

A Trace Of Actions Unseen – The Photographic Error As Photography ‘In Performance’

Paper presented at *Times and Movements of the Image International Conference*, 15th – 16th November 2018 at ESAD.CR, Caldas da Rainha & Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

Introduction

This paper emerges from my research project [*In Pursuit of Error*](#), which is an exploration of the error in photographic practice. The project investigates photographs that have, either through some technological fault or human error, not come out correctly, insofar as the resulting image does not represent what was in front of the camera according to the expectations of the photographer. This includes a wide range of common photographic accidents such as motion blur, light leaks, de-focussing, over or under exposure, poor framing or inadvertent cropping, or combinations of these things. The images I’m showing here alongside this talk are all images that have been contributed to the project.

In this paper I will discuss three distinct stages of the photographic error –three acts, if you like, which characterise its life cycle. This begins with the photographic event, and the collision or collusion between camera and photographer in the making of a photograph. This is followed by the image, and the moment of its inscription onto sensor or film. Lastly there is the image as received by the viewer, who is the interpreter and translator of all that has gone before. These three stages – an artificial schematic thrown over a common and rapid event - allows me to explore the error’s relation to time and movement in detail and will form the three parts of this talk.

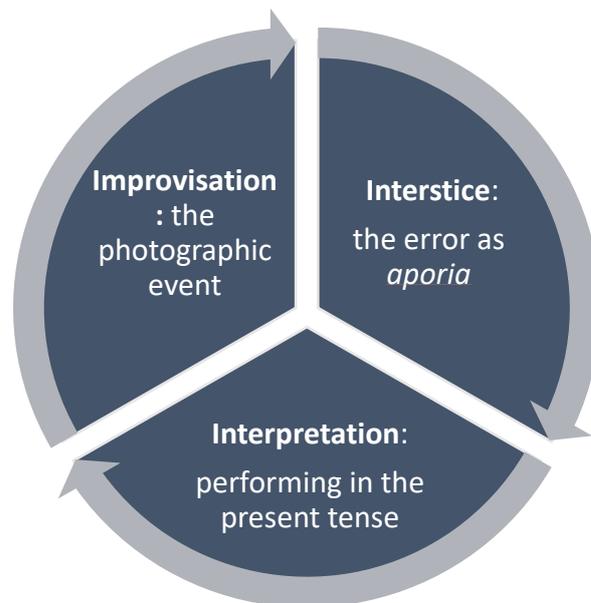


Fig 1. Three stages of the photographic error

1. Improvisation – the photographic event

What happens when we make a photograph? Of course the term 'make' implies a conclusion of some intention which is set in train well before the result. Perhaps I should add a proviso, go back in time one step, and rephrase my initial question – what happens when we *attempt to make* a photograph? What actions do I and my camera perform in the moment *before* the making, in that *a priori*, anticipatory space before the images is recorded?

The photographer moves their body in relation to their instrument. The actions we perform are a complex sequence (I'm taking as my example here photography as an act out in the world rather than in a studio where many decisions can be prefigured and controlled). To be out in the world, with a camera we are engaged in a sequence of actions which begin as noticing (seeing the thing), then desiring (to capture as an image), then preparing (opening/starting the camera), then framing (holding the camera toward the subject) and only then the invisible split second of making.

In our aims we are clear, however sometimes the results of our actions are not. It is this disjuncture between intention and result which categorises the 'error' for me – the image envisaged but not fully resolved. The degree of difference between the intentions of the photographer and the outcome might lie somewhere between absolute accuracy and miserable failure, and it is important to think of this as a continuum rather than a set of polarities because in that continuum lies the error, with all its attendant mystery and intrigue.

Errors can be characterised as either in excess of or in deficit of the result intended by the photographer. On the continuum between accuracy and failure are many possible outcomes – inconsistencies between my vision and the resulting image, partial resemblance to my intentions, and, to a greater extent, omissions of important features and inclusion of extraneous or unwanted elements in the final image.

If we take the photographer's intention as the baseline for decisions on whether an error has occurred, the identification of an error becomes a subjective process, but there are some general photographic features which we commonly recognise as erroneous: motion blur, de-focussing, over or under exposure, inadvertent cropping for example. These accidents are a consequence of the actions that take place before and during the making of the image. As already mentioned, there are several actions that take place before the shutter is pressed, and this is where things can go 'astray' – a fumble, a misstep, a movement out of place, an object passing between the camera and its field of vision.

