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Nothing to see here: photography and the politics of invisibility

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Nothing to see here: Photography and the Politics of Invisibility

Daniel Rubinstein

“We use systems to keep the wolf from the door, I thought. And systems are nothing but vast complexes of notions and concepts. Everything that helps us lose sight of the petty, pathetic and meaningless parts of our own selves. That is the wolf. The awkward, twisted or stupid part of the soul, the grudges and the envy, the hopelessness and the darkness, the childish joy and the unmanageable desire. The wolf is the part of human nature that the systems have no room for, the aspect of reality that our ideas, the firmament that the brain vaults above our lives, cannot fathom. The wolf is the truth.” (Knausgaard 2015)

Preamble

One approach to thinking about the way photography contributes to political theory and practice is to consider it as a tool for documentation, testimony and reportage of the way political power operates on human subjects. Photography would then be defined as a critical medium posited against political power and offering a way of exposing the machinations of post-industrial society and the damage it inflicts on the environment, on animal and human life and on the fates of individuals and of nations. One might have a political situation such as mass migration, low-wage labor, poverty, racism, exploitation, occupation, apartheid, genocide, and then ask what will be the fitting photographic approach to adequately represent the political situation to be examined. One way of contemplating photography as political would be therefore as the creation of images about visible manifestations of hegemony, be it in the houses of parliament, on a council estate, in a fast-food joint, in a refugee camp or in a gold mine. To do so would be to study photography as a ‘quantum of truth’ and ‘moral leverage’ (Berger 2013, pp. 27-28) located outside the events and situations it attempts to represent, while simultaneously conceiving of them as spectacles that can be more-or-less adequately captured by optical means. The popularity of this approach to ‘doing’ photography is widespread and stretches across

numerous projects from Dorothea Lange's portrait of Florence Owens Thompson as 'Migrant Mother' to the knowingly deadpan pictures by Martin Parr to the hyper-dramatic compositions of Sebastião Salgado. The common denominator of this way of working is that photography is conceived as a window that opens up unto certain event. Vilém Flusser remarked somewhere that a window in the wall of a house is only capable of showing that which is happening on the street beneath, but a photographic window is capable of showing things that are far away, either very small or very large, at the bottom of the ocean, on the face of a comet, etc. In every case, photography is understood as capable of taking a slice of the real, three dimensional world and presenting it to the eye in the form of a two dimensional picture. Photography then is regarded as a privileged technology that accurately represents the order of the world thanks to its grounding in industrial-scientific production backed up by a rational process of reliable recording. The danger in this way of thinking is that it determines photography as a discourse about external events; dominated entirely by the force of signification rather than by its own *materiality*. Questions are always asked about what the image is of, and what does it say about the state of the world, and this precludes submitting representation itself to radical critique.

Against the popular view outlined above that considers photography as a representation of external reality, this chapter proposes that thinking through the distinct political potential of photography requires confronting the notion of representation as the common denominator of photography. By interrogating representation and its effects, it is possible to re-stage photography not as the more-or-less passive window onto the world but as an active political agent that acts in the world and through its action presents to the gaze the dynamic and creative forces that constitute the real political structures that shape the earth. As will be discussed below, far from being a reliable depiction of an external reality, images introduce notions of incompleteness, randomness, mutation, and change. For that reason, this essay is not about photography as a window but about the inroads into the construction of contemporary life afforded by it.

In what follows I wish to argue that in the 21st Century the importance of photography is not in freezing moments in time, not in portraying situations and individual points of view, but in exposing the inherent contradictions of structures that take representation as their ground. As representation is one of the building blocks of our

culture, from the political order (representational democracy), to economics (money represents assets) to science (experiment represents physical laws), photography provides an insight into the abysmal paradoxes of representation precisely because it configures the very space of the visual.

Photography is fundamental to the transition from the industrial to the information age because it allows to think about power beyond the reactive logic of ideology (Colebrook 2001, p. 543) and to conceive of it as immanent to the way information and knowledge are produced, distributed and utilized. For this reason, the question for this chapter is not 'how individuals use photography' but 'how individuality is produced by photography'.¹

The challenge therefore is not to describe photography as a representation of politics, but to suggest that representation is a force that molds and configures political action. Photography then becomes a means to radicalize politics by making available to the gaze the dynamic techno-political forces that shape the world.

From self to selfie

It is surely one of the most natural things to approach photographic images as legible visual surfaces that open a window onto the world outside the image. But what if the 'outside' not to mention the 'world' is not the stuff that is external to the image, but the very stuff the image itself is made of? If an image is not an expression of a point of view, but a process that organizes information, not a platform from which to observe the state of things, but itself a state of things, then perhaps before there can be an image of any kind, there has to be a relation of some sort that is required to produce the image. I would suggest that we ought to consider this relation as the first rule of politics for the 21st Century. The continuous *transformation* of reality via infinitely proliferating code and the associated incessant creation of new landscapes, weather by means of ballistic missiles, drone strikes, dark web, drug mules, cyber attacks, sex trafficking, 'honor' killings, slave labor or the melting of polar ice caps, suggests that the image has to be re-thought to accommodate within it considerations of change, movement and flow.

