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# Images beyond Representation: Evidence and Depth of Meaning

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## Abstract

In this article, I consider images from a philosophical point of view, starting from its definition and its relation to thinking. Some analogies with imagetic signs and words are established. And in doing this, I try to value seeing, not to the expense of saying or thinking, but as a way of getting in touch with images that privilege a certain way of knowing.

**Keywords:** images, language, thinking, perception, fantasy

## 1. Introduction

When considering images, the first problem is to identify the theory of images that best define them. That is something often difficult to establish because such theories lead us to articulate discourse and image. In addition, in an attempt to explain them, the discourse overlaps the images. However, do they need an explanation?

One of the issues at hand when tackling the possibility of discourse on images is their relationship with thought and with seeing or looking. For an image presents us with something to be seen and looked at, about which we formulate a thought. Barthes ([1], p. 32) wonders if an image is not a simple agglutination of symbols or if it produces a system of signs. If we consider that the language-based thought system operates differently from image reading, we will come to think of that question as not valid. However, in semiotics, language is just spoken or written language because of the way in which it is articulated. Images, on the other hand, seem to form a rudimentary system that resists meaning. If meaning is intrinsic to images, how is it added into it? Marie-Jose Mondzain states (in [2], p. 23) that thought, in paintings, is within images. We learn from images, though it is necessary to distinguish between seeing and looking. Visibility cannot be reduced to what is merely apparent, since it is also related to invisibility.

Didi-Huberman [3] explores this theme in *Devant l'image. Questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*. When presenting the issue that prompted him to write this book, the author refers to the experiences of whoever lays eyes on a work of art: the experience is that of a paradox because, despite unclear and indistinct, what we see is simultaneously evident. Nevertheless, those unsatisfied with this paradoxical experience need an explanation. Such an explanation comes in the form of a speech – that is the historian's or art critic's discourse, the one who sets himself up as the knower of art. However, what prompts us to rise to this level of certainty regarding this object that gives us this paradoxical experience? Elkins ([2], p. 41) concedes to feeling the attraction to what we call the ontology of the image – meaning the idea that the

image has something non-linguistic that is beyond logic and language. It is possible to identify in this statement some of the problems we face when seeking to define the image and, thus, find a field to understand it: we end up placing the discussion in binary distinctions that come from language, such as rational and irrational, logical and illogical. Whenever we want to understand them through concepts from other areas, we lose sight of them. Every time we establish codes or references, we realize that they cannot fully account for the image. Barthes ([4], pp. 68–69) realizes that the photographic image cannot be reduced to the object portrayed or to the image of the person reproduced. The concept of “*punctum*”, which can be approximated to Walter Benjamin’s idea of aura, refers to something beyond the image. Elkins recognizes that some of the positions taken in this discussion are pragmatic, like Goodman’s or even his ones. He also argues that non-Western concepts could have a more central place in the discussion about image<sup>1</sup>. Initially I will present Georges Didi-Hubermann’s and Roland Barthes’s positions on this debate.

