Intentional image and transcendental image in the work of art

* an ontological analysis -

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The purpose of this paper is to show that images have an ontological support by which they obtain an independent existence from the mind. In accordance with the new theories of aesthetics, we will see that the object of art is taken as an object of thought. Image has an important role in the existence of the work of art; therefore the image becomes an object of thought. To show how the image is independent from the mind or to show how it is not a mind-dependent object, the analysis has to start from the pre-ontological level of the work of art in order to understand the existence of images in correlation with the work of art. At the beginning there is only the object. The object is the work of art before its concretization. It is not nature; it is the natural support of art. From this point of view, the role of the image can be explored in all ontological stages of the work of art. Firstly, it can be argued that the intuition of the artist is the image of the idea underlying the work of art. The intentional image is a subjective image. Secondly, it seems that people can see or have in mind different images (representations) referring to a work of art. This is possible in time and space and implies cultural differences, historical events and so on. A question arises: what supports the intentional image? One answer put forward is that the mind is the support of the image, but it seems that the original intentional image has something that can make other intentional images possible, an infinite number of representations, in other words an infinite number of images. The aim of this paper is to show that we can talk about an original intentional image (the first idea), intentional images (the representations of the work of art in time and space), and the transcendental image which can be defined as the ontological condition for the existence of the intentional image. At the end I will argue that the transcendental image is the support or the entity which offers the ontological conditions necessary for all intentional images.

**Tags:** intentional image, transcendental image, ontology, object and subjectivity.

When we see a chair, read a book or contemplate a painting, an image appears in our mind. The objects are nothing more than ideas: the idea of a chair, the idea from a book or a painting etc. Therefore, we can say that we have the image of some ideas. If we agree with this we can consider images as ‘something’ which is, in a certain way, mind-dependent. Husserl’s idealist view states that all things are mind-dependent. In this case, we are dealing only with fictional objects. Thus, we have the image of a fictional object or the images itself are fictional objects. But there are various aspects that make this position doubtful. For example, in Lacan’s view when we are talking about images we must start from three main concepts: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. These three systems guide our understanding. Without these we cannot understand anything about experience and as long as the image is mental-dependent, we must pay attention to our psyche in its interactions. This applies to real things and to the relation between our psyche and objects. But when we are talking about images we must understand them independently from mind and objects, we have to grasp the image’s functions and its ontological conditions to understand it as a pure entity.

The image can be understood starting form this situation: the relation between a work of art and the subject in space and time. This gives us three possible images:

1. the original intentional image – the idea of the artist;
2. the intentional image(s): the representation in time and space of the work of art;
3. the transcendental image: the ontological support of the intentional image.

The transcendental image is the entity that can be grasped through our capacity of receiving representations, i.e. impressions, and through these representations we have the possibility to know this concept and its functions. As Kant said, through our representation the object is given to us, and through cognition the object can be thought in correlation with our representations.

The present paper will try to shed light on the matter by applying an ontological analysis to individual things, in this instance to images. The purpose is not to develop an ontological analysis of the concept of image, nor to describe the structure of our thought about image, but to grasp how the image is in itself[[1]](#footnote-2).

1. Image: an element of thought

Modern aesthetics is drifting away from its constitutive issues and from the rules of art and it is becoming a way of thinking that generates a new vision, where the elements that form or constitute the arts are elements belonging to thought, not to art. Looking back on the history of aesthetics, it becomes obvious that we are dealing with an evolution of thought about art and an evolution of thought in which the objects of art become objects of thought. The modern view on aesthetics is in fact an amplified return to Baumgarten’s definition, where aesthetics does not study art but the sensitive area of knowledge. Kant would follow the same path in a way, by referring to aesthetics as the theory of the sensitive forms. Finally, aesthetics is not a field belonging to art or the analysis of art, but a way of judging the elements of art as elements of thought.

