

6th Helsinki Photomedia Conference: **Contact of Models**, 20 December 2023

Conference Paper Proposal (addressing subthemes 'Images and Representations', 20-minute illustrated presentation).

Working title: *fireflies**

Eileen Little University of South Wales, UK

How the practices and models that orient our use and analysis of images are relevant or shift in purpose for all the stakeholders of photography (and that's everyone with a phone, so, everybody) is my concern with this paper, and at the start of every new term of the photography higher education with which I have been engaged for decades across a variety of courses and institutions.

If modelling consists of translating intricate knowledge systems into computational models do photographs themselves still have the quality of 'feeling real'? (and from discussion with students so far it would appear this is still a major motivator for signing up to a course, whether it be Art Photography, Documentary Photography and even more applied uses of the photograph).

Photography education with all its promise in terms of making visible identity and community with the goal of empowerment is certainly considered to be archaic. Now we have almost total visibility and a question mark even over any right to opacity. Those aspirations of education that students would harness the visual (photography especially) to represent themselves and their communities, that their making of visual images would not only mine the meanings of what it is to be human, but also become formative of their own subjectivity, have withered; the self in relation to the photographic has metastasized into something entirely amorphous, large, unwieldy, pure performance disconnected from the 'real' on our social media platforms (which purports to 'connect' us). One outcome of this paper is to think how contemporary photography education might address the rebuilding of those aspirations around agency, shaping identity and defining community in the constant blinding glare of platform capitalism. Our culture now suffers from a surfeit of transparency and illumination to the extent that we're blinded to the glimmers (fireflies) of resistance to power structures that rule us and mass culture that supports it. What to teach students of photography vis à vis notions of community, memory, agency, and personal and social identity?

Could photographs still everywhere abundant be constructed as "*the image ... (as) the temporal operator of survivals?*"¹

Courses advertise themselves online " your unique vision can help to redefine the way we see the world around us." Look on any of the web pages of HE courses, identity is always on the syllabus in the first year.

I have been looking for fireflies in the internet – those real people who seek comfort and community ensconced in the machine (*Mourning on Facebook* for example) and I turn my attention here specifically to young people starting out on what they may think is a picture-making 'career' and to those who stand in front of them hesitating to pick up the camera, slightly concerned about the trajectory of scholarship so enthusiastically signed up to in their

¹Didi-Huberman, G. (2018) (trans) Swope-Mitchell, L. *Survival of the Fireflies*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.

own first photography classes, in another era for whom the models for understanding and making are in sharp contradistinction. Who hesitate and are reminded of how Didi-Huberman wrote of Pasolini's trajectory in thinking about the possible power of the light of the fireflies. Are the young students concerned with identity in the same way we were? What is the power of the photograph for them? Dealing with it every day in very proscribed ways?

The methodology for my contribution consists of a survey of syllabi across courses and interviews with both students and lecturers about their experience of the new ways of modelling the photograph, both in its 'origin' and its dissemination in the 'real' world. It will take its starting point the history of theory with which photography has been traditionally taught to these students. It will seek to determine how and indeed if that scholarship, still on the syllabus, still is relevant and necessary. What does it mean that the recent 'Christmas card' photography from Kensington Palace has a finger missing from Prince Louis' hand? "*Are Prince William's children even real or are they fake?*" is a facetious headline (which, then, naturally, goes viral) from the British tabloids. And as AI becomes more widely used for 'originating' the photograph the relation between the origin (perhaps that loved body) and the image widens. Yet first year courses often have modules entitled '*Who We Are*' (e.g., at my institution) as foundational to the further study of photography. The nature of the 'photograph' determines what can be modelled as properties of 'photography', and although AI has the capacity of image(s) that stretch the bounds of imagination what we perceive as natural is shaped by the (indexical) model we measure it with. And a discussion of this as the object itself morphs so fundamentally is crucial to a critical study of the medium.

What it means to be a human being has long been a purview of art and media courses, human dignity at the apex of that trajectory. But that essential part of looking back at ourselves (indexicality) can no longer be assumed, yet often our experience of the image is still imbued with Barthes' "*that-has-been*". And privacy, foundational to human dignity, is seemingly beyond the control of the individual.

And finally, intimacy. Do these image ephemera have anything like the felt-durability of those previous iterations of the photographic image in the complex and fleeting dissemination of them now predominant? Do these mostly pixel projections, within the firehose of neo-liberal capitalism and techno-culture, maintain any of the intimacy felt when looking at a treasured photograph of a loved one?

The relationship between these words—agency, subjectivity, intimacy, identity and memory—to the experience of both students and lecturers (and the communities to which both are committed) and the way of modelling the world now through photography with the goal of prioritizing the human and the phenomenological is the ultimate aim of the research.

...the prophet...perceives...the future in the fading light of the past...

— Benjamin 2003:4-407

¹Didi-Huberman, G. (2018) (trans) Swope-Mitchell, L. *Survival of the Fireflies*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.