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## Untimely Ripped (Against the Mass Image)

Sean Cubitt

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ABSTRACT: I take the Aristotelean view that the question for ethics is 'How should I live?' and the question for politics is "How are we supposed to live?" Aristotle's next step was to argue that in both instances, these are questions about the good life. These are fundamentally aesthetic questions. So let me advance as a hypothesis that the reason for doing any of the art, science and critique we undertake is happiness. The world we have is unhappy, so happiness depends on negating what is given to us as the world. That is what images do: they negate the world in order to produce pictures that are more more startling, richer, surer, more filled with meaning and more desirable than what we have to inhabit. Even images of unhappy events attempt to heal them. *An* image aspires to happiness. The *proliferation* of images is a different matter.

In bygone ages, images were scarce. The invention of the printing press began that proliferation of images that now preoccupies us. For fairly obvious reasons playing cards were the first printed goods in Europe – it's possible both Gutenberg and Dürer, the first master of intaglio printing, apprenticed with a man known only as The Master of the Playing Cards. A feature of his cards, here the Nine of Beasts, one of the mediaeval suits, was that each of the pips is a separate block, reused on different cards. This unit division of the image is a crucial stage in our story. We spend a lot of ink on the history of printed texts: printed images were at least as revolutionary. Photography was an interesting event in the history of printed images but it added nothing to their circulation until half-tone made photographs compatible with the industrial rotary lithographic presses that powered the 19th century boom in newspapers and magazines. Round 1920 photography connected to the rotary press via telegraph, reducing the dead time between investment and profit and laying the foundations for all subsequent electronic media. These three phases created the assemblage, now small enough to fit in my pocket, of the mass circulation of images. The new photographic ensemble of smartphone cameras and network communications captures, distributes, proliferates and aggregates images in immense numbers at immensely condensed speeds.

Today the multiplication and acceleration of recording and circulation sums up at stasis. When any image is exchangeable for any other, there is no longer any information or benefit to be gained from circulating more of them. Instead of negating the world, the mass production and exchange of images reproduces it in the form of its economic logic.

It takes labour to produce an image, and that labour is open to exploitation when the image is produced for exchange. As items in systems of exchange, the labour of making and the images themselves have to be easily equated with any other labour and every other image. To do that, the labour that made them has to be hidden in the image itself. In the mass, each image negates not only the world it pictures but the labour that made it. Images do this so they can exist. But because they exist apart from labour and the world, they have to stay the same, which is what we mean by the word 'exist'. This mass circulation of images cannot produce a lasting happiness because it replaces the unhappy but changeable world with objects that cannot change.

Even though the individual image's negation of the world lies at the centre of its operation, mass proliferation of images promptly produces a positive: its own existence. Mass imaging's reproduction of the world negates the single image's negation of the unhappy world. It does not replace the unhappiness of exploitation and commodity exchange, because it reproduces it. The mass image – the huge composite picture of the world which is being assembled in databases at Microsoft, Instagram and Google – goes far beyond the single image even though it retains some of its defining qualities. The mass image employs humans to produce a universe of image-commodities that we and others exchange, reproduce and consume. In the era of industrial production, we made houses, tools and clothing because the artifice of comfort held a cruel world at bay. In the age of the mass image, we make and consume pictures because we ascribe to the mass image the ability to replace the unhappy world with happy pictures.

Each image taken negates the scene it captures and replaces it with an image. As the absolute number of images increases, negation produces the mass image which replaces the entirety of the world, not just the unique scene, with a mass of pictures. A culture of compulsorily happy pictures – the culture of Facebook and Instagram – necessarily negates happiness by replacing

happiness with pictures. If there is one thing we know about happiness, it is that it isn't single. The aggregate, singular, mass image negates happiness a second time by re-imagining it as normative, coherent, stable and universal.

Taking and sharing (that is, exchanging) happy images does make us momentarily happy, in the manner of Enzensberger's poem about the cigarette machine. Psychologically, we desire the kind of happiness adverts show us, tuned to social norms. But if our desire were satisfied, we wouldn't desire to consume anything else. So every act of consumption is always a mobilisation of desire followed by its dissatisfaction followed by a new mobilisation. This repetition makes profit possible, but dooms us to the cycle, never actually making ourselves happy. Every time we repeat, we are trying to find a way through to happiness. This is what in creative industries discourse is called creativity. Here in the mass image, "creativity" is what mass-produced user images provide as often unpaid labour to a capitalist system that is incapable of creativity itself. And because pursuing happiness by making happy pictures is (1) a self-fulfilling prophecy; (2) negates even the happiness we mime for the camera; (3) is fundamentally repetitive and (4) is based on self-exploitation, this project is doomed to failure.

A world of happy pictures is not a happy world, but it is unhappy in a new way compared to the unhappiness of the world it replaces. When each happy image is consumed and replaced by dissatisfied desire, the individual images comprising the mass image are ephemeral. "Ephemerality" suggests that the images – that negate changing events by replacing them with object-like happy depictions – ultimately negate themselves by disappearing.

How then can we make *an* image, an image that is not subsumed under the ephemerality of the mass image? Ephemerality is about the bubbling in and out of existence of consumable facets of a single, all-subsuming mass image. The goal of the mass image is perfect pictorial communication. Such perfection is by definition entirely predictable and therefore incapable of producing information. From within the mass image, the becoming-other of images is decay: mere noise, externality. From outside the mass image, this noise is unpredictable generation of the new.

The snapshot poses itself as a unique instant in time. Considered alone, as a unique instance,

that is what it is. This is the kind of photograph Roland Barthes talked about in the discussion of the picture of his mother: unique, precious, significant, and a presence tied to an absence, a lost but nonetheless real moment of the past. But when it is shared in gigantic databases (which Barthes avoided by not publishing the photo), and placed in relations of exchange with every other image; and when it also shares its GPS, facial recognition, histogram and compositional parameters, it becomes not an instant but an instantiation: a pixel in a pattern, an entirely predictable efflorescence of the universal image. In the mass image, every unique image loses its uniqueness at the moment its timecode and date stamp allocates it a place in a chronological map of time, a calendar which is no longer time-based but the translation of time into the spatial cartography of the calendar. In the *Timaeus*, Plato described time as 'a moving image of eternity': in the mass image, we see constructed an eternal image of movement.

By rights the atemporal image should be a native of this timeless time. But where all time is gathered towards an eternal image, to be atemporal is to refuse the norm of eternal presence. An atemporal image pitches itself against the entropic trap of perfect communication. In the critical perspective, the mass image's attempt to exclude noise is doomed because noise is intrinsic to any communication, increasingly so as communication strives for perfection, the universality of the mass image. Some images, like the dalmatian illusion, are temporal in that they flicker between modes of perception. Others succumb to the inevitable decay of things under the laws of thermodynamics. For some images, decay becomes a source of becoming-other, like Daro Montag's *Bioglyphs*, produced by the interaction of microbes and insects with fruit left to rot down on sheets of photographic material: still images, in the sense that their becoming has been arrested at some point in their development, but containing the time of decay that a snapshot strives to erase. Other images, like montages and Photoshop confections, show off the labour that they contain, and with it the time it took to make them. Atemporality today does not mean either eternal or removed from time but negating the regime of time that dominates our perceptions and calculations. Unlike traditional individual images with their definite, discrete existence, and unlike the mass image's eternal and collective picture of movement, whose existence as a unified whole depends on the ephemerality of its component images, temporal images are not things.

Negation as the philosophers use it is a device to show that things are incomplete, unstable,

inconsistent. For many contemporary philosophers, *things* do not exist because they contain in themselves the reasons why they are otherwise than themselves. Instead, what we think of as things are multiplicities (in the Marxist tradition) or becomings (in the Bergson-Whitehead tradition). The problem of the traditional image, which negates only to replace, is that it replaces change with a thing – an image – that *does* contain in itself the reason why it is so and *not* otherwise. If the unique image *does* exist, it loses the power to change. An image that *is* present: it is now (present), and it is here (presence). As a negation, an image puts its thing-ness in the place of something multiple and changeable, which it displaces. By occupying the present moment, and exclusively the present moment, an image – a still image – also replaces the time of things that otherwise change. A painted paradise on a church wall promises to replace suffering with eternal bliss. In certain ways, photography belongs to a much older history of images whose task is to restore the magical. Even today we have justified fears of being identified not only *by* but also *with* our image: the abiding superstition that defacing an image – or a photograph – is an act of violence against the depicted – the 21st century equivalent of pins in a voodoo doll.

On the other hand, **unlike** a drawn, painted or etched picture, making a photograph is potentially instantaneous and therefore traumatic. Even if laboriously set up and composed, a photograph rips a moment out of the flux of time. The truth it claims as a record of an instant in time comes at the price of no longer sharing the common fate of instants: change. In this sense a still image is true to the extent that it is without meaning. It can only record and communicate a truth about the instant if it does not expound its significance for us. The being of the world, its truth, is outside of language. Drawing, painting and printmaking are significant acts which instruct us in the meanings of what they depict because they cannot avoid departing from verisimilitude in favour of style, and 'Style', said Cocteau, 'is the enemy of journalism'. A photograph, contrariwise, registers automatically what occurs in front of the lens: whatever meanings it carries are properties of either the thing imaged or the person imaging (camera operator or viewer), not of the apparatus or the entity 'photograph'. This, I admit, is a medium-specific description: many wonderful images made with photographic apparatus are significant, but like paintings they are so to the extent that they abandon their claim to truth and to that degree abandon the calling of photography itself, the pencil of nature. The truth that 'true' photographs lay claim to is the truth of an instant: ripped untimely from the universal flow.

