

Feeling Fuzzy

Photographic meaning, is extremely fuzzy. Trying to represent is like juggling with jelly...

This semester our Fuzzy Pictures¹ class did not reach a consensus on what fuzziness is. But it is hard to consider how meaning can be derived from an image. Any given image shifts its meaning when it has to operate outside of its natural context. And what is a natural context for an image? Fuzzy Pictures² encouraged us to think about how meaning functions in relation to information given about an image, or how an image functions when detached from such information. Is it better to have contextual information to ease us into a photograph? Can we jump straight in? If we do jump, what happens if we land in the wrong place?

At the end *Silence of the Lambs* I know that Clarice Starling is ok, she does not get killed. But each time I watch the scene in the basement where Buffalo Bill watches Clarice through night vision glasses, my heart starts pounding and for a moment there, I really wonder how it will end. I cannot help myself. When we see photographs, regardless of how contentious the image is with regards any kind of veracity, how can we stop ourselves reacting? How can we look at a photograph and not feel something? We may be able to intellectually respond to a photograph, knowing that the subjective nature of any image makes all photographs impossible to read literally, and we may be aware of how vulnerable to message pixels are in a digital photograph, but can we stop ourselves from emotionally responding to a photograph? Can we stop ourselves from being duped? More importantly is it desirable to be so cynical? It is nice enjoying photographs. So, are all photographs Fuzzy Pictures³ and can other forms of representation be Fuzzy Pictures⁴ too?

Garfield Minus Garfield (garfieldminusgarfield.tumblr.com) can be seen as a Fuzzy Picture⁵ as it subverts the regular Garfield comic strip by (guess what) removing Garfield. Without the crucial character the narrative moves from an amusing dialogue between cat and owner, to lone man asking questions to the air. Because we mourn the humour that is meant to present, the scenario quickly moves to tragedy as we realise that Jon is all alone.

A photograph of a pet horse, presumably a beloved friend can take on Fuzzy Pictures⁶ attributes if the angle of composition focuses our attention on his enlarged head, cropped out eyes and ears and highlights a nostril and mouth with chance patch of strong light. A pet portrait mutates into snarling monster as the musculature of the flared nostril comes towards us. Photographs can be pushed into being extremely Fuzzy Pictures⁷ by complicating their methods of production. An evolutionary method of production involving a camera, film, Photoshop and pencil makes the labelling of what kind of an image we are seeing fuzzy. This gives the hybrid images an uneasy feeling – defying categorisation subverts how we usually enter an image. A night time cityscape, a long exposure without a flash, creates a literal Fuzzy Picture⁸. All that can be made out is the blur of street lights, a few office lights left on in high rise buildings and a strip of vertical sky between the buildings, eerily light and dark feeling at the same time. Nothing is clear in the photograph. This photograph is not attempt to transmit information, but its Fuzzy Picture⁹-ness can be used by the image maker to describe a relationship with the city. A sense of wonder, mystery and respect is created in the haze of city life in this image. Cindy Sherman trades on Fuzzy Pictures¹⁰ ideas in all of her work, but perhaps, her work combining medical anatomical dummy parts are her fuzziest. The clash of body parts, plastic genitalia, awkward angles and red silk resists any pleasure that we may wish to find in a photograph. As we move between the different elements of the photographs, attempting to find meaning or failing that, erotic pleasure, we are resisted at every turn. We must withdraw from the photograph, scolded for our attempt to enter it.

