

Performative Photography and the Construction of Authenticity: Exploring Performance, Cinematic Influence, and Photographic Evidence

Abstract

This proposal explores performative photography through the interconnected themes of performance, cinematic influence, and photographic evidence. Situating the discussion within contemporary photographic practice, it examines how staged and constructed imagery complicates traditional assumptions of authenticity, truth, and authorship. Drawing on theorists such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, alongside practitioners including Cindy Sherman and Sophie Calle, the essay considers how performative strategies both reveal and disrupt the perceived neutrality of the photographic image. Through critical analysis and reflection on practice, this investigation develops a focused research question concerning the role of performance in shaping meaning, interpretation, and authenticity within contemporary photography.

Performative

I am Jamie Sides, photographer, director wannabe, but a hard worker. I try my best to be my best, but one man's best is only as good as his peers. That's where this question begins. Not in theory, not in a book, but in practice. In standing somewhere public, dressed not as yourself, holding a camera, and feeling like you're both making something and pretending at the same time.

That feeling, of making and pretending, is at the centre of performative photography.

Performative photography sits in an uncomfortable place. It isn't purely documentary, because something is constructed. It isn't purely fictional, because it often exists in real environments.

It exists in-between. That “in-between” is where people start to doubt it. Is it real? Is it staged? Is it art? Or is it imitation of something else, film, theatre, narrative?

Looking at artists like Cindy Sherman, this question becomes more complicated. Her *Untitled Film Stills* are clearly staged, clearly performative, yet widely accepted as fine art. She performs identities, constructs scenes, and creates images that feel like fragments of cinema. But they are not films. They are photographs that borrow from cinema while still functioning independently (Mulvey, 1991).

This is where tension begins. Because borrowing is often mistaken for imitation.

Performative photography is frequently criticised for being derivative. It references cinema, literature, theatre. It leans on existing visual languages. There’s an assumption that originality means creating something entirely new, untouched by influence.

But that idea doesn’t hold up. As Susan Sontag argues, photography itself is an act of selection and framing (Sontag, 1977). Even documentary photography, often positioned as truthful, is constructed. The photographer chooses where to stand, what to include, what to exclude. Meaning is shaped through these decisions.

Performative photography doesn’t hide this. It exposes it.

In my own work, when I step into a character, wearing a suit, standing in a roadside layby, holding a briefcase, I am not documenting reality. I am constructing it. But the location is real. The weather is real. The journey is real. The only fiction is the figure within it.

That distinction matters.

Because the performance does not replace reality, it interacts with it.

This leads to a deeper question: does performance reduce authenticity, or does it reveal that authenticity in photography has always been unstable?

As Roland Barthes suggests, photographs do not carry fixed meaning; Barthes develops this idea further through his distinction between *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the general, cultural reading of an image, what we are expected to understand based on context, knowledge, and intention. The *punctum*, however, is something more disruptive. It is the detail that breaks through, something personal, unexpected, or emotionally sharp that cannot be fully controlled by the photographer (Barthes, 1980). In performative photography, this becomes complicated. If the image is staged, constructed, and deliberate, can it still produce a *punctum*? Or does performance risk over-determining meaning? In my own work, even when I construct a scene carefully, there are always elements I cannot control, a passerby in the background, a

shift in light, a reaction from someone watching. These moments interrupt the performance. They introduce something real, something unplanned. This suggests that even within constructed imagery, there remains space for unpredictability, and perhaps that is where meaning becomes most active. they are interpreted through context and viewer perception (Barthes, 1980). What we read as “real” is already constructed through cultural understanding.

Performance makes that visible.

Even historically, photography has always involved performance. Early portraits required subjects to sit still, to hold expressions, to present themselves in specific ways. Documentary subjects respond to the presence of a camera. They adjust, consciously or unconsciously.

So performance is not new. It is inherent.

The difference is that performative photography brings it forward.

And maybe that’s why it unsettles people. Because it removes the illusion that photography is neutral. It forces us to acknowledge that images are not just captured, they are made.

Cinematic

Cinema and photography are not separate, they are intertwined. Before cinema, there was photography. Before movement, there was stillness. Early photographic experiments, long exposures, staged compositions, controlled lighting, directly informed the development of film.

The visual language of cinema, particularly in noir and detective genres, is rooted in photographic aesthetics. High contrast lighting, shadow, composition, these are photographic decisions translated into motion.

The “gumshoe” films of the 1940s and 50s did not emerge in isolation. They were shaped by photographic traditions, press imagery, urban documentation, staged portraiture. The aesthetic is photographic at its core.

Directors such as Orson Welles and David Lynch build on this. Lynch, in particular, creates images that feel like photographs, still, composed, unsettling. Watching *Twin Peaks* Lynch, D. (1990–1991) *Twin Peaks*. [TV series] or *Eraserhead* Lynch, D. (1977) *Eraserhead*. [Film]. USA: American Film Institute., individual frames could function as standalone images.

This is important.

Because it shows that cinema itself depends on photographic thinking.

