TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF IMAGE

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We shall begin with certain more or less commonplace statements about language and image. The world of image, like the world of language, is nothing static. This follows from the fact that neither of the two phenomena is natural. Secondly, the world of image and the world of language are not independent of each other. In fact, they feed into each other, ceaselessly. And finally, both image and language have been claimed for and studied in terms of their literary-artistic and scientific-documentary ends.

It is a well-established fact today that externalized visual manifestation of language, that is, *writing*, was historically preceded by and is derived from *drawing*. Therefore, the historical movement of 'representation' could only have been: from *speech* to *image* and then to *writing*. But then, speech itself could be said to be preceded by the non-manifest 'mental image.' This at least was the perspective adopted by Aristotle, according to whom, "(s)poken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images." (*On Interpretation*)

We cannot, in this paper, go into the seemingly endless discussions and debates that try to account for the intertwining relationship between language and image. We can only try and identify some of the more recent and contemporary benchmarks on this question. In any case, our

purpose in touching upon this question, in the context of
understanding the relationship between philosophy and
media is only secondary. Our intention is to identify and
present some of the philosophical perspectives on image,
with as far as possible, a reference to the media.[1]

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A 'philosophy of image' – a rather vaguely used term – ought
to be able to account for the use of the term 'image'
beginning from its sense of the 'mental image' to the current
proliferation of 'images' in the scientific, artistic, literary and
mediatic domains. Aristotle's use of the word 'impression'
to speak of the mental image must have been preceded by
the existence of seals and other graphological signs and
practices in ancient Greece. Today, when the brain scientists
take this notion far more seriously, they refer to some sort of
a 'reality' that is present in the brain that can be scanned
and displayed on a visual monitor. A monitored 'map' of
the brain simulates in a more or less organized way the
chaotic activation that the neurons are supposed to receive.
If the image was for Aristotle the form of a representation
within us of the outside reality, today this inside reality is
said to be mapped and given for further viewing. While a
mirror 'reflects' the reality for a viewer in front of it – though
with a left-right inversion – on the basis of the luminous rays
falling on the latter, the image on a computer 'monitor'
involves complex physical mediations between its own
properties and the properties of the thing that it simulates.
What the monitor 'projects' for our viewing is the technically
organized simulation of a reality that is hidden and not given
to our viewing.[2]

Since we are used to believing in the images that we
perceive on a monitor, or for that matter and more surely,
our 'mental images' it is not difficult for us to conclude that
the 'image,' whether simulated or not, is *distinct* from the
thing. Rather than an exact counterfoil to the real thing,

the image is now seen as a node in the chain of visible forms that are available to us, including the thing itself. This means that image is not just a psychological resultant of perception, imagination or thought, but a mode of existence of the real world.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his well-known work, *L'Imaginaire* (1940) had made a clear break with the tradition coming from Hume, which viewed the image or imagination as a pale copy of the mental image or impression resulting from perception. According to him, imagination and perception involve distinct "attitudes of consciousness." The former is 'active,' and in it one gives oneself an image of the object, and the latter is 'passive,' merely letting one to encounter the object in reality. For Sartre, image "is a certain manner in which the object appears to consciousness, or rather, a certain manner in which the consciousness gives itself an object." (Sartre, p. 21)

Secondly, contrary to perception which manifests only slowly and bit by bit, imagination appears in one bloc and produces the image as a whole and with an immediacy. In this wholeness of the image, the object is however rendered as non-present and non-existing. That is to say, while one can act on the basis of the impression got from perception, the image of an object in imagination does not prompt one's action upon it. Furthermore, according to Sartre, imagination involves a continuous emotive effort on the part of consciousness, while on the contrary, in perception, the object is passively received by it.

This phenomenological position on image has at least two counterpoints in European philosophy. The first of these appeared as a direct critique of Sartre's perspective on 'commitment' in art and literature. Levinas in a short article, 'Reality and Its Shadow' (1948) published in the Sartre-founded journal *Les Temps Modernes* rejects the idea that the (artistic) image can have any value either as representational truth or as manifesting the commitment of the artist. In the

image, according to Levinas, there is no transmutation of the object by means of emotive or existential energy. But rather, he argues, it is the image that takes a hold over us and renders us to a fundamental passivity. Levinas: 'An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity. Possessed, inspired, an artist, we say harkens to a muse. An image is musical.' An image detracts us from the secure path of our conceptual reality, and sets us to its own rhythm. Hence art maintains itself as a realm of sensation (i.e., the 'aesthetic' realism) which can be rendered into conceptual / discursive mode only by means of acts of criticism. In this realm, the image is no longer in contact with reality. In Levinas's words, it, 'disincarnates' reality.

