

Without Place and Free From Its Origins

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Over twenty years ago in his essay; “Phantasm, Digital Imaging and the Death of Photography” (1994), writer and critic Geoffrey Batchen (1956) stated that:

Photography may indeed be on the verge of losing its privileged place within modern culture. This does not mean that photographic images will no longer be made, but it does signal the possibility of a dramatic transformation of their meaning and value, and therefore of the medium’s ongoing significance. However, it should be clear that any such shift in significance will be an epistemological affair rather than a simple consequence of the advent of digital imaging.

(Batchen, 1994: 50)

A quotation that I believe remains every bit as relevant for anyone associated with photography to understand today as when he wrote it. In his book *Burning With Desire* (1999), Batchen locates the timing of photography’s emergence within what he terms ‘the undecided folding’ (Batchen 1999: 186) at the time of the collapse of the ‘Classical’ era and the emergence of ‘Modern’ regimes of knowledge. These are periods chosen by Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) in his book *The Order of Things* (1966). Batchen establishes the origins of photography within the 1830s, positioning its emergence within the wider social and cultural context of that specific time and suggests that it ‘emerged from a confluence of cultural forces’ (Batchen, 2002: 16). He argues that photography’s origins were inherently linked to the social and cultural transformations that followed, the advent of steam and the innovations that rapidly emerged as symbols of ‘the modern era’: the railway, the telegraph and the modern museum. Batchen identifies William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) as one of several ‘father’ figures of modern photography. Talbot, he argues, was working during a pivotal moment in the formation of Victorian knowledge systems, during a time of enormous social and cultural transformation in Britain. The Industrial Revolution which witnessed the shift from predominantly rural, agrarian society to an industrial urban society was accompanied by a growing

middle class. Alongside this there was an emerging and consequent institutionalisation of knowledge. Talbot's discovery of a mechanical and reproducible method for reliably creating evidential and truthful depictions of the material world positioned photography in line with the Victorians' search for empirical evidence and order, thereby making photography immediately desirable.

The seeds for the Victorians' attraction to empirical enquiry had been sown through the development of positivism in France, as espoused by French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). The ground for empiricism had been well prepared as he consolidated a philosophy with its 'emphasis on scientific observation and explanation and the rejection of theological and metaphysical speculation' (Solomon, 1988: 100). As Martin Lister has pointed out, photography at this time, while being a 'product of the technological age,' simultaneously secured a privileged position within it:

... the Cartesian representational schema, for it is an image the truthfulness of which is underwritten by the scientific procedure that created it... [suggesting that] ... to know something means to have an image of it and only knowledge given as an image is rational and correct.

(Lister, 2006: 26)

More recently a further 'rupture' has taken place, as a direct result of the advent of the microchip, which has brought in its wake exponential technological advances, the like of which we have not experienced since humans harnessed steam. These are visible in manifestations as various as Artificial Intelligence (AI) machine-ware and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) as well as bringing about seismic changes in the same areas most implicated in the Industrial Revolution such as transport, (today taking the form of driverless cars), communication (via the internet and the I-phone) and museum culture, which has seen an emergent digital museum culture. All of these have lead to this moment being dubbed the 'Second Machine Age' (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014).

Joan Fontcuberta fifteen years ago identified that:

The dramatic metamorphosis from the grain of silver to the pixel represents nothing more than a screen which conceals the evolution taking place in the whole framework that provided photography with a cultural, instrumental and historical context.

(Fontcuberta, 2003: 10-11)

The digital age can be seen to be unfolding many of the past systems, much of which is taking place out of sight, invisibly. Batchen noted that; 'Photography may indeed be on the verge of losing its privileged place within modern culture' (1994) and what followed was an anxious series of essays and texts across the field. For example, Rosalind Krauss wrote that; 'Photography can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its own obsolescence' (Krauss, 1999: 289), while William J. Mitchell (1944-) proposed that, 'from the moment of its sesquicentennial in 1989 photography was dead - or, more precisely, radically and permanently displaced.' (Mitchell, 1992: 20). Alan Trachtenberg similarly asserted that; 'If the nineteenth century invented photography, the late-twentieth-century began to disinvent it' (Trachtenberg, 1980). But of course, photography is neither dead nor obsolete, nor disinvented and I believe that Mitchell, Krauss and Trachtenberg were wrong in reaching such a conclusion. Where they may have been writing at a time poised for change, there was no collapse.