¹ On this point see (Agamben 2009)

As an example of one such relation, consider for instance the way Facebook 'friends' are not a window onto real (physical) friendships, but an autonomous and real (but not in a physical sense) entity that evolves according to an algorithmic logic (that is rapidly becoming integrated into living bodies). While it is certainly possible to view Facebook as a (distorted) representation of one's social reality, there is also a possibility that Facebook is a symptom of life that is detached from its biological origins, and is re-oriented towards fuller integration into computational and algorithmic systems. Then Facebook might be explored as an image of a human condition that becomes truly immaterial, not interested in the production of spatial-temporal objects such as chairs, sausages and tea bags for consumption in the 'real' world, but instead focused on manufacturing information rather than commodities. Social Media industries such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can be understood not as leisure activities, but as sites of immaterial labor: an infinite process without an end product in which communication is work and work is communication.

Labor and play are then not two separate and dialectically opposed activities but one continuous process of transmission of signals that obliterates the distinction inherited from Marx between base and superstructure. In this new economy of information capitalism, surplus value is generated not from the traditional labor activities of manufacturing or buying and selling (Pasquinelli 2011) but from updating one's status on Facebook, swiping right on Tindr and navigating with Google maps.

As (Colebrook 2002) observed: "There are not communities who *then* rely on channels and vehicles of communication. The immaterial communicational networks, the very machine of production, *is* the community." This conception of life as algorithmically, rather than biologically or socially determined, also suggests that the familiar notions of identity and subjectivity as the stable and permanent building blocks of the rational self are being replaced by a new conception of subjectivity that is created, codified and configured by technologies of communication. As the visual incarnation of algorithmic processing, photography is not accidental to this process of subjectivisation, but it is the nexus of forces that establish information capitalism as irresistible visual spectacle by helping us to imagine virtual selves and seductive futures while simultaneously normalizing and naturalizing the transition from physical to online spaces.

For instance, the selfie phenomenon draws untold millions of people into a pleasurable game of self representation, while Facebook constructs massive server farms in the Arctic circle to host this treasure trove of facial data. (Harding 2015) In what way it will be used is anyone's guess. But it is possible to consider the selfie not as a voluntary exercise in mass self-surveillance, but as a genuinely new art that does not follow the ingrained perspectival ideal that places the spectator/artist at the apex of cone of vision. The selfie might point towards an entirely different aesthetic criterion, based not on the subordination of the world to the eye, but on a radical decoupling of the eye from the body (exemplified by the selfie stick). The selfie then is not the digital, and vulgarized version of the self-portrait, but a provocation that questions the dominance of the eye and inquires after the politics that utilize the optical field in the construction of identities. Far from being a celebration of heightened individuality and narcissism, the selfie could be seen as questioning the notion of identity as solid, permanent and unchanging entity that carries the ego through life.

Selfies are made in rapid succession, as sequences, to be immediately shared online. Sharing and sequencing point to a break between photography in its narrow sense as representation, and the expanded field of photography that forgoes the domination of the absolute values of identity in favor of sharing, dissemination and distribution. By going beyond the sovereignty of the eye over the organism, the selfie uncovers a state of pre-visual visibility, in which the image is not a signifier of an absent signified, nor is it a linguistic sign, instead it is a demarcation of a constructed and unstable identity randomly fabricated from bits of landscape, body parts, accidental props and spatial relations. Uncoupled from the discourse of 'truth' and from the metaphysical baggage of representation, the selfie resembles a 'primitive territorial sign' that neither reflects pre-given reality nor reacts to universal concepts. It can be thought of as a self-validating reaction to a local and specific environment:

"The primitive territorial sign is self-validating; it is a position of desire in a state of multiple connections. It is not a sign of a sign nor a desire of desire. It knows nothing of linear subordination and its reciprocity: neither pictogram nor ideogram, it is rhythm and not form, zigzag and not line, artifact and not idea, production and not expression." (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 203)

In its traditional form, photography expresses the potential for representation located within capitalist organization of society. But when photography is detached from its ability to produce representations, and considered as a flow of image-data, one arrives at another fully real force that springs from photography's ability to produce rhythms and not forms, reproduce and not represent, proliferate and not identify, self-replicate and not copy. As a process of continuous repetition, photography is being detached from objects in space and instead it poses a question about seeing as such. Instead of evaluating images on the basis of their similarity to actual events or situations, instead of re-examining their indexical or symbolic content, what is required is to evaluate the social function of images and their potential to reconfigure the relationships between humans, computers and networks.

