

SPENCER MEEKS

AFFECTIVE IMAGES

The Transformative Power of Photography in Siri Hustvedt's The Blindfold

ABSTRACT: Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* is a novel in which photography, or to be more specific, a photograph, seems to have the power to shape, obfuscate, and frame narrative. In what is primarily a close reading of the book, this paper will highlight the ways in which a photographic portrait alienates, emulates, and finally embodies its subject, the protagonist Iris Vegan. In maintaining a focused textual analysis, this paper is ultimately able to excavate the photograph's role in the novel, with particular regard to narrative, temporality, and subjectivity. Central to my argument is that the photographic portrait becomes a character in its own right. An antagonist and copy of Iris, which, through its photographic properties, seems to supersede Iris's sociality, health, and reality. Following the close reading, the paper concludes in a more reflexive tone as it asks and answers what *The Blindfold's* affective portrait could mean for our own contemporary moment of proliferate and instant photographic social media, dubious provenance, and "fake" news.

KEYWORDS: Photograph, Novel, Narrative, Image, Fake News.

The Blindfold was published in 1992. It arrived in tandem with the beginning of the final decade of a century obsessed with 'disposable' popular and celebrity culture (Henderson 1992, 54), and the entrenchment of neoliberal politics. This combination of disposability, and the neoliberal need to be flexible, to be constantly open to adaptation, is central to understanding the problem/solution *The Blindfold* posits in its examination of the relationship between text and image.¹ The problems, alienation, and uncanniness Iris feels in relationship to photography in this 1992 novel has found a new currency in our own contemporary society. The novel explores the ways in which image can become untethered from narrative provenance and vice versa—which, if was a problem in the early nineties, has become problematically normalised in today's age of "fake news" as discussed below.

The Blindfold is the retrospective first-person narrative of Iris Vegan (told from eight years in the future), detailing the period when she was an English Literature PhD student at Columbia University in New York City. The narrative spans approximately three years and is structured in four anachronistic sections that temporally bleed and interweave with each other. In the first section, Iris recounts

¹ See also Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001) for a similar exploration of these themes in fictional narrative.

her work for Mr. Morning, in which her job was to describe objects that belonged to a dead girl into a tape recorder. The second section explores the effects of the photograph. The third section recounts her hospitalisation for chronic headaches, and the final section describes Iris's affair with her tutor and her transformation into her cross-dressing pseudonym, Klaus—named after a character in a German story she was translating at the time. The second section is the primary focus of this paper. As a brief synopsis, she goes with her boyfriend Steven to visit his photographer friend George. He takes her photograph, as well as a candid shot of an anonymous woman having a seizure on the street below. Later when Iris sees the photograph for the first time, she is unable to recognise herself in, or as, it. The photograph is then exhibited next to the shot of the woman who is mid-seizure, is later stolen, and is mysteriously proliferated throughout Manhattan. The paper focusses on these key scenes and considers how they affect the novel's narrative and characterisation.

The scene in which Iris gets her photograph taken progresses from excitement to abjection. Initially, she finds the experience enticing and describes the act of being photographed in a rhythmic and sexually dithyrambic way. Indeed, Alise Jameson goes as far as suggesting that this intentional act of allowing herself to be photographed “lend[s] power to Iris” (Jameson 2010, 426). However, as soon as the shoot ends Iris's reaction becomes more abject as she explains, “I recoiled from him. The intense pleasure I had felt only seconds before was gone” (Hustvedt 1993, 55). Here, at what is essentially the conception and birth of the photograph, its soon-to-be antagonistic role already emerges inasmuch as it appears to sap pleasure from Iris. In other words, the climactic act of exposure leaves Iris feeling as if a part of herself had become imposed onto film. The energy she expends becomes a part of the photograph and she recoils at the end because the dualistic relationship between Iris and the photograph that commands the narrative has begun.

What is more, when Iris first sees the developed picture she is unable to recognise herself. She sates, “The person in the picture seemed to bear no resemblance to me [...] I had the awful impression that the parts of me that weren't in the photo were really absent” (Hustvedt 1993, 62). This compounds the theory that the initial act of photography “took” something from Iris. By feeling that the parts of her body excluded by the framing of the photograph are “really absent,” Iris's concrete ideas of subjectivity and personhood begin to be erased. She feels like she is absent relative to the potent presence of the photograph. Indeed, the defamiliarity and uncanny response Iris has in (not)seeing herself in the photograph further establishes the recurring dualism the novel considers, between the interplay of photography and personal narrative. The fact that Iris logically knows that it is a photograph of her, and yet cannot recognise it as such, is a destabilising instance of uncanniness in the literal sense of it being (un)“homely” (Freud 2003, 126), for it is usually the property and ownership of our individual body that we can, at least, rely upon. This is exemplary of the “political unconscious” (Jameson 2002

[1981]). Iris's inability to recognise the photo—to recognise herself—is testament to the problems she faces in a disposable and neoliberal world. She cannot afford food, works multiple jobs, and constantly adapts to the point of exhaustion. In short, whatever self-narrative she maintains cannot attach to this affective image of her.

