Thoughts on Photography

Ted Hiebert

Three Heads of Cerberus

Photography today is a many-headed beast—a medium that morphs and shifts and transforms into myriad forms. There is photography as a documentary practice, with all the ironies of a digital image that no longer commands the same respect as its historical cousin. There is photography as a technologically augmented reality, representing the scientific, the idealized, the aesthetic and the politicized—forms that only the mind, and no longer the eye, can see. There is also the photographic gaze—as surveillant, or counter-surveillant, the gaze of proof, and the gaze of memories given over to machinic archive as though the human body might no longer quite be trusted with its own history. And in all this there is also the transition of the human into something quite distinct, if not properly new—a hybrid creature both indebted to and liberated by the world of images.

In Greek mythology there is a figure to which one might refer amidst this game of multiplicity—Cerberus, a three-headed hound with a mane of snakes and the tail of a dragon. Both guardian of the entrance to the underworld and conveyor of the dead to the depths of Hades, Cerberus was both the keeper of souls and of the darkness of underground living. And with the story of Cerberus as a guide, one might begin to tell a somewhat different tale of photography—not simply a medium that illuminates appearances, but one that also emerges from and returns to the darkness of uncertainty. And so, to rise to the challenge of a plural practice and a plural medium, three chronicles—stories of what might be called the heads of Cerberus—three versions of photographic practice in the stories of illumination and darkness, technology and subjectivity, and politics and the imagination.

Illumination and Darkness

The most famous story of photography is probably Plato's "Allegory of the Cave,"[1] in which prisoners of the darkness are brought into the light, revealing a world of appearances, and beginning the philosopher's project of enlightened living. From this beginning, the fusion of image and knowledge has persisted—built from the foundation of documented observation.

fig. 20   1   Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 227-35.

There is a reason, however, why the cave of Hades has a guardian whereas that of Plato's allegory does not—namely that there is a different kind of wisdom necessary to function in the darkness. Consider that while photography is often referred to as a medium of appearances—what the philosopher Jean Baudrillard called "writing with light"[2]—there is an inverse side to photographic practice, that side that is exactly not about appearances or sight or the eye. Instead, this inverse side is exactly about what happens when a photographer enters the darkroom—a place where light does not reveal but contaminates the fragile surfaces of film and paper. In a twist of irony, photography must be protected against the light—a perspective perhaps best put by the artist Evergon, who called the camera a "coffin of darkness," sacrificing the night-time of possibilities every time a photograph is made.[3] And in the dark, the photographer must rely, not on vision but on *touch*—a tactile debt to the medium that is rarely mentioned.

Yet this goes further, for as anyone who has stared into the sun knows full well, both underexposure and overexposure of the eye results in darkness—do not stare into the light, lest one be blinded, even if only temporarily. And so, whether touched by the light or forced into a tactile mode by exactly lights deprived, photography has been forced to develop a relationship to the immediacy of a visionless environment. It is a version of what photographers call incident light—the light of encounter rather than appearances, light that is interrupted before it is reflected back into the world of appearances. Incident light is also that light that blinds, light from the sun or the light bulb or the firefly—light that radiates, light projected outwards leaving those who stare too closely gasping in illuminated darkness.

Technology and Subjectivity

In part, this relationship to the incident is compromised when photography goes digital. Strangely, the digital is much less reliant on darkness—cutting out the tactility of photographic practice in favour of full-spectrum illumination.

2   Jean Baudrillard, "Photography, or The Writing Of Light," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, article 083 (Spring 2000).

3   Evergon and Ted Hiebert, personal communication, May 2007.

Digital photography is enlightened photography, finally rid of its debt to darkness—but not quite. For even within the digital there remains an historical ghost. If photography can indeed steal souls, it is the digital that has stolen that of the analog—not rendering it obsolete, but multiplying it—the irreconcilability of bodies with multiple souls—the three heads of each of us now desperately attempting to understand the ways they inter-relate... or the ways that they don't.