However, these departures from the logic of representation bring to light a problem encountered by anyone attempting to theorize photography as the visual surface that envelops algorithmic processes, and as a platform for technical, social and physical reconfiguration of the organism. This is because the theoretical instruments available for discussing photography dovetail with the paradigm of representation and therefore the terminology of photography is rooted in the representational discourse, whether in its traditional iteration as objectively valid truth statement or in its more recent version as the expression of the subjectivity of the maker of the image.

The task of this essay therefore is two-pronged: its first aim is to explore the impact of representational thinking on photographic practices. Its other aim is to assemble a conceptual tool-kit apt for grasping and inhabiting a form of photographic practice that is not relying on paradigms of representation and the eternal bedfellows: image/model, subject/object, figure/ground.

There is some urgency to this task not least since the rapidly changing and mutually co-related processes of globalization, media and technology are underpinned by the way images frame, configure and enact the power relationships of the digital age. By exploring the rules of engagement that govern the use of images it might be possible to free thought from its dependence on the binary oppositions such as model and copy, subject and object, form and content. For as long as the rule of the model versus copy persists, it is impossible to escape what Deleuze branded as 'the four iron collars of representation: Identity in the concept, opposition in the predicate, analogy in judgment and resemblance in perception.'

(Deleuze 2004) Thought that relies on representation cannot free itself from the transcendental, it is bound to remain metaphysical and theological. One of the installation pieces by the artist Jimmie Durham (2015) bears the inscription: “[...] Humans and their gods seem to naturally create opposites-as-a-system. When one thinks ‘white’ one’s next thought is usually ‘black’, for example, and then one declares a polarity that may not necessarily reflect a natural truth. (Do you really think the North Pole is really ‘up’ in the universe? – that the earth is bobbing along in space happily right-side-up?)”

Colonizing representation

More than 50 years ago, Martin Heidegger has observed that the two most decisive events of modernity are that the world is transformed into an image and man into a *subject*. (Heidegger 1977, p. 133). Heidegger’s criticism of representation locates a paradigmatic shift in the philosophy of Descartes: it is with the inception of *cogito* that representation has become the basis of truth and of Being. (Helfer 1996, p. xiii) The modern subject maintains his hold over the world by representing it to himself as a picture. “World picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as picture.” (Heidegger 1977, p. 129) For Heidegger, modernity is ‘the age of the world picture’ because the modern subject is the product of a philosophical regime that declared representation to be the limit and the possibility of all knowledge. Representation configures the basic ideas about identity, subjectivity and truth in two interrelated ways: on the one hand it is the idea that the world can be known by rendering it as a picture, on the other hand representation is the reduction of knowledge to a set of standardized and repeatable procedures. (Judovitz 1988, p. 68)

Photography is still, and for the most part studied as a mode of representation anchored in the metaphysics of light (Bolt 2000), on all its colonial connotations of bringing light to dark places. But there are indicators that the commanding position of the eye and the dominion of vision are being undermined by technologies that replace ocular logic with algorithmic architectures. (Parisi 2014)

Similarly, the transformation of the world into information and of the human being into a nodal point in a social network has decisive consequences for the role of photography within these new cultural formations. As Foucault argued in the *Order of Things*, ideas such as ‘life’, ‘truth’, ‘man’ and ‘knowledge’ are not eternal, transcendental

values but the outcomes of specific configurations of knowledge, tied to mechanisms of collection, division and distribution. (Foucault 1989) More specifically, Foucault explained that the division between natural and human sciences is decisive in determining what constitutes 'truth' for a society. For this reason, the idea of 'truth' sustained by the age of Enlightenment up to and including the 20th century is based on representation as a form of knowledge in which the image 'stands in' for the absent object. The image then becomes a map by means of which the absent object can be known. What is at stake here is not simply a model-copy relationship, but a political agenda of mapping, superiority and conquest. As Bruno Latour indicates, Western Imperialism is a representational project because its intellectual justification always was to map the world ((Latour 1986, quoted in Bolt 2004), i.e. to represent the world in a way that allows first conquest then exploitation and finally tourism. In this context, colonial photography is simply the visual expression of a representational project that for the most part is not concerned with the production of visual surfaces but with territorial appropriation. As Barbara Bolt sums up: 'representation [is] a mode of thinking and a relationship to the world that involves a will to fixity and mastery' (Bolt 2004, p. 17) Extending this understanding to photography, it is possible to say that the logics of humanism, community and morality are conventions that take their bearings from a concept of truth that appeals to the idea that an image can stand in for a real thing. It is assumed that an image has a proper value that contains within it a valid statement about the world. The failure of post-colonial photography to offer an effective critique of colonialism, can be attributed to the fact that post-colonial photography relies on the same representational logic and on the same strategies of visual appropriation that it attempts to critique in colonialism.

