

Martin Lister, 'Introduction' to *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London, Routledge, 1995). Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd. <http://www.tandf.co.uk>

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### EXTRACTS FROM INTRODUCTION TO THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE IN DIGITAL CULTURE

[...]

**I**N QUITE UNTENABLE WAYS, the rhetoric surrounding new image technologies has constructed an idea of their 'newness' by setting up some false dichotomies and oppositions with lens based media. Almost overnight, it seemed, the photographic image and other analogue visual media (film, television and video) became realist images viewed by passive dupes. Simple mirrors held up to mundane realities at which we passively gaze. 'Media which we are familiar with as passive will become active' claims the video artist Simon Biggs, writing about the future of video. He dismisses virtual reality hardware as defunct before it has hardly left the laboratory. He leaps over research aimed at scanning information on the retina (there is no mention of whose retina or why!), and speaks of 'more advanced research' which is aimed at 'the direct stimulation of the optic nerve as a means of dispensing with inflexible and difficult to use hardware' (Biggs 1991: 71). In three sentences we lurch from the familiar video camera to a Gibsonian world of post-biological surgery and neural prostheses.

Kevin Robins has characterised what he has called the 'techno-fetishistic' approach to new image technologies (Robins 1995). This is an approach toward technology which he characterises as euphoric, exultant and full of a 'sense of omnipotence' at the opening up of 'unbounded possibilities'. He quotes, elsewhere, from an article titled 'From Today Photography is Dead':

Photographers will be freed from our perpetual constraint, that of having, by definition, to record the reality of things, that which is really occurring . . . Freed at last from being mere recorders of reality, our creativity will be given free rein.

(Robins 1991: 56)

As Robins argues, claims for 'What is "superior" about the post-photographic future becomes clear, then through contrast with what is seen as an inferior, obsolete, photographic past'. What digital technologies are being claimed to offer is at least partly achieved by a highly selective attention to the history of the photographic image.

### Photographic realism (resurrected)

This casting of photographic images (not always negatively as in the current cases) as slavish inprints of physical reality, as mirrors held up to the world, or as open windows through which it can be directly seen, are as old as photography itself (Snyder and Allen 1975, Snyder 1980). In the current tendency to oppose photography to digital imagery we are actually witnessing a continuation of an old debate about photography. This is the debate between those who have stressed the photographic image's privileged status as a trustworthy mechanical analogue of reality and those who have stressed its constructed, artifactual, and ideological character. The former position stresses the automatic means by which a photograph is produced, the latter the myriad decisions, conventions, codes, operations and contexts which are in play both when the photograph is made and when it is made sense of by a viewer (Barthes 1977b).

This vexed and often tedious argument about something called the *photographic medium* is now being cast as a debate *between* photography and the digital image. In this new opposition, what were formerly two broad and often contradictory ways of understanding photographs themselves have been parted. One view, the realist, stays attached (in a less subtle but newly zealous form) to photography; the other, what could be called the constructivist position, has been transferred to the digital. The same debate continues but from different sites. And it looks as if the realist position has a new, if rather crude, currency. In its earliest forms it was often used to distinguish photography (again negatively) from a romantic view of painting as the expressed subjectivity of a gifted individual or from a waning classicism in which worthwhile images were refined by the artist's intellect. In its early twentieth-century forms it was used to claim something essential and unique about photography as it claimed its own place within high modernist culture. Now it is being used to distinguish a suddenly sad and earthbound 'photography from the creative realms of the new digital technologies.

Realist theories give priority to the mechanical origins of the photographic image. They argue that the mechanical arrangement of the photographic camera means that 'physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light' (Arnheim 1974). Photographs are spoken of as "cosubstantial with the objects they represent", "perfect analogons", "stencils off the real", "traces", or as "records" of objects or of images of objects' (Snyder and Allen 1975). Hence, what is stressed is a guaranteed causal link with the physical world; photographic images are automatically produced and are passive in the face of reality. It is this quality of the photographic image that Barthes (op. cit.) calls its 'being thereness'. It is argued by realists that this is the source of the photographic image's special force as evidence. In his application of semiotic theory to the photograph, Barthes built upon this concept of 'indexicality' for different reasons; to show how

