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A MATTER OF THEFT NOTES ON THE ART OF STEALING A SOUL FLORIAN SCHNEIDER

There is a well-known myth according to which indigenous people believe that when a camera takes a picture of them, it captures a part of them, if not stealing their soul. This has been repeated often enough, by the pioneers of ethnographic photography as well as in online forums by today's amateur photographers; so-called natives have been credited with this belief in every part of the world and across time. Like many other popular assumptions from the field of ethnography, the idea of the theft of a soul by image has become a commonplace, free from critical reflection and questioning.

It proves what is supposed to be evident: the primitiveness of the other, of those who are unfortunately doomed, as well as their originality as a rare, still available and not yet fully exterminated example to whom the privilege of possessing a soul has only recently been granted; the naivety of those who are not familiar with new technologies, as well as the correlate power of those who know how to handle them properly; the spiritual innocence of the noble savage, as well as the guilty conscience of those who intrude upon their reservations...

It is not rational, since it is irrational, a self-fulfilling prejudice that reveals not much about those who are supposed to hold the belief but quite a lot about those who assign the belief to others. In that respect, the myth of the soul-stealing camera appears as a colonial projection constitutive for the exoticizing practice of portraying indigenous people.

The innocent, noble savage does not only have to look and behave, wear clothes, hold weapons, make gestures in order to fulfill the expectations of the colonial photographer. The antipathy of indigenous people towards the camera may not have derived from their alleged belief in its soul-stealing capacity, but rather from their own very concrete experiences: the camera has served as a weapon in the process of photographic colonization that 'violates the silences and secrets essential to our group survival' (Leslie Marmon Silko).¹

Moreover, the indigenous were forced to believe what was in fact a bourgeois fashion in the European capitals of the nineteenth century: with the emergence of physiognomic studies the face was considered to express the interior

¹ Quoted in Victor Misyayeva and Erin Younger, eds., *Hopi Photographers. Hopi Images* (Tucson, 1983), 10.

decoration of the mind to the public, to reveal the individual and the essential truth of the subject. The face became the mirror of the soul.

Although at its outset and by its inventors photography was considered ill-suited to the rendering of faces and the art of portraiture, the technological development has been shaped according to the desire to capture the intimate privacy of a person rather than stills of landscapes. While Daguerre still doubted that the slow lenses, time-consuming preparation, and long exposures required would make his process suitable for portraits, by the mid-1850s at the latest the new medium had been bent towards the art of portraiture: reproducible paper prints, natural lighting and faster lenses prepared the ground for the widespread success of portrait studios.

As soon as photography was capable of taking the picture of a person, as soon as it managed to reproduce the human face in a recognisable and identifiable way, resembling the subject and expressing his essence, honorable figures from Balzac to Baudelaire began to fear an uncanny technology that produces doubles and doppelgänger, that materializes spirit, that manifests the soul in the image of the subject.

In 'My Life as a Photographer' the former caricaturist and pioneering French photographer Felix Nadar recalls a theory he heard from Honoré de Balzac: 'All physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other... Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life'.²

Apparently Balzac borrowed his thoughts from the Latin poet Lucretius, who suggested that images are 'films', insubstantial shapes of things, which travel through air: simulacra, atom-thin and lightning-fast images that stream from the surfaces of solid objects and enter the eyes or mind to cause vision and visualization.

Long before the triumph of wave theory in nineteenth-century physics, Lucretius proposed a materiality of the image that seems fundamental for any further elaboration on soul theft and image production. Balzac's adaptation appears confined within an logic of scarcity, while Lucretius originally assumed an endless production of simulacra based on the infinite existence of atoms. Furthermore, for Lucretius the soul is affected by the constant stream of simulacra off of each object such that it is as if one were wounded, epileptic, or paralyzed.

What is the reason for Balzac's greed? Why should there be only a limited number of images as 'ghostly layers' which disappear by exposure? What really endangers the 'very essence of life'? The antipathy or refusal of being photographed resonates with a problem that must reside outside the field of photographic technology; another, yet unknown precariousness.

The soul that is stolen by exposure leaves an objectified person behind that has lost its subjectivity and become alien to itself. Hegel still used the term alienation as both a positive and a negative force of modern life, but the young Karl Marx took that concept in order to lay out one of his foundational claims: in the emerging industrial production under capitalism, workers lose control of their

² Felix Nadar, 'My Life as a Photographer', in October 5 (1978), 9.

lives and selves—in other words, of their souls, since they lose control of their work. Marx denounced the process of abstraction from use value to exchange value as ‘fetishism’—yet another metaphor that relates to allegedly primitive cultures, but this time it goes the other way around and it finds its assignment in the centres of industrial capitalism. Based on the belief that inanimate things or commodities have human powers, these things appear as able to rule the activity of human beings, replacing concrete social relationships with the illusions or artificial character of the commodity form.

