
Proximity, sharing and choice: the constituents of a digital subject

Human Interfaces: Borderless (Dis)Connections and Disrupted Futures

INTRODUCTION:

In this paper I hope to map out some thoughts about photography and in doing so, I intend to express how it offers a way to understand the terms of our own subjectivity. Which is to suggest that photography can be read as the interface of a changing, late-capitalist, subjectivity. Of course, and probably like most of us here, I begin from a particular an ongoing problem. This is one that emerges as I continue to address and contend with photography as a subject of study at the university, and specifically, as I try to articulate to my students and my peers my understanding of its radical potential. When I do this I realise I have to reinvent something I was once familiar with. And I find myself needing new terms to express my understanding of what photography is.

It may be useful to register and be clear about the conceptual place from where I speak from. For me, as part of this process of reinvention, I have approached photography, from both a sense of weariness and excitement. Excitement, because photography is doing so many interesting and new things. But weariness at how it is a subject that is often approached using theoretical instruments that have not been revisited for quite some time. A consequence of this railing against photography *as it once was* compared with photography *as it now is* means my critical reflection of photography begins with an articulation of a negation or misunderstanding of photography.

Through theory, I claim this misunderstanding is, in fact, photography's constitutive form. I accept this may sound counter intuitive however I remain convinced this approach opens a useful gap for us to intervene in reconfiguring the wider project of what photography is and does. An example of how this process of misunderstanding successfully functions can be seen in the scene in "Four Weddings and a Funeral," in which Hugh Grant fails to communicate his feelings for Andi McDowell. What is being expressed in this scene is more potent when Grant articulates through a structure of misunderstanding.

What then is the misunderstanding of photography? What is its negation? Today, when teaching photography, we all find ourselves confronted with a very different object of study. What is crucial, for me, is to define and refine its relevance in the 21st Century. I am, of course, absolutely certain it has one I am simply less certain how to articulate precisely what that is.

FROM VISUAL TO PROCESSUAL:

I chose then, to begin by considering how the digital age constitutes photography in a new condition. We can, perhaps, agree that part of this new condition incorporates thinking about how algorithms, data and processual information create image in a new form. In making this approach, we shift emphasis from visual analysis toward something processual, toward a system or something that speaks to non-human agency or to the “strange strangers of non-human actors”. Of course, there is inevitably, a problem with attempting to claim photography is a subject that is not anything but visual. But I believe this is the structure of its negation.

To express the same thing in a different way: my starting point is not the visual content of photographs, but the very form of photography. In other words, I wish to pay particular attention, not to what something is, but to the way it is done. I do this because I believe it is then possible to develop a more complex point about the constituents of a digital subject and, importantly, its relevance for this conference: the ontology of a new, *human*, digital subject.

THE THREE FOUNDATIONAL BUT PARADOXICAL ELEMENTS:

My general argument – or rather the co-ordinates on which it is built – is that, in the digital age, a new subject is formed that embodies three key elements: **proximity**, **sharing** and **choice**. However, I caution that these are fundamentally paradoxical forms. I describe them as being: a **proximity** replaced by the interface of the screen; a **sharing** that fervently excludes those unable or unwilling to participate; and an excess of **choice** but an inability to choose. It is, of course, no coincidence that these are qualities, not only of the digital subject, but also of photography.

Proximity:

Today, photography appears to offer a way to close down distances. While we can communicate instantly, sending images of where we are and what we are doing, from right here right now to right there right now, inevitably the physical distance that separates us is replaced by the interface of the screen. A consequence of which is that all contact, near or far, appears to be mediated and replaced by this very same screen.

Sharing:

In the context of digital environments such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, sharing photographs is a common place activity. However, sharing is not necessarily an inclusive activity. Rather it forcefully excludes those who are not followers or friends, favouring those who interact by liking, swiping right, commenting, retweeting or sharing.

Choice:

With so many photographs available online, it is not unreasonable to question why we might need to take any photographs at all. Should we decide to make our own images, the seemingly excess of choice becomes a constraining force advocating we take only certain familiar and standard types of images that conform to the choices of images we have already seen before. It is as though given more choice of image we are faced with the impossibility of being able to chose what images to make unless, of course, they conform to the standardised form we have already seen before. The unending possibilities of image seems to have exposed its opposite: a limited set of standard and familiar image formulas and types.

Digital photographic determination, I argue, rests on the triadic logic of these seemingly contradictory positions. Through these elements a digital photograph appears elaborated in a way that enacts the movement of 'absolute recoil,' wherein its determination is mediated and structured by itself. Photography is mediated not by its opposite – as we might understand identity through difference or essence through appearance. In this sense photography is defined as such, not because it is neither painting nor movies, instead, photography is its own epistemic obstacle. I suggest a way of proceeding is by looking at how we think about photography *otherwise*.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT POSITION OR DICHOTOMY?

If I may, for a moment, elevate to the altitude of critical theory. What are the general theoretical positions? Levi Bryant's, (*The Democracy of Objects*, 2011 p.247) outlines two positions or cultures of thinking:

One has "a focus on lived experience, text, discourse, signifiers, signs, representation, and meaning." This is the phenomenological field. What we experience are things onto which we project intentions, meanings, signs and discourses. This approach being one that is largely familiar to those who studied photographic theory in the 80s.

"This is a form of inquiry dominated by figures such as the various phenomenologists, Derrida, Lacan, Žižek, and Foucault, for example. Here there is very little in the way of a discussion of the role played by nonhuman actors in collectives involving human beings. Rather, nonhuman entities are treated as screens upon which humans project their intentions, meanings, signs, and discourses, rather than as genuine actors in their own right. They are instead passive matter awaiting formatting by humans." (Ibid)

While the other culture "pays careful attention to the differences contributed by nonhuman agencies such as technologies, animals, environments, and so on." This is the domain of the new materialists, or vital materialists or the thinking of object orientated ontologies.

"humans are not at the center of being, but are among beings," and "objects are not a pole opposing a subject, but exist in their own right, regardless of whether any other object or human relates to them. Humans, far from constituting a category called "subject" that is opposed to "object", are themselves one type of object among many" (Ibid, 249).

In "The Democracy of Objects" (2011), Bryant borrows from and builds upon DeLanda's term of a flat ontology, in which there are no ontological privileged agents that can totalise reality. Bryant's "flat ontology" seeks to reconcile these two positions. "an ontology capable of doing justice to these strange nonhuman actors, capable of respecting these strange strangers on their own terms, and an ontology capable of doing justice to the phenomenological and the semiotic" (Ibid: 248).

And within this flattened ontology, human subjects are just one in a series of disparate objects. Bryant develops four positions toward this flattened ontology:

Firstly, that no objects have full presence or actuality.

Second, that the world does not exist – there is no “super object” or totality that gathers everything together in harmonious unity. What is meant here is that the world isn’t one container into which objects are placed. It’s not the super object that is comprised of all the other objects in it.

Thirdly, that humans occupy no privileged place within being. We are left with differences in degree rather than difference in kind.

Finally, all objects are on an ontologically equal footing. In this regard, technologies, institutions, fictions are just as real as planets, trees and oceans. Thus we are invited to think in terms of differing temporal and spatial experience and to consider entanglements and collective forms, rather than the usual human and object dichotomy.

“. . . to diminish an almost exclusive focus on propositions, representations, norms, signs, narratives, discourses, and so on, so as to cultivate a greater appreciation for nonhuman actors such as animate and inanimate natural entities, technologies, and such.”

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA:

Along similar lines, Jacques Rancière argued that “Man with a Movie Camera” is an example of the practice of ‘cinematic communism.’ It presents a multiplicity of life forms in everyday life. In the film we see everyday activities: washing hair; speaking on the phone; unplugging cables. According to Rancière, what makes this cinematic practice communist is that what we are shown, all these displayed activities, are equalised and entangled. He (Rancière) claims, they present an assertion of the radical universality of being. Such that the usual hierarchies and oppositions are suspended and as such there is an apparent harmony of being. I believe its possible to extend Rancière’s position to the point where image as a structuring force creates apparent universality. In this way, the everyday activities presented in “Man with a Movie Camera” are the forerunners of YouTube videos of people doing everyday things, such as ‘unboxing’ or chores like cleaning their cars.

