Abstract

What started as an image taken to say thank you became a question about the continuing proliferation of images and family mythology. Sharing images online transforms the image into a type of currency that seeks to provide validation for both authors and readers, this perpetuates the visual language of established societal norms through placation, morals and covert colonisation as a subtle blackmail. This is a subtle ebb which we are all complicit and must intentionally reconsider and reengage with the way we use images. Where futurity is concerned, it should begin in the unlearning and relearning of visual culture.

The Online Image as Currency

My 2-year-old daughter would receive many gifts over the festive period from my wife's extended family as we made our annual pilgrimage to visit. "Make sure you take a picture of her wearing it and send it to your aunt to say thanks." In fact, all of the gifts that we received would need to be meticulously documented and catalogued so that these photographs could be shared with the donor of the present as way of a thank you and proof that the gift was gratefully received. Even though, as a photographer myself, I find that to photograph is almost a reflex action, and the ease and enjoyment with which I photograph even the most banal of subjects is a constant draw, I started to consider the value of these images we were being asked to record and what happens to this value once it has been received, once they are within the realm of the pervasiveness and democratisation of photography.

The photograph can be thought of as a form of currency - a term that could be used to describe how images are used, and ultimately appropriated and how they inappropriately propose evidence and provide what Roland Barthes termed a certification of presence (Barthes, 1993, p. 87) in that we must provide others with an ongoing, online record of achievement, no matter how menial that might be. This is the new accepted normal acknowledging the representative futurity of our present age. Currency as an acceptance of the ubiquity of images and need to show oneself to others. In this description of the image, photography becomes a form of transaction, promising to pay the bearer on demand, though not to be confused with the commercial sense of the term (photographic skills are of course exchanged for their monetary worth). The value I refer to is the emotional and moral exchange that also takes place through

the prolific sharing of images. mages that are designed to reduce your own value, images that are designed to reduce the value of others through the intersection of gaze and the intersectionality this creates (Lutz & Collins, 1991, p. 135); Images that provide an emotive moment, one way or the other (Barthes, 1993, p. 27) resonating and lingering with us.

John Tagg interprets Barthes assertions and refers to how the image's indexical naturalistic appearance can create falsehoods; the very existence of an image cannot safely assure us that the thing photographed existed (Tagg, 1988, p. 2). The meaning of a photograph is tied very closely to the referent and can easily be confused as such, yet Tagg supports the idea of an image playing its role in meaningful transactions, but urges us not to believe its perceived truth (p. 3).

In the digital sphere, one way that the inherent value and 'truth' of photographic images is becoming more and more quantified Is in a dilution of quality, recognized through the unattainable view of perfection; the idealistic and fundamentally edited world of our lives, shown as nothing more than a greatest hits compilation. And this is part of the performative power of photography and one that is continuing the illusion and the pretence that for many is indistinguishable from the bottomless malaise of imagery that filters onto our mobile technology. In the west this extends all the way to supporting these accepted norms by through a long history of covert colonisation, from the missionaries and anthropologists of the nineteenth century (Sealy, 2019, pp. 17-60) to the driving force behind a homogenised globalized commodity of imagery, which is sold as the ideal 'Caucasian beauty' as documented by photographer Zed Nelson in his project 'Love Me' and published in 2009 (Nelson, 2009). This has been a growing digital entity as newer generations of technology savvy users enter into their online only worlds, but also an ever existing modus operandi unchallenged by the economics that drive and have driven it.

The recipient of the image, our donor, who views it; is the reader, and the one who derives meaning from it, is still the most important when an image is used as currency, as a transaction. There is a ubiquity of imagery online, one that creates a second by second account of human existence, in what Geoffrey Batchen terms "A social Imperative" (Batchen, 1999, p. 36) However, our lives online are drawn from a tight editing process to seek visual gratification for something that may not even exist. A show-and-tell of

some new stuff, a summer holiday a child's achievement, all of which are socially abstract from the time and work it took to get there. Yet we share them without the nuance and expect acknowledgement for this idealistic life all the same. This is a more readily understandable transaction occurring between the author and the reader of the image (Barthes, 1977, pp. 142-149). This author seeks validation and gratification that one has lived; the reader will provide that validation and appropriate the image to suit their own gratification. This is an emotional attribution to the image, one that forms a kind of tangible link to a virtual and devoid online world.

