

Intro-response

WE CANNOT
LOSE FAITH IN
WHAT WE NEVER
BELIEVED IN

Žarko Pać

Dear Krešimir,

An invitation from your *New Theories* journal to participate with an article on the topic “Do we still believe in the power of images?” of course I can’t refuse. After all, together and each in our own way, for more than twenty years we have been trying to solve the question of the ontological status of the image in modern times and perhaps open new perspectives in understanding the relationship between visual arts and philosophy. We have edited several collections in Croatian and English on this topic, especially the publication of the book *Theorizing Images* from 2016 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing was an extremely important step. The book soon became mandatory reading for the course on art history and theory of images at the Humboldt University in Berlin. However, the highlight was in this effort to establish visual studies as a new scientific discipline within the humanities in your collection *The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies* from 2021. The question you ask about the so-called call for papers seems rhetorical and as if it can only be answered in the affirmative or in the negative. However, there is another small problem in the question itself, and that is – *belief*. As you know, I, as a philosopher and one who, in Weber’s words, is not musical by faith, cannot remain intact on this formulation. It is clear, of course, that when you take it pragmatically, you mean that belief here is synonymous with opinion in the sense of judging and taking positions. There is, however, something else especially intriguing about the question of believing or losing faith in the power of images. It is precisely this excess of theological-religious *thinking* in the concept of image that appears from the very beginning in the Greeks, and continues throughout the entire history of Western metaphysics, even in the understanding of the so-called technical or digital images in Flusser, who, like the late Horkheimer, modernized his Jewish eschatology and messianism with the idea of a telematic society for which the transparency of the image means the possibility of merging with the divine.

Your question is formulated without any doubt in extremely challenging and inspiring way, all the more so since you mention how in 1994 the framework was created for the end of the metaphysical “great narrative” about language with the emergence of *Bildwissenschaft* and Visual Studies, the one initiated by Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell

from different theoretical perspectives. As you know, already in my book *Aesthetics and the Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art: Pictures Without a World* from 2006 (eng. edition, Springer 2021), right in the first chapter entitled “The world without a picture” I talk about the end of the image not only as the end of mimesis and representation, but also about the end of the image in the sense of any sublime remnant of the divine in the image, and with the term *immanent transcendence*, which I explain in a footnote dealing with Vanja Sutlić, not Gilles Deleuze, I enter into the analysis of the impossibility of image becoming a new language, because that would only be the continuation of the rule of language as logocentrism by other means. The real problem of my understanding of the image as a technosphere, which you interpretively recognized in your book *Pictorial Appearing – Image Theory After Representation* (Transcript, Bielefeld, 2019, pp. 106-121), refers to the disappearance of the traditionally understood space and time of its form of appearing, and not appearances as such.

Among my first impulses to engage in a radical rethinking of the relationship between image and thought in the horizon of the end of metaphysics after Heidegger and Deleuze was Alain Besançon’s book, *L’image interdite* (Gallimard, Paris, 1994). As you well know, this monumental and truly brilliant study on the problem of iconoclasm from Plato and Plotinus to Kandinsky and Malevich, clearly showed that the question of the image is a philosophical-theological question about the origins and the beginning of its referential framework, and that the problem of contemporary art is in fact a secularized problem of the transformation of “faith-in-the-image” into an ideology and politics as a fundamental form of the avant-garde aspiration for a revolutionary end to the difference between art and life. My propositions in the numerous books in which I dealt with these same questions and problems were directed towards finding what medieval theology calls the TERTIUM DATUR. Thus, both language and image enable something synthetically and analytically autonomous, the very “thing” of thought that becomes, from the aesthetic object of Marcel Duchamp to the autopoietic activity of Ken Rinaldo’s robot, the same thing as self-producing and self-moving, but so that there is no longer a difference between ideas and phenomena, transcendence and immanence; instead, at the place of the linguistic and iconic turn, it is now a matter of visualizing the concept as a *technosphere*. It is not an image that has

