Camera Obscura: Image and Imagination in Descartes’s Méditations

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For the late Renaissance and early modern period, a major tension exists between what can be seen and what can be said. Seeing and saying are acts that tend to go their own separate ways, as different and scarcely compatible instruments for representing the world. Foucault and others have given us various descriptions of this parting of the ways for a culture that no longer saw the world as a text. But the divorce between seeing and saying was a painful and embarrassed one, all the more so because the art of seeing, refined into artificial perspective, was in some ways the guiding discipline of this revolution in knowledge. Not even René Descartes, master though he was in the art of renunciation and doubt, could sacrifice the concept of vision without a struggle. I would like to explore briefly some of the problems that Descartes encountered when he adopted, as criteria for truthfulness, terms that belong chiefly to the visual arts. Although Descartes did find ways to move from seeing to saying—or, in other words, from visual to verbal models of truth—he had to travel a path marked with images of monsters and ghosts.

When Descartes tells the story of his discovery of the principles of his method during a stay in Germany, he places an unaccustomed emphasis on the physical surroundings of his cogitations. There, he tells us, “n’ayant d’ailleurs, par bonheur, aucuns soins ni passions qui me troublassent, je demeurais tout le jour enfermé seul dans un poêle . . . ”¹. This retreat from distraction and external stimulus is representative of the Cartesian project of discovering knowledge within the mind alone. Descartes’s heated room can be a useful landmark for students of the rhetoric and history of philosophy.

In the Discours de la méthode, Descartes tells us his room was warm. In the Méditations he tells us that it was dark and quiet, filling completely his needs for the exclusion of all that was not himself. A dark room is a particularly apt place for Descartes to set the scene for his investigation into first philosophy because it is against this darkness that qualities of
truth can shine forth in the figurative terms that Descartes uses. For him, true ideas are clear and distinct ideas. By proclaiming the qualities of clarity and distinctness as the criteria of truthfulness, Descartes took for philosophical reflection terms more often associated with the description of images, in particular of painted images. This move incorporated into the procedures of his research in first philosophy a problematic trope borrowed from a field which was also the object of his scientific research. In the history of optics, Descartes enjoys a place of importance along with his contemporaries Snell, Fermat, and Grimaldi. His mathematical statement of refraction furthered the study of light that was later advanced by Newton and Huygens. But Descartes's study of natural light (light from the outside, material world) is less central to his work in general than the antithetical concept of *lumière naturelle*, the light of reason, or inner light.2

This appropriation of optical terms in their figurative sense reveals a number of very fragile constructions in the Cartesian system, which can be thought of globally as one in which the subject flees external stimuli in a radical attempt not only to doubt, but also to exclude, all that is not the “I” of the subject.3 Philosophy is described metaphorically in the *Principia* as superior to sight: “le plaisir de voir toutes les choses que notre vue découvre n'est point comparable à la satisfaction que donne la connaissance de celles qu'on trouve par la philosophie” (p. 558). The philosopher’s eyes seem to be opened to a different sight, one which has nothing to do with *notre vue* in the usual sense. Sense perception is deprecated, and with it sight. Philosophy becomes the discipline of sight in the sense of the disciplining, that is, the repression, of sight. Yet the repression of literal sight permits the formulation of the metaphoric sight which is opened within. We are all familiar with the Cartesian gesture of retreat into an isolated and enclosed space. Yet in that space (for example, the heated room of the *Discours de la méthode*) the outside world appears as image, posing the further challenge of mentally judging the clarity and distinctness of all ideas that are presented as images to the faculty of judgment.

In this attempt to reduce stimuli, distractions, and uncertainty, while maintaining clarity and distinctness as the marks of truth, Descartes seems to install within the mind a replica of the external, doubtful world. The *cause* of that replica becomes a question of ever greater significance, for outside the immediate apprehension of the *cogito*, the genesis of ideas
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is paramount. Which ideas are illusions and which are not? What is the role of the mind (*esprit*) in the production of ideas? If an idea appears clearly and distinctly must not the cause of that idea be an existing thing outside the mind? Because clarity and distinctness are terms used in the study of optics and in the application of such optical devices as the *camera obscura* to drawing and painting, it is not surprising to see that Descartes turns to the description of painted images to help recognize and circumscribe sources of error and distortion. The purpose of the *camera obscura*, which Descartes describes in *La Dioptrique* (e.g., V: 214–15), is to project inside a chamber an inverted image of something that is outside. The distinctness of the internal image, as Descartes notes, is increased by decreasing the size of the hole in the side of the chamber. The *camera obscura* is useful because of its combination of receptiveness and restriction. Distinctness is proportional to the restriction of light from the outside. On the other hand, the movement outward from the sure foundation of metaphysical knowledge in the discovery of the essential and purely spiritual subject, the *ego* or "I," conflicts with an optically based model requiring the movement inward of light from outside the subject.

