

Faithful and Disappointing: Reflections on the *Idea of Idola*

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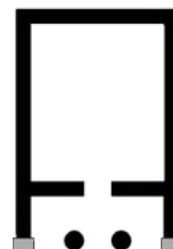
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Faithful and Disappointing: Reflections on the *Idea* of the *Idola*

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In these images—if indeed that is what they are—there is perhaps everything. Life, death, culture, science, truth, falsity, certainly; but more than all of this, one might decipher what has portentously been called ‘the whole that acts in every instant and every phenomenon’.¹ We begin with the particulars, as indeed we must, in the no doubt forlorn hope of saying everything.²

What we see, without ever really seeing, without ever being in a position to say ‘I see’ in a way that attends to the formation of an idea, a seeing, in other words, that is conditional upon a certain blindness, are photographs that have been manipulated into composite images that distort and disfigure.³ ‘But o, photography! as no art is | Faithful and disappointing’, we might say, quoting Philip Larkin’s reaction upon looking through a young lady’s photograph album.⁴ But the implications of this claim might be more complex than they first appear. Is it ‘photography is faithful and disappointing as no other art is’? Or is it ‘Photography is faithful and disappointing and thus no art is, i.e. is not art’? In truth, there is little to choose between photography as art’s exception and photography as non-art; and, in the end, perhaps it is wisest simply to agree with Roland Barthes’ judgement that ‘Photography is an uncertain art’.⁵ In any case, quoting Barthes again, the photograph ‘is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see’.⁶ For Larkin, the photograph is ‘faithful and disappointing’ because it ‘records dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds’. Disappointing, then, because it is faithful, because of its fidelity, because of its truth, because the camera does not lie. The implicit Platonism of Larkin’s verse is that art is not disappointing—or at least not in the same way as photography—precisely because of its infidelity, its faithlessness, its falsity, its lies.

¹ Novalis, quoted in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 355.

² This conceit of trying to say everything (*tout dire*) has been associated with literature by Jacques Derrida (*Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge [New York and London: Routledge, 1992], p. 36; *Passions* [Paris: Galilée, 1993], pp. 64-5). For a broader consideration of this idea, see Kevin Hart, ‘The Right to Say Everything’, *The European Legacy*, 9 (2004), 7-17.

³ It is not possible here, but there is a lot that could be said about the etymological links between *eidōs* (idea), *horao* (I see), and *oida* (I know).

⁴ Philip Larkin, ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Twaite (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003; and Victoria: The Marvell Press, 2003), 43-44, p. 43.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 18.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4.



Let us immediately establish some critical distance from this easy oppositionality between art and photography by briefly noting some of the ways these photographic images or idola that we have before us falsify and dissemble. Prominent in several of the images is a duck/rabbit-style illusion whereby a different image or idolum emerges as the result of an aspect shift in the viewer. This is immediately problematic for any theory of mimesis because it suggests that perception is not just a product of the particular external stimulus, but is also determined by mental activity. Can, then, photography be faithful? And to what? Let us bracket these questions for a moment and observe some of the perceptual play these images prompt. In the first image there is the unseeing idolum of Jorge Luis Borges, Tiresias-like but given a cyclopic oracular eye by Samuel Beckett. Somewhat amusingly, Borges seems to be smoking Beckett's cigarette. Jacques Derrida quizzically looks on. In the second picture, set against the gaze of Maurice Blanchot and the far-away look of Cormac McCarthy, who is staring, perhaps, into the outer dark, Alain Badiou appears transformed into Walter Benjamin—a violence neither of them could have foreseen. In the third idolum, Julian Barnes peers through spectacles of T.S. Eliot and Philip Larkin. Hélène Cixous presides over the fourth idolum as a Jewish Nefertiti, but what we realise, for the first time and with a sudden pang of delight, is that her hairstyle is Joycean—Cixous styles her hair after Joyce, so that from one angle Joyce in this idolum appears to have a peculiarly elongated head. Joyce and Cixous stare downwards, Joyce scholarly and confident, Cixous imperious; Kristeva, on the other hand, looks outward, anxious, beseeching, and with an earnestness that is cruelly and comically undercut by Joyce's tie, which seems to loll from her mouth like a grotesque tongue. More cruelty follows in the apparently joyous fifth idolum. Is there secrecy, perfidy and victimisation here or does the idolum lie? It seems mad—sheer lunacy—but is not Michel Foucault cupping his ear to encourage Edward Said to say something that can't quite be said, that Said cannot quite bring himself to say, about Judith Butler? Butler, with Christ-like compassion, sees, accepts and forgives this betrayal—it is not grievable...forgive them, mother, for they know not what they do, we might imagine her saying in the midst of this tableau. In the sixth picture a rather dejected Virginia Woolf, not quite of this world, looks sadly through her right eye, but more hopefully through a left eye lent to her by Toni Morrison. And is it a trick of the light, or does Salman Rushdie have the shadow of a Chaplinesque moustache, making him look decidedly more impish than usual? These are the various puncta that pierce (or 'lacerate', a word used by both Barthes and Larkin about photography) the studium, the field of the visual.

