

PROLOGUE: THE UNDEAD OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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What is an image in our time? It is at once our field of experimentation and our field of politics. It is the technical format in which experimental lives – lives consciously lived differently than our own – might one day find not only their form but also, we hope, their political expression within a new statistical literacy capable of navigating the conditions of telematic culture.

– John May, *Signal. Image. Architecture* (2019)

The Photographic Image

At the workstation, I notice that printed photographs are few and far between in my environment, partly because I am in a temporary residence and away from the city and my library. But even then, I reflect upon how my physical image world has shrunk over the years, and how analogue photos have been put out of sight. No pinboard of cluttered images, no framed prints, no image books on the small writing desk. Apart, that is, oddly enough, from a sole image on the cover of a copy of the academic journal *photographies*, volume 14, issue 2, June 2021, which Martin Lister thrust into my hand the last time we met and which I've carried with me (fig. 1). I am looking for an example of a reproduced photograph with which to start my discussion of what I think has happened to photography with networked computing. Staring at the cover of *photographies* for some time, it occurs to me that I may have struck lucky, for there, on the silky, bleached white cover of the journal, is what at first glance appears to be a photographic image.



Fig. 1: Photo taken on an iPhone 6 by the author in October 2021

And, what's more, an image of a camera, or rather a printed reproduction of a photograph of the back of a camera, complete with black leather case and digital viewfinder showing an epic mountain landscape. The image of the camera, cropped to the exact edges of the rectangular frame of the printed image, is the same scale and ratio as an iPhone 6 and creates the semi-illusion of the physical camera object lying on the surface of the paper, a technique perfected in Apple iPhone advertising. But this photograph of a camera is a deliberately tricky image, an ironic gesture, playing in the space between the materiality of analogue photography and its remediation by simulated software.



Fig. 2: Image from cover of *photographies*, photo taken by the author in October 2021

It was produced/made by [Doron Altaratz](#), in 2018, from an iPhone 6 screenshot of the Hipstamatic software interface for a smartphone screen (fig. 2). It is a screenshot of an interface, a born-digital object. Altaratz is co-author, with Paul Frosh, of one of the journal's papers, 'Sentient Photography: Image Production and the Smartphone Camera' (2021), in which they discuss what is happening to image-making possibilities by virtue of the onboard software and network connection of the smartphone. The paper rehearses the technical ways in which built-in sensors and algorithmic software agents create the programmed and platform-ready image. The [paper makes a case](#) for what they term 'sentient photography' as an emergent mode of photographic production, in which 'ultimate decisions are made by context-aware learning software, radically reconfiguring the distribution of agency between humans and technologies'. The puzzle for me in the paper is why the mode of the computational production of the image is inverted as a photographic mode and reinserted into the discourse of photography. An obvious clue is to be found in the academic remit of the journal, while a further clue lies in the reproduced screenshot on the cover, in which software simulates the representational image of the photograph. The screenshot precisely brackets out the materiality and systems of the smartphone, the device which produces the screenshot, as any Hipstamatic user will know (an iPhone image of another iPhone, with the Hipstamatic screen interface, would indicate more of this materiality; fig. 3).

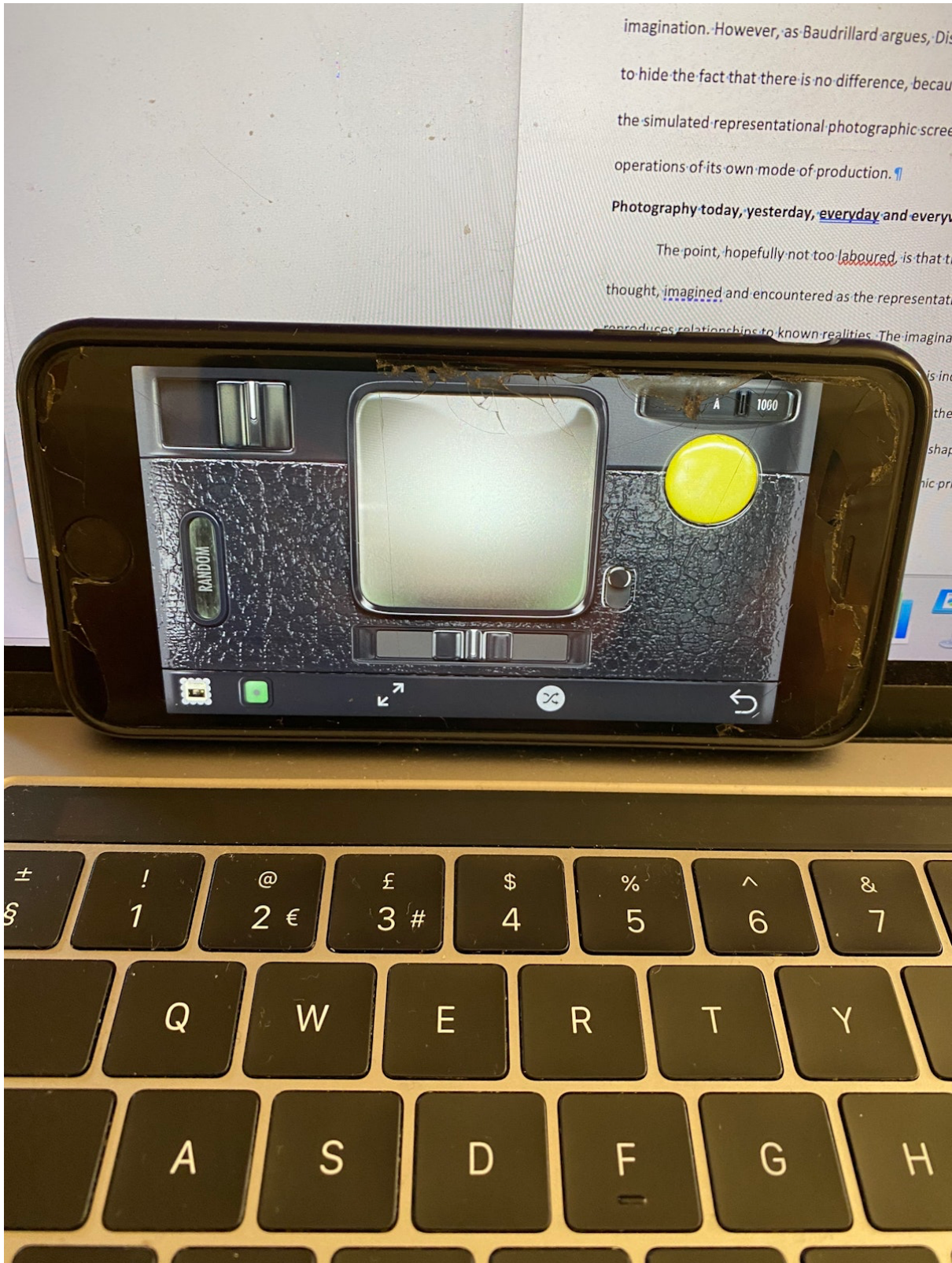


Fig. 3: Photo of Hipstamatic interface on iPhone 6 taken by the author in October 2021

Hipstamatic wants its users to stay in the photo mode, to immerse themselves in a simulation of analogue photography, to revel, even if only playfully, in nostalgia for a photographic image now lost to them. The clever cover image also invites the viewer to stay with the photographic apparatus. Reaching back to a postmodern polemic, I am reminded of one of Jean Baudrillard's famous observations, that Disneyland exists as a second-order simulated world producing a clear-cut distinction between reality and imagination. However, as

Baudrillard argues, Disneyland is nothing but a desperate attempt to hide the fact that there is no difference, because all of America is Disneyland. ¹ So it is that the simulated representational photographic screen image conceals the computational operations of its own mode of production.

Photography Today, Yesterday, Everyday and Everywhere

The point, hopefully not too laboured, is that the representational image is still thought, imagined and encountered as the photographic image, which holds and reproduces relationships to known realities. The imaginary of the photographic image and its discourse cannot let go of this real, even though it is increasingly acknowledged amongst some photographic scholars that the representation of the real is produced by a new kind of image assemblage of humans and machines, which is shaping a new real. Photography remains enshrined in the analogue or digital photographic print, collected and catalogued in archives, exhibited in galleries and museums, kept in domestic albums and shoeboxes, carried in wallets. The photographic image continues to be reproduced in newspapers, magazines, on hoardings, posters, books, printed on clothing, ceramics and a host of other paraphernalia. Photography as an apparatus and activity is to be found in the procedures of police, medical and engineering records and in military and civic forms of surveillance, even though it is video, machine-vision algorithms and the operational image that are doing the advanced work of detection. Photography is taught in schools and colleges; it is part of media production industries and disseminated through the sale of photographic equipment. Photography is an occupation, a profession, a hobby and an everyday activity. Photography is the subject of technical books, histories, theories and picture books and is organised in competitions, biennales, exhibitions and displays. But for all these countless instances of the presence and applications of photography, the most familiar, overwhelming, immediate, present and contingent way in which ‘the photograph image’ is encountered is on screens. It is redundant to say – except inasmuch as it gives us a perspective on the history the photographic image – that a Google search algorithm will report that more than 50 billion images have been uploaded to Instagram alone and more than 250 billion to Facebook – 1.8 billion images every single day. Every two minutes, humans take more photos than ever existed in total 150 years ago. There are 2.5 quintillion bytes of data being created each day at the current rate. Ninety percent of the data in the world has been generated over the last two years alone. The image is everywhere, at any time and in any place, received as data signals on smartphones, tablets, laptops, desktops and the LCD screens that make up the architecture of cities. This bountiful cornucopia, overflowing with images, stretching out across all forms of social, economic and political life, is a marker of society made visual, in which the image acts in the world and is an intimate part of ourselves and social relations. From the perspective of all those directly or indirectly involved in the production, distribution and circulation of images, the discourse of photography reaffirms the photographic image’s apparent place at the centre of visual culture. It certainly brings employment as well as pleasure. But photography’s most recent rehabilitation is hollow. It is data which issues forth everywhere, not the photograph, which is data’s temporary signalisation and, it is a software hybrid which fills the screen. The image is becoming less and more than visual: a new computational register of the ‘invisual’ is taking hold. ² The internet fundamentally changes photography’s historic temporal mission and its relationship to any real, cancelling the distinction between the contemporary and historical, collapsing the photographic image into an undifferentiated heritage object and reducing photography to rhetoric. There is a lot to figure out if such a situation as I describe were to be accepted.

A Critical Perspective

Therein lies the fundamental problem of what this hybrid image is. All material manifestations of photography are now dependent in one way or another upon its mediation,

remediation and simulation by the computation mode of production. The category of photograph – and, with it, its language, rhetoric, conventions and cultures – masks the greater reality of the network image and the reality it performs. What then, might be looked for in contemporary critical perspectives on photographic discourse's relationship to the networked image and the computational mode of production? As much as this question begs an agenda, it also calls for a consideration of how photographic knowledge is produced and who it is for. Where does photographic criticism belong and what work does it do? This somewhat wobbly start in writing about photography responds to a very sharp, felt sense of the precarity of the common and shared life world.

Life on earth is still lived, paradoxically, in relation to local and regional customs, patterns of work, family ties, traditional social bonds and a solid, if misplaced, sense of the permanence and abundance of nature, even under extreme conditions, such as the climate emergency and the trauma and displacement of war. But life on earth has been changed dramatically, both intimately and externally, by the relations and functions of global capitalist economics and sophisticated networked technologies. There are 6.4 billion humans with a smartphone and internet connection of some sort. The Network of networked computers linking the planet together with mobile telephony has changed everything, including photography and what we know about it.

Knowledge is itself less certain, made questionable and increasingly shaped by an algorithmic logic, which commodifies and instrumentalises thought, expression and enquiry. In short, the conditions of the production of knowledge, its traditions, modes and provenance, cannot be taken for granted anymore and that is true for what we take to be the history, theory and practices of photography. But it is precisely at times when an existing social and technical order is buckling under the pressures of radical change, that the order itself can be glimpsed and new insights for understanding the human relation to reality made possible. It is the view taken in this discussion that today we are facing nothing short of a cultural revolution in the terms outlined in Frederic Jameson's discussion of late capitalism. Although Jameson was writing about the postmodern condition in the last decades of the twentieth century, his notion of what constitutes a cultural revolution applies equally to the present. Jameson's account of cultural revolution is useful to the discussion of a critical agenda for photography, because it accounts for the relationship between cultural works, in his case literary texts, and the social formation and mode of production of which they were expressions. The novelty of Jameson's account is in saying that 'every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own'. ³

Zombie Photography

Photography has died a number of times, and as Geoffrey Batchen has recently said, these many deaths of photography must be a sign of life, ⁴ and so it is, but not under the conditions I think he imagines. The refusal of photography to die is a sign of its altered state, a state of the undead, a material incarnation of an obsolete medium, a corpse, but one which refuses to die: in cultural mythology it is a zombie whose historical soul needs somehow putting to rest. Zombification is the condition photography has occupied for some considerable time, while the many efforts to resuscitate it as digital photography, expanded photography, post-photography and here sentient photography, to name but a few, can't hide its exhausted presence.

If photography is the living undead, then in what productive terms can photography be spoken? Photographic zombies roam our cultural and educational institutions and invade the

networks. I invite you to join the resistance to the discourse of photography in order to re-examine and repopulate its ruined territory, to restore life and forget photography.