DIAPHENOMENOLOGY: A MEDIA THEORY OF APPEARING

EMMANUEL ALLOA
LOOKING THROUGH IMAGES:
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF VISUAL MEDIA

What is an image? Emmanuel Alloa's brilliant and powerful investigation of everything image-related sets off from the observation that the problem of the image leaves us at a loss. Even though most of us use and even produce images on a daily basis, we would be hard-pressed to explain how they work. Alloa has a suggestion: "As supposedly transparent media, they are usually overlooked" (3).

The problem of the image is as deep as it is old. At least since the fourth century BCE, Western philosophy has been pervaded by a profound ambivalence towards images, something that Alloa relates to Plato's distrust in the Sophists, "the most sublime of all image-makers" (10). As a defense against sophistry, and simultaneously against the alleged capacity of images to overpower the senses, Plato constructed "a metaphysical watershed of lasting consequence": a two-world ontological model of sensible things (*aistheta*) and intelligible things (*noeta*)–hence also the lingering distrust of the senses.

Alloa's comprehensive book aims to rehabilitate images by overcoming philosophy's longstanding iconophobia. To this end, it seeks to properly diagnose this iconophobia and to seek out philosophical resources that can help develop an alternative analysis of images–one that no longer adheres to the two-world model. The development of such an analysis requires a broader conceptual investigation that also considers "philosophies that do not immediately present themselves as philosophies of the image" (9).

But why are images in need of rehabilitation? The main reason is that, at least since Plato, images have not been understood on their own terms. The two-world model inaugurates an ontological alternative of *things* and *signs*: things that exist in and of themselves (inherent essences) and things that depend on something else (externally attributed relationships). However, images do not fit on either side of this alternative. In Alloa's view, there is something about images–their *phenomenality*–that cannot be properly accounted for within the two-world model. Images, in other words, are neither things nor signs in the terms of this model. Throughout the history of philosophy, therefore, the *phenomenality* of images has been systematically forgotten–or, borrowing a term from Sigmund Freud, repressed. The phenomenal excess of images has been subdued by (often futile) attempts to assimilate images into representational models that privilege discursive rather than presentative forms of symbolization–simply put, models that privilege words or verbal language over images.

This tendency has continued all the way to the present era. The academic study of visual media from the 1960s onwards has been marked by the "linguistic turn" (a term coined by Richard Rorty) in philosophy. This meant that attempts were made to explain images and their workings by employing models borrowed from linguistics–more precisely from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiological structuralism. The Saussurian approach proceeded from the idea of the arbitrariness of signs, which turned out to sit awkwardly with visual phenomena. As a result, the new-fangled visual semiology grew into a conceptually messy field characterized by theoretical workarounds and ad-hoc solutions. By the early 1990s, there was a reaction that, in explicit contradistinction to the linguistic turn, announced itself as a "pictorial turn" (a term coined by W.J.T. Mitchell), or in the German-speaking world, as an "iconic turn" (a term coined by Gottfried Boehm). The gist of this new turn was to reject language-prone explanatory models and (finally!) approach images on their own terms–whatever that could possibly mean. It makes good sense, I think, to position the Alloa's project in the broader context of this pictorial or iconic turn. An allusion to this turn is made in book's introductory chapter, which proclaims that "we have [now] reached the end of the Gutenberg age," and that today's society goes beyond "alphabetizing human minds" (1). All the more reason, therefore, to get a better grasp of the workings of images.

Before presenting Alloa's alternative analysis of images, I want to say a few words about his arguments for rejecting the representational approach. In the introductory chapter, Alloa gives two reasons. First, the representational model must be rejected because it "reduces being an image to being a copy insofar as pictorial representations only ever represent, after the fact, something that already exists independently of the image." Second, it must be rejected because it "subordinates pictorial forms of expression to verbal forms of expression insofar as it takes propositional statements to be the standard of truthful reference" (4). This is to say that, regardless of whether we approach images as things or signs, they are seen as *deficient*: as copies, they are less real or secondary compared to their originals; and as pictorial forms of expression, they fail to establish genuine propositions with truth values. The book's rehabilitation project, therefore, aims to develop an analysis that allows images to step out of the subordinate positions they have repeatedly been placed in since antiquity.

