

Notes on Vilém Flusser's *Philosophy of Photography*: Chapter 1, the Image

Images are significant surfaces. This means that images signify, as well as make comprehensible as an abstraction, “something ‘out there’.” Images are reduced from “four dimensions of space and time” to “two surface dimensions.” (8)

Imagination is this specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time. Imagination is the precondition for producing and decoding images. “The ability to encode phenomena into two-dimensional symbols and to read these symbols.” (8)

The significance of images is on the surface. A single glance remains superficial and doesn't reconstruct the abstracted dimensions. One has to “allow one's gaze to wander over the surface feeling the way as one goes” in order to enhance and deepen the significance. The path the gaze follows is “complex” and formed by the “structure of the image” and the “observer's intentions.” (8) This is called ‘scanning’ and reveals the significance of the image. Therefore, it is a kind of synthesis between the intention manifested in the image and the intention belonging to the observer.

Images are not ‘denotative’ (unambiguous) complexes of symbols (like numbers, for example) but ‘connotative’ (ambiguous) complexes of symbols. Images provide space for interpretation. The space reconstructed by scanning is the space of mutual significance. The gaze produces specific relations between elements of the image. Scanning is thus a kind of eternal return: the gaze “can return to an element of the image it has already seen, and ‘before’ can come ‘after: the time reconstructed by scanning is an eternal recurrence of the same process.” (9)

The space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic. Within the space and time of the image, nothing is excluded; everything participates in a significant context. Moreover, this is a world where everything is repeated. The cyclical reality of the image is therefore structurally different from the linear world of history “in which nothing is repeated and in which everything has causes and will have consequences.” (9) He gives the example of a cock crowing at dawn to describe the difference: “In the historical world, sunrise is the cause of the cock's crowing; in the magical one, sunrise signifies crowing and crowing signifies sunrise.” (9)

The significance of images is magical. The magical nature of the image has to be taken into account when we want to decode them. It's wrong to look for a frozen event in images; “rather they replace events by states of things and translate them into scenes.”(9) The dialectic inherent to an image must be seen in the light of this magic, whose power lies in the superficial nature of the image.

Images are mediations between the world and human beings. We ‘ex-ist’: the world is not immediately accessible to us. Images are needed to make the world comprehensible. “But as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings.” (9-10) Although they are intended to be maps, they quickly turn into screens.

Instead of representing the world, images obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create. We cease to decode images and instead project them still

encoded into the world which (meanwhile) itself becomes like an image: “a context of scenes, of states of things.” (10) Our reality is magically restructured into a ‘global image scenario.’

This reversal of the function of the image can be called ‘idolatry.’ Flusser suggests we can see this even in the present day in the technical images which proceed to violently re-code reality. “Essentially this is a question of ‘amnesia.’” (10) We forget we created the images to orient ourselves; once we can’t decode them anymore, our lives become a function of our own images, in other words...

Imagination has turned into hallucination. Flusser believes this is a recurring process. He cites the invention of linear writing as people “trying to remember the original intention behind the images. They attempted to tear down the screens showing the image in order to clear a path into the world behind it. Their method was to tear the elements of the image (pixels) from the surface and arrange them into lines... They thus transcoded the circular time of magic into the linear time of history.” (10) This transcoding was the simultaneous origin of both historical consciousness and history.

From then on, historical consciousness is ranged against magical consciousness. This is a struggle which has not died down; Flusser cites “the stand taken against images by the Jewish prophets and the Greek philosophers (particularly Plato.)” (10-11) This struggle of writing against the image runs throughout history.

With writing, a new ability was born called ‘conceptual thinking’ which consisted of abstracting lines from surfaces, that is, *producing* and *decoding* them. Conceptual thinking is more abstract than imaginative thinking. All dimensions are abstracted from phenomena, except straight lines: thus with writing, we take “one step further back from the world.” (11)

Texts do not signify the world; they signify the images they tear up. Decoding texts just means discovering the images they signify. Texts intend to explain images, while concepts intend to make ideas comprehensible. “Texts are a metacode of images.”(11)

Texts explain images in order to explain them away, but images also illustrate texts to make them comprehensible. This explains the paradox that the more science struggles against ideologies, it absorbs ideas and becomes itself ideological; just as the more Christianity struggled against Paganism, the more it absorbed the images and itself became pagan. “Conceptual thinking admittedly analyzes magical thought in order to clear it out of the way, but magical thought creeps into conceptual thought so as to bestow significance on it.” (11-12)

Images become more and more conceptual as texts become more and more imaginative. In the course of the dialectical process, conceptual and imaginative thought mutually reinforce one another. As an example of an extreme of conceptual abstraction he suggests we consider computer images, which makes even more sense with modern advances in data compression. At the other end, it is in scientific texts that we can expect to find the greatest imagination. (12)

Behind ones back, the hierarchy of codes is overturned. Texts, originally a metacode of images, have themselves as metacode. But, just like images, writing itself is a mediation and is subject to the same internal dialectic. Writing is torn apart by internal conflict.

If it is the intention of writing to mediate between human beings and their images, it can also obscure images instead of representing them. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the insinuation of writing itself between human beings and their images. We can't decode our texts anymore, or reconstruct the signified images.

If the texts become incomprehensible as images, human beings' lives become a function of their texts. He coins the term 'textolatry' to denote a state of hallucination similar to idolatry, of 'faithfulness to the text' (in quotes in the text.) He gives two examples: Christianity again, and Marxism.

Texts are projected into the world out there, and the world is experienced, known and evaluated as a function of these texts. The example here is the scientific discourse: any idea we have of the scientific universe which is signified by these texts becomes unsound, since any ideas we form about scientific discourses have been wrongly decoded. "Anyone who tries to imagine anything, for example, using the equation of the theory of relativity, has not understood it. But as, in the end, all concepts signify ideas, the scientific, incomprehensible universe is an 'empty' universe." (12-13)

Textolatry reached a critical level in the nineteenth century. With it, argues Flusser, history came to an end. "History...is a progressive transcoding of images into concepts, a progressive disenchantment (taking the magic out of things), a progressive process of comprehension." (13) But, again, if texts become incomprehensible, there's nothing left to explain: history's over.

During the crisis of texts, technical images were invented. They were invented to make texts comprehensible once more. They place texts under a magic spell "to overcome the crisis of history." (13)

--Joe Weissman