# THE NEW LIVES OF IMAGES

## Digital Ecologies and Anthropocene Imaginaries in More-Than-Human Worlds

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# PREFACE

*Our civilization doesn't have adequate images, and I think our civilization is doomed, is gonna die out like dinosaurs if it does not develop an adequate language or adequate images.*

—*WERNER HERZOG*, Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe, *1980*[1]

*Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics and politics beyond our control. . . . Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.*

—*SAMUEL DELANY*, Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction[2]

*The imaginal is not a world, but it is what makes a world possible in the first place. . . . [T]he imaginal is a field of possibilities.*

—*CHIARA BOTTICI*, Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary[3]

This book is rooted in a conviction that I have pursued in my writing for the last few decades: that most modern accounts of the human imagination misunderstand and underestimate its role in shaping the world that humans inhabit. Imagination is not something that is "just in our heads"; it is not merely an error-prone way of making sense of the data brought to us from the world by our senses. On the contrary, imagination is something like the medium in which we and others live. There *is* a universe outside of the one we can grasp with our imagination(s), but it is not a universe that is free of the kinds of meanings

we impart to it. This is because meaning is inherent in the universe for meaning-bearing beings. We humans are one such being, though far from the only one, and the idea that our (human) ability to bear or create meaning is not only special but somehow separate from the physical universe is a flawed premise.

In this sense, I begin with a rejection of what Alfred North Whitehead called the "bifurcation of nature." This is the idea that our experience of reality is divided between "the nature apprehended in awareness"—"the greenness of the trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet"—and "the nature which is the *cause* of awareness," that is, the "molecules and electrons" known to science, and that the former is ontologically secondary and therefore less real than the "primary qualities" that make up the latter.[4] Each of the first category presumes a perception, an interpretation, or a meaning. Rejecting this bifurcation means rejecting the idea that meaning is an adjunct to reality, and that it somehow separates us, enclosing us in a subjective mental bubble, from the universe. On the contrary, Whitehead's radical proposal is that meaning situates and emplaces us within reality. If this is the case, then I believe it is also true to say that the main way in which meaning-bearing beings grasp or bear meaning is through what can be called "images." As I will explain in the first chapter, images are central to understanding what it means to live in a world, or to "live a world." Images are neither subjective nor objective, or, rather, they are both; they are what links subject and object, and what connects our concrete experience with the abstraction that makes sense of that experience. They are small and they are large. As Gilbert Simondon has put it, "Images impregnate civilizations and energize them with their power."[5]

Understanding our capacity to make and use, or at least to bear, images—which is how I will define the imagination—is central to understanding both ourselves and our universe. What is most important, and what I will attempt to shed light on, is what we do with those images and how they shape, enable, and constrain us as we navigate our relationship with the more-than-human world around us. Our capacity to bear images is inherent to our perception of the world, but also to our creative transformation of that world. This dual aspect of images—as perceptual and as creative, as reproductive and productive—will

be our key. As philosopher Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei writes in *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World,* imagination both *reveals* and *makes* the world for us. It is "the presentational and transformational activity of human consciousness," where "presentational" refers to "something that is brought to the fore or made present for consciousness," and "transformational" refers to the possibility of "change" in the "object or expression of imagining."[6]

Two modern philosophers whose work provides rich insight into this, if in quite different ways, will be my touchstones here. Whitehead is one of them; the other is Charles Sanders Peirce. The work of both has been applied to the interpretation of images and to understanding media, including today's digital media, but not necessarily in the way that I will do this. Their work is not entirely unique, and it is related to and echoed by a diverse cast of others today and in the past—westerners and non-westerners, women and men, philosophers and poets, scientists and shamans.[7] Even as Whitehead and Peirce frame my own thinking about images and imagination, neither of them detailed the full implications of the "bifurcation of nature" they each, in their own way, identified. That has required generations of philosophers, historians of science, and others who have probed the ways in which this bifurcation has shaped and been shaped by histories of colonialism, extractive capitalism, and cultural and ecological practices marked by gender relations and other variables unfolding over centuries.[8] All of this work remains to be successfully synthesized into a popularly resonant form.[9]

What I tease out of the work of these thinkers is this idea that the *perceptual* and the *creative*—what and how we perceive, and what we do with those perceptions—constitutes a kind of unified field within which images, or ima*ging*, plays a central role. Today that field is shaped increasingly by the world of digital media, and it is my overarching goal to understand how that world affects and changes the possibilities for imagining the world into existence. The reason such an understanding is needed, to quote political artists Mihnea Mircan and Jonas Staal, is in order to address the "crisis of the imagination," which they define as "a lack of imagination to understand our disastrous present as much as to project our desired future."[10]

This book is the fourth in a series devoted directly to some dimen-

sion of this image-centered understanding of the contemporary world. The first, *Claiming Sacred Ground*, focused on how imagination features in conflicts over land and in perceptions and interpretations of its meanings. Those interpretations included claims for land's alleged significance or "sacredness" in places where environmental conflicts appeared outsizedly acute. While its analysis of images was more implicit than explicit, the book's attempt to theorize "place-images" in the context of human activities—"practices of place" that shape those places into what they become—is something that is directly relevant to the present volume. Most especially, the way in which that volume moved between activities thought to be religious or spiritual and those considered secular or modern—between ceremonial rituals on one hand and tourist promotion, recreation, and real estate speculation on the other—is something I will pick up again in this book. All such activities are still with us, but now they are found within a context shaped increasingly by digital media.

