Images and mediation

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This paper focuses on the question of mediation via images. Its point of departure is the work of Kant on the mediation of human reality by the faculty of reason, including imagination and the forms of space and time, as well as the categories of the understanding, all of which combine to render an intelligible, spatiotemporal world, as opposed to the inaccessible realm of 'things-in-themselves'. This is followed by a scrutiny of Gombrich's claim, that artistic schemata comprise an elaboration, by the artist, on the commonly human, rational structuring of the manifold of experience, according to Kant. In other words, artworks mediate the world in a different, more nuanced manner than reason does in the ordinary course of events – something intelligible in terms of Merleau-Ponty's conception of 'style' as 'coherent deformation'. With the work of Lacan on the image one comes across an intimation of something paradoxical at the heart of the image, as shown in the infant's identification with its own mirror-image as 'itself', notwithstanding the fact that it is a 'misrecognition', for Lacan, and therefore mediates identity as a fictional construct. The exploration of images in relation to mediation culminates in Nancy's radical phenomenology of the image, which uncovers it as being distinct from, and simultaneously intimately conjoined with, the thing in terms of resemblance. This paradoxical status of the image explains why such diametrically opposed interpretations of the image can exist, ranging from conventional representationalist theories of mediation, to Baudrillard's denial of mediation with his notion of 'hyperreality'.
Key words: art, image, hyperreality, mediation, paradox, representation

Hierdie artikel fokus op die vraag na bemiddeling via beelde. Met Kant se werk oor die bemiddeling van 'n menslike werklikheid (in plaas van die 'dinge-in-sigself') in terme van rede (insluitend verbeelding en die vorme van ruimte en tyd, asook die verstandskategorieë) as uitgangspunt, word aangetoon hoe Gombrich daarop uitbrei met sy opvatting van 'kuns-skemata', waarmee kunstenaars 'n alternatiewe strukturering van die gemeenskaplik-menslike werklikheid teweegbring. Hierdie nuansering van die gegewe werklikheid via kuns kan ook aan die hand van Merleau-Ponty se begrip van 'styl' as 'samehangende vervorming' verstaan word. Lacan voeg egter 'n moment van paradoks hierby waar hy die spieëlbeeld, waardeur die kind 'sigself herken', as fiktiewe bemiddeling van subjektiewe identiteit blootlê – 'n insig wat die weg voorberei op Nancy se radikale fenomenologie van die beeld. Laasgenoemde toon aan dat die kenmerkende eienskap van die beeld daarin bestaan dat dit duidelik onderskeibaar of afsonderlik is in verhouding met die ding, maar dat dit terselfdertyd intiem daarmee vervleg is in terme van ooreenkoms. Hierdie paradoksale status van die beeld verklaar waarom soveel teenoorgestelde interpretasies van die beeld kan bestaan, vanaf konvensionele representasionalistiese bemiddelingsteorieë tot die ontkenning van bemiddeling in Baudrillard se idee van 'hiperrealiteit'.
Sleutelwoorde: beeld, bemiddeling, hiperrealiteit, kuns, paradoks, representasie

This paper is intended to throw light on the question of mediation (of a world, of things, and of experience), with specific focus on the role or function of images in the process of mediation. It is primarily intended as an essay in philosophical aesthetics, although some instances from the history of art are adduced to illustrate and illuminate certain aspects of mediation. Mediation, as well as its relation to images, has become a significant issue today, in the early 21st century, given the saturation of media space by images of all kinds (Kearney 1988). The fact that media space – as an important part of social space today – is permeated by images, touches on the very nature of human social reality, given Baudrillard's (1996) claim, that there is no 'real' today, because the 'real' has retreated in the face of an endless, self-replicating realm of simulacra, or hyperreality (images without referents). I do not here intend focusing on the question of the relation between media images and social reality as such (although I do cast a cursory look at Baudrillard again towards the end of the paper), but rather on that of mediation by images in philosophical terms.[1] This necessitates returning to Immanuel Kant's so-called 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy of the 18th century.

It is well-known that Kant redeemed the human faculty of imagination at a time when it was still regarded with suspicion by most philosophers (Kearney 1988: 167-177), given its capacity to conjure up images (such as that of an imaginary beast, like a unicorn) that could be found nowhere in empirical reality. What Kant did, was no less than demonstrating, in his first *Critique* of 1781 (Kant 1978; Olivier 2002a), that – far from being inimical to reason – the

imagination has an indispensable constitutive function at two distinguishable levels. First, there is what he called the 'productive' imagination, which provides the very 'mould', as it were, for any object whatsoever to (be able to) appear as a phenomenon in space and time, and second, the 'reproductive' imagination, by means of which similar phenomena are capable of being reproduced or repeated as occurrences in space and time.

So, for instance, the productive imagination supplies, in *a priori* fashion (that is, by being part of reason, in anticipation of specific experience), the forms for the sensory apprehension of, for example, a moving object, which enables one to 'see' a moving person – say, an infant's mother walking towards her. The reproductive imagination enables that same infant to perceive the family dog or cat walking past her, and later, a car driving down the street.

Hence, one may gather from Kant that imagination, as integral function of reason – together with the forms of intuition (space and time), understanding and 'pure' reason, each of which has its own distinct function – participates in the process of mediating a spatiotemporal world. By '*mediation*' is meant, not merely the opposite of what may be claimed to occur 'immediately', but *the process by means of which a certain state of affairs comes into being*. According to Kant, the faculties of reason perform a transcendental function, reason being the *condition of the possibility* of there being a world. It may therefore be said to 'mediate' the world of spatio-temporal phenomena – that is, such a world is unthinkable without the structuring function of reason's faculties. In brief, according to Kant (1978:142-3), the faculty of imagination operates in conjunction with the a *priori* forms of intuition, space and time, in supplying the perceiver with certain materials or 'contents', which are interpreted by the understanding in terms of its twelve 'categories' (such as causality, substance, unity, and so on). The resulting comprehended phenomena are, finally, placed in a kind of horizon of coherence by 'pure' reason – that is, reason devoid of any comprehended 'content', but circumscribed by the 'regulative ideas' of the *world* (which can nowhere be apprehended in its entirety), the *self* or soul (which must be presupposed, but is similarly nowhere encountered 'face to face') and *God* (the idea of whom functions as a kind of limiting 'first cause', but cannot be subjected to any perception or proof whatsoever).

The 'world' is therefore constituted by the combined mediation, or synthesis, of imagination, space and time, and understanding, and owes its coherence to the fact that, without the mediating, transcendentally constitutive, or structuring function of these capacities of reason, there would be no world – what it might be, independent of these rational faculties, is unknown to us, and Kant designates the realm – which must be postulated, lest we fall back into subjective idealism – which is constitutionally inaccessible to human reason that of the *Ding an sich* or 'thing in itself'. We know 'that it is', but not 'what it is' outside of the mediating function of our rational faculties. Reason – of which imagination is a constituent part – mediates human reality.

One might say that Kant has left a model – and an indispensable, unavoidable one at that – for understanding processes of mediation as such. Before this 18th century thinker, philosophers tended to have a 'God's eye-view' of the world – up until, and, except for incipient flashes of anticipatory insight here and there (for instance in Descartes's work), including the 17th-century rationalists and empiricists – which assumed that the world was pretty much as it appears to us, *independently* of us. Kant, referring to his epoch-making intellectual work as his 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy, was the first to highlight the indispensable mediating role of reason, without which one could not intelligibly speak of a (shared) world.

The art historian, E.H. Gombrich (1965: 62-74), has added an interesting specification regarding art and artists to Kant's epistemological model. Building on Kant's notion that, by providing a mediating schema of a certain kind, human reason functions in a transcendental

manner in relation to the shared world of space and time – that is, its operation being the condition of the possibility of there being a world at all – Gombrich argues that what distinguishes artists is the fact that, through the (further) mediation of period- as well as personal styles, they bring about modifications of this general transcendental schema shared by all humans. Moreover, these styles, although irreducible from one artist to the next, may (and do) exhibit generic similarities from one 'school of art' or period to the next.

To illustrate this, Gombrich (1965: 62-63) relates the narrative of a group of German artists (the illustrator Ludwig Richter and his friends), visiting a well-known landscape at Tivoli, and setting about drawing it as faithfully as possible, each one determined to do superior justice to every detail of the landscape in question, especially when some French artists arrived on the scene and started painting it on canvas with rough, big brushes. When, by the end of the day, the German friends compared their artistic attempts – all bent on an 'objective' representation of the scene – they were amazed at how differently each one had rendered what, presumably, was the 'same' landscape, with a subtle 'transformation' of the motif by the mediation of their respective pencils on paper being evident. Gombrich's explanation is that (individual) artists are distinguished by the manner in which their way of selectively perceiving the world – partly determined by the 'style' of the period, which 'sets up a horizon of expectation' (Gombrich 1965: 65) – instantiates a variation on some initial 'mental set' or schema. This is tantamount to saying that artists mediate the world in a distinctive fashion, as evident in their individual 'style', which is mediated, in turn, by the 'style' of the period or school of art. From Gombrich's reference to the different materials employed by the two groups of artists in question (pencils and paper by the Germans; oils on canvas by the French), one can further infer that the 'schematic' variation, on the part of artists (and visible in their style), on the general rational structuring of human reality, is supplemented by the artistic materials employed – the way that broad, expressionistic oil paint brushstrokes on canvas captures the features of a landscape is very different from the manner in which fine pencil drawings or sketches of such a landscape would mediate its perceivable properties.

Lest it should escape one's attention, it should be stressed that Gombrich's insight into the mediating function of artistic 'vision' highlights the impossibility – already intimated by Kant – of gaining access to human reality (the 'world') 'as it is in itself'. Whatever it is that is 'out there' (Kant's *Ding an sich*), human interaction with 'it' constitutes or 'produces' reality, including the reality in which one can share by looking at a painting, in this way temporarily assuming the mediating artistic 'spectacles' provided by the artists in question in the guise of their paintings, sculptures, and the like, the 'styles' of which function to shape the perception of spectators. Moreover, if the rational schema proposed by Kant instantiates the first level of mediation, the generic (school- and period-) styles in the history of art mark secondary and ternary stages of mediation. Few instances of such artistic mediation are as ubiquitous as the way that perspective painting – which is nothing 'natural', but a 'geometricized' shaping of the space on a canvas – influenced the way that people have looked at ordinary, everyday landscapes and city or town streets around them. The 'lines that meet at the horizon' seem natural and persuasive until one reflects on the words of Merleau-Ponty (1964: 48-9), that:

> …classical perspective is only one of the ways that man has invented for projecting the perceived world before him, and not the copy of that world. The classical perspective is an optional interpretation of spontaneous vision, not because the perceived world contradicts the laws of classical perspective and imposes others, but rather because it does not insist on any one and is not of the order of laws. In free perception, objects spread out in depth do not have any definite 'apparent size'.

In other words, art – in this case a specific convention in painting that lasted for about 500 years, until artists like Manet, Cézanne and impressionists such as Monet finally broke its hegemonic hold on perception (Shlain 2001: 97-118) – mediates the way in which one looks at the world

around him or her. Perhaps 'style' is too misleading a term to designate the differences between one art-shaped way of perceiving and the next, given its usual, superficial meaning of a mode of expression that is characteristic of a specific artist or art-movement, or even an identifiable period in art history. Not that this way of understanding is wrong as a description – it is not – but it hides as much as it reveals. One must turn to someone such as Merleau-Ponty in order to come to grips with the world-mediating and -transforming function of style, which is, moreover, not anything arbitrarily interposed between the painter and the world, but – for Merleau-Ponty – issues from the perceptual, communicative appropriation of the world by the painter.

In perception, the painter communicates with the world. According to Merleau-Ponty – who criticizes Malraux for claiming that style is 'the expression of a meaning lent to the world, a call for and not a consequence of a way of seeing' (quoted in Merleau-Ponty 1964: 53) – it is precisely in the course of seeing the world that style is born as a way of 'concentrating' the inchoate 'meaning' of that seeing. The artwork, then, embodies the way in which the artist perceives the world – not as something passive, but as a kind of interlocutor in the perceptual process, where some elements of what is perceived rise to prominence and others withdraw into the background. Nor is this withdrawal and foregrounding of worldly things an innocent thing – on the contrary, if the artwork is the manifestation of the artist's perceptual exchange with the world, the very manner in which these countervailing 'movements' occur, already 'forms' or 'deforms', 'tilts' or 'straightens', 'curves' or 'refracts' what the artist sees. In a word, this is how style comes to be – which is not to say that this is its 'origin'. One would be hard put to draw a line between the artist's world as it is before style mediates, and the way it is subsequent to this event. Merleau-Ponty puts it like this (1964: 54):

> It is quite true that style for the moderns is much more than a means of representing. It does not have any external model; painting does not exist before painting. But we must not conclude from this, as Malraux does, that the representation of the world is only a *stylistic means* for the painter, as if the style could be known and sought after outside all contact with the world, as if it were an *end*. We must see it appear in the context of the painter's perception as a painter; style is an exigency that has issued from that perception.

Quoting Malraux on painting, favourably this time, Merleau-Ponty proceeds (1964: 54): 'There is signification when we submit the data of the world to a "coherent deformation"'. And from this he concludes that (1964: 54): 'For each painter, style is the system of equivalences that he makes for himself for the work which manifests the world he sees. It is the universal index of the "coherent deformation" by which he concentrates the still scattered meaning of his perception and makes it exist expressly'.

Although Merleau-Ponty's understanding of style is compatible with Gombrich's interpretation of the way artists modify, in a recognizable, identifiable fashion, the universal (human) Kantian schema of 'comprehending perception' (or 'perceiving comprehendingly'), it adds to it by articulating 'style' in terms of a communicative exchange between artist and world, where the latter is not anything identifiable independently of the perceptual, communicative process, nor as anything arbitrarily 'created' by the artist, but features as an interlocutor that contributes to what is perceived in the first place. 'How' it is perceived becomes visible in the style in which the artwork is articulated, and it is this style which mediates the world as perceived by the artist – a style or mediation which is not static, but displays a temporal development from one work to the next, even if it may be sustained in the course of a number of artworks issuing from the laborious perception of an artist.

Things are not as straightforward as they may seem at this point, however. If style mediates in the way described above, it follows that – as a modification of a universalistic perceptual schema – it is a mediation of a mediation, and depending on whether it is a generic or an individual style, it may represent another, further, level of mediation. But – and here's the rub – images (of various kinds: realistic, surreal, abstract, and so on) are indispensable for style to

be discernible – they constitute style. And images disturb this mediation, perhaps unbearably. But precisely what is understood by the ostensibly self-evident term, 'image', and why should it 'disturb' or unsettle mediation?

In a passage that is compatible with what I have said so far about imagination being the rational faculty that produces and reproduces images, neurologist-turned- philosopher Leonard Shlain (1998: 4) describes images as follows (in contradistinction from written words, which are said to be *abstract*):

> Images are primarily mental reproductions of the sensual world of vision. Nature and human artifacts both provide the raw material from the outside that the brain replicates in the inner sanctum of consciousness. Because of their close connection to the world of appearances, images approximate reality: they are *concrete*. The brain simultaneously perceives all parts of the *whole* integrating the parts *synthetically* into a gestalt. The majority of images are perceived in an *all-at-once* manner.

Regardless of the neurological slant of this description, it provides a useful point of departure regarding the distinct, and distinguishable, character of images, which are all too often conditionally linked to linguistic signifiers for their meaning. Even Barthes (1977: 38-39), who (on the one hand) admits the polysemy of images – in this way affirming their semiotic richness – points out (on the other hand) that different linguistic techniques are usually employed to 'fix' the meaning of images one way or the other. For example, the way that a photographic image is 'anchored' by means of a caption, or a painting by its title, gives direction to viewers regarding its meaning. Both are ways of relieving spectators or viewers of the anxiety inculcated by the polysemous, and therefore – given the difficulty of choosing among competing meanings or signifieds – silent image. This is what Barthes (1977: 39) calls the 'terror of uncertain signs', and explains the reason for language customarily coming to the rescue of what is all too often experienced as confusingly multivocal, and therefore paradoxically mute, images. Precisely this overwhelming semiotic richness of images is what Shlain hints at (above) by saying that 'concrete' images 'are perceived in an *all-at-once* manner', in this way distinguishing them fundamentally from written words (Shlain 1998: 4-5). What this suggests, is that, what is perceived 'all at once' in an image, is not yet articulated along the syntagmatic axis, as in spoken or written language, where the links between signifiers are made explicit up to a point. With the perception of images, what is apprehended holistically, and implicitly grasped in all its iconic richness – for example the horror evoked by perceiving a grotesque witch's image in a Goya painting – first has to be unpacked linguistically to arrive at the conceptual counterpart of its 'all-at-once' apprehension as image.

In addition to the properties of images listed above, and to my mind related to them, I would further argue that – if images are concrete, holistically perceived and marked by a sometimes paralyzing semiotic richness, which seems to require linguistic intervention for meaning to be ascribed to it – images are '*irreducible*'. To understand what I mean by this, consider the following. If reason, including imagination as the faculty of the production and reproduction of images, mediates human 'reality', one should not forget that, for Kant, such 'reality' is not the same as what he terms the 'thing-in-itself'. In fact, it is radically, *irreducibly*, unknowable (one cannot even say that it is 'dissimilar', because one has no access to something not mediated by space and time, and the categories of the understanding). Further, if the artist's idiosyncratic artistic schema singularly modifies the Kantian universalist schema, and 'style' manifests the outcome of the artist's perceptual communication with human reality, the fact that artistic style is constituted through images means that it, too, is irreducible. What is the meaning of 'irreducible' here, and why should this be important?

A first take on the irreducible character of images is afforded by Jaques Lacan's (1977: 1-7) claim, that the infant's sense of self is mediated by its experience or perception of its 'own' image in the mirror, which possesses all the attributes that the infant still lacks – such as

coherence and unity. The child 'misrecognizes' this image as its own, in fact, as 'itself', which means that, in so far as it constitutes the basis of the infant's sense of self (or ego), the latter is founded in a (necessary) fiction. Nevertheless, what is important for the present theme, is that there is something 'irreducible' about it. Lacan puts it as follows (1977: 2)

> This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject…. the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being…of the subject asymptotically…this *Gestalt*…symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination…

The image and language are contrasted in this excerpt, because the image, being particularistic, marks the irreducible singularity of the individual subject in what Lacan calls the imaginary register. Language, by contrast – which 'restores to it…its function as subject' – does so, as Lacan indicates, through its universalistic aspect, that is, through the fact that every word, in addition to being a signifier, also has a conceptual side to it, namely as signified (which, as poststructuralists have argued, is again, in its turn, a signifier, and so on). Concepts are not particularistic – unlike the irreducibly singularizing role of the image in relation to the individual, it raises what is signified to the level of universal meaning or validity. 'Jacques' is a person by virtue of personhood or humanity being a universal predicate of persons.

As an aside, it may be noted that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1994: 163-199) distinction between 'percepts' – that is, specific, distinctive 'ways of perceiving' the world as embodied in artworks (think of Van Gogh's inimitable visual idiom) – and 'concepts' as belonging to the domain of philosophy (according to them, philosophy's distinctive task is to create new concepts, such as 'the fourfold', or 'the differend'), represents an interesting elaboration on Lacan's distinction between the registers of the imaginary and the symbolic. Just as the imaginary is the order of perceivable images, Deleuze and Guattari's 'percepts' relate to the perceivable or imaginable order of (novel) images, and parallel to the symbolic order's universalistic conceptuality, the concepts that philosophy creates offer new ways of traversing and comprehending social reality, by functioning like nodal points which create unexpected connections between different aspects of reality.

The reason for Lacan claiming that language 'restores' to the subject its subjectivity, is because no one who has not acquired language can claim true subjectivity. To be a subject is to be 'subject to' (and subjected to) the universal moral law and all it entails, which is only possible via participation in the conceptual order opened up by language. In other words, particularity in the guise of the irreducible image-connected self of an individual – 'irreducible', because applicable to the individual subject alone (consider how disconcerting it sometimes is to witness two so-called 'identical twins, with iconically indistinguishable faces – intuitively, it seems too violate the 'selfhood' of both) – is not, as such, subject to moral judgment. Only by entering into kinship relations, and through these, into society, through language, does one become subject to the moral law.

What does this teach one regarding the image? It accentuates that there is something quite strange about an image, as opposed to words as linguistic signifiers. In so far as images belong to the imaginary register, and language is part of what Lacan calls the symbolic register, one could perhaps say that the image, by itself, seems to stand half-way between the symbolic and the register that surpasses iconicity and linguisticality altogether, namely that of the so-called 'real'. This enigmatic order in Lacan's thought reminds one somewhat of Kant's *Ding-an-sich*, except that the latter, or *noumenon*, is to be thought of as being outside of time and space

(unlike phenomena, which appear in space and time), while the 'real', by contrast, manifests itself negatively *within* language itself as its 'internal limit' (Copjec 2002: 95-6). In brief, every time one finds language lacking in being able to describe or capture an experience – especially traumatic ones (Lacan 1981: 55; Olivier 2008) – adequately, the 'real' manifests itself (negatively). Language fails in the face of the 'real' – all that happens when one tries to put it, for example a traumatic experience, into words, is that more and more linguistic signifiers are generated, while an image (think of Goya's witches' images again) confronts one as something which is not the same as language (although it 'lends itself' to linguistic interpretation), and not quite the same as the ineffable 'real' either.

Hence, if the real transcends image and language, and (particularistic) images don't quite make it as bearers of (universalistic) subjectivity, in this sense surpassing language in its own right, it makes sense to think of the image as being closer to the 'real' than language. The saying – 'a picture is as good as a thousand words' – may therefore be understood as meaning that, given this irreducible particularity of images, they (like the traumatic 'real', because it is closer to it than language) can give rise to endless linguistic interpretation, simply because words are of a different order altogether. But if this is the case, what happens to the mediating function of images in art? What is it that they mediate, except their own irreducibility? They appear to be thoroughly paradoxical.

What Walter Benjamin (1969) referred to as the 'aura' of the work of art comes to mind here. For Benjamin, the actualization of the technical reproducibility of artworks (especially of film), always possible in principle, holds enormous social and political potential, given the vast audiences that may be reached in this way. (Benjamin could not foresee the politically paralyzing effect that mass cinema would increasingly be used for; see Olivier 2003). This is its progressive aspect, which does not happen without sacrificing something in the process, namely the authenticity that the artwork used to enjoy. Such authenticity is captured in the term 'aura', which, for Benjamin, disappears in inverse proportion to the actual reproduction(s) of the work of art. As he puts it (Benjamin 1969: 220-1):

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be…The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity…The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced…One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.

What does this imply with regard to the irreducibility and singularity of the image? Firstly it affirms such irreducibility, at least in the case of images encountered in, or as constitutive of, the work of art. In fact, a normative distinction is implied by Benjamin's distinction between the auratic 'original' and its reproductions. The original Mona Lisa, therefore, would be marked by an authenticity that emanates from its 'aura', while the thousands of reproductions of this painting on postcards, in art museum brochures, art history books and in the form of posters the size of the original, detract from, or progressively destroy this aura because they lack all the characteristics of the original (like its unique, historical coming-into-being, its specific, material composition and the history that has befallen it since its emergence, including the changes in its constitutive materials and its ownership).

While anyone who has stood before paintings such as the Mona Lisa in the Louvre certainly has to agree that it exudes 'aura', I would repeat my argument, (articulated in a different context before; see Olivier 2002), that in a different historical epoch (one's familiarity with) reproduced images of such an artwork do(es) not detract from this aura as sign of its authenticity, but enhances it. I recall having such a vivid experience in the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, where the unexpected brilliance of the colours in Van Gogh's paintings (coupled with their

unexpectedly small size) was a startling reminder of the authority vested in these paintings – something left unaffected by the hundreds of Van Gogh reproductions I had seen before. To be sure, as a helpful critic has pointed out, what Benjamin was 'signalling' was a 'radical shift in emphasis', and my own experience should therefore be understood as being made possible in an already changed historical context, where the sheer glut of reproductions, when starkly contrasted with the (always evolving) 'original', contributes to a kind of resuscitated experience of its 'aura'.

Having affirmed the aura of the 'original' artwork, however, there are other, equally important considerations. I put 'original' in scare quotes because (as Derrida would point out), being acquainted with reproductions before apprehending the artwork 'itself', casts doubt on it being the 'original' (in light of one's 'original' familiarity with its simulacra, which makes it secondary, at least in temporal terms). And if one's familiarity with the 'original' occurred at a time when there were no reproductions, or copies, of it, the term 'original' would be redundant, because it only makes sense in relation to 'non-original' reproductions or simulacra. But beyond this consideration the crucial question of this paper still looms: if, on the basis of the preceding argument concerning mediation (by images), which has led, via Lacan, to a recognition of the irreducible singularity of the image, does it not follow that the image *as such – including* the images comprising reproductions of artworks – should be found to be distinguished by such irreducibility? And if the answer is affirmative, would that tell us something about the experience of the images comprising artworks at a time when their reproduction has become a ubiquitous feature of the art industry, regardless of the fact that the 'original' still retains its 'aura', despite thousands of simulacra populating cultural space?

My answer would be in the affirmative, first because personal experience demands it. When I first beheld Kees van Dongen's *The Purple Garter* (*circa* 1911) in the form of a reproduction – a photograph reproduced on shiny paper in an art book – I was fascinated by it and kept returning to the page to look at it again and again. I tried to work out for myself why it held my attention so firmly, and realized that, regardless of it being a photograph, the image of a woman wearing a purple garter over black stockings captured – or 'mediated' – what 'woman' means in such a singular manner (despite the fact that it was clearly an artistic image; especially the non-realistic rendering of the face emphasizes that this is no photograph of an existing person) that the very image seduced me. To be sure, I could not desire 'that woman', because she consisted in an image, but because what Husserl might call the '*eidos*' of woman was embodied, made perceptible, in an image, it stirred in me desire *as such*. To be sure, no one, including myself, can 'see' an *eidos*, given its abstractness – it can, at best, be incarnated in a concrete, singular image such as the one in question.

Recently, when I suddenly and unexpectedly found myself in front of the 'original' *The Purple Garter* in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada, I experienced the painting in exactly the same manner – repeatedly, I returned to the hall where it was hanging, marvelling at its mediating effect regarding femininity on me. But is that all? If it is, again, a matter of mediating something in an unsurpassable, insurmountable manner, what about its irreducible aspect as an image?

That this experience is not only afforded by art-images of women, is apparent when one compares one's experience of other artworks with the one described above. A case in point is *Piss Christ*, a cybachrome photograph by Andres Serrano (1987; see Olivier 2007a), which I have only seen reproductions of (printed from the internet). As with Van Dongen's *The Purple Garter*, my experience of the reproduced (photographic) image does not appear to me as lacking in any way as far as my awareness of its translucent beauty, and the aesthetic pleasure mediated by it, is concerned – an experience of beauty that, on reflection, makes way for an experience

of the sublime, when one considers its genesis. Keeping in mind that beauty is an experience of a certain kind of harmony or equilibrium – between the understanding and imagination, according to Kant (1969: 104-107) – while an experience of the sublime is occasioned by a clash or conflict between these two faculties, given the iconically unpresentable character of the sublime (Kant 1969: 107; Lyotard 1984: 80-81), what is it that occasions the transition from beauty to the sublime in the case of Serrano's image of a crucified Christ suffused in goldish orange and yellow?

The passage from the one kind of experience to something qualitatively different is brought about by reflection, which casts the image in a different light, as it were. When one learns that the artwork is, factually speaking – which does not exhaust its being, of course – a photograph of a crucifix floating in a container filled with the artist's own urine, the harmonious nature of its beauty is replaced by an intense awareness of something conflictual as far as the image is concerned. The clash, I believe, flows from the knowledge one has of its genesis, which introduces a scatological element into the artwork, in this way somehow disturbing or compromising what is first experienced as a beautiful image – understanding and image conflict, and consequently the image strikes one as incongruous, not quite what it seems to be, to the extent that what one *sees*, is not representative (that is, a representation) of what one *knows*. After all, the thought of excremental bodily fluids is, in the western aesthetic consciousness, not exactly associated with beauty.

And yet – every time one returns to the image the same thing happens. It is perceived as being pleasantly beautiful, until the thought of how it was made obtrudes itself unpleasantly (in the precise sense of making its presence felt in an unwelcome but irresistible manner). Why would this be the case? Why would this tensional process surround the apprehension of this hugely controversial image? I would argue that what it teaches one, has something to do with what I have so far called the 'irreducible' character of images – the image of Serrano's *Piss Christ* reasserts its irreducibility or autonomy as an image despite and in the face of the disturbing knowledge of its origin.

Lacan's insight into the irreducible character of the mirror-image as constituent of human subjectivity has already given one a clue towards grasping what this irreducibility entails in terms of its particularity versus the universality of concepts, and my examination of the experience of reproduced images has enabled one to comprehend this attribute of images better. Is it possible to go further in one's attempt to gain full understanding of this enigmatic aspect of images? My answer would be that it is indeed the case, but that one must always (paradoxically) be prepared for the unexpected.

Just how paradoxical images really are appears even more clearly and forcibly in Jean-Luc Nancy's disconcerting phenomenology of the image (2005). It casts Lacan's (1977: 2) contention, that the infant's (visual) identification with (or mistaken experience of) its mirror-image as 'itself', is a *misrecognition*, in a novel light. It does so (Nancy 2005: 1-14) by foregrounding an important aspect of images, namely, their 'distinctness'. With his famous criterion for truth – the 'clarity and distinctness' of ideas, where the latter entails the non-confusion of one idea with another – 17th-century thinker, Descartes (1972: 158), anticipated what Nancy here claims for images, in the precise sense of every image being discrete and distinguishable from others. The important difference between the two is, of course, that ideas are conceptual and abstract, while images are concrete, as Shlain (1998: 4) accurately points out: the written word, 'dog', in no way resembles the concrete image of either an existing, perceived dog, or a picture of one. Moreover, the word as signifier leads syntagmatically to the signified concept of something like 'a mammalian, omnivorous quadruped', while the particular qualities

of a picture lead paradigmatically in the direction of personal acquaintance and experience with animals resembling or differing from the image in question.

It is further striking that the sense of 'misrecognition' attributed, by Lacan, to the infant's act of identifying with the mirror-image as its 'own', is elaborated in Nancy's observation, (2005: 2), that:

> The distinct is at a distance, it is the opposite of what is near. What is not near can be set apart in two ways: separated from contact or from identity. The distinct is distinct according to these two modes: it does not touch, and it is dissimilar. Such is the image: it must be detached, placed outside and before one's eyes…, and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially.

Via his analysis of the image Nancy here vindicates Lacan's claim concerning the *misrecognition* on the part of the infant in the primitive act of identification – apprehending the mirror-image as 'itself' is a *mistake*, in so far as it is essentially, as image, *distinct* from the young subject. Nancy makes this clear when he remarks that it is 'separated…from identity'. As separate or distinct, an image therefore also instantiates a singularity, and even if two or more images appear to be 'similar', this is still the case.

This may explain the satirical or critical weight of artworks that employ multiple images which suggest endless, alienating multiplication and standardization – either by explicitly juxtaposing them, or implicitly. Think of Duchamp's *Fountain*, for example, with its implicit parody of the bourgeoisie's valorization of certain 'aesthetic' qualities (such as symmetry and a 'smooth finish') in artworks, and found in industrially reproduced objects such as urinals. Or recall Andy Warhol's multiple, juxtaposed images of Marilyn Monroe (graphically similar, but chromatically different), and his paintings of Campbell's soup cans, mimicking industrial productive multiplication, but at the level of re-presentation. Taken together, these raise the question of the 'identity' of a film and media icon in the age of industrial mass production.

Considering that 'image' here means, primarily, an iconic presentation or representation in some medium (painting, sculpture, film), and secondly, the iconic appearance of things and individuals at a visual level (although it could be extended in light of Saussure's use of the term 'sound-image' for a signifier in speech), the intuitive prejudice that has existed in 'unenlightened', pre-modern societies towards so-called 'identical twins' (as being 'the work of the devil; Savulescu 2005) makes sense. It would appear to be perceived as ontologically 'wrong', inconceivable, or even 'evil' for two or more things, each uniquely valuable ('in the eyes of God'), to be marked by the 'same' image or appearance. This reminds one of Levinas's (1999: 88-94) claim that a person's face marks a 'non-phenomenal' singularity or irreducibility. The difference with Levinas, however, is that he seems to be gesturing towards something almost mystical, beyond the image or representation, which is (for me, at least), highly suspect.

The most valuable, and at the same time startling lesson learned from Nancy, however – which bears on the question of precisely *what* is mediated by images – is this (Nancy 2005: 8-9):

> It [the image; B.O.] is neither the thing nor the imitation of the thing (all the less so in that…it is not necessarily plastic or visual). It is the resemblance of the thing, which is different. In its resemblance, the thing is detached from itself. It is not the 'thing itself' (or the thing 'in itself'), but the 'sameness' of the present thing as such…a thing presents itself only inasmuch as it resembles itself and says (mutely) of itself: I am this thing. The image is the nonlinguistic saying or the showing of the thing in its sameness: but this sameness is not only not said, or 'said' otherwise, it is an *other sameness* than that of language and the concept…

In this excerpt Nancy elaborates on what was already intimated in the earlier quotation, namely, that there is a paradox at the heart of the being of the image – it *is and is not* a thing. But this is a fecund paradox, as the second quotation demonstrates. Inasmuch as it is *not* a thing, but resembles the thing, it mediates the world of things; but in so far as it *is* a thing, it comprises or

constitutes something distinct from a mediated world: it *is* a world (of the image/images). This 'image-world' is the *same* as the (world of the) thing, without being the (world of the) thing 'itself'.

Nancy's radical, poststructuralist phenomenology of the image, which refuses the reductionist path of either construing the image as mediating representation (of some independent thing or referent), or, at the other extreme, in neo-idealist manner, as a kind of self-sufficient, hyper-entity, explains why most theorists of art or of the image usually fall into this binary trap. It happens because of the underlying, paradoxical truth, that the image is both of these simultaneously, and they should therefore be thought together.

In fact, Baudrillard's (1996) notion of a world of 'simulacra' minus corresponding referents, or of 'hyperreality' (alluded to earlier), is predicated on the historical disappearance of the referents or things represented by images, leaving only a self-enclosed, endlessly self-referential universe of images (as simulacra) in the place of what was formerly believed to be the case – namely, that images supposedly referred to, or, alternatively (in the case of iconoclasm) distorted referents. Ultimately Baudrillard's conception of images suggests a solipsistic world *sans* any cogent sense of reality, while Nancy's analysis of the structure of the image shows how both positions (representationalism *and* positing hyperreality) can be defended, in turn, but in vain, given the irresolvable stand-off between these two binaries.

To conclude, then, this investigation has led from the position that, what Kant argued concerning the rational mediation of a coherent, spatio-temporal world, specifically elaborated on by Gombrich regarding artists' singularizing mediation of this world (or reality) via their art, is revealed as being subject to ambiguity, if not paradox, in the work of Lacan on the image (which is, and is not, the mirrored infant) and of Benjamin on the singular 'aura' of the artwork before its 'mechanical reproduction'. In Nancy's work one encounters confirmation of the sense of Lacan's and Benjamin's thought, which, each in its own way, emphasizes what the latter thinks of as the 'distinctness' of the image, which yet, somehow, simultaneously gives one access to the thing, while stopping short of coinciding unambiguously with the thing. This paradoxical both/and structure of the image, I believe, explains Nancy's (2005: 6) observation, that the image is desirable 'as such':

> The distinct *distinguishes itself*: it sets itself apart and at a distance, it therefore marks this separation and thus causes it to be remarked – *it becomes remarkable*, noticeable and marked as such. It also, therefore, attracts attention: in its withdrawal, and from out of this withdrawal, it is an *attraction* and a *drawing* toward itself. The image is desirable or it is not an image…

Were images not distinct, set apart from things – while resembling them at the same time – they could not exercise this strange power. The experience of the images comprising artworks such as paintings, cinema, sculpture (*and* music; Nancy stresses that images are not restricted to the visual and plastic arts; 2005: 4) attains new meaning via this radicalization of the phenomenology of the image by Nancy. It casts the irresistible attraction of people, today, to the millions of mediated images (which do not, themselves, merely mediate, as has been argued here) in a novel light. Whether it is an the image of a beautiful woman, of an attractive man, of a powerful, sleek motor car – all of which are easily grasped as being 'desirable' – or, for that matter, an image that repels (for example, that of a rotting corpse lying in a road in Iraq), in both cases it confirms Nancy's hermeneutic of the image. Unless images, simply by virtue of possessing these attributes of the image uncovered by Nancy, attracted viewers, listeners and onlookers, one could not be repulsed by them, either. Repulsion is here simply desire in its privative form.

In the light of Nancy's radical phenomenology of the image, is it at all surprising that one is either attracted, or repulsed, virtually on a daily basis, by the images comprising our 21st-

century world of images, so misleadingly[2] called 'hyperreality' by Baudrillard? After all, as this investigation has brought to light, media images are still images, and as such display the paradoxical features of the image described by Nancy, including its capacity to elicit desire (or, privatively, repulsion).

Notes

1. On a previous occasion (Olivier 2002b; see also Olivier 2003a), I have addressed Baudrillard's relativistic claims regarding the image-without-referent in the context of the ontological implications of the 2001 'terrorist' attacks in New York and Washington. On that occasion I explored the relevance of the television images of this event for people's conception of social reality.

2. Misleading, because it is supposed to be 'more real than the real', when, as I hope to have shown, images lie somewhere between the 'real' and the symbolic, and are thoroughly paradoxical, to boot, instead of being adrift in a self-referential universe of simulacra.

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