Which returns us to the camera – that linked presence in the act of making the photograph. Regardless of the level of technology being employed, the camera has a subjective viewpoint on the thing photographed, and performs its own sets of operations and actions, bidden and unbidden by the photographer. These actions form another set of possible sites for error, however in this case it is not a direct action which brings the error into being, it is an omission, on the part of the photographer, to account for the camera's 'way of seeing' at

the point of making the photograph. So in the case of an error of over or under exposure the camera's settings permit its vision to perform in one particular way, when the situation and subject require something different. Any mismatch between the camera's programme (it's subjective vision at that point in time) and the environment and subject is ripe with error-potential.

Thus we have a situation where the photographer's actions, and the camera's actions, and the subject, and the environment all combine to create the potential circumstances for an error to occur. The stage is set, the actors have their roles, and at the moment of pressing the shutter, the error transpires, unforeseen; an improvisation in the midst of what should be a perfectly scripted performance of making a photograph. The error is emergent – occurring at the moment of its making, thereby establishing its ontology as time-based, with the inherent characteristics of unpredictable fluidity.

Vilem Flusser describes photography as an act of “phenomenological doubt” (Flusser 2000, 38). The error exposes this ‘doubt’ as extending beyond the decisions which the photographer must perform to become the very essence of the photographic event, that complex, multi-faceted and ungovernable point of time. In the photographic event doubt and certainty oscillate with either ready to take the upper hand. These moments of oscillation sometimes continue beyond the moment of the shutter press, extending into the process of recording and in the download or development of the latent image. Thus the photographic event is both instantaneous yet durational, occurring before, during and after the ‘making’ of the photograph. In this extended space errors can appear in many guises.

2. Interstice – the error-image as aporia

The error performs the moment of its making, inscribing the conditions of its creation into the fabric of the image. This moment of making (the poiesis of the error if you like) extending beyond the conventional fraction of a second, now encompasses the actions of camera and photographer which become perceptible, if not entirely knowable.

The error as image is an entirely different prospect to the conventional photograph. Looking at these images here behind me we soon realise that we cannot really see the subject matter in isolation from the action which brought the image into being. We cannot see ‘through’ and past the photograph into a recognisable situation or event and thereby forget that we are looking at a photograph – these are not transparent windows onto past events, instead they are obscured, veiled, fogged with actions and interference which we have no choice but to apprehend along with the ostensible subject of the image.

In this way the error closes the distance between image, action and subject, compressing the layers of time to create a solidity where we normally expect transparency. With the loss of a separate and distinguishable depiction the image becomes nothing more than a representation of its ‘photographic-ness’ and it gains a solidity and presence which is sometimes unavailable to the conventional photograph. Unlike ‘normal’ photographs, errors appear more like objects than windows.

But what is this object? It is photographic by means of its production but it wanders from the path of convention into territory which exposes elements of the photographic act that are normally hidden from our perception. Through the error image we can 'see' movement, we can 'see' time – we can see its trace, its marks, streaks across the surface, tracing lines in the sky, obliterating the subject of the photographer's original intent. The error image inscribes the actions of camera and photographer indelibly into the resulting image and in so doing proposes a very different type of photography to the seemingly timeless and authorless images which are inherent in a machine-led and 'automatic' concept of photography. Error images by contrast are messy, subjective, tactile; unveiling a haptic and sensory world which the shutter normally precludes.

Despite inscribing the event of photographing within the resulting image, the error retains an inherent unknowability. It is an aporia, an undecidable gap in the photographic process, a hiatus of order, a question mark. It is as if the camera – in a fugue state - has created something which neither it nor we were in expectation of. This momentary destabilisation can be thrilling – suggesting the possibility of other ways of seeing and depicting which do not rely on conventional viewpoints and approaches.

This thrill, or wonder suggests that unlike 'failure' which seems to signal an end point or defeat, the error instead offers a sense of potential, of continuation. The 16th century etymological roots of 'error' closely align it to notions of wandering, purposelessness and not-knowing, an openness which, through the Rationalist project of the Enlightenment was gradually subsumed into a much narrower definition which categorised error as opposition to and deviation from 'truth' (Nunes 2011, 21). The earlier concept of 'error' suggests the uncertainty and instability of the error in process and execution, of the space of interpretation which it opens up, of the gap in our understanding which it suggests. The error wanders from the path of conventional photographic truth, and presents us with different ways of knowing.

3 Interpretation – performing in the present tense

The error image is both evidence of the photographic event, and an indication of its inherent unknowability. Looking at photographic errors involves the viewer in reading or guessing the 'narratives of action' that have brought the image into being. Unlike the performative indexicality of the conventional photograph which represents a 'slice of time', the error trades specificity for uncertainty both in the moment of creation and in the resulting photograph, as the viewer explores the image for traces of unintended actions. In so doing, the error-image destabilises common assumptions about photographs as simple, immediate documents.

