

Photography,* or the missing asterisk (photography as placeholder)

When AI imaging suddenly entered ordinary people's everyday lives in early spring 2023, an old placeholder reappeared on the scene: the Photo Credit. In March and April, one story after another surfaced: AI-generated images of then Pope Francis in a white puffer jacket; Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins's photorealistic conjectures about an imminent arrest of Donald Trump; Amnesty International's AI-generated images commemorating the second anniversary of police violence against protesters in Colombia; and many more. A common thread in the articles criticising this use of images is that, even while highlighting and condemning these images precisely for not being photographic, publications still labelled them as Photography in the caption field. British daily newspaper The Guardian, for example, ran a major story about how Amnesty International was criticised for using AI-generated images (May 2, 2023), reproduced one of them, and provided the following caption: "*An AI image generator-made picture to depict protests and police brutality in Colombia. Amnesty International said it chose to use the AI-generated images to protect protesters. Photograph: Amnesty International*". The online magazine Slate published on March 29, 2023 an AI-generated image of then Pope Francis with a similar caption: "*That's not a real picture of the pope, and he probably does not own such a puffer. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos via feraljokes/Twitter and Chris Barbalis/Unsplash*." Photography seems to be a fixed prefix automatically added before the name of the image creator. The predefined format, the caption template, specifies an attribution field — a fixed location within a spatial model — and establishes a pictorial captioning practice that materialises a particular space for a stand-in: "photo" means source, image, illustration, or figure. Suddenly, with the Dall-e and Midjourney imaging entering the scene, the template appears both misplaced and ubiquitous in newspapers, online blogs, and databases. Either the image editors have become blind to layout, or the software has been bought and paid for and is beyond editorial control.

This persistent practice reveals that this placeholder is temporary rather than a durable default and that the historical default has expired. Still, 2.5 years later, we see this practice, although it appears to be changing. This paper takes that default as its starting point and asks whether photography — the word photograph and the concept of photography — more generally, tend to act as such placeholders, not only in journalistic practices and everyday language but also in academia. Where the Photo credit now appears more clearly than before, photography in other contexts is not marked as placeholders. It lacks an asterisk, a sign that it should or ought to be replaced by something else, that it is there to communicate or because nobody thought of a better word, that it stands in for something else. That something else is sometimes an image, a depiction, a visual representation, or an aesthetic image object. These can be photographic but often are not. Instead, they reveal specific ideas about photography that may never have been adequate and that, today, are less satisfactory than at any previous time in history.

Contemporary photographic theory has unsettled conventional notions of representation by foregrounding the photograph as networked, shared, and operational. However, much of the current literature remains focused on aesthetic and social practices—an important emphasis, but one that is insufficient for grappling with pressing theoretical and societal questions. A more comprehensive theory of photography therefore requires widening the analytical lens to

incorporate a broader range of practices and interdisciplinary perspectives. This broadened approach clarifies how photography continues to function as a proxy for concepts such as image, representation, and documentation, even amid critiques of representational thinking and an emphasis on operativity, process, and dynamic networks. The paper draws on photographic practices employed in systems of social control and discipline (for example, surveillance and border enforcement) as well as on imaging practices from the natural sciences, aiming to contribute to a photo-theory better equipped to address contemporary and future challenges in the field.

This paper investigates photography as a stand-in, theoretically (i.e., conceptually) and practically (i.e., as practice). As a placeholder, photography can enable legibility and communication, but it can also ossify categories, erase nuances, hinder interdisciplinary collaboration with academic and practical fields where photography serves as a tool, and undermine the potential for new insight. The paper draws on theories of photography, visual studies, image theories, theories of visualisation and imaging, as well as methodological and conceptual interdisciplinary practices. This paper argues that while recent theories productively reconceptualise the photograph as networked and operational, they must expand beyond predominantly aesthetic and social frameworks. By integrating more diverse practices and interdisciplinary insights, the paper will contribute to the development of a comprehensive photographic theory capable of addressing urgent theoretical and societal issues.

Keywords:

Photographic theory, Photo Credit, Conceptual Interdisciplinary, Imaging, Photographic Practices