How to Shoot a Unicorn: Epistemic Access and Interpretation of Fiction in Photography

Zsolt Bátori[1]

ABSTRACT. Paintings and drawings are images of scenes produced manually, while photographs are the results of recording light values mechanically. While it seems that from the indexical nature of photography if follows that we may not take photographs of entities that do not exist, there are several examples for the fictional uses of photographs.

In this paper I discuss three positions. First, one might hold that photographs are incapable of representing fictional characters, objects or states of affairs. Second, it may be argued that we can use photographs as prompts to imagine that they represent fictional entities. Third, some have also suggested that photographs are capable of representing fictional entities by purely photographic means.

I argue that there are no photographs of fictional entities and states of affairs; the fictional use of a photographic image is an imaginative process in which we learn about the visual properties of a) the real persons and objects depicted in the photograph and b) the imagined properties of the fictional characters and objects. We form perceptual or sensory beliefs about the visual properties of real persons and objects depicted in the photograph (the literal meaning of the photograph). At the same time we form perceptual or sensory imaginings about the visual properties of the fictional characters and objects. Forming perceptual or sensory beliefs is a reflex-like, automatic process, and forming perceptual or sensory imagining involves cognitive imaginings about what is fictional in the context of the fictional use of the photograph. This position is explicated in the context of a cognitive theory of fiction and imagination.

Finally, I also argue that the fictional use of photographic images is a specific type of photographic illocutionary act, when the default photographic interpretation is suspended or modified for the sake of the fictional use. Indexicality and counterfactual dependence is assumed only for the literal meaning of the photographic image. For the properties of the fictional entities fictive indexicality and counterfactual dependence is imagined.

1. "Picture of x" and the fictional

When we say that we are looking at the "picture of x", the expression has two distinct instances of use. On the one hand the picture in question may be a drawing, a painting or some other form of manually rendered image. On the other hand it may also be a photograph of x, that is an image produced by mechanically recording light values that reflect from objects. Because of the causal physical connection between x and her image photographs are indexical pictures. One of the most significant differences

between manually rendered pictures and photographs is that although we may have drawings and paintings of nonexistent entities, such as the mythical Pegasus, the indexical nature of photographic images seems to prevent us from taking photographs of things that do not exist. Despite this initial intuitive observation, however, there are numerous examples for the fictional *uses* of photographic images.

1.1. Unicorn pictures

Gregory Currie argues that although it is possible to paint or draw a picture of a unicorn, it is not possible to take a photograph of a unicorn, because there cannot be photographs of objects that do not exist.[2] According to this position a photograph of a horse with one horn attached to the middle of its head may merely *look like* a photograph (that is, an impossible photograph) of a unicorn. Although it might *fictionally* be photograph of a unicorn, it is, in fact a photograph of a horse with one horn attached to the middle of its head.
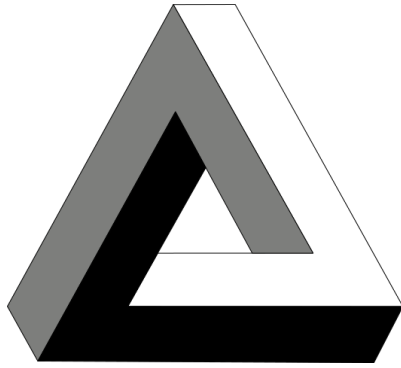

1.2. Penrose triangle pictures

This is a photograph of a sculpture in which the sculpture *looks like* the impossible Penrose triangle.[3] Although it might *fictionally* be a photograph of the impossible triangle, it is, in fact a photograph of a possible and real three-dimensional object (sculpture).

---

[2] Currie 1995, p. 75.
[3] Hopkins 2012; Woodward 2016.

Penrose triangle

Impossible Triangle by Brian McKay & Ahmad Abas, 1999, East Parade roundabout, East Perth, Western Australia. Seen from a specific angle, the sculpture seems to be (looks like) a Penrose triangle.

1.3. Wanda Wultz: *Io + Gatto*, 1932

This is a composite photograph that was created by printing two negatives on the same photographic paper, and it *looks like* a photograph of a cat-woman, a non-existent creature.[4] Although it might *fictionally* be a photograph of a cat-woman, it is, in fact a compound image of a photograph of cat and a photograph of a woman.

