Image(ry) and Visibility: What Creates Us and How?

Summary

Following the visual turn, computational technologies move us into the digital Anthropocene that in turn is changing our modes of existence. The book emphasizes the status of the Anthropocene in visual media, attempts to delineate the cartography of contemporary visual culture and link the debate to the essential features of capitalism and technological industry. Cloud computing imagery well conveys a sense of the current space-time in which images circulate. The virtual clouds, as if competing with nature, reach a divinity sphere. "Cosmotechnology" enables a vast spread of images, billions of which are concentrated on social networks, extending their visual rays onto our consciousness. Thus the authors raise a question: in what ways does visuality affect what we see, who we are, and how we imagine ourselves? How do images function as substitutes for reality and gain the will to act in social life? As well as how powerful visions of the future might occur?

The term visual turn was defined at the end of the twentieth century, although the image-producing technologies were moving towards it throughout the entire 20th century – photography, cinema, television and other media were continually shaping "optical subconscious". It is clear that the visual turn corresponds to post-modernity, when image-based culture comes to the fore, testifying to the emergence of the volatile world along with the recession of textual culture and the end of great narratives. Besides, the rapid development of digital media and the Internet determine the intensification of visuality. As a result, the image, as though liberated from any defined frame, becomes an active participant in the global world. In the endless chains of reproduction, the meanings become fluid, indefinite and

constantly changing. Spectacular communication supplemented by fake news resembles empty air bubbles, increases uncertainty and affective feelings. It seems that the more we see, the less we know. But are the images in any way responsible for what is confusing in today's world? What are the deeper problems associated with public relations, media powers, digital technologies, capitalist economy, and so on? Five chapters bring five authors together who work across different disciplines and encompass a multi-layered life of images, explaining the present state of visual culture in terms of its genesis and evolution, and negotiating the limits of human visual culture.

It is noteworthy that images are characterised in the book as a coupling of mental pictures and visual representations, of what is visible and invisible, and what create an environment in which psychosocial individualization takes place. Imagery affects the deep structures of individual and collective consciousness; images connect mental reality with the material world; image-making shapes social imaginaries, lifestyles and everyday meanings. Tangible and intangible images are interdependent. In other words, the image is not just simply a surface through which the gaze penetrates. Also, a boundless depth of the imagination certainly lies in the profundity of the image, which has the capacity to restructure concepts, belief systems and perceptions. However, what happens when images are not the imaginings of human consciousness but the products of computer programs? When do images get stuck in a global network of communicating machines?

One of the theoretical starting points of the book is Gilbert Simondon's philosophical concept of the image as a complex phenomenon – a quasi-organism that inhabits subjective and collective terrains. Its role as a mediator empowers it to act on social, economic, and political planes, linking aesthetics to technology. By uncovering insights from philosophy and cultural anthropology (Heidegger, Simondon, Stiegler, Stengers, Descola, Latour, Coccia), cultural studies and media theory (Debord, Baudrillard, Flusser, Kittler, Rushkoff, Hui, Vaidhyanathan), sociology and history (Lipovetsky, Heinich, Lash, Zuboff, Boorstin), art history and visual studies (Belting,

W.J.T. Mitchell, Mirzoeff, Rubinstein, Gunthert), image theory and art (Hoelzl, Paglen, Šalčiūtė), the authors take an interdisciplinary approach to the discussion of the evolution of contemporary visual culture. They investigate image (*imāgō*) functioning in multiple systems related to global capitalism, digital communication technologies and visual media. Furthermore, they analyze the role of images (īcōn) in the construction of attitudes, meanings and identities; considering the relationship between visuality and visual art, image and imagination (*imāginātō*). Finally, they ask what might be the possibilities to change social imaginaries, bearing in mind that a productive imagination is overwhelmed by the technology market. Therefore, a chiasmic gaze underpins the main research questions: what do we create and what, in turn, create us? How do visual media (re)shape society and (over)govern the social and cultural sphere?

In recent years in the theory of visual culture, grounded in philosophy, there has been a growing focus on the impact of new technologies, on the evolution of images and on the spread of images in social networks that ensure an unlimited (self)representation and spectaclization of everything, influencing changes in subjective and intersubjective modalities. Algorithmization, artificial intelligence and viewing machines raised pressing questions on the new image users who are no longer humans, but who intensively explore images, trying to "extract" meanings from our personal moments of life. As a result, there is a growing debate on computer vision. Thus visual studies have been extended by the research of new viewing-seeing trajectories that are not limited to the human eye.

Visual studies have also been significantly complemented by visual activism. Artists, who have entered the research field, as well as theorist, are trying to reveal the infrastructures, visual codes and control mechanisms of digital industry. Their voice is growing stronger both in terms of discussing the peculiarities of digital technologies, the effects of social media and the issues of invisibility – what remains in the grey zones and in the shadows of increasingly popular post-visual culture.

