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The venomous potential of photographic images

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Photography theory has long been captured in an intellectual system of semiotics. Scholars have been talking about referents and signs as if they are actually existent certainties not constructed through an intellectual process of systematization. To see relations between these dualizing poles has long been treated as if this was the ultimate solution for us to be able to say something about our relation to reality through photography.

In this treatment of photographic material, a dimension of the way the photographic images really affect us, in a corporeal sense, is lost. The central problem with the semiotic perspective on photography is that photography is assumed to be a system that is separated from our bodies and our corporeal interactions with reality.¹ In my opinion the divide between the constructed, photographic image-world and reality must be narrowed in order to approach and understand photography's full potential.

At the close of the 19th century, Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer proposed a theory on alternative principles of magic. Frazer pointed out how a certain type of magic that he called *contagious magic* depended on the principle where two objects that had been in contact with each other continued to be affected by the other after the physical bond had been removed.² This contagious principle is present in voodoo: according to voodooist belief, acts impacting made to a hair that has been picked from a person's hairbrush also impact the same person's physical body now remote from the hair in time and place. This indexical relationship that enables the magic principle is also true for photography that shares the same function as physical trace from an object.³

Indexicality is a crucial term for photography in many ways. The indexical relation is responsible for the mythical belief in photography's role as objective "truth teller". As such, it is at the very heart of discussions on photography's relation to reality and hence on our use of photography in order to understand reality. The fact that light rays have bounced off the actual photographed object and then further into the camera, where it has made a physical imprint on the light sensitive surface or the digital sensors, is a fact that seems to be hard to surmount in theoretical reflections on photography of any kind.⁴ But are photographs really places where changes of reality can be made? The act of burning a dictator's photographic portrait won't make him burn in real life, will it? If I reframe the question: Can

¹ "Corpoethetics" is Christopher Pinney's term for photography's embodied and corporal aesthetics as opposed an aesthetics that over-cerebralises and over-textualises the images". Pinney, Christopher, *Photos of the Gods: The printed image and political struggle in India* (OUP: Oxford, 2004).

² Frazer, James G., *The Golden Bough: Studies in Magic and Religion*, in (2nd edn., Macmilan: London, 1900) (first pub. 1890). p. 9-10.

³ I have elsewhere written about the relation between magic principles, voodoo and photography. See Goysdotter, *Impure Vision. American staged Art Photography of the 1970s*, (Nordic Academic Press: Lund, 2013).

⁴ See for example the discussions in Elkins, James (ed.), *Photography Theory* (Routledge: New York, 2007).

changes be made to the world through the use of manipulation techniques on photographic material? This question is much easier to answer in positive terms. Retouching, staging, and selection are all methods tied to a photographic practice that enables us to make retouches to reality - or at least our outlooks on that reality when it comes to expectations, norms, standards, etc. Change in one end of the photographic makes changes in the other, a principle that - again - owes to photography's indexicality. This mechanism that relies on cause and effect is, however, still dependent on the duality between reality and representation to some extent. We still have two intermingled but distinguishable levels - a quasi-duality. What happens if we takes it one step further from here?

The New Orleanean author Robert Tallant wrote a seminal book on the voodoo culture in 1946. As part of the last chapter, Henry Allen, a waiter at a New Orleans hotel, was interviewed on his opinion about voodoo. Allen said: "I believe this: I believe if these hoodoo people can get to you they can put stuff in your drink or your food. (...) But I don't believe any hoodoo - or voodoo, whatever you call it - can harm if the *fixer* lives across the river or ten miles away or anything like that. I think it's all poison."⁵ Let me for a moment instead elaborate on photography as poison - leaving the harmful and negative aspects of poison aside, and instead dwelling on the mechanisms of the process of poisoning. First a distinction between poison and venom must be made. Venoms are toxins that are injected through a bite or a sting, then acting as poisons within the stung body. Poisons are ingested or absorbed. A poisonous animal can only poison a human being if this human being eats or touches it. It is thus the delivery method that distinguishes one from the other. The process of being poisoned, where the poisoned-to-be - at least theoretically - is rather active when it comes to interaction with the poisonous object, stands in contrast to the more passive reception of venomous poisoning. Here, a vessel carrying the venomous poison attacks and induces our bodies with it through a syringe of some sort.

