Towards Photographic Education

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In light of the triumph of the digital photograph as the basic semantic unit of New Media, this paper investigates the response of photographic education to the culture of ubiquitous mobile and networked photography. It argues that photographic education fails to address such contemporary conditions as the crisis of the visual, the demise of the still photograph and the redundancy of the notion of authorship because it perceives the digital turn in technological terms. This paper suggests that if the digital moment in photography will be approached conceptually rather than technologically, it will present photography educators with a unique opportunity to place the study of the digital photograph at the centre of a culture which is based on reproduction, multiplication and copying.

I

The tasks that photography education is committed to, those of teaching how to make photographs and how to interpret them, never seemed more redundant and obsolete than in the present moment. The resignation of photography education in the face of digital culture crippled it and proved its irrelevance to everyone beside itself. Photography education knows of no method with which to approach New Media image culture; instead, it attempts in vain to prolong its survival by clinging to the historical moment of photography, not realizing that this moment has passed and that it has nothing to offer to the present besides obsolete judgements and inadequate interpretations.

At the heart of photography education there is a contradiction verging on a paradox. As Susan Sontag observes:

> cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the working of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers).
>
> (Sontag 366)

The importance of photography to capitalist culture lies in its dual function as means of distraction and entertainment on the one hand and as a tool of discipline on the other. Yet, as photography plays a crucial role in defining reality both as a medium for the recording and storage of information and as a spectacle, industrial capitalism without photography is unthinkable (Debord 1–35). And yet the role of photography education as an academic subject is marginal at best. If it is true that photography is a way of knowing the world, then it is equally true that most people who make knowing the world their profession do not feel the need to be educated in photography. Within the sciences, photography is used extensively to study micro-organisms, distant galaxies and everything in between. In medicine, photography is used both for reference, as a

learning tool and as a powerful diagnostic device used in the imaging of the body. In experimental physics photography is used for recording the spread of sub-atomic particles. These academic disciplines developed their own methodologies for obtaining and interpreting photographs that do not rely on photographic education either for technical or critical knowledge.[1]

Perhaps the point to consider is not the limitations of the discourse of photography education but the systems of classification, the mechanisms of observation and the economies of production through which photography is exercised without ever being made the subject of critical inquiry. When an assortment of photographic practices was labelled as an academic discipline and allocated resources and given a stake in theory, was it to keep it away from the industries of knowledge? Consider the humanities disciplines which rely in their day-to-day operations on photography. Take Art History, for example; imagine it without photographic reproductions: posters, post-cards, exhibition catalogues, without 35 mm transparencies, without the whole industry of photographic reproduction of art – is there any doubt that Griselda Pollock is right when she says: "Art History, as we know it, as a university discipline and general subject, was not possible before the photographic age" (Pollock 165). The significant point is not so much that photography is essential for the study of art but that it is essential for photography to be a transparent and uncritical medium of presentation within the discourse of Art History.

The problem is not that the sciences and humanities have their own photographic methods but that they are certain in their methods. If photography education had a voice in these quarters it could say to art history, to medicine and to physics that all photographic methods are producers of ideologies. As Rancière says:

> Methods are recounted stories. This does not mean that they are null and void. It means that they are weapons in a war; they are not tools which facilitate the examination of a territory but weapons which serve to establish its always uncertain boundary
>
> (Rancière 11)

As it stands, photographic education does not have a stake in this war. After the last university darkroom is emptied of film dryers, enlargers, focus magnifiers and processing trays, photography will carry on as always: medical scientists will continue to advance research with the help of microscopic photography, magneto-scans and ultrasound, astronomers will continue to study images obtained by orbit telescopes, physicists will record traces left by photons, historians will study photographic archives and law enforcement authorities will still accumulate photographic evidence. Nothing will change in the world of knowledge if there are no more photography graduates. It will be objected that even if this is all true, it is because photography education is not concerned with these uses of photography. It has no business in the laboratory, in the hospital and in the CCTV control room. Photography education has a different goal which is to educate in the creative uses of the medium, to provide a critical framework for the interpretation of creative images and to further visual literacy.

But precisely here lies the paradox; it is in the laboratory, in the hospital and in the CCTV control room that the aesthetic values of art are being forged through delineating the visual language of realism (Tagg 93–95). It is within these spaces that photography plays the most decisive role in the creation of social fabric by furnishing ideologies

which normalize and naturalize procedures of surveying, recording, duplicating and storage. Within these institutions photography is routinely relied on to distil information into power. The absence of photographic education at these sites means that photography is never being considered as anything other than a convenient tool. But information does not become power without leaving a remainder.[2] Whenever power requires images for the production of knowledge, the by-product is the discourse of realism. By disengaging from the institutions which routinely use photography to reproduce and objectify reality, photography education resigns itself to examining what is left out of this discourse: the use of photography in the production of art.

