

# IMAGINATIONS

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# imaginations

## On the Undecidability of Images (in communication)

Fabrizio Scrivano [TRANS. LISE HOGAN]

W.J.T. MITCHELL SUSTAINED THAT one can remain paralyzed in front of an image when this image simultaneously stirs up various alternative readings. It has to do with a “sparkling effect” of the meaning, making the image seem like a desiring machine, causing the spectator to feel interrogated by the image and thus to find within it a desire for autonomous communication. With this hypothesis, Mitchell wanted to justify the origin and the permanence of the magic attributed to the image in old and new cultures, where these images could be treated as animal objects or volitional beings, as venerated idols or as fear-inspiring amulets. An enormous power is attributed to these images, possibly even greater than what can be controlled by observers and the actual producers of the images. Certainly, there exist a rhetoric and a logic of fear, which exceed the ancient rhetoric and logic of wonderment.

As Rudolf Arnheim has often lamented, against an intrusive and unrestrained usage of images, there is actually little training about images, so that the knowledge or awareness of the effects produced by images in human beings and their world perception is, at best, an autodidactic experience. In fact, only an educated class has any idea of how images work. Hence there is a general impression that images hold a certain power and that they are instruments of a power that remains hidden.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that, simultaneously, the opposite feeling is equally

widespread among the many, that is, that images are the best and most direct way to transmit the evidence of things and situations. In other words, that images are a technology of diffusion of the real aspect of reality (whatever this expression means). In evaluating the faithfulness of images, we have always made use of a principle of the likeness between the image and the direct visual experience, which, evidently, no longer holds any validity, at least since the invention of photography and the practice of montage, which enabled the production of perfectly convincing, yet false, images.

There is no contradiction in this natural ambivalence of the image, which makes it simultaneously a repository of secret power and a mirror of the real. There is no contradiction since it is well known that reality is magical!

The truth is that images are at the same time material reality and symbolic reality: they are perceived as things, perhaps as things indicating things, while also being perceived as signs, as instruments of meaning. Images are not only used to show or to bring something into evidence; they are also often used, if not predominantly, as a language, as observation tools. The distinction between these two usages is not always evident—acknowledging that it is actually valid: in fact, the channel through which images are experienced, sight (including the entire apparatus of sight, from the eyes to the mind) has such an important implication for the body that, often, the characteristics of abstraction of the visual function cannot be perceived nor completely valued.

This state of affairs makes it more difficult to understand images in the scope of communication, because the image always has an ambivalent content: it shows things and articulates meaning. For its purposes, communication sometimes trades on—not always knowingly—this double denotation or reference of the image. This complicates the whole problem, because it immediately concerns the distinct spheres of the organization and the use of knowledge; that is, it deeply concerns epistemological convictions (from hypotheses on reality to the consolidation of certainties) as well as behaviour (from the emotive to the ethical) incited by the image.

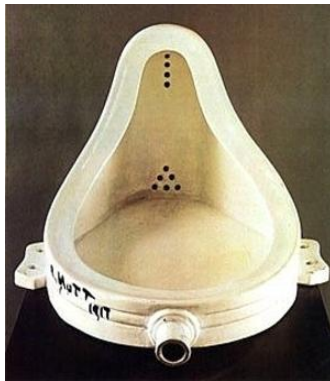
In this problematic outlook, I would now like to address a handful of questions related to communication. Communication is an act or a *status*, which, seemingly, our behaviour cannot ignore: whether it is active or passive, whether it is interpretative or deliberative, whether it is interested or distracted, it is so pervasive as to result in a permanent yet corrosive condition of experience and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The questions concern how, and what, we communicate through and with the image; whether it might contain, retain, or produce something that is pertinent to

the field of communication; whether the communicative function of the image in some way alludes or refers to this something. I will not directly formulate these questions because, at this point, I do not think I can provide adequate responses to those vast problematic areas in which they are introduced. Instead, I propose concrete cases, without any ambition of these functioning as models; I hope these will serve to establish some useful interactions with the object.

