

Beyond the Indexical:
Meaning in Photographs of the Natural World

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Introduction

Photograph: 'light writing.' From *phos/phot-* (Greek) 'light,' and *graphein* (Greek) 'to write.'¹ The etymology of the word 'photograph' suggests a definition rooted in its action. Though it and the various forms to which it gives rise ('photography,' 'photographer,' 'photographic') have come to embody over 150 years worth of accumulated theory and criticism (often acquiring an ontological status of their own), they all derive from the performance of a certain technical process. Indeed, at the time of its compound invention in the 1830's, scientists such as Fox Talbot, Niépce and Louis-Jacques Daguerre were pioneering investigations into the various chemical reactions of certain substances by which light could be fixed to a surface. The nature of their enquiry was not so much concerned with an *object* of production (as was much of the Industrial Revolution at the time) as it was the *means* of production.

The concern of my essay here is to bring to the foreground that which photography *does* as a practice rather than what it *is* in the realm of visual culture today. In this case, I will be looking at the specific example of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition annually on show at the Natural History Museum, London and at various venues worldwide. My model for such a study is an interdisciplinary approach which intends to start "on the shop floor," as W.J.T.Mitchell has put it, working "bottom-up" from the realm of the particular and the tangible.²

Such a restricted topic is not chosen in order to attempt to bypass or remove myself altogether from such general debates as for example, the place for genres in photographic practice, or identification of a semantic language in photographic images. Nor do I seek to pursue a strict theory of "technological determinism,"³ whereby I am claiming, via a Greenbergian twist, that the medium determines the limits and competence of the art. I am aiming instead to ask of photographic practice how it operates as a launchpad for particular meaning and its communication, how interpretation has revolved around and spread like a net from this given site.

I am already both caught in this net (the sheer quantity of hermeneutical understanding is not something one can ever escape) and operate as a net-thrower (I produce both theory and images). It is my hope that the linear narrative which follows succeeds in some way to circumscribe the various meaning-giving operations present (assumed and created) when photographing the natural world.

¹ Collins Concise Dictionary, 21st Century Edition, 2001

² W.J.T.Mitchell, (contributor), "A Range of Critical Perspectives," *Art Bulletin*, December 1995, Vol LXXVII, No.4, p.541. My essay has been written as if one part of a diptych: the complimentary essay, entitled 'Is Visual Culture a Discipline of Art History?' follows a "top-down" model. It is hoped that the two approaches, when seen alongside each other, can serve to illustrate the characteristics of two different modes of study as discussed by Mitchell in his article, and perhaps provide a platform for further discussion and synthesis.

³ Martin Lister, from "Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging" in Liz Wells (ed), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, p.342

Part I

“A bourgeois folklore, ...an established myth,” “a contingent ideology,” “an Edenic fiction,” “an imperialistic mode.”⁴ Such is pronounced the still widely-held belief in the objective capacity of the photograph. Given the insistence by a wealth of critical writers, both past and present, that the throne of photography’s authoritative claim to truth in representation of the world is a somewhat contextually limited (if not false) construction, one might think such authority no longer holds sway over us. Yet the stubborn belief remains.

If the barrage of academic theory on the subject would as yet appear to have made no dent on this throne, neither has the growing scepticism of the public with regard to photographic images in the press and in advertising – images which are often known to have been selectively chosen, arranged or manipulated. Nor too, in the private field of domestic photography, does computer software or the often overtly acknowledged weight of sentimental value, diminish the place held by the photograph as a faithful unbiased record of what was seen at the time. The fact persists that culturally, we remain spellbound by the veracity of the photographic image; indeed, we are voracious for them, as their increasing presence in our daily lives will testify.

What are we to make of this belief? If, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Robert Romanyshyn have argued,⁵ the specific ideologies underlying the concept of photographic truth actually serve to bolster this notion (however contradictory), does it remain impregnable in an ivory tower? By turning to the example of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition I intend to suggest some answers to these questions, in the vein of a direct confrontation with photographs that purposefully claim to be visually true.