No less important issues are raised on the intersection of visual studies and the sociology of culture. One of the most important issues remains the aesthetic dimension of visual culture. The aestheticisation has become closely interlinked with "artistic capitalism" and "arketing", blurring the line between art and product. Those interconnections shape an anthropocenic aesthetic complex, which dominates our perceptual experiences.

Another significant branch of visual studies stems from posthuman studies. In response to the Anthropocene discourse, scholars encourage various non-anthropocentric approaches that create the preconditions for the image to be perceived as an ecorelational phenomenon. Non-antropocentric perspectives encourage strengthening of the relationship between man and nature, humans and other species, as well as restoring interconnected vital networks; this invites to create a new *sensus communis* realizing that the human sight is not a dominant sense. Ecophenomenology has given a strong impetus to this, inspiring to see the world not only from a human point of view, but also through the "potato eyes", drawing our attention to the ontological experience of all beings.

What is the contribution of this book to the latest studies and current debates? The monograph describes the systematic changes in visual culture and the substantial challenges for the human gaze. It does not seek to differentiate images, to delve into the individual areas of visual media or art. The focus rather lies on the dynamism of visuality and its systemic shifts that affect our vision, experience, thinking and creativity, leading to the limits of the human visual culture.

In the first chapter, "The Media Anthropocene: the Postmodern Over-mastery of Visual Consciousness", Vytautas Rubavičius argues that only a profound understanding of the logic of postmodern capitalism, which overmasters visual media, enables a critical evaluation of the current social and cultural "appearances". The chapter provides a theoretical framework for assessing visual media that reinforce the marketization of public conscious-ness and memory, subordinating psychosomatic and biological processes to

technology. The author discusses the insights of Heidegger, Stiegler, Ellul and other philosophers of technology, considering the broad process of the mastery of consciousness through the technological engineering. Bernays's work and practice help to understand this process, which is evolved in the digital "society of the spectacle". Also, Stiegler's thinking about Bifurcation, as a vital possibility of planetary change, relates to Heidegger's testamentary *Spiegel* interview about the future of mankind. This raise a fundamental question: is it possible to build a "geological" political will that meets the challenges of the Anthropocene and is capable of bringing about a fundamental change into the operation of entropic planetary capitalist system? The media Anthropocene, based on computational technologies – the current state of global capitalism recycling "human resources", living matter and living energy – continues to industrialize, desymbolize, algorithmize society, increases its entropy and destroys sociality. Therefore, the author considers how we could break free from the cinematic consciousness and the future images projected in it? How could we get rid of the systemic technological governance and integrative propaganda? How could we change ourselves in a toxic environment of image-making, laying foundation for the new ethics?

In the second chapter, "The Ontogenesis of Visual Culture: the Changing Ways of Viewing and Seeing" Odeta Žukauskienė discusses the shifts that follow the visual turn. She explores the evolution of visual culture and new visual regimes drawing on insights from W. J. T. Mitchell, Mirzoeff, Rubinstein and other theorists. She argues that not only has the digital shift expanded the archive of images, but also changed the perspectives of seeing the world. Satellite systems and electronic devices have introduced the types of viewpoints that are remotely controlled and that have become the means of invisible powers. Social media have created an opportunity to be hypervisible by offering a playful and performative environment for self-imaging instead. The merging of these perspectives has welcomed the algorithmic turn that begins an era of post-visuality, in which visibility depends not so much on the powers of images as on the automation systems behind them. However,

facing a "new climatic regime", the theoretical framework of Latour, Coccia and others intensively activates an alternative non-anthropocentric shift, stimulating the image to be seen as the ethos of life. Thus, contemporary visual culture finds itself among the struggling belief systems, each of which could bring significant changes.

The intrusion of machine vision into the creative realm is changing the ontological relationship between technologies and arts. Skaidra Trilupaitytė considers the issue in the third chapter "Digital Faces or "Portraits" Created by Artificial Intelligence." This section explores the rise of algorithmic aesthetics and algorithmic imagination, providing examples of how computer programs and computer vision are integrated into the creative field. The author is concerned with how artificial intelligence can be creative, and how it works in art. The programs of image generation, recognition and classification raise fundamental questions about algorithm creativity and the artistic capacities of AI in relation to humans. Therefore the author asks if the tools of AI are solely the extensions of human consciousness and vision or they go beyond this?

