

Image and text.

A lecture to be held at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

I am speaking at a Jewish University, one of the centers of a culture which is based on a book and which holds image making in horror. But I am also speaking at a historical moment when mankind is being informed ever more effectively by images of the type "television", "film" or "poster", and when books tend to become pre-texts for image making, scripts for visual programs. This contradiction between the spirit of the place and the spirit of the time, (spiritus loci and Zeitgeist), is characteristic of the dialectic which prevails in the relationship between text and image. Texts are linear codes, and their message flows from left to right, (in Hebrew from right to left), which implies that it unfolds in time. Images are surface codes, and their message offers itself to the beholder as on a platter, which implies a temporality, a localisation. Thus texts are, by their very structure, media for historical messages, and images are, for the very same reason, media for a-historical messages.

But as I say this I am aware that here and now this dialectic between image and text is inverted. This here is a Jewish place, not a Jewish time and this now is a historical moment within the history of a new image culture. Judaism, that culture of texts, is now localized, which seems to contradict the structure of its linear, historical message; and the image culture, which is structurally a-temporal, (pre-historic, pagan), has now become the articulation of historical living. In other words: the Jewish texts are looking for a geographical home, and the images are on the move and are becoming movies. The outer contradiction between text and image is becoming, here and now, an inner contradiction within text and within image. The purpose of this lecture is to direct your attention to this curious revolution in the traditional relation between text and image. A revolution which is having a tremendous impact on every aspect of our lives, and which has special implications from the point of view of Judaism.

Images are of course far more ancient than is linear writing. Linear texts, and more specifically alphabetic texts, are a relatively late development of image making, one that occurred not too far from here and not so very long ago. But the images which now surround us from every side, and which irrigate us with their messages day and night, are not of the same type as were the images against which the prophets shouted their violent invectives. TV programs are not the same type of image as is an image of the goddess Ishtar. The basic difference is that present images are the result of technical manipulations, which again are the result of scientific theories. It is therefore necessary to make a clear distinction between traditional images and the ones that now dominate our surroundings, and to call those new images by some new name, for instance "techno-images". No doubt: the prophets would have disliked them as much as they did the image of Ishtar, because

the techno-images are, just like the traditional ones, "admirable" and "adorable", (meaning: made to be stared at), and are therefore "idols". Still, techno-images are codes which constitute a new level of human communications.

This suggests a specific criterium for the analysis of the past of our civilisation: Three periods can be distinguished. The first one before the invention of linear writing, the second one before the invention of techno-images, and the third one the present. This criterium may coincide with other more familiar ones in various aspects, but it accentuates certain events which do not appear so clearly in more traditional historical approaches.

From such a point of view two events are seen to be turning points in the history of our civilisation: the invention of linear writing, (and more specifically of alphabetic writing), and the invention of techno-images, (and more specifically of photography). There is a third event which will appear to have been decisive from such a point of view on history, namely the invention of printing. Each of these events will demand close attention. While I cannot, in the course of this lecture, go into this in detail, I shall point out what seems to me to be essential.

Let me ask first: why was linear writing invented? The question is at the point, because images are far superior codes than texts. Surfaces may carry infinitely greater amounts of information than lines, because they contain an infinity of lines. A concrete proof of this is the fact that a description of an image occupies far more space than does the image, and is never exhaustive. Why then was an inferior code invented? The answer has to do with the dialectics inherent in mediation. Images mediate between man and the world, in the sense that they represent the world. But in doing so, they also substitute themselves for the world. The German term "vorstellen" articulates this dialectics: images "stellen die Welt vor und stellen sich vor die Welt". They are both maps and screens. If the screening function of images menaces to prevail over the mapping function, they no longer mediate with the world but tend to alienate from it. Linear writing must have been invented when images began to be felt to be alienating factors. It must have been against alienating images, as an attack on them, that linear writing was invented.

To grasp how images may alienate from the world they are meant to represent, one may consider how they are deciphered. The eye first contemplates the surface and it seizes, at a glance, its "Gestalt", its configuration. One may say that it grasps its message in one stroke. But it then scans the surface to analyse the message, to grasp its details, and the longer the eye scans the surface, the more meaningful the message becomes. While scanning the surface the eye follows intricate circular lines which

are suggested both by the configuration of the image and by the intention of the beholder. Thus the deciphering of an image is a synthesis of the intentions of the sender and the receiver of the message. It is an "interpretation". Such an interpretation is an analysis of a situation, or: it is a diachronisation of a synchronic message.

This implies a very specific experience of time on the part of the receiver of the message. Time is felt to be a flux which circulates on the image surface and which orders the elements of the surface. Now when images are preferential codes to mediate between man and the world, this specific time experience is being projected from the images toward the world. By this inversion of the relation between image and world, between the significant and the signified, the structure of images becomes, for man, the structure of the world. The world is being deciphered as if it were a scene, ("skené"). The circular time experience proper to image deciphering becomes the time experience of the concrete world. Such an experience involves a very specific existential climate, the climate of myth and magic. Time is that order which alots each thing in the world its "just" place within a scene, and to dislocate things is injustice, "a-dykia". But since living implies discolating things, to live means to commit crimes, and it becomes necessary to constantly expiate crimes, if one is to escape just punishment. This climate of the eternal return ("kyklos té<sup>s</sup> geneseos"), and of retribution, ("ananke"), is what the prophets meant by "paganism".

Linear writing was invented when this climate began to be felt as a form of alienation from the concrete world. The inventors of linear writing took a step back from images and assumed a position from which ~~it~~ they "criticized" the relation between world and image. They thus assumed a greater distance from the concrete world than the one of the image makers: their level of consciousness was more "abstract". From such a higher transcendence they were in a position to pierce through the images in their effort to "save" man from magico-mythical alienation, and to create a new code to mediate between man and the concrete world.

Their method of piercing through images consisted ~~ed~~ in unrolling the image surface into its lines, as one would unroll a textile into its threads. This was evident as long as linear writing was pictorial. Some of the pictorial symbols which composed the image surface were as if pluc out of the surface and aligned as if on a string. Later, when linear writing became ideographical, or hieroglyphic, or alphabetic, this technique of unrolling surfaces proper to texts became less evident, but it was still there. The difference between those various codes is profound, they represent various directions into abstraction. But they are, all of them, abstractions from images. They are, all of them, essentially image explanations, (de-mythifications).

The action of the writers against the images consisted, essentially, in counting and recounting. The elements which composed the image surface were aligned like beads on an abacus, ("calculi"), they became clear and distinct one from another. Thus texts translated the magico-mythical message of images into lineary logical accounts, ("tales" in the sense in which "telling" means "counting"). But the full impact of this translation from image to text became evident when people learned how to "read", how to decipher writing.

In reading the eye follows a line in order to grasp its message. It collects, ("legere"), each symbol, (letter, cipher), like blades in a corn field, and it is only after having thus collected the symbols that the message becomes a meaningful one. Such a meaning depends as much on the order which organizes the symbols on the line, (the "syntax"), as it depends on the meaning on the individual symbols. There is basically no "interpretation" involved in reading: the reader deciphers the message in obedience to the intention of the writer. The written message is less "connotating" and more "denotating" than is the image message. Less "imagination", and more "conception" is involved in reading. The consciousness of the reader is a more "conceptual" one than is the consciousness of the receiver of image messages. But the decisive difference between the deciphering of texts and images is in the time experience those two codes involve.

To read is to synthesize various symbols contained in a text and thus discover their meaning. It is a synchronisation of a diachronical message. Time is thus felt to be a linear stream which flows in the direction of meaning, and which thus gives the text its meaning. When text becomes the preferential code to mediate between man and the world this experience is projected into the concrete world. The structure of the text becomes, for the reader, the structure of the world, ("natura libellum"). The unidimensional, directional time becomes the "real" time. The world is no longer deciphered to be a scene, but a process, a "drama", and man's existence in the world is no longer felt to be a puppet, but action. Man is no longer involved in a scene, (like a dancer), but he now acts within a process, (he is an actor, "drontes"). This involves a specific existential climate, for which every moment is unique, every opportunity lost is lost definitely, and life becomes tragical. This is the climate of historical consciousness. Thus the invention of linear writing has created history in the strict sense of that term.

