

SCREENING ABSENCE

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That advances in technology occasion ontological ambiguity and re-orientation is certainly not novel. Inventions that could reproduce images mechanically, such as photography, fundamentally transformed the cultural understanding of the world of visual artifacts. The embalming of temporal change made possible by the emergence of cinema toward the end of the 19th century represented yet another ontological mutation. Throughout the following decades, the emergence of sound film, television, video, interactive computer games, algorithmic images, machine vision, and VR systems have continuously redefined the nature of the image for us. For some, the shift in the medium's ontology brought on by computer-generated images is considerably more dramatic than those previous evolutions, resulting in a surprising—and somewhat paradoxical—turn in visual culture toward the invisible. Machine-readable files, which generate images to be looked at only intermittently, entail, in the words of Trevor Paglen, a “widespread automation of vision.”¹ From automatic license-plate readers (ALPRs) to motion-tracking systems, such as Realeyes, and Facebook's DeepFace algorithm, this mechanization of visual culture brings about the proliferation of images that are no longer representational but instead actively intervene in our everyday lives.² In terms of the processing capability of such images, the neural networks that scan photographs on social media—to put it into perspective—can marshal “a degree of attention that would make even the most steadfast art historian blush.”³

It is highly probable that the spread of machine vision has biopolitical implications that are potentially enormous. Reconceptualizing Nikolas Rose's term “molecular politics,” Peter Lindner has argued that our new technological reality ushers in an “aretaic” era, characterized by an intensifying reliance on a plethora of sensory gadgets.⁴ Technologies that transcend our somatic limitations—wearable devices such as sleep and fitness trackers, apps for analyzing nutrition, drones—define this new, heavily “datafied” condition. The aretaic shift, Lindner holds, introduces “a peculiar ethics of leading a healthy life as well as a new kind of somatization of identity.”⁵ The self that emerges

out of these socio-technical constellations is an informational self, relational rather than biological, governed by a quantifiable, best-practice approach to being human rather than by a more heterogeneous, spiritual understanding of humanness. Perhaps worryingly, the informational self relies on behavioral norms whose authority rests not so much with ethical or social principles as with the figurations of mass data.

In his essay, Paglen suggests that in order to negotiate this new visual culture of the invisible image we really need to “unlearn how to see like humans.”⁶ Maybe he is right. But the question lingers whether this is really feasible, even if desired. In what follows, I would like to try to think beyond the divides of the analogue/digital, visible/invisible, human/machine, and image/data to address the problem of the ontology of the image from a position that is hopefully less beholden to the popular interpretive frames of our times. Two assumptions will ground my argument. The first is that there are no clean breaks, nor slates, in history. In the face of even the most fundamental upheavals, widely divergent conceptualizations and ontologies might co-exist for a long time. The ascendancy of digital technologies and machine vision institutes massive disruptions—socially, culturally, economically, politically, and maybe even cognitively. But does it change everything? Our entanglements with aretaic devices, surveillance appliances, and artificial intelligence seem to grow deeper by the day, that is true. I now own a Fitbit watch, which is a nice thing to have. Being hooked up to this contraption nonstop, however, is not so exhilarating that I forget to watch movies or play records (the other day I saw *The Conformist* again (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970), admittedly in a digitized version). I still worry about how isolated many of our students have become during the pandemic. I read up on the new and emerging social order in Rojava, Syria, for a book that I am completing. University politics appears torn between factions that want to pool all of the resources into just a few prioritized areas and factions that want to defend pluralism. I supervise student projects on topics like war cinema, Black feminism, and why there are so few statues of women in public spaces. Everyone I meet—I would say there are no exceptions—seem preoccupied pretty much with the same thoughts, challenges and feelings that they had before images became data. While I know that the image of my daughter playing soccer is technically a machine-readable file, I do not care about the file, I care about the image.

