

The Ethics of Images

*Truth, Visual Communication and
Information Disorder*

by

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Introduction

“Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves,
and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it.
I am the Lord your God.”
(Leviticus 26:1).

Leviticus 26:1 is part of the instructions given by God to the people of Israel, through Moses, to guide them in their spiritual and social life. The verse serving as the epigraph to this Introduction concerns the prohibition of idols, that is, images that are objects of worship and that, in this case, represent divinity. Yet, the etymology of the term *idol* derives from the Latin *idolum* and the Greek *eidolon*, meaning the reproduction of someone’s characteristic features, “image, phantom, form, apparition”, but also simulacrum, portrait, image of a God, idol, reflected image, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

The verse establishes a peremptory prohibition against the creation of idols and images, regardless of the materials or types of objects that may be worshipped as a God. The reason for this prohibition lies in the fact that such adulatory and idolatrous practices were common among ancient peoples, just as they continue to be today, albeit now in a synoptic mode, through a more ordinary and socially tolerated form of worship: a contemporary iconolatriy currently in vogue, exemplified by the iconophilic practice of producing and disseminating *Instagrammable*¹ images in new media, or by the act of following public personalities on social networks and contemplating the private and banal images they publish from their everyday lives. This notorious verse from Leviticus reveals that God intended the people

of Israel to distinguish themselves from idolatrous peoples, reserving pure and exclusive worship to the one true God, expressed through the Greek term *latreía*.²

The meaning of this verse is simple and straightforward, yet it conveys several important messages, including the condemnation of prostration: the adulation of images constitutes an attitude and posture of servile flattery before an accessory representation, rather than before what is essential, namely reality itself. Furthermore, it expresses a critique of the worship of the image instead of the worship of the authentic and *original*. The verse explicitly prohibits bowing before idols, images that are merely representative, visual signs. This concern, already present in the biblical text, re-emerges in Jean Baudrillard's (1999) critique of consumer society, in which the proliferation of objects and signs produces a fantastical and alienating evidence of abundance, replacing reality with simulacra. Thus, two texts separated by time converge in denouncing a form of alienation generated through symbolic mediation, whether religious or consumerist. We are no longer primarily surrounded by our fellow human beings, but increasingly by objects, culminating in the permanent spectacle of the celebration of the object through the hundreds of messages daily disseminated by the media. In *Simulacra and simulation*, Baudrillard (1994a, p. 7) synthesizes the successive phases of the image, the stages through which the image as a mere representation subverts reality: (a) it is the reflection of a profound reality; (b) it masks and denatures a profound reality; (c) it masks the absence of a profound reality; and (d) it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

According to Baudrillard, with excess and banality, the image has become our form of exorcism. "Photography is our exorcism. Primitive society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors, and we

have our images.” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 153). If primitive societies had their masks and bourgeois societies their mirrors, today we have our images, which fascinate us and are worshipped at the expense of reality itself, a reality that has effectively ceased to exist. We now inhabit the image of reality rather than reality itself; experience has become the experience of the un-lived.

To prostrate oneself is an act of worship and submission. God did not wish His people to transfer such honour and reverence to any other object or entity, such as an image, which is merely a representation. Beyond affirming the identity of God, as expressed in the concluding declaration, the verse reinforces God’s authority and exclusivity as the only being worthy of worship; it serves as a warning to contemplate what is authentic and true.

Indeed, this alienating plethora of images has not only persisted but has intensified, thereby constituting the central problematic of this book. The focus lies on the ethics of the image, or visual ethics, and on practices of visual persuasion and interpretation, at a time when disinformation has assumed disproportionate dimensions of power and dominance because of technological advancement.

The ethics of the image, within the context of contemporary media, refers to the moral principles that guide the creation, editing, and dissemination of images, particularly regarding truthfulness. In the context of the verse from Leviticus, the prohibition against creating and worshipping idols may be understood as an act aimed at preserving the truth and authenticity of faith, protecting against the manipulation and falsification of representations of the divine.

This ethical concern with the integrity and authenticity of representation extends beyond religious imagery to the broader contemporary

information environment. In an era in which images are central to the production and circulation of meaning, the manipulation, decontextualization, and misuse of visual content contribute to what is increasingly described as information disorder: a broad condition of the information environment characterized by the production, circulation, and consumption of false, misleading, manipulated, incomplete, decontextualized, or otherwise problematic information, whether disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and capable of distorting the interpretation of reality.³

In the age of information disorder, and particularly disinformation,⁴ the ethics of the image in media, understood as the set of principles regulating the capture, editing, circulation, and visual contextualization of content, becomes crucial, given that images can be easily manipulated to deceive and influence the public. This biblical passage evokes the necessity of ethical conduct in the use of images, avoiding both idolatry and the distortion of reality. Ethical conduct, or ethicality, may be understood as custom, habitual behaviour, or expected conduct within a social group in relation to others (Foucault, 1989a). Custom carries with it duties and prohibitions, idols and taboos, all of which vary throughout history, from one era to another and from one place to another.

