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Conquest of Photography: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Images.

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I'd like to begin by discussing a recently published book By Robert Hariman and John Lucaites entitled "The Public Image" (2016). A recurrent and no doubt calculated concern of this book is its determination to counter the reductive and sometimes moralistic analysis of much late 20th Century criticism of photography; most notably exemplified by the work of Susan Sontag, who they describe as "the central author of twentieth-century discourse on photography." Many of the arguments in this book are likely to be familiar to anyone with moderate knowledge of photographic discourse, but there are also points where Hariman and Lucaites contribute new and illuminating observations. One of these comes towards the end of the book where they invoke Paul Feyerabend's posthumously published "Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being" (2001), from which the title of this presentation has been derived. In this book Feyerabend contends that our preoccupation with abstract categories has a tendency to blind us to the abounding variety and complexity of the world. So where critics of photography see an unshackled and excessive medium, Hariman and Lucaites point out that we might equally observe its unlimited richness and potential for expression and critical insight. This is a vital point, but it's also important to add that any given resource—whether it be photography, oil or food—is only excessive or abundant within a wider context of comparative examples; or a "stage" as Feyerabend puts it. And as Hariman and Lucaites also intimate, when photography is compared with language, on a stage furnished and arranged according to abstract linguistic principles, the defective party is invariably found to be photography.

So the aim of this presentation is to bring into relief the degree to which our language-centric view of the world obscures our understanding of photography and depiction more generally. Or, as Wittgenstein put it: "Philosophy is the battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."

Despite their laudable intentions, there are times when Hariman and Lucaites fall prey to some of the same confusions that they elsewhere criticise. For example, at several points they define photography as "a small language" because it has "only the most rudimentary syntax, and [is] otherwise lacking most of the semantic and artistic resources of literature and other arts." The reason photography lacks syntax and semantics is because it isn't really a language at all, let alone a diminutive one. Images are a form of communication, but unlike any language large or small, they do not depend upon the acquisition and deployment of linguistic rules and conventions—conventions, yes, but not linguistic ones. It is odd then, that Hariman and Lucaites make this claim,

especially when at other points they rightly observe that: "Visual images are not texts", "Showing is not telling" and "Photographs are indeed mute fragments".

In some ways it's understandable that photography is commonly mischaracterised as a quasi-linguistic medium. After all, without language we would lack the conceptual categories and analytical tools necessary to discuss images and to extrapolate from them in conceptual terms. This is probably why Hariman and Lucaites place such a justified emphasis on informed spectatorship and interpretation. Nonetheless, it would be helpful if they were clearer about the dependence of symbolic meaning upon language. The interpretation of what an image simply depicts requires only recognitional abilities, whereas the interpretation of what an image means, is a much more sophisticated task.

Now, it will be helpful here to say a little about the concept of meaning. When we say that a ball means "playtime" to a dog, we need not be committing ourselves to the belief that the dog regards the ball as a *symbol* of playtime. We merely mean that the dog knows that the ball usually accompanies playful activity. In other words, we take the dog to be capable of forming associative responses to things and thus to know what they mean in this limited sense.

On the other hand, the recognition of symbolic or what is sometimes known as "semantic" meaning requires abilities of a significantly higher order that we take to be largely (although not entirely) exclusive to human beings. Hacker and Bennett put it like this:

For something to be a (semantic) symbol, it must have a rule-governed use. There must be a correct and an incorrect way of using it. It must have a grammar determining intelligible combinatorial possibilities with other symbols, which is elucidated by explanations of meaning, that are used and accepted among a community of speakers. (Hacker and Bennett 146)

Noble and Davidson also contribute an important observation in this regard:

The example given by Saussure of his seeing a 'natural connection' between justice and balanced scales depends upon his and his readers' shared appreciation of the idea, which can only be elaborated through deployment of linguistic signs, that 'justice should be even-handed'... Thus, what looks like an effortless perception is one built on the back of a lengthy history and education reliant on the use of language to explicate the various meanings that allow the link to be seen. (1996 68)

So what then of the photographic image? Are photographs symbols of the world? In his influential book "Languages of Art: an approach to a theory of symbols", Nelson Goodman argues that *all* representations are symbolic. Several theorists (Novitz 1977, Files 1996, Blumson 2014, Hamlyn 2015) have pointed out significant flaws in Goodman's reasoning. In particular he fails to distinguish between two very different sorts of resemblance. Some things resemble one another because they share properties in common, whereas other things only

resemble one another by way of illusion or illusionistic techniques. I will return to this point.

