

RMIT University

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Essaying the picture

Abstract:

This work attempts to self-reflexively apply the method of ‘childlike freedom’ (Adorno 1984: 152) inherent in the post-Montaigne tradition of the essay, to an exploration of the vicissitudes of ‘picturing’. Picturing, particularly since the advent of photographic technologies, is often associated with apparently verifiable representations of the material world, and yet there has long been a fascination with the interplay between picturing and the imagination suggested by the very word *image*. This essay braids memoirist scenes and images from contemporary popular culture with vignettes from the early Spiritualist tendencies within the history of photography. It traces the erotics and the mysteries to be found in the overlapping margins between vision, memory and fantasy when essaying the picture.

Biographical note:

David Carlin is a writer, Associate Professor and Co-Director of the nonfictionLab in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. His widely acclaimed memoir *Our father who wasn't there* (Scribe) was published in 2010, and his creative essays and articles have appeared in *Griffith review*, *Overland*, *Text*, *Newswrite*, *Victorian writer*, *Continuum* and other journals. David co-chaired the 2012 NonfictionNow Conference with Robin Hemley. His research interests extend across nonfiction creative practices from the essay and memoir genres to digital media and archives, and he currently leads the Circus Oz Living Archive Project, having previously directed Circus Oz on New York's 42nd St as well as written and directed award-winning films and plays.

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Dearest, pictures are beautiful, pictures are something we can't do without, but they are torture, too.

(Franz Kafka, writing to his lover Felice in the presence of her photograph [Zischler 59])

This is a confession. I was originally invited to contribute, through this writing, to a conversation at a conference on 'picturing the essay'¹. A fascinating topic: how has the personal essay form been adopted and adapted by artists working in the field of visual images? Filmmakers, photographers, graphic essayists. Step forward Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Alison Bechdel. The essay, says the American essayist Ander Monson, 'is oversexed in its potential union with anything: polemic, story, treatise, argument, fact, fiction, lyric'. To which promiscuity could happily be added pictures of all sorts, as I'm sure Monson would agree. I was invited because I have been a filmmaker and theatre director myself, and now I'm interested in the personal essay. But this opportunity led me to a kind of negative epiphany: in the business of 'picturing the essay', I feel like I'm, to be frank, an interloper.

Why? What is it with making pictures? I shot my first film when I was 18 on a borrowed Bolex 16mm film camera. But apart from a few Super 8 films at university, that was the last time I ever shot one of my own films. Usually someone else seemed to have a better idea how to do the camerawork. It was the same with directing and designing theatre. I could work with the actors, their motivations and thought processes; someone else again was usually better at the pictures. I knew a good picture when I saw one; it's just a mystery where they come from.

Finally I've come to realise that the best pictures I can make are with words, so here, swimming upstream, I'm going to be essaying the picture rather than vice versa. And I'll be brief; if this essay were in pictures it would be a set of miniatures.

There won't *be* any pictures. Let's get that straight from the start.

There will be pictures but not on the screen or on the page.

There might be pictures. It's up to you.

If there are pictures, let's drape them melting in midair between us, a la Dali.

To essay means to try, if you're French. An essay wanders and it worries; it scratches around like a chook, digging for scraps of thought, following its chookish beak. An essay can't picture where it's going, and it doesn't have to picture where it's going. An essay's happy, scratching.

The imagination is the house of images. What we imagine we picture to ourselves, etymologically speaking. But the picturing I do in my imagination looks nothing like the neat arrays of photographs that repeat into their thousands on my computer's albums like

tombstones in a military cemetery. Well, except now it does, temporarily, because I *am* picturing those things in the very act of imagining that I'm *not* – the rows of photographs and especially the more interesting gravestones which, to be precise, stretch into the distance on manicured lawns tended by the US military in the fields of Normandy, vision courtesy of a long forgotten television documentary or news item. And if I try to focus on what I said I *was* picturing in my imagination that was *nothing like* these pictures, I arrive, in fact, at gloom and murk, shrouded figures and ectoplasm, as motifs for the shape shifting mental activity I aim to describe. Which explains not a puff about the visual register of the human imagination in general, or only that it is perhaps best thought of as a plastic bucket that has been attacked by a deranged swordsmen so that whatever is poured in leaks right out again in unpredictable directions – because last night I went to bed, it so happens, with images and tales from the long, gloopy and shrouded tradition of spirit photography (to which this essay will return). So it's gloom in, gloom out. Uninvited. The imagination at half past ten this morning is the house of gloom and gravestones.

