

## Notes from Howells and Negreiros 'Photography'

- **The success of the Daguerreotype -**
  - The Daguerreotype democratized image making enabling ordinary people who could not afford to commission paintings to own photographic portraits for themselves.
    - The process was still expensive so was not truly available to all.
    - **George Eastman's** introduction of the Kodak camera in 1888 made photography available to all.
  - This also represented the beginning of the establishment between photography and realism:
    - "they believed in the genuine authenticity of the photographic image. It was like owing a little piece of reality itself." (p. 185)
- **Photography and reality:**
  - Photography represented a new way of seeing the world, a way of seeing based on the unique relationship between the photograph and the thing photographed.
    - "Photography...has a special relationship with reality, which persuaded people that when they looked at a photograph, they were looking at reality itself." (p. 190)
    - "a photograph is an unmediated medium with a direct, uncomplicated authenticity and which provides straightforward evidence of the thing photographed. As it is a mechanical recording device, it can only record the truth." (p. 190)
  - **Andre Bazin: 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image':**
    - While the photographic image has a clear physical relationship with the object photographed, it is also freed from the conditions of time and space that governed it.
      - E.g. A photograph of **Abraham Lincoln** is undoubtedly *of* Lincoln, but captured at a particular place and time, the image can subsequently be viewed anywhere at any time. The photograph is not reality itself, but a technologically captured impression of reality.
        - "the photograph is like a 'fingerprint'. It is not the finger itself, but a record of the thing itself made by the thing itself." (p. 199)
  - **Mike Weaver:** the photograph is like a novel based on a true story. A meeting of the actual and the imaginary.
  - Photography is "a meeting of the actual and the imaginary, where each adds to, rather than detracts from, the power of the other. When we view a photograph, we are stimulated by the hallucination and the fact at the same time - and receive the compounded stimulation of both. The effect is doubled, not halved. The relationship between photography and reality is, therefore, a complex one, but it is a complexity that explains the deep and articulate richness of the photographic image." (p. 200)
- **Photography and art:**
  - The same argument for the mechanical authenticity of photography argues against photography as art.

- Because photography is "easy", it cannot be art.
- Photography's "umbilical relationship with its subject-matter" means that it is simply a mechanical record of what is already out there.
  - We respond to what the photograph is *of* not the photograph itself.
  - "The photograph does not create the drama; it just reports it. That cannot be art...it only reproduces what is out there...a photograph cannot transcend its subject matter; it can only be beautiful if it is of a beautiful thing." (p. 191)
- **Roger Scruton**: "If one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject. A painting may be beautiful, on the other hand, even when it represents an ugly thing." (p. 192)
- Technical and creative choices by the photographer are what makes photography art - "Selective choices are creative choices." (p. 192)
  - E.g. recognising the aesthetic potential of a scene, compositional choices, when to press the shutter, focus, exposure
- **Roger Fry**: it is the emotional elements of design that carry the meaning of a work of art - meaning is communicated not so much by content but by form.
- **Susan Sontag**: "[p]hotographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings are." for example, the FSA photographers "would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film - the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation and geometry." (p. 198)
- **Photography and theory:**
  - Theoretical approaches to photography are complicated by the fact that the photographic image is both reality and representation.
    - **Iconology** - there is a risk of "iconological over-interpretation" as a photographs content can often be the result of circumstances rather than premediated intent.
    - **Ideological** - (e.g. **Berger** and **Mulvey**.) Concerned with class, property, gender, race - visual evidence of social attitudes and to be read in social contexts.
    - **Semiotics** - complicated because unlike language it is hard to argue the relationship between photograph and subject is arbitrary.
      - E.g. denotation and connotation and **Barthes** notion of 'what goes without saying'.
    - **Hermeneutic** - the way in which photography can be both actual and imaginary lends itself to this approach which embraces ambivalence.

### **Bibliography:**

Howells, R. and Negreiros, J. (2012) 'Photography' In: *Visual Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 183-206