The faculty governing this inward replica is the imagination. To understand the role of imagination, a faculty which Descartes alternately invests with a decisive importance and even describes as necessary for judgment or *entendement* to occur and, on the other hand, castigates as a major source of error, we must recognize that for Descartes everything that can be known, including everything that can be known about the self, must pass through the test of representation. By the test of representation, I refer to that process by which the idea to be judged is brought to mind or perceived. Perception includes imagination and conception (*Principes*, §32, p. 585). Imagination is the act of representing something to the mind in a way that resembles the stimuli of the senses, most often the sense of sight. The act of conceiving consists of perceiving (that is, representing to the understanding) what cannot be represented in any form resembling sensory data. Unlike seeing (that is, *voir*, in the ordinary sense), imagining produces images that are without a detectable source outside the mind of the subject. Some things can be imagined but not seen, other things can be seen but not imagined. Descartes's example of something that can be seen but not imagined is the geometrical figure of the chiliogon, a figure with a thousand sides. Although such a figure can be seen, the mind cannot, according to Descartes, produce a specific pic-
ture of it. When the imagination fails in this way, conception is the faculty by which the mind represents a thing:

[Je] remarque premièremenent la différence qui est entre l'imagination et la pure intellection ou conception. Par exemple, lorsque j'imagine un triangle, je ne le conçois pas seulement comme une figure composée et comprise de trois lignes, mais outre cela je considère ces trois lignes comme présentes par la force et l'application intérieure de mon esprit; et c'est proprement ce que j'appelle imaginer. Que si je veux penser à un chiliogone, je conçois bien à la vérité que c'est une figure composée de mille côtés, aussi facilement que je conçois qu'un triangle est une figure composée de trois côtés seulement; mais je ne puis pas imaginer les mille côtés d'un chiliogone, comme je fais les trois d'un triangle, ni, pour ainsi dire, les regarder comme présents avec les yeux de mon esprit. Et quoique, suivant la coutume que j'ai de me servir toujours de mon imagination, lorsque je pense aux choses corporelles, il arrive qu'en concevant un chiliogone je me représente confusément quelque figure, toutefois il est très évident que cette figure n'est point un chiliogone, puisqu'elle ne diffère nullement de celle que je me représenterais, si je pensais à un myriogone, ou à quelque autre figure de beaucoup de côtés . . . [Méditations, VI: 318]

The mind cannot easily make pictures of all things, and Descartes tests the boundaries of what can be pictured and what cannot be pictured. Like a somewhat malevolent drawing teacher, Descartes gives the mind tests of what it can trace. It is important to emphasize that this test applies to the picturing, not to what is pictured. Triangles and pentagons can be imagined, whereas chiliogons and myriogons can only be conceived. This distinction does not indicate a defect in the chiliogon, some inherent escape from the laws of optics, but rather a limitation of the mind in its visualizing capacity.

All visual perception seems to be a distancing from the essence of the mind. If conception as pure intellection cannot produce images, while imagination, which is not part of the essence of the mind, can do so, then the distinctness of image increases as the subject's attention moves away from itself or from its essence (cf., p. 321). Yet at the same time the subject is testing its capacity to produce such images, and the boundaries of sense, imagination and conception are located by failure of distinctness. The more confused the image, the closer the mind to an activity that passes into the pure realm of conception. The mind (esprit) seems to be a
failed maker of images, dependent on some other faculty or source, a source outside the dark chamber of the mind.

