Listening to the image: photography between representation and discourse

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Abstract

From Aristotle's proposition that the soul never thinks without a mental image, to Kant's call for non-representational 'image-less' rational thinking, and to the more recent attempts by post-modern philosophers[1] to find dialectical solidarity between image-based, rational thinking and mathematical metaphysics, the exploration of the link between human thought and images has been an influential creative catalyst of Western philosophy and visual culture. In the present age of New Media and the worldwide web when images are stored and transmitted electronically as binary files, the question of whether thought can be expressed as (digital) image acquires new urgent significance, particularly given the mobile transmission, immersive gaming and virtual archiving that now become basic ingredients to our everyday lives. The question becomes: where can we locate the materiality of digital photographic images transmitted in rapid volleys across networks, shared between computers and beamed from one handheld device to another? How does materiality of the image emerge in an environment that no longer requires any concrete, physical presence?

I

The proliferation of photography both in print and electronic media, is one of the main attributes of Digital Culture, but the influence of photography does not stop with art and humanities: the world of science is involved with photography in a different way but to no lesser extent than the world of art. The digital photographic image is unique in being deeply relevant to a range of disciplines that don't otherwise share many other common interests. This does not mean that the photographic image plays a similar role in the Humanities and in the Sciences. The opposite is true – within each discipline involved with digital photography there exist separate and independent practices of viewing, archiving and interpreting photographs.

The triumph of the digital image as the basic semantic unit of digital culture is evident within a wide range of socio-political and cultural processes; from images of distant

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[1] I am thinking especially about the work of Badiou, Virilio, Le Doeuff

nebulas recorded by orbit telescopes to images of sub-atomic particles, to representations of the swine flue virus obtained by electronic microscopes. And yet, despite the omnipresence of the digital image and its dual role as a means of surveillance on the one hand and as means of entertainment on the other, up to the present moment traditional photographic theory did not develop a comprehensive approach to deal with the materiality of the digital image. Partially, this is due to the general premise that the photograph is a representation of an object in the real world, and partially this is due to the notion that every photographic image can be traced back to the negative from which it was made, establishing a direct connection between the original and all the subsequent copies.

Photography is traditionally seen as a visual medium, as a form of mechanical painting. This approach is especially evident in the corpus of photographic theory that explores the meaning of the image with the tools of semiotics and structuralism. At the heart of this interpretative work there is the assumption that the photograph is a form of representation. In the post-industrial, techno-scientific world, this assumption seems dangerously problematic: we are surrounded by images whose connection to objects in the real world is questionable or non-existent.

For the theory of digital photography to move beyond the constrains of traditional semiotic and structuralist analysis, it has to develop a way of thinking about digital media as a non-representational environment which produces political and aesthetic meaning through polyrhythm, seriality, repetition and bricolage. As digital images lose the representational connection with real world objects and become simulations of virtual realities, it is no longer a question of looking at images but rather of tuning into the rhythms, the patterns and the variations generated by images that do not represent anything outside themselves.

II

The digital turn within photography is characterised by the crisis of the visual, the demise of the still photograph and the redundancy of authorship in photography. Within the study of photographic theory, the digital shift was largely perceived as quantitative, not qualitative. The revolution brought about by digital imaging was reduced to technologies, enveloped in historical analogies and explained away with dystopian rhetoric. Following the triumph of digital technologies as the driving force of Western Culture, photography underwent a series of metamorphoses which

significantly altered our understanding of it. In a relatively short period both the practice of photography and its theoretical foundations became the site of dramatic changes. Take one example: 1980's Trivial Pursuit question, 'who is the biggest buyer of silver in the world?' (answer Kodak), can now be updated to 'Who is the biggest manufacturer of cameras in the world?' (answer Nokia). This revolution in photography occurred in conjunction with a deep shift in mobile multimedia communications. The merging of the camera with the telephone attached photography to the most important device of personal communications that ever existed – the mobile phone. As Kristo´f Nyiri observes:

> Combining the option of voice calls with text messaging, MMS, as well as e-mail, and on its way to becoming the natural interface through which to conduct shopping, banking, booking flights, and checking in, the mobile phone is obviously turning into the single unique instrument of mediated communication, mediating not just between people, but also between people and institutions, and indeed between people and the world of inanimate objects. (Nyiri 2005: 2)

