Image-World

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1. On Display

Today, we strive to squeeze all information into a headline or a tweet, and our opinions are invariably condensed into 'likes'. Similarly, there is a generalised urge to make everything visual, so that it can all be seen at a glance. Putting everything *on display*, this constant showing, can but remind us that our world is "essentially advertising" (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 122). Exhibition value[1] takes precedence, so much so that things are only deemed valuable or interpretable when they are actually seen, when they are visually presented. Our society has rightly been dubbed the 'exhibition society', characterised by a striking overabundance of images[2] and the excessive inflation of the iconic.

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[1] Walter Benjamin noted that "In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line." 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In W. Benjamin (1938/1968). *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. p. 225.

[2] We must not forget, as J. Winston indicated (referring to a text by J. Good) that "every two minutes today, we take as many photos as all of

The image has now diversified into an infinite number of different types. In this visual-digital world, the non-visible, that which cannot be formulated visually, now seems to be largely irrelevant and worthless. New links between the mundane and the ubiquitous have begun to arise. In these times, the issue is not that images play a key role in narrating events per se, but rather that they form an intrinsic part of what's going on.

Since the late 19th century, when photography let the world be seen *as an exhibition*,[3] we have sought to live, as Calvino (1953/1985) put it, "in the most photographable way possible" (p. 43). Today, given the extreme proliferation of devices for visual documentation and online applications for sharing images, our surroundings take on, more than ever, what Kracauer termed "a photographic face" (1927/1992, p. 433).

An endless stream of tools, apps and filters are designed to make it easier for our things and our faces to become merely *suitable* as images. These are two sides of the same coin: our image-making devices, our cameras, simultaneously verify and reject an experience (Sontag, 1973/2005), or they limit it, at least, to what is essentially a search for the photogenic.

To claim that we *see photographically*[4] is also to acknowledge cameras not so much as tools for remembering, but rather as devices for ensuring that pictures of things overshadow (without erasing) the things themselves, in an increasingly clear predominance of the technological record over our own gaze. This is part of a broad crisis in the relationship, always a bodily relationship, between our eyes and our surroundings, in search of an experience that is almost

humanity did in the 1800s." In 'Photography in the Age of Facebook', *Intersect, 6(*2), 2013.

[3] See the article by Timothy Mitchell (1989). 'The World as Exhibition'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 31*(2), 217-236.

[4] I borrow this expression from Edward Weston, who uses it as the title for his text 'Seeing Photographically'. In A. Trachtenberg (ed.) (1980). *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven: Leete's Island Books.

constantly mediated by the screen. In these times, we have gone from seeing to viewing, from optics to visionics.

An infinite number of cameras continuously record everything, even if there are no human eyes watching the footage – their purpose, in most cases, is the mere storing of visual data, or the automated filtering out thereof. Such phenomena mark the arrival of an era of purely technical, automated vision, an act of seeing with no *human* gaze.

We desperately want to have images of everything, and we constantly try to give all of our experiences a visual form. These images, however, must always have a mirror-like quality if they are to capture our attention or move us, as demonstrated by the pictures of tragedies and humanitarian catastrophes - we only feel disturbed by them if we can see ourselves or our loved ones reflected in them.

There is perhaps an *excessive* presence of images today, which some associate with a primitivisation in thought patterns, i.e. the predominance of a "mosaic approach"[5] to thinking. This approach simultaneously flashes many disjointed elements in front of our eyes, almost always leaving out the more nuanced syntactic operators. Undoubtedly, nearly everything on social media shows parataxis: everything is presented on the same plane, stringed together, with no end in sight. All of these things claim to be equally valuable, wrapped up, as they are, in the bright and breezy novelty of this non-hierarchical ordering.

The direct link between the eye and the camera has now been applied to a wide range of wearable devices, such as the intimidating Google Glass or GoPro-style cameras, which record what we see from a subjective, first-person perspective, turning our experiences into something like a 3D videogame. These visual recording devices are hands-free: you no longer need to hold the camera, because it is attached to the body. In fact, the camera wants to be the body,

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[5] The notion of the 'mosaic approach' is discussed in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1962, p. 41-42 (and throughout).

it moves in sync with the body, and the body in turn becomes its 'tripod', its base.

Additionally, the merging of the camera and the communicational device, i.e. in mobile phones, led to the emergence of a new visual communication model, based on the combination of the image and textual language (Rubinstein, 2005). Even so, the image will always take precedence.

By treating the world like this, i.e. as an image, digital communication has become actively included within icon-based models. We chat with more and more visual elements, which are almost always pre-designed for us, and we frequently interact by using graphics selectable from a set, often articulating our conversations with visual alphabets.[6]

Certain applications have played a key role in the image's rise to dominance, as is typical of online communication. Sometimes no text is needed at all, mostly because these apps were actually conceived for smartphones and not the 'typewriters' with which we often associated the first computers.

"Say It with Stickers" was the slogan for a recent ad campaign by a telecoms company. The emoji syndrome, we might call it, is something we suffer from more and more intensely. Little wonder that the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji was the Oxford Dictionaries 'Word' of the Year for 2015.[7]

Debray (1992/1994) noted that "Kodak was to the image what Luther was to the letter" (p. 226) in order to make a thought-provoking comparison between the socialisation of the production of images, i.e. today's 'we are all photographers', in relation to the 'we are all priests' of Lutheranism (ibid.). And given the fact that photography is no longer solely for professionals, the flipside of this is that we are now all obliged to partake in it, we are 'enslaved' by it to a certain extent, as manifested in our desperate incessant snapping.

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[6]　See Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'The Summer of 'Pokemon GO'', *DiEM25*, 12th September 2016. [https://diem25.org/the-summer-of-pokemon-go/].

[7]　'The Oxford Word of the Year 2015 is . . .' [http://blog.oxforddictionaries. com/2015/11/word-of-the-year-2015-emoji/].

Even in the mid-1960s there were still those who resisted photography, as seen in this testimony noted by Bourdieu: "members of the upper class refuse to see it as an object worthy of enthusiasm or passion" (1965/1990, p. 67). This claim is of course unthinkable today, since we would never hear anybody stating, at least in high-consumption societies, that taking photos "isn't for the likes of us" (p. 16).

The slogan 'we are all photographers' entailed being a photographer *all* the time. It was the next step after the desktop phase, when we would connect to the Internet by using a computer in our office or home, followed thus by the phase of absolute portability via our tech devices. This portability means that the creation of images is also subjected to the condition of being 'always on', constantly connected, a continuous act of online sharing.

We are now in the era of personal live streaming, the day-to-day broadcasting on social media, in real time, of our lives, and we are beginning to envisage, furthermore, how live video content will become increasingly important in online social contexts.

The growing presence of videos in social media newsfeeds turns them into a multiple, simultaneous reality show. The Internet is gradually succumbing to the logics of television (Derakhshan, 2016), shifting its focus away from the written word, and instead giving precedence to a relentless flow of sequences of moving images.

This constant recording, or taking photographs of almost any given thing or moment, leads to the increased overlap between seeing images and producing them (in fact, today, the devices that take images are almost always the same ones that play them back). Thus, the oft-repeated logic of the world-as-image, the world as representation, happily assimilates into this new context.

Our desire to be permanently observed encourages us to come up with 'micro' forms of 'pseudo-events',[8] i.e. situations created with the express purpose of their being photographed and shared. These small, 'fake' formulations might provide the reason or opportunity

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[8] For more on this term, see Daniel J. Boorstin (1962/1992), *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, New York: Vintage Books.

to create a visual record which can then be shared online, thus ensuring our continued presence *on stage*.

Traditionally, we have assumed that photography, rather than corresponding to one given vision of the world, in fact helps organise it in a particular way. This is based on the argument, which we would accept, that all photographs not only describe but also codify reality in some way, always encouraging the naturalisation of certain forms of seeing and looking. Of course, it cannot be denied that photography is a way to "achieve symbolic or imaginary possession over reality" (Robins, 1996, p. 157), as an instrument therefore of power and, ultimately, as a "defense against anxiety" (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 5). But when the act of taking pictures becomes constant, as is the case today, and almost like a reflex, this act might have more to do with the visual technology used than any intentional and subjective shaping of the field of perception. The technical aspect predominates, pushing aside the user's possible aims to shape the world, and so the intentions of the device itself come to the fore. The sniper-like photographer, taking calm and measured shots, has given way to the more trigger-happy machine-gunning photographer. We find it curious that, on smartphones, they still use an imitation of the old shutter sound to let us know, as Rubinstein (2005) has noted, that a device, which is now never just a camera, is taking a photograph.