This affective duality only intensifies as the photograph mysteriously circulates around Manhattan. Caught somewhere between Richard Dawkins and today's internet, the photograph proliferates something like a “meme” (Dawkins 2006, 189-201) as it begins to infect Iris's lifeworld. First, when she visits her boyfriend and sees the photograph outside of George's possession, she explains, “I was struck by a fantasy of its proliferation—my image multiplied into the thousands, scattered like so much litter into the streets” (Hustvedt 1993, 66). This fantasy of her photograph scattering throughout New York is reminiscent of bright and multifarious images in places such as Times Square, which are simultaneously omnipresent and anonymous. Yet, this fantasy becomes realised later in the narrative as the photograph increasingly becomes a dominant character in its own right. This situation, in which a seemingly inanimate object becomes imbued with a form of affective power, is foreshadowed in the first section of the book. For, the objects that Mr Morning asks Iris to describe “weren't dead, not in the usual way we think of objects as lifeless. They seemed charged with a kind of power” (Hustvedt 1993, 13). The photograph comes to imbue this same potent dynamism. Iris notes that “Everywhere I go, the stupid thing seems to have been there before me, it's like I'm chasing it” (Hustvedt 1993, 74). Here, the photograph begins to inhabit the same geography as Iris, but is crucially always a step ahead of her.

Thus, because it is seemingly everywhere, and ahead in time, the photo—much like the scene in which it is produced—continues to have the effect of leeching from Iris's identity and life. For instance, when Iris is in the library, a stranger approaches her and recognises her not just *from* the photograph, but almost *as* the photograph itself, or rather, a version or poor imitation of the photograph. The stranger asks, “You're Iris [...] aren't you?” to which Iris replies, “No [...] Another person entirely” (Hustvedt 1993, 75). This, in other words, marks the moment in which Iris has relinquished her identity over to the photograph. She now only has claim to the identity “Iris Vegan” relative to the presence and existence of the photograph; in effect, she *has* become a copy of the photograph. With the relationship from original to reproduction now seemingly inversed, it can be argued that after this exchange, Iris no longer holds ownership or copyright to her identity.

To this extent, the affective power of Iris's photograph is the inverse of Dorian Gray's own portrait (Wilde 2003). Where his picture is famously hidden from society and takes the psychological (and aesthetic) brunt of his actions, in *The Blindfold* it is Iris who is forced to retreat from sociality as her picture multiplies around the city. It must be noted, however, that Iris finds a certain placidity in this exchange, explaining that “the ease at which I had sidestepped my identity alarmed

me. I had done it before. A few months later I would do it again, but that's another story" (Hustvedt 1993, 76).² Thus, even if she finds herself losing ownership and control over her identity, it is not necessarily an altogether mournful experience, but an opportunity to escape the very real pressures she is under (economic, academic etc.), as is further explored later in the novel in her adoption of her alter-ego, Klaus. Indeed, this 'ease', and later Klaus, offer the symbolic solution Jameson describes. Despite losing her identity, she gains a form of resistive peace, but only intermittently.

Compounding the dualism and alienation already established by the increasingly agential photograph, George decides to exhibit the photograph as part of a series. That an art dealer approached George is crucial to realising that the photograph becomes symbolically imbued with a new economic form of power and prestige. In other words, the reduction of Iris's sense and ownership of her personal identity is rendered here only in monetary terms; she, by way of her photographic proxy (which now claims the right of ownership to "Iris Vegan") is commodified. Iris's response to learning about the exhibition is pivotal in understanding the affective control the photograph has had, and is having, on her. She tells him "I don't know where I am anymore [...] You robbed me" (Hustvedt 1993, 78). This highlights, in bare terms, the effect the photograph has had on her subjectivity. However, even in this protestation Iris realises the shallow and hollow meaning of her speech, realising that all she is able to pinpoint is some obscure "amorphous truth" (Hustvedt 1993, 78). This amorphous quality, this shapelessness to her words and lack of boundary to her identity is, as will be discussed in detail below, similarly a fundamental nature and power of the photograph in the novel.

