

Photography on Photography (Meta-photography)

In what ways and to what extent is it possible for photography to be self-reflexive or self-researching?

To some extent all photographs are reflexive on photography, in so far as photography asserts itself as image, in image and as photograph. Photographs are also a *measure* or *observation* of photography, but as a kind of invisible substrate to observations of some other attendant thing that is more (and primarily) visible. Roland Barthes writes 'whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.' (Barthes, 1981:6)

Explicit photographic reflexivity is unusual; photographs are not usually about photography, rather something else - a photograph's object, index, referent, or even maker. In looking at photographs or discussing them, we mainly see or talk about the the matter of the subject (subject matter), or 'that [which] has been' (Barthes, 1981) or which 'must be' (Sontag, 1977). Susan Sontag writes: 'There is the surface. Now think - or rather feel, intuit - what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way' (ibid, 1977: 23). Photography itself is a surface, interface or suspension, much like a window or mirror (Alberti, 1435/ 1991; Szarkowski, 1978) that remains 'invisible'. Louis Marin writes: 'the invisibility of the support surface is the condition of possibility for the visibility of the world represented' (Marin, 2002: 312), and so the invisibility of photography is a pre-requisite to the visibility of the 'world represented'. In this way, the photograph *becomes* its object, index or referent, or what André Bazin (2004) calls 'the model': 'The photographic image is the object itself... it shares, by virtue of the very process of it's becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model' (Bazin, 2004: 14). The photograph's meaning is predicated upon that of the 'model', since the model is 'already in use in the production of meanings, and photography has no choice but to operate upon such meanings' (Burgin, 1982: 69). This is perhaps why James Elkins (2011) states that photography has no 'genius' of its own, nor exists 'in itself'. Photographic reflexivity (or what might be termed *meta-photography*) defies this and any pre-existing meaning, since there is no pre-existing 'model'. Rather than a photograph's adherence to its referent, the referent adheres instead to the 'photographic' through and in duration. This may be a reversed relationship between photograph and object, where the *visibility* of the support surface becomes the key condition (Marin's clause minus the 'in'- visibility).

The index does not exist 'already', and cannot be pointed at or to should the camera be removed (like the 'imagined number' that can only exist as or in an equation).

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (London, 1981)

Bazin, André, *What is Cinema* (USA, 2004)

Burgin, Victor (ed), *Thinking Photography* (London, 1982)

Elkins, James, *What Photography is* (London, 2011)

Marin, Louis, *On Representation* (USA, 2002)

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (London, 1977)

Szarkowski, John, *Mirrors and Windows* (USA, 1978)

PAUL BEVAN (extract from *Can the Superposition Provide Any New Observations on Photography [and Visa-Versa]*).