So when performative photography is described as “cinematic,” it is not necessarily imitating film. It is engaging with a shared visual language that predates cinema.

In my own work, when images appear cinematic, that is not the intention in a literal sense. I am not recreating film stills. I am responding to a visual language I have absorbed over time.

Films like *se7en* Fincher, D. (1995) *Se7en*. [Film].

demonstrate how atmosphere, framing, and tension can be built visually. These are not exclusive to cinema, they are rooted in photographic composition.

As Bordwell and Thompson (2019) note, film is constructed through framing and mise-en-scène. These are photographic principles extended into time.

So the relationship is not one-way.

Photography influenced cinema. Cinema influenced photography.

Performative photography exists within this exchange.

The problem lies in perception. Documentary photography is often positioned as truthful, while cinematic imagery is associated with fiction. Therefore, when photography adopts cinematic qualities, it is seen as less authentic.

But authenticity in photography is already complicated.

A photograph is not reality, it is a fragment. A decision. A perspective.

Cinematic influence does not reduce truth. It reveals construction.

And that awareness becomes part of the meaning.

Evidence

The idea of evidence is central to photography. Images are used to document, to prove, to record. They are associated with truth, crime scenes, journalism, archives.

But evidence is not neutral.

It is selected, framed, organised.

As Sekula (1986) argues, photographic meaning is shaped through systems of classification and presentation. Images become evidence not because they are inherently truthful, but because they are positioned as such.

Artists like Sophie Calle challenge this directly. In *The Hotel*, she documents spaces in a way that feels investigative. The images suggest presence through absence. They feel like evidence.

But they are also constructed narratives (Calle, 1984).

This duality is key.

Performative photography often adopts the visual language of evidence, black and white imagery, archival formats, case file presentation. But instead of presenting truth, it constructs ambiguity.

In my own work, placing images inside an envelope labelled “Case A483” transforms them. They are no longer just photographs. They become documents. Clues. Fragments.

But the narrative is not factual. It is constructed.

So what does that say about evidence itself?

Even in real-world contexts, evidence is interpreted. It is organised into narratives. It tells a story, but not necessarily the whole story.

Performative photography exposes this process.

It shows that evidence is not just found, it is made.

This became particularly clear during my own experience of being questioned while photographing. My activity, documenting spaces, was interpreted differently by others. The same images carried different meanings depending on context.

This highlights a key idea: photographs do not have fixed meaning.

They are read.

Performative photography uses this to its advantage. It creates images that look like evidence but resist clear interpretation.

It destabilises the authority of the image.

And in doing so, it becomes critical rather than imitative.

Critiques of Performative Photography

Despite its growing presence within contemporary practice, performative photography continues to face criticism, particularly in relation to authenticity and originality. One of the most common critiques is that staged or constructed imagery lacks the indexical relationship to reality that has historically defined photography. Unlike documentary approaches, which are often understood as capturing moments as they unfold, performative photography is seen to fabricate situations, raising questions about whether it can still function as a truthful medium.

This concern is closely tied to the idea that photography's authority lies in its connection to the real. When that connection appears disrupted through performance, costume, or staging, the image can be perceived as artificial or overly controlled. In this sense, performative photography risks being dismissed as imitation, borrowing from cinematic or theatrical traditions without producing something genuinely photographic.

Additionally, the influence of cinema presents another point of tension. If images begin to resemble film stills too closely, they may be interpreted as derivative rather than original. This raises the question of whether performative photography expands photographic language or simply relies on pre-existing visual conventions.

However, these critiques rely on the assumption that documentary photography itself is neutral or unconstructed. As previously discussed through the work of theorists such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, all photographs involve processes of selection, framing, and interpretation. From this perspective, performative photography does not break from photographic truth but instead makes its construction visible.

Rather than weakening photography, performance may expose the instability of authenticity that has always existed within the medium, prompting a reconsideration of how truth is defined and understood in photographic practice.

Conclusion

While performative photography presents significant possibilities, the critiques surrounding authenticity and originality highlight ongoing tensions within the medium. This exploration has examined how performative photography operates across the overlapping territories of performance, cinematic language, and evidential aesthetics. Rather than presenting a fixed position, the discussion has highlighted ongoing tensions between construction and authenticity, fiction and documentation, and image-making and interpretation. The work of practitioners such as Cindy Sherman and Sophie Calle, alongside theoretical perspectives from Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, suggests that photography has never been a neutral or purely truthful medium, but one shaped by framing, context, and perception.

Within this context, performative photography does not simply imitate other forms such as cinema or theatre, but engages with a broader visual language that complicates how images are read and understood. The incorporation of performance foregrounds the processes of construction that are often hidden within photographic practice, raising important questions about how meaning is produced and received.

These considerations point towards a need for further investigation into the relationship between performance and photographic truth, particularly in relation to contemporary image culture and personal practice.

This leads to the central research question:

How does performative photography challenge and redefine notions of authenticity and truth in contemporary photographic practice?

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Reference List

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