### The Communicative Image and the Demonstrative Image

We all realize perfectly the fact that a large part of our dispositions towards represented objects has a phantasmagorical origin. That is, both our mental attention and the represented object are amenable to the mediation of the image: in cases where it is evident and others where it is not, we expect the image to be predominantly a medium of information. This is true even in cases where it is otherwise evident that the image has, as its object, itself or its elaborative process, or its resulting effects. Even with a serious divergence regarding the *linguistic usage* of visual forms (if the field of information and the field of art diverge at all), the certainty of the visual forms' occurrence does not always correspond to an equal assurance of their enjoyment; rather, their occurrence is accompanied by a sensation of being devoid of conscious means of defence towards them. I would also like to address this insecurity, hoping that it will provide a means, as sometimes happens, of not hiding behind the shield of some weak certainty.

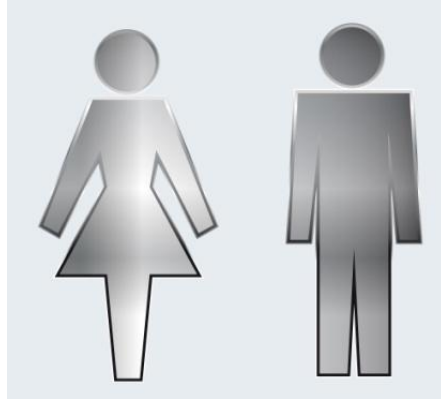
Therefore, I would begin by showing the possibility of collision between the area of the production of images that seek to inform, and that of images that question their own visibility; we could name these the functional and the artistic areas. Let's try to imagine, for a second, what would be the capacity to effectively orient oneself with a public washroom sign, which, instead of the typical man/woman sign, used Marcel Duchamp's 1917 image of a *Urinal*.



Might a woman mistakenly enter into a place marked with a male object of use, or would she interpret the urinal as an icon that indicates the species by the gender? To start, we might ask: what is it that makes us understand that the sign actually indicates the presence of a washroom and that it is not just another of so many vulgar reproductions hanging on a wall?

These are possibly ill-placed questions, but an eventual answer converges toward a single point: understanding to what measure a certain competence concerning the origin (the source) of the sign might influence or somehow relate to the communicative function. Or better still, understanding whether this competence is necessary to the understanding of the sign. This is an important question both in the informative circuit, especially concerning authenticity, and in the artistic circuit, especially concerning originality, statement, or temporal arrangement.

Still on the subject of washrooms, I would like to show below, a few alternatives to the figural indication of the space that are not problematic. The first is conventional, yet not deprived of a decidedly plastic (though not aesthetic) meaning that guarantees its recognisability:



The stylization of the figures allows us to grasp the meaning without too much deductive reasoning. There is no need to figure out the transitions between sign and meaning, and the image-place association is quite automatic.

On the other hand, the designation in this next label is strongly metonymic instead of plastic:



It relies on logic of identification that allocates the image to a genre and the rhetorical process of designation is certainly more evident to those who perform it. In other words, in this image, I have to perform a conceptual connection between what is indicated in a synthetic and unambiguous manner and the persons who are designated in the space behind the door.

When appended on a door, both labels simply indicate that behind the door there are toilets, for men as for women: I do not know whether there will be any further separation of spaces or whether the same space is meant for the use of both genders. Moreover, in the second case, we could perforce imagine that the washroom is reserved for pipe-smoking women, but how can we decide whether the “high-heeled shoes” symbol precedes and includes the “pipe smoker” symbol? In effect, I could think that it is a washroom designated for transvestites, that is, men (who smoke pipes and we know that women do not smoke pipes!) who dress as women (in high heels): a hardly plausible interpretation, yet not impossible. If, alongside this door, there were other doors with similar labels but combined differently, for example, a pipe with men’s shoes and high-heeled shoes with lipstick, then this hypothesis would be more tenable. But then, why would we patronize a place that presents such complicated gender signs?

One more image, plastically effective and direct, yet a bit confusing, could be this one:



It is simple enough, yet we cannot help but wonder what is signified by the duplication of the stylized male figure: two toilets? Men accompanied by men? Wait in line? I'll repeat it in case you didn't get it the first time?

We normally ignore these small perplexities of communication, but their existence demonstrates an important point: the image contains a hidden residue. The image is a screen where the practice of indicating occurs by activating a relationship between sign and meaning, but it is also something that stands in front of, and stands for, an object. At the same time, an image is a thing and semantics about things (similarly to words).

That the perception of the image has an unexplained and inexplicable residue in the actual moment of it is sensed and in the moment of it is elaborated on, appears to be a proven fact. What is less clear is why this happens. We could put forward at least two hypotheses:

- a) the first is that this kind of “mute,” unexpressed, meaningless residue is something that the perceiver needs, practically as a means to find comfort in the existence of some element of material reality in the image. It is as if a sort of island devoid of any meaning were produced in the act of perception itself that would allow us to separate what is necessary to articulate linguistically from that which, instead, should not be articulated but instead given to ensure a grounded judgement;
- b) the second hypothesis is that this residue forms an intimate part of the nature of the image, that is, it is something that cannot be omitted so that the image may be truly what it is.

In the first case, it would be a question of a sort of cognitive mode, which could also be considered as an epistemological preconception that can understand or

manifest the act of consciousness only as the explanation of an independent reality, which must always and only be interpreted. Rather, in the second case, there is something different from the meaning, something that goes in a different direction from the indexical and generical sign function, a *quid* requiring a completely different reading or open to a totally different experience. In both cases there is space for a sort of double value or a double scope of the image.

All the mystique about the image, that is all the discourses that have attributed certain virtues to the image have only highlighted this duality, by highlighting the perception of this residue that we are talking about: magic, with the attribution of effective grounds for the image; veneration, with the anagogical drive towards the represented object; and also iconoclasm, with the prohibition of capturing the soul within the form, all appear as ways of signifying that, at the moment when the image establishes a duration (a temporal extension characterized by such a high level of fixity as to recognize the permanence of an object), it also reveals (in the actualized context of the image) the presence of a redundant, uncontrolled reality, at least not belonging to the same order as the visual form.

Outside of a clearly metaphysical dimension, the perception of a residue can also be interpreted as the product of the difference between spoken and visual languages: if in the former, the primary function is naming and in the latter, it is pre-eminently display, then we should suppose that verbal language *signifies*, while the image *demonstrates*: but while it is very clear that the signifying of *something* occurs within the limits of a system (be it a language or a code), for which this *something* is a discrete object of the system, it is certainly less evident that the object shown by the image is *something*, which is discrete in a system of images. It is as if the abstract graphic elements of writing and the equally abstract phonetic elements of speech were perfectly grasped (perceived) by users as essences that cannot be reduced to the objects for which they appear to stand, while visual forms (lines, colours, etc.) would be in greater continuity with the represented world, as if they were made of the same material. It is clear that this differentiation, although it is described a bit coarsely at this point, is a fairly widespread misapprehension.

What this misapprehension especially conceals, or at least, what it does not allow us to clarify, is the fact that verbal language and the image have a common origin in the *act*, which does not explain anything about their nature, form, and structure. But at least it helps us to understand that language and image acquire meaning even at the moment in which they are understood, accepted, and enjoyed as an act, as a behaviour, as an action; which simply means the meaning is not only in the signification, but also in the behaviour of signs in a context where strongly heterogeneous elements interact: persons, instruments, environment. This is a

sensorial dimension, the scope of which is properly measured in the quality of the exchange, that is, in communication and in the ultimate analysis, dealing with an exchange of meaningful and symbolic values, in a rhetorical sphere.

But let's go back to the case that was initially proposed and namely, to the question of whether, and in what way, the signalling of the presence of a toilet behind a door or around a bend, through the reproduction of Duchamp's *Urinal*, could correctly transmit the information "the washroom is here." In the case of the plaque displaying the artistic object, we could say that the content of the image is not exhausted by what we understand perception to be. To those who possess an adequate historical-artistic competence, the "Duchamp shape" would probably be understood before the washroom marker; while those who lack this competence, that is, those who do not recognize Duchamp, would primarily perceive a strange and unusual sign as opposed to typical ones that might even appear too explicit for indicating the presence of a toilet.

The difference between the two apprehensions of the image is that the artistically competent viewer grasps the metaphorical aspect of the sign, while the incompetent one does not grasp the metaphor, though he might understand the message "the washroom is here." The latter may miss another level of meaning that may not be in the structure of the image, but rather in its use. I have not haphazardly chosen the Duchamp example: it is well known that the aim of this idle art (which is practically an oxymoron) was to displace the perception and the expectation of the viewer by proposing for the viewer's contemplation an object of much more prosaic use than the strictly artistic one. I cannot reflect here on the various positions that criticism has assumed concerning the operation of this artist, whether it is a gesture or a composition,<sup>2</sup> but I can only emphasize the intention of eliciting the beginnings of a dialogue by the mere presentation of the object, as petulant and irreverent as this dialogue might be, due to circulating precepts about the status of the figurative arts; a dialogue undoubtedly based on the act of rendering the object unrecognizable, estranged, irrelevant in certain familiar conditions of visibility and exposability. The recycled use of this image as an indicator cannot but appear charged with irony yet, I repeat, the interesting fact is that, in such a case, the message to be communicated maintains its primary effect even though large parts or layers of meaning may not be completely understood. In what sense, then, can we speak here of residue? Can we consider as such that which the incompetent viewer is missing, that is, that complex level of representation that makes the message ironic as well as amusing? And if so, then in what way does this residue continue to be present, to form part of the image, even in the case where it is not understood, and therefore not actually communicated.

## The Secret of the Image

In the theoretical writings of Cesare Brandi, we can find a few observations about this duality on which I am focusing, between the image as presence and as meaning.<sup>3</sup> They may only be a few sentences, but they are incisive and strategic in the economy of the Brandian presentation, and hence they are graced with certain brilliance. For example, on the first page of *Segno e immagine* (Sign and Image), we can read this observation, “between the sign and the image, there is no heterogeneity as there is between phenomenon and category; sign and image are, at the source, the same thing that consciousness directs in two different directions” (13). The image is mirror-like and due to this characteristic, it achieves a figurative mode; on the other hand, the sign involves the cognitive content, it indicates a semantic value: image and sign are thus two diverging modalities of representation (which Brandi understood as an act of consciousness), inasmuch as the first attributes to its object the empirical characteristic of being present and “available” (underlined in the text, perhaps a concession to *vorhanden?*), while the second dissociates the form from the design, that is, it does not value the presence of the sign as vehicle, it does not consider the current experience significant for the explanation of the meaning.

Brandi claims that these two directions of consciousness (I could also call these fields of representation) must remain separate because only in this way does civilization register a concrete progress (which, we suppose, consists of an enhancement of self-consciousness, of experiences, and of the languages used in depiction or expression). This position closely resembles that laborious task of separation performed by Konrad Fiedler between figurative arts and the other spiritual spheres that require skill, attention, and thought. By attributing to the artistic activity a highly peculiar capacity for the development of consciousness, and by persistently separating it from any other process of representation, Fiedler actually seems to be attributing to art a real and proper cognitive value, by identifying a particular field for a figural, or more fittingly, a visual knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This is something that Brandi does not appear to consider appropriate, and not only for reasons of terminology. But aside from the division of the domains of the representational activity, and despite this substantial difference and the diversity of outcomes, the two authors set off analogically, taking into account the proper relationship between tools and their modality, from a deep reflection on verbal language and ultimately on the problem of the articulation of meaning in a specific language.

This removed any abstraction from its horizon of meaning, at least in *Sign and*

*Image*, or rather, until the dominant critical requirement became to track the means by which the image presented itself totally as a figure, abstraction here meaning the way in which the figure is, or becomes, a sign, that which attributes meaning. Towards the end of the essay, in the pages dedicated to Abstractism, Brandi writes in reference to Burri that by positioning himself on the side of the sign rather than that of the image in communication, in the direct trade between the work and the spectator, he postulates much of his justification historically as much as aesthetically (83-4). It is the word “communication,” briefly defined as a “commercial trade” between the consumer and the object (thereby suggesting a meaning that seeks to underscore commodifying trends and alluding to fetishistic drives), that appears to shine a light: the exchange occurring between the viewer and the work of art, to be interpreted perhaps as the fact that something is taken from the artwork, is the result of the function of the sign. Since the sign does not present its vehicular form but merely the suggestion of its referent, the viewer experience is not accomplished in the presence of the object, but rather in the demarcation of its absence. For this reason, the image-sign is merely communication, it is not a stand-alone item but a means.

Brandi’s clear rejection of a semiotics that echoes a need for “communication to the bitter end” now more than ever appears to be a quasi-heroic attempt at maintaining, in the area of sensory experience, something that the ancients would have called *secret*. A dimension of the artwork that risks being completely lost in our dense culture of communicative exchanges, if it is not already completely lost. And this is, I believe, one of the most significant and original features of the Brandian reflection.

Indeed, what else could be something that appears linguistically articulated yet is devoid of a significant function; something that marks a presence yet leaves us disconcerted, if not a secret? And it is this question that directs Brandi’s theoretical work toward his *General Theory of Criticism* that will seek to establish in the referent the relationship between artwork and reality: the concept of *presentness* (*astanza*) used in this essay seeks to determine a site of experience (consciousness) that is clearly distinct both from that possible sphere of a merely empirical presence (flagrancy), and from its conjectural and meaningful forms (semiosis). And since presentness manifests itself only with art, and in art, there is no doubt that Brandi is indeed searching for a dimension of meaningfulness for the artistic experience (102). But for Brandi, the meaning of the artistic experience is not to be confused with the signified, in whatever form it may be produced: in fact, the meaning of art relates more to matters of perception than to those of semiosis. The second part of *General Theory of Criticism* leaves no doubt as to the fact that access to presentness is possible through the senses, or at least, through the

various types of “givenness”: presentness is not realized outside of perception; presentness is not a hallucination, but rather, it is a disconnected and autonomous perception in respect to the representative function.

Thus, the idea of maintaining an intimacy, a sort of exclusive proximity with the thing just to establish a secret connection with the object that is being perceptively experienced, is a rather particular feature of Brandi, but it is not completely isolated even though it has, and has had, different faces, and has elicited, and continues to elicit, so many different attitudes. First, there was and there is (also outside of modernity, as we now assume this to be) a widespread notion that modernity, with its science, its technology, with its consistently applied knowledge, and with its obsessive praxis, ended up depriving human beings of the hidden dimension of the experience, to the point of rendering it uncertain or even impossible.<sup>5</sup> I would evoke the disconsolate mood of a sculptor such as Arturo Martini who, while perhaps mourning its disappearance, attempted on various occasions to recapture in art (and in life) the secret that is concealed in things.<sup>6</sup> Attributing the blame to the growing intrusiveness of means of communication for seizing the full meaning of art, Martini, in *La scultura lingua morta* (Sculpture as dead language), while reporting the cause of a widespread abandonment of the art, urged a proximity with the mystery of the object, something other than the explanatory evidence of the form, which too often appeared to him as volume without plastic sense. Elsewhere, he also said that for the ancients, space was also composed of a fourth dimension: mystery.<sup>7</sup> Or I could even evoke Italo Calvino's observations about the *Trojan Column*: a work enveloped in so much mystery, but the greatest, according to the author, is that it is not absolutely understandable or imaginable to whom is destined such precision of illustrated narration.<sup>8</sup> It is impossible to see from below, it is too far to be seen by any surrounding building, nothing seems to allow a continuous reading of the story that is sculpted into it. Whom or what does it serve, then, Calvino wonders.

If these kinds of doubts, expressing a certain anxiety more than a real and proper question awaiting a response, have something in common, it appears to be in the sense of an inexplicability produced by the proximity between the image and the thing. In a 1973 essay dedicated to René Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Michel Foucault reestablished the distance between the statement and painting as it unfolded; painting (not only Magritte's, but all the others that dissociate the representative figure from the form, deliberately relinquishing the mimetic relationship of the image), with the intention of scrupulously, cruelly separating the graphic element from the plastic element, with the aim of breaking the ancient conviction that likeness is sufficient for explaining the image. According to Foucault, this belief derived from the fact that, without much discussion, without

much care for the many unstable elements that are continually reproduced in the two divergent and complementary systems of writing and drawing, the dimension of difference (with respect to the thing) had been assigned to the first, while the dimension of likeness was assigned to the second. But I will not linger over that essay which sees in Magritte's operation an open challenge to the rigidity of these two systems, to show how little is needed (entrusting the writing with a contradictory meaning from the image that it presumably captions) to produce a distressing short circuit.

Rather, I would like to evoke an episode of epistemological crisis that persisted throughout the twentieth century, the experience of which is evidenced in Brandi's opposition of sign-image. In short, to conclude (temporarily, of course) on this aspect, I propose this observation: we have no actual verbal linguistic code that would permit us to express the significance of the discrete in the sphere of visual perception. When we speak with someone, our attention to the words and their reception is constantly displaced between a positive (recognition of an identity) and negative (recognition of a difference) assimilation: "he said money, not honey," "he said exhausted, not just tired," also reflexively "I said disturbing, not upsetting," are sentences that we quickly elaborate to trace the word back to the system (in the semantic domain, obviously): that is, the specificity of the circumstance. All this had been denied in the plastic arts, and it is not too bold to say that what has so often been identified as "dissolution" in the arts is none other than the attempt to free the image, the visual experience, from the objects.

### **The Blindness of Writing**

If, during the last century, figurative art has sought in plastic art a proper articulation of sense and meaning to the point of constructing one or various languages to coordinate the relationship between figurative image and imagination; to the point of involving a gestural, bodily, or kinetic reference in the visual grammar; to the point of becoming completely unrecognizable, no longer analogous to the world and even less to itself; if all this has occurred in the world of visual arts, however, a similar process has also been performed in the literary field. Perhaps more sporadically, perhaps less-clearly manifested, but certainly with the same breaking force and the same capacity of estrangement. It may seem that the two areas, the literary and the figurative, show weak points of convergence, but for both, the issue at stake is representation, that is, how sign and image relate to each other. Therefore, what I will talk about could also be taken as a reverse example, a sort of photonegative.

Among the various cases that can be recalled, I will mention one here that

characterizes itself as being a theoretical perspective critically confluent with literature; indeed, it is quite similar to the work of Brandi and moreover, it is chronologically parallel to it. In *L'entretien infini* (1969), Maurice Blanchot, among the many questions asked in this complex and articulated text—essentially dedicated to delineating the discontinuities and ruptures that characterize the literary experience, a structural, rather than formal, discontinuity capable of involving the production, as much as the enjoyment, and the artwork itself—, I would even say that underlying the discourse of the essay, he presented a radical critique of the programmatic and substantive course of development in the modern novel: that of thinking about narration as a kind of dialogue with visibility, with the visual experience, and essentially with the image. According to Blanchot, this was a way to ensure a horizon of meaning, perhaps of coherence, of verisimilitude, of similarity with the represented world, in the story. The knowledge to be developed in a long-lasting environment (Blanchot contrasted this with the night, darkness, blindness) is only capable, in his view, of inhibiting any experience that could place man on the limit of the mystery. I can only remember his reasoning on the concept of attention: there is a personal one that is assessed according to the relationship established with the object, focusing on it and referring all meaning to it (it is another way of talking about knowing through principles of objectivity and truth) and hence, destined to be an instrument, a means of juxtaposition, an apparatus of transparency; there is also an impersonal attention, open to the occurrence of the unknown, to the mystery that is perpetuated by never crossing the threshold of the knowable (another way of talking about the experience of non-thought) and destined to become a habitable space, although without reference and without centre, and therefore unstable and uncertain, a completely opaque matter.

First of all, it is the principle of similarity that is at stake, the one on which is based the possibility of recognition, the possibility of establishing a true relationship among the elements involved in the representation. When Blanchot, quoting Mallarmé in the subtitle, refers to writing as a *foolish* game, he engages its most powerful implication: the lack of meaning is not a defect of the discourse but its objective; not for the sake of paradox or contradiction, but rather for the fact that writing acquires its greatest meaning when it does not direct the sign toward a search for signification, toward the cognitive resolution of language, but rather, toward the affirmation of a permanence, of an existence that does not require being explained so much as being experienced.

There is another consequence worth noting: narrating, including through images, is no longer the production of discourse as narrative; at the moment where narration waives the task of serving as a suture between the experience and the

world, the artwork loses its value as a document, as a documentary collection of experience because the only possible experience is only, and already, all in the text. More than retracing the dimension of absence to which the book and the artwork refer (Blanchot is looking particularly to combating the exteriority that produces limitations and the enclosure of the book within the limits of the intelligibility of the story), it would be better to juxtapose another essay to this reading, namely, *Le plaisir du texte*, written in 1973 by Roland Barthes. This essay also seeks the meaning of the literary experience in the cracks, in the coarseness, in the difficulty produced by the reading, all discontinuances that abolish the distance between the act and its comprehension, between reading time and historical time. What is significance? It is sensually-produced meaning, affirms Barthes: pleasure and enjoyment appear to abolish the distance from the narrated objects or rather, that distance that is produced at the moment in which the word makes itself visible, and the reading is transformed into an image. And together, they do away with that need for consistency that appears to characterize writing: this is a very abstract place to mark the experience, a place where any plastic tie between sign and referent are abolished, a place made possible by the fact that all the meaning is established as it extends and explores the space that it takes up; yet, the need to see in it something that would emerge only and constantly in the marking of its absence is never exhausted. In other words, Barthes seems to deny the transparency of the means and to resolve the tension of the meaning within an obfuscating experience.

### **Conclusion: Fallacious Modelization?**

Perhaps we have strayed a bit too much or too quickly from our starting statement, and so we must return without hesitation to the problem of what and how we communicate through the image.

On closer inspection, the various positions considered above appear to converge in a negative response to the simple fact that “through the image,” we go somewhere: if the visual-related experience has no primary function as a communicative vehicle, if it is not the form of something outside of itself, the image cannot be thought of as a conveyance—independently dominating the spatial or temporal expanse. If it is a place, then it must in some measure consist of filled and empty spaces (it is this ascertainment about the text that directed Blanchot and Barthes). Just like a body whose integrity in parts and harmony, if it exists, is only rarely perceptible as a whole: we more easily feel parts of the body, now a finger, now a foot, sometimes something inside. In other words, the whole image is never to be taken at the level of phenomenon: it may be a product of sensorial responses tracing back to the phenomenon; precisely because it is

possible to move within those responses, it is equally possible to design a unique dimension for them, but only their discontinuity allows us to imagine a continuity. If this totality of fullness and emptiness is the structure of the image, what is the point of asking ourselves what it communicates? Maybe something can be conveyed through it? Or perhaps only the filled spaces can be responsible for this transfer? Can this eventually occur without confusing the transferred object with the transferring object? Would the recipient discern a possible overlap?

I am deliberately skirting questions that border on the absurd; they are as such because they exacerbate a state of confusion in respect to the object, so that no one could say what it is made of, or whether it is comparable to matter. And this is exactly what has been at stake from the beginning: on what do we base the reality principle? The attempt to understand what happens when the image in a Duchamp piece is used to indicate something that the artwork negates as its own content, could be addressed again at this point. Certainly, the fact that an image may have different levels of reality is inconsistent with the idea that every thing, to be real, must also be unique and monodimensional.

Vilém Flusser repeatedly proposed the idea that our behaviour toward the matter has undergone a profound alteration in the last century.<sup>9</sup> The author argues that the notion that man be related to the subject through a process of abstraction capable of producing either forms or outlines, or anything else, is rapidly dissipating; perhaps spurred by the means of production, perhaps by the instruments of communication, it is increasingly the case that the product of abstraction itself is perceived as matter. The fact is that we are witnessing a curious phenomenon of inversion whereby producing an abstraction no longer means proceeding from the concrete to the intangible, but rather, from the intangible to the thing. Thus, the activity of representation seems to have become a filling activity of the tangible rather than that of forming the intangible. The aim of the symbolic action is more that of giving shape to forms than that of shaping bodies.

But if this observation were feasible, then we could say that the formation of meaning is no longer to be found in the composition of an abstract system capable of performing an explanatory action within its own boundaries, but rather in the composition of the matter entrusted with the whole experience. This position appears very interesting to me: because it allows a glimpse into what is involved in the production of images aimed at conveying a message, even one as simple as “there is a washroom here.” In a way, it involves the production of reality.

