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WHAT'S LEFT? MARXISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Surplus-Value: Surplus Image

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The image surplus of the 21st-century' directly maps a crisis of critical new ideas, as well a social shift away from confronting economic, environmental and political consequences. Today, in the economy of images, exchange is the formal determinant of a distracting means of re-production. In an age of Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, photography is a form of both abstract labour and enjoyment. While we usually consider photographs to be equivalents of a diverse number of things – when they show our faces, our sunsets, our favourite food, our pets, our holidays and our celebrations – ultimately they fail to maintain this assertion, under even minor scrutiny. What if photography contains within it the capacity to be more than a representation of some thing or other? Would this not provide a radical re-reading of photography and a means to reimagine the structures of capital? In other words, to engage with photography as a way of thinking allows us to begin to rephrase the discourses of production and exchange.

Following Marx's formula of commodity-money-commodity I suggest there is a process of experience-image-experience, when an experience is photographed. I argue that in the digital world we are undergoing an inverted shift to image-experience-image. This occurs when the creation of images becomes the primary aim and objective. In this new formula, image becomes more than image: it is the mediation of experience into something incrementally excessive of simply image and becomes a new means for a different mode of production.

Introduction

In the economy of everyday photographic images, we might consider exchange as being the formal determinant of a distracting means of (re)production.¹ At a time of crisis, regarding challenging economic, environmental and political consequences, the obsession with and production of an excess of images appears to express a fundamental failure of our vision: signifying a kind of blind spot in our awareness. It is as if instead of marshalling challenges to the inequalities that permeate the social order, through the act of photographing the world we render things somewhat less obdurate.

In the above formulation, photographic images offer a distracting means to face an already formed alternative image of the world, not the world itself. Photographs are also not only visual images of things structured by a supposed direct correspondence with resemblance, they are experienced materially or digitally as objects 'enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions' (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 1). In this sense, photographs are images of things but they also things in themselves. Although, even when we understand photographs themselves as material objects, there remains a certain tacit acceptance that they are also objects that depict images. We understand them as objects that can be looked at, as well as objects that contain something which more often than not, demands looking at.

Guy Debord offers a line of thought in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994: 38), wherein looking is configured as a compensation for the experience of productivity. When looking at photographs, the attention given to the visual and the visible serves to distract from how photographs emerge from and through particular processes of labour: namely those of distribution, duplication and reproduction. These processes are the critical components of everyday photographic production. Furthermore, following Debord (1994), what appears intrinsic to these processes is how an illusion of enjoyment and satisfaction overlaps with the concrete and abstract labour required of everyday photographic image production. Inevitably, in

¹ Following Hand, everyday photographic images are understood as being produced by an image-making that is now, seemingly, an 'ordinary aspect of people's lives' (Hand, 2012: 3)

this knotting, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the parts of photography we enjoy and the parts that might be described as simply another form of working.

Crucially, everyday images that are miscast as representational objects appear to mask something of their own production, of the work they demand of us. In other words, we see, experience and understand most photographs as a multitude of depictions of things that are happening and going on. But by doing this, we fail to engage with the forces of labour and enjoyment that today underpin a different function for a photography; a photography that is made every day and pervades everywhere. As noted above, even if we accept photography as producing some form of object (Barthes, 1984; Edwards & Hart, 2004), it is always confusingly an object that carries within it an image. And frustratingly, its materiality is often subordinated to something that will 'fundamentally cohere the photograph as image' (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 15). Thus, analysis of photography as either image or material object usually fixates on the 'act of viewing' (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 15) in some way.

An alternative position offers inroads into photography that does not rely on representation as its ground. Instead, photography can be understood as both the site of and output from a complex form of cultural production. The almost ceaseless rendering of experience as photographic image has served a transition from industrial age to information age. Expressing a general move from the materiality of objects (the photograph) to the immateriality of experiences (the digital image), photography and the digital photographic image has become, as Lister (2007), Rubinstein and Sluis (2008) and van Dijk (2011) have argued, intrinsic to 'globally connected flows of information' (Hand, 2012: 11). In reconfiguring the image of modernist modes of production into the phrases of networked and interlinked expressions, it appears that we encounter more clearly not a singular moment of photography – such as an individual print or a memorable snapshot – but a multiplicity of photographically inflected commodities. These all have very different forms – material and immaterial – and usually operate in some way at the service of pleasure and enjoyment.

