

RESEMBLANCE: PLAY BETWEEN THE VISIBLE AND THE  
INVISIBLE

... If we are concerned about the resemblance of our faces,  
we must consider whether he who affirms it is a painter, or not.  
– Socrates, in Plato's *Theatetus*

Resemblance is the most slippery kind of thing.  
– The Stranger, in Plato's *Sophist*

The problem of the exact relationship between the visible and the invisible belongs to the most troubling issues not only in Plato, but in the whole tradition of Western metaphysics, which has inherited them from the Athenian philosopher. But Plato was an artist as well, with the soul of a poet and the eyes of a painter. The characters of his dialogues conceive the relationship between the visible and the invisible according to an artistic, especially painterly, pattern as resemblance or lack thereof. Resemblance becomes both the epistemological principle of the theory of anamnesis and the principle of metaphysical and political legitimation. Thus, the artist in Plato provides the philosopher with the structure of representation that governs his world and his ideal state. The *Republic*, which establishes the model of representation based on resemblance, has recourse to the comparison with the painter's art when evoking the philosophers' foundation of the ideal state: "A city could never be happy otherwise than by having its outlines drawn by the painters who use the divine pattern." The philosophers, founders of the city, like the painters, "would take the city and the dispositions of human beings, as though they were a canvas" and "in the first place, they would wipe [it] clean, 'purify' (*katharan poiëseian*)."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the philosophers-creators should follow the procedures of careful artists in order to secure the accuracy of their reproductions of the ideal model. At the same time, however, the analysis of painting and poetry calls into question the possibility of such artistic reproduction of the political and metaphysical structure. The same *Republic* points to the painter's and poet's deception as a great danger to the metaphysical and political stability of the world and the state. At the end, the artist himself becomes a victim of the philosophical and political rather than achieving artistic "purification."<sup>2</sup>

The *Republic* stages a drama – an agon between art and philosophy or, more specifically, between Homer and Socrates. The philosopher acknowledges his lifelong love for the poet and yet – *amicus Homer sed magis amica veritas* – he is obliged to banish him in order to satisfy the metaphysical principle of the simultaneous distinction and resemblance between the visible and the invisible world. Apparently, Homer ignores the latter, or at least does not credit it with much ontological weight.<sup>3</sup> The realm of the invisible – which Plato paradoxically names *ideai*, Forms or outward appearances of things, but which he sometimes associates with Hades or *Aeidēs* (the Incorporeal, the Invisible) – is situated beyond our world, beyond the world of images. In Plato's view, what connects our world with the true but invisible world of Forms is resemblance. The lack of resemblance, on the contrary, marks an imprisonment in the visible realm. Is not, however, resemblance a “visible” relation *par excellence*? “Resembling” seems indeed equivalent to “looking like,” to “being perceived as” and to “being an imitation of,” and it might eventually implicate the invisible realm of Forms in the realms of mimesis and of broadly understood visibility. Thus, paradoxically, resemblance – while securing the participation of the visible world of images in the invisible world of truth – threatens to undermine the autonomy of the latter and the whole system of its relationship with the visible. In what follows, I shall examine some consequences of this ambiguity of resemblance as a guarantee and, at the same time, as a threat to the system of representation, which refers the visible images to the invisible models.

“Image without resemblance” is a disturbing phrase, particularly for the Greeks and their heirs who derive the notion of image (*eikōn*) directly from the notion of “resembling” (*eoikenai*). Yet, the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* does not seem to mind the paradox when introducing the famous distinction between resembling and dissembling images, nor does Gilles Deleuze when he develops Platonic polarity into his own theory of simulacra, a theory that should lead, paradoxically, to the “overturning of Platonism.” Indeed, for Deleuze the paradox of “dissembling images” accompanies the paradox of using Plato's own text as leverage in the attempt to fulfill the major task of modern philosophy and art: “*le renversement du platonisme*.”<sup>4</sup> “Was not Plato to be the first to overturn Platonism, or at least to point out the direction such an overturning should take?” asks Deleuze after having evoked the end of the *Sophist*, where the sharp distinction between the true image of the invisible paradigm and the sophistic play with the simulacra seems to break down.<sup>5</sup>

What could be more dangerous for Platonism than confusing the philosopher, a champion of truth, with the sophist, an "artist" and a master of mimesis? The Stranger's distinction between the images of being and the simulacra of appearance and becoming is introduced precisely in order to separate the "good" from the "bad" side of mimesis, which is part of a larger project in the *Sophist*, namely, the separation of philosophy from (the art of) sophistry through the criterion of the resemblance with true reality. Resemblance (*homoiotēs*) is, however, "an extremely slippery kind of thing" (*olthisthērotaton gar to genos*), warns the Stranger in the *Sophist*, and "a cautious man should above all be on his guard against resemblances."<sup>6</sup> Deleuze does not mention this passage of the *Sophist*, but he seems to have it in mind when, following in the Stranger's steps, he attempts to prevent the "slippage," i.e., when he attempts to render resemblance unambiguous. He is apparently more successful than Plato's character in developing the image/simulacrum polarity, which is rigorous and never questioned. In Deleuze's reading of Plato's texts – the *Phaedrus*, the *Statesman*, the *Sophist* – simulacrum is not a vaguely resembling figure of the Idea, a fading image still preserving some traits of the original, but rather a completely dissembling counterfeit, violating the principles of family resemblance.<sup>7</sup> Resemblance should mark a profound genetic dependence, an interior kinship, and no superficial effect produced by the simulacrum could compensate for the lack of this.

