



Journal of Visual and Cultural Studies

GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN:
DÉPLIER L'IMAGE



CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IN IMAGE STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

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**CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IN IMAGE STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST**

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Laura Marin
(Issue Coordinator)

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Emmanuel Alloa, ed.

Penser l'image (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2011), 304 p.

Penser l'image II: Anthropologie du visuel (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2015), 316 p.

As the editor of (and one of the contributors to) the first two volumes of the *Penser l'image* series published by Les Presses du réel in their "Perceptions" collection, Emmanuel Alloa manages to assemble an unprecedented theoretical kaleidoscope, having in its invisible center a protean and fluid conception of the *image*. The metaphor is not too far-reaching, if one sees the two anthologies – distanced only in time, not so much in substance – as "optical" devices serving to an imaginative examination (*skopeō*) of the beauty (*kalos*) of images (*eide*).

"What do we think about when we think about images?" seems to be the key question that confines within the covers of the series a wide range of contemporary insights into an inexhaustible paradox: it becomes increasingly obvious that the proliferation of images grows in reverse proportion with our ability to provide a stable definition for them. Accordingly, the only approach able to do justice to the trans-disciplinary indeterminacy of the visual studies ("l'image est aussi indisciplinée qu'elle est indisciplinaire," *Penser l'image* 19) seems to be one that mirrors the vast territories inhabited by images, in as many relevant senses of the term as possible. Neither the art historian, nor the anthropologist, the philosopher of culture, the science illustrator, or the passionate reader interested in theoretical sights and insights in the realm of image studies will abandon this "assemblage" in disappointment.

Both volumes are collections of original or translated fragments belonging to reputable authors, in their attempt to shed some light upon the challenge images pose not only to one's sight but, more importantly, to one's thinking framework and imagination. However, the authority of these books does not spring exclusively from the individual names filling the tables of contents; significantly, most contributions repeatedly complete, reflect, and engage in a particularly fertile dialogue with one another. And this is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the series.

The first tome gathers and enriches the proceedings of a seminar held at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris, in 2007 and 2008 respectively. It opens with Emmanuel Alloa's introductory study aiming to dismantle a long-debated, yet artificial conflict between the

conception of image as transparent surface allowing for transitivity and pure visibility, and its understanding as an opaque body whose intransitivity is the *sine qua non* of its "reading" as a system of signs inscribed in matter.

Among the four sections that articulate the skeleton of the book, the first one – "Le lieu des images" ("The Place of Images") – preserves in its three chapters similar binary (and sometimes contradictory) structures. Gottfried Boehm describes how the images are always arising in the very heart of a tension whose intensity is visually translated into various degrees of contrast that make up for what he calls "iconic difference" – a difference so necessary that no image could ever be conceived in its absence. Identifying another pair of tensions, Marie-José Mondzain discusses in "L'image entre provenance et destination" the image in its twofold relation with its "maker" and its "seer." In the last chapter of the section, Jean-Luc Nancy unfolds the question of the image at the threshold "between *mimesis* and *methexis*" and briefly dwells upon the differences separating the *image* from the *figure*.

The second section is reserved to the historical perspectives. For Emanuele Coccia, the medieval thought is an interesting starting point for a discussion of the *strangeness* of the image (*esse extraneum*), virtually explained through the displacement of images both from the space of the object and from that of the subject, from the natural as well as the spiritual realm. A second study signed by Emmanuel Alloa brings up the difference between two categories of the image, namely the *fetish* and the *idol*, discussed in a line of thought whose assumed Heideggerian descent seeks to clarify the present status of *idology*, a "forgotten science." Hans Belting initiates a comparison between two paradigms of sight, starting from the particularities of the window (a symbolic form) as designed by the Western and the Eastern world, respectively; this metonymical approach reveals a *tour de force* of wit, original intuitions, and surprising implications.

