

Symptoms of the Image

Citation for published version (APA):

Viola, T. (2023). Symptoms of the Image: Review of Emmanuel Alloa, "Looking Through Images. A Phenomenology of Visual Media". *Radical Philosophy*, 215, 89-93.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2023

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:

Free access - publisher

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

future directions for a social and political *ethos* echo traditional ones. The ‘man to come’, for Sartre, is designated by ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’. Pinkard argues that Sartre would have seen his own project as ‘the realization of the (originally bourgeois) goals of the 1789 revolution’ that could only be actualised in a post-capitalist order. Like Hegel and Marx, Sartre did not wish merely to ‘cancel’ but to ‘cancel and preserve’. Trust the words of a renowned Hegel scholar like Pinkard when he says that ‘Sartre ended up with an unfinished version of a kind of somewhat naturalized left-Hegelianism ... shorn of many of Hegel’s own commitments’ (and Marx’s too, I might add). Pinkard ends *Practice, Power, and Forms of Life* with the following note: ‘Foucault’s quip about Sartre’s “pathetic” use of the nineteenth century to probe the problems of the twentieth might have a lot more truth

to it after all – even for the twenty-first century.’ Pinkard makes us consider symptomatic self-contradictory misrecognitions of the crisis of capitalism that falsifies such attempts to avoid the problem through fidelity to prior liberal-democratic bourgeois thought. Given Sartre’s return to a left-Hegelian liberalism out of his rejection of Marxism, readers familiar with Sartre should wonder to what extent Sartre is implicated by his own critique that he articulated in the orphaned introduction to the *Critique* called *Search for a Method*. There, Sartre writes, ‘I have often remarked on the fact that an “anti-Marxist” argument is only the apparent rejuvenation of a pre-Marxist idea. A so-called “going beyond” Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism; at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond.’

Ethan Linehan

Symptoms of the image

Emmanuel Alloa, *Looking Through Images. A Phenomenology of Visual Media*, trans. Nils F. Schott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). 391pp., £121.00 hb., £30.00 pb., 978 0 23118 792 3 hb., 978 0 23118 793 0 pb.

Emmanuel Alloa’s *Looking Through Images* is an exceptionally ambitious book that attempts nothing less than rethinking the fundamental questions of image theory. Originally published in German more than a decade ago, the book weaves together two very different strands of thought. It is primarily a ‘phenomenology of visual media’, as the subtitle itself declares. Secondly, the phenomenological strand is linked to a historical approach, which Alloa calls an ‘archaeology of the Western engagement with images’. The interplay between these two approaches – phenomenology and archaeology – is motivated by Alloa’s intention to forestall a traditional criticism of phenomenological analyses: ‘bracketing questions of causality and provenance must not mean the absence of reflection on the provenance of one’s own categories’.

The book is structured around five long chapters. Each chapter is divided into ten sections and accompanied by so-called ‘Illuminations’: short, dazzling descriptions of artworks that shed light on the theoretical discussion from a lateral viewpoint. While the first three

chapters are entirely devoted to an archaeological reconstruction of the philosophical discourse about images, in the fourth chapter the discussion shifts to key phenomenological authors, before reaching the most original conclusions in Chapter Five. Nils F. Schott deserves much credit for translating Alloa’s prose into eloquent English that allows the nuances of the German original to shine through without impairing readability.

The sheer number of topics dealt with in this book may leave the reader – let alone the reviewer – with a sense of inadequacy. But overall Alloa manages to spin the many threads of the book into a cohesive and compelling narrative. The author’s primary objective is to articulate a definition of images that encapsulates their unique way of serving as a *medium*. Alloa defines the medium as a being that ‘takes on the form of some other being, without being this being’. The image is a medium because it is something *through* which we are able to see something else, although not in the sense of pure transparency, as when we look at a landscape through a window. The book delves into the specific ‘logic of this

‘through’”, demonstrating why images are irreducible to other forms of signification. So, on the one hand, images are a distinctive and irreducible type of media. But, on the other hand, they are particularly indicative of the nature of media at large.

