Theory

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The Power of Images

The historical distinction between the true and false, between reality and fiction, between science and art, must fall. And it is precisely this abandonment of ontological, epistemological and ethical-political discernment, or criticism, what we mean by "post-history". It is irrelevant whether we assess negatively or positively. The important thing is that we learn to live with it.

What happened in Romania in December '89, namely the fact that images make history, could be foreseen, and was foreseen (for example, in my own essay "Into the Universe of Technical Images" '85). Fortunately, this "image revolution" occurred in a relatively unimportant corner of history's stage. It might have been otherwise. Consider what would have happened if the images had not reared up at history in Romania but in the United States or in Japan. This fortunate circumstance allows us to take the Romanian events as an experiment to examine the power of images – like a kind of nuclear weapons test. The present contribution will attempt to take up this outlook.

At issue is the relationship between images and history. Formally speaking, images are surfaces that signify scenes. Scenes can be considered states of affairs, that is, contexts in which things relate to each other in such a way that the relationship of each thing to another is reversible. The things in the situation can move (the scene does not have to be rigid), but each thing must be able to return to its original place in the scene over time. This means that, formally, images cannot signify stories. A story is a context in which one thing flows from the other (is caused by it) to let another thing flow out (to have an effect). Such a chain of cause and effect cannot be called a scene because it has a linear rather than surface structure. Therefore, images are not an adequate code for stories; linear codes (especially the alphabet) are required for stories. Not picture making, but history writing is needed.

Yet, as we know, this formal incompetence of images for history has been technically overcome. Photographs, for example, are images in which stories are captured so as to be transcoded from events into scenes. In photography, the flow of cause and effect is transformed into a reversible state of affairs, the one-dimensionality of history is flattened. And films, for example, are series of photos glued together and processed so quickly before the eyes that they give the impression of an uninterrupted sequence. In this way, the photo succeeds in being incorporated into a film, and so, deceptively, in being transcoded from a scene into a causal chain. In this illusionary ("artificial," "technical") manner, images can, as we know, show stories. The above is far more complex than it already seems at first glance. For here the reaction of a tool on the person using it enters the equation. This reaction ("feedback") is what sets us humans apart from other living beings. For example: a "primitive man" creates a stone knife to simulate his tooth in the stone; then the stone knife strikes back at the primitive man, and he begins to simulate his tool. He begins, that is, to behave like a knife, cutting everything, dividing it into rations, thinking and acting "rationally." In the case of image making, the process looks something like this: the people in Lascaux step back out of their three-dimensional circumstance, in order to oversee it, to get a picture of it. They simulate something like climbing a hill. What they gain is a viewpoint that allows them to stop bumping into things and to see the state of affairs. And then this viewpoint or image reacts back on the people, and they begin to simulate the image. That is, they begin to

behave in a three-dimensional setting as if it were a scene to think and act in "imaginatively." In short: images react on us as "magical consciousness."

Quite different is the reaction of linear writing on consciousness. Linear writing was invented in order to gain a distance from images, to describe them. The alphabet is a step back from pictograms. With it, the scenes signified by images could be rolled up into lines, and the meaning of the images could be "explained", "told", and disenchanted. But then linear writing reacted back on the writers, and the literati began to think and act according to the rules of text. They began to see the circumstance as one line, as a consequence of cause and effect, and then to act upon that insight. In short, linear writing has reacted on us as historical, "political," "scientific" consciousness. History begins with the invention of linear writing.

After these reflections, of course, the question of the relationship between image and history becomes fundamental, and the events in Romania gain an almost apocalyptic cast. For now it is clear that image making (as, for instance, by Romanian television crews) springs from magical consciousness and elicits a magical awareness in the image recipients. At the same time, it can be seen that the storyteller comes from a political, scientific, linearly structured consciousness, and that the goal of such consciousness is to abolish images, to "explain" them, to disenchant them. The Romanian image revolution may therefore stand as only the first, relatively harmless, uprising of magical against enlightened thinking. A future takeover of by magic power, and the submission of political and scientific thinking, is to be feared. However, before giving in to such apocalyptic brooding, some further considerations are wanted.

