

On the Subject of Photographs

The active (act of?) contribution by the
medium in the creation of photographs

My research is investigating three notions:

1. The consequences and implications of our beliefs and assumptions about what photographs 'are' and what they show us
2. The ways in which, and the extent to which, our language informs these assumptions
3. That, by identifying and interrogating these assumptions, it may be possible to develop a new way to think about and use photography

With its origins in the industrial revolution, the camera – like the telescope & the microscope – is assumed to operate in accordance with the laws of physics. Accordingly, we regard the camera as an objective instrument to record images which, in turn, are understood to be:

“a window on reality” (Bryman, 2012:427), “an accurate and objective record” (Genoni, 2002:137), “a faithful record of what has been witnessed” (Rogers, 1978:33), “a natural and truthful” account (Fosdick & Fahmy, 2007:1) of things that were “already there” (Barthes, 1984:55), “as they really are” (Ross, 1982:12)

As a result, we recognise only three factors in the creation of photographs:

1. *The photographer's intention* (what we want to achieve, or what we want to show you)
2. *The photographer's expertise* in manipulating the camera & the technology of reproduction in the pursuit of this intended or desired result
3. The appearance and behaviour of (what I call) *the things in front of the lens*

These beliefs (about what photographs 'are' & the factors that determine their content) are both reflected and reinforced by describing photographs as 'taken'

I submit that this way of *describing* photographs encourages certain *ways of thinking about them*:

- That the scenes, events & 'moments' depicted in photographs *already existed 'out there' independently of the act of recording them*
- That 'the subject of the photograph' (what the photograph is 'about') is a reference to either *the photographer's intention*, or *the person, place or object photographed* – what I call *'the things in front of the lens'*

There may however, be *something else going on here...* something which the conceptions imposed by our definitions may make it difficult to see



Untitled (Crowd 2), St. Petersburg, Russia - Alexey Titarenko (1993)

A small number of photographers have thought so

I never have taken a picture I've intended. They're always better or worse. You don't put into a photograph what's going to come out. Or, what comes out is not what you put in. The camera is 'recalcitrant'. You may want to do one thing and it's determined to do something else.

(Diane Arbus, 1972, 11, 14-15)

I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed [...] the photograph isn't what was photographed, it's something else.

(Garry Winogrand - cited by Sontag, 1973, 197 & Diamonstein, 1981-82)

I fully agree with [you about giving] photography the chance to participate in the production and creation of the photograph. Often I work in this way [so] that I don't know what will be on the film.

(Michel Szulc Krzyanowski, personal correspondence 1988)

What, then, is this *something else* going on in photographs – and where does it come from?

- That 'the subject of the photograph' (what the photo is actually 'about') is indeed the glimpse it offers of the world "as it really is" – *but a world 'as it really is' which is invisible to us due to the conceptual constraints imposed by (what I call) our 'bino-chrono consciousness'*
- That, as a result of the way it interprets and renders space & time, *the camera sometimes creates scenes and 'moments' which did not exist – and could not have existed – but which were created by the act of photographing them*

By '*bingo-chrono consciousness*', I refer to the influence of the perceptual and cognitive biases resulting from the mechanics of human biology and its impact on our experience of space and time:

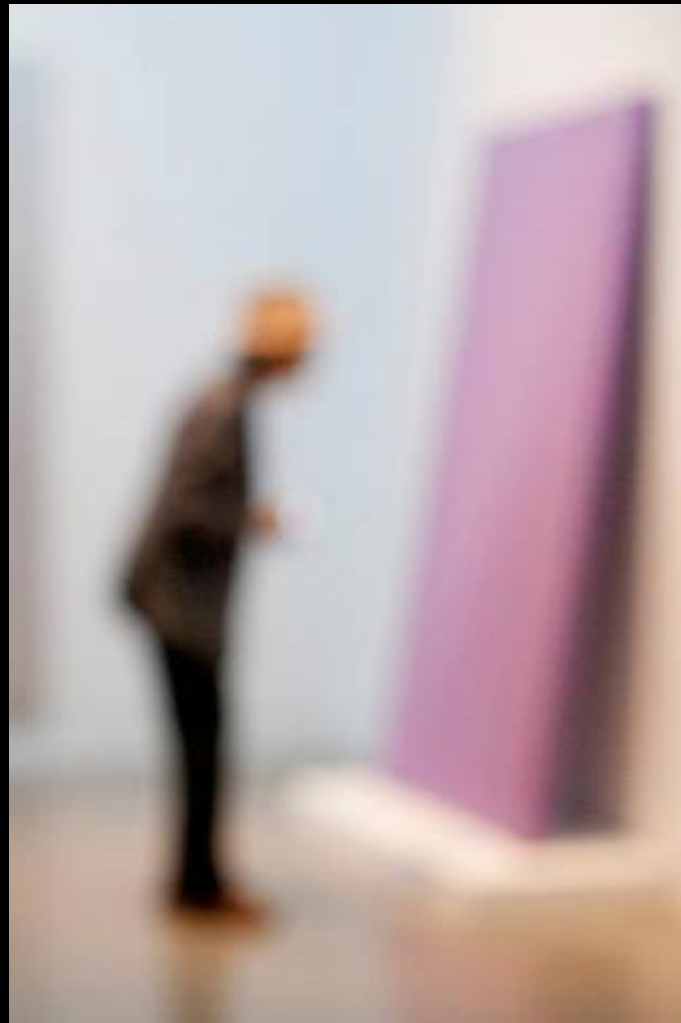
Space

1. Binocular vision which gives us both *the means to perceive* – and *the expectation that 'reality' has or is made up of* – 3-dimensional depth and distance

The camera knows nothing of depth & distance but instead describes the world *as a flat surface* because, with its monocular eye, this Cyclops *sees it as one*. In doing so, the camera reveals patterns hidden behind what binocular vision tells us is a 3-dimensional world



Waiting room of a clinic - Eimu Arino



Barbara Kyne (2015)



Promenade des Anglais #3 – Rutherford (2003)



Snow – Saul Leiter (1960)



First Flight – Rutherford (1994)

By '*bino-chrono consciousness*', I refer to the influence of the perceptual and cognitive biases resulting from the mechanics of human biology and its impact on our experience of space and time:

Time

2. We experience time as a seamless chronological continuum with a 'before', a 'during' and an 'after' (what Enkvist [1995:123] called "the epistemics of cause and effect")

To the camera, there is no 'before', 'during' or 'after'. Whether a fraction of a second, minutes or hours, the moment depicted is a single '*now*' in which *everything happens at once* – and *keeps on 'happening' forever*

