

A SHORT HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY, chapter 2, photography theory, p26-43, (Bate, 2009)

THREE PERIODS OF OUTBREAKS OF THEORY IN AND ON PHOTOGRAPHY HAVE OCCURRED:

1. Invention of photography 1830
2. 1900-1930
3. 1960-70 into post modernism

1. Victorian aesthetics

Q: How far can photography copy things?

Q: If photography copies things, how can it be art, clarity, precision, composition, or idealism? A set of debates tried to sit photography into a field of visual art. A romantic belief that human imagination is needed to make technology creative.

2. Mass reproduction 1920s & 30s

- Key essay: "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, 1936). This asked whether the invention of photography had transformed the nature of art, rather than where it fitted into art? Looked at it transformed relations to rituals, art objects....
- Key book: John Berger "Ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972). Led to critical analyses of the pictures themselves, how they work and their social purposes. It located photography within our social environment and showed the significance of the meaning in photographs. This led the way to more sophisticated analysis of meaning such as semiotics.

3. The 1960s and 70s

- Rise of the communication industries brought studies about their significance, how their roles affected the style of photographers' images.
- Barthes the photographic message" on new photography and (1961) and Rhetoric of the image" (1964), on advertising.
- Structuralism a new way of thinking about society and culture.
- Conceptual artists used photography, as Benjamin predicted.
- Barthes semiotic critical theory and his "Thinking about photography" (1982) drew together some of the new theoretical arguments about the photography of this period.

So, by the end of the 80s photography began to be absorbed into art institutions as a dominant art form.

THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

- Critical analysis of images can reveal things about how we see ourselves and the ideology and practical knowledge that we use to live our lives, beliefs, and values.
- Louis Althusser French philosopher argued this is communicated through images and other things in ways we do not usually think about. In representations we are unconscious in what we do.
- Semiotics was the first systematic theory of the ideology of photography, Barthes method of cultural analysis.

Structuralism

- This focused on the structures and systems of rules underpinning things and was primarily based in expanded linguistics, semiotics.
- Semiotics was later revised using methods such as psychoanalysis and deconstruction, leading to the new name poststructuralism.
- Barthes wrote about a variety of things but showed his interest in photography in many essays, showing how photographic meaning is achieved.
- Barthes Camera Lucida, his last book emphasised phenomenology as a method rather than semiotics (Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from

the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. the phenomenology of photography seems to depend on what we believe about the images that we look at).

Semiotics

- **Early founder Ferdinand de Saussure** argued that language is an organised system of signs used to represent ourselves in human culture. It is a collectively owned language. See p32 for detail.
- **Saussure:** meaning is in one particular language, where that code operates. Linguistic sign made up of signifier and signified which = sign. Signifier (material image) signified (mental image). So how we make sense of an image will depend at a basic level on the language system used, p33. So, the meaning of any image is partially dependant on the viewer's language, codes employed and their cultural knowledge, as well as the spectator generating the meaning.

Photographic codes

- Sender and receiver must use the same code
- There are photographic codes that we don't think about: the geometry of perspective built into the camera and lens.
- Umberto Eco (Italian semiotician) called these the perceptive codes. This visible legibility is something we learn. He states 10 photographic codes.
- Focus
- Lighting

Rhetoric (the art of persuasion, aiming to move, to please and instruct.)

- In photography this organises codes into an argument. By themselves codes are meaningless, they need to be put together in specific combinations to make an effective photograph. Then the rhetoric of the image determines the range of meaning in the photograph.

The language of photography

- In the 1960s and 70s realism was the orthodox theory of photography against which semiotics emerged.
- Andre Bazan, photographs carry their own referents (the represented objects) within the picture is a key ideological issue. In the theory of photography.
- In realism the signifier (the actual photograph) is the same as the signified (reality). So, the signifier (photograph) disappears into the signified (referent) and we only see the subject matter.
- Whilst semiotics emphasises the way difference is involved in photographic signification, the difference between the photograph and the real object represented.
- The theory of realism shows us how people think about photography, about the similarity it appears to have with reality.
- Semiotics highlights the difference between what we see in a picture and the actual reality that it depicts as non-identical. Showing how difference operates in all the codes.

Points of view

- Realism encourages you to think about an image as if you are there.
- Semiotics reminds you that the reality being presented is a product of codes of geometry and perspective – a reality the camera has organised.

