Post, Like, Share, Submit.
Visual Control and the Digital Image (13 Theses)

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0. Instruction

Deleuze's short essay on the societies of control has, one could say, infected thought on the present. Few serious reflections on today's media society seem immune against the plausibility and evidence of Deleuze's deliberations, not least because they use the force of abstraction to draw theoretical concepts from empirical facts, allowing for an anticipation of future developments without getting lost in details. Deleuze argues that a society whose media and technologies provide an apparatus of seamless connectivity and global scope has irreversible effects on the way we perceive, think, and create order. At the same time, the naturalization of these effects progresses via retroaction – making us forget it has ever been different. With his text, Deleuze stands in the midst of this naturalization and neutralization process: This may be why it is inevitably a "postscript" to the societies of control – it takes the artificial position of the "post" in order to be able to look at one's own contemporary culture from an alienating distance, as Foucault once demanded for every description of the present (1999: 91). This "post," then, by no means signals a retrospective look at a process already completed; instead, Deleuze gives an exaggerated account of the early digitization age from an artificial retrospective standpoint, which, ironically, will also have been one "after" writing.

The following 13 theses approach the digital image as a node in that apparatus of seamless connectivity and global scope. At issue here is not an image-theoretical determination or an aesthetic reflection, however, but the process of effect and naturalization that unfolds in the mode of digital image making. In this sense, the following considerations are themselves infected and infiltrated by Deleuze.

I. Assemblage

Digital images are *assemblages* that render media-specific distinctions almost impossible, i.e., the fusion of various types of media technologies and practices can no longer be

disentangled as they coalesce quasi naturally and indistinctively.[1] Amongst the many image technologies, digital photography is paradigmatic, as here every single pixel can be modulated and the individual photo is downright forced to indiscriminately fit into generic graphical environments (Lunenfeld 2000: 59). General image editing (morphing, overlaying, filtering, blurring, retouching, cropping, rotating, mirroring, inverting, scaling, coloring, inserting), but also additions of text, further images and symbols etc. accompany digital images like a virtual fog (see Deleuze 2002) (→ *Repetition*). Digital images are integrative hybrids. They operate through quotation or imitation, as they reference existing types and universes of images (logos, artworks, brands of photography, videos, films, blog designs, newsfeeds), explicitly seize on them, use or transcode them (→ *Access*). Whether intended as collaborative or not, they spring from a gesture of appropriation: digital images are manipulable and manipulative. Unlike the analog image, therefore, they no longer present conditions accessible to the eye only (→ *Commodities*). What they are, they are nowhere but in the → *Flow*.

II. (Inversive) Accessibility

Digital images address and transform visual and cognitive perception based on their own laws of processuality and interactivity. Their intuitive reception is complemented by options of intuitive creation that require little expertise (→ *Self-Control*). While the code – their law of possibility – remains largely intransparent or is rendered invisible, the access options and ways of processing and distribution multiply. Today, virtually no app for visual content comes without editing options (filtering, retouching, cropping, etc.). The digital image is the motor and the oil of "communicative capitalism" (Fisher 2016: 57)[2]: Its incessant circulation is accompanied by a non-comparing indifference towards its concrete contents. In the universe of the digital image, surfaces are smooth and unresisting – as is their accessibility. The tactility of physical control buttons, levers and switches, instruments and tools is being replaced by the immaterial, abstract work (Hardt/Negri 2001: 292) of the eye. (→ *Commodities*)

III. Flow

The availability and supply of digital images in the flow is multi-optional and multilinear. It has no beginning and no end. The flow of images follows the example of television (see Cavell 1982). Through algorithms, the images can be assembled and organized. They can be searched, selected, and sorted. The images themselves have a hybrid temporality:

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[1] The term *assemblage* here alludes to the avant-garde practice of integrating processed, often fragmentary everyday objects into a work of art (such as collage, montage, object art). It explicitly does not figure as the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's French term *agencement*.

[2] All citations from this German-language article by Mark Fisher have been retranslated into English.

heterogeneous, potentially awkward and opposing depths of field are smoothed out on the sleek surface of the individual image into a supposedly homogenous time. This time cannot but seem artificial: It is both removed from reality and set to define it – the Instagram channels for travel, food or living come to mind. Digital images are therefore always expansive. As the boundary between virtual and real pictorial space is blurred, every digital image can become a window (see Friedberg 2006). The flow, a reference chain of windows without an outside, ravenously sews the outside into its continuum and tacitly annihilates it (→ *Space of Appearance*). This ultimately extends to the users of the flow: via their *click drive*, communicative capitalism has gained "virtual and unlimited access" (Fisher 2016: 59) to them. Accessibility, then, in light of the flow, is always an → *(Inversive) Accessibility*.

