THE IMPLICATION OF IMAGES IN THE REVIVAL OF AESTHETICS

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The movement to revive aesthetic theory in the contemporary world has produced a fascination with images that has been haunted by the ghost of Platonism. This is true despite the fact that there has been no single, more sustained, or emphatic intellectual enterprise among contemporary aesthetic theorists than to exorcise Plato's philosophical presence. This should hardly come as a surprise. As with postmodern philosophy generally, contemporary aesthetic theory is embedded in a culture dominated by images, and so would seem to require a reversal of Plato's critique of image-making, including the images that are prominent in art. In adopting this stance, contemporary aesthetic theory follows closely in the footsteps of its great-grandfather, Nietzsche, whose own project was conceived as a "reversal" of Platonism. A crucial remark is found in Nietzsche's notebooks of 1870–71: "My philosophy *reversed Platonism*: the farther removed from true beings, all the purer, more beautiful, better it is."[1] Indeed, one of Nietzsche's great hopes was to recover the value of the world of appearances that Plato and his philosophical heirs seemed to have disparaged. If, as outlined in *Republic*, III and X, Plato is skeptical about images because they stand at several removes from the truth of the eternal forms, then it would seem to be the duty of aesthetic theory to overturn Platonism so as to re-capture whatever truth images may contain. But, as I hope to explain, the critique of Plato that underpins much contemporary aesthetic theory is based on a tradition that has misconstrued some of Plato's fundamental ideas. It is contradictory in other ways as well. While one of its main concerns is to assert the validity of contemporary art, it is engaged in a project that is far broader than what may be associated with any narrowly-bounded aesthetic sphere. Indeed, the goals of contemporary

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studiensausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), VII, p. 199.

aesthetics require a de-coupling of aesthetics from art. They involve coming to terms with the implications of Nietzsche's insistence that existence and the world could be justified only in aesthetic terms.[2]) In the view of one writer, Alexander Nehamas, this implies the transformation of life itself into a work of art.[3] But whereas Nehamas had Nietzsche's doctrine of interpretation foremost in mind, the transformation of life into art has in fact occurred largely through the cultivation of "style" as corporate-sponsored and media-driven "life-style" rather than as a manifestation of ethical individualism or of responsiveness to qualitative experience. And yet, to re-state my earlier point, the "reversal" of Platonism in contemporary aesthetic theory rests on what is at best an insufficiently nuanced view of what Plato has to say. It discounts Plato's own propensity to write in a discourse that is highly imagistic; indeed, its attempted reversal of Plato applies more accurately to what *became* of Plato – to Platon*ism* – rather than to Plato's writings themselves. In the process, Plato's understanding of the relationship between image and truth was obscured, and some of the force of aesthetics against the iconoclastic opposition to images was lost.

Taken in the root sense, "iconoclasm" suggests the destruction of images; more generally, it indicates the eradication or suppression of images. At the present historical moment such a desire seems anachronistic, if not inconceivable. We live in a cross-cultural, global world where images prevail above all else. Images are the sites of some of the most heated contemporary conflicts, where some of the fiercest political and ideological debates are engaged. Witness the Abu Ghraib photographs, the Muhammad cartoons, the visual images of the 9/11 attacks, and the fascination with video images in the first Gulf War. The dominance of images is apparent in virtually all spheres of life – in politics, in commerce, as well as in academic circles, where there has been a noticeable turn away from the traditional practices of interpreting texts toward the reading of images. Along with Martin Jay's critical account of the disparagement of vision in twentieth-century French thought (*Downcast Eyes)*, there has been a plethora of books heralding the "visual turn" in criticism. Witness Norman Bryson's anthology *Visual Culture*, W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, as well as books by Jonathan Crary *(Techniques of the Observer*), David Michael Levin (*Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*), and others.

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[2] "Nur als aesthetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechfertigt." *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), p. 47.

