What does photography ‘document’?

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The traditions of photography have left it with a number of tough expectations that maybe we cannot do without. To lose faith in these now, and to ask whether photography can really document, is to ask the wrong question. I want to ask instead: what does photography ‘document’?

A web blog, (http://www.shanelavalette.com/journal/2007/12/14/duane-michals-this-photograph-is-my-proof/) posts the 1974 photograph by Duane Michals of a young man seated on a bed being fondly embraced from behind by a woman titled This Photograph is my Proof (Fig. 1). The blogger writes:

I’ve always been moved by this pairing of text and image by Duane Michals. Below the photograph it reads ‘This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon, when things were still good between us, and she embraced me, and we were so happy. It did happen, she did love me. Look see for yourself!’

It seems as if Michals’s own text, written in longhand below the image, is not enough. The blogger wants to personally appropriate its insistence, to draw from Michals’s image a power over reality itself.

Further in the blog is a set of comments and responses from other webusers who have come across this site including: ‘...I’ve always been amazed at the genuineness of his work. Always deeply personal but in such a way that avoids alienating the viewer or
becoming saccharine’ and ‘This photograph is awesome, it’s so real, like one can reach out and touch it. It is life, a revealing moment etched in time, forever’. (My Italics)

The comments further in the blog speculate about the degree of longing the photographer might continue to experience and whether the breakup was already imminent when the photo was taken: ‘We know that the disconnect is real, despite the desperate words at the end’.

What if the photograph indeed records a moment in Michals’s life? His interviews tell us that Duane Michals is gay and has been in the same relationship for 39 years (Murtha, 2008). Proof, however, is dated both 1967, two years before the commencement of this relationship, and 1974, presumably when the text was added and the picture exhibited as an artwork. Michals appears often in his own photographs, and in 1967 was 35, so could well be the man in the picture.

However, Michals is known for photographs that are constructs, extensively and obviously manipulated in the darkroom, and invariably concerned with the nature of photography. The Michals in Proof could be an actor or at least a persona he devises to question the evidentiality of photographs. But maybe also not.

Even when the blog comments concede that Michals’s work is precisely about the deceptiveness of photographs, the comments link this purpose to the ‘reality’ of the relationship portrayed, deciding that, ‘In this way, Michals cleverly plays with viewers’ ideas of what is real and reminds us that it is always slipping from our grasp’. So, although the photograph mocks our gullibility, there remains the need to conjecture that it possibly still records that tragic ‘revealing moment’ and that any deception (or self-deception) rests with the subject or with the photographer himself but not with the photograph.

To read a photograph as a photograph, one may speculate that the subjects are lying, or that the photographer is lying, but it is essential to believe that the photograph itself consists of documentary evidence, even if it is evidence of deception. Whether it constitutes ‘objective’ proof is not the point; what remains important is to believe in its definite relation to an actual occurrence. As Tom Gunning (2004) argues, if this were not so, what would be the use of faking photographs?

So what is it that compels this suspension of disbelief; what does photography document that lends it such a strong ‘reality effect’?
To discuss any relation of photographic images to reality, two concepts need to be considered: what is ‘reality’ and what is photography?

The nature of reality has been debated since the beginning of philosophy. Mostly, the disagreement has been over whether what we perceive through our senses is all the reality there is, or whether things exist that give rise to our perceptions and whether even these ‘things in themselves’ are but traces of something greater. Moreover, reality needs to be distinguished from actuality—which is reality at the moment of its manifestation in a given present. Whether this actuality is all there is, or whether there is an eternal reality beyond that, is yet another philosophical conundrum.

