What do images want? Towards an Economy of the Image in the Age of Digital Envisioning.

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What do images want? (after Grusky), 2018, digital photo, Mark Titmarsh

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Abstract

The technology of our private portable screens has silently engendered a new visual presence, a technical image, that reaches out to all other kinds of screens, including the traditional screen of painting. The way an image appears to us through digital formats, is more aptly described as an envisioning, facilitated by light emitting diodes that irradiate the eye, while at the same time beckoning touch through an interactive surface.Villem Flusser claims that these 'technical images' are technically not images, but symptoms of electronic processes driven by a convergence of visual observation, conceptual categorisation and computing touch. Consequently the technical image is not like anything that has preceded it, from the cave to the cinema, since envisioning is facilitated by a swarm of electronic points in a state of decay, closer to a yawning emptiness than a physical presence. In this paper I will develop an economy of the contemporary image by way of Flusser and Friedrich Kittler, arguing that technical images have moved out beyond all previous means for understanding images, cutting aesthetics, philosophy and contemporary art off from the previous age of images and their productive or communicative projects.

As such the contemporary image is caught somewhere between being and non-being. The image as semblance

is less than a being because if semblance were to fully resemble its model then it would no longer be an image but that indicated being. At the same time any kind of 'appearing as non being' given by the image has its own kind of being that cuts across the division of being-non-being. The result, by way of Heidegger is that technical images bring all visualisation into an essential closeness, a deseverance, that does not make images more intimate or understood, on the contrary, images become conceptually and phenomenally distant like looking glasses, equipment to be looked 'through' but not 'at'. By treating images in this way, as optical holes instead of dithering presences, something of the gigantic nature of our global technologies of envisioning are revealed, bringing with them an annihilating distance flung to the greatest point of removal beyond embodied experiences and discursive formations.

Author Keywords
Image; technical image; smart phone; painting; icon; Marie-Jose Mondzain; Villem Flusser; envisioning; Friedrich Kittler; Martin Heidegger; de-severance.

Introduction
In the darkness a person is deeply engaged with their phone, the light from the screen projects onto their face as if both are preparing to engage in an intimate transaction.

What are they looking at? Could it be said to be an image? The way the device glows it looks more like the phone is looking at the person, as intensely and intently as the person looks back. They appear almost as lovers in a visual embrace. If the glowing phone is the carrier of an image, what is it an image of?

As Jonathan Crary suggests about many forms of contemporary technology, it is less about the image than it is "the positioning of the subject within the technological space where the (putative) image appears."[1] Only occasionally does a phone attempt to capture an image of reality as a photograph or video. The realism of the phone and its rectangular shaped liquid crystal display is not one of a mirroring or mimesis but the way it captures the contemporary now, how the phone functions as "the mediator of all relations."[2]

Is 'image' even the right word for what appears on the LCD display? Isn't it more a schematic made up of layers of communication events, occurring between the visual front end and hardware back end, comprised of graphic interfaces and embedded microprocessors that only occasionally deliver something close to an image? Before I can go any further I need to ask the most basic of all questions, what is an image? With so many histories of the image, so many ways of imaging and being imaged, where to begin?

Ontology of the Image
John Lechte lists a broad array of types of images, they can be "pictographic, photographic, painterly, cinematographic, televisual, videographic."[3] James Elkins gets more specific and lists some unusual types of image, "virtual-reality reconstructions in legal cases, linguistic inquiries into historical uses of colour terms, emblems used in economics, visualizations of viruses, programs that graphically monitor intranets, image-based exercises in occupational therapy, multispectral imaging in aerial surveying, radio astronomy images of stars, visual solutions to mathematical problems, studies of the deformations of grain in sandstone,

kidney pathologies, images of the sea floor using side scanning sonar."[4]

Despite the dizzying array of ways an image can arrive, from traditional substrate to technological platforms, they all share a kind of split reality, where there is a physical tension between the image as an object and what it depicts. Heidegger makes this clear in his discussion of a picture postcard of the Weidenhauser Bridge:

"I can look at a picture postcard of the Bridge. What is bodily given is the postcard itself. The card itself is a thing, an object, just as much as the bridge or a tree. But it is not a simple thing like the bridge. It is a picture thing. In perceiving it, I see through what is pictured, (to) the bridge. (…) In the consciousness of a picture there is the picture-thing and the pictured."[5]

The image or 'picture-thing' is the substrate or medium, in the case of the postcard it is paper and ink, while the pictured is the bridge. In the case of the phone the picture-thing is the LCD screen comprised of pixels and diodes. In both cases the being of the substrate is manifest while the being of the depicted is entirely in doubt, since it may be an image of something that does not exist as in a fraudulent or imaginary image. As such the image is caught somewhere between being and non-being. As Blanchot and Nancy put it: "the image appears upon the absence of the thing"[6] whereby, "the absence of the imaged subject is nothing other than an intense presence."[7]

The image is a mode of contact with the imaged, it is a pathway from looking, to the presence of the thing in its very absence. The image withdraws so that the absent can appear, the paper and ink withdraw so the bridge can appear. In so doing "the image never stops tightening and condensing into itself"[8] while at the same time generating "a force that forces form to touch itself."[9]

Metaphysical Image

Ontologically the image is split between the picture-thing and the de-picted.[10] However in previous ages there was a type of image in which there was no split between picture and what was depicted. This happened in the representation of gods, where a sculpture or a painting could in certain situations be coincident with the presence of Christ or Zeus.

This kind of discussion about the image could get you killed in the 8th Century during the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm. Iconoclasts attacked as idolatrous and sacrilegious any notion that icons, or images of Christ, could depict or be co-substantial with Christ's divinity. Against that iconophiles argued that Christ was both human and divine and so images of him could be both worldly and divine at the same time. Additionally they believed that the act of looking is doubled in the icon, since as divine, the image literally looks back at us, the divine contemplates us through the icon.[11]

This special economy of relations in the icon extends to the presence of the subject, Christ himself. He may manifest in the painting by virtue of the artist's technical skill, but at the same time, "Christ never stops withdrawing."[12] That is, He is only "present to the extent that the icon is the mark of His absence."[13] This kind of split between presence and absence, a 'pres-absentiality', already sketched by Heidegger and Blanchot, is crucial to any image from this time to the

present, such that we might say that iconic images of "Christ becomes the prototype for every image."[14]

Marie-Jose Mondzain introduces the radically bland word 'economy'[15] as the primary tool to describe the management of the crucial relation between sacred and profane images, between image, icon and idol. At the heart of the economy is the mystery and ultimate enigma of the image. To mismanage this economy is to risk damnation, since it is to confuse natural and artificial images, the true and the false. As the Old Testament exhorts "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"[16] and "Thou shalt not bow down to them or worship them."[17] Yet images are an important part of the economy since "God made man in the image of God"[18] and Jesus is "the Son as image of the Father."[19] Both are instances of the invisible, God and divinity, being made visible, establishing a consubstantiality between an image and its impossible and invisible model.[20] The original image is the divine since God is the model of man and son, hence "the model of every image."[21] "The (…) image of the (Godly) Father and the human (icon) image of the Son are one and the same image, in the sense that the relation 'son of' is equivalent to the relation 'image of.'"[22] There is no semiotics of the image here, no forest of signs since "the image is everywhere a figure of immanence … a relation of essential similitude."[23] The image re-joins the image, resembles an absent and invisible image, and is made flesh.[24]

Conversely flesh can be transfigured into image, as in the veil of Veronica in the moment she wiped the blood and sweat from the face of Jesus on his way to Calvary. His image was then miraculously imprinted on the cloth and is commemorated by the Sixth Station of the Cross and works of art based on it. The icon then mediates between two extreme terms, the "human and divine (…) without mixing them together or altering them."[25] The icon then presents "the grace of an absence within a system of graphic representation (where) Christ is not the icon"[26] but precisely that part of the image which "never stops withdrawing."[27] It is this paradoxical visibility of the invisible that will become a hall mark of great art even up to our own time. As Mondzain puts it, "the greatest western pictorial works of art also necessarily concern an existential relation to the presence of an emptiness."[28] The grapheme, or basic graphic unit in iconic art is "the line as an edge where being begins … a graphic fissure …(that) marks the visible limits of the void … (and) will never be a perimeter."[29] Ultimately "the figure is only there in order to show the emptiness and absence of what it indicates to the gaze."[30]

