



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography

Shobeiri, S.A.

Citation

Shobeiri, S. A. (2018, January 24). *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/59754> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Shobeiri, S.A.

Title: Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography

Issue Date: 2018-01-24

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have showed how a close reading of the medium of photography, through the lens of geography and philosophy, can shed light on the spatiotemporal account of place. I started my analysis from the ground level, before the act of photography begins and with the body of a photographer, explaining the way in which a lived body deals with its surrounding space. Afterward, I looked at the mechanical place of photography to highlight how the camera's inner mechanism and automaticity can exceed any spatial certainties that the photographer wishes to inscribe in the photograph. Then, by discussing the photograph's movability and transferability in different spaces, I showed how it becomes a place whose spatial trajectories cannot be predetermined. Turning from the photograph's body to its surface, I explored how the photographic image can interact with the non-visible spatial dimension that is embedded in its frame. Subsequently, I elevated my view from the ground level to subsume the spectator in the photographic act, indicating how photography can bring to life a view of place that is not reducible to any time and space. Finally, to discuss the way in which a particular representational schema communicates its subject matter through places, I showed how the genre of aftermath photography translates a physical place to a photographed place to communicate a content to the spectator.

In other words, by reflecting on the photographer's body as a place, I demonstrated how a lived body cannot be reduced to a location or point in space, as if it had fixed geometrical boundaries. Then, looking at how the camera deals with the perceptible referent, I showed that a camera's significance cannot be limited to where it is located or what it is constituted of, but lies in its sheer mechanical functionality that surpasses both its locale and location. Further, by concentrating on the transmissibility of photographs on the internet, I indicated that the photograph's identity is not only marked by its evolving guises and material settings, but also by its dispersive directions and indeterminate origins. At this time, by drawing on the specificities of the photographic frame, I showed how a photographic place can project an expanding spatial dimension onto its very edge. Later on, by shifting to the recipients of photographs, I argued that the very transient but eternal encounter between the spectator and the photograph, promised by the vacant space of the universal spectator, can be deemed a place. Finally, through foregrounding the function of text and image in aftermath photography, I showed how this genre safeguards its subject matter through the empty space located in-between the photograph and its caption. Therefore, through paying distinctive attention to each

partaker of photography in this dissertation, I have argued how this medium accounts for the concept of place as that which resists being delimited to *where it is* (the photographer), to *what it is* (the camera), to *where it goes* (the photograph), to *what it encloses* (photographic place), to *where and when it transpires* (the spectator), and to *what it represents* (aftermath photography).

To grasp a phenomenological understanding of the photographer's body, the first chapter argued that the body should be considered as both a lived body (*Leib*) and a physical body (*Körper*), before the photographer confronts the subject matter in the world. While as a lived body the photographer can actively project the schema of space by merely taking an upright position, as a physical structure the body is a thing among other things, which requires indirect localization through kinesthetic experiences that are felt within it. Being aware of the double characteristics of a lived body, I suggested that the body of the photographer should be viewed through the lens of a lived place as proposed by Casey. For, the concept of lived place not only endows the body with porous boundaries and open orientations, viewing it as something that can actively interact in its environs, but also acknowledges that as a physical object the body is co-localized amongst other objects in space. To make this point palpable, this chapter drawn attention to the banal act of walking as practiced by landscape photographers, in which they constantly oscillate between keeping still as a physical body and keeping-in-operation as a lived body, thereby inhabiting the landscape with and through a lived place. Then, this chapter argued that for a lived place, which reflects an ongoing integration into the landscape whereby it inhibits it from within, the landscape cannot be considered a predefined image, idea, or way of seeing, but an unnamable encounter with the materiality of the world as a conglomerate of things.

