

Kristóf Nyíri:

### *Images of Home*

In this talk I attempt to connect two main topics of the present conference: the topic of "places", and that of "images". The connection can be directly made by pointing out that, first, information about places is best stored and conveyed by representations having a spatial logic, and, secondly, that places are concrete and unique. Now it is images – mental images and physical pictures – that, in contrast to words, have an inherently spatial organization, and it is images, not words, that best serve as representations of concrete objects and events.<sup>1</sup> Also, pictures give rise to emotions more immediately than do words;<sup>2</sup> clearly, attachment to a place involves making and having images of it. Such images were predominantly mental ones before the arrival of photography; today they are, increasingly, digital, and are proliferating as a consequence of the spread of camera-equipped mobile phones. Humans are communicative beings; the possibility of communicating pictures is an incentive to *make* pictures.

Another, lengthier, version of the above argument might proceed along the following three steps. First, one can argue that thinking in images and thinking with pictures is psychologically more fundamental than thinking in words. In fact, it is images that make up the *content* of words. Words are but *labels*. Of course labels are often quite indispensable; the logic of language is an essential organizing dimension of human rationality; thought and communication are incomplete unless comprising both sensorial and verbal levels. But thinking, and especially thinking about places, will always mean, also, thinking in images. Secondly, although *rational* thought essentially depends on language, it does not *wholly* depend on it. There is a logic of images, too – a visual logic. Rational problem solving, especially when relating to spaces and places, cannot do without images or pictures. Thirdly, a thesis can be formulated to the effect that no place *qua* human environment lacks an element of the *past*, of recollections. As Heidegger put it: "even Nature is historical. ... Nature is historical as a countryside, as an area that has been colonized or exploited, as a battlefield, or as the site of a cult."<sup>3</sup> Human dwelling-places, in particular, are imbued with memories; the sense of belonging, both in its spiritual and spatial meanings, always has a temporal dimension. To quote Heidegger again: "everything essential and great has come about only because man has a home and is rooted in a tradition".<sup>4</sup> Now traditions are handed down via images as much as via verbal formulas; images of home are part of the traditions of home.

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<sup>1</sup> As was classically shown by Alan Paivio, in his *Imagery and Verbal Processes*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Compare especially David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, and Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, München: Beck, 1987. I have touched on the topic in my essays "Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication", in Kristóf Nyíri, ed., *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, and "Bildbedeutung und Kommunikation", in Kristóf Nyíri, *Vernetztes Wissen: Philosophie im Zeitalter des Internets*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> "[A]uch die Natur ist geschichtlich. ... als Landschaft, Ansiedlungs-, Ausbeutungsgebiet, als Schlachtfeld und Kultstätte", Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967, p. 388.

<sup>4</sup> "[A]lles Wesentliche und Große [ist] nur daraus entstanden ..., daß der Mensch eine Heimat hatte und in einer Überlieferung verwurzelt war", from the *SPIEGEL* interview in 1976, repr. in *Antwort: Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, ed. by Günther Neske and Emil Kettering, Pfullingen: Neske, 1988, p. 99.

## Ode to a Mobile Phone

Before adding some details to the above argument, let me describe, briefly, the mobile device I have been using for the past few months, the device that has provided much of the inspiration behind the present talk. Snobbish intellectuals might find it repugnant that in the course of a scholarly talk I offer what amounts to technical specifications, but in fact there are many historical precedents for what amounts to a clerk being infatuated with his knowledge-processing instruments. Recall, for instance, the twelfth-century poet Baudri of Bourgueil, who dedicated numerous poems to his wax-tablet notebooks. He owned several. A particularly fine one, as we learn, had eight wooden tablets, thus providing fourteen writing surfaces – the outsides of the two outer tablets were not written on. They were of an unusually small but highly practical format; and to save the eyes, they were coated with green wax.<sup>5</sup> The writing surface my mobile phone has is a touchscreen 4 centimetres by 6, with five different keyboard simulations, and a sketch pad in 16 colours. It has a built-in camera, which takes snapshots and records video clips. It plays music, and makes voice recordings. It browses the web, receives and sends e-mails and SMS messages. Also, of course, it is a phone. But what I would like to concentrate on here is the MMS capabilities of this device. Multiple texts, drawings, photos, video clips, voice recordings and music clips can be combined in a single message, in any order. You can formulate a proposition, make a visual point, add another remark, add another image. The device definitely invites you to form multimodal thoughts. Having the instrument induces you to yield to your urge to communicate. Since the instrument has multimedia capabilities, you tend to exploit them. And exploiting multimedia capabilities entails thinking multimodal thoughts.

