

A Study on the Interrelationship Between the Unconscious and Digital Images

Won-Ho Choi, *Member, KIMICS*

Abstract — The subject collects information and constructs the outside world mainly through the sense of sight, though he cannot help but always see things from the viewpoint of the self-aware ego. While we are able to access the unconscious of which the latent desire is reflected in involuntary images and dream images, the substance of desire cannot be easily accessed due to the censorship of the ego and the super-ego, which makes images of the unconscious nonlinear, and allows us to pursue fantasies for pleasure.

The original human desire to record and express visual objects has come true with technological fulfillments, and furthermore, digital technology has realized visual pleasure and desire, through simulation. The images that the unconscious produces and the images that digital technology produces are a visualization of objects by the subject's desire, and the subject realizes his pleasure through a visual fantasy.

This study, based on the mechanism of the unconscious and the formal stamps of digital images, explores the interrelationship between the unconscious and digital images, both of which seek pleasure and desire.

Index Terms — Unconscious, Digital Images, Pleasure, Desire, Fantasy

I. IMAGES AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

The subject collects information through his sense organs to contact the external world and communicates through the media of sounds, facial expressions, and gestures among others. That is, the subject constructs the outside world through the five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Among these senses, the eyes are sense organs that collect the most information, and the subject greatly depends upon this sight. When Descartes wrote "All the management of our lives depends on the senses, and since that of sight is the most comprehensive and noblest of these, there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are among the most useful that there can be," he valued visual representations through a scientific principle, such as perspective. Although the subject transforms his sight by his will alone when he sees an object, he cannot help but always see things from the viewpoint of the Cartesian self-aware ego.

In other words, the subject sees the object involuntarily even with his lack of subjective activeness and subjectivity and transforms his sight unintentionally. Also, he recalls unconscious images involuntarily even when he is conscious, and produces his latent images through dreams. These phenomena are the images formed in a different realm from that of the Cartesian subject.

Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, says that the aforementioned phenomena are actions accessed by the unconscious hidden in the subject. The unconscious is the basis to sustain and form consciousness, but the subject cannot clearly recognize the substance of his unconscious that lies dormant in his everyday life. According to Freud, the subject consists of the id, the ego and the super-ego, which exert unseen influences on one another and interact with each other. While the realm of the ego is a voluntary one where the subject secures his activeness, the realm of the id is the center of the unconscious positioned in a profound abyss of the subject. While the id produces desires through which it tries to subvert the subject based on his will, the super-ego is a realm of the rational subject, which sustains the ego and maintains his socialization. The id's desire is to realize itself through the subject when it tries to pass through the preconscious, border of consciousness and the unconscious, and to bring itself to consciousness, but this trial of the id fails by the ego and the super-ego.

To Freud, the unconscious is not a silent non-action which lacks consciousness but an "animate" substance which, while constantly shocking consciousness, tries to subvert or "negotiate" with consciousness, and he calls it "the dynamic unconscious." "The dynamic unconscious" constantly attempts to move the subject, producing a desire unknown to him, but the desire is sent back to the unconscious by the ego and the super-ego. Then the failed desire remains as trauma in the preconscious and accompanies a visual image. The conscious subject cannot clearly recognize the visual image through the trauma, which later gives clues as dream images and involuntary images.

Fundamentally psychoanalysis, which illuminates the subject's acts and thoughts by exploring his mind, attempts to access the origin of the subject's desire and split consciousness. Here a visual image is a significant clue that provides access to the unconscious and its desire. Since the desire produced by the unconscious is not governed by the reality principle, the Cartesian ego and super-ego cannot accept it but send it back to the

Manuscript received November 2, 2010; revised November 12, 2010; accepted November 19, 2010.

Won-Ho Choi is with Dept. of Digital Contents, Dongseo University, Busan, 617-716, Korea (Email : choihw@dongseo.ac.kr)

unconscious. Therefore, the image coming up by the unconscious is a clue to the subject's desire and an important method to access the substance of the unconscious as a liaison to the subject's inner thoughts and feelings. Involuntary images and dream images given by the unconscious, of course, are conveyed and analyzed through the subject's language, but the image produced by the unconscious is an important passage through which to look into the subject. Although the desire for an object may be a product of the conscious subject, the desire that the subject produces is a product of the unconscious as the basis of consciousness, unveiling its trajectories and traces through a visual image.

