

# Jeff wall photography philosophy



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The artist Jeff Wall has argued that there are two prominent myths about photography, ' the myth that it tells the truth, and the myth that it doesn't'. Discuss Wall's statement with reference to the work of any two photographers from the 20th Century.

In the following essay I propose to discuss Jeff Walls' philosophical statement of photography, ' the myth that it tells the truth and the myth that it doesn't' in which Wall openly recognises the associated ambiguities of photography's' systems of representation and perception. The apparent naturalism associated with the photographic medium draws a certain sense of the presence of inherent truths.

However, the degree of photographic truth or indeed myth is much dependent upon the intentions of the photographer who instigates and captures the composition. The argument which Wall refers to is not a contemporary difficulty with the medium, as these debates have been circulating ever since photography's beginnings. One must however acknowledge that photography's difficulties with regard the perception of truth or myth have progressively developed as time has transgressed. This notion is in accordance with the greater availability of manipulative photographic technology which has allowed the artist greater control over any proposed outcome. Every image embodies a certain way of seeing which happens to coincides with the consciousness of mankind's individuality. Therefore it is entirely relevant to mention the importance of an awareness of the term semiotics which considers the interpretation of these visual systems which we each profess to. In order to understand the pertinence of Wall's argument, I plan to explore and discuss the works of Wall himself in

conjunction with the works of another American artist, Cindy Sherman. A key universal element of my argument will rest upon the acknowledgement of the incorporation of the multiple peoples who incur the work of photographer as it is these who create and communicate the notion of truth and myth. Whilst no definitive answer may be given regarding the statement which Wall proposes, I do however seek to trace the inner complexities which threaten the authenticity of the photographic movement.

Debates concerning the notion of perception, myth and truth have been circulating ever since mankind's inception to the planet. One of the earliest documented records of this debate goes back to the 4th century BC, in which the philosopher Plato presented theories which objectify the then traditional Sophistic views of morality and reality.

Plato concluded that both subjects originated from ones' own objective ideals of absolute truth, of which only existed in total form in our minds and not in our conscious state of physical awareness. To put simply, Plato writes that an idealised level of truth could never be achieved in absolute terms in our daily lifestyle and that any proposed notion was strongly dependent on our own quality of self interests. From this reading I can comprehend that the notion of reality, truth and perception are all in fact manufactured perceptions based around our own terms of reference. I do view this reading as significant when related to the works of Wall and Sherman who coincidentally share a communal categorisation of photographic theme, yet whose subjective visual understanding of a 20th century American society contrast greatly. Artistic intentions are developed or withdrawn in accordance with our own unique mental facets. Related to this matter,

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concepts of knowledge are also fiercely dependent upon societal context and worldly experiences. Knowledge is an ever developing independent discipline as are the illusive notions of truth and myth.

“ Theoretical research does not lead to such certainties. Usually its results are quite intangible. It leads to new ideas - but ideas are uncertain and debatable. It leads to new points of view - but this is not enough if we want hard and fast results. It is only if we are very lucky that far down the road theoretical research leads to what we have been looking for all along: understanding.” (Greenstein, 1983, Pg. 108)

In order to fully comprehend the truths and mythologies of photography, it is necessary to acknowledge that each person including the viewer prescribes to a certain creative vision and that these views we profess to may not be in keeping with the genuine intentions of artist. Modernist understandings of the visual field fall under the study of semiotics which recognises that art functions as another communicative language yet does not present its meanings quite as literally as with journalism.

In the year 1978, Wall created a piece of breakthrough photography entitled ‘ The Destroyed Room’ which documents the disturbing repercussions following an unspeakable act of domestic violence.

