

Image and Imagination (New York, 13–15 Oct 05)

Bernd Huppauf

IMAGE AND IMAGINATION

International Conference

New York University

13-15 October 2005

“What happens when one closes the eyes? One does not stop seeing. What one now sees is not related to the eyes.” (Wittgenstein, Philos. Betr. 103)

At present, we are witnessing fundamental changes in the production and dissemination of images. The invention of photography gave rise to a debate about the elimination of subjectivity through its mechanical-chemical process. Has the history of the image now reached a point where the mechanization/imagination relationship is reversed? The large canvas, once the most important arena for representing the world has become marginal whereas imaging technologies have opened up the image to indeterminacy and the image producers' and viewers' imagination.

Digitalization and new image creating apparatus and techniques require a fundamental reconsideration of our theories of images. The face is a striking case in point. Surveillance techniques concentrate on the human face not because it is the most obvious expression of a unique individual, but only because facial recognition techniques can be read as visual data and electronically translated into numerical patterns that can be stored in an the electronic memory. The electronic image of a face can then be compared to all other images of faces fed into a flow of abstract information. Similarly, images produced through advanced medical technology are no longer based on a concept of mimetic representation. Instead of using light waves or X-Rays they are based on abstract models of cells, molecular structures and atom movements. Computer programs are designed to determine combinations of geometrical structures and colours which then appear on the screen where they look similar to conventional images. These images are constructions of a reality that is invisible not because it is too small or too fast for the anatomy of the human eye but because it is an invention resulting from abstract theories. Yet the words image and picture continue to be used in processes of visualization that no longer apply techniques of analogous representation but are the product of a combination of advanced computer technology and scientific imagination. What are the consequences for the reading of images and our

understanding of the image?

During the last decades, an intensive debate about images has emerged. A collection of essays entitled "What is an Image?" (ed. Gottfried Boehm, 1994) reconstructed the debate concerned with pictures and images in Philosophy, Psychology and Art History during the second half of the 20th Century. Ten years later, a new anthology (edited by Christa Maar and Hubert Burda, 2004) collected recent and important contributions to this international debate and was appropriately subtitled "The New Power of Images". Its title "Iconic Turn" is a reflection of the term "linguistic turn" created by Richard Rorty which for forty years has served as a common reference signifying a fundamental change in the conception of the humanities that turned away from questions concerned with consciousness and replaced them with theories of linguistic structures. This turn was significant of the definition and self-image of the humanities for the entire 20th century. It is not unreasonable to assume that the current turn towards images could lead to an equally fundamental reconstitution of the humanities and affect the foundation of all disciplines focused on the understanding of the arts, the sciences and cultural processes.

The ongoing debate is paradigmatic for a transatlantic transfer of ideas and, furthermore, an example of the dense network of German/American theoretical discourse. Its origins can be traced back to the Viennese school of history and theory of art (Alois Rigl and others) that was instrumental for the creation of academic art history in America. During the last twenty years, American empirical research radiated back and became influential in German theoretical discourse. It is certainly no coincidence that W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago) and Gottfried Boehm (Basel) suggested the term "iconic turn" and "pictorial turn" respectively in the same year (1994).

Recent research in the neural-sciences both in America and Germany has gathered rich knowledge about seeing as the physiological process of image making in the brain. This research has contributed a great deal to the understanding of mental images as fragments of the human consciousness. It has put to rest many inherited speculations about the nature of images as well as a narrow concept of images as realistic representations of reality. Yet, philosophical questions have not become obsolete. As far as the image/reality relationship is concerned, the functions of the imagination for the production of images remain an unresolved issue. It needs to be reconsidered in the light of empirical research, recent collective experiences with photographs from wars and disaster zones, and new high tech imaging processes in medicine and military information gathering.

There is no doubt that individual and collective images are to a

considerable degree the product of the human faculty to imagine and fantasize. It is the conference's contention that an understanding of the complex process of images making cannot be reduced to physiological and technological processes only. All three aspects of image making, physiological, technological, and imaginative, need to be kept in focus.

Following an international conference in 2003 on the relationship of public images and the sciences, this year's conference is devoted to the complementary aspect of Picture Theory, namely the role of the imagination in the process of making and perceiving images. We are shifting attention to the weakening of the mimetic relationship between the image and the objects represented and towards the sign character of the image that places emphasis on the imagination both in the production and decoding of images. The threefold relationship between the image, its object and relation between the two needs to be expanded by the contribution of the conscious and subconscious involvement of the subject in the creation and perception of images. The conference will focus on aspects of the imagination in the process of creating and understanding images, both mental images and pictures before our eyes, and their mutual relationship. A distinction between the eye as optical and neural organ of seeing and the gaze has proven productive in recent debates in the emerging field of 'image theory'. The relationship between the eye and the gaze will be addressed and questions concerning the constitutive role of the imagination for the gaze explored. Photography and highly sophisticated image creating technologies are experimenting with innovative techniques such as blurring, extreme large formats or miniaturization, long term exposures and digital manipulation that seem to give the coup de grâce to the ideal of a true representation and make the imagination go wild. The image seems to turn into an attack of the imagination on reality.

Speakers from the USA, Germany, Switzerland and France who have made substantial contributions to the international discourse on images will participate. Panels will focus on three aspects of the general theme:

Theories of constructing and decoding images: Philosophical and scientific questions of reciprocal processes of seeing as perceiving and producing. The making of images will be explored with particular reference to the constitutive role of subjective and collective imagination.

Images in the (electronic) media: The modern period is characterized by a dramatic increase in the production and consumption of images. A few hours of TV means the exposure to tens of thousands of images. If homo sapiens can be defined as the animal symbolicum (Cassirer) this image explosion will have fundamental consequences for the definition and experience of reality.

Rituals as Images: Images are produced and interpreted in and through

social practices and therefore need to be studied with particular reference to the constitutive role of imagined institutions. While theories of modernization were based on the assumption that rituals would inevitably be replaced by rational processes of communication and purpose oriented constructions of social cohesion, we are witnessing a return of the ritual and the emergence of a new consciousness of its performative dimension. Public rituals are not only dependent on visual representation but can themselves be perceived as images in motion.

The conference topic makes it mandatory to extend academic discourse and include contemporary art. The project of Berlin based artist Gabriele Leidloff makes an attempt to use the means of an installation built with most recent apparatus of medical technology to fuse scientific experiments and artistic ways of image construction. A discussion centered around her work will explore new interrelationships between contemporary art and theories of the imaginative.

PROGRAM

THURSDAY 13 October 2005

10:00-10:15

Introduction (Bernd Hüppauf and Christoph Wulf)

10:15-11:45

Theories of the Visual Imagination

- W.J.T. Mitchell: The Unimaginable and the Unspeakable

- Christoph Wulf: Mimesis, Image, and Imagination

11:45-12:00

Break

12:00-14:00

Contemporary Art and Image Theory

Video presentation by artist Gabriele Leidloff (Berlin)

Imaging and Imagining the Face. Image Generating Techniques and What They Do Not Generate

Round Table Discussion with Claude Ghez, Gabriele Leidloff, David Poeppel

14:15-15:15

Catered Lunch for registered conference participants at the Torch Club, 18 Waverly Place

Afternoon session at Jurow Lecture Hall, Silver Center Rm 101, 32 Waverly Place

15:30-17:30

Constructing Images 1

- Lisa Cartwright and Morana Alac: Affect, Identification, and Embodied Experience: Participant Observation in MRI and Robotics
- Britta Schinzel: The body in medical imaging between reality and construction

FRIDAY 14 October 2005

Morning sessions at Deutsches Haus at NYU, 42 Washington Mews

9:00-10:45

Constructing Images 2

- Anthony Movshon and collaborators: Images and the Neurosciences

10:45-11:00

Break

11:00 - 12:00

Keynote Address

Peter Sloterdijk: Image and Imagination

Followed by reception

Location: Jurow Lecture Hall, Silver Center Rm 101, 32 Waverly Place

Afternoon sessions at Deutsches Haus at NYU, 42 Washington Mews

14:00-15:30

Creating Images and the Visual Imagination

- Gabriele Brandstetter: Doodling, Scraping, and Painting Over. Erasure as a Narrative Technique
- Dieter Mersch: Imagination and Creativity

15:30-15:45

Break

15:45 -17:15

Rituals as Images

- Michael Taussig: Ritual Aspects of Vision as in Abu Gharaib and the Colors of the "Fascination of the Abomination"
- Rebecca Schneider: A Small History of Images as Ritual: Reenactment and the Optical Unconsciousness

17:15-17:30

Break

17:30-19:00

Imagining Moving Images

- Gertrud Koch: Moving and Removing Images: The Cinematic Construction

- Erika Fischer-Lichte: Performative Spaces and Imagined Spaces

20:00

Conference Dinner

SATURDAY 15 October 2005

Location: Deutsches Haus at NYU, 42 Washington Mews

9:00-10:30

Signs, Perception and the Senses

- Gunter Gebauer: Language games and Imagination

- Roland Posner: Synaesthesia. Physiological Diagnosis, Practice of Perception, Art Program - A Semiotic Re-analysis

10:30-10:45

Break

10:45-12:15

The Images' Fuzzy Logic

- Gottfried Boehm: The Logic of the Indeterminate

- Bernd Hüppauf: Blurring Lines and Creating Spaces for the Imagination

12:15-13:30

Catered Lunch for registered conference participants

13:30-15:00

Imaging and the Intuitive Self

- Karlheinz Kohl: Popular Images and the Conception of Self

- Ludger Schwarte: Intuition and Imagination. How to see something that isn't there

15:00-15:15

Break

15:15-16:45

Entertaining the Imagination with Images

- Ludwig Pfeiffer: Sport Rituals, Media Images, and the Imaginary

- Martin Puchner: Kierkegaard's Shadow Figures and the Ethics of Squinting

18:00

Final Discussion, chaired by Marvin Carlson

Deutsches Haus at New York University
42 Washington Mews
New York, NY 10003

Prof. Dr. Bernd Hüppauf (New York University)

Prof. Dr. Christoph Wulf

Kontakt:

sfb447@zedat.fu-berlin.de

bernd.huppau@nyu.edu

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