But maybe even this isn't so unfamiliar a story. Psychoanalysis has been telling us for decades that we have split minds, alienated within ourselves and negotiating multiple perspectives on the world. Only now, technology theorists are telling us the same thing—in Marshall McLuhan's words, technology turns us "inside out,"[4] for Paul Virilio our eyes have been re-placed by the "vision machine,"[5] and for Arthur Kroker each and every one of us have become "possessed individuals," people literally inhabited by the languages of technology and image.[6] And it is here that the technological imperative comes back to also inhabit our minds—subjectivities bound to the machine, yet also strangely liberated in the process as virtual identities proliferate—from blogs and avatars to Facebooks and MySpaces. Really, we could imagine ourselves almost any way we wanted—and more importantly, we could still provide the images to prove it.

We have given the image the task of remembering for us—of proving our identities are real—I am photographed therefore I am. And yet, with this new debt to the technological image, the act of self-representation is fused with that of the imagination—even potentially with the self-falsifying. This occurs because under the ever-intensifying signs of technologically mediated existence, identity begins to multiply. And the resultant confusion is much more real than any given image, for the image inevitably fails to represent the myriad possibilities of who we know we can be.

4   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 19.

5   Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

6   Arthur Kroker, *The Possessed Individual: Technology and the French Postmodern* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 5.

It is here that the self-portrait becomes an unfamiliar phenomenon—not a subjective assertion of presence, but a statement of unreasonable singularity—the uncertainty of self is much more familiar to me than my own self-image.

Politics and the Imaginary

In this, it would seem imperative to decide to which fictions we orient ourselves—for the possibilities of digital self-reinvention seem directly counter to the authenticities of analog certainty. And, if we allow ourselves only one head, this might be true, and yet we no longer dictate which heads rise and speak at any given time. "Objects demand to be photographed," insisted Jean Baudrillard,[7] and if this is true then not only does history document itself, but we too are caught in the game of willful volition—a story of personalities caught on film, each demanding their own authenticity of presence.

It was Walter Benjamin who famously articulated the importance of the reproducible image, arguing that reproducibility carried with it great political potential for the diffusion of centralized power structures.[8] How ironic, then, that under the sign of reproducible identities what gets diffused is precisely the centralized self. And yet, with this, comes the possibility to return some form of intentionality to the image. If photography can steal souls, perhaps it can also give them back—imaginary souls revivified in order to keep the story alive. These are selves that are not selves, but purposefully other, imagined back as "pataphysical" solutions to the disappearance of darkness.[9]

And in the disappearance of darkness, what we find is a resurrection of the imaginary—not because the imaginary had disappeared, but because the unassailable reign of illuminated truth has come to an end. When the digital begins to challenge the domination of the real, when singularities dissolve

7 Jean Baudrillard, "Objects, Images and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion," in *Art and Artifact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (London: Sage, 1997), 14.

8 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

into multiple possibilities, what we find is that the imagination re-enters the scene with renewed spirit, dancing in the shadow play of uncertainty. In the words of Richard Kearney, when the reign of analog truth is challenged we have no other options than to "imagine it differently."[10] And so, to imagine is no longer merely a trope of artistic production, relegated to the safe status of suspended living. Instead, the imaginary has been activated as a necessary possibility for the contemplation of lived uncertainty, a necessary guardian of the ghost of darkness.

Multiplicities

There are not simply three heads to the beast of photography, but many more—each of these mentioned belonging less to the three-headed hound and more to his multi-headed mane of snakes, slithering and flickering with tongue-speak. The lesson of Cerberus is that what seems to be one is three, and what seems to be three is many more—sign of digital times at the intersection of analog histories and technological possibilities. Guardian of the cave, Cerberus is also the guardian of darkness—long-standing symbol of both fear and possibility—the monsters of myth are also those under our beds at night, imagined into existence no less than we ourselves. The difference now is that images begin to walk among us—digital selves and avatar self-concepts and illuminated imaginations of how we could all be different. As a child I used to pretend I was a panther—when the timing was right, I actually believed it. Now, photography allows for these delusions to live on equal footing with our more mundane versions of the world. These are self-portrait chronicles—meditations on the impossibility of singular being.

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9   Alfred Jarry defined pataphysics as "the science of imaginary solutions." Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (Paris: Galimard, 1980), 32.

10   Richard Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998), 364.