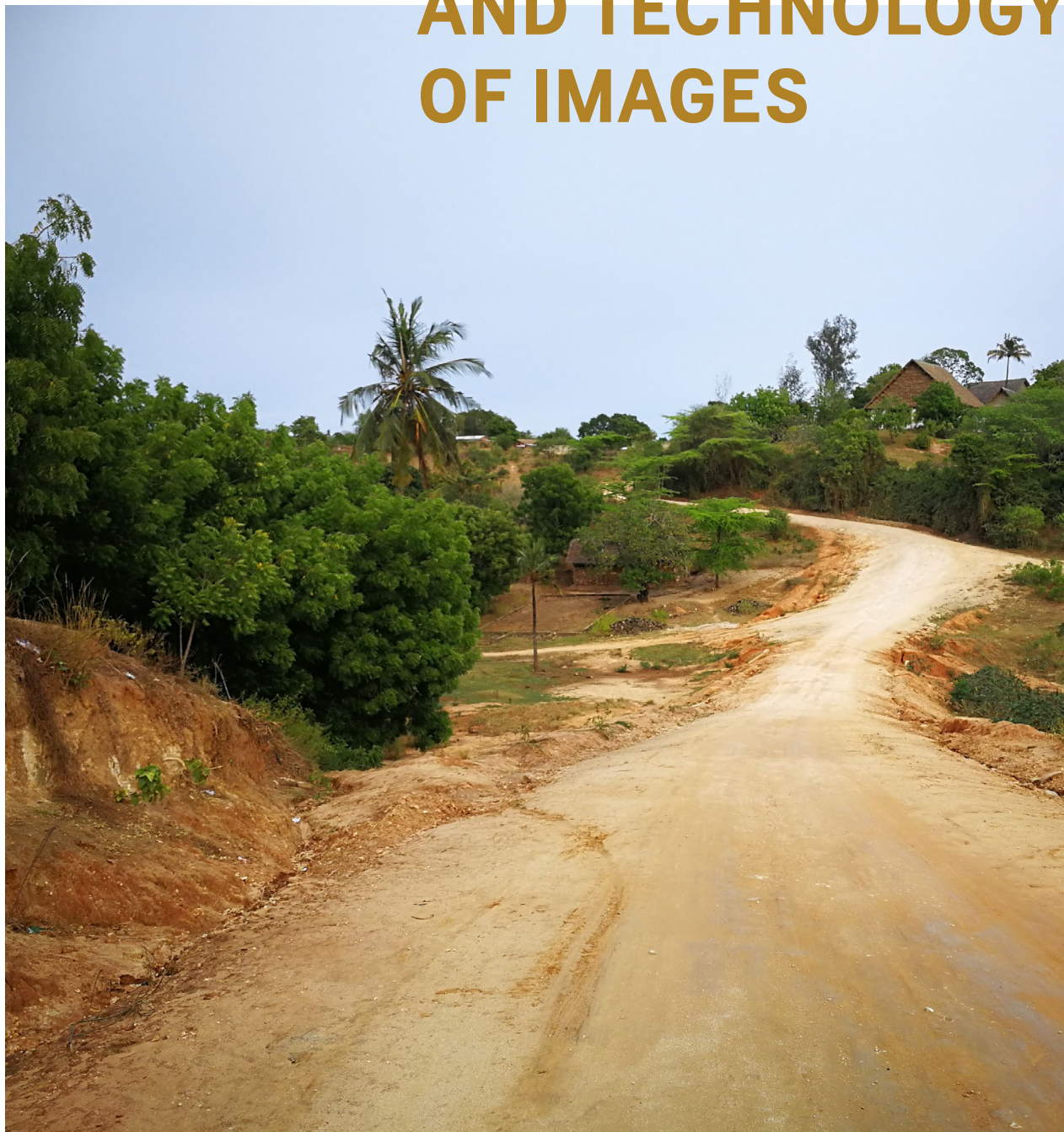


URBAN VISUALITY, MOBILITY, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY OF IMAGES







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URBAN VISUALITY, MOBILITY, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY OF IMAGES

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Do not be Seduced by Images. A Critical Approach and a Pedagogical Perspective

Raffaele Tumino

University of Macerata,
raffaelino.tumino@unimc.it

Abstract

Images run faster than words (which need time to be written, spread, read, and understood). They are at the same time fixed and changeable, native-born and nomadic, capable of communicating history, hope, belonging, expulsion, abuse, and redemption in an immediate way. We may not remember many facts that led to the short student revolt in Tiananmen Square in China in 1989 but we can never forget the image of the protesters standing in front of a line of threatening Chinese tanks. If we have seen these images, we remember them not only because they are highly emotional but also because we have thought about them in our minds *through* words. Images are *presentative* and have their own syntax: in a photo, for example, the term or idea is expressed through purely visual qualities: shapes, lines, colours, shadows, proportions.