Soon after its exhibition the photograph is stolen from the gallery. Initially, George wrongly assumes Iris has stolen the photograph as a means to reclaim her sense of self. However, during this exchange, Iris recollects that the photographs in George's series were each paired with another. Instinctively, she realises that her picture had been paired with the candid photograph she saw George take of the woman having a seizure. In doing so, in pairing them in this fashion, Iris's loss of agency at the hand of the photograph (and, of course, the photographer) has become physical and biological. In short, through this photographic juxtaposition, Iris mirrors a woman whose entire agency is suspended, however temporarily, as she has a seizure. George tries to pacify Iris by explaining that the pairings are "studies in counterpoint" (Hustvedt 1993, 86). Yet, this only acts to heighten the sense in which their similarity is absolute, "counterpoint" being the musical term for harmonically interdependent voices.

For instance, when Iris's boyfriend Stephen sees the woman having the seizure he remarks that he thought she "was going to come apart" (Hustvedt 1993, 49).

² I would like to thank Anke Pinkert for her helpful question during the conference in which she highlighted the importance of the word 'ease'.

This echoes what Iris sees in her own photograph. She notes that “A long piece of hair was swept across my right cheek and part of my mouth, slicing my face in two” (Hustvedt 1993, 62). Thus, not only is there an aesthetic resemblance, but the mutual “breaking” and “slicing” in both Iris’s portrait and the image of the anonymous woman, resembles the anachronistic, confused, and fractured narrative of the novel itself. With this in mind, when Iris says “I don’t know where I am anymore” it is because of the photograph’s power to slice and fracture her narrative into amorphous pieces, like the anonymous woman “coming apart,” or Iris’s face “slicing in two.”

As mentioned, not only is the novel composed of four anachronistic sections, but also, it is Iris’s own retrospectively detailed account. In other words, she herself has chosen to frame the narrative anachronistically and into these amorphous fragments. If it is true that the dominant power of the photograph—able to claim the identity “Iris Vegan”—through its proliferation and exhibition as mentioned above—fractures and breaks Iris’s sense of narrative self, then that Iris still retrospectively frames the narrative anachronistically highlights how potent the photograph’s power remains even eight years after the fact. Thus, even with the clarity of hindsight, the photograph continues to obfuscate Iris’s ability to establish linear narratives.³ This ability of the photograph to fracture and displace narrative in the novel is most clearly seen in the “black holes” that appear in Iris’s vision, most notably the one which forms when she is scrutinising the photograph. This is how Iris describes it:

The image was changing. With more curiosity than alarm, I noticed a small black hole in the face. [...] The hole grew, eating away the left eye and nose, and then the dread came, cold and absolute, a terror so profound it created a kind of paralysis. The hole was devouring the entire image [...] It was bonded to my hands, a part of my limbs, and then I was blind (Hustvedt 1993, 67).

Firstly, the word “paralysis” here is key inasmuch as it continues the novel’s concern with dualism. As mentioned above, the photograph of Iris is exhibited in counterpoint to the woman having a seizure and note here that this association continues as Iris holds the photograph. The “paralysis” caused by holding the photograph is similar to the loss of agency caused by the seizure; where the seizure renders the woman unable to control her movements, holding the photograph renders Iris unable to move at all. Moreover, this paralysis was caused by “dread” and “terror,” which reflects the abject recoil Iris suffers when the photograph was initially taken by George. Everything seems to come full circle as both Iris and the photographic antagonist become locked in a temporal paralysis, each seemingly vying for the control and identity of “Iris Vegan”. Secondly, notice how the photograph through the motion of the black hole is able to break free from the

³ For a fuller account of the warped narrative in *The Blindfold* please see Christian Knirsch’s detailed analysis (Knirsch 2010).

boundaries of its framing. Susan Sontag notes that the “photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace [...] cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened [...] to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Sontag 2004, 41). Sontag explains that every photograph is a result of that which it has excluded, and certainly, in *The Blindfold* the photograph seems to act in such a way as to recapture that which was purposely excluded, that which was purposely framed.

