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**The Commercial Elephant in the Room: The Curious Silence in the Discussions on Digital**

Sharon Harper

In the eyes of most photographers and theorists, the digitalisation of the image has fundamentally changed the nature of photography – its practice, its form, its consumption. Yet, despite the radical impact of digitalisation on photography as a whole, discussion on this subject has been developing unevenly. On the one hand, the highly visible and ubiquitous nature of images on social media has meant that a broad range of scholarly and artistic activity looks at digitalisation in relation space, time, memory and public engagement with the medium. Likewise, philosophical enquiries – both theoretical and artistic - have dug into the very ontology of the digital image questioning not only its connection to the objective world but its very status as a photograph. However, a key area with little scholarly attention is the impact of digitalisation upon commercial photography, which has been equally transformed by these new technologies from digital cameras and post-production software in the creative process to social media and multimedia platforms as forms of distribution. The gap in knowledge, outlined below, leads me to consider some new avenues of investigation that would help to broaden our understanding of digital within the commercial sector of photography.

**Early discussions on digital**

In order to identify those gaps in scholarly inquiry, it is important for us here to outline the areas that *have* been addressed. The initial response to digital in photography was an anxiety over the disconnection to the real. Historically, photography had been characterised by the relationship of the subject in front of the camera, the light transferred from that set of material objects to the light-sensitive plate or film, to the final print that 'recorded' the existence of the original scene. A broad range of influential theorists of photography, including Susan Sontag, Max Kozloff, Andre Bazin, Rudolf Arnheim, Rosalind Krauss and Carol Armstrong, all see photography as more than just a representation; they see it as a trace of the real, something tangible (Değirmenci 2015:255-256). The capability of digital technology to easily facilitate manipulation both within the camera and the computer shook this core belief. William J. Mitchell observed in 1992 that "After a century and a half of photographic production, we also have to contend with the powerful 'reality effect' that the photographic image has by now constructed for itself" (26), famously concluding that digitalisation heralded the "post-photographic era", and that digital images were not photographs due to their severance from reality. Sarah Kember's widely cited book *Virtual Anxiety* (1998) stressed the sense of malaise and argues that "digital images pose a threat to our investments in photographic realism" (35).

That initial response wasn't all negative. For many photographic artists, working with code rather than film and chemicals opened the doors to a new realm of possibilities, particularly one in which photography's indexical nature (its tie to reality) could be prised apart. Diana Hulick saw new digital forms as a continuation from painting where generalisations about the world were able to be extracted from detail, providing "an archetypal truth". Artist Susan Felter delved into creative detail about her ability to recreate moments to reshape our perception of the past (in Dawley 1993:59). Creative development beyond a representation of the real was at the forefront of thought.

**Bigger, better, broader**

These initial discussions founded on the concept of indexicality have since widened. The examination of vernacular photography – photographs from people's everyday lives and domestic world – has become significant as image content on social media mushroomed both with old photographs scanned and given a new life in the public domain or else newly produced images that cater

specifically for these new platforms and forms of engagement. The instantaneity of picture-taking, the dematerialisation of the photograph into shareable files, the understanding self-representation as a social practice, have come in for philosophical investigation and thought, and key themes have emerged, particularly in relation to reception and public use. A major form of investigation has centred upon self-representation as profile pictures and selfies dominate sites like Facebook, Instagram and SnapChat (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz 2009; Lien 2014).

The issue of digital photography as practice – in relation to the vernacular – has also extended to the creative uses of the technology, both in terms of device and of social platform. Through an examination of key concepts such as media convergence, connectivity, ephemerality and performance, Bushey sees a trend in scholarship toward "exploring photography as a practice that is defined by social, cultural and technological forces… that identifies the continuity of image-making practices and the ruptures in which digital practice departs from pictorial traditions." (2014:43) Although many scholars have branded networked vernacular images as "banal" (Ibrahim 2015; Rubinstein and Sluis 2008), others, such as Wagner (2011) characterise this practice as an articulation of engagement and storytelling that engages creatively with other media forms and image production. She argues that "remediation does not mean the compulsive repetition of previous media conventions. For the moblogger, it is rather like having a toolbox of formats she can reshape, assemble and transform into the new vernacular." (233) Digital technology, then, allows the 'lay' user the ability to create and transform the image and further to re/distribute thereby facilitating both creativity and accessible engagement.