As in the veil we come to understand that whatever Christ touches "becomes his graphic trace"[31], a type of writing with light that prefigures modern photography and all those technologies based on it that lead up to the smart phone.[32] The annunciatory relationship with the mobile phone incarnates an invisible economy held between the flesh (of the hand) and technology (that glows out of an incandescent LCD screen). The screen of the phone becomes a contemporary icon, a visual transfiguration of an invisible real that continues to withdraw and never represents. In gazing at the screen we are not simply connecting with others or searching for information but feeling "the pressure of a light producing gaze."[33] The image on the screen of the phone becomes the "womb of the invisible … from which all future images will be born."[34] By means of stabbing fingers and voice recognition the image

pronounces itself somewhere between my body and the technological interface. The power of the phone, the importance of it in our lives, is "nothing other than the appropriation of iconic authority and its symbolic fertility."[35]

Written texts can also evoke images in the act of rhetorical persuasion, Aristotle even claims that "all human thought takes place in and through images."[36] Similarly sculpture can transcend the division between image and object, flesh and the inanimate, to evoke a symbolic authority similar to a painted icon. In classical Greek sculpture there are works where marble is "so vividly lifelike" a viewer might feel themselves to be "in the presence of (…) a living being: (with) its power to feel, speak and weep."[37] Through artistic technical refinement the work captures a vivid likeness that stuns the viewer into a type of hypnosis transfiguring marble into the overwhelming presence of what is manifestly absent. Caroline Van Eck describes this as 'animacy' "endowing stone with the illusion of pulsating life … (which) makes the viewer (…) believe she looks at living beings instead of their representation."[38]

Eck's notion of animacy is derived from two related Greek terms enargeia (vividness) and energiea (actuality).[39] These can indicate a form of mimesis "that is not based on lifelikeness"[40] or the technical skill of the artist, but rather an ikonopoiesis between the viewers look and the activation of life in the depicted entity. She traces the derivation of enargeia back to Homer in the Odyssey who uses it to describe "the blinding light in which the gods appear to mortals."[41] Consequently animacy can occur even in a statue roughly hewn, or partially destroyed like Scopas' Bacchante (c 380 BC). As the ancient Greek sophist

Callistratus wrote "hard though it was, it became soft to the semblance of the feminine … though it had no power to move, it knew how to leap in Bacchic dance."[42] Lifelikeness, something other than mimesis, working through a "primordial kind of artistic agency" can become so uncanny, that it enters an ecstatic form of life, a "psychogenesis of experience"[43] beyond the rational presence of both viewer and art work.

Animacy is not limited to Christian icons or ancient Greek sculpture, it can occur in 20th Century artworks by artists such as Picasso and Rothko. Rothko's chapel paintings in particular blend aesthetic and spiritual experience into a cocktail of total perceptual embrace and the suspension of critical distance that might be described as religious.[44] James Elkins shows this through the diary notations of the art historian Jane Dillenberger and her viewing of the work in Rothko's studio: "At first (she) could barely see. Then, slowly, out of the darkness, she found the outlines of several huge unfinished canvases. For a minute she stood still, looking up and down the height of the paintings. They were almost fifteen feet tall, dark and empty like the open doorways of some colossal temple. As her eyes got used to the half-light, she began to see their surfaces—dull, blank, nearly black. She walked up to one. It was tar black, veiled with washes of deep maroon. The paint was not flat like a wall: you could look into it, and it had a kind of watery motion. As she stared, the matte canvas moved, and flowered into shifting planes of darkness. It was entrancing, and perplexing. Rothko remained quiet, even when she brought her face up to within a few inches of the canvas. Yet there was something in those surfaces, something waiting to be seen. They were elusive but mysteriously comforting. 'I felt as if my eyes had

fingertips', she wrote in her journal the next morning, 'moving across the brushed textures of the canvases.' The more she stared, the more she felt at home. Then she was crying, and the two of them remained that way for several minutes: the art historian looking at the canvases through a blur of tears, and the painter smoking, watching her. It was a moment, she told me, of 'very strange feelings', but mostly of relief, of perfect ease, of pure peacefulness and joy. After a few more minutes she dried her eyes and went over to begin the interview."[45]