In an essay entitled “Critique of the Image” (1970) Umberto Eco, writes:

Now a simple phenomenological inspection of any representation, either a drawing or a photo, shows us that an image possesses none of the properties of the object represented.

For Eco, the relation between images and “real phenomena” is “wholly arbitrary”. But this is surely mistaken. Words like “cat” certainly do have a “wholly arbitrary” relation to the things they refer to. Consequently there is no question of our mistaking the word “cat” for a four-legged animal of the feline variety. But if, as Eco claims, images also share “none of the properties” of the things they represent, then how is it possible that we can occasionally mistake what turn out to be images for the things they represent? Eco offers no explanation. I suggest that if it is true that we can sometimes mistake the properties of one thing for the wholly different properties of another, then it is reasonable to suppose that we must be dealing with some form of illusionistic resemblance.

It would be wrong though, to conclude that photographs are simply illusions. As J. L. Austin comments “We might as well ask whether producing a photograph is producing an illusion—which would plainly be just silly.” Silly as it might be to ask such a question, it wouldn’t be silly to suppose that we could use photographic techniques to construct an illusion. Nor would it be silly—although it might be comical—if, on occasion, we were to momentarily mistake a life-sized photograph of a person for an actual person, as my son did a year or so ago. My point then is this. Photography and other forms of depiction involve the use of a range of illusionistic techniques which enable the two-dimensional *simulation* of objects and states of affairs.

The Australian art theorist Donald Brook writes:

It may be that people without any experience of pictorial simulation would not say that the distant hills look blue, but even such innocents would probably be tricked, by being smuggled into a good planetarium, into believing that they were looking at the open night sky. (Brook “How to Draw the Curtains.” 1985)

According to Brook, representational simulation does not depend upon symbolic rules or even (as in the above case) on its necessarily being recognised as representation but on the fact that we can make perceptual mistakes in certain regularly occurring and contrivable circumstances and that the tendency to do so turns out to enable the felicity that we call “depiction”. So while Brook’s innocent visitors to the planetarium are *not* aware that they are viewing an illusion, the rest of us usually *are*, and this familiarity “takes the edge of illusion” as Austin (1960) says, and leaves us with what we readily regard as illusionistic techniques; techniques that could, in other more highly controlled circumstances (like a psychology lab for instance), be used to produce *actual* illusions.

Like both Goodman and Eco, Vilém Flusser, in his book “Towards a Philosophy of Photography” (1983) also claims that photographs are symbols. He rightly acknowledges that “They provide space for interpretation” but he fails to observe the crucial distinction (already mentioned) between interpretations of what images are *of* and interpretations of what they are *about*. So whilst it is true that photographs provide space for interpretation of what they are about, it is much less true that they provide space for interpretation for what they are *of*.

Another prominent late 20th Century theorist of photography, Victor Burgin (1982), echoing the sentiments of Roland Barthes, claims that: “images are texts” whilst Barthes himself famously described photographs as “messages without a code” (1977). Burgin’s category error (Ryle 1949) is self-evident, but we might be tempted to agree with Barthes’ seemingly innocuous claim. Let’s briefly look at the grammar. We commonly speak of what messages are *about*, but it makes no sense to speak of what a message is *of*. On the other hand, it makes perfect sense to speak of what a photograph is *of*. What a photograph depicts is fundamental in a way that its meaning is not. This deserves emphasis.

When we speak of what an image is *of*, when we describe its pictured subject or refer to its depictive content we are dealing with what might be called its *primary representational features*. Whereas when we speak of what an image is about, when we discuss what it means or refer to its symbolic content we are dealing with its *secondary representational features*. These *secondary features* are necessarily dependent upon the *primary features* because without these there would be nothing to interpret in the first place.

I hope it is clear from these observations that the conceptual foundations of many mainstream theories of photography and depiction are confused. The culprit here is the tendency to reduce nonverbal representation to language. This includes a common failure to acknowledge that language is a subcategory of communication, of which there are other conceptually and procedurally distinct categories, depiction being a prime example.

I’d like to finish with a few remarks about the ubiquity of photography. Implicit in this notion is a suggestion that the increasing availability of photography is somehow suspicious. A moral nuisance is smuggled into the debate. It is as if there is something common, modish, simplistic, disposable, primitive and above all threatening about photography. In this way photography is regarded as an uncontrollable weed or parasite in the garden of culture. When Sontag wrote of photographic excess she was thinking in very similar terms, I think. She privileged the word over the image and, as I have been trying to show, this tendency—this prejudice even—obstructs our understanding. Photography is complimentary to language. It is another form of communication with its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Yes, language massively expands the utility of photographs but it does not circumscribe them.