The most obvious manifestations of such photographically orientated multiplicities include Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Within these environments, certain types of photographic images proliferate such as selfies, food porn and memes. While these can be explained in part by the ubiquity, mobility and connectivity of the smartphone (Murray, 2008; Van Dijk, 2008; Van House, 2011; Frosh, 2015), they are also indicators of non-representational developments (Lasén & Gómez Cruz, 2009; Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012; Lister, 2013; Frosh, 2015) in thinking about photography.

Non-representational photography and dematerialised labour

To many, a non-representational reading of photography would seem counter intuitive (Thrift, 2008). However, what this offers is a way to consider the structure of photographic production and consumption, in a contemporary context, without resorting to the traditional approach of visual descriptions and analysis. What framework links the phenomena of photographic multiplicities, and what understanding can be brought to the vast and increasing production of photographic images? I argue digital photography now represents a form of symbolic dematerialised labour common to late capitalism. It may even be possible to suggest it is the most significant form of labour in the developed world in this period. Situated and circulated most obviously within the horizontal social networks of the internet and emerging through advances in associated technology, photography embodies something of how Marx described the general intellect. This is to understand photography as the 'power of knowledge objectified' (Marx, 1973: 638) and as a very real and pervasive force of production. Of course, such production requires human labour, but it also emerges autonomously with its own agency. Thus, it embodies subjective *and* algorithmic properties (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008; Uricchio, 2011; Van Dijk, 2011; Gómez Cruz & Meyer 2012).

Marx suggests a determining factor of how capital functions comes from the agencies labour sets in motion, not directly through labour time. (Marx, 1973: 636). In these terms, labour is not something embedded within production. Instead, it

functions as 'watchman and regulator' (Marx, 1973: 637). I argue the automatic, almost autonomous, creation of often interchangeable digital photographic images—linked by the interactions of users is one example of how photography redefines contemporary forces of production and social relations. Furthermore, the freed up labour time produced by the apparent automation of image making processes creates a space and capacity to impulsively make more and more images (Flusser, 2007; Uricchio, 2011; Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012). Through these reconfigured notions of production, I claim photography anticipates a new subjectivity. It does not do this by showing different pictures of things, but by how it organises and distributes information and by how this is then responded to.

My central argument is that Marx's notion of 'surplus', and specifically that of surplus-value, helps provide a way to understand the abundance of images we experience today (Marx, 1991). It allows us to treat photographs non-representationally and to examine their agency as being structured by their form of production. There is then, within my argument, a search for the apparent structural homology between surplus-value and the surplus images we currently experience.

Surplus-value and a new economy

Marx identified that there was a need for surplus-value within the process of production in order for capitalism to continue. He claimed that a surplus is revealed under conditions where there is no equality or balance between what a commodity costs to produce and what this commodity is then traded for. A surplus is formed when the costs of production are lower than the ultimate cost of exchange. Importantly, without creating a surplus capitalism will cease to function. Therefore, surplus is understood as one of the drivers of capital. I suggest this notion of surplus, and its relation to production and exchange, is reflected in how photographic images are currently made. Today, most photographs are made in anticipation of being shared, liked and valued. These kinds of interactions, or perhaps a more appropriate term would be transactions, help to boost reputations, relations and status. In short, they create a specific rendering of subjectivity.

In *Capital*, Marx described how use-value is present in the production of things. When things have a use there is a value attached to such usage. He also suggested it is perfectly possible for commodities to have both a use-value and a separate value. When a commodity is exchanged for the cost of its production, there is no creation of surplus-value; it is simply exchanged for the value of its production. The consequence of this kind of exchange is that money is not then converted into capital. Therefore, as I stated earlier, for capital to function there always needs to be surplus-value, which is realized within the commodity at the point of exchange. The process of creating surplus-value is generally understood as being simply a continuation of the production of value. Surplus-value is something extra added to a commodity and realized later when it is exchanged. It is not the overpricing of a commodity, nor is it a result of the consumer paying too much. It is determined at the point of production and, for Marx, was directly connected to the excess amount of the worker's labour used to produce capital.

In relation to how value is produced, for photography there are two possible positions to consider. Firstly, if photographs are understood as being commodities that are traded for money (for example in the art market or in the commercial sector), then like all commodities within capital, the laws of surplus-value should apply. For photography, the value of a photograph may well be connected directly to something other than the actual physical photograph or its production costs. For example, when what the image shows, i.e. its content, has some form of marketable value, this will be transferred to the photograph itself. Photographs of celebrities, depending on their current popularity, will likely command different prices. In this case, value is then 'reflexively determined' (Marx qtd in Žižek, 1989: 20; Žižek, 2006: 106).

