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COMM 5030: Communications Revolution

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Essay I, 13 pages

Photography – its popularity and ubiquity in the light of Susan Sontag and other medium theorists

How can we understand the popularity and ubiquity of the photograph in modern society? Answer with reference to at least one major theorist you have encountered on this course.

## Introduction

Photographs are “easy to the eye”. Usually we enjoy looking at photographs. Pictures do not need to be decoded to get a first impression. That pictures address the subconscious mind can be misused too, though. Photographs are omnipresent, not only in advertisements or news reports. They are cheap to produce and so a whole family’s memory lives on in photo-albums telling about the past and pretending to be real.

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## The development of photography

As early as 1798 the Niépce brothers started to experiment with the *camera obscura* to make images permanent using material that hardened when exposed to light. They were not successful in taking pictures before 1827. Louis Daguerre, who joined them, soon discovered the properties of silver chloride helping to develop and fixate the image. Also, exposure time was much shorter then. The French government bought the rights of this process which got known as Daguerreotype when Daguerre developed the first practicable appliance in 1839 (Legatt, 2003). This method to mechanically 'draw' images was generally well appreciated as Edgar Allen Poe illustrated in "Alexander's Weekly Messenger" in 1840: "[T]he Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands" (Poe, 1840, original emphasis). Worth mentioning here are also the following waypoints (George Eastman House, 2003):

- 1855 Roger Fenton illustrates the Crimea war with 360 photographs.
- 1880 Newspapers contain printed photographs using halftone screening.
- 1942 Edwin Herbert Land patents instant imaging introduced as "Polaroid" in 1947 to the public.
- 1995 First digital cameras for the wide public.

## Stereography – 2D or not 2D?

Soon an interest in stereography emerged, with popularity raising and falling in various waves: Already Leonardo da Vinci wondered about the difficulties of painting images analogue to human sight (Ono *et al.*, 2002). In 1833 Charles Wheatstone explained the stereo effect and made the first stereoscopic drawings – even before the first photograph. In 1847 Sir David Brewster invented a two-eyed stereo-camera which remained quite popular until 1880: "No home without a Stereoscope". A stereo reflex camera was available after 1929. A preliminary last wave of popularity was seen around 1955 but declining soon thereafter. Computer generated images arose another small wave at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the loss of depth in two-dimensional images must be seen as a major difference to perception of the real it is understandable that stereo imaging is generally not very successful since glasses, special equipment or training of the eyes to focus at an unusual depth is necessary in order to enjoy the three-dimensional effect – to produce them can be complex, too. Still, it always will be a fascinating amusement which explains the waves of popularity with every new invention. Also, this knowledge is used for serious applications, as can be seen in advances in virtual reality technology that make it possible, for example, to practice difficult surgeries before applying them to the real body.

### Object in space and time

The photograph is not only constrained concerning depth due to the projection<sup>2</sup> (in the mathematical sense) from three to two dimensions. It is also constrained in space and time, i.e. a photograph can only show a part – a cut-out – of reality at one specific moment. The attempts to capture movement onto one image using special effects such as blurring have to be seen of marginal importance (Cutting, 2002). Considering space, panorama or even 360-degree photographs now become more popular, since even the cheaper digital still cameras allow to string photographs together that are shot in sequence. But unlike cubistic art photography always remains “a surface view on the world” from one direction.

With the fixation of the image on paper the (photographic) message endures in time, serving as a kind of memory<sup>3</sup>, and in space as the photograph can be moved around easily. The portability has to be seen as a major – albeit profane – reason for the popularity and ubiquity of the photograph. As Susan Sontag points out, with “still photographs the image is also an object, lightweight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store” (Sontag, 1977: 166). People like to collect

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<sup>2</sup> A projection in geometry is a transformation from an n-dimensional to a lower-dimensional space. Most commonly, it is a method of representing the earth’s three-dimensional surface as a flat two-dimensional surface.

