements and that it is interpretively beneficial to view them in such a way. To ask of a photograph if it functions primarily as a description or an ethical judgment is to ask important interpretive questions, questions more important and yielding greater insight than those that ask if a photograph is in the category of “nude” or “landscape” (Time-Life Books, 1970), “straight or manipulated,” “Purist and Pictorialist” (Ward, 1970), “mirror” or “window” (Szarkowski, 1978).

Descriptions

All photographs may be said to describe, in greater or lesser detail and clarity, within the constraints of various cameras, lenses, films, and other technical variables, and within the constraints chosen by the photographer, the surfaces of objects. Some photographs, however, are not meant to be more than descriptions. Paradigm cases of descriptive photographs are identification photographs,
medical x-rays, photomicrographs, NASA space exploration photographs, and photographic reproductions of artworks. These photographs are analogous to statements of fact in verbal language, are visual recordings of empirical qualities and quantities, and are meant to be interpretively and evaluatively neutral. Their makers attempt no more than accurate recordings of objects and events onto photographic surfaces.

Explanations
Explanatory photographs function analogously to empirically verifiable statements in language. An exhibit and book, Exploring Society Photographically (Becker, 1981), is a paradigm example of the uses of photography to understand the workings of the social world. The investigations, by scientists and artists, include sections of Mead and Bateson’s Balinese Character and more recent work by others of Arkansas prison life, the travels of migrant fruit pickers, a comparison of a family-run restaurant with a McDonald’s, and the urban assimilation of American Indians. Explanatory photographs are falsifiable in that they could potentially be empirically demonstrated to be true or false, accurate or inaccurate.

Interpretations
Nonfalsifiable interpretations are another type of explanatory photographs. These are analogous to metaphysical claims in language in that they purport to give information about the universe but are asserted independently of empirical evidence. Clear examples are several sequences of Duane Michals’s, for instance, “The Spirit Leaving the Body” and “The Creation” (Bailey, 1975), and most of the work of Jerry Uelsmann (1973). Photographs in this category depict an intentionally subjective understanding of phenomena, often use photographic fiction as a mode of visual expression, and generally yield information about the worldviews of the photographers who make them. They are nonfalsifiable in that in cases of dispute they cannot be confirmed or denied empirically. If, for example, Duane Michals asserts an afterlife in some of his sequences, the claim would be difficult to prove or disprove with empirical evidence.

Ethical Evaluations
Photographs that function as ethical evaluations always describe, often attempt to explain, but also, and most importantly, imply moral judgments, generally depicting how things ought or ought not to be. Most photographic advertisements, for example, present us with aspects of the advertiser’s conceptions of “the good life” or assert what products, life-styles, and attitudes ought to be desired. The majority of the work of W. Eugene Smith may also serve as a clear example, most notably his last book, Minamata (1975), with his portrayals of village fishermen suffering as a consequence of industrial poisoning.

Aesthetic Evaluations
All photographs can be apprehended aesthetically, and many photographs are made to be aesthetically pleasing even though their purpose is to condemn or explain. But some photographs are made primarily for aesthetic appreciation. These photographs function as visual notification that the photographer deems certain people, places, objects, or events as intrinsically worthy of aesthetic apprehension; or they function as notifications that the photographic presentation of people, places, objects, or events is worthy of aesthetic apprehension. The works of such masters as Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, and Gary Winnogrand are well-known and clear examples.

Theoretical Photographs
Finally, some photographs are not about people, places, objects, or events in the world but are about art or about photography. They function similarly to meta-

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guage in verbal language or metacriticism in art discourse. They generally are made to address issues about photography, or issues about photographs, functioning as visual commentary or as visual art criticism. More simply, they are art about art or photographs about photography. *Making Chicken Soup* (1972), for example, is a visual cookbook by Les Krims which is dedicated to “concerned photographs;” a term usually designating concern with social issues. Krims is engaged in elaborate critical sarcasm pointed at those who would attempt to solve social problems with cameras; in Krims’s view, as useless an effort as making chicken soup to cure physical infirmities.

