

The Image as Origin
Time and Seduction

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Thank you.*

Contents

Preface

Introduction

Between Seven Minutes

The Hourglass

Dwarfs and Art History

Dwarfs and Origin

Image and Seduction

Metamorphoses

Image and Word

An Undraped Female Statue

Return to Beauty

Preface

One of the strangest memories of my life is a scene in which I am praying in front of a typical kitsch garden set of the seven Dwarfs and Snow White. I asked my mother about this memory and she confirmed that at the age of 4 I used to ask her quite often if she could take me to the back of the nursery school where there was a little garden carefully set with all these little sculptures. It was there where I used to pray in my childhood. The accidental encounter with the same image in a cemetery of Cagliari has prompted me to pay closer attention to this disquieting relationship between the dwarf's image and the sacred sphere.

“The Image as Origin” is the title of this paper and of a series of artworks that I created in relation to this peculiar phenomenon, in which images of commercial consumption (the Disney dwarfs) have replaced the sacred images. “Between Seven Minutes” and “Image and Seduction” are two short essays I have written to reflect on those concepts, which I feel are very important in my art practice, especially for my project “The Image as Origin”. These two essays represent my personal way of questioning and reviewing the general idea of art history and aesthetic categories in relation to images. In my work, I refer to the rejection of art history through a process of transformation, in which sight and touch, knowledge and destruction, aesthetics and anthropology, decay and resurrection can coexist.

What I have written about in these two essays is what I have painted, sculpted, and recorded in my artworks.¹

¹ 'The Image as Origin' is a two years project I developed as a student of the Transart Institute. 'Between Seven Minutes' is a short essay written in the first year, focusing on art history and aesthetics, while 'Image and Seduction', my second year essay is mostly centred on the relationship between image and seduction. With my advisors we decided to present both essays like two different but essential parts of my final thesis, since they are extremely relevant for the conceptual framework behind my art project entitled 'The Image as Origin,' from which my thesis bears the title.

Introduction

“How can we know an image if the image is the very thing that imperils (...) the positive or objective exercise of knowledge? If the image is what makes us imagine, and if the (sensible) imagination is an obstacle to (intelligible) knowledge, how then can one know an image?”²

In the last two years, I believe, this question has shaped my personal opinion and awareness of image in relation to art and its history. This paper represents the contribution for my research topic. I feel this research to be quite important both in relation to my art practice, and to the contemporary understanding and value of art. Reviewing some philosophical perspectives, this paper does not claim to answer to such a perilous and demanding matter but more modestly to give a look at image from a perspective which is beyond the wall of art history and aesthetics.

In the first part of this paper, entitled “Between Seven Minutes”, I delineated, in relation to image, a different conception of time, which I described using the analogy of the hourglass. I conceptualized a kind of time that is a “whole” in every moment: a kind of time that is past, present and future all at once, in which every instant is an infinite, structuring chains of worlds that belong to each other, reciprocally permeated with their totality.

The hourglass image represents everything at once, as much as it simultaneously contains every infinite and probable combination of every possible world. Such an object represents time as much as it expresses the integrated and simultaneous existence of past, present and future. Within the hourglass, the sand at rest is the perfect example of the time as a unity of past, present and future; but it is also the image of “being”³ as the unlimited possibility of worlds to exist. When we turn the hourglass upside down, we begin to perceive everything as a quick progression; we have an experience of historical time, generating worlds that are different and separate from one another. This perception is faulty, since inside the hourglass the total amount of sand does not change.

“Image time” is the opposite of “historical time”. In order to see the wholeness of the sand contained by the hourglass, we have to avoid exposing images to our method of questioning that does not transcend the realm of intellectual concepts. Our gaze will be destined to divide time and worlds grain by grain, looking for the beginning and conclusion, distinguishing what came before from what came after. Understanding the quality of time in relation to image is, I would argue, the first step to experiencing the image.

² Georges Didi Hubermann, *Confronting Images*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), xvi-xvii.

³ In its sense, 'being' must be understood as 'anything' that can be said 'to be', which is opposed to 'nonexistence'.

Nevertheless, a problem remains unsolved: what power or principle enables every moment to stand as a constant, simultaneous instance of the present, past and future at once? Or in figurative terms, what turns the hourglass upside down, transforming it to the oneness of the world (all possible worlds) and all time (past, present, future)?

In “Image and Seduction” I attempted to answer to this question introducing the concept of desire. From the philosophical point of view, the word “desire” might be considered and analysed from multiple perspectives, but for the purposes of this paper, I will define the term 'desire' only in its relation to the image and its time.

I believe for an image, there is a true “development”⁴, only when “the becoming” is in every instant “an origin”, a past, present, and future happening together. There is no linear progression, only an 'absolute whole' that develops itself as an “absolute whole”. This development is an authentic mystical⁵ evolution, since it cannot be performed by the mechanical or rational practices of cause and effect typical of the progressive development of things; in this case we now have to think of a subtler and more seductive situation; not a mechanical, but a psychical movement emerging between the gaps of every identity. Every development is based on cause and effect situation in which there is an interaction between the individualized things. This is the attitude of representation and intellectual concepts, where the non-distinction is always dismissed as a negative lack of existence.

In “Image and Seduction”, I attempted to prove the fundamental importance of non-distinction if we want to experience the image for what it is, as an anthropological and human manifestation. Desire always drives and originates the image. Paradoxically, desire is based in a sense of lack, a gap between two or more identities, a non-distinction. Desire is what is not, it is the absence of something. Desire moves the world of images according to a “seductive chain”. This chain is seductive because it is a set of images not connected or related by the interaction or reaction between two or more images, but it is a chain of images connected by the seductive emptiness between “what is” and “what is not”. We are dealing here with a seductive development that does not arise from the interaction of two or more identities, but from the seductive relation between “presence” and “absence”.

Art history represents presence and the relationship between the individuality of things and their developments or changes according to the rules of cause and effect. Desire, however, represents the invisible connection between “presence” and “absence”, the seduction that beckons between “what is” and “what is not”. The essence of an image is extraneous to “art history”, and in this sense, image belongs to a metaphysics of desire that is beyond observation.

⁴ In this case, 'development' must not be understood as “something that grows and changes” but rather like “something that abruptly and constantly starts to exist again and again”.

⁵ The term 'mystical' refers to a knowledge that can never be obtained just by observation.

Between Seven Minutes

The Hourglass

The “image as origin” is not an invention of mine. It is a neologism that I found in Benjamin's essay entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In its theoretical complexity this essay marks a turn in aesthetics towards a new conception of the image, whose continuous condition of becoming replaces the crystallized construction of sense and meaning of aesthetic forms. Indeed, behind this abstruse neologism a new attitude to image is concealed, that replaces the obsolete and cultural conception of image as pacific and harmonic form.⁶

Historically speaking, the image as conciliation of opposites has been a theoretical compromise invented by art historians to explain the image as a rational device. This invention degenerated into the unchangeable and motionless forms of aesthetics as the science of beauty and good taste.

It is true that in the 18th century, the new concept of the sublime was the first sign of transformation, but we had to wait for Nietzsche and Freud's research for a radical and evolutionary change in the conception of image. Neither Nietzsche nor Freud dealt directly with aesthetic problems, but to some degree their philosophy had important consequences in the aesthetic sphere. Nietzsche elaborated a new kind of experience, “the tragic experience”, that was no longer characterized by the conciliation of opposites and harmony as the aesthetic experience, but, on the contrary, by the endless conflict of two terms, that he defines as the Apollonian and Dionysiac.⁷ In 1919, Freud wrote a brief essay entitled “The Uncanny”, where he considered the 'uncanny' as a new dimension of experience, that became an alternative to the traditional aesthetic categories such as beauty and the sublime. According to Freud, the uncanny experience is something that is beyond every logic of identity; it is a familiar extraneousness: “the uncanny,” writes Freud, “is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”⁸

This brief digression is essential to illuminating two elements that are of great interest and utility in understanding what I define as “original image”. To some extent, this conception of image is related to Nietzsche and Freud's work since they tried, for the first time, to experience the reality beyond the traditional aesthetic and harmonious image. The question is, how can we imagine an image whose identity is beyond the representation, since its opposite still experiences the endless conflict of being as continuous condition of becoming? How might we think of an image that never finds harmony, where every logic of identity is lost, since every familiar knowledge and certainty becomes terrifying and horrible?