‘Thingification’ turns everything into commodities or objects to be owned. The soul becomes a matter of property relations: through alienation and commodity fetishism it turns into a thing that is concealed, exchanged, traded and sold, after it has been stolen.

Postmodern capitalism has carried this idea to its extremes. The alienated labor force is not enough; the new managerialism demands the production of affects. The stolen soul reappears as the new productive force; it invests in creativity, enthusiasm, commitment, loyalty, friendliness, motivation, dedication.

II

In the face of a social reality ruled by alienation and based on affective labour, the theft of the soul through photography may itself sound like a nice, innocent, harmless and naive metaphor. Nevertheless it corresponds to the irretrievable loss of authentic life caused by the contradictions of an emerging, not yet fully graspable technological change.

Its incapacity or reluctance to cope with the contradictions of early capitalism allowed the bourgeois subject to project its very own fears onto the noble savage or the primitive. With the help of the indigenous other and in the best tradition of orientalism, the antimodern soul desperately sought to remain indispensable as the last resort of an individuality that should not be endangered or alienated. Today’s criticism and latent concern about surveillance and control technologies follows a similar pattern. At the first glance, it seems that, after all, the soul became a matter of privacy—walled off, gated and protected against a hostile public. What is supposed to be guarded against invasion and intrusion is conceived as constitutive for distinctiveness and individuality; it exists in solitude, apart from company and being observed. ‘The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others’, as Hannah Arendt pointed out.³

Since Augustine of Hippo, across romanticism and existentialism, maybe even in parts of the neomarxist criticism of alienation, the soul can be perceived as a hidden interior territory, home of an untroubled personality, an enclosure in which authenticity is nourished, not bothered by interferences and unexpected encounters: ‘In the inward man dwells truth’, as Augustine said.⁴ As the headquarters for the cultivation of emotional life it is the hotbed of personal preferences, individual taste, and other partialities. In this view, the soul would stand

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), 58.
⁴ St. Augustine, *Of True Religion* (Chicago, 1966), xvii.

for the limits of manipulative access to subjective experience. Access is granted, if at all, only through specifically designed interfaces, and trespassing turns out somehow equal to theft.

Contemporary surveillance practices based on digital technologies are widely considered such ‘trespass on the soul’. But today, the violation of the soul lies in duplicating the self rather than intruding upon it. One of the main reasons for that is the ongoing inversion of the classical notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’. To the extent communication became the key factor of production in the postfordist age, the relationship between public and private seems to turn on its own axis: what was considered publicly accessible gets privatized without any fuss, and what was formerly known as private gets exposed to the scrutiny of a more and more specific public and ever-fragmented semipublic.

In the digital age, the soul is copied over and over again by means of data mining and user profiling: the tracking and tracing, examination and evaluation of personalized settings, individual preferences, and habits within communication networks. The digital double created by these practices can be perceived as an attack on the alleged integrity and originality of the soul. The doppelgänger is made of bad copies, owned by secondary possessors. Nevertheless, these spitting images resemble the idea of one’s own; and this idea should comprehend the relations and proportions constitutive of the internal essence.

This is probably what makes the society of control so scary: the privation of privacy not only turns out to be the theft of the soul, but it marks precisely what constitutes the postmodern individual as ancestor or previous owner of a self that is indeed multiplied in all sorts of corporate and social networks; still, it relates back to the subject of a claim or pretense—and it does not matter so much whether self-images, profiles, preferences and private data are voluntarily given away or literally deprived.

III

What was formerly known as ‘information society’ has shifted into an image economy based on the techniques of imaging information or turning information into images. At the same time, contemporary images are characterized by a passage from visibility to legibility: ‘constantly modulated, subjected to variations, repetitions, alternations, recycling, and so on...’ as Gilles Deleuze noted it.⁵

Such ambivalence reflects the two potentialities of images that Jacques Rancière recently suggested: the image as a ‘raw, material presence’ or ‘pure blocs of visibility’ and ‘the image as discourse encoding a history’. Such duplicity defines specific regimes of ‘imageness’: ‘a particular regime of articulation between the visible and the sayable’.⁶ Their relations are constantly redistributed and by no means limited to the realm of the visual or the world of pictorial representation. Rancière for instance sees the invention of the double poetics of images in novel writing.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990* (New York, 1995), 53.
⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London, 2007), 11.

Today's search engines may be an example of another redistribution of the relations between visible and sayable. Their crawlers and spiders replicate the content of innumerable websites across the World Wide Web by wrenching them out of their original context, imaging them by storing and caching them; but the goal is to reduce their complexity into a specific model of indexability by which alone they become visible and accessible, according to the ranking algorithm.

The advance of portrait photography in the mid-nineteenth century, which discovered the face as unique identifier and gateway to the bourgeois identity, has found its present-day equivalent in the phenomena of self-exposure in social networking platforms which culminates in googling one's own name. Furthermore, in its digital form the image appears as a storage unit for framed portions of psychic realities that can be duplicated without significant loss and distributed nearly in real time. The image becomes subjected to processes of design as well as designing processes of subjectivation.

The bourgeois or modern conception of property has been characterized by anonymity and pure objectivity. The fundament of western individualism is the ability to first of all 'own' or author one's soul, and therefore 'own up' to one's actions and transactions. But today, in the age of immaterial production, digital reproduction, and networked distribution, there is increasing confusion about biopolitical property relations. These relations need to be made visible in order to be enforced. In order to keep faith with capitalism we need to believe in the presence of property relations that appear ever more imaginary. And this marks precisely what is at stake in contemporary image production. The actual content matters less and less: it is copied, remade, replicated, stolen, looted, pirated, faked anyway. What counts is the fact that its soul is still supposed to operate as a commodity. Or as Benjamin once observed: 'If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in just existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle.'⁷

Property exists first of all as imagery and rapidly becomes a matter of imagination: the desperate attempt of corporate networks to reidentify and reinforce the abstract nature of the value of exchange while being confronted with the overwhelming opulence of use value once the images are liberated from the fetters that arrested their freedom of movement, their capacity to circulate freely. In a society after the spectacle, we are realizing that it makes no sense anymore to criticize and expose the fetish character of non-things or absurdities, since it constitutes the very essence of the means of immaterial production. It is inscribed directly into the process of imagination, since imagination turns out as the labour power of the creative industries of late capitalism.

In the 1970s Bernard Edelman researched the development of intellectual property laws parallel to the emergence of commercial cinema and industrial image production. French law of the nineteenth century had not considered pho-

7. Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire', in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Second Empire* (New York, 1983), 55.

tography a creative act, since it was just a copy of reality: 'The product, the photographic negative is soulless because only the machine works, and the photographer has merely learned to get it to work properly'. A few decades later, the opposite is true. The photographic machine becomes 'pure mediation of the subject's production: The real belongs to the subject if the subject invests in it, or: on the condition "of bearing the intellectual mark of its author, the imprint necessary to the work's having the characteristic of individuality necessary to its being a creation"'.⁸

To explain the transition from soulless labour to the soul of labour Edelman proposes the concept of the overappropriation of the real: 'The appropriation of what has already been appropriated'. All production is the production of a subject, the category by which labour 'designates all man's production as production of private property'. As soon as the productive forces demand that images be protected by copyright law, 'it is sufficient for the law to say that the machine transmits the soul of the subject'.

Today, it is again the theft of the soul which turns images into property. But to the extent that its property relations are inscribed into every image, we might also experience a reconcretization of the commodity form. What has been extensively abstracted in the space and time of modern capitalism returns in a perilously concrete, almost tangible fashion. It might be such 'derefication' or 'becoming-image' which ironically turns out today to be the key obstacle to consciousness, more or less in the opposite way as Lukacs suspected 'reification' to operate.

There is no way out of the imaginary. Not because the 'imaginary' is equal to the fictitious, faked or 'unreal', but because of the indiscernibility of real and unreal, as Deleuze mentions once in his very few remarks on this peculiar terminology: 'The two terms don't become interchangeable, they remain distinct, but the distinction between them keeps changing round...'⁹

This could lead to a first and fundamental characterization of imaginary property: as a set of exchanges it is based on the impossibility of discerning anymore what is one's own and what is not. Such indiscernibility certainly rests on the persuasive power of the digital image, which promises to instantly provide 'lossless' and cost-free copies while insisting on the identity of the copied content. But more importantly, it introduces the urgency of a constant renegotiation and exchange of meanings of ownership which remain distinct.

IV

'If this idea is hostile to us, why do we acquiesce in it? Give us those lovely phantasms! Let's be swindlers and beautifiers of humanity!' (Nietzsche)¹⁰

8. Bernard Edelman, *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of Law* (London, 1973), 51.
9. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 66.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge, 2003), 51.