It is repeatedly asserted in the *Méditations* and the *Principes* that prior to exercising judgment the mind must perceive the idea to be judged. The role of the subject in the genesis of these perceptions is debated. Sylvie Romanowski argues that the production of evidence by the thinker, and in particular through the imagination, is a dangerous procedure. Truth, she argues, should be “trouvée, non pas faite par moi, non pas l’objet de quelque travail imaginatif, mais être découvert, toute faite, prête à être cueillie par ma pensée.” This opposition between activity and passivity is a useful delimitation of one source of error perceived by Descartes, but it is perhaps not forceful enough to account for the twists and turns of the Cartesian description of the production and judgment of images. Ideas (actively imagined or conceived) can be erroneous or true, though the active production of ideas is only a stage in obtaining knowledge. Descartes’s use of the verbs *imaginer* and *concevoir* seem to indicate an active presentation of perceptions to the judgment, a presentation in which these faculties replace the doubtful perceptions of the senses. Produced perceptions or perceptions which are treated as ideas of things rather than as the things themselves are what we would call representations. We have already seen that Descartes traces the boundaries between imagination and conception, the two principal faculties of representation, by locating cases in which these faculties fail to represent. The imagination fails to represent a chiliogon; the conception fails to represent a mountain without a valley (*Méditations*, V: 313). Because a mountain cannot be represented without a valley, a mountain cannot exist without a valley. This is an example of the way representation becomes interesting to Descartes primarily in cases of failure, for successful representation does not guarantee existence: “comme il ne tient qu’à moi d’imaginer un cheval ailé, encore qu’il n’y en ait aucun qui ait des ailes, ainsi je pourrais peut-être attribuer l’existence à Dieu, encore qu’il n’y eût aucun Dieu qui existât” (p. 313). One might conceive or imagine a God, and yet that God might not exist, but one cannot, Descartes argues, represent God without representing at the same time His existence. This failure to represent a nonexistent God is a convincing argument in Descartes’s text whereas the successful representation of God is not convincing.

When we possess an image and know that we could not ourselves make that image, we know that the image is true, that it comes from
outside the *camera obscura* of our mind. So the "image d’une vraie et immuable nature" can be certified as a *true* image, since it surpasses the powers of the imagination itself, but the winged horse is a mere image, entirely within the power of the subject. The image itself is not called into question but rather the subject's ability to fabricate or feign images. Hence it seems appropriate to accept failed activity rather than simple passivity as the model of the Cartesian perception of the image.

The image of a true and immutable nature which is the image of God passes this "failure-test" of imagination. Such an image is present to the "eyes of the mind" yet is apparently beyond the ability of the subject to create. "Reality" (or truth) in perception seems to coincide with the failure of conception and imagination combined (e.g., "il ne m’est pas possible de concevoir deux ou plusieurs Dieux de même façon ..." p. 314).

The gradual escape of the image from the will of the thinker guarantees the autonomous and self-sustaining quality of the image because the mind is revealed as failing to invent, or be able to remove, these aspects of the image. This discovery, moreover, unfolds in time. Something changes between the first moment I imagine the triangle and later when I am forced to perceive certain properties of the image. This temporality of knowledge emphasizes a difference between the subject (or the mind) and something which is in the mind. Descartes supposes that the triangle is unchanging. Each time I imagine it, it is the same. But my knowledge of the triangle does change. The mind is cast in the role of describer of an image. The image remains the same, but the mind makes ever more complete descriptions.

There seems to be something curiously satisfying to Descartes in the initial failure to perceive the entirety of the image of the triangle. The contrast between the changelessness of the image across time and the changing description/perception of the image confers on it a status of "immutability," one of the properties of certain truths, while this contrast also consigns the subject's understanding to the realm of change. By producing an immutable and richly describable image, imagination permits judgment to operate as a mutable, descriptive faculty. As a consequence of this, we can say that the "clarity" of an image does not preclude the subject's failure to grasp or recognize its implications. Because the mind recognizes more and more clearly the properties of a triangle, while the image in the imagination does not change, clarity of recognition cannot in itself be taken as proof of truth, for this clarity of recognition changes
while the truth pertaining to the triangle does not. The truth of the triangle does not increase as the mind increases its knowledge of the triangle. The image produced by the imagination is therefore the pretext for a temporally characterized translation of the image into words—the words of a description in which the atemporal qualities of the image are rendered more accessible to the “eyes of the mind.”

