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A territory of our own

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Abstract. Ever since we first came across it, art has allowed us to see a sight enriched with the impression of entering a territory of our own. From its very beginning, art is the visible expression of the passages between images, the making visible of its own laws, its analogies and affinities. Walter Benjamin already shed light on the “auratic” value of such transformations, and while he is known for stating that photography causes a degradation of the aura, it is no less true, though less known, that that loss is redeemed by the aura photography carries in itself. Image’s secret, its potency and splendour, lies precisely in that distance between image and thing, between word and thing. In photography – as a medium inheriting water’s and mirror’s powers of reflection – the leaning over one’s own reflection (the Greeks called it Narcissus) is ‘magically’ reinstated.

Keywords. Image, expression, mirror, unrepresentable, witness.

1. THE ANIMAL THAT STEPS BACK

No image is more completely virtual than the image produced by the mind. In fact, though we see and hear through these images, we neither see nor hear them. It is only at the moment when discrepancies emerge between what we see and the possibility of seeing or between what we hear and the possibility of hearing, in severe cases of sight or hearing pathologies, that we become aware, via a troubling fracture, that the condition of seeing can only be recognised in sight and that contact with that condition in its pure state deprives us of any familiarity with what seemed to us most familiar, and indeed is most familiar: the ability to see, the ability to hear.

To see sight, to hear hearing, or to become aware of the disappearance of the concord between the image and what it represents and presents, are instances of violent separation between a theme and its development, between a force and its effects. And yet, art, ever since we first came across it, in Palaeolithic engravings, paintings and sculptures, has allowed us, right from the start, to see a

sight free of that disturbing shade of strangeness: to the contrary, that seeing is enriched with the impression of entering a territory of our own, because here sight absorbs its own conditions, presenting the mode of seeing as embodied in an aspect belonging to the seen and glimpsed thing. By this I mean that from the beginning art is the visible expression of the passages between images, the making visible of its own laws, its analogies and affinities, all of them insusceptible of being turned into operable rules, the making visible of how imagination works, and this via the production of a certain image.

The experience of passages, approximations and metamorphoses that is apparently the lot of those who explore certain drugs (and also, though not precisely on the same level, the lot of those who dream) includes, it is said, an affinity with that experience of seeing the image as it takes shape, that terrifying, astonishing and delightful standing-out that occurs as each seen thing becomes a gaze. All this can be found in Walter Benjamin's descriptions of his experiments with hashish¹. He called that transformation 'aura' and, while he is known for stating that photography causes a degradation of the aura, it is no less true, though less known, that that loss is redeemed by the aura photography carries in itself.

Before Plato managed to subdue his passion for images by means of no less powerful concepts, the Greeks had a flawless love for appearances: the gods could only be recognised through their images, made by poets, sculptors and painters, and the poets tell us that, as the gods walked among men, their divinity manifested now as the peculiar gleam of a warrior's ferocity, now as the sagacity of a beggar-woman's advice, now as the majestic and precise movements of an eagle, now as the sudden change in direction of the smoke rising from a sacrifice: beings, forces and forms whose signs the Greeks learned to read from infancy.

The Platonic classification of degrees of reality² is like a long and subtle disciplining of such

excesses, which Plato could not, in fact, abolish or avoid, because they were sanctioned by his own tradition. That is certainly the reason why he was saddled with the challenging, insuperable and wondrous task of defining what may be an image. A reflection on water, a few brushstrokes on an amphora, a crater, or a funerary vase, in which we can recognise the likeness of Achilles, the shape of a rock called Athena, the shadow of a lighted body, have in common among themselves the fact of being a relationship with an other. Let us look at two of them.

