Image as Vortex (Oxford, 18 Jun 16)

University of Oxford, Jun 18, 2016
Deadline: Mar 15, 2016

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Image as Vortex: An Interdisciplinary Conference on the Question of what an Image is by examining what it does.

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For more information: https://conferenceimageasvortex.wordpress.com/

THE IMAGE IS NOT an idea.
It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX,
from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.

- Ezra Pound, Vorticism, 1914.

It is hard to find a definition of what an image is. Most of those 'definitions' content themselves with saying what an image is not. It is not (merely) a symbol; it is not (merely) a form of language; it is not (merely) an idea in our mind; it is not merely a representation of anything else in this world. It is especially the latter general consensus – that an image is, ontologically, not a mimetic representation (a 'picture') of a thing or idea – that constitutes the question behind this conference. As such, the conference seeks a positive answer of what an image is (without contending ourselves merely with what an image is not), by inviting interdisciplinary contributions to this important inquiry. The conference is interested in images as a starting point rather than an end in themselves: even if an image is the end of (artistic or technological) production, the produced image means the start of the life of the image. Seen as such, the image is not a representation or an illustration, but rather a starting point of something else to come.

In order to start articulating a positive definition of the image, it might be helpful to look at Ezra Pound's definition of an image as 'vortex', i.e. a sort of node or cluster of energy that both transmits and receives – something that "rushes" through, from and into certain phenomena. This definition comes close to another, more recent, formulation given by Hans Belting, who believes that images can be perceived as "nomads who alter their modes in historical cultures and thus occupy the available media as if they were temporary stopping points" (Belting, Bild Anthropologie: Entwürfe für ein Bildwissenschaft, 2001). Or Aby Warburg's idea of the so called "Pathos Formula" (Pathosformeln), by which he meant to describe sorts of "eloquent images of crystallized interferences that visualize the processing of affectual (emotional) energies into cultural (visual) patterns" (as Hartmut Böhme has reformulated it). Moreover, new research in Psychology has also

contributed to a fuller understanding of the image, underlying that images are not mere representations, for example by showing that the image perceived can have vastly different properties than the physical stimulus (change blindness), and also by studying the difference between what we believe we perceive, and what we actually perceive (blindsight). Moreover, Neuro-imaging has led to a revolution in studies of mental imagery, studying underlying mechanisms used in producing and sustaining mental images.

This conference aims to bring together scholars from the humanities, sciences, social sciences, as well as artists, who work in, with, or about images. In order to get a more thorough view on the ontology of images, it is important to study them from various disciplines and angles. Hence, we invite paper proposals from a wide range of disciplines, including archaeologists, philosophers, art historians, artists, psychologists, neuroscientists and medical imaging scientists. Applicants are encouraged to determine which one of the conference's four panels would fit their research best (yet keeping in mind that the conference seeks interdisciplinary dialogues and expects an exchange between all four panels):

* Panel 1: The Image in/as Art.
One characteristic of the image in/as art is to question. The loci of questions vary from the notion of body, society, or, in a sort of self-reflexive bend, to art itself. One could say that by questioning, images continue to have effect - as a second life - in the ongoing lives of their beholders or recipients. Questions that arise from this include our perception of the role of circulating images: Can images produce and solidify knowledge, comparable to Latour's notion of immutable mobility? Or should one rather argue for the opposite, i.e. that the image in art tends to transfer the senses to 'another place', in that act creating something like a 'heterotopia'?

* Panel 2: The Mental Image.
The mental image can be defined as the mental representation of a stimulus, without the stimulus being physically present. In other words, a picture in our imagination or part of one's memory. Whilst mental imagery was traditionally considered within the purview solely of philosophers, cognitive psychologists have studied our ability to manipulate these mental images (e.g. Kosslyn rotation), while neuroimaging has led to a revolution in studies of mental imagery, with attempts to add it to the class of higher order functions (i.e. object memory and knowledge). This has led to the 'tractability' of mental images – studies are currently working to extract mental images from the mind, such as the IBM patent for 'Retrieving Mental Images of Faces from the Human Brain' (2015). Still, questions remain, for example: Can we compare mental images, produced from viewing the same stimulus, held by different observers? And what aspects of the image change when interpreted by different observers?

* Panel 3: The Image in Use.
Some examples of images in use are images from medical imaging and computer technology. From the digital image to the medical image: here images are produced as "information". In order for the surgeon to operate in the right place or the doctor to make the best treatment plan, s/he relies heavily on medical images to measure the organs (dis-) function, or the exact location of a

defect/injury. However, although it takes little effort to acquire images, it requires knowledge about the technique to be able to create the correct parameters and methods in order to understand the images and the artefacts that can influence the images. This means that the result - the image as such - transcends 'mere' representation, because of the human decisions that have shaped it: firstly, a determination is being made about that which influences the truthfulness of the image, which will then, secondly, have consequences on the selection of what to omit – the decisions that are made about what should be left out of the image. Therefore, even though most medical images are taken to be representations of reality one can also see them as 'presentations' of reality, for instance in the case of early prediction of disease. Questions that result from that are related to the conditions that make images usable: How do we perceive the relation between image and reality? What do we do to create 'correspondence' between the two?

* Panel 4: The Time Image.
The time image can be thought of as an image-in-motion, like a film or like an object or image that is transformed throughout history (as a motif that manifests itself in different forms through time). Yet it can also be seen as an image of/as time, like a fossil, in which a specific time has been conserved like a time capsule. Questions that arise would be: how can images become time-images – 'dialectical images' that unfold themselves like a narrative told? Or sometimes become visible in an instant, in a constellation of past-present-future?

Sample questions that could be helpful in answering the leading question of the conference are:

• How can images travel throughout history and how are they transformed by their medium?
• Can images exist without a medium in which they find a (temporary) form? Do purely psychological images, images as ideas exist?
• Do images constructed from tactile exploration, sound, or smell have a different mental form than images constructed through purely visual input?
• How can we compare mental images, produced from viewing the same stimulus, held by different observers? What aspects of image change the most when interpreted by different observers?
• What purpose can an image have from the respective disciplines within this conference, and how could that image be useful for a clearer understanding of the nature of the image for other fields?

Deadline abstracts: Please send an abstract of 250-300 words to imageasvortex@gmail.com<mailto:imageasvortex@gmail.com> by 15 March, 2016, with your preferred panel in the subject line (see below for panels). Questions can be directed to the email address above. Participants will be notified of acceptance by mid-April.

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For more information: https://conferenceimageasvortex.wordpress.com/

We can also be found on Facebook: "Conference Image as Vortex" (see links on website above).

Reference:

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