

Images in the New Media

Among other things, an image is a message. It has a sender and it searches for an addressee. This search is a question of its portability. Images are surfaces. How does one transport surfaces? It all depends on the physical bodies on whose surfaces the images are affixed. If these bodies are the walls in a cave (as in Lascaux), they are not portable. In cases such as these, the addressees must be transported to the pictures. There are more convenient and more portable physical bodies to which images can be affixed, such as wooden boards and framed canvases. In such cases, one uses an improvised method of transportation. One transports the images to a specified meeting place, such as a church or an exhibition, and then one transports the addressees to the designated place. Of course, these cases make another method possible. An individual can acquire (buy, cheat, steal) one of these portable images for himself and thus become the exclusive addressee of the message. Recently, something new has been discovered. Disembodied images, "pure" surfaces, and all the images that have so far been in existence can be translated (transcoded) into images of a new kind. In this situation, the addressees no longer need to be transported. These pictures are conveniently reproduced and transmitted to individual addressees wherever they might be. However, the question of portability is a little more complicated than it has been described here. Photographs and films are transitional phenomena somewhere between framed canvases and disembodied images. There is, however, one unambiguous tendency: images will become progressively more portable and addressees will become even more immobile.

This tendency is characteristic of the current revolution in culture. All

messages (information) can be reproduced and transmitted to immobile addressees. This is truly a revolution in culture, not simply a new cultural technique. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to compare three different situations of images to each other: the image of a bison in a cave painting, an image in an oil painting placed in front of a painter's studio, and an image on a television screen in someone's bedroom.

Hunting bison is a necessity of life. One should not approach this task without thinking (the way a jackal does it). One should reflect on this task from the outside (beyond subjectivity) and orient oneself to what one sees. By doing this, one will hunt better. But what one sees is fleeting. It needs to be suspended on the walls of a cave and in such a way that others will also be able to orient themselves to what has been seen. The bison's image on the cave wall is a suspended perception, a suspended experience, a suspended value, and it is a model for all future intersubjective perception, experience, and conduct, for all future hunting parties. It is an "image" in the true sense of the word. The portability of the image is out of the question. The addressees, such as the tribe, have to gather themselves around the image, to practice hunting in the presence of the image, for instance, through dancing.

The painter has learned to code his experiences, perceptions, and values in color surfaces. Like the codes of the alphabet and those of musical tones, this code has been transmitted from generation to generation. The painter swims in history. In his private chamber, he is preoccupied with putting whatever is specific to him (his own experiences, etc.) into these universal, intersubjective codes. These "noises" enrich the code. This is his contribution to history. If the manufactured image is nearly complete—it cannot be perfect, because both code and material work object to the idea of perfection—then the image must be transported from the private sphere to the public sphere, to make its way into history. The master painter places his painting in the marketplace in front of his house, so that those who walk by will critique it. They will establish the value of the image in a twofold manner: first, according to its usability with respect to a future history (exchange value); second, according to its degree of perfection (intrinsic value). The painter paints images because he is engaged with history by making the private public. This is what he lives for, and how he makes his living.

In order to legislate a complex society like that of the postindustrial age, one must be able to foresee how it will conduct itself. The proper method is to prescribe models of behavior. The situation of the cave demonstrates that images are good models of behavior. Images have an

additional advantage in that they function as good models of experience and perception. Thus, legislators appoint specialists who manufacture such images. In addition to these specialists, other specialists are required who transport images into society or who measure their efficacy. These specialists are not the original senders, but rather the functionaries who oversee the transmission.

The Paleolithic hunter crawls into the dark, hidden, and secretive cave, to leave the open tundra behind and “to come to himself.” He looks for and finds images that keep him from losing himself in the tundra. Together with other hunters, he uses the images there to help orient himself. In this manner, the world becomes meaningful to him. Shimmering in the torchlight, the images on the cave walls are responsible for making him into a hunter. They are a revelation of himself and his world. They are sacred.

The citizen leaves his private home and walks to a public place such as the marketplace or the church, to participate in history. He looks for images and other publications. Every publication calls out for his critique, which is to say, it calls out for integration into a reservoir of historical information. The more difficult the integration is, the more “original” and interesting the publication. And the less “original” it is, the easier integration can be accomplished. This is the criterion of all information criticism, including the criticism of images. If the citizen wants to enrich himself, then he purchases an original image and brings it home, to process it there. His reservoir of information—which is to say, he himself—is transformed by this process. If he wants to forgo the sacrifice of purchasing the object, he can be satisfied with the processing of information and images done in passing. This is the risk the painter takes, for his livelihood depends on sacrifices.

The postindustrial functionary (man or woman) and the children of these functionaries allow themselves to be exposed to images on a screen. Because so-called free time—time without any apparent function—is increasing, this exposure takes on greater dimensions and eventually gives evidence of its functionality. The functionary who appears not to be functioning—for example, the objectified office worker relaxing in a comfortable chair—is programmed by images. He is to function in a particular manner, because he is to be both producer and consumer of things and points of view. The images are programmed so that they reduce the addressee’s criticism to a minimum. There are different methods for accomplishing this, for example, by means of an inflation of images that makes freedom of choice impossible, or a speeding up of the

sequence of images. The addressee cannot interrupt his exposure to images simply by disconnecting the apparatus, to end objectification and become a subject; for he would thus give up his function and take himself out of society.