Phaedrus' reflection on the river Ilisius is not Phaedrus, but Socrates may lovingly focus his gaze on the water and contemplate Phaedrus. Achilles' painted likeness is not as powerful as Phaedrus' presence, as he leans over the river, for painting shows us a being that has never been reflected, but it is also true that we expect – whether we are able to recognise him or not – and so does the painter, most fervently, Achilles to lean over the brushstrokes and recognise himself in them. A movement proper to imagination, the ordinary image, into which vibrantly converge that which we expect from Achilles, that which contaminates and sustains all expectations regarding Achilles, and that which only the artist can compose, is the image with which we compare – even if we do not acknowledge it – the colour patches that made Achilles, painted Achilles, visible³.

To live off an other, to replace an other, to reproduce, to offer news of an other, to degrade an other, to trick one who is looking for that other, to cause an other to shine for the first time: these are some Platonic approaches to the image. Not only are we unable to rid ourselves of them all at once, but besides that we are able to contemplate them all at once, thus suffering their paradoxical effects, the result of simultaneously looking at what is lost and what is gained with the images.

If we give priority to what is lost, we are supposing (by either lending it the dignity of an axiom or obscurely accepting it) that a knowledge devoid of an image is ontologically superior or

¹ See Benjamin [1927].

² See Plato [2013].

³ See Plato [1990].

that there are beings who do not need an image to know and are for that reason superior, a supposition that is usually accompanied by a similar distrust of language, a distrust that originates in a dream, a deep longing for communicating without the mediation of the articulated sounds of one's voice. And yet, it is precisely in that distance between image and thing, between word and thing – whatever the image, word and thing may be – in all of its degrees, that lies the image's secret, its potency and splendour: we are unable to tear Phaedrus' reflection off the water; the communication of that secret is art's task. Plato feared it.

Phaedrus steps back from his reflection and disappears. Sorrow concerning images, any image, contains the more or less obscure, more or less clear awareness of the fact that Phaedrus always steps back from his reflection. Even if he has never, strictly speaking, faced Plato's written words as he faced the water, Phaedrus is in them, Phaedrus hovers over them, between them, forever hovers before the gaze of the one who is reading Plato. We, unable to see Phaedrus, can follow the trace he left for us in those written words, and only in them we are able to follow that trace, a vision of Plato. The trace is a sort of vapour, a dust, that Phaedrus causes to rise and fall as he steps back.

Phaedrus steps back from his reflection and disappears. We know well that the water will stop reflecting Phaedrus, as soon as he steps back and disappears (and we also know that he will always disappear whenever there is a possibility of him being reflected).

Into painting and sculpture converge two inseparable ways of stepping back, the stepping back of the one being imagined from its image (of the reflected one regarding its reflection, of the body regarding its shadow, etc.) and the stepping back (the reflection, a shadow, a painting, a sculpture) from the word. It should be remembered that the image in the word, the image that breeds and feeds the word and is bred and fed by the word, is not the image of the reflection, of the shadow or of the paint patches, but all that conveyed by the sounds the voice wants to say (in fact, the words are not things, or even images of

things, but ways of articulating them).

It must be stressed that the stepping back of the imagined from its image is not solely due to a deviation outside the image, but also inside it: in other words, that outside deviation exists between the reflection on the water of Phaedrus' face and the face that is being reflected; but the distance between the sculpture of the goddess Athena and Athena herself must be evaluated and preserved in the sculpture, even though that stepping back may never be fully absorbed. As to the second stepping back, the one of the image from the word, it is proper, there is no other way to put it, to matter and its powers, to *phýsis*, to nature. Like an animal that refuses to be touched, the image always steps back from those who want to speak of it, and that is just as present in the dismal and nauseating experience of the repetitiveness of images as in that image in which something shows itself as an image for the first time.

In photography, the convergence of these two forms of stepping back reaches an excessive potency, further intensified because in photography – and that more intensely than in film, and much more radically than in video – this leaning over one's own reflection, which is another movement proper to imagination (the Greeks called it Narcissus, whose memory lives in a wintry flower, and which we have tortured through psychology), is magically reinstated, and 'magical' is a word we can use here in all its concentrated expressiveness.

