BEYOND WAYS OF SEEING

Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media

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Rather than vision-based forms of representation, Releasing the Image appears to recast images as multisensory, lived abstractions fluttering through an ever more fluid reality. The three essays of Part One lay the groundwork of this metamorphosis by considering the “Origination and Auto-Origination of the Image.” The section highlights the tendency toward conceiving images as living entities by the addition of auto-origination and the vital capacity of images to “self-generate” and evolve in complexity.

Peter Geimer’s opening chapter looks at the discovery of photography as preexisting its 1830s invention by centuries according to myths of self-originating images, such as religious miracle images. Far from being only a matter of myth, Geimer recounts cases of self-originating images in science such as Camille Flammarion’s scrutiny, at the turn of the century, of lightning forming natural images. Importantly, these phenomena move the nature of photographic imagery away from optics and the camera to more self-generative indexical processes. Away from optics and conventional modes of seeing, Jean-Luc Marion takes the next step in reconsidering Paul Cézanne’s proto-abstract painting and departure from vision-based Impressionism. Obviously Marion’s title, “Cézanne’s Certitude,” is intended to reverse of the terms of Maurice Merleau Ponty’s well-known essay, “Cézanne’s Doubt.” And from his conclusions—that Cézanne’s use of primitive geometric figures made it “no longer a question of using categories or models to reduce the visible to objects, but of letting the things (‘nature’) render themselves visible”—one can easily suppose that Marion wants to reverse certain assumptions of phenomenology as well (48, italics original). Revisions and refinements of phenomenological methods are intensified in Giorgio Agamben’s following chapter, titled simply “Nymphs.” Here, a finely wrought series of meditations on the question of “How can an image charge itself with time?” coils around Aby Warburg’s dynamic conceptions of art historical imagery.

Having located the origin of images in phenomena of flux, the next chapter crosses the threshold into the burgeoning image world of new media including video, sound, and digital art. Mark B.N. Hansen begins the section with his chapter, “From Fixed to Fluid: Material-Mental Images Between Neural Synchronization and Computational Mediation.” Through a sweeping survey of recent neurocognitive research, Hansen draws striking correspondences between the microtemporal pattern of cognitive activity in image formation and multisensory uses of images in computer-driven media art. Strangely, the sense of the image here dissolves into numerically tuned oscillations of brain or machine, seemingly as bizarre as the arcane world of quarks in quantum physics. Just as optics are useless in rendering visible quantum scales, lens-based media are seemingly eclipsed by media images charged more by time and electronics than by steady rays of focused light. At whatever
scale, the energy infusing images becomes emphatically acoustic in Vivian Sobchack’s next chapter, “When the Ear Dreams: Dolby Digital and the Imagination of Sound.” In a poignant mixture of psychological and phenomenological forms of analysis, Sobchack drills into the series of Dolby promotional sound trailers. Layer by layer, she details how these films display an imaginary of surround sound that releases the image into a heightened synthesis with acoustics. The resulting sound-image causes a metamorphosis of the standard tropes of cinema where the filmic image becomes as much an emanation of sound as of light. This interchangeability of sound and light extends beyond the Dolby-equipped cineplex to the avant-garde media works in Timothy Murray’s chapter on “Imaging Sound in New Media Art: Asia Acoustics, Distributed.” Murray vividly describes how a range of Asian sound art and multimedia environments materializes advanced conceptions of the image by John Cage, Yves Klein, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Luc Nancy as a warping of time and space. However remote these time warps may appear, they approximatly reality and modern ways of being/becoming. Cesare Casarino brings this home in the section’s final chapter on the “life-image” of Deleuze, cinema, and bio-politics. For Casarino, the life-image is what the time-image becomes under a fully realized regime of biopolitical production. In addition to questions of power, the chapter also carries questions of modes of being and becoming in the image and raises the notion of lived abstraction that resonates for me throughout the whole book.

The book’s ultimate section, “Past and Future Itineraries of the Image-Concept,” offers a more rigorous philosophical footing for the open-ended capacity of the image to give life to abstractions. The four chapters found here, with their eloquent embrace of a range of modern philosophical texts, can be tough going for anyone but academic philosophical majors. However, the section illuminates key concepts, starting with the concept of the image-concept itself. Kenneth Surin’s opening chapter probes one of the greatest divisions in the Western philosophical tradition—that between image in the realm of experience and concept in the realm of reason. New apprehensions of the image, however, like involuntary memory or Deleuze’s time-image in cinema seem to be both image and concept and yet not exactly either one. The capacity of the image to confound traditional philosophical categories is taken further in Forest Pyle’s questioning of the romantic image’s capacity to both imprison and liberate. Kevin McLaughlin’s chapter next plots these tensions within the philosophical tradition extending from Immanuel Kant to Walter Benjamin and his construction of the dialectical image. According to Pyle, force is key to understanding the dialectics at work. As in Benjamin’s angel of destruction, the force field of the image comes from the past with the angel facing backward moving toward the future. Pyle’s conclusion about the potentiality of the image implies a turnabout, with the attention on the speculative future. To speculate on great technological and industrial mutations taking place around the digital image, Bernard Stiegler draws on Gilbert Simondon’s notion of transindividuation as a way to imagine the social collective without disregarding the individual. Oddly, Stiegler brings the reflection back to the eye and optics as an embodied organ of sight strangely figured as an octopus eye endowed with the ability to see knowingly.

To see knowingly with all the senses appears to fulfill the book’s objective to set the image free and to reveal future possibilities and potentialities of image-born knowledge. Releasing the Image provides an excellent forum of multidisciplinary media theorists and philosophers to speculate on the ever-widening horizons of the image at work in our minds, bodies, and the media environment. The book marks a distinctive twist on the “iconic turn” set in motion by a previous generation of visual studies research and is essential reading for those interested in encountering the expanded field of images beyond ways of seeing.

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BOOKS


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