**Today's debates**

Arguably, the emerging form of discussion regarding the photographic image, is a discussion over its very ontological status. Given art's (and art history's) engagement with the nature of the object – both in relation to creation and reception – the codification and dematerialisation of the photograph understandably fits into this historical preoccupation. Certainly museums and archives are having urgent and numerous debates regarding these issues. As early as 1994, James Enyeart, then director of the photographic institution, George Eastman House, tied together the changing nature of the photograph and the issue of dealing in and presenting photographic objects. "If we think of digital imagery, not as an extension of photography, but as a medium in itself, then it is not so far-fetched to imagine a home library or a museum collection of compact disks or other forms of visual memory able to be recalled for viewing on a monitor or other viewing system. The need to hang it on the wall simply would not apply because the expectation would be different." (33) Although the practicalities of dealing with digital files rather than objects (alongside all the other related issues of changing technologies, lack of permanency, location of work) is much of the focus of these debates, Enyeart has touched upon a more fundamental issue in the examination of the digital image, and that is its status as a photograph. Flusser's thought has been important for many scholars in this line of thinking. He philosophically unpicks the Cartesian dualism of mind/body, likening this to the dualism of materiality and idea in photography. According to his ideas, the dualistic basis of our thinking is reshaped in the computer age through a concept of immaterialism (2011). These ideas can be seen to underpin thoughts on photography. From a philosophical perspective, the shift from film and chemicals to pixels and code has engendered serious debate over whether these forms are the same or incommensurable (Zeimbekis 2012), or even whether or not photography and photographs even exist any longer. Toister notes "the omnipresent anxiety in discourse about photography during recent decades" over its very existence. (2014:163)

These ontological questions set the framework for understanding two key interests that dominate current debate, the first to do with moving image, the second examining the triad of past, present and memory. With regards to the former, photography has historically been defined as having an

infinite duration and yet the product of a singular moment. The 'image' as data, need not, and indeed does not, take the form of something static. Streitberger and Van Gelder (2010) argue that "Photo-filmic images are not images where photography and film are both present in their own right, mutually reflecting one another, but rather 'multi-mediating pictures' .... They layer, if not amalgamate, structures of existing media (photography and film) in order to provide new images of and on the world." (51) In other words, the ontological status of the photograph has shifted to something different, as yet fully defined, since it not only takes a different form but also is phenomenologically differently experienced. This discussion is still primarily in relation to art practice, again, stemming from the historically engaged nature of artists to form.

Investigations around past, present and memory tie together the interests in the vernacular and social media as well as the ontological nature of digital images. The shift from analogue to digital is seen as crucial to a change in practices of memory (Keightly and Pickering 2014), with a common foregrounding of familial memory, such as those circumscribed by the finite object – a single photograph with edges, boundaries and usually a single copy existence that acts as a memento – as well as the death of the corporeal person, to something which transgresses those boundaries determined by material existence. Jason Kalin (2012) argues that the act of rephotography and representation (through digital technology and social networks) is not a "representation of memory, [but rather] suggests a practice of actively constructing and inhabiting memories and their times and places while also incorporating them into the present as active forces."(168) Although all of these examples focus on vernacular images, artistic practice also comes under investigation for its explorations in time and memory embedded in digitalisation (eg. Modeen 2013).  In all of these cases, memory then becomes an act of presence that is no longer located in one time or space.

**So, where's the commercial?**

All of these research strains are undoubtedly valuable and timely. The explosion of social media imaging, both as present time recording of life and as archives returning to inhabit the present, warrants such artistic and academic reflection since it occupies such a large space in our daily existence. And, the part played by vernacular images is too big to be ignored. Without looking at the vernacular, the impact of digitalisation cannot be understood. However, despite the abundance of research taking up the challenge of getting to grips with digital images, and the digitalisation of both the means of production and distribution, there is, undoubtedly a significant lacuna in the body of academic investigation. The digitalisation of the image has equally had a profound effect on the commercial image industry, not least of all publishing, the historical outlet for professional images. Practice and object have both been fundamentally affected. Furthermore, the inclusion of moving image has been a significant development within professional photography. And yet, little of the *academic* discussion has included examples of commercial practice and, when it does, there is often an underlying sense of unease.

What does exist primarily resides within the professional photography press – journals such as the *British Journal of Photography* (*BJP*), *Creative Review* and *American Photo*. Interviews and profiles, in the style of celebrity magazines do discuss the impact of digital on practice. For instance, fashion photographer Frederike Helwig, profiled in the *BJP* (Williams 2013), talks about the experiential shift from film to digital. Although she describes digital as "immediate, fast and led by instinct", she "mourns the loss of time and space that film used to offer" saying that "[f]ilm demands time, to think, to re-evaluate and therefore have space for the possibility of a different context other than the one intended." (36-37) Stock photography is also an area that is covered in the literature, with articles such as "Taking Stock" (Charski 2014) discussing professional work in the "mounting mass of online images", particularly in relation to microstock agencies. More substantive are texts that

address the aspiring photographer such as Grant Scott's *Professional Photography* (2015) whereby he outlines aspects to current industry practice that are affected by digitalisation. In it he makes the argument that "[digital] technology has given photographers the tools not only to create images but also to self-publish, promote, exhibit, and connect their work directly to their chosen audience." (2015:20)

