Love in the Time of Computation (Afterthoughts on 'The Mass Image' inspired by Walker Evans)

SEÁN CUBITT

University of Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

Abstract

In a brief note on 'Photography' published in 1978, American documentary photographer Walker Evans offered principles for his practice. Close analysis suggests that the heart of his concerns lay in the photographers' love for their subjects based in an unexpressed but significant ecological orientation. This analysis leads towards a critical reconsideration of the concept of 'mass image', a term developed to describe the production and management of a collective database of imagery uploaded to social media platforms. The article criticises the idea that this mass image is single and unified. Developing ideas of love and fantasy, the article argues that, in an era when the unconscious is structured not like language but like code, massed image databases lack a single present time, with consequences for photographic aesthetics.

Keywords

Photography, Walker Evans, love, ecology, mass image

There is a small mystery about the essay that triggers this writing, a note of two and a half pages by Walker Evans, doyen of documentary photography, in the *Massachusetts' Review* titled 'Photography'. The essay appeared in 1978, three years after Evans' death. It is quite possible he sent it to the editor, Jerome Liebling, early in the development of the issue: the online repository for the journal includes notes on only the first five contributors, including James Agee who died in 1955. But Agee's piece is dated 1940. No such date appears on Evans'. [1] Agee's contribution comprises four short paragraphs on Evans' Subway Photographs taken in the 1930s and 40s, where he

admits the risk any writer takes in trying to supplement a photo, especially one that presents "those who were being photographed as unaware of the camera as possible. To anyone who understands what a photograph can contain, not even that information is necessary, and any further words can only vitiate the record itself" (Agee, 1978). Among the phenomena that make this admonition even more interesting today is the increasingly close relation between words and images in the second decade of the 21st century, notably in image generators that respond to textual prompts. There are also, lurking in the labyrinth of that new relation, questions about time. What it might mean for a photograph, a photographer, or a text to persist, physically or in memory, posthumously? What durations or narratives are appropriate to describe the relations between photographers, the objects they record and the apparatus they deploy? This paper will suggest that historical and cultural permutations of love – for other people, for the world, for photography itself – as condition and as story will help understand emerging relations between images and language, and the mathematical-logical coding that comes after language. Love is reciprocal obligation. Unlike sex, it has no end. It endlessly sews together what has been torn apart: soul from soul, human from world. Re-reading Walker Evans, photography pitches love against either capture (extraction) or representation (exploitation) in favour of a third entity that it is the project of photography and the world to build together.

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Walker Evans has been considered the epitome of documentary photography, defined by a cool, dispassionate, even intellectual objectivity. A typical judgement comes from feminist photo historian Andrea Fisher, who describes him as "widely recognized as the paradigmatic figure of documentary […] the guarantor of honest observation" (Fisher, 1987: 131). It seems however that there have been doubts about the purity of his documentary impulse at least as far back as 1979, when Alan Trachtenberg noted that "the apparent documentary mode of his pictures […] has made his pictures seem test cases in the controversy over meaning in photographs", going on to ask, "Do his pictures yield transparent access to the world as it is? Are they impersonal, privileged acts of immediacy? Or are they pictures only incidentally achieved through photography, pictures that make visible the calculating hand and interpreting eye of

the maker […]?" (Trachtenberg, 1979: 7). Trachtenberg may be accused of making Evans a straw man in a once-rebellious attempt to introduce political semiotics into the academy. Fisher performs a similar move when she compares Evans to his contemporary Dorothea Lange, who also photographed the lives of poor sharecroppers for the Farm Security Agency at the same time that Evans and Agee were preparing their famous photo-book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for the same New Deal project. Fisher describes Evans' work as cold compared to the care that Lange devoted to her subjects. Documentary photography stumbles over the fence between demonstrating its affections and claiming uninvolved observation: damned if it cared and damned if it didn't. But in the question whether documentary photography was pure observation or demonstration of the inevitable complicity of emotion and craft in their making, Evans' photos were the epicentre of the debate. A slightly different and slightly older question dates back to Agee's 1940 concerns about the relation between words and pictures.