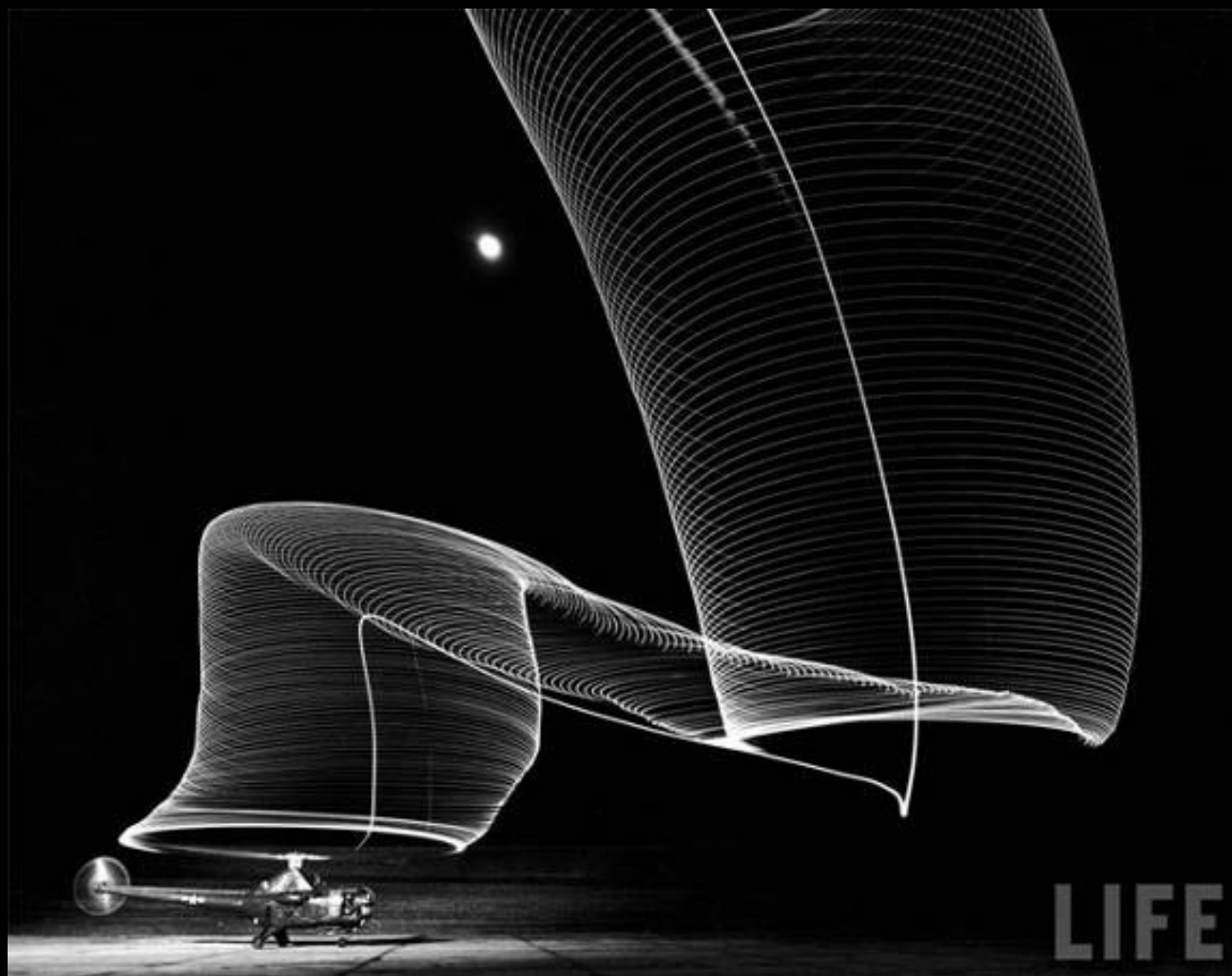


Ballet N.Y.C. - André Kertész (1938)



Paranal Residencia – John Colosimo ESO





Sikorsky helicopter - Andreas Feininger (1949)



Greg Rutherford - Sport magazine (2012)



We know (and make sense of) what we see in photographs (and what we think they show us) through 'the language of our eyes', but also – *pace* General Semantics – through 'the eyes of our language'

(Consider the world view both reflected and reinforced by the use of language in the phrase 'You made me angry')

Acting as the perceptual and conceptual 'filters' by which we 'map' and 'know' the world, language not only gives us the means to *experience* space & time, but *defines the manner in which we do so*.

As a result, these filters not only define *what* we (think we) know about photography (ontology), but *how we 'know' it* (epistemology)

By interrogating these assumptions, we may find that the camera does indeed offer us “an accurate and objective record” of the world “as it really is”... but “as it really is” to **photography** – not to **us**.

So... if the world “as it really is” that photographs show us can only be seen by being photographed... does this not oblige us to concede that these ‘moments’ do not exist until they are brought into being by photography?