---

[4] Paloma Atencia-Linares 2012; Woodward 2016.

The fictional use of photographic images raise the following question for an account of how to interpret these images. Although we may have drawings and paintings, that is, hand-rendered images of nonexistent entities, we cannot have photographs of characters or objects that do not exist. However, we may gain knowledge about nonexistent entities by the fictional use of photographs. For instance, we may learn something about how they *fictionally* look like. The question that these examples raise is how we can account for our apparent epistemic access to the visual properties of nonexistent entities via these photographs.

2. Fictionality, knowledge and photographic images: three positions

2.1. Photographs cannot represent the fictional

It has been argued that photographs are incapable of representing fictional characters, objects or states of affairs.[5] Since photographs are indexical images, the visual properties of the image of a scene in a photograph are causally and counterfactually dependent on the visual properties of the scene photographed. The content of photographs is largely determined by the automatic causal (photographic) processes, not only by the intentions of the photographer. (This does not mean that there are no photographic properties that are determined by the photographer.) The visual properties of drawings, paintings, and other hand-rendered images, however, do not depend causally and counterfactually on the visual properties of any scene. Preserving counterfactual dependence on the properties of real scenes is possible, but it is an artistic choice.

---

[5] Friday 1997; Scruton 1981.

4

According to this position only hand-rendered pictures [6] can represent fictional characters, objects or states of affairs, because their content is entirely determined by the intentions of the artist. Artists can choose to draw or paint properties of nonexistent entities. Photographs, however, are incapable of representing fictional characters, objects or states of affairs. The problem with this view is that we often interpret photographic (and cinematic) images in fictional contexts as depictions of fictional entities, while we know that since they do not exist photographs cannot represent them. Our practice seems to be at odds with our knowledge about what types of communicative purposes we may use photographic images. This position, therefore, does not account for some of the standard ways we use photographs.

2.2. Imagining the photographic fictional

The second position we need to consider is the view that although photographs cannot represent fictional characters, objects or states of affairs, we may use photographs as prompts to *imagine* that they represent them. Gregory Currie and Richard Woodward distinguish between beliefs and imaginings, and they argue that photographs may be used to prompt imaginings as well as beliefs. [7] Imaginings are mental representations that may share their content with beliefs, but we do not hold the psychological attitude of belief in relation to the content of these mental representation. Currie and Woodward also distinguish between perceptual (or sensory) and symbolic (or cognitive) mental representations[8], and they argue that photographic images are often used as prompts for visual perceptual imaginings. Perceptual or sensory beliefs and imaginings may be of different perceptual modalities, such as visual, auditory, tactile, etc., while symbolic or cognitive beliefs and imaginings are linguistic types of mental representations.

According to Currie perceptual beliefs and imaginings are counterfactually dependent on the visual properties of the objects they represent. Symbolic beliefs and imaginings, however, do not depend counterfactually on the visual properties of symbols. Imagined mental states are similar to beliefs and desires in terms of internal causal role; they can be operated on by inference mechanisms, they can cause emotional states, etc. Imagined mental states, however, do not share their external causal roles with beliefs and desires, because they are blocked off from behaviour; they are "off line". We come to have perceptual imaginings when using photographs (or cinematic moving images) as prompts to imagine that they represent fictional characters, objects or states of affairs. We supplement these perceptual imaginings with symbolic imaginings about what is fictionally depicted by the photographic

---

[6] Sculptures are also likely candidates, but here I restrict my discussion to two-dimensional images.
[7] Currie 1995, 1999; Woodward 2016.
[8] While Currie talks about perceptual and symbolic imaginings, Woodward distinguishes between sensory and cognitive imaginings. Although there might be slight differences between their accounts, for our purposes here the differences are only terminological.

image. [9] Woodward argues that although photographs primarily invite sensory imaginings, the fictional use of photographs may also prescribe cognitive imaginings about what is fictional in the work.[10] According to Currie's summary of this position while we may talk about *photographs of* existing entities, we may only say that there are *photographs about* fictional entities.[11]

The most important shortcoming of this account is the ascribed discrepancy between our knowledge about the ontological and epistemic status of photographic mages and our practice of using them in fictional contexts. If we know that photographs cannot represent fictional entities, then it does not seem to be logical to use them for something that we know they cannot do. This position, therefore, is in need of a detailed account that includes a) a theory of imagination (perceptual/sensory and symbolic/cognitive imaginings) *and* b) a theory of photographic interpretation that accommodates the fictional use of photographic images as well.

