

The Images of the Artificial or Why Everything Looks the Same

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Abstract: Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is not merely the passive reception of visual data but an embodied, imaginative, and transformative experience. What is transformed through embodied perception is the perceiver of the world and the world perceived, in short our sense of reality. From this we can imagine the world as being fundamentally abstract, artificial and manipulable. This obviously raises questions about the nature of the realm of the material, of what we might call concrete reality. For design this appears untenable for though the perception of the world as-it-might-be functions on an abstract level, the changes we make are based upon our embodied experience of the world as-we-perceive-it. These changes then become operational at an apparent material, concrete, level. As design activity is concerned with transforming the world, quite literally in material form, this leads to design being imagined as the creation of the artificial world. In this paper I seek firstly to draw upon these parallel concerns with the imaginative and the artificial by examining the central role that the image plays in both. I will specifically interrogate the nature of the images of design and argue that because they are largely technical and increasingly ubiquitous – that is they are available to anyone with a camera phone, a computer and design software – that we are witnessing the erasure of the imaginary by the image. I will conclude by speculating on how we might resist such conditions.

Keywords: Design, Phenomenology of Perception, Photography

Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. (Simon, 1996[1969], p.111)

Introduction

The human act of designing is concerned with transforming the world we inhabit to one that better suits our perceived needs and desires. As a consequence of this transformation we inhabit an increasingly human-made, or artificial, world. It is for this reason that Herbert Simon coined the term ‘The Sciences of the Artificial’ when arguing the need for a program of rigorous study of the phenomena of design.¹ His conception of design resulting in the production of the artificial, or human-made, world was not to pass judgement on it, but to distinguish such a world from the naturally occurring one. This might now seem like a simplistic binary definition but the distinction Simon makes provides a useful and necessary analytical construct to highlight the shift that has occurred as a result of our constant intervention in the natural world through our propensity to design. Although this last point may be regarded as pressing, because we are rapidly replacing the natural world with the artificial, it is not one that I will be addressing in this paper. I do not seek to comment on what we are doing to the planet as a consequence of our propensity to transform it, I will leave that to others better equipped to do so. Instead I seek to understand the basis of our urge to design. As a result I will not be offering any answers to solve the issues, or problems as other might call them, that I raise. Rather I wish to illuminate a particular perspective on design to better understand it for much of the discourse on design sees it largely in instrumental terms as being concerned with solving problems. Such a view, and one that I will in part challenge in this paper, is concerned with doing design better to make it more efficient or effective. This is very much in keeping with Simon’s attitude to the study of design. More recently making design more efficient and effective is a way of recasting design as more sustainable or eco-friendly; to solve problems in the natural world as it were. While this seems a

¹ Simon, The Sciences of The Artificial.

laudable intention solving problems does not strike to the heart of the matter as to why we design. I consider this approach to be somewhat naïve, if not disingenuous, for to think that we can solve the problems of the natural world through design fundamentally misunderstands the imperative to design, which is to transform the world in our image through acts of human imagination. Simply put it is through imagination that we perceive the world can be different from how we currently perceive and experience it. In this regard perhaps looking at the act of design as something that can be better managed, or made more efficient, might prove less fruitful in mitigating our impact upon the natural world than addressing the nature of these perceptions and images that we have of the world we experience, on a day-to-day basis.

Images are significant surfaces. Images signify – mainly – something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as ‘imagination’. (Flusser, 2007[1983], p. 8)

Not only is the facility of the image to “abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back” the foundation of imagination, it is also the foundation of design, our ability to transform the world. Images are central to the creative act of designing. They are manifest and operate on both a ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ level. They are simultaneously concrete and abstract when a designer observes an artefact or environment with a view to transforming it. Concrete in the sense that their experience of that object or environment is ‘real’ and abstract in the sense that the image they have of them, which is encountered through perception, is not physically manifest and is uniquely theirs and not transferable to anyone else. Additionally the images of design (for that is what I will call them) are abstract when they are the image a designer ‘thinks’ of (or imagines) in relation to the changes they wish to make to that perceived artefact or environment. They then become concrete when that imagining becomes manifest in the plans, drawings, diagrams or photographs (all visible images) a designer produces to instruct others to manufacture the artefact or environment they have conceived. It is this specific relationship between the abstract images that designers perceive and imagine and the concrete images they encounter and produce that I wish to explore for they are at the heart of how we design.

Drawing has long been one of the key image types that designer’s have used to develop and visualise their concepts, plans, and representations of the artefacts that they design.² Early in the design process drawings are used to record observations of contexts and artefacts to be re-imagined through design. Later in the process they become the representation, or instructions, of the artefact to be manufactured. Design-by-drawing, as this is called by Design Methodologists, is regarded as being an improvement on craft production because “trial and error is separated from production by using a scale drawing in place of the product as a medium for experiment and change”.³ However Design Methodologists have argued that design-by-drawing is not up to the task of dealing with the increasingly complex, or systems level, design problems the world faces because problems that are not visible tend not to come to the attention of those who practice it.⁴ Jones, however, notes that the even so the designer requires something analogous to drawing otherwise they will have “no medium in which to communicate the essence of the mental imagery with which he could conceive of a tentative solution”.⁵ Irrespective of the utility of drawing in complex design situations it is clear the image in one form or another, concrete or abstract, is central to the act of design.