[3] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

There is no doubt that we need to establish the role of aesthetics in the context of this culture of images, but in order to do so we also need to reflect critically on the received understanding of Plato's critique and, in the process, to place our thinking about images in relation to what we understand about the paradigm of production, which lies in different ways at the heart of Plato's thought and of modern views. Thus one part of my argument (which would take more space to demonstrate than is available) is that the contemporary culture of images evolved as the successor to the culture of industrial production, which it has nonetheless not left entirely behind. Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Baudrillard in *Simulations*, and Žižek in *Welcome to the Dessert of the Real!* already began to see that we need to expand and modify the Marxist understanding of industrial- and commodity-production in order to take into account the fact that simulations now provide grounding for the real. Especially in Baudrillard and Debord it is clear that the primary object of production is no longer the manufactured commodity but the image; the commodity simply provides a support that the image requires. But so too Jameson in his essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" spoke of the consequences for politics of this "cultural form of image addiction": a distorted understanding of the past and a stunted sense of any transformative hope for the future ("transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project").[4]

But in spite of what these analyses have shown we still need better ways to deal with the de-centered and mostly globalized frameworks within which production has evolved in the new image-world. Marx already wrote of circulation as "the movement in which general alienation appears as general appropriation, and general appropriation as general alienation." He went on to explain that "because circulation is a totality of the social process, it is also the first form in which not only the social relation appears as something independent of the individuals as, say, in a coin or an exchange value, but the whole of the social movement itself."[5] (Cf. Debord: "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.")[6] But as a result of more recent developments, "pro-

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[4] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

[5] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), p. 180.

[6] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 12.

duction" has become an aesthetic paradigm that incorporates the reproduction, dissemination, and transmission of images as well as their production. The term "aesthetics" here is not indexed philosophically in terms of beauty or art, but rather in terms of the world of appearances as determined by the pre-existing formation of commodity production (Debord: "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image").[7]

One could thus imagine a view in which the widespread interest in Nietzsche's revindication of appearances is in fact a symptom of the commodified image-world. The parallel question is whether a critical aesthetic theory can adopt Plato's radical alternative. Certain aspects of Plato's critique of images are so well known as to require only a brief summary here, but in other respects Plato's views have been subjected to a long history of mis-interpretation. In a notorious passage in the *Republic*, X, Plato described the painted image of a bed as a degraded and inferior copy of an ideal form – a version of the truth twice removed. If the idea of bed is, as a form, eternal, and so if made at all then made by a god, then what a carpenter makes is a copy of this form, and what a painter produces is a copy of a copy that would seem to have the weakest claim of all on the status of truth. Beyond this, Plato sustains a distinction between the making that is proper to artifacts and the process of emergence by which the things of nature come forth. Stanley Rosen explained that

> the god does not stand to the idea of the bed and the constructed bed as he stands to the Idea of the cow and the existing cow. By making the idea of the cow, the god also makes cows. But by making the idea of the bed, the god does not also make beds […]. There is as it were an *ontological* difference between the two kinds of work, natural and technical or demiurgic.[8]

Moreover, it seems that the makers of such second- and third-order images – painters, poets, and the like – do not provide anything we might really want to know about the things they copy. Following Plato's argument, we would consult a physician rather than a painter if we wanted to know the truth about the workings of the human body in order to cure the illnesses that afflict it, and we could consult an engineer if we wanted to construct a bridge that would withstand the forces of an earthquake. The implication is that the physician has some genuine knowledge of the body, and the engi-

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[8] Stanley Rosen, *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 17.

neer some genuine knowledge of bridges, whereas the painter merely knows something about the *appearance* (the "look") of the body or the bridge. (The philosopher claims to know something higher and truer than painters, physicians, engineers, or anyone else.) Moreover, it seems to Plato that those who are expert in making images in words – the poets, and especially the *tragic* poets – are inclined to produce images that arouse passions and are untruthful in what they say about the gods. For these reasons, and for others articulated elsewhere in the dialogues, Plato is skeptical about the role of images in politics and in political education.