2.3. Representing fictional entities by photographic means

Paloma Atencia-Linares[12] argues that Wanda Wultz's *Io + Gatto* (see above in section 1.3.) was produced solely by traditional *photographic* means. It is a photograph that bears all the causal and counterfactual relations to the scene(s) as other photographs do. According to Atencia-Linares we do not have to imagine that it represents the cat-woman, because it does in fact depict it solely by photographic means. This is because all the composite parts were produced by traditional darkroom photographic means that are considered to preserve counterfactual dependence between the object depicted and the photographic image.

The problem with this account is that it is not clear why montage could be a tarditional *photographic* technique that preservers counterfactual dependence. The technique of montage pertains to the visual arts, but it is certainly not confined to photography. Further more, the interpretative processes we use for composite images such as *Io + Gatto* diverge considerably from our default interpretation (see below in section 4) of photographic images. When using the technique of montage, the result is *not* photographic in the sense that we do not consider the whole image to be counterfactually dependent on one scene. Compound indexicality is not understood as an object having been in some physical causal relationship with the resulting image. We know that there we more that one scenes involved in the production of the montage. We do not interpret such images *as photographs*, but as a type of image (such as paining or drawing or other hand-rendered image) whose overall content is largely determined by the intentions of the artist. The use of photographic components

---

[9] Currie 1995.
[10] Woodward 2016.
[11] Currie 1999.
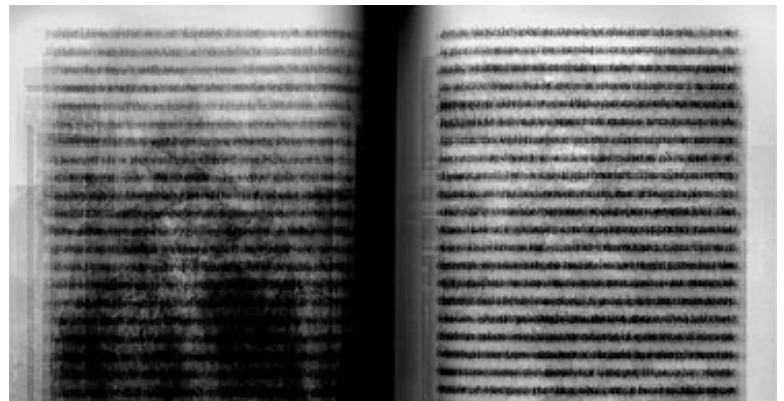[12] Paloma Atencia-Linares 2012.

for the production of the overall image is an artistic choice that is functionally similar to choosing to preserve counterfactual dependence in realist or photorealist paintings.

Besideds Wanda Wultz's *Io + Gatto* we may consider some more examples for compound images whose content is based on photographic images:

Idris Khan: *Every...Bernd and Hilla Holy Koran, 2004*
Becher Gable Sided Houses, 2004   Idris Khan: *Every… page of the*

Both of the above examples are multiple exposure photographs by Idris Khan. It is part of the interpretation of the images *qua* images to recognise their composite nature, moreover, it is part of the interpretation of their artistic properties to recognise that their graphic quality (i.e. that the look like pencil drawings) is achieved by photographic means. This interpretation, however, is very different from the default photographic interpretation (see below in section 4) when we understand a photograph as a straightforward indexical representation of one scene in front of the camera at the time of shooting the image.

3. Pictorial representations and a cognitive theory of imagination

A cognitive theory of imagination needs to account for how we come to have and process mental representations such as beliefs, desires, and imaginings. [13] Imaginings are mental representations that may have the same content that beliefs have, but we do

---

[13] See Bátori 2011; Nichols and Stich 2000.

