

## The Critical Import of the Image: From Freud to Magritte

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### Abstract

In the *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud asks how and if the dream, which is made of images, can express its connective structure, and in particular the negation. This can be made only by interpretation. This question represents the thread to examine the problem of the critical import of figurative arts, by comparing Adorno's and Heidegger's theories. According to Adorno, the artwork is *mimesis*: the capability to express negativity coincides with its autonegation, with its disappearing. For Heidegger, on the contrary, the artwork is first of all a work, and interpretation is the reconstruction of its genesis, or better, the understanding of it as temporal. In the last part of the text the problem of the relationship between negation and image is tackled discussing Magritte's painting «*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*»: the structure of this painting (it is formed by images and words) makes it a rebus (like the dream, according to Freud), the deciphering of which carries a conceptual and interpretative work. Only this interpretation can account for the negation that it, as image, could otherwise not express.

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1.

In the *Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud poses a very interesting problem: in Chapter 6, after having stated that the dream is made of images, he nonetheless denies that it has to be understood as a pictorial composition. Like hieroglyphic writing, it is rather a kind of “puzzle (rebus)” (Freud 2005, 523), where pictures have to be taken in their symbolic function. That notwithstanding, a very radical question arises: after having compared the dream work to an “assemblage” of blocks

of ice, Freud asks, how is it possible in the dream to represent linguistic elements for which there are no possible images?

When the whole mass of these dream thoughts is subjected to the pressure of the dream activity, during which the parts are turned about, broken up, and pushed together, something like drifting ice, there arises the question, what becomes of the logical ties which until now had given form to the structure? What representation do “if,” “because,” “as though,” “although,” “either—or,” and all the other conjunctions (*Präpositionen*), without which we cannot understand a phrase or a sentence, receive in the dream? (Freud 2005, 569)

This limitation regards all figurative arts, from pictures to sculpture, which, unlike poetry, are not able to express such relations.

Here Freud implicitly poses the problem of the relation between representation and understanding, image and thought: the dream can represent only the oneiric content, its material, but not its relations, its conjunctions, what Freud in the original text generically calls “prepositions” (the most syntactical of the grammatical categories). The task of reconstructing these connections, which the dream-work has destroyed, is precisely what is demanded to interpretation.

For a series of reasons, which here I cannot fully explain, but which concern linguistic and ontological questions of very great importance to me, I will in general call “pre-positive” (Chiurazzi 2009) this relational and connective structure, which the image cannot express, and which instead interpretation has to make understandable: these connections are in fact only the objects of understanding: they cannot be seen or perceived. The meaningfulness of the word “preposition” consists in that: it means something which “stands *before*” the position; by this I would suggest that the connective structure, as a pre-positive structure, is the condition of every positivity, or, in other words: the syntactic structure of a language precedes its lexical structure, the sense precedes the meaning.

The different relevance given to these elements distinguishes in my opinion phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology is founded on vision: its preferred gnoseological medium is then the image, which has its grammatical correlate in the noun, since this refers to the object in the world or to that Freud calls “oneiric material”; hermeneutics, on the contrary, is

founded on understanding: its gnoseological object is sense, which has its grammatical correlate in the “pre-positive” connections between nouns, to which no object corresponds in the world. This difference is particularly relevant in relation to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: how can image express the connective structure of the dream?

The most difficult connection to represent in the dream, Freud writes, is negation, that is, contrast or contradiction. “The attitude of the dream towards the category of antithesis and contradiction is most striking. This category is unceremoniously neglected; the word ‘No’ does not seem to exist for the dream.” (Freud 2005, 579) There is a limit, which is intrinsic to the imaginative representation: to be able only to affirm. The image, as with the nouns, is always positive, a difficulty that has troubled philosophy since Plato: how is it possible to say through images or words that something “is not”?

The image cannot express non-being. A painting of Magritte illustrates—I would say “represents”—this situation well. It represents a pipe under which we read the writing “*ceci n’est pas une pipe*,” “this is not a pipe.” The stratagem of this painting is similar to that which Freud says about some old paintings, in which “little tags were hung from the mouths of the persons represented giving the speech, the expression of which in the picture the artist despaired of” (Freud 2005, 570). The painting of Magritte cannot represent the fact of “not being” a pipe—it must say it. In order to deny being a thing, and thus to affirm being only an image, it must recur to writing, to a *logos*, so becoming, as the dream to Freud, a rebus.