I guess my point here is that the turn toward the operative, or operational image does not curtail our continued reflection about the perpetually elusive nature of the image. This brings me to my second assumption, this time in the form of a question. Is there such a thing as an ontology uncontaminated by the semantic field that purports to provide its definition? The transition to an “invisible” visual culture that Paglen talks about seems predicated upon a strictly technical conceptualization of the image. If determined by other conceptual parameters, say, culture or aesthetics, our ontological grasp of the image might be quite different. Banal as this observation in some ways is, it nonetheless flags up the untenability of believing that one can identify a realm of meaning beyond any of these vast notions that alone have the discursive authority to settle the essence of something. As I write this, a newsletter from Bloomsbury appears in my inbox, providing notice of three new books that have just been published in their “Film and Media Studies” series. One is Daniel Herwitz’s *The Political Power of Visual Art*, on aesthetics and political agency. The second is Robert B. Pippin’s re-interpretation of the cinema of Douglas Sirk, in which he argues that Sirk’s films should be seen as a subversion of the genre of melodrama. Lastly, there is *Roland Barthes and Film* by Patrick ffrench [sic], an engagement with the place of cinema in the French intellectual’s thought. It is of course too easy to pick such random examples from the ceaseless flow of new publications, but that is exactly my point. Each of these three casually selected books presuppose, however tacitly, a particular conception of the image that has nothing to do with the invisible culture of algorithms that Paglen addresses in his essay.

An initial response to the question of the changing ontology of the image in a post-digital environment would thus be to accentuate the unruly—and for some, vexed—multiplicity of possible ontologies sticking to our perceptions, prosaic as well as scientific, of what that thing we call an image actually is. As crucial as materiality is to the identity of any given medium, it still cannot define it solely on its own terms. The discourse of any given discipline or intellectual formation, as Gertrud Koch has pointed out, inevitably “constitutes” its objects.⁷ When it comes to the medium of film in particular, Koch invokes Foucault’s concept to reflect upon a cinematic *dispositif* that “arranges our ways and modes of speaking and thinking about film.”⁸ Comprising such a *dispositif*, for Koch, are components such as the institutionalized frameworks within which film production and reception take place, the physical milieu in which screenings

occur, and the affective reactions that any given film produces. Equally vital to such a dispositif, I would argue, is the entire cache of writings and discussions that historically have been generated around cinema as a machine of human expressiveness.

Without losing sight of the inherent heterogeneity of interpretations that accrue to the idea of the image, in what follows I want to consider ways in which our current predicament could conceivably teach us something new about images and their amorphous presence in our world. Can the pandemic image—the iconic manifestation of which might be the Zoom meeting, with its black screens and wall of miniature faces—convey something about “imageness” that we have either forgotten or failed adequately to address before? The evacuation of sociality from physical space to the virtual space of the computer screen that marks the contemporary moment re-emphasizes what the philosopher Hagi Kenaan has called “the rule of the frontal.”⁹ In his theory, the process of seeing itself has been subject to a transformation by which the eye has become both gluttonous and insensitive. Having access to boundless visual information, the eye absorbs everything indiscriminately. On our immaculate interfaces, different images coningle in every conceivable combination; the haggard Zoom faces, the bystander footage of police brutality, the YouTube video of a parrot singing “Stairway to Heaven,” the highlights from the Champions League semifinals, the corporate logos, and the slides from the digital family album. We are relentlessly manipulated, Kenaan claims, by the commodifying logic of the market that presently is the biggest generator of the visual field. Addicted to instant stimulation, the eye has attained a state of permanent unexcitability, knowing “only one form of relationship: an unchanging uniform distance.”¹⁰ Staring into the screen, Kenaan writes,

the living space of the eye yields to the domination of the homogeneous where all points of view take on identical form. Since the screen functions as a frame for contents packaged and served in a way that fits the consumer’s needs to begin with, the manner of accessing the phenomenal, the angle of observation, the kind of involvement—the orientation, the self-positioning—do not play any actual role but constitute a minor and negligible by-product of what appears in front of us. And indeed, everything is already there, framed and frontally presented, for everyone and no one in particular. The various contents that appear on the screen always have

an identical, essentially flat structure, not because of the screen's physical characteristics but rather because of the way in which the screen creates what Baudrillard calls 'the degree zero of meaning,' that is, a meaning whose internal form and constitutive logic is that of a commercial.¹¹