Envisioning
This kind of discussion of the image outside the ordinary everyday relationship of truth and fact reminds us that we are still under the sway of primordial images and primal relationships to the image that were established in prehistoric caves, then temples and churches. As Elkins puts it "images are fundamentally a religious category"[46] since our entire secular tradition of image making rests on a massive prehistory of images "conceptually inseparable from religious or ritual belief."[47] As such "any engagement with the image will inevitably evoke its theological history … a time of the true image when there was no clear separation between the image and the imaged."[48] We relate to the 'true image' not as an artefact or even as an image but as a 'direct passage to Christ'[49] or whatever figurehead of belief sits behind the most relevant economy of revelation. We do not even simply look at the true image, the true image or "icon contemplates us", looks back at us.[50]

Who looks and what is seen is thrown into an entirely unexpected field of relations that brings us back to the phone and a user lost in an embrace of looking and

touching. The mobile phone glows out, shines out of itself, looks at us as much as we look at it. We stab the screen with fingers and thumbs, dragging and scrolling text, photos, video, so what kind of "imageness"[51] is this?

To begin with we can say that the phone sits in a similar economy of relations as a byzantine icon. It is an image of the image, it exists as pure seriality, an image of relationality to all other images, now picked out by dancing fingers, roaming up and down the screen, scrolling through text and image, hyperlinking across a network of interrelationships, glowing out of a preternatural world of diodes and electronic protocols.

This kind of imageness is never still, it unfolds temporally as a schema of relationality where the act of looking is no longer the simple register of vision. The technology of our private portable screens has silently engendered a new visual presence that reaches out to all other kinds of screens, including the traditional screen of painting, and the psychological screen of dream projection. The way an image appears to us through digital formats, is more aptly described in Flusser's terminology as 'envisioning'[52] which he uses to combine both the surface of the technology and the mode of visual consumption it encourages. In the case of the phone it is facilitated by light emitting diodes that irradiate the eye, while at the same time beckoning touch through an interactive surface.

We come to look at the world as an envisioned surface, as if it were a phone, relationality organised as in the design of the phone: framed, multi-layered, interactive, temporal, and glowing. Envisioning goes unnoticed since it is eclipsed by our everyday practices as we use

the phone for a myriad of practical purposes, as a "credit card, photo album, compass, map, radio, music library, dictionary, camera, video, shop, ride service, torch, printing press"[53] and so on. The worldliness of the phone disguises the radical change it effects in relation to the eye, the gaze and the look.

Because of the mouse and interactive screens, attention is extended beyond the visual to where "we concentrate more and more on our fingertips."[54] The new interfaces enable reaching into a universe of particles that "no longer follow the rules"[55], into a place of "no dimensionality" and the "void of intervals."[56] There is literally "a transfer of existence to the finger tips."[57] where there is no difference "between the pressing of a shutter release of the camera and the start button of a washing machine."[58]

Like Merleau Ponty and the blind man's cane, we feel our way into a world of images. We finger with our eyes to establish a new "visualising gesture"[59] of grasping images by a digital pointing. As Flusser puts it "envisioners are people who raise themselves up against the world and point at it with fingertips to inform it."[60]

At the same time "the penetrating force of (…) images drives their receiver into a corner .. to press keys to make images appear."[61] This "scattering into isolation" does not produce an asocial person "but one who is profoundly socialised in a new sense."[62] They are someone who is assembled in private so that they can be spread out in public.[63] They sit at the end point of a system of image radiation at a private 'terminal',[64] their desktop, laptop, tablet or phone. Consequently

"envisioners stand at the most extreme edge of abstraction … in a dimensionless universe."[65]

Technical images

If so called images on our phones are not yet image or more than image, we can use another of Flusser's terms 'technical images' to say they are technically not images at all. Instead they are symptoms of electronic processes driven by a convergence of "visual observation, conceptual categorisation and computing touch".[66] As such the technical image is not like anything that has preceded it, from the cave to the cinema, since technical images are facilitated by a "swarm of electronic points in a state of decay, closer to a yawning emptiness than a physical presence."[67] Two other major media theorists, Friedrich Kittler and Lev Manovich, tend to agree. Kittler argues that technical images have moved out beyond all previous means for understanding images, cutting aesthetics, philosophy and contemporary art off from the previous age of images and their productive or communicative projects. While Manovich claims that "the image in the traditional sense no longer exists: it is only by habit that we still refer to what we see on the real-time screen as 'images.'"[68]

Consequently images are no longer tied to embodied moments of perception, since phenomenal reality does not provide the content of the image. Rather the image drives a process of continual interpretation and judgement, based more on an algorithmic imaginary rather than perceptual sets of relations. Technical images create a new universe comprised of "photographs, films, videos, television screens and computer terminals,"[70] that are "inherently different from earlier pictures."[71] Such images are "not surfaces

but mosaics assembled from particles."[72] They cannot be grasped by the hand because they are "particles without dimension .. inaccessible to hands eyes or fingers. But they can be calculated … by means of special apparatus equipped with keys."[73]

The interface between a human face, the place where all our senses are concentrated, and the no-dimensionality of the technical image is the screen. The screen is both our way inside the image and a barrier, since as Kittler puts it, we are "screened off from our computers … to be full of ourselves."[74] Kittler develops a back story for our relationship to screens by looking at the way the ancient Greeks adapted Phoenician script to develop an introspective language based on a new writing system. They introduced vowels into a consonant system and adopted a sign system that "taught the Greeks how they themselves spoke".[75] Extrapolating on our current situation he suggests that "we know nothing about our senses until media provide models and metaphors."'[76] If we consider the phone as a general writing system for globalised communication then there is "no sound, no word, no sentence, no thought that cannot be expressed in the writing system that belongs to it."[77] Just as the new vowel based alphabet of the Greeks enabled them to finally record the hexameter's of Homer, it could also be used recursively to indicate not only words, but numbers and musical tones.[78] This re-functionalisation of letters in the Greek language is mirrored by the refunctioning of computers in our time away from raw data towards a total engagement with the visual. Computers were not originally designed for image processing but for decoding secret war codes and so for the first ten years of the life of the computer "input and output consisted of stark columns of numbers."[79] Later came UNIX

command lines then graphic user interfaces which simulated the appearance of an image. Computers were born "dimensionless and imageless"[80] and as such "do not reproduce any extant things, surfaces or spaces at all" but reveal to us the nature of a contemporary 'real' based on a "general interface between systems of equations (algorithms) and sensory perception."[81] A notion of the contemporary real is captured in the transition from alphabets to algorithms where the "digital image … coincides with the real precisely because it does not want to be a reproduction like the conventional arts."[82]

The conventional arts, painting and sculpture, are made with the application of manual skill, whereas the images that appear on the phone screen arrive as if they were not made by human hands, free of producing gestures. They are like the Veil of Veronica, archeiropoietic[83] traces of a disembodied algorithmic providence that touches my phone as Christ's divinity marks fabric in a moment of thermo-luminescence.

