

**UNIVERSITY OF ARTS AND DESIGN CLUJ-NAPOCA**

**PhD THESIS**

**STUDY OF ILLUSION IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL  
RESEARCH ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE IMAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF  
SOCIAL EVOLUTION**

**SUMMARY**

**PhD Applicant: Maria Brudașcă**

**Scientific coordinator: prof.univ.dr. Ioan Horvath-Bugnariu**

This research aims to study the visuality of the contemporary society through the angle of the involvement of the image in the evolution of social systems. In the current state of the ubicuity of the image, generated by its infiltration in an increasing number of domains of everyday life, it is necessary to identify connections between its main trends of use during historical evolution and the development of contemporary visual language.

The image is a language in its own terms, the first one that naturally occurs in the development of cognition, allowing the conceptual expression of an experience on a surface. Throughout the ages of evolution of mankind, the image sets the parameters of man's relation with his own experience, with divinity, with the social and cultural climate of which he is part of, with his own productions.

An important aspect of living in the contemporary urban environment is the constant exposure to visual media, which leads to an enormous accumulation of visual data, which therefore are able to generate an infinite number of mental associations. The influence of the endless visual stream can be felt in the speed at which these connections between shape and

meaning occur. A minimal hint, such as a certain typeface, certain colours or a particular composition of the image is sufficient for the viewer to extract a multitude of information contained in the surface of the image – informations about a type of event, a category of products, the social class or age group which these products are addressing to, etc. Presently, fields such as economy, communication, human relations and social practices are mediated through images, thanks to media and technologies of production, reproduction and diffusion. The efficiency of the image in social organizing has gained new aspects and ways of handling in the age of internet and digital technologies.

The image as surface which contains relevant information for the human existence leads to the equivalence created between style, or better yet, aesthetics, and the notion of truth. Even though the depicted object is lacking essential information of its physical reality, the image holds the power to fascinate, influence and persuade through its bidimensional surface.

The advantage of the visual language compared to other forms of language is its transitivity in time due to the material surface on which the image is fixed. This property allows transmission of knowledge and social evolution through the constant improvement of a prototype, leading progressively to a culture of linear accumulation. The visual system produced within a certain historical period embeds social and behavioral values; the connection between innovation and depiction functions both ways. In certain cases progress (understood as the deciphering of an aspect of reality) is propelled through the medium of the image, which, in its turn, has the ability to produce shifts in human perception of reality, as in the case of photography.

Today's interaction with the world involves filtering reality through the previous contact with its versions created by the visual media; the technical and symbolic possibilities of media are infinite, thus the image has obtained an absolute autonomy from any real referent. Its contemporary meaning transcends the role it has played during previous centuries, that of an instrument of knowledge and explanation of the natural world through the visible synthesis of its aspects; in present time image production is located beyond any reference to nature, thus creating an autonomous space of experience.

Considering that the field of research is extremely wide, the study is limited to selecting certain historical periods from the evolution of Western civilisation, since this one has been, throughout its evolution, the society which has based its cognitive progress on the use of the image more than any other. Throughout the ages, human vision became oriented from a general perception upon the world to an increasingly specific viewing of its constitutive elements, leading to a culture of precision, which, on the other hand, is only capable of communicating a partial truth. In its concern for imitation in the purpose of approaching reality, the image has always been subordinated to a purpose; but the value of the image is different than the one of the information which it embeds, due to the fact that even though its physical surface is unchanged, its original meaning is only valid in terms of the historical period in which the image has been produced. Moreover, verosimilitude, beyond the convincing representation of the exteriority of the material realm, is the result of the intention of its creator, who is in his turn conditioned by his cultural climate that validates this type of depiction.

The interest for depicting the world in order to better understand it is both a natural and a cultural tendency. The first chapter studies human perception, following the interaction that occurs between the sensorial and cognitive process; the aim of this section is to demonstrate why the hypothesis of the Cartesian self, long-time present in Western mentality, is not valid. The hypothesis of a rational self, detached from its sensoriality, and which has led in time to the notion of the neutral observer, fundament of the scientific way of thought, is invalidated through researching on how the perceptive mechanism actually works. Following the reaction to visual stimuli coming from the outside world, human perception, an active and dynamic process, mobilizes its cognitive resources searching through memories of past experiences in order to impose meaning upon the present percept. Perception is thus a constant interaction between the observer and its object of observation.

Sight is the first way through which one makes contact with the outside world, one that allows storing of data and extracting operational concepts. The natural tendency to organize mental images around a concept and to transpose them onto an exterior surface is the object of the second chapter, „Depiction. A tool for transposing and organizing experience“. A relevant example for the continuity of the tendency of organizing from perception to depiction can be identified in the children's impulse to draw, which comes from the need to conceptualize and

immortalise their relevant experiences. Primitive depictions are the expression of man's need to invest the image with an intention, in order to grant it the power of acting on the real element which serves as its model. From the very beginning the image is a mediator between man and the world, serving the purpose to approach and to appropriate a part of it. This tendency is at the core of the developing of all forms of visual language.

Depiction is addressed for communication detached from its creator, thus it preserves an intention without giving clues about the context that has led to its creation. Writing evolves towards the abstraction of previous visual forms of language in the purpose of reducing the effort and, through this, making communication more efficient. Looking at the example of Ancient Greece, its evolution is tightly linked to the developing of the phonetic alphabet, the most operative form of encoding language discovered and used until the discovery of digital language. The progress of language allowed social and cultural development, the occurrence and passing forward of philosophical thought systems. Just as innovative is the invention of the printing press in the Renaissance, the first mechanisation of labour, which brings along the possibility of unprecedented accumulation of knowledge on mobile surfaces, announcing the dawn of a long-term process of making information accessible.

The third chapter, „The history of depiction – the history of perceptive habits. Tendencies in the use of the image” studies the condition of the image as a tool of organizing, stabilizing and evolution of existence in permanent settlements, following the identification of main trends in the social use of the image, along with correspondences between form and function. Along with the evolution of technical means in image production, the image is attributed increasingly specialized functions.

In Ancient Egypt the image is used as an instrument of the established power, which is using a mix between human and divine depictions in order to proclaim its legitimacy relative to eternity. Ancient Greece's civilisation is focused on establishing aesthetic norms which express the values of its cognitive system, revolving around man being in the center of the natural world.

The interest for realism is decreasing during the ages in which Christian dogma restricts humanist progress; the depiction returns to a form of symbolic communication, which through simplifying its technical means is able to mediate information without captivating the attention of

the viewer through its surface. These ages have an intuition on the power of the image to fascinate through itself, thus they attempt to reduce its visual attributes, subordinating it to the purpose of embodying moral values and behavioral codes.

The Renaissance returns to the humanism of Ancient Greece, assuming and developing its aesthetic preoccupation for identifying a plausible formula for the depiction of reality, in order to expound a general truth. The return of the realist image implies it becoming an undisposable instrument of social and cultural progress of those centuries and the ones following.

The artist is a visual translator of its era, and as different personalities have left their marks building a common cultural foundation, the interest for verosimilitude has become multi-layered, bringing together the depiction of space with an ever increasing interest for depicting the artists's personal experience.

Following this streamline, the fourth chapter addresses the process of art gaining its autonomy as a separate domain of studying and knowing reality. Art is gradually liberated from the obligation of limiting itself to subjects dictated by external structures, as well as from the duty of representing reality through imitation.

In Romanticism, art values personal expression in the context of an increasing conscience of the historical time, bearing a function in social critique, in order to become a relevant testimony of its own era.

In the time of the ascension and instauration of the bourgeoisie, at the dawn of the development of the industrial age, art elaborates its own ideology which, in its goals, matches the newly-occured social and political ideology. Art is freed from the former structures of the artistic system, limited to a restrained circle of commendators and academicians; in this context a new generation of artists is emerging, along with an audience issued from the new social classes. The realist revolution, which proposes following and transcribing the significant innovations of the century from a critique perspective has a short existence. Realism, confiscated by the bourgeoisie through institutionalisation in academies, Salons and other official structures, becomes a mediocre art of social confirmation.

The beginning of the artistic modernity can be found in the movement which brings forward the self-centred programme enounced by realism, impressionism, received with skepticism by the public and condemned by the official structures. The influence of temporality upon experience becomes more important than the obligation to depict reality; from that moment on, artistic movements evolve towards the liberation of the visual means of expression, their research being oriented towards the possibility of these means to transmit meaning through themselves.

The movements of the avantgardes give the painting the statute of an object with its own reality, brought to visibility by the individual creative impulse and open to the viewer's interpretation. On this path, art, along with Duchamp's ready-mades, makes the decisive jump to postmodernity by putting into discussion the link between the manual intervention and the act of creation, becoming an entity creating contexts in which society is symbolically reinterpreted. This phenomenon can not be separated from the abundance of images involved in the development of the consumerist society. From the concern for the most idealistic realism, art takes a step back from depiction, making the passage from the accumulative visual culture to a form of unpermanent expression, dependent on the temporal and circumstantial dimension of the context which it questions.

The fifth part of the work studies the role of the image in social organizing in the context of the accelerated urbanization process at the beginning of the XXth century. The visual alphabet of the city is composed of universally decipherable signs, whose purpose is to organize the city, a space of constructed conviviality artificial proximity.

The origins of the present abundance and ubiquity of visual media are located in the social events marking the beginning of the XXth century, such as World War I, in which the mass-produced low cost image has proved to be the most persuasive, and, consequently, most efficient form of mediated communication between the state and various social categories. Similar with the case of advertising, the message carried by the image is invested with social meaning and is addressed to the emotional side of the viewer, in order to provoke an initial reaction and its materialisation in an action.

The economic system developed around industrial production is based on the constant growth of productivity and expanding the limits of the free market. This principle of functioning generates a superabundance of objects and a process of production revolving around needs concerning social relations, instead of actual needs. Thus the era of symbolic economy emerges, in which the actual qualities of a product are subordinated to its social meaning, its desirability, its capacity to be used as an instrument of self expression. This process is inseparable from the evolution of the image in advertising and the visual content industry, which continuously generate social significations accompanying the products, along with the fabrication of ideal contexts for their viewing and consumption. The goal of perpetual consumerism on which global economy is based is to stabilize a society whose geographic and cultural expansion enhances its imprevisibility. The connection to the common denominator of consumerism is seen as necessary in the context of the global economy system promoted by the western world.

