

The Life of the Image

Bergson noted that the cinematographic *image* does not really move. It is, then as now, a series of still photographs. The real motion in such images is produced by machinery, which imparts a *kinesis*, an energy of movement, to the succession of fixed images. Our perception then endows such images with their “life,” insofar as they can be said to possess life. It is an illusion, it is “virtual” both as space and time. The real duration, as generated by the machinery or as lived by the perceiver is part of a broader *system* of images that includes those still photographs and their succession. Images of images of images, by the time they are processed by our bodies and appear to our mind’s eye as inhibited acts we have *not* enacted.¹

If Plato truly disapproved of the images created by artists (and it is always hard to discern what he really thought), what would he say of these thin, almost ghostly, celluloid replays of the “was,” especially since so much of what has been committed to film was acting – deception raised to the power of *n*, when captured by a machine and imprinted in reverse on a flimsy (and highly flammable) canvas, only to be forced through a machine and cast as a dancing shadow on the wall of a cave, a wall we pay to see? And there we are, captives of the colorful show. Plato was unhappy enough when we believed even the evidence of our direct sensation, it seems. This pay-cave would be an outrage.

Yet, Bergson committed himself to an entire ontology of images a year after the cinematograph was announced by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895, and did so without knowing what this technology augured for the problem of meaning. Still, he could intuit what it foretold. His idea was that the distance from being to meaning was best traversed riding the movement or the conveyance of images. Ideas, interiority, and certainly “concepts”

1) For details about the cognitive school called “enactivism,” see Ralph D. Ellis, *Questioning Consciousness* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995). The view has developed since Ellis’s book (and indeed he has written a number of books and articles since), but the idea of enactivism is, in my view, best stated and defended here. It has since been drawn back into less productive kinds of debates that resemble old-style philosophy of mind.

were residual reminders of the ceaseless movement of images. They leap back into the present, and even ahead of it, as “memory,” in his singular sense of that term.² Meanwhile consciousness spreads and flattens itself out across what it takes to be a thin but simultaneous moment, when in fact it is rebound from a receding present, falling off behind, and beating its head against that wall repeatedly, in intervals that depend upon the depth and intensity of its patterns. The more it can retain in an epoch of duration, the less frequently does consciousness bang its head against that wall. But perception is not so weak. It gathers up a sum of past images and hurls them through that wall of the present with all of its might. Perception is mostly memory, at least when the creatures have a maximal (that is, human-like) intensity and depth of durational epochs. The excellent article by Gedi and Elam in this issue provides a naturalized narrative suggestion (in the vein of Cassirer and earlier philosophers of culture); the making of images in and through perception and then casting them into the path we are walking down (that is, by creating culture), as a species, is as close to doing what we do by nature as anything can be. Certainly, Bergson saw perception as a virtual space we create according to the requirements of action that has not yet commenced.

So, in your perception, you have an unlimited concentration of acts you have not enacted (and for the most part, never will). The cinematograph externalizes and mechanizes that process, becoming for us a symbol of ourselves as perceivers, and, perhaps to our horror, greatly reducing our need for reference to or grounding in a sort of interiority that is the treasure-hoard of the Cartesian subject. If the cinematograph can manage to project a world, without the mediation of God or the evil deceiver, or even the *cogito*, then what meaning is there in throwing an image ahead of ourselves to live our way into it? It is not, as Bakhtin (usually on Bergson’s side on such matters) a mere expressive form that we fill with our intentions. There is even less to the moving image than meets the interpreting eye. It leaves meaning afloat on the surface of a shallow pool.

Something more grounded is found in Andrew Irvine’s exploration of the wild images, untamed on the edges of consciousness. These may be, speaking in the naturalism of Gedi and Elam, something seeping in from an earlier time in the childhood of the race. But they seem wild to us because we do not yet know enough as children to recognize when we are standing on holy ground. So we do not remove our sandals and we stare right into the face of the divine. Wild images cannot be filmed, and in a way they can be memory without *being* remembered. There is a homey past that is the past of our perception, but there is an uncanny, *unheimlich*, past that knocks at the doors of perception but is not allowed to enter. It may explain why the film version of *Where the Wild Things Are* was so great a disappointment to so many. Those wild images refuse to be photographed at all, let alone sequenced for a machine. It is interesting that they can be drawn, but Maurice Sendak knew that if he could get the drawing right, he could tell the story, and not the other way around.