the power any longer, but what directs the image from the technical dispositif of Power to the Power of number, that is, the mathematization and technologization of being and time, to put it in the language of Heidegger from the period of *Sein und Zeit*. *The technosphere is the rule of the absolute triad of calculation-planning-construction and can no longer be understood by traditional metaphysical concepts of either language or image*. Admittedly, the late Wittgenstein foresaw this when he inserted into the philosophical discourse the concept of “language games” or *Sprachspiele* as a form of life. But here we are talking about pure Platonism in a twisted way. The idea that the *technosphere* auto-poietically visualizes the world as an image stems from its hyperplasticity exhibited by an artificial brain or artificial intelligence. Hence the image in the so-called “post-digital world” – which presupposes precisely the Power of numbers and the mathematization of the world as a metaverse – requires the abandonment of both philosophy and theology, but also the history of art. Let’s go one step further, both *Bildwissenschaft* and Visual Studies too. Why?

The answer presupposes the answer to the question about “do we still believe in the power of images?” Our so-called faith was not a matter of faith in a secular god of information as a condition of the possibility of cybernetics. Therefore, when I titled the book “pictures without a world” with the subtitle “iconoclasm of contemporary art”, I primarily wanted to follow the trail of the late Heidegger and his concept of *Kunstlosigkeit* to reach the other shore, the one where there is no longer a difference between art and non-art, nor the difference between living and non-living. You remember that for the first time in that book the concept of the *technosphere* heralded an era that transcends the concept of art from the Greeks to Hegel and beyond. Art, like science, in the age of the *technosphere* is only possible as a research and experiment in the creation of the new from the spirit of *autopoiesis*. That spirit, metaphorically speaking, means the thinking that produces its own reality no longer as a difference between idea and appearance, *noesis* and *noema*, to put it in Kantian-Husserlian way. What such a thinking produces is beyond any knowledge of the image in the sense of philosophy or semiotics, as was necessary for the *Bildwissenschaft* or Image Science, but also of any social-cultural differentiation of gazes and looking the image as a representation, such as those entertained by Visual Studies which are part of the so-called the umbrella of all possible twists

and turns in the referential field of the image as insight, reflection, the gaze and observation. *An image in the tradition of Platonic-Plotinian theology or metaphysics has always been a flash of God's light and a reflection in the eye of the beholder of what is invisible, so the allegory of the cave is the beginning and the end of the aesthetics of simulacrum. We no longer have anything to do with it, because it is synesthetic thinking that creates visualized objects as fragments of a contingent and emergent mappa mundi as a new reality without any help from an external creator.*

The end of the so-called belief in the power of images is not the end of philosophy and art in line with the triumphant march of the technoscientific "world picture", which will accelerate as soon quantum computers start operating. After all, the fundamental questions of today are not decided by philosophers, theologians, or artists, but only by the triad of astrophysics, cosmology, and biogenetics. *This means that thinking in speculative or reflexive manner having an image as its object must become transversal and experimental in the face of a radical change in the concepts of Power and Image in general. Because Power is not political power, but what conditions everything and results from the cybernetic turn in which the management of systems and the environment is created as a quartet of information-feedback-control-communication. Homo kybernetes is therefore the end of all previous anthropologies, including the one that calls itself cybernetic. The image is no longer an external-internal matter of the relationship between the sublime and the banal in the field of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, as, after all, Deleuze clearly showed in *Film 1* and *2*, when he established an ontology of images, movement and time following Bergson's footsteps, but mostly following Artaud and his *brain-as-screen* ideas. What follows is something extremely monstrous – *Unheimlich*. If the image is an autopoietic model of the creation of new worlds from the logic of number and its infinity, then language and narration have become superfluous to the functioning of the *technosphere*. Instead we have "concerts of machines" and the frenzy of "symbolic mathematics". Everything becomes a visualized world of interaction of what is no longer substantial or corporeal, but is a networked tele-presence matrix in the game of the non-human. There are three examples that can testify to this, and which at the same time speak about the end of the image as the essence of art in the modern world.*

