The Future of the Image

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The Future of the Image

My title might lead readers to anticipate some new odyssey of the image, taking us from the Aurorean glory of Lascaux’s paintings to the contemporary twilight of a reality devoured by media images and an art doomed to monitors and synthetic images. But my intention is different. By examining how a certain idea of fate and a certain idea of the image are tied up in the apocalyptic discourses of today’s cultural climate, I would like to pose the following question: are we in fact referring to a simple, univocal reality? Does not the term ‘image’ contain several functions whose problematic alignment precisely constitutes the labour of art? On this basis it will perhaps be possible to reflect on what artistic images are, and contemporary changes in their status, more soundly.

Let us start at the beginning. What is being spoken about, and what precisely are we being told, when it is said that there is no longer any reality, but only images? Or, conversely, that there are no more images but only a reality incessantly representing itself to itself? These two discourses seem to be opposed. Yet we know that they are forever being converted into one another in the name of a rudimentary argument: if there is now nothing but images, there is nothing other than the image. And if there is nothing other than the image, the very notion of the image becomes devoid of content. Several contemporary authors thus contrast the
Image, which refers to an Other, and the Visual, which refers to nothing but itself.

This simple line of argument already prompts a question. That the Same is the opposite of the Other is readily intelligible. Understanding what this Other is is less straightforward. In the first place, by what signs is its presence or absence to be recognized? What allows us to say that the Other is there in one visible form on a screen but not in another? That it is present, for example, in a shot from *Au hasard Balthazar* and not in an episode of *Questions pour un champion*?\(^1\) The response most frequently given by detractors of the ‘visual’ is this: the television image has no Other by virtue of its very nature. In effect, it has its light in itself, while the cinematic image derives it from an external source. This is summarized by Régis Debray in a book called *Vie et mort de l'image*: ‘The image here has its light in-built. It reveals itself. With its source in itself, it becomes in our eyes its own cause. Spinozist definition of God or substance.’\(^2\)

The tautology posited here as the essence of the Visual is manifestly nothing but the tautology of the discourse itself. The latter simply tells us that the Same is same and the Other other. Through the rhetorical play of telescoped, independent propositions, it passes itself off as more than a tautology by identifying the general properties of universals with the characteristics of a technical device. But the technical properties of the cathode tube are one thing and the aesthetic properties of the images we see on the screen are another. The screen precisely lends itself to accommodating the results both of *Questions pour un champion* and of Bresson’s camera. It is therefore clear that it is these results which are inherently different. The nature of the amusement television offers us, and of the affects it produces in us, is independent of the fact that the light derives from the apparatus. And the intrinsic nature of Bresson’s images remains unchanged, whether we see the reels projected in a cinema, or through a cassette or disc on our television screen, or a video projection. The Same is not on one side, while the Other is on the other. The set with in-built light and the camera of *Questions pour un champion* place us before a feast of memory and presence of mind that is in itself foreign to them. On the other hand, the film of the film theatre or the cassette of *Au hasard Balthazar* viewed on our screen show us images that refer to nothing else, which are themselves the performance.

**THE ALTERITY OF IMAGES**

These images refer to nothing else. This does not mean, as is frequently said, that they are intransitive. It means that alterity enters into the very composition of the images, but also that such alterity attaches to something other than the material properties of the cinematic medium. The images of *Au hasard Balthazar* are not primarily manifestations of the properties of a certain technical medium, but operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them. Let us look at the beginning of the film. The play of ‘images’ has already begun when the screen is still dark, with the crystalline notes of a Schubert sonata. It continues, while the credits flash by against a background conjuring up a rocky wall, a wall of dry-stone or boiled cardboard, when braying has replaced the sonata. Then the sonata resumes, overlaid next by a noise of small bells which carries on into the first shot of the film: a little donkey’s head sucking at its mother’s teat in close-up. A very white hand
then descends along the dark neck of the little donkey, while
the camera ascends in the opposite direction to show the little
girl whose hand this is, her brother and her father. A dialogue
accompanies this action ('We must have it' – 'Give it to us' –
'Children, that's impossible'), without us ever seeing the
mouth that utters these words. The children address their
father with their backs to us; their bodies obscure his face
while he answers them. A dissolve then introduces a shot that
shows us the opposite of these words: from behind, in a wide-
gangled shot, the father and the children come back down
leading the donkey. Another dissolve carries us over into
the donkey's baptism – another close-up that allows us to
see nothing but the head of the animal, the arm of the boy who
pours the water, and the chest of the little girl who holds a

In these credits and three shots we have a whole regime of
'imageness' – that is, a regime of relations between elements
and between functions. It is first and foremost the opposition
between the neutrality of the black or grey screen and the
sound. The melody that pursues its direct course in clearly
separated notes, and the braying which interrupts it, already
convey the tension of the story to come. This contrast is taken
up by the visual contrast between a white hand on an animal's
black coat and by the separation between voices and faces. In
turn, the latter is extended by the link between a verbal
decision and its visual contradiction, between the technical
procedure of the dissolve, which intensifies the continuity, and
the counter-effect that it shows us.