This peculiar ability of photography to play a central role both in the production of discourses of truth and in the production of discourses of art is neatly summarized in the title of Walter Benjamin's essay "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". This text, perhaps one of the few foundational materials of photographic education, is being photocopied so often within photography departments that its aura is almost completely lost, and yet in most interpretations the stress falls on "work of art", which gets emphasized as the ultimate destination of the photograph, while the "mechanical reproduction" is being interpreted as suggesting that photography is an art done by mechanical means. This emphasis on the authorship of photographs is equally present in discussions of existing photographic works and in suggesting to students that they are the sole creators of photographs, ultimately responsible for all aspects of their meaning. This approach has two consequences – not only does it give students the questionable idea that an artwork can be created at a press of a button but it also prevents the understanding of the photograph as a site of collective labour.

The question of labour is especially acute in the relationship between the photographer and the photographic apparatus. It is usually assumed without question that the camera obeys the will of the photographer; the more skilful the photographer, the better she can articulate her vision through the operation of the camera. In this sense, photographic education is still following the approach championed by Ansel Adams who used to say that the negative is the musical score and the print is the recital (Adams 2). In this vision of the solitary photographer as an artistic prodigy, there is no room for such petty considerations as the forces of labour involved in the design, the marketing, the production and the assembly of the photographic apparatus, nor is there any way to think the photograph as an outcome of collaboration between large numbers of individuals (designers, engineers, assembly-line operators) who contribute various dimensions to the final outcome. There are two shortcomings to this approach as far as photographic education is concerned. First, it flies in the face of the foundational principles of cultural studies, which require that culture is examined not only from the perspective of heroic individuals but also through articulating it as a web of processes that involve representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (du Gay et al. 3). Second, it overlooks and ignores the control exercised over the photographer by the photographic industry which manufactures photographic equipment with specific economic and socio-political goals in mind. In the words of Vilém Flusser:

Photographers may think they are bringing their own aesthetic, epistemological or political criteria to bear. They may set out to take artistic, scientific or political

images for which the camera is only a means to an end. But what appear to be their criteria for going beyond the camera nevertheless remain subordinate to the camera's program.

(Flusser 36)

The relationship of the photographer to the camera is a complex one. At times it resembles the intricacies of the Hegelian master–slave dialectic. The essential question that needs to be asked is "who controls the image, is it the photographer or is it the camera?"

Given the emphasis on authorship, it is perhaps not surprising that the subject that gets the least attention in photographic education is the question of reproduction and copy. The dual emphasis on originality on the one hand and the production of artworks on the other restricts the notion of photography to an event that takes place at the back of the photographer's mind – an artistic vision captured through technological means. Yet this interpretation of the photographic process ignores the political and cultural value of reproduction.

II

The digital turn was an opportunity for photography education to acknowledge the crisis of the visual, the demise of the still photograph and the redundancy of authorship in photography. This was an occasion to reinvent photography education as the study of the means by which reality is being recorded, copied and reproduced, and along the way to contribute to the emerging culture of image studies.[3] This moment was missed. Within photography studies, the digital shift was perceived largely as quantitative, not qualitative. The revolution brought about by digital imaging was reduced to technologies, enveloped in historical analogies or explained away with dystopian rhetoric. In short, the digital shift was translated into abstract values and reified (Rose 27–51); it was presented as an affirmation of technological progress for a society of unlimited exchange. By reifying the digital moment, photography education saved itself from a crisis but plunged into oblivion. A living anachronism, it can no longer offer a platform from which photography can be concretely accounted for. In the face of the expanding culture of the image, photography education shrinks back and resigns itself from any attempt to play a decisive role in understanding the ecology of the digital image.

Following the triumph of digital technologies as the driving force of Western culture, photography underwent a series of metamorphoses which significantly altered our understanding of it. In a relatively short period both the practice of photography and its theoretical foundations became the site of dramatic changes. Take one example: the 1980s Trivial Pursuit question "who is the biggest buyer of silver in the world?" (Answer: Kodak), can now be updated to "Who is the biggest manufacturer of cameras in the world?" (Answer: Nokia). The fusion of photography with mobile phone technology helped to create a culture of digital images which circulate the World Wide Web as streams of data spontaneously and instantly picked out of vast databases and merged temporarily through such online practices as social networking, tagging, compositing and archiving. Unlike traditional analogue images, digital images are generated for display

by software algorithms. This means that they can be endlessly copied and placed in new contexts, their content and meaning changing with every permutation of the image file (Rubinstein and Sluis 9–21).

The dual concerns of photographic education with content and authorship are significantly challenged by the digital turn. Photography students spend a large part of their time at universities learning how to read a photograph in order to decode its meaning.[4] The notion that a photograph is a ciphered message that needs to be unpacked with the tools of semiology and structuralism is the foundation concept of applied photographic theory. Yet these methodologies have some serious shortcomings in theorizing digital images – first, because in the case of digital images the meaning is determined largely by the context within which the image appears and so it is rarely fixed or stable, and, second, because the very idea of meaning, as a representation of something in the real world, is itself problematic and questionable within a culture of images transmitted by mobile multimedia which change, morph and re-assemble continuously. As image data are passed across networks in rapid volleys, connections are often made that are both accidental and irrational; they create momentary continuities and produce meanings that cannot be explored by focusing on the subject of the image alone.

