

# INVESTIGATING THE DIGITAL SUBLIME THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHERS' VIEWS OF REALITY: A CASE STUDY OF NATHAN BAKER'S OCCUPATION PROJECT

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The digital sublime refers to digital-composite photography that presents the existence of something unrepresentable. Dissatisfied with the representation of the outer world, sublime photographers are compelled to create personal versions of the world. To better understand these photographs, I propose that we investigate the artist's views of reality. This paper cites Nathan Baker's project *Occupations* as an example.

## Introduction

The concept of the “sublime” has been discussed by a few philosophers. According to German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the sublime refers to something “absolutely great” [1], such as the vast Saharan desert or an earth quake, that surpasses one’s ability to comprehend with one’s reason. The sublime brings a mixture of anxiety and pleasure to those experiencing it: anxiety from the conflict between reason and imagination, and pleasure from the awareness of the supremacy of human reason. While Kant focuses on sublime nature, French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924–1998) concentrates on sublime art, such as avant-garde art, which presents “the existence of something unrepresentable” [2] and that confronts us with the limits of our ability to reduce the world to rational concepts.

More recently, the term “sublime” was used to indicate a new type of photography. With the rapid advancement of technology in the photographic industry, more photographers, such as Jeff Wall, Pedro Meyer, Barry Frylander, and Loretta Lux, have been relying on digital facilities and embracing the style of digital-composite photographs. Using computers to combine pieces of images, digital-composite photography requires a new method of production and renders a matchless look – a sophisticated fabrication, a perfect and clean composition, a maximum color saturation, a multiple-point perspective, and stunning or newfangled content – which is often referred to as the “digital sublime” [3].

This paper investigates what “unrepresentable” entities the digital sublime attempts to present. Dissatisfied with the representation of the outer world that can be easily accomplished by pressing a single shutter button, photographers who painstakingly synthesize images together to create the digital sublime seem to be compelled to create personal versions of the world, which may be closer to the beliefs through which they interpret and interact with the world.

To gain a better understanding of these photographers’ digital sublime photographs, I investigate the photographer’s worldview, or what s/he values as knowledge. As contemporary architectural theorist Mark Gelernter (1995) suggests, knowledge is the foundation of one’s intention, ideas, and thus, forms of artwork [4]. If we understand how a photographer sees the world, we can have a better idea about the principles that guide his or her artmaking. A more approachable way to inquire into a digital photographer’s knowledge is to ask about his or her view of reality [5] with questions such as “What is your definition of reality?” “What notion of reality do you represent in your photographs?” and “How do you visualize your reality in photographs?” After knowing their layers of reality, the deepest and the most

sophisticated layer can be considered as their knowledge, which may explain the “unpresentable” substance presented to viewers.

As an example of how we can understand a body of digital sublime work, the following section cites the photographic project *Occupation* of Nathan Baker. The discussion of Baker and his work is primarily based on an interview I conducted with him in December 2006 in his studio. In addition, I referred to Baker’s artist’s statement as well as consulting other critics’ evaluation of his work.

Herein, I first introduce Baker’s process of photographic creation, including his initial feelings, thoughts, ideas, and finally, the actual production. I then relate his definition of reality, and strategies he employs to visualize reality in his photographs. Next, I interpret Baker’s multiple layers of reality and cite suitable theory, realism, to explicate her work. Last, I conclude with the knowledge provided by Baker’s photographs, from which we can gain a better understanding of his art.

### Baker’s Occupation Project

In his project entitled *Occupation*, Nathan Baker, a Chicago-based artist, produces composite photographs that express the labor one puts into one’s job. By condensing various tasks required by a job into a single frame, Baker evokes “the frenzied tedium of a wide variety of occupations and the intensity of effort that people put into them” [6]. The *Occupation* project consists of twenty photographs, each presenting one job at a workplace, and hence describing twenty occupations ranging from scooter repairer, house painter, to hotel housekeeper.

Baker explains that his initial idea to produce *Occupation* was from a negative perspective. It was later, from viewers’ responses concerning the humanity shown in the photographs, that he started to look at the occupations positively. Coming from a lower-income working-class family where money was always an issue, Baker learned that jobs have occupied most people’s lives, and that people devote incredible amounts of energy, effort, and time only to benefit other people. In turn, what they gain is mostly contempt or mocking of their “circus-like bodily performances” [7]. However, viewers see this project differently: esteemed humanity outweighs other messages. Therefore, intentionally or unintentionally, Baker demonstrates the tension between the disgraceful and dignified natures of a job—its skills provoke scorn, though they deserve respect.

Baker articulates his production of these images. All of the twenty occupations are working-class, which reflects a lot of labor and specific manual skills. The stationary camera is usually positioned higher to render a full view of the whole space as well as the details of every task. In addition, the faces of the workers are intentionally sheltered or side-viewed to avoid viewers’ quick recognition of the fact that it is the same person at work in the final images. This strategy prevents Baker’s seamless digital composites from being immediately read as unnatural Photo-shop collages. His ultimate purpose in de-emphasizing the Photoshop techniques is to make his photographs documentary-like.

