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“The Great Environmental Switch”:
Ecology, Technology, and Thinking

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Lecture, 20th of May: *Towards an Understanding of Experimental Ethics in Media Ecology: Updating Susan Sontag's Concept of an 'Ecology of Images'*

Good afternoon, I want to start with a tiny legacy or better: theoretical remain(s) of Susan Sontag, which, according to our thesis, could be a promising prospect for contemporary media-ecological thinking of the digital image. In her essay "The Image-World" she writes in 1977: Quote "If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.". Sontag had warned of an erosion of "real reality" through images of horror and war, and had therefore dreamed of an ethical Guardian Council that would sort out right images from wrong ones. We should imagine this model briefly and I will exaggerate a little: a worldwide operating picture agency made up of discourse and image ethicists, perhaps under the chairmanship of Jürgen Habermas, examines the images for their critical and enlightening content before they are fed into the sphere of media picture circulation. An ecology of images would then not only be a strictly normative and regulatory procedure, it would also be an ecology concept oriented towards balance and natural equilibrium/harmony - towards a conscious use and consumption of images. So this is not that far from the new bourgeois paradigm of digital detoxification nowadays. As we know: Sontag later revised this term: In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag distances herself from this, as she said "conservative" demand for an "ecology of images". Well, we would like to appropriate and update this term completely differently, free it from these conservative implications. I would actually like to understand my proposal of an experimental ethics as an "ethico-aesthetical paradigm" (Guattari), but today I focus primarily on the field of (aesthetic) operations of digital images. The central question for the image world of the here and now is: How can the status of digital images be understood? Why could it therefore be an advantage to speak of an "ecology of images"? In the following, we will therefore deal with a work on the concept/term. But we already know that, because that is the status of media ecology till now. The basis of a media-ecological thinking of the images is the following:: I want to follow Erich Hörl - in a very affirmative image oriented way - , who explains that the term ecology is increasingly denaturalized, that it loses its political-semantic charge with nature and thus pushes for the watchword of an 'ecology without nature' in the sense of Timothy Morton. (Hörl 2016, 33). This is exactly the horizon of an ecology of images (without referring to Morton). Concerning the contemporary digital image worlds (plural) one could argue: we are confronted

with a denaturalization and a weakened ontologization at the same time. So an ecology of image, I suggest, cannot afford to use a idealistic culture pessimism concerning image in the tradition of Susan Sontag or Neil Postman and: It do not ask in the tradition of platon and critical theory: What is beneath the surface of digital images? It has to deal with the surfaces of images, so in this sense we strictly follow Gilles Deleuze, who was focused on that. The digital image proliferates, diffuses and modifies, it spreads in space and time. It cannot therefore be fed back to any particular individual form, which is why Deleuze call it "dividual" (Deleuze 1993, 258). So digital images can never be immobilized, never individuated and never appear individually, but only and necessarily in permanent transformation. Continuing Deleuze's characterization of the human subject in the "control society" as a fluid and dividual quantity, one can therefore understand digital images as image assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 504–05): According to the swedish-austrian Film scientist Lisa Akervall they could also be described as "configurations and interactions of humans and machines, living beings and technologies" (Akervall 2018, 68). As an advocate of another ecology of images, I want to clarify three aspects: Firstly, I am concerned with determining the indeterminability of digital images, secondly with their surroundedness in affective environments and thirdly with the possibilities of the political in the horizon of control and loss of control.

1. Surroundedness: Das digitale Bild in seinem Umgeben-Sein

The term media ecology refers first of all to the integration of life into a global media network. The premise is therefore Marshall McLuhan's media-ecological realization that technical-medial infrastructures are to be understood as a network of conditions. What is the great environmental switch with regard to an ecology of images? We have to see environmentality first of all in the context the control society paradigm of Gilles Deleuze. An Ecology of Images in Media ecology means the omnipresence of being surrounded by images and image machines in "planetary capitalism" (Guattari 2018). As we remember: McLuhan undertakes a radical change of perspective that makes media-ecological thinking possible in the first place. It consists in the fundamental insight that artefacts (and we have to understand these artefacts as materialistic images as well) are "to environ". In reference to McLuhan, we have to realize that digital image flows and image machines are live environments in the full organic sense. They alter our feelings and sensibilities, especially when they are not attend to. In a different defined ecology of images, I would prefer the term: To be Surrounded or in German: Das Umgeben-Sein. The so called surroundedness of digital images implies its erratic, changeable ontological status: Because they do not just environ, they become modes of being. Images are therefore more than just shimmering objects in environments: They run through our bodies, they are part

of our divided life. Therefore we have to give them a variable ontological status. Images therefore no longer form a classical background, there autonomous subjects look at these image objects. No, pictures as techno-ecological environmental entities are not only processual, but have a liveliness. They are alive in their power of spectralization (*Spektralisierung*) - as Derrida mentioned.

