

Changing lenses: photography as counterfactual thinking

There is something inefficient about photographic images. They never seem to show us what we want or what we thought we wanted them to show. In this sense alone, they feel partially broken or at least partially incomplete. Or to put this another way, images also articulate something about the failure of representation as a system, as well as being things that represent objects or stuff or events in the world.

What underwrites this notion of incompleteness is a rethinking of the gaze. This rethinking situates the gaze around a blind spot. So, the gaze is not how we look, as Mulvey and Metz would have claimed. Instead, the gaze is concerned with what is absent or what is missing. It is configured not by what we see but by what we don't see, what is outside of view.

For Mulvey, in her use of the Lacanian gaze, the gaze is embodied in the camera and the position it takes functions to create objects of desire. However, in the correct Lacanian reading of the gaze, what creates desire is not the look - the position of the camera - but what is not seen. In this sense there is an incompleteness to all looking which photography is complicit in.

In this way, what is absent from the gaze manifests itself as an uncertain or unrealised fantasy. Building on this, desire comes from imagining the possibility of the lost object - as Lacan would describe it, the *petit objet a* - being somehow regained.

What all of this indicates is my starting point in that what is broken, incomplete or partial about photography, is the very thing that also motivates the Lacanian gaze.

This understanding provides a fundamental shift in the way we can think about how photography works.

Simply put, photography is often at the centre of our discussions and thinking about representation, and the usual arguments are those that focus around truth and indexicality. If, however, we are to take a different view, namely that photography fails to represent because there is always something missing, then its failure allows the correct notion of the Lacanian gaze to be re-articulated. Photography then moves, ever so slightly, away from being about representation and becomes the ground for thinking about how subjectivity is structured differently. We are able to focus less on how this or that representation depicts a set of relations and be more attentive to a relational configuration of photography overall.

What is significant here, is not that photography somehow, suddenly, starts to not represent things. It's just the notion of representation is one that usually dominates photographic discourse and discussion. Whereas I argue for an examination of photography in its wider functioning. In doing this we can ask more useful questions about what is actually happening to photography and why what is happening might have greater consequences and matters more. My basic assertion is that the failure to fully represent is a structuring principle of photography. But it's one that most people who study, look at, or consider photography mostly chose to overlook or ignore. We assume a kind of visual truth where in fact we are confronted by the structure of something that is principally false.

From this model mapping photography onto a failure to fully represent I'd like to consider the idea of fake news. Clearly, fake news is not just about faked photographs or images that have been Photoshop-ed. And to be clear fake news does not provide a way to express photographic representational failure. Rather, fake news is an altered discourse, it's a new narrative structure that has become workable or acceptable.

Certainly, photographs appear comfortable supporting this new condition. They are still deployed to verify something's existence or as they have always done, to make an evidential claim suggesting something along the lines of: 'seeing is believing' or 'the camera never lies.' However, in the case of fake news the tendency is for any verification to be in support of a lie rather than truth. In this sense photographs miss-represent reality by suggesting an alternative, fake, one.

But fake photographs don't make fake news and fake news doesn't underpin the argument I've made for photographic failure. Instead we should go further to examine the relationship these two have.

Firstly, what is the context for fake news? We can think about fake news through the terms that Chomsky set out in 'Manufacturing Consent.' Here, Chomsky noted that when media bias is in favour of the status quo, we tend to experience the following results:

1. The media is held by major corporations with interests and goals similar to power elite elements of society
2. People who hold different views, or those with dissenting voices are rarely heard

3. The breadth of any debate is generally limited
4. The official stance and institutional memory tend to dominate and prevail, this then becomes history
5. People's attention is diverted away from issues about which they should become concerned

Today though, we can see that some of these points have become a little more inverted: people appear to be more widely heard; Debate appears not as limited in the sense that Chomsky defines; the official line is often questioned, for example the various Wikileaks stories; while attention span is arguably shorter it tends to not always be easily diverted.

Through social media and the Internet, we have a space in which ordinary people appear able to organise and manage themselves without reference to any form of higher authority. It is within this space that fake news has been allowed to evolve and grow. What we experience are multiple, personal versions of events. And through their mediation trust of any 'official' outlets is discouraged. The line being that government and public bodies are somehow not telling us the truth.

If we return to my original proposition concerning photography we can build an argument that suggests photographs work because contained within them is a particular knowledge that they are in some way incomplete and fallible. Thus, their failure to represent adequately structures a particular sense of their being (badly) representative. But this is rarely acknowledged explicitly. Furthermore, representation, always and necessarily, requires something additional that cannot easily be comprehended; something that is, ultimately, in excess of itself.

