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POSSIBLE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: HALLUCINATIONS, DREAMS, AND BUTTERFLIES

1. In order to clarify the different relationships that can be established between the eye and the image, Georges Didi-Huberman, in his essay *The image burns*,¹ introduces what he calls the "parable of the moth." First of all, he emphasizes that often very serious people claim there is nothing to learn from an encounter with these tiny animals, because for them this is a purely accidental occurrence with no substantial foundation. In fact, butterflies are accidental, ephemeral beings, destined to leave no trace of themselves behind and to disappear in a simple breath of wind, just like the beating of their wings. One normally looks at them for a very short time, and the enchantment only lasts as long as one's sigh of wonder. After this moment of hesitation, the feeling of being in complete harmony with the surrounding landscape quickly disappears and the viewer tends to move on: his or her thoughts go back to the things that really matter, because to be distracted from the essential for too long is unwise. Beyond the transitory flight of the butterflies there are enduring, multi-faceted and still unfolding issues that will not disappear tomorrow or in the following days. Of course, the enchanting beating of wings and the momentary uncertainty of its *tyche* leave in the viewer the subtle impression that each singularity, each life — even one's own — shares the same ephemeral haphazardness of the butterfly.

The fact remains that there are people who are more inclined than others to observe, who feel more engaged and alive when they dedicate themselves to look at things, and who focus more intensely on the object of their gaze. This passion for vision, however, affects the way these people deal with their encounters: for them, what increases the importance of an encounter is the fact that it is governed by chance. Moreover, the insistence with which their look is captivated by the evanescence of an event leads them to the realization that the truth manifests itself in such pure accidentality with the same punctuality with which it manifests itself in a substantiality; actually, the one manifestation cannot take place without the other. That is how the moth, in the depths of these people's eyes, and only for a moment, becomes *imago* and takes flight. The evanescence of that flight, however, makes it difficult to focus one's attention on a pure haphazardness, because the beating of the wings forces the eye to see discontinuously and intermittently, and introduces an hesitation, an uncertainty that proves essential to the perception itself. Besides, it is inevitable that sooner

or later those wings will not be visible anymore: they will turn into a black dot and finally vanish in the air. As a result of their vanishing, however, the air will acquire more vigor and a greater visual substance precisely because of the absence of the image.

For Didi-Huberman there are two types of butterfly chasers. First of all, there are the natural born hunters, those pure fetishists who, painfully aware that the accidental nature of their encounter will be lost forever, carry a butterfly net with them and, when the butterfly sits on a flower and closes its wings, take aim and throw the net to seize that gentle embodiment of freedom. Once it is brought home, however, the trophy triggers conflicting emotions: on the one hand, there is the thrill of holding in one's hand the still vividly colorful symmetries of a unique specimen; on the other, the excitement fades precisely when the longing for possession is finally fulfilled. Once pinned in its display case, the little animal gradually loses what made it so unique as it was chased and finally captured: gone are the unpredictability of its flight, the beating of its wings, and also the air that made all this possible. There remains only the possibility of a compulsion to repeat, the necessity not so much of a possible comparison between different specimens, but to build a real collection, thereby re-introducing the search for a new kind of thrill. However, there are also butterfly chasers who do not long for possession: they simply let the encounter with the image direct their gaze. They carry no net with them, and are attracted not just by the lucky sight, but also by its charming ephemerality: the colorful beating of wings lasts for an instant and cannot be captured. Indeed, the pleasure these hunters derive from this flies precisely in the total unpredictability of that movement, in its coming and going, in its sudden manifestation and equally sudden disappearance. This intermittent gaze alters the tone of the emotion it generates, because it renders pleasurable the singularity of the encounter where each event takes place, at least as long as the encounter lasts. Of course, that gaze cannot tell whether it is always the same butterfly that keeps reappearing, but it knows that, in any case, it is always a unique butterfly that offers itself as an image and disappears as quickly as it manifests itself. Sooner or later, however, even this type of butterfly hunter has to return home. The day comes to an end, the light fades and it becomes increasingly difficult to accommodate all those colors in the depths of one's eyes.

