

Photography as Metaphor

When photographs were presumed to tell the truth...

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One of the most problematic, yet fascinating, aspect of studying early photographs is the knowledge that we can never, under any circumstances, see the images with the same understanding as their makers or first viewers. Contemporary viewers must constantly be aware of the fact that meanings have altered merely through the passage of time. We view all early photographs through a multi-filter of personal prejudices as well as today's visual conventions. Also, we have seen so many of them. It is difficult to sustain a feeling of wonder; there is something rather sad about a truckload of caviar, as someone once said.

This familiarity with photography may not breed contempt but it certainly encourages cynicism. I was watching television at the home of a friend (I did not own a television set) when the screen showed a group of camouflaged troops, automatic weapons at the ready, running through the scrub. I missed the commentary. "Where was this military action taking place?", I asked. He shrugged. "Hollywood, probably." I looked surprised. Were there riots in the streets? "My theory," he said, "is that the networks have stock footage of actors dashing through the boondocks which they trot out at every mention of a brush war, anywhere in the world. They all look exactly the same so no one can tell the difference. Anyway, who cares?"

And that is just one example of our lack of faith in the veracity of photography, and how our viewing attitudes differ from those of the Victorians. They *knew* photographs were real, true, factual, authentic and trustworthy. So much so that the word "photography" was often substituted for "truth" - it became a metaphor for plain, unvarnished, warts-and-all facts. They had not learned that photographers are often liars.

Implicit faith in photography as a vehicle for truth, unsullied by the human and erring hand, led to some curious uses of photographic terms as metaphors.

For example, a newspaper in Mexico during the 1850s was called The

Daguerreotype, emphasizing its objective, factual intent. It had nothing to do with the photographic process, as I found to my chagrin after many wasted hours searching for, and through, this potentially unknown source of early photography. Similarly, I was excited to discover in the British Library catalogue a book entitled Sunday School Photographs. During my wait for its arrival I anxiously expected to find rare 19th century images of school children at their desks, learning their prayers. No such luck. The book does not contain a single photograph; it is a collection of homilies and inspirational texts. "Photographs" in this case was a metaphor for "truths." This was also true for an early periodical called The Photographer (only two issues were published). It was a religious tract with no connection, or reference, to the profession of its title.

There are many other examples. In an antique book store I came across a spine which stated, Under the Lens: Social Photographs, published in 1886. Again, it does not contain a single photograph (of a slum building, tramp or industrial worker - or of anything else) and the text makes no mention of photography. It is a collection of humorous descriptions of social types, such as "The Clerical Rough" or "The Ex-Beauty".

I was also fooled by a magazine published between 1858 and 1865 called The Stereoscopic Magazine. This was a periodical for enthusiasts of the blossoming stereo craze, right? Wrong. Its text has nothing whatsoever to do with photography.

Another intriguing title is Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography, published in 1893. Was this a manual on how to think photographs directly onto film? Unfortunately not. It is, in fact, an early self help book akin to the plethora of do-it-yourself psychology manuals now flooding the bookshops. Its author summarizes its contents: "The laws of mental healing with meditations and suggestions for 'fixing' [another photographic metaphor] the mind on a homily, e.g. Health is Natural."

Mental photography reminds me that the literature of spiritualism is littered with photographic metaphors, far too many to list. For example, the spirit presence is often likened to the latent image on film, "there" but invisible unless "developed," by a medium. Some spiritualists pushed this photographic metaphor to such an extent that their theories of the spirit world read more like texts on photography.

Talking about spiritualism prompts the thought that another branch of photography immediately captured the public's imagination at the turn of the

century: X-rays. It, too, was used as a metaphor for truth. But now the work implied not only a clear, untarnished view of reality but also an ability to see through surface appearances at the underlying bones of the matter. My favorite example is the Arizona newspaper called The Rising Star X-Ray. In contradiction to its title, the editor, Albert Tyson, described himself as "horse, snake, lying, and fighting editor" with the paper's motto: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you, and do it fust"!

The 20 century man had arrived and Tyson, like his editorial successors, obviously did not take his newspaper's photographic metaphor too seriously. Today, the assumption that a photograph reveals truth seems quaintly naive and unsophisticated. Yet early photographers reveled in such innocence. It sounds ridiculously trite to state that we must also attempt to recapture a sense of childlike wonder when we study their work, but I cannot think of a better way to express the idea. Photographic historians and critics are too clever for their, and our, own good. Sometimes, simple trust is appropriate.

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