2. IMPURE IMAGES

What does photography do to life? Something more than painting, etc.? Something completely different? Does it expand or annul something that is proper to the other arts? Through representational excess – direct sensibility to light, replacement of the eye with the lens or electronic devices, indefinite reproducibility – photography spreads, under chronic paradoxical forms, the impossibility of tearing the imagined away from the image, which becomes its intimate source of anxiety. Let us attempt to turn that anxiety into a concept.

Representation, Unrepresentable, Unrepresentables

Photography is a vehicle, a medium, an instrument of technically reproducible objectified representation. Before it, its only ancestors and closest relatives were water (which is an element, not a medium) and mirrors. All that holds the power to represent, all that is able to represent, can also express, but the representational operation may cause the distinction between expression and its recognition to fade, confusing them and at the limit eradicating it.

Expression is one of the modes of the unrepresentable, but let us say it is an unrepresentable within the frame of the conditions of possibility of representation itself, which has countless natural touchstones, as is the case of any sentence in the Portuguese language. According to Wittgenstein's exact perception, whenever we say something we also show something, which is the very condition of saying this and that, in other words, its logical form. All representational actions and, likewise, all machines that reproduce representation have, so to speak, their own logical form⁴.

Let us consider this to be the degree of the unrepresentable that necessarily accompanies representation, as long as there is representation, and which cannot be extirpated from it, not only made to our measure, but measured by us. That degree can undergo several potentiations, up to a point in which, in the creation of artworks or in poetic speech, it is possible to glimpse the most elevated conditions of our imagination, including the condition of seeing an aspect, of presenting something instead of simply representing it, that which is called artistic and poetic expression. Here, the distinction between showing and telling, between describing and expressing or presenting tends to fade, decline; it even experiences the splendour of fusion. Here, the image speaks for itself. Once again, Wittgenstein comes to help us⁵.

There is another degree of the unrepresentable, which is not exactly related to the difference

between what is told and what is shown, and so on and so forth, nor to its glorious dissolution. That degree of the unrepresentable stems from the longing to go beyond the visible, the sensible, the body, breathing, the earth and suffering, and that regardless of whatever assumption it may be tied to. However, there is a certain assumption, that the fulfilment, the satisfaction of the longing take on the form of a redemption, a preservation of the sensible, the body, suffering and the earth, and there is also the assumption that this satisfaction will amount to the suppression, the negation of the visible and its retinue: to never return to the body, to no longer have the earth, to no longer suffer.

Then, the unrepresentables are discussed: God and all the invisibles or near-invisibles, which include, for instance, death and joy, as well as everything that is excessively large or powerful in the visible sphere.

We are in the realm of imagination, in the splendour and fall of its symbolic power, which draws pleasure and induces knowledge through the formation of connections, through the inner-vention and rousing of plots that stabilise themselves into tangible figures. That force cannot expand itself limitlessly: the realm of imagination, like any other realm, has its own borders. Confronted with certain kinds of vastness (a mountain range) and a certain level of potency (a stormy sea), imagination finds itself unable to fulfil simultaneously the operations of apprehension and comprehension: when it reaches its borders, imagination stops producing analogies, creating affinities or stimulating the formation of connections and figures.

However, against all appearances, the unrepresentables, as both the kind of beings that can only be figured indirectly and the kind of beings for which imagination has only one gesture, to plunge into itself, to sacrifice itself, these unrepresentables (roughly based on the Kantian distinction of the beautiful and the sublime⁶) also fall within our measure, a sentimental and emotional

⁴ See Wittgenstein [1923].

⁵ See Wittgenstein [1968].

⁶ See Kant [1790].

measure. It is either a unique kind of balance or a unique acceptance of unbalance: we measure that which we long for through symbolic figuration or else, lost, we fall down, dragging with us our own strength and taking pleasure in that, gestures that reveal the tension and content in the longing by which we are measured.

Of course, these different degrees of the unrepresentable intersect and interweave with one another, with specific consideration, according to the act of representation.

