Tracing Shadows:
Reflections on the Origin of Painting

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To Nurith, my mother, who with infinite love taught me how to look at paintings

1. To draw a line by candlelight

In his memoirs, the painter Giorgio de Chirico returns to his childhood with particular attention to the times and events surrounding the death of his father. In his description of that period clouded by death, there are two particular episodes that invite us to draw a connection between de Chirico’s experience of loss and mourning and the developing sense of his vocation as an artist. The first episode had taken place a few weeks before the death of Giorgio’s father.

My father felt that his end was not far away. One day towards evening, a fine evening near the end of April, I was going along a street in Athens with my father. Between me and my father, despite the deep affection that linked us, there was a certain aloofness, an apparent coldness or rather a kind of reserve… we walked in silence and the shadows of the evening came down in silence. I was on my father’s left. At a certain moment he took hold of me by the shoulders and I felt the weight of his large arm. I was upset and embarrassed and tried to understand the reason for this unexpected gesture or affection. Then my father spoke to me: “My life is ending. But yours is hardly beginning.” We returned home without saying anything more, my father keeping his arm over my shoulder.1

De Chirico’s language remains close to the visual. The dramatic scene of which he speaks can easily be framed as a picture, one that naturally belongs to the corpus of de Chirico’s own metaphysical paintings. The urban setting consists of a long, perhaps even empty, street. The light is sufficient for viewing the scene, but darkness is just about to settle in and there’s a strong presence of the shadows coming “down in silence.” Against this backdrop, we see two figures walking – again, in silence – connected by the invisible threads of a completely private world. This childhood picture shares the basic features of such paintings as de Chirico’s Nostalgia for the Infinite or The Anguish of Departing; but, at the same time, it stands out as unique due to the sudden disruption of the serenity so typical of de Chirico’s paintings of that period. The stillness of the framed memory is broken by an event, a surprising twofold gesture. De
Chirico’s father puts his arm over his son’s shoulder and begins to speak: the physical distance so central to the relationship between the two figures collapses at once, and the silence enveloping father and son is suddenly fractured (Fig. 1).

For Giorgio, the boy, the saying of the father cannot be contained within the ordinary. The saying of the father is described as an epiphany, one that continues to resist explanation also in the eyes of de Chirico, the adult writing his memoir. De Chirico makes no attempt to explain or elaborate further the meaning of his father’s words. But, this is not because he thinks these words cannot be understood. On the contrary, it is because the only way to access their meaning is by recognizing the manner in which these words have become embedded in the personal span of a life. The significance of the father’s saying lies in the manner in which this saying echoes throughout de Chirico’s autobiography.

“My life is ending. But yours is hardly beginning.” End and beginning. The relation between father and son is articulated in terms of an opposition: the man and the boy occupy asymmetrical positions in regard to time. The father’s time is running out. For him, time is already past, but for his son time is the open future, the possibility of a life that needs to be lived through. More specifically, the father speaks of the inescapable structure of human temporality. And yet, what he relates to his son is not the mere fact of human finitude. In the voice of the father, the fact of mortality resonates as a request. What de Chirico’s father bequeaths to his son is an imperative: live your life!

De Chirico’s father does not succeed in overcoming his illness and he dies within a few weeks. In the memoir, there is no mention of any further conversation between father and son. The second episode that concerns us takes place a few hours after the death of de Chirico’s father.

In the evening when everyone left and the servants had gone to bed, my mother, my brother and I stayed up to keep vigil over my father. It was a beautiful mid-spring night, the full moon lit up the city that was sunk in sleep. The song of amorous nightingales rose from...
the surrounding gardens and from time to time came distant chords of a guitar and songs sung in chorus by groups of young men accompanying a friend singing serenades beneath the window of the girl they loved. Midnight struck. Beneath the weight of the fatigue and sorrow my mother and my brother had fallen a sleep and I remained alone to keep vigil over my father. I looked at him and then I looked outside through the open window, at a beautiful moonlit May night. Then, I tiptoed into my bedroom, took some paper and pencil, and returned to draw by candlelight my father’s profile as he lay in the sleep of kindly death. My mother always kept this drawing and I believe that my brother still has it.

