Metàfora Studio Arts

The Power of the Image: History, Media and the Modern-Day Cult

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This thesis is an investigation of how images structure our reality, infiltrate the collective consciousness, and inevitably influence the way we think and behave both on an individual and group level. In part 1, I discuss the image in relation to how it is defined, read, and manipulated, focusing on the gaze, perspective, distortion, and semiotics. In part II, I discuss the image and power. I question how grand narratives have been constructed through archiving and history, and how contemporary imagery continues to reinforce these narratives through technology, media, and propaganda, thus cultivating the modern-day cult.

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In the following thesis, I will discuss how images structure our reality, infiltrate the collective consciousness, and influence the way we think and behave both on an individual and group level. Everything we know stems from the images and information that structure our reality which has a massive impact on the way we live, think, and behave. In part 1, I discuss how the image is defined, read, and manipulated, focusing on the gaze, perspective, distortion, and semiotics. In part II, I discuss the image and power; questioning how grand narratives have been constructed through archiving and historical texts, and how contemporary imagery continues to reinforce these narratives through technology, media, and propaganda, thus cultivating the modern-day cult.

Part I: Image theory

    i.) *The Image:* (What is it and how is it read?)

'The image' can be defined as a signifier that points to a specific moment in space and time. According to John Berger, an image is "a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from place and time." How do we read and decipher these appearances and symbols in order to translate them into meaning? Flusser writes, "The significance of the image represents a synthesis of two intentions: one manifested in the image and the other belonging to the observer. It follows that images are not 'denotative' (unambiguous) complexes of symbols (like numbers, for example) but 'connotative' (ambiguous) complexes of symbols: They provide space for interpretation."

To read images, we must consider the lens through which the image was created in addition to our ways of interpreting signs and symbols. It has been argued that we are living more in a world of images than actual reality. In semiotics, there is the idea that language doesn't reflect reality but rather constructs it. If we consider images to be a visual language, we can apply the same principles. Yet the fact that images are so complex and leave space for interpretation creates an interesting

predicament concerning what is reality and what is the image. It also asks us where truth can exist within this conversation if at all.

When reading an image, there are three important layers to consider, the first is the intention of the person framing the image, the second is the gaze of the person reading the image, and the third is the context in which the image was created and being viewed. The image possesses a pre-established set of signs and symbols associated with or connected to a particular world. It then becomes filtered through various modes of translation, collection, organization, fragmentation, reduction, reproduction, etc, further removing it from its original context, perhaps distorting its intended meaning. About this, Roland Barthes says we "drift between the shores of perception, between sign and image without every approaching either." There is a liminal space in between that becomes even further complicated and ambiguous when disparate images are brought into proximity. Interpretation plays a significant role in reading a single image, but what happens when we play with the context of the image and place it in relation to another? There is a concept in color theory that says we can't understand a color until we have changed the context surrounding it. This concept can be applied to images as well. Taking an image out of its original context and shifting it can give an entirely different meaning.

a.) video still from *Red*, 2022

How single images are framed and read on their own is one level, but then dealing with how they are manipulated and reproduced is another. We live in a world where the reproduction of images is inevitable, and the space for interpretation and mistranslation grows significantly. In *Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin discusses (in reference to an artwork) how reproduction devalues an original art piece. Something becomes lost in the copying of an artwork and will never have the same effect as the original. This idea is interesting when we apply it to any image being reproduced today and how its meaning can shift upon every reproduction. Hito Steyerl, on the other hand, argues that in the digital age, every time an image gets reproduced its quality may worsen but its meaning and content become richer due to all of the metadata the manipulated image carries every time it is translated, pixelated, cut, pasted, reposted, etc. She writes "The poor image constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it."

This manipulation of signs and symbols is a tool that has been used for centuries to reinforce systems of thought, placing certain signs and symbols together to send a clear message. The same tool can be used to challenge these systems of thought and play with how images are read and understood. When we consider the additional layer of technology and screens, this understanding shifts again. Not only does the image act as a mediation between us and reality, but the screen adds a layer, further separating us from the original. The sheer amount, density, and concentration of visual information we experience today is unlike any other moment in history and contributes to the frenetic energy of how information is distributed and consumed.

