
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Cut Together
Cara O'Connor

Stony Brook University, New York

Jean-Luc Nancy (2005) *The Ground of the Image*
New York: Fordham University Press
ISBN: 0 8232 2541 0
158 pp

Even though this is a review of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Ground of the Image*, I want to take a moment to discuss a few pages from 'Of Being Singular Plural,' an important essay of Nancy's, first published in 1996 (2000: 47-73). In these pages on the 'conditions of critique' Nancy considers Situationism's analysis of the spectacle and its critique of capitalist society. The Situationist critique was based on the conviction that the experience of 'true life' had been replaced by a ubiquity of images that fragmented and distorted reality. The way to retrieve an authentic relationship to reality would be through artistic actions that awakened individuals to their authentic desires and capacities for self-expression. While acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of this critique of 'alienation, illusion, [and] ideology,' (2000: 53) Nancy finds that the Situationists, like other Marxists and post-Marxists (from Bataille to the Frankfurt School) (2000: 52) fumbled with one of Marx's key insights: 'This was the intuition of society exposed to itself, establishing its being-social under no horizon other than itself—that is, without a horizon of Meaning in which to relate being-together as such....' (2000: 52). Nancy thinks interventions such as those of the Situationists rely on the notion that there

is a hidden truth or origin to which the 'authentic' individual has access—a notion that ultimately ends up reproducing the classical binaries between truth and appearance and unity and plurality. This stubborn anxiety over origins reveals a failure to understand that 'a society exposed to itself' means not a 'reign of appearance' in the classical sense of the replacement of truth by appearance, but rather a 'reign' of *co-appearance*, from which very different conclusions about the relationship between appearance and truth (or meaning) must be drawn (2000: 59).

Nancy's own thought on plurality¹ thus leads him to argue that co-appearance (the 'simultaneity of being-with' (2000: 68)) is altogether different from 'appearance' — as either revealing what was covered over, or as 'mere' appearance, which fails to reveal truth. Since there is no authentic reality or self before or behind the appearance we make to one another, Nancy suggests that the crisis of the spectacle is not so much a result of the replacement of life by representation, as it is the result that 'society gives itself its representation in the guise of symbolism' (2000: 51).² A distinction therefore needs to be made within the 'order' of appearance, between practices that distort reality by claiming to exhibit it *as such* and those that belong to the more fundamental dynamics of appearance for beings-in-common. Admitting he sets a task that 'Of Being Singular Plural' will not further pursue, Nancy proposes that in order to understand the role of critique, and the relation of the spectacle (and art) to society, we have to undertake the difficult task of re-evaluating basic concepts that pertain to appearance, such as 'social relation,' 'imagination,' and 'figuration.' We must come to terms with the fact that, 'there is no society without spectacle; or more precisely there is no society without the spectacle of society' (2000: 67).

¹ Which is articulated largely through Nancy's critical analysis of Heidegger's *Mitsein*.

² By 'symbolism' Nancy understands a 'bond of recognition,' a closure that aims to replace difference.

In some respects *The Ground of the Image* is just such an effort. This compilation of nine of Nancy's recent essays on art and the image (dating from 1999-2004) does not offer a methodical rethinking of 'social relation,' 'imagination,' and 'figuration.' Instead it deepens, annexes, rephrases, and sometimes confuses the questions (and stakes) of such a rethinking by finding a variety of ways to contemplate the meaning of the image. The 'variety of ways' reflects the different contexts for which these essays were originally composed. The first six essays were all gathered together and published as *Au Fond des Images* in 2003. Of these, five were originally published in exhibition catalogues, academic journals, and an anthology exploring art and the memory of concentration camps. The three additional essays that complete this volume were themselves previously published as catalogue essays and as a stand-alone work. Although none of its sustained interactions with art concern film or 'time-based' media, this volume should still be of interest to those working on film and philosophy, especially regarding questions of representation and signification.

Though all of these essays overlap in a variety of ways, there are three areas of emphasis into which they can provisionally be grouped. 'The Image — the Distinct,' 'Image and Violence,' 'Forbidden Representation,' and 'Distinct Oscillation' all explore the structure of the image as distinguished from other modes of communication and non-communication. 'Uncanny Landscape,' 'Visitation: Of Christian Painting,' and 'The Sovereign Woman in Painting' focus on paintings and genres of painting that signal a change in our relationship to the image. 'Masked Imagination' and '*Nous Autres*' connect the structure of the image to the ontological structure of being-with, or plurality.³

The Image — the Distinct' — appropriately the first essay in the collection — reads like a subtle manifesto of the image. The image is unavailable for use — it is not a

³ Rather than discuss the essays strictly in the order they appear in the book, I will look at them as they fit into these themes; but I do think the essays benefit from being read in order — which reflects the care with which they were edited.

