

Photography

Photography as an image technology of social transformation

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Since its emergence, photography has become the core technology of modern image production and billions of photographs are shared on social media. In addition to the automations of the technical process, which make photography easier and easier, this is due to a specific medial constitution of the medium as index and image.

Although digital measuring methods have largely replaced the photochemical recording process today and the possibilities for realistic image production will also be dramatically expanded by artificial intelligence, photography – at least when it is understood in the tradition of analogue photography – will continue to assert indexicality and referentiality. If it were to give up this claim, there would be no more fakes, and attempts at deception would be in vain.

Photography produces a purely visual reality that optically resembles the real situation that was recorded, but in the process the original references to reality are cut, new ones are created and transformed into imagery. This visuality manifested in the photo is not only photographically realistic, it is also photographically pictorial. This medial specificity is extremely important for the representation, interpretation, and production of the social and thus also for the (pictorial) scientific research of historical and current social conditions.

In the following, therefore, a distinction will be made between the photographic reality produced by photography (1) and the photographic images that are generated simultaneously in this process (2).

1. The photographic reality

Photographs reduce the complexity of social reality to a squared momentary view, which they suddenly and completely establish, register, and fix according to the optical possibilities provided by the camera, its technical settings, and lens.

However, this moment is not only shaped by the photograph itself, but also by the impression of the photograph. All those involved – insofar as they are aware of the situation – are thus placed in a mode of image production. The photographic situation is created by their interactions within historically concrete spatial-social conditions. In this interplay, the photographers usually take control of the themes, motifs, and moments of the shot; they usually decide **what** is shown in which section/cutout. Through the choice of point of view, technical parameters, perspectives, distances (proximity/distance), and, if necessary, direct instructions and arrangements, they also have a great influence on **how** it appears in the photo. The potential performers behave physically, mimic-gesturally in and to the photographic situation, which can be imagined in a wide spectrum from indifference and refusal to active posing and organised (group) performances. The photographic situation is therefore essentially performative.

The decisions in front of and behind the camera are linked to inner individual and collective visual worlds and needs, and they are more or less made with regard to imagined addressees and uses. They shape the visual contexts of the photographic image as well as the photographic image that is created as a result.

There are various reasons why photographs of social situations can be surprisingly different from what the image producers imagined, despite this intentionality that is powerful on several levels. On the one hand, there are image-relevant, even contradictory decisions that are not consciously made by those involved, and especially in the field of digital photography, image ideas and conventions of the manufacturers of the recording apparatus are also inscribed via standard settings, limit values, and filters. On the other hand, the technically induced method can produce new views of social situations quite independently of human experience and perception. For in only the fraction of a second that the moment of capture usually measures, photography fundamentally undermines the perceptual thresholds of the human visual apparatus. At the same time, the precision and completeness with which the visible parts of the photographic situation are captured and fixed exceed the possibilities of

selective human perception. In this way, the photo (also) manifests what the participants in a photograph neither saw nor imagined. The historical, cultural, political, and social conditions in which the photographic situation was embedded are also incorporated via the unconscious, the accidental, and the technical pre-settings.

In photography, a new, purely visual reality is created, the perception and interpretation of which in turn follow its own rules. In this way, the excerpt and momentary nature of the photograph create a temporal and spatial off-screen (Dubois, 1998) that, when viewed, encourages different assumptions of what might have happened inside and outside the cutout and what this means in relation to social relations claimed in the context. In addition, multisensory affects can be evoked (Kanter & Pilarczyk, 2018) and photography can be emotionally touching.

Notions of reality of this kind represent, in a way, an attempt to reinsert the moment fixed in the photograph into the temporal-spatial continuum from which it has been wrested. However, because the realistic references to the photographic situation were irretrievably severed with the photograph, these imaginations do not lead (back) to the reality of the photographed situation. Rather, they belong to a construct of reality that is produced by the individual and historically social world of experience of the viewer according to the peculiar rules of photographic reality.

These assumptions of reality are determined by the new visual contexts and elements in the photo section. The immaculate white sandy beach in the advertising photo is imaginatively expanded, even if in reality mountains of garbage were piled up to the left and right of the frame. A typical example of photographically evoked references to reality are also glances into the camera, which can unfold an extraordinary presence in photographs, although this intense impression is due to the temporal stretching of the photograph. In other words, if the snapshot of a fleeting glance into the camera encourages us even to relive this moment and to reflect on it in dialogue over long periods of time, this has more to do with the viewer and their situation, needs, emotional states, and world conditions than with the (historical) reality of the photographic situation.

However, photographs are usually selected for further use with their effect in mind. This applies primarily to all types of professional use, but even laymen do not make selection decisions purely randomly in everyday use. Here, the purpose is often decisive, and even

lightning-fast judgments of taste (like – don't like) are made against the background of personal experience, individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1981), and current needs.

However, these interpretations and imaginations, which photographic reality invites, must be distinguished in principle from the interpretations that the pictorial quality of photographs encourages.

2. The photographic image

Thus, while the photo section is characterized by (cut) lines that point to relationships to a photographed reality **outside** the photograph, the same lines also function as (image) frames. This frame includes what is photographed and creates an entity that is characterized by structures within it – meaning image composition, dominant lines and surfaces of the planimetric arrangement, light and shadow relations, the image center, lines of sight and the vanishing point, as well as color. All elements can be symbolically charged within this pictorial context.

Depending on the mode in which a photograph is perceived, its interpretation is organized differently. The photo as an index refers to an (imagined) reality and to popular visual formulations of realistic situations. The photograph as an image, on the other hand, refers to other images (including paintings, drawings, film, and video scenes), to long cultural pictorial traditions (Belting, 2001), and to individual pictorial associations.

The intrinsic logic of the photographic, which invites both the construction of reality and the interpretation of images, justifies the value of photographs for social science and historical investigations, which goes far beyond their use as evidence and testimony. From a photorealistic point of view, of course, factual conditions of the photographic situation can be described and – with a minimum of reliable contextual knowledge – classified historically (Pilarczyk, 2017). However, the real value of photographs for visual science work lies in the transformative and constructive performance of photography as a recording and as an image.

Thus, social phenomena and institutions – such as community, friendship, family – are not only registered and documented by photographic images, but are also produced in the process of mass recording and use, i.e. visually formulated, appropriated through repetition, and further developed through variation (Pilarczyk, 2009). In this process, iconic images, in

which the meaning and problems of social phenomena and events are condensed, have a central function for modeling, transmission, emotionalization, and dynamization.

Photographs can thus convey insights into the historical world of experience of the image producers and viewers, into individual and collective cultural perspectives, into mentalities and the self-image of social groups, both in the references to reality they create and through their imagery. Above all, they offer access to the media spaces in which people create their social realities. Photographs are therefore excellent documents for the ideas and manifestations of visibility and normality in societies, for the legitimisation of knowledge, for the formation of national, family, and institutional traditions, for the views of growing up, of family, of youth, childhood, and of the relationship between the sexes, generations, and cultures.

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