² Jones, *Design Methods*, pp. 20-23

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20

⁴ Lawson, *How Designers Think*, p. 18

⁵ Jones, *Design Methods*, p. 42

Design Methods, influenced as it was by the work of Herbert Simon, attempted to develop a scientific approach to the study and practice of design in the 1960s and 70s and formulated the metaphor of design being a problem solving activity. Much has been written about the success and failures of Design Methods in the intervening years but irrespective of those critiques the problem solving metaphor of design largely persists. More recently design has embraced the ethnographic method, particularly in the form of co-design, participatory design, and user experience design. Photo-observation and the use of photographic archives have long been used in the field of anthropology, and to a lesser extent sociology, to gain insight into the experiences people have, and the meanings they make of the worlds they create and inhabit. In using photo-observation, or accessing existing photographic archives, design researchers try to understand the contexts of usage that a product, built environment, or service will play out in, to better design it.⁶ This increasing use of photography, as a source of information in the formative stages of the design process, has occurred with little or no critique of the consequences of doing so. This stands in contrast to the extensive literature that exists around the role and consequences of using drawing in design⁷ and indeed the role and consequences of using photography in anthropology.⁸

In this paper I wish to explore the consequences of and constraints that may arise in the imaginative act of designing, when the concrete images that designers engage with, as documentary evidence of perceptual observation, are increasingly photographic. I shall do this with particular reference to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Vilem Flusser, the former because he developed one of the most sustained philosophical interrogations on the phenomenological nature of embodied human perception, and Flusser because he is unique in his phenomenological understanding of both photography and design. I will firstly explore the phenomena of the mass digitisation of photography and its impact upon how we perceive the world. I will do this in relation Flusser's philosophy of photography. I will then apply Merleau-Ponty's theory on the role of images in embodied human perception to my understanding of the role of images in design as a way of challenging the orthodox view that design solves problems. I will then draw these threads together to look at the consequences for the imaginative and transformative act of design that has occurred as a result of the shift from 'traditional' (hand generated) images to 'technical' (machine generated) images.

Images of the Artificial

Once upon a time we were occasionally subjected to the dreaded family slide night of a visiting friend or relative where we politely watched an endless display of often poorly executed photographs of distant relatives, events or locations. We were bored with the monotony and sameness of it all yet we too could usually compile a similar photographic chronicle of our own lives to inflict upon others. Many of us had such photographic collections and we valued them because we usually had direct experiences of the people, events, and places within them. Conversely we were disinterested in the collections of others if we didn't have such a direct connection, through personal experience, to the content of their photos in spite of the fact that they probably chronicled similar things. In essence the collections of others were effectively meaningless to us if we had no experience of what they depicted. But the difference between those experiences of domestic photography, and now, is that they were essentially privately shared and rarely encountered. This has all changed with digitisation and the internet.

Everyone with a camera phone and a computer is busy chronicling their everyday lives and uploading them to the internet for just about anyone to see, choking up one aspect of what

⁶ See for example Anderson (2004), Dreyfuss (203[1955]), Plowman (2003), Sanoff (1991), Zeisel (2005[1984]).

⁷ See for example Henderson (1995), Oxman (1997), Schon (1983), Suwa & Tversky (1997), Van Der Lugt (2000).

⁸ See for example Ball and Smith (1992), Banks (2001), Edwards (1992), Pink (2006) and Prosser (1998).

Lotman calls the semiosphere.⁹ The distribution and display of photographs, through the internet, that reveal so much of the visible evidence of so many peoples' everyday lives has ensured that such images now inundate us on a daily basis. Finkelstein has argued that if we treat the visible "as if it were self-revealing, then we have entered the realm of the despotic banal".¹⁰ The "surplus of material presence" such imagery is emblematic of is indeed banal and as Ranciere argues is not commensurate with the gravity of human experience.¹¹ If the stock in trade of most domestic photographers is the documentation of everyday aspects of their lives and the sheer volume of this documentation renders such images banal, then the ubiquity of the medium and its digital distribution renders the practice of documentary photography itself banal. So much so that Bremner wonders whether "the act of taking a photograph might have been superseded by the sheer abundance of pre-existing images" that have been "split from the surface of the world to float in a virtual non-space" (the internet).¹² Yet despite this, Bremner notes that "we continue to take photographs simply because we can."¹³ And because we do so digitally "the everyday is now an image covering the surface of the modern world", courtesy of the internet.¹⁴ So we have firstly transformed our perception of the world by splitting images off it, in the form of photographs of our everyday lives, and then transformed our perception of it once again by 'resurfacing' the world, via the internet with these images. These images are not all that is available in the world to perceive but because of their ubiquity they are a powerful presence and a reflection of the things we value perceiving. As a reflection of what we value, and because they can be endlessly reproduced in the digital realm, they are a form of self-replication that plays out in a perpetual performance of reality. I have previously called this phenomenon the rehearsal, or re-prediction, of the self.¹⁵ By this I mean that through the almost constant photographing and re-photographing of the everyday experience of the self the photograph is no longer a mirror of who we are but a mirror of who we imagine we can be.

