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## INTERPRETATION

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To interpret a photograph is to make sense of it for oneself and to learn what it means to others. For many viewers, photographs seem to be transparent, obvious, like looking at actual persons, things, and events in the world, and in little need of interpretation as images. Because photographs are made from light reflecting off of people, places, and objects in the world, they have attributes of what C. S. Peirce called "indexical" qualities. The photographic sign is caused by what it signifies, or in Roland Barthes's definition, a photograph is "that which has been." Thus, given this causal connection to reality and an inherited Renaissance style of realistic depiction, people often view snapshots, news photographs, advertising images, and art photographs as transcriptions of reality rather than as opinionated and

influential constructs bearing situated knowledge and invested expressions. Photographs are factual, fictional, and metaphorical, and need to be interpreted. The interpretation of art, for Arthur Danto, entails seeing the work as being about something, projecting a point of view by rhetorical means, requiring interpretation within a cultural context.

In Ernst Gombrich's and Nelson Goodman's view, there is no innocent eye, and by implication, no innocent camera, or viewer. According to Goodman,

the eye functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes,

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constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make; and what it takes and makes it sees not bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons.

(Goodman 1976)

An interpretation of a photograph is a thoughtful response in language to its subject matter, medium, form, and the context in which it was made and in which it is seen. Interpretations, like photographs, are constructs. When we interpret we do not merely report meaning, we build it and then report it; interpretation is a process of discovery and invention.

To interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a photograph and what else we have seen and experienced. Richard Rorty says that "reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens." Jonathan Culler prods interpreters to

ask about what the text does and how: how it relates to other texts and to other practices; what it conceals or represses; what it advances or is complicitous with. Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted.

To interpret a photograph is to ask and answer such questions as: What is this that I see? How was it made? What is it about? What does it represent or express? What did it mean to its maker? What did it mean to its intended viewer? What is it a part of? What are its references? What is it responding to? Why did it come to be? How was it made? Within what tradition does it belong? Interpretations are built by individuals and shared. Eventually cumulative answers to interpretive questions, offered publicly by informed interpreters, most often art historians, critics, curator, and photographers themselves, are received as conventional understandings that are generally shared in scholarly venues by a community of like-minded interpreters and then passed on as what are essentially canonical understandings, in short, the accepted view by which subsequent interpretations are made. Such conventional interpretations of photographs are recorded in history of photography courses, encyclopedias, exhibition catalogues, and especially in historical texts.

Socially minded interpretations broaden conventional interpretations by examining the social implications and consequences of images. Allan Sekula, for example, advocates that we "regard art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather

than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience." Socially interpretive questions include answers to these kinds of questions: What ends did the image serve its maker? What purposes, pleasures, or satisfactions did it afford its maker and its owner? Whom does the image address? Whom does it ignore? How is it gendered? What problems does it solve, allay, or cause? What needs does it activate or relieve?

To interpret an image is also to make personal sense of it by asking and answering such questions as: What does this image mean to me? Does it affect my life? Does it change my view of the world? A requirement for an interpretation by some scholars is that it changes one's life. Rorty, in the Pragmatist tradition, argues that there should be no difference between interpreting a work and using it to better one's life: A meaningful interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one's priorities and to change one's life. In the phenomenological tradition, for Hans Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, the purpose of interpretation is to make the artwork one's own. Ricoeur asserts that interpretation involves appropriation by which the interpreter makes what is interpreted one's own through the endeavor to make sense of it in the light of his or her personal experience. Because an artwork has an existence of its own, Ricoeur adds the requirement that the work interpreted must be understood as well as appropriated.

Feelings guide interpretations. As Goodman argues, "The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses. Emotional numbness disables here as definitely if not as completely as blindness and deafness." Israel Scheffler negates the false dichotomy between thinking and feeling: "Reading our feelings and reading the work are, in general, virtually inseparable processes....Emotion without cognition is blind, cognition without emotion is vacuous."

Conventional, social, and personal interpretations are not mutually exclusive and ought to correctively enhance one another. A conventional interpretation that ignores social implications of what it interprets is lacking in complexity and relevance. A social interpretation, however, that ignores conventional knowledge of what it interprets risks lack of correspondence to relevant facts of origin. A personal interpretation that is uninformed by conventional knowledge and social insights is most likely too personal to be relevant to what is being interpreted.

