

# On Notions of Truth in Photography: Semiotics and the Stereograph

*by Gunnar Swanson*

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# On Notions of Truth in Photography: Semiotics and the Stereograph

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CATEGORICAL STATEMENTS ABOUT THE NATURE OF A MEDIUM are always made in peril of being parochial. There is, however, something about photography that compels us to categorize, if only about photography's relation to its subject matter. The optical/mechanical/chemical basis for photography seems to separate it from the strictly handmade media, inviting generalization about its depiction of truth and reality. It seems obvious that, in a way different from a painting being more than just pigment on cloth, there is something more to a photograph than just a collection of metallic salts and pigments on paper.

In the mid nineteenth century photography was often assumed to be as an act of God, with human intervention purely technical in nature. In his 1859 *The Stereoscope and the Stereograph*, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that “we owe the creations of our new art” (photography) to “the sun itself.”<sup>1</sup> Truth, it would seem, should be as much inherent in God's photography as it is in His other works. This idea of natural intervention was not a new one—twenty-one years earlier, Louis Daguerre had stated in an investment notice that the “daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw nature...[it] gives her the power to reproduce herself.”<sup>2</sup>

The seduction of the apparent “realism” of the photograph has long obscured issues of subjectivity and intent. In *The Stereoscope and the Stereograph*, Holmes compared the Daguerreotype to a mirror in which one can see one of the “films” or “effigies” cast off by any solid object. Although one might like to consider O.W. Holmes an intelligent and scientific man and assume he was using such constructs from Democritus of Abdera (“the Laughing Philosopher”) for illustrative purposes only, there is no indication that Holmes' mirrors placed at various increments from the exfoliating object seemed to him an artificial notion; i.e., we might assume he considered the surreal image of miles of mirrors sufficiently educational to overcome

1 Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph” 1859 *Atlantic Monthly* magazine as reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*, Lecte's Island, New Haven CT 73

2 Louis Daguerre in a notice circulated to attract investors, 1838, as quoted in Susan Sontag *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., New York, NY 188

feelings of amusement or absurdity, but there is no indication that he recognized the fact that a viewer's position and a mirror's size, placement, and very nature affect and limit the image every bit as much as the seen object's cast-off effigies.

While we can empathize with Holmes' wonder at the railroad, the telegraph, chloroform, and the Daguerreotype, in his enthusiasm he abandoned any common sense view of existence. An "idea of reality" that "we clasp...with our minds" neatly replaces reality itself, to the point that he rejects the "use" of "matter as a visible object...except as a mould on which form is shaped" and even suggests that illusions of form "must" become like money: "promises to pay in solid substance, which the sun has engraved for the great Bank of Nature."<sup>3</sup>

Even Charles Sanders Peirce, whose work on semiotics predated Ferdinand de Saussure's by nearly half a century, accepted the notion of the photograph as somehow "natural." He divided signs into icons (where there is physical resemblance between the signifier and the referent, such as a photograph of a person), indices (where there is a causal relationship between the signifier and the referent, such as a footprint of the person), and symbols (what Saussure called "sign proper," where the signifier is arbitrary and purely cultural, such as the person's name).<sup>4</sup> Peirce claimed that icons and indexes "assert nothing" and that only symbols are in the "declarative mood."<sup>5</sup>

Late in this century Roland Barthes focused (pardon the expression) the discussion of the semiotic of the icon further. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes wrote that *"The photographic referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call the 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and most often are 'chimeras.' Contrary to imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there."*<sup>6</sup>

Thus, according to Barthes, the essential truth of a photograph is "Reference."

Certainly that common sense notion of an inextricable union of signifier and referent has been at the heart of the practical use of photography almost from its beginnings. (Sometimes, as in aerial reconnaissance photography, the death of the photographically identified Communards, or mug shots, even O.W. Holmes' bizarre

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<sup>3</sup> Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 81

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Selected Writings*, 1966, 1958, Dover, New York, NY (Originally published as *Values in a Universe of Change*)

<sup>5</sup> Author's class notes from Visual Semiotics class, California Institute of the Arts, fall 1991 (If you can confirm or refute this, please email me at [gunnar@gunnarswanson.com](mailto:gunnar@gunnarswanson.com))

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 1980, translation 1981 Hill and Wang, New York, NY

notion of photograph-as-currency may have some appeal.) Excepting questions of possible deliberate fakery (Gardner's "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter," images of Communard atrocities, and Lee Harvey Oswald with his rifle, for instance), "photographic evidence" is tantamount to proof. Even when the quality is so poor as to be unreadable (as in flying saucer, Loch Ness monster, and "grassy knoll" shooter photos), or, in fact, not actually the photographic analog of any part of the spectrum (Kirilian "photographs," for instance), the existence of a "photograph" implies the existence of a referent and thus, it seems to many, the proof of something.