What appears to the eyes of the mind exists in the mind. The question is, does such a representation, and in particular such an image, come from the outside or the inside of the mind? What is there about these gradually described still images that can reveal their source? Do they enter the camera obscura from the outside? Or are they productions from within the chamber? In the Discours de la méthode appears one of the major examples of deceptive images, the chimera. Descartes returns again and again to the dream image as a major threat to his system, a threat made possible by his grounding of truth in clear and distinct perception, for the images in dreams are often quite distinct. How can we distinguish them from waking images?

Paradoxically, imagination, which is associated with the doubtful perception of a doubtful object (material nature), is associated with the perception of that which has never been in material nature. In criticizing the proponents of the maxim that nothing is in the mind which has not first been in the senses, Descartes says that such people “n’élévent jamais leur esprit au-delà des choses sensibles, et qu’ils sont tellement accoutumés à ne rien considérer qu’en l’imaginant, qui est une façon de penser particulière pour les choses matérielles, que tout ce qui n’est pas imaginable leur semble n’être point intelligible” (p. 151). In assigning to imagination the function of thinking about material things, Descartes seems to pre-judge the existence of material nature. But the dream image poses the additional and converse problem that it is not sufficiently associated with the supposed material world. Although the dream image and the waking image proceed from the same faculty, the waking image is tainted by being excessively associated with the external world, while the dream image is defective because it is insufficiently associated with the external world. Yet this defect of the dream image is hidden by its excessive vividness and distinctness, so that the dream image is in some ways the apogee of distinct imagery in Descartes, the triumph of the image.

The conclusion of the fourth part of the Discours de la méthode addresses this problem and attempts to exorcise the image. Descartes first
supposes that while sleeping, a geometer invents a new demonstration, then asserts that sleep alone (or the fact that the demonstration appears in a dream) does not prevent the demonstration from being true. But the argument slides back and forth—its purpose somewhat dubious. The paragraph begins by arguing for the validity of our waking thoughts. These thoughts are somehow threatened by dreams: yet “les rêveries que nous imaginons étant endormis ne doivent aucunement nous faire douter de la vérité des pensées que nous avons étant éveillés” (p. 152). Oddly, Descartes chooses to combat this threat from the images of dreams by defending the validity of one such hypothetical dream. The most ordinary error of dreams is, in a next step, described as being the similarity between dreams and sense perception. Descartes does not, however, use the similarity to defend the accuracy of dreams. Instead, he uses this parallel to attack the senses. Although the seventeenth century was a period of increased emphasis on making pictures correspond to actual sight, Descartes finds the correspondence between mental image and sensorial image a defect, not a positive quality. For Descartes such correspondence becomes a source of condemnation of visual perception in general:

Et pour l'erreur la plus ordinaire de nos songes, qui consiste en ce qu'ils nous représentent divers objets en même façon que font nos sens extérieurs, n'importe pas qu'elle nous donne occasion de nous défier de la vérité de telles idées, à cause qu'elles peuvent aussi nous tromper assez souvent sans que nous dormions; comme lorsque ceux qui ont la jaunisse voient tout de couleur jaune . . . [p. 152]

This argument contains the basis for a defense of the dream image as no less accurate than the senses, but Descartes uses it to subvert the senses, displaying them as no more accurate than the dream image.

At this point Descartes invokes the strangest and most ambivalent example, the image of the chimera:

[Et] nous pouvons bien imaginer distinctement une tête de lion entée sur le corps d'une chèvre, sans qu'il faille conclure pour cela qu'il y ait au monde une Chimère; car la raison ne nous dicte point que ce que nous voyons ou imaginons soit véritable, mais elle nous dicte bien que toutes nos idées ou notions doivent avoir quelque fondement de vérité . . .

Descartes goes from listing failures of seeing "external" things (failures caused by jaundice and distance) to describing the case of a distinct image of something never seen. Having begun with the example of a geometer
discovering a correct (or true) demonstration in his sleep, Descartes moves to an image which is false despite its distinctness. But the two forms of validity are quite different. The demonstration is true without reference to material actualization. If one imagines a triangle or other geometrical figure, it has a certain truth even if it is never formed in the physical world. But the chimera is called false simply because it is not formed in the outside world but is only an image. Descartes realized that this line of argument has contradicted the self-contained validity of the geometrical demonstration by introducing a figure (or image) which can be judged false only by reference to an ontological judgment about the outside world. The geometrical demonstration does not have to refer to the world outside the dream to be true; the chimera is being judged on the basis of such a reference.