Unlike the first type of chaser, apparently, this one does not carry anything with himself and comes back with no physical object to put on display and immortalize: he simply seems to cherish the memory of something that perhaps has really happened to him. Therefore, when in the darkness of the evening he sits at the table and lights a candle so that the air can regain its luminous breath, the image reappears. It is a moment of pure happiness because the flutter of wings that he thinks he recognizes is not at all the same singularity he may have carried along with him, as if that singularity had kept following him in the darkness. That singularity is now another one. A singularity which ignores him absolutely. The source of its charm and its very existence lies exclusively in its desire for the flame and the intensity of its light: it flies

around it, approaching it and then moving away, and suddenly catches fire, and the onlooker's excitement at the scene is profound: what is left of the image, however, is only a few traces of ash scattered across the table.

We should go beyond this dichotomy — typical of the structure of any parable — between the two kinds of butterfly hunters, and explore their mutual implications: perhaps a different destiny is in store for the person who chases butterflies with a net in his hands, because it is likely that all image-chasers, even when faced with a fully random encounter, always carry some kind of net with them, at least in the depths of their eyes. Didi-Huberman puts us on the right track when, at the end of his essay, he argues that in fact all images are inflamed with their own memory and history. But there is more to that: we could add that all images somehow nurture within themselves the hope to be met by a gaze that will stare at them indefinitely through the frame of a device, a support or through the crystalline lens of the eyes in order to bring them to their full realization. Time and again, the butterfly, perhaps always the same one, or perhaps always an entirely new one, manifests itself there to "blind," with its luminous heat, the greyness of the gaze which presumes to be able to read everything. It is an encounter, a *ryche*, where the language metaphors no longer set fire to the images in order to derive a future meaning from them, but demonstrate how the images endure because they keep burning before our eyes in order to be themselves once again, if only this were possible.

2. In *Phenomenology of Perception?* Merleau-Ponty devotes some extraordinary and controversial pages to the phenomenon of hallucinations. He argues that to consider a hallucination, as well as one's past, simply as something that has occurred, means never to be able to identify oneself with either the hallucination or the past. Thus, there seems to be a bond that ties together, at the level of thought, the experience of the past with that of the hallucination. Of course — Merleau-Ponty immediately adds — if one could only speak about the experiences one identifies with, there would be nothing to speak about, because to speak about what happened implies by itself an inevitable separation in the structuring of time. Not only that: he also argues that, without words, there would be no real experience, because a pure lived experience does not even exist for those who are able to speak. So much so that when the subject evokes his past in the present he or she has already distorted it. However, it would seem that for Merleau-Ponty that subject could also be able to take such distortion into account, thereby becoming aware of the tension that exists between the suppressed past and one's arbitrary interpretations.

The issue is clearly controversial and it is understandable that Merleau-Ponty placed memory and hallucination on the same side. A pure lived experience is never accessible because, in order to capture that experience, the word must necessarily separate it from the subject: as a result, any recollection of a past experience is inevitably distorted. In other words, as an event unfolds, a metaphorization of the experience must occur that makes such experience expressible at least to oneself, if not to others. According to this view, therefore,

there would not be a real moment in which the subject becomes aware of his or her distortion of the past, because there is no possible comparison to make: for the person who experiences it, the past emerges, from the very start, as a deformed residue. If this is true, then the subject, through the language of thought, is consciously involved in the actual distortion of what happens and, at the same time, of what has already happened and, finally, of what never happens.

The tension inscribed in this subjectivity, therefore, derives from, on the one hand, the awareness of a mismatch between memories and events and, on the other, from the attribution of meaning leading to the appropriation of the events. In other words, the real event seems to take on a hallucinatory tone which contrasts with the word's capacity for approximation. What we have is thus a hallucinatory experience that calls for the word, but does not submit to it, if not by hiding something of itself, something that the word can express only through a distortion. So much so that Merleau-Ponty speaks of a past suppressed and not merely altered by language in order to acquire a possible meaning. Similarly, he also argues that the hallucination would disintegrate the real before our eyes. This is not so much a descriptive generalization, but it indicates what happens in the precise moment in which that single hallucination unfolds. In this sense, the disintegration of the real before our eyes would not represent the final synthesis of a hallucinatory action, but an actual effect characterized by the advent of such singularity, of such single hallucination – something that cannot be ascribed simply to the single subject who is experiencing it or has experienced it in the past. Of course, this insistence on singularity does not simplify the task of understanding, because we cannot identify exactly who is speaking. We cannot tell if those who speak of this disintegration are the ones who are experiencing the hallucination, or rather those who have witnessed the emergence of this phenomenon through the description of a person who affirms the presence of a reality that does not correspond to what is considered a common perception.

