

Warning:

Objects in Photograph not as Real as they May Appear

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the nature of photography and how it alters one's perception of reality. First, I explicate how the mechanical nature of the camera forces the photograph to capture reality in a certain way. Then I study the philosophy which claims the reality is dead (i.e. Baudrillard), ultimately concluding that photography results in false images of the real. Lastly, I examine the impact of images on one's perception of reality. I conclude that one conceives of the world anamorphically, through the photograph.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein proposes to his reader the idea that “we make to ourselves pictures of facts. ... The picture is a model of reality”.¹ Wittgenstein was referring to the philosophical importance of language, and how one uses language to access reality; in the modern world, pictures and images are just as important relating to reality. The above statement can also be said of photography; for photography, like language, exists as a problematic window to the world. There is often a discord between a photographed object, and the objects' appearance in the photograph. This should be a great concern for modern philosophers, as photographs have become the window to reality. Photography, cinematic or still, has become the way in which one comes to understand what reality is. False images and expectations are generated by photography. There have been a few philosophers who have examined the philosophical implications of the photograph, but they have been overly critical. This paper will focus on explicating the impact of photography on the conceptualization of what is real.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. CK Ogden, (London: Routledge, 2000), 39.

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This will, of course, necessitate a full definition of reality; this will be given. But it will be of benefit to first examine the photographic process itself, and what the result of a photograph is. From there, the role that photography plays in interpreting reality can be discussed. It will be shown that one relates to reality through the photograph, which means that one relates to an anamorphic reality.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ACT

This is, of course, a bold claim. It is, therefore, reasonable to begin examining the source of the controversy: the creation of the photograph. The physical construction of the camera necessarily distorts the image it records. However, this same process is the one in which the photograph receives its meaning – “meaning” referring to the significance of the photograph. It is important to analyse a photograph’s meaning first as it is the reason a photograph is taken. It must be seen how a photograph receives its meaning. Fortunately, one can turn to one philosopher for guidance: this philosopher is Jacques Derrida.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida proposes the notion of the “archontic power”.² This concept is based on the power which the “archons”, a group of people whom are entrusted with possessing and maintaining the documents and laws, possessed in ancient Greece. Derrida claims that these people possess tremendous power:

The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. ... they have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.³

² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

³ Derrida, 2.

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What this shows the reader is simple: those who have the information also get to interpret it.

The photograph is the interpreter of the information; the information the photograph deals with is reality. One may be tempted to say that it is the perceiver of the photograph who interprets the information (i.e. reality); but this would be simplistic, and incorrect. The viewer asserts no meaning to the photograph, but interprets it. The viewer may interpret the photo through his or her subject experience of it, but this does not mean that he or she gives the photograph meaning: they are only responsible for its interpretation. The information which is to be interpreted, the image, is constructed partially by the photographer and partially by the camera.

On the one hand, the photograph, which results from the act of the photography, is not the mechanical manipulation by the photographer, but also the camera itself. The camera has certain technological limitations which prevent a direct and unmediated relationship to reality. To take a photograph the camera needs a certain lighting, it needs to be on a certain angle, it needs to focus on this object, etc. In short, the camera records the object it sees through its mechanical nature. Therefore, the image which results is not reality, but reality as it is seen through the eye of the camera (i.e. photograph). In and of themselves, these technical misfortunes have little importance: but since they exist, they force the photographer to be mindful of them. And consequently, she is forced to use the camera in a way such that she can overcome these limitations—this further distorts the reality the camera sees.

It should also be noted that often these limitations of the photograph often become intentional aspects of the photograph themselves: the photographer uses the limitations to

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interpret reality as she desires. She attempts to gain the best possible picture that she can. Photographers will often distort reality intentionally; by making an object appear out of focus, or the take a picture of a thing in insufficient lighting so that it appears darker than it truly is. The photographer intentional uses these limitations to create a certain image. She is the one who makes the camera perceive the object in such a way as to make that object, when it is a human, perceive itself in a certain way.

