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# Image in contemporary culture

One of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative human imagination seems under mounting threat. We no longer appear to know who exactly produces or controls the images which condition our consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 1994

In today's world of mass consumerism, globalisation, worldwide economies and accelerated communication, we are ceaselessly bombarded by visual images. Italo Calvino refers to this experiential condition as 'the unending rainfall of images',<sup>2</sup> whereas Richard Kearney uses the notion 'image addiction'.<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes calls our entire post-industrial and post-modern mass-media culture 'the civilization of the image'.<sup>4</sup> Today's profusion of images often gives rise to an oppressive feeling of excess and eutrophication, a kind of suffocation in an endless Sargasso Sea of Images.

The constantly developing imaging technologies have certainly opened up entirely new means of monitoring, recording, analysing and depicting countless aspects of reality, and the industrial production of images has made them present anywhere and available to anyone. The image has changed the ways we experience the world and communicate about it. At the same time, the current hegemony of the image has also made its negative impacts apparent.

## Hegemony of the image

Images are produced and deployed ad infinitum for purposes of information, education and entertainment, as well as for commercial, ideological and political manipulation, and artistic expression. Our physical world, cityscapes and natural settings, as well as our inner mental landscapes are all colonised today by the image industry. Even the traditional culture of the book seems to have been swiftly replaced by the image and digital information. Recent studies have alarmingly shown the decline of language skills and literary knowledge even in the economically most advanced nations. Before the emergence of the era of writing and mass literacy, humans communicated primarily through gestures and images. Are we now on our way back to a new illiterate age of communicating through the image? Is reading turning into an antiquated skill and a nostalgic pastime of the privileged few?

The excessive flow of imagery gives rise to an experience of a discontinuous and displaced world. In the book, information is usually embedded in long causal narratives, whereas the digital search media mostly provide quick but detached and fragmented pieces of knowledge. A recent study revealed that more than 50 per cent of American children under 15 years old had never watched a single television programme from the beginning to its end.<sup>5</sup> Does this signal the end of complete narratives and the ethics of causation? What is the ethical message of interrupted and discontinuous narratives? As a teacher of architecture I have witnessed the negative impact of easily available but fragmentary information in student papers that tend to lay out numerous facts but often lack an understanding of the essence of the subject. Information is replacing knowledge.

An instant and effortless impact is surely the objective of most of today's communication and entertainment. Even architecture – the art form that, in the view of Sir Christopher Wren in 1660, should bear 'The Attribute of the

eternal', and be 'the only thing incapable of new fashions'<sup>6</sup> – has become an area of short-lived imagery. This observation is reinforced when comparing architectural journals from the era of modernity with today's magazines; the first give the impression of an evolving culture of construction whereas the latter usually seem to show momentary and individualistic formal inventions. No wonder, many philosophers of post-modernity have characterised our era with such words as 'contrived depthlessness', 'waning of historicity and affect' and 'lacking of overall views'.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time that images have multiplied in number, they have changed in character. Instead of being representations of a reality, today's forceful imagery creates its own reality that is often more 'real' than the existing physical and human worlds. As Richard Kearney suggests, the role of the image today differs fundamentally from former times, as 'now the image precedes the reality it is supposed to represent',<sup>8</sup> and 'reality has become a pale reflection of the image'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in today's ordinary life, and commercial and political practices, as well as the entire expanding realm of entertainment, the image often dominates or replaces reality, and 'the real and the imaginary have become almost impossible to distinguish'.<sup>10</sup> The reality of politics today is most often based on carefully controlled imagery rather than any historically authenticated truth. In the virtual image world, as in computer games and virtual reality, or in the simulated surrogate reality of *Second Life*, the reality of computer-generated imagery has already replaced the reality of the flesh. The virtual worlds are already objects of our identity and empathy. In fact, the notion of 'reality' has been totally relativised; we need to specify whose reality, and in which context, we are talking about. 'Reality' itself is philosophically a highly disputable notion, but it has never been as ambiguous and groundless as today.

## The demise of imagination

The notions 'image' and 'imagination' seem to be semantically closely related. Yet, Kearney reports that many commentators today speak of 'the demise of imagination'. He makes the further alarming suggestion that 'the very notion of imaginative creativity may soon be a thing of the past'.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the fragmentation of information, the increasing speed and short attention span, and the consequent simplification of both text and image, the accelerated communication inevitably reduces nuances and flattens the space of individual imagination. In the case that our autonomous capacities of imagination

and critical judgement would actually weaken, as has been suggested, it is inevitable that our experiences and behaviour are in danger of being increasingly conditioned by images of unidentifiable origins and intentions. The weakening of imagination also suggests a consequent weakening of our empathetic and ethical sense.

Recent neurological studies have greatly advanced the understanding of our brain and neural processes in perceiving, recalling and imagining images, but even this advanced research information is already utilised for the purposes of developing increasingly canny strategies and methods in advertising and commercial conditioning.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, imagination as an autonomous mental faculty seems to be replaced rather than stimulated by the excessive but passivating external imagery around us. Concerned studies of the influence of the Internet on our cognition have already appeared, such as Nicholas Carr's 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?'. In the writer's view:

The Internet is likely to have very far-reaching effects on human cognition. Never has a communications system played so many roles in our lives – or exerted such broad influence over our thoughts – as the Internet does today. Yet, for all that's been written about the Net, there's been little consideration of how, exactly, it's reprogramming us. The Net's intellectual ethic remains obscure. The Net even changes the structure of other media from newspapers and magazines to television.<sup>13</sup>

Is our uniquely human gift of imagination threatened by today's over-abundance of images? Do our mass-produced and computer-generated images already imagine on our behalf? Is it reasonable to assume that even today's prevailing political pragmatism and lack of social visions and utopias are a consequence of a withering of political imagination? Are the expanding realms of fantasy life and daydream images a surrogate for genuine, individual and autonomous imagination and human affection? My anxious answer to all these questions is: yes.

## Image production and the feasibility of architecture

In the era that preceded printing and mass reading, the cathedral with its sculptures, frescos and stained-glass windows was a seminal medium for

conveying biblical texts and events to the largely illiterate congregation. The invention and deployment of printing made the book available to the masses and also became an incentive for the skill of reading.

Victor Hugo appended an enigmatic paragraph to the eighth edition of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) entitled 'ceci tuera cela' ('this will kill that'), pronouncing the death sentence of architecture: 'In the fifteenth century [...] Human thought discovered a means of perpetuating itself in a more lasting and resistant form than architecture. It was simpler and easier as well. Architecture was dethroned. To Orpheus's stone letters succeeded Gutenberg's leaden type.'<sup>14</sup>

Hugo further examines this thought, which he places in the mouth of the Archdeacon of Notre-Dame: 'The foreshadowing that the human mind in changing its form would change its mode of expression, that the foremost idea of every generation would no longer be written on the same material, with the same manner; that the stone book, so solid and lasting, would give way to the paper book, still more solid and lasting.'<sup>15</sup>

Although Hugo's prophecy has been quoted time and again, its meaning for the course of architectural history has not, I think, been correctly interpreted. Hugo's prediction that architecture as the most important cultural medium would lose its status to newer media, has undoubtedly come true. But the new media have not ousted architecture because of their greater strength and durability, as Hugo predicted, but for exactly the opposite reasons: because they are fast, fleeting and dispensable. The printed book signified the first major step towards today's visual and simultaneous world. Early books on architecture, along with increasing travels – the Grand Tour – facilitated the propagation of stylistic ideals, such as the Palladian principles of architecture. At the same time that architectural ideals gained universality through their presence in the printed form, architecture lost its status as the most important locus of cultural information, in accordance with Hugo's prediction.

When even styles have become articles of conscious elaboration and consumption in today's consumer society, architecture has proved to be a hopelessly cumbersome medium of communication compared with the novel forms of disposable mass media. The fundamental meaning of architecture, even in the civilisation of the image, is integration and stability, as Sir Christopher Wren preached, but these qualities are in open conflict

with the ideology of consumption. In fact, the normally long lifespan of buildings and other material constructions is in evident conflict with the ideas of momentary consumption, designed aging and repeated replacement. The strategy of consumerism requires ephemerality, alienation and the splintering of consciousness. A coherent view of the world would undoubtedly reveal the insanity of obsessive growth and consumption.