In both cases, the disintegrated real survives as a background that generates the awareness that one cannot give up the necessity to share what is perceived, although this sharing proves to be completely impossible. The reference to the disintegration may then simply be taken as a metaphor, in the sense that it is "as if" the hallucination disintegrates the real before our eyes. And yet Merleau-Ponty's expression does not sound allusive, but seems to point to a real experience. He also seems to regard hallucinations as a common experience, an occurrence that anyone should be familiar with. If the meaning of this experience is understood by everyone, one might assume that everybody should be able to recognize it and understand what it means to go through it. We might add, paradoxically, that the lack of perception of the surplus that the hallucination announces could be understood as the intuition of an hallucination by subtraction.

If we take one of the examples provided by Merleau-Ponty to describe the phenomenon, we find a schizophrenic person who claimed that every time he

looked out the window he would spot a man standing in the garden, whose position, dress and attitude he would describe accurately. When someone was actually instructed to stand in the garden exactly in the same place, with the same clothing and in the same posture, his reaction was one of astonishment. He looked carefully and recognized that there was actually someone in the garden, but claimed that the man was not the same one he habitually saw. However, he refused to count two men in the garden. This example is used by Merleau-Ponty to emphasize how the hallucinatory person remains capable of distinguishing between hallucination and perception. As for the problem of the disintegration of the real, however, this particular example sounds quite peculiar. In fact, if we take another case discussed by Merleau-Ponty immediately after the one just described, we encounter a delusional subject who claimed to see a guinea pig where the hand of his physician should have been; however, if a real guinea pig was placed in the other hand of the physician, he was also able to notice the animal right away.

In the second example the subject cannot avoid counting *two* guinea pigs. Of course, there is not a perfect correspondence, because on the one side we have a hand holding a guinea pig and, on the other, a hand that *is* a guinea pig. In fact, in the implementation of the experiment, no animal was placed on the hallucinated hand, because there was no hand at all to deal with, despite the fact that a hand was still present in the form of a guinea pig. This example confirms the hypothesis that the hallucination has no place within objective reality: through the subject's words we witness a visual distortion that disintegrates reality before our eyes. On the contrary, in the first case, there is room for hallucinations in the objective reality, because the subject does not say that there are two men in the garden (the real one and the hallucinated one) standing next to each other like the two guinea pigs, but that the one "arbitrarily" introduced is a different one despite remaining a single person. A completely different kind of disintegration takes place before our eyes: there is no longer a mismatch between the vision of the hallucinated person and that of the external observer, and the visions of the first are not so difficult to identify as in the second case. Indeed, it is no longer clear why the hallucinations would take place on a scene different from the perceived world, since, as Merleau-Ponty argues, they seem to overlap with it. Even from this perspective, the two cases take on entirely different meanings. It can be assumed that in the second case the man saw a guinea pig superimposed on the hand, which in turn disappeared from his sight while remaining present for any other external observer, if only for the physician who presumably continued to perceive it normally. In the case of the man in the garden, however, we do not know who overlaps with whom: the hallucinated person and the experimenter see the same man, they both count only one man, but their gaze is different. The hallucinatory gaze is not merely an ascertaining one: it reveals, as it were, a greater perceptual capacity as it is cast upon its object, as if an additional temporal permanence overlapped with that particular figure through a partial splitting. This difference between the two cases persists even if we take into

account Merleau-Ponty's idea that hallucinations disintegrate reality before our eyes: they do so by replacing reality with a quasi-reality. The visual transformation of a hand into a guinea pig hovers in a quasi-reality, so much so that it is possible to place another real animal in the other hand of the physician in order to establish a comparison. On the contrary, the man in the garden is already in himself a quasi-reality entirely encompassed by the subject's visual field, and the language cannot add or subtract anything from it. There is no possible comparison to establish: the man remains one single man in any case.