I exemplified this point through comparing Adams' landscape photograph, which embodies an impeccable, anthropocentric, and uninhabited landscape conjured up from the imagination, with Metz's photograph, which features the landscape as an encounter with a serendipitous collection of things. Subsequently, the first chapter argued that the phenomenological experiences of the lived place, which continually oscillates between passivity and activity due to its inherent dispositions, can be expressed inasmuch as its conflicting aspects are sustained. For this reason, this chapter deployed Rancière's notion of "the sentence-image" as the suspension through which a work of art stitches passivity onto the explosive forces of art, resonating with the lived place that sustains itself as a physical body while commingling with its surrounding space. Then this chapter suggested that the photographer's body, being both physical and lived, is continually held in abeyance between

active and passive intervention in its circumambient space. Accordingly, I argued that the photographer's body is a *lived place* that unremittingly stitches passivity to its active spatial presence, becoming simultaneously static and dynamic, still and moving, and thus inactive in space. Therefore, in my first step towards reading photography through the lens of place, I have shown that the photographer's body is never reduced to a fixed location or null point in space, but is always in the constant process of entanglement and disentanglement, belonging and disruption, and inactive intervention with the space of which it is a part.

In my second approach towards places, I explored how in a photographic act the camera functions as a place that, by aiming and capturing a subject in the world, forever eternalizes the spatiotemporal dimensions to which it is exposed. To discuss the active role the camera plays in this process, this chapter looked at the camera as a non-living agent, which cuts off a piece of space and time to preserve them in the photograph through its mechanical intervention. However, this chapter also showed that the camera's intervention should not be regarded as an active intrusion in the photographed subject, since the camera is not a tool but an apparatus that patiently lies in wait. Thus, by drawing on Flusser's discussion on the camera, this chapter argued that this mechanical agent does not literally cut off or slice out a section of space and time, which would make it an active tool that can interfere in the physical world, nor is it a passive agent in the photographic act. Instead, it is a place that provides the possibility of a passive intervention through its inherent automaticity. To exemplify this point, I deployed Collins' photograph to show that, despite the camera's passivity in recording the exposed reality, the photographed subject never remains passive, waiting to be hunted by the camera. Further, by focusing on the unidentifiable pixels in Collins' photograph, this chapter suggested that although the contingent pixels do not present what they obscure, they can put us in reference to, or in the presence of, the spatial configuration of the very moment of their making.

Having discussed how the camera unintentionally lies in wait and records the spatial continuum that was once confronted and forever eternalized in the photograph, this chapter also suggested that the contingent pixels can shed light on the bifurcated aspects of Barthesian punctum of time and detail. Because, on the one hand, the indecipherable pixels clearly signpost the immediacy of the impact of time, through manifesting the that-has-been of the photographed subject in front of the lens. On the other hand, they stand as the unintentional, incongruent, and utterly heterogeneous details of the photograph, thereby becoming the unlocatable within the frame. Then, by drawing on Derrida's distinction between the photographic reference and the referent, this chapter showed how the contingent pixels characterize the perpetual suspension of the perceptible referent within the photograph.

Consequently, by focusing on the way in which the camera deals with space in this chapter, I proposed that the photographic camera is a *contingent place* in which the spatial continuum is temporalized and that-has-been is spatialized: a place wherein the possibility of an indeterminate relation towards the photographed subject is born. Therefore, in my second effort to read photography through places, not only have I shown that the camera grants a temporal dimension to the spatial configuration witnessed by its lens, but also that it imbues the photograph with a spatial dimension caused by the suspension of the referent into an irrevocable past.

In my third approach, I focused on the pliability of the photograph as a thing that has been continually altering and transforming through different modes of reproduction and channels of distribution. Underlining reproducibility as a capacity instilled in each photograph, this chapter indicated that photographs are simultaneously marked by the conflicting forces of domiciliation and dispersion, whereby they resist being permanently localized in any time and place. Then, this chapter argued that photographs as things or objects are like loose leaves, which can be exchanged among people and move from one place to another, facilitated through the intense acceleration of the reproduction phase of photographs: the fact that a photograph is just as much domiciled in the place at which it is situated as it is transferrable to other locations. Irrespective of the disguise in which a photograph appears, this chapter underscored its capability to become a fluid and transmissible artifact that never remains in a single location, but disperses in a multiplicity of indeterminate directions like a flyer without any final point of disembarkation. To exemplify this point, I examined Fontcuberta's photograph through the Foucauldian concept of heterotopic places, which only afford temporary localization while remaining outside of all times. In doing so, I suggested that *Googlegram* manifests how a photograph can become a place that cannot be permanently localized in any single location, but endlessly traverses different locations and times, bearing the traces thereof.

