



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

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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’,² 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 visibility 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.³ 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 mechanism⁴ 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 journalism⁵ and the emerging fields of forensic aesthetics⁶ 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 studies⁹ — 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 journalism¹¹ 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 *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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² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. By Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

³ B. Grespi, 'L'evidenza dell'immagine. Postfotografia e idea documentaria', *Dalla parte delle immagini. Temi di cultura visuale*, ed. by Barbara Grespi and Luca Malavasi (Milan: McGraw Hill, 2022), 61–104.

⁴ André Gunthert, *L'image partagée* (Paris: Textuel, 2015).

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.

⁶ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), Eyal Weizman and Matthew Fuller, *Forensic Aesthetics. Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London, New York: Verso, 2021).

⁷ Ruggero Eugeni, *Capitale Algoritmico. Cinque dispositivi postmediali (più uno)* (Brescia: Scholé, 2021).

⁸ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. by Julie Rose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁹ Cf. David Houston Jones, *Visual Culture and the Forensic. Culture, Memory, Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2022); Thomas Keenan, Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull. The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (London: Sternberg Press, 2012).

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).

¹² Matthew Lombard and others, *Immersed in Media. Telepresence Theory, Measurement & Technology* (Berlin: Springer, 2015).

¹³ Cfr. Andrea Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021), and Pietro Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2020).

¹⁴ Lisa Nakamura 'Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 19.1 (April 2020), 47–64.