There are two points, then, that can be made about photography as a representational mechanism. The first is that it is conservative, the second that it is infantile. *Conservative*: No matter what is the subject of an image, no matter what is the content of a photograph, it is always a representation of something or other. Therefore, while the content is different at every instance, representation remains the same. This persistence of representation creates an impression of stability and continuity, it suggests that while people, events and situations depicted in an image can change, the act of representation itself is internally constant. Under the rule of representation it is impossible to conceive the prospect of genuine revisionism, of a situation where representation, as a

mechanism that has subjectivity at its core, is replaced by another way of knowing and thinking. For that reason, representation offers itself as the economy of infinite exchange (Osborne 2010) that does not allow to imagine a way of being in the world outside of subject/object relations. Photographic representation ensures that subjectivity - as the way by which humanity expresses its hold on the world, has the right to continue. In short, by accepting representation as the sine-qua-non of photography, we make it impossible to imagine the possibility of a human being who is not experiencing the world as a subject, for whom the world is not an image or a picture. *Infantile*: Representation is a law that is enshrined in the order of the world, its authority cannot be questioned, because nothing, not even questioning itself, is posited outside of this law. Whatever cannot be rationally represented remains outside of knowledge and immune to it. Representation is true because it is rational and has its origin in the ability of the subject to present the world to himself as an image. Representation is transcendental because it is the visual manifestation of a logic that permeates all that can be known about the world. The governing assumption is that the world is derived from representation, or *logos*, or reason, that precedes it and makes it knowable. The rationality of the human subject, his ability to make decisions for himself and have autonomy over his destiny is guaranteed by representation because it provides a true image of the world.

Intentionally Blank: fractals, speculation, algorithms

Another way of thinking is possible if images are seen not as two dimensional projections of a three dimensional space, but as manifestations of a non-subjective temporality that does not rely on linear chronology. When the image is considered not as a representation of an external reality but as the exposure of difference, then as Jean-Luc Nancy explains:

This painting which foregrounds the spacing of time as such foregrounds – exposes – that which, precisely, *is not as such*. It is not possible to say *what* the spacing of time *is as such*, because it is negativity for itself. Negativity cannot pose itself as itself [...]: it can only open, it opens, it hollows out or punctures, it has no genre, not even its own. Unexposable, absolute exposer. (Nancy)

The ‘absolute exposer’, of which Nancy says that it expresses something unsayable, resonates with photography, for the photographic exposure never fails to

capture precisely the present. As an exposure, photography is not a picture, rather it is a moment, an instant that obliterates itself through repetition. When photography becomes detached from historical and scientific notions of time, it can be conceived not as a fossil of the past preserved in the present, but as time in its pure form. Not socio-historical, modern time of human subjectivity, but time in which something - no matter what - happens. Photography then is not a form of cultural production, or visual communication, but a manifestation of an ethics of immanence, in which all images, regardless of their content, are expressions of the continuous / discontinuous flows that envelope the globe in algorithmic and computational networks. Conceived from the perspective of production, photography opens up a possibility of thinking about the algorithmic time of the network not as a chronology of historical events but as an instantaneous, always-on, presence that manifests itself not in this or that image, but in the negative spaces that open up between images.

If representation can be overcome as the default operative principle, at the very least this might suggest moving away from political photography and towards making photographs politically. (Bishop 2004) Which is to say, in a way that identifies the photographic processes as meaningful and creative activity, that has value in and of itself, above and beyond the image that might or might not be produced. It is possible that by shifting the focus away from the representational content, the algorithmic and networked photographic image becomes suggestive of forms of comprehension, affect and communication that do not rely on subjectivity. Photography then might be the right vehicle with which to ask not 'how things look photographed', but 'for whom is this world and this image are given?'. The question of photography becomes the possibility of experience without subjectivity, of life without a fixed and immobile rational self.

Which is not to suggest that in the transition from the printed page to the screen photography has lost its descriptive power, but on the contrary to propose that photography is physically descriptive of the networked environment of Information Capitalism and of a milieu that is ordered, defined and managed by a network of multifarious economic, technical and sensuous events. This new-found richness of the photo-networked image, its Phoenix-like rebirth out of the ashes of technology previously known as photography is not lost on a number of artists-philosophers whose playful and

sometimes mind-bending work problematizes the notion of the photographic image and the concomitant ideas about identity, representation, time and history.²

Given this cultural, moral and scientific investments in representation this essay's proposition that we think of images (photographic and otherwise) not in terms of what we see but in terms of what it took to produce what we see might seem implausible if not outright perverse. Nevertheless, there are clear signs that excessive reliance on the visible as the essence of the image is a very bad strategy for attempting to grasp something authentic about the morphology of the world, because the world always escapes being fully grasped by rational and logical propositions (Stengers, 2010), particularly, as (Golding 2014) puts it, 'in light of the strange materialities, curved temporalities, and sliced dimensions expressed in, through and by the digital world'.

