

*W.S. Sullivan in Angela*

*Flusser's letter Tassing!*  
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The Imagination of the Second Order.

Suppose that the "image" is a meaningful surface, and that "thinking" is the processing of concepts. In that case, the "image of thinking" is a surface that means (signifies) that process. But there are several problems. One has to do with the fact that to imagine and to think (to produce images and to process concepts), are two distinct mental activities that overlap and may contradict each other. Another problem has to do with the fact that thinking was codified much earlier than imagining (speech probably precedes cave paintings by many millenia). However: speech was transcoded into letters much later than cave paintings were made, and writing has transformed thinking. And a third problem has to do with the fact that a code for images of thinking was developed at least ever since the Ancient Greeks (the code of plane geometry), and that this code has deeply penetrated both imagining and thinking. These problems must be kept in mind if we are to understand the new images of thought that are emerging at present, and that seem to aim at a synthesis of imagination and conceptual thinking (of "art" and "science").

Let us face the first problem: To imagine is to step back from the object-world into subjectivity, and to look at it from that perspective. The advantage of imagination is that it offers an overview (a map of the world). Its disadvantage is that it offers "appearances" (phainomena) which may be seen but not grasped and handled, and the reality of which may thus be doubted. The purpose of thinking (of processing concepts) is precisely to criticize imagination (to deliver us from its errors). In the last analysis, every instance of thinking is a "thinking of an image". However, there is an inner dialectics involved here: As we think of an image we conceive it (we process it). It turns into an image of thinking.

Let us now face the second problem: Ever since Man became Man, he codified thinking in air waves, (into speech), so that thinking could be transmitted from one person to another. As for imagination, it was codified much later, and before the invention of painting imagination was a private experience (it was subjective). Thus imagination could be published only through speech (through "myth"), that is to say through thinking. With the invention of painting imagination became intersubjective, and thus an object for thinking to criticize it. However, since thinking had by then become mythical it was unable to criticize imagination. Letters were invented (spoken sounds were transcoded into visual signs) precisely to permit thinking to criticize the images that by then dominated all actions and passions. Thinking became iconoclastic. The images resisted this attempt of the letters to describe them by infiltrating themselves into scripts and thus becoming "illustrations". Thus thinking became something opposed to images, and the images something opposed to thinking. An outer dialectics is involved here: by thus opposing each other, thinking became ever more

imaginative, and imagination over more conceptual. Until the invention of printing broke into that knot, cut through it, and separated thinking from imagining: "modern science" on the one hand, "modern art" on the other. No doubt some gray zones between those two cultures persisted, but grosso modo this was the situation of our culture until the event of the images of thinking.

Let us now face the third (and most difficult) problem: The letter code permits the description of images (their analysis by means of concepts). But letters do not permit the concepts themselves to be imagined (they are not "ideographic"). Letters permit us to step back from images and to see them from a critical distance, but they do not permit us to step back from thinking itself and to see it from such a distance. Letters do not permit an "imagination of the second order", one that may look at thinking the same way "imagination of the first order" looks at the world. (It is curious to note that before the invention of letters ideographic codes were in use which permitted such an "imagination of the second order", but were since abandoned.) The need was felt to elaborate a code for images of thinking that would provide such a critical distance with regard to the concepts, a code for such an imagination of the second order. The result was (1) the code of Arabic numbers (the number "2" being the image of the concept "couple"), and (2) the code of Pythagorean geometry (the straight line being the image of the concept "the smallest distance between two points"). Those two codes of images of thinking had two diverging destinies after our culture was divided into "science" and "art". In science the geometrical code was transcoded into the arithmetical one (analytical geometry), and it was integrated into the letter code ("alpha-numerical writing"). In the arts the geometrical code was integrated within the imagination of the first order (what comes to mind as examples are perspective and Cubism). Thus the two codes of images of thinking became subservient to the processing of concepts on the one hand, and to the imagination of the first order on the other.

This is no longer true at present. The number code has emancipated itself from the letters (first in the form of differential equations, which are images of complex concepts, and later in the form of computer codes, which are methods of very rapidly transcoding differential equations into numbers). And there are now machines that can transcode those numbers into geometry (in the form of computer-synthesized images, which are thus products of the imagination of the second order). On the side of the arts there is now a tendency toward the mobilisation of the imagination of the second order, which means that images tend first to become conceptual, and then to transcend that concept by an image. Those two tendencies (the scientific and the artistic one) are now converging and merging within the new images of thinking. Within those astounding and adventurous products of the imagination of the second order, wherein there is no longer any sense in distinguishing between imagination and conception, between art and science. A new mentality is emerging where to think becomes to imagine.

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There used to be a mutual distrust between those who think and those who imagine. To the thinker imagination is dubious, and to the maker of images thinking is barren. This exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum should show that this mutual distrust is unfounded. It should show the poetic (creative) power within the imagination of the second order as it slowly emerges from previous image making. Pascal has said that "the heart has reasons of which reason know nothing about". This exhibition should show that reason has a heart of which the heart knows nothing about until, that is, the heart learns how to process reason.