So much is widely accepted. But, as Iris Murdoch pointed out in *The Fire and the Sun*, Plato never *banished* the poets from the state. He simply proposed leading them towards the edge. Plato distinguished between good poetry and bad, and suggested that a reformed kind of poetry might have an important role to play in political education. Indeed, how *could* Plato reasonably exclude poetry on the grounds that it is a discourse of images (albeit of images made in words), since his own dialogues, the *Republic* included, depend heavily on images in order to lead souls, through a process of *psychagogia*, to an understanding of the truth? In fact, Plato's understanding of what counts as "truth" is unimaginable apart from the imagistic discourse that carries it. Think of the image of the divided line, or of the fire that casts shadows on the wall of the cave, or of the sound-image of the cicadas in the *Phaedrus*, or of the mental picture of the charioteer and his horses in the passage of the *Republic* where Plato describes the different parts of the soul. Similar examples could be multiplied at great length. Choose almost any Platonic dialogue and, at its heart, there lies a constellation of images that is central to Plato's understanding of the truth.[9]

How then can we reconcile Plato's reliance on images in his philosophical practice with his apparent censure of images in the philosophical theory of the *Republic,* and what can this tell us about the postmodern desire to "overturn" Plato? In order to pursue these questions it is useful to look at a crucial dialogue on this subject, the *Sophist*. Here, Plato is interested in establishing the difference between sophists and philosophers – a difference that turns in large measure on the images that each of them deploys. The *Sophist*

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[9] The dramatic form of Plato's dialogues has been commented upon by a distinguished line of philosophers and critics, among them Paul Friedlander, H. G. Gadamer, and Leo Strauss. More recently see Giovanni Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Andrea Nightingale Wilson, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Jill Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy: Literary Device and Dramatic Structure in Plato's Dialogues* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

relies centrally on the trope of hunting: the dialogue separates the *technē* of production and acquisition and then distinguishes among various forms of acquisition, including the acquisition of knowledge. Hunting is regarded as a particular means of acquiring. This is relevant to the central topic of the dialogue because Plato imagines that the search for the identity of the sophist is a kind of hunt, and a particularly difficult one since the sophist seems so closely to resemble the philosopher. Plato's success in establishing the identity of philosophy depends critically on the success of this hunt.

One might well expect that the difference between the sophist and the philosopher would turn on the fact that the one deals in images while the other does not. But this is not in fact the case. Indeed, philosophy *must* be imagistic and the philosopher must use images, if only because knowledge is discursive and discourse is itself comprised of verbal images (εἴδωλα). The difference between philosophy and sophistry lies in the fact that the philosopher is said to offer images that are true while the sophist offers images that are misleading and false.[10] In Plato's view, this is the difference between *icons* and *phantasms*: an *icon* is a true image whereas a *phantasm* is false. And while Plato clearly believes that one can recognize the difference between icons and phantasms, he does not offer an analytical method for distinguishing between them; he offers no set of procedures to serve as a sorting mechanism independent of the *intuition* on which this distinction is based. In other words, a crucial difference between philosophy and sophistry depends upon a faculty that cannot be explained philosophically *if* we view the task of philosophy as an account of the truth that is both internally consistent and complete. On the contrary, the practice of philosophy requires an ability to distinguish between true and false images that has some form of intuition as its final ground. Understood in this sense, philosophy resembles what Blaise Pascal called the *esprit de finesse* more than the *esprit géometrique,* and is related to the classical theory of aesthetic taste that one finds in a philosopher such as Kant. Better said, philosophy requires both an *esprit de finesse* and an *esprit géometrique* as well as the capacity to determine their appropriate roles and measure in any given situation. But this is a matter of wisdom, and for wisdom there is by definition no analytical procedure.