Torments

Here we find ourselves at a point in which imagination ceases to be a realm, as its scintillating borders darken and measurelessness becomes the standard by which we measure ourselves, something we cannot measure up to, only subject ourselves to; the unrepresentable par excellence: the unfamiliar made visible insofar as it is depicted as visible – as photographable, for instance. Whoever has been burned knows that evil vibration, that acid, corrosive current that runs through the body and causes the teeth to gnash. This image (of which I have had a taste, and thus make no apology for it) allows me to approach that representation that sears the conditions for all possible representation; however, that current of agony and torture seemingly leaves them intact and operating. In effect, we see visible things; in effect, the bodies have weight; in effect, the bodies sweat and nauseating liquids and effluvia seep out of their openings; in effect, the bodies scream and writhe; but the laws of physics and chemistry, the geometric coordinates, numerals and cardinals, fractions, rationals and irrationals and all the paraphernalia of the temporal systems of quantity and relationship remain unvanquished, nothing is too large or too powerful: it is something that fits in a man's hand, in a hole, under the shower; it can be an injection, a scalpel cut, a luminous burst; all things that are measurable and serially produced. And God, too, may come to someone's mind, someone may beg, someone may try to defend God, especially after, later, even by means

of the most subtle doctrine, making divine grandeur coincide or explode with their own powerlessness, a poor, forsaken God, like the one Hans Jonas imagined in "The Concept of God after Auschwitz"⁷, drawing inspiration, without having properly read her, from Etty Hillesum⁸.

The Impossible Witness

The fact of representing does not cancel, as concerns the represented, the inherence of unrepresentability (much in the same way that, as Benjamin taught us⁹, the fact that we have forgotten the unforgettable does not alter its unforgettable quality: it simply shows that we are no longer able to recognise what is worthy of our remembrance), but it carries within itself an inability to accept the unrepresentable, since what is before us is visibly representable, naturally photographable. An irresistible inference leads us to state: if this is visible it is representable, and if that visible unfamiliar is representable, then it cannot be unrepresentable. Here we have a serious form of blindness concerning the reciprocal rapport between representable and unrepresentable, akin to that blindness that, through obedience of the principle of non-contradiction, refuse to acknowledge that an empty room can be filled with light at the same time. Wittgenstein beckons once again¹⁰.

Manifold are the attempts at justifying this blindness, within the scope of some social or anthropological theory, moral doctrine or aesthetic interpretation. The most powerful instance remains the moral doctrine of testimony, expressed in the act of bearing witness. In borderline cases, that is to say, in those cases in which the unrepresentable has fallen upon the represented at the precise moment of representation, captured by a revealing operation, namely a photographic operation: it is at that point that both the name and the action of witnessing find themselves

⁷ See Jonas [1987].

⁸ See Hillesum [1984] and Hillesum [1986].

⁹ See Benjamin [1921].

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein [1968].

in captivity.

From that captivity emerges the paradox of the witness (of war, of unbearable pain, of the refugee camp): the unrepresentable can only be witnessed by those who no longer can, who will never again be able to witness, who are now unable to witness, now and forever. We call them living testimonies, depicted in images as emissaries that certify a certain state of affairs, but they cannot in any way detach themselves from that of which they are the living real testimonies, for they were cast into an abyss where categories and ways of saying have become empty, where being a mother, a father, a son, a sister, breathing, breathing, eating or desiring have all become intangible; in other words, it is no longer possible by any means go on living, even though you go on living.

At this point, photography definitely obscures the visible because it is so visible, thoroughly visible, blinding anyone who looks at it. Once the visible has been represented (we no longer know what is shown: what imaginative forms are these? nor who is expressing him/herself here: the photographer?), the unrepresentable coincides with our blind gaze and is submerged, devoured and confused with the rhetoric proper to the conditions of representation. The only response would be to close our eyes, to cast down our eyes, to cover our ears, to let out a thousand screams, to fall down. But also to wipe the sweat off one's brow, to lie down on one's side, to open the door. There are instances, however, in which the photographer is part of that number of witnesses who will never manage to bear witness, turned into ashes now or soon. Out of that group he stands out, obscure, spectral, his heart in his mouth (though that image from language has never shown its inadequacy as much as it does in here), insane and saner than we may be able to see. We will return to this, or to something close.

