

Missing Jennifer. From image-object to digital product

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Abstract

After the arrival of the post-internet era we cannot distinguish any more between the life we develop outside and inside the Internet, offline and online. We are learning how to live between the body we inhabit and the images which represents us in the web. In this context, images have started to develop new meanings for the viewer. These meanings are determined by the new circuits in which we insert them: the social networks. In this way, we first see how the image transforms itself into an image-object and then into a digital product.

Keywords: Image, post-Internet, social networks, algorithm, filtering, digital, post-production, World Wide Web.



Constant Dullaart, *Jennifer_in_Paradise* (2013). Restored digital image re-distributed online with stenographically encrypted message

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I still wonder if you felt the world change there on that beach. The fact that reality would be more mouldable, that normal people could change their history, brighten up their past [...] you were young, and the world was young, as it still naïvely believed in the authenticity of the photograph. Sometimes, when I am anxious about the future of our surveilled, computer-mediated world, when I worry about cultural imperialism and the politics behind software design, I imagine myself travelling back in time, just like the Terminator, to that important moment in technological world history, there on the beach in Bora Bora. And just sit there with you, watching the tide roll away.

Constant Dullaart
A letter to Jennifer Knoll (2013)

Almost 30 years ago, Jennifer was enjoying her holidays in Bora Bora with her boyfriend John. One of those mornings on the beach, Jennifer sat on the sand and looked at the impressive island of To'opua, feeling the majesty of nature – an intimate moment which was captured by John. It was a simple gesture that would not only be relevant for the couple's personal history but for the lives of many others. What made Jennifer and John Knoll different was that, at the time, both worked together in Industrial Light & Magic, the visual effects division of the film production company Lucasfilm. Due to his job, John was one of the first people who had come in contact with the newly created image editing programs. Since he was delighted with the potential possibilities of photo-editing, he created his own programme in collaboration with his brother Thomas: Photoshop. In the 1980s, if users wanted to manipulate a photograph with digital means, they first needed a scanner to transform the image format from analogue to digital. When John was ready to scan an image to demonstrate the features of the programme, there she was: the photograph of Jennifer in paradise, the image that was to become the first Photoshop-edited colour photograph and was included as a sample picture in the programme's first editions. We all know today what happened to Photoshop after this humble beginning: the programme became the most popular image editing software in history. With its worldwide dissemination, it allowed anyone with access to a computer to transform images and so, in a way, create a new reality.

This story reached the ears of the artist Constant Dullaart who, in his work *Jennifer_in_Paradise* (2013), attempted to recover the first digital version of the photograph in order to reveal its cultural importance. But Dullaart could not achieve a complete restoration of the image (which had been manipulated on countless occasions) because it had been buried some place in our digital village. The artist was at least able to obtain a blurred copy through screenshots. Dullaart maintains that this photograph should belong to the public domain, given its relevance. Even though the election of the photograph was casual, *Jennifer_in_Paradise* contains in itself the birth of the world of images –digital, shifting and easy to manipulate– in which we are immersed today.

Until that moment in 1987, reality was something physical, something that we could see, touch and capture with an analogue camera. When images became digital and intangible –as a consequence of their transformation in code and pixels– they somehow emancipated from us. Photos became more self-sufficient than in any period before as a result of their greatly enhanced ability to be manipulated and to shape parallel realities in our computers¹. But only two years later, in 1989, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, a system designed to share documents which expanded the use of the Internet to the general public (in the early 1970s, the first computers networked thanks to Arpanet, the forerunner of the Internet). The sum of the Internet and the web started off the worldwide interconnection of computers along the 1990s. In the dawn of the World Wide Web, the majority of users were passive –that is, they received information that had been previously uploaded by others onto the web. It was only around the year 2000 that the user became an active participant. The web 2.0 was born and the first global interactive communities appeared: the social networks, where users could publish information easily and

handily. This is how we started to interact socially in these spaces until today when, in the second decade of the 21st century, most of the people living in countries with Internet access have experienced some kind of communication with other users through these networks². Since the moment that we transferred a part of our social interactions online, we began to live a part of our lives on the Internet. In these spaces we communicate through texts, images and videos. If we focus on the image, the birth of web communication involved the circulation and the massive exhibition of manipulated images altered by software such as Photoshop or, later, Instagram. In this way, these transformed photographs left the private computers and began to shape a collective imaginary in which they mingled with unedited photos.