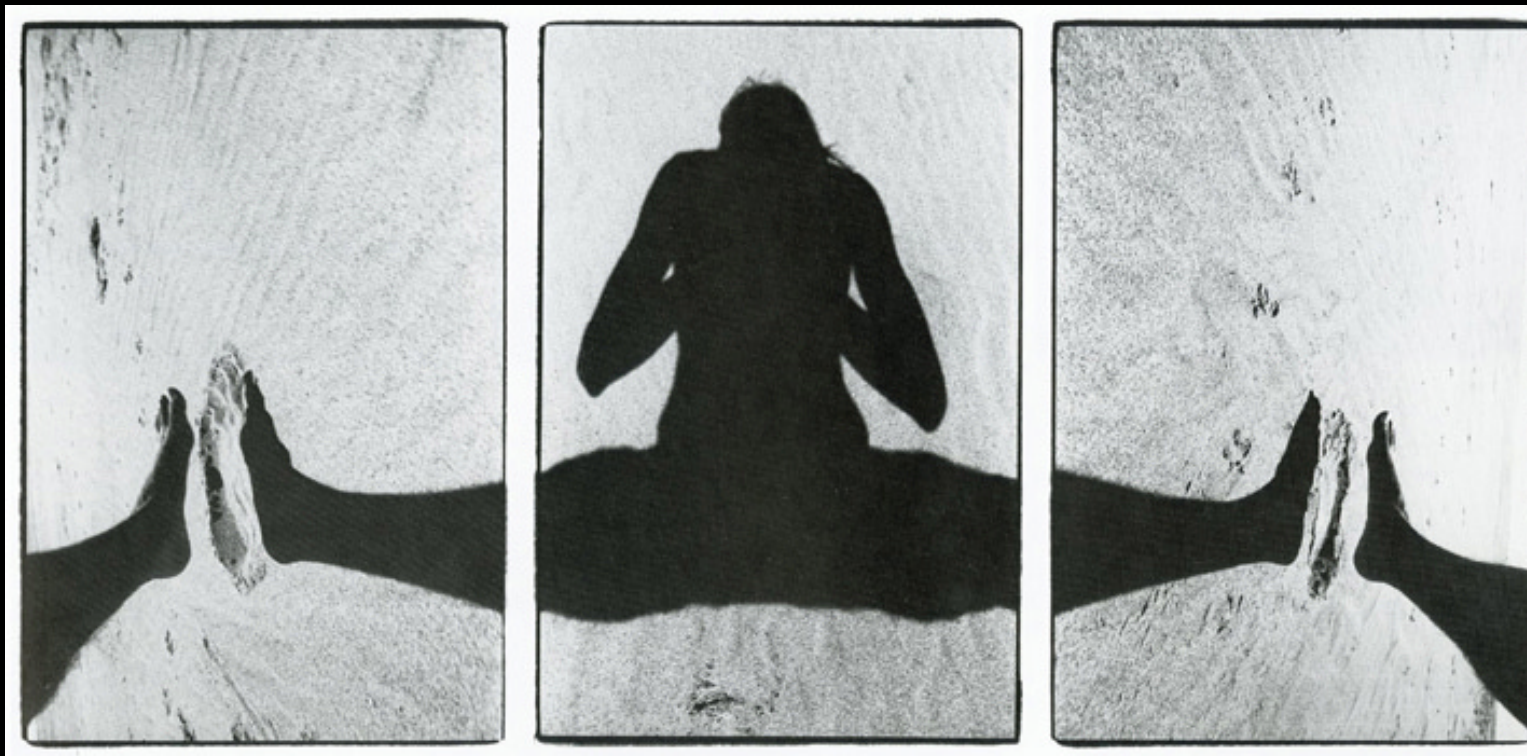
If so, is it not more accurate *to think of* – and describe – some photographs as *‘made’* rather than as *‘taken’*?

These issues are explored in more detail in my article *Photography as an act of collaboration* published in the *Journal of Media Practice*: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14682753.2014.1000043>

