

NOTES ABOUT INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY OF IMAGES

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IMAGE
IMAGERY
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This article is composed of a succession of notes, linked by the commonality of the theme but not by a narrative consecutio, developed over the past two years on the theme of the multifaceted nature of the world of images. Some - 1 and 3 - are notes on readings on the theme, while others - 2 and 4 - are reflections on the study of images. Some of the contents have been anticipated and developed more extensively in the introductory essay to the proceedings of the IMG2017 conference - *IMAGES? International and interdisciplinary conference on image and imagination between representation, communication, education and psychology* (eds. Luigini et. al., 2017), to

which we refer for further details.

The first note is about how images strip us bare and the need for an interdisciplinary gaze. The second is about the multiplicity of images that interest the magazine. The third is about the genesis of visual culture. The fourth is about the relationship between image, imagery and imagination.

The article wishes to present, synthetically, the discreet process that leads from degree zero to the acknowledgment of the theme's complexity, to the recognition of a cultural tool that may help to explore it in greater depth, to finally assert the (plausible) solution to the initial question: how to investigate images?

1. STRIPPING BARE

Georges Didi-Huberman in his *DEVANT L'IMAGE. Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (1990/2016) states that it is important in approaching an image to create a space between our previous knowledge, categorized and characterized by different types of knowledge, and the moment in which the gaze, our gaze resulting from our experiences, poses itself on the image. Didi-Huberman talks about this cognitive moment in a recent interview:

«The appearance of an image, regardless of its “power” and efficacy, “invests” us and so “strips” us bare. [...] to be in front of the image means both to question knowledge in order to put it back on the table. We must not be afraid of no longer knowing (as the image strips us of our certainties), nor of knowing more (as we must understand the stripping itself, understand it as something greater involving the anthropological, historical or political dimension of images)» (Eco, et al. 2015, p. 56)

The intangible substance of the image is the optimal infrastructure for the imagination, understood as the construction of image-syntheses of eidos and eidolon (Cassirer, 1923/2009) which occurs mainly as the “making of imagery”, to come full circle in the triptych of terms that identify the nascent magazine.

On the other hand, the process of perception that makes the signifying significance of the image tangible is underlined by the substantial equivalence - i.e. equivalence of value - between the act of seeing and the act of imagining proposed by Merleau-Ponty (2003), detaching itself from the Cartesian statute of the distinction between Knowledge and the World. The ontological primacy of perception in Merleau-Ponty leads us to rediscover how the world, in our intent a world made of images, is indissolubly related to our body:

[...] we are in the world through our body, insofar as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remarking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural

self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 239)

Merleau-Ponty's overall vision also differs from Sartre's substantially negative vision of the imaginary (1948/2007), in which the enunciation of the illusion of immanence, on the other hand, seems significant for our purposes, in recognition of the transcendental character of images and the experience of them: in adopting Husserl's theory of intentionality, Sartre proposes a vision in which the image is not a thing but an act of conscience. Although these positions are two distinct interpretations of Husserl's phenomenology, we believe they can contribute, together with Didi-Huberman's stripping bare, to identifying the centrality of the moment in which the image interacts with our gaze.

2. MULTIPLICITY

The nature of the relationship between image, "imagery" and imagination can be profoundly fluctuating, because fluctuating – and often ambiguous - is the nature of the image, in light of the notes in the previous paragraph, due to the fluctuating nature of the gaze of those who observe and study them. So, as previously stated (Luigini, 2017), there are images that "set in images" their author's imagination (artworks or project drawings) and images that seek to discover their original intentions (cognitive drawing - survey drawing); images deeply rooted in a real space (geographical maps and images of cities) and images that act in a necessarily imagined space (virtual & augmented reality, utopian cities or Piranesi-like spaces); images that intentionally alter perceived reality (photographic manipulations) and images that derive from deception or from the alteration of perceptual patterns (anamorphic representations and disperceptive phenomena); images that build narrative processes (visual storytelling, visual journalism) and educational images, that can shape knowledge, know-how and being (didactic

iconography and iconology); images that enhance the narrative experience of the child (illustration for children) and experiential images that are a synthesis of time and space (children's drawing); images that stimulate the imagination of the observer (visual design) and interactive images that support the imagination of the planner (processing and visualisation of data on a territorial scale). Thus Art, Architecture, Visual Communication, Education, Psychology, as well as the disciplines that derive substantial possibilities for their development from the signification of images, are gathered in this common research space where different methodologies and epistemologies complement one another.

Yet, the conviction shared by much of the scientific community is that the field of study in which many of the approaches introduced so far - and many others - converge is the field of visual studies, in the different ways it is understood in different geographical-cultural areas. First of all because in visual studies the tendency is to focus the analysis on any type of image that is an integral part of a cultural process far beyond the field of art (Elkins, 2001), but also because considering images as cultural artifacts dignifies paying attention to the context in which the images themselves originate, to the original condition in which they were produced, to their original presupposition, to their author's intentions, and to the meanings and contents that have been recognized by those who have placed themselves before those images (Pinotti, Somaini, 2016, p. 38). This approach is broader and can therefore be applied more easily to the various fields of study that require a heteronomous epistemological approach for the study of images.

3. GENESIS

Pinotti and Somaini (2016) places the origins of visual culture in the work of critic Béla Balász and artist László Moholy-Nagy, both Hungarians but active in the German-speaking

area: in their reflections, based on the locutions of *visuelle Kultur*, *optische Kultur* and *Schaukultur*, it is possible to trace the description of the paradigm introduced by the use of photographic and cinematographic means, which determined a profound change in the relationship between image and reality. Moreover, the production of moving images using the *machine* that, according to director Jean Epstein, rethinks reality on the basis of its technical possibilities and its own *intelligence*, intervenes on the imagination and on memory (Pasquali, 2002).

But the invention of printing is where Béla Balázs places the start of the process of transformation from what he calls *visible spirit* to *readable spirit* (Pinotti, Somaini, 2016, p. 4), i.e. the transition from image to word that film technique then recaptured in the large-scale production and diffusion of the return to the image in the visual dimension.

With regards to the culture of vision, around the 1920s László Moholy-Nagy introduced the theme of using light to configure the material of objects in space, giving rise to new cultures and new forms of expression; the Hungarian artist trusted in the influence that cinema and photography could have on the cultural transformation of vision associated with human experience. Thus the overlapping of multiple images, curved screens and light projections, would lead to the codification of a form of visual education for individual perceptive patterns as they would be modified by the technological medium.

What light represented for Moholy-Nagy from the artistic point of view in the act of vision, was represented for Jean Epstein by cinema, by the *machine* in action that intervened in the recording of movement and the consequent restitution of dynamic images, profoundly changing the perception of reality in evolution over time. The characteristic of fluidity and variability of the image-space over time, through the cinematographic device, defined a further formal syntax, that of visual emotions; in fact, Epstein referred to visual thought, «a quick, tangible, plastic knowledge that is acquired directly

through the gaze» (Pinotti, Somaini, 2016, p. 11).

Those heroic years witnessed the development of numerous studies on the world of images, giving rise to a shift from a completely art-centric vision to a broader vision that would not mature until much later: in this sense it is also possible to consider the loss of the *aura* enunciated by Benjamin (1936/1966), as an attestation of the inevitability of the process of directing scholars' attention away from the work of art towards images that are not art. A process that would come to completion only half a century later.

4. BILD, BILDER/BILDUNG, EINBILDUNG

If what has just been described is the origin of visual culture as we consider it today, it should be stressed once again that the number of contemporary studies dealing with images is much greater. Pinotti and Somaini also outline a line of development that leads from the studies of Husserl and Fink to the above-mentioned Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, in a variegated range of approaches to phenomenological studies, as well as, later, in the field of hermeneutics, semiotics, psychology and neuroscience, or analytical theories of depiction. This list seems to represent the set of disciplinary fields that, earlier and more thoroughly than others, perhaps, have proposed a systematic reflection on the triad ontology-epistemology-methodology, more structured than in other disciplinary fields. These fields have also made the study of images a non-secondary aim: this is true in the graphic sciences, where graphic designers and architects, among others, are active, but also for pedagogues - as other scholars have amply recounted in other contributions to this volume - or for all those disciplines that in some way, in any way, are interested in what images can tell us (for example the interpretation of what is invisible through the visible in archaeology, philology, cognitive sciences, etc.), the transformation of a concept into an image (think of mathematics, from the colour version

of Euclid published by Byrne to proof-without-words, and physics, whose teaching, for example, is greatly enhanced by a metaphorisation through images) or any other mode of “writing” or “reading” an image.

This inclusive attitude involves many difficulties and some risks.

The main difficulties can be found in the transliteration of concepts and arguments from one discipline to another when they take on different meanings depending on the context - the term “representation” alone is a clear example - sometimes much deeper than simple terminological “nuances”, in the epistemological difference between disciplines that often leads to the formulation of different questions when faced with common problems, or in the lack of inherently interdisciplinary literature. Whereas the risks lie mainly in dispersion and cultural crossbreeding. Dispersion, because the skills required to work within the domain of images are many and of different nature (perceptological, psychological, aesthetic, technical, etc.), while the cultural crossbreeding, which in this case acquires a negative meaning, occurs when one loses control of a solid epistemological and methodological apparatus, necessary to produce scientific research that can be shared with the scientific community.

Yet, the advantages of interdisciplinary research, particularly around the theme of images, seem to be more convincing than the fear of running into the difficulties outlined above: first of all, given the intrinsically inter- and trans-disciplinary nature of the object of study, as mentioned above, it can only be enhanced by the encounter of studies of different kinds, but secondly, the opening of innovative strands of research seems more likely if accompanied by an intense interaction between different points of view.

An example of excellence in the field of interdisciplinary research is the *Bild-Wissen-Gestaltung*, the laboratory of the Humboldt University in Berlin founded by Horst Bredekamp, in the presentation of which we read:

“Complex problems cannot be solved within the boundaries of

a single academic discipline. They require the knowledge and skills of researchers from different fields of knowledge: representatives from more than 40 different disciplines were involved in the research of fundamental design processes in the sciences at the Interdisciplinary Laboratory "Image Knowledge Gestaltung" at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin from 2012-2018". (Bild-Wissen-Gestaltung, 2019)

Moreover, it is no accident that many interdisciplinary studies on images arise in the German-speaking area, because as Bredekamp himself explains in one of his successful essays:

Because the meaning of the German word Bild includes image, picture, figure and illustration, the term Bildwissenschaft has no equivalence in the English language. It seems as if this linguistic difference is deepening an ongoing distinction between English- and German-speaking art history. (Bredekamp, 2003, p.418)

Similarly to this vertical vision of the term *bild*, it is rather suggestive to note the progressive containment in a horizontal sense, like nested Chinese boxes, of the terms *bild*, *bildung* and *einbildung*, which probably refer to the conceptual succession that from the "figure" - *bild* - passes through "giving shape" - *bildung* - and goes back to "conceiving a new shape/figure" - *einbildung* -. A triad, referring to the context in which these brief notes were developed - the *Fakultät für Bildungswissenschaft der Freie Universität Bozen* - which presents itself as parallel to the triad on which this new journal is founded, which in a process of further investigation will seek to explore the world of images, imagery and the imagination. In German *bild*, *bilder* and *einbildung*.

NOTES

1 Interesting in this regard are, among others, the studies conducted by the research centre *Sichtbarkeit und Sichtbarmachung* (Visibility and visualization) of the University of Potsdam, or the IKKM (Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie). For more information, consult the websites: <http://www.sichtbarkeit-sichtbarmachung.de/>, <https://www.ikkm-weimar.de/>.

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