TOWARDS A GENERAL ICONOMY

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What is "iconomy" (a portmanteau of "icon" and "economy")? And how does this concept capture (if it does) a "changing ontology of the image" that the questionnaire for this issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* invites us to consider?

In *The Supermarket of the Visible*, I developed a concept of iconomy as an explicit response to what we could call a relational ontology of the image. An image, I wrote, "is always more or less than an image": "An image has value only in relation to other images."[1]

Such a statement about the relational value of the image could easily be misunderstood. One could think that it holds only for filmic images that are meant to be unreeled in succession ("the value of an image," Robert Bresson said, "must be, above all, an exchange value").[2] Or one could think that it holds only for the images that circulate today on social media, where they are constantly displaced and replaced, according to an exacerbated logic of "exhibition value" (Walter Benjamin's "iconomic" translation of Marx's "exchange value").[3] My contention, though, was not simply that images have *become* relational or differential entities within a worldwide system of exchanges. It was rather that, with the hypercirculation of contemporary images, what comes to the fore is the heterochronic tension that is inherent to *any image as such*. In other words: images have always consisted in their exchangeability with others or with other versions (formats) of themselves, but the speed of their exchanges was slow enough to make them seem completely stable and self-contained, whereas it now tends to accelerate to the point where it overshadows the image itself. In *The Supermarket of the Visible*, I offered Brian De Palma's 1976 film *Obsession* as an example of "a masterful staging of different speeds in the exchange between images": while a close-up of the paddle wheel of a boat evokes a slide carousel rotating with extreme velocity, the fresco that appears underneath another fresco when it flakes off because of humidity is the result of a long-term transformation. This is what led me to conclude that, "whether they change places every millisecond or have to wait several centuries," images can never be considered as definitely individualized entities: "from the point of view of

a general iconomy," there is no such thing as an image; in other words, "there are no images, only the relationships between them."[4]

Since the publication of *The Supermarket of the Visible*, the book has become the pretext or starting point for a show that I curated, with Emmanuel Alloa and Marta Ponsa, at the museum of the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Titled *The Supermarket of Images*, the show took the iconomic argument one step further. The works, objects, videos, and installations explored five aspects of the changing economy of images in the era of their hyper-exchangeability: stocks (from charts to digital image banks); raw materials (from oil to pixels); work (from knitting to click-workers and their management of visibility); values (from Yves Klein's "zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility" to cryptocurrencies); and speed of exchange (from the proto-cinematic device of the zoetrope to peer-to-peer image sharing and piracy). Also important in the show, and in the introductory essay I wrote for the catalogue, was the idea that the circulation of images relies on iconomic infrastructures, on "road networks" that striate and organize the visible: while this idea was already central in *The Supermarket of the Visible*, where it grew out of a reading of Benjamin's notion of "innervation," I now traced its genealogy further back to Aby Warburg's mappings of the "migratory paths" (*Wanderstrassen*) of images and what he called their "automobile vehicles" (*automobilen Bilderfahrzeuge*).[5]

Iconomy, then, could certainly be the name for a general iconology or iconography in the age of the hyper-exchangeability of images. But it is not limited to the era of their accelerated circulation. Looking back from an iconomic perspective at Pliny's legendary account of the origins of painting (the object of so many glosses and commentaries throughout the discipline of art history), I was struck by the fact that the first painted image was not simply an image, but also, immediately, its transformation; or better: its *transformatting*. Indeed, in a famous passage from book XXXV of his monumental *Natural History*, Pliny traces "the origin of the art of painting" to the act of drawing "an outline round a man's shadow."[6] But in a later passage, he describes this painterly gesture as being immediately translated into another medium (the drawing becomes a relief in clay), as if the first painted image were only conceivable in relation to another version of itself: "Modelling portraits from clay was first invented by Butades, a potter from Sicyon, at Corinth. He did this because of his daughter, who was in love with a young man; and she, when he was going

abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire with the rest of his pottery."[7] The origin of painting, then, would amount to a difference in format (between drawing and terracotta); and to a speed differential too, since one of the formats (modelling) takes longer than the other (drawing). Likewise, though on a completely different temporal and spatial scale, the billions of images that circulate every day on social media exist in provisionally suspended states between their codings, decodings, and recodings.

It was becoming increasingly clear to me that not only do images consist in their iconomic relations (their exchanges, circulations, transportations, or migrations), but their very texture or tension (what holds them together and splits them apart) is the heterochronic result of a momentarily stabilized speed differential. In a forthcoming book, I try to expand the scope of this notion of heterochrony as constitutive of the image in general.[8] In a move towards what I call "the iconomy of the non-human," I look, on the one hand, at the tradition of acheiropoietic images (divine images not made by hand) as a possible prefiguration of today's machine vision—our increasingly "invisible visual culture," as Trevor Paglen puts it, "with humans rarely in the loop."[9] On the other hand, I follow Gilbert Simondon's footsteps in his extraordinary lecture course from 1966 on imagination and invention, where he suggests an analogy between the metamorphic becoming of images and the ontogenesis of organisms, while insisting in both cases on the "different speeds" that coexist in their respective "processes of growth."[10]

In sum, from the relational ontology suggested by our contemporary iconosphere to the iconogenetic heterochrony of non-human images, there is a line of thought that leads to what I am tempted to call (thinking of Georges Bataille) a "general iconomy."[11]

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1 Peter Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, trans. Jan Plug (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 40. The word "iconomy" was coined by Jean-Joseph Goux, who uses it in a more restricted sense than I do, in order to designate the monetary role of painting when it becomes an "idealized standard of values" and a "capitalizable treasure" on the contemporary art market: see Jean-Joseph Goux, "L'art et l'argent: vers une nouvelle 'iconomie'," *Art Press*, no. 165 (January 1992); "Art and Money: Toward a New 'Iconomy'," trans. Deke Dusinberre, in *The Supermarket of Images*, ed. Peter Szendy et al. (Paris: Gallimard-Jeu de Paume, 2020), 65-72.

2 Robert Bresson, "As I Would Write A Poem," in *Bresson on Bresson: Interviews 1943-1983*, trans. Anna Moschovakis (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), 42.

3 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 108.

4 Peter Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible*, 87.

5 Peter Szendy, "Shadow Iconomics and Road Networks of the Visible," trans. Jeremy Harrison, in *The Supermarket of Images*, 21-3.

6 Pliny, *Natural History*, IX (books XXXIII-XXXV), trans. H. Rackham (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 271.

7 Pliny, *Natural History*, 371-3.

8 Peter Szendy, *Pour une écologie des images* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2021).

9 Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)," December 8, 2016, thenewinquiry.com.

10 Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination et invention* (Paris: Les Éditions de La Transparence, 2008), 18. This lecture course hasn't yet been translated in English.

11 See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988).