

A photograph is only ever about itself: ontological abstraction in the technical image

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This paper seeks to interrogate the oscillating tensions between interpretations of photographs as either technical or cultural documents. It is relevant to the specific conference theme, which describes photographs as both culturally “grounded” and technically “aloof”. Much of the history of the theory of photography has charted these tensions in terms of its indexicality or perspectivism. Photographs refer to the world directly as proxies for material situations, rendered as “sun pictures”ⁱ; at the same time, the discourse has also wrestled with the empirical limits to its modes of representation.

This paper proposes that some of these tensions that have characterized the histories of photography can be mitigated by reconfiguring the two interpretations not as poles on a continuum of indexicality - between empirical representation and its absence - but rather as entirely separate ontologies. Central to this approach is Vilém Flusser’s explicit conceptualization of photographs as technical imagesⁱⁱ. For Flusser, technical images did not represent the world; they calculated it. Flusser felt that any image produced by a camera was the product of a code of an apparatus, which was itself composed of scientific knowledge. All technical images are therefore *abstracted* from the world according to the specifics of each code. Flusser felt the eventual prevalence of this ‘third order’ of abstraction, primarily in the form of synthesized electronic images, would come to characterize human history more than any other technological advanceⁱⁱⁱ.

There are various dynamic considerations that follow from this ontology of technical images. The more complex the code, for example, the more abstract the picture of the world produced (abstract not in a pictorial sense but in an ontological sense). This in turn entails some counterintuitive implications which run against the grain of art history. A black and white photograph, for example, is *less* abstracted than a colour photograph. A high resolution image is *more* abstract than the poor images defended by Hito Steyerl^{iv}. According to this formulation, Flusser’s definition dovetails with themes to be found elsewhere in media theory, such as Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal^v. Increasing abstraction is consistent with the complexity of codes not just in immersive platforms, but also now with generative imagery in what is colloquially referred to as AI ‘slop’.

It is further worth revisiting apparent harmonies between Flusser’s definition of technical images and McLuhan’s distinction between the medium and the message^{vi}. It seems peculiar that there has not been more research to address the shared implications of the two media theories for photography, specifically. It might seem excessive to suggest that McLuhan’s contention - that the deployment of a medium is more important than whatever is being mediated - could ever be transposed onto photography as a cultural practice. But why? Are photographs simply invested with too much cultural import, more than say a telephone conversation? Flusser’s definition of technical images might provide a way to extend the impact that McLuhan’s idea should probably have had on photography, but did not. That is to say, photographs function culturally, of course; we make them for cultural reasons and they can be studied for cultural effects. Photographic pedagogy in art schools globally has traditionally linked photography with the histories of other visual media such as painting and drawing (often treating it as a single way among many to make an image). Photographic education has in this way focussed on what photographs *do*, rather than what they *are*. It is this history of photographic theory,

for example, that frames Ariella Azoulay's important essay "What is a Photograph?"^{vii}, or WJT Mitchell's brilliant *What do Pictures Want?*^{viii}.

However, if we accept Flusser's definition of technical images and consider that the abstraction in the code of an apparatus obscures any notion of indexicality *absolutely*, then a photograph can only ever be metaphorically about the thing it represents. Motivations for and discussions of photography are essential, but they do not necessarily invoke the fundamental considerations of the technical ontology of the medium. A photograph might appear to be about the thing represented, but it is ontologically only ever a performance of the code of abstraction. Each photograph is primarily an instance of the technical image universe becoming unto itself.

This hard line drawn between the world and representation through the code of abstraction in the apparatus, might serve to liberate culturally critical analyses of photographs from discussions of empiricism and perspectivism. In particular, this conception of photography bears substantive implications for discourse on the burgeoning inclusion of AI, index-less imagery in everyday image searches. The thesis here might be encapsulated in the following question: why draw an ontological line between traditional photography and machine-learned images, as opposed to between the full range of technical images and the world itself?

For the conference presentation format, I would propose to deliver a somewhat performative lecture that incorporates images from my own artistic practice, examples of which can be seen via the link in the bio provided.

Keywords: technical image, photography, ontology, indexicality, media theory, proxy, metaphor, AI

ⁱ Talbot, William Henry Fox. *The Pencil of Nature*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1844-1846, p.7.

ⁱⁱ see Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion Books, 1984.

ⁱⁱⁱ see Flusser, Vilém. *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Translated by Nancy Ann Roth, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

^{iv} see Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image". e-flux journal. #10. 2009.

^v see Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

^{vi} see McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet Books, 1966.

^{vii} Azoulay, Ariella. "What is a Photograph? What is Photography?" *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 1 (2010): 9-13.

^{viii} Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. London: University of Chicago Press