

The three ages of the image

Miguel A. Hernández Navarro

Translation: Paloma Checa Gismero

José Luis Brea

Las tres eras de la imagen. Imagen-materia, film, e-image

Madrid, Akal, 2010, 142 páginas.

The three eras of image is the intellectual will of José Luis Brea, one of the most singular, subtle and lucid voices of contemporary thinking. Written in a fair and balanced style, this text accounts for the particular attention to language –not just to the ‘what’, but specifically to the ‘how’ -that distinguished Brea’s critical project. This concern brings him closer to literature, and lets us state that he was, above all, a ‘writer’, since writing was not, for him, just a transparent mean for sharing knowledge, but a place where what wants to be said can be in-corporated. Brea is, in this sense, an “inhabitant of language” who, to use Roland Barthes’ expression, radically transforms the *reason of things* into *how to write them*”.

Through his beautiful but always accurate and fair language, this book abridges some of the central concerns of Brea’s corpus, and articulates them in a kind of cultural historical theory of the image and the ways of seeing, consequently conforming a theory of culture. As for Brea, every image is reduced to the way it connects with the whole cultural system that lies behind; a scopic regime or, even, an archive of visuality. In this book, as in his whole work, Brea does not only go through the idea that images and vision are socially construed and determined, but he holds that they are in themselves, the social, where knowledge lies -the power and desire archive Foucault spoke of. From this idea, Brea identifies three main visual archives, in-corporated in three different ways of existence for the image.

The first one relates to the image as matter, associated to artifacts and traditional arts, the image as an object, the image as a painting or a sculpture. For him, image as matter embodies the promise of permanence, of a permanently reachable memory (ROM memory). It is all about unique and singular images that make us believe in radical individuation. Above all, they rely on the power of the eye. Image as truth that recreates a static and durable world –for Brea, this image clearly comes from the Christian project and the belief on the incarnation of the Word.

Image as film is the second era, governed by the reproducible image, transient and impermanent, a dynamic one (image-movement) that does not retrieve what it leaves behind. The promise held by image as film is that of the Illustration project, the independence of the modern subject. This image, distinguished by an economy of distribution and retinal memory (REM memory), is built around an optical unconscious scopic regime, based in the absence of trust in what we see; because in what we see lies a knowledge ungraspable by our eyes. Inside this scopic regime, the images we call art (avant-garde art) will be committed to show that blind spot and to demonstrate their own inability to open themselves to a broad public.

Finally, the third regime Brea identifies is that of the electronic image, an image that bares no original. Ghost images, of unlimited productibility, that float ubiquitously through a thousand screens and are governed by a process memory system

(RAM). It is a time image that promises general intellection, a community of experience-based users placed far from property and distribution regimes. In a world governed by instant images, art can no longer hold a privileged position (not, at least, as singular images still based in property economics that belong to the past).

So all disciplines that engage in this study (the History of Art), ought to be broadened or replaced by others capable of accounting for that place shared by the rest of images: critical studies or visual culture studies.

These three visual governments, as Brea thoroughly explores, appear in a diachronic way, but can also happen in synchronic and interlaced ways. They do not disappear completely, but they mix and interfere. Brea builds a cartography of the archives of visibility, that is to say, of the conditions of possibility of images and vision (plus everything it implies). An important fraction of the book (practically its half) is aimed to explore the third era of image, the one that corresponds to a present where all is submitted to change. Brea does not relate in this work –as he neither does in the previous ones, such as *La era postmedia [The Postmedia Era]* or *Cultura_RAM [RAM Culture]*– to an upcoming utopia, but to a complete series of current potential possibilities. In addition, he also refers to the dangers and control places –the management of images– of this world to come, despite the fact that it is already here. I would like to state that Brea's work -and this book stands out exemplarily- is an enduring warning about the possible already being possible; a possible whose activation would depend on our realizing this fact. Undoubtedly, this warning on the promises and dangers they imply is rooted in Walter Benjamin's critical project developed in the first third of the XXth Century. To map a world, to tell its perils, but to point out its opportunities and, above all, to practise what is preached. Because Brea, as did Benjamin, put his words into practice at his work and its ways of existence -through a net based work flow, through the rupture of knowledge property economics or the questioning of the status quo– a whole world that was already here, but that many yet considered utopic.