

Object Agency: Interpreting 'Berlin'

When creating understanding of the world around us and representing it through art, we quickly fall upon the established epistemological tropes of anthropocentric interpretation. This view is inherently narrow and fails to consider any impact or influence that comes from other factors, such as the medium used to construct. My focus of discussion is the medium of photography, where the idea of truth, interpretation, representation and bias has been discussed in terms of how these things impact our cultural sensitivities, as humans. However little is said about the 'material agency' (Knappett & Malafouris, 2008) of objects, which has a tendency of being dismissed; where 'agency' is concerned, many believe it is only within the domain of the human conscious. However, as I will discuss, the object does have an influence, even when it is inanimate and when we limit our scope to this method of understanding, it is not possible to fully interpret the object and by extension a world of objects both conceptual and actual - anthropocentric perception cannot fully resolve the object in its entirety.

When discussing Edmond Husserl, Graham Harmon notes his analogy of two Berlins: *"One of them a content inside the mind and the other an object outside it"* (2020:15). This assertion is to suggest that if I were to describe Berlin to you, assuming that you had never been there, it would be different from the one that you might find if you went there yourself. Not necessarily so different that you wouldn't recognise it as the Berlin I described, but the way that I perceive a place and then describe it will inevitably abstract certain details. I may skip bits less important to me, which you then find crucial to the way that you experience it. I really like chocolate so I might mention that there was a pretty good chocolate shop by the Brandenburg gate, or the cool northern district where I bought that

t-shirt but can't remember its name – began with an 'F,' I think. You will experience and remember a different city to me; you may even remember the name of that district. Husserl acknowledges the negligible difference between these two realities as an *"absurd notion"* (p. 15) however, it shows that human perception of the concrete world is a construction of bias and truth, even if that construction describes that same reality.

Harmon is an advocate of Object Orientated Ontology (OOO) placing agency in the object, free from how humans perceive it and removes us from being the central focus of how the world interpreted. The described object has its qualities, which can be looked at in innumerate ways, some of which leading to abstraction. The object however, remains as it is, regardless of this human interaction. As Harmon notes, *"we abstract certain features from these objects, which exist in their full and unexhausted plenitude quite apart from all our theoretical, perceptual, or practical encounters with them"* (2020:18).

Within the sphere of OOO, Berlin would be considered an 'object' like any other: *"any 'thing' is an object, whether living, non-living, artificial, or conceptual"* (Kerr, 2016). It continues to exist in a complexity impossible to define even if *'Ich bin ein Berliner.'* Once you start to put this into those terms of being fundamentally unable to grasp the entirety of an object, then our own authority to interpret is becomes tenuous. Considering the multitude of Berlins as objects of concrete and conceptual, photography, an object unto itself, can be thought of as an act of interpreting objects also, albeit narrowly, and using Husserl in the visual sense, is a third 'Berlin' in how it also abstracts the object; how you photograph an object transfers it from the three-dimensional plane to the surface level of the image, or digital display.

The interpretation of the object is now based on how it has been photographed: how the apparatus has been programmed, how it has been lit, how it has been composed. The object has its own immutable qualities, yet the interpretation is closely tied to the qualities of the photograph, which can supersede those of the object. A black and white photograph for example, abstracts the colourful concrete world, and by doing so de-privileges human perception. However aesthetically, we find its look quite pleasing and our collective learned knowledge starts to kick in, constructing the black and white photograph as 'art,' or more 'serious' work, which is born from a history of images presented in black and white. The ubiquity and fame of 'Migrant Mother' is a notable example of this, as Sally Stein points out it "*often circulated as the centrepiece of the documentary canon*" (2020:62) and for years has been considered an aspirational representation of the plight of the depression era sharecroppers despite its problematic approach to Florence Owens Thompson, which was subsequently appropriated and continually de-contextualised. With the black and white image, the abstraction is perhaps easier to spot, safe in the assumption that the world does not look the way it does in this photograph: qualities of the object's colour remain even when viewed this way.