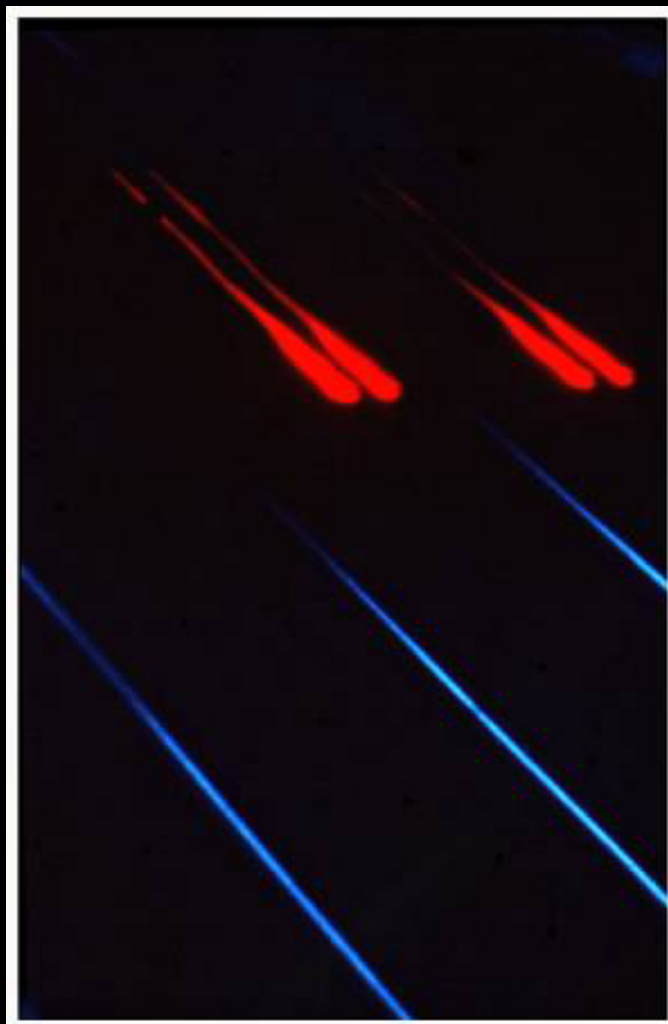




Trees, spring, Toronto Canada - Alex Neumann (1980)



Baja California - Michel Szulc Krzyzanowski (1980)



tail lights and streetcar tracks, Queen Street West – Rutherford (1980)



Dan's the man – Rutherford (2013)



Syrgos Selini submarine 4783 – Rutherford (2010)



Cretan Sea submarine 4227 – Rutherford (2015)



Cretan Sea submarine 0488 – Rutherford (2013)

Research questions:

1. Does the ubiquitous use of the term 'taking' photographs predispose us to see photographs as something akin to *photocopies 'taken' from the world 'as it really is'* – and so hinder us from seeing them as a record of something else?
2. Is it possible that, in some cases, the way in which the photographic medium renders or depicts *the things in front of the lens* results in an image (a scene, an event or a 'moment') that did not exist 'out there' – but which was instead *created by an Act of Photography*?
3. How can I know? (How can I test this?)

Selecting a research methodology

To determine whether *the camera creates scenes and 'moments' that did not exist – or could not have existed – until created by an act of photography*, I will need to investigate and establish:

- i) A set of criteria for selecting appropriate photographic works (by established masters, amateur photographers, and the researcher) to test the hypothesis
- ii) The kind of features or characteristics which are not the result of the photographer's intention, expertise, or the appearance or behaviour of the things in front of the lens – as evidence of the postulated act of photography
- iii) A valid/reliable means (and/or set of tools) to investigate the selected photographic works to detect/identify such features (and possibly) determine their origins

Challenges in selecting a research methodology

As a result of:

1. the assumption that photographs provide objective evidence; that they represent:

“a window on reality” (Bryman, 2012:427), “an accurate and objective record” (Genoni, 2002:137), “a faithful record of what has been witnessed” (Rogers, 1978:33), “a natural and truthful” account (Fosdick & Fahmy, 2007:1) of things that were “already there” (Barthes, 1984:55), “as they really are” (Ross, 1982:12)