Then we remember: an idolum is more than just an image. The word can also signify an unsubstantial appearance, a spectre or a phantom, a false mental image or a fallacy—something Francis Bacon had much to say about.⁷ Idola, then, are untrue, deceptive—anything but faithful one might say. But that would be to move too quickly. Might an act, performance or depiction of deception and dissemblance not be regarded as faithful or true

⁷ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).







to something? When a liar lies, is he not being true to himself? Surely, that to which the idolum must be faithful determines the nature of that fidelity? In some cases, accurate mimicry or imitation might be more appropriate. That would assume a relatively stable referent and hermeneutic clarity. Might a different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions not call for a different sort of fidelity? Barthes remarks that ‘the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of “Look,” “See,” “Here it is”; it points its finger at a certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language’.⁸ What Barthes means is that ‘a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent’.⁹ In light of the idola reproduced here, we might say that this simply is not true. Here, the representation and the referent seem distinct. But are they? Might this not be to mistake the referent? There is, certainly, still the same photographic sense of immediacy, but with one notable and constitutive difference. Rather than being antiphonal of ‘Look, See, Here it is’, the idola seem to say ‘Look, See, Here it ISN’T’. Is there, then, a fidelity in these idola to a certain opacity, an invisibility, a faithfulness to impossibility? Not ‘faithful and disappointing’, but ‘faithful because disappointing’? In this sense they would not be considered false—misleading images, masking the truth, that is. Rather, these idola would be eide—or ideas—in their own right. Here I am using eidos or idea in the technical philosophical sense meaning ‘the presentation to itself of being or the thing’,¹⁰ the sense Hegel had in mind when, famously, he defined art as the sensuous manifestation of the idea. Martin Heidegger, fittingly, comments that ‘eidos resonates with what we mean when we say that a thing has a face, a visage, that it has the right look, that it stands’.¹¹ These idola, then, would, in the spirit of Hegel’s aesthetics, be spectral visages that transgress—and in doing so, undermine—the traditional distinction between the image and the idea, between the aesthetic and the intellectual, between poesis or pictura and philosophy, between mythos and logos.

Disappointing, then, not because these images show things as we might find them concretely in the world, but because this is precisely the photographic duty on which they renege. But, in a further dialectical torsion, it is because they are disappointing in this way—because they are unfaithful to the myth of the given, to co-opt Wilfrid Sellars’ phrase—that they are faithful to something else, to a different order, to something that resists direct representation. Again, then, ‘faithful because disappointing’. In this sense it is the realisation that a belief in direct, unproblematic access to things is in fact false and acts to distance us from the thing we seek by presenting us with the illusion of proximity, the illusion of immediacy. This idea is in itself not remarkable, however. It is there in everything from Romantic, to psychoanalytic, to poststructuralist thinking, to name but a few obvious manifestations of this realisation. In the humanities’ linguistic turn in the

⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 5.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 89.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 63-4.



twentieth century, that which distances us is language, and that from which we are distanced is a totalising conception of the operation of language itself, unconditioned by our use of it and, for that matter, its use of us. There might not be any ‘outside-text’ (il n’y a pas de hors-texte), but what is denied us, as textual beings, is the exposure of that textuality beyond a subjective textual node.¹² Even though poststructuralism implies the mutual collapse of the subject and ontology into one another, there remains a non-coincidence between thought (that is, language, the operation of textuality in the individual, textuality configured as an individual) and being (that is, the constantly drifting, changing textuality viewed, impossibly, from nowhere—textuality risen to a sort of Hegelian Geist-like self-knowledge). The finite poststructural individual, always already mediated by the web of signifying a processes out of which it emerges, is called to act and is motivated by the play of textuality that, ultimately, is beyond it, conditioning it. It is this aspect of textuality that, because of its transcendental opacity, we might perhaps call counter-textual, where ‘counter’ connotes both proximity and opposition. The countertextual, then, could be understood, to use Wallace Stevens’ phrase, as being both ‘beyond us, yet ourselves’.¹³ It cannot be called to account (logos)—it resists demonstration and verification—and the more we try to pin it down the more it flees our grasp.

