The Unphotographable: 
a comparison of metaphor and metonymy 
in documentary photography

Introduction

The indexicality of photography implies that ‘authenticity’ is one of its primary qualities, so we generally expect documentary photography to depict concrete events, places, people and things to tell its stories. This is however a limited view of documentary, described by John Grierson as "a creative treatment of actuality" (1933).

Many enlightened practitioners have successfully worked with the ‘creative’ part of the definition by deploying the hidden hand of authorship. Documentarians have long been applying semiotic theory (consciously or otherwise), employing signs to communicate ideas that cannot be directly photographed.

Documentary here describes any photography where there is an intention to inform its viewers of some reality, "beyond the production of a fine print" (Ohrn 1980: 36). Semiotics is the study of signs (Saussure 1983), and for visual communication we consider a sign in terms of its inseparable parts, the signifier and the signified – the thing photographed and what it represents. The linguistic transference that occurs when 'thing A means idea B’ can take the form of metaphor or metonymy.

Sunflowers, Ukraine, 1998 by Simon Norfolk

...of someone you know, 2016 by Rob Townsend

A metaphor evokes a similarity between signifier and signified (e.g. a field of wilting flowers connoting death), while a metonym evokes an association – whether a causal connection or a synecdoche – between signifier and signified (e.g. fresh flowers tied to a lamppost also connoting death, but in a different way).
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As a documentary photographer, does it matter which to use? Is one more appropriate, useful or reliable than the other? This essay examines the respective uses, advantages and limitations of metaphor and metonymy as rhetorical tools for communicating subject matter deemed to be 'unphotographable'.

Language, authorship and ambiguity

Both types of figurative comparison sit at the foundation of language itself, though often overlooked. According to Bate, Jacques Lacan believed that "metaphor and metonymy [are] the two most important rhetorical figures, because they account for the 'slippages' in language that occur in everyday life" (2009: 42).

One reading of Martha Rosler's meta-critique of documentary photography The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (1974-75) is that the titular systems are not specifically verbal and visual, but more broadly metaphor and metonymy (Edwards 2012: 106); it just so happens that Rosler used metonyms for the photographs and metaphors for the text cards, having decided not to photograph actual drinkers (ibid: 7).

Barthes identifies three messages in a photograph (1977: 36): the linguistic message (accompanying or embedded text, working descriptively as 'anchoring' or indicatively as 'relay'), the denoted message (what is in the picture) and the connoted message (what the components of the image represent). To differentiate between denotation and connotation is to understand the distinction between what a picture is of and what it is about.

Before dissecting metaphor and metonymy it's useful to consider their common ground as figurative rhetorical tools. According to Franklin (2016: 146), documentary photography can be categorised as didactic (pseudo-objective 'eyewitness' work such as photojournalism) or ambiguous – allowing the viewer the cognitive space to bring their own imagination and context to create the meaning in their mind. If didactic images are analogous to prose, ambiguous ones are more like
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poetry (ibid: 151) – more expressive, fragmentary, potentially difficult to immediately understand, but more rewarding and memorable once the viewer-reader has made the connotative connection.

The distribution channel and the viewing environment can determine whether using ambiguity is appropriate; in photojournalism the image needs to "give up its meaning quickly" (Seawright 2014), but in a book or gallery environment one can create a more engaging, reflective viewing experience.

There is a continuum of authorship: at one end is consciously placing (or finding) signifiers to communicate a particular message; along the continuum is the photographer working reflexively and introducing signification without overt intent; at the other extreme is the image where connotation is entirely in the mind of the viewer – Barthes' reader as author (1977: 142).

This essay covers the first of these: the deliberate encoding of a photographic message at the moment of production with the intent of it being appropriately decoded at the moment of consumption (Hall 1980: 128).

Metaphor

Metaphor represents linguistic substitution: one item for another (whereas metonymy represents linguistic combination: one item to another) (Jakobson 1956). Metaphor simultaneously relies on similarity and difference (Fiske 1982: 96); signifier and signified must be sufficiently similar in some quality for them to co-exist in the mind, yet be different enough for the contrast to be evident.

One advantage of metaphor is its flexibility of form: the signifier can be an object in the frame, or a colour, shape, pattern, shooting angle, lighting choice, focal point or even a compositional element such as juxtaposition or position in the frame. A red colour palette can connote danger; a low upwards angle can connote authority; a person on the edge of the frame can connote isolation.

Another benefit of metaphor is that it can work at a subconscious level; a viewer may not know why an image makes them feel calm, happy, angry or unsettled, but it may be due to encoding by the photographer.

Metaphors require some creative cognition in the viewer and can therefore be riskier to employ; the universe of potential similarities to select from can be vast and diverse. The signification may go over the viewer's head entirely, or there may be a negotiated or oppositional reading (Hall 1980: 128). Thus it is the ‘micro-level’ context that matters with metaphor: the viewing experience needs to provide supporting information such as text or other images, giving
some 'bumper rails' within which to frame potential readings. The earlier example of death connoted by wilting sunflowers may not be immediately understood as an isolated image, but with relevant supporting text, and positioned between photographs of a derelict building and an execution site, it gives up its meaning more easily.

