

# *Reapprendre à voir:* Images, Symptoms and the Media of Appearance

**Emmanuel Alloa** interviewed by **Benediktas Vachninas**

Emmanuel Alloa, Professor of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at the University of Fribourg, is one of the most active contemporary thinkers in the field of new visual studies. His areas of research include aesthetics, phenomenology, theories of image, theories of media, and the French philosophy. Professor Alloa has authored and (co)edited numerous books, of which, the most important ones are *Looking through Images. A Phenomenology of Visual Media* (Columbia University Press, 2021), *Dynamis of the Image. Moving Images in a Global World* (De Gruyter, 2020), *Partages de la perspective* (Fayard, 2020), *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty* (Fordham University Press, 2017). He is the recipient of the Latsis Prize 2016 and the Aby Warburg Prize 2019 and currently serves as President of the German Society of Aesthetics.

In 2021, Professor Alloa gave an online cycle of lectures titled *Orbis Pictus. A Media Phenomenology in an Image World* at Vilnius University. This year, I had the pleasure to hold an online conversation with Professor Alloa as he kindly agreed to discuss the topic of images and his project of symptomatology. The interview encompassed questions about the relation of an image with the image theories, the differences between the symptomatological approach to images and the visual semiotics, Derrida's contribution to the problem of mediality, and the role of images in the philosophy today.

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**BV:** Let's start from a question regarding the place of symptomatology in the *iconic turn*. In *Looking Through Images: a Phenomenology of Visual Media*, you propose a new approach in the field of visual theories, namely, symptomatology of images, which, on the one hand, is dealing with a classical problem of "What is an image?" and, on the other hand, analyses different types of concrete images while defining *symptoms of iconic*. I would like to ask: How did you devise the idea of symptomatology, and how would you see it with regard to the division between *Bildwissenschaft* and *Bildtheorie* considered in *the iconic turn*?

**EA:** I might start by saying that there has been an incredible productivity in the field of visual studies, image studies, image theory, and these different labels do not always refer to one and the same reality, and, I guess, part of your question already hints at

that. I myself consider to be part of the discipline that could only be one of the actors of this general turn toward images – the discipline of philosophy. Of course, as someone coming from the discipline of philosophy, I am tempted to systematize the discussions. And philosophers often like to have definitions, clear-cut definitions in the sense of an economy of means. If the definition is simple, crisp and clear, then it must be good. Now I also come from a kind of a philosophy that is defined by the phenomenological method. And philosophy as phenomenology does not start off by definitions, it does not start off by saying “x is such and such.” But it starts by describing phenomena, and it starts by describing the phenomena in their variety, in their complexity, in their richness, in their manifoldness. I believe that a philosophical approach to images that is informed by a phenomenological understanding must start by taking to account that what we call ‘images’ or sometimes ‘pictures’ – also in English which the German language refers with one single word ‘Bild’ – must be addressed in its variety. Hence the importance of setting up such a dialogue in an interdisciplinary way. There are many disciplines that, unlike philosophy, have dealt with images for a long time: it has developed an expertise in describing them, in describing their materiality, their design, their organisation, their composition – artistry in the first place. But, of course, also other disciplines, such as, for example, archaeology or literature studies, but also film studies, aesthetics and media theory, generally speaking, performance studies, etc. I think that phenomenologically informed philosophy of images should not start off with definitions, but should first begin by describing this variety. And, in a second step, we can try to see if this some common denominator, some common traits that emerge from this variety. This is what phenomenology usually does: we look at different ways things appear and then see if there are some common features that can be established as emerging properties.

Now, what I see is that very often in the context of visual studies the very object is taken either for granted – that is to say most of image scholars do not spend their time on defining what images are, on the one hand – and, on the other hand, we have image theories who are very self-assured of what images are. And we can now discuss what these definitional proposals are made of. I am a bit frustrated with both: I am a bit frustrated with those who simply say “ok, I work with images,” but who never have anything to say about what imaginability is made of; but I am equally frustrated with those who belong to a kind of theoretical method that is defined by the attempt to have a “one size fits all” definition. And what we find out in the second case, in the latter case, is that very often these definitions cut into this large field of images saying “well, if images do not correspond to definition I set up, they are simply not images.” So I am also frustrated with the second account. Hence my turn to what I call ‘symptomatology’.

