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Photography and Abstraction

Introduction

John Beck and David Cunningham

After explaining the technical processes involved in making daguerreotypes, stereoscopes, and photographs to his readers in *The Atlantic* in 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes allowed himself the liberty of ‘a few glimpses at a conceivable, if not a possible future’ produced by the new photographic technologies:

Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. (Holmes 1859)

Holmes’ assessment of a future in which the image supersedes the object is often cited, and with good reason, since he manages to catch in this brief sketch the violent emancipation of the photographic image from the now redundant world of things.¹ The image, though, is not free for long since the act of taking the picture does not liberate at all but ensnares the image in a new visual economy. Nature will soon be stripped of its fruit, Holmes predicts, since ‘[m]en will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth’. While matter is ‘fixed and dear’, form is ‘cheap and transportable’; the asset-stripping of things by the camera allows for the acquisition and accumulation of these abstracted forms that ‘will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries’. A ‘comprehensive system of exchanges’ will be necessary,

Holmes continues, ‘so that there may grow up something like a universal currency of these bank-notes, or promises to pay in solid substance, which the sun has engraved for the great Bank of Nature’ (Holmes 1859). The imperial gusto with which Holmes imagines the world being flayed of value is only equalled by the efficiency with which that value is inventoried and put to work in a system of exchange.

What is then, from one perspective, an apparently irreducible photographic attentiveness to particularity, to the capturing indexically of this singular moment, this thing, this person, this place, appears from another as a dividing up of the world itself into a series of abstract grid-like units, phantasmatically projecting some all-encompassing and flattened ‘global’ space of universality. It is this economy of photographic vision that relates it also to those forms of abstraction inherent to the fetish-like character of commodities, which are ‘both particular, sensual objects ... *and* values, moments of an abstractly homogenous substance that is mathematically divisible and measurable (for example, in terms of time and money)’ (Postone 1993: 175; see also Cunningham 2012). If photographic technology is, then, for Holmes, a license to print money, it is so in the sense that the photographic image, in its endless reproducibility and interchangeability, and in its promissory value as the symbolic substitute for something material yet absent, seems to invite the same rapacity and acquisitiveness as the money form itself.

Of course, for photographs to work like currency, the image must have been abstracted *from* something, and Holmes’ understanding holds firm to the impression – the engraving or inscription – that the world makes upon the image. The mark of light is for Holmes the sign of value and as such presupposes a relation between thing and

image that cannot, however, necessarily be guaranteed. French philosopher François Laruelle, for example, suggests that photographs are not indexically related to the things they represent; instead, a photograph merely shows what a thing looks like when it is photographed. Perhaps this is not so far away from Holmes' notion of photographs as currency, though, in the sense that photographs have more in common with other photographs than they do with the things they are erroneously said to depict. The problem with this account politically is that it relieves photography and photographs of any attachment to the world – an anxiety which the specific but in some ways still obscure 'abstractions' of digitalization may well be said to have exacerbated - much in the way that financial markets are said to have uncoupled themselves from any relation to 'real' money (the abstraction of an abstraction) even though this abstraction continues to produce very real effects.

At the same time, it is this question of abstraction's relation *to* reality that perhaps most obviously cuts across the antagonistic disciplinary domains claimed by those two 'chattering ghosts' which the late Allan Sekula suggested haunted photography in general: 'that of bourgeois science and that of bourgeois art' (Sekula 2004: 122). If the former, however, manifests itself in the imperialist universalism of Holmes's 'great Bank of Nature', and in an instrumental rationalism that construes the world as an ensemble of abstracted (and, thereby, possessable and administrable) objects, the latter has often been assigned the historic task of resisting, or even redeeming, the violences of such objectification through the affective or sensuous particularity of an aesthetic experience which was, for much mid-twentieth-century modernism, ironically said to be guaranteed precisely *by* its abstraction from any representational functions, if not, indeed, from worldliness itself. Whereas, then, in the first mode

photography is customarily associated with broader forms of ‘real’ social, scientific and technological abstraction – themselves artistically and critically mediated in, for example, those kinds of strategies of repetition and sequence typical of the work of Ed Ruscha, Warhol and the Bechers during the 1960s (see Roberts 2010) – in the second mode it is, paradoxically, an appeal to photography’s capacity for a *specifically artistic* abstraction that is as often as not mobilised, in the name of an irreducible singularity, against what it is the deracination of an otherwise variegated and richly concrete reality under conditions of societal abstraction and a disenchantment of the world.

Photography’s relation to abstraction, then, is complex and contested (Krauss 1989, Rexer 2009, Beck 2011, Cunningham 2012). What is the nature of such abstraction? Is there, say, any relation between formalist abstraction – that is, a rejection or refusal of figuration (most usually identified with modernist painting) – and the real abstractions of capitalism? Is photography capable of giving form to unseen relationships, undetectable currents, flows and networks? Can photography be made to critically address its historical and contemporary role as a key technology for the capture and control of data? What consequences might digitalization have for a reimagining of abstraction today? Does photography only mark the passage of time, or can it, through abstraction, anticipate times to come? The purpose of the articles collected here is to address some aspects of abstraction as it pertains to photography, though there is no consensus here as to what constitutes abstraction nor, indeed, is there a common view of photography as such. There is, however, as there is in Holmes’ speculations concerning the future of photography, a shared sense of photography -- as apparatus, as practice, as particular images -- as a means of

engaging with the political implications of abstraction in its formal, social and philosophical dimensions.

