



Looking through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media by Emmanuel Alloa

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A book review of Emmanuel Alloa, *Looking through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*. Translated by Nils F. Schott. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, xiv + 392 pp. ISBN 9780231187923.

Alloa's book connects itself to the line of thinking that at the beginning of the 1990s was given the title 'pictorial turn' (or sometimes 'iconic turn'). In contrast to the so-called 'linguistic turn' – a reorientation of philosophical discourse that happened some decades before it was named in the 1960s – the title 'pictorial turn', as Alloa himself admits, was meant to capture a reality that was still 'longer in coming' (p. 2). Has this anticipated reality in *Looking through Images* now become present?

Looking through Images is the translation of the German original *Das Durchscheinende Bild: Konturen einer medialen Phänomenologie*, published in 2011. While Alloa was writing his book he was for a time associated to the NFS Bildkritik in Basel and in direct contact to those who coined the term 'iconic turn'. Alloa shares the view of the proponents of the 'iconic turn', such as Gottfried Boehm, Hans Belting, and Lambert Wiesing, as well as W. J. T. Mitchell (who coined the term 'pictorial turn'), that for the longest time of the history of philosophy the image has been marginalized. European philosophy has been philo-logy in its literal sense: in love with the *logos*, neglecting or ignoring what is not of propositional form. However, according to the proponents of the iconic turn, the image is an irreducible way of opening up the world in its own right.

From this basis Alloa starts to set up his own programme. The reason for the marginalization of images in philosophy is the marginalization of the concept of appearance. This is the first of the two important claims of the book: if one wants to understand the image, one first has to understand appearance. The study of images is nothing but the study of appearances, that is, phenomenology. Identifying

BOOK REVIEW

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the image as *phainomenon* allows Alloa to explain why iconophobia in philosophy is not accidental. The essential ambiguity of the concept of appearance, its ‘oscillation between being and not-being’ (p. 17), challenges philosophy’s internal striving for disambiguity and identification. Whenever philosophy was concerned with appearance it tried to subsume it under the idea of a stand-in for something else, as a re-presentation, refraining from thinking of appearance as something in its own right.

The second important claim of the book is that there are no pure appearances. This means: ‘That which shows itself never shows itself out of itself alone. It always shows itself in passing *through something else*’ (p. 77). Alloa recovers this thesis from Aristotle’s theory of perception. That through which appearances show themselves is called ‘medium’ (*metaxy*) by Aristotle in *De Anima* II. The media of perception are not perceivable themselves but nonetheless have their own texture, which shapes whatever shows itself through them: ‘Media take on a form to whose shaping they have contributed: they “in-form” the information they convey’ (p. 294).

The synthesis of the two central claims of the book explains its subtitle: since thinking of images is reflecting on appearance, that is, phenomenology, and since reflection on appearance has to take into account the medium through which the appearance shows itself, thinking of images takes the form of a *phenomenology of media*. Though Alloa discusses mainly visual examples of images and media, nothing in his account excludes the possibility of non-visual images and media. The ‘visual’ in the subtitle of the English version might be therefore taken to be a verbal approximation of his project to the ‘visual culture studies’ of the anglophone world.

The translation of this book into English is a welcome step towards an interchange of the tradition of German-speaking *Bildwissenschaft* and the anglophone discourse. However, the translation of *Bild* as ‘image’ throughout the book goes without further comment. In the short preface to the English edition, Alloa misses the chance for a clarification of the particularities of the language-specific discourses. The German term *Bild* is ambiguous between ‘picture’ and ‘image’ – an ambiguity that seems to be essential to Alloa’s own theoretical programme. But this is not the only reason why the term *Bildwissenschaft* is often not translated in anglophone discourse. One uses the German expression to mark differences in the theoretical and institutional origins of *Bildwissenschaft* and its anglophone relatives such as visual culture studies and media studies. While *Bildwissenschaft* developed from (German-speaking) art history, the approach of visual culture studies and media studies seems to be much closer to cultural studies. The reader would have been happy to learn more about Alloa’s stance on whether and how the several approaches differ.

The otherwise precise translation by Nils F. Schott has been able to smooth out some of the volts of Alloa’s capricious prose. In content the English version differs only marginally from the German version. A short afterword by Andrew Benjamin, which contrasts Alloa’s approach with a hermeneutical one, and a useful index are added.