The historical part of the book features a detailed discussion of ancient Greek philosophy, which is followed by an exceptionally learned, though necessarily quick-paced, survey of the long historical period extending from Late Antiquity to Early Modernity. Alloa’s main objective here is to identify the historical roots of the traditional ‘skepticism concerning images in philosophy’. This skepticism, he contends, has been fuelled by two prevailing theoretical paradigms that, despite appearing to be diametrically opposed, have actually supported each other in obscuring the true nature of images. Using terminology derived from Arthur Danto, Alloa calls these two paradigms the *transparency* and *opacity* theories. In essence, the transparency theory is based on the premise ‘that *images are defined by what lies behind them*’, thus emphasising their referential or semiotic status, whereas the opacity theory maintains ‘that *images are fully determined by their material objecthood*’. These two paradigms are less incompatible than they first appear, in that they share a reductionist perspective. They present a false dichotomy between images as *signs* and images as *things* – a dichotomy that ultimately overlooks precisely the status of the image as a medium.

A third and more productive paradigm can be traced back to Aristotle. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle uses the concept of the *diaphanous* to refer to the medium of vision, i.e., ‘that through which and in which that which appears does appear’. Initially used as an adjective – water or air are diaphanous in the sense that they are transparent and allow light through – the diaphanous gradually becomes a noun, thereby referring to the space of visibility itself, an ‘as yet nameless shared essential nature of appearing’. This use of the concept is tantamount to the concept of *medium*. On that basis, Alloa spells out as follows the main ‘principle’ of Aristotle’s media theory: ‘*something appears to a perceiver because the perceiver is affected*. This affecting, however, does not take place immediately; the object of perception [...] does not act directly but mediately and at a distance. What operates the affection here is that which lies “between” the organ and the object of perception: the medium’.

According to Alloa, Aristotle’s media theory of vision is partially anticipated by Plato. However, the latter plays a deeply ambivalent role in the book. On the one hand, Plato inaugurated the ontological distinction that supports the dichotomy of opacity and transparency. This is the distinction between something as taken by itself (*kath’auto*) and something in relation to other things (*pros alla*). On the other hand, in his quarrel with both the Sophists and the Eleatics, he recognised that we can only do justice to images if we conceive of them in terms of a coexistence between these two categories. However, overall, Plato treated this peculiar ontology of images not as something to be cherished but rather as the hallmark of a deficient status. Only with Aristotle do we begin to recognise that ‘images are interesting in themselves’ and irreducible to anything else. Moreover, Alloa points out that Plato treated the image and the act of seeing as two different things. Aristotle reversed this assumption, proposing that ‘an image always *appears in* a medium, yet this medium, to make anything visible, must rely on a seeing eye.’ This entails an ‘originary unity of phenomenality and iconicity’: for an image to appear, ‘it takes more than just light; it takes an active, living seeing eye to whom the image appears’. It should be apparent from these quotations that Alloa interprets Aristotle as a forerunner of phenomenology.

Chapter Three offers a ‘reception history of the diaphanous’. In what reads almost as an etymological pun, however, this exercise in *Geistesgeschichte* turns into a ‘ghost story’, that is, the story of a haunting absence rather than of an idea. The history of the Western engagement with images is the history of the multifarious ways in which the Aristotelian paradigm was forgotten and the reductionist alternative between transparency and opacity was favoured. Alloa has a gift for revealing how philosophical discussions are often continuous with philological debates about the interpretation of classical texts. Thus, he shows that the transparency paradigm unfolded in parallel with an interpretation of Aristotle that ‘spiritualizes the diaphanous’, making it entirely immaterial. The opacity paradigm, on the contrary, rests on a materialistic transformation of the medium. This materialistic turn originated with the Stoics and carried over into modern philosophy. (Think here of Descartes’s well-known analogy between seeing and operating a stick.)



Taking a bold leap forward, Alloa further suggests that this history comes to a head in twentieth-century image theory. The transparency theory had by this time come to be associated with a 'negation of the image support' that underpins iconological and semiotic approaches. These approaches view the image as an open window, 'a *document* yielding insight.' Opacity theory, on the contrary, looks at the image as an opaque and 'self-contained *monument*'. Both theories have in common a neglect of the medium and a disregard for the phenomenological perspective, which 'describes images in their appearing'. Here, I found myself wishing that the book could help the reader to better understand how it was possible that precisely in the twentieth century, the century in which phenomenology emerged, image theory took so little notice of it. The question becomes all the more relevant as the subsequent chapter is devoted to phenomenological theories of the image.

