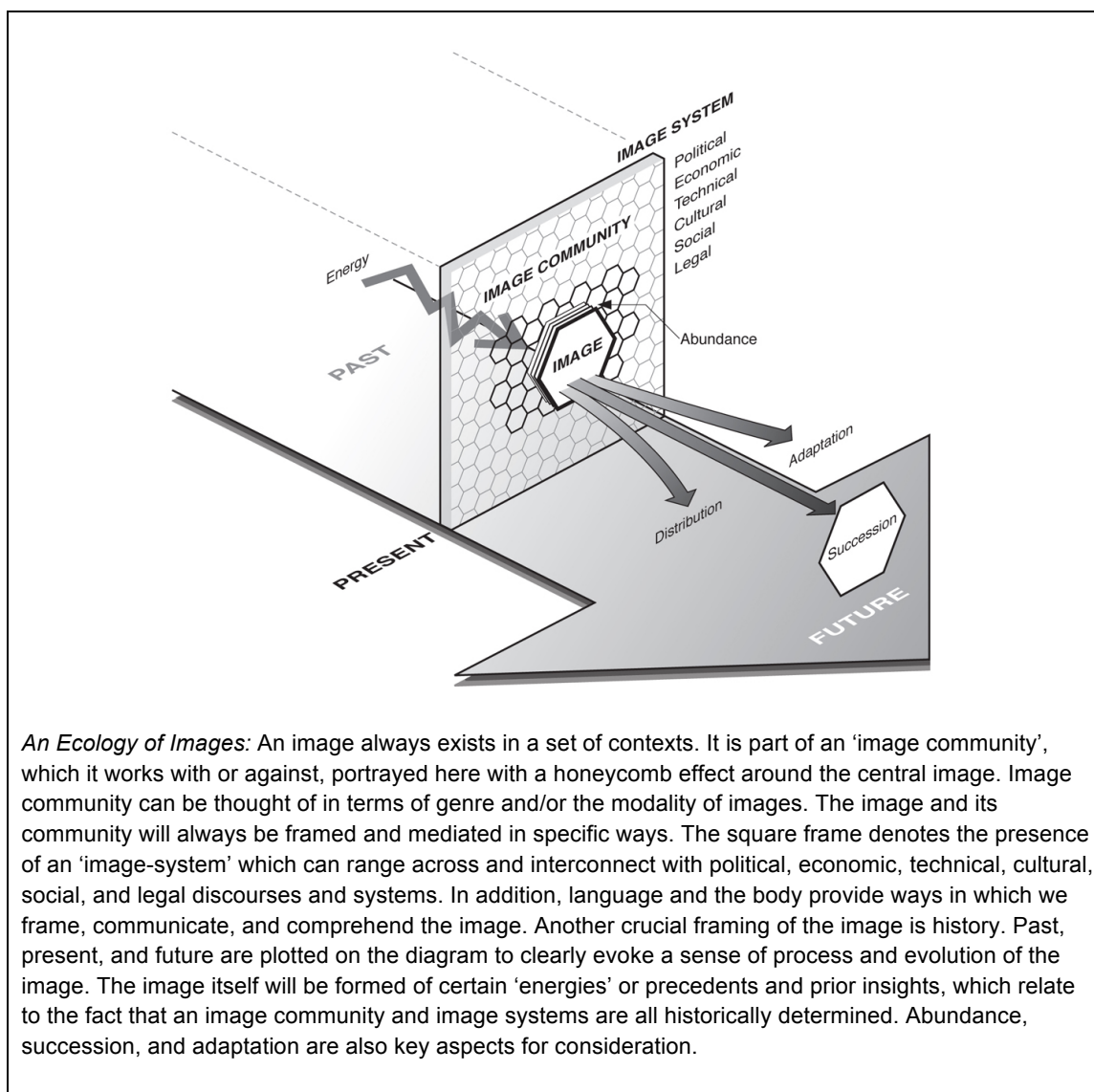**Sunil Manghani**
University of Southampton

An Ecology of Images

In *Image Studies* (Manghani, 2013), the reader can consider as a guiding metaphor an imagined 'ecology of images', which hopefully maintains a fluid, open account of the image, yet allows for a degree of mapping across a complex and rich 'image-system'. An initial articulation of the phrase 'ecology of images' appears at the very close of Susan Sontag's seminal book *On Photography* (1979). Sontag writes:

> Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well. (Sontag, 1979, p. 180)

In the context of writing about photography, Sontag's remark reflects upon the relationship between images and reality, which to this day is still frequently characterized in the terms of the Greek philosopher Plato; in particular, a passage from *The Republic* on 'The Simile of the Cave'. The argument associated with Plato is that images are illusions, and the world revealed to us through our senses is only a poor copy of its true 'Forms', which can only be apprehended intellectually. Sontag was interested in the way photography might overturn much of the Platonic philosophy about images and reality. 'Cameras,' she writes, 'are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete' (1979, p. 179). Sontag's thoughts on an 'ecology of images' pertain to certain political and ethical principles about reality, representation, and images. However, these are only some of the concerns and interests we might raise in relation to the image. In conjuring the phrase 'ecology of images,' it is fruitful to consider the word 'ecology' as much as 'image'.

