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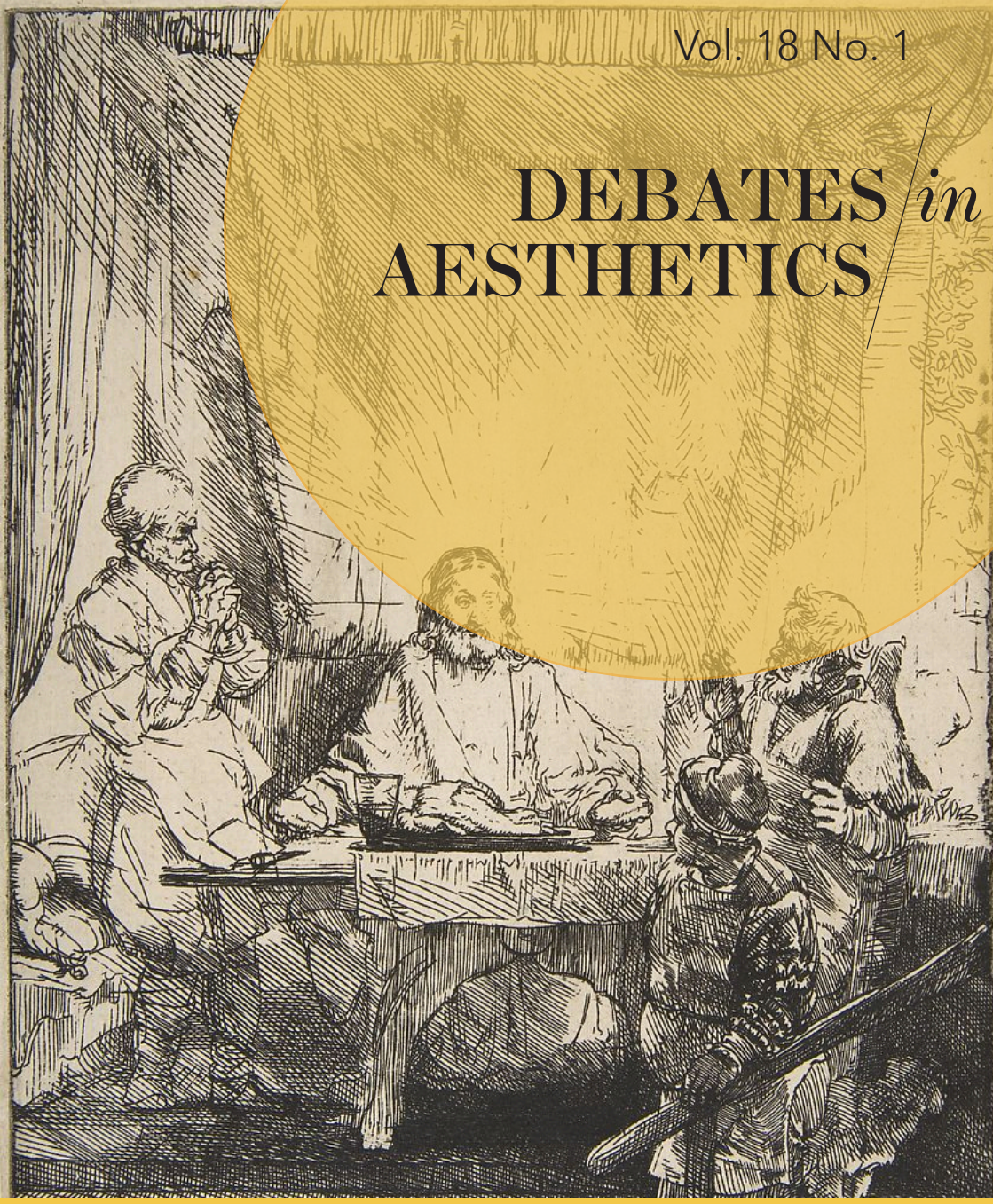

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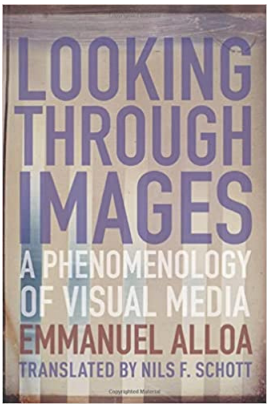
Contents



LOOKING THROUGH IMAGES: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF VISUAL MEDIA

Emmanuel Alloa
Columbia University Press
2021

FOTINI CHARALIBIDOU

"*Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*" is the title covering the front of one of Emmanuel Alloa′s books. As a phenomenological reading of it indicates, the title reveals much and raises enough curiosity to be characterized as enigmatic. On the one hand, it offers insight into the book's two main themes; it announces that at stake is a phenomenology of images, according to which images are *looked through*, as well as a phenomenology of visual media in general. Furthermore, it provokes the suspicion that the former is to be put in methodological priority over the later. On the other hand, it creates curiosity as to how this "*looking through*" is conceived, along with how to understand the manner in which the description of this phenomenon can shed light upon the experience of visual media as well.

As Alloa sets up the main philosophical question to be addressed in his book, he draws from the observation that in our contemporary lives we are abundantly met with images (2021, 1). As he furthermore notices, although we seem to hold an intuitive understanding of what it means for something to be an image, we would be hard pressed if asked to articulate it. He therefore asks: What does the pictoriality of images consist of? What is the function of an image? What is it that makes images, images? These function in the text as different ways to ask one and the same question: "What is an image?" (2021, 2).

The book consists of five chapters. In the first chapter, Alloa offers an interpretation of Plato's historical move from Sophistic and Eleatic philosophical

doctrines, towards the demarcation of what he characterizes as the "true philosophy of the image" (2021, 16). According to this interpretation, Plato aimed to pinpoint the manner in which the Sophist is lead to hold simultaneously that images shall be considered as *being* and that they should be thought of as *not being*. This polarization is a consequence of presuming both that images essentially *are* the same as their models and that, in parallel, they *are not*, in the sense that they seem to differ from them. Plato understood that the Sophist argues under the premise that "the measure of the being of the image is the entity it depicts" and that it is this assumption which lays ground for this opposition between the two theories of images as *being* and *not being* (2021, 18).

As Alloa writes, Plato's obtained awareness of this ontological commitment made by the Sophist, alongside his conviction that all speech refers to the being, allowed him to alternatively employ the categories of methexis and difference (2021, 19, 20) He thus conceived of an image as being, inasmuch as it is essentially similar and different from its model, instead of opposite to it (2021, 19-34). Diving into the inquiry about the ways in which various images are similar and different with respect to their models bears the seed of awareness of the truth that such research is possible only in the event of us as preconceiving images as concerned with their own appearance. This reading of ancient Greek philosophy prompts Alloa to set the description of the phenomenal qualities of images as the historical starting point of reflection which concerns the concept of the image (2021, 34-39).

The second chapter offers a roundly informed reconstruction of Aristotle's definition of the medium, which is historically marked as the first attempt to construct a general media theory and which took on perception as its starting paradigm. As Alloa writes, in the Aristotelian description perception can only take place through a medium, which connects the perceiving eye with the perceived object, while maintaining their distance (2021, 81, 82). This medium is thought of by Aristotle as a space, which is characterized by the capacity to receive and transmit forms, without the matter of things from the object of perception to the sense organ, thus giving rise to appearance (2021, 83-85). Importantly, Alloa also highlights, that in the Aristotelian doctrine any medium is far from being theorized as transparent. It rather "shines through" things

and endows their appearance with its own character (2021, 76-80).

In the third chapter, he provides an interpretation of the historical reception of Aristotle's notion of the diaphanous medium, as a "history of forgetting the medium of appearances" (2021, 11). As he suggests, theories of perception throughout the Middle Ages and till the Renaissance received and interpreted the concept of the diaphanous medium by the influence of metaphysical, epistemological, theological, as well as structural reasons (2021, 106-147). More particularly, they were polarized between endorsing the transparency thesis, namely a conception of images as defined by what lies "behind" them, or the opacity thesis, which posits that images are fully determined by their material objecthood. They thus proposed various accounts about the optical, physiological, and physical laws of perception and at the same time forgot about appearance and mediality (2021, 147-155).

In the fourth chapter, Alloa provides a brief introduction to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, with a special focus upon his transcendentalism about appearance. As he points out, the theory at issue specifies that the ego brings into appearance things that either exist or do not exist (2021, 178). Additionally, it draws from a presupposition of three moments of phenomenalization: namely the addressee (*ego*); the mode of appearance (*cogitatio*); and the appearing object (*cogitatum*). It also acknowledges a need for a medium to connect the *cogitatio* with the *cogitatum*. On the face of it, the doctrine proposes, that it is the ego that mediates between the other two moments of appearance (2021, 171, 172). It becomes evident, then, that the Husserlian theory about appearance is starkly divergent from the Aristotelian, as presented in the second chapter, yet remarkably it remains highly influential in contemporary thought. It is for these reasons, that Alloa worries that Husserlian transcendentalism about appearance stands in the way of reconciling our current phenomenological theory with the Aristotelian theory of the medium (2021, 173).

In the rest of this chapter, Alloa aims to secure the capacity for such a reconciliation. To this purpose, he presents Sartre's theory, which proposes that consciousness of images posits its object as non-existent (2021, 178). He thereafter highlights and interprets the difference between Sartre's and Husserl's views. It is in this manner that he ends up endorsing an understanding of the

object of appearance as neither actively represented by consciousness, nor purely given to it after all (2021, 180). He thus appeals to the need for a corresponding medial phenomenology and revises Husserlian transcendentalism. In three additional units of this chapter, Alloa furthermore introduces further contemporary doctrines– those of Eugen Fink, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – which have already sought after a construction of such a medial phenomenology (2021, 192-208).

Alloa's interpretation, alongside his joining of traditional phenomenology with the Aristotelian theory of the medium, contains playful and insightful moves which feel philosophically fertile and exciting. His thorough historical knowledge concerning disputes around images and the Aristotelian theory of the medium, and his convincing interpretation of these allows for a philosophy of images to finally attend to and understand its own origins and internal struggles, so as to become mature enough to exceed itself and grow further. Growth, here, is understood as the rise of willingness to admit that everything in the history of our conception of images indicates that it just makes sense to think of them as media in the Aristotelian sense of the term. It also amounts to the enhancement of the courage which is necessary for describing the character of the medium, which essentially eludes the focus of attention.

The fifth chapter bears the heading "Media Phenomenology" and is intended to offer a phenomenology of images (2021, 11). In this part, Alloa introduces a distinction between so called "replete" and "discrete" media. He specifies that, in the case of the former, the medium is inseparable from the content, which implies that, in the event of it bringing about the slightest phenomenal difference, this difference shall hold significance in its overall transmission. In contrast, in the case of the latter, the medium of transmission rather disassembles, transports and reassembles the content at hand and, in this respect, it is separate from the transmitted content (2021, 228-233). Along with this conceptual distinction between the two kinds of media, Alloa specifies that images are to be submitted under the category of replete media and deserve to be phenomenally described as such (2021, 233-238). Alloa distinguishes between these kinds of media in a clear way and convinces us that this move is necessary for better understanding the plurality of media, images included.

In order to phenomenally describe images as replete media, he sets to reject

the thesis that images can be defined by reference to necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead of opting for a theory about such conditions, he draws inspiration from Nelson Goodman's methodological shift from the question "What is art?" to the question "What are the symptoms of art?" and implements the same idea (2021, 238-242). He thus shifts the attention towards the development of a "symptomatology" of iconicity, namely to the provision of a list of symptoms of images, the presence of which rather indicates that one is possibly met with an image, without necessarily - let alone sufficiently - entailing so. As for three characteristic examples, Alloa lists "framing", "synopticity", and "presentativity" (2021, 242-275). This symptomatology is developed by reference to various works in the literature concerning the special properties of images and is remarkably careful and perspicacious. It does great justice to first person phenomenal experience of images and transmits the wild joy accompanied by the accomplishment of articulating phenomena which resist being articulated.

Upon critical reflection, it is worth pointing out that Alloa seems tempted to identify either replete or visual media with iconicity. This inclination is rendered most evident by choosing the heading "Media Phenomenology" for a chapter which mainly concerns the phenomenology of iconicity. Furthermore, he lists several kinds of replete media, such as images, voice, dance, and gestures and - even though he does not expand on this - one imagines that he would admit that there are various kinds of visual media as well, such as images, videos, holograms etc. However, identification of the symptomatology of images with either the symptomatology of replete or visual media in general implies that the genus is considered the same as one of the kinds that falls under it and this is a consequence to be avoided. Additionally, it runs against the premise that – ordinarily - the concepts of iconicity of visual media are employed differently.

In addition to an identification of these concepts being somehow arbitrary, the effort to account for the symptomatology of iconicity leads to the unwanted inference that the symptoms of iconicity are identical with the symptoms of either all replete or all visual media. As a consequence, we find ourselves lacking criteria for a "differential diagnosis" of replete and visual media in general on the one hand, and for each visual medium separately - including

images - on the other hand. This implies an incapacity to account for what makes images images and to fulfill what was set as a main goal in the introduction of the book. As Alloa himself mentions: "If everything is an image, nothing is an image anymore [...]." (2021, 239).

Furthermore, if we endorse Alloa's premise that images constitute one amongst a plurality of replete or visual media, then we must also accept both that all images are replete or visual media, and that not all such media are images. With that being assumed, it would be preferrable to obtain knowledge about the symptoms of iconicity, starting from the symptoms of replete or visual media, rather than the other way around.

As for one final remark, in the introduction of the book Alloa promises to dismiss the view that it is possible to account for the conditions of necessity and sufficiency for images. However, the rejection of this thesis functions as a working assumption in the text rather than as an inference (2021, 12). As a consequence, for the reader who is relatively unfamiliar with philosophy of images, it may not be all that clear why, for example, the symptoms of framing and synopticity together are not sufficient for iconicity.

These points of criticism deserve to be seen as indicative of the potential to immerse ourselves in Alloa's thought, to cherish his insight upon images' replete mediality, and to work our way towards the formulation of new theoretical attempts which do justice to images' functioning as media, while simultaneously rendering clearer the distinctions amongst the various kinds of visual media, thus defining images more precisely. Under these considerations, I wish to maintain that the book at hand offers ample opportunity for discussion and to recommend it for thinkers interested in the question of images and mediality.

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