

# Tókos

“For money was brought into existence for the purpose of exchange, but interest increases the amount of the money itself (and this is the actual origin of the Greek word: offspring resembles parent, and interest [*tókos*] is money born of money); consequently this form of the business of getting wealth is of all forms the most contrary to nature.”

Aristotle, *Politics*<sup>1</sup>

One of the most invariant paradigms of Western thought—a thread that runs through both philosophy and science—is undoubtedly constituted by its underlying analogy of thinking with vision: thinking means first and foremost *seeing* with the mind, a seeing that comes way before listening or touching, and definitely much more than tasting or smelling. The privileged status of vision among all the other senses is nevertheless countered by an equally constitutive doubt towards its products, namely images. Since Plato, images and appearances have been regarded with a certain mistrust: the ‘allegory of the cave’ famously provides an account of phenomena—what we see—as shadows cast by a fictitious puppet-show.<sup>2</sup> Philosophy must then turn away from such images, and walk on a path leading to the contemplation of immutable, universal ideas. Images are either misleading or merely particular instances of such ideas: *eidolon*,

the word that Plato uses for image, is a diminutive of *eidos*, the word by which he indicates universal form. Participles of *orao*, “to see”, both words confirm the analogy between vision and thought as well as the fundamental mistrust towards such sensible form.

The lexical kinship between *eidos* and *eidolon*—between idea and image—defines, at the same time, a field of legitimacy: according to Plato, images can be produced as long as they *represent* something. As *eidolon*, the image must always be the derivative (the ‘image’) of something else, of a thing in itself (Greek *auto*) and ultimately of an *eidos*. If on the one hand the image cannot but help being a particular manifestation of its reference, on the other hand its connection to it turns the image into a way—a *medium*—for us to gain knowledge of what is still *concealed* to our minds (the Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, literally “unveiling”). This is the case of the image

produced through a *tekhne eikastike*, an ‘art’ whose figuration is an *icon*, an image conceived as likeness or representation (*eikasia*) of an original reference.<sup>3</sup>

But how can an image be otherwise? How can it possibly be produced without an ‘object’ of reference? Plato’s notion of *mimesis*—and the condemnation of it that follows—play a crucial role in this regard. Despite what the term might today suggest, Plato’s *mimesis* is quite far (if not opposite) to notions such as the ones of copy or of representation. The best example is perhaps the one of the sophist: in the eponymous dialogue, Plato argues that what sophists produce is an *imitation* of knowledge. As such, the sophist’s production does not result in an ‘image’ that is a copy of something else; rather, its product ‘pretends’ to be something that simply *is not*. If representation is an ‘image of something’, *mimesis* is instead an *image of nothing*. The sophist produces not knowledge (*sophia*), but a ‘mimetic’ image of it (*doxa*, mere “appearance”) that has no ‘true’ reference—like the one of the transcendent *eidos*—but only an immanent scope: to be sold. The mediation that such an image performs does not connect the particular to the universal, allowing thus a connection with the order of the cosmos, but is rather merely oriented to the very mundane end of profit. Sophistry is therefore what Plato calls a *tekhne phantastike*,<sup>4</sup> an ‘art’ that produces not *eidola*, but phantasms, images without a ‘true’ consistency, and that are therefore illegitimate: the sophist, as well as all the producers of this kind of images, must be kept out of the city.

Plato’s dream of a civic order completely purified from such images is nevertheless quite far from being a reality. Jean-François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* states it quite clearly: the prem-

ises of sophistry, namely the ‘commodification’ of knowledge into something only “produced in order to be sold,” have become the dominant paradigm.<sup>5</sup> By encrypting information (and therefore knowledge) into a numerical support, digital technology turns every image precisely into a non-referential entity. Since they are ‘virtualised’ out of mere calculation—out of ciphers—digital images cannot help but being *articulations of naughts*. The realisation of such a condition is at odds with the ‘critique of pure images’ just outlined. In other words, our fundamental prejudice towards images completely clashes with the very environment we live in today.

If looking back at Plato provides an awareness towards the fundamental structure that weaves thoughts and images together, Aristotle might be the one to provide a helpful model to face today’s condition. Differently from Plato, Aristotle is not really concerned by the epistemological status of images. Tragic poetry, condemned by Plato as another example of misleading art, is instead placed by Aristotle at the core of the *polis*. Fiction is not a problem, since the ‘catharsis’ it provides well-integrates it as one of the natural ends of the life of the city. Aristotle’s condemnation does not fall over what is untruthful, as much as on what is potentially ‘un-purposeful’: money. Every property, Aristotle writes, has two uses: a “proper” (*oikeia*, literally “in-house”) and an “improper” one.<sup>6</sup> The first one corresponds to what the property has been conceived for, the use that corresponds to the needs according to which it has been produced. The second use, the “improper” one is the one of exchange—a shoe, as Aristotle himself exemplifies, can either be worn or exchanged. Money, on the other hand, does not have a proper use: it can only be

exchanged. To a certain extent, Aristotle's notion of money plays the same role to the one of images in Plato: as the image (*eidolon*) has to be a representation (*eikon*) of something else, money is also meant to be a "substitute of need," therefore 'representing' the necessary exchanges to the subsistence of the city. But, as images can become non-referential *phantasms*, money too can become a 'property' on its own, disconnected from any determination: this is what happens when money is acquired or produced for no other scope than profit itself. According to Aristotle, the "art of money-making" (*tekhne khrematistike*) deprives money of the economic purpose of measuring and mediating only the essential (and therefore natural) needs of exchange within the city; such 'reference' is instead diverted and diffracted into *pleonexia*, a desire that is potentially endless precisely because it knows no external determination.<sup>7</sup>

Up to this point, both philosophies seem to be dealing with the question of what might be called 'non-referential products' in a similar way. But how is Aristotle's formulation of the issue more helpful? While discussing the problematics linked to profit, Aristotle goes further by tackling one of its most important byproducts: interest. Not only money can be deprived of reference through profit, but the same art of money-making opens up to the possibility for money to 'reproduce' itself through time. The greek word for interest, *tókos*, bears also the meaning of offspring or child: like a living being, money engenders its own offsprings. Of course to Aristotle this is an unnatural kind of reproduction, as it fully detaches money from the purpose of exchange for which it was meant in the first place. But the suggestion of seeing the *tókos* as a 'living

being' and therefore capable of 'naturing', of coming to life, provides an interesting retrospective look over the question of images. From an understanding in terms of likeness, as copies or representations of an original reference, we come then to a conception of images as autonomous beings. In such a perspective, images are not mere speculations, but the products of it. They are literally *species* (species and speculation share the latin root of *spiciere*, "to look"). Similarly like biological species, they live and reproduce by engendering at the same time their own environment—they 'breathe'. Yet, the monetary and 'numerical' nature of the *tókos* weaves the biological with the artificial, it organically accommodates its 'affairs' in a 'natural' set-up. That is, perhaps, how we might think of our "postmodern condition": a *milieu* of digital images, an environment populated by species that make room for potential mediations, the terms of which are not necessarily given. According to Plato, any image that was not directing knowledge towards a higher good was only a misleading one; the *tókos*, the digital species, unwinds the image from any *direction*, but only to open it up into a field of *orientation*, a field that is not imaginary, but '*imaginal*' [see: *Imaginal* p. 145–146].

- 1 1258b. As translated in: *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1944.
- 2 *Republic*, 514a–520a.
- 3 The notion of *tekhne eikastike* is discussed by Plato in the *Sophist* (266a–266d), whereas the one of *eikasia* is to be contextualised in the so-called "analogy of the divided line," to be found in the *Republic* (509d–511e).
- 4 *Sophist*, 266a–266d.
- 5 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; p. 4.
- 6 *Politics*, 1257a.
- 7 For a more detailed account of these concepts, see: Marcel Hénaff, 'The Figure of the Merchant' and 'The Scandal of Profit and the Prohibition of Appropriating Time', in *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 2010.