

The University of YouTube: the medium, the user, photography and the search for really useful knowledge.

Blog post at: <https://unthinking.photography/themes/photo-education/the-university-of-youtube-the-medium-the-user-photography-and-the-search-for-really-useful-knowledge>

This short text is the result of an attempt to understand photographic theory by YouTube, which took the shape of an online errand of forking paths, full of interesting digressions, leading of course everywhere and nowhere. After several evenings of semi-distracted browsing and a solid half-day of clicking and watching I had to put a stop to it. Just how many paid/unpaid, work/leisure hours should one dedicate to the world's third most visited website, where five billion videos are watched each day by over one billion users who upload **300 hours of video every minute** ? By what methods is such a vast repository of data to be navigated and made sense of? Or, perhaps the goal of making sense belongs to an older and possibly generational logic, now overturned by the non-linear essence of digital archives and the click or swipe of a screen replacement. As a strategy to avoid the mental exhaustion of finding a theory of photography via YouTube the quest took a reflexive turn towards the question of what YouTube does to the user. A question I consider more anchored in the body, real time and space and possibly more pertinent to our period of accelerated cultural consumption and its precarious conditions. Surely, if you can watch a video that shows you how to remove the oven door, then you can learn about photographic theory, or can you?

What I know about photography has been accrued over a lifetime, in many contexts including teaching, research and scholarship and through making images, looking, reading, discussion and writing. YouTube however, invites us to circumvent the frame of established knowledge, through its instantaneity, encyclopedic character and non-linear form. With this recognition in mind I wondered if it might be possible to imagine an experiment in which,

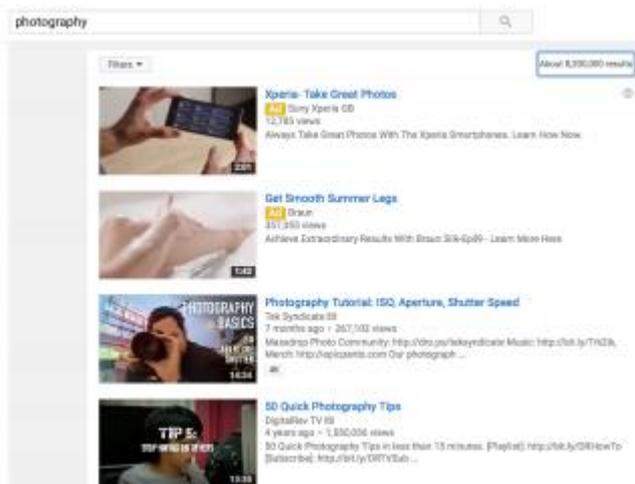
through hypnosis say, I was able to enter YouTube as a young art student having not yet fully considered photography. In my hypnotic state of time travel (forgetting for a moment that as an art student in the 1960s YouTube had a long way to go to be conceived), an observer could record my search journey and interview me about what I had watched and made of it.

Hypnotize Yourself **WITH VOICE **WORKS GREAT** PLAY / REPLAY**

This is an optional caption for the video. I think it would be great for additional context but might not fit with the existing essays.

A Hypnotic Journey

Search for photography and what do you get? Eight million links and a lot of advertising.

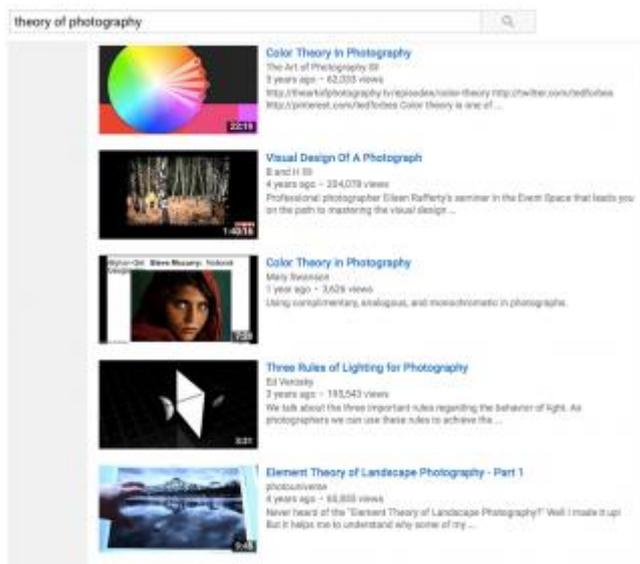


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More tellingly you get a definition of photography defined solely by its technical dimensions. This is photography as the ‘camera commodity’ in which YouTube remediates older print editorials and advertorials, with countless videos explaining which camera to buy and how best to use it to get ‘top quality pictures’. As one camera buff suggests, sitting behind a table full of cameras, “basically photography hasn’t really changed much since the beginning, it comes down to three things, ISO, Aperture and Shutter Speed”.