II. NON-LINEARITY AND THE FANTASY OF THE UNCONSCIOUS AND DIGITAL IMAGES

The dynamic unconscious, which produces a pure desire, consistently attempts to be conscious, not being bound by rational judgments or social rules. To be conscious, the desire of the unconscious needs to pass through the preconscious, but all parts of the unconscious cannot do so. Then the unconscious, to come up in consciousness, employs strategies to express its desire. Desire condenses and displaces its object and replaces a real desire with its simulacrum to pass the censorship of the ego and the super-ego. For this reason, the ego cannot easily understand the real desire. After the subject's desire, which wishes to pass through the preconscious and to be fulfilled in consciousness, is rejected by the ego and the super-ego, the desire's core is returned to the unconscious though it sometimes leaves a trace in the preconscious. In so doing, the desire's trace is engraved as an image in the preconscious, and the trace of the unconscious and of desire makes known the desire's existence when it comes up in dreams and consciousness from time to time.

The unconscious' trace of the desire is nonlinear. If the unconscious fails to pass through the preconscious, it is because the unconscious's desire cannot pass the social and cultural censorship established by laws and rules, and the ego in consciousness cannot easily accept its desire. The control over the unconscious is done in a way that the partial trace of desire remains as an image and a nonlinear form when the individual's conscience and ideology limit the unconscious. This nonlinear trace of the unconscious can be seen in dream images. Dreams are a means to reveal the real nature of the subject's desire when it escapes the ego's and the super-ego's repression, and visual images of dreams inform the conscious ego of its nonlinear forms.

The desire that fails to pass through the preconscious and dream images are nonlinear, which is very similar to the characteristics of digital images. Digital information composed of data "zeros" and "ones" demonstrates clear non-linearity when electrical signals cut and connect, which is differentiated from the linearity of analogue data.

Digital images are based on articulation and discontinuity, and their non-linearity is not exhausted or reduced when an image is repeatedly reproduced, due to their advantage of the data's clarity.

Also, digital images produce a reality that actually exceeds reality, creating a visual image even when they do not have real corresponding objects, while analogue images correspond with physical objects in a linear way. Before images could be produced by digital technology, paintings, pictures, film, and broadcasting had to have real corresponding objects to produce their images. That is, they could make images by selecting and copying their linear objects. However, digital images can produce an image though it does not have a real corresponding linear object. For digital images can manipulate and change objects by combining "zeros" and "ones," and it makes the representation of an absent object possible according to the producer's will. Thus, digital images by nonlinear data share common formal stamps with images articulated by consciousness and the unconscious in their formal characteristics.

Digital images can create simulations exceeding reality when they vividly manipulate a virtual image that does not exist in reality. Here digital images create an image that is not based on reality, constructing a fantasy through imagination. The fantasy characteristics of digital images are analogous to the fantasy images through the unconscious's desire that is not based on society or culture. As the unconscious constantly seeks desire and generates fantasy images, digital images transform fantasy images connected with the unconscious into real images. In short, digital images that create a fantasy, visualizing an imaginary image, are similar to the unconscious's image that remains in the preconscious or has passed through it.

The subject's consciousness is formed through unseen communications with the huge unconscious that sustains consciousness, and even the Cartesian self-aware ego is based on the unconscious. Thus, the creation of digital images, which visualizes unreal images, reflects and is performed through the actions of the subject's consciousness and the unconscious.

Furthermore, the image produced by the unconscious that pursues only pleasure is very similar to the digital images created for visual pleasure. Digital images produce all that can be imagined more real than reality itself and deepen the depth of visual pleasure. The visual image by the unconscious always pursues desire and fantasies because it is out of the subject's definite control, and the ego's recognition. On the other hand, the unconscious's desire and fantasy that are not controlled by the ego are always out of the realm of reality, which causes the ego's and the super-ego's censorship while making the desire and fantasy fail to pass through the preconscious. However, the unconscious does not produce a desire with no base since the unconscious's desire is formed by consciousness that the conscious subject has formed in his individual and social contexts. In other

words, the subject's unconscious and desire are based on consciousness and reality, and the unconscious's desire attempts to be conscious and comprehended in reality.

