

Reconfiguring the Lifeworld: Spatial Experience in the Universe of Technical Images

Abstract:

This paper explores how photography reconfigures the lifeworld, augmenting or displacing its perceptual character. To various degrees, theorists of photography since Walter Benjamin and László Moholy-Nagy in the 1920s and 30s to Vilém Flusser in the 1980s and the post-photography theorists of today have argued that the technical image transcends human perception and intentionality. In a world conditioned by the photographic apparatus, even more so in the age of the networked and algorithmic image, space and time turn from being fundamental facticities of experience and become instead, at the extreme, mere simulacra.

What is at stake are the spatiality and temporality of a world in which the embodied subject of perception lives. At several points in his writings, Maurice Merleau-Ponty critiques photography on the basis that it replaces the spatial and temporal horizon of embodied human experience with a static and mechanical frame. His criticism echoes and is clearly founded upon Edmund Husserl's analysis, in his late writings, of the idealisation and mathematicisation of the world promoted by modern science and technology. This analysis was in turn a key influence on Flusser's conception of photography, which he contended, far from serving to represent the world, turns us into its functionaries. This paper traces these arguments and their relationships and seeks finally to identify an element in the lifeworld which might offer resistance to the apparatus's effects.

Keywords:

Phenomenology, Lifeworld, Technology, Apparatus, Photography, Data, Algorithm, Image

1. Introduction: Photographic Space

In Man Ray's photograph *Anatomies* from 1929 a pale, shimmering phallic form rears against a black background. The shoulders visible at the bottom edge of the image and upon which this shape sits, suggest that what we are looking at is a head; but there is no face, only a roughly pyramidal volume of silvery skin rising out of the figure's chest. It does not take long before we recognise that the odd triangular apex forming – if it is a head, then its crown – is actually the sitter's lower jaw seen from below, the head tilted far back and the sitter's neck stretched upward so as to take the place of the face, which disappears behind its own jaw. This chimerical, surreal being is a creation of photography, which Man Ray among others praised for revealing spatial anatomies different to those seen by the eye and represented in

traditional images. Approaching photography from the opposite direction, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that the depth of lived space is “not a geometric or a photographic one” (2006, 73). This paper is an initial exploration of this distinction, as well as the relation, between lived perception and photography.

In its rudimentary form our question is about the effect photography has on spatial experience, and a significant proportion of this paper will be concerned with the necessary explication of the terms of this question – What is meant by ‘photography’? And what by ‘spatial experience’? First, then, we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, photographs, i.e. photographic images, and the practices that give rise to them, and on the other, photography as an apparatus. This I do in the second section of this paper. Secondly, we need to have a definition of the lived nature of spatial experience. That is to say, we need to understand on what basis a distinction such as that Merleau-Ponty made between lived perception and photographic representation can be made. This I will explore for the most part in the third section of the paper, where I will start to unfold issues around Edmund Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld.

As Husserl’s concept exemplifies a fundamental phenomenological starting point echoed in Merleau-Ponty’s own analyses of being-in-the-world, we should pause to ask what the lifeworld is. Fundamentally, the lifeworld is the world of lived experience, that is, the world as it appears and makes sense within this experience. It is the sense of the world and our action within it before we begin to reflect on or analyse any part of it. Importantly for Husserl’s argument in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1970a), our existence within the lifeworld makes it possible for us to analyse or reflect on the world at all, because without our pre-reflexive lived experience no world would be given for us to comport ourselves towards theoretically. Husserl’s account of the concept often suggests it equates by and large to direct perceptual experience; however, as becomes much clearer in his essay “The Origin of Geometry” (1970b), the lifeworld must nonetheless be considered an historical phenomenon, an evolving context of life within which cultural techniques and technologies are integrated. Perception would therefore not be an unchanging process, but rather, as I discuss in the third and fourth sections below, it would be reconfigured as new technologies extend or alter it. These of course would include photography. In light of this, our question develops into one regarding the way and the degree to which technical images transform perception.

The 'crisis' alluded to in the title of Husserl's book refers precisely to the way in which the evidence of the lifeworld is occluded and forgotten in the mathematical model of the world erected by the theoretical sciences. Photography, or at least the photographic apparatus, is seen by Vilém Flusser as the product of such a theoretical model. Flusser presents this view in his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983; 2000), where he follows a similar line of reasoning to that presented by Husserl. Where Husserl talks of the shapes of pure geometry being products of a deductive system detached from the intuitively experienced shapes of the lifeworld to which they apparently correspond, Flusser talks of photographic images being in reality realisations of the apparatus's program rather than images of the world. Like Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and a range of other writers did before him, Flusser indicates how technical images differ from traditional ones. Where Benjamin emphasised how photographs erode the unique presence of the world of direct experience, Barthes underlined the potential they have both to naturalise and circumnavigate the cultural codes that infiltrate perceptual experience. Writing some 50 years after Benjamin, and around 25 years after Barthes's first analyses, Flusser stands at the beginning of a period when the photographic apparatus, having become digitised, networked and algorithmically driven, has become both more intimately integrated into our lives as well as apparently immaterial in its ubiquity, leaving us with the question: what, if anything, eludes the effects of the apparatus?

