

Karl J. Mendonca

# Without a Trace: Cell Phone Images and Personal Media in a Post-Cinematic Age

---

## Abstract

FotoCache (<http://kathacollage.com>) is an online repository of “recycled” images that people send me from their cell phones. I conceived of the project in 2009 when, while making a transition from an older phone to a newer one, I realized that I had over a hundred images, over half of which would never be shared, posted, backed up, or made public in any way. The website became a space where I could collect and look at what other people find less interesting, less valuable, or have forgotten within their own collections of cell-phone images. In this paper, I will introduce the project and discuss theoretical frameworks for thinking about the collection, archiving, and re-presentation (or visualization) of cell phone media in a post-cinematic age. The extreme proliferation of personal media technologies might mean that a large portion of what is produced disappears without trace.

---

In 2009, when the battery of my then two-year-old cell phone stubbornly refused to hold a charge, I succumbed to the lure of Apple and decided to purchase an iPhone. I remember going to the store, the technician helping me transfer my numbers and contact information over, and his follow up question: did I want to transfer all the images on my old phone over as well? I decided to back up the images myself, and it was during the process of selectively deleting or transferring images that I conceived the premise for FotoCache—an online repository of forgotten or unwanted images that people take with their cell phones. At the time, I did not have any clearly defined artistic goals or objectives for the project, but took it on as a generative space that would go through several iterations. I decided to use Flickr as a hosting platform and hacked together some code that would create a dynamic online gallery of user-submitted images. The submission process is exactly as it currently works on the website today: participants were given a prompt to send me an image attachment via email, after which my code would take care of

the rest. I put out a call for submissions to friends and an artist network that I am a part of, after which I stopped actively working on the site.

In early 2012, I presented FotoCache to fellow students at the University of California, Santa Cruz as part of a class titled “Representing Memory” for their feedback. I received a much-needed critique and several suggestions that I have presented as two inter-locking points. Firstly, the project needed to be better defined in terms of its audience and the mode in which it announces itself to the public; secondly, the overall design of the website and the re-presentation of the images needed to illustrate the theme of the project in some way. While I agreed with the general thrust of these recommendations, rather than attempting to improve the project from a purely logistical or design standpoint, this paper is an attempt to step back and think about FotoCache from a broader theoretical perspective. The paper is divided into three parts: In the first, I use Steven Shaviro’s proposal of the “post-cinematic” as a starting point to define a theoretical framework that places software studies in dialogue with postcolonial



studies. In the second section of the paper, I discuss questions of re-representation and strategies for troubling the ontological truth claims of data visualization, using Roland Barthes's notion of the work as "text." In the final section of the paper, I return to the question of post-colonial politics and introduce Ravi Sundaram's notion of "recycled modernity" as a possible theme that can be further developed in future iterations of the project. Inasmuch as the narrative parses out a working connection between institutionally defined categories of "theory" and "practice" within the context of a film studies program, it also traces an ongoing effort to compose an ethico-political framework for my own artistic practice.

### From the Cinematic to the Post-Cinematic

Between first launching FotoCache and the time of writing this paper, the project website has received a little over a hundred images. While this may not seem like a large number, even a cursory scan through the images reveals a heterogeneous range of themes, with, in some cases, an extremely high level of abstraction. While semiotics and content analysis are useful modes of critique that can be applied to visual media, to attempt to categorize and analyze the images on the level of

content would be futile, as the project is potentially ever expanding. My first task then is to propose a theoretical framework that will allow me to identify an aspect of the project that can be built upon and developed in future iterations. Here, film theorist Steven Shaviro's proposal of the "post-cinematic" provides an extremely useful starting point. As Shaviro notes, while cinema is generally regarded as one of the most dominant aesthetic forms of the twentieth century, it has become part of a much more complex mediasphere where newer digital and computer-based media forms exist alongside more traditional media, such as radio, television, and cinema.<sup>1</sup> Even as distinctions between these forms of media begin to blur (Is it





still television if you are watching it on a computer?), the proliferation of screens, from cell phones, to computing tablets, to electronic billboards, marks a deeper change in audience reception, consumption, and, with “social media,” even production patterns. Rather than decipher the formal aesthetics of digital images, Shaviro urges us to consider the “expressive” materiality of digital media, which does “not represent social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them.”<sup>2</sup> Or, to put it more simply, in the terms of McLuhan’s famous dictum—“the medium is the message.” With FotoCache, the submitted images reside on a server and are organized as part of a database. They can also, potentially, be used to explore what new media curator and theorist Christiane Paul describes as “the tension between the mostly linear and hierarchical structure of databases...and instructions, on the one hand, and on the other, the seemingly infinite possibilities for reproducing and reconfiguring the information contained within these structures.”<sup>3</sup>

