Essay

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Photography and Objectivity.

Introduction

In our daily life we relay on photographic images to give us information, to verify if the written accounts we read can be considered truthful. We want to see pictures to be sure that a story is real. Newspaper and other media supply us day in day out with photographical evidence of their truth. And so the question that I want to discuss is: why is photography considered to be objective? Why do we trust it and were lies its origin, was photography always considered to depict the world as it appears to us?

For this essay I have taken two text; Objectivity by Lorraine Datson & Peter Galison and The burden of representation by John Tagg and tried to combine them to make a sketch of how photography developed. In Objectivity Lorraine Datson & Peter Galison describe the change in the scientific virtues and practices over time illustrated by the images from various scientific atlases. John Tagg describes in The burden of representation the history of photography and in particular that of the portrait and how it is used as a machine of power.

Objectivity and subjectivity.

Let us first look at what objectivity implies. To start, objective is closely linked to subjective, one can't be described without the other, since they are each others opposites.

Objective and subjective haven't always had the same meaning as they have today, in fact they were used in a complete opposite: '"Objective" referred to things as they are presented to consciousness, whereas "subjective" referred to things in themselves.' (Objectivity p.29) It's after Kant that the meaning of the two words begins to change: 'For Kant, the line between the objective and the subjective generally runs between universal and particular, not between world and mind'. (Objectivity p.30). Kants meaning off the words is still different than that of our time but he lays the foundations for the way we understand the words. In the beginning of the 19th century objective is referred to as nature and subjective as the self or intelligence (Objectivity p.17). René Descartes idea that 'I think, therefore I am' lays at the heart of how we understand the words subjective and objective.

Subjective is mostly described as expressions from someone's mind or in other words the expressions of a subject. The subject must interpret, classify, change, make information his own, forms his own opinion. Objectivity is mostly described as something outside of ourselves, something that is bigger than you as a person. The object does not have an idea of its own, its just simply there. For subject to be objective they need something outside themselves that proofs that information communicated is indeed objective. 'Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without

inference, interpretation or intelligence.' (Objectivity p.17)

Objectivity and Truth-to-nature.

The prologue from Objectivity describes how a physicist named Arthur Worthington studies the impact of a liquid drop on a flat service. In the beginning he makes drawings of his own observations with a flash that leaves an image of a split second behind in his mind. The pictures that he draws from his observations show us beautiful symmetrical drops of fluid bouncing back when hitting the table.
A few years later he re-enacts his research but this time using photography to catch the different stages of the impact. The drawings made by hand and observation where stylized and in perfect symmetry; the photographs however showed a more chaotic splash. After comparing the drawings to the photographs the physicist realised how much his own subject, his own prejudice was involved in making these drawings.

Truth-to-nature

Lorraine Datson & Peter Galison define scientific practise earlier then the objective mode Truth-to-nature. For example truth-to-nature depicts a flower in an atlas as one who stands for the whole while objectivity shows the variety of the whole. In other words the first is stylized the other isn't.
The Truth-to-nature scientist seeks to unravel the underlying structures in the variety of forms in which nature presents itself. To do so a scientist must be an expert in observation: "genius of observation" (Objectivity p.58). The scientists needed to see a lot of different specimens to render an archetype that could stand for the whole. Seeing and observing needed a lot of practice before findings of a scientist were considered to be truthful. Therefore the scientist had to train their observation skills but also their mindful will to see the truth of nature.
Within these images of observation there are two ideas: 'The "ideal" image purports to render not merely the typical but the perfect, while the "characteristic" image locates the typical in an individual.' (Objectivity p.70). Within the "ideal" images the scientist seeks to combine truth and beauty to get the purest images.
In a sense the pictures created by these observation practices are more real than nature itself because they try to show the underlining structures of nature. The scientist that practise Truth-to-nature didn't reject beauty moreover they tried to show the beauty of nature, the beauty of structures underneath the chaos of appearances. It is good to realize that almost all of these scientist where religious people and what they tried to unravel was in a sense the hand of god.
To translate these observations onto a piece of paper the scientist needed an artist that would also have good observational skills. Artist and scientist worked

closely together in those days and even more interesting the practise of the artist and that of the scientist had a lot in common, they hat almost the same goals; to show the beauty of nature.

