Experiencing Otherness through Technology: The Lessons of Photography

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ABSTRACT

Working with a definition of experience as "a potential learning process produced by an encounter with something new, an obstacle or challenge that moves the subject beyond where it began," this article differentiates between the "others" encountered by the subject in that learning process in terms of Aristotle's distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. In the former, the "other" is experienced as an object to be formed in a process of production or creation, whereas in the latter, it is another subject in an intersubjective interaction. The article then explores the ways in which technology in general and photography in particular mediate experiences in each case. After examining the alternative modes of *poiesis* that can be called domination and disclosure, as well as the implications of treating events rather than objects as the origins of photographic images, the article concludes with an investigation of the communicative functions of the new "social photo" enabled by the internet and social media.

KEYWORDS experience, *poiesis*, *praxis*, photography, social photo, *sousveillance, Erfahrung, Erlebnis*

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There is no easy way, as I discovered when writing *Songs of Experience*, to sort through the welter of denotations and connotations that have accrued to the numinous term "experience" over its long history, and then settle on a fixed meaning. When one tries to take into account the approximate cognates of "experience" in other languages—in the book, I pay attention only to a few major European examples—this lesson becomes still more obvious. Rather therefore than coercively subsuming all usages under an arbitrarily chosen umbrella definition, it would be more prudent to acknowledge that what keeps them more or less together is what Wittgenstein would have called their "family resemblances." Although their meanings often overlap or supplement each other, none covers all of the others.

Take, for example, what is normally understood to be the Chinese equivalent of the English noun "experience," *jingyan* (經驗). Although myself unable to unpack its semantic subtleties, I have been able to turn to a helpful essay by Ye Shu-Xian, who teaches Chinese literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. There is, Ye tells us, a dispute in the scholarship about the word's etymology. Some scholars call *jingyan* a modern loan word originally created by Japanese scholars who combined two Chinese ideograms to stand for the German *Erfahrung* understood in the terms of Kantian epistemology. *Jing* originally referred to a warp, the frame over and under which threads or the woof are woven, which suggests order, rule, and canonical wisdom. *Yan* means testing, which is also present in the link between experience and experiment made explicitly in certain Western languages like French and Italian. But others have claimed instead that *jingyan* can be traced as far back as the fourth century, when it could either mean "an individual, particular *event* occurring in a particular situation" or "testing" (Ye 79). Whichever etymology is more persuasive, when it comes to venturing a contemporary meaning, Ye offers the following definition: *jingyan*, he tells us, is "an event, which cannot repeat itself." Although this definition does not perfectly map on to all of the uses of the word in the Western languages I have consulted, we will find it useful to recall when we turn to the main focus of this paper, which is on photography.

But before we move in that direction, let me pause to offer what my research in *Songs of Experience* suggested is a more capacious definition that will have particular resonance for the question of technology in general. Although it does not cover all possible usages, it will help us to conceptualize the impact technological innovations can have on the ways in which humans live our lives. Surveying a wide range of meanings in many different contexts reveals that "experience" most frequently "involves at least a potential learning process produced by an encounter with something new, an obstacle or challenge that moves the subject beyond where it began" (Jay, *Songs* 403). It thus reflects a "willingness to open the most seemingly

integrated and self-contained subject to the outside, thus allowing the perilous, but potentially rewarding journey to begin" (Jay, *Songs* 408). Here the linguistic resonances of the Latin *periculum* or "danger" in the root of "experience" and *Fahrt* or "journey" in the German *Erfahrung* get us in touch with the word's implication of risking an encounter with otherness that involves leaving behind the fortress of a settled, closed, boundaried self, in order to learn by venturing beyond its limits. Here the link between "experience" and "experiment" or "testing," which is also indicated by the *yan* in *jingyan*, is evident.

Adopting this capacious definition of "experience" will, I think, allow us to explore its relationship to technology in productive ways. To begin to do so, however, we must first address a question about the nature of the alterity, the otherness, encountered by the subject outside of itself in the potential learning process enabled by an experience. Do all "outsides" of the subject, we have to ask, contain comparable "others"? Although English does not make the distinction, in French, there is a helpful distinction between two words for the "other" that clarifies two different possibilities; they are *l'autre* and *l'autrui*. Whereas the former signifies an objective "other" that is opposed to a subject, as posited for example in the Cartesian dualist philosophy of mind and matter, the latter means an "other" who is him- or herself also a subject. That is, whereas the first involves a subject's encounter with a material world of objects, the second indicates an intersubjective encounter with another person or other persons, another or other consciousnesses. The learning process that is "experience," in the sense we have posited, may thus be very different when it involves one "other" as opposed to the other "other," when it encounters, in other words, an *autrui* rather than an *autre*. Or to put it slightly differently, when the "alter" of the "ego" is itself another "ego."