Image also bears a relationship to the object, which is that of 'resemblance,' something which other represent-ational media such as symbol, sign or word cannot have. The thought that is, from a phenomenological point of view, aimed at an object cannot pass the level of image. This is what accounts for the opacity of image, in contrast to the transparency of the sign. This space where conceptual thought is arrested in its quest for reality, is according to Levinas, the shadow of reality, or the image. Image resembles reality not in comparison, nor analogically, but as the shadow that accompanies and resembles the thing. Confronted with the face of a person, one's thought can attain only its caricature, its image. The image precedes the thing. Levinas: '...the thing is itself and its image.... this relationship between the thing and its image is resemblance.'

Thus image is characterized by its own specific temporality. The artistic image is accompanied by a stoppage of time, its inability to participate in real time. Its time is an instant drawn from the real time, separated from it, and destined to last, in its immobility, forever. Levinas: 'A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future.' It is this time of the image that Levinas refers to as

the 'meanwhile' or the interval, or even the 'time of interruption.' (Later, Maurice Blanchot will speak of this as the 'time of time's absence' specifically in the context of literature.) Even when an object unfolds or develops in historical time, as image, it may be immobilized as a shadow and an instant of its existence may be immobilized as an interval. The shadowy meanwhile (that an image is in relation to its object) is, according to Levinas, 'never finished, still enduring – something inhuman and monstrous.'

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A general skepticism towards art and artistic image that seems to lurk in Levinas' work, is not discernible in the works of his one-time teacher Heidegger, and that of his close associate and friend, Maurice Blanchot. Heidegger, as we know, spoke of the artwork in term of its ability to induce truth as 'unconcealment' (*alethia*). In the context of the dynamic flow of the historical world, the artwork is essentially a 'useless object'; it is like a 'broken tool' as he puts it. Broadly speaking, it is this idea that resurfaces in Blanchot's essay, 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary' (Blanchot, M., *The Space of Literature*, Appendix 2).

Blanchot, however speaks of the inoperative, and inhuman aspect of the artistic image in somewhat human terms. Here again the image comes not after, but before the object, as the incapacitated shadow that resembles reality. But, Blanchot compares the artistic image not to an inorganic object or tool, but to the organic body, more precisely to the dead body. The image bears a 'cadaverous resemblance' to the thing. Like the dead body, it retreats from the human reality, and occupies a special place as well as a fleeting but enduring time in the human social milieu. The artistic image bears on itself the pompous impersonality and immobility of the dead body. The death of the living body that Blanchot speaks of is not the sublating death of Hegel, nor is it death featured as destinal possibility as in Heidegger. He is instead

referring to Levinas' notion of 'death as impossibility'. Blanchot: 'It is as if the choice between death as understanding's possibility and death as the horror of impossibility had also to be the choice between sterile truth and the prolixity of the non-true. It is as if comprehension were linked to penury and horror to fecundity.' (ibid., 261) Like the undying death of the other that induces infinite responsibility in the self, the cadaverous absence-presence of the image, induces 'the *other* of all meaning' and due to its ambiguity, 'nothing has meaning, but everything *seems* infinitely meaningful.' (Ibid., 262)

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Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1910) antedates Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* by more than three decades. It can be considered as the quintessential work in a philosophy of image. In his materialist account of consciousness, the distinction between matter and consciousness is eliminated by resorting to a universally pervasive notion of images, which act among themselves continuously. Bergson poses his problem frontally in the first paragraph of his work:

> Here I am in the presence of images,...., images perceived when my senses are opened to them, unperceived when they are closed. All these images act and react upon one another in all their elementary parts according to constant laws of nature, and, as a perfect knowledge of these laws would allow us to calculate and to foresee what will happen in each of these images, the future of the images must be contained in their present and will add to them nothing new.

This naturalistic materialism of images, which mediate the presumed opposition between matter and mind has had its takers and opponents. Levinas rejects it for assuming that there is a natural 'continuity of time as the essence of duration' and for not being sensitive to 'the paradox that an instant can stop.' We have seen that for Levinas, image is

the shadow of reality, an image arrested in time, the immobile interval.