In the brief concluding section of the paper I will speculate on an aspect of the lifeworld that might offer an answer to this question, namely its implicitly intersubjective nature. Otherness is excluded from the computation on which the photographic apparatus is based, whereas the lifeworld, as an historical way of being into which the subject is born, is necessarily intersubjective. It is because in itself it is a predictable and ultimately closed system that the apparatus must needs be exclude the other. By contrast human action, as Hannah Arendt (1998) says, being oriented towards the other, has outcomes that are unpredictable. Action takes place beyond the subject's own sphere within the intersubjective horizon of the world where its fate is unknown. So, in as much as photographers search for an image not predicted by the apparatus, as Flusser incites them to do, they might also be considered as acting in this Arendtian sense. Consequently, the investigation into the photographic apparatus in this paper ends with an acknowledgement of the need to begin again, this time from the point of view of photographic practices understood as acts that have the potential to reconfigure our relation to the apparatus.

2. From Practices to Apparatus

Different photographic practices imply, more or less explicitly, different understandings of the photographic apparatus, and vice versa. In 1926, ensconced among the Surrealists in Paris, Man Ray wrote of photography as “a marvellous explorer of those aspects our retina never records” (1989, 12). Ten years later, Walter Benjamin would write in a similar vein that it is through the camera that “we first discover the optical unconscious” (2008, 37). Both writers find in the camera’s machine vision a royal road to the uncanny set of resemblances between things which is the Surrealist preoccupation. Indeed, it has been argued that photography, or at least a particular understanding of it as an optical automaton, is the red thread linking the disparate styles and media of Surrealist art (Krauss 1985). By contrast, writing from the end of WWII, Andre Bazin’s praise of the cinematic realism in the films of Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini and other directors is based in the notion that the photographic image is continuous with the world of our perceptual experience. Nonetheless, like the Surrealists, Bazin based his notion of a realist aesthetic on unique features of photography. Emphasising its affinity with the everyday perceptual world as opposed to that of unconscious phantasy, he saw the essential realism of cinema as being constituted by the “transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction” that the apparatus effects (2004, 169). As these divergent critical credos demonstrate, photographic practices can be distinguished from the photographic apparatus, although of course the former do not exist in isolation of the latter. Indeed, as all photographic practice, from daily snaps taken with a tourist camera or smartphone to commercial or artistic productions, presuppose the apparatus, it is with it that we should start.

In a journalistic piece published soon after the invention of photography in the late 1830s, Edgar Allan Poe wrote that

the Daguerreotypied plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. [...] the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. (1980, 38).

This notion of the photographic image as a faithful representation, or at least emanation, of nature runs through a venerable line of commentators. It is there at the root of Bazin’s realism as well as in Barthes’s late meditation on the photograph, *Camera Lucida*, where however it is less realism than a return of the real that is attributed to it. In photography’s present,

though, it is the world's fabrication rather than its resemblance that is apparent when the image is scrutinised.

A relatively salient aspect of this is the High Dynamic Range function found on the camera apps of most smartphones nowadays. When you take a photo with HDR turned on, the camera takes several photographs at different exposures in quick succession. These it then combines so that what would have been underexposed or overexposed in one image is augmented by segments from one of the others. What does this is a bit of software that makes the choice as to what parts of the photographs are desirable and automatically sews them together. However, turning HDR off does not mean, of course, that the resulting image is free of computer-aided simulation. The white balance or overall hue of the image is calculated algorithmically by the camera, too. In fact, all images appearing on digital screens are composed of a grid of pixels, each a mathematically determined combination of red, blue and green light. When a digital camera takes a 'picture' it actually produces a data file containing abstract information about this grid of pixels, which when subsequently processed by the appropriate algorithms on a computer, is turned into a perceptible image appearing on a screen.