These photographic 'machine guns', these quickfire devices that are our smartphones, give us the sensation that taking a photograph is, ultimately, an act of reiteration, that there will always be hundreds of other images of whatever it is that we are pointing our device's lens at. As such, perhaps we should accept that our picture will always be a *second*-hand vision, invariably a quotation, even if this quotation is not intentional or even aware of its source. Therefore, the fundamental issue is no longer acknowledging, or otherwise, that 'everything exists to be photographed', but rather to recognise the existence of a 'photographic world', a world-as-image, which comes before any impression that we might capture of it. This could explain the interest, for example, in certain post-photographic

practices, such as those creative, appropriationist acts that make use of online image banks or the all-encompassing systems of photographic documentation such as Google Earth.[9] Many of these proposals reside somewhere between acknowledging the all-embracing, comprehensive character of the worldwide photographic archive, and the continued prevalence, in the digital sphere, of new forms of *acheiropoieta*, those ancient representations made without any intervention by the human hand or eye. Today they have been replaced by the automatic gaze of the satellites and vehicles that provide the GPS services with their images, or by the CCTV and security systems that are *watching* all the time.

In the past, not everything was deemed worthy of being photographed. The act of taking a photograph used to indicate that whatever was happening, or what was in front of us, deserved to be documented, that it had a special worth. But with the proliferation of digital cameras, this maxim - i.e. that you should be a discerning photographer, that you should only photograph the exceptional (that which should be remembered for its particular solemnity, for its being an especially important or precious moment; in other words, something that does not come around every day) – no longer makes sense. In the digital age, the term 'photographable' is now somewhat redundant, given the radical shift towards the mundane that has meant that photography is now irreversibly dominated by the *ordinary*.

Photography is not necessarily associated anymore with special occasions, although, generally speaking, it is still a 'festive technique',[10] often deployed for documenting happy moments (above all when they are to be shared on social media, which only seems to be

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[9]   I addressed the relationship between the image and GPS services in the section 'Fotografía y geonavegadores' in *Prácticas artísticas e Internet en la época de las redes sociales* (2015). Madrid: Akal, pp. 241-251.

[10] According to Bourdieu, photography is a practice "so strongly associated with extraordinary occasions that it could be seen as a festive technique". 'The Cult of Unity and Cultivated Differences' in P. Bourdieu, et al. (1990), *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* [1965]. Cambridge: Polity Press. (English translation by Shaun Whiteside). p. 35.

for displays of joy and pleasure). There are still, of course, certain situations which have to be photographed, i.e. particular family milestones or events, as well as moments or places that we feel should be documented simply because that's what you do – for example, taking photographs is a must when visiting certain monuments or other tourist spaces, realised in the form of keepsake-photos, souvenir-photos or trophy-photos. We still succumb to the desire of obtaining our own versions of those images that have already been so widely reproduced, previously seen so many times, and which, finally, we can actually star in ourselves.

It has been said that Kodak was the first company to 'sell moments' – the expression 'a Kodak moment' became applicable to or even synonymous with any moment worthy of being remembered (Palmer, 2010, p. 160). And today, we can certainly say the same about the countless moments in our lives that we feel the need to photograph and share on social media: irrespective of their importance as unique events, we share them precisely because these are the kind of events that tend to be shared there. Whole lives are recorded snapshot-style, which shows how much we now imitate the representational behaviours that form the basis of the hugely powerful system of production within the prevailing 'social' or 'affects-based' capitalism.[11] Furthermore, given our willingness to follow its norms of articulation through images, this system is getting ever stronger.

2. Images of themselves

The claim that "a painting is a world; a photograph is *of* a world" (Cavell, 1979, p. 24) can no longer be true in all cases. With regards to digital photography, we cannot even make any assumptions about the observer's position in relation to the object represented. There

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[11]   For more on this term, see J. Martín Prada (2011). '¿Capitalismo afectivo?', *Exit Book: revista de libros de arte y cultura visual, 15,* 32-37.

are new technological tools that can work in ways very similar or identical to photography, but that produce completely synthetic images. Just because an image looks like a photograph, then, is no longer a guarantee that it has any true, direct relationship with a given element in the world of objects. Therefore, the claim that "the visual indicates, decorates, evaluates, illustrates, authenticates, distracts, but does not show" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 255), can surely be extended: the visual, above all, *shows itself*. Today, the image is increasingly an "image of itself" (ibid., p. 254), which can only be conceived as a fragment of the world, something both in the world and of it. The digital image is, above all, self-referential, and it always alludes, we could say, to the broad concept of *the visual* itself. Thus, we should move on from the question of what it means to *be a picture of*, unless this 'of' refers not to the object and subject represented, but rather to the issue of its provenance (who has sent it, why they shared it, etc.).

There is no filmed scene, according to Barthes (1961/1977), whose objectivity is not read as the very sign of objectivity. He was referring to the strong sense of denotation or "analogical plenitude" (p. 18) that, in his opinion, we get from a photograph. The analogue photograph was, essentially, proof that something was in front of the camera lens just when the shutter opened. Similarly, many years beforehand, Peirce (1894/1985) had noted that "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the object they represent" (p. 11). This is the idea of photography as the witness to a presence, much like the inscription on the back wall in *The Arnolfini Wedding* (1423): 'Johannes de Eyck fuit hic' ('Jan van Eyck was here'). As such, this idea works on the assumption that the photograph is the closest possible image to a real object, because it is the imprint or inscription of the light that the object gives off, another key concept in the development of the photograph in its role as a fetish.

Nevertheless, we are all aware that analogue photography has an irrefutable ability to assert many different kinds of fiction, and this is rooted in, precisely, its supposed direct link with *reality* (which is understood as 'the truth'). Furthermore, we tend to forget that, despite the similarity, what we see in a photograph is not what we see with our eyes. Firstly, the camera's gaze is cycloptic, non-human, and secondly, as Benjamin (1935/1968) put it, "evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye" (pp. 236-7).

In any case, the period that Barthes was referring to, above, is now over. In this age of the digital image, the observer must always bear in mind that digital technologies can entirely transform any image, or even create, out of thin air, something that looks exactly like a photo. Instead of taking for granted that there is a denotative link between a photograph and the world, we should cautiously assume that any given photograph is probably artificial, that it is unlikely to have a direct point of reference. We have to accept this 'unreality', which we could call the *disguise* of denotation, whose reference to or contrast with an external reality might well be inexistent. Ultimately, the computer screen is a seeing machine that is reluctant to attest to any kind of existence that resides outside of the same vision system that it belongs to.

Given that images have been freed from any necessary subjugation to a source, it is perhaps now more important than ever to look into how we believe in them. Derrida (2001/2015) stated that "it would be fascinating to analyze the system of *credit* in all the arts: how one believes a novel, certain moments of a theatrical representation, what is inscribed in painting and, of course, which is something else altogether, what film shows and tells us" (p. 27). It is worth emphasising here that the key question is no longer whether we believe, or not, in the image, but instead how it can (or rather how it seeks to) make us believe, its belief system, the ways in which this 'how' operates, as supported by representation. The issue of the supposed 'knowledge' that images can transmit has now been replaced by how 'credible' we find them to be, and this

is a necessary shift towards an analysis of the 'credit' with which we entrust them.

Whether in relation to these issues, or other ones, the fact of the matter is that we still talk about images, even if the term 'image' is perhaps no longer linked to the system of things that was typical of the *imago*. Nor has the term remained faithful, at all, to the idea that it must be a figure, a representation or something similar to something else. Quite the opposite: the best theses on the *death* of the image talk about the birth of "the visual" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 235), about a context in which the idea of the image would become diluted in a flowing, unstable environment, where nothing would appear to constitute an *imago*, but rather a purely visual *effect*. And the evolution from the video-based to the net-based culture served to intensify this situation, this immersion. We have gone, certainly, beyond the image, and we all now live incorporated into a system that is not so much of images but of image-discourses.

Despite this, we still use the term 'image' here, albeit in that sense, always *plural* (there needs to be an investigation into why there are only *images* whose multiplicity, as noted by Didi-Huberman (2016), "whether it be in conflict or connivance, resists any synthesis" (p. 65). As such, the *imago* is not necessarily a representation or an apparition (in line with the Romans' sense of *ghost*), and nor is it an echo (in the sense of the *resonance* of something real).

