The photographic statement.

Abstract:

Photographs are not what they used to be. They used to be precious, rare and treasured. They used to be a stand in for the real and as such they fitted Maynard’s description of an “Engine of Visualization”, and led Barthes to comment on mortality, punctum and loss. Looking at a social networking site now would suggest that a photograph is a throw away object. The content is insignificant and the process of photography careless and haphazard.

Rather than suggesting that new technologies have allowed unskilled masses to fill the web with photographic pollution, this paper will look at photography as producing phatic statements. Statements that above all say, “here I am”. As such these social networking pictures acquire their value as much through the act of production as in the act of display. Further, the insignificant content, rather than being a handicap, becomes an indispensible attribute of the photographic statement.

The ideas in this paper come out of a larger, practice led, study into representations of space within the photographic paradigm. This study uses photographs of virtual objects in virtual spaces to explore photographic space. The idea of a photograph of a virtual object is not without its problems, not the least of which is that a photograph of a virtual object might not be a photograph at all. It might, just as easily, be a drawing. This line of questioning leads to more general descriptions of photography, and a comparison between the photograph of a virtual object and Roland Barthes’ description of a photograph as an index, and a sign with out a code that says, ‘This has been’, or, if we for the moment leave out Barthes meditations on mortality, something that says ‘this was’. Applying these criteria to the photograph of a virtual object we are forced to ask, ‘What is it an index to?’ And furthermore since we are using Barthes we should also ask, ‘Who is speaking?’

In asking these questions about a photograph of a virtual object I am aware that the same questions apply to photographs of real objects. Mimesis provides a quick and easy answer to the first question. The photograph has an indexical link to the object or objects that the photograph is a photograph of. It is an index to things that look like the image of the things in the image. It is also an index to a string of events that result in the photograph being in the world now and available
to observation. Most of these events involve human activities, some as photographic techniques and others as the historical timeline that brings the photograph to our notice. These questions force us to look at a photograph not so much as a referent but rather as the product of human activity. Or to put it another way, something that people do, a lot.

In 1977 Susan Sontag noted that there were lots of pictures. Her discussion of the image world positioned photography as a social rite and a, ‘tool of power and a defence against anxiety’ (Sontag 1979). Whilst she was wrong about there being a lot of pictures, there were hardly any compared to now, I think she was right when she attached significance to the photographic act since as the number of photographs increase it appears as if the individual photograph looses its importance. The photographic image is devalued and yet people keep making them. Why? What are they doing when they make photographs?

To answer these questions I will consider the early photographic process and how that affects what we can say about who is saying what with the photograph.

Photography used to be a simple process, simple enough for one man, a boy and a donkey to perform. Between them they could sensitise the plates, make the exposure and transport the camera, a dark tent, chemicals and all the buckets needed to make a photographic negative and from that a print.\(^1\) Photography is much more complicated now. Now we need a factory full of experts to build a camera, and another factory full of experts to build a computer to manipulate the data set created by the camera. If we want to show the pictures to some one else we need a third set of experts to design software and systems that distribute, and unscramble the data set, onto a screen, or control the distribution and flow of pigment onto paper through a printer, (another factory full of experts).

The photographer used to be a technical expert working at the interface between physics and chemistry. Every development since has been aimed at producing technically better pictures whilst moving the expertise from the image maker to the manufacturer of photographic materials and provider of photographic services. From silvered metal, to glass plate, to sheet film, to roll film, to silicon chips the move has been towards smaller, faster, easier cheaper and simpler photographic image making. The photographic image is significantly more complicated now than ever before, but not for the image maker. For the person taking the picture it has never been more straight forward, so it should not then be surprising that there are a lot of photographs in the world. What is surprising is that, with the simplification of the photographic act we expect the photographic object and how we use it to remain the same.
When Roland Barthes was looking at a picture taken of his mother, as a child in a winter garden, he was looking at something that was done to the child. (Barthes 1984) The child was photographed by someone. She was asked to stand still whilst this thing took place. The people who caused the picture to be made were even less involved in the process than the girl. They may have suggested a location or an outfit that the girl might wear, but as far as the technical production of the photograph is concerned they paid a photographer to make the picture. The picture was then used as a stand in for the girl as she was at that moment, a moment that was unreachable in any way other than through an act of imagination.