In *The Origin of German Drama*, the wonderful image of the origin depicted by Benjamin that lies in the flux of becoming at the centre of a vortex, becomes a theoretical starting point for analysing the new condition of image that does not cancel out the opposites and maintains the differences.⁹ *The Origin of German Drama* was published in 1928, but it was originally written in 1925 and presented at the University

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (New York, Verso, 1998), 27-48.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'The uncanny', (London, Penguin Books, 2003), 121-122.

⁹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45-46.

of Frankfurt as a postdoctoral dissertation meant to earn Benjamin the qualification to become a university instructor in German. The essay was not well understood. It was considered theoretically complex and referentially obscure by the academic judges of the aesthetics department, so Benjamin's dissertation was rejected. This rejection was a discouraging embarrassment to an academic system, that could neither understand nor conceive of a new philosophical idea in opposition to all criteria of knowledge, representation and form.

However, in 1927 Martin Heidegger published his main work *Being and Time*, two years after Benjamin's dissertation. This essay tackles the true nature of "Being" whose essence, according to Heidegger, was historically misunderstood, since all previous investigations of "Being" have always focused on particular entities and their properties, or have treated "Being" itself as an entity or substance. This path led Heidegger to the destructive analysis of the history of metaphysics. The philosopher held that the metaphysic thought always accorded central importance to representation, but never recognized what was beyond representation. Heidegger noted that it could be far more illuminating to examine the boundaries of ordinary knowledge and thought by trying to study "what is not" rather than "what already is". In this sense Heidegger considers aesthetics as a part of metaphysics, a purely representative thought that keeps reducing "Being" itself to any specific entity. This is a feature that Heidegger's philosophy criticises.¹⁰

His anti-metaphysical view opens an entirely new way of thinking that has been fully expressed by modern French authors such as Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski, Derrida and Deleuze, who developed a new way of experiencing reality, that to some extent is opposite to every fundamental principle of traditional aesthetics.

Gradually, it happened that every immutable or unchangeable truth became false and denied in accordance with a new criteria of judgement, based on the principle that every truth is destined for failure and ruin.

From now on, every possible truth is the "truth of becoming".

In 1925, Benjamin suggested just an image whose principle of truth was just its condition of becoming, an image that could take shape from its continuous process of construction and destruction in an endless cycle of emerging and becoming in which the image survived as aura.¹¹ Of course, these particular dynamics inherent in the image might not be immediately understood by our mind, especially if we attempt to analyse them according to an ordinary conception of time. Indeed, only a new conception of time can allow us to comprehend the image beyond its representational form, and I am referring to a concept of time that is able to deny its own history.

The reader might feel also this statement quite confusing and difficult to understand, and I don't blame him, since this idea is quite a puzzle. It is not by accident that Nietzsche himself, in *The Gay Science* defined the "eternal return" as the "greatest weight."¹²

Before I started this research, I never thought that time could be so closely related to image. The fact is that we are so used to imagining time as the everyday time, the time that can be measured and represented by the progress of nature and the world, that we actually do not think, we only live time. I am not interested in

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, (Yale University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45-46.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), section 241.

discussing here which is the true essence of time, neither to support the scientific or objective conception of time rather than the more poetic and abstract time of the consciousness (for example the “duration” of Bergson or the Heidegger's individual time of “dasein”), I would like instead to address another problem. I would like to analyse the connection between time and image.

Indeed we rarely notice that time never engages the senses, but it engages thought, memory, and imagination: it is extraordinary to think how time always engages image to conceive itself. We cannot touch or taste time, we can only depict it. On the contrary, every image in itself is timeless or beyond the concept of time since it does not rely on palpable amounts of time to come into being. Time always needs image to be conceived: the happiest or worst moments (times) of our life are images that depict time. Image does not need time, but contains time. We might think of image as a conical empty shape where time is materially contained repeating itself continuously; the image as “hourglass”, where water or sand, in their ongoing state, concretely embody the impossible concreteness of time.

It seems to me that this particular character of time in relation to image has never been taken into account by artists, theorists or philosophers until modern times, and to this day nobody has really tried to delve into the matter. For example, Nietzsche does not address the problem directly, but an implicit interest in this complex connection between time and image can be clearly inferred from his theory of the “eternal return”¹³. Also Benjamin does not clearly discuss this fascinating connection, but in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, he expresses precisely the “time of the image”, the time contained as an entire whole inside the image itself: “To articulate the past historically”, writes Benjamin “does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger, (...) to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.”¹⁴

In moments of danger, the image is capable of retaining time, not as the continuum of history, but as time filled by the presence of the 'now' in which past, present and future coexist. At first, I know this statement might also be another puzzle quite difficult to understand, but I rely on the image of the “hourglass” to help the reader to understand this subtle and refined concept. The “image as origin” is quite a complicated theory of image based on two premises: the rejection of the ordinary understanding of image as harmonious aesthetic form, and the rejection of any conception of time that is not conceived as image, or as “hourglass”.

Consequently, every other theory about image decays that is based on aesthetic forms and historical time. Aby Warburg was the first scholar who fully understood this shattering power of the image, but he was never capable of theorizing it. He paid for this personal failure with madness. Nevertheless, in his insane attempt to visually represent the “image as origin”, he created the “Mnemosyne Atlas”, an epic project that consisted of stretching black cloth on metal frames upon which he mounted hundreds of images from numerous fields with the unique desire to surpass the rational limitations of understanding the language of images. Warburg's lesson was not taken up by successive art historians who, baffled, misjudged his work for almost a century.¹⁵

¹³ Compare Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Part III 'Of the Vision and the Riddle', (Pennsylvania State University, 1999); *The Gay Science*, Section 341.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

¹⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Immagine insepolta, Aby Warburg, la memoria dei fantasmi e la storia dell'arte*, (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006).

If nowadays the presence of Seven Dwarfs in a cemetery is incomprehensible, it is because we are not able to understand how the Seven Dwarfs at once embody the whole of every sacred figure. They are not only an aspect of the whole, but they are the whole of one aspect: thus they are dwarfs as dwarfs, dwarfs as angels, dwarfs as simple gardeners, dwarfs as caretakers, and dwarfs as the psychological desire of San Michele's people to decorate the ground of the cemetery with joy and happiness.

Dwarfs and Art History

Art history is never born and always comes back to life.

We are used to judging images on the basis of our taste.

We all are men of taste.

We are used to judging images on the basis of the particular time that belonging to its history.

This is the consequence of our aesthetic culture.

This is the limit that prevents us from going beyond the seeming differences and seeing the truth of the image.

Beyond the simplistic and heartening veil of art history there is always the breath of image.

In his essay "Aporias of Modern Aesthetic", Peter Bürger starts off by saying that "a garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome."¹⁶ This is a wonderful beginning that could open up an entirely new perspective of image, but this statement leads to an obvious consideration about art and its decay or disappearance. Baudrillard gets quoted on his statement in which "art has today totally penetrated reality"¹⁷, and where the border between art and the culture industry, and between art and non-art, dramatically disappears.

The art historian ascertains that art is disintegrated into a pure exchange value and he makes a very good point when he states that "the institution that determines what does or doesn't count as a work of art gains in significance to the degree that works of art and everyday objects become indistinguishable"¹⁸; and also when he states that the aesthetic discourse does not attach itself to works of art, but it is rather the aesthetic discourse that makes them possible in the first place: "we have works of art because we have the institution"¹⁹ he says. Unfortunately he doesn't delve into the problem, and every explanation revolves around the usual analysis of modern aesthetic and his history. Bürger misses the point. Of course it is quite difficult to find an art historian capable of blaming himself for what he considers the dissolution of art. Although he clearly maintains that art became indistinguishable from other objects, since its canonisation depends on the specialists of art, the art historian will never blame himself for it. The art historian explains everything with the history, and history is continuously created and recreated to explain the image.

At this point I wonder if history is the proper method for a true understanding of image. It happens that the history of judgements and evaluations becomes the value that replaces the image, and while the history of image embodies concretely the image itself, the image - regarded as genuine image - loses its own value. In other words, when we are in front of an image, we are confronted by the history of its judgements more than

¹⁶ Peter Bürger, *Aporias of Modern Aesthetics*, in *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* (London, ICA, 1991), 3.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, (Columbia University, 2005), 98.