One can elaborate on whether the effect of exposure to a photograph is more like poisoning - an absorption or digestion presupposing that the photograph has the greater passivity in this process? Or, if it is more of an attack, where the viewer is infused by a message, emotion or the like, without actively seeking it? Of course, one could also think of a situation where we seek the syringe of photography. Where we walk into a room full of potentially poisonous vessels - a photographic exhibition maybe - provocatively bare wristed, hoping for some of the photographs to attack us and change our worlds. If we take the toxin analogy to Roland Barthes' seminal little book *Camera Lucida* we there clearly recognize the venomous effect of photography in Barthes's concept of *punctum*. In Barthes' words, a certain detail of the photographic image "pricks" or "bruises" the onlooker when the function of punctum is active. Barthes also gives an example of an image that only "shouts" but fails to wound.⁶

⁵ Tallant, Robert, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, (Pelican Publishing Company: Gretna, 2003) (first pub. 1946), p. 246.

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Vintage: London, 2000) (first pub. 1980.), p. 27 and p. 41.

The passive, poisonous effect of photography is much more present in photographic theory than the aspect of photography's uncontrollable agency. The viewpoint of photography as a passive, yet complex, information source is closely related to the more commonly discussed visual levels of photography where "visual literacy" is of central importance. The onlooker is supposed to act as a reader who deciphers a photographic message, extracting historical facts as from a complex text. Michael Lesy suggests the ambitions of such a "reading" of photography:

"The multiple truths embedded in a single photograph - public and private fears and assumptions, aspirations and convictions that lie just beneath an image's surface - are like the parts of a machine, waiting to be activated by a viewer's gaze. Blink once, blink twice, look then look again, and the machine begins to transmit messages."⁷

Though probably useful in historical research, the boring aspects of treating photography as "visual texts that have to be interrogated, unpacked, unfolded, opened up, and opened out", as Lesy describes them, is devastating to photography's potential as art. Photography is hard to capture and identify owing to its many different usages and its terrifically large impact on culture - all the way from science data to Facebook profile pictures. It is perhaps unnecessary to find a way to discuss photography enabling us to combine the many roles of photography, but if the text-perspective is left to dominate the approaches to what a photograph is, important factors on photographic potential are missed out. One such problem is highlighted through the voodoo analogy above: the question of control.

In Lesy's description of how we engage with photographic material we as beholders are in control whether to engage with the photograph or not. We activate them. We interrogate, unpack, unfold, and open them up - but what about their potential agency?

Les Krims, an art photographer that is commonly referred to as one of the staged American photographers of the 1970s, has expressed his view on how photography autonomously works on the beholder in the following way:

The light oscillations composing a photographic illusion—the variegated distribution of wavelengths of light reflected from a photographic image—enter the brain through the eyes. Light can stimulate through chemical & electrical reactions, the formation of substances in the brain, and result in a memory—a permanent change affecting an area in the brain. Viewing light reflected from a changing 3D world can have the same result: memory. Therefore, light reflected from a stable, two dimensional illusion of reality, and light reflected directly from the flux of a 3D world, can similarly affect the brain (looking at a photograph is, after all, a real-time visual experience). As both can be the result of fabrication (to one degree or another), and it's impossible to tell from the photographic illusion itself what was or was not fabricated, emanations from either may result in memories—the photograph may have, as The Shadow used to say (a character in an old radio show), 'The power to cloud men's minds.' ... Arguably, a photographic imaging device (camera) is the best instrument there is to make images to cloud men's minds.⁸

Not only is an understanding of the infusion of the real world and the photographic world, as Krims describes, a necessity in order not to drain photography of its power both as art object and as an object that impacts our daily corporeal practices. It will probably also become necessary in order to be able to theorize on the contemporary usage of photography as an embodied practice. In an online world where photographic images are communicated and

⁷ Lesy, Michael, "Visual Literacy", *The Journal of American History*, June 2007, pp. 143-153, p. 144.

⁸ Goysdotter, *Impure vision*, p. 146.

consumed at a rapid speed, there is no time for lining out symbolic relations between referent and sign, or deciphering a presumed photographic text. The intellectual paradigm that Constance Classen has called “Western visualism”⁹ that too a high degree is based on the ability to see, visualize, and that advocates an approach to reality as a logically constructed place that we can understand by reading it, is under reconstruction in the globalized world. The contemporary immediate and corporeal usage of photographic images will, in the future, make it unsustainable to even talk about an image-world and a real world as separate spheres. Instead we must understand reality as redefined as partly virtual. Mark Hansen writes about “mixed reality” as a contemporary alternative to the concept of virtual reality that to him symbolizes an old generation of the concept where the biological body is thought of as totally separated from a visual experience that informs the mind.¹⁰ In the same way, I suggest we look at photography not as a simulacrum separating us from the lived-world experience, but in a sense where images are part of a new definition of reality that is partly virtual. Photography is not something we read but something we live.

⁹ Classen, Constance, *Worlds of sense. Exploring the senses in history and across culture* (Routledge: London, 1993), p.6.

¹⁰ Hansen, Mark B. N., *Bodies in Code. Interfaces with Digital Media*, (Routledge: New York, 2006).