From the outset, I should state that I agree with the many theorists who would see through such a claim to autonomy as being false, and in actuality only ever contextually defined and created, but rather than embarking on a triumphalistic crusade, I would seek instead to find in the midst of such constructs, the place for a practice that continues, undeniably, to stand up to such theoretical accusations. For fundamentally, the *acts* of image capture, whether for an art exhibition, a website, a newspaper or a family album, carry on.

The practice of these technical processes (however varied), particularly with regard to their historical origins are worthy of attention, not so much because they provide a definitive answer as to whether photographs can communicate truth or not, but because they are always in fluid relationship to such debates and the beliefs which surround them.⁶ In the encounter between practitioner and photographic equipment

⁴ Allan Sekula, from “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in Victor Burgin (ed). *Thinking Photography*, London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1984, p.84, 86; and Victor Burgin (in the same book), from “Photographic Practice and Art Theory,” p.46; and “Looking At Photographs,” p.144; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p.180.

⁵ I go on to discuss these writers on pages 6 and 8.

⁶ Discourse is primarily about relationship, not words. According to Allan Sekula, “a photographic discourse can be defined as an arena of information exchange, that is, as a system of relations between parties engaged in communicative activity.” (from “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” p.84)

is introduced a whole host of motives, desires, and attitudes which cannot be subsumed to the logical operations of a machine or to universal dictums about what photography does; it is undoubtedly a foundational site for the creation and implementation of such ideals as we have mentioned.

Part II

What we are specifically talking about here is the perceived ability of the camera to produce (by means of the reaction occurring on a chemically-prepared surface when exposed to light) an entirely objective record of the scene in front of it. In comparison to other created images, such as paintings, drawings or press prints, photographs are declared in all manner of contexts to be documentary, unmediated, natural, authentic, indexical, exact, veracious, authoritative, true and reliable copies of the real world. From the time of its inception, both its definition and its uses revolved around this capacity.

We have already noted the literal meaning of the word 'photograph', which came into existence in the 1850's. Prior to this, Niépce's 'heliography' in the 1820's (*helios* – Greek – 'sun') and Fox Talbot's 'Pencil of Nature' in 1844⁷ are singular examples of a terminology employed that reflected an often overtly romantic idea about the photographic process. The means by which the agent of something as ephemeral as light could produce such a lucid fixed image was deemed "miraculous" by Herschel writing to Talbot in 1839, and at times in the extreme, an embodiment of the spiritual world or Nature herself.⁸ As Edgar Allan Poe said in 1840;

"The closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented."⁹

In such terms is expressed what is actually an ideology about science. Before we consider any additional elements of justification for photography – which certainly developed at the time too (I shall consider something of this in Part IV) – the reverence immediately accorded to photography was on account of the invention of the success of a scientific achievement. Thus at the Great Exhibition in 1851, Henry Cole declared photography "the most remarkable discovery of modern times,"¹⁰ and this among such inventions as the electric telegraph and the industrial crop reaper.¹¹ Here was possibly the apex of Enlightenment philosophy in action: a celebration of humanity's progress and ultimate betterment in the hands of rational enquiry and experimentation.

It is not too large a leap to see such undertones in more recent expressions of photography's indexicality. The term 'index' itself, which I have particularly chosen to use from among the others mentioned at the start of this section, is significantly

⁷ Quentin Bajac, *The Invention of Photography: The First Fifty Years*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p.17; and Alan Trachtenberg, (ed). *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, Connecticut: Leet's Island Books, 1990, p.28

⁸ Quentin Bajac, *ibid*, p.22, p.142,143

⁹ Allan Sekula, from "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," p.87

¹⁰ Quentin Bajac, p.47

¹¹ <http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/greatexhibition/contents.htm>

loaded with a scientific meaning given to a logical and precise ordering, or pointing towards, whether literary or mathematical. Its employment in photographic discourse is often within the context of a semiotic analysis of images, due not least to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs published between 1931-1958.¹²

