Apparitions of the Digital

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I

The call for papers for this conference raises issues such as digital remediations, reanimations, repetitions, recalls, and memories in digital media. With the stupidity particular to the philosopher, I have interpreted these terms in a very literal way, so that my questions here are, how do such terms help us to understand how words and images are meaningful? And how are these, and the relations between them, affected by the digital? My aim here then is to investigate such issues in relation to the digital image from the perspective of recent French philosophy. I will contrast two points of view on the image and the significance of the digital. The first perspective is that of Bernard Stiegler who, largely following Jacques Derrida, argues that images are meaningful according to a principle of differance, which is accentuated, but not fundamentally changed, by digital media. This perspective suggests that words and images are meaningful in a similar way. The second perspective is that of Jean-François Lyotard, who argues for a fundamental difference in the way that words and images are meaningful: while he agrees with the Derridean view that words follow a logic of *difference*, he asserts that images follow a logic of *presence*, which punctuates and differs from the differential logic of words. Each perspective thus differs in what form of meaning is attributed to words and images, but, as we shall see, both present images as always already ghostly or apparitional.

II

Bernard Stiegler has extensively discussed the effects of digital and other technologies on meaning, developing the idea of a 'programmatology' which follows and develops Jacques Derrida's 'grammatology.'[1] Under this name (among others), which refers to a 'science of writing,' Derrida presents a quasi-transcendental theory of meaning. Derrida's concept of *différance*, which indicates spatial differing and temporal deferring, contests the principle of meaning which has, according to Derrida, dominated throughout the Western tradition, which he calls the 'metaphysics of presence.' This theory proposes an origin or full presence of 'pure' meaning in an idea held in the mind, which is then progressively corrupted by being put into spoken, then written, words. This supposed corruption of meaning institutes the spatial and temporal differing and

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[1] As well as being deeply influenced by Andre Leroi-Gourhan. See the latter's *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993).

deferring which, Derrida contends, are in fact the conditions of anything being meaningful in the first place. According to Derrida, there is no possibility of a pure, simple, original meaningful presentation, and every apparently original presentation is always already a repetition or a *re*presentation. His arguments are of course extremely complex, but may be treated summarily by noting what he draws from structural linguistics. This is, that every linguistic meaning only functions because of the possibility of its reiteration, or what Derrida calls 'iterability.' Every linguistic usage draws from an already-existing store of linguistic meaning (the virtual structure of language as a whole), and in that sense is already a reiteration. Moreover, every use presupposes the possibility of the listener or reader reiterating the use in another context, because the very nature of linguistic competence – and thus, the capacity to understand – depends upon the ability to use language in this citational manner. When Derrida turns his attention to visual images, in texts such as *The Truth in Painting*,[2] he develops concepts (such as the trait, the parergon, and the subjectile) which essentially follow the same differential logic as writing. Let's recall that Derrida insisted on the ambiguity of the character Plato gave to writing as *pharmakon*, which means both poison and **remedy**. In this sense, then, all meaning, as writing, is **remedial**.

Stiegler applies Derridean principles to contemporary information and communication technologies, which he understands through the broader idea of 'programmatology.' He extends Derrida's critique of presence and concept of differance, arguing that there is no meaning prior to *an external inscription of material traces*, such as we find in technologies from the first marks made in wood or stone through to the digital. For Stiegler, these recent technologies have simply accentuated and brought into focus what has always been the case. Following Leroi-Gohran, he suggests that the idea of the 'program' we take from contemporary ICT can now be employed retroactively, to construct a remedial view of all meaning-making processes as programs:

> The notion of **program**, or of software (as the program putting to work a logico-linguistic element), can be retroactively expanded to all sorts of activities (academic programs, political programs, work programs, etc.) and be applied to everything *that formalises rhythms, repetitions, habits*, under a more complex form.[3]

Like Derrida's argument about iteration, key to the meaning-giving function of the program is a repetition which institutes a difference, through the logic of the *trace* – that which is repeated contains a trace of what it repeats, but a full presence of meaning can be found neither in the original, nor the repetition. Meaning is disseminated throughout programs as they institute material traces in their functioning.[4]

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[3] Bernard Stiegler, 'Technologies de la mémoire et de l'imagination,' *Réseaux* vol. 4, no. 16 (1986), 64. Translation mine.