not hold a psychological attitude in relation to the content of imaginings; we do not believe or desire them. Inference mechanisms and affect systems may operate on mental representations without necessarily being sensitive to whether or not we hold a psychological attitude, such as belief, in relation to the content of those mental representations. A specific filtering mechanism, a "belief generator" determines what mental representations can be "seen" and processed by the systems that are sensitive to our psychological attitude in relation to the content of mental representations. Such psychological attitude sensitive systems include decision making and action control systems, for instance. While our beliefs influence our decisions and actions, our imaginings do not have the same consequences. We will likely decide to try to save a person in real danger, but we do not make such decisions when the danger is imagined as in case of fictions. Contents of fictions do not pass the belief generator; the mental representations we come to have when attending to works of fictions are imaginings, not beliefs. See Figure 1 below for a detailed cognitive architecture underlying the formulation and processing of pictorial and linguistic mental representation.[14]

Our perceptual systems provide us with both symbolic (linguistic) and perceptual mental representations.[15] Perceptual processes are fast, automatic, reflex-like, and modular. The visual system identifies the input on the basis of a few visual features of the object seen. The resulting (pictorial) mental representation, however, is not necessarily a belief. For instance, when we see a drawing of a cat, we typically do not come to have a belief that we can see a cat. We identify drawings as drawings, and we will come to have a belief that we can see a drawing of a cat. When seeing drawings, paintings or other hand-rendered images of fictional entities, such as Pegasus or unicorns, we will not come to have beliefs that those are visual properties of creatures that exist. We understand the fictional use of these images and we will come to have imaginings, not beliefs about the visual properties we can see in these pictures. In other words, we will come to have pictorial imaginings without holding a psychological attitude (such as belief) in relation to the content of these mental representations.

Photographs *about* fictional entities are also processed without resulting in beliefs that they are photographs *of* fictional entities. A photograph of a horse with one horn attached to the middle of its head results in a belief that we can see a photograph of a horse with one horn attached to the middle of its head. If this photograph is used in a fictional context, then it might *fictionally* be a photograph of a unicorn. This means that we will come to have a pictorial imagining with the appropriate fictional content (photograph of a unicorn) without holding a psychological attitude (such as belief) in relation to the content. The same type of process can be described when looking at the aforementioned Penrose triangle pictures and at Wanda Wultz: *Io + Gatto*.

---

[14] For the sake of simplicity I omitted other perceptual modalities.
[15] Although words and sentences reach our cognitive systems through auditory (or visual) channels, only the sounds (or the visual properties of letters) are perceptual. Words and sentences, however, are processed by our linguistic recognition system as linguistic symbols.
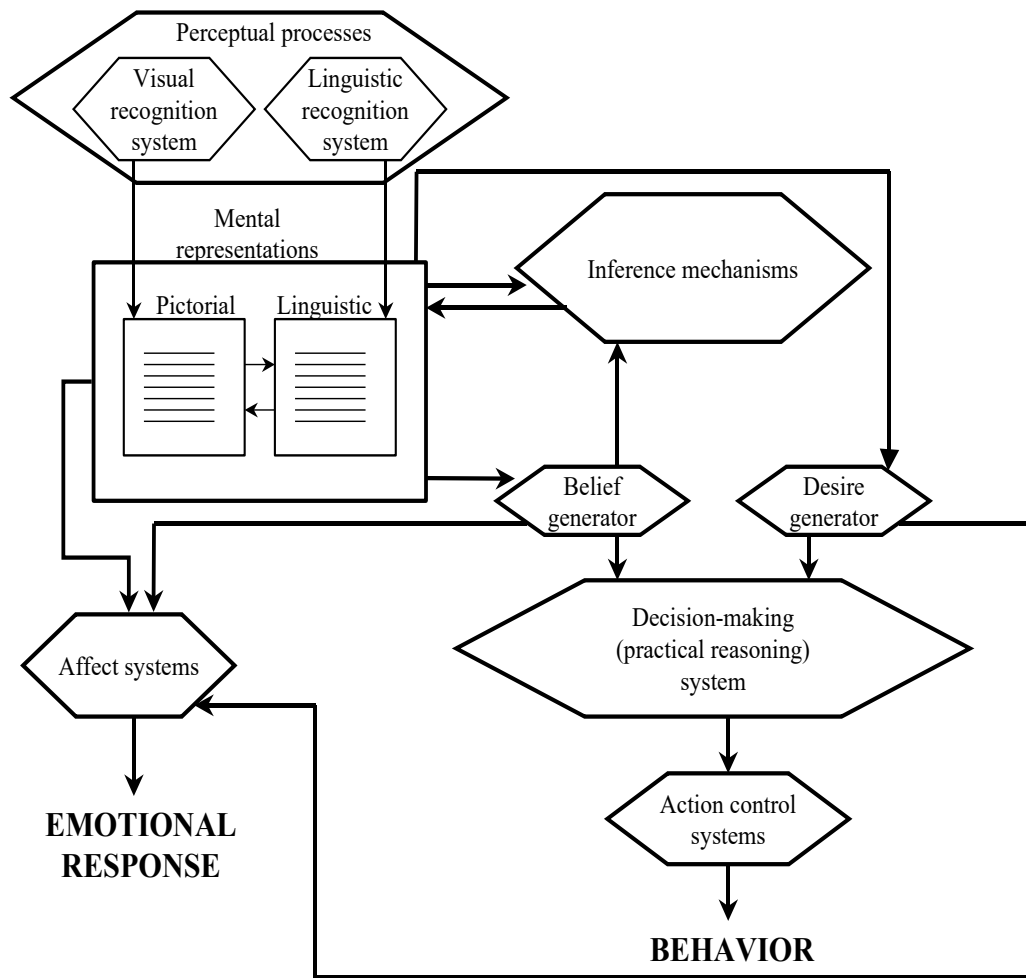
Figure 1: A cognitive theory of fiction and imagination, distinguishing pictorial and linguistic mental representations