Clearly not all photographs enter into or become part of the system of monetary exchange. Therefore, a second position considers how the everyday photographic images we produce are not often or usually exchanged for money. Instead, they are part of a new economy of interaction and information exchange; one that converts a status update, a like or a comment into a new and different form of surplus-value. In this sense I claim photographic images are intrinsic to dematerialised

labour, not at the point of their production, which may well be understood through a more traditional reading of the concrete labour process, but at a further stage; a stage when they are abstractly, distributed and shared. For surplus-value to operate within photography an additional process is embedded into the overall production of images, which is presupposed during the concrete labour-power of production. This is how photographs correspond directly to new forms of knowledge and information exchange, not to the traditional processes of manufacturing and selling. Such a correspondence is also connected to how abstract labour is embedded into photography. Here, photographic labour can be understood as something of a social imperative, a task that must be completed in order to sustain both an experience and photography itself.

Today, the circulation of photography is dispersed and distributed, and its method embodies duplication and repetition. These processes contribute to the ways images can be experienced as commodities in another form. However, our contemporary experience of photographic images is not like our consumption of food or other material commodities. Instead, photographic images are experienced in a similar fashion to how we encounter an environment (Burgin, 2009). They operate through time and movement, through associations and connections. They are a connected multiplicity, linking to the familiar and signaling the register of repetitions and duplications. They are descriptive not because they show the recognizable shapes of objects, but in how their form latently describes and expresses the terms of production in a new economy of information exchange. In late capitalism, this form of production takes a position that dominates, influences and colours all others (Marx, 1973).

The limits of representation

By approaching photography as a form of production and distribution, another perspective emerges from which we can understand photographs. This is one that situates photographs at the discursive limits of representation and means photography is actualized by its own failure to represent. Despite appearing to have the potential to impartially and mechanically record the world, photography

consistently fails to do so. It is this negation of truly successful representation that sustains and defines photography. By understanding photography in this way the fundamental but usually hidden excesses of photographic images become apparent. If photography fails to represent, representation itself must be one of its central questions. However, it is not a question that should be framed in terms of how photographic likeness or similarity operates. Instead, it should set out to challenge how representation itself is structured through a configuration of processes and systems, of flows of information. This means we experience photographs not only as visual pictures but also as units of data, as expressions of rhythms or as interconnected patterns.

In this sense, once we stop reflecting on photography as only making representations of things, photographs can be seen as the expression of a new economy. This is because, when they are seen as depictions of things in the world, the force photographs have in structuring the world becomes less and less obvious. It becomes hidden behind thoughts and ideas about meaning and intention, which appear to be embedded into images. This distraction happens at the point when we ignore the formal nature of the photograph and focus exclusively on its content. In doing this, suddenly the photograph itself disappears. We are left with a somewhat imperfect mimetic, an image of some thing or other. However, photography approached via this non-representational position becomes a more dynamic and an even more interesting object to think through conceptually. To be clear, I make no claim that the visual image is no longer important. Photographs continue to show things. Fundamentally, my argument offers a way to challenge the dominance of the visual.

Of course, a problem for photography is that it has always been overdetermined. Its ontology is, historically, problematic. There can be little doubt it operates within symbolic and imaginary domains, but a symbolic and imaginary understanding of photography never fully accounts for what photography does or how it functions. The apparent static nature of representational objects and their emphasis on the visual has the effect of making photography appear to be

fixed, even though cultural contexts and meanings alter what photographs show us. Fundamentally, photography appears unchanged and unchallenged. But with a non-representational approach to its study, photography can become more experiential. This helps explicitly expose its properties as part of a continual process; the incessant production of images. It is this *in motion* nature of photography that directly relates back to Marx's own use of the dialectical method, whereby capital exists and is described as a process and not a static thing (Harvey, 2010: 12).

A non-representational approach allows photography to be theorized differently. It helps frame questions that ask why and how photographs exist rather than ones that interrogate what photographs depict. Historically, photography has tended to be particularised by its subject matter. This resulted in defining what a photographic image is by examining and attempting to explain it by what it shows. As stated earlier, even theoretical approaches to the materiality of photographs (see Edwards & Hart, 2004) retain a certain sense or relation to the visual. But I claim this is a false unification. The extensive examination of the visual content of photographs, or even the relationship of object to image, consistently fails to reveal core aspects to what photography is or does. If we were to cut up the human body, we would not find anything that equates to the human subject; in a similar way, looking more deeply into visual appearances does not reveal very much about photography.