The above scene is, again, not so much of an actual narrative as an evocation of an elaborate image. The space of the scene is construed through the opposition between the closed interior of the father’s private room and an indefinitely open “beyond,” a backdrop consisting of a big city at night. Whereas the father’s room is the place of death, sleep, sorrow and silence, the “outside” appears as the realm of desire, spring, song and beauty. De Chirico’s mother and brother are under “the weight of the fatigue and sorrow” and thus surrender to sleep, as if temporarily joining the dead father. De Chirico, on the other hand, is caught in between *eros* and *thanatos*, and embodies the irresolvable tension between them which is the very tension that holds the scene together. Here again, as in the previous episode, the general setting is suddenly lit up by an unexpected event: in between *eros* and *thanatos*, Giorgio finds the possibility of creativity. De Chirico is neither tempted by the call of desire reverberating through the open window, nor does he surrender to the sorrow dominating the silent room. Instead, he acts creatively, drawing in pencil, by candle light, the profile of his dead father.

De Chirico’s act is indeed spontaneous. Yet, its immediacy is neither isolated nor cut off from the overall logic of the narrative. The drawing of the dead father is not an arbitrary act, but one that allows de Chirico to respond in a personal manner to his father’s last request appearing in the previous episode. In drawing the profile of his dead father, de Chirico is in fact taking the first step in a path evoked by the words of the father: “your life is hardly beginning”!

Hence, I suggest that de Chirico’s drawing should be understood as an act of self-determination. The sketch of his father’s profile is, in this respect, de Chirico’s first work as a painter. That is to say, that the above scene commemorates not only the death of de Chirico’s father, but also the moment of de Chirico’s individuation as a creative self, his birth as an artist.

At the heart of this picture of a child parting from his father, we thus find an image of origin: the origin of de Chirico’s painting, his first work or art. This unique moment of beginning is not forgotten by the adult, the famous painter writing his memoir. De Chirico does not explicitly articulate his attachment to that place of beginning, yet he clearly alludes to its continual and intimate presence in his life, by referring to the whereabouts of that first work: “My mother always kept this drawing and I believe that my brother still has it.”

De Chirico’s account of the origin of his painting is intrinsically woven into the intricacies of his autobiography. But, the central image dominating this biographical tale of origin is not merely personal. In fact, it strongly echoes an age-old image: the mythical image of the birth of painting which we first find in Pliny’s *Natural History*. 
2. Pliny on the origin of painting

In Pliny’s *Natural History*, we find two versions of a myth concerning the origin of painting. Pliny first mentions the tale in the context of the debate over the place in which the first painting was made. According to Pliny, the geographical “origin of Painting is uncertain,” yet “all agree that it began with tracing an outline around a man’s shadow and consequently that pictures were originally done in this way.”3 Pliny returns to elaborate this theme further precisely at the moment he moves away from painting to a discussion of a different art form, the modeling of clay.

Enough and more than enough has been said about painting. It may be suitable to append to these remarks something about the plastic art. It was through the service of that same earth that modeling portraits from clay was first invented by Butades, a potter from Sicyon, at Corinth. He did this owing to his daughter, who was in love with a young man; and she, when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by the lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire with the rest of his pottery; and it is said that this likeness was preserved in the shrine of the Nymphs.4

In this second version, Pliny provides a richer and more concrete setting for the legendary birth of painting, one which allows the original act of painting to lose its anonymity. Hence, the observation of a man’s shadow and the tracing of its contour is integrated into the particularity of a painful moment in which a young woman must face her lover’s departure. Painting, in other words, is located here at the intersection of love and loss, of *eros* and *thanatos*.