In movies, the main character's desire is a manifestation of the unconscious by the interaction between consciousness and the unconscious, and especially, this can be realized as a realistic visual image in a digitally created fantasy space. Moreover, the audience's identification with dark spaces and the camera's point of view highlights the main character's desire with that of the audience and satisfies the fantasy stage. The audience here accesses the other's unconscious and desire, experiencing catharsis in the creation of realistic digital images and the fantasy stage, and this is the reason why the audience gets excited about digital images as a created fantasy.

III. THE CONSORSHIP OF THE UNCONSCIOUS AND DIGITAL IMAGES

The unconscious existing in the subject can be accessed through dream images and associations that the subject recollects. The ego cannot access the unconscious directly, so it attempts to illuminate the nature of the unconscious and desire by a way of psychoanalysis, which is not an easy process. Because the unconscious is settled at the bottom of the inner world and only reveals traces when it comes up through the preconscious, psychoanalytic free associations reveal only the shadow of a displaced or substituted desire.

In the unconscious, there exist dissolved traces of consciousness that the subject has accumulated since childhood. The conscious subject cannot clearly define an object in the unconscious, and the unconscious's desire as pure desire is unknown to the ego due to consciousness's censorship. Therefore, through the conscious subject, the ego can gain access to the subject's desire only by traces of the unconscious. The unconscious's traces here are not a direct reflection of desire, but symbolic vestiges that are condensed or displaced. These vestiges occasionally come up as dream images, Freudian slips, mistakes.

Freud discovered the unconscious and made it possible to access it through free associations and interpretation of dreams. Most importantly, he provided a significant clue to gain access to the substance of desire produced by the unconscious when he revealed that the visual images of dreams were the traces of the unconscious.

A visual image here is a form shown through dreams that can be traced to the unconscious, is also an object of media through which the ego collects most information, and that humans have pursued from the dawn of time. An animal with eight legs scratched in a primitive cave shows primitive man's desire for movement, and Egyptian paintings produced various images from a particular point of view. In China, objects were described in a method that harmonized humankind and nature, and Western art

evolved into realistic depictions of objects long before the technology introduced duplicated art. These attempts on visualization were an unconscious desire of all people through the ages, and then, the production of visual images from the perspective of drawing to photography, film, and broadcasting solidifies the history of reflection of the unconscious through intuitive images. Intuitive images by visualization provide the subject who seeks it visual pleasure—think of scopophilia—which in turn maximizes the effects. Mainly, production and reproduction of realistic images by technology, such of photography, film and broadcasting, strengthen the visual power, expanding their demands on the basis of unconscious pleasure. Moreover, the digital processor that amplified the efficiency of processing information made a turning point to how the image is accessed. The early discourse of digital images focused on, as an advantage, reproductions that did not differentiate a copy from the original and strengthened digital power, while, as a disadvantage, it emphasized the weakening reliability and devaluation of visual media. Since then, with improvements of the processor and technological evolution, digital images have satisfied visual pleasure in an extreme way, making it possible to realize anything imagined. Digital images created by virtual data produce an unreal image perfectly, reproduce a visual desire, and gradually unveil the unconscious's desire formed in interaction with consciousness.

Digital images expand the process of production, transmission, and consumption from an exclusive realm of experts to the general realm of the public. Anyone can produce digital images and transmit them through a global network such as the World Wide Web. Also, the produced digital images can be appropriated and reproduced according to the receiver's will, so they can be reproduced without limit. Therefore, receivers confront an environment where they cannot consume all the digital images in order. They search for the network, satisfying their need, and choose a digital image among other media by necessity, which causes nonlinear access. In doing so, the subject searches for a number of digital images only according to his need, and in this process his consciousness and the unconscious take a decisive role. It is the subject's own choice and censorship of digital images in media when he accesses them for his visual desire. A nonlinear digital image that has passed the subject's censorship can be represented to the subject, but a digital image that cannot pass his censorship fails to come up and remains in the network. Then the subject's censorship is his choice, a censorship upon visual desire by consciousness and the unconscious.

These censorship and nonlinear representations of the subject's visual desire resemble very much the process of the unconscious's image manifesting itself consciously. An image of desire produced by the unconscious is rejected, transformed, and perceived through censorship, and this image acquires nonlinear characteristics. As a

digital image continuously represents a visual desire chosen and censored by consciousness and the unconscious, realizing an unreal image, which analogue images could never realize, the unconscious's image is controlled by the ego but, at the same time, produces a desire by consciousness and the unconscious.