Note that whatever ‘reality’ is allowed to us humans, although typically regarded as illusionary or at least obfuscated, it is considered to be connected, through direct cause and effect, to an ultimate reality. Photographs are similarly credited with what C. S. Peirce (1955 pp.104-107) called an indexical relation to the actuality in whose presence they were created. That a unique actual light event affected the emulsion is usually undeniable. It is this, then, that confers on photographs their privileged relation to the real. Or is it? Would not a photo taken with a cracked lens, deteriorated out-of-date film, and through a misshapen aperture equally be the consequence of actuality conditions? But would it carry the same degree of reality effect? It seems that a certain amount of iconic verisimilitude is also necessary for a photograph’s reality effect. Now, what is paradoxical is that this iconicity in fact severs the photograph from its seamless metonymic relation with the real and makes it a simulation, and not a portion, of an actuality that has already ceased to be. Once it is iconic, the image can be tamed, encultured, become socially or personally symbolic, in a way that the raw chaotic unfolding actuality can not. So it is this manipulable simulation and not an inflexible facticity that is the true object of desire of human viewers. Whatever their stated intentions, people attempt above all else to ‘understand’ or ‘recognise’, in other words to project their imagination upon, the symptoms of a past actuality in photographs, and by this means to speculate on an ultimate reality otherwise denied them. What photographs ‘document’ is the cues that can prompt this process.

I will reflect upon four more instances in order to demonstrate and examine this tendency: first a remarkable investigation into the veracity of Roger Fenton’s seminal 1855 war photograph, Valley of the Shadow of Death, by filmmaker Errol Morris; then the way that Roland Barthes characterises his concept of the punctum in Camera
then a brief reference to Cartier-Bresson’s account of his method. Finally I will look at the 1988 image by Thomas Demand titled *Fenster*.

Errol Morris became intrigued by Susan Sontag’s judgement, in her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), concerning two Fenton photographs of the same Crimean battle-site taken from the same position within an hour and a half of each other. One of these has some cannon balls littering a ditch but shows a clear roadway (Fig. 2). In the other one, chosen to be the historical image, cannon balls and shot cover the whole terrain like fallen hailstones (Fig. 3). Morris questions Sontag’s opinion that Fenton had avoided the heat of the battle and then scattered cannon balls about a relatively peaceful scene nearby in order to add dramatic effect and to misrepresent his own journalistic courage. Objecting to Sontag’s assumption, Morris reasons that the two photographs could just as easily have been taken in the reverse order, and sets out to research that possibility.

He finds the two photographs—which Sontag in her book only refers to but does not reproduce—and also contacts the historian of the Crimean war, Ulrich Keller, from whom Sontag had drawn her data. Keller, like Sontag herself, assumes that:

The first variant *obviously* represents the road to the trenches in the state in which the photographer found it, with the cannonballs lining the side of the road. In a second version we discover a new feature. Some round-shot is now demonstratively distributed all over the road surface—as if the balls had just been hurled there, exposing the photographer to a hail of fire. Not content with the peaceful state of things recorded in the first picture, Fenton *obviously* rearranged the evidence in order to create a sense of drama and danger that had originally been absent from the scene. (Morris 2007)

On further questioning, Ulrich admits that his determination of the order in which the photographs were taken was based on no evidence other than his assumptions concerning Fenton’s psychology.
Interviewing Mark Haworth-Booth, the former curator of photography at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Morris finds that Sontag had used Haworth-Booth’s speculation about the photographs some years before Ulrich and then ‘exaggerated it’. To cut a long and fascinating story short, Morris interviews several other authorities and finds an equal tendency to assume either one or the other sequence but always on psychological speculation rather than evidence. One hypothesis is that cannonballs were ‘recycled’—shot back at the enemy. Another is that the road had to be cleared after Fenton’s first photograph to make way for transport. Research into Fenton’s correspondence confirms neither one hypothesis nor the other, but adds general information about the circumstances surrounding the photographs. Morris then publishes this information and the photographs in an article in the *New York Times* on Sept 25, 2007. In this article, he invites readers to voice their own speculations and this results in a fascinating ‘forensic’ interrogation of the photographs themselves in two subsequent articles in the *New York Times*. Again, some speculations rely on psychological assumptions but others try to determine whether the time of day may be read back from the shadows, or whether the distribution of cannonballs accords with random probability.

