

Colloquium with Ruggero Eugeni

Luigi Cocchiarella

Abstract Ruggero Eugeni is a professor of Media Semiotics at the Catholic University of Milano. His field of interest is extended to the *Semiotics of Image*, a specialized branch of Semiotics where deep foundations for a discussion concerning the visual language of technique between science and art can be found. The interview was recorded on 22 April 2013 at the Catholic University of Milan. According to the purposes of the seminar, the focus was on the history and epistemology related to visual language. A transcript of the conversation is included in the following pages.

The interview with Ruggero Eugeni (*right*)



Interviewed by Luigi Cocchiarella.

Video recording by Politecnico di Milano. Translated in English at the Politecnico di Milano.

Video interview available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0FH9n0LiJc>

L. Cocchiarella (✉)

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

e-mail: luigi.cocchiarella@polimi.it

© Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2015

L. Cocchiarella (ed.), *The Visual Language of Technique*,

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-05350-9_2

LC¹: *Good morning, we are at the Catholic University of Milan to ask Ruggero Eugeni, professor of Media Semiotics, some questions about the role of the image in the technical field. The first question I would like to ask you, professor, is this: image semiotics is a rather specialised field of study and perhaps those who do not work in the field know little about it, in spite of the fact that today we are overwhelmed with images everywhere we go, so much so that Régis Debray has defined our age as a visual era, namely a “video-sphere”. In light of this, would you recommend image studies even in fields that are not strictly related with technique and that would seem to have little connection with the visual approach?*

RE²: Yes, absolutely. The image has become a fundamental tool; not just for communicating but also, and most importantly, for thinking. It is a part of the equipment we constantly use to make sense out of the world that surrounds us, and out of the experience we make of it. This is what semiotics is all about: the science of signification and the analysis of how forms of understanding, interpretation, meaning and even thought can stem from certain items and objects, including images. There is no doubt that studying these mechanisms is very important as well as useful. I believe, and maybe we'll come back to this, that this way of operating with and on the image, which we do on a daily basis without realizing it, requires a reflexive movement; actually, such a reflection is precisely the semiotics of image.

LC: *The second question I would like to ask you is about the difficulty surrounding learning and development where image studies are concerned. I often tell my students that the apparent obviousness of the image is one of the main factors standing in the way of any in-depth study; the fact that we can see, seems to imply that we can therefore also understand. With great perspicuity, Bruno Zevi compared the extensive periods of time we spend in the school studying literary masterpieces (i.e. three years for the Divine Comedy) with the very short periods we spend examining great architectural works such as Saint Peter's Basilica, which normally only gets a few minutes for both a visit and an explanation. So, bearing all this in mind, are we really able to fully escape the task of visual literacy if we consider this context and this state of affairs?*

RE: Of course not. It is important to work on understanding and on mechanisms for understanding the image. Certain negative influences carry weight in traditional Western ideas about the image, such as ancient Platonic thoughts; these have worked extensively within Western culture to create the idea that knowledge of the image is considered as a form of secondary knowledge. Even recent analysis, including phenomenological studies, operate on the idea that the image provides some kind of instant experience, which can be reflected in greater detail later on. I believe that two other lines of thought for cultural understanding of the image are more interesting. On one hand, the image has appeared in certain moments of Western reflection, especially in the Middle Ages, as a tool for real and effective

¹ Interviewer **LC**: Luigi Cocchiarella

² Interviewed **RE**: Ruggero Eugeni

presence. Regis Debray, who you mentioned earlier, claims the same thing. I am talking about this idea that images are proper presence carriers; sacred images, for instance, used to replace forms of presence. There is an extensive debate about this and recent philosophy has taken this up again, for instance with Georges Didi-Huberman. The second line of thought is that of semiotics, i.e. the idea of interpretation. What is interesting about semiotics is that over the last 50 years or so, it has begun to apply tools of interpretation to the image and therefore to consider it like a piece of writing or speech that can and should be broken down into components and examined using all those cultural mechanisms that have guided it, and still are guiding it, with reference to understanding, interpretation, and the construction of meaning mentioned earlier.

