

# On the Intimate Relation between the Reproducible and the Abstract Nature of Images

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## Abstract

This paper outlines a way for investigating images produced and reproduced by machines. We focus on the phenomenon of reproducibility as an essential characteristic of modern images and on the loss of our ability to read images as visual abstractions. In the first section, we present the non-discursive content of images as a condition for their reproducibility. The second section, about the secondary nature of the original, prepares for the following section that introduces the husserlian notion of the ‘garb of ideas’. The last, conclusive section, uses this notion to explain the loss of our ability to read the visual abstraction of images, and points to the role of the machine therein.

**Keywords:** art, image, abstraction, reproduction, reproducibility, machine

## 1. Introduction: Works of Art as Reproductions – Images and Reproducibility

The reproductive essence of works of art was the basis for Plato’s critique on what we now call the fine arts: images depicting reality are superfluous and present us with a merely illusionary presence of what is depicted. Works of art are not a result of production (like the products of craftsmanship), but of re-production. Since a table, e.g., is a particular and therefore imperfect image of the essence or the Idea of the table, a painted picture of a table or any other depiction of worldly reality is itself a reproduction of this imperfect image (the empirical table) of the perfect original (the Idea of a table). Two steps removed from the truthfulness of the eternal Ideas, works of art are a degraded double of reality.

Moreover, Plato was well aware of the fact that these reproductions – especially when it comes to poetry – can manipulate people’s emotions, and consequently their thoughts, such that the way of the intellect to truth and goodness is obstructed.

Nowadays, Plato’s problem about the essentially reproductive character of works of art seems to be squared. Works of art are no longer necessarily a reproduction of empirical reality, but with the advent of various reproduction techniques, they are themselves *reproducible*. At least one kind of works of art – these works of art that we shall call ‘images’ here – have taken

up their reproductive essence in a quasi perverted way. Instead of being merely reproductions, they have become themselves reproducible. In the following sections, we will outline a way for investigating this squared Platonic problem.

## **2. The Non-Discursive Content of Images as a Condition for Their Reproducibility**

Images do not have a discursive nature, but give their content immediately and instantaneously. This does not imply that an image cannot be read as a text, or that diverse layers of interpretation do accompany an image. Images, like texts and musical compositions, can indeed be considered as time-objects, i.e. objects that need the course of time to unfold themselves. The non-discursive nature of the content of images rather implies that the first perceptual access to images is experienced as something effortless. Images seem to impress themselves immediately on our visual apparatus and we experience ourselves as passive subjects, undergoing the instantaneous and immediate visual impression of the image in our mind.

In contrast with reading a text, the perceptual experience we have of images seems to include a lack of awareness of the very specific intentional acts necessary to perceive an image *as* an image (cf. Husserl and Sartre on imagination; Saraiva, 1970; Sartre, 1981). The massive omnipresence of images together with the inherent speed of the media in which these images are presented, have led most of us into an attitude of banal realism. Images are considered as pieces of reality, i.e. perceivable and to be perceived in the same way one perceives reality. This sort of realism does not point to a belief in the faithfulness of the image, but rather to the belief that to perceive an image does not demand a visual interpretation of the pictorial character of the image.

But in what way is the non-discursive nature of images a condition of possibility for their reproducibility? Why is it that the immediate givenness of the image renders it easily reproducible? Of course, a text, at least the linguistic symbols used in it, can also be easily reproduced by means of reproductive techniques. But a reproduction of what is immediately given in a text, does not mean that its content is co-reproduced. In the text, the relation between what is immediately given and the content (which is co-given but not immediately accessible) is much more contingent and arbitrary than in the case of images. The immediate givenness of the image pertains to something more than the form, since matter and its characteristics is not only necessary for the mere presence of works of art, but also for its content. Whereas the font in which I write a text does not necessarily matter to its content, the characteristics of the visual components of an image are extremely important for what is presented. With the advent of modern reproduction techniques, this inseparability between the image and its 'content', together with the way images are perceived, does not only make images reproducible *par excellence*, but makes them reproducible by *essence*. The underlying mechanism and the importance of mechanical reproduction techniques is explained in section 5. First, we explain how the possibility of reproduction inevitably affects the way images are perceived.

## **3. The secondary nature of the original**

A person in front of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, mostly has the experience that s/he finally sees the original of the many reproductions s/he has seen before. This experience often is mixed with unease, since the onlooker is aware that s/he is unable to focus on what is to be seen there and what s/he has seen many times before in reproductions of the painting. What comes to the

foreground is the experience of the presence of the original, against the background of the numerous reproductions seen before. S/he has come to the Louvre, not to see the *Mona Lisa*, but to see the original. Or rather, s/he has come to see the original *of a series of reproductions* seen before.

The accompanying unease might be caused by the feeling that it is impossible to separate the unique experience of the original from the pictorial content seen many times before. In other words, in the context of a pervasive culture of reproducible pictorial contents, the uniqueness of the original is and remains veiled. The original has become secondary since the reproduction is primary now, and even if we want the original to be primary, we fail in trying to approach it as such.

Most often, however, the situation is much less anecdotal, and we mostly are unaware of the mediate nature of our perception of reality (which is in the above case the original painting). Da Vinci (1949) tells us the story of a dog that reacts to a painted depiction of his master as if his master were bodily present. In the course of time, da Vinci's dog seems to have lost his anecdotal force, and may have become a metaphor for all of us, who live in a world crowded with *images* that we perceive from a very realistic perspective. Photographs, e.g., a particular kind of images, are treated as faithful representations of reality. This does not mean that we believe that photographs depict real situations or persons, but rather that we believe that the perception of what is depicted in photographs is unproblematic and self-evident (see also sections 2 and 5).