4. Interpreting photographs of and about things

In order to explicate the interpretive mechanisms involved in pictorial communication with photographs let us first briefly recall the basic components of linguistic communication. Speech act theorists[16] have proposed that we perform various actions, such as promising, requesting, etc. with words and sentences. Conveying information, stating propositional content is just one of many other possible types of actions. Others interpret our words and sentences in order to figure out what actions we perform with them in the given contexts. This interpretive process includes the understanding that the utterer intended her words and sentences to be interpreted that

---

[16] Austin 1962; Searle 1969

way. (Deception is an exception, because in case of deception the aim of the utterer is to conceal her real intentions.)

The basic components of linguistic communication are the (literal) meaning of words, syntax, utterer's intention, and context. The locutionary act is the mere production of linguistic utterances, while illocutionary acts are the uses of those utterances interpreted in the given contexts according to some (correctly or incorrectly recognised) utterer's intention. The possible perlocutionary effects are wide ranging from simple acknowledgement to feeling hurt or outraged. For instance, if I comment on the work of a student with the locitionary act of "Great job!", the she is likely and correctly interpret is as a compliment. She also understands that it was my intention that she interprets my utterance as a compliment, since in educational contexts she does not expect an ironical use of this expression from me. A possible perlocutionary effect is that she feels contented or proud about her work.

The original speech act theory was extended to pictures by Kjørup and Novitz.[17] They argued that similarly to words and sentences we perform various actions with pictures as well. Conveying pictorial information is just one of many other possible types of actions. Others interpret the pictures we present them in order to figure out what actions we perform with them in the given contexts. This interpretive process includes the understanding that the utterer (producer or presenter of the picture) intended the picture to be interpreted that way. (Deception is an exception, because in case of deception the aim of the utterer is to conceal her real intentions.)

The basic components of pictorial communication are the ("literal") meaning of pictures, object recognition, visual processing of pictorial and spatial relations and arrangements, utterer's intention, and context. The "literal" meaning of pictures is the pictorial representational content that we recognise by relying on our general visual recognition capacities. While linguistic literal meaning atomic and conventional, pictorial literal meaning is nonatomic and natural.[18] Although the literal meaning of pictures is visual, it is also possible to attach symbolic meaning to specific pictures or specific classes of pictures.

The pictorial locutionary act is the mere production or presentation of pictures while illocutionary acts are the uses of those pictures interpreted in the given contexts according to some (correctly or incorrectly recognised) utterer's intention. The "utterer" may be the producer or the presenter of the image as well. Similarly to speech acts, the possible perlocutionary effects are wide ranging from simple acknowledgement to feeling hurt or outraged. For instance, if a draw a caricature of a politician, then viewers of the image will correctly interpret it as an image that

---

[17] Kjørup 1974, 1978; Novitz 1975, 1977.
[18] See also Currie 1995, pp. 130-132 for a detailed discussion about the nonatomic, but nevertheless productive nature of cinematic images. What he calls „natural" meaning is the pictorial representational content of images that we recognise by relying on our general visual recognition capacities.

magnifies some of the visual characteristics of the politician in order to make fun of him. They also understand that this was my intention because they interpret my image in the context of the genre of caricature. Possible perlocutionary effects include being amused or outraged, partially depending on the attitude of the viewer in connection of the politician in question.

