

Deleuzian Virtuality in Jurgis Baltrušaitis's Vision of Art History

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Jurgis Baltrušaitis's work in art history exposes a multifaceted concept of time that reveals the way art forms undergo a cycle of awakenings and returns. To delve deeper into his research system, this paper employs Gilles Deleuze's concept of virtuality. Deleuze's approach also challenges classical paradigms and allows us to amalgamate and expand upon the ideas of these authors. The Deleuzian concept of virtuality is utilized due to its ontological scheme that encompasses elements of memory and anachronism, which correlates with Warburg's and Baltrušaitis's methodology. The approaches by Baltrušaitis and Deleuze converge through Henri Bergson's concept of virtuality as a remnant of the past. It is revealed in this paper that the concepts of Baltrušaitis's research – survival, anachronism, and deformation – function as an ontological Deleuzian concept of virtuality.

Keywords: Baltrušaitis, Deleuze, anamorphoses, anachronism, survival, virtuality, Bergson, Warburg

The destruction of a figure precedes its representation. The image swallowed up in a torrent or in a confused whirlpool emerges, similar to itself, in an oblique vision or in a mirror. Resurrected from its chaos like the Phoenix from its ashes, it appears transfigured by a mystery.¹

Jurgis Baltrušaitis

Jurgis Baltrušaitis's studies of art history embody a methodology offering a gateway to interdisciplinary studies that unveil a profound understanding of artworks and their lives. This inclusive approach correlates with philosophical theories that aid in unveiling fresh avenues for examining images. Baltrušaitis's research has

captivated the attention of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard; however, his contributions to art history and comparative studies have been the primary focus of discussion, leaving a gap in research that connects the fields of philosophy and art history.

* Translated by the author from Jurgis Baltrušaitis, "Anamorphoses", in *Anamorfosen spel met perspectief*: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 1975–1976. Köln: DuMont Schaberg, 1975, unnumbered pages. Original: "La destruction de la figure précède sa

représentation. L'image engloutie dans un torrent ou dans un tourbillon confus émerge, semblable à elle-même, dans une vision oblique ou dans un miroir. Ressuscitée de son chaos comme le Phénix de ses cendres, elle apparaît transfigurée par un mystère."

One of the most comprehensive studies of Baltrušaitis's works in Lithuania, touching on some aspects of the intersection of art history and philosophy, is Odetta Žukauskienė's monograph *Metamorphoses of Art Forms: The Comparative Art History of Focillon and Baltrušaitis*.¹ The author draws attention to nomadology as a concept that describes the movement of forms in Baltrušaitis's works, which aligns him with the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Žukauskienė also draws attention to the concept of the fold (in terms of folds of time and space) by Deleuze and how it relates to Baltrušaitis. Philosophical aspects are also analyzed by Dalia Aleksandravičiūtė in her recently published paper, "Reflections of René Descartes' Rationalism in Jurgis Baltrušaitis's Research on Perspective and Anamorphoses,"² where the author pinpoints the fundamental "tools" employed by Baltrušaitis in his research and draws parallels with certain concepts in philosophy. Employing hermeneutic analysis, I will focus on the Gilles Deleuze's concept of virtuality to reveal its connections with Baltrušaitis's core concepts, such as survival and anachronism.

Virtuality and the Warburgian Survival of Forms

In the field of art history, both Deleuze and Baltrušaitis distance themselves from traditional and epistemological methods.

Baltrušaitis was influenced by German and French formalism, but Focillon's ideas undoubtedly had the greatest influence on him. The formalists encouraged Baltrušaitis to focus on the study of ornaments, to which he devoted much attention, and to analyze how geometrical structures deform the figure – from this followed his research on anamorphoses. This study of deformations allowed him to transcend the confines of formalism, which tended to isolate the art from its historical context. On the other hand, he also questioned the schemes of the development of art styles. The concept of the image in Baltrušaitis's theory was conceived as an anachronistic phenomenon that allowed transcending the strict boundaries of time.

Deleuze too was critical of formalism. As Vlad Ionescu summarized: "For Greenberg, the image is an object that circulates between other objects, and for Riegl, it is the way an age wants to shape itself visually. Yet Deleuze transforms this descriptive formalist analysis into a vision of art as performativity and transition."³ These common research directions allow us to analyze Baltrušaitis and Deleuze in parallel using the concept of virtuality. This term is, in various aspects, related to the concepts found in Baltrušaitis's works, such as deformation, survival, and anachronism. For Deleuze, virtuality is perceived as a remnant of the past that participates in virtual objects. As he puts it, "[t]his is why virtual objects exist only as fragments of themselves: they are found only as lost; they

1 Odetta Žukauskienė, *Meno formų metamorfozės: komparatyvistinė Focillono ir Baltrušaičio menotyra*. Vilnius: KFMI, 2006.

2 Dalia Aleksandravičiūtė, "René Descartes'o racionalizmo atspindžiai Jurgio Baltrušaičio perspektyvos ir anamorfų tyrinėjimuose," *Sovijus* 7, No. 2 (2019), pp. 125–138.