Bremner notes "we are assured that this massive front of images published on the web is finally the much-anticipated arrival of the democratic project of mass creativity that is now called participatory culture".¹⁶ However, his experience of such imagery indicates that it doesn't quite deliver on the promise or freedom implied by the idea of mass creativity because "the photograph has changed its function from being an index of conditions" - that is pointing to the condition of the world photographed - "to become a conditioning tool" that informs how we perceive that world.¹⁷ We navigate through this veritable tsunami of photographs via their text tag and search engine hit counts to find images we think we are looking for. Our perception and experience of the world in this context is therefor conditioned not only by the photographs available on the internet but by their tags and the parameters of search engines. As a consequence we are no longer faced with a crisis of photographic truth - a subset of the crisis of representation and the crisis of the real - as we are with a tsunami of photographic banality that is informed by our collective values as manifest in the photographs of self-replication and self-prediction that we upload and tag. This tsunami is indicative of what I have previously called the crisis of the artificial¹⁸ - the crisis, or crises, confronting design. In this context design is in crisis because "the future possible of our imaginings is the image of the everyday".¹⁹ The almost endless generation of fairly generic photographs of the everyday we are now inundated with via the internet means

⁹ Lotman (1990) uses the term semiosphere to describe the sphere of semiosis, or environment, in which sign processes function. It is a term derived from the term biosphere that refers to the biological sphere or environment.

¹⁰ Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self*, p. 192

¹¹ Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, p. 110

¹² Bremner, *Image Residue*, p. 50

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48

¹⁵ Roxburgh, *The Reprediction of the Self*.

¹⁶ Bremner, *Image Residue*, p. 49

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹⁸ I have written about this crisis previously in Roxburgh 2005 and 2006.

¹⁹ Bremner, *Image Residue*, p. 50

that we have a decreasing variety of ‘indexes of conditions’ to draw upon for imaging and imagining possible futures. The more of the everyday that becomes visible through these photographs the less hope there is of anything new being revealed to us. All that is revealed is a state of perpetual visibility of “everything in the everyday”.²⁰ In short, this tsunami has reduced the horizon of our perception of the world for it is conditioned by the perpetually visible everyday that is everywhere. Necessarily it is within this landscape that the horizon of our perception unfolds and through which we take our cues for designing; that is, imagining the world to be different.

Flusser provides one of the more detailed critiques of various aspects of photography, its’ role in industrial culture, and its’ conditioning or constraining dimensions.²¹ Significantly he also provides a sustained critique, or philosophy of design.²² This is not coincidental for the issues he identifies in regards to the photographic image are paralleled in his critique of design. He is fundamentally concerned with the friction between conceptual and imaginative thought and the central role that design and photography play in collapsing these into one another and the consequences of this. These consequences are the extent to which the conceptual thought that underpins both design and photography conditions, or constrains, the imaginative thought that plays out through them in very specific ways, whilst preserving the appearance of choice implied by their creative applications. Flusser argues that there has been two key turning points in the development of human culture: the first being the “invention of linear writing” and the second being the “invention of technological images” in the form of photography.²³ He credits the invention of linear writing as the “beginning of ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘history’ in the narrower sense” signaling the emergence of “conceptual thinking” with its analytical and organizing tendencies.²⁴ “The linear world of history” that emerged from this is structurally different from the world of the image that preceded it because the “space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context”.²⁵ In the world of linear writing “the circular time of magic” has been transcoded “into the linear time of history”.²⁶ Here cause and effect underpin progress through space and time. Where the world of linear writing privileges conceptual thought, the world of the image privileges imaginative thought. Flusser argues that “conceptual thought is more abstract than imaginative thought as all dimensions are abstracted from phenomena” and as a consequence humans take “one step further back from the world”.²⁷ This would seem to signal a split of the ideal from the material, the subject from the object. Flusser notes that such a split has led to an historical dialectical struggle between the written word and the image.

The dynamics of the dialectic between conceptual and imaginative thought changed during the industrial revolution, itself only possible because of conceptual thinking. It was during this period that the two practices central to this paper came into being, these being the emergence of the profession of design and the invention of the medium of photography. Flusser sees the invention of photography as the second key turning point in human culture because it coalesces the programmatic agenda of conceptual thought, via the apparatus of the camera, with the imaginative world of the image. The technical image, according to Flusser “is an image produced by apparatuses” that are themselves “the products of applied scientific texts”.²⁸ He argues that “ontologically, traditional images are abstractions of the first order insofar as they abstract from

²⁰ Ibid., p. 49

²¹ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

²² Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*

²³ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p. 7

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 10-11

²⁵ Ibid., p. 9

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10

²⁷ Ibid., p. 11

²⁸ Ibid., p. 14

the concrete world while technical images are abstractions of the third order: They abstract from texts which abstract from traditional images which themselves abstract from the concrete world”.²⁹ I have depicted this concept in diagrammatic form in Figure 1.