¹⁸ Bürger, *Thinking Art*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

by the image itself. I believe that this process has reached the final stage: indeed, we are no longer able to understand the image for what it is. The art historian doesn't observe any more; he judges. Most especially, he judges with absolute disinterest.²⁰ The art historian judges the image because he wants to dominate the image, regardless of whether the image loses its true value. What matters to him is its history: every time the image becomes incomprehensible, he creates a new history. The attention moves from the image to its history, and the art historian is the one who manages to prove the truth of his history. Finally the truth of history becomes the truth of image. The image becomes object of disinterest when the whole interest is focused on its history.²¹

I agree with Bürger that "a garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome"²² but I disagree with him on the reasons for the change. According to Bürger, a garden gnome can no longer be thought of merely as image of petty-bourgeois taste, because in the meantime, art appropriated a new aesthetic category: kitsch.

Kitsch explained and justified the image on the basis of a new value: kitsch taste actually became a new value of art. Thus the art historian has written a new part of his history and justified from his point of view what was an incomprehensible image.

In my opinion, "a garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome",²³ but the true nature of image does not lie in its understanding but in its misunderstanding. In other words, it is quite useless to resort to kitsch taste if we want to find a suitable explanation for this garden gnome image. Indeed, every outside value cancels out the image as auratic power, since every history only tries to fill the gap between what is comprehensible in the image and what is not.

Let us think of an image as an incomprehensible beauty, as a totally open image that does not experience the condition of historical time and survives in its auratic form of decay and resurrection.²⁴

Art history began with the art historians: Giorgio Vasari is considered the first art historian and published his most famous book *Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori* in 1550. Essential to Vasari was the notion of the rebirth of art: his whole history was focused on a progressive development of art that reached its peak in Vasari's own time with the divine Michelangelo. This is the power of "good taste" that simplifies the differences and always finds its true value, distinguishing between major and minor ones.

Taste changes as well as art history, and after Vasari it happens that Winckelmann inaugurates a new art history. The time of the art history is that of the winner, the one who writes art history and establishes the value of aesthetic things. During the Age of Enlightenment, Winckelmann invented art history and this invention has been unchanged over centuries up to last century.

The thought of causality dominates this new realm: one image gives rise to the next, which appears as a positive or a negative reaction to what came before. In accordance with positive science, art history is an historical method of aesthetic analysis capable of explaining every image, resorting systematically to the epistemological categories of analogy and succession.²⁵ Every image is viewed and considered within the

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (Macerata, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Quodlibet), 9-18.

²¹ Ibid., 9-18

²² Bürger, *Thinking Art*, 5.

²³ Ibid., 5

²⁴ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45-46

²⁵ Didi-Huberman, *L'Immagine insepolta, Aby Warburg, la memoria dei fantasmi e la storia dell'arte*, (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006), 16.

context of art history as a single point on a continuum in which every analogy explains and assures the certainty of the succession.

Winckelmann claimed this invention as the new truth against the simplistic judgement of taste. Naturally this claim is impossible and false. Winckelmann is simply the winner who imposed his own aesthetic model and replaced the old taste with a new one.

From that time on, every established and dominant aesthetic value has concealed the true essence of image within the structure of the history. Art history is the rational system used to analyse and explain the image. I wonder what gives us the certainty that we can bear out the truth of the image with this method. Winckelmann invented the concept of art as history only because he comprehended time as a linear structure and a continuum of past, present and future. Consequently, he thought of an image within a historical time where every image could experience its own origin, development, decay and death in systematic succession.²⁶ This conceptual structure allows the winner to explain the image and create its history. This concept excludes the image from the creative vortex²⁷ of every civilization. This means of excluding the image from its true life which makes the image the metaphysical product of a kind of rational thought. The aesthetic sphere becomes the only value, to the detriment of impure elements that nowadays are represented by other fields of research such as anthropology and psychology.²⁸

Art history is the result of a contradictory polarity: art and history. Winckelmann created art history unifying image and time according to a prior ideal model of beauty. This aesthetic norm forced history within the boundaries of the beautiful objects that, opposed to ugly objects, became cast as the “good characters” in history itself. When Winckelmann established a prior aesthetic norm, history lost its organized method of science and became a simple story in which everything revolves around good and beautiful characters. Winckelmann considered himself to be the father of a new discipline whose principal aim was to understand the true essence of art. When he tried to investigate art with that positivist method of history, he invented the aesthetic model, and so failed in his attempt. Nevertheless, this aesthetic model represents Winckelmann's only chance of success juxtaposing art and history.

It is impossible to analyse art from the viewpoint of scientific time: this requires a prior model that forcefully determines the ending of the story. This is the “bad conscience” that is beyond art history. Winckelmann makes a strenuous effort to link image and time. He decided to create his normative model on the basis of objects that did not exist any more. When Winckelmann invented art history, classical art was “ruin” and “fragment”. The ideal of Beauty was the only way to piece together this debris. Winckelmann invented a new discipline that smells of the corpse. His ideal model resulted from a desire for something that no longer exists. This distressing desire lays the basis for an ideal Beauty that subverts history and image, forgetting “ruins” and “fragments”.²⁹

In 1887, Nietzsche published *On the Genealogy of Morality*. He was concerned with showing the origin of our moral prejudices, and of our valuation of Good and Evil. I believe what Nietzsche calls “bad conscience” doesn't belong solely to morality. Socrates invented metaphysics: life became something that could be

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45-46.

²⁸ Didi-Huberman, *L'Immagine insepolta*, 51-60.

²⁹ Ibid., 13-28.

judged, and thought became the instrument to create superior values: “Truth and Falsehood, Good and Evil, Beauty and Ugliness, Good Taste and Bad Taste”.³⁰ This process led to the aesthetics of Beauty, the field in which the man of taste³¹ can freely exert his taste up to degeneration.

It is very interesting what Agamben says about aesthetic taste: “Good taste,” he writes, “does not have a tendency to pervert itself into its opposite; it is, in some way, the very principle of any perversion, and its appearance in consciousness seems to coincide with the beginning of a process of reversal of all values and all contents”.³²

The “man of taste” is one who knows the difference between beautiful and ugly objects, and, in creating categories of taste, restricts his judgement to the outward appearance. What Agamben defines as “the beginning of a process of reversal of all values and all contents” is inherent in this practice. Every form of judgement based on the value of objects contains in itself a “principle of perversion”³³ that causes a true blindness to the value of image. This leads to a fetishism for the object that conceals an absolute disinterest for the complexity of the image. I believe it is clear that the bad conscience doesn't belong only to morality.

Dwarfs and Origin

It was a strange coincidence to find out that Zarathustra, at the moment he was in front of the gateway called 'Moment', was in company with an imaginary friend: a dwarf.

Nietzsche employs a philosopher and a dwarf when he wants to create a meaningful dialogue in which he presents to the reader his disquieting conception of time.

“Time itself is a circle”³⁴ says the dwarf, and saying that, the dwarf himself knows that he will return eternally.

There is a seeming difference between the childlike, happy Disney dwarfs that I discovered in the middle of the cemetery in San Michele and Nietzsche's obscure and disquieting dwarf. This difference is evident since the outward appearances reduce every difference to the simple distinction of two things. This distinction is artificial: beyond appearances, the Disney dwarfs experience the same recurring condition of time.

The “image as origin” is not symbolic. Every attempt to explain this concept creates a metaphysical framework that undermines the concept itself. The “image as origin” is far from a conclusive thought. Every endeavour to legitimize this thought simplifies its esoteric life. It would be a mistake to resort to any kind of symbolism to explain the “image as origin”. The greatest misunderstanding would be to consider the image according to innate and universal rules as collective unconscious or archetype,³⁵ or to consider the idea of “origin” as a starting point, a moment at which the essence of the matter is found. The “origin as image” is not an original image and does not call for a world-behind-the-world to be explained. The “origin as image” does not need to be explained, does not need to be rationalized, because is not an event, but a process.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³¹ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 9-18.

³² Ibid., 15.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 144.

³⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *L'uomo e I suoi simboli*, (Milano, TEA, 2009)

When Nietzsche decided to write *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the book that in his opinion stood above all his other works, he conceived the essay as a philosophical novel. The entire essay is permeated by biblical language. I don't think that Nietzsche mimics ironically the style of the Bible in order to present ideas which fundamentally oppose Christian and Jewish morality and tradition. I think Nietzsche was aware of the importance of style to express his abyssal and esoteric truths. The “overman” (Übermensch), the “eternal recurrence”, and the “will to power” are themes that are still matters of debate. Nietzsche intentionally created an unreadable text that frustrates every academic attempt at analysis.

Benjamin also denied every preconceived truth and the logical philosophic reasoning as method. Combining elements of the Jewish mysticism and German Idealism, his style consisted of sentences that do not originate in the ordinary way, do not progress into one another, and delineate no obvious line of reasoning as each sentence had to say or explain everything. Benjamin refers to Medieval treatises and the mosaic to explain his philosophical method: “the value of fragments of thought,” writes the philosopher, “is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste.(...) The truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter”.³⁶ In Benjamin's style, fragments and quotations become truth-contents to express the idea. Enhancing fragments and quotations, Benjamin tries to emphasize the process instead of the event, to find the genealogy instead of the historical origin.³⁷ The style becomes the means to express the ineffable philosophical truth of becoming.

Aby Warburg was also particularly sensitive to the problem of style, and he referred to his extremely dense writing style as his “Aalsuppenstil” (eel-soup style).

Let us imagine formless bodies, a tangle of serpentine forms, where every figure is beyond recognition, something that is between the sculpture of Laocoon and the Monki Indians' dances with live serpents³⁸, something that has not principle and end, a terrible agglomeration of heads and tails.³⁹ This “eel soup” is the appropriate style to translate the visual experience. It may come as no surprise that his magnum opus, the “Atlas Mnemosyne”, depends little on the written word. Warburg consciously renounced the written word, because he knew that image can be conceived as origin only by means of other images. The “Atlas Mnemosyne” goes beyond every aesthetic theory and does not search for the original image but repeats and multiplies the differences. We might consider the Warburg's “Atlas Mnemosyne” as an overturned Platonism⁴⁰ in which every image refers to another, every single image gets lost in another one; between several metal frames, the infinite visual references allow neither “original” nor “origin” to subsist. The “Atlas Mnemosyne” with its process of images denies the origin as event and time as “historical present” (single point on a continuum). The image can be conceived only as “Ursprung”, where the “Ursprung” is the German word that stands for “Origin”, but in this case the term origin assumes a completely different meaning: “Origin (*Ursprung*),” writes Benjamin “although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless,

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 29.

³⁷ Michel Foucault *Michel Nietzsche, Genealogy, History in Language, counter-memory, practice*, (Cornell University Press,1977).

³⁸ Aby Warburg, *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual*, (Journal of the Warburg Institute, Vol. 2, No. 4), 286-292.

³⁹ Didi-Huberman, *L'Immagine insepolta*, 33.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (New York,Columbia University Press,2004), 80-81.

nothing to do with genesis (Entstehung). The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.”⁴¹

The so-called “Nachleben” (meaning both afterlife and survival), was Warburg's extreme conceptual attempt to express the image as “Ursprung”, the “image as origin”. Warburg tried to go beyond every established rule of time and identity, because he was certain that the time of image could not coincide with the time of history, inasmuch as the identity of the image could not be eternally established and determined in itself. Every image survives its own decay and death as an emerging figure of becoming that takes shape within its continuous process of construction and destruction. But if every image survives into another image, every image is as origin. If every image is not subject to an ageing process just as human beings are, every image contains the entire range of images.

This concept is subtle and requires a better explanation. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin discusses Plato's theory Ideas, and comes to expound his views on the configuration of the idea as a monad. This brief passage about the idea as monad might be interpreted as an astonishing theory of the true essence of image, and might help the reader understand the image as monad.

The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored. Virtually, because that which is comprehended in the idea of origin still has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be described as the past and subsequent history of this being.⁴²

Paraphrasing Benjamin, the representation of an image cannot be considered successful unless it contains the whole range of possible images. And this is possible only virtually because we conceive the image as historical present and not as a process of being in which the time is filled by the presence of the now, in which past, present and future coexist.

We will never understand why, in a cemetery, images of commercial consumption (the Disney dwarfs) have replaced sacred images as long as we keep explaining images according to normative identity and aesthetic representation. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze states: “It is strange that aesthetics (as the science of the sensible) could be founded on what can be represented in the sensible [and not] the inverse procedure consisting of the attempt to withdraw the pure sensible from representation and to determine it as that which remains once representation is removed”.⁴³

In the introduction, I discussed the nature of the dwarfs' image and I drew the conclusion that dwarfs are dwarfs, but are also angels, ancestor spirits, simple gardeners, caretakers, and the psychical desire of San Michele's people to decorate the ground of the cemetery.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 27.

⁴² Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47.

⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 68.

The dwarfs are what remains once representation is removed, namely repetition, as Deleuze writes:

Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated.⁴⁴

“All truth is crooked; Time itself is a circle”⁴⁵ says the dwarf, and saying that, the dwarf himself knows that he will return eternally.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 144.

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Image and Seduction

Metamorphoses

In 1928 George Bataille published *Story of the Eye*, a novella apparently centered around the sexual passion existing between the unnamed adolescent narrator and Simone, his primary female partner. I say apparently because this novella might not be interpreted necessarily as a pornographic narrative, given that these series of episodic vignettes constitute only a background for another story: the story of the eye, the metamorphoses of an object. In this case, the “object eye” becomes interchangeable with other objects: eggs, bull's testicles, and other ovular objects within the narrative. This interchangeability is seductive and not rational. These objects do not show any outward cause that relates them each other. There is not relationship between eggs and bull's testicles. Nevertheless when we read Bataille's novella we perceive an occult link between these disparate objects. On the level of common sense there is nothing in common between eggs and testicles. The relation becomes perceptible only if we think of them as they were images: the image of eye, egg and testicle.

In “Metaphor of the Eye” Roland Barthes describes Bataille's novella as a structuring chains of metaphors and questions if an object might have a story. Implicitly he identifies the link between object and image as a powerful drive to develop a system of metaphors that, according to Barthes, constitutes the essence of Bataille's novella. He writes about the 'object eye': “No doubt it can pass from hand to hand; it can also pass from image to image, so that its story is that of a migration, the cycle of the avatars it traverses far from its original being, according to the tendency of a certain imagination which distorts yet does not discard it.”⁴⁶ According to Barthes, Bataille “proceeds (...) only within what is essentially an image system”⁴⁷ and this allows him to create a metaphoric composition that follows and respects the improbable and seductive combination and structure of the image's world and excludes, on the contrary, that timid and predictable imagination that is guaranteed by reality.

In his novella, Bataille does not write a story of the eye but a story of the image of the eye. There is a qualitative difference and distance between an object and its image, and it is in this gap that Bataille creates this story of metamorphosis. There is a seductive connection between things that is beyond reality. We might perceive it only if we proceed within the “image system” and its unexplainable essence of aleatory combinations between things. Bataille was able to create a novella based on the seductive and associative power of images in which the eye is potentially contained or expressed within the egg or testicle's image. From this perspective they are states of the same identity. In “Metaphor of the Eye”, there is a passage where Barthes masterfully explains this particular condition of the object. He says:

Since poetic technique consists, in this case, of undoing the unusual contiguities of objects in order to substitute for them new encounters limited, nonetheless, by the persistence of a single theme within each metaphor, there occurs a kind of general contagion of qualities and actions: by their metaphoric

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 239.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 240.

dependence, eye, sun, and egg participate closely in the genital; and by their metonymic freedom, they endlessly exchange their meanings and their usages, so that to break eggs into a bathtub, to swallow or to shell (soft-boiled) eggs, to enucleate an eye or to play with it erotically, to associate milk dish and sexual organ, a thread of moonlight and a jet of urine, to bite into the bull's testicle as if it were an egg or to insert it into one's own body- all these associations are both the same and different; for metaphor, which varies them, manifests a regulated difference among them, immediately undertakes to abolish: the world becomes disturbed, its properties are no longer divided; to flow, to sob, to urinate, to ejaculate – these form a vacillating meaning, and the whole of *Histoire de l'oeil* signifies in the manner of a vibration which always produces the same sound.⁴⁸

Bataille creates a condition of things that Deleuze calls “orgiastic representation”. According to the french philosopher this state of things emerges “when representation discovers the infinite within itself, (...) it rediscovers monstrosity”.⁴⁹ Bataille obtained this monstrosity by forcing the object to abandon reality and proceed within the image's field. It is not an accident that this novella seems at first blush to be only a pornographic adventure. The sexual background of the story works as a springboard, enabling the object to jump from reality to image. There is a real affinity between eroticism and image: both develop themselves according to seductive strategies.

