Falling Upright
by Björn Franke

"If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it."[1]
—Chris Marker, *La Jetée*

When prompted to visualize something, we may form mental images, articulate vivid descriptions with words, or create visual representations. The significance of these visualizations lies not merely in accurately or comprehensively capturing the subject but in evoking an emotional and affective response. When we visualize something this way, we endeavor to imagine the multi-sensory qualities of a situation.

The realm of imagination appears boundless, as repeatedly evidenced by dreams. In dreams, we encounter myriad worlds and experiences, often detached

from our waking reality. We might undergo experiences unattainable in real life, such as the sensation of flight. However, translating these dream experiences into tangible images or words that can encapsulate their emotional essence proves challenging. At best, such renditions serve as approximations, for the true nature of these mental landscapes remains elusive.

However, David Hume posits that our imagination possesses conceptual constraints and maintains that "*[w]hatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence,* or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.* We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible."[2] Beyond the logical, linguistic, or conceptual challenges of conceiving a mountain without a valley lies the visual hurdle: how would such a mountain look like?

The limitations of imagination delineate the edges of our world, whether imagination is expressed through words, images, or a combination of both. Picturing something may lead some people to form mental images, whereas others may use words and descriptions. But the goal remains the same: to capture a scenario's experiential qualities beyond mere factual descriptions.

While imagination need not always manifest visually, visual elements often play a significant role. Images and words can render something visible, allowing it to emerge and command attention. This visual dimension of imagination holds particular importance in eliciting emotional responses, especially when shared with others. Imagined images depict fictional realms—past, present, or potential futures—parallel to our reality. They embody emotions, fears, and aspirations intertwined with memories and anticipations.

Imagining

How does imagination function, and are mental images akin to visual images? When we speak of imagination and attempt to envision something, we often employ the term "image," but is this accurate? What is the nature of these mental images—are they true images, proto-images, visual fragments, or more like feelings?

Colin McGinn, for example, has explored the cognitive nature of mental visualization. He states that the brain serves as the primary organ of vision: "[The eyes] work as *transducers* of information; they convert light energy into neural impulses. They are *not* the basis of visual experience itself, obviously. That honor belongs to the visual cortex: *it* is the organ that

makes visual experience possible. The external eye merely sends inputs into this visual organ; and it is perfectly possible to have visual experiences and have no external eyes at all. So the organ of visual experience is really the brain."[3] This means that the act of seeing is not solely a function of the eyes but rather a manifestation of the brain's imaginative faculties. Thus, the process deviates from conventional ideas about perception: it is not the eyes that perceive and the brain that interprets, but rather the brain that perceives through imagination, aligning what the eyes see with the surrounding environment. In a sense, perception precedes ocular vision.

McGinn reasons that mental imagery is a multifaceted phenomenon crucial to various cognitive processes, including memory, perception, and imagination. He suggests that mental images extend beyond mere internal replicas of sensory experiences and constitute a unique cognitive mode enabling individuals to manipulate and transform mental representations. For McGinn, imaginative perception transcends passive (re-)collection of visual data; rather, it involves an active, creative process of mental visualization and exploration. He argues that imaginative perception offers insights into subjective experiences and the mind's construction and interpretation of reality.[4]

McGinn also distinguishes between sensory-based and propositional forms of mental imagery. Sensory-based imagery involves the mental recreation of perceptual experiences, while propositional imagery encompasses conceptual or symbolic representations not tethered to sensory input. For him, imaginative perception predominantly falls within the category of sensory-based imagery, involving the mind's capacity to generate vivid visual representations akin to actual perception.[5]

Evan Thompson expands on the notion that imagination is not merely a mechanism for conjuring fictional scenarios but a fundamental aspect of reality construction and interpretation. He notes that perception inherently involves selectivity and interpretation, shaped by beliefs, expectations, and past experiences. Thompson suggests that reality is not an objective, fixed entity but a dynamic construct influenced by perceptions, assumptions, and cultural narratives. Thus, our perceptions do not faithfully reflect reality but are instead influenced by imagination and cognitive processes.[6]

Thompson contends that vivid perceptions divorced from external reality—such as hallucinations or dreams—underscore the creative and flexible nature of perception and its susceptibility to illusions and distortions. He argues that our self-image is not static

or objective but continually shaped and reimagined through interactions with the world and internal narratives. He suggests that our capacity to imagine alternative scenarios and possibilities enables us to exercise agency and make meaningful choices.[7]

Furthermore, Thompson emphasizes the embodied nature of imagination, highlighting how sensory-motor experiences and bodily sensations enrich our imaginative capacities. Embodied imagination allows us to immerse ourselves in and engage deeply with fictional worlds. Consequently, he challenges the traditional dichotomy between reality and imagination, proposing that our understanding of reality is inherently subjective and contingent upon imaginative faculties.[8]

Dreaming

Within dreams, we encounter experiences that defy physical and conceptual limitations, often transcending the bounds of possibility. Distinguishing between dreaming a dream, recalling a dream, and articulating a dream underscores the challenge of grasping the bewildering essence of the dream using both imaginative faculties and language.