Interpreters of Pliny’s anecdote have underscored the connection between image, shadow and death which seems to call for an anthropologically oriented investigation. According to Gerhard Wolf, for example, “Pliny’s story should be read within an anthropology of the shadow in the classical world (and in other ancient societies), where the insubstantial *eidola* of the dead were called ‘shadows.’”5 Victor Stoichita suggests that we read Pliny’s myth against the background of the symbolic connection assumed by the Greeks between “shadow, soul and a person’s double.”6 According to Stoichita, “this would indicate that the result of the collaboration between the potter and his daughter was the symbolic creation of a ‘living’ double, a surrogate figure difficult to understand without visualizing the ritual actions we exert over it.” Hence, for Stoichita, the transferring of the image to the temple at Corinth implies that “the clay semblance becomes a cult object” which, in turn, points to an important detail eliminated by Pliny’s story: namely, the death of the beloved. In other words, for Stoichita, the end of Pliny’s story “suggests a cult of the ‘clay semblance’ that reproduces, includes and accommodates the ‘shadow’ of the young man, who in all probability is forever absent.”7

Pliny’s legend clearly bears the mark of ancient conceptions of the magic quality of images as well as of a specific metaphysics underlying rituals of the dead. But, in addressing the significance of Pliny’s fable, it is perhaps even more important to notice the immense impact which this primordial image has carried for the future history of reflection on painting. Here, the work of Robert Rosenblum has a unique status in the way it sets the field for an investigation of
the origin of painting as an iconographical problem. In “The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism,” Rosenblum is primarily concerned with the manner in which Pliny’s tale is turned into a prevalent pictorial theme by romantic classicism. Rosenblum is interested in explaining the surprising abundance of pictorial images of the Corinthian maid – the first painter – in the last third of the 18th century. Yet, as he proceeds with an anatomy of this image of origin and of the significance it carries for late 18th century painting, Rosenblum also provides a condensed history of Pliny’s tale that enables us to appreciate the complex matrix of versions and interpretations – from Quintilian to Alberti to Leonardo and Vasari, to Rousseau – which presented itself to the imagination of romantic classicism (Fig.2).

3. The birth of painting and the origin of philosophy

What can Pliny’s image of the origin of painting tell us about the essence of painting? Can the image of the Corinthian maid tracing the shadow of her departing lover be relevant to our present understanding of the work of art? At first sight, Pliny’s image seems to fully operate within the bounds of the Classical opposition between the sensible and the intellectual. Pliny’s depiction of the birth of painting seems to consist of the very elements which traditionally mark painting’s inferiority in relation to the ideal of a genuine quest for truth. While truth calls for a spiritual path that transcends our all too human temporal and corporal situatedness, painting is understood as a form of mimesis which can only respond and correspond to what shows itself to the eye. In other words, Pliny seems to speak of painting in a manner that only reinforces the traditional hierarchy between the work of the painter and the work of the thinker: between, the artist who remains riveted to the perspectival materiality of the sensible and the philosopher whose quest for truth necessarily leads beyond appearances.

In this respect, Pliny’s origin of painting may suggest itself as a complementary image, one that should be read in juxtaposition, to yet another age-old image of origin: the origin of philosophy as depicted by Plato in his allegory of the cave (Republic VII). Plato’s description of human prisoners “dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern” has lent the tradition one of
its most vivid and influential pictures of a philosophical journey in which the pursuit of truth and the transcendence of our human captivity are intertwined. For Plato, captivity is the very structure of our being in the world. Immersed in immediacy, plunged into the ordinary, the human condition is an intrinsically captive condition that can be overcome only by the search for eternal truth. Plato’s prisoners have “their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads.”

The prisoners are not only radically severed from the world outside the cave, but their perception of things is so strictly bound to a single – narrow – perspective that they cannot even begin to develop a view of their near surroundings in the cave. The prisoners, like us, cannot see “anything of themselves or of one another, except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them.”