As photographic images mostly, but certainly not exclusively, result from the camera being pointed at some segment of the world, they feel like, and often operate as, an index of that worldly reality. On the surface it may seem they refer to the physical world, but this is not their real referent, rather, arguably, a mere simulation covering the digital infrastructure that produces and shapes photographic images. The meaningful question to ask of the photographic apparatus in its algorithmic form, therefore, would be the same one Alexander Galloway poses for the computer, the ultimate substrate of present day photography. "The matter at hand", Galloway writes, "is not that of coming to know the world, but rather that of how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world" (2010, 282). This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the abstraction inherent in the apparatus, in transcending both the dexterity of the hand and acuity of the eye, also appears to have the potential to dissolve the cultural codes and conscious interpretations that are reproduced in our habitual practices¹. On the other hand, the majority of images produced by the apparatus present a veil behind

¹ The faith placed in the camera as a means to reform vision by not only the Surrealists, but also by other Avant-gardes from the Russian Constructivists and Dada to the Bauhaus, is reprised in a number of contemporary post-photography theorists, including, for example, Rubinstein 2013.

which its operation remains obscure, and which actually has the effect of allowing cultural codes built into the apparatus to continue to operate on a subterranean level.

3. Space and the Lifeworld

“The photographic apparatus reproduces the purely optical picture”, wrote the newly appointed ‘Master of Form’ at the Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy, in 1923, and it does so, he added, without rendering it into a “comprehensible whole” as human perception would (1971, 117). Whilst the photographs of his Russian contemporary, Alexander Rodchenko, kept a foot in the social world, emphasising the presence of human spectators in a world similarly estranged through the image’s unexpected perspective, Moholy-Nagy used the subject matter he photographed to realise a potential in the photographic apparatus itself. In his essay “Production-Reproduction” of 1922, as Victor Margolin says, he “argued for an art of pure sensory experience as opposed to an interpretative engagement with the imagery of the lifeworld”, which the camera, once shorn of the reproductive logic attributed to it, would enable (1997, 140).

Where Moholy-Nagy, like Man Ray, saw advantage in the camera’s transfiguration of perception, Merleau-Ponty saw a flaw. At a number of places in his *Phenomenology of Perception* and across a number of his essays, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the gestalt nature of lived perception – that is, essentially, its integration of sensation within a “comprehensible whole” – by contrasting it with photographic representation. So, for example, in his essay “Cezanne’s Doubt” he writes that “in perception, the objects that are near appear smaller, those far away larger, than they do in a photograph”. To illustrate this he describes how a train actually approaching us increases in size less quickly than the same train in a film would appear to (2006, 74)². The reason for this is that the apparent size of a perceived object is not a measure of that object in isolation, but arises out of the perceptual situation as a whole in which other objects and my own body form an interrelated system along with the focal object. To put this simply: the world has depth and objects apparent size only for an embodied subject who is included in the scene they view.

How does technology change our perception of the world? Early in his *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty explores the phenomenon of apparent size through the example of the moon’s changing appearance as it moves about the sky. When it appears at the horizon it looks bigger than when it is at its zenith. The explanation for this is that “the parts of the [perceptual] field

² This example is reiterated from his *Phenomenology* (2012, 271-2).

act upon one another and *motivate* this enormous moon” looming on the horizon. However, “if we gaze attentively, such as through a cardboard tube or a telescope, we will see that its apparent diameter remains constant” (2012, 34; 30). The telescope does indeed transform lived perception, but, Don Ihde argues, if the optical instrument distorts immediate experience in doing so, the vision it produces is nonetheless not entirely severed from it. Rather – and this is something Merleau-Ponty fails to emphasise – “it makes dimensions of the newly enhanced lifeworld open to perceptual-bodily experience” (2016, 55).

So, although photographic imagery, like telescopic vision, represents a mediated and learnt form of seeing, the difference between it and the lifeworld is not necessarily unbridgeable. In fact, in Ihde’s account the issue is not how technology comes to change a supposedly original and pure lived perception, but whether perception can be extricated from its intertwining with technology in the first place. Because, as he tells us, there is no seeing that is not in some way mediated by cultural techniques or technologies (2016, 58). Yes, we do have moments of relatively unmediated perception – what Ihde in an earlier work called ‘micro-perception’ – but their meaning is always relative to culturally and technically mediated systems of perception – or ‘macro-perception’ (1990). Perception is polyvalent; it can and does take various forms both between different cultures and historical periods as well as within a single cultural context. Nonetheless, true to his Husserlian heritage, Ihde also saw mediated perception as reciprocally founded in direct perception.