The enigmatic, fragmentary, and often haunting quality of dreams is captured beautifully in the experimental radio program *Invention for Radio No. 1: The Dreams,* produced by Delia Derbyshire and Barry Bermange for the BBC in 1964.[9] Drawing upon individuals' descriptions of their dreams, Derbyshire weaves a pastiche of sound, arranging the narratives into five thematic movements: Running, Falling, Land, Sea, and Color. Through meticulous editing and atmospheric soundscapes, Derbyshire explores the acoustic landscape of dream scenarios, where sequences of words repeat to evoke the eerie, dreamlike sensation of repetitive movements detached from physical or temporal reality. Listening to individuals attempting to articulate their dream experiences vividly and accurately captures the haunting, disconnected nature of dreams. While visually imagining sensations like "falling upright" or "falling forever" may prove challenging, these feelings are graspable on an experiential level—a realm of sensations rather than clear images. The outcome is a mesmerizing collage that sonically portrays the diverse and surreal terrains of dreams.

Another approach to capturing the imaginative realm of dreams is through poetic language rather than direct description. Theodor Adorno, for instance, explores imaginary experiences, scenes, and situations through a series of highly stylized poetic musings. In *Dream Notes,* Adorno examines the depths of the

unconscious mind, employing vivid and evocative language to convey the complexity and ambiguity of human consciousness. Many of his dream descriptions involve encounters with women, often sex workers, who exhibit surreal characteristics, such as one woman who "insists on keeping her cigarette in her mouth during the kiss." While such scenes may be picturable, they carry strange undertones. Adorno also describes moments of waking up at the brink of death or awakening with laughter, hinting at experiences of absurdity. Through his exploration of dreamscapes, Adorno prompts readers to contemplate the enigmatic nature of the mind and the poetic potential inherent in dreams.[10]

Dreaming, particularly during REM sleep, evolved in mammals approximately 140 million years ago, offering a glimpse into a prehistoric and pre-cognitive realm. Efforts to accurately capture dreams involve reimagining them consciously rather than subconsciously. Personal explorations of dreams often seek to reconcile their phantasmagoric dimensions with a coherent framework grounded in real-life experiences.

In cinematic representations, dreams often manifest as strange or bizarre settings aimed at capturing dreams' illogical and inconsistent nature. However, these cinematic depictions often offer externalized rather than internal mental images. For instance, in

the television series *The Sopranos,* the protagonist, Tony Soprano, frequently experiences dreamlike states where he observes himself or engages in surreal situations, such as sitting on a horse in his living room or conversing with his former high school coach. As these scenes portray dreams externally, they may resemble lucid dreams, where the dreamer maintains self-awareness while dreaming.

The films of David Lynch, however, possess dreamlike qualities for a different reason—they do not aim to depict specific dreams but evoke dream states through illusive atmospheres and fragmented narratives. Lynch's films unfold with a sense of unease and disorientation, reminiscent of dreams where logic may be elusive and events unfold in unconventional sequences. Lynch disrupts traditional narrative structures, introducing non-linear storytelling. Additionally, Lynch manipulates the perception of time, creating a sense of temporal distortion resembling dream experiences where time may feel elongated or compressed. Moreover, Lynch's characters often embody mysterious or symbolic qualities, resembling archetypal figures. The films, thus, evoke a feeling rather than a coherent narrative. In nightmares, for example, fear is produced through the experience of the dream rather than through an understanding of a "plot." As such, Lynch's films evoke emotions rather than coherence, mirroring the disorienting quality of dreams.

Affecting

At the heart of our engagement with images lies their capacity to evoke emotions. Whether mental or physical, images are not neutral but carry emotional weight. However, their impact can vary significantly from person to person and depending on the context in which they are encountered. For instance, a horror film may elicit shock or laughter, depending on individual sensibilities. This emotive power of images is starkly evident in advertising, where images are strategically crafted to influence viewers in specific ways.