3 Vlad Ionescu, "Strategies of Reading Art Historians," in *Art History after Deleuze and Guattari*, Stephen Zepke (ed.). Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2017, p. 33.

exist only as recovered. Loss or forgetting here are not determinations that must be overcome; rather, they refer to the objective nature of that which we recover as lost, at the heart of forgetting.”⁴ In the same text, he claims: “It is – not only by its origin but by its own nature – a fragment, a shred or a remainder. It lacks its own identity.”⁵ For Deleuze, virtuality is perceived as an infinite displacement, as if one mask covered another in perpetuity. And the virtual object, then, exists in the present as a trace, something that remains or survives.

This remnant or trace could align with the concept of survival in the history of art, signifying the enduring presence of artistic forms across time. Described in this manner, the phenomenon of survival encapsulates Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return, interpreted by Deleuze as returning not the same, but always new, different. In Baltrušaitis’s works the concept of survival⁶ is observable in his studies of medieval art and letter, and in his analyses of aberrations or depraved perspectives. As we explore virtuality in art history and the instrumentality of the concept of virtuality, we see how Aby Warburg’s theory of *Nachleben* leads us toward a virtuality that encompasses anthropological and psychological aspects. *Nachleben* is one of the most important concepts of Warburg’s theory, meaning a survival of certain elements from the past – in other words, it expresses the return and rebirth of emotional formulas

that emerge in the subconscious of history. The Warburgian influence is very likely, considering that Baltrušaitis communicated with members of the Warburg Institute. However, this term is also very Deleusian and close to virtuality.

The parallelism of these concepts can also be viewed through the prism of George Didi-Huberman’s book *The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*.⁷ The author draws on Deleuze’s insights and his concept of virtuality as a philosophical framework to explain the basis of Warburg’s methodology. Didi-Huberman analyses the transformative attributes of virtuality. He argues that in the context of Warburg’s theory, the virtual aspects of images allow them to undergo metamorphoses, adapting to changing cultural and historical circumstances while retaining their essential qualities. According to Gustavo Chirolla and Juan Fernando Mosquera:

In particular, the crucial notion of survival in Warburg is reworked by Didi-Huberman through Deleuze’s understanding of the eternal return as repetition. This notion of the ‘eternal return of the same,’ as Nietzsche put it, is not understood by Deleuze to mean the return of the identical, but as saying that what is the same in what returns is the difference. For Didi-Huberman, Nietzsche wrote about the immanence of plastic force, and Deleuze interpreted this as the repetition of difference, but it was Warburg who applied superior empiricism to art history.⁸

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 102.

5 *Ibid.*

6 This concept probably originated from Henri Focillon, who developed it in his collection of papers *Moyen Âge, survivances et réveils*, 1943.

7 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn. USA: Penn State University Press, 2017.

8 Gustavo Chirolla and Juan Fernando Mejía Mosquera-

Revealing the virtuality inherent in *Nachleben* leads to another important term in Warburg's theory – *Pathosformel* (a repeatable emotive formula), the idea that emotional or psychological burdens survive across changing cultural and historical contexts. This allowed the phenomena of recurrent images to be associated with the return of traumatic memory. Thus, the concept of survival can be approached from a psychological perspective as it relates to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic scheme. Freud studied the functioning of memory and analyzed the process of repression. On this, he said:

Let us remember what we have learned about the nature and origin of fantasies, the first stage of hallucinations. They are remnants and substitutes of various repressed memories that cannot enter consciousness through the mechanism of displacement due to resistance, but which nonetheless become conscious through transformation and distortion.⁹

Bergsonian Echoes in the Concept of Anachronism

These latent aspects of the human psyche correspond in a certain sense to the virtual sphere in Deleuze's terminology; for Baltrušaitis, the elements hidden in mythologies and the fantastic images that represent them are also similar to displaced fragments of reality that cannot be reduced

to a single primary source. The returning of the past moments and the revival of its elements leads to anachronism – a specific scheme of temporality which unfolds in the works of Deleuze and Henri Bergson.

Focillon's contemporaries were influenced by Bergson's intuitionism, which significantly impacted French aesthetics. In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze delves into Bergson's theory of memory, highlighting its virtual nature.¹⁰ Virtuality, in this context, is shaped by the concept of duration as a qualitative element. Duration enables us to perceive the difference in a thing not merely in terms of degree but fundamentally in a qualitative sense, making it distinct from itself. This perspective leads us to view memories not as static entities but as continuously evolving phenomena, changing in tandem with the accumulation of new memories. Consequently, memory is conceived as a virtual realm where the present and the past coexist and intertwine. This insight allows us to perceive the artwork as an image which contains not only the visible, but also the virtual – the plane of memory as a mental reality. For this reason, a work of art does not adhere to a linear concept of history but acquires its inner reality.

The framework of ideas becomes fundamental in Deleuze's philosophy of art. He perceives the work of art as a dynamic field of intensities, constantly evolving and resisting any form of stability. These ideas also presuppose a different view of art history, as described by Ionescu, focusing on its genealogy rather than geography. In this

era, "Deleuze and Didi-Huberman on Art History," in *Art History after Deleuze and Guattari*, Stephen Zepke (ed.). Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2017, p. 91.