As for visual rhetoric, or the rhetoric of the image, it may be understood as the persuasive power of images and, consequently, as their capacity to influence perception, judgment, emotion, and behaviour. From an ethical perspective, this persuasive capacity is particularly significant because the power to persuade also entails the possibility of manipulation, distortion, and undue influence. In the verse, the prohibition of images is connected to the fear that such representations may divert attention and devotion away from the true God toward distracting and alienating objects of representation, such

as images themselves. Although this theological concern belongs to a specific religious and historical context, it points to a broader ethical problem concerning the power of representations to displace, obscure, or distort what they purport to represent. Likewise, in the contemporary age of information disorder, images are employed rhetorically to manipulate emotions, opinions, and behaviour, sometimes presenting constructed or misleading representations as if they were transparent accounts of reality. To understand the rhetorical power of images is therefore not merely to recognise their persuasive mechanisms, but also to identify the ethical responsibilities associated with their use. Cultivating a critical gaze becomes a condition for resisting visual deception and, at the same time, for demanding greater responsibility from those who produce, select, frame, modify, publish, and circulate images.

As the capacity to interpret the meanings conveyed by the information presented through images, visual literacy, or image literacy, is already foreshadowed in the warning contained in Leviticus 26:1. This verse may be understood, by analogy and with the necessary historical and theological reservations, as an early lesson in visual discernment: it encourages resistance to the uncritical elevation of representations and, more broadly, invites reflection on the relationship between representation and what is represented. From the perspective of the ethics of images, such discernment is essential because images are never entirely neutral vehicles of information. Their meanings depend upon processes of selection, framing, contextualisation, coding, and interpretation, while their effects may vary according to the purposes for which they are produced and circulated. In the age of information disorder, visual literacy has consequently become essential for navigating a digital environment in which images in new media are frequently used to disseminate false information, misleading narratives, decontextualised representations, and manipulated or

synthetic content. Learning to analyse images critically is therefore not only a cognitive competence but also an ethical practice: it contributes to protecting individuals and communities against deception, prejudice, manipulation, and the normalisation of false visual narratives. In this sense, visual literacy may be regarded as a form of ethical resistance to the contemporary forms of visual persuasion that seek to substitute appearance for evidence and emotional immediacy for critical judgment.

Therefore, although the biblical prohibition against idols and images emerges from a theological and cultural context profoundly distinct from our own, it is possible, with due caution, to establish a symbolic parallel with the contemporary need for the ethical use of images, the critical understanding of their rhetoric, and the demand for visual literacy. The parallel becomes particularly relevant when the ethical problem is understood not as a prohibition of images as such, but as a concern with the power that representations acquire when they are treated as unquestionable substitutes for what they represent. With the necessary distinctions in mind, while the biblical text concerns fidelity to the divine and the rejection of idolatrous mediations, the contemporary media context places at stake the integrity of information, the truthfulness of facts, the dignity of those represented, the accountability of those who produce and disseminate images, and resistance to manipulation. The ethical question is therefore not simply whether an image is persuasive, but whether its persuasive power is exercised responsibly, whether it respects the truth and dignity of its subjects, whether its context is preserved, and whether its circulation produces unjustified or foreseeable harm.

This parallel is not intended to collapse the religious and communicational domains into one another, nor to suggest a direct historical or conceptual continuity between biblical iconoclasm and contemporary

visual ethics. Rather, it emphasizes that the problems raised by images⁵ are not new; they are ancestral and recur whenever representations acquire the power to mediate human relationships with reality, with others, and with systems of meaning. What changes historically are the technologies, communicative environments, social functions, and forms of power through which images operate. The ethical response must therefore be adapted to each context. In the contemporary media environment, this response requires not only critical interpretation and visual literacy, but also responsibility in image production and circulation, respect for truth and human dignity, awareness of context, and resistance to the manipulation of visual representation. The ethical challenge of images thus lies simultaneously in how they are made, how they signify, how they persuade, how they are circulated, and how they affect those who produce, encounter, and are represented by them.

The ethics of images: Truth, visual communication and information disorder explores the image as a sign within a dynamic process of semiosis that manifests itself as active and intrinsically connected to time, perception, and the viewer, rather than as a merely static object of representation. The image is never complete or finished; it is an event that emerges and is constructed in interaction with the one who sees it. It is a field of forces acting upon the observer, with whom it establishes a dialogical relation. The image occurs not only at the visual level, but also at the level of emotional experience (i.e., the *pathos*); it unfolds across multiple domains⁶ according to W. J. T. Mitchell's (1986) categorization of images, particularly in *Iconology: Image, text, ideology* where he reflects upon the concept of the image and proposes an iconological approach based on the comparison of different kinds of images.