[4] In Stiegler's words, 'the supplement is an always-already materialized trace.' *Technics and Time vol. 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 4.

What are the implications of Stiegler's programmatological view of meaning for the digital image? Stiegler has explored this (among other places) in the essay 'The Discrete Image.'[5] Unsurprisingly, he frames the question by beginning with a gesture of fidelity to Derrida, and insisting that the question of the image is in fact a question of writing:

> [W]ithout the objective image, despite what one might think, there is not, has never been and will never be a mental image: the mental image is always the *return* of some image-object, its *remanence* – both as retinal persistence and as the hallucinatory haunting or *revenance* of the phantasm.[...] The question of the image is therefore also and indissolubly that of the trace and of inscription: a question of writing in the broad sense.[6]

As with his analysis of the nature of technology in general, Stiegler grounds his account of what *changes* with new technologies in an undercurrent of what remains the same. In this sense, he argues for the *irreducible materiality* and *originary technicity* of the image[7]: there were not first mental images, and then the ability to capture and produce such images through technological means, but rather, technologies of image production – images fixed in external marks – have always already been the condition of possibility for our construction of internal mental images. What this means is that technologies of image production change our capacities for imagination (and not just vice versa).

Stiegler undertakes his analysis of the digital image by contrasting it with the analog image as presented by Roland Barthes in his well-known book *Camera Lucida*.[8] The difference, according to Stiegler, is this: with the analog image, the essence is the reality effect, while manipulations are accidental. With the digital image, this is reversed: manipulation is essential, while the reality effect is accidental. According to Barthes, what is remarkable about the (analog) photograph is that it captures something that was objectively there at the time the photo was taken, which he calls a '*this was.*' They then transport this past reality to our present gaze. Stiegler describes this process as involving a *continuous* relay of light, between the photons which touched the person or object photographed, and the photos which reach our eyes from the photograph. By contrast, digital photography breaks this continuity with a digital process of recording light, which is already a discrete matrix. The manner of recording light by transforming it into digital information means that the image is formed in a way which is *already* susceptible to massive and highly flexible processes of manipulation. In short, while the analog image presents us with some objective reality (*this was*) which might then be manipulated, the digital photo is already captured in a highly manipulable form. The result is that when we look at a

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[5] 'The Discrete Image' is in Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).   See also *Technics and Time* volumes 2 and 3.

[6] 'The Discrete Image,' p. ?

[7] See *Technics and Time vol. 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[8] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1993).

digital photograph, we don't know whether or not anything we see was or wasn't produced by an objectively real object.

Stiegler underscores that according to Barthes' analysis, the analog image already has a ghostly, haunting, revenant quality: it is something which has come back to us from the past. And its ghostly quality is given in the fact that what is captured in the image is something which can 'touches' us, but which we cannot ourselves touch. But according to Stiegler, this haunting quality is in a significant way heightened by the digital image, because of the uncertainty (Stiegler even says anxiety) it induces in us regarding the reality of the image: like a translucent apparition, the digital image gives something to vision, the reality of which we doubt. The implication of Stiegler's analysis, both of meaning in general and of the digital image in particular, is that any meaningful mark would be always already a **remediation**, any life of meaning already an **afterlife**, every word or image a **revenant.**

    II

While Derrida and Stiegler apply this logic of (pro)gammatology to both words and images, a distinction is made between these by Jean-François Lyotard precisely around the issues of presence and repetition. While he accepts the arguments of Derrida and Stiegler regarding words (language), he argues that the image functions according to a different logic, in which perception is struck by an immediacy of sensation which differs from the repetitions which construct conceptual and linguistic meaning, and that this is where the unique 'meaning' of the visual lies. Notably, Lyotard insists on the term which lies at the heart of Derrida's critique, a critique continued by Stiegler: *presence*. At the same time, he, too, characterises the visual image as something ghostlty, an apparition, a revenant. How does this work?