For a very long time, of course, this historical consciousness was restricted to a very small élite, to the scribes, the clerks, the "litterati". The males of the Jewish people belong to this. The vast majority of society was illiterate and went on to live in the circular time of ever returning feasts, in magico-mythical "paganism". Though the masses did not participate actively in history, still they were influenced by it. A complex feed-back between texts and images was established. Texts deemed

to be "sacred", (originally Homer and the Bible), were "illustrated" by images, and they served as "descriptions" of images. In the course of that feed-back, (the best example of which is the history of the Church) both "imaginative" and "conceptual" thinking were at play and they strengthened each other: the stronger became the conceptual faculty, the stronger became imagination and vice versa. Images opened themselves to critical investigation, and texts opened themselves to imaginative interpretations. Scenery became conceptualized, and history was mythified. All of which might serve as a description of the existential climate during Antiquity and the Middle ages.

The invention of printing disturbed this feed-back between text and image. It rendered the texts, which were so far extremely expensive, accessible first to the bourgeoisie, and then to the masses. Thus the whole of Western society became literate and acceded to historical consciousness. But this was not its sole revolutionary effect. It revealed the true function of the alphabet, which was so far curiously hidden. Up to the invention of printing it was felt that the alphabet was somehow connected to a specific language: there was one alphabet for Latin, another for Greek, another for Arabic, yet another for Hebrew. To learn a language meant to learn also the code in which it was written. All the other languages except those four were held to be "vulgar": codes for the communication of the unhistorical masses. Printing needed moveable letters which could be re-set. It showed that any alphabet could be used for registering any language if appropriately codified. It showed the abstractness of the alphabet from the spoken word. And this contributed powerfully not only to the rise of modern nationalism, (the codification of "national" languages and literatures), but even more fatefully to the rise of modern theoretical, scientific, thinking.

One of the results of this revolution was the divorce between the figurative arts, (which became "fine"), the artistic literature, (which became "belles lettres"), and scientific literature, (which became "pure"). And this again led to the distinction between "art" and "technique". Imagination and conception became two different capacities, and the relation between the two became a problem. The meaning of images became ever more unconceivable, and the meaning of scientific texts ever more unimaginable which is an important aspect of the present crisis. From the point of view here assumed it means that scientific texts no longer explain images (which is what they were invented for), but now tend to become self-centered. The message of a scientific text not only cannot be imagined, but should not be imagined, if it is to be correctly deciphered. The equations of modern physics, for instance, do not mean an imaginable scene, but "pure" concepts, and if they are taken to mean a scene, this is undue "vulgarisation". It is in this context of alienating abstraction from the concrete world that the photograph was invented.

The fact is that texts are subject to the same dialectics which is characteristic of any mediation, and which was discussed when images were considered: ~~xxxx~~ they represent the world they mean, but th they also tend to substitute themselves for it. During the Modern age, when the texts became increasingly the main code to mediate between man and the world, this screening aspect became ever more prévalent over the mapping aspect. Texts tended to form ever more opaque library walls which separated men from the world, and people tended ever more to live in function of the texts instead of using texts to orient themselves in the world. This "fidelity" to texts as if they were autonomous realities, and not mediations, is well seen in Jewish orthodoxy, and it is just as alienating as is idolatry: a new form of "paganism".

The invention of photography occurred when a point was reached at which imagination became utterly frustrated. It was confined to the figurative arts which tended to form a sort of ghetto within the codes that mediated between man and the world, and scientific texts, which tended to become the sole "authority", inhibited progressively any effort to imagine their meaning. Photographs and their progeny, films, TV, video, hologram and so forth, are the results of an effort to use scientific texts for image making. Equations and theoretical texts in optics, chemistry, mechanics and other disciplines are applied to result in surfaces which meet the concrete world. They permit the beholder to imagine the world. They are images just like the traditional ones, but they relate to the world in a way which is quite different from the traditional image relation. An X-ray of a broken bone is quite different in its meaning from a painting, in infra-red photograph quite different from a mosaic, and a TV program is quite different in its meaning from a Gothic Church window. This difference must be considered if we are to grasp the new image culture.

Two characteristics of techno-images are <sup>essential</sup> ~~characteristic~~: They seem to be effects of the things they mean, not their symbols. And they are produced by apparatus. Those two characteristics must be considered more closely.

