

in the Colombian newspaper *Tiempos del Mundo*, 15/03/2006. A reproduction of the printed page can be consulted in: www.elsiglodedurango.com (24/11/2007), and there are various references to this article in: www.coberturadigital.com (14/02/2007) or in *Enter 2.0* in <http://enter.com.co> (19/01/2007), all of which were consulted on: 08/03/2008.

[18] *Ibid.*, note 13, p. 15 and following.

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DIGITAL ETHICS

[GERARDO SAN MARTÍN]

Starting from the Aristotelian principles of ethics, the path that is to take us to the same place soon forks out in two different directions. The ethics of the emitter and the ethics of the message must consider the ethics of the medium. In this manner and from the very beginning we have laid out this text's starting point: the measure and value of digital technologies as necessary bearers of the ethics of images, as well as the considerations triggered by these mediums' current vulnerability.

It is crucial to reconsider ethical issues when dealing with images. The frailties of network access and in the reception of digital communication compel us to perform this task rigorously and transparently. On the other hand, we must recall that the utility and necessity of questioning the ethics of images in digital media will inscribe itself within the utility and necessity of tackling ethical concerns in any human activity.

All images reveal an action. A real action in itself, captured in a specific place, instantly and simultaneously incorporated at the very moment of its capture, at which point reality is frozen. The image appears as a temporal and spatial fragment. The real image is not the object that produces the vision. The image that we are dealing with is generated in, and by the mind [1].

Any image that is created to be visualised, beyond the light that makes it visible, reflects the ethics of an action, of a language expressed somewhere between full consciousness and full unconsciousness. The image dictates an interpretation of things from our own perception. The image blinks, talks and breathes. The image seems to be alive, evokes and makes us think. All thought is an ethical event. All thought anticipates an action, or the decision of inaction which

taken as such is just another form of action [2]. If all images lead us to a thought, all thought processes generate images. Ethics expand to encompass an entire mode of conduct, active or passive, of what is human. The photographic image represents, in its numerous forms of capture and technological forms of processing, the paradigm of the image of the world at present. It is disconcerting to think about the present, knowing that it has already passed away, that it has been; yet there it is. In photographic images, we can find traces of what has been and of what no longer is [3]. Photography is literally an emanation of the referent.

It would be useful to consider to what degree digital technology modifies the principles of photography. We are facing a decisive moment, in both time and space, in which the image ceases to be an image. In digital processes, the transformation of light values into numeric values allows for the random alteration of images, to the extent that the referent not only appears unfocused, but totally out of focus. That moment of intervention on the image is decisive to consider the extent to which an action can influence the ethics that the image carries before its alteration.

What we can raise from the onset is that digital technology is not responsible for modifying the specific image that we receive. An abstract image is being intervened. At that point, the image is not visible. The photographic image, the visual-digital information, becomes so vulnerable that if modified, will turn the image into a violated territory.

Then again, how many visions intervene in an image? How many images can be contained within the image? Is it not true, that all images are created to be seen? Similarly, is it not the case that, all visions generate a certain propensity towards thought?

Digitally modified images become abstractions of themselves. Curiously, photography and cinema are anti-abstract forms of representation. They are essentially,

representative modes. However, what do they represent? They represent beings, things and the relation between them. Photography and cinema have gradually mutated into representations of themselves, of the subject that intervenes and even of the spectator that observes and constructs the image. Having said this, going beyond this concept, we can glimpse at the essence of all images, both before and after the image. The perception of it and of what it projects, evoking the Platonic cave.

The represented image has become existence *per se*, intrinsic to itself. In the era of the latest communication technologies, we can be immediate witnesses of events that take place in very distant places, and even beyond our planet. We know, we believe, that some of these events are real. Others may merely seem to be real. Some may be virtual events -virtually false or virtually real. The available technological resources make it possible, as do our own perceptive capacities.

The numeric codes in which reality is fragmented travel through visible and invisible networks. What are these impulses, which transformed into codes, transform once again, into impulses? Are they not a system, similar to that which the brain develops, for the coding and decoding of sensory stimuli? Technology once again reveals the evidence of its plagiarism. If photographic cameras imitate the eye, computing systems imitate the brain.

In digital images, as well as the necessary bond between the camera and the eye, there is also a connection between the computer and the mind.

What are therefore, the existing relations between these processes and ethics?

Ethics are an invisible system of codes, endowed, to a certain extent, with an anthropological nature, which individuals develop in their conduct. These codes aim to provide our actions with meaning and a sense of purpose as regards the consequences that they have on ourselves,

on others and especially on what is other. Ethics become the interface of our conduct, between what we see, what we think and what we do.

To picture the image leads us to the pictured image. Let us therefore think about that digital image. If technology allows us to expand the depth of field between what is real and what is virtual, this intensifies the conflict with that image's ethics. We must therefore elaborate an ethic of the image and an ethic of vision.