While for Gilles Deleuze, the Bergsonian perspective of the world as incessant interactive mobility of the material images amounted to a theorization of the Cinema, before its time. (Deleuze, G., *Cinema I – Movement-Image*, 1983) This is in spite of the fact that Bergson himself was philosophically sceptical of the artificial movement-image he saw in the nascent cinema of his time. Deleuze's justification for this unexpected Bergsonism in cinema runs as follows:

> The cinema can, with impunity, bring us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them, it suppresses both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world. Hence it substitutes an implicit knowledge and a second intentionality for the conditions of natural perception. It is not the same in the other arts, which aim rather at something unreal through the world, but makes the world itself or a tale [*récit*]. With the cinema, it is the world which becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world.

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The second part of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) – a work that is written in homage to Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* – begins with a discussion of the photographs of the then recently deceased mother of author. What characterizes the photographic image, according to Barthes, is its property of 'that-has-been.' This image, unlike the artistic or the cinematic image, is ultimately '*intractable,*' that is: 'what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.' (Ibid., p. 77) The *referent* of this image was really present in some place and at some time to some consciousness, which may be either the operator (of the camera) or the spectator (of the

image).[3] The referent (e.g. of a person, one's mother), *emanates* from the image for the spectator, in one bloc, without giving much scope for personal interpretation. (This is the basis of Barthes' opposition between two contrary qualities of the photograph: *punctum* – that which hits me directly like an arrow, and *studium* – that which permits contemplative study.) And yet, though the photograph refers to a point distanced in space and situated in the past time, the photographic image is *without future*. The photograph is both like a specter from the past and a sign of one's future death, Barthes would say. In other words, shall we insist, it does not cease to be a caricature, a shadow of reality and the arresting of time?

In the concluding sections of the *Camera Lucida*, Barthes had alluded to this ambivalence in the context of the photographic image. On the one hand, Barthes had noted, the unmediated or immediate evidence of reality that a photograph can give makes it a 'mad' medium. But on the other hand, it is 'tamed' in the attempt to make it into an art such as the cinema or by a banalizing preponderance of it, as is the case in television and other electronic media today. Roland Barthes:

> Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (leafing through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute, and so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call..., the photographic ecstasy. (Ibid., p. 119)

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Photography, as we know was a technological invention of the 19th century marking a major transformation in the history of the image. The epoch was also characterized by

large-scale developments in the mechanical reproduction
of the work of art. While the period leading to the European
Renaissance was marked by a proliferation of Christian
religious paintings, more or less sacred, the 19th century
photographic image and the easy availability of mechanically
printed images took away, as Walter Benjamin says, the 'aura'
of the artwork, and pushed it closer towards a depiction of
historical reality. Photographic image as a bearer or
documented reality, either benign or harmful, is indeed
the contemporary mode of its employment and of
understanding its use in the media today. Even neo-realist
cinema claimed to present documented historical reality by
means of its own specific techniques.

From the painted images of Jesus' resurrection which
served as the resurrection of the image against the
monotheistic proscription of images in divine worship to the
recent attempts to censor the violent media images in the
aftermath of the terrorist destruction of the twin towers in
New York, the Western civilization seems to have come a
full circle. The ambivalent disposition of man towards image
has perhaps come from the fact that its mute presence can
be both in the service of man and a possible source of
destructive violence. Unlike linguistic discourse, the
unmediated and immediate character of image has been a
source of concern both in the mediation between man and
god and between man and man. *Can the image kill?*[4] is in fact
the title of a recent work by Marie José Mondzain, a
contemporary philosopher of image. Similarly, 'Image and
Violence' is a central chapter in Jean-Luc Nancy's book, *The
Ground of the Image.*[5] We shall dwell on these two works in
the remaining part of this paper.

Both Nancy and Mondzain are thus concerned with the
question of the relationship between image and violence.
But while Nancy approaches it in terms of a deconstruction
of the ontology of image, Mondzain inquires into the
relationship between the image and the spectator that is

always in the process of being constituted and reconstituted both from the end of production and that of reception of images.

