

Indexicality and New Media in Rephotography: From Roland Barthes to Google Earth

Imagine that you have the power to look at any scene and turn back the clock. This superpower would grant you access to the visual history of any given place. It would be possible to glimpse a time that was once present in a place that continues to be, to superimpose the visual past and present. Because of the emphasis on accuracy and human experience of sight, I have termed this concept History Vision. But this superpower is not entirely a fantasy. Roland Barthes drives at the idea in *Camera Lucida*: “in photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography.”¹ Indeed, almost any consideration of the ontology of photography touches on the concept. Photography is the superpower. Photography is History Vision.

While many visual theorists and artists recognize these unique properties of the photographic image, only one genre is devoted to the exploration and uses of this ontology. Rephotography is a genre in which photographers make images that imitate an existing photo with a considerable time lag in between the two, creating a “then and now” comparison of space over time. Successful Rephotography depends on finding the footprints of photographers past, aligning the center of your lens with the exact geographic location of their ground glass. The theory of this place is rooted in the index of a photo and Barthesian confidence that such a place must exist.

Therefore, consistency of place is essential in Rephotography while time becomes the variable, alluding to change but incapable of telling its story. Internet-based applications like Google Earth that tie together place and time are increasingly prevalent and entirely appropriate

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 76.

for the genre. Place and time are fundamental concepts in any photograph, but their centrality to Rephotography allows the genre to be a bridge between early visual theorists like Barthes and Bazin and contemporary new media like Google Earth.

Camera Lucida, published in 1980, is Roland Barthes' intensely personal exploration of photography, memory, and the past. His reflections focus on the ontology of the photographic image, especially its indexicality, coming to a head in a meditation on a photograph of his late mother, the infamous Winter Garden snapshot. Barthes wrote on photography throughout his career, most notably in the essays, "The Photographic Message" (1961) and "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964). Both essays can be read as logical predecessors to *Camera Lucida*; they touch on what he termed "the photographic image [as] an analogical reproduction of reality."² However, his commentary on code and signification was revised by *Camera Lucida* in just one of several breaking points critics recognize when examining his writing.³ *Camera Lucida* has been criticized as a volume that, blinded by passion, undermines Barthes' earlier work. But it also contains important continuities that deserve recognition and analysis on their own terms.⁴

Barthes' discussion of the ontology of the photographic image in *Camera Lucida* is perhaps the most famous and passionate defense of photographic indexicality ever written. For Barthes, indexicality took on a very personal meaning when he found a photograph of his mother. The Winter Garden photograph became a physical testament to his mother's life, proof

² Linda Coverdale, trans., *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 353. In Nancy M. Shawcross. *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 7.

³ See Shawcross for a detailed analysis of Barthes' writing on photography.

⁴ A common criticism of *Camera Lucida* is that it is not an all-encompassing analysis of photography, even though it is frequently hailed as essential reading on the subject. Indexicality distinguishes photography from other arts, but there is certainly more to the medium than this property. Although *Camera Lucida* overlooks this, to critique this too harshly is to miss the point of the book, and indeed, fail to see its use as a springboard to a close examination of indexicality and ontology of the image.

that she existed, and even evidence of “her hair, her skin, her dress, her gaze *on that day*.”⁵ This concept builds on his earlier discussion of a photograph of Napoleon’s brother, which opens the book. He expresses amazement to be “looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.”⁶ He does not distinguish between the eyes in the photograph and eyes in reality. The fact that the camera recorded Napoleon’s brother was enough to communicate the same experience and meaning of sharing the gaze, as if they were in the same room. Thus, Barthes demonstrates the extremity of his interpretation of indexicality and frames the tone and argument of the entire book.

This idea, combined with Barthes’ anguish over his mother’s recent death, creates a sentiment that seeps into the theory he presents. He carefully distinguishes between “what is no longer” as an unknown, and “what has been,” which is what the photo does reveal, thus dispelling death through the Winter Garden photograph. Barthes repeatedly asserts that a photo is evidence that the object in the picture, out of necessity, existed when the photo was taken. For him, this is the most important aspect of a photograph and the key ontological concept in *Camera Lucida*.

Andre Bazin, renowned film theorist, wrote before Barthes, and contributed strikingly similar ideas to the discussion of photographic ontology and indexicality. His essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945) is a canonical work in film and photographic theory. In this essay, Bazin also disregards the distinction between image and reality, throwing it out the window entirely when he asserts that “no matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no

⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 82.

⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 3.

matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.”⁷ With this bold leap, Bazin establishes his intense belief in the indexicality of the image, and makes a case for the photograph as a true representation of reality. His reference to the ontology of the photograph, “the very process of its becoming” also speaks to his belief in the existence of the object photographed, and by extension, its continued existence in the photograph and its supplanted reality.

The writings of Barthes and Bazin are strikingly similar, although they worked thirty-five years apart. It seems unlikely that Barthes never read Bazin and Barthes’ thinking remained entirely unaffected by his predecessor. Yet, Barthes does not actually reference Bazin in *Camera Lucida*. Although they arrived at very similar conclusions regarding the indexicality of photography and the ontology of the medium, Colin MacCabe points out several distinctions between the two theorists. He notes that the goal of their works was quite different; Bazin wrote from an anthropological perspective, comparing photography to the Egyptian sarcophagus, and an innate human desire to dispel death. Barthes wrote from a personal sense of mourning for his mother, this grief penetrating every aspect of his reflections. Furthermore, Bazin wrote about photography as a prelude to cinema, the last line of his essay alluding to additional analysis in this direction.⁸ Barthes analyzes photography on its own terms without reference to cinema.⁹

Although Barthes and Bazin approached their essays on photograph with different goals, and in different time periods, their similar conclusions demonstrate how pervasive and important

⁷ Andre Bazin. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 169.

⁸ “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language.”

⁹ Colin MacCabe, “Barthes and Bazin.” in *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabate (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 71-76.

their theories of indexicality remain. Together, Barthes and Bazin establish the reality of photographed places and objects. By virtue of their having been photographed, such objects and places once existed in front of the camera. Their essays lay the theoretical foundation for those who would seek to put the camera in front of these places once again.

Rephotography is a genre that relies on indexicality to make relevant contributions to art and science. Rephotography operates from the understanding that every place has a history, a unique series of events that are tied to a specific geographic location. Photography is a medium capable of revealing this past, and comparing it to another time, again, and again, and again. The ontology of the photograph, as established by Barthes and Bazin, ensures that the scene photographed once existed in reality. It is up to the rephotographer to find the view again and reproduce it as accurately as possible, taking into account the time of day, lenses, and camera placement. The result is a “then-and-now” set of photographs that show the same scene at different points in time. Rephotography requires that geographic place remain a constant throughout a series, thus isolating the element of time. A single photograph can only speak to the passage of time by virtue of the exposure length, usually less than a second. However, in Rephotography, two or more photos are read against each other as a means of pointing to the passage of time between their exposures. Photographs cannot reveal what took place in between, only that something happened, thus inviting broad cultural and scientific analysis.

Mark Klett, founder of the Rephotographic Survey Project, popularized the genre when the RSP repeated images of the American West made in the 19th century. The project ran from 1977 to 1979 and was funded by the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Klett and his team focused on repeating photographs made by William Henry Jackson, Timothy O’Sullivan, and John Hillers. By the Fall of 1979, the project had become a full-blown

photographic survey, and the team stopped to publish their works in *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*.

Klett followed up his first book more than twenty years later with another volume, *Third View, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West*. This book, published in 2004, attempted to extend the work of two decades ago by revisiting the sites yet again for a third, unique look at the land and a deeper understanding of the genre's essential connection to place and time. The volume takes advantage of the different time spans to explore visual change caused by human activity; in some instances, it is painfully obvious what technology and development has wrought on the environment as telephone poles and buildings obscure the original photographs, and render the new images compositionally ineffective as stand-alone pictures, but telling contributions to the series.

In the opening essay of *Third View*, Mark Klett situates his own work within landscape photography: "most people assume that landscape photographs are about rocks or trees or space, but I believe their real meaning concerns our essential connection to place, to each other, and, most importantly, to time."¹⁰ Here, Klett affirms the two essential elements of Rephotography, place and time. He also pushes the definition of landscape photography, suggesting that there is significantly more to the genre than basic aesthetics. His essay goes on to suggest that Rephotography is uniquely capable of filling this gap in the tradition of landscape photography, particularly as it shows human presence and influence in Klett's rephotographs of the American West. Klett also calls Rephotography an "open-ended" contribution to an existing photograph. By introducing the variable element of time, rephotographs invite viewers to consider the interval between the two images. Klett's work in *Third View* also demonstrates that

¹⁰ Mark Klett, *Third View, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2004), 1.