V

In one of his recent essays, 'My Self and my Own, One and the Same?' Étienne Balibar revisits John Locke's 'Essay on Human Understanding,' in particular the chapter 'Of Identity and Diversity' which Locke wrote separately and included only in the second edition. Balibar shows 'how the vexed relationship between the self and the own' prepares the ground for Western theories of 'personal identity', the self and the subject: 'There is nothing natural in the identification of the self and the own, which is really a norm rather than a necessity, and reigns by virtue of a postulate'.¹¹

Balibar comes to this conclusion via the detour of his own misreading of a poem by Robert Browning. Balibar considered the beginning of the verse 'My own, confirm me!' as a form of self-interpellation, and originally thought he had found an example where 'my self' and 'my own' were indeed one and the same, identical. Only later did he find out this was not the case and Brownings' 'my own' actually designates his beloved wife. 'My own is my wife', Balibar realizes:

It is the other with whom I make one and the same precisely because we can never become identified, indiscernible, in other terms, with whom I experience the uneasy relationship of identity and difference, not only because it is conflictual, but because the identification of what is shared or what is the same and of what is separated or divorced can never be established in a clear-cut and stable manner. The name of this uneasy experience conventionally is 'love'.¹²

Balibar's little mistake and the resulting rich elaboration on the production of a vanishing difference or a vanishing duality that is 'neither unity nor multiplicity' might also pave the way for a less lamenting understanding of the art of stealing souls.

Maybe taking an image is somehow like falling in love, except it is the soul that is stolen instead of the heart? Certainly it creates unease and tension, but at the same time it leads to the very interesting question: what does it actually mean, today, to own an image, especially once it is stolen or taken away?

From invention, creation and distribution to recognition, exhibition and conservation, images are subject to an infinite variety of operations that are not only characterized by conflicting powers of producing, possessing and processing them. Ownership of images has turned into the challenge of implementing solutions in real time. It is a progressive appropriation, which is, as Balibar might say with Locke, 'defined in terms of an intrinsic relationship to its other'.

Images appear as the products of struggles for imagination. It is not about the relationship between the owner of some thing and the object that is owned. Imaginary property deals with the imagination of social relationships with others who could also use it, enjoy it, play it or play with it. Ownership is a matter of communication and constant renegotiation, gained and performed on an in-

11. Étienne Balibar, 'My Self and My Own: One and the Same?' in *Accelerating Possession: Global Futures of Property and Personhood*, ed. Bill Maurer and Gabriele Schwab (New York, 2006), 41.

12. *Ibid.*, 33.

creasingly precarious basis rather than grounded on a stable set of eternally valid laws which follow traditional ideas of property and personhood.

After all, taking an image and consequentially stealing a soul turns out to be an impossible operation as such: giving what cannot be stolen to somebody who cannot receive the stolen good. But into what could such double negation possibly resolve?

VI

The image we take from the world has to deceive the senses and produce a series of situations that occur to the cognitive subject: simulacra, images of images, which are intentionally distorted and modulated in order to appear somehow correct to the respective sensual capacities of the viewer. With the advent of digital technologies which are supposed to produce perfect copies, the deceptive and thievish nature of images has finally become a matter of fact. There is no such thing as an identical copy which is bit for bit one and the same.

The digital image pretends to be identical or at least equivalent, but it operates on a rather pragmatic basis: in the end it is all about eliminating noise as the disturbing presence of an inexplicable and unidentifiable otherness. In signal processing, sampling originally describes the reduction of a continuous signal to a discrete signal: if the noise is less than the noise margin, then the system performs as if there were no noise at all. This is why digital signals can be regenerated to achieve so-called lossless data transmission, within certain limits.

That means that the illusion of identity is produced by a concept of postmodern border management. In order to perform the supposed integrity, a dynamic regime of continuous control and instant communication needs to decide whether specific information would be considered useful or useless in order to behave as if there were no disturbance at all.

Meanwhile, the stolen souls are flocking together below the noise margin ignored by the system. It is neither above nor inside, it is 'with', as Deleuze stated: 'It is on the road, exposed to all contacts, encounters, in the company of those who follow the same way, "feel with them, seize the vibration of their soul and body as they pass", the opposite of a morality of salvation, teaching the soul to live its life, not to save it'.¹³

VII

The formula could go like this: the soul that is stolen in the image that is taken is the difference that is repeated.

13. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (New York, 1987), 62.