The fusion of photography with mobile phone technology helped to create a culture of digital images which circulate the worldwide web as streams of data spontaneously and instantly picked out of vast databases and merged temporarily through such online practices as social networking, tagging, compositing and archiving.
The merging of photography with mobile multimedia challenges the traditional notion that a photograph is a ciphered message that needs to be unpacked with the tools of semiology and structuralism. This challenge extends to the whole concept of authorship of the image, and that for two reasons. First, the meaning of digital images is largely determined by the context within which the image appears, which means that it is unstable and changeable. Second, because the very idea of meaning, as a representation of an object in the real world is itself problematic and questionable within a culture of images transmitted through the communication networks of mobile telecommunications and the Internet. As raw image data is passed across networks as binary code, connections are often made which are random and accidental. The ease with which image data can be placed in radically new contexts, creates momentary continuities and produces temporal meanings which cannot be explored by focusing on the subject of the image alone. In this climate, the notion of authorship of the image looses its traditional meaning, as the

image data is open to modification by display algorithms and by the editing abilities of each user.

The crisis of authorship has another dimension. Since digital image making conquered the mainstream of photography, amateur photography has overtaken professional photography as the main supplier of images to print and screen publishing. Given the increasing popularity of digital cameras and the ease with which images can be shared across the internet and various mobile networks, this is hardly surprising, but it does mean that photography can not be evaluated, or examined based on the work of selected 'masters of photography' whose work is championed by the museums, the galleries and the art magazines. The amateurisation of photography means that contemporary digital photography is characterised not by the outstanding work of these masters, but by the mediocre photography of laypersons. Rather then a system for the production of works of art, digital photography is a system of distribution, copy and presentation in which the individual image is a nodal point, or a fractal shape which has no representational value of its own, but which participates in economies of meaning through connections with other, equally meaningless images.

It follows that digital photography is characterised not by the platonic distinction between the original and the copies but by a much more delicate and hidden difference between copies and simulacra. The digital image is a simulacrum because it has the capacity to be endlessly repeated and reproduced. In addition to that, it is also permanently unfinished and unstable due to the inherent malleability of the digital code and the process of continuous contextualisation through networking. This volatility of meaning and contextual instability of the digital image means that it cannot be examined fully in representational terms. The tools of semiotic and structural analysis are helpless in the face of images whose meaning keeps changing with each rendering at the hands of a display algorithm. It can be said that as simulacra, the products of digital photography resist the process of deciphering because they do not function as a representation but as a pure surface. The economy of representation is replaced by an economy of duplication and repetition. Up to the present moment traditional photographic theory did not develop a comprehensive approach to deal with the materiality of the digital image. Partially, this is due to the general premise that the photograph is a representation of an object in the real world, and partially it is due to the notion that every photographic image

can be traced back to the negative from which it was made, establishing a direct connection between the original and all the subsequent copies.

Yet it would be wrong to say, as many were saying at the start of the digital revolution, that the digital turn hails the death of photography. The most profound effect of the digital culture was to reveal the most concealed aspects of the photographic image by making them the most manifest. Through the examination of the digital image we come to appreciate the unfinished, the non-representational and the rhythmic aspects of photography. We come to realise that the photographic image, whether digital or analogue is always a process, never an object. Looking back at the history of photography through the perspective afforded by digital imaging we can see that the dual emphasis of photographic theory on representation, on the one hand, and on authorship on the other, is at best an incomplete account of the way photographic images operate. The examination of the digital image affords the insight that all acts of authorship are never-ending processes of assemblage, annotation, manipulation and attunment.

Lyotard remarked once that photography forced painting to become a philosophical activity; as photography took upon itself the task of representation, painting had to seek out the rule of formation of pictorial images in the same way that philosophy has to seek out the rule of philosophical sentences. (Lyotard 1991: 121). In a similar way, the triumph of the digital image forced photography to examine its own foundational principles. Digital culture made the task of representation redundant and obsolete, and forced photography to examine the rules of its own image making. This process of examining the foundational principles of photographic images has to embrace the incompleteness of the image as one of its central and fundamental qualities. It has to tune into the non-representational aspects of images: rhythms, repetitions, patterns and explore the meaningful structures created by images outside of the visual field. By exploring the ways in which digital image represent the unrepresentable we can account for its dominant role within contemporary culture.

References

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