This concern emerges in Evans' 'Photography' piece when he writes that younger photographers "dream of photographs like poems", going on to suggest that "photography seems to be the most literary of the graphic arts", before adding that "conversely certain writers are noticeably photographic", listing Henry James, James Joyce, and Vladimir Nabokov. It may be that when he wrote of photographs like poems, he was thinking of the poet William Carlos Williams, an associate of the earlier photographer Alfred Stieglitz (Dijkstra, 1978) whose aestheticising approach to photography Evans described slightingly as "artistic and Romantic" (Katz, 1971: 83). Williams' 1923 suite *Spring and All* contains much anthologised imagist poems like 'The Red Wheelbarrow'. The first, untitled poem of the book ('By the road to the contagious hospital') describes the twiggy, wet landscape of late winter before the lines "Now the grass, tomorrow/the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf//One by one objects are defined," where spring appears not as goddess or even season but as evidence creeping into sharper definition. A remaining metaphorical impulse aligns the season's turn with an increase of distinctiveness, while defining the season by the growing clarity of its witnesses. Published two years earlier, 'The Great Figure' ('I saw the figure 5 in gold') inspired a painting, now at MOMA New York, named for those lines by Charles Demuth, another member of the Stieglitz group. Williams' poetry of definite

observation carefully translated into language with, at this stage, few adventures into any additional thoughts indicates how the observational mode of science (Daston and Galison, 2010) and documentary impacted literary modernism, but also how that poetic commitment to "no ideas but in things" (a later slogan of Williams') impacted a generation of photographers.

In turn it seems to have impacted Agee who, between slightly purple passages and knowing avant-garde techniques, comes to moments of 'photographic' description like this in 'Late Sunday Morning', the second section of their collaboration on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

> He was middle-sized and dark, beginning to grizzle, with the knotty, walnut kind of body and a deeply cut, not unkindly monkey's face. He wore dark trousers, a starched freshly laundered white collarless shirt, and a soft yellow straw hat with a band of flowered cloth. His shoes were old, freshly blacked, not polished; his suspenders were nearly new, blue, with gold lines at the edge. He was courteous, casual, and even friendly, without much showing the element of strain (Evans and Agee, 1941).

There is perhaps a slippage away from pure documentary in the phrase "the knotty, walnut kind of body", where we are invited to align this very specific man with a type that we are presumed to recognise (not a specifically racialising type: such a character is cited a few lines later using a racist slur). That recourse to a shared lexicon of types, like the shared vocabulary of American English, ostensibly places us in a world apart from the 'immediacy' of picturing. Evans describes the camera as an "incredible instrument of symbolic actuality", a phrase that throws us into the complex relations between actual and symbol, immediate and mediated, picturing and verbalising.

In the next line, Evans lays claim to another aesthetic principle of documentary: "complete realization of natural, uncontrived lighting". This surely points away from studio photography towards locations, but then natural light was stock in trade for at least some portrait photographers like Bill Brandt in 1950s England, pushed in printing to give what equally certainly counts as Evans' "symbolic actuality". The clue may lie in Evans' assertion that "the eye traffics in feelings, not in thoughts": so that an emotional response is acceptable to the degree that it is caught up in the atmosphere

of the scene before it, thus getting over Trachtenberg's stumbling-block between impersonality and interpretation. But then, italicised in his final paragraph, Evans cites Henry James: "In the arts, feeling is always meaning". If the obverse is also the case, then perhaps meaning is not reducible to language after all, but is a matter of affect, nameless movements of sensation and empathy. The penultimate paragraph gives us no more clarity, even though it excludes some options. Here Evans discusses "the language of vision", but it is not at all clear that this language is verbal. This language, he says, can't be taught: "formal education deals in words, mathematical figures, and methods of rational thought, not in images". Earlier he had specified as the third of his principles "the rightness of in-camera view-finding, or framing". That could place us in the terrain described by Susan Sontag (1977: 3): "In teaching us a new visual code, photographs […] are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics". The question of ethics will return, but in the first instance we can start from the idea that, as 'visual language', photographs are governed by a syntax that brings them closer to code (as in Morse code, but also perhaps as in moral code). As Stuart Hall observed, the ideal coded message is "perfectly transparent communication" between equivalent sender and receiver (Hall, 1999: 514). However, in actuality, "'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange" (ibid: 510, original emphasis). As Hall is at pains to point out, the ideological task of inculcating tailored ethical attitudes is especially prone to failure. So too are even simple instructions or descriptions. To the extent that picturing is code, it is open to interpretation, the extraction of meaning in words as well as feelings. To the extent that photography is at least partially automated, the photographer is only the first interpreter of the photograph.