What might we mean by an *ecology* of images? It would be a precarious task to transpose ideas and terminology from the scientific field of ecology, not least because even within the field itself there have been numerous debates over its true focus and distinctiveness. However, as a metaphor for a desire to understand the interrelationships of things (the nature of change, adaptation, and community), the classificatory, comparative, and systems-based approach of ecology can be made pertinent to image studies, as it too seeks to locate how and why images operate in certain 'environments' or systems of meaning.

An Ecology of Images: An image always exists in a set of contexts. It is part of an 'image community', which it works with or against, portrayed here with a honeycomb effect around the central image. Image community can be thought of in terms of genre and/or the modality of images. The image and its community will always be framed and mediated in specific ways. The square frame denotes the presence of an 'image-system' which can range across and interconnect with political, economic, technical, cultural, social, and legal discourses and systems. In addition, language and the body provide ways in which we frame, communicate, and comprehend the image. Another crucial framing of the image is history. Past, present, and future are plotted on the diagram to clearly evoke a sense of process and evolution of the image. The image itself will be formed of certain 'energies' or precedents and prior insights, which relate to the fact that an image community and image systems are all historically determined. Abundance, succession, and adaptation are also key aspects for consideration.

This diagram attempts to plot various terms that might underline an 'ecology of images'. Taking a cue from the ecologist's three main 'units' of assessment – the organism, its community, and the eco-system – an image always exists in a set of contexts. An image is always part of an 'image community', which it works with or against. It is portrayed here with a honeycomb effect around the central image. Image community can be thought of as a genre and/or modality of images. As such, there are formal, aesthetic properties and particular content and uses an image might share with other images, or indeed which it is attempting to work against or appropriate. In addition, the image and its community will always be framed and mediated in specific ways. The square frame in the diagram denotes the presence of an 'image-system',

which can range across and interconnect with political, economic, technical, cultural, social, and legal discourses and systems. In addition, language and the body provide ways in which we frame, communicate, and comprehend the image. Another crucial framing of the image is history. Past, present, and future are plotted on the diagram to clearly evoke a sense of process and evolution of the image. The image itself will be formed of certain 'energies' or precedents and prior insights, which relate to the fact that an image community and image systems are all historically determined. An image may well be found in great 'abundance' (as labeled on the diagram). An advertising image, for example, will clearly be in greater abundance than a child's drawing made at home one afternoon. Of course, there are various potential futures of the image. The aforementioned child's drawing might end up the winning entry of a competition; as such, it would likely receive greater distribution (through various means), leading to relative abundance. It may also be re-worked for a final product, which we could understand as the succession of the image. Images can also be adapted. A good example of this would be how cartoonists appropriate images and manipulate them for satirical effect.

It is important to stress that the exercise of imagining an ecology of images is certainly *not* to impose scientific terms and concepts. The intention is purely to step back from the image, to think about its greater complexity and variety. The aim is to slow ourselves down before the image, to appreciate complexity; to seek to understand image histories, connections, cultures, and adaptations, as well as to ponder the future of any given image. In just these few pages, all number of assumptions have been made about what we even mean by the 'image'. A crucial component to any ecology of images, then, is to incorporate a more complex consideration of definitions of the image. In the opening chapter of his book *Iconology* (1984), W.J.T. Mitchell provides an important overview of the difficulties and dilemmas in providing a coherent account of the image. The chapter provides a useful diagram and discussion of a 'family of images', which reminds us of distinct differences (and confusions) between graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal images. An ecology of images must incorporate these differences and keep open to the inherent complexities, both in terms of practical engagement with images and with respect to their intellectual arguments. Thus, in pursuing any form of image-related research, the researcher needs surely to be encouraged to imagine all kinds of quarrels, allegiances, and environments that can transpire, given the sheer abundance of image families and ecologies on display and in play.

For a fuller account of an 'Ecology of Images' see Chapter Two of *Image Studies: Theory and Practice* (Manghani, 2013)

References
Manghani, S. (2013) *Image Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
Mitchell, W.J.T. (1984) *Iconology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Sontag, S. (1979) On Photography. London: Penguin.

This article is part of *Looking at Images: A Researcher's Guide*:
http://blog.soton.ac.uk/wsapgr/looking-at-images/