Denotation – the visual signifiers

- Antithesis (the direct opposite) is a common argument in rhetoric. Understanding how this works as a rhetorical device in an image in photographic codes helps us to understand how meaning is derived from them.

Cultural connotations and understanding are needed to validate and understand images.

Realism and reality

- Reality is what we believe exists, whilst realism is the mode of representation that supports that reality.
- Realism depends on a preconception of reality.
- The reading of an image will depend on assessing the credibility of it.
- One of the core features of photography is the veracity (truthfulness) that it claims and organises.
- Realism takes reality for granted whilst semiotics argues reality is constructed through a photographic discourse of codes.
- Visual semiotics develops a way “to speak about how the graphic marks on a piece of paper come to signify a “reality”” (Bate, 2009;42).
- Meanings do not stand still, they may change.

Poststructuralism

- A signifying unit (the photograph) doesn’t change but the cultural connotations attached to it, may.
- Jacques Lacan, French philosopher, on rhetoric in linguistics says metonymy (name substitution) and metaphor (not literal) are the 2 most important rhetorical figures as they account for slippages in “language”.
- Therefore, we can’t control language and significations and unintended meanings may occur. Barthes calls these obtuse meanings.

Summary

- Any practice constitutes a theory.
- Photographic theory has developed new ways of thinking about photography alongside its use in wider social contexts.
- Semiotics distinguishes between the signifier (photograph) and signified (concept).
- Photographs need a spectator to give an image its signified meaning.
- Meanings are polysemic, can change.

REFERENCE

Bate, D. (2009) *Photography: The Key Concepts*. New York: Berg publishers.

Benjamin, B (1973) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Illuminations. London. Fontana

Berger, J. (2008) *Ways of Seeing*. [Kindle edition] (s.l.): Penguin UK.

Barthes, R (1977) *The photographic message and Rhetoric of the image*, in Image-Music-text. London. Fontana

See Bate p172 for further readings mentioned

PHOTOGRAPHY Stephen Bull (2010)

Chapter2 The identity of photography

P14 Bazin.

The indexicality of the photograph – it showing reality Bazin, Sontag, Szarkowski

P15 An indexical sign has a direct physical relationship to its object

P17 Barthes

P28 Transient photography in terms of digital photography which can be constantly shuffled:

Szarkowski – open to manipulation, transferable, an a transient state

Chapter 3 The meanings of photographs

P32 Saussure

P32-37 Barthes

P39 Rose visual methodologies

P41 Edwards and Sekula de-contextualising images and how it affects their meaning

P43 discourses. Foucault. All the statements around a photograph, its discursive context, produce how it is thought about.

P46 the unconscious psychoanalysis surrealism

P57 Barthes Camera lucida Studium (the general experience of viewing) and punctum (prick or punctures the viewing in a personal way).

Chapter 7 Photographs as Art

P130 Authorship and expression

- 1930s & 40s photography art photographs when recontextualised on modern art gallery walls.
- P131 Szarkowski exhibition **the photographers' eye (1964)** and book. **Photographs has qualities that could be used by photographers to express their individual vision as an author: a key modernist concept – the photographer as an author.**
- P133 Modernist photography peaked early 1960 abstract imagery and authorship, Adams, Weston, Minor White f64 group, inspired by Stieglitz.
- Weston sharp refined images.
- White influenced by Stieglitz's Equivalents, photographs as mirrors of the photographer rather than "windows on the world" (Marien) 2006:338-339.
- Szarkowski exhibition based his exhibition, **Mirrors and windows MoMA (1977)**, on positions of this.

P134 White and others abstract expressionism had by then marked the end of modernist photography's progression.

P 134 Conceptual art

P 137 **Post modernism: when progression and fixed identity are turned upside down.**

Writers Crimp, Krauss, Solomon-Godeau

P183 Modernism was medium specific, post modernism was not medium specific, eg Sherman, Kruger, conceptualism

P139 Barthes "Death of the Author"(1968/77) His ideas on writing can be applied to any media, texts meaning lies with the cultural context not the author.

P141 Contemporary art photography

Chapter 10 conclusion

P185 Barthes Camera Lucida, photography an illusion or reality?

P186 **Debates about subjectivity and objectivity and art- subjectivity and expression**

The re-conception of photography late 20th and into the 21st century -a transient form in a transient culture.

Reference:

Bull, S. (2010) *Photography*. Abingdon: Routledge.

P 189 further reading meaning

P 197 P198 Magazines

P199 online resources