Metonymy

Metonymy is "the invocation of an object or idea using an associative detail; [...] it does not require an imaginative leap (transposition) as metaphor does." (Bezuidenhout 1998). Not requiring this leap gives metonymy an advantage in some situations: the transference of meaning between signifier and signified relies less on a creative receiving mind and more on knowledge and relational cognition. Metonyms can be therefore be easier to decode by the average viewer.

Metonymy relies less on the specific viewing experience than metaphor does, and can more reliably stand alone – as long as the ‘macro-level’ context exists, i.e. the knowledge that connects signifier to signified is part of a shared cultural code: flowers tied to a lamppost will connote death without further clues, as long as this form of memorial exists in the culture of the viewer.

The downside of using metonyms, aside from the risk of the cultural code not being shared, is that they are normally less ambiguous than metaphors and therefore potentially less expressive or ‘poetic, which may render them less potent or memorable.

Now to look at when a documentarian might employ metaphors or metonyms – when one may need to portray subject matter that is either impossible or unacceptable to photograph directly.

Taboo subjects
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First there is that which is unphotographable not literally but culturally: subject matter that breaks a taboo. There are subjects that are inappropriate or forbidden to depict in certain societies, with general examples being death, violence and sexuality and more specific ones including blasphemy or abortion. The photographer may have limitations placed on the shooting and/or distribution of images, or may self-impose restrictions for ethical reasons, such as the dignity of victims or the sensitivities of the viewing public.

Gilles Peress employed both metonymy and metaphor in this 1993 image of children playing in a Sarajevo war zone; the chalk line connotes murder victim and the shadow connotes a (child-sized?) corpse, but the former allusion is the more immediate and potent. The use of signification makes this image more powerful than a photo of an actual sniper victim, as this doesn't just say 'people were killed here' – it adds 'and children accepted this as part of normal life'.

There's a sub-genre of contemporary documentary that employs metonymy in an almost typological way. In 2016 Katherine Cambereri did a project photographing the clothing worn by rape victims, presented against a plain black background. It's a combination of taboo subject matter and temporal shift, and uses the synecdoche of clothing to represent the victim.

Temporal shift

The second unphotographable category is what might be termed temporal shift. By its nature photography can only capture the present moment – the past is history and the future's a mystery. What photography can do however is evoke a past (aftermath photography does exactly this) or foreshadow a future.

Simon Norfolk arrived at Auschwitz over 50 years too late to capture the killing that took place, but this staircase carries the message through a causal metonym. The punctum (Barthes 1993: 27) of the distinctive wear pattern on the steps, which when coupled with the caption
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placing the staircase in Auschwitz unleashes the horrific meaning of the image – the sheer volume of death. Metaphor is present as a secondary device; stairs as an allusion to ascension to heaven and the ‘other side’ in the blurry reflection to the right. This is a photo of a staircase, but about genocide.

Anticipatory or foreshadowing photographs are less common, but Josef Koudelka’s wristwatch image from the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague is a good example. Despite the reality that the photo denotes the time the invasion reportedly started elsewhere in the city, it takes on a connoted meaning by using the watch as a metonym signifying anticipation, emphasised by the purposeful posing of the arm over an eerily empty street. It is a photo about invasion taken before the invaders arrive on the scene, and so becomes a photo about a future event.

Intangible concepts

The broadest category of unphotographable subjects is intangible concepts such as thoughts, emotions, sensations and characteristics. How can one photograph indecision, infatuation, anxiety or stoicism? Wells suggest that "Objects do service as carriers of emotions" (2009: 98). This is an area where metaphor is more flexible and potentially more successful than metonymy.

Bill Brandt’s A Snicket, Halifax (1937) shows how long documentary has embraced metaphor. The steep, narrow, gloomy cobbled hill powerfully implies the struggle inherent in the lives of the northern working class he was chronicling, without depicting people.

An advantage of metaphor mentioned earlier was its ability to work beyond the constraints of the frame; it can extend into the presentation format. Edmund Clark’s Control Order House (2011) examines the life of a terror suspect held without charge under a form of house arrest. In the exhibition installation one room is covered floor-to-ceiling with all the JPGs from his
Memory card, unedited – a potent metaphor (to a photographer anyway) for permanent surveillance.

Conclusion

I'm increasingly deploying a combination of metaphor and metonym in my own work. In the example in the introduction I used flowers to metonymically connote bereavement. My final Level 2 assignment was concerned with regional stereotyping in the aftermath of the EU Referendum, and metaphor and metonym were employed as authorial devices to communicate stereotyped ideas.

Taking the broadest view, it can be argued that all documentary photography is metonymy – specifically synecdoche – in that it uses fragments of the world to represent a wider subject. Within the frame however, metonyms are particularly suited for subject matter that is not technically unphotographable but rendered so by taboo or timing; an associative detail does its best to stand in for the thing not shown.

Metaphors, on the other hand, excel at mentally evoking subject matter that is genuinely not physically photographable – the intangible concepts category. Provided the viewing audience can be reasonably expected to decode the message, in the appropriate context and perhaps after a suitable period of contemplation, then the world of metaphor offers the open-minded and expressive documentary photographer a potentially infinite box of rhetoric tools.

In the hypothetical situation of being forced to choose, I choose metaphor.

(1997 words)
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Sources

Katherine Cambereri http://www.katcphoto.com/well-what-were-you-wearing.htm (accessed 25/10/2016)
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