**BV:** If you say that phenomena are changing in time, is it possible to have final definition of images through processes of describing, looking from the phenomenological point of view.

**EA:** Well, I think that we can tease out common features – yes. I think we can talk about features of images. What is, what I these features I call (inspired by Nelson Goodman’s

symptomatology of art), I call these symptoms of images or symptoms of imaginability. And these symptoms are features that are features that are neither necessary, nor sufficient. But that they are taken together, they make up for convergent indices of what images are. Most images share these features, some images only share some of these features or symptoms, some images share other features, but, taken together, they are a convergent indicator of what imaginabilities are made of – as opposed to other discursive forms of meaning building.

**BV:** While describing the ten *symptoms of iconic*, you referred to a wide spectrum of authors beginning from Plato, St. Augustine and going right to Edmund Husserl, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Moreover, other authors can be ascribed to the camp of semiotics, notably, Nelson Goodman and Louis Marin. So do you think that symptomatology of images can go in dialogue with those positions of visual semiotics which in a way follow Émile Benveniste's famous essay *Sémiologie de la langue* – that is to say they presuppose that images cannot be analysed as signs in a linguistic sense? Would you see the field of images as a place where not only philosophers and art historians, but also semioticians could have a productive conversation?

**EA:** That's a very interesting question. And, undoubtedly, it seems at first sight that phenomenology and semiotics are mutually at odds: they are mutually exclusive in their respective methods. If we take a very simple consensual understanding of what semiotics is, semiotics starts saying that "everything that there is, is a sign of something." And phenomenology crucially and fundamentally denies that. Phenomenology would distinguish not modes of being a sign, but distinguish modes of appearing. And, to a classical phenomenology, only some modes of appearing are semiotic, only some modes of appearing are signitive, that is, based on sign structures – and others are not. Perception, for example, is not a signitive mode of appearing, but in perception things appear as themselves, they are not as representative of themselves.

At first sight, it would seem that they are incompatible. And you are right in saying that I try to establish some form of dialogue with visual semiotics or semiotics of images. There are several reasons for this.

First one is that I believe that it's within a field of visual semiotics that some of the most elaborate descriptions have been provided of how images work. And I would think primarily of Louis Marin who is maybe one of the most refined image theorists who clearly come from semiotics and yet has also I believe to some extent pushed semiotics to its limits in order to include a reflection on the powers of images and how images generate effects through the latency. That would be one comment.

Secondly, I am also and, of course, centrally relied on Nelson Goodman's theory of art. You have now decided to include Nelson Goodman among the semiotic approaches. And probably this is a plausible way of rubricating him. What Nelson Goodman does is that he offers an account of how artistic artifacts can be interpreted on the basis on their internal structure, I would say, the way they are organised. And he has done a very important service to the community in allowing us to move towards to what I call more medial approach. In a certain sense, Nelson Goodman inherits Susanna Langer's approach

of the philosophy of symbols. And, of course, this philosophy of symbols is indebted to Ernst Cassirer. We would have to rebuild a genealogy that ends somewhere completely different than French visual semiotics. So I just mean to stress this difference.

Nevertheless, you are right in pinpointing that Nelson Goodman is not a phenomenologist, very far from that. And, although he has written an early book called *The Structure of Appearance*, I think, what we miss in his philosophy is an account of what appearing means. So, I think, I can take some sections from his work without doing injustice to the entire project, but that I can adapt to my own attempt of a medial phenomenology of images. Simply because his approach that I would rather call a ‘circumstantial’ approach as symptomatology is helpful in avoiding a bit false of either a theory that could only account for definitory claims of what images are, or can only describe absolutely, radically separated individual artifacts that have nothing to do with each other.

**BV:** Let’s delve deeper to the question of symptoms. You propose that *symptoms of iconic* are influenced first and foremost by Sigmund Freud’s conception of symptoms, and also aforementioned Nelson Goodman’s *symptoms of aesthetic*. However, in the description of symptoms, it is not possible to reconstruct the relation between *symptoms of iconic* and Freud’s symptoms.

Taking your and Goodman’s models of symptoms into consideration, I think that the biggest difference lies in their relation to the sphere of phenomenality: while *symptoms of aesthetic* demand cognitive capacities to be thought of, considering *symptoms of iconic*, it becomes very important to include their effective, while, in the case of *presentativity* – affective side. In this respect, in my eyes, it relates to the idea of Merleau-Ponty that the world is already expressive and is the condition of language. So, my question is what is the role of the Freud’s conception in your project of symptoms?