Technical manipulation, although perhaps intuitively antithetical to this line of reasoning, often amplifies the "scientific" perception of photography. Frances Galton based his eugenics theories on his ideas of racially and morality superior "types," and composite photographs gave a real face (albeit often without ears or fine features) to The Criminal, The Jew, et al.<sup>7</sup> "Computer enhancement" is accepted by the public without questioning of the nature of the "enhancement" algorithms. The computer, after all, is the perfect tool for breaking codes and uncovering secrets.

The naiveté of the idea of photograph-as-plain-truth seems to most of us as obvious as the unified photographic signifier and referent. These two common sense "givens" lead almost syllogistically to the photography-as-a-secret-language theory.

The secret language theory includes photographic boosterism, typified by Moholy-Nagy's call for photographic literacy,<sup>8</sup> as well as the outright conspiratorial such as Wilson Brian Key's contention that liquor advertisers airbrush monsters on ice cubes in their ads to encourage the self destruction of their alcoholic audiences.<sup>9</sup> Wider (and less laughable) conspiracies are identified by Stuart Ewen in his histories of the shaping of consumer culture by the (often photographic) images of advertising.<sup>10</sup> In *All Consuming Images* Ewen extends Holmes' argument to style in general: *"With remarkable, if unwitting clarity, Oliver Wendell Holmes had laid out the contours by which the phenomenon of style operates in the world today. Holmes was writing of photography, yet his perception that people would soon navigate the world, skin it of visible images, and market those images inexpensively to people, reflected a keen understanding of what, in the twentieth century, would stand as a palpable indicator of material progress. For people who, in another epoch, would have been unable to afford it, the acquisition of style represented a symbolic leap from the constraints of mere subsistence."*<sup>11</sup>

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7 Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive" *October* 39, Winter 1986 (a revised version appears in *The Contest of Meaning* ed. by Richard Bolton 1989, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA

8 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," *Telehor* 1,2, 1936 translated in Lyons, *Photographers on Photography*, 34

9 Wilson Brian Key, *Subliminal Seductions*, 1973 Prentice Hall, New York, NY

10 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 1976 McGraw-Hill, New York, NY and Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen *Channels of Desire*, 1982 McGraw-Hill, New York, NY

11 Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images*, 1988, Basic Books, New York, NY pp. 25-26

Although he applies Holmes' arguments beyond photography, Ewen devotes much time in his classes at Hunter College to decoding or deconstructing the photographic images of advertising.<sup>12</sup> He encourages his students to examine the physical relationships, dress, and other associations of the people and products depicted. From his techniques it can be inferred that Ewen believes that intent and thus the "real" message of photographs is apparent to the close observer. The secret language is readily decipherable, as insidious but less closely guarded than Key's monstrous ice cubes. It is not clear how Ewen views the conspiratorial mechanism. While ordering beasts for ice cubes is clearly a conscious decision, the appropriation of signifiers, arrangement of models and products, and creation of images to enhance power relationships and sell a myth of fulfillment through style could conceivably be done unconsciously by photographic crews steeped in modern consumer culture.

It is this sort of unconscious revealing of attitudes and relationships that is central to one school of secret language theorists. Body language theories range from the psychoanalytical<sup>13</sup> to the "practical."<sup>14</sup> In these ways of thinking, the positions and mannerisms of people depicted in a photograph as surely reveal their attitudes, feelings, and relationships as Ewen's somewhat similar list of a photograph's attributes would reveal the intent of the bourgeoisie's hired hucksters.