The aim of the book is to give the outlines of a phenomenology of media, but Alloa knows that this cannot be done from scratch. The conceptual tools one would apply for that purpose have a history and are heavily loaded with presumptions and blind spots. So, one must begin with the history of the categories in which one is used to thinking of images. *Looking through Images* enfolds its theme as a history of the philosophical discourse on images, being at the same time an ‘archaeology and genealogy’ of concepts (p. 8). In a tour de force from ancient antiquity to the Renaissance, Alloa proves his impressive literacy in the European history of image discourse, within the canon and outside it. The book contains five chapters, the first

three of which cover the period from Plato to Berkeley. The fourth chapter, which has a transitional function, jumps to the twentieth century, to Husserl and his recipients. The last and longest chapter is finally supposed to give a sketch of what a media phenomenology is. Spread throughout the book, Alloa offers 10 discontinuous image-analyses that he calls 'illuminations'. In what follows, I will trace the structure of the book, discussing each chapter separately.

The first chapter, 'Between Thing and Sign: The Hubris of the Image', develops the conceptual frame for the dialectic along which the history of image discourse is told. From its very start, Alloa claims, thinking about images has been misorientated by a false dichotomy. Alloa names this dichotomy, using a distinction by Arthur Danto, the 'paradigm of transparency' versus the 'paradigm of opacity'. The liminal being of an image has been continuously subsumed under one of these paradigms, being treated either as that which is represented by the image (paradigm of transparency, assimilating the image to a sign) or as a thing in itself, standing for nothing but itself (paradigm of opacity). But this dichotomy is false: in either case, the image is grasped as a self-sufficient thing in itself. This misses the very essence of the image, as Alloa claims, since the image has a non-identical nature: as appearance, it is the presence of what is absent.

The misfortune of this false dichotomy starts as early as Diogenes Laertius' misreading of Plato, it finds an influential expression in Augustinus' *De doctrina christiana*, and is finally canonized in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*. Plato himself plays an ambiguous role. On the one hand he sees the necessity to defend the possibility of *doxa*, and therefore appearance, not only against the Eleatic tradition but also against the challenges of the sophists. The self-comprehension of philosophy relies on the contrast of knowledge and *doxa*, of being and merely appearing, as Alloa convincingly reads from Plato's *Sophist*. On the other hand, while opening the logical possibility for appearance, Plato allocates it on the side of sophistry. The distinction between *eidolon* and *eikon*, reserving only the latter for philosophy, pre-determines scepticism about image-thinking that puts the representational function of images into brackets.

The second chapter, 'Aristotle's Foundation of a Media Theory of Appearing', offers a phenomenologically informed reading of Aristotle's *De Anima*. Here Alloa offers his most valuable and innovative insights. According to Aristotle, perception requires not only an organ and an object of perception but also something in between. This medium consists of an element (air, water, fire, and so on), which is different for each sense of perception. The medium is not visible in itself but it becomes visible by virtue of another. To have a name for this essential feature of media, Aristotle forms the neologism 'diaphanous'. 'Diaphanous' further means that a medium has the potential to take up the form of something else without taking up its matter. Indeed, being a medium is defined by this potentiality: 'Mediality thus names the capacity for taking the shape of something that one is not' (p. 85).

Alloa's reconstruction of the concept of a medium relies on the Aristotelian metaphysics of potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*). An appearance basically is the actuality of the medium, the medium itself being nothing but a space of possibilities. Though the medium is defined by its fundamental potentiality, it is not nothing. It has a certain materiality that is constitutive for how an appearance shows itself through the medium. Medial phenomenology must therefore not only ask what shows itself but also how something shows itself. To put it negatively: the idea of a medium that has to be overcome is that of a merely transmitting *tertium* that lies between perceiver and perceived object. The radicality of Aristotle's idea consists in his shift of the locus of seeing 'from either the eye or the object to the elementary

middle in which something appears' (p. 64). That is why, according to Alloa, Aristotle's theory of perception opens up the possibility of thinking of appearances, as well as of images, beyond the transitive models of mimesis and representation.

The third chapter, 'Forgetting Media: Traces of the Diaphanous from Themistius to Berkeley', tells the story how this possibility was forgotten in the course of history. The reception of Aristotle's 'diaphanous' deflates its systematic importance in the following theories of perception. Appearances and images get trapped in the oscillating dialectic of the paradigms of opacity and transparency, introduced in Chapter I.

To mention just a few stations: late antiquity (Themistius) exaggerates the diaphanous to a transcendent aether; Plotinus replaces it by *sympatheia* and *parousia*. Burgundio of Pisa translates the Greek term into the Latin *transparens* in the twelfth century; the scholastics of the High Middle Ages take it up in their 'metaphysics of light' (John Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, Robert Grosseteste); the 'discovery' of the central perspective (Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti) affirms by its techniques of production the duality of the opaque and the transparent (mirror, veil); Johannes Kepler pictorializes the vision; René Descartes understands the inner image as a sign; and George Berkeley finally fixes the meaning of 'diaphanous' to refer to Alberti's permeable veil, which separates the order of the tactile from the order of the visible. The conclusion: the scholastic alternative of order of signs and order of things culminates in Descartes's distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, which will dominate European philosophical thought in the following centuries. 'Where the only alternative is between things that stand for themselves and representations that depend on the mind, a subjectless description such as that one of the *metaxy* will find itself at odds' (p. 146).