In light of that first volume, the second in the series, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, may have appeared a detour into an altogether different line of study, though it is the book that most directly leads into this one. Understanding images today necessitates a rigorous analysis of the kinds of images that came, most dramatically, to populate and to shape the world over the course of the twentieth century: moving images. *Ecologies of the Moving Image* attempted not only a thorough refashioning of our understanding of moving images, but a kind of excavation of them from within a world reshaped by them. It presented a multileveled analysis of cinema in terms of the worlds it produces, which are material, social, and perceptual (or animate); the ways we viewers engage with those worlds—their moment-by-moment spectacularity, their sequential narrativity (or one-thing-after-anotherness), and their referentiality to all kinds of other worldly and imagined things; and the ways our engagements with film-worlds changes the worlds that precede and outlast those film-viewing experiences (which, again, it does materially, socially, and perceptually). *Ecologies of the Moving Image* was in this sense both phenomenological, to do with how we experience films, and ontological, to do with what films and their worlds (film-worlds) are and how they relate to other dimensions of reality.

The next volume, *Shadowing the Anthropocene*, deepened the philo-

sophical basis of my previous work, relating it especially to the "speculative realisms," "new materialisms," and "ontological turns" that have marked certain segments of the philosophically inclined academy (though not so much analytic philosophy departments as cultural studies, media studies, and the arts and social sciences). Then I applied this philosophy to the *practice* of living and to the theorization of cultural and religious "image wars" or "iconoclashes," all within the context of the "Anthropocene predicament," which an increasing number of intellectuals take to mark the present time. With its forays into the practical and the "iconoclashic," *Shadowing* returned me more directly to the concerns of the first volume in this tetralogy.

The present volume effectively brings all of these concerns together. It proposes, in the most complete form to date, a theory of the imagination that is also a theory of images—what they are and what they do—and that accounts for a broad spectrum of people's use of images, from the religious and political to the scientific and aesthetic, and from the premodern to the world of digital media. If anything, it takes such categorical distinctions—between religion, science, magic, aesthetics, politics, as well as modernity, secularism, and others—as categories to be set aside so that their common substance can be recognized. That common substance is imagination and the forms it takes: images or imaginings (image-events), image ecologies (or imaginaries), image regimes, and the icono-couplings and iconoclashes that occur in the mixtures of images we find in the world; all these terms will be defined soon enough. And it continues the work of analyzing moving images—images that *move* us—in a world where those images have gone if not viral, then at least digital.

This book is, in a sense, both a genealogy and the beginnings of an analysis of the heavily mediated present. That makes it an ambitious book. Fortunately, its division into two parts absolves me of some of that ambition. Where the first half presents the theory in its most holistic form, the second selectively focuses on a series of locations or sites of interest to understanding the Anthropocene condition. Like the three books preceding it, this one aims to help us navigate the set of circumstances humans collectively find ourselves inhabiting today. I (and others) have argued that the term "Anthropocene" is a misnomer, both because the "Anthropos" is hardly a responsible and unified agent—

the causes of the Anthropocene are far more complex than the term suggests—and because humans are far from equally implicated in this condition. At any rate, the case I make is that the Anthropocene *condition* or *predicament*—a shared situation rather than a geological epoch (as geologists themselves have recently asserted)—is not just one in which human activities today risk the physical and biological foundations on which we depend, so that those activities need to be reassessed and remade. It is also a predicament that requires epistemological and ontological regrounding. This book hopes to contribute to that task by helping us understand the image-world in which we live.

I use this term "image-world" in a double sense. It is, on the one hand, the world of images that surround us increasingly, and that do this by virtue of imaging technologies that are primarily electronic and digital. This is the *digital* image-world, and while the digital is not reducible to images, digital technology makes possible the networked, participatory, and hypermediated world that so many of us live with and, to a large degree, live within. It is where we find the bulk of the images, as well as the stories and texts, that shape and make sense of our lives. On the other hand, I also intend to recognize that *every* human world is an image-world; it is a world brought forth in and through our imaginative capacities and acts. The book aims to contribute to both of these: an ontology of *the* image-world (which is every world) and an ontology of the *particular* image-world—that of digital images and networks—that grows around us and enfolds us increasingly today.