Bresson's 'images' are not a donkey, two children and an
adult. Nor are they simply the technique of close-ups and the
camera movements or dissolves that enlarge them. They are
operations that couple and uncouple the visible and its sig-
nification or speech and its effect, which create and frustrate
expectations. These operations do not derive from the proper-
ties of the cinematic medium. They even presuppose a sys-
tematic distance from its ordinary employment. A 'normal'
director would give us some sign, however slight, of the
father's change of mind. And he would use a wider angle
for the baptism scene, have the camera ascend, or introduce an
additional shot in order to show us the expression on the
children's faces during the ceremony.

Shall we say that Bresson's fragmentation vouchsafes us,
rather the narrative sequence of those who align cinema with
the theatre or the novel, the pure images peculiar to this art? But
the camera's fixing on the hand that pours the water and the
hand that holds the candle is no more peculiar to cinema than
the fixing of Doctor Bovary's gaze on Mademoiselle Emma's nails,
or of Madame Bovary's gaze on those of the notary's clerk, is
peculiar to literature. And the fragmentation does not simply
break the narrative sequence. It performs a double operation
with respect to it. By separating the hands from the facial
expression, it reduces the action to its essence: a baptism consists
in words and hands pouring water over a head. By compressing
the action into a sequence of perceptions and movements, and
short-circuiting any explanation of the reasons, Bresson's cine-
ma does not realize a peculiar essence of the cinema. It forms
part of the novelistic tradition begun by Flaubert: an ambiva-
ence in which the same procedures create and retract meaning,
ensure and undo the link between perceptions, actions and
affects. The wordless immediacy of the visible doubtless radical-
izes its effect, but this radicalism itself works through the
operation of the power which separates cinema from the plastic
arts and makes it approximate to literature: the power of
anticipating an effect the better to displace or contradict it.
The image is never a simple reality. Cinematic images are primarily operations, relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect. These operations involve different image-functions, different meanings of the word ‘image’. Two cinematic shots or sequences of shots can thus pertain to a very different ‘imageness’. Conversely, one cinematic shot can pertain to the same type of imageness as a novelistic sentence or a painting. That is why Eisenstein could look to Zola or Dickens, as to Greco or Piranesi, for models of cinematic montage; and why Godard can compose a eulogy to cinema using Elie Faure’s sentences on Rembrandt’s painting.

The image in films is thus not opposed to television broadcasting as alterity is to identity. Television broadcasting likewise has its Other: the effective performance of the set. And cinema also reproduces a constructed performance in front of a camera. It is simply that when we speak of Bresson’s images we are not referring to the relationship between what has happened elsewhere and what is happening before our eyes, but to operations that make up the artistic nature of what we are seeing. ‘Image’ therefore refers to two different things. There is the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand in for it. And there is the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance. This alteration can take a myriad of forms. It might be the visibility given to brush-strokes that are superfluous when it comes to revealing who is represented by the portrait; an elongation of bodies that expresses their motion at the expense of their proportions; a turn of language that accentuates the expression of a feeling or renders the perception of an idea more complex; a word or a shot in place of the ones that seemed bound to follow; and so on and so forth.

This is the sense in which art is made up of images, regardless of whether it is figurative, of whether we recognize the form of identifiable characters and spectacles in it. The images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance. Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. Visible forms yield a meaning to be construed or subtract it. A camera movement anticipates one spectacle and discloses a different one. A pianist attacks a musical phrase ‘behind’ a dark screen. All these relations define images. This means two things. In the first place, the images of art are, as such, dissemblances. Secondly, the image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words. But the commonest regime of the image is one that presents a relationship between the sayable and the visible, a relationship which plays on both the analogy and the dissemblance between them. This relationship by no means requires the two terms to be materially present. The visible can be arranged in meaningful tropes; words deploy a visibility that can be binding.

It might seem superfluous to recall such simple things. But if it is necessary to do so, it is because these simple things are forever being blurred, because the identitarian alterity of resemblance has always interfered with the operation of the relations constitutive of artistic images. To resemble was long taken to be the peculiarity of art, while an infinite number of spectacles and forms of imitation were proscribed from it. In our day, not to resemble is taken for the imperative of art, while photographs, videos and displays of objects similar to everyday ones have taken the place of abstract canvases in
galleries and museums. But this formal imperative of non-resemblance is itself caught up in a singular dialectic. For there is growing disquiet: does not resembling involve renouncing the visible? Or does it involve subjecting its concrete richness to operations and artifices whose matrix resides in language? A counter-move then emerges: what is contrasted with resemblance is not the operativeness of art, but material presence, the spirit made flesh, the absolutely other which is also absolutely the same. ‘The Image will come at the Resurrection’, says Godard: the Image – that is, the ‘original image’ of Christian theology, the Son who is not ‘similar’ to the Father but partakes of his nature. We no longer kill each other for the iota that separates this image from the other. But we continue to regard it as a promise of flesh, capable of dispelling the simulacra of resemblance, the artifices of art, and the tyranny of the letter.

**IMAGE, RESEMBLANCE, HYPER-RESEMBLANCE**

In short, the image is not merely double; it is triple. The artistic image separates its operations from the technique that produces resemblance. But it does so in order to discover a different resemblance en route – a resemblance that defines the relation of a being to its provenance and destination, one that rejects the mirror in favour of the immediate relationship between progenitor and engendered: direct vision, glorious body of the community, or stamp of the thing itself. Let us call it hyper-resemblance. Hyper-resemblance is the original resemblance, the resemblance that does not provide the replica of a reality but attests directly to the elsewhere whence it derives. This hyper-resemblance is the alterity our contemporaries demand from images or whose disappearance, together with the image, they deplore. To tell the truth, however, it never disappears. It never stops slipping its own activity into the very gap that separates the operations of art from the techniques of reproduction, concealing its rationale in that of art or in the properties of machines of reproduction, even if it means sometimes appearing in the foreground as the ultimate rationale of both.