To improve the believability of his documentary, Baker utilizes photographer Robert Frank’s (b. 1924) “filmic style of photography” [7], where photographs are composed in a seemingly casual way by intentionally leaving some part out-of-focus. This style imitates the visual habit of glimpsing as if one is looking at the actual scene. By implementing this filmic strategy, Baker invites viewers to enter the scene, or

makes them feel that they are present in the situation where the photographs were taken. In Baker's opinion, the more viewers can bring themselves to the scenario, the more believable the photograph is. For example, Baker incorporates a blurred arm in the left side of the frame in *Casino Boat Engine Room* to create an illusion that viewers are actually present in this space and watching these workers.

Despite embracing Frank's strategy of filmic documentary, Baker says that a single shot was not sufficient for him to describe something thoroughly. He then realized that when putting together all these single shots of the same person digitally, he was able to communicate more facts about the job so as to achieve "a real representation" of it. Because each shot was taken in real time and in a real space, the final images are still considered documentary. However, in Baker's terminology they are more than traditional documentary; they are comprehensive documentary. Baker has described each occupation as fully as he can within the framework of the medium of photography, and since he directs people to perform the tasks of their jobs, he also calls his project "directorial documentary" [7].

Baker tends to investigate a subject by showing concrete objects associated with the subject. For example, in his previous project *Tangible Mediation*, he showed an individual and an object the individual chose in each photograph. By closing the eyes of each individual, he directed viewers to see the objects first, and then ponder the relationship between the object and the subject in order to sketch the identity of the subject. For Baker, objects are "mediators that provide both personal and societal representations of individual identity" [7]. In other words, in Baker's view, a tangible object from the outer world serves as an important clue to understanding what is going on in a person's mind.

Baker succinctly defines his view of reality: "My definition of reality is one's experience, which is composed of a physical component and an intellectual component. Those two things compose one reality" [7]. According to Baker, the physical component comes from his five senses, and the intellectual component indicates his thought or idea that responds to the sensory stimulation. Following this criterion, Baker's *Occupations* represents a reality for him. On the one hand, it presents his experience of actually taking pictures of these people. On the other, it demonstrates his ideas of comprehensive documentary, which thoroughly describe twenty occupations.

Baker also asserts that his photographs carry multiple types of reality to viewers. The first type is the physical reality of the pictures itself. The second type presents each figure performing in real time and in a real place and was recorded as snapshots. The third type, even more real than the second, shows a multitude of figures co-existing in an invented space, and contains fuller information. The last type is the metaphoric references or visual connotation that makes viewers think about the ideas behind the pictures, or different mental places that viewers go individually.

### Theoretical Understanding of Baker's Work

Based on Baker's assertion that two components constitute his reality, his view of reality can be explained as two-layered. The first layer comes from the five senses, and the second is the idea or thought provoked by the sensory. Thus for Baker, coming from the most sophisticated layer of reality, knowledge is ideas derived from sensory experiences, and such a view renders Baker a realist.

According to British realist philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), objects exist in the external world independent of the mind. In some circumstances, when these objects act upon the senses, a stimulus is transmitted from the senses through the nervous system, and eventually gives rise to a mental

process—the conscious perception of the object [8]. The idea of the object thus derives from the faculty of understanding which abstracts, systematizes, orders, and abbreviates the data of sense. Locke also explains that the mind is like a camera; when it is passively acted upon by external objects and receives stimulation, the mind, or the camera, registers ideas that reflect and resemble these objects. For Baker, the sensory and ideas rely on each other and are indispensable components in the formation of his knowledge.

Baker's ordainment of the four types of reality given by his photographs can actually be categorized into his two layers of reality. The first and the second, respectively the physical reality of the picture itself and the fact that each figure exists in front of the camera in real time and space, are physical realities where viewers can touch and see their existence. The third, where multiple figures coexist in an impossible plane, comes from Baker's idea, which results from solving the problem of how to bring more information into photographs to provide a complete illustration of his view. Finally, the fourth is viewers' mental states or individual interpretations of images. Echoing contemporary philosopher Kendall Walton's (1984) assertion of "trans-parent photographs [9]," Baker contends that when viewers look at his photographs, they not only see the pictures themselves, but by seeing through photographs, they literally see figures photographed. In addition, viewers capture Baker's creative idea of putting figures all together, as well as giving rise to their own meaning about the photographs.

Baker's *Occupation* corresponds to Aristotle's (384 BC – 322 BC) description of mimetic artwork, which is considered the first theorization of realist art. First of all, *Occupation* does not only represent the particular event of a person at work, but illustrates occupations in general, such as hotel housekeepers. Baker presents a normative idea of what an occupation *ought to be* from his own point of view.

