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How Can One Recognize What One Did Not Know?

Mnemosyne and the Art of the Twentieth Century

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In a page of his posthumous book entitled *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) writes: “As the ethnologist in the face of societies called archaic . . . must describe a mythical time where certain events ‘in the beginning’ maintain a continued efficacy; so also social psychology, precisely if it wishes to really know our own societies, cannot exclude a priori the hypothesis of mythical time as a component of our personal and public history”. For Merleau-Ponty it is precisely this mythical time that is evoked in the works of Proust and Freud, or in the attention for simultaneity that characterizes modern painting.

On the other hand, one of the most important contemporary specialists in Greek mythology, Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914), reminds us that the ancient Greeks called that mythical time *aiōn* and wondered that *Mnemosyne*—the goddess of memory and the mother of the Muses—could allow poets to know that time.

In his turn, another French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), in his book *Difference and Repetition* (1968) characterizes the mythical time as “a past that was never present” and underlines that only reminiscence saves that peculiar past for us, as—in his opinion—Proust has taught us. Deleuze reminds as well that the production of reminiscences is due to what Proust called “involuntary memory” and Deleuze qualifies this latter as a “passive synthesis” that he baptizes precisely with the name *Mnemosyne*. Actually, not differently from the Greeks in their archaic epoch, Deleuze characterizes *Mnemosyne* as the reverse of *Léthe* rather than its opposite, and precisely in their chiasm he indicates the roots of that very creativity thanks to which *Mnemosyne* was supposed to be the mother of the Muses. In this light, Deleuze describes *Mnemosyne* as the human faculty that—in its intimate and creative link with forgetting—passively elaborates the essences (or the “ideas” according to the Greek acceptance of this word) of our lived experiences and that puts (“retro-jects”) those essences in that mythical time of “the beginning” that turns out to be “a past that was never present”.

Thus, Deleuze judges this characterization as *non-platonistic* and, in the second edition (1970) of his book entitled *Proust and Signs*, he claims that Proust elaborated “a totally new or modern concept of reminiscence”. Deleuze suggests as well a parallelism between this modern concept of reminiscence and the modern art attempts as *non-mimetic*—both considering essences or ideas not as points of departure for their creative elaborations but rather as points of arrival—and therefore raises also the crucial question of the meaning of recognition according to this perspective. Particularly, it is in this way that Deleuze characterizes a certain form of modern painting that links, in his opinion, Cézanne to Francis Bacon, in his book entitled *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981).