Architecture and Naturing Affairs

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Riccardo M. Villa

Tókos

"For money was brought into existence for the purpose of exchange, but interest increases the amount of the money itself (and this is the actual origin of the Greek word: offspring resembles parent, and interest [*tókos*] is money born of money); consequently this form of the business of getting wealth is of all forms the most contrary to nature."

Aristotle, *Politics*[1]

One of the most invariant paradigms of Western thought—a thread that runs through both philosophy and science—is undoubtedly constituted by its underlying analogy of thinking with vision: thinking means first and foremost *seeing* with the mind, a seeing that comes way before listening or touching, and definitely much more than tasting or smelling. The privileged status of vision among all the other senses is nevertheless countered by an equally constitutive doubt towards its products, namely images. Since Plato, images and appearances have been regarded with a certain mistrust: the 'allegory of the cave' famously provides an account of phenomena—what we see—as shadows cast by a fictitious puppet-show.[2] Philosophy must then turn away from such images, and walk on a path leading to the contemplation of immutable, universal ideas. Images are either misleading or merely particular instances of such ideas: *eidolon*, the word that Plato uses for image, is a diminutive of *eidos*, the word by which he indicates universal form. Participles of *orao*, "to see", both words confirm the analogy between vision and thought as well as the fundamental mistrust towards such sensible form.

The lexical kinship between *eidos* and *eidolon*—between idea and image—defines, at the same time, a field of legitimacy: according to Plato, images can be produced as long as they *represent* something. As *eidolon*, the image must always be the derivative (the 'image') of something else, of a thing in itself (Greek *auto*) and ultimately of an *eidos*. If on the one hand the image cannot but help being a particular manifestation of its reference, on the other hand its connection to it turns the image into a way—a *medium*—for us to gain knowledge of what is still *concealed* to our minds (the Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, literally "unveiling"). This is the case of the image

produced through a *tekhne eikastike*, an 'art' whose figuration is an *icon*, an image conceived as likeliness or representation (*eikasia*) of an original reference.[3]

But how can an image be otherwise? How can it possibly be produced without an 'object' of reference? Plato's notion of *mimesis*—and the condemnation of it that follows—play a crucial role in this regard. Despite what the term might today suggest, Plato's mimesis is quite far (if not opposite) to notions such as the ones of copy or of representation. The best example is perhaps the one of the sophist: in the eponymous dialogue, Plato argues that what sophists produce is an *imitation* of knowledge. As such, the sophist's production does not result in an 'image' that is a copy of something else; rather, its product 'pretends' to be something that simply *is not*. If representation is an 'image of something', mimesis is instead an *image of nothing*. The sophist produces not knowledge (*sophia*), but a 'mimetic' image of it (*doxa*, mere "appearance") that has no 'true' reference—like the one of the transcendent *eidos*—but only an immanent scope: to be sold. The mediation that such an image performs does not connect the particular to the universal, allowing thus a connection with the order of the cosmos, but is rather merely oriented to the very mundane end of profit. Sophistry is therefore what Plato calls a *tekhne phantastike*,[4] an 'art' that produces not *eidola*, but phantasms, images without a 'true' consistency, and that are therefore illegitimate: the sophist, as well as all the producers of this kind of images, must be kept out of the city.

Plato's dream of a civic order completely purified from such images is nevertheless quite far from being a reality. Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* states it quite clearly: the premises of sophistry, namely the 'commodification' of knowledge into something only "produced in order to be sold," have become the dominant paradigm.[5] By encrypting information (and therefore knowledge) into a numerical support, digital technology turns every image precisely into a non-referential entity. Since they are 'virtualised' out of mere calculation—out of ciphers—digital images cannot help but being *articulations of naughts*. The realisation of such a condition is at odds with the 'critique of pure images' just outlined. In other words, our fundamental prejudice towards images completely clashes with the very environment we live in today.