3. The New Forms of the Spectacular

Nietzsche asserted that the idea of decadence was connected to the loss of power to resist against the stimuli of the spectacle.[12] Following this critique, the link between society and the spectacle has been the object of constant attacks.

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[12] Nietzsche describes what he refers to as among "the most general types of decadence" as follows: "One loses one's power of resistance against stimuli, and comes to be at the mercy of accidents: one coarsens and

The logics of the spectacle, the spectacular, were defined by Debord (1967/2014) as part of the process of the coagulation of everything in human activity that had previously existed in a fluid state. These logics have actively colluded with the world of the commodity in order to take over all living experience, since the commodity entirely colonises social life. Since we are reduced to being consumers of illusions, it is no wonder that Debord insisted, again and again, on the link between the spectacle, understood as a place of false consciousness, and the reconstruction of a *material* form of the religious illusion (p. 6).

The spectacle was thus established as the essence and the very basis of society. This created two-way alienation, in which reality was understood as a by-product of the spectacle, and the spectacle, in turn, was taken to be *real*. The result is none other than the *distancing* of things by way of their representation. The spectacle, therefore, is a mediating form that does not act before our eyes but rather as "the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise" or, somewhat more graphically, the ruling order's "self-portrait" (ibid., p. 7).

However, if only out of caution, we should not forget our own *fatal* flaw: we often fall in love with these logics of spectacularisation, as noted, on so many occasions, by the theoreticians of the 'ecstatic' relations that are typical of the spectacular. These relations duly provide us with emotional, wondrous joy, caused by the dizzying rush of "stereotyped traits, unreal and recurrent" that so characterise them (Baudrillard, 1983/2001, p. 190). This spectacularisation was driven, above all, by the medium of television, which lives on, further intensified, in other forms and media. Yet spectacularisation was always spurred on by a somewhat ironic motivation, forced

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enlarges one's experiences tremendously". In *The Will to Power* (1967 translation): New York: Vintage Books (Random House). [Note: some English translations render "tremendously" here as "to a monstrous degree". See H. Siemens, 'Nietzsche on Productive Resistance' in H. Siemens, and J. Pearson, (2019). *Conflict and Contest in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, London/New York: Bloomsbury. p. 39).]]

upon us by the heteropathological addiction that we cannot shake off: "the perversion of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is as fascinating as catastrophe" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 72).

But of most interest here, with regards to the concept of the spectacle, is its visual essence, as the impetus or inclination to put things *on display*. Debord (1967/2014) regarded the spectacle as the heir of all the *weakness* of the western philosophical project, which he claimed was an understanding of activity dominated by the categories of *vision*. He described the spectacle as the 'vision' of a world that had been objectified, and as the transformation of the real world into images. In turn, these images become "real beings - figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior" (p. 6). The spectacle, in short, turns capital into an image, the result of over-abundance – capital is accumulated to such an extent that it becomes an image. Elsewhere in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle is defined as "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (p. 2).

A great deal has changed, though, since Debord's text was published in 1967. Firstly, his concept of the spectacle had a very restricted meaning, and was often applied to the 'mass media' and their usual forms of "news, propaganda, advertising, [and] entertainment" (1967/2014, p. 3). Today, however, spectacularisation clearly takes on a far wider range of forms, linked to an infinite number of new media that operate in vastly different ways to the traditional mass media. Similarly, the 'proletarianisation' of the world, in this age of information capitalism, can no longer be entirely attributed to the widespread separation between worker and product, or to the end of all direct personal communication between the producers, something which Debord considered in depth. In theory, this cannot really be regarded, anymore, as the main cause of the current processes that lead to increased precarity, since we now live in a world that is hyperconnected via personal devices for the accessing and broadcasting of information. Likewise, the idea of 'separation', so important in Debordian theory,

is not particularly useful when trying to understand today's new forms of spectacularisation, which are not quite so related with a fundamentally *unilateral* kind of communication (for Debord, we recall, the spectacle was "the opposite of dialogue" [p. 6], and he insisted on defining it as "a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned" [p. 4]). In contrast, the new forms of the spectacular tend to be participatory – today's increasingly common pseudo-events are actually carried out, experienced, by people who were previously just *informed* about them. This is an ongoing process that is steadily blurring the line between worker and consumer, as well as the old distinctions between production time and leisure time.

There has been another significant change in the new context of online participation, where everybody is a prolific producer and distributor of images: the world *displays itself,* it lets itself be seen. The world is not staged – instead, it would appear to stage itself, constantly. In other words, spectacularisation has been socialised, and expanded. Every moment of our lives, having been turned into images ready to be shared and circulated, aims for this widely-distributed condition, and so, every day, we all exert the alluring logics of the spectacular. Our life is no longer represented, but rather, we could say, *it represents itself,* crystallised in a multitude of sequences, of moments documented as an image. It's like when we talk about 'the world of the spectacle' when referring to producers, i.e. in the sense of a professional sector that is now, however, unspecified, since we all belong to it, to a greater or lesser extent.

In fact, many of the more critical stances in relation to the new forms of domination, among which we must mention some of the emerging artistic practices, are now attempting to present the Internet as a spectacle in itself (going against the idea of art just as an activity for producing works of art, i.e. for creating *other* spectacles). This distancing strategy (which perhaps turns the Internet and its processes into a kind of 'ready-made') has proven to be one of the best ways to reflect, in depth, upon the current conditions that are dictated by the state of hyperconnectivity in which we live.

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Despite this, the *making-visible* concept, typical of the logics of the spectacular, cannot be considered as separate from the constant attempts at simplification, at boiling things down to their most appealing features. In this sense, things have barely changed since the late 1960s. The control over the forms of *displaying*, as exerted by the economic interests behind the new industries of subjectivity, can still be characterised as follows: images must be clear, bright, striking, easily recognisable and enjoyable, and they must adhere to certain templates that immediately spark attraction. The image should not only be that which society can be and do, but also *what it should want to be*, and this requires straightforward and immediate identification. This has led to a context geared towards speed and simplification, in which any act of interpretation is almost always discouraged (if and when we are drawn in, there is barely any room for interpretation, let alone critique). The spectacle continues to demand our obedience, so if the image were to require any degree of interpretation, this would of course be its worst enemy.

The network system still aspires to absolute legibility, an *aletheia* through the image, insomuch that it wants to make things appear in an act of dis-concealment that shows them off as desirable commodities. This world should really be called a world of *images without imagination*,[13] i.e. images which lack the power to say anything beyond that which is patently clear from their ever- 'satisfactory' obviousness.

On the other hand, a rejection of the notion that an image's authenticity has anything to do with the legibility of what it represents, a rejection which is surely the basis of any critical practice of visual production (in the sense of the *anti-spectacular* image), can be found, in embryonic form, in Benjamin's writings. He

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[13] I use the term here in a very different way to the one proposed by Claude Lanzmann, who stated that "I have always said that archival images are images without imagination. They petrify thought and kill any power of evocation." Cited in G. Didi-Huberman (2008), *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See section 'Archive-Image or Appearance-Image' (pp. 89 – 119).

denied that the photographic image necessarily conforms to visual clichés, those which, ultimately, "merely establish verbal associations in the viewer" (Benjamin, 1931/1999, p. 527).

Therefore, and bearing all of this in mind, when thinking about the possibility of a visual practice of *resistance*, what we should really crave is the generation of images that have certain potential for estrangement, at times even inducing a kind of "temporary dumbness" (Didi-Huberman, 2013, p. 189) which actively works against the enduring idea that making things *visible* is the same as making them *intelligible*. In other words, to challenge the logics of the spectacle there need to be images that require interpretation, as this is the only effective vaccine against the determinations of seduction and its *excesses* of meaning: such simplicity would only ever be swallowed up by the voids that all genuinely *critical* images (critical not because of what they say, but rather, precisely, because of the ambiguities they contain) need and seek.

4. Appearance as an on-screen *apparition*

Another particularly interesting aspect when revisiting Debord's concept of the spectacle today, in the age of the global networks, regards the term 'appearance'. The language of the spectacle is made up of the *signs* of the dominant system of production (Debord, 1967/2014, p. 3), and so, according to him, it all works via the manifest affirmation of the games of the apparent. This even extends to the spectacle's affirmation that life itself is a simple appearance, in its existential and social dimensions, or, to be more specific, the spectacle is a "visible *negation* of life" (p. 4). Therefore, and as the image of the prevailing economics, the spectacle is the main force behind capital's colonisation of all human social life. And it is important to remember that, before anything, this takeover is responsible for the demotion of *being* to *having*, followed by a second shift from *having* to *appearing* (p. 5), the latter of which entraps all forms of *having*.