## Images Natural

In her talk at the present conference, Lynn Marentette called attention to the fact that students who are classified as showing learning disabilities, namely in a word-dominated classroom, often perform average or above on non-verbal, visual/spatial problem-solving tasks. And from the history of ideas we know that some of the most creative scientists and thinkers had indeed been less than brilliant in their school years. This was the case with Wittgenstein, who along with Heidegger was one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Wittgenstein certainly had a problematic relationship with written language;<sup>6</sup> by contrast, *drawing* was for him a preferred means of communication. Georg Henrik von Wright, his successor at Cambridge, used to tell the story that in his Berlin student days "Wittgenstein had a friend with whom he 'conversed' by means of drawing pictures."<sup>7</sup> And Wittgenstein's manuscripts clearly reveal his method of trying to formulate a philosophy with the help of drawings and diagrams.<sup>8</sup> According to this philosophy,

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am following the description given in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 317.

<sup>6</sup> Compare my paper "Heidegger and Wittgenstein", in Nyíri, *Tradition and Individuality: Essays*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992, see esp. p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> The story was mentioned by Anna-Maija Hintikka in her talk "Dialogues with Inner Pictures: Ludwig Wittgenstein as Dyslexic" at the 2001 Kirchberg symposium.

<sup>8</sup> See my paper "Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication", referred to above.

cognition proceeds via verbal and pictorial expressions in combination; however, pictures are more *natural* carriers of meaning than are conventional words.

## Images Rational

The unanimous conclusion of all earlier research on mobile pictorial communication, a conclusion also endorsed by Ilpo Koskinen's talk at this conference, is that pictures best convey meaning when complemented by words. Seen against the background of Wittgenstein's position just referred to, or against the background of Allan Paivio's more recent and very influential dual coding approach,<sup>9</sup> this conclusion is entirely justified. Still, it is important to see that pictures by themselves too can communicate knowledge. Nelson Goodman's celebrated argument to the effect that the meaning of pictures is quite as conventional as that of words, and that, consequently, pictures as such are inherently ambiguous,<sup>10</sup> must be judged to be void once one recognizes that while *static pictures* by themselves are in fact semantically incomplete (do they *assert* what they show? do they *negate* what they show? what do the state of affairs depicted actually *tell* us? what are we to *do* with this picture?), *sequences* of pictures, or *animations*, will go a long way towards providing their own interpretations. In my 2002 paper "Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication" this is the formulation I ventured: "while still images correspond to the *words* of verbal languages, animations correspond to *sentences*."<sup>11</sup> The basic unit in the logic of verbal language is the sentence; the basic unit in the logic of visual language is the animated image. Static pictures are below the threshold of what might count as a logical unit; small wonder they cannot, by themselves, convey unequivocal meanings.

My colleagues at the Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Bedő Viktor and Kondor Zsuzsanna, are presenting papers at this conference to show how pictures are beginning to play a new role both in science and in metaphysics due to the spread of MMS. My own approach here is closer to that of the Ling–Julsrud paper, in particular where they come to the issue of carpenters, architects, and homes. Indeed, images of home must be seen as inevitably related to images of constructing and building, once we realize, with the Heidegger of "Bauen Wohnen Denken"<sup>12</sup>, that building not only *serves* dwelling, but *presupposes* it; only the sense of dwelling enables us to have a sense of building: "*Nur wenn wir das Wohnen vermögen, können wir bauen.*"<sup>13</sup> Dwelling, for Heidegger, is a fundamental trait of being; both building and *thinking* are rooted in dwelling; and both building and thinking, as Heidegger puts it, are grounded upon "long experience and incessant practice".<sup>14</sup> We are back at the topic of tradition, and very briefly I will now turn to the connection between traditions and images; not, however, before pausing to say that my *own* thinking on MMS has indeed been influenced by the experience of building – namely the experience of partly re-building my own home.

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<sup>9</sup> See his book referred to in note 1 above, as well as his *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Compare my paper "The Picture Theory of Reason", in Berit Brogaard – Barry Smith, eds., *Rationality and Irrationality*, Wien: öbv-hpt, 2001, see esp. pp. 256 f.

<sup>11</sup> Nyiri, ed., *Mobile Communication*, p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> This is the title of a talk Heidegger gave in 1951. The text is printed in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1954.