Certainly, when examined in terms of production, exchange, movement and circulation, photography appears to be constitutive of a very different multi-agential force. Thus, what photographic images do and what value they have extends beyond being an expression of the categories used to define what they show. An example of this can be seen in how photographs of a specific subject matter can elicit a global response and reaction. However, this is not because an image depicts a scene realistically according to prevailing conventions. In this context one might cite, amongst many possible examples, the torture images that emerged from Abu Ghraib prison or the images of Syrian child Alan Kurdi, whose body was found washed up

on a Turkish beach. The standard response is to consider images such as these as documentary evidence of an event, or to view them as a reliable and concise visual summary of what happened. Against this view, I argue these photographs offer something more, a hidden surplus-value. It is this surplus that offers the possibility of exposing something of representation; something hidden from our conventional understanding of a photograph and of photography.

Photographic excess

In the above examples, I suggest their surplus should be understood as how they are *more than* photographs. This means there is something which exceeds their being as simply photographic images of things or events. Of course, the logic of the signifier and the symbolic order is embedded into a representational reading of photographs. I would, however, suggest there is an excess in how these kinds of images relate to an infinite temporality. Their meaning is conveyed as much by how they proliferate, how they duplicate and how they disseminate as it is by what they depict. In fact, their pervasiveness can result in them becoming almost invisible. We might speak about them as powerful images, which have an effect at a specific time, but their force is linked to such things as the number of people who have seen or reacted to them rather than what they portray. Today, photographs are infinitely situated across a network of screens and devices, making them distinctively different from how photographs have been previously materialised.

A constitutive part of the conditions of production is how the photographic image contributes toward a transformation of late capitalist subjectivity. This is not to say the photograph records the transformation, but to state that a photograph embodies the transformation.

Of course, there are many lines of argument that could assess, critique or contextualise the images from Abu Ghraib. We might, for example, politically question the circumstances depicted. We might also question the desire to photograph the conditions depicted at all. What these images show are not circumstances that are hidden from society, rather they explicitly show what we know happens but that we do not wish to have confirmed actually takes place. When such images are widely shared, distributed and discussed what is traumatic is how

the usually unseen has become seen. A further component of our distress is the realisation that such depictions have apparently escaped containment, through an act of sharing, such that they are rampantly embedding themselves into our everyday perception.

Algorithmic photography and contemporary experience

Algorithmic processes, which govern how photographic images are distributed, contribute to the structuring of contemporary perception. Algorithms order, organise and distribute data into different media across a virtual environment. They channel data into image and amalgamate interactions, tags, likes, comments and retweets. This process pays little or no attention to what images show. Instead, it functions recursively, accumulating and aggregating data. It also embeds itself back into the data. And in this way, we gain access to the most popular, the most liked, the most retweeted forms. Most troubling is that these often appear to be empirically and naturally selected.

How photographic images are exchanged and shared is intrinsic to a new information economy: an economy that trades with experiences rather than material commodities and is determined by abstract labour forces rather than concrete ones. For clarity, I understand photography as being part of a process responsible for the transformation of a range of different experiences. I make deliberate use of the word *experience* rather than the philosophical term *event* (Badiou, 2005; Žižek, 2014), because events are recognized reflexively in their opening up of truth (Badiou, 2005: xii). This means we cannot at any specific moment observe or photograph the event. Events are something we can only understand as happening after they have occurred. For Badiou, an event is a rupture in the perceived continuity of order; it is my argument that one of the possible instruments of making such a rupture is photography itself. But photography does not observe the event in the present. The event happens later, after photography (again we can easily understand the Abu Ghraib images in these terms).

In keeping with my non-representational approach and my use of the notion of surplus, I claim photography transforms experience into event. This is done not only through what it depicts to us visually, but by adding some form of excess or surplus

to experience. It does this through the processes of production and distribution, how photographs are made and then shared. These processes provide continuity between labour and pleasure. Photography appears to perfectly combine these, so there appears to be little or no division between them. In the connected world of the Internet we do not value experiences by what we recall of them; we value them through consideration and anticipation of how much effort is taken to record them and the subsequent impact of sharing them. Such anticipation is manifested in the choreography of life for the camera, the most obvious form being the 'gesture' of the selfie image (Frosh, 2015).