Jeff Wall, “ The Destroyed Room,” 1978, Transparency in light box, 1590 x 2340 mm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The destroyed room is clearly that owing to a woman judging by its disassembled contents; strewn feminine clothes and elegant heels. Another

prominent indicator of a feminine presence within the composition is the inclusion of a rather graceful and strangely intact porcelain dancer figurine upon a shaken wooden cabinet. A number of intentionally placed diagonal indicators lead our eye to this perverse female substitute which further indicates the notion that she is a universal symbol for the masked, unspoken and disturbing realities evident within the 20th century American home. But is this an accurate representation of 20th century society? Wall created the piece by recreating the theoretical elements of Delacroix's infamous work, 'Death of Sardanapalus' which in effect offers a contemporary model of a historic reference.

Eugène Delacroix, "Death of Sardanapalus", 1827, Oil on canvas. 392 x 496 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

While strong feelings of misery, deep unhappiness and pain prevail in both these meticulously composed works it would be misleading to conclude that both works tell of the same truths. Delacroix's painted piece incorporates figurative subject matter in romanticised states of physical torment which contrast greatly to that of Walls' graceful, serene figurine seeming to mask the emotional elements of violence by contrast.

Wall appears to be making a mockery of Delacroix's curvilinear models through the inclusion of a cheap artificial piece confirming that Wall does not hold any desire to remit the same intentions of Delacroix's work alluding to the mythical existence of an idealised human form, implying a certain utopian view.

It is also interesting to note that Wall's work places a clear responsibility on the viewer to focus specifically on just one single victim of destruction as apposed to dividing our attention between a number of peoples as in the case of Delacroix. The absence of a real physical presence in Walls' work is unsettling for the viewer warranting us to question the welfare of those involved moreover then Delacroix's painting. My feelings of empathy and concern are as a direct consequence of the medium of photography which further evokes the sense that this depiction of intimate violation could in fact be real to life due to the fact that many works of factual photo journalism are presented in a manner similar. I also believe that such a scene does not constitute the creation of a timely idealised masterpiece. This image is revealing of one person's view of a society but it would be a myth to suggest that it an agreeable truth for all else involved especially those who experience domestic abuse.

As a viewer, I am aware that I am placing my objective thoughts on the work which may contrast with that of the practitioner and by this means I could unknowingly be creating a work of myth or indeed truth. Similarly I relate this analysis to Wall interpretation of Delacroix's work in that did Wall really take initial inspiration from the work of Delacroix or did Wall get caught up in the moment of physical chaotic creation which later seemingly related in theme to that of Delacroix? We may never know the answer but I take some comfort in my as Wall's work seems an entirely abstract muted edition of the work of by contrast to his previous reworking of the work of Hokusai in " A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai),"

In 1982, Wall created another thought provoking exposure entitled ' Mimic' which again similar to that previously discussed, seeks to condense the negative misgivings of a contemporary culture within a single frame.

Jeff Wall ' Mimic' 1982, Transparency in light box, 1980 x 2286 mm, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.

The image presented reconstructs an offensive racial gesturing witnessed by Wall between two men; a well turned out Chinese man and a roughly clad Caucasian man. ' Mimic' presents an interesting representation of the bodily gestures which typically stereotype these nations. In the case of the Chinese man, his unobtrusive, self servient gesture presents the typical conservative gesture that I connote most to being of Eastern cultural origins. In contrast to this, the Caucasian mans' middle fingered gesture presents him as being from an inflammatory type society with liberal outspoken values. Do these gestures pertain to be as accurate representations of the real and whole conditions of the cultures we reside within? No they are not truthful in this regard yet they are truthful in that they do provide a truthful momentary pictorial of an offensive gesture. I fear as a woman that I cannot abide by the social condition Wall has involved here as he positions his camera maintaining an overtly masculine presence with lessened thought given for the role of women within society. It appears as though the lady portrayed is being dragged along or perhaps slowing back deliberately denoting herself as an unwilling participant in this racial transaction as she also stares in a voyeuristic manner away from the confrontation. I would even go as far as commenting that Wall appears to connote that women share as much of an unrecognized role in 20th century American society as any other foreign

emigrant would and that the Caucasian man rules over all regardless of social rank or occupation.