The Goldsmith's Art

No one is able to regulate the photographer's responsibility or even to simply assign responsibility to the photographer (as if photography, due

to its very nature, were an ethical gesture, either as possible grounds for some ethical judgement, under the disguise of a moralistic advisor, or by being evaluated from the standpoint of a moral and political belief – belonging to the critic, to the exhibition's curator, to the museum director). Nothing can be added, from a photographic point of view, to the photograph, by saying: 'the photographer's courage in taking this photograph...' (for whom? in the name of whom? in favour of whom? for the intervention of whom?). This ties us to an indistinct, perverted language in which ideology, journalism and aesthetics mingle, in an attempt to overrule photographic representation and its inherent paradoxes, even jeopardizing the possibility of a true discussion about them, and suppressing our wonder over what we see photographed, which is no real thing, but how a thing looks after being shot, plus all the subsequent optical, chemical and electronic operations.

Does art save us? Does photography save us? From what? Is our life in images? Yes, yes. No, no. Be they polished chains, to be the goldsmith of one's own fetters (words put by Paul Valéry in the mouth of his Socrates¹¹), or the finest sarcophagus, images do not save our life, or save us from it: they report it, glorify it, scorn it, fear it, accept it; but all this is always the issue of an act of presentation, not a way of making a decision about our life.

In the 20th century, Hermann Broch¹² and Gerhard Richter¹³ expressed, with greater intensity than many others, a keen awareness of such concerns. The mix-ups between art and life, on the one hand, and the growing muteness of art regarding life, on the other, combined with the enormous, unbearable weariness of art, in its old age, amount in their minds to an irreparable loss: art is no longer a divine calling. And yet, we might add: that's nothing new! In fact, it is apparently nothing new; in Western history, the experience of loss is a recurring feature. However, the

¹¹ See Valéry [1921].

¹² See Broch [2002].

¹³ See Richter [1995].

experience of continuing to do something while being unbearably certain of its meaninglessness, that is new; before Broch, no one had told us the following: 'I feel like a man who hurries to finish a book only to include it into the library of Alexandria just before its burning'¹⁴.

Folk wisdom tells us that a dog's bite is healed with the same dog's hair, which can be transliterated and adapted as follows: both the crown of thorns and the crown of glory of art, and photography, search for one another, substitute one another and coincide all the time; that is the reason why only photography itself – and never a theory – will ever be able to redeem its deadly deliriums.

Conditional Freedoms and Compassionate Grounds

All this breeds mistrust. Some use it as censors, inspectors of photographic purity, policing the photograph's level of 'having been there', deciding what is a photograph and what is not, attempting to annihilate those photographs in which time's bite has been somewhat eradicated (since it is impossible to fully eradicate it and still remain within the sphere of photographic representation) or at least taken in. Then, the degree of treason or fidelity, the degree of disobedience to certain principles of photographic ethics, written on a few very sensitive hearts, is measured and an ontological table is defined: this kind of beings is more worthy of being photographed than that other, a photograph becomes more exalted when it features such beings. Its reality lessened due to choices that are unjustifiable in the legislator's eyes, the photograph is a degraded, sinful image, subjecting itself to the consequences of temperance: a summary trial.

We find another effect of mistrust in those who — intimately despising, like Baudelaire¹⁵, photography's representational crudeness, its aptitude to serve the crowd's insatiable appetite for mimetism — wish to wipe out the 'having been

there', as an impure contamination that strikes photographic expression dead. In their eyes, photography is purely a medium; and yet, and precisely because it is a medium, a specific instrument of representation, that contamination cannot be leached out.

