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The Truth About Images

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Abstract

Many people believe that images—photographs in particular—are truth bearers; that they provide meaningful testimony and have what philosophers sometimes call "factive", as opposed to "fictive", status. We also commonly hear of how images are untrustworthy because they can be made to falsify the facts. I aim to explain why these ways of talking about images, in terms of their truth-value, have the effect of misleadingly reducing images to linguistic tokens. Furthermore, doing so overlooks, misunderstands or worse still ignores, the essentially mute but nonetheless powerful effectiveness of images as substitutes for the things they represent.

Almost all theories of representation refer to images as "signs" or "signifiers", as "readable" objects or "messages" that require "decoding", "deciphering" or "interpreting." In everyday language, we talk of how images "convey meaning", "have content" and are "about" the things to which they "refer." We also talk of what images "tell" us, what they "describe", "articulate", "suggest", "explain" and "imply." Characterising images as semantic entities in these ways has the great advantage of rendering them as truth evaluable. The purpose of this paper to explain that whilst images are indeed truth evaluable, they are not fundamentally truth dependent.

Introduction

I begin by discussing the concept of communication and the way in which images function as tools of communication, as opposed to tools of language. I will then explain how images are used in practices of substitution and of how these practices rely on the very real possibility that we can sometimes mistake images for things they represent. This is then followed by a discussion of our use of photographic images as evidence. I round off the discussion by considering various ways in which images are used in relation to the concept of truth and I conclude with some remarks about how our capacity to use of images—whilst profoundly informed by language—is by no means dependent on language.

Communication

As a concept, communication can be divided into two broad categories: verbal and nonverbal. Since verbal communication and language more generally relies to a significant degree upon

syntax and semantics, whereas nonverbal communication does not, it makes sense to regard communication, and not language, as the higher-order conceptual category. Accordingly, it would be an obvious category mistake if we were to take too seriously the suggestion that language is a *picture* of the world or that images actually *describe* objects or events.

In his book “Dilemmas”, Gilbert Ryle warns against what he describes as “smother words” like “picture” and “description” because they conceal important distinctions and can be the cause of widespread conceptual confusion. This paper is an attempt to explore some of the ways in which our understanding of depiction is commonly smothered by our preoccupation with language.

Communication Tools

Philosopher and Wittgenstein scholar, Peter Hacker argues that what distinguishes humans above all else, is our use of language. There is an obvious sense in which this is correct. Our use of language and symbolic communication in general, far outstrips that of even the most skilful and highly trained nonhuman animals. But there is another sense in which language can be regarded as just another tool in our behavioural toolkit alongside many other intelligent, skills, dispositions and propensities not the least of which is our capacity to make and use images.

Images are undoubtedly tools—why else would we be the only animals who use them? But depictive images are a very special kind of tool. Unlike words, depictions do not gain their fundamental utility by virtue of cultural conventions, and this is probably what Roland Barthes was referring to when he famously declared that photographs are “messages without a code”. The only reservation we might have about Barthes’ formulation is that depictions are only messages insofar as we regard them as being free of all semantic ties. If messages are necessarily semantic, then photographs are also inextricably bound to the same cultural conventions—the “codes”—from which Barthes was presumably seeking to distinguish them. Strictly speaking then, photographs, and the closely associated techniques of depiction, are not *fundamentally* a form of messaging, but rather a form of nonverbal communicative representation, or what Donald Brook calls “efficacious substitution”.

Efficacious Substitution and Mistakes

Images can only be substituted for the things they represent in certain respects. A photograph of an apple is a very poor substitute for an apple in respect of flavour or nutritional value. However, unlike words, diagrams, abstract images and maps, it is both conceivable and demonstrable that a skilfully produced and presented depiction could be mistaken for the thing or things it represents in one or more ways. It should be noted that in practice, we do not have to mistake a depiction for the thing it depicts in any respects at all to know that such a mistake might be made in controlled circumstances. It is this possibility of mistaking depictions for the things they represent in certain respects and in certain circumstances that makes them such appropriate stand-ins for the things they represent.

Perhaps one of the first things we learn about images is that they are most effective when viewed upright, perpendicular to our line of sight and in even illumination. As Steven Pinker has observed, we commonly ensure that we have a good seat at the cinema for similar reasons. Knowing how best to view an illusion is also to know best how to take advantage of an illusion and also, perhaps, to be best prepared for other similar illusions.

There are ways to make images resemble the things they depict because there are ways and respects in which they can be made more or less indiscriminable from them, ways that maximise the potential for illusion. But whilst we may be susceptible to certain kinds and degrees of illusion we are also have a variety of skills and capacities that make full-blown illusion remarkably difficult to achieve. It is also worth noting that conjurers are under no illusions about the tricks they perform and nor, it may be said, are we when we use images in most instances. We may make assumptions on the basis of images and these assumptions may be mistaken, but in the vast majority of cases we do not mistake images for the things they represent. Nonetheless, I do not wish to suggest that the potential for illusion is merely attributed to images. Our susceptibility is not an invention. Images really do share something in common with the things they represent in ways that words, for example, do not. Words do not usually look at all like the things they refer to.

Evidence

Images are used in many different ways to provide evidence and to establish or corroborate the truth. Sometimes they are used to illustrate fictions or to deceive, to distort or to embellish. They have great power to inform, to instruct and to entertain. But whilst images are used in

various ways as evidence, it is important to bear in mind that our capacity to treat any artefact or statement as an item of evidence, relies to a very significant degree upon our understanding of causal relations. An analogy will be helpful.

Imagine that we could go back in time, to the era of Queen Victoria and that we are witness to a tryst between Prince Albert and one of the royal servants. Our task in this imaginary scenario is to provide a single item of evidence of the royal infidelity in one of two ways: as a photograph or as a realist painting.

First, imagine Queen Victoria's response if she were to see a realist painting of her husband and one of the servants. It seems very likely that she would be outraged at the suggestion that he would do such a thing. The image might well lead her to be suspicious of her husband, but it probably wouldn't provide sufficient evidence to incriminate him, whereas a photograph almost certainly would.

Imagine now that we go further back in time, slightly before the invention of photography. Imagine also that we encounter another royal infidelity and can leave a realist painting or a photograph as evidence. As in the previous case, the painting would be unlikely to do more than outrage the monarch but—crucially—the photograph would probably be no more persuasive. This is because the use of photographs as evidence is wholly dependent upon our understanding of the causal processes necessary to the production of photographs. Digital manipulation notwithstanding, we tend to trust photographs because they are mechanically produced and are difficult to manipulate convincingly. Without an understanding of these underlying processes and characteristics, a photograph would probably be regarded as just another skillfully produced realist depiction and its currency as evidence would provide little in the way of persuasive traction. Simply put, the use of photographs as evidence requires an understanding how photographs are actually made.

Truth

In the same way that images are only evidential insofar as we can understand and rely upon their causal history, so too does the truth of images rely upon our practices of truth assertion and evaluation.

For example, consider the following two images taken of the same waterfall.



A



B

Can we say with any confidence that one depicts the waterfall with greater veracity or truth than the other? Is there one image that presents a greater degree of verisimilitude? It might be tempting to say that image A is the more accurate or faithful of the two, since the water is sharply rendered. If we were to make a portrait with a similar degree of blur as the other image (image B), we might find the lack of clarity unacceptable, especially if it were difficult to identify the person depicted. However, unlike the steps over which the water flows, a waterfall is not a static object. Thus, it might reasonably be argued that image B presents a more convincing simulation of the rapid movement of the water as it cascades over the steps.

Ordinarily, when choosing between differing truth claims it is necessary to evaluate the evidence and arguments placed before us. We do this through the use of cultural conventions, standards and normative criteria. But in the case of these images, it isn't clear which would qualify as the more truthful or faithful image, since the criteria for making such a judgement are not already established. The truth of these images is not to be found by closely inspecting the distribution of colours or marks upon their surfaces for example, but must be attributed to them according to evaluative criteria that we must supply and which are inevitably informed by our purposes and our knowledge of the many different ways in which depictions and other representations are used.