First of all, we must distinguish between "traditional" and "technical" images, that is, between, say, cave paintings and television pictures. The first type of image emerged (and arises again and again) from the attempt to gain distance from a situation. The second emerged from an attempt to visualize political, scientific, and technical discourse (so-called "progress"). We are dealing with images on two very different ontological levels. First let us briefly consider the relationship of the first type of image to history. Then we will consider the relationship of the second image type with history.

The first type of image is prehistoric: it has existed for at least 30,000 years; history for at most 5,000 years. And, as we noted above, history can actually be seen as an onslaught against images, as an iconoclasm. But images defended themselves; they did not yield to the texts that wanted to explain them away. Instead, they thrust themselves into the texts and began to illustrate them. This created a dialectic between image and text, between magical and historical consciousness, thanks to which images became ever more historical and texts ever more imaginative. There is a textual magic on the one hand, and a history of images on the other. This creative dialectic was brought to an end with the invention of printing. Texts took the upper hand, historical consciousness became general, and images were confined to glorified ghettos such as museums and academies of art. And it is there, on the horizon of everyday life, that we still find this type of image today.

The second image type is made by apparatuses that began to be invented and produced in the first half of the nineteenth century. Photographic cameras are among the earliest devices, holographs and computer plotters among the latest. The development of technical images can be told as a progressive refinement of the grains constituting them: the first photos are coarse, their grains are the size of silver nitrate molecules;

in the latest images they are photon computations. Taking television pictures as examples of an intermediate stage in this development, we can observe how they become ever more "defined," how they look ever more as if they really were surfaces and not calculated mosaics. The progress of technical images consists in their ever improving pretense of being images of scenes, and not the calculations of an apparatus. But then we come to a break in this progress, when synthetic images no longer pretend, but design scenes. They no longer "lie" – now they program. These computer images, however, fall outside our considerations. Here we are dealing with television pictures, and so with lying pictures. The question is: for what purpose are apparatuses such as cameras made? There are at least two ways of answering. The first answer is to say they automate image making. The second (and more profound): that they put image-based magical consciousness into the service of progressive consciousness. Although the first answer is very important (cameras are among the first robots), here only the second will be considered.

In the first half of the 19th century (i.e. as the Industrial Revolution reached its peak), images of everyday life almost disappeared (the environment became the familiar gray color of money and the industrial city). At the same time, scientific, technical and political progress became unsurveyable, indeed unimaginable. Cameras had, therefore, two tasks: on the one hand, to bring images back into everyday life, and on the other, to offer people ideas about the world through these images. The interest of the camera inventors (and their supporting industry) was not only "pure," that is aesthetic and epistemological. It was also in smoothly integrating into machine operation the mass that had just recently been moved from villages to factories. Despite book printing, the rural population was still largely illiterate, still had a magical consciousness (see pictures of saints). Photos aimed to embed this consciousness within a progressive historical consciousness, as in, for example, illustrations for newspaper articles. They aimed to "document" history – a fact that deserves further consideration.

An example should shed light on the documentation problem. People marry, and for this reason go into a church, in order to come out of it again. This is a typical historical process, a "happening": a one-dimensional chain of cause and effect. Now, a person equipped with a camera steps out of this chain in order to "take it," that is, to transcode it from surface into scene so that the picture stands beyond history. The person draws an incident from the stream (takes it), processes it, and returns it to history as a "document." But again, the thing is not as "neutral" as it seems at first glance: the happy newlywed couple knows it is "being taken," and they pose themselves for that purpose: they themselves also step out of history (in a sense, out of the wedding). And the photographer cannot help intervening in the story, making it "photogenic": for example, by having the bride say "cheese." The photo thereby does not document a frozen section of the historical chain (which in itself is already problematic), but manipulates history. It is, strictly speaking, already in the seemingly naïve wedding photo, post-history in the making. This will become clear in Romania.