The above considerations should be read as a description of the extremes between which the relationship between photographer and artist, photography and art develops. Of course, the countless hues and various shades that tinge that relationship should also be listed, but that listing cannot be made just by wishing it done, and much less by hearsay. Strictly speaking, photography was, and will be, made with any kind of camera and about anything: in each different case there is a new rule to find.

Inherently representational media, such as photography, are fertile breeding-grounds of magic power, and imaginative expression cannot avoid plunging into these reproductive waters, even if with the intention of changing their composition, and even of poisoning them, making them unusable for a while and triggering end-of-photography fears. Sometimes, it is simply a matter of bringing down too-high temperatures, namely through subjective indifference, which turns the photographed one's 'having been there' into something brutally innocuous. There are cases, however, in which that bite spread rapidly through the image, causing fearful infections.

The Mystical Body

Let us now return to that unrepresentable that belongs neither to the beautiful nor to the sublime.

Dimming eyes are doomed by the images that accumulate without possible release: to be unable to see, to be unable to have, and keep, an image, possibly a saving one (to again hear the word spoken by the mother at the moment of her death, as the character in Vergílio Ferreira's *Para Sempre* hopes to¹⁶), and then someone photographs those eyes: what do we see? The scandal of an unrepresentable

¹⁴ See Broch [1980].

¹⁵ See Baudelaire [1859].

¹⁶ See Ferreira [1983].

sentable secret that has been left intact and intangible, in our hand and within our reach, by photographic representation.

A man has been shot in the head; he did not die, but is now blind and crawls on all fours across the ground, moaning and screaming that he is blind, he crawls in circles, pain and fear drip from his mouth, revolting and supplicating: do I photograph him?

Now and then, nausea or a flinch pass through our gaze, as it runs freely over the photographs, at the moment in which the photographed man appears not to withdraw from the photograph; he does not recoil nor step back, he is simply there at our mercy and, a witness to our officiating power, accuses, accuses our gaze. That, it seems, is the existential mode of photography, its danger, its very own uneasiness, the specific initiatory condition that expresses art's sacrificial nature, as a development of the action in which the actor looks at himself as he acts, and implies the separation of the one who contemplates and the one who acts, who is the object of the former's contemplation, a separation that lies at the root of artistic pleasure. The protagonists of the sacrifice are the officiant and his victim, but in art, and especially in photography, unlike what happens in a real sacrifice, the tension between the victim, that offering to a deity, and the sacrificer's eye is never resolved by distance. The yet-unabsorbed part of that tension — which no cosmic, religious or political justification will ever truly absorb, though such is its purpose — may take this form:

one feels the other
one sees the other
one hears the other
one questions the other
one knows the other
each one dies with oneself

I interpret the photographer's gesture as a response to having been caught by something, falling into the category of the one who sees (feels, hears, questions, knows) the other in action, the category of the officiant, followed, in improbable

simultaneity, by being caught by what he sees and identifying now with the victim, and so on.

Carried away by photography's way of expressing its representational nature, the photographed one lets out a scream: we will never be able to hear it unless we suspend our gaze, once we have used it to scrutinise the picture. This inaudible scream is a memento of the photographic image's paradox, in which the stepping back of the imagined from its image, which can go as far as a leap backwards, into the distance, into eternity, mixes with the refusal to withdraw, and all this is the product of the photographed one's bite into the image. It is from this contagion that the photographic aura and magic are derived¹⁷.

The mystical body is born of the noxious body, of the suffering body, of the body on the verge of putrefaction, of the delirious, amorous body in a trance. The photographic body inherently abdicates that transfiguration, whose mystery can only be communicated in the realm of the living and the dead. And yet, the living body 'having been there', a kind of ghost of the noxious body saturates materials more sensitive than hearts, and thus the glorified body can be reborn, but only in things composed of paper, chemicals and electronic engineering.

Should we love more photography or that which photography devours and reproductively diffuses? Disjunction is not always disjunctive, especially in those moments of splendour when the horse of life passes swiftly by, dragging before us, for the first time, an image, which we follow.

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¹⁷ See Benjamin [1931].

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