The question of resemblance is crucial to the problem of overturning Platonism because the ontological and cosmological framework of the Platonic system has the structure of representation. In the "visible world," the thing itself is an image and the fact of being a legitimate image, a well-founded copy, connected to its model – the "invisible idea" – by a proper relation of resemblance, gives a claimant the right to be called "thing itself" and not "simulacrum." Platonism and representation stand or fall together. For Deleuze, simulacra (*phantasmata*) result precisely from the frustration of this foundational procedure or, to put it another way – and to suggest the revolutionary potential of simulacra –, they cause the foundation to collapse. Herein lies the attraction of (pure) simulacra for Deleuze. Their production and diffusion are the best means of confronting and overturning the regime of representation. Simulacra are not just false, non-resembling copies within the system of two levels of reality, the invisible and the visible. By placing in question the very notions of model and copy, they threaten the coherence of representation as such. Plato is aware of this threat when he attempts to exclude the simulacra that flaunt the two complementary principles of the

system of representation: identity and resemblance. In Deleuze's words, the most profound motivation of Platonism is to put simulacra "out of sight," "to repress [simulacra] as deeply as possible, to shut [them] up in a cavern at the bottom of the Ocean," "to keep them completely submerged, preventing them from climbing to the surface and 'insinuating themselves' everywhere."<sup>8</sup> Thus, Deleuze interprets Socrates' banishment of art in the *Republic* as Plato's own "serious" decision, with all its metaphysical and political consequences. In his view, modern philosophy and art should counter this effort of repression by liberating and glorifying simulacra, which should be allowed to leave their cavern at the bottom of the Ocean in order to rise to the surface of visibility.<sup>9</sup> Deleuze points to the moment of Pop Art as a successful transformation of the artificial – i.e., a copy of a copy, entangled in the web of resemblance and representation – into the simulacrum of pure visibility.<sup>10</sup>

The end of Michel Foucault's *This Is Not a Pipe* sounds like an echo of Deleuze's "Plato and the Simulacrum":

A day will come when, by means of similarity (*similitude*) relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell.<sup>11</sup>

Deleuze himself could have written this sentence (with the exception of the term "similarity"). Andy Warhol's series of soup cans would thus be a perfect case of the metamorphosis of the most overused commercial rhetoric into the "poetry of simulacra," into a glaring manifestation of surface visibility.<sup>12</sup>

The term "similarity" (*similitude*) in the above citation might be mistaken as a critique of Deleuze. In fact, Foucault is not challenging Deleuze's characterization of simulacra as images deprived of all resemblance to an invisible model. The two words, "similarity" and "resemblance," are not synonymous in *This Is Not a Pipe*. To be sure, they were closely related in Foucault's previous book *The Order of Things*, to which Deleuze refers in *Differences and Repetition* (p. 262) in his discussion of resemblance.<sup>13</sup> Foucault's theory of *This Is Not a Pipe* differs, however, from the simple picture of *Les Mots et les choses*. The change of perspective results apparently from a closer consideration of modern art, in particular the paintings of René Magritte.<sup>14</sup> One might also hear in this new theory of images and simulacra an echo of the Platonic Stranger's warning against resemblance, save that Foucault seems to situate the slippery character of resemblance exclusively on the image/representation side of the Stranger's and Deleuze's distinction. Although not directly referring either to Plato or to Deleuze, Foucault situates *This Is Not a Pipe* in the framework of a Deleuzian overturning of Platonism.<sup>15</sup> He begins, just like the Eleatic Stranger, by

expressing misgivings toward the devious workings of resemblance: “*Qu’une figure ressemble à une chose ..., et cela suffit pour que se glisse dans le jeu de la peinture, un énoncé évident ...: ‘Ce que vous voyez, c’est cela.’*”<sup>16</sup> Here resemblance appears as the condition of the essential identification of a figure: you “see” it because you “recognize” in it an image of a thing; representational vision is a re-vision.

The motivation behind Foucault’s statement questioning images and likeness in *This Is Not a Pipe* is different from, and apparently opposed to, that of the Stranger. Foucault does not fear that likeness might allow a phenomenon to slip out of representation. On the contrary, it is precisely the realm of representation that he would like art to escape from, and he praises Magritte for having achieved just that. In order to allow for such a possibility, Foucault – refining Magritte’s own theory of art – has recourse to the same notion as the Stranger and Deleuze: “an image without resemblance.” He seems to follow Deleuze’s suggestion about using Plato’s own text, the *Sophist* in particular, in order to reverse the hierarchy of representation dominating the “Platonic” theory of art.<sup>17</sup> Apparently reinforcing the Stranger’s distinction between images and simulacra, he assigns to each of them a positive characteristic: “*ressemblant*” and “*similaire*.” Images refer to the absent, invisible model through the framework of representation based on *resemblance*; simulacra glide freely on the surface of immediate visibility, according to the principle of *similarity*:

Resemblance has a “model,” an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes. The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences. Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similarity serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similarity circulates simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar.<sup>18</sup>

Foucault’s terminology, perhaps better than that of Deleuze, reflects the positive power that governs the proliferation of simulacra. It seems to express the need for a term that would resemble, or be similar to, resemblance without incorporating the simulacra into representation. But “similarity” (*similitude*), a word so closely related to “resemblance” in common parlance and in Foucault’s own *Les Mots et les choses*, can hardly fulfill this task. Rather, it seems to confirm the Eleatic Stranger’s apprehension, and reveal the ambiguity – the slippery character of *homoiotēs*.

The resemblance (or similarity) between resemblance and similarity makes it difficult to maintain a rigorous theoretical distinction between

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