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## A new imaginary



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## NOTE ON THE DIGITIZED IMAGE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper inquires into the statute of images and the relation of subjects to them, based on the consideration that we are invaded by images we consume and produce. The novelty of the digitalization of images is presented, whose consequence is the inscription into a real register, thus introducing a novel relation between the imaginary and the real. With digital images, the symbolic statute is reduced to the real. Based on Gérard Wajcman's work *The Absolute Eye*, a question is raised about what the author calls "the wall of images," referring to the ambition of science to see it all, to the omnipotence of the gaze as a universal eye.

### KEYWORDS

Digital image | Pixel | Technoscience | Universal eye | Gérard Wajcman | Registers | Aall of images | Digital body

If we are constantly invaded by images, images that we consume and produce, images that make reading on tablets possible, this phenomenon is not new in itself. What is really new is the digitalization of images, their encryption in a digital language: this radically modifies not only the very statute of images but, above all, our relation to them. Armed with the three Lacanian registers, what we can immediately say is that images are inscribed, from now on, into a real register, because of the very nature of that encryption, which implies, then, a novel articulation between the imaginary and the real introduced by technology, which the term *data* names and which is no more than a vicissitude of the long process it has taken *technosciences* to mathematize the real.

Incidentally, digital images do not mathematize absolutely anything, but rather write in a digital language what thousands of cameras cover on the planet's surface, the unlimited remoteness of the universe, as well as the unlimited minuteness of the human body, with the promise of successfully encrypting, in the near future, all the existing information in the universe of the speaking being. The famous Moore's law, formulated in the 1950s, which states that the storage capacity of microprocessors doubles every two years, does nothing but verify this ambition. This law has been demonstrated to hold for the current possible storage capacity of chips.

The pixel, the unit of digital measurement of this encryption, determines a particular nature of images: it no longer presents the same texture that all types of support had given it so far, because its structure is numerical, reduced to the combination of 1 and 0. In any case, what we have is a new digital support that has introduced new images into our world. Our colleague and friend Gérard Wajcman gives us the paradigm of this difference when he tells us, in *The Absolute Eye* (Wajcman, 2010), how he comes up against this limit of the pixel in lieu of the pigment of paint, as he tries to come as close as possible to a painting by Velázquez while visiting Google-El Prado. This project aims to make us believe that, thanks to technology, we would be able to take a

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better look at the paintings than we would if we were actually in the museum. However, because of the digitalization of images, when we come close to any of the paintings, we bump into that which encrypts images, the pixel, beyond which images are empty. Thus, the eye cannot capture what Cézanne called “the truth in painting” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 66) and that which is there for us to see is no more than the truth of the image. As the author says,

the problem lies both in that the engineers at the virtual museum Google-El Prado substitute the truth for the image itself and in that by giving themselves the illusion—and by giving it to us—of being able to tear out the truth in painting, they do nothing but give us a truth of the image. (Wajcman, 2010, p. 66)

Walter Benjamin had already addressed this problem in the text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936 [2017]). It is not so much about the multiplication of the image itself as its mechanical reproduction allows, but rather about the very modification of the image through its digital encryption.

Those of us who love photography are aware of this frustration that Wajcman points out, with the fissure that digital photography introduced with the loss of the grain of photos in the passage from silver to digital photography. Images themselves have changed and, with them, perhaps so has the statute of the imaginary, which is no longer articulated with the symbolic, making Lacan say that the statute of perception is a signifier, since with digital images this statute may be reduced to its real statute. Certainly, we can still introduce the signifier into images, but noting the impoverished imaginary world of today’s adolescents is enough to make us think that access to images, in which they are immersed almost permanently, might have the same nature as pornography, that is, a statute that no longer accommodates the symbolic, thus certifying its decline, this image recovered due to its real nature, that is, encrypted.

Images produce joy; Lacan pointed that out through the satisfaction of the young speaking being after discovering his image in the experience of the mirror mentioned in the famous *Mirror Stage* (Lacan, 1997), but we wonder whether these new saturated digital images might redouble the surplus *jouissance* (*plus de jouir*) that the imaginary produces with this technological torsion operated on images. In any case, we wonder whether this new statute of images modifies the perceptive phenomenon and how the symbolic can be reduced there, if not foreclosed, because of its digital nature. If what a digital image shows us is basically an image of the image, a pixelated construction of it, where the pigment of the paint and the grain of the photograph disappear, we may wonder about the impoverished eye of the beholder, whether it has observed something other than the representation of the image, and not the image itself.

This is what virtual images offer us now through holograms, which allow the body to be digitally present somewhere it cannot be physically so. For example, it is possible for politicians to give speeches at events they cannot attend, or for people to organize concerts and performances by artists who have already died<sup>1</sup>. The digital body becomes its digital image and loses all carnal consistency. It is an image of the body, as close to the reality of the body as possible, which makes us believe that the body is almost there. Lacan’s *make-believe* semblant category is applicable in this example. Incidentally, here we find the operational ability of the opposition between semblant and real that Jacques-Alain Miller ([1991-92] 2002) pointed out in Lacan’s latest teaching: the digital body and its images tend to their nature as semblant, forcing us to tell a real image from a virtual one, where the former is different from the real in Lacan.