The problem here is not so much the recording of an event onto a surface to transcode it into a scene, that is, the shift from historical into magical consciousness. More problematic is the way back, how the photo returns to history (e.g. by being stuck in an album, or inserted into a newspaper article). This gives the impression that we're dealing with frozen events that float like icebergs in the river of history, slowly dissolving into it (as photographs yellow). In fact, on the contrary, the photos function as a dissolver of history. The former exemplary happy newlyweds look at the picture after fifty years, and this contemplation is typically magical; they "set themselves back" into an imaginary scene, they turn the chain into a loop, they are in the "eternal return of the same." Thus, it turns out not that the photograph put magical consciousness into the service of historical consciousness, but that, on the contrary, historical consciousness is photographically reenchanted.

Already at the beginning of the 20th century this dubious position of the "documentary image" was consciously and purposefully exploited, namely by fascism and even more strongly by Nazism. In this period, the photo became film, and so an optical illusion of an event. This technique was used to reenchant the mass consciousness, manipulating it into a magical mode of action in the service of the rulers. Fascism, and Nazism above all, were ideologies fundamentally hostile to historical consciousness and open to magic. For them, images such as photos and films, that is, technically enchanting counter-history, were unreservedly usable, and one shudders at the thought of what would have happened had television existed already then. On the other hand, text-bound ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism (and, by the way, Christianity) could not be so unrestrained with such images because of their devotion to linear history. This explains why Stalin (and later Ceaușescu) did not "document" as well as Mussolini and Hitler.

We do not, however, need fascist ideology to exploit the internal dialectic of documents. In the second half of our century, we began to turn the magical function of documents back into history, like a Möbius strip. It is, of course, clear that even the Nazi manipulation of events into magical scenes pursued historical intentions, so that magic, somehow, still served the rulers. This has now become a method. Two examples of this: people being shot to the moon to be recorded there; and aircraft being kidnapped in order to land in front of TV sets. In this process, the image has become the goal of the event, and political, historical consciousness is aligned with magical consciousness. This requires a more detailed analysis:

The original intentions of the camera inventors were for the technical image to stand above the flow of events in order to take scenes from it. The image should not change the events themselves. Progress should not be affected. But now the image has become the goal of history: everything happens to be recorded. The image no longer stands above the line of events, roughly like an epicycle. It is now at the end of history, like a dam, into which events have flowed in order to revolve around each other there forever. This has caused a great acceleration of progress. In the second half of our century, events rushed forwards in the wake of recorded images (especially television images). History began to race because it wanted to be "documented." And this is true not just for political history, but also for scientific and technical history. Thanks to this restructuring of the "image–history" relationship, hitherto aimless history finally gained a goal: to be recorded in an image from which to appear eternally. History itself became magical. Already in the 1960s, some observers of this slightly weird situation saw clearly that the position of images in history allows a third variant. Not only can images stand above history to record it and then immerse themselves back into it. Nor are they limited to standing at the end of history and recording from there, transcoding it into a still scene ("*nunc stans*"). They can also design stories out of themselves ("make history") in order to take these stories back into themselves. They are then neither above nor behind the events, but are at once the beginning and the goal of the event. Although this was clear to some observers for quite a long time (and I count myself among them), and although some symptoms of this exchange of historical for magical consciousness were telling, the matter was too fantastic (too awful) to be seriously considered. If one spoke of post-history, one meant basically this Möbius strip, this inside-out glove, in which images do not testify to events, but are witnessed by events. However, one dared not express it (so as not to talk of the devil). The Romanian affair of December '89 (one does not dare call it an event) pulls off the last veils.

