



Introduction:

The Realm of the Senses and the Vision of the Beyond— Toward a New Thinking of the Image

I say you have to be a visionary, make yourself a visionary. A poet makes himself a visionary through a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts within himself all poisons and preserves their quintessences. Unspeakable torment, where he will need the greatest faith, a superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed—and the supreme scientist.

RIMBAUD, *Lettres du Voyant*

Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

PLATO, *Republic*, VII

Toward the end of Brian De Palma's film *The Fury*, in a moment of fear and trembling, the film's heroine, a teenager named Gillian, a girl possessing extraordinary visionary powers to see the future and the unknown past, cries out: "I'm afraid to close my eyes, afraid of what I'll see."

Marking the *opening* of her visionary powers to the future and the past, of the extraordinary type of *seeing* she possesses, as having to do with the experience of *closing* her eyes, of blocking the *perception* of the world

surrounding her, Gillian's statement poses for us the following questions: What type of seeing opens when the eyes, paradoxically, close, when the eyes are wide shut? What is the significance of the *doubling* or *splitting* of the eye's function, between the opened eye's perception of the surrounding world and the closed eye's visionary seeing of the future and the past, and what is the relation between these two functions? And finally, what is the source of the anxiety and fear involved in this visionary seeing coming out of the closing of the eyes of perception?

Gillian's visionary moments in *The Fury* always arrive as a strange experience of film watching, where giant screens emerging from nowhere present hallucinatory and otherworldly visions, offering a series of cinematic images in excess of the perceptual world surrounding her, to which she is exposed, which she cannot control, and which haunt her. The exposure to the cinematic image in De Palma's film, then, announces, allegorically, the opening of a second eye, a visionary eye seeing into the future and the past in excess of the eye of perception. The cinematic image *shows* something that cannot be perceived, the film allegorically seems to suggest, something that can be shown only to the one whose eyes are closed and in whom a different type of seeing, of the future and the past, opens.

Yet what kind of thing is the cinematic image that it could thus show us something in excess of, or beyond, that which we perceive? What is its power or force to open our eyes to an otherworldly—that is, to that which is not of the order of the surrounding world open to perception—vision?

If we are to understand what kind of thing the cinematic image is and what type of force it possesses, we might want to start by asking the more general question: What kind of thing is an image? How are we to define and conceptualize this strange thing that the philosophical tradition tried to grasp by the term *image* and that the artistic tradition tries to bring into view through dedicating itself to the practice of its creation?

Confronted by these questions we might immediately want to say, when we survey most of those things we usually take to be images, that what is evident about them is, to begin with, that they seem to be images *of* something. The image is not a regular thing or object of perception, we say, but involves a process of *mediating* our access to the object *of which* it is the image. The image is an image of an object, we say, but it is *not* the object itself. A difference thus immediately seems to open between what we take to be real objects and what we perceive to be the images of these

objects. Yet how are we to think through this *difference* between the two and how are we to understand the nature of this process of mediation that seems to be involved in the very activity of the image? The manner in which these two questions are answered, I suggest, determines our understanding of the essence of the image.

It is the Platonic manner of raising these questions and responding to them that has most famously dominated the West's philosophical and theoretical determination of the essence of the image; I would like to very briefly turn, therefore, to this Platonic determination.

It is well known that the division into image and object, or image and its model—that which an image is an image *of*—is at the very heart of the Platonic universe, crossing all of Plato's major philosophical moves and conceptual decisions (be they ontological, aesthetic, or ethical, to use categories not yet found in Plato)—and indeed, it seems to me that it might be argued that, if examined from the perspective of these questions, the whole Platonic system could be said to originate in Plato's unprecedented sensitivity to, and attempt to respond to and understand, these strange and uncanny things we call images, which are not of the order of objects but seem to *double* them and enigmatically appear to point in a mediating way *beyond* themselves. That is, I suggest that instead of regarding the question of the image as one among many dealt with by the Platonic system, we regard rather a certain strange experience having to do with the discovery of a difference between objects and images as that which gives the impetus for thinking to the whole Platonic project.¹ The nature of philosophy consists, the Platonic texts seem to suggest, in articulating what is at stake in these uncanny things we call images.

The Platonic response to the question of the image, to speak in a very brief and reductive manner, has famously opted for a fated and specific understanding of the image by interpreting the *difference* between objects and images (a difference Plato himself articulated philosophically for the first time) as pointing to a difference between two levels of reality and two types of *objects*. One level, associated with the image, is now interpreted as a level of inferior objects, whose ontological status is considered in certain cases false and imaginary and in all instances less real than what exists on another level, a level of true reality, associated with real objects to which the image points as its beyond. The relations between these two levels of reality are highly complex, for the lower level, that of the image, is simultaneously

