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Unfixing the photographic image: Photography, indexicality, fidelity and normativity

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Normative conceptions of embodiment can operate only by fixing or essentialising the body's necessarily processural (or existential) ontology. Given that traditional film-based photography and cinema are reliant on the arrestation of a process, a process of fixing analogous to that seen in the constitution of normative bodies, this paper suggests that it is not surprising that photography has long been considered a privileged realm for the presentation of idealised bodies. Some critics have of course problematised this primarily indexical role of the photographic image by showing how this is disrupted in avant-grade practices in both photography and the cinema. In this paper, what is suggested instead is that the rupture of indexicality in traditional cinema and photography was always already inscribed in the technological apparatus or medium itself, and that what appeared to present itself as an ontological precondition of photography (its indexicality) was therefore only the result of the normal usage and perception of this medium. To this end, this paper presents case studies of the work of (amongst others) Edward Weston and Bill Henson, paying particular attention to their conceptualisation of the material ontology of the medium in which they work to show how they, respectively, reinforce or disrupt normative modes of embodiment.

Introduction

In a recent article for the *Weekend Australian*, Sebastian Smee (2006) boldly (yet perhaps belatedly) declared that 'photography as an art form is on the wane', that 'something inherent in the medium – something people have spent $1\frac{1}{2}$ centuries being beguiled by – is losing its grip on the public imagination'. For Smee, 'photography's hard-won victory – its gradual acceptance as an art form – turns out to have been a pyrrhic one' and he attributes this failure of photography partly to a saturation of the visual field, 'the astonishing superabundance' of photographs, the medium's absolute ubiquity, but also to changes that have come about in the medium. Indeed, he suggests that photography's fall from grace has come about also because the strictly analogous relationship that photography was previously believed to entertain with regard to objective reality has been thrown into doubt by the limitless possibilities of image manipulation afforded by digital technology. As he writes, 'Thanks to the digital revolution, there is virtually nothing that can't be done to a photograph to alter its once unique relationship to reality' (Smee 2006).

As Smee recounts the contemporary situation of photography, this has led to a somewhat paradoxical situation in certain genres, because it has meant that the documentary strain of photography that was previously so popular precisely because it accorded with people's conviction that 'photography's great purpose was to record historical truth' has now passed into the realm of art photography. But, as he goes on to remark:

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> Sadly, this awkward new context has only added to the insecurities of the great photo-journalists. Displayed in art galleries, their work tends to meet with popular, but rarely critical, success. Their claims to represent objective truth inflected with moral urgency have been thrown into doubt by critics and philosophers of the image. (Smee 2006)

According to this line of reasoning, then, it is the indexical relationship that photography is considered to entertain with the world that is its essential downfall, because whereas representational painting generally creates iconographic links to the real world and writing symbolic ones, links that thus have the potential to constantly subvert expectation, the very tight existential bond between the photograph and the real it records seems destined to deliver only what already is (or, rather, what already was).[1] Yet, this notion of the indexicality of the photograph, although deeply ingrained, is perhaps somewhat of a lure because it is not at all certain that the link between the photograph and its pro-photographic scene has ever been indexical. Something similar is suggested by Smee himself when he comments of those photographers in whom he still finds inventiveness and interest and who are still creating what he terms 'great art' (namely Henson, Mann and Fuss): 'what they seem to have in common is an acute sensitivity to the medium's inherent aptitudes, its original, fragile relation to reality' (2006, 19).

However, if traditional, film-based (as opposed to digital) photography is *not* primarily indexical, the general consensus on this medium would seem to suggest the opposite (see, for instance, Holschbach 2004; Dubois 1983; Arnheim 1974; Snyder and Allen 1975). Even Roland Barthes seems to conflate all moments of the photographic process into the instantaneous moment of capture when he states:

> the *noeme* 'that-has-been' was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (the discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object. The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. (Barthes 1981, 80)[2]

Although Altman (1992a, 43) and Manovich (2001, 306) problematize this schema by giving examples of the disruption of the indexicality of the image through avant garde practices in both photography and the cinema, what I would like to suggest in the present paper is that the rupture of indexicality in traditional cinema and photography (it is possible to conflate the two here because the technological process with regard to the production of the image on the film is almost identical) was always already inscribed in the technological apparatus (taken as a *whole*) or the medium itself, and that what appeared to present itself as an ontological precondition of photography (its indexicality) was therefore only the result of the *normal usage and perception* of this medium.[3] However, to attribute indexicality only to certain deployments of photography – and not to qualify it as an integral part of the medium's ontology – seems to have been beyond the realm of possibility for a long time. Christian Metz, for example, notes how even though cinema has managed to distance itself from a pure indexicality thanks to its supplementary components, and despite the fact that the photograph in Peirce's analysis always retains room for iconic and symbolic aspects, 'Photography … remains closer to the pure index, stubbornly pointing to the print of what *was*, but no longer *is*' (Metz 1985, 139). Similarly, at the same time as Altman notes that experimental techniques were, during the early days of photography, 'roundly condemned' and that 'offering ontological arguments about photography's nature, critics insisted that certain types of retouching constituted a highly undesirable form of "cheating"', he also observes that 'for all this prestidigitation … the basic assumption was never jeopardized: cinema is primarily an indexical medium, directly dependent on the photographic recording of each pro-filmic scene (or scene fragment)' (1992a, 43).

