

Can I be dead and alive at the same time?
(And does photography *really* matter as art more than ever before?)

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"Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's Cave"
Susan Sontag

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Introduction

In a world where so much is changing, partly due to the digital revolution (1950 to date), attempting to track down reality seems like a distinctly contemporary activity. Ideas that underpin titles such as ***Reality is Not What it Seems*** (Rovelli 2014) and ***The Case Against Reality*** (Hoffman 2019) are founded on scientific voyages into a quantum universe which threaten to pulverise our long-held assumptions. Photography plays a significant role but it is a mistake to look at it in isolation; it should always be considered within the wider landscape.

We've learned via quantum theory that even at the smallest level, performance matters. Particles behave differently when a conscious agent is present. Nevertheless, Modernism and Postmodernism often seem uncomfortable with it and Modernist writer Michael Fried blatantly projects when he writes in *Art and Objecthood*, "theatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such". (1967: 7)

I aim to identify texts which explore an unfolding understanding of what reality might be in contemporary terms, link ideas therein to narratives which have existed for centuries, and single out key texts which contain debates around the photographic image and its relationship to reality. There is no room here explore the performative nature integral to digital culture nor the structural implications of a coded world which seems to turn things "inside out and right side out" too, saliently making the private public. (Hayles, 1999: 162)

Instead, I will establish performance as the main topic, visit a text about photography and its relationship to reality, touch on the misunderstanding and *appropriation* (von Held, 2017) of Brechtian theory within the wider Modernist project, briefly identify relevant modern philosophical and sociological texts, before ending by referencing a film which explores some of these themes.

The Mind is Flat (2018) Kindle Edition, Nick Chater, London, Penguin

Nick Chater rejects the idea that we have a rich unconscious world lurking and informing decisions and behaviour. He suggests we are improvising from moment to moment, making up our identity as we go along. Chater is enthused by behaviourism; off-putting as that particular set of theories seems on the wrong side of morality. Sylvere Lotringer's description towards the end of **Overexposed** explains.

"When Skinner [who coined the term], pushing individual adjustment to the extreme, advocates going "beyond freedom and dignity," he is not so much challenging Western values as revealing them for what they are.

"Behaviourism marks the end of the "humanist era", and with it, of the type of "productive" power analysed by Foucault." (2008; 205)

However, Chater's description of performance feels relevant, and his description of how the eye works, relating it to the construction of our perceived reality is more informative than most.

Elkins James (2011) *What Photography Is* (Kindle), New York, Routledge

Existence is described by Elkins as being filled with monsters of all sizes from tiny microbes to atomic bombs, mostly bent on destruction and a quest for power over the other. Elkins suggests, amongst critical theorists and artists there is a growing sense that photography is probably rather dull and the "life we see in snapshots [...] untypical" of the medium. (loc 2845)

Fig. 1. Elkins' includes Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic images of atomic explosions. "The object in this picture refused to be described in terms of things I know [...] this object will not be made into something familiar. {...} I fall into a kind visual desperation." (Elkins, 2011: loc 2108) (Image from Middlebury.edu)

Elkins draws on Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, and Pierre Bourdieu as he describes how the invention of photography has been accused of intruding on perception and how it became appropriated by the bourgeoisie who relied on it to convince themselves of, and reinforce their limited, self-serving view of reality.

He quotes Benjamin; "...film he said, creates a percussive shock to the consciousness by continuously changing scenes, "I can no longer think what I want to think." Or "My thoughts have been replaced by moving images." (*The Work of Art*, in *Illuminations*, 238)" (loc 1311). And, "I am unaware of the masses of things, the on and one of things, that I am permitting myself not to see." (loc 1326)

Elkins states that Baudelaire was being "sour and splenetic" but correct when he said, "photography made the 'whole squalid society ...rush to gaze at its trivial image'". (loc 1561) One can imagine what Baudelaire would make of today's selfie-culture. Perhaps 'narcissism epidemic' would be an understatement in his view. Had Baudelaire been alive today, intolerance for a constant state of collective prurience might have driven him to apoplexy, given, "There is no way to staunch the floods of

false nostalgia for people and faces." (loc 1425) The death of the Princess of Wales marks a clear turning point in our recent history, from which point onwards, it has become more and more acceptable to reveal all publicly. Sylvere Lotringer's *Overexposed* deals with our culture's desire to bare and fetishise what was once private and hidden. "Secrets aren't secrets at all. They are some kind of social secretion." (1988: 207) Lotringer's entire oeuvre is a criticism of capitalism in which photography plays a significant role – the title of his book quoted here, *Overexposed*, relates to the making of images and is a multi-faceted *entendre* about too much light, too much flesh, too much perversion, too little space, no dignity or darkness – viewed by our society as something to avoid.

