

IN VALÉRY'S *POIESIS*, THE VERTIGO OF THE DIGIT, MEMORY AND FORGETFULNESS

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ABSTRACT: The article presents a parallel between the processes of making art based on Paul Valéry's *poiesis*, and attempts to establish a parallel between the digital models of decomposition and unfolding of the digital image and the weaves of simultaneous elements that occur in the process of making art. It seeks, in the dialectic relation between memory and forgetfulness, gaps and holes to deal with a process of artistic mutation.

KEYWORDS: Memory. Forgetfulness. Photography. Digital image.

Paul Valéry (1871-1945) passed away long before the beginning of the digital era, but his thoughts are impregnated with foresight to some of the key issues developed by the concepts of multiple, repetition and memory, besides other theoretical elements present in the particularity of the digital image and new technologies in art. For Valéry, the very meaning behind the making of art — *poiesis* — involves language as both substance and medium (Valéry, 1938). The repetition, imitation, recompositions and unfoldings, the tools, the data of culture and the medium, procedures, instruments of creation, objects of the study of *poiesis*, wind up finding a surprising parallel in the model of numbers and data of the digital era. Don't the multiple elements present in the invention and elaboration of poetics anticipate the repetitions, codes and calculations of a language that ultimately remains connected to form?

It is not difficult to associate the process of creation, as epistemological and semiotic structure, to the severe numeric plots of the digital image. They both involve the simultaneous possibility of data analysis, which has its source in an archeology of knowledge, of memory. However, I do not intend here to suspend from Valéry's huge dimension of thought this similarity of models between the plots of *poiesis* ("the art of doing") and the digital model of the

grid. It is in the repetition of the multiple, in memory and the imminent possibility of its loss — forgetfulness — that the parallels and similarities can be found. I attempt to draw a correspondence of the characteristics that specify the digital age within the substance of spirit of Valéry's poetry.

Numerical plots, vertigos of abstract signs, repetitions and codes. The multiple variations of graphical scores and the colors of combinations and models cause a rupture between silver image and digital image. Mathematized and calculated in repetitions and associations, the digital image is structured in a way that allows the simulation and modification of parts of an image's whole. Aren't these the particularities that caused a crisis of the document, of its supposed veracity as witness? Dominique Baqué speaks of contemporary photography as an "iconic device", because the advent of the digital allowed the emergence of complex devices of manipulation and presentation of the image. This implied in the emergence of a new aesthetics, based on the failure of the testimony of History and the absence of documental authenticity (Baqué, 2002, p. 38-41). According to the author, this element opens an era of suspicion on the image as a document of collective memory. It also opens way for an individual, involuntary memory, much appreciated by Marcel Proust (1995) and to the resulting fictionalization of photography by art. The artist using new technologies works with mathematical codes which he replicates, combines and organizes, manipulating them in a language that remains connected to form, but works disregarding the real as a commitment of model. Digital images can be decomposed, recomposed, modified, and falsified, always in strict observance of mathematics. It is a rhythmic movement that relies on memory; the powerful memory of the machine. And here lies the factor of lack of commitment with the factual, with collective memory. Could the liberation of the image from the chains of collective memory in the direction of personal recollection indicate its double face: of a potentially positive forgetfulness, as Valéry mentioned?

CURATIVE FORGETFULNESS AND THE DIGITAL WAVE

The lapses that roam around the digital image like a threat are the risks of imminent memory loss. The involuntary deletion, be it by human error or power failure or a failure in a machine's memory storage device, as would occur with the fire risk in a large library, bring upon this counterpoint. They are elements also present in the dialectics of the poetic experience that work against forgetfulness and at the same time in the possibility of relying on forgetfulness to be able to create. Alongside his poetic body of work, Valéry presents

a large critical work on memory and forgetfulness. According to Harald Weinrich, Valéry played all his life with the idea of drawing a wide memory theory to study the laws of the mysterious ability of remembering and establishing the frontiers with the possibility of forgetting (Weinrich, 2001, p. 202-203).

Weinrich selects some elements of Paul Valéry's *Cahiers*, which represent this critique of memory in the image of a parrot (in French *perroquet*). The bird is presented as a foolish animal, but possessing an extraordinary memory (like a machine). And if it has the astuteness and virtuousness of repetition, it is also synonymous of a critique to the same vice of repetition. The author emphasizes that Valéry apparently hated the repetition of grandiose words such as "spirit", "personality", "hope", "universe", "nature", which we use in speech and writing many times without thinking. And he stresses that the forgetfulness of these empty repetitions would bring about a chance to free the memory of useless content, in a process of curative, utilitarian forgetfulness, opening the way for intellectual creation. Couldn't a comparison be established here among silver photography's testimony of history (collective memory) and the fabricated recollection of digital photography, emerged exactly from the forgetfulness of the need to repeat history?