## Architecture and the spectacle

Architecture has always fictionalised reality and culture through turning human settings into images and metaphors of idealised order and life, into fictionalised architectural narratives. Historically, architecture has also negotiated between the cosmic and human dimensions, eternity and present, gods and mortals. It has a central role in creating and projecting an idealised self-image of the given culture. This idealising objective is as clear in Greek architecture and *polis* (illustration, page 122, The Acropolis, Athens, Greece) as in Roman architectural structures and the organisation of the Roman city. A special realm of idealised architecture includes utopias and fictional architectural projects that were not even intended to be built, such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi's (1720–78) famous *Carceri d'Invenzione* drawings, the projects of the French utopists at the time of the French Revolution, and the visions of glass architecture of the German Expressionist architects. However, today's forceful imaging techniques and instantaneous architectural imagery often seem to create a world of autonomous architectural fictions, which totally neglect the fundamental existential soil and objectives of the art of building. This is an alienated architectural world without gravity and materiality, hapticity and compassion. The earlier visions of architecture reflected a viable form of culture and lifestyle whereas today's computer-generated visions usually appear as mere graphic exercises without a sense of real life. Today's thematised settings and fictitious architectural simulacra, such as shopping malls and urban squares, exemplify this loss of cultural sincerity and innocence. Are we today being manipulated by images of our own making? Yes, we are, and the ecstatic architectural images of our era of personal exhibitionism and narcissism conceal the fundamental and decisive issues of lifestyle, and value, and they blur the view of an ethical and biologically sound future.

From *The Society of the Spectacle*, promoted by Guy Debord,<sup>16</sup> we are swiftly turning into the society of surveillance and manipulation. The secret control

of behaviour and individual life through images and technical devices already extends beyond the visual mode; multi-sensory marketing manipulates experiences, feelings and desires through sounds, tactile sensations, tastes and smells. In fact, today we are colonised through all our senses. Such notions as 'multisensory marketing', 'branding of the senses', 'sensory persuasion', 'tapping the sensorial subconscious', 'canalizing the mind-space', and 'hypersensuality of the contemporary market place' are used to describe these novel sensory strategies of scientifically informed marketing.<sup>17</sup> This expansion of sensory colonisation is exemplified by the recent attempt by the manufacturers of Harley-Davidson motorcycles to patent the characteristic coarse and masculine sound of their engine.<sup>18</sup>

A peculiar form of architectural 'colonisation' takes place through the uncritical application of technologies, such as efficient mechanical air-conditioning, which make it possible to build in the same universal style everywhere regardless of local climates.

Today's signature architecture seeks the same kind of close-circuit effect and product identification, and there are even examples of 'franchised' architecture, commercialised projects by the globalised offices of signature architects which aspire to express a recognisable brand. The great empires of the history of civilisations have always marked their territories by a specific architecture, and architecture has always promoted power. Today's globalised image-architecture aggressively claims the territory of the globalised market economy, the latest phase of worldwide capitalism.

Consumerism and its primary tool, publicity, even have ideological consequences. 'Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world', John Berger argued more than three decades ago.<sup>19</sup> Berger's argument suggests that we are living in a world of multiple realities and that we are forcefully exposed to make-believe realities. In today's world of instant global information and fluid capital, it is more evident than ever that an always expanding veil of disguise and mental conditioning frequently masks the realm of real intentions. It has become the hopeless task of critical journalism and various citizen movements to attempt to unmask the fabricated reality that we are forced to live in.

## Images of control and emancipation

### THE COMMANDING AND THE EMANCIPATING IMAGE

Images either focus and control the subject's attention and awareness for purposes of manipulating emotion and behaviour, or they liberate and inspire his/her imagination opening up a dimension of individual imaginative freedom.

Ludwig Hohlwein, *Und Du?* (*And You?*), 1932. Political poster, offset lithograph, 117.5 x 80.6 cm.

The commanding image of a political poster. The image weakens the viewer's sense of self by focusing his/her imagination.