thing like other things. Cut away and separated from the ground, the image is a distinct totality that breaks with the continuity of life in general. Unlike an icon or a votive object, the image has no aura and is not religious; it is not infused with the power of any outside authority, but it does exert a force. This force comes from the relationship between the distinct and 'remarkable' image and the invisible ground that surrounds it *by being absent*. The image in all its palpable materiality does not merely symbolize or represent some other thing; instead, it literally presents the 'dissimilarity that inhabits resemblance;' (9) it makes the invisible 'obvious' (12). Every signification and every look performs this operation of marking itself out and becoming absolute; meaning always refers to a 'network' of significations, yet its irreducible distinctness also absents it (13). Art is image in its purest form, since art does nothing other than present this groundlessness of meaning.

'Image and Violence' furthers this attempt to understand the image as something different from representation. Rather than arising from the negotiable terrain of worldly opinion, the image immediately compels, by virtue of its own totality (or self-sufficient groundlessness). In this way it is like truth (and is a kind of truth) because 'in one stroke' it asserts itself and says something about the world 'without being accountable' to the world (20). Violence is also immediate and unaccountable — and violence even creates an 'image' of itself (21). But the difference between this 'real' violence and the violence of the image is that the violent blow denies dissimilarity by being brutally complete and worldless — it refers to nothing other than its own coercive force. Art, on the other hand, is 'violence without violence' (26) because the image always refers to difference and opens onto the world.

'Forbidden Representation' looks more deeply at the ethical relationship between representation and the image. Obliquely referring to Theodor Adorno's work on the same

subject,⁴ Nancy asks, 'What became of representation itself at Auschwitz?' (34). Knowing that the camps at Auschwitz destroyed the possibility of representation by destroying subjectivity (and all that that entails), the essay wants to argue that art can still be made — even art about the camps. Nancy suggests that representation can be taken in two ways — one in which all absence/difference is scrubbed out by representation's claim to exhibit the truth, and the other, in which it is absence itself that activates and sustains the representation. The first kind of representation results in the monumentalization and trite memorialization rightly rejected by those who say we cannot represent Auschwitz. But the second kind of representation does not 'represent.' Instead it refers to an irresolvable opening or absence that can neither be eliminated nor forced into the light. Nancy concludes that 'the criteria of a representation of Auschwitz can only be found in this demand: that such an opening — interval or wound — not be shown as an object but rather that it be inscribed right at the level of representation, as its very texture, or as the truth of its truth' (49).

If 'Forbidden Representation' is the most sober and systematic essay in the book, 'Distinct Oscillation' is probably the most playful and disjointed. Affecting a kind of 'round table' discussion, Nancy employs (slightly) different 'voices' to remind us that text and image are interdependent and to explore the contradictions and ambiguities of this interdependence. The 'Oscillator,' like the absent ground, is a kind of force that makes possible the imaging text and the textual image (73). The interlocutors themselves are implicated in this oscillating process, since '[i]n the end...what is "image" and what is "text" depends on who is thus countered and what comes to be encountered. The encounter involves recognition and exchange, a commerce of signs and of mutual trust or mistrust' (77).

⁴ 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today' (Adorno, 1995: 33).

Almost every essay in this book touches upon the special relationship of art to the image, but some artworks and art-forms are singled out for providing images that condense and perform historical shifts in our understanding of where meaning comes from. 'Uncanny Landscape' locates landscapes in the transformation of the relationship to land brought about by industrialization. The image of the landscape comes into being only when the gods have fled the countryside, and 'a general estrangement occurs, in which pagans and peasants can find themselves unsettled, straying and lost' (57). Landscape is a genre that reflects the shifting meanings and power of theological, political, and economic frameworks, without itself being one of these frameworks (59). Landscape offers no ground of identification with either nation or nature: 'no country...is given, and every possible peasant has to invent everything in his occupation as well as the manner and the intention by which his culture is most suitably invented' (62).

'Visitation: Of Christian Painting' locates the turn away from the symbolic depiction of religious 'truth' and toward the co-presence of spectator and painting. Nancy writes that Pontormo's *Visitation*, is a 'remarkable turn away from the religious' because the 'painting thus plunges into us and into our vision a look that makes us the substance of the subject of the painting...' (116). The painting as surface invites the spectator to think the immemorial as a 'real and hidden presence' (115). Once Christian painting ceased representing the 'beyond' it began to 'hollow out this opening of a place that gives rise to no place.' In other words, the presentation of *the excess of presence* ('the divided up and shared out access to our common presence') is actually occasioned by Christianity itself (125).