By contrast, making pictures, the production of visible visual artifacts with a camera in particular, reeks to me of definition, framing, an organisation of perspective. There is a surface stability, a certainty to this type of picturing. What you see is what you get. Even though like any literate person I know this isn't strictly true, and a swell of artists, wits and tricksters has made careers messing here, I still *feel* it to be true when I look through a camera viewfinder.

Taking pictures has long roots within possession: images, like wild animals or prisoners of war, are *captured*. What is a wedding, a graduation, a sporting victory or a holiday without its *capturing* with photographs and video? It's a cliché to say that the world we live in is increasingly saturated with images. Perhaps it's more interesting to take notice of how pervasively images are applied as a currency of reduction. Pictures, whether still or moving, are often used as a summary device, standing in for the larger scene of an experience, event or action. Nowadays, as we see with political or celebrity actors conversant with the language of media flows, the originating event is often staged only so as to facilitate the production of the photographs that are its endpoint: familiar stock genres and their variations include the statesmen shaking hands, the vice presidential candidate pretending to wash dishes at a soup kitchen, the actor mincing on the red carpet or the bare-chested Russian president looking manly in the wilderness. The rules of the game insist that pictures can work both ways: a female Prime Minister trips and falls or a singer suffers a 'wardrobe malfunction'. And nowadays we are all under surveillance. Remember Mitt Romney secretly filmed speaking his unfortunate mind at a donor event, and insults half of the American population. We are fascinated at the spectacle of the mighty brought low, at the carnivalesque irony of the puppeteers of the image revealed as puppets.

Photographic pictures, like Freud's dreams, both condense and displace. At my niece's 21st birthday party, a slideshow condensed a quarter of a life, all those shared and separate days, into a three-minute shorthand, an almost random picturing that threatened to overwrite our failing memories. It was looped as if for all eternity, or so long as the

electricity lasts. Complete with the ‘Ken Burns effect’, those drifting dissolves that came as a default with the software.

And then there’s this: the rules! In cinema the singsong shot/reverse shot. Wide shot. Close-up. When I used to make short filmic dramas and comedies I felt bound to play within certain codes and grammars. It engaged the mathematical side of my brain. I was entranced by the legend of Hitchcock who, it was said, had such control over the image that he could visualise the entire film, perfectly, in advance – shot by shot, frame by frame – as if it were an elaborate algorithm which only needed to be played out through the shooting process. I set out to be Hitchcock, to have his cinematic precision (a suitably perverse fantasy). Why? – as if images must be painstakingly rehearsed and organised because they would not otherwise come unbidden?

Words, conversely, come to meet me in a sentence. I know they drag along their own tra-la-la of codes and grammars but I set out at the top end and, if I pause and give them time, here they come trip-trolloping along, not minding every which way they burp and fart and otherwise cause trouble. Words are all too ready to be essayed.

And yet, but still, and yet, but still ... pictures, even and perhaps especially photographs, are always threatening to drift away from their certainties, their literal there-ness. They only come to tease and fool and play with us.

When I was twelve I set up a darkroom in our outdoor dunny. It must’ve been one of the smallest darkrooms ever constructed. I can’t quite envision how it was possible now, but I know that the enlarger sat on a bench above the toilet bowl, and I remember that opening and closing the door to achieve the required blackout conditions was a tricky procedure.

Anybody who’s ever done darkroom photography, that now quaint and obsolete practice, will recall its pivotal erotic moment. Having been exposed briefly to the light of the enlarger filtered through the ghostly celluloid negative, the blank white sheet of photographic paper is slipped into the tray of chemical developer. There it floats, and is nudged under the surface by the gentle prodding of the photographer, who waits and watches until from nothing emerges the first blush and markings of a picture. The image seems to come out of the depths of the paper – as if something so thin could contain depths – but at its own pace, teasing the photographer who only wants the complete scene the camera promised to be revealed; the photographer who, despite her confidence in the chemical and optical logic of what is happening, is at this moment little different from a shaman or a priest willing into existence a predicted vision.

As it happens, modern technologies of picturing have long been invested in bringing into vision the previously invisible.

