

Karl Marx and the net

This essay will focus on the nature of digital imagery analysed in relation to Marx's theory about the 'ontology of the social form of value in society based on relations of exchange' (Osborne, 2010, p.59). A brief synthesis of Osborne's view and of Marx's relevant theories will be followed by a step by step parallel where the current relations between the real and the indexicality of the digital image will be read through the lens of Marx's theories of use-value and exchange-value in relation to labour. A concise discussion about the relevance of the analogue-digital shift in photography will follow. Findings will be tested against examples of contemporary celebrities.

The crucial aspect of digitalisation lies, according to Osborne, in the computerised processing of the production of images. Photographic practice has always been split into two phases - the act of photographic capture and the processing of the image - but now the latter seems to have taken a life of its own. Whatever the nature of the representation that enters this process, the outcome is an invisible set of data, a data file or 'digital image', capable of morphing in potentially infinite fields of visualisation. Computer processing pulverises any 'casual and deictic aspects of photographic indexicality' (Osborne, 2010, p.63), and this is true regardless of whether the input was a digital or analogue image. Another feature that hinders indexicality is the unprecedented quality of the editing technique; an extremely sophisticated manipulation can nowadays be carried out to completely alter the original representation without leaving any to-the-eye visible trace. A final relevant feature is the high versatility of digital data that can lend themselves to potentially infinite fields of visual representation. Copies of the same original or, according to Groy (Osborne, 2010, p.66), original visualisations from the same copy - the data file - have filled the visual space with a visual pattern that always speaks of-itself (when not for-itself) under different forms. Paradoxically the morphing of the digital image under multiple guises has unveiled its de-realised character. (Osborne, 2010, p.67)

According to Marx (2015/1867) the capitalistic society considers the exchange-value to be the natural value form of commodities, whereas '[t]he value form of the product of labour is not only the most abstract, but is also the most universal form, taken by the product in bourgeois production'(p.58). Among the many consequences of this socially unaware yet universally accepted convention, Marx's cites the fact that a 'commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.' (Marx, 2015/1867, pp.47,48). The following three paragraphs will be concerned with afore-mentioned parallel.

Marx (2015/1867) identifies in use-value the natural value form of the commodity. Use-value can be seen as both the physical properties that are beneficial to satisfy men's needs, and as the specific, individual, human labour that generated it. In a similar way indexicality to the real could be seen as the 'natural' referent of images because in nature, an image is the 'perceptual abstraction of a visual structure from its material form' (Osborne, 2010, p.67).

Yet, in the capitalistic society the value form of the commodity is the exchange-value, an abstraction that allows the infinite social exchanges of goods because it equates all commodities to their undifferentiated content of human labour. This abstraction arises from the fact that the exchange-value form 'treats various kinds of labour as purely quantitative' (Marx, 2015/1867, p.57); this implies the reduction of qualitatively different and individual labour into an undifferentiated, socially abstract human labour. Through this abstraction use-value is detached from labour and the latter is only valued in terms of its exchangeable potential. In a similar fashion, in order to circulate on social media any image undergoes computer processing which democratically and mechanically erases the qualitative aspects that were attached to the original image-source by turning the latter into an aseptic and invisible set of data. Computer processing suppresses the ontology of the image-source to give birth to a new image endowed with the ontology of the digital image. The qualitative aspects that were attached to the original source are lost in order to facilitate the possibility of generalised exchanges. Through this abstraction digital images are completely de-realised from their material referent.

'[W]hen, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it. Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is.' (Marx, 2015/1867, p.49) In other words by participating in an exchange-value system, people implicitly accept that the value of labour will be dictated by the social exchangeability of its product rather than being determined by the individual, concrete labour force deployed in production. The validation of this value-system implicitly and covertly takes place on a daily basis each time one exchanges a commodity. Although erratic sprouts of consciousness can occasionally arise when, for example, consumers boycott a label for business malpractice or ethical reasons, the infinite reiteration of exchanges of commodities has transformed this mode of generalised social exchange into a natural, hence unquestionable mechanism. This could explain why even though every economic activity starts from money to make more money, people tend to identify the real economy as the driving force behind the system. The palpable evidence of the real economy is occasionally dwarfed by the determinative power of 'abstract money' - finance -; this usually happens when the masses are directly and tangibly affected by its undeniable might. It is during these rare moments of crisis that the subtle mimicry of the most famous capitalistic abstraction - money - is unmasked and the 'real real' becomes apparent to everyone, as was the case during the 2008 financial crisis. On the whole though, the masses are under the spell of what Marx calls 'the fetishism of commodities' (Marx, 2015, pp.47-53) where 'the most real appears unreal, and the apparently or empirically real has little determinative significance' (Osborne, 2010, pp.64,65).

It is common knowledge that media images are digitally created; that the vast majority among them are photographic; and that in the vast digital-image world any computer-processed visual representation, no matter what its ontology and origins, is levelled to the same anonymous, thus undifferentiated, status of a de-realised image. Yet, despite the publicly shared evidence that they do not bear any indexicality with the real, a vast audience - and one cuts across all demographics - keeps both disseminating and visualising digital images on the net. The infinite repetitions of this social-web practice are turning its embedded abstraction into a social reality and are validating it as a naturally, and hence a-critically accepted practice. The social web is

the place where people socialise with abstracted identities, and they become one in the process. The term 'abstracted identities' is pertinent because the wealth of information attached to the physical person is lost during a social-web-mediated interaction. Furthermore, people have the tendency to post, if not ideal projections of their persona and their life, at least a carefully constructed, most appealing self. Even though millennials are spending a growing number of hours in the virtual world, they are still embodied in flesh and bones, and the virtual dimension not only dictates their self-perception - both virtual and real - but also physically affects their daily reality despite its abstract nature. The anxiety of the real can thus be interpreted as the problematic co-existence of the virtual and real worlds upon a single body-mind organism. Contemporary life offers plenty of evidence for the complex interaction between these two conflating dimensions where often the virtual world - abstraction - seems more real than the real. It can be concluded that "The anxiety about the real' produced by digital imagery has its origins ... in the ontological peculiarities of the social form of value in societies based on relations of exchange." (Osborne, 2010, p.59).

On the basis of the above, Osborne's statement about the un-relatedness of photography to this anxiety about the real seems justifiable. The uncanniness about the real is not caused by the reliability of photographs per se. Social web users are fully aware of the degree of manipulation affecting the images they consume, and yet that does not stop them from relating to them as an integral part of their real life. Finally, by definition the distinction between analogue and digital photography has been pulverised through the inevitable computer processing that all web images undergo; it is therefore, irrelevant to the discussion.

The following few paragraphs will attempt to exemplify how digitalisation is affecting the distinction between what is real and what is only appearance, and the intricate way in which these two planes interact.

Brett Cohen, a 21 years old student living in New York, decided to pull a prank (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYU1a0lTTTw>) in order to experience how it felt to be famous, "a status anyone can achieve nowadays". He was convinced that one could "walk the city's streets and immediately become the centre of attention just *by appearing* to be important". To this purpose he made himself look like a typical celebrity, with two professional body guards, a few assistants and "photographers following him around Time Square and a camera crew to film every second of it".

His experiment was a success. People started reacting to him as if he was a celebrity. They claimed to be aware of his artistic endeavours despite the fact that, when questioned, the crew never specified who Cohen was. By-passers qualified Cohen as important because he was being photographed and to some among them the evidence was so strong as to induce false beliefs about the real. He did not become a celebrity exactly, but he is now famous to an extent because more than 6 million people have seen his YouTube video.

Cohen's experiment is very instructive to many extents. In particular it proves that nowadays it is the image that determines the importance of the real, whereas previously the image depended upon the importance of the real. In other words, in the past photographs were

mostly taken to arrest a noteworthy real, whereas nowadays the real becomes noteworthy when photographed. It is emblematic of how the image can elicit a social contagion that can alter the perception of the real (the 'false' recollections of the interviewees) to the point of 'creating a new real' (albeit for a very brief timespan, Cohen was a celebrity). As much as money should have been instrumental to an economic system that fulfilled the needs of men, and instead the situation is the other way around, in a similar way the image was instrumental to expand the real and now it is the real that expands or contracts based on the image.

Kim Kardashian is an example of real expanded by the image. She became famous after a sex tape about her was leaked on the net and, in the same year, she and her family started to successfully appear on a reality TV show. She has since gained hordes of followers on social media (110m instagram, 29m facebook, 59.9m twitter) on the basis of no specific merit apart from her resonance on social media itself. Her digital image has made her a millionaire on the basis of nothing.

Tiziana Cantone is an example of the real contracted by the image. She was a victim of revenge porn and committed suicide because of cyberbullying. An explicit video of her was uploaded on the net without her consent; it ended up on porn sites and became so popular that t-shirts were printed with a phrase that was part of the recording. She had to change her name, move home, and although she managed to have the video removed from the net she eventually succumbed to the public shame and took her own life.

In both cases it is the image that dictates the destiny of the real; for both women their real lives were overpowered by their virtual ones. The interesting question would be to understand if it is still possible to reason in terms of the dichotomy virtual vs real identity, or if contemporary identity already belongs to an augmented reality trope.

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