

## Photography's "Truth Claim"

Photographs represent the world.

Analog photographs are a physical impression of light onto film – they are an

impression of the world captured in a *filmic emulsion*.

Anything that was in front of the camera lens will be captured on the photographic film:

In this way photographs see more than the human eye. Photography's 'Truth Claim' can be summarized as the idea that:

If a photograph shows an object, or scene, then that object, or scene, **must** have been present in front of the camera.

The photograph shows what was there. The photograph is evidence that a thing existed.

Even if a photograph is deceptive, for example the photograph has been edited, exposed twice (double exposure), cropped, or captioned in a deceptive way, the photograph is still *true*.

Something must have appeared before the camera's lens. Photography differs from painting and drawing in this way.

Think about the image of Lincoln's' ghost ['Mary Todd Lincoln with the ghost of her husband Abraham Lincoln. Photographer William H. Mumler, c. 1869']. At some point Lincoln must have been photographed for this image to exist.

Analog photographs are sometimes described as *indexical* or as *indexical signs*.

Indexical signs include footprints, finger prints, death-masks. Like these things a photograph is a physical impression of an object. The relationship between the object (for example a foot) and the thing that represents it (a footprint) is indexical.

"indexes establish their meaning along and axis of a physical relationship to their referents" Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," in *October* (3), 1977

**Challenge yourself: read and annotate the following text available through Open Lab (password protected)**

Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction"

[Index is a technical term developed by C.S. Pierce to describe the function of signs within language]

## *In Plato's Cave*

Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But being educated by photographs is not like being educated by older, more artisanal images. For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention. The inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been photographed, or so it seems. This very insatiability of the photographing eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.

To collect photographs is to collect the world. Movies and television programs light up walls, flicker, and go out; but with still photographs the image is also an object, lightweight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store. In Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (1963), two sluggish lumpen-peasants are lured into joining the King's Army by the promise that they will be able to loot, rape, kill, or do whatever else they please to the enemy, and get rich. But the suitcase of booty that Michel-Ange and Ulysse triumphantly bring home, years later, to their wives turns out to contain only picture postcards, hundreds of them, of Monuments, Department Stores, Mammals, Wonders of Nature, Methods of Transport, Works of Art, and other classified treasures from around the globe. Godard's gag vividly parodies the equivocal magic of the photographic image. Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.