What do images want
At first glance images are generous givers, offering something to be seen, they make an invitation to look, they become fascinating. Flusser speaks of "the magnetic fascination of technical images."[84] Blanchot defines fascination as "what happens when the gaze is seized (when) what you see (…) seems to touch you with a gripping contact, (…) where what one sees, seizes sight."[85] Images bestow fascination as a gift and at the same time take hold of us because they want something in return. Images want agency, an iconic presence, sometimes approaching possession through devilry and magic. Technical images are powerful agents because they are also "complex computational

cultural objects"[86] that operate in the space between historical visualisations and what we hold in our hand as an algorithmic future. Smart phones epitomise this because they seem to bypass the issue of image and go straight to being an "interface that seeks to facilitate thought."[87] Our phones hypnotise us into a state of fascination and make us believe we are 'algorithm whisperers', having "such mastery over the machine code that (we) can directly interact with the basic operating levels of digital systems without any need for intermedia(tion)."[88] Algorithm whisperers feel as if they are in absolute intimacy with the device.

This sense of being in a 'natural' relationship with the phone is facilitated by constantly updating algorithms that are part of the "computational quest to continually expand the boundary of "effective procedures"[89] available to smart devices. As part of this the phone screen is neither surface or image, but an effective procedure based on "layers of processes, abstractions and interfaces"[90] that constantly generate new streams of content and connection. Effective procedures facilitate the technical image as a menu, a drop down list of potential moves, based on conceptual linkages and informational hyperlinks, offering a montage of possible readings and constantly updating actions that move through an infinite regression-procession of windows within windows. It has the quality of what Plato names Khora "neither present or absent, … both amorphous and an infinitely receptive receptacle .. not strictly a place, for it is prior to all spatiality."[91] Despite the fact we can hold it in our hands it is fundamentally without form since "that which is to receive all forms should have no form."[92] Everything passes through here but nothing is retained, the whole world is made available through the phone but it's fascinating glow

has become "a neutral directionless gleam which will not go out, yet does not clarify."

What do technical images make painting do?
What implications does the technical image have for other kinds of image making in particular painting? Is it the harbinger of another technology-based regicide of our oldest image making discipline? Historically painting has made many compromises with potential assassins, in particular photography, cinema, television and computers. The precedents for the painted image bending in relation to new forms of technology are many. In 18th Century industrial revolution England, the painter George Garrard depicted "a Newtonian world of transmitters of power or force: mechanical pullies, winches, masts, sails, ropes, wheels and chains …. (with) human labour and horses as producers of power."[93] In a steam powered 19th Century, Turner developed a more recognisable "image in the era of industrialism"[94] with his painting Rain, Steam and Speed (1844) in which he evokes the world thermodynamically.[95] He sees as if through the eyes of a steam engine where heat, temperature, energy and work become interchangeable in a cloud of variable intensities. Francis Picabia at the beginning of the 20th Century and the machine age, developed a literal machine aesthetic, as well as a prophetic style of layering imagery that evokes the multiplicity of vision in the time of photography and cinema.

In the late 20th Century, at the beginning of the post-industrial information age, Gerhard Richter's work would seem to be a clear example of photography making painting become "photography by another means."[96] Yet the most significant element in Richter's painting is not his photorealism but his use of the

painterly smear to dissemble the photograph and all lens based media, to dissimulate the photographic as the ground of every image. In doing so he establishes the "power of dissemblance over resemblance"[97] since the smear deconstructs the photographic, reconstructs the painterly, ultimately drawing together both painting and photography in iconic tension. In the end Richter shows that only painting can reveal the photographic and vice versa," that the nature of painting or photography (is) only (…) graspable in another medium."[98]

If painting is revelatory of photography, a technology that sought to replace it, can it also tell us something about the nature of the contemporary technical image? Is it in fact essential for doing so? If photography made Richter blur the painted image, then the mobile phone is likely to pull painting away from its traditional craft based object status into something technical, something only graspable in another medium. If the view from a smart phone is a technical image based on a menu of drop down options, non-visual protocols and a constant push and pull between various media, then painting will most likely respond by becoming a similarly temporal event that is neither merely figural or visual. So if photography made Richter copy and paste with an existential blur, then smart phones and Facebook make contemporary artists like Jim Lambie and Katherine Grosse shift into an expanded field of painting where "medium is not defined internally …. but is the result of relations between and across media."[99] As such painting becomes a technical image of itself, proliferating through hyper-connectivity with all other media and disciplines, continuing to be respectful of its craft based history, but finally released from any requirement to conform to it.