So the cinematograph has limits, as a symbol. It consumes photographs, or at least it did until animation changed the rules. The cinematograph is still a threat, a foreshadowing of an empty Cartesian subject, a bait and switch of subject for subjectivity, reducing consciousness to a mere rebound upon the flux, and perception to a gathering of that in pictures. But that cinematograph is pretty old-fashioned, as a symbol. It is not clear whether a philosophy of culture can save its special self-substitution for the Cartesian ego (and here I mean subject plus its perceptions, minus its imagination and passions). Maybe that era of the cinematograph is a day away and a dollar spent by a civilization no longer ours. Even if the structure of our perceptual faculties has not changed, we may reasonably ask what imparts *kinesis* to our digitized images.

2) My primary references for Bergson are, for the ontology of images, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988 [1896]); and for the famous cinematograph discussion, see *Creative Evolution*, trans. A.H. Mitchell (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983 [1907]), 306–347.

As Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński reminds us, the digital image is not the same communicator as the filmatic image. The distance between *Casablanca* in the cinema, and the clip from *Casablanca* on YouTube is a very great difference. The first absorbs us in a world that transforms us into the being who has seen that film and separates us from the being who had not yet. The second is an aesthetic tool for teaching morals to the public or the student. Failure to adapt is complete failure to communicate, to influence, to guide, to evaluate. The digitized image takes the filmatic image down to its physical constitution and reconstructs its value, byte by byte, into something artificial. But, as Gedi and Elam argue, artificial is natural, *for us*.

Still, somewhere between 1907 and 2007 we managed to slip off the edge of our kinetic mechanism and glide into, first, the electrical impulses that moved the machinery, and then into the interior of the pulses until they became patterns of electromagnetic communication. Analyzing these into their extremes of 1's and 0's, we pushed the patterns into our service by blocking and channeling their tiniest movements according to the affordances that pleased us, did our work, and calculated for us our dreamiest prospects for perception. Kinesis is still there, but it is less easy now to say what is and is not "alive." If by chance you are reading this while depending on the power of a replacement organ or limb "printed" in three dimensions, according to a close analysis of the part you once grew yourself, you might even grunt in disapproval if I say "it is not alive."

We must either expand our way of thinking about life, or come up with an idea that has no debt to mere mechanics while remaining efficacious in animating whatever it is that supports living systems (electrochemical processes?). It would be easy – too easy – to idealize the image, to presuppose the world of culture and imbue the image with its whole range of meaning while neglecting its processual mode of being. Will the *idea* of energy suffice for filling the whole distance from pulsing life to cultural dynamism? It feels adventitious: "let there be energy, and let it mean whatever we need to complete our thinking. . . . and let the image receive that energy." (The line is too long for the beginning of *The New Faust*.) We are certainly accustomed to jumping from being to meaning and back again. We have been making that leap since long before Lascaux became the first picture show (speaking of wild things). And without jumping we would have no phenomenology, indeed, no problem of consciousness. And we do have those things, along with Lascaux, and Faust.

Somewhere between the wild things and the digits, there is the process of fragmenting and reproducing the images, not to say commodifying them, since anything that *can* be dismembered for a profit *will* be. Katarzyna Weichert identifies the photomontage as the pivotal point in this development. To see the image as an amalgamation of digits happens only after we have refused to accept the image whole, intact, indivisible, with meaning and limits for all. Image becomes images. When the image comes to have parts then the endless rearranging of the images is our main temptation. Why create new wholes when we can reconstruct old wholes into new ones? And before we can turn around twice, our very experience is defined and limited by the limits of reconstruction. Culture becomes such a montage of images, with no center – only all-pervading technique. Consciousness is a mess and perception is adrift. Will art save us? Perhaps, or perhaps it is just the best therapy for consciousness. We subscribe to HBO.

But there is a frightening problem here. Do you want the blue pill of art or the red pill of dystopian rationality? What if the energy in the image is the power source of consciousness, and culturally mediated perception is its output, an illusion within a lie? William James, John Dewey, and numerous others, have advised that we should resist the urge to use the *idea* of consciousness to glue being and meaning together. It is not that this road leads to madness; rather, that madness, and a million other wild things we must regard as real, if we are honest inquirers, will not be crammed into the concentration camp philosophers have called "consciousness," or the problem thereof, with no *Endlösung* in sight. It is a pseudo-problem. Granted, this camp is a well-ordered place, but the guards are brutal and no one really does much "living" amid the philosophies of consciousness and of mind generated by our very rational analysts. They have no tolerance of the quasi-sane, very wild mess that

is life. They ignored images for over a century, deported them and closed them into the ghettos of aesthetics, ethics, and other merely emotional ways of “failing to think.” Bless those who fail so, for they shall inherit the image. Give me the blue pill. But do not tell me what to do with it.

The day of the analysts came to a close, some years back,³ although some are coming by the news rather late. After all the journals are still being doctored by the (few) true believers and the agents of the professionalized discipline. Mostly, in the last half century, it was sheep leading lemmings, all the herders having died long before, along with their shepherd dogs. These sheep are good at repeating things, these dismissers of the image, but I am reminded that *repetition* is Bergson’s very insightful definition of “matter.” Philosophy without the image and its grounding is both matter and a matter of no real concern; which may explain its precipitous decline under the watch of the analysts. But the image persists. It has the power. Indeed, it *is* that power. In the beginning was the image and through it was everything made and without it was nothing made, that *was* made. There is the first line of *The New Faust*. He got to heaven last time; maybe this time he will upload himself to the Cloud.

The image *is* the act insofar as the act endures, and insofar as it persists, and yes, insofar as it repeats, except that it never really repeats, and it never completely perishes. As an image drops away, it just moves less and less until it becomes almost pure, almost fully individuated, almost perfectly clear. Or at least that is what happens if Bergson is right, which I confess I do not know. But I like the narrative. It seems to me to *include* the other narratives I know, those I like and those I do not like. Inclusion is a powerful drug, like a big blue pill. If you have a thesis, and I have one that includes yours, undamaged, you should allow me to do that “including thing.” My thesis is not an alternative, not a contrary, not a contradictory, it is a gift. Make it a sub-contrary if you feel you must, if you are feeling put off at being a character in my story, but I will say “we can both be right, but we cannot both be wrong, and you will not be if you do not insist on excluding what you cannot know one way or another. Give yourself a shot at being right. The blue pill includes the red pill, but not vice-versa. The image is the act and the act *is*, even if we do not know whether it is all that is.

Tereza Hadravová challenges us with the idea, from Susanne Langer, that the image, as had in the cinematic delivery system, is an externalized dream, but the dream may be a dream of anything. When paired with Weichert’s analysis of the photomontage, we can see that Eisenstein already saw that people would dream if certain rules of continuity and framing were followed. In the primal dreams of those who had never seen a photograph, let alone a cinematographic sequence, one wonders whether the movement of the mind’s eye followed the rules of framing the shot, of continuity between shots, and of proportion that are necessary in creating a film. These rules contract dreaming to the kinds of limits we find in waking perception, but after we grow up with films upon films in our history, does our dream experience not become a movie screen? Are our dreams now limited by our waking experience? If so (and I think my own dreams usually do have a cinematic framing), how do we let our dreams grow wild again? Is the image powerful enough to de-unify the montage, without the aid of will, desire, intention of a substantial subject? If not, how do we recover our dreams? Must we de-culturalize ourselves? Is that the difference between subject-as-ego and subjectivity? Surely not.

And now we arrive at a rarely noticed feature of the image. Even without interiority, it *is* desire. And it is also history, the repository of the was. The image, even when it only sort of is, is only barely there, fugits

3) Some of you will want a date. Waterloo came in 1978, when Richard Rorty gave his Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. It has been a slow death since then, but death it was. The Germans, having only recently discovered analytic philosophy, due to their government’s mandate that every academic pursuit must either *be* a science, or at least look like one, are on a very slow boat to the future. As usual, the French do not care and the Anglophone world has been there and done that. Unhappily, the Chinese and the South Koreans are misled into thinking that analytic philosophy actually did something. Who knows when that illusion will wear off? Not I.

like *tempus*, but leaves “matters” (repetitions) different. Since the image never fully repeats, is it not natural, to return to the thesis of Gedi and Elam, that when we create anything human, we choose the image, aural, visible, tactile, olfactory, kinetic, even gustatory, as the time-arrester? That which cannot repeat must create. The new categorical imperative. The image is pliable, it is the unit of creativity, at least once enacted – becoming one photo in the montage. Beforehand it is symbol of what will be, and also of what might be but will not be. Yet, the image is open, it is hungry, it is bottomless with its desire to take on form, structure, even flesh. The image is already intentional before it is anyone’s image, or, more accurately, before anyone belongs to it, to the image. We are included in these images, you and I, as blue includes red, in tooth and claw. They make us, not we them. We are part of what they create. It is what Heidegger was saying badly when he said that language speaks us. It is a shame that Gadamer historicized that insight when he had enough understanding to take Heidegger the other direction, putting history into the image, instead of vice-versa.

If I have not upset you yet, I think that maybe I will not. That was the hard part, which was getting to the thought at the bottom of this issue of our journal. The point I am making is that the philosophical discussion of images, even if they are just filmatic, is never just about the art of cinema. We live amid images, and we are images to others, at the least, whatever else we may also be. Please pause to consider how many of the people and the things you see in a day pass you by without ever achieving any greater depth, for you, than a filmatic image would. If, on the other hand, you begin to sum up all the filmatic images you have seen that made a deeper dent in your very being than their ephemeral existence should allow, you see the paradox of the image. After all, paradox is the criterion of truth, if it has a criterion. That is a compact way of saying that if your problem does not lead you to a paradox, it is not a philosophical problem. And if it does lead you there, you must have made a mistake along the path of your thinking. And indeed, you always do, if for no other reason than that the thinking is, definitively and finally, *not* the thing thought. The thought and the thing, and their aversion to one another, is the paradox upon which modern philosophy is built, and also the limit of the age. The resolution is that the blue pill includes the red pill; reason is a fable. Descartes said so himself.

Perhaps we are breaching the surface of another age, we humpbacks of the late modern, coming up for air after a long dive under the pressure of gravity, our favorite modern myth, our falling and fallenness. That is the pressure of the depths to which we sank, the myth of modernity, with aesthetic and ethical and emotional divers avoiding rationalists and their sharp harpoons, as they seek oil for their lamps of reason. Denizens of the image, we grew hungry for air and for light, and here we are. Non-modern, non-post-modern, we philosophers of culture, trying to teach the watery world how to interpret something they call a non-language, namely, our images. But for us, even our words are images. And the images locked above the surface of the deep, in books and calculations, have gradually taken wing, rising from the pages of dictionaries and encyclopedias that caged them, and have joined their kin among the living, moving images that we are, in their warm impermanence. We have not become our language, as the esperantists and Russellians predicted. The thin parts of image they called language first flock with the feelings and the emotions and the dancing lights, and then school with the exotic tropics around the living reefs of meaning. Only later do they line up and parade in squads and platoons of definition and analysis, in the army of universal grammar.

And Plato smiles. Or at least *my* Plato does. If your Plato has a form stuck in his throat, let him choke on it. You will need more than conceptual analysis to Heimlich *that* chicken bone. I see this collection of essays as images of the images they discuss. I have had the opportunity to talk with and listen to these authors. I see therapy in the essays. Two examples are Lipszyc and Giorgi, and I will close this discourse with their prognosis and recommendations.

Adam Lipszyc plunges into the problem of the temporalized image with a sort of prophetic urgency. Summarizing Benjamin, he says that “the very act of fortune-telling and reading the signs of the future events

discharges the bodily energy needed for the future action that would make the events actually take place. Thus, the event would have or at least could have happened – if not for the fact that we have read the augury!” Perhaps the energy that the image carries and transmits is sufficiently finite to exhaust itself in an act of interpretation, if we create and then read off the symbols with a pathological sincerity. Lipszyc says “a sign of what is to come uses all the energy of the future event and thus effectively precludes what it was to anticipate.” Perhaps we *will* a certain version of the future away by making a film about it now. The virtual images push away their redder counterparts, and hence a film is a sacrifice to the gods of fate and fortune saying “anything but this.” Such is the hopeful logic of *Black Mirror*, in any case. The counsel is that we ought to be careful what we are wishing away. Moderation in the open image, as is found in Haneke’s film *Time of the Wolf* (2003), may be a wise balance of exorcising the not-yet of its demons-to-be. If it is safe to go back into the waters of the present, with appropriate precautions about the undertow for habitually rational subjects, maybe we need not stay ashore in the past. There are whales breaching out in the deeper and thicker depths of the present. We should see them, or join them. The cautionary image forearms us, and forearmed, we are forewarned.

But do filmatic images still have the kind of cultural power Lipszyc assumes? Federico Giorgi examines whether film, as it is distributed and consumed through the cinema system, still has the capacity to sensitize the public to social issues and injustices as it has done in the past. He concludes that things have changed enough, at this point in history, so that the answer must be “no.” One might see his conclusion as pointing to a deeper social fact, namely the liberation of the image from the cinema system. After all, the producing and distributing of “movies” was an industry controlled by a few wealthy people, whereas today, anyone can make a film – especially short films and videos – and have a chance at reaching an audience of millions. The reduced impact of the cinema system is not an indication of the reduced power of the filmatic image; rather, the opposite is probably true.

In a non-cinematic age, perhaps the wilder dreams can return to a generation not strapped in its chair like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. If the Ludovico Treatment of the cinematic image is what it takes to be reclaimed as a modern subject, let us hope for non-modern (and non-postmodern) subjectivity instead. I do not think the new Order of the Image demands respectable corporate citizens, even if it includes them, as blue includes red. The image has desires of its own, but we do not learn what they are by psychotherapy. We have to wait to see what the images do, and then we can narrate their movements, their kinetic implication. Yes. Perhaps we can shock the images into certain habits of aversion and avoidance, but maybe we would do well to let them run wild for a bit before we give them supper and a bedtime story.