For Plato, the image of the prisoners’ existence in the realm of shadows serves as grounds for a further articulation of the possibility of human enlightenment and emancipation. Yet, for our purposes, it is precisely the prisoner’s unenlightened condition that seems to suggest an analogy with the condition of the first painter: Butades’s daughter creates a line, a figure, that testifies to her indissoluble attachment to a shadow. And her preoccupation with the realm of shadows may seem to be indicative – just as it is in the case of Plato’s prisoners – of a forgetfulness of true being, a conflation of the real and the virtual, a life of illusion, the endorsement of a substitution, a replica.

The relegation of painting to the domain of the insubstantial (the ephemeral, artificial, simulated, the one-dimensional, ornamental, excessive, obscure, etc) can easily be integrated into and supported by the Platonic conception of visual representation. In this context, “the shadow represents,” as Victor Stoichita shows, “the stage that is furthest a way from the truth” and consequently “here and later, the shadow is charged with a fundamental negativity that, in the history of Western representation, was never to be abandoned altogether.” Hence, Stoichita finds it fruitful to underscore the affinities between Pliny’s image and Plato’s allegory of the cave. For him, if I understand him correctly, Pliny’s origin of painting (which “is in truth the story of the surrogate image”) should be read against the backdrop of Platonic metaphysics. Pliny’s image is a reflection of the Platonic oppositions that underlie the ontological inferiority ascribed to the art of painting. And furthermore, Plato’s bias against visual representation is couched in the same terminology used by Pliny “to expound the story of Butades, which stems from the same archaic if not oriental mentality as the surrogate image.”

Is this the right way to understand the philosophical significance of Pliny’s image? Can the image of the Corinthian maid speak to us in a non Platonic language? Can it subvert the Platonic field of oppositions in a manner that would allow us to resist any binary understanding of the aesthetic? Perhaps, it is not at all “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” that echoes in Butades’s story, but the reverberation of the very depth of an intimacy which is intrinsic to the relationship of philosophy and poiesis, thinking and seeing, truth and visuality?
4. Butades and the act of painting

In approaching the image of the birth of painting we first need to bracket the common tendency of thinking of painting – and more generally of the artwork – as a thing, a product, a self-contained object. The sense of the word “painting” is indeed twofold. The word indicates both an object which is the result of a certain creative process, the product of the artist’s work and, on the other hand, the actual work, the process itself, the act of painting or painting as a form of action. It is this second sense of the word that is crucial for us. The key to deciphering Pliny’s image thus lies in our ability to see that the crux of this image isn’t the visual product or object made by Butades as much as it is the actual making of the painting (in Pliny’s tale it is, in fact, only the father who is preoccupied with art as a product). What’s at stake here is, in other words, the specificity of the new gesture called “painting”: Butades’s act, the disposition and orientation it presupposes, the response and responsibility it embodies.

It seems to me that once we realize that the focus of Pliny’s myth is a form of response to the world, a new horizon would open up for our investigation. We can now ask: what is the significance, the meaning, of that action? What is the Corinthian maid actually doing when she draws that primordial line of hers?

We may begin by considering the setting, the location, of painting’s birth. Painting originates at an intersection. It takes place at the crossroad of desire and the experience of loss. We have already spoken of eros and thanatos. Butades draws the first line as she finds herself in and responds to an unresolved tension intrinsic to the human condition. This is the tension between the character of the world as a domain of meaningful things which we want and love and care about and the character of the world as a place in which we inevitably also find ourselves separated and cut off from, forsaken by the things and people we care about and love.

Once we recognize desire and loss as the twofold root of the act of painting, we shall also see why the predominant way of speaking about the first painting as a form of “replacement” or “substitution” cannot suffice. Butades is not creating a substitute because she has no need for a substitute. Her love is real and she cannot sell it short. The young woman is in love. She wants to love and she wants one specific love, but she also knows she has been abandoned. Desiring, she faces the object of her love. Yet, she also faces, just the same, the impossibility of fulfilling that love. Butades faces her limits and limitations, her finitude – herself. In other words, the first painter is a woman who experiences the world without collapsing the experience of desire and loss into one another, without replacing one for another. In this sense, her act of painting is not a mean for construing a stand-in for her lover, a surrogate or a substitution. To use the common terminology of “presence” and “absence” (of which I am not a fan), we should notice that the issue here is not the alternation between these two poles. Butades is not concerned with filling up and eliminating the absence which has pervaded her life. Her act is not an attempt to replace absence with a new form of presence but, on the contrary, it reflects an attempt to create a new place for her self in between the opposite poles of absence and presence.