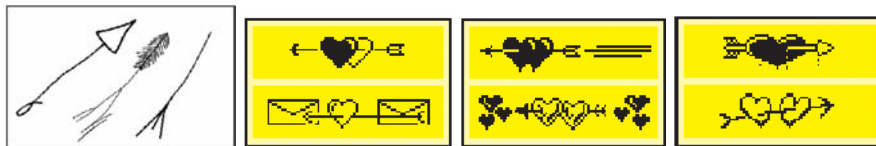
<sup>13</sup> *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155 f.

## Images Traditional

The familiar term "oral tradition", and the influential theory by Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, according to which traditions are verbal devices of knowledge storage in pre-literate cultures (a theory to which I myself adhered for quite a few years) lead one to see traditions as purely or primarily a linguistic affair. However, as perhaps Maurice Bloch has shown most convincingly,<sup>15</sup> since even verbal narratives are stored by our memory not in the form of narratives, but in the form of mental models of which *imagery* forms an integral part, any handing down of memories, of traditions, is necessarily channelled through the medium of visual representation. And of course throughout history, and indeed pre-history, pictures themselves belonged to the stock of the handed down. In contrast to the first – Egyptian and Sumerian – writing systems, the use of which was tied to a separate class of scribes, the *visual symbols* which emerged much earlier, e.g. cave paintings, could play a more direct role in people's lives. One should stress that cave paintings served not only the purposes of ritual, religion, or art; they came into being as an answer to the felt need of *preserving* and *communicating* knowledge. John Pfeiffer's book *The Creative Explosion* was published in 1982. Pfeiffer takes the tool-making revolution of the Upper Paleolithic as his point of departure, referring to the enormous increase in complexity of the social world, to a veritable information explosion, which rendered inevitable the renewing of the "tribal encyclopedia". The latter expression originates with Eric Havelock, and Pfeiffer's work, focussing on visual memory, in fact complements Havelock's theory of traditions.<sup>16</sup>

As an example of visual tradition, let us single out the sign of the *arrow*. It is already there, in various forms, in cave paintings, for instance as a stylized symbol in the Niaux cave, in the French Pyrenees, in the picture of a bison painted some 13,000–14,000 years ago.<sup>17</sup> More naturalistic arrow-representations are the three different forms found in the Cosquer cave, on depictions of seal, horse, and reindeer.



*Arrows in Cosquer cave*<sup>18</sup>

*Oplogos*<sup>19</sup>

The arrow stands for penetration, death, and love; it symbolizes the annihilation of distance. Cupid's arrow, driving through the heart, a visual tradition thousands of years old, is still a living tradition today, applied, for instance, in mobile phone oplogos.

<sup>15</sup> See Maurice E.F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> John E. Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982, see esp. pp. 121 ff. and 185 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g. Jean Clottes – Jean Courtin, *The Cave Beneath the Sea: Paleolithic Images at Cosquer*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> After Jean Clottes and Jean Courtin.

<sup>19</sup> Source: *Nagy oplogó könyv 2* [The Great Oplogo Book 2], compiled by the Westel–777sms Team, Budapest: 2002.

## From Places to Images

Images of home had not, until very recently, become a topic for the social sciences. This surely is, or was, a state of affairs in need of explanation, and Mark Poster in the paper he read to the present conference actually provided just such an explanation when he said: "In the modern period one can say that spaces were given their substance by the territorial ambitions of the Western nation-states. ... the nation was the primary designator of space... All other spaces were relative to this, from the smallest neighborhood to the planet at large." Attachment to one's nation-state could not possibly be conceived of in terms of images, since the rise of the nation-state ideology was connected to printing – to the spread, characteristically, of *texts*. Benedict Anderson's *imagined communities*,<sup>20</sup> clearly, cannot be depicted by concrete images. Now the *post-modern* period, as Raimondo Strassoldo pointed out yesterday, is "marked by a revival of localism. ... Post-modern man/woman, just because he/she is so deeply embedded in global information flows, may feel the need to revive small enclaves of familiarity, intimacy, security, intelligibility, organic-sensuous interaction... The easy access of the whole world, with just a little time and money, gives new meaning to the need of a subjective center – a home, a community, a locale – from which to move and to which to return and rest."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to what Professor Strassoldo suggested, I believe that mobile telephony in general, and MMS in particular, by enabling one to depict and to communicate the meaning of the locale, helps us give substance to that "subjective centre".

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<sup>20</sup> *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Strassoldo, "Globalism and Localism: Theoretical Reflections and Some Evidence", in Zdravko Mlinar, ed., *Globalization and Territorial Identities*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1992, p. 46.