COLD CASE NO. 1. MODERNISM: PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MORGUE

Forgetting indeed remains the disturbing threat that lurks in the background of the phenomenology of memory and the epistemology of history. Forgetting is, in this respect, the emblematic term for the historical condition … the emblem of the vulnerability of this condition.

– Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004)

John Heartfield, *Wer Burgerblatter liest wird blind und taub: weg mit den Verdummungsbandagen!* [Those who read bourgeois papers become blind and deaf: away with the bandages of ignorance!], 1930 © The Heartfield Community of Heirs

Investigative Method

The undead are beings in mythology, legend, or fiction that are deceased but behave as if they were alive. Seeing photography as the undead or the figure of the zombie is a thought experiment, aimed at producing a new critical perspective on contemporary visual culture. It is an act of constructive criticism, involving a temporal shift, a trick of sorts, or a kind of distancing device. It is an invitation, from the speculative position of a future present, to approach the cultural/historical form of European/US photography as a relic, a ruined territory, a medium made obsolete by its computational simulation. The rationale behind zombie photography is an attempt to occupy a perspective closer to the conditions of the current mode of image production. It is important to stress, as I do at greater length in *Forget Photography*, that the aim is not to erase photography from memory, far from it, but rather to remember it differently. To disassemble the continuity and canon of photography as a contemporary medium, which it no longer is, and to reassemble it in ways that consider the realities of what it participates in. The aim of forgetting photography is ultimately to unite ways of seeing with the cause of world peace and liberation, a cause that has a long history and active communities of interest and struggle.

What's at Stake?

The case to be investigated is why and in what ways the photographic image in computational culture has functioned, and continues to function, as a system of universal representation that underwrites a capitalist social formation. The production, circulation and consumption of the data-driven, networked image fundamentally change photography's historic temporal mission and its relationship to any real. The new conditions – governing not just images but also social life – have compressed the distinction between the contemporary and the historical, collapsing the photographic image into an undifferentiated heritage object and exposing its rhetoric. The cultural experience of the global computational mode of production can be described as an accelerated hypermodernism, characterised by the shrinking of any future horizon to that of the perpetual present, in which time competes against itself, producing multiple temporalities, and where the paradoxical individual is the singular unit and measure of commodified value. [1] Hypermodernism also spawns an overproduction of cultural affects, a hyperdrive of display, a perpetual cultural churn and recycling of ideas and expressions producing hyper hypo-affective disorder. [2] These cultural manifestations of computational capitalism [3] bear upon the photographic image as both cause and effect of its zombie condition.

The Dilemma of the Modern

Photography's condition as the undead is a consequence not only of computation's technical mode of image production but also of chrono-reflexivity and the cultural undoing of *the contemporary* in Western culture. The contemporary is a key concept underwriting the practices of the modernist aesthetic. The contemporary guarantees the narrative of historical progress and its timeline. In the global and networked context of multiple times, the Western idea of the contemporary is unsustainable as the singular dominant moment in a linear historical timeline, in which social, political and technological progress is registered. [4] The paradigm of Western modernist thought and aesthetics has been central in creating the canon and taxonomies of photography, as it became institutionalised and organised in the early twentieth century. Photography has operated in two polarised registers: as a scientific/technical mode for the objective recording of empirical reality; and as an artistic mode for the expression of subjective psychological realities. Photography was cast, paradoxically, as both reliable witness and expressive imagining, the first defined as the photographic document, the second as art. With the end of photography as the technical

medium of representation, and the end of the contemporary in the multiple times of hypermodernity, the distinction between these two polarised modes of photography no longer applies. This was the ironic twin moment in the modernist aesthetic tradition when the photographic document was accepted as a medium of contemporary art and the analogue was replaced by computation.

The problem for the contemporary art museum is either that the modern stopped being modern, at some techno-cultural periodised point and hence should be regarded as no longer able to speak for and to the present, or that the contemporary continues as the logic of the present, but only by disavowing radical techno-cultural change. Either way the dilemma of the modern presents a conundrum for the inclusion of photography, as a contemporary medium of art, in the age of the computational mode of image production. Moving beyond or outside photography means remembering what photography as a medium and a culture has been and what it has done, rather than what it still purports to do. Put another way, remembering involves seeing photography as a dynamic temporal assemblage of ideas, people, apparatuses, objects and events. It is through the remembrance of photography, and by identifying its memorialisation, that the undead of photography can ultimately be forgotten. Forgetting is an appeasement of the world photography represented and a means of making way for new understandings of the image. The remembrance of photography involves, by definition, nostalgia and a deep sense of loss, which can be found in every exhibition of photography, as photography mourns its own passing. This passing of photography is neither the 'that has been' of the perfect mechanical analogon of reality, which Roland Barthes spoke about 5 – although the past is the source of mourning –, nor am I simply referring to the recognition of the historical nature of photographic archives and collections, although again an ample source for mourning of people, times and places. The mourning of contemporary photography I am pointing to is inscribed in its continued practice and the practices of exhibition, because the computational means by which instances of photography are produced is disavowed in the image taken as a photograph. A further techno-cultural dimension of mourning recognisable in photography exhibitions concerns the cultural context of reception. From the perspective of forgetting photography, the cultural context of the reception of the photographic image is the future present, in which the photographic image is simulated for every spectator.