The types of experiences each entails can be clarified still further if, with my apologies for too much terminological ground-clearing, we introduce yet another conceptual dichotomy, which goes as far back as Aristotle and has found modern resonance in the work of theorists like Giorgio Agamben: that between *poiesis* and *praxis*.[1] Although by no means free of ambiguities,[2] the two terms can perhaps best be understood as follows: *poiesis* (from the Greek verb *poiein*, "to create") suggests bringing something into being, whether *ex nihilo* or through working on nature or the already existing world. Accordingly, it has been associated with verbs like "making," "fabricating," and "producing," as well as "creating," giving rise to the image of man the maker, or what in Latin is called *homo faber*. Despite its

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[1] See Agamben.
[2] For an attempt to sort them out, see Markus.

etymological affinity for the creation of aesthetic objects, such as poems, and Heidegger's interpretation of it in terms of the coming into presence and unconcealment of truth, *poiesis* has more normally been associated with material production through labor of a world of objects for human use, consumption or preservation. As such, it has been linked, at least for some, to the instrumental domination of nature.

If *poiesis* implies creating or making, *praxis* (from the Greek verb *prattein*, "to do") suggests instead acting or performing. Sometimes Aristotle argues that it is acting for its own sake, distinguishing it from the making of objects for use, consumption or accumulation. This is the connotation that informs Hannah Arendt's celebrated defense of political action as the essence of human freedom rather than the self-preserving labor of the *animal laborans* or the object-creating production of *homo faber* (see Arendt, *The Human Condition*). As such, it is enacted in a public space of intersubjectivity and never in isolation. Although at times Aristotle concedes it can include teleological activities that have an end outside themselves, for those who want to elevate action over production as the highest level of human existence, it is its non-instrumental implication that is most valuable. Whereas, we might say, the making of *poiesis* may contribute to our well-being by providing aids to our self-preservation and material prosperity, the acting of *praxis* can help us to live well by giving our lives meaning, and doing so through our interaction with others. Indeed, it may in itself exemplify living meaningfully, surpassing the maintenance of "mere life" and opening the possibility of leading a "good life," one in which we flourish rather than just survive.

Much more can be said about the distinctions between *l'autre* and *l'autrui*, on the one hand, and *poiesis* and *praxis*, on the other, but let me sum up the lessons we have learned so far from our exercises in conceptual and etymological clarification. I will then turn to their implications for our understanding of the relationship between experience and technology, and in particular that corner of it we call photography. Taking experience to mean a risky encounter with otherness, which moves the subject beyond its starting point and allows a process of learning to take place, we have seen that the "others" it encounters in that risk-taking journey outside itself can be either objects from the natural and historical worlds or other human subjects. Whereas *poiesis* entails leaving something behind from that encounter, producing a created or changed object ripe for use, consumption or accumulation, *praxis* involves actions, practices, and performances that explicitly or implicitly entail intersubjective interaction with others, who are themselves treated as subjects rather than objects. Such interactions can be understood as ends in themselves, leaving no material residue, rather than means to the production of new objects.

Through *poiesis*, we encounter the other as *l'autre*; through *praxis*, the other as *l'autrui*. Or to put it in the terms that were made familiar by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the former is based on "I-it" relations, the latter on "I-thou."

Where does "technology" map onto these processes? There is no simple answer to this question, but we get some initial help from noting the word's derivation from the Greek *techne* and its placement in Aristotle's system. Explicitly associating it with *poiesis* rather than *praxis*, Aristotle says it is "a matter of *making*, not *acting*" (1140a16; bk. 6, ch. 4). As such, it implies both skilled craftsmanship and artistic creativity. *Techne* is normally differentiated from purely cognitive activity, which the Greeks called *epistēmē*, because the latter is disinterested and non-instrumental, whereas the former seeks practical knowledge, or in other words, wants to *know how* rather than to *know what*.[3] Epistemic knowledge is often, but not always, connected to what we would call understanding and theory, both of which lack the practical implications of *techne*, the craft or art that helps form or transform the objects that are produced or created by *poiesis*. If there is a comparable term for *praxis*, it seems to have been *phronesis*, which is a kind of practical wisdom, the wisdom that informs good judgment. It is perhaps symptomatic of the relative importance given in our culture to practice understood in terms of means-ends rationality over practice understood in terms of wise judgment, that the recently invented word "technology"—its popularity if not coinage can be traced to the nineteenth century—is not matched by a comparable "ology" of *phronesis*.