Further, as the photograph’s black hole pushes beyond the limits of its frame it seems to sap agency from Iris. The hole begins in the face of the photograph and then grows onto Iris’s own bodily hands and then limbs, eventually devouring her entire body (as with a spatial black hole) and rendering her blind. The visceral nature of this attack on subjectivity surely dispels a mere symbolic reading of the photograph or the black hole’s effects. Indeed, that it manages to render Iris “blind” not only references the title of the novel—thus highlighting its importance—but temporarily completes Iris’s loss of identity; in this instance of blindness, the photograph breaks from its form as object-to-be-viewed into antagonist-that-can-see in a post-modern and gothic moment of possession.

Of course, much of this can be read as a psychoanalytic metaphor. For example, that the imitative copy (the photograph) is able to “take ownership” of Iris’s identity could be symbolic of Iris’s loss of control, ill health, poverty, and academic stress. However, to reduce the photograph only to a metaphor somewhat misses the point. As we have discussed, the photograph’s potency continues to haunt and influence Iris’s ability to self-narrativise even eight years after the fact; what is more, this is not the only instance that Iris sees the black hole. The black holes are *literal* to Iris at the point of perception and the effects they have are visceral, and like their cosmological equivalents, have the ability to manipulate time.

We can see this, as mentioned, through the fact that much later in the novel, and despite no further mention of the photograph, the black hole reappears once again. Iris explains, “It didn’t last long, but I stopped talking and clutched my chair. That hole wasn’t the first and it wouldn’t be the last, but staring into the black emptiness, I believed it was real” (Hustvedt 1993, 178). This echoes the library scene quoted above in which Iris sidesteps her identity; where Iris makes clear that it is not the first or last time she will sidestep her identity (because of the dualistic dominance of the photograph), it corresponds that it is not the first or last time that she will see the black holes. This narrative repetition has the effect of cementing the link between Iris, her subjectivity, and the photograph. The black hole of the photograph is thus an exercise in temporal plasticity, as the photograph’s attack on Iris’s subjectivity haunts not only through the border of its framing, or through the borders of narrative, but because of the fact that it is a retrospectively detailed account, through the borders of time. In short, the black holes represent the moment in which the photograph fully emerges as Iris’s antagonist. On the one hand, it colonises Iris’s identity completely, but in doing so, it—like with the

“ease” of Iris’s ability to sidestep herself—her own identity—offers an escape, a rabbit hole through which to roll the dice. This, at least through the narrative order Iris constructs, is an escape through reclusive drag.

This final section of this close reading considers Iris’s retreat into her alter ego Klaus. The name Klaus is taken from a German story she is translating for her tutor, with whom she is having an affair. Iris explains that she adopts the fashion of Klaus (a man’s suit) out of the fear of being sexually assaulted, finding that men take less notice of her when she exists as Klaus. However, the warped narrative of the novel proffers a second rationale behind the adoption of Klaus, and it is this tacit reason which again highlights the affective power of the photograph in framing the narrative of the novel, and indeed, in regards to the act of reading the novel itself. That is to say that because of the narrative framing, it appears as if the proliferation and exhibition of the photograph in some ways *cause* Iris’s retreat into the anonymity of Klaus (as explored above in the effects of the black hole). Klaus only emerges in the final section of the novel, so from a readerly perspective it is after our knowledge of the photograph (which occurs in the second section of the novel). However, (after a careful archaeology) in actuality it transpires that the Klaus scenes pre-date the drama of the photograph altogether, and we only read the inverse because of the anachronistic (and reparative) way the narrative has been framed by Iris.

In other words, Iris (writing from the present) has intentionally framed the narrative to seem as if the photograph causes her retreat into Klaus. This again bolsters the long-lasting potency of the photograph’s affective hold over Iris, as if she has had to consciously mis-order her narrative in order to provide Klaus as a coping mechanism to “deal” with the ways in which the photograph is still affecting her eight years later. It is in this instance of conscious re-ordering that the stakes of the novel become greater than the sum of its narrative parts. If we understand that the photograph has been imbued with a form of antagonistic subjectivity in its own right, which is able to outpace Iris and even subsume her identity, and if we realise that a radical restructuring of the narrative fragments is necessary to “deal” with this photographic power, then the photographic image is not only an affective and inveigling device in the novel, but one that manipulates the reader as well. In *The Blindfold*, we too are fooled by the powerful currency of the photograph. Here the novel has proven to be an incredibly prescient cultural artefact.

