

## Questioning Realism: Bazin and Photography

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"All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a snowflake or a flower whose vegetable or earthly origins are inseparable from their beauty".

(André Bazin 1967 *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, p13)

In an age when the essential subjectivity of meaning and meaning-making are assumed, and the social and historical contingency of scientific apparatuses and their products appears self-evident, it may seem merely quaint to lodge the appeal of photography in its "earthly origins" beyond "the presence of man". But it seems to me that what can on casual reading appear a defence of the most naïve realism, is both subtle and complex.

In this essay I will attempt to consider aspects Bazin's position. I will also draw on the understandings offered by other perspectives - particularly those round the social construction of art and, beyond that, meaning.

To use semiotic terms, Bazin proposes an iconic relation between the photographic image and its object – a direct impression which is not arbitrary but inevitable. This is what enables him to declare that "the objective nature of photography confers upon it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making" (Bazin, p13)

And indeed it is clear enough that the conventional photograph (even the Rayogram ) requires something to which the light-sensitive material(s) can respond. It is also what makes the photograph a material "fact", part of the physical world in and by which it arises. But of what does the photograph offer an impression - and how "impassive" (a word Bazin uses several times) is it?

It might be appropriate to begin with a very basic reminder of some traditional concerns around the nature of "the real" itself. This has of course been an ancient and central concern in philosophy, with several models contending for dominance. Most prevalent in the Anglophone world has been the empiricist model. In Locke's famous formulation, this sees the world "out there" making an impression on the blank "tabula rasa" of the mind. This model may be supported by the physiology of vision inasmuch as we know that the eye records. It is also a model of the way light energises the photographic emulsion. To this extent, at least, Bazin's realist position on photographic veracity is well founded - a photograph cannot be made without something prior "out there", and having being made it becomes itself something "out there", independent of human intervention.

But of course from Plato to Proust, humans have been aware that what they "see" is not fixed and may indeed be recalled without something actually "out there". Beyond that, the raw sense-data require interpretation. This has produced idealist models of

perception, which root what is seen in the decoding processes of mental apparatus. As in Kant's "categories of perception" which determine what can be recorded (just as the camera determines what can be recorded, by the structure of the lens, emulsion etc.) The thrust of these positions is that the "real" is unknowable because we are only ever able to "experience" the filter of our own apparatus. In extreme forms, represented most poetically by Descartes, this may lead to questioning the actual existence of anything beyond the imagining consciousness.

Following the positivist shifts in philosophical interest in the early 20th century, recent models have displaced the central preoccupation from the axis perceiver/perceived to a concern with the socialisation of the perceiver and hence the way seeing is constructed and constrained.

So to return to Bazin, one might simply ask, what is it in fact which stands outside the camera - a world of "flowers", "snowflakes", and other forms, or a world in which these "phenomena" (in Kant's term) have themselves been given a social identity? The Inuit with their legendary number of names for snow, remind us that the very category "snowflake", is a social one, and one which, in itself, the camera quite simply cannot "see". In the same way, the camera does not see a "person" in a portrait, but merely a complex of light interacting with forms and surfaces. It is we who see the flower, the snowflake, the person.

Indeed the early exploration of photography is replete with examples of the struggle to understand how the camera does "see" and what implications this might have for our own sense of the nature of human perception. And Bazin himself describes photography's now well-accepted effect on painting by which "it has freed Western painting, once and for all, from its obsession with realism, and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy" (Bazin p16). It is congruent with this position that Impressionism began to suggest that we did not, after all, see like the cameras which (we assumed) had been built to see the way we thought we saw! Another example of this influence is that it is possible that cubism, (which as it were "returned" to photography via Moholy Nagy and others), might not have happened had it not been for Muybridge and the motion picture.