We can best understand this if we consider the functioning and structure of conspiracy theories or religion. Underlying any belief in these is the sense in which we do not know everything. In order for these kinds of systems of belief to work it is therefore necessary that there is something more to believe; something beyond what we can know. And we can understand a photograph in a very similar way. In order for photographs to function at all there has to be a certain hidden essence which is beyond our common understanding.

Explaining photography or a photograph, many people would accept that it embodies a certain ideological position: that it expresses a particular view point. We may also be honest and state that while photography appears to be like a magical object, it can function, like all commodities, as an expression of relations between people.

However, what we actually need to consider is the reverse of this. Namely, that while photography can be understood through the terms of its embodiment of social relations or as an expression of ideology, it is the reality, in which photography *appears* to us as some kind of magical object, that needs addressing. One might say that while we know that photographs are expressions of relations between people, do photographs themselves know this?

We might ask, whether the expression of post-truth or fake news narratives is actually a manifestation of the apparent realisation that there never has been any age of truth. In this sense, the liberty or freedom not be constrained by an overarching or hidden truth opens up a way for non-truths to be given equal footing. In this sense we do not align ourselves with an unequivocal, or truthful narrative, instead we experience a certain accord only with what *feels* genuine.

Rather than measuring truth by some form of external gauge, truth can really only be accounted for by understanding something of the formal inconsistency or contradiction inherent in its articulation and its context. Again, here photography provides another crucial insight because in a photograph truth can appear to be simultaneously both present and absent.

There is inevitably a comparative measure, wherein we might ask does this representation look like the object it represents. But beyond this kind of statement there are few external or useful gauges of truth, especially when we only see photographs representationally. I argue, if there is any possible truth of a photographic image it lies in the multiple, unresolved contradictions that sustain its representational meaning. Of course, it is in this sense that we inevitably determine that there is no inner truth to photography. But such a conclusion is rarely developed beyond this deadlock. Since, to do so would have to confront that what exists are merely a series of contingent, representational, displacements. Photographs continuously point to something they never finally reach. This then is perhaps their essence, not a definitive capacity to point, but the infinite capacity to go on and on failing to truly represent.

The difference between what might today be understood as fake news and the 'old' news that has always been in some sense fake is that for those of us who may have once believed in news, to subsequently discover that it may have been fake is to experience a certain level of alienation. Which is to recognise that something is not as it is. Whereas by acknowledging fake news as having at its core untruth built

into it, we fundamentally are never deceived. The point is thus that fetishistic disavowal of ideology - I know very well but nevertheless - renders subjects more enslaved to ideology than a simple ignorance of its functioning.

Perhaps then, the truest test of our post-factual times is to consider what truth-effect is inevitably forced upon us. One truth-effect would be a single, unifying consideration of truth with a post-truth, of fact with the post-factual. In this sense truth and post-truth isn't measured against each other, rather it is a phenomenon in itself. Perhaps, neither position entirely matters. In this environment we are free to think truthfully or post-truthfully without disappointment since they are one and the same.

We can see this in the continuous linking or displacement of images, such that we begin to understand images as referring not to some external formal reality but only to other images. Or alternatively it seems we are offered so many versions of reality that it is no longer valid to think of there being just one at all. Instead, what we are confronted with is image in its multiple guises. So, photographic images are no longer 'images of things;' in the sense they were once imagined to be. Instead, they become a series of looping combinations, a concatenated folding of image onto image, an incessant demand which exchanges image for image.

But what if there can be no unification? What if fact and post-fact are distinct? Here we experience the enslavement to ideology. With the alternative reading, the truth-effect we experience is one of a hierarchy: opposing the authentic with the inauthentic, the empirical with the hypothetical. It suggests a certain determined nature of being wherein we might say 'this is true' or 'this is not true.' But this serves to

obfuscate the affective nature of experience in general; when something feels true but there may well be nothing to substantiate this emotion.

It is fair to say that, most obviously, photography has tended to support the hierarchical line of thought. As such it operates as a mechanism which helps positions us on one or other side of the truth/post-truth argument: it may validate truth or even support some kind of post-truth. But this requires our belief that photographs show us or hide from us things. If we consider that photographs fail at showing us very much, instead they confirm with us their own contradiction. I know very well this is a photograph that shows me nothing nevertheless I accept it as showing me a kind of truth of something, perhaps even a fake kind of truth. What would be a better articulation would be to accept a photograph as a critique of a way of thinking. It comfortable allows us to both believe and disbelieve. Because of photography things that are seen to be post-truth or fake news are still entitled to a certain level of acceptance or even inevitability.

As the cycles of (image for image) image-qua-image, truth and post-truth have passed and continue to pass interchangeably and almost unnoticed, I argue, in its complicit relationship with both fact and fiction, photography is the ground zero of the post-truth epoch.