Rephotography is not limited to two images. Instead, he specifically expresses his hope that images he has photographed for a second time continue to be repeated as part of a continuous interrogation of the human impact on the landscape and cultural issues surrounding it. Klett emphasizes the ability of Rephotography to reveal not only the transformation of time, but also of culture. The landscape images of the RSP must therefore be read well beyond their aesthetic. They do not function theoretically as stand-alone images, but instead gain meaning and depth through intentional comparison with their older counterpart.

Klett continuously emphasizes the painstaking methodology employed by the RSP to ensure highly accurate rephotographs. He devotes a significant portion of both introductory essays in *Third View* and *Second View* to explaining his technical processes. In these essays, he discusses techniques based on geology, methods for selecting the correct lens, and choosing the correct time of day for shooting. Math and diagrams that demonstrate the accuracy of his methods accompany these explanations.¹¹ Thus, Klett strikes a curious balance between the scientific and cultural in his approach to Rephotography.

It is appropriate that such intensive efforts to guarantee accuracy are used in Klett's work as the theoretical foundation of Rephotography is undermined by inaccuracy. However, Peter Hales criticized the RSP's efforts in his seminal essay, "Landscape and Documentary: Questions of Rephotography."¹² Hales observed that the RSP seemed torn between an artistic and scientific approach to Rephotography, both of which were undermined by ambiguous intentions and the fact that "their vantage points were often subtly inaccurate."¹³

¹¹ Mark Klett, *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 42-43.

¹² Peter B. Hales, "Landscape and Documentary: Questions of Rephotography" *Afterimage* 15 (1987): 10-14.

¹³ Hales, "Questions of Rephotography," 13.

The debate on the artistic and scientific merits of Rephotography stretch across the genre, as there is a significant gap between photographers who value its artistic possibilities and those who implement the same techniques to measure geological change. Not unlike the history of photography itself, Rephotography has been difficult to place firmly in either category. Robert Stanton and Claude Birdseye were photographers who worked in the same era as O'Sullivan and Jackson, and are famous for expeditions they led down the Grand Canyon, collecting scientific data and photographs. In 1991, John Charlton, a staff photographer for the Kansas Geological Survey, accompanied a team of scientists who retraced Birdseye's journey with the aim of producing visual evidence to compare the landscape with that of seventy years prior. In the introduction to the published volume, *The Canyon Revisited*, the author declares, "today, people normally think of photographs made in the Grand Canyon as scenic and pictorial. That kind of image was not the intent of the 1923 survey photographers, nor was it ours."¹⁴ Instead, the primary goal behind this project was not to fulfill an artistic concept, but rather to document geological change over time, using photography as a mechanical means of creating accurate comparisons.

Robert H. Webb published a similar book, *Grand Canyon: A Century of Change: Rephotography of the 1889-1890 Stanton Expedition* which features impressively accurate rephotographs, and extensive discussion of vegetation, lava, and erosion. The volume is overtly scientific in nature and intent. Interestingly, in both of these books, the authors chose to use the term "repeat photography" in the text instead of "Rephotography". This also represents an intentional separation from the genre and helps to set their work apart as being primarily scientific, not artistic. While any Rephotography project must contend with this ongoing debate,

¹⁴ Donald L. Baars and Rex. C. Buchanan, *The Canyon Revisited: A Rephotography of the Grand Canyon 1923/1991* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 8.

particularly when considering execution and accuracy, the writing and cultural context of the photographer will generally help situate their work in one camp or the other. Despite Peter Hales' misgivings, Mark Klett and the Rephotographic Survey Project fall decisively in the "artistic" category, as made clear by Klett's concern for place and time, as well as the cultural issues raised by his rephotographs.

Klett's essays highlight the importance of Rephotography as a cultural practice. Reaching beyond Roland Barthes and the foundational concept of indexicality, Rephotography is also a cultural invitation to remember the past and make a connection to the present, either through viewership or participation. With the Internet and new media, the participatory potential of Rephotography and image-sharing in general, has never been more accessible. Rephotography can be practiced all over the world, as part of an exotic vacation or everyday life. By sharing this work, Rephotography can globally connect people who are interested in the history of a certain place or event and thus, partially transcend the genre's inherent dependence on place.

