The visual mutation of the social world

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Abstract

How can we see the world in our contemporary society? What is the role of vision and of images? We must reflect on our epoch through the hypothesis that we live in a new kind of a civilisation of images, where social life is more and more conditioned by the presence and the massive use of images that modify the phenomenological conception of the reality.

Keywords

Images, imaginary; perceptions; phenomenology; visual forms; visual sociology

Resumo

Como podemos ver o mundo na sociedade contemporânea? Qual é o papel da visão e das imagens? Nós necessitamos de refletir sobre a nossa época através da hipótese de que nós vivemos numa nova espécie de civilização de imagens onde a vida social é sempre mais condicionada por uma presença e uso massivo de imagens que modificam a conceção fenomenológica da realidade.

Palavras-chave

Imagens; imaginário; fenomenologia; formas visuais; perceções; sociologia visual

> Notre appartenance au monde des images est plus forte
> plus constitutif de notre être, que notre appartenance au monde des idées
> Gaston Bachelard

> An eye for an ear
> Marshall McLuhan

The process of comprehension is founded on an evolution of thought across different epochs that bring together culture, society and knowledge. We know that each epoch presents a particular type of thought, a way to see the world. This development represents the basis of the scientific revolution and the change of paradigm. So in each epoch there is something that characterizes the social world, an "essential character" that acts as a trace of the society that characterize the reflexion and so another way to see the world with a different vision. This "new" vision of the world, as a paradigmatic development, influences the phenomenological and gnosiological process of understanding and means to be in accord with the actuality of the social world. In this sense we can

take inspiration from the reflection of Michel Foucault about the "ontology of actuality"[1] that is an answer to the question of Kant *"was ist Aufklärung?"* (1874). Foucault, reflecting about the question "what is our actuality"? sees a new dimension of philosophical comprehension in the topic "what is our present, what is this today"?. This represents at the same time an ontology of actuality and an ontology of ourselves. In this paper, we will limit ourselves to trying to use the interrogations raised by this question without going into the details of Foucault's reflexion.

In fact we believe that it is interesting to ask what is this today considering the influence of images, and how our actuality is influenced by the new form of seeing and thinking trough images. We know that the trajectory of the image wasn't simple before it became more popular and, in a large sense, accepted. We can think for example in the reluctance of scientific institutions concerning their attitude *vis-à-vis* the eyes and the instruments that extend it. In fact, in the scientific *habitus,* images have been considered as an eccentric modality, disqualified as data and instrument. From its origins, the western civilisation devalues the image. A long, philosophical, pedagogical and scientific tradition has destroyed images and installed a suspicion around them; so the image, in the name of Reason, was depreciated, seen as uncertain and ambiguous. In this sense a "thought without images" dominates culture. Later in the 20th century, jungian psychology, neo-kantism with Heidegger and Cassirer, Husserl's phenomenology, the hermeneutic and the studies of cognitive science revalorized the visual representations and imaginative practices. This means also that an epistemological rupture, that debates the position of positivism and objectivism of the Human Sciences, takes position, for example in the figure of the theorist of the imaginary Gilbert Durand – but we must also mentioned Gaston Bachelard – for a new epistemological spirit that revaluates the image and the imaginary.

This is a veritable change of status of the images that begin to be considered in a scientific way, with an evolution of their role, where the eye represents an active exploration of a universe that is there to be seen. We assist, in this way, to an important variation about the essence of the images: precisely we can refer to Gottfried Boehm's the "iconic turn" or to a "pictorial turn" as described by William Thomas Mitchell (1994), characterized by a new centrality of images, visibility and vision in different areas of human and social sciences. Naturally, this means giving a special attention to a dimension of knowledge incarnated in the power of images with the ability they have to open the mind to multiples aspects of our world and to discovery different fragments of reality.

Cinema and photography operate a deep transformation of knowledge and are apt to describe the epochal alterations of vision because they are media that can delineate the relation between image and the world and, in particular, between the visible experience and the notions of comprehension. We must remember that in its theoretical analysis, Jean Epstein talks about visual culture to put in perspective the fact that cinema contributes to change our vision of the world, in a way that is related to the changes in the mental climate of an epoch. In this way, we witness a new turn of the knowledge

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[1] The conference "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" was pronounced at the *Collège de France* in January 1983 and published in may 1984 on the N°207 of *Magazine littéraire* and we can find it after in *Dit et écrits* (1994), Paris: Gallimard.

funded on the primacy of the image participating in the process of understanding the world. We can take as an example, the important contribution of Béla Balázs – as an aesthetic theorist of cinema –, about the initiation to visual culture in *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924) and afterwards in *Der Geist des Films* (1930), where he explores how the visual spirit became a new dimension of reality through the invention of the cinematograph. That technology is considered as a technical diffusion of spiritual production and as an advanced technology of seeing and showing; for Balázs the cinematograph gives a new turn to culture towards the visual. This produces also a new way of seeing or even better, a *Weltanschauung*, an expression that Kant defines as the intuition of the world through the senses and in the philosophical language represents the experience of life and an image of the world. For us there is a visual *Weltanschauung* where images are a system of understanding and, at the same time, a symbolic representation of the world, where we get a kind of glance that characterizes the eye of an epoch according to the theory of László Moholy-Nagy that sees a new culture of the glance through the advent of the photography as "new vision", producing simultaneously a new sensory experience and how to see the world anew.

Hence, we understand that the affirmation of the pregnancy of images in the process of knowledge across different epochs generates many reflections; as a witness of this importance, there is the affirmation of *visual culture studies* in USA and UK and the *Bildwissenschaft* – that means the science of image – in Germany. The epistemic position of the image indicates an intense cultural significance: the importance of vision and of the production of sense in various forms of images (art, photography, cinema) where, at the same time, it's important to reflect on the conditions of technique and media permitting the visualization of the world but also the social use made by the people of the numerous images that circulate in the social sphere.

These forms of knowledge contaminated the reflection on the social world and in this context we can assert that images become more and more a specificity of our time, a root of a sensibility characterizing the expressive variety of our culture and society. If we affirm with Gillian Rose and Nicholas Mirzoeff that we live in an ocularcentric dimension of the world that happens "not simply because visual images are more and more common (...) but because we interact with constructed visual experiences" (Rose, 2012, p. 9). This ocularcentrism is often used to illustrate a visual paradigm with a centrality of the sight that indicates a sort of immersion in a transitional dimension where a thought of sight and an emphasis of the sensible are taking place. In tradition, since Aristotle, sight is the predominant sense, a source of cognition but this does not means that the other senses are not important in the process of perception and that they do not participate in the attribution of historical and cultural meanings to social relations. Indeed as John Berger said: "seeing comes before words" (1972) and today the pervasiveness of *visuality* enlarges the effect of ocularcentrism. We considerate it a key in the reading of post-modernity, that delivers a large panoply of images through the new effects of screen and technology.

The actual visual culture – meaning the relation between the production and consumption of images in social experience – is related to the imagery where each person finds a signification, information but also a *jouissance* and a *reliance* through using the different apparatus or digital interfaces whose role, as Walter Benjamin illustrates in its works, is growing almost daily. We are immersed in a "constellation" of images structuring our daily experience of life, as a kind of imagery galaxy where – inspired by Marshall McLuhan's analysis – emerges a mosaic formed by various images that we must approach as a tactic and a practice in a genealogy of a daily life.

It's fundamental to think that the actual scene of the imagery in our culture must be considered as something changing the relation with social reality and transforming identities. In this scenario, the spectator becomes a spect(a)actor – or a prosumer – producing a relation of interactivity with the multiplicity of images that mediate our life. In a social-cultural climatology, for instance, Instagram can be thought of as a large constellation of daily scenery where each fragment is the presentation of a lived instant. So, the image can be a possibility to present what exists; this is the time of images and of the pregnancy of imaginary, where the practical experience of daily life is also constructed through a visual disposition, a visual modality of our relation with and through the world. If the imaginary, according to Durand's perspective, is a place where the procedures of human thought take place, we can look at social reality as a *mundus* of images and imaginary surrounding the sphere of knowledge.

In a climatological viewpoint of our time, related with the present, we are immerged in it and in its social cultural facets, and there is an prominence of images that suggests a change of *episteme* where images, in a phenomenological way, put our consciousness in relation with things and senses associating, in this perspective, persons with the world and the being, in a kind of essence's view. The various apparatus, as photography, video and screens, are forms developing an attentive language of comprehension of reality, where the visual presentation shows social phenomena. All the images are integrated in the social and cultural experience of life. That means that when we analyze the visual social world, we are in a process of production of knowledge. We know that image is a trace of the human being and shows a presence and builds a collective memory of daily life; for this, the image is a permanent practical experience of daily life, a reality that is also constructed by a visual disposition, a visual modality of our relation with and through the world. The image is the space where we consume the experience of the world but, at the same time, observing this scenario in sociological posture, it's a production of knowledge inserted in a relation with the sight, in order to produce a contemplation of the dimension of daily life memory of the glaze, it is *eikôn,* that means to "make present". This seems to be one of the essential characteristics of the capacity of images in our contemporaneity.