9 Sigmund Freud, *Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensens "Gradiva"*. Leipzig und Wien: Franc Deuticke, 1912, p. 52.

10 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberiam. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

perspective, art functions as a migratory force. In Ionescu's terms, "[b]ecause the object of art is an anonymous force that has the potential to migrate through the world, like the colorism of the Roman imperial age that leaps across time into impressionism, or the intensity of the gothic line that anticipates expressionism."¹¹ These theoretical trajectories are based on virtuality as a concept closely connected to memory as a form of dynamic duration. Bergson's philosophy of time encouraged the development of new theories on temporality, influencing the definition of anachronism and permeating Baltrušaitis's works.

The anachronism is an essential aspect in Baltrušaitis's studies, especially evident in *Le Moyen Age fantastique: Antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique* (1955) and *Réveils et prodiges. Le gothique fantastique* (1960) as well as his studies on aberration. Anachronisms allowed Baltrušaitis to not limit his research into art forms to the boundaries of either geography or time period. In his work, he explores the connections between antiquity, the East, and the West, and recognizes elements of Asian mythology in Christian art. More specifically, he identifies which elements undergo transformations in transition from one civilization to another. We can also see anachronistic deformations in the shell motifs described by Baltrušaitis, when the beautiful ancient goddesses born from a shell are transformed into fantastic creatures in the Middle Ages. They seem to be deformed, and their new forms point

to a multitude of meanings, rhizomically unfolded in various periods.¹²

Ontological Aspects of Deformation

Finally, the deformations bring us back to the zone of virtuality and the concept of the virtual. The zone represents the intersections of visual expressions from different cultures. Deleuze employs the term of virtuality in his book on Francis Bacon. In this context, it signifies the portion of an image where contours cease to be discernible, vanishing when the artist mechanically manipulates a segment of the image through techniques such as rubbing or splattering with paint. Deleuze refers to Bacon's method as deformation. And deformation, in Deleuze's text, becomes a concept equivalent to the ontological plane of being, because it expresses the displacement of the force that creates the plane of virtuality. Deleuze explains: "When a force is exerted on a scrubbed part, it does not give birth to an abstract form, nor does it combine sensible forms dynamically: on the contrary, it turns this zone into a zone of indiscernibility that is common to several forms."¹³ In Deleuze's philosophical reflections, virtuality manifests itself in the faded contours of Bacon's paintings. Meanwhile, in Baltrušaitis's research, it constitutes a wide spectrum of connections between forms and meanings, transcending the boundaries of periods.

11 Vlad Ionescu, "Strategies of Reading Art Historians," p. 28.

12 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Fantastiškieji Viduramžiai: antika ir egzotizmai gotikos mene*, trans. Aldona Merkytė. Vilnius: Vaga, 2001, p. 60.

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, intro. Daniel W. Smith, afterword by Tom Conley. Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 59.

Deformation is another key concept in Baltrušaitis's research, developed in his book *Formations, déformations. La stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane* (1986).¹⁴ In this reprinted work (first published in 1931), formation and deformation are discussed within the context of medieval culture, with a particular focus on ornamentation. The deformations arising from these ornaments also create a plane of virtuality. Various forms of ornaments, in endless metamorphoses, embrace coexisting religious, philosophical, and artistic meanings from various periods. In Baltrušaitis's view, ornaments are dialectical mechanisms: "They unite closely with each other, they generate each other, diversify each other, complicate each other, by virtue of a movement which has only an external analogy with reasoning on numbers, and which resembles rather the shimmering phases of a dialectic."¹⁵

The ornamental forms generated through deformation gain an autonomous existence. Autonomy, dialectics, movement – all of this creates this zone of indiscernibility that acquires an ontological dimension. As in the motive of the shell which embraces the images of the birth of Aphrodite and the birth of Demons.¹⁶

¹⁴ The first edition: *La Stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane*. Paris: Leroux, 1931.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. X–XI. Translated by the author.

¹⁶ Baltrušaitis, *op. cit.*, 2001, p. 60.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis reveals the correlation between Baltrušaitis's and Deleuze's concepts. The concept of virtuality can be perceived as a connecting link. Baltrušaitis's concept of survival and anachronism, related to the Nietzschean concept of eternal return, can also be studied in connection to Warburg's *Nachleben* and *Pathosformel*. These concepts open up the virtual plane of an image, enabling a non-linear study of visual images and their movement across various cultural layers. Deleuze's concept of virtuality adopted the Bergsonian concept of temporality and broadened the understanding of anachronism, which became an important methodological tool for Baltrušaitis. It allows us to perceive an ornament, form, or image as a continually changing phenomenon. This insight is further reinforced by the shared concept of deformation. In Deleuze's context, deformation erases static lines and opens a zone of virtuality. In the context of Baltrušaitis, the movement of deformation functions as the plane of virtuality that acquires a dynamic existence within an image.

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