The active presence of absent things: a study in social documentary photography and the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005).

Roger Grahame Brown, MA

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Abstract

“Phenomenology is the place where hermeneutics originates, phenomenology is also the place it has left behind.”
(Ricoeur 1991: From Text to Action)

Hermeneutic interpretation lies at the centre of the process of making social documentary photography. As Nagel has pointed out for philosophy, for the social documentarist there is a core problem: how to combine the perspective and understanding of a particular person and their experience in the world, with an objective view of that same complex and fluid world of human activities and behaviour, that includes both the person and their viewpoint (see Nagel 1986: The View From Nowhere). Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics of text, action, time and narrative, offers us a thoughtful way of doing so.

In this thesis I shall examine possibilities for bringing into dialogue the practice of social documentary photography and the conceptual resources of the post-Structural and critical philosophical hermeneutics of text and action developed by Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) from the 1970’s onwards. Ricoeur called this an ‘amplifying’ hermeneutics of language, defined as ‘the art of deciphering indirect meaning’ (Ricoeur 1991: ibid).

Social documentary photography is an intentional activity concerned with the visual interpretation, ethics and representation of life, the otherness of others, and through them something about ourselves. The photographic narratives made form social histories hinging on encounters with others. They raise challenging questions of meaning and interpretation in understanding the relations of their subjective agency to an objective reality. Traditionally the meaning of such work is propositional. It consists in the truth conditions of bearing witness to the direct experience of the world and the verifiability of what the photography says, or appears to say about it. To understand the meaning of the photography is to know what would make it true or false. This theory has proven useful and durable, although it has not gone unchallenged. The power it has is remarkable and new documentary narratives continue to be formed in this perspective, adapting to changing technologies, and reverberate with us today.

A more subtle way of thinking about this is given by a pragmatic theory of meaning. This is what I am proposing. The focus here is upon use and what documentary photography does and says. A praxis that I refer to by the act of photographing: a discourse of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary utterances in whose thoughtful and informed making are unified theories of visual texts within the theories of action and history. The key is the capacity to produce visual narratives made with intention and purpose that in their performative poetics and their semantic innovations attest to the realities of experience and sedimented historical conditions witnessed, and communicate those to others within a dialectic of historical consciousness and understanding.

The narrative visualisations disclose a world, a context in which the drama of our own life and the lives of others makes sense. In their interpretations of an empiric reality can be found ethical concerns and extensions of meaning beyond the original reference that survive the absence of the original subject matter and the original author of the photography whose inferences our imaginations and later acquired knowledge can meditate upon and re-interpret. Thus in the hermeneutic view, the documentary photographic narrative is a form of text that comes to occupy an autonomy from, a) the author’s original intentions, b) the reference of the original photographic context, and c) their reception, assimilation and understanding by unknown readers-viewers.

Ricoeur argues that hermeneutic interpretation discloses the reader as ‘a second order reference standing in front of the text’, whose necessary presence solicits a series of multiple and often conflicting readings and interpretations. Consequently Ricoeur’s critical, philosophical hermeneutics brings us from epistemology to a kind of ‘truncated’ ontology that is only provisional, a place where interpretation is always something begun but never completed. Interpretation according to Ricoeur engages us within a hermeneutic circle of explanation and understanding whose dialectic is mediated in history and time. For Ricoeur this implies that to be able to interpret meaning and make sense of the world beyond us is to arrive in a conversation that has already begun. His hermeneutic wager is, moreover, that our self-understandings will be enriched by the encounter. In short, the more we understand others and what is meaningful for them the better we will be able to understand ourselves and our sense of inner meaning.

The central thesis of his hermeneutics is that interpretation is an ongoing process that is never completed, belonging to meaning in and through distance, that can make actively present to the imagination what is objectively absent and whose discourse is understood as the act of:

“Someone saying something, about something, to someone.”


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