LC: *Let us look more at the idea of the image as a piece of writing. Since ancient graffiti, the image has had a special relationship with art, particularly because of its ability to accurately represent world events and figures. However, at least since the time of Descartes, it has also been strongly associated with the scientific world and has therefore encountered a more abstract form of expression that can also convey much deeper meaning – the non-visible. Considering how these two sides of the image are employed, matter that is so admirably expressed in Leonardo Da Vinci's work, can we consider the image's potential duplicity as an additional resource in learning and research in the technical field, which ultimately sits between science and art?*

RE: Absolutely, I agree with you there. As Hegel reminds us with his idea about the end of art history, and as many other modern-day thinkers highlight, we are somewhat victims to the idea that the image is connected to art and to individual expression, as well as to art institutions, as we know of today in the post-romantic age. Actually, images have had very different roles in their history but nevertheless they have all had one aspect in common. In spite of the fact that they are used with supports, images have always been tools, they have always been used practically and dynamically and therefore they have always been intrinsically fluid and mobile, more homeodynamic than homeostatic. As such therefore, images have been tools of actions and operations ever since they were painted on cave walls; it is known this was done as a ritual and not as artwork, as we know it today. We then go right through to what we consider works of art in itself, such as Renaissance works; if we analyze this kind of images, we notice that they were situated inside spaces (like for instances cathedrals or private chapels) with well defined functions; moreover, they involved a specific discipline of the bodies and designed distinct form of the presence for the subject in front of them—in one word, they were part of a dispositive. We really have to free ourselves of this idea of the image as a work of art and start thinking again of the image as a tool. If we see the image as a tool, we can then find a series of connections, as the function of the image is to enable the creation and spatialisation of ideas and enable us to go on a journey, a prehensile journey within our interior worlds and within the ideas we are developing. This is where I believe we can find not so much points of contact as points of contagion between art, the project, practical activity and the actions that involve images.

LC: *You mentioned points of contagion. Digital innovation probably helps to give us a clearer idea of certain points you have discussed and which I would like us to go back to. In addition to the possibility of 3D creations, digital innovation also introduces the possibility of interacting with images and operating within the image, and there has also been an increase in the “semantic size” of the image itself. Images are no longer just figures; they are now real information databases. The model can be consulted and it is possible to add and extract parameters, which are also relative to physical properties, as well as to hidden properties that are directly linked to the image configuration. So with this gradual syncretism of the image, which tends to bring together multiple information dimensions, is it necessary to focus more on digital semiotics, in line with traditional image semiotics? Furthermore, what are the risks with this gradual syncretism? In other words, do we risk perhaps to duplicate realities, of little use whatsoever, thus having almost the cartography map effect of Borges mentioned by Michel Foucault as a paradigm of the negation of representation?*

RE: The question has various layers and I think we should examine at least two. A first aspect is about the ontology and the ethics of the image and in a way it therefore comes before the epistemology of the image. Of course, in this area the digital image poses some highly interesting problems. If we try to get to the heart of these issues, I believe that the main new element is the idea of an image with a mobile surface or, better still, a mobile object constantly transforming, not fixed, but ever willing to interact with the subject. Though less obvious in contemporary thinking, this instantly creates a problem of ethics of the image tied to a sense of belonging. I don't believe it is actually necessary to distinguish between reality and image. In distinguishing the different ontological levels, subjects move around well. However I do believe that with the image it is very important to develop a culture of belonging. Whom do the images belong to? Who built them? Who is responsible for them? This is a question that Didi-Huberman develops for certain images of the Holocaust, emphasizing on how to look at certain images. It basically means becoming sort of the “images’ owner”, and therefore taking some kind of responsibility for them even in the moment they are seen. Hence, what really concerns me is not a Borges overlapping of maps, but the tendency to consider images as “nobody’s images”. They always belong to someone, as they rightly and appropriately should, and by looking at an image, we are taking possession of it with all the consequences that this involves.

As for the second layer of your question, the topic is more tied in with the epistemology of the image. I believe that in the wake of these considerations, semiotics has a huge field of interest that is relevant to the image today. This field of interest is related to the type of experience that the image enables us to have. For some time now, I have insisted that we should release ourselves from the obsession that the speech and the written word are the key to semiotics, and replace the importance of the written word with the idea that experience is the key instead. These experiences are planned, designed and even made possible through the image. Images make it possible to gather experiences, which we would not be able

to gain with just words or other types of production. In my opinion, the best kind of image semiotics is the semiotics of the iconic experience, that is to say the experiences that the images make possible for us.

