Idea or Image: The Latter Prevailing – Lindsay Rybkoski

Lindsay Rybkoski wrote her paper “Idea or Image: The Latter Prevailing” for Dr. Miltnor’s College English II (ENG 10002) course. Students were asked to write a paper that considered Milan Kundera’s novel Immortality and reflect on what it meant to them.

Dorothea Lange once said, “The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” Perhaps after seeing images through a lens so often, we create our own limited perception of how we view a situation. We narrow our opinions and focus on the one and only solution we feel is right. When viewing the images through a lens, are we able to understand the words actually trying to be portrayed? However, is the lens so narrowly focused that we are not able to broaden our thoughts on all the scene has to offer? Who is to blame? Possibly these problems and the questions along with them can come to a wide-ranging resolution when we consider the words of Paul in Milan Kundera’s novel Immortality. Paul says, “ideology belongs to history, while the reign of imagology begins where history ends” (120). The immediate question brought to light is what lasts longer, an idea or an image? Are we, as a people, so caught up in fancy cars, up-to-date computers, and cell phones that we forget about ideas as a whole and simply remember the billboard sign off I-77 as we drive to work or school? In order to better understand the term Kundera coins “Imagology” we must first examine how Kundera presents the term in the book and defines it, how this idea affects my life and others’ lives as well, and how imagology informs us about the culture we live in today.

Consider the first chapter in Immortality. Towards the end of the chapter the narrator says, “The essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself for a second in that gesture and dazzled me” (4). Perhaps the narrator chooses to include this sentence to show the absence of idealism in his thoughts. Out of everything the narrator could possibly possess; intellect, thoughtfulness, or perhaps wit we are left with the embedded image of a gesture in our minds.

No, we are not thinking of her mind, we are thinking simply of a silly gesture that leads to the laugh of a lifeguard, and the satisfaction of the man spectator. The opening scene is a perfect example of imagology. Remember, however, Paul’s definition of imagology and its entities. So now we must think in the past, because imagology is beginning at the end of ideologies history. Think back in history to the love affair of Bettina and Goethe. The childlike love Bettina shares with Goethe inevitably leads her to exchange love letters with him and eventually publish them. However, these letters were later found to be rewritten so Bettina could create an image that would flatter herself (Culik 210). What is left? History is tainted with the image of Bettina’s recreated love letters. In her quest to embed her image of immortality into each person, she leaves a tainted image of false love in the minds of everyone. We no longer remember the tale of love created but only carried out through letters and sporadic visits, we remember her image of creating falsified letters of this love. Let us look to Professor Avenarius who, in mad fits of rage against modern society, slashes tires in the middle of the night. This gesture of slashing tires is not forgotten. Do we remember the morals Professor Avenarius stood for? No; rather, we remember him running around in the dead middle of night slashing tires. Out of all of the ideas turned images, we must ask ourselves one important question: why do we create the images in our minds instead of remembering the significance behind them?

For a possible answer to this question we must go to Kundera. One of the major grievances that Kundera holds against the contemporary world is its tendency to reduce everything to a superficial, easily digestible simplification (211). Conceivably, we find it much easier to remember a simple image in our mind rather than a series of ideas, therefore we end up categorizing these images in our minds simply to make it easier on ourselves. We now have an idea of how some of the characters are affected by imagology in the novel and we have heard about some of Kundera’s thoughts, but if we look at society today, we must examine how imagology has come to have an impact on us.
The idea of imagology makes me reflect on how much of an affect it has on society today. Consider how many advertisements we pass on a simple drive to work or school; or how many commercials we have seen in a lifetime. We are enveloped in an array of imagology. Think about former President Jimmy Carter. Can one remember every issue he stood for? Most likely, we cannot. We can recall, however, the time he was jogging on television to show America that exercise was good for us and ended up collapsing. Imagology makes me think about the negative effect this has on our society. Is it necessarily a good thing that we do not remember ideas but instead replace them with images? I also feel that Kundera brings this term into the novel to show how much of an important role it plays and has played in the world for so many years. Kundera references Hitler in *Immortality* when he says, “Even Hitler had his personal imagologue, who used to stand in front of him and patiently demonstrate the gestures to be made during a speech so as to fascinate the crowds” (118). How many times when speaking of Hitler do we refer to this gesture? Many times we do. Deeply and forever embedded in our minds are the gestures of hands, movements of the body, and every other image that takes precedence to an idea. Finally, let us consider the impact that imagology has on the culture we live in today.