So an ecology of images understands the aspect of being surrounded and traversed by digital images not only as a new environmental condition, but also as a transformation of world contexts, in which digital visualization practices and digital image surfaces have become a central modus operandi. In recourse to Bruno Latour, W. J. T. Mitchell we have to define digital images as “quasi-actors” (Mitchell 2008, 66). In continuation of this, an ecology of image is concerned with illustrating the modulation movements of digital images, when images as agents affect other images, when machines make images for machines and no longer only for the human eye. If digital images and image machines become increasingly intertwined with modes of subjectivation then, as Henning Schmidgen states, these image machines can “be used for a variety of purposes. The enormous multiplication of surfaces that we observe, scan and measure today makes this clear” (Schmidgen 2016, 232). The current image machines reproduce themselves in basically infinite flows, takeovers, modifications and produce other subjectivations, affect-allocations and constantly changing social ways of participation that continuously reconfigure the field of the political. Well: This means to counteract a purely technical determination of images: Claus Pias' famous statement that he has never seen bits and bytes in the wild before, not only suggests that the digital image does not exist, this approach undermines the emergence of images and their affective and political being in the world: an ecology of images does not want to inscribe itself in a philosophical history of distrust of images. The motif of a latent contempt for images also appears in the discussions about media aesthetics and media ecology. Keyword: condemnation of digital network visualizations. However, Gilles Deleuze, who never spoke of manipulation or deception, should never be integrated into this contempt for images. Deleuze has clearly positioned himself in the question in "Logic of Sense": Quote "Reversing Platonism therefore means letting the illusions rise, asserting their rights between the icons or the images." Of course, this does not mean falling into an unclouded, affirmative iconophilia, but rather, following W.J.T. Mitchell, "to pursue criticism without comfortable iconoclasm." So a closer look at digital images reveals the classical assumptions of loss and repression as a dubious myth that not only isolates their “being” from the social world in which they operate (Mitchell 2007, 241), but leaves their actual entanglement with their milieus and political life systems in the dark. An ecology of images

looks on the one hand, at what digital images *do* and, on the other, at the (social) environments in and with which they operate. In the mode of the digital, we are confronted with a constantly changing image status. Central to a definition of the digital image is therefore Karl Sierrek's proposed understanding of digital images as fluid images: The digital image is "an image type in the process of becoming [...], which nowhere offers firmness and reliability. It swings and oscillates, it vibrates and modulates" (Sierrek 2007, 131)

Affective Environments

In his book "Post cinematic Affect" Steven Shaviro is interested in the ways how sounds and images express a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular. Today, new affective environments popping up: Sensors give things and machines the ability to "feel", to record and measure. As a result of their distribution, environments develop into sensory networks. Let us focus on the potentiality of digital images in these affective environments: The potentiality of digital images - in its erratic, changeable ontological status - has to be understood as the capacity to act: Digital images in the here and now, circulate, are highly mobile, constantly recalculate themselves and constantly change: their production and transformation, their mutual participation and individual appearance are only limited by hardware. The particular capacity of affect images is not only its contagious power, but also its ability to interrupt processes of action in order to bring visual processes of becoming into view. As we know: Gilles Deleuze exemplary determination of image types is not directed at the viewer of films. Deleuze is interested in the different qualities of moving images in their appearance and in their self-transformation. Using the affect image also in a post cinematic way, media scientist Michaela Ott diagnoses the central mode of the digital image: "In the affect image, one could say, that the image is about its image. It exhibits its image formation and its image change" (Ott 2010a, 472).