So, how does the book undertake this task? It does this by addressing the very feature of images that cannot be fitted into the two-world ontological model: their phenomenality. It is important to note here that the category of phenomenality is wider than the category of pictoriality, and that Alloa advices us to approach pictoriality via the broader scope of phenomenality. As the book's subtitle indicates, this project draws on the resources of phenomenology. Yet, there is a twist to Alloa's phenomenological project: it also draws on the resources of ancient philosophy–more precisely, the philosophy of Aristotle, whom the book presents as a proto-phenomenologist.

Alloa's project is guided by the assumption that images and words do not produce sense or significance in the same way. Images differ in that they "feature an iconic excess that is genuinely visible or phenomenal" (3). That is to say: the specificity of iconic sense is that it shows itself in visual form. And not only that, in images, we are dealing with "an appearance whose sense constitutively depends on its being an appearance" (4). This implies that iconic sense has no propositional equivalent and that images cannot be translated into verbal descriptions without losing something. For, as Alloa sees it, "*phenomenal and propositional structures are not subject to the same laws and cannot be reduced one to the other*" (9, original emphasis).

We can now see more clearly why the representational model falls short of explaining how meaning comes to pass in images: by privileging verbal languages and propositional sense-making, it fails to account for phenomenality–for the sense-making that happens in and through appearances. There is, therefore, a need for an alternative account that addresses the phenomenal suchness of images head-on. However, as already touched upon, phenomenality is a broader category than pictoriality. This means that Alloa, in his endeavor to develop an approach that factors in the specificity of iconic sense-making, starts out from the broader question of what it means for something to appear. This is why he turns to Husserl, whose phenomenology provides a "radical reflection on structures of appearance" (9).

But Alloa's project is based on yet another assumption, which sets it apart from classical phenomenology as well. This assumption has to do with his insistence on the relationship between appearances and their media. Alloa puts it in this way: "For, strictly speaking, images are not phenomena but rather media in which something else appears; they do not themselves appear but in them show something other than what they are" (4-5). Images are, in other words, "conditioned by media" (5). This implies that media are what makes visibility possible in the first place. Or to restate the same point in a phrase that alludes to the main title of the book: visibility "is due to our looking through media." This then is how the book's engagement with visuality and phenomenality is joined by a third concern: *mediality*. However, Alloa argues that the concepts of media and mediality are no longer to be understood in representational terms. Instead, mediality is conceived in terms of a generative logic of iconic seeing-through.

The generative take on mediality distinguishes Alloa's project from established media theory, which, as he sees it, has tended to treat the medium as merely a channel for transmitting predefined messages. The reason for this, again according to Alloa, is that media theory has paid most attention to "discrete media," that is, to "media whose mode of functioning consists in disassembling, transporting, and reassembling any conceivable content" (5). But pictorial media, Alloa argues, are "replete media" where, in sharp contrast to discrete media, "every phenomenal difference makes a difference" (5). It follows that, in images, it is "very difficult to draw a line between meaningless sign support and meaningful appearance" (6). In other words, images are never mere carriers of meaning. What is

needed, therefore, is a "media theory of appearing" (109), a foundation for which Alloa finds in Aristotle's idea of elemental media.

As transpires from the above, Alloa draws on two main resources in developing this alternative analysis of images and their workings: Husserl's theory of appearance and Aristotle's *aisthetics*. The book undertakes a sort of diffractive reading of these two thinkers, allowing their philosophies to correct and revise each other. For example, Alloa brings in Aristotle to counteract Husserl's egological tendency and to overcome the idea of pure appearances. Particularly relevant here is the Aristotelian concept of the *diaphanous*. At the same time, Alloa's rereading of Aristotle is clearly informed by phenomenology. As a result of these productive crossings, phenomenology is transformed into what Alloa terms a "diaphenomenology," or equivalently, a "*medial* phenomenology" (10, original emphasis).