Moving images are a response to this trauma. The Lumière Brothers' first film, almost certainly, the *Arrivée des Congressistes à Neuville-sur-Saône* of 1895, shows photographers arriving by boat at a congress where Auguste and Louis would show them these, their own moving portraits, the next day. The film counters the dominant presence of the photographic aesthetic not just because it captures a moving picture of the unpredictable puff of smoke from the boat's funnel; or even because these are the faces of the last people for whom moving images had never existed (one or two look at the apparatus, wondering what is so new about it, but it was a congress of photographers, and the Lumières were major operators in the industry). It has also acquired a temporality of its own in the way the filmstrip has buckled with age, sending ripples like gravity waves across the screen; and because the repair and retransmission have produced new blocky artefacts forming and dissolving in the picture. In relation to the then-dominant still image as negation of change, this first moving image has become atemporal.

The still image rips a moment out of the flow of the world. This is its magic and its uncanny: the Dorian Grey of every photographic portrait. The *moving* image is an intuitive attempt to heal the trauma and restore significance by supplementing each image with another, even faster than the production of still images. That the attempt was fruitless is obvious from the fact that we are still making movie after movie and still have not secured the significance of the world.

The granular scan of digital cameras can be understood as an attempt to rewrite this procedure for the era of the mass image.

Photography, analog or digital, couldn't work unless it obeyed the laws of physics. What photographs record is not things but light. The more sensitive the apparatus, the clearer it is that it changes the light it observes. It changes it into images, but it does that by taking at least some of the energy from photons and converting it into chemical or electronic energy, or both in the case of analog photography. The Hubble Space Telescope's photon counter is an exceptionally delicate instrument that gathers individual photons that have travelled for billions of years in order to eradicate them by turning them into data. These unique and vastly ancient things, that have travelled since shortly after the big bang, stretched out across space

and time by red shift, freighters and witnesses of the beginning of all things, have travelled this near-eternity only to expire, abruptly and forever, into digits, a form which, as archivists, we are beginning to learn is, not only on cosmic scales, as close to ephemeral as a storage system can get without being embarrassed to call itself storage. This wilful destruction sometimes stops me dead, much as I prize Hubble's deep space images.

It stops me because the implication is that any photograph is an act of destruction. Of course energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but its conversion into data – which occurs in any electronic act of representation – is to some extent the murder of the light that it documented. Some light reflected away from the lens components; some from the recording surface, some got lost in the camera body as heat, and some dispersed as stray ions in the oxidation of silver salts, radiation as by product that in some instances must have tickled the recording surface with phantom reactions from the stray electrons produced in its interactions bouncing around inside the lens housing. That these events are vanishingly small quantum events does not make them any less terminal.

The energy needed to produce information has to come from somewhere. Converting light into information is part of that system, which also includes the concentration of metals, chemicals of varying kinds, manufacturing processes, the often immense amounts of energy needed to refine silicon, glass for lenses and fibre optics, the vast infrastructure of the web and cloud server storage, the logistical and transport systems that bring materials to intense concentrations in sub-assembly, and sub-assemblies to final products and thence to retailers, to home delivery and then travelling to the places where images are produced. The impact of photons seems perhaps a small thing in such a gargantuan effort of industry and coordination. Is it ungrateful to speak about the unique image, as if the glass-plate photography of Niepce and Fox Talbot were the true medium and our popular, democratic society of ephemeral images a dereliction of their high calling?

I am suggesting that the atemporal image has a history. Against the traditional still image, its traumatic assassination of photons, its negation of change in favour of Being; against all this the moving image revolted in a desperate attempt to heal the trauma. But then moving images joined the proliferation of printed images and the electronic acceleration of circulation to create the conditions of the mass image. Here individual images lost their being, becoming



instead ephemeral components. Today we cannot go back, other than in imagination, to the traditional still image and its being. We have inherited ephemerality from the mass image. The new revolt against the dominance of being in the universe of images is a revolt against the collective being of all images as facets of a single unchanging image of movement. If, as I want to argue, atemporality is the quality of refusing dominant temporal structures, the new atemporal image must be singular but ephemeral.

The painted paradise on the church wall promises a certain kind of eternity. A selfie posted to Facebook risks a different transcendence. In that instant of taking and posting, you have been Identified. You exist. But you exist as a quantum fluctuation in a statistically normative ocean. You have no eternity: only the ocean is eternal. Selfies are obsessive performances of the self precisely because the self is in crisis. The ephemerality of selfies, which makes them trivial in the regime of the traditional image, is the true aggregation of self, an identity, a lifestyle choice, a node in the social graph, in the 21st century. But very ephemerality of contemporary images can extract them from both previous regimes of time, to create a new revolt.

I want to think through the time of the atemporal image with the aid of three quotations. In the first, Adorno writes, in the 1960s:

‘The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society’.

Reality is a field of conflict, an unhappy world. Art wants to make works that are whole, unified, harmonious. Art that tries to depict the world – like photography and film – has to wrestle the unhappy so as to give the world a form it lacks in its unhappiness. At this point, Adorno is thinking of early cubists collaging bus tickets on their canvases to force a connection between formal experiment and the real world. He thinks the experiment fails because it is the struggle with the unformed that makes art worthwhile, not direct quotation of the real. This poses a challenge for realist photography and cinematography, which can hardly operate without quoting reality.

Much more recently, Badiou gnaws on the same challenge:

‘Artistic activity can only be discerned in a film as a process of

purification of its own immanent non-artistic character'

Film, Badiou thinks, is simply not an artistic activity at all because it only records the non-artistic, that is, raw reality. The only artistic thing it can do is to struggle to rid itself of whatever is unartistic. His point is less that it is possible to eradicate all traces of the real, but that what art there is in film comes out in the struggle with the world it depicts, the struggle to cleanse it of whatever is purely contingent. The problem that Badiou's line generates is that in (sort of) rewriting Adorno, he lights on a deep division between humans and their world, a division which is where art occurs as a process of humanising the world. Adorno is more specific: the problem is society, not the world: the human is the challenge to art, not the non-human. Indeed the techniques and technologies of art lift it out of the human, which is why items from social circulation like tickets and banknotes cannot resolve the broken character of the social relation.

Derrida is in one sense even more specific, though at the same time the most general of the three:

'what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence'.

Let's substitute photography and film for the word writing (though there is plenty to chew on concerning the difference between picturing and writing). Meaning becomes possible when pictures eradicate natural presence. This is the exact opposite of Baudrillard's condemnation of the hyperreal, which stifles and erases meaning along with the real. Earlier I used the words 'existence' and 'being' to flag pretty much what Derrida meant by 'natural presence'. Papering over many cracks, Derrida's presence can be seen as an effect of Adorno's 'unsolved antagonisms of reality', specifically the commodity form, where, in the case of image-commodities in particular, the use-value (meaning) is eradicated in favour of the exchange-value that creates the mass image. Where imaging pitches itself against unquestioned and unchanging existence of the component commodities of the mass image, then it can purify itself of the non-artistic, in Badiou's terms.

Making an image – paying attention to the work of making – means attention not to the exchange-value of labour but its use, which is the making of meanings, where meanings are unpredictable outcomes that escape the entropic norms of the mass image. To oppose "natural" presence is to oppose not nature but the pseudo-nature of the commodity circulation of images. We oppose it by paying attention otherwise: by extracting a picture from the mass of exchange as critics, forcing it to become useful again. There is nothing

intrinsically wrong with any one image just because it is an image (*obviously some images are aimed at creating and perpetuating unhappiness: the ethics of violent and pornographic images would need another and much longer paper*). It is their commodification, their circulation as equivalents through commodity exchange, that demands either or both an artistic work of making or a critical work of repurposing. The problem is that commodification does not just happen at the level of the image but in its technical construction.

A second issue with the mass image, then, concerns the intensity of commodification. It is sobering to remember that somewhere between 2008 or 9, the number of machines connected to the internet passed the number of humans. By now we are at a point where, however you calculate it, there is more machine-to-machine communication than human-to-human. This concerns everyone worried about image processing, facial recognition, state surveillance, and social graphs. The terms of the mass image are entirely congruent with a circulation in which no human perception is involved. What this means for the political aesthetics of visual culture is probably the most pressing issue for our conference. For the moment though, let us concentrate on a smaller formal issue, the invisibility of sub-perceptual time in electronic images.

