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Apparitions Photography and Dissemination

Geoffrey Batchen
Antoine Claudet studio (London), *The geography lesson*, c. 1851 (detail, see fig. 70).
Stereo-daguerreotype 8.7 × 17.6 cm (object). Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Endpapers:
Alonzo Chappel (engraver), *Thomas Chalmers: Likeness from a daguerreotype by Claudets [sic]*, 1873 (details, see fig. 36).
Fig. 1
In August 2013 a PR-conscious pontiff posed for a selfie with some mobile-phone wielding teenagers. The resulting picture—with its telling conjunction of youth and age, contemporaneity and tradition—tells us quite a lot about the current state of photography. Not just about a particular genre of image, which this example confirms as the fashionable pose of the moment, but also about the nature of the photograph itself.

This photograph was of course shot with a camera incorporated into a multimedia communications device. As a consequence, the photograph was primarily taken, not to be printed as a permanent document, but to be exchanged with friends all around the world, mainly by being uploaded onto a social media site to join billions of other, very similar, images. Its maker assumed that the photograph now consists of a stream of electronic signals, representing an entirely ephemeral exclamation of a presence in the present (rather than signifying something in the past ‘that has been’).

Given the permeability of the private and public realms that social media encourage, this same photograph quickly found its way into the hands of the world’s press, circulating in a variety of manifestations for a brief news cycle. But electronic signals and newsprint were only two of this photograph’s many possible transmutations (Fig. 2). After all, different kinds of photographs can be produced from the same matrix, and often are. This fluidity of identity is what makes photography such a difficult medium to pin down, both literally and metaphorically. To shift from pixels to newsprint, for instance, this photograph’s image had to be transferred from one place to another and transformed from one state of being into another. The image of the papal selfie is common to both screen and newspaper, but retains an existence separate from either. Now it appears in this book, having been reproduced in yet another format. If this example is any guide, then, the ability to separate a photograph from its image—the ability of a photograph to become an apparition of itself—has become the most important aspect of photography, the aspect...
that has the greatest value, that gives any particular photograph its capacity to continue to be disseminated in various forms across space and time.

Or has this always been photography’s primary mode of being, and historians of this medium have just preferred to ignore it? Driven by a market invested in singular prints and rarity, the history of photography has tended to restrict itself to a discussion of photographs as individual physical objects, as if this—a collective of such objects—is all that the word ‘photography’ encompasses. But what if we try to imagine another kind of history for photography? What if we try to imagine a history that might be able to speak to, even account for, the medium’s present?

At least, such a history will have to follow a logic quite different from the one that has prevailed until now. For a start, it will have to be a history of photography freed from the tyranny of the photograph. Breaking with the self-imposed ghettos of medium purity, it will have to trace, not just the production of physical photographs, but also their migration as objects and their dissemination as images. No longer confined to precious commodities or specific technologies, this would be a history finally able to consider the full implications of both photography’s reproducibility and its capacity for transfiguration. It would become an accounting of dynamic relationships, not only of static things—a tracking of dispersals and transformations rather than a celebration of origins. In short, it would be a history about the relationship of a photograph to its reproductions, wherever and in whatever form these have appeared.

Given the centrality of reproducibility to photography’s mode of being in the world, it is surprising that no one has yet written a sustained critical study of the consequences and implications of the reproduction of the photographic image. Perhaps that is because photography’s reproducibility generates all sorts of problems for the rigorous photo-historian. Among other effects, it allows photographic images to be widely circulated, but it also gives the same image the capacity to come in many different media, looks, sizes and formats, and have many authors. It also makes it possible for an image to appear in many places at once and to exist simultaneously at many different points of time. A photograph, therefore, almost always comprises a number of different versions of itself. This multiplicity of physical manifestations is matched by a similar proliferation of meanings and effects. Given all this, given photography’s multiple personality disorder, we can no longer be satisfied with determining the possible meaning of a photograph just at the moment of its production. Instead we will have to trace the arc of a photograph’s journey through space and time, acknowledging that this journey too is a complex one as images enter new contexts and circumstances.