For Mitchell, there is no single definition of the term *image*, since the concept is employed across different fields of knowledge, including art, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy, with distinct meanings. His objective is to examine, much like Ludwig Wittgenstein, the *language games*⁷ we engage in when using the notion of image (Mitchell, 1986), arguing that there exists a vast variety of things that receive the designation of *image*, and that it is therefore more productive to conceive of images as a distant family that has migrated across time and space, undergoing profound mutations in the process. In this sense, the image must be understood temporally: it may change in meaning or impact precisely because it is not fixed but processual. Rather than being a finished product, the image forms part of a continuum of (re)creation, depending fundamentally on how it is perceived (e.g., context, perspective, interpretation). The image possesses a peculiar vitality and constitutes an event in the world. According to André Lalande (1997, p. 310), in his *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, in the ancient Latin sense of *eventus*, this word signifies “*résultat, effet, issue; (...) ce qui advient à une date et en un lieu déterminés, lorsque ce fait présente une certaine unité, et se distingue du cours uniforme des phénomènes de même nature.*”⁸

In turn, the term *happening* is an English noun derived from the verb *to happen*. As defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989), *happening* originally denotes “the action or fact of taking place; occurrence; event.” Within the context of twentieth-century artistic experimentation, however, the term acquired a more specialized meaning, referring to a performative event structured around improvisation, unpredictability, and the active involvement of the audience, thereby challenging conventional boundaries between art and everyday life.⁹

Although these two terms may often function as synonyms, subtle distinctions remain. *Happening* tends to designate important, historical, unexpected, or significant occurrences, carrying a more spontaneous and unpredictable character (e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall). By contrast, *event* is generally used in a more formal and organisational sense, referring to something planned or deliberately arranged (e.g., ceremonies). Thus, while all events may be considered happenings, not all happenings qualify as events.

If an image is understood as an event, we perceive it not merely as a static visual object, but as something that occurs, affects, and transforms the viewer. Within the viewer's visual experience, the image as a happening can be understood in a phenomenological sense, insofar as it happens, that is, it acquires meaning through perception. When we observe an image, we are not simply seeing it; rather, we are affected by it in some way. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests in *Phenomenology of perception*, perception is always an active encounter between the subject and the world. In this sense, the image generates a perceptual event. According to Merleau-Ponty (2005, p. 500), "the world is inseparable from the subject" and the subject is nothing but a project of the world and inseparable from the world which the subject itself projects. "The subject is a being-in-the-world and the world remains 'subjective' since its texture and articulations are traced out by the subject's movement of transcendence." (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, pp. 499-500).

Accordingly, war photography functions as an emotional and cognitive event, capable of eliciting reflection, memory, and critical judgement. Beyond representing historical moments and through their circulation, repetition, and public appropriation, certain photographs acquire the status of socially significant symbols, shaping the ways in which events are remembered and interpreted.

Jeff Widener's *Tank man* (1989), for example, does not merely document a historical episode; it transforms an anonymous individual into a universal symbol of moral courage and civil resistance. The photograph's global circulation through the press displaced its meaning from the singular event it recorded to the broader values it came to embody. Its rhetorical force resides not only in what it depicts, a man confronting military power, but also in the interpretative and emotional responses it continues to generate across different historical and cultural contexts. As such, the image performs as a visual event whose significance extends beyond documentation, actively participating in the construction of collective memory and political imagination.

Popularized on newspaper front pages around the world, depicting a lone man standing in front of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989, this photograph is more than a press image or a documentary record, although these two closely related yet distinct genres are often conflated (Susperregui, 2024). It became a visual event symbolising resistance and revolution. The difference between an isolated photograph and one that is published and disseminated through newspapers lies in its reach, impact, and construction of public meaning. A photograph *per se* is merely an image; once published and circulated globally, it becomes an event. Visibility, which is simply the quality of being seen and recognized, amplifies its visual rhetorical power of persuasion, transforming it from an individual record into a collective symbol capable of shaping narratives, raising public awareness, and altering social and political perceptions. This explains why the same image may acquire greater historical and cultural significance when embedded within a context of visibility¹⁰ through mass communication. From a pragmatic perspective, the image is an event, a performance: it performs actions and generates semiosis. An image does not merely depict; it acts upon the world and triggers

responses, as illustrated by images of natural disasters or humanitarian crises disseminated by the media, which have at times mobilized the international community to provide humanitarian assistance.

