

Social scientific perspectives on ‘photographic truth’

Ever since its inception, photography has conventionally borne a realist trait, as it mirrored, copied, or fixated different traces of social reality. Along with the development of digital technologies, the facility to produce and reproduce photography in various contexts has shed new light on photography’s relations to ‘authenticity’, ‘truth’ and ‘naturalness’. In this move, photographic meaning is claimed to become re-signified, as photographs carry on being looked at, experienced, discussed and shared in novel contexts. Some of them materialize on paper to be touched or even smelled while others go viral in social media, often raising intense emotional reactions and bringing back new contexts.

The aim of this workshop is to provoke a discussion on photographic meaning(s) that deal with ‘photographic truth’. To do so, the speakers will put forward one photograph each and develop a quick reflection, using social scientific approaches and methods. The speakers will use the following case studies:

- (1) A 1862 photograph (and a detail of it), of São Paulo by Militão Augusto de Azevedo, considered to be the city’s first photographer. The photograph will be used to address a materialist reflection on how photographs may help us understand reality considering Walter Benjamin’s ideas on technical reproducibility, the apparatus, the concept of image and the game in play between viewer and the viewed.
- (2) Francis Galton’s 19th century composite photography, used to produce ‘real and true portraits’ that rely on traits visible in pictures of faces. Galton’s composites were made with an intention to portray ‘the social’ in a particular rendering of the face that was understood as a photographic aggregate of its components. A relation between ‘real and true portraits’ and composite photography has since been clearly questioned and problematized. Surprisingly, novel camera technologies are lately again used for composite photography, e.g. in trying to identify criminals based on portraits, or sexual orientation of those depicted. The case will reflect on the naturalization of technically mediated social sorting as ‘real and true’.
- (3) A photograph taken by the speaker in front of Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial (the A-bomb dome). Inspired by Didi-Hubermann suggestion that ‘We ask too little of images’, the case discusses photography’s revelatory capacity to reveal and generate life amidst signs of death.
- (4) A photograph of film director Agnieszka Holland confronting police cordon preparing for the monthly political-religious celebrations in the center of Warsaw. Following its publication on Twitter, and only later in traditional media, the photograph was immediately named as an icon of current political affairs in Poland. By contextualizing this photograph with (i) similar images of women standing up to the system, and (ii) other images of that event, its iconic status will be questioned.

Workshop organizer:

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Presenters:

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