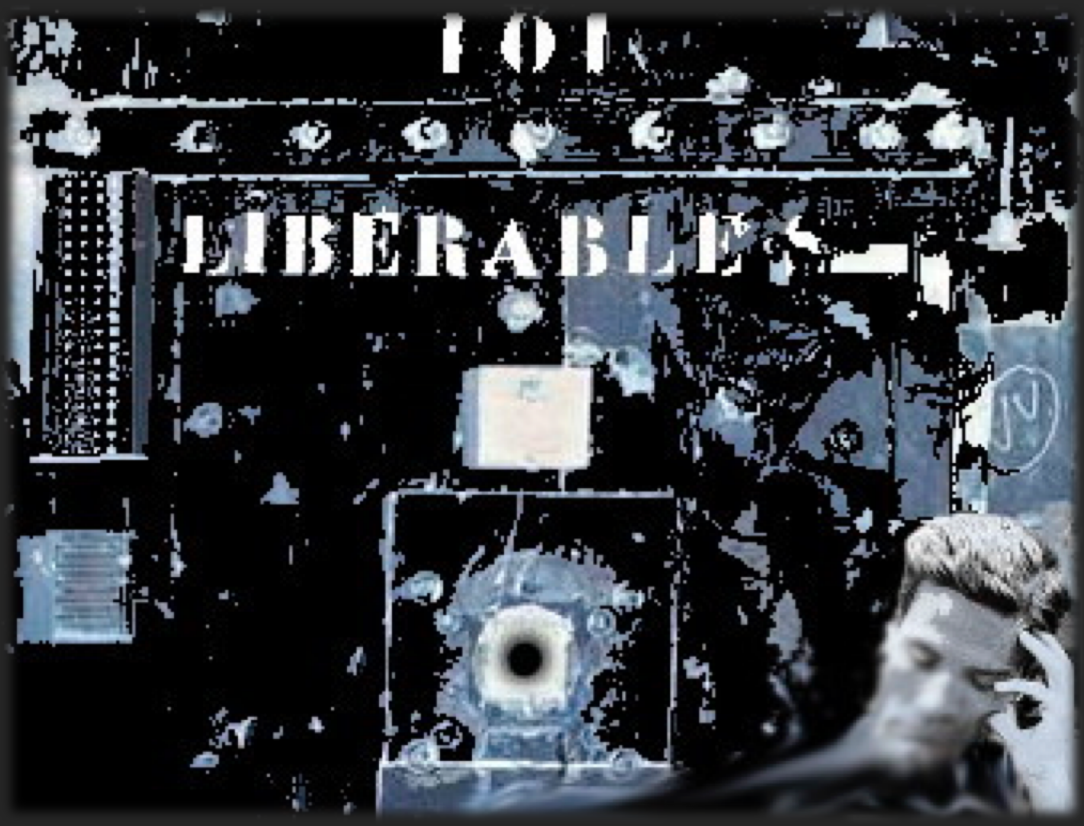
LIGHT AGAINST LIGHT



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The disappearance of the fireflies—when the blinding glare of spotlights crushes the weak glimmer of glowworms in the night—is an excellent poetic allegory, a lovely "speaking image" on which to build something like a general *poetics of light*. This allegory has become familiar to us through the intervention of a great poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini.[1] So we cannot be surprised that artists and thinkers have elevated this allegory in the field of aesthetics, and that it may lend itself as the title of an art exhibit. And yet its sole purpose is to ask, stubbornly, over and over again, a question in the field of politics, a question that has become more contentious today than ever: what might be a *politics of light*? Fireflies are pretty, moving and all of that—most often we like to think of them in a personal or even an intimate context, remembering an encounter with them in the course of some nighttime ramble, perhaps solitary or romantic—but like Pasolini, we must summon this image of fireflies to the cruelty of a certain relationship between light and light, or rather, of a certain "agony," a certain *struggle of light against light*.

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Beginning in his youth—in early 1941, that is in the midst of a World War, with moving letters to his childhood friend Franco Farolfi, one of which actually concerns fireflies[2]—and continuing without interruption, Pasolini chose to write luminous descriptions, to *write by the light*, of his states of spirit (of joys and worries), states of tears (of sufferings) or states of arms (of struggles). Innumerable examples already appear in his poems from 1941 to

[1] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Disappearance of the Fireflies," trans. Christopher Mott, Diagonal Thoughts, June 23, 2014, http://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=2107

[2] Pasolini, *The Letters of Pier Paolo Pasolini: 1940–1954*, ed. N. Naldini, trans. Stuart Hood (London: Quartet, 1992), 121.

