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ON THE IMAGE

I. The Static Image

What distinguishes the static images from the moving one is its permanence, its presence, its perpetuation of a portrayed reality. It is no coincidence that cave painting were done in inaccessible, often almost *concealed* places and that the natural environment was also incorporated into the image. Entry to these places was reserved for only a few who had been initiated into the ritual meaning of these images: he who had an overview had power.

Although in my opinion the question of the difference between the static and the moving image is essentially irrelevant – after all, both are related to reality only as images – I believe their impact is fundamentally different. The static image is not so much framed by space as positioning itself within it. The positioning of the static image in itself also generates more meanings. Although both invite the spectator to approach them, the materiality of the static image, whether two- or three-dimensional is always greater. The static image is also less narrative in nature. A route (narrative) can only be marked out with what lies within the static image. Two views of the static image here come into conflict: on the one hand the pretentious myth of the image as a synopsis of reality; on the other the world of ornament, compressed to the extreme. Only a fervent plea for the significance of the detail can deal with the first misconception. As far as the second is concerned, we have to point out the visible working of time: craquelure, yellowing, crumbling, and so on. As a consequence of this ageing process, which takes place in parallel with real life, this loss is in fact inherent in the painting from the start. Every static image depicts its own vanishing from the very time of its creation: it is always finite and precisely for that reason not reproducible. So the image can do nothing other than absorb, soak up and fade. Unlike when one has a series of images, the destruction of the static image is more complete and absolute. However paradoxical it may sound, the static image can in this way be infinitely more powerful in the memory than the moving image. Since it is impossible to regain the original image exactly, a great many meanings can be accumulated, but also misunderstandings. Although the image is 'fixed', the mental equivalent is constantly and increasingly in movement. The pictorial or sculptural articulation of depth, for example, or light or space, is so impressive because they are both static and finite. The only moving images that also have this power are transmitted images, such as those on television. These signal images are not projected. Just as in the painting, the light comes from within the device. The fact that they only become visible by grace of the light that falls on them means colours and tones are much deeper and more consistent. They are therefore more difficult to remember exactly, but easier as a specific degree of hot or cold. The static image, much more than a series of images, can still make a mood crystallise into an idea, a pattern or a master. To conclude: since that static image, as a catalyst, recurringly records its surroundings, I can say that, simultaneously to its decline, it accumulates a huge mass of information. The static image is more fictitious than the moving image. A certain form of impenetrability or even invisibility is reached, not by association, but rather by combination and distortion.

II. The Moving Image

Film is a product of the industrial revolution. Bertrand Russell once said that this revolution provided the tools to design more and more tools, and so on *ad infinitum*. Edison modelled his kinoscope on the phonograph. It is a not unimportant, and almost paradoxical, fact that the recording and reproduction of audio, the word, sound, preceded and even generated the recording and production of the moving image.

1870 saw the birth of a new science: experimental psychology. One of the problems underlying this new discipline was the phenomenon of the image that remains burnt onto the retina long after the physical cause has passed. This was in fact the first intuitive understanding of the after-image. Empirical research involving mirrors and stroboscopic instruments led scientists to the conclusion that perception takes place in the brain. Almost immediately after that, they deduced that it must be possible to create the illusion of movement by means of a particular malfunction of the human brain, or by slightly distorting images. In addition to the subjective reproduction of reality – the painting – and the individual recording of an instant – the photo – a third means of depiction now also appeared: the projection of a series of images.

J.A.F. Plateau experimented with and on himself and at the age of twenty-eight went blind as a result of looking at the sun too long. He continued to carry out research into the after-image until he was eighty-two and along the way designed the phenakistoscope, a device that analyses movement. He was the first person to work using photos and devised a way of projecting them on a screen.

Ironically enough, Edison was already deaf when he designed the phonograph, and Plateau blind when he invented the first rudimentary form of cinema.

The explosive growth of the middle-classes in the late 19th century was accompanied by a rise in the demand for portraits. Artists were unable to keep up with this huge demand: the market was taken over by amateurs equipped with a camera lucida. But this new technique was thought to reduce the subject to a rather lifeless or less animated appearance. This was in contrast to the so-called true art, which was assumed to see the subject as a motif able to evoke memories, emotions and desires. It was not the photo but art that invited the viewer to show an empathy that enabled it to come to life. Nowadays this view seems at the very least odd. Since progress was increasingly put under the label of technical innovation, this idea gradually faded away. Art was increasingly identified with mechanical reproduction. The camera appeared to confirm the behaviourist view of man as a mechanical object. Film helped undermine even more the idea of the one-off, magical and fetishistic nature attributed to the work of art. The image was for the first time observed as a mass and consumed as a reproduction. With the speed of light – the only matter that truly possesses a memory – cinema was able to spread trends and fashions, comfort the masses, and entertain and inform the illiterate. Film cleared the way for new forms of nostalgia, modern sentiments and a sophisticated form of fetishism.

Because they were so short, some of the pioneers' films were more like dreams. Is it a coincidence that Freud was working on psychoanalysis at the same time as Lumière was inventing film? The crucial concept in psychoanalysis is that of the transfer by which the patient projects his fantasies onto an impersonal screen. If on the one hand we bear the phenomenon of the after-image in mind, and on the other the way film gives shape to the illusion of movement and space, or as it were forces the viewer into a mental leap by means of a close-up, we have to conclude that film has an extremely refined feel for the laws of the psyche. The best film scripts are in fact composed using associative ideas.

The film enables space, time and causality to become effortlessly absorbed into the utterly internalised world of the memory, the imagination and emotions. In film, depth and movement do not appear to us as hard physical facts but as a mixture of facts and symbols.

III. Symbiosis

The two hypotheses formulated above concern two separate developments. When the television forced its way into the living room, the two were suddenly able to be linked: the static image and the projection of a series of images.

Once again the experience of the image and its materiality were narrowed. Instead of being projected, the television picture is transmitted. It is now no more than a signal. And every signal is like any other, since the fact of its transmission erases any notion of editing. What else is this standardised image area, by necessity reduced in size, but a rotating disk ?

Whereas we have never been so literally detached from the image, the impact on the viewer, which cannot be defined as anything but physical, has been maximised. The instant of experience has been banished and alienated from any real time-span, and the instant has become a code that is perfectly able to skim across the surface of the existing reality.

The information, reduced to its most rudimentary form, which means impulse and reaction, is virtually total; what follows is addiction. The image as such has become invisible, unknowable and anonymous, its meaning undiscoverable as a result of being fragmented into thousands of possible interpretations. The earth has shrunk in time and space into a global village, while in psychological terms the world has surged outwards countless times.

Work is done on the potential of the user at the same time as on this boundless and immediate, and equally experience-free, accessibility. The image itself become a producer. It is no longer dependent on the consumer only in terms of his turning it on or off; the user can now also make changes to the visual information. One image can be isolated from a series and stored. The image is once again reduced, this time by digitalisation, whereby it is defined within the binary system. The web brings together every sort of information, regardless of differences in meaning, in a single non-place. The possibilities seem unlimited, but so is the confusion.

Some people (mainly in the United States) see the internet as the ultimate realisation of the old dream of equality by means of new technological achievements. But there are problems too. Is it, as has been suggested, indeed no longer necessary to activate political awareness, since all the information is available anyway ? the question is: for and by whom is the information centralised ? Who keeps track of it ?

There is an urgent need for research into the tactical use of the media, where attention will be focused undiminished on the difference between the intimate media and the mass media. We do not stand apart from the image, but are in its midst. We shall ourselves have to determine (and learn to determine) when we appear or disappear. In this sense, the old aristocratic dream of immersing oneself in a morass of sensuality has mutated into the concept of the self dominated entirely by technical devices. Each individual is his own pornographer.

IV. Epilogue

Now these three developments and their mutual influence have been outlined, we should look explicitly at art. So what is art? Is art the translation of the abovementioned aristocratic idea of complete surrender to perfect pleasure and true luxury? Or is art by necessity always that same anachronistic mixture of opposites? I don't know. As an artist operating in the ever-decelerating reality of the art world, I can only observe that behind the mask of what is presented as 'image' lies a substantial loss of meaning. The question of whether photography, film, television or even the internet is art by no means offsets the question of the quality of a particular communication of meaning.

Let's be honest: the institution that is art, or that into which it has degenerated, remains conservative. It cherishes in the most improbable manner a past that appeals to the imagination and allows us to dream of our own history. Even though this institution has always been dependent on the balance of power and has never been an actual reality, but always a pure fiction or sort of superstition. To then claim that film – a technical innovation which, stimulated by American industry, has expanded into the most important form of entertainment – is art is of course problematic because it is irrelevant. Let alone that this relatively recent medium might or should lead to anything as insane as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Film naturally has a visual contribution to make, and of course cinema has a chance of survival, because, just like all other media, it can generate meaning. The danger is just that in today's art circles it is precisely these various levels that are no longer differentiated and art people settle for a literal, far too literal, interpretation. It is here, and this is what I fear, that the missed opportunity is to be found. It is plainly clear that film, television and the new media have an obvious influence on current image formation. However, a precise definition of this impact remains unforthcoming, while dwelling on the surface of 'use' and 'presentation'. The irrevocable result is a want of meaning, and utter predictability.

Translated from the Dutch by Gregory Ball