We know that it is possible to alter the image and the perception of the image. They are alterable. But if we do not start from a fair approximation of what is real we may end up confusing reality itself because of the technical capacities that allow for its modification. Memory evokes Roberto Rossellini's precept, according to which realism is an ethical issue [4]. Reality is understood as a specific interpretation of the truth. Ethics are therefore, an adaptation to the existence of humankind in accordance to it. Reality affects all beings. The truth only affects humanity, as the only beings responsible for their conduct towards themselves, others or the world.

The ethics that correspond to the capacities of digital technologies and their uses in cyberspace are the ethics of truthfulness. The possibilities of these technologies open up three alternatives.

One, which maintains the direct reproduction of reality and the relation with the actual referent, as is typical in photography. This is the documentary image.

Another, which opens up the path for an intended transformation of what is real, based on certain goals and specific purposes. This is the commercial image.

Finally, one that incorporates technological elements into the free dominions of art's creative processes. This is the artistic image.

On the, still habitable remains, of a collective imaginary constructed daily throughout the history of humanity, lies another imaginary. It is a task for the present, that pushes us

inexorably and relentlessly towards the future, to bestow real meaning into this imaginary, truly human meaning that is. We must dehumanise our instruments, while humanising our senses. To be able to affirm, simultaneously, that the image of the world may capable of transforming the world. Within lies the enormous responsibility that this new imaginary has in the ethical order of our times. At present, we are permanently building tomorrow's imaginary [5].

The ethics of images that must relate to these new technological capacities, in a permanent state of acceleration, is that which Max Weber coined in his dual consideration of ethics. The ethics of conviction (principles) and the ethics of responsibilities (consequences) [6]. Both stances intertwine the ethics of the message with the ethics of the emitter and the receptor, the ethics of the image with the ethics of the vision. We must take this system of relations into account, as it constitutes the flow from certain positions to others.

Falsehood interpreted as truth implies a significant loss of knowledge. Falsehood may be consented, be it within the game of illusions that life has to offer, or in the acceptance of simulations in the artistic field, and their extreme reinterpretation of reality(ies). The simulations that the new visual technologies allow may have fair and justifiable applications. (Flight simulations, simulations of urban and architectural spaces, medical treatments, scientific research, etc.) The simulation places itself within the experimental field aiming at a previously evaluated application, or within the field of creative freedom. In both fields, one must be conscious and in control of the effects of these simulations. These simulations do not substitute what is real but rather help to reinterpret it. Has not art always done the same thing? Standing in front of the chasm of reality; while scrutinising the horizon of possibilities, in both imagination and knowledge. Visual language, like any other language, is in a constant struggle between

what is real and what is false. Moreover, it has developed the capacity to present falsehood as plausible. That is where simulations fit in.

The new resources generate all kinds of simulations of an anti-ethical nature. These simulations may appear ridiculous, absurd and clearly detrimental. Such is the case of all simulations that pretend to supplant reality, and in which individuals enter without really doing so, losing the notion of their own identity, dehumanising themselves. The use of simulations and virtual spaces in videogames, in some commercial adverts, in journalism, or in entertainment cinema, represent submission and surrender in the face of a clearly escapist ideology. An ideology that has spread, and which spreads into the new generations, not due to chance but rather because of very clear geopolitical interests. The domestication of individual wills and the subjection to behavioural directives and consumer habits as orchestrated by private entities that develop their strategies under the umbrella of distinctly globalising governmental interests.

Finally, new technologies allow us to present something virtual as if it were real. Illusions. This was to a certain extent already present in the magic of the first photographs and the first movies. Let us not forget, that as Barthes stated, it was not the birth of cinema, but rather that of photography that marked the anthropological change in modern civilisation [7].

The further transformation of the referent, allowing for the digital treatment of images, and the consequent loss of identity of the referent and of the image's authorship, converts this process into an instrument that must be employed under the careful scrutiny of the principles and responsibilities of any intervention in the transmission of information.

Regarding the veracity of virtual images, we must be very careful not to confuse that which Jacques Aumont refers to as the incorporation of the variable eye in post-

modernity, with the incorporation of variable ethics [8].

Let us continue asking questions, as this is a necessary condition of ethical deliberation. Does the fundamental order of photography, identified by Barthes as the referent, maintain itself in the digital processes for the intervention on images? We believe that it will maintain itself [9]. Notwithstanding, we must be immediately aware of this technology's capacity to modify, distort, eliminate parts or grouped elements of an image. Taking into account, furthermore, that this can be done with astounding ease and economy as compared to the capacities of an analogue laboratory.

In digital images, the "this has been" of photography, undoubtedly loses the aura of emulsion. However, we must ask ourselves whether this effect is due to a legacy of the aesthetic tradition, rather than a direct effect of technological transformations. The photographic image is still the result of capturing the luminous energy of an object, encapsulating it in an image that reinterprets these energy impulses into forms that are recognisable to the human eye. We are therefore back, to the comings-and-goings between reality, the eye and the mind. All of this implies that we must continue talking about photographic images, eluding the "digital" adjective.

Digital images, as such, do not exist; they are the numeric codes that circulate through information highways or are stored in memory cards. Images are always the result of a further transformation into analogue media. All images are analogue. This implies that we must deal with the ethics of the image in a manner that is "analogous" to how analogue images are treated. The object of analysis is the medium that enables the image.