For Krauss (1981), of course, the reason why the indexicality of photography persists is quite simply because (as the modernist art form *par excellence*) it performs modernism's general tendency always to repress the always already prefigured nature of its representations instead of

presenting itself as that which grasps the original moment. The logic of Krauss' critique is followed through by photographer Christian Boltanski (Renard 1984), who notes that tourists photograph not so much landmarks themselves as unconsciously absorbed photographic clichés of those landmarks, and, more famously, by theorist Jean Baudrillard (1994), for whom postmodern reality is characterized by a precession of simulacra. Meanwhile, for Sarah Kember, the indexicality attributed to photography persists because of a 'panic over the loss of the real [which] is actually a displacement or projection of a panic over the potential loss of our dominant and as yet unsuccessfully challenged *investments* in the photographic real' (1996, 203). Whatever the reason, what is certain is that the internal inconsistency and flaws of the argument that simultaneously holds that the indexicality of photography is both inherent to the medium's ontology and yet capable of being circumvented by 'cheating' obviously cannot be maintained; either indexicality can be attributed to photography as part of its very ontological ground or it cannot. And although some may contend that the two propositions can, in fact, coexist if one accepts an ontological split between 'pure' (or 'straight') and 'impure' photography – the former here designating photographs that have not undergone any manipulation or prestidigitation and the latter those that have[4] – or even between the documentary aspects of photography and its artistic and aesthetic potential (a division existent since the very early days of photography thanks to the late 19th century pictorialist movement, which reacted against the optical image of nature proposed in the work of many of their contemporaries and fellow pioneers), I would argue that this split *cannot* be accepted because the very process of *all* traditional photography always has the potential to cause a massive haemorrhaging of the supposed indexicality of the medium.[5] What is more, this potential is carried not only in the historical and sociological strata of photography, its myriad forms and uses, as critics such as Lister (1995), Sekula (1986) Lalvani (1993) and Tagg (1988) suggest, but also in the very technological apparatus that for these very same critics provides the determinism required for an incessant return of the indexical to discussions of photography. This is to say, then, that although many critics such as those just cited do, indeed, insert photography into a relational matrix that destabilizes the clear-cut distinction between an essentialised reality and an objective recording of that reality and that shows many kinds of photographic representations to be discursive formations that produce a new photographic reality rather than merely reproduce an essential reality, this is invariably done against a backdrop of a presumed indexicality of the ontology of photography itself as a physical photochemical medium.[6] Thus, as suggested by Smee (2006), it is only the uses to which photography is put that are ultimately articulated to anything other than a purely indexical relation, which means, in turn, that the photochemical and technological ontology of photography is completely elided and presumed still to remain indexical.

To see why this retention of indexicality is problematic, it will be instructive briefly to turn to a related field, which presents a situation analogous to that of photography, namely sound recording and the concept of high-fidelity reproduction.

The very premise of high-fidelity reproduction, which, as its name implies, is intended to ensure that the sound reproduced on a recorded medium is as faithful as possible to the original sound source, obviously wishes to create an indexical relationship between copy and original in the real world. Indeed, one could argue that analogue recording technology, which converts sound waveforms into a physical analogue of that form through inscription on a material support and then reconverts that physical trace back into a waveform via a process of amplification and transduction, provides an example of the physical connection between sign and referent that is so important for Peirce's category of indexicality. And yet, as many critics have argued, the very notion of high-fidelity reproduction is a deeply problematic concept because, first, recorded sound always carries not only the sound of the source, but also of the recording (Altman 1992b, 26) and, second, because in nearly all cases recorded sound does not reproduce a 'pure' sound coming from an unadulterated source but, rather, a sound that is always already mediated. Talking

of sound reproduction, Jonathan Sterne argues that 'both copy and original are products of the process of reproducibility. The original requires as much artifice as the copy' (2003, 241). For Sterne, this, in turn, means that:

> ...the medium does not mediate the relation between singer and listener, original and copy. It *is* the nature of their connection. Without the medium, there would be no connection, no copy, but also no original, or at least no original in the same form. (Sterne 2003, 226)[7]

Even though these points demonstrate that 'fidelity', like indexicality in the discussion of photography above, is not so much an ontological condition of recorded sound as much as the secondary effect of specific *usage* and perception, however, what is more important for the purpose of the present discussion concerning photography is a related and more fundamental point made by Sterne. For him, the problem with all philosophies of sound reproduction that invoke the possibility of an original source that can be faithfully reproduced is that they abstract their analyses from the relational matrix (both social and technological) that the very act of recording brings into play. Such a view, as he says, 'ontologizes sound reproduction too quickly ... In emphasizing the products of reproduction, it effaces the process' (Sterne 2003, 219).

   Although it cannot be said that all analyses and philosophies of photography have similarly failed to insert photography into a social relational matrix, the problem facing philosophies of this medium are, in many respects, precisely those outlined by Sterne in relation to sound recording. That is to say, if it seems nigh impossible for photography to shrug off indexicality entirely, then this is because critics have all too often similarly ontologized the medium too quickly, examined only the photographic product (the photograph) and the discursive practices that come to produce the mediated 'reality' of the photograph, yet have at the same time neglected to comment on the process of photography, which is to say the photochemical, technological and material qualities that allow us actually to talk of the ontology of photography as a medium regardless of the mode of production and end uses of its *images*. David Green, for example, sensibly contends that 'photographs have to be regarded in every case as actively manufactured or constructed renderings of reality, produced within the limits of pictorial and technical conventions and subject to cultural and material resources' (Green 1984, 4). Yet, shortly after this, claiming that a history of photography may well be impossible, he suggests:

> ...there can be no ... singular identity to photography which binds together what are in actuality very different and varied functions of the image under the pretext of the media they share. What alone unites photographs or divides them from each other is the particular conditions within which they exist and the social and historical circumstances which determine the manner in which they are produced and used. (Green 1984, 4)

The great irony here, of course, is that Green obviously wishes his emphasis on the 'discursive practice' (1984, 4) of photography to destabilize the indexicality it was supposed to demonstrate for Galton and other eugenicists (or scientists more generally) and, thus, to discredit their claims for photography that could only be maintained in collusion with, as he writes, 'the suppression of all evidence of the photography's own materiality' (Green 1984, 4). And yet, by implying that any analysis of photography must consider 'not the components of any object but the conditions of photography as a discursive practice' (Green 1984, 4), he himself elides the materiality of photography which *does* enable a history of photography that would unite all of its diverse manifestations, which is to say a history of its technological development. A similar line is taken by John Tagg, despite his insistence that what photography requires is 'not an alchemy but a history' because it is 'a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts' (1988, 3). To pursue such a material history of photography is not the path that Tagg follows, because his avowed intention is to examine the history of photographic evidence in order to prove that the evidential qualities of photography are the result only of 'definite techniques and procedures,

concrete institutions, and specific social relations' (1988, 4–5).[8] As with Green then, Tagg's concerns have more to do with photography's effects than with photography *per se* and yet his insistence on the historically and contextually contingent nature of photography lead him not so much to freeze photography's ontology prematurely as to deny it one altogether. He writes:

> Photography as such [h]as no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence, and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular currencies they have. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such. (Tagg 1988, 63)

Thus, Tagg's position is slightly different, for although he does indeed wish to rid photography of the last vestiges of indexicality, in his view it is precisely because there can be no 'ontological or semiological basis for the privileging of photography as a means of representation which renders a direct transcription of the real' (1988, 188) that one must abandon the attempt to talk of the ontology of photography, instead to study only its meanings.

Contra these positions, I would suggest that we can and must study not only photographic meanings, but also photography as such, that photography's history does have a technological consistency (which is to say, there is a historical and ontological unity to photography based on the Daguerrotype process, just as there is for the photochemical film-based photography that concerns us here and just as there will be for digital photography). However, to propose that there is such a thing as an ontology of photography that would traverse all genres of the photographic image is not to regress to an essentialist position incompatible with that of Green and Tagg, to suggest that photography is 'an object' or inescapably indexical; because if one does not prematurely freeze this ontology, it becomes apparent that the material photochemical ontology of photography is just as discursive (and, therefore, non-indexical) as the production of its manifest content as an image or photograph inserted into a particular constellation of historical and ideological forces. This is to say, just as the discursive practices that produce an image are crystallized in the moment of photographic capture, so the photochemical processes of photography are arrested or fixed at a moment in time that is determined not by any exact correspondence with an external reality but, rather, a moment in time that is itself integrated into the discursive process of image production. Let me explain.

The majority of film-based photographic processes requiring chemical development in use today have as their direct precursor Talbot's calotype process, the first photographic process to rely on an intermediate negative image from which multiple positive images could be produced. The most direct descendent of this process still in use today, and whose chemical processes account for the principle (if not the chemical specificities) of the vast majority of film-based photographic processes available (including the C-41 process), is the gelatin–silver process, which is the photographic process commonly used for much black and white film-based photography. In the gelatin–silver process, acetate film is coated with silver halides held in a suspension of gelatine. Once this dries, the resulting film is exposed to light for a fixed duration of time in a camera. The light causes a chemical reaction that releases small atoms of free metallic silver from the silver halides and these atoms form a latent image. Once the film has been exposed in this way, the latent image on the film is developed by immersion in a solution that amplifies the latent image as silver salts near the free metallic silver are also reduced to metallic silver – and appear as black areas on the negative image of the film. Once the desired contrast is achieved, the development of the film is stopped by the addition of another solution that neutralizes the developer and then, finally, the undeveloped silver halides – which would, of course, continue to be reduced to visible atoms of metallic silver if exposed to light – are removed in another chemical bath, a process called *fixing*. The film is then washed in clean water, dried and used to produce an image on discrete media using a very similar process, light

being projected through the negative film to produce a positive image on a light-sensitive (normally paper-based) surface, the light again causing a chemical reaction that produces a latent image that is subsequently processed through a multistep chemical immersion process during which the latent image is amplified or developed so that it becomes visible, the development process then being stopped by neutralizing or removing the development agent, *fixed* by dissolving all remaining unexposed or undeveloped light-sensitive emulsion, washed and dried.

