

The dialogue of the images

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01. Domestic Violence

Abstract

The texts and the images radically differ. Both are mediations between us and the reality, as well as between ourselves. Both languages are based on an immanent plane — syntactic —, which defines the components of the language, and a transversal direction — semantic or symbolic —, which relates the language to the reality, i.e. the signifiers and the signifieds. Textual registers tend to develop mainly the syntactic plane, and ignore the symbolic relations with reality. By contrast, image registers tend to define an alternative syntactic plane, and to establish a more intimate symbolic relationship with the reality. Furthermore, the dominant thinking tends to use above all textual registers, while implicitly accompany that of images with explanations that restrict their symbolism. Given this fact, we propose a radical strategy of political resistance and subversion of the dominant thinking, consisting in operatively suspending the recourse to the textual and promoting *the dialogue of the images*.

Keywords

dialogue, images, symbolism, signifier, signified

The images *talk* to us. But they also *hold a dialogue* between them [01]. The images keep a secret language that doesn't coincide with the textual language. They accumulate a potential, a sort of untapped wealth. This is something that all cultures of all times knew to a greater or lesser degree, but now, despite the widespread belief that we live in a highly developed and qualified society, has been largely lost. It is however *there*, *stored* in the images, and can be recovered if we *wish*. Not only it can be recovered, but also should, because we risk more than it seems. We risk even the survival of our world.



02. Politeness of Censorship

The images and the texts *speak*, so to say, different languages [02]. This doesn't mean that they cannot *hold a dialogue* between them. But this doesn't mean either that the texts explain the images, or that the images illustrate the texts. As mentioned, they can hold a dialogue. And to make this dialogue possible their essentially different nature must be respected. Obviously we are talking about dialogue in a metaphorical sense. What we mean is that images and texts share something fundamental. Both *reflect* the world, or better, are mediations that allow us to relate to the reality, and therefore relate to each other. They are our culture, our language, our identity, our patrimony, our heritage. In short, human dialogue involves using these — more or less shared — mediations. We understand each other, we engage in dialogue, through textual language — spoken and written —, but also through images.



03. Warning: Capitalism

As mentioned, the textual language and that of images *talk* to each other. Since both ultimately help us to understand the world, to communicate with it and with each other, it is logical that text and images are closely linked. But they are essentially different, belong to different registers. They are also "incommensurable" in the sense given by Paul Feyerabend in *Against Method* in relation to the different types of knowledge. The dialogue between texts and images must be understood in this same sense [03]. In fact, if there can be a dialogue between the two is precisely because they differ, because they cannot completely agree. Because, using a metaphor, they don't completely *overlap*, they don't *cover* the same reality. Or, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* because they don't define the same "plane of immanence" with respect to reality.



04. Propaganda Transparency

This dialogue between texts and images is not the same as a negotiation in which the parties must renounce to their essence to conform a monstrous entity. This is the case of our so-called "democracies", in which, contrary to all the rhetoric about the virtues of the system, the fact is that the majority decides for the minority. (In the best case, in which sovereignty has not been transferred to other bodies.) The notion of "parliament" as a space for dialogue is thus distorted [04], becoming an apparent alternation of the same majority, who systematically marginalize the integrity, the essence, the identity of the minorities. Instead, the dialogue we are talking about involves recognizing the intrinsic singularity of the other, the essential impossibility of a common position. This dialogue consists in recognizing and respecting the right of others — especially of these minorities — to be as they are or want to be, rather than in restricting their freedom. When we speak here of dialogue between texts and images, we are referring to this type of relationship in which none of the parties prevails over the other.



05. Eros and Reason

Let us look the case of dialogue between people. If it is possible is because there is something that goes beyond the words. In the Platonic dialogue it is clear that, before Socrates formulates his philosophical considerations, there is a personal relationship, a particular respect and also an attraction, as can be observed in *Phaedrus*. We tend to believe that the Platonic dialogue is based on the exchange of ideas between two *lovers of wisdom*. Almost like Adam Smith's economic exchanges between "equal" parties. But in fact the most important dialogue is that established between the philosophical "plane" and the reality, between the

"lover's" (*erastês*) thought and the "beloved's" (*erômenos*) image [05]. As Michel Foucault showed in *The History of Sexuality*, if reason arose in Classical Greece was above all because a particular form of dialogue was possible, because there was an exceptionally favorable atmosphere for it to arise. No doubt that the military and commercial power of the city-states, as well as the slavery, played an important role. But this doesn't refute this Greek achievement, but rather broadens the challenges of the dialogue.



