

Screening the Impossible

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When someone were to ask you: “What do you really want?,” it is likely you would be struck by a painful freedom. There are, or rather, there seem to be, infinite possibilities – even the idea of desiring the impossible could cross your mind. This desire seems to dominate science fiction. As the material gathered in this special issue reveals, a host of sci-fi images show us a *possible* world (and *possible* human beings) – these images visualize a world that could be. The fact that this world is shaped by technology indicates that our ‘destiny’ is apparently joined closely to technological developments. Furthermore, these representations reveal a fundamental desire to communicate with ‘something’ that lies beyond the limits of our visible and knowable world (the *impossible*). As such, it is an almost religious desire for transcendence, perfection, redemption, which – just think of the horrors and the *Aliens* we are frequently confronted with when venturing in ‘outer’ space – often turn out to be their opposite. Media, in this case photography and film, apparently act as screens of the imagination where the impossible becomes possible: they therefore occupy an uncanny position between illusion and reality.

In his film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Steven Spielberg pictures an encounter with aliens – an encounter of the third kind no less (the two other types being Perception and Physical Proof). The combination of imagination and real contact by means of the screen is illustrative of the belief accompanying all media. Media want us to believe that they are in touch with the “truth out there” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 30). Or rather, it is perhaps more accurate to say that through media, we delude ourselves with the image that we see things the way they really are. In the closed off space and time of the cinema, this belief is still clearly delimited. However, for someone who is convinced UFOs truly exist, on the basis of photographs for example, this belief knows no bounds and it determines the believer’s entire experience of reality.

For a long time we thought that photography also represented reality as it truly was. It was believed to be a faithful reflection of things as it did not involve subjective intervention. Now we realize that the idea of an objective photography was an article of faith, because a photograph does not merely refer to reality denotatively, but is also determined by a context of meanings (connotation), while aspects such as the choice and the composition of objects all contribute to the construction of a reality (De Mul, 2002: 159). Contemporary photography, which employs primarily digital techniques, has thus renounced the medium’s claim to objectivity. Nonetheless, it does reaffirm the pretension of earlier analog photography in a different way. It so happens that the operations that can be carried out by maker and medium are so effectively hidden from view that it may seem as if there is no acting subject in the mix, and that the digital photograph is therefore a truthful reflection. The power of this photographic realism is so compelling that we might relapse into naive belief. This becomes evident in the commotion caused by press photographs we assumed to be true while in fact they turned out to be digitally retouched (recall the photograph with ‘thickened’ smoke plumes over Beirut after an Israeli air raid during the Israeli-Lebanese war of 2006 which discredited the Reuters press agency).

Yet, must the (scientific) insight in the ways in which photographs construct a reality together with our everyday encounter with manipulated images lead to an awareness that digital pictures are nothing more than illusory representations of

states of affairs; that they have nothing more to offer than representations of possible worlds? And yet, this sort of deconstruction of the faith in media should not lead one to jump to the conclusion that reality as such has been superseded by the existence of a hyperreality where everything is a matter of interpretation and manipulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Perhaps things also move in a dimension that is by no means visible to us, a dimension that lies beyond our (current) horizon, and which therefore depends on acts of the imagination to become somewhat accessible – an imagination that now finds its expression through digital technologies. And it is here that digitalisation offers a new window of opportunity. By means of digital techniques, we can generate images of ‘impossible objects’ and of spaces that would otherwise remain out of our reach. Space photography can serve as an example, and might provide a captivating paradigm for digital photography. Indeed, how can we verify whether the solar systems and other objects ‘out there’ are really as beautiful and colourful as they appear, when all we have at our disposal are digital data which we cannot but ‘picture’ so as to render things somewhat identifiable? In this sense, the imagination belongs to our perception of reality itself, and ensures that the desire to go beyond ourselves is always, however slightly, satisfied.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Ma./London: MIT Press.

De Mul, Jos. 2002. *Cyberspace Odyssee*. Kampen: Klement.