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Looking through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media consists of five main chapters, each divided into ten sub-chapters. Both the chapters and the sub-chapters can be read independently of each other. In addition, the book contains ten "illuminations," which are short, standalone texts marked off from the rest of the text by a thin frame. These illuminations provide succinct interpretations of artworks or short discussions of other topics, such as the distance-point procedure in the production of perspectival images (Illumination 4) or intuitive arithmetic (Illumination 7).

The first chapter, entitled "Between Thing and Sign: The Hubris of the Image," fleshes out the philosophical context of the establishment of the two-world ontological model and the ontological alternative of things and signs. The chapter primarily engages with the philosophy of Plato, but also with ideas of Aristotle and others. It provides the conceptual background for why images came to be associated with imperfection and irrationality, which helps explain the longstanding ambivalence toward images and the continued denigration of the iconic. The chapter traces the long-lasting implications of the two-world model for competing understandings of images—whether as things or as signs—which Scholasticism turned into a fraught choice between icons and idols. The chapter ends by emphasizing how appearances are lost in the ontological gap between things and signs, pointing to the need to save them.

The second chapter, "Aristotle's Foundation of a Media Theory of Appearing," challenges the idea that images are fundamentally a-logical or irrational by asking: "What logos can be assigned to the phenomenal itself?" (55). It proceeds to show that, in Aristotle's philosophy, there is a logos at work already in perception. And not only that: according to Aristotle, the act of seeing depends not only on a certain faculty of the soul, but also, crucially, on a mediating medium. Building on these observations, Alloa starts to carve out an interspace between things and signs, which he calls "the level of appearance" (64). The chapter's main contribution is what Alloa sees as Aristotle's media theory of appearances, which grows from Aristotle's concept of the diaphanous medium. This concept emphasizes how "[e]very appearing [...] is always an appearing-with or an appearing-through" (77).

The next chapter, "Forgetting Media: Traces of the Diaphanous from Themistius to Berkeley," recounts the reception history of the Aristotelian concept of the diaphanous, which Alloa regards as "the first coherent media theory" (105). As shown in chapter 2, the diaphanous carves out an in-between space—the level of appearance—between things and signs. However, as chapter 3 makes clear, the reception of the diaphanous is characterized first and foremost by a forgetting of this in-between space, and hence, by a "systematic overwriting of the process of mediation." This means that, in the period covered in this chapter, the two-world ontological model is never challenged or overthrown but instead further consolidated. This chapter also covers the transition to the modern versions of the two-world model, which continues to influence contemporary ways of thinking about images (and beyond). As a result, thinking about images continues along two familiar tracks: either the transparency of images is emphasized, leading to their semantization (a transcendentalism of meaning), or their opacity is underscored, reducing them to mere objects (an ontology of thingness). In either case, the phenomenality of images is lost. For all that, and throughout this entire period, the Aristotelian diaphanous continued to haunt philosophical discourse. It resurfaced, for example, in Leon Battista Alberti's discussion of the veil in the procedure of central perspective.

The fourth chapter, "A Phenomenology of Images," starts out by presenting key aspects of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, including the slogan "to the things themselves" and the concepts of act and adumbration. The idea of adumbration is particularly relevant to the theory of appearing, as it concerns the way sensible things present

themselves in partial profiles, offering us only one side at the time. In Alloa's reading, this idea points toward "an alternative concept of the image that moves away from the semiotic model and is no longer exhausted by deputation" (167). The chapter continues to discuss binary and ternary articulations of appearance, the latter of which invokes mediality. It also examines Husserl's take on imagination and considers other thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugen Fink, and Jacques Derrida. But most importantly, it observes that Husserl discovered a "genetic dimension of phenomenology that could have opened up the field of mediality," but that this dimension was never realized by Husserl himself (192). The chapter ends with a poignant discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who takes major steps toward the "becoming-genetic of phenomenology" (207), and who, in his later philosophy, explicitly embraces an elemental mediality.