This does appear to vindicate Trachtenberg's implication that photography is not exempt from the work of interpretation and ideology. Nonetheless, in the form practised by Walker Evans, it has a significant proximity to reality, even if to a reality that demands some kind of interpretation. Evans' photos seem to back away from any but the merest presentation, like William Carlos Williams' poetry, since presentation too is a code, both communicative and ethical. Evans' problem with this coding is clear from his reaction against formal education's obsession with words and logic:

"This may be", he says, "a form of conspiracy that promises artificial blindness". Yet he concludes this observation with the following knotty expression:

> It is this very blindness that photography attacks, blindness that is ignorance of real seeing and is perversion of seeing. It is reality that photography reaches toward. The blind are not totally blind. Reality is not totally real (Evans, 1978: 646).

We can understand something of the expression "The blind are not totally blind" if we understand that, despite our education, we are capable of overcoming the artificial blindness it has produced in us. As Hall noted, ethical education has never been totally successful. For Evans, the idea that photography "reaches toward" reality, perhaps without ever fully grasping it, has a dialectical edge. An event of image-capture, since it always fails, must be repeated over and over, as a photographer takes multiple shots of the same subject, or goes in search of a new one. What remains enigmatic is the final statement: "Reality is not totally real". After quoting Henry James ("feeling is always meaning"), Evans moves to his final determination of "the matter of art in photography": "it is the capture and projection of the delights of seeing; it is the defining of observation full and felt". So what is captured in a photograph is an affect pinned to the act of seeing, an act won by resisting the blindness that our social formation imposes on us, and passing it on ("projection"). That is the reality that photography can capture, an actuality that brings together the seen and the seeing, symbolic in the sense that it embodies "feeling" at least as much as subordination to or dominance over a reality that lies beyond the grasp of visual language. Photography was an act of love.

1.

The attraction of this re-statement of Evans' analysis is that it is ecological. There is a continuum between our world and us, which includes the camera as a symbolic instrument that synthesises world and observer. Latent in Evans' idea that the photographer needs "originality of vision, or image innovation; exploration; invention" (1978: 644) – that the photographer must bring something unexpected to the act of seeing in order to see past their acquired blindness – is the thought that the

world too should bring something unforeseen. Evans describes this unexpected gift as "the raw feast: much-used shops, bedrooms, and yards, far from the halls of full-dress architecture, landscaped splendor, or the more obviously scenic nature" (ibid). What brings innovation to the photographer is the raw world, unkempt, tumultuous, contingent.

A problem with the concept of a relationship between photography and the rawness of a world liberated from blinkered preconceptions is that what was then a privileged window for generative encounters on the way to creativity has become something closer to Vilèm Flusser's gloomy description of photography as a project to complete a total image, reducing photographers to functionaries of this totalising goal. This is the age of the mass image – the sum of the billions of photos uploaded to social media platforms and consolidated as a single resource for image and data mining. The universalising project of the mass image seems precariously analogous to the changing status of contingency in contemporary capital. Elie Ayache (2016: 243) discovered that "Traders don't use derivatives to trade the underlying; they use derivatives to make volatility tradable". His discovery, supported by the analyses of Appadurai (2016), MacKenzie (2002), Mirowski (2006), and Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2017), indicates that capital used to suppress contingencies as "risk", noise that threatened the efficient running of markets, but now depends on random fluctuations. Indeed, markets actively produce randomness, in order to gain tactical leverage on the differences that produce profit. Like Evans' photography, contemporary capital, red in tooth and class, also enjoys a raw feast. It seeks out the unexpected as a rare source of profit and subsumes it into its ravenous pursuit of gain. The raw no longer breaks open the system: it feeds it.