## **2. Didi-Huberman, Rosalind Krauss: minimal art and European *avant-garde***

According to Didi-Huberman’s [5], minimalism launches an attack against seeing. The author discusses the requirements and purpose of minimalism. For Robert Morris and Donald Judd, they aim at eliminating the illusion to impose specific objects, objects that only asked to be seen. For Didi-Huberman, however, this purpose seems simple in theory, but it proves to be more complex in practice, since the tendency of illusion is to project itself onto any object. Belief easily comes about regarding something. This statement brings an important element to the act of seeing an image: our eyes are not neutral. They do not see colors and spatial material shapes only; instead, the argument is that meaning is added to what is seen. Robert Morris and Donald Judd make the following requirements: (1) manufacture a visual object stripped of all spatial illusionism – an artefact that does not lie about its volume (Didi-Huberman, [5], p. 50); (2) eliminate every detail in order to conceive the object as an individual indecomposable totality ([5], p. 54); and (3) the purpose of these first two requirements is to eliminate all temporality of objects in order to impose them as objects to be seen always immediately, always exactly as they are. When thinking about these requirements and purposes, it seems that what these artists proposed amounts to a new form of aestheticism. Pure objects should be seen in themselves, even without external references and meaningless attribution. In this case, art would refer only to itself, to its own history. For Didi-Huberman, minimalist art sought to overcome the representational image, thus presenting objects devoid of meaning to those who see these images. In the 1950s and 1960s, minimalism emerged as an offshoot of the European *avant-garde* movements in the United States, mainly of expressionism. This movement, unlike what Minimal Art proposed, brought images that expressed feelings. Emptying the meaning of image is a proposal that is constituted at that later moment. Frank Stella states in an interview [6] that everything he did originated from Kazimir Malevitch’s Black Square [1878–1935] with a blue triangle. Here, I would have to differentiate Malevitch’s proposal from Stella’s, which I will do in the near future, as this is not our intention at this time. For

<sup>1</sup> At a seminar held in 1998, participants read a revised version of his text *Different horizons for the concept of the image*, in which the author explores Persian, Chinese and Indian concepts of image. I am currently investigating this theme and it will be the subject of a future publication. Approaching the image from Eastern concepts can broaden our vision, but more than that, it requires an immersion in a culture that needs a deeper interest than a mere reference or comparisons with our usual concepts.

Malevitch the Square [7] is a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason, which he considers necessary to be placed alongside utilitarian reasoning.

Malevitch does not explain the meaning of the expression “intuitive reason”, but it can be assumed from some of his statements that it knows things as they are, thus opposing utilitarian reason, which “invents the world” and “fake effectiveness” ([8], p. 124). For Martineau, the proposal of a new pictorial and philosophical ontology by suprematism means an identity between being and nothingness, as well as a liberation of the latter. This would result in man as pure freedom. Rosalind Krauss ([9], pp. 303–306]) discusses these relationships and the heritage of the European *avant-garde* movement in the United States. If artists of European expressionism and futurism used sculptural form to create a metaphor for organic life, artists like Donald Judd will reject the idea of a deep meaning of their sculptures.

The sculptures by Naum Gabo [10] [1890–1977] and Antoine Pevsner [11] [1886–1962], made of plastic, plywood or tinplate, says Krauss, “do not revolve around” ([9], p. 303) these materials. However, they visually present “the creative power of thought, a meditation on the growth and development of the Idea” (idem). Behind the material surfaces, there was an indication of “the interior and it was from this interior that the life of the sculpture emanated” ([9], p. 303).

However, according to Krauss, minimalist sculptors, whether in choosing the material used or in composing the form, “had the objective of denying the interiority of the sculpted form – or at least rejecting the interior of the forms as the source of its meaning” ([9], p. 303). What the minimalists intended was the “reduction of art to the point of emptiness”. In this way, they denied the relationship between the work and the artist’s interior. Still according to Krauss, by rejecting this relationship, Judd was “rejecting a notion of individual self that assumes personality, emotion and meaning as elements existing in each of us separately” ([9], pp. 308–9). Thus, the minimalists, here represented by Donald Judd, are questioning the very illusion produced by art, and thus art itself. Moreover, they present a posture that is in line both with this questioning of art as an activity that puts us in contact with other spheres of experience and as a form of communication. Saying “what you are is what you see” means to find it impossible to say anything beyond the obvious. Everything that one can say or communicate, one says and communicates within the public space.