Thus, the production of the photograph depends, at two stages during this process, on a fixing or arrestation of the process that renders the final product possible. Little wonder then that critics (and, indeed, the general public who, thanks to the mass commercialization of domestic photography, are able to pass directly from the stage of capture through the viewfinder of the recording apparatus to contemplation of final image without ever being aware of the multistep process in-between) tend to focus little on this process and to analyse only the final product as (on some level) an indexical sign of a prior and now eternally fixed reality despite other evidence to the contrary. However, it is precisely this neglected part of the photographic process that, arguably, constitutes the major ontological basis of the very medium of photography. Indeed, Hubert Damisch notes how the technology of the camera obscura itself was not what interested the early pioneers of photography. Rather, as he writes:

> Niepce, the successive adepts of the Daguerreotype, and those innumerable inventors who made photography what it is today, were not actually concerned to create a new type of image or to determine novel modes of representation; they wanted, rather, to fix the images which 'spontaneously' formed on the ground of the camera obscura. The adventure of photography begins with man's first attempts to retain that image he had long known how to make. (Damisch 1978, 88)

For Damisch, however, it is this 'long familiarity' with the technology of the camera obscura itself that led to the commonly accepted misprision of its nature, to the belief that its apparently automated (and, thus, preordained) chemical basis meant that its processes could all be elided into the apparently indexical moment of capture. As he writes:

> This long familiarity with an image so produced, and the completely objective, that is to say automatic or in any case strictly mechanical, appearance of the recording process, explains how the photographic representation generally appeared as *a matter of course*, and why one ignores its highly elaborated, arbitrary character. (Damisch 1978, 88)

However, to analyse photography according to this common sense perception and to ignore such an important part of its photochemical ontology is to fix its ontology prematurely, to efface the process that tells us that any traditional photograph necessarily entertains more of an iconographic relationship to reality than an indexical one, because the photograph's visible image is produced not in the analogue process that forms the latent image as light frees atoms of metallic silver from silver halides but, rather, in the far more arbitrary stages of development and fixing.

To view photography in this decidedly non-scientific manner is not only to ontologise it too quickly, it is also to severely limit photography, to allow it always to be haunted at some point by the spectre of indexicality and, thus, to leave it open to the kind of pseudoscientific appropriations and (mis)uses analysed by Green. Indeed, as he writes:

> It is the very notion that pictorial depiction in general, and photography in particular, are passive processes determined by the existence of reality as a model for their own formation which made visual representation such an attractive mode of scientific enquiry. (Green 1984, 4)

What is particularly worrying about this in light of the analyses of Tagg, Green, Sekula and Lalvani concerning the service rendered by photography to eugenics, criminology and other taxonomic orders designed to exercise power on both the body of the individual and the social body, is that if we can posit the existence of a universal photographic ontology, then the

essentializing tendencies imbricated in the too hasty ontologisations to which photography so often falls prey become a potential pitfall not only for the kinds of functional photographic practices analysed by Green et al., but for *all* photography.

Take, for instance, the most famous early example of rapid motion capture photography, Eadweard Muybridge's *The Horse in Motion* (1878). This series of photographs was produced by Muybridge at the request of Leland Stanford, a businessman who hired the photographer to provide evidence of his conviction that there was a point in a horse's gallop when all of its hooves were not in contact with the ground. Muybridge's photographs were always intended, then, to provide an account of the *normal* movement of a horse, just as other series of photographs he later produced using similar techniques were intended to show normal patterns of movement of the human body in varying situations. It is for this reason that Muybridge's work is associated with the beginnings of the science of biomechanics, which, even though its secondary applications are of most use for the treatment of pathologies, similarly attempts to arrive at an understanding of the proper, essential components of many aspects of biological matter, movement and function through the application of mechanical, physical and chemical theories to bioentities.

Muybridge's photographs, of course, serve pseudoscientific ends and are thus ultimately perhaps not all that different in genre from Galton's portraits analysed by Green, Lalvani and Sekula. However, even as we move away from this kind of instrumental photography towards the realm of art photography, many similar essentialist discourses can be found in photography's representations of the human body. Indeed, some of the 20th century's most striking and famous images of bodies can be found in Leni Riefenstahl's documentary film *Olympia* (1936), which celebrates the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin and is essentially a celebration of the ideal body that reinvents Classical ideals for the modern era. Although it may, of course, be contended that these ideals were precisely that, utopian ideals that presented a goal that could never be attained, the association of Riefenstahl with the major political figure of her time in Germany would convert these images from utopian ideals to empirical models of physical perfection intended to become the norm of an entire race through a political programme of eugenics and ethnic cleansing.

A less extreme and clearer example of this kind of photographic representation of bodily norms with similarly worrying links to eugenicist ideologies can be found in Australia with the body culture movement that has been documented by Isobel Crombie (2004) in her book *Body Culture: Max Dupain, Photography and Australian Culture*. As Crombie notes of the early European branches of this movement, which was to be so influential for Dupain:

> What is notable is that the various 'body culture' groups [Graeser] listed invariably promoted their activities through the use of photography. This choice made sense: not only was photography *the* modern medium but it also carried a powerful authority of truth. The objective imprimatur of the photograph enabled it to reveal the 'energies' or 'degeneration' of the body in a more factual way than other medium [sic], and its supposed impartiality helped legitimise the concepts of eugenics, racial nationalism and vitalism that invariably underpinned 'body culture'. In addition to its pseudo-scientific uses, photography also played a key role in bringing the classical conceptions of the ideal body into modern life. (Crombie 2004, 9)

Although Crombie here suggests that photography was used in movements such as the body culture movement not only to represent the healthy body, but also to record bodily degeneration, thus serving a teratological end, this function of photography seems to be most prevalent among those whose agenda was primarily political and not aesthetic or artistic. As Crombie says:

> A visual language also developed among those interested in eugenics, and photography played a key role. Indeed the scientific authority of photography made it one of the most powerful media at the disposal of the eugenicist offering graphic visual evidence of the 'fit' and 'unfit' body. (Crombie 2004, 33)

For Dupain and others whose interest was not primarily political but, rather, aesthetic – albeit shot through with deeply held *ideological* connections – photography was absolutely not a medium in which to record bodily abnormalities or degeneration. Indeed, Crombie suggests that much of Dupain's artistic practice was actually formulated in part as a reaction against the 'unfit' or decadent body (2004, 12).

Although the examples of Riefenstahl and Dupain show perhaps better than any other the dangers inherent in the essentializing tendencies of certain forms of photographic representation, one could, of course, object that the essentialist strain that comes through their work has less to do with a mistaken belief in the indexicality of photography than with their own politically inflected ideological beliefs and/or historical, political and social context. Although this is undoubtedly true to a point, the fact remains that it is through the photographic (or cinematographic) medium that this constellation of factors is expressed and that photographic media seem to lend themselves to such discourses more readily than many others because of the common (mis)conceptions regarding their ontology. Nonetheless, lest it be thought that the aesthetic aspects of Riefenstahl's and Dupain's work are compromised by these positions, presenting therefore a kind of utilitarianism by stealth, in order to follow the logic of the present argument through to its end, it will be necessary to examine the work of another photographer whose work is not underscored by such politically inflected ideological stances but appears, rather, to present the viewer with a purely aesthetic rendering of the human form. To this end, let us briefly examine the work of Edward Weston, for many one of the 20th century's greatest photographers and whose work is of interest to us here not only because of its content, but also because of the ways in which this content is explicitly articulated by Weston to the mechanico-photochemical ontology of photography.

Weston's photographs, according to the prefacing comments to a collected volume of his nudes, 'combine the essentials of physical passion with a desire to go beyond the transitory to a discovery of eternal forms' and also of '"the vital essence of things"' (Weston 1977). Such essentializing tendencies are obvious in Weston's own views of his art; in an essay entitled 'Seeing Photographically', for instance, he suggests that photography:

> . . . provides the photographer with a means of looking deeply into the nature of things, and presenting his subjects in terms of their basic reality. It enables him to reveal the essence of what lies before his lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object. (Weston 1964, 107)

Similarly, in a daybook entry dated March 15 he writes:

> It is but a logical step, this printing in glossy paper, in my desire for photographic beauty. Such prints retain most of the original negative quality. Subterfuge becomes impossible, every defect is exposed, all weakness equally with strength. I want the stark beauty that a lens can so exactly render, presented without interference of 'artistic effect'. (Weston 1977, 61)

And in an entry dated April 24 1930:

> *final form of presentation seen on ground glass,*
>
> *the finished print previsioned complete in every*
>
> *detail of texture, movement, proportion,*
>
> *before exposure –*
>
> *the shutter's release automatically and finally <u>fixed</u> my conception, allowing no after-manipulation –*
>
> *the ultimate end, the print, is but a duplication*
>
> *of all that I saw and felt through my camera.* (Weston 1997, 95; my emphasis)

Here, then, Weston draws parallels between the mechanics of the photographic process, its presumed indexicality (which is apprehended as part of the medium's very ontology) and its presentation of subject matter. Elsewhere, Weston complicates this over-simplistic analysis and thus shows that the indexicality of photography can only ever be a wilful self-deception or phantasy. He states, for example, that various technical adjustments can be made at a number of stages in the photographic process in order to 'depart from literal recording' (1964, 107) and yet, even when he acknowledges this possibility, there is always for Weston a requirement for such manipulation to be carried out within the clearly delimited bounds of what he perceives to be the essence of photography, which is to say that the photographer still has to strive through these techniques to attain the realization of a vision that is properly photographic and always saturated with predetermination, just as he must similarly strive to attain the vital essence of his subject matter (1964, 106–7).[9] At all stages in the photographic process then, the tools of traditional photography are, as Mitchell notes, found to be 'well suited to ... Weston's high-modernist intentions – [his] quest for a kind of objective truth assured by a quasi-scientific procedure and closed, finished perfection' (1992, 8) and they are so not so much because of as in spite of the processes in which he was engaged. However, what is particularly significant about Weston's comments seen above is not merely the fact that this too-hasty ontologization of photography is explicitly linked to the concept of the *fix*, nor simply that this premature ontological fixing of the medium can only ever be a wilful misapprehension of the process in play, but also that the photographic medium seems to be particularly prone to the production of prematurely fixed ontologies in its own products (or reproductions, rather) as the body is considered to be a *thing*.

Ultimately, what I wish to suggest from this is that there is a certain kinship between photography and the stereotype as analysed by Rosello (1998). In Rosello's analysis, it is precisely the mechanical ontology of the stereotype (when this term is traced back to its original etymological function designating a duplicate of a set of typographical elements that was used for printing instead of the original so as to ensure massive iterability) that has led to this term's modern day connotations and metaphorical meaning. Defined by its potential for massive iterability (like photography),[10] one of the major dangers that the stereotype constantly courts – and this is why it is of such concern to Rosello – is that its iterative force is such that its viral propagation can appear actually to erase the original entirely and it can thus be mistakenly apprehended as an essence rather than a semipermanent configuration involved in a *process*. This is precisely the point I have made in relation to photography, because I have suggested that the primary mechanico-photochemical action that brings the photograph from latency into the visual field (the fix) is taken to be the essence of photography, the guarantee of its indexicality and stable ontology. However, what this mistaken analysis forgets is that even though the fix arrests certain developmental processes, it is itself also a *process* and not the symptom of a predetermined essence.

