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Picture Research

The Work of Intermediation from Pre-Photography to Post-Digitization

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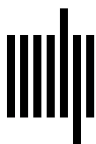

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Conclusions and Implications

Every week, an email drops into my inbox with the offer of a "free stock image," available for download if I log onto Shutterstock.com. This is an online platform for buying and selling a diverse range of "content," and at the end of the year 2021 it boasted "more than 400 million images" available for download through its website.[1] In addition to stock and editorial pictures, sourced from both amateurs and a range of established news agencies, it carries videos and music. It can also furnish a host of design templates for customers to use when publishing pictures, videos, and music on other web-based platforms, whether these have been licensed from Shutterstock or not. "One library, millions of ways to tell your story," is how it pitches itself to customers.[2] "Share your work and start earning," it promises potential contributors, who are invited to "join Shutterstock's global community of contributors and earn money doing what you love."[3]

Welcome to the latest incarnation of the picture library as a "lean platform," an Uber or Airbnb of the pictorial economy, which owns no property and employs no staff, except the intellectual property of the software and data analytics that make up the platform itself, and the staff needed to run the extractive operation of percentage collection and data analysis.[4] Welcome also to the creative gig economy, based entirely on the mutually supportive fallacies that doing what you love is not really work at all and that being paid per piece or task is the bright future of work under capitalism, rather than a hideous throwback to its past.[5] Just as Uber, Airbnb, and Deliveroo encourage us to think of driving, dwelling, and cycling—things we do anyway—as potentially monetizable services, so Shutterstock and other "microstock" platforms lead us to see

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the smartphone photos that attract likes on our social media accounts as potential assets to rent out, rather than share for free.[6]

Shutterstock sends me these emails not because I used to be a picture researcher but because, in many ways, I still am. In fact, as I observed in the introduction to this book, we are all picture researchers now, whether we like it or not. Over the past few years, the standard templates and formats that many of us use to produce working documents and semi-official publications of various kinds have increasingly begun to include or invite some kind of default illustration. Now, my presentations and publications tend to include pictures anyway, because as a scholar and teacher of visual culture what I have to say is usually directly related to or occasioned by some sort of image. Yet more and more I find myself also feeling obliged to "liven up," or emphasize by visual means, information that is purely textual, such as the title of a lecture, a key quote from a work of theory, or the submission date for an essay. Somehow, all this basic information appears to need accompaniment by a photograph, or what the stock industry calls a "vector" (a computer-generated drawing) in order to merit the requisite attention.

I use pictures to ease my navigation of the online teaching space, too: when running three different courses on the same online learning platform with the same user-unfriendly interface, it helps no end to have a banner at the top with an immediately recognizable visualization of each course topic. In order to comply with standards of intellectual property rights within my institution, however, I must fill these spaces either with pictures to which I personally own the copyright, pictures in the public domain, or pictures that have been duly licensed from another source. So if I am not prepared to be my own stock photographer, I have to be my own picture researcher—on top of the teacher and researcher that I am already employed by the university to be, full time. Hence my signing up for a limited-period subscription to Shutterstock's services a few years ago, providing them in the process with my email address, and thus the means by which to provoke me, every week, with their disingenuous offer of a supposedly free picture. For as readers of this book will have gathered by now, there really can be no such thing.

The successive chapters of this book have detailed the varied work of intermediation that over decades of reproducing, archiving, captioning,

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cataloging, copying, searching, and re-searching has built the aggregated collections of visual data and textual metadata that, by the early 2000s, could be rendered into computable information through the technical processes of digitization. The legacies of this work are still embedded in the online picture repositories and search engines that define the post-digitized pictorial economy of today. We encounter them explicitly, as visual metaphors like the gridded display of thumbnail image search results, which emulates the layout of a 35-mm slide sheet, and as textual metadata in the form of captions or credits, identifying the provenance of pictures from long-defunct publications or news agencies. We also encounter the legacies of picture research and librarianship implicitly, as the product of generations of appraisal. The digitized resources we consult today are, in the first instance, the sum of judgments made about what to capture and preserve by photographic means and, in the second instance, about which photographic reproductions to extract for recapture and transmission as digital surrogates. Even though most of the content we see online today is born-digital, rather than dumped from an analog source (to paraphrase a quote from Bill Gates cited in chapter 3), the post-digital and post-digitized pictorial economy of the 2020s still relies on the market-making mechanisms of intermediation, which this book has traced back to the pre-photographic trade in paper-based visual ephemera that flourished in the 1830s.

The figure of *The Connoisseur* (figure 1.1)—a woman made out of pictures—that we first encountered in chapter 1 can be reinvoked here as a visual summary of the examples discussed throughout this book, and a metapicture of the key issues raised in each chapter. In all the versions of *The Connoisseur* currently circulating online, the lithographic print that was first produced through the joint efforts of Spratt, Madeley, and Tilt, working at the cutting edge of imaging technologies of their day, appears remediated on the screen by the sedimented layers of nearly two more centuries of technological development, human ingenuity, and physical labor. As such, it embodies what Cubitt calls "the dead still present in the automata of technology."[7] It does this neither more nor less than any other lithograph dating from the same period that has been digitized and transmitted through the same online networks. What distinguishes *The Connoisseur* from other prints, however—even ones from the same series,

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like *The Conchologist* or *The Entomologist*—is that it also helps us visualize the complex relations among labor, skill, and technology, in both its own time, the 1830s, and its future, which is our past and present.