The first is Godard's film essay on the history of the 20th century as the history of film, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in which the end of the film

marks the end of the “great narrative” about the representation of what we are watching. The effect of the de-realization of the visible and already seen in other films, images, texts, montage of discursive chaos as modeled in Benjamin’s *Arcades* becomes pure melancholy of the technical dispositif of the film, which disappears with the arrival of pure visualization. The second is the launch of the “James Webb” telescope into space, with which astrophysics and cosmology get a pictorial insight into the constellations of the universe, the origin and end of stars, the age of galaxies and possibly a “picture of God” as an intelligent designer before the Big Bang. Of course, soon, with the progress in visualization technology itself, it will be completely clear that the sciences can no longer exist without two fundamental concepts, namely measurement and pictoriality, which derives from the essence of the technosphere as calculation-planning-construction. Black holes in the universe will be solved by advances in the quality of visualization and advances in the mathematical calculation of the entropy of the universe itself. The third is the emergence of the new in the sense of the contingent cause of consciousness itself as a simulacrum of human thought. Brain scanning and neurocognitivism therefore belong to the only remaining mystery, which is the question of self-awareness as a mode of existence of all beings in the universe with the potential to distinguish between good and evil. *The image is always TERTIUM DATUR, the connection between the sublime and the appearance in its metamorphic structure of a synesthetic “illusion”. The film, the telescope and the simulacrum of the artificial brain show us the end of the metaphysics of art and the end of the image as a sign and meaning.*

Instead of the history of the world as the history of the development of self-awareness starting from language as logos with the referential framework of myth to the Greeks and the Christian religion in the Middle Ages, the image as representation from Velázquez to Cézanne and the image as information from photography to film, our age is determined by the rule of the *technosphere* as the Power of the *number* in an infinite variation of models and simulations of reality. It is an age without a picture, the one that, as in Godard’s *Histoir(e) du cinéma*, needs philosophy and art as a speculative-reflexive musealization and historicization of events that go away irrevocably at the speed of light; and precisely for this reason, the necessity of a new thinking presupposes a different consideration of the question of “believing in the power of

images”. *We have not lost our belief, because we never had it, except as a kind of saving consolation that all this will not become a trail of pure light, a trail of nothingness with such monstrous speed.*

Well, dear Krešo, that’s how I think about it.

Your
Žarko

Dear Žarko,

Thank you for your letter, which, like so many times before, prompted me to think more in depth; this time it is the concept of “believing in the power of the image”. As you yourself note, in that syntagm the underlying concept of “faith” is discursive and not theological in nature, although, as you also note, the discursive in the images often had mythical, religious and otherworldly characteristics in different ways. However, no matter how semantically we secularize the concept of belief-as-faith – as a discourse, thinking, hope or expectation – we are left with the other part of the question, which is the “power of the image”. In your reasoning, I recognize techno-pessimism, to which I myself am inclined. This, of course, is not about opposing technological progress, and even less about succumbing to eco-paranoia as a new ideological juggernaut, but about how technology changes our perception of the world through images understood as multi-modal “screens”, from Paleolithic drawings to AI image generators. I think that right now we are witnessing an epochal change that allows us to understand that images were never related to reality but to other images or to themselves. How to explain this? Did not divine and earthly reality overlap in the spiritual presence of Christ Pantokrator in Byzantine icons? Wasn’t Louis-François Lejeune’s historicist depiction of *Napoleon’s battle at Borodino* from 1822 showing only one possible version of that particular event? Don’t photographs for personal documents, despite ubiquitous software for manipulation, still testify to the strongly rooted conventionalization of representation that we call “imitation” since antiquity? Only with abstract *paintings* – here I deliberately exclude “half abstract” images, like synoptic charts or medical visualizations – we witness pure reality. Paradoxically, what

we see in, for example, Julije Knifer's "meander paintings" is the only thing we *can* see in them: the unadulterated reality of picture-as-difference. If we manage to solve the "problem with reality" that images have always had, we might get closer to what you are advocating, which is a different reflection on "belief in the power of images" in the age of the technosphere. The advent of artificially generated realities give us the last, although belated, possibility to do this.

Your
Krešimir