

Image as Translation: The Ideological Implication of the Camera Obscura for Media Studies

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Article abstract

This essay relies on the historical figure of the camera obscura, as the site or place of articulation between the visible and the invisible. With the help of iconographic documents, it shows that it is not merely a process of inversion that defines the camera obscura. Indeed, a crucial spatial component is at play in the medium of the room itself: the camera is the very milieu where both an inversion and a displacement take place. From this perspective, it will appear more clearly that visibility does not stand beside or float above the invisible, but “takes place” right at its heart.

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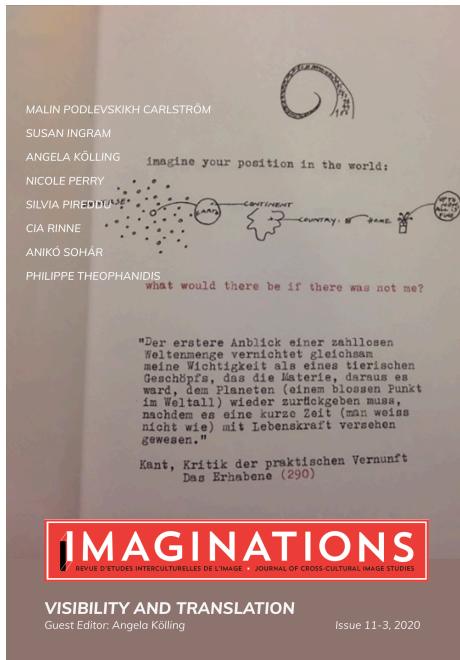
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Image Credit:

Cia Rinne, *Das Erhabene* (2011)

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IMAGE AS TRANSLATION: THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION OF THE CAMERA OBSCURA FOR MEDIA STUDIES

PHILIPPE THEOPHANIDIS

This essay relies on the historical figure of the camera obscura, as the site or place of articulation between the visible and the invisible. With the help of iconographic documents, it shows that it is not merely a process of inversion that defines the camera obscura. Indeed, a crucial spatial component is at play in the medium of the room itself: the camera is the very milieu where both an inversion and a displacement take place. From this perspective, it will appear more clearly that visibility does not stand beside or float above the invisible, but “takes place” right at its heart.

Cet essai s’appuie sur la figure historique de la camera obscura, en tant que site ou lieu où s’articulent le visible et l’invisible. À l’aide de documents iconographiques, elle montre que le processus définissant le fonctionnement de la camera obscura ne se réduit pas à une inversion. En effet, une composante spatiale cruciale est en jeu dans le medium de la chambre elle-même : la camera est le milieu où prennent place tout aussi bien une inversion qu’un déplacement. Dans cette perspective, il apparaît plus clairement que la visibilité ne se tient pas à côté non plus qu’elle flotte au-dessus de l’invisible, mais prend place en plein dans son cœur.

A scholar without imagination appears only as a pseudoscholar, or at least as an incomplete scholar.” (Baudelaire 127)

This essay¹ examines a specific issue at the intersection of two academic traditions: namely media studies and visual cultures. Its focus is the process by which images take place. This process—imagination—is understood here as a process of displacement or dislocation. If we agree to understand translation not

merely as a linguistic process (i.e., the translation of one language into another language), but as a broader process of transference from one place to another, then it follows that translation is also fundamentally concerned with images. Hence, instead of arguing that translation could catch on with visibility, this essay argues that images “take place” as events for which translation is a condition. By casting imagination as a process of translation, the long-standing ideological preference for the invisibility of translation in favor of an authoritative source is turned on its head.

This essay therefore casts images not as things or objects, but as relations. These relations involve the negotiation of differences: they need differences and, in turn, generate differences. From the perspective of media studies, this can be properly said to be a process of mediation, but only insofar as mediation is understood not as a channeling or a bridging, but as a spatial process or, more precisely, as a continuous process of spacing (in French: *espacement*, *décalage*, *écartèlement*). To think of imagination as translation allows for images to be not merely conceived as the fixed terms in a relation of resemblance and similitude with an original, but as the tension of an irreducible difference from which resemblance and similitude—along with the ideology of the origin—is derived.

In the following paragraphs, I will first quickly present Rada Iveković’s idea of translation as a process of displacement or transit. This will pave the way for more exhaustive examination of the relationship between images and space. Second, a brief examination of the word “image” will allow us to consider images not merely as things to be looked at, but rather as differences or relations. In the third and main part, this relationship will be fleshed out by examining the operation of the *camera obscura*, an early optical device used to reproduce scenes from the world inside a dark room (Figure 3). This example will be examined from a variety of historical treatment, from a 16th century treaty written by Giambattista della Porta to Karl Marx’s use of the *camera obscura* as a metaphor for ideology. The displacement involved in the process of image creation will become explicit, further asserting the relevance of the *camera obscura* for both

visual culture and media studies. Finally, it will be possible to bring together imagination, translation, and ideology.