it lends enormous power to the photograph's symbolic and mythological properties by masking them as natural or real and not historical and cultural. But in many versions of realist theory, the photographic image is seen as more or less short-circuiting the filter of ideas, cultural codings, and intentions which the producer is conventionally thought to bring to other kinds of representations. In this way it is claimed that, due to the kind of technology which produces a photographic image, it is distinctly and absolutely different from all other kinds of representation. Such theories appeal deeply to common sense. They resonate strongly with positivistic beliefs about the facts of a situation being transparently clear to us when open to inspection by vision.

However, such accounts have their source in a restricted view of how photographic images come to have meaning. Such realist theories are fixated with the historical difference between the technological means employed in photography and all other kinds of autographic and manual means of image making and reproduction. This technological difference has been abstracted – isolated and generalised – as a principle which can be used to explain the special significance of the photographic image.

One important outcome of this insistence on defining 'the photographic' in technological terms has been a related preoccupation with trying to read beneath all of its varied and contradictory social uses (the different practices of fashion and surveillance photography for instance, or between a surrealist's and a documentarist's use of the technology). This was in order to find its essential and unifying characteristics as a 'medium'. As John Tagg (1988: 14–15) has pointed out, it is more helpful to think of 'photographies' which have different 'histories' than it is to think of a singular medium with a singular, grand and sweeping history. The conventional history of photography has been written like *The History of Literature or Art*. It would be better understood as like a history of writing. By which Tagg means that it is better understood as a technique which is employed in many different kinds of work. Writing for instance is a technique employed in the different tasks of making shopping lists, surveyors' reports, advertising copy, poems, etc. These cannot be usefully understood as if they all belonged to one grand, selective and linear enterprise held together by a unifying idea and a defining set of canonical works. Neither can photography.

Yet, recently, in the face of the biggest radical shift in the technology of images since the emergence of photography itself, the polarised terms of the old debate seem to have returned in a particularly crude way. The monolithic view of photography is being resurrected. Its technological basis again becomes its defining feature. And this is contrasted with a digital technology which itself is rapidly gaining the status of a new essentialised 'medium'. But this time, not one which guarantees access to reality but one which celebrates that impossibility and offers to construct virtual ones instead.

### Photographic meanings

The question of how our belief in the special veracity and evidential force of the photographic image gets attached to the material image itself can be approached by

considering the photographic image in more historical and sociological ways (Tagg 1988: 3–5) This can also lead us to question the view that there is a fundamental cultural break between the photographic and the digital. Instead of focusing attention upon the photograph as the product of a specific mechanical and chemical technology, we need to consider its technological, semiotic, and social hybridness; the way in which its meanings and power are the result of a mixture and compound of forces and not a singular, essential and inherent quality.

Over a period of 150 years photographic images have contributed to how we see and think about the world, ourselves and others. But they have not achieved this historical shaping of perception in isolation or through technological means alone. First, the still photographic image has circulated, eventually on a global scale, via other graphic and technical processes and predominantly alongside the meanings of the printed word. As John Tagg puts it:

With the introduction of the half-tone plate in the 1880's, the entire economy of image production was recast . . . half tone plates at last enabled the economical and limitless reproduction of photographs in books, magazines and advertisements, and especially newspapers. The problem of printing images immediately alongside words and in response to daily changing events was solved . . . The era of throwaway images had begun.

(Tagg 1988: 56)

From this time on the discrete chemical photographic print is, relatively, a rarity. Yet, the chemical process itself came to stand at the centre and as the originating point of the modern world's web of reprographic processes and print media. The path from chemical photograph to its social availability and circulation in the magazine, newspaper, book, etc., is complex and mediated. For the modern saturation of experience by images to have occurred, the photo-mechanical process was a necessary but by no means a sufficient cause. This depended upon a convergence of photography with print, graphic, electronic and telegraphic technologies. With the emergence of digital technology this convergence is exponentially increasing. It can be seen, at least in part, as an acceleration of historical processes already surrounding the photographic image. In the cycle of cultural production and reception, which passes through many technical, social and political stages, the meanings of a photographic image or a text can be fixed or changed at a number of points. In this respect the opposition between an isolated photo-chemical technology (seen as having automatic, guaranteed and fixed meanings) and hybrid 'new media' (as having more open and layered meanings) depends, to a considerable extent, upon collapsing the cultural form of the photographic image into the technological form of the chemical photograph. Once we reflect upon the technological and social complexity of how we meet the photographic images which circulate in everyday life, this particular opposition is greatly diminished.