The existentialist tenor of this statement should be clear and it perhaps explains why traditional photography is also, if we accept Smee's point, no longer deemed a relevant art form. Because if our mistaken apprehension of the nature of the fix in photography allows us to sustain our belief in its indexicality and atemporality, then (as has been seen) photography appears doomed to petrify the shifting ground of performative (Butler 1993) or heterogenetic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) subject formation that has characterized so much recent work on the human and, rather, to arrest man in the vertical, transcendent structure of normative embodied subjectivity. Or, to view the question from the other side, as does Sarah Kember, perhaps it is actually the case that 'the current panic over the status of the image, or object of photography, is technologically deterministic and masks a more fundamental fear about the status of the self

or the subject of photography, and about the way in which the subject uses photography to understand the world and intervene in it' (Kember 1996, 203), which is to say that we believe in the absolute fix of photography as a means to recuperate a sense of stable subjecthood that is felt to be threatened.

Whichever way one looks at this question, when conceptualized as indexically fixed to an essential reality, photography is not only at odds with contemporary theories guiding people's understanding of its preferred subject matter (bodies), but it can also fall out of synch with contemporary debates in art criticism. For instance, the conceptualization and analysis of photography critiqued herein bears striking resemblances to the modernist interpretation (à la Clement Greenberg) of modern art chastised by Bois and Krauss (1997) in their book *Formless: A User's Guide*. As they argue in their book, analyses such as that of Greenberg are engaged 'above all in an ontological project' that requires modern art:

> ... to justify its existence as the search for its own essence[,] to address itself uniquely to the sense of sight[, to exclude] temporality within the visual and on the body of the perceiving subject[, to be] addressed to the subject as an erect being, far from the horizontal axis that governs the life of animals [and] to have a beginning and an end [so that] all apparent disorder is necessarily reabsorbed in the very fact of being bounded. (Bois and Krauss 1997, 25)

Following their example, we may similarly claim of the nude photographs of Weston (to return to one of our former examples) that here both the body itself and the medium are ontologized too quickly, address themselves solely to the visual,[11] are considered only in terms of the visual pleasure afforded by their final consecrated version and not in terms of the process that brings them into that visual field, addressed to us as erect beings convinced of the superior essence expressed by our upright form and composed with meticulous concern for exquisite composition within the strictly delimited bounds of the frame and instantaneous temporality.

However, photography is not, by its nature, doomed to fall prey to this modernist model. Indeed, the critical projects of scholars such as Suren Lalvani aim to do nothing other than to rethink the history of the ways in which the body has been constructed by photography according to 'pathological determinations of binary structurations' that have determined not only modes of embodiment, but also 'constituted and organized technologies of sight such as the camera' (Lalvani 1996, 19). Yet, projects such as Lalvani's invariably salvage photography's representations from such pathological determinations by, as he says, 'rethink[ing] the body by comprehending its constitution, its operations as signifying material, and its limit within the intersections of cultural and historical production' (1996, 20). This is to say, it is once again only within the signifying, cultural and historical networks into which photography is inserted once the image has been produced that such projects are able to destabilize the dominant discourses surrounding photography and not from within the technological sphere of photography itself. However, I would contend that photography can liberate itself from such pathological strictures not only after the fact, as it were, but in its own practice and that it can do so both in its content and form; that is, its technological deployment. In order to show how it can do this, I would like to finish by examining briefly one example of a photographic *œuvre* that does not ontologize the medium too quickly or essentialize its subject matter, that retains the processual nature of the fix and the temporality of the image. The example chosen is the work of Australian photographer Bill Henson.

In considering the ways in which Henson's work retains both the processual nature of the fix in the mechanics of photography and the shifting existential ground of subject formation, as well as the temporality of both image and subject matter, one word is of the utmost importance: twilight. Twilight is a liminal time characterized not by punctual chronometric precision but,

rather, by a constantly shifting ground that is founded upon differential relations of light and darkness deployed in time. As Peter Craven suggests:

> It is not for nothing that twilight is his [Henson's] favourite time of day, that time when colour still functions as an agent of definition but when it has lost the capacity to distract the mind with any excess of the sensuous, when everything has bled and receded into a music of diminuendo and the richest of purples is merely the mauve tint of grey. (Craven 1992, 356)

It is because they inhabit a similar kind of liminal space also that Henson often uses adolescents in his work; as the photographer explains:

> The reason I like working with teenagers is because they represent a kind of breach between the dimensions that people cross through. The classical root of the word 'adolescence' means to grow towards something. I am fascinated with that interval, that sort of highly ambiguous and uncertain period where you have an exponential growth of experience and knowledge, but also a kind of tenuous grasp on the certainties of adult life. (Sidhu 2005)

Far from the naked images of Weston's prepubescent son or those of his fully developed 20-year-old model and muse Charis Wilson, which seem intended and destined nostalgically to freeze time, to create an ever present past that will forever remain unchanged, Henson's adolescents inhabit what Edmund Capon has termed a 'twilight world' or a 'no-man's land' (2005, 9). Nor is it only their age that thrusts these adolescents into this twilight zone; in many of Henson's images (and never more so than in his works *Untitled 1994/95* and *Untitled 2003/04*), the models he chooses often display slightly androgynous features.