understood as (1) that *through which* the higher level *shows itself* (for example, in a painted portrait the model shows himself or herself through his or her image even, and especially, when no longer present²); (2) that which, by mediating our access to the model and showing us only a partial view of it, actually obstructs our direct access to the model; (3) that which, in certain extreme cases, pretends to take the place of the model and be self-sufficient, declaring itself to actually be the model (in *trompe l'oeil* painting for example); and (4) that which can come into view and show itself only because of its being related to a model. We would not have any access to or understanding of the image, were it not for some implicit intuition or understanding of a model that guides our access to the image (thus, a painter would have to have a model, be it only in his or her mind's eye, to guide and direct, to prefigure the creation of the image). To sum up these points, to be an image *of* an object therefore now means, for Plato, to be an inferior object pointing to and revealing a certain aspect of, or even to be an inferior object letting shine through it and partially show—but *at the same time obstructing from a direct view*—an original real object, which, most famously perhaps, it is supposed to imitate and copy, model itself on, and which, in the worst-case scenario, it pretends to replace, positing itself deceptively as the real thing it actually hides from view.³

The difference discovered between the object and the image has thus turned into a difference between degrees of reality and types of objects, entertaining between them a highly complex set of relations.⁴ Perhaps the most significant arena in which Plato works out his understanding of this essential difference between image and object at the center of his thinking is the one involving his most influential philosophical move, the theoretical *separation* between two realms of existence: a sensible realm, a realm of appearances opened to our perception and senses, *the world* we encounter in our everyday existence; and a non-sensual, or intelligible, realm of Ideas, an other to the world, a realm not available to the senses but that the realm of the senses, the world, points to as its *beyond*, a true reality, of which the world is a pale reflection, or an image, which it copies or imitates, which it lets shine through it, but which it also at times obstructs from view, pretending to take its place.⁵ The difference between the object and the image, then, has been transformed into the separation between this sensible world, experienced as an image, and its non-sensible intelligible beyond, the object it reflects but that it also obstructs from direct view.⁶

What is played out in this conceptual move from the identification of a difference between image and object to the decision on a separation between a realm of the senses and an intelligible realm? What issues are at stake in this move? At stake, for our context, in this Platonic separation of the realms are two major issues. The first concerns the dimension of the senses and the determination of the senses' limits. A fundamental aspect of the Platonic procedure of articulating a division and a separation between a sensible and an intelligible realm, a procedure originating in the discovery of the difference between image and object, is his crucial insight that what is at stake in this difference between object and image, what plays itself out in the *philosophical* interrogation of this difference, is nothing less than the discovery of a strange dimension in existence, the dimension of the senses, the dimension of that *through which* we relate to things and open up to them. *The difference that the image makes reveals the dimension of the senses.* A further Platonic insight is that the articulation of the dimension of the senses essentially involves a thinking of the senses' *limits*: A sense has to do, essentially, with a relation to a limit. What is a limit in the case of the senses? It is that which marks a relation between what can be said to be *open* to the senses—the world—and what is *closed* to them—a beyond the senses, a beyond the world. A sense, we could thus say, has to do with a certain determination of a *mode of opening*. The difference made by the image reveals to us, then, that the senses open to the world, to the realm of the senses, only in relation to something that makes possible their opening but is closed to them, beyond them and the world. We see the sensible world, for Plato, *only through the mediation of the Ideas*, but the Ideas themselves are not available to the vision of the sensible, or to perception. The drama of the senses, then, is the drama of this tension between the opening to the sensible world and that which *opens us to* the sensible world, yet which is itself not of the order of the sensible, but is beyond it. What is it, we then want to ask, that is open to the senses? And what is closed to them, beyond them?

The second major issue for our context concerns the Platonic discovery that what is also at stake in the difference between object and image has to do with the problem of the nature of the relation between the question of intelligibility, or *meaning*, and the question of the senses, a relation that is essentially tied to the question of the limit of the senses. What is beyond the senses, what is closed to them, is the dimension of meaning or intelligibility, says Plato. The question of meaning or sense, then, opens up

in relation to the discovery of the *limit of the senses*. What is, we then want to ask, the relation between meaning and the senses, or perhaps between intelligible sense and worldly senses? What is at stake in the difference between the object and the image is, then, to repeat, on the one hand, the discovery of the question of the senses from the perspective of the problem of what is closed and what is open to them and, on the other hand, the question of the relation between meaning and the senses.

These Platonic discoveries—the discoveries of the question of the senses in relation to the idea of a limit and a dimension beyond the world, a dimension having to do with the question of meaning—are, I suggest, crucial, and should serve as guide to any thinking of the image. Yet, the question remains, how are we to interpret them? There is a failure in the Platonic, or perhaps more precisely, Platonist interpretation of these issues that we need to examine critically. Yet such an examination should not take the traditional form of a reversal of Platonism, of an attempt to affirm this world, the world of the senses, and eliminate the idea of a beyond as a projection made from the point of view of the only reality that is ours, the reality of this sensible world. No, a more complex relation to Plato is needed, one in which the idea of a beyond, of an outside the world, while serving as a guide, is to be interpreted completely differently. The challenge is, then, I argue, to accept the Platonic discoveries of the difference between object and image as pointing to a thinking of the senses in relation to a beyond, yet reject the separation of the realms in the way Plato, or at least what came to be called Platonism, effects it.⁷ In the following pages I would therefore like to very briefly examine the Platonic way of responding to these issues and then open up an alternative way, an alternative, I suggest, that guides the most fundamental contemporary efforts to think the question of the image, manifested in the writings of such thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, or Jean-Luc Nancy, and in the works of the most serious artists, among them our unlikely hero, Brian De Palma.