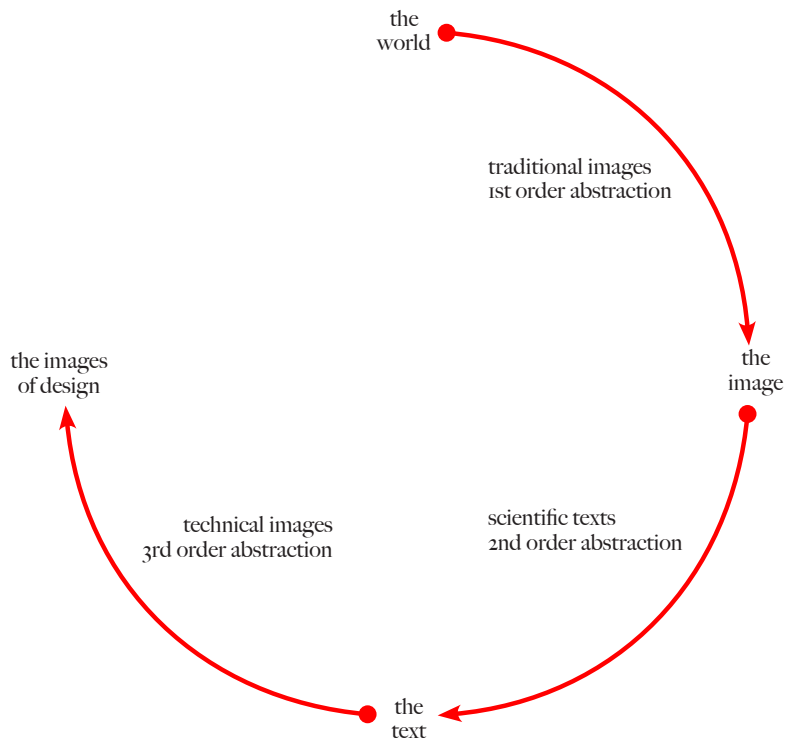


Figure 1: Levels of Abstraction

In this regard “traditional images signify phenomena whereas technical images signify concepts” and “decoding technical images consequently means to read off their actual status”.³⁰ As a consequence, traditional images are generally seen as pictures of symbolic orders and photographs are mainly seen as pictures of the actual world. The photograph has assumed the position of the traditional image because the circular time of magic has been stitched into the endless digital reproduction of the present where everything is endlessly reproduced, rather than repeated, and everything circulates in a context lacking significance, except the significance of the everyday self. It is worth noting then that this context is the ever-repeating history of now.³¹

The emergence of the design profession is as significant a phenomenon as the invention of the photographic image in bringing together conceptual and imaginative thought. Flusser argues that towards the end of the 19th century “the unfortunate split” between “the world of arts and that of technology” began to be bridged by design.³² Prior to this “culture was split into two mutually exclusive branches: one scientific, quantifiable and ‘hard’, the other aesthetic,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ I first formulated this concept of the history of now in a 2006 draft of Roxburgh & Sweetapple 2007. This concept, that was also the provisional title of the paper, was subsequently dropped but the key idea was the current pre-occupation with the perpetual present. This in turn signals the re-emergence of ideology and dogma over evidence and reason, all too prevalent in contemporary political and social discourse.

³² Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, p. 18

evaluative and ‘soft’”.³³ The new profession of design was centrally concerned with the image because “the industrial revolution split idea from manufacture and turned the imagination of change into an image”.³⁴ Until industrial production emerged, craft was the dominant process for making things. With craft, the object was conceived and made by the same person. Industrial production followed the logic of mechanization so that conception and making became separate specialist occupations. As a consequence someone was required to generate the images of the things to be made so the maker knew what to make. It was the designer that translated the idea, or imagining, of a thing to be made into “an image of the possible future” to be manufactured.³⁵ In the early stages of industrialization it was the trained artist who more often than not got the job of creating these images.³⁶ Needless to say they were well versed in the imaginative and symbolic world of the traditional image. Regardless of the type of image used, and it was almost invariably drawing in one form or another, the designer had to come to terms with the technical dimensions of industrial production. Although their images may have appeared traditional they were essentially technical instructions that had to be comprehensible in the technical world of production so that they could emerge as artefacts in the concrete world. Hence the process of industrial production becomes a tool that conditions how traditional images should be used. Design embodies both conceptual and imaginative thinking, working across the dialectic of both. It is “the site where art and technology (along with their respective evaluative and scientific ways of thinking) come together as equals, making a new form of culture possible”.³⁷ Design practice and its technical images, both photographic and drawn, are central in producing a new form of culture: what Manzini³⁸ calls the ecology of the artificial, or the ecology of the human-made world if you like.

Where traditional images can be seen as abstractions of the first order and technical images as abstractions of the third order, the images of design can be seen as abstractions that lead to a fourth order of abstraction, the designed object. I have depicted this concept in diagrammatic form in Figure 2. The objects of design, though concrete in the end, are abstractions of the technical image of design (which are abstractions of texts, which are abstractions of traditional images, which are abstractions of the concrete world). The images of design signify the concept, or idea, of phenomena yet to become actual; they are often the consequence of both imaginative (traditional) and conceptual (technical) thinking. Decoding the images of design is to read off their conjectural rather than actual status.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bremner, *Image Residue*, p. 48

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980*, pp. 35-36

³⁷ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p. 19

³⁸ Manzini, *Prometheus of the Everyday: The Ecology of the Artificial and the Designer's Responsibility*