Barthes looks at the picture and because of its indexical relationship to his mother comes to the conclusion that the picture means, more than anything else, “this has been”, and of course in many ways he is right. The interpretation of the image is further dependant on who is looking at the image. For Barthes the image is so significant that he feels pierced. The image means little to me, without knowing the significance of the image to Barthes, I would see a girl in old fashioned clothes. There are many such pictures. In the New York Public Library there are hundreds of thousands of pictures which the archivist librarians have catalogued with description names such as, “Studio portrait of young woman with thin ribbon around neck” (NYPL Digital Gallery 2008). Whilst they talk about a historical moment they say very little about the physical subject. At most they provide a reference to fashion and body type, possibly evidence of disease. The images make the claim, “this has been” with out much information about what being, “this” means. (What I am identifying here is what Barthes describes as studium as opposed to the almost physical sensation of punctum that he felt when he sees the Winter Garden Picture.)

Whilst the image of Barthes mother tells us little about its subject, it is also unclear as to who is making the “this has been” statement. Is it a conscious statement by the girl? Or the unconscious expression of the physical object, identified as the girl? Perhaps it is the supposed parent, who commissioned the picture, or the anonymous photographer who is speaking. Barthes doesn't struggle with these questions. His main concern is that the picture says that his mother was when she is now not any more. The picture acts as a memorial. By standing in for the real, the picture invokes the absence of the referent. In remembering his mother Barthes is forced to also visualise her mortality. I don't believe that this was the intention of the girl in the photograph, the photographer or the supposed parent. Rather they hoped that the photograph by saying “this has been” actually meant “this was” and would enable those who knew and cherished the child to remember when the photograph was taken and to imagine other times that they may have been with the child, an altogether much happier idea. Patrick Maynard in his book, “The Engine of Visualisation” argues that it is because the photographic image is an indexical link to its subject that it proves a
powerful tool, enabling us to make an act of imagination, or remembering, of a time when we were in the presence of the subject (Maynard 1997). As any one who has scratched the eyes out of photograph knows this doesn't have to be a happy thing, but it is powerful.

Barthes is telling us about the impact that this photograph has on him as part of a project to understand photography from a personal point of view. If *Camera Lucida* reveals any universal truths about photography – I think that it does – they come through a personal introspective analysis, Barthes looks at himself as he engages with photography. This immediately sets a boundary to his discussion. Since he doesn't take photographs himself he is unable to comment on that aspect of photographic engagement. He does identify two more photographic activities, being photographed and looking at photographs, both of which he feels able to discuss. That he doesn't take photographs himself is due to his being ‘... too impatient for that: I must see right away what I have produced.’ (Barthes 1984. p9) Today of course he could.

Suppose Bathes' mother was alive today aged about fourteen. There are many more possible explanations of how a picture of a child in a garden might come to be made. The child's parents could take the picture during a random act of photography. There may be a commissioned professional or even a professional making a non-commissioned picture. The photographic act could be part of a celebration or in response to an email from the girl's Grandma asking to see what the child looks like now that her braces are off. All these scenarios are possible and with the inclusion of a photographer can be possible reasons for the original picture as well. What the 21st Century picture has that the original does not is the possibility that the picture was taken by the child's friend during a session of mutual photography that was initiated just as something to do whilst they were not doing anything else. As such the picture could be one of many taken during the same session, and amongst these images there would almost certainly be a picture in which both friends appear with one of them reaching out of frame holding the camera. Let us suppose that it is Barthes' mother holding the camera, and further that the camera that she is holding is built into her new mobile phone. Later that night Barthes' mother uploads the picture of herself and her friend to her social networking page on the World Wide Web. It is this picture that Barthes finds many years later as he is sorting through his mother's hard drive.