In *Erotism*, an essay written by Bataille 29 years after the publication of *History of the Eye*, he identifies the main character of eroticism with a drive that destabilises the more rational and important opposition of human being's life: “Erotism” writes Bataille “is the approval of life until death”.⁵⁰ Eroticism expresses the undeniable desire to transgress the boundaries of individuality to reach the orgiastic experience of losing one's self. Images, like eroticism are always accompanied by a certain tremor and insufficiency that represents its own condition. Constantly image tends to be “what is not”, making a presence out of absence, just as erotism tends to bring life to death. In this sense, I found very interesting Bataille's definition concerning the object of desire. If the erotic experience is a process that overwhelms our individuality of being and brings all the differences and contrasts within the world of non-distinction, we confront a paradox: the object of desire holds its own denial of being object.⁵¹

Surrealism is the first intellectual movement that seems to be perfectly aware of this paradox. The object of desire is an anxious and unquiet object. It continuously manifests its desire to get rid of its own individuality to proceed within the image's world. This passage assumes that the object will disappear and then emerge as a pure image, thus becoming “the image of an object”. The object of desire is the most desirable because it potentially contains the dynamic unity of its own denial: the object is desirable because it manifests its own desire to be what it is not. This is the starting point for an “orgiastic representation”, where every identity gets lost within the infinite possibility of being another being.

On the first page of *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze questions the existence of the identity itself:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 245.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.

⁵⁰ Georges Bataille, *L'Erotismo*, (Milano, ES, 2009), 14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 126 -127.

The difference between two things is only empirical, and the corresponding determinations are only extrinsic. However, instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. There is cruelty, even monstrosity, on both sides of this struggle against an elusive adversary, in which the distinguished opposes something which cannot distinguish itself from it but continues to espouse that which divorces it.⁵²

Reality is established according to rational concepts, and is experienced according to the individuality of things. From this prospective, every determination is a form that emerges from the background, ceasing to be the amorphous part of the remaining whole. Our normal state of consciousness is to decipher reality with intellectual concepts that construct a world of distinctions and opposites. The world of images transcends this state, necessitating a categorical reversal in our thinking. Identity as a factual principle must be discarded, while image must be conceived as a condition of becoming proceeding within a system of seductive relationships. In other words, we should bring the background (sky) at the same level of the form (light) and become aware that once the determination of the form is dissolved, the background acquires autonomous existence. This is the field in which eye, sun, egg and genital become interchangeable.

Image and Word

The idea of a world based on seductive relationships becomes an appealing truth that might change our modern perceptions of reality. This is what Baudrillard suggests, discussing such a hypothesis:

Perhaps signs⁵³ are not destined to enter into fixed oppositions for meaningful ends, that being only their present destination. Their actual destiny is perhaps quite different: to seduce each other and, thereby, seduce us. If such is the case, an entirely different logic would lie behind their secret circulation.

(...) Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions. Suppose not just that the feminine seduces the masculine, but that absence seduces presence, cold seduces hot, the subject seduces the object, and to be sure, the reverse. For seduction supposes that minimum reversibility which puts an end to every fixed opposition and, therefore, every conventional semiology.

(...) Now suppose that wherever relations of opposition presently exist, relations of seduction are put into play. Imagine a flash of seduction that causes the polar or differential, transistorized circuits of

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 28.

⁵³ In this case, Baudrillard employs the term 'sign'. He does not attribute a precise and concrete entity to this term. We don't know if the author wants to indicate the reality of things or the world of images. I believe the term 'sign' might be interpreted like something whose nature lies in the middle of two other natures: that of reality of things and that of images. The sign becomes a bridge between two spheres.

meaning to melt? There are examples of a non-diacritical semiology (that is to say, a non-semiology). The elements of the ancient cosmogony; for example, did not enter into structural relations of classification (water/fire, air/earth, etc.): they were not "distinctive" elements, but "attractive" elements that seduced each other: water seduces fire, water seduced by fire.⁵⁴

This idea of the world so intertwined with seduction (and, consequently, with every unbridled force of transformation), might seem strange to the modern observer accustomed to understanding reality from a rational and univocal perspective. The primordial conception of aesthetics was formulated according to an implicit and continuous tendency towards ending every conflict between polarities: the ideal of harmony, organic unity, symmetry, regularity are an ideal suspension of a struggle between opposites.⁵⁵

It is important to remember that particular origin of our concept of aesthetics, if we want to understand our modern attitude toward art and image. Throughout history we witnessed a gradual decline of the original sense of image and its seductive existence. The aim was no longer to experience the image but rather to judge the object as beautiful or ugly, and legitimize its appropriateness or inappropriateness to art. What became important was the end of the struggle, deciding which category or polarity we should attribute to the object in question. Appraising a work of art, we always try to solve an ideal opposition: what is aroused in ourselves is not just our immediate enjoyment and feeling for the object, but also our judgement. We subject the object to our intellectual consideration. The critical stance has become so strong that when we are before a work of art we no longer attempt to experience it, but rather attempt to represent it to ourselves within a critical framework furnished by aesthetic judgment.

Presently, this kind of aesthetic experience and judgment is so spontaneous and familiar that we never even question its mechanism. In his essay *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Giorgio Agamben describes the paradox behind aesthetic judgment and intellectual consideration of art, and compares our behaviour to that of a pathologist:

In the act of judgment that separates art from non-art, we turn non-art into the content of art, and it is only in this negative mould that we are able to rediscover its reality. When we deny that a work is artistic, we mean that it has all the material elements of a work of art with the exception of something essential on which its life depends, just in the same way that we say that a corpse has all the elements of the living body, except that ungraspable *something* that makes of it a living being. Yet, when we actually find ourselves before a work of art, we behave unconsciously like a medical student who has studied anatomy only on corpses and who, faced with the pulsing organs of the patient, must mentally refer back to his dead anatomical model in order to orient himself. Whatever criterion the critical judgment employs to measure the reality of the work, (...) it will only have laid out, in place of a living body, an interminable skeleton of dead elements, and the work of art will have actually become for us, as Hegel says, the beautiful fruit picked from the tree that a friendly Fate has placed before us, without,

⁵⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, (Montréal, Ctheory Books, 2011), 103-104.

⁵⁵ Mario Perniola, *L'arte e la sua ombra*, (Torino, Einaudi, 2000), 19.

however, giving back to us, together with it, either the branch that has borne it or the soil that has nourished it or the changing seasons that have helped it ripen.⁵⁶

In this sense, put before a work of art we perceive only the object, the anatomical model we studied, the corpse: the image -the living body- remains invisible. The tree, the branch, the soil, the changing seasons inside the 'image-fruit' are not tasted: the beautiful fruit that has been picked has no flavour. Unable to eat it, we can only look.

The ancient world and the Middle Ages had a completely different approach to art and image. The intrinsic and substantial unity between art and image satisfied the soul's spiritual needs of the human beings, and there was a living link between art and image that reflected the specific character of a precise world view and religion, in which it would be inconceivable to speak of art as an aesthetic object, because art did not embody an object, but an image connected to the basic condition of the universal consciousness of the age. There were no aesthetics; there was only a living culture that could express its content through image. Art and image as an indivisible entity reflected a spiritual need in which religion and mythology held the lexicon for seductive signs to be constantly created and recreated. In previous ages, the ancients enjoyed an anthropological spectacle of images in which people were able to reflect themselves and their essence of beings. Today, we experience an aesthetic spectacle of objects devoid of anthropological content, holding only our critical judgments instead.