In its original historical context, discussed in chapter 1, this lithographic print of a contemporary caricature illustrated the democratized access to art enabled through the constellation of Enlightenment ideas and industrial reproduction technologies in the early 1800s. It also embodied the distributed authorship of pre-photographic mass-produced picture commodities in the early nineteenth century through its explicit recognition of drafter and printer, as well as publisher. This arrangement acknowledged and institutionalized the mutual dependency of artists and reproducers within a legal system of copyright that accorded protection of an original design only once it had been subjected to the work of intermediation performed by engraver and printer. Although the picture industry that developed in the twentieth century was technologically enabled by photography, it was made economically viable by this legal recognition of the value added by the intermediaries who orchestrated the actual encounter between pictures and their publics.

Chapter 2 detailed the ascendancy of this industry in the early 1950s, when *The Connoisseur* would have been an apposite visualization of the picture librarian "soaked" in her material, in the manner recommended by Gibbs-Smith in his account of the storage and retrieval system at the Hulton Picture Post Library. Clearly gendered as female, the character might also have been recognized as an ancestor by the women librarians surrounded by photographic prints in the Keystone files (figure 2.3), where pictures were allegedly pouring in from all over the world, seeking to be rapidly connected with audiences through the intermediary offices of the picture library's skilled and efficient staff.

The further fortunes of the lithograph in the latter half of the twentieth century would also speak to Keystone founder Bert Garai's idea, outlined in the same chapter, that the value of a picture can be enhanced by the label attached to it. This was certainly case with the copy that ended up in the files of the Mary Evans Picture Library in the 1970s, where comanager and chief caption writer Hilary Evans retitled it "The Picture Library Girl." Under that name it was adopted as a totem of the library's mainly female staff and an alter ego of Mary Evans herself, exemplified by

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the printed invitation to visit the eponymous picture library "at home" in its new premises. The character could just as well have graced the cover of Evans and Evans's coauthored *Picture Researcher's Handbook* as a visual metaphor for the diligent picture researcher who was always prepared to go out and look for pictures in person. Above all, however, it would in that context unambiguously have signaled the picture researcher's work of cultural intermediation as a practice of connoisseurship, the acquired ability to exercise independent aesthetic judgment and recognize value in pictures that others may have overlooked or rejected.

In the booming pictorial economy of the 1970s, the first edition of *The Picture Researcher's Handbook* taught a generation of researchers how to do their job by explaining the tools and knowledge needed to attain that ability. Then, in the late 1990s, the BBC television drama *Shooting the Past* demonstrated to a general audience how a picture library had worked for the best part of the twentieth century. As discussed in chapter 4, Stephen Poliakoff's scenes, set in the fictional Fallon Photo Library, were built with props from the real-life Hulton Picture Post Library, illustrating yet another way of picturing picture librarians immersed in their collection. Like *The Connoisseur*, who carries an entire picture collection on her person, Oswald in *Shooting the Past* carried the millions of images in the Fallon collection inside his head, and could entrust the spatial memory and fuzzy logic of his brain to retrieve, within seconds, the individual, material pictures from the precise, actual locations in which they were filed away. On screen, Oswald embodied the picture librarian as an "intelligent device," the intellectual operations of which information scientists in the 1990s were beginning to study and describe with a view to transforming the knowledge work of intermediation performed by humans into automated information labor that could be executed by computers. Through the setting of the picture library, *Shooting the Past* conveyed an apprehension that was felt among cultural intermediaries far beyond the picture industry.

When digitization took hold of the picture industry in the course of the 2000s, as we saw in chapter 5, online repositories of digitized pictures increasingly became the default starting point of any picture research process, and technologies of intermediation, in the form of digital platforms and automated search engines, relieved library staff from much of

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their intermediary functions. Against this background, *The Connoisseur* could be reinterpreted once again, this time as a late Georgian steampunk vision of a mechanical picture librarian: an automaton programmed for the aggregation, retrieval, and display of pictures, with its handheld lorgnette intriguingly pre-figuring the now-ubiquitous magnifying-glass icon of digital search.

Finally, in chapter 6, *The Connoisseur*'s human face and hand, peeking out from under the pile of pictures, could be read as an allegory of the bodies and minds that scaffold the pictorial cornucopia of post-digitization since the 2010s. In that chapter we encountered representations and traces of the human intermediaries that have been, and still are, performing the labor and supervising the machineries of capture, accumulation, extraction, and transmission that make digitized repositories of photographs and other pictures appear online as if by magic. This work of reintermediation amounts to a form of "digital authorship," as Löffler and Mager put it, which nevertheless goes as unacknowledged in the online interfaces of digitized collections of visual research data in the twenty-first century as did the work of hand coloring lithographs performed by women or girls in the nineteenth century.[8]

A host of similarly anonymous and therefore uncreditable digital coauthors made it possible for me to write this book. I have gathered my examples and case studies from the digital platforms and physical archives of commercial picture libraries and public museums, from the digitized and physical holdings of public libraries, from broadcast and print media, from the online circuits of the secondhand book trade, and from conversations with picture researchers and librarians. With the exception of the picture story from the Hulton Archive in chapter 5, all of the pictures and texts I have analyzed are "born-analog" items, which in one way or another have been processed by digital technologies in order to reach me. This means that I have often consulted digital scans of pictures or pages of text, sometimes in addition to, and often instead of, consulting the paper or emulsion-based original document. In other cases it means that I have got hold of an analog item or real-life person by communicating through a digital platform. This way of conducting research is now par for the course in the humanities, where digitization "has speeded up" scholarship, as the historian Emma Rothschild notes,

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by increasing the amount of time that can be spent actually consulting sources compared to that spent searching for them or gaining admittance to the archives, libraries, or museum stores that hold them.[9] In compiling a history of the work of intermediation in the picture industry, I have in other words benefited from (or perhaps I should say suffered under) the disintermediated environment that characterizes both picture research and academic research in the era of post-digitization.

It used to be that the main difference between professional picture research and scholarly research on or about pictures could be summed up in the distinction between search and research, drawn by library scholar and photo historian Estelle Jussim decades before either of them were digitized: “Unlike research, which is usually the investigation of the relationship between two or more variables, a search simply accomplishes the finding of a wanted item [and] represents a one-time need, unrelated to any scientific structure of investigation.”[10] Since the purpose of picture research is, in most cases, to discover the most suitable illustration of a given subject in a given context, it stops once the discovery has been made, and the picture has been chosen. Scholarly research, by contrast, often starts with a discovery or choice—a single picture that intrigues an art historian, for instance—and then finds its purpose in the gathering of a number of other variables, as Jussim calls them, through which to search and re-search for evidence of relationships, which in turn may lead to other discoveries requiring more gathering and searching, and so on.

Disintermediation by digitization has blurred the boundaries between search and research, between picture research and scholarship. Because there is so much available to search through (400 million images on Shutterstock alone!), at no perceptible cost to the researcher, picture researchers can end up endlessly sifting through potentially relevant stuff, unable to make a definitive decision because the algorithmic mechanisms of the database throw up ever more suggestions. And scholars can decide to stop looking and ignore other potential variables as soon as the picture they had in mind, the document they knew existed, or the citation that confirms their hypothesis turns up in the search results.

Both these behaviors are ways of coping with the digital overwhelm at human scale. They are also symptoms of the post-digitized condition that limits—or infinitely expands—search and research to the already

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digitized. Research "that is powered by patterns in the digitizable detritus of the modern world," as Putnam phrases it, will at some level also reflect the patterns of power that enabled digitization of that detritus in the first place, as well as those that regulate access to it.[11] I have accounted in this book for some of the work of intermediation that is involved in the processes of digitization, performed with the aim of producing the pleasurable illusion of disintermediated search. The pleasure and ease with which it is possible to use online resources, however, is also due to another kind of intermediation, which is no less crucial to the practical functioning not just of post-digitized research but of online searching and browsing in general.

Digitization has not done away with the need for human intermediaries in the pictorial economy, but they are frequently doing the opposite of the traditional work of intermediation in the picture industry. Where the picture researchers and librarians we have met in this book helped pictures do their job of being looked at in a visual material culture dominated by editorial media, the new intermediaries have their work cut out looking at pictures in order to stop others from having to see them. Generally known as content moderators, they work "to evaluate and adjudicate online content generated by users and decide if it can stay up or must be deleted," as Sarah T. Roberts has documented, and this work is intentionally left "imperceptible to the users of the platforms that pay for and rely upon this labor."[12] It is the labor, skill, and not least judgment of commercial content moderators that stand between us and "some of humanity's worst expressions of itself."[13] Yet they are treated as part of the infrastructure of digital social media, and their interventions are frequently attributed by users to an algorithm. You can be sure that any commercial platform that invites user-generated content from and for a general audience relies in some measure on the services of paid content moderators, even a high-end purveyor of glossy stock imagery like Shutterstock. Unlike the contributors of content to that platform, however, moderators would probably be hard pushed to say they are getting paid for doing what they love.

The intermediary work of content moderators suggests another response than my earlier provocation at the notion of pictures being "free," as in given away for nothing. As we have seen, there are any

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number of authors and coauthors who have laid down their labor in the production of both the picture that is offered and the machineries through which it is being circulated and exploited. This labor may have been "freely given," as Cubitt writes of the contemporary mass image, but it is nevertheless "purloined as forced labour in the form of machinery."[14] Even if I could be *free to* download any one of the 400 million Shutterstock images without imparting with money, however, it is the intermediary work of content moderators that ensures I can exercise that freedom while remaining *free from* exposure to offensive or hateful pictures. In the apparent free-for-all of the post-digitized pictorial economy, human intermediaries are no longer required to make pictures meet their public, but they are very much needed to keep the public safe from certain pictures. The work of intermediation is never done.

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