I have suggested that communicating with photographs constitutes a specific kind of pictorial illocutionary act.[19] I propose that with photographic illocutionary acts we perform various actions with photographs *as photographs*, not merely as pictures. Conveying photographic information is just one of many other possible types of actions. Others interpret the photographs we present them in order to figure out what actions we perform with them *as photographs* in the given contexts. This interpretive process includes the understanding that the utterer (producer or presenter of the photograph) intended the photograph to be interpreted that way. (Deception is an exception, because in case of deception the aim of the utterer is to conceal her real intentions.)

The basic components of photographic communication are the ("literal") meaning of photographs, object recognition, visual processing of pictorial and spatial relations and arrangements, utterer's intention, context, and the intended recognition of photographic images *as photographs*. Our (more or less precise) knowledge about the ontological and epistemic status of photographic images is also an inherent component of photographic illocutionary acts.

The photographic locutionary act is the mere production or presentation of photographs while photographic illocutionary acts are the uses of those photographs interpreted in the given contexts according to some (correctly or incorrectly recognised) utterer's intention. The "utterer" may be the producer or the presenter of the photograph as well. Similarly to speech acts and pictorial illocutionary acts, the possible perlocutionary effects are wide ranging from simple acknowledgement to feeling hurt or outraged.

In case of a photographic illocutionary act we interpret the image as being the result of photographic processes, even with the added understanding of possible analogue or digital editing or manipulation of the photographic image. Setting brightness, contrast, shadows and highlights, hue/saturation, colour balance (in case of colour images) are standard photographic editing processes. *There must be some settings* for these photographic properties, either in an analogue darkroom or in digital editing software, including the digital camera's own software. Therefore, setting some value for these properties of the photograph is not "manipulation", even if such editing might also have manipulative uses. For instance, setting the brightness in a way that conceals some objects that were otherwise visible in the photograph may well be considered
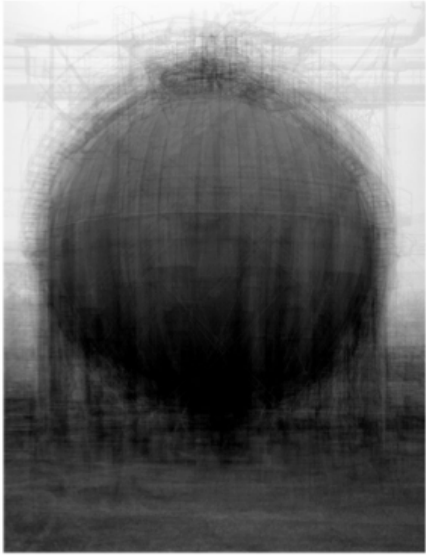
---

[19] Bátori 2015.

manipulative editing on par with removing objects from the image with some analogue or digital retouching method.[20] When some (digital or analogue) editing is evident ("readable" from the image), this will also be taken into account when interpreting the image. Neither the aforementioned setting of values for properties nor readable editing is manipulative because the viewer is aware of them and interprets the image accordingly.

The default interpretation of photographic images *as photographic images* relies on our more or less precise knowledge about the difference between the ontological and epistemic status of photographic images on the one hand, and drawings, paintings, and other non-photographic, hand-rendered images on the other hand. Let us consider two examples to illustrate the process.