States of Aggregation of digital Images

The acting ability of the single picture is always there - see the **Kaputzenmann** of Abu Ghraib - but in an ecological perspective it is about formations of images. Their high acceleration and modulation power and their temporary figurations. An ecology of images then means looking at the flow of images and their manifold formations in their processuality: understanding the images both in their agency and as "extensions of man" in the sense of Marshall McLuhan. Therefore we have to give these formations a liveliness without naturalizing them. Also John Durham Peters speaks of "media as modes of being" in "The Marvoulos Clouds" - which are

filled with big data and images and not just with the echo of dolphins - to make McLuhan's relevance for the digital age clear. So the point is to measure the states of aggregation of the images in their energetic force; I would like to briefly mention here Lev Manovich's empirical instagram project a couple of years ago, this project is questioned in this direction when we look at specific image formations of specific time-spaces in big cities. From a critical perspective it is therefore a matter of scaling this hybrid formations in a post-Aby Warbug drive. An ecology of images asks how these image formations emerge, how they grow up and disappear. We can only comprehend and measure these streams of images in their states of aggregation: McLuhan spoke of hot and cold media; it would be better to speak of hot and cold image formations in the context of an ecology of images, which also deals with states of aggregation concerning the Political. Measuring their intensity rates would be in the tradition of Robert Smithson work Spiral Jetty: We remember the hallucinatory filming of a salt lake installation in Utah from a helicopter in the mode of analog color film.

Digital images as image assemblages: The question of the political

As we know: Big Data is the new uncanny of our time: Big data understands individuals as quantities to be divided up and allocated, which are to be calculated, modulated, valued and controlled – also in terms of images (Deleuze 1993, 258; Ott 2015, 16). At the same time, persons model themselves affectively and perceptively through their application of technology and may under certain circumstances integrate themselves euphorically into a media-ecological assemblage. So, not surprising, Félix Guattari's concept of ecosophy remains important for us. He thinks the interactions between ecosystems, mechanosphere and social as well as individual reference worlds as “transversal“ ones and outlines a new formation of a different human ethical praxis (Guattari 2016, 34). An ecology of images - we know about the scepticism of Guattari, then he speaks of degenerated media images - is concerned with analyzing the digital image worlds and their interdependencies with the personal-social sphere, above all their mutual conditions and relations under the term “dividuation“. We dedicate ourselves to man-image assemblages from which no single figure can be meaningfully detached, since the social context today results precisely from the interdependent, divided interferences of persons and images: it is a never complete, always fragile togetherness of human and image.

The digital image as part of comprehensive socially constituent assemblages is involved in political processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization. These intense digital image environments are characterized by something transitory. They are in the process of becoming, in a permanent transitional stage. This is precisely why experimental ethics should always be

linked to aesthetics, because both areas affect each other. Media Ecologies cannot operate like an ethics commission that wants to manage algorithms. It must focus on the cracks up; i.e. focus on the situational collapses of technological and algorithmic infrastructures that then reveal the share of things and images in the chain of action - to paraphrase Latour at this point. And it has to think the relationship of appropriation and exploitation, in order to find new weapons as Deleuze said. So if we are looking on the digital passage of refugees, we can see that the smartphone as an important digital portable device creates zones of surviving, not only of control. An ecology of images is therefore oriented on many levels: on surveillance and control and the loss of control: How the digital and of course digital images undermine these paths, we can see in the way the afro-american artist Legacy Russell created the so called Glitch Feminism as part of Xenofeminism. Glitch Feminism embraces the causality of "error" and turns the gloomy implication of "glitch" on its ear by acknowledging that an error in a social system disturbed by economic, racial, social, sexual and cultural stratification and the capitastic wrecking-ball of globalization—processes that continue to enact violence on all bodies—may not be "error" at all, but rather a much-needed erratum. The glitch posits: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a body." The digital is a vessel through which our glitch "becoming" realises itself and through which we can reprogram binary gender coding. Our "glitch" is a correction to the machine. Such a perspective implies a networking of social processes with the world of images, be it in the mode of control, of opening access, of connection.

Conclusion

Our proposal for an ecology of images does not aim to compulsively bind the world of images to a concept of ecology in order to create a new discipline. Our aim is to refresh a concept that thinks the big environmental switch: an ecology of images is to be understood as an umbrella term to capture or measure all image movements of different image types in planetary and extraplanetary space: Because the rhizomatic and dynamic processes of the digital image world model the social and affective being in the world. An ecology of images thus provides a tool - disguised as a image-active phenomenology - for the digital age - as a bigger picture. Images can hardly be shut down or tamed anymore; they are in an infinite process of acceleration and hybridization. In a continuation of Aby Warburg and Gilles Deleuze, an ecology of images proposed by us concentrate on the energetic, affective potential of images: So it is focused on the states of aggregation of growing and falling image formations - as if we could actually let the Marvelous Clouds become political.

