

# *Reconciling dualistic controversies*

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Through a consideration of photographic history and the AGNSW exhibition *Photography & Place, Reconciling Dualistic Controversies* examines the tensions that emerge from the intersection of modern and postmodern thought. Briefly tracing the early development of photography, early photographic and artistic discourses are examined. The article begins with an examination of how photography was initially used to augment traditional media in their pursuit of realism. It is then highlighted that, at its advent, photography was viewed contrary to notions of art, and thus the belief that it was not suited to artistic expression became deeply embedded in the popular consciousness. This is augmented by a discussion of Modern and Postmodern influences on the discourse, and the evolving treatment of photography throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, the photographer's role in mediating reality is considered, with a focus on whether photography is an explicitly objective or subjective medium. This is followed by a reflection on the opposing views concerning the construction of meaning, with an emphasis on authorship. Ultimately, it is concluded that neither Modern nor Postmodern thought yields an all-embracing approach to photography, and thus we must attempt to reconcile the two modes of thought.

'The history of photography is punctuated by a series of dualistic controversies.' Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1973, p. 129)

These controversies represent the interplay of modernist and postmodernist thought. This article seeks to dissect the tensions that lie at the heart of this interchange, through a consideration of the history of photography and the Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition *Photography & Place*. This exhibition traces the development of Australian landscape photography since the 1970s. Focusing on notions of place and the photographer as narrator, it demonstrates the evolution of conceptual and material photographic practice. Through an analysis of photography's initial rejection as an art form, its progressive permeating influence on artistic discourse, notions of objectivity and subjectivity, and the construction of meaning, a greater understanding of the present moment we live in is elucidated.

## **Photography and artistic expression**

One issue that has perpetually plagued the history of photography is whether, as an inherently objective medium, it may constitute art alongside traditional media. Although it is now almost universally accepted that photographs may be used as an instrument of expression, this was not always the case. A consideration of this historical development of photographic discourse elucidates a greater understanding of the present moment we live in by demonstrating the progressive construction of contemporary ideas.

## **The advent of photography**

Photography has its roots in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE China, where Mo Ti first discovered that light reflected off an object and passing through a pinhole onto a dark surface yielded an inverted projection of that object (Davenport 2000, p. 4). This fundamental principle was developed and

applied in subsequent years, with many photographic devices being produced. Perhaps the most influential was the camera obscura, 'a dark room, with a small hole in the wall or window-shutter through which an inverted image of the view outside is projected on to the opposite wall' (Gernsheim 1986, p. 3). From this came the camera lucida, which utilised a prism to reflect light onto paper, which could then be traced. However, photography was not seen as an artistic medium in its own right, but subordinate to painting and sculpture which dominated the fine arts until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, it was used to augment the artistic process by facilitating endeavours to represent the world with fidelity, congruent with the prevailing realist tradition.

### **Photography in art**

With public censure of the superfluities of the Machine Age during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, notions of the artist were tied to an individual's technical capacity (Lovejoy 1990, p. 258). It was believed that one who could create - paint, draw, sculpt - with his hands was somehow mystically endowed. However, photography utilised a mechanical process, and thus this element of 'draughtsmanship' was absent (Tilney 1930, p. 3). Furthermore, the value of art was seen to be inextricably tied to its uniqueness - the source of its symbolic value or 'aura'. This authenticity was lost with the advent of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1935). Due to a combination of these factors, the medium struggled to gain acceptance as a legitimate art form. It was relegated to purely documentary roles, the belief being that it was an inadequate vehicle for expression (Freeland 2007, p. 105). Consequently, early discourses of photography were heavily focused on its scientific, industrial, and commercial applications.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of these convictions, some photographers made persistent attempts to have photography inducted into the canon of expressive media. Accordingly, they sought to make photography a hand-made process. This was achieved in utilising techniques such as smearing vaseline on the lens, scratching negatives, and painting chemicals directly onto prints. This produced romantic, pseudo-impressionistic prints 'that rivaled the beauty of painting' (Baird 2008, p. 974). This movement, pioneered by Alfred Stieglitz, became known as Pictorialism, and garnered significant attention during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As these works were more akin to painting and drawing than photography, they gained some acceptance. However, notions of photography as art were clearly beginning to enter the public consciousness, the prevailing view was that photography was not on equal footing with more traditional media. Even so, due to its relevance to scientific pursuits, the photographic process continued to be developed, and photographs yielded progressively greater objectivity. This capacity to portray the natural world with great fidelity began to encroach on what was once the domain of painting and drawing. Consequently, artists working with traditional media began to shift away from the realist tradition that had dominated since the Renaissance (Bourdieu 1990), signaling the intrusion of Modernist thought into the visual arts.