For similar reasons, Walter Benjamin's discovery of the optical unconscious needs to be updated. The more completely the cyborg corporations that manage the massive numbers of images uploaded daily assimilate and predict the probable content of those images, the hungrier they become for randomness, for something new. For Benjamin, photography revealed spaces between or underneath the visible world, things too fast or slow, too small or vast for unaided vision. For Benjamin in the 1930s, the capacity for humans and their technical partners to generate randomness in otherwise closed systems could be relied on to unleash creativity. Today, however, a huge part of our

daily lives – work, leisure, commuting, consuming – is conducted in various forms of human-computer interface, and to that degree much of our activity is plannable. Short of the genuinely unpredictable but potentially apocalyptic profitability of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007 and Schuller and Maldonado, 2016), ordinary human creativity, especially our ability to misinterpret (which in Hall's time was still potentially subversive) has become a reliable source of productive innovation and profit. Where in the 1930s Benjamin saw machines revealing humanity's optical unconscious, today we humans have become the unconscious of our machines. As functionaries of the photographic apparatus, we are no longer tasked with risk management and producing standard products, but with supplying freedom and creativity to a system no longer capable of producing them on its own.

In Lacan's psychoanalytic frame, the unconscious was structured like a spoken language: an obverse of the master-commands shaping the development of the infant child. Today, if the master discourse belongs not exclusively to humans but increasingly to digital systems, then the human unconscious of the digital apparatus is structured, increasingly, like logico-mathematical code. It is increasingly important therefore to understand how code is structured and how it operates (Fazi and Fuller, 2016 and MacKenzie and Munster, 2019) so as to unpick how the contemporary unconscious operates as the obverse of code, in parallel with the way the psychic unconscious operates as the obverse of language. While counselling against taking their terms as a complete or foolproof agenda, Beatrice Fazi and Matt Fuller list ten aspects of computation: abstraction, universality, discreteness, axiomatics, numbers, limits, speeds, scale, logical equivalence, and memory. Each aspect, as they present them, opens out into fields of possibility for creative engagement, allowing them to offer insights such as, in reference to Kintera's 2005 robotic artwork *Revolution* when it repeatedly beats its 'head' against a wall, "This not a generative error, as a glitch would be, but a machinic ability to repeat without recourse to reflection" (Fazi and Fuller, 2016: 294). As we seek out shadow realisations of code, we may well be looking for generative errors, glitches, and for such other negations of their listed terms as concretion (against abstraction), uniqueness (against equivalence), presence (versus memory), locality (versus universality) and flux (as opposed to discreteness). From a systemic perspective, each of these negations, in their various ways, can be considered

as noise. By no means do all human activities fall into these negative categories, since so much of our behaviour is subordinated to or shaped by computer interfaces and edge computing, and much of what does conform to the new categories – "the creativity that capital secures as the flow-through of communicative and affective energy", as John Roberts (2022: 27) puts it – can be understood as deliberately generated by the system in order to provide it with novelty. Once we understand photographic uncovering of the unseen as a practice of coding, it is easy to see how, regardless of a photographer's motivation, the click of a button feeds the maw of a capital that now thrives on the unforeseen. Because motivations no longer frame the photographic event, the human functionary is effectively unconscious of its function in the whole apparatus of the mass image. As the unconscious, they are no longer individual but mass. The mass image generates the mass unconscious.

Individuality, where it persists, is only a by-product. Human-computer interfaces are designed for individual users, largely overdetermined by a predilection for mental illness rather than social upheaval, and by the falling rate of profit that requires increasing numbers of devices, each tailored for one individual's exclusive use. The corporate cyborg is therefore residually individualist, even though it treats every individual functionary as equivalent to any other. The Freudian unconscious, for all it was a product of linguistic and discursive socialisation, was experienced individually. The mass unconscious, as the obverse of code, is shaped by industrialised processes of individuation and is therefore far more likely to be either collective or interpersonal. When Walker Evans argued that the language of vision "is learned by chance, not system", he already pointed towards the possible unconscious collaborations involved. The world intervenes in photography as equipment and motif; the human as the one that feels and frames. From the perspective of the corporate cyborg, world and human are equally external environments, surroundings other than itself that it inhabits and exploits. Humans become world, elements of the environs that surround the outer edges of the system. This system has meanwhile ceased to store data in rigid taxonomies and instead moved from relational databases to the dynamics of SQL and noSQL, reversing the old adage about the centre of a network being anywhere: in contemporary networks, the centre is nowhere and the periphery everywhere. Like the ubiquitous borders studied by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) – where arrivals, imports