We may still not be in a digital era, but rather in a pre-digital state.

However, treating the image as language is slightly different. To understand the ethics of

images, as we do the ethics of language. Passolini's theory, "cinema is the modern language of reality," takes on a greater and more updated meaning [10]. In the anthropological development of the imaginary, words and images set parallel stages in their evolution and interpretation. They go together as they do in the structure of thought itself. Learning the visual language must favour the connection of intuitive actions with discursive actions, as understood by Mendelbaum, configuring an ethical ensemble that allows for a more thorough evaluation of ethical judgements [11].

If we add something to reality, modifying it in a clear and legible manner for those who receive it, this reality will be permeated by that which transforms it into a new reality. In this process, the enabling of dialogue is worth highlighting. Both the emitter and receptor of the communication put some of themselves into the reinterpretation of that reality. A simple example would be to consider an image with an altered tone, where this is the only and very recognisable technical intervention. There is no falsification of any kind. The simulation is clearly noticeable. It is the condition of dialogue between the emitter and the receptor in the context of the image.

Considerations such as these lead us to believe that ethics are not an instrument. Ethics are more of an instruction manual. A user's guide that must bear witness of all conducts. In the case that we are referring to, we do so simultaneously with communicational behaviour.

For Habermas, the communicative act is the key factor in all ethical stances. Both the emitter and the receiver start from an ethical position. All communication provides an antecedent that reflects upon that which is in line with ethical principles. All communicative acts pursue agreement, the acceptance of an ethical stance. According to Habermas, all ethical positions are presumably universal. Therefore, the serious danger in digital ethics lies in concealment, the moment the image

ceases to be an image and can be freely transformed [12].

It is crucial that the digital-ethical code establishes the possibility of dialogue that is uncontaminated by the trickery that this clean, invisible and anonymous technique allows. Something, which is reminiscent of how Dziga Vertov in the film "The Man with a Camera" shows the processes of concealment of projection techniques in cinemas that prevent the spectator from being aware of what really happens on screen [13]. Therein lies the symbol behind the cinema seats that simultaneously flip down, due to hidden automatisms. The goal is rather to distance spectators from reality, to entertain them, and not, necessarily to depict reality with the full capacity that the cinematographic medium offered at the time. This film serves as a symbol of that moment, which is worth revisiting nowadays.

It is useful to think that digital technology in its pure mathematical abstraction of the world, in its immaterial nature that goes beyond the physical principles that sustain it, raises a new situation, and thereby a new alternative. In the dehumanisation of the communicative processes, a greater humanisation of the principles that govern such messages is permissible and necessary. Undoubtedly, this solution is rarely appreciated. The technification of existence is confronted with a greater humanisation of the contents that operate these technological systems. The medium is increasingly technified, while that which it transmits continues to generate emotions, curiosity, sensitivity and thought... The ethics of the medium are therefore the ethics of the discourse taken to the platform of relations between individuals. It is a discursive ethic, directly descended from Kantian categories, but finally distant from the dogmatism of morals and closer to the ethics of co-responsibility as expressed by Karl-Otto Apel [14].

Apel himself expresses this clearly and directly, "what it is all about, for the first time in the history of humanity, is to assume

solidary responsibility for the consequences and sub-consequences at a global scale of the collective activities of humanity, such as – for example, the industrial application of science and technology- and to organise this responsibility as collective praxis [15].

[14] Apel, Karl-Otto, *Teoría de la verdad y ética del discurso*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1991, p. 149.

[15] Apel, Karl Otto, *Ibid*, p. 148.



NOTES

[1] On the responsibility of action, as tackled by Husserl, Heidegger further develops the concept, understanding it as an action of authenticity. As expressed by Emanuel Lévinas in his book *Ética e Infinito*, Ed. Visor, p. 89.

[2] Inaction as a form of action and its repercussions in the ethical judgement of all kinds of behaviour are the main themes of Stefan Zweig's text, *"The Eyes of my Brother, Forever"*, in which the freezing of an image brings about an ethical struggle with the protagonist's own identity.

[3] Barthes, Roland, *La Cámara lúcida*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, p. 126.

[4] Rossellini, Roberto, *El cine revelado*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 2001, p. 39.

[5] It is inevitable, although there is no direct quote, to recall Martin Heidegger's intuitive capacity, although writing some time ago he referred to the transition from one era to another. The transition from the era of the world's image to the era of the world as image.

[6] Habermas, Jürgen, *Escritos sobre moralidad y etnicidad*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1999, p. 119.

[7] Barthes, Roland, *Ibid*, p. 52.

[8] Aumont, Jacques, *El ojo interminable*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1997, p. 50.

[9] Barthes, Roland, *Ibid*, p. 74.

[10] Passolini, Pier Paolo, *Empirismo erético*, Milan, Garzanti, 1972, p. 43.

[11] Mendelbaum, M., *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience*, The Free Press, New York, 1955, p. 31.

[12] Habermas, Jürgen, *Ibid*, p. 17.

[13] The visual concepts raised in this film by Dziga Vertov are still very relevant at present and very useful for the handling of the new technological media.