

A LESSER BEING. FROM LOUIS MARIN TO SIMONDON AND BACK

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I.

How to qualify the changing ontology of the image—that is the suggestive as well as provocative question we are invited to answer in this questionnaire. The question itself is formulated rather vaguely, and leaves space for at least two interpretations: Does it mean that the ontology of the image is undergoing a major change today (because of the mutation in its materialities, its codes, its modes of circulation, for instance)? Or does it mean that the ontology of the image—its imaginal or iconic being—could never be addressed other than in terms of inconstancy and change? Either interpretation is suggestive and provocative, as it either hints at a *change within ontology* or at an *ontology of change*. Both interpretations, however, presuppose that we can address images in ontological terms at all, and that visual studies should talk about images *qua* being.

For sure, for centuries, a lasting onto-theological tradition made such an endeavour unthinkable: in Aristotelian metaphysics, images belong to a category of relational entities that have no substantial existence of their own, while in a Platonic setting, images are defined by their lack of being. While excessive in their appearance, they are deficient with respect to the being they depict.¹ Against the backdrop of such a lack that expresses itself in the guise of falsehood (*pseudos*) or non-being (*mè on*), images can't be grafted onto an ontology; or, inversely, they can't offer secure grounds for any ontology to come.

If the point of any ontology is to study what remains unchanged of a being throughout all its contingent alterations, both the idea of a change within the ontology of the image as well as the idea of an ontology of change *tout court* must resonate rather oddly. Either the contemporary image changes to a point that it becomes something radically diverse, setting up an altogether new way of being that has nothing in common with what was before. Or it forces, in its ever-changing modes, to change the very project of what we call ontology, beyond the substantiality of the unmodified. Undeniably, the current fixation of certain regions of the social

sciences to proclaim “ontological turns” and to call out for “new ontologies” is hardly compatible with what was called ontology for the past 2000 years. According to Louis Marin, when asking about the “being of the image,” the “hasty answer of the history of ‘Western’ philosophy—or hastily read in its vulgate—is to make of the being of the image a *lesser being*, a decal, a copy, a second thing in a state of lesser reality, and at the same time, as a screen to the very things, to be an illusion of thing, an impoverished reflection, an appearance of being, a deceptive veil.”²

Rather than dismissing such an approach as a symptom of the deep iconophobia that runs through the tradition of European logocentrism, we could also try to take its central intuition seriously. The image as a lesser being, on the verge of non-being, of exiting the very order of what is defined primarily through the category of persistency. Lesser being of the image, less being for the image—that could be a beginning of an answer. Images are first and foremost appearances, and this appearing character should be reckoned with, through a phenomenology of their phenomenal effects. If the image is a *poikilon*, a versatile and polymorphic creature, as Plato describes it, it has indeed a cunning ability to avoid definitive categorizations.

How do images elicit change, how do they indicate how things should turn out, how do they visualize how a matter could be? What processes do images themselves emerge from? What metamorphoses are they subject to and from what grounds—in what media, on what screens, on what surfaces, natural or artificial—does their shaping occur? How are processes of becoming reliant on images and along what lines does the becoming of images themselves take place?

II.

Gilbert Simondon has made a proposal that yet remains to be fully understood. He argued that the dynamics of the image should be compared to that of the general dynamics of the living. The dynamic cycle of images, Simondon states, can be described as “successive phases of becoming of one single genetic process, comparable in its unfolding to the other genetic processes the living world presents us with (phylogenesis and ontogenesis).”³ In order to explain this process of becoming of the image—its *iconogenesis* of sorts—Simondon resorts to a peculiar metaphor: images, he explains, can be compared to an “outcrop attached to a continuous substrate; they are attached to a base which

carries them after having prepared them, like the visible part of the mushroom, carried by a mycelium more durable, as well as more essential, and more universal, because there are mushrooms which do not even produce this visible part, popping out of the ground; yet they do not proliferate less, their action on the environment [*milieu*] does not have less force.”⁴

If we follow this vegetal metaphor, images would thus be tantamount to the visible part of the mycelium, the outcrop of the hyphae that allowed for their emergence. When they pop up, they rarely pop out of the blue, but have been patiently prepared and are sustained by a rhizomatic substrate that carries and nourishes them. Attentive as ever to the material infrastructures, Gilbert Simondon’s theory of individuation insists on the link between the ontogenetic processes of the image and its surrounding milieu. An image never comes alone, it rests on a complex network that allows for it to come into being.

Gilbert Simondon stresses the fact that in trying to grasp what images are, metaphorization is quickly at hand. Organic metaphors such as that of the fungus, but also inorganic metaphors such as the growth of crystals. Irrespective of whether mental or materialized in artefacts, perceptual or hallucinatory, abstract or concrete, personal or collective: their processes of emergence, of concrescence and of “proliferation” are both analogous to organic ontogeny and phylogeny as well as distinct from them. One can always make an attempt at retracing the destiny of one single image—its ontogeny—and one can discuss how images emerged in different historical, cultural or technological milieus (that would be their phylogeny, or the study of the image “tribe,” its *phylum*). The attempt at isolating an altogether parallel ontology of images, however, misses the point, Simondon argues, as it repeats the error of substantialism, whereby individuation names a process where a preceding principle of individuation regulates how a separate being becomes what it is.

Iconogenesis doesn’t establish a separate realm of imaginary beings—*pace* Jean-Paul Sartre—but indicates the intricacies of reciprocal entanglements of matter and visibility. What the intermediate nature of images requires, Simondon explains, is a “phenomenology.”⁵ In a sense, in phenomenology, the issue of ontology is always secondary or, as Simondon’s teacher Merleau-Ponty puts it: an “indirect ontology,” and this is even more true of the image. As phenomenal entities that grow on other substrates, images are no monads grounded in themselves, or, if anything, they are “parasitic organisms, secondary monads.”⁶ What is

more, they exist thanks to the responses their appearance elicits in their beholders. In all possible meanings, their “complex mode of existence”⁷ is relational and dependent on their associated milieu.

III.

These Simondonian disquisitions enable a return to the starting point, that of the strange status of the image as a derivative, lesser being. Rather than defending the autonomy of the image and the sovereignty of imagination—ideas a certain Neo-Romantic tradition likes to wallow in—it might be worth taking this notion of a deficient ontology at its face value. For centuries, iconoclasts old and new have denounced the incapacity of images to have a voice of their own, their mute “a-logic” nature, exploited by ventriloquists that use them as means to an end.⁸ Image enthusiasts, on the contrary, have defended the image’s right to existence, arguing for the need to take their “life” into account, as well as their biographies, loves and desires. As Tom Mitchell once aptly remarked, we have an intractable tendency to personify and subjectivize pictures.⁹ That might explain why some feel the urge to defend them against those that denigrate the image’s unfounded claims.

But maybe there never was any need to “emancipate” the image from such entanglements, and to set it free. Maybe the image’s heteronomy should be acknowledged for what it is. According to Louis Marin, the power of the image stems not from its capacity for acting (the traditional privilege associated with sovereign authorship) but from its latency, from what it keeps in reserve. The image does *not act* spontaneously, it does not actualize its capacity. It requires a gaze that bestows it with a potentiality, a power that would be on lease, so to speak. And paradoxically, such potentiality is lent by a beholder himself turned passive, attracted and enthralled by a surface that had first interrupted his goings-on. The image’s power is indissociable from its impotency, as it demands for the spectator to attribute more to it than the eye can see. An optical desire for that there be more and something other than what is currently on the table.

The deficient being of the image is inseparable from its strange version of power, a non-actualized potential: the force of inactuality. In recuperating what is no longer, in gesturing towards what can’t be anticipated yet, the image has in itself—these are Leon Battista Alberti’s words—a *vis admodum divina*, a “divine power”, that of presenting what is not currently the case. In

that sense, their becoming undercuts the dichotomy between being and appearance. Their power is in letting something enter the stage of visibility, while the medium of the image shines through in whatever it brings to light. The image's power is a power of appearing without fully being what it allows to appear. In its strange relationship to what is lacking, the image also and simultaneously displays a remarkable excess—a phenomenal excess.

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- 1 432d1-2: "Do you not perceive how far [ὄσος] images are from possessing the same qualities as the originals which they imitate?" in Plato, "Cratylus," *Works*, Vol. 12, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Loeb Classical Library, 1921).
- 2 Louis Marin, «L'être de l'image et son efficace,» *Des pouvoir de l'image. Gloses* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 10.
- 3 Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination et invention* (1965-66), ed. Nathalie Simondon (Chatou: Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2008), 3.
- 4 Simondon, *Imagination et invention*, 4.
- 5 Simondon, *Imagination et invention*, 15.
- 6 Simondon, *Imagination et invention*, 9.
- 7 Simondon, *Imagination et invention*, 15.
- 8 Psalm 135: 16-18. "They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them!"
- 9 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Loves and Lives of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 30.