It is in line with such a political attentiveness to different forms of abstraction that this issue of *photographies* opens with David Bate's 'Daguerre's Abstraction', which, against the return to abstraction announced in much contemporary art photography, makes its own return to one of the earliest of all photographs of urban life. Taken by Daguerre from a Parisian rooftop in the late 1830s, and generally celebrated as the first known photographic recording of a human being, Bate notes the significance of the fact that it is also an image of an exchange of labour and of class difference. In this way he relates the 'abstraction' of the shoe-shiner in Daguerre's image, who appears as a blurred and ghostly figure by virtue of the very real and physical activity demanded by his labour, to both Marx's famous account of capital's abstraction of labour in general and the psychoanalytic conception of negation: the simultaneous absence and presence generated by denial or disavowal.

One of the central points of Bate's essay is to show how, as in the daguerreotype, forms of abstraction in fact belong 'to photography from the beginning', so complicating the conventional oppositions between abstraction and representation posited in most standard histories of photography (and histories of art photography in particular). Similarly, David Cunningham's article addresses the thorny issue of the relationship between abstraction and realism in the sequencing of photographs according to certain, often novelistic and epic ideas of narrative form. Setting out from the opening text of Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*, and exploring the antinomies of realism as these are manifested in competing tendencies towards what Georg Lukács

termed 'narration' and 'description', the essay concludes by suggesting the ways in which it is the irreducible *actuality of abstraction* within the concrete everydayness of capitalism that means that *all* photographic 'realism' is intrinsically 'haunted' by a certain spectre of what Marx described as the real abstraction of that 'self-moving substance which is Subject', in the 'shape of money', or of capital itself.

Complementing Cunningham's focus on photography's relation to the representational problems posed by a capitalist 'presentism', Joanna Zylińska turns to photography's relation to the future, addressing how photography might approach the 'abstraction of extinction' and the notion of a future 'after the human' in the here and now. Photography's capacity to produce the effect of arrested temporality means that photography, rather than being fundamentally about death, as Roland Barthes would have it, is also a mechanism for making cuts in time in order to 'bring forth things' and 'make life'. Reflecting on the contemporary popularity of images of ruined modernity, Zylińska suggests that such images provide a way to imagine the end of capitalism, even if it is through a projected planetary extinction. Photography's encounter with time, then, moves across scales, from the past of old photographs to the future anterior, the what will have been.

Zylińska considers the prospect of a post-human photography for which there is no viewer; the data gathering of satellites and drones that congeals into digital imagery is already, in a sense, a process of visionless 'seeing'. Discussing Laura Kurgan's work on images produced by commercial satellites, John Beck asks how modernist abstraction and its resistance to representation might provide insights into the myth of 'raw' data as new mode of authenticity and veracity in image-making. Kurgan's work

Monochrome Landscapes is partly made in dialogue with a print by colour field painter Ellsworth Kelly, though Kurgan's work is resolutely content-led in ways that would be antithetical to Kelly's formalist purism. Yet the resistance in modernist abstraction to instrumentalised and degraded modes of representation might provide a model for challenging the overbearing claims made for the omniscience of contemporary digital surveillance technologies.

In his contribution, Andrew Fisher takes up a number of threads from the preceding essays in order to identify and explore three key ways in which questions of abstraction have been and continue to be associated with photography: first, the tradition of photographs that, in one way or another, are taken to 'be' abstract (explored by both Beck and Bate); second, the technical-conceptual abstractions embedded in and structuring of photographic apparatuses (as discussed by Beck and Zylinska); and, third, the invisible but determining forms of abstraction central to capitalism and the shaping of photography as a technical-historical form (which are foregrounded in Cunningham's and Bate's contributions). Seeking to think these different, if interconnected, accounts of the significance of abstraction for photography in relation to one another, Fisher focuses on a variety of issues concerning photographic *scale* that have to date, he argues, been critically neglected and yet which are of profound importance to making a number of relatively obscure and intertwined presuppositions that are harboured in particular discourses of photographic abstraction explicit.

In the final contribution, John Roberts explores what might be termed the *absolute* abstraction of photography posited by the currently much-discussed writings of

Laruelle. Countering the latter's attempt to sever photography's relations to all questions of the real, Roberts both critically traces the roots of such a position in Laruelle's wider (non-)philosophy and demonstrates the ultimate implausibility of his attempt to understand photography as the formation of an 'unlimited theoretical space' at a perpetual ideational distance from the world. As Roberts concludes, while we might well need 'a theory of abstraction *in* photography' – a project to which, to a greater or lesser extent, all the contributions to this special issue are committed – what is required is not a philosophy of photography that would dismantle all links between abstraction and the real, but one that would instead grasp photographs themselves as concrete abstractions, socially embedded signs that are subject to, and a product of, historically shifting processes of social and technological reproduction.

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Notes

¹ Sekula (2004), Beshty (2009) and Baker (2009), for example, each cite Holmes in relation to photography and abstraction.