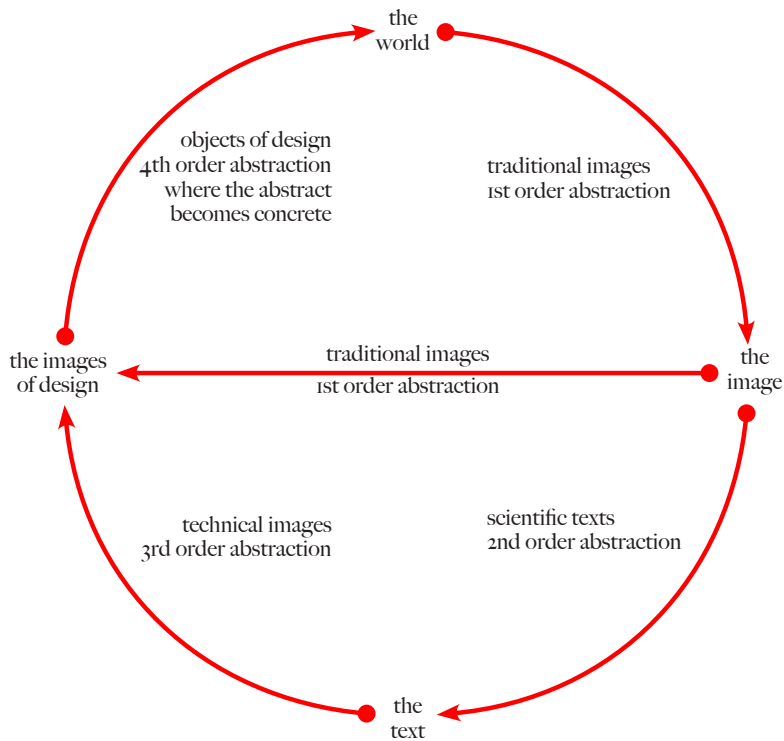


Figure 2: Further Levels of Abstraction

The Conditions of the Artificial

With the digital age upon us, the things we design and ‘make’ can exist apart from the concrete world we live in, as an image on the screen, in a different order of abstraction; where space and time collapse into the virtual. This is almost certainly the case with visual communication design as a distinct design practice. I say this because the things that visual communication design produces are almost always exclusively images and increasingly these exist only on a screen. If we look at the relationship between the seen world and the images of design it can be further imaged (and abstracted) as I have depicted it in diagrammatic form in Figure 3.

When viewed like this it is apparent that the images of visual communication design follow a different trajectory than most other images of design. The things most other design practices produce, though they are likely to exist at some point as an image on a screen, are intended to be things that we can touch and feel in the ‘real’ world; that is they are conceived to become objects that appear in time and space. Here the abstract becomes concrete but more than this the concrete is a form of abstraction derived from a prior concrete existence. This is why the human world is fundamentally artificial for it is an endless cycle through the concrete and the abstract. I will return to the manner in which the image functions in this cycle in more detail when I look at the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