It appears the structuring of experience through photography does not ever deliver a form of truth. Instead, it brings into being a means to gauge and throttle a particular value. In the crudest terms, we can measure something of an experience's value directly through photography and its interactions. It follows that within a society dominated by images, photography is a socially necessary or useful activity, which transforms experiences. This then returns us to the question, what actually creates this insatiable demand for photographic images?

The distracting rhythm of photography

As with Marx's analysis of commodity exchange where the creation of need is critical, a new demand for images has come from websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and the internet in general. But in meeting this demand photography continues, more intensely, to obscure the collective relations and forces of labour and work behind a veneer of individual creativity and enjoyment. One of the results of this obfuscation is, as I have indicated, a new late capitalist subjectivity. This subjectivity emerges at a point where work and enjoyment appear to coincide (Žižek, 2016: 488). This new subjectivity is located within a society transitioning from the prohibition of enjoyment to one which now demands it (McGowan, 2014; Ahmed, 2010). Against this general backdrop of a life without boredom or restriction, labour and enjoyment now appear imperceptibly joined together. What emerges is a complex, non-binary and fundamentally uncertain subject who seeks out different forms of release. In order to escape from depression and 'nervous hyperactivity' (Žižek, 2016), this subject becomes attracted to the

mundane. This often takes the form of watching YouTube videos, which show people doing everyday things such as unboxing products or chores like cleaning their cars (Žižek, 2016). Perhaps the over-production of repetitive, duplicate images experienced as a ubiquitous and everywhere photography functions in a similar way; distracting from the otherwise 'frantic daily rhythms' (Ibid) of late capitalist social relations. What this indicates is a reality shaped not only from representation but also from numerous and distracting processes. This move signals a different intentionality for photography, away from being a recorder of things and towards becoming a distraction, a process or a rhythm in itself. It should not be approached as a discrete object of study, but as a process of relational forces that operates not unlike the way Marx described the function of capital. However, this still does not fully explain the apparent need and desire to take so many photographs.

In Mette Sandbye's article 'It has not been – it is: the signaleptic transformation of photography', photography is described as 'process, presence, and bodily "affect"' (Sandbye, 2016: 105). Presence and being present are understood as different modes, which are then photographically mediated. Taking photographs and immediately sharing them is part of a presence/present mode of photography. What this brings forth is an interpellation of a different type of photographic subjectivity. A rudimentary example of this is when swiping through images on a mobile device. Through this very process we become activated and entwined in photography's relational structure. Our demand for there to be another image after every swipe creates two imbricated cycles. In one cycle an infinite amount of photographic images supplies our demands; in the other we swipe continuously in order to satisfy a curious and unending desire. Clearly, there are other complex processes at work here (for example, the interactions of databases, the algorithms of selection and the interactions of other users), but an unfulfilled and infinite desire shapes the structure of photography as it is experienced today.

In thinking about photography anew we should take account of how it embodies a form of production; about how it is deployed through certain technologies; and how, within its processes of distribution, it creates new forms of social relations. It would be wrong to simply assume that the visual component

of a photograph is directly responsible for these. In fact, the visual in photography is really a fixed point and a distracting one. At a basic level of interpretation, photographic appearances do not address the appearance of something. What they indicate is that there may be something else behind the appearance. The dynamic relations and rhythms of photography, the extent of its possibilities as a form, require a more penetrating perspective. This should take into account the changing relationship between productive forces, technology and social relations, because these help to shape subjectivity and society in new ways.

The rendering of desire

At this point, I wish to return and consider briefly an alternative critique of photography's representational aspects. The visual surface of photographs inevitably appears to embody a lost object (Barthes, 1984). Through a failure to realise and to replace what is not there, we then continue to move from photograph to photograph. In this way, we confront on one failure after another; one image after another. This simply returns us to a function of representations. However, one of the most important questions for photography is not *what* it represents but the form of *how* it represents. This question of how is less embedded into representation and more firmly rooted into production. The fantasy of being able to represent something that will almost certainly become lost is fundamental to the spread, popularity and wider interest in photography and photographs. This false promise of the photograph is essentially that it will somehow provide an object of satisfaction, or a replacement of the lost object. Photography renders both a desire and a false fulfilment that carries on infinitely, driven by the disappointment embedded within it. The infinite photograph is probably best articulated in any Google image search, wherein what is returned are pages and pages of more and more images. But it is image itself that constitutes the gap between objective reality and the symbolic order. Therefore, what unites all photographs is a failure to adequately represent, while desire drives a need to address such a failure.