Let us start with the question of the definition of what is open to and what is closed to the senses. I would like us from now on to take the sense of vision as our focus, as it is for Plato; we will therefore be dealing with the question of what is closed and what is open to vision or to the eye. What are the limits of the eye, and how does Plato come to conceptualize them? We have seen that for Plato, the intelligible realm, separated from the sen-

sible one, is conceptualized as closed to the eye and comes to define the *manner* in which it is delimited, the *logic* of its delimitation. And this logic is an objective or substantial one. What the worldly eye cannot see, what is thus *invisible* to it, are certain types of *objects or substances*, the intelligible Ideas in the realm beyond the world. We can say then that the eye's limits are defined for Plato by the *type of objects* it can and cannot see.

Here we can conveniently start to articulate the major problem with the Platonic way of proceeding. And this problem can be succinctly defined as originating in the insufficient distinction between the two major components involved in the question of the eye: the dimension of the eye or of vision as a *sense*, that is, as a *manner of opening* onto something (what in later philosophy came to be called *intentionality*), and the dimension of the *object* of vision, that *onto which* the eye opens. The Platonic procedure, then, tends to confuse the eye's *manner* of opening and that *onto which* the eye opens, and thus ends up understanding the eye's limitations in the terms of the objects onto which it, the eye, opens. What we need is a thinking of the eye's limitation whose terms are guided by the question of *what is an eye as sense* rather than by the question of the objects onto which the eye opens. In philosophical terms, such a move is implied in the transition from classical ontology to modern phenomenology (usually understood as inaugurated by Kant's transformation of philosophy),⁸ that is, from an examination of the types of objects that compose the world to an examination of the logic of their appearance, or of our opening up to the world. In this conception, the image, in its distinction from the object, will reveal to us something about the *eye as sense* and about the logic of its opening up to a world in relation to a dimension of closure, or of a beyond the world.

Let us examine, then, the Platonic procedure from a perspective that isn't Plato's, at least not in a clear enough manner, the perspective of the *experience* of the eye itself, rather than from the perspective of the objects *to which* the eye is directed, and try to understand the logic guiding his confusion of the status of the eye (which we can also define as the status of the human subject) and the status of the object. In the few remarks to come, I will not therefore follow the Platonic procedure itself but will suggest a different perspective from which to interrogate it. I will try to open up again the difference between image and object in a way that is to an extent more primary than its final elaboration in the Platonic text. My manner of speech will therefore be something like a free indirect discourse, speaking

through Plato but trying at the same time to speak on behalf of an excess found in Plato but repressed by him.

If we take the experience of the eye as our focus, we can say that the Platonic discovery of the difference between image and object, a discovery resulting in the separation of the realms, was initially made *at the heart of the worldly experience of the senses themselves*, or at the heart of worldly vision, as a difference between what we can now call two experiences of the eye: between the eye as it relates to a regular object of perception, let us call it the *objective eye*, and the eye as it is experienced in the relation, for example, to a mirror image, a reflection in the water, a shadow on a cave's wall, or a painting, let us call it the *image-eye*. If the objective eye is unobstructed and seems to involve a *direct* relation to the object of perception, the image-eye seems to involve, we have seen, a moment of mediation, as if we relate to the object only through some other thing, not directly. This dimension of mediation is also felt by the eye as involving an obstruction, of something closed to it, a closure in relation to which, through the mediation of which, it opens up to what it sees.⁹ This seeing of the mediated object is experienced as *sensing*, that is, as opening onto something through the mediation of a closure. Thus we can say, as Plato basically does, that only in relation to the image does the *eye feel itself as sense*, that is, as passing through a dimension of closure to open up to its object. This is why Plato can say, absolutely accurately, that the world of the senses (both in the case of empirical objects and in the case of images appearing in the empirical realm, such as paintings, and so on) is, at bottom, an image, or opens up as an image, *haunted by mediation and pointing beyond itself to a closure from which it senses itself opening*.

We can thus say that Plato has managed to distinguish two activations of the eye: the eye opened to an object, perceiving the object directly, and the *eye feeling itself as sense*, that is, as *opening* onto an object from or through the mediation of a closure. *The image reveals to the eye its being as sense*, shows Plato. We can thus distinguish between the experience of *perceiving* an object, already found in the opened world, and *sensing* an image, feeling the opening onto the world out of a closure. The image, then, *activates* the world's opening as a *realm of senses* whereas perception is already within the opened world. These, I suggest, are Plato's essential discoveries in relation to the question of the difference between image and object, when taken from the point of view of the experience of the eye.