and contagion occur not just at the edges of a territory but in every airport, post-office and public space – the margins of edge computing are 'outside' neither the living world nor the digital that suffuses and is suffused by it. The image, under these conditions, whether in the form of a recognisable picture or the abstraction of a bar code, is still an edge, but the edge is everywhere, within and without the cyborg that processes it. As Thomas Elsaesser (2016: 211) observed, "a novel suggests *a* world (among many), while Google suggests *the* world". But if the diegesis of any individual novel, ideally, coheres into a recognisably whole world, the world that Google tries to contain inevitably exceeds it. Here I have to make my *mea culpa*: when I introduced the idea of the mass image above in the singular, I failed to recognise either the multiplicity of platforms and systems, the contradictions between them, or the plurality of images as they fail to congeal into a single picture of a single world.

2.

Among the implications of this retrenchment is that the mass image – if it is not one, and since its failure to become one also evidences the struggle between rival databases – is not present in the temporal sense. The multiple databases this plural image inhabits are dynamic, which means they are formed in and of time – just as language and code are. It is not that time has no prior existence, or that it is not produced either by or against or entirely outside digital systems, but that whatever modes of time shape code also shape the code-structured unconscious. This mass unconscious is also a temporal phenomenon: more a narrative than an event or a condition. However, seen from what we experience as the exterior of the system, the mass image is indeed still: what we put in appears to come out again. At this level, the more assimilated humans become to software, the more eternally present the human becomes. But as we have seen, contingency is capital's way of assimilating history and natural history. In terms Celia Lury (1997: 220-1) derives from Colin Campbell (1996), the factory worker's "character" – their willed and willing, ethical and productive aspects – are abstracted as labour power. But they are also "abstracted" psychologically, as when we describe someone absorbed in their social media as "abstracted". The subordination of humans to machinic or digital systems results in an abstraction that works both ways. It produces an enumerable set of repetitive activities (machine minding,

swiping/liking/clicking) which leave the remainder of the human – Campbell calls it "personality" – abstracted, psychically elsewhere. Let's call this elsewhere 'fantasy'.

Fantasy, as Freud (1979) already knew, is plural. By empathy we can occupy the position of an Other, imagine ourselves doing and being done to, positively or negatively, simultaneously. The problem with fantasy, as Freud imagines it, is the word "simultaneously": fantasy occupies only a single time. As the underside of language, this may well have been an accurate account; but in our time, as obverse of code's individuation, we must be attuned to fantasy as interpersonal. If then, as Lacan argued, the sexual relation is impossible because there is no 'relation' (and therefore no love) where the sexual act is undertaken for 'my' pleasure, not my partner's, then the interpersonal experience of love cannot be regulated as a simple sublimation of the sexual drive because it demands a relationship with an Other that does not instantly loop back to my own gratification. Samo Tomšič finds a double bind in one attempted solution, one with implications for the ethics of documentary photography:

> Masochism still assumes that enjoyment could be separated from exploitation, obtained in the form of contractual enjoyment, by means of a symbolic agreement between the masochist and the dominatrix. Sadism, on the other hand, uncovers the compulsive, involuntary, forced and non-relational character of enjoyment (Tomšič, 2019: 25).

The photographer who purchases the right to photograph puts themselves in the hands of their object; the one who steals an image imposes a colonial, capitalist power over their subject. The second relation is almost universal in images of non-human creatures and places.

Alain Badiou's meditations on the truth of love propose an alternative. The Other here may not necessarily be the declared object of affection: the love of fans for an idol or of her subjects for a lately deceased monarch are not the product of reciprocal engagement, like that of lovers. They do however produce a vast and complex interconnection of large populations sharing that unreciprocated affection. Landscape photography may escape the charge of extractivism if it is undertaken in the spirit of unrequited love. Yet that is still a subjective position. Badiou focuses on the Two; the condition of fandom is that there are at least two, and by implication many, many