On this account, the regression of the visual to the frontal is so commanding that it could be considered as a new ontological condition in itself. A paradox, for Kenaan, is that the overwhelming accessibility and diversity of images only lead to a shapeless sameness experientially. Gathered together in one singular, impoverished perspective, the contents of our screen lack depth, dimensionality, and sincerity. The screen prohibits the possibility of any real encounter, and its flat homogeneity impedes the qualities of the human gaze, "its freedom and concomitant responsibility, its ability to be involved, its constant involvement, its ability to be critical, to be intimate, to sense shame, to refuse."¹²

While Kenaan turns toward the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his mysterious phrase *ethics is an optics* to find an alternative to the levelling of the screen—the rule of the frontal—I want, in closing, to go in a slightly different direction. An intriguing aspect of Kenaan's admittedly bleak analysis of contemporary visuality is the peculiar dialectics of phenomenological richness and existential privation. This is a relation that could be re-translated as one between connectivity and absence. The "enzooming" of pandemic communication, both professionally and socially, is describable as an expansive, rapidly multiplying network of digital linkages. But its sheer ubiquity also underlines the structured absence that is constitutive of the photographic image. Both in its analog and digital instantiations, the apparatuses of photography and film are in one sense machines for the production of absence. We can see the objects, but they are not really there. When we think about someone who is not with us spatially, we can summon their presence in our minds. When we see that same person in a photograph, or on a screen, they are still not really with us, but the fact of their immediate visibility may in fact underscore the reality that they are elsewhere. The screen does provide us with information—that is undeniable—but it also creates visualizations of absence. Some of the foremost theorists of the photographic image have of course been on to this. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes addresses the "madness" of photography, calling it "a new form of hallucination" that is

“false on the level of perception, true on the level of time.”¹³ By this, he means that the photograph indexes and thereby confirms the temporary, limited existence of the object in the moment of capture, but that what is given to us to look at is an illusion, an ontologically reduced proxy at best. In André Bazin’s ambitious psychology of the desire of image-making, he speculates that the drive to produce images throughout history stems from an impossible objective to overcome absence; what he refers to as “the mummy complex” plays itself out as the business of attempting to preserve a fragment of the lost object in some kind of representational state.¹⁴ But the irony is that the successful reproduction of the object in a form determined by technological and aesthetic processes also at the same time draws attention to its absent status. One of the etymological meanings of the word “screen” is “to conceal” or “cover,” which is yet another reminder that the ontology of the screened image may have more to do with the production of absence than we are accustomed to think.

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- 1 Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images: Your Pictures Are Looking at You," *Architectural Design*, 89. 1 (2019): 22-27; 24. The longer, original version of this essay was published in *The New Inquiry*, December 8, 2016, accessed April 23, 202, <https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/>.
- 2 The kind of automated images Paglen discusses is close to German multimedia artist Harun Farocki's notion of "operational images," which again shares a conceptual affinity with Paul Virilio's "seeing machines," Vilém Flusser's "technical images," and Allan Sekula's "instrumental images." See Volker Pantenburg, "Working Images: Harun Farocki and the Operational Image," in *Image Operations*, eds. Jens Eder & Charlotte Klonk (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016).
- 3 Paglen, "Invisible Images," 26.
- 4 Peter Lindner, "Molecular Politics, Wearables, and the Aretaic Shift in Biopolitical Governance," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37 no.3 (2020): 1-26.
- 5 Lindner, "Molecular Politics," 7.
- 6 Paglen, "Invisible Images," 27.
- 7 Gertrud Koch, "Carnivore or Chameleon: The Fate of Cinema Studies," *Critical Inquiry*, 35. 4 (2009): 918-928; 928.
- 8 Koch, "Carnivore or Chameleon."
- 9 Hagi Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), xviii.
- 10 Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality*, xv.
- 11 Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality*, xv-xvi.
- 12 Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality*, xviii.
- 13 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* [1980], trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 115.
- 14 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *What is Cinema 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9.