

Imprints of Movement

Presentation, Re-presentation, Presence

ALEXANDRU POLGÁR

The will to record or, more properly put, the will to re-presentation is actually a will to presence, a will to grasp the “object” and to present it again and again.

THE AIM of this rather speculative essay is to formulate as accurately as possible a hypothesis or a question regarding the relationship between the representational processes/procedures and movement. In fact, what I am going to talk about exceeds the classic definitions of representation and should rather be called, for this reason, *presentation*. This distinction, stemming in fact from the meditation on representation undertaken by German Idealist philosophy (where the word for “representation” is *Vorstellung*, while what one can translate as “presentation” is *Darstellung*), is employed here in order to grasp and describe a particular mode of looking at what movement leaves behind, as some sort of material traces, beyond the will to representation of an artist. In this sense, I will not talk about a specific type of movement, but rather about a singular way or “procedure” by which movement is recorded by or just gets stuck to artistic works (fictional or non-fictional). This “procedure” is not properly speaking a procedure, and even less one *of* representation, because it actually escapes, inasmuch as it is missed by them, the questions raised by

Alexandru Polgár

Editor of **IDEA arts + society**, a journal of contemporary arts, theory and politics based in Cluj. He is the author of the book **Politică** (Politics) (2015).

representation as such: the codes, the syntax, the content of representations are left aside here, in order to focus on something else. The question raised, then, by this text is that of delimiting what this “something else” could mean, if we were to eliminate the intended representational content from certain visual or non-visual configurations of movement, the expression “configuration of movement” being only a very first attempt to avoid the word “representation” in terming that which, in the representational process itself, is more (or less) than representation.

To give a very first approximation of the “phenomena” I am thinking about: the painter’s hand is holding the brush and is moving while painting; this movement is recorded, is imprinted on the canvas, but it is not *represented* there: the representation (the painting), even if it would be a representation of a completely accidental movement (like in Jackson Pollock’s paintings, for instance), does not *represent* the movement exerted by the artists’ hands, but it *imprints* or *presents* them, simultaneously effacing them in the work. (As a notable detail, traditional aesthetics addresses these discrete movements only under the headline of artistic *technique*.) This example could be easily extrapolated to other arts as well, even to those whose medium is movement itself: dance, for instance. But developing too early other implications of the notion of imprints of movement would mean to anticipate too much before actually grasping the nature of this quite uncanny “figural presence” of movement, a “figural presence” which, exceeding our habitual notion of representation, “offers” nevertheless to our eyes something to be looked at, while at the same time withdraws or suspends the presence of a will to show or to reveal, which is supposed to exist behind every image or representation in general.

In spite of the manifold theoretical questions raised by the distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung*, there is not yet a theory of *such* imprints of movement. Building up a theory of them or, more modestly put, sketching out an interpretative framework for what I call here imprints of movement would require, I believe, to go beyond (philosophical) aesthetics and even beyond a more generally conceived art theory (so deeply indebted to the notion of “representation”). This must be done in order to avoid the focus on the content, the codes, the representational procedures of art, or on the “theses” of artworks in general (insofar as artworks always *posit* something in front of a viewer).

Before starting to develop some of the theoretical complications resulting from such a way of looking at movement and its representations, I have to acknowledge here to what kind of theoretical work this idea is indebted. Some years ago I was working on a projected public lecture with a Romanian researcher, Adrian T. Sîrbu. Our idea was to display a documentary on the anti-G8 demonstrations that took place in Genoa (2001) and to prepare a text that would accompany the projection of this movie. We tried to articulate this text

from the point of view of a critique of the Spectacle,¹ i.e. using the movie as a counter-example of the intense spectacularization of our current societies (the symposium to which we participated with this multilayered intervention was called *Synthetic Light: A Critical Approach of the Advertising Phenomenon*).² Our starting point was that in the documentary we were going to show³ there was something that resisted the logic of spectacularization. Eventually, in the writing process itself, the text had become less our common work than the application to this particular movie of some of Sîrbu's insights stemming from his preoccupation with the theory of metaphor and the question of (re)presentation in philosophy. His final version of the text is entitled "The Society of the Spectacle and Its 'Enemies' (Refuseniks)."⁴ The most interesting and important achievement of this text is that it formulates a critique of the Spectacle by developing a singular way of reading the documentary movie we were interested in. As Sîrbu puts it:

My chief goal here is to outline a "reading" protocol aiming not at an interpretation of the "message," but rather of what becomes visible, independently from the original intention that commands it, through/by the material "formality" of the "signifier." This protocol will be demonstrated by applying it to the way in which an audio-visual, non-fictional document functions, a document that, even if it does not differ from current mass-media productions (including its ideological, symbolic and/or "spectacular" effects!), bears witness to an important utopia—inasmuch as the anti-globalization movement is the new social utopia of our times. In other words, this type of reading is similar, in certain respects, to a "rhetorical" (or even "poetical") critical decoding of these media documents, a decoding that allows us to avoid the trap of the ideological "contents" (commonplaces of dissent rhetoric, partisan symbolic-spectacular identifications, etc.) borne and produced by such documents.⁵

The main assumption of Sîrbu's article is that, even if it is not strictly speaking a fictional work, the documentary produced by *kanalB* does not escape, in general, the logic of the Spectacle. His demonstration proceeds by a progressive *Einklammerung* ("bracketing") of the representational effects or contents of the movie, emphasizing the image or the (audio) visual character of the film. Through this focusing on the image as image and by stressing the fact that an image is always constructed as a stage (we always need a *pro-skenion* or a "distance of the gaze" to actually be able to *look at* and *see* images), he points out that an image as such is "the material analogon of the 'origin' of any spectacular"⁶ or Spectacle. Considered from the point of view of this emphasized focus on its visual character, the documentary contains some moments that are, so to speak, "piercing" the surface of the Spectacle, which not only reveal "its transcendental

mechanism,” but also undermine it. These two moments are actually, both of them, related to movement. The first of them is the movement of a video camera, while a policeman beats its holder, a protester who has fallen to the ground, with her legs in the air, completely exposed to the aggressor. The camera is recording the sky, some leaves of a tree, and sometimes the baton of the policeman, as well as his arm. In the background, we can hear the voice of the beaten young woman: “Bitte! Bitte! Bitte!” and then “Por favor! Por favor!” The second moment, which is also the end of the movie, presents the blood traces on a wall beside some stairs inside the Diaz school in Genoa; from these traces one can easily deduce that somebody chased the victim. The blood traces end in a puddle of blood, in a corner, presumably the result of a “successful hunt” by policemen. According to Sîrbu, even though these shots are inserted in a representational and therefore spectacular account of the events, they nevertheless escape the logic of the Spectacle, for one cannot ignore that these scenes are not *only* about representation, but also about the *presentation* of something, recorded by the sensitive surface of a medium: the camera in the first case and the wall in the second one. Our analysis should now attempt to differentiate between what is “representational” and what is “presentational” in the two mentioned cases.

The images of the first scene are not actually so unusual for the eyes of those familiar with the so-called “reality shows.” The moving camera and hence the moving, vibrating images are a very ordinary and widespread way of representing reality or of creating its illusion, the illusion that we, the viewers, are actually participating to the “action” (a police chase or a session of bungee jumping, etc.). The movement of the camera is the actual guarantee of the reality or of the truth-content of the action, represented by the random alternation of unfocused and almost illegible images. These images are not “showing” (or focusing on) something, but they rather re-present in the sense of re-bringing into presence the “eyes” of those involved in the action; they *capture*, strictly speaking, something from the “experience” itself by ignoring or by being forced to ignore—“under the pressure of the moment,” as they say—the conventionalities (codes, syntax, content) of representation. (From the point of view of our question, it matters little that this suspension of the representation becomes the code, syntax and content of creating a new representation.) The viewer loses control of the images shown to him, and this eventually creates the reality effect; usually of situations involving fear or uncertainty (it is a commonplace that, in the logic of the Spectacle, the Real is the shocking).