### **Permeating popular discourse: The rise of modernism**

The Modernist movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, founded in the Enlightenment project (Grenz 1996, p. 60), was characterised by a departure from traditional modes of thinking. These were seen as incongruent with new sociopolitical and economic characteristics of the increasingly industrialised world. The result was revolution across all aspects of life - most notably in philosophy, science, and the arts. Modernists favoured reason and rationality, and asserted the ideal of absolute truth. A consideration of these ideals and their influence yields a greater understanding of the present moment that we live in, as it becomes apparent that they are fundamental to our accepted modes of thinking today. Their effect in the visual arts became apparent during the 1860s, and continued up until the 1970s. Its influence was defined by the

aforementioned shift away from realism, and gave rise to movements such as, inter alia, expressionism, surrealism, dadaism, cubism, futurism, and minimalism. Photography, however, remained caught up in the struggle to be accepted as art. Consequently, it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Pictorialist movement - and its focus on traditional aesthetic formalism - slipped out of vogue.

It was the work of Paul Strand, a student of Stieglitz, that instigated this change. Strand appreciated the camera's capacity to capture shapes and forms simply and directly. It is generally said that he pioneered the modernist movement that came to be known as 'straight photography' or 'the new realism' (Langford 1982, p. 342). His style became the aesthetic of the 20s - you were supposed to accept reality as it was, not manipulate it to conform with Romanticised notions of beauty. This revolutionised notions of realism, as photographers continued to document reality, but began to investigate its intrinsic abstract form. Drawing influence from artists such as Picasso and Matisse, new realists utilised selection and framing to produce art from the everyday, often disregarding traditional subject matter - nudes, portraits, and natural landscapes. The movement gained further prominence with the formation of *Group f/64* - a collective of eminent photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston - in 1932 (Newhall 1982, p. 192). It was their attempts to promote the aesthetic treatment of natural form that sustained interest in unmanipulated photography throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The permuting influence of modernism is reflected in *Photography & Place*. In his series Canberra suite 1980-81, Ian North presents a very deadpan view of suburban Canberra desolate and devoid of human presence. He has found beauty not in grand, natural landscapes, but in the everyday scene. There is no grandiosity, no brilliant chromatic spectrum, and nothing that transcends the commonplace. Furthermore, he has used a very narrow aperture such that the focus remains on form, and his representation is unfettered by the loss of detail inherent to a shallow depth of field. Similarly, Marion Marrison adopts a 'straight' approach in *no 68* (1981), from her *Bonnet Hill bush* series. Her work is comprised of 9 snapshots of a small, fallen tree. Although an ostensibly dull subject, her arrangement of these photographs into a 3x3 grid, coupled with her composition, represents an elegant treatment of form. Despite being printed in monochrome and suggesting an almost naive use of the photographic process, her work remains impossibly intriguing, and causes the viewer to ponder the chaos and spontaneity of nature.

### **The reaction to modernism**

Although Postmodernism signalled a decline in 'the new realism', it unequivocally reshaped the photographic discourse for the better. It marked the final stage of the 'century in which photographic reproduction went from rude infancy to a universal adulthood' (Grundberg 1999, para. 1). Postmodernism is difficult to define as this act of classification is an inherently modernist endeavour, contrary to Postmodernist notions of deconstructionism (Derrida 1976). However, it may be described generally as a reaction to modernism, characterised by 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1979, pp. xxiv-xxv). It rejects traditional notions of truth, rationality, and objectivity (Eagleton 1996), and is thus inherently deconstructive. Within the arts, it produced broadly expanded notions of aesthetics and medium-specificity. Even during the 1960s, photography remained marginalised within the art world, as reflected in the generally limited number of photographs displayed in contemporary art galleries (Skrebowski 2010, p. 88-89). This on-going struggle to be accepted as a legitimate art form, which marked the Modernist period, was characterised by efforts to deconstruct prevailing photographic discourses, which remained grounded in 19<sup>th</sup> century (Krauss 1982). Despite the attempts of prominent photographers, purely photographic exhibitions, such as Szarkowski's *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* in 1962 at the Museum of Modern