1953, from which I extract a few lines at random, in the same order as the pages fluttering before my eyes:

> My hand is the friendly light
> Newborn, my spirit that
> Light giving shape to remains.[3]
>
> I feel his breath
> In my hair, and the void,
> An infinite light
> Becomes only one with his eye.[4]
>
> And there shines the moon,
> Rising up above a clear
> Deathly silence.[5]
>
> The child rejoices and turns to his father
> A face full of laughter, like a star
> Between other stars, trembling with joy.[6]
>
> In vain on this paper where I write
> The light falls naked, exhausted
> By its travel through the noon skies
> So humid and stifling—a miracle of sun—
> In this final goal lies
> Its worried agony: in vain.[7]
>
> And already the night pales in a brilliance
> That claws the cornea and reflects there

[3] Pasolini, "Uomo/L'homme," *Adulte? Jamais: une anthologie (1941–1953)*, trans. French R. de Cecatty (Paris: Points, 2013), 29. [Translations to English mine. —TN]
[4] Pasolini, "Ressuretion/Resurrection," in *Adulte? Jamais*, 71.
[5] Pasolini, "Çant di amor/Chant d'amour," in *Adulte? Jamais*, 79.
[6] Pasolini, "Der Erlkönig/Le Roi des Aulnes," in *Adulte? Jamais*, 215.
[7] Pasolini, "Invano sulla carte dove scrivo…/En vain sur le papier où j'écris…" in *Adulte? Jamais*, 259.

An image of mutilated walls.[8]

One must burn to succeed
Consumed in the final fire.[9]

And the more the shadows
Deepen, the more the light blinds. The world
Has no regrets: every creature flies and falls.[10]

In his remarkable poem of 1954, "Gramsci's Ashes," Pasolini gives the most precise version of that *light against light struggle*, taken up—in himself as in all of contemporary society—in the form of a specific cultural configuration which, although evoked in his poetry, would demand exploration or analysis from a *political anthropology* perspective on the relation, as Pasolini says here, between myth and history. Myth appears as *survivals* in oppressed social classes—those people who wander and hustle in the Roman suburbs, those who consequently fill prison cells, with their distinct slangs, their rituals from who knows where, their timeless gestures—even as history, at this time, enacts *destructions* under the poet's very eyes, in a light about which he now wonders: what good can it possibly do?
Yet as I possess history,
I am possessed by it, enlightened by it:

but what good is the light?
[…]
But I, with the conscious
heart of one who lives only in history,
can I ever act with pure passion again,
when I know that our history has ended?[11]

[8] Pasolini, "E già smuore la notte in un chiarore…/Et déjà la nuit pâlit dans une clarté…" in *Adulte? Jamais*, 293.
[9] Pasolini, "Bisogna bruciare per arrivare…/Il faut brûler pour arriver…" in *Adulte? Jamais*, 307.
[10] Pasolini, "Sonnetto Primaverile/Sonnet printanière," in *Adulte? Jamais*, 327.
[11] "Gramsci's Ashes," in *Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 177, 187.

What lies between disappearances and survivals? Acts of *resistance.* Perhaps an everyday struggle to counter injustice, if not a struggle that justice may be served. And Pasolini names *light* as the vital element of such acts of resistance: a *poetic* element because "poetry is in life";[12] a *political* element because life itself expands, breathes, moves—even dies—politically. In 1961, fourteen years before the fireflies article, Pasolini still thinks of the political Resistance as that poetic or aesthetic, metaphorical or esthesic, element of light:

> Thus I came to the days of the Resistance
> without knowing anything except style.
> It was a style all of light,
> memorable consciousness of sun.
> It could never fade, even for an instant,
> even as Europe trembled on the deadliest of eves.
> We escaped with our household goods in a cart
> from Casarsa, to a village lost
> among canals and vineyards,
> and it was a pure light.
> My brother left on a still March morning
> in a clandestine train,
> his pistol in a book, and it was pure light.
> He lived long in the mountains [⋯]
> Came the day of death and freedom:
> the martyred world recognized itself anew
> in the light⋯
> That light was the hope for justice,
> I didn't know which justice.
> All light is equal to all other light.
> Then it changed: the light became uncertain dawn [⋯][13]

What Friedrich Nietzsche, George Simmel or Aby Warburg calls a "tragedy of culture," Pasolini begins to imagine as a "tragedy of light." The

[12] Pasolini, "La poésie est dans la vie: Entretien avec Achille Millo," (1967) trans. French J-B Para, *Europe* 247 (2008), 110–118.

[13] Pasolini, "Resistance and its Light" in *Roman Poems*, trans. Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Francesca Valente (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005), 63–65.

great yet deadly anthropological transformation of post-war Italy—mapped out in *La Rabbia* (1962-1963), like the ultimate atlas of poetic-political images—would end with an "uncertain dawn," imposing the ambiguous light or the gloomy gray of "normality," of petit bourgeois mediocrity. From that dawn a new era of the *light against light struggle* would begin: the fireflies would disappear, and the Montedison factories alone—later replaced by the spotlights of Berlusconian television stages—would furnish the sole light in which our poor democracies bathe.[14]

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Light against light: it is no longer enough to speak of light in general, of light as a vehicle or a space of visibility in general. There is a struggle of certain lights against other lights, because certain lights make things appear and other lights make them disappear. Light is like fire: multiple, voracious. For better and for worse. Light can be cruel, no doubt what we mean by the expression *harsh light*, which recalls the implacable fluorescents of penitentiary spaces that destroy prisoners' morale by producing the torture of their prolonged insomnia. Similarly, one could say that a television screen's electronic light, as it relays the lights of sound stages, possesses that same continuous wave that produces insomnia—produces eyes that, even in exhaustion, can no longer close.