There are at least three reasons why this is so:

First, as Benoit B. Mandelbrot showed, many natural forms continuously self-replicate, and cannot be adequately described by any fixed measurement system that uses the yardstick of representation. Fern leaves, cauliflower, clouds, DNA molecules, mountain ranges, snow flakes and many other phenomena have a shape that is self-identical, i.e. it appears the same at every scale. (Mandelbrot 1982) The broccoli head is a magnification of the smallest floret: the big and the small are constructed with the same laws. Mandelbrot named these self-replicating shapes 'fractals'. As he amply demonstrated, fractals are found everywhere in nature. In a short, provocative essay titled 'How long is the coast of Brittan; Statistical self-similarity and fractional dimension' (Mandelbrot 1967) he explains: 'Geographical curves are so involved in their detail that their lengths are often infinite or more accurately, undefinable'. In other words, the coast of Brittan cannot be represented because its length is entirely dependent on the unit of measurement, instead of imagining a broken straight line, it is more accurate to see it as a self-replicating fractal. The smaller the unit of measurement, the longer the measured length, and any attempt at an objective or measurement-independent representation is going to fail. Fractal-like

² For a taste of post-representational practice see for instance the works of Phil Chang *Four Over One and Double (Exposure 1)* 2007-9. Can be viewed at <http://www.philchang.com>. Berkay Tuncay, *This Image or Video Has Been Removed or Deleted*, 2011. [Berkaytuncay.com](http://www.berkaytuncay.com). Walead Beshty, <http://www.thomasdanegallery.com/artists/34-Walead-Beshty/works/>. Elaine Sturtevant, Diana Thater <http://thaterstudio.com>, Christopher Williams, Erik Kessels. Evan Roth

behaviors are not limited to coastlines and mountain ranges, they are also found in society, where large groups are formed from small groups, that are in turn formed from even smaller groups. The topology of the web can be characterized as scale-free, continuously self-replicating fractal. (Berners-Lee 2009]) Taken as a whole, fractal forms open up a way of describing the world not through representation but through repetition, symmetry, self-replication and division. This repeatability of fractal forms opens up a way of thinking about the world not as a shadow on the wall of Plato's cave, not as a fixed entity represented as an image, but as a sequence of repetitions that establishes a 'synthetic unity' (Golding 2012). The difference between the representational world view and the fractal can be summarized thus: while representation is way of comprehending the world through images, fractal logic is more concerned with rhythms, self-replicating segments and patterns. As these are found everywhere in nature, in society, and in production they are exceptionally well suited to describe processes of growth, learning and proliferation. As Johnny Golding explains:

This sequencing creates pattern; the pattern re-loops to create 'synthetic unity'; the process is repeated. It is a process found throughout nature; it is in every pattern of growth; it is at the basis of artificial intelligence, and how robots 'learn'. (Golding 2012)

Fractal geometry has a particularly significant relationship to photography: Considered from the perspective of a single image, photography is static: it represents an object as fixed in space and attached to a frozen moment in time. But considered from the perspective of the process, photography is a 'dynamical system' (Baranger 2000), infinitely changeable and malleable as the algorithmic procedures continue to reshape the image and alter it while at the same time bifurcating and disseminating versions of it.

From the perspective of the process, photography is of course inherently fractal, multiple, and self-reproductive technology, in which every single image instance can be infinitely repeated. Photography's social and political agency is often more directly connected to the fractal distribution of the image than to its content. For instance, consider the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the four year old refugee from Syria who drowned during a sea crossing to Europe. Was it the content of the image or perhaps the dissemination on social media that caused it to have an impact that surpassed anything achieved by many similar images? When representation is augmented by repetition, instantaneity and

distribution it is never enough to judge an image by its content. A whole new dimension of visual culture opens up when the logistics of dissemination, the discursive powers of reproduction and the incalculable affects of algorithms are taken into account. It is possible that this photograph became an iconic image, not because of what it represents, but because the fractal proliferation and dispersal of the image places something like a real, unimaginable horror to stand before ourselves.

Mandelbrot's self-replicating forms cannot be adequately represented by a methodology that focuses solely on the visual. By drawing analogy with the coast of Brittan, it is possible to suggest that migration of human beings seeking shelter from the hardships of war cannot be adequately represented in an image. But the infinite, simultaneous and instantaneous distribution of a single image of a drowned boy that for a time becomes the most viewed image online, affords something that transcends visibility, and can be described as an *experience* that is beyond experience. Conceptually this image can be only grasped as content: it can be related to previously seen scenes, to other signs or to the semantic messages within, but as an encounter this image has affective power that transcends memory and language. What is given in the image is not so much a figure of a child lying face down in the sand but the very act of giving the given itself. As something unquantifiable, gigantic and incomprehensible, the image momentarily succeeds in matching the enormousness of the event of which it speaks. But this match does not happen in the field of vision, rather, it is the immeasurable dimension of this image, its gigantic scale, its unlimited magnitude and incalculable range that make it stand in front of us as a virtual obelisk.