Dislodging the unintelligible from art is to consider seeing an operation without depth, and the spectator as an almost inert body deprived of the illusion game: seeing happens so quickly that the observer does not spend much observation time. Apparently, the observer will not ask what is hidden behind such clean images. We can identify in the images of minimalist art the reference to the seriality of industrial production. Nevertheless, for those who look at them, the question remains: what am I seeing? Do minimalist artists intend to provoke the public, or they simply accommodate themselves to the reduction of the image as reproduction? The vision of these images is disconcerting: both because they present, as heirs of the *avant-garde* arts, an artistic production that subverts the production procedures of the work – they even subvert the *avant-garde* proposals – and because they present to the viewer an image that seems to say nothing to him or her. However, for Didi-Huberman [5], there is a contradiction in the minimalist proposal itself. The minimalism to which they intend to reduce their works provokes and disturbs, thus posing a current question about the image and its visibility.

If Robert Morris was dissatisfied with the way iconographic and iconological discourse is invested upon sculpture, betraying its specific parameters, Judd was opposed to the optical illusion that intends to suggest a third dimension, the answer for both would be to manufacture a visual object stripped of illusionism, a spatial object in three dimensions that produced its own spatiality. Non-relational objects are closed in on themselves ([5], pp. 50–53).



For Morris, such objects should be “simple volumes” and “their parts... so unified that they offer a maximum resistance to all separate perception” ([6], p. 54).

As for Judd, he considered that “a strong work should not be composed” ([5], p. 54). The result of eliminating composition was to “propose excessively simple objects, generally symmetrical, reduced to a minimal form... Objects reduced to the simple visibility of their visible configuration, offered without mystery, between line and plane, surface and volume.” ([5], p. 54). Frank Stella, whose painting produced in that period had in it “only what can be seen in it” ([5], p. 55), agreed with Morris and Judd. Didi-Huberman concludes that the result of this is the victory of tautology. The artist speaks of the obvious. His art is exactly what you see. Moreover, that is what it will always be.

What these artists aimed to produce were stable objects: their stability resides in the absence of the marks of time. For that, they used industrial, resistant and mass-produced materials, as opposed to classic materials. Yet, as we have seen, they aimed to produce objects theoretically without meaning games. For them, there is no interiority, no latency, no time, no being, just the specific object. No recoil, mystery or aura. For Judd, the purpose of this problem is to eliminate all anthropomorphism in order to rediscover and impose this obsessive, imperative specificity of the object that the minimalist artist took as his manifesto. For these artists, seeing would be thus condemned to the smooth and equal surface of their objects, without background or depth. In addition, it would not refer to anything beyond that surface. This is a pessimistic position that somehow condemned any mention to the private nature of experience, to the sphere of the unrepresented, to a product of illusion and imagination, or to a utopia.

However, for Didi-Huberman, there seems to be an internal contradiction in minimalism: by presenting themselves as simple objects, do they not engender any discourse about them, or is the paucity of words due to the discourse’s inability to account for the visual world? For Didi-Huberman, the second alternative is the case, since discourses do not always account for what is seen and the attempt to bring them together is not always a good solution for the critic. For him, the critic’s work is precisely to point out the disjunction between work and discourse, “because it is in it that the work’s beauty is found” ([5], p. 69). The disjunction is the place of an opening, of a breach that a discourse about the work problematizes it. He regards the act of seeing not as the act of a machine perceiving the real as composed of tautological evidence. The act of making visible is not the act of giving visible evidence to pairs of eyes that unilaterally seize the “visual gift” to unilaterally satisfy themselves with it. Giving to see is always to disturb the seeing, in its act, in its subject ([5], p. 77). The work of the critic who penetrates the gap is to find words for what is disturbing in minimalism; that is, its insistence on saying nothing.

### **3. Benjamin’s reflections on paintings and child perception**

We can say that Walter Benjamin inspired some of Didi-Huberman’s reflections on images. In the quoted work [5], *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, the French author wrote at least two chapters in which the reference is the work of the German critic. There, he mentions both the notion of “aura” and of “dialectical images and thought-images”. Here, I will refer to texts from Benjamin’s early period in which he presents his reflections on images as well as his experiences in front of some paintings.