The galaxy of images represents an expressive model, a monstration activating a sensorial impact that influences the thought. We already know, as Rudolf Arnheim theorized, that visual perception means visual thought. So visual perception transforms what is viewed in notions and reflexions of the thought. In this context, our immersion

in the visual atmosphere conducts us to notice a strong analogy between the symbolic content of images and reality. At the same time, we must not forget that images offer us fragments and details of reality that are selected in a subjective way, contributing to the construction of thought and knowledge. The visualization of reality permits us to give a specific subjective definition that is the process of production of a particular vision of the world.

The use of images in the construction of social reality is a pertinent perspective to see reality, it surrounds things and establishes a symbolic order. Hence, if we interrogate ourselves about how we build a social construction of reality – thinking about the famous work of Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann – we can considerate image as a component of this process, participating to create and recreate intersubjectivity, meaning that multiple realities coexist in any context. This coexistence can also be perceived with the consideration that image, in the viewpoint of Michel Maffesoli (1993), is a "mesocosm": an interstitial element between macrocosm and microcosm. With its function of reliance, it invites us to understand the social world. On another side, the image corresponds to a mirror of society, and we know that the mirror is a symbolic figuration of the image, where its ontological problematic is condensed. The mirror – analyzed by Plato, Leibniz, Lacan – forms a symbolic figuration of image, a centre of otherness and identity that we must take in consideration when capturing expressive signs of our present. In a symbolic process, this analysis can be related to the idea, in the construction of social reality, to conceive ourselves through others: "looking glass self" said Charles H. Cooley in 1902 to illustrate how the others are the mirror of ourselves. And this mirror of contemporary ambience can be illustrated, as en example, by sharing instants of our life *via* different photography. And at the same time, this "mirror" can also be illustrated by the phenomenology of the selfie, a typical attitude of our times that means, as well, a presence transmitting a relation. The selfie, as the auto-portrait of 21st century, is a desire to be there, a proof of our participation in the world. Social media indulge our identity and culture, they present oneself has having an aperture to others. In this way, the "selfication" of reality is a key to read a social practice oriented towards others where *reliance* is the process of a being in the world and the individual, in the process of social relation, adjusts itself to its social environment. In a sociological approach, we know that we are linked to others and to society in order to satisfy the vital need of social recognition, our identity and existence. This is also a symptom, to build through images an aesthetic of existence or affinities that in our epoch become, following Vincenzo Susca (2017), "connected affinities".

Well, the various images circulating in the social sphere are an expression of the symbolic figuration of the mirror that puts together alterity and identity generating a kaleidoscope of our existence, with bonds and communion. This process of *mimesis* is also the expression of a dependence regarding the other and the visual apparatus through which the individuals experience their daily life. A visual *Erlebnis* is in act in our social world where symbols, images, imaginary are condition of possibilities of the experience and, at the same time, make possible an intense comprehension of the sense of realness that people express.

Concerning perception, it is obvious that when we talk about the perception of experience we must also pay attention to the technical structure, to the apparatus that permit us to enlarge reality. In fact there are some sensorial alterations influencing our mode of perception and vision. Where there is an interaction with the interfaces that are interposed between us and the world, there is the production of a techno-symbolic penetration that modifies sensorial perceptions. We are facing a perceptive visualisation of the being and its ways to inhabit the world that generates a cine-presence, photo-presence and imago-presence. Visualisation is an instantaneousness of experience where the screens became prosthesis of the explosion of visuality that influences the way we act. In this direction can we question the nature of our relation with the screen? The screens are surfaces of projection of our existence and presence, a manifestation and an appearance that makes possible, or better, visible the world and the being there. So it is appropriate to talk of screenology where the screen represents a lived surface and, in consequence, to look at the inter-medial relations as cultural forms.[2] Nowadays, we can't deny the important impact of screens, that are permanent extensions of our bodies; but the screen is naturally a totem of our relation with the world and in our contemporary society it can be seen as a narrative form and a process of identification that transforms the practice of visualizing daily life. If the gaze of the social world is mediated by images, the screen has an ontological nature that means that isn't a simple technological device, but an optical device that characterizes our way to be in the world and our relation with the real. Reality is the screen because it appears through the screen and at the same time the screen is a medium that establishes the contact with reality, where, in the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, we see through and with the screen.

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[2] See for example the reflexions of Lev Manovich and Erkki Huhtamo. *The Screen Media Reader. Culture, Theory, Practice*, edited by S. Monteiro (2017), New York: Bloomsbury.

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