It's very easy to make fireflies disappear: just turn on a searchlight, a strong-enough spotlight or a highway light. To make fireflies reappear—which is still possible, since many things in nature and almost all things of the mind are capable of survivals—all we have to do is render to the night its powers of potential, of latency. All we have to do is accept the night, in order to access its power of visuality, which is called: darkness. Then the fireflies will be able to reappear—even if you have to wait a very long time. They don't come out just like that, all at once, from a state of "disappearance" in light. Even better, by reappearing they will make the night itself appear, as the visual space through which their precious signals come to us. There are things, like fireflies, that we can't simply *light up* or "elucidate" at any

[14] Pasolini, "Disappearance of the Fireflies."

price (a lit-up firefly loses its own light and no longer appears to us, except as its dry little insect body, pathetic and insignificant); but we must preserve their freedom to appear or not, or to do two things at once: to appear and to disappear, passing before our eyes like a bolt of *lightning* or a falling star, however slowly that star may fall.

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As I write these lines, I know almost nothing about the art exhibit soon to open within the walls of the former prison Sainte-Anne d'Avignon, to be titled *Disappearance of the Fireflies.* I have an intuition, at least, that one of the crucial questions that such an exhibit raises will concern *the apparition of images* along the spectator's path. How does one light an image? How does one provoke its apparition? How does one respect the singular light that a work of art demands? How does one find the right light—ethically, aesthetically—in a prison cell? Walter Benjamin teaches us all the anthropological, political and aesthetic significance that a simple modification in the lighting of Paris streets, for example, might hold.[15] From André Malraux, we learn the possible significance of new illumination—such as a raking light—for a national monument.

But the question becomes more complicated if, with a single choice of lighting, one wishes to respect the memory of an *infamous place,* as a prison might be, even while placing within it such prestigious or *famous things* as works of art. How, then, can one find the proper light in which to encounter both the prison cell and the art exhibit, both the bars and the glass display case, both the prison guard and the museum guard—to place in shadow and to place in light? And the prisoners themselves—what happens to them in this story? For André Malraux, the ideal artwork could, by definition, transform any infamous thing into a famous thing—as he expresses, for example, when he accords to Michelangelo's *Slave* all the

[15] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 562-570. See also Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life Under Siege* (1870-1871) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 51-88.

virtue and prestige of the ultimate *heroic* being.[16] It is true that works of art touch us most deeply when they are able to manifest the infamous in the famous, the vile in the noble, the lowest in the most high. And all in the same gesture, in the same form and the same light—a *didactic light,* one might say, and often, in fact, in chiaroscuro—as in Rembrandt or Goya, or, in literature, in Rimbaud or Jean Genet. But the most important thing is this: that these artists knew *never to forget the infamous within the famous,* never to lose sight of the infamous's crudity in the glory of the famous.

It does not surprise me that the Andalusian *cante jondo,* or "deep song," includes a *famous* style that has never forgotten its *infamous* origins: a group of prisoners' songs—as in other latitudes there are slave songs—called *carceleras. Carceleras* sing of the prisoner's solitude and sadness in the black night of his cell (Saint John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle* is not far off), but also of the paradoxical internal freedom of that night, when it settles on the flash, the *firefly-glimmer*, of a simple cigarette glowing red in the dark:

> They threw me in a hole
> where I could not see the daylight;
> crying out I gave myself light
> with the small star that I burned for myself.[17]

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This scene—a small glimmer in the darkness of a prison cell—might lead us to imagine a new version of Plato's allegory of the cave (an allegory of light; that is, of knowledge): humans remaining forever prisoners in their grotto or their prison cell, "unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around" towards the outside, and contemplating shadows

[16] André Malraux, "Michel-Ange et l'invention du héros" [Michelangelo and the invention of the hero], in *Écrits sur l'art, II* (Œuvres complètes V), ed. H. Godard (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1220-1223.

[17] "A mí me metieron en un calabozo / donde yo no veía ni la luz del día / gritando yo me alumbraba / con el lucerito que yo incendía." See P. Espínola, *Flamenco de ley* (Grenada: Universidad de Granada, 2007), 209-303.

projected on the wall "from a fire burning far above and behind them."[18] But suddenly the fire goes out: the shadow projectionist must have forgotten to feed wood into his great theatrical blaze. Suddenly the prisoners are free from all the simulacra fed to them from on high. So they light a cigarette and simply contemplate the glimmer of that "small star" as it reddens and glows, a fragile wonder at the very center of their solitary condition.

Salvador Dalí suddenly comes to mind, as well. Why him? I don't like it much at first, this free association. Dalì represents the famous *par excellence*—that is, the vagarious, or rather the virtuoso of vagaries. Where is the fragile glimmer and the deep song? Where is the infamous in Dalí? Yet the infamous does exist in Dalí's work, beginning in his youth, in Madrid with Federico García Lorca, with their assumption of the term *putrefactos*, to which the two friends' respective graphic productions attest: Saint Sebastian's wound–glimmers in Lorca's poetry, or the Christ child swaddled in twigs in Dalí's painting (figures 1–2).[19] Not to mention the continuous presence of Luis Buñuel at the heart of this *revuelta* as it gathered politically and poetically over those years of 1922–1929.