If we consider the image a possible element of a work of art, we can say that the image is an element of thought, thus an aesthetic concept. In this way of understanding the elements of art, the role of the image is completely different from that presented in traditional theories. The image present three ontological stages in a work of art: firstly, there is the intentional image of the original idea of the artist, secondly, there is the intentional image expressed or represented by the work of art, and finally there is *something* that correlates the two stages of the intentional image, namely the transcendental image. We can also say that the transcendental image enhances the image itself. For instance, a painter has an idea to paint something to express X, in reality the picture which has inherited the idea to express X does not express X because of the several factors such as time, space and the contemplator himself. A contemplator could feel the X sentiment but in different ways. We cannot be sure that the first intentional idea to express X is the same as the sentiments felt by a contemplator. But the representation or the aesthetic feeling originates in the initial idea expressed by the artist. If we are consider two people from different centuries contemplating the same picture, they will have, in their minds, two different intentional images of the same picture based on the initial intentional image. This means that a work of art has one original intentional image and at the same time presents the possibility of an infinite number of intentional images.

Images can withstand the passage of time and be equally powerful irrespective of space and independently from the cultural or social environment. This is possible because a work of art includes two types of images:

1. The intentional image - the concretization of the idea of the work of art.
2. The transcendental imagine - the image itself has the power to provide multiple interpretations and form countless meanings.

In time, the intentional image becomes a transcendental image. This process can be understood as follows: an artist who paints an idea paints the image of that idea; during the process of contemplation, this image has the power to show an infinite number of mental images. A mental image exists because of its intentional determination, and thus we are dealing with an intentional image different form the original intentional image. Both must have the same entity to exist independently from the contemplator and similarly during the contemplation. We can find the entity of the image in the pre-ontological level of image, which is expressed by the elements of the original image. Because of the power of the image to resist and to adapt in time, this entity of the image presents a transcendental feature. We are dealing with a new kind of image, possibly the image itself: the transcendental image. The transcendental image could exist if it were to be understood as a heteronymous entity which has the fundament of its being in itself.

We can understand this process by resorting to Ingarden’s ontological system. According to Ingarden, in terms of what exists, there are three types of things. Firstly, there are ‘individual entities’ which are certain things like a painting but at the same time they are tropes of a certain thing. At this stage there are independent individual objects (substances) which could be basic objects or higher-order objects and dependent individual objects (trope). Secondly, there are ‘ideas’ which are non-temporal entities. All these ideas have a content by which we can distinguish the concrete entities. The latter are the ‘ideal qualities’ which can be understood as transcendent qualities. They are non-temporal entities and they could be tropes or what Husserl calls ‘moments’. Following this ontological scheme, the role and necessity of a transcendental image becomes evident.

We can comprehend this in a structured manner because transcendental images offer various degrees of the visual, different moments of emergence and an ontological game of their interpretation which depends on several factors: social, geographical, cultural, etc. Consequently, the issue of image and the understanding of its meanings becomes a problem that implies the space and time of their comprehension: it must have a transcendental characteristic.

1. The pre-ontological level of the work of art: the object

In order to understand the transcendental image and its role, it is necessary to return to the pre-ontological level of the work of art. To understand the pre-ontological level we can start by trying to answer several questions, such as: what exists before a literary work of art? What does it consist of? We can answer by saying that before it there was the idea, the paper that comes from the tree, the imagination and so on. If we are wondering what exists before a visual work of art, the answer could be the canvas with its transformation (in painting), objective nature (in cinema or photography) or imagination (in 3D art). All these questions can be summed up into the following question: is there something that precedes the work of art? The pre-ontological level allows us to understand the transcendental image and to see how it is related with an intentional image and in which conditions we can talk about a pattern image as an element of the work of art.