It is what emerges in the contemporary stress on distinguishing the genuine image from its simulacrum on the basis of the precise mode of its material reproduction. Pure form is then no longer counter-posed to bad image. Opposed to both is the imprint of the body which light registers inadvertently, without referring it either to the calculations of painters or the language games of signification. Faced with the image *causa sui* of the television idol, the canvas or screen is made into a vernicle on which the image of the god made flesh, or of things at their birth, is impressed. And photography, formerly accused of opposing its mechanical, soulless simulacra to the coloured flesh of painting, sees its image inverted. Compared with pictorial artifices, it is now perceived as the very emanation of a body, as a skin detached from its surface, positively replacing the appearances of resemblance and defeating the efforts of the discourse that would have it express a meaning.

The imprint of the thing, the naked identity of its alterity in place of its imitation, the wordless, senseless materiality of the visible instead of the figures of discourse – this is what is demanded by the contemporary celebration of the image or its nostalgic evocation: an immanent transcendence, a glorious essence of the image guaranteed by the very mode of its material production. Doubtless no one has expressed this view...
better than the Barthes of Camera Lucida, a work that ironically has become the bible of those who wish to think about photographic art, whereas it aims to show that photography is not an art. Against the dispersive multiplicity of the operations of art and games of signification, Barthes wants to assert the immediate alterity of the image—that is, in the strict sense, the alterity of the One. He wants to establish a direct relationship between the indexical nature of the photographic image and the material way it affects us: the punctum, the immediate pathetic effect that he contrasts with the studium, or the information transmitted by the photograph and the meanings it receives. The studium makes the photograph a material to be decoded and explained. The punctum immediately strikes us with the affective power of the that was: that—i.e., the entity which was unquestionably in front of the aperture of the camera obscura, whose body has emitted radiation, captured and registered by the black chamber, which affects us here and now through the ‘earnal medium’ of light like the delayed rays of a star.3

It is unlikely that the author of Mythologies believed in the para-scientific phantasmagoria which makes photography a direct emanation of the body displayed. It is more plausible that this myth served to expiate the sin of the former mythologist: the sin of having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs. The semiotologist repents having spent much of his life saying: Look out! What you are taking for visible self-evidence is in fact an encoded message whereby a society or authority legitimates itself by naturalizing itself, by rooting itself in the obviousness of the visible. He bends the stick in the other direction by valorizing, under the title of punctum, the utter self-evidence of the photograph, consigning the decoding of messages to the platitude of the studium.

But the semiotologist who read the encoded message of images and the theoretician of the punctum of the wordless image base themselves on the same principle: a principle of reversible equivalence between the silence of images and what they say. The former demonstrated that the image was in fact a vehicle for a silent discourse which he endeavoured to translate into sentences. The latter tells us that the image speaks to us precisely when it is silent, when it no longer transmits any message to us. Both conceive the image as speech which holds its tongue. The former made its silence speak; the latter makes this silence the abolition of all chatter. But both play on the same inter-convertibility between two potentialities of the image: the image as raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history.

FROM ONE REGIME OF ‘IMAGENESS’ TO ANOTHER

Yet such duplicity is not self-evident. It defines a specific regime of ‘imageness’, a particular regime of articulation between the visible and the sayable—the one in which photography was born and which has allowed it to develop as a production of resemblance and art. Photography did not become an art because it employed a device opposing the imprint of bodies to their copy. It became one by exploiting a double poetics of the image, by making its images, simultaneously or separately, two things: the legible testimony of a history written on faces or objects and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativization, any intersection of meaning. This double poetics of the image as cipher of a history
written in visible forms and as obtuse reality, impeding meaning and history, was not invented by the device of the camera obscura. It was born before it, when novel writing redistributed the relations between the visible and the sayable that were specific to the representative regime in the arts and which were exemplified by dramatic speech.

For the representative regime in the arts is not the regime of resemblance to which the modernity of a non-figurative art, or even an art of the unrepresentable, is opposed. It is the regime of a certain alteration of resemblance – that is, of a certain system of relations between the sayable and the visible, between the visible and the invisible. The idea of the pictorial character of the poema involved in the famous Ut pictura poesis defines two essential relations. In the first place, by way of narration and description words make something visible, yet not present, seen. Secondly, words make seen what does not pertain to the visible, by reinforcing, attenuating or dissimulating the expression of an idea, by making the strength or control of an emotion felt. This dual function of the image assumes an order of stable relations between the visible and invisible – for example, between an emotion and the linguistic tropes that express it, but also the expressive traits whereby the hand of the artist translates the emotion and transposes the tropes. We might refer here to Diderot’s demonstration in his Lettre sur les sourds-muets: alter the meaning of a word in the lines Homer gives the dying Ajax and the distress of a man who asked only to die in the sight of the gods becomes the defiance of a rebel who faces up to them when dying. The engravings added to the text supply the evidence to readers, who see the alteration not only in the expression on Ajax’s face, but also in the way he holds his arms and the very posture of his body. Change one word and you have a different emotion, whose alteration can and must be exactly transcribed by the designer.⁴

The break with this system does not consist in painting white or black squares rather than the warriors of antiquity. It does not even consist, as the modernist vulgate would have it, in the fact that any correspondence between the art of words and the art of visible forms comes undone. It consists in the fact that words and forms, the sayable and the visible, the visible and the invisible, are related to one another in accordance with new procedures. In the new regime – the aesthetic regime in the arts, which was constituted in the nineteenth century – the image is no longer the codified expression of a thought or feeling. Nor is it a double or a translation. It is a way in which things themselves speak and are silent. In a sense, it comes to lodge at the heart of things as their silent speech.

Silent speech is to be taken in two senses. In the first, the image is the meaning of things inscribed directly on their bodies, their visible language to be decoded. Thus, Balzac places us before the lizards, the lopsided beams, and half-ruined sign in which the history of the Maison du chat qui pelote is read; or shows us the unfashionable spencer of Cousin Pons, which encapsulates a period of history, a social destiny, and an individual fate. Silent speech, then, is the eloquence of the very thing that is silent, the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth.

But in a second sense the silent speech of things is, on the contrary, their obstinate silence. Contrasting with Cousin Pons’s eloquent spencer is the silent discourse of another novelistic sartorial accessory – Charles Bovary’s hat, whose ugliness possesses a profundity of silent expression like the face of an imbecile. The hat and its owner here simply exchange
their imbecility, which is then no longer the characteristic of a person or a thing, but the very status of the relationship of indifference between them, the status of 'dumb' art that makes of this imbecility — this incapacity for an adequate transfer of significations — its very potency.

Accordingly, there is no reason to contrast the art of images with goodness knows not what intransitivity of the poem's words or the painting's brush-strokes. It is the image itself that has changed and art which has become a displacement between two image-functions — between the unfolding of inscriptions carried by bodies and the interruptive function of their naked, non-signifying presence. This dual power of the image was achieved by literary discourse by creating a new relationship with painting. It wished to transpose into the art of words the anonymous existence of genre paintings, which a new eye found to be richer in history than the heroic actions of history paintings obeying the hierarchies and expressive codes laid down by the poetic arts of yesteryear. The façade of the Maison du chat qui pelote, or the dining-room discovered by the young painter through his window, take their profusion of detail from recently rediscovered Dutch paintings, offering the silent, intimate expression of a way of life. Conversely, Charles’s hat, or the view of the same Charles at his window, open on to the idleness of things and beings, derive the splendour of the insignificant from them.

But the relationship is also inverse: writers 'imitate' Dutch paintings only in as much as they themselves confer a new visibility on these paintings; in as much as their sentences educate a new gaze by teaching people how to read, on the surface of canvases recounting episodes from everyday life, a different history from that of significant or insignificant facts — the history of the pictorial process itself, of the birth of the image emerging from brush-strokes and flows of opaque matter.

Photography became an art by placing its particular techniques in the service of this dual poetics, by making the face of anonymous people speak twice over — as silent witnesses of a condition inscribed directly on their features, their clothes, their life setting; and as possessors of a secret we shall never know, a secret veiled by the very image that delivers them to us. The indexical theory of photography as the skin peeled off things only serves to put the flesh of fantasy on the Romantic poetics of everything specks, of truth engraved on the very body of things. And the contrast between the studium and the punctum arbitrarily separates the polarity that causes the aesthetic image constantly to gravitate between hieroglyph and senseless naked presence. In order to preserve for photography the purity of an affect unsullied by any signification offered up to the semiologist or any artifice of art, Barthes erases the very genealogy of the that was. By projecting the immediacy of the latter on to the process of mechanical imprinting, he dispels all the mediations between the reality of mechanical imprinting and the reality of the affect that make this affect open to being experienced, named, expressed.

Erasing the genealogy that renders our 'images' material and conceivable; erasing the characteristics that lead to something in our time being experienced by us as art, so as to keep photography free of all art — such is the rather heavy price to be paid for the desire to liberate the pleasure of images from the sway of semiology. What the simple relationship between mechanical impression and the punctum erases is the whole history of the relations between three things: the images of art, the social forms of imagery, and the theoretic procedures of criticism of imagery.
Indeed, the point in the nineteenth century at which artistic images were redefined in a mobile relationship between brute presence and encoded history was also the moment when a major trade in collective imagery was created, when the forms of an art developed that was devoted to a set of functions at once dispersed and complementary: giving members of a ‘society’ with uncertain reference-points the means of seeing and amusing themselves in the form of defined types; creating around market products a halo of words and images that made them desirable; assembling, thanks to mechanical presses and the new procedure of lithography, an encyclopaedia of the shared human inheritance: remote life-forms, works of art, popularized bodies of knowledge. The point at which Balzac makes decoding signs written on stone, clothes and faces the motor of novelistic action, and when art critics begin to see a chaos of brush-strokes in representations of the Dutch bourgeoisie of the golden age, is also the time when the Magasin pittoresque, and the physiognomies of the student, the lorette, the smoker, the grocer and every imaginable social type, are launched. It is a period that witnesses an unlimited proliferation of the vignettes and little tales in which a society learns to recognize itself, in the double mirror of significant portraits and insignificant anecdotes that form the metonymies of a world, by transposing the artistic practices of the image/hieroglyph and the suspense image into the social negotiation of resemblances. Balzac and a number of his peers had no hesitation about engaging in this exercise, ensuring the two-way relationship between the work of literature’s images and manufacturing the vignettes of collective imagery.

The moment of this new exchange between artistic images and commerce in social imagery is also that of the formation of the components of the major hermeneutics which sought to apply the procedures of surprise and decoding initiated by the new literary forms to the flood of social and commercial images. It is the moment when Marx teaches us to decipher the hieroglyphics written on the seemingly a-historical body of the commodity and to penetrate into the productive hell concealed by the words of economics, just as Balzac taught us to decipher a history on a wall or an outfit and enter the underground circles that contain the secret of social appearances. Thereafter, summarizing a century’s literature, Freud will teach us how to find in the most insignificant details the key to a history and the formula of a meaning, even if it originates in some irreducible non-sense.

Thus was solidarity forged between the operations of art, the forms of imagery, and the discursiveness of symptoms. It became more complex as the vignettes of pedagogy, the icons of the commodity, and the disused shop windows lost their use-value and exchange-value. For by way of compensation they then received a new image-value, which is nothing other than the twofold power of aesthetic images: the inscription of the signs of a history and the affective power of sheer presence that is no longer exchanged for anything. On this dual basis, these disused objects and icons came at the time of Dadaism and Surrealism to populate the poems, canvases, montages and collages of art, representing therein both the derision of a society X-rayed by Marxist analysis and the absolute of desire discovered in the writings of Dr Freud.

THE END OF IMAGES IS BEHIND US

What might then properly be called the fate of the image is the fate of this logical, paradoxical intertwining between the operations of art, the modes of circulation of imagery, and
the critical discourse that refers the operations of the one and the forms of the other to their hidden truth. It is this intertwining of art and non-art, of art, commodities and discourse, which contemporary mediological discourse seeks to efface, intending by the latter, over and above the discipline that professes itself such, the set of discourses that would deduce the forms of identity and alterity peculiar to images from the properties of apparatuses of production and diffusion. What the simple contrasts between the image and the visual, or the punctum and the studium, propose is the mourning for a certain phase of this intertwining — that of semiology as critical thinking about images. The critique of images, as illustrated in exemplary fashion by the Barthes of Mythologies, was a mode of discourse that tracked the messages of commodities and power hidden in the innocence of media and advertising imagery or in the pretension of artistic autonomy. This discourse was itself at the heart of an ambiguous mechanism. On the one hand, it wished to aid art’s efforts to free itself of imagery, to achieve control over its own operations, over its power to subvert political and commodity domination. On the other, it seemed to chime with a political consciousness aiming at something beyond, where art forms and life forms would no longer be bound together by the equivocal forms of imagery, but tend to be directly identified with one another.

But the mourning declared for this system seems to forget that it was itself a form of mourning for a certain programme: the programme of a certain end of images. For the ‘end of images’ is not some mediatic or mediumistic catastrophe, to counter which we need today to restore goodness knows not what transcendence enclosed in the very process of chemical printing and threatened by the digital revolution. Instead, the end of images is a historical project that lies behind us, a vision of the modern development of art that obtained between the 1880s and the 1920s, between the time of Symbolism and that of Constructivism. In fact, these were the years that witnessed the assertion in a whole variety of ways of the project of an art released from images — that is, released not simply from old representation, but from the new tension between naked presence and the writing of history on things, and released at the same time from the tension between the operations of art and social forms of resemblance and recognition. This project took two major forms, which on more than one occasion were combined: pure art, conceived as art whose results no longer compose images, but directly realize the idea in self-sufficient material form; or art that is realized by abolishing itself, art which abolishes the distance of the image so as to identify its procedures with the forms of a whole life in action, no longer separating art from work or politics.

The first idea found precise formulation in Mallarmé’s poetics, as summarized in a famous sentence of his article on Wagner: ‘The Moderns regard it as beneath them to imagine. But expert in the use of the arts, they expect each one to lead them to the point where a special power of illusion explodes and then they consent.’ This formula proposes an art entirely separate from the social commerce of imagery — of the universal reportage of newspapers or the mechanism of recognition in reflection of bourgeois theatre. It proposes an art of performance, symbolized by the self-vanishing, luminous trace of the firework or the art of a dancer who, as Mallarmé puts it, is not a woman and does not dance, but simply traces the form of an idea with her ‘illiterate’ feet — or even without her feet, if we think of the art of Loïe Fuller, whose ‘dance’ consists in the folding and unfolding of a dress lit up by the play of spotlights. To the same project belongs the theatre
dreamt of by Edward Gordon Craig: a theatre that would no longer stage ‘pieces’ but create its own works – works possibly without words, as in the ‘theatre of motion’ where the action consists exclusively in the movement of mobile elements constituting what was once called the set of the drama. It is also the meaning of the clear contrast formulated by Kandinsky: on the one hand, the typical art display given over in fact to the imagery of a world, where the portrait of Councillor N and Baron X are placed side by side with a flight of ducks or calves napping in the shade; on the other, an art whose forms are the expression in coloured signs of an internal, conceptual necessity.

To illustrate the second form, we might think of the works and programmes of the Simultaneist, Futurist and Constructivist age: painting as conceived by Boccioni, Balla or Delaunay, whose plastic dynamism embraces the accelerated rhythms and metamorphoses of modern life; Futurist poetry, in synch with the speed of cars or the rattle of machine-guns; dramaturgy à la Meyerhold, inspired by the pure performances of the circus or inventing forms of bio-mechanics in order to homogenize theatrical interactions with the rhythms of socialist production and construction; cinema with Vertov’s eye-machine, rendering all machines synchronous – the little machines of the human animal’s arms and legs and big machines with their turbines and pistons; a pictorial art of Suprematist pure forms, homogenous with the architectural construction of the forms of a new life; a graphic art à la Rodchenko, conferring the same geometrical dynamism on the letters of transmitted messages and the forms of represented aircraft, in tune with the dynamism of the builders and pilots of Soviet planes as with that of the builders of socialism.

Both forms propose to abolish the mediation of the image – that is, not only resemblance but also the power of operations of decoding and suspension – just as they do the interaction between the operations of art, the commerce of images, and the labour of exegesis. To abolish this mediation was to realize the immediate identity of act and form. It was on this common programme that the two figures of pure art – imageless art – and the becoming-life of art – its becoming non-art – were able to intersect in the 1910s and 1920s; that Symbolist and Suprematist artists could join Futurist or Constructivist denigrators of art in identifying the forms of an art which was purely art with the forms of a new life abolishing the very specificity of art. This end of images – the only one to have been rigorously thought through and pursued – lies behind us, even if architects, urban designers, choreographers, or people who work in theatre sometimes pursue the dream in a minor key. It ended when the authorities to whom this sacrifice of images was offered made it clear that they only dealt with constructor-artists, that they themselves were taking care of construction, and required of artists nothing but precisely images, understood in a narrowly defined sense: illustrations putting flesh on their programmes and slogans.

The distance of the image then recovered its prerogatives in the Surrealist absolutization of the *explosante fixe* or in the Marxist critique of appearances. Mourning for the ‘end of images’ was already expressed by the energy devoted by the semologist to pursuing the messages hidden in images, so as to purify both the surfaces of inscription of art forms and the consciousness of the agents of future revolutions. Surfaces to purify and consciousnesses to educate were the *membra disjecta* of ‘imageless’ identity, of the lost identity between art forms and life forms. Like all forms of work, the labour of mourning is tiring. And the time came when the semiologist
discovered that the lost pleasure of images is too high a price to pay for the benefit of forever transforming mourning into knowledge. Especially when this knowledge itself loses its credibility, when the real movement of history that guaranteed the traversal of appearances itself proved to be an appearance. The complaint is then no longer that images conceal secrets which are no longer such to anyone, but, on the contrary, that they no longer hide anything. While some start up a prolonged lamentation for the lost image, others reopen their albums to rediscover the pure enchantment of images – that is, the mythical identity between the identity of the *that* and the alterity of the *was*, between the pleasure of pure presence and the bite of the absolute Other.

But the three-way interaction between the social production of resemblances, artistic operations of dissemblance, and the discursiveness of symptoms cannot be reduced to the simple beat of the pleasure principle and the death drive. Evidence of this, perhaps, is the tri-partition presented to us today by exhibitions devoted to ‘images’, but also the dialectic that affects each type of image and mixes its legitimations and powers with those of the other two.

**NAKED IMAGE, OSTENSIVE IMAGE, METAPHORICAL IMAGE**

The images exhibited by our museums and galleries today can in fact be classified into three major categories. First of all, there is what might be called the naked image: the image that does not constitute art, because what it shows us excludes the prestige of dissemblance and the rhetoric of exegeses. Thus, a recent exhibition entitled *Mémoires des camps* devoted one of its sections to photographs taken during the discovery of the Nazi camps. The photographs were often signed by famous names – Lee Miller, Margaret Bourke-White, and so on – but the idea that brought them together was the trace of history, of testimony to a reality that is generally accepted not to tolerate any other form of presentation.

Different from the naked image is what I shall call the ostensive image. This image likewise asserts its power as that of sheer presence, without signification. But it claims it in the name of art. It posits this presence as the peculiarity of art faced with the media circulation of imagery, but also with the powers of meaning that alter this presence: the discourses that present and comment on it, the institutions that display it, the forms of knowledge that historicize it. This position can be encapsulated in the title of an exhibition recently organized at the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts by Thierry de Duve to exhibit ‘one hundred years of contemporary art’: *Voix*. The affect of the *that was* is here apparently referred to the identity without residue of a presence of which ‘contemporaneity’ is the very essence. The obtuse presence that interrupts histories and discourses becomes the luminous power of a face-to-face: *facingness*, as the organizer puts it, obviously contrasting this notion with Clement Greenberg’s *flanal*. But the very contrast conveys the meaning of the operation. Presence opens out into presentation of presence. Facing the spectator, the obtuse power of the image as being-there-without-reason becomes the radiance of a face, conceived on the model of the icon, as the gaze of divine transcendence. The works of the artists – painters, sculptors, video-makers, installers – are isolated in their sheer haecceity. But this haecceity immediately splits in two. The works are so many icons attesting to a singular mode of material presence, removed from the other ways in which ideas and intentions organize the data of sense experience. *Me
voici’, ‘Nous voici’, ‘Vous voici’ – the three rubrics of the exhibition – make them witness to an original co-presence of people and things, of things between themselves, and of people between themselves. And Duchamp’s tireless urinal once again does service, via the pedestal on which Stieglitz photographed it. It becomes a display of presence making it possible to identify the dissemblances of art with the interactions of hyper-resemblance.