Once more, Descartes sees the implications of this contrast—the paragraph contains the basis for the “truth” of a chimera, even if no chimera can be located in the material (or waking) world. Reason does not tell us that what we see or imagine—that is, what we possess as images—is true. Reason does tell us, however, that all ideas (including images) must have some basis (fondement) in truth. Therefore the chimera cannot be rejected as entirely false. Descartes is caught in the grip of the ideology of his camera obscura.

Let us look at this chimera, a monster designed to alert us to some disturbance produced by imagination. The chimera is false; it is a form of incarnate or imaged fallacy. Moreover the image of the chimera is composite, the head of a lion on the body of a she-goat. This composite nature is for Descartes the mark of imperfection (p. 150), and the way the chimera is composed expresses the particular kind of imperfection that concerns Descartes—I should note that I find this passage in Descartes irresistibly inviting a parallel reading with Montaigne’s “De l’oisiveté” (I: 8). The chimera’s head is that of a lion (masculine in grammatical and perhaps physical gender)—here the superiority of reason or esprit is emblematized—and its body that of a she-goat (female) with all that that conventionally implies of sexuality, carnality, proliferation of matter. This is a clue to the major disruptive force of images in general in the Cartesian system. They are combinations and hence confusions—things joined together. It is difficult to isolate and purify these things, or to “defuse” the power of the image. Jaundice infuses everything with a yellow color. How can that color be removed from the image
which it permeates and vitiates? Yet some images that come to us in dreams are distinct. The chimera is such a distinct product of the imagination. Its composition is clear and yet it may not exist in the world. The chimera is therefore, on one hand, disconcertingly like the theoretical constructions of geometry—it fails only by not being outside the mind. It is not sufficiently composite; it exists only in the mind and not in the body. Yet on the other hand the chimera is vastly inferior to a geometrical figure because it is based on images from outside the mind. The chimera thus blocks the distinction of inside and out. The falseness of the chimera can only be determined by reference outside the mind; hence the invocation of this image forces the mind to turn outside if it is to avoid the monster. On the other hand, if the mind wishes to remain within the realm of reason it must admit the "truth" of the chimera, and with the chimera, the status of the imagination as a faculty productive of truth.

In a more general and deeper sense the chimera points to Descartes's problem of relating mind and body and to the particular role of sight. "Seeing" and "imagining," here placed in a position of equivalence as untrustworthy guides to truth, are also described as untrustworthy guides to fallacy, since both sight and image-production have some basis in truth. They are placed, after all, in the mind by God ("car il ne serait pas possible que Dieu, qui est tout parfait et tout véridicale, les eût mises en nous sans cela," p. 153).

The image in general, of which the chimera is an example, is a graft (ente) of truth and fallacy, and of two natures. The divine, all-perfect and all-true part of the image is united to the human imperfection, which prevents our thoughts from being all-true. The composite and impure image of the chimera thus figures the nature of all human thought. Yet Descartes's frantic and somewhat clumsy effort to escape the chimera and its possible truth places waking sensory perception, especially sight, and dreaming or imagining in direct conflict—miming the chimera itself, with its conflicting pieces. The chimera can only be said to be untrue to the extent that a diligent search for the chimera is fruitless. Our senses do not offer any confirmation of the existence of the chimera represented in our mind. Yet our senses are not to be trusted. The dream image can only be disproven by the waking image, yet both are deceptive.

In the first Méditation, Descartes again addresses the problem of dreams and the clarity and distinctness of the impressions dreams make. Attempting to locate a difference between dreams and waking, Descartes
turns to painted images for an analogy. His principal aim is to argue that the elements of dream images are derived from existing things, and that they are thus externally caused:

Toutefois il faut au moins avouer que les choses qui nous sont représentées dans le sommeil, sont comme des tableaux et des peintures, qui ne peuvent être formées qu'à la ressemblance de quelque chose de réel et de véritable; et qu'ainsi, pour le moins, ces choses générales, à savoir, des yeux, une tête, des mains, et tout le reste du corps, ne sont pas choses imaginaires, mais vraies et existantes. Car de vrai les peintres, lors même qu'ils s'étendent avec le plus d'artifice à représenter des sirènes et des satyres par des formes bizarres et extraordinaires, ne leur peuvent pas toutefois attribuer des formes et des natures entièrement nouvelles, mais font seulement un certain mélange et composition des membres de divers animaux; ou bien, si peut-être leur imagination est assez extravagante pour inventer quelque chose de si nouveau, que jamais nous n'ayons rien vu de semblable, et qu'ainsi leur ouvrage nous représente une chose purement feinte et absolument fausse, certes à tout le moins les couleurs dont ils le composent doivent-elles être véritables. [Méditations, I: 269]