In the arc of history, the unity of art and image, and of image and anthropological content, breaks.

| A | B |
|--------------|-------------|
| Image | Word |
| Interest | Disinterest |
| Anthropology | Aesthetics |
| Life | Culture |
| Desire | Concept |
| Seduction | Judgment |
| Difference | Identity |

The figure above describes the polarities among which we experience art. At present, our attitude toward art is in accordance with the values listed under the letter **B**. We witness a radical transformation: on one level the observer prefers to exert his knowledge and culture on the object rather than experiencing it as itself. The observer judges and legitimises the object as being or not being art, while missing the pleasure of engaging himself within the imagery language that the object would implicitly express. Thus the object loses its seductive, metaphysical power of illusion and representation. On the other level, the artist takes an

⁵⁶ Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, 64-65.

analytic attitude: he loses interest in expressive and representative languages and directs his attention to metalinguistic and reflective forms of expression. The artist begins to be interested in the mental process that lies behind the concept of art: the concrete object and its quality loses its fascination. The art object is no longer manifested by refined techniques and traditional experience, but becomes the evidence of a pure thought.

In *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna* Filiberto Menna attempts to follow this process and to outline the most evident stages of such a gradual separation between art and image. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the scientific use of painting, known as pointillism, invented by the French painter Seurat, marked the birth of a process that progressively denied any emotional and expressive property of the art object in favour of a critical reflection that became the only principle to legitimise the value of the art object.

In the 1960s Conceptual art movement, represented the most influent consequence and expression of the division between image and object. Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and the English Art and Language group began a radical interrogation of art: one of the first and most important things they questioned was the common assumption that the role of the artist was to create special kinds of material objects. ⁵⁷*One and Three Chairs*, created by Joseph Kosuth, features a physical chair, a photograph of that chair, and the text of a dictionary definition of the word “chair”. The photograph is a representation of the actual chair situated on the floor, in the foreground of the work of art. The definition, posted on the same wall as the photograph, delineates in words the concept of what a chair is, in its various incarnations. With Kosuth the split between the art object and its critical assumption reaches its peak: Kosuth makes art employing tautological statements where the artworks literally are what they say they are. In his essay *Art after Philosophy*, he considers the separation between aesthetics and art as necessary to achieve a true understanding of art and its essence; he upholds a theory of art that presents the same dichotomy I showed in the figure above: it is an impartial perspective where “A values” are underestimated and considered as negative and useless, while “B values” are held to be positive and essential for the notion of art and its reality.

It is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deals with opinions on perception of the world in general. In the past one of the two prongs of art’s function was its value as decoration. So any branch of philosophy that dealt with “beauty” and thus, taste, was inevitably duty bound to discuss art as well. Out of this “habit” grew the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true. This idea never drastically conflicted with artistic considerations before recent times, not only because the morphological characteristics of art perpetuated the continuity of this error, but as well, because the apparent other “functions” of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.) used art to cover up art.⁵⁸

From this passage it becomes clear the extreme perspective by which Kosuth reviewed the notion of art. Art no longer belong to human condition, it develops itself within another world apart from human life. We

⁵⁷ Filiberto Menna, *La linea analitica dell'arte moderna*, (Torino, Einaudi, 1975).

⁵⁸ Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, (Studio International, 1969), 3.

are before a complete liquidation of all anthropological values in few words: “the apparent other ‘functions’ of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.) used art to cover up art”. In the following part of Kosuth's essay there are no more mentions of these harmful “functions” of art. The liquidation is total: Duchamp and Wittgenstein become the two load-bearing columns on which Kosuth legitimises a new, true notion of art.

The entire essay goes on with the only worry to support a new horizon of art on the base of simplistic and ingenuous premises. A strain of banal truth runs all through his book with paradoxical pitches in statements like this: “actual works of art” writes Kosuth “are little more than historical curiosities. As far as art is concerned Van Gogh’s paintings aren’t worth any more than his palette is. They are both “collector's items”⁵⁹ The object-painting is completely devaluated and a demeaning comparison of Van Gogh's paintings with his palette denies every seductive quality of the image. With this statement Kosuth would determine the end of an idea of art based on image and its allusive and seductive power: image is decoration, what matters to Kosuth is only the metaphysical idea behind the image. From this viewpoint, image itself never expressed outward values beyond those values expressed like rational concepts. Before Van Gogh's painting, we might only reflect on those elements that art history recognised as essential for the development of the concept of art and its history. According to Kosuth's assumption, art is simply questioning the nature of art,⁶⁰ consequently the extraordinary Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* might remind us only what Post-Impressionism added to the concept of art, namely that: “Post-Impressionists extended Impressionism while rejecting its limitations: they continued using vivid colours, thick application of paint, distinctive brush strokes, and real-life subject matter, but they were more inclined to emphasize geometric forms, to distort form for expressive effect, and to use unnatural or arbitrary colour”.⁶¹

Paradoxically, it happens that the image, as the constitutive and fundamental element of art, is replaced with another element: the word, which belongs to a different field of human communication: namely, language.

The general consequence, I would argue, have been that every aesthetic discourse does not attach itself to works of art, but is rather the aesthetic discourse that makes them possible in the first place. This might take us to the extreme and radical perspective by which we have works of art because we have the institution of art, but beyond that, we are unable to understand and enjoy art.

Despite this paradoxical relationship between image and language in the art field, I suppose we all might agree that seeing comes before words, and consequently we can experience and understand the surrounding world before our brain develops its capacity for language. In *Way Of Seeing* John Berger holds that “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”:⁶² “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining – as well as to their experience of the

⁵⁹ Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁶¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Impressionism>

⁶² John Berger, *Way Of Seeing*, (London, Penguin books, 1972), 7.

pain of burns.”⁶³

Our perception or appreciation of an image is thus affected by a series of learnt assumptions constituted by historical and cultural relations between present and past, that lead us to select a precise sight from an infinity of other possible sights. Thus Berger draws the logical conclusion that every image embodies a “way of seeing”. It is quite obvious that in the case of a work of art, where learned assumptions concerning values like beauty, truth, taste, form, genius, etc. are so influential, we are enabled to see the world as it is, and we realize our incapability to experience the pure objective fact of seeing. This reflection of Berger on image, especially in relation to art, reveals an always-present gap between words and seeing, on which artists started to work at the beginning of the last century.

Magritte has been one of the first artists to be interested in questioning this peculiar precondition of vision in which our way of seeing converges with our knowledge of things. There are also other artists whose work might at first appear to be very far from being interested in such a relationship between sight and knowledge, but they do not escape from this condition of seeing. We might take two images that, aesthetically speaking, appear very similar: for example a cave painting and a modern art brut piece of Dubuffet. What makes the difference between the elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave and any Dubuffet's painting is the different approach of the author to the image, the emancipation of the art practice from ritual. The quality of signs and images inside the cave are not comparable to their situation in a time when emphasis on aesthetic ideals transformed the work of art into a matter of exhibition and value judgement.

With the rational invention of dialectics and its oppositional values, images and signs began to signify a content. Gradually it became evident that an image could not be seen without being known. The ideal world of contents became an overwhelming awareness of imaginative qualities that increasingly affected the way we look at things. It is hard to define exactly how cultural assumptions and ideologies have changed our way of experiencing image. Certainly now, images conflict drastically with our intellectual considerations, and I fully agree with Berger when he states that “every image embodies a way of seeing”.⁶⁴

Now my intent is not to deal with the issue between innocence and knowledge or between the natural and the cultural, but to understand if image, in relation to modern art and conceptual works, has maintained a dimension of seduction, a condition of signs that signifies beyond every intellectual and representational understanding.

Over the course of history we have been witness to a process that changed the nature of art, modifying the way image and signs are experienced and how they interact with reality. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin deals with the problem of reproduction and its new technical standard of photography. In this essay, he supports and defines his concept of aura, providing an interesting historical background in relation to art. He briefly retraced the way art reached the contemporary stage of form and sense to which we are now accustomed. His method in tackling this issue is illuminating, and he offers some interesting insights into the matter of image and knowledge.

According to Benjamin, “during long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence,” and “the manner in which human sense perception is organized,

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well”⁶⁵. Thus, “originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult”, and “the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind”⁶⁶. But already in the Renaissance this ritualistic basis of art are remote and in decline, becoming secularized in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty.