The fifth and final main chapter, "Media Phenomenology," opens by asserting that a phenomenology that takes mediality seriously, cannot start, as Husserl does, with the constituted *noema*. Instead, the chapter searches for "possible points of entry into such an a-teleological, medial phenomenology" such as that provided by Husserl (210). The chapter proceeds to explore the idea of elemental media in more detail, especially as picked up by Merleau-Ponty. Midway through, the chapter abruptly shifts focus. In the lengthy seventh sub-chapter, Alloa outlines what he calls an "iconic symptomatology." Inspired by Nelson Goodman, this project aims to identify "symptoms" of the iconic, not as essential features but rather as overlapping similarities in line with Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances. Alloa's preliminary list of symptoms includes ellipsis, synopticity, framing, presentativity, figurality, deixis, ostensivity, case sensitivity, the chiasm of gazes, and seeing-with.

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Emmanuel Alloa's book is as brilliant as it is impressive. The long detour (as he calls it) via the Western intellectual history of the image is a veritable tour de force. What makes this book such a captivating read, however, is that there is something at stake: in both everyday and scholarly dealings with images, we may often remain unaware of the extent to which we are still caught in the grip of age-old metaphysical categories. These categories continue to channel our thinking about images along one or the other of two predefined tracks–the transparency theory or the opacity theory– neither of which captures what make images images: their

phenomenality. As Alloa convincingly demonstrates, images and their mediality have been, not only overlooked, but misunderstood and misconstrued since ancient times, and still so today. The detour can be seen, therefore, as an intervention that opens up a leeway in a tightly spun conceptual web, that frees up just enough theoretical wiggle room to allow us to think about images differently.

For several decades now, visual studies have been characterized by a certain ontology fatigue. Voices have been raised for us to stop wasting our time pondering "what-is" questions about images. There have been good reasons for this–but then, there is also a price to pay, which Alloa's book is an ardent reminder of: "Those theories especially that consciously stay away from ontological questions along the lines of 'what is an image?' are burdened all the more by this epistemic heritage" (294). I could not agree more. Time has come to expose the two-world ontological model for what it is: the historical result of historically made ontological decisions. What this means: The transparency and opacity theories of the image are deep-rooted and ingrained, for sure, but they are not inevitable. What this also means: Images could (and should!) be thought of differently. For those interested in embarking on this audacious task, Alloa's book is the best of guides.

Personally, I am also deeply convinced by Alloa's insistence on the phenomenality of images, and how the book urges us to take the mediality of appearing seriously. Along with that, I truly sympathize with the books main project, which is to correct and transform phenomenology into a diaphenomenology. The "dia" marks the integration into phenomenology of the Aristotelian diaphanous– hence the elemental take on mediality, which breaks with ideas of pure appearance and pure visibility, as well as with representationalism. Thanks to its strong focus on the mediality of appearing and on elemental media, the book makes a strong contribution also to media theory. And in fact, in contemporary media theory, there seems to be a renewed interest in elemental media, as seen for example in John Durham Peters' *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago University Press, 2015).

As already hinted, Alloa's book is elegantly written (and translated!) and highly engaging to read. It is also extremely rich and complex, and it continues to give, chapter after chapter and in the illuminations, each of which offers another independent mini-study. While this way of organizing the book has the advantage that each chapter,

and in fact, each sub-chapter, can be read independently, it also leads to a certain patchiness—narratively and at times also conceptually. The patchiness is most pronounced in chapter 5, where the introduction of the symptomatological project, especially, involves an abrupt shift in vocabulary. While Alloa's iconic symptomatology is certainly interesting, it does come across as a digression from the book's main project—or, perhaps, as a project within the project. That said, even here, Alloa provides conceptual gold.

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I will conclude this review by raising three questions, which are curious and explorative more than they are critical.

The first question, which has been lingering in the back of my head since I read the book's introduction, concerns the role of Nelson Goodman in this project (I am thinking here of the diaphenomenological project and not of the symptomatological one). The book sets off by drawing a distinction between replete and discrete media (5), which to my ears sounds rather Goodmanian, a suspicion reinforced by how the density and repleteness of visual media are later explained. There is nothing wrong per se in drawing on Goodman, of course, it is just that this thinker is certainly not a phenomenologist. Indeed, Alloa himself later in the book makes a sudden and surprisingly critical remark leveled against Goodman on exactly this point: "[D]espite an early work entitled *The Structure of Appearance*, [Goodman] is not particularly interested in appearance but only ever in the gamut of predicate logic at its basis" (260). Alloa's criticism goes further, noting: "For Goodman, fullness or density are not phenomenal but purely structural properties that could also be calculated by beings (computers, say) that have no sense for appearances."

These observations compel me to ask: To what extent do the concepts of density and repleteness perform the work Alloa wants them to? Can the assumedly infinite differentiation or articulation of visual media be assimilated to the figural differentiation and dimensionality that, for instance, Merleau-Ponty describes? I am not sure, but my guess would be not really. What is worse, I cannot shake the feeling that the replete-discrete distinction, and the closely related phenomenality-propositionality distinction, are but another historical product of the two-world ontological model that the diaphenomenological project is designed to overcome. I guess the answer to whether or not diaphenomenology is equipped to

overcome the two-world model (which I am inclined to think it is!) depends on how far we are willing to go in our expansion of the intuition zone—which brings me to my next question.

The second question concerns the destiny of the image-word distinction within diaphenomenology. To my mind, the most exciting parts of Alloa's book are the two sub-chapters at the end of Chapter 4, which deal with Jacques Derrida and Merleau-Ponty, respectively. These sections, which touch upon the medium of writing and linguistic expressions, make it clear that even these forms of symbolization are performative and generative. A phenomenology like Merleau-Ponty's, for example, Alloa notes, does not allow for a "fundamental caesura between the perceptive and the linguistic" (203). He continues, now also including numeric forms of symbolization:

> Creative geneses of sense, which Merleau-Ponty tracks in bodily gestures, in linguistic propositions, in the discovery of mathematical formulas, or in the articulations of new visibilities in images, all indicate that meaning cannot be something readily present but must always already be performed (204).

This radical expansion of the intuition zone is repeated once more in Illumination 7, which concerns the way Merleau-Ponty regards the "arithmetical operation as a thinking taking place in the image" (205). Images, words, and numbers: Perhaps they are all presentative media? While this radical (and intriguing!) idea announces itself at the end of Chapter 4, it is not picked up in the book's concluding chapter, which instead seems to reinstate the Goodmanian distinctions introduced at the very beginning of the book.

Alloa's book was written well before the advent of generative AI images (the original German version of the book, entitled *Das durchscheinende Bild*, came out in 2011). Even so, the third and final question concerns how diaphenomenology would fare in the era of this new mode of image production. The introductory chapter makes two claims of particular relevance to the current media situation. First, that "we have now reached the end of the Gutenberg age" (1), and second (and this time more enigmatically) that "there are no digital images" (5). I start by commenting on the second claim. Alloa's argument that there are no digital images is an interesting one, because it corrects a conflation that is frequently made in the discourse on digital media between the material-technical and

phenomenal aspects of images. The book's stance on this matter is pretty clear: "Data masses become images only when they are brought into an internally consistent pictorial appearance for receptors capable of perception" (5). It seems, therefore, that phenomenality is off-limits for computers. This stance is marked once again in the criticism leveled at Goodman, where Alloa claims, as we have seen, that computers "have no sense for appearances" (260).

So much for image reception. What then about image production? Also on this point, the book has something interesting to say:

> [I]mages (and presentative media generally) allow for bringing out something that digitizing procedures precisely exclude, namely, what it means for something to appear. [...] They must generate attention and produce meaning within the frame of the image plane, within a delineated visual field. Producers of images are phenomenologists in that they must first find out the laws of phenomenality in order to then, hopefully, be able to use them as a phenomenotechnique for their specific purposes. (296)

But what, then, are we to make of today's producers of AI images? And, if we pick up on the idea that we have now reached the end of the Gutenberg age, what are we to make of the image production that occurs by way of textual prompting—a practice in which images quite literally are generated *through* words? What situation are we dealing with here? Are we back on square one? Do today's large-language-models-turned-image-producers represent the ultimate revenge of words over images?

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