

Multiple Indexicality: a New Perspective in Photography

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ABSTRACT Just as smoke is an index of the presence of fire in nature, so too a photographic picture traditionally involves its subject in a causal and counterfactual relationship; it records its subject and, normally, by observing the photograph, one can say that that subject exists and looks more or less as it appears in the photograph. Photography has been historically considered an indexical art form. This feature is related to one of the steps involved in its mode of reproduction, which mechanically captures and records configurations of objects in space. Due to this indexical component, photography seems to struggle more to generate metaphors than intentional art forms like painting and drawing. By analysing a peculiar kind of photograph — the so-called multiple exposure photographs, which are generated by a combination of multiple shots — I will provide some reasons to support the idea that photographs belonging to this specific category are suitable candidates for being considered as photographic metaphors.

1. Introduction

This paper's goal is to reflect on how the indexical and counterfactual component involved in one of the steps of the photographic process does not preclude the possibility of creating photographic metaphors. To do so, I will focus on the pictures generated by the superposition of multiple photographs, the so-called multiple-exposure photographs.

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The paper opens with a brief history of indexicality in the art (1). In the second, section I explain what multiple-exposure is and why it is worth analysing this technique (2). In the third section, I draw on Carroll's idea of visual metaphor (3). Finally, in section four, I explain why I believe multiple-exposure photographs are good candidates for being considered to be photographic metaphors and what distinguishes them from linguistic and visual metaphors (4).

2. Indexicality in the Arts

Since the last decades of the 20th century, and even more strikingly during the 21st, a transition has taken place that has seen works of art increasingly move away from the role of mere icons to that of indexes: objects whose aim is to witness, to signify something, and stand as a concrete signal of it (Krauss, 1977). Just as smoke, in nature, is an index of the presence of fire, similarly, a photographic image has a causal and counterfactual component within its process of production; it reports and records its subject, it shows a realistic representation of it, and, by observing the photograph, one can say that that subject exists and looks more or less as it appears in the photograph. From the 1970s onwards, the purpose of a work of art — be it a photograph, a performance, a sound recording — is not so much to be a copy of something, but rather, increasingly, to be the testimony of a fact, to be the bearer of an intrinsic meaning, to exist to say something to those who get in contact with it. Among the arts, photography has traditionally been regarded as the paradigmatic indexical medium. Such a characterisation, however, captures only one aspect of the photographic process and risks reducing photography to its causal relation with the world. This paper instead adopts a conception more closely aligned with the New Theory of Photography, according to which photographs are the outcome of a multi-stage process and cannot be reduced to their indexical dimension alone. Within this broader framework, the analysis focuses specifically on the indexical component involved in one stage of the photographic process — the *photographic event* (Atencia-Linares, 2012; Lopes, 2016). The aim is to show that this indexical component, far from being incompatible with metaphorical meaning, plays a crucial role in making photographic metaphors possible.

3. What Multiple-Exposure is

The photographic technique I refer to, multiple-exposure photography, can be achieved in two ways. First, it can be achieved through the analogue photographic process of multiple-exposure, by which the camera automatically records two or more images, thanks to the multiple exposure of the sensitive medium (film) to light, at the moment of shooting (the shutter is opened several times, but the film is not advanced). In this case, we speak of superimposition: the creation of the image is counterfactually dependent on the two (or more) states of affairs we grasp together when developing and then printing the photo. Second, it can be achieved through the process (more usually digital) of post-production of the photographs, which are, in this case, manually juxtaposed at a time after the shot. In this case, it appears more accurate to speak of juxtaposition, as the two (or more) elements that constitute the picture are juxtaposed only after its creation, although they initially existed independently of one another.

A third and rather peculiar case can also be included within the broad category of multiple-exposure photographs (hereafter MEPs). This case may be regarded as a hybrid version of the two techniques discussed above. I am referring to the images collected in the photographic book *Scarti* (Broomberg and Chanarin, 2013). These photographs are distinctive because they result from the accidental superimposition of previously printed images, produced during the printing process itself. More specifically, *Scarti* is composed of waste sheets — the paper used to clean the printing rollers between successive print runs, in Italian “*scarti di produzione*” — from an earlier publication by the same artists. The resulting pictures can plausibly be classified as multiple-exposure photographs, even though the process differs from more conventional techniques. Moreover, it is not immediately clear whether authorship should be attributed exclusively to the artist duo or, at least in part, to the printing process that physically generated the superimpositions.

This example is particularly relevant because it recalls the hybrid form of image production associated with contemporary AI systems. As Young and Terrone (2024) argue, users never exercise complete control over AI image generators. Rather, they resemble gardeners who guide the development of an autonomous process without fully determining its outcome. Similarly, the images in *Scarti* emerge from the interaction between intentional human

actions—the production of the original photographs—and the contingent operations of a non-human process, namely the printing mechanism that randomly superimposes them. The difference, of course, is that Scarti remains entirely within the domain of analogue photography, whereas AI image generation is fundamentally digital. In both cases, however, the creative process is distributed across human and non-human forms of agency, making the identification of the proper maker of the final picture far from straightforward.