If looking back at Plato provides an awareness towards the fundamental structure that weaves thoughts and images together, Aristotle might be the one to provide a helpful model to face today's condition. Differently from Plato, Aristotle is not really concerned by the epistemological status of images. Tragic poetry, condemned by Plato as another example of misleading art, is instead placed by Aristotle at the core of the *polis*. Fiction is not a problem, since the 'catharsis' it provides well-integrates it as one of the natural ends of the life of the city. Aristotle's condemnation does not fall over what is untruthful, as much as on what is potentially 'un-purposeful': money. Every property, Aristotle writes, has two uses: a "proper" (*oikeia*, literally "in-house") and an "improper" one.[6] The first one corresponds to what the property has been conceived for, the use that corresponds to the needs according to which it has been produced. The second use, the "improper" one is the one of exchange—a shoe, as Aristotle himself exemplifies, can either be worn or exchanged. Money, on the other hand, does not have a proper use: it can only be

exchanged. To a certain extent, Aristotle's notion of money plays the same role to the one of images in Plato: as the image (*eidolon*) has to be a representation (*eikon*) of something else, money is also meant to be a "substitute of need," therefore 'representing' the necessary exchanges to the subsistence of the city. But, as images can become non-referential *phantasms*, money too can become a 'property' on its own, disconnected from any determination: this is what happens when money is acquired or produced for no other scope than profit itself. According to Aristotle, the "art of money-making" (*tekhne khrematistike*) deprives money of the economic purpose of measuring and mediating only the essential (and therefore natural) needs of exchange within the city; such 'reference' is instead diverted and diffracted into *pleonexia*, a desire that is potentially endless precisely because it knows no external determination.[7]

Up to this point, both philosophies seem to be dealing with the question of what might be called 'non-referential products' in a similar way. But how is Aristotle's formulation of the issue more helpful? While discussing the problematics linked to profit, Aristotle goes further by tackling one of its most important byproducts: interest. Not only money can be deprived of reference through profit, but the same art of money-making opens up to the possibility for money to 'reproduce' itself through time. The greek word for interest, *tókos*, bears also the meaning of offspring or child: like a living being, money engenders its own offsprings. Of course to Aristotle this is an unnatural kind of reproduction, as it fully detaches money from the purpose of exchange for which it was meant in the first place. But the suggestion of seeing the *tókos* as a 'living being' and therefore capable of 'naturing', of coming to life, provides an interesting retrospective look over the question of images. From an understanding in terms of likeliness, as copies or representations of an original reference, we come then to a conception of images as autonomous beings. In such a perspective, images are not mere speculations, but the products of it. They are literally *species* (species and speculation share the latin root of *spiciere*, "to look"). Similarly like biological species, they live and reproduce by engendering at the same time their own environment—they 'breathe'. Yet, the monetary and 'numerical' nature of the *tókos* weaves the biological with the artificial, it organically accommodates its 'affairs' in a 'natural' set-up. That is, perhaps, how we might think of our "postmodern condition": a *milieu* of digital images, an environment populated by species that make room for potential mediations, the terms of which are not necessarily given. According to Plato, any image that was not directing knowledge towards a higher good was only a misleading one; the *tókos*, the digital species, unwinds the image from any *direction*, but only to open it up into a field of *orientation*, a field that is not imaginary, but *'imaginal'* [see: *Imaginal* p. 145–146].

1 1258b. As translated in: *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press,1944.
2 *Republic*, 514a–520a.
3 The notion of *tekhne eikastike* is discussed by Plato in the *Sophist* (266a–266d), whereas the one of *eikasia* is to be contextualised in the so-called "analogy of the divided line," to be found in the *Republic* (509d–511e).
4 *Sophist*, 266a–266d.
5 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984; p. 4.
6 *Politics*, 1257a.
7 For a more detailed account of these concepts, see: Marcel Hénaff, 'The Figure of the Merchant' and 'The Scandal of Profit and the Prohibition of Appropriating Time', in *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 2010.

Riccardo M. Villa

Imaginal

It is the world situated midway between
the world of purely intelligible realities and
the world of sense perception;
the world that I have called the *imaginal* world
(*'alam al-mithal, mundus imaginalis*) in order
to avoid any confusion with
what is commonly designated *imaginary*.

Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*[1]

C*ogito, ergo sum*. In René Descartes' well-known formulation, thinking becomes the premise of being. In other words, thought is set as the *a priori* condition of any individual existence, as if it would come *before* life itself. Yet one could challenge the extent of validity of this axiom and ask: *is thinking still possible while no one exists?* This assumption seems to be at the base of Averroes' notion of a 'separate intellect'. Elaborated in a set of commentaries to Aristotle's writings on the soul, this intellect bears the attribution of 'separate' as it is completely detached from any individual mind. Averroes' intellect is an autonomous one, not to be mistaken for any 'subjective' kind of intellection. At the same time, the fact that it is not individual does not imply a transcendence of it: in other words, the separate intellect is not 'divine', nor is it a Platonic repository of universals. On the contrary, the 'objectivity' of the separate intellect is quite an immanent one: not by chance Averroes often refers to it by the name of *material* intellect. This 'materiality' is explained by the capacity of the intellect to receive images, and by its disposition to be literally *in-formed* by them, to 'reshape' its 'matter' in a corresponding form. The material intellect is not only able to receive images, but also to *cast* them: such 'projective' ability goes by the name of *agent* intellect. Averroes' separate mind is therefore some sort of emplacement that makes of images a device of physical mediation. One of the most common metaphors for it is in fact the *diaphanous*, a transparent medium that, like a glass window of a gothic cathedral, withholds and manifests light in its own

matter and provides an objective embodiment to what would otherwise be invisible and 'immaterial'.[2]

Averroes' Islamic culture was to develop, in the Middle Ages, serious advancements in the study of optics. The notion of an invisible domain, not 'above' but in-between immanent existence was already present as a spiritual notion. In his extensive studies of Islamic and Iranian culture, Henry Corbin named this domain as *the imaginal*. Starkly in contrast with the 'imaginary', the imaginal is not fantastic or unreal, it is instead endowed with an own 'real' existence. Corbin describes it as "the world situated midway between the world of purely intelligible realities and the world of sense perception"—the imaginal does not depend on one or the other, but is attributed by Corbin an autonomy of its own.

The images that appear in such a domain are bridges between the two worlds, they constitute a *medium* between the transcendent one of intelligible realities and the mundane one of sense perception. Establishing the imaginal as a third, autonomous domain makes of these images not mere representations of one of the two worlds they connect; rather, they work more or less as a compass does: by 'orienting' themselves, they actually articulate both worlds as the 'poles' of this orientation. The mediacy that these images convey is therefore a *constructed* one: it is only by an active imagination, and not a mere reception, that images can 'project' their poles. The mundane world of perception and the transcendent one of pure intellection act—in Corbin's words—as "two mirrors (*specula*) facing each other,"[3] and the image is what materialises in their double speculation. This architecture puts the three 'worlds' (the mundane, the celestial, and the imaginal in-between)[4] in connection with each other, but at the same time it does not affirm the primacy of one above the others. The imaginal is a domain in which images are both 'naturally born' and 'artificially built', and where the difference between the two is annihilated. The image that 'lives' in such a domain is a *tókos*, both a 'natural offspring' as much as a 'technical affair'.

The imaginal can then be described as an architectonic domain, since it accommodates mediation not just as a transcendental form—as an *a priori* form to the 'content' of the mediation itself—but as a constructed one. It must not therefore be mistaken for a *tabula rasa*: images 'populate' the imaginal, they constitute its very 'environment' and, at the same time, they *make room* in it—they form a 'constellation'. The 'life' of these images, their activity, could perhaps be compared to the art of gardening: a collection of species that does not grow 'in the desert', but that instead is the result of a meaningful selection and of a careful disposition of the same species that proliferate outside of its boundaries, in the wildness. The *imaginal* is the space of this 'gardening' [see: *Gardening* p. 147–148].

1 Henry Corbin, 'The *Imago Templi* in Confrontation with Secular Norms', in *Temple and Contemplation*, KPI, 1986; p. 265.
2 My understanding of the diaphanous and of Averroes' "separate intellect" is largely based on the work of Emanuele Coccia, *La Trasparenza delle Immagini: Averroè e l'averroismo*, Bruno Mondadori, 2005.
3 Corbin; p. 267.
4 Respectively the *Imago Mundi*, the *Imago Caeli*, and the *Imago Templi*, in Corbin's words.

Riccardo M. Villa

Gardening

Garden refers to the *environment* only to establish in it the good rules of gardening, and to *landscape* only as it never stops engendering it. ... the garden appears as the only territory of encounter between man and nature where the *dream* is allowed.