ii- Framing, the gaze, and identity

Who is framing the image? Who is the power voice? What narratives are they circulating? Images are taken from a specific perspective, and there is a relationship between photography and authority. What images and systems of knowledge have been passed down, distorted, and manipulated, and perhaps more importantly what or who is not being represented? Sontag asks the question: "…in a world in which photography is at the service of consumerist manipulations, no effect of a photograph can be taken for granted. We are so used to receiving information that has been tainted by a political patriarchal westernized agenda, what exists in the spaces in between?" If a single image can say so much in terms of voice and authority, a collection of images becomes that much more powerful symbolically- which speaks to the power of art history books, film, the news, the internet, etc. Artists have created work that challenges these grand historical or political narratives; for example Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne.* In this work, Warburg challenges the concept of the archive or catalog and re-organises artworks in a way that focuses more on the image and the concept of the analogy and provides an alternative way of understanding art history.


b.) detail from artist's book *A Brief History of Art through Hand Gestures* (2023) in which images from art history are organised by hand gestures rather than by traditional linear art historical narrative.

Not only are we limited by the perspective of the framing of the lens but also by the limitations and biases of our gaze. Berger writes, "We only see what we look at, to look is an act of *choice*" The relentless production and reproduction of visuality in the digital age has problematized

the status of the image because we are actively choosing what information to look at. The fact that there is so much information at our disposal, has been used as a tool to sway opinions. It can serve as a possible explanation for why society is so polarised on social and political issues of today. Images are and have long been, instrumentalized to organize people into two sides of the spectrum. People can choose which "team" they are on, for example, right or left wing, for or against a particular idea or issue, consumers of a product, or its competitor. These choices help individuals define their identities, their beliefs, and the communities that they become a part of. Social media platforms reinforce what sides people choose by propagating more imagery that represents an individual's morals, values, and identity, and broadcasting it to the people around them. This can be understood as a contemporary iteration of the panopticon, where everyone is completely consumed by viewing (surveying) everyone else and acting as if they are being watched. This draws all the attention to the image of an individual projects out into the world rather than focusing on what is happening politically on a community, national or global level. This is, of course, intentional, because the more focused people are on themselves, the more money they will spend on their own image, strengthening the economy and lessening the chance of political backfire or revolt.

b.)
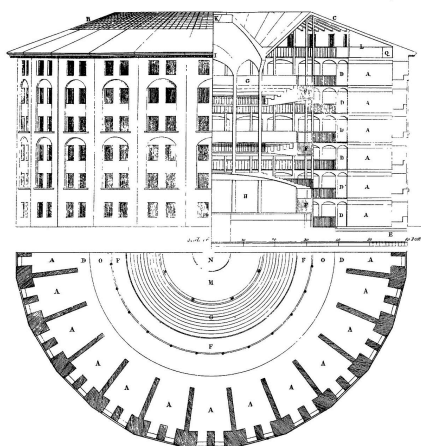
b.) Illustration of the panopticon, "The panopticon is a disciplinary concept brought to life in the form of a central observation tower placed within a circle of prison cells. From the tower, a guard can see every cell and inmate but the inmates can't see into the tower. Prisoners will never know whether or not they are being watched"

PART II: Power and the Image

i-Power Structures: History, Narratives & Archives

In *Ways of Seeing,* Berger discusses how at first images were a way to "conjure up the appearance of something absent. but then people realised images outlast what they represent, and this representation became the record which thus becomes part of history, a consciousness or individuality." There was a moment in time people became conscious that their image could outlast their own lives. This realisation could perhaps also be the moment in history where the image gains importance over reality for the individual. When exactly this shift took place is difficult to pinpoint, however, we know that the Renaissance is one of the earliest clear examples of this type of thinking. We can see it in painting and architecture of the time with the invention of linear perspective and focus on humanism. We can observe this humanistic focus throughout art history, emphasising the image of the self, and the construct of a particular reality surrounding it.

This underlying concept and importance placed on the human or the individual has significantly impacted the art that was created from that point up until today, as well as the media that we consume on the internet and television. Foucault writes "All of discourse, the entirety of the way you think and talk about things has been filtered through a set of background assumptions that have been given to you by the cultural and historical conditions you were born into" Our thinking and behavior is completely rooted in the images and information we receive our entire lives and the historical root of that information. There is a clear connection between individualistic culture of today to humanism through art history.