<sup>3</sup> In the film *Memento* (2000) the pictures of a Polaroid camera replace the protagonist’s short-term memory.

all kinds of objects – among them the photograph is one of the most easily collected items: “photographs transcribed in a film cease to be collectible objects, as they still are when served up in books” (Sontag, 1977: 167). The order of photographs compiled in a book proposes a “sequence in which the photographs are to be looked at” (Sontag, 1977: 166). In comparison to film, it is up to the individual viewer to decide how much time to spend on one ‘scene’, though, and the ‘reader’ can jump around. Like navigating through hypertext looking at photographs does not need to follow distinctive paths. One’s own photographs usually are collected within an album, especially the popular family pictures capturing all nuances of everyday life, bringing private life to the public: Me in the bathtub, on the tri-, bi-, uni-, and motorcycle, on holiday, at my birthday, at first communion, on graduation day; the family on Christmas, the ‘extended family’ with relatives at the wedding. All these pictures might be presented to friends, hung up on the wall at home or on a homepage<sup>4</sup> in the World Wide Web (WWW).

Pierre Bourdieu argues that these family pictures are popular because of the intrinsic wish to re-unite the family. When photography still was new, expensive and not widely practiced as hobby, to take a picture meant the “solemnization and immortalization of an important area of collective life” (Bourdieu, 1990: 24). This led to a “wide diffusion” of photographs where the family is both subject and object, although photography “satisfies neither a primary [...] nor a secondary need” (Bourdieu, 1990: 22). Now, everything is seen worth to be photographed which “democratize[s] all experiences by translating them into images” and thus “levels the meaning of all events” criticizes Sontag (Sontag, 1977: 168/9). Looked at from a different angle, the “omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events” which are worth photographing. Whatever is photographed is made notable; at the same time other events diminish. The predominant taste of aesthetics might undermine the unasserted, individual taste, though.

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<sup>4</sup> These vary from sophisticated discussions about photographic excellence to mere presentations of one’s own private environment à la “This is my dog”.

## The existentialism of tourism

To be a photographer is very much part of travel and tourism. One is at the same time viewed and photographed, states John Urry (Urry, 2001: 127). Most people practice photography as “a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power” (Sontag, 1977: 168). In spaces where people are insecure, photography gives them something to do – like smoking cigarettes (which never was a primary need, either) it keeps one busy. With the photograph one wants to prove that something did indeed happen. Pictures are shot as evidence that one has been there or that one has done that. The photograph confirms that the captured subject and the photographer exist. I photograph, therefore I am. One cannot have enough evidence of one’s own existence, so one can never have too many photographs, Susan Sontag (Sontag, 1978: 86) philosophises.

Even the journey itself is shaped by photography: One stops or makes a detour just to take a picture and not miss specific photo-opportunities (Urry, 2001: 128). Sometimes it seems that the whole holiday is spent behind the camera, and the accumulated trophies<sup>5</sup> on photographic paper are worshipped afterwards at home – the holiday not re-lived but lived as of first experience.

Susan Sontag fears that photography might even be mistaken with reality – like in Plato’s cave we might accept (our) shadows in place of reality. Photographed images seem to be pieces of the world rather than pictures of it (Sontag, 1977: 166). In the late 1920s the artist René Magritte illustrated the effect that pictured objects are often mistaken for real with a simple but effective picture of a pipe (Wade and Swanston, 2001: 44). The caption beneath it read “This is not a pipe!” This misleading of photography – giving the feeling that one can hold the whole world in one’s hands as long as one collects enough photographs – has to be seen part of its popularity.

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<sup>5</sup> Armed with cameras they shoot pictures like game and then bring them home to anatomise...

## Objective paintings

For many photography is their hobby – amateurs like cameras as “machine-toys” – for some it is profession, for others art. “Beauty is not inherent in anything; it is to be found, by another way of seeing” (Sontag, 1978: 90): Reality is aestheticised by cameras. In a painting, be it one of the most realistic images, one always can detect the strokes of the pen. Paintings have an individual, subjective touch. Unlike that, photographs seem to be objective images of reality. It is “a kind of automation that eliminate[s] the syntactical procedures of pen and pencil” (McLuhan, 2001: 206). Roland Barthes, too, sees photography as “mechanical analogue of reality” (Barthes, 1961: 197). Although a reduction from the object to the image takes place, he understands this reduction not as a “*transformation* (in the mathematical sense of the term)”. He concludes that the image is a “perfect *analogon*“ without relay between the both and thus the photographic image “*is a message without a code*” (Barthes, 1961: 196, original emphasis).

