

# THE DAWN OF THE IMAGE. COMMENTS ABOUT THE VOCATION AND DESTINY OF IMAGES

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## Abstract

*The study of the contemporary image – and the transformations created by the introduction of the digital technologies – give us the opportunity to review the role of the image as a tool for knowledge and understanding of the world. The following paper, based on the formulation of a possible hypothesis for the birth of this concept (image), seeks to restore its original sense.*

**Key words:** Image, Epistemology, Sense.

I would like to share a vision with the reader: on a bright sunny morning, in the middle of a pine forest during the last ice age, a common ancestor of ours is running, panting, for he knows he is being closely followed by a powerful predator – perhaps a sabre-toothed tiger. Terrified, he hides inside a cave, in the hope of taking a shortcut or, perhaps, as his only possible refuge. We then suppose that it is quite a large cavern, full of large chambers and internal subdivisions. Rapidly, our ancient relative seeks another exit from the labyrinth to allow him to continue his escape and, at the same time, to confuse the beast that is pursuing him. Thus, when he discovers a gap through which comes a certain amount of light, without hesitation, he enters in the assurance that it is another way out, that he will indeed survive.

However, when he goes beyond the entrance, he views a feint moving image in front of him and hears the roar of the monster that is harassing him. In a reflex action, he throws his spear straight at this image. But the spear is simply smashed on the rock wall. Thus, the desperate man is disarmed, defenceless to face what he believes to be the predator, and awaits the fatal attack. But this ends up not happening, and he discovers after a short, but apparently interminable, period, that what he sees is not what it is. In other words, the feint image before him is not his natural enemy, no matter how similar it may be. He then notices that the “beast” has its head down and is really only something on the rock wall. Without difficulty, he discovers that this something is formed by a small orifice – a crack in the opposite wall, through which light enters and illuminates the chamber.

At the next moment, the hunter still scared, looks through the crack and observes that there outside is his pursuer. For obvious reasons, he is not, at this moment, willing to leave the cave to check if what he sees outside is not merely another form of illusion. But the simple separation between that which is outside and the “thing” that appearing on the wall in front of him, is perhaps sufficient to define that on the wall as something different, of another order, if compared with the object outside to which, however, it is evidently related. Thus, there may have

been born the idea of a new category of things – Images – that represent others as if they were only their visual portion. And, moreover, in relation to these same objects they represent, they occupy a different space and, perhaps, a different time. Naturally, the sabre-toothed tigers had a terrible precedence over their own projected images, as well our ancestors knew. A precedence that, nowadays, we can denominate ontological.

It is certain, however, that our hero survived despite his broken spear, for, after all, we and others before us too, are here to tell the story. This is said because it seems probable that such a spectacular discovery as this, no matter how much one tries to hide it, should give rise to narratives. Legends that, in the future, would generate myths, which, as someone has already said, are only stories whose origins have been forgotten. Thus, perhaps the myth itself of the cavern of Plato, as also the description of the formation of an image through an orifice made by Aristotle, and then, afterwards, and in a more poetic manner, albeit no less explicit, the fable of the birth of the painting narrated by Pliny, were echoes – duly filled, in some cases, with symbolic meaning – of a common event, or similar, that was prehistoric.<sup>1</sup>

An event that must have been presented first to the members of the same tribe. And one that could have particularly impressed its political and religious leaders – those responsible at the time for interpretation of everything that happened in nature. In this manner, warrior chiefs and magicians – the powerful of the time – to whom our survivor could have presented the place, would have had an insight into the enormous potential to ally magic to the image, or, the power of illusion. Incorporating the visual reproduction or projection of the image of a thing, and all that it might mean, such as, terror or bedazzlement, for its rituals. The Image thus would be born already charged with a responsibility greater than that of the simple, immediate representation: it was through this the magical act of description, understanding and control over the world itself were also reinforced.