The crisis of meaning and representation is deepened by the crisis of authorship. In recent years the amateur has displaced the professional as the primary producer of photographic images for the public domain. Given the vast numbers of digital cameras in circulation and the ease with which images can be uploaded to the World Wide Web this is not surprising, but it does mean that the classroom study of photographic masterpieces by selected "masters of photography" feels more and more outdated. Contemporary digital photography is characterized not by the outstanding work of the few but by the middling work of the many. Rather than a system for the production of works of art, photography today is a system of dissemination and reproduction, in which the individual image is a nodal point, or a fractal shape which has no representational value in and of itself but which participates in economies of meaning through connections with other, ostensibly meaningless images.

III

The challenge that photography education is facing now is to see that the Platonic dualism of the original (negative) and the copies (prints) have been replaced with a much more subtle and clandestine difference between copies and simulacra (Deleuze 7–13). A digital image is a simulacrum in so far as it is endlessly repeated and reproduced, but at the same time it is also unfinished in the sense that its meaning is unstable both through internal malleability and external contextualization. As simulacra, the products of digital photography escape the process of deciphering (semiotic or structural), which ends when the photograph stops acting as a representation, when it is becoming pure surface. The economy of representation is substituted or augmented by an economy of repetition and copy.

Moreover, within digital culture the most concealed aspects of the image become the most manifest – the unfinished, the non-representational, the rhythmic (Deleuze and Guattari 311–12). The digital image is always a process, never an object. Consequently,

the dual emphasis within photography education on content on the one hand and on authorship on the other proves to be inadequate in dealing with images whose meaning is inherently unstable because the act of authorship is a never-ending process of assemblage, annotation, manipulation and attunement that can take place at each instance when the data file is presented on the computer screen (Golding 15–17).

Digitalization of photography presents another challenge to photographic education – the loss of technological specificity. One of the reasons why photography departments are so reluctant to replace their frail enlargers and colour processing machines with digital printers is that this analogue technology gives photography education its identity. Take them away and who can tell the difference between photography and multimedia? The digital turn was a paradigm shift at which the photographic image ceased to be associated with photographic technology, and exploded to become the basic semantic unit for information everywhere. The digital image, which is inherently undecided and unfinished, is a picture of the way doubt becomes part of rational argument. Within the culture of mobile multimedia, photography acquired a range of multi-layered socio-political functions that cannot be sufficiently accounted for by the traditional homogeneous categories of photographic theory (gaze, gender, identity, colonialism) that specialize in decoding photography as a representational medium and rely on the assumption that a photograph is a symbolic representation of the real.

Another challenge that photographic education must face is that the age of the still image is (almost) over. Digital photography is produced in bursts and sequences. The distinction between still and video camera is an anachronism, and even the notion of the camera itself is rapidly becoming a thing of the past as the market is dominated by multifunctional data-capturing devices. Yet the central role that photography came to play in the culture of mobile multimedia creates a unique opportunity to re-evaluate the assumption that photography can be summed up as a technological process. The shortcomings of a technological approach to photography are becoming the more obvious the further we move into digital culture. As long as we identify photography as technology, there is nothing that sets photography apart from other digital media. At some point there will have to be an admission that photography merged with multimedia to such an extent that it does not have a separate existence. On the other hand, if we accept, as Heidegger said, that technology is nothing technological, that it is a mode of revealing something essential about our current state of being, we can enter a new era of creative and critical engagement with photography (Heidegger 3–35). Through the technology of photography something essential is exposed about the culture of the image: it is reproduction, not representation that forms the essence of the digital image.

The digital turn occasions the need for a philosophy of photography. It is an opportunity to establish photography education as the study of reproduction (analogue and digital) in all its forms. A culture based on images requires a discipline that studies images "in all their theoretical, critical and practical contexts, uses and history" (Manghani, Piper, and Simons 1). The task of investigating the role of reproduction and multiplicity within image culture has to be one of the aims of photographic education of the future. The digital moment calls for an education that can address the iconology of the digital image by embracing the processes of copy, multiplication and duplication. Photography education needs to become interdisciplinary in order to achieve this aim.

As digital images exist both within and outside visual culture, photography education will have to consider the image as a holistic field, not limited to visual or representational images. Sensorial, aural, and verbal images are all part of a trans-disciplinary approach to images that will allow photographic education to explore the digital image within the broad perspective of the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 11), which characterizes the culture of New Media.

The task of photographic education will be to turn away from the photograph as a work of art and engage with the events of reproduction and the economies of duplication and copying that occur everywhere in academia and form the basis of knowledge building in the humanities and in the sciences. The task of photography education would be to engage all producers and users of images in a dialogue about the ways in which images are being manufactured, interpreted, distributed and stored and about the ideologies that are being furnished within these processes. One can hope that by following this route photography education will assume its rightful place in university education, and the question of the future will not be what is the purpose of photographic education but what is the value of education without photography?

Notes

1   See, for example, Logan and Higinbotham.
2   "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than the objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (Adorno 5).
3   On the need for iconology see, for example, Mitchell, *Iconology*.
4   See, for example, Burgin.

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