Photography as Quasi-otherness: the resistance of the embodiment of a prosthesis

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The search for ontology

There is no easy way to answer the question when, where, and by whom photography was invented. The most frequent answer would be 1839, and the three names that are most frequently mentioned in the history of photography's origin are: Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot. There is an interesting paper, in which the invention is presented, read to the British Royal Society in 1839 by Talbot. In this Talbot compares the speedy camera and the slow work of the hand of the painter or sketcher. The photographic process is found superior due to "the boundless powers of natural chemistry" that in the space of a few seconds can let nature use "her own inimitable pencil, for the imperfect, tedious, and almost hopeless attempt of copying a subject so intricate".[1]

Most early documents concerning photography as invention speak of either how the sun itself, the chemistry, or the nature, are the active agents in the photographic process. And it is also understood that it are these connections to forces outside human control that make photography absolutely superior when seeking the true knowledge of the world. This ontologic dimension seems to be reachable only by withdrawing epistemology, and by letting other powerful, partly unknown, forces interact.

And following the believed photographic access to ontologic knowledge, the consensus was total over photography's future meaning for science. It did not take long before photography had been made the central tool for science. It had an enormous importance for biology when it came to reproductions of microscopic findings. And it also became absolutely central for astronomy.

The status of photography as witness to "truth" is seen in the president of the Royal Academic Society, W. De W. Abney's proclamations of 1895:

(…) " this year the eye has to hold a subordinate place, giving way to the photographic plate as a recorder. (…) for a study of the heavens its retina is capable of receiving more accurate impression than that sensitive surface that lines the eye, and which transmits impressions to the brain, more or less tainted with preconceived notions."[2]

This notion of the camera as an extended, more accurate, scientific eye, became very common at the closing decades of the 19th century. In science, the photographic technique gradually came to replace the human eye as the information collector. The human eye was degraded to a tool for second hand reading of information.

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1 Talbot, William Henry Fox, *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or, to the Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil* (1839), reprinted in Newhall, Beaumont, *Photography: Essays and Images. Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1980, pp. 23-31

2 Quote reprinted in Block, David L, and Freeman, Kenneth, *Shrouds of the Night: Masks of the Milky Way and the Awsome New View of Galaxies*, Springer, New York, 2008, p. 125

As an extension of the human eye the camera could see more. It went beyond the scope of the human eye, and was therefore viewed as a sort of prosthesis of the human scientific searching body that, with its help, soon would be able to achieve omnipotence in the visual field.

During the late 1870's the American photographer Eadward Muybridge successfully captured instantaneous motion in a series of plates. The momentaneous motion of a galloping horse, never seen before, was presented step by step. The camera could freeze time.

A reviewer of Muybridge's first exhibition states how the prior erratic conception of movement was due to "the impossibility of the unaided eye to convey correct impression to the brain. (…) The grand discovery of an eye which would catch, and a plate which would register the most evanescent of movements, has enabled us to comprehend what was concealed before (…)"[3] The contrast between the "naked eye" and the eye equipped with photographic aid was frequently stressed, always on the behalf of the naked eye that was degraded to an eye of the second range.

The discovery of the x-rays in 1896 by means of photographic plates, and experiments showing that the photo plate could record ultraviolet and infrared light, totally invisible to the naked human eye, further provoked the degradation and increased the dreams of visual expansion. New worlds and dimensions of research were opened. By aiding the human eye with "an eye that would catch the most evanescent of movements", the human race would soon enjoy visual control. The human eye, with its new prosthesis, was unstoppable.

But, as always, there is a dark side of the moon. The opening up of new dimensions brought with it a sense of anxiety of facing the unknown. Walter Benjamin summoned photography's effect on mankind in "The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" from 1935 as follows: "the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses".[4] The door into the unknown was now open, and only the camera eye could see something in the dark that hovered behind it.

Anxiety and an epistemological crisis

This feeling of anxiety is present e.g. in the article "The Aim and Future of Natural Science" from 1890:

So, too, when we find upon the photographic plate the prints of stars so far away that we cannot see them even in our most powerful telescopes (…) we feel ourselves almost in the presence of infinity itself. Is there no end to the universe, no point beyond which there do not stretch worlds on worlds? Will the science of the future answer this? Who can tell?[5]

Was it really only good this new technical dependence? Not all scientists were convinced. Geographers using photographic technique for mapping rated it as "(…) the least perfect" since "it gives permanence to images in either an increased or diminished ratio; distance, foreshortening, and

3 Review from *San Fransico Call,* 5/5, 1880, reprinted in Rabb, Jane M., *Literature and photography. Interactions 1840-1990*, University of New Mexico Press, 1995, p. 142

4 Benjamin, Walter, "The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 1935

5 "The Aim and Future of Natural Science", *Science*, Vol. 16:404, 1890, pp.239-244

perspective (…)".[6] The ideal image, the perfect reflection, was in its static reproduction too little dynamic.