In the first example we will compare and contrast how we interpret Idris Khan's image entitled *Every... Bernd & Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholder* on the one hand, and Chuck Close's *Big Self-Portrait* on the other hand. The two images are interesting from the point of view that the visual properties of the images conceal their real nature. Khan's work looks like a pencil drawing, but it is a composite photographic image. Close's work looks like a photograph, but it is a painting. For their adequate interpretation of the images both their real nature and what they look like are relevant. Khan's work refers to the photographs of Bernd & Hilla Becher with a composite image, but in order to refer to other photographic images the composite work itself must have been composed of photographs. No hand-rendered solution would convey the same artistic content even if it looked identical to Khan's work. Close's work, however, would be misinterpreted if approached with the default photographic interpretive assumptions. It is one of its artistic properties that it looks like a photographic image while being hand-rendered.
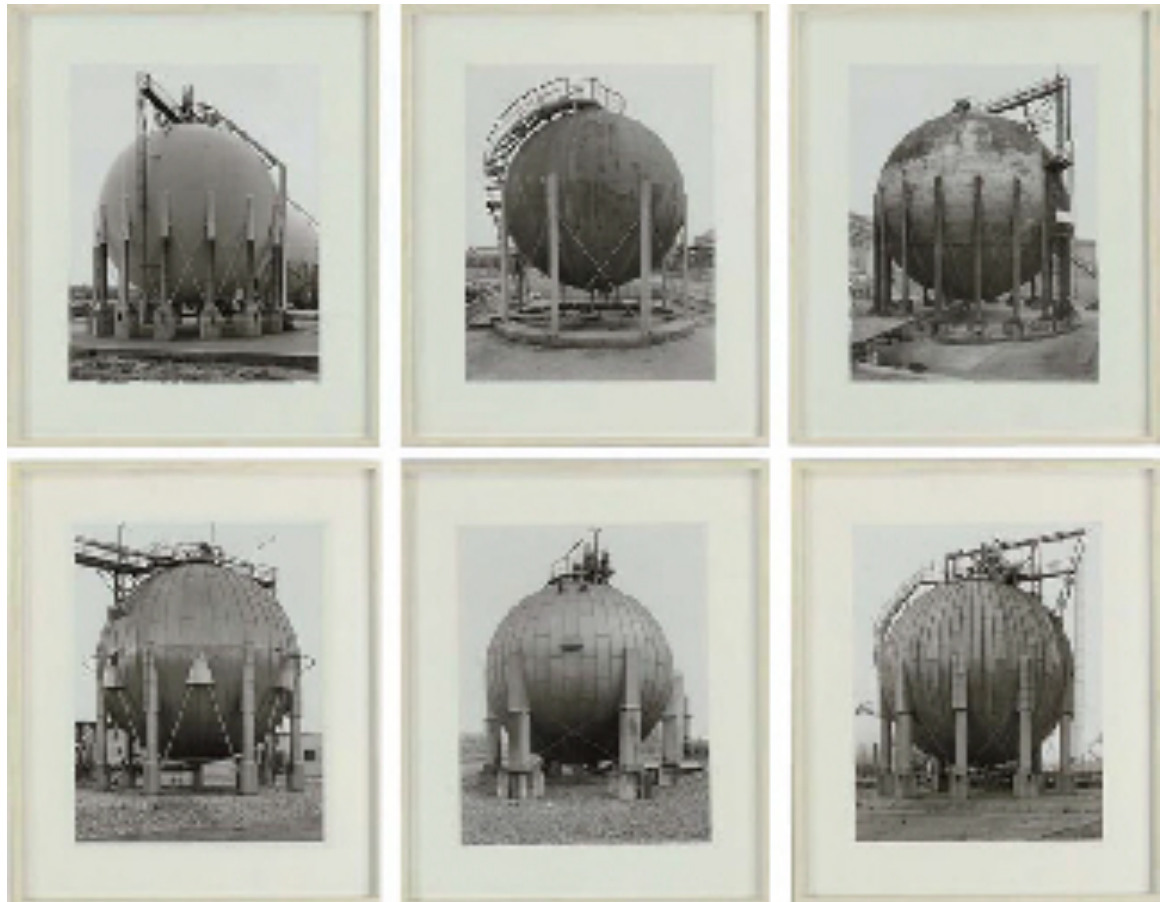
---

[20] I use the word 'setting' here as a neutral expression for editing and 'manipulation' as a negative term for deceiving, concealing, manipulating the viewer, etc. In other contexts 'manipulating images' may be used neutrally as well as a synonym for 'editing images'.

