

Contemporary Media Forum

The Impact of Image Streams

In this media rich age of ours, a steady stream of images flows past our eyes everyday, on computers, televisions, billboards, posters, and in magazines, pamphlets, and books. How do we react to this flood of visual stimulation? How much of it registers in our conscious and unconscious mind? Do we become desensitized? What captures our attention, and what does not?

These are the kinds of questions I have been considering lately as a psychologist who has always been intrigued by the psychodynamic processes underlying visual images, especially their impact in contemporary media, such as cyberspace. And so I set out to conduct some research that might shed some light on these issues.

For three of my undergraduate classes on psychotherapy, consisting of a total of approximately 65 students, I presented a slide show of 200 numbered photographs at the rather rapid pace of five seconds each. The images included a wide variety of types, such as landscapes, animals, architecture, street scenes, still life, abstracts, people, and portraits. Before the slide show began, I asked the students to jot down the numbers of any images that stood out for them, to which they found themselves having a significant positive or negative reaction, for whatever reason. In this article I will refer to these photographs as the “standout” images.

Once the slide show finished, I asked them to close their eyes, take two deep breaths in order to clear their thoughts, and then allow one of the images from the slide show to surface into awareness. I will refer to this photograph as the “recalled” image. After giving them a few moments to focus on this image, I directed their attention to an instruction sheet that encouraged them to write down what they remembered of the photograph and to describe their reactions to several questions that Weiser (1993) often used in her psychodynamic approach to “phototherapy,” such as: What thoughts, feelings, or memories come to mind about this image? If you could go into this photograph, what would you say or do? What would you change about this image? What message might this photograph be giving you? Who might the photographer be, and why did he or she take this shot?

Of course, according to the standards of rigorous experimental design, this research is flawed in a variety of ways. I did not conduct a scientific content analysis of the types of images in the slide show. The images were not randomly presented, which means their fixed order of presentation might account for how the subjects reacted to them. The subjects were also all undergraduate

psychology students, who certainly are not a representative sample of the general population. Nevertheless, it is a relevant and useful sample, as they grew up in this rich media age of ours and should be, as psychology students, more adept at articulating the intrapsychic processes that I was hoping to investigate. Keeping the limitations of this study in mind, here are some of my observations about the results.

WE DO BECOME SOMEWHAT NUMB, AT LEAST CONSCIOUSLY

After tallying up the number of images that stood out for the people as they were watching the sequence of 200, it was clear that there were many more “standouts” within the first 20, and significantly more in the first 100 than in the second 100. This suggests that when we are flooded with images in the media, we do become a bit numb to it all. It made me think of movies that are chock full of special effects: we start off thinking “wow” and by the end of the movie we are yawning. However, when the slide show ended and I asked them to allow one of the images to surface into awareness, these “recalled” images seemed to be randomly distributed throughout the whole sequence of 200. As psychoanalytic thinkers, we know that inviting something to surface into one’s mind is a type of free association that primes the unconscious. It is a technique sometimes used in psychoanalytic therapies (Suler, 1989). Therefore, this difference between the standout and recalled images suggests that while the conscious mind habituates to visual stimulation, the unconscious might always be prepared to react. I was reminded of Silverman and Weinberger’s (1985) groundbreaking research on subliminal psychodynamic activation. The unconscious mind responds to visual stimulation that the conscious mind does not notice.

HIGH AND LOW RESPONDERS

Some students listed 40 to 50 photographs as standing out for them during the slide show, while others listed less than 10. Clearly, some people react more strongly, or at least more frequently, to an ongoing stream of images than others. We might therefore conclude that there are “high responders” and “low responders” to continual visual stimulation. For the images that surfaced into awareness after the slide presentation, the low responders tended to react to these recalled photographs with feelings of worry, anxiety, and fear, a need to withdraw into sleep, and a desire for relaxation. These results made me wonder whether some of our numbness to the ongoing stream of visual stimulation in the media is a kind of defensive shield that can be penetrated by images that trigger anxiety or the need for relief from it – images that linger in one’s mind and surface later on. However, almost all of the high responders who listed many standout images during the slide later recalled a photograph that triggered ideas about happy and loving relationships with friends and family, which rarely

happened among the low responders. Perhaps thoughts of fulfilling relationships, including the positive introjects that enhance one's sense of self, encourage us to respond more readily to a variety of life experiences as depicted in the proliferate images of our media.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES TRUMP VISUAL DESIGN AND CONCEPT