With regard to Husserl, in particular, Alloa in Chapter Four defends a double interpretive thesis. If one considers the first segment of his career, Husserl seems unable to grasp the irreducibly mediating character of the image, and this limit is related to his attempt to operate a 'liberation from all the symbols, images, and other mediations with which post-Hegelian and, later, neo-Kantian currents had interspersed philosophy in the late nine-

teenth century'. Starting with the Göttingen lectures of 1904-1905, however, 'another Husserl' comes to the fore: one who no longer sticks to 'the primacy of the immediate', but rather undermines it by means of a newly minted, *triadic* conception of the image. This conception breaks with the dichotomy between the image as a material vehicle and the object it depicts by introducing a third element, namely, the appearance or 'image object', which lies between the two. Elsewhere, this fundamental triad is described in slightly different terms. In the *Crisis*, for instance, Husserl distinguishes between the appearing object (the *what*), the mode of appearing (the *how*), and the addressee of the appearances, the 'datival to whom'.

Readers familiar with the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce will find it puzzling that Alloa opposes this triadic conception of the image to what he calls a semiotic conception. For Peirce's semiotics is based on a comparable triadic model in which the distinction between sign-vehicle and sign-object is made possible by the mediation of an 'interpretant', which Peirce describes as that *to which* the sign conveys its meaning. The two models are, of course, not perfectly overlapping. But there are sufficient similarities to indicate that Alloa's tacit assimilation of semiotics with the transparency paradigm and a binary conception of the image would require greater scrutiny than is provided in this book.

Alloa's phenomenological arguments come to a head in the book's final chapter. Drawing inspiration from Nelson Goodman's philosophy of art, he argues that the original question of 'What is an image' must be replaced with the question of 'When is an image.' That is, rather than drawing a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be an image, we should look for 'symptoms' of pictoriality. This anti-essentialist move derives from the two approaches that give this book its peculiar flavour. The first is historical awareness of the contingent nature of our philosophical categories, including the very category of 'image'. The second is a phenomenological inclination to begin the process of inquiry not with the image as a ready-made object, but rather with the 'much vaster field of the iconic' in which the image is embedded. Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and William James, Alloa repeatedly insists on the phenomenologically constitutive nature of this surrounding field, these 'fringes of the act of seeing' from which the image springs into the beholder's eye.

Given that they are best interpreted as something radically different from a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of the iconic, it should come as no surprise that Alloa's ten 'symptoms' display porous boundaries. They continuously blend with one another and, in so doing, let at least four overarching themes emerge. Let me take each of these four themes in turn.

1. The most significant and encompassing theme is the image's ability to present its content in an immediate or immediately perspicuous manner. Images, according to Alloa, are synoptic, meaning that their components are presented all at once. This, in turn, entails ellipsis and framing, or the fact that, while presenting their content perspicuously, images will necessarily leave out something else. (Both synopticity and ellipsis, in turn, entail 'flatness' or 'two-dimensionality'. A three-dimensional sculpture is less elliptic and less synoptic than a picture: it leaves out less and cannot present everything all at once.) The image's specific way of conveying content also explains its specific evidential force, which Alloa calls *figurality*. A diagram is particularly effective at convincing and informing because it does so perspicuously and without any need for discursive elaboration. Finally, with the symptom of *presentativity* Alloa captures the image's ability to 'let something other than what is currently visible be seen'. But presentativity is also – following Susanne Langer – the opposite of 'discursivity', i.e., a linear and temporally extended mode of signification.

2. One of the most fascinating aspects of this final chapter is that, just as Alloa sketches the topics of presentativity or synopticity in images, he also suggests that this is 'clearly insufficient to define images [...] What needs explanation, rather, is how it is that images do not keep anything from the eye and yet in them not everything is given visibly from the outset'. In other words, images do not merely present their content perspicuously – they also contain an element of potentiality or indeterminacy. This indeterminacy may be reduced through the interplay with discursive modes of presentation (consider a situation in which a verbal description expresses, describes, or clarifies the content of an image). Images display a fringe or halo of vagueness. They also contain areas in which indeterminacy rather than representational focality becomes predominant – as in the faux marbles of Fra Angelico, which, on closer inspection, are not faux marbles at all but rather abstract 'matrices

of meaning in which a figurative force rests in a state of latency'.

3. A further theme is the specific ability of images to indicate and exemplify by dint of their medial nature. While semioticians traditionally take iconicity and indexicality to be two different forms of signification, Alloa argues that images embody a specific kind of *deixis*. That is, images always refer to themselves as much as they refer to something else. They thus possess ostensivity, that is, a dimension of pure appearance – or 'phenomenal excess' – that shows itself without signifying anything else. If I understand Alloa correctly, this 'phenomenal excess' is nothing other than the medium or *Bildobjekt*. It is the intermediate and diaphanous layer of appearance through which something becomes visible (see also the symptom of *seeing with*). Finally, the 'phenomenal excess' is also the place where a chiasm of gazes occurs. While I look at an image, something springs out and 'demands attention for itself'. In other words, the more you stare at images, the more they stare back at you.