So it can quickly be realised that the "objectivity" of the camera is a result of complex choices, and the legions of photographs which don't "come out" show the disjunction between the photographic apparatus and our socialised sense of the "real". Against these anarchic potentials, Peirre Bourdieu has shown how the camera must be disciplined to reproduce the sclerotic banality which is the character of most photographs, as records not of "mechanical" encounters so much as marmoreal repositories for the inherited expectations which give our lives their curious aspect of sleepwalking. So, in discussing wedding photography he says "The photographic image, that curious invention which could have served to disconcert or unsettle, ... established itself very quickly (between 1905 and 1914) because it came to fulfil functions that existed before its appearance, namely the solemnization and immortalisation of an important area of collective life." (Bourdieu p20)

Bourdieu goes on to consider the dense matrix of socialised assumptions and rituals which surround and socially/discursively "construct" (uphold) actual photographic practice - in the family, in clubs, and the profession. In this connection it might

be worth the risk of appearing obvious, by remembering that the camera itself is a social instrument - a machine evolved from a sense of human interests and concerns. It is in that sense no more "neutral" than a fork or a teapot. Assumptions are built into it. In this respect Bazin's snowflake and flower are illuminating, coming as they do from a lexicon of the picturesque in which nature was figured as a zone of wonder. But the valorisation of flowers and snowflakes is itself an outcome of historically and socially specific outlooks. And the history of photography is as much a struggle for conformity as for novelty. This is true even at a technical level - one thinks of Ansel Adams' zone system whereby the four-stop range of printing paper and the nine-stop range of film emulsions are manipulated to produce a "full range" impression of the fifty stop range of the eye, in relation to "objects" which often turn out to be symbolic "equivalents" (to use Steiglitz's term) or "correlatives" (T.S. Eliot) of immaterial psychic (socialised) intimation. Man Ray's camera-less photographs or "Rayograms" are only one example of a continuing body of work which reveal the contingency of the camera's "objectivity" and the imaginary nature of its projections via lenses designed to produce what we agree to recognise and call a "picture".

In this context Hal Foster's useful précis of Lacan's lecture on the gaze shows that "seeing" itself is, rather like Barthes' language, a mode, a discourse, a practice, which pre-exists the subject and constructs him/her in relation to the "real". And indeed, just as any photograph traces, reifies and hence reveals the position of the camera, in the same way the sardine tin "discloses" Lacan the looker. (Foster p...) And this is not of course merely "mechanical", so the image constructs a social as well as physiological "point of view" for the viewer as an obverse of the scope of the seen.

So Lacan's theorisation of the gaze roots it in an intrinsically imaginary (image-forming, image-formed) relation with the materials of sense data. Indeed his famous discussion of the "mirror phase" suggests that the unitary viewer him/herself is as much an imaginary entity as the "things" which surround him/her. The construction of meaning in the transformation from data to "image", is social, and occurs by means of a "screen" of categorical meaning-potentiae.

If the fixity of the object-image-meaning axis of naive epistemology has come under sustained challenge, this has been applied to the "reality" of the photographic image as well. Reception theory (implicit in Barthes' elevation of the reader as author) has shown how the same image may mean different things at different times for different viewers and may give comfort or distress according to what the viewer brings to the reading, while the work of Victor Burgin problematises the notion of inherent meaning in photographs. And claims for relativity and contingency in the way pictures "mean" can lead us back to a crisis in realism itself - to question whether any representation, and indeed any sense impression, proves the existence of the "reality" it implies.

In this sense when Foster says that for Lacan all art results in a "taming of the gaze" (Foster p140) by subjecting it to a screen, he echoes Bourdieu's observations about photography as an activity for the creation of apparent unity and order; a device for the creation of meaning from the chaos of sense-impression. In Lacan's terms (and perhaps Bourdieu's?) exposure to the unmediated real would lead to the implosion of meaning.

Lacan suggests that beyond what he called "the defile of the signifier" there lies only chaos and (to use Kristeva's term) abjection - a dissolution of the ego and the psyche, and hence of all "meaning".

But is "seeing" entirely and always socially contingent? Is there, in the common-sense use of the term, an "objective" dimension to it?