Be that as it may, the question that needs to be asked is the following: How does our rapid and selective journey through various languages, ancient and modern, clarify our understanding of the relationship between experience and technology? If we stick with the capacious definition of experience as "a potential learning process produced by an encounter with something new, an obstacle or challenge that moves the subject beyond where it began," the outlines of an answer should begin to emerge. Technology, broadly speaking, has been an essential medium in the on-going human encounter with the world, as we respond to obstacles and challenges by generating exo-somatic solutions, prosthetic extensions of our bodies, which extend and enhance our innate powers and compensate for our vulnerabilities in an often hostile environment. We have come to distrust attempts to place different cultures on an allegedly progressive scale in which some are judged "advanced" and others "backward," but when it comes to technology, there is general consensus

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[3] For a discussion of their differences and overlapping usages among other Greek philosophers, see the article on "Episteme and Techne" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

that a species-wide learning process, a kind of collective experience, has in fact occurred. The easy transferability of most technological innovations across cultures reinforces that conclusion.

If, however, we distinguish between the experience of *poiesis* as an encounter with an objective other (the French *l'autre*) and the experience of *praxis* as an encounter with other subjects (the French *l'autrui*), a more differentiated picture emerges. Aristotle's placement of *techne* as a mode of *poiesis* accords well with the commonplace assumption that it serves more in the production of new objects that *homo faber* has so skillfully and abundantly crafted since the introduction of the first primitive tools. Sometimes we use technology to relate to the objects outside ourselves as recalcitrant obstacles we need to bend to our will in the spirit of domination, at other times, as potential partners in a mutually harmonious relationship which allows the world to disclose itself to us. In certain cases, technology can even transform the human body itself into an object ripe for control, producing self-reifying experiences that undermine the sense of our being unified selves, our minds no longer coterminous with our bodies but merely inhabiting them and manipulating them from afar. It can also serve to disclose aspects of our mental unconscious and hidden corporeal processes hitherto undetected.

When it comes to the intersubjective experience of *praxis*, the impact of technology has arguably been no less powerful. Technologies that have extended, enhanced, and transformed communication have mediated our direct encounters with other subjects in a variety of ways. Perhaps the first such mediating technology, it is often conjectured, was the invention of writing, with the next great breakthrough coming with printing, both of language and images. In the contemporary world, we are, of course, overwhelmed by a myriad of new technological innovations that accelerate the speed, augment the dissemination, and even modify the linguistic basis of communication itself. Indeed, at times it may even seem that the encounter with other subjects that we have identified with the second meaning of experience is giving way to communication between or among objects in a world where intelligence is increasingly artificial and the so-called internet of things is replacing the intersubjectivity of humans. We are not, however, yet in a post-human world, so human *praxis* is still a relevant category for the understanding of the relationship between experience and technology.

Let me now narrow our focus and move to a more concrete example. Rather than continuing to offer grand generalizations of the kind that probably seem either too obvious or vulnerable to too many counter-examples, I want to explore the impact of one technology in particular on human experience in the modern world. Less than two centuries old, the mixture of rapidly changing technical innovations

and cultural practices that have been clustered under the rubric of "photography" offers an ongoing laboratory of ways in which human experience has been enriched, but also arguably impoverished, by technology.[4] The replacement of analogue with digital technologies of photographic image-making in our own day has often been credited with ushering in a radically new chapter in the history of the medium. Although continuities have also been discerned that make it hard to talk of a complete rupture, the more recent explosion of what has been called "social photography" enabled by smart phones and the internet has intensified the sense that something fundamental has changed, and with it the experience of making and viewing photographic images. One way to explain that change, to anticipate the argument I will be making in what follows, is a shift from photography understood in terms of *poiesis* to photography better understood in terms of *praxis*.

Let's begin with analogue photography as an example of *poiesis*, the world-making activity of *homo faber*. What exactly is "made" or "created" when a photograph is taken? In what sense can it be said that it dominates or discloses aspects of the objects it makes, creates or transforms? Does it actually do something to the external object that it encounters while fashioning the image that depicts it? At the most basic level, traditional analogue photographs can be said to produce images that replicate already existing objects, albeit inevitably refracted through the constantly changing means they employ to that end. That is, photographs both preserve aspects of the objects they turn into images, which leave what are often called indexical traces of their presence, and inevitably filter them in ways that distort, sometimes enhancing, sometimes diminishing, what they portray. Even when they are in color rather than black and white, they turn a three-dimensional object into a flat, two-dimensional one, change its scale, either through miniaturization or magnification, isolate it from its full context through an arbitrary frame, and perhaps most radical of all, suspend its durational flow in favor of a punctual freezing of time. For all their referential authority as indexical traces, for all their apparent claim to mimetic fidelity, photographic images are always both technologically mediated and culturally coded rather than neutral, mimetic reproductions of the world.

In many traditional accounts of the medium, the *poiesis* that makes or creates a photographic image has been interpreted as an experiential encounter with otherness that aggressively dominates the object whose trace it preserves. Cameras that "shoot" pictures, producing "snapshots," are often, in fact, analogized to guns.

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[4] It is useful to distinguish between the image itself, called "the photograph," and the larger cultural phenomenon called "photography." For a discussion of this distinction in connection with the issue of truth and lying, see Jay, "Can Photographs Lie?"

