KREŠIMIR PURGAR

PICTORIAL APPEARING

IMAGE THEORY AFTER REPRESENTATION

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From:

Kresimir Purgar
Pictorial Appearing
Image Theory After Representation

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The proliferation of digital technology has changed our visual perception and the way we interpret terms such as ›representation‹, ›immersion‹, and ›virtuality‹.

Kresimir Purgar examines some of the topics fundamental to an understanding of the contemporary culture of images. The principal thesis of this volume is that we are witnessing the transitional period of images as not-representation-anymore and not-yet-immersion. Instead of just asking what images mean, we should ask ourselves what images are, how they appear, and what they do to us.

The author proposes the comprehensive concept of »pictorial appearing« that takes into account phenomenological, semiotic, and art-historical perspectives on both old and new images.

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Introduction

Imagining a world without images: Mimesis, simulacrum and beyond

The initial task of general image theory should commence with *pure visibility*, however, not in the sense of visibility being an aesthetic experience, as defined in the early 20th century by German philosopher Konrad Fiedler in his notion of "*reine Sichtbarkeit*", but rather of visibility as materiality. General image theory should first establish the foundational ontological presumptions of each and every pictorial experience: in what way does the image exist, what enables us to see it, why and in what way do we imagine it when it is not really present, how does the image differ from reality, what does it bring into reality, and what does it take from reality? Traditional humanistic disciplines that tackled images as their theoretical objects, such as art history and semiotics – just like the more recent disciplines like cultural or feminist studies – have not taken an excessive interest in these issues. The reason for this is, simply, that they have been focusing their interest on *the meaning of what is represented* in images, interpreting the latter within a framework of their own respective disciplinary priorities. In order for the meaning of forms represented in images to be of any importance – not only for scientific study, but also for the common observers – it is necessary that all of us approach the image, ontologically speaking, in a commensurate manner: as a depiction which can, but does not have to, resemble reality. And even when it does so, to the greatest possible degree, we should know that it always differs from reality. Therefore, the premise according to which an image is an object or a thing, a visual or light configuration that was thrown into or set in the world, provides a foundation enabling images to be discussed, praised, disputed or, sometimes, destroyed.

The power of image does not consist of the image showing something for *me*, but in the fact that the image always depicts something to *each* of us, though every individual differently sees and interprets that which has been depicted. The basic issue that a general image science should solve, therefore, consists of a paradox wherein each and every individual can have a *different* opinion on the image only because, in ontological terms, we all understand the image in a *commensurate* manner – as an artifact, a produced object thrown into the world. The image cannot be a universal communication tool unless we accept that simple paradox. The ontology of pictorial experience within diverse cultures and civilizations has to go beyond art history's aesthetic imperatives and encompass cultural history, the turns within a phenomenon that Jonathan Crary referred to as "the techniques of the observer", as well as within technology in general. In opposition to the numerous examples of historical iconoclasm, when images disappeared due to a simple act of physical destruction, today images disappear in a civilized manner. The latter happens due to two reasons. Firstly, because of employing the technologically advanced processes of visualization that no longer necessitate the substantiality of paper, canvas, celluloid tape or any other physical base. Secondly, due to the obsoleteness of the notion of representation, i.e. because of what I call the *iconic simultaneity*, the possibility to get immersed in a visual experience of real events that are happening somewhere else at the same time. We shall discuss this, among other things, in the book's first chapter.

This book talks of the above-described processes that occur on the edges of pictorial experience. In this matter, the book aims at inciting a doubt, claiming that the age-old experience of the image as a *difference* from reality has now perhaps come to an end. However, the process of weakening the ontological basis of image as representation – that is, of the image as a generic notion by which we discern the mediated visual information in relation to pure, unmediated visuality, that arises only through light's impact on the eye's retina – is not a linear process, and is more than just technologically, culturally or historically determined. This process is influenced by a complex interaction between a multitude of facts. For example, the original version of iconoclasm – which was prescribed by God's Second Commandment from the Decalogue – prohibits the representation of God, since the belief was that a pictorial representation renders visible something that is invisible. Therefore, any act of rendering the latter visible would counterfeit the divine substance, which is not transferable by any visual media whatsoever. On the other hand, the iconoclastic discussions in the Byzantine period, during the 8th and 9th century, tackled a completely different issue. The writings of Constantine V and John of Damascus clearly reveal that the dispute did not revolve around the visible or invisible nature of divinity (since in Western monotheistic religions divinity is always invisible), but around the issue of what kind of visual information is transmitted by the image in the first place. In other words, the issue was whether the depiction of God in the image is God himself, or the representation of God. Therefore, this notably modern debate on the ontological nature of image could be regarded, in the words of Emmanuel Alloa, as "visual studies *avant la lettre*".

