

Michelle Henning | University of West London, UK

# UNFIXING THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE

*Towards a new history of photography*

Over the past few years I have been engaged in writing a cultural history of photography, to be published by Routledge. You may wonder why such a history is needed, when there are excellent books on the subject already. Here, I set out the difference between my approach and existing ones, in particular my emphasis on media, mobility and transience, and some of the ways in which I am exploring this through archival research.

The established histories of photography are hybrid affairs. Most combine a technical account, which addresses the impact of various technical innovations, with an art history that attends to artistic movements and key aesthetic and stylistic changes, highlighting significant individual photographers and works. Added to this mix is a social history of vernacular photography, especially portraiture and family photography; and, since the 1970s, an institutional history that considers the role of photography in policing, colonialism, and commodity culture, in the construction of deviancy and madness, and in the production and reproduction of norms of sexuality and gender.

Such histories are useful and have much to teach us, but if there is a need to write the history of photography once more, and differently, it is because they fail to account for certain aspects of photographic practice that have long existed, but which have only recently become particularly vivid or noticeable. These aspects include photography's mobility, by which I mean the ability of a photograph to be transmitted, projected, and transported, and to make other kinds of image mobile through reproduction. This ability has been highlighted by recent developments in digital networked photography, as has the transience of certain kinds of photographic images, which appear not as frozen moments, but as snatched glimpses, that fade away almost as soon as they are seen.





---

*If there is a need to write the history of photography once more, and differently, it is because of the failure to account for certain aspects of photographic practice that have long existed, but which have only recently become particularly vivid or noticeable*

The notion that to take a photograph is to capture a moment is an idea that derives from French humanist photography, especially from Henri Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' (1999), but it has been extended and applied to photography as such. Another central tenet of photography theory (exemplified in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*) is the idea that while we submit ourselves to the camera in an attempt at immortality, we find ourselves frozen in images eerily predictive of death. This deathly quality is often seen as an essential characteristic of photography as a medium. Yet, my research shows that this way of understanding photography also has narrow origins, emerging first in the late 1920s in the very specific social and cultural climate of inter-war Germany. Similarly, photography's fleeting, mobile and communicative qualities have become more vivid in our own specific historical context: it is, above all, the development of the smartphone camera and of visual communication apps such as Instagram and Snapchat that has brought these qualities to the fore. Commentators often assume this is a dramatic shift in the uses and practice of photography or a change in the nature of photography but in fact we can trace these qualities back to the various moments of the medium's invention in the nineteenth century.

One way to establish this alternative history is through archival research. My own recent research in the British Library and at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona, has been partly about finding neglected or unusual examples of photographic practice and re-reading early histories and textbooks on photography, including early editions of some of the most canonical and influential texts. I wanted to track the point at which a certain dominant way of explaining photography becomes embedded and unquestioned and also to find out how photography was conceptualised at different moments: what Thomas Skaife meant by 'instantaneous photography' in the 1860s, for instance, and how this concept linked photography to telegraphy, or what we can learn about photography as a medium by examining René Dagron's use of microfilm and carrier pigeons in the early 1870s (Skaife, 1860). This is significant because photography is so frequently excluded from histories of the media, being neither electrical nor a broadcast medium in its early incarnations, yet photography was central to what the Victorians themselves frequently referred to as the annihilation of time and space produced by modern media and transport systems (it was a cliché of nineteenth century journalism: on May 31 1844, for example, a writer in the *Baltimore Sun* commented on Morse's telegraph that 'time and space has been



completely annihilated'; earlier, in 1830, another journalist in the *Charleston Courier* described a railroad trip in the same terms).