When Barthes looks at this image he can still say that the image is a sign without a code that says “this has been” and as such it still alludes to the subject's mortality. We can also assume that the photograph was made for other reasons. The girls are making the photograph in an idle moment. If they were not photographing each other they would be chatting. The act of photography has in this instance become chatter and the product of this chatter is the photographic image.
Chatting is an important social activity. It forms and maintains social relationships. The phatic statements that make up the content of the chat are not that important but the act of chatting is. When the girls are photographing each other as a chat activity, it is the photographic act rather than the photographic product that is important. For the girls the photograph is evidence of time spent together. It is a statement that says, “We are now”, over and over again.

At its most basic a statement is an utterance that contains knowledge about the speaker's existence. If I clear my throat, to attract attention, or nod, to indicate listening, I am making a statement about being physically or mentally present. The “We are” statement that the girls produce from their chat is more complicated than that, but not necessarily any more interesting, and since it is the act of chatting rather than the content of chat that is important then the girls might never look at the pictures again. Even if they are uploaded to a social networking site on the World Wide Web, they very quickly lose their purpose. They have to be discarded in order for new, important, chat activity to happen. The only way that chatter can work is if the statements are ephemeral. We could not continue to repeat conversations about the weather if all our previous weather statements were still present. Spoken statements work very well in that they go away, we don't keep them and, in terms of chatter, don't value them for their content so much as their existence at a particular moment as required by the dictates of chatter. The photograph, with its new ease of production and dissemination has become a chat product that is the result of chat activity, and both the product and the activity are chat statements.

As well as social bonding chatter, the photographic act appears in other existential statements. As the photographer of our own world we photograph to say “I am here” or “I am in the presence of...”. The subject “I” in both these statements is separate from the subject of the picture, in which case the meaning of the image is separate from the content of the image. The girls photograph themselves together and each other separately. If they were standing outside the Colosseum in Rome they might photograph that as a tourist activity. The tourist activity is a statement. Non-tourists outside the Colosseum tend not to photograph. Photographing the Colosseum says “I am here being a tourist”, in a way that riding a scooter around the Colosseum sounding the horn does not. Like the chatter photograph, the photograph that is produced by the tourist is less important than the tourist act of photographing. When we come home from our tourist activity we can use the photograph to show our friends not so much that we went to Rome, they know that, or what the Colosseum looks like, they know that too, but that we have been tourists and are now, as we show the pictures, using our former tourist status as a subject for more social chatter.
Foucault has something to say about statements that are apropos of this discussion. (1972).

In Part III of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault, as part of his analysis of Discursive Formations, sets out to define “the statement”. He starts with a problem;

And the problem soon arises: if the statement really is the elementary unit of discourse, what does it consist of? What are its distinctive features? What boundaries must one accord to it? Is this unity identical with that to which logicians have given the term ‘proposition’, and that which grammarians call a ‘sentence’, or that which ‘analysts’ try to map by the term ‘speech act’? What place does it occupy among all those unities that the investigation of language *(langage)* has revealed? (1972, p80)

By stating the problem thus Foucault is laying the groundwork for the rest of the chapter, which proceeds to place ‘the statement’ not as a sub set of language, nor as a sign or material object. More positively Foucault finds the statement is;

…a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents in time and space (Foucault 1972, p87).

….The repeatable materiality that characterizes the enunciative function reveals the statement as a specific and paradoxical object, but also as one of those objects that men produce, manipulate, use, transform…. (Foucault 1972, p105).

We should note, as does Foucault in the following chapters, that a function requires an intelligence or person to invoke that function. Statements do not happen without people and they happen at a time and in a place. Another way of putting that is that statements are something that people make, and that it is in the making that the function happens. Relating this back to photography it is the photographic act, the taking, posing for, sharing and thinking about photographs, that constitutes the human action that makes the statement. The photographic image is a fixing or focus of those actions, but not necessarily the statement. The statement function is activated at a time and a place. We can activate the function again by looking at the photograph, but that photographic act is a different activation to the original photographic statement. The statement is separate from, and yet embodied in, the materiality of the photograph.

