

# PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: DOES PHOTOGRAPHY STILL EXIST?

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In his celebrated article, "A Small History of Photography", Walter Benjamin asserted that theorists of photography had for almost a century sought to situate photography within a fetishistic and anti-technical concept of art. For him, the photographer had already overturned the tribunal of art, in other words, had refused to earn the credentials from that tribunal (Benjamin 1997, 241). Today, Benjamin's confidence in the photographer's reckless attitude towards the judgement-seat of art seems to be groundless. For about forty years after this assertion, photography has found a firm place in the modern museum in the 1970s, and has been endowed with the status of art. For some authors, this has primarily to do with the recuperation of the auratic subsumed under the banner of subjectivity and the development of the connoisseurship of the photographer's style (Crimp 1980, 97). Indeed, the problem of subjectivity and whether the practice of photography has enough "human intervention" to be declared art have always haunted the discussions on photography. Early photographers seemed to have had two choices: some followed pictorialism by emulating painting in order to demonstrate photography's ability to exhibit personal artistic expression; others complied with Daguerre's understanding of the aesthetics of photography, in which the daguerreotype is the totality of physical and chemical processes that enable nature to generate or show itself (Marien 2006, 23). Thus, photography needs no intervention to be declared art. Although seeming a bit archaic now, this perspective persisted amongst some esteemed later thinkers. Bazin (1967), for example, considered photography a process from which human beings' creative intervention was absent.

Indeed, what underlies all these discussions is the problem of the real that photography was destined to entail since the beginning of its existence. Far from being outdated, the problem of the real still pervades the discussions on photography. The claim that photography mirrors reality has two consequences for what a photograph inherently is. The first

is closely related to the wearisome discussion of whether photography is art or not, with the primary emphasis on the so-called "absence of subjectivity" in the production of the photographic image. The second consequence concerns the status of photography as a document, by situating photographic practice within the realm of pristine objectivity. With the emergence of digital imaging, the tables seem to be turned. Ironically, the claims that the digital image no longer associates with the referent, together with the supposed loss of the real, have led to the revival of the questioning of the status of photograph-like images as art. Even more interestingly, within the image-driven economy of our age, images undertake functions of proof and persuasion more than ever, though digital images, it is claimed, have less credibility than analogue images.

Even more so, the problem of authenticity still haunts contemporary discussions on photography as much as in Benjamin's claims about the loss of the aura. While the advent of the mechanical reproducibility of photographic images has led to discussions on the disappearance of the actual original and the fetish of the original (Benjamin 1968), in the discussions on the digital image the problem of authenticity refers to the disappearance of the distinction between the copy and the original or rather the complete loss of the meaning of the original, which culminates in the fact that the digital image has no physicality at all. But the problem of reality recurs at this point as well. While it primarily arises from the relation between the referent and the image in analogue images, the problem shifts to the reality of the image itself in digital images. What is at stake is no longer primarily the reality of the appearance of the referent on the photographic surface; rather, it is what the image represents with regard to the existence of itself.

Throughout the 1990s, the literature on photography was divided on the basis of whether the phenomenon of digital imaging augured the death of photography or, in other words, radically transformed the practice of photography to make it hardly identifiable as photography anymore. For some authors, such as Martin Lister (2007, 251), the discussions came to an end with the critical consensus that photography was not dying. Somewhat overly optimistic, Lister argued that digital technology led to the "production of more, not less, 'photography'" rather than signalling the death of it. Those discussions on the whatness or ontology of the digital image have, however, critically challenged and altered the conventional meaning of what Lister calls "photography by overgeneralization". One could identify various photographs, if not the death of "photography", at best after reading those diverse accounts on the ontology of the digital image. Having written the most comprehensive

study on the differences between film-based and digital images, William J. Mitchell (2001) claims that the physical differences between these two modes of production have brought about significant consequences that signal the emergence of the post-photographic era, as the title of his book suggests. Mitchell bases his argument on the assumption that analogue images are not replicable without degradation, although the copies of copies of any digital images are in no way distinguishable from the originals (*ibid.*, 6). Another difference that Mitchell recognizes between these two modes is the amount of information yielded. For him, analogue or film-based images have an indefinite amount of information in contrast to digital images, which have limited tonal and spatial information. Mitchell adds that digital images are inherently mutable, though extensive reworking is "outside the mainstream of photographic practice" (*ibid.*, 7). One of Mitchell's striking conclusions, which is based on these differences, again touches upon the problem of reality. He asserts:

Today, as we enter the post-photographic era, we must face once again the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and the tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream. We have indeed learned to fix shadows, but not to secure their meanings or to stabilize their truth values; they still flicker on the walls of Plato's cave (*ibid.*, 225).