Two points that I want to make here are these: the photographs are not permitted to be considered ‘inexplicable’ in the way a raw actuality after it has passed beyond our scrutiny might need to remain. Everyone projects an interpretation, and the photographs themselves are believed to contain forensic proof, if only they can be interpreted. But what kind of proof is it? Can it really tell us about Fenton’s psychology? Can it tell us what actually took place? Well, no. It can provide us only with evidence of its own evidence. It furnishes indices but not what they are indexical of. There are clues here but no reality. We have to piece together what that may be, whether by analogy with phenomenological experience or through psychological empathy.

The example of Roland Barthes’s reflections, in what was also his last publication, *Camera Lucida*, provides more insight into this relation that humans have with photographs. After a professional lifetime of semiotic analysis informed by Structuralist linguistics, Barthes wants to address a reality outside of language. He takes great
pains to distinguish between what he terms the *studium* of photographs—the conventional planned aspects of an image, and the *punctum* (1984, p. 47). How he characterises the *punctum* is not entirely consistent. At first it seems to be equivalent to the intrusion of mundane reality into a planned cinema script - not unlike what led Andre Bazin to admire the films of Rosellini. Bazin (1967) advocated the wide shot, deep focus, and the long take, because, unlike a montage of closeups, it would admit the untamed actuality to intrude into and override whatever was prescribed by script. Italian neo-realism, filmed during a period of post-war poverty, perhaps more for economic than aesthetic or ideological reasons, would leave these chance intrusions in the film without a retake. In Barthes’s case, comparable intrusions by the real include such things as a ‘boy’s bad teeth’ (Barthes 1984, p. 46) in the photograph titled *Little Italy* by William Kline; and in another photograph, *Idiot children in an Institution* by Lewis Hine (Fig. 4), a ‘huge Danton collar’ and ‘the girl’s finger bandage’ (Ibid. p. 50).

Barthes thus draws our attention to what may seem ancillary details intruding from reality into the intended photograph that he argues *rend* the predictability of the *studium*. The *punctum*, however, also emerges as highly idiosyncratic to Barthes’s own sensibilities. Particularly when referring to personal family photographs, he draws on memories of an actuality not necessarily recorded in the emulsion of his photograph. The photograph of his mother as a little girl contemplated by Barthes just after her death, which prompts his whole investigation, connects Barthes not to an actuality long before his birth, which he could never have experienced, but to his recent memory of nursing his mother on her sick bed. And, as Victor Burgin (1986, pp. 85-67) observes, Barthes’s memory of what constitutes a particular *punctum* can change in the course of his account. A *punctum* that Barthes finds in James Van der Zee’s 1926 photograph *Family portrait* (Fig. 5), ‘an ankle strap’ on the shoes of one of the subjects, becomes
further in the text identified as a necklace, which then reminds him of an aunt and subsequently of a box in which the necklace was kept — which is what, Barthes reminisces, ultimately arouses in him the 'great sympathy ... almost a kind of tenderness’ that distinguishes it from the *studium*. Unlike Bazin’s cinematic ‘realism’ which flows past us too quickly for contemplation, the *punctum*, Barthes notes, although it is already in the photograph, requires a ‘*pensiveness*’, an ability to ‘add to what is already there’ (Barthes 1984, p. 55). As Margaret Olin (2002) concludes,

> A reading of *Camera Lucida* suggests that the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a ‘*performative index*’, or an ‘*index of identification*’. (pp. 10-11)

However, this desire for an interchangeability, within the photograph, of actuality with an entirely phenomenological reality, whose *intention* is nonetheless focussed on a past, is not exclusive to Barthes. It is enlightening to note also that Henri Cartier-Bresson himself apparently trusted his memory of actuality more than its indexical trace upon the emulsion. In 1952, Cartier-Bresson published his book *Images à la Sauvette*, in English titled *The Decisive Moment*. It included a portfolio of 126 of his photos from the East and the West and a 4,500-word philosophical preface.

