

Lawson Sharrer

Dr. Perlman

PHIL 182

18 October 2024

Brain to Camera to Brain, There is No Truth

Frame. Capture. View. The innovation of portable and digital cameras propelled the practice of photography into a whole new world: it had never been easier. Requiring little to no effort from the user, photography ripened into one of the most accessible forms of artistry known to humans. While digital photography carries nuances greatly exceeding the three steps provided, those are the requirements users must follow to take a photograph, despite the result.

Photography allowed journalists to accompany writing with imagery, issuing real-life examples supplementing their text. Writing prompts contemplation and reflection, but better yet, photography wields the power to provoke emotion through something real. How could anyone dispute the validity of real-life, captured moments? The suggestion that images reveal an objective truth, however, is an overarching misconception. Without exception, a photograph holds multiple layers of meaning, from the subject in the frame to the brain of those holding the camera to the capturing of the image to the mode of release, and finally, to the brain of the viewer. Photos are incapable of producing an objective truth.

Subjectivity in photography is derived from the brain. *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, written by Catherine Malabou, vividly analyzes the brain as a nonstatic, plastic organ. Malabou hones in on the idea of plasticity, a term used to define the brain as an ever-changing, complex ‘work,’ incomparable to machinery. To interpret and reproduce sensible data taken in, a plastic brain utilizes “the entire identity of the individual... her past. Her surroundings, her

encounters, her activities... every brain--has to adapt itself, to include modifications, to receive shocks, and to create anew on the very basis of this very reception” (Malabou 7). A plastic brain reinvents the original propositions of the brain's functions, positing it as a fixed organ; the brain can adapt, change, conjure subjective interpretations, and summon an identity unique to the individual possessing it. Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* outlines the innovation of photography, namely the shift to portable or digital cameras, and the employment of imagery as a journalistic and informative medium. Sontag argues against the ‘objective image’ despite the mass assumption of the photo's presentation of a universal truth. She expresses that the participation of humans in photography necessitates subjectivity, pinpointing that images “always had, necessarily, a point of view” (Sontag 22). The brain and photography, first and foremost inseparable, incontrovertibly fabricate a subjective idea.

The ascent of the photograph as a journalistic medium was pivotal; it allowed people to capture a moment in time, pair it with text, and draw out any message of their choosing. The application of photos surpassed words in the advancement of journalism; they are “a trace of something brought before the lens... presenting immediacy and authority greater than any verbal account...” (Sontag 21). What went unnoticed with photographs, however, was (1) the subjectivity in the production of the image, and (2) the subjectivity in the reception of the image. The brain and objectivity do not go hand in hand; it is “fashioned throughout a whole life within the intimate experience of the outside...” (Malabou 37). Plastic brains instantly link new sensible data to all previous experiences to explain a situation in the context of the individual, leaving them with a subjective interpretation. The first presence of subjectivity listed entails the photographer's intentions while taking a photo. On most occasions, they previously arranged what photo(s) they needed to tell their story, excluding photography of war or irregular events.

So, inherently, they will take a picture of an event to tell a story: the story *they* wish. The second inevitable subjectivity occurs through the reception of the image. Sontag elaborates “the eye is connected with the brain...” which then “sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling. This sleight of hand allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony...” (Sontag 23). The audience, more precisely their brains, view the produced photograph, sometimes read into the intended context, but undoubtedly frame it into their understanding of the world. Subjectivity in photography is unavoidable and objectivity unattainable, at least so far.

Far too often, images are taken out of context and used by third parties to promote particular ideologies, introducing another level of subjectivity. For example, some view the image of Trump after the assassination attempt as a motif of resilience and power; others see a horrifying example of never-ending problems in this country regularly swept under the rug (e.g. *see Fig. 1*). While Trump *did* survive an assassination attempt, an unquestionably substantial moment, the image can be swallowed as either a symbol of power or evidence of the nonexistent gun safety laws in the U.S., depending on who examines or reposts it. Reposting imagery out of context, or even worse, positioning imagery in incorrect context strips the photographer's intention and the viewer's autonomy of perception. With the evolution of AI, as well, images can be secretly altered, diminishing the minute truth the photo once held. Images have developed into a dangerous ‘informative’ tool; it is necessary to take precautions when encountering any imagery now. It is essential to attempt to verify authenticity and reestablish the original context of imagery.

The concept of objectivity paired with photography is the same as spraying water on an oil-based fire. The innovations surrounding photography have made it progressively more

difficult to seek out unaltered, original photos. Further, the multiplicity of brains involved in the process of producing, presenting, and perceiving photographs institute subjectivity every step of the way. As long as ethical production is strived for by the producer, further research is demonstrated by the viewer, and the thorough displacement of imagery from its original context halts, false objectivity can be avoided, and hopefully, squashed eternally.



(Fig. 1)

Works Cited

Malabou, Catherine. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Fordham University Press, 2008.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the pain of others*. Picador, 2004.