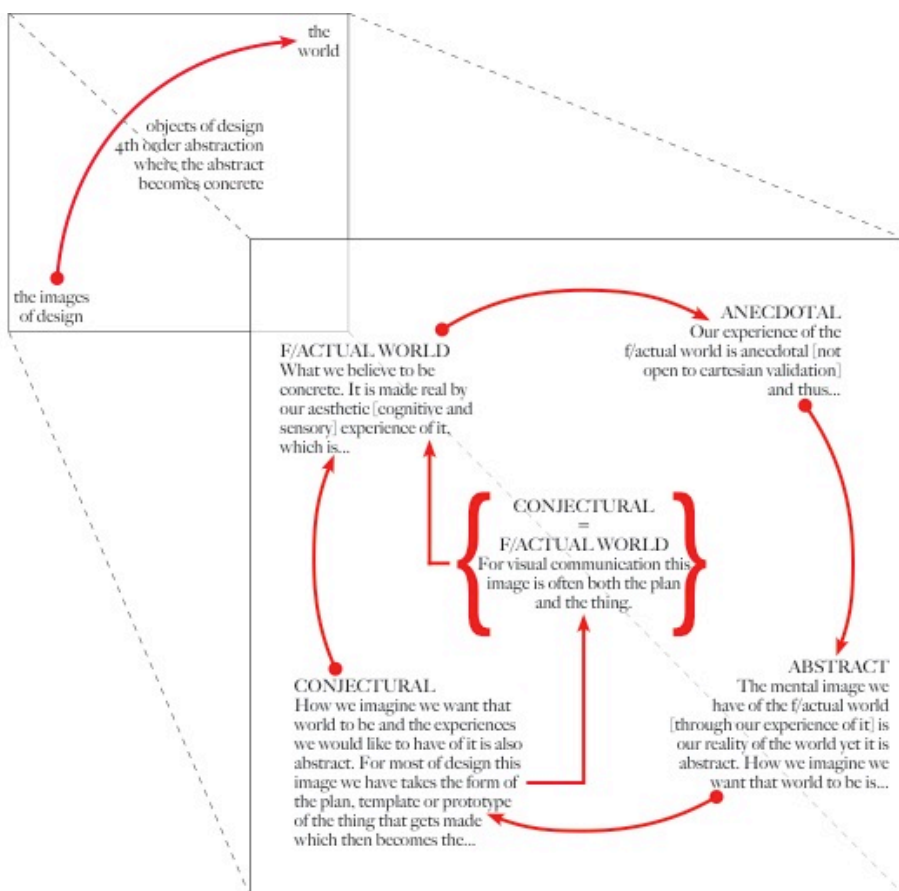


Figure 3: The Images of Design

The images of object design are plans to be made into actual objects. Such images are always only conjectural until they become an object. Once they become an object they become a kind of fact - even though these objects are in themselves an order of abstraction - hence my term the (f)actual. Because the images of visual communication can be simultaneously the plan and the thing, especially in the digital realm, they are of a different order of design image. They forever remain conjectural, never truly concrete in a philosophical sense. Even though they may appear contained and actualised in some concrete form – for example as an image on a brochure – it is the brochure that is concrete not the image. It almost goes without saying that the images of visual communication design can of course influence the other images of design and these images in turn become objects and part of the (f)actual world. Fundamentally though the images of visual communication design are forever conjectural regardless of whether they circulate in the (f)actual world or the virtual world. They are forever becoming and never being, themselves a kind of perpetual performance of reality. This is similar to the situation of consumer digital photography, which I outlined earlier, for much of what is uploaded and displayed is a kind of performance of reality.³⁹ The conjectural has collapsed into the (f)actual, rather than preceding it,

³⁹ Yoon 2003, Kindberg et al 2005, Lee 2005, Hjorth and Kim 2005, and Hjorth 2006 have all undertaken empirical research into the use of consumer digital photography. Their work indicates that the digitization of photography has led to a heightened sense of a performance of reality. This relates back to my comments about rehearsing the self and self-prediction.

as seems to be the case of the images of object design. It is for this reason that the images of visual communication design, and indeed much contemporary realist photography, are simultaneously ubiquitous and ephemeral. They are everywhere at once yet fundamentally meaningless, prosaic, and disposable.

This would appear to signal the collapse of distance between what we perceive and what we photograph and indicates a different kind of project for photography has emerged. The potential of this project has been explored at times, as we have seen in the prescient work of August Sander, as well as the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the UK social research project Mass Observation. This is the project of photography as archive. Philosophically speaking, most photographers are no longer producing or creating images. They are however manufacturing without idea because they are caught in an endless cycle of replication and self-prediction. This endless stream of images is not an act of production in a constructive sense; nor is it an act of consumption, although it is evidence of being consumed by the self. What we are witnessing seems instead to be a form of erasure for all the imagery that circulates in the semiosphere is an archive of the perpetual same that rubs out the imaginary. Banality then is no longer common place but a form of addiction. Like all addictions only the addict can decide when to break the addiction. This requires the will to traverse the space that is critical distance and question the nature of the images that dominate our landscape and condition the imaginary.

For Flusser, design “is the basis of all culture” and because of the conflation of conceptual and imaginative thought its agenda is “to deceive nature by means of technology, to replace what is natural with what is artificial and build a machine out of which there comes a god who is ourselves”.⁴⁰ This points to the power of design as a vehicle for creating the world in our own image, which of course implies human agency. However it is an agency not without its conditions for “the design behind all culture has to be deceptive (artful?) enough to turn mere mammals conditioned by nature into free artists”.⁴¹ In other words our capacity to become free artists, and in particular the capacity for all of humanity to participate in mass creativity, is a condition of the technology of design, and the conceptual thought underpinning it. Our freedom comes with hidden constraints.

Flusser goes on to note that “the question of Design” has replaced “that of the Idea”, implying that the activity and object of design (design as verb and noun) is more important than the thinking of design.⁴² Certainly the tsunami of photographic banality is indicative of this, as is the explosion of do it yourself visual design in virtual space.⁴³ He contends that with design “the barrier between art and technology had been broken down” and that this opened up “a new perspective” in “which one could create more and more perfect *designs*, escape one’s circumstances more and more” and “live more and more artistically (beautifully)”.⁴⁴ Where the activity and product of design supplants the idea behind it Flusser argues that we suffer from a “loss of truth and authenticity”.⁴⁵ The flurry of mechanical (and now digital) photographic self-replication and visual design is exemplary of this. Putting aside the contentious notion of truth, the loss of authenticity that Flusser articulates is a result of the predictability and prosaic nature of the things that are replicated or the domestic images of us that are self-predicted. Flusser contends that this is inevitable because conceptual, not imaginative, thought underpins the mechanics of the production of the images of design and photography. In Flusser’s words this is their program. To accept Flusser’s premise that the program of the technical image by default conditions a sameness of imagery, as logical as it seems, would be to deny the role of human agency in this state of affairs however. Flusser himself recognises this oversight and I will come

⁴⁰ Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, p. 19

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20

⁴³ With current advances in 3D printing it is only a matter of time before objects designed by home enthusiasts parallel what has occurred in the realm of domestic digital photography and visual communication.

⁴⁴ Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, p. 20

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

to this shortly. However I contend that these circumstances are not just the result of a conceptual or technical program but also a result of the failings of the project of mass creativity, in the form of participatory culture. The point I am making here is that although participatory culture enables human agency - for all get to 'speak' - not everyone has something interesting to say; or in the words of TISM "Andy Warhol got it right / everybody gets the limelight / Andy Warhol got it wrong, 15 minutes is too long".⁴⁶ That so much prosaic imagery clogs the semiosphere tells us that, creatively speaking, we are not all created equal. Blaming technology allows us to duck the issue of expertise and ability but more importantly it means we do not have to take responsibility for maintaining an attitude of critical distance towards the manner in which we transform the world in our image. Critical distance is not a certainty even if human agency, in whatever circumscribed form it may be, is present.

