

# The Authenticity and Virtuality of Images: A Philosophical Exploration of Contemporary Western Photography in the Post-Truth Era

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**Abstract:** The advent of the post-truth era has blurred the boundaries of "authenticity," and the "objective record" attribute traditionally associated with images as "slices of reality" has been unprecedentedly questioned. This paper, taking contemporary Western photography as the research subject, explores the dialectical relationship between image authenticity and virtuality from a philosophical perspective, especially under the influence of digital technology. Through examining the evolution of photographic forms from traditional silver halide photography to digital composite photography, and incorporating Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, Benjamin's notion of "aura," and Wittgenstein's theory of "language games," the paper discusses the shift from images "reflecting reality" to "constructing reality," while reflecting on the reconstruction of authenticity under the infiltration of virtuality. The study shows that photography in the post-truth era does not dissolve "truth"; rather, it gives rise to a "plurality of truths." The value of images is no longer limited to simple reproductions of objective phenomena but has become a medium for human perception, thought, and dialogue with reality, expanding the philosophical depth of visual expression in the tension between authenticity and virtuality.

**Keywords:** Post-truth era; Contemporary Western Photography; Image Authenticity; Virtuality; Simulacra Theory

## 1. Introduction

The concept of "post-truth" is based on an accurate summary of the characteristics of information dissemination in modern society: when emotional appeal outweighs factual foundation and when subjective viewpoints more easily influence public opinion, "authenticity" becomes a philosophical issue worthy of reflection. Photography, which has always been tightly bound to "truth" from its inception, is now facing a deep crisis of recognition due to the dual impact of digital technology and post-truth logic[1].

In 1839, the invention of the daguerreotype marked photography as "the mirror of nature": through the chemical reaction between silver halide film and light, it seemed possible to objectively "capture" the real world, making each image a representation of something that "once existed." Whether used to document historical moments in photojournalism or to freeze fragments of daily life at home, photography has long been a solid bridge linking the past and present, reality and memory. However, with the development of digital technology, this situation has undergone a radical change. Software like Photoshop allows for easy "modification of images," while "intelligent generation" technology can create fabricated composite videos, such as the "child refugee and teddy bear" that resonate globally, only to later be exposed as fabricated. As "retro street scenes" are rendered to such a degree of realism that viewers may even mistake them for actual records of a past era, "authenticity" is no longer an assumed concept, but an object that requires constant verification and debate[2].

In contemporary Western photography, artists have long been attuned to this dilemma, offering responses to the question "What is an image?" through both creative and theoretical exploration. From Cindy Sherman's deconstruction of the "identity of truth" in images, to Thomas Ruff's questioning of "documentary truth" through his manipulation of news photographs using digital technology; from Andreas Gursky's construction of a "hyperreal reality" through "collage" techniques, to Trevor Paglen's revelation of the "power truth" hidden in surveillance images, modern photographers no longer see "restoring reality" as their sole aim. Instead, they seek to uncover the surface of "truth" through the "fictionality" of images, exploring the cognitive logic and power structures concealed

behind them[3].

This paper aims to philosophically interpret the complex relationship between authenticity and virtuality in images, using contemporary Western photography as a case study. First, it outlines the evolution of image forms from "objective recording" to "digital construction" and provides a preliminary discussion of the technological and social foundations underlying this shift. Secondly, by referencing the relevant discussions of Baudrillard and Benjamin, it analyzes the process in which images transition from "reflecting reality" to "simulacra dominance," the disappearance of "aura," and the generation of "hyperreality." This analysis also offers insights into the development of contemporary visual culture[4].

## **2. From Silver Halide to Pixels: The Technological Evolution and Form Transformation of Photographic Image Virtuality**

### ***2.1 Traditional Silver Halide Photography: The Anchor and Limitations of "Physical Reality"***

Traditional silver halide photography is based on the fundamental physical principle of "photo-chemistry." When light passes through the camera lens and strikes the photosensitive emulsion on the film, the silver halide crystals in the emulsion undergo a chemical reaction under exposure, forming a latent image that is invisible to the naked eye. This latent image is gradually developed into a visible image through darkroom procedures such as developing and fixing, eventually becoming a tangible photograph. The formation of the image relies on the lighting conditions of the real scene, with each pixel (or silver halide grain) corresponding to a specific object or reflective point in reality. This makes the image a "real imprint of reality on film," and this material connection lends traditional photographs their inherent legitimacy as "objective records," positioning them as the center of "authenticity" in photography[5].

