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The New Identity of Image in an Informational Society

Abstract: The communicational society re-shapes the world of images and, to some extent, manages to replace the real world, while the natural, real space is replaced by the one re-created by means of images in motion. The world of images has been extending so much that, in certain cases, it generates mutations in the relationship between the source and the copy and practically overturns the meaning of reviewing the image, generally described as a substitute for reality or a duplicate of something concrete. Reality is no longer the concrete world, but that which is present on the Screen, while the real Space takes on the part of its own copy.

Keywords: image in motion, audio-visual, reality, source, representation.

The world of images has been extending so much that, in certain cases, it generates mutations in the relationship between the source and the copy. R. Barthes sees the growth of the techniques of multiplying images nowadays as a resurfacing of the need to “authenticate the reality”; he quotes photography or the feature report as solid evidence of “what used to be”, of something that happened at a particular point in time and space. Images today appear to be more of a substitute of reality and I am going to illustrate that with a couple of rather commonplace examples. Let’s take, for instance, the story of the father that takes his kids out in nature; the kids, natural born gamers in the digital age, impressed with the contemplation of the natural landscape, cry out “This is the best resolution we have ever seen! It’s better than High definition (referring to virtual games)!”. So, on one hand, this example serves to enforce the idea of the new homo digitalis, the contemporary human being living isolated in the virtual world of new media; this new sort of human being is able to sur-

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pp. 189-197

vive in isolation; the only communication with the outside world is enabled by the screen; there is no need for real interaction, as long as you can do that, virtually; there is no need to get up, get out and make what you need, as long as you can order it online and get it delivered to your door; there is no need for mobility in order to survive, as long as, virtually, you can move about any space; every single means of perception (except for the touch) is achievable with the help of the new media. And since all these needs can be met virtually, the human being will naturally go for the easy way out, in accordance with the principle of the least effort. Furthermore, I will present a couple of more personal examples to emphasize the above theory.

In my work with students reading for either journalism or audio-visual production, that is, people belonging to the same sociological profile of the *homo digitalis*, I have noticed that faced with the reality, forced to get into the real life while working on putting together a news material or a feature report, they found themselves in an environment they perceived as completely new, strange and hostile, one that made them feel exposed, vulnerable and incapable to adapt. Their way to cope with the challenges of the exercise (always pertaining to the reality) was, in most cases, the flight from reality; they were trying to find refuge in the virtual world, resorting to fictionalizing, or fiction reconstruction (re-enactment with actors) of real facts or, turning to the digital reconstruction, by means of

virtual reality techniques (animation, 3D graphics, image processing to create virtual spaces out of fragments of reality). The impact with the real life would shock the “digital” youngsters and would force them back into the virtual world of TV screens and zapping they had been born and grown into. The source universe was not the real one of human society, but the substitute, the one they had got to know in front of their screens.

These are just a few examples of how the communicational society re-shapes the world of images and, to some extent, manages to replace the real world, while the natural, real space is replaced by the one re-created by means of images in motion.

Another amusing example is the one described by M.Joly (106); she starts off from Cezanne’s paintings and subtly reveals another way the contemporary civilization equate the copy to the source. The author talks about an environmental project, whereby in a traditional tourist’s part of France, a traffic sign at the side of a highway reads, as the name of the place, “Landscape by Cezanne”, for promotional purposes. To be more exact, the landscape in question resembled a famous painting. Thus, the natural landscape that inspired Cezanne (probably born or having lived in the same part of France), transferred on the canvas and by means of additional artistic value, has turned into a reference to its own reviewer. This is an example that practically overturns the meaning of reviewing the image, generally described as a sub-

stitute for reality or a duplicate of something concrete. In the age of communication, populated by *homini digitalis*, such a mutation becomes possible. Reality is no longer that which we can “put our finger on”, but that which is present on the Screen, while the real Space takes on the part of its own copy. This particular kind of mutation and change of roles between the reviewer and the representation of reality gives new meaning to the concept described by A. Bazin (and wildly disputed nowadays) whereby “the Image of the Source changes into the Source itself”; it is this concept that is considered to be the absolute proof of objectivity of all the mechanisms employed by the cinema (Aumont Bergala 104).

