

Evidentiality, Interfaces, and Photography

Rough Guidelines for Contemporary Factography

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The proposed presentation will outline the research that focuses on the status of visual evidence in investigative journalism and art projects that seek to counter contemporary anti-epistemic beliefs and power structures by emphasizing scientific models of investigating and representing reality and proposing new epistemic modalities for the justification of the narratives and deliberative processes. In particular, it will focus on the visualization technologies (video, photography, animation, 3D modeling) in relation to an event, process, or state of things through the linguistic category of evidentiality to conceptualise that which is evidentiary.

One of the misconceptions of our contemporary image world is that it is saturated with evidence – that it consists of evidence – I will argue that it is more apt to state that it consists of “evidentials” (Aikhenvald 2005) – which can perform (act) as evidentiary (epistemic markers) in a specific deliberative context. It is beneficial to reexamine the visual and specifically the notions of truth, credibility, veracity, and evidentiary through the linguistic category of evidentiality, as evidentials are defined as “the grammatical means of expressing information source” (Aikhenvald 2005); the presentation will focus on a simple question: What are “the visual means of expressing information source”?

The very notion of evidence implies a certain social contact, and in a broad sense even a social contract – or rather a “prescribed” social interaction (not least conventions of communication) – and as such the evidence itself has meaning in relation to a question, particular regime or at least competing pressures (Engelke 2008) and is always already performative – it provides a certain “contract” of proof and what to do with proof (Aikhenvald 2005). Opposed to autographic visualizations (Offenhuber 2019) and visual indices (indexicality; Peirce 1897) evidentials have no “inherent” ability to provide evidence i.e to be in relation to “the truth”. The concept of evidentiality is separated from concept of epistemic modality which conveys probability, possibility, and reliability of the discourse. For the purpose of the presentation we will take the notion of “evidential proper” (evidentials not being a variant of epistemic modality), and apply it to the visual (images that is) to understand the pervasive and persuasive nature of both “moments” operating in the various discourses: visual evidentials and visual evidence.

Furthermore: visual evidence is to be understood as an interface in both meanings of the notion: as a translation between different data sets and as interactive mediators with the observer/operator. This means that the exposition of something as evidence (and especially the presentation of visual evidence) implies both – the adherence to certain conventions of communication – evidentiality value, and the “elusive” relation to the truth – evidentiary value.

Contemporary investigative media and art (taken as part of a broader deliberative process) – need to shape their visualizations around the aesthetics of the objective – scientifically constructing the facts (a privileged mode of contemporary “factography”) using satellite imagery, open-source imagery, vernacular imagery, presenting them with illustrations, diagrams, modelling data in virtual reality environments and augmenting them by using lidar, measurement apps, metadata etc.

The idea underlying these visualisations is the possibility of the subversion of the vertical model of authority (counter-investigations), the possibility of creating networks of investigative communities (citizen journalism), and the creation of an active, media and interface literate, global, critical subject (citizen researchers). But what kind of facts are established through these projects, what kind of conception of evidence is most prevalent in these projects? How do they appeal to the senses of the observer, what impact do they have on policy makers? And how can it be conceived through evidentiality as a linguistic category? Especially photography – as one of the most ubiquitous and yet multivalent means of visualization.

Broadly summarizing: the presentation will outline an “exotic” attempt at application of linguistic category of evidentiality first developed in the field of anthropology (through research on “exotic” languages; Boas) to the visual.

Keywords: evidentiality, deliberation, evidence, interface, photography