A photograph of a house seems to be an impression of the sun rays which reflect themselves on the house, and thus to be somehow caused by that house. Its relation to the house seems to be similar to the relation between fingerprint and finger. It seems to be impossible to doubt the "veracity" of the photograph: it is linked to its meaning by objective causal chains. This is a danger inherent in techo-images: they look like "objective" images of the world.

The photograph is produced by a camera which is an apparatus manipulated by a photographer. An apparatus is a tool which, like all modern machines, is a simulation of an organ with the help of some scientific theory. It is a simulation of the eye with the help of optics, chemistry and so forth. But unlike modern machines the apparatus does not aim at

changing the world. It aims at giving the world a meaning. Another difference between apparatus and machine is that it does not oppress its manipulator, (the worker), in the interest of its owner. The apparatus transforms its manipulator into an operator. There is a complex feedback between apparatus and operator: they function in function of each other. The photographer chooses his points of view in function of his apparatus, and the apparatus produces a photograph in function of the photographer's choices. This new form of activity, which is a function of feed-back between apparatus and operator, and which is well illustrated by persons like Eichmann, is another danger inherent in techno-images: they are not human products in the traditional sense of that term.

The fact is that techno-images are a step back from texts, as texts are a step back from traditional images. The operator-apparatus complex transcends the texts, as the writer of texts transcends traditional images. A new level of consciousness articulates itself in techno-image making. The apparatus-operator complex, (the film industry, the TV-establishment, but also astronomic observatories, meteorological satellites and other image-making apparatus), use texts as pre-texts for image-making. The linear texts flow into these complexes to be translated into techno-images. The apparatus-operator complexes devour texts on one of their openings, and they spit techno-images from out of their other openings. They are transcoders of texts into images, and thus they "stand above" the texts. And this produces a new existential climate.

What happens is that the unidimensional flow of texts is thereby converted into the circularity of eternal repetition. Not only can a film, which is the transcodification of a script, be projected over and over again, but it can be projected backward, parts of it can be repeated during projection, it can make "flash-backs", it can slow down or accelerate, or it can jump over phases. Techno-images are manipulations of the uniform, unidimensional text flow. This is not only true of films and videotapes, where it is obvious, but it is true of all techno-image making. Techno-images stand beyond historical time, and their makers, the operator-apparatus complex, manipulate that time from the outside.

Strictly speaking this is the end of history, and it is so in two senses of the term: It is the end of history, because the apparatus-operator complex devours historical time and transforms it into images, into "programs". And it is the end of history, because the operator can see the flux of history, (for instance the film strip), simultaneously from both ends, (like God who sees the beginning and the end), and he can bend that flux, (something God cannot do). Speaking in traditional terms the apparatus-operator complex is the "fullness of the times", but it has aspects which traditional historical thinking did not foresee: it transforms history, not into the Kingdom of God, but into programs.

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This new post-historical existential climate which characterizes the techno-image culture articulates itself in many ways, for instance in structuralism, cybernetics, scenario-based politology, or trans-ideologisation. It may be concretely observed in the programs impressed into the memories of computers, intelligent tools and miniprocessors. But it is as yet very far from having become entirely conscious. We live, all of us, as yet on the magico-mythical and on the historical level. We decipher, all of us, TV programs as if they were traditional images or as if they were linear texts telling some story. Which means that we find ourselves in the same situation illiterate Israelites found themselves in the face of the Sinaic tablets. Instead of deciphering those programs critically, we adore them. It is difficult for us to live and think on the level on which techno-images are made. This is why they tend to program us, as texts programmed the masses during their illiterate situation. Unless we learn how to decipher techno-images, unless we achieve what may be called "conscious techno-imagination", we are bound to become dominated by the apparatus-operator complex. Which seems to function objectively, but which in reality manipulate us from the subjective, although inhuman, point of view of the apparatus.

All this has, of course, specific Jewish aspects. Judaism may yet contribute to the conscientisation of techno-imagination. The present submission of linear texts to techno-images, and the contradictions this creates in the consciousness of writers and readers, raises specific Jewish problems; it is a problem for orthodoxy and for Zionism. But there is a higher point of view from which this revolution in human communications may be seen to imply Judaism. If anything, Judaism is one of the roots of Occidental historical thinking. And it thus can become one of the methods to save historical consciousness, (which means freedom of action), from manipulation by programs. I submit this problem to your consideration.