Speaking in the most general terms, semiotics attempts a scientific investigation on the linguistic properties of the image. Assuming the represented content of the photograph as an empirically ratified object, it goes on to perform a dissection on the concepts implicit in such content, as if an atom were being examined for all its component parts. And depending on your semiotician, one discovers various codes of logic at work – Scott/Peirce delineate 3, Roland Barthes has mentioned 6, Umberto Eco 10, and Victor Burgin 20.¹³

It is not my desire to follow these analyses in this essay, suffice to say that they demonstrate an intention orientated with a methodology not unlike that of scientific enquiry. A point of note is that, while this semiotician's approach seems devoid of a utopian faith in humanity's progress, it nevertheless assumes a certain a priori faith in the trace of the real which is imprinted on the photograph. This belief is cause for iconographic investigation which perhaps supposes an ideal of a meta-narrative and ultimately conceptual meaning, rather than a socially-orientated ideal about technological progress.

Leaning somewhat closer towards the latter is the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. Since its inception in 1964, it has been firmly rooted in the authoritative mould of indexical photography. The only eligible entries are, by inference from the competition rules, 'pure' photographs submitted with the original transparencies; not considered are "sandwich shots, double exposures, photographs which consist in any way of more than one separate image, images which have been digitally altered or manipulated."¹⁴

Pre-photographic manipulation of the subject is also discouraged, as "conditions that are unnatural"¹⁵ when the picture is taken must be declared. Thirdly, accompanying all the shortlisted pieces in the exhibition is a string of data pertaining to the exact mechanical conditions at the time of shutter release, for example "Canon EOS 5 with 28-105mm f3.5-4.5 lens; Fujichrome Provia 100; tripod; flash and reflector."¹⁶

With such definition, one that goes a long way to dismissing the human operator, the competition elevates objective image capture as if the only relationship of significance is that between light and film. Echoes of the early 1800's, the endorsement of scientific truth via the indexical capacity of photographic apparatus, are clearly to be seen. While obviously not following the ideology of technical

¹² In this vein, I am referring to Clive Scott's discussion on the nature of photography, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p.27-45.

¹³ Clive Scott (expounding on Charles Sanders Peirce), *ibid*, p.27ff; Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp.21-25; Umberto Eco, from "Critique of the Image," in Victor Burgin (ed). *Thinking Photography*, London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1984, pp.35-38; and Victor Burgin (in the same book), from "Photographic Practice and Art Theory," p.75.

¹⁴ www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ Anna Levin (ed). *Wildlife Photographer of the Year: Portfolio 13*, London: BBC Books, 2003, p.154

invention to quite the same extent, the competition certainly endorses a photographic practice that ascribes professionalism specifically to the apparatus rather than the photographer.

This is further seen in the competition's liberal acceptance of *any* practitioner, amateur or professional, to include in three junior categories those aged 17 and under. This is indicative of what Scott lists as one of five features of indexicality, namely photography's "inbuilt amateurism."¹⁷ For since the camera does virtually all the manual labour to create an image, any authority assumed to be found in the technical ability and accuracy ostensibly liberates its appropriation in a social sphere – to anyone.

This was certainly the case in the 1800's. Though in many respects described as a categorically exclusive and autonomous process, photography's development and practice always took place in the public domain. From the free rights given to the daguerreotype process in 1839 by the French State, to the rapid expansion of commercial studios internationally, the public craze of 'cartomania' (1850's), and the arrival, in the 1880's, of Kodak's snapshot camera,¹⁸ photography was open to all.

The background of photographers at the time varied enormously; "dentists, watchmakers, painters, miniaturists, opticians, engineers,"¹⁹ as well as scientists, filled the fledgling societies that were founded then. And this is similarly the case today, both with the WPY competition – whose winner in 2003 was a taxi-driver – and the continued populist appeal of membership societies such as the Royal Photographic Society.

Part III

At this point it is worth considering in more detail the fact that, despite such a growth of interest in the medium, the status of the photographer in the 1800's, whose task in the capacity we have been talking about is infinitesimally small, remained in the shadows, even disparaged. As well as being evidence of the tremendous precedence of industrialisation, this effect might also be described as the outworkings of a particular philosophy relating to the position of the observer.