Even a painter attempting to represent sirens and satyrs takes as models the parts of existing animals. Images have a certain syntax, we might say, in which the paradigmatic selections are combined in a new and artificial way. The paradigms are true, but the combination is false. Truth and fallacy in painting can be measured by the correspondence of the image to something that exists outside the painting. Hence paintings are themselves only manifestations of the absence of something—e.g. of eyes or a head—that really exists somewhere else. A painter proceeds by combining absences, or the signs of absences, into something that is either overtly deceptive, like the recognizably fantastic siren or satyr, or covertly deceptive, that is, a believable picture. This whole image structure is considered by Descartes as doubtful and uncertain because of the syntactic operation of combination or composition.

This devaluation of the composite—explicit in the first Méditation—actually overlays something more fundamental in the simile of painting for dream, namely, the criterion of absence. The painting, and hence the dream, are only syntactically flawed; the paradigmatic basis for paintings is true: painters, even in their most artificial fancies are constrained by the repertory of imagery that exists in nature. Yet this constraint, which makes the fragments of the image true, reveals the paradox of true image.
If the image truly represents something, that thing is elsewhere and hence absent. Conversely, if the image in a painting is not a vehicle of absence, a marker of something that is not entirely there in the painting, the painting is false. Should a painter, says Descartes, be so “extravagant” (i.e., mad) as to invent “quelque chose de si nouveau, que jamais nous n’ayons rien vu de semblable, et qu’ainsi leur ouvrage nous représente une chose purement feinte et absolument fausse” (p. 269) at least the colors would have to be true, that is, would have to exist elsewhere in nature. Yet at the same time one can argue, following the inventive genius of the extravagant painter, that should he create something entirely new, its complete being would be in the painting—it would be entirely present, hence false, because nonexistent in the world outside the painting.

The excessive presence of the paradigmatically false painting is related to the temporal characteristics of painting in general. Falseness is measured by reference to the past experience of the subject. Artists in general do not use “formes bizarres et entièrement nouvelles,” but reuse old forms. The extravagant painter, on the other hand, invents something “si nouveau, que jamais nous n’ayons rien vu de semblable . . . ” (p. 269). The excessive presence of the false image is connected to its attachment to the present time. The false image, even in its selective components, has no past, whereas paintings in general are new only in respect to their composition, not with regard to the elements that form their paradigmatic source. To the extent that the painter is limited to composition, the painting can claim a basis in truth. The more inventive the painter is with respect to the elements of selection, the more feinte and false the painting is. Hence the truth of the painting depends on limitations in the activity, or at least, the inventiveness, of the painter.

In the first Méditation Descartes admitted that he could not distinguish conclusively between dream and waking. At the end of the Méditations, he pursues the attempt to eliminate the dangerous equivalency between the images that occur to the mind in these (perhaps) different states. In Méditation VI, Descartes identifies the recognition of the dream image as the decisive step in terminating what he calls the hyperbolic and ridiculous doubt, “particulièrement cette incertitude si générale touchant le sommeil, que je ne pouvais distinguer de la veille . . . ” (p. 334). The difference between dream images and waking images is based on the continuity of waking vision or of the supposed continuity of the world into which the waking vision is inserted:
Car à présent j'y rencontre une très notable différence, en ce que notre mémoire ne peut jamais lier et joindre nos songes les uns aux autres et avec toute la suite de notre vie, ainsi qu'elle a de coutume de joindre les choses qui nous arrivent étant éveillés. Et, en effet, si quelqu'un, lorsque je veille, m'apparaisse tout soudain et disparaîsse de même, comme font les images que je vois en dormant, en sorte que je ne pusse remarquer ni d'où il viendrait, ni où il irait, ce ne serait pas sans raison que je l'estimerais un spectre ou un fantôme formé dans mon cerveau, et semblable à ceux qui s'y forment quand je dors, plutôt qu'un vrai homme. Mais lorsque j'aperçois des choses dont je connais distinctement et le lieu d'où elles viennent, et celui où elles sont, et le temps auquel elles m'apparaissent, et que, sans aucune interruption, je puis lier le sentiment que j'en ai, avec la suite du reste de ma vie, je suis entièrement assuré que je les aperçois en veillant, et non point dans le sommeil. [Méditations, VI: 334]