Elkins also quotes Pierre Bourdieu who links the middle-classes, which emerged as capitalism did, to photography. He writes, "It is easy to agree that photography's apparent realism has been formed by the middle-class hope that the photographs give us reality itself (as Bourdieu says)." (loc 762). And "'photography is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration'. (Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen*, 48)" (loc 707). If you are born into that class and spend your time contemplating photography, you cannot help but be an unwitting conspirator, and Elkins does not refrain from pointing at his own collusion. "For Bourdieu, photography is bourgeois to its bones, and it even includes its own futile anti-bourgeois gestures, like my own attraction to things that aren't family photographs." (loc 716). Susan Sontag's comment, "Photography has become the quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies" doesn't do much to counter that view. (2008: 69)

Fried, Michael (2008) *Why Photography Matters As Art as Never Before*, New Haven and London, Yale Press & Willet, John (1981) *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht*

Fried's book was recommended as an antidote to Elkins' statement about photography being boring. Held in high regard within the academic community, Fried's discussion nevertheless seems quintessentially bourgeois and is laden with protestations against the charge that photography might not be an art due to its mechanical nature – this on-going insistence from photography seems neurotic. If you see no reason to question the validity of photography as a medium, like any other which can be used to make art¹ [and I don't], then the debate seems redundant or irrelevant.

¹ As opposed to being an art itself

Fig. 2 Jeff Wall's *After "Spring Snow" by Yukio Mishima Chapter 34*, (2000-05) Pigmented inkjet print, 59.3 x 68.3 cm (From read01.com)

Aside from the above, two significant issues emerge during an initial foray into Fried's book. The first addresses theatricality versus anti-theatricality and is dealt with below. Perhaps the second explores the photograph's nebulous classification as an object, which relays information, or an object in its own right. Fried suggests photography "may be thought of as an ontological medium" and that some bodies of work "are not only illuminated by ontological thought but themselves make a positive contribution to such thought" (347). Fried, however, focuses on photography which styles itself as high art and is therefore separate and elitist. One of the main points he makes about Jeff Wall's *After "Spring Snow" by Yukio Mishima Chapter 34*, (2000-05) is that it was very expensive to create. Susan Sontag, on the other hand, says that photographs, "even the most amateurish" eventually become art with time (ibid: 21). Her comment seems more in tune with the trend of self-organising artists who aim to bypass the institution and to make art more available and democratic, and echoes Hannah Höch's (1889-1978) appropriated newspaper and magazine cuttings which she used to create her politically charged collages.

It is worth investigating the phrases *theatricality* and *anti-theatricality* further and my history as an actor puts me in a good position to deconstruct Fried's use of the terms.

Many young directors, and quite often established ones too, have mistakenly assumed Brechtian means dry, sterile, turgid, or to borrow Elkins straightforward word, 'boring'; and that is palpably a misunderstanding.

Fig. 3 Premier of Brecht's musical, *The Threepenny Opera*, at the Theatre am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, Ullstein Bild, 1928 ©Ullstein Bild/Getty Images – mis-en-scene includes handwritten information and simple sets.

Brecht wanted to change theatre and make it more relevant, potent and accessible to those outside bourgeois circles. He attempted to do so by choosing subject matter and characters that hadn't previously been the main focus, except perhaps in comical subplots. In terms of visual art, think of farmers and beggars being the main subject in paintings rather than aristocracy or mythical creatures. John Willet describes Brecht's work as "an embittered and anarchic reaction against the shortcomings of orthodox morality" (1981: 68) However, "Neat, light and often satirical writing" (87) are important, not, as Willet describes, "the apocalyptic confusion of the expressionists or the wordy bombast of the socialist utopians" (88) According to Willet, "Nobody thought it profound or clever if he was impossible to understand." (ibid)

The visual arts have conflated and confused Brecht's ideas as have many in the theatre, and Martha Rosler's *Kitchen Semiotics* (1975) is not, as some might assume, an example of 'Brechtian' acting, although she does rely on practical aspects such as the use of placards, plus an intention to question and undermine the status quo – which is Brechtian. Catherine Scorsese's (1912-1971) performance as Tommy DeVito's (Joe Pesci b1943) mother in a clip of *Goodfellas* (2016) [available on Youtube] might be seen as a truer example of Brechtian-style acting due to its pared-down, unadulterated and honest style. Much from epic theatre, originally influenced by film has been re-absorbed back into contemporary and popular filmmaking including voice-over and episodic time-lines.