I will do this, first, by identifying a series of patterns or configurations, which I call "image regimes," according to which humans have negotiated their relationships with the larger world through the use of images. These present multiple variations on the humans–images–reality triad. Since human ideas about each of these—about images, about reality, and about humans ourselves—have changed over time, this will be a way to establish some reference points amidst an ensemble of moving pieces. In the second part of the book, I will apply this understanding of image regimes to three sites of image production. The first pertains to the Anthropocene itself, in the shape of a set of multimedia artworks dealing with ecological, climatic, and geological changes affecting humanity today. The second examines an array of online audiovisual materials documenting and commenting on trans-

species animal encounters, that is, encounters that cross commonly assumed boundaries between humans and nonhuman animals. The third looks at art, music, and poetry that refer to and engage, or at least claim to engage, with agential forces that exceed or transcend humanity as it is currently understood in its dominant formulation.

I have chosen these three sites in order to give us a sense of what is at stake in our imagination both of ourselves—the human, the *Anthropos*—and of three significant kinds of others-to-the-human. The first of these others is the Earth as a whole, the geological or biogeochemical other in its unity. The second includes the ranks of animal species to which we humans belong, as animals ourselves, but from which we have disavowed our belonging insofar as we have considered ourselves humans and *not* animals. The third of these others is less easy to pinpoint: it is not one that is obviously scientifically knowable, and depending on one's convictions, it may or may not exist except as a product of imagination. And yet it represents the kind of other that has been looked to as the most significant by many societies over millennia: the other referred to in discourses commonly labeled religious, spiritual, mythological, supernatural, or at the very least poetic. Together with the animal other, this third other raises a question that has haunted humanity across the period marked by the rise of what is loosely called humanism: *Are we alone?* If most forms of humanist thought, including the very humanist idea of the Anthropocene, suggest that humans constitute a central character on the stage of the world, then this question "Are we alone?" becomes a complex and open site: a site of denial, of haunting, of speculation, and of utopian imagining. And if we are to move to a "posthumanist" embrace of the more-than-human world, a more-than-humanism, this question will need to be taken seriously.

To that end, the three chapters that make up part 2 of this volume will treat these three image formations, in effect, as construction sites. It is these kinds of sites that are, to use Chiara Bottici's words (cited above), "what makes a world possible in the first place." They are part of the "imaginal" that can prepare us, or fail to prepare us, for the world Werner Herzog and Samuel Delany foresee in the accompanying epigraphs. I will name them "scenes"—the "Anthroposcene," the "Therioscene," and the "Theoscene"—to highlight the ways in which

they serve as settings for image-formation unfolding at three kinds of boundaries, thresholds, crossroads, or encounter zones: those between humans and the Earth, between humans and other animals, and between humans and the more mysterious relations that anchor us in our sense of passage between the past that grounds us and the future that beckons.[11] It is this sense of movement within temporality, and in fact within multiple temporalities, that makes this project a "chronopolitical" one, a way of navigating time that encompasses aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions.

For all this talk of the "anthro" and its "(s)cene(s)," I wish to make clear, and hope that my analysis bears out, that the human world is neither singular—one shared human world—nor is it exclusively human. Humans are one kind of being that bears worlds; many worlds do we bear, and their convergence and divergence is a real issue for us to contend with today. The argument developed in this book builds up to a focus on how certain decolonial, Indigenous, and Afrofuturist artists are contributing to the elicitation of imaginaries that may help us with this world-crafting. This is a world-crafting that involves redefining ourselves as well as our animal kin and our *other* others—those ancestral, invisible, and mysteriously present to us in ways that may be accessible via the imaginal practices of artists and other "diviners." My premise here is that grappling with a world of growing ecological precarity, political and economic instability, late-imperial resource rivalry, and general feverishness—the twenty-first century world of late-capitalist crisis—requires cultural and imaginative resources from beyond its dominant, institutionalized strains, and significant creativity in their uptake.

Many other worlds exist alongside our human worlds, and some of them elude even the least of our human contributions. Each of them points to a larger, all-encompassing reality within which these worlds arise and by which they get subsumed. We can call that reality "the more-than-human world," as my subtitle does, or we can call it, much more broadly, the universe, even if physicists (and anthropologists) aren't sure if it is one universe or many, a multiverse or a pluriverse, or something altogether unknowable—an agnoverse (to coin a term). Each of the worlds making up this pluriverse, polyverse, or agnoverse situates the bearer within some understanding of that more encompassing

reality, a reality that is actively turning (from the Latin *vertere*) in one direction or many. This is what it means to bear a world, to image, and to live and dwell in it.

That we bear and share worlds with other dwellers, and other kinds of dwellers, is the starting point for any philosophy worth promoting today. The fruit of that philosophy will be a contribution to the task of living with those others.

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