Lyotard lays out arguments against understanding the visual on the model of language in his first major book, *Discourse, Figure*.[9] Here, he contrasts the formal features of the visual as analysed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the perceiving body with the formal features of language found in De Saussure's structural linguistics. The linguistic or discursive involves a space of meaning which is flat, horizontal, two-dimensional, virtual, and grid-like, in which invariant spacings allow for a structure of oppositional signs. By contrast, Lyotard argues, the visual implies a space of meaning which is deep, vertical, "four-dimensional", heterogenous, motivated, and continuous. The implication of these differences are summed up in a later text on Daniel Buren, where Lyotard writes:

> It has been demonstrated that a blue, a red, a straight line, a spiral, a point, a horizontal, a slant [...] immediately induce kinesthetic effects and coenesthetic effects (which have to do with the sensations by which one is aware of one's bodily state) on the body of the viewer. The linguistics of spoken language, on the

[9] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lyons (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

other hand, has taught us that phonological units which enter the code of language don't, or virtually don't, possess intrinsic value – that they are received not for their sensate quality, each in the singular, but for their potential for differentiation. [...] the value that matters is that which results from its interchangeability or lack of it against other phonemic units.[10]

Lyotard does not deny that it is possible to treat visual images in a linguistic way: to read them, to interpret them, to assign them meanings, to treat them as text, in which case they form part of a complex weave of discourses, those of art history, of culture, of deconstructive writing. But what he does deny is that this linguistic approach captures the unique force of the visual, its power to move us in a way which is different to that of words, and which can often enough leave us feeling lost for words. It is for him a matter of the capacity of visual images to be *art*, and to engender the kind of *aesthetic experience* distinctive of the visual arts. What is distinctive, he asserts, is the *immediate sensual presence* of the visual, which strikes the body and cuts through or undoes the knots and weaves of textuality and discourse.

In the 1980s Lyotard developed his ideas about art through the aesthetics of the sublime. These reflections led to a generalisation of certain features of the sublime to all aesthetic experience, which in turn led him to discuss the visual as an apparition, a revenant. An apparition, as he defines it, is an appearance 'struck with the sign of its disparition.'[11] Surely this sounds like a play of presence *and absence*, introducing the differential logic which Derrida and Stiegler insist mark the visual – and significantly, stamp it with the same structure of meaning as writing, as the word? This is denied by Lyotard. The apparition remains a presence, an occurrence in an instant other than the usual synthesis of different temporal moments in space-time which constitute memory, and all the 'ordinary perceptions' based upon it, as analysed by Stiegler. Lyotard writes:

> The happening of the affection that the pictorial (or artistic) gesture calls up, breathes at the same time the aura of a return. The latter does not imply memory, it is the mark inflicted on the *aistheton* by its passage through darkness. The work is a revenant. It is built upon the loss of ordinary time, space, and sensibility.[12]

Clarifying this issue, he specifies that the space-time in question here is not that of a repetition, of a play of presence and absence. Rather, it is a 'contraction' of appearance and disappearance in one and the same space-time: 'the gesture of painting suspends repetition and it contracts the alternation in a spasm of space-time-colour.'[13] This becomes clearer when we link this analysis back to the *feeling* of the sublime: the apparition of the visual, its ghostly character, induces