However, having been converted into reproducible immaterial information subjected to mass proliferation, this chapter argued that photographs are no longer distributed as in the Foucauldian train via a determinable itinerary, but rather as a ship that inexorably drifts into the untraceable cyber space. To clarify this point, I deployed the Deleuzian concepts of striated and smooth space, indicating that while the former provides movement based on allocation from one fixed point to another, the latter instigates movement based on distribution through indefinite directions and trajectories. Then, by drawing on typographical characteristics of the metaphors of surfing and cruising the net in relation to smooth and striated space respectively, this chapter argued how surfing in the smooth cyberspace constitutes a multidirectional,

uncountable, and nomadic movement whose distributary directions are essentially indeterminate. At this point, I claimed that searching for the word photo in the cyberspace space undercuts any fixed itinerary for *Googlegram*'s constitutive photographs; instead, I proposed that Fontcuberta's photograph manifests the vagabond locomotion of photographs in the internet space. Finally, this chapter put forward that in the smooth cybernetic space the photograph is a *placeless place* that perpetually sails through a plethora of digitized information and continually massifies through a polyvocality of directions: a place that perpetually lacks its own emplacement. Therefore, in my third step towards reading photography geographically, I have not only shown that a photograph as a thing cannot be restricted to the space at which it temporarily rests, but also that it can become a vagabond flyer whose spatial movements and provenances remain radically untraceable.

In my fourth attempt to examine photography through places, I shifted my attention from the body of the photograph to its surface, to look at the spatial features of photographic place: a visual place that is embedded in the photograph as an image. To do this, this chapter considered the photographic frame as an edge to examine the spatial features that lie inside, outside, and at the photograph's frame. To foreground the gravity of the photographic frame, I drew attention to the spatial dimension that could be included but has been left out of the photo: the blind field. Then this chapter argued that while a painterly frame does not possess a blind field, and a filmic frame may expose it at any given moment, the existence of the photographic blind field is simultaneously insinuated and concealed within the frame. Having discussed the specificities of the photographic frame, I firstly looked at ESA's photograph to exemplify how the maximization of the blind field affects an existing photographic place. Looking closely at the spatial features of ESA's photograph, this chapter showed how the increased blind field has masked the functionality and purposiveness of the photographic place, thus obliterating its spatial nexus with its surrounding space. Afterwards, by discussing how the amplified blind field veils the real dimension and position of perceptible things, I showed how this augmentation can impair the spatial scales in the photograph. At this point, I argued that a maximised blind field not only strips off the spatial nexus between the in-frame and off-frame, but also destabilises the spatial scales within the frame, thereby manifesting a defamiliarized photographic place that seems to have come into existence *ex nihilo*.

In order to display how the minimization of the blind field affects a constructed photographic place, I later examined the largest photographic place ever taken by NASA. By foregrounding how NASA's photograph has expanded our field of view and vision, this chapter showed how a diminished blind field can visualise the spatial fabric of infinite universe for the