Returning to the present argument, multiple-exposure photographs (MEPs) allow viewers to perceive scenes that challenge familiar ways of interpreting photographic images. Within the framework of the New Theory of Photography, this challenge does not arise because MEPs cease to be photographs, but because they incorporate more than one photographic event into a single image. Whereas an ordinary photograph typically derives from a single photographic event, multiple-exposure photographs are grounded in two or more such events. As a consequence, the image embodies multiple indexical relations, each corresponding to a distinct state of affairs. This plurality of indexical relations may initially make it difficult to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the depicted scene. Yet viewers are often able to do so. I suggest that this interpretative achievement resembles the process involved in linguistic metaphor, where apparently incompatible concepts are brought together and reconceptualised within a unified framework. As will become clear, the distinction between the three kinds of MEPs introduced above — superimposition, juxtaposition, and hybrid forms — is merely taxonomic. Regardless of the procedure through which they are produced, images belonging to all three categories can function as photographic metaphors.

Conversely, just as not every juxtaposition of words gives rise to a linguistic metaphor, and not every combination of objects gives rise to a visual metaphor, not every multiple-exposure photograph gives rise to a photographic metaphor. This issue will be further elaborated in the next section.

4. A Forced Coexistence

In general, when viewing a photograph, we tend to form beliefs about the scene it depicts. This tendency is deeply rooted in our ordinary engagement with photographic images and reflects what has often been described as the epistemic privilege traditionally associated with

photography: “We tend to concede certain epistemic authority to photographs” (Atencia-Linares, 2012). This point remains significant even in the case of multiple-exposure photographs. Although such images may initially appear unusual or even puzzling, viewers are nevertheless inclined to seek a coherent interpretation of their content. I suggest that one fruitful way of accounting for this interpretative effort is to understand these images as photographic metaphors. To develop this proposal, I begin by considering Noël Carroll's theory of visual metaphor (1994) and explore how it can be adapted to the case of multiple-exposure photography.

Let us consider Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Bull* (1942). This artwork can be recognised as a visual metaphor because it brings together two elements — the saddle and the handlebars of a bicycle — which, in ordinary circumstances, belong to separate domains and would not be perceived as parts of the same object (Carroll's principles of *homospatality* and *non-compossibility*). In other words, the two elements originally possessed a different meaning — or, more precisely, given that we are dealing with artifacts, a different function: they were designed to enable the riding and steering of a bicycle. Through the process of reconceptualisation enabled by homospatality and non-compossibility principles, however, they acquire a new and unprecedented meaning. Within the metaphorical configuration, the saddle and the handlebars become respectively the head and the horns of a bull. Using the terminology commonly employed in metaphor theory, the combination of the saddle and the handlebars constitutes the *vehicle* through which the *topic* of the visual metaphor — the bull — is presented.

A question that may spontaneously arise is the following: can every association of elements that operates according to the principles of homospatality and non-compossibility be considered a visual metaphor? This possibility seems problematic. It is precisely for this reason that Gal's view (2019), according to which any unusual pairing of objects generates a visual metaphor, appears unconvincing. Just as not every juxtaposition of words results in a linguistic metaphor, and not every combination of visual elements results in a visual metaphor, not every instance of homospatality and non-compossibility gives rise to metaphorical meaning. In my view, only those cases in which elements that originally possessed a specific function or meaning acquire a new and unprecedented one through metaphorical reconceptualisation can properly be considered visual metaphors. The mere fact that one object takes the form of another is not sufficient to initiate a metaphorical process. Gal's example of Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Soft Drum Set* illustrates this point. This work is not convincing as a visual metaphor because the

drum-shaped pillow was conceived and produced as such from the outset. It was, so to speak, created in this form. The two elements did not possess independent meanings or functions that were subsequently transformed or enriched through their juxtaposition. Rather, this is simply an object (a pillow) designed in the shape of another object (a drum). Since no reconceptualisation is involved, no metaphorical process takes place. Returning to Picasso's *Head of a Bull*, it is precisely the unusual coexistence of visual elements that previously belonged to different functional and semantic domains that enables a new conception of the artwork and constitutes the basis of its metaphorical character. Analogously, multiple-exposure photographs bring together two (or more) states of affairs that would not ordinarily coexist within the same spatial and temporal configuration, by embedding them within the same surface. It is from this unusual coexistence — only in the cases in which an interpretative reconceptualisation invites it — that photographic metaphors may emerge.



Picture 1

5. Multiple-Exposure Photographs as Photographic Metaphors

What is a photographic metaphor, and why can multiple-exposure photographs be considered suitable candidates for this category? I propose that photographic metaphors should be understood as a specific subset of visual metaphors: a subset constituted of pictures that originate from a photographic process that involves an indexical component in the photographic event. This does not imply that photographs are reducible to their indexical dimension; rather, it highlights the fact that the causal relation established during the photographic event constitutes one of the components through which photographic pictures are produced. Within this framework, multiple-exposure photographs represent a particularly interesting case because they bring together two or more photographic events (and, therefore, two or more indexical components) in coexistence within a single picture. As a result, interpreting the picture requires an active process of reconceptualisation: the viewer must find a way to make sense of the coexistence of multiple photographed scenes within a single visual space — a situation analogous to that of the viewer of Picasso's *Head of a Bull*.