The Image of Experience

Merleau-Ponty argues, "the word 'image' is in bad repute because we have thoughtlessly believed that a design was a tracing, a copy, a second thing, and that the mental image was such a design, belonging among our private bric-a-brac".⁴⁷ It is not. Such images "are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside" and help us to "understand the quasi presence and imminent visibility that make up the whole problem of the imaginary".⁴⁸ I trust I have gone some way to demonstrate this already by exploring the relationship between the technical image and design in the creation of the artificial, or designed, world. The visible image - as photograph, design or painting - is neither a copy nor representation of the world. Nor is the visible image a thing separate to our perception of the world. It is part of the world we perceive and not simply a mechanism for showing us commonplace things that are absent from our field of view.⁴⁹ This mutually constitutive relationship, between the visible images of the world we see and the abstract images we have of the world we'd like, Merleau-Ponty calls the image sensitising itself. It is how we transform "the lived world" and "is not an extraordinary event".⁵⁰ For Merleau-Ponty what one sees (sight) and makes seen (visible images) is vision itself.⁵¹ This line of thinking calls into question the conventional view of the image as a representational regime as articulated by critical theory.

Merleau-Ponty critiques the tendency of classical analysis to regard the "perceived world" as the "sum of objects" and the consequential premise "that our relation to the world" is "that of a thinker to an object of thought".⁵² According to Merleau-Ponty, classical analysis frames perception as something that is independent of the things (objects) we (subjects) observe. Alternatively, therefore, the things (objects) we (subjects) observe can exist independent of our (subjective) observations of them. In contrast to this Merleau-Ponty argues that the objects we observe cannot exist independent of our observations and experience of them, for the perceived thing "exists only in so far as someone can perceive it".⁵³ Their existence for us is entirely dependent on our perception and as such they are not stable entities in the way classical analysis would see them, rather they constantly change as the circumstances of our perception change. As such perception does not reveal "truths like geometry but presences".⁵⁴

⁴⁶ TISM, Jung Talent Time

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 164

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Diprose, *In Light Relief the Image Sensitises Itself*, p. 33

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 188

⁵² Ibid., p. 12

⁵³ Ibid., p. 16

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 14

According to Merleau-Ponty the revelation of presences, and not truths, which “constitutes the unity of perceived objects” does not occur as a form of intellectual synthesis.⁵⁵ Rather we are engaged in what he calls “perceptual synthesis” for when we perceive an object we firstly “delimit certain perspectival aspects” of it then go beyond these; that is we see what is visible of an object and imagine what is not visible of it.⁵⁶ In this regard the object we perceive to be a static unchanging thing is actually an ever-changing thing based on our experience of it within its changing horizons or contexts. These horizons and contexts include our multi-sensory engagement and previous experiences of similar objects, that are now increasingly conditioned by our images of the self-replicated everyday available on the internet. Merleau-Ponty further extends the idea of perceiving what is not visible to highlight the role that imagination plays in perception and its paradoxical nature by contending that even if we imagine a place we have never been to the fact that we can imagine it makes us present at that place.⁵⁷ For design, the place we imagine that we have never been to is the future and this too plays out within these horizons and contexts.

Rather than designing to solve problems then, I would contend that we design as a matter of perceptual course. We design simply because we can perceive the world being different. Merleau-Ponty articulates something similar in talking about artistic vision. The painter, he argues, “sees the world and sees what inadequacies (*manqué*) keep the world from being a painting” and thus sets out to rectify these inadequacies through a painting.⁵⁸ In the context of design this suggests that no designed ‘thing’ is a logical inevitability. Rather, design itself is a transformative, creative, and imaginative inevitability for it is bound up in our perceptual synthesis. I am suggesting here that whilst this process of imaginative transformation is inevitable the form that any designed outcome takes is not, however it will be conditioned by the images we have access to. This positions the image as key to both design and perceptual transformation. In particular it highlights the centrality of the non-visible image, the imaginary, (perhaps the purest form of visual abstraction) to both.

Diprose explores Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the image sensitising itself in relation to my abstract photographic practice but also in regards to my critique of the transformative potential of realist photography.⁵⁹ She argues that even realist photographs can “have a transformative impact on the viewer” because “contingency in experience is not something that can be controlled”.⁶⁰ Necessarily, if we follow Merleau-Ponty’s logic on this then, such photographs do transform the world because our perception of it is transformed by encountering them. However she does concede that not all art or photography enables “equally creative expressions of a world” and that “perspectival painting and realist photography express their worlds by lifting the viewer above the lived world to the position that tends to sediment the significance of relations between things and the possible paths for living these relations allow”.⁶¹ This, she argues, limits the creative expression of the world. This is similar to the concerns Flusser articulated in relation to the conditioning dimension of photography. Diprose goes on to argue, in effect, that creative expression that is less tied to realist depiction allows “the landscape of the visible to continue to reverberate through the vision as the imaginary lives on in the real”.⁶²

Diprose’s concern is more aligned to philosophical and ethical questions. Although these are also a feature of my interests the implications of these questions for design are far more pragmatic given design adopts an instrumental logic. In drawing our attention to the parallels between the imaginative and transformative dimensions of both embodied perception and design,

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 15

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 16

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 165

⁵⁹ Diprose, *In Light Relief the Image Sensitises Itself*

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 38

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 37-38

⁶² Ibid., p. 38

and by signalling the centrality of the non-visible image –the imaginary- in both, I seek to highlight the implications for how we imagine our world if such transformation is then played out through the technical images of photography and design, as it so often is. As these technical images are constrained by the programs inscribed in the apparatus that produce them, notwithstanding the varying degrees of human agency that may be exercised within these conditions, then the implications are that our perception of the world as transformed and the actual images of transformation we produce (design) are themselves constrained. If perceptual synthesis is common to all humans yet the visible images of transformation that we produce are so constrained then we appear to run the risk of imagining, and indeed designing, an increasingly generic world.