'The Sovereign Woman in Painting' uses the lessons of the image to rethink sovereignty and the paradox of its representation. In Artemisia Gentileschi's early 17th century painting of Cleopatra in the act of killing herself, Nancy finds the secret bond of 'desire, power, and the image' (133) that had already become buried or obscured during

Antiquity, when 'the presence of the gods receded' into the figuration of the 'antique' (126). Artemisia 'attempts to make visible this vision drowning in the shadows' (131). Sovereignty is what is at stake: How is authority justified once the founding gods disappear? How is a 'civic religion' secured? Politics chases after this secret, yet domination is no substitute for power. It seems that art and the image are our best hope for embodying sovereignty free from domination. Art that *images* the image, presents groundless sovereignty that rules over nothing except its own enigma, 'that is, of the possibility of founding without a foundation and of making laws without legislation' (135).

Perhaps the most difficult and subtle theme in the book is the one that connects ontological plurality to the image. 'Masked Imagination' is a particularly complex essay that, unlike the others, presumes some familiarity with specific philosophical texts. It considers Kant's schema and Heidegger's *Kantbuch*, focusing on Heidegger's choice of the death mask as the paradigmatic 'image.' After validating Heidegger's peculiarly extreme choice, Nancy exposes Heidegger's failure to notice the implications of his own example. While for Kant the imageless image of the schema originates 'pictorially' (89) before contact with the materiality of the manifold, for Heidegger this 'priority of the look over the look' suggests that the look is not self-originating; the look can never coincide with itself and therefore can't complete itself (86). Any 'one' requires its own absence in order to imagine itself (as one). In this way, the gaze of the dead man symbolizes the image, which 'looks without seeing or sees without looking' (95). However, Nancy tentatively suggests that in glossing over the *concealing* role of the mask and treating the mask as exclusively a form of 'self showing,' Heidegger fails to consider how the look of the death mask is also 'the death of a look.' Nancy writes, 'In the ground of the image there is the imagination, and in the ground of the imagination there is the other, the look of the other, that is, the look onto the other and the other as look' (97). The implication is

that the 'one' of the image 'comes from the "other", and not from the auto-intuited self...' (97).

For Nancy the difference between the self or 'same' and the 'other' does not constitute an opposition between discrete beings that would be an original or primordial space of meaning. Instead the difference or invisible space *between* members of a plurality is fundamental. This idea is expressed in '*Nous Autres*,' which considers the photograph in order to ask what it means to say 'we.' Where saying 'I' performs its own unity, distinguishing the individual self 'without remainder' (102) the claim of 'we' is a solicitation that depends on confirmation from those others it claims to include. "'We" must construct its own fragile and difficult alterity,' because 'we' relies on difference, for its particular 'inchoate' unity (103). According to Nancy, 'this non-coincidence passes through photography in an exemplary way' (104). In a photograph — especially the snapshot — the sameness or unity of the picture is haunted by its own past, the moment it documents in which the one who took the picture and the 'subject' of the photograph, had to come together—the first is documented as an absence, and the second is documented as presence, but as a past instant imbedded in the present moment. The 'I' of the photo is a 'coexistence without coincidence' and 'It remains to be asked whether there is ever any *I am* that is not laden in the depths of it-self with innumerable we-others...' (106).

The Ground of the Image weaves a story of the image just shy of (or one might rather say perilously close to) a heroic journey. The story begins by establishing the fact that the image has always been with us 'in every gesture' (13) but in the past our ability to be affected by its power was blocked by the belief in the divine truth of the gods (figuration, truth as figure, destiny, character). With monotheism our relationship to the sensible world is transformed: The truth is elsewhere with an invisible God. Yet God's invisibility is really the beginning of the death of God — a death that is never exactly

finalized, but can't be undone. This death first allows the image to 'come into its own.' With modernity comes an obsession with identity — now the truth is to be found in the (scientifically and technologically available) visible world rather than the beyond. The laws and powers of representation overtake the image; we are driven to attain a complete 'picture' of how things are and how we think they should be, and to eliminate or deny whatever and whoever does not fit within this picture. The Holocaust and Hiroshima are catastrophic modern attempts to kill the remainder, close the circle — but despite their devastating effects they do not succeed in effecting such closure. Instead, we are faced with a profound crisis of representation from which a need emerges for ways of looking and remembering that somehow eschew the arrogance of 'capturing' in images the meaning or truth of the 'human experience.' While it is hypocritical to seek the comforting closure of memorials and monuments, what precisely is needed, in Nancy's view, is art-as-image; art that presents the groundlessness of the real — art that draws us into the threshold between our world and a world of pure sense which we cannot inhabit. Above all, what is needed is for us to find the presentation of groundlessness important, and to be able to notice when this basic fact of plurality communicates itself to us through art.

