Thinking Images

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Ron Burnett

HOW IMAGES THINK
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WETHER IT IS the television, computer, Personal
Digital Assistant or mobile phone, many of us spend
a considerable proportion of our lives engaging
with images presented on screens. Digital images are integral
to television, film, photography, animation, video games and
the Internet, and are used increasingly as the main medium
of communication within the context of new media: computer games, virtual
reality, digital photography and film. Central to the book is the
argument that ‘images will become more and more intelligent
because images are already the interface that we look at, walk
through and manipulate’. The syntax Burnett uses to express
this viewpoint — that images assume an active role in the
making of meaning, that they ‘think’ and are ‘intelligent’ —
troubled me at first. By the end, however, it worked as a
challenging linguistic ploy. So much intelligence has been
programmed into these image-dependent technologies that it
often seems as if images are ‘thinking’. And, of course, it also
provides a provocative title for the book.

Ascribing thought to machines, suggests Burnett, rede-
defines our relationship with them and enhances our ideas about
body and mind. The development of this new relationship
marks a turning point in our understanding of the connections
between people and machines: recognition that using
new media involves bringing people and machines into ‘a
close interdependent relationship’. Rather than attributing
power to the computer or criticising the computer’s incapaci-
ty to achieve great power, Burnett talks about people and
computers together achieving ‘super-intelligence’.

Throughout the book, Burnett refers to debates about perception, mind,
consciousness, and the role of images and culture in forming and shaping how
people interact with the world around them. Despite numerous efforts by the
areas of the sciences to ‘picture’ the way
the mind operates, profound questions
remain about the relationship between
mind, body and brain, and how the elements of consciousness interact with
different cultural and social environments. The book explores the intersec-
tions of image creation, production and
communication within the context of these debates.

How Images Think is a handsome book. The metallic
silvery-blue cover displays a haunting image of a smoke stack
that Burnett ‘took’ (here the author draws the reader’s attention
to the notion of ‘taking pictures’) without consciously
realising its connections with the loss of most of his family
in the Holocaust. The cover also functions as a mirror,
which was somewhat disconcerting as I played with the angle
of the book to make out the picture of the chimney.

The book might well become the second in a trilogy that
Burnett is planning. The first volume, Cultures of Vision:
Images, Media, and the Imaginary, was published in 1995.
Drawing on both media and cultural studies, Burnett explored
what it is that makes a world seen or a world listened to
become a world that is understood. The third instalment is
apparently on the drawing board, and we can look forward to
Burnett’s examination of the growing importance of design
in visual culture and communication.