4. Reconfiguring the Lifeworld

What happens to depth perception when vision is abstracted from the relation between the subject’s body and other things? The camera itself does not ‘see’ depth; it does not perceive, it functions. Only when it works in tandem with the embodied eye can the vision it produces become part of the spatio-temporal lifeworld. Direct perception of an object-world is at the core, as Husserl saw it, of the concrete, pre-scientific experience that makes up the lifeworld. The question, then, is whether it is possible that the simulacral surface of technically produced images, in reconfiguring our macro-perception, not only displaces the spatial depth identified by Merleau-Ponty and Husserl as an essential dimension of the lifeworld, but does so to the degree that experience of and in depth becomes an exception rather than the founding reference for all knowledge.

Although Husserl placed unmediated perception at the core of the lifeworld and the origin of scientific knowledge, he also accounted for the integration of techniques that extend

subjective perception into objective knowledge. The Husserlian lifeworld is not only, therefore, the concrete world of micro-perception, but also a series of sedimented ‘ideal acquisitions’ compacted into perceptual habits and practices. Numbers are a good example of what is meant by the term ‘ideal acquisition’, something learnt that then shapes our perception unconsciously. For those of us living in a numerate culture it is hard to envisage a human world without number, but there have been cultures that did not count. According to linguist Daniel Everett, the Pirahã people in Brazil are the only remaining culture that does not count and whose language lacks grammatical number (2008, 220; 195). Having spent some 30 years living for lengthy periods with the Pirahã and studying their language, Everett describes how the latter is formed around what he describes as “the cultural immediacy of experience principle”. That is to say, only what is “anchored to the moment” of speech is spoken about, and as a consequence the Pirahã language possesses no grammar that expresses anything relative to any other point in time, such as the past perfect or future perfect tenses in European languages (131-2). This explains why the Pirahã have no number words, as “number entails a violation of immediacy of experience in so many of its uses—as a category it generalises beyond the immediate, establishing larger generalisations” (196). People coming from other cultures than the Pirahã acquire this category as children. Perhaps the acquisition is laborious at first, but in later life the idea of seeing quantities of objects solely in terms of ‘fewer’ or ‘more’ as the Pirahã do, rather than numerically, seems even more difficult to conceive of than ‘reactivating’ the original intuitions in which we first grasped the concept of number.

Husserl saw a difference between the ideal acquisitions of basic numeracy and those of mathematical science, however. Pure geometry, which is Husserl’s recurring example, does not deal with the actual and necessarily more or less vague shapes of the lifeworld, but rather corresponds to an “ideal space” of fully determined shapes. These ideal shapes – platonic triangles, squares or four-dimensional cubes, what have you – cannot be intuited, only calculated; they don’t exist phenomenally. Rather they are derivations of an abstract system of “axiomatic concepts and propositions” permitting the “deductively univocal construction of any conceivable shape” (1970a, 22). A threshold is crossed with such idealities. Not only would it be extremely difficult to trace the chain of axioms and theorems that constitute them back to an original intuitive experience in the perceptual lifeworld, but the self-sufficiency of such a theoretical system, Husserl believed, threatens to bury in irremediable forgetfulness the evidence presented in our experience of the directly perceived world. If sight were lost of

this experiential evidence, then reactivation of the original intuitive sources of our ideal constructions built upon it would cease to be possible too. So runs the phenomenologist's argument.

Here the roots of Vilém Flusser's critique of photography can be discerned. Beginning in the "concrete lifeworld", Flusser's 'ladder of abstraction', his genealogical model of the technically imaged world, describes how a series of acquired techniques and technologies – running from hand tools, through traditional images and texts, to technical images, each subsequent form remediating the former – progressively distances us from the concrete starting point of our being (2011, 6-10). This account of the rise and effects of the 'universe of technical images' bears a striking resemblance to Husserl's account of the rise and effects of theoretical science. "We owe [technical] images", Flusser writes, "to a technology that came from scientific theories, theories that show us ineluctably that 'in reality' everything is a swarm of points in a state of decay, a yawning emptiness" (38). Take away the hyperbole and you are very close to Husserl's thesis, namely that the abstraction of theoretical science may derive from the directly experienced world, but it need not be referred back to it in order to function. It forms a self-sufficient system of symbolically defined idealities, which though "reliable in accomplishing obviously very useful things", works like "a machine [that] everyone can learn to operate correctly without in the least understanding the inner possibility and necessity of this sort of accomplishment" (1970a, 52) – somewhat like a modern camera.