Today, more than ever, is the age of appearances, insomuch that we increasingly tend to think that things are exactly as they outwardly appear to be. However, in this context, it would be helpful, and going against Debord's position, to make use of the term 'true appearance', bearing in mind that we cannot just understand the word 'appearance' as that which covers up the 'real' thing (as if the real thing were hidden by its own appearance), i.e. what it seems to be, and, yet, is not.

When all aspects of life are made visible, i.e. when they are forced, by their own protagonists, to appear as images, we cannot keep talking about a visible *negation* of life, no matter how much these patterns of visual production imitate the norms of the power structures, and regardless of how much they feed off their logics. It therefore makes no sense to keep talking about the conflict between being and appearing, nor to keep thinking about Debord's formulations of the spectacular like those of an inverted world, where truth is nothing but a *moment* of falsehood.

Of course, things exist in their matter, in their unmediated physicality, perhaps even in their Kantian noumenic unknowability. But they now also exist in the way that they appear on the screens within our informational ecosystem, since appearance today is, above all, on-screen *apparition*. Therefore, the apparent should no longer be linked with illusion, or with the false: there should be thus a rejection of the old Platonic notion of the image as a secondary copy of the real, and appearance and referent would instead be on the same plane, always co-existing as elements that complement each other.

There has also been widespread debate about how, in the world of digital simulations, it is but the appearance itself that disappears, appearance understood in the sense of the 'transcendental' dimension that might *appear* through the image. Žižek (2004) exemplified this by recalling those revolutionary events which, in his opinion, acted like a sign through which the transphenomenal dimension of freedom, of a free society, would appear. For the Slovenian philosopher, at the

moment when the simulation cannot be told apart from the real, everything is present, there is nothing transcendental which "'appears' in/through it" (p. 810) at all. Today, however, in the context of the overproduction of images in which we are living, it is somewhat debatable whether simulation still plays a key role, at least in the sense most commonly used since the early 1970s, when simulation was regarded as an imitating image, a forgery that would stand in for the *real*. We should not dismiss the idea that, in the millions of photos shared every minute on social media, there might well be a certain transcendental 'something' shining out, albeit fleetingly or dimly. This 'something', at times almost overshadowed by the clichéd forms adopted by the image, is but the intense desire to a live a life that is free, full and intense.

Furthermore, appearances do not go against the *truth* of things, for such things too exist in how they appear as an image. Appearance would be released, thus, from its subjugation to the *illusion*, which is understood as the false, what is not, and we agree with La Fontaine when he wrote about illusions that "never deceive by always lying to us" (as cited in Bachelard, 1932/2013, p. 27).

As well as our materiality or consciousness, we also exist in the way we display ourselves, how we appear before others, how we visually present ourselves in a certain way in the social sphere. This does not mean, however, and this must be emphasised, that a given thing's appearance subtracts any ontological 'beingness' from any of the other dimensions that make it up, yet it can no longer be denied that the social space is a visually-determined construct.

All of this, nevertheless, brings to mind distant times gone by. There are several clear similarities to be drawn between what we are living through now and certain norms of aestheticism from the late 19th century. Many of Wilde's writings (such as 'The Decay of Living', 'The Critic as Artist', etc.) seem to be replaying in our minds, those writings in which the possible was praised over the real, celebrating the liar, the pretender, those who prefer flights of fancy

over facts, denying thus the individual's supposed predisposition for transparency. Wilde's idea of realising one's own personality "on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life" (Wilde, 1921, p. 2) is seemingly being evoked in the idealisation and aestheticism typical of the visual activity on social media. When we talk about avatars or profile pictures on social networks, perhaps we are talking about new games of masks, about how, echoing Rilke (1910/2011), there are people who "change faces incredibly fast" (p. 6). We are forced to acknowledge this multiplicity, so keenly practiced by many, in acts of displaying which either meet the prescribed expectations, or else are rebellious and resistant to them.

5. Images of a sea of data

The concept of 'cyberspace' has always had a strong visual connotation, as is clear in the definitions that associate the term with a spatialised visualisation of information (Novak, 1992), or a hallucinatory nocturnal landscape in the distance, which Gibson (1984/1995) described as "like city lights, receding" (p. 67). In fact, one of the most important facets in the evolution of digital design today is the visual and dynamic representation of this landscape, of the vast quantities of data and correlations that are in a state of constant transformation and flux. The aim is to turn immense volumes of informative material into something more visually comprehensible, presenting it, before our eyes, in a diverse range of interactive graphics. These visual configurations might bring to light hidden patterns within the abstract statistical data, or enormously complex correlations. Thus, they also have great potential for political elucidation, as shown in many initiatives, such as, for example, the visualisations by Josh On, Share Lab, Bureau d'études, Mark Lombardi, and the Public Accountability Initiative, among others.

There has been a huge evolution, in recent years, in the field of computational information design.[14] This has opened up many avenues so that we can handle, visually, huge quantities of constantly-changing data, and this data therefore becomes instantly intelligible. These practices show our need to turn information into an image, in order to *orient ourselves* in this new world.

By giving a visual shape to such huge quantities of data, the *absolutely large* takes on a tangible form. This action has quite rightly been termed 'anti-sublime', i.e. giving an image to that which, otherwise, bearing in mind its sheer magnitude, we would not be able to represent without the help of information technology. They are, therefore, forms of what is seemingly unfathomable, visual translations that simplify, by means of diagrams, those dizzying amounts of information which we think of as abstract and apparently infinite or incomprehensible when discussed in strictly numerical terms. Visualising data in this way turns it into something understandable, like an image: its correlations can be seen, and its scope is easier to comprehend. These visualisations usually allow us to navigate this sea of data on different scales: there is often a zoom function, so that we can choose between a macroscopic view (visually simplifying great volumes of information into diagrams) or a microscopic one (allowing us to delve into these digital visualisations until we see highly specific details).

Within these lines of investigation, into the visual design of dynamic data, there are also countless initiatives that can be linked to the idea of a 'kinetic information sculpture' (Fry, 2004, p. 165) These are visual practices based on graphs and diagrams, on drawing network systems, and on representing their tensions, densities and flows. Thus, the art of drawing goes back to its ancient meaning of *disegno*, linked with the connecting of points, a certain kind of cartography which retains, in any case, its underlying and now-transmuted notion of *vision* as *navigation*.

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[14]   See Benjamin Jotham Fry, *Computational Information Design* [doctoral thesis], Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004 [http://benfry.com/phd/dissertation-050312b-acrobat.pdf].

The interest in this kind of informational design practice is not only about, however, its ability to clarify or represent, synthetically or comparatively, the myriad of data that circulates on the Internet. Nor is it about revealing certain patterns of action or behaviour that are widespread or recurrent within this context. In fact, there are countless projects that almost parody such attempts at representing the innumerable, or that which is practically impossible to reduce into an image.[15] The paradigmatic example of this would be, of course, Borges's impossible map, drawn at a 1:1 scale, as described in his short story 'On Rigor in Science' (1946). As such, many initiatives in this emerging line of artistic creation do not actually seek to synthesise data, highlight correlations, reveal patterns or, ultimately, visually reduce the complexity of such data. Instead, some artists use these data visualisation techniques as a way of thematising our life experience, and how it is essentially conditioned by an immense and constant production of data and its non-stop circulation. These are, therefore, practices that talk about our life experience in a context defined by the infinite flow of information, opening up, for us, a poetic and critical space that is external to these same flows, even if this is always via, precisely, a *statistical* vision of things.

6. The Pulchritude of the Digital

Following the arrival of the TV monitor, the image was no longer just a substance that reflected some of the light that hit it (as happens with a drawing, a painting or a sculpture), and it became an image that actually emitted light. Many years beforehand, with the magic lantern, we had gone back to a certain *stained-glass window* kind of image, an *illuminating* image. Today, like a fireworks display, visual

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[15] One of the first and best examples of these investigations into the 'anti-sublime' is the project by Lisa Jevbratt called *1:1* (1999-2002), which consisted of a visualisation of the whole Internet, via a navigable database that contained the URLs of all the websites that existed at that time.

events dart from screen to screen, bursting with their luminous, ever-changing qualities.