It would therefore be incorrect to suggest to the reader that either the photograph or the photographer was the archon, the thing which asserts the order and meaning to the photograph. It has been shown that the technical limitations of the camera force the photographer to use the camera in a certain way; but it would also be incorrect to say that the camera is the archon, as the photographer may use the limitations to intentionally distort reality. Instead, both the photographer and the camera mutually distort reality—together they form the archon. With this in mind, it is now possible to examine the image and its importance. This image, which is the result of certain mechanical alterations of the real image, shall be referred as “anamorphic reality”.

THE SIMULACRA OF THE REAL

The photograph is a very unique phenomenon: it possesses the power to depict reality in a certain way. It possesses the ability to distort reality, as has been seen. But this distortion is not inconsequential: it can alter one’s conscious state. For example: if the image depicts something morose (i.e. refugees, war-torn villages, etc.), then the object can grab the viewer’s mind and convert the happiness that one was experiencing into a sadness. It thus important to examine the consequences of the image, in what ways the photograph can distort the reality one perceives.

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Here, one inquiring into the nature of a photographed object is rather fortunate, as some philosophers have already penetrated this subject matter. Although they seem overly critical. One philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, has argued that photography, cinematic or still, has led to the death of reality. He claims that photographs announce the disappearance of the real thing.⁴ For Baudrillard, the object disappears into the photograph, leaving behind it a dead entity. There is some reason behind this. When a photograph is taken, it removes the object from its environment. Therefore, the object will change while the photographed object does not. For Baudrillard, the object loses its reality when the photograph isolates it from itself. Baudrillard believes that the photograph is real while the object is not. Therefore, the photograph represents to the death of the real. In turn, Baudrillard, the photograph is made more attractive (i.e. real) than the real and thus seduces its viewer into, what he calls, “hyperreality”.⁵ Baudrillard will not have an opponent in me, in terms of his view of photographs being more attractive than reality; however, his “metaphysics” of photography are extremely critical, if not simply false. But to this, another view of the object’s relation to the photograph can be made.

It is a fairly common philosophical claim that an object’s appearance is different from its reality. This is an ancient idea, and it can certainly be applied when examining the relationship between an object and its pictorial existence. Plato speaks to this point. In reference to figures of squares, triangles, and other geometrical shapes, Plato claims that students of mathematics make depictions of the above mathematical objects to assist in the study of them. These depictions, he claims, “they treat as images only, the real objects

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner, (London: Verso, 2008), 87.

⁵ See Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* for more on this subject.

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of their investigation being invisible except to the eye of reason".⁶ Now, for Plato, these images existed as a part of his philosophy—a very complex thought involving the existence of Forms on which the world of appearance is based. These mathematical images were to be used to better understand reality. It's not that these pictures were not real, but that these images were less real than those things which are real.⁷ It is this element of Plato's thought that can be used here.

In the same way a drawn triangle is not a real triangle, a photographed object is not the real object. When a photograph is taken of an object, the object undergoes an existential splitting – a development of two types of existences. On the one hand, the object, which was photographed, continues to exist and change. On the other hand, the camera captures the object's image, and this image of the object exists only as an image based on a real object.

Here, there is common ground with Baudrillard, but only in terms of making the dichotomy between the object and its photographed existence. Baudrillard claims that the world is made absent by the photograph.⁸ But this is a case where a philosopher may have misinterpreted the philosophical evidence. Where Baudrillard see a loss of referent, one should see a lack of reality in the photographed object. A photograph is a false image precisely because a) of its anamorphic nature – as explained earlier, and b) the fact it is not the object which is depicted.

Thus, the problem with the photograph is not that it somehow destroys the reality of object; but rather the image is a false image. That photograph depicts reality only in an

⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 239.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Prefect Crime*, 87.