The reason for that free association becomes clearer now: somewhere in Dalí's work, there is, in fact, a cigarette glowing in the night. A small, fragile flash—a firefly—surrealistically elevated to the rank of "psychoatmospheric–anamorphic object," meaning the best that the artistic perception of the world can offer, equal in its very intricacy to the cosmic *immensity* into which contemplation of a starry night may plunge us: "Similarly to the way that the altogether relative mystery, generally consisting for a person of falling into dreamy contemplation of a luminous point that is a bright star in the firmament, is shattered at the very moment that the beholder realizes his illusion and ascertains that it is a matter of none other than the tip of a lighted cigarette (that which, moreover, should cause him to fall into meditations that are far more profound and enigmatic): similarly, I say, this cigarette tip will regain anew [⋯] all of its most indisputable giddiness of seduction and irrational curiosity from the very moment when

[18] Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," in *The Republic of Plato* (Book VII, 514a), trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Harper Collins BasicBooks, 1968), 193.

[19] See J. J. Lahuerta (editor), *Dalí, Lorca y la Residencia de Estudiantes* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Conmemoraciones culturales, 2010), 96–116, 297 and 300.

the cigarette tip in question will be the solely visible element of a huge psychoatmospheric-anamorphic object. [⋯] The tip of this cigarette could not but shine with brightness far more lyrical to human eyes than the atmospheric sparkling of the most limpid and distant star."[20]

Here, the example of the cigarette glowing in darkness allows Dalí to reverse the aesthetic hierarchies of *elevated* objects and *low* objects, with "high" and "low" understood spatially as well as metaphorically: in 1933, the humble point of light in the dark responds better to the artist's "lyrical needs" than all the sublime landscapes of Romantic tradition. But this assumes, first, a reversal of the gaze, which no longer aims towards celestial heights but rather towards the immediate "lowness" of things that occur right under our noses.[21] Rosalind Krauss has shown how this example participates in the surrealist strategies of *formlessness,* where perspective turns ninety degrees and leaves us completely disoriented, as we see in the photography of Man Ray, Brassaï or Boiffard.[22] But Dalí uses his little "psychoatmospheric" image for still other purposes, to reverse things on at least two levels. First, on an epistemic level—the explicit goal, even in a parodic displacement, of the "paranoiac-critical method"—the artist claims to reverse the hierarchy of *psychic* objects and *concrete* objects, of what is unobjectivable and what claims to be: one can sense, in particular, that he wants to take the exact opposite of the positivist perspective that Alfred Binet adopts in his famous "cigarette description" psychological test.[23]

Finally, on the level of light, Dalí uses all kinds of hypotheses in an effort to reverse the hierarchy of *lighted* things and *glimpsed* things, those objects which we perceive only in their passage, or as a flash in the dark. Thus his 1933 text—which appeared in the fourth issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*—presents an entire elaborate protocol for

[20] Salvador Dalí, "Psychoatmospheric-anamorphic Objects," in *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, trans. Haim N. Finkelstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 248.

[21] Dalí, 245.

[22] Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," in *L'amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston and Dawn Ades (New York: Adeville Press, 1985),

[23] Alfred Binet, "La description d'une cigarette," in *Écrits psychologiques et pédagogiques* (Toulouse: Avanzini, 1974), 33-40.

fabricating objects that are barely visible or actually invisible, using "camera obscuras" and hermetic capsules, blind descriptions and lightless photographs….[24] This ends with praise for "spectral sex appeal," that is, praise for a paradoxical visibility understood through the inversion of all the normal conditions—of light, in particular—according to which an object is considered "visible."[25] Later, in 1935, after elevating those tiny glimmers of cigarettes in the night to the level of an aesthetic paradigm, Dalí would praise the "black points" in bright space: those "black points" deforming Cartesian space through their perverse "sex appeal," just as blackheads disfigure a pimply adolescent's face, but which an "artistic" or loving operation could extract using a localized pressure on the skin….[26] This is what may allow us to take some liberty with the illustration that Dalí chose for his 1933 text, which shows a collection of small pebbles or droppings [*crottes*] (figure 3): by inverting the light, one can easily connect this illustration to the idea of a batallion of celestial objects, even of large fireflies in the night (figure 4). A manner of saying that the "blackheads" of bright space have their aesthetic equivalent in the "luminous points" of nocturnal space.

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There is indeed a struggle, then, of certain lights against other lights. To the necessary phenomenology of perception, we must here add another, no less necessary, "polemology of perception," somewhere between *disagreement* and *distribution*, to pay tribute to Jacques Rancière's works on the relationships between aesthetics and politics.[27] It is true that reading sociological or political works on art often deprives us of a *specific phenomenology* of the sensible world, when that reading—in search of a common anthropology for all aesthetic perception—often reaches an impasse before *sensible divergences,* of which every visual object may become the

[24] Dalí, "Psychoatmospheric-anamorphic Objects," 246-247.

[25] Dalí, "The New Colors of Spectral Sex Appeal," in *Collected Writings*, 204.

[26] Dalí, "Aerodynamic Apparitions of 'Being-Objects,'" in *Collected Writings*, 209.

[27] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).

object. The idea of "taste" most often serves as a sort of fig leaf or alibi in the complex relationship to be established between phenomenology and the politics of the visible.