Some have gone so far as to claim that "the small colour screen more than satisfies the Neoplatonist desires of Plotinus [. . .] it gives us back the emotion of immediate presence" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 252). In all truth, it would seem that our fascination with the bright screens of television sets and tech devices can only be explained by thinking of these screens as some kind of substitute for what the Greeks called *to ekphanestaton* (that which "shines forth most purely").[16] However, reference should be made here, bearing in mind the radiance that these screens give off, to the recurring mythical-historical concurrence between sources of light and sources of authority.

"Thus again, the evening star is the most beautiful of the stars: not that the parts of which it is composed form a harmonious whole; but thanks to the unalloyed and beautiful brightness which meets our eyes."[17] This exquisite statement is by Basil of Caesarea, exemplifying the ancient emanationist tradition based on light, on *claritas*.[18] For Saint Isidore of Seville, as for many others, beautiful things were beautiful because of their light: "Marble pleases because of its whiteness, metals because of their sheen, and precious stones because of their glitter" (in Tatarkiewicz, 1970, p. 84). An historical interpretation of these views would take us beyond Greece, where beauty was fundamentally a question of form and proportion, towards the even more distant lands of the Middle East, where the

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[16] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993, p. 273.

[17] Basil of Caesarea, 'Hexaemeron', II, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 8., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895.

[18] As Tatarkiewicz notes, for Pseudo-Dionysius "beauty is defined as *consonantia et claritas* [. . .] that is, harmony and light, or proportion and brilliance". See *History of Aesthetics,* (1970) Vol.2. Mouton: The Hague and Paris, and Warsaw: PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers, p. 30.

idea of beauty was linked to the intensity of colours, aromas or sounds, to the *life-giving light* (Boman, 1954).

Today, it seems we are once again enchanted not so much by relations, but rather, as Plotino and Saint Basil said, by *simple* things, the kind of things that now shine on our screens. In fact, the dissociation between the form and the content of digital material, which circulates while adapting to countless templates in different apps and platforms, and to a huge variety of screens, situates us necessarily in an aesthetics not of formal relations but rather of *intensities*, perhaps closer to that of *radiance*. Ever since we moved into Web 2.0, information has no longer been linked with a predetermined visual design, embedded within a specific website. Instead, this information could now move around countless different interfaces, in thousands of ways, adapting to a wide range of possible setups.

Our gaze is trapped within the screen-walls, and so it might be pertinent to revisit the matter of *extromissionism*, the ancient theory that claimed our eyes emit beams of light (*per radios emissos ab oculis*). This idea now applies to the screen-eye, and we are instead the receivers of the light beams, as clinical as they are attractive, which shine out from the bright monitors of our computers and digital devices. On these screens each thing is impeccable, *beautiful*, above all due to the stark, immaterial neatness, which might be just as important as everything that appears on the devices' crystalline surfaces. Our *philokalia* is, undoubtedly, a love of the *pulcritudo*, of the extreme neatness of the *pulcherrime factum*, of all that is made with prodigious perfection, as is typical of the digital.

7. Immediacy and Obsolescence

We appear to have lost interest in all that we cannot take part in, i.e. anything which is not going on *right now*. It would seem that this development can largely be ascribed to the fact that freedom

today is understood, above all, as the possibility and fulfilment of spontaneity, ever further removed from freedom's ancient, precious sense that linked it to autonomy.

The need for immediacy is at the centre of everything. We are incapable of waiting; we want everything at a moment's notice, at the click of a button, available for download. This is the age of the new collectors and gatherers (rather than observers) of images, the age of avid downloaders.

In the past, the power of signs was a product of their depth, but now their power is defined by how prevalent they are in a given context. Things are now presented to us in their most obvious elements, so that they can be immediately understood. The time for reasoning has been cut – everything must convince us in an instant. Meaning is no longer the result of elaboration, since *it's already there*, crystal-clear, ready-translated into seductive visual configurations. This is precisely why images are now less likely to have any degree of mystery – today, at most, they might provoke a kind of nervous suspense or intriguing expectation. Thus, when we talk about the role of art in the production of 'counter-images', we should encourage, precisely, the kind of visual production that, above all, refuses to engage the spectator in an easy, immediate interaction. Instead, such counter-images should give off a *slower* and *denser* kind of light, one that requires a more prolonged visual *digestion*.

The history of the present is being written in messages of very few characters, in a revival of the aphorism, the fragmentary text. It is not so much a narration or a chronicle, but rather a proliferation of impressions. We are in the 'micro' phase of language, both in terms of length, as in posts and tweets, and in its scope of reference: it focuses on the personal, the individual. This is the social networks' intensive spectacle, characterised by the microscopic attention to the most banal and day-to-day goings-on, in the endless flowing of informative elements that flit tirelessly before our eyes. We are living in a spellbinding, almost hypnotic claudication, amid this multiplicity of shared details.

Interpretation, which is always a slow and forced exercise, tends to be reduced to simple, knee-jerk responses: 'like' or 'dislike'. *Hermeneutics* has to be instantaneous, just like the online messaging services. It seems we are being forced to accept an excessively obvious and literal reading of Roupnel's intuition, one which appealed to Bachelard (1932/2013) so much: "Time has but one reality, the reality of the instant" (p. 6).

Today there is barely any time, when trying to comprehend events, for going over them, or looking back. Our eyes are submerged in the flow of these media; everything seems to be situated in simultaneity. Chronological history gives way to an intense and frenzied affirmation of the present, with priority given to the event, to scoops, to breaking news, to the infinite potential of now. Aubert was right when he stressed that there was a cult of urgency in our "time-sick" society. The principle of the switching between broadcasting and receiving is what prevails now, and this switching is immediate. Its deceptive effect is crudely presented thus: "the less deeply we look into things, the more there is to see" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 285).

This present era is based on a logic of instantaneity. A context in which 'fluidity' or 'liquidity'[19] has been a successful metaphor for this sense of flowing and floating, useful for conceptualising the *flux-image* (Buci-Glucksmann, 2013) that is so typical of the virtual.

Just like waters rushing down a river, everything is constantly changing on our screens. The fact that it is now nigh-impossible to visit the same website twice (given there can be new adverts, new offers, based on the cookies of our own browsing history, or new comments that continually modify the content) is a good example of the constant variation in the online media landscape. If we used to speak of 'web pages', the permanent updating thereof now forces us to speak of flux-documents, of *shifting* images.

Perhaps the experience of surfing the Internet is so attractive and addictive because it is so intensely variable, even if it sticks to the

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[19] See Zygmunt Bauman (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

formula of always-the-same, but always-different. We are becoming accustomed to living in the age of a data-stream ecology. We cannot help but wonder about a new visual *kairology*, i.e. what to pause, where to focus our attention, in this deluge of a myriad of things that hurtle before our eyes.

It is unsettling to think that, in the network-culture, no real historical foundation is being laid: there is no substratum that might constitute the kind of landscape that can be revisited at a later date, as a fixed point of reference or contrast, to make it possible to look back at it all. But perhaps the problem is that we no longer know where to *look back* to. Instead of memories or interpretations, it appears that we are now just desperate for 'updates'.

Life, as articulated by communicative and affects-based flows on social networks, is characterised by momentaneous impulses, by short-terms actions, which some see as a somewhat *reckless* existence. And yet, there are still those who, for many reasons, refuse to play down the age-old associations between calmness and happiness.

Buci-Glucksmann (2003) made a distinction between two forms of the ephemeral: there is a 'melancholic' ephemeral which established, in her opinion, the historical baroque or modernity (Baudelaire, Benjamin, Pessoa, etc.) and another ephemeral that she called 'positive', which "pervaded the history of the gaze in 19th-century France (Monet)" (p. 27). But the effect of today's connected devices is so strong that the best way of characterising the current form of the ephemeral seems to be describing it as simply hypnotic – we cannot prise our eyes away from our screens, we always have to be bobbing along in the flow of informational waters that constantly rush past our ever-stimulated gaze. Our disquiet can only be relieved by plunging ourselves into the choppy waters of those vast digital outpourings.

The gap between space and time is widening - they are barely interlinked anymore, in a process that began a long time ago, around the dawns of industrial modernity, when both concepts came to be thought of as "mutually independent" categories of action (Bauman, 2000).

Information flows in front of our eyes, even if we do not ask for it or search it out. The captivating link with those huge waves of data turns the Internet into a space where we can lose ourselves, hypnotically, while observing an endless transit of information. Desire corresponds, above all, to the flow-form of things. Just like a river, we dive into, we *navigate*, the ever-flowing waters, and *here* is dissolved into a constant, immersive *now*.