First, we shall draw attention to the fact that the early iconoclastic debates concerning images already contained the understanding of image as the *intensity,* and not as the permanent and unchangeable *essence*. In order to exist at all, the image should always unite what we wish to depict and that which we can see. Let us consider an example where we deem that pain cannot be depicted visually but can only be corporeally or spiritually sensed. Therefore, with each visual depiction, we agree to a certain extent to sensation's metaphorical transformation into the image. Accordantly, if a dogmatic doctrine does not allow even the slightest metaphorical transformation of belief into the image – i.e. if God is non-representable – then none of the models of pictorial appearing is acceptable. However, in this case, we do not speak of some specific power or weakness of image, but of the characteristic of a being that complies with the absolute prohibition of representation. Consequently, it is not some specific capacity of the image that does not provide a justification for the non-depictability of divinity, inasmuch as the capacity of divinity is *per se* a justification for its non-depictability. On the other hand, in Byzantine iconoclastic disputes, the debate was no longer led by (merely) the question of whether God can be depicted. Now the debate included discussing the sort of depictive identity that the image can assume and whether the general feature of the image, one enabling it to represent something, is acceptable in the case of the depictions of the divine. This is no longer a refutation of the absolute impossibility to depict spiritual capacity in the image. The debate is now about what constitutes this new, special *pictorial capacity* of a represented being or thing – spiritual or corporeal – and in what manner these two are present in the image, that is, how do they appear.

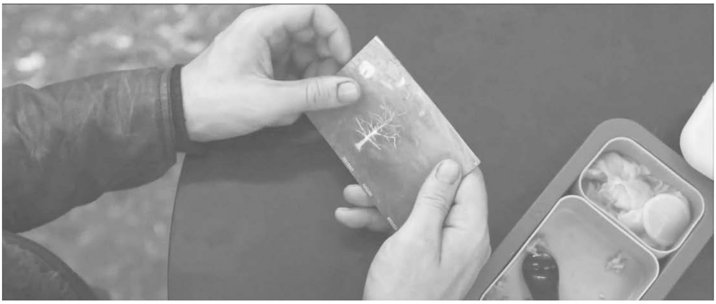
Cultural history demonstrates that images never possessed a unique ontological basis. Though Plato's and Aristotle's earliest reflections on the image and its representation were of a secular character, up to the Renaissance, it was religious convictions that most frequently defined what we see in images, what are we allowed to see and in which manner this should be depicted. When Western Christianity adopted the concept of mimesis, Western culture legitimized the image as representation, that is, as a depiction allowing the metaphoric transformation of the visible and invisible worlds into colors, shapes, and lines upon a delimited surface. However, Aristotle's principle of representation-as-semblance could not have existed without Plato's concept of simulacrum as the deceptively depictive power of the image. Plato's theory is a proof that even with the earliest visual media – drawing, painting, and sculpture – people accepted the recognition of forms and physiognomies from the real world, merely because people themselves intuitively produced "a correctional mechanism" for representation, the latter being actually a doubt of the simulacrum-like nature of the image, that is, a doubt that the image is not in itself what we see in it. In Judeo-Christian culture, God has made man in his own image, the depiction of which was prohibited. However, in the culture of antiquity, man created the ancient pantheons in his own image(s), which underwent aesthetic changes in accord with the principles of representation. Therefore, from the position of theory and the ontology of image, only the joint action of mimesis and simulacrum enables two crucial features of all images. First, images can present anything we are able to recognize in them. Second, what we recognize in images is not what the actual images are – wooden plates, walls or screens. A dialectic principle of the image and its numerous effects consist of two preset limits. Naturally, these are not the limits of the absolute non-depictability of a being, as commanded by the Decalogue, but the limits of the image's possibility to exist as a medium. One side of this peculiar pictorial limit is our ability to make a difference between the medium's material basis and its content. On the other side, there is an ability to make a difference between the media's content and the world's content. The styles and techniques of mimesis constantly direct us to the predominance of media content. However, the understanding of the simulacrum-like nature of every pictorial experience brings us back to the content of the world. This shall be discussed in more detail in the second chapter.