Abstraction of other images is perhaps harder to spot. When photographing an object, it is assumed that the representation is based on a solid premise of an actuality. Yet as Vilém Flusser is quick to remind us, the camera can only record a concept, which is based on a number of human decisions. Flusser notes a photograph of a green field being merely a chemical mixture added to the emulsion of a film (2000:43) and can be taken further in our digital age as the sensor of a camera is also programmed to create the aesthetic associated with the brand of the apparatus. The abstraction of the photograph by

supplanting the qualities of the object, omitting and limiting some of them to only the surface level of the photographic image, which also subtly abstracts through its own qualities of interpreted chemical or computational values, which are human decisions – this could be considered a further 'Berlin' to continue with Husserl's analogy.

Some of the best photographic works seem to draw attention to the act of photography, which is another way of saying that they also accentuate particular qualities of the photographic process. For example in the way that Vanessa Winship only constructs her images in black and white, which she states is to highlight and contrast a world of colour (2015). Her use of a larger format camera is also akin to a form of theatre of the medium, which is another way to draw attention to the process she undertakes, the qualities of this start to supersede those of the object – that of the human in front of the camera. Winship's is one of theatre and performance and so is the subject of that image whose agency is first determined by the agency of the qualities put forth by the apparatus and the operator. Essentially, what is taking place through all of this abstraction and hierarchy of object qualities can be put in another way: opportunities to interrupt anthropocentric interpretation are frequent.

There is an argument that agency is the sole domain of human conscious and the objects discussed are all designed by us to be secondary to our own existence, which extends the anthropocentric interpretation of the world through materials (Knappett & Malafouris, 2008:IX). However, even when removing all of the human constructed objects from the conversation, if we use the definition of agency as a type of influence, even the qualities of non-human objects can have a massive impact on the perceived 'exclusive' agency of humans. For photographers, the apparatus has been constructed and values

defined already by decisions made earlier in the process. However, there are limits placed on these decisions from the influence of the sun, for example; an object with agency that continues to exist in its immeasurable complexity and without any anthropocentric value placed on them in terms of how it supersedes how the human operates. Proponents of exclusive anthropocentric agency should consider that the history of humans is the history of objects, after all, what is left but the objects that we leave behind? Archaeology is the world interpreted through objects, for instance (2008:XII).

Defining agency as influence is the discussion of how the qualities of the object can transfer, exchange, form hierarchies, and shape the interpretation and representation of the anthropocentric view before we place value on our ability to place ourselves at the centre of the conversation. These qualities are interrupters of interpretation, yet it is still challenging for us to fully remove anthropocentric interpretation in how we understand the world; we will always be looking at a world through human eyes. Focussing only on our interpretations of the world also places value on one human's view over another, one so-called 'enlightened' culture over another, which perpetuates old tropes and are hard to eject from collective experience. There is a tendency to view texts of a narrow field of interpreters, which would create a justified, true 'Berlin,' which only a handful of narrow opinion makers have applied their qualities – even Husserl, Harmon, Stien, Flusser, myself, et al also apply qualities through the act of writing.

Placing the impact of the object's own agency before our own is perhaps not even the answer either however, in terms of OOO, humans would also be considered a form of object, in both figurative and a literal sense, which places our own influential qualities in the same hierarchy as other objects. For photographers, there is a propensity to discuss the

agency of a subject without considering the impact of fundamental qualities of the author, or that of the medium, the apparatus, the environment, all of which are able to create multiple 'Berlins' and change the representative meaning of the intent. Therefore, it is worth understanding that sometimes there is a priority over anthropocentrism in order to better understand and interpret, which may also create a more diverse and equal opportunity for all agency: cultural, socio-economic, human and non-human. Understanding the agency of the object's qualities, how the impact of one over the other creates meaning of representation of that object is crucial

Representation in art that does not consider the material agency of the object, those qualities of both animate and inanimate, risk not being true representations at all as they fail to acknowledge fundamental influences of material, conceptual, and actuality. The anthropocentric position is merely one of the actors that create influence over the intent.

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