Society's ultimate aspiration in terms of objects is no longer that they endure over time. This aspiration, which used to be the paradigmatic form of the principle of stability and permanence, so crucial to the ideology of ownership and property,[20] has slowly moved towards a more temporary and progressive updating of the objects at the subject's disposal. This looks beyond the economy of the obsolescence of products, which has now become, above all, an obsolescence in the mechanism of seeing and interpreting. Perceptual expiration, i.e. when vision itself goes out-of-date, is particularly prominent in the new digital society. This is clear, for example, with online browsers, those programs that turn lines of code into images, which become outmoded after a certain period of time and so have to be replaced by newer versions, along with regular downloads of updates and new plug-ins.

Although the devices might age, the image itself, as a file, will not. Nor will it yellow over time – this is unlike printed images, whose ink will eventually fade. But one day these image files might no longer be compatible with a given viewing application. In the digital sphere, the absence of physical ageing is replaced, instead, by the threat of inaccessibility.

We always have to bear in mind that what we see on the screen is being generated there all the time – it is a process of decoding,

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20 We should remember that, for Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "bourgeois culture [. . .] aspires to possession, that is to extension in time". In 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', *The New Media Reader* (eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort). Cambridge, Mass./London: The MIT Press. 2000, p. 265.

depending on the visualisation software used, as well as the settings determined by the user. Furthermore, the possibility of interacting with the digital image is but a form of synchronisation between image and observer. The moment these images appear before our eyes is the exact moment they are produced. The interactive digital image is reactive, in a sophisticated non-differentiation between our seeing the image and its *being ever-updated.*

We find ourselves placidly immersed within a continuous transit of many different kinds of information – news, messages, personal statuses. Our social media accounts are essentially real-time managers, always trying to satisfy (and intensify) our passion for what is happening. We lose interest in events when they're over; we are like those creatures that only pay attention to things that are *in motion.*

Yesterday's newspaper used to be the definition of 'old news', a term which can now apply to a tweet from just a few hours ago. This shows a devotion to the ephemeral, which today might echo Roupnel's only slightly exaggerated comparison between the instant that has just gone by and "the same vast death that holds dominion over abolished worlds and extinguished firmaments" (as cited in Bachelard, 1932/2013, p. 7).

It is still interesting to see how the most critical thinking has questioned, on infinite occasions, our tendency to regard real-time informative material, the kind broadcast by the media, as 'pure' acts of information, proponents of transparency, "unmarked by technical interpretation" (Derrida, 1994, p. 29). Page upon page has been written about this, essentially about how we are conditioned to connect the immediate with the non-mediated, to consider it as *the truth.* However, the key question today, as also raised in many of the more interesting artistic practices, seems to point towards how the 'real' appears to be conceived as 'real time', the *temps unique* that connective technologies give to us.[21]

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[21] In the field of artistic practices, this thematisation has undergone, in the last decade, an interesting development. There have been Internet-

8. The Scattered Gaze

Max Nordau's premonition in *Entartung* (1892-1893/1898) was spot-on: he predicted that the end of the 20th century would be inhabited by a generation

> to whom it will not be injurious to read a dozen square yards of newspapers daily, to be constantly called to the telephone, to be thinking simultaneously of the five continents of the world, to live half their time in a railway carriage or in a flying machine, and to satisfy the demands of a circle of ten thousand acquaintances, associates, and friends. (Nordau, 1898, p. 541)

Certain texts by Simmel, Adorno, Benjamin and Kracauer played a fundamental role in diagnosing that distracted, unfocused perception was becoming a fundamental characteristic of modern subjectivity. The suspicions noted in some of these texts, regarding the link between distraction and regression (something which would probably be easy to link with the constituting of 'docile' bodies that Foucault spoke about) are still the object of constant controversy.

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connected installations, based on the real-time incorporation of data, as seen, for example, in works like *L'attente* (2007) by Gregory Chatonsky or *Murmur Study* (2009) by Christopher Baker. Another good example is *Moveable Type* (2007) by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, in which 560 monitors, situated in the lobby at the *New York Times*, show the daily copies of the newspaper (news, editorials, etc.) as well as searches, navigation and commentary data of their website's visitors. A dynamic 'portrait' of the 'life' of the newspaper, the flows of information that run through it, and the changing intensity throughout the day. This flow-automatism is also present in the installation *Decorative Newsfeeds* (2004) by Thomson & Craighead, based on the taking of continuous snapshots of Internet headlines so that they can be then reconfigured like animations or abstract drawings, thus turning informative content into lineal configurations that are constantly changing. These are all good examples of what we might call 'the real-time informational flow aesthetic'.

We live in an age in which our attention is scattered, divided, ever in *multi-tasking* mode. Our various different on-screen tasks (working, reading, communicating, etc.) are always interrupted by our checking something else. We can't do just one thing anymore. Constant cut-offs and the juxtaposition of different activities are typical of the lived experience in the means-of-access-to-information culture, and these interruptions are perhaps also the most palpable manifestations of the new forms of anxiety. We deal with different activities and different sources of information at the same time, and our attention thus floats around – we were warned, some time ago, that "it's hard to have a fixed point of view in a world where everything is happening simultaneously" (McLuhan, 1970, p. 7).

We used to become distracted when we lost interest in an object, but today we are almost always focused on several different objects at the same time: we shift our attention even if we are still interested in a given object, in a state of nervous hyperactivity. It feels like we don't actually have to move on from one thing to the next (perhaps endowed with that extraordinary 'divine' attention as described by Saint Augustine), as if everything is present (and conceivable) at the same time, before our eyes - we have the impression that it takes no time at all to hop, on our screen, between different elements.[22] We are getting used to the false sensation of being able to see things *all at once,* a gaze that takes in everything *at the same time,* which would only be possible with *distributed* eyes.

Our condition as permanently-connected beings means we are constantly exposed to the infinite number of attention-grabbing things that swarm around on the Internet. Many people, understandably,

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[22] Saint Augustine, in *The City of God* (chapter XXI) described divine attention thus: "[God has] no variableness, neither shadow of turning. [. . .] Neither is there any growth from thought to thought in the conceptions of Him whose spiritual vision all things which He knows are at once embraced. For as without any movement that time can measure, He Himself moves all temporal things, so He knows all times with a knowledge that time cannot measure". *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo.* Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1871, p. 460.

regard this as a serious problem, claiming that not being able to concentrate on anything prevents us from carrying out any in-depth analysis or interpretation, and we are limited thus to a merely superficial grasp of what's happening around us (if anything, we might add, 'attention' is the mind's focusing on the plane of meaning).[23]

It is often said that digital 'natives' are unable to pay attention to one single element for a sufficient period of time. This explains why, in the contemporary storytelling of our entertainment culture, there are continuous cuts, and each segment is loaded with action. This is to ensure that the average spectator does not get bored, since it might be gruelling for them to sit through a plot that doesn't have lots of twists and turns. It is hard to deny that, today, more and more has to be done to sustain the viewer's interest and attention. And, quite rightly, attention deficit disorders, which are so characteristic of our times, are frequently associated both with undue impulsiveness and an increasing intolerance of frustration.

More than ever before, we feel like we are living in a quasi-*schizophrenic* state (schizophrenia has of course been, for at least three decades now, the number one metaphor for describing the experience of living through capitalism). In this state, the ability for selective attention is reduced, and our perception is often scattered, projected upon multiple vanishing lines that hardly ever converge, and we are oversaturated while being unable to focus on anything at all. Entertainment culture plays around with this, skilfully merging strategies for attraction with distracting techniques. Stimulating, dynamogenic tactics are predominant, designed as they are to cause over-excitement in the perceiving subject.

It is well known that the technophilia of attraction played a key role in the emergence of mass visual culture. The problem is that, today, everything seems to be configured this way, i.e. in 'attraction'

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[23] John Dewey noted: "In attention we focus the mind, as the lens takes all the light coming to it, and instead of allowing it to distribute itself evenly, concentrates it in a point of great light and heat". *Psychology*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 134.

mode. This mode aims for the oversaturation of content in this *infosphere*, the visually-appealing network that always aspires to be irresistible to us.

9. Giving Time to the Image

A process whereby vision became more accelerated was characteristic of the birth of modernity.[24] The touristic notion of seeing as rapid visual consumption gradually began to take form in the increased speed with which we relate to what is *on display*.