IV. THE UNCONSCIOUS AND PLEASURE OF DIGITAL IMAGE

The subject forms consciousness and the unconscious in his individual contexts and acquires his unique identity. Thus, desire varies from subject to subject. The conscious subject, however, cannot definitely know an object that the unconscious desires for. This is because the unconscious produces desire through the interaction between consciousness and the unconscious in the realm where social restraints such as laws, rules, and ethics do not hold sway. The unconscious's desire is continuously produced, in relationship with the other, and it attempts to subvert the subject, which is not easily accomplished. The unconscious's desire is not always social and is mostly controlled by the ego and the super-ego. The subject's desire sent back to the unconscious is repressed and attempts to influence the subject. However, the repressed desire does not easily surface but occasionally hints to the subject its transformed trace and reminds him of its existence. The traces of repressed desire attempt to have the ego recognize it in the forms of visual images and dream images.

In fact, in the history of visual images, the image as a sense the subject highly depends on was desired since beginning of humanity and awaited to be realized through technological developments. Since photography was announced in 1839 and film was invented in 1895, the image dramatically developed, so the original desire for the image as a sense has been fulfilled; furthermore, it has expanded its influence on the public and produced the desire for power over the image.

The desire of the unconscious is always produced for the subject's pleasure. While the unconscious's desire cannot be easily realized, the image by technology can reveal and visualize the trace of desire and the object of desire, reflecting the real and the unreal by forming a new space for the image. The photographic image went beyond a realistic record and was developed into a means that could express the subject's desire based on consciousness and the unconscious. Especially, film could access visual pleasure and the other's desire, making a fantasy stage; a cinematic stage that could be made exceeding reality emerged as a means to access a desire beyond the realm of laws, rules and ethics, creating audience enthusiasm for movies.

Technological evolvement into digital images becomes an answer to the human desire for visual pleasure and satisfies the unconscious pleasure and visual pleasure

through images. Digital images fulfill the environment that perfectly satisfies a visual desire imagined through consciousness and the unconscious. Photographic images accomplish a perfect fictional reality through synthesis and retouching, and television images are produced and consumed on the basis of information on a virtual space and objects. Furthermore, film creates pleasure, making a perfect fictional stage. While analogue film accesses pleasure through a fantasy stage, digital film realizes visual pleasure by creating a perfect fantasy beyond its narrative. Here the fantasy stage unveils the unconscious's desire and realizes visual pleasure, producing an unreal, illogical space.

The producer of images fabricates images of desire by way of digital processors that perfectly realize imaginary images and in the process creates an object of desire. The human collective need to realize an imaginary desire through a visually moving object is now being realized through digital images, and the unconscious's desire that cannot surface or be fulfilled due to the ego's censorship is being realized in the stage of digital images. The virtual image realized by digital processors is welcoming to a stage where the unconscious can be comprehended and the human need fulfilled. Especially in movies, where the audience immerses itself and identifies with the objects on the screen, digital images are formed as a fantasy space that realizes visual desire and the unconscious's desire.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by Dongseo University Research Grant in 2010.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Ha Tae Hwan. Seoul: Minumsa, 2008.
- [2] Calvin Hall S., *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*. Trans. Sang-Chang Baek. Seoul: Mun-ye Press, 1999.
- [3] Lemaire, Anika, *Jacques Lacan*. Trans. Mi-Seon Lee. Seoul: Mun-ye Press, 1994.
- [4] Leutrat, Jean-Louis, *The Fantastic of Cinema*. Trans. Kim Kyung On. Seoul: Dong-mun-seon, 2002.
- [5] Park, Chan-Bu, *Sign, the Subject and Desire*. Paju: Chang-bi, 2007.
- [6] Sturken, Marita, at al., *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Trans. Tae-Jin Yun, at al. Seoul: Communication Boos, 2006.



Won-Ho Choi

Born in 1972. He is a professor of Dept. Division of Digital Contents at Dongseo University. He is currently a Ph D. candidate Dept. Interdisciplinary Program of Art-Culture at Pusan National University. His research interests are Image, Visual Art, Unconsciousness and Steroscopic Image. Email: choiwh@dongseo.ac.kr