1. Work of art as intentional nature

In the archaic era, tehné stood for both art and craftsmanship and at the same time nature was governed by tehné. The first antique artistic forms were guided by three theories: cosmology or the theory on the structure of the universe, later psychology and then intentional human activity. Each led to the emergence of various types of art, myths or concepts depending on the understanding of the role of art and the process of concretization. Every art had its purpose, corresponding to each theory. The arts were spiritual activities with the purpose of creating a relation between God and humanity, an intimate expression of the human spirit that was meant to improve life. Reason had to enlighten every artistic object or act otherwise we could not know its purpose. These three theories are in a close relationship and lead people to create art. If an art did not have a purpose, it was useless, and this is the reason why Plato was hostile to the arts and to artists in Ion, Phaedrus or in the Republic. When he banished poetry he was doing so for a higher good. The images existed only if the art was related with, for example, worshipping the gods but in a moral way. Poetry had to be created on rational principles and Plato said that this was not possible because of its power of interpretation. The image is presented for the first time as independent form the work of art and rational principles and it allows for interpretation. The image gains its role trough Aristotle’s ‘mimesis’ which implies the concept of imitation and the concept of representation. But sill, mimeses is not only an aesthetic phenomenon; it is a basic element of human nature. The role of the arts is still rational: imitative arts are rooted in human nature and the pleasure they give has ‘cognitive value’. For Aristotle, artists were ‘image makers’ but the image had to be probable or necessary. These ideas show us that from the beginning, the works of art were intentional in nature. But we have to see how we can explain the image and its role.

The work of art must arise from something, from an object. Tehné is the procedure used to transform the object into art. Afterwards, the idea and the image as a representation of the work of art are ontological entities of the entire process of concretization. If the work of art is limited to the idea and has not yet an image, it is just an empty idea. But at the same time the subject transforms the idea into an infinite number of interpretations and visions and this is the first understanding of the image: an intentional activity of the subject.

We can say that the fundament of the work of art is the object understood as its matter. We can interpret tehné as the action which transforms the object or a part of an object into art. But tehné[[2]](#footnote-3) is not only the transformation of the object, it is also art itself. In ancient philosophy using tehné as art was considered wrong because the word tehné meant craft and this was the practical application of an art. In this way, another meaning of tehné becomes apparent: the art of craft.

The rules of art encourage us to solve the problem of the pre-existence of the work of art. The oldest thought of how art is made is the idea of mimesis. But this idea is strictly related to the idea of tehné having a double meaning. Starting from the platonic statement, art is imitation, and life itself is imitation, thus imitation is not specific to art but to the existence of man. Therefore, mimesis belongs to the biological nature of man. In the beginning, a child learns by imitating the gestures, words and habits of adults. We imitate not only to produce a work of art, but to live according to certain established rules. A problem arises: what can we imitate in order to create a work of art? Nature would involve several existential connections and this is why we must look for something specific in the level that pre-exists art. From this point of view, the arts are strictly related to life, they are a part of nature. Holistically speaking, we can say that arts are intentional nature and the images are an effect of the intentionality.

1. The object as the pre-ontological entity of the work of art

In order to explain the pre-ontological stage of the work of art we must start by analyzing the incongruent connection between the object and the work of art: the work of art is an intentional product while the object is its support. The modern term ‘creation’ is the process of concretization of the object into a work of art. Creation (which is similar in meaning to tehné) can be understood as the process of *domesticating[[3]](#footnote-4)* the object, i.e., transforming the object into a work of art. In this process we can find the role of the intentional images and the entity which they are based on.

According to Grenier, the object is analyzed in conformity with the functions of finality of the domestication process. The idea of a purpose is still a condition of a work of art. He speaks about the ‘distant object’ which implies several categories of the object after the contemplation process. Then about the ‘ritual object’which is religious, mystical and magical. Its characteristic is the rite as an active form that strengthens the object in a cyclical manner. The work of art is destined to be transformed and thus elevated from the initial level of profane nature to the level of sacred nature, to then return to the first state as a work of art[[4]](#footnote-5). In this case we can talk about the image in an ontophanic way. In addition, there is the ‘usual object’which, because of its properties, opposes the ‘distant object’. The role of the image relative to the ‘usual object’is a double one as the ‘usual object’ features on the one hand utility as a social form and on the other hand, it offers the appearance of a work of art that leads the image towards luxury, in other words, to a new type of object - the ‘decorative object’. Therefore, the work of art is a result of the Object that presents itself in various ways combining utility with beauty. The image could be understood in the pre-ontological level as an internal desire and because of our imagination, the concretization of the Object must be proximal with our spiritual needs. Therefore, the image is the warranty that the works of art continue Aristotle’s idea, that it has a purpose. If a work of art cannot provide an image we are dealing with a paradox.

The work of art is transformed from the object and becomes artificial while images present a game of the social and of the work’s themes. The last type of object Grenier refers to is the ‘technical object’[[5]](#footnote-6) which does not belong to the natural world but to the human world. The ‘technical object’is the intermediary stage between the Object and the work of art and it is exclusively a part of the social environment. What is important to note is the fact that the object is imposed whereas the work of art is produced. The work of art is usually associated with exceptional things like a book or a painting. A simple definition of work of art could be: a product with and in experience, but the product as a thing in itself is very hard to understand. In this sense, Dewey said “when an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

A work of art exists only in experience. If we have a book but do not open it, the book does not exist. If a picture is hidden in a box and none can see it, the picture does not exist. From this point of view, we can say that image is an existential action of our psyche. The problems appear when we separate the artistic objects from both conditions of origin and operation in experience. The artistic objects are alone in a world full of significations and interpretations different from the original experience. This could mean that the intentional image corresponds with our needs or desires during our contemplation or our reading. From this point of view, Lacan could have been right when he said that imagination is the psyche activity which searches for our needs. Our needs are not always material and thus, the image is the perfect substitute for them.

1. Intentional image and transcendental image

We can say that the image is a form of our imagination and the process of imagination starts when we feel a spiritual lack. The image is the representation of our desires and the work of art is the concretization of our image of our ideas. In this case we are dealing with three stages of the image: the image of the idea, the original intentional image of the work of art and the intentional images. All this three types of images are rooted in the same thing: an ontological entity that makes the image itself possible as an image. This entity must be the transcendental image.

To understand the necessity of the existence of the transcendental image we need to know if the intentional image is self-sufficient. When we have a thing in front of us or in our mind, we have to know the proprieties that make it what we see. All the proprieties of a thing are dependent upon each other. The dependency itself shows us that we are dealing with a non-self-sufficient image. Therefore, an intentional image could not exist independently: it requires other entities for the unity of its whole such as a painting, picture and so on. The intentional image requires something deeper, an entity which is non-temporal and non-spatial, and this entity could be the transcendental image.

How can we understand the transcendental image in a work of art? First of all, the work of art is an autonomous entity and the image itself is an element of this autonomy. The image is a phenomenon: to understand the image we have to know how a thing becomes an image. Fundamental ontology is not concerned with understanding something, but with the problem of being-in-the world. To understand the image we do not have to find out the present sense but the projection into the future. The image is something prior to cognition, a power, a being. A self-sufficient image needs to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the work of art. In this sense, Heidegger said that if we interpreted a text, this does not “entail imposing a ‘signification’ on a text or placing a value on it, but clarifying the involvement that is disclosed by the text in our always prior understanding of the world.”[[7]](#footnote-8) But what gives us the impression that the image exists and is correlated with the being? If the work of art exists only in experience, this means that the image is correlated priori to my experience. If the intentionality is not active there is no image, but if we have an intentional attitude we may comprehended an image. The image as an idea that exists a priori to all works of art as a form of our spiritual need, as we already saw.

What gives us the impression that images are real and not fictional? If we read a book we can be sure that the book exists because it is something that we physically hold, but the image is something that we feel, we experience. The image must be true since we have some different sentiments in the process of reading. When we see a painting, photograph or a movie, our experience is different from the first process of reading. We do not have to be active to get the image. We just watch the static images (painting or photography) or the kinetic images (movie). We have two different experiences with different artistic objects. But in both cases the image is in our mind. In our mind we have the signification of the image from the book, painting or a movie and not the image itself. The signification of the image could be understood differently and this means that the concretizations of the image require something form the subject or are related with the subject. Before we can go any further, we need to establish if the images are outside or inside the subject’s mind.

According to Descartes we have to doubt if we want to know what really exists. In the *Third Meditations* he says: “but only by a sort of blind impulse that I believed that things existed outside of, and different of me, which, by the organs of my senses, or by some other method whatever it might be, conveyed these ideas or images to me [and imprinted on me their similitudes].”[[8]](#footnote-9) And he goes on and says: “but when we consider them as images, one representing one thing and the other another, it is clear that they are very different one from another.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Descartes tries to differentiate between things by means of experience. When one reads poetry one starts to feel something, some sentiments that are determined by the poetry through the process of reading. The image that appears in one’s mind is engendered by the signification of the words and one’s sentiments (hate, love, enthusiasm, etc.). If we read poetry by Celan, we can create a mental image with the words from the organic poetry, our feelings and from our impressions from what we know, for example, about the Holocaust. The image that is in our mind is now completed through this entire process: reading, feelings and something that we know. The image could not be a pure image but an intentional image. The intentional image could not be ideas because ideas are taken like certain modes of thought and images are constructed but an idea could be an image in a platonic sense. Descartes continues “there is no doubt that those which represent to me substances are something more, and contain so to speak more objective reality within them [...]”[[10]](#footnote-11) In this case there are two different types of reality. Firstly, there is the “formal” reality where all the things from the real world are intrinsically real and the “objective” reality of the things where something (image) exists by its representational content. For example, when looking at Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* we can see that it contains three different realities but represented under a unity which is the imaginational life according to the Bible. The painting is objective reality because its main topic is a representational idea of a true belief which is implied in the Bible. But its complexity of symbols, especially in the central panel, gives the painting a certain degree of ambiguity: the reality, if that is what the images represent, is it in accordance with our intrinsic reality or is it just a fantastic world with moral implications? If the painting, the central panel, is a warning about how our lives may be if we were to give in to temptations, the image expresses the conditions of the possibility. Thus, the images are the proprieties of the objective reality. Considering the images of the painting and their power to generate interpretations, it can be said that the painting is a warning about our human condition. On the other hand, this could be interpreted as a panorama of the lost paradise. If the image of the painting is conditioned by our mental process, the painting could satisfy our own imagination, and this perspective makes things complicated.

First, we have the image (images) of the painting, they are the intentional image of the painter (Bosch), they are intrinsic reality, but when the painting is contemplated the intentional images undergo a process of transformation started by the subject. It is in the image’s power to represent what the subject involuntary has in his mind. The painting is just a form of being that makes the transformation process of the images possible. The original intentional image is the condition for the new image which is achieved by the subject, trough his mental power, and what unites them is the transcendental image. This means that the original intentional image has the power to fulfill or to start the imagination. The image seems to be the objective element that could accomplish the imagination of the simple being. In this sense, the image has numerous interpretations and all can be possible because they represent an intrinsic reality. In this structure, the colors, the biblical characters, the Eden, the Last Judgment and other artistic elements help to construct the transcendental image. For now, the transcendental image can be defined as the image which exists before any interpretation of the painting and that stems from the relation between the subject and the work of art. This could not be an empirical image because the image does not arise from experience: it is discovered in time and space.

The transcendental image is not the image that we have in mind when we see a painting or we read a book, it is the condition for imagination and thus for image. It is the main entity of the image, which has the power to generate different meanings for each person according to sociological, geographical and cultural principles.

How can this be possible? Or, is it possible? We have to find the source of the infinite number of meanings of the image in general. When an artistic object is made, it is created according to an idea. But, when the object is transformed into an artistic object, it holds the image of the first idea. The question is: why do we see more or something else? Why do we transform the intentional image given to us by a painting, a sculpture, poetry or a movie into a different one? Because, according to Bergson, the problem begins from the subject and continues to the artistic object trough memory.