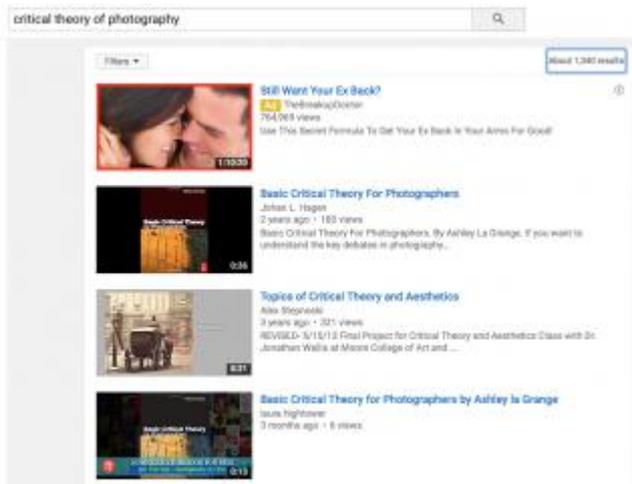
Photography Tutorial: ISO, Aperture, Shutter Speed PLAY / REPLAY

But hasn't photography changed? Isn't the condition of the photographic image radically different with the advent of digital technology, computation and networks? Might I get closer to the current condition of photography if I refine my search term to "photographic theory"? In response, YouTube produces a list of videos covering the **technical** theory of the camera apparatus: depth of field, ISO, colour temperature. Up until the 1970s photography was taught as a technical and vocationally applied subject and theory was closely tied to the knowledge required to understand how photography utilized reflected light and how the camera frame composed a subject.



Search for "Theory of Photography" on Youtube

But what other kind of theory of photography is there which stretches beyond the science of colour, chemistry, electronics and optics? Photography has deep connections to the social and the personal. Photography is centrally entailed in the system of visual representation, within a larger economic mode of the reproduction of capital and human labour. What YouTube search terms might yield these interests and connections? A social theory of photography? A psychology of photography? The economics of photography? Could YouTube offer up such perspectives?



Search for "Critical Theory of Photography" on Youtube

YouTube the Medium: is it still the message?

In looking for productive meanings of photography, or anything else on YouTube, you first and foremost enter the medium itself – which is to recognize that you become a user, subjected to YouTube’s scopic regime of embedded video, hyperlinks and search engine optimisation. Resistance, or more neutrally, ‘critical distance’ is of course always possible by virtue of bringing your existing knowledge to bear upon and scrutinize any situation, virtual or otherwise. However, the moment you engage with YouTube you are taking part in a data-gathering interrogation in which you have no choice but to make choices, which define your user profile and interactions.

Try as I might in my self-imposed hypnotic state, I cannot leave this accumulated knowledge and the perspectives it gives me at the door of the YouTube interface. My ‘old knowledge’ drives me to return to an old question of whether, in the case of YouTube, the **medium is still the message**? What would media theorist Marshall McLuhan have made of YouTube?

Marshall McLuhan Full lecture: The medium is the message - 1977 part 1 v 3

PLAY / REPLAY

In McLuhan's argument, the content of any new medium is always the form of a previous medium; hence, the content of writing was speech, whereas its message was writing itself. If this were true of YouTube, its content is video, but its message is computation. If the medium is the message then all of the billion hours of video on YouTube are rendered as one thing – the content of a previous medium. Following this logic, philosopher [Jean Baudrillard giving a lecture on the violence of the image in 2004](#), has exactly the same equivalence as [Beyonce performing 'The End of Time'](#), in which she sings “there's nothing between us but time and space”, or [Ed Sheeran's video, 'Photograph'](#), in which he pens the line “we keep this love in a photograph”.

[Beyoncé - End Of Time \(Live at Roseland\)](#)

PLAY / REPLAY

[Ed Sheeran - Photograph \(Official Music Video\)](#)

PLAY / REPLAY

And that is the universal point of YouTube: entertainer, philosopher, professional, amateur, expert and novice all perform. The digitisation of old movies, television programmes, Vlogging, together with the jokes, pets, talking heads espousing countless theories of everything under the semiotic sun merge into the streaming of bits and bytes as the performance of the self enacted before the video camera. Interestingly enough, Baudrillard was one of the first of the Postmodern thinkers to recognise this, which makes it rather odd to see that he appears on YouTube in nine, ten minute sections, reading his lecture rather haltingly and uncomfortably in English.