06. Invitation to Have a Soup

We said that there is a fundamental "incommensurability" between words and images. A priori there is no reason why one should prevail over the other. In many cultural traditions the images have actually been more important than the texts. This is the case of the *Tarot of Marseilles*. However, the dominant culture in the European tradition has been eminently textual. The image has been relegated to a secondary place and the texts have assumed the right to explain the images. This translation from the register of the images to that of the texts is not negative in itself. The problem comes when it is done under the assumption that the text is more important than the image, that the text, so to speak, *has the last word*. By contrast, if we understand that texts and images should engage in a dialogue, in the mentioned sense, that is to say, a dialogue between equals, in which none of the two prevails over the other, in which it isn't necessary to reach an agreement, in which the dialogue is an act of love, then an endless feedback between the two becomes possible. And that can be a powerful method of knowledge [06].



07. Forbidden Liberties

But as we said in our culture a greater importance has been given and continues to be given to the textual languages. That means that, if we want to establish that equitable, balanced dialogue, we previously need some kind of *detoxification*. Especially considering how the textual has abused not only the images but the reality in general. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have spoken in these terms in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To free ourselves from the *tyranny* of textual languages, to give back to the image register its well-deserved importance, we should temporarily suspend, if possible, the dialogue between texts and images — prone to the vice of explanation or illustration —, and engage in other dialogue, that of the images themselves [07].



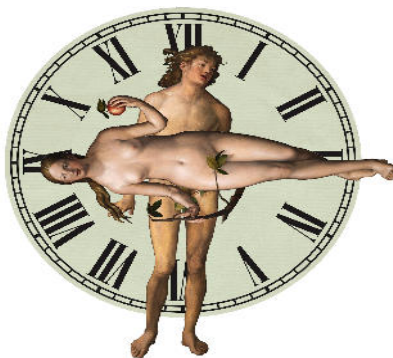
08. Yes We Hasta la Victoria Siempre

The prevalence of the textual can be clearly observed today. It is often maintained that we live in a visual culture. And this is partly true. We communicate more and more through — still or moving — images. We tend to believe that they *speak* for themselves, without the mediation of texts. It is even said that "a picture is worth more than a thousand words". But the truth is that the images continue to be subjected to a dominant thinking. And this means that they are subjected to a dominant interpretation which finds its less ambiguous formulation through texts. Thus, even though presented without an accompanying text, it is as if the images were accompanied by an implicit caption that *defines* what we see, that provides us with the dominant interpretation. This has become a common practice in the cultural industry and the mainstream media, but also in the institutions and the academia, and it is nothing but a form of — more or less refined — propaganda [08].



09. Maobama in the Forbidden House

In this context, promoting the dialogue of the images becomes a crucial strategy to escape the manipulating mechanisms of the system [09]. But we must insist on the idea that, when we say *dialogue of the images*, we are implicitly referring to our dialogue with the world and with others *through* the images. And without the *support* of the textual language. In fact, only some wise men or great artists, are able to do that. This is the case of those who only taught by example. This is why the Greek reason arises on the basis of virtuous personal relationships (*The History of Sexuality*). Similarly to the wise men, who didn't leave a personal work other than what their disciples could transmit, some great artists hardly explain their work. Not that we should underestimate the work of critics or interpreters, but only consider their contribution as it actually is — relative. For, in fact, thinkers or great artists are such precisely because they cannot be univocally interpreted, because they don't *say* the same to everyone, because they generate controversy, because they invite to the dialogue.



10. All in Due Time

But at this point we must make a clarification. When we say that the words and the images are mediations that allow us to interact with the world and with others, we are actually presupposing a much more complex phenomenon. Our thinking and knowledge are created on the basis of a series of categories or principles such as spatiality, temporality, causality, identity, etc. that are again mediations of reality, not the reality itself [10]. For example, the force of gravity is not real, it's just a mediation that Newton created, a model that emulates nature's behavior but is still an artificial model. And these mediations allow us to *intervene* in a certain way in nature, as well as communicate with others in an organized society as ours. But our knowledge — this is

important to be aware of — can never fully encompass the reality, in the same way that our language can never be completely encoded.



11. The Theater of Science

Now, if we say that texts and images are *mediations of reality*, this presupposes that they imply, in a way or another, the mentioned principles or categories. When we say that texts and images *mediate* between us and the reality, and they do it differently, what we are meaning is that they tend to use some of these principles or categories rather than others, that images and texts tend to use different ones. For some languages enable a more faithful formulation of some of these categories or principles. This is the case of mathematical, logical or geometric languages, which are more suitable expressions of practical, rational or scientific thinking. At the other extreme there would be artistic, poetic or symbolic languages. Thus, we could say that these different languages don't mediate or express the reality in the same way. We said that they cannot fully encompass the reality, but we also believe that the closer to the poetic or symbolic extreme, the more faithful is the mediation. In *Pasolini l'enragé* the Italian filmmaker spoke in these terms in relation to how his cinematographic language resembles that of reality. We share this way of thinking, but can admit that, at the other extreme, a scientist would also understand the world as something very close to his or her model. In fact, both cases share a desire to approach, to be faithful to reality, we can even say an "enthusiasm" (*Phaedrus*) about this dialogue with reality. But if we incline to the symbolic pole is mostly for political reasons, since the dominant world view tends to approach to the rational pole. For our strategy of political resistance is to dismantle this dominant thinking from its own epistemological structures [11].