When we "capture" on film what seems to be fleeting or take a "slice" of life and eternalize it into a "frozen" moment preserved within a frame, the metaphors we use suggest a violent interruption in the ongoing movement of time and a confinement of what is inherently free (or as we say in English, an "arrest" of its temporal flow). The aggression of contemporary paparazzi who relentlessly stalk celebrity targets is thus taken to be a particularly exaggerated version of the potential in all photographic appropriations of the world. When what is photographed is a living person, the results are often likened to mortification or reification, thus affirming the anxiety of some early subjects that they were being stripped of their living personas by being turned into dead images.[5] André Bazin, the French film theorist, once even claimed that like ancient Egyptian burial practices, photographs expressed a "mummy complex" in which the dead were embalmed in an effort to prevent their decomposition (4-9).

At times, the experience of looking at a photograph, rather than just taking one, has been interpreted in similar terms. For example, Roland Barthes argued in his celebrated rumination on photography, *Camera Lucida*, that "the Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (91). It was not by chance that he distinguished between a photograph's *studium*, its publically available, culturally coded subject matter, and its *punctum*, the unexpected intrusion of an emotionally intense personal meaning, by describing the latter as a cut or a wound. Even more menacingly, the thanatological implications of photography, Barthes insistently argued, included the realization of human finitude and the inevitability of death produced by seeing a photographic image taken in the past. "Whether or not the subject is already dead," Barthes argued, "every photograph is this catastrophe" (96).

Although such implications are worth taking seriously, we should be careful before adopting too grim an analysis of the *poiesis* of this technology. The alleged photographic domination of the world, the equation of the images it makes or creates with the reification of its objects, forgets that although external objects may be reproduced as images, they remain themselves unchanged by the experience. That is, although our perception of an object may well be altered and our experience of viewing it through its photographic depiction may be transformed, the original object is itself left as before (with the occasional exception such as a delicate painting being faded by the harsh light of too many flashbulbs). Barthes's *punctum* cuts and wounds the viewer, it should be remembered, not anything prior to the viewed

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[5] Honoré de Balzac supposedly shared this fear, according to Félix Nadar (see Nadar 9).

image. Life may appear to be "sliced" and time "arrested" by the click of a camera's shutter, but they blissfully flow on anyway. The device may freeze the moment, confine objects in visual frames, and alter their size and color, but the objects blithely go on as if nothing has changed.

In other words, unlike some other technologies that work directly on raw material, penetrating, shaping, and reassembling it in ways that might well be understood as a kind of aggressive domination, the experience of photographing the world does not directly have an impact on it. The camera is not really a literal gun, after all, and a photographic safari leaves the big game it hunts still alive. Although it is arguable that photographing the world is complicit in other more direct technological interventions that draw on the information it provides, by itself, the encounter with otherness it enables is not inherently dominating. Or more precisely, we might say that photography is one of those rare technologies that allows a *poietic* experience providing a feeling of controlling or dominating the objects we encounter and turn into images, while the objects themselves are actually largely left undisturbed. If there is any validity to the argument that aggression, mortification, and reification accompany the photographic recording of the world, it concerns the subjects doing the picture-taking and picture-viewing, not the objects of their gaze. What we learn through this version of an experiential encounter with otherness can therefore be a heightened appreciation of the difference between appearance and essence or simulacrum and reality.

There is, moreover, another, more benign reading of the encounter with objective otherness that suggests experiential learning of a much less morbid or aggressive kind. It has often been noted that however controlling the photographer might be in his or her creation of an image, however intent he or she might be in imbuing the results with formal beauty or conceptual intelligibility, there is something in a photograph that inevitably exceeds those intentions. In English, we don't say "making" a photograph as often as "taking" one, which suggests a certain dependence on something that is prior to the action itself, something that thwarts full creative or productive control.[6] Especially evident in un-staged, spontaneous photos that rely on a certain amount of good luck in addition to skill in producing a striking image, an unexpected residue of objective reality that resists subjective intention can often be detected even in the most carefully constructed images. What I have called elsewhere the "magical nominalism" of photography means the

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[6] There are, to be sure, art photographers who use the technology to stage as much as possible the images they produce—for example, the Canadian Jeff Wall and German Thomas Struth. Not surprisingly, they are praised by art historians like Michael Fried, who want to elevate photography into an art form expressing the intentionality of the artist. See Fried.

stubborn resistance of the world to subsumption under already constituted categories, conceptual or formal (Jay, "Magical" 2-3). In short, photographs almost always disclose something irreducibly particular beyond the generic conventions of their culture or the intentional impositions of their creators. Rather than feeding our desire for technological power over the world, they humble our pretensions to be always in control.