[Jean Baudrillard. Violence of the Image. 2004](#)

PLAY / REPLAY

[How to Remove Oven Door - ovendoorglue](#)

PLAY / REPLAY

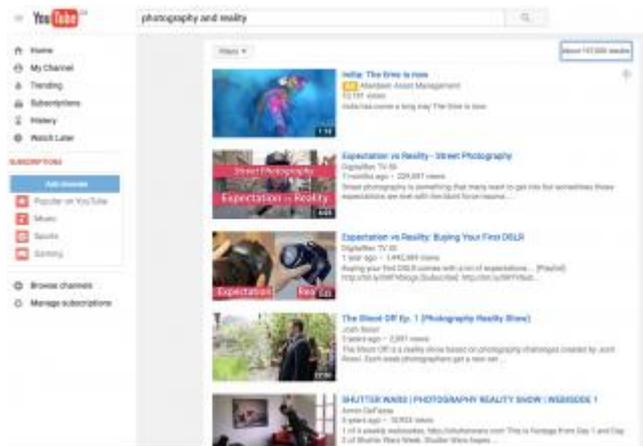
Unlike the above video of an oven door being taken off, where we see the oven door and the hands unclipping the side supports and

removing the door, all we see of the violence of the image is an elderly philosopher looking down at his paper, talking in highly abstract concepts, dressed every bit as the philosopher, but also as a French worker. In the video Baudrillard speaks of three kinds of violence of the image: the violence of power and oppression, the violence of historical meaning and critical analysis and – a new kind of violence – the violence of hyper-regulation and irregularity. This violence he terms a “meta-violence” which is the violence of transparency, a violence with no object and, extending McLuhan, violence as the message and the medium. The third and present kind of violence obliterates the two previous historical forms of violence, that of oppression and analysis. Baudrillard speaks of the image and information as “the murder of the real” and as “the vanishing point of reality”. Images, he says, are now indifferent towards the real.

Whilst YouTube has been programmed to display videos as representations of the real, in effect it projects them without reflection into the new spacelessness and timelessness of the screen as excessive energy.

Now, could it be that this third kind of violence – the meta-violence – is precisely what YouTube does to Baudrillard, Beyonce, Ed Sheeran, photography and everything else? Whilst YouTube has been programmed to display videos as representations of the real, in effect it projects them without reflection into the new spacelessness and timelessness of the screen as excessive energy, By this new definition YouTube cannot escape its own excess, its restlessness, its lack of an object outside of itself that could make everyday life possible or representable. YouTube could be – as Baudrillard defines the new violence of the image – violence in the brain, a biology of lobotomised people. For YouTube ‘photography and

reality' is only another loop, another playlist of the myth of transparency, another recycled list demonstrating automaticity.



Search for "Photography and Reality" on Youtube

Baudrillard's lecture on the violence of the image is extended by artist and theorist Hito Steyerl in a 2013 lecture at The New School, in which she describes a key moment in 1989, when images first crossed the screen and entered the space of reality. By this she means that images become part of or constitutive of reality, rather than reflecting or documenting it.

[The Photographic Universe | Photography and Political Agency? with Victoria Hattam and Hito Steyerl](#) PLAY / REPLAY

Steyerl argues that the reality we live in consists of images... images that have started crossing the screen and materialising within reality. Images no longer represent the real, neither subjectively nor objectively, they catalyze it and the reality they produce is the wreckage of images, bruised and damaged. Images are therefore able to migrate across landscapes, proliferate, transform and activate. In this sense, we live amongst images. At the start of her talk, she experiences technical difficulties with the connection of her laptop to the data projector and two people appear on screen to help her, which they don't manage to do straight away. Steyerl doesn't get flustered, but handles the situation well, joking that she supports the right of technology not to work and laughs at the idea of her lecture taking place in two parallel registers, that of

what she has written and says and that which is shown. Somewhere, she forgot to add that, like the nomadic image which she argues crosses the screen, proliferates and create realities, her appearance on a YouTube video is also destined to take place everywhere and nowhere in a virtual eternity.

Hypnosis Basics : How to Wake Up Someone Under Hypnosis

PLAY / REPLAY

Carmen Lyn, an expert hypnotherapist helps me to end this nightmare of YouTube. “I’m going to count up from one to five and you will gradually become more alert and awake and [my addition], remember everything that you saw and thought whilst on YouTube”. Good, I’m awake, so now finally how to resolve my hypnotic journey to find photography on YouTube with my reflexive thoughts on the medium? To my mind we are left with three evident paradoxes, which say something about the current moment of image culture.

Firstly, the more you search for an understanding of the present state of photography by YouTube the more you are returned to its material and cultural past. Photography on YouTube appears as a solid legacy, a social heritage, rather than as its present, more urgent, uncertain computational and networked condition.

Secondly, the YouTube appearances of Marshal McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard and Hito Steyerl remind us, through their words and voices, that media and images are inextricably linked to politics and power. However, the very act of voicing critical analysis on YouTube neutralizes the potential transformative power of radical viewpoints, making such speakers complicit with YouTube’s un-reflexive mode of reproduction. YouTube does not make its own power apparent, but rather trades on the very transparency, which once belonged to photography. Could YouTube contain a video that was reflexive about itself? No, don’t ask, it’s a medium without a memory, only an inventory of its users.

Thirdly and finally, for the prosumer of online video-sharing the rules of engagement – that is, the conventions by which cultural value is established and meaning shared – remain, paradoxically, unwritten at the same time as being fully operational. The School of YouTube we might conclude has no beginning and no end, only interruption before the moment of ecstasy and replacement beyond the moment of enlightenment.