The lifelessness of the reproductions was disturbing also to John Ruskin, who later in his life was sincerely opposed to photography for this reason. He wrote about photographs in the following way: "They are popularly supposed to be "true", and, at the worst, they are so, in the sense in which an echo is true to a conversation of which it omits the most important syllables and reduplicates the rest."[7] Maybe Ruskin condemned photography because of the same reason as Walt Whitman did find it peculiar to be surrounded by mute portraits: "Phantom concourse – speechless and motionless, but yet realities. You are indeed in a new world – a peopled world, though mute as the grave."[8]

New dimensions maybe had been opened, but some dimensions had been subtracted. Where were the colours, movement, and the life? And an epistemological crisis was called for: ***If the newly discovered ontologic reality was invisible to the human eye, what did the human eye then see?***

Prosthesis theory

The will to create a prosthesis of the camera that could reach into an ontological sphere thus fell a bit short when applied to an everyday context. Through the wish to embody it, the camera and its product eventually came to represent *an other*. Let us now look at how this described problem can be explained theoretically by looking at three theorists discussing the relation between technology and its users.

A quite simplified anthropomorphic view is expressed by Wilem Flusser as he writes: "Machines are simulated organs of the human body. The lever for example, is an extended arm (…)."[9] If viewed upon like this, Flusser means that:

(…) tools, machines and robots can be regarded as simulations of hands which extend one's hands rather like prostheses and therefore enlarge the pool of inherited information by means of acquired, cultural information."[10]

This theory of a relation is an oversimplification, at least if it is compared to the development of the relation between photograph and man as described earlier. In the case of the camera we saw how the desired picture of an ontological dimension had an alienating effect, at least in a non-scientific context. The wish to embody the camera and make it a prolonged eye seemed, in this case, to irretrievably separate the eye from its prosthesis and make them rivals. The camera never belonged to the human

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6 Bellas Greenough, George, "On an Improved System of Mapping", *Journal of the Geographical Society of London*, vol.11, 1844, pp. xxxix-lxxvii

7 Ruskin, John, "Cestus of Agalia" (1865), reprinted in Rabb, Jane M., *Literature and photography. Interactions 1840-1990*, University of New Mexico Press, 1995, p. 113

8 Whitman, Whalt, "'Visit to Plumbe's Gallery', July 2, 1846", reprinted in Rabb, Jane M., *Literature and photography. Interactions 1840-1990*, University of New Mexico Press, 1995, p.21

9 Flusser, Wilém, *The shape of things: a philosophy of design*, Reaktion Books, London, 1999(1993) p. 51

10 Flusser, p. 44

body, and it did certainly not ” enlarge the pool of inherited information by means of acquired, cultural information” in the harmonic way described by Flusser.

The truth is rather that it created a crisis, and this effect is mentioned by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*. In a passage Freud encircles the problem of the psychological effect that the modern technical gadgets have produced:

"Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent, but these organs have not grown onto him and they still give him much trouble at times."[11]

The omnipotence desired by the scientific controlling human is here described as not easy to handle. If compared to the case of the development in the relation between the human and the camera this uncertainty is further understandable. Once knowledge about the world is reached, the knowledge that the world is not perceived through the own body hovers over the sensation. A new paradigm had established, and it was based on research conducted through increased visibility - a visibility that was not permitted the naked eye. Without equipment the human could not navigate in her new world.

Freud’s account of this is directly comparable to what Don Ihde writes about the wish for total transparency. On one hand, there is a wish for the technology to become me, for a total embodiment. The longing for the face-to-face experience with an object is what drives this desire. On the other hand, this desire is a desire to gain and have power. So, technology can, according to Idhe, create a desire to want the experience technology allows, but the presence of the technology is not wished for. The extended experience withheld from technology, says Idhe, therefore, always carry with it a ”quasi-transparency”.[12] The extensive experience created by the equipment is wanted, but simultaneously there is a wish for the equipment to be absent. This ambiguity is seen clearly in the case of the camera where the new ontological worlds are desired, but where the collision with the existing epistemology, and the capabilities of the naked eye, are giving the relation between man and the camera a slightly unsatisfied, anxious and threatened tone.