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anamorphic sense: i.e. the reality in that photographic exists only when viewed from this angle in this light; that photographed “reality” only exists in a certain context. The photograph has the ability to seduce its viewer, because it is anamorphic. It is something new, exciting a variation of a familiar subject. Thus, the photograph is a simulacrum for the real, which is often taken to be true.

ANAMORPHIC REALITY

Now, one can turn to the task at hand: examining the impact of the proliferation of the photographs on reality. As said earlier, photographs, due to their anamorphic nature, are problematic windows to reality. But this claim requires some clarification by what is meant by “reality”. A great deal of philosophical work has been dedicated to determining what is real, thus it is difficult to define it precisely in one paper. However, the definition of “reality” this paper adopts is “whatever is actually”. The problem, here, is not answering the question “what is real?”. Reality can appear one way, and people can believe that the appearance is real, or reality can appear a certain way, and people do not believe that appearance to be real. The Ptolemaic astrologists believed that the sun revolved around the Earth, on the basis of appearance. The Copernican astronomer believes that the Earth revolves around the Sun, despite reality appearing to be the opposite.

But what is real is not as important as what is believed to be real (the Church’s opposition to the Heliocentric model is proof of this). Today, and perhaps this is true also of the past, reality’s appearance is more important (i.e. meaningful) than reality itself. Today, reality is conceived of through the anamorphic nature of photography. The

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anamorphic reality of the photograph is much more important than the reality upon which that photograph is based.

In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek states “that a thing is its own best mask”.⁹ This is important for the present analysis, because this is what reality is today: reality is conceived of as its own mask. Photography, cinematic or still, is that mask. The photograph stands as an anamorphic depiction of reality—this has been explained in the preceding section of this text. The photograph’s image only exists because of the mechanical limitations of the camera’s eye: those images are, as explained, desirable, and capture the viewer’s imagination. This is the case of both repulsive and seductive images. The proliferation of images has meant that one’s understanding of reality develops within the context of a photograph’s anamorphic reality. Consequently, one comes to conceive of reality through a photograph’s anamorphic nature: in other words, one conceives of reality in an anamorphic sense, as depicted by the photographs.

Pictures do, after all, play an important role of learning what is to be expected in life. Take an example: a photograph of a woman modelling for some fashion magazine. She appears skinny, attractive, healthy, etc., even though she, in reality, is not as skinny, attractive, or healthy as she appears. A child comes to view what a woman is through the context of the anamorphic photograph. The young girl believes that she should have that complexion and body shape. She believes that women are really as skinny as that model in that photograph. The young boy, presuming he is heterosexual, comes to conceive of women in the same way, and that he should desire this woman, as, after all, that is what

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006), 28.

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real women look like. But, obviously, not all real women look this way; thus one is taught to desire that which is false.

Of course, the photograph is not real at all: the image only appears that way because of the camera's eye, which was employed by the photographer, to produce the anamorphic image. The object of the photograph always hints at something better than what is, it therefore seduces the viewer to think reality in the context of the photograph. When one views a photograph, one is, at least partially, a victim of the reality it allows one to see. The more photographs, still or cinematic, one views, the more constant that anamorphic view of reality becomes. From every picture, the window to reality grows. One comes to view reality through, in the context, the anamorphic photograph. Thus, one's concept of reality becomes increasingly anamorphic, as one views more photographic material.

CONCLUSION

Reality has always existed as a problem for philosophy: philosophers have often been confused between the real and what has been conceived to be real. Photography has become a modern problem in this regard. The position which should be adopted by the modern reader: photography only captures an anamorphic depiction of reality, and not reality itself. One should be careful not to fall victim to the philosophy from the like of Jean Baudrillard who argue that reality is dead, and that photography is the new real. Instead it should be noted that what is believed to be real is different from what is real. Photography feeds the former. Consequently, the proliferation of photography has meant that anamorphic reality is wide spread. This anamorphic conceptualization of reality is

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more important than accepting reality as it is. Therefore, one conceives of reality, through the photograph, anamorphically.

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