

A digital image is no longer merely a representation of that which was captured in the photographic process, it is a vessel carrying a meaning of its own as a medium. The carrier, the medium, the platform – these prime our perceptions to process the image presented to us, often to the point where the meaning of the vessel supersedes that of the image's contents. We seek the priming and context more than we seek the image and its representee, as the context communicates to us the *identity* of the image.

Images disseminate through various structures. They may emerge from a central source such as a government or broadcasting agency. They may also disseminate through decentralized networks such as social media and advertising. Note however that the distinction between centralized and distributed modes of distribution is no longer so clean cut.

Sources of imagery demarcate themselves through visual and textual-stylistic identities. Such points of demarcation are however largely aesthetic in their nature – we are struck by them in initial impressions. As such however, aesthetics, and therefore perceived modes of image dissemination, are easily subject to appropriation. Without external prohibition, there is nothing stopping one party from taking on the aesthetic identity of another, thus priming the viewer to the context of that aesthetic.

Media and aesthetics are riddled with associations. We may associate an aesthetic to a place, a lifestyle, an identity which we want to be a part of. Taken to the extreme, aesthetics serve to demarcate that which we consider true or reliable, and that which we consider to be untrustworthy.

In a networked age where the distinctions between image sources become harder and harder to place, our trust in these sources begins to destabilize. Aesthetics become deceptive and impostors lurk at every corner, attempting to lure us in with forms that seem familiar. Such a case serves to weaken our trust and beckons us to retreat from these modes of image and information. Yet on the other hand in an increasingly complex world all we have the capacity to process, are first impressions.

We feel as though we live in a world of 'as ifs', where the pastiche and appropriation of cultural forms are used to further the ends of a system whose efficacy is measured by the economy it creates.

If all information now exists in networks, where the sources of information become hazy and indiscernible, then our relationship to information is also radically changed. How do we now decide what is important and what is not? Perhaps we may limit the scale of our networks – as such they become manageable and understandable. Yet in doing so we must also be wary that they become stagnant and closed off to diversity. In both the cases of localized and global networks we are faced with opposing short comings. It seems as though as impasse.

In such a situation, what alternatives may exist?

Footnote:

Algorithmic and machine learning processes are often meant to serve predictive purposes. On behalf of one party, they predict what we will want to see, what we want to be shown, what we want to experience, and what may be meaningful to us. Or, perhaps taking a more pessimistic view, they predict what will capture our attention and consequently what our impulses may drive us to consume.

Such processes are in effect measurable. Their efficacy can be determined by various metrics, for instance user satisfaction, sales performance, and web traffic. When designed to these metrics, they in effect shape the things we are coerced to experience to achieve a desired performance.