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Snapshots, Clichés and Simulacra
By Millee Tibbs

In his essay "Photography," Kracauer critiques the abundance of photographic images in illustrated newspapers stating, "The blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean."¹ Current digital imaging technologies have turned this blizzard into a complete whiteout. Never before have people had such access to image-making technologies and the ease with which the images are now disseminated. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the snapshot has evolved little and remains a visual cliché - a banal vessel of personal sentimentality.

In this paper I will discuss the use and fetishization of snapshot images in both my own studio practice and by other contemporary artists. I will focus on simulacra as the process through which the meaning of a place or thing becomes distorted, inflated, and manipulated as its representation propagates, and how the repetition inherent to snapshot imagery transforms the relationship between the thing photographed and its meaning. As a point of departure I will examine an archive of snapshot images of the disused train station, the Michigan Central Depot in Detroit as an example of how a place becomes both an icon and a cliché through the repetition of its representation.

As a visual artist, my studio practice has led me to several lines of inquiry that have focused on the snapshot as a space where the authentic meets the constructed. On the one hand, the snapshot image holds none of the pretense of being "art". Very much to the contrary, it is perceived as being primarily evidentiary in nature, showing where one has been and with whom, what one has seen, what one chooses to remember. At the same time, however, the snapshot, through its rigor of repetition and form, and cultural coding, is a construction. Snapshots are derived from a model. Their very essence is tied to a lack of originality. We use visual codes to produce the desired meaning. We perform ourselves in very consistent ways for the camera: posing in front of monuments and smiling with our friends and family. We choose specific times to photograph: when we are celebrating, when we are somewhere new, when we are with people that we deem to be important. There is very little that is random in a snapshot. Even though the aesthetic decisions may seem arbitrary, it is only because they are so thoroughly learned and embodied that they become second nature. Everyone knows how to make a snapshot. And everyone's snapshots look the same. ²

An example of this universality is evident in the work of Artist Joachim Schmid who investigates the systematic and serial nature of photography in mass culture. In his series

“Archiv, 1986-1999,” he accumulated and classified hundreds of snapshot and vernacular images. By placing these similar images in arrangements of types, he emphasizes their repetition in formal structure and the reiteration of their typological content.

This repetition creates iconic imagery, which, through its simplification of the subject matter and overuse, becomes cliché. A photographic icon is both a representation of a person/place/thing and an enduring symbol of it. These images have a tendency to romanticize through nostalgic desire for the past, which is often manifested in the aestheticization of the subject matter. The image becomes a representation of a desire to see something in a particular way - the way we desire that it once was. Nostalgia is part and parcel of photography because the photograph is an object that always presents us with a fixed vision of the past.

Schmid's collection of snapshots of the pyramids illustrates this point. The two themes that are repeated in each image are pyramids and camels. The pyramids reference a distant past and an idea of being able to access that past through those ruins. The camel signals an exotic experience. They are photographed because they are different and fulfill an idea of what the image-maker wants the Egyptian experience to be about. The images promote an idea of Egypt that rests on nostalgia for the past, which is manifest as a desire to romanticize (or in this case, exoticize) the place. These images reveal how the photographic icon can function not only as a singular image, but as a particular way of seeing and representing a place through the propagation and dissemination of snapshot images of it. This desire is repeated each time we take a similar photograph, and that repetition replaces the original meaning of a place with an oversimplified and trite copy of itself, a cliché.

The tourist snapshot is both derivative and creator of the visual icon and the cliché. It is a cheap version of a place that one can take home as a personal possession, a souvenir, which also reiterates the importance of that place. The more a place is imaged, the more important it becomes. The more a place is seen, the more important it becomes to see it, to record it as being seen, and to show it to others. This practice creates a type of visual feedback loop that

displaces the original meaning of a place from its propagated visual representation. The visual cliché begets the simulacral experience. As an image accrues importance, its meaning shifts from individual to symbolic, taking on the importance of metaphor. The symbol negates personal understanding and stands instead as a universal experience. In the world of the snapshot, genuine emotion is replaced with sentimentality. Because the tourist industry is based on capital, and capital is based on the desire of the consumer, and the consumer desires to see the place as it has been imaged so that they can image it in that same way, the place replaces itself with a clichéd idea of itself. Eg. The camel is always present for its photo opportunity.

There is a dichotomy between the highly individual nature of the snapshot image as a personal possession and its universality in terms of form and content. It seems that everything in existence has already been imaged and archived; yet there is an individual drive that compels us to keep making photographs. Looking at a postcard of a tourist destination is not the same as reminiscing over one's own snapshot of it and having participated in the imposition of meaning on the place. Imagery becomes redundant because it is important that we each have our own personal documentation of this experience. The overuse and repetition of the imagery both drains the subject of a unique meaning, but it also reinforces its importance.

In her series "The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else (2006)," Lisa Oppenheim reveals the tension between personal investment and universal sentimentality in the clichéd image. Oppenheim took 15 found images of sunsets taken by soldiers in Iraq, held them up against a real sunset in New York, and re-photographed them. It is the very essence of the sentimentality of these clichéd images that gives this work its power. One imagines the atrocities of war that are taking place just outside the image's border but are held at bay by the image's frame. What is beautiful in these images is the comfort of knowing that the sunset is the same everywhere, but that is also what is terrifying. By introducing these images of a far off place into her immediate environment and exposing their similarity she also suggests that there might be other things in common, too. War and its violence is a possibility anywhere.

The imposition of a frame onto a place determines what the conversation about that place will be. As a new resident of Detroit, my visual research has led me to question the abundance of images of the city, what is imaged, and the way in which it is imaged and how these images influence the way the city represents itself. Unlike the images made in Iraq during the war that focused on the scenic sunset and left out the rest, what is framed inside the images of Detroit is the story urban blight, economic failure and little else.

