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What is 21st Century Photography?

– Daniel Rubinstein

Fifty years before photography was officially unleashed onto the world, in answering the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1784) Immanuel Kant wrote: ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’. Kant was writing this at a time when thousand years of Feudalism were ending, and he strived to define the emerging world order based on scientific method rather than religion, representational democracy rather than autocracy and market economy rather than bartering.

Enlightenment meant a clean break from the dark ages and a resounding turn towards reason, logic, and rationality. This rupture with the past and the launch of a new era of science, capitalism and democracy, was summarised by Kant in the motto ‘Sapere Aude!’ – ‘have courage to use your own understanding!’ The invention of photography that flowed from this scientific revolution cemented the final break with the medieval iconography of saints and cherubs.

The photo-graphic image combined some of the key attributes of the Enlightenment: rational method capable of producing identical results under controlled conditions, industrial processes that replace physical labour with mechanised production, and the delirium of mass-replication that mimics the infinite circulation of commodities in a capitalist market. In other words, the technical image captured the key scientific, political and ethical tendencies of industrial capitalism and presented them to the eye as an image, inaugurating along the way the age of aesthetic modernism.

The reason photography was the most suitable visual form to reflect on the changing face of society, as it was reshaped by industrialisation, is that it is itself the product of the same industrial process that replaced human and animal muscles with motors and pistons, accelerated movement to ultrasonic speeds and exchanged craftsmanship with mass-production. Photography emerged out of this melting pot of bodies, energies and

machines as the visual figuration of a social order that made representation and subjectivity the cornerstone of its scientific, political and economic activities. A photograph of a cat represents a real cat according to the same logic that maintains that paper money represents gold bullion (gold standard), a member of parliament represents her constituents and H₂O represents water.

However, in the 21st Century this representational world order inaugurated by Newton's laws of motion, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, parliamentary (representational) democracy and the photographic camera has already come to an end, and even if some parts of it are still visible, they are in a state of advanced decay, maintaining a holding pattern while they are being transformed by a new set of forces. The 'Age of Information' is characterised by the emergence of another kind of machine, one that replicates the activities and the processes not of the human body, but of the brain.

Just as during the previous 'Industrial Age', machines replaced physical labour not by copying animal locomotion (airplanes don't flap their wings like birds) but by utilising different sources of energy (petroleum) and different processes (internal combustion), the new machines that we refer to as 'computers' do not operate within the categories of human reason, such as dialectics, subjectivity, and representation. Quantum physics did not obliterate Newton's laws, but showed that these laws apply only to a narrow segment of reality. Quantitative easing did not obliterate paper money, but annulled any possibility of money representing gold bullion or any real assets. The Arab Spring did not obliterate representational democracy, but exposed a connection between the democratic vote and fundamentalism, and computers did not obliterate reason and representation but augmented them with fuzzy logic, undecidability, artificial intelligence and the paradoxes of Turing machines.

In this new age of thinking machines, algorithmic processing, and vast computational speeds, a dramatic change is happening to the visual field. The industrial age was an age of universal visibility, as Foucault demonstrated by offering the examples of the school, the factory, the hospital and the barracks, which operated in the same visual order of perspectival hierarchy. Photography had a clear-cut role in this optical regime, as Susan Sontag noticed: 'cameras define reality in the two ways essential to

the working of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)’.

The only thing that remained unrepresentable under the Western eye was, in Marx’s phrase ‘the hidden abode of production’: the secret of profit making remained classified. Even photography was unable to shine the disinfecting power of sunlight onto this secret, because the process that produces capital is also the very process by which photography itself is produced, for as we have seen, photography and capital operate by means of technology, mass delirium, reproduction and infinite exchange. The demise of the industrial age is at the same time curtains for the spectacle of representation: visual surveillance is replaced with predictive policing, industrial processes replaced with trading algorithms, armies replaced with remote controlled killer robots and perspectival geometry replaced with the flat topology of the computer screen.

These changes do not mean that suddenly what we have in front of our eyes does not matter, but that many more things that matter are outside our human field of view. The question is, what becomes of photography when the locus of power shifts from the optical nerve to the fibre-optic cable? What becomes of the public space – the heart of any European city – when it is invisibly but relentlessly morphed by multinational capital into privately owned space with public access, and when sovereignty, citizenship and autonomy find themselves under threat from multinational corporations and when – as Andrea Philips wrote – the changing concept of the public (space) reconfigures how we understand the performance of truth, judgement and rights?

Sadly, the answer has to be ‘not much has changed’. As a recent visit to photography graduates exhibition confirmed, photography is still, above all else, the universal face of representation. To this day photography’s *carte-de-visite* proudly proclaims that it can take any aspect of the world and present it to the eye as an image. Indeed, is there anything that cannot be shown in a photograph? The surface of a comet? Check. Someone’s pale ass reflected in the bathroom mirror? Check. A puddle of urine under a hospital bed in a shantytown? Check. Teenagers on the beach looking wistfully into the distance? Triple check!