For the huge international exhibition in London, in 1871, a pamphlet was produced (as noted by Mallarmé) that advised how to see it all in just one visit. Seemingly, a great many images could be seen in very little time. This was the beginning of the ongoing disproportionate relationship between what is exhibited and the time available to contemplate it, which still applies to our exhibition practices today – we never have enough time to see it all.

Little by little, such speed was brought into the home, perhaps irreversibly, in the urban culture, and it would inevitably be reflected in the creative act itself. As Baudelaire suggested, there would have to be a corresponding adjustment in the correlation between the speed of the world and the artist's activity: "there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist" (Baudelaire, 1863/1964, p. 4).

And, of course, perhaps the sharpest criticism of modernity's swift perceptual experience can be found in some of Nietzsche's work, and many find his negativity ideal for applying to the analysis of our perceptual experience today:

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24 It is worth highlighting, for example, the illustration by Albert Robida, published in *Le Vingtième Siècle* in 1884, called *The Tramway in the Louvre, from The Twentieth Century*. In this drawing he depicted, with great irony, a group of visitors upon a tram, hurtling through one of the galleries inside the Louvre.

the abundance of disparate impressions [is] greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to "digest" anything [. . .] (Nietzsche, 1888/1967, p. 246)

Towards the end of the 19th century, the requirements for slow and thorough contemplation were gradually left behind. Such rumination had been discussed at length in the previous century, above all with regards to empiricist-based aesthetics. In fact, many Enlightenment-era thinkers insisted, again and again, that in order to value the beauty of an object, we should carefully choose the appropriate time and place to do so, and bring, as Hume (1757) claimed, our imagination 'to a suitable situation and disposition" (p. 213). A perfect mental serenity, and the suitable degree of attention given to the object, would be essential conditions to ensure that the experience is not misleading. If, however, we do not find ourselves in this state of *tranquility*, and we are not paying enough attention to the object before us, then our aesthetic judgment, according to Hume, will be wrong. These are issues related to taste, and, as it happens, they were practically the same as those noted by Locke as being the cause of an incorrect differentiation of ideas:

[I will not here examine] how much the imperfection of accurately discriminating ideas one from another lies, either in the dulness [*sic*] or faults of the organs of sense; or want of acuteness, exercise, or attention in the understanding; or hastiness and precipitancy, natural to some tempers. (Locke, 1690/1825, p. 105)

This well-concentrated, focused vision, deeply longed-for by Schiller, in which time would be *suppressed* in time (also akin to the medieval concept of the *beatific vision*) would however seem incompatible with the new perceptual habits of the 19th century, habits which would encourage the increasingly rapid reception of

images. This would all lead to the absence of any awareness of the passage of time, as is common in the spectacles and creations that would define the new entertainment culture.

Instead of being *absorbed* by the observed object, as usually happens in the act of contemplation (which for Schopenhauer, we must not forget, was essentially the route to the *idea*), objects and their images started to 'bowl over' the observer. A scopic regime which would get stronger and stronger, forced to keep accelerating, throughout the 20th century. The commercial gaze would end up annihilating, as indicated by Benjamin in 1928, any and all space reserved for free contemplation, since advertising works in a way, he claimed, that "hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing in gigantic proportions, [which] careens at us out of a film screen" (Benjamin, 1928/1979, p. 88).

The history of the 20th century is, effectively, a history of spectators who are forced to acquire all the necessary skills so as not to be overwhelmed by the infinite abundance of visual elements that constantly bombard them. An age in which *contemplation* would be almost always reduced and broken down into mere *impressions*.

Nevertheless, today, subjected as we are to the frenzy of 'the visual', our gaze also seems to be *hungry* for time, which perhaps explains, for example, the relative success of TV experiments like Sakte-TV in Norway, i.e. 'slow TV' in which 'hardly anything' happens.[25]

Within the field of artistic practice, playing around with the timeframe of the gaze has been, for decades now, a core strategy, and approaches like this probably offer the most intelligent reflections on the time-based regimes of our perceptive habits. They are creative manifestations in which the visual is used to challenge mere instant relatability, going against any unthinking correlation

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[25] Sakte-TV ('slow TV') is a television genre born in 2009 on NRK, the Norwegian public television and radio service. It refers to programmes which last for many hours, showing non-stop footage of events such as boat trips, salmon fishing or the winter migration of thousands of reindeer.

(complete, synchronic) that might be established with images from the commodified world. What many of the best artistic practices bring to the table is, precisely, a questioning of the time-based regimes imposed by the new media, based on the conviction that, ultimately, all art is, we should not forget, "a controlling of time" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 267). They often seek, albeit momentarily or even symbolically, to challenge the thoughtlessness generated by the active, fast and constant assemblages produced by the generalised regime of aestheticism in which we live. They aim to interrupt this fake meaningfulness which tries to impose itself as the *inherent* logic of the world and which, precisely, operates at a speed that barely allows us to *situate* it critically. In fact, dealing with a time of the visual that is 'other' means that some of these artistic practices might well be regarded as the most sophisticated work that reflects on the experience of images and, above all, on the power they have. Such artworks seem to be imbued, due to their very nature, with the attempt to sustain the "critical moment of aesthetic experience" (Buck-Morss, 1996, p. 29).

Among all the time-based strategies that we have seen proposed in contemporary artistic practice, the slowing down of time, forcing the spectator to contemplate something over a prolonged period, is undoubtedly the most prevalent. These 'poetics of slowness' include interesting experiments based on times of observation/expectation, as seen in pieces by Bill Viola, David Claerbout, Sam Taylor-Johnson, Luca Pancrazzi, Douglas Gordon and John Gerrard, for example. The stretching, pausing and slowing down of time are methods that turn the very *presence* of the moment into the central protagonist, i.e. the way in which we experience events in time, rather than focusing on what the image is capable of showing in a given timeframe. This is a stopping of time, the effects of which could even be linked with certain aspects of psychoanalytic retroaction, insomuch that they might eventually help redefine past moments of reception, perhaps making it possible to restructure these moments in a different way. Interpreting these poetics might bring to mind certain ancient and

moving stories or moments about pausing and paralysis, such as the encounter between Onesicritus and the fifteen hermits who were "naked in different postures and motionless, coping with the suffocating heat of India" (Román, 2008, p. 55) or the thousands of tales about Medusa turning to stone whomever dared look her in the eye, or even how annoying it used to be at the cinema when the film roll would get jammed in the old projectors, freezing the image.

But *giving time* to the image can be achieved not only by playing around with pausing and slowing time down, but also, in an even more literal way, by doing so the other way round, i.e. *giving narrative time* to a static image. There are many noteworthy examples, but it would be remiss to overlook Sergei Eisenstein, who, as Deleuze recalled, would analyse paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and El Greco as if they were, in fact, cinematographic images. Similarly, Andrei Tarkovsky insisted on *giving time* to Brueghel's paintings, duly giving them 'the time'.

Creating a whole film from a single frame, i.e. creating a 'real-time' fiction based on the digitally modified stillness of a single image, was the proposal in the piece *Space Surrogate I (Dubai)* (2000) by Philipp Lachenmann, another good example of playing around with the nuances between 'occurring over time' and 'consisting of *duration*'. Exploring the Proustian incommensurability of the place we occupy in time, in relation to the place we occupy in space, is an ongoing poeticisation of a psychic, non-chronometric time.

Other artists, meanwhile, explored processes that went the opposite way, such as in the series *Theaters* (which began in 1978) by Hiroshi Sugimoto, or in *Illuminated Average #1 Hitchcock's Psycho* (2000) by Jim Campbell. But perhaps the prime example of these experiments into the *tempus* of reception is *Sleep* (1963) by Andy Warhol, six hours in length, with no soundtrack, projected slightly slower than usual (16 frames per second, as opposed to the normal 24), in which some of the footage was repeated in loops, thus stretching out the dream of the poet John Giorno, the passive protagonist of this film. Warhol thus created a false

effect of correspondence between the filmed time and the viewing time, bringing the cinematographic image and the photographic image closer together. As in another of his pieces, *Empire* (1964), we could say that the most significant aspect here was the brushing aside of the assumption that something has to happen before our eyes (the founding principle of art understood as a spectacle), a rebuttal which he achieved by shifting this assumption back onto the spectator (*something happens with me*).[26] It is a parody, in any case, of the media convention that presumes that something must *happen* in a given piece, that one shot must be followed by another, and that some kind of narrative action has to take place. It is an attempt to situate the reception of the image not in the sphere of entertainment, but rather in a certain form of inaction that radically questions the idea of art as a *pastime*. Gestures like this can be seen today in dozens of works that seek to present *duration* as a metaphor for a certain form of *resistance*.