Art, were only a sporadic occurrence (Hughes 1978). It was only with the Postmodernist movement that photography was ultimately accepted as a legitimate artistic medium, and photographs became commonplace in galleries. This may assist us to further understand the present moment, as it illustrates that all understanding is fluid, and in a constant state of transformation.

The 1970s saw a further shift away from traditional notions of art, particularly the belief that art is concerned only with feeling and that 'if one has ideas to express the proper medium is language' (Read 1949, p. 27). Far from the realist tradition and straight photography, Postmodern art was characterised by eclecticism, parody, appropriation, recontextualisation, intertextuality, reflexivity, and deconstruction. Such techniques are manifest throughout *Photography & Place*, reflecting the permuting influence of Postmodern thought. In *after Heysen* (2005), Rosemary Laing appropriates Hans Heysen's classic watercolour *Summer* (1909), thereby deconstructing 'the culturally constructed view of landscape' (Laing, cited in MCA 2005, p. 13). In a similar vein, Simone Douglas' *Promise I* (2006), from her series *Sky of the skies*, reflects the Postmodern reaction to straight photography and the Modernist ideals of truth and objectivity. Her work is intentionally out of focus, such that the viewer does not have a depth of field, or a sense of space - rather, they are said to be viewing the work from outside of space. This provides an impressionist feel, through which Douglas deconstructs accepted notions of photography as an objective medium.

Postmodernism, further, saw a rapid rise in conceptualism, whereby material form was seen purely as a vehicle for the concept. This is illustrated by Simryn Gill's *Rampant* (1999), wherein she questions notions of nativity and alienness through the placing of sarongs and lungis amongst non-native plants, such as bamboo and camphor laurels, in a subtropical Australian landscape. The conceptualist agenda was concerned to propagate the negation of medium as the crucial determinant of an artwork's value. Their 'use of photography (as a 'non-art' form) has been understood as one of the main means by which this negation was pursued' (Skrebowski 2010, p. 87). However, this result was not achieved. Rather than notions of medium-specificity slowly subsiding into obscurity, photography became fully subsumed into the canon of expressive media. This influence was so extensive that 'by the mid-1990s photography had arguably taken the place of painting as the dominant 'medium' of mainstream contemporary art' (Skrebowski 2010, p. 88).

### **Mediating truth**

What role, if any, does the photographer play in mediating photographic truth? That is, the past reality that photographs profess to expose. This debate, grounded in notions of objectivity and subjectivity, lies at the intersection of modernist and postmodernist thought. The modernist tradition, in its perpetual attempt to rationalise and classify, erected a firm division between science and the arts, which were concerned with logic and feeling respectively. Photography, as an inherently objective medium, was inextricably entwined with the former, as it was contrary to modernist notions of artistic expression. Hence the perpetual struggle to gain acceptance as an artistic medium despite the revolutionary thought that occurred during modernity. The camera's growing capacity to reproduce reality with great fidelity, exemplifying the modernist ideal of progress, was ironically limiting in that it only solidified its existence within the scientific discourse. Correspondingly, the general consensus until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was the camera's mechanicalness prevented its products from being art.

The Modernist view was that images represented reality 'mechanically, not humanly' (Barthes 1977b, p. 44), and 'without any intervention by the photographer' (Baird 2008, p. 973). That is,

the photographer does not mediate the truth, only reveals it. In contrast, the postmodernist view is that the reality produced through the photographic process is inherently, and unavoidably, mediated by the photographer. It is believed that 'photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are' (Sontag 1973, pp. 67) and that they 'reveal as much about the maker as the subject' (Grivett 2006, p. 39). Photography may reveal one's personality (Brassai, cited in Hill & Cooper 1982, pp. 41) through, inter alia, the use of form, subject matter, framing and the manipulation of exposure and lighting. Essentially, the Postmodern view is that photography is equally as subjective as traditional media.