The notion of the absolute in early German Romanticism, *différance* in Derrida, the night that is other in Blanchot, *khôra* in Kristeva and Derrida, as well as the unconscious and the real in the schemas of many writers and thinkers, might all be considered attempts to render minimally the countertextual. The common characteristic which confirms them as such is that they cannot be presented, articulated, or brought to light in any way without severe distortion; and yet they are believed to underpin and make possible the very discursivity they resist. The countertextual is ‘the indemonstrable, on which all demonstration depends’, to borrow J. G. Fichte’s phrase.¹⁴ Its status is, therefore, one might say, strictly speaking mythical. And, unsurprisingly, it provokes desire. The story of modern literature, philosophy, and the arts more generally, might plausibly be retold as a series of attempts to encounter, albeit fleetingly, in an experience entirely impossible, the countertextual, that which stands over and against meaning as the inarticulable condition of signification. But, learning the lesson of the *idola*, a straightforward, logically discursive account would be inimical to the mythical countertextual, and so it must be approached awry. Our desire to possess, to have it made present for us, must, paradoxically, be self-denying, if we are to move towards it. It will no doubt be obvious that part of the power of this myth can be attributed to the fact that it is, at least structurally, a retelling of that archetypal myth of self-denying desire channelled into art, the tale of Orpheus, in which,

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

¹³ Wallace Stevens, ‘The Man With the Blue Guitar’, in *The Man With The Blue Guitar and Other Poems* (New York, NY: A. A. Knopf, 1937), 3-35, p. 3.

¹⁴ J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. by Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 77 (I, 508).



as we know, Orpheus can only approach Eurydice indirectly, by means of his song. This allows us to draw out one of the most remarkable things about these idola, and it clusters around two closely related observations.

First, that which is countertextual—which, with a little more explanation we might call the absolute or the real—retains its power as such only to the extent that it is transformed into myth, which one might reasonably consider to be its opposite. The irony is that the real, the true, that to which the idola are faithful, belongs to the falsity of myth, not to demonstrable fact or logos. We think of myths as stories, but if the mythical countertextual is a story at all, it is the story of the impossibility of its telling.

And this leads to the second observation, which is that arguably the only myth in a position of dominance in theory today is one that remains inexistent (a term often associated with Alain Badiou, which he came to modify to *inexistent* in tribute to Derrida).¹⁵ It is the myth of the impossibility of a story, a telling, a naming—the myth of the impossibility of myth, one might say. And as these idola might be considered testimony to the impossibility of photography, they too might be thought of as countertextual. The very falsity of idola, then, is true—not in the sense that they are truly false, but because truth is located in their falsity, in their dissemblance, a dissemblance that undermines the possibility of there being such a thing as true resemblance. Once more, then, faithful because disappointing. Eidos because idola, logos because mythos.

But even this is not to say everything. What, for instance, of the idols themselves? Beckett, Borges, Derrida, Blanchot, McCarthy etc. Some of the great and good of modern letters. If Barthes was right (and Seán Burke was wrong) and the author is indeed dead, then what we are looking at are ghosts of the literary and theoretical canon. Idols as in idola, then, as in phantoms or spectres. Fictitious false gods. As St Paul puts it in the first epistle to the Corinthians, ‘an idol is nothing in the world’. And the more dead they are, the more spectral, the less they are in the world—even if living—the greater the amount of idolatry they inspire. Barthes, then, was no idoloclast. Death idolises. Ironically, Barthes observes the same process in photography—photography translates something into an image, it has the power to transform a subject into an object. ‘Death is the eidos of [the] Photograph’, writes Barthes.¹⁶ When my photograph is taken, he writes, and ‘I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person’.¹⁷ Death idolises, photography murders, negating subjectivity in the production of an object (an idol is nothing in the world). Thus, subjectivity, or ‘private life’ as Barthes puts it, ‘is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, trans. by David Macey (London and New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 143–4.

¹⁶ *Camera Lucida*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 14.



image, an object'.¹⁸ But does this hold true for the false idola? Perhaps not. Perhaps these idolum montages de-idolise, restoring subjectivity, enlivening dead letters. We are speaking of nothing less than the possibility of deliverance. These idola take not authors but authorities, not creators but logos, representatives of presence, cornerstones of canonicity. In other words, they take objects, not subjects, and transform them into something not fully present, not fully objective. They restore a sort of indeterminate subjectivity, disclosing that which refuses to come forth, that which refuses to be named, the spectral that animates literature--the countertextual, one might say. These photographs, these idola, then, are living, not dead, or rather, echoing Blanchot echoing Hegel, they endure death and maintain themselves in it.¹⁹ They open up within the image a space in which something more than the image exists, a space in which the image is, strictly speaking, inexistent. As such, they partake in what Simon Critchley refers to as 'the creation of new forms of life at a distance from the order of the state—which is the order of visibility'.²⁰ Idola, true and false, poetic, philosophical and scientific, would then claim as their domain the space of the political, the space, indeed, of life itself. The space, we might say, of everything.

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