The development in the 19th century of strange and wondrous new technologies of imaging – photography, x-rays, cinematography – alongside equally astounding means for invisible long-distance communication such as the telegraph, was a danse macabre

between the physical and the fantastical (Harvey 2007, Jolly 2006). Since hitherto impossible things were made possible – a moment of time past could be preserved and transported far into the future, a camera could see through the skin inside the body, a moving train could suddenly appear thundering across a darkened room – who knew what else that was previously hidden might not now be seen?

For example, the Parisian doctor Hippolyte Baraduc experimented in the 1890s with photography as a means to capture emanations of the soul. His technique required neither camera nor lens. He would lay the photographic plate near to the subject's forehead or hand and await the imprint of the body's 'fluidic mist' (Warner 2006, 259). His contemporary, Louis Darget placed his own brain in close proximity to the photographic paper and concentrated on the mental transfer of selected objects. His more celebrated results include 'The First Bottle', 'The Walking Stick' and 'The Eagle'. They're murky, mottled things.

Baraduc and Darget were by no means lone crackpots. Efforts to visualise thoughts, auras and the spirit realm, conceived according to a variety of theories, were widespread throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries within the broad and, at the time, fashionable church of Spiritualism. They were undertaken, in many cases, by scientists using (supposedly) rigorous empirical methods, often the same scientists who were making the technological advances that still underpin our media. William Crookes was an English physicist who invented the cathode ray tube that later made possible the development of television. He believed that the physical wonders of invisible electromagnetic waves and so forth suggested irresistible applications for psychical research. In early experiments, he worked closely with a spirit medium called Florence Cook who helped him conjure the apparition of a girl called 'Katie King'. As proof, he managed to photograph himself with the spirit visitor 24 times in one week. In the images she appears, as cultural historian Marina Warner puts it, 'wraith-like, swathed in white' (226). Katie's alabaster eyes are closed and the fingers of one hand reach up to touch the side of her face as if messages are being transmitted through them. By her side, their arms touching, is the bearded Crookes. His eyes, too, are closed; his thoughts travel where hers go. They look like they have come to the altar to be married but have fallen asleep instead.

What is pictured here is desire. The desire for scientific evidence, at last provided through the indexical photographic image, of the continued existence of the dead, on another plane removed but not disconnected from this earthbound one. The desire for the miraculous and comforting continued presence of lost loved ones. But other desires too. Crookes was not the only Spiritualist to be accused of carnal relations with his spirit visitor. A perverse erotic charge lingers in many of these ghostly images: the erotics of the real and not-real sliding together; the embodied and the disembodied; the here and the beyond. That which appears as if from nowhere on the surface of the body, on the skin of the photographic paper as it lies caressed by liquids.

The darkroom, with its faint amber glow, its dripping sheets, its overpowering smell of

dissolution, was a theatre of the uncanny. And who could know for sure what the camera might have seen, until the proof was there?

In the dark we have to work to decipher everything. Walking on a familiar beach on a moonless night I was surprised to find the ocean arranged differently to usual. On the long straight beach the tide was out. Great tendrils of frothy water could be seen stretching up the sand, as if filling some newly formed undulations. I stepped forward to feel the froth on my shoe and suddenly there was no froth and no tendrils of water; in their place I now perceived the irregular swathes of illumination cast by a distant orange streetlight through the sand dunes. But if I walked towards the source of the light it too might have revealed itself to be something other than what it appeared...

Picturing can be a solitary or a shared hallucination. A creative act of will.

A final miniature: my son, at the age of seven or eight, used to lie down on the grass in the park with his friend Holly and look at the sky. Their game was to observe the clouds, watching for the pictures they made. Cloud gazing is as old as the hills, of course. Leonardo da Vinci promoted this and similar pursuits as exercises to fire the imagination: he encouraged people to stare at ‘the stains on walls, or the ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mugs, or like things’ because, he declared, ‘the mind is stimulated to new inventions by confused things, which are intrinsically meaningless and inscrutable but lend themselves for those very reasons to scrutiny’ (Warner 2006, 110). Start where there are no pictures, and watch them come. In my son’s case, in the clouds with Holly, it was dragons. Dogs, horses, cats, rabbits, snakes – but dragons were the most common in the clouds, he said. You could find them everywhere.

I will dedicate this essay to all of the confused things we cannot help but picture. And the astounding transactions between the framed, the crystal-clear and the dissolving.

Endnote

1. A previous version of this essay was presented at the ‘Picturing the essay’ panel of the 2012 NonfictionNow Conference, held 21-24 November 2013 in Melbourne, Australia.

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