For the objectively indexical mode of the camera has been well researched by Robert Romanyshyn and others as a technological symptom of the Cartesian dream that promotes the autonomy of vision and detachment from the body. In our camera's is given flesh "our psychological condition of distance, ...of infinite vision."²⁰ This can be traced back to the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance art, which Brunelleschi pioneered and Alberti subsequently defined in the 1400's as a mathematical means of representing space.

The basic construction of such representation consisted of an understanding of the picture-plane as if it were a window, the identification of a singular vanishing point on

¹⁷ Clive Scott, p.30

¹⁸ Quentin Bajac, p.24

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.67

²⁰ Robert Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, p.97

a horizon line, and the prior determination of a distance point, in order to delineate a neutral space. The effects of the adoption of such a construct are extremely prodigious. It achieved, Romanyshyn maintains, a radical way of looking at the world, one that subsequently affects the course of art, science, psychology, social and political history up to the present day so pervasively that we have trouble identifying it as a cultural phenomenon.²¹

He goes on in his book to discuss the three-fold effects of “Self as Spectator” (Chapter 3), “Body as Specimen” (Chapter 4), and “World as Spectacle” (Chapter 6). By way of an attempt to summarise those effects more relevant to this discussion, I have drawn up a list of words or phrases expressed by Romanyshyn in Chapter 3 (see Appendix One, p.13).

From this it is clear how the photographer of the 1800’s may somewhat ‘naturally’ assume an invisibility, and how he/she may easily ascribe the resulting photographic images, if in accord with a window/vanishing point/distance point construction, to a ‘natural’ indexicality. Does this mean then, that the ideal of scientific measure in upholding such an objective vision is to rid the involvement of the human body altogether?

Romanyshyn would argue yes, and his book is ultimately concerned to turn us away from such a destructive course and to inspire a return to earth (Chapter 7 is entitled “Re-entry: Paths of Return”).²² Interestingly, Jonathan Crary might say no, for reasons less ideologically pessimistic and more about what was socially inevitable. In turning his attention to other scientific investigations and inventions occurring in the early 1800’s, his insight is perhaps more relevant to our discussion here.

For Crary proposed that the realistic representation given by such popular instruments as the thaumatrope, the zootrope, the diorama, the kaleidoscope and the stereoscope²³ gave to indexicality an active, perceptive human engagement. In front of such images (and certainly the photograph did not escape their appropriation, particularly with the stereoscope), the observer always remained aware of a constructed and mediated experience of what was essentially an illusion.

At the same time, scientific studies of such men as Goethe, and Joseph Plateau²⁴ gave recognition to the subjective capacity of the human eye to invent and manipulate vision; for example in afterimages. Here, in the middle of what Romanyshyn would say was a society consumed with technological utopian aspirations for objective emancipation, was a significant trend towards a delight in self-recognition and bodily awareness. This is important to note with regard to photographic indexicality because it is indicative of the insistently corporeal relationship between apparatus and viewer – a relationship that cannot be

²¹ *ibid*, p.65

²² He argues that even in the ideal, utopian, limitlessness of technological advances, reference to a home-coming is inherent in not just the concept, but also in the practice: “Return is as much a part of the phenomenology of technology as it is of its psychology.” (*ibid*, p.200)

²³ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992, p.105, 110, 112, 113, and 118 respectively

²⁴ *ibid*, p.98, 107

suppressed even by discounting the mode of the observer in the name of machinery's supremacy.

That said, Crary points out the further development of the work of these scientists as having to move from a qualitative field to a quantitative one. If their "corporeality of vision" rooted the subject in the body with its "pulsings and phantasms," modernization was to "relocate perception and the observer within the reach of empirical exactitude and technological intervention."²⁵ This to be "made compatible with new arrangements of power; the body as worker, student, soldier, consumer, patient, criminal."²⁶ Thus Crary suggests that such a relationship as functionally harnessed the photographer to his/her equipment and promoted the superiority of detached objective vision was symptomatic of greater changes in society at large. Indeed, the *uses* to which photography's indexicality was put demonstrate a movement away from an overtly scientific justification, towards instead a political and ecological justification.