The victory of imagination over discursive reason, magic over politics, which was experimentally confirmed in Romania, forces us to think posthistorically. And indeed, not only what happened in Romania, but all events can no longer be understood in historical, political, logical-discursive categories. For example, there is no point in asking anymore what "really" happened and happens, because the "real" is what works in

the image. The vectors of meaning are reversed: it is not the image that refers to the world, but the world that refers to the image, and therefore the bodies in Timişoara, for example, are "real" if and only if they are in the picture. The question of what purpose the image serves is no longer a good one, for the image has become an end in itself. To ask after the intention of the apparatus operators in Romania, is to ask "metaphysically," for the television crews were functionaries of the apparatus, and they functioned as a function of the apparatus. If you like, you can speak of "l'art pour l'art" in Romania (and therefore everywhere): images make history in order to make new pictures out of them. One can, however, just as well speak of the laziness thanks to which a process that emerged by chance avoids leaving traces in the image and therefore being repeatedly retrievable from it. These are just two of countless examples of the shipwreck of political and discursive thinking in the face of what has come to pass in Romania and could come to pass anywhere else.
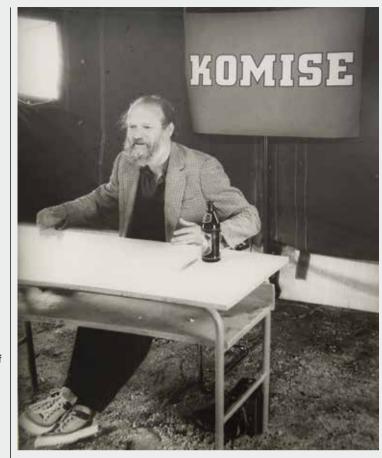
It is too early to gauge the extent of this blast. The numerous symposia, debates and investigations (including the book planned here) that deal with it, must be regarded as preliminary studies. And yet, the key point of the revolution of images against history has already made itself known: the historical difference between true and false, between reality and fiction, between science and art must be dropped. And this dropping of the ontological, epistemological and ethico-political distinction, that is, of criticism, is exactly what we mean by "post-history." Whether one evaluates this negatively or positively is beside the point. The important thing is learning to live with it.

FLUSSER, Vilém. Die Macht des Bildes (The Power of Images). 1989, Television/ Revolution: das Ultimatum des Bildes, in: Jonas Verlag für Kunst und Literatur, Marburg 1989. Copyright @ Universität Mannheim 1996, Výtvarné umění (Fine Arts), 1996, no. 3–4, pp. 131–138, translated by Václav Paris, courtesy of Miguel Flusser, Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, Flusser archive, Milena Slavická.

Aleš Kuneš, from the event The International Day of Never Implemented Ideas, 1997, Ivan Mečl's archive

Human Scale
Photos in Non-exhibition Spaces in Czechoslovakia at the Turn of the 1980s and 1990s

When the symposium *The Art of Exhibiting Photography* took place in Brno in 1983, where Josef Moucha introduced the phenomenon of expansive photography, developed by his Polish colleague Jerzy Olek, the

Czech and Slovak professional public was also informed of the ambitious exhibition *The Family of Man* through a review by Petr Tausk, published in the symposium proceedings.[1] The première of the exhibition took place at the MoMA in 1955, and it was presented all over the world, for example in Belgrade in 1957 or in Poland at the turn of 1959 and 1960. Tausk wrote about it again in 1983 to highlight the humanistic ideas presented through photographs of anonymous people from all over the world, portrayed as one big family. Many authors focused on the political meaning of the exhibition.[2] The formal aspect of the large format prints, originally mostly documentary photographs, used by the Russian and German interwar avant-garde, must have had a far-reaching impact. The exhibition was primarily designed for exhibition halls and museum halls. The concept invented by Olek in the early 1980s and presented by Josef Moucha was meant to free photography of

Aleš Kuneš, Transformation of an Artist in Unfreedom into an Artist in Freedom, Performance Art in Freedom, Antwerp, Belgium, 1993, Aleš Kuneš's archive