Gilles Clément, *Gardens, Landscape and 'Natural Genius'*[1]

According to Martin Heidegger, one of the "essential" characters of modernity—the *Neuzeit*—is "the necessary interplay between subjectivism and objectivism."[2] Through technics and modern science, he maintains, the experience of the world as well as its understanding becomes something 'objective', something that we can look at in its detachment from us. Modernity is then the age of the world 'as a picture': a representation, in the German sense of *Vor-stellung*, that therefore positions man not inside of it or above it, but in front of it. This 'setting before' of the object turns man into the other pole to it, the *subject*, and forces him to 'represent' himself as such. As a subject, man becomes then part of such a 'structured picture' (*Gebild*), and tied to its rule. Once man walks inside this picture, all previous metaphysics are accounted in it as 'world-views' and, as 'views' and not as pictures, they cannot help but being ultimately reduced to 'subjective' stances.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, *Gardens, Landscape and 'Natural Genius'*, landscape architect Gilles Clément seems to rearticulate Heidegger's question in a novel manner. The antinomy between subject and object, world-view and picture is presented in another form, abstracted from an epistemological set-up, and translated in a rather 'ecological' one of *landscape* and *environment*. "Landscape"—he says—"refers to what is in our range of sight." Something that "appears as essentially subjective." Landscape is "an object that is not reducible to a universal definition. In theory"—he continues—"for every site there are as many landscapes as individuals to interpret it." Environment, on another hand, "is the exact opposite of landscape, as much as it attempts to provide an objective reading of what surrounds us." Like Heidegger's *Weltbild* that is at the same time set-before, in front of the subject, thus separated, and at the same time a 'picture' that encompasses him, the

environment shares a similar ambiguity: as Clément himself highlights, "environment" can also be translated as *milieu*, "a term that suggests an immersive condition rather than a putting into distance." The novelty of Clément is the addition of a third element, the one of the *garden*: "*Garden* refers to the *environment* only to establish in it the good rules of gardening, and to *landscape* only as it never stops engendering it." By designing the landscape as an 'image' of the environment, the garden acts as a medium between the two poles, the 'subjective' one of the first and the 'objective' one of the latter. Evidently though, the mediacy that the garden enacts is not simply a given one: only by consciously designing and shaping the 'givens' of the environment the garden can (literally) 'take place'. The mediation is therefore not analytical or epistemological, but architectonic. In other words, following the 'botanical metaphor', wildness already implicitly engenders a landscape by itself (is a tropical forest not a landscape?), but it is only in the garden that this landscape becomes architecture.

Nevertheless, this must not lead to an apodeictic classification of the garden as an 'artificial' fact, in opposition to a 'natural' one. Any classification that operates through antinomies cannot possibly hope to grasp it. The garden is not opposed to the wildness of the forest, it is rather an 'instance' of it: it is only by embracing the wildness, collecting, cultivating, and carefully selecting its species that the garden can happen—but this means that many other orders can be 'hidden' and 'encrypted' in the wildness, like incomprehensible tongues waiting to be heard. The garden is then the result of this 'hearing'; it would therefore be better to speak of the garden as an action, as *gardening*. The act of gardening can be described as a domestication of entropy: an order that is not created *ex nihilo*, but that is weaved upon what appears as disorder, a space that removes itself from wildness, still establishing a communication with it. This 'imaginal' space [see: *Imaginal*] arises through a *continuous* cut, both in space (enclosure) and time (recursion): weeds are kept outside of the garden, but they are also cut away whenever they appear inside of it. The gardener defines then a new kind of 'subjectivity', one that is not just 'receiving' objects as 'pictures', but that actively designs them, and that understand nature not as a given, but *as a project*.

Gardening makes room for a space of rest out of restlessness: "the garden appears as the only territory of encounter between man and nature where the *dream* is allowed." In the words of Clément, the dream is connected with nakedness: only in a place of rest, in which all possible threats have been excluded can one both dream and be naked, 'unarmed'. In the garden, we could add, images are 'naked': they are the product of what Plato called *tekhne phantastike*, images that do not derive from anything else, and that therefore are not bound to the necessity of 'covering' any truth. Like *tókoi* [see: *Tókos* p. 61–63], these images are non-referential and therefore self-determined: not 'natural' (as opposed to fictional), but *naturing*.

1 *Jardins, paysage et génie naturel*, inaugural lecture held for the 'Chair of Artistic Creation' at the *Collège de France* on December 1st, 2011.
2 Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; p. 66.

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