If I'm looking at my own error image I can sometimes tell the story of what happened in terms of my own actions or omissions but my narrative rarely includes the imperceptible environmental factors and camera actions which may have also come into play. The story is always full of holes into which the mystery of the resulting image seeps.

The error image has a complex relation to time – it is both of the moment yet extends backward to a time before and during the instant, in which multiple additional stimuli were

absorbed into the image. Because the past of the error is uncertain, inconclusive or unknowable, contemplation of the image becomes a present tense activity, a performing of possible interpretations by the viewer.

Thus the error image has some similarities to Thierry De Duve's concept of a time-image, a protracted and potential form of temporality which contrasts with the explicit 'here and now' of the snapshot. The error image evades specificity and definition and through its ambiguity points not to a definitive past but to an 'uncertain now'. De Duve refers to the Time-exposure as "a pause in time, charged with potential actualization" (De Duve 1978, 121). This actualization takes place through the 'time consuming act of looking' (De Duve 1978, *ibid*) in which the viewer is engaged.

And what are we looking at? Images which stand outside the system of visual discourse which, through convention and expectation, we associate with photographic visuality. For Lacan, visual reality is a social construct, deviations from which might be categorised as hallucination, misrecognition or visual disturbance (Bryson 1988, 92). Error images might be one or all of these things, acting to disrupt the 'screen' of cultural conventions through which we normally perceive photographs, instead presenting a new sort of visual entity which might require a new visual lexicon to interpret.

The narrative of the image, performed by the viewer in the present tense is partial, speculative and imaginative. When presented with an error image our first act is to wonder: what happened here? In this wondering, my mind wanders, back to the event and the circumstances, forward to the image itself, its visual presence, what it suggests and connotes over and above the story of its making. Oftentimes the narrative of how an image came into being is rather mundane, pathetic or uninteresting (I moved, it moved, the camera did something strange) yet the image is intriguing, exciting, beautiful. This disjuncture between act and result is where the power of the error lies – in that unfathomable interstice between the two where something unquantifiable happens.

Luce Irigaray constructs wonder as a space which is ungoverned by linear time, an 'in-between' rather than a fixed certainty, an in-between space which bridges two zones of perception, the time then and the time now (Irigaray 2004, 64). . As we contemplate a photographic error we are offered a glimpse of a photography pared down to its essential components: light, time, camera and human action. The error invites us into the event of the photograph as a provisional action occurring in time and space.

The in-between space opened up by the error allows us to navigate the distinction between the event of photographing and the photographic object more clearly, to see them as two distinct elements which are contingent upon each other but which are not the same. The error becomes "The point of passage between two closed worlds, two definite universes, two space-times" (Irigaray 2004, *ibid*). . The point of passage is open and can be traversed from either direction, enabling the viewer to criss cross in their performance of narrating, interpreting, wondering, in an act which is not required to be settled, but which remains open and porous.

Conclusion

The activity of making photographs is a complex fusion of human agency and technological processes. When mistakes arise in this context, the resulting images present alternative ways of understanding the practice of photography. Errors produced by the camera without conscious human intervention create speculative examples of possible image worlds while human errors reflect ways of seeing which are partial, subjective and affected by our bodily actions and the contexts of time and place. In contemporary digital photography, where errors can be easily erased and many complex decisions given over to the camera, the error is an increasingly rare and unusual phenomenon, but it offers a unique and important way of conceiving time and subjectivity in relation to photography.

The three 'acts' of performance described here in relation to the error are somewhat broad methods of exploring complex and interlinked phenomena. They may also not be purely applicable to photographic errors, but also form an attempt to isolate and attend to the constituent elements of photography itself – that dynamic whole which we make and see in such abundance and such simplicity always and everywhere. If the error image does anything, it permits us to reconsider photography as an inherently uncertain act: embodied, contingent and full of wonder.

Dr Tracy Piper-Wright
Senior Lecturer in Photography
University of Chester, UK

References

Flusser, Vilem. (2000). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Translated by Antony Mathews. London: Reaktion.

Irigaray, Lucy. (2004) *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Continuum: London

De Duve, Thierry (1978). Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox. *October*, 5, 113-125.

Nunes, Mark (ed (2011) *Error: Glitch, Noise And Jam in New Media Cultures*. London: Continuum Books

Bryson, Norman (1988) "The Gaze in the Expanded Field" in Foster, Hal (ed) *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press. 87-108

© Tracy Piper-Wright 2018. No part of this paper to be reproduced without the express permission of the author.