The difficulty in understanding the hallucinatory phenomenon resides for Merleau-Ponty in the fact that we tend to reconstruct this event, instead of living it. One may think that hallucinations have no place in the world and in intersubjective relationships, because they lack the fullness that allows the perceived thing to be at rest in itself, to exist for its own sake and concretely in a living present. This, however, is not the case, because we tend to ignore the subject's ambiguous adherence to pre-objective phenomena. Merleau-Ponty's essay appears to inhabit the same tension, pointing in some passages to a subtle proximity and in others to a clear distinction between hallucinatory experience and perception, for example when he says that the hallucination cannot grasp the living present as it occurs only in a state of hovering above time and world. In other words, the experience would be similar to a dream, where the person who speaks has in fact never opened his mouth, and, if he did, he did so before he had actually said something. Likewise, those who suffer from hallucinations very often report that they "hear" with their mouth, claiming that the speaker is, as it were, on their lips. When hallucinating persons feel the presence of someone who is approaching or moving away from them — whether beside, behind or above themselves — this experience never corresponds to something actually visible. In this sense, hallucinations, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, would appear to be "short-lived phenomena, such as pricking sensations, jolts, explosions, draughts, waves of cold or heat, sparks, points of bright light, glowing lights or silhouetted shapes." Instead, when they take a definite shape, such as that of an animal — like a guinea pig — they conform to the style or the general physiognomy of that animal.

According to these assumptions, hallucinations would arise as an invisible effect, which would never be matched by anything on the outside, since in order to be confirmed in its meaning and existence such effect would require the inescapable presence of a single and determined subjectification. However, referring to the necessity of this presence, Merleau-Ponty makes the essential remark that the so-called normal person is not able to enjoy his own subjectivity, but runs away from it, because he or she is actually concerned with being in the world: thus, his or her grip on time is direct and immediate. The hallucinating person, instead, takes advantage of his being in the world in order to carve a private and personal space for himself which contrasts with what is considered the common world, thereby constantly running up against the transcendence of time. In fact, this decentralized existence reveals something essential about the experience of what we consider the common world, so much so that even the

constitution of the so-called normal person seems to require similar operations. Each subjectivity is traversed by sensory fields and possesses also a body: therefore, it must keep the wound of its own singularity open — it can only understand itself, we might add, as incised by the "original" trauma of its being "a life." This way, each subject, along with his conviction of actually being in the world, is also traversed by forms of illusion, and is forced to recognize that his particular representation of the world, which posits him at center of such world, is in fact completely vulnerable.

Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest a complete reversal in the distinction between perception and hallucination, since, as he himself points out, if we do believe what we see, then this conviction must precede any possible validation. Therefore, to have an hallucination or to feel in the grip of one's imagination means to benefit from the necessary tolerance toward an ante-predicative world and to recognize one's complete vertiginous closeness to an essentially syncretic experience.

3. In his *Seminar X^F* Jacques Lacan argues that the evanescent manifestation of what happens to us takes place between the initial instant of looking — where something of the intuition is invariably elided and lost — and the final and necessarily elusive moment where our grip on reality is not conclusive, but partial and deceitful. The final moment, therefore, proves to be elusive and disturbing because of the initial elision in which the encounter with the event takes place, despite one's impression that the event is grasped in its immediacy. It should be remembered that for Lacan the gaze takes always the form of a strange contingency, in the sense that there is a symbolic form, a grammar of the gaze, which preserves its actuality with respect to what appears on the horizon; together with this, however, there is in the gaze a form of interruption of one's experience due to the constitutive lack of castration anxiety.

The fact that there is a sequence unfolding between a starting and an ending point is due to the fact that the process of encounter is expressed within a logical time that needs this sequence in order to express itself. In reality, these two temporal processes should be thought of as one. Thus, the linguistic re-appropriation of the event is eluded due to the elision of the instant of looking: a symbolic form interprets, in a sort of domination of the eye by the gaze, the sense of what it encounters, while on the side of the eye there is an arrest, a specular capturing of the visible data without the intervention of any castration anxiety. In other words, the eye, in its separation from the gaze, is imprinted, so to speak, with a pure intuitive form, which is elided so that the symbolic register can metaphorize the encounter and deform it in a misleading grammatical re-appropriation.