Contrasting with the ostensive image is what I shall call the metaphorical image. Its power as art can be summarized in the exact opposite of Voici: the Voilà that recently gave its title to an exhibition at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, sub-titled ‘Le monde dans la tête’. This title and sub-title involve an idea of the relations between art and image that much more broadly inspires a number of contemporary exhibitions. According to this logic, it is impossible to delimit a specific sphere of presence isolating artistic operations and products from forms of circulation of social and commercial imagery and from operations interpreting this imagery. The images of art possess no peculiar nature of their own that separates them in stable fashion from the negotiation of dissemblances and the discursiveness of symptoms. The labour of art thus involves playing on the ambiguity of dissemblances and the instability of dissemblances, bringing about a local reorganization, a singular rearrangement of circulating images. In a sense the construction of such devices assigns art the tasks that once fell to the ‘critique of images’. Only this critique, left to the artists themselves, is no longer framed by an autonomous history of forms or a history of deeds changing the world. Thus art is led to query the radicalism of its powers, to devote its operations to more modest tasks. It aims to play with the forms and products of imagery, rather than carry out their demystification. This oscillation between two attitudes was evident in a recent exhibition, presented in Minneapolis under the title ‘Let’s entertain’ and in Paris as Au-delà du spectacle. The American title invited visitors both to play the game of an art freed from critical seriousness and to mark a critical distance from the leisure industry. For its part, the French title played on the theorization of the game as the active opposite of the passive spectacle in the texts of Guy Debord. Spectators thus found themselves called upon to accord Charles Ray’s merry-go-round or Maurizio Catelan’s giant table football set their metaphorical value and to take a semi-distance from the game through the media images, disco sounds or commercial mangas reprocessed by other artists.

The device of the installation can also be transformed into a theatre of memory and make the artist a collector, archivist or window-dresser, placing before the visitor’s eyes not so much a critical clash of heterogeneous elements as a set of testimonies about a shared history and world. Thus the exhibition Voilà aimed to recap a century and illustrate the very notion of a century, by bringing together, inter alia, Hans-Peter Feldmann’s photographs of one hundred people aged 0–100, Christian Boltanski’s installation of telephone subscribers, Alighiero and Boetti’s 720 Letters from Afghanistan, or the Martins’ room devoted by Bertrand Lavier to exhibiting 50 canvases linked only by the family name of their authors.

The unifying principle behind these strategies clearly seems to be to bring about, on a material that is not specific to art and often indistinguishable from a collection of utilitarian objects or a projection of forms of imagery, a double metamorphosis, corresponding to the dual nature of the aesthetic image: the image as cipher of history and the image as interruption. On the one hand, it involves transforming the targeted, intelligent
productions of imagery into opaque, stupid images, interrupting the media flow. On the other, it involves reviving dulled utilitarian objects or the indifferent images of media circulation, so as to create the power of the traces of a shared history contained in them. Installation art thus brings into play the metaphorical, unstable nature of images. The latter circulate between the world of art and the world of imagery. They are interrupted, fragmented, reconstituted by a poetics of the witticism that seeks to establish new differences of potentiality between these unstable elements.

Naked image, ostensive image, metaphorical image: three forms of 'imageness', three ways of coupling or uncoupling the power of showing and the power of signifying, the attestation of presence and the testimony of history; three ways, too, of sealing or refusing the relationship between art and image. Yet it is remarkable that none of these three forms thus defined can function within the confines of its own logic. Each of them encounters a point of undecidability in its functioning that compels it to borrow something from the others.

This is already true of the image that seems best able, and most obliged, to guard against it – the 'naked' image intent solely on witnessing. For witnessing always aims beyond what it presents. Images of the camps testify not only to the tortured bodies they do show us, but also to what they do not show: the disappeared bodies, obviously, but above all the very process of annihilation. The shots of the reporters from 1945 thus need to be viewed in two different ways. The first perceives the violence inflicted by invisible human beings on other human beings, whose suffering and exhaustion confront us and suspend any aesthetic appreciation. The second perceives not violence and suffering, but a process of de-humanization, the disappearance of the boundaries between the human, animal and mineral. Now, this second view is itself the product of an aesthetic education, of certain idea of the image. A photograph by Georges Rodger, displayed at the Mémoires des camps exhibition, shows us the back of a corpse whose head we cannot see, carried by an SS prisoner whose bowed head shields his face from our eyes. This horrid assemblage of two truncated bodies presents us with an exemplary image of the common de-humanization of victim and executioner. But it does so only because we see it with eyes that have already contemplated Rembrandt's skinned ox and all the forms of representation which have equated the power of art with obliteration of the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, the living and the dead, the animal and the mineral, all alike merged in the density of the sentence or the thickness of the pictorial paste. 6

The same dialectic characterizes metaphorical images. These images, it is true, are based on a postulate of indiscernibility. They simply set out to displace the representations of imagery, by changing their medium, by locating them in a different mechanism of vision, by punctuating or recounting them differently. But the question then arises: what exactly is produced as a difference attesting to the specific work of artistic images on the forms of social imagery? This was the question behind the disenchanted thoughts of Serge Daney's last texts: have not all the forms of critique, play, and irony that claim to disrupt the ordinary circulation of images been annexed by that circulation? Modern cinema and criticism claimed to interrupt the flow of media and advertising images by suspending the connections between narration and meaning. The freeze-frame that closes Truffaut's Quatre cent coups was emblematic of this suspension. But the brand thus stamped on the image ultimately serves the cause of the brand
The procedures of cutting and humour have themselves become the stock-in-trade of advertising, the means by which it generates both adoration of its icons and the positive attitude towards them created by the very possibility of ironizing it.  