LC: *I would like to look into one particular point now. A few years ago Stefano Zecchi wrote an essay entitled “L’uomo è ciò che guarda” (“Man is what he sees”), which emphasises the “visual materialism” that dominates our age. Now, if we transfer considerations to the technical world, what technical profile can we expect to see as users of the image in the near future?*

RE: This is a very interesting question; in fact, we can paraphrase Zecchi and say that today more than ever “man is what people see”, not just what he sees; as well as “man is what he sees himself” too, not just what others see. Technical competence in the production of images has become extremely widespread. As mentioned earlier, the idea of images belonging to someone ties in with this “prosumer” or “grassroots” production of iconic materials and audiovisual, static images etc. Here, the type of technical competence is no longer a clearly distinct competence between the hyper-literate and the illiterate. Between the two, there is a vast grey area, which is actually not even grey anymore, it is somewhat transparent. Within this area each of us so-called “digital natives”, is able to produce images, even high-quality images, make them circulate and have others see them.

A recent cartoon strip festival featured the first ever superhero cartoon competition for amateur filmmakers; the results were extraordinary and the films were very high quality. Yet we always see high quality films on the internet, just as we see different technical competences with the use of hand-held camcorders or even smartphones as tools for producing images. This is an extremely broad field, which redefines the distinction between the “professional” and the “amateur”, and most certainly redistributes responsibility. What is even more interesting, according to me, is that it redistributes the innovation. Sadly, we did not say much about innovation in this interview, but without any doubt the theme of innovation, the theme of conception, is central when we speak of the image as a tool. The image is indeed a tool for innovation. It allows us to discover new worlds and new roads, and to identify new passages. Hence, in this respect, innovation processes are spreading increasingly: they are becoming more and more cooperative and, above all, they are getting more complicated to get a hold on. Academic institutions and traditional mainstream cinema are no longer able to block or monopolise the field of innovation.

LC: *I would like to finish off with an idea from Heidegger on the theme of technology; he assigns a substantiating power to technology, meaning that it has the power to reveal, make present and bring forms, solutions, problems and operations to light. However, if we consider that the majority of technological items and procedures are prefigured beforehand through the image (therefore, the image acknowledges the device revealing the technology), can this lead us to draw any conclusions on the role that the image plays as a tool for exploring and predicting technology?*

RE: I would say there are two aspects to this question, a “cognitive” and an “emotional” one. Regarding the first aspect, the image is a tool that technology uses to become an invention; i.e. the image is the device that makes it possible to introduce innovative aspects of real, significant transformation to thinking and to technical work. In this respect, we could now reinterpret the phenomenon of the spread of inventive processes, which are no longer just the prerogative of the large institutions that possess technology. As soon as technology becomes light and pervasive, the common user can become the “prosumer”, he can, in turn, produce, take possession of the technical tool and turn it into an apparatus of invention; that is when we are back to the idea that the image needs new producers as well as new centers of responsibility in terms of this inventive aspect.

If we shift now to the second aspect of Heidegger’s statements – i.e. the one linked to a history of the emotional experience of the Modernity –, I reckon that he gave those statements in a specific moment, in which the medial image was the necessary interface between the subject and technology. Technology appeared as an “assemblage” of highly artificialized apparatuses. The impact between these artificial apparatuses on the one side, and the natural, biological world of the human organism on the other one, occurred via a compensation environment, which was provided precisely by the medial image. The latter “softened” the shock implied by the impact of technology on the human organism, and made it possible to manage the relationship between the subject and the artificial apparatuses of Modernity.

I notice that this emotional device is not still working today, since technology has become so widespread that the medial image is presently the site of a “naturalisation” of technology –, rather than the interface between the artificial and the natural. Today, medial images and media devices around us (which are increasingly slimmer, invisible and easier to carry) are a network of displays and sensors playing a huge (yet generally quite unnoticed) part in our daily life. Within this context, the image appears more and more as a hybrid entity that is no longer fully nature, yet neither is it completely technology; actually, it is a meeting and melting point between nature and artificiality, that ultimately allows us to overcome the opposition of these two categories.

LC: *Thank you very much, Professor. Thank you for your time, for this interview and, above all, thank you for the thoughts and ideas that have come out in the course of your answers.*

RE: Thank you.

The Visual Language of Technique

Volume 1 - History and Epistemology

Cocchiarella, L. (Ed.)

2015, XII, 182 p. 119 illus., 84 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-05349-3