As Umberto Eco asserts, texts have rights: All images set limits as to how they can be interpreted. The rights of an image are established in part by

the internal textual coherence of the image that sets itself firmly against any uncontrollable urges of the interpreter for social betterment or personal meaning. Nevertheless, “photographs’ rights” are often and seamlessly overridden by the printed words that accompany them, or by the contexts in which they are shown: a Lennart Nilsson photograph made for scientific meaning of an intra-uterine fetus can readily be supplanted by placing it on placards in demonstration for or against abortion rights. In practice, photographs mean through use. Responsible interpretative endeavors can rectify misuses of images.

If one wants a plausible interpretation of a photograph, one cannot just fix on one or two elements of the photograph and forget about the rest of the elements in the image and in its causal environment. There is a range of interpretations any work will allow that is socially constituted by consensual agreement of pertinent practitioners. As Eco asserts, certain readings prove themselves over time to be satisfactory to the relevant community of interpreters. For Eco, “certain interpretations can be recognized as unsuccessful because they are like a mule, that is, they are unable to produce new interpretations or cannot be confronted with the traditions of the previous interpretations.”

It is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at a right interpretation, but rather interpretations that are reasonable, informative, convincing, enlightening, satisfying, and that allow interpreters to continue on their own. Contrarily, weak interpretations might simply be inane, far-fetched, unresponsive, unpersuasive, irrelevant, boring, or trivial. Nor is it the goal of interpretation to arrive at a single, cumulative, and comprehensive singular interpretation. Images are not the kinds of things that reduce to singular meanings, and informed interpreters of images are not the kind of responding individuals who are looking for simple, single meanings. There are many different interpretive answers to the different questions interpreters ask. Multiple interpretations are valuable in that they direct a viewer’s attention to an aspect of an image that the viewer might not otherwise see and ponder. Good interpretations inspire other interpretations and engender further discourse.

Some interpretations are better than others. Interpretations can be evaluated by criteria of coherence, correspondence, and completeness. Coherence is an external and independent criterion asking that the interpretation make sense in itself, as a text. The criterion of correspondence asks that the interpretive text match what is seen in and known about the image being interpreted. Interpre-

tations ought also to account for all that is included in the image and what contextual knowledge is available about its origins.

Interpretations of an image ought not to rely exclusively on or be limited to what the maker of the image meant the image to mean. As Israel Scheffler argues,

human creation is always contingent, always experimental, always capable of yielding surprises—not only for others, but for the human creator himself. The product humanly made is never a pure function of creative purpose and foreseeable consequences of the maker’s actions. The human maker does not fully own his own product.

Intentionalists, however, believe that an image does have a meaning and the meaning is determined by the maker of the image. A significant limitation of Intentionalism is that it commits one to the view that there is a singular meaning of a work, and a single correct interpretation of it, namely, the maker’s meaning.

In opposition to Intentionalists, Conventionalists maintain that meanings that can be reasonably attributed to an image are based on the linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions at work when the image was made. Nor does it make sense to limit what a photograph might mean based on what its maker says it means. To rely on the artist’s intent for an interpretation of an artwork is to put oneself in a passive role as a viewer. Reliance on the artist’s intent unwisely removes the responsibility of interpretation from the viewer; it also robs the viewer of the joy of interpretive thinking and the rewards of new insights into images and the world. Thus the maker’s intent might play a part in interpretation, but ought not determine a work’s meaning.

Interpretations can discourage further interpretations. Karen-Edis Barzman refers to these as “master readings” that have “a dependence on so much erudition that the reader is disarmed and even daunted at the moment of reception, a moment in which asymmetrical power relations between writer and reader are at least implicitly affirmed.” Such interpretations position the viewer asymmetrically as a passive recipient of fixed meaning (the interpreter’s), harmfully deny the plurality of interpreters, and suffocate thought.

They presume to read authoritatively for their audiences, universalizing their own situated perceptions, fixing meaning with the stamp of finality, and thus rhetorically denying their readers the possibility of intervening interpretations themselves.

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*See also:* **Barthes, Roland; Ethics and Photography; Image Theory; Ideology; Photographic “Truth”;**

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### Representation; Sekula, Allan; Social Representation

#### Further Reading

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