Larry Sultan’s book, Evidence is full of Fuzzy Pictures¹¹. The fuzziness here lies in the lack of contextual information. Butting the images up against one another without any explanatory notes takes the world of the evidentiary document to a nonsense and all of a sudden the photographic meanings are up for grabs. Any discussion can be had over any image. The most fantastical explanation is permitted. Stripped of a title and context, Robert Capa’s *Death of a loyalist soldier*, 1936 is an extremely Fuzzy Picture.¹² This is a soldier’s last breath. This moment, the most important moment for this soldier, has been recorded and saved for us to view. There is no model release form. This is death. Photographs can record anything we choose. This type of photograph reminds us of the responsibilities we have as image makers, as we produce visual evidence of moments existing and the fuzziness of a photograph can be at odds with our intentions for a photograph. War photographs exist long after the conflict has passed. How do we interpret them now? Can we re-contextualise them for now or must we be careful to preserve all contextual information in order to view such imagery as historical artefacts? Or do these type of images transcend their context, and remind us of the fragility life, when other imagery we are surrounded by, with imperfections erased, tell us a contradictory message? What about news pictures? The images we see circulated on the television, newspapers and online. Are they all Fuzzy Pictures¹³? If we accept their inherent fuzziness, how should we approach them? If we accept there is no truth in a news image, what do we see when we encounter this type of imagery? Must we stop looking?

¹ I think a fuzzy picture is a picture that lacks one or both of the following a clear referent, despite the fact that pictures are supposed to refer/point toward something, and/or a picture in which the intentionality of the photographer seems (purposefully) unclear. Fuzziness is almost entirely dependent upon context.

² Fuzzy Pictures are photographs that create questions but don't not provide answers.

³ Because a photograph is by nature a recording of something, whether real or created, a viewer is always aware that they are looking at a photograph, and there is always a lingering question of how the photograph came to be. It becomes impossible for a photographer to simply send one message with a photograph as that photograph immediately also brings up discussion of the process, form, and representation. The photograph is formed in this mystery of being. Without it, the photograph would not be controversial, it would not be alive. It would not ask questions or present answers to those that had not yet been asked, the way a photograph always does. Because of this, all photographs are "fuzzy", although some perhaps more fuzzy than others.

⁴ A fuzzy image is and can be anything, everything and nothing. Taken literally a fuzzy image can be an image with fur on it, or with motion causing a blur. A fuzzy picture gives little to nothing about itself and allows the viewer to make up and fill in the gaps.

⁵ I guess the way I see it is that there is fuzziness in all photographs. For instance with almost any form of art photography we run into gray, or fuzzy, areas. For example with documentary photography, we are in a sense replicating something through our own ideas. So the images themselves are not really what we are documenting rather they are the idea that the photographer has about their subject. So I guess to me, the idea is not that a picture IS fuzzy but what it is in a photograph that makes it fuzzy.

⁶ Fuzzy Pictures are ones that refuse to give all the information and asks questions fuzziness represents the instability in art.

⁷ A piece of art work that always remains unresolved. The ambiguity of the work should leave the viewer thinking about all the possible resolutions that are unattainable.

⁸ A fuzzy image is and can be anything, everything and nothing. Taken literally a fuzzy image can be an image with fur on it, or with motion causing a blur. A fuzzy picture gives little to nothing about itself and allows the viewer to make up and fill in the gaps.

⁹ I think a fuzzy picture is when what is outside the frame is more important than what is in the frame, physically and theoretically.

¹⁰ The heart of the idea is in understanding fuzziness itself. Like in general use, it indicates something unclear, as in a disjunction or delay between the perceived surface and the suggestion of a more solid form somewhere within, possibly edgeless or permeable. The purpose of seeking out this function in a photograph can be manifold. Simply to point at the difficulty of locating meaning in an image where context often obscures its nature as a construction. When looking at a fuzzy picture, you may find yourself spit back out, somewhere unexpected or at a complete loss for the tangibility that photography is known for. If a photograph manoeuvres slipperily around meanings, fuzziness is the reveal of the layers between those meanings as well as between photographic object and its viewer. Places and thoughts that are complicated to perceive and not recordable through the process of light reflecting off a surface necessitate seeing in-between layers of indeterminacy.

¹¹ The term fuzzy picture produces a fuzzy definition that includes, but is not limited to an image that blurs the lines of certainty that raises questions within the viewer. It offers an intangible element that can exist on an intuitive level, while becoming confused when examined in rational terms.

¹² A fuzzy picture is

1. not a kodak moment
2. one that makes you linger over the answer to "what is this a picture of?" a. defers closure
3. revels in the inevitable and incommensurate gap between representation and its referent

¹³ Fuzzy Picture- An image in which the meaning is to be interpreted by the viewer.