According to the traditional standards of visual design and concept, the photographs ranged from acceptable to excellent composition, with some portraying straightforwardly benign ideas (e.g. a path curving through woods), while others depicting puzzling and even bizarre scenes (e.g. a clown in a graveyard, holding a duck and taking a photograph of the viewer). These differences in the "pop" of visual design and concept did not seem to make a difference in what images the subjects recalled after the slide show. Some of the recalled images "popped" and some were quite mundane. For example, despite the fact that the graveyard clown was one of the top 20 standout images during the slide show, only one subject recalled this photograph afterwards. In fact, there was very little overlap in what specific images the students recalled after the slide presentation, and only half of the top 20 standout images during the slide show were later recalled. What might this finding suggest? Perhaps the "pop" of visual design and concept has an immediate conscious impact on what stands out for people as they view an ongoing stream of images, but what they later recall, what lingers in their minds, and most probably in their unconscious, is determined more by their individual personalities and background.

MOMMY AND I ARE ONE

Earlier I mentioned how the results of this study reminded me of the research conducted by Silverman and Weinberger (1985), in which subjects showed ameliorative reactions to the subliminally presented message "Mommy and I are one" that presumably activated unconscious symbiotic fantasies. Although the images in my study were not projected at anything close to subliminal rates, there were many of them, of many different types, and yet the most common reaction subjects discussed concerning the images recalled after the slide show was a kind of symbiotic desire for a state of "peacefulness, joy, contentment, love, relaxation, comfort, security, oneness, rejuvenation, synchronization, immersion, and pure tranquility" (to use their words). Similar to what Freud (1930/1961) suggested in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, this "oceanic experience" of symbiotic fusion occurred in reaction to images of nature, as well as to a variety of other types of images, including those that stirred ideas about joining with friends and family members, sleeping peacefully, immersing into books, and becoming one with sport activities and the team. These reactions to the recalled images were not necessarily based on specific memories,

but rather more impressionistic feelings and desires. Exactly what activity or situation created this symbiotic feeling was unique to each person.

Congruent with the ideas of Freud's classic work, perhaps the subjects longed for a release from the stresses and demands of our contemporary, multitasking, forever-busy lifestyle, and a return to a state of simplicity, clearness of mind, and presence in the here and now. Or perhaps that oceanic experience is an intrinsic spiritual need, regardless of the stress level in one's life. During the second half of the slide show, when the subjects tended to habituate to the images, as evident by a significant decline in the number of images that stood out for them, the photographs most often selected as standouts were warmly colored images of a path through the woods, a person petting a cat, and a beautiful sunset. Paradoxically, contemporary media continually bombard us with a never-ending stream of fantastic, supercharged, special effects images, when what really attracts people is simply a return to a state of tranquility.

DREAM-LIKE NEGATIVE AFFECTS

Although the desire for a relief from stress sometimes served as a springboard for the symbiotic fantasies in the images recalled after the slide show, an obvious indication of negative affect appeared for only about 10 people, and these people did not tend to mention any escape into a symbiotic experience. In these cases, the ideas associated with the recalled images tended to revolve around three basic themes: being attacked by a threatening figure, loss of a loved one, and being restrained or trapped, either by some external force or by one's own limitations. I found it interesting that all of these images were not realistic looking photographs, but rather surrealistic, dark, or blurry scenes, much like one would experience in dream-like states of consciousness. What might this suggest? Perhaps many of us usually defend against negative affect as portrayed in the images of our media, but if an image is to break through those protective barriers, it will more likely succeed when it simulates unconscious, dream-like modes of perception, or it will succeed for those people who are more susceptible to these dream-like states.

IT IS MEANT TO BE LIKE THIS

Of all the questions posed to the people for the recalled images, I found most intriguing the reactions to this one: "What would you change about this image?" Many people did not respond to this question, and if they did, they almost always said that they would change nothing. Of course, that made sense when the subjects associated positive feelings and memories with the photograph. However, even in cases when the image triggered negative associations, subjects still tended to say that they would not change anything about the photograph. A few people remarked that if they could enter the picture, they would provide some kind of assistance or support to the person in the photograph who

appeared distressed, and yet they would still not change the image itself. As one subject commented, "It's meant to be like this." As a psychologist who studies photography, I found this quite profound, because it supports what many visual artists say about their work, including and perhaps especially their work that captures a moment depicting suffering in the human condition. This is the way it is, and for that moment, this is the way it is supposed to be.

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