LEITMOTIV

Omaggio a Escher

Numero 5/2005-2006

ART IN THE AGE OF VISUAL CULTURE
AND THE IMAGE

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Iconology and Ontology of the Image

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Two citations, in exergue.
The first from Heidegger, in *Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch* (from *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1951):

> Our current name for the look and appearance [*für Anblick und Aussehen*] of something is 'image' [*Bild*]. It is the nature of the image to let something be seen [*etwas sehen zu lassen*]. By contrast, copies and imitations are already derivative forms of the authentic image [*Dagegen sind die Abbilder und Nachbilder bereits Abarten des eigentlichen Bildes*], which, as look, lets the invisible be seen [*das Unsichtbare sehen lässt*] and thus, in unifying the invisible with that which is foreign to it, 'imagines' it. […] This is why poetic images are 'imaginations' [*Ein-bildungen*] in a distinctive sense: not mere fantasies and illusions [*Phantasien und Illusionen*], but rather imaginations [*Ein-Bildungen*] as visible inclusions of the foreign in the look of the familiar [*als erblickbare Einschlüsse des Fremden in den Anblick des Vertrauten*]. [1]

The other citation is from Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*:

> When Orpheus descends towards Eurydice, art is the power by which the night opens itself. The night, by the power of art, receives him […] but it is towards Eurydice that Orpheus has descended: Eurydice is, for him, the extreme which art can attain, she is, under a name which hides her and under a veil which covers her, the profoundly obscure point towards which art, desire, death, night

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[1] M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen 1954, pp. 194-195; english transl. in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York 1975, pp. 225-227 [all citations have been modified].

seem to tend […] Orpheus' work however, does not consist in securing the imminence of this 'point' in the descent towards the depths. His work is to bring this point back to daylight and to give it form, figure and reality in the day. Orpheus is capable of all, except of looking at this 'point' directly, of looking at the center of the night in the night. […] But Orpheus, in the movement of his migration, forgets the work which he must accomplish. […] In turning towards Eurydice, Orpheus ruins the work, the work undoes itself immediately, and Eurydice turns back into shadow. He thus betrays the work as well as Eurydice and the night. But, not turning back to Eurydice would not be betraying her any less, would not be any less unfaithful to the force, without measure and without prudence, of her movement, which does not want Eurydice in her diurnal truth and in her everyday charm, which wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, which wants to see her not when she is visible but when she is invisible and not as the intimacy of a familiar life but as the foreignness which excludes all intimacy, not to make her live but to have living in her the plenitude of her death. [2]

My analysis comports three moments.

FIRST MOMENT: THE PERCEPTION-IMAGE

An image is not a nothing, an image is «something», it presents itself, it is 'presence', it is given by a perception. But it is not a thing like any other. It is something that presents or represents something else: every image is an image of something, «it lets something be seen», as Heidegger writes. Thus, from the very inception, a duality is inscribed in the being of the image. The duality – or the dialectic – of the same and the other is thus constitutive of the being of the image. In any case, and this will be the first premise, can an image not present or represent itself? As an image of an image, or an image of the being-image of the image? Certainly, but not indefinitely, not interminably: the process of presentation and representation must be interrupted at a certain moment – and it is this interruption which sets in place and sets to work the 'other' of the image. And what if, this will be the second premise, the other were present at the same time as its image? This too is possible, but not interminably: a 'double' world, like that of Narcissus and his reflection, would be inconsistent. And indeed as Kant observed, a mirror, a reflection,

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[2] M. Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, New York 1981.

reverses right and left. This doubling, then, is nothing but an illusion, a 'failed' redoubling. Thus, it must be affirmed that the condition of the image is in the rift between a presence and an absence. To cite Blanchot from *The space of literature*:

> But what is the image? Where there is nothing, there the image finds its condition, but there it disappears. The image requires the neutrality and the effacement of the world, it would that everything enter into the indifferent ground where nothing is affirmed, the image reaches into the intimacy of that which still subsists in the void – it is its truth. But this truth exceeds the image; what makes the image possible is the limit where it ceases.

The image affirms things in their disappearance, the disappearance to which it is itself subject.

Presence-absence or perception of non-perception, such is the image. It is worth recalling that the Greek *eikôn* finds its development in the Roman *memoria*. Roman commemoration, deviating from Greek anamnesis, no doubt constitutes the anthropological beginning of the image. The time of 'it once was' and of 'it no longer is' is the first time of the image. And yet this perception of a non-perception, this presence-absence is not simple. This ambiguity is perfectly seen by Kant when he writes in his *Anthropology*, section 28:

> The imagination, as the faculty of intuition without presence of the object [*ohne Gegenwart des Gegenstandes*], is either productive, in other words a faculty of originary presentation of the object (*exhibitio originaria*) which thus precedes experience, or it is reproductive, in other words a faculty of derived presentation (*exhibitio derivata*) which brings to mind an intuition which one had earlier had.