Units of vision in the waking state do not appear suddenly and can be explained as coming from and going to someplace. At the end of the Méditations the image once more is distinguished from other ideas, which are judged on the basis of clarity and distinctness, and is evaluated in terms of the absences with which the image is surrounded. In the earlier passage the absence concerns the elements out of which a painting is composed. In the closing paragraphs of the Méditations the image as a whole, in its composite state, is considered in terms of the absences which precede and follow it. A new criterion is adduced to distinguish true and false images, a criterion based on the invisible continuity of the seen. Dream images are not contested as less clear and distinct but precisely as too distinct (in the sense of permitting conception of them as separate from something else). In order to be acceptable an image is itself disregarded in favor of an off-stage or off-screen continuity (not unlike cinematographic continuity in the hors-scène).

By emphasizing knowledge of what precedes and follows an image rather than its appearance in the present, Descartes moves from optical qualities towards narrative ones. The thinker expects to be able to say what happened before and what happens after the things appeared in his visual field. The before and after of a verbal account become more important than the presence of the image and the present tense of a description of the figure in the image. While the figure in a dream is just as clear and apparently present as the images we perceive while awake, figures from the two types of image differ in their resistance to questions about
their past and future. The temporal qualities of the image—or at least the
temporal qualities of the figure in the image—are thus given priority.
Presence and “the present” are identified as descriptive terms and in the
same gesture devaluated as ontologically probative terms.

A picture presents special difficulties of interpretation. While it may
seem to represent an existing thing, a picture does not make an unequivocal
statement about being and time. An image, unlike a sentence, does not
declare that what it portrays “is” or “might be,” “was” or “will be.”
Unlike most languages, images per se have neither tenses nor modal indica­tions. Various systems have been constructed to overcome these limi­tations of the single, isolated image by forming image-clusters or strips
that are read in a certain order to decode temporal sequence. Descartes,
however, usually speaks of images as isolated and disconnected (e.g., a
chimera, a siren, a triangle), not as part of sequences, much less as a
perpetually changing but never broken visual continuum. Such images
are therefore frozen moments in time, or rather without any time except
a generalized present.

I have already mentioned the contrast between the posited immutabi­lity of the image and the ever-changing apprehension and description of
the image that is made by the thinker. At the end of the Méditations,
Descartes gives a new and different account of the discovery of the image
in time, an account designed specifically for the image of things that are
supposed to exist materially. In the case of the image of the triangle, the
thinker returns repeatedly to the same, unchanging and solitary image to
discover in more detail the contents of that image. The image exists ap­parently outside time, while the discovery and description of the image
occur in time. The image described at the end of the Méditations has a
temporal quality that derives from its integration into a series of images,
each of which has a firm and specific assignment in time. In this conclu­ding passage of the book, the isolated image, which, in earlier sections,
served to support geometrical demonstration, is abandoned as a para­digm of internal vision in favor of the sequence of images made out of
(presumed) sensory data and recapitulated by memory. With this gesture,
Descartes has reversed the temporal situation of the viewer and the image
that obtained in the description of triangles. A changing, learning thinker
confronted an unchanging geometrical image. Now, at the end of the
Méditations, an apparently unchanging thinker studies a changing scene.
Waking images, though still thought of individually, are supposed to be
part of a temporal series guaranteeing their truth. On the other side—that is, in the thinker—is a transcendant faculty called memory which has no significant history of its own, but is only concerned with the history of the images which it stores and knits together.

Such a shift in Descartes’s description and evaluation of images is possible only because of a shift in the amount of certain knowledge available to the thinker at the end of the Méditations. It is not mere coincidence that the single, clear, and distinct image and the cogito are associated in an earlier phase of the Méditations. The cogito is a statement in the present tense about a fact that is certain only in the present moment. As Descartes writes in Méditations II: “Je suis, j’existe: cela est certain; mais combien de temps? A savoir autant de temps que je pense...” (p. 277).