Second, at the point of reception or consumption, photographic images are seldom, if ever, met in isolation. They are embedded and contexted in other sign systems. Primarily, these are those of the written word, graphic design and institutional connotations. As Barthes (1977b: 15) puts it, the photograph is at the centre

of 'a complex of concurrent messages'; in a newspaper these are the text, the title, the caption, the layout, and even the title of the newspaper or publication itself: a photograph can change its meaning as it passes from the page of the conservative to the radical press.

Apart from this close relationship with the written word, photographic images become meaningful by the context of the spoken word and casual, oral culture. For still images, this is particularly the case in the domestic world where snapshots are virtually an occasion for talk, reminiscence and commentary. This is also the case with the educational uses of photographs, in the classroom, lecture theatre or public event. While having an obvious relationship to text, the meanings of photographic images in newspapers and magazines may also be inflected as they are spoken about or argued over. If we extend the definition to the images of cinema, television and video then their crucial relationship to sound and speech is obvious, although more complex than we ordinarily imagine (Ellis 1991: 127-44, Altman 1980). But for current purposes it is the very fact of the connection itself which is important; between the technological forms of sound and visual reproduction. Writing about photography and film in 1936, Walter Benjamin pointed out that the photographic image actually called forth a new relationship between the visual image, the human voice and speech.

Just as lithography virtually implied the illustrated newspaper, so did photography foreshadow the sound film, [because,] Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech.

(Benjamin 1973: 221)

The sheer pervasiveness of photographic images, in all major areas of social and cultural life, is also the grounds for their intertextuality. The meanings of any particular photographic image are not freestanding and autonomous, as if fenced off from all others. Each one or each cultural form in which they circulate, is a small element in a history of image production and a contemporary 'image world'. Photographic images belong to a kind of 'second nature'; a dense historical environment of mass-produced images, symbolic objects, spectacles and signs (Buck-Morss 1991). Within this environment, the photographic image gains its meaning by a continual borrowing and cross-referencing of meanings between images. The still photograph quotes a movie, the cinematographer adopts the style of an advertising photographer, the music video mimics an early silent movie, etc.

If what a photograph refers to is at least partly the way the world is represented in other images, then another kind of distinction between the photographic and the digital becomes less sharp. The frequently made observation that digital images are reworkings of received images, are built from the fragments and layers of other images, is better understood as a meta-form of processes long involving the photographic image; not a radical difference but an acceleration of a shared quality.

Each of these relationships between the photographic image and other technologies of representation and communication takes place within social institutions and forms of organisation: media organisations, entertainment industries, bureaucracies, families, educational establishments, workplaces, cities. It is mainly in the

way that photographic technology was understood, and used, within institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that photographs came to have their distinctive significance(s). John Tagg (1988) and others (Sekula 1983, McGrath 1994, Green 1984) have carefully researched the manner in which still photographs have gained their various statuses as art, evidence or document – the meanings that we now take for granted and see as actual properties of the 'chemically discoloured' pieces of paper themselves (Tagg 1988: 4).

In *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg researched early uses of photographs as evidence in courts and public enquiries, as medical and police records, and as saleable commodities which photographers wanted to own and copyright. He traces the way in which all these uses had to be fought for, or 'produced' as he puts it. It was not, to start with, self evident that a photographic image was more truthful than any other kind of image. Neither was it evident that an image produced by a machine could be owned by an individual; that it could have an author. It was by appealing to other sources of power and authority, and connecting the photographic image to them, that these values were established. Principally, these sources of authority were the new social sciences, civic authorities, courts of law, the premisses of capitalist economics, and traditional ideas about artistic creation where the artist is thought to have 'given' something of 'themselves' to their work.