**EA:** I would like to take a step backwards. There are different types of signs. And, by using the concept of symptom, I also want to push back a sometimes universalising claim that a theory of symptoms can be addressed generally within a theory of the sign, and that a theory of the sign is something that has to do with distance. We are used by a long European tradition to believe that wherever there is an absence of something, all that can be is a sign of that absent object. Semiology has taught us that we should start understanding, interpreting signs on the grounds of a remoteness of the referent that the sign is about. So when I read about something, the referent will be absent; when I look at the signpost, it refers to something that is elsewhere; when I see a photograph, I will be reminded of an absent dear being etc. etc.

We, however, have a specific type of signs called symptoms, and symptoms are important in medical tradition because they cannot be treated if not with a contextual understanding. What do I mean by contextual understanding? It means that deciphering the symptoms of a body, that is to say, symptoms of sickness, the symptoms of health state – whether physical or psychic health – are symptoms that have to be read circumstantially, in presence. So, remote diagnosis is very shaky business. The physician usually will be

required to be on the spot and to read the symptoms on the body of patient directly, because of contextual understanding that is to do to say that it is important to understand the spatial relationships between the symptoms: how close, how distant are they, what their specific way of appearing, is it lighter or darker, is it intense or less intense. And these ‘kind of’ symptoms cannot simply be translated into discursive information. The patient cannot simply pass the message through a phone saying “I have this and that symptom,” but the symptoms have to be read and understood by sharing a common perceptual situation. My whole phenomenology of this kind of understanding is a phenomenology that insists on the shared perceptual situation. The shared perceptual situation involves that we read the symptoms, something that is present right here right now on a body of which these symptoms are somehow the expression.

And that’s I also wanted to question a certain consensus around writing as a technology of meaning that involves distal interpretation as Jacques Derrida has taught us through his grammatology of writing. Of course, there seems to be a ban on any description of a perceptual shared situation, since Derrida’s deconstruction of it. I believe we have somehow gone too far here and have not understood why it is simultaneously important to stress a fact that meaning is built and determined through the very media of its appearance. And, at the same time, that these media also are located in perceptual spaces that embodied beings can apprehend.

**BV:** Going further, I would like to press a point on the reference function of symptoms: *symptoms of iconic* holds a relation with a disease or, as you say, *iconic phenomena*, a relation which functions like a reference in terms of probability. You propose that, if taken individually, conversely, if taken together, symptoms cannot assure that type of reference.

What I find very important, examining the relation between *symptoms of iconic*, is that it is not possible to consider symptoms separately from phenomena that are, in the first place, a condition of them. Would it be possible to interpret that it is sufficient to indicate more than one symptom of iconic in relation with concrete phenomena to suggest that one is dealing with *iconic phenomena*?

**EA:** Yes. What I mean to say is that the phenomena I am talking about, phenomena that are shared by images, many images, not all images and not necessarily as necessary conditions. The fact that some of the symptoms I describe cannot be made out in every single image doesn’t mean that either the symptom is not an *iconic symptom* or that the artifact I am talking about is not an image. That’s my point. Just as Nelson Goodman said it’s not because an artwork is not in a museum it’s not because the artwork is not seen in a distant fashion, it’s not because the artwork doesn’t have a density of its own semantic or syntactic etc. etc.

We can enter now into discussion of the specific symptoms. This doesn’t mean that we are not dealing with an artwork because, of course, the history of art has also been a long history of undoing the expectations of what artworks are about. And I believe that in art we are seeing something similar. Today, with the rise of artificial intelligence,

images are generated that do not share a certain number of features we have traditionally attributed to images. When people tell me “Images are defined by intentionality of the imagemaker” – the fact that someone has decided to create an image about something – then I want to say “well, sorry, but there are many images that have not been made with any specific purpose.” And, in that sense, AI generated images are sometimes aliked to the *archaeopedic* images from Byzantium – images not made by human hands, images that are somehow self-generated icons, or by natural images. So, an image in the mirror, or the image in the water, are images that are not resulting from any deliberate attempt to depicting something. Some of my colleagues in image theory, image philosophy would simply say “ok, the specular image is not an image.” I am not very happy with that kind of answer. And when people tell me “images have to be bi-dimensional,” I say “yes, most of them are,” but sometimes the play on depth or three-dimensionality of the materiality of the surface can also be important when making us understand how images work.

Thirdly, I would say that the fact that all images have to be about something, I would also doubt that. We have abstract paintings, and why should abstract paintings be excluded from the field of images? Here again I have colleagues that would say “ok, abstract paintings are not images, they are just paintings.” I can understand why these colleagues are claiming this, but they are claiming this because it’s the result of their definitorial approach. Since I am not following this approach, I want to give an account of the diversity of images and yet of what makes them peculiar, what makes them specific as signs making media. This would be my symptomatological approach where, by superposing different searchers for these symptoms, we can get closer of how images work.

**BV:** On a different note – your investigation into the notion of *symptoms of iconic* raises the problem of relation between image and language. You suggest that the symptomatological approach through the description of symptoms seeks to deal with a notion of ‘image’ which has a plurality of meanings in the relation with various natural languages. In other words, it aims at the articulation of zone that is common to different definitions and groups of images.

However, looking to the history of phenomenology, it is important to mark a turn which began with Martin Heidegger’s critique of Husserl for underestimating the importance of historicity in phenomenological description. The critique was radicalized by Jacques Derrida in *La voix et le phénomène* where it was shown that ‘writing’ is present in Husserlian descriptions of phenomena.

In the other camp of philosophy at the time of the *linguistic turn* it was also seen that, in certain sense, language is a medium that structures our thinking. With regard to this context – in what sense *symptoms of iconic* and *iconic phenomena* in Roland Barthes terms has *la richesse ineffable* that is not smeared by language? What is the role of *diaphenomenology* articulating the zone peculiar to images that is *iconicity*?

**EA:** We are the inheritors of 2500 years of European metaphysics that, as Jacques Derrida has shown, has encapsulated us in believing that reason has to take the form of the



‘λόγος’, and the ‘λόγος’ has to take the form of the discourse, and the discourse itself has to be presented in a certain way. This logocentrism, Jacques Derrida has argued, has led to the oblivion of the mediatic support necessary for exchange of arguments. And he calls this ‘writing’. Although I to large extent have been inspired by Derrida’s own readings, I part with his conclusions that what has been left out or forgotten is writing. I believe, on the contrary, that there is *textocentrism*, a *grammatocentrism* that dominates western thinking, and that only that would be presented itself in a written form is accepted as a valid source of meaning. I believe that we could very well take the first part of Derrida’s demonstration – the deconstruction of this logocentrism – without having to resort to identification of the medium of the logos as being a medium of writing and [that] we can return to Greeks and Plato to see this.

Derrida equates the ‘γραφεῖν’ with the ‘writing’. But the word ‘γραφεῖν’ in Greek does not only mean ‘writing’, it also means ‘painting’. What is the graphic dimension of reason? – would be my question. What are we leaving out if we reduce the mediality to grammatology, if we reduce every kind of support, every form of material inscription to writing? I think when we have brushstrokes on a canvas, or when there are flickering forms pushing over a film screen, this is not writing. We should write better descriptions of what this is. And because we have been trained by a tradition of alphabetic writing to believe that writing is the universal medium, we have been let to exclude other forms of sense making systems that are not discursive as alphabetic writing is. And these nondiscursive forms of expressions – I call them following a hint by Susanne Langer, I call them ‘presentative media’. ‘Presentative media’ are not ‘discursive media’. They show something by showing themselves. They show something by presenting some of their own features. By the way, they are organised themselves they let something else appear. This is no return to a metaphysics of presence: presence is not what precedes representation, presence is not what precedes the copy or the sign, or the redoubling, or the simulacrum – presence is the result of a presentation. This is the starting point of my *diaphenomenology*: whatever appears, appears through something, and this something is the medium of appearing.

So we can take Derrida’s lesson as something decisive, we can take Heidegger’s critique of the oblivion of historicity in Husserl as something that is also very important, without having to resort to explanation such as categories of writing and categories of the *Geschick*, the destiny of being by saying that whatever has been formed, has been formed by something else, whatever comes to the fore, comes to the fore through these positions, determinations – in short through media that have shaped how and what comes into appearance. And I believe that it is by discovering the structure of how images work, that we can then extent this to more general investigation to how some things come to visibility and others not. Alphabetic writing by its deliberate dissociation of content of message and the bearer of this message – the fact that it is totally unimportant how something is written as long as we can distinguish the elements, the discrete elements that make up for its code – have led us to forget the importance of the material appearing quality of the media themselves, that can often show something, by showing something of themselves.

**BV:** Looking to a wider context, I wonder how you would define the status of images in Western culture. As demonstrated by proponents of *pictorial turn*, images function as instruments of persuasion in our society by creating myths that embody certain ideologies. And today, with the ongoing war in Europe, this phenomenon gets new exposure. Do you think that investigation of *iconicity* can suggest ways that help to dismantle the structures of power that we recognise in images?

**EA:** Images are neither *per se* agency of oppression, neither *per se* agency of liberation. Images can have very different effects. For many centuries religions, but also philosophies have done ranks in trying to ban the effects of the powers of images, excluding them from the space of truth and of meaningful sense making. Whether you take Plato's ban of visual arts from the Republic, or whether you look at other phenomena of iconoclasm throughout premodern history.

And yet we see today that the visual dimension is of an increasing importance in our contemporary world. And there is certainly a discrepancy between the ubiquitous presence of images in our everyday life and the lack of tools we are equipped with to analyse their proceedings. Visual studies have contributed a great deal to close this gap and make us aware the way images work, the way they call up on us, the way they interpolate us, they make us do certain things we might not even want to be doing. But sometimes they also amplify our political demands, they create powerful rallies, rally cries and identification signs for communities that have often long been marginalised and excluded. Images can also make appear the gap of what is and what ought to be, between what is the case and what could be the role of the utopian imagination of exploring how things might be if we allowed them to become different. So images can have all these different effects.

And I believe that those who loudly and decidedly try to undo the power of images are also those who best recognise their effects. It's the iconoclasts who may be most obviously granted the images in excessive power in believing that it was only through the destruction that their efficacy could be undone. Looking at the history of iconoclasm might also teach us something about why it would not be very clever to believe that images are merely pacified, neutral signs that refer to something else. But they are also because of their phenomenal quality, because of their appearing quality – something that appeals to the senses that makes us do things in ways that we might not even know about or be ready to translate into discursive arguments.

**BV:** Going almost to the end, I would like to ask a more general question regarding symptomatology's role in the philosophy of today. In one of your earlier articles, you suggested that visual studies should locate effects in the discourse produced by images: notably, in the case of Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, we are dealing with Cézanne's works, while in Foucault's *Les mots et les choses – Las Meninas*.

I think that your project of symptomatology has the line similar to *the iconic* and *pictorial turn*: ultimately, the symptomatology demands a particular object of analysis which enables to think about something more abstract, theoretical, but is not reduced to



it. So, in this regard, can symptoms as a unique perspective open up a new trajectory in the philosophy today?

**EA:** It is probably interesting that philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault used artworks in an emblematic way. That is to say as examples to start with for a much broader question. In case of Merleau-Ponty, the genesis of a sensible world, and, in the case of Foucault, deconstruction of a classical episteme. That is to say, images are not just treated as artworks. Not that it's not artistic images that we often learn most about images in what they convey, simply because artworks make the most extraordinary inventive use of the resources of images. But also simply because the point is not to produce a philosophy of art. For centuries those who studied images so closely were those who treated them mainly as artworks. But if we look at premodern times, if we look at anthropologists, if we look at what people from non-western cultures have to tell us about, anthropologies of figuration – I am thinking of the last book by Philippe Descola, French anthropologist – then we are seeing that images can be much much, more than just artworks in the modernist's sense. When Merleau-Ponty and Foucault use artistic images, they are doing so not in order to produce a philosophy of art.

I think today we are at an important crossroad where is actually often artworks that teach us something that goes way beyond the question of “is this art?” as analytic philosophy of art is often preoccupied with. So, not so much the ontology of the work of art, but the question: what does it mean to reorganise, redistribute perspectives, from where do we see, what do we see, what can we see, what can emerge, what can appear, what can be thought, said, what are our beliefs, can we visualise the way we organise the circulation of privileges of who gets to speak and who gets silenced, what is significant, what is insignificant. And I believe that these questions can be forcefully elucidated by a closer look of how images work. Many images make us see how we see – mainly artistic images, but also images that have no claim to any artisticity. We are seeing beings where beings in doubt with vision, and yet we have to learn to see anew – as Merleau-Ponty once put this, “reapprendre à voir.” There is no better school for training our vision than images.