According to this view, in the so-called waking state there would be an elision not only of the gaze, but also of what appears and, in turn, looks back toward us; this, however, does not happen in the field of dreams, where the images simply appear and embody the totality of the eye — they are a pure hallucination. That is why even in the dream there is a kind of slipping of the

subject, in the sense that the subject can never be reduced to a pure consciousness of its own dream; what appears, in fact, always coincides with what happens in the foreground. In the absence of a real horizon – which has turned into a screen – the images take on the character of an emergence, a contrast, or a spot, and their colors become more intense: in this sense, according to Lacan, those who dream basically do not see. They do not see because they look into what is looking back at them: here, what in wakefulness is understood as the act of contemplation does not exist. In the dream, holding the net of his imagination in his hand, the subject chases the images as if they were butterflies in order to entrap their *inango* in the depth of his eyes.

In a dream, Chuang-tse sees himself as a butterfly. This for Lacan means that Chuang-tse sees the butterfly in its gaze-like nature; it means that his eye, as a screen, is one with the many shapes and colors of such spectacle, where the essence of the gaze seems to find the imprint coinciding with its primitiveness. The awake Chuang-tse asks himself if it is actually he as a butterfly who is dreaming of Chuang-tse as awake: this, according to Lacan, provides the evidence that he is not crazy, that he does not believe to be perfectly identical with himself. Even more: this hesitation, this radical doubt, indicates that when he was a butterfly in the dream he was actually holding on to a root of his identity. In other words, through such form of gaze, he comes to the realization that while he was dreaming he essentially *was* that multi-colored butterfly: it is precisely in the uncertainty of this ultimate root, where there is no clear distinction between Chuang-tse the man and Chuang-tse the butterfly, that Chuang-tse can encounter himself.

4. When Walter Benjamin, during his stay abroad, realized that he might have to let go forever of the possibility of returning to his hometown, he decided to get vaccinated against nostalgia by abandoning himself to the images of his childhood that mostly connected him to his birthplace. Two pages of the book⁴ that was born out of this experience are devoted to the chase of butterflies, something very similar to the hunt for images that his memory was engaged in. He recalls how, driven by a burning desire to capture those wings, he would follow the blunted-edge cabbage butterflies or pale-winged common brimstones from the well-kept trails of his garden out to places where the vegetation was much wilder: there, helpless, he would have to face the conspiracy of wind and scents, of foliage and sun, and immerse himself into that glorious spectacle.

Holding his net with his hand raised, he would observe the butterflies as they passed from flower to flower, hovering above each one of them. He would wait impatiently for those wings to be momentarily captivated by the charm of a particular flower, as if the colorful petals were able to hold them back a bit longer; at the same time, when the butterflies seemed ready to sit on the petals, he would watch them with pleasure as they shifted sideways, focusing on the shades playing on their wings and again following them as they hovered above yet another flower they would never sit upon. So when an admiral or a sphinx

teased him with their hesitation and apparent stillness, he would suddenly feel the desire to dissolve into light and air, but not so much in order to identify with the freedom of that movement, but rather to approach the prey undetected and finally to catch it. This desire would become so real that he would lose himself into each vibration and oscillation of those wings, feeling inundated, as it were, by those very movements. It was the ancestral pattern of the hunt. It so happened that the more he felt united with the animal with every fiber of his body, the more he realized that, in the depths of his gaze, he had become himself a butterfly; at the same time, the movement of the wings would increasingly take on a human determination. He would regain his humanity only through the hunt and the capture of the butterflies.

The capture of the image through an immersion in the evanescence of its colorful reality – in the awesome feeling of *being* a butterfly and of a gaze turned animal – is a pearl diver-like gesture. As Hannah Arendt pointed out⁵, Benjamin had the ability to tear a series of fragments out of their context and rearrange them so that they could shed new light on one another, leaving them floating, as it were, in a gravity-less space. This unactual reification of the captured (but at the same time definitively lost) images highlights how the matrix of memory is essentially preserving, whereas that of recollection, in the inescapable vividness of its colors and in its hallucinatory mode, disintegrates reality under our very eyes, thereby displaying all its destructive force. Memory, in order to be itself, cannot go beyond the register of the symbolic, and must adhere to the narrative capacity of its historical form. On the contrary, recollection, in its purely virtual power, belongs to the register of the real, displaying, each time, its purely gaze-like nature.