Anti-theatricality is a misnomer

Fried says in *Art & Objecthood* (1967), "theatre is now the negation of art." (4) But performance is fundamental to what we are. Primatologist Richard Wrangham (referred to in Donald D Hoffman's book (below)) suggests that once our ancestors could gossip we became conscious of the dangers of being noticed and spoken about – and how this at its most extreme conclusion leads to execution if you were deemed a deviant. And so, a deep-seated fear of being seen, according to Wrangham, lurks within each one of us².

We might also relate conscious and unconscious reactions which occur when being observed to quantum physics and the famous double-slit experiment where measurement has an effect on whether waves behave as particles or not. The presence of a conscious agent changes what occurs at the most basic level of reality.

Nick Chatham says we are constantly "creating an improvised character and trying to stay within our role" (2018) (which seems relevant even if you reject his notion there is no unconscious). It may be accurate that a lot of theatre nowadays is dire but to write it all off as a negation of art seems extreme. In *On Photography* (2008) Sontag refers to "anti-photography" where it "increasingly reflects the prestige of the rough, the self-disparaging, the off-hand, the undisciplined," (74) and to the unnecessary addition of surreal content to photography, since, photography's very nature is surreal already, perhaps like life itself (52). The most seemingly mundane

² As a portrait photographer, I have learned to become suspicious of people who claim they aren't perturbed by the thought of having their picture taken. Subjects who make these claims often end up uncomfortable and cagey once the camera comes out and it can be difficult to get a picture that doesn't contain a level of defensiveness in their eyes and/or expression. Some actors but by no means all and occasional non-actors do appear to have an ability to perform for the camera in a way which works but it is almost impossible to say why. I put the viewfinder to my eye and the subject is transformed somehow in a way that seems quite magical. I have no recollection of these photogenic subjects dismissing the discomfort of being watched and seen as meaningless.

moments can be theatrical enough, and the camera catches normal people looking abnormal in any case, "if one has the eye to see them" (34).

With all this angst around theatricality and performance, curators today appear embarrassed or apologetic when someone emerges from outside a Western Modernist tradition dripping in theatricality, pre-meditated thought, and flamboyance; for instance, describing Zanele Muholi's work as having "unashamed artistry" (2017) – not only finding performance uncomfortable but also underscoring social discomfort around the idea of a black woman deliberately making herself seen. But Muholi says, "I am reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continually performed by the privileged other." (2017) Muholi's use of everyday objects, her presence within large-scale images, the artistry, all amount to a theatrical Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* because she places objects together – herself and the camera and its related materials – in a way they aren't usually by the dominant makers of large scale photography, the advertising industry.

Hoffman, Donald D. (2019) *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth From Our Eyes* (Kindle), London, Penguin and Lupton, D. (2019) *Data Selves, More than Human Perspectives*, London, Polity

Fried's earlier essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967) is referenced though his book on photography. The concept of an object is according to physicist Donald D Hoffman doomed along with space-time itself. In a complex theory explored in ***The Case Against Reality* (2019)**, he suggests "We see objects in three dimensions not because we reconstruct objective reality, but because this is the format of a compression algorithm that evolution happened to build into us." (117) Although process rather than objects are popular in modern scientific philosophy, not everyone buys into it.

In collective work ***A rumour reached the village* (2019)**, a group installation I contributed to recently, objects, including some photographs, were made or sourced by each of the individuals involved and placed near or with or over each other creating a loose fractal pattern of assemblages. As most of our communications took place via social media apps while working, Deborah Lupton's (2019) comments in her recently published book ***Data Selves: More Than Human Perspectives*** are relevant to this work, and in increasingly in art which begins as photography but becomes three-dimensional in some way (performance, 3D printing, installation).

Lupton published an excerpt shortly before her book's release which states, "Personal digital data assemblages are partly comprised of information about human action, but their materialisations are also the products of human action, and these materialisations can influence future human action. While digital data assemblages are often conceptualised as immaterial, invisible and intangible, I

contend that they are things [objects] that are generated in and through material devices [more objects and so on] (smartphones, computers, sensors), stored in material archives (data repositories), materialised in a range of formats that invite human sensory responses and have material effects on human bodies (documenting and having recursive effects on human flesh).” (2019) Lupton rejects traditional Western binaries and as a new materialist see death as a continuation.



Fig 4. Field, Sarah-Jane et al. (2019) *A rumour reached the village*. [Installation, images, objects, moving image and living cultures] At: <https://www.sarahjanefield.com/a-rumour-reached-the-village> (Accessed 18/10/2019).