Part IV

Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in her critique of documentary photography, has noted that the deeply inscribed belief in photographic truth accompanying its invention lent itself to all manner of recording purposes. The appetite for the collection and categorisation of visual evidence in areas as numerous as that of industry log-books, geographic and ethnographic exploration, police identification, archival indexing, journalism, topographical surveys and scientific illustration, was indeed vast. By the 1860's there was already a compendium of images, such as: Guillaume Claine's collection of Belgian monuments, Robert Howlett's coverage of the building of the 'Great Eastern' steamship, Anna Atkins' illustrations for a book on 'British Algae,'²⁷

"Désiré Charnay's pictures of Mayan ruins and Madagascan natives, Samuel Bourne's photographs of India and Nepal, Felice Beato's war photographs from the Crimea and the Opium Wars, Matthew Brady's staff's reportage on the Civil War..."²⁸

And the list could go on. These existed to fix and register factual information under the general heading of encyclopaedic knowledge. Thus the initiative behind the founding of the National Geographic Society in 1888, now perhaps best known for its internationally circulated magazine (which, with an abundance of glossy colour photographs, continues to cover an enormous range of globally diverse subjects), was "to increase and diffuse geographic knowledge."²⁹

Yet without doubt, as a wealth of photographic criticism has been able to show, the motivations behind such endeavours was often less ingenuous and more politicized than one might think. Thus Solomon-Godeau stresses that these photographers were always products of their time; the explosion and proliferation of specifically journalistic practice along these lines was not only 'natural' to the aspects of its

²⁵ *ibid*, p.141, 136, and 145 respectively

²⁶ *ibid*, p.147

²⁷ Quentin Bajac, p.73, 78, and 114 respectively

²⁸ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p.171

²⁹ www.nationalgeographic.com

invention and technology hitherto discussed, but was also propelled “within the framework of reformist or ameliorative intent.”³⁰

Hence the documentary genre is retrospectively understood to originate with the work of Jacob Riis in 1887. Here, photographs accompanying his project ‘How the Other Half Lives’ represented the underside of New York bourgeois life, assuming a role of subject/object separation and surveillance that specifically accords with Riis’ time and context. What became traditional ‘victim’ photography served to tautologically perpetuate the authoritative political position of a society that created victims – the images were “produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions [they] then represent.”³¹

Similarly, the state-initiated projects of ethnic and geographic illustration had a decidedly political agenda, as Allan Sekula observed:

“Reproduced, these images served as an ideologically charged reification of the expanding boundaries of the bourgeois state. The mythical image of the ‘frontier’ was realised by means of photographs.”³²

One does not have to look hard to find such loaded connotations in the contemporary photography of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. Not only does the list of twelve categories read like an inventory of the available natural habitats, as if for territorial conquest (Animals in their Environment / Animal Behaviour: Birds / Animal Behaviour: Mammals / Animal Behaviour: All Other Animals / The Underwater World / Animal Portraits,³³ etc. etc.), but the language used, the ‘capturing’ and ‘shooting’ of the subject, suggests, if not the corporate power behind an imperial domination, then the individual power to possess, to hunt down, and to assimilate unto oneself.

If such an association seems too fierce – and it is by no means expressed explicitly as such – then the somewhat more agreeable purpose of an exhibition seeking to represent and support environmentalism is certainly expressed. This “ameliorative intent” can be seen in both the allocation of a category called ‘The Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Wildlife’ and in the fact that the judges “place great emphasis on photographs taken in wild and free conditions, considering that the welfare of the subject is paramount.”³⁴

The stress undoubtedly placed on such global concerns find in indexical photography not just a carrier for information, but also the capacity to evoke empathy in the viewer, particularly in a category called ‘The World in Our Hands,’ whose photographs more often than not illustrate “our capacity for damaging it.”³⁵ Six out of the nine shortlisted images for 2003 contain scenes of illicit suffering, whether the

³⁰ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, p.173

³¹ *ibid*, p.176

³² Allan Sekula, from “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” in Victor Burgin (ed). *Thinking Photography*, London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1984, p.95

³³ www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto

³⁴ Simon King, in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year: Portfolio 13*, London: BBC Books, 2003, p.8. An interesting point to note is the distinction now made between words such as ‘trophy’ and ‘specimen’, whose ethical connotations no longer allow them to have the same meaning.