Secondly, the basic components within the final images are acquired from the world; that is, they are all what one can observe with the naked eye. It meets Aristotle's emphasis on the use of the senses, and on the empirical observation yielding certain and clear knowledge of the world. In addition, Baker's attitude toward the subject matter is not fantasizing, disdaining, or criticizing, but is fairly and objectively displaying what a job consists of. Also, his manner of presentation is not prejudiced, distorted, or idealized, but is impartially describing what he sees about a job from his own perspective. In other words, the subject matter of people at work is the primary concern, while his judgmental expression is secondary.

Thirdly, an important criterion for Aristotle in art is the dispensability of form and content. Baker's strategy of repeating an identical person at work does not derive from a formal concern, but is crucial to the articulation of his idea: the tension between the complex skills an occupation can involve and the entertaining bodily performances an occupation requires. In Baker's view, his strategy also serves to describe an occupation fully by bringing in more information. This information does not come from Baker's subjective inner world, but is from his experience of interacting with the world. Alternatively put, for Baker, to describe something fully is to provide all that he can sense, and what an occupation means to him is comprised of what he can experience visually. Consequently, for example, a job is depicted by using thirty-six decisive moments, which are simultaneous form and content.

Lastly, similar to Aristotle's articulation that the intent of mimetic drama is to give pleasure, Baker urges viewers to contemplate pleasure from viewing his well-planned photo-graphs. Condensing various bodily gestures at work, Baker highlights the amusement from watching circus-like performances. This pleasure requires viewers' cognitive operation of the mind. Viewers can understand this humor as long as in the real world they have ever seen similar presentations.

Baker's work is also subject to realist explorations in general, and hence provides realist knowledge. His comprehensive documentary stresses the resemblance of the representation in synthesized photographs to what, in his view, is actually happening in the real world. The verisimilitude of his depictions gives a vivid sensation of seeing those workers in everyday life. By arranging them realistically so as to make use of the believability of documentary photographs which dictate a real time and a real place, Baker's viewers tend to consider the workers as, indeed, being in front of the camera. However, what makes *Occupation* different from normal documentary is its more-than-usual amount of true information about what it depicts. This motivation of adding more factual and pertinent information has made *Occupation* realist [10]. Consequently, Baker's realist knowledge provided by his photographs dwell in the window on the world, which presents the likeness of what occupations really are. By including more data and keeping the combination seamless, Baker has polished the window itself so as to let it contain a richer view.

Baker's strategies to visualize occupations correspond to his realist worldview. Whether in *Tangible Mediation* or *Occupation*, his realist intention is to illustrate a person through objects around him or tasks he encounters. That is to say, what accounts for a person or an occupation is situated in the outer world. To understand a person, Baker resorts to an object the person picks; to know more about a job, he compacts a variety of tasks into photographs. Along the same vein, *Occupation* is composed of a culmination of multiple documentary photographs, which no doubt originated in the external world. After gathering components from the outer world in the form of documentary, it was Baker's faculty of understanding at work to systematize, abstract, and abbreviate data, and then generate the idea of multiple figures in one image. The final result is the comprehensive documentary which surpasses documentary's limitations, while preserving its nature. Influenced by but different from Robert Frank's filmic style, in which "the image seems boundless, not contained within the rectangle of the frame, but stretching beyond it," Baker's composite photograph is literally a film, which stretches beyond one single decisive moment and records the whole process of time and tasks associated with the job.

The directorial ingredients in *Occupation* do not interfere with its realist essence. In theorizing the directorial mode in photography, critic A.D. Coleman (1998) asserts that the directorial elements have played a part in a large number of documentary or straight photographs, including those of photographic image-makers who title themselves documentary champions. In *Occupation*, the authenticity of the original event is not an issue; rather, it is the general idea of what an occupation consists of that anchors the subject matter. Therefore, no matter how the scenes were constructed, how workers were directed to perform their skills, or how many pictures were condensed in a final image, Baker's realist perspective remains the same, where he acquires knowledge about occupations through his experiences and presents what he has observed with his senses to viewers, who then gain the same knowledge. All of the directorial efforts were made only to describe the given object or event fully, rather than to impose Baker's emotional impulse from his inner to alter the given knowledge from the outer world.

## Conclusion and Implications

Investigating digital photographers' views of reality helps identify and clarify the valuable knowledge they communicate in their work. In Baker's sublime photographs, we can find two layers of reality: the sensory stimulation and his understanding of it. In *Occupation*, he exemplifies realism. The knowledge he provides to viewers and the "unpresentable" substance that his photographs try to present reflect his perspective of a detailed, true-information-laden, and believable representation of those occupations in the real world. By making his photographs resemble the world, Baker urges viewers to look into the

drama screened in paper film, and to contemplate the dignity and humor that transpire from the human figures.

Students of photography need a deeper understanding of the nature of digital-composite photography before they select it as the medium for expressing their ideas. In order to appreciate and teach about the digital sublime, photographic educators need to be aware that the digital composite may deliver a variety of aesthetics and knowledge, which may encompass modernism and postmodernism so as to incorporate pedagogies that address both the appreciation of fine arts and the critique of visual culture in classrooms.

### **References and Notes:**

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