‘During the process of enlarging’, writes Cartier-Bresson in the preface,

> it is important to *recreate* the values and mood of the time the picture was taken; or even to *modify the print to bring it into line with the intentions of the photographer at the moment he shot it*. It is necessary also to re-establish the balance which the eye is constantly making between light and shadow. And it is for these reasons that the final act of creating in photography takes place in the darkroom.(Cartier-Bresson, 1952, p. ii) (my italics)

Cartier-Bresson’s disdain for reliance on a photograph’s indexical precision is further demonstrated when he writes:

> I am constantly amused by the notion that some people have about photographic technique—a notion that reveals itself in an insatiable craving for sharpness of images. Is this the passion of an obsession? Or do these people hope, by this ‘*trompe l’œil*’ technique to get to closer grips with reality? (Ibid. p.ii)
What all this suggests is a thirst for reality, not as it is mechanically recorded but as it is phenomenologically experienced. Although, to give him his due in terms of the traditions of his profession, unlike Barthes, Cartier-Bresson desires a phenomenological experience that is congruent with the actuality at the photograph’s time of exposure rather than with some entirely personal reality.

Documentation of an entirely different kind of reality is desired by Thomas Demand. Demand’s *Fenster* (Fig. 6) *seems* to be a photograph of a window with a venetian blind through which we observe the glow of ambient light. But of course it is not that. It seems to be an index of something that it isn’t. Like many of Demand’s works, *Fenster* is a photograph of a mock window reconstructed out of cardboard. However, the iconic quality of Demand’s photographs, unlike that of a painting, can *substitute* for the indexicality that the image does not possess. As Keith Moxey (2009) observes,

> While these photographs do not depend on objects in the real world for their existence, the fact that they resemble such objects suggests that there might be a connection after all. (p. 2)

But *why* can this substitution come about? Surely not through their limited and merely generic resemblance to any particular window we may have seen. So what do these ‘icons’ actually resemble? To add irony to paradox, verisimilitude is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence with reality. Roland Barthes, in an earlier book (however, not translated until 1986), *Criticism and Truth* (1987), notes:

> Aristotle established the technique of mimetic discourse based on the existence of a certain *verisimilitude* deposited in the minds of men by tradition …Verisimilitude does not necessarily correspond with what was once the case (that is a matter for history) nor to what must be (that is a matter for science) but simply to what the public thinks is possible, which can be quite different from historical reality or scientific possibility. (p. 34)

So verisimilitude itself, what we refer to as iconicity, can be either actually ‘cultural’ (linguistic in Structuralist terms) or phenomenological - deeply
personal -but never a mirror of reality as it might imply. Photography, likewise, is neither solely text nor index, nor mimesis pure and simple, but yet another form of ‘mimetic discourse’. What Demand’s ‘photograph’ resembles most is photographs - or at least our consensual expectation of what a photograph is. Despite not being replete with puncta, it, nevertheless, through its resemblance to the discourse of the photograph, allow us to imagine an indexicality for which we are led to substitute a distillation of our own past actualities involving windows. In this way, Demand’s picture appears to defy Derrida’s famous argument against the ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Derrida, 1973) and to recuperate Husserl’s notion of an indicative sign that can, by virtue of its own intrinsic meaninglessness (Husserl, 2001, p.104-105), point to a ‘that’ - which, in the case of Fenster, is, in addition, not a specific experience but a platonic essence.

What I have demonstrated here is a range of ‘performative indexicality’: five subtly different ‘reality responses’ that expand on the type suggested by Olin. Apart from the emotive Barthsian punctum, we can exert a hermeneutic or forensic response, or even perhaps a prelinguistic reaction to pure form, but in each case what we gain access to, immediately we reflect on what we see, is our own past experience, whether already linguistic or initially phenomenal.

Although most theoretical attention has concentrated only on its inference of causality, the photographic index clearly oscillates between this and what Peirce (1955 p.107) termed ‘degenerate’ indicativeness, in which the referent remains fluid and dependent on context. Seeing Michals’s photograph, we are torn between interpreting his artistic intention on the one hand, and his existence and state of mind as a photographic subject on the other; in Fenton’s photographs, we imagine we can find both physical and psychological evidence regarding the integrity of the photographer. Barthes projects his own private experiences or fantasies onto certain cues within photographs by others; Cartier-Bresson tries to impose his memory of what happened onto the photograph even as he completes it in the darkroom. Looking into Demand’s Fenster, through recognising a form generic to photographs, we can even imagine a window to platonic heaven.
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