According to the historical account, camera belongs to what Don Idhe calls technology that has become a *quasi-other*, an *other to which I relate*.[13] The desires and the collision make transparency impossible, and the impossibility is thereby instead repeatedly actualised through the desire.

Anthropomorphisms

Don Idhe sees anthropomorphisms as one of the reasons to why this kind of quasi-otherness relation can develop. Analogies between human organs and body parts and technological equipment are so deeply embedded in our consciousness, through language and myths, that we automatic tend to see the similarities rather than the differences, says Idhe. Flusser’s theory, described above, would be of such a kind.

For example, the eye and the camera are still compared to each other in a routine manner. And the basic mechanisms are similar, with the retina as the light sensitive film, the pupil as the aperture, and perhaps the eyelid as a shutter. But there is the end to the similarities. The selectiveness, the periphery seeing, that which has been degraded to the limitations of the naked eye, are not present in the camera.

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11 Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, W.W. Norton Company, New York, 1962(1930), p. 38f.

12 Don Ihde discusses this in Ihde, Don, *Technology and the Lifeworld. From Garden to Earth*, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 75f.

13 Idhe, p. 98, 107.

The camera is obviously blind without aid from the human eye. Despite this the myth of camera's animated own eye and its autonom powers live on.

Another reason for the belief in camera's autonomity, and which I have already mentioned, is also present in the early sources of history of photography. It is the connection to Nature and natural forces. Talbot talked about "the boundless powers of natural chemistry" as the creator of the pictures. The sun, the objects and nature, was presented as drawing their own pictures on the plates. This process was not controlled by man. He was just holding a plate in front of the wild energetic nature who made its imprint on it. The early concept of the camera and photography was formed with the idea that photography stood in direct contact to the mystic forces of nature.

These two, to some extent, parallel tracks converged in a third one, which can be seen as embracing both of the other: the parallel between the photographic process and the human mind.

The camera and the human mind

Here we have to start with the camera obscura. Camera obscura had been a perfect pedagogical model of explaining the functions of the eye, but there it stopped. The camera obscura could give no explanation to what happened in the mind after the visual registration. It had no memory. No wonder that when the camera obscura with a memory – the photograph – was invented it became a favourite analogy of how the mind functioned.[14] It was especially the ability to imprint, the basis for the creation of a memory, which became valuable for the new mind/camera analogies.

John William Draper, who was professor at NYU and the first person ever to make an astrophotograph, based his reflections on how memory worked on the photographic metaphor. Draper took his starting point in the "phantom image" that one perceives after staring at a bright object for a while, and then having closed the eyelids. He suggested that the optical mechanisms of the imprint made by a sensory impression were similar to how perceived visions could leave a permanent trace in a big archive of memory images. He wrote in 1878:

"Thus I have seen landscapes and architectural views taken in Mexico, developed, as artist say, months subsequently in New York – the images coming out, after the long voyage, in all their proper forms and all their proper contrasts of light and shade. The photograph had forgotten nothing."[15]

Draper further connected this mechanism of the photographic memory production to explain how dreams were made.

"Just as the imprint on the retina stemming from starring at an illuminated object can't appear if we not close our eyes and let it project itself in darkness, the "silent galleries" of mind can not bee seen when pure sensory apparatus "are in vigorous operation". But when this sensory perception apparatus, for some reason or another, is dull – as in sleep – "the never sleeping Mind, that pensive, that veiled enchantress, in her mysterious retirement, looks over the ambrotypes she has collected (…)".

And parallels like these were everywhere to be seen during the last decades of the 19th century.

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14 See also Draaisma, Douwe, *Metaphors of Memory. A history of ideas about the mind*, Cambridge University Press, 2000 (published 1995 in Dutch as *Die Metaforenmachine – een geschiedenis van het geheugen*), p.120

15 Draper, John William, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, London, 1878, p. 133f. Also quoted in Draaisma p. 121

These last decades of the 19th century was also when the concept of the unconscious was given serious scientific attention, not at least as a central concern for the psychological field that was establishing. The mysteries formerly thought of as belonging to nature now moved within the human body. The magic powers of the uncontrollable nature was located inside of the mind instead, but it was still considered a mystery, and its unexplainable, uncontrollable force somehow resisted proper investigation. It was a part of the mind, but it was not reachable. It was a quasi-other and another to which one had to relate.

Freud and the unconscious

There was a conflict of discourses going on around the concept of the unconscious that gives a good background to an understanding of Freud's strategy in defining it.