Borrowing the principles developed in Carroll's theory of visual metaphor (homospatality and non-compossibility), and applying them to MEPs, I argue that these principles provide a useful and neutral framework for interpreting such uncanny images. The concepts of homospatality and non-compossibility allow us to account for how apparently incompatible states of affairs can coexist within the same pictorial space and become the basis for a metaphorical reconceptualisation. At the same time, photographic metaphors appear to represent a distinctive way of generating metaphorical meaning. Unlike linguistic metaphors, which rely on the conceptual interaction between terms, and visual metaphors, which generally depend on the perceptual features of their elements, photographic metaphors involve the coexistence of multiple photographed realities within a single image. Their metaphorical potential therefore emerges from the interaction between the interpretative mechanisms typical of visual metaphor and the specific conditions introduced by the photographic process.

Analysing Picture 1, we encounter the picture of a patient in a psychiatric hospital juxtaposed with a picture of a room filled with weapons and ammunition. By simultaneously endorsing a unified interpretation of the scene, in accordance with Carroll's visual metaphor principles of

homospatiality and non-compossibility, we can associate the elements of mental illness, evoked by one of the two layers, with those of war, evoked by the other layer. Thereby the viewer will see the picture through a new lens: “mental illness is like a war”. The reconceptualisation made possible by the visual juxtaposition of the two pictures have created an enrichment of its meaning. The viewer is aware of the juxtaposition, but can also entertain the illusory scenery made possible by it. As Christian Metz notes, talking about superimposition in cinema, the spectator (of a superimposition) is not a victim of deception to the point of ignoring its existence, but is not aware of it to the point that it loses its effectiveness. (Metz, 1968). In our case, for those who are able to engage with the illusion created by the coexistence of two distinct scenarios within the same spatiotemporal framework, the image acquires a new, metaphorical significance: mental illness can be experienced as a form of warfare.

What appears to be particularly unconventional and innovative in photographic metaphors is that, unlike linguistic metaphors, which require access to the concepts associated with the two coexisting elements, and unlike visual metaphors, which rely primarily on the perceptual and aesthetic features of the elements involved, photographic metaphors seem to require the simultaneous activation of both perceptual and conceptual processes in order for their metaphorical meaning to emerge. In visual metaphors, for instance, the metaphor of the bull arises from the formal resemblance between the bicycle saddle and handlebars and the head and horns of a bull; if these elements had exhibited different visual properties, the metaphor would not have been perceived. By contrast, the metaphor “Mental illness is like a war”, generated through the coexistence of different elements within the same spatio-temporal frame, can only be fully interpreted if the observer both (a) perceives the visual composition and its salient features, and (b) possesses the conceptual knowledge associated with both ‘mental illness’ and ‘war’.

Second, photographic metaphors display a peculiar form of medium-specificity. A comparison with another medium in which superimposition is widely employed—cinema—highlights this distinctive feature. In film, superimposition typically guides the viewer towards a relatively determinate interpretation of a scene. For instance, it may signal that a character is recalling a different temporal dimension, as in *The Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigori Chukhrai, 1959), where the protagonist remembers his beloved, or that the scene belongs to a dreamlike or oneiric dimension. In such cases, the superimposition primarily performs a narrative or representational function rather than a metaphorical one. By contrast, within the domain of

photographic multiple exposure, superimposition appears to facilitate the construction of metaphors more readily, and its interpretative function is not governed by equally stable conventions. Rather than directing the viewer towards a single predetermined reading, multiple exposure in photography opens up a range of possible interpretations, thereby creating favourable conditions for metaphorical meaning to emerge.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, multiple-exposure photographs appear to be particularly strong candidates for photographic metaphors. This proposal is original insofar as photographic metaphors seem to differ from both linguistic and visual metaphors. Moreover, the product of multiple exposure in photography appears to elicit a mode of interpretation that differs from that associated with the same technique in other media, such as cinema.

A possible objection may concern *painterly* metaphors, namely whether replacing the two superimposed photographs with two painted images would produce the same metaphorical effect. What seems to make photographic metaphors possible is precisely the indexical and counterfactual component (the photographic event) which can be found through the photographic process, and which is absent from painting. The metaphorical meaning of photographic pictures appears to emerge more readily for two reasons: epistemically, because of the epistemic privilege traditionally associated with the photographic medium, and phenomenologically, because of the lifelike appearance of photographs that triggers the immediate formation of beliefs about its content. These features provide further grounds for considering photographic metaphors as a distinct type of metaphor.

Finally, photographic metaphors demonstrate that the juxtaposition or superimposition of multiple photographs can give rise to an open-ended range of metaphorical meanings, relatively unconstrained by fixed rules or conventions. As argued throughout this paper, the indexical and counterfactual components involved in the photographic process, from which the images composing the different layers derive, do not undermine the emergence of metaphorical meaning. On the contrary, they constitute the very conditions that make this form of metaphor distinctive.

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