If we regard both perceptual and design transformation as being an imaginative inevitability as opposed to a logical one then we cannot escape the question of morals or ethics. I say this because we absolve ourselves of a certain degree of ownership over the logically inevitable for it appears objective. Merleau-Ponty critiques this tendency, prevalent in the form of scientific thinking, to seeing the world as an object of study that leads to a view of the world in which we are determined by things other than ourselves. He argues that such a science “manipulates things and gives up living in them”.⁶³ The imaginatively inevitable cannot be divorced so easily, on the other hand, from an experiencing human subject.

Conclusion

Where once we perceived the world as being different through the traditional image, that was underpinned by imaginative thought, we have increasingly turned to technical images, in the form of the images of design or photography that are underpinned by conceptual thought, to do so. The understanding of the relationship between images, perceptual synthesis, and design transformation that I have outlined, enables us to see the consequence of imagining change through an image that is so constrained. As the visible image is part of our horizon of perception and these images are increasingly technical and prosaic our imagination has a constrained horizon to draw upon. This results in the transformation of the world to appear evermore the same, prosaic. The explosion of technical images that has flooded the semiosphere is evidence that the technical images of design and photography are erasing the imaginary.

Following from Merleau-Ponty's point that artistic vision is earned by exercise, and given the ubiquity of the technical images of design and photography as they exist in the guise of mass creativity, then there is an imperative to learn how to see all over again in order to imagine a world less prosaic and more poetic. Perceptual synthesis played out through embodied experience, in the form of what Stimson might call a critical photographic gesture may enable us to conceive of change then that is more imaginative and less imagistic.⁶⁴ The imperative to learn how to see all over again I have previously called the design imperative: “that is if you desire to act (design) then learn how to see (aesthetically)”.⁶⁵ Learning how to see in this manner will not be achieved by relying solely on critical theory, which sees the image as representation and not real anyway. This is so because “critical thinking results from the praxis of linear writing” and through this “we have developed the capacity to divide, to separate, and to break down into dot elements all the phenomena of the external and internal world”.⁶⁶ This is precisely the same set of conditions that have given rise to the technical image in the form of photography. Because photography and other types of technical images are made by apparatus that are the products of

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 159

⁶⁴ Imagism was an early 20th century poetry movement that favoured the use of clear concrete images to get to the essence of the thing written about.

⁶⁵ Roxburgh, *Photography and the Design Imperative*, p. 15

⁶⁶ Flusser, *Criteria-Crisis-Criticism*, pp. 42-43

science and technology - and are “themselves based on critical thinking” - then any critique of technological images “is therefore essentially a critique of critical thinking”.⁶⁷

Critical theory was where the world took the textual turn, and more recently was said to have taken the pictorial turn. In this second turn the use of conceptual thought to critique the technical image has reached an impasse and it is why I advocate a turn to aesthetics because the embodied manner in which we perceive and experience the world is aesthetic in the broadest possible sense. Aesthetics in this guise is not concerned with how things look but is the multisensory manner in which we open ourselves to the world that is after all, as I have argued with reference to Merleau-Ponty, an imaginative and creative act. It is my contention then that a theory that will challenge the banality of the technical image and its conditioning of the artificial world as prosaic needs to be derived from the perspective of a critically imaginative and embodied practice.

In professional photographic and design circles we are used to the critical perspective, the criticism of our addiction, to come from theorists and philosophers. Like adolescents we regard them as nagging parents because they just don't understand us, even if we suspect they might be right to a degree. We are right, but also only to a degree, to say they don't understand us if they haven't shared our experiences of our addictions. It is for this reason that the space of practice currently appears to be the most viable route of theorising photography and the images of design and responding to the crisis of the artificial. Flusser himself argues this for he believes it is experimental photographers who are “conscious that *image, apparatus, program* and *information* are the basic problems they have to come to terms with”; who consciously attempt “to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program”.⁶⁸ He goes on to argue “a philosophy of photography is necessary for raising photographic practice to the level of consciousness” that “gives rise to a model of freedom in the post-industrial context in general”.⁶⁹ Despite agreeing with the ideas contained in this premise I would shape them differently: I contend that a philosophy of photography will be raised to a level of consciousness through a form of critical (but not dull conceptual) photography that speaks of these issues but also the magic and beauty of images and the world they inhabit, or maybe more importantly the world that they could inhabit. Perhaps through this then we may escape the tyranny of the prosaic and mechanical aspects of the artificial. Flusser himself suggests as much for he regards the task of a philosophy of photography to be to “reveal the fact that there is no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses, in order to finally show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to open up a space for freedom”.⁷⁰ This seems critical in a world that is increasingly automated and where the processes of automation are increasingly invisible.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 43

⁶⁸ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p. 81

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 82

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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