Pathos, Loss and Photography's Ruins

Tate Modern's exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* (2014/2015) 6 illustrates that in the art museum the photographic document which apparently recorded the events of war and evoked its memory was actually documenting the memory of photography. The exhibition was inspired by Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, first published in 1969 but based upon events he had witnessed in the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945, twenty-four years earlier. This provided the curatorial trope for the exhibition, measuring not only the distance of specific events of war from the present but also the time elapsed between the event and the image. Curating war photography through a diachronic time signature of the image, rather than using the photojournalist convention of showing the synchronicity of catastrophic events, privileges the photograph as subject, framed and justified by chronological time. Reading reviews of the exhibition, the disjuncture between the images, diachronic time and representations of conflict became evident. Sara Knelman, writing for *frieze*, commented, 'This wasn't, ultimately, a show about specific conflicts, or even conflict in general. It was about photography's relation to these events: about distance, trace and memory, and photography as a mode of remembering, reflecting and abstracting.' 7 It is a short leap from Knelman's observation to saying that the not fully disclosed subject of the exhibition was the mode of photography itself, which in the 'cold case' is photography's previous life.

The Case File Remains Open
Now the image has fled the photographic representational frame and its reality lies in the operations of computational systems, developed and deployed in barely discernible wars and clandestine surveillance and monitoring. Photography ceases to function as a contemporary medium capable of representing the realities of war, because its credibility as an iteration of a continuous historical past is no longer coterminous with the present. In this sense the photographic modernist aesthetic becomes indistinguishable from any other heritage object. Far from illuminating photography's relationship with war, *Conflict, Time, Photography* took us further away from the present causes and realities of war, preferring instead to memorialise photography.

Coda
Where does this paradoxical dimension of the undead of photography leave a photography of death, or what is conventionally taken as 'war photography'? Certainly it opens up the historical photographic archives, both those made public as well as those kept secret, to different considerations of the participation of photography and photographers in the military operationalisation, staging and management of judicial and extra-judicial killing. In ongoing capitalist theatres of war, the image is operationalised beyond that of representation, so that the image is itself a technical operation of death and destruction.
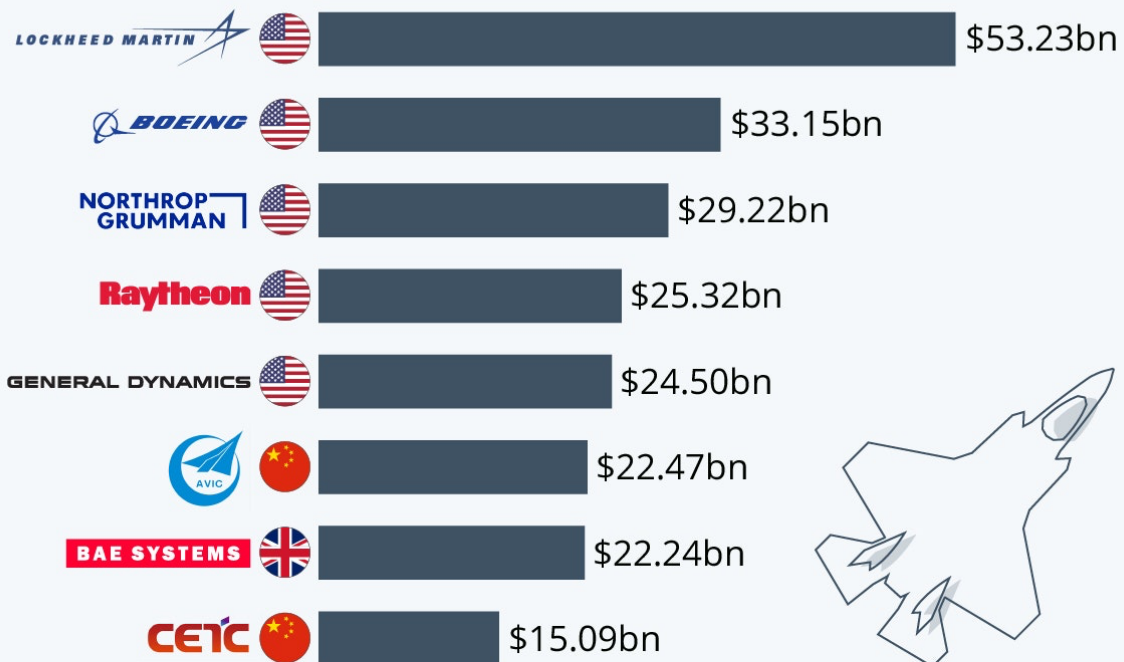
MQ-9 Reaper

Air Force MQ-9 Reaper

The US Airforce describes the mission of the MQ-9 Reaper in the following terms:
'The Reaper is employed primarily as an intelligence-collection asset and secondarily against dynamic execution targets. Given its significant loiter time, wide-range sensors, multi-mode communications suite, and precision weapons, it provides a unique capability to perform strike, coordination, and reconnaissance against high-value, fleeting, and time-sensitive targets.'

Writing in *e-flux* in November 2014, Trevor Paglen noted that 'Harun Farocki was one of the first to notice that image-making machines and algorithms were poised to inaugurate a new visual regime. Instead of simply representing things in the world, the machines and their images were starting to "do" things in the world. In fields from marketing to warfare, human eyes were becoming anachronistic. It was, as Farocki would famously call it, the advent of "operational images."'

As Walter Benjamin saw the situation, 'The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society. The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production – in other words, to unemployment and the lack of markets. Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of "human material," the claims to which society has denied its natural material.' 8

The World's Largest Arms-Producing Companies

Sales by the world's largest arms-producing companies in 2019

Company	Sales
LOCKHEED MARTIN 🇺🇸	$53.23bn
BOEING 🇺🇸	$33.15bn
NORTHROP GRUMMAN 🇺🇸	$29.22bn
Raytheon 🇺🇸	$25.32bn
GENERAL DYNAMICS 🇺🇸	$24.50bn
AVIC 🇨🇳	$22.47bn
BAE SYSTEMS 🇬🇧	$22.24bn
CETC 🇨🇳	$15.09bn

Source: SIPRI

statista

'The World's Largest Arms-Producing Companies', 7 December 2020