This becomes the historical turning point from which works of art can be received and valued on different planes: “two polar types stand out”, Benjamin writes, “with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work.”⁶⁷ Then Benjamin remarks on something that I personally assess to be highly valuable in terms of art and image. He writes:

“ . . . with the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental.”⁶⁸

This passage clearly indicates the qualitative transformation that art and image underwent over history: art as well as image shifted from essential magical values to acquire what Benjamin defines as the “artistic function”; and it is illuminating how Benjamin recognized the artistic value of art to be probably “incidental” in the future. In the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue of The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin distinguishes knowledge from truth, and gives us an idea of knowledge that assumes the quality of a doctrine based on historical codification that mostly recalls the value of that 'artistic function' of art that probably will be only an incidental knowledge in the future. The difference between knowledge and truth addressed by Benjamin becomes interesting in relation to our inquiry about knowledge and image. It might be useful to decide whether to consider the existence of an hypothetical connection between image and Benjamin's idea of truth. In regard to knowledge and truth, Benjamin writes:

Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of -even if in a transcendental sense- in the consciousness. The quality of possession remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good of truth. For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object -even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form. Unlike the methodology of knowledge, this

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, (Torino, Einaudi, 2000), 23.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.

form does not derive from a coherence established in the consciousness, but from an essence. Again and again, the statement that the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth will prove itself to be one of the profoundest intentions of philosophy in its original form, the Platonic theory of ideas. Knowledge is open to question, but truth is not. (...) As a unity of essence rather than a conceptual unity, truth is beyond all question.⁶⁹

According to Benjamin “knowledge is a possession,” and its method consists of possessing the object in the consciousness by means of knowledge itself, that is to say, to possess the object thanks to a network of conceptual insights (based on historical codification) that helps us explain and thus possess the object. Knowledge covers the distance between the object and our consciousness, but as Benjamin clearly states, the object does not have an existence prior to knowledge representing it in the consciousness. Knowledge effects this depreciation in the act of possession, while truth is beyond the method of knowledge because it is self-representation, a unity of essence rather than a conceptual unity.

Earlier, I remarked that the act of seeing comes before words, and I also pointed out how our perception of image is always affected by knowledge and cultural assumptions: the persistent attempt to describe, explain or reconcile the distance between image and its authentic sense and meaning. The power of institutions of knowledge, structured by tradition, has established his rational methodology for the possession of the object, the image within the consciousness. But Benjamin openly reveals that knowledge is not the truth, like the conceptual explanation or any cultural assumption to possess the image are not the image itself. Benjamin is clear: knowledge can be questioned, truth can not; our way of seeing images can be questioned but not the image itself as a truth.

In another passage of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin delves into the problem and remarks on the impossibility of any rational or scientific methodology to reach the truth. He writes:

The demand for flawless coherence in scientific deduction is not made in order that truth shall be represented in its unity and singularity; and yet this very flawlessness is the only way in which the logic of the system is related to the notion of truth. Such systematic completeness has no more in common with truth than any other form of representation which attempts to ascertain the truth in mere cognitions and cognitional patterns. The more scrupulously the theory of scientific knowledge investigates the various disciplines, the more unmistakably their methodological inconsistency is revealed.⁷⁰

The inability of thought to reach the truth of things by rational methodology receives additional insight when Artaud describes the relation between the physical world and the language of words, as related to the state of mind. He describes an interesting movement of feelings in which the category of fullness and void in relation to thought are inverted. To some extent, he proposes a movement like that of desire, described in the first chapter of this essay, in that it is seductive because it does not enter into the fixed oppositions and

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (London, Verso, 1998), 30.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

dialectic logic of sense and meaning. Artaud states:

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is to *dissimulate it*. True expression hides what it makes manifest. It sets the mind in opposition to the real void of nature by creating in reaction a kind of fullness in thought. Or, in other terms, in relation to the manifestation- illusion of nature it creates a void in thought. All powerful feeling produces in us the idea of the void. And the lucid language which obstructs the appearance of this void also obstructs the appearance of poetry in thought. That is why an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech and its analytics. This is why true beauty never strikes us directly. The setting sun is beautiful because of all it makes us lose.⁷¹

That being said, there are many different ways to pose the question of image in relation to art and knowledge, but we usually only recognise the legitimacy of the historical method. Today, the possibility of rejecting the authority of humanist paradigms, and the power of institutional thinking structured by tradition, is very remote. The most natural experience inevitably returns to critical assumptions and cultural understanding. Before a work of art, explanation and experience conflate: we are able to see art objects but we experience only what we understand of them. All artists works within this great ideology of knowledge. It is neither right or wrong: it is just our way of seeing. To demand a change is futile. It would be like asking to a Stone Age painter to draw his elk in accordance with modern values of beauty and proportion. Our culture of knowledge and science produces signs and images that our consciousness receives and possesses within the frame of knowledge itself. This is the vicious circle of the modern methodology in which knowledge mirrors itself on the surface of image, while the truth of image remains unexperienced. Benjamin put us on our guard: in their essence, signs and images don't belong to knowledge, and all values we are conscious of might be considered "incidental" in the future. No-one can say whether the signs and images produced by our culture will retain their power of seduction in the future. The gap between image and knowledge remains, and what can be showed cannot be said, despite every logical attempt to fill the distance exists between eye and mind.

Given

In various passages of his essay, Kosuth openly admits that "the function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp", and it was with the Ready-made that "art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said".⁷² As is well known, Duchamp took a common product, such as anyone could purchase in a department store, and, alienating it from its natural environment, forced it into the sphere of art. He transferred the object from a technically reproducible and fungible state to one of aesthetic authenticity and uniqueness. Over time this subversive action became the conventional point of view for a large number of successive art historians and artists that like Kosuth wanted to challenge the traditional thought about art and art making. The subversive action became a canon and nowadays we are not longer

⁷¹ Antonin Artaud, *Il teatro e il suo doppio*. (Torino, Einaudi, 2000), 133.

⁷² Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, 5.

able to distinguish art from non-art. The explosive movement of modernity and liberation caused by Duchamp's thought and his ready-mades led to a total overproduction of objects for art's sake. According to Baudrillard nowadays "art has thoroughly entered reality. It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash, on walls, in the streets, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred today without any further debate."⁷³

In general, Duchamp's work has been reviewed and interpreted in a univocal and partial way. In most cases Duchamp is considered as the cerebral artist, who created the ready-made and was the first one to show an authentic intellectual disposition toward art and its practice. This interpretation is more than fifty years old. New interpretations of Duchamp's work come from authors like Georges Didi-Huberman who reappraises the French artist with a completely new perspective: he notes that critics have thoroughly simplified the complexity of Duchamp's work. To declare that Duchamp is the creator of the ready-made, and that with his found objects he questioned the very notion of art, is to re-present again an idea generally excepted and repeated everywhere like an undeniable truth.

In his essay Georges Didi-Huberman attempts to correct this one-sided judgment reflecting on the idea of imprint and its peculiar relationship with Duchamp's work. Emerging out of this analysis are two significant elements: an undeniable sexual essence that is almost always present in his work, and a hand-made quality of his objects, the same ones we are used to perceiving in fine art objects.⁷⁴ These seem like two uncomfortable truths that critics tends to avoid. We all know ready-made objects, and I don't want to deny their value and importance, but I wonder why critics attribute them with such prominence while other extraordinary work like the *Etant donnés (Given)*, is rarely mentioned.

Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, is the entire title of an artwork that consists of a tableau visible only through a peep hole in a wooden door. It shows a nude woman lying on her back with her face hidden, legs spread, and one hand holding a gas lamp in the air against a landscape backdrop. Duchamp had worked secretly on the piece from 1946 to 1966 in his Greenwich Village studio while even his closest friends thought he had abandoned art. Duchamp died on 2 October 1968 and *Given* represents his final major art work. At the end of his career Duchamp poses the question of image again: we are before an artifice, an illusion, an organic object that seduces us: "Images embrace us", writes Didi-Huberman, "they open up to us and close themselves to us in so far as they conjure up in us something that we could call an *interior experience*."⁷⁵

Duchamp wants to seduce us again, and creates a work of art that for implicit eroticism, illusive power and hand-crafted care of details, might be compared to those mechanical prodigy that during the Renaissance and the Baroque were used for the production of aesthetic effects and illusory marvels. Duchamp seems to be aware that "seduction, never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice."⁷⁶

In 1969, when Joseph Kosuth wrote his essay entitled *Art After Philosophy*, Duchamp's final legacy had already been simplified and summarily expressed into a new dialectic between art and language, image and

⁷³ Jean Baudrillard. *The Conspiracy of Art*, (New York, Semiotext, 2005), 105.

