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Réapprendre à voir: Signs, Symptoms and the Media of Appearance

Emmanuel Alloa interviewed by **Benediktas Vachninas**

Emmanuel Alloa, Professor of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at the University of Fribourg, is one of the most active contemporary thinkers in the field of new visual studies. His areas of research include aesthetics, phenomenology, image theory, media theory, and French philosophy. Professor Alloa has authored and (co)edited numerous books, among which the most important ones are *Looking through Images. A Phenomenology of Visual Media* (Columbia University Press, 2021), *Dynamis of the Image. Moving Images in a Global World* (De Gruyter, 2020), *Partages de la perspective* (Fayard, 2020), *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty* (Fordham University Press, 2017). The recipient of the Latsis Prize 2016 and the Aby Warburg Prize 2019, he currently serves as President of the German Society of Aesthetics.

In 2021, Professor Alloa gave an online lecture cycle titled *Orbis Pictus. A Media Phenomenology in an Image World* at Vilnius University. This year, I had the pleasure to hold an online conversation with Professor Alloa as he kindly agreed to discuss the topic of images and his project of symptomatology. The interview encompassed questions about the relation between single artefacts and image theories, the differences between the symptomatological approach to images and visual semiotics, Derrida's contribution to the problem of mediality, and the role of images in philosophy today.

This interview was carried out on the 20th of June, 2023

BV: Let's start from a question regarding the place of symptomatology in the *iconic turn*. In *Looking Through Images: a Phenomenology of Visual Media*, you propose a new approach in the field of visual theories, namely, a "symptomatology of images", which, on the one hand, is dealing with a classical problem of "What is an image?" and, on the other hand, analyses different types of concrete images while defining *symptoms of the iconic*. I would like to ask: How did you devise the idea of a symptomatology, and how would you see it with regard to the division between *Bildwissenschaft* and *Bildtheorie* with regard to *the iconic turn*?

EA: I might start by saying that in the field of visual studies, image studies, image theory, there has been an incredible productivity, and these different labels do not always refer to one and the same reality. I guess that part of your question already hints at that. I

myself consider to be part of the discipline that could only be one but many actors of this general turn toward images – the discipline of philosophy. Of course, as someone coming from this discipline, I am tempted to systematize the discussions. And philosophers often like to have definitions, clear-cut definitions in the sense of an economy of means. If the definition is simple, crisp and clear, then it must be good. Now I also come from a kind of a philosophy that is defined by the phenomenological method. Phenomenological philosophy does not start off with definitions, it does not start off by saying "x is such and such." Rather, it starts by describing phenomena, in all their variety and complexity, in their richness and manifoldness. I believe that a philosophical approach to images informed by a phenomenological understanding must start by taking stock that what we call 'images' or sometimes 'pictures' – also in English which the German language refers with one single word 'Bild' – must be addressed in its variety. Hence the importance of setting up such a dialogue in an interdisciplinary way. Unlike philosophy, there are disciplines that have placed images at the very center of their attention: such disciplines have developed an expertise in describing them, in analyzing their materiality, their design, their organisation, their composition – art history in the first place. Now this is true of other disciplines too, such as, for example, archaeology or literature studies, as well as film studies, aesthetics and media theory, generally speaking, performance studies, etc. I think that phenomenologically informed philosophy of images should not start off with definitions, but would be well advised to begin by describing this variety. In a second step, we might try to see if some common denominator, some common traits emerges from this variety. This is what phenomenology usually does: we look at different ways things appear and then see if there are some common features that can be established as emerging properties.

However, in the context of contemporary visual studies, quite often the very object of the research field is either taken for granted – that is to say most of image scholars do not spend their time on defining what images are, on the one hand – and, on the other hand, we have image philosophies or image theories that are overconfident about what they take images to be. Let me confess: I am rather frustrated with both. I am unsatisfied with those who simply say "ok, I work with images," but who never have anything to say about what imaginality is made of. On the other hand, I am equally unsatisfied with those who belong to a kind of theoretical method that is defined by the attempt to have a "one size fits all" definition. In the latter case, quite frequently these definitions cut into this large field of images by saying "well, if images do not match to the definition I set up, they simply can't be images." So I am also frustrated with the second account. Hence my turn to what I call 'symptomatology'.

BV: If you say that phenomena are changing in time, is it possible to have final definition of images through processes of describing, looking from the phenomenological point of view?