By the end of the Méditations the knowledge of God has permitted the thinker to advance to a reasonable certainty of the past (“pouvant user de ma mémoire pour lier et joindre les connaissances présentes aux passées...” p. 333). Therefore, in practice, clarity and distinctness in the present are no longer as uniquely important as they were at an earlier stage of the discovery process. In a way—speaking rather freely but without departing too much from Descartes—we can say that the Cartesian God is more on the side of the writer than of the painter, or, at least, that He favors the narrative painter. The act of connecting times and cumulating experiences modifies what is available to the judgment, thanks to continuity supplied by a truthful God. With this switch from an isolated present to a series of separate perceptions that are compared, the scale of Descartes’s description of images is modified.

In describing the chimera, the siren, and the satyr, Descartes indicated that composition, rather than the paradigms of anatomical elements, was the source of their novelty, and thus of their falsehood. Composition is also invoked in the discussion of the specter or phantom in the conclusion of the Méditations, but the level or scale of composition has changed. The whole of the individual image itself is now the paradigmatic element, not the details or fragments of the individual image. Descartes is not concerned with the way this specter looks, in fact it seems that the specter looks like anyone else, quelqu’un. In other words, the specter is not itself a grotesque composite image made out of recognizably disparate pieces but is a whole, an entirety, apparently received from the world outside the mind. The truth ascribable to paradigmatic elements derived from the material world now seems to inhabit the entire image and to render that
image (even in its combination of elements, its composition) true or at least indistinguishable from true, waking life. If paradigmatic qualities were earlier the source of truth and compositional qualities the source of falsehood then the dream image seems to reduce the instruments of image description to a state of paralysis, to deprive us of weapons against the chimeras and the specters. But, by a reversal of the previous approach, Descartes now permits the compositional or syntagmatic qualities of the image to serve as the determinants of truth. The individual image is the invariant element which, however false, can be exposed by combining it with appropriate images of before and after along a chronological sequence.

Playing *fort/da* with the specter, Descartes supposes that the viewer of a waking image has a secondary repertory of images with which to account for the unseen part of the visualizable sequence. Being able to imagine where someone came from and where that person went upon leaving the visual field means, in effect, not only maintaining a smooth series of primary images that are composed in time, but also being able to sequence hypothetical unseen images, that is, to suppose that the person does not cease to exist upon becoming invisible. This is the inverse of the specter, for the specter is visible but does not exist, whereas persons may be invisible and yet exist. The exactness of representation which is possible in an image, even a dream image, is less important at this point than the plausible fabulation which permits the movement of figures into and out of the image. The restriction of vision which is the basis for forming a distinct image in a *camera obscura* yields to a wider, less precise but highly comforting knowledge that the figures which disappear into the dark do not cease to exist, for we can make up stories about where they went.

**Notes**


5. John Morris has shown that the term lumen naturale is generally associated in Descartes’s works with the power of understanding, or more particularly, with what Morris describes as the passive form of understanding, and not with the active or quasi-active faculty of conceiving. Hence imagining, or making images, lies at the opposite pole of mental activities from the “natural light.”


7. “Je trouve en moi une infinité d'idées de certaines choses, qui ne peuvent pas être estimées un pur néant, quoique peut-être elles n'aient aucune existence hors de ma pensée, et qui ne sont pas teintes par moi... Comme par exemple, lorsque j'imagine un triangle, encore qu'il n'y ait peut-être en aucun lieu du monde hors de ma pensée une telle figure, et qu'il n'y en ait jamais eu, il ne laisse pas néanmoins d'y avoir une certaine nature, ou forme, ou essence déterminée...” (Méditations, V: 311).


9. In some ways we have detected Descartes reversing the movement described by Reiss in the “concevoir motif,” for while Descartes does use conception as a means to argue the material existence of that which is only proven ideally, through conception and judgment, the imagination motif shows Descartes struggling to undo (selectively) consequences of admitting into the mind the image of something of which he is not willing to grant the existence outside. See Timothy Reiss, “The ‘concevoir’ Motif in Descartes,” in *La Cohérence intérieure*, ed. J. Van Baelen and D. L. Rubin (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1976), pp. 203-222.