³⁵ www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto

caged tiger and wolf for a cruel show in China, or the destruction of a rainforest in Cameroon (see below). Certainly it is acknowledged that:

“Where it one was sufficient simply to record a subject, now, and in this competition in particular, there is a hunger and demand for greater ‘personalisation’ of the image – for the viewer to be able to ‘see’ what the photographer saw, whether it is drama, sadness, pathos, power, grace, or spine-tingling beauty.”³⁶



Tiger and wolf show
Pete Oxford, (UK)
Highly commended



Clearing primary rainforest
Karl Ammann, (Switzerland)
Highly commended

That such communication may be encouraged for reasons as various as aesthetic appeal, a ‘green’ mission, captivation of the exotic other, sponsors’ media promotion, consumer persuasion, or elevation of the photographer’s status and ability, is however, never once removed from the fundamentally authentic purpose of the photograph. For the most interesting point to note about the partnering of ideology to the notion of indexicality is just how inseparable they can be.

The disclosing of any contextual bias does much to uncover hidden meanings and intentions in the production of a photograph, but to stop there is to fall short of an understanding that recognises the implications for the viewer. Non-visual concerns regarding photographs rightly hold for us a specificity which, while invisible, must necessarily point us to the original aims in their making. Equally, however, such concerns can point us to the apparently overlooked oddity that our belief in the indexical truth of the photographic image remains compatible with any such aims, even when they are revealed to be contradictory to our original assumption of objectivity.

Roland Barthes called this “the photographic paradox,”³⁷ whereby, despite the constructed connotations implicit in the message of the photograph, despite too the often accompanying “parasitic message”³⁸ of text around or with the photograph, despite even the immediate and unavoidable perceptive, cognitive and ethical codes we bring in our reading of the photograph (in what is precisely a linguistically structured interpretation) – despite all these things, the uninterpretable, literal

³⁶ Simon King, *ibid*, p.7

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, London: Fontana Press, 1977, p.16ff

³⁸ *ibid*, p.25

denotation can coexist with them in the image. It is both “at once ‘objective’ and ‘invested,’ natural and cultural.”³⁹

Furthermore, this “analogical perfection,”⁴⁰ acting as the basis on which all codes of connotation are developed, can also serve to interrupt them, effecting a level of apparently immediate visual contact with the photograph’s realistic representation. Barthes famously calls this the “punctum” – that element of a picture “which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”⁴¹

Within the context of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, I think this is particularly recognized in the category called ‘Wild Places’ whose landscapes “must convey a feeling of wildness and create a sense of awe and wonder.”⁴² Though no doubt bearing the shadows of such *conceptual* connotations as Sekula’s myth of the ‘frontier,’ or Kant’s notion of the sublime,⁴³ the primacy of the *perceptual* is here given the greatest scope. Max Kozloff’s words, describing his encounter with the first photographs of the Mars landscape, are equally applicable to my experience in front of ‘Red Aurora Borealis’ by Subhankar Banerjee (see below):

“The impact of these pictures, with so much that was inchoate in them, was implacable and concussive. The self-confirming aspects of social projection – for science is definitely a social undertaking – were stunned by material disclosure. ... [Such a picture] offers a visual torrent, whose texture of inconsequent, atomized odds and ends is impossible to overlook because of its shock as a first sighting. In fact, the total newness of the material spectacle (to our eyes), is the real point, the real subject.”⁴⁴



Red aurora borealis

Subhankar Banerjee, (India)

Highly commended

³⁹ *ibid*, p.20

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.17

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1993, p.26

⁴² www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto

⁴³ Interestingly, Kant’s definition is specifically emotive: “The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*,” *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960 [1763], p.47

⁴⁴ Max Kozloff, *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames: Essays on Photography*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, p.237, 239

Conclusion

At this point we would appear to have come full circle in the notion of indexicality to describing photographs, once again, as the direct, unmediated, objective copying of the real world. Significantly however, such a subjective experience as Barthes, Kozloff and others describe serves to remind us that photographic practice cannot make an *end* of its object, nor effect a closure on the testimonial capacities sealed in the frame.

