Periphery Vision: data as image

John Hillman

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I begin by suggesting digital photographic images should be considered as being neither a purely visual experience nor a purely perceptual one. Instead, I argue these may be somewhat limiting terms which confine our engagement with images to traditional linguistic interpretations. At a time when digital images are more amenable and liable to forms of recombination, fragmentation and to being encountered through associations and connections, semiotic approaches to signification may no longer be the most appropriate tools for describing and explaining images. In "Reading the Figural" (2001), D.N. Rodowick suggests a linguistic reading of images is both interrupted and disrupted by the different spatiotemporal organisation of contemporary forms of representation. His account of the figural is an attempt to reconcile image and text as being discursive in a non-linear, non-uniform and discontinuous sense. In this sense the figural is not a combination of image and text, it is an interstitial space located between them both that conforms to the properties of each but can be reduced to neither one nor the other.

WHERE AND WHAT ARE IMAGES?

In the digital age the common property of image and text is the computer code from which they are shaped. Furthermore, computer code itself is organised by instructions and procedures within software that are algorithmic in their structure. These are processes that largely determine the location and form of images. Presenting a challenge to the indexical or discrete units that are required by a semiotic analysis, the networked, simultaneous and process driven account of images present us with images everywhere – simultaneously - but in different ways.

Victor Burgin (2009) has remarked, photographic images are perceived environmentally, they are disseminated across different realms and experienced as heterogeneous rather than unified objects. For Burgin, image fragments coalesce through differing, mediated, virtual spaces, such as the Internet, and mix with the personal fantasies and memories of the viewer. Images are therefore never one single thing located in one single place. This perspective, on both what images are and where they are located, is specifically pertinent to networked digital images that mutate and reform continuously. Moreover, the networked digital image itself may be seen as the expression of the "interlacing of physical and algorithmic attributes, aesthetic and political forms, which characterise the age of information capitalism" (Rubinstein, Golding & Fisher, 2013: 08). We might conclude from this that visual representation is no longer the solid ground of the image. Instead images have moved beyond representation, becoming forces that structure reality rather than document it. From these initial positions, which test the relationship of vision, representation and perception, it may be possible to widen the theoretical attention we pay images.

THE FIGURAL IMAGE: HOW ARE IMAGES STRUCTURED?

If we understand the figural as binding a network of image and text into a new form, then the underpinning organisation of computer code and algorithmic manipulation expresses something of how the force of the figural may be fashioned. How software interacts with algorithms and data structures is, as Lev Manovich describes, the "software medium" (2013: 207). The term 'medium' here describes a technique which is defined by the material or methods used. A medium is therefore understood as a "combination of particular techniques for generation, editing and accessing content" (Ibid: 335). The properties of media objects, Manovich argues, are not specifically defined by their formats or file types, for example images or texts, but also by the software medium that accesses them. Therefore images or texts should be considered to be data structures made 'visible' or accessible through a software medium. The software medium organises data into a familiar or recognisable form. It also may combine it with other data (meta-data) in differing ways. In this

context, two of my students, Gerry Burton and Marcus Thurman, have recently been experimenting with projects examining how image data structures may sound aurally by converting them into audio files. Similarly they have created image outputs from audio recordings taken at the same time they made images. However, it remains to be asked whether these re-combinations and reconfigurations still maintain any relationship to representational practice?

PERIPHERY VISION: AN INTERFACE BETWEEN DATA AND MEANING

My own project "Periphery Vision," builds on data structures as representative of an understanding of the figural. Initially inspired by Lev Manovich's cultural analytic projects - "On Broadway" (www.on-broadway.nyc), "Selfiecity" (www.selfiecity.net), "Phototrails" (www.phototrails.net) - which visualise data in a specific way, my project examines random and associative data in real-time. Manovich's projects use fixed data sets collected over a specific and limited period of time. The focus of "Periphery Vision" is to use software to combine and randomise live data from the Internet in real-time, simulating how we perceive and experience images daily. Structured in this way, each refresh of the page is able to produce a different combination and a new set of associations. The project pays particular attention to the random and 'real-time' spatiotemporal aspects of structure and the open-ended relationship of image and text. Its primary aim is to present image not as a unified object but as a contingent encounter. Such an encounter is underpinned by the structure and logic of code and algorithms interspersed with repetition and randomness. I argue, following Burgin, that these are the conditions that shape our experiences with the world of images.

STRUCTURE

"Periphery Vision" is divided into six columns containing images or text. The functionality, written using Javascript, takes data structures of text and images from live sources on the Internet. The work is laid out as follows. The first column extracts Instagram images tagged with a specific hashtag. The second column simultaneously displays the colour palettes of the each of the Instagram images. The third column displays the comments and tags that have been associated with the Instagram images. The fourth column uses a random word from the third column and searches image site Flickr for comments and tags. It then displays the associated images. The fifth column displays the titles of the Flickr images shown. The sixth and final column takes a random word from the fifth column and displays a Google search result. Clearly these associations could continue, infinitely and with different combinations or procedures connected with each. What the project represents is a way of initially engaging with Burgin's combining fragments. The limitations of html web page layout, the external sources available and the methods Javascript uses to gather sources, dictate that "Periphery Vision" has in its present form a rudimentary formality. This in itself indicates Manovich's software medium, wherein the technique defines how it actually appears. Nevertheless, experimentally this work attempts to frame a question as to what are the terms of reference for images. It also crudely articulates the experiences of contemporary forms of representation that are fundamentally concerned with data overlaid with media objects.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this work makes no attempt to visualise abstract data, which I argue would be a fundamentally representational project. Instead, the work organises and builds relationships between the data structures of image and text in order to demonstrate a new conceptual instrument – in which what is visual is seen as incidental or *peripheral*. Images are not purely visual nor are they purely perceptual objects but I argue they are always relational – they are formed from and create new relationships. Therefore, what this work attempts to express is that a key characteristic of networked images is that they are organised around associations and framed by their repeating or random discontinuities rather than by their claim to being 'pictures of something or other.' Furthermore, if software explicitly configures and structures the images and text we encounter, then simultaneously it must also be generating new coordinates for these descriptions of the world.

Website: www.peripheryvision.co.uk

REFERENCES

Burgin, V. (2009) *Situational Aesthetics.* Leuven University Press, Belgium.

Manovich, L. (2013) *Software Takes Command.* Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Rodowick, D.N. (2011) *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media.* Duke University Press, Durham NC.

Rubinstein, D. Golding, J. & Fisher, A. (2013) *On the Verge of Photography.* ARTicle Press, Birmingham UK.