In the fourth chapter, 'A Phenomenology of Images', Alloa describes the systematic locus of the image in classical phenomenology, meaning the writings of Edmund Husserl and his recipients. This undertaking starts with a difficulty: in his *Logical Investigation V*, Husserl excludes the concept of the image, declaring it to cause 'inextricable errors' in the interpretation of the relation between act and subject. Alloa has to look out for a re-entry of the image in Husserl's theory and he finds it in the doctrine of 'adumbrations'. Alloa gives a medial interpretation of the adumbration theory: 'In perception, according to Husserl, the thing itself shows itself; its self, however shows itself only *through* the manifold of the thing's adumbrations' (p. 166).

The idea of a mediated process of perception allows Husserl to overcome the binary model of appearance in favour of a triadic model (what, how, for whom), which is mirrored in his triadic theory of the image (*Bild-Gegenstand*, *Bildsujet*, *Bildobjekt*). However, Husserl's 'transcendental turn' prevents him from a breakthrough to a medial phenomenology: he turns the 'for me' of the appearance into an 'out of me'. Along the lines of the workings of Eugen Fink ('relucence'), the early Jacques Derrida (origin and becoming of the image), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (genetic phenomenology), the book follows the traces of the medium set out in Husserl's work.

The title of the final chapter, 'Media Phenomenology', suggests a programmatic closure of the book but it continues to bring in new texts and observations. It centres around the two ideas that (1) every appearing is an appearing through something, and that (2) an image is characterized by bringing the appearing to appearance. Instead of a systematic development, Alloa presents variations of these themes within a manifold of contexts to his readers. Since Jean-François Lyotard and Emmanuel Levinas both emphasize the importance of the peripheral, he suggests replacing an eidetic phenomenology with a lateral one. A sub-chapter is dedicated to media studies and contains a critique of the one-sided focus on what Alloa calls 'discrete media' (media that allow medial content

to be distinguished from medial form). Finally, the chapter offers a list of 10 features characterizing the concept of an image, which is called a 'symptomatology'. This list is not supposed to answer the question of what an image is but rather, following a remark by Goodman, when or under which circumstances something counts as an image. The list (containing titles like 'Ellipsis', 'Framing', 'Figurality', 'Deixis', and others) differs slightly in order and in content from the German version so that 'Seeing-with' appears now as the climax of the enumeration. Under this title Alloa articulates what in his eyes makes his 'seeing-with' different, on the one hand, from the 'seeing-as' of the friends of aspect-seeing, and on the other hand from Richard Wollheim's 'seeing-in'. Image-related seeing has to be redescribed, Alloa maintains: to see an image is not to neglect its material support (as 'seeing-as' would have it), nor does it mean to project arbitrary contents into the material support (as in the case of 'seeing-in'). Rather, it is a seeing thanks to and according to the material in which the image appears. As a description for this kind of seeing, Alloa suggests 'seeing-with', borrowing the phrase from Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*.

The dialectic of the paradigms of opacity and transparency that provided for the composition of the first parts of the book becomes loose in its later parts. The last chapter is only hard to grasp as a unity. Here Alloa's broad literacy and the passion for his topic turn into a weakness. He barely resists the temptation to continuously offer new aspects – some of them he only alludes to in passing. The reader oscillates between the wish for further elaboration of certain points and the need for reduction for the sake of clarity of the argument.

Has Alloa's book sharpened the meaning of the term 'pictorial turn'? The answer depends on whether he has successfully shown that the image is to be thought of in terms of an appearance. There remain some doubts: is there really one single concept of medium that covers both the media of perception and what Husserl has called the *Bild-Gegenstand*? To put it very simply, do we not need to hold up a difference between the fog *through* which I see a horse and the clouds *in* which I see a horse?

Finally, I remain unconvinced by Alloa's account of looking through. The concept of looking through something, as Alloa forms it, relies on the distinction between *what* appears and *how* it appears. But why should the how not be reducible to the what? In different philosophical contexts this question has been proven to be far from trivial (such as Kant's form of intuition, or Wittgenstein's picture-theory, to mention just two examples). Alloa's theory hints at the urgency of this question rather than answering it.

These are just two of the many lines along which one could continue thinking about the topic of *Looking through Images*. The book is valuable for dismantling the history and therein the biases of categories we are most familiar with in thinking of images. The exposition of Aristotle's theory of perception as a media theory belongs to the most innovative and inspiring parts of the book. Its most important contribution consists in offering a single focus to the varying disciplines of *Bild-Theorie*, visual studies, phenomenology, and media studies – the concept of a medium.

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