No doubt the argument is not decisive. By definition, what is undecidable can be interpreted in two ways. But it is then necessary discreetly to draw on the resources of the opposite logic. For the ambiguous montage to elicit the freedom of the critical or ludic gaze, the encounter must be organized in accordance with the logic of the ostensive face-to-face, representing advertising images, disco sounds, or television sequences in the space of the museum, isolated behind a curtain in small dark booths that give them the aura of the work damming the flood of communication. Even so, the effect is never guaranteed, because it is often necessary to place a small card on the door of the booth making it clear to viewers that, in the space they are about to enter, they will learn anew how to see and to put the flood of media messages that usually captivates them at a distance. Such exorbitant power attributed to the properties of the device itself corresponds to a rather simplistic view of the poor morons of the society of the spectacle, bathing contentedly in a flood of media images. The interruptions, derivations and reorganizations that alter the circulation of images less pretentiously have no sanctuary. They occur anywhere and at any time.

But it is doubtless the metamorphoses of the ostensive image that best express the contemporary dialectic of images. For here it proves decidedly difficult to furnish the appropriate criteria for discerning the proclaimed face-to-face, for making presence present. Most of the works put on the pedestal of Voici cannot in any way be distinguished from those that contribute to the documentary displays of Voilà. Portraits of stars by Andy Warhol, documents from the mythical section of the Aigles du Musée by Marcel Broodthaers, an installation by Joseph Beuys of a batch of commodities from the ex-GDR, Christian Boltanski’s family album, Raymond Hains’s stripped posters, or Pistoletto’s mirrors—these scarcely seem conducive to extolling the undulated presence of Voici.

Here too it is then necessary to draw on the opposite logic. The supplement of exegetical discourse proves necessary in order to transform a ready-made by Duchamp into a mystical display or a sleek parallelepiped by Donald Judd into a mirror of intersecting relations. Pop images, neo-realist découpages, monochrome paintings, or minimalist sculptures must be placed under the common authority of a primal scene, occupied by the putative father of pictorial modernity: Manet. But the father of modern painting must himself be placed under the authority of the Word made flesh. His modernism and that of his descendants are indeed defined by Thierry de Duve on the basis of a painting from his ‘Spanish’ period—Christ mort soutenu par les anges—inspired by a canvas of Ribalta’s. Unlike his model, Manet’s dead Christ has his eyes open and is facing the spectator. He is thus an allegory for the task of substitution assigned painting by the ‘death of God’. The dead Christ comes back to life in the pure immanence of pictorial presence. This pure presence is not that of art, but instead of the redeeming Image. The ostensive image celebrated by the Voici exhibition is the flesh of material presence raised, in its very immediacy, to the rank of absolute Idea. On this basis, ready-mades and Pop images in sequence, minimalist sculptures or fictional museums, are construed in advance in the tradition of icons and the religious economy of the Resurrection. But the demonstration is obviously double-
edged. The Word is only made flesh through a narrative. An additional operation is always required to transform the products of artistic operations and meaning into witnesses of the original Other. The art of Voici must be based on what it refused. It needs to be presented discursively to transform a 'copy', or a complex relationship between the new and the old, into an absolute origin.

Without a doubt Godard's Histoire(s) du cinéma affords the most exemplary demonstration of this dialectic. The filmmaker places his imaginary Museum of cinema under the sign of the Image that is to come at the Resurrection. His words counter-pose to the deathly power of the Text the living force of the Image, conceived as a cloth of Veronica on which the original face of things is imprinted. To Alfred Hitchcock's obsolete stories they oppose the pure pictorial presence represented by the bottles of Pommard in Notorious, the windmill's sails in Foreign Correspondent, the bag in Marnie, or the glass of milk in Suspicion. I have shown elsewhere how these pure icons had themselves to be removed by the artifice of montage, diverted from their arrangement by Hitchcock, so as to be reintegrated into a pure kingdom of images by the fusing power of video superimposition. The visual production of iconic pure presence, claimed by the filmmaker's discourse, is itself only possible by virtue of the work of its opposite: the Schlegelian poetics of the witicism that invents between fragments of films, news strips, photos, reproductions of paintings and other things all the combinations, distances or approximations capable of eliciting new forms and meanings. This assumes the existence of a boundless Shop/Library/Museum where all films, texts, photographs and paintings coexist; and where they can all be broken up into elements each of which is endowed with a triple power: the power of

singularity (the punctum) of the obtuse image; the educational value (the studium) of the document bearing the trace of a history; and the combinatory capacity of the sign, open to being combined with any element from a different sequence to compose new sentence-images ad infinitum.

The discourse that would salute 'images' as lost shades, fleetingly summoned from the depths of Hell, therefore seems to stand up only at the price of contradicting itself, transforming itself into an enormous poem establishing unbounded communication between arts and mediums, artworks and illustrations of the world, the silence of images and their eloquence. Behind the appearance of contradiction, we must take a closer look at the interaction of these exchanges.