The image over time is a continuous event, in the sense that each time it is viewed, it *happens* anew in a different way. In this regard, Gilles Deleuze develops this dimension through his concept of the movement-image in cinema, arguing that the image is a flow, a process of constant variation that can never be exhausted by a single interpretation. War photographs may also acquire a movement-image-like quality, not because they are intrinsically mobile, but because they continue to generate new meanings across successive historical, political, social, and cultural contexts.

In particular, the ethics of images must also address the hyperreality of images, understood as a condition in which digitally produced, manipulated, and algorithmically mediated representations increasingly blur the distinction between reality and simulation. In such contexts, ethical concerns extend beyond the content of images to encompass the ways in which they are created, modified, circulated, and consumed through digital technologies. In the digital era or, according to some perspectives, post-digital era, the production, dissemination, and reception of images have themselves become technological events occurring within networked environments while generating tangible consequences in the physical world. Viral images, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence generated visual content can influence elections, shape public opinion, reinforce stereotypes, fuel social movements, and transform cultural narratives. Consequently, conceiving the image as a happening provides a framework for understanding its transformative individual and social power, highlighting its capacity not only to represent reality but also

to produce it by shaping perceptions, influencing behaviour, and constructing narratives.

Regarding the relationship between image ethics and image rhetoric, we draw on the Aristotelian philosophical tradition. As Italo Calvino argues in *Why read the classics?*, Aristotle's works remain enduringly relevant because "a classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers" (Calvino, 1999, p. 5). This insight is particularly applicable to Aristotle, whose *Art of rhetoric* (Aristotle, ca. 350 BC/2021) and *The Nicomachean ethics* (Aristotle, ca. 350 BC/2009) reveal the intrinsic relationship between ethics and rhetoric by examining these two complementary and interdependent domains.

In *The Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle associates ethics with the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, attained through the cultivation and practice of virtue (Canto-Sperber, 2004). Virtues are stable dispositions that guide actions in accordance with reason. Ethics is therefore concerned with the formation of character and the deliberate choice of virtuous actions. According to Giorgio Agamben (1999b), *eudaimonia* constitutes the *doctrine of happiness*, reflecting the original meaning of the term *ethics* as it emerged in the Greek philosophical schools. As he explains, "for the Greeks, the link between the demonic (*daimonion*) and happiness was evident in the very term with which they designated happiness, *eudaimonia*" (Agamben, 1999b, p. 138).

Aristotle defines rhetoric as the capacity to identify, in any given situation, the available means of persuasion. He distinguishes three principal modes of persuasion: *ethos* (the speaker's character), *pathos* (the audience's emotions), and *logos* (reason or logical argument). The relationship between Aristotle's works on ethics and rhetoric is particularly evident in his treatment of *ethos* and moral virtue. *Ethos* refers to the credibility and moral character of the speaker. For

Aristotle, persuasion is most effective when the speaker is perceived as virtuous and trustworthy (Finnegan, 2015). In *Art of rhetoric*, Aristotle (ca. 350 BC/2021, 1356a) states that modes of persuasion arise “through one’s character, whenever the speech is stated in such a way as to render the speaker deserving of credence”, and, therefore, “for those who are decent we give credence to a greater degree and more quickly concerning everything in general, but in those matters that are imprecise and leave room for doubt, we give credence to them even completely. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is delivered in such a way as to make us think him credible; we believe good men more fully and more readily than others. The speaker’s moral character is therefore essential because it directly shapes the audience’s willingness to accept the arguments presented. Moral virtue occupies a central place in Aristotelian ethics, being intrinsically linked to the cultivation of a good and just character. Accordingly, an ethical speaker must possess and demonstrate virtues such as honesty, justice, and integrity.

The Aristotelian relationship between ethics and rhetoric also lies in their shared objective of achieving human flourishing. Ethics seeks to understand and promote the virtuous life that leads to *eudaimonia*, whereas rhetoric, when exercised ethically, aims to persuade audiences towards what is good and just, thereby contributing to social harmony and the common good.

The relationship between ethics and rhetoric can also be demonstrated through the notion of moral responsibility. Aristotle acknowledges that rhetoric may be employed either ethically or unethically. Plato likewise distinguishes between *bad rhetoric* and *good rhetoric*: rhetoric as the art of persuasion in the service of evil, as portrayed in the *Gorgias*, or in the service of the good, as presented in the *Phaedrus*, where it either deceives and distances people from the truth (Plato, ca.

