

STORIES OF REFLECTIVE IMAGES AND FACTS GIULIA DAMIANI

Consider 'reverse' as to utter a return. As to move tongues backwards to return to the initial paragraph, the first few ecstatic lines that engendered the spirit of the following years, now previous decades. Cross out the many subordinate clauses and conjunctions that led to the present length of this evolving text, forgetting the interpretations and consequent adaptations to reality that have been enacted by its audience. Reverse the direction, jump back to the original intention, the simple idea that was jotted down quickly to then become official imperative discourse. Reverse to reveal the spell of words, leaving listeners and populations astounded.

On February the 25th 1956, during the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in Moscow, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin's cult of personality. 'Stalin was a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious. Stalin sanctioned the most brutal violation of socialist legality, torture and oppression.'¹ After decades of praises and devotion to the genius of Stalin, Khrushchev halted this portion of history and announced a complete change of direction. Within the 17,000 words or more of his speech, the popular portrait of Stalin – the Great, the Beloved, the Father of the Soviet populace – was turned upside down; Stalin was the criminal, the tyrant and the manipulator of Soviet language. The disillusioned mass of Soviet citizens tried to revolt against this new impending truth to be eventually defeated. In March 1956 protests were repressed in Georgia, Stalin's homeland; some of the shocked spectators of Khrushchev's speech suffered heart attacks; later on others committed suicide. In the unveiling of secrets and in the quest for social progress, people found their consciousness scattered around at random.

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Swap the sea with the sky, the liquid with the areal. Swap the fresh breeze against your skin with the sensation resulting from a dive into a summer river. What is left at the end of both involvements with nature are tiny drops of waters, and like dew on a secluded garden they rest on your body. When not visible in the distance, still the horizon exists and belongs to your eyes. The line, the tenacious division stretches and loses itself in your vision. Humans' presence connects and reconciles what is above with what is below.

Above the surface of the earth, buildings develop vertically and people move across space mainly horizontally. Birds, fishes, flying and swimming creatures can at any moment invert their routes and progress in every thinkable direction. There is a freedom of movement, a way to use and retain the all-encompassing landscape that is unknown to humankind. How many points in space does a kingfisher visit over its existence? Every year, the North American Arctic Tern flies about 40,000 kilometres, a distance about equal to the circumference of the earth.

Time as used by humans is a consequence of itself. Moments stem from each other and extend in an endless chain of onward movements that anticipate and bring the following ones into life. The passing of time is imagined by humans as a ripple on an infinite expanse of water: each circle engenders the next one, keeping a relation to its original form and yet coalescing new water into it to form a greater current and further relations. Ripples propagate outwards and cannot return to their previous qualities; similarly time is believed to have one direction which can't be reversed.

But existence is a pastiche of ageless images, where all moments can be seen happening at once by your mind's eye. The past is frequently the majority of the present. Among the most ancient materials, amber is one that can hold within itself traces of matter, including hair and spider webs, dating from millions of years ago. The ruin of the time, what was once alive is maintained in fragments of thought, in shreds of amber that have travelled in every way and don't belong to any age. In an introduction she wrote in 1968,² the theorist Hannah Arendt described the process of decay as a process of crystallisation, one that happens in the depths of the sea, where the things that once were alive sink and dissolve. Some things, some ideas, suffer a sea change and survive in new crystallised forms and shapes; it is as if they waited for the pearl diver, for a new thinking, to emerge again in the world of the living as something 'rich and strange'. Reversed and yet diverse.

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Frequently in her theories, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti takes the readers through ideas of linearity and its hegemonic meaning. Her books ask for movement to be at the heart of thought: thinking reversely, the non-unitary vision of the subject, philosophy as gymnastics of the soul are described as contrasting patriarchal order as well as nostalgia, inertia and other forms of contemporary critical stasis.

Her opposition to the mental habit of linearity wants to reassert the dynamic nature of thinking and favour progress through different modes of engagement with the present. Her writing is most intriguing when indulging in illustrations of the formation of identity by relations that move onwards and backwards between a subject and another.

In an essay from 2006,³ Braidotti supports her reading of Gilles Deleuze's theories on the 'subject', which include sustainable changes, transformations and a cartography of movement. As a mobile identity in space and time, the subject absorbs external influences while remaining extraordinarily faithful to itself. Against the social security and the idea of authenticity that are usually attached to personal identity by Western civilisation, Deleuze through Braidotti suggests that this 'faithfulness to oneself' is based on mutual sets of inter-dependence and inter-connections, of relations and encounters. In this way, the capacity to affect and to be affected through time lies at the very core of one's own identity. The individual – the coming together of forces, passions and senses – is a symphony sharing instruments and concert halls with other symphonies; within an individual/symphony, each sonata, that is each solo performance, provokes a series of non-orchestrated and unpredictable solo performances as well as joint responses, which become the raw inspiration for and prelude to the following sonata. Each sound is a catalyst for other sounds that endlessly meet in compositions to then reverse backwards to be single sounds.

In the same text Braidotti mentions the latitudinal and longitudinal forces which structure the subject according to Deleuze. Both radically embodied in one's own identity, latitudinal forces are the affects a subject is capable of, how intensely they move; longitudinal forces are the distances they cover, how far these affects can go. The individual is an explosion of drives to become, of movements outwards and returns, of potentiality and body placed in front of a mirror and their reflections.

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What is a shadow? Most commonly, it is the outline of one's own body reproduced on a separate surface: freed from pretensions to clarity and individual authenticity, they expand and are more or less blurred, vague. It is a presence accompanying you while walking on the margins of a road under a peaceful light-blue sky; the body is attached to the steamy asphalt, its dark reflection touches the refreshing green of the fields extending on the sides. Shadows on the wall are by a five-year old self who is seeing the world through shapes and boundaries.

A shadow is the photographic reverse of the body as image. Occurring under conditions of light, it is the encounter of an original with its mimic and yet inverted reflection, its negative.

What is a shadow of an image? Positioned on the floor of my bedroom, it is the darkened version of Map ix, a framed relief-print representing a map of the world that hangs from above. On the floor, continents emerge as scattered islands, as black buoys in a sea of gold. Shadows highlight details and obscure evidence. To preserve at best their material conditions, most museums and art galleries prevent artworks from direct exposure to sun rays. In these rooms where the curtains are down and shafts of light can hit the bare walls only, artworks keep loyal to the original compositions avoiding the interpretations given by natural light.

Do these ethereal silhouettes have colour? Is there a pigment that returns in all shadows? Is it grey, black or simply darker than the surface on which they appear? Of the thing that casts a shadow, solely the shape is visible, while each of its colours is turned into a uniform absence of colour, or words to grasp it. Being generated in the circumstances given by light in a space, the darkened area belongs more to the space; appropriating some of this expanse, it makes the colour of the surface more intense.

The black and white photographs by the American artist Francesca Woodman report fleeting human figures and eerie shadows that belong to the photographs and seemingly to nothing else. The entities emerging from her prints are alluring and precarious, as precarious is the condition of her archive of work: when she died at the age of 22, Woodman left behind hundreds of prints and over 10,000 negatives.