In his discussion of the social construction of reality the analytical philosopher John Searle writes "realism ... is not a theory of truth, it is not a theory of knowledge, and it is not a theory of language. If one insists on a pigeonhole, one could say that realism is an ontological theory: It says that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations" (Searle, p155) but, as he points out "it is consistent with ER (his term for External Realism) ... that different and even incommensurable vocabularies can be constructed for describing different aspects of reality for our various different purposes". (Searle p155) Applying this to photography one would wish to separate out the fact of the photograph as object from the many ways in which its "meaning" might be attributed.

And it is here I would like to return to Bazin. For it seems to me that an important dimension of his essay is his discussion of the memorial appeal of photography as way of reconnecting with a constantly vanishing world.

Aristotle said that the pleasure of mimetic recognition was fundamental to the satisfactions of art - the sense that in the presence of a "true" picture (or drama) one is able to achieve that "aha" experience of Socratic "anamnesis", which lies beyond the infatuation with spectacle and the exotic, but is a recovery from forgetting into self-recognition and affirmation.

And Bazin's own defence of realism in photography is more subtle than might first appear. For example, while he says "no matter how fuzzy distorted or discoloured .... the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction" (Bazin p14) and this material quality - "after the fashion of a fingerprint" (Bazin p15) accounts for the forensic and social values attributed to the "power of an impassive mechanical process" (Bazin p14), the social qualities of the image are by no means lost on him. So he is able to say "photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely an hallucination that is also a fact" (Bazin p16)

This seems to me to be a statement of quite extraordinary subtlety. It is entirely congruent with Lacanian understandings, for example, in which the "screen" is an hallucinatory mediator to a "reality of nature".

Nevertheless, while Bazin grapples with the contingent nature of photographic construction, speaking of "the illusions of geometric perspective", he returns to the capacity of "the mechanically produced image" to "reach out beyond baroque resemblance to the very identity of the model"(Bazin p16) This may at first sight seem problematic. For as I hope I have shown, the "identity" of the model is very much a matter of social ascription. But in fact if we are prepared to look beyond the

apparently scientific dimension of his argument to its poetic value, we see that he is saying something both simple and profound: "The impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love." (Bazin p15) It is a process of social and perceptual refreshment which is his central claim for the medium, the traditional but always pressing function of art.

So if Bazin's theorization of realism is inconsistent and at times shadowy, this does not vitiate the value of his essay. His discussion begins with a speculation on the appeal of art which echoes Aristotle in suggesting that the illusion of re-encountering the object depicted accounts for the comfort and pleasure afforded by artistic representation. So it is that he can claim that "photography is the most important event in the history of the plastic arts" (Bazin p16) since it removes from painting this ancient burden, and sets it free to explore the pleasures of unfettered visuality.

But there is another dimension to Bazin's discussion which I would like to consider. His view of the external world is not static. So his essay suggests that a fundamental, (perhaps the fundamental?) aspect of the magical allure of photography is its capacity to engage with both the process and experience of time: "photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption" (Bazin p14) This again seems to me to be a remarkably fruitful observation. For it suggests that the real "subject" of the photograph may not be the "things" seen by the camera at all, but the "being-in-time" experience itself (in Heidegger's famous phrase). It is congruent with the concerns of artists such as Tarkovsky and Cartier-Bresson and informs Barthes' account of the slightly uncanny pregnancy of photographs.

In this vein, Steiglitz's *Equivalents*, the first of which he exhibited in 1922 titled "Music: a sequence of ten cloud photographs" were a foray in search of "a reality - so subtle it becomes more real than reality: that's what I'm trying to get down in photography" (quoted in Naef p82). One might even be tempted to suggest that in the end it not the "visible" at all which is the essential subject of photography: the photographer and teacher William Gedney kept in his notebooks a quote from V.S Pritchett "describing happiness, the delicious sensation of simply being alive; and it is done by fidelity to what is passing, by making concrete the sense of evanescence (my emphasis) in ordinary things" (Sartor and Dyer p167).

As a practising photographer, conditioned by habits of obligation to produce explanatory images which engage with social concerns, this is a profound challenge and invitation.

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