370 BCE/1987) or functions as a force capable of influencing the mind through words (Plato, ca. 370 BCE/1995a). Aristotle, however, places particular emphasis on the moral responsibility of the speaker to employ rhetoric in the service of truth and justice rather than deception or manipulation. This moral conception of rhetoric is consistent with the ethical principles governing virtuous action, particularly in relation to the uses and social effects of new media in the context of disinformation. Consequently, the effectiveness of rhetoric depends, at least in part, on *ethos* and on the virtuous use of persuasive language. When aligned with ethics, rhetoric becomes a powerful instrument for promoting truth as a common good, highlighting the interdependence of these two disciplines.

It should be emphasized that the title of this book refers specifically to the ethics of the image and the rhetoric of the image, rather than to ethics and rhetoric as autonomous and comprehensive disciplines. It also refers to the age of disinformation and to visual literacy, understood as a complementary and interdependent field of inquiry. The ethics of the image concerns the moral responsibility involved in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of images. It encompasses issues such as image manipulation, the fair and accurate representation of individuals and events, and the effects that images may have on the public's perception, emotions, and actions. In *Seeing is believing: An introduction to visual communication*, Arthur Asa Berger (2012) argues that the power to create images influences viewers' emotions and beliefs and carries significant social and cultural implications. Accordingly, image-makers bear a responsibility towards those who will perceive what they create and place their trust in what they see.

In this context, the rhetoric of the image refers to the techniques and strategies employed to persuade through images. It concerns the ways

in which visual elements, such as colour, composition, symbolism, and other formal features, are used to construct meaning and evoke specific responses from audiences. It examines the persuasive effectiveness of images in contexts such as propaganda, advertising, politics, and other domains in which persuasion plays a central role.

Visual literacy, by contrast, refers to the ability to interpret, critically evaluate, and create images in an informed and reflective manner. It encompasses the skills required to decode the meanings and intentions embedded in images, understand the contexts in which they were produced, recognize rhetorical techniques, and critically assess the impact of visual representations.

The relationship between these domains is both evident and fundamental to communication and information conveyed through images. The ethics of the image is closely linked to visual literacy, since the critical understanding of images is essential for assessing their ethical implications. At the same time, the rhetoric of the image provides an essential framework for visual literacy by enabling a deeper understanding of how images persuade and of the rhetorical techniques through which their persuasive effects are achieved.

The ethics of the image and visual literacy both promote responsibility in the production and consumption of images. The rhetoric of the image, however, may be employed either ethically or unethically, depending on how persuasive techniques are applied and for what purposes. On the one hand, visual literacy enables informed ethical judgements about media images; on the other, an understanding of visual rhetoric equips individuals to recognize manipulation and persuasive practices with ethical implications. Consequently, the ethics of the image, the rhetoric of the image, and visual literacy are complementary perspectives for understanding the social pheno-

menon of visual disinformation in contemporary society. Together, they illuminate the relationship between strategies of persuasion (*ethos*), the appropriateness or inadequacy of messages and the means or media through which they are conveyed (*logos*), and their effects on perception, interpretation, and emotional response (*pathos*), which collectively underpin the uses and practices of images.

The gradual predominance of images and visual display devices (screens) in contemporary society has contributed to the emergence of a global, digital, and visually oriented public sphere in which iconophilia and even iconolatry are increasingly cultivated. This shift towards the visual, or towards the image as a sign, is conceptualized by Yuri Lotman (2005) as the semiosphere; by Régis Debray (2001) as the videosphere; and by other scholars as a civilization of the image (Fulchignoni, 1972; Calvino, 1988), a civilization already accustomed to thinking through images (Eco, 1998), a civilization of the image that simultaneously constitutes a civilization of the cliché (Deleuze, 1985), a kingdom of images or *règne des images* (Mondzain, 2002, p. 7), an empire of images (Huyghe, 1959), or an *empire of signs*, as Roland Barthes (1984) characterizes Japanese culture in *L'empire des signes*.

The reference to the *information disorder* in the book's subtitle underscores the contemporary relevance of the issue and suggests that disinformation is an ongoing and defining phenomenon of the present age. It also indicates that the concepts of the *rhetoric of the image* and *visual literacy* encompass both the theoretical and the practical dimensions explored throughout this book.

The production and dissemination of disinformation through images have significant ethical implications insofar as they undermine the principle of truthfulness in visual representation. Accordingly, the ethics and practices of the image within the information disorder

society are most appropriately examined within the field of communication from an interdisciplinary perspective, as Denis McQuail (1983) points out in *Mass communication theory*. Communication is inherently interdisciplinary; it is not a discipline *per se*.

As a relatively recent epistemological field, communication sciences, communication studies or media studies have evolved alongside the latest developments in information and communication technologies, particularly internet and multimedia technologies, often referred to as the “*nouveaux médias*” (new media), insofar as these technologies have generated new uses and practices while giving rise to new theoretical and methodological approaches (Meunier & Peraya, 2004).