EA: Well, I think that we can tease out common features – definitely. I think we can talk about image features. These features of images or rather, these features of imaginality, I like

to call them (following Nelson Goodman's inspirational ideas about a "symptomatology of art"), symptoms of imaginality. Mind that such symptoms correspond to features that are neither necessary, nor sufficient. But when taken together, they make up for convergent indices of what images might be. Most images share these features, some images only share some of these features or symptoms, some images share other features, but, taken together, they are a convergent indicator of what imaginalities are made of – as opposed to other discursive forms of sense-making.

BV: While describing the ten *symptoms of the iconic*, you referred to a wide spectrum of authors beginning from Plato, St. Augustine and going right to Edmund Husserl, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Moreover, other authors can be ascribed to the camp of semiotics, notably, Nelson Goodman and Louis Marin. So do you think that symptomatology of images can be in dialogue with those positions of visual semiotics which in a way follow Émile Benveniste's famous essay *Sémiologie de la langue* – that is to say they presuppose that images cannot be analysed as signs in a linguistic sense? Would you see the field of images as a place where not only philosophers and art historians, but also semioticians could have a productive conversation?

EA: That's a very interesting question. Undoubtedly, it seems at first sight that phenomenology and semiotics are mutually at odds: they are mutually exclusive in their respective methods. If we take a very simple consensual understanding of what semiotics is, semiotics starts saying that "everything that there is, is a sign of something." And phenomenology crucially and fundamentally denies that. Phenomenology wouldn't distinguish modes of being a sign, but distinguish modes of appearing. To classical phenomenology, only some modes of appearing are semiotic, i.e. only some kinds of appearing are "signitive", that is, based on sign structures – and others are not. Perception, for example, is not a signitive mode of appearing, given that in perception things appear as themselves, and that they aren't representatives of themselves. At first sight thus, it would seem that both methods are incompatible. However, you are absolutely right in observing that I try to establish some form of dialogue between phenomenology and visual semiotics. There are several reasons for this.

The first one is that I believe that it's within the field of visual semiotics that some of the most elaborate descriptions have been provided of how images work: First and foremost, I am thinking of Louis Marin who is maybe one of the most refined image theorists who clearly came from semiotics and yet has also I believe to some extent pushed semiotics to its limits in order to include a reflection on the powers of images and how images generate effects through the latency.

Secondly, I am also and, of course, centrally reliant on Nelson Goodman's theory of art. With your question, you have decided to include Nelson Goodman among the semiotic approaches, and probably this is a plausible way of rubricating him. What Nelson Goodman does is that he offers an account of how artistic artifacts can be interpreted on the basis on their internal structure, I would say, by the way they are organised. And he

has done a very important service to the community in allowing us to move towards to what I call more medial approach. In a certain sense, Nelson Goodman inherits Susanna Langer's approach of the philosophy of symbols, and her philosophy of symbols is in turn indebted to Ernst Cassirer. We would have to rebuild a genealogy that ends somewhere completely different than French visual semiotics. This would take us elsewhere, now, but I think it is important to stress this difference.

Nevertheless, you are right in pinpointing that Nelson Goodman is not a phenomenologist, very far from that. Although he has written an early book called *The Structure of Appearance*, what one misses in his philosophy is an account of what appearing means. For my own work, can take some sections from his oeuvre without doing injustice to the entire project, that much I can adapt fruitfully to my own attempt of a medial phenomenology of images. Goodman's approach – that I would rather call a 'circumstantial' approach than a symptomatology – is helpful in avoiding the pitfall of either a theory that could only account for definitory claims of what images are, or restricts itself to describing radically separated individual artifacts that have nothing to do with each other.

BV: Let's delve deeper to the question of symptoms. You claim that your *symptoms of the iconic* are influenced by the aforementioned Nelson Goodman's *symptoms of aesthetic*, but also first and foremost by Sigmund Freud's conception of symptoms. Taking your and Goodman's models of symptoms into consideration, I think that the biggest difference lies in their relation to the sphere of phenomenality: while *symptoms of the aesthetic* demand cognitive capacities to be thought of, considering *symptoms of the iconic*, it becomes very important to include their perceptual, intuitive or also – in the case of *presentativity* – affective side. In this respect, in my eyes, it relates to the idea of Merleau-Ponty that the world is already expressive and is the condition of language. So, my question is what is the role of the Freud's conception in your project of symptoms?

