With Views on the Image

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Anges et chimères du virtuel, Pau : Presses universitaires, 2002, (Figures de l'art, n° 6)

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L'Ombre de l'image : de la falsification à l'infigurable, (sous la dir. de Muriel Gagnebin), Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 2002, (L'Or d'Atalante)

- 1 As the keyword of all connection with the visible world, *image* occurs in the titles of books with very different areas of concern, attesting both to the dispersed range of approaches attaching to the idea of image, as well as to the persistence of a defiant attitude towards it. Serge Tisseron and Marie José Mondzain nurture a defence of the image that is theoretical, in the face of the suspicion of dangerousness refuelled by the contemporary doxa. The image produced by new digital tools worries Michel Porchet when it is presented chimaera-like on the lintel of issue n°6 of the annual periodical of the Presses universitaires de Pau, *Figures de l'art*. Lastly, the shadow is a metaphorical and problematic lining of all imagery for the 26 authors brought together under the banner of *L'Ombre de l'image*, who all probe the invisible aspect of the image, when, on the contrary, visibility is glorified and exercised in the album *Au-delà du visible*. Let us start from this point, noting, first and foremost, that the problem-set of the image regularly leads us to the outer fringes of art¹. The intent of the Phaidon album, which is the only one to present images, is to open up the field of the ordinary experience of perception, for it includes more than 300 plates categorized by their scale, ranging from the very micro to

the very macro-images, the preface-writer points out, due “to devices made to extend the power of the human eye”. Beyond an aestheticization of snapshots, scientific and technical imagery here questions “in actuality” the paradigm of photographic visibility, when the eye does not know if it is surprised by what it sees (intimacy of organic matter by MRI or enormity of perception in the cosmic dimension by infrared) or by the shifter of its sight (rich reproductions). It is a question of this ilk too that electronic technologies and synthetic imagery fuel in their turn. So it is with Michel Porchet who constructs his “criticism of the synthetic image”—as the subtitle puts it—from an odd engineer’s viewpoint, defender of industry against the dehumanization of the image, synapses versus processors. The at times rapid and cavalier perspective dovetails history of computer science, criticism of the free market, and fundamental physiology, to challenge the computer-generated image through its manner of production, reserving the designation of synthetic image for the appearance on screen, and display coding, and reducing to quite a brief diagram the *arche* of the image—to borrow the word used by Jean-Marie Schaeffer—to contrast it with a virtual reality denounced as a cause of the break in the representation-referent link. The author sees a defeat of the image in its technological fate, a defeat pointed to through a swift evocation of the image in art, a position that comes across like nostalgia for a lost perspectival scopic device, replaced by this image now bodyless, status of image so deceptive that it can only be transitory for the author. It is quite some way from this sort of mechanical reduction that we find the many different challenges and issues of the academic contributions to *Anges et chimères du virtuel*, which, from the figure of the Angel according to St. Thomas Aquinas to *Matrix* by way of Marcel Duchamp and the on-going reference to Louis Marin, reinstates a differently articulated trajectory of the virtual, thus of a different density as dictated by the 26 signatures brought together under the editorship of Bernard Lafargue in an ambitious if uneven volume, dealing with those unstable realities represented by on-line image circulation and the “eyes” of webcams, as well as the staging of theatre and music defined by its holes.

- 2 They are just as numerous in the shadow of Murielle Gagnebin, covering very broad fields here, too, from film to painting by way of photography and astrophysics. Broad fields but ones permeated by the operative figure of the shadow, which, from Plato to *M. le Maudit*, constructs the image in all its depth, either literally or metaphorically, depending on the case in point. And Agnès Minazzoli reminds us of the ground-breaking role of the layout of Dibutade, mythically articulating the image to the thing as much to the absence of the thing as to its disappearance. Around the Russian film-maker Sokurov on the one hand, but above all around historical perspectives in the image devices with which the archaeology of painting and photography alike is filled, like Lavater’s silhouette-making machine referred to by Bruno-Nassim Abouddrar, the shadow remains a logical shifter of the intelligence of the image, a talking stand-in making imagery for imagery’s sake, with the result that the volume achieves a certain coherence, in spite of the heterogeneity of the fields occupied.
- 3 Our last two authors deal more precisely with the contemporary non-formulated categories of logic to do with the image in the public domain, responding to the accusation based on a striking operation of image substantification. Marie José Mondzain recounts that it is “because we treat the image as a subject that we suspect it of wanting to misuse its power”. Serge Tisseron, for his part, reminds us that, without the essential dynamic of desire, the image cannot make any sense. And both authors make their way

back up theoretical and disciplinary paths already staked out, but whose current condition leads them to project themselves further ahead, in an operational mode—and this prospect alone makes their reading important, with a concern for a “collective questioning about the political destiny of our emotions” (Mondzain), reflected by it in the long time of the history of “seeing together”, precisely where, as a shrink, Tisseron clearly retraces the diversity of the image, when he describes it by the yardstick of the *pharmakon* of the Greeks as containing the contrasting principles of good and evil, wound and healing. For the image is above all the territory of construction of that vitally unstable edifice, the subject, be it psychic, political subject, be it cultivated or swathed by media and technology, or whether it sees through apparatuses and devices. In a few months—the translation is currently in progress—and from an angle nurtured by the same concerns, we should be able to read the words of Hans Belting who, based this time around on the experience of art history, will also once more set the subject at the heart of the whole device of vision, in his undertaking which involves the anthropology of the image.

NOTES

1. As was specified by the exhibition catalogue *Iconoclash* at the ZKM in the summer of 2002. See: *Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Karlsruhe; Cambridge (MA); ZKM; MIT Press, 2002.