Personal photographs, such as family photographs, can stir profound emotions within individuals. Tina Campt observes that photographs generate affective resonances and attachments that transcend personal or biographical connections. Family photos, in particular, prompt intense engagement. Campt suggests that photographs act as catalysts for affect, inciting shifts from one intense experiential state to another. They evoke and register affective responses within us.[11]

Images documenting social or political events also possess the power to move us. However, Susan Sontag argues that the role of such images is to mediate our relationship with the actual events pictured. Unlike stories, images often detach us from direct emo-

tional engagement with events, as we tend to remember the images themselves rather than the events they depict. Consequently, images can linger in our consciousness, haunting us with their resonance.[12]

Mediated images, prevalent in advertising, news media, and social media, nevertheless play a significant role in shaping our affective responses and everyday behaviors. Carolyn Pedwell contends that these images not only reflect social norms and values but actively produce and circulate affective intensities that influence our emotions, desires, and actions. Through repeated exposure, certain images become ingrained in our routines, shaping our perceptions of self and others and contributing to broader social dynamics.[13]

For instance, the "Tank Man" photograph, captured by Jeff Widener during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, embodies a powerful symbol of resistance against oppression. The lone protester confronting a column of military tanks has become an iconic representation of peaceful defiance. While the photograph itself holds significance, its meaning is constructed by the viewer and can vary greatly depending on individual interpretations and changing contexts.

However, there exists a fundamental disparity between the experience of the person standing in front

of the tanks and the experience of someone viewing the image of that individual. The emotional response of the protester cannot be fully captured in the image. Even with advancements such as virtual reality, which may offer immersive and multi-sensory experiences from alternate perspectives, one cannot fully replicate the emotional state of being in that very situation, since the embodied experience defies reduction to the visual realm.

Projecting

The emotive power of images extends to shaping our collective and individual visions of the future, particularly within the social sphere, where compelling future images are crucial for societal vitality. According to Frederik Polak, the inability to renew images of the future may precipitate cultural decline, emphasizing the significance of utopian thinking for societal progress.[14]

However, these future images need not be overly optimistic in terms of social, political, or technological progress. Lauren Berlant, for example, scrutinizes the pervasive optimism prevalent in contemporary societies, highlighting its dual nature as being both sustaining and damaging. Berlant introduces the concept of "cruel optimism," wherein individuals invest

their hopes in objects, relationships, or ideals that ultimately fail to deliver happiness or fulfillment, perpetuating feelings of disappointment, frustration, and disillusionment. She explores the various forms of attachment underlying cruel optimism, from material success and romantic relationships to political ideologies and cultural narratives. With this concept, Berlant mainly critiques neoliberalism, arguing that its ethos of individualism and market-driven values fosters relentless sanguinity that obscures systemic injustices and inequalities, and consequently advocates for alternative forms of social organization.[15]

Mark Fisher further questions the capacity of modern capitalist societies to imagine alternative futures, remarking that it often seems easier to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[16] Fisher introduces the concept of hauntology, coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida, which denotes the persistence of past cultural forms, ideologies, and specters within the present, disrupting linear narratives of progress and historical continuity. Fisher observes how hauntology manifests in contemporary culture, particularly literature, cinema, and music, evoking nostalgia for lost futures, failed utopias, and obsolete technologies. Fisher contends that neoliberalism has engendered a cultural impasse, prompting a reliance on short-term solutions and the repetition of established cultural forms. The disillusionment and disori-

entation felt in the face of neoliberal hegemony fuels nostalgia and an uncanny familiarity, underscoring the need to reclaim lost histories and futures.[17]

This second volume of *Seeing* explores the worlds, experiences, and emotions shaped by the imaginative fusion of image and text. It examines how images and text conceive realms both real and imagined, offering insights into the human capacity to weave narratives that transcend the limits of reality. It features visual reflections, poems, annotated lists, experiments, and observations made by students of the MA program in Visual Communication at Zurich University of the Arts in response to two seminars on Visual Culture led by Björn Franke and Sarah Owens. The responses are linked to the realm of perception through a visual exploration of sequence-space synesthesia by Anina Amacker, brought to other states of consciousness through an essay on dreams by Sarah Owens, and anchored by a collaborative investigation of various reasons for tears inspired by Anne Collier's artwork *Women Crying*. Together, these contributions examine the diverse manifestations of imagined images across various mediums and forms.

Notes

1   *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker, 1962.
2   David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 32 (bk. 1, pt. 2, sec. 2).
3   Colin McGinn, *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 43.
4   Ibid., chaps. 2–3.
5   Ibid.
6   Evan Thompson, "Imagining: Are We Real?," in *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
7   Ibid.
8   Ibid.
9   Delia Derbyshire and Barry Bermange, *Invention for Radio No. 1: The Dreams,* aired January 5, 1964, on BBC.
10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
11 Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 16.
12 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 79–80.
13 Carolyn Pedwell, "Mediated Habits: Images, Networked Affect and Social Change," *Subjectivity* 10 (2017).
14 Frederik Lodewijk Polak, *The Image of the Future,* trans. Elise Boulding (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1973), 14.
15 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
16 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009).
17 Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012).