Before discussing some of the questions that this view raises for contemporary aesthetic theory, I would point out one important corollary of what has been said so far. What is regarded by Plato as true in the deepest sense

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[10] See *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 235d–236c. See also Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

is not a state of affairs or a set of propositions, but the whole. Philosophy is for Plato an articulation of the dream of the whole. The *polis* is one example of the whole, but is not itself the whole. Because even true statements must be *other* than and external to what they describe, discourse is by definition a part or a fragment, a view or perspective on the whole. The identification of truth *itself* with perspective in fact occurs much later, though well before Nietzsche (e.g. in Spinoza.) The Platonic dialogues are best viewed as key examples of such partial discourses insofar as they offer literary-dramatic perspectives from which Plato views the whole. Moreover, the fact that philosophy proceeds by images and deals in icons is not just something that happens to be valid for Plato's dialogues by way of accident or circumstance but is also, according to the implications of the dialogues, something that must *necessarily* be true of philosophy itself. Contrary to the received understanding of Plato's views, this is because philosophy can claim no *direct* access to the true nature of things, but can only present the truth by means of images. Hence the various narratives (*mythoi*), dramas, and image-forms that Plato relies on in order to disclose the truth.

And yet various forms of philosophy since Plato have ignored this fundamental insight and instead have attempted to speak in a language that is true in some direct and non-imagistic fashion – in a language that strives to be coherent and complete in itself. Modern philosophy's infatuation with formal logic and mathematics can be understood this way. A rather vivid version of this philosophical dream is articulated in the writings of Descartes, whose explicit goal was to model philosophy along the lines of mathematics. Insofar as Descartes hoped in so doing to purge philosophy of the distortions he associated with certain kinds of images (fictions), he set a path for modern Western philosophy that, unlike Plato, is fundamentally iconoclastic. The form of iconoclasm that is at issue here needs to be understood in the broad sense of the term described above – as involving the suppression of images. Its mathematical pretensions are indicative insofar as mathematics is conceived as a discipline in which the truth appears directly to intuition. Not surprisingly, this iconoclastic bias has had consequences for the ways in which modern philosophy tends to view literature. In modern Western thinking, Plato's original distinction between phantasms and icons was replaced by the distinction between *fiction* and *philosophy*. It is, of course, this distinction that contemporary aesthetics in the Nietzschean vein has been striving to overcome. But the realities are more complicated, both because of what philosophical discourse in the manner of Descartes reveals as a practice and because of what it wrongly assumes about Plato.

I have elsewhere commented that Descartes articulates an anti-aesthet-

ic ideology that he scarcely adheres to in his own philosophical practice.[11] There is an even more pronounced divergence between philosophical practice and philosophical theory in Descartes than there is in Plato. (After all, Plato never attempted to present an account of how a "first philosophy" would function.) Although Descartes desires to model philosophy along the lines of mathematics and so to suppress images, his own discourse is richly imagistic. The *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method* both rely so centrally on a series of images as to seem literary-poetic in nature. Think of the image of Descartes sitting in his dressing gown, by the fire in the stove-heated room; or of his description of the wax that softens and releases its aroma as he brings it near the warmth of the fire; or of falling into a whirlpool of water where he can neither reach the bottom nor swim to the top. But because the images of the Cartesian texts have so often been suppressed by interpreters, the postmodern critique of Descartes is better understood as a critique of Cartesianism than of Descartes – and in roughly the same way that the postmodern critique of Western metaphysics is more a critique of Platonism than of Plato. These critiques are nonetheless relevant because they were embraced as part of the history of Western philosophy by a number of influential post-Cartesian (hence post-Platonic) thinkers. Hegel's views of Descartes in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* were crucial in this process, but I would also cite Wittgenstein's definition of the world as "all that is the case" in the *Tractatus* and his concomitant relegation to silence of everything that cannot be grasped in these terms. Hegel himself recognized the limitations of mathematical cognition and conceived of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as meeting goals that mathematics could not fulfill.[12] His aim was for the *Phenomenology* to be more encompassing, hence more true (and more "scientific"), than mathematics. And yet it is apparent that even in Hegel's version the Absolute cannot encompass the whole. This is so if only because the Absolute cannot contain entry into itself; it must in fact *begin*. It is little surprise, then, that a thinker like Adorno attempted to stand the Hegelian dialectic on its head; central to the "negative dialectic" is Adorno's association of the whole with the untrue.[13] And yet the principle of negative dialec-

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[11] See Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[12] Hegel describes the limitations of mathematical cognition in the *Phenomenology*, par. 42–46. For example: "philosophical cognition includes both [existence and essence], whereas mathematical cognition sets forth only the genesis of the *existence*, i.e. the *being* of the nature of the thing in *cognition* as such." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 24.

[13] See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1979).

tics carries the iconoclasm of modern philosophy forward while inverting the relationship between the whole and the true.

There is no doubt that Plato's distinction between a world of appearances and a world of ideas had an important bearing on Descartes' thinking, just as it informed Kant's distinction between the phenomena and things-in-themselves. And yet the hope to eliminate images from philosophy, and the relegation of such things as freedom and the will to the realm of silence, were never among Plato's goals. (Plato's aim was rather to preserve a distinction between image and original, and in this he differs profoundly from postmodern, alias Nietzschean, aesthetics.) The question of *how* Plato's views about images became distorted is nonetheless a complex story; it begins already with Aristotle. Granted that Aristotle preserves something of Plato's insights into the limitations of pure analysis and recognizes that wisdom must include different forms of cognition. For instance, Aristotle sustains the need to distinguish between the fitting and the true when he describes the various forms of knowledge and their appropriate degrees of certainty in connection with different modes of inquiry at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. And yet, as a metaphysician, Aristotle exhibits a clear and strong preference for a discourse that is self-contained and analytical. As Rosen observes, it makes no difference whether the designation "metaphysics" derives from Aristotle himself or not, "metaphysics as we know it (but not necessarily as it ought to be known) is a product of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition, not of Platonism."[14] It culminates in the philosophical treatise rather than in the dialogue, in narrative, or any other image-laden mode of discourse. The treatise suits metaphysics insofar as it provides "demonstrative knowledge, via predicative discourse, of pure forms."[15]. Aristotle's account of predication in the *Categories* establishes him as a precursor of modern philosophy's "linguistic turn," which adheres to metaphysics in spite of its emphasis on language.

Aristotle's work eventually had a profound effect on the interpretation of Plato. Indeed, with Plotinus it was assumed that Aristotle was one of the most effective expositors of Plato's thought. As Lloyd Gerson remarks, this was in part because Aristotle was assumed to know Plato's philosophy, including the "unwritten teachings," first-hand and to have recorded it. In addition, early Greek historians of philosophy tell that Plotinus' teacher, Ammonius Saccas, was among those who assumed that Aristotle's philosophy was consistent with Platonism. This did not preclude disagreements be-

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[14] Rosen, *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image*, p. 30.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

tween Aristotle and Plato nor did it prevent misunderstandings of Plato on Aristotle's part. Nevertheless, Plotinus' adoption of many Aristotelian arguments seems less puzzling when we realize that he took these as compatible with Platonism and as useful for articulating Plato's position, especially in areas where Plato was not explicit.[16]

Owing in part to the reception of Plotinus during the Renaissance, the interest in images in the "neo-platonic" tradition adopted a strangely mystical understanding of Plato's distinction between appearances and ideas and assumed a hyperbolic interpretation of Plato's arguments about beauty and the soul. (The text of Plotinus' *Enneads*, rediscovered by Ficino, was crucial in this history.) If one adds to this neo-platonism an overlay of the Scholastic reading of Aristotle and, beyond that, a dose of the Renaissance re-reading of Plato that concentrated on the *Symposium* rather than the *Republic*, it is not hard to understand how, by the time modern philosophy began, this accretion of commentary and mixing of sources had so seriously distorted Plato's views that the entire tradition seemed in need of new foundations by a "scientifically" inclined philosopher such as Descartes. It was the modern, scientific version of fundamental ontology, grounded in epistemology, against which Nietzsche was largely reacting when he spoke of reversing "Plato" in the name of overcoming metaphysics. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for instance, Socrates is targeted as a new type of "theoretical" man ("*den Typus des theoretischen Menschen*").[17]

Moreover, Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics depends upon a response to Plato that is at best contradictory in its invocation of aesthetics. The alliance between postmodern philosophy and aesthetics is equally paradoxical in ways that reflect the Nietzschean roots of contemporary thought. Both are committed to "aesthetic" principles even while they deny the existence of a self-contained aesthetic sphere. In the case of aesthetic theory, there is general acceptance of Arthur Danto's view that, while not everything is a work of art, *anything can be* a work of art. (It is worth remembering that among Danto's early works is a book on Nietzsche.)[18] For Nietzsche, the issue was more "existential." As noted above, his conclusion in *The Birth of Tragedy* was that life itself could be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. The point is that the turn towards aesthetics depends upon a de-definition of the aesthetic sphere, which is to say, upon a gesture that *releases aesthetics from* the confines of art even while it *absorbs life into* an aesthetic sphere.

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[16] Lloyd Gerson, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Plotinus," (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plotinus/).

[17] Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, p. 98; my emphasis.

[18] Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: MacMillan, 1965).

These apparent contradictions are somewhat more intelligible if we place the postmodern (Nietzschean) engagement with Plato in the context of the social and material worlds in which it has taken root, i.e. in light of the cultural pre-eminence of the image. Images in contemporary culture are not just everywhere – on every surface and in every medium, saturating every space – but occupy a place that is *in advance* of the thing itself. The processes of globalization seem to count on what we might call, after Baudrillard, the "precession" of the image, meaning that the image precedes the real not just temporally but ontologically.[19] The physical space of Times Square has been transformed into a collage of digital surface-images; nearly every building there has become de-materialized, its interior functions subordinated to the display of capital on its video-façade (advertising images, multinational power, and seduction). The most "ordinary" cellular phones function as cameras; they show video clips, transmit text, and allow access to the image-rich content of the internet. "Personal" music devices (I-Pods etc.) now capture televised images for consumption "on the go." One of the grandest and most beautiful natural wonders in China, the Jouzhaigou Valley, announces itself to the visitor on large-scale exterior screens that project, among other things, images of the park itself. These simulacra have the effect not only of announcing (or advertising) the real, but of legitimizing it. Wrapped around Motorola's China headquarters is a 13-story poster, and Pepsi qualified for a Guinness record for the largest tri-vision outdoor billboard in Chongqing with a Gatorade advertisement that measured 108 x 295 feet. There is talk of installing the largest video screen ever in the Gargantuan (7.3 million square feet) Golden Resources shopping mall outside Beijing – a screen some 30 x 250 meters in size that will form an artificial sky over this enormous mall. For good or for ill, the visual turn in criticism, and the aesthetic turn in theory, coincide with the rise of this brave new image-world.

Already in 1983 Baudrillard wrote of the "induction," "infiltration," and "illegible violence" of the media.[20] The question now facing aesthetics is whether it can respond *critically* and not merely with fascination or cynicism to a culture that increasingly understands itself as producing, and as produced by, images. I would recall Jameson's critique of "the complacent (yet delirious) camp-following celebration" of this aesthetic new world" even while recognizing the power of current fantasies about the "salvational nature of high technology, from chips to robots."[21] The question for a critical

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[19] Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations*.
[20] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 55.
[21] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 46.

aesthetic theory is whether we can identify some "'moment of truth' within the more evident 'moments of falsehood'" of this culture."[22]

If there is to be any hope of doing so we need first to re-establish the links between the postmodern culture of images and the paradigm of production. I would argue that Western modernity and its successor, postmodernism, is at once a historical frame and a cultural field in which the paradigm of production prevails. This holds true both intellectually and in social and material terms. The productionist idea has a long history, going back to Plato, whose discussion of poiēsis was part of a critique of productionism that pits him against modern thinkers. Indeed, Plato and Kant share less in this regard than Kant and Marx. For it was with Kant that philosophy came to recognize that we truly can know only that which we make. For Marx, human beings produce not unilaterally but universally; production is self-production. More strongly stated, the fundamental form of human production in Western modernity is history.[23] Within the framework of history as it is understood in modernity, one can interpret actions as fitting or just, and one can assess their sense by reference to narrative forms and frames (as in Hayden White's account in *Metahistory*). These principles of judgment, taste, and form rely on the premise that there is no place *outside* of history from which to evaluate it. Kant recognized this much in his essay "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" Indeed, since the modern understanding of production accepts the view that history constitutes the whole, there is no possibility that there could exist any "other" domain to which its discourse might appeal. History is the whole, and it is produced.

To situate images within the historical sphere is, first of all, to recognize that they too are produced. This much seems uncontroversial. Yet I would argue that the contemporary culture of images also marks a fundamental transformation within the paradigm of production. We live at a moment when images are not merely the products of human activity (history) but also play an integral role in producing it. The result is a new, more fluid sense of the grounding of the "real" in the image. In part for this reason critical practice can no longer be oriented around a historicism that is wedded to familiar forms of materialism, in part because the object of critique for classical materialism referred to a "real" that was grounded in the categories of time, space, and matter. Its goal was to bring the productionist paradigm,

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[23] See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 391.

in its full historical-materialist dimension, to light. By contrast, the contemporary culture of images takes as its point of departure a shift in both the ordinary and the philosophical suppositions of an equivalence between the "real" and the temporal, spatial, and material world. In spite of the fact that the image cannot in the end escape the coordinates of time, space, and matter, it offers a de-materialized, pseudo-transcendent version of the material world. Classical Marxism allowed us to grasp the conditions by which an automobile is produced (labor, time, materials, capital, etc.), whereas a recent Mercedes advertisement proposes "You're not buying a car. You're buying a belief." We require a critique of image-production, and not merely of production in the old sense, in order to deal with such circumstances. And yet, this brave new image-world is one in which the effects of earlier, materialist modes of production have left indelible traces, which is also to say that it is a world in which the alienated forms of labor and disenchanted forms of social interaction derived from the era of industrial capitalism have assumed a surprising degree of permanence and an appearance of normativity. When Jameson writes that the postmodern world is affectless, and that anxiety and alienation are no longer relevant,[24] he means to describe the displacement of modernism's alienation by a new sense of fragmentation. But the fragmentation of the subject is something for which, I would argue, the alienation of commodity production is a precondition.

The question is whether the "revival" of aesthetics can offer grounds for a critical understanding of such matters. Or is aesthetics merely content to cordon off a sphere for "art" so as to avoid these questions? The sources of a critical posture that might measure up to these challenges are admittedly difficult to find. The orthodox reading of Plato does offer one basis for a critical response to the new image-world, but is hardly without drawbacks. While Plato accepts the view that we have no direct access to originals, but only to images, he also hopes to judge images true or false depending on whether they resemble (are justly proportional to) the originals which they represent. For Plato, the relationship between image and truth is analogous to the relationship between icon and original. And, as I suggested above, the Platonic understanding of originals carries with it a view that is at odds with the ways in which the contemporary world has come to experience itself as an *effect* of production. Moreover, Plato's view seems unable to shed its intellectual elitism; it seems reliant on the anti-democratic belief that the ability to grasp the truth is not shared equally among all individuals but is the province of a privileged (philosophical) few. It is no surprise that Plato's

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[24] Jameson, p. 14.

ideal state is ruled by a king – a philosopher-king, to be sure, but a king just the same.

Where then to turn? To recap, my own view is that the contemporary culture of images represents a heightened, extreme, transformed version of the paradigm of production, and ought to be considered within this framework. As sketched out above, this means not just that the image world is *produced* but that what is produced is *primarily* an image-world, not social or material reality. Whereas in Plato the image could be redeemed insofar as it was a truthful semblance of the eternal forms, we live in a culture where the image-domain claims to constitute the truth, which it also puts in brackets, as "truth." The image suggests itself as all-encompassing in a way that displaces or subordinates the claims of the social, the material, and the natural, not to mention the true. In Jameson's analysis, this resulted first in a new aesthetic emphasis on what he called the machines of *re*production:

> not the turbine, nor even Sheeler's grain elevators or smokestacks, not the baroque elaboration of pipes and conveyor belts, nor even the streamlined profile of the railroad train [...] but rather the computer, whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power [...]. Such machines are indeed machines of reproduction rather than of production.[25]

Twenty-five years later we can see that the computer has come to serve as a new (i.e. post-filmic) kind of "apparatus" for image-support.[26] Hence the confluence of computer monitor and flat-screen t.v., not to mention all other manner of computer-powered image-devices (mp3 players, web-enabled mobile phones, portable/personal dvd payers).