Moreover, what do we mean when we say, here or there, that a thing is *visible* to us? From a contemporary sociological perspective inspired, in particular, by Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image*,[28] "visibility" would be the new term—as the "civilization of the image" requires—for the ancient "fame" (*fama*). This is precisely what I wish to suggest by speaking of artworks as "famous" objects—that is, objects invested with social prestige and celebrity. Sociologist Nathalie Heinich closes her analysis of the "elite artist," a figure that, she argues, was constructed during the nineteenth century, with an examination of phenomena of "visibility" as a central characteristic of the contemporary "mediatic regime."[29] The idea of *visibility* would then be identified with something like a scopic regime of fame,[30] which also functions as a capitalist regime of visual "values" or "goods." That some things or some beings may be "seen" more than others means, according to Nathalie Heinich, that *visibility* can be understood as an actual *capital* susceptible, in this respect, to being measured and managed like any other economic quantity.[31]

Nothing could be more true and nothing could be more false. Nothing could be more true, because nothing can better describe the present state of our alienations, of our race for "capital." But if, as Nathalie Heinich rightly suggests, "visibility" is this "total social phenomenon affecting all domains of collective life,"[32] then nothing could be more false than a description of this phenomenon solely from the perspective of the "winners," so to speak. Nothing could be more false because "capital" and the "mediatic regime" are far from exhausting the totality of phenomena, social practices, and, of course, acts of "visibility." It is misleading to consider the social domain as regulated in its totality by a single operation. Rather, this domain should be

[28] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (NY: Vintage, 2012).
[29] Nathalie Heinich, *L'Élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); *De la visibilité: Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
[30] According to Leo Braudy, "visibility is fame." Cited in Heinich, *De la visibilité*, 25.
[31] Heinich, *De la visibilité*, 33–52.
[32] Heinich, *De la visibilité*, 561.

imagined as a field of tensions, even as a field of battle: *visibilities against visibilities.* Just as there are lights against lights, just as there are powers against powers, there are operations against operations. A coherent analysis of the society in which we live, and in which "visibilities" form, cannot do without—as Georg Simmel, among others, understood[33]—a *dialectical analysis* that brings into play everything that is "visible" or "capitalized," along with, and against, everything that refuses to be "visible" or "capitalized." Whether by will or by fate—through *conflict in any case*—there are phenomena that escape the winners' logic. If it were truly impossible to escape that logic, the fireflies would have well and truly disappeared. But this is not the case: they exist in spite of all, just as, everywhere, there exist *minorities.* Sometimes they exist in the form of artworks—though not only, far from it—that reserve for "visibility" a non-standard fate, that is, a *critical existence* with regard to society as a whole.

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The fireflies have not disappeared. They've gone to ground somewhere, perhaps in the air of uninhabited nights. Perhaps, sometimes, in art. Against all textbook philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty called them to a dialectical thought—even "hyperdialectical," as he said—able to escape the brutal antinomies of being and nothingness. The real is made only of liminal, intermediary situations—of conflict and of compromise—between "absolute being" (that of a capital-visibility, for example) and "absolute nothingness" (destitute of fireflies, for example). We cannot understand anything at all unless we dialectize, unless we include the negative of every positive existence and the positive of every so-called nothingness. "Everything is obscure when one has not thought out the negative; everything is clear when one has thought it as negative. For then what is called negation and what is called position appear as accomplices and even in a sort of equivalence. They confront one another 'in a tumult like unto silence'; the

[33] See Georg Simmel, *La philosophie de la modernité*, trans. French Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Payot, 1990), 355-426; *Sociologie: études sur les formes de la socialisation*, trans. French L. Deroche-Gurcel et S. Muller (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999), 346, 453-470).

world is like that band of foam on the ocean which appears immobile when seen from an airplane, but which suddenly, because it has extended itself by a line, is understood to be shimmering and living from close up."[34]

Would we not say that it is utterly insane to try to capitalize—to buy, possess, seek new returns on investment, resell according to a new *value*—the line of foam that comes and goes between the shore and the sea? Isn't the *visible* precisely that line of foam, that perpetual stream whose form, and even moreso whose value, nobody will ever be able to set? Such is the fundamental ambiguity of artworks: they are objects, and consequently they enter the circle of exchange, of value and prestige. This is why they are brightly lit, confined in their frames or behind secure glass… But at the same time, they are precious—yet *invaluable*—like the visible that they reveal, like that shifting line of foam, sometimes lovely, erratic in places; the visible that it is impossible, strictly speaking, to close off within an isolating light. In the same manner as language, the visible would then be thought, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "as what is realized in man, but nowise as his *property*."[35]

Is this why Merleau-Ponty spoke, at one moment, of a "free image?"[36] Is this why he imagined the visible as "stream and life"? As a radiant *phenomenon* and not as a simple, limited object, above all because every event of visibility—every form that emerges, every color that expands, every light that pricks the dark—changes according to "its own duration"?[37] Certainly. A phenomenon is a thing of time, which implies the opening of its visibility to some paradoxical space-time of *latencies* that a simple light or glimmer in the night would be capable of bringing out, like a ghost, or an involuntary memory: "Like the memory screen of the psychoanalysts, the present, the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere, which it announces and which it conceals."[38]

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[34] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 64.