As this cultural context is highly relevant for contemporary applications of Rephotography, equally important is the way rephotographers learn about the cultural context of original photographers. Those who visit the site at which a photograph was taken are suddenly privy to a host of things that generally remain unknown to viewers outside of this context. For instance, at the site, it is possible to see what was left out of the frame. Furthermore, the selection of the site itself is an element that can only be appreciated on the ground. Mark Klett notes that surprisingly, many sites where striking photos of remote wilderness were taken are actually located just feet away from a major artery between destinations.¹⁵ Both of these examples can reveal information that would otherwise go unreported, but affects our understanding of how

¹⁵ Klett, *Second View*, 22.

these photographers operated. Framing and the selection of site are both decisions informed by a photographer's cultural influences and objectives in making a picture. Having the context for these decisions, obtained by visiting the location and repeating their process, is a valuable tool for deepening understanding of past photographers' work.

Although new media bears exciting implications for Rephotography, Tom Gunning expresses his fear that new media and technological progress depends on "the anaesthetization of the past" and an "ignoring of the true complexities [of] photography" in promise of a digital utopia.¹⁶ While these concerns are not easily dismissed, it is worth pointing out that Rephotography remains a genre that is dependent on engaging the past and such complexities of photography, even as it comes to be displayed with new media applications that may otherwise contribute to a digital utopia. Rephotography is rich with opportunities for incorporation and display in new media applications, a genre perfectly suited to bridge the gap that Gunning identified due to its reliance on the works of past photographers for creating contemporary works based in indexicality.

Google Earth is the best, most accessible interface for displaying Rephotography, as its visibility encourages participation, while strengthening theoretical roots through the applications' function as a representation of place. It is the ideal platform for tying together the threads of time and place. Google Earth allows viewers to "travel" to a geographic location and immerse themselves in a 3-D representation of a wide variety of locations, using Street View. With respect to Rephotography, this simulates the experience of place and allows viewers who have not physically traveled to a location to gain some sense of connection and visual understanding

¹⁶ Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 23.

of the process of Rephotography. Google Earth also incorporates the element of time with its capacity to display videos that can be tied to geographic locations.¹⁷ Thus, the essential elements of Rephotography are represented using Google Earth. Furthermore, Google Earth is highly interactive and promotes social contribution, two hallmarks of new media, which also contribute to the contemporary cultural significance of Rephotography. The visibility and accessibility of Google Earth and other internet-based applications help to create a social experience and exercise in collective memory of place. It is easy to create History Vision in Google Earth, keeping the past alive through images, but encouraging a reconstruction of its meaning through the comparison between old and new.

Peter Hales introduced another key concept to Rephotography in his key essay, that of the crisis of modernist photography in the 1970s and 1980s, notably at the time of the publication of *Second View*. This crisis, Hales noted, seemed to especially affect landscape and documentary photography due to a “loss of faith” in serious photography. Hales argues that as artists like Sherrie Levine appropriated photographs by Walker Evans and Ansel Adams and the documentary was defined and redefined, the legitimacy of the documentary and landscape was undermined in favor of a broader postmodern movement.¹⁸ It was in this context that Rephotography emerged as a new genre. In many ways, Rephotography is a very postmodern response to the crisis of modernism. It is intentionally and intrinsically unoriginal, drawing its meaning from imitation. This production piece of this project follows in this tradition, pushing it a step further through the digital format. The modern/postmodern dichotomy of borders versus global flows speaks especially to this concept; by rephotographing the Iron Curtain, the border is

¹⁷ This project incorporates such videos, which consist of two photographs blended together to show change and similarity before and after the Iron Curtain in Germany.

¹⁸ Hales, “Questions of Rephotography,” 10.

recreated. However, the Internet, digital formatting, and social media objectives of the project are examples of postmodern elements that make the reconstructed border fluid and malleable, a digital object that encourages participation and recontextualization.

By examining Rephotography in the era of digital media and Google Earth, it becomes clear that theorists like Roland Barthes and Andre Bazin were forbearers of this genre. Their canonical works on the ontology of photography and the medium's indexicality laid the foundation for photographers to create meaningful images within their theory. Mark Klett and the Rephotographic Survey Project pioneered the genre, highlighting the importance of time, place, and cultural context that can only be revealed through Rephotography. The genre has been pushed further by applications like Google Earth that allow place and time to be visualized and help promote social participation and interactivity, a keystone of new media. Place and time are the concepts that roots Rephotography in visual theory and allows History Vision to be realized in new media applications. Photography is History Vision. Rephotography, based in ontological theory, displayed in new media, and understood culturally, brings History Vision to life.

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