Compared to drawings or paintings photographs primarily carry denoted messages and thus objectively convey *what* is photographed. Connotations in paintings originate from the subjective influence as “result of the action” of the artist and refer “to a certain ‘culture’ of the society receiving the message” (Barthes, 1961: 196). The photographer has to “select, structure and shape actively what is going to be taken” (Urry, 2001: 128). Connotation is *how* something is photographed. Examining the content of a photograph, i.e. not only looking at it but ‘reading’ it “to a traditional stock of signs” (Barthes, 1961: 198) or describing it in words, this secondary meaning is revealed. The second-order or the connoted message builds *upon* the first-order or the denoted message. That “a coded message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*” (Barthes, 1961: 199, original emphasis) calls Barthes the ‘photographic paradox’.

## Easy to the eye

This decipherment of messages, be it photographs, television programmes or texts, is only done by an active audience; some effort has to be put in to get the message. “Connotation is not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message

itself” (Barthes, 1961: 198). Like Roland Barthes divided the photographic message into two levels, Marshall McLuhan divided media into ‘hot’ and ‘cold’. In *cool* jazz, Miles Davis for example, the subtle rhythm has to be felt within the off-rhythm; musical gaps have to be filled in (Finkelstein, 1968: 79). In *Understanding Media* McLuhan classifies cartoons as cool media: “A cartoon is ‘low definition’, simply because very little visual information is provided”, whereas a photograph is, “visually, ‘high definition’” (McLuhan, 2001: 24). Cool media are low in definition and high in participation, since only a small amount of data or information (in its technical meaning) is given and “so much has to be filled in” or completed by the audience:

“The passive consumer wants packages, but those, [Francis Bacon] suggested, who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth” (McLuhan, 2001: 34).

Although McLuhan points out in the *Gutenberg Galaxy* that “non-literate societies cannot see films or photos without much training” (McLuhan, 1962: 36), by classifying photographs as a hot medium he declares them as immediately understandable by a passive audience and deprives pictures from a deeper, denotative meaning.

Whether there are one or two levels in photographic messages, it is not necessary to decode a secondary message of photography to just perceive or enjoy the images. This puts ‘authors’ of pictorial media in a position of being able to address the biggest audience. No wonder photography is ubiquitous.

## **Point of view**

Photography introduced a different view on the world insofar as it acts as “extension of the senses”; it “amplifies the eye” as McLuhan puts it. It is now possible to not only figuratively get a picture of the world but get a real image of the earth from outer space. Also it possible to picture smallest details the eye with its (relatively low) resolution would never be able to resolve without aid. With photography micro- and macro-spaces were opened. “The point is precisely to see the whole by means of a part”, explains Sontag (Sontag, 1978: 88). Furthermore,

the eye is not capable of analysing fast movements. Here, high-motion capture photography has put humankind in a position to study phenomena one could not see or even know of before.

## **Sea of troubles**

With the industrialisation of photography – it has “become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing” (Sontag, 1977: 168) – the amount of yearly produced pictures rose tremendous. John Urry speaks of sixty billion pictures in the year 1999 (Urry, 2001: 127). With the emergence of cheap 35mm and digital cameras photography is omnipresent. Digital pictures do not need to be developed but merely uploaded to the home-computer at no cost. Only the time necessary to take the pictures constrains the amount taken in one day. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of pictures today of yesterday’s unspectacular night out. Obviously, it is hard to find the few good ones among them. Similar to the information glut of the WWW where meaningful information is lost under the meaningless, good photographs are lost even easier in this sea of pictures. Messages “without a code” are impossible to index for search engines. AltaVista and Google, for example, analyze “the text on the page adjacent to the image [and] the image caption [...] to determine the image content” (Google, 2003) – but not the picture itself. To index pictures by analysing and comparing the actual pixel-data still is a too complex task.