Both are also concerned, at least as a starting point, with the sacredness of images, and even if not entirely, with the sacred image. The 'sacred,' Nancy clarifies, is that which is separated, cut off, from the rest of objects. It is 'distinct' from them. The distinctness of the image, comes from its being both present and absent, and at the same time, neither present nor absent. In Mondzain's rather technical definition, 'image (is) a certain category of vaguely designated objects like the visible objects which are strictly speaking neither objects among other objects, nor signs among other signs, but some sort of specific appearances (*apparitions*), offered only to the eyes and not to any other organ.'[6] Further, from a more closely spectator-oriented perspective, she would say, 'image (is) is everything that makes a subject who can see a subject capable of maintaining a spectatorial relation with the visible.'[7]

The image, whether it is created by human hand or not, cannot be touched. It maintains its 'sacred' distance from us, even when it is exposed to us in its intimacy. It exercises a sacred, even violent, force over us. Though sacred, Nancy says, the image cannot be sacrificed. In its simultaneous separation and intimacy, the image maintains a pompous and violent domination over us. It remains present for what is absent, and its distinct presence cannot be made absent, either by sacrifice or by consumption. This is what gives the image its power over us, its power to engulf us, to render us passive, even when it is we who are looking at it. Hence the fear and the corresponding query, 'Can the image kill?' An answer to this question is indeed not difficult to find, for no violent image as such can make us violent, just as any number of images of virtue cannot, in themselves make us virtuous. It is not the violent or virtuous contents of the image that makes us respectively violent or virtuous, but it is the

unmediated quality of the images that can hold us in their violent sway.

In its monstrous intimacy, in being an indelible excess over the given field of forces, image is akin to violence. This excess is also not different from and parallel to the excess of the scopic drive in us. We wish to see over and above as well as behind what we see. According to Mondzain, this principle has been profitably exploited in the 'violent history of images.' That is how the Byzantine church authorities, rejected the iconoclasts' demand for (re-)enforcing a ban on divine images, even while they were not favoring idolatry. Rather than prevent the believers from seeing the divine image in conformity with the monotheistic God's decree to Moses, the officials decided that it was even better if the former are in visual contact with the figure of the Christ 'incarnated' in images.

What the medieval church sought to achieve was the elimination of the brute and violent power of the images as such, by claiming that the divine figure is incarnated in them, that is, they took the place of or represented an absent god. The strategy they employed was to both ward off the substantiality of the 'incarnated' images and to 'incorporate' the followers into the body of the church. Mondzain, speaks of this complex move to reestablish the authority of the church even when faced with the proliferation of images:

> Only the image can incarnate, such is the main contribution of Christian thought. Image is not a sign among other signs, it has the specific power of making one see, of pictorially realizing forms, spaces, and bodies that it offers to view. Since Christian incarnation is nothing but the coming in the visible of the visage of God, incarnation is nothing other than the becoming image of the unfigurable. To incarnate means to become an image, and more precisely an image of passion. But this power of appeasement, is it the case with every image whatever be its form and content? Certainly not. ... Only the image which has the force to transform violence into critical freedom, is the image that incarnates. To incarnate is not to imitate, reproduce nor simulate.

The Christian messiah is not God's clone. It is not even to produce a new reality to be offered to the idolators' eyes. The image is fundamentally unreal, and it is in this that rests its force, in the rebellion against all substantialization of its content. To incarnate is to give flesh, and not to give body. It is to operate in the absence of things. Image gives flesh, that is to say, *carnation* [flesh-tint] and visibility to an absence, in an insurmountable distance from what is designated. To give body is, on the other hand, is to propose the consumable substance of something real and true to the members of a community, who are founded and who will disappear in the body with which they are identified. To commune in and by the image is to be devoid the incarnation of a visibility without substance and without truth.[8]

The Byzantine church thus claimed the incarnation of Christ in the nonsubstantial and visible image, but at the same time it sought to incorporate the believers in its own body by means of their communion in and through the substance of his image. The power and the violence of the image is thus contained by invoking the absence of any substantial presence behind it, but at the same time the substantial image is employed to incorporate the faithful into a common, and potentially violent body on the basis of their exposure to the visible image. In our own day, perhaps this is how, the preponderant and seemingly endless stream of images, even though harmless in themselves, and in their contents – since there is no causal connection between images of violence and acts of violence – which incarnate one or other kind of absent realities, incorporate and confuse the viewers who are exposed to them through the public or private media into a common, nay, communal body, ready for violence.