Communication, as a field of scientific and academic inquiry, constitutes a distinctive object of study, differing from more traditional disciplines. It emerged as a problematic field and acquired the status of a scientific object of knowledge within the framework of modern experience (A. Rodrigues, 2011). However, it was only throughout the twentieth century that communication became established as an object of study characterized by the “paradoxical features” of a “transversal science” (A. Rodrigues, 2011, p. 163). For the disciplines that investigate communication, it represents an abstract, comprehensive, and multifaceted object of inquiry. Consequently, the concept of communication encompasses a wide range of meanings (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1997). It is unlikely that a distinct and self-sufficient “science of communication” will ever emerge, given its origins in numerous disciplines and the breadth of the communicative phenomenon.

Within the context of examining the ethics of the image in the contemporary era, disinformation refers to the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information intended to deceive.

Although the terms *disinformation* and *fake news* are distinct, they are closely related. Disinformation is a multifaceted process encompassing four interrelated dimensions: (a) malicious actors who create and disseminate manipulative content; (b) platforms that enable the distribution and amplification of such content; (c) audiences that confer meaning and impact through their willingness to engage with it; and (d) countermeasures designed to detect, mitigate, and limit its effects (Culloty & Suiter, 2021).

Within this broader process of disinformation, *fake news* refers specifically to the abusive use of information in the news media, whether false, incomplete, or presented out of context. The scope of these two concepts largely overlaps, encompassing issues such as manipulation, ideology, propaganda, hyperreality, and the manufacture of public opinion. The frequent conflation of these terms stems from the multiple forms and genres through which disinformation manifests itself. It may appear as a news story, a meme, or a social media post, and its content may range from complete fabrication to distortion or decontextualization (Culloty & Suiter, 2021).

In the information society, images play a significant role in the dissemination of distorted narratives, thereby highlighting the ethical dimension of the image, which examines the issues associated with its creation, manipulation, and use, as well as its impact on the public perception of events. Subjective biases or prejudicial framing in news reporting, for example, raise ethical concerns regarding image manipulation, staging, and deception, all of which are central to debates on objectivity and media ethics (Good & Lowe, 2020; Biswal & Kulkarni, 2024).

As its title suggests, this book examines the interrelationship between major and interconnected domains of image studies: mainly the ethics of images, but also the rhetoric of images, visual literacy, ethics applied to press photography, and visual information disorder. The book is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of media studies and visual culture studies, with particular emphasis on the persuasive (visual rhetoric) and interpretative (visual literacy) dimensions of images in contemporary society. However, these dimensions are approached from a dialectical perspective that integrates visual ethics, visual rhetoric, and visual literacy.

The principal object of inquiry is the image itself, examined through the related themes of the ethical and persuasive dimensions of image-making in the media, the legibility of images within the modern iconosphere, and the alienation associated with the society of the spectacle and the simulacrum. Accordingly, the image is analysed through a tripartite framework comprising the ethics of the image, the rhetoric of the image, and visual literacy.

Endnotes

¹ The term *Instagrammable* refers to something visually appealing or aesthetically striking enough to be photographed and shared on social media, especially on Instagram, to attract attention, engagement, or social validation.

² From the Greek *latreía*, “worship”, the worship due to God.

³ Although this volume adopts *information disorder* as a broader umbrella concept encompassing false, misleading, manipulated, incomplete, decontextualized, or otherwise problematic information, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define the term, which is an umbrella concept, more narrowly as an overarching framework comprising three distinct categories: *misinformation* (false information shared without intent to cause harm), *disinformation* (false information deliberately created or disseminated to deceive or cause harm), and *malinformation* (genuine information shared to inflict harm, often by removing it from its original context or disclosing private information). The broader definition adopted here extends beyond this tripartite classification to include additional forms of informational

distortion, particularly omission, incompleteness, decontextualization, and visual manipulation that may not fit neatly within the original taxonomy but nonetheless compromise the truthful interpretation of reality.

⁴ The term *(dis)information* is deliberately written in parentheses to emphasize that while we inhabit the age of information, we simultaneously inhabit the age of disinformation, thus underscoring this duality, since information today can no longer be understood as a pure concept but is often permeated by distortion, manipulation, excess data, and various subterfuges that make distinguishing between truth and falsehood increasingly difficult.

⁵ Due to the power of images to display, deceive, mediate, or divert.

⁶ For example, graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal domains.

⁷ Language-game refers to Wittgenstein's view that the meaning of words depends on their use within rule-governed social practices ("forms of life"), rather than on any intrinsic or fixed correspondence with reality (see Wittgenstein, 1996, §§ 5, 7).