This fact entails that contemporary citizens with Internet access have started to suffer the same process of transformation underwent by Jennifer in 1987. In digital photography, the physical world –outside the web– and the imaginary worlds –retouched or made up– are mingling as we have never seen before in the analogue image. This is due to the accessibility and the speed that the new technologies allow in the creation of manipulated digital images by the general public. In this way, our online and offline lives interweave, questioning what is real and what is not. Nowadays, we are as much our physical body as the images with which we identify on the World Wide Web (manipulated or not).

2

The fusion of our offline and online lives has created what many theorists have called a post-internet or post-digital age: a moment in which it no longer makes sense to distinguish between real life and the Internet as its reflection³. We are pictures inserted into the World Wide Web (in particular in the social networks) and we have started to identify the rest of the users with their images, too. For example, we know and keep contact with people only through the Internet. We do not see them physically as often but we know how they look thanks to the visual information that they publish on the web. In the professional field, companies ask their potential employees to provide their social networks addresses when they are recruiting. Additionally, young people have replaced the use of mobile phones with social media. Nowadays, they add their friends and peers to these social spaces instead of asking them for their mobile phone numbers. Not only have we become visual representations on the Internet: when we walk on the street and the surveillance systems (installed in an ever growing number of cities) record us, or when the Google cameras capture images for their digital maps, they transform us into images, too.

In this essentially visual life, images are beginning to acquire new meanings as a consequence of their circulation through these social channels. In this new context, we can point out two values of the image which can seem contradictory. On one hand, the digital image represents us. We circulate images that portray us (photographs about our life or our personal appearance), and others perceive us through them. In this sense, the image has representation value –we identify with it. So, on the one side, we believe in the authenticity of the image, we lend it credibility. But, at the same time,

the image is also a manipulation. We know that it can be retouched and/or altered. In this sense, we are aware that we can perceive others through imaginary or filtered constructions of their lives. As these constructions are separated from their original referent, they start to be real. For example, if we only see people through their online social platforms and we have not seen them physically in years, they can make us believe whatever they want, thanks to programmes such as Instagram or through self-marketing texts.

3



Still from Hito Steyerl's video *How not to be seen* (2013).
HD video file, single screen, 14min.

When an image is in its post-production phase, it is more clearly transformed into an object (digital, about ourselves, but an object). This fact leads artist and writer Hito Steyerl to affirm that when we have visual contact with an image, we identify with its materiality (before reaching this conclusion, Steyerl also denies the existence of an original photograph on which copies are based). In other words, we do not identify with the image as something that represents us or that reflects reality. The image is not something subjective that we interpret in our minds. Instead, we identify with images as something objective and material:

But what if the truth is neither in the represented nor in the representation? What if the truth is in its material configuration? What if the medium is really a message? [...] To participate in an image –rather than merely identify with it– could perhaps abolish this relation. This would mean participating in the material of the image as well as in the desires and forces it accumulates. How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but [...] a fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears –a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence? As such, the image is –to use yet another phrase of Walter Benjamin– without expression. It doesn't represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other –a thing like you and me (Steyerl, 2010).

Steyerl urges us to replace our concept of representation with the idea of participation. In this way we participate in the image, an image that is couched in affects but which is, in the end, an object that does not represent reality. A sequence of *How not to be seen* (2013), one of Steyerl's works, can clarify our transformation into image-objects. In this video, Steyerl teaches us how to escape from a world made of images like ours, a world which is permanently being photographed and recorded by surveillance cameras. In a class format, the artist explains for example how the resolution of the world's objects is measured when institutional or economic powers take aerial images. She also enumerates which are the privileged spaces that have the right to remain invisible and not be transformed into images –unlike the rest of locations and citizens. In fact, as Steyerl shows us, this is the only option we have if we wish to escape our transformation into image and video files: to become invisible. This is the reason why the artist teaches us how not to be seen by aerial cameras and how to disappear in front of an audience. One of the techniques to become invisible is to 'disguise'. Steyerl thus appears before a chroma key onto which images are being projected⁴. The moment the artist applies paint of the same colour as the chroma key on her face, her cheeks and nose start to mix with the background until she becomes invisible. In a world made of images, if we transform ourselves into the projection screen, we are camouflaged. This simple gesture, in which Steyerl transforms from subject to object in a performative act, encapsulates the very complexity of the image-object: once we capture an image and we insert it into an editing software (such as Photoshop or similar programmes for photo and video editing), we can be cut out, coloured, duplicated, blurred or erased. In this way, we transform ourselves into nothing but an object –just like Steyerl. It is a transformation in which we can turn into both still and moving images; both can be manipulated and put into circulation with similar software.