As such, our particular scene from the Genoa documentary does not completely escape this logic of representation: the difference is that while in the case of “reality shows” there is a powerful code (the reality show itself) that regulates

the perception of “reality images” shown to the spectator, and thus a *representational intention* behind the scenery displayed, such a code and such an intention are not present or are rather secondary in the scene of the beaten protester. In fact, the representational intention was subsequently added to the scene by its insertion into the documentary. Only by this insertion into the documentary, one can interpret the scene in terms of a reality show type representational effect and, accordingly, as subsumed to a well-defined representational intention. In fact, the low level of representational features of the images significantly increases as soon as the intention of the director of the movie is, so to speak, applied to the images of the police action. At the same time, if in order to assess the intentional level of the raw images of the scene one would focus not on the intentions of the producers, but rather on those of the protester holding the camera, one could say that, in general, from the moment a video camera is switched on, a certain representational intention or will is already present. This is undoubtedly true. And it is true even if we would take into consideration the fact that such an intention was guided by a desire to document a particular situation and not by that of producing a simulation/illusion or a so-called artistic representation of it (but it is precisely this difference that we are trying to get rid of here). By carrying this minimal representational intention, the scene is, at the same time, the perfect example of an interruption of the will to representation: the camera is no longer in the hands of its holder, in that its movement is not guided by the will of the holder, but it is abandoned to the images that it now records by itself, while the will (to representation) of the protester/operator is annulled by the clash between her and the policeman (it is not *she* who is filming the policeman beating her, rather the camera—*by itself*, if I may say so—does it). There is no “illusion” or “impression” of movement to be created: the movement, in more than one sense (the movement of the policeman, the movement of the camera, the movement of the image, etc.), is rather impressed on the photosensitive surface; it is imprinted, recorded, stamped, “tattooed” or stabilized there without being contained by the stability of a representational thesis. We have to do, then, with a different type of “stabilization” that comes into play in this way.

In fact, our whole matter concentrates at this point on how to make the difference between these two types of stabilization (given that it is not completely wrong to say that they are two). If we take into consideration what I just said about the role of the intention in representational processes, the least that can be concluded from this about the difference between presentation and representation is that the latter is governed by a will to posit the object of representation in front of a viewer, in order to be re-presented again and again later on. In the case of presentation such a will is missing or is placed into brackets, diverted

or even subverted. The only “will” that would still persist in the case of presentation is that embedded in the medium of (re)presentation itself: the (impersonal?) will—of the camera or rather *materialized* in the camera—to record. This will that makes itself known through such a bracketing of the content (both of the representation and of the medium) is not without relationship with movement in its most general determinations: the passing away of time or, rather, the passing away that time incessantly is. The will to record or, more properly put, the will to re-presentation is actually a will to presence, a will to grasp the “object” and to present it again and again. But this throwing-in-front-of, which is the etymological meaning of the *ob-ject*, is already part of the vocabulary of re-presentation; actually, things in general become “objects of representation” in the representational process itself—as a whole philosophical tradition beginning with Kant⁷ teaches us. Things are thrown in front of a spectator-subject, open to his perception, thus becoming potential *objects* of perception in general. The task of representation is not only to create the illusion of movement or of something else in general, but also to make accessible again and again what is represented, saving it from disappearing in the abyss of oblivion or of nothingness. This is why representation is also the way in which meaning is constructed and, consequently, this is why representations are, by essence, subject to interpretation, which means that their ontological region is that of an “inter” or of a mediation.

To grasp the nature of this mediation, one should recall here the definition of *mimesis* from Aristotle’s *Physics*.⁸ According to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe,⁹ there are actually two definitions of *mimesis* in this book. The first one, which is also the more common one, states that *mimesis* is *imitation* in the sense already established by Plato’s *Republic*.¹⁰ The second one, which Lacoue-Labarthe proposes to be termed “fundamental *mimesis*,” is related to nature or, rather, to *physis*. Leaving aside the complications raised by the translation of *physis* by “nature,” and the whole analysis of these concepts in modern and contemporary philosophy, it is crucial to note that the fundamental *mimesis* sends us back to the question of appearance in general. “Nature (*physis*)—as we know—likes to hide itself” (Heraclitus). Thus, for Aristotle, *mimesis*, which is essentially *techné*, is a supplement that would allow or force nature to show itself, to appear. To avoid entering the immense questions raised by such a distinction, I would like to stress only the fact that, while *imitation*, as one versant of *mimesis*, is seen as re-presenting an already revealed image (*imago* stems, as we know, from *imitare*), the fundamental *mimesis* seems to be the very gesture of delimiting a “to-be-looked-at” that later can be transformed into an image (representation). Indeed, this “later” does not come temporally after the delimitation of what is to be looked at, but, rather, the image is the logical consequence of such previous

delimitation. In this sense, there is no pure imitation: the painter, for instance, always has to decide *what* will be imitated, but it would be completely impossible to take such a decision in the absence of any idea of what is to be shown through the painting.