IV. Velocity

In the flow, the individual image perishes while standing in line to be revived, ready at all times. Therefore, the velocity of change constantly increases: In the timeline of the flow, nothing old under the sun exists, and all cats are gray. The algorithmic assembly of images, too, operates in accordance with this law. Perception's inner rhythm thus calls for ever shorter periods of change. The eternal rotation of posting, following, sharing, linking and forwarding conditions and accelerates the flow. Even where it appears as circular, its accelerationist mode knows how to obscure that circularity. For every signal that emerges in the → *Space of Appearance* harbors a new urgency to which the motoric automatism of clicking responds; perception then always functions as split, incomplete attention (Fisher 2016: 60).

V. Repetition

Repetition is the principle and the success factor of the individual image. The sheer fact of repetition – as mentioned: repeatability has an extremely low threshold – creates a significance that points to nothing else but repetition itself. Sharing and liking on their part are techniques in conformity with the timeline. Conversely, commenting can become resistant and delay the flow (which, its enormous memory capacities notwithstanding, tends to obstruct remembrance). In the flow, difference as repetition is kept at bay precisely through its inherent acceleration. Tools that are user-friendly and always follow the same design scheme generate image types, genres of visual communication, that have no beginning and no creation date, while as prototypes they simultaneously restore a certain cyclical temporality. They communicate nothing but communication itself. This double standardization of the icons, emojis, and memes abets globalized image traffic (→ *Commodities*).

VI. Simultaneity/Sequence

The flow is marked by a paradoxical juxtaposition of unbounded memory capacities and pressure for renewal: One image has to give way to the next one in the timeline, and in perception. Nevertheless, in individual chains of information, images come in a necessary sequence that implies processes of understanding and generates and organizes subsequent communications. Despite the ongoing succession, these chains of information must be kept present – against the flow of images, as it were. Actuality has an expiration date that puts the individual comments under pressure to prove they matter. Multilinearity and nonlinearity must always defer to the law of actuality, which, simultaneously, they also claim for themselves.

VII. Commodities

Images no longer make things appear; rather, in the flow they are themselves appearances and become the object of desire. With the digital image, the original pact between capitalism and visuality manifests itself again (see Baudelaire 1964; Benjamin 1968): The visually advertised commodity (shop window, display, ad, glossy magazine) is replaced by the image as commodity – where it is now both sensible and supersensible, no longer just an object of visibility (see Wiesing 1997), but an act of exchange. The digital image always demands a surplus. At once object and subject of appropriation, collection, accumulation, and linking, it is thus in a position to raise different types of capital (see Bourdieu 1984). The low threshold of providing and delivering digital images transforms the consumer into a new kind of prosumer. While the classical prosumers were already crucially involved in the production of the product they acquired (Ritzer 2008; Ritzer/Jurgenson 2010), the new prosumers produce a product whose utility they will never quite understand. Processuality and interactivity are accelerated by the media of digital image provision and editing. The resulting prosumer mentality is one of self-determination and individuality (see Mischke 2012: 40f), it centers on the hope that one's practice may lead to further qualifications. Yet, given the multitude of individuals and the limited space for deviation granted by the code, what emerges are mostly standard products that only seem to be individualized and tailored to personal consumption habits. Thus, desiring machines in turn generate desiring machines – in a manner that functions in perfect uniformity. In the flow, marketing, which is always potential self-marketing (➔ *Self-Control*), reaches a new level of self-fascination that has long since been coopted by communicative capitalism: Self-marketing is dissolved into acts of "communication." The way they accompany the posting, liking, sharing is as natural as the click drive is automatic. Consumption is no longer just an appendage of the images (see Böhme 2006: 348); instead, digital images are "prosumed." ➔ *Accessibility*, then, concerns not just participating in the flow, but in society as well. The other side of the

coin is the aforementioned inversion through which communicative capitalism gains access to the "dividuals" (Ott 2018: 34) as prosumers.

VIII. Self-Control

The digital image flow also fuels a new type of self-control. Taking on the form of artificially created and cultivated self-representations, self-control is not just produced, selected, and controlled through digital images; a high-frequency recursiveness also puts the individuals under great pressure to create resonance. Norm and norm alignment (see Link 1998) are so closely linked that the self-image becomes an infinite project in the realm of image processing. Not originality is paramount, but the tacit promise of subsequent benefits. Behind each sharing and expressive self there is potentially a talent whose individual "expertise" may be discovered by an invisible headhunter: The whole world, via the digital technologies, is already structured like a company (see Deleuze 1992: 6). Like the ones between public/private, art/commerce, original/copy, interior/exterior, the distinction between laymen and experts becomes increasingly porous and is replaced by access through passwords (see Deleuze 1992: 5) (→ *Dynamics of Control and Protest*). Distinctions like those between users and followers are retained only as long as they serve control (e.g., of click rates, scope, and traffic). These indices of digital technologies are transferred to the individual as a principle of self-control. This is an essentially interminable process: rankings, numbers, and ratings must always be updated. Joy and fun are constitutive for the functioning of self-control, for the acts of desire have long since been transformed into objects of desire (→ *Commodities*) (see Reckwitz 2006: 596).