Desire, as it is manifested within capitalism, is organised in order to create subjects who will try to understand the problem of desire itself. In photography the drive to image occurs because subjects appear to want or desire to be photographed.

However, this process is not some natural desire contained within the subject, but a projected desire onto a subject perceived to require photography. There is no object out there waiting and wanting to be photographed: instead there is a photographic desire that substantiates the world. Perhaps, we come close, in this sense, to viewing all the world as being in some way photographic. However, what is significant is how photography and the structure of capitalistic desire merge. It is of no small coincidence that terms we can apply to photography – such as authenticity, fantasy or satisfaction – are also terms that readily apply to capitalism. Additionally, if what drives capitalism is the accumulation of capital, then money becomes the reason and expression of capitalist success. This reconfigures the commodity–money–commodity formula into that of money–commodity–money, thereby money becomes a means in and for itself. Could a parallel be drawn to illuminate what is currently driving the volume of photographic images we produce, such that we now experience an accumulation of image for image?

As photography is unable to absolutely resolve searching for something, its failure necessitates a form of re-invested additional action. This is where image, like capital accumulation, becomes something in and for itself and we experience image for image. A responsive photographic behaviour is produced, which requires acting *as if* photography can at some point fulfil what is lacking. In this sense, photographic actors, with their repetitive actions – photographing their food, themselves or their cats – are inscribed into a normal process of behaviour. All the while, the next image, and if not that one then the next one, promises to deliver some form of unmediated experience. This very possibility of image-qua-image happens only when social relations (most obviously exemplified by a digital network of interconnected images) are determined in a particular way. This suggests, as I have been arguing, that photography is not a disconnected object that should be interrogated or examined in isolation and only for what it shows us. Rather, photography is a propagating, distributing and self-replicating process, which is simultaneously both visual and non-visual, material and non-material. Not only does it show us a visual version of the world, it also configures certain responses and behaviours within the world. As I have stated, paying attention to the visual acts as

an obstacle to realising other engagements with what photography does. Thus, I claim, considering photography as a multidimensional object of study opens up an experiential way of thinking about the world, not just a visual one. However, it does not open up the world of appearances – reality – to anything other than a mediated and potentially superficial experience.

What is crucial is the very appearance of some form of accessibility. It is essential for photography that, to an extent, reality appears to be understandable and reachable. The real frustration is that it is not. It is apparent that today the terms of this frustration are often ignored. Improvements in imaging technology are one example whereby a claim is made to be able to produce more realistic images. Furthermore, I suggest the absence of being able to *really* experience reality animates a kind of drive to photograph it. As Freud argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2015), the human subject is defined through a constitutive loss. Photography, like the Freudian subject, is determined by a satisfaction that comes from repeating this loss, by the reiteration of one failure after another. I argue the potential, and ultimate realisation, of that failure that drives photographic representational practice. The success of photography therefore becomes dependent upon its ability to fail to adequately represent. In this way, I claim photography is situated at the very limits or, potentially, even beyond the limits of representation. It satisfies our desire for images by how it constitutes itself as the obstacle of its own efforts. In other words, the only satisfaction it actually achieves is ultimately created by the continual repeating of the failure of representation. What is important is not the final outcomes – the photographs themselves – but the means by which such outcomes are not achieved; in this journey failure is written into the process. This is, of course, also the structure of desire for the commodity in capital.

The surplus of experienced reality

Another critique of a photograph's visual surface can be offered if we consider the limits of its representational properties. I suggest we can learn something of photographic ontology through its point of failure. A printed black and white photograph might be understood as *more* than shades of tone printed onto paper.

It signifies something by its interaction with light and shade and the shapes it reveals. Usually, we might claim an image is a photograph because it has a set of properties: it freezes time and portrays objects, people or places (Wells, 2010: 1). It is also possible to invert this and state any images with these functions do this because they are photographs. This is the function of the photographic. However, what happens if photographs can only be determined to be photographs because they are not the reality they depict? Understood in this way, photography forces a minimal distance from reality and also from representation. The photographic is then a surplus of experienced reality because it is neither reality nor an adequate representation of reality.