Objectivity

In the mid- and late 19th century there were scientist that noticed that the interpretations they made would sometimes be the wrong ones. So in order to not make anymore mistakes or better misinterpretations the scientist needed to create a system that would protect them from jumping too quickly into conclusions. Their new goal was to: 'Let nature speak for itself' (Objectivity p.120) which meant that 'wilful intervention of the artist-author' (objectivity p.121) had to be repressed by 'a strict protocol, if not automatically.' (Objectivity p.121), the scientist must be self-regulated. In this 'banning out the subject' of the scientific practice mechanical devices and machines were very helpful because they lack a free will to interfere. Photography is one of these mechanical devices that the scientist used because of it's so called: 'blind sight.' (Objectivity p.124).

The blind sight that a photograph has is a 'judgment-free representation' (Objectivity p.139) and the scientist aimed to see like a photograph, without judgment and to be like the machine. But images created by a machine are mediated and therefore a photograph is never free from intervention by a subject. The dream of the objective scientist to have images that are completely objective was never fulfilled: 'Merely using photography could not cure the diseases of the will, a disorder that survives in the very construction of the German word willkürlich.' (Objectivity p.151) (willekeur – Dutch or arbitrariness – English)

The history of photography.

In the year after photography was introduced in 1839 it was mostly used for making cheap portraitures of the middle class. In this sense photography was used as a substitute for art and there was no real distinction between art being more subjective and photography being objective. When photography was introduced it was immediately loved for its fine detail and its naturalistic depiction of the natural world. Therefore it is not surprising that lots of people were going to photographers to have there portraits taken, John Tagg mentions in The burden of representation that: 'It is estimated that more than ninety percent of all daguerreotypes ever taken were portraits.' (John Tagg p.43) and 'By 1853, three million daguerreotypes were being made annually ..' (John Tagg p.43).

Photography became a big industry in a short time, but it is was more an easy way to get a portrait then a device for science. And of course there were a lot of

problems with photography in those days, like for example the long exposure time and the fact that a daguerreotype is a direct positive and can't be reproduced. This last problem was fixed by the negative-positive system invented/designed by Henry Fox Talbot but for a long time it was of a lot less quality than the daguerreotype. But photography developed rather quickly, exposure times getting shorter by more sensitive paper as well moving from paper to glass plates as a negative and shaper lenses. By 1860/70 photography is getting interesting for scientist to make images that they can study for their research. At the same time photography is also used for the identification of people, mostly by the police and in prisons to register criminals. Tagg describes the difference in pose of the artistic portraiture, like Nadar, and the so called head-on view that is used by the normal photographers and by the institutions to make photographic documents, documents that gain power over society. 'The portrait is therefore a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity.' (John Tagg p.37) It is this period that the photograph becomes more than just truthful representation of the real but evidence.

Context

The context wherein photography functions makes up way we interpret the photograph. It's the discourse around the photograph that defines if we should look at a photograph as evidence or as an interpretation.
Photography made, maybe not by itself, objectivity possible and objectivity made photography the objective eye of the world; it made that we consider photography to be truthful. Photography was one of the most important machines in the discourse of science and that of the surveillance for supporting them with truthful information. Photography is evidence within these contexts and therefore gain the annotation of being truthful. Also in the discourse of the news and the newspaper photograph functions as evidence or documentation of an event that really took place. Photography functions in these discourses alongside other media such as descriptions and is organized in a specific way to clarify the information they possess.

Conclusion

It's in the prologue of Objectivity that we see very clearly why photography is objective, because it's just a machine that catches light, blind sight nothing more. The prologue also illustrates why there was a change towards objectivity: 'their fear was that the subjective self was prone to prettify, idealize, and, in the worst case, regularize observations to fit theoretical expectations: to see what it hopes to see.' (Objectivity, p.34) We became conscious of our own subjective and prejudice will to intervene with and interpretate information. The fact that we need machines and

strict protocols to suppress our own subject to be able to produce truthful data shows us that it's very hard to be objective. The interesting contradiction within this is that because we thought that we needed to be more objective we realized that we are subjects and therefore became more subjective.

Research strands.

What would be interesting for further investigation is the question how photography began to use its objectivity within the discourse of art? In my idea this emerges in the 1960thies with the arrival of conceptual art. This because before conceptual art, art was considered to an expression of an individual artist and not something reconstructed. In other words art was, and maybe still is, thought of being something subjective while conceptual art uses structures and methods to make work something that has an notion of being objective.

One of the artists that I am interested in are the Bechers. Bernt and Hilla Becher studied the way photographs are organized in archives, the fact that they are documentations and how this relates to art.

Bibliography

Objectivity - Lorraine Datson & Peter Galison
The burden of representation – Joh Tagg
Photography: a Cultural History - Mary Warner Merien