A World of Imprints: The Epistemology of Visual Evidence Between Digital and Virtual Media-Ecologies

Rosa Cinelli/Ph.D. Thesis Abstract
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Throughout the history of mechanical images — the first of which is surely photography — the capacity of the image to adhere to its object or referent has influenced its positioning within aesthetic, artistic, and semiotic theories. Referentiality, understood as the ‘founding order of photography’, was considered the cornerstone of a precise ontological definition of the image and has contributed to creating a link between mechanically generated images and the realm of veridiction.

Nevertheless, today, new mediatic practices like Virtual Reality, CGI, and AI-powered images (such as machine vision) are increasingly challenging the epistemological paradigm of what counts as visual evidence. From immersive and visual journalism to forensic practices and data-driven investigations, a vast panorama is taking shape in which photographic images are more and more blended with computer-based ones, creating uncanny configurations which are reshaping the regimes of visuality as well as our information economy. At times, this polymorphic class of composite images may be defined as a visualization, composition, or assemblage: all of these are complex concepts entailing different theories and archaeologies. A new type of imaginary challenges the traditional tools commonly used to describe photographic and filmic images, such as, for instance, Peirce’s very concept of the index. While it is true that a complete feeling of scepticism towards the image — often prophesied by the detractors of the digital revolution — has not completely taken over, it is possible to state that the procedure which allows for an image to be regarded as a visual fact seems more often to derive from a context-based rhetorical mechanism than to be guaranteed by the technical genesis of the image. This seemingly very subtle change, since it does not entail a radical transformation from the pragmatic point of view, is nevertheless a very theoretically rich node as it suggests a shift from the ontological to the rhetorical plane of discourse. Must the traditional ontology of the photographic image as a truthful — or even sacred — imprint be discarded for good?

Ethical concerns may also be raised when
This hybrid visual regime is considered in its socio-political agency. Contemporary journalism practices, such as visual journalism\(^5\) and the emerging fields of forensic aesthetics\(^6\) are imposing new challenges to research. Making broad use of so-called ‘algorithmic’ devices,\(^7\) these experimentations are aspiring to confer full visibility to complex socio-political phenomena, ranging from humanitarian conflicts and migrations to the ecological crisis. Re-signifying what Paul Virilio already referred to as ‘the vision machine’,\(^8\) a very problematic posthuman dimension is added to the very human relevance of visual evidence.

This ‘forensic turn’ in visual studies\(^9\) — or, rather, the ‘visual turn’ of forensics — is proposing revisions of aesthetics and media theories, since an important part of such investigations aims to make sensible and evidential what so far has been considered as a ‘mere’ thing, such as the dust that is lifted in an explosion, the cracks in the walls of a building, or the growth patterns of trees in forests.\(^10\)

On the other hand, looking at what seems to constitute a more sensationalist pole of the scope, the experiences proposed by the field of Virtual Reality immersive journalism\(^11\) are characterized by the idea of reporting on news episodes, providing the viewer not only with a hyper-realistic rendering of their object but also to make him or her feel as if she or he were assisting at the scene of the event. The verisimilitude of sensorimotor movements allowed by the head-mounted device, the plausibility of the reconstruction and the emotional and empathic response of the experiencer confer a sense of quasi-reality that is linked to a very strong sense of presence. The feeling of almost ‘being there’\(^12\) suggested by these ‘out-of-frame’\(^13\) images creates a perpetually unfolding present, which seems to re-actualize the ‘has been’ of Barthesian memory with forms of immediacy: ‘I am there’, ‘that is’, ‘this is happening’. However, this sense of presence does not come without the risks of what has been regarded as ‘toxic’ forms of empathy,\(^14\) raising again the question of the representability of others’ sufferings as well as issues in power and gaze distribution.

When contemplating this spectre of practices, many questions can be raised: are we witnessing the affirmation of a new kind of visual regime regulating the realm of veridiction by simultaneously hyper-stimulating an empathic response and completely eluding the percipient subject? What kind of images are now worth believing in, at a time of an increasing hybridization between ‘traditional’ photography and new technological imageries? How do these new developments in the realm of the image affect the slippery relationship between the document and the artistic genre of the documentary? And more generally, is it still possible to talk about images at all, or should we give up this concept in favour of a different one?

This doctoral project aims to try to answer these questions by considering photography’s \textit{episteme} and its remediations in the contemporary media ecology. Particular attention will be paid to the semiotic concept of index as well as to those of trace, imprint, and document. Drawing from visual culture studies and media-archaeology approaches, this project aims to articulate a theoretical framework that will fill these research gaps, and it intends to do so by adopting an interdisciplinary methodology combining the field of aesthetics, semiotics, and theory of photography.
Notes

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5 Some examples are, The Citizen Evidence Lab held by Amnesty International, the visual journalism section in the New York Times online journal, or the website Bellingcat.com.


10 Weizman, Forensic Aesthetics.

11 Some of the most famous examples are: Hunger in Los Angeles (Nonny De la Peña and others, 2012); Project Syria (Nonny De la Peña et al, 2014); The Protectors (Catherine Bigelow, 2017); Omni (Ai Wei Wei, 2017); Home After War (Gayatri Parameswaran, 2018); Reeducated (Sam Wolson, 2021).