Flusser's diagnosis of the crisis experienced on the last rung of his ladder of abstraction, that of "computation and calculation" (2011, 7), is that technical images so pervade our lives, and their infrastructural origins within the black box of the apparatus are so opaque to us, that we have become their functionaries. Here we have a thesis that inverts Ihde's optimism: the photographic apparatus no longer extends our perception; rather we become an extension of its logic. Flusser's argument applies not only to the computerised image, which had not yet become the *de facto* form for photography at the time he was writing, but also the analogue image. "Photography does not simply reproduce the real," Susan Sontag observed, "it recycles it" (1979, 174). In its recycled form the world has become mere image, and gives way in our experience to what Flusser calls "the photographic universe". He argues that photographic images are produced to realise possibilities inherent within the photographic apparatus itself; ultimately, the world serves photography, rather than photography the world. Photographs would be, in this respect, the predetermined outcome of the apparatus rather than a translation of a subjective intuition. They substitute, in consequence, a surface

simulation for the depth of the lifeworld, which they reconfigure as an “image-world”, to use Sontag’s phrase.

5. In lieu of a conclusion: From Apparatus to Practices

In lieu of a conclusion to this discussion, I want to start again. That is to say, I would like to sketch out here, very briefly, an alternative approach to our initial question about the relation of photography to spatial experience, one that would lead back out of the cul-du-sac that concentrating too closely on the apparatus leads us into. An alternative to pursuing the question of how photography impacts on spatiality, which is the route taken in this paper up to this point, would be to turn the tables and ask how spatial experience affects photography. Is there anything within lived space that would allow the photographer to reconfigure if not the apparatus globally, then at least our relation to it locally?

As a first step, I will allude to an aspect of Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld I have not raised so far, but which suggests the potential of a different approach to the relation between the technical image and the lived world. Husserl calls this aspect “horizon-certainty”:

We always already know of our present world and that we live in it, always surrounded by an openly endless horizon of unknown actualities. This knowing, as horizon-certainty, is not something learned, not knowledge that was once actual and has merely sunk back to become part of the background; horizon-certainty [...] is already presupposed in order that we can seek to know what we do not know. All knowing concerns the unknown world, which yet exists in advance for us as world (1970b, 373-4).

The lifeworld is not primarily what is known, but what could be known, as well as what is, was or will be known by others. The possibility of others’ perceptions forms the horizon of the world. Husserl expended much effort in his later years trying to establish the compatibility between the ideas that, on the one hand, the world is subjectively constituted and that, on the other, it is nonetheless intersubjectively valid and accessible, which is why it appears as an objective world. For him, a solipsistic world would barely warrant the name. The other’s perspective may remain at the horizon, out of direct perceptual reach as it were, but it is nonetheless implicit as a constant possibility in my worldly experience. The lifeworld is not ultimately reducible, therefore, to the familiar knowledge sedimented in our ‘habituallities’, as Husserl puts it, nor is it the closed sphere that the sedimentation of experience within an ego would suggest. On the contrary, it includes the paradoxical certainty of the unknown – or, as we might also say, of the unpredicted – that borders the ego.

Lived space is an expression of this ‘horizon-certainty’. The experience of spatial depth, in particular, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in *The Visible and the Invisible*, implies a world of

other perspectives, notionally reversible with my own, but as yet or forever unknown to me. That is to say, the fact that only an embodied being included in the world can perceive it spatially, means that they too must be spatial, which in turn entails that the perspective can be reversed and the perceiving subject become the object of another perception. This is the full sense of lived spatiality: in short, the spatiality of the world implies in itself a horizon of potentially existing others. But where can this certain horizon of the other and the concomitant reversible depth of the spatially existing world be located in photography? To show this would be the second step.

The photographer's "acts are programmed by the camera", Flusser writes. The problem of photography, as he sees it, is how to evade the prediction of the apparatus. His answer is for the photographer to seek freedom by "playing against the camera" and its closed, horizonless system (1983, 72-3; 2000, 80). Unpredictability is to be sought, then, in photographic practices. They cannot change the apparatus itself, at least not directly, only the way we encounter it. In other words, if photographic practices are in part submerged in the logic of the apparatus, they nonetheless have the potential to create sense in relation to others in the lifeworld, too.

Here we might do well to augment Flusser's reading of Husserl with a concept developed by another student of phenomenology, Hannah Arendt. Where practices do create sense in relation to others, they may be counted as 'action', in Arendt's (1998) sense of the term. Action takes place across the intersubjective synapse, in the certain but unknown space of the other. The originator of action cannot know how the other, who is its necessary continuation, will receive it, nor in what form they will pass it on. By contrast, in operating, apparatuses no more act than they perceive; whereas the operation of the machine is predictable – except where it fails to operate and then becomes a mere thing – action is unpredictable. So, although it is necessary to pass through an exploration of the photographic apparatus, practices should not be seen as only its derivatives. Once we see them in terms of action, we might begin to appreciate how they create a space for reconfiguring our relation to the apparatus.

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