However, visual communication (Lester, 1995, 2006) is built not only by technical means and their mastery; it also requires a process of cognitive and emotional processing by those who produce the image. Those who are involved in education are questioning the value and the functions of visual communication, and this implies the task to determine the meaning of the signs within and through different cultures; to study the communicative effects of signs in a person and in communities. Therefore, it is important to favour a critical distance that can restore the authenticity of our "anthropological abodes" against any form of media abuse and promote the *encounter* between cultures. In the following paper, I will take up these issues in the context of the Kenyan Mathare SLUM TV, a film *Soul Boy* directed by Hawa Essuman, and the recent developments in ethnographic research.

Premise

The task of the pedagogist is to promote the educational experience in terms of the growth and improvement of the person in different areas of learning: formal, non-formal, and informal (Dewey, 1916). The success of this path, which is not without obstacles, is the achievement of autonomy by learners, hence their responsibility and their freedom. However, a persistent and problematic tension exists between authority and freedom, between teacher and student, between being and having to be, between history and utopia, which makes education fascinating and irreducible. Nietzsche taught us that sometimes we need to get rid of history to build something new (Nietzsche, 1976). And in the wake of the German philosopher, Banfi and Bertin remind us to "free your soul as a young man from the old, free your education from any form of determined pedagogy" (Banfi, 1922, p. 21). Banfi and Bertin's lesson is of extraordinary relevance; in particular, Banfi's theory of reason does not pretend to "grasp and define the Absolute" (Banfi, 1926, p. 48) but it is only an instrument that challenges every dogmatization of experience, a transcendental principle that allows us to grasp and understand reality in the complexity of its various determinations.

The objective of "critical rationalism" is not to offer knowledge of the objectivity of the real but to describe the complex dynamics of the world of culture according to a methodical principle in which reason and experience are the terms of a dialectic that never finds a uniquely definitive solution. Philosophy, therefore, is "the consciousness of relativity, of the problematic, of the lively dialectic of reality" (Banfi, 1959, p. 713). The transcendental activity of thought – in the forms of philosophy and science – does not entirely exhaust the experience but rather allows us to unveil its infinite richness. The theory of education that does not intend to expropriate the educational experience in the "history" between teacher and pupil derives from this dimension of thought, and so opens the experience to new horizons, waiting to receive meanings from the teacher and the pupil (Banfi, 1961). There is room for speech, for dialogue, for face-to-face communication. The Socratic demon comes back despite everything; despite the civilization of computerization, despite the pressing "culture of images" capturing us in a spiral of immediate consumption, despite the speed and consumption of images that do not allow us to distinguish even artistic images from advertising images. The statues of Daedalus comes to mind: because of their scattered and inhomogeneous position, due to their extreme mobility, these statues do not allow us to contemplate them in order to know them (Plato, 2015).

Such an approach to visual communication can be described as modernist and read in the ample context of the TICASS project (*Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art, and Social Sciences*), oriented towards the interpretation of images in urban public spaces in an intercultural perspective. Reading and rereading analyses of visual

communication, I have the impression that we cannot do without critical thought because specialists on the subject also use criteria keys of reading from semiotics, aesthetics, and histories of art that should be critically reviewed. Lester's theory of visual communication cannot renounce a theory, as is expressed in the adoption of various theoretical approaches in personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical perspectives. Also, one of the principles of visual communication – that the contents of the messages reside more in the memory of images accompanied by verbal communication (Lester, 2000, p. 18) – seems to confirm the irreplaceable presence of critical thought through speech.

Aiming to overarch fields of aesthetics, art, and complex cultural phenomenology (Paci, 1965), I advocate critical rationalism to propose the need for an interpretive grid in constant weaving. This grid is composed of cultural history, semiotics, anthropology, and ethnography, as – because of their methodological implantation – anthropology and ethnography play an important role in reflection and the pedagogical theory in the current multicultural setting characterizing our world, and in which, once again, the image is able to unify or accentuate the differences.

The interpretive grid presented on the following pages, comprised of semiotics, anthropology, and ethnography, is used to interpret the experience of SLUM TV and SLUM TV Cinema in Nairobi. The aim is to propose the development of a "laboratory of images" that can give us back our sense of wonder in, and belonging to, this world.

Why Anthropology and Ethnography?