But it is not only (nor even perhaps primarily) with regard to the forms of his subject matter that Henson's images refuse the supposed indexical rigidity of photography, because his use of the formal and material specificities of the photographic medium itself also skirts this twilight realm where fixed boundaries and ontological certainty do not exist. Indeed, one cannot accuse Henson of ontologizing the photograph too quickly because, for him, the photograph is only half completed at that point when it is considered to be finished for all those believing in the indexical power of photography – such as Barthes, for whom the very nature of photography is constituted in the pose in the microinterval required for the light emanating from the subject to be captured (1981, 78). Indeed, this, for Henson, constitutes the major interest of photography. As he explains:

> I always shoot on negative film because it has potential for far greater extremes in lighting situations. And also, negative film is designed to be half the process, the second half being the making of the print. More often than not, I make test prints and let them sit around in a kind of semi-finished state. Gradually, my ideas start to shift as to what this image could be about and how I should modulate it formally and technically. It is quite a lengthy process. I go into the darkroom, change the density of some areas, or maybe change the emphasis between various elements within the picture, and push it around.
>
> The exhibition prints don't look anything like the original negative that came out of the camera. My work is all done in the traditional manner in the darkroom. (Sidhu 2005)

By considering the photograph not to be ontologically fixed in the initial instant of film exposure and image capture, Henson ruptures the indexicality of photography, its apparently analogical relationship to its subject matter and, through a mechanico-photochemical process, further fractures both photography's apparently unbreakable bond between sign and referent and its promise of perfect, limitless iterability. As Isobel Crombie remarks talking of his *Untitled 1980/82* series:

> Henson's intensive but subtle processing and toning removes much of the extraneous detail that ties the photograph too immediately to its origins. The reworking of the print subverts another notable characteristic of photography: its promise of infinite reproduction. By his processing technique – which involves the hand agitation of developing fluid over the paper to create a smoky appearance

that differs slightly in each work – Henson suggests that the unique amalgam of chemistry and the artist's intervention results in a finished print unlike any other that may be made. (Crombie 1995, 382)

In Henson's work, then, the chemical fix that brings the photograph into the realm of visuality serves to undo the fixed forms supposedly inimical to photography. In Henson, this mechanico-chemical work does not produce a 'cheat' or a 'tricked' image,[12] it merely intensifies a process integral to all traditional photography. Concomitantly, this intensification imbues his works with something of the formless or *informe* which, as Krauss and Bois suggest:

> . . . is not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolizable theme, a given quality, as it is a term allowing one to operate a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder. Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative. (Bois and Krauss 1997, 18)

If photography has a (at least partially) performative ontology, then it is surely in the darkroom that it is made manifest. Indeed, as Henson's work shows, the work that takes place in the darkroom could be said to bring the formless into operation in many different ways because it is that part of the photographic process that reintroduces temporality into the photograph – because it is only through delayed exposure to both light and chemicals that the latent image is produced and then developed – and which makes of photography something other than a purely visual medium – as the photographer handles the work, transferring it from one chemical bath to another, masking various portions of the image to overexpose others or manually agitating developing fluids so as to create the 'smoky' appearance mentioned above. Most importantly, however, it is in the darkroom that the predominant verticality of photography is subverted;[13] although photographs are invariably taken in a vertical plane – most often standing up and facing an upright subject – and exhibited and viewed in the same manner (when in galleries), in the darkroom, photography is constructed around a horizontal plane, the image projected down onto paper laid flat, that paper then being passed through a series of horizontal baths.

Although all analogue photography necessarily passes through this horizontal plane, in pretending that its nature or ontology is not affected by the process of the fix but is, rather, fixed for ever in the moment of capture, most photography seems to imagine itself to be constructed purely around a vertical axis and this is reflected in its subject matter also. Weston, for example,[14] mostly shoots his models in upright poses, clearly delineated against their background, which either acts as a purely neutral backdrop intended precisely not to interfere with the central figure or else reinforces the verticality of the composition owing to its own lines, shadows or forms. Even when bodies are photographed in an apparently horizontal position, lying down or folded across the frame, the linear composition of the shot still tends towards the vertical, nipples, legs, arms or quite simply the perspectival angle directing the viewer's eyes away from the horizontal back up into the vertical plane.

In contrast, in Henson's work the horizontal always dominates and, in the series *Untitled 1994/95* and *Untitled 2003/04*, there are a few images that are constructed solely on the horizontal plane: a landscape with no truly vertical forms, the trees seeming to follow the expansive lines of the horizon rather than the verticality of their architecture; a shot of a level crossing in which the perfect symmetry of horizontal lines afforded by the train tracks and overhead power lines is sustained in the brick building in shot, which is perceived in terms of the horizontal proper to its construction and not in terms of the verticality normally associated with the built environment; a photograph of shipping containers on a train stretching from one side of the frame to the other and in which even the lightning seems, impossibly, to obey

a horizontal logic, the same impossible logic that, presumably, allows another photograph's adolescent protagonist to lie suspended in mid-air. Even when the central figure or form in the images in these series appears to obey a vertical logic, it is invariably drawn out along a horizontal axis by one of several techniques. Sometimes the vertical is simply overwhelmed by formal horizontal elements that come to dominate the field of vision (as when fences and telephone or electrical wires strung from one side of the image to the other dominate the verticality of chimney stacks, skyscrapers or telegraph poles). At other times, the verticality of the figure itself is drawn outwards by the disposition of arms or the extension suggested by a body's movement. In two striking shots, one of a river and the other of a road, the vertical is even stretched across the entire frame as perspective distends the image at its base. Elsewhere, the eye is often drawn away from the underexposed central figure by the twinkling, blurry lights of a distant horizon, although more often still this work of horizontalization is effected merely by the gravitational pull of the overwhelming blackness of the image, which seems to pull the fragile figure at its centre outwards into its horizontal framing, blurring the boundary between figure and ground and creating an incommensurability that confounds both the very binaries of photography (light and darkness, form and content) and the direction of the movement across their terms. What is more, the overwhelming darkness of Henson's images extends this horizontal even beyond the image itself, because, ironically, these works must be hung in very low lighting if they are to be seen at all, conditions that necessarily effect another power of the formless, namely its refusal to remain bounded and thus reabsorb all apparent disorder within the clearly delimited boundaries of the work of art. Indeed, when hung in this way, these images seem to seep into the ambient space of the gallery, to impinge upon the sacrosanct and absolute remove between artwork and viewer that gallery space promotes at the same time as their very subject matter transgresses the bounds of subjectivity and objectivity, familiarity and alterity.[15]