Sigurður Guðmundsson, *Encore* (detail), 1991.

The emancipating poetic image of an Icelandic artist. The image empowers the viewer and opens up his/her imagination.

The notion 'image' is used frequently and fundamentally in differing meanings and varying contexts. The very same word is used indiscriminately for pictures, percepts, and entities of imagination, dream and daydream. Images are deployed for countless purposes, but there are two opposite types of images in relation to the individual freedom of the subject: images that dictate, manipulate and condition, and others that emancipate, empower and inspire. The first type is exemplified by images devised for political and consumer conditioning, the second by emancipatory poetic and artistic images. The first category narrows down, confines and weakens the freedom, choice and individuality of the subject by means of focusing and channelling his/her attention and awareness into a forced pattern, often grounded in the subject's sense of guilt and inferiority. The latter category of images opens up, fortifies and liberates by means of strengthening personal imagination, emotion and affect. The first category of images weakens us and makes us more uncertain of ourselves and dependent on authority, whereas poetic imagery reinforces our sense of self, autonomy and individual independence. The poetic images are images of individual integrity and freedom.

Altogether, images open up a direct channel to the human mind and emotion, and this channel can be used for multifarious and even opposite



purposes, humane or totalitarian, benevolent or cynical ends. Even in historiography, countless fragmented facts are compiled into images and narratives, and our understanding of history is fully dictated by these condensed and pre-narrated images of the fundamentally unfocused and shapeless temporal flow of places, personalities and events. The progression of history is normally told as a narrative between the milestones of wars, agreements, discoveries and great personalities; notoriously, standard histories are the stories of the winners.<sup>20</sup>

The development of imaging technologies and the mass production of fictitious narratives have already reversed the notions of reality and fiction. The merging of reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, ethical concerns and aesthetics, past and future, is one of the fundamental strategies in today's political and economic practices. Kearney sees the cultural situation critically indeed: 'We are at an impasse where the very rapport between *imagination* and *reality* seems not only inverted but subverted altogether.'<sup>21</sup> But the art world too is frequently an authoritatively pre-narrated and manipulated realm. The financial fact that entire nations today are living on credit is another alarming indication of the speeding up of life and the hold of fictitious realities; we are increasingly living in the future tense and losing the sense of the present.

Since time immemorial, the cultural task of storytelling, literature and art was to produce and maintain 'the other level of reality' – to use a notion of Herbert Marcuse<sup>22</sup> – that of dreams, beliefs, myths and ideals, for the purpose of creating an essential mental counterpoint to the mundane, and usually depressing, everyday experience of reality. During recent decades, however, the ethical responsibility of artists and writers seems to have reversed, and their task today is to strengthen our experience of the real. In the preface to his bestseller novel *Crash* (1973), JG Ballard argues to this effect, as he suggests that the relation of fiction and reality is in the process of turning upside down. We live increasingly in worlds of fiction and, therefore, the task of the writer is not any longer to invent fiction. Fictions are already here, and the 'writer's task is to invent reality'.<sup>23</sup>

## The sense of the real

The condition of architecture has changed similarly. In a world which is increasingly fictionalised by an architecture of the commercialised image, and

the enticing and seducing architecture of the retinal image, the task of the critical, profound and responsible architect is to create and defend the sense of the real. Instead of creating, or supporting a world of fantasy, the task of architecture is to strengthen our experience of the real in the spheres of perception and experience, as well as in cultural and social interaction. When our settings are turning into thematised and fabricated facades of fictitious culture – simulacra, to use a notion frequently used by Umberto Eco and other philosophers of post-modernity – the duty of responsible architecture is to defend the authenticity and autonomy of human experience. In the world of simulacra, simulation and virtuality, the ethical task of architects is to provide the touchstone of the real.

In my view, in the near future, the notion of the 'real' will increasingly imply what is justifiable in the biological perspective, both past and future. The notion of the real in our settings of life cannot be endlessly expanded and relativised; we are biological and historical beings whose entire physical, metabolic and neural systems have been optimally tuned to the reality of physical, ecological and biological facts. The human reality, as well as our future, is undeniably grounded in our biological and cultural past as much as in our wisdom concerning the future.

One of the basic reasons why the image has become such a forceful means of manipulation lies in the historical fact that logocentric Western philosophical, scientific as well as pedagogic thinking has neglected, or even entirely denied, the role of imagery and imagination in human thought, communication and everyday life. As a consequence, the image has been taken hostage from the realm of serious thinking and research, and it is being increasingly forcefully exploited for manipulative purposes. This is again paradoxical in a culture dominated by vision to the degree that vision has been accepted as the common metaphor for truth.<sup>24</sup>

There is no doubt about the fact that the humanity of the third millennium is a result of hundreds of thousands of years of human imagination and imagery. We are creatures of the life-world who have deliberately tamed and made ourselves. Images have served humanity in freeing us from the overpowering biological imperatives. But have we ourselves become victims of our own imagination? Has human imagination, combined with the desire for power and control, turned against ourselves as a biological species? Again, my answer to my questions is: yes, I believe so.

If imagination and images have emancipated the human race, couldn't the re-humanised image liberate us again? Couldn't the poetic and embodied image, the unselfish, disinterested and authentically curious imagination open up an optimistic future and emancipate us again?

This book was written with the belief that we can liberate and sensitise ourselves through a re-mythicised and re-poeticised understanding of the world, and that human imagination is autonomous, self-generative and limitless. It is encouraging that during the past few decades, scientific imagery seems to have approached poetic imagery, and vice versa. We live in an imaginative world – or worlds – of our own making, and the future of humanity rests entirely on our capacity for imagination. The following chapters analyse the essence of the mental image and imagination, and suggest ways in which we might go about re-rooting the art of architecture in its existential soil.

# References

- 1 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, Routledge (London), 1994, p 3.
- 2 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Vintage Books (New York), 1988, p 57.
- 3 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 1994, p 383.
- 4 As quoted in Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*, Harper Collins Academic (London), 1991, p 8.
- 5 The study is referred to in Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 1994, p 1.
- 6 As quoted in Norris Kelly Smith, 'Crisis in Jerusalem', *Late Entries*, Vol II, Rizzoli International Publications (New York), 1980, p 108.
- 7 Most notably, Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press (Durham), 1991, and David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Publishers (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK), 1990.  
'Everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historisation of experience', Jameson asserts (p 9). Harvey points out the flattening of artistic thought: 'It is hardly surprising that the artist's relation to history [...] has shifted, that in the era of mass television there has emerged an attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than solidly achieved cultural artifact' (p 61).
- 8 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 1994, p 2.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid. p 6.
- 12 The most useful neurological studies for this context are listed in the Selected Bibliography on pp 140–143.
- 13 Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?' (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/>).
- 14 Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, trans Catherine Liu, The Modern Library (New York), 2002, p 168. The unfortunate title of the English translation, which Hugo himself disliked, makes the deformed bellringer the protagonist instead of the cathedral itself.
- 15 Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, 2002, p 162.
- 16 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books (New York), 1995.
- 17 David Howes, 'Hyperesthesia, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Empire of the Senses*, edited by David Howes, Berg Publishers (Oxford and New York), 2005, pp 281–303.
- 18 David Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 2005, p 288.
- 19 John Berger, *The Ways of Seeing*, The British Broadcasting Corporation (London), 1977, p 149.
- 20 Jared Diamond's history of the human settlement of the world, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, WW Norton & Company (New York and London), 1999, narrates the gradual distribution of the human species around the world from its origins in East Africa, following the logic of actual movements of groups of humans. His story reads as an entirely different causality in comparison with standard histories.
- 21 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 1994, p 3.
- 22 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press (Boston), 1964, p 57.
- 23 As quoted in Lars Fr H Svendsen, *Ikävystymisen filosofia [A Philosophy of Boredom]*, Kustannusosakeyhtiö Tammi (Helsinki), 1999, p 92.
- 24 For the hegemony of vision and logocentric thinking, see my previous books *The Eyes of the Skin* (1995 and 2005) and *The Thinking Hand* (2009), as well as the numerous books referred to in these two studies.