The context in which a photograph is captured, presented & thus examined constitutes a variety of iconic indexical signs. The resemblance to 'Mimic' to that of street photography, cinematographic photography and even photo journalist photography through its successful combination of conceptual performance art qualities and also colloquial elements means that its authentic intentions are difficult to read. The museum reference given pushes us to regard the piece as an aesthetic high art object implying a enriched sense of credibility which forces us to consider its compositional qualities as well as formal aesthetic qualities in a more conscious manner which might not necessarily be the case regarding its possible inclusion in a mass consumed newspaper.

Museum curators dictate the manner in which we experience & interpret photography and one would most likely consider a different set of indexical signs if museum artworks were placed outside of its intended location. The placement of art may hinder its idea, yet it is the placement of art which determines the power of an artistic idea. The same argument is relevant regarding the notion of time yet it is again the power of the artists' intention which will conquer all inhibitors.

" The meaning of a photographic image is built up by an interaction of such schemas or codes, which vary greatly in their degree of schematization. The image is therefore to be seen as a composite of signs, more to be compared with a complex sentence than a single word. Its meanings are multiple,



concrete, and, most important, constructed.” (Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988)

The work of Cindy Sherman emphasises aspects of concurrent femininity which aspires to philosophise the changing role of the female identity in response to cultural expectations. Sherman herself manages to direct, model and capture her photographic intentions in much the same self autonomous process she seeks to explore through her works. Sherman brilliantly captures the metaphysicality of the female figure through her incorporation of diverse facial expressions, considered clothing choices and through the application of heavy make ups which in effect offer few clues to Sherman’s inner identity which she desires to be excluded from her works. Yet if she so heavily desires to be excluded from her works why does she use herself within her work & why did she originally title her early works ‘ self portraits’? I place ambiguity over Sherman’s desire to remain anonymous within her work & I firmly believe her intentions to be a work of myth.

‘ Untitled Film Still (#96)’ depicts an outstretched Sherman lying rather suggestively across a domestic floor, exposing the myths which define a woman’ s expectations of sexual fantasy. The image promotes a certain sexual objectivity of the female body specifically through the considered placement of hand and tissue hand near her female organs. Yet I can connote a contradictory sense of imperfection, insecurity and hidden vulnerabilities through her blushed facial expression. “ Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one-and can help build a nascent one.” (Sontag, 2001, Pg. 9)

Cindy Sherman 'Untitled Film Still (#96)', 1981, Photograph, 60.8 x 121.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Sherman's choice of a birds' eye view camera angle does not allow us to engage with the camouflaged societal location as the figure is zoomed in upon & cropped forcing us to engage solely with the figure. The image is part of a series entitled 'centrefolds' which were deliberately labelled in accordance with Sherman's choice of publication layout which involves a two page spread in the middle of a magazine which sees Sherman as a sort of fetish for male readers. While the image has been labelled 'Untitled Film Still', it does not convey an obvious sense of the films' actualities as the cropped field of view by the photographer has created an artificial sense of place in which we have no knowledge or clues of the film's preceding & proceeding moments. In a sense the image goes against the commonalities of film making as its lack of information forces us to narrate our own variation of the films' intentions. Sherman as apposed to Wall chooses not to focus on any specific moment but rather the amalgamation of a number of common episodes which she has encountered through the media which in effect creates a work which may remain true to Sherman herself but seems false & overtly cliché for the viewer. It would be a grave mistake to label these images as obsolete due to their supposed level of artificiality as they do communicate a level of truth and more importantly a message which causes us to question & learn from our own lives misgivings. None of the images I have discussed are inherently better than the next because of its determined or undetermined levels of truth & myth. One could almost say that Wall works were more morally truthful as he seeks to reissue a lived

moment yet the actors he positions could not possibly be feeling the raw emotions that the initial experience entailed. And the same is true of Sherman's work in that she is just re-enacting another persons' portrait.

“ The photographers' way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. Every image embodies a way of seeing; our perception or appreciation of an image depends upon our own way of seeing.” (Berger, 1973, Pg. 10)