WHAT IS THIS NEW SUBJECTIVITY?

My argument is that photography represents a form of symbolic dematerialised labour, one that is common to late-capitalism. It may even be possible to go as far as saying, it is the most significant form of labour in this epoch. Situated and circulated, most obviously, within the horizontal social networks of the Internet, and emerging through advances in associated technology, photography embodies something of how Marx described the ‘general intellect.’ In wider terms, relating to its production, it anticipates a new subjectivity.

In *Grundrisse*, Marx expresses how the material mechanism of industrial production expresses the relationship of capitalist domination, wherein the worker is a mere supplement to the machinery owned by the capitalist. The same can also be said of the digital subject who inhabits the Internet, such that the particularity of social positions are seemingly eradicated. Similarly, the power relations of the Internet are also obfuscated by the notion of it being some form of collective, neutral, self-regulating and self-organising system. The ceaseless rendering of experience as photographic image has served the transition from industrial age to information age. It has done so by reconfiguring a modernist mode of production into the phrases of networked and interlinked expressions. I claim, the basic Marxist concept of a proletarian subject and of exploitation require rethinking. Clearly, the strict notion of surplus value – wherein labour is measured by time – no longer fits our capitalist model. Even Marx was aware that as knowledge becomes central to wealth production the classical logic of exploitation no longer works.

Big technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, own our ‘general intellect,’ they control the symbolic substance of society, our very means of communication. Today, in order for us to communicate with one another we have to pay rent to these organisations. It is therefore a different model of making money; this is very different from appropriating extra profit. In the economy of ‘everyday’ photographic images, it seems we can consider exchange as being the formal determinant of a distracting means of reproduction. Instead of mustering resistance to the inequalities permeating the social order we resist confrontation by imaging and imagining the world. In a time of crisis, with regard to critical, new and workable ideas, along with the social shifts that lead away from confronting economic, environmental and political consequences, the obsession with and production of an excess of images expresses a fundamental failure of our vision and signifies a blind spot in awareness.

In this formulation, photographic images offer the means to face, not the world itself, but an alternative, already formed and particular image of the world. This is an image that is not structured by any correspondence with a real or visual truth or any documentary claim. Rather, it is one emerging from and through the notions of **proximity**, **sharing** and **choice**. These are the critical components of 'everyday' photographic production.

A further point for consideration is concerned with how photography is a process that is becoming more and more technically sophisticated yet our experience is not a seamless rendering of the world, in which image and reality are indistinguishable. Rather, what becomes more apparent is the gap between the symbolic surface and reality.

Photographs do not appear to render the world more precisely and accurately. Which is to suggest that a faithful experience is depends as much on what is implied is as what is stated. Thus the excessive qualities of image are of the same order as the information overload that provokes a kind of paralysis of choice.

The relative narrowness of the mediated forms of image – such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat etc. – are able to penetrate our interior worlds in ways that reality itself fails. When confronted by experience that is other than image, we immediately become positioned at an ordinary, normal, distance. The movement here is from an ethereal presence to a brutal immediacy. Furthermore, the trauma we experience when moving from mediated image to reality is not caused some form of desublimation. Experience is not a void that gets filled by the real. Instead, the digital environment of digital images is *over-present*, part of a continuous and friction free flow of image after image. Ultimately, what this removes is the sense of power relations and social antagonisms that are part of the economy of exchange.

CONCLUSION:

Photography can be used as way to articulate the distancing of proximity, it can express the exclusive nature of sharing and it can embody the paralysis of too much choice.

Perhaps we can begin by recalling the image of the analyst of the patient. In this there is nothing more than the impossibility of intersubjectivity. They are not actually in dialogue with one another. Instead we are together in attempt to not understand one another. We are therefore all looking out toward something in a kind of solidarity (from "The community of those with nothing in common" (Alphonso Lingis, 1994)). The essential quality of being in communication with someone who is dying wherein what you say can really make no difference and the prospect of intersubjectivity, of communication is often built at the moments of its greatest failure.