While it has a different implied construct of cause and effect, ultimately this is the flip side of Galton's what-you-see-is-what-you-get theory of genetic purity. The appeal of "trusting your eyes" has affected greater minds than Galton's. Arthur Schopenhauer lived long enough to see photography's rise and wrote: *"That the outer man is a picture of the inner, and the face an expression of the whole character, is a presumption likely enough in itself, and therefore a safe one to go on; borne out by the fact that people are always anxious to see anyone who has made himself famous... . Photography... offers the most complete satisfaction of our curiosity."*<sup>15</sup>

It is tempting to assume from Barthes' early condemnation of a common form of photographic illustration he called "mythology"<sup>16</sup> that he would fall in the secret language camp; he was however, by his death in 1980, apparently quite uninterested in such decoding. In his 1959 "Myth Today" essay, Barthes made a case for a sort of semiotic structural dishonesty. A sign is the unity of the signifier and the signified, of expression and meaning. Barthes condemned as "Myth" and "de-politicized

<sup>12</sup> "Consuming Images" 1990 PBS television special

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Robt. U. Akeret *Photoanalysis: How to Interpret the Hidden Psychological Meaning of Personal and Public Photographs* 1973, Peter H. Wyden, Inc., New York, NY

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Noren *The Way We Looked; The Meaning and Magic of Family Photographs*, 1983, Lode-star Books, New York, NY

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer as quoted in Sontag *On Photography* 183-184

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, translation 1972 The Noonday Press, New York, NY

speech” the practice of using an existing sign as a signifier that, in combination with a new signified, forms another (“second order”) sign. The example he gave was a photograph in *Paris Match* that showed a black soldier in French uniform saluting the tricolor. He made the case that the image of this individual, already a sign, was being used as a signifier in a new sign, a statement about French imperialism. Barthes believed that it was this semiotic structure that “naturalized” imperialism in the image.

The same case can be made for much of what might be called “persuasive” photography (including advertising and editorial, and thus the bulk of professional photography), but in his 1980 book on photography Barthes rejected the recent extension of such re-reading and re-examination, saying that: *“It is the fashion nowadays, among photography’s commentators (sociologists and semioticians), to seize upon a semantic relativity: no “reality” (great scorn for the “realists” who do not see that the photograph is always coded), nothing but artifice: Thesis, not Physis; the photograph, they say, is not an analogon of the world; what it represents is fabricated, because photographic optic is subject to Albertian perspective (entirely historical) and because the inscription on the picture makes a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional effigy. This argument is futile; nothing can prevent the Photograph from being analogical; but at the same time, Photography’s noeme<sup>17</sup> has nothing to do with analogy (a feature it shares with all kinds of representations). The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code—even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it—the realists do not take the photograph for a “copy” of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art. To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.”<sup>18</sup>*

It would take either complete naiveté or tremendous faith in people’s intuitions to not reject the idea that photographs represent “reality” pure and simple. Although the “secret language” approaches tend to range from dwelling on the obvious (analysis of whether one subject of a photograph seems comfortable next to another) to silly (seeking images in ice cubes), a certain amount of it requires serious consideration.

Bauhausian calls for a new photographic “language” can perhaps be dismissed as having the same problem as most of the “international” “languages” of modern design: like Esperanto they have the advantage of being nearly equally unintelligible to people of all cultures. It is clear and unavoidable, however, that photographs

17 “That-has-been”

18 Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 88

communicate additionally to their simple denotation.

Barthes' "myth" is the very fabric of much of the imagery we all see. Whether we accept Barthes' early semiotic proscriptions or the close readings of "photography's commentators" (whom Barthes later dismissed), cultural biases and power relationships are apt to be inherent in any imagery. This fact fails to speak to question of how photography is simply more real than other media. Paintings and poems show cultural biases and power relationships, but paintings and poems do not naturalize them quite as efficiently as do photographs. The author's intervention is more readily apparent and the author is more clearly a human being—a bit of the attribution of photographs to God or nature does tend to hang with us.

Clearly Barthes' point about necessarily versus optionally real referents is an important part of how a photograph is seen, but in the end, I can't help but believe that the relationship between the photographic signifier and referent might be more than "evidential." If you don't believe that, try applying a suggestion given by an art history professor of mine at UCLA. After talking about "primitive" views of the photograph that link the photographic image and the subject's soul, he stated that we all knew that this was silly; photographs were just a collection of metallic salts and pigments on paper. To prove it, he suggested that we all go get a picture of someone we love and poke the eyes out with a pin.<sup>19</sup>

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