At this point, the image becomes somewhat deceptive. It behaves and acts as an object, but at the same time we still identify with it, especially when the image captures fragments of our lives. If we follow Steyerl's argument, we participate in the image, endowing it with affective values (be it a selfie or a picture of our holidays). And this fact has consequences. Today we live between our body and the image-object; we inhabit somewhere between the body and something with which we still identify but behaves like an object. If we go a step further, we identify with something that behaves like a product: an image-object-product controlled by the great corporations. These companies are the ones that set the rules of the game on the Internet. I will now discuss this point.

4

It is nothing new that products in general, and images in particular, embody their forms of production and distribution. As a consequence of this, they reproduce the political and economic forces behind them. When Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord formulated their theories on the effects of mass images (Benjamin in 1936 in the beginning of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, and Debord in the 1967 with the consolidation of the visual entertainment for the mass society) the division between the production and the distribution of cultural goods was still clearly

differentiated from their reception. The process was as follows: images were produced by an economic and corporate power (for example, Hollywood film production companies). Later, these images were watched by a public who did not participate either in their creation or distribution –the viewers only took part in the process at the moment when the work was being exhibited. Benjamin or Debord would not have believed the current image, which has gone a step further. Today's image embodies all these political and economic forces, but it is no longer seen by the public as something external in cinemas or televisions. This image has enmeshed into this society to the extent that the viewers identify personally and feel represented by them. It is a mass image on which the audience no longer projects itself as part of a daydream or as a way to idolize the star-system; rather, it is an image in which the public acquires the leading role. Today we are all part of the show thanks to the social networks. The process is as follows: we create the image-object with our production media (smartphones, digital cameras...). As we have seen before, we can manipulate it with post-production programmes and, as a consequence, create a brand new reality. Finally, we put the image in circulation on the social networks. This is how this object, that originally was singular, is now multiplied into hundreds or thousands of copies that will be seen by the same public who produces yet more images in the context of social platforms.

Giving the public the power to produce their own images implies in some way a democratisation of their production and distribution. But this democratisation carries a risk. Due to the fast pace in which audiences create and distribute their own digital photographs, the public as a creator can lose sight of the economic and political forces which still condition the making of an image. In addition, the wider accessibility to image creation and manipulation in the digital sphere entails that the process of production of an image, which was before clearly defined, is now blurred and less perceptible.

This problem has been explained by Jean-Luc Godard with a metaphor: the transition from recording with one eye through a viewfinder (as we did with analogue cameras) to recording with two eyes through the LCD screens at the back of digital devices or on smartphone screens. When the cameramen recorded with one eye, they were aware that there would be a necessary process before the image could be seen with both eyes. They knew that they were in the moment of the recording of a work and before them –in the case of a film– were the actors performing a scene. This step was clearly differentiated from the next –the viewing of the recorded images to select the best ones. After the editing process, the movie was distributed and exhibited to the public. In this way, the different steps of cinema production were clearly separated.

The writer and filmmaker Joshua Simon summarizes the well-known passage of Godard and updates it for our current context:

Godard's point was that a whole mode of production has disappeared, and with it a perspective that is no longer attainable [...]. From analogue to digital and from film to data chip, not only production and distribution have changed, but also the relation between imagination and visualisation. For Godard, the move to LCD preview screens [...] is a new mode of seeing. By shooting with two eyes we lost what the one shut eye obtained –historical perspective. As the closed eye negates the seeing one, the closed

eye projects the gap between production and distribution, acting and performance, [...] here and elsewhere. With the Selfie we encounter the gaze of two eyes that can only see themselves [...]. To paraphrase Susan Buck-Morss, what is missing from our current way of photographing is exactly the dialectics of seeing, which provides historical perspective. Taking the picture with two eyes, we are unable to envision an outside to neoliberal optics (Simon, 2014).

Even though we cannot see the political and economic forces as clearly as before, they are still there. Today the platforms where we distribute these images, the social networks, are the ones that contain many of the forces that will later be translated to the visual representations.