4. A final theme is exemplified by the symptom of variation sensitivity. Goodman would have referred to it as 'density', indicating that images are unlike discrete systems of signification. Even minimal changes in appearance can have consequences for the image's meaning. Therefore, 'no detail, no nuance can per se be declared irrelevant'. This motivates Alloa's provocative claim that 'there are no digital images. Data masses become images only when they are brought into an internally consistent pictorial appearance for receptors capable of perception'. Today we are increasingly discussing a new generation of digital images, specifically those created by generative forms of AI from textual prompts and vast pre-processed datasets. Much of this technology relies on the system's capacity to progressively reduce noise in the collection of pixels comprising a digital image, leveraging linguistic encodings in the process. It would be a timely endeavour to enquire about the specific challenges this novel development poses to a phenomenology of visual media, as well as the consequences that this further linguistification of the image may have for the dynamics of the creation, fruition and transmission of pictorial contents.

While it offers a thorough examination of the phenomenological tradition, Alloa's book also engages in close dialogue with an exceptionally broad array of theories, ranging from the classics of Western philosophy to

prominent figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century image theory. In part due to this wide range of references, the book also provides a vital link between philosoph-

ical reflection and historical-artistic studies. *Looking Through Images* is a must-read for anyone with a stake in the theory of image, media and imagination.

Tullio Viola

Black anarchism's history and future

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). 224pp., £85.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 0 74534 580 2 hb., 978 0 74534 581 9 pb.

Should the state be the source of freedom? Should it be a wellspring for the affirmation of humanism? The modern anarchist tradition has repeatedly answered these questions in the negative, thereby distinguishing it from proponents of liberal democracy as well as Marxism-Leninism. Anarchism at its core is anti-statist, arguing that social stability and progress are best gained through more immediate forms of direct democracy and mutual aid. A fostering of and dependence on local community is positioned against bureaucratic state assistance and intervention. Unsurprisingly, anarchism has consequently appealed to activist-intellectuals and communities that have been marginalised by states and, often as a matter of routine, have been policed by states through violence.

These elements provide an explanation as to why anarchist politics would appeal to Black activists. Yet the Black anarchist tradition remains under-examined as a critical position within the history of Black struggle, in addition to being underappreciated as an approach for present and future politics. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* is a vital intervention designed to rectify this situation. It addresses what makes Black anarchism distinctive. 'What sets Black anarchism apart from classical or European anarchism is that it was born out of a rejection of the hierarchical, messianic, and authoritarian embraces that limited so many Black movements prior', William C. Anderson summarises in his foreword to Ervin's book. 'This makes Black anarchism special because it was already doing the terribly undervalued work of internal critique'.

This internal critique emerged from Ervin's own life. His path to anarchism was eventful, mirroring a number of the most important events and organisations during the second half of the last century. Born in Chattanooga,

Tennessee, in 1947, he came of political age during the era of the Vietnam War and civil rights movement. His childhood was shaped by Black and working-class life in the Jim Crow South – his father was a chauffeur and his mother a domestic worker. He joined the military during the 1960s only to become an anti-war activist shortly thereafter, leading to a court martial and discharge. Ervin went on to become involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers. The crackdown on Black radicalism at the time prompted him to hijack a plane to Cuba, where he was imprisoned by the government, including a stint in solitary confinement. He then fled to Czechoslovakia, followed by East Germany, after which he was deported back to the US. These fraught international experiences with socialist states, combined with the suppression he was subjected to by the US government, contributed to his growing disillusionment and skepticism toward governments generally as providing solutions to social problems, whether racism or class inequality.

Time in federal prison further reinforced this critical perspective. Yet it also fortuitously presented him with a new set of ideas. Upon his return to the US, Ervin encountered the attorney and famed prison abolitionist Martin Sostre (1923-2015), who introduced him to the concept of anarchist socialism. The life of Sostre requires its own biography. Black Puerto Rican in background, Sostre began his activism as a member of the Nation of Islam during the early 1960s. He went on to become politically involved on several fronts, including advocating for prisoner rights and education during the 1960s and 1970s as well as opening the Afro-Asian Bookstore in Buffalo, New York, in 1966. He himself was imprisoned before and after this latter moment, including his arrest