To return to the idea of experience as a learning process, what photographs can therefore reveal is in excess of what is visually familiar, or to put it in the terms coined by Walter Benjamin and made famous by the American art critic Rosalind E. Krauss, they can allow us to explore our "optical unconscious."[7] "It is a different nature that speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye," Benjamin argued, "different above all in that, rather than a space permeated with human consciousness, here is one permeated with unconsciousness. . . . Photography, with its aids (slow-motion sequences, close-ups) . . . can show [us] the optical unconscious, just as it is only through psychoanalysis that [we] learn of the compulsive unconscious" (Benjamin, "Brief History" 176). Estranged by their appearance in a photograph, everyday objects of ordinary experience can reveal startling and unsettling qualities that are invisible to the unaided eye. Rather than *poiesis* as a form-giving application of skilled craftsmanship, one in which an encounter with the other results in the submission of an object to the formative intentionality of the dominating subject, it can also disclose a reality previously hidden to the photographer and viewer alike.

In addition to revealing the secrets of the natural world—the way horses gallop or the delicate pattern made by a drop of splashing water—previously occluded dimensions of the man-made world, the effects of history, can also be disclosed. Despite the often lamented capacity of photography to serve ideological purposes in what Guy Debord famously denounced as "the society of the spectacle,"[8] there are many counter-examples demonstrating its subversive potential to reveal contradictions in conventional wisdom. As the British art historian John Roberts provocatively put it, "What capitalism dislikes about the photographic document is precisely this uncontrollable volatility of the photograph, in which even images that are supposedly secure within the very heart of the system spill out to be used and reframed by others to defame and embarrass the state, particularly in a world now dominated by instant image transmission" (Roberts 10). Although it is not clear that other systems besides capitalism are or would be more tolerant of the

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[7] See Benjamin, "Brief History of Photography"; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. For further discussion, see Smith and Sliwinski, eds., *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*.

[8] For a discussion, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, ch. 7.

transgressive potential of photographs, the larger point is worth taking seriously. Here the experiential lesson learned is humbling insofar as a photograph can register the resistance of the world—understood both in natural and historical terms—to attempts to force it to conform to the will of the maker. Here technology is in the service of letting the objective "other" simply *be* rather than *be dominated*, indeed perhaps even to protest against that domination.

There is yet another way in which the experienced "other" of the photograph can be conceptualized, which brings us back to the definition of *jingyan* I cited earlier from Ye Shu-Xian: experience understood as "an event, which cannot repeat itself." Against the assumption that photographs leave indexical traces of *objects*, some commentators have argued that what they preserve are better understood as past *events*. For example, John Berger, the English culture critic and novelist, writes, "The language in which photography deals is the language of events," and the Belgian art historian Thierry de Duve adds, "with photography we have indeed the paradox of an event that hangs on the wall" (Berger 293; de Duve 109). By shifting our attention from the traces of objects to the traces of events, Berger and de Duve alert us to the complex temporality of both experience and photographs.

Although it would require a serious semantic unpacking of the concept of an "event" to do justice to this issue,[9] the definition of an experience as a unique event that defies repetition inevitably invokes Walter Benjamin's celebrated discussion of mechanical reproduction in the modern world, which concentrates on film, but also includes photography.[10] Benjamin's ruminations on the withering away of the unique aura of authenticity surrounding traditional works of art and their potentially emancipatory replacement by reproductive technologies of distraction are well known. What is perhaps less appreciated are the implications of his argument for the question we are addressing in this essay: the way technology in general, and photography in particular, has effected experience. What is at stake, we might say, is the relationship between the original event that is photographed and the enduring image that results, or more precisely the experience of viewing such images when they are treated as enduring. According to Benjamin, the nineteenth century witnessed an increasing number of innovations in which "one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps" (Benjamin, "Motifs" 176)—for example, the striking of a match or the lifting of a telephone receiver. But it was, he writes, "the 'snapping' of the photographer that had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited

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[9] For one attempt, see Jay, "Photography and the Event." For a more sustained discussion of the meaning of "the event," see Pacifici-Wagner.

[10] See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were" (Benjamin, "Motifs" 177).

If experiences are events that cannot be repeated, to cite once again Ye Shu-Xian's definition of *jingyan*, then it would seem that photographs that preserve them for posterity may somehow undermine their experiential integrity, which paradoxically means their ephemerality or, in the thanatological terms we have already encountered in Roland Barthes, reifies and mortifies them. That is, if we attribute some meaningful temporality to events, when they are frozen in a moment of time, "arrested" by the click of a camera's shutter, they are robbed of their spontaneity, duration, and vitality. But as we noted in the case of objects, what has been photographed has not actually been dominated by being turned into an image, however much we may fantasize about that effect. The experience of participating in an event and the experience of seeing a photograph of one moment in it are, after all, never the same.