The impact of aestheticization on contemporary society and culture is examined in the fourth chapter – "The Montages of Pictures and Images: the Entrenchment of Transeasthetisation". Combining visual studies, the sociology of culture, and media theory, Žilvinė Gaižutytė-Filipavičienė discusses the penetration of aesthetics into all spheres of life and knowledge, arguing that the diffusion of visibility and image-making is determined by a dynamic development of consumer capitalism and globalized markets, characterized by a never-ending search for innovations. The aesthetic turn relates to the "artistic capitalism" constantly expanding the powers of visibility. Life becomes overwhelmed by pseudo-events and pseudo-realities and art in its turn is involved in the production of public images and social imageries. This encourages reflection on the permanent transgressions of boundaries in the image industry that destroys the sense of boundary itself.

In the fifth chapter "The Excess of Emotions in the Visual Ecosystem of the Internet and Art" Agnė Narušytė reveals how social networks create

misleading visual labyrinths characterized by the excess of emotions. She explores how online space and image-sharing media affect social life and artistic ecosystem. The hysterical, performative, emotionally evocative, algorithmically re-engineered and algorithm-fueled psychodrama is not limited to a virtual reality, but spans into social reality and a confused existence that leads uncontrollably to a potentially scary future. Case studies show how spectacular cyberculture is being reflected in the creative strategies of Lithuanian artists, who reveal the hidden layers of the new visual existence offering rebellious contravisuality. The artists rework images involved in online psychodramas, disrupt the automation of communication networks and turn creative forms into the instruments of criticism.

The monograph offers a comprehensive overview of the various aspects of contemporary visual culture, reflecting on the systemic changes dictated by global capitalism and technological advancement. The authors refer to the methodological principles of cultural theorist Mieke Bal, endorsing the view that the object of visual studies should not be imprisoned within a specific paradigm. In this respect, the co-authors engage in a multidisciplinary research, providing insights into a complex functioning of images across social and cultural spheres; and capture significant aspects in the development of the Anthropocene in visual media that is changing the entire environment of human existence. The book aims to reveal the transformations of visual culture and to present the distinct lines of the current situation.

The co-authors claim that after the visual turn and the expansion of the global network, computational technology moves us into the digital Anthropocene. The challenges of the Anthropocene are related to the global development of western modernity and ideology that enforce constant need to modernize, mediate and innovate. The study of those challenges highlights several extreme modalities in contemporary visual culture and visual studies.

Firstly, contemporary visual culture reaches its apogee in non-human vision that expresses the crisis of humanity. The inhuman horizon of vision follows the algorithmic turn, while expanding digital infra-

structures, computer systems and artificial intelligence. Visual life unfolds in those invisible electronic structures, in which the image assists in the implementation of communication and data transactions rather than performs representative or aesthetic functions. Capitalist cosmotechnics acquires hegemonic power that electronically observes humanity, takes control of attention and governs conscious and subconscious sight. Moreover, the automated engineering claims to have entered a creative field. The efforts have been made to humanize computer vision and AI. However, a Promethean concept of human technologies increases the influence of entropy on humanity. The development encourages critical rethinking of the relationship between human and machine visions, asking what would lead to antientropic processes.

The horizon of inhuman sight occurs in the theoretical framework of the Anthropocene discourse too. While we are overwhelmed by the burden of responsibility for the fate of our planet, the efforts are being made to promote ecological awareness and naturalistic cosmologies. Non-human beings have also become a priority. Nonhuman centered approaches stimulate seeing the world as a symbiotic network of human-environmental interactions. This leads to the promise of the ontological turn and the rediscovery of the worlds' unity, including the images created by other living organisms in the horizon of vision and treating the image itself as natural and supernatural force. Hereby, scientific and artistic studies focus on sensual "being-here-with-others" and those belief systems that would restore the unity of the sensible by shaking off ideological doctrines and programmed visions. In this path, the inhuman mode envisages a plural openness with the potential for the coexistence of man and other beings in a common visual ecosystem.

Thus, the processes driven by the visual turn branch out – the ethics of technology and the ethics of life are incorporating images into the new ways of viewing and perceiving. However, it is important that human self-perception would not be absolutely faded. Consequently, technological or other ways of human "liberation" are fundamentally problematic.

The conditions for individualization, memory, and time perception have been gradually shifting towards the in-human regimes and the crisis of Anthropos. In a sense, the structure of human consciousness has become the product of the producer's visuality, and individuals had to present themselves by becoming images. As a result, ceaseless visualization, stylization, aestheticisation, "artistification" process takes place, due to which the Heideggerian Dasein transforms into "design". Herewith, artistic activities themselves become problematic, they move out of the zone of aesthetics, turning to activism and other practices, including criticism and the realm of research.

