

Somewhere in Time, a note on Yair Barak's "The Whole Truth" by Yanai Toister

Not so long ago there appeared a picture of a building. That picture was claimed by some to be one of the first pictures in the form of a photograph. Further it was said that it was the building itself (and not a human) that had made the picture, had made its own picture.¹ This building is still standing. It is called Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire England, home to one William Henry Fox Talbot - a politician, an amateur poet and a minor authority in multiple fields including astronomy. Talbot is best known for being one of the inventors of photography. One can say that that history therefore tells us a funny story. It tells us that, by way of chemistry and optics, photography is a marvelous confirmation of the laws of nature.² It follows then that photographs are thus manifestations of nature, and apparently more so than any building.

Given this, what has later been alleged is no wonder at all - photography and nature are *one and the same thing*. But what does all this mean for us today? That is to ask, one and the same *what*? When photography first emerged into our world nature was a rather obscure concept. For most of us now nature is just obscure.

Bearing this in mind I shall ask – have we ever abandoned the idea that photography maintains a privileged connection to that same contested nature? I will say, no, we still maintain it. We have never treated this idea light-headedly and we cannot reject it now, not just yet. That is to say, we may have outgrown the radical hypothesis suggesting that a photograph of an object in one's world is the object itself³ but we are still confused. Unfortunately there are many of us that still feel that photographs are duplicates or doubles or reproductions of objects, or substitutes or surrogates for them. To be sure – they are not. An object in the world and its photograph thereof share very little commonality but they do share a belief. What and which is that belief we must now want to know.

Often, many would say, what follows from a photograph of an object is unavoidably the fact that, at one point, sometime ago and somewhere, an object existed – “if x is a photograph of a man, there is a particular man of whom x is the photograph.”⁴ Much too much has already been said about a particular photograph x of a particular man who was identified as Napoleon's brother. Nevertheless this should not deter us. One photographer believes that it matters the world how a picture is made. Another believes that it matters not. He may concede that it matters somewhat but what matters more is that all photographs are *made*. Made, I say, as they are not merely taken, they are always constructed and never simply found. Neither Photographs nor photographic meanings are found in the world the same way that rabbits are found on downs. So maybe meanings are not to be found in the world at all? Maybe they are found elsewhere and only within us? Maybe they are made? Our photographer believes that, in and of itself, the mere fact that photographs are still being made *is*, in a sufficient sense, significant substantiation of their meaning.

But more must be said. We believe in photographs because we need them and this belief matters. Without it we would not be able to make use of photographs at all. For how else would we make inferences about ourselves and about our surroundings? We believe in dusty snapshots of people we may never have met and we believe in the invisible satellites that orbit us night and day. Why then should we deny that we believe in our photographs even when they are dark and blurry, selectively focused or intentionally out of colour? “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” said Pascal.⁵ He was right, we do believe.

¹ “I made in this way a great number of representations of my house.... And this building I believe is the first that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture.” Beaumont Newhall, ed. *Photography: Essays & Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 28. Reprinted from W. Henry Fox Talbot, *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or, The Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil* (London: R. and J.E. Taylor, 1839).

² Talbot believed that photography itself is to be regarded as confirmation of the laws of nature, not only an instantaneous confirmation of those laws but also a marvellous one. An act of 'natural magic' no less: “You make the powers of nature work for you, and no wonder that your work is well and quickly done... There is something in this rapidity and perfection of execution, which is very wonderful.” Gail Buckland, *Fox Talbot and the Invention of Photography* (London: Scolar Press, 1980). 31.

³ “The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking, in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.” André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005). 14.

⁴ Roger Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 3 (1981): 587.

⁵ Attributed by Althusser to Blaise Pascal. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). 168.

The only thing shared between an object and its photograph, is always already our belief. And it is precisely this belief that the photographer sets out to explore, and to praise and to delineate when he depicts an object in the form of a (non-celestial) sphere he calls Atlas, possibly after the primordial titan who carried the celestial sphere on his shoulders. We may recall that according to the Greek mythology astronomy shared Atlas with navigation and navigation is where we shall go next. For now it seems that Atlas' sphere has been dropped and is now to be found on the ground in a photograph that our photographer has made. What does this mean?

Moreover what should we believe our photographer knows when another object he depicts is a formation of rocks? Does he know that if an identifiable formation of rocks was erected somewhere and sometime it could also have been erected elsewhere and anytime? That is to say, is *this* why *his* formation of rocks is *the sum of all formations*, the sum of all forms? For the photographer's belief has travelled more than just twenty-six miles – the distance separating Lacock Abbey and Stonehenge. His belief has also, in the case of *his* photographic form (a form with *all* rock formations), traversed one hundred and eighty two years. That is precisely the duration passed from Talbot's photograph to his, this time round delineating our modern belief in the pencil of nature as not un-similar to a primitive belief in the order of nature.

There is yet another aspect to our evolving geometry, one that we must not forget - an axis that upon it everything here may hinge. Both photographs in question have been made at almost equal distances from one (geographical) point. This point is possibly called Greenwich (although elsewhere it may be called something else) and it is the point that the Greenwich meridian dissects. But why was our photographer standing there? (That is if indeed we accept that he was standing there and that there was something there for him to stand against.) Perhaps he was only there to make us aware of one and only one fact. This fact, whose importance cannot be over emphasized, has been all too rarely acknowledged, is the fact that meridians (like the ones in Alberti's linear perspective) make very little sense if you are not, or do not want to be, standing within the space that they divide. Put differently, Greenwich is the epitaph of the order of rationality only for those who stand within it. Our photographer, having once visited there, may rather wish to be standing from outside it, that is to say, if anyone can ever stand outside of the orders of rationality. Maybe our photographer knows that there is no standing outside them, only within. Once those orders have been erected they will stand for many millennia to come. Until others are erected instead. From now on let us think about photographs, odographs and chronographs not as representatives of the orders of rationality but instead as symbols of irrational order.

Writing about the rational of irrationality seems to mock thought with a vengeance and therefore we shall stop here. However, and since we are only just beginning, another, last question remains to be asked - can anyone genuinely photograph the rationale of irrational belief? Our photographer seems to think so. He knows that there is an irrational element to all good things.

Yanai Toister⁶

October 2013

Sydney

⁶ Yanai Toister is an artist, curator and a scholar. He is currently a PhD candidate at the Sydney university. Toister holds a BFA from the Betzael academy of art in Jerusalem and MFA from Cal arts, Los Angeles.