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[10] Lyotard, "The Works and Writings of Daniel Buren: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Contemporary Art," *Artforum* vol. 19, no. 6 (1981), 21.
[11] Lyotard, "Scriptures: Diffracted Traces" in *Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists*. Jean-François Lyotard. Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists, ed. Herman Parret. Vol. 4.II. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 555.
[12] Lyotard, "The Pictorial Event Today" in *Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art*. Jean-François Lyotard. Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists, ed. Herman Parret. Vol. 4.I. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 233.
[13] "The Pictorial Event Today," 231.

this *complex feeling*, which is *at the same time* a feeling of pleasure and pain. This complexity of feeling explains the congruence of the notion of the visual as immediate presence with the notion of it as apparition. The *perception* and the *feeling* it induces are immediate. It is only when this perception and this feeling are *conceptually and discursively analysed* that they appear as double, or differential. The "presence" of the visual that Lyotard insists on is a presence of sensation, not of concept.

While Lyotard never addressed the question of the digital image directly in any extended manner, I want to suggest that we can find an implied position concerning the questions Stiegler raises about it in the context of an essay on painting and the museum, called 'Conservation and Colour.'[14] Here, Lyotard begins by effectively countersigning Stiegler's work: he draws on it explicitly to argue (against a popular view) that conserving artworks does not mean their death, because every material inscription is always already a technique of memorization, or conserving through time, not in essence different from the museum's work of conservation. Lyotard then ends by outlining what he believes is at stake in painting which, significantly, he says might appear to be in contradiction with his previous point, but which he believes is not.[15] Questioning the nature of painting in the context of the museum, he writes:

> It is enough, perhaps, to take the situation of works in museums in itself and for itself, *without referring it* to their supposed initial situation, in the studio, at the moment of the 'first' sketch, or even what might have been the artist's 'first' imagination of them. It is enough to convince oneself that there is not *one* originary freshness, but as many states of freshness as what we might call dis-armed gazes. As many times of presence as there is soul [...].[16]

We can see then that what Lyotard wants to take from the critique of an originary presence in Derrida and Stiegler is the liberation of multiple 'presences,' by freeing them from reference to an original. We have seen that, while he wants to refuse any fundamental 'photo-centrism,'[17] Stiegler's analysis of what is distinctive about the digital image depends upon the continued – though weakened – reference to the original objective image.

From a Lyotardian perspective, the apparition of the digital in art would *suspend* the very question of reality. This is not an immediate reaction; we have to work to achieve this experience of 'immediate presence.' This is something like the phenomenological *epoché*, and it signals that aesthetic perception is something divorced from ordinary perception, which concerns itself with identification so that we can navigate and comprehend the world. According to Lyotard's argument, the visual 'presence' of the image is indifferent to repetitions, such that digital mediations or remediations can accrue this presence as surely as 'natural' perception.

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[14] In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
[15] *The Inhuman*, 149.
[16] *The Inhuman*, 150.
[17] REF. *Technics and Time 2*.

What is at stake in thinking words and images through the lens of recent and contemporary French philosophy, as I have briefly outlined here, is the question of how each are meaningful. As we have seen, for Derrida and Stiegler images act like words; they are always already taken up in the differential logics of (pro)grammatology. For Lyotard, an image is an immediate sensuous presence, while a word is already caught up in the differential play of language. What we have with Stiegler and Lyotard, when considering the digital image, are also two types of apparition. Stiegler's emphasis on writing as material trace causes him to assert that images must change as technologies of inscription change. His apparition leads us to believe that, by throwing our sense of reality into a crisis, the digital increases the apparitional character of the image. But Lyotard's analysis leads us to a different kind of apparition, which is indifferent to the technological framing of the digital, and the particular problematic which makes us fret over the reality of the image. The pertinent question here is, when faced with a digital image, what is the quotient of reality at stake? Is it a concern for *aesthetic appreciation*? Does it affect the status of the image *as art?* Or is it only an issue for vernacular or documentary photography? Such are the stakes, I suggest, in the different perspectives of word and image in the context of the digital image I have explored here.