According to Sigrid Weigel ([12], p. 206), “painting, art history and the discussion of modernist art play a fundamental role in his way of thinking”. Nonetheless, his thoughts on these themes have attracted little attention from scholars. For

Weigel, Benjamin's reflections on paintings and memories of the ones he saw, serve as "incubators" for concepts such as thought images, dialectical images and non-sensible similarities. I cannot demonstrate this path here, but I shall shed some light on some of those reflections that expand the notions of image and seeing. I have selected some passages from volume VI of the *Gesammelte Schriften* [13] by Walter Benjamin. This volume brings together autobiographical writings and fragments, as well as some sketches grouped under the title *Zur Ästhetik* (On Esthetics), which deal with fantasy and color, in addition to comments on painting, child perception and children's books. Based on this material, I briefly to highlight the relationships between child perception, color, and fantasy, which recognizes the extension of the ability to seeing and a perception not colonized by culture.

According to Schiavoni ([14], pp. 12–13), childhood is configured in Benjamin's life in the following terms:

*como una especie de tierra de desembarco (categoría al mismo tiempo histórica y mítica) recuperada luego de su toma de distancia ideológica del potencial fascistizante insito en los "movimientos de la juventud" (las Jugendbewegungen) que operaban a principios de siglo, y del idealismo de impronta liberal activo en el círculo reformista de Gustav Wyneken, el innovador "maestro" de su adolescencia y fundador de la "libre comunidad escolar" de Wickerdorf en Turingia, con el que Benjamin rompió drásticamente en el verano de 1915 por las elecciones filomilitares patrocinadas por Wyneken.*<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin's comments and reflections on 19th century children's books represent the pursuit of a childhood capable of fantasizing and perceiving the world for itself, without the influence of education tailored to them, which ends up making them docile and compliant to the rules of the system. A work aimed at children and praised by Benjamin in *Alte Kinderbücher* ([13], III, pp. 14–22; [15], pp. 47–53) provides colored prints, fairy tales, and songs that escape the "control of philanthropic theories". They are cultural assets inherited from previous centuries, not sacrificed in the 19th century, and which still maintain the relationship with aspects that may resemble the primitive due to the used technique. This and other books tailored to children, when not treated by the moralizing philistine culture, come to them "as...a sacred text", a place in which "there is a promise of happiness that adults have lost or betrayed" ([14], p. 28).

Benjamin underlines the role of fantasy in texts on child perception and in ancient books. To him fantasizing is a primordial phenomenon, different from creative imagination. This feature of fantasy can best be seen in fairy prints of German children's books. Different from creative imagination, fantasy is based, for example, on the reception of colors. "Pure colour is the medium of fantasy, the home of clouds of the child who plays; it is not the rigorous canon of the artist who builds" ([13], IV, p. 613; [15], p. 59). Fantasy appears as an anthropological feature to which the child is closest. When putting together a proposal for child education, Benjamin places at the core of his proposal the notion of creative imagination that manifests itself in play, in children's play. Benjamin stresses the feature of the reading game; a game proposed by the booklet itself that leads children to do their own reading, to learn how to decipher "hieroglyphs" ([13], III, pp. 127–132; [15], pp. 71–75).

<sup>2</sup> "as a kind of landing ground (a category both historical and mythical at the same time) recovered after its ideological distancing from the fascistic potential found in the "youth movements" (*the Jugendbewegungen*) that operated at the beginning of the century. Also, distancing from the idealism of liberal imprint active in the reformist circle of Gustav Wyneken. Wyneken was the innovative "teacher" of his adolescence and founder of the "free school community" of Wickerdorf in Thuringia, with whom Benjamin drastically broke apart in the summer of 1915 because of the filo-militaries elections sponsored by Wyneken."