In *L'Idée fixe*, Valéry interprets Daniel Defoe's famous character Robinson Crusoe. For Valéry, Robinson did not lose only his possessions and objects of civilization in the shipwreck episode or in the deserted island where he had to live. By effect of an enormous wave (the analogy with the "digital wave" is mine), the character loses part of his historical memory. And for Valéry, it was only when unburdened of so much of his memory's useless content that Robinson could reconstruct culture, with much superior limits than the old culture he previously possessed. Only then could Robinson find his memory, in an island, inside his renovated mind; by forgetting in order to restart life in his island.

SURFACES OF PROJECTION AND INSCRIPTION: THE SKIN, THE SAND, THE RUINS

Inscriptions in the sand, on the surface of the skin, waves. Metaphors of photography faced with new technologies, the same employed by Valéry. *L'Idée Fixe*, written in 1932, also brings a dialogue between a young man and a physician he meets in a sandy beach. Here Valéry writes a sentence that would become famous, always reminded in the so-called surface arts, like photography: "*Ce qu'il y a de plus profond dans l'homme c'est la peau*" ("the most profound thing about people is their skin"). Scars, surfaces of inscription and

outbursts, sand — elements of memory, photography and forgetfulness. We obviously cannot revoke collective memory, forgetting the cultural relevance of history, as many times we cannot erase scars from the skin. Even by retouching, either epidermal or analogical. Maybe we could erase the marks of the digital image without leaving traces. But wouldn't the overwhelming "weight" attributed to silver photography (of photojournalism from the era of the photographer - hero-witness) as formative image of history, with its heavy burden of reestablishing collective memory, be lifted from the shoulders of photography with the advent of the digital era? Writing on the sand, or in fragile layers of sand, is a possible metaphor of digital photography and forgetfulness. The artist's personal recollection would be formed between amnesties and amnesias, grids of combination and recombination of memory and forgetfulness.

Ruins in the desert. We can establish a relation between deletion, the ruins of collective memory, and the possibility of the dream, the change, the reaction of a private recollection that represents the making of a work of art, bringing again an idea so dear to Valéry. A deletion that restores as it offers a rediscovery of something. When something that was written on paper or sand is erased, it is deleted. Thus, the delete button has become one of the most important buttons in the computer. But woe to us if it is used in the wrong moment. Loss is the grave, the black hole. It is the death of the intellectual work in the tomb of forgetfulness. And here is where the double face reveals itself: the technique to overcome it and the critique in wanting to overcome it. Man needs to combat and at the same time rely on forgetfulness. Contradictory duplicities, like building/destroying. Weinrich teaches us that Lethe, goddess of memory and forgetfulness, was a Greek deity, and like all deities, was ambiguous to her relation with mankind. There is, therefore, a positive forgetfulness, in many aspects similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900)¹ healing forgetfulness. Therefore, an enlightened forgetfulness can exist. For Dante, hell was destined for the sinners that forgot God. But images, like photography, can be neither too dark nor too illuminated. Too much light damages memory. In the Divine Comedy, the contents of memory are conceived mnemonically — images placed in certain places. For Simonides, the artist of memory is someone who establishes a fixed constellation of places. An ordinate sequence of content transformed into images resides in these places. The artist of memory needs to invoke a series of images from memory. Therefore, this art always acts within

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Friedrich Nietzsche, *Extraneous considerations*, quoted by Weinrich, 2001, p. 178

a landscape of memory, and in this landscape, everything that needs to be remembered has its specific place. Only forgetfulness has no place there. But forgetfulness for Dante can be a redeemer, for it “removes from our memory the sins committed”. The souls in purgatory rely on forgetfulness — an amnesty from God.

Sand, desolate places, places of deletion. Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), in *Babel's Library*, also anticipates the advent of the digital age. Couldn't such library, with its infinite knowledge as imagined by Borges, be analogous with the internet's vast domain of storage and sharing of memory? But for the Argentinean writer, forgetfulness is materialized in the time that slips away. His favorite symbol is the hourglass, in whose river of sand can also be read the incantation of Lethe's torrent, the river of forgetfulness. The sand clears the content of memory. Sand is the dust that transforms earthly things into nothing, into nobody.

For philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), too much memory represented little discernment. It is a fact that some sciences depend more on memory than others. But for Kant, the critical philosopher feels better in forgetfulness than in memorizations. Doesn't the use of memory devices and interactive mechanisms of new technologies, like digital images, represent, in this sense, a phenomenon of rupture, freeing the artist from the need to rely on memory, leaving his imagination closer to a state of creative disengagement? The advent of new technologies could thus allow a return to Valéry's concepts of *poesis*, redefining the phenomena of elaboration and making of art, in an era of ruptures of the symbols of collective memory, in favor of a hiatus of the artist's private recollection.

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