Visual Culture Landscapes and Positionality: Questions while Mapping Three Oxbow Lakes into the Same River

> *Oxbow Lake - a crescent-shaped often ephemeral lake formed in the abandoned channel of a meander by the silting up of its ends after the stream has cut through the land within the meander at a narrow point.[1]*

It used to be the 1950's. Now it isn't, but we have an archival photograph of color televisions in black and white. The photo is deactivated - off - just like the TVs. It is a static object floating in space when it is viewed alone, cut off from the river of meaning of which it was once a part. Humorously the spectacular breakthroughs in color technology the image advertises are not able to be captured with the type of film used to make the photograph.

The Image of 'the Postmodern Condition'[2] – An Abundance of Cats and Screens

Below the black and white photo is a photograph of secondhand televisions in all models and shapes. More exist than people want or need because new, better screens exist.   These old TVs are living on the fringe of an obsolescence that feels current. The distance in time becomes enlarged when the images are compared, but the distance in time is also eliminated because here we are looking at both at once.[3] Two moments in non-sequential time can be viewed right now, simultaneously.   When placed together the images perform a dialogue for us. We feel there is a story being told between them.[4] We can spot opposites like on and off, old and new more easily. Secondhand TVs of poor quality and limited use are borderline trash but activated trash. The TVs are on and alive which we notice in contrast to the stoic, heavy old sets. The image is in color because it can be. Color is the default because we believe if the moment is closer looking to human perception, we can more easily enter it. The screens are lined up like frames on a contact sheet, and a film is moving inside. Each screen has a slightly different color scheme and presentation of the same event. The impulse feels to look for the screen that is the most 'authentic'. The screens are like people all trying to tell the same story, but it is somehow not

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[1] This is the Merriam-Webster definition of oxbow lake.

[2] Referencing Lyotard's (1997) book *The Postmodern Condition.*

[3] Foster (2002) describes archival art as "the will to 'connect what cannot be connected'" (21), and time is one example, in which non-linear points may be connected.

[4] According to Edwards (2008) the oral dimension is a significant aspect of photographs, and there are numerous entangled stories bound up in these images; there are the stories of the photographers, but the photographs perhaps deviate and tell their own stories. This text is me telling a new story, adding to the layers of existing stories.

the same exact story, and we realize it could never be the same exact story.   A small paper sign taped to a shelf in the top left corner says, "security cameras in use" and I wonder if they are connected to the TVs or in reference to watching for thieves who might be stealing the TVs. Maybe it's not even a film playing on the screens but a livestream of a cat in the parking lot.

Are all cameras security cameras in the sense that they are securing visual evidence for re-examination later? These images show some moments in the history of the screen are securely documented, and we can feel comforted knowing we have proof of our invented culture. At the same time, looking at the triangulation of the three images together, perhaps proof is subject to change? In fact, the trajectory of the cultural landscape feels more uncertain due to the syntax of this assemblage.[5] How are the security cameras related? The photographs could also be viewed as images taken from insecurity cameras because we couldn't know the full magnitude of what we were looking at in the isolated, 'decisive moment'.[6] As anthropologists, how can we address the uncertainty of images that is compounded by their unknown future meanings in different contexts? Continuous recontextualization of our images is one way to try to understand variations in meaning and bring invisible aspects of images to the foreground.

"The image is an act of treachery against the reality principle; it reveals that principle isn't as solid as we think." - Baudrillard, Fragments, 92.

The Gaze, The Missing Cat, and the Missing Aura

Inside this collection and outside of it, we are all watching. First there is a cat somewhere out there. Then the cat is watched by someone and flattened out and put on a screen. Then I, the photographer, probably under the view of a security camera, watched the cat on all of the screens at once. You, the reader, are in front of your computer screen watching the image of the images of the cat. Where is the reality in this chain? My perspective feels like the real one because it is current and mine, and probably you feel the same about yours. In my view, we never can see the cat in the images, only glimpses of his distorted, fragmented referent, existing in multiple screens simultaneously.   According to Walter Benjamin once we make a reproduction the *aura* of the cat is gone, so what are we looking at in the image?[7] The watchers watch the other watcher watch the other watchers watch the cat. Remember simpler times when

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[5] Barthes (1997) proposes that, like words in a sentence, images in interaction with each other have their own syntactical meaning (24).

[6] The term 'decisive moment' is coined by Cartier-Bresson in his 1952 book *The Decisive Moment*.

[7] Benjamin uses the term aura to denote a presence of the subject which is lost in reproduction (2007, 222).

one or two watchers would just watch a cat? Afterwards they might write about it and get it published in a book or journal. We couldn't see what we couldn't see in writing. Now we can bring our watched cat to show to others in multiple formats. But shouldn't we consider which aspects of the process are not reproducible? What can we still not see even while we are seeing? The *aura*, the soul, the *je ne sais quoi*? If an anthropologist goes into the field and takes a photo, what are they photographing and what are they not photographing due to the limitations of both the medium and quantum physics? If we've deconstructed all the metanarratives and the idea of objective truth, we can assume a part of what we capture is our own narrative under the pretension of telling the story of a cat.

"...yes, we think the world, but because the world thinks us! In the image we find this same reversibility: the object which thinks us, which surprises us, which makes its own way." - Baudrillard, Fragments, 90

The Hidden Screen

At the top of the assemblage a police cart is attached to a pole holding four cameras. The pole appears to rise over the city, taller than the skyscraper in the background due to the perspective. We are being watched from different angles. There is a reversal from the other images where this time the cameras are visible, but the screens are hidden. Often when we take a photo, the screens we compose it through are hidden from our subjects. There is a power dynamic to the hidden screen. We compose a private view and secure it with the potential to make it public to any number of different publics. But how does it feel when we cannot see the image but just the watcher's eye?

With the cat we couldn't see who was first watching the cat, but we felt like it was us no matter how many times over the image was removed. We were at the top of the cat-image food chain, and we ate it up without worry. In the instance of the surveillance pole, we are being hunted, captured, and consumed like the cat. The unsettling, unanswerable question is 'for what'? How much can we or should we trust the cameras fixed on us? Conversely, how much should we expect others to trust the cameras we have fixed upon them? Which cameras should be trusted, and which shouldn't? What kind of gaze is the 'right kind' for anthropology? Even those holding the camera can't be certain to what use, in what arrangement, or in what interpretation their images will be assembled later. In this idea there is at once the potential for great creativity and great peril, but it is important to be conscious of both.

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Image List

Image 1 – *Color TVs in Black and White*, *Found Photo*. Unknown Photographer. Circa 1950's. United States.

Image 2 – *Cats on TV*. Photographer: Nicole Miller. 2010. Charlotte, North Carolina, United States.

Image 3 – *The Hidden Screen*. Photographer: Max B. 2013. Albuquerque, New Mexico, United States.