Indeed, the notion of the “in between” is helpful. It is precisely a domain of “in between-ness” that the act of the Corinthian maid opens up. As she faces her situation, Butades’s daughter
could have responded in a variety of ways. The field of options is there for her, characteristically arranged in pairs of oppositions. Yet, in her response, she resists the appeal of the “either-or.” She neither tries to prevent her lover from leaving nor does she insist on joining him. She neither holds on to her object of love nor does she renounce or turn her back on it. She is neither active – practical, goal oriented, etc – nor passive. She opts for an option that has no significant objective consequence, no real effect in the world, but she clearly does not retreat into the privacy of the purely subjective. The act of the Corinthian maid is neither a something nor a nothing. It is, to use Vladimir Jankelvitch, a *presque rien*. And it is in this location of infinitesimality that painting originates. This is where the field of the aesthetic opens up.

5. The shadow and the line

Let us look now at the actual move done by the Corinthian maid. How does she act? What does she do? She directs herself at a shadow. She draws a line. What is the character of this quiet gesture?

First, the shadow. Butades attends to the shadow of her departing lover. As suggested, her preoccupation with that shadow may call for an analogy with the condition of the Platonic prisoners riveted to the realm shadows, i.e., the domain of the transient, the perspectiveal, the insubstantial, etc. In my view, this kind of analogy is mistaken. And furthermore, it is a mistake that levels the crucial differences between the two allegories. In the case of Plato’s cave, the shadows are so captivating precisely because they do not call attention to themselves as shadows at all. The shadows are real and since the prisoners cannot make room for the distinction between appearance and reality, between the real and the true, the shadows completely dominate their perception. The prisoners are, in this sense, under the spell of the shadow. That is, the kind of captivity of which Plato speaks is one in which we cannot, or do not know how to, see a shadow as a shadow. The prisoners are held “in” the domain of shadows because they cannot find a point of view from which the shadows could appear as a distinct framed object, as a *vor-stellung*. In other words, the prisoners inability to see and represent the shadow, their inability to establish a distance necessary for such a representation – is precisely what holds them captive. This is of course very different from the situation of the Corinthian maid who, in tracing the outline of a shadow, makes the shadow’s form explicit. When Butades looks at the shadow, her eyes are not lost in it. On the contrary, she responds to the shadow by delimiting it, by determining for the shadow a specific place and boundary. Butades has been abandoned. She suffers a great loss but she does not allow the lost object of her desire to cast its shadow on her. Using Freudian language, we may say that in the act of painting, the young woman releases herself from a state of melancholy where, to use Freud’s famous idiom “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.” Hence, as we look at the different Neo-Classical depictions of this scene of origins, we see that they share a common feature. Engaged in drawing, the gaze of the Corinthians maid is manifestly directed beyond her lover. He is not the object whom she seeks to represent. What she works on capturing is not his presence, but the presence of his absence – his shadow. The primordial painter has internalized the fact of being separated from the object of her desire.
And at the same time, she does not surrender to the pain of separation. In identifying, lending form and setting the limits to the shadow of the desired lover, the Corinthian maid takes the essential step in resisting the domination of the shadow. Her response to the shadow is a response to the claims of desire and pain over her situation: while acknowledging the continual presence of both desire and the pain of loss, she creates a place that is dominated by neither. The line she draws around the shadow is creative. It embodies the event of her freedom. Is this what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he writes that “painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all auto-figurative”?16