[35] Merleau-Ponty, 274.

[36] Merleau-Ponty, 258.

[37] Merleau-Ponty, 247.

[38] Merleau-Ponty, 114.

Here is the reason that visibility is not a matter of *quantum* but of *quale,* that is, of a singularity that issues from a play of forces (as an entire theoretico-artistic tradition, from Leonardo da Vinci to Paul Klee, has never ceased to insist). It is remarkable that Merleau-Ponty was able to speak of sensible objects—this pebble, that shell beneath my gaze, between my hands—as so many *soft forces* faced with a certain state of the world: "The thing, the pebble, the shell, we said, do not have the power to exist in face of and against everything; they are only soft forces that develop their implications on condition that favorable circumstances be assembled. [⋯] Being and the imaginary are for Sartre 'objects,' 'entities'—For me they are 'elements' [⋯] that is, not objects, but fields, soft being, non-thetic being, being before being."[39]

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For me, the softness of "non-thetic" things that Merleau-Ponty identifies evokes, in the luminous domain, precisely the soft slowness of fireflies, of their erotic signals in the night. But that softness is inevitably faced with non-softness, with the hardness of the world. To speak of fireflies, then, is to speak of an alternative state of light: the light of softness against the light of hardness, of insomniac overexposure. Is there not already an obvious conflict between the *visibility* of the phenomenologist of perception and the *visibility* of the media sociologist? But this does not mean that one "exists" while the other should be reduced to "nothingness," that one is "truth" and the other a "lie." Both exist—there lies the drama, and at the same time, the dialectical interest of the situation. Both coexist in their perpetual conflict, in which the crucial events are at once *poetic* (because forms will be invented) and *political* (because social relations will be invented).

Whether one is a sociologist or a philosopher, an artist or the curator of an exhibit, one must constantly make choices in order to produce a visibility in the eyes of each and everyone. The "mediatic" choice that Nathalie Heinich analyzes (although she seems not to see that there are many

[39] Merleau-Ponty, 161 and 267 [Translation modified. —TN].

other possible choices) consists in saying that a visible object is an object that is sufficiently *lit up,* so that a maximum number of spectators will have access to it. The "phenomenological" choice, of which Merleau-Ponty describes the experience, consists in recognizing, on the contrary, that an object is only truly visible because it *gives light* sufficient for someone, even if only a single someone, to perceive it. This is what happens when, in the course of a nocturnal stroll, fireflies suddenly flash out with their "soft" visibility. From a phenomenological perspective, then, what is visible is not so much what is accessible *beneath the light* (that is, lit up) but that which is accessible *as light* (that is, giving light). One might almost think of an amorous impression: Baudelaire's *Passante*, Warburg's Nymph or Jensen and Freud's Gradiva… Zoologically speaking, for that matter, fireflies are nothing other than amorous apparitions, luminous invitations to come and couple, sent out to others of their kind. That is what gives this perspective a particularly erotic or emotional tone, sustained through two concomitant *movements of approach.*

The first is a movement of *reciprocity* wholly ignored by "mediatic visibility," which is so entirely organized by inequality, by the power of the seen over the seer. Merleau-Ponty never ceases to emphasize the "incorporation of the seer into the visible" and the impression—articulated by painters, especially—that what we see also looks at us.[40] An amorous reciprocity, indeed, but clearly it is also a question of the politics of the exchanged look in that absence of hierarchy: the seeing body opens itself to the visible body at the same time that this body finds itself opened to the look—or the desire—of the spectator. Which is what leads Merleau-Ponty to suggest something like a kiss, an *act of lips* addressed to the visible, in the visible: "The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two lips: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open."[41]

The second movement, also an erotic one, is a *pulsation* between two antinomic states: a pulsation that—on the philosophical level of Merleau-

[40] Merleau-Ponty, 131 and 139.

[41] Merleau-Ponty, 136.

Ponty—moves from being to experience and from experience to being, a pulsation understood metaphorically as a state alternatively "illuminated" and "extinguished" before the visible, but just as much before time itself: "The visible things about us rest in themselves, and their natural being is so full that it seems to envelop their perceived being, as if our perception of them were formed within them. But if I express this experience by saying that the things are in their place and that we fuse with them, I immediately make the experience itself impossible: for in the measure that the thing is approached, I cease to be; in the measure that I am, there is no thing, but only a double of it in my 'camera obscura.' The moment my perception is to become pure perception, thing, Being, it is extinguished; the moment it lights up, already I am no longer the thing."[42] A manner of saying that one cannot have everything under the same light, and, particularly, that if you set up—in an art exhibit, for example—an object that is well lit on the outside, it will be difficult for that object to manifest the powers of the dark and to cast its own light. As in every aesthetic choice, as in every ethical choice and in all perception: what you might win from one angle, you inevitably lose from the other.

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Silently, then, fireflies send us their pulsations, their luminous *beep-beeps.* Is this an invitation? An SOS? A love signal or a distress signal, or both at the same time? What we explore in the nearby space of the underbrush, then, is it the same thing that Walter Benjamin, in the distant space of a nocturnal sky, named "the warning of the stars"?[43] We may recall a crucial moment in *Elective Affinities,* when Eduard and Otillie cling together "to seal their fate," where Goethe writes the phrase that Benjamin considers to be "the caesura of the work," "in which [⋯] everything pauses" to deliver a central truth (central to the novel and perhaps even to any romantic relationship): "'Hope shot across the sky above their heads like a

[42] Merleau-Ponty, 122.

[43] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," trans. Stanley Horngold, in *Selected Writings vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 354.

falling star.'"[44] I have the strong impression that fireflies offer us, on their own scale, a similar image: the image of a tiny little thing, but the sign of an entire fate. An uncertain flash in the night, a marvelous, miniscule thing; we cannot know if it is flying or falling, and we observe, as well, that sometimes it goes out.

To look deeply at the discreet, intermittent light of fireflies, would mean, in some sense, to listen to their "warnings," their cautions, their signals, their floating "divinations." A way to experience, once more, the reciprocal incorporation of the visible and of seeing; that is, of the visible and of time. *Seeing time*—even *without really knowing*—this is the experience that the two protagonists of *Elective Affinities* seem to have. We know that such an experience would be truly fundamental for Benjamin—but before him, for Baudelaire, for Marcel Proust and so many others—from the planetarium of *One Way Street* to the messianism that threads through his otherwise very materialist theses "On the Concept of History." We know, also, that Aby Warburg began constructing his entire anthropology of images, to its most madly poetic as well as its most directly political results, after a consideration of divination by the stars—or, symmetrically, by viscera.[45]

There are lights, then, for illuminating things—for example, a trinket in an artseller's window—and yet other lights for *seeing time* within an experience of the visible capable of opening itself to the negative, to the night, to intermittence, to dispossession. A light for seeing time and, equally, a light for *seeing truth*… But what kind of—"non-thetic," no doubt— truth? One could say, looking only at the pages that Benjamin dedicated to "the warning of the stars," that this truth appears with three faces at once.

First, it *appears as survival.* This is what Hannah Arendt means in in her lovely posthumous elegy to Benjamin, when she says that the more a phenomenon is held back, discreet, minor and even minuscule (and this would apply to light itself), the more it is a carrier of time and becomes closer

[44] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," 354-355.

[45] Aby Warburg, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 760-774; and *The Mnemosyne Atlas*, ed. Kizer Walker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2016), https://warburg.library.cornell.edu. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, trans. Shane Lillis (Boston: MIT Press, 2018).

to the "archetypal phenomenon" *(Urphänomen)* so dear to Goethe and then brought back to light, and doubly so, by the surrealists: "Strongly influenced by surrealism, it was the 'attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were.' Benjamin had a passion for small, even minute things; Scholem tells about his ambition to get one hundred lines onto the ordinary page of a notebook and about his admiration for two grains of wheat in the Jewish collection at the Musée Cluny, 'on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete *Shema Israël.*' For him the size of an object was in an inverse ratio to its significance. And this passion, far from being a whim, derived directly from the only world view that ever had a decisive influence on him, from Goethe's conviction of the factual existence of an *Urphänomen,* an archetypal phenomenon, a concrete thing to be discovered in the world of appearances [⋯] The smaller the object, the more likely it seemed that it could contain in the most concentrated form everything else."[46]

Second, this truth *appears as poetry,* even where philosophical thought is deployed in its most polemical and most political aspects. "What is so hard to understand about Benjamin," Arendt writes, "is that without being a poet he *thought poetically*," which could, as an aside, help to explain Benjamin's friendship with Bertolt Brecht.[47] Starting with this poetic thought, Benjamin managed to reinvent completely the genre of aesthetic criticism, through this very passion for images and texts considered as so many "stars" in the sky, so many "fireflies" in the underbrush, so many "pearls" at the bottom of the sea: "Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new

[46] Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940," in *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken, 2007), 11-12.

[47] Arendt, 14.

crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as 'thought-fragments,' as something 'rich and strange,' and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene.*"[48]

Finally, this truth *appears as hope.* An odd hope, one might say: it is what gave Franz Kafka his dark energy, what would give Pier Paolo Pasolini his "desperate vitality." Benjamin catches the fleeting phrase in *Elective Affinities*—"'Hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star'"—in order to arrive almost as quickly at this thought: "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope."[49] When he comments on the medieval allegory of Hope, which also attracted Warburg's attention, Benjamin notices most of all the paradox that "Sitting, she helplessly extends her arm toward a fruit that remains beyond her reach. And yet she is winged. Nothing is more true."[50] When Benjamin writes to his friend Scholem to tell him of his despair a few years after writing those lines, what comes spontaneously to his mind is the cruel and paradoxical "dialectical image": "Good, I am reaching an extreme. Someone who has been shipwrecked, who carries on while drifting on the wreckage, by climbing to the peak of the mast that is already crumbling. But he has a chance of sending out an SOS from up there."[51]

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Lights against lights: famous lights against lights of infamy, or, at least, against discreet lights, against nameless, minor, even clandestine lights. Well-lit things swiftly become established signs, things to be possessed,

[48] Arendt, 50-51.

[49] Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," 356.

