

Virtually invisible: Photography and the image in the demotic space.

*Demotic - relating to a simplified form of hieroglyphics used in ancient Egypt by the ordinary literate class outside the priesthood.*¹

To speak of the virtual may be to address two distinct spaces. The first is the “world of computing,” the digital virtual. The second space is associated with ‘thought,’ of images that form in the mind and inhabit the psychical space. It is therefore a reasonable assertion to state that the virtual image can be both visible and invisible; in the computer and in our thoughts. It is at this intersection, at the point of meshing where the digital photograph *becomes* virtually invisible where we may begin to consider some ideas toward a re-thinking of our relationship to the image, where it is located and how it functions.

The demotic or popular space of images is a space almost exclusively made up of and inhabited by the photographic image. To speak of the photographic image, in anything other than the demotic space, is arguably becoming more and more difficult. Since the image is ubiquitous, it is encountered everywhere in a digital space that has spread across society and is now firmly embedded into the lives and actions of most people in the Western world. The digital space of computing and the Internet has shifted the presence of the photograph, altering the location of the image, placing it into a new virtual and social space. The demotic images we encounter are familiar, repeated and copied endlessly. They are the Instagram image, the panorama, the HDR image, the ‘selfie’ and countless others. The photograph and more increasingly the moving image, the video clip, plays an intrinsic part in our encounters with everyday life, *forming our sense of the visual world* through the optics of the lens and the social spaces of the Internet and our computers. Photography is has always been a part of the machine, the apparatus, the ‘*dispositif*’ that formulates our popular consciousness but it now pervades into a far greater part of our digital world.

Flusser has suggested that “the image is a significant surface. Images signify something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to *us* as abstractions.”² The image, he proposes is an activator of the imagination, extracting and encoding phenomena into two-dimensional symbols, which we are then able to read. He continues, outlining that images are not denotative, unambiguous complexes of symbols but are in fact connotative, ambiguous symbols. In other words they are open to interpretation. While taking in the surface of the image with our eye, pondering it element by element, as viewers, we produce a temporal relationship between the objects that are captured within the frame. What is significant in this optical experience is that at the same time, we are also experiencing spontaneous thoughts and a myriad of associations that appear outside of the image. The relationship between dissimilar elements, the apparent juxtaposition of fragments without clear

¹ “Free Dictionary Definition,” accessed Nov 2013, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/demotic>

² Flusser, Vilém, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2007)

connection, is known as parataxis. This relationship occurs within our thoughts and most often within our dreams.

At the very moment of producing a photographic image, we create paratactical relationships casting subjects via light onto Flusser's significant surface of the image. On that surface will be made visible all the visual fragments of the world in front of the lens. These fragments may even be present without any awareness of them at the time of creating the image. It may not be until the image is viewed for the first time as a print or digitally on a screen that they are seen as being placed together. It is those elements that become in Flusser's terms "open to interpretation"³. It may be argued that the underlying structure of many photographic images, especially those created in the demotic or popular space, is paratactical. This structure as stated, is similar to that of our dreams, where seemingly unconnected elements are played out through a virtual narrative in our minds. Therefore the connection between the photographic image, the process of reading that image and the course of recounting a dream offer a framework for considering how the image functions and potentially how our relationship with it can be understood in terms of memory connections. The computer generated, virtual image has shifted even closer toward the dream or memory image, since in both cases there is often an absence of material presence. The subject of both the computer virtual image and the thought image may have never existed or at least does not need to have existed as a physical object. Therefore the digital or virtual image, which is closely analogous to a mental or psychical image invokes analysis that requires words and associations in order to understand its function. Furthermore, the digital image, connected via the Internet, is also suspended between multiple meanings, connections and associations. This position inevitably calls at least in part for psychoanalysis as the methodological tool and *wild psychoanalysis* as the specific approach since 'working through the image' inevitably takes place outside of the clinical session.

In his book *The Future of the Image*⁴, Rancière proposes that the image is not exclusive to the visible. There are, he suggests, images which consist wholly in words. However the most common image is one which presents a relationship between the say-able and the visible. These images play upon analogy (words) and dissemblance (visual). So if this is a part of a larger theory how does it or can it relate to the image in practice? We may begin in part to answer this by exploring the relationship between photographic practice, the image in its actual and virtual forms and the narratives which bind these elements together. As part of my ongoing research, community based, participatory photographic workshops were set up. During the workshops participants were asked to take photographs in response to set briefs and assignments. The participants were of mixed age and sex and the groups were no larger than 10 people. Participants were recruited through community based learning programmes. All participants had an interest in photography but none earned a living through photography as a profession. The age range of participants was from 18 to 70 years with varying socio-economic backgrounds including unemployed and part-time workers. Participants had a range of qualifications through to doctoral level. A significant

³ Flusser, Vilém, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 2007)

⁴ Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image*, (London: Verso 2009)

and unexpected aspect to this project was the importance of the relationship between the participant and the personal narratives connected to the image. Also, since this was a community-based project, of equal importance was the relationships formed between each participant. In fact the image was often secondary to the stories that were told or used to 'stand in' for the images. During the research process there was a transition over time, in which the workshop gave way to Bourriaud's "moments of sociability"⁵ where the practice of taking photographs was less significant than the conversations and connections that the photographs initiated. This new practice of sociability gave participants another reason for taking photographs rather than them simply adding to the abundance of digital images already in existence. It also facilitated a modification of sometimes 'formulaic' imagery into photographs that required stories, and descriptions, which initiated performances, concerns, jokes and memories. The images in themselves were little more than references to other things, things that were not visible, things that were better spoken about and worked through in a number of ways.