Not only is there an emphasis on the individual, but a certain type of individual. Roland Barthes refers to this in *Mythologies*: when he talks about how pop culture images, magazines, cookbooks, television programs, etc., may seem benign and innocent but they are subtly putting the power dynamics of the powerful and the bourgeoisie, while silently oppressing everyone else. We receive the idealised version of what life should be, who we should be, and what things we should

own, and that almost always excludes marginalised people, setting an unrealistic standard that only tells one story. This lack of representation is problematic because it leads to the othering of people and the polarisation of society. This exclusion can be observed in how information and knowledge are constructed. Science and history are organised and categorised through systems that are put in place by people in power. How can we understand large amounts of information differently? What exists in the liminal spaces between the archives and the hierarchy of categorisation ? What stories have intentionally been left out of the grand narrative and why?

d. Adverts from the 1950s

ii- Propaganda: Media, Post-truth and the Modern Cult

Art History can be understood as the original form of propaganda and undeniably has a connection to the propaganda of today, social, cultural, economic, and political. In the past it may have been to support the ideologies of religious or secular powers whereas today it can be seen as more commercial economic agendas, pushing consumer culture and selling "the commodity of the self," Berger compares the language of the public image to the language of oil painting, "they both stereotype women, idealize nature, use nature and mythology, gestures of wealth, desire, luxury, virility, success" for example. He goes on to say, "Publicity has another social function…it turns

consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears drives) takes

the place of significant political choice and masks what's happening in the rest of the world"

Adam Curtis discusses the history of this shift in his documentary *The Century of the Self,*

where he illustrates how Freud's theories on groupthink and the collective conscious were applied

by corporations through advertising techniques to manipulate people into thinking they needed

material things to feel part of society. He explores the history of the birth of modern individualism,

the mind of the crowd, and how this technique was employed to keep people occupied and docile.

The 1960s was the start of intentionally using psychological crowd mentality techniques to

construct ways of thinking, however, the church and state have been using imagery and art for

centuries as a way to communicate how one should be.

In T*he Society of the Spectacle*, Debord uses the term 'spectacle' to refer to the replacement

of actual authentic social life and interactions among people with its representation. "The spectacle

is not a collection of images but rather, it is a social relation among people, mediated by images."

He describes this phenomenon as "the decline of *being* into *having*, and *having* into

merely *appearing*." He claims our current situation values image and appearance over reality and

truth. On consumerism, he writes, "In a consumer society, social life is not about living, but about

having; the spectacle uses the image to convey what people need and must have. Consequently,

social life moves further, leaving a state of "having" and proceeding into a state of "appearing"; namely the appearance of the image." A society organized around such consumption induces boredom while shaping people's desires in ways that could be fulfilled only through the purchase of consumer goods. Consumerism encourages people to buy things they don't need and refines what survival means when we consider consumer goods necessary to our survival.

Politics have become about this as well. We are all responsible for continuing the spectacle even though the theory was written over fifty years ago. One of the clearest articulations of how we do this is through social media, we highly curate and select a very specific portrayal of ourselves as happy, successful, and fulfilled people as opposed to actively seeking out real experiences. Our behavior and thinking have largely become centered around appearances and the idea that everyone is watching. People engage in certain activities and rituals to publicise the kind of person they are, certain examples of what could be considered cult-like behavior that re-enforces this notion includes but is not limited to working overtime in pursuit of an idealised "American dream" type of goal, including gym culture, mass travel culture, weddings, drinking and party culture, and so on. These activities are enforced by the television and movies we watch, celebrities, our peers, etc. Our need to feel part of society is part of being human. Capitalising on this need by constructing a false reality as well as selling people things they don't need just so that they feel a part of society is corrupt and troubling. This shift discussed in Curtis' film which occurs in the 1950s and 60s is very much evident today, as most of the images we consume are with a commercial or economic agenda behind them. The techniques for constructing these messages have become less obvious. The idea that we need material things to feel good and a part of society is embedded in everything we consume from television series, to the music we listen to, to our social media feeds.

We are currently living in an age of individualism, where community, nation, and planet come second to the needs and image of the self. We are also living in an era of post-truth. Where the philosophical concept of truth has already been unstable for some time, however, this instability is

now amplified by the notion that personal opinion supersedes objective facts. The bombardment of images in our everyday lives and their respective re-productions and mistranslations constructs a situation in which we can no longer tell what is image and what is reality, or what is "real" and what is being sold to us.

iii- conclusion.

Images play a significant role in shaping our reality and influencing the way we think and behave on an individual and collective level. Images can be manipulated and distorted to reinforce systems of thought or to create new meanings. The power of the image lies not only in its meaning but also in its ability to create powerful narratives when collected and presented together. The perspective and gaze of the viewer also play a crucial role in how images are understood and consumed. In the digital age, we are constantly bombarded with visual information, and our ability to think through images has changed dramatically. If images function as mediations between us and reality or contract our reality entirely, how can we deconstruct this reality and what will we find in the liminal spaces in between?

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