To understand the image-domain as a transformation of the paradigm of production in turn allows us to locate some points of engagement for a critical response to it. Plato thought that images could be truthful resemblances of inaccessible originals, but now the question for aesthetics is as much to discover what the image-world renders *in*visible. What, in spite of the pervasive appeal to the visual, is necessarily excluded from its view? I would identify the following points as necessary considerations for any further development of an aesthetic critique of the image-world, and likewise as central to the viability of aesthetics as a critical enterprise in an age where aesthetic theory can no longer essentially be linked exclusively to art:

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 36–7.
[26] See the essays in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

1. That the seepage of images every area of contemporary life – the saturation of life by image – means that there is no longer a separate aesthetic sphere for aesthetic theory to address. Aesthetics is at once everywhere and nowhere.

2. That with the advent of the image-world the material basis of making has given way to increasingly diffuse forms of production. Accordingly, historical materialism needs to be supplemented by a critical response to the de-materialized forms of production that prevail today.

3. That the media by which images are transmitted are increasingly hybrid in their nature because they are increasingly de-coupled from their materials. The de-differentiation of the aesthetic sphere in turn means that the medium-bound specificity of the arts is indeed a thing of the past. The question raised by Jean-Luc Nancy – "Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One?"[27] – needs to be re-phrased around the new hybridization of the media.

4. That production is increasingly de-centered and globalized, and that the forms of agency associated with it are structural and diffuse rather than punctual. Rather than continue to think of the effects of image-making in terms of mass culture and collective agency, aesthetics must take structural agency into account and come to grips with the forms of power that sustain it.

5. That the moments of transmission, communication, and dissemination all form part of the paradigm of production, and are not mere appendages to it.

6. That images have come to challenge some basic assumptions about the categories of time and space. Increasingly, the force of images depends no so much upon their impact in a given place or at a given time, but upon the velocity of their circulation from place to place. Theoretically, this means recognizing the ways in which the rate of circulation and velocity of images provides an aesthetic grounding of the real.

7. If aesthetics seems now to require a critique of images, as distinct from the criticism of texts or works, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics needs likewise to be re-thought by asking about what images say above and beyond what they show, and likewise what they require. As a paradigm of response, the ideal of universal judgment drawn from Kant needs to be revised. The task is not so much to locate the grounds for universal judgment

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[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–39.

but to find the means to question the images that present themselves *as if* with the force of universal assent.

8. In conclusion I would propose that earlier views of globalization, as well as the strategy of "cognitive mapping" that Jameson developed, in part at least as a response to it, were overly confident about the enduring qualities of space. To be sure, there was never any sense that a new aesthetic (of practice or of theory) would invite a return to some older geographical or nation-based notion of space, but would have to respond to the world-space of multinational capital and its flows. Jameson believed that this space would bring a breakthrough to "some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing [...] in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle."[28] The political form of postmodernism, he went on to say, would have as its vocation "the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale."[29] Nearly a quarter of a century later we can see that these "new modes of representing" have indeed arrived, and that their form is the electronic production, dissemination, and communication of images. We can furthermore claim that these new modes of representing have transformed some of the foundations of the production of the "real." Now, more than ever before, art finds itself faced with the challenge of representing time in the absence of space, and vice-versa, of acting in space where the nearly simultaneity of reception all but obliterates time. The task that is yet to be accomplished for aesthetic theory is to incorporate such concepts as the "circulation" and "flow" of images and to engage critically with these in the face of a world that has been fundamentally transformed by this latest turn in the production paradigm.

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[28] Jameson, p. 54.
[29] *Ibid.*