human eye. Comparing the eye of the camera with that of human, I then claimed that NASA's photographic place feeds our first and only perception of the Andromeda galaxy and not what we could see with the naked eye, thus constituting its first memory in our perceptual world. Drawing on the Bergsonian concept of "memory-image," I finally argued that the radical minimization of the blind field has created a familiarized photographic place wherein our perceptual distance towards what remains physically far removed has been reduced. At this point, having looked at the spatial features that lie inside and outside the frame through ESA's and NASA's photographs, this chapter probed into the spatial qualities that lie at the photographic frame itself, where the implied existence of the blind field is buried. Having deployed Casey's distinction between border and boundary, I proposed that the photographic frame functions as a porous boundary that innately links the inside and outside through the blind field, thus undercutting its role as an impassable border around the image. Then, by discussing the permeability and pliability of the frame with reference to Tagg's and Derrida's reflections upon it, this chapter suggested that the frame is a liminal construct in-between the work and the setting, where the ergon confronts the milieu. To exemplify this point, I stressed how the enshrouded existence of the blind field allows mental projection and spatial pretension beyond the frame, thereby making liminal what is kept in the frame. Finally, I proposed that any photographic place that holds the crepuscular existence of the blind field can become a *liminal place*, capable of supporting and collapsing, underpinning and liquefying, and thus both familiarising and defamiliarising what is enclosed within the frame. Therefore, in my fourth approach to reading spaces through places, I have not only shown how the liminal existence of the blind field can affect our spatial reading of a photographic place, but also how this tertiary element can project itself as an extra spatial dimension onto its edge.

In my fifth approach to examining photography through the notion of place, I included the spectator in the photographic act, arguing that a place is neither necessarily embodied through its location, locale, or sense of place; nor can its significance become palpable by combining these three aspects into a unity whereby it becomes a place. Instead, through discussing Merrifield's and Thrift's understanding of place, this chapter outlined that places can also be viewed as moments of encounter or inconstant events that yield evanescent appearances in the moment of place. Underlying the importance of encounter in grasping the concept of place, I deployed Azoulay's formulation of "the event of photography" to point out that photography, too, can be seen as an encounter between its participants. However, through discussing Azoulay's example of an interrogation process, this chapter showed that the event of photography not only occurs as an actual encounter in relation to the camera or the photograph,

but also as a potential encounter in relation to their hypothetical existence. Then, this chapter argued that, as a potential encounter, which is not conditioned by the presence of its participants, the event of photography shares its features with other modalities of the event: becoming an effect that exceeds its establishing causes and providing recognition after it has always-already taken place. In doing so, the event of photography can surpass its founding structures and come about without heralding its arrival time. Accordingly, I argued that the event of photography as a potential encounter—same as the Badiouian event—is to be understood as an additional possibility buried within the structure of photography, awaiting the time of its maximal appearance, thereby providing a retroactive sign of recognition to its emergence.

Nonetheless, this chapter also argued that whereas the Badiouian event becomes anchored to the location from which it came into existence, thus becoming a site attached to it, the event of photography is never attached to where it takes place. In that, owing to the existence of the universal spectator, whose place is always vacant, waiting to be occupied by individuals who are yet to come, the event of photography resists being singularized and localized at any time and location. At this point, this chapter suggested that, unlike the moment of witnessing that is always singular and linked to the time and the location a photograph is taken, the universal spectator can provide the possibility of bearing witness to the photographed subject in future times and locations. I exemplified this point using Nick Ut's photograph, *The Terror of War*, arguing that the universal spectator sprang up at the very moment at which this photograph was taken, in order to perpetuate the act of bearing witness to the photographed subject for posterity. By virtue of this possibility embedded in each photograph, this chapter argued that the event of photography can be reiterated and, thus, sempiternally continued in different times and spaces. Lastly, I proposed that the event of photography manifests an *evental place* that fugaciously but perpetually comes into being between the universal spectator and the photograph: a place that is simultaneously processual in time, unconfined to any location, and evental regarding its advent. Therefore, in my fifth step towards reading photography through places, I have shown that the very perdurable encounter between the spectator and the photograph can be viewed as a place, instilled with the possibility of eternal resumption thanks to the vacant space of the universal spectator.