The notion of *pictorial appearing*, as introduced and described in this book, means that I understand the image as the intensity, and not as the essence. By doing this, I attempt to define the limits of the image in space, demarcated by the material basis of the media and the content of the world, between which lays the image's content. Hence, the objection to this hypothesis could be the following: does this not crucially predefine the essence of the image? The answer could be affirmative if the pictorial ontology truly remained within the already mentioned pictorial limits, i.e. if the difference between the image and world – all the aesthetic changes in art apart – remained undeniable and permanent as they used to be, at least in Western culture, from the Altamira cave drawings to the abstractions of high Modernism. The real and metaphorical edges of new visual media became increasingly less visible. Therefore, the firm ontology of image-as-difference, with increasing frequency, began ceding its place to the mediated visual experiences, i.e. to the contents of the world that merge with the image's contents. This happens exactly because the latter no longer possesses a visible material ground.

A new theory of digital images has to take into account that technology already – speaking in engineering and production terms – enables much more than the creators of visual contents, artists, designers of computer games and authors of interactive experiences are capable of imagining. Since virtual reality is not a content in itself – but merely the condition for the possibilities of experiences beyond the physical reality – that which is going to take place within virtual reality will soon no longer be a problem of the technique of realization, but a problem of the production of longing. It will no longer be in accord with Microsoft's slogan from the early Internet days, which said "where do you want to go today", but in line with a more dramatic phrase: "who do you want to be today". A few visually very impressive sequences from Denis Villeneuve's futurist movie *Blade Runner 2049* allow us to detect the degrees or, in accordance with terminology used here, the various *intensities* of transforming a classical two-dimensional *tableau* into three-dimensional experiences, with whose help the movie's protagonists are capable of producing hybrid corporeal forms, made up of people and holographic projections. Beneath the story – whose narration is relatively simple – in searching for the evidence that a sexual union between robot and human can produce a real human being, the movie tackles a complex relationship between people and humanoid machines. Hence, at a certain moment, we will have a presentiment that the main character – replicant K, who is played by Ryan Gosling – is himself perhaps a product of "the technology of appearing", born on the evasive border between human and robot.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, human and non-human, that is, representation and simulacrum (or "pictorial limits", as we previously termed them) are presented as the markedly unstable phenomena. To put this in more precise terms, they are presented as an interspace between two utmost limits: human and pictorial. In the traditional understanding, this rift was still clearly determinable, but in a period which Žarko Paić refers to as the *technosphere*, it acquired an entirely new dynamism. Today we have totally accepted the interspaces of gender identities. In the same manner, we will have to accept the unpredictable results of a human's transformation into a cyborg, along with the transformations of material and screen images into pure visuality. The history of arts and media, together with Mitchell's notion of the *pictorial turn*, demonstrate that each period in history, just like each change in technology, is but a continual transition of one method of depiction into another, of one visualization technology into another. The third chapter will discuss the history of epistemological turns within "the conditions of looking", which painting, photography, and movies have been confronting us with during the civilization of image.

The phenomenon which this book presents as the transitive pictorial characteristic – namely, its appearing in the various technological and ontological intensities – is told by Villeneuve through a metaphor of the changeable intensity of human insight and (un)natural body. However, even with Villeneuve, everything starts with representation: the scene set in China Town shows replicant K looking at some ordinary digital photos of a location, a place potentially hiding the proofs that could change the destiny of the human race. Later on in the movie, we witness the next form of transition, manifested as "a touch" between replicant K and his holographic girlfriend Joi, that takes place on his apartment's terrace during a rainy night. The subsequent stage is the amalgamation of holographic Joi and human Mariette, meant to enable replicant K to sense a "real" physical union, instead of a mere visual simulacrum. Following this event, K experiences disappointment, masterfully staged in a scene when Joi communicates with him through a holographic three-dimensional depiction, via classical advertisement "call to action". At this point, K realizes that he has not fallen in love with a person, not even with a mere apparition of mirage technology. Rather, he has fallen in love with the entire species, a factory line product, a product quite like himself. The strongest metaphor of appearing is disclosed in the movie's final sequences when old Rick Deckard and replicant K meet, the latter already developing an awareness of his potential human origins (Fig. 1).



Replicant K is watching digital photographies in China Town

Robotic body and holographic visualization in impossible bodily touch

Physical body and holographic projection merge into unique appearance

Replicant K is looking at the advertisement for his holographic friend Joi

The confrontation of human, half-human and non-human

1. Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049*; still images from the movie, 2017

What is it that Villeneuve's imagination truly reveals in regard to the technologies of appearing and then also, indirectly, to the unstable ontology of image after the representation? It reveals, among other things, that appearing – as the unstable state of the image – is actually a glitch in representation. Just as the robot's unstable state and his desire to be human are technological glitches. Every technical device, from the simplest to the most complex one, has its function, is programmed to do something and has to complete a given task (though these tasks do not have to produce an effect that is known in advance). Accordingly, technical devices are constructed to avoid – to the greatest possible extent – the possibility of error. If an error appears, we speak of an anomaly, of the impermissible state of a machine that does not behave according to the preset rules. In short, a machine is defective not if it does what we do not like, but if it does what it has not been programmed for. It is rather easy to find yet another demonstrative example from popular film culture. James Cameron's movie *Terminator* from 1984 begins with the premise that digital technology became so advanced that computer systems could now develop their own consciousness, becoming a threat to the survival of the human species. Though the Terminator (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) was created by the computer's undesired deviation, he is an entirely functional machine in regard to a task he has been given, until the adverse party destroys him. This cyborg-killer possesses no moral scruples since such a thing is not expected from a machine. On the other hand, replicant K suffers from a surplus of the humane, from a peculiar humanoid *glitch* which makes him neither a good machine nor a bad human. K continues to exist in a rift between radically changing society and technology. If we decide to watch *Blade Runner 2049* as an allegory of theory, the movie can suggest that the interspace between humans and machines is perhaps comparable with the interspace between the opacity and the transparency of the image. Therefore, the book's fourth chapter will introduce a typology of pictorial interstices and discuss which modalities of pictorial appearing should be included in the "image theory after representation". We will suggest that the analyses of both classic and technical images should be approached regarding their four fundamental dimensions of appearing: *temporality, transparency, mediality,* and *referentiality.*

Finally, regardless of our view of representation in images as either desirable or objectionable, images always serve a single thing: they help something to get depicted. Accordingly, if we deem that some images depict "nothing"– which is people's most common opinion on abstract works of art – even then we shall not deem these as non-images, or a car, a corkscrew or a totally unknown object whatsoever. Western civilization has taught us to approach images intuitively or culturally, to search for known objects or contents in them, or to allow images to invoke imaginary worlds within ourselves.

Following the claims put forward by Martin Seel in his book *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, even if by observing images we do not recognize a single connotation that could be linked to the visible world, the abstract artworks – precisely because they are abstract – stress their own alterity in regard to the world. Ultimately, they will always possess self-referentiality, that is, they will always be able to depict themselves. The history of abstract art has confirmed that the image cannot represent nothing. However, stylistics and the historiography of art have not been given the capacity to foresee whether the image could, in some future development, simply cease to exist as the image. In other words, could the image – just like in a case of a bionic symbiosis between the holographic Joi and the human Mariette – get transformed into the very world which it was its due to depict? This has already come true from the perspective of digitally produced images. However, the latter does not imply that images have to lose their alterity in regard to the world; unlike Jacques Rancière, I do not think that the end of images is behind us, that the only thing left to us is their "silence" about what cannot be shown and that what remains is only an illusion of reality in the pictorial metaphors of the world, as this French philosopher foresees in the opening chapter of *The Future of the Image*. In the fifth and final chapter of this book I will bring forth a different proposition: if we did not look for anything in images and if we let them show "nothing", only then would we notice what I am calling the *absolute image* – a specific kind of abstract representation that has the ability to always remind us of the existence of psychical world, for the very reason that such images will never come to represent anything else beyond themselves and will never allow us to "go" somewhere or to "be" what we are not.