The concept of "aura" used by Walter Benjamin in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* aptly explains the source of this authenticity. Benjamin argued that "aura" arises from the unique existence and specific historical context of an object, and although photography is a machine-based reproduction, it still maintains a direct connection with the "original" object. For example, nineteenth-century portrait photographs not only document the external appearance of the subject but also carry with them the lighting, humidity, and even the emotional exchange between the photographer and the subject. These "inimitable details" form the "aura" that creates an inseparable, real relationship between the image and reality for the viewer.

However, for traditional silver halide photography, "authenticity" is not absolute. Technically, the photographer's choice of focal length, aperture, and shutter speed has long been a way to interfere with the truth. Using a large lens to blur the background can highlight the subject while reducing the importance of other elements; even when photographed from different angles, the visual perception of the subject can be altered (for example, an overhead shot makes a person look smaller, while a low-angle shot makes them appear taller). From a creative perspective, the photographer's choice of subject and scene, as well as the composition of the image, is essentially a "selection and reorganization" of reality. For instance, a journalist's photograph of an angry protester or a composed police officer conveys completely different messages. Likewise, a photograph captured in either sunrise or gloomy weather can evoke vastly different atmospheres. Clearly, even within traditional photography, its "authenticity" already contains subjective selection factors, which were often obscured by the objectivity of the "photo-chemical reaction" and not given sufficient attention[6].

### ***2.2 Digital Photography: The Infiltration of Virtuality and the Deconstruction of "Reality"***

Since the 1990s, the development of digital technology has revolutionized the logic behind photography production. The replacement of silver halide film with image sensors (CCD/CMOS), the use of electronic screens instead of photographic paper, and the indispensability of image editing software for creative work have made the creation, modification, and dissemination of images more convenient, allowing "virtuality" to manifest in all stages of photography production.

The essence of digital photographic images is essentially a collection of "binary code." Light passes through the lens and strikes the image sensor, which converts the light signal into an electrical signal, and then an analog-to-digital conversion process transforms it into a digital signal, which is finally stored as an image file (such as JPEG or RAW format) in pixel form. In this process, the "physical

connection" between the image and the real world is replaced by "digitization." The brightness and color of each pixel can be adjusted by software, and elements in the image can be directly added or removed, with no trace of traditional "darkroom manipulation." Its "operability" completely shatters the myth that images are "immutable," raising unprecedented doubts about the "authenticity" of images[7].

In contemporary Western photography, many artists have used the virtuality of digital technology to deconstruct the concept of "truth." For example, German photographer Thomas Ruff's News Photographs series uses digital manipulation to alter traditional news photos, such as modifying key information in the image (like the subject's face or the event's details), or adjusting the colors, contrast, etc., to make what originally appeared to be "objective facts" become blurred and ambiguous. In doing so, Ruff questions "authenticity": if an image can be arbitrarily altered and important information can be concealed, then is the "fact" it conveys truly objective, or is it a construct created by the medium itself? Similarly, American photographer Cindy Sherman, in her Untitled Film Stills series, uses makeup, costumes, and settings to portray various types of women (such as housewives, secretaries, and movie stars), presenting them in the form of photographs. Sherman reveals the falseness of "identity truth" in the video, showing that the person in the video is merely a "fiction," a construction made up of clothing, makeup, and setting, and not a true personality[8].

The advent of digital technology has made image "modification" possible, while also allowing image "generation" to surpass the limitations of "real-world existence." With the progress of AI image generation technology, one can now create highly realistic "photographic works" simply by inputting brief text cues (such as "rainy day on a 1950s New York street, black-and-white photo, film texture"), and AI can generate images that may depict scenes which never existed in the real world.

### ***2.3 The Changing Context of Communication: The Dilemma of "Reality" in Images in the Post-Truth Era***

Along with technological advances, the changing context of communication has created even greater challenges for the authenticity of photographic images. In the post-truth era, social media, as the mainstream platform for image-based information dissemination, is driven by the pursuit of traffic, emotional resonance, and fragmented reading, characteristics that are diametrically opposed to the logic of "fact-checking." In social media, an image with strong emotional impact (for example, depicting the tragic plight of refugee children or animal cruelty), even without any actual evidence, can quickly go viral; while a strictly verified image, but devoid of emotional appeal, is often buried in a sea of information.

In this mode of communication, "emotion" takes precedence over "facts" in the consumption of images, providing even more space for the existence of "virtual images." For example, in 2016, the image of "Syrian boy Alan Kurdi drowned on the beach" attracted widespread attention to the refugee crisis. The photo visually conveyed the theme of "the fragility of life" and resonated emotionally with viewers. However, later some media outlets found that certain organizations, aiming to promote the refugee issue, had engaged in "re-creation" of the image: some added sad background music, others incorporated provocative elements, and some combined the image with the sufferings of other disaster victims, intensifying the "visual shock." This "re-creation" of images, while amplifying emotional expression, also in a sense deviated from the original context of the photograph, blurring the line between "factual reality" and "emotional reality."

