

Thinking Images

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Ron Burnett

HOW IMAGES THINK

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WHETHER 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 through which we interact and communicate with each other.

Although we may be aware of the increasing cultural presence of images, less apparent are the changes in how we might think about them. In the new media landscape, images are no longer just representations or interpretations of our actions; they have become central to every activity that connects us to each other and to technology. Understanding the nature of the complex relationship we have with the images that surround us is the principal concern of Ron Burnett's new book, *How Images Think*.

Ron Burnett is the President of the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. For five years in the 1980s he taught cinema studies at La Trobe University. His ongoing connection with Melbourne helps explain the inclusion in the book of a photograph of Federation Square, that controversial complex of buildings on the banks of the Yarra devoted largely to art and media, and regarded by visitors as either masterpiece or folly. The photograph is of one of the sandstone and glass exterior walls, which acts as a screen for a changing succession of light forms. Each light form is reflected by a series of robotic mirrors controlled by a computer, which scans Melbourne's airways for radio waves, translates them into different mirror positions and produces configurations that are continually changing. Burnett uses the photograph to illustrate his discussion of the relationship between images and the spaces they occupy, and how viewers interact with those images.

According to Burnett, architecture creates the interdependent spaces within which images operate. In the Federation Square example, the combination of design, digital technology and 'architectural sensitivity' provides the site for an elaborate image-based 'performance'. The last time I visited Federation Square, there was no image of a light form on the wall, but one of its architects, Peter Davidson, claims the project is still active.

Burnett opens *How Images Think* with an intriguing discussion of visual perception. He then examines 'interactivity' 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, redefines 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 incapacity 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 cognitive sciences to 'picture' the way the mind operates, profound questions remain about the relationship between mind, body and brain, and how all the elements of consciousness interact with different cultural and social environments. The book explores the intersections 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.