

This is an extract from a much longer article which was written as an opening to a conference at The London Film Makers Co-op in July 94. It was intended as a broad and basic introduction to issues surrounding digital image manipulation.

On the tube last year I overheard someone talking about the snuff movie which he'd been given by mistake rather than the "no animals, no S.M. just straight hard porn" which was his particular predilection. Despite his disgust he described the film in vivid detail to his mate. A description which even now makes me feel ill. I couldn't help thinking that the images he described could just have easily corresponded to mainstream, 'legitimate' television - I'd just seen 'Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer' and not long before that news had shown very detailed images of charred corpses in Somalia.

He knew that the snuff movie was a video recording of something that had actually taken place because of its complete lack of concern with aesthetics, production values, etc. . Static cameras, degenerated tape, obvious unawareness of the female and so on. 'Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer', on the other hand is probably the only mainstream film I've seen which doesn't either glamorise the violence or give the killer any redeeming features or excuses for his actions.

Now we can fabricate the appearance of truth, now images of fantasy and reality can be and are often similar is the distinction between what is a document of the actual and a simulated reconstruction which appears to be "real" dependent upon its use and context or the quality of production?

With the advent of electronic imaging we can now construct and manipulate the appearance of 'reality'. Any image can be stored, altered and output onto a format which resembles traditional mirror image photography or be laid onto tape and present an invisible manipulation of live action footage. But we could argue that all photographic imagery is coded in some way or another. Choices such as lighting, length of exposure and the sensitivity of the stock produce a coded version of appearances which effect the final look, feel and information content of the image. added to this the moment that the shot is taken, the composition and many other more subjective decisions are going to effect our reading. Retouching and montage techniques have always been practised but each grain of silver that makes up the image can't be altered. With digitisation however, it is possible to alter every pixel of the image (this alteration corresponding to a change in mathematical value) and it's the ease and seamlessness of the transformations which makes it different from traditional photography - it allows a much greater potential for manipulation, cannibalisation, simulations of simulations to appear as "truth"

Traditionally the credibility of the lens based image as a recording of objective truth rested upon a knowledge of its mechanical rather than manual mode of operation the image is produced by light falling onto a referent and captured by a machine and it is therefore supposedly the product of a regular and predictable process. This notion has been reinforced and reiterated by the authority of the institutions which employ it such as science, medicine, law. With digitisation, or electronic imaging photography loses its indexicality, we could be producing images in the image of an image - what appears to be a photograph in the traditional sense is pure iconicity.

Underpinning the development of photographic and video technologies has been an understanding of the primacy of the real and the image as a second order rendering of the real. Yet in a society in which images fuel desire which drives production and in which television images are the first point of reference for many people, reinforcing rather than expanding our existing consciousness, the relationship between the real and the image of the real is turned on its head. - A life as living in a world saturated by images preoccupied by surface and hyper conformity, where the need to interact with materiality is increasingly unnecessary and certain types of knowledge are gained at the expense of others. A paranoid view is that imagination could be reduced to imaging and change reduced to appearance. When all things can be reduced to video data could it mean the end of fiction, drama and realism? The collapse of the simulated into life?

In 66 Gene Youngblood wrote of “an evolution of an intelligence where the concept of reality will no longer exist - the image/real distinction is obsolete and a more appropriate distinction is that between the immaterial and the material”. One fundamental difference with the advent of electronic media is that the ‘material’ is abolished to all intents and purposes (technique is no longer the ability to manipulate material but the ability to manipulate technology). It is not a fail safe or realism without risk but it is “a tool that can operate as an extension of our nervous system protecting us from our own ignorance and freeing us from specialisation.”

Using the computer as both medium and metaphor has helped to alter our conception of real and meaning. Increasingly Art is discarding materials and objects - new materials and approaches have proliferated which involve concepts of the immaterial. A new aesthetic is evolving which is synchronised with scientific and technical goals, as well as pushing art out from the existing gallery space and system to a broader and less prescriptive platform. The psychological effect of television's immaterial nature is largely responsible for contemporary artists awareness of concept over icon, and the shift from the possession of objects to the publication of ideas and this necessarily forces expansion into more complex language and experiences.

The potential for abuse of the possibilities provided by electronic imaging technology is enormous. We could say that our relationship with photography is based upon faith, we never have before us empirical evidence and we are left to rely upon the context in which the image is presented. We are all aware of the selective and biased reporting of the news. We are all aware of the potential for image reconstruction and manipulation. We should know by now that we can't believe in appearances and that the democratic potential of electronic imaging is severely hampered by its bonding with economic forces which by definition serves to reinforce the dominant patterns of power and oppression, wealth and poverty - we cannot rely on the context in which they are presented. In spite of this images still have an abiding and almost visceral resonance, it still seems much easier to disbelieve a speech or a piece of writing than it does to question a powerful and convincing image. But is this so different to what has always been going on? -

The whole of written history is a work of conscious reconstruction, very careful selection and omission. If the snuff movie had been made with the same cinematic concerns as say, Silence of the Lambs, Pulp Fiction, The Accused, or even Deliverance, then I'm sure that most of us would unquestioningly believe it to be a piece of fiction.

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