In *Spielzeuge und Spielen* he affirms the importance of the game as a resource not to harden the habit, but to learn it as a game so that it does not become nature. Thus, eating, drinking, sleeping, dressing are habits that “come into life as games.” On the other hand, the characteristic of the game is “doing it again and again”, and that means creating a habit. The child wants to repeat the lived fact, to taste again “triumphs and victories” ([13], II, p. 131; [15], p. 75); yet, narrating an experience “relieves the heart” of horrors” (idem). Habits are like fossils, testimonies of a “primal situation from which the first impulse was born” (idem). Benjamin’s statements are intended to challenge the way we learn – he is opposed to the Enlightenment education model characterized, in the afterword of Seidmann-Freud’s booklet, as “relentless pursuit of goals, widespread dispute to conquer the ‘knowing’ of what the adult (...) demands” ([13], III, p. 272; 1984, p. 107). To this model “the doors of true knowledge are closed”.

Thus, Benjamin emphasizes the importance of childhood experience in the development of adults. In *Grüne Anfänge*, he states that the seriousness ([13], III, p. 314; [15], p. 114) of life has nothing to do with life in black and white or better saying it, with the absence of fantasy in adult life, but rather with the scope and importance that childhood experiences have for the adult. The smaller the adult’s intervention in children’s activities, the greater the flow of fantasy. As indicated above, fantasy is related to perception. Benjamin considers it as a primordial phenomenon, in the anthropological sense. In his own words: “In the vision of colors, the nature of fantasy reveals itself, as a primordial phenomenon in opposition to creative imagination. Man himself corresponds to every form, to every trait he perceives, in his capacity to reproduce them. The body itself in the dance, the hand in the drawing, reproduces its elements of perception and appropriates them.” ([13], III, p. 613; [15], p. 59). Therefore, it is an anthropological feature in the sense that it is related to the way in which humans receive and reverberate colors, for example.

In their games and plays, children turn to thought and fantasy ([13], III, p. 611; [15], p. 57). The examples mentioned by Benjamin are of books that the child can build; books that they read and in which they surrender and are absorbed by them. They are impregnated with the “fairy central German world... their ingenuity is based, as well as that of colours, on fantasy” ([13], III, p. 613; [15], p. 59). In them, “colours, as if winged, float over things. For its charm does not radiate from the coloured object or simply from the colour” ([13], III, p. 613; [15], p. 60). Child’s experience with these readings, and the child’s visual experience with the pictures in the books, can be compared to the experience of contemplation, which in the essay on the work of art Benjamin opposes to distraction. That is the experience avoided by the minimalist works mentioned earlier; works created with the intention of establishing an immediate relationship with the viewer. The reception of these works is conceived by their authors as collective and public, in the register of distraction. If we follow Benjamin’s statements in the essay on the work of art, it is a tactile reception. Contemplation is the form of optical reception, distanced. It promotes the experience of the aura and leads the “receiver to immerse him or herself in deep meditation” ([16], p. 40). For Benjamin, this form of reception that is in decay in modernity finds conditions for its existence in childhood. The reception of color by vision takes place in order to promote a state of immersion in the object.

The human body, says Benjamin, is incapable of producing color, in relation to which the body behaves, therefore, in a receptive rather than creative way. In this reception, vision is the faculty that operates active and passive correspondences, standing out among the other senses, and allows a movement of immersion in things through imagination and fantasy. This movement is not just contemplation or concentration, but immersion in the object.

Thus, for Benjamin, children's esthetic perception emerges not as a form of "esthetic education", but as a form of maintaining what brings the child closer to the artist: the pure experience of colors. An experience that refers to an interiority and depth that is being lost.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper has tried to show how authors like Barthes, Didi-Huberman, Mondzain and Benjamin see images not as rudimentary systems of meaning and more than mere appearances. The paper has approached the dialectic between the visible and the invisible and how the reading of images must consider this dialectic.

In our contemporary world, images have become widely used as means of communication. This makes it urgent to understand the process of reading and interpreting images and the effects of this paradoxical experience; particularly when it comes to challenging artistic images. The relationship with artistic images makes possible to experience an active and passive reception of colours, thus awakening our faculty of imagination.

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