

The Emancipated Image

Autonomy instead of Metamorphosis

Abstract

The ambition of this paper is to form an approach to the notion of the image and to make the case that the image moves besides the plain role of giving something a different form, whether this might be metaphor, or translation, transition, or even metamorphosis. Instead, given the visual language of the image and taking into consideration the arguments of the linguistic revolution, it is the image that perhaps uses us rather than it being used by us –‘us’ here applies primarily to the maker but also to the beholder. Thus, the making of the image seems to be taking a form of a struggle and an encounter with it, prompting in this way questions of authorship and authenticity. Though, as the image (following Lyotard) is rather seen and not readⁱ, its function as visual language takes a rather different dimension. The image is read through the retinal, through the senses, enhancing in this way the mere formalist aspect and character it has. This, though, challenges the function of aesthetics and the way meaning, content, or what is there legible can be communicated through it. One seems to be there in the need to create his/her own language within the visual language of the image, with all the signs and signifiers. In a way, this becomes a “*highly personalized semiotic activity*”ⁱⁱ.

In addition to it, I would like to take this hypothesis a step further and to argue that the whole narration on the discourse on the image should be perhaps set on a different ground. The image is often regarded as a representation of something other and it takes through that the marginal position of giving form to this something. And, as it functions in a role of symbolizing or depicting, and being a vehicle to something else, is rendered a plain surface that simply hosts an event, foreign to it. In this manner, it becomes detached from its own self and from both the meaning it carries and its language –the way it functions. The further step I would like to take, in this instance, is to argue that the image does not stand for anything else other than its own self and that there is no language registered on it. The language is instead the body of the image, the very image itself; the ‘*selfsame*’ in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy. The image is its language and with it rather than bearing meaning is itself its very meaning, and accordingly, does not originate from or stand for something else rather than its own self. Something interesting, in this regard, can be the parallelism of the image to the analyzing of the paradigm that Giorgio Agamben does. The paradigm (example) stands in an autonomy from the object that was meant to represent in the first place; the example of the table is not the table but rather becomes something else besides the table. It becomes a new ‘*arche*’ and perhaps even an archetype. This archetype takes the form of an entity, standing in its own autonomy and becoming in a way emancipated. In the case of the image this becomes enhanced by a function the image indirectly bears –the one of an ‘*eidolon*’ (idol)- and its function as such is perhaps one of the fundamental attributes of the image, and becomes present in all the different encounters we may have with

it; in religion, in art, even in encounters with plain, trivial photographs, or our own reflection in front of a mirrorⁱⁱⁱ.

ⁱ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Discourse, Figure", 2011 University of Minnesota Press

ⁱⁱ It is a term that Isabelle Graw uses for painting in: "Thinking through Painting", 2012 Sternberg Press, p.45

ⁱⁱⁱ "Everyone knows that the photograph of their mother is not alive, but they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it." W.J.T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures Want", The University of Chicago Press 2005, p.31