Various, critics have ascribed this authoritative end to photographs by recalling the origins of the practice and its technical particularities. Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen have provided a warning against what they see as either an over-emphasized or over-simplified connection with the 'nature' of photography in this respect – whether via indexical truth or the analogy sometimes made between camera and eye (“the ‘mechanical’ model” and “the ‘visual’ model.”⁴⁵). That they regard this as almost entirely misled is seen in their deconstruction of such models, revealing them to be the human and contextually-defined ideologies that they are:

“The picture is valuable as an index of truth only to the extent that the process by which it was made is stated explicitly, and the pictures can be interpreted accurately only by people who have learned to interpret them.”⁴⁶

Yet Snyder & Walsh come close to throwing out the photograph's capacity for visual veracity altogether. While I have touched on some of their arguments here and throughout this discussion, it is not to do away with or deny the facts relating to the chemical processes by which an image is acquired. Rather, it has been my intention in this essay to demonstrate that the indefatigable indexicality associated with photographs continues to surface in our understanding of what we are looking at, not because the 'light-written' object has an unbreakable, universal autonomy of its own, but because our interpretation owes its belief to a whole host of historical and social relationships of which we are a part.

Barthes too, on occasion, seems too quick to make the photograph an exclusive site of meaning, one whose “power of authentication exceeds the power of representation,”⁴⁷ as if beyond our reach. Ultimately however, it is us who grants such power, us who endorse its operation, and us who enact its 'beyond' in the very localized spaces given to its practice.

⁴⁵ Joel Snyder & Neil Walsh Allen, “Photography, Vision, and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.2, Autumn 1975, p.149. We would do well to recall here the discoveries of Goethe, Plateau, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty among others, whose phenomenological understanding of the body have revealed just how subjective and creative it can be.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.159

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.88

Appendix 1

(from Robert Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992

Chapter 3, "Self as Spectator", pp.65-102)

Implications of linear perspective:

- a historical invention, a style of thought, a cultural perception, a way of imagining the world, a habit of mind
- spectator consciousness
- distant vision
- distant and neutral observer, detached and non-involved spectator
- things seen a spectacle and a specimen
- retreat
- estrangement
- private, interior, self-contained self
- the self a subjective reality
- the world an objective reality
- separation
- interiorization
- individual
- birds-eye-view
- Hamlets/Edgars/Cartesian dreamers/princely deceivers
- pseudo self-awareness
- narcissistic self-expression
- the world an object of vision, a matter of light
- record
- reproduce
- observe
- the veiled eye
- insight
- experience
- self-chosen prescription
- analytical vision: decomposition, isolation, decontextualisation, anatomization, geometrization, fragmentation
- turning away, distrust, methodic doubt
- an ideal
- inspection
- projection
- purification
- plotting space, mapping the world
- imposition of meaning
- disentanglement (dis-membering)
- pure mind
- reductive vision
- miniaturization
- the world at infinite distance from us, or us removed to infinite distance from the world
- convergent vision
- withdrawal

- mediated
- precise and pointed knowledge
- 'heady' v. 'gutty'
- passionate concern for dispassionate objectivity
- cool, detached, impartial, indifferent
- the world no sound, no taste, no smell, no colour, no feel, no quality. Only measure
- surveyor
- involvement lacking in investment
- high definition, scope, precision
- lack of empathy/intimate understanding
- alienation
- gaze (focussed)
- efficiency, cold abstraction
- specialization, expropriation, hospitalization, standardization
- cheap, theatrical sentimentality
- cosmic/universe-al
- renunciation/dispensation of the body
- incarnation an impediment and obstacle
- realization of the Copernican vision
- the eye Cyclopean
- fixed gaze
- singular vision
- certitude, exactness
- hostile to metaphor and ambiguity
- scientific, mathematical
- self without a shadow, disembodied
- infinite vision

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www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto (Wildlife Photographer of the Year website)

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