Negation has no figure. That the image cannot express negation means that it cannot express any distance from reality, since negation means exactly this: a distance, a fracture, a separation. Nonetheless, is it possible to confer to the image such a critical import? and if so, how? This question coincides with another one: in which sense is the figurative art critical? The avant-garde has no doubt represented and spread a critical force without precedent, well recognized by authors as Adorno, Derrida, or Vattimo. But there is a difference, in my opinion, in the way this critical capability can be understood. To

this purpose I will refer to two examples: Adorno and Heidegger.

2.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno makes a striking re-evaluation of the image: as Axel Honneth pointed out in a book published in 1986, *The Critique of the Power. Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, this re-evaluation of mimesis is the result of the radical critique of instrumental rationality Adorno put forward, along with Max Horkheimer, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Honneth 1993, 57-96). In fact, the mimetic relation is an approach to the world not based on domination: it is rather a way of relation which deliberately avoids the instrumental strategies of the cultural industry, and thus can present itself as a paradigm of liberation, for it leaves out the conceptual, objectifying knowledge of nature. However, in order to have a hold over the real, a minimal mimetic relation with reality is always needed: “The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death. The subjective mind which disintegrates the spiritualization of nature masters spiritless nature only by imitating its rigidity, disintegrating itself as animistic.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 44-45) Every image is an image of reality, and when thought severs this link with reality it withdraws into itself, it becomes tautological: “The idea, having no firm hold on reality, insists all the more and becomes the fixation.” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 157) It becomes ideology.

According to Adorno, art has the task to restore the correct mimetic relation to nature, that is, to restore the natural relation of thought to the real. It does nothing but to replicate, on the level of artificiality, this privileged relation. In aesthetic mimesis, unlike in conceptual mimesis, things are not the counterpart of manipulative processes, but of sensorial processes, which are not subject to any constriction but have the possibility of breaking off in a completely free way. The mimetic relation to nature is the profound essence of very art, which assures the convergence between artistic beauty and natural beauty, where nature is understood as pure manifestation, never as material of work or of life-reproduction,

less than ever as a substrate of science: “Just how bound up natural beauty is with art beauty is confirmed by the experience of the former. For it, nature is exclusively appearance, never the stuff of labor and the reproduction of life, let alone the substratum of science.” (Adorno 2002, 65)

This phenomenological primacy explains at the same time the secondary and derivative role of the conceptual in Adorno, and his suspicion against technique and every pragmatic dimension. The very place of mimesis is neither the concept nor the technique, but the sensation, which follows “naturally” the movement of the object; the concept, instead, dominates the object, and bends it to external purposes: it manipulates the object. Art and technique, therefore, are different just like sensation and concept, renunciation and domination.

Confined to its mimetic and not its technical moment, art is, according to Adorno, more art the less it is action. By re-proposing the analogy between artistic experience and aesthetic experience of nature, Adorno says clearly: “Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images. Nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action” (*ibid.*). What confers to the mimesis, and then to the image, this special role of resistance to domination is thus its non-involvement in action, its being pure appearance: the radicalism of the critique to instrumental rationality also ends up striking down action as such (as it often seems to strike down rationality as such) and therefore to turn into a relation in which action is reduced to a minimum, as it is in the passivity of sensation.

*Aisthesis* is, in fact, appearance. The artwork does nothing but to capture the evanescence of aisthesis by objectifying it: “In art something momentary transcends; objectivation makes the artwork into an instant” (Adorno 2002, 84). The artworks are “the persistence of the transient” (*ibid.*). One understands this way why the critical function of the artwork as image, according to Adorno, cannot consist in nothing else than in its self-negation: “The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks” (Adorno 2002, 81). In order to explicate their critical force against the existent, they

have to disappear, to explode: “The instant in which these forces become image, the instant in which what is interior becomes exterior, the outer husk is exploded; their apparition, which makes them an image, always at the same time destroys them as image” (Adorno 2002, 85).

The artwork cannot deny the thing-like nature of the objects but by denying it in itself, i.e.: by denying itself. This dialectic thus remains completely closed inside the mimetic relation “thing-image,” in a way which I would define as “speculative,” and which places off limits every practical determination of the artwork as a product, namely, as a work. This way of thinking seems incomprehensible even for a Marxist and in my view shows clearly the Hegelian, namely, speculative character of Adorno’s philosophy. Artworks, in fact, tend more and more to be like what Hegel calls “concept”: something reflected in itself, self-movement. They are not made by humans, they are not the expression of a praxis, but have in themselves the principle of their doing: “Their immanent process is externalized as their own act, not as what humans have done to them and not merely for humans.” (Adorno 2002, 80-81)

The mimetic structure of the artwork risks expelling it completely from history, from the system of productive relations, which are always practical and energetic, namely: from the social relations. We thus understand why Axel Honneth has been able to speak, referring to Adorno’s critical theory, of a paradoxical “repression of the social” (Honneth 1993, 72). We can then ask in which sense the artwork, which as mimesis opposes the world of the things, can also be really a critique of the social relations which structure that world of things. The image cannot express, as we saw, the pre-positional connections, that is, the relations linking words or things, and which in the real world are social relations, between humans and things, and between humans and humans. In order to do this, the artwork should not be thought as mere image: it should carry a reference to these relations, presenting itself explicitly as a part of them. Not as image, then, but as a work.

3.

The difference between conceiving the artwork as mimesis and conceiving it as work is evident in the way Heidegger, unlike Adorno, intends it. In *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger starts from the banal consideration that the artwork is, precisely, a work, that is, the result of a doing: “The workly character of the work consists in its being created by the artist”, so that “it can obviously be grasped only in terms of the process of creation”, in its turn intended “as a bringing forth (*Herstellung*)” (Heidegger 2002, 34). In this way Heidegger refers the artwork primarily to the field of *techné* rather than to the field of *mimesis*: the artwork is not primarily a representation, not an image, but the result of an operation. As such, it is not simply an object: its object-being, however, does not constitute its work-being (Heidegger 2002, 20).

In the field of technical doing, which is a doing based on a specific knowing, Aristotle distinguished two modalities: *poiesis*, the doing which has an external purpose, and *praxis*, the doing which has its purpose in itself. The Aristotelian distinction sets, on one side, the production of artificial objects, artifacts, objects of everyday utility, such as a table or a piece of furniture, but also works of art, such as a statue or a painting; on the other side, instead, there is moral doing, *praxis*, which has its purpose in itself, as its purpose is not an object but the good life.

Heidegger, even though he never again takes up this distinction explicitly, uses it here in order to operate a conceptual shifting, which is extremely important. It literarily shifts the place of the art. In Aristotelian view, in fact, the production of objects consists in giving form to a matter in sight of their possible use. In this respect, the object of *poiesis* is always a tool or equipment: “The equipment’s readiness for use means that it is released beyond itself to disappear into usefulness.” (Heidegger 2002, 39) On the contrary, for Heidegger the process of creation in the artwork is not finalized to an external use, but to the fixation of truth in the figure (*ibid.*), which means: presentification of the event of Being. The artwork is the “setting truth into the work” (Heidegger 2002, 36); it brings forth the event-like character of Being: in front of

an artwork we cannot but realize that it is made; what is important is not who made it, for instance a great artist, neither its utilitarian purpose, but the mere fact that it was made:

The point is not that the created work be certified as a product of ability so as thereby to raise the public profile of the producer. What is announced is not “N.N. fecit.” Rather, “factum est” is what is to be held forth into the open by the work: in other words this, that an unconcealment of beings has happened here and, as this happening, happens here for the first time; or this, that this work is rather than is not (Heidegger 2002, 39).

The artwork shows the mere “that” (*daß*) of the being, its “there is”: but as such, as what, which could not have been.

We can then understand the difference between this conception of the artwork and Adorno’s. Heidegger definitively takes art away from the horizon of *mimesis*; art is poetry (*Dichtung*), because what is prevailing in it is not the figurative aspect as such, but its being a work, which makes it a trace of an event, of a history. The work has a diagrammatic nature, it is a symbol or a “fundamental design (*Grundriss*; Heidegger 2002, 38)” of the event of Being. This shifting from the image to the symbol is the most notable consequence of the shifting from the phenomenological to the hermeneutical conception of the artwork: in it the point is not the mimetic, i.e. aesthetic, moment, but the symbolic, i.e. hermeneutical one. The artwork is thus no longer a “sensible object,” as Adorno claims, but an object of understanding.

In fact, that the artwork has an origin can only be understood, because understanding can go beyond mere presence – that is, beyond sensation – in order to grasp what is not present, something else, something absent. This is a function, not of what Stoics called the *phantasia kataleptiké*, but of the *phantasia metabatiké*: unlike the *phantasia kataleptiké*, the *phantasia metabatiké* can go from the present to the not present, from the *delón* (the manifest) to the *adelón* (the not manifest), and is then the condition of possibility of the understanding of time (Chiurazzi 2010). The negative moment of the image is not its self-destruction in the evanescence of its appearing; it is rather what makes it a trace of an absence,

something which, as it is, refers to what is not, to another time, in which the work was not. In this form, as understanding of time, that is as a negation of the present, the fundamental critical instance appears: what Heidegger calls “ontological difference.”

The Greek temple is art, therefore, not in virtue of its formal aspects, which following Plato’s classification (Plato 1921, *Soph.* 235d ss.) can make it an image more or less similar to given proportional relations; rather, it is art as it sets up a world (Heidegger 2002, 22), that is, a set of relations belonging to historical space and time. In Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s portrait representing a pair of peasant shoes, the work is intended as a place where a world is revealed: through the portrait, a whole world is revealed, with its efforts, its moods, its needs and its seasons. Aesthetics here becomes hermeneutics, as Gadamer foretells in *Truth and Method*. More than being image, the artwork assumes in this way a schematic connotation in the Kantian sense of the word: to say that the artwork is image means that one understands it only from the point of view of the result of its genetic process, and not according to the schematic dimension, which constitutes it, literally, as a determination of time.

What emerges from the Heideggerian conception of the artwork, which involves a historicization of the image, is its practical structure. As in the case of the dream, to interpret a work of art means to reconstruct the connections that the images are not able to express, and which gives us back its formative process, its genesis. To understand the work of art as simple *mimesis* means to condemn it to a simply reproductive, and even unproductive, relation, since it involves the negation, the repression (in a psychoanalytical meaning) of the world of production. But this way of thinking condemns art to remain in the conceptual scheme of Plato’s *Sophist*, in which *mimesis* is understood only in terms of its capacity of reflecting, in less or more appropriate way, an external reality. Understood on the contrary as a work, the artwork emancipates itself from this mimetic relation: thanks to its genetic process, it becomes an integral and constitutive part of the world from which it arises; it is no longer a mere thing but an effect. Adorno’s theory

remains enmeshed in the thing-like conception of the artwork precisely by preventing to see it as an effect, as a result of a *praxis*: the only option which remains for the artwork, in order to emancipate itself from the world of things, is thus the suicide of self-negation. Marx's theory of fetishism represents a form of advice against the risk of the works' reification, which become fetishes – or simulacra – the more they are eradicated from the productive process of their genesis. A risk which, I guess, Adorno's mimetic conception also runs, when he writes, as we have already quoted, that the immanent process of the works of art “appears on the outside like their own doing, not as what humans made in them, and not only for other humans.”

4.

The need to destroy the thing-like essence of the image coincides with the need to destroy its positivity, by introducing in it a negation, that is, a conceptual dimension, which is the very essence of the avant-garde and of contemporary art. The death of art meant the death of its preferential medium, which to Hegel was the sensible representation: since then, art also survives, like philosophy, in the form of the concept.

The impact this destruction—which actuates an interpretative work—has on the image is hyperbolically represented by Magritte's painting to which we have already referred: a painting of a pipe with the writing “*ceci n'est pas une pipe*”. Magritte's painting shows the survival of art in the form of a concept, that is, of the understanding, through a complex play of references between images and words, but above all through an understanding of their relations, which configures different meanings and senses.

The painting represents a pipe: but this representation is denied by the underlying writing “*ceci n'est pas une pipe*”. This writing re-establishes the distance between the image and the represented object, sophisticatedly confused by virtue of their homonymy. We have to remember, in fact, that the problem of the image, as an ontological problem, arises in philosophy as a problem of homonymy, or of equivocity. Aristotle makes it clear at the beginning of *Categories*:

Things are said to be named 'equivocally' when, though they have a common name [sc.: are homonyms], the definition corresponding with the name differs for each. Thus, a real man and a figure in a picture can both lay claim to the name 'animal'; yet these are equivocally so named, for, though they have a common name, the definition corresponding with the name differs for each. (Aristotle 1928, *Cat.* 1, 1-5)

The Aristotelian example undoubtedly derives from Plato (Villega-Petit 1991), for whom the painter is the creator of homonymic realities which deceive because they create confusion between reality and appearance (just as the sophist does):

He who professes to be able by virtue of a single art to make all things will be able by virtue of the painter's art, to make imitations which have the same name as the real things, and by showing the pictures at a distance will be able to deceive the duller ones among young children into the belief that he is perfectly able to accomplish in fact whatever he wishes to do (Plato 1921, *Soph.* 234b).

What Magritte's painting could mean in the first instance is that images deceive: an ancient theorem, as we can see. The images betray, for they cause us to confuse the painted pipe with the real pipe. The title of the painting, which till now we have not revealed, and which will grant us further wonder, is actually *La trahison des images* ("The Treachery, or the Betrayal, of Images").

But the structure of the relations between image and concept is in the painting much more complex. If the sentence "*ceci n'est pas une pipe*" is referred to the image of the pipe, it means that the painted pipe is not really a pipe. In this case, the painting stages the falsity of the image. However, it is possible that the sentence "*ceci n'est une pipe*", because of the pronoun "*ceci*", does not refer to the image, but to itself. In this case, it could mean that the sentence itself, "*ceci n'est pas une pipe*", is not a pipe, which cause it to stand out in contrast to the truth of the image of the pipe. The painting would say then that writing is never an object, and therefore that there is always a radical fracture between words and things, as Michel Foucault underlined with different arguments in an essay devoted to this painting of Magritte (Foucault 1993). This ambiguity in the identification of the referent of the sentence

“*ceci n’est pas une pipe*” is due to the presence of the indexical term “*ceci*” (“this”), which, since it is not a noun, has a changeable referent. It is in sum not certain that in Magritte’s painting the sentence “*ceci n’est pas une pipe*” refers to the image of the pipe.

*La trahison des images*, therefore, refers to two levels of betrayal: a first level is that of the image as compared to reality, and this cannot be said by the image itself, but only by the writing “*ceci n’est pas une pipe*”; a second betrayal is that of language, which deceives in its reference: while it pretends to refer to the image, of which it would say its falsehood, it refers in truth to itself, saying to be not a thing.

These two levels are overhung by a further level: the title does not refer, actually, to these particular levels, but to the whole painting, which in turn is an image. *La trahison des images* says then that the whole painting, as image, is deceptive. The entire truth it should carry is therefore challenged, as if the painting were saying: “I am lying”. That is: “what I am saying is false”. And then: “It is false that ‘*ceci n’est pas une pipe*’”; it, therefore, is a pipe. Through the falsity of the whole painting, the truth of the image it contains is paradoxically restored.

This self-negating interpretation of the painting – which perhaps is similar to the function Adorno attributes to the artwork, which in its appearing is destined dialectically to disappear – follows from understanding the genitive in the expression *La trahison des images* as subjective: images betray, even this one, even this painting. But we can intend the genitive also as objective: in this case, the betrayal is not provoked by the images, but consists in betraying the image. The painting does, perhaps, just this, precisely by inserting writing, which is not an image, beside the image. Here we have neither to see nor to read: we have first of all to understand what the painting does. Here emerges the definitive consequence of understanding the artwork just as a work and not as image: it does not represent, it *works*, literally, it performs something, which we can understand by means of images, but not as image. Just like the dream.

One betrays the image when one contaminates it with something other, when one rips out it of the closure of its mimetic relation with the represented thing. This is what “to interpret” means. What the psychoanalyst should do to the dream, according to Freud, is then first of all to betray its nature as image (just as Champollion made with hieroglyphs, disputing their purely iconic nature) and understand it as a rebus, to see it not as a picture, not as a dialectically contradictory and evanescent representation, but as something meaningful, which must be interpreted. Do we not then resume exactly in this title the general function of hermeneutics, and perhaps even of psychoanalysis? It is, in all the senses which we have here tried to make clear, and which Magritte’s painting literally stages, as the dream, according to Freud, would do, a *trahison des images*.

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