More recently Geoffrey Batchen (2008) has identified a gap in the art historical approach to understanding photography, in that there doesn’t seem to be a place in art history for an understanding of snapshots. For Batchen most snapshot
photographs are boring in that they repeat the same poses and compositions over and over again. From an art historical point of view he considers that a study of the snapshot should extend beyond the boundaries of the physical static art object to include, ‘a network of expectations and obligations extending far outside the picture itself’ (2008). The photographic statement, in that it is a function is also outside the picture.

Batchen recognises that Barthes personal analysis of photography is very much about snapshot photography, especially the winter garden photograph. He notes that Barthes does not reproduce this photograph thereby allowing the readers to fill in the image from their own experiences of similar snapshots. This is an example of the photograph as statement and statement as function.

So, Barthes looks at a photograph of his mother and declares that a photograph says ‘This has been’. Further, he feels as if the picture has reached out and pierced him, a feeling he describes as punctum. He acknowledges that this punctum is personal and not intended by the photographer. Thinking in terms of the photographic act and the photographic statement does not undermine Barthes position. When Barthes looks at the winter garden photograph he is performing a photographic act independent of the photographer’s. He is looking at the photograph and using it to make that statement in that place, at that time. It is Barthes who is making the statement ‘This has been’. The photographer is making different statements, the simplest being ‘Here I am / here we are’, that in no way interferes with Barthes’ statement. It might very well be the disconnect between these two statements that causes Barthes to experience the sense of punctum. The photograph is not, on its own, the statement, yet it is the photograph that… ‘cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents in time and space’.

Barthes adds emphasis to this idea of performing the photographic act. For Barthes to really see the photograph he must close his eyes and see it in his imagination (1984, p55). He must remake the picture, that is be engaged in the image for it to work. Without his intervention the photographic statement is mute. Before Barthes looks at the photograph there is no statement. After he has looked the statement is remade every time he thinks of the photograph. Once the statement has been activated for Barthes the actual photograph is redundant.

Earlier I imagined that Barthes’ mother used her mobile phone to take her own picture as part of a chatter activity. The mobile phone is perhaps the latest communication tool to latch onto the statement making functions of the photographic act. The same functions that started with the fashion for Daguerreotype portraits, carte-de-visite and, via the industrialisation and democratisation of the technology, to social net working sites and picture sharing on the World Wide Web.
This description of photography as something that we do is more inclusive than previous formulations that emphasise the object that is the photograph. The photographic image is a link to more than the just the photographed object. It is an index to a chain of events, any one of which has the ability to add interest to the photographic statement.

The photographic statement made by the photographic act rather than the photographic output, the photograph itself, does not supersede Barthes’ or Maynard’s descriptions of photography. The photograph is still an ‘engine of visualization’ and a ‘sign with out a code’ that says ‘this has been’. This is what they are to the viewer or photographic consumer or the art historian. If we include the act of taking photographs we can complete the description by adding that a photograph is – at least – a phatic statement.

To take this further we could consider what statements, besides the phatic “I am/ we are here” chat, a photograph, or other temporally discrete objects, might make.

This is the subject of further study.

Notes:

1 The first member of the British royal family to visit Australia was Prince Alfred who toured the Colonies in 1867 – 68. The visit provoked an outpouring of enthusiasm for the Prince, one assassination attempt and a newspaper cartoon showing a mass of photographers lined up to photograph the Prince. Behind the rows of cameras and tripods, the cartoon shows the rows of tents and carts that this proto paparazzi needed to drag around with them. Needless to say all the photographers in this picture are men. The cartoon is captioned “The Prince met with a cannonade of photography” and was cut out and stuck into an album, “Who and what we saw in the Antipodes”. This is held by the National Gallery of Australia

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Works cited:


