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Image as a Technology of Being and Becoming

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1. Introduction

The idea that visual culture is the dominant mode of not only communication but also existence has been pervasive among theorists and the public at the turn of this century. Simultaneously, the collapse of the distinction between high and low culture in the West brought about the notion of egalitarianism of visual outputs. The pressing question of the moment is how to structure and glean meaning in a world saturated by mediated information. Once the endorsement of an authority does not influence one's judgment people are left to their own devices in evaluating the transmission of information. One becomes split between the intuitive notion that the avalanche of images is meaningless and the need for visual communication of what's behind them.

Understanding the mechanisms behind the depth and flattening of an image will throw additional light on the human being in the present world. Our participation through the act of perceiving and choosing among the images becomes a political and ontological activity. This consummator act initiates a process of individuation, which relates humans to each other and to their own being. Images in thus conceived structure are the tools and the extension of what is present behind them. In the following text, I will trace the process of individuation as it comes to realization through images in the process of flattening of meaning and transmission of being.

2. The Flattening of Image

With the onset of distribution platforms drowning one in information and images, we have become intensely selective viewers. Ironically, images designed to solicit one's attention such as advertisements are readily edited out by one's psyche. The aesthetization of the visual world facilitates our ability to filter information further. The flattening of an image resulting from this process allows for streamlining data that bypasses emotional reactions. Aesthetics facilitates our functionality in the world where information threatens to overload human processing capacity.

This popular utilitarian view can be traced back to the idea of aesthetics introduced by Jacques Rancier. In an interview below, the author gives his phenomenological argument.

(...) aesthetics not being a sociology of art but as being a form of experience. That is, an experience of disconnection. This has been conceptualized by Kant and Schiller in terms of disconnection: there is something that escapes the normal

conditions of sensory experience. That is what was at stake in emancipation: getting out of the ordinary ways of sensory experience. (Rancier, 71)

Rancier believes in the power of aesthetics used in the service of reframing the world. This detaching gesture allows a person to emancipate themselves from their present situation by stepping back and appreciating their position from a distance. In Rancier's view the detachment is a positive development that facilitates political change. He goes on to say that "The aesthetic experience is set up as a kind of disruption". (Rancier, 73) The discontinuity of reality provided by a painting, for example, opens the door to perceiving a possibility of one's position within a new paradigm. The aesthetic experience "became the basis of a new idea of revolution and a new idea of community where people are equal as sensible creatures and not only as citizens. So the aesthetic regime gave a new form to ethical thinking." (Rancier, 73)

The framing of sensory world provided by aesthetics brings about a new kind of egalitarianism. It is accomplished by providing extraordinary ways of sensory experience, in which everyone can participate. Moreover, it is not up to the artist to pontificate from the soapbox of their work. "People were not emancipated by revolutionary painting. But they could acquire a new kind of body, a new gaze out of this availability of any kind of painting." (Rancier, 74) Therefore, the variety and availability of images becomes the liberating factor. Everyone is equal as long as they have equal access to reframing devices such as images or text. The accessibility of such devices is becomes increasingly widespread in the electronically enhanced world, which we inhabit today.

The crowd carrying Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* through the streets of Paris during the French Revolution exemplifies the marriage between aesthetics and political action. Many have pointed to David's genius for igniting the revolutionary fervor yet from Rancier's point of view it is the people that endowed the artwork with political meaning. The work framed a historical event and was embraced by political subjects as a symbol and a trajectory of their struggle. The aesthetically flattened event, Marat's death, provided a point of view and a point of departure alternate to the hegemonic reality. It became political the moment it was seized by the crowd. As Rancier states "The problem is not what artists have to do to become political; the question has to be reversed: what do political subjects have to do with art"? (Rancier, 74) The question of the political subject's participation becomes paramount since it dictates the interpretation of the image. The significance is being structured from without. Today, the availability of images brings about opportunities to structure multiple meanings and the choices are more polarized than ever.

3. Where is the Aura?

In contrast, Rancier's scenario is Walter Benjamin's worst nightmare. In the beginning of the last millennium, Benjamin grieves over the flattening of image, which results from its reproduction. In his view, the process of copying and distribution due to

popularization of photography and printed media rids the subject of “aura.” He explains the process in the following terms.

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. (...) And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. (Benjamin, 221)

For Benjamin the loss of the original context and historical dimension of the object dilutes its gravity and even erases its significance. The soul of the object is forever lost while its reproduction communicates only a façade of an experience. The perceived object understood as a carrier of meaning gives gravity to a first-hand experience. It is precisely the autonomy of objects that is at stake in a world filled with reproductions.

Other thinkers such as Roland Barthes make some allowances when it comes to the reproduction possessing certain amount of soul or aura. Following his mother’s death Barthes embarked on a search for a photograph that would capture the essence of the departed person. After dismissing a pile of failed reproductions of his mother’s likeness, he came across a photo that managed to achieve the task.

These same photographs, which phenomenology would call “ordinary” objects, were merely analogical provoking only her identity, not her truth; but the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*. (Barth, 70, author’s italics)

The discovery of this photograph signals a possibility of communicating the aura through a medium other than the original. It is as though certain reproductions become infected with the being. The science and art of passing an essence by the way of different permutations of matter is illusive. In a different passage, describing Nadar’s photograph of his mother or wife (the identity of the woman is uncertain) Barth claims that “he (Nadar) had produced a supererogatory photograph which contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer”. (Barth, 70) Therefore the transference of aura is technologically unreasonable yet if successful, it is readily recognized by a human.

The illusive alchemy of meaning takes place at a point where the receiver’s perception hits the aura-transmitting medium. Understanding the perceiver’s role as partly constitutive of the phenomena takes us back to Rancier’s view of the process. The mediated experience, instead of being a terminus for meaning, can act as Rancier’s reframing that allows reanimation of the object through further permutations of meaning. The aura is not only conserved in the special cases of images but also can be reactivated by the act of perceiving and acting on the image. The constitutive action comes from the original object as much as the viewer on the other side of the media.

It appears then that aura is not completely lost while aesthetics contribute to the variety of possible worlds we can choose from. Therefore images, after all, do carry transformational properties behind their glossy and electronic surfaces. We are dealing with a certain reality of being that is transmitted. To cite an example, the contemporary parallel to Nadar's portrait of a woman is the photo of an Afghan girl featured in 1985 in National Geographic. In an article written about her reunion with the photographer the author gives expression to the depth of the photographic transmission in the following passage. "Her eyes are sea green. They are haunted and haunting, and in them you can read the tragedy of a land drained by war". (Newman) Looking at the photograph, no one would disagree with this statement. The reality of not only a singular being but also a whole nation became encapsulated in one snapshot.

4. Image as a Technology of Being

I will go as far as saying that an image today can serve as a technology of being and individuation. In order to make such a statement, first I would like to define what is meant by terms: being and individuation. When considering this ontological question, one often takes it for granted that being and an individual constitute one and the same entity. Yet portraying this relationship as a fusion of the two may be an oversimplification. Gilbert Simondon proposes a different take on how being and individual are related to each other. In his model, the individual is only a partial manifestation of the being, which is behind the particular. "Thus, the individual is to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of the whole being in question" (Simondon, 300). The individual never exhausts the being, which as the origin of the former holds additional potentialities.

Simondon introduces a concept of preindividual state, which is the being in its original constitution saturated with possibilities and tensions. The individual phase of the whole being is marked by the previous state in the following manner.

(...) a phase that therefore carries the implication of a preceding preindividual state, and that, even after individuation, does not exist in isolation, since individuation does not exhaust in the single act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the preindividual state. (Simondon, 300)

This original state seeks a certain kind of resolution in the individual since it carries all the possibilities, which are not always compatible with each other. The plentitude of options remains in equilibrium until a crystallization process becomes triggered and an individual entity comes forth from the primordial soup of potentialities. Simondon gives the following description of the individuation process.

Individuation must therefore be thought of as a partial and relative resolution manifested in a system that contains latent potentials and harbors a certain incompatibility with itself, an incompatibility due at once to forces in tension as well as to the impossibility of interaction between terms of extremely disparate dimensions. (Simondon, 300)

Further, this static being holding all the tensions, the preindividual being, unfolds as a structure resolving the tensions in a process of becoming. In Simondon's words "becoming exists as one of the dimensions of the being, that it corresponds to a capacity beings possess of falling out of step with themselves, of resolving themselves by the very act of falling out of step" (Simondon, 300). This incongruence in the makeup of the being unfolds as a series of steps resolving the initial internal incompatibility. "The being in which individuation comes to fruition is that in which a resolution appears by its division into stages, which implies becoming" (Simondon, 301). In this sense, individuation comes to fruition through becoming.

The individuation is the extended being, which adapts a specific structure as a means of resolving the latent potentials. The process of individuation can be understood in terms of the being. "(...) we must consider the being not as a substance, or matter, or form, but as a tautly extended and supersaturated system, which exists at a higher level than the unit itself, which is not sufficient unto itself" (Simondon, 301). In this statement the author is establishing a metaphysical relationship between the being and its individuation. Additionally, there is a directionality in the process of passing on the reality from the being through the process of becoming to the individual manifestation. Curiously, Simondon establishes points of temporary equilibrium that is reached by the individual until it falls out of step with itself again. "Unity and identity are applicable only to one of the being's stages, which comes after the process of individuation" (Simondon, 301).

Simondon's structure highlights the pattern established between the being and the individual. The dynamic involved in the process of becoming, which takes place between the two, and the implied flow of reality from one to the other is reminiscent of the process of communication via a medium. In fact, Simondon states himself that:

The true principle of individuation is mediation, which generally presumes the existence of the original duality of the orders of magnitude and the initial absence of interactive communication between them, followed by a subsequent communication between order of magnitude and stabilization. (Simondon, 304)

A contemporary individual, who becomes trained in mediated communication as soon as they are able to press buttons on a keyboard, intuitively grasps the process of mediation.

5. Conclusions

Today, images and text enter a relationship with actual events and people, which parallels individuation process. In another words, certain images hide being, which by the way of mediation individuates itself as a specific manifestation of that being. This notion is consistent with Simondon's understanding of individuation as mediation between orders of magnitude. Therefore, media in general can be looked at as a vehicle through which an individual is becoming something specific. The whole process extends backwards and forward in the following progression: being, an event, mediated

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representation, receiving consciousness. Being in this system propagates forward although never exhaust itself in any one manifestation. The individuation through a singular image is only one of the many possibilities, which arrives as a resolution of being's internal tensions.

The simultaneous sense of aesthetical flattening and sensation of a being behind the image finds its resolution in the act of perception. The self-reflexive viewer can achieve both motions. The pulling back and gaining aesthetical distance allows one to change the lens or point of view on any given situation. At the same time, adopting one of those frames as one's own allows a deeper read of the mediated object. The being comes to a surface of the medium called by the observer and individuates further along the trajectory in his or her own psyche. The individuation takes place with every act of viewing a new set of data as the understanding of the self shifts within the context of the new frame. What we find behind the multiple images and in between them is our own becoming and as a conscious being we are able to appreciate it on its own terms. Today, inspired by the availability of media and images, a fresh and surprising individuation takes place at each instance.

Presently, more than ever, we are able to appreciate our existence as specks of dust in a larger perspective of the churning history. The information available via various media teaches us a lesson about the enormity of factors shaping our trajectories in the world. We have become aware of being ingrained in a history where personal can become political. Aesthetics as a frame presents a unique opportunity for gaining distance and appreciation of the numerous ways in which to see the being behind the image. While flattening allows processing of larger amounts of information, it also facilitates our ability to make choices in an informationally saturated world. By joining a specific being and individuation trajectory, we choose our world in a political sense. Since we do have the ability to make choices between the frames, individuation is no longer an unconscious by-product of living in a world. In the process of self-reflection, the image stands as a technology revealing our being to ourselves.

Notes

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