12. Immortalize the Moment

Now we can pick up the thread of our exposition. The textual language tends to be closer to the pole of the rational, while that of images tends to approach the symbolic one. Not that the texts cannot be poetic —

poetry self is an example. But the fact is that our dominant thinking has relegated poetry to an anomalous, exceptional, reserved realm, in order to make it harmless, while it has extensively developed different textual languages in more rational, instrumental, classificatory senses. Legal jargon is a clear example of that. On the contrary, it is more difficult to encode the images and get rid of their symbolic dimension. For, as mentioned, they are closer to the language of reality. They are, to put it in other words, a more direct mediation. The case of photography clearly shows the extent to which this language *almost* imitates reality [12].



13. Scales of Eros

When we say that we want to — operatively — suspend the recourse to the textual and use images almost exclusively as the instrument of mediation, we are in fact presupposing these categorical structures as well as their political dimension. Since, if in the West certain categorial apparatuses have *dominated*, this happened mainly because they allow to construct sufficiently complex and consistent systems, but also because they enable a greater abstraction of reality. This "plane of immanence" (*What is Philosophy?*), to put in a topological sense, is located transversally with respect to the mediation of reality. They are spatial, or temporal, or logical, or causal, or classificatory systems — often a combination of them —, which allow to define a number of elements and their relationships, and they can achieve a high degree of complexity and sophistication. But this doesn't mean that they respond to the reality, which is located, so to say, in a transversal direction. Or, put another way, these knowledge systems define a "plane" which crosses the reality in a certain manner, but they don't coincide with reality, which stills holds another dimension in depth. What we want to emphasize is not so much that these rational or scientific languages cannot fully *cover* the reality, but above all, that the mediation they produce is artificial, and somehow ends up *betraying* reality. And this has profound political implications. Because these systems ultimately are means to dominate nature and man (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*). In this sense, our interest in the dialogue of the images is — we insist — a strategy of political subversion at the core of the dominant epistemologies [13].



14. United Capitals of the Empire

We are not so naive to believe that we can completely give up these instrumental languages. We just intend to emphasize this other transversal direction, which is that of their mediation with reality, and we can call symbolic. In essence we are talking about signifiers and signifieds, and the symbolic mechanism that links them. The spatial, temporal, rational, logical systems that we previously mentioned, define in fact planes of signifiers and their relationships. But the mechanism that transversally links these "planes of immanence" with the *surrounding* reality, the mechanism which associates signifiers and signifieds is eminently of a symbolic order [14]. Jacques Lacan formulated this idea in similar terms as two planes connected by "quilting points" (*The Seminar III. The Psychoses*). We can understand now why a mathematical or geometric language can reach an enormous degree of formalism without the need of *signifying* anything, without necessarily being applicable to the reality. Similarly, at the other extreme, there are purely symbolic languages full of significance, sense or depth, while very difficult to structure, to systematize. This is the case of *the dialogue of the images* at its purest.



15. Heil Aerobics

We said that images and texts are mediations of reality, symbols that ultimately refer to it. And they can do that more or less directly, with a greater or lesser signifying depth. Both operate according to a symbolic mechanism which relates signifiers and signifieds. But this relationship is not as simple as we tend to think. For example, when we say "dog", everyone knows that we are referring to a particular animal species. But that's not saying much. It can be *useful* to define a taxonomic classification and organize a museum of natural sciences. But the exclamation "beware of the dog!" can cause many different *effects* depending on the contexts and the listeners [15]. This is what we consider to be the symbolic mechanism to its full extent, implying a non-univocal relation between signifiers and signifieds. We think that this non-univocal property of symbolism, although it may seem arbitrary, is actually what gives *real* sense to a language.



16. Border Hurderling

This is the notion of symbolism that interests us, because it allows us, so to speak, to escape from the determinism of the *dominant* thinking, from its logical, rational, causal and quantitative categories. One could argue that the signifier "dog" actually determines the signified — the corresponding species. But this is only a reduction of a much more complex symbolic relationship. In other words, a simplified, crude, even perverted form of symbolism. And this simplification reveals that it is nothing but a convention — on the basis of a certain intentionality and world view —, that is, ultimately a political mediation. What to do, for example, with wolf dogs, with species that look like dogs but are not, with Walt Disney's Pluto, with human attitudes reminiscent of dogs, with many uses of language where "dog" appears... [16]?