Photographs may be, at some level, appear structurally limited by the symbolic. Although, they become seemingly unlimited when they are placed within a horizontal network, as experienced by the Internet. In the network, images hide their symbolic determination through their overuse – in the guise of the repetitions of sunsets, selfies and Selena Gomez (the image of Selena Gomez was rated as the most popular Instagram image of all time in 2016 (*The Huffington Post*, 2016) – such that representation becomes the only thing we think we are experiencing. Simultaneously, the returning kernel of the real blinds us to its own reappearance and maintains its own distance from any symbolic equivalence. Therefore, we cannot know photographs are *real representations*. Instead they are real, and they are representational independently. I argue endless streams of photographs are a universal response to an impossible and radical unknowability of experienced reality. As a consequence of there being an abundance of photographic images, our perception becomes photographic in its form. Any attempt at unmasking reality is a false goal: we cannot look behind photographic images to find reality. The process of examining what lies behind the manifest content of the symbolic moves toward the unknowable, or even the unthinkable. Instead of pursuing this, it is best (and here I borrow from Freud) to consider the question as to why the symbolic exists in the form it does.

Fundamental to a Lacanian understanding of signification is the notion of the gap, a divide between signifier and signified. The gap is what structures the signifier

and signified. As photographs show us things that are ostensibly no longer there, in some capacity they appear to occupy or fill in the gap. In this way the world is perceived as somehow incomplete through a sense of presence and absence. In capitalism the commodity is seen as the means to bridge such incompleteness. Although commodities are in some way present to us, they nevertheless still ultimately fail to eliminate subjective absence completely. While capitalism is structured differently from signification, it nonetheless presents the very same failings as an absence of presence. Absence is inserted into the subject, through the failure of signification to deliver on its promise of providing access to the signified. The world is then mediated through an impossibility of resolving absence with presence.

Conclusion

If photography operates at an intersection of two forces – of labour and enjoyment – undefined by either one or the other, oscillating between them, how might we understand these? On a representational level, a surplus escapes the photographic image. This ultimately results in a sense of lack and the desire to repeat the search for what has escaped. As I have outlined above, in representational terms, I suggest that what is excess or surplus in the image is the very nature of photography itself. Here we might say that there is something especially photographic about photographs. This, as I have claimed, is the fundamental failure to adequately represent. It is at the non-representational level where surplus-value emerges through the concrete and abstract processes of production, duplication and repetition. As with surplus-value in the commodity, which is created at the point of production, the processes of the network–duplication, sharing and interaction–are already presupposed within everyday photographs. Shown in their ability to infinitely replicate, everyday photographic images become the casual apparatus of everyday representation. This form of representation is now routinely produced and circulated. The very logic of photographic production and duplication explicitly maps the ways that both early and late capitalist production functions. In its mechanical reproductive mode, photography is the production line of images, the idealised form of modernist image making. In late capitalism, photography again

shares the properties of production by the circulation of abstracted emotional values. Photographs are not embodied as the prosthetics of memory; they are statements and enunciations of a differently speaking subject. With their infinite supply, and their continuous distorting and ameliorating, they resist static interpretations and appear to gain plasticity. How they reform, reproduce and proliferate is governed and shaped by users, objects, relational databases, software commands and algorithmic processes. These do not rely exclusively on what we visually see, only on how we respond or interact.

There is, of course, an argument that would rightly find something paradoxical in taking away from photography its representational function. What are photographs if they are not in some way images of something? However, the extent to which we are embedded into the production, distribution and consumption of photography is what forms the basis of a changed and new late capitalist subjectivity. It is this aspect of photography that is largely under theorised. It would be reasonable to suggest that the relationship we have with everyday photographic images is constitutive of a shift in wider social-relations. As with Marx's concern over the conditions of industrial factories and their machines, which produced commodities, the digitalisation of life also requires new attention. There are no actual factories producing everyday photographic images, because their production is dispersed amongst the population. As I have indicated, these photographic workers are engaged in the overlapping modes of enjoyment and labour. In terms of distribution and consumption, the points of contact and interaction with photographic images are often via the horizontal network of the Internet and the screen. This general shift, from out of the factory into the abstract spaces of the digital, must necessarily have an impact on class, gender and family relations. And it will also create changes to the intricate mechanisms of daily life. Of course, photography is not alone in being responsible for this. However, it is one of the most significant forms of the digital. Photography is also one of the determining mediums that interfaces the world, it is therefore useful as an instrument to help explain the new conditions it helps provoke. In its most basic formulation, much everyday photography masks an antagonism to itself. In that – despite its

visual content appearing to have the potential to be ordinary, random and even disposable – it is most usually highly structured, organised and systematically reproduced. This has the effect of creating a certain indifference, over familiarity and passivity. What photographs depict visually is in abundance; there is always another version of the same image. However, what these images also do is contribute to the curation of our own lives. They become part of the commodity story of the late capitalist subject and advance an opaque mediation of the self as both a subject and object. This process is not only reliant on what is shown visually, it also needs substantial interactions; it requires the social relations of the network to sustain and maintain it. The currency or value generated relies not so much on content, but more on the responses that can be elicited from humans and computer processes. What is critical is not what we are showing each other, but the fact that someone somewhere is looking and interacting.