EA: I would like to take a step backwards. There are different types of signs. And, by using the concept of symptom, I also want to push back a sometimes universalising claim that a theory of symptoms can be addressed generally within a theory of the sign, and that a theory of the sign is something that has to do with distance. A long-standing European tradition has accustomed us to believe that wherever there is an absence of something, all that can be is a sign of that absent object. Semiology has taught us that we should start understanding, interpreting signs on the grounds of a remoteness of the referent that the sign is about. So when I read about something, the referent will be absent; when I look at the signpost, it refers to something that is elsewhere; when I see a photograph, I will be reminded of an absent dear being etc. etc.

However, there is a specific type of signs called symptoms, and symptoms are important in medical tradition because they cannot be treated if not with a contextual understanding. What do I mean by contextual understanding? It means that deciphering the symptoms of a body, that is to say, symptoms of sickness, the symptoms of a given health condition – whether physical or psychic health – are symptoms that have to be read circumstantially, in

presence. In other words, remote diagnosis is very shaky business. The physician usually will be required to be on the spot and to read the symptoms on the body of patient directly, because of contextual understanding that is to do to say that it is important to understand the spatial relationships between the symptoms: how close, how distant are they, what their specific way of appearing, is it lighter or darker, is it intense or less intense. And these 'kind of' symptoms cannot simply be translated into discursive information. The patient cannot simply pass the message through a phone saying "I have symptom x and y," but the symptoms have to be read and understood by sharing a common perceptual situation. My whole phenomenology of this kind of understanding is a phenomenology that insists on the shared perceptual situation. The shared perceptual situation involves that we read the symptoms, something that is present right here right now on a body of which these symptoms are somehow the expression.

And that's I also wanted to question a certain consensus around writing as a technology of meaning that involves distal interpretation as Jacques Derrida has taught us through his grammatology of writing. Of course, there seems to be a ban on any description of a perceptual shared situation, since Derrida's deconstruction of it. I believe we have somehow gone too far here and have not understood why it is simultaneously important to stress a fact that meaning is built and determined through the very media of its appearance. At the same time, these media also are located in perceptual spaces that embodied beings can apprehend.

BV: Going further, I would like to press a point on the reference function of symptoms: the *symptoms of the iconic* entertain a relation with a disease or, as you say, *iconic phenomena* name a relation which functions like a reference in terms of probability. You propose that, if taken individually, the referentiality is uncertain but that taken together, symptoms reinforce the likeness of reference. What I find very important, examining the relation between the *symptoms of the iconic*, is that it is not possible to consider symptoms separately from phenomena that are, in the first place, a condition of them. Would it be possible to interpret that it is sufficient to indicate more than one symptom of iconic in relation with concrete phenomena to suggest that one is dealing with *iconic phenomena*?

EA: Yes. What I mean to say is that the phenomena I am talking about are phenomena that are shared by images. They are shared by many images. Not by all images, however, and thus can't serve as necessary and sufficient conditions. The fact that some of the symptoms I describe cannot be made out in every single image doesn't mean that either the symptom is not an *iconic symptom* or that the artifact I am talking about is not an image. That's my point. The fact that an artefact, event or situation has high semantic or syntactic density makes it more likely for it to be an artwork, but this might be the case of religious experience too. A similar point can be made with regard to what defines images.

We can enter now into discussion of the specific symptoms. This doesn't mean that we are not dealing with an artwork because, of course, the history of art has also been a long history of undoing the expectations of what artworks are about. And I believe that in art

we are seeing something similar. Today, with the rise of artificial intelligence, images are generated that do not share a certain number of features we have traditionally attributed to images. When people tell me "Images are defined by the intentionality of the image maker" – the fact that someone has decided to create an image about something – then I want to say "well, sorry, but there are many images that have not been made with any specific purpose." And, in that sense, AI generated images are sometimes alike to the *achaeoropoietic* images from Byzantium – images not made by human hands, images that are somehow self-generated icons, or by natural images. Hence, an image in the mirror, or the image in the water, are images that are not resulting from any deliberate attempt to depicting something. Some of my colleagues in image theory, image philosophy would simply say "ok, the specular image is not an image." Such kind of answer leaves me unsatisfied. When people tell me "images have to be bi-dimensional," I say "yes, most of them are," but sometimes the play on depth or three-dimensionality of the materiality of the surface can also be important when making us understand how images work.

Thirdly, I would say that the fact that all images have to be about something, I would also doubt that. We have abstract paintings, and why should abstract paintings be excluded from the field of images? Here again I have colleagues that would say "ok, abstract paintings are not images, they are just paintings." I can understand why these colleagues are claiming this, but they are claiming this because it's the result of their definitorial approach. Since I am not following this approach, I want to give an account of the diversity of images and yet of what makes them peculiar, what makes them specific as signs making media. This would be my symptomatological approach where, by superposing different searchers for these symptoms, we can get closer of how images work.

BV: On a different note – your investigation into the notion of the *symptoms of the iconic* raises the problem of relation between image and language. You suggest that the symptomatological approach through the description of symptoms seeks to deal with a notion of 'image' which has a plurality of meanings in the relation with various natural languages. In other words, it aims at the articulation of a zone that is common to different definitions and groups of images.

However, looking at the history of phenomenology, it is important to mark a turn which began with Martin Heidegger's critique of Husserl for underestimating the importance of historicity in phenomenological description. The critique was radicalized by Jacques Derrida in *La voix et le phénomène* where he showed that 'writing' is present in Husserlian descriptions of phenomena.

In the other camp of philosophy at the time of the *linguistic turn*, we witness that, in a certain sense, language is a medium that structures our thinking. With regard to this context – in what sense could we say that the *symptoms of the iconic* and *iconic phenomena* have the kind of "richesse ineffable" (Roland Barthes) uncontaminated by language? What is the role of *diaphenomenology* articulating the zone peculiar to images that is *iconicity*?

EA: We are the inheritors of 2500 years of European metaphysics that, as Jacques Derrida has shown, has encapsulated us in believing that reason has to take the form of

the ‘λόγος’, and the ‘λόγος’ has to take the form of the discourse, and the discourse itself has to be presented in a certain way. This logocentrism, Jacques Derrida has argued, has led to the oblivion of the mediatic support necessary for exchange of arguments. This media base, Derrida calls it ‘writing’. Although I have been inspired by Derrida’s own readings to a large extent, I part with his conclusions that what has been left out or forgotten is merely “*écriture*”. I believe, on the contrary, that there is a kind of *textocentrism*, a *grammatocentrism* that dominates Western thinking, and that only that would be presented itself in a written form is accepted as a valid source of meaning. I believe that we could very well take the first part of Derrida’s demonstration – the deconstruction of this logocentrism – without having to resort to identification of the medium of the logos as being a medium of writing and that we might return to Greeks and Plato to see this.

Derrida equates the ‘γραφεῖν’ with the ‘writing’. But the word ‘γραφεῖν’ in Greek does not only mean ‘writing’, it also means ‘painting’. What is the graphic dimension of reason? – would be my question. What are we leaving out if we reduce mediality to grammatology, if we reduce every kind of support, every form of material trace to writing? When there is a brushstroke on a canvas, or when there are flickering forms scurrying over a film screen, this is not writing. We would be advised to provide better descriptions of what this is. Yet, because we have been trained by a tradition of alphabetic writing to believe that writing is the universal medium, we have been let to exclude other forms of sense making systems that are not discursive as alphabetic writing is. And these nondiscursive forms of expressions – I call them ‘presentative media’ following a hint by Susanne Langer – are not ‘discursive media’. They show *something* by showing *themselves*: they show something by presenting some of their own features. By the way, they are organised themselves they let something else appear. This is no return to a metaphysics of presence: presence is not what precedes representation, presence is not what precedes the copy or the sign, or the redoubling, or the simulacrum – presence is the result of a presentation. This is the starting point of my *diaphenomenology*: whatever appears, appears through something, and this something is the medium of appearing.

So we can take Derrida’s lesson as something decisive, we can take Heidegger’s critique of the oblivion of historicity in Husserl as something that is also very important, without having to resort to explanation such as categories of writing and categories of the *Geschick*, the destiny of being by saying that whatever has been formed, has been formed by something else, whatever comes to the fore, comes to the fore through these positions, determinations – in short through media that have shaped how and what comes into appearance. My hunch is that by discovering the structure of how images work, we can then extend this to more general investigation to how some things come to visibility and others not. Alphabetic writing by its deliberate dissociation of content of message and the bearer of this message – the fact that it is totally unimportant how something is written as long as we can distinguish the elements, the discrete elements that make up for its code – have led us to forget the importance of the material appearing quality of the media themselves, that can often show something, by showing something of themselves.

BV: Looking to a wider context, I wonder how you would define the status of images in Western culture. As demonstrated by proponents of the *pictorial turn*, images function as instruments of persuasion in our society by creating myths that embody certain ideologies. And today, with the ongoing war in Europe, this phenomenon gets new exposure. Do you think that the investigation of *iconicity* can suggest ways that help to dismantle the structures of power that we recognise in images?

EA: Images are neither agents of oppression as such nor are they agents of liberation *per se*. Images can have very different effects. For many centuries, religions, but also philosophies have joined ranks in trying to ban the effects of the powers of images, excluding them from the space of truth and of meaningful sense-making, from Plato's ban of visual arts from the ideal republic all the way to other phenomena of iconoclasm throughout premodern history. Yet today, we can't but recognized that the visual dimension is of an increasing importance in our contemporary world. There is certainly a discrepancy between the ubiquitous presence of images in our everyday life and the lack of tools we are equipped with to analyse their proceedings. Visual studies have contributed a great deal to close this gap and make us aware of the way images work, the way they call upon us, the way they interpellate us, they make us do certain things we might not even want to be doing. But sometimes they also amplify our political demands, they offer powerful rally-cries and identification signs for communities that have often long been marginalised and excluded. Images can serve to visualize the gap between what is and what ought to be, between what is the case and what could be. That is the role of the utopian imagination: exploring how things might be if we allowed them to become different. In summary, images can have all these different effects.

I remain convinced that those who loudly and decidedly try to undo the power of images are also those who best recognise their effects. It's the iconoclasts who may be most obviously granted the images in excessive power in believing that it was only through the destruction that their efficacy could be undone. Looking at the history of iconoclasm might also teach us something about why it would not be very clever to believe that images are merely pacified, neutral signs that refer to something else. If they are more than mere signposts referring elsewhere, if they stir passions and motions, that is because of their phenomenal quality, because of their appearing quality – something that appeals to the senses that makes us do things in ways that we might not even know about or be ready to translate into discursive arguments.

BV: Going almost to the end, I would like to ask a more general question regarding symptomatology's role in the philosophy of today. In one of your earlier articles, you suggested that visual studies should locate effects in the discourse produced by images: notably, in the case of Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et l'esprit*, we are dealing with Cézanne's works, while in Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* with Velázquez' *Las Meninas*. I think that your project of a symptomatology has a line similar to that of the *iconic* and *pictorial turn*: ultimately, the symptomatology demands a particular object of analysis which

enables to think about something more abstract, theoretical, but is not reduced to it. So, in this regard, can symptoms as a unique perspective open up a new trajectory within philosophy today?

EA: It is probably interesting that philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault used artworks in an emblematic way. That is to say: as examples to start with for a much broader question. In case of Merleau-Ponty, the genesis of a sensible world, and, in the case of Foucault, deconstruction of a classical episteme. In both cases, images are not just treated as artworks. Not that it's not artistic images that we often learn most about images in what they convey, simply because artworks make the most extraordinary inventive use of the resources of images. But also because the point for Merlau-Ponty and Foucault was not to write a philosophy of art. For centuries those who studied images so closely were those who treated them mainly as artworks. But if we look at premodern times, if we look at anthropologists, if we look at what people from non-western cultures have to tell us about, anthropologies of figuration – I am thinking of the last book by Philippe Descola, French anthropologist, *Les forms du visible* – then we are seeing that images can be decidedly more than just artworks in the modernist's sense. When Merleau-Ponty and Foucault use artistic images, they are doing so not in order to produce a philosophy of art. Today, we are at an important crossroad where is actually often artworks that teach us something that goes way beyond the question of "is this art?" as analytic philosophy of art is often preoccupied with. What they teach us is not so much the ontology of the work of art, but the question: what does it mean to re-organise, redistribute perspectives, from where do we see, what do we see, what can we see, what can emerge, what can appear, what can be thought, said, what are our beliefs, can we visualise the way we organise the circulation of privileges of who gets to speak and who gets silenced, what is significant, what is insignificant? And I believe that these questions can be forcefully elucidated by a closer look at how images work. *Many images make us see how we see* – mainly artistic images, but also images that have no claim to any artisticity. We are seeing beings where beings in doubt with vision, and yet we have to learn to see anew – as Merleau-Ponty once put this, "réapprendre à voir." There is no better school for training our vision than images.