Arjen Mulder

Meaning and Agency

in the Universe of Technical Images

Flusser makes a distinction between traditional or handmade images, technical images made by apparatusses, and dialogical, interactive images. These different images have their own way of making meaning, or getting meaning.

The method to find the meaning in traditional images is called iconography, or broader iconology. The meaning is to be found in 3 layers:

1. the primary or natural meaning – what the image is about (pre-iconographic description);
2. the secondary or conventional meaning – the image as part of a visual culture and it's themes and conventions (iconographic analysis in the strict sense)
3. the third or intrinsic meaning, which combines 1 and 2 with the specific intentions of the imagemaker (iconographic synthesis).

To find 1 you need eyes and careful observation; to get 2 you need art historical and related knowledge of the period when the image was made; to grasp 3 you need a 'synthetic intuition'.

The peculiar thing about technical images (photographic images, as in photography, film and related image machinery) is dat level 1 and 2 are present but level 3 is nowhere to be found. The photographic image is not made by an artist, but by an apparatus (camera) and its functionary (the photographer). It's the program of the photographic medium that determines the outcome.

So photographic images miss every 'depth' and also every relationship to time (because they're made in a small fraction of a second). What makes them interesting anyway? The fact that people love to project all sorts of meanings into the image. The best interpretation of a

photograph is the most subjective one. Concepts that are usefull when looking for this specific subjective meaning potential of the photographic or technical image: studium and punctum, the photogenic, the decisive moment.

What Flusser called technical images we call analogue images. Digital images are understood by Flusser under the name of dialogical or interactive images. Flusser wasn't able yet to make this clear distinction in 1985 when writing Into the Universe of Technical Images, but this is how both types of images developed since then.

The way to find meaning in dialogical images is to forget about linguistic meanings: dialogical images are about agency. They are interfaces that allow their viewer/user to click beyond the image, change it when needed, or even synthesize them from scratch, in purely numerical form. Agency doesn't oblige to spontaneous answers in real time, it can take a while before the virtual in the dialogical image is actualised. Agency is meaning as conditional readiness for behavior, as affordance.
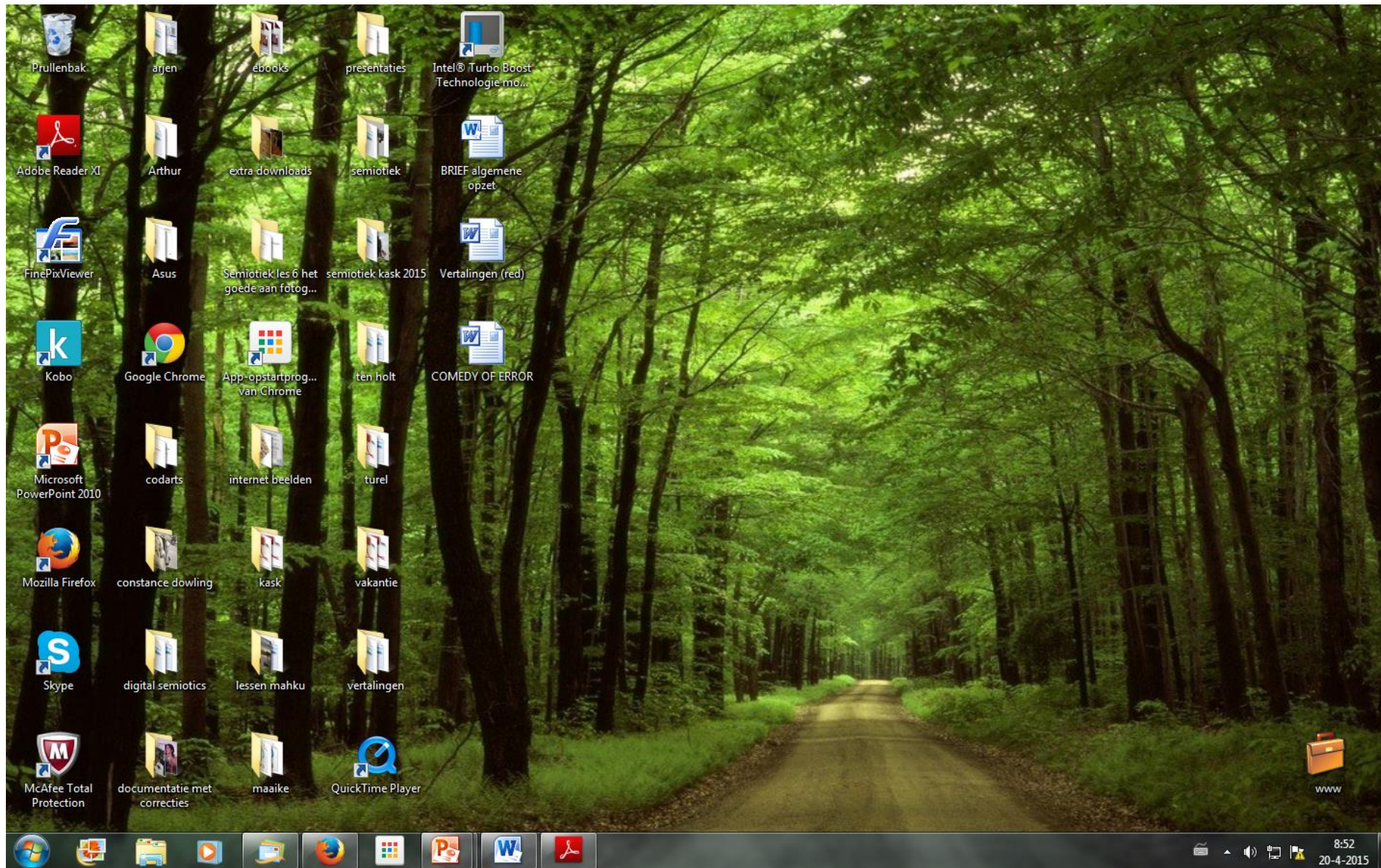
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MEANING

IMAGE

TRADITIONAL IMAGE

ICONOGRAPHY

NATURAL SUBJECT MATTER

PERCEPTION

CONVENTIONAL SUBJECT MATTER

STUDY

INTRINSIC MEANING

SYNTHETIC INTUITION

CONTENT

TECHNICAL IMAGE

FIND

GIVE

SIGN

SIGNIFIER - SIGNIFIED

SYMBOL

SYMBOL

CONVENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP

language

ICON

ICON

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DIGITAL

PROGRAMMABILITY

INTERACTIVITY

TWO-WAY MEDIA

INTERFACE

STRUCTURE

AFFORDANCES

AGENCY

creativity

information retrieval

communication

IMMATERIALIZE

TOUCH SCREEN

ENVIRONMENT

DATA

SEARCH ENGINE

PATTERN RECOGNITION

MODELLING

STATISTICS

DATA ARE THE NEW SIGNS