Benjamin's characterization of this fixation as a "posthumous shock" has, however, a more ambiguous meaning. For according to his analysis of the degradation of experience in the modern world—in German, the replacement of *Erfahrung* or experience as a meaningful story based on developmental coherence by *Erlebnis* or experience as an isolated moment of mere intensity[11]—shock was already inherent in the initial experience recorded by the camera. That is, the cumulative learning process based on an encounter with otherness that we have identified with a robust notion of experience was already in jeopardy before the posthumous shock delivered by the camera. If this is true, then the technological re-experiencing of experience produced by photography is less the cause of mortification and reification than the means by which it is disclosed as such. Or to put it in the terms of magical nominalism, what can be unintentionally revealed by photographing events is the prior impoverishment of experience itself, at least when the term is understood as a cumulative learning process based on an encounter with otherness. The optical unconscious discloses not only objects that resist subsumption under generic concepts or intelligible categories, but also the crisis of experience understood as *Erfahrung* or meaningful narrative, the journey of discovery suggested by root word *Fahrt*, and its replacement by *Erlebnisse* in which meaningless shocks prevail.

Such conclusions are, of course, highly speculative and depend on an acceptance of Benjamin's account of the poverty of experience understood in terms of the loss of *Erfahrung*, but they provide us some help in thinking about the complexities of our technological mediation of something we can call "experience." Or more

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[11] For an account of his theory of experience, see Jay, *Songs of Experience*, ch. 8.

precisely, they give us ways to interpret some of the possible modalities of experience understood in terms of *poiesis*, in which the subject encounters an outside object in the sense of the French *l'autre* and produces or creates something as a result. They heighten our awareness of the myriad ways in which technology can both dominate the others we encounter—or in some cases give us a simulacral, post facto experience of such a domination—and allow the disclosure of something previously hidden from view in our optical unconscious. What is disclosed, to be sure, is variable, as it might be an aspect of the natural world previously invisible to the unaided eye or a detail of historical events that has escaped our attention. Or perhaps it might even leave a clue that by posthumously shocking those events through fixing them into atemporal images, as Benjamin argued, we can come to appreciate that they had perhaps already lost the narrative coherence of *Erfahrung* and were originally mere *Erlebnisse*.

Considering events as well as objects in the category of raw material fashioned by the camera into images does, however, something more. It opens the question of experience under the rubric of *praxis* as well as *poiesis*. For the category of event implies, after all, human interaction, and thus involves "others" as subjective *autrui*. Photography's impact on *praxis* and intersubjective action can be said to have begun when the very first sitters for Daguerreotype portraits subjected themselves to the camera eye and the photographer behind it. The same alternative that we noted earlier between disclosure and domination was quickly evident. When photographers later left their studios to record everyday life in the streets of modern cities or more exotic settings, they could be praised for revealing hitherto un-appreciated aspects of human experience as well as condemned for voyeuristically exploiting their subjects. The taxonomic categorization of people, for example, into racial, criminal or mentally defective "types" demonstrated the problematic potential of the new technology to organize human relations in a coercive way. Less ominous was the invention of so-called *cartes de visite*, cheaply produced small images for mass distribution, by the French photographer A. A. E. Disdéri, in the mid-nineteenth century. Giving the photographed subject control over at least the dissemination of his or her image, they democratized the effects of the new technology. And when that democratization was advanced by the availability of cheap cameras later in the century, emblematized by the American George Eastman's Kodak, the possibility of what has come to be called *sousveillance*,[12] resistant looking from below, emerged to challenge the power of surveillance,

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[12] The term was coined by Steve Mann.

disciplining observation from above. The largely passive objects of the photographer's gaze, forced to sit still by the limits of the old technology, now had the potential to leave the studio and become fully active recorders of the world around them.

It can, however, be argued that an even more radical transformation of the impact of photography on intersubjective experience has occurred in the past few years with the meteoric rise of what has been called the digital "social photo" taken on smart phones and shared on the internet. Duplicating some of the anxieties we have noted in the discourse of traditional photography, a great deal of controversy has been generated by the experiential effects of new social media, including the explosion of images on such sites as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Often the worry is that the type of experience produced by immersion in social media is that of an "episodic self" unable to generate narrative coherence and reflective depth, deprived, in other words, of authentic, coherent *Erfahrung* and incapable of integrating the intense but ephemeral moments of *Erlebnisse* into anything more enduring.[13] In this account, the "telling" of a narrative culture, already eroded by explosions of random "information" in the modern world, is replaced by the "showing" of a visual one, where distraction impedes real communication. An invidious contrast is often posited between the "real" experiences that can still happen off-line and the "virtual," "second-hand" or "simulacral" ones that occur on-line.[14] Because social images can be infinitely reproduced, perhaps even going viral and reaching millions of viewers, and can exist without being tied to a geographically specific place, it has worked to "render digital space *chaotic*," which, one critic worries, "arguably continues the modern decline of experience, and indeed further reduces it" (Lammin 193-208).