The result is that “the image will cause total de-realization of the human world of conflict and desire, under the pretext of trying to illustrate it” (Wunenburger 328). J. Baudrillard notes that one particular trait of the contemporary world is the fact that “we find ourselves in an universe with more and more information, but less and less meaning.” (Baudrillard 92). This observation regulates the relationship between information and meaning and allows for the classification into three different instances of this relationship, in the context of new age of communication. The first instance describes the information as bearing meaning; its significance, however, is quite fragile, as a result of reviewing it as part of the “competing” environment that contains it. The second instance shows the information losing its meaning; it’s the purely

instrumental information, as part of the technical environment; information that doesn’t imply a meaningful justification and will never be a part of an act of judgment (Baudrillard 93). The last instance is the one that contradicts the generally agreed on ratio of socializing and exposure to media, one that appears to establish a correlation between meaning and information; “when we think information might give way to meaning, the exact opposite happens.” (Baudrillard 93).

Baudrillard’s vision is that the multiplied information has an auto-destructive behavior, where meaning and communication are swallowed away by their own effort to become significant: “More and more information is invaded by this sort of hollow content, of homeopathic graft, of reverie of communication [...], while we seem to be spending more and more energy in order to be able to control this mere mockery and avoid the confrontation to the obvious reality of having completely lost the meaning of it all.” (Baudrillard 93)

Thus, it becomes clear that the side effect of an environment that does not allow significance is the mockery, as an optional solution to the loss of communication; the mockery is part of a circular process: “that of stimulation, that of a hyper-reality of communication and meaning. Reality is abolished by a reality even more real” (Baudrillard). Audio-visual expression specific to cinema is not just “a simulation of reality, but a representation of that, by means of real methods”, a continuation of the images-frames of

mind discussed by Baudrillard: image-reflexion; image-distortion; image-absence; image-mockery; D. Pop proposes a new value to the series, that of image-substitute. "The concept of the substitute keeps the relationship to the source intact; the connection to the same source will remain intact, as well; will even become necessary in order for the substitute to correctly function, as the substitute cannot exist without a real object." (Pop 17).

This relationship is quite specific in the case of film expression: the function to represent the reality has as a starting point a mutual contract between the object and the subject. But the substitute, despite the academic approach, cannot be detached from its deprecating significance. It is common belief that the substitute is a fake and inferior replacement. "Representation and fake-representation are two fundamental directions in film making; that is because film is based on a technique of capturing the reality – the photographic dimension; we take the images in motion, virtually, as reality, while, in the case of the substitute, we consider the artificial as being real and vice-versa." (Pop 24).

The implicit effects of this mutation in the relationship between reference and representation, as well as the side effects have been discussed by quite a few theoreticians. As an argument to the existential addiction to communication, I urge you to think back to the beginning of the year 2000; on that occasion, the reset of all information systems as a result of going from 1999 to 2000 was anticipat-

ed as a possible Apocalypse. The proliferation of images and their rapid evolution hide, however, quite a few perils and a lot of vice; multiple fields of our lives are affected. "The proliferation of images is an epidemic, one that gives way to confusion between reality and fantasy to such an extent that reality ends up disappearing completely from the image." (Wunenburger 330). Moreover, "the endless multiplication of images favors a chronic voyeurism, an intoxication by means of "ingesting" images that forces an implosion of the resistance of real time and space. Since life is reduced to images and everything can be stored, altered and activated through images, the human being, connected to the image producing devices, will turn into a bodiless eye." (Wunenburger 331).

All these aspects have an addictive component: you can't live without, even though your health is seriously threatened by the toxicity of what you're ingesting. The addiction to images turns the contemporary human being into a soldier, armed, at all times, with a device able to store images, a device without which we would lose our identity. The prototype of "the Japanese tourist" comes to illustrate this new condition. For the "Japanese tourist" each new and exciting life experience is but a mad hunt to capture negatives. The camera is always at hand and each detail, significant or not, is conscientiously recorded on the backup conscience. The surrounding world is seen exclusively through the eyes of the camera, while live emotion is placed

on hold to a later time when you're reviewing the negatives. You no longer feel the need to experience the novelty of life directly, as you wait to do that at a later time, while you're going through the images captured on camera. Reality is just a pretext, the subject matter of negatives; reviewing the negatives at a later time is an experience you continuously get to relive.

The photos or the film are in fact the real thing, replacing the direct witnessing of reality. The human being turns into the camera man of his own existence, where the Self is the main character of the film made up of his own images, similar to a "TV show that completely sucks in the reality; the whole world tends to become just a TV experience" (Dragan 46).