## THE WALL OF SCREENS

In his book, which is essential for this question, Wajcman uses this expression and points out the importance of what he calls “the wall of images” (2010), which constitute an “object of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” in their control, information, observation, security, advertising, or simply spectacular nature (Wajcman, 2010, p. 67). Why does Wajcman speak of a “wall” here? Because beyond the multiplication and accumulation of images (let us think about the photos we gather in our computer memories, in “hard disks”, or in “clouds”, which we never look at again: the end of the photo album), the superimposition and posting of images on social media networks, we can no longer speak of a quantitative explosion of images, but rather of a frame that now structures our relation to reality. Reality has become an image of the image itself. The original is the film image, the images we send on social media networks, and its copy of reality seeking to imitate that original more or less accurately. Images have separated us from “reality” for some time now and they have in fact become a wall through the use of their digitalization, which already separates us from this reality. A mosaic of images projected to the infinite separates us from reality and this wall has become reality “itself”. But this wall is also an infinite window, the way in which Le Corbusier replaced the wall with the window in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A window which is supposed to allow us to observe the reality that declines in this very wall and which translates the ambition of science to see it all, as well as the triumph—in some way—of the omnipotence of the gaze. *Full Vision*: this “universal eye”, as Wajcman calls it, this civilization of the gaze implies being set free from the perspective really awarded to the human eye by its true power. A flat construction takes its place, liberated in principle from all obstacles, opening to a 360° view, with a depth of field equivalent to zero raised to infinity in all directions.

A worldwide network of cameras makes up this wall, giving shape to the phantasm of a technically-feasible, real-time, permanent surveillance and *omnivision*. This globalization of the gaze accompanies that of the market and hardly knows any other restraint than those areas which are voluntarily suppressed from the virtual menu for security reasons. But everything is, from now on, transparent to the gaze. And that is, therefore, the shape that the contemporary Master takes today. The Master says it can see us to the limit of intimacy, where it stops, but where other cameras might take over. All would be visible and, as a result, foreseeable. This is the illusion, as Wajcman (2010) points out, which the successive financial, climate, health, and—why not—political crises come to deny: we can actually see nothing. We believe we can see because the real is permanently monitored, but nothing, or very little, can be explained. Here neurosciences are almost the paradigm of this impasse, when by explaining to us that what can be observed in the brain is the cause, they do nothing but substitute an effect for the cause itself. It is the scientific fraud of making us believe that the effect is the cause itself. Jacques Lacan was more honest when he talked about the analytic fraud, since the symbolic does not succeed in reducing the real. Here it is believed that what is observed as a consequence of what is ignored becomes that which is ignored. Nobody notices these cameras in any enormous room, which would be the central observation post. We are made to believe that *Big Brother is watching you*, when *Big Brother* is actually the device itself. There are algorithms that observe “risky movements”, for example, in London’s subway system or in some cities. But it is a panoptic power device, although there are no eyes to see it, which translates a political will to see it all, where *technosciences* collaborate with that which is political in this sense.

### “YOU HAVE SEEN NOTHING IN HIROSHIMA...”

We look in order not to see, because we do not want to see. Wajcman (2010) takes up the famous sentence in Marguerite Duras’s novel in order to show that despite the enchanting repetition of the images of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, as well as the successive crises that science has not been able to predict (the 2008 financial crisis, the political crisis that almost removed Greece from Europe in 2008, the recent *Brexit*, the

climate crises that are just beginning), paradoxically, nobody sees anything in the current world: the more cameras there are, the less we see. “You see nothing on the transparent wall of images,” seems to be saying today’s *omni-voyeur* world.

What could not stop affecting the statute of the word, if it is not indeed because of a devaluation of the word itself, is that we increasingly believe in what images show. We find an alienation of truth in the image as an illustration of a cause, which is intended more and more real, disconnected from all determining symbolic causality, which the term *subject* condenses in human sciences.

Marguerite Duras herself, in a meaty dialogue with Jean-Luc Godard in 1979 (but how many others preceded her! Heidegger with the word “in the information age” in the 1950s, Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* in 1969) already pointed out “as screens are completed infected by a degraded word, a degraded discourse, completely antinomic of a true word. A word antinomic of the word: the word of political commerce, the word of propaganda” (Duras & Godard, 2014, p. 24). Duras stressed that the word of film language is also inscribed in this register. A word that is sold, which tries to sell images. When Alain Resnais was about to make the film of his novel—Duras added—the “first speaking film in cinema,” he said that all the others before his were flooded with an empty word. Resnais had begged her, “Please, don’t make any differences between what you write and what I ask you. He was the only one who could accept that and, even more so, ask for it. Starting a film about the world’s biggest catastrophe by ‘You have seen nothing in Hiroshima.’ While the whole world was already flooded with photographs and images” (Duras & Godard, p. 33).

And Duras, who made films later, also sought, through long silent sequences, with only music accompanying images, to give shape to words and silence in films. Re-injecting words into films, or giving images their full expression. In those years, films could still be made that way; some directors (Tarkovski, Bergman, Fassbinder, Kurosawa) could afford to offer us a festival of images and words. Even a Guy Debord, who in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), seeks to annoy the audience’s eye without making any complacent concessions to the gaze, going against the grain of what *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1967) proposed as images. What can be said about commercial films, which must adapt to a protocol dictated by an anxious timing, keep the audience on the edge of their seats throughout the film, and match the images to an account pre-formatted by simple and pleasant storytelling? The market and producers dictate the norm that determines not only the simplicity of images, but also the screenplay itself.

All that remains, therefore, is to give images their honor back: it appears that this will not be possible in a civilization that has degraded the value of words and will not be able to re-sweeten them in a *reverse* preciousness seeking to extol them again, or in a baroque movement with the intention of giving life to a language already uninhabited by the being.

<sup>1</sup> In France’s 2017 presidential campaign, some candidates actually used this procedure, and a concert by the popular artist Claude François, who died several years ago, was successfully organized a few months ago.

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