The disparity between these views may be demonstrated by an examination of the differing treatment of Lynn Silverman's series *Horizons* (1979), from *Photography & Place*. Each work in the series is comprised of two photographs, one above the other - one looks forward to an outback Australian horizon, and one looks down to the ground, Silverman's feet just in shot. A modernist interpretation may concentrate on the wide depth of field, and assert that the apparent fidelity to the original scene renders the image objective. However, a postmodernist interpretation would suggest that subjectivity is evident in Silverman's use of reflexivity, the physical arrangement of the photographs, her use of form, and her decision to subvert traditional notions of landscapes in producing an image nearly entirely consumed by sky. It is clear that both of these views have merit, and neither appears more valid than the other.

Thus, to reconcile these approaches, it is proposed that photographic objectivity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive. It may be said that we, as mediators, use the objective medium of photography in a subjective manner. A photograph may provide an entirely faithful representation of a scene, yet remain emotionally charged. Similarly, a particular image may be described as objective within a scientific context, but, if placed in a gallery, where the focus is on self-expression, its subjectivity may just as easily be articulated. It is therefore postulated that, inherent to their nature, all photographs are inherently subjective and objective. Notwithstanding a lack of manipulation, any product of the photographic process will invariably be affected by the photographer, yet this alone does not negate its objectivity. It is thus posited that to classify a photograph in such rigid terms is an intrinsically flawed endeavour.

### **The construction of meaning**

Fundamental to Modernism is a belief in absolute truth. It is believed that a text possesses one true meaning - that intended by the author. Interpretation, then, is the process of uncovering this particular meaning. As such, a photograph's meaning and purpose is prescribed by the photographer. An image produced by an artist is an artwork, and an image produced by a forensic photographer is an objective record - there is no hybridity, no overlap, no alternative. Postmodernism, however, rejects this notion of a universal truth, rather asserting that all meaning is socioculturally mediated. It is argued that as disparate interpretations of any 'aspect of reality' can exist, discourses are 'socially constructed' and inherently plural (Van Leeuwen 2005, p. 94), resulting in an ongoing 'battle for truth' (Olsson 2007, p. 223). The construction of meaning is no longer the domain of the author, but the reader. Neither the author's context nor intention are relevant - the reader is born at the price of the author's death (Barthes 1977a). A text's meaning is, furthermore, dependent upon the discourse in which it operates. The particular meaning - or set of meanings - that exist in one discourse may be completely invalidated when one transitions to another.

Yet again, the divergence between modernist and postmodernist thought is demonstrated by work from *Photography & Place*. Within an empirical scientific discourse, Wesley Stacey's *Umbie Gumbie Thicket* (1981), which depicts recovering bushland on the outskirts of human

settlement, may provide a record of the effects of man and bushfire on the natural environment. However, when operating within an artistic discourse, the photograph becomes a representation of aesthetic value. Whilst Postmodern thought suggests that these views are equally valid, the Modernist view is that the latter is superior. Whilst the Postmodern view appears more flexible - an ostensible benefit - it is not always applicable. It is proposed that elements of Postmodern thought may serve to mitigate the rigours of Modern thinking. The author - that is, the photographer - should be revived within particular discursive contexts, as is necessitated in a society based on rationality and hierarchical systems of functioning. Indeed, whilst the fundamental tenets of Modernism are entirely necessary within some discursive formations, it must be accepted that 'Photography is a polylogue' (Sontag 1973, p. 173).

## Conclusion

More than any other artistic medium, the history of photography history has been marked by dissent. The last century in particular has seen the photographic discourse pulled apart and reconstructed. Catalysed by the rise in modernist and postmodernist thought, it has progressively permeated the artistic discourse, resulting in its integration into the canon of expressive media. Although some tensions and ambiguities remain evident from photography's turbulent history, these are largely reconcilable. Indeed, both modernist and postmodernist views concerning notions of objectivity and subjectivity, and the construction of meaning have merit in their application to photography. As society largely operates according to Modernist ideals, one cannot simply adopt Postmodernism's more liberating stance. Rather than adopting a polarised view, we should attempt to reconcile the ideas that characterise each movement.

## Notes on Contributor

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