In order to describe the shape of such an image one needs fractal geometry that explores structures that do not fit the linear models of Euclidian geometry and single-point perspective. From self-generating, 3-D landscapes in video games to biologically inspired robots that learn without being programmed (Brooks 1995) the principles that underpin fractal geometry are repetition and self-replication. By devising alternative methods of measurement with which to explore irregular forms, Mandelbrot demonstrated that outside the field of view of Euclidian geometry lies another world of shapes that proliferate through repetition. (Mandelbrot 1982, p. 3) However, this world of self-replicating figures is impossible to grasp by means of representational technique that operates on the basis of a binary distinction between original and copy. The fractal universe has no track with

binary or dialectical thinking, rather it involves chance, statistical regularities and irregularities, scaling and fragmentation. (Mandelbrot 1982, pp. 3, 25).

Second, as Nigel Thrift's argues, the inability of representational approaches to capture movement, change and affect requires a 'Non-representational theory'. Thrift notices that contemporary capitalism is able to diverse many of its tasks into non-representational jurisdictions that operate not with semantic or coded messages but through flows, shapes, forms, tactile surfaces and hypnotic rhythms. (Thrift 2008, p. 17) The point is not only that some messages are better communicated through sensations than through semantic codes, or that forms of expression exist independently, or alongside, forms of content, but that 'human life is based on and in movement' (Thrift 2008. p. 5). For photography not to lose its social and cultural relevance, it must follow not only the visible manifestations of capital but also the invisible forces of production and flows of speculation.

As the old-school distinctions between the conscious subject and the inanimate object are dissolved in favor of a continuous process of transmission and feedback, Thrift observes that in the age of information and communication technologies, space ceases to operate as a three-dimensional, Euclidian topology and acquires streaming and performative qualities. (Thrift 2008, pp. 43-44) When cities, streets and buildings come pre-loaded with information, that is for the most part invisible, and yet absolutely essential for their functioning as public and political spaces, the ability of photography to adequately deal with space is severely compromised.

For as long as photography is obsessed with the representation of the visible it allows the non-visible to slip through the fingers, without being taken to task, examined and criticized. But the non-representational is an active dimension of strife, manipulation and life-altering hand-to-hand combat of energies. (Massumi 1992) For instance, money does not anymore represent a quantity of gold. Instead, since the abolition of the gold standard and introduction of quantitative easing post-2008 financial crash, money has speculative, rather than representational value. One consequence of this is the re-shaping of urban spaces by speculative capital, as can be seen for instance in the mushrooming of the 'deposit boxes in the sky' across London. (Booth 2014) European cities are defined by the concept of a public space, however, as public spaces are converted to privatized areas with public right of passage (aka PAPO - Public Access, Privately Owned), they appear

visually unchanged, but structurally, politically, socially and culturally these are radically different entities from the urban spaces beloved by the street photographers of 20th Century.³

For an example of the invisible forces that naturalize the politics of every day life, consider the Granary Square in London, one of the largest public spaces in Europe. It is framed on all sides by imposing buildings: an art school, national Newspaper headquarters, multinational IT companies. At its heart is an ‘urban beach’ with fountains, street food stalls, canal bars and restaurants. As a public space it is a popular escape from the hullabaloo of a major train station nearby. But as the whole area is owned and developed by a private investment company the public are only allowed in as consumers, visitors and spectators. The idea of public space as an *agora* – a political entity related to citizenship, public debate, demonstration, protest and specific performance of *truth* (Phillips 2013) is made absolutely impossible, not least because the area is monitored 24 hours a day by private security who would immediately act to prevent any civic activity, even the distribution of leaflets. China Mieéville novel ‘The City and the City’ imagines life in a town where all residents are taught from birth to ignore aspects of urban life that do not fit with the current political arrangements, (Miéville 2011) but the truth is that for a number of years, the most significant real changes in the structures of European cities are taking place outside of the optical field of view. What is most remarkable is that the gradual transformation of the city through the depolitization of the public space appears all the more natural for not leaving visible stress marks. In a very real sense it is a different civic entity, in which the possibility of public engagement with politics is significantly restricted. The irony – if irony it is – is that photography is still accepted as the primary means of capturing and representing the city.