Instead, what has transpired is a previously inconceivable expansion and transformation of every aspect of the medium, which has witnessed an abundance and deluge of images and image making tools. While bringing about a radical displacement of more traditional systems and support structures, new ones that further the medium continue to emerge. While the value of the contemporary image could be said to be being drowned out by accumulation, image making itself is far from dead. To put this in perspective, 95 million photos and videos are shared on Instagram per day and almost 9,000 photos are shared every second on Snapchat (Wordstream, 2018). 1.2 trillion photos were estimated to have been taken on smartphones alone in 2017 (Chart, 2018).

Martin Hand in his appositely titled book *Ubiquitous Photography* (2012) suggests that what we are witnessing is 'the death of film but the proliferation of photographies' (Hand, 2012: 2).

Photography has of course always passed through cultural and ideological changes but I believe the

changes based on this second ‘unfolding’ and the unfolding cultural theories have transformed the nature of photography to such a degree as to warrant such uncertainty and bring about the current crises in the medium’s identity. As a practitioner, these issues raise the urgent question of what exactly it means to be identified as a ‘photographer’ today. How can our practices explore ideas of ‘transformation’ and new ways of saying? How can we now explore new ways to make and distribute images which interrogate the new conditions within which we find ourselves enmeshed?

Beyond the supposed unraveling of photography and its ‘twilight zone of obsolescence’ (Krauss, 1999: 289), as practitioners we need to attempt to understand and articulate the condition of photography now. In *The Post-Photographic Condition* (2015) Fontcuberta writes that today we are witnessing, not the birth of a new technique in the realm of the digital, but the ‘transmutation of fundamental values’, stating that where ‘the carapace remains unharmed... its soul is being transformed, in a sort of metempsychosis’. He is suggesting that there is a transmigration of photography’s essence into a new guise. He states that what we are witnessing is not the invention or discovery of a process as witnessed at the origins of the medium but instead, less romantically than the rebirthing implied, what we are seeing is ‘the un-inventing of a culture - the dismantling of the visual language that photography has hegemonically ingrained in us over a century and a half’ (Fontcuberta 2015: 10).

Simultaneously there are a multitude of emergent platforms so while we would appear to be witnessing the ‘dismantling’ of past orders and the shift in the privileged position the photograph and the photographer once occupied there is I feel something increasingly exciting waiting to take shape. Fontcuberta identifies that where previously two facets had existed side-by-side, ‘the image as visual information’ and the ‘physical support or medium’ and forming something that historically had been ‘perfectly fused and inseparable’ (Fontcuberta 2015: 12) this has now changed. A detachment, in fact a series of displacements, have taken place, somewhat out of sight, resulting in these two facets as being able now to exist independently or even unrelated to each other due to the shifts in technology. Whether the shift is from the physical film and its chemical negative to a jpg file stored on a hard drive or in the means itself of capture via a smart phone, what digital technology is identified as doing is bringing about a detachment which opens up as yet a vastly unexplored area for image makers. Once broken free of such supports, the digital image can then be seen to be without place and free from its origins, to float away from the anchors with which we had become so familiar. I am reminded of a quote by Walter Benjamin who stated:

As the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organised—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history.

(Benjamin, 1936: 23)

As Batchen said speaking at a symposium in Oxford in 2017, working with photography today is ‘closer to genetic engineering than chemistry’ (Batchen, 2017). I suggest that where we are now, in the digital era, with photographing a common practice for many, is to feel that we are waiting for some further development to occur. If we are to be alive in a post-modern reality where there are no longer such over-arching explanatory ‘grand narratives’ by which we can explain ourselves to ourselves, then the rules have changed allowing for new ways of making images and delivering narratives.

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