The significance of photographic images can not then be fully grasped without looking to the systems of ideas, and the ways of ordering knowledge and experience, in which they became implicated from the middle of the nineteenth century. And then, having been produced and made meaningful in these ways, they come to be understood within yet other sets of ideas and beliefs. The theories of the 'realists' for example, whose thinking separated the photograph from its social embeddedness and sought its significance in its technological means of production.

That I take a photograph to give me 'the facts' of a situation is 'guaranteed' by the extent to which I consciously or unconsciously accept the principles of empirical scientific method. That I read a photograph as the 'subjective expression' of an artist's idiosyncratic way of seeing the world depends upon my having the idea that this is what art and artists do (and that it is appropriate to see a photograph in this way). When a photograph is a poignant token of my past life, it is so because of a powerful compound of my belief in its scientific basis and my desire for what I have lost.

We need, then, to think about photography as a set of practices with different purposes. Whilst they share a technological basis we do not get very far thinking about these different practices in technological terms alone. We now also need to recognise that digital technology has more than one relationship to this range of photographic practice. Even in these early years, digital image technology is being used in more than one way and these ways inevitably owe much to the established forms, discourses and institutions of photographic production.

### Digitisation

Beneath the technological surface of digital image production, important cultural continuities are at work. In a fuller account than it is possible to give here, we

would need to think separately about the digital coding of the analogue chemical photograph, and the *simulation* of 'chemical' photographs by digital means; the production of 'photographic' images which have no specific or causal referent in the world of objects and events. Third, it would probably be useful to distinguish the latter from the scenarios of virtual reality. As these ultimately centre upon an aspiration to dissolve material images altogether; the removal of any material interface between vision and image.

The first two uses of digital technology: the recoding and the simulation of photographs, bear very directly upon what can be done with the photographic image. The third, while being quite remote from the practical production of photographic images, is frequently seen as part of a teleology of the cinema – a progressive technological fulfilment of the cinema's illusionistic power. It is important to stress that beyond research laboratories and 'shoot-em-up' arcades 'virtual realities' are not socially available in any meaningful way. The apparatus is presently more of a 'discursive' than a material object. That is, it is something that is reported rather than seen, something that is talked and speculated about, and represented in other media: cinema, TV, novels, comics, rather than used (Hayward 1993). However, while not at the centre of this essay's concerns, 'VR' has much to do with the notion of a 'digital culture' and the ideological context into which photographic images are now entering. It is, surely, the imagined and desired object into which the 'hard copy' and screen based image manifestations of digitisation are frequently and confusingly collapsed. Not only by techno-theorists but also by manufacturers of popular computer software.

However, closer to the present in which images have their meaning, the digitisation of chemical photographs and video stills was immediately seen to have implications for the continuing (and already problematic) status of photo-reportage, journalism and documentary practice. At the same time, the use and recontexting of digitally scanned and digitally *simulated* photographs, has been primarily applied to entertainment, corporate training and education, in the form of interactive multimedia. It may be useful to see these two developments as pulling in two directions. Broadly, the use of digital technology within documentary and reportage traditions is leading to a defensive preoccupation with issues of authorship and integrity. While within multimedia practice there is, at least at an ideological level (copyright issues are still fiercely pursued, if confused, at the level of material production and product control), a celebration of 'interactivity', of openness, and the dissolution of concepts of original, singular, authorship. (See Barthes 1977a: 142–8, Foucault 1979: 108–19, Lury 1992: 380–5, on concepts of authorship.) This has been a longstanding tension within photographic culture which may now be stretched to breaking point.

The historical use of photographs as 'evidence' and reliable documentation has long been in continual contradiction with other uses of photographs, particularly as art, and in advertising and corporate publicity. As Sekula has put it:

the hidden imperatives of photographic culture drag us in two contradictory directions: toward 'science' and a myth of 'objective truth' on the one hand, and toward 'art' and a cult of 'subjective experience' on

the other. This dualism haunts photography, lending a certain goofy inconsistency to most commonplace assertions about the medium.