This idea can be clarified by considering the second example provided by the Genoa documentary. The traces of blood on the wall record a movement of somebody who was bleeding. If in the previous example, because of the presence of the camera, a representational intention could be still documented, in this case there is actually no established or formal medium ready to record “reality,” transforming it into an image. The wall becomes only incidentally the support of a “mural painting,” which is not a painting at all, but the trace of a movement, revealed as such, or rather re-defined as such by the movement of the camera along the blood traces on the wall. In this way, the traces are transformed into a story, with a beginning and an end, in a narrative of violence that attains its meaning on the background of the previous scenes of the documentary: the invasion of the Diaz school by the policemen, the tens of injured people carried by the medical staff, the interviews made with some of the doctors. In this narrative development the traces of blood play the role of a conclusion, images shown without any kind of comment, speaking about the truth of repression. But what these images are showing—not only the blood traces, but their *meaning* in the development of the events—cannot appear without the material support of the traces themselves, which already constitute an imprint, a “figural presence,” something located at the limit of representation. To state the obvious, when these imprints were created no representational intent commanded the bleeding body that left them on the wall. Yet, the traces show something, they offer something to be looked at, despite the fact that there is nobody who would be the subject of this offering. As in the case of ordinary representation, we have to do here with a mediation of something, with the crucial difference that the mediated is not filtered by or subsumed to a will to representation, to a thinking subject. There is no author, properly speaking, of the traces. Nor can we speak about them in terms of an artwork. At the same time, one could not say that they would be completely meaningless if the narrative framework of the documentary would be withdrawn. What remains if one withdraws the surplus of meaning provided by the movie is solely the movement of a bleeding body. This is legible first of all in the interrupted lines left by the fingers of a hand or the obscure stains all over the wall, ending in a puddle of blood in one of the corners. Presence is recorded, but by no means re-presented. The representation comes only when the video camera follows the traces of blood *suggesting* the movement, re-marking it, delimiting an area of the “to-be-looked-at,” showing us something by means of an enriched contextual information.

TO SUMMARIZE what we have attained until now: 1) the main difference between representation and presentation is the presence or the lack of a representational will, of an author behind the figural result; 2) there is a movement in the representational process itself that has nothing to do with the result of representation (the work, the image, the narrative), but with the coming into presence of what is presented (as a figure); 3) the “to-be-looked-at” of the representation is more or less well delimited, while that of the presentation remains somewhat obscure; 4) to sum up all these insights, the imprints of movement are actually located outside of the “to-be-looked-at” configured by a representational will, being nonetheless legible as such in the figural products resulted from a movement (the hand of the painter, the traces of a body, the movement of the camera, etc.).

Other examples of such imprints of movement, escaping the (artistic or other) representational processes, but remaining presentations of movement, are the footprints in the snow, the traces left by a car on a wet road, etc. The most remarkable feature of these examples is a certain overlapping between *how* something is (re)presented and *what* is (re)presented. In the case of the painter, the traces left by the movement of his hands on the canvas are certainly present on the surface of the painting, but their final result (the painting) is not about these movements anymore. In the case of a movie, the movements of the camera are clearly perceivable by the viewer of the movie, but the final product (the film) is not about these movements. In the case of drama, the movements of the actors on the scene, at least those that are not transformed into gestures and, as such, into highly significant movements, are present on the stage, but the play is not about them. In opposition to these examples, the footprints left by someone in the snow are not about something else; they are their own sign, witness to the vanished presence of some feet. As such, they reveal or, rather, remind us something about the representational process itself, basically the fact that there is no representation without movement and that, indeed, in its own discrete mechanism, the representational will (wanting the ever renewed stability of presence) is self-contradictory. This is to say that representation, for being what it is, needs to always reject or conceal its truth, inasmuch as before any representation there is, as the condition of possibility of the first, a presentation, an apparition which has nothing to do with the *construction* of a meaning, being in fact nothing else than meaning *materialized*. The footprints in the snow are not trying to suggest or to build up a meaning—the movement of a person—, but they are nevertheless the testimony of such movement; we *know* or *can deduce* that where footprints occur, a movement has taken place. (This is why icons such as footprints can also be used as representational raw material in paintings or in movies, when the artist desires to create the illusion of movement.)