While such an approach would help frame the project by emphasizing the materiality of software and databases, given my own background (I was born in Bombay and lived there for twenty-five years), I am also interested in thinking about how post-colonial theory can add to the discussion of new-media aesthetics. As artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña observes, in discussions of electronic media, “twenty years of post-colonial theory simply disappear.”<sup>4</sup> This is not entirely surprising because, as Fernandez points out, the two fields have had opposing goals. Postcolonial studies have been concerned primarily with European imperialism and its effects; by contrast, in the 1980s and early 1990s electronic media theory was primarily concerned with establishing the

electronic itself as a valid field of practice. Within the context of South Asia and specifically India, the relationship between postcolonial studies and software studies is theorized either from a historical and cultural perspective or with a focus on technology, with an inevitable trade-off between the two. The challenge of creating a dialogue between software or media studies and cultural studies is one of scope, theoretical frameworks, and language. If software is a new form of writing and democratic institutions are themselves a medium into which Indian society is being (re)written, how do I as a media artist account for histories and life practices that are not recognized and subject positions that do not exist, within a secular formulation of democracy? What ethico-political frameworks are available that allow me to engage with the “other”? What vocabulary should I use when writing about the intersection between software and culture? While I have no ready answers for this set of questions, I will return to the intersection of post-colonial studies and software studies in the last section of this paper.

### On Re-presentation: The Database as “Text”

Given the emerging field of database documentaries and the proliferation of information visualization in the news and mass media, I would like to highlight a set of tensions between the ontological “truth claims” of data as empirical evidence and the mode of its representation as fact. In reworking FotoCache, I want to produce a work that can become part of a conversation, rather than *illustrate* a point in the manner that filmmaker and theorist Jill Godmilow articulates with her critique of the “liberal” documentary:

We understand “our” documentary films as residing outside the dirty domain of propaganda—inhabiting instead a non-ideological, pure information space....By utilizing descriptive footage as evidential proof of social or historical situations; by substituting personal memory for historical analysis; by the use of sentiment to produce audience compassion; by avoiding analysis of the limitations of its own materials; by repressing demonstrations of how audiences are implicated in the situations

described, or propositions of how audiences could intervene in such situations—by all these things, the liberal documentary can be accepted (and enjoyed) as educational at the least, and at the most, inspirational. My question is: is that of any political use?<sup>5</sup>

In the essay, Godmilow systematically debunks the (non-)ideological “truth claim” made by certain types of documentaries that is manifested through formal cinematic techniques. By repressing both the medium and the audience’s implication in the subject matter, the “liberal” documentary announces itself as a closed text and produces a purely sentimental response that, for Godmilow, is ultimately bereft of politics. To put it in broader terms: rather than dealing with the representation of reality as a question that is constantly foregrounded and in play, the “liberal documentary” pretends that you *can* present reality using film footage as evidence. It is important to note that Godmilow is not merely critiquing the aesthetics of the film, but is diagramming a model where the authorial intent of the filmmaker is crystallized in the formal characteristics of the film and ultimately carries over to the audience as a kind of sentimentality. With FotoCache, even as I attempt to use the notion of image as data to drive a form of representation, an adequate response to Godmilow’s critique would mean to “complicate” the form by revealing the medium (in this case, the database). While documentary practice has established a set of reflexive heuristics (breaking the fourth wall, structural approaches such as scratching the surface of the film, etc.), what are the techniques available for software/new media practitioners seeking to work in the same vein?

Lev Manovich provides an interesting starting point with his proposal of “media visualization.” Given the vast quantity of images and media in collections, according to Manovich, we need new techniques that would allow us to observe “media universes.”<sup>6</sup> Graphing and similar statistically driven visualizations are inadequate as they hide the objects (in this case the images) behind the points and lines. Using *metadata*, information that is coded into the images, and a form of digital image processing conceptually similar to the automatic analysis of texts already widely used in digital humanities, Manovich proposes using software to render images

in relationship to other images and detect interesting patterns. This approach is both non-empirical and yet what Manovich calls “anti-sublime,” as it responds to “the promise of rendering the phenomena that are beyond the scale of human senses into something that is within our reach, something visible and tangible.”<sup>7</sup>

Media artist and theorist Warren Sack’s critique of Manovich asks us to step back, to consider not just “*how* data can be mapped [but] *why* one should map the textual or numerical into the visual.”<sup>8</sup> Sack makes an important distinction between artistic projects that work with information visualization from artists that render or “pretty up” scientific visualizations. In terms of interpreting the former, Sack steps away from the aesthetic political framework that Manovich uses and argues that when thinking about the larger role for artists with information visualization, one must consider how conceptual art and work by artists such as Sol LeWitt have reiterated the modes of industrial production and bureaucracy in order to engage, decode, and critique them. For Sack:

[W]hen you look at artistic projects that map out and visualize information, do not worry so much about whether they are pretty, beautiful, friendly or easy to use. Instead interrogate them by asking what sorts of governance they support or reflect: Are they democratic or bureaucratic? In short, I ask that we shift our attention away from visual aesthetics and focus, instead, on an *aesthetics of governance*... In other words, the aesthetics of information visualization concerns the Body Politic and the history of information visualization is the history of art and design created to gather together, reflect and represent the Body Politic.<sup>9</sup>

Sack effectively shifts the focus from what is being re-presented, to the “publics” that are hailed and represented by the work as a model of democracy. Here Barthes’s essay “From Work to Text” presents a framework for thinking through the model that Sack outlines. For Barthes a “Text”:

1. Is not “an object that can be computed. ... [T]he Text is experienced only in an activity of production”;<sup>10</sup>
2. Does “not stop at (good) Literature; it

## WITHOUT A TRACE

cannot be contained in hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres”;<sup>11</sup>

3. “[P]ractices the infinite deferment of the signified...the logic regulating the Text is not comprehensive (define ‘what the work means’) but metonymic”<sup>12</sup> and thus “accomplishes the very plural of meaning”;<sup>13</sup>

4. “[R]eads without the inscription of the Father...the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*...it is not that the Author may not ‘come back’ in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a ‘guest’”;<sup>14</sup>

5. Tries “to abolish...the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work, but by joining them into a single signifying practice”;<sup>15</sup>

6. And finally, “is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge master, analyst, confessor, decoder.”<sup>16</sup>

What emerges from Barthes’s propositions is not a formalist/historical/genre-based apprehension of the Text, but a positive re-statement of Godmilow’s criticisms as a political model. With the Text, the tyranny of the author is de-emphasized and replaced by the production of a collective critical subjectivity, where the act of reading becomes a form of writing. The Text is a relay for politics because its open form can fulfill the conditions of a collective enunciation: rather than re-present the truth of reality, the Text poses the *problem of reality*.

The notion of the Text is particularly pertinent to projects such as FotoCache, where the intent is less didactic than, for example, a data visualization project that looks at government expenditure on defense in a given year. By moving beyond the delimited meaning that comes with authorial intent (“objective reality” in the case of the “liberal” documentary), the Text opens up to an infinite degree of interpretation and debate that is ultimately *social*. Finding strategies to visualize the social while maintaining an “openness” of form/aesthetics, in terms of presentation, becomes the design challenge moving forward. The visualization of the images is no longer a question of arranging them to produce a kind of legibility, or a digital anthropology of media as Manovich would have us work towards, but rather to produce “publics” that will actively participate in the construction of meaning.

## Poor Images / Postcolonial Subjectivity

Before fully embracing this model as the theoretical engine for developing the project, there are two further issues that I would like to point to. The first concerns the matter of the images themselves and their relationship to the larger, expanding set to which they might “belong.” While the data-driven projects that Sack, Paul, and Manovich describe deal largely with bounded sets, the types of images that have ended up in FotoCache are constantly in excess to modes of government or democratic processes and are best encapsulated by Hito Steyerl’s term “poor images.” For Steyerl:

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates...Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism... [T]he rampant privatization of intellectual content, along with online marketing and commodification, also enable piracy and appropriation; it gives rise to the circulation of poor images.<sup>17</sup>

While Steyerl is primarily dealing with the privatization/commodification of state sponsored archives and cinema, her formulation of “poor images” also produces a missing subject position that emerges through the extra-legal modes of circulation and distribution. If the discussion has shifted focus from the politics of re-presentation (what the images mean) to the politics of the body politic (how publics are constituted by the images), what sorts of problems emerge when one does not acknowledge these extra-legal forms of circulation and renders the “public” visible without acknowledging its historical basis?

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the implications of rendering the Euro-centric construction of this “I” and its historical context transparent are clearly laid out in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak points to a commonality that First World



intellectuals, specifically Deleuze and Foucault, share with the subaltern studies group, that the oppressed “can speak and know their conditions.”<sup>18</sup> Here Deleuze might argue that the subaltern can indeed speak, in which case there is no need for criticism: critical theory becomes a series of de- and re-territorializations where the subaltern is fully capable of self-realization and representation in the political sense. This is problematic for Spivak, because while Deleuze claims a broad alliance with labor (as Foucault does with Maoism), he fails to acknowledge the international division of labor, and the resulting discourse is at best the theorist talking to “his shadow” in his own language, about the other. The subaltern cannot speak, because her subject position is not recognized by theory, hence the need for a more explicit form of criticism. Focusing on the subaltern woman and the cultural practice of Sati, Spivak goes through a step-by-step analysis where the subject position of the woman is usurped first by colonial translators and then by the law, so that the position is dislocated from the subject completely. The question of Sati is over-determined by the legal system and transformed into a question of whether it is legal/not-legal. The subaltern cannot speak, because there is no subject position for her to occupy within theory:

the West is ultimately interested in preserving itself as a subject, and the academic field is unable to relate to the other with anything other than its own paradigm. A failure to recognize the international division of labor and colonial practices leaves a blind spot, where certain subject positions remain in a subdued or over-determined state in relation to the subject position produced within the Enlightenment project. A different kind of plurality is lost when the historical context of the subject is unacknowledged. While a proper response to Spivak’s critique is well outside the scope of this paper (there is a growing body of literature dedicated exclusively to her essay), to bring the matter back to FotoCache, we are faced with a double bind of managing a project that overlaps with but is also in excess of the Enlightenment narrative of the “public.”

While I have no clear answer, post-colonial media theorist Ravi Sundaram’s proposal of “Recycling Modernity” is a starting point for possibly reframing the project. Focusing on the technoculture of Delhi, Sundaram uses the term “recycling” to describe a strategy of both survival and innovation on terms entirely outside the current debates on the structure and imagination of the net and technoculture in general. Recycled Modernity is:

## WITHOUT A TRACE

a pirate modernity, but one with no particular thought about counter-culture or its likes. It is a simple survival strategy... This is a world that is everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation. This is also a world that never makes it to the computer magazines, nor the technological discourses dominated by the cyber-elite. The old nationalists and Left view this world with fascination and horror, for it makes a muddle of simple nationalist solutions. One can call this a recycled electronic modernity.

And it is an imaginary that is suspect in the eyes of all the major ideological actors in techno-space.<sup>19</sup>

Although FotoCache is quite literally a world apart from Delhi, it is the subject position of this space that I would like to preserve within the project, where the word “recycled” becomes an epistemological framework for developing the code, interface, etc. The challenge, of course, lies exactly at this point: having arrived at a theoretical understanding of the project, it is now my task to manifest its politics in legible form.

---

**Karl J. Mendonca** is a mixed media artist whose work explores a range of themes at the intersection of postcolonial studies and software studies. His work has been shown at a number of galleries and film festivals including the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Oxford Film Festival, InLight Richmond, Stuttgart Filmwinter 2010, Jersey City Museum and Experimenta (India). He was Adjunct Faculty member at Eugene Lang where he taught hybrid courses in media theory and production. Karl has an M.A. in Film & Media Studies from The New School and is presently a Ph.D. candidate in Film & Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

### End Notes

1 Steven Shaviro, “What is the post-cinematic?,” *The Pinocchio Theory* (blog), August 11, 2011, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=992>.

2 Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2010), 10.

3 Christiane Paul, “The Database as System and Cultural Form: Anatomies of Cultural Narratives” in *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, ed. Victoria Vesna (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.

4 Quoted in Maria Fernandez, “Postcolonial Media Theory,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 58.

5 Jill Godmilow, “What’s Wrong with the Liberal Documentary?” *Peace Review* 11, no. 1 (March 1999): 91.

6 Lev Manovich, “Media Visualization: Visual Techniques for Exploring Large Media Collections” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2013), [http://softwarestudies.com/cultural\\_analytics/Manovich.Media\\_Visualization.web.2012.doc](http://softwarestudies.com/cultural_analytics/Manovich.Media_Visualization.web.2012.doc)

7 Lev Manovich, “The Anti-Sublime Ideal in Data Art,” on Lev Manovich’s website, last modified 2002, 11, [http://www.monovich.net/DOCS/data\\_art.doc](http://www.monovich.net/DOCS/data_art.doc).

8 Warren Sack, “Aesthetics of Information Visualization” in *Context Providers*, ed. Christiane Paul, Victoria Vesna, and Margot Lovejoy (Chicago: Intellect Ltd., 2011), 2, <http://danm.ucsc.edu/~wsack/Writings/wsack-infoaesthetics.pdf>.

9 *Ibid.*, 8, 14.

10 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 156, 157 (italics in original).

11 *Ibid.*, 157.

12 *Ibid.*, 158.

13 *Ibid.*, 159.

14 *Ibid.*, 161.

15 *Ibid.*, 162.

16 *Ibid.*, 164.

17 Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *eFlux* no. 10 (New York, 2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image>.

18 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269.

19 Ravi Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India” in *Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain*, ed. RAQS Media Collective and Geert Lovink (Delhi: Sarai, 2001), 95.