## **3. The Dialectical Relationship between Image Authenticity and Virtuality from a Philosophical Perspective**

### ***3.1 Baudrillard's "Simulacra Theory": From "Reflecting Reality" to "Hyperreality"***

The "Simulacra Theory" proposed by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard provides a key theoretical tool for understanding the authenticity and virtuality of photographic images in the post-truth era. Baudrillard pointed out that under the combined influence of consumer society and digital technology, human society has entered an era where "simulacra" precedes reality — meaning that simulacra do not merely imitate reality, but replace and even construct "hyperreality."

Baudrillard divides the development of simulacra into three stages: The first stage is where simulacra imitate "natural reality," such as using oil painting to represent a real scene, where there is a clear relationship of "imitation and the imitated" between the image and reality. The second stage is

where the virtual image increasingly obscures the "lack of reality" — for example, the connection between the imitation and reality becomes blurred, but people still acknowledge the "real" reality. The third stage is where simulacra and reality are completely separated, forming "hyperreality," where the simulation no longer needs to imitate reality but can instead generate "reality" on its own. In this stage, what we experience as "reality" is simply a product of simulation.

When applied to contemporary Western photography, we can clearly observe the evolution of images from "reflecting reality" to "constructing hyperreality." Traditional silver halide photography is situated in the first stage of "simulacra," where despite certain selective processes, the primary goal remains to "mimic reality," and the "authenticity" perceived by the viewer is an "indirect reflection" of what is seen. However, digital photography, represented by AI-generated photos, has entered the third stage of "virtual reality." These images can create "impossible scenes" that appear "real" (matching the logic, lighting, and texture of reality), but in fact, they are not "originals"; rather, they are constructed "hyperrealities" that simulate reality.

AI-generated "vintage photographs," for example, when given a prompt like "a café in Paris in the 1920s, black and white, film texture," can create an image that includes a café, pedestrians, and street scenes. Every detail (like the pedestrians' clothing, the café's sign, or the cobblestone street) aligns with the historical characteristics of 1920s Paris. Some details even include "flaws" not found in many 1920s photographs, like scratches or light leaks. Compared to many actual photographs from the 1920s, this AI-created image may appear more "real." This is because the image "reproduces" an overall image of "1920s Paris," which has been shaped over time by films, literature, and historical materials. AI-generated images simply transform these "collective imaginations" into "hyperreality," which viewers mistakenly interpret as "historical reality," creating an illusion.

Baudrillard's philosophy reveals that photographs in the post-truth era possess "virtuality" — they are not merely "false," but also have a nature of "hyperreality." When images are no longer dependent on the existence of reality and can instead be constructed according to human imagination and needs, the traditional notion of "authenticity" is completely overturned. The meanings of "reflecting reality," "constructing reality," and even "defining reality" are all deconstructed.

### ***3.2 Benjamin's "Aura" Concept: The Erosion and Reconstruction of "Realness" by Virtuality***

Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura," introduced in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, although aimed at distinguishing traditional fine art from machine reproduction, still provides valuable insight into the authenticity of digital photography. Benjamin viewed "aura" as a critical feature of traditional art creation, rooted in its "uniqueness" and "presence" — that is, the "actual existence" of the work within a specific historical context and the emotional resonance it evokes in the viewer. However, mechanical reproduction (such as photography and film) allows these works to be copied infinitely, thus losing their "uniqueness" and "presence," and their "aura" disappears.

The virtuality of digital photography further accelerates the disappearance of the "aura." Despite being mechanically reproduced, traditional silver halide photos are "unique." Even photographs taken from the same roll of film, due to subtle differences in development time and temperature, can vary slightly, and these "variations" help preserve both the "presence" and the "aura" of the photo. In contrast, digital photography is a "binary-encoded copy." Whether it's one or a thousand copies, the image remains identical; even the original image can be endlessly modified, losing its "fixed form." These "indistinguishable copies" and "modifiability" cause digital photography to lose its "uniqueness" and "presence," leading to the complete "deconstruction" of its "aura."

However, the disappearance of "aura" does not mean the complete loss of the image's "sense of reality." In contemporary Western photography, many artists have introduced a new "sense of reality" into digital images, that is, the "reconstruction of aura." By combining digital techniques with traditional methods, they preserve the convenience of digital technology while infusing images with "physical texture" (such as the graininess of paper or the softness of color), thereby giving the image "aura." In doing so, the viewer can experience both the "realness" of traditional photography and the fine details offered by digital technology. This "fusion of old and new" creates a texture that brings new life to the tension between the virtual and the real, renewing the image's emotional power.