Truth and Lawful Conduct

When we certify that a passport image is “a true likeness”, we are entering into a legal transaction, which demands that the image be produced in a particular way. It is conceivable, for instance, that a passport image of an identical twin could be used as a likeness of their sibling, but such a likeness would not be a true likeness because it would not be an honest depiction of the person it is used to represent. In fact it would be a fraudulent depiction. In other words, the methods of its production would not be faithful to the standards of conduct required by the passport authority. Accordingly, it is possible in principle for an image to be an excellent likeness, yet fail to be a *true* likeness.

Standards of Truth

To evaluate an image according to standards of truth is to evaluate it according to social practices that instantiate these standards. But it should be clear that these standards are not organised into a fixed and immutable system. If someone distorts an image, it obviously isn’t necessarily the case that they are engaging in a dishonest act. Likewise, if someone produces a very high-resolution image, it is not necessarily more accurate, more precise or more truthful. It is the way that images are used and thus the practices and contexts into which they are interwoven, that leads us to describe them as being honest or dishonest, faithful or unfaithful, accurate or inaccurate, truthful or deceptive etc.

Logical Constructs

In the study of logic, typical “truth” bearers include sentences and statements. These are the primary focus of logical analysis because such declarative propositions can be readily evaluated in terms of truth or falsity. Images can sometimes also be evaluated in terms of truth, but it should be clear that images are not generally regarded as appropriate items of logical analysis because, unlike sentences and statements etc, they are not logical constructs. When we evaluate the truth of an image, we do so according to the principles and processes of logical analysis. These are largely, if not entirely, abstract and symbolic in form. In other words, the analysis of the truth or falsity of images is dependent upon the degree to which such images can be regarded in symbolic terms; in particular as propositions or statements which are therefore abstract and semantic and are thus closely tied to language.

Conclusion

So to sum up, when we say that images "tell truths" or present "lies" we do so according to linguistic practices. In effect, we treat such images as items of language. In ordinary usage this is both understandable and uncontentious, but my primary purpose in this paper has been to show that lying and telling truths are much more firmly rooted in linguistic practices than are, say, acts of deception or misdirection, or even some simple evidentiary practices. Of course, images can depict things that never did, could or will ever happen. But a misleading image is not necessarily a lie. Images can be used in acts of lying and they can be used to corroborate truths, but just as a nonverbal human witness can point to the perpetrator of a crime with no necessary recourse to language, so too do images gain their fundamental efficacy from factors that are independent of linguistic competence.

Images are powerful because they trigger many of the same responses as the things they represent — just as words do in fact. But, unlike words and declarative propositions, they do not require elaborate skills in symbolic substitution to do so. It would therefore be a mischaracterisation to claim that images are essentially bearers of truth, tellers of tales or descriptions of the world. If someone shows us a view through a window, they are not presenting a truth and nor are they presenting a lie. Likewise, a view of the moon through the distorting lens of a telescope is neither factive nor fictive. When we present evidence of the truth, the evidence might enable us to establish the truth but it does not constitute the truth. When we say "I see the truth" we do not mean to suggest that the truth is a perceptible property of things. We mean that the truth is something that can be understood.

So at their most basic, depictive images are useful substitutes for the things they represent because they are like the things they represent in certain ways and respects. It is sometimes argued or assumed that photographs function by way of reference, signification or meaning. There is no doubt that photographs can connote, signify and allude to all kinds of things, but only insofar as we are able to ascribe meaning to them by virtue of skills that we acquire as language users. Although photography and other forms of non-verbal representation are enormously influenced, assisted and informed by language—by our abilities to devise and use conceptual categories—they are made possible by susceptibilities and propensities that almost certainly preceded the emergence of language.