But not all commentators have been so pessimistic. The case for a more positive assessment has been perhaps most persuasively made by the British sociologist of media Nathan Jurgenson in his recent book *The Social Photo*. The transformation he discerns is not so much in the technology itself, understood as the onset of digitalization, but in the larger sense of photography as a cultural institution and not merely a technical process. The casual photos exchanged by amateurs on the internet, he argues, should be understood as more than isolated, discrete images produced by the hardware of a traditional camera, images that can be decried for atomizing experience, reifying what they capture in an atemporal moment, and stored in an archive that preserves the past like flies in amber. Social

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[13] See, for example, Simanowski, *Facebook Society*. For a critique of his argument, see D'Ambrosio and Moeller; and Simanowski's response, "On Self-Construction in Social Media."
[14] See, for example, Turkle.

photos are instead continuous with the digital software that modifies and disseminates them in the present. Self-documenting "selfies," shots of the food we are about to eat and even sexually explicit images intended for a limited audience, are best understood not as frozen *scenes* framed by impermeable borders, but as moments in flowing informational *streams*. Or more precisely, they are expressive elements in a new intersubjective process of communication, which transmits "a general alertness to experience rather than facts" (Jurgenson 15). Able to convey moods and attitudes as well as record objects or events, social photography is emblematic of a modernity that, as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman famously argued, has become increasingly "liquid" rather than solid.[15] The accelerated velocity of liquefaction revivifies what Barthes and others had lamented as the reifying and mortifying effect of viewing photographic images. Frames and boundaries no longer confine photographs, which bleed into an ongoing communicative process of intersubjective disclosure and sharing. "While the photograph has long been associated with death, as an object in which experience is entombed and calcified," Jurgenson contends, "the social photo instead emphasizes an ongoing exchange, a springboard to future action and dialogue. It is necessarily less sentimental and nostalgic" (Jurgenson 49). Rather than trying to carve a slice out of the onrush of time, arresting its movement, it embraces ephemerality and the transience of the present.

By entering the stream of our visually mediated immersion in social media, we embark on a new version of that journey of self-discovery valorized by the notion of experience as *Erfahrung*, which is enabled through an encounter with otherness (in this case, usually the other as *l'autrui*). Although the cumulative model of developmental maturation traditionally associated with this notion may be undercut by the non-teleological quality of that journey, Jurgenson argues against Benjamin and his contemporary followers, the social photo promotes instead a healthy inconsistency and spontaneity, which shows "people aren't just what they *are* but engage in a nonlinear process of continual *becoming*, rife with starts and stops and wrong turns" (Jurgenson 61). Thus the normative notion of an allegedly "authentic" self with integrity and coherence is challenged by a more fluid and even inconsistent, but not entirely random or episodic self, whose transformations over time are preserved in images that can ultimately serve as retrospective evidence of how far we have travelled. Because the subject of the photo and the photographer are often the same, moreover, the social photo has a reflective dimension that is absent when we pose passively for portraits fashioned by others. Rather than experience

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[15] See Bauman. For an assessment of Bauman's argument, see Jay, "Liquidity Crisis."

understood in the form of *Erlebnis* as unself-conscious immersion in the moment, the "selfie" experience is always both inside and outside the event it records.

In addition, Jurgenson contends, a new type of community is created by the network of exchanges across cyberspace, which is no less real than ones enabled by physical proximity: "social media provides contemporary documentary vision an expanded audience and thus an intensification of others' perception within one's own. The modern camera eye decenters the content of the image in favor of how it will circulate. Social media asks us to see the world through the lens of how other people might see it and to identify what they might like" (Jurgenson 37). Challenging the accusation that social media abet the triumph of *Erlebnisse* over *Erfahrungen*, Jurgenson argues that the sharing of experience "can succeed at storytelling rather than fail at exactitude. In this way, visual communication is like oral storytelling" (Jurgenson 17). Paradoxically, unlike its traditional versions, it is enabled by an intimacy that is produced by distance rather than proximity. Although it would be an exaggeration to say what follows is a new version of *phronesis*, the practical wisdom and good judgment that experience is often thought to provide, social media may create new opportunities for intersubjective interaction in a digital public sphere.

Against the complaint that the explosion of self-documenting photos indicates a rise in narcissistic self-absorption, Jurgenson notes that "selfies" are always intended for a network of witnesses. Exposing our vulnerability and weakening our inhibitions, they exhibit to the public not our external façade, the objective surface of our personalities, but rather a glimpse of the more private selves that we hope will be seen. Ironically, they reveal the inevitably performative quality of even our most intimate selfhood, showing that our interiority is always embedded in an intersubjective dialectic of recognition that involves both externalization and internalization. By entering the stream of our visually mediated presence in social media, we may be following a different path to self-construction from the traditional one whose loss is lamented by critics of social photography. But it is still capable of fostering experience as *Erfahrung* through an encounter with otherness.