Our past experiences are preserved in our minds as memories. According to Bergson the memory has two ways of being. The first, the habitual memory (motor mechanism), is stored in the brain and is evident in behavior, and the second, pure recollection (independent recollections) is stored within consciousness. But, according to Gross, there is another type of memory (voluntary memory) which has the power to summon images from the past in order to apply them to an immediate situation. This type of memory is known to be in opposition with the involuntary memory, also known as ‘proustian memory’, and some thinkers believe that the first two types of memory are part of voluntary memory. From this point of view, images are connected to memories. But, how are images connected to memories or what kind of relationship is there between images and memories? Going back to the earlier example about *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* we could say that images, intentional or real, refer to an unsecured (non-self-sufficient) existence. For instance, when we see an image in reality that is not an image but a hallucination, it does not mean that the image does not exist, but the real element is the one that does not exist. Therefore the conditions necessary for the intentional image are born from our memories. Take for example the classical desert hallucination, when people see rivers because they are thirsty. The existence of the image is unsecured in relation with reality but has a subjective ontological explanation depending on our memories. But is there a support where we store our memories? In both cases, with the painting and with hallucinations, we could say that there is a continuation of the intentional or natural image in our consciousness. We could not see, as a hallucination, a river in the middle of the desert if we did not have some conditions to experience this hallucination. We know that if we are thirsty we have to drink water, and we know many different images of water. So, from the storehouse of impressions we could create an image in the middle of the desert. And of course, the river could be improved trough our imagination: we could see the hallucination as we want to. This means that in our memories there is some kind of background for the existence of an image. In the case of the painting, the intentional image exists strictly related to the idea of the painter. But nowadays a viewer could interpret the painting according to his memories. This means that the intentional image of the painter is transformed into another intentional image if the necessary conditions are met. The condition is the background of the image, the transcendental image of the first intentional image. And the transcendental image is the image that keeps the ontological elements of the image. Without this, there could not be an image because we would not have a support for an intentional image. And the transcendental image is neither dependent on the intentional image or a natural image, nor on the subject. It is an ontological condition for the existence of the image in time and space.

1. Conclusion

The ontological method applied to the analysis of the image requires two conditions to support the existence of the transcendental image. First, we have to be certain that the image is a sensitive representation which is different from the representation of reality. And the second - the image has a potency which is not expressed empirically. These are the reasons why the image sometimes, if not always, cannot be rationalized. An image does not hold a guarantee for the truth, the image is not true or false, the image can be both at the same time: it is an infinite source of meaning.

The transcendental image can be applied to different circumstances and can support all types of images. This variation is based on an interaction between the subject and the image itself. Every experiment, with the painting or the hallucination, can be interrelated with the external conditions, those conditions that are outside of the subject.

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1. This is a method used by Ingarden and Armstrong under the name of ‘revisionary metaphysics’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I use the word tehné in two ways: firstly, the initial meaning - craftsmanship – which is the rational method through which works of art are produced, and the second meaning is used in the context of episteme, i.e. having the knowledge to do something. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The expression *des domestique* is used by Jean Grenier in *L’art et ses Problèmes*. Its meaning refers to breaking away a part of an unknown object and transferring it to the intelligible and visual field. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. What is interesting in the process of art is the role and transformation of the image. If initially the image of the ritual object has mystical and sometimes magical features, depending on the social context, the image is limited to understanding the meanings of religion or rites. The decline of the object to the profane level transforms the image by giving it universal symbols. At the first stage, the image is intimately linked to social conscience, and it becomes universal through the work of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A concept introduced by Theodor Lipps. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Dewey, John, *Art as experience*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1980, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *The Cambridge history of literary Criticism*, vol. 8, edited by Roman Selden, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, edited by Stanley Tweyman, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Id. (in the French version: i.e., participate by representation in a higher degree of being or perfection). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)