5

Understanding the media in which we circulate the image-object is essential. In the first place, we are referring to Facebook, the social network that concentrates the largest number of users. In many cases, when users talk about social networks, they are talking about Facebook. The worldwide expansion of this platform has been unequalled by others such as Twitter⁵. These spaces belong to multinational companies that establish the rules of the game in the interaction within their media. When I talk about game rules, I am referring to the algorithms that control the information flow which the users receive on their social pages. These algorithms select the postings that appear in our news feed –that is, in the main page of the social network. In this space, we are informed about our Facebook friends' social news, and we can see the texts and images that they have published recently. Our friends' newsfeeds are usually identified with how they are: for example we can see photographs of a meeting with friends or texts about some professional success.

Here is when the algorithm's lack of neutrality comes into play. While a social network such as Twitter does not use an algorithm to filter the newsfeed (we see what is being published live, with no intermediaries), Facebook does indeed: this company filters what the users share and what their friends will see in the newsfeed page. Algorithms are a list of instructions, in this case programmed by Facebook to select information. They are not public; we do not know exactly the criteria to which they abide. But after some time using Facebook, it is not difficult to infer that one of the criteria is the commercial. Of course, users are not Facebook clients (they interact on the social network for free, driven by their social instinct, and they fill the space with lots of personal information) –its clients are the advertisers. In other words, Facebook manipulates the content that each user receives in his news feed (based on the preferences that the user has previously expressed on the social network) to try, in the end, to sell him products.

This is only the most general economic implication of interacting in Facebook. In a recent article, the sociologist specialised in the web Zeynep Tufekci explains the political consequences of the Facebook algorithm. She does it in reference to the recent disturbances occurred in Ferguson⁶. Tufekci details how the lack of a filtering algorithm in Twitter caused the information concerning what was happening at Ferguson to be spread quickly through the publication of images and texts. In this way,

the Ferguson conflict situation was quickly disseminated among the users and, as a consequence, it first came to bear national and then international relevance⁷. While all this was happening on Twitter, nothing was being published on Facebook, but not because people were not publishing information about Ferguson –people were doing it indeed–, but because the algorithm of the social network did not allow this information to be published in the news feed.

Taking into account these examples, it is easier to understand the political and economic consequences that algorithms have in our daily lives. Zeynep Tufekci believes that, probably, if a social network such as Twitter (among others) would not have existed, the disturbances that took place in Ferguson would not have had the exposure they achieved:

This isn't about Facebook *per se* –maybe it will do a good job, maybe not– but the fact that algorithmic filtering, as a layer, controls what you see on the Internet [...] I'm not quite sure that without the neutral side of the Internet [...], we'd be having this conversation. [...] Ferguson is also a net neutrality issue [...]. How the internet is run, governed and filtered, is a human rights issue" (Tufekci, 2014a)

Along with these facts, I would like to mention what is already known by all of us: Facebook and other digital platforms facilitate the release of their users' private data to the NSA (National Security Agency) of the United States –as Edward Snowden's leaks revealed. Facebook has also conducted secret sociological experiments with the users as the object of study. The social network does this, again, without their permission. With all these examples on the table, the shortage of neutral spaces on the web is obvious.

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We can therefore affirm that the image-object that circulates in these social networks has been transformed into a product with which companies trade to achieve economic purposes. As we have just seen, this fact has political consequences. Then, what consequences does its transformation in a product have for the image in this context? Does the observation of the image-object-product change the way in which we see images in general?

If we state that visual creations embody their means of production and reproduce their values, might we possibly be getting used (with our daily visits to social networks and other platforms) to consuming images instead of contemplating them? This is nothing new. We can argue –returning to one of my previous examples– that the great Hollywood production film companies also work as corporations that pay attention to the law of supply and demand –in this sense, we were already consuming images which are products. Nevertheless, what is radically new is the intense dissemination and penetration of these images-objects-products into our lives. How they get into the screens of our computers at home, or into our smartphones when we are on the street, as a consequence of our great exposure to social networks. The space in which

we are getting used to seeing images is not a neutral one –although it may seem to be, due to the instantaneity that Godard mentioned. In this context, the image reproduces the economic value that it has, for example, for Facebook.

