

Photography and History

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The following scheme is suggested here: "History" is a univocal process pointing towards the future and issuing from images in order to make explicit that which is implicit in them; "history" is a narrative process that explains the contents of images, bringing out their hidden virtualities. And "photography" is an image that stops history short, damming its forward motion and thereby allowing it to be made recallable and revokable. Prior to the invention of the photograph and the other technological images that followed it, history was to be viewed as a branching current flowing toward a non-evident ocean -- the "fullness of times". After those inventions, history became more comparable to a torrent plunging over an artificially inserted dams and stagnating in the reservoir of photographs and other technological images. According to this scheme, our existential mood has changed since the introduction of photography. Earlier, we used to float down the river of history, swept along by its non-repeating events, its unique opportunities. But now we circle in the reservoir of technological images, into which the historical events tumble helter-skelter. We are the playthings of the surging and foaming images.

To clarify the suggested scheme, we have to elucidate the concept of history employed therein. "History" refers here to the period following "prehistory", with an intermediary period, namely "proto-history", binding them together. These two periods are quite distinct from one another: two different "times" apply in them. Prehistory is a whirling time, whirling across the scene of the world, arranging the things of the world -- even the human beings in the world. History is a rectilinear time, coming from the past, pointing toward the future, and sweeping along all things of the world -- even human beings. In the whirling time of prehistory, everything kept repeating, like day and night and day, or like sowing and reaping and sowing; and this eternal recurrence was the "Ultimate Judge" to quote Hegel against himself: whenever something or someone left its or his appropriate place in the universal order, he was returned to the right place in the course of time and by means of time. In the rectilinear time of history, nothing was repeated, every new day was different from previous day, and this irrevocability implies causal

explanations: everything is the effect of a cause and the cause of effects. In short: prehistory was scenic, and history dramatic.

The gray zone between these two times -- i.e., <sup>proto</sup>early history -- allows us some insight into emergence of history from prehistory. Understanding this development presumes a knowledge of archeology and paleo-ethnology, but we will not go into that. In the prehistoric world scene, people oriented themselves according to the images they formed from their existential distance. To say the same thing in reverse: the world was experienced as a scene because people oriented themselves in it by means of images. Indeed, the whirling time corresponds to the circling motion of the eyes deciphering the image surface. However, images, like all mediations, are subject to an internal dialectics: they cover up that which they are supposed to represent. As of a certain critical point, images reserved to acquire a meaning that was the opposite of the original one. They no longer served as orientation charts for their creators. Instead, as people "forget" that they have created the images, the images begin forcing people to view the concretely experienced world as an orientation in the images. This idolatry, this transformation of images into their opposite, this image crisis, characterizes <sup>proto</sup>early history, and it can also be read in later documents, such as those of the pre-Socratics and the Jewish prophets.

These images, which now alienated rather than transmitted, all this imagination, which had turned into hallucination, had to be opposed by new orientation codes. That was why in <sup>proto</sup>early history writing was invented -- first pictograms, hieroglyphics, which then somewhat circuitously led to the alphabet. Writing was meant to describe images and, through them, the world that is. This narrative -- this explanation of the meaning of images -- was supposed to make images transparent again for the world. The result was a development that <sup>had</sup> not been foreseen in the invention of writing. Script projected its own linear structure, its lines upon the world, just as images had once projected their own scenic structure, their surface upon it. Time stopped whirling, and it began to stream in an unambiguously linear direction. It was script that made prehistory give birth to history.

We should not imagine proto-history as a sharp cut between pre-history and history. The first hints of a linear code, of "historical consciousness" must have occurred very early, perhaps as far back as the Paleolithic. But most people remained illiterate, living prehistorically, up to and after the invention of printing. Rather, we should view proto-history as a gray zone, blurring on both sides, and in which image-thinking and script-thinking overlap in a complex manner, whereby literate historical thinking, in an arduous process involving countless

setbacks, eventually wins out. The same applies to our individual consciousness: by and large, we experience the world prehistorically, in images, as a scene; and our critical, enlightened historical thinking forms only a thin "higher" level in our minds. In this sense, we can talk about the simply breathtaking success of history as an enlightening process. The code that carries history, the "alphanumerical code" -- that is, the alphabet in which numbers are encased -- has produced science and technology, thereby revolutionizing our knowledge, experience, and values. From there we exist differently. In this context our different existence can be grasped as follows: we live in an unimaginable world, of which we can form no image whatsoever. All the images offered us by science, all the so-called "scientific world-images" do not orient us, they lead us astray; and all the images offered us by art, all the "aesthetic models", never allow us to understand the world -- they miss the mark because they are not in tune with the scientific and technological revolution. The breathtaking success of history has placed us, as still prehistoric human beings, into a world that overtaxes our imaginations. Science and technology have soared beyond our fantasies. Yet we cannot endure a situation in which we can just barely orient ourselves, and ~~not~~ only conceptually at that, but no longer evaluatively. A situation that we can describe, albeit just barely, but not imagine. This state of affairs is responsible for phenomena like Nazism, nuclear weapons, the population explosion and such emotional, unreasonable conflicts like the Arab-Israeli one. We therefore need to mobilize a new kind of imagination, one that allows us to make a completely new kind of image -- namely, images of the concepts we utilize to just barely orient ourselves in the world. These would no longer be images of the world, they would be images of the "description" of the world or images of "history". These new images would have to take more or less the same position in regard to history that the prehistoric images took in regard to the world. The prehistoric images were made from an existential detachment from the world, and the new ones are to be made from an existential detachment from history. The first of these new images is the photo. Hence, the photographer's position in regard to history is roughly that the Paleolithic cave artist in regard to hunting wild horses. Let us now delve into this assertion.

At first glance, it looks like this: both the photographer and the cave artist step back from horses in order to form an image of them, and both have the goal of orienting themselves in regard to the "horse", of evaluating it ethically and aesthetically. That is, say, eating it up and liking it while doing it. At first glance, the only discernible difference between the cave artist and the photographer

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is the latter's camera. But if we then look at the camera, we realize that the photographer has by no means stepped back from a horse, although he may think so. Actually, he has stepped back from photons, which were reflected from a surface of an object called a "horse"; and he forms an image by capturing these photons on molecules that have been specifically programmed to ~~the~~<sup>this</sup> end. He makes an image not of a horse, of the world, but of a scientific explanation, and he does so thanks to a technology based on explanation. A look at the camera reveals a further difference. It is not <sup>the</sup> photographer who forms the image, for a self-timer could do the job in his stead; the real former of the image is the camera designer, and he or she is not even present. This person -- or this artificial intelligence -- has stepped back not from the horse or the world, but from an explanation of the world, from history, in order to form an image of them. The photo is not the image of a horse, it is the image of an historical explanation of the horse. It is a new kind of image, and its goal is to render imaginable a world that is understood just barely and the horse that is understood as a swarm of particles. However, our consciousness is so retarded that we receive the horse photo as if it had been painted on the wall of a Paleolithic cave.

[The camera, this apparent extension of the eye into the external world, is in fact an empty box which we interpose between our own plenitude and the plenitude of the world. Sartre says that we are too full of ourselves (trop pleins de nous-mêmes) and this excessive plenitude overflows into the emptiness of the camera there to collide with the overflowing plenitude of the world that comes through the shutter-lens. But the intensity of our own plenitude as opposed to the passive inertness of the world imposes itself to result in an image. It is this pure intentionality ("reine Intentionalität", Husserl) which structures the plenitude of the world as it has flown into the camera so that the photo is in fact an image of our pure intentionality as it comes up against the world. This is the difference between a photo and a cave painting.

We are beginning to master these new images (albeit <sup>with</sup> somewhat unpleasant methods), just as people in early history learned how to read and write. The theme of this contribution is one of these unpleasant methods of learning: we are starting to push history in the direction of the new kind. But before discussing this new direction, let us recall another method of learning, for it can clarify the results of these new historical activities more effectively.

Horses, you see, do not have to be photographed as recounted above. They can also be photographed more or less as follows. First you describe the horse as clearly and lucidly as possible. It would be best to use the code of topological analysis. Then you digitalize this

description, feeding it into a computer. The computer processes particles on its monitor in terms of this description, so that dots, lines, and surface become visible. Something like a wire netting of a described horse surface appears. This mesh can be projected according to the rules of descriptive geometry, in various perspectives and various dimensions; it can be coated with various "skins"; it can be given any aspects of any body -- say, mass, the ability to cast shadows, internal tensions, etc. The ultimate outcome is the photo of a horse that, in phenomenal terms, differs in no way from the one produced by the previously described method. Except that in regard to this second photo, it is obvious that what is shown is not an image of a horse -- of the world -- but an image of a description of the world, of history in the sense meant here; for not only the photographer, the subject of the world, but also the horse, an object of the world, has become unnecessary for making an image.

The topic of this lecture is a different learning method of the new kind of images. We have learned to stop driving history away from images and "forward"; instead, we have to do the very opposite: drive history in the direction of the <sup>new</sup> kind of images. As we have tried to demonstrate, history commenced as a description, a narrative, an elucidation of images, and was driven so far that it was pushed into the unimaginable. And now we are starting not only to drive history toward images, but to whip it along in that direction; and today, history is galloping.