### **3.3 Wittgenstein's Theory of "Language Games": The Reality and Virtuality of Images as "Visual Language"**

Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of "language games" reveals the connection between the authenticity and virtuality of images, proposing a new philosophical perspective. Wittgenstein pointed out that the meaning of language is not derived from its "correspondence to reality," but rather from its "use in a specific context." In other words, different forms of communication — such as everyday conversation, scientific debate, or poetic creation — each follow their own rules, and their "truth" is not only about "objectively reflecting reality," but also about how well they fit into their respective "games." If we extend this concept to photography, we find that images can be seen as a "visual language," where their "authenticity" does not come from "conforming to reality," but from the "rules of use in a particular context."

In traditional photography, "authenticity" essentially follows a "recording-type language game." In fields like photojournalism and documentary photography, "authenticity" refers to the "objective recording of reality," with no significant alterations allowed to the information. This "recording facts, conveying facts" contextual role is a key factor. However, in artistic photography, the rule of "authenticity" is more flexible. Photographers are free to use composition, lighting, and color to express subjective feelings, and even alter the image. As long as these changes follow the "rules of artistic expression," they can be considered legitimate creative acts.

In the post-truth era, the rapid development of digital technology has led to greater diversity in "visual language games" and has complicated the definition of "authenticity." In fields that emphasize "objective recording," like journalism and documentary work, digital editing techniques have broken the conventional rules of the "recording-type language game," leading to a crisis of "authenticity." When news images are manipulated, with core information deliberately altered, they can no longer fulfill the "transmitting facts" rule of their context, thus losing the meaning of "journalistic truth." On the other hand, in fields like art, advertising, and entertainment, "creative language" is a form of "creative language game," where artists use digital technology to create "surreal images," advertisers use virtual images to convey product concepts, and the entertainment industry uses AI-generated videos to enrich content forms. While they may not follow the rules of "realistic representation," they still adhere to the "rules of creative expression" within their context, thus carrying meanings such as "artistic truth," "commercial truth," and "entertainment truth."

For example, a series of videos featuring "models applying lotion on a virtual beach," even though digitally manipulated, convey the concept of the product's "natural ease," and are therefore seen as an "efficient promotional expression," carrying the meaning of "commercial truth." On the other hand, modifying an image of a "peaceful protest" to show "violent conflict" would violate the "transmitting facts" rule of the journalistic context, thereby becoming "fake news" and losing its "journalistic truth" significance. These discrepancies indicate that the "authenticity" of an image is not a fixed concept, but is dependent on the "language game" it belongs to. In different contexts, the definition of "truth" varies, and its virtual functions also differ.

Wittgenstein's theory suggests that when discussing the authenticity of an image, we cannot separate it from its contextual rules. Instead, we must focus on "how the image is used in a particular context" and "whether it follows the specific contextual rules."

## **4. Conclusion**

In the post-truth era, the development of contemporary Western photography has become a philosophical exploration of the "truth and falsity of images." After going through phases of "physical reality," "virtual construction," and modern "multiple realities," the concept of "image authenticity" has continuously evolved throughout history. Its meaning has now surpassed the boundaries of "objective reproduction" to include dimensions such as "critical truth," "emotional truth," and "memorial truth."

Baudrillard's "Simulacra Theory" establishes "hyperreality" based on the imagined nature of imagery. "Hyperreality" does not stem from reality itself, but is a visualization of human cognition and imagination. Benjamin's concept of "aura" suggests that in "fiction," the "sense of reality" of an image can be reconstructed, depending on whether it can evoke emotional resonance and memory associations in the viewer. Wittgenstein's "language game" theory argues that the "authenticity" of an image depends on the contextual rules it follows. Discussing "truth" and "falsehood" without context strips the image of its meaning.

From the experience of contemporary Western photography, the challenge in the post-truth era does not lie in "deconstruction," but in the failure to establish a clear understanding of "the diversity of truth." If we interpret "truth" as a "dynamic process of human interaction with reality," we can recognize the meanings embedded in the tension between "virtual" and "real." Images no longer serve merely as a way to record reality; they are also a response to reality, an expression of emotions, and a construction of meaning.

With the continued advancement of digital technology today, the "virtualization" of images will continue to push new boundaries. Yet their greatest value will remain in the "connection between humans and reality." In the post-truth era, we should neither fear nor reject "truth." Instead, we should explore and innovate its interpretation from different angles. In this dialectical relationship, images will undoubtedly become a powerful force for people to understand themselves, the world, and the pursuit of beauty.

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