⁷⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La somiglianza per contatto. Archeologia, anacronismo e modernità dell'impronta*, (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2009).

⁷⁵ Georges Didi- Huberman, *L'immagine aperta*. (Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2008), 1.

⁷⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 2.

word, according an overwhelming power of the concept, which allowed Kosuth to state that “Works of art are analytic propositions. (...) A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist’s intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true *a priori*”.⁷⁷ This is the point at which art lost its very connection with image, since image is always beyond any system of production and interpretation, very far from any conceptual field.

An Undraped Female Statue

In the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche subjects the Kantian definition of the beautiful as disinterested pleasure to a radical critique. He writes: “in Kant's famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. 'That is beautiful,' said Kant, 'which gives us pleasure *without interest*.' Without interest! (...) If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favour that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues 'without interest', one may laugh a little at their expense”.⁷⁸ According to the German philosopher an undraped female statue cannot be viewed without interest. Nietzsche calls into question the truthfulness of our aesthetic experience, that enables us to maintain our individuality, to judge without interest the object of our intellectual reflection.

In *The Theatre and its Double* Artaud uses the term “cruelty” to indicate a particular attitude to life, a form of metaphysic discipline, that should enable us to regain the true essence of our human existence. The use of the term is not always clear but it is always persuasive and meaningful. Artaud tries to describe a precise physical determination to modify the spiritual of our existence: cruelty, evil, violence, physical pain become poetic and evocative new qualities to approach life and restore reality: “when we speak the word *life*”, writes Artaud, “it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames”.⁷⁹ Reflecting on the relationship between forms of ritual camouflages and body, Baudrillard comes to illustrate Artaud's idea of cruelty in relation to the system of seduction:

Rituals, ceremonies, raiments, masks, designs, mutilations and torture -all in order to seduce...the gods, the spirits, or the dead. The body was the first great medium of this immense undertaking. For us alone does it take on an aesthetic, decorative character. (...)We might find the forms disgusting: covering the body with mud, deforming the the skull or filing the teeth in Mexico, deforming the feet in China, distending the neck, or making incisions in the face, not to mention tattoos, jewellery, masks, fine raiments, ritual paintings; or even the bracelets made from tin cans worn by present - day Polynesians. The body is made to signify, but with signs that, strictly speaking, have no meaning. All resemblance has vanished, all representation is absent. The body is covered with appearances, illusions, traps, animal parodies and sacrificial simulations, not in order to dissemble, nor to reveal (a desire, say, or a drive), nor even just for fun (the spontaneous expressiveness of children and primitives). What is involved here

⁷⁷ Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁹ Antonin Artaud, *Il teatro e il suo doppio*. (Torino, Einaudi, 2000), 133

is an undertaking that Artaud would have termed metaphysical: a sacrificial challenge to the world to exist.⁸⁰

The cruelty is this metaphysic of signs: “a sacrificial challenge to the world to exist”. Cruelty is the savage irruption of signs into reality, the violence of rituals and ceremonies that forcedly substitute reality. Artaud wanted to save the theatre from a decaying reality, substituting the representation with “cruelty”, that was something beyond the illusion of representation, something that belonged to the savage action of signs on reality, a magic indistinct gap between sign and reality, where reality becomes sign and sign reality.⁸¹ Thinking of a sign like reality and vice versa, means to bring the ideal to the real and make the real operate like the ideal: in other word to break the Kantian stability of opposites based on the predominance of the **B** values. In this case, the break should not cause another condition of stability in favour of the other side of values **A**, but to create a reversible system without trace of sense, a realm of a magic interchange

Image is seductive, is always somewhere else, and like desire exists only sustained by lack: this is the reason why it is so concrete. Art history is the result of a culture that has rejected the world of appearances. It represents every form as having irreversible values, a stability where every vertigo is refused; based on progressive and linear time, every development or change observes the constant condition of cause and effect; it is a culture of meaning and sense where everything must be explained and materialized in accordance with the most objective categories. Without appearances, our culture became pornographic⁸²; based on reality, we live under an ideology of the concrete that discards appearances in favour of concreteness: value, use, production, mechanical labour is what matters. In any case, the system of appearance and seduction that belongs to image (A), must not to be considered as it was opposite to this world of stability and concreteness of sense (B). Appearance and image are authentic cracks of our rational system, a constant seduction that might pervert every consolidated truth. The true power of image consists of its own reversibility: image is a finality without a trace of meaning and direction, it is energy without production, it is a sublime spectacle of signs that continuously attempt to pervert reality. Appearance and image are the world detached from reality, but not an ideal and Platonic copy of reality with its stability of concept always present beyond the material world; but more like an influential and seductive world that tempts reality with its senseless absence. Image resides within the sphere of desire, is what seduces us more than a concrete thing because it is nothing, never existed or be produced and this is its power. This is the truth of God, the image par excellence:

To dispel all appearances so that God's truth could shine forth was the illusion of the Iconoclasts. An Illusion because God's truth did not exist, and perhaps secretly they knew it, this being why their failure proceeded from the same intuition as that of the adorers of images: one can live only the idea of altered truth. It is the only way to live in conformity with truth. Otherwise life becomes unbearable (precisely because the truth does not exist). One need not want to dispel appearances (the seduction of images).

⁸⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 91.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

⁸² Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 28.

But if one does, it is imperative that one not succeed lest the absence of the truth become manifest.⁸³

Truth and God are seductive, because they are images that shines with their own absence: their power lies within the desire of making them visible and real. This would break the enchantment: every coincidence between appearance and reality decrees the end of desire. As far as we desire, the reversibility of appearances is possible, and God can exert his seduction of image, which is desirable because has never been manifested nor existed. The objects without appearances are fetish, the gods without appearance sleep in museums.⁸⁴ These objects are not more desirable, the chain of seduction is broken, what you see is what you touch: there is no more distance, absence.

Return to Beauty

Many art historians decreed the death of art without understanding that art is never died, it just changed its nature. When Baudrillard states that art is “null” or “art, in its form, signifies nothing”, or that “art is simply what is discussed in the art world”⁸⁵, he said it from an anthropological point of view. Promoting the object for its own aesthetic value signified to interrupt any connection with image. There is no longer an anthropological perspective behind art, because the distance between object and image is disappeared. The artistic object became something detached by the seductive chain of appearances, it became an aesthetic form valuable only for its own economic value. Presently, art expresses the most incredible paradox: it became more commodity than commodity, an “absolute commodity”.⁸⁶ Today we are very far from a metaphysics of desire in which image and appearances lies behind objects with their infinite chain of seductive “absences”.

Erotic desire is the ruin of intellectualist aesthetics. Where the Venus of logic vanishes, the Venus of “bad taste”, the “Venus in furs” appears beneath the banner of the only beauty, that of real vital and materialist agitations. -Beauty is but the epitome of consciousness of our perversions. -Breton has said, “Beauty shall be convulsive or nothing”. The new surrealist age of the “cannibalism of objects” likewise justifies this conclusion: “Beauty shall be edible or nothing.”⁸⁷

For years I judged this Dali's statement to be a very puzzling sort of enigma. This brief text is a subtle invitation towards a new art perspective: a “beauty edible” does not mean only a “beauty eatable”, it means also a “beauty desirable”, so desirable that we can eat it; it is kind of beauty that regain an anthropological link with human beings because it will be edible or will be nothing, will be necessary like food and so desirable or will be nothing. Currently nothing is more desirable of illusion, because everything deprived of its own imaginary it is deprived of its own reality, like a beautiful but empty shell.

⁸³ Ibid., 58-59.

⁸⁴ Antonin Artaud, *Il teatro e il suo doppio*, 130.

⁸⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, (New York, Semiotext, 2005), 91-93.

⁸⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Le strategie fatali*, (Milano, SE, 2007), 108-110.

⁸⁷ Salvador Dali, *I cornuti della vecchia arte moderna*, (Milano, Abscondita, 2008), 65.

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