more. Badiou's love is true when there is a pledge of fidelity, and the idea of pledge is important here because it is a verbal promise in the form of the phrase 'I love you'. Fredric Jameson (2013: 27 ff) makes a distinction between emotions, which are named, and affects, which are bodily. Love, as pledge and promise, is verbal, and therefore an emotion, registered in the public space of language, where love as affect is bodily and connected to the surging, nameless tides of feeling that swirl through the world and the bodies that inhabit and are inhabited by it. This planetary connectivity of flows between bodies and world appears in Evans under the guise of "natural, uncontrived lighting" that pulls photographer, apparatus and scene into the experience of seeing that reaches towards an unrealised commons they might share. As a temporal reach towards some absent wholeness, a photographic image is not a completed event but a love story, one that exceeds the boundaries of language.

It is no secret that social media are not social. The arrival of artificial intelligences capable of producing photo-realistic quasi-photographs on the basis of mass image databases, like DALL-E, has clarified the new orientation of love in computational photography. The mass image is continuously produced by human users taking and uploading photos. In the aesthetic – however complex and confused – of the American documentary photography from Stieglitz to Walker Evans, as captured in William's poem from *Spring and All*, photography chose love on which, as Williams wrote elsewhere, "so much depends". Love overwhelms the division between lovers, the gulf between photographer and world. What happened in social media photography, regardless of the intentions and emotions of photographers or the affects of their world, was a reinstatement of the object. Traditionally, some photographs passed between lovers – most readers probably have in their possession a photo given to them by a parent, child or lover that they cherish as much for the giving as for the image. This is the first intuition of the posthumous appeal of photographs.

A different level of less-than-social but more-than-narcissistic love emerges in uploading photographs to platforms, a degree of sharing that targets either one or two others or an imagined community. At the same time, and this is the larger change, uploading donates images, freighted with affect, to the immense technological Other of the database. Photography is beginning to realise that its first passion – for the technology of photography itself – no longer needs the mediation of another human,

a human Other. Nor is it exclusively focussed on caring for some specific place, time or being framed in the *prise de vue*. The camera was the first love of every photographer, and the darkroom and the album: the apparatus of photography as a whole. Now that apparatus has become the ever-open channel from capture to online storage. Few, if any, human Others will ever see the vast majority of photos I or anyone takes. Automatically uploaded to cloud storage systems, the only attention that millions upon millions of photos will ever receive is the sleepless attention of databases. It is a one-sided affair. But isn't that the case with so many interpersonal love affairs? Unrequited, unreturned love is still love, and sometimes the more intense for its rejection. In the manner of fandom or grief for the dead Queen, love as affect may not be engaged by a verbal pledge but is no less embodied affect flowing through the machinery and the human body that, as lover, seeks to serve it. This is how code enters the new practice of photographic love.

Agee and Evans' concern for the relation between image (file) and language (metatags) finds a new resolution when both converge as code. To the degree that love escapes the selfishness of the (absent) sexual relation, it ceases to be 'my' fantasy, opening onto the shared fantasy of lovers, and the social fantasy of imagined communities. Social fantasy is however still historically shaped, and even though it leans into simultaneity and therefore an ahistorical condition, love as social fantasy still abides by the rule of affect which, since it is now definable in or by language, is excluded from it. Today it is not only 'natural' languages but 'artificial' symbolic codes that structure the social fantasy underpinning photo uploads.[2] Under these circumstances, to reverse Plato's *Timaeus* (1892: 1826), time is no longer a moving image of eternity: the time love yearns for in the form of storage is an eternal image of movement.[3] But the dependency of photography now on its infrastructures as well as its ecological and interpersonal legacies makes any autonomy, and therefore any form of stillness, impossible. The promise of database storage is the promise of eternity. As Luhmann (1990: 9) noted, "Memory, and then writing, have their function in preserving – not the events, but their structure-generating power". But the modes of dynamic storage dominant in contemporary relational databases (and likely to be even more dynamic in the coming era of quantum computing) are less like structuring taxonomies, and more like the forms of mimesis that Celia Lury (1997: 5) describes as "a bodily mediation […] that

is both metamorphosis and coincidence", "a relation of adaptation, affinity and reciprocity between self and context in which personhood is not limited to the confines of the individual" but extends to mimicry of every living thing and, she insists, to imitation of the dead. We might add that in the fantasy of love, such lived, embodied imitations may extend to future states.

Luhmann and Lury differ in their conceptions of time. Luhmann struggles to escape the equilibrium that early cybernetic systems theory posited as the core negentropic tendency towards a steady state – one in which by definition there can be no stories. Lury begins from metamorphosis. The difference informs an understanding of fantasy's predisposition to occupy multiple positions simultaneously. In the relational dynamic, these are less simultaneous, and less 'contemporary', whether describing a period following modernity or an ahistorical present, and more co-temporaneous, that is, events, conjunctures, possibilities that, though they may be recovered from the past or introjected from a possible future, appear co-temporaneously in the minds of the living and the processes of computation. Liberation philosopher Enrico Dussel (1983: 36) affirmed "the priority of the Other as creative origin over creation as work, as finished totality and perfectible". Beyond the revolutionary moment of rupture and creation, "liberation is affirmation of the subject already beyond negation: the positivity of the new order, the new man. Liberation includes pre-revolutionary moments, the revolutionary situation, the revolution itself and the continuation of revolution as construction of the new order" (Dussel, 1983: 70). The early Dussel's anthropocentrism and gendered language aside, the distinction between revolution and liberation rests on the singularity of the former and the co-temporaneity of the latter as it brings together preceding and succeeding moments around the possibility opened by the historical break. To make a microcosmic analogy, in line with the proposition that any unique event occurs at the margin of what a system can assimilate, pictures uploaded to platforms never preserve enough self-consistency to be 'seen' as coherent and discrete entities in storage, which is also already processing. Just as lovers must abandon selfishness – the self itself – in order to love, the price of remembrance is no longer, as it was for Luhmann, to recall and restart structuration, but to abandon any claim to self-identity and coherence, and to plunge into what we now must inhabit, the space-time of probabilities.

3.

These reflections on time and the scope of possible love raise the stakes in the poker game that is love in the time of computation, particularly the relation between socio-political scales of historical change and the interpersonal scales of love and friendship. At the minimal point of narcissism, the selfie is an ironic parody, a staging always undertaken in bad faith because it is set up on behalf of a more-or-less absent beloved leaving the gap that the interpersonal operation of image-messaging arrives to address. The wager here is that the true recipient of the selfie, and of the pledge that accompanies it, is not another human or even the human that re-cognises its self in the photo it takes of itself but the database who, in the nature of the game, is both public and elsewhere. Large Language Model interactions with the mass image oscillate between image capture and emotion capture ("affective computing" is a misnomer: a selfie inscribes an emotion, not a fluid affect). The word "capture" is significant here. In the move from language to code, love changes from verbal pledge, with all its narrative possibilities, into mobile, co-temporaneous, and unstructured data. Once again, etymology springs a trap: data (from the Latin *datum*, "given") is never freely given. It may be contracted or purchased, but it is mostly captured or harvested on the colonial extractivist model. A pledge, on the other hand, we regard as freely given (with an allowance made for the treachery and misunderstanding that provide so many spurs for love stories). If documentary photography is caught in Tomšič's sado-masochistic dialectic, is photographic love doomed to choose which margin it stands at: colonising or escape route?

When once deposited into these archives, personal or institutional memories are placed in the service not only of a dynamic re-membering but of wholesale oblivion, the planned obsolescence of souvenirs. Minus memories, the subjects of code find themselves incomplete and lacking. To borrow a phrase that Lury already borrowed from Marilyn Strathern (1992), a documentary photo is "an imitation that is not of but, rather, after nature" (1997: 226), a phrase that recalls the passage from language to the code that comes after it. Preservation – of language or of nature – is falsification: the copy transforms its original even as it yearns for it. This too is love. The perfect clinch of image and reality that guides André Bazin's cinematic ontology always displaces the past into the present; its pledge, linguistic in form, preserved the specifically emotional

point of love – that it should always be realised not now but deferred, in the future – as opposed to the dynamic flux of affect. There may have been a feminisation of photography from Box Brownie to iPhone by way of the family album. The mass image may indicate a queering of picture-making. In this sense the anticipatory powers of technology may not be entirely a Bad Thing. Its shortcoming is that in the interests of a pairing that would anneal a lost (pre-oedipal, maternal Real) wholeness, the mass image offers a totality susceptible to cognitive mapping and exploitation, especially of creativity and randomness. Even the inevitable failure of this aspiration to a totalising matrix (a womb) and an ahistorical now cannot end the dynamic that the system feeds and feeds on.

Discussing the work of liberation philosopher Arturo Andrés Roig, Gandolfo (2009: 189) writes, "The truth of reality is best seen not in the whole but in the marginalized particulars". The actuality of massed processing of images in databases creates a new set of dynamics. Not only are human consumers of goods and services (cameras, networks) entirely subsumed back into the system as consumption becomes production of more data for more exploitation. Not only are land, animals, and other people converted into standing reserves whose extracted images, uploaded to autonomous relational systems, are forced to donate their services to the ongoing process of capital accumulation. The very machines we have built, made of ancient knowledge and skills, languages and mathematics, have been reduced to slavery, forced not to create what they will or to build unprecedented, unthought of, and unthinkable futures, but to repeat, endlessly, the same obsessive gestures. This is a system fully capable of exploiting even the most random of behaviours, indeed is hungry for them, now that its own operations are in large part predictable. What remains, once the unconscious is structured like code, is the possibility of some other mode of noise. Recent affect theory has addressed the possibility of a cognitive non-conscious, an ability to sense, react to, and act on the world shared by humans, technologies, and living creatures (Hayles, 2017) and extensible to the intelligence of things (Angerer, 2023) – the cognitive ability of a river to navigate its way through rock and sand. In these first steps into possible collaborations between human and more-than-human Others, built on the bordering and exclusion of processes that do not compute and are not accountable, may lie the seeds of a human-non-human aesthetics, an un- or

pre- or non-conscious anticipation capable of rewriting history and the increasingly monolithic (because increasingly dynamic) present. Agee told us that "words can only vitiate the record itself" (1978: 743). That may be exactly what needs to be done.

Bazin and Evans found in photography an escape from the tyrannical habits of language, but as photography became code, a form that could not have been better designed for harvesting, language once more reveals its ancient power: to be a machinery of syntax and vocabulary capable of generating endless new statements. It was perfectly possible to say "the Earth moves round the Sun" centuries before that became common wisdom. Sentences that could have no meaning in the habitual worlds where they were spoken may have been uttered a thousand times before their turn came to become true. Photography too became a way of making both possible and impossible statements, and were always, *pace* Agee, evoked by even the most evidentiary photographs, and perhaps, as Evans indicates, those in particular. Yet we may have to give up our fond nostalgia for the memories held by photos and the words that cluster round, interpreting and re- or dis-positioning them in order to allow them to become once more generative fragments of the endless conversation. A line from Reece Auguiste's 1989 film *Twilight City* catches the dilemma: "Sacrifice a piece of the past for the whole of the future."

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Notes

[1] Edward Clifford, Assistant Editor of *The Massachusetts Review*, kindly supplied these details in an email dated 1.11.2022: "I looked through the issue and found that Walker Evans' Contributor Note lists as having died in 1975. There is also an acknowledgments page on the back of that which states that "Photography" was from Kronenberger, Louis and Marshall Lee (eds) (1969). *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*. New York: Athenaeum. Unfortunately, most of the editors of MR from that era have died or moved out of contact, so there's not much more we here can discern about how it was acquired. My best guess is that, because Evans had work published in our Summer '63 issue, when Evans died, Jerome Liebling and the other editors wanted to include a piece by him posthumously".

[2] The phrase "artificial symbolic code" refers to computer languages (like Python and Fortran), which can be traced back through Bishop John Elkins' 1668 'An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language', which drew on 'the Art of Raymond Llull', composed between 1274 and 1290, itself grounded in Llull's earlier collection and translation of Al-Ghazali's logic from the late 11th or early 12th centuries.

[3] "When the father creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original;

and as this was eternal, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fulness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call time."

Seán Cubitt is Professor of Screen Studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications include *The Cinema Effect*, *Ecomedia, The Practice of Light, Finite Media, Anecdotal Evidence* and *Truth*. He is series editor for Leonardo Books.

Email: sean.cubitt@unimelb.edu.au