In front of a photo, the individual finds time for contemplation; reality is no longer changing; it's even something you can replicate, stop, reverse, control; it ceases to be implacable, it turns into something that the human being is actually able to decide on, choosing only the part that he enjoys and, thus, changing his relationship with the Time, turning it into something illusory. "Image will undoubtedly open doors to artificial paradises that don't abolish the responsibility of taking reality upon ourselves. We can never truly dispose of a sense of morality, as far as images are concerned; a sense of morality that would help assess the risks and denounce the manifestations that are in fact delirious [...]. Wisdom, as far as images are concerned, would be less about disparaging certain images and more about

setting up a set of rules to better use images. Because image contributes to certain events and behaviors that prove to be positive and creative." (Wunenburger 332)

Throughout this age of the image, or of the global screen, the notion of image, though associated with a lot of meanings, is generally pointing to the flows of the media, to photography and film; it's what J.J.Wunenburger calls "the proliferating" image. Image has been continuously building and consolidating its position as a mediator between the human being and the world, going beyond its technical role of amorphous "communication vessel" that it appeared to get stuck on, during some of the stages of human evolution. The contemporary informational context, where the hunt for new means of communication, as existential matrixes, is at its height, holds a particular place for the image; it has become the point of connection for quite a few ontological aspects. Moreover, the images in motion go beyond their role as a mediator, turning into "an absolute master, an imperial dictator, and an all-knowing father-like higher authority that decides on the public agenda and feeds our need to find out more, to be entertained, to seek refuge." (Joly 44). We live in an age turned global, mainly as a result of the world expansion of the images in motion, due to television and the new media. "A new kind of sensory experience was born together with television; one that is all-powerful and unconstrained by society or culture. The public has become the

slave of messages provided by means of television, its powerless addition" (Fiske Hartley 5). The relationship between the "slave" imprisoned in front of the screen and the "master" inside the screen is a coercive one. The public is sentenced to a chair, forced by their own will to sit and watch, while contemporary society condemns the individual to excess of information, quite early in their lives. "The movie viewer is, most of the times, more or less a refugee whose mobility has been suspended at the cost of having his sight and hearing enhanced." (Aumont Bergala 185). The assimilation of images is, therefore, inevitable; it forces upon the viewer from all parts. The explosion is for life. In this universe of information life goes on by its own rules. If you don't abide by them, you get to be punished. If you don't understand them, you get to suffer. If you don't adapt, you die. "All living organisms live within a particular environment they need to adapt to; similar to that, the human beings live in an ocean of words..." (Hartley 70).

The world is not the same, ever since technology has come to mediate the relationship between the human being and reality. The technical evolution has complicated the social equation. New unknown factors have come across within our society. The audio-visual civilization irreversibly pushes us towards a state of museum exhibits – the long gone "Gutenberg civilization", while the ocean of words we live in keeps re-writing itself, as an auto-update of the times we live in. The particular environment

the human beings need to adapt to nowadays is of a visual nature.

We are being surrounded by images and our existence is determined by images. Our intellectual life, our conscience and affections are being established by means of images (Wunenburger 237).

How does the Human Being inside his Universe look like nowadays? A lot of solitary individuals, each and every one of them condemned to their own place, because of the replacement of real interaction with an artificial and virtual one. Direct interaction is limited and subjectively mediated through images. Each solitude is furnished with images and signs in motion, behind a Screen that has become the absolute reference. "Detractors refer to the TV set as a slothful instrument", because the use of it requires a minimum of intelligence, "you don't even have to know how to read". In reality, television is a means of communication that requires quite a lot of effort. The visual information is transient; the viewer cannot go back to what he watched, as the people that read a book or a newspaper can." (Hartley 18).

Another paradox is the controversy between the good and the evil. The screen feeds us substitutes, it depersonalizes us, it turns us into consumers of fakes; but, at the same time, the screen also offers something else: it challenges us to find new ways of survival, by means of activating new functions of natural selection; the screen forces us to come up with a new form of responsiveness, adapted to the new existential environment. Heidegger

sees poetic expression as a way to avoid the deviant effects of the progress of technology, as art – in its different manifestations – is the specific human response to the disclosure of the truth. The nostalgia for books or written words is more and more present. Reading, poetry have become uncertain, because, as we all know, an organ that is not used it atrophies. Will these disappear alongside the traditional society? Will the principle that “nothing is lost, everything is transformed” hold in this case too? And if so, what will it be transformed into? Is reading turning into viewing? Is literature being replaced by film? Reality will answer yes to most of these questions. “Nowadays, the supremacy of the word appears to have been replaced by the supremacy of the image; McLuhan thinks that the civilization of the written word has gone extinct. Roland Barthes thinks the opposite, however: we’re still in the age of the written word; the written word is everywhere, even in visual messages. I think a balance between these two trains of thought is more appropriate here: for five centuries, the written word has been winning, with the aid of the printing technology; it’s time for the image to start winning and be assisted by technology. Today, the image and the written word are at a draw within the process of communication (Codoban 36-37).

Personally, I have tried to find answers to these controversies by suggesting to my students a work topic entitled “A digital poem” – an essay on explor-

ing poetic expression by means of new technology. The results were diverse and quite interesting. “The only legitimate similarity between cinema and literature is not the one between film and prose, but that between film and poetry.” (Bergala 127) Poetry is always present in the visual interpretation of written text; poetry will also arise from the combination between sound and image (as presented throughout the chapter entitled “The relationship between sound and image”); the poetry of words is shifting towards tri-dimensional animation and computer graphics.

These results account for a new theory – the human being, in his attempt to adapt to the new environment governed by audio-visual communication, will reshape his ontological functions. “For many of us, the eyes we were born with have gone blind, have atrophied, due to not using them. Instead, we are guided, democratically, by the glass eyes of television” (Dancu 51).

The image of this universe bent on communication, somewhat dictatorial, takes us back to Orwell’s novel *1984*. In the book, the plot is built around the absolute authority of the totalitarian leader – the Big Brother – that watches over and controls to the tiniest detail the life of each and every individual. No one has ever seen Big Brother, because his message comes exclusively through projections on big screens. This is a metaphor for the drama of the individual within a totalitarian regime, where the taking away of freedom (freedom seen as most profound manifestation of humanity) be-

comes extreme. Nowadays, Big Brother is still present in our lives; but not as a residue of totalitarian ages; more like part of a new existential paradigm – the age of the Screen. The contemporary human being is being kept prisoner by a virtual authority that completely subdues him. Screens are everywhere and they are watching us. We are led forward with the help of Screens. The way our society functions nowadays copies the reality imagined in the novel. The control of the mind and of the individual (his opinions, his knowledge, and his agenda) is achieved with the help of the Screen. We can be controlled with the help of the Screen. “... television is the glass eye replacing the healthy eye: it doesn’t just offer images, but also takes on the claim of giving us the gift of vision, covering the eyes we were born with” (Dancu 51).

Orwell wrote “Big Brother is watching you”; nowadays, we watch the Big Brother of our own accord. Nowadays, we are the ones calling on Big Brother, needing him, depending on him and, willingly submitting to him. The still present entity of Big Brother returns on the public agenda, taking on the form of a TV show. Born together with the new millennium, the Big Brother format is sold as a revolutionary concept that will re-invent television and change the role and status of new media. Big Brother has become a mass phenomenon that perfectly describes contemporary society (Stavre 79).

In all forms and formats of tele-reality, the show is a lab experiment where a

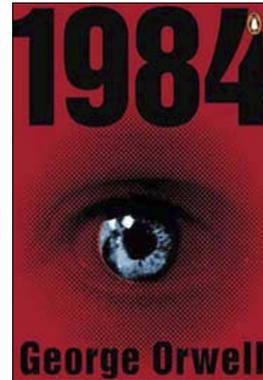


Illustration 1.1 George Orwell -1984

higher authority will come up with the most sophisticated of challenges in order to get a particular reaction from its “guinea pigs” – a reaction as close to reality as possible. All these responses from inside the fish tank are meticulously brought together and wrapped up in order to be sold to the audience.

The idea of the Big Brother concept was, naturally, inspired from Orwell’s novel. It consists of a totally controlled environment, where the day to day life of the characters is watched in real time by the eyes of the cameras. The cameras don’t build a new reality, as in the case of cinema, and don’t have a subjective component, because they are just surveillance devices. They control the space by means of public display, exhibition and ostentation. Nothing gets by the unforgiving eye of the camera. Surveillance eyes are everywhere. Multiplied eyes that see everything. An eye that doesn’t lie and never forgives. The eye is the window to real life. Big Brother is watching you through the omnipresent eye.

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