Detroit is, in its own way, a tourist destination, and, as with any tourist destination, the act of photographing picturesque sites is a means of entertainment unto itself. However what is considered “picturesque” in Detroit is a point of contention. Tourists and amateur photographers (as well as professionals and artists) come to Detroit to photograph the patina of derelict buildings, feral homes, and abandon spaces. The subject matter elicits a quick emotional response and is prey to easy aestheticization through smart camera phone applications and Photoshop filters. The epicenter of this photographic phenomenon is the Michigan Central Depot.

The Michigan Central Depot, built in 1912, has become the visual shorthand for Detroit. Though constructed three-quarters of a mile from downtown Detroit in the Corktown neighborhood, this placement signaled a belief in the imminent growth of the city. The depot stood as an investment in the economic prosperity of Detroit’s future. Ironically, it was this very strategy that was one of the leading factors to the demise of the station. After the dismantling of the streetcar system in Detroit, pedestrians had little means of arriving at the station and its lack of a parking structure further lead to the depot’s undoing. Soon, the private automobile, which had become synonymous with the prosperity of Detroit, would displace the entire rail system of the United States as a means of public transportation. It seems ironic, then, that the symbol of rise and fall of the Motor City would become this abandoned train depot.

Bound up in this iconography is a confused nostalgia. On the one hand, the depot represents an era of both economic and aesthetic prosperity. The beaux-arts architecture

stands in contrast to the pragmatic and capital driven edifices that have cropped up over the city in the last decade. The structure reminds us of the cultural heritage of the city of Detroit and the economic importance it once held. But the depot never fulfilled its promise. As soon as the vision for the future was made concrete, it slipped into an icon of the past. Its time as a symbol of prosperity and growth was very short lived.

To compound this irony, Corktown, the home of the depot, is now a site of urban revitalization. New restaurants, bars and coffee shops are cropping up on Michigan Avenue opposite the train depot's foreboding silhouette. The depot itself is a tourist destination. But unlike monuments that project triumph and success, the depot stands as a contemporary ruin and a symbol of the city's demise.

The architecture of the very building itself fulfills the idea of ruin and pulls at the heartstrings of nostalgia. Like many other "temples to transportation" constructed for train travel in the early 20th century, the aesthetic of ruin is imprinted onto its very structure. Influenced by the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, architects resuscitated the idea of grandiose civic architecture in modern city planning.³ The visiting and viewing of ruins is an experience that promises a specific emotional response that touches on the sublime - they never disappoint in moving us and they remind us of the transitory and inconsequential nature of our existence. The depot fulfills this promise. It is at once beautiful and sad, and imposing in its grandiosity. It satisfies the culturally prescribed image of what a ruin should look like and it represents a way of life that has failed. And like the ruins of Athens, Rome or Egypt, tourists flock to it and validate its status as ruin with each additional snapshot of it.

While still a foreboding structure, the depot carries more cultural symbolism than its mere architectural edifice can withstand. The depot stands as a symbol of the complex and tragic history of Detroit, but Detroit, synecdoche for the entire American automobile empire, has become a metaphor for the problems of American consumer culture, Capitalism, race relations and is often referred to as a possible cautionary tale for the future of America as a

nation. In order to bear this weight, the photographic image is employed. Each snapshot distributes the weight of this cultural burden, simplifying its meaning to an easily digestible visual equivalent of a truism.

As each of these images are made and distributed what was once a complicated history slides a little deeper into cultural cliché. Digital technology allows these images to be both made easily and cheaply, and quickly disseminated into popular culture. Photo sharing websites, such as flickr.com, proliferate the snapshot mentality – to repeat and reinforce through repetition. In addition to visual substantiation through repetition, there is online interaction that voices validation through user’s comments like “Love this shot!”, “Fantastic work!!!”, or “Cool.” The subject matter accrues cultural value only *as* subject matter, a thing to photograph, a “photo op”. It becomes less about the thing it is (or was) and more about what it looks like as a photograph.

Easy access to digital photo imaging applications like Photoshop or Lightroom, and less robust but more popular apps like Hipstamatic, Instagram and Camera + blur the boundary between “art photography” and the snapshot. The image looks like something that resembles art but lacks any content but a heavy handed emotional solicitation through the use of stylizing filters and HDR compositing. The problem with the visual cliché is that it oversimplifies its subject matter. Through the process of aesthetization, the making of anything into something beautiful, a positive value judgment is placed on the subject matter *as* subject matter.

While the snapshot has always live in the realm of capital both as an individual drive to possess and cultural currency to exchange, digital imaging technologies have allowed the photographic image to leap off the printed page onto quotidian objects. The complex history of a space is diminished to a fashion accessory or dishware, which exist solely to be consumed. Through its consumption and display the image is again validated as a mere photographable subject and commodity. As the image of the depot replicates itself, the place becomes less about its history and more about the idea of itself as a ruin. Like the ever-present camel at the

Egyptian pyramids, will the idea of Detroit replace the place itself? Will the desire to see Detroit as the way that it has been imaged perpetuate its abandoned and dilapidated state? By reinforcing the photographability of urban decay through the reiteration of its image, and by proxy its status as an aesthetic subject, one relegates the complex history of Detroit to nothing more than an easy photo opportunity.

¹ Sigfried Kracauer, "Photography," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 58

² Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on Photography and the Simulacral," *Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, Ed. Carol Squiers, The New Press, 1999, p. 174

³ Melanie Grunow Sobocinski, Michele V. Ronnick, Marlise Beadoen, *Detroit and Rome: Building on the Past*, The Regents of the Univ of Michigan, 2005, p. 111

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