5. In Winfried G. Sebald's novel⁶, Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of the story, recalls an episode from his past in which, on a summer night, he and two other people held a lamp in their hands as if it were a butterfly net and stayed up all night watching the moths as they flew around them. There were a staggering amount of them, up to ten thousand at a very rough estimate. The bright tracks that they seemed to leave behind formed various circles or spirals, but in reality they did not exist: they were purely ghost tracks generated by the slingshotness of the onlookers' eyes. It was as if the inaction and the laziness of their eyes allowed them to see a residual blaze in the place from which the insect had already disappeared, after being caught for a fraction of a second in the reflection of the lamp. Precisely these unreal, hallucinatory, and yet actual flashes in the landscape, so similar to what one encounters in the eyes of a loved one, ignited their deepest feelings or, at least, those which one is usually led to interpret as such in what might be a possible autobiography.

This inaction of the gazing eye can lead to a luminous intensification of what hovers in the air, which is in fact nothing but an intensification of the air itself. This allows us to understand that there is a temporal discrepancy between what we are able to recognize, to read, and to make sense of and what appears to us when captured in the field of vision. It is within this same kind

of discrepancy that we can try to follow Austerlitz when, after reading H.G. Adler's text on Theresienstadt, he is engaged in a search for a propagandistic documentary on the life of the camp shot by the Nazis. This was the same camp in which his mother had been interned and died.

According to Adler's account, the documentary was shot during a planned visit by the Red Cross. Before the visit, the Nazis had made sure the camp was properly transformed, at least along the route that the commission was supposed to follow. Here, life should have looked pleasant, safe and distant from the dangers of the war, so much so that the title of the documentary was: "The Fuehrer gives the Jews a City." This staging was filmed and kept as archival record; a musical accompaniment with Jewish folk motifs was added. Unable to imagine what life was like for his mother in that place, Austerlitz had unsuccessfully tried for months to acquire a copy of the documentary. As he kept thinking about what he could see had he come in possession of the film, he began to imagine how he would immediately recognize Agáta, his mother, a young woman as she would be if compared to her now old son. He would perhaps spot her among the customers in front of the fake coffee shop specifically built by the Nazis, or as a saleswoman in the haberdashery shop; most of all, since she used to be an actress, Austerlitz would picture her in the role of Olympia in the play *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which, as Adler recalled, had been staged in Theresienstadt as part of the Nazi's propagandistic strategy. As he was increasingly abandoning himself to these kinds of fantasies, he would fancy seeing her walking on the street in a summer dress, wrapped in a light gabardine coat, amid a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll; but it was only her, among all the others, who would actually walk toward him until, coming closer and closer, she would step out of the screen and — at least this was his impression — pass over into him.

When he finally managed to obtain a copy of the film, his immediate reaction when he watched it for the first time inside one of the Imperial War Museum viewing rooms was that he could not catch anything of what he was actually seeing. The unknown faces surfacing for a few seconds in front of him seemed to follow an endless, empty succession; even the actions filmed appeared to him mostly as a sequence of senseless movements. It was all "a constant, pointless-to-do of hammering, metal-beating, and welding, cutting, gluing, and stitching." Even the final scenes seemed to him a sequence of clichés rather than samples of real life, as if there had been no real reason for their being recorded: men taking a shower in public baths, well-groomed gentlemen borrowing books from the library, the execution of a real orchestral concert, people intent on raking the flower beds, watering the plants and searching the leaves for caterpillars. Other images, instead, showed people sitting on benches as if in front of their real home, seemingly satisfied with their day's work: a man reading a book, a woman chatting with her neighbor, other women simply looking out of the window with folded arms. Only the sky, occasionally filmed, seemed to him motionless and unchanging, filled with the same white clouds.