The scanning procedure adopted for the cathode ray tube was tightened up by Sony's Trinitron shadow masks and wire grilles to improve apparent resolution. Liquid crystal displays and other display mechanisms increased the geometric rigidity through Cartesian grids of pixels and sub-pixels now not only native to displays and to image-capture devices like CCD and CMOS chips but to the motherboards of any computer with visual in-out ports. These grids are controlled through clock functions that govern latency, refresh rates, and the ordered instruction sets that place data at specific points of screens and printers. In this process, every pixel acquires an address composed of its cartesian x and y coordinates. For each pixel, there is a numerical value which instructs it to display a colour. Each pixel then is equal, but every pixel can be moved or recoloured by a strictly speaking meaningless numerical operation. This is the microscopic operation of the commodity form: pure exchange of coloured squares with no intrinsic semantic or symbolic use-value. Every pixellated image is a variant on the Dalmatian illusion. Every pixellated image is an illusion composed of dots. Each dot is the extinction of a moment of reality, an averaged cluster of photons. Every

pixelated image is a product of the immense standardisation that followed the equally immense flowering of invention and creation in the 1970s. This standardisation has resulted in the global dominance of two closely related systems, JPEG and MPEG. As Daniel Palmer says, for these codecs 'now is the only time that matters'.

At the same time, the 'now' of digital imaging and video is deeply compromised by its efforts to disguise the lack of presence in the image-commodity. Scanning is a process for filling the screen progressively from left to right and top to bottom. It is also a system for removing the previous image. Every image is built in time, and disassembled in time. Scanning disperses the unity of the image into this internal temporal structure. The electronic image that erases itself in the process of replacing itself with another image is not unified. Implanting a clock function inside each frame ensures that no single frame is ever complete. The still photo proposes itself as a whole thing ripped out of time. Mechanical cinema tries to mend the trauma by substituting a new image for the current one. Electronic video unpicks the wholeness of each frame. So my first analysis was wrong: images are unhappy too: they are products of traumas and unsuccessful attempts to fix traumas. But in the conjuncture of techniques for capturing and transmitting images, video comes to a deeper truth: that no image is whole and complete. Every electronic image is composed in time, even supposedly still images.

What matters about an image is not its unity. In the case of the moving image, what is important is how the image, at any point and over any duration, is otherwise, and not 'so'. Any image is an image *of*, and to that extent refers always to something outside itself. Any image is therefore incomplete. But the ontological incompleteness of the *moving* image lies in the oxymoron of image and movement. Imaging before photography was an act of memory, tracing the vanishing present to carry forward in the past. After electronics, imaging is a precise action of erasure, tracing how we forget. In David Connearn's drawings, each new line drawn to follow the precise contour of the previous line, the condition of incompleteness gestures – as his drawings are always gestural – towards a state of the drawing which would be other than this unique drawing, even were the same parameters to be applied to the scale, paper, pen, ink, space between lines, speed and direction of drawing. An occupation of time that presents itself as a field of vision, the drawing disaggregates into a memory of a process of making that is also an unmaking. In this respect Connearn's drawing is a properly contemporary critical account of the condition of the atemporal image.

To make an image atemporal, it suffices to remove it from the mass image. Given sufficient attention, any image can escape the eternal present of the mass image which quite simply *is* time, the eternal image of movement. (this time is in fact the time of debt, the structure of time as destiny, a future where all debts are reconciled which is both absolutely compulsory and indefinitely postponed – we can discuss this later if anyone is interested). The internal time of scanned images demonstrates their failure to exist: to be present. But this failure to inhabit the now is in the end a saving grace. It is what allows time to burst out of the prison of the frame the mass image has it locked up in.

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If there's still time I'd like to demonstrate how a critical practice, in this case of image making, takes the terms of contemporary circulation – the MPEG codec in this instance – and frees it from both the stillness of the traditional image and the eternity of the mass image, to create an atemporality of a new kind, a video work by Jacques Perconte, *Chuva*, from 2012 (documented in lo-res at <https://vimeo.com/50592418>).

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In conclusion, the new atemporal image is no longer merely human. It must relate to the massive growth in machine to machine communication. It must also relate to the massive concentration of minerals and energy in the electronic production and circulation of images. It must that is engage with the non-human, and with non-human temporalities of ancestral and ecological labour. The atemporal is untimely – in many senses – and the untimely is *unheimlich*, uncanny. The subject of the traditional (Narrative, perspectival) image was human. Today no human could ever see every image and video. No scientist could know all scientific facts, so we ascribe knowledge to Science; no human can understand all trades, so The Market knows them. The subject who knows the mass image is no longer human. What this liberates is the possibility of video like Perconte's which propose to show how the machine perceives, and how the non-human environment perceives itself. Liberating the codec may be a first step towards answering Aristotle's question "How are we to live", by proposing that the "we" involved must include the non-human.