⁸ Author's trans.: "result, effect, outcome; (...) that which occurs at a specific date and place, when this fact exhibits a certain unity, and is distinct from the uniform course of phenomena of the same nature".

⁹ The term "happening" derives from the verb "to happen", which ultimately traces back to the notion of occurrence or contingency, historically associated with the Latin *contingere*, meaning "to touch," "to reach," or "to occur." *Contingere* is formed by *con-* ("together") and *tangere* ("to touch"), conveying the idea of something that takes place or comes into contact within a given context. This concept does not strictly correspond to the notion of "event", despite their semantic proximity. The term "event" derives from the Latin *eventus*, from the verb *evenire*, meaning "to come out," "to emerge," or "to happen." *Evenire* is formed by *e-* ("out, outward") and *venire* ("to come"), suggesting something that arises, occurs, or manifests itself.

Throughout this book, I distinguish between event and happening. While event refers to an occurrence in the empirical world, happening denotes the phenomenological and hermeneutic process through which an event is disclosed, mediated, and acquires meaning. Accordingly, the news image is understood not merely as the representation of an event but as a happening.

¹⁰ That is, the ways in which something is seen and interpreted, encompassing not only the act of seeing but also the cultural codes, conventions, and constructions that shape visual perception.

Chapter 1

The philosophy of the image: Foundations for the ethics of images

These three disciplinary domains also belong to the broader field of philosophy. Within media studies, visual studies, and cultural studies, the philosophy of the image (or *media philosophy*, as termed by Emmanuel Alloa, 2021) provides the conceptual, critical, and exploratory framework that underpins this book. Rather than offering a history of the media or a historical account of images, let alone photography, this book adopts an interdisciplinary approach that intersects with fields such as the sociology of the media, the sociology of culture, and the sociology of art, particularly in relation to the social relationships established by photography as an art form (Furió, 2000). It also draws upon visual semiotics (or visual semiology), understood as the study of signs (images) and the systems of meaning through which they operate (Manghani, 2013; Moriarty, 2005).

A philosophy of the image or, more specifically, an ethics and deontology of the image rather than of the photographic image alone, focuses on the ethical dimensions of image practices in the media.¹ If media studies are closely aligned with cultural studies (Wells, 2024), visual culture studies likewise encompass the study of images both as visual media and as processes of cultural mediation; those who produce or create images fundamentally engage with and respond to the visible (Wells, 2024). Accordingly, this study seeks to develop a conceptual and critical framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of media images.

The label *philosophy of the image* is particularly appropriate because it encompasses many of the field's central themes and questions, including authenticity and truth, the ontological status of the image (e.g., press photography), the ethical implications of images, and the ethics and professional responsibility involved in image-making practices. Photojournalism provides a paradigmatic example. It is the practice of recording reality through images for a public audience or of producing visual reports of newsworthy events (Caple, 2013), conveying visual information through the media, most commonly in the form of photographs published in newspapers or videos broadcast on television and online news platforms (Newton, 2001). As Clive Scott (1999) observes, photojournalism is only one photographic genre, yet photographs do not belong to this genre by any inherent property; no photograph is intrinsically photojournalistic. Rather, "photojournalistic photographs" are simply photographs used by newspapers (Scott, 1999, p. 99). To understand photojournalism, therefore, is to understand the *photojournalization* of photographs, that is, the psychological and perceptual mechanisms activated when an image is incorporated into the medium.

The designation *philosophy of the image* may be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context in which it is employed. Given the broad scope of philosophy and the diverse nature of images, an appropriate interpretation is to regard it as a field of inquiry. In this sense, the philosophy of the image refers to the philosophical study of the nature and significance of images (e.g., photographs, paintings, films, and other visual media) and their visual elements. It addresses questions concerning the nature of visual representation, the relationship between image and reality, the ways in which images shape perception and thought, and the ethical issues arising from their production, circulation, and use. This perspective justifies the engagement with the work of authors who have made seminal

contributions to this field, such as Barthes and Baudrillard. Their writings are particularly important to the development of this book, as both devoted significant attention to the study of images and advanced our understanding of their cultural, social, and epistemological effects.

The philosophy of the image also encompasses an ontological reflection on the nature of images and, more broadly, an inquiry into the role of images in the construction of knowledge and the understanding of reality. It therefore includes considerations of how images shape our understanding of the world and how visual perception relates to the experience of reality. From this perspective, the functions of images and their influence on the ways we see, think, feel, and act, as well as on our capacity to distinguish between what exists and what does not, or between truth and falsehood, constitute an enduring and multifaceted philosophical problem. Given the persistence of this issue, one may ask whether it remains worthwhile to address it once again. Indeed, this problem has acquired new dimensions and ethical implications with the emergence of new technological devices that transform our relationship with the world and our perception of reality. As Alloa observes:

“There is thus, generally, little reflection on the use made of visual media, even among those who have made the exploration of visuality their goal. Images primarily remain purveyors of information through which we look at something else but which do not deserve to be looked at in their own right. As supposedly transparent media, they are usually overlooked.” (Alloa, 2021, p. 3).