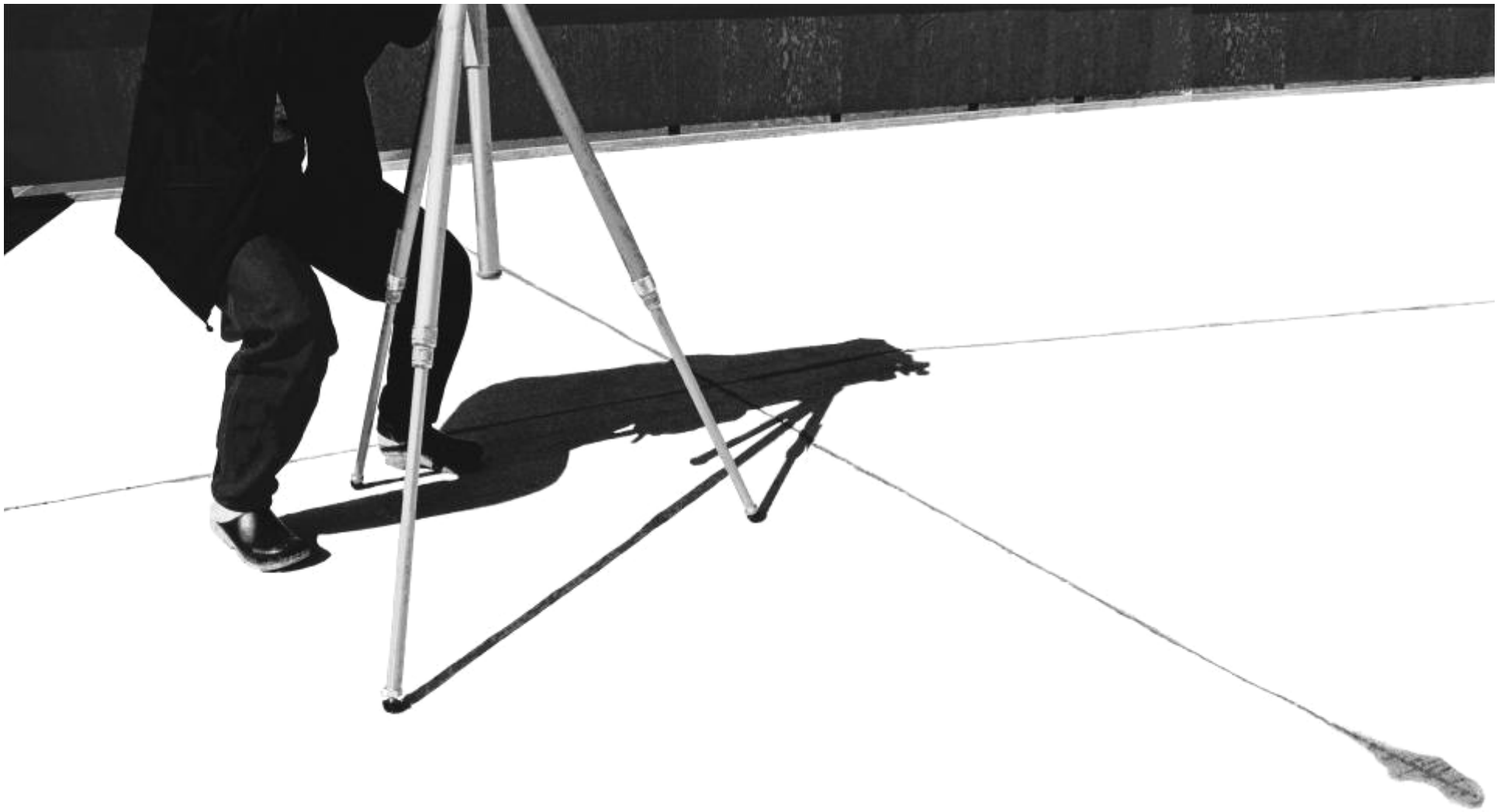
2. the colonisation of photographic visual research by the social sciences (*anthropology, cultural studies, ethnography, history, psychology, sociology, etc.*)

Challenges in selecting a research methodology

In the design of visual research methodologies, there are a set of ontological & epistemological assumptions that the purpose of studying photographs is to identify the social practices (the values & beliefs) that inform *why* the photograph was made, *how* it was made, of *what*, by *whom* and *when*

1. *The photographer's intention*
2. *The photographer's expertise*
3. The appearance and behaviour of *the things in front of the lens*

As a consequence, the visual research methodologies by which photographs are typically interrogated look, not *at* the photographs – but *through* them as if through a portal, with no regard for *the way in which the medium has rendered or depicted what it records*



Rutherford's website:

www.theshadowofthephotographer.com