Let’s look now at the line itself. The first thing we need to notice is that in drawing a line, Butades is not – surprisingly perhaps – engaged in mimesis. She draws a line in a setting in which the separation and distance between the real (e.g., physical) and the represented object are not clear and distinct. In the ancient setting of this first painting, there is no distinctive medium for a representation that stands vis-à-vis the world (Butades draws on the same wall on which she sees the shadow). And the drawing of the line is not a copy of any corresponding object which is altogether separate and independent of its depiction. The act of drawing is not a second making – a surrogate – of something that is independently present in the physical world. But, neither is it, at the same time, an externalization of an internal image present in the mind. The creative line is not a projection of the Corinthian maid’s private vision onto the wall on which she draws, but a form of response, rather, to something she sees – something that shows itself to her. The surprising dimension of this primordial response toward the visual lies, again, in the manner in which the act of painting carves for itself an intermediate space of meaning, opening up a third realm in between the subjective and the objective, the internal and the external, the private and the public.17

The first act of painting makes no use of an autonomous, self sufficient, means of representation. The first painter does not work within an enclosed medium and space, but stretches her hand out to the world. She traces a line, touching simultaneously what she sees and what she wants to make visible. But what exactly does she see? The term “trace” may suggest that Butades simply passes over a given line which, in itself, is already there, registered on the wall. But is this case? Can we speak of a line that delimits the lover’s shadow prior to the act of the first painter? Are contours, outlines, objectively present in the things we see?

In Eye and Mind – to which my present analysis is greatly indebted – Merleau-Ponty challenges what he calls “a prosaic conception of the line.” This is a conceptualization of the line “as a positive attribute and property of the object in itself.” For Merleau-Ponty, the character of the visual is never fully positive since the visible is essentially pervaded by a dimension of invisibility. “The visible has an invisible inner framework, and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible… it is in the line of the visible, it is its virtual focus…”18 In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty continually labors on articulating the unique presence of what he calls “the invisible of the visible.” And yet, according to him, it is the daily work of the painter that most successfully contests the positivistic attitude toward the visual. It is the painter – rather than the philosopher – who embodies the possibility of an openness to the truth of the visual. In this context, painters are indeed the ones who know best that “there are no lines visible in
themselves, that neither the contour of the apple nor the border between field and meadow is
this place or that, that they [the lines] are always between or behind whatever we fix our eyes
upon; they are indicated, implicated, and even very imperiously demanded by things, but they
themselves are not things.”

Hence, returning to Butades, we may say that while the young woman traces a line whose
presence is clearly found beyond the sphere of her subjectivity, the line itself is not something
that appears as a positive element in her field of vision. It is not fully or objectively there. The
line is not a given. And consequently, the gist of Butades’s act lies precisely in the manner in
which she enables the implicit presence of a line to take on an explicit form visibility, to show
itself as a line, as a form of figuration.

Despite its apparent inconsequentiality, Butades’s minute response to a shadow on a wall is
an event that completely transforms the visibility of the world. Tracing a line, Butades unlocks
a crucial dimension of the visible that had previously remained hidden. After the first painting,
the visual is no longer simply that which meets the eye. It is no longer the mere façade of things.
In bringing forth the visibility of the line, Butades exemplifies a dimension of potentiality that
pulsates at the heart of our seeing. What we see is always more than what we see. Transcendence
is an integral part of the visual. In this respect, Butades should be understood in terms of her
ability to draw out of the visual a dimension of difference. This is the difference between the
positive and immanently transcendent aspect of what is seen. And the line she draws is a mark
of that difference. It is, first of all, a mark of the fact that the visual is never simply and fully
there, that seeing is not just a grasping of a given content; or in other words, that what we see
always pulsates with the absence of what we cannot see which means, in turn, that genuine
seeing is structured around a possibility, an event, a mode, of unfolding. We have already noticed
that the first act of painting is not representational or mimetic. And we may now add that it is,
in fact, an act of uncovering. Butades’s act reveals the depth of the visual. Or more precisely,
it uncovers depth at the very heart of the visual, and shows depth to be the inner frame – the
membrure as Merleau-Ponty would call it – of what we see.