When Walter Benjamin reflected on these issues in the mid-1930s, he chose to equate the reproductive capacities of photography with the processes of mass production, and thus with the most basic operations of capitalism itself. For Benjamin, these processes are fraught with an inherent contradiction, an alienating inversion of social and commodity relations, such that reproduction is simultaneously capitalism’s lifeblood and its poison. Photography, he suggested, contained within it this same contradiction, being equally capable of sustaining capitalism and of destroying it. For him, reproducibility was therefore a politically charged capacity that could be either exploited or suppressed, but should definitely not be ignored. Yet most commentaries on Benjamin’s famous essay are content to do just that, avoiding the essay’s larger political concerns by concentrating on what he might have meant by ‘aura’—perhaps (with the possible exception of “punctum”) the most misunderstood word in the photographic lexicon. Benjamin described aura as ‘a strange tissue of time and space: the unique apparition of a word in the photographic lexicon. When Walter Benjamin reflected on these issues in the mid-1930s, he chose to equate the reproductive capacities of photography with the processes of mass production, and thus with the most basic operations of capitalism itself. For Benjamin, these processes are fraught with an inherent contradiction, an alienating inversion of social and commodity relations, such that reproduction is simultaneously capitalism’s lifeblood and its poison. Photography, he suggested, contained within it this same contradiction, being equally capable of sustaining capitalism and of destroying it. For him, reproducibility was therefore a politically charged capacity that could be either exploited or suppressed, but should definitely not be ignored. Yet most commentaries on Benjamin’s famous essay are content to do just that, avoiding the essay’s larger political concerns by concentrating on what he might have meant by ‘aura’—perhaps (with the possible exception of “punctum”) the most misunderstood word in the photographic lexicon. Benjamin described aura as ‘a strange tissue of time and space: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.’ I take this to be his attempt to account for the hallucinatory effects of commodity fetishism such that unequal relations of power are experienced by individuals in very real, if often invisible, phenomenological and psychological terms. According to Karl Marx, commodity fetishism enables the subjugation of all social conditions and relationships to the needs of capital: ‘A definite social relation between men [...] assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.’ This form is ‘fantastic’ because the commodity comes to be invested with unearthly powers beyond its capacity to deliver. As Paul Wood explains the process:

The commodity becomes a power in society. Rather than a use value for people it assumes a power over people, becoming a kind of god to be worshipped, sought after, and possessed. And in a reverse movement, as the commodity, the thing, becomes personified, so relations between people become objectified and thinglike.
Accordingly, the endless reproduction of an artwork such as the *Mona Lisa* brings this painting close to us, but at the considerable cost of the commodification of our relationship to it. In reproduction form the artwork is near, physically and temporally, but that work’s cult value has been exponentially amplified by this same reproduction, and thus we are simultaneously distanced from it. We might flock with enthusiasm to see the original, to see (and photographically copy for ourselves) the source of this torrent of images. However, this copying has transformed the nature of our experience even before we get there. Protected by layers of glass, the original is a mere shadow of what we already know of it from its many reproductions, as if it has been degraded by that very knowledge. Its celebrity status—a consequence of its constant reiteration in reproduced form—denies us access to the painting on its own terms. We see a star, rather than an actor; a masterpiece to be worshipped, rather than a piece of painting to be appraised and understood. Alienated by processes inherent to capitalism, we are prevented from having anything like an authentic relationship to this or any other similarly replicated product of our own culture.

Although not always attuned to the broader politics of this relationship, a number of scholars have written about the role played by photographs in the reproduction of artworks.8 With this study as a background, Stephen Bann has argued against a ‘photographic exceptionalism’ that too readily lends itself to a ‘tunnel history’ in which related media forms or broader contexts are neglected in favour of keeping the photograph in its own little ghetto, detached from everything happening around it. As a counter to this tendency, Bann has situated the professional practice of photography in the nineteenth century within an expanding visual economy that included a range of different kinds of printmaking, measuring, among other things, the competition between photographs and engravings as a means of reproducing paintings. Bann has even asserted that ‘on the epistemological level, photographs appeared to present no distinctive and unprecedented vision of the external world.’9 He therefore concludes that, ‘in order to write the history of photography, one must not write the history of photography’.10 What one should write instead, he implies, is a history of reproductive media in general, and then locate photography within it.