Third

Since the triumph of the digital and networked image, the logic of computation is becoming the dominant cultural logic of the visual image. A number of recent studies focused on the uncertainty, undecidability and contingency embedded in the notion of computation. (Marenko 2015), (Parisi 2014), (Rubinstein & Sluis 2013)

³ Another example of this is ‘Iceberg Architecture’: mansions that appear modest on the surface but now contain basement extensions – used for anything from bowling alleys to vintage car showrooms – that are many times larger than the visible house. (Wainwright 2012)

As (Parisi 2014) says: 'Algorithms construct the digital spatiotemporalities that program architectural forms and urban infrastructures, and are thereby models of living'. This means that computation is much more than a mechanism that produces, disseminates and distributes images across the web. Algorithms not only perform instructions, they are also agents that create the reality of the world by selecting, evaluating, compiling and manufacturing data. Even more significantly, algorithmic processing of image data introduces glitches, noise and mutations, and taken together, these artifacts produce new forms of experience that encompass 'embodiment, sensorial participation and the situated apprehension of materiality'. (Marenko 2015)

One of the consequences of photography being underpinned by an algorithmic, rather than representational logic, is that it introduces randomness, undecidability and automation into the photographic process. While 20th C. photography could be more-or-less convincingly understood from within a totalizing system of dialectical opposites, in which the image is opposed to the model, such idealistic pretensions are unable to cope with the notion of the image as a product of algorithmic processes that not so much represent reality but progressively create realities, cultures and ways of thinking that are inherently computational. And while the representational content of the photograph confirms the experience of perception by situating objects within a perspectival frame, the algorithmic processes that produce the said photograph 'represent abstract patterns [...] that extend beyond the limit of perception'. (Kostas Terzidis quoted in Parisi 2014, p. 66)

The picture of the world constructed by contemporary photography has undecidability – rather than representation – at its core, but in a paradoxical way, this does not make it less true but, I would like to argue, opens up the photographic image to new forms of materiality and performativity. The reason for this is that since the first half of the 20th Century, undecidability has emerged as one of the underpinning features of modern (fuzzy) logic and as one of the foundational principles of computation. In mathematics, the principle of undecidability was proven by (Gödel 1992), but it was put to practical use a little later when Alan Turing employed it in the construction of the 'Turing Machine' – the theoretical prototype of the digital computer and the device that he used to decipher the Enigma code during WWII that ultimately lead to the surrender of Germany.

As a conceptual formulation that limits certainty and introduces an element of chaos and indeterminism into calculation, undecidability is a non-dualistic entity that

bypasses such oppositional pairs as true-false and form-matter in favor of continuous deferral and a state of irresolvable complexity. The algorithmically processed digital image is undecidable to the extent that the material processes involved in its production cannot be fully determined. As (Marenko 2015) argues, the aesthetics of algorithmic processing are to a large extent connected with the concept of the glitch, as the unforeseen, 'procedural stutter' that forms the immersive materiality of digital images. For that reason, in the transition from optical to algorithmic imaging, photography did not simply replace one mode of image production for another, but passed from a closed system to an open, undecidable environment that makes room for expression that does not seek to 'make sense' but to inhabit states of indeterminacy that allow for chaotic and random movement that points to a world outside the domain of rational and logical representation.

The shared suggestion put forward by fractals, non-representational theory and algorithmic processing is that there is no reason to accept the postulate that underpins all theory of photography: that photography operates as an inscription of reality which is external to it. Reality is not first given to be later inscribed in an image, but rather reality inscribes itself as an image through a process of repetition and self-replication. It is not photography that represents reality, it is reality becoming photographic through a process of continuous self-replication.

Three non-representational strategies: erasure, repetition, self-replication

There are at least three principal figures by which one is able to escape the logic of representation, and open up a pathway for the creative transformation of photography: the first can be code-named as erasure, the second as self-replication and the third as repetition.

Erasure is a move that aims to re-move the content of the image, getting to a semi-emptiness that is filled with the memory of something that has been there previously but is now destroyed. By effacing the image, the gesture of removal also quietly suggests that there is a trace of non-signifying, pre-rational and pre-subjective experience that nevertheless persists within the image. An image that is defaced, obliterated and damaged connects with the life-experience of the viewer not by representing destruction – like so

many immaculate photographs of catastrophes – but by intimating that the viewer and the image share the same experience: the individual disintegration of the former is mimicked in the physical obliteration of the later. As instances of erasure one could consider Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square, 4.33* by John Cage, *Erased De Kooning drawing* by Robert Rauschenberg and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*. When traces of representation are removed from the image, all that is left for the spectator to experience is the event of the encounter. The question then becomes not what the image allows one to remember but what has been erased, removed and forgotten.

Self-replication denotes a situation where images are generated not by a reference to reality that is external to them but through doubling up and copying fragments of themselves within themselves and via adhering to the auto-erotic logic of mis-en-abyme. In self-replication the metaphysical opposition between the inside and outside is overcome (as in Mobius strip) through a strategy of mirroring that happens when a robot builds a robot, a candle is infinitely reflected between two mirrors, a camera is taking a picture of a camera, or a hand drawing a hand as in a painting by Escher. (Hofstadter 1979) Self-replication indicates a possibility of an unlimited proliferation that is capable of change, mutation and variation without the need for any external input. It is at the basis of the way fractal patterns replicate and reproduce themselves. (Mandelbrot 1982) While self-replication does not reference anything external to the image, the very act of self-replication is commensurate with the way life recreates itself by reproduction. This aesthetic gesture succeeds in saying something essential about life not by representing it, but through recovering within the image something of life's own essential material condition of proliferation.