It is clear, we must stress here, that there is a whole series of other natural events that could equally be cited as possible

candidates to empirically – emergence of this new category of things, which are perceived visually and are related to a given object, even though, at the same time, they are more or less independent of it. In fact, the origin of the notion of image could draw upon many other phenomena. The water mirror (which certainly is not by chance present in the Narcissus myth) is one of them; the desert mirages; the hallucinations created by drugs used in rituals; dreams, etc. There is a whole set of types of images that comprise what Jean-Paul Sartre once called 'The Family of the Image'.<sup>2</sup>

But what makes this short story attractive is that, besides the illusion, there is also present all the mechanism of the projection itself of an image, and the consequent possibility of a detailed examination of its observable elements: the difference in luminosity among the atmospheres; the aperture of communication between them; the wall/screen on which, from the light coming through the orifice, the image was formed. It would further be possible to observe that, covering the orifice, the illusion would cease – which would allow immediate association between the formation of the image and a means by (and through) which it is manifested: the light itself. And also that the image could be formed on any other supporting device placed between the passage of the light and the wall, the palm of a hand for example. Not only the notion, but the very making of the Image would thus be quite literally at hand. And, therefore, perhaps by almost being able to catch it, Man also began, at the same time, to understand it.

However, it is also certain that, at the beginning of the formulation of the thought about the image, the comprehension of this mechanism was neither immediate nor unanimous. For many centuries, the ideas of Ptolemy that the image was formed from an emanation of rays from the eyes, which, like those that touched the objects, drawing their form, coexisted with studies that, on the contrary, used to state the objects were the source of these emanations. The already cited description of the formation of an image through an orifice, offered by Aristotle, is an example of this contestation. However, this Ptolemaic conception remained valid in the west until the studies about optics developed by Alhazan (Abu Ali Hasan Ibn al-Haitham), in the 2nd century A.D., came to be known and exercised great influence on Europe, obtaining great acceptance there. Thus, for a long time, there coexisted, as much the idea that the sight was produced by rays that were emitted by the eyes – like a strange form of touch – as the supposition that the things themselves emanated something that formed the image. Newton, in the 18th century, and later Maxwell, later, in the 19th century, came to establish the bases of our current theory of light and, consequently, the present explanation of the optical phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that, irrespective of where the vocation (emanation) of the image is placed – whether in the subject or in the object – what in fact it establishes – in any one of its formulations – is the link between the two. Thus, as much for classical epistemology as, subsequently, for the modern, the image is defined as that which arises as a result of the encounter between the subject and the object. It is, therefore, formed from

all that which a subject can perceive about an object that is presented, that is, makes itself present for this same subject. The image is, in this manner, the fruit of the experience of making contact, finding something that affects us to the point of being outstanding within the set of all the other things that surround us. Perceiving images is, therefore, a constant production of differentiation. And, thus, the phenomenon of knowledge starts as much by the encounter of the subject with the object as based on the capacity of the former to discern one thing among others. The condition of being able to know, thus lies as much in the possibility of connection – the encounter – as in the capacity to discern another – another thing, whose origin is, or at least seems to be, always external to the very consciousness of the one who perceives it. It does not matter if the perturbation originated from an external or internal world in relation to the subject. Whether from an ontological viewpoint, or interpreted via some form of psychology, the image is produced whenever we are faced with something different, which, at least at the outset and by principle, we distinguish from ourselves. In this manner, as much the realist conception of the image as that of the idealist share this same vision: the images are formed from the sensation of a presence, regardless of whether true or not, which is the condition for their own formation and which must be distinct from ourselves, their observers.

As an image is something that must always be formed (gain form), perhaps one could then state that no sensorial image exists without the equivalent production of a form and without the clear sensation of a presence. Form and presence arise and so, from this perspective, are always associated. And, in view of this, advancing in this affirmation, we could also further enquire: Can there be production of difference without an equivalent production of form? Can a connection be effectively produced without a presence occurring?

A negative answer to the two questions above, would allow us to then conclude, at least provisionally, that a connection really can not happen without there occurring some type of legitimate encounter between those that are communicating. And also, such an encounter will not be able to exist without there being some manifestation of presence – whether of the object itself, or only some form that represents it – in relation to the subject that perceives it.

This same reasoning is reflected in the knowledge process itself, for it allows enquiry as to whether the formulation of an idea does not always occur simultaneously with a discrimination of concepts that surround it, and whether we do not always use for this purpose some type of taxonomy or categorization, whether this is adapted, acquired or even invented throughout this process. Formation and formulation would then have as a pre-condition the possibility of presence/existence respectively of an object and of a concept that would be both prior to and distinct from what is to be formed – the image – or that is being formulated – the idea. Or put in another way: the experience of the image would always be inserted into a prior symbolic universe that would reinforce its comprehension and would assist in making it meaningful. It would give it meaning. After all, the man chased by

the beast already perfectly understood the risk he was running and what encountering it would mean.

But here we must return to our cave. The discovery of a natural *Camara Obscura* could thus mark the start of the idea of what we vulgarly call Image: a vision arose that it did not mean the real and immediate presence of what was seen, and that it could also be reproduced and controlled. For the first time, the mechanisms of its construction were observable and intelligible, and, being based on them, it became possible, for this very reason, to develop techniques for its reproduction. Thus, the birth of the concept of image must mark as much the beginning of development of the techniques for its storage, as its substantive affirmation, for, as stated above, the perception of the form induces us to a formulation. In other words, at the same time it is born as a thing of a particular order, the Image should already be understood as a representation that necessarily has a reference, that precedes it, and whose proximity would guarantee its very authenticity. Besides this, as already stated, as the discovery of this *Camara Obscura* would offer conditions for direct observation of the mechanics of image formation, it would also perhaps allow, the formulation of theories based on the relation between light and the image, besides the arousal of techniques for storage and subsequent reproduction.

And perhaps there would be still further consequences leading from a discovery of this magnitude. It is possible, for example, that value began to be placed on those individuals whose manual skill allowed – with the instruments and colourings available at the time – lines or stains on the wall, depicting the forms of the projected objects. Thus, the relations between art/technique and power were perhaps not a belated acquisition – the consequence of a subsequent development – but a determinant, a real constituent of the establishment of these same activities. In the same manner that form and thought, presence and discernment, Image and idea, meaning and information, always reach us together.

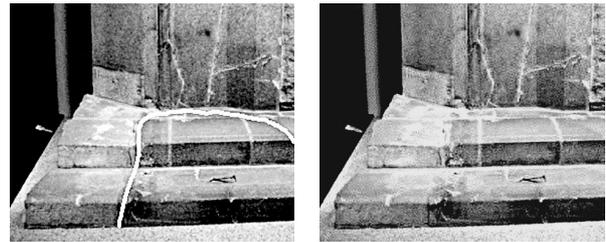
But there is another relevant question that arises here. It makes us realise that that particular arrangement the light projected on to the wall of the cave described in this story – the sum of light and dark that define a form – would occur even without the testimony and the presence of an observer. And, thus, in case some type of photo-sensitive material were placed on to the rock, something might be printed by means of and thanks to the light that came through that orifice. In this way, a record would occur irrespective of whether someone is present or as an observer on the spot. What guarantees the image a certain phenomenological autonomy, if not before the object whose form it reproduces, at least in relation to the possible observer. The image can, thus, legitimately, be stated as an objective phenomenon sincronized with the object that it reproduces and that produces it, as much as a perception of the subject that receives it. A fact that, at times, is currently forgotten by some.

A tragic example of this type of formation and recording, let's say, spontaneous and not determined subjectively from an image, is of the human shadow printed on a wall in Hiroshima by

radiation from the atomic bomb explosion. The eye witness there disappeared, leaving its his/her own feint image – that of a shadow – as evidence of presence.

### An epitaph written with the body itself

The photos above present the recording of a human image shadow, printed on the steps on which he/she was seated at the moment of the blast. The person's body, which had been consumed in the explosion, prevented the radiation (including luminous) from directly affecting part of the stone, which thus remains darker ( region signed in the photo on the left ).



An epitaph written with the body itself (2)



Shadows printed "photographically" on the Yorozyua Bridge  
<http://www.peacewire.org/photoexhibits/Hiroshima/images/>

We speak, therefore, of an objective phenomenon – which could occur independently of observation – but which, upon being witnessed, would, at the same time, induce an interpretation and allow an immediate comprehension, perhaps intuitive, of its very nature. But, the discovery of the mode of formation of an image would speak to us at just one time, as much of its existence as a real phenomenon, as of its own limitation in relation to what it represents and refers to. In fact, it is empirically the "act of knowledge", itself, that is offered there to the observation. Act which was elevated then to the category of a natural phenomenon.

The Truth, as a problem or question, arises and is installed precisely in the space that is opened up between the image and its reference, in the passage from the cave to the outside. In an experience that could have been undergone intensely by someone, which thanks precisely to this hiatus – between the object and its image – survived. A story whose narrative perhaps, has reached even Plato, who, in turn, attentive to this profound feeling, constructed there the powerful symbolic force of a myth.

Thus, the Image is in its origin and by its very nature this voice that emanates from the object. This is its vocation. Even if the sound of this voice nowadays does not make itself heard clearly: it becomes in fact and if so much only a slight whisper. It is this that, at times, we forget when we are confronted with the formulation of what some call Technical Image, or, even, when one discusses the new statute of Reality and the objects frente faced to the Virtual Image. It is true that a new technological device may determine new forms of creation and expression. The confrontation (more than the opposition) between the art and the technique is false: new image techniques always show themselves to be, at least they have been historically, channels for new ideas and catalysts for the process of human creation and expression. But we must not forget that the technique, itself, is always the fruit of a creative idea that it was previously. The technical image is, first and foremost, an image.

An image that is constituted of a clamour of the object that has, by destiny, Man, its guardian and the one who, being at another extremity of its trajectory, determines, in this manner, its own sense – gives it purpose, fulfils its vocation. It would then be what we must rediscover consists of: beyond the mechanism of formation of the image (its technical component) and its potential as symbolic representation (its communicational and aesthetic dimension) is fundamental in the sensation of an image, that its presence affects us, makes itself feel, and, with this, produces sense. We can thus reach these three principle components of the images in general:

#### The Technician

- Related to all that which refers to comprehension of the phenomena and elements responsible for the formation of the image and for the computation – evaluation and quantitative/qualitative measurement – of its modes of recording and storage.

#### The Symbolic

- Responsible for the modes of construction of the form, its representation – overall design – and for the installation of the

codes that allow its interpretation and use as a form of expression – the symbolism and the visual language.

#### The Affective

- At the instant its value is determined, a selection is executed: we choose one from among various possible images; or, as Bergson so rightly pointed out, we allow ourselves to be affected by some, but not by all, the images that constantly reach us. The sense, in association with the symbolic component is installed – the *raison d'être* – of an image.

It is through these last two that the emotion affirms the reference, and the subject constructs the bridge between the image and its object, manifesting, therefore, the vocation of the image itself and making it fulfil its destiny. For, if he had not been so profoundly disturbed by the presence of the beast that chased him, perhaps the pre-historic hunter of our simple story would not have let himself be affected (emotionally and intellectually) by a simple patch stain of light – a projection – present on the wall of a cave.

We can also recognise in these three dimensions of the image, a direct correlation with the protagonists of the act itself of knowledge. In the approach to its technical aspects, the image would be more aimed at the question of its literally matching – *ipsis litteris* – what it represents, that is, the object. On the other hand, in its symbolic dimension it would be centred on its own injunctions with a clear emphasis on the question of the codes and systems of representation. And, finally, the affectivity of the image would return us to the subjectivity, re-introducing us to the questions linked to the sensation, perception and psychology of the subject.

#### Notes

1. Indeed, there was two Plinys, the younger and the older. The older was a roman centurion and was also uncle of the other – the younger – whom was a senator of Rome. Both was writers. The older wrote a long “Natural History”, were he told us that the painting was born in the old Egypt, and also told to us the tale of a young lady called “Debutates”, whom had ask for her father to draw the silhouette of her fiance, IN THE WALL OF A DEEP CAVE, before his gone to the war. See, PLINY, The Older. *Natural History: A Selection*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,1991.
2. See, SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *O Imaginário*. São Paulo. Editora Ática,1996.
3. A good reference for a short history of optics on web: <<http://www.ee.umd.edu/~taylor/optics.htm> >