Austerlitz could get none of these images into his head; they were dancing before his eyes as the source of a kind of continual irritation. Also, the actual duration of the film had proved to be only a quarter of an hour: a simple collage of fragments and nothing else. Besides, nowhere he had been able even to sense the vague presence of Agáta. For this reason, perhaps, every face seemed to dissolve as quickly as it appeared — exactly as it happens when one realizes, in a mixture of enchantment and surprise, that one is, without a particular reason, in pursuit of a butterfly. When he imagined himself looking at the film, Austerlitz had been able to picture an increasingly real image of his mother, so real that at some point she had "passed over" into him, becoming part of his off-center world: wrapped in a light gabardine coat, smiling, she had come to settle at the bottom of his eyes. Now that he had those longed-for images before his eyes, instead, he had lost all his imaginative powers, and his gaze, as it were, had been blinded by an excess of vision.

Tired of uselessly inspecting pictures that dissolved in the very moment of their appearance, Austerlitz decided to have a slow-motion copy made of the film. This copy extended the length of the film from a quarter of an hour to a full hour. Only then, with the images captured in the net of the time, he began to make out things and people that until then had escaped his attention. Moreover, it seemed to him that the men and women — so long did it take them to complete their actions — were working in their sleep; this way, the film appeared wrapped in a dreamlike fog and in an entirely imaginary time. The figures were walking as if floating in the air, as if their feet no longer needed to touch the ground: the whole thing seemed a sequence of fluid pictures taken by Louis Darget in the late nineteenth century.

When the slow-motion images showed the scene of the concert and the camera closed in on several members of the audience, then, on the left of the screen, in the background, behind the gray head of an old man who occupied almost the entire right half of the picture, there appeared the face of a young woman, almost indistinguishable because of the dark shadow engulfing her. It was probably because of this shadow that Austerlitz at first had completely missed it. Around her neck the woman wore a fine three circle necklace, barely visible on the dark and high-necked dress, and in her hair she had a white flower. It was exactly how Austerlitz had imagined Agáta the actress on the basis of his weak memories and a few other minor details he possessed. In this temporality snatched from the time of history, Austerlitz realized that what he imagined coincided with what he was seeing, so that he could no longer look away from the woman's face that appeared to him strange and at the same time entirely familiar. Every time that single frame was replaced by the following ones, he would run the tape back to see it again; he repeated the procedure countless times and, each time, the image reappeared identical to itself; the time indicator in the top left-hand corner of the screen, with the numbers covering part of the woman's face, showed the minutes and seconds, from 10:53 to 10:57, while the hundredths of a second, despite the slow motion, flashed by so fast that one could not read or capture them. It was as if that face

was suspended on the precipice of a fraction of time that no technical skills could slow down or let alone bring to a halt. It was not possible to count, one by one, each hundredth of a second, which inexorably flew away.

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NOTES

- 1 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image brève*, in L. Zimmermann (a cura di), *Penser par les images: autour des travaux de Georges Didi-Huberman*, éd. Cécile Defaut, Nantes 2006.
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945.
- 3 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1973.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1950.
- 5 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Brace & World, New York 1968.
- 6 Winfried G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, C. Hanser, München, 2001.

Possible Autobiographies: Hallucinations, Dreams, Butterflies

This essay revolves around certain core themes that return in cycles and intertwine with each other at the intersection of several authors: hallucination in *Phenomenology of Perception*, from which I closely re-read the passages concerning the difficult relationship of discernibility and indiscernibility between hallucinatory and perceived things, which in the experience of the patient tends toward a kind of superimposition that gives life to an image and that is more than one yet less than two; the look, the encounter, and the dream in Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XI*, which I re-read starting from the famous parable of Chang-Tse who dreams of being a butterfly dreaming of being Chuang-Tse; Georges Didi-Huberman's reflections on the relation of encounter, image, and memory that again rely on the figure of the butterfly, its ephemeral appearance, the contradictory attempt to follow and capture it, the utopia of the collector who loses it in catching it; and, finally, the double return of the figure of the butterfly in the pages of Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* and in Winfried Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*.