Lupton's work follows on from Kathryn Hayles' ***How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (1999)***. Hayles says at the end of her book, "Only if one thinks of the subject as an autonomous self independent of the environment is one likely to experience the panic performed by Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* and Bernard Wolf's *Limbo*. This view of the self authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self's complete dissolution. By contrast, when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to depend on the splice rather than being imperilled by it." While society continues to seem neurotic about post-humanism and flesh being broken, spliced or intruded upon, who art is made by, regardless of form, may become more relevant than which form is 'best' (especially as Hoffman contends, since all may be like space-time, ultimately doomed.)

Haigh, A. 2015, *45 Years* (Film) Artificial Eye

There are currently a plethora of films and TV shows which explore questions about the nebulous boundaries between man and machine, life and death, dream and waking worlds, past and present. Many are set in the afterlife or include grand super-natural narratives which rely on tropes found in the bible or Greek mythology. *The Good Place* (Netflix 2016-2019), *The AO* (Netflix 2016/2019), *Forever* (Amazon 2018) *American Gods* (2018/19) *Good Omens* (2019) are just a few. Andrew Haigh's *45 Years* (2015) is perhaps more useful as it places concerns about breached boundaries, as well as photography's (or more widely - technology's) ability to bring the past to life in a setting we can recognise.

In *The Guardian*, Mark Kermode writes "A subtle examination of the persistence of the past and the fragile (in)stability of the present" (2015). The film's action takes place over just a few days. However, its narrative spans 50 years. Kermode's brief synopsis tells us: "an ageing married man [Geoff] receives a letter telling him that the body of his previous girlfriend has been found, perfectly preserved in the ice of the Alps where she fell 50 years ago. This news gets a chilly reception from his wife [Kate], who is alarmed by the frozen spectre of a former love." (2015) The ice-preserved body can be related to artist Alain Fleischer's passage on mummies, quoted in an essay about text and photography titled, '*The interphototextual dimension of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's L'usage de la photo*', "Mummification and photography are united against the disappearance of appearances: they are alike in their materiality, their techniques, and their codes of resemblance" (Blatt, 2009) (Fleischer, 2002) (Field, 2017, 2018, 2019)

Fleischer's *Mummy, mummies* (2002) has been a rich source of inspiration and is referenced in *Work in Progress: This Family Still* (2017), *i will have call you* (2018) and the verse element of *Gossip* included in *A rumour reached the village* (2019).

As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that Geoff used to take photographs although the middle-aged couple have few. Kate says, "It's a shame not to have more photographs round the house. I guess we didn't see the point of taking pictures of ourselves", relating to Susan Sontag's comments about mothers seeming neglectful if they don't photograph their children (2008: 81). Since Kate never embarked on motherhood she seemingly felt no compulsion to use a camera, unlike her best friend's daughter who is becoming "quite a decent photographer" following the birth of her child. Geoff does have a camera but it's as impotent as we discover he is in a touching and realistic sex scene. He stores the camera and boxes of old images of his recently discovered late girlfriend in the loft.

Towards the end of the film Kate ventures up the rickety and dangerous steps into the roof (Jungian synchronicity representing Geoff's head and emotional life) and looks at the images. Director Haigh opted for slides rather than prints so Kate effectively creates her own Plato's Cave when she looks at them, only here the shadows on the wall may be the more truthful version of reality which existed all through her marriage. A devastating actuality 'comes to light' which is only revealed when she sees the images and Kate must find a way to come to terms with knowledge that threatens to undermine and dissolve her reality. Extraordinarily genuine performances mean the couple's "history is alive in every glance and gesture." (Kermode, 2015)

Photography is a character in the story, and moving image is its form. An inner world is revealed using photography outside of Geoff, inside the house (attic) and outside of Kate, inside of whom it presumably hid for years. But it doesn't matter more than the text, or the acting, the direction, the audio [Kermode comments on the diegetic music choices which play an integral part] or the make-up team.

Conclusion

Jonathan Raban writes in *Passage to Junea*, "Within the last 9,000 to 12,000 years, when people were present to witness such events, they would have seen the sea close over islands as earthquakes rearranged topography. You couldn't look at the delicate compromise made here between land and sea without imagining the Flood: and you couldn't imagine the flood without inventing a Noah or a Gilgamesh" (1999: 323) Science and mythology are often positioned in opposition to each other. However, both are attempting to make sense of a reality which is bizarre, at times terrifying, and according to the latest scientific philosophy, probably an illusion. Modernists and Postmodernists have scoffed at theatricality. But as we discover just how much of existence is a performance of one sort or another, their arch, supercilious view seems adolescent. As our understanding of reality continues to disintegrate and as the old binaries we've relied on for so long no longer makes sense, we may find a taste for theatricality imperative.

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