

What is the literal meaning of 'photography'?

For European Photography

Some might ask themselves in idle moments: why is it that telegraphers make telegrams, whilst photographers make photographs instead of photograms? And this wavering between grams and graphies may be expanded: why do biographers make biographies instead of biograms, and how do electrocardiographers relate to electrocardiograms, autographers to autographies, seismographers to 'what's that name?', or holographers to holographies and/or holograms? And finally: why do cinematographers make films instead of cinematographies or cinematograms? These are idle questions because the answer is obvious: because the inventors of those words had little Latin and less Greek, probably the only thing they had in common with Shakespeare. Still, Freud suggests that mistakes ('Fehlleistungen') like confusing graphies with grams may be revealing.

The most curious instance is that with cinematographers: those Greeks produce something English, (films), although they show it in something Greek (in cinemas). And this is interesting for photographers as well. The English word 'film' means a thin skin, although it is related to the German 'Fell', which means 'fur'. For instance films may form on the surface of stagnant ponds. The Greek word 'graphein' which is part of the cinematographers means 'to write', but it originally means 'to carve' or 'to dig', because originally letters were dug into clay before the clay was burnt. This digging, carving, scribbling, 'scribere', 'schreiben' is preserved within all of our languages, although we no longer use cuneiforms. Thus whatever the cinematographers may engrave, they do so into a very thin skin. This is why they are ashamed to call their products 'graphies' or 'grams' (give, the thinness of their skin), and they prefer to call them films.

Photographers should be just as ashamed, because they too engrave into a very thin skin, at least as long as they produce chemically. But they have an advantage over cinematographers: instead of 'cinemato-' they have 'photo-'. If they are literate they may argue as follows: true, we use thin skins instead of clay, but we also use tiny wedges instead of a stylus, namely photons. Thus we may use the more elegant term of 'photography' (photon writing) or even 'photogram' (photon scripture), and we may consider ourselves to be writers.

If one pursues that argument, it goes as follows: Originally stylus was used on clay, later quills on papyrus, typewriters on paper and cameras on films: stylus and quill produce manuscripts (hand-graphies), typewriters and cameras apparatus-scripts (typographies and photographs). The difference between camera and typewriter is that with the typewriter you have to press on numerous keys while with the camera only one is pressed, because it is fully automated and the photons work automatically.

This is not a ridiculous argument, but one that takes the word 'photography' literally. And it permits the following continuation: 'Photography' cannot mean 'photon writing', because the inventors of the word probably had no idea about photons. What they did know (vaguely) was that the Greek prefix 'photo-' has something to do with light. They intended to articulate the fact that a photo is a thing where light is engraved into something. But with that prefix 'photo-' they touched upon a wasp's

nest which it would have been better for them to leave untouched. Indeed; 'photo' does derive from 'phōs', meaning 'light', but it should rather be spelled 'phāos'. And if one does so, one approaches 'phaiein' and 'phainein', which should be rather translated as meaning 'to appear' and not 'to shine'. This has to do with things like phantoms, fancies and phenomena, with spectres, delusion and appearance, in short; with the apparent. And this is what 'photography' means literally: 'appare writing'. The prefix 'photo' denies the suffix 'graphy': a photo is something written only in appearance, and a photographer is one who writes apparently only.

Thus the arguments has turned against itself: First it argued that photographers are wrigers who use photons instead of pens and cameras instead of typewriters. And now it has to admit that all this is mere appearance, and that photographers do something altogether different. Since appearances deceive (as opposed to light which enlightens), it must be asked what does hide behind the deceptive word 'photography'. And of course; we must ask that question in a literal sense. And to do that we must reconsider that initial wavering between prap and grams, we must restate that idle question.

The answer is simple and it concerns grammar (as is in order): 'Graphy' is to 'gram' like 'writing' is to 'script' and 'excavation' to 'grave'. To put this more to the point: the first terms mean something which is in progress, and the second terms something wh oh is over and done with. A biography is a 'graphy' because you might always add something to it, and a telegram is a 'gram', because it ends with a full stop. But unfortunately there is more to it. 'Gram' does not only mean 'scripture' but also 'letter', and 'grammar' is not a theory of scriptur but originally the know-how with letters. (Charlemagne says of himself as the Roman emperor that he 'supra grammaticos sto-stands above grammar', meaning that he is illiterate.) Thus photography is less perfect than is a photogram, not fully engraved yet, still a little bit graphical and thus grammatically not quite correct. Which means: as long as photographers make photograph and not photograms, they are not really swindlers, because they do not hide the fact that their work is only appearance. It is only if they produce photograms like electrocardiographers produce electrocardiograms, it is only then that the rules of grammar should be fully applied against them.

Now of course: all this is literally so, and therefore should not be taken dead serious. But to come to think of it: how is one to take dead serious something that scribbles in a skin as thin as this one?