The next section – "La vie des images" ("The Life of Images") – begins with a study of the *iconic turn* in natural sciences. Horst Bredekamp makes an interesting exploration of the S-shaped forms in the history of scientific imagery, starting from Galileo and passing through original drawings by Leibniz, Darwin, Ernst Mach, and Odile Crick. Treating the expression "the life of images" quite literally, W.J.T. Mitchell writes in "What Do Images Really Want?" about the ever-

present tendency to invest images not only with Being, but also with a will of their own. This daring hypothesis is taken even further by Jacques Rancière's questioning of the images' potential "will to live." The ending section, "Restitutions," is reserved for Georges Didi-Huberman's engaging analysis of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki's works, through the filter of his ethical concerns regarding the historical and social dimensions of the image in its contemporary practices.

Less structured, but equally insightful is the second tome of the series, *Penser l'image II*, where Emmanuel Alloa focuses on a more specific aspect of the image – the anthropological one. He explains his choice in the opening chapter, where the broader discussion on the ontological status of representation and its functioning as substitute, remedy, or multiplication device is reiterated in the context of the absence-presence dynamics. Further on, Vilém Flusser advocates for the technology-created need of virtual, perfectly abstract new imaginative paths, devoid of actual reference or material dimension. Restricting the meaning of "image" to "painting" (or, in any case, to *homo pictor's* mimetic artifacts), Hans Jonas restates the distinction between the vehicle of figuration and the figurative function itself, while comparing and contrasting the means and the semiotic codes of images and language. With references as varied as Warburg, Goethe, Fra Angelico, Walter Benjamin, Plotin, and Bataille, Andrea Pinotti retraces an interesting itinerary of morphological approaches in the study of image. David Freeberg's work on idolatry and masks with respect to Warburg's famous visit to the Pueblo Indians establishes a new thematic connection with the first volume, and particularly with W.J.T. Mitchell's and Emmanuel Alloa's chapters about idols.

The following several texts are also linked with themes and motives previously explored, but tend to investigate them in a more applied, case study manner. If the first tome launched several hypotheses on the "life of images," the second volume hosts Philippe Descola's study on "The Double Life of Images," where the author sees images developing in one (or several) of four possible ontological formulas, namely animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism. Keeping a constant reference to the works of Aby Warburg, Carlo Severi investigates the relations between images and memory (be it individual or collective) in a case-study focusing on the representations of the "white man" in the Kuna shamanic tradition. If images have a life (a

double life, even), some kind of "will," and strong relations with memory and the way we shape our worlds in both time and space, Jan Assmann discusses their *performativity* and their *power*, in the specific representational context of the Ancient Egypt. By means of adapting Austin and Searle's speech acts theory, Assmann attempts to introduce a similar approach to "image acts." Bruno Latour re-discusses the role of images in the anthropology of science and technology, speaking about "the sights of the spirit." Last but not least, James Elkins departs from the already mentioned W.J.T. Mitchell and his *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* in order to investigate visual traditions other than the Western ones. As Hans Belting did in the previous volume by means of analyzing some particularities of the image in the Arab world, Elkins briefly summarizes three different traditions of conceiving the image (the Chinese, the Persian, and the Indian) with the help of a body of ancient treatises which, while little known, seem very appealing to the Western reader.

Caught in the ever fluid interplay and apparent contradictions occurring between transparency and opacity, form and background, subject and object, figuration and abstraction, pure materiality and symbolic form (to mention but a few), each image carries its own charge of invisible, yet somehow manifest tensions. It is precisely from these subterranean *iconic differences* (to borrow the terminology of one of the contributing authors) that the images draw their *life*, their *will* and authority within a community or a visual tradition, their ethical and religious implications and, perhaps most importantly, their power of seduction and fascination, as old as mankind.

Eclectic and protean as they might be (for it would be impossible to have them otherwise, given the infinite diversity of images and possible approaches to their study), the 600 pages of the two anthologies edited by Emmanuel Alloa attempt to render these morphological, cognitive, symbolic or performative tensions and mechanisms a little more visible to the curious eye.

Alexandra Irimia