Perhaps then, one final paradox to this need for looking and interacting is that today large numbers of digital photographs are taken but never looked at. These digital files are downloaded from cameras and stored on hard drives but then never opened. They remain forever as code, as data objects: never to be materialised by software into anything resembling the visual. In this way, they fail to exert the forces associated with the representation of reality. Images in code form have no sense of composition, no logic of framing or of depth of field or any other elements associated with photography. Their surfaces cannot be read: they are neither a window onto the world nor a mirror held up to the world. Instead, these unrealised digital images express another potentiality. They are quite literally a part of photography's surplus and inevitably within them labour and enjoyment are elided. I argue, the shift they indicate is part of the wider move from making, manufacturing, buying and selling – the activities of mercantile capitalism – to the liking, scrolling, swiping and status updates of late capitalist subjectivity. We are no longer engaged in labour to produce things in the traditional sense, instead we work to show our enjoyment, to indicate our mood and to declare our interests. These unseen digital files are only one aspect of this process. Yet, they are the

crudest form of de-materialised image, which then require databases, algorithms and software to actualise them.

The de-materialised digital image is an abstraction from photography, and while all images are at some point de-materialised, these leftover images are especially indicative of the underlying structures of digital photography. In this state they point directly toward photography's own conditions of production and thereby pose a threat to photography's representational paradigm (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013: 25). They are also an expression of surplus-labour and enjoyment left as an unrealised, but ultimately passive force.

We should consider what value these images have when they are made and kept but ultimately remain in the form of data. Žižek offers one possible answer when he uses the term 'interpassivity' (2008: 144) as the other side of interactivity. In this state, the object takes away any subjective reaction. When images are kept with a possibility of being viewed later, the awareness that they *are* kept provides a kind of satisfaction. The computer is understood as looking at the images on our behalf. Here, I have modified and updated Žižek's argument from *The Plague of Fantasies* (2008: 145), where he suggests films recorded on a VCR are stored for viewing. The VCR in a way watches the movies in place of them being watched in reality. The VCR is the 'big Other,' of symbolic registration (Žižek, 2008: 145). Žižek develops interpassivity as a form of enjoying through the other. However, it is equally indicative of the overwhelming mediation of experience. This over-saturation of representations means we can only respond to them by a further proxy. This means we are ultimately forced to distance ourselves, because we cannot be confronted by the scale of the task of having a direct response to each one.

Implicit in this is how excess images diminish all image value by an inherent over supply. There are, quite simply, more images than we have time to look at. There is a photographic gridlock. But there is another possible conclusion; these images are also the effect of a voracious desire to photograph and share our day-to-day experiences. In these vast quantities, they can be considered as the residues of a late-capitalist discourse, which motivates a subject who passes over and interacts with

so many information flows but may be barely conscious of its detail. In this analysis, the volume of image data represents new modes of being and behaviour. In a similar fashion the likes an image attracts, the Tinder matches achieved and the re-tweets that propagate the Internet are all an accumulation of different kinds of data interactions and a manifestation of surplus-value. They are not a goal in themselves; they are part of an ever-expanding self-reproductive process, which shapes responses and behaviours. The significance for subjectivity is how it moves from image itself to abstracted behaviours and processes. In the extreme, it no longer matters what we see, intuit or interact with, only that we do so directly or via a proxy. In this we realise the surplus-value presupposed at the point of production. This also creates a shift from the binds of representation and sets up questions as to the veracity of subjectivity and experience. It is within representation that the subject was and is established as a 'rational being capable of objectifying the world', and the knowable world is limited only to a form of rational representation (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013: 26). Non-representational thinking provides new states of being not defined by the binary of image and object. The current period of abstract production is obfuscated by a labour process mediated by enjoyment and pleasure. The unceasing demand to make and consume everyday photographic images appears to satisfy a very different human need – not the need to remember, recall, record or document – the need to express our failure at, and frustration with, not being able to express anything at all. Instead, the unknowable world becomes an unlimited and interminable flow of surplus image, image, image.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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