The greatest difficulty here is, nevertheless, to assess this materialized meaning. Up to now I tried to bring to light some of the features of presentation by comparing it with representation and analyzing its presence at the heart of the representational process itself. The question is to describe what the relationship is between representations of movement and imprints of movement, in general. The hypothesis I was announcing at the beginning of this text would be, then, that there might be a relationship between the various patterns artists used for representing movement and what I tried to describe here in terms of imprints of movement. Formulating this hypothesis from the point of view of a concrete example: one could ask why, for instance, in the case of the classic statue of the *Discobolus* the artist had chosen to represent the disk thrower in that particular instance, located in time before the actual throwing of the disk; the answer would be that this moment is, in fact, the one in which the imprints of movement on the human body, which functions here as some sort of screen displaying the tension of the muscles and the particular configuration of the body in a single gesture, are the most salient for a virtual spectator. Of course, such a formulation would only be a very first attempt to use the concept of “imprints of movement” in order to explicate the various representations of movement, i.e. to re-introduce this concept in the field of aesthetic analysis. It is more than clear to me that in order to do that the hypothesis merely outlined here should be corroborated with more than one example and, most probably, the notion of imprints of movement will probably not remain unchanged during this corroboration. Nevertheless, in further developing the cluster of questions raised by the imprints of movement, it might be inevitable to go back to the Heideggerian analysis of art, so deeply concerned with the matter of (re)presentation; in order to acknowledge this one should recall here the complex relationship Heidegger draws between art and truth, understood as *alétheia*, or un-concealment.

BUT BEYOND the possibility of applying the insights gained through this analysis to particular artworks, the presence of movement in the representational process itself constitutes a separate problem, one that, although it is not without relationship with the questions raised by the representation of movement, still remains to be formulated and explicated in its singularity. But this is not the task of this essay. Here I only wanted to indicate the existence of a particular thematic area revealed by the focus on what I called imprints of movement. It is the task of future analysis to explore this area and to grasp more firmly the set of problems configured within it.



Notes

1. The meaning of this word should be taken here in the sense established by Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977).
2. *Synthetic Light: A Critical Approach of the Advertising Phenomenon*, 11–12 October 2002, Cluj, Romania.
3. See kanalB, *special: genoa g8*, no. 10, 2001, <http://kanalb.org/edition.php?clipId=52&PHPSESSID=f3ba20dce37d7a6da2c43d85b9e427ac>. Last checked: 05.01.2006.
4. Adrian T. Sîrbu, "Societatea spectacolului și 'dușmanii' (refuznicii ei)" (The society of the spectacle and its "enemies" [refuseniks]), *IDEA – artă + societate* 16 (2003): 125–127.
5. *Ibid.*, 125 (my translation).
6. *Ibid.*, 126 (my translation).
7. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
8. Aristotle, *Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).
9. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Imitations des modernes* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).
10. Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003).

Abstract

Imprints of Movement: Presentation, Re-presentation, Presence

The matter of presentation and re-presentation has been crucial for the entire legacy of Western philosophy in general and to traditional aesthetics in particular. This paper uses a documentary about the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa to illustrate a number of theoretical questions raised by presentation and re-presentation. I will demonstrate that presentation is always a matter of (involuntary) traces or imprints of a certain movement, which must be opposed to re-presentations, inasmuch as the latter can be seen as a will to presence, as a will to capture and re-iterate presence for various artistic, ideological or scientific purposes.

Keywords

presentation, representation, movement, presence, art, trace