Not surprisingly, Mitchell's provocative argument provided many critics with a target. Lev Manovich points out new digital technologies that allow users to work with images of virtually unlimited size; thus the pixel is no longer the final frontier of digital imaging (Manovich 2006, 244). He adds that today's digital technology is capable of yielding images that have "much finer detail than was ever possible with traditional photography" (*ibid.*, 243). Furthermore, Manovich was truly right in his criticism of Mitchell's notion of "normal" or "straight" photography that presupposes unmanipulated, "pure" images (*ibid.*, 245). For him manipulation has always been a common practice of the modern uses of photography; straight photography does not exist.

The novelty of Manovich's contribution to the discussions on digital imaging, for me, does not emanate from his criticism of Mitchell or his questioning of what had been considered the differences between digital image and the analogue. Indeed, what he terms the fetishization of the "'film look' itself—the soft, grainy, and somewhat blurry appearance of a photographic image"—tells how digital imaging imitates the "cultural codes of film and photography" (*ibid.*, 242). Manovich, rather than proclaiming the death of photography or post-photography, uses the

formulation "photography after photography" to refer to the condition after the digital revolution in which the digital image "annihilates photography while solidifying, glorifying and immortalizing the photographic" (ibid., 241).

Although Manovich's claims may be read as a testimony for the very existence of photography after the digital revolution, I prefer to interpret them as forecasting the death of photography by the glorification of the photographic. Indeed, for me, what is implied in his claim is that what digital imaging represents is a postmodern nostalgia for the representation of the referent in the photographic mode, no longer the referent itself. Geoffrey Batchen seems to make a similar distinction between the photographic and photography, while asserting that in digital images "there is potentially no direct referent in an outside world" and "digital images are not so much signs of reality as they are signs of signs" (Batchen 1999, 18-19). In a way they are representations of representations already out there. These points bring us to the ontology of the photographic image, that is to say how it relates to the existence of things out there, the ontology of the referent.

"The referent adheres," says Roland Barthes (1981, 6). One could get closer to the problem of the real in photography by reflecting upon the ontology of the referent rather than the problems of authenticity, the original and the copy, or the mutability of the digital images. For Barthes, what constitutes the essence of photography is this adherence or stubbornness of the referent; the original presence; the prick of the appearance of a thing that undoubtedly existed in the past and left its trace on the photographic surface. Indeed, it exists both in the present and the past. It no longer matters to what degree the trace on the surface resembles the "original"; what is important is that the thing actually once existed. The photographic surface comes after the presence of the thing.

Susan Sontag makes a similar comment by provocatively asserting that a photograph is "not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or death mask" (Sontag 1977, 154). One may legitimately ask what the difference is between this emphasis on the certainty of existence and the presence or primacy of the referent and, on the other hand, the old claim that photography mirrors reality. Unless the notion of presence in photography, as conceived by Barthes, is situated outside the classic reality problem, the photographic representation remains totally identical to other systems of representation. Paul Edwards (1998, 380), for example, identifies the perspectives of not only Bazin but also Sontag and Barthes with a post-pictorialist attitude in which the

camera is redefined within its so-called "pure and indirect nature". He goes further, saying that this is a materialistic understanding of photography, which constitutes the basis of ontological discussions leading to melancholic realism.

Such an understanding seems, however, to forget the significance of the interplay of absence and presence. Namely, the photograph has an indispensable relationship with death and this relationship is mostly an allegorical one: the photograph owes its existence largely to the elements that seem to be present on the surface, but are actually absent. In other words, the photograph exists by its absence. Barthes explains this aspect of the photograph by provocatively claiming that "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (Barthes 1981, 6). Barthes deliberately makes a difference between photography's referent and the referent of other systems of representation. For him, the photographic referent is not "the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (ibid., 76). The very absence of the thing does not mean absence before the lens. Absence here operates through what Barthes considers the noema of Photography: "that-has-been", "intractable", *interfuit*. That means:

what I see has been there, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator or spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred. It is all this which the verb *internum* means (ibid., 77).

In Jolanta Wawrzycka's words (1997, 95), this simultaneous presence and deferring "is the genius of Photography" for Barthes and it "testifies to the presence of a thing at a certain past moment and to its absolute pastness, its death". As evidence that a thing existed, Photography "partakes in the economy of death and resurrection". Barthes imagines the Latin word for "photography" would be "'imago lucis opera expressa' [...], image revealed, [...] 'extracted' (like the juice of a lemon) by the action of light" (Barthes 1981, 81). Interestingly, as Wawrzycka (1997, 90) states the Polish word for pictures literally means "taking offs" or "removals". In Turkish, also, any photograph is pulled out, removed or taken off rather than being shot as if the world of reality out there is constituted by infinite number of image layers; or as if the very physicality of the photographic surface in hand is created at the expense of an emptiness in the world of things in the past. They, in a way, exist but they are already dead. In Barthes's terms, "with the photograph, we enter into flat death" (Barthes 1981, 92). Barthes attempts to explicate the

indispensable feature of photography, death, by giving an account of his feeling when he is photographed: "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death [...] I am truly becoming a specter [...] I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person" (ibid., 14).