I would like to illustrate this condition with an episode of what we might call a

news report about information. A few years ago, a video was circulated, and some frames from it were published in several newspapers, documenting a serious tragedy that occurred in the occupied Palestinian territories. In the video, we could see a man and a young boy seeking shelter from an intense burst of bullets; then the boy appears to lose consciousness. The video report explained that when a shootout broke out in the streets between soldiers and the militia, the man and the child were caught in the crossfire: a bullet fired by an Israeli soldier had struck the Palestinian boy, killing him. The sequence was particularly distressing because it showed the fear, the struggle, the despair, and the helplessness. In the days following the distribution of the report, certain sources began to deny its veracity, claiming that the video was staged and that it was a fraud. The non-veracity concerned its content: the boy was not really dead, but had happily survived although wounded. This anti-thesis apparently tried to soften the emotional impact of the content of the video and led to the formulation of the following argument by the viewer: since the video is said to show the killing of a boy during a fire fight in which he had been involuntarily involved, but we know that he did not die, then the whole video is also a fraud. This is an obvious fallacy; and while the user may understand that his conclusion on the falsity of the video is unjustified, any produced emotion is irretrievably destroyed. In short, we are discussing the veracity of showing. *This is not a pipe*, just like *This is not a murder*. But the important fact, which can provoke embarrassment, is not so much the questioning of the veracity of the scene as the fact that the controversy over the meaning (what it shows) also puts into question the veracity of the video itself; that is, judging whether it is acceptable that a child be involved in a shootout ties in with the reality of the effect that this individual case has produced. Hence, we might think that the exemplary use of the image is still somewhat ambiguous, despite the assured foundation effect of the real. But this also shows that the image is assigned a presence that goes beyond the description.

Finally, I hope that this article has shown that doubleness that can be a source of ambiguity, and that is certainly a cause of undecidability, and hence, that of sensing images as narration as much as something capable of producing a presence. But I fear the consequences of denying that the image can assume the responsibility of being a constitutive form of absence, that is, a reference to an abstract and intangible process, because it would mean removing from the figurative any intelligence, including any intelligence that detects the secret, and surrendering to the idiocy of a world flooded with images. And that is something that, as shown by the images below, we cannot afford.



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## Image Notes

Image One: "Duchamp's Urinal." Blog. [artnewsblog.com/2004/12/duchamps-urinal.htm](http://artnewsblog.com/2004/12/duchamps-urinal.htm). artnewsblog.com, 1 Dec. 2004. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

Image Two: Buho. Blog. [bubosong.blogspot.com](http://bubosong.blogspot.com). Buho's Songs, 21 Feb., 2007. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

Image Three: [linguatec.it/images/fun/wc.jpg](http://linguatec.it/images/fun/wc.jpg). Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

Image Four: Scarlettinas. Blog. [scarlettinas.splinder.com/archive/2008-09](http://scarlettinas.splinder.com/archive/2008-09). Trespass, 15 Sept. 2008. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

Image Five: "Remembering Muhammad al-Durra." Blog. [fisan.wordpress.com/2007/03](http://fisan.wordpress.com/2007/03). Try to find the light. 18 Mar. 2007. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Perniola.

<sup>2</sup> See Octavio Paz's essay *Aparencia desnuda: la obra de Marcel Duchamp* (1973) and Jean-François Lyotard's article in *Les transformateurs Duchamp* (1977).

<sup>3</sup> Cesare Brandi (1906-1988) was an art historian and theorist who founded in 1939 the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, the first and most important learning and research centre for the conservation of artistic heritage. The first twenty years of the institute were synthesized in a 1963 essay of great relevance, *Theory of Restoration* (tran. from *La teoria del restauro*, by C. Rockwell and D. Bell, Firenze, Nardini, 2005), which was translated into several languages. Brandi posited restoration as a necessary operation for the aesthetic recognition of the work of art, since the operation on the physical substance allowed an interpretation and an outline of its generational transition. However, the essays to which I refer here have not been translated.

<sup>4</sup> See particularly Fiedler's essay *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit*.

<sup>5</sup> On the end of experience, see also Agamben.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in a 1926 letter to Francesco Messina: “Mystery, that is what is missing in our whole life—there is no longer any danger to things, there are no longer robbers in the streets, and even women no longer have any mystery of modesty,” 193.

<sup>7</sup> See *Colloqui sulla scultura 1944-45*.

<sup>8</sup> See *La colonna traiana raccontata* (1980).

<sup>9</sup> The writings of Flusser on the new media that have emerged over two decades. See also the essays *Das Unding I* and *Das Unding II* (1993) in: *Filosofia del design*, Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2003.