Clicking the Icon

This article has considered the image in many forms, from its ontological status, through the metaphysical history of the image becoming icon, to the current pragmatic presence of the image in its technical digital state. As such technical images represent the latest stage in the life of the image. Paradoxically all our communication devices and their digital screen interfaces seem to bring a world of technical images into an essential closeness, literally in our face and to our fingertips. Yet the nature of these images are not more intimate or more easily understood, on the contrary, all images have become conceptually and phenomenally distant like looking glasses, equipment to be looked 'through' but not 'at'. Heidegger's term for this kind of experience is de-severance.[100] He argues that we are essentially de-severant beings, since we are always tearing things away from an undifferentiated environment and placing them in an existential proximity so as to understand them, bringing them closer and into a personal field of concerns.

At a mundane level distant things can be existentially close and close things can be existentially distant. For example when looking at a painting, my glasses are closest to me, right there on the tip of my nose, yet "they are environmentally more remote than the picture on the wall."[101] Such equipment, my glasses, "has so little closeness that often it is proximally quite impossible to find."[102] That is to say I can be looking for them and not realise I am actually wearing them. At the same time I can be gazing into my phone and not realise my device has "so expanded (the) everyday environment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the (entire) 'world'"[103] World deseverance "brings into play unlimited power for calculating, planning and

moulding of all things."[104] Through a deseverance of distance and quantity, the gigantic rushes forwards, from an enormous distance, from a great point of removal, where it enters as an absolute closeness. By treating technical images ontologically, that is whether they are existentially close or distant, rather than as visual phenomena, they suddenly appear more as optical holes instead of shimmering presences. The smart phone is one such hole that comes to reveal the hidden but gigantic nature of our global technologies of envisioning, bringing with it an annihilating distance which flings us existentially to the greatest point of removal beyond embodied experiences and discursive formations.

Through the gigantic reach of global communication technologies, everything physically distant has been desevered, brought close by virtue of our calculating machines. No longer tied to main frames, they have been progressively miniaturised so that we can hold them in our hands or wear them. They facilitate envisioning as a way of bringing things closer, towards the "conquest of (all) remoteness",[105] while quietly running the risk of never being able to see or visualize what is most important to us, what is closest: the ineffable, truth, love, community. In the age of unlimited calculation, even the distant gods have been brought near, their brilliance shines out from the glow of our screens. By virtue of a new kind of animacy our devices have invited them back across impossible existential distances of time and space. All of this takes place in a conceptual space beyond what might be called the truth of the image. Captured by the image in a moment of fascination, there is a different kind of satisfaction than the one derived from analysing and understanding. In gazing at our phones, as we would a

Byzantine icon, we shuttle between looking and touching, creating a visual precinct that has no frame or limiting structure. In order to contain this precinct, akin to Borges's Aleph, "a body larger than the heavens is required, a space for something that does not have any, a place for something that is everywhere, a visibility for something that no one can see" is required. [106] If the phone does this kind of work for us it is important to remember something about its thingly nature. Every image, whether it be formed by paint or liquid crystal, has its own physicality, which drives forward with the innate creativity of matter, half dumb, half divine, demanding to be looked at so as to bestow its own kind of visual grace. The digital screen has become the place where all our images appear, it is a kind of theatre, in that is both an actual space that we attend and touch with our hands while at the same time it is a place where everything is made unreal, a stage of disappearance, an inexistence where we connect to the world and others in our specific and complete isolation. It is a screen that no longer screens, it allows everything to pass through without limit, it is a surface permeable to light, such that even the act of looking has been incorporated within its powers of incarnation.

In the contemporary empire of technical images the phone blesses our looking with an iconic aura. Stretched between icon and idolatry the phone has become an infamous model of all intelligibility and visuality, an image of our contemporary beliefs. In that intimate embrace with the screen, somewhere between looking and being looked at, "for an instant the brilliance of divinity happens to fall on a mortal creature, illuminating (us) as in a fleeting glow, with a

little of that splendour that always clothes the body of a god."[107]

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