I could explain the significance of the simultaneous feeling of presence and death that creates the catastrophe of photography in Barthes only by articulating my personal story about *Camera Lucida*. When I first read Barthes' *Camera Lucida* I was startled while reading the passage where Barthes has found the Winter Garden Photograph in which his recently deceased beloved mother was five years old (ibid., 67-73). He was trying to find a photograph among many others that would give him the truth of the face he had loved. The Winter Garden Photograph is different for him from the "ordinary" photographs that are merely analogically capable of only provoking her identity, not her truth. For him, "Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved [for him] *the impossible science of the unique being*" (ibid., 71). This image of his mother-as-child is for him powerful enough to reveal her presence and death simultaneously in front of him. Since my childhood, I had been somewhat terrified by certain moments in which particular images of my loved ones come to my mind, arousing the deepest feeling of love inside of me. I was terrified because these were also the moments when I felt the certainty of their presence and their future death simultaneously. These frames of mind, however, dreadfully overlapped the future and the present (or past). I felt their presence and death at the same time within that moment. Their certain presence (or sublime appearance) in a way involves their inevitable and timeless death. I realized that these were the times when I felt the *unique being* of the loved ones. It was the same with Barthes's feeling in front of the photograph that is for him *the impossible science of the unique being*. Barthes's account of the Winter Garden Photograph was also, for me, the most direct and elegant one that helped me to feel Barthes's notion of *punctum* in its deepest sense. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999, 72) aptly puts it, "Through the unknowable *punctum*, photography becomes sublime. The most important and yet most unknowable singularity of photography is this power to open a *punctum* to the realm of the dead".

Indeed, photography's mysterious link with the notion of death has always been a regular theme in reflections on photography. Sontag (1977, 15) says: "to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability". Pierre MacOrlan goes further and explicates the power of photography as being in its ability to create death:

To be able to create the death of things and creatures, if only for a second, is a force of revelation which, without explanation (which is useless), fixes the essential character of what must constitute a fine anxiety, one rich in forms, fragrances, repugnances and, naturally, the association of ideas (MacOrlan 1989, 32, quoted in Robins 1995, 41).

Barthes goes even further by explaining the relationship between photography and death in an historical perspective. He attempts to relocate the "anthropological place of Death and of the new image" in contemporary society by pointing out Edgar Morin's notion of the "crisis of death", which began in the second half of the nineteenth century. He states:

For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death (Barthes 1981, 92).

Thus, Photography's immense power lies in its ability to produce the traumatic effect of Death in modern times. What makes it traumatic is that this effect happens outside religion, which used to make Death less uncanny and more bearable.

"Will Image Move Us Still?", the title of Kevin Robins's article, best summarizes the central question at this point, regarding digital images with respect to the themes of the photographic era already discussed: the interplay of absence, presence, existence, and death. It might, however, still be too early to give a plausible answer to this question but there are already some features of digital images, which seem to prove quite the opposite, at least with respect to those themes. Referring to Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of modern rationalism as a logic that liberates men from fear, Robins considers digital technology and its concomitant discourse as a continuation of the project of the rational subjection to create a death-defying simulation (Robins 1995, 42). He states:

Electronic images are not frozen, do not fade; their quality is not elegiac, they are not just registrations of mortality. Digital techniques produce images in cryogenised form: they can be awoken, re-animated, brought "up to date". Digital manipulation can resurrect the dead (ibid., 41).

Moreover, with the loss of physicality images have also lost their very uniqueness. A printed photograph is so and not otherwise. They relate to being, not appearance. Yet digital images are potentially both this way and

otherwise. As has we have seen, they are signs of signs; their referents are increasingly becoming photographic. They are photographic at best—representations of representations, rather than photography. "To lose sight of the unbearable", writes Régis Debray, "is to diminish the dark attraction of shadows, and of their opposite, the value of a ray of light [...]. The death of death would strike a decisive blow against the imagination" (Debray 1992, 33, quoted in Robins 1995, 42). Digital technology tries to amplify the powers of vision, to make the invisible the visible and the desire or power to see is its main motto. It negates absence and death, and mainly operates through the representation of representations.

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