Jurgenson, in short, provides a suggestive corrective to the simplistic critique of social photography as an intensification of what Benjamin called "the poverty of experience" in the modern world, the decline from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*.[16] But as is the case with traditional analogue photography before the digital age, there is,

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[16] Benjamin, to be sure, was always ambivalent about the changes he described, often expressing hope that the destruction of outmoded versions of *Erfahrung* by mechanically reproductive technologies would lead to new, even revolutionary possibilities. See Jay, *Songs of Experience*, ch. 8. A number of the critics of social photography, such as Lammin and Calzati, acknowledge this potential.

of course, also a potential danger in the rise of internet social photography, even if we modify the conventional understanding of the cumulative process of *Erfahrung*. For the exponential increase of social photos can also lead to their use as mere information for the data banks that states use to police populations and that corporations use to manipulate and seduce consumers.[17] As a more skeptical commentator, Stefano Calzati, has argued, social media can entrap users in "a process of commodification that quantitatively turns them into a 'datified self' (i.e., user-as-consumer) and that qualitatively produces an atrophied social experience" (210). The abuse of facial recognition systems for political control is a cautionary example of the dangerous potential in social photography. In both cases, the digital photograph no longer circulates in an expressive realm of experience understood in the sense of intersubjective *praxis*, but functions instead as an object to be dominated by other subjects seeking to control them. We are back in the realm of *poiesis*, but in this case, the objects made are humans reduced to their function as data points in an informational system. Whereas the photographer and the photographed subject may soon forget the event that brought them together as the stream of social photography rushes inexorably forward, the moment is retained for much longer in the impersonal memory of a data bank. Here the opposition between domination and disclosure, which we called alternative modes of that encounter with otherness as *l'autre* characterizing *poiesis*, is conflated. Or more precisely, disclosure is now in the service of domination rather than the revelation of nature's hidden mysteries or history's unnoticed details. What the technologies of big data disclose are either aggregate populations to be disciplined and controlled or individual consumers deprived of their privacy for the purposes of surveillance and manipulation.

It is now time to leave our hurried consideration of photography and experience behind and conclude with a few general observations about the meaning of all this for the larger question we are addressing at this conference: the interaction between technology and experience. As we have seen, "experience" is itself a contested term with no fixed meaning, but exploring some of its most frequent usages, I hope, helps us understand the potential impact of technological innovation. Taking the most useful definition of "experience" to be a learning process enabled by a subject moving out into the world, embarking on a risky journey of discovery through contact with others defined either as objects or as other subjects, we have seen that technological mediations can play different roles in that process. Understood in terms of their role in an encounter between subjects and objects in a process of

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[17] For an account of the political dangers of digital images, see Stocchetti.

productive *poiesis*, they can both abet domination, albeit often simulacral, and enable disclosure. A similar alternative can be discerned in the communication between subjects who interact under the rubric of *praxis*.

There is no *a priori* formula or body of evidence that will allow us to know in advance which alternative will prevail. One possible way to make sense of the ambiguities we have been tracing is to adopt yet another term inherited from the ancient Greeks, *pharmakon*, which refers to a medicine that can both cure and poison depending on the size of the dose. The French philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler, building on the deconstructive use of *pharmakon* introduced by Jacques Derrida, has argued that technology in general can be understood as both the source of our troubles and their remedy, according to the dose we apply.[18] There is something to be said for this approach, but I am not sure it will do justice to all of the issues raised by the ways in which experience can be effected by technology. Sensitivity to proportionality and scale alone will not suffice to diminish the dominating potential of technologies and enhance the disclosures they might provide. Moderation in most things may be better than excessive application, but it is not a cure-all for every problem.

Instead, I would suggest in conclusion, we need to be more reflective about the kinds of experiences that our technologically mediated encounters with otherness can provide, depending on the cultural and social contexts in which they are embedded. For if the complicated example of photography is in any way typical of the potential that technology has to lead to very different journeys of discovery, there is no way in advance to know which experiences they will enable and which they will curtail, let alone give us the wisdom to judge their ongoing impact. The only thing that one can say with certainty is that technology by itself, isolated from its larger cultural context, can never lead to only one kind of experience. As we have seen with the rise of social photography, many of the traditional assumptions held about the implications of a technical medium can be radically challenged when it is displaced to a new context. If Benjamin is right in claiming that traditional photography was instrumental in revealing the "optical unconscious," technology in its various cultural contexts has the ability to make manifest and activate what we might call our latent "experiential unconscious." Not only will it challenge all of the previous ways both *poiesis* and *praxis* have been pursued in human history, but as the second ideogram in the Chinese word for experience, *jingyan*, suggests, we ourselves will be tested in new and unforeseen ways with no assurances that the accumulated learning of previous generations can guide our path.

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[18] See Lemmens, "An Interview with Bernard Stiegler" cited in Calzati, "A Proposal for Survival."

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