

The Metaphor of Light.

(For: Artforum, New York).

We are about to penetrate into the Age of Electromagnetics, (or so they tell us). Instead of manipulating inert, peffidious matter, we shall concentrate upon rays, and those curious particles those rays consist of. Catchwords like microelectronics, semiconductors, bits, and derivates from those catchworks, like artificial intelligences, robots, computer images and holograms are signposts on this path of ours away from "material" toward "immaterial" culture. What is Electromagnetics, for Heaven's sake? It has to do with oscillations of specific particles. And light is one such oscillation. Thus it may be said that electromagnetics has to do with phenomena of which light is one. A special one, because light is the only electromagnetic phenomenon which may be perceived by our eyes. This may be said the other way round: electromagnetics has to do with light, be it visible or invisible. Thus the Age we are about to penetrate may be said to be the Age of Light.

This has a metaphorical ring to it: we are about to leave the Age of Darkness. But before we congratulate ourselves on this, it is wise to consider what is implied in this metaphor. This paper is about some of those implications.

For reasons which are not as obvious as they seem to be most people are in favor of light and against darkness, in favor of enlightenment and against obscurantism. This manichaeistic commitment shows itself through numerous images: light rays come out from Moses' forehead, Buddha is the Enlightened One, and the Saints are surrounded by halos. However this sort of light which illuminates as if from behind, (this "transcendent" light), is not the one Modern metaphors were after. Modern man did not like this light coming from the background, because it has the things, (like Moses, the Buddha and the Saints), appear, and appearances deceive, they cannot be trusted. Modern man preferred a different kind of light, one that he himself might project against the world: the Light of Reason. He was opposed to the light that makes the things appear, and in favor of that other light which makes them transparent. Which shows that the commitment in favor of light and against darkness is not as obvious as it seems to be at first sight.

Consider the Light of Reason. The world must be opaque, for it to have any purpose. If the world were indeed illuminated from behind, there would be no reason for Reason. The Light of Reason has the obscurity of the world for a premiss. To be sure: things appear on its foreground. Not, because they were illuminated from behind, but because we ourselves illuminate them, (perceive them). But behind the appearances darkness hovers. There, the "true" links between the appearances are hidden. Those links have the appearances move around: they are the wires which govern the world. We must carry the Light of Reason into those dark backgrounds. We must explore them, make them clear, and then it will be ourselves who shall pull the wires. The Light of Reason searches for Truth as a means for attaining Power. This light metaphor is luciferian: it has man carry the light in order to obtain power.

As a rule, we do not identify Modern Age with Lucifer, and Enlightenment with the Fires of Hell, although, in view of it's results, (like Auschwitz or thermonuclear weapons), we are more ready to do so than previous generations. We do not identify the Light of Reason with hellfire, because we are favorably impressed by science and technology, which are the most obvious works of Reason. Science throws its Light into the dark backgrounds, and technology pulls the wires, and most of the time this satisfies us. If we compare pre-modern to modern paintings, however, we might doubt this satisfaction of ours. In Byzantine paintings, for instance, it is the other light, the one that comes in from the background, which gives us satisfaction. Possibly the commitment to the Light of Reason is a kind of obscurantism? It has to shield off the light that comes in from the background? And possibly the satisfactions which science and technology offer us, (like longer and more sheltered life and greater mobility), are surrogates for lost satisfactions?

Now those are of course metaphorical questions, which means a sort of rhetorical questions, and nobody would dream to seriously ask them. Nobody would dream to seriously take medieval life as a possible alternative to ours. And those questions are not only rhetorical ones, they are frankly disgusting. They suggest that reason, this highest of human capacities, may not be the good sort of light, and we know from recent experience, where this distrust of reason will lead to: Auschwitz. Still: the metaphor of the Light of Reason is a very powerful one, and it includes the mirror. The Light of Reason is not only meant to be carried into the darkneses of the backgrounds, but it is also meant to mirror itself, so that it's rays may penetrate it's own flame. Distrust of reason is a motion proper to reason. And if reason is reasonably distrusted, this will not lead us to Auschwitz, but to it's opposite: criticism. The questions which were formulated above become less disgusting, if they are taken to be critical questions.

Consider the metaphorical mirror, and the light metaphors derived from it: speculation and reflection. It is not opaque, (like the things of the world), and there would be no purpose for the Light of Reason wanting to make it transparent. On the contrary: the mirror of speculation and of reflection serves reason to render itself transparent. The premiss of this metaphor is that there are dark, hidden backgrounds behind reason. Now this is a curious premiss. It supposes that there is such a thing like the Light of Reason, with appearances and darkneses in front of it, darkneses behind it, and a mirror somewhere in the middle. The curiousness, indeed unbelievability of this metaphor has become almost unbearable, ever since Kant's critique, and it culminated in Freud, he who showed the hell where the light of reason comes from. Thus the metaphor of the Light of Reason distroys itself through it's own rays, and it looks like the end of the Age of Enlightenment and the beginning of Dark Ages. Contrary to what was said in the first paragraph of this paper.

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It is however impossible anyway to maintain the modern metaphor of the Light of Reason, (and all the other metaphors that derive from it, like Enlightenment, clarification, speculation or reflection), in the face of Electromagnetics. The discovery that the opaque objects, (what used to be called "matter"), are composed of oscillating particles, that they are knots within the electromagnetic field, seems to impose a return to the pre-modern metaphors of Light coming from the background. Like in Byzantine paintings, there is now a sea of light in the back of all the appearances, an interwoven net of visible and invisible rays, and we ourselves, as reasonable subjects of the world, are nothing but such knots within this radiation. The Light of Reason is no longer a beam which illuminates an opaque world, but it has now become one among the various irradiations which come out from the background. Consider the impact of this discovery on the Light of Reason metaphor:

Neurophysiology suggests that what we call "mental processes", like perception, imagination, desire, and reasoning, are in fact complex chemical and electromagnetic processes which go on in the brain, and which may be reduced to quantic jumps of electrons over the gaps between nerve synapses. Now those jumps may be simulated in inert matter, and will then result in what is known as artificial intelligences. Those machines can calculate, and perform logical operations, they can decide, and they can order other machines to manipulate objects. In other words: those inert machines possess reason in some of it's most abstract aspects. This is not only a pragmatic proof for the correctness of some of the discoveries made by neurophysiology: it is a challenge for us to reformulate our concept of "reason". We are led to admit that it is a result of specific electromagnetic processes, and that, if we say "Light of Reason", we mean "one among the ways in which the Background Light is knotted".

Now such a reformulation of the modern concept of reason must have consequences which we are yet incapable of foreseeing. One such consequence is that reason must be conceived of as a form of energy, just as matter is to be considered an energy form, which does away with the traditional "ontological" distinction between matter and "spirit". Another such consequence is that we have to face a new kind of distinction: the one between natural and artificial reason. In fact: the ultimate consequence of this formulation will probably be the necessity to abandon the whole modern idea that man is a reasonable subject of an objective world. We will probably have to admit instead that there is an Ocean of Light, (an electromagnetic field), within which the rays knot and un-knot, occasionally giving rise, by a complex interplay of chance and necessity, to what we call "reason". Which is a metaphorical way of saying that we are about to abandon the modern faith in the Light of Reason.

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The metaphor implied here: "the objects and subjects are knots within the Ocean of Light", although more akin to medieval than to modern imagery, is still radically opposed to medieval world vision. The Light which irradiates

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from the background of ~~an~~ a Byzantine icon or a Ravenna mosaïque illuminates, enlightens the observer. It is the Sacred Light which gives life it's meaning. The Light which irradiates from the background of a TV image, or which is bundled to form a hologram, has been manipulated for the purpose of meaning something. It consists of oscillating particles which whirl about in a void, and which have been processed by man-made apparatus to acquire a meaning. The Ocean of Light of the post-modern metaphor is no longer that transcendent radiation to which the mystics aspire. It is an absurd, meaningless context from which we emerge and into which we shall return, but to which we can give meanings. And it is in this curious, and somehow desperate sense that it may be said of us that we are about to penetrate the Age of Light and leave the Age of Darkness.

Ever since the invention of photography light has become something we handle for the purpose of sense giving, (for the purpose of creating information). We no longer consider light as something which we ourselves project in order to illuminate an obscure world. On the contrary: we consider it to be something which comes out from the world, and which we process to give the world a meaning. This processing has taken two different directions. On the one hand, we process electromagnetic phenomena to produce "immaterial" objects. On the other hand, we process them to simulate our own subjectivity, to produce "artificial intelligences". Those two directions are merging. Artificial intelligences can now produce immaterial objects. As for the material world, now known to be a kind of knot within the "immaterial" field, it can be manipulated by machines controlled by artificial intelligences. Indeed: the Age we are about to penetrate may be defined as one where radiation is simultaneously the subject and the object. Is this reason enough to consider it a "Radiant Age", (to use one more light metaphor)?