Although these six categories are definitionally discrete, photographs overlap them. This overlapping category system is not meant to be used to end thought and discussion of photographs through pigeon-holing; on the contrary, it is to open discourse about photographic meaning in order to increase understanding and appreciation of photographs and of the variety of statements photography carries and delivers. It should be used as a heuristic matrix of questions with which viewers could interpretively approach any photograph or group of photographs and question, for example, whether a press photograph is descriptively accurate or whether it is subtly imbued with negative value judgments. To place any photograph in a category, even those paradigm examples cited here, requires decision making backed with evidence of a contextual sort. The placement is always open to dispute, calls for argument, and is open to counterargument. To engage in thought and discourse of this nature regarding a photograph is deemed eminently more worthwhile than comfortably labeling it “documentary” or “a portrait,” “interesting” or “beautiful.”

**Conclusion**

Sometimes it is beneficial to see that all representational, expressive, communicative media and objects of media share commonalities and belong to a large continuum. This study recognizes this but attempts to do another task, one of pointing up differences between photography and other media, and photographs and other pictures. The attempt has been made to find and point up differences so that the characteristics of photography that distinguish it from other pictorial media are not obscured or diminished. The effort has been to show that photography is different in kind from other pictorial media. Certainly photographs share some conventions with other pictures, but photographs are not the same; to see them only as items on a vaster continuum is to miss what photography provides and how it provides it differently.

There are three main conceptions in the text: the identification of selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility as the distinguishing characteristics of photographs, and an exploration of how these matter; a recommendation based on the nature of photography that photographs be interpreted contextually; and that photographs fall into overlapping categories when they are seen as functioning analogously to language statements. These conceptions may be used heuristically as guides to interpreting any photograph, from family snapshots to social documents to artwork.

In following the logic of the text, one might approach an exhibition of photographs, for example, and experience the photographs as photographs by attempting to distinguish them as a class from other classes of pictures. One might look at the pictures as if they were windows in the walls of the gallery and thus see through them to the world beyond which they depict, initially accepting them as credible, natural, and transparent. One might examine how and why it is that they can easily be seen this way, and one can then go on to recognize the highly selective input of the photographer in choices he or she has made regarding the rendering of space on a two-dimen-
sional plane, as well as his or her manner of working with temporality in a still medium. One would seek to know how aspects of time and space have been selected to present more or less credible pictures.

To consider any of these aspects requires comparisons—of these photographs to other pictures, and of these photographs to the original subject matter they depict—in order to begin to posit what the photographs might be about (Danto, 1981). The viewer could mentally run the photographs through the categories and combinations of categories to see where any one makes most sense, fits best, does its best job, or where it is seen to its best advantage (Walton, 1978). This interpretive activity would lead the viewer back into contextual considerations for reasons to support one placement over another and back into considerations of what and how the photographer selected regarding aspects of time and space and how convincing was the selection.

While the primary thrust of the conceptions of this text are toward understanding photography and interpreting individual photographs, the conceptions may also be used in relation to evaluation in the sense of determining worth or merit. The unique characteristics of photographs identified in the first sections are descriptive, attempting to distinguish photographs from other pictures, but they could be used as evaluative criteria for determining the photographic-ness of photographs. Similarly, the overlapping categories might beneficially be used as a means of judging the worth of particular photographs based on the functions they are made to, or used to, perform.

Finally, although the thrust of the text is toward dealing with photographs that have been made and that are shown, the conceptions may also be used as guiding the production of photographs and the teaching of the making of photographs (Desmond, 1983). Having students deal with the conceptual issues raised in this study is more directive and more educationally sound than asking for “beautiful” photographs, and it offsets the inordinate concern for technique and equipment that plagues the field of photography and photography education. To have students make and consider photographs significantly about something significant enough to invite interpretation and contemplation is a worthwhile goal for photography education within art and aesthetic education.

References


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