But, Butades does more than that. In tracing a shadow’s contour, Butades has changed
forever the form of our human encounter with the visual. Before the birth of painting, the
visuality of the world was encountered as that which simply imposes itself on the eye. The
visual appearance of things was cast on the human eye as a shadow. When faced and looked
at, the world appeared. And, it appeared through the medium of sight. Looking at her father,
for example, Butades could see him working on his pottery. She could see him tired at the end
of the day just as one afternoon she suddenly saw how worried her lover had become. In other
words, before the birth of painting, seeing was no more than a way, a prism for accessing and
processing the world. And accordingly, the visual appeared as a manifestation of the world
itself, of those things, qualities, events and facts that show themselves in one’s field of vision.
Yet, with Butades and her inventive act, a new possibility has opened up. This is the possibility
of not merely seeing the world, but of seeing the world as that which is seen.

Butades, the first painter, should be remembered as the one who allowed the visual to show
itself as visual. The primordial line of Butades is the mark of a human possibility to overcome
our fundamental “thrownness” – to use Heidegger’s term – into the realm of visibility. With the first painting – and I believe this applies also to painting’s actual beginnings in such places as Chauvet, Lascaux or Altamira – humans have been granted the privilege of not only being-in a perceived world, but of meeting and seeing the world, as if for a second time (Fig.3). In the presence of painting, the world is no longer what’s simply there, but is there in the form of what shows itself to a viewer. Hence, what is celebrated in the tale of the first painting is the impregnation of the field of visibility with the seed of human reflection. The stroke of a line – the line of Butades or the one made more than thirty thousand years ago by a human hand moving in the light-spotted darkness of a cavern – is a second beginning. It coincided with the birth of a human look, a liberated gaze, that has released itself from the shadow of brute existence by learning to see the world as a reflection of its own image.

Notes
4. Pliny, XXXV, 43.
7. Stoichita, pp. 18-20.


10. Plato, 514a

11. Plato, 515a


15. Following those instances in the tradition in which the Corinthian maid bears her father’s name, I shall, hereafter simply call her Butades.


17. I see here a fruitful analogy, which I would like to develop in the future, between my phenomenological reading of Butades’s creative act and D.W. Winnicott’s account of human creativity and its roots in what he calls the “potential space” between the baby and the mother. See, for example, David W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge 1991.


20. This is also what Merleau-Ponty seems to have in mind when he describes the artist’s “challenging of the prosaic line” as “simply a matter of freeing the line, of revivifying its constituting power”. Did Merleau-Ponty bear in mind the novel gesture of Butades when he wrote these lines or when he followed Paul Klee’s saying that “the line no longer imitates the visible, but renders visible”? (p.143).

21. The historical question of the origin of painting has been answered in different ways by 20th century anthropology and art history. Relevant for our discussion, see Ernst Gombrich’s (in my view, a positivistic) account of the birth of painting in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 107-110. It should be noticed, that the different answers to the question of origin typically do share, nevertheless, a common view: i.e., that painting should be understood as a practice which derives from a specific – dramatic, constitutive, etc. – point of origin. This view is still common although it has lost the clear predominance it used to have. Brigitte and Gilles Delluc, for example, present this view in the following way: “Around 30,000 years ago, in the Aurignacian, at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic, someone or some group in the Eyzies region invented drawing, the representation in two dimensions on the flat of the stone, of what appeared in the environment in three dimensions.” “The Origin of Image Making,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1986, p. 371. For a contestation of this view, see Whitney Davis, “The Origin of Image Making,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1986. See also David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in Cave*, Thames and Hudson, 2002. Indeed, this is the moment to glimpse back at the historical beginnings of painting and ask ourselves what the connection is between the silhouette drawn by the mythical figure of Butades and the powerful and enigmatic images of the upper Paleolithic. Can the present phenomenological reading of Pliny’s tale be relevant in any way to an understanding of the making of these primal images, to the dramatic moment of transition, to the birth or a new form of experience, to which these images – the horse, the stag, the bison, the human hand – bear witness? For now, I leave these questions open.

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