Most important here was the medical discourse, and the experimental psychological discourse. It was important for the medical field to eliminate all rumours about how the unconscious was a realm that was not able to map by physiologic means. The experimental psychologists were eager to mark an independence from medicine, in order to avoid ending up as a subordinate area of research to the strong, confident medical field.

Freud was one of these experimental psychologists who tried all he could not to be caught up in the medical explanation to the unconscious. Freud's metapsychological model was born during his emancipation from the neurological psychology where he had been active in his early years. Freud was eager to disconnect psychoanalysis from the physiological field and constructed therefore a model through which he would be able to explain the human psyche without any empirical study of neurons in the brain. [16] The model was developed throughout Freud's life but its outlines appear as early as in 1895 in "Studien über Hysterie", and is continued and extended in the last chapter of "Die Traumdeutung" from 1900.

There is an interesting tension, present throughout Freud's early texts, between the use of pedagogical spatial metaphors and Freud's will to mark a distance from the topological anatomical model of the brain and its function. According to the metapsychological model, the psychic process is possible to divide into three functions: the unconscious, the pre-conscious and the conscious. To pedagogically visualise the relations between the three structuring functions of the psyche, Freud admits, it is most useful to apply plastic and topological metaphors to pedagogically show how the three functions relate to one another.[17] But he also identifies a serious problem following a use of topological metaphors: the connection to the anatomy of the brain is then not possible to escape.

The solution to this problem, Freud concludes, is to exchange the topographic model with a dynamic one where energy is said to gather and make one or another function the dominating by a locally increased density and charge in that particular area.[18] But the dynamic model is never freed from the topological. Freud's psychoanalytic method requires two locations present at the same time: one for

16 See also Luttenberger, Franz, *Freud i Sverige. Psykoanalysens mottagande i svensk medicin och idédebatt 1900-1924*, PhD-dissertation, Department of History of Science and Ideas, Uppsala University, 1988, p. 44

17 Freud Sigmund, "Das Unbewusste", *Gesammelte Werke. Zehnter Band, Werke aus den Jahren 1913-1917*, Imago Publishing, London, 1949, p. 274

18 Freud is discussing the problem of a topological model versus a dynamic one in "Die Traumdeutung", *Gesammelte Werke. Zweiter und Dritter Band*, Imago Publishing, London, 1942, p. 614-626 and in "Das Unbewusste", p. 270-275.

the unconscious and one for the conscious. These had to be separated from each other, since the original unconscious source to the conscious is not removed when the conscious thought arises.
There was a problem to give words to this mechanism, and Freud was after a better metaphor that could free the model from the topological concreteness and that yet let there be two separated stages of the perception process. He decided to try the photographic metaphor.

The photograph and the human subject is intertwined in a graphically rhetoric and delightfully mystified analogy between the human unconscious/conscious and the negative/positive relation of the photograph:

A rough but not inadequate analogy to this supposed relation of conscious to unconscious activity might be drawn from the field of ordinary photography. The first stage of the photograph is the 'negative'; every photographic picture has to pass through the 'negative process', and some of these negatives which have held good in examination are admitted to the 'positive process' ending in the picture.[19]

The conscious and the unconscious cannot spontaneously reach each other and communicate with each other. But to avoid the topological explanation, where the unconscious would have been spatially located in one place and consciousness located on another, Freud chose to use the photographic metaphor where the process of imprinting, developing and projection is used to describe the flow of information within he human mind.

It is not a very good metaphor – it contains several fallacies. But the important thing here is how photography, once again, was made into a model for the mechanism of the mind, and that the unconscious was explained by a visual paradigm and foremost described by visual terms. The unconscious was for Freud, as also for Draper and most early psychologists, seen as an archive of imprints, or in Freud's own words:

"The index value of the unconscious has far outgrown its importance as a property."[20]

As much as the unconscious was defined in terms of photography, photography thereby was defined in terms of the unconscious, and photo theory has made great use of this, especially during surrealism, but also later. And I will at last hastily give some examples of how the sense of the quasi-otherness has lived on through time.