We must recognize that we come from a certain theoretical and epistemological orientation, in many respects, puritan and very tempted by iconoclasm. The image, which today plays such a strong role, continues to arouse an archaic terror, which all great critics of the civilization of the image – from Debord to Baudrillard, from Adorno to Habermas – have evoked, denouncing it as a "mortuary culture" (Debord, 1990, p. 59; Vercellone, 2013, pp. 96-97; Vercellone, 2016, p. 23). Before the advent of visual studies, it was difficult to circumscribe the world of images in a peculiar and stable field, autonomously characterized by philosophical and scientific points of view. The advent of visual studies has allowed us to recognize that images are forms endowed with a peculiar grammar, and an autonomous ontology of their own hermeneutics (Lester, 2000).

The image exerts an incomparable power in our world and at the same time it is fundamental to our learning process. We may not remember many of the facts that led to the short revolt by the students at Tiananmen Square in China in 1989 but we can never forget the image of the protesting students standing in front of a line of threatening Chinese tanks.

We are dealing with a flow of images that are conveyed, in particular, by the internet, and that are very often completely similar to a formal or structural point of view, despite the many differences in the content crossing them. An image is a vehicle of meaning to profoundly convey various content, from arts to medical investigations, from politics to advertising to the media, thanks to its extreme adaptability to the most different contexts and its ability to vary its own medium. It thus forms the cornerstone of a new identity that is no longer plural (common), like traditional identities, but unique (individual, singular), even if capable of self-differentiation thanks to its own technological media. Thus, it includes the differences between cultures, presenting a variety of faces of the world; the image tends to change into the world itself. If the image, with its grammar, tends to change itself into the world, how many opportunities do we have to not be seduced by the image?

In research projects like TICASS (*Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art, and Social Sciences*) and in the particular approach to public spaces through images, the contribution of anthropology and ethnography can be valuable, perhaps even decisive. Until now too little attention has been given to visual perception or to "eye work" (Belting, 2014; Marazzi, 2015). Yet it is through visual representations that human cultures have expressed their religious ideas as well as their ethical and aesthetic ideals throughout history. It is through mental visions that take the shape of magical beliefs, shamanic journeys, and ecstasies. The power of sight is expressed in different cultures through the production of paintings, sculptures, and artefacts of various kinds; the widespread use of icons by political and religious powers; interpretations of the meaning of visions; and the importance attributed to images or the fear they create, causing their censorship – iconoclasm. The "anthropology of the image" would be a study adapted to the different ways of seeing, aware of the various forms of cultural representation visually expressed and interpreted. The attention to "eye work" is particularly important in today's world where visual communication through images often lacks an interpretative grid to take into account both the "history of the gaze" and the vision in the Western world – which claims to radiate throughout the whole world, trying at all costs to homologate different points of view on an image, to cancel the cultural specifications of different ways of seeing.

Consider a paradigmatic example drawn from Hans Belting: the visual perception of a traditional painting. Western civilization is based on the gaze, on the primacy of the eye and the sovereignty of the observer, then a cognitive function predominates it; in contrast, Arab civilization privileges the light, faithful to the non-iconic graphism of ornamentation and therefore is more emotionally inclined to feel divine presence. The "vanishing point," essential for perspective painting, offers the observer a position in front of the image by defining the absolute horizon, addressing the opposite front, summoning the observer and giving them a fundamental dignity and role. Compare this to the two-dimensionality of Arabic decorations (like the Muqarnas), without depth or perspective, reflecting the status of the Islamic religion in which

the subject is lost in faith: "a mosaic of individual signs, before which our perception becomes unstable and uncertain, an uncertainty accentuated by the distance from which we look" (Belting, 2010, p. 46). Through perspective, in the West, the gaze becomes the domain of art which "transforms the world into a glance at the world" (Belting, 2010, p. 54). In this way, artistic images began to stage the gaze itself; that is to say, the world becomes an image, emancipating the human subject celebrated for the first time as an individual.

This thesis was supported in the nineteenth century by Jacob Burckhardt when he identified the revolutionary moment in the history of the West not so much with the official Renaissance as with the "proto-Renaissance" of the Late Middle Ages, or with Dante and Giotto, for example, who were the first to be recognized as subjective authors and who projected their own subjectivity onto their immortal creations (Burckhardt, 1960, pp. 32-56). The degeneration of the subject's active role occurs within the cult of "reality" and "live" television culture of our days, when the image becomes a consumer good, dependent on the individuals.