Although this story I am attributing to Nancy is compelling, teasing it out can be hard work. Nancy's elliptical and enigmatic prose often demands multiple readings. As the essays (and multiple readings) accrue, Nancy's ideas about the image become more resonant and less sketchy. Yet even in their fullness these ideas about the image remain evasive, and it is 'difficult to know what to think of this flight.'⁵ When I ask myself if an aspect or emphasis is missing from these essays I return to Nancy's comments on Marx's 'intuition.' As a society 'exposed to itself' whose only horizon is itself, all of our images are encountered from within historical and political contexts — contexts which

⁵ From Fénelon, *Adventures of Telemachus*, one of Nancy's opening quotations.

are themselves understood and 'imaged' in vastly different ways. In this sense the image is never pure, but is always encountered in *our* image.

It is clear that Nancy believes there are major political and ethical stakes attached to our encounters with the 'passion of the image' (3), yet there is little here to help locate just in what ways we can critically assess our current relationship(s) to what may be spectacle, may be image. Instead it seems that the image is both abundantly available and radically scarce: It can be found in every gesture and every work of art, and yet its power is easily obscured by common practices of representation. The selection of entire genres and art forms for their exemplarity seems arbitrary and absolutely disconnected from other ways these 'exemplars' may signify. For example, I find it difficult to imagine a 'European' landscape painting that is not at some basic level political or economic — and I wonder why Nancy insists on the transcendence of the landscape as if it were the sublime result of uncertain times. But more confusing is the choice of relating the photograph to the structure of 'we-others.' It is as if Nancy is willfully ignoring the whole tradition of the photo as icon, rather than offering us a way out of its lure. If care for the image (and art) is supposed to be an alternative to the futile search for authenticity, what does this care call upon us to do? How can our attention to the image in art and 'life' transform our 'image culture' if the image exists on an entirely different register and will not 'communicate' with these other phenomena? Or to put my question differently, if this form of discontinuous communication is so important for life, then how do we share it and bring it about in a way that is alert to endless potential of slipping into mere fascination with our selves and our representations? Nancy points to these problems in two important comments which he sadly does not elaborate upon: In 'The Image — the Distinct' he notes the difficulty of differentiating between the attraction one feels to the image by virtue of its inherent power, and the allure of the ornament or spectacle that offers a tantalizing 'vision' or representation (6). Similarly, in 'Image and

Violence' he asserts that the first responsibility of art is 'knowing how to discern a groundless image from an image that is nothing but a blow' (23). Nancy offers little to suggest how we might remain loyal to these responsibilities.

My other worry might be trivial, but I will voice it anyway. There are times when Nancy's thoughts seem very close to writers whom he does not acknowledge — or from whom he distinguishes himself in ways that are not entirely fair.⁶ For example, in 'Forbidden Representation' I find it disturbing that Nancy does not directly engage Theodor Adorno, so that it is impossible to know from reading Nancy's essay whether or not he understands that Adorno's famous interdiction of the image was not really an interdiction at all.⁷ Adorno arguably came to many of the same conclusions that Nancy does in this essay. I think it would have been helpful to the reader and perhaps to Nancy's own argument if he had directly situated his own thoughts in relation to Adorno's, instead of merely alluding to him by way of a poem that itself seems to misunderstand the 'man whom many consider wise' (144).⁸ I also think that Emmanuel Levinas gets short shrift. To relegate Levinas to the position of a Judeo-Christian philosopher without carefully reviewing his approach to alterity does the complexity of Levinas's 'atheistic' Judaism a disservice.

On the other hand, no announcement or qualification needs to be made to connect this work with many of the most influential writings on the image, to which, it seems to me, it makes a significant contribution. In my view, *The Ground of the Image* is

⁶ It also strikes me that in "On Being Singular Plural" Nancy missed the opportunity to relate his ideas of plurality to the obvious and potentially fruitful connection with Hannah Arendt. This matters for *The Ground of the Image* because plurality, or the idea of being-singular-plural, is the basis of Nancy's approach to the image.

⁷ For a discussion of the dominant (mis)reading of Adorno's so-called interdiction against art after Auschwitz, see, for example, an excellent essay available on-line by Elaine Martin (2006).

⁸ The poem by Hans Sahl, which opens "Forbidden Representation," was published in *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter*, so it seems likely that the poem (and by extension Nancy) means to refer to Adorno.

a passionate and demanding elaboration of Barthes' simple, hopeful remark: '[T]hanks to what, in the image, is purely image (which is in fact very little), we do without language yet never cease to understand one another' (1978: 61).

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland (1978) *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang.

Martin, Elaine (2006) 'Re-reading Adorno: The "after-Auschwitz" Aporia.' *Forum 2*
<<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/issue2/martin.pdf>>.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000) 'Of Being Singular Plural' in *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Anne E. O'Byrne and Robert D. Richardson. Stanford: Stanford University Press; pp 1-99.