Both the textual and the image languages entail the symbolic mechanism. The difference is that it has been easier for the textual to *function* outside this mechanism, to construct planes of signifiers — or "planes of immanence" — apart from their signifieds. What is more difficult in the case of the images. As we have shown with the signifier "dog", one tends to think that the words themselves mean something. But what actually gives them sense is using them in practice, in *reality*. Any language needs both directions: the "plane of immanence" or syntactic plane, and the symbolic depth or symbolic or semantic direction. What happens today is that the syntactic plane becomes more and more developed, sophisticated, esoteric as evidenced by the existence of so many linguistic registers and jargons. One can *move* through many different planes. But at the same time, the ability, and also the freedom of movement in the sense of the symbolic depth, is more restricted. There may be many syntactic planes but this is useless if it is not possible, not just moving from one to another, but relate them, and also relate them to reality along the symbolic direction. This is in fact one of the biggest problems of today. This is what in fact makes difficult a *real* dialogue.



17. Biological Warfare State

Let us give an example of this insane situation we are living today. Let's take a research scientist on a high-security biological weapons laboratory [17]. He will know how to use different planes: complex protocols of action in his laboratory, how to expose part of his research in a conference, how to keep an informal conversation with non-scientist. But he may well not be able to connect these planes, as well as find a

significance to his work or life. We assume that now can be better understood what we are intending by promoting the dialogue of the images and why that has a profound political transcendence. Engaging images in dialogue is therefore, first of all, put on hold the dominant interpretations that seek to explain what the images *signify*. But we have seen that the significance cannot be explained.



18. Sacrificial Op Art

But the images won't *tell* us anything by themselves. It is needed that we want the images to tell to us something — "Warning: Perception requires involvement" (Antoni Muntadas). We would like images to *speak* to us as clearly as the logical language [18] — "All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal." But images don't speak so clear. In fact they don't tell the same thing to everyone. It is therefore necessary to engage, in the above-mentioned sense, in a dialogue with them. And then it might be possible, if we do it properly, that they tell us the *secrets* they keep.



19. War Easing

But as we said, this must be done, as much as possible, outside the textual. In order to avoid falling into the dominant interpretations that we have learned and we are receiving in one way or another all the time. But this dialogue with the images is not some sort of contemplation. Not some sort of passive or receptive aptitude. In the dialogue of the images — and our dialogue with the reality through their mediation — there should be a "give and take". We won't be able to know their secrets if we don't strongly *ask* them for. Not only it is not something passive, but in fact must be intentioned, even not without a certain stubbornness, a certain violence. Something like Nietzsche's "philosophizing with a hammer". What is understandable, as we're intending to question their dominant interpretations, which already involve a "structural violence" (Slavoj Zizek, *Violence*). *Breaking* these assumptions in order to construct others implies therefore a certain aggressiveness. And the more this dominant thought is rooted, the greater needs to be the violence of dialogue [19].



20. Narcissistic Civilization

As for the register of the images itself, it is important to understand that they are not isolated beings. They also have, in some way, their syntax, i.e. a particular way of relating to each other. But this syntax tends to be radically alternative with respect to that of the textual. Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosine* is an extraordinary example of that. The images in any of its panels relate to each other outside the dominant categories common in textual registers. In fact, this syntax of the images is the same that can be found in primitive, magical, mythical, esoteric or divinatory practices [20]. And considering that, besides this specific syntax, images relate in a particularly close way to reality, the dialogue of the images allows us a much intimate *understanding* of reality. But also, in the same measure, a type of understanding which is often difficult to explain, a type of understanding which is above all an invitation to continue the dialogue.



21. Eagles of Peace

Holding a dialogue with the images, and doing that in their own register, involves inciting them to dialogue. Even in a heated, contradictory way [21]. It is necessary, first of all, *lose respect* for the images, if we intend to treat them as equals, use them as an active form of knowledge, hold a fruitful and endless dialogue. Dialoguing with the images presupposes that we have *some* interest in them, that we believe that they keep something that we want to know, and something that we cannot know but through them. It means starting on a *certain* basis, having *some* expectation, searching *something*. This adventure only makes sense if we believe that we can evolve through the process, that our perception of the images will be transformed, that we will change along the process too.



22. The Prison of Representation

Finally, we should advise that the dialogue of the images might be dangerous, addictive or regressive. It might lead to childishness, disproportionate utopianism or sterile fantasy. Even to madness. We might become trapped in the world of the images [22]. We might get so close to the limits of reality that we wouldn't be able to come back to the "plane". For this reason, it shouldn't be forgotten that — however

fascinating it might be —, this should only be used as an alternative way of knowledge, a sort of initiation. But it is recommended to come back to *tell the story*, and try to do that with the clearest words.

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