Yet, although these two different ways of looking coincide with two different conceptions of the world and of being (Western and Arab), on some occasions, history has created encounters and intersections deserving further study. For example, as Brian Rotman claimed, we should think of the theoretical and conceptual as well as scientific relationship entailed in the invention of the vanishing point in comparison to the introduction of "zero" in Arabic numerals (although the contribution of the discoveries and inventions of Alhazen – an Arab philosopher, mathematician and scientist who created the first "darkroom" prototype – is even more decisive [Rotman, 1993]). Belting dedicates an entire chapter to this revolutionary character, in which, among other things, two central aspects emerge. In the economy of this work, however, we can dwell only on the first element, related to the application of geometry to writing and artistic representation, a central subject in Alhazen. Belting says:

Writing is in fact a geometric construction as much as the ornament. Unlike Western art, here the ornament is not purely decorative, but it is a semantic instrument like writing and, therefore, bearer of a message to decipher where a real cultural training is essential [...]: training eye and spirit serves to decipher the structure of the world, which the Creator has codified in many ways. (Belting, 2010, p. 72)

In the closing of the quotation, one can grasp the (pedagogical) invitation to train both the eye and the spirit. The fruition and production of images, both physical and mental, place people at the centre of interest as a cultural entity; the complex interaction between inner and outer images and the conception of the mind as an integral part of the body provide Belting with arguments challenging the rigid dualism between spirit and matter typical of Western thought (Belting, 2010, pp. 95-99).

The author recognizes that the figurative power of the media is not separate from the commercial and political interests directed at social control; in the potential of digital media awaits a "referential crisis" based on simulation dominating the virtual worlds. Rather than dismissing the question with an alarmist definition, Belting states with clarity that "when the current situation of euphoria, or the sense of the end of time, has subsided, we will find ourselves faced with the task of reconsidering the discourse on images and the figurative nature" (Belting, 2010, p. 29), a subtle warning that has the merit – if nothing else – of retaining the ability for critical thought.

Therefore, people are "naturally" places of images. From this consideration Belting affirms the need for contemporary reflection on the question of the image: "the question must urgently be directed towards an anthropological foundation of the image in the territory of the human gaze and technical artefact" (Belting, 2011, p. 30). It is therefore a question of rethinking the status of images by immersing it directly in the perceptual and factual experience they create and convey. It is not true that – as often static and irrelevant spectators – we release our phantasms and fantasies only through a projection. Our body plays a part in this directionality by creating a triangulation made up of three elements: the image, the medium, and the body. Then, our gaze on this work creates a triangular space in which the three agents vivify an already medial art, showing the reciprocal implications in logic where the Cartesian duality of subject-object falls apart. There is no longer an omnipotent subject who looks at an inert object but a system where each element acts on the other, so much so that this complex cannot be evaluated except as a whole.

The temptation to confuse the image with the medium/work of art is strong, so every day we use the words painting, photograph, opera, film, video, and frame, or, in general, "pictures" to talk about images, helping to feed a widespread confusion, awkwardly looking for a viable way to untangle ourselves from the ambiguities of meanings hidden in language. If "the history of images has always been a history of figurative means" (Belting, 2011, p. 31), Belting focuses on the essential distinction between image and medium, a paradigm that later allows an understanding of to what extent the body – which he defines significantly as a "place of images" – is central to the discourse on the visual. The long shadow of iconology as presented by Aby Warburg looms over the reflection developed here: it is projected to us and, through its majestic thought, continues to illuminate our history of culture (Gombrich, 1986; Warburg, 1999). As Belting seems to be telling us, the latter is foremost a history of images in relation to humankind, in relation to the gaze, and in relation to culture (Belting, 2011, p. 49).

There are two more reasons that can be put forward in favour of an anthropological and ethnographical grasp on image and culture, leading to the anthropology of image and culture. I also consider them fundamental for the project on the laboratory of images.

The first reason is the methodological importance attributed to the use of images in the form of reportage or documentary cinema that allows learning about cultures and people by challenging the self-referentiality of the gaze, ethnocentrism, and Western cultural evolutionism (Loizos, 1995). It is sufficient to recall Leroi-Gourhan (1993), Piaux (2000), Rouch (Stoller, 1992), and David and Judith McDougall (1988): their works on image lead us to reflect on the theme of the representation of diversity, on the construction of the image of the Other, on stereotypes, and visual resistance. From the first ethnographic films of the early twentieth century to the precursors of visual anthropology such as Dziga Vertov and Robert J. Flaherty; from an ethnographic film of pure observation such as Gregory Bateson's to a participatory "cinéma vérité" such as by Lionel Rogosin (Chiozzi, 1993), the evolution of the cinematographic experience reflects questions of representation and ethics in the relationship between the observer and the represented subjects, from a vertical position to an increasingly equal collaboration, acquiring more and more awareness of the variety of points of view.