The inflation of pictures leads to a higher threshold at which an image is perceived at all. Advertisements compete with more and more spectacular images – sometimes it is hard, if not impossible, to discover the relationship between imaged and advertised object. One remembers the ad but not the product. These pictures strive to outreach reality itself by using strong colours that let reality around one seem grey. With publicity portraying only idealised models people get unsatisfied with their own body. This dissatisfaction leads not only to doing exercises exceeding the point to which they are healthy. The popularity of plastic surgeries shows how ubiquitous this type of photography is.

## To die, to see – no more

Especially in times of war journalists try hard to get the most striking picture to communicate the newest 'event'. A new type of journalism evolved where an 'embedded journalist' accompanies the troops to be able to directly send live pictures from the 'war theatre' (Kümmel, 2003). It has "become plausible", Susan Sontag writes, "in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life" (Sontag, 1977: 170) to choose the photograph.

Documentation seems to be of higher value than life; both at the same time are not possible sometimes. The wish to have pictures of everything is dominating, culminating in a kind of 'total awareness' or surveillance. Not only is there "nothing that should not be *seen*; [...] there is nothing that should not be *recorded*" either (Sontag, 1978: 91). Disappointment and critique gets loud if news reports have to do without picture – luckily, with the popularity and ubiquity of amateur photography there are photographs and films of virtually every, supposedly unexpected, event – be it 09/11 or the recent Columbia disaster, for example.

## Incredible authentic

With technical advances the manipulation of pictures is a more important issue than ever – digital photography and applications such as Photoshop allow moving pyramids, babies or whatever with the touch of a button. The former objectivity of the photograph is diminished and drowns in inflationary amounts of potentially manipulated pictures. Still photography has to make place for film combined with sound as newer believable medium. Eventually, only live pictures leave the impression of objectivity – but who says what is live? Saddam Hussein's 'live-speeches' are likely to be pre-recorded (Rötzer, 2003). Again, even live-pictures can be manipulated as seen in football-games where the perimeter advertising in football stadiums is changed digitally on-screen to embed different ads for each country before broadcasting the show.

These technologies create suspiciousness and disinterest in pictorial media. The communicated information becomes unbelievable. One could think of a growing significance of subjective views on the world that remain real and untouched.

Words describing events may get more important again – not only as picture captions. Is it really Saddam Hussein on TV – or one of his doppelgangers? One reporter says it is him – he has seen the distinctive twitching under Hussein’s right eye which he knows of personally. Everybody has to decide for her/himself whether to believe or not in these pictures – as we want to see them, the photograph remains ubiquitous nevertheless.

## Consumption

For Susan Sontag the final reason for the need to photograph everything is the logic of consumption itself: pictures are ordinary and precious at the same time; consumed pictures are ‘used up’, thus more and more images are needed to replenish this loss. It is the camera that initially creates the ‘lust’ for pictures that cannot be satisfied, though: It is impossible to possess all imaginable pictures – there are too many possibilities. (Sontag, 1978: 93)

Digital photography brings the consumer nearer to this goal. With huge collections of photographs on the Web, McLuhan’s idea of a ‘global photo-album’ became reality. Basically everything that can be photographed is out there and can be copied without any loss in quality. In the ‘global village’ of the Web amateurs and professionals alike exchange their knowledge about one of the most widespread hobbies.

## Conclusion

A picture is worth a thousand words, at least says a common proverb. “Vision is our dominant sense” (Wade and Swanston, 2001: ix), thus most pictures are consumed without effort. In visual media news is no news without pictures, and photographs still seem to be necessary as proof of happenings. Not only for the tourist are photographs items worth collecting, being transportable both in time and space. With digital photography the once fragile pictures are not anymore “plagued by the usual ills of paper objects” (Sontag, 1977: 166), although it takes some effort to annotate (and backup) the images, otherwise they will be lost in the information glut – and with them our past.

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