The five components and critical thresholds in the genealogy of visual culture are outlined here in the conclusions:

1. The media Anthropocene is the present state of postmodern capitalism, in which images as tools of ideological governance shape the field of public relations, communication and marketing. Digital visual technologies form the basis for the transition to the hyper-industrial stage, which permeates all the areas of human world and uses images for capital exchange. Social media also do the job of the "spectaclization" of social relations. Social media marketing is complemented by neuromarketing, which direct new technical organs to biological and psychosomatic levels. The industrialization involves human memory and mental apparatus. Technological hominization destroys the conditions for personal and communal individuation, cultural and biological diversity and life itself. This leads to the final stage of the Anthropocene, providing the vision of its limits, which anticipates the possibility of an unexpected evolutionary shift opening up toward a negentropic, nurturing life mode of being.

2. Another important phenomenon of the present digital culture is an extreme acceleration of image circulation, which not only determines the incomprehensible abundance of images, but also ruthlessly blurs the line between the original and the copy, reality and virtuality, determining a deep uncertainty of existence. The digital platforms are setting new perspectives on

vision, where the humans are not the most important viewers; they, in turn, are the objects of observation, too. Remote sight systems (developed in the defence industry) acquire hegemonic powers, expand control and establish a cartographic vision. On the contrary, social media stimulate deceptive performativity. In the dynamic environment of visual communication a post-image culture emerges, linking human and non-human factors. Those changes encourage rethinking the position of human beings in the world when a human person is no longer a central agent nor an essential visual observer.

3. Cyber technologies take over vision and creative abilities from humans; computational systems lead to significant changes marked by virtual agents. As soon as artificial intelligence has entered the field of social life, it takes a great interest in the art market. However, the creative ability of AI requires the rethinking of the concepts of creativity, artistic originality and free will. Moreover, the proliferation of synthetic images and facial recognition programs expands the field of disinformation, distorts the ecosystem of human relationships and meanings; furthermore, the superhuman visual regimes broaden the grey areas of vision controlled by algorithmic "brains". All of this makes it more important than ever to reflect on the opaque black box of technology and the artistic subject, raising ethical and political issues related to the essence of being human and the definitions of identity and subjectivity.

4. Transaesthetisation leads to another extreme limit drawn by integral capitalism and creative industries. After the aesthetic turn, visibility has emerged as a powerful form of capital and the field of self-exposure. It has affected the modes of subjectivation and the planes of social and cultural imagination. In addition to this, transaesthetisation leads to a consummate artification of all social and cultural fields, subordinating creativity and art to the regime of hypervisibility and blending of branding and art. The increasing artification problematizes intuitive aesthetic sensibility as fundamental value and touches on the issues of human existence in the inhuman conditions of commodification.

5. Finally, the antiseptic, automated info-visual ecosystem, activates extreme emotions that mislead humanity in the labyrinths of psychedelic post-truth, where there is nothing real and hysterical dramas take hold. The Internet and social networks are usurping existential time, cultivating a meaningless presence that leads to a potentially scary in-human future. However, the image always exists in a double perspective. Thus visual artists are trying to draw the opposite vector. By observing a technological ecosystem that shapes a non-contextual gaze, constantly reconfiguring identities and turning individuals into characters of their own psychodramas, artists take advantage of internet media and the pictorial ambiguity. By contrasting the rebellious visuality that infiltrates the system with unforeseen human intentions, they create conditions for ironic discharges of emotions and feelings of the absurd, transforming visual creation into a tool of criticism and a field of thinking that escapes the intensity of programmed imagery and offers alternatives to the cyberspectacle.

To conclude, the critical analysis engages in thinking about how to change. The destabilisation of the human and the sense of inhuman in the Anthropocene might be seen not just as a challenge to contemporary humanities and social sciences, focusing our attention on the possible futures, but also as an encouragement to contribute to the development of new theoretical discourses. Therefore, the crucial questions arise: how in the digital age, which expands the exteriorization of the contents of our consciousness and leads to entropy, could the reverse processes and new forms of internalization emerge, overcoming the technological toxicity? How to disclose the different layers of technology itself, awakening new cosmotechnics, cosmologies or ontologies? How to create new interactions between man, technology and nature, to enact new concepts and to develop an ecology of images and machines by using inventive methodological approaches?

In the light of the possible changes, researchers are obliged to reassess our ontological relation to the image. An increasing tendency to link humanities to the natural sciences is leading to new methods (compostographic, phasmid,

etc.) that are taking roots in visual and cultural studies, seeking to enact critical imagination and to embody different views. This tendency allows to focus on sympathetic systems by referring to the variety of living species and creatures along with their images, which require us to return to primordial appearances and visual perceptions. One must, however, keep in mind that the dominant regime encourages all forms of "post", "trans" and boundary crossings. It is precisely this that paves the way for further critical analysis of the modern Western project and for the critical rethinking of relationships between visual, technological and natural systems.