The second reason is the contribution that anthropology and ethnography can make to better understand the process of transnationalization of cultures and, on the other hand, to foster new ways of educational interaction among all individuals. This analytical and operative model is called "transculturalism" and overcomes the limits of the intercultural paradigm. A great invention of Western pedagogy is that interculturalism has sustained and supported capitalistic economic globalization. Interculturalism is the habit of Western tolerance towards other cultures (Demorgon, 1998; 2004). The term transcultural refers to the idea of crossing all cultures in transit, on a continuous journey, without leading to the creation of a synthesis "at all costs" that would add to those already sadly known. In transculturalism – hoped for by transnational anthropology, ethnography, and ethnopschoanalysis – every experience, whether it is a person's or a stable or migrant community's, is enhanced through narration of life stories, autobiography, and diaries. The narrative device has various forms: from the oral tale by the "griot," preserved in the memory of Berbers, Dongo, Wolof, Jie and sub-Saharan people (Calame-Griaule, 2002; Brugnatielli, 1994), to migrant literature (Frank, 2008; Durante, 2014); even to the tales in pictures (Marazzi, 2015), regardless of aesthetic judgement. A hermeneutic awareness of these different narrative experiences allows us to grasp the similarities, differences, and contaminations (Amselle, 1998) happening between them.

The Laboratory of Images. Experiences in the Field

In such a synthetic framework, it is not inappropriate to question the chances of the image. In front of an image that is sometimes lost in its own plasticity – which is also the capacity to self-reflect – different opportunities can be created. The wise use of an image could show and denounce the state of abandonment in the slums of a metropolis, but it can also return the beauty of places, bringing us the value of “living together”; the aesthetic experience becomes an educational experience.

This happened through Slum-TV, founded in 2008 in Nairobi. This street television project recounts the life and identity of this city within the city, according to a point of view foreign to Western media and with the idea of using inexpensive and basic technology to circulate the training, self-narration, and development of a self-financing economy. Visual communication (Lester, 2000) and “visual ethics” (Lester, 2018) can have an impact on the perception that each individual has of the world, but they cannot change the world; this is the task of education.

The purposes of Slum-TV are various:

1. to give the people of Mathare the opportunity to document their lives rather than subjugate them to outsider imposition with its pre-established mental structure;
2. to preserve a documentation of life in Mathare; 3. to build a digital archive with some of the stories of the valley; 4. to organize safe projections into public spaces, which would be more an exception than rule in the neighbourhood

Slum-TV should be seen also in the context of “new media art” because it is made with simple economic technology but also with new technology – as a medium of construction, self-representation and self-narration, within a combination and contamination of the media, without a passive acceptance of involvement in the “new media milieu” focused in particular on instruments. In its 10th year Slum-TV launched a major film festival for young people, which is not a simple revue – there are no catwalks or red carpets, there are no stars, there are no icons to be immortalized but there is a real “image lab” in which we can learn not only cinematographic or documentary art but also participation, sharing, and discussion.

Keeping this example in mind, it is worth asking whether we can build an “image laboratory” through which we can exercise our gaze on what surrounds us. What learning environment could be used? Who should be involved?

I would begin to answer these questions starting with who should be involved: these should be children, youths, and adults, as is the case for Slum-TV, and their learning environment should surely be the city. Photographic or filmic documentation requires making cognitive walks to discover neighbourhoods, roads, natural places, abandoned places, forgotten places, in order to rethink and redesign the territory, and then returning to take care of it, starting from our observations. In addition, it allows us to make paths from education to emotions, relationships and dialogue through theatrical elaborations, festivals of emotions and any other initiative promoting the emergence of individuals' deep feelings.

In conclusion, the “image laboratory” stands as the “anthropology of the gaze,” which is precisely capable of “seeing” the world in order “to change” it. Other activities of this “image laboratory” should be the following:

1. analysis of different languages and styles of narration, through the vision of various documentary films: deconstruction of the projected work and identification of the narration – making formal choices,
2. activities of “waiting, listening, observation, research” on different forms of truth as far as television, internet, and/or cinema may be concerned,
3. critical activity on the thin border between truth and fiction,
4. production of video makers or short films.

The film *Soul Boy* by Kenyan director Hawa Essuman, tells the story of Abila, who helps her sick and delirious father, a victim of Mama Akinyi, nursing him to complete recovery by recovering his soul. This is a true modern fairy tale expressing a great metaphor of the human post-modern condition: we are buried under a pile of images and we must recover our souls.

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