Postmodern out-of-body-ness

19 "Eine grobe, aber ziemlich angemessens Analogie dieses supponierten Verhältnisses der bewussten Tätigkeit zur unbewussten bietet das Gebiet der gewönlichen Photographie. Das erste Stadium der Photographie ist das Negativ; jedes photographische Bild muss den 'Negativprozess' durchmachen, und einige dieser Negative, die in der Prüfung gut bestanden haben, werden zu dem 'Positivprozess' zugelassen, der mit dem Bilde endingt." Freud, Sigmund, "Einige Bemerkungen über den Begriff des Unbewussten in der Psychoanalyse", *Gesammelte Werke. Achter Band, Werke aus den Jahren 1909-1913*, Imago Publishing, London, 1948, p. 436 Sarah Kofman has parallelled Freud's usage of the photographic metaphor to Marx's usage of the camera obscura metaphor. Kofman Sara, "Freud - Der Fotoapparat" inWolf Herta (ed.), *Paradigma Fotografie. Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters*, Band I, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2002

20 "Der Wert des Unbewussten als Index hat seine Bedeutung als Eigenschaft bei weitem hinter sich gelassen." Freud, Sigmund, "Einige Bemerkungen über den Begriff des Unbewussten in der Psychoanalyse", *Gesammelte Werke. Achter Band, Werke aus den Jahren 1909-1913*, Imago Publishing, London, 1948 (1942), p. 438. English transl. from *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XII (1911-13)*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1964, p. 266

The myth of photography's autonomy, the close connection to the bodily functions and to the uncontrollable unconscious drive, the mystic connections to a bodily dimension or an ***other to which I relate*** also made it highly interesting for postmodern theorists, exemplified here by two theorists, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

It is the space this otherness opens up between viewer - or reality and picture - that attracts most of their attention when discussing the photographic medium. The connection to the unconscious is not explicit, but the sense of, as a viewer, being at an intermediate space between image and oneself, present but unknown and unexplainable, is something that is constantly stressed.

In the case of Barthes this intermediate region between viewer and picture is dictaded by time and the fact that time has elapsed leaving a dimension of contingency to every photographic picture. The physical trace of an object, leaving its imprint on the light sensitive surface, has been given many different names throughout the historiography of photo theory and is still often present in discussions of the effects of the photographic picture, where it is usually made into the static pole from which the feeling of photography's captivity in contingency emanates. This trace of a physical body is commonly referred to as the *index* of the photograph, with a reference to Charles S. Peirce's semiology[21] or to Barthes's discussion of the photograph's *noeme* or its *that-has-been*.[22] Because of this indexicality all photographs are, as Alan Sekula with reference to Peirce once expressed it, "fundamentally grounded in contingency".[23]

Roland Barthes resembles in *Camera Lucida* the photograph to a sort of: " … ectoplasm of "what-had-been": neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch".[24]

And when the space opens up between the picture and the viewer it is often described just like this - as doing so with an effect of vertigo, as something of an out-of-body-experience. This act is obviously not able to explain solely by the iconographic qualities of the photograph. It is rather to be explained by photography's ability to materialise things from an otherplace: it is the emanation of a ghost, but it is also a transition to a contact with another dimension that is present somewhere, but that is not entirely reachable.

The same cryptic otherplaceness-vocabulary can, for example, be found in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* where she speaks about the photograph as a "reality of the second degree".[25] But where Sontag speaks about another dimensional yet material reality which could be accessed or at least comprehended, both Barthes and Derrida focus on the photograph's ability to transit the viewer to a place in no-mans-land located somewhere between image and reality in Barthes's case, and a place which Derrida describes as a ghostly limbo between picture and referent. The experience is again depicted as an occult physical transition:

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21 For an investigation whether this reference is just or unjust, see: Elkins, James, *Photography Theory*, New York, 2007, p. 130ff.

22 Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre Claire*), Vintage, London, 2000 (1980), p. 77

23 Sekula, Alan, "Photography Between Labour and Capital" in Buchloh, Benjamin H.D, and Wilkie, Robert (eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948 – 1968: Photographs by Leslie Shedden*, Halifax, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983, p. 218

24 Barthes, p. 87

25 Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London, 2008 (1977), p. 52

This is a 'return of the dead' whose spectral arrival in the space of the photogramme well resembles an emission or emanation. Already a sort of hallucinating metonomy: it is something else, a bit come from the other (from the referent) which is found in me, in front of me but also in me like a bit of me (since the referential implication is also intentional and noematic; it belongs neither to the sensible body nor to the medium of the photogramme).[26]

This quote directly describes the effect of the feeling of quasi-otherness. It is the tension of photography's resistance to embodiment and its simultaneous resistance of intellectualisation that is the essence of Derrida's lived experience with the photograph.

Perhaps we want to embody the camera view. But it simply has to be an other to which we relate. And, simultaneously, we are a bit scared to the dimension it opens. Especially of that which is simultaneously known and unknown that haunts our minds.

26 Derrida, Jacques, "The deaths of Roland Barthes", in Silverman, Hugh J., *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty, Continental Philosophy I*, Routledge, New York/London, 1988, p. 282