Our claim is that, in opposition to what common sense tells us, we somehow have become *unable* to read images, and that the enormous production of images in the present time can be considered a symptom of this inability to read images. In order to make this clear, we have to turn back to the issue of the immediate givenness of the image. It is here that the notion of the 'garb of ideas', presented by Edmund Husserl, comes into the picture.

#### 4. The Garb of Ideas

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1954), Edmund Husserl explains the relation between the method by which our everyday life-world is objectified and this life-world itself. In this explanation, the notion of 'garb of ideas' plays a pivotal role. "Mathematics and mathematical science, as a garb of ideas, or the garb of symbols of the symbolic mathematical theories, encompasses everything which, for scientists and the educated generally, *represents* the life-world, *dresses it up* as 'objectively actual and true' nature. It is through the garb of ideas that we take for *true being* what is actually a *method* – a method which is designed for the purpose of progressively improving, *in infinitum*, through 'scientific' predictions, those rough predictions which are the only ones originally within the sphere of what is actually experienced and experienceable in the life-world." (Husserl, 1970 [1954]: 51-52) Husserl explains how the method, the mathematization of nature, by which the sciences construct 'reality', *disguises itself*. Although the sciences are based upon our life-world (the only one actually experienced and experienceable), they are generally accepted as presenting us the true and actual being of nature. In other words, that which is *secondary*, the 'true' and 'actual' nature as the result of applying a specific method, has become primary; i.e. the 'true' and 'actual' objective nature is believed to *underlie* the life-world. The only way by which this reversal has been possible, is because the method has remained unintelligible and because the disguise of the ideas covers its true meaning.

Based on abstraction and idealization as methods, we consider the life-world as secondary and merely subjective vis-à-vis ‘primary’, mathematized nature. Husserl explicitly compares science and its method to a *machine* everyone can learn to operate without understanding the inner possibilities and necessity of the presuppositions, constructions, concepts and theories implied by it (ibid: 52).

In a similar way, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1960) describes how the invention of geometric perspective in the Renaissance often is interpreted as a method to represent reality in an objective way. However, the application of the geometrically constructed perspective is a very specific *interpretation* and thus a specific representation of the world and the way we look at it. Instead of being a decisive method that enables us to finally represent the world in an objective way, Merleau-Ponty describes how the geometrical perspective is a very specific invention that constitutes a certain kind of objectivity, rather than being based upon it. The same reversal Husserl analyzed, between the results of the method and what is actually experienced and experienceable, is thus at work in the consideration of the geometric perspective as a method.

In the next section, mathematical method and the notion of machine play a similar, unnoticed role in what we take for granted in perceiving images. Images turn out to be loaded with construction, abstraction and idealization, and are reproducible thanks to their mathematical nature. Let us therefore turn back to the issue of the image.

## **5. Conclusion: Visual Abstraction and the Inability to Read Images**

With Husserl’s ‘garb of ideas’, we have a tool to explain into more detail our claim that the ability to read images is lost. Let us first recapitulate. Images are essentially reproducible phenomena. Moreover, we claimed that the characteristic of reproducibility is inherently linked to the immediate givenness of the visual content of the image. It is within the context of immediate givenness that the notions of abstraction and machine come to play their particular role. Most importantly, but generally overlooked, images are ultimately compositions of dots, lines and planes. This is what da Vinci already had stated: the basic constituents of paintings are points, lines and planes and the combination of these geometrical entities allows the illusion of the third dimension. In other words, what the onlooker experiences as a representation of reality, is only possible because of the ability (of the maker) to decompose and recompose a visual content by means of geometry. Since this representation is mathematizable, the nature of it is highly *abstract*. This abstract character was a necessary condition for images to be reproducible by means of machines. With the advent of the possibility to reproduce *ad infinitum* the abstract visual content of images in a mechanistic way, i.e. with the advent of *machines* that can produce and reproduce images, this abstract and mathematical character has become veiled (since it is the machine, and not the human eye and hand, that produces the image).

Thus, and first, the abstract, mathematizable character of images is a necessary condition for machine-like production and reproduction of the image. The machine (television, camera, computer, etc.) enables us to produce and reproduce exactly the same image over and again. The reproduction of images by the machine depends upon the possibility to treat images as visual abstractions. The machine uses a binary system to produce and reproduce images. This binary system is a string of zero’s and one’s, representing colored dots or grey values that collectively make up the image.

Second, the overall presence of images does not only depend on the widespread use and availability of machines that produce and reproduce images, but essentially upon the fact *that abstraction allows reproducibility*. Whether you have one machine or many, is not important.

Third, since the operation of these machines is black-boxed to the ordinary user, we are no longer aware of the mathematical nature of the method by which these images are produced and reproduced. It is precisely due to this black-boxing, that the *fact that images are inherently visual abstractions*, is veiled for us. Both the fact that everyone can handle and manipulate image-producing machines and the loss of our ability to read images as visual abstractions go together. These phenomena go together because of their common origin in the veiling of the workings of image-producing machines.

Therefore, and firstly, that an image is visually highly abstract is no longer noticed; images are perceived as ordinary pieces of reality (cf. the banal realism). Secondly, one of the effects of the omnipresence of images is that our first encounter with the 'original' is via the image, the reproduction of it. The image is first, and the final encounter with the original is mediated and secondary.

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