After close analysis of the three cases compared here, one regrets that the word *image* is being used for all three situations; for the word has a different meaning in each situation. In the first one, it signifies a revelation resulting from stepping back from the life-world. In the second one, it signifies a private offering to a public history, calling out to others for its integration. In the third one, it signifies a method for programming the behavior of functionaries in a postindustrial society. However, it is unavoidable to speak of the “image” in each of these three cases. And this is not only because the prehistorical and historical meaning of *image* resonates in the contemporary—“posthistorical”—significance of the word. The images flickering on the television screen contain remnants of prehistoric sacrality as well as of historical engagement, and, indeed, in both the political and the aesthetic sense of the word. This is exactly what makes an objective assessment of the contemporary situation so difficult.

There is a tendency to confuse the reception of screen images with that of cave images: as if the new images propelled us backwards to a prehistoric, uncritical situation, and as if they were therefore depoliticizing. In addition, there is a tendency to confuse the reception of screen images with that of exhibited images: as if the new images were still transmissions sent by aesthetically and politically engaged individuals, the only difference being that the original images were no longer available for purchase, but rather had been made available as universally accessible reproductions. Each of these two tendencies leads to a different assessment of the contemporary situation: the first tendency to a pessimistic assessment, the second to an optimistic one. Both are in error. We must attempt to judge the contemporary situation according to its own characteristics, but we should also not lose sight of the previous interpretations of the “image.” Thus, we will perhaps make the following judgment:

Owing to the manner in which images are currently transported, they must serve the same function as the codes of conduct just described. They must transform their addressees into objects. This is the intention of portability. However, the current methods of transport do not necessarily correspond to new media technologies, but rather only correspond to the intention behind them. The media can just as well—or perhaps even more effectively—be connected differently: not bundled, so that a sender is connected to countless addressees, but rather networked, so

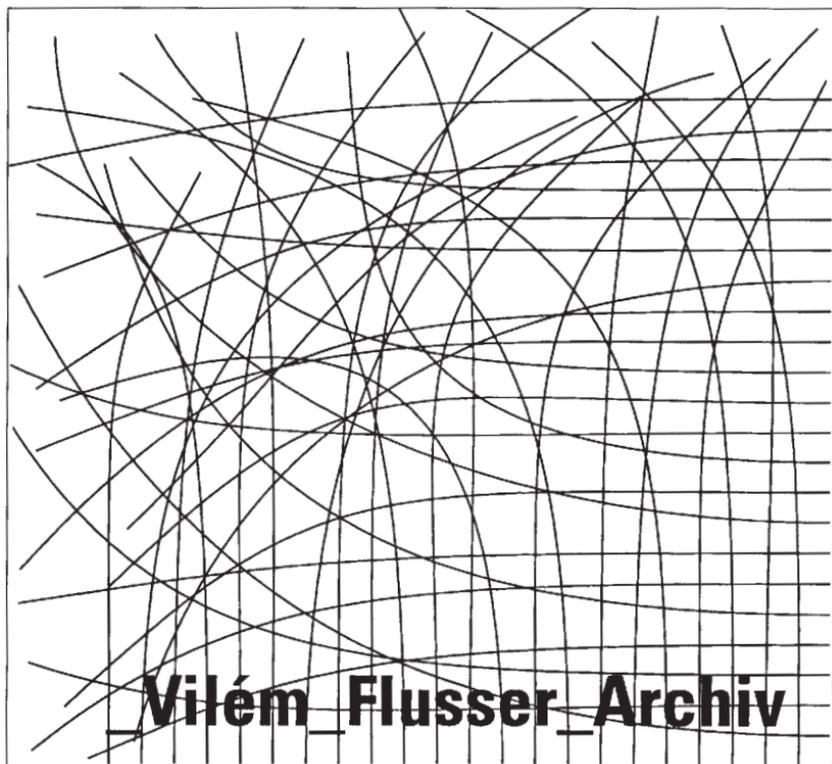
that individual addressees are connected with one another by reversible cables—thus, less like the television, more like the telephone network. Images do not have to be broadcast out of any sort of technical necessity. They can just as well be sent back and forth. The contemporary image-situation should therefore simply be considered an example of one technical possibility among others.

The intention behind the current mode of transmission is indeed powerful, but it is not impossible to overcome. We are in the beginning stages of a major change in the transmission of images, especially in the sphere of computer images. There, we can see how images are sent out from a sender to an addressee, to be then processed and returned. The beginning stages of this major changeover demonstrate how it is technically possible to outplay the intention behind the current mode of transmission. They demonstrate that technical means make it possible to take the political, economic, and social “powers” out of commission.

Should this change be successful, the notion of “image” would acquire a new, fourth meaning. The image would be a “disembodied surface.” Many different participants would cooperate to project different meanings on this surface. In this manner, the previous meanings of *image* would be “negated,” thus taking on a new, higher level of significance. The image would remain universally accessible, the way it currently is. It would still be a multiple of itself that is easily transported. It would regain the political, epistemological, and aesthetic potential that it possessed during the time when painters were responsible for its production. And, perhaps, it would regain some of its original sacred character. All of this is technically possible today.

My conclusions are relevant not just for what I have said about images, but for future existence in general. In our contemporary society, the new media are currently geared toward making images into models of behavior and people into objects. However, they can be connected differently. The new media can turn images into carriers of meaning and transform people into designers of meaning in a participatory process.

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