From a scholarly standpoint, Sigrid Lien's excellent discussion of professional studio photography examines the impact of digitalisation on an element of commercial practice (2014). In it, she examines the production and distribution of a case study studio in Norway, and challenges some of the simplistic judgements made by well-known scholars regarding this type of commercial imagery. Another excellent study is that by Kim McNamara (2011) of the paparazzi industry and new media which takes into context both production and distribution. And, the image content industry has had some academic examination with Paul Frosh's 2003 book *The Image Factory*, although his study is now clearly dated with no updated version. Other sources of academic attention stem not from photography theorists, or even from art and design more broadly, but from law studies (eg. Kogan 2015) and marketing and consumer research studies (eg. Pagel and Aebli 2015).

Some historical and cultural factors can account for the gap (Harper forthcoming). Photography theory, certainly in the UK but also elsewhere in the English-speaking world, has been a relatively small-scale affair. Certainly other disciplines, such as Film Studies for example, have grown in conjunction with a growth in Higher Education (HE) courses and a subsequent swell in academic numbers. Greater numbers, consequently, has meant a greater breadth of academic interests. Thus, avenues of research have expanded along multiple lines and outward into different territories. The dual signs of growth, in HE courses and in academic outputs, is arguably also beginning to happen in photography theory and the number and breadth of photography courses grows. And, whereas in the past discussions on photography were often confined to broader disciplinary forums within art history and cultural studies, new and dedicated journals (*Photographies* 2008-; *Philosophy of Photography* 2010-) and conferences (*Helsinki Photomedia* 2014-) have been opening up in recent years. Nonetheless, whereas Film Studies has been expanding since the 1970s, photography theory is only starting to do so now and so significant gaps in areas of study are still patently evident. In addition, a divide that separates 'art' practice from commercial practice had entrenched itself in the study and discussion of photography as early as the 1860s, manifesting itself in animosity on both sides. Museum shows have gone some way to bringing the commercial – be it documentary or editorial - and other 'fine art' practice together. Edward Steichen was a clear advocate as New York's MoMA director in the mid-20th century and London's V&A, National Gallery, and National Portrait Gallery, with its upcoming exhibition *Vogue100*, have also crossed that divide.

Academics have historically been uncomfortable with the museum/commercial relationship (eg. Williams 2008), especially when it is understood that much photography theory stems from a Cultural Studies tradition in Great Britain and a post-structural tradition in other academic circles.  In these contexts, although mass culture was fodder for examination, is was usually done so from an anti-capitalist (therefore anti-mass culture) stand point where only that work that was seen to challenge was valorised. And, in conjunction with the academic position, important photographic artwork produced in the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st is actively anti-advertising providing critiques of mass culture. Vered Maimon's analysis of Thomas Ruff's *jpegs* (2014) is an clear example where these two strains, the academic analysis with the conceptual/artistic critique of advertising mass culture, are seen together as dimensions of the same perspective. As a result, the cultural divide between commercial photography and its links to mass culture production, and academic and fine art practice and its ties to academia, has seemed intractable.

The palpable discomfort at the perception of endorsing commercial work is a significance hindrance. It should go without saying that we, as photography theorists and historians, would aspire toward a broad range of approaches and areas of investigation that are not only interpretive but include all manner of production, practice and distribution – commercial as well as vernacular and artistic. But as theorist and critic, Susie Linfield (2010) has observed that in photography criticism "you will hear precious little talk of love, or terrible nakedness, or passion's pitch. There, critics view emotional responses – if they have any – not as something to be experienced and understood but, rather, as an enemy to be vigilantly guarded against" (4).This critical distrust of the very medium about which theorists spend their careers writing about is especially stark in contrast to those writing about other media such as music or film. It could be argued, based on everyday observation, that the distrust of the medium is most acute amongst those coming from either an art historical or cultural studies perspective, but that those immersed in the commercial world of photography tend to be enthusiastic supporters of the medium with little in the way of critical suspicion. It is noteworthy that at conferences, participants often tend to overtly situate themselves on one or other side of the divide. Arguably digitalisation – its slippery basis in reality and ontological conundrums over its materiality – has made this critical divide even more acute, particularly in relation to commercial practice when academically pitted against the vernacular, often seen, simplistically, as challenging the commercial monoliths that be. Given the dearth of studies on the commercial photography, huge assumptions are made regarding the nature of that industry. It is, I would argue, the academic elephant in the room.