Henson unknowingly qualifies his work as one in which the powers of the *informe* reign when he says that 'the photograph has to suggest, not prescribe', that 'art is what almost goes missing in the shadows. It is what is not clearly delineated but, in fact, just suggested [. . .]. It is the way in which you somehow have something, but do not have it' (Sidhu 2005). To conceive of photography in this way is to deploy the *informe* because it is to operate a declassification upon the taxonomic order of photography itself, to recognize photography as a performative and not indexical medium, to loose photography from ontological fixity and, at the same time, to return the existential or processual to the fix. And it is at this point that the *informe* works upon the boundary between form and content also, because Henson's work troubles not only the commonly held belief in the indexical relation of the photographic form to reality, but also, through these same processes of horizontalization and taxonomic lowering, photography's reinforcement of normative body ideals. In this respect, what is perhaps particularly important in Henson's work is how (unlike the work of Joel-Peter Witkin or Jan Saudek, for example) he manages to effect this taxonomic disruption through the normative body itself and, what is more, to do so via the teenage body, the larval stage through which we all pass on the road to adulthood.

Notes

1. Barthes states, 'The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. . . . the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents' (1981, 85). See also Perice (1955, 99–119) for his notion of indexical signs and their difference from icons and symbols.
2. For a discussion of Barthes' supposition of the indexicality of photography and the reasons for this misplaced faith, see Tagg (1988, 1–4).

3. My view here is somewhat different to Mitchell's, because although the latter suggests that it is the arrival of digital technology that allows us to 'expose the aporias in photography's construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic tradition' (Mitchell 1992, 8), the implication here is that this deconstruction of the visual field of photography can be enacted from within an analysis of traditional photography without its digital other.

4. This split and these terms are used by Mitchell (1992, 7), for whom 'straight' photography constitutes 'normal' photographic practice and that which is automatically attributed to a photograph by a viewer in the absence of supplementary information.

5. And let us note, *contra* critics such as Mitchell (1992) but in accordance with Manovich (1995) and Lister (1995), that to suggest this is to assert continuity rather than rupture between analogue and digital technology.

6. John Tagg's approach is slightly different from the others here in this regard, as will be seen.

7. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that critics such as Sterne have to argue so forcefully against apparently commonsense perceptions of technology, because Walter Benjamin (1992 [1936]) argued something not dissimilar to Sterne's point in his *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, stating essentially that, in an age of mechanical reproduction, the very reproducibility of works of art has had a major impact on their traditional form.

8. This can be maintained even in the face Tagg's contention that what he is trying to stress is 'the absolute continuity of the photograph's ideological existence – its coalescence and codification of value-filled meanings – with its existence as a material object whose "currency" and "value" arise in certain distinct and historically specific social practices' (1988, 188) because, as can be seen here, for Tagg the photograph as a material object is inseparable from its ideological function in its reception or utility, which is to say from its meaning.

9. Interestingly, what Weston may be said to argue, then, *contra* Benjamin, is that photography *does* transmit an aura, but an aura that is specifically photographic.

10. Susanne Holschbach (2004) notes how 'In early proto-photographic experiments, the search for a simplified process for duplicating existing masters was equally as important as the goal of fixing the camera obscura's images'.

11. Roberta McGrath comments on the fact that Weston was part of the West Coast photographic group f/64, who took their name from the aperture setting that achieves maximum depth of field. Although McGrath notes how this technique heightens visual qualities, she suggests that these qualities 'excite and invoke (without allowing) the sense of touch' (1987, 333). However, I would contend that the depth of field of Weston's photographs do not even invoke the sense of touch because the maintenance of focus across the depth field of the photographic is peculiar to the very constructed nature of the photographic image and the very opposite of the always localized and discretely focused nature of haptics.z

12. John Berger, although problematizing the notion of authenticity in photography because of the removal of an event from existential time, nonetheless states that 'If the photograph isn't "tricked" in one way or another, it is authentic like a trace of an event' (Berger and Mohr 1979/1980, 166).

13. It should be remembered that for Bois and Krauss, one of the most revolutionary aspects of Pollock's work came from his act of laying his canvas flat and thus subverting the dominant verticality of art (Bois and Krauss 1997, 93–103).

14. Note that this is the case in Dupain and Riefenstahl also, and particularly so with many contemporary photographers such as Herb Ritts, Bruce Weber and Helmut Newton (to name but a few).

15. Henson himself says, 'Photography to me is about finding that intensely intimate element without any presumption of familiarity. That really is about distance or, if you like, the gap between yourself and the subject; and how you charge and electrify that gap. I suppose it has to be at once an unbridgeable gulf and, at the same time, something which has such a tender, proximate breathing presence, that it almost feels as though it's not separate from oneself' (Sidhu 2005).

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