It is already 50 years ago that Marshall McLuhan stated “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 2001/1964). Still, McLuhan was much more optimistic about the technological media (physical examples such as a computer, or codes in the case of Google or the social networks). He saw them as beneficial extensions of men and women that would help them progress. Today, if we want this to be true, we need a truly democratic web, one which is not determined by the rules imposed by corporations in connivance with governments. As long as the web is governed by them, “Facebook is the message” or “Google is the message”.

In addition to this, we cannot forget the fact that we still feel an emotional and personal connection with images, as I argued in the beginning of this text. If we still identify with the image-object, and if the image-object has become a product in the social media, are we also partially a product? Is a part of our identity a product?

And for art? What implications does all this have? A public who is used to consuming images instead of contemplating them will look for different things when approaching art. Consequently, the omnipresence of the image-object-product is accustoming the viewer to a shallow gaze on the images (products). This type of vision is more a consumption than a reflective observation. In this way, viewers get accustomed to practice a gaze that stays in the surface of things, and this is what they do in front of art pieces in museums and other spaces (institutions which have their own political and economic set of implications, too). A spectator is thus born who sets aside the slow contemplation of his surroundings and, conversely, adopts a practical vision. A viewer who is oriented towards multitasking, who is used to scan but not to read, and who will have serious problems in his ability to concentrate in the short and long term. These effects are already evident and art needs reflection, not fast consumption. For all these reasons, we have to reflect on how we want to live in a world and an everyday reality which are already digital and made of images. And this, of course, concerns visual culture and the arts performe.

Notes

¹ Analogue images, with their materiality, formed realities as well. The conflict between what we call ‘real’, and the value of photography in relation to this reality was already present in the period of analogue images. Nevertheless, this conflict reaches its peak (so far) with digital photography, since these images are easier to manipulate than the analogue ones thanks to new technologies. In this sense, these images are much more connected with our present because their production processes are shorter and the circulation of the images is faster. For example, if a user takes a photograph, retouches it and publishes the result on the Internet, the process can last less than 10 minutes. The creation process and the distribution of analogue

photographs was considerably slower; therefore, a time gap was projected between the act of taking the photo and its circulation. As a consequence, analogue photographs were much more connected with the past (with this morning, with yesterday, with our last holidays) than digital images, which are much more connected with the present due to their instant creation.

² In September 2013, the Pew Research Institute estimated that 73% of the people with access to the Internet used the social networks. This fact can give evidence of the massive establishment of these social communications platforms. <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>

³ My intention is not to question the validity or 'reality' of the life that we developed on the Internet. In my view, all the things that we experience on the net are real –not only in the field of photography, which is the focus of this article. For example, if we receive an apology in an email, it is as valid as an apology pronounced face to face (although the second may probably seem more sincere). The same goes for the publication on the Internet of a digitally manipulated image that shows something that has not occurred outside the limits of the web. For example, an edited image showing a user visiting the Amazon rainforest when he has never been there. The photograph will become real in the sense that the rest of the users who are viewing that image will believe in its authenticity. That is, this photograph will create a new reality, one that will be valid in the sense that the rest of the users who observe it will take it as real, although it may never have taken place outside the web. In this sense, our life within the Internet is real, it does form realities in which we believe, but it is deceitful.

⁴ A chroma key is an audiovisual technique through which the characters of a scene or a program host are recorded in front of a vertical surface of a single colour (usually green or blue). Once the scene has been captured with the characters in front of the chroma key, the image is inserted in an editing program, where a different image is 'projected' onto the green area of the chroma. The result is a visual effect thanks to which we can now see the characters before a futuristic city, for example. What actually produces this effect is that, in the editing program, the colour of the chroma is cut out (erased) from the original image. In this way, a different image is projected in the 'empty' space behind the characters.

⁵ Other similar spaces for social interaction are Google+, Instagram or LinkedIn, among many others.

⁶ The Ferguson conflicts began August 9, 2014, after the death of Michael Brown, a young black man who was repeatedly shot by a white policeman, Darren Wilson. According to some witnesses, in the moment of his death, Brown was hands up, and was saying he was unarmed. His death triggered demonstrations in the area for the rest of the month.

⁷ Twitter is more neutral but it is not completely free of control. The social network only uses an algorithm in order to select and inform the users about the most popular themes at a certain moment, to show trends. But it does not use it to control the information that arrives to the user's main page.

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