But this is not all, identical images also pressing upon us from bus stops, magazines, mobile phones, notice boards, tablets and bags of cat food, to such an extent that it is often hard to know if you are looking at a gallery wall or at the shop window of Primark. The astonishing diversity of subjects, events and situations that photography is able to attend to, suggests at first sight that its scope is unlimited and its reach universal. And yet, these ostensibly Technicolor riches hide their own dark secrets, best summarised by drawing an analogy to Henry Ford's remark that 'you can have the Ford T in any colour as long as it's black'. In the context of photography, this means that you can have any photography you like, on any device, topic and subject, as long as it is a representation of something or other.

The problem is that in a post-Fordist society the locus of political agency and of cultural relevance has shifted from the object - as visually arresting as it might be - to the processes that (re)produce and distribute the object. Processes, however, by their own nature, are less visible and less representational than objects. For that reason, it seems to me that if photography mainly concerns itself with representations of objects in space, it is losing its relevance in a world in which speed, acceleration, distribution and self-replication acquire a significance that overshadows the visual appearance of spaces.

In the 20th Century photography existed on a printed page, mimicking in the perspectival organisation of its elements the hierarchical organisation of a centrally governed society with its focal point located in the subjectivity of the observer. In the 21st Century this arrangement is just as quaint as piecemeal production in the age of conveyor belt assembly. The photographic print disappeared everywhere apart from some galleries and nostalgic photography departments. In its place there is now a luminous screen that has its one side facing the human, bathing her in blue light and screening from the immediate surroundings, and its other side remotely plugged into an unimaginable stream of data that is constantly worked and reworked by algorithms that keep being written and re-written by invisible and unknown puppet masters - our real rulers.

From time to time these algorithms pluck a few data packages out of this interminable stream and give them a visual form that resembles what we used to call 'a photograph'. But this resemblance is superficial to say the least. The four horsemen of

the photographic apocalypse: Index, Punctum, Document, and Representation can no more account for this process than a printed page can explain the operation of a computer screen. This is not to suggest that the algorithmic image is somehow immaterial or inhuman, but rather to propose that both materiality and humanity must be re-evaluated in the light of these bio-techno-political developments.

And yet, there is still an image, and the image can be of something or other, for example a cat, a politician or a beheading, and this image can still be fascinating as we know many images to be. But in a meta-critical sense – a sense beyond the manner in which we normally consider and criticise images – this fascination appears to be the defining quality of photography, precisely because the word ‘photography’ today names not another visual form of representation, but an immersive economy that offers an entirely new way to inhabit materiality and its relation to bodies, machines and brains. Johnny Golding christened this new materiality ‘Ana-materialism’ and we can simply call it ‘The Now’.

Within this absorbing ‘always-on’ and ‘everywhere at the same time’ ana-materiality, the world does not come before the image, nor is it produced by the image. Rather, photography is the visual figuration of a new layer of consciousness – in which new relationships to space and time, and therefore new categories of thought, play, art, and agency are emerging.

It would be hasty therefore to dismiss photography as a heritage practice from the industrial age. Above all else, photography, as the visual incarnation of the algorithm, is shaping our world everywhere, and from time to time we can even glimpse the workings of this process in the images that it throws up. But just like the pebbles scattered by an ocean wave, these images are simply the by-products of a crushing force that acts according to a logic of its own. There is, however, no need to read too much into the shapes created by these pebbles, but instead consider that the urgent task is to learn how to surf this wave. As Gilles Deleuze said: ‘There is no need for fear or hope, only to look for new weapons’.

21st Century photography is this wave, characterised as a continuous process of re-shaping visual forms out of data. It has little in common with prints in black frames, these coffins of photography. It will not be found in the ‘60 inches from the floor to

the center of the image' rule that still passes for curating in some quarters, nor in the 'eye level' arrangement on the walls, that reinforces the rhetorical tropes of perspectival painting inherited from the Renaissance. And it has nothing in common with the hypocritical moralism of the post-colonial document that relies on the same representational paradigm that made colonialism possible. In short, 21st Century Photography is not the representation of the world, but the exploration of the labor practices that shape this world through mass-production, computation, self-replication and pattern recognition. Through it we come to understand that the 'real world' is nothing more than so much information plucked out of chaos: the randomized and chaotic conflation of bits of matter, strands of DNA, sub-atomic particles and computer code. In photography one can glimpse how the accidental meetings of these forces are capable of producing temporary meaningful assemblages that we call 'images'. In the 21st Century photography is not a stale sight for sore eyes, but the inquiry into what makes something an image. As such, photography is the most essential task of art.

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