An important factor contributing to the power of persuasion which the image holds in modern society is the invention of photography, which, based on the verosimilarity of the depiction, facilitated the evolution of various scientific and social domains, and at the same time has accustomed people with a new set of perceptual and behavioural habits. The depiction's status as evidence becomes incontestable due to the technical precision of the photographic camera, and image production, a natural, and, in present time, almost necessary aspect of social life.

The last part of the research deals with the evolution of visual media throughout the XXth century. Starting from the shift in perception on depictions of reality brought by the invention of photography – including the decay of realism in art – this section aims to draw some of the causes of the credibility of the photographic image, alongside with the implications deriving from this attitude, and its consequences for the development of the modern visual society. The accessibility of the medium, its ability to produce an unlimited number of copies on a portable surface which allows spreading them worldwide has provoked an unprecedented cultural receptivity and an increasing appetite for the diversity of experience. The modern man, liberated from the necessity of possessing individual technical skills has been transformed into a producer of signs.

Film and television are the natural consequences of the technical evolution of the new medium. The research focuses on the social and behavioral influences that these forms of media have in the context of modernity. The film gathers a large number of people in front of the screen during the delimited period of time of a shared visual experience, thus implementing common perceptive habits and behavioral models in the audience. Television brings an equally significant change through the insertion of a visual device capable of continuous diffusion in the family home, altering the activities, interactions and behaviors of people in their most intimate environment. The premises for the apparition of the digital era are thus created, emerging from the necessity of handling an ever more complex economic system, and to connect members of the global society in a unique medium which offers the possibility of interaction between all the participants.

The virtual medium can be considered an environment – it belongs to reality and yet it is separated from it, due to its ability to create real experience through the visual means that it possesses.

In the era of digital communication through portable devices made accessible through their visual interface, verbal and written communication becomes insufficient; the endowment of communication devices with the possibility to capture, record and diffuse images of reality, along with the self-validation and self-expression through images embedded in modern mentality are the main reasons of the visual communication required by the social interaction of the virtual medium nowadays. The internet is a place of apparently democratic expression, safe and anonymous, which leads to a substantial part of social interaction being mediated through its space.

The fragmentation of the self identity in contemporary society is visible in the use of the avatar, through which users choose to express and display those aspects of their life which would arouse the favorable feedback that they need in order to validate their own experience. The medium apparently offers an infinite number of tools of self expression which stir up a real feedback. The less obvious aspect concerns the fact that these media are a social construction, the instruments are limited (in their apparent diversity) by the system which has created them with the aim, present for centuries, to stabilize and homogenize social behavior, aspirations and expectancies; freedom of expression often appears in an already constructed framework.



Along with the interdependence between one's own social status and the absorption of media flow, its consumption equals the idea of being present, connected to events and information from worldwide. Virtual interconnectivity cannot replace real communication, but the latter is suffering an increasing process of decay. In the physical sense, people have never been more distant from the ones surrounding them, because of the practically unlimited number of available virtual realities and the exposed fragments of identity of an unlimited number of people. To communicate, to put in common, to share, is replaced nowadays by the concept of self-expression. This is a need felt as real, both socially and individually, and its fulfillment in the environment of an autonomous and visual medium has proven to be beneficial for the system in most cases.

The last chapter consists of a self-interrogation concerning my own artistic activity through the angle of the information acquired during the research. In the same way in which every chapter has aimed at drawing some of the principles of functioning of the image with the purpose of identifying their consequences on perception and social behavior, the chapter „Translator of my own experience” follows the manifestation of the psychological and cognitive tendencies that drive my personal need of depiction. The knowledge acquired during this study have proven to be exceptionally useful in structuring, and implicitly reinterpreting my own artistic projects according to this exercise of self-interrogation.

The self-analysis starts with trying to decipher the motivations which stand behind my childhood drawings, aiming to identify those which have perpetuated to present works. Observation, the desire to communicate through narrative depictions and to translate the understanding of my own experience are some of them. The opposite tendency is the attempt to renounce, as much as possible, the perceptual predeterminations and the intention of depicting a certain element in the process of image making, manifested in complementary exercises of order and hazard. Through this I explore my capacities in using basic means of visual expression as figurative elements, either focusing on the repetition of certain gestures in order to sense their native and acquired habits, either applying a minimum of physical intervention on the matter, in order to enter the mental association game required by the abstract surface.

Through its uniqueness, the gesture is the keeper of time; the last project is an audio-visual performance, in which the visual component borrows a part of the temporality of music, combining in order to create a common space and time.

The contemporary era, characterized by the increasingly spreading habit to receive, decipher and produce images, is an extremely fertile environment for directing my own artistic production in the direction of suggestion, omission, absence of explicitating, aiming to offer the viewers a space upon which they can develop and follow their personal connections.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'M. M. M.', is located in the lower right quadrant of the page. The signature is written in a cursive style with some overlapping strokes.