IX. Space of Appearance

Images do not obey their own immanent laws but are bound to the dynamics of their framings, i.e., of the social networks and platforms into which they are seamlessly integrated. The digital image thus never comes alone, it always exists in the plural – because being digital, it is infinitely divisible. As a picture-text hybrid (in memes, or in connection with comments), its affinity to graffiti becomes transparent. However, it is not applied to a public wall or surface, but its interlinkage with other images requires a virtual screen as its space of appearance, thereby constituting a second screen (a screen^2, as it were).[3] On the screen, we process pictorial information. At the same time, the screen^2 serves as a control center for messages and banners that push into the frame of actuality. But the screen is also a center of input, the space of appearance hence also one of control: Clicking, swiping, tapping, sending are the instruments of an ambivalent control (→ *(Inversive) Accessibility*).

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[3] On the concept of the screen, see Manovich 1995.

X. Public Sphere

Digital images in connection with the → *Flow* (as technology) and the → *Space of Appearance* transform the public sphere. The public now generates itself from accessibility, responsiveness and recursivity (re-post, re-tweet, comment, share). Each communication chain through following, sharing, and commenting generates a public, which, however partial it may be (= filter bubble), perceives itself as a whole or majority.[4] The principal participation that transcends "natural boundaries" transforms the public sphere into a global sphere, it increases points of connection, which in turn are themselves exposed to a certain dynamics (→ *Dynamics of Connection*).

XI. Dynamics of Connection

These dynamics of connection pose the question of control once more: reposting, re-tweeting, and commenting are instances of communication control *par excellence*. Nothing has to stop, everything can almost simultaneously be crossed out, denied, refuted, and exposed or recoded. It is precisely this burgeoning potentiality of rejection, disclaimer, response, outdoing, and hostility, that comes with a certain unchaining. Dynamics of connection follow the logic of escalation and excess. The infinite forwarding functions, e.g., in online shopping, create desires; they continuously sew a hitherto unrecorded outside into an interior. Inside the Instagram universe, everything is translated into the matrix of purchasability and self-marketing. Ever more often, the incentives created by the pictorial universes can no longer be met where converted into demand in real space (the iconicity of, say, the lonely island, the abandoned surfer's paradise, stands in opposition to the followers' rush for it in the real world). If a product cannot – or no longer – be acquired, it has, as an image, already triggered a visual desire for saturation. Images are followed by even more images.

XII. Violability

Because they tend towards escalation and excess, the infinite dynamics of connection require harder techniques of controllability, limitation, enlightenment, and moderation. As the images in the digital flow are no counter-reality, they more than ever are exposed to different cultures and contexts of value. They thus have a strong potential for violability: hurt feelings, broken discursive rules, violated norms have become objects of strategic calculation and symbolic validity claims in the flow. This doubly affects the distinction between subject and object. The image assemblages do not always have a clear con-

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[4] On the notion of the 'filter bubble,' see Pariser 2011. On the relationship between 'partial' and 'total' public (*a* public vs. *the* public), see Warner 2005.

tent, but instead see themselves as acts (→ *Assemblage, Commodities*). The content of the image is therefore extremely prone to conflicting connections. Moreover, the subject of sharing can, at any time, become its object. A precarious moment of violability follows from these inversions or directional changes. The images in the flow are the gateway as well as the subject of an intensified communication control over the 'violability' currency. In the flow, intercultural conflicts can be extended into the global sphere (shitstorms and trolling), and their scope and effects remain ultimately unpredictable. As a result, they require ever new and increasingly complex techniques of control (→ *Dynamics of Control and Protest*).

XIII. Dynamics of Control and Protest

Deleuze's question regarding new forms of resistance against the mechanisms of control is itself precarious in light of the above theses, because "new forms of resistance against the societies of control" that would be "capable of threatening the joys of marketing" (Deleuze 1992: 7) are rare and often characterized by a destructive trait of unchained communication. The cooptation mechanisms thus follow the pattern: "Where there was protest, there must be control." A mode of protest, then, that would be able to permanently escape communicative capitalism's cooptation mechanism would have to effect the disintegration of communicative capitalism itself. Difference would have to take the place of indifference with regards to the contents in circulation. The consequences of such a departure from communicative capitalism, however, are as unpredictable as is the flow itself.

translated from German by Daniel Falb

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