In the same way he distinguishes, in section 51 of the *Critique of Judgment*, the archetype (originary model) and the ectype (the copy). It is easy to see how «the faculty of intuitions without presence of the object» gives birth to ectypes or derivations based on a prior object which has here the status of a model: memory is thus the fundamental mode of such an image. But what is an *exhibitio originaria*, «which precedes experience» when, as is well known, «all knowledge begins with experience […] and that no knowledge precede in us its experience?» Where to situate, the «originary» in 'originary exhibition'? The sole coherent response is that this 'originary exhibition' would be that of the a priori conditions of possibility of all experience. But for Kant, as is well known, the conditions can not be the object of any experience. Did Kant try

to resolve this question in the third Critique by way of the enigmatic notion of the «aesthetic Idea» which he identified precisely with 'originary exhibition'? The latter would then subscribe to the definition which Kant gives of the aesthetic Idea, namely, that «it gives more to think than a mere concept». Have we thus gained an 'origin'? No, for the aesthetic idea is by definition undetermined (or else it would become a concept). The origin could not be anything other than the reference to this undetermined 'subject', placed at the center of the Copernican Revolution, as inaccessible as Eurydice in her deepest night. Or, and this amounts to the same thing, this indefinable 'genius' which one must posit in order for art and images to be produced.

The only thing left then is the reproductive image subject to resemblance and repetition. But can we even speak of it? For, to speak of resemblance and repetition is to speak of a model, of an origin. But if the origin is, as we have just seen, inaccessible, the model is then lost in the night of time. Resemblance and repetition are thus not demonstrable, not showable.

SECOND MOMENT: THE CRISIS-IMAGE

It is once again Blanchot who will allow a transition here. In *The laughter of the gods* [3], a text on Nietzsche, Blanchot writes:

> A universe where the image ceases to be second with respect to a model, where imposture pretends to truth, where finally there is no longer any original, but an eternal scintillation which disperses the absence of origin in shards of detour and return.

I shall here posit the following principle: that the image ignores chronology. What, in fact, is the 'present' of the image, of this image which takes place, as Kant says, «without the presence of the object»? Nietzsche can help us in our analysis. Not just because he opposes the primacy of «forgetting» to the pretended privilege of «memory», but also by way of the determination which he gives, in the second *Untimely Meditation,* of three types of present, which is to say three ways of relating the present to the past. It is then the Nietzschean determination of three kinds of history, which will help us make

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[3] M. Blanchot, *Le rire des dieux*, in «Nouvelle Revue Française» (1965).

progress in the question of the image. First of all «documentary» history articulates a present to a past which is no longer, to a past which has gone by, a fossil past, a past of remains and of ruins – a history of mourning and separation [*Abschied*]. Then, «monumental» history articulates a present to a past posited as «a testimony for eternity», a lesson for the future, an anticipatory, progressive history. Nietzsche distinguishes these two types of history from «critical» history. What is «critical» history? It is the present history of the present. Which is to say? It is the history of the transformation of history, of mutation and of discontinuity: neither mourning, nor progress, but rupture. Rupture of the temporal continuum, time of «counter-time», time of «crisis». The 'present' of 'critical' history is therefore not the contemporary, it is not that which is timely; it is 'counter-time', the non-contemporary, the untimeliness [*Unzeitgemaess*] of time within time.

I shall assert that the image is a fundamental structure of experience: that of the untimeliness of time. Neither remembrance, nor anticipation, such then is the image. The image ignores chronology: untimely presence, always in the present but never contemporary: it is the contemporary of counter-time. The image is born of this 'crisis' (hence the very notion of 'critical' history). The image is itself crisis.

Two remarks here:

First remark: if the image is crisis, then this means that at the heart of the image there is contradiction. Contradiction is the heart of the image. The image is by definition contradiction. Contradiction for, as we have seen, it is crisis, counter-time, rupture. And there we have the status of the Heideggerien *Bild*. Recalling the opening quote: the *Bild* «lets the invisible be seen», «it is the visible inclusion of the foreign in the appearance of the familiar». A contradiction without overcoming, without *Aufhebung* in the Hegelian fashion, a contradiction which remains a contradiction. To the contrary, when the contradiction ceases the image also ceases, the image disappears as image, or it leaves the stage to copies and illusions. The image is only image as contradiction of the visible and the invisible, of the foreign and the familiar, of day and night held together inseparably, like life and death, like birth and death – the inseparable «ultimates», to use Reiner Schürmann's terms from *Les Hégémonies brisées*[4]. The image is the insurmounted, insurmountable contradiction: this is the condition of the being-image of the image. Which is why I would

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[4] R. Schürmann, *Les Hégémonies brisées*, Mauvezin 1996.

say that the image always implies a historical *Stimmung* and that this latter has a double status: that of Greek wonder [*Erstaunen*] and Modern terror [*Erschrecken*] [5]. Wonder or terror, are produced by and accompany our images.

Hence, I can come back to Nietzsche somewhat, and this time, to the *Birth of Tragedy*: to the two drives or original forces of the Apollinian and the Dionysian in their encounter, which is not the effect of a reconciliation in the Hegelian fashion (not *Aufhebung* but rather *Paarung*, to use Nietzsche's expression). An encounter which is a living and maintained contradiction – like beauty, figure and dream on the one hand, inebriation, dance and music on the other. These two 'sides' are inseparable in Greek tragedy. This contradiction will later be named «body» by Nietzsche, and what amounts to the same, «earth». This living contradiction is the very concept of Greek tragedy in Aeschylus and Sophocles – the opposite, according to Nietzsche, of Euripidean drama. (The latter is, I believe, a prefiguration of the modern *Trauerspiel*, the baroque dramas play of mourning, where contradiction is resolved in an 'elsewhere' and in an 'other world'). To recapitulate then, I would say that the Nietzschean notion of «tragic» (contradiction of the Apollinian and Dionysian) is precisely what I am calling 'image'. The image is tragic, the image is the 'tragical'.

Second remark: I said that the being-image of the image is located in the untimeliness of the image – here my analysis will be carried out in the proximity of the Art-historian Aby Warburg (I am relying on G. Didi-Huberman's remarkable *L'image survivante – Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* [6]). Warburg was of course an avid reader of Nietzsche. The history of art which he implements (e.g.: the studies on Botticelli's allegories, or of the astrological images of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara) is a-chronic from the beginning, for his task is to elucidate what he calls the «survivings» [*Nachleben*] in an epoch's images. But, one must insist on this, these «survivings» are not residues nor rests which could be inventoried as such – no, they are readable in the transformations which activate them and enliven them. In this sense, Warburgian images ignore chronology and inscribe themselves in an untimely 'present'. Images, according to Warburg, «return», but not in order to constitute imitation or resemblance, but rather in order to constitute

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[5] See *Basic Problems of Philosophy*, GA 45.

[6] G. Didi-Huberman*, L'image survivante – Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris 2002.

the contradiction of what we might call (in Warburg as in Husserl) the 'living present'. For Warburg the «returning» of images, is a 'becoming'; there is a 'return' of the image which, as with Nietzsche's eternal return, is not a return of the identical. Indeed, the function of this return is to incapacitate the thesis of an 'historical progress' in the history of art, as in history in general. The history of art and of images propounded by Warburg is the history of what he calls «*Pathos-Formeln*», pathic or pathetic formulas which are not the imitation of anything but the very experience of corporeal existence. Hence, the Greek term «*Mnemosyne*» inscribed by Warburg above the entrance to his institute has nothing to do with Roman '*memoria*'; it is not a question of commemoration but rather of an immemorial, a form of unconscious which however has nothing to do with an a-temporality. Hence, if there is a «surviving» of images, then this surviving presents itself, I would say, as a 'supervening' of images.

THIRD MOMENT: THE IMAGE AS 'SUPERVENING':
THE IMAGE-PHAINOMENON, THE APPEARING OF THAT WHICH APPEARS

Picking up again the Heidegger quote from the beginning: the image is «the visible inclusion of the foreign in the appearance of the familiar», which is to say that the image is inherently contradiction. The nature of the image is thus collision of the expected and the unexpected, of distance and non-distance, of proximity and remoteness. All of which points back to the term «shock» [*Stoss*] which Heidegger employs in *The origin of the work of art* [*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*]. I can thus affirm that the 'origin' is «shock», which is to say perturbation of time and of space, temporal disorientation. There is 'origin' when time is 'outside itself'. But is time not always 'outside itself'? Is it not always 'ungraspable'? Which is to say that one can never hold it 'in one's hands'. And the image, in its being-image, does it not inherit from this origin – for its part always absent? A sort of present of absence. Absence is thus our 'living present'. Our living present is that of absence.

In order to advance, I shall take a step back, behind Heidegger and Blanchot and quickly towards Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*. Schelling, who places the imagination (*Ein-bildungskraft* = force of uni-formation) at the center of all «potencies» [*Potenzen*] including nature itself: imagination is in nature, is a potency of nature (for nature creates, it is genesis and growth) and there is hence no original dualism between nature and spirit. For lack of

space I shall not here develop this further, but I would like to concentrate on one particular point of Schelling. In § 39 of his *Philosophy of Art,* Schelling distinguishes three types of presentation: schematical, allegorical, and symbolic:

> The presentation in which the universal signifies the particular is schematism [this is schematism and determinant judgment in Kant]; the presentation in which the particular signifies the universal is allegory [or Kantian reflexive judgment]; the synthesis of the two, where neither the universal signifies the particular, nor the particular signifies the universal, but where they are absolutely one is the symbolic.

Here we see how Schelling displaces the Kantian notions such that whereas the schematic and the allegorical are of the order of a signification between two levels (universal and particular), the Schellingian symbol does not present two levels but one, where, as he says, the ideal and the real are one. This is where Schelling situates the potency of art:

> We are satisfied neither by a mere being without signification nor by a simple signification, but we would rather that the object of absolute artistic presentation be as concrete as the image and nevertheless as universal and filled with sense as the concept; this is why the German language translates symbol perfectly with *Sinnbild*.

The Schellingian symbol is not grasped by the traditional scission of the sensible and of signification; it is the 'real' itself, it is the 'thing in itself', it is the *phainomenon*: it is the appearing of that which appears. This is what I am calling 'image'. The image does not signify, it 'is' – or rather, it is what it signifies, and it signifies what it is. The scission is not *between* the image and some other thing or some other signification, the scission is *in* the image, in its living contradiction. The image *is*, is '*body*', is '*living body*'.

Here, it seems to me that Konrad Fiedler contributes remarkable analyses in his *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit* (1887), analyses which prefigure Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of art. As regards artistic creation, he uses an interesting term: «inner atelier». What does this mean? The inner atelier, he says, is «the collection of physiological processes» – which resonates well enough with Nietzsche. It is noteworthy that Fiedler writes: «reality no longer appears as representation but as an infinitely multiple and changing process which is played out in our sensory organism». The issue

then is not one of a spiritual interiority which would oppose a material exteriority. There is thus no dualism in Fiedler anymore than in Schelling, an the «inner atelier» is a productive atelier, in other words, an «infinitely multiple and changing process». It is thus clear that «a formative activity which cannot unfold without the body», is necessarily «an external formative activity» – it is external because it produces bodies outside of the body: the traditional opposition of the internal and the external is completely replaced by the notion of a «formative activity». I would call these bodies produced outside of the body '*body-images*'.

This leads Fiedler to the analysis of what he calls «visibility». Fiedler accords visibility a primacy in formative activity. This primacy may seem unwarranted. But things are not so simple, for the primacy of vision for Fiedler depends on the contrary on this that it is not enough to open one's eyes in order to see. The extraordinary character of Fiedlerian vision is that for him: «Vision comes, so to speak, to itself when the relation to an object disappears». To see is thus to «see for the sake of seeing» and not to see an object; whereas, e.g. to 'touch' is to touch an object, to touch something. But then what does one see when one sees «for the sake of seeing»? Perhaps light and color, the very matter of vision, almost immaterial matter, matter that cannot be grasped by any other sense other that vision. Seeing for the sake of seeing thus relegates every other sense to the background: «One cannot separate from the object the sensory quality carried by touch. On the other hand, in vision one obtains a material of reality which can be represented independently of the other sensible qualities of the object». And here vision is then an 'abstract' sense: the sense of *form*. The inner atelier where this «formative activity» takes place is nothing other than the atelier of visibility: «Freed of the burden of the object, visibility becomes a free and autonomous configuration»; seeing for the sake of seeing is thus «seeing without seeing anything». Writing of the access to the realm of the visible, Fiedler says: «Only that activity which puts the visible into form can accede, not the eye».

CONCLUSION

It should now be clear that «the activity which puts the visible into form» coincides with what I call 'image'. The image is, I believe, an activity which puts the visible into form, when vision is a seeing for the sake of seeing, freed of the burden of the object. The image would be image at the heart of this in-

surmounted and insurmountable contradiction of appearance and disappearance. One could then speak of an 'archetype', in a sense of an origin without an origin, itself origin of no object. This would be the thing in itself, or the phenomenon, the process of the production of visibility.

I would say that the image is not an object but a fundamental structure of experience – the very experience of the absence of origin.

[Translation from French: Susanne Schilz and Hakhamanesh Zangeney]