In the modern technologies of media, especially in film and television, the role of the screen is to offer a determined place of the subject with respect to the voice of the master, that is, to organize the spectator's look. The screen is that which divides visible space into two: that of the 'director' and that of the 'spectator.' The directorial 'voice' directs

the course of the visible image for the spectator who is reduced to the silence of scopophilic desire, and is 'incorporated' into the master discourse. The spectator's body that fuses with the body in which he or she is incorporated, is also led by the imaginary personhood of the latter body. This is how the television or the cinema screen induces a *personification* of the guiding body of the visual discourse that keeps unfolding there. The violence that the screen-image may induce is not due to the contents of what appears there, but due to the suppression of the body, the voice and the thought of the spectator who is under the guidance of the director. Since the image and its power is essentially unchannelisable, the operations of incarnation, incorporation and personification that takes place can be resisted only by opening it to a non-directed and open-ended critical discourse, or shall we say, a deconstructive discourse. In Modzain's words: 'The visible does not kill in the field of an always active speech.'[9]

However, is language itself immune from any play of violence? And in what is image necessarily manifest as violence? Jean-Luc Nancy explores these questions, in his text, "Image and Violence" (*The Ground of the Image,* Chapter 2). There is indeed a 'truth of violence,' where the latter is straightaway a display of force, over and above the given play or equilibrium of forces, leaving behind tell-tale signs of destruction. He insists too, in a rather deconstructive vein, that 'truth' itself – whether in language or not – cannot be dissociated from a certain violence. (Though this violence is quite different from the violence of the image.) Truth, he says, 'cannot irrupt without tearing apart an established order.'[10] Truth breaks open towards the outside of a given system, it involves acts and the reality of transgression. There's a difference between the two kinds of truth, and the two kinds of violence, according to Nancy. The 'true truth is violent because it's true' while truth of violence is true only because it is violent. Similarly, true violence is both

destructive and self-destructive, while the violence of truth is that which 'withdraws even as it irrupts and... that [which] opens and frees a space for the manifest presentation of the true.'[11]

Similarly, Nancy points out that image and violence also share certain common features. Violence communicates itself to its beholders only by leaving an image of itself. It renders itself visible by authorizing its own action upon the surroundings. Image, is similarly an excess upon what is already given to view. Violence, truth and image, all these involve the appearance of a certain alterity in relation to the given self. In other words, a self-manifestation of the other. Both truth and violence, involve some kind of showing: a *demonstration* in the former and a *monstration* in the latter. That is why, the image is a continuous and unstoppable irruption in relation to the placid stability of the given order. A 'dynamic and energetic metamorphosis' that it is, the image cannot be completely separated from blood-stained cruelty. The image, in Nancy's words "is the prodigious force-sign of an improbable presence irrupting from the heart of a restlessness on which nothing can be built."[12]

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on 'Philosophy and Media' organized by the Department of Philosophy, University of Poona, Pune, in March 2008.

2. In a recent note, Claudine Tiercelin provides us with an account of the new and recent developments in response to the question 'What is an image?': "Firstly the proliferation of images of every kind, but even more, the appearance of new types of images (photos, films, videos, synthesized images, virtual images and digital images, etc.) and the galloping complexification of networks and medias within which they are inserted. And then, the appearance of new techniques of imagery and among them cerebral functional imagery intended to establish the mapping of brain in its functioning." She notes that there has been, "thanks to these new technologies, a transformation of the methods of cognitive science, cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind," and it "becomes possible not only to obtain structural information

relating to the anatomy of the brain (MRI, X-ray) but with the aid of techniques such as electroencephalography (EEG), positron emission tomography (PET), functional magnetic resonance imagery (fMRI) or the magneto-encephalography (MEG) to observe in vivo the brain involved in cognitive activities, such as, notably that of imagery." (text translated from French by the present author) (Internet site, http://www.lemonde.fr/savoirs-et-connaissances/article/2004/06/30/claudine-tiercelin-le-concept-d-image_371085_3328.html)

3. This notion of the 'intractable' has been questioned since the advent of the digital images, which allows for distortion and manipulation of the image shot by the camera. See especially, criticism by B. Stiegler, 'The Discrete Image' in *Echographies of Television* (2002).

4. *L'image, peut-elle tuer?* (Paris, Bayard, 2002) is the French title of Mondzain's book. Quotations from this text are translated by the present author.

5. The first six chapters of Nancy's *The Ground of the Image* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2005) are a translation of *Au fond des images* (Paris, GalilÈe, 2003). We shall be referring to only the first two chapters of the English version, viz., 'The Image – the Distinct' and 'Image and Violence.'

6. Mondzain, Marie José, *Homo Spectator,* Paris, Bayard, 2007, p. 13.

7. Ibid, p. 13.

8. Mondzain, Marie José, *L'image peut-elle tuer ?* Paris : Bayard, 2002, pp. 31-32.

9. Ibid., p. 59.

10. Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Ground of the Image,* (Tr.) Jeff Fort. New York, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 18.

11. Ibid., p. 18.

12. Ibid., p. 23.

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