In order to speak about our culture and the study of it, we must begin from a working definition of culture studies. The book *Introducing Cultural Studies*, written by Borin Van Loon and Sardar Ziauddin, says cultural studies are “A moral evaluation of modern society and to a radical line of political action...thus cultural studies aim to understand and change the structures of dominance everywhere, but in industrial capitalist societies in particular” (9). I can picture myself flipping through the channels and happen to stumble upon a commercial. I catch a glimpse of a young African American boy’s face. Although a portrait, it has allowed me to see the malnourishment that afflicts him. The subtle frown of unhappiness washes across his face and I am left with this image imbedded in my mind. Can I recall what this commercial is about? Well, I can guess it is an organization asking for people to donate to needy kids in third world countries, but other than that, I have not a clue. But can we not see the power this image possesses? The image is exactly what advertisers want us to remember. If all we recall is a dreary looking face and a phone number to call and pledge dollars to this child, then the money they put into the commercial has been well worth it. We are a society of instant gratification. Must we be required to, and forgive me for saying this, think for ourselves? So then it is blatantly easier to stare at a poor child’s face and pledge money and laugh at the Commander in Chief. So how do all of these examples reflect our definition of cultural studies? Is the picture of the child aiming to understand and change the structure of dominance?

I feel it depends on what one would consider dominance. If we would like to go back to the battle between idea and image as if one is dominant over the other, we would find a direct link between dominance and images in society. However, to reach a valid and objective conclusion, I must see both sides, positive and negative, of ideas and images with respect to culture. Yes, images do play a vital role in our economy. Advertisers and marketers everywhere sell goods and obtain jobs from images. Is it right to say ideas are no longer important to our society? I think not. I feel we are somewhat, not entirely though, shed of our image-struck minds when we enter a classroom. We sit in a classroom and are told to read, evaluate, reach decisions and trust our instincts. I also feel much of our academic focus is targeted at teaching us to think for ourselves. No examples need be given to explain the impact of images on our society, but once we can find the balance between the bombardments of images we are presented, and the lingering ideas we still know exist from them, we can then become a more well-rounded individual.

Now, out of everything we have examined thus far, there is no need to rush to conclusions. Granted, there is room for change in all of us if we reflect on the information I have presented. We have considered the impact of ideas and images on characters in *Immortality* while incorporating a few of Kundera’s thoughts in the mix of my thoughts, as well as showing how ideas and images affect my life and others’ lives, and describing how imagology is a major staple in our culture. Where has society been in terms of images in the past and where is society
going with images in the future? Perhaps the decline of reading recently has led to the downfall in ideas. I do know that in order to keep our ideas in equality with images, we must keep reading and reaching our own conclusions, which can only happen when we think for ourselves. One can only speculate why this has happened. Dorothea Lange said it well when she said the camera is an instrument. However, it is up to society to use the camera as a tool and learn how to see and broaden their perceptions of life without it. Jan Culik in the Dictionary of Literary Biography points out that Immortality is a “novel as a debate” which undeniably holds true in all aspects (212). When the image of a little boy surfaces in my mind from the commercial I have seen, I will urge myself to know more than simply the face, because without the idea behind the image, it would be like a book without words, necessary to obtain information but useless if lacking a solid, self-fulfilling idea behind it.

Works Cited