But let us go back to our day-to-day experience as Internet users to point, albeit briefly, towards the time-based system that defines this experience. It seems fair to say that this system is almost always related to some kind of suspension, though sometimes minimally, of one's own will.

The fact that, today, we use the same machine, i.e. the computer, for both work and leisure, puts our power of self-control at risk, in terms of how we use it. Our own willpower has less and less control over of our actions in the digital sphere – our relationship with technological devices becomes progressively more akin to addiction. In other words, we begin to act in ways that *we do not want to*.

We are subjected to thousands of stimuli and attention-grabbing things, submerged in the media spectacle – we are barely aware of the passage of time, in a peculiar kind of pyknolepsy. The media-centred economy of time is based upon a well-studied continuum,

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26 See Rudolf Frieling, 'Reality / Mediality. Hybrid processes between art and life', in *Media Art Net: Survey of Media Art*, vol. 1. New York: Springer-Verlag, 2004.

made up of interruptions and discontinuities, that subjects us to the hypnotic passing of time. Its effects are hidden within a never-ending, hurried flow of information and images.

The current economies of the use of time, and of the consumer-spectator's exposure to media, always aim for time to pass by unnoticed, in line with a dynamic of stimulation that finds its ultimate form in the excitement produced by computer games or online pornography. The aim is to make the passage of time imperceptible, and this process lies at the heart of many lucrative economic strategies.

Unlike the progressive detemporalisation of audiovisual media, on the radio there is still a rigorous control over the measuring and signalling of time. Until recently, on some stations the time announcements still took precedence over the contents themselves, even interrupting them, abruptly. It has not been the same, of course, on television, which was always far less concerned with time, the experience of which was played down, the longer and more inconspicuous the better. This greater awareness of time, on the radio, can perhaps be ascribed to the fact that radio broadcasts are *blind*, showing a strange link between the absence of the image and the reliance on time to keep order. With no visual structure, the structure instead comes from the most objective of all measurements: time itself.

A critical approach to all of this would explain why many artists continue to play around with the practices of pausing time, just as they are produced and administered by the media and the entertainment industry in general. It is more necessary than ever to try to reveal, to make obvious, those elements that get in the way of any critical analysis of the new economy of time, in the uninterrupted flow of interruptions, and of effects that are always effective and biased.

10. The Snapshot

In the mid-19th century, the term 'snapshot' was coined to refer to a quick, sudden photo, taken without preparation, and with a very short exposure time. This soon becomes habitual, with the arrival of photographic plates made with a more sensitive gelatine, meaning that cameras could be held in the hand, with no need for a tripod – the photographer could thus work more spontaneously. The arrival of these handheld cameras led to the increased uptake of photography, a phenomenon accelerated by the launch, in 1888, of the original Kodak.

These new gadgets allowed photographs to be taken at any moment in any situation, breaking with the previous protocols of posing and careful preparation in a studio. From this point onwards, anything or anybody could be photographed anywhere, without the previous understanding of having to adopt a rigid pose. In fact, the term 'snapshot' would mainly be used, in many texts of the 1890s, to refer to those photographs taken without the express permission of the subject.

Although these new cameras meant that photography could now capture, immediately, any given moment, actually developing the photograph itself would still require, for many years to come, slow and delicate chemical processes to reveal the captured, latent image. It was only in the mid-20th century, when Polaroid cameras burst onto the scene, that the time between taking a photo and obtaining the positive image was drastically cut, reduced to just a few seconds.

The digital file, a distant descendant of what, in analogue photography, used to be the latent image, definitively eliminated the waiting time between taking the photo and viewing it. Today, the time between capturing an image and its appearance on the screen is negligible. The phase of the latent image (that magical, invisible impression, a purely *potential* image) is over, and it is now a matter of immediate appearance, an instant *revelation.*

The act of taking photographs would become, in many cases, taking a screengrab of the real-time video feed that appears on the screens or electronic viewfinders of cameras when setting up a photo, in the clear-cut precession of the moving image over the photographic image, which has now become the pausing of a flow of digital images. The importance of this might be as huge as it is fascinating, if we were to imagine that every old analogue photograph is simply a film still. Our understanding of the history of photography would change radically if, in an astonishing fiction, it were to be revealed that all photographs from the past are not instants isolated in time (with a past and future that are *lost*, i.e. not caught on film), but rather frames chosen from a recorded series (which would still be available to view, somewhere) of a string of lived moments frozen in pictures.

11. Images in the Key of the Present

According to Kundera (1988/1991), "Rubens discovered a peculiar thing: memory does not make films, it makes photographs" (p. 313). Under this logic, our memory would consist of thousands of fading mental *photographs*. Whether we accept this thought-provoking hypothesis or not, it is hard to deny that the history of photography has been, at least until the arrival of digital technology, that of a profound desire to generate memory or, at least, to facilitate this by means of technology. When life's enjoyable experiences are few and far between, photography can multiply them in the memory, with the possibility of using technology to relive that which we cannot experience again *existentially*. However, the relationship between photography and the past has not always been regarded in a positive light. As Sontag reminds us:

> Whenever Proust mentions photographs, he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary

relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to be made by responding to cues given by all the senses—the technique he called "involuntary memory." (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 128)

The widespread use of analogue photography turned it into a language of *disappearance*, condemned to document the fleetingness of time, capturing unrepeatable moments, freezing as an image that which will never again be before our eyes, at least in that *exact* way. Castel was right when he said that photography is "the representation of an absent object, *as something absent*" (2003, p. 334). Essentially, that has been the most accurate definition of photography: "presence in an image, that is to say, the presentation of an absence" (ibid.). The image is, therefore, analogous to the present, to the lived moment, bringing back that experience by means of synecdoche, where a part, an instant, represents the whole.

However, this is not the predominant meaning within photography today, in most cases. The use of photography in advertising shows how current strategies for encouraging consumption are focused on describing the contexts and settings where these products can be used, seeking their total incorporation into the present moment. It is about presenting images that have to be perceived in the opposite way to how, traditionally, we would relate to the photographic image. The idea is not to see the documenting of a *past* state of an object or situation, the freezing and witnessing of a moment, but rather, to be exact, it is about seeing a present that the spectator-consumer has to want to appropriate for themselves. Advertising photography therefore seeks to prevent any time-based requirement of the object, aiming to situate it in a total and permanent present of which the advert is proof.

Similarly, the photos we share on social media must also comply, to a large extent, with an advertising-style function (that of our own self-promotion), and they are situated in the key of the present – their temporality marks not so much 'this is what happened', but rather

'this is happening', or perhaps 'this has just happened'. Although they are events in the past, they are always in the key of the present; by sharing photographs on social media there is a tacit engagement with right now, with our present situation.

Furthermore, the outsourcing of memory as offered to us by digital media, which can bring back at any time the exact same visual experience, turns the act of remembering into something increasingly like clicking the 'play' button. To remember is no longer to evoke; seeing is reduced to *seeing again*, to a reencounter with certain images. And this is perhaps one of the most typical features of this 'informational chrono-politics' that comes from our living *with* time and not so much *in* it.

Although photography quashes any presumption of objectivity in representation, given the huge scope for images to be manipulated, there is still a presumption of *authenticity*, not in the photograph itself, which is almost always edited, touched up or enhanced in a thousand possible ways, but rather an authenticity in the atmosphere of the event it describes. Ultimately, the desired notion of *truth* in photography is about leading a life *of one's own* and it being seen as true, that the time captured in those images was free, and that the enjoyment was authentic, even if the images themselves are an array of tweaks and filters. This notion of authenticity is very different to the old idea of objectivity. Therefore, on social media, the exhibition value of photography is what rules, a value that Benjamin compared to cult value, which now, of course, is barely existent. The one exception of this value, where cult value does not back down "without resistance", that "ultimate retrenchment", was, for Benjamin (1935/1996) the "human face" (p. 258). But even this exception appears to be going extinct today, somewhat paradoxically, given that we live in the time of the *Face*-book, where the millions of people there do not invite us, of course, into any cult-style relationship with the past, but rather they always demand, of the onlooking visitor, a *radical* form of the present.

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