Just as existing histories neglect this mobile quality of photography, so photography theory ignores or devalues it. In particular, theorists have been suspicious of the facility by which photographs become detached from contexts and captions, the ease by which they become ambiguous or can be given new meanings with new captions, new interpretations. This is no coincidence, I think, given that many theorists of photography come from literary, text-based disciplines rather than from art history or visual culture. Photography theory also identifies an inevitable and essential tendency in photography towards the static through processes of objectifying and freezing. The photograph objectifies the person depicted, and this is exacerbated in the case of images of women, since women are already culturally constructed as objects for a male gaze (Solomon-Godeau, 1991). Photographs are understood as putting things (and people) on display, turning them into spectacle. Spectators, the theory goes, collude with this objectifying process and the apparently static character of the photograph intensifies this, allowing for a sustained and unflinching gaze upon a subject that can neither return the gaze nor move out of sight.

Yet the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2005) suggests that images are as much about absence as presence, meaning they are as much about withdrawal as bring forth, or showing. For every photograph that seems to put objects or people explicitly on display, we can find examples



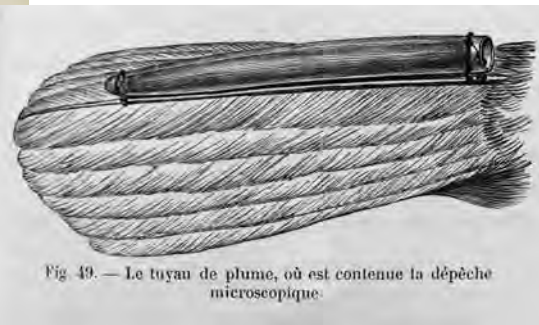


Fig. 49. — Le tuyau de plume, où est contenue la dépêche microscopique.

*Photography's fleeting, mobile and communicative qualities have become more vivid in our own specific historical context: it is, above all, the development of the smartphone camera and of visual communication apps such as Instagram and Snapchat that has brought these qualities to the fore*

that hint at the pulling away of the visible into invisibility. Think of Robert Frank's famous image of an elevator operator caught between other, blurred figures. Her bored gaze suggests a slowing down of time, a frozen moment perhaps, but also a caught glimpse, something that is by its nature transient and chanced upon, about to be occluded by a passenger exiting the elevator, and yet is the very antithesis of the decisive moment (Frank, 1959). Or, differently, think of one of the most famous images of Greta Garbo taken by MGM staff photographer Clarence Sinclair Bull in 1939 [neither image is reproducible here for copyright reasons]. In this image, her head and hand are isolated and seem to float in an eternal darkness. All signs of specific fashion (the details of clothing and hairstyle) are swept away. Even Garbo's plucked eyebrows and sharply defined lips do not betray the era, but link her more closely to an archetype such as Pierrot. No wonder Roland Barthes described her face as 'at once perfect and ephemeral' (Barthes, 1973: 56). Garbo's disembodied face is on display, for us to inspect, yet at the same time she withdraws from view: her eyes are cast down, her lips firmly closed, she looks pensive but it is impossible to read her ambiguous expression. The photograph has the peculiar quality that Nancy (2005) sees as characteristic of images and that Walter Benjamin called 'aura', a proximity that is at the same time a distance, and an intimacy that reveals nothing but pulls away (Benjamin, 1999: 83).

At the Center for Creative Photography, I looked through the archives of two photographers working in the mid-twentieth century. One, John Gutmann, was a German-Jewish émigré who arrived in San Francisco in 1933, after wrangling a job as a press photographer

for the Berlin agency Photo-Press. What he had not told the agency was that he had shot only two films, and had no idea how to develop them, having only just bought the camera as a means to finance his escape from Germany. Between photographing typically American sights for the agency, he also photographed graffiti. The graffiti is particularly poignant because it marks not where people are, but where they have been, in a time of the massive and tragic displacement of people, of uprooted sharecroppers, drifters and emigrants. These photographs speak of absence and loss as much as presence: 'we are here but where are you?' reads one.