Idris Khan: *Every... Bernd & Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholder*, 2004

Chuck Close: *Big Self-Portrait*, 1968

Bernd & Hilla Becher: *Six Spherical Gasholders*, 1931-1934

The second example is a photograph that was published with the caption *This Man Is About To Die* in the New York Post on December 5, 2012. Should this image be a movie still in which the protagonist is looking after a train that he tried to catch in the tracks, we would not be much concerned about the image. It would be a fictional use of a photograph showing a man climbing out of the tracks. Our reaction, however, radically changes when we learn that it is a photograph of a man who fell into the tracks while the train was approaching the station. Learning that he in fact died a few seconds after the photograph was taken provides us with a context for an interpretation and reaction that is markedly different from the one we would have had to an identical looking movie still.

This Man Is About To Die, New York Post, December 5, 2012

The two examples above lead us to consider the role of context in interpreting photographic images as photographic images. The default interpretation is replaced by another interpretation in which indexicality and counterfactual dependence are not assumed in at least two cases. First, we suspend the default interpretation if image editing can be observed by looking at the image itself. Collages and other types of composite images are not interpreted as indexical images, because we know that the visual properties of the image do not depend counterfactually on one specific scene. Interpretations of Idris Khan's work or Wanda Wultz: *Io + Gatto* are clear examples for this type of modified interpretation, even though the photographic nature of the component images is significant for the artistic meaning of the works. Second, we may also know from the context that the default interpretation should be suspended. This is the case when looking at photorealist paintings, fashion photography (where image manipulation is the rule, not the exception), or in the case of the fictional uses of photographic images. We are only deceived when we do not know that we should not approach the image with the default interpretation for photographs.

5. The fictional use of photographs

We are now in the position to summarise a coherent account of the fictional use of photographic images. I have argued to support the view that there are no photographs *of* fictional entities and states of affairs, and that the fictional use of a photographic image is an imaginative process. When looking at a photograph used in a fictional context we learn about the visual properties of a) the real persons and objects depicted in the photograph and b) the imagined properties of the fictional characters and objects. We form perceptual or sensory *beliefs* about the visual properties of real persons and objects depicted in the photograph (literal meaning of the photograph). At the same time we form perceptual or sensory *imaginings* about the visual properties of the fictional characters and objects. Forming perceptual or sensory beliefs involves the working of a belief generator, a specific filtering mechanisms that is responsible for determining whether or not we will hold the psychological attitude of belief in connection with the content of the mental representation in question. There are some cognitive mechanisms that may operate on our beliefs only, not on our imaginings. Forming perceptual or sensory imagining involves cognitive imaginings about what is fictional in the context of the fictional use of the photograph.

The fictional use of photographic images is a specific type of photographic illocutionary act where the default photographic interpretation is suspended or modified for the sake of the fictional use. Indexicality and counterfactual dependence is assumed only for the literal meaning of the photographic image. For the properties of the fictional entities fictive indexicality and counterfactual dependence is imagined.

References:

Atencia-Linares, Paloma. 2012. "Fiction, Nonfiction, and Deceptive Photographic Representation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70:1, 19–30.
Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Bátori, Zsolt. 2015. "Photographic Deception". In Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu (eds.), *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 7, 68-78.
Bátori, Zsolt. 2011. "Image and Imagination". In Fabian Dorsch, Jakub Stejskal and John Zeimbekis (eds.), *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 3, 67-80.
Currie, Gregory. 1999. "Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 57:3, 285–297.
Currie, Gregory. 1995. *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science.* Cambridge University Press.
Friday, Jonathan. 1997. "Digital Imaging, Photographic Representation and Aesthetics." *Ends and Means*, 2, 7-11.

Hopkins, Robert. 2012. "Factive Pictorial Experience: What's Special about Photographs?" *Noûs*, 46:4, 709–731.

Kjørup, Søren. 1978. "Pictorial Speech Acts." *Erkenntnis*, 12, 55-71.

Kjørup, Søren. 1974. "George Inness and the Battle at Hastings, or Doing Things With Pictures." *The Monist*, 58:2, 216-235.

Nichols, Shaun and Stich, Stephen. 2000. "A cognitive theory of pretense." *Cognition*, 74, 115–147.

Novitz, David. 1977. *Pictures and their Use in Communication: A Philosophical Essay.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Novitz, David. 1975. "Picturing." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34:2, 145-155.

Searle, John Rogers. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scruton, Roger. 1981. "Photography and Representation." *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 577–603.

Woodward, Richard. 2016. "Fictionality and Photography." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 74:3, 279–289.