It is true that future histories of photography will have to embed their accounts in a wider media history and indeed in a larger history of industrial and consumer capitalism. Nevertheless, an argument can still be made for the specificity both of photography’s history and of its particular attributes as a medium of representation. Despite many overlaps with other media and a common social, cultural and economic context, photography does in fact have some distinctive elements. Analog photographs are printed from a matrix, like engravings, but they can be printed at a variety of sizes and sometimes in different media (as either a salt print or an albumen print, for example). Photographs, as Roland Barthes and many others have discussed, have a peculiar relationship with their referents, and thus to referencing in general, due to the indexical means of their generation. This peculiarity matters, psychologically as well as pictorially.11 Photography eventually became a popular domestic craft, rather than just a professional practice, and this too has distinguished its history from that of most other media forms. All these things are important in understanding both photography’s role in the development of modernity and our relationship to photographic images. All these things, and more, would need to be recognised in any media history that included photography.12

In any case, my interest here differs a little from that of both Bann and Benjamin. Rather than examine photography’s ability to reproduce other images (etchings or paintings, for instance), I want to consider the consequences of its capacity to reproduce itself. The question to be addressed is: what is this ‘itself’? What is being copied when a photograph is reproduced? After all, a photograph corresponds to, but does not look like, the negative from which it has been printed. Every photograph is therefore already a copy for which there is no original. As Benjamin put it: ‘From a photographic negative […] one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense.’13 That this sort of replication is also a form of displacement, even of dislocation, is made overt when a photograph’s image is reproduced in another medium—as a wood engraving, for example.

How does one describe the photographic image that is transferred from one substrate to another during this process? This image seems to be a kind of ghost, a momentarily dematerialised entity derived from a photograph that it resembles but is different from in substance (for such an image is photographic, but not a photograph). This photographic image is simultaneously attached to and detached from an origin point that becomes increasingly difficult to grasp (that is, indeed, often erased in the process of its reproduction). Its self a spectre, a wood-engraved image derived from a daguerreotype, for example, conjures the photograph that was destroyed to make it, a photograph that now can only be imagined. But that wood engraving, by marking an absent presence, in turn torments a history of photography all...
The complexity of the identity of this outcast is signalled in the very word ‘dissemination’, a word that, by being in contradiction with itself, enacts its own alterity; as Jacques Derrida said, ‘it marks an irreducible and generative multiplicity’. But even the *Oxford English Dictionary* concedes that dissemination means both ‘the action of scattering or spreading abroad seed’ and ‘the fact or condition of being thus diffused’, thereby declaring this word to be simultaneously a verb and a noun, a mark and the act of marking. The complications of such a simultaneity—rendering inoperable, for example, any simple opposition of original and copy, material and immaterial, photograph and image—should be kept in mind as one pursues the kind of history I am advocating here.

This book is about the early history of this procedure. It is about what happens when a photograph is made to ‘give up the ghost’ in this way and become just one among a multitude of replicas. But a full account of the consequences of photography’s reproducibility would take many volumes. To give it limits, and allow for some historical depth, my study will therefore focus on the establishment of commercial photography in England between 1839 and about 1851, and especially on the business practices of the first two studios to open in London. This will necessitate some discussion of the development of these businesses and of their production of daguerreotype portraits for a variety of clients, along with the reception accorded such photographs. Strangely, given its centrality to photography’s history, this is a story that has not previously been told in much detail. However, my aim is also to complicate the usual privileging of photographs in the writing about photography’s early history. To that end, I will reveal the extent to which these two studios were also involved in selling daguerreotypes to the popular press so that they could be reproduced in other media, and even in offering prints after photographs to their own clients. I will show, in other words, that the dissemination of photographic images was a central feature of their business practices.

Despite this relatively narrow focus on England in the 1840s and 1850s, it will soon become clear that this study is both global in scope and relevant to the present. Necessarily grounded in a larger political argument about the consequences of reproduction, any accounting of photography’s dissemination is, after all, also an examination of the operations of industrialisation, capitalism and colonialism. It therefore cannot help but traverse an unusually fraught and contested territory. Concentrating on the reproduction of photographic images in the popular press, my commentary will be studying an entity not easily defined, ephemeral even when first produced, and of no great monetary value in the marketplace today. Doubly displaced from its point of origin (which it nevertheless plagues as a ubiquitous presence), crossing borders without restraint, rejected or ignored as second-rate by our culture’s authority figures (including by most photo-historians), this virtual entity, the itinerant phantom that is the photographic image, is, it seems, an unwanted outcast.