Repetition. It is found in copies, clones, duplicates, reproductions and twins. When an image is repeated, the second iteration overlaps with the first without becoming fully dissolved in it. This results in a series of ostensibly identical images that are nevertheless distinct from each other. Prints from the same photographic negative are said to be identical, but they bring into view a 'reality segment' (Golding 2010) that can be named 'multiplicity'. The very ability of being repeated multiple times suggests that the logic that operates within a multiplicity is different from the logic of representation, because no matter what is denoted in the visual content, repetition puts forward a non-dualistic and non-representational logic of production, distribution and dissemination. Repetition is

never on the same plane as the content: content inscribes the image with meaning by treating it as a signifying surface. Content is semantic denotation that orders the world as a legible structure. But repetition does not deal with signification, rather it mimics the labor vested in the production of commodities: things that are mass-produced usually don't carry with them the legend of their own production. For instance the smartphone on my desk does nothing to remind me of the way it was manufactured, on the contrary, one could say that all traces of fabrication, assembly and labor were surgically removed from it to render it perfect, innocent and immaculate. As an ethical strategy, repetition strips the veil of innocence from objects, revealing their secret logic of labor made invisible and hidden from view by mass production. Bernd and Hilla Becher shown the difference between representation and repetition in the Topologies series. Representation operates on the level of content where each single image denotes an industrial object. But repetition operates between the images themselves suggesting that industrial production is not represented in photography but that photography is it. Bechers achievement is in demonstrating that photography is not a form of visual communication, rather it embodies the logic of technological production that commands all forms of aesthetic expression.

Conclusion: The Practice of Photodigital life

The three strategies of non-representational photography, erasure, self-replication and repetition reveal something about the one-sidedness of the pictorial-representational approach; about its inability to deal with anything that is processual, temporal and fluid. Practices that re-produce, disseminate, copy and mutate constitute the primary photographic activity: they operate discretely, away from the signifying surface of the image. All the usual operations of indexical signifiers, decoding and reading are secondary processes that emerge out of the photographic unconscious: the invisible process of repetition.

Photography however is not one image system among many but the basic unit of visual communication of the age of technology. Peter Osborne has already point out that: '[T]he photographic is not best understood as a particular art; it is currently the dominant form of the image in general.' (Osborne 2010, p. 62) If photography is at the very heart of the image, it is possible that an inquiry into its conceptual building blocks can reveal something about images as such.

Photography can function successfully as representation precisely because the qualities that account for its own production are generally excluded from the content of the image. But the creative powers of photography lies not so much in the visual surfaces it is capable of producing but in allowing us to inhabit a state that is prior to the formation of the visual image. It is precisely because photography is an image produced through the means of modern technology that it is at one and the same time an event in the history of image-making systems and an event in the history of thought.

The processes of production that operate beneath the optical surface of the photographic image are pre-subjective and pre-individual, but they create the connections between photographic production and production as such that constitutes the spatiotemporal reality that the photographic image represents. Photodigital culture can be studied as a archive, a memory or as visual communication, but this approach is risking to forgo the possibility that the digital paradigms that produce visible surfaces are doing more than serving us data. Reality is not out there waiting to be photographed, but the photographic process that algorithmically shapes the image out of data is the same process that is shaping the environment, that has to be understood as located 'within the algorithmic object'. (Parisi 2014, p. 36).

The arrival of Photodigital environment suggests that rather than understanding photographs as discrete units of information that capture specific time and space coordinates, photography should be understood as an infinite flow that cannot be equaled with rational representation or be reduced to individual images. To insist on the primacy of the visual image is to be deaf to the truly radical message of photography: that the 'visual image' is conjoined to processes of construction and distribution and through them to life itself. There is no possibility of distinguishing between form (content) and functions (code) because both are merged in the photodigital object. The consequence of this unity is that any critical theory that takes the opposition between form and content as its starting point is bound to miss the role undecidability, incompleteness and dissemination play in constructing the ground of the digital image.

The invisible aspect of photography is a tangible (but not optical) encounter with itself in the space of the human gaze. This is not a representation of something not is it an expression of subjectivity. Photography gives visual expression to this part of life that escapes representation because it is not adequate to any concept: labor, desire, re-

Daniel Rubinstein

Nothing to see here: photography and the politics of invisibility

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production, self-replication, forgetting, and erasure – the essential and sensual organic singularities preformed by humans in figuring through play and fight what humanity consists of.

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Daniel Rubinstein

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