Autobiographies possibles : les hallucinations, les rêves, les papillons

Cet essai tourne autour de certains noyaux thématiques qui reviennent de manière cyclique et qui s'entrelacent l'un dans l'autre dans les croisements des auteurs examinés : l'hallucination dans *Phénoménologie de la perception*, dont je relis minutieusement les pages consacrées à la question du rapport difficile, tout ensemble de discernabilité et d'indiscernabilité entre chose hallucinée et chose perçue, qui dans l'expérience du patient tendent à une sorte de surimpression qui donne vie à une image et qui est plus qu'un et moins que deux ; le regard, la rencontre et le rêve dans le *Séminaire XI* de Jacques Lacan, relu à partir de la célèbre parabole de Chuang-Tse qui rêve d'être un papillon qui rêve d'être Chuang-Tse ; et encore, les réflexions que consacre Georges Didi-Huberman au rapport entre rencontre, image et mémoire, se référant à son tour à la figure du papillon, à son apparition éphémère, à la tentative contradictoire de le suivre et de le capturer, à l'utopie du collectionneur qui le perd en l'attrapant ; enfin, le double retour de la figure du papillon dans les pages de l'Enfance berlinoise de Walter Benjamin et dans le roman de Winfried Sebald, *Austerlitz*.

Autobiografie possibili: allucinazioni, sogni, farfalle

Questo saggio ruota attorno ad alcuni nuclei tematici che ritornano ciclicamente e si intrecciano l'uno all'altro nel trascorrere dall'uno all'altro degli autori esaminati: l'allucinazione in *Fenomenologia della percezione*, le cui pagine vengono rilette con minuziosa attenzione isolando la questione del difficile rapporto, insieme di discernibilità e indiscernibilità tra cosa allucinata e cosa percepita, che nell'esperienza del paziente tendono a una sorta di sovrainpressione che dà vita a un'immagine che è più di un uno e meno di un due: lo sguardo, l'incontro e il sogno nel *Seminaro XI* di Jacques Lacan, riletto a partire dalla celebre parabola di Chuang-tse che sogna di essere

una farfalla che sogna di essere Chuang-tse; e ancora, le riflessioni che Georges Didi-Huberman dedica al rapporto tra incontro, immagine, memoria, affidandosi a sua volta alla figura della farfalla, alla sua apparizione effimera, al tentativo contraddittorio di inseguirla e catturarla, all'utopia del collezionista che la fa propria perdendola: infine, il doppio ritorno della figura della farfalla nelle pagine di Infanzia berlinese di Walter Benjamin e nel romanzo di Winfried Sebald, *Austerlitz*.

GIANLUCA SOLLA

MERLEAU-PONTY'S ECHO

I

In Merleau-Ponty's notes for the course on passivity held at the Collège de France (*Le problème de la passivité: le sommeil, l'inconscient, la mémoire, 1954-1955*), we find a peculiar statement:

Méthode propre à la compréhension du rêve: rêverie sur le rêve, rêverie herméneutique. Parce qu'il n'est pas chose dite, mais écho à travers totalité; C'est ce système d'échos qui constitue l'ontisme de la veille aussi (cf. parole non parlante de Blanchot). (*Passivité*, 204)

The metaphor of the echo appears very often in the works of Merleau-Ponty. In this passage its function is clarified as an understanding of that nocturnal "clump" we call a dream. A dream, according to this view, would be nothing but an echo, or, more precisely, a "system of echoes:" the echo of something that is actually dreamed. To dream means, therefore, to create the space for an echo that reaches us even while we are asleep. This echo, however, is not confined to our oneiric life, but extends into our wakeful one, in a sort of "oneiric wakefulness" which accompanies our daytime activity. There is only a difference of quantity, not of quality and even less of essence, between being awake and dreaming: both are "system of echoes" that intertwine, overlap, decompose and recompose themselves.

The echo allows us to identify the image that can explain both the dream and the state of wakefulness. If this is true, however, Merleau-Ponty's words also show an unprecedented methodological concern with the phenomenon of the echo. They point to the idea of a systematic use of the echo, which is to be understood not as a natural phenomenon of sound refraction, but as a strategic device through which we achieve what Merleau-Ponty calls the "understanding of dreaming." Here we come across an issue of immense importance: what can this revealing echo tell us about the act of thinking? Does the echo understood as an essential part of human life (both oneiric and wakeful) lead us to another way of addressing the question of what it means to think? To recognize the importance of the echo in this area means obviously to change its function radically and, with it, the very nature of what it means to understand. There is no longer an understanding in the usual sense of the term, but only as a "rêverie sur le rêve."