The second photographer whose archive I researched was an American fashion photographer, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, whose photographic work began in the late 1920s. Alongside her fashion photographs she took travel photographs, repeatedly picturing what she called 'holes': the empty spaces and shapes created by architecture, ruins and caves. An interest in negative space informs her fashion photographs too, where she shows herself highly aware of the shapes created by a bent elbow or knee. Yet where the fashion photographs are all about explicit and legible display (no limbs are ambiguously concealed, every gesture is expressive) the 'holes' photographs are about absence and what cannot be seen. In the archive, I discovered that on the same journeys as she shot the 'holes' (Algeria in the 1920s, Guatemala in the 1950s) she was also photographing veiled women in the street as shadowy, ambiguous presences, or friends behind mosquito nets, or figures silhouetted in archways and in the shadows of alleyways. The camera must be carefully controlled to produce a readable image, and can just as easily be used to





conceal or obscure, or to draw attention to what is concealed, obscured, to absences and holes (not least in the Western traveller's ability to grasp the world).

Yet the history of photography repeatedly emphasises the ability of the camera to see and to pin down reality. Traditionally, the story of its invention is told as a story of fixing the image, in particular the moving, evanescent pictures produced by the *camera obscura*. My ambition is, instead, to tell the history of photography as one of letting loose or liberating the image; that is, photography as a set of technologies that facilitate reproduction, projection, transportation and accelerate the movement of images. This accelerated movement of images was described in the 1940s by André Malraux in his famous *Musée Imaginaire*. Translated into English as *Museum without Walls*, the original French title is more evocative of Malraux's argument that photography extends not just the reach of an image, but the mental image repertoire available to people (Malraux, 1967). In particular, Malraux was interested in its impact on the imaginations of artists, who now had more visual resources, more examples of past art and more access to other, non-Western visual cultures. The result, he argued, was an ever-accelerating process of stylistic innovation.

More recent studies from art history, visual studies and anthropology also pay attention to the mobility of images, though not necessarily in relation to, or with specific interest in, photography. Art historian Hans Belting (2011) describes the movement of images not just from screen to screen, or screen to print, or from slide to projection, but also between a picture in the world and an image in the imagination. In a recent study, Pasi Valiäho describes images as 'biotechnical': embodied and mediated through us as well as through technological media (Valiäho 2014). This he sees as a particular quality of present day image culture in which television, video and computer games compete for the attention of users and audiences and in doing so populate our imaginations with imagery designed to tie us ever more tightly to a culture of consumption. While Valiäho is interested in the role of images in cementing relations of power, in surveillance and control, I am interested in exploring the side of photographic culture that undermines this control: the slippery, ungraspable, and transient photographic image.

nw

*My ambition is, instead, to tell the history of photography as one of letting loose or liberating the image; that is, photography as a set of technologies that facilitate reproduction, projection, transportation and accelerate the movement of images*

#### References

- Barthes, R. (1973) *The Face of Garbo (1955)*. *Mythologies*. London: Paladin: 56-7
- Barthes, R. (1981) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang
- Belting, H. (2011) *An Anthropology of Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Benjamin, W. (1999) *Little History of Photography (1931)*. In M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith (eds). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*. Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press: 507-530
- Cartier-Bresson, H. (1999) *The Decisive Moment*. In H. Cartier-Bresson. *The Mind's Eye: Writing on Photography and Photographers*. Aperture: New York: 20-43
- Frank, R. (1959) *The Americans*. New York: Grove Press
- Malraux, A. (1967) *Museum Without Wall*. London: Secker and Warburg
- Nancy, J-L. (2005) *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press
- Skaife, T. (1860) *Instantaneous Photography*. Greenwich: H.S. Richardson
- Sontag, S. (1977) *On Photography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Solomon-Godeau, A. (1991) *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Valiäho, P. (2014) *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power and the Neoliberal Brain*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press

#### About the author

Michelle Henning is Associate Professor in Photography and Cultural History at the University of West London

#### Keywords

Photography, photography history, media history, photography theory, John Gutmann, Louise Dahl-Wolfe