**Moving forward**

It needn't be the case, of course. The investigation of commercial photography, given its scale, presence, and even influence on vernacular photography (as well as the reverse influence) *should be* a buzzing hive of academic investigation, especially given the changes that digitalisation has brought to all creative industries. It is certainly the case with regards to other media forms. David Hesmondhalgh's broad look at the creative industries, for instance, examines different aspects of the impact of digitalisation on skills, access, distribution and its commercial viability in a range of media including music, television, newspapers and cinema (2013).

Two very good studies presented at the major media studies conference MeCCSA held in January 2015 are worth considering here as positive avenues to consider. The first is Katherine Champion's examination of magazine publishing's strategies in adapting to the digital world (2015). Using the magazine titles *Elle* UK and *Total Film* as case studies, she examined the ways in which magazines have been adapting to embrace multimedia platforms and also the ways in which they are constrained. Champion incorporates interview material with those working at both Hearst Magazines UK as well as Future Publishing to help illuminate decision-making around digital and print content, economic constraints, and design. Needless to say, as magazines constitute major outlets for commercial photographic work, these changes are hugely significant to photographic form as well as practice. The other paper, again with resonance for this debate, was by Anna Zoellner (2015). Here, she focused on change that has occurred in documentary television production over the last few decades as seen through the eyes of documentarists themselves. These changes have been, in part, brought on by digitalisation, but also fuelled by audience demands, commercial pressures and changing business models in television production and distribution. What was interesting about Zoellner's ethnographic study of these documentary producers, was that there was a direct investigation of the "perception of change" that they have experienced as practitioners. And, unlike the aforementioned celebrity-style interviews with individuals, her findings drew out patterns and broader observations about attitudes to change.

To those immersed in media studies, none of what I have outlined here will seem revolutionary. Interesting perhaps, but not earth-shattering. But in the world of (English speaking) photography studies, these approaches are notably limited. A study similar to Zoellner's would be, I propose, an excellent place to start. Direct conversations with commercial photographers who have long-standing experience, particularly with the shift to digital, would facilitate broader insight that allows patterns to emerge and would, hopefully, constitute engagement rather than judgement from the academic quarter. Anecdotally, I have heard commercial photographers relay unexpected observations about the effect digitalisation has had on their practice and a more systematic, ethnographic study could illuminate perceptions on creativity, production, materiality and relationships with clients, commissioning editors, and the public. It could also shed light on the relationship of these practitioners with social media and even funding streams such as Kickstarter.

Given the lacuna that exists, there are some adjunct aspects of a study of this nature that could present difficulties. The definition of the 'photography industry' is one such hurdle. Searches of academic article databases using such terminology usually return material related to an 'equipment' based understanding.  Other academic studies incorporating photography as a commercial *industry* come from business studies that primarily include it in cluster analyses where the location of practitioners to each other and to other creative and related industries are situated. Closest to home, some studies see it through the lens of advertising rather than photography itself. Unlike film, television, music and publishing, all of which have structured industries (at least historically) with organisational titles, roles and patterns, ones that Champion and Zoellner can tap into, photography has been a much looser set of associations. So, a definition of the 'industry' or 'industries' or even pattern of relationships is something that needs to be established. After all, even its very definition has undoubtedly been affected by the impact of digital. And, in conjunction, although commercial photography has historically had the role of staff photographer, more often has been home to self-employed freelancers and micro businesses. So, what we are dealing with here is a skills-based association of thousands of individuals.

Not only should these obstacles not stop us, but they are valuable hurdles to jump since the lack of understanding is fuelled by these basic gaps in knowledge. Of course, commercial practitioners would undoubtedly argue that such knowledge does exist *in* the industry, by industry people. Indeed, a busy production manager recently expressed a mixture of bemusement and curiosity when I described this lack of engagement from the academic community. "Really?" she kept saying. But research and understanding are (should be) the driver of academia and such a perspective can offer valuable insight into the dramatic changes that are widely acknowledged to be happening across all the creative industries. That does not mean that commercial practitioners will all agree with the findings. But they can work in a more closely allied fashion that means that greater insight for both parties is possible and productive.

What is heartening to see is the growth of photography studies from something that was a niche part of either art history (as it was in my own degree) or generalist image fodder for cultural studies. Areas that have been outlined here have been spurred on by the rapidly changing nature of photography as a medium – as a dematerialised form that now transgresses time and space – and as an interface for social engagement. The impact on commercial practice, still a dynamic and active part of image production, needs urgently to be addressed. Whilst other academic investigations into media industry studies have been getting to grips with the impact of digitalisation, commercial photography has been left in the dark.

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