Given that semiology is defined as “a science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable” (Saussure, 1959, p. 16), the philosophy of the image, understood as an ontological inquiry, may be situated within a visual semiological approach or, more

specifically, within the semiotics of photography (Santaella & Nöth, 1998), in order to examine the role of the image as a sign and its strategic or rhetorical use in the construction of meaning and in shaping ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and acting. This approach is particularly relevant because it addresses fundamental questions concerning language, communication, and the organisation of the systems of signs through which we describe, interpret, and represent the world.

The study of signs provides a set of conceptual tools for the systematic analysis of sign systems to discover how they produce meaning. As Gemma Penn (2007, p. 227) states, “Semiology provides the analyst with a conceptual toolkit for approaching sign systems systematically in order to discover how they produce meaning”. Image analysis may therefore be understood as a process of unpacking its connotative and contextual meanings. Within the semiotics of photography, a specialized branch of the semiotics of the image (Santaella & Nöth, 1998), the meaning of a photograph is inseparable from its cultural definition (Sekula, 1984; Langton, 2009). Consequently, the interpretation of images varies according to the experiences, knowledge, values, and cultural beliefs of viewers at a particular historical moment and within a particular culture or society.

The image is a non-verbal sign and a form of visual language. Producing an organized body of ideas around the problematics of the image is tantamount to the act of thinking the image (Zunzunegui, 1998). To think the image as language is to bring it into theoretical focus. This is a philosophical endeavour that dates to Classical Greek Antiquity, when the need first emerged to conceptualize and problematize the forms of linguistic expression and meaning. Accordingly, “the origin of semiotic practice is as old as humankind itself” (A. Rodrigues, 1991, p. 31).

According to Ogden and Richards (1923), Heraclitus was the first to argue that words embody the nature of things, and his influence on Plato is evident in *Cratylus* (ca. 370 BCE/1997b). Heraclitus (ca. 540-470 BCE) regarded language as the most enduring element in a world of perpetual change, an expression of the common wisdom shared by all human beings. For him, the structure of human speech reflects the structure of the world (Heraclitus, as cited in Ogden & Richards, 1923).

This justification of the importance of signs reinforces the need to think the image and to subject it to critical inquiry in an increasingly visual age and culture (Aiello & Parry, 2020). It also provides a basis for understanding the phenomenon of iconolatry. The importance of understanding what is most fundamental in culture, which is progressively transformed into a semiosphere, where signs mediate everything that occurs, exists, and is perceived, lies in the profound social transformations brought about by the uses and effects of the digital image.

Signs are meaning-producing artefacts that actively shape the cultures in which they are embedded. It is therefore appropriate to begin with the fundamental characteristics of signs to understand the growing significance of processes of signification and visibility in everyday experience and human relationships. Contrary to Baudrillard's (2005) claim, however, this process does not entail the death or assassination of the sign through the abolition of the real world in favour of a world constituted solely by signs.

This leads to the problem of the image of the world, namely, the transformation of reality into sign. The problem of the image of the world concerns the accuracy of representation and signification. These are operations of signs and language, which possess the capacity to

convey the nuances of thought and imagination, even though, as Calvino argues in *Six memos for the next millennium*, language is always used in an approximate, contingent, and imprecise manner. As a form of visual language, the image is likewise affected by this limitation: “We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors.” (Calvino, 1988, p. 57)

These images are deprived of the inner necessity that defines them as form, meaning, force, the power to command attention, and a richness of possible meanings; consequently, they dissolve almost immediately.

Although ancient and intellectually fruitful, the relationship between what is (reality) and what is not (appearance, representation, or the image of reality) has become far more acute in the digital age because of the multifaceted and increasingly complex experiences, relationships, and practices of mediation. As Russell (1997) argues, the relationship between appearance and reality constitutes one of the fundamental problems in the philosophy of the image. Accordingly, ethics plays a central role in the representational relationship between the image and reality, particularly when the image of reality fails to correspond to reality, is manipulated, and thereby deceives. In the digital age, transparency has emerged as a normative principle for restoring trust (Heim & Craft, 2020). It is an indispensable element of public accountability and a necessary condition for fostering public trust in social institutions (Heim & Craft, 2020), including the media.

The ways in which images represent and generate meaning are social practices that produce interaction and exert influence. Yet these practices are also amenable to theoretical inquiry: they require *theoria*² as a mode of contemplation and knowledge to be properly under-