As argued, the photograph in the novel does not act like a regular visual archive; rather than a static signifying object, it is best thought of as an affective character in its own right, anthropomorphised and always a step-ahead of Iris. It is able, with the help of black holes, to move through space-time regardless of form, reality, or chronology. The photograph is depicted as being much more than an illusion of power—it is no mere *trompe l’œil*—given it has a form of stolen agency. It is also dynamic, and attempts to reclaim that which was initially excluded from its framing. To this extent, the photograph is indicative of the novel’s postmodern

style—it outright refuses to adhere to its lineage (as a visual archive) and it thoroughly questions the surety of surfaces. For instance, is the photograph actually Iris? Does it exist at all? Are the black holes “real”, and does this matter? How is it being proliferated? Such narrative uncertainty hinges on the productive agonism that arises when text and image are so thoroughly intertwined. This uncertain archival quality is even foregrounded in the first section of the novel, when Mr Morning rubbishes photography in favour of the spoken word; “‘Photographs!’ He spat out the word. ‘I’m talking about true recollection—seeing the face’” (Hustvedt 1993, 29). Note here again the relevance of the black hole, which emerges from—and subsequently conceals—the face in the photograph of Iris.

At times the novel makes for uncomfortable reading, but reading this deceptive text/image relationship is crucial to understating the crux of the novel: it forces us consider our own ontology, specifically asking us how we live when we cannot trust neither text nor image. Not only does *The Blindfold* call the legitimacy and integrity of the photographic image into question, but also, because of both the warped narrative and the fact that the photographs are only ever constructed through words, the written text itself. Ultimately, we are left unsure about the very texture of the novel: what is the truth? What is the lie?

Above, the paper argues that the black holes must be read as real and not as metaphors. This is necessary in order to understand, ironically, their contemporary significance: photographic portraits today are always affective, and are each, like the Marquise de Merteuil from *Dangerous Liaisons* a “virtuoso of deceit” (*Dangerous Liaisons* 1988, film). To this extent, the affective power of the photograph of Iris is not limited to the boundaries of its own narrative, but leaps towards us as a postmodern parable, a warning of the affective power photographs have to disturb profoundly our understanding of reality and subjectivity. This is increasingly pertinent now given the fact that photographs are seldom on paper, but are rather instantaneously digital. The capacity for photographs to become, not only affective antagonists in our lives, but complete “virtuosos of deceit”, reaches a new cultural purchase in the age of Instagram, filters, and internet circulation. Though to a great extent it is true that today’s images becomes yesterday’s news before the day is even out, this is only in eyes of the viewer. As with Iris, the effects to the subject of a particular photograph can continually haunt. After all, they can be proliferated and doctored at a rate Iris would scarcely be able to comprehend.

It seems clear that in an age where most people are photographers (the iPhone is only little over a decade old), where many people often circulate their own images, what is crucially lost is narrative. Iris shows us how damaging and alluring a free-floating image can be, especially without a corresponding narrative. However, as I mentioned above, this interplay of image, narrative, and subjectivity goes beyond the personal. The political unconscious of the text resonates today more than ever. However, whilst on a personal level the Instagram age of photography is problematic in terms of securing and anchoring one’s own sense of

identity, on a larger scale we can see that it is the text/narrative that deceives today. If we are increasingly unable to align what we see today with what we are told—the symbiotic combination of text and image has never been more crucial; *The Blindfold* is an example of the affective and jarring dislocation that can occur when images run free of any narrative provenance. As George Eliot writes in *Middlemarch*—whose protagonist Dorothea Brooke is the subject of Iris’s own research—‘It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view’ (Eliot 1994, 66). This is certainly true. Indeed, in *The Blindfold* affective power came from a pseudo-Iris, a fake Iris in the form of an antagonistic photograph. Today, however, we have a different political and cultural antagonist in the form of “fake news”, a narrative character deployed with abandon to speak a false narrative over truth or to conceal and façade opposition. This is the moral of Iris’s story: text and image are crucial—they are the “studies in counterpoint”—but for each to maintain their integrity it is down to us to be vigilant, questioning readers and viewers of all narratives.

This paper has argued that in *The Blindfold*, the affective presence of a photograph of the protagonist, Iris, shapes, frames, and fractures the very texture of its narrative. Through a close reading of the photograph in the novel, it has maintained that we must read the photograph as an antagonist in its own right, capable of profoundly affecting the subjectivity and reality of its subject through multiplication, proliferation, and through “stolen” agency. This paper is not a piece of theoretical work, but an aesthetic springboard upon which to inspire further research into the interaction between the photograph and the novel. The need for such research is only increasingly pressing; Iris’s duplicitous, deceptive, and affective self-narrative and photograph begin to teach us how to grapple and comprehend many of the problems in contemporary culture and society, where the question of real and fake news/image/story entertains, threatens, and deceives in great numbers.

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