(Sekula 1986: 160)

Sekula points to the way that photographic images are seen, now as the product of an autonomous technological force, now as a matter of aesthetics, pleasure, expression and subjective interiority. This problematic position of photography as it has been caught up in philosophical and institutional divisions of science and art, has always troubled its theorists. Yet it is unlikely that it has troubled its practitioners and institutions to the same extent, on one side of the line or the other. At present, it seems that the advent of digital 'post photography', despite its capacity to confound realist/constructivist categories, is still being thought about with the 'goofy inconsistency' that Sekula points to. Practitioners and institutions with an investment in 'myths of objective truth' are attempting to shore up these ideological partitions (Ritchin 1990b: 36, Mitchell 1992: 8). On the other hand, in both popular and more formal, academic ways, the technology is being seized upon as confirming the dissolution of the science/art, objective/subjective, divide and, in particular, the image's status as any kind of reliable index of a prior reality.

In a short section of his book *The Reconfigured Eye*, entitled 'Digital Images and the Postmodern Era' (Mitchell 1992), William Mitchell proposes that the emergence of digital imaging can be seen as a means to

expose the aporias in photography's construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic tradition.

(Mitchell 1992: 8)

At one level, Mitchell could well be pointing to the way in which a software programme such as Adobe Photoshop can operate rather like a practical demonstration of photographic semiotics. Within a couple of hours' use, such a programme opens up, in principle at least, the post-production manipulations of photographic representation: manipulations which previously would have been the outcome of several months' apprenticeship in the chemical darkroom. Digital software becomes a heuristic tool for *understanding* photographic representation.

Mitchell goes beyond this. By means of what can only be described as a homology – a sense of a 'fit' or resonance – he suggests that a (digital) medium which 'privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and that emphasises process or performance' is the technological counterpart to some propositions of cultural and linguistic theory. He sees 'post-photographic' practice as analogous to 'poststructuralist' theory, both embraced within a world characterised as 'postmodern'. Where the search of the high modernist heroes of photography, such as Paul Strand and Edward Weston, for a kind of 'objective truth assured by a quasi-scientific procedure and closed, finished perfection', is anachronistic and no longer supportable.

He points to the open-endedness of the digitised image and the manner in which image manipulation software is designed to facilitate change, alteration and recombination of elements. He sees this as being in contrast to the 'one to one' relationship

which the photographic image conventionally has to the scene or object which it represents. He then draws an analogy with poststructuralist theories of language and meaning. The emphasis in such theories is upon the polysemic nature of signs, their capacity to mean more than one fixed thing. It is also upon their 'indeterminacy', the way that language and sign-systems are always in process as they are used. They never reach a final destination of fixed, settled meaning; that is any kind of 'closure'. It is in the emergent form of interactive multimedia that such ideas might be thought to find their analogy in the production of digital image 'texts'.

Multimedia, whether encoded on CD Rom or in its promised 'on-line' forms, raises many questions and issues. With the multimedia 'text' the consumer or user is seen to be empowered by being able to navigate through a potentially immense range of knowledge and information. In making their own connections, choosing their own pathways, by being active in making their own sense of the material, they are thought to be newly included in the construction of meaning. By looking at what is involved in this emergent cultural form, we can take up again the discussion of cultural continuities between the photographic and the digital image. For it looks as if the dispersed social and technological complexity of photographic meaning, which was discussed earlier, has found a kind of concentrated technological form in multimedia production.

[. . .]

Multimedia texts are designed frameworks and structures, holding selective contents, in which a necessarily constrained interactive function is offered to the user/consumer. It is also the case that the signifying powers of the photographic images carried on digital media, the ideological frameworks in which multimedia texts are built, and the conventions which are established to make them meaningful, have to come from somewhere. This 'somewhere' is, in the first instance, the skills, practices and conventions which have been historically developed around the still and moving photographic image. And like the photographic image itself, the range of other signifying and discursive systems which contribute to its meaning. New kinds of production conventions, forms of exhibition, institutions, and new audience or consumer practices are likely to develop for multimedia. They do not, however, exist as pure forms waiting to be divined. They are being built in negotiation with the forms of a photographic culture.

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