There is a link between virtual tangibility and sporting events - when we root for our team to win, we react in what is known as the 'spectating brain,' where we can put ourselves into the role of the athlete on the field and get a real sense of feeling, a connection to the sport and community spirit, without any verbal communication or actual and literal physical link to the act of taking part in the activity (Borreli, 2016). It is something that can be palpably felt through a TV screen, or through the plethora of mobile devices that we interact with daily. This neurological impact has also been attributed to a number of actions wherever emotion is also attached, we start to mirror those feelings after witnessing others perform, which then creates links and other implications in the way we read each other's emotions and also how we empathize with them (Winerman, 2005, p. 48).

Through the prolific sharing of images that takes place every single second, we aim to generate a validation and empathy from others. However, it could also be a 'status quo' that might need to be maintained through these visual transactions. If an emotional resonance is created from the image, then potentially it can be used as a method of placating others. Moving back onto the image of thanks, there is a subtle politics is at play and a kind of *irrational* behaviour for sending this kind of image, especially if the gift was not gratefully received, as was the case for items we received for our daughter. Not to be viewed as being ungrateful however, some of the items were not the most appropriate, in terms of the size of clothing or the age range of the toy given. In a reverse of the function of the initial image transaction that I discussed related to the internet, in the thank you scenario, the photograph appeases and validates the donor, and maintains the political balance and allegiances within the family unit. Although in most cases this might be tenuous, it is a form of obscure blackmail, transmitting deeply held moral values and motives: the photograph becomes both a product and bait (Barthes, 1993, p. 92). The currency of the image is within the context and the a thank you is a punctuation that notes the end of the exchange.

Here It is part myth akin to Barthe's discussion on electoral appeal establishing personal links between us (Barthes, 1993, p. 91): After the transaction has happened, the image becomes essentially meaningless and removed from its intended use: its context now has been finalised, it is redundant and the thing that we photograph has been appropriated (Sontag, 1979, p. 4). The context has fallen away, however the image can assume new meaning other than its denoted content by entering into the mythology of vernacular family narrative , in the sense that the image starts to fulfil us, and add value to our lives through the attribution of emotion as we fondly look back over older images and this 'present' image, the image captured in the moment, this image that has been used as thanks, that was a perfunctory exchange is now part of an intimate family record.

In this way, both the author the reader-donor are now fulfilled in a way that may not happen through the simple thanks of a text message, letter, or simple email. They are visually stimulated in the knowing that the received gift has been put to good use, they can see this indexical '*evidence'* that forms the tangible link, the emotional connection to object, person and place. Of course, these are shared online in an album created in the 'cloud' where personal poignancy, and other more candid moments blend together with the thank you transaction becoming part of the nostalgia and ongoing narrative following the beautiful development of our child, familiar to many.

These images may also regain some of their value over time, re-appropriated by nostalgia and in the context of historical intrigue, however this is of course may only be if these images survive the digital process of capture and storage. Printed images have the power to be cherished in a way that digital images will not, or instead they become the property of data harvesting juggernauts and disappear into the cloud (Prix Pictet, 2019) only to be referenced and used to fine tune algorithms and serve you unattainable perfection once again.

In essence, the thank you image transaction is part of the wider discussion on the complacent proliferation of images. If we view photography as a type of currency, it would be in the form of a traded commodity exchanged for emotional validation, whether positive, or more often than not, a negative one. It is a quiet rage that is provided in the exchange of images for validation, consuming images as we do; it is easy to skip over their value due to the deluge and instant replacement of them in the quest for even more images. Our culture encourages it, and capitalism demands it, defining our very freedom on the ability to continue consuming (Sontag, 1979, p. 178). The thank you image is just another part of this

plurality that exists in photography. We placate, take more, and validate more, yet the need for more images continues. Perhaps the true resolution of validation comes from not photographing at all, or it is that the value lies within the exchange and the validation and not the image itself which is the medium and not the message (McLuhan, 1967).

Online Image currency is a paradigm of our digital cultural exchanges, rich in personal and family mythological status, which we are currently and knowingly passive. It may be important to unlearn in order to relearn this visual culture and gain true visual literacy and here is where the real validation should sit.

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