Having already looked at each partaker of photography through the lens of place, I lastly explored how aftermath photography translates physical places into photographed places to communicate a content. First, by looking at physical places in the world, this chapter considered landscapes to be particular localities that are inherently interlaced with, and

comprised of places, foregrounding the inextricable affinity between landscape and place. Then, by drawing on Simmel's understanding of the mood of landscape and Bell's understanding of the ghost of place, this chapter argued that physical places are capable of acquiring agency through intera-acting with people. The agency of place, I submitted, is the very gravitating relational effect that propels the photographer to a particular locality with quirky singularities and not to others. Later, by shifting from the physical world to the world of photography, this chapter argued that aftermath photography utilizes the landscape genre to create a temporal suspension in the act of looking. I exemplified this through examining Kocken's photograph, showing that aftermath photography deploys landscape images to prolong the act of looking, thus creating a temporal arrest in which we are invited to look, witness, and stare at the remnants of the past. By drawing on Brett's and Baer's readings of traumatic landscapes, this chapter also pointed out that aftermath photography creates a ghostly effect, resulting from the temporal irreversibility of photography. At this point, however, I argued that the ghostly effect of aftermath photography not only originates from the image, but also from its accompanying text: the caption.

Drawing on Barthes' and Burgin's reflections on caption, this chapter argued that the photograph's caption prevents the viewer from being invaded by the latent linguistic codes that reside in the photograph, and instead it gives direction to the act of looking through the linguistic messages that are supplemented with the photo. Then, by nuancing between two types of caption proposed by Scott, I suggested that the caption in aftermath photography can have a double function: being both a rebus, which is anterior to the image and thus dissuades the viewer from looking further into the vista, and a quotational, which seems to bring news with the photograph and thus persuade the viewer to further inspect the landscape. Due to the bilateral function of the caption, this chapter argued that the incongruent juxtaposition of different temporalities in aftermath photography not only occurs in the image, but also in the text. As a result, I proposed that in this genre the meaning resides neither in the image nor in the text, but in their point of convergence or site of struggle: the spatial juncture in-between the two. Subsequently, by drawing on the work of Agamben, this chapter pointed out that, if aftermath photography entangles the viewer in-between the text and the image, it is to communicate the photograph's content as the unexpressed part of this communication: as a gesture. By doing so, aftermath photography conjures up the exigency of the photographed place: the urgent demand of remembrance of, and judgment about, what remains unexpressed yet unforgettable within the photograph. Finally, this chapter proposed that the conversion of a physical place into a photographed place in aftermath photography manifests how *the agency*

of place in the world is turned into *the exigency of place* in the photograph, through the spatial vortex wherein the viewer is held at an ethical impasse between resistance and collaboration, invitation and exclusion. Therefore, in my last approach towards reading photography through the concept of place, I have not only shown how the space in-between the photographer and a particular locality coagulates the agency of place, but also how the lacunary space in-between the text and the image begets the exigency of place.

In conclusion, throughout this dissertation I have attempted to conduct a geophilosophical analysis of photography, through reading each of its participants via the methodological lens of place. That is, instead of regarding indeterminacy, contingency, omnilocality, liminality, and eventementality as the prerogatives of spaces, I have endowed places with such qualities to show how photography can corroborate Casey's dictum that "place is not the content of definite representation."⁵³⁶ Rather than viewing space as an abstract entity that continually evades representation, I have demonstrated the imperceptible, intangible, and intractable aspects of each partaker of photography in order to elicit their placial dispositions. In other words, instead of analysing place through space, I have given precedence to the former in order to show how place *creates* space (the photographer), how it *fixes* space (the camera), how it *passes through* space (the photograph), how it *interpolates* space (photographic place), how it *promises* space (the spectator), and how it *operationalizes* space in-between the text and the image (aftermath photography). In doing so, throughout this dissertation I have been creating a geophilosophical lexicon with which to read the photographic act, which does not simply view the act as a photographer takes a photograph with a camera. Instead, my geophilosophy of photography aspires to recognize the photographic act as: when a *lived place*, by spatiotemporally eternizing the photographed subject through a *contingent place*, conduces a *placeless* and *liminal place* that provides the possibility of an *evental place* to come to pass ad infinitum, thereby turning *the agency of place* into *the exigency of place* photographically.

Seyed Abolfazl (Ali) Shobeiri. August 27th, 2017.

⁵³⁶ Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 231.