Throughout the project the image was often used as an excuse to begin a discussion or to initiate a conversation. It is with this in mind and acknowledging that due to digital technology, there is much greater ease with which the image making process can now be adopted. It is then time to consider the significance of what may be called the 'process of the image.' This term refers to the spectrum of thinking about, taking and then sharing the photograph. It defines an end-to-end process, one that is completed but also continually worked through. The 'process of the image' deals with the totality of making, viewing and experiencing the image. It has long been the case that the image has been a contributor to our ideas of common sense and to the exchange of meanings with our society. A refined understanding of the process of the image in a virtual or digital form may indicate that photography, or *the process of the image* should be better considered as an actant, bringing into being our awareness of the world. The image is the *environment* where the real and the virtual intermingle. It is the space out of which ideas about the world are formed but also it is a space onto which our ideas of the world are projected. This is perhaps best demonstrated when research participants were asked to *make* images, their response was invariably to re-produce images they have already seen, using techniques they copy or styles they imitate, endlessly recreating the images they have encountered before. In the Freudian sense this was very much a process of remembering, repeating and working through the image.

As a part of the research project workshop participants were asked to think about a place, write about it and then subsequently visit that location and photograph it. Finally they were asked to reflect on the process and write some additional thoughts. The aim was to understand the relationship between the thought image and the image taken with camera. It was hoped that the participants would be able to articulate their thoughts and produce complementary or supporting visual work. The two practices, the written and the visual, would come into being at the intersection of a virtual or thought based

⁵ Bourriaud, Nicholas, *Relational Aesthetics*, (France: Les Presses du Réel 2009)

image and a digital photograph. This process would encourage a re-thinking of photography *and* place and the relationship between a demotic (or popular) photographic practice, the personal space of memory and the physical location where the image was created. The results of this research have been brought together in the virtual public space of the Internet and although the work is still ongoing, its aim is to attempt to look at how we can activate or mobilise responses not only to work itself but also to each other. It may be argued that the contribution of words and images to a collective resource results in the construction of a parallel layered world, one which like the technologies it is built upon, will have implications for the social and political imaginary. Victor Burgin⁶ suggests that the camera acts as a node in the Internet, a connection point. He goes on to propose it is the apparatus of photography that produces photographic images. By apparatus he includes the institutions that refer to photography, (Universities, galleries, the Royal Photographic Society) the forms in which photographs are presented such as billboards, screens and the Internet and the discourses that take photography as their object.

It is amongst the already seen images where we are most likely to encounter the demotic, vernacular, or familiar photographs. The formula for these images, which are no longer images *of* the world but are projections *onto* the image of what the world should look like, are sought out and shared on the internet, in camera clubs and in photographic magazines. Examples of this demotic space includes the British Airways website "Picture Your Holiday" which allows visitors to select their holiday based on the images provided. After user selection British Airways kindly offers an appropriate destination to which they fly and that resembles or connects with the images chosen. A similar image driven holiday experience is also the basis of the Expedia website "Find Your Story."

Through these virtual image selection based websites we are called to assemble worlds according to pre-visualised imagery. It is all the more interesting to note that the virtual image, the rendered computer 3D world where objects have never actually been placed in front of a lens aspires to the visual flaws of lens based optical seeing rather than the vision experienced through our eyes. The digital simulated image often aspires to recreate the visual flaws of lens-produced images. It is as though recreating an image 'as if it were taken by a camera' is to recreate an image that is more real. Once again, we come up against the idea of the world projected onto the image this time taken from a version of the world as-already-seen by a camera viewfinder. The image should therefore be understood to be as much projection of the world as a representation of it. We should also concede that as Baudrillard suggested, all there is, is simulation, all there is, is image.⁷

To return in summary to the idea of the 'process of image', the connection between a subject and its representation which is threaded together with the notion of the narrative, to invoke the say-able along with the visible, places an emphasis upon the connections to the image and its attachment to the social

⁶ Burgin, Victor. "Interactive Cinema and the Uncinematic." in: *Photocinema the Creative Edges of Photography and Film*. eds N. Campbell, A. Cramerotti, (Bristol: Intellect 2013)

⁷ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations* (USA: Semiotet[e] 1983)

world. The fixed surface of the image is a less significant surface when it is mutable, changeable and adjustable. It is less significant when it is understood as image projection as well as image representation since what it signifies can only ever be what has already been before. Its significance, if it does indeed have one, is *also* manifested in its connection to the overarching social narrative of the world and this does not exist on the image surface but rather exists in 'a relationship' and not as an object. The image and its story is linked, bonded and comes into being through its relationship to other images and to all our narratives. It is no longer and has never been a thing in itself. It may therefore be a convincing argument that the modernist sense of an artefact is replaced at a time of digital media by a relationship of image-to-image, image-to-story, connection-to-connection; an always virtual, digital image. The digital photograph is contained in a space, in an environment that is social and connected. The photograph is a part of the structuring of that environment. To create images as part of a participatory practice is to create and perform the connections and articulate the stories, which link photographs. Through the practice of participation we slip away from the medium, from the photograph, to appear on the other side of it, looking back at it reflectively with words and with associative thoughts, through a series of virtually invisible paratactical relationships. Relationships that serve to locate the image into an environment of the social.

As participants we may even discard the image completely so that it becomes verbal description, thought and memory. In doing this it returns to a thought image where it originally began. In this way the photograph and its description takes on a similar relationship to retelling a dream, in that through this social process we come to understand how little or how much we are actually able to describe of the personal. We may end therefore by paraphrasing Victor Burgin, suggesting that the photograph, "unattached to the social world, is free to go anywhere but has nowhere to go."⁸

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⁸ Burgin, Victor. Work and Commentary (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973)