TRANSLATION AS TRANSIT

In her essay “On Permanent Translation,” Rada Iveković proposes to understand translation as a “primal condition, or rather a condition *as such*—not that of a place, but that of a primal move” (121). In doing so, translation exposes the real in a different light. Instead of being caught in a traditional dialectic of oppositions (truth/false, real/unreal, original/derivative), the reality exposed by translation appears as an irreducible and unsolvable tension. As Iveković further suggests: “translation always takes place, and is always unsatisfactory” (122). Hence, the “taking place” of translation is endless. Likewise, the process of imagination—the taking place of images—does not involve a static *milieu*, nor does it occupy a proper site once and for all. As a condition, it is a situation; it happens as an event. This event, furthermore, exposes the space of difference, the in-betweenness from which stem the ideas of origin and copy, reality and illusion, authenticity and simulacrum. Here, the word “mediation” claims its spatial component: the medial or the Latin *medium*, the yawning of an intermediary space. A brief examination of the word “image” will expose how it can be understood as the space of difference, rather than merely as some discreet thing to look at.

IMAGES AS DIFFERENCE

Although the Proto-Indo-European provenance of the Latin word “*imāgō*”—from which the English word “image” is derived—is uncertain, most dictionaries attest of the same semantic field and meanings: imitation, copy, likeness, simulacrum, emulation, resemblance, similitude, etcetera. Some authors have explored the philological relationship of this semantic field with the idea of friendship, suggesting an affinity between “*imago*” and “*amigo*” (Wackernagel 77). Indeed, we sometimes use the same word in English to operate in both semantic fields of resemblance and friendship: for example, “like”

and “akin.” This alone would suffice to suggest that instead of being one individual, discreet thing, the image instead always marks a disparate plurality. The image exists not merely in relation to its model, but as the relationship between something and something other. “More than one” is the minimal condition for an image to exist. Moreover, despite or precisely because of what the semantic field associated with “*imāgō*” evokes (imitation and simulacrum), an image can be named as such because it is also not the same, not identical. In other words, the image exists foremost as a difference, in state analogous to that “infinitesimal discontinuity” that Michel Foucault attributes to the speaker’s relation to his own discourse (311). Here, difference is not opposed to resemblance, but conceived instead as its very condition of possibility. The “self” of an image is to be found in otherness or, as Daniel Tiffany puts it, “the image has always been an essential bearer of otherness” (218). The *camera obscura* provides an interesting entry point, then, to this exploration of how the differential nature of the image can be thought of spatially and, as such, relates to what Dieter Mersch calls “the medial” (153-180).

INVERSION: GIAMBATTISTA DELLA PORTA

The *camera obscura* has provided and still provides a strong and lasting model to think the articulation of images and reality. The *camera obscura* has been called “an epistemological figure” and an “assemblage” (Crary 30), a “root metaphor” for the modern concept of subjectivity (Bailey 63), an “epistemology engine” capable of producing knowledge (Ihde and Selinger), and, as such, could qualify as a “hypericon” in W.J.T Mitchell’s vocabulary (5–6). The *camera obscura* has also been referred to as a notorious and problematic “metaphorical constraint” when thinking about ideology (Kofman 3). However, before evaluating these more contemporary preoccupations and concerns, I turn instead to an earlier and, indeed, paradigmatic description of the *camera obscura* in Giambattista della Porta’s *Natural Magick*, originally published as *Magiæ Naturalis* in 1558 (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Della Porta's description of the *camera obscura* appears in the seventeenth book dedicated to "Strange Glasses" (*De catopricis imag-*

inibus), under chapter VI titled “Other operations of a Concave-Glass” (*Alia speculi concaui operationes*). The description is familiar as it emphasizes one of the main features of the *camera obscura*: how it produces an inverted image of the world (Figure 2).

You must shut all the chamber windows, and it will do well to shut up all holes besides, lest any light breaking in should spoil all. Onely make one hole, that shall be a hands breadth and length; above this fit a little leaden or brass Table, and glew it, so thick as a paper; open a round hole in the middle of it, as great as your little finger. Over against this, let there be white walls of paper, or white clothes, so shall you see all that is done without in the Sun, and those that walk in the streets, like to Antipodes, and what is right will be the left, and all things changed; and the farther they are off from the hole, the greater they will appear. If you bring your paper, or white Table neerer, they will shew less and clