

Latent Images, Blind Comments on Photography

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ABSTRACT

Photographs, or images as the final result of a process, merely mark out the moment when the eye is helplessly limited to what it sees. Thus, what escapes the eye in the physical sense, i.e. what the eye will never see, is what occurs before the product-image, within the act itself.

The latent image, the desire-image, unfolds throughout the duration of the photographic act. When the picture is 'taken', then the desire subsides until the next desire for another image arises.

Based on the photographic experiment by Jerry Chan, member of a group of blind people, this article aims at rethinking the photographic act as the real-life experience of an impression process, leading the blind apprentice photographer to experience sightedness within his very flesh.

Keywords: *Photographic Act, Latent Image, Echo-Image, Blind, Duration, Desire, Impressions, Body*

1 | INTRODUCTION

"I realized that it is not only the physical world that differs from the aspect in which we see it; that all reality is perhaps equally dissimilar from what we believe ourselves to be directly perceiving and which

we compose with the aid of ideas that do not reveal themselves but are none the less efficacious"

Marcel Proust, The Guermites Way, 1988

When Merleau-Ponty interrogated both the visible and the invisible, he questioned flesh as the core of intercorporeity. From this depth of flesh, "this mass worked from within" (1964) which creates gaps but also reversibility, between visible and seeing, between touched and touching, Ghylaine Chevary Lessard reminds us — with the author's words — that "I cannot, at once, feel my left hand touched and touching. Some depth is preventing this. Paradoxically, this gap is the necessary distance so I can inhabit things." (2003, pp. 124-125)

Moreover, and as Jean-Lou Tournay remarks, we notice that photography does not appear in Merleau-Ponty's words: "photography always seems to be the object of a suspicion, as if it were the accomplice of a manner of seeing the world, ignoring the *living* character of man's relationship to this world, as if it merely presented images incapable of being inhabited by a gaze." (2013)

Today photography is everywhere; we do not function without it anymore. But between seeing the image and thinking through it, the gap - perhaps can we speak of a gap as far as it would represent an adequate setting

for the birth of thought? — is wide and the eye plunges into it. Much more than it begets thought, photography parasitizes the eye. We are quite far yet from escaping *trompe l'oeil*. Photographic images invade the surface of the world, superimpose themselves on reality and worm themselves into the social networks to the point of becoming *metafaces* on which our eyes slide. In this sweeping movement, they divert us from the world with which they merge and in the same movement they absorb us too. Each and everyone have a go at this with their machine, be it imposing or tiny inside a telephone device, and photographs continue to reproduce themselves, accumulating at the surface of matter. One presents oneself, then represents oneself again, forgetting to which extent the eye colonizes. We wanted images to be so representative that tirelessly delivering every slightest visual detail of our surrounding world leads us to at best doubt it, and at worst, not see it at all anymore. Then comes a time when, in this not seen-before but rather over-seen, one feels the urge to not seeing anymore for what we are offered to see does not suit us, does not involve us, does not resound with us anymore...

By analysing a sensorial experience of the photographic act, the following article proposes to revisit – and therefore remove itself from – what E. Bavcar, B. Meyer or H. Parret name ocularcentrism which, according to words coined by photographer M. Pataut, could come down to a certain “cultural formatting of the eye”. C. Rosset’s “proximity doubles” – echo in particular – will here greatly help us understand how the latent image develops over time (Bergson), as well as its importance within the photographic process.

2 | ABOUT OCULARCENTRISM

We are currently living in an “iconosphere, a kind of grotto loaded with images”, as per the apropos words by Joan Fontcurberta who also raised the pregnant question on “if we live inside the image, we are faced with the problem of survival...” [1]

The eye created photography (some might even say it is its idiom), but in a mutual sweeping movement, the latter uses the eye to the level of removing it from the body. The eye wanders and photography partakes, as would an accomplice, in this roving. A disjunction appeared within two elements we believed intimately connected: image and body. For the eye has interposed itself with such force that corporeal vanished from visual. It would thus be somewhat provoking to wonder if, at the onset of the 21st century, one could speak of new visual forms. But that is not the question for the eye is saturated and the body empty.

How then could a mere image render the experience of the thickness of this flesh Merleau-Ponty speaks about, and which today seems to only amount to the thickness of a skin, whilst the eye, insofar as it actually occurs, is incapable of burrowing deeply to inhabit it?

The question that imposed itself to Plato is far from being solved. As photograph Evgen Bavcar reminds us, “we are not done with the shadows yet [2]” “the allegory of the cave is more relevant than ever, and photography partakes in this blinding process as it lines the walls. Photographs are shadows, blinding shadows. Payant applies this Platonic vision which positions image as the shadow of realness to photography. Images “expose themselves on the side of artifice, of sign.” (Payant in Boulanger, 1996, p. 163)

If the process we are discussing today had been called *skiagraphy* instead of photography, it would perhaps have been easier to grasp its semantic and poetic challenges. In lieu of this we continue to teach it as a “writing of light” on a sensitive surface. We forget that we thus limit the image’s visibility to its luminous imprint. A blind person taking photographs pertains to a paradox. Let us not forget that Tristan Tzara, after having acquired images by Christian Shad, named these “*shadographies*”, shadow writings.

Where Marc Pataut in his activity as a photojournalist became aware of a “cultural indoctrination of the eye: the face is the medium to represent, which is done through the eye.” (2001, p. 287), Denis Roche wonders: “the question is probably not “what does a photograph question” anymore, nor “what can a philosopher do with a photograph?” But rather “what can a photograph have anything to do with, since we take it.” (Dubois, 1983, p. 56). The root of this article lies within this “taking”. The photographic act is driven by a desire to take and this desire is not the privilege of the eye which does not take, but rather “deludes itself through the sensation of “taking a picture” (in French “*prise de vue*” literally means “taking a sight”). The taking, as we will see, pertains to a corporeal impression and punctuates the real-life experience stream.

3 | EXITING OCULARCENTRISM

In his preface to words by Jean-François Lyotard, Hermann Paret reminds us that “it is true and dangerous that the eye needs to believe, unify, and be intelligent”. This is why, observes Jean-François Lyotard, Duchamp fulminates against “retinal” painting, against the phenomenological horizon: “stupid as a painter”. It is necessary to “blind the eye which believes it sees something, one must create

a blindness painting to throw eye complacency off balance.” (Parret, 2010, p. 16)

In order to rethink the founding principles of the photographic act, I chose to challenge the preconceived notions of the ocularcentrist thought and stand by those who don't use the eye to see. And among these notions, here is a sizeable one: how could blind people claim to take photographs since they will never see them? Living in such an ocularcentrist culture leads the blind to doubt this themselves. But then, how is it that, round the bend of a street, we sometimes happen to come upon blind people taking pictures?

In order to better grasp the issues at stake in this reflection, one must begin by accepting our blind condition and ponder far beyond the “unless I see... I will not believe” by Saint Thomas.

Contrary to common belief, blindness is not the ailment of those who cannot use their eyes. José Saramago reminds us of this in his *Essay on Blindness* (1995). Each of us is blind to some extent; some remain so, others don't. “The blind only become aware of their difference, with time, because they live in a society organized by and for sighted people” (Mollard, 2011). It is also because society is organized by and for the sighted that blind people start doubting their own capacity to take pictures. The blind are only blind in the eye of they who believe they can see. The novel by H. G. Wells, *The Country of the Blind*, portrays an enlightening example of this. The story's main character, Nuñez, who only sees through his eyes, experiences blindness as he encounters a community of blind people living in the mountains:

“They startled him by a simultaneous movement towards him, each with a hand outstretched. He stepped back from the advance of these spread fingers.

‘Come hither,’ said the third blind man, following his motion and clutching him neatly. And they held Nunez and felt him over, saying no word further until they had done so.

‘Carefully,’ he cried, with a finger in his eye, and found they thought that organ, with its fluttering lids, a queer thing in him. They went over it again.” (1984, p. 24)

Let us get back to our blind condition. The subject is delicate as it supposes we position ourselves outside ocularcentrism as analyzed by Evgen Bavcar, Benjamin Meyer or Hermann Parret who reminds us that “ocularcentrism is probably the almighty epistemology of Renaissance. Della Pittura d'Alberti is its most emblematic expression.” (2007, p. 18)

Hailing from this visual culture myself, I am indeed incapable of grasping the world of he who was born blind, but as Arthur Molard points out, therein lies a challenge to imagination, rendered even more difficult to take up since the landmarks we spontaneously refer to are drawn from a totally different perception world than the one we conceptualize; as a result they are very likely to mislead us. This perceptive gap may be crossed by imagination — but as with any gap, this one calls for passageways: analogies drawn from other senses or from language, efforts to disconnect oneself from thought automatisms — what Christine Cloux, blind from birth, calls mental flexibility” (2011) and as Olivier Bitoun says about the film by William Herzog, *Land of Silence and Darkness*: “it is always better to try and reinvent one's perception of the world rather than blindly accept the reigning madness, like the Heart of Glass sleepwalking villagers who walk towards disaster without a flinch.”

4 | THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ACT “OVERFLOWS” THE LUMINOUS IMPRESSION OF THE SENSITIVE SURFACE

Due to the existing analog relationship between the photographic image and the eye, it is difficult to apprehend the extent to which the corporeal dimension of the act escapes us when faced with an image. It is even more difficult to seize the act in its duration. Through my works I experiment with this act process through time, and I aim at faithfully transposing it here. In the best case scenario with a discerning eye, one can describe the position or posture of the body adopted by the photograph vis-à-vis the represented object (via high-angle and low-angle shots, frontal view, side-on etc.), and evaluate the distance at which the photographer stood. But could one state that the latter touched, or was touched, by their subject?

The experience of photographer Marc Pataut as regards the place of the body in the photographic act is quite significant. With the photographs taken by the children from the *Aubervilliers Day Hospital* he realized the importance of the body in his work. “They [the children] turn the camera back on themselves. [...] I understood that a portrait is not merely a face, that the photographic act involves the body and the subconscious, something else than the eye, intelligence and virtuosity [...]. Of the day hospital I retain that one can take pictures with one's gut, that portraits are in relation to the body — how one places one's body in space facing another body, and at which distance.” (2001, p. 287)

As Philippe Dubois reminds us in his book *l'Acte*

photographique (this work must be cited here since it is the only one to title under the photographic act), photographs appear to us as an expression of the referent. He writes that the index finger literally forces us through a “blind” impulse to pay attention and look solely at this referent. We are also reminded that the essential feature of photography is to be found, according to Bazin’s words “not in the result, rather in the genesis” (Dubois, 1983, p. 64). Nevertheless, in this genesis Dubois leaves very little room for the photographing body since he apprehends the photographic act as the physical instant of connection between the referent light reflected by the object and the sensitive surface. What about the impressed body, functioning in intercorporeity with the surrounding world? The photographic act cannot be reduced to the sole indicial character of the photograph. It overflows the production mode of an indicial sign which turns around on itself.

In the context of this research, the photographic act is revisited from an experiment with a group of blind people whose ultimate body movement was that of the index finger on the camera shutter release, and not on the sensitive surface.

5 | THE LATENT IMAGE OR THE ECHO-IMAGES BY JERRY

I chose to base my words on an experiment which took place in March 2013 in Macau, with a group of blind people from the São João School in Brito and in particular with Jerry Chan, one of the participants. For the first time in over eight years of my artistic and photographic work being impressed by the perceptions of blind people, I found myself faced with a precise request: these people wanted to learn how to take pictures.

It is precisely then that I lost my sight. The time had finally come to truly revisit the photographic act. The *prise de vue* (picture-taking) could be avoided via some characteristics of the medium and in particular spatio-temporal distance and cut principles.

While strolling on the Port of Coloane Territory [3], one of the three Macau Islands, Jerry found himself beneath a porch overlooking the port. Upon entering this area, he wrapped his arms around himself, lowered and tilted his head and, in a slight movement, started swaying from side to side then back to front. He remained in this posture for some time; then he unfolded his arms, and freeing his body began to clap his hands. The resonance of the sounds was immediate, turning into echoes.

“Outside objects impress the body”, G. Deleuze would say in his course on cinema. To these impressions set by echoes succeeded a series of movements and Jerry turned around, attentively following the effects of the sound on the surrounding obstacles. Among these movements I noted he was handling the photographic device and that at the precise moment when a hint of exaltation appeared on his face, he triggered the photographic device. Becoming echo itself, the shutter opening sound punctuated the various instants of a sensorial step connected with the impression of the echoes in Jerry’s body. The instantaneousness of the triggering enabled him to fix within himself an image built from the echo experience.

As Clément Rosset reminds us, echo does not let itself be touched, the echo, as reflection and shadow, does not belong to a tangible dimension “in the first sense of the word” (“that cannot be touched”). “One will probably object here that a sound vibration is always concrete, whether the sound is emitted or echoed. But, precisely: it is the same sound, and the concreteness of the reproduced sound is but a mere pretense of the concreteness of the emitted sound; the echo is the same sound, altered indeed, as the sound it echoes. The emitted sound does all the work if I may say so, and the echo is only a manner amongst others of receiving and “hearing” it. In itself, the echo does not emit anything. It is as tranquil as the still cliff. It is not a fact, rather an “effect”. (2004, p. 19)

The same goes for photography.

Thinking about it with closed eyes, it appears that the only concreteness it could claim would be that of machine, film and paper which is more or less thick, rough or smooth to the touch (but already, with digital photography, the only concreteness it could invoke has disappeared, unless the image is printed). As for the rest, I mean the eyes, photography itself is but a mere pretense of the actual surface of the photographed object.

In the temporal disjunction when Jerry claps hands to produce the echoing sound and, when following the reverberations he triggers the camera, the sound effect meets the *photographic effect*. Clément Rousset said about the proximity doubles to which the echo belongs that “contrary to the doubles carriers of illusion, these ‘second type doubles’ vouch for the reality of the objects of which they constitute the forced environment, however fleeting and sometimes even disturbing this may seem”.

“These doubles, that one could call proximity doubles

or minor doubles, as there exist minor orders, are not spectral extensions of reality; rather, they are necessary complements as obligatory attributes — given there is a natural light source to beget shadow, a mirror to reflect, a cliff to echo. Were these not there, the object would lose its realness and become spectral itself.” (2004, p. 10). Isn’t there, within echo, the power of something that “has existed”?

Let us name *photographic effect* the inscription of light on a sensitive surface, in a split second. Thus photographic effects match the echoes perceived by Jerry. And visible images correspond to the impression images issued from contacts between Jerry’s body and the echoes produced (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4).

These impressions resulting from the correspondence between sound effects and photographic effects constitute the *latent image*, flesh of an eyeless gaze, set in a body experimenting the photographic act. In this sense, blind people are not who we think they are, for they who only believe what they see in their naked eye, i.e. in the “revealed” image, will have to make do with mute visual indications.

The image of the blind person here belongs to echoes whereas the image of the sighted person belongs to shadows and reflections. In the photographic act such as was experienced by Jerry, echo meets shadow as the finger triggers the shutter release. One could create here an analogy with the time-image as described by Gilles Deleuze in the sense that, at the precise moment when Jerry triggers the camera, the not-yet visual and the not-anymore audible “brings the visual and audible tearing to fusion point” (28 May 1985 class).

The photographic act is first and foremost about impressions which go beyond the luminous trace inscribed on a chemical emulsion or analysed by a digital sensor. It is composed of a succession of impressions acting on sensitive surfaces of various kinds. The visual image here is but a mere instant in this process, and not its product anymore.

In this work context, the act is a body posture experimenting the reality effects of the objects; it is an experiment of the latent image as duration-image, punctuated by time-images, where the reality of objects escapes the representation.

6 | DURATION-IMAGE, DESIRE-IMAGE

In order for the notion of duration to echo here, let us get back to H. Bergson’s words who considers it like a time presence to consciousness:

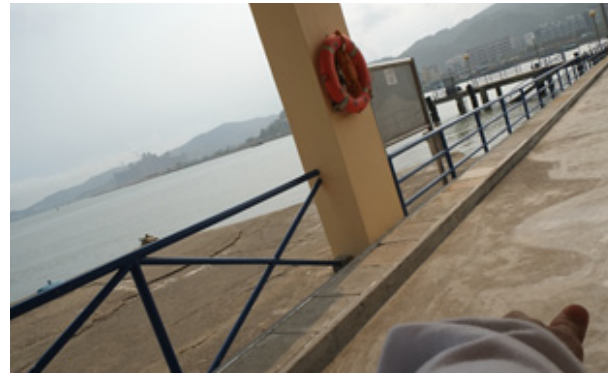


FIGURE 1 | *Écho 1*, Jerry Chan, 18th Mar. 2013 Port de Coloane



FIGURE 2 | *Écho 2*, Jerry Chan, 18th Mar. 2013 Port de Coloane



FIGURE 3 | *Écho 3*, Jerry Chan, 18th Mar. 2013 Port de Coloane

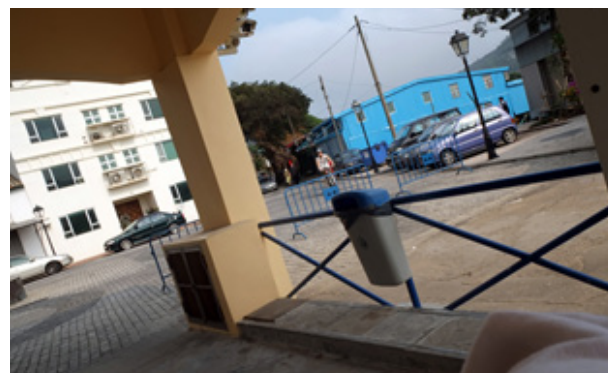


FIGURE 4 | *Écho 4*, Jerry Chan, 18th Mar. 2013 Port de Coloane

"If I want to fix myself a glass of sugary water, I have no other choice than to wait for the sugar to melt. This ordinary fact has great teaching value, for the time I have to wait is not mathematical anymore — which would be consistent throughout the history of the concrete world were it to suddenly spread across space. It matches my impatience, i.e. some part of my own personal duration, which cannot be shortened nor lengthened unlimitedly. It is not about thought anymore, it is about experience. It is not relation-based, it is absolute." (1959, p. 18)

The latent image in question here is not an image lacking revelation since it belongs to the duration. In other words, the latent image is an image undergoing a constant revealing process. The indicial image, for its part, belongs to time. This inscription time which constitutes the indicial trace and is calculated in time units, in split seconds, only represents a step in the photographic process, a concrete step, invisible and silent; an outside image built by a mechanical eye, "interrupter" of the continued real-life experience, superimposes itself on the image growing in an eyeless body. The mechanical time-image cuts through the duration-image in the manner of Zatoichi's sabre (Kitano, 2003), with eye-defying precision. The latent image defies sight as it does not allow the eye to sweep it.

The sudden urge felt by Jerry to photograph according to the impressions fixed by the sound effects is akin to the urge felt by the "sighted" to speak of visual silence when contemplating a photographic image. The visible luminous impression on the product-image triggers the necessity to put in into words. Indeed photography is surrounded by paradoxical discourses, reinforcing the fact that it cannot be seized. As for the echo, the photographic image in its speech-prompting structural silence, "flees before one could seize it" (Rosset, p. 19). Here echoes trigger finger movement, as shadows or reflections spark off speech; these two actions are underlain by an earnest desire for image in the sense given to it by Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 39) rather than by a desire to represent — the finger looks no more like the echo than words resemble photography — to the condition of a non-resemblance, of being *hors-figure*, I would dare say in the dimension of the face...

Roland Barthes would say "to me, the eye is not the organ of the photograph (I am terrified by it), rather it is the finger: which is linked to the clicking noise of the shutter release, to the metallic sliding of the plates... I affection these sounds [and this gesture] in a near-voluptuous manner." (Dubois, 1983, p. 73). The photographic act implies that a subject animated

by a desire to capture a corporeal image presses his index finger on the camera trigger. Dubois spoke of "this mystery, this underground force that works photography, beyond ("behind") appearances, and indeed on which desire is based." The desire which here provoked the photographing body escapes the eye. In the photographic act, the latent image is a desire-image. Not the image of desire, rather a desiring and desired image, penetrating flesh with latency beyond revelation. As long as the image is latent, it continues working the body and in return, as B. Noel has said, it augments with the thickness of the body.

Yet, when the visual result is seen, one can also notice the split between the latent image and its representation limited to the surface of things, and which, via the spatio-temporal distance principle specific to the photographic act, becomes "the setting for the shaking of our certainties." (Dubois, p. 91)

The sighted person whose eye sweeps the product-image is exposed to this split. The blind person knows the photographic image remains latent, therein lays its strength. Where the sighted will experience the absence and the vanishing of the photographed object, the blind will retain the presence of this object within, "a weight, a power, a fullness of reality" (Dubois, p. 83) that the pressure of the forefinger on the shutter release will have triggered. This reality fullness is transmitted by the eye of the sighted, blinded by the referential force which then represents an "outside" to the blind, the alterity of the photographic effect.

What Barthes called "the metonymic extension of punctum" and Ph. Dubois described as the pragmatic force of the indicial ontology "which renders the physical presence of the unique object or being in the image itself" (1990, p. 79) is inscribed for the blind person in the forefinger pressure. For the blind person photographing according to the echoes, the product-image is itself the punctum of the photographic act, the unqualifiable, the unseen, this thrust of reality reaching outside the latent image.

7 | CONCLUSION ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BLINDING IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ACT

We will here identify the ethical stakes of a blinding experiment, not only in the duration of the photographic act but also in a teaching of photography such as given in many institutions, via an ocularcentrist vision — I mean outside from an incorporeity experience.

This experience, akin to a corporeal experience over time, disappears with digital photography in

the sense that the body does not experiment night anymore in the way it was still possible to create it, in this place I like to call the *analogy laboratory*. Nighttime handling disappeared in favour of an immaterial image with which the eye desperately struggles in its split from the body.

It would then amount to working photography in an auto-reflexive manner, i.e. using its indicial and iconic properties indeed, but to critic and reflexive purposes. Therefore in this case shadows would gain in might to the point of shaking not only the practices, but also the way in which we see reality. Photography actually challenges us in that it endeavours to change the way in which we see ourselves seeing, and not merely our way of seeing. R. Payant works in this sense; to him, for example and as Ch. Boulanger tells us “the true artistic scope of the medium would reside in its capacity to auto-reflect, to review its history, to question the modalities of its relationship with reality [...]”. In another text, *L'étrange vérité de la photographie* (the strange truth about photography), Payant elaborates his vision of a photography exploring out-of-frame, beyond what is portrayed. [...] Photography to Payant moves away from reality to “produce an image which is the shadow of reality; within it a breach opens, which places it in the opposite direction of what is portrayed.” (1996, p. 167)

In the photographic act — the experience of an impression process spurred over time by a desire for images and guided by the pressure of the forefinger on the trigger — the blind apprentice-photographers experience sight within their own flesh. Speaking from his own experience, photographer M. H. Labat [4] said the blind from birth reach “the depth of images”. That everything hails from such spontaneity the “sighted” and some “partially-sighted” do not have due to their haunting memories. This visual culture prevents the emergence of certain photographs. The blind people from birth with whom M. H. Labat [4] worked remember every perceptive detail and sensation which enabled the triggering and the realization of each photograph.

Working on the question of the photographic act with people who cannot see amounts to experiencing alterity. It means inhabiting the eye and experiencing this Other one cannot seize.

As a blind person, my words will not be about visibility of the product-image and we will end this reflection with a thought on latent image.

In this sense, the photographing blind turns photography into an affect-image, beyond visibility,

an image from outside, an image out of frame. As “the face overflows of course, the functions we give to it” (Deleuze, 1982), the photographic act overflows the indicial inscription of the object on the sensitive surface. The latent image created in this laboratory of the invisible which is the body, overflows the product-image; it could even do without visual revelation and would nearly take on airs of a great shapeless image (Julien, 2003).

ENDNOTES

[1] Words from an interview with Renata Simões in the program produced by the Garapa Group: Joan Fontcuberta - fórum de fotografia - Ancine Agência National do Cinema - Itáu cultural - 2º fórum latino-americano de fotografia de São Paulo from 20 to 24 October 2010.

[2] Words from a conversation with the photographer (2013).

[3] Each new work begins with the discovery of a territory. One can here refer to the “Intersections” exhibition from an artistic residency at the TDM in Joué sur Erdre (France) in 2012. Available on (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MipVDeGKAM>)

[4] To meet Globules Association’s request, photographers M. H. Labat et P. Sageot organized a workshop in the city of Le Havre in 2002 with blind and partially-sighted people.

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