[50] Benjamin, "One Way Street," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings vol. 1*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 471.

[51] Walter Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem, April 17, 1931, in *Correspondence 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 378.

"insured" values. While the things that give light—and even more so the things that give light intermittently, like fireflies—strip us of all certainty. They send us only their distress signals or their helpful signals, depending. And yet, perhaps true hope exists only in those signals, however "weak" they may be. This is the way that images themselves must be understood. What can I hope from an image, at base, if not that it occurs both as a "fire alarm" politics and as the poetic form of a hope, even a hope as paradoxical as the medieval allegory of the same name, immobile as well as winged? We should not be surprised that Walter Benjamin's simultaneously aesthetic and political lesson—which one can read through the related allegory of the *Angelus Novus* and in the form of that messianic "small gateway" that each second of time is capable of carrying with it[52]—is taken seriously in Ernst Bloch's three enormous volumes of *The Principle of Hope*, with its central concept of "wishful images"[53]; or that Theodor Adorno, too, took Benjamin's lesson seriously in his lovely *Minima Moralia.*[54]

The *Minima Lumina,* of which fireflies offer the exemplary image, teach us that being small is useful for escaping power.[55] They also demonstrate the rule that Adorno formulated, according to which "truth is inseparable from the illusory belief that from the figures of the unreal one day, in spite of all, real deliverance will come,"[56] including the most modest figures, modest *images* or unexpected apparitions of light, now placed on the same philosophical level as the most eminent *ideas,* and yet so immanent. Which does not prevent Adorno from criticizing all the more harshly everything that Guy Debord would later name the "society of the spectacle," and particularly its "elitist-artist" variants, where reigns "the much-lauded play-acting of modern artists, their exhibitionism, [which] is the gesture

[52] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings vol. 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 397.

[53] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope vol. 1*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

[54] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2005).

[55] Miguel Abensour, "Le choix du petit," afterword to *Minima Moralia* by Theodor Adorno, trans. French G. Kaufholz and J.-R. Ladmiral (Paris: Payot, 1991), 235.

[56] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 121-122.

whereby they put themselves as goods on the market."[57] But Adorno adopts the very correct—and dialectical—attitude of being satisfied neither with a sociology that consents, naively or cynically, to everything it describes, nor with a critique so radical that it becomes pure and simple vituperation: "Among the motifs of cultural criticism one of the most long-established and central is that of the lie: that culture creates the illusion of a society worthy of man which does not exist [⋯] This is the notion of culture as ideology, which appears at first sight common to both the bourgeois doctrine of violence and its adversary, both to Nietzsche and to Marx. But precisely this notion, like all expostulation about lies, has a suspicious tendency to become itself ideology. [⋯] To identify culture solely with lies is more fateful than ever."[58]

Between the two extremes of tacit consent and empty curses, Adorno—like Benjamin before him—guides us with his dialectical method, without, however, showing any certain path: on this level, the space of thought resembles the nocturnal woodland where we wander, where the fireflies may perhaps come, although it's never certain, to enchant us with their *Minima Lumina.* Adorno draws on his own experience of a "damaged life," at times with a particular despair: for example, just after forcefully affirming that "it is the sufferings of men that should be shared," he adds, as if slamming the door shut: "the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pains."[59] Yet it is not solely a matter of consoling oneself with the pleasures that every existence, even a miserable one, may offer. It is a matter of recognizing the joys—of "desperate vitality" as they may be—inherent in movements of resistance, of struggle, of emancipation. At the end of his masterwork *Discipline and Punish,* Michel Foucault warns us that, in the extremely hard history of the "fabrication of the disciplinary individual," it is necessary, in spite of all, to "hear the distant roar of battle."[60] An image, even one so modest as that cigarette's red glimmer in a dark prison cell, should also make us "hear the distant roar of battle."

[57] Ibid., 215.

[58] Ibid., 43–44.

[59] Ibid., 26.

[60] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 308.

These small fireflies—whose movements Eisenstein released into space, in 1928, which he contemplated on the negative filmstrip in the silence of his editing studio (figure 5)—these small fireflies becoming a swarm[61] were nothing other than the people in protest, in a struggle, light against light, for their freedom (figure 6).

January 2014

[61] See Michael Hardy and Antonio Negri, "Swarm Intelligence," in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 91–93.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Federico García Lorca, *San Sebastián,* 1927. Ink on paper, 15.5 x 12.5 cm. Madrid, Fundación Federico García Lorca. Photo DR.

2. Salvador Dalí, *Nacimiento del Niño Jesús (Homenaje a Fra Angelico) [Birth of the infant Jesus (homage to Fra Angelico)],* 1927. Collage sur papier, 13,5 x 8,7 cm. Madrid, Fundación Federico García Lorca. Photo DR.

3. Salvador Dalí, Psycho-atmospheric anamorphic objects, 1933. From *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution,* n° 5, 1933 (positive).

4. Salvador Dalí, Psycho-atmospheric anamorphic objects, 1933. From *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution,* n° 5, 1933 (negative).

5. Sergei Mikhailovitch Eisenstein, *October,* 1928. Still (negative).

6. Sergei Mikhailovitch Eisenstein, *October,* 1928. Still (positive).