

Photography and the Future

Tom Huhn, New York, 2015

Philosopher Tom Huhn stuns us in his disavowal of the contemporary photographic image and asks us to question our understanding of seeing and imaging the world.

Of course this will sound curmudgeonly, but here goes anyway: photography is now the largest impediment to human advancement. I say this without having in mind any particular goal toward which human development ought to be headed, but rather with the conviction that photography is currently just the biggest, dumbest block in the road impeding our motion toward wherever else we might instead wander. I hold no particular brief against the snapshot, fine art photography, fashion, or product shot alone. Rather, it is the photographic image *tout court* that bears the distinct look of devolution.

The pervasive appearance of the photographic image—in print and on screens, monitors, LEDs, jumbotrons, cellphones, and thus all the while more firmly entrenched in our visual imaginations—continuously incapacitates us. Indeed, the plain old photograph seems pretty quaint these days, as if photography itself, pixilated or not, has the look, increasingly, of a rustic technology. This sheer, flat deadness of the photographic image is nearly enough to make one wish nostalgically for a return to the days when we purportedly were still in thrall to some image or another. The problem is that photographic imagery, though we are surrounded by it, no longer captures us. Still, the photographic image does have some kind of hold on us, and it is the nature of that hold that is most distressing. That there is something amiss about photography's hold, or perhaps only that it doesn't hold us enough, is betrayed by its proliferation, as if by multiplying and simultaneously becoming more "high-definition" and "Blue-rayed," ultra-glossy and leaking color, it might justify the stakes it has in us. These are the marks of the contemporary overdetermination—that is, desperation—of the photographic image.

Another way to approach this current impasse of ours is to consider the primacy of the image has thus far enjoyed in the visual constitution and organization of our lives. The image has been, for a very long time now, the structured, dynamic unity by means of which visual experience takes place in us. (And, further, there are of course many people now suggesting that what stamps our era most deeply is the displacement of the centrality of the word by the image.) The hallmark of the historical image has been its composition into bounded, cohesive totalities—that is, things that we see. The image has been the unit, par excellence, of visual life and thought. The advent of photography, however, introduced a novel wrinkle into the history of image-making: the hand and eye of the machine. This most thrilling advance in image-making, transforming the photograph's quasi-alien origin into the source at once for both its exoticism and seeming hyper-realism, tempted those like Walter Benjamin to imagine some revolutionary potential lay precisely in the photographic image's divorce from the hand and eye (and mind) of human history. Even the impulse underlying William Eggleston's *Democracy of Images* is a weak version of this belief that the value of photography is rooted in its distinct distance and differentiation from human making. Perhaps, in the end, there is something to be said for technological developments that liberate us from ourselves. Still, at what cost do we abandon our continuities with the long history of image-making that precedes the recent appearance of the photographic mechanisms and all that follow in their train?

The question of the status of the photographic image needs to be placed in the larger inquiry that asks which developments of our capacities, whether technological or aesthetic, enhance whatever we might next become. My fear is that the photographic image has helped to disinherit us from images that could have had their beginnings only with us anyway. The sheer mechanicalism of the photographic image seems to absolve us of all responsibility toward, and kinship with, imagery, thus slowly marking all imagery as no longer recognizable or as once having been our own. Indeed, the history of the photographic image is the history of our diminishing share in the imagery that produces and reproduces the world we attempt to inhabit. An old-fashioned word for this event is *alienation*. And the most profound sort of alienation is not merely having the things we make become unrecognizable to us but rather to have the very capacities by which we engage the world become the capacities of someone, or rather something, else. The photographic image has served as the means by which we've been losing our affinity for, and kinship with, ourselves. I imagine this is about as estranged as anything might become. And yet, we still make and see these photographic things, repeatedly and endlessly, and thereby continue to remake ourselves ever more removed from what we previously produced as that which resembled, or might come to resemble, us.

Our fascination with the photographic image and thus the reason why it holds us—however fleetingly and in the end fruitlessly—lies in our continuing to hope for some relief from ourselves, which is to say, some respite from the self-alienating dynamic that the photographic apparatus has become the vehicle of. We therefore have a somewhat ambivalent relation to just that power of the photographic apparatus that has taken up residence within us. The photographic image's estrangement from us makes it seem just the right place to look for deliverance, as a site where we might be located just far enough from ourselves in order to have a look back into what we've become. We look into the photograph to find what is strange about us and to try thereby to feel at home within it, which is to say, with ourselves. And yet, we also seem to know that each photographic image will distract us only long enough to allow us to forget what it is we nevertheless seek to find in it. Despite our vigilant scrutiny, accompanied by the longing for some knowledge that might transform us, the photograph continues to stupefy us.

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