

## PHILOSOPHY, IMAGE, ARTS

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The article deals with some philosophical reflections of the image and its production. At the beginning it focuses on Plato's classification of the imaginative art and his negative characterization of simulacra. In the next part it moves to Deleuze's analysis of simulacra and their position in the social space. Afterwards Baudrillard's conception, which considers simulacra to be the dominant image expression of modern society, is invoked. In the last part the author mentions the critics of this conception (Lyotard, Latour) and calls attention to the conflicts and clashes connected with images today.

### I

It is generally known that Plato had no high opinion of the art of imitation cultivated by painters. In Book X of Republic he wrote:

Art of imitation is thus, as it seems, a long way off the truth, it is for this reason that it is able to create anything since it captures only something of every thing and that is the external image" (598 B).

The painter, the imitator of the external images of things has no knowledge of what he imitates, his action is only a play, he does not understand what is the object of his imitating. A painter and a poet stand one next to each other, both equally superficial, equally unconscious, equally harmful to healthy life of an individual and a state.

And now we may fairly take him (a poet—M.M.) and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul (605 A–B).

Both the poet and the painter are mere creators of the images. Their imitative arts are far from the truth; their works do not turn to the rational part of our soul—they associate with the part of the soul that is far from reason. The words Socrates used in this dialogue to express this derogatory attitude do not admit any doubts: "The imitative art is thus worthless, meets the worthless and engenders worthless" (603 B).

After all this, it is obvious that Plato repudiates painters, their art of imitation, and its product—an image. For the purpose of better assessment of his views of image, we should complete these words by what is said in another dialogue.

In Plato's dialogue *The Sophist*, Theaetetus answers the question asked by a Guest, of what we understand by image:

We shall doubtless tell him of the images which are reflected in water or in mirrors; also of sculptures, pictures, and other duplicates (239 C).

This approach grants images the status of dependent things: whether in water, in mirrors or in the form of created works, they always depend on the original. The real is beyond them and they only imitate it. The image as a resemblance is not really real, it is only connected with the real. Such a connection of “being and not-being” is rather doubtful and Theaetetus says that it is a thing the least possible of all. The guest adds that this art should be placed among the arts of “magicians and mimics” (241 B). All this shows that Plato's philosophical thought is not friendly towards the art of image-makers and their products even in this regard.

By placing the image among non-beings and image-makers among those representing not being as being, the exploration is not concluded as a whole. In this dialogue Plato has already called attention to one difference which should be noticed in considering image-making art. We learn that this art is manifested in two ways. In the first case, it consists of imitating and it will be suitable to call it “*likeness-making*” art.

It is the art of likeness-making; a likeness of anything is made by producing a copy which is executed according to the proportions of the original, similar in length and breadth and depth, each thing receiving also its appropriate colour (235 D–E).

There is, however, another version of this art and another type of artists. Some of them do not care for making a true image of the original, they do not care for the truth and their images do not bring an imitation of real proportions but what appears to them beautiful. The fruit of their work is not an image drawing its value and truth on coming close to the original. In this case there is actually no original, the work has been removed from a dependence on the particular being and we face what Plato's guest calls illusion, simulacrum. Theaetetus confirms then his suspicion that there is a great deal of this kind of thing in painting and in all imitative art. The guest suggests to call this art the art of image making and illusion and concludes: “I thus called both types of image-making art: image-making and illusion” (236 C). Close to the end of the dialogue, this idea emerges again to divide also the illusion into two parts (266 D–E, 267 A).

Only after considering these objections to the art of painting and its products, we can better understand Plato's arguments against a painter and his pictures. To banish him from the state, it will do to call attention to the fact that by his art of imitation he is far from the truth; he has no knowledge of what he imitates; he

imitates the external images and averts the soul from the search of truth. The painter—imitator imitates in his works only appearances, the essence of things escapes from him. From the point of view of the care for the soul and interest in truth, the imitation of the visual part is harmful because it leads us to the surface, leaving the being aside. This attitude is in the Sophist joined by the difference inside the image-making art itself. There is the image-making art which strictly keeps to the proportions of the original. And there is the image-making art, which does not represent true proportions in images, but those that appear beautiful to the painter. The product of the latter is a pure illusion, since “they appear only and are not really alike”, which appears to be similar but is not similar in reality (236 B).

Be the art of imitation worthless and harmful as it may, it is not the worst reproach that can be addressed to the painter. It is still worse that he actually also betrays the imitation with his links to the external side of things to be able to create objects inferior only to the criteria of beauty. An image produced according to the proportions of the original betrays being but it is only the image of the external, deceptive form of things, but still containing the recognition of the model and original; on the other hand, illusion, simulacrum confirms the expression of these inferiority relationships in favour of the appearance of beauty. It is then bad that the painter imitates but if he stops imitating, he falls even lower and actually becomes a producer of illusions. The painter expelled from a community becomes a producer of illusions.

## II

These illusions begin to avoid and distress a well-ordered Platonic State. We could have thought that everything has its place in this world, which is determined by basic distinctions between reason and senses, being and non-being, substance and phenomenon, idea and its image. The image truthfully imitating particular proportions also belongs here because it points in itself to its inferiority to the original and to ontological subordination. It points out or says or shows humbly: I am just a copy, the original is beyond me. Through its faithfulness, the image can thus win a place at least on the margin of a town. But what about an image that rejects such a vassal relationship and does not want to imitate? Gilles Deleuze (1969, 296) expressed the difference between the place of copies and simulacra in the Plato's world as follows:

Copies are the second owners, well justified adepts secured by resemblance; simulacra are like false adepts who have been created based on non-resemblance and contain a sort of essential pervertedness, an essential fraud.

The copies confess their inferior role and thus their non-reality does not bring any threat to true reality; contrariwise, it puts emphasis on it, it enables a re-drawing of its profile on their margins and to introduce it as its own object of

education and the aim of the improvement to the individual soul and collective spirit. Such an image, characterized by a resemblance to the original can become a stage of the path leading from the illustrative and individual to the rational, conceptual and principally non-imaginative as it is seen in the Hegelian account of the stages of the development of the spirit. Illusion, simulacrum does not admit such an expansive development and inclusion into a unifying metaphysical story. Deleuze wrote that simulacrum

contains in itself a sort of crazy, undetermined meaning [...], which is always different, subversive, coming out of the depths, prepared to omit what is equal, represents a boundary, what is Identical or Similar to it; it always represents something more or something less but never what is equal (ibid., 298).

It is, as Deleuze warns, a threat to Platonism. Platonism reacts by attempts to enforce a limit on simulacrum, to subjugate it, to attach it to images accepting likeness, include it among icons. If simulacrum succeeds in confirming that it is not a declined copy and if it wins positive determination, it would bring a danger to the whole system of representation based on relationships between an original and a copy, model and reproduction. It would lead to a turnaround of Platonism:

To invert Platonism then means: to show simulacra, confirm their rights among icons or copies, [...]. The point is to establish a split in this world (ibid., 302).

Deleuze also warns that Plato himself was the first to take such a subversive step when, at the end of the Sophist, he led speakers in their contemplations to casting doubt on the concept of copy.

### III

Doubts, which Plato himself had come to in developing Platonism, retreated. Platonism petrified taking on the form of distinctions between the essence and phenomenon, between idea and image, model and copy, providing thus a support for the conception of representation. The modern theory of knowledge and history of social consciousness could be placed into the frames of the world divided on these lines. It is interesting to follow how subversive actions against this basic order of the universe began to be reflected in the sphere of the fine arts. In his small book devoted to the well-known picture of R. Magritte, Foucault writes that one of the two principles dominating western painting in the period between the 15th and 20th centuries identified the fact of imitation with the arguments of the ties of representation. It means that each figure that appeared on the picture brought forward an argument pointing to the relation of the reference. Foucault ascribed the abolition of this principle to Kandinsky:

By a sovereign gesture he eliminated the old equivalence between imitation and argument; he liberated painting from both (Foucault 1994, 55).

Magritte's merit consists in the fact that he "separated resemblance from imitations and started playing against it". Foucault immediately explains the difference between these opponents as follows:

Imitation has one patron: an original element, which coming from itself organizes and hierarchizes all copies up to the weakest [...]. Resemblance is developing in rows, which do not have either beginning or end, one can move there in both directions and they are not hierarchized but are spread from one small difference to another one. [...] through resemblance, simulacrum is put into circulation as an infinite reversible relationship between similar and similar (Foucault 1994, 56–57).

In Magritte's pictures an old phantom of the image that does not want to imitate obediently, emerges from the dark nooks beyond the borders of the divided and hierarchized world of representation. Simulacrum, "the crazy, indefinite being" appears in the image, immediately manifesting its subversive character. Although it claims resemblance, it does not want to imitate. It does not want to resemble the superior model but only something similar to itself. It impudently stands up against the model. It does not bow to the idea, refuses to be its true yet always imperfect imitation. Who would think that in these, a little comic-flavoured images, subversive forces have come to light, threatening the principle of our organization of matters.

#### IV

A question should be raised, however, whether this report on the subversive action of simulacra does not speak about the times, which are now in the past. Today, simulacra are not phantoms emerging from the underground when the dark sets in to disturb us in our sleep and put our homes in danger from the outside; they have apparently penetrated into them long time ago, settled there and became part of our everyday lives. They address us from every billboard, every TV programme, they even penetrated into the news. It is not surprising that after Deleuze's analyses of Platonism and Foucault's penetrations into the prerequisites of Magritte's painting, an opportunity arises in the philosophical discourse for Baudrillard's characterization of the present as the era of simulacra. Whether we accept Baudrillard's conception or not, it is evident that a simulacrum does not have to hide itself in the underground and wait for the darkness to set in. The image that disposed of the control of a referent, poses in the light of the sun and comfortably enters the community of roller skaters. Homi K. Bhabha arranges it like this, using an example of the Blake's painting "The Meeting" or "Have a Nice Day, Mr. Hockney" (which actually is a "Californian" postmodern transposition of Courbet's "The Meeting" or "Bonjour Monsieur Courbet"). To this transposition Bhabha adds that the image of postmodern life of the street, maybe a too lively, brings an important message about the character of representation in postmodern discourse, namely the concept of simulacra signification (see Bhabha 1996, 310). Bhabha then joins Derrida,

saying that in postmodern epistemology, after doing away with the referent, there only remains writing of the dreams, fiction, which is glistening, a medium that is glowing. There is nothing here to remind the dark origin and the earlier position of the exile. Simulacrum went out of the cave, got rid of the slave shackles, basking now in the sunshine of attention and expanding to all sides. We can even think about whether the sun itself is not simulacrum at the time of "simulacra signification".

## V

The creators of simulacra gained the rights of the citizens in the state. Their products can be displayed in public places. And there are also voices that would like to provide them not only with the whole space of imaginative presentation but also what has been regarded as its objective pattern until recently. As expected, this expansion does not engender only enthusiasm. Even among those whom we should not suspect of a priori distrust in postmodernism there are doubters of the universality of the "simulacra signification". One of them, J. F. Lyotard, the philosopher of "postmodern situation" said of Baudrillard:

When Cézanne stood in front of his mountain Sainte Victoire, he attempted neither at any simulacrum nor surplus value of seducing (Mercadé 1988, 6).

This remark of Lyotard can be understood as an expression of doubts about the results of apparently inexorable process of simulacra signification, which, from a particular moment, does not see anything else except its own products. If this victory is determining for the position of images in our era, then simulacrum is something more than the evidence of one type of creation; simulacrum is then both at the beginning and at the end, it is both the model and the image, both "patron" and servant. The objective pole—whether material things or ideas—was lost in the simulacra ocean. Lyotard doubts it and remembers the painter's relationship to the mountain, which definitely was not an illusion for him.

A significant without a significate, signification without commitments to the represented, an image without a model. Until recently, simulacra have been marginal existences, not having any rights; now they are allegedly the only inhabitants of the state. Lyotard is not the only one who would like to remind us that simulacra signification does not define the whole production of images in our society. The representative of symmetrical anthropology, Bruno Latour also joins these doubts from a little different, in no case "postmodern", positions.

In his work *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour shows that the elimination of the reference and separation of discourse in the realm of signs introduced by postmodern philosophy does not bring any solution to current situation:

The great weakness of these philosophies, however, is to render more difficult the connections between an autonomized discourse and what they had provisionally shelved: the referent—on Nature's side—and the speaker—on the side of society/subject (Latour 1993, 63–64).

We should not lie to ourselves, the realm of signs did not discard either the objective or subjective pole, it only set them aside. It left nature to epistemologists and society to sociologists and thus the image still represented objective reality on the one hand, but, on the other hand it continued to be a manifestation of constructions led by power relations. Let us add religious and artistic demands on an image and we see that beyond the border of the Realm of signs (which really has its borders), there were struggles for the character of truth and assessment, and the image emerges in the centre of these continuing struggles. While some try to protect images against accusations of fabrication, and to avoid the label of “socially constructed” others triumphantly show that human hands created them. The situation is far more complicated than those who would like to present all images as products of simulacra signification would think. It is a situation in which there are real clashes over images. Latour named this situation, the mystery surrounding images, *iconoclash*:

If images are so dangerous, why are there so many of them? If they are innocent, why do they trigger so much passion that is persevering? This is a mystery, hesitation, visual puzzle, iconoclash we wish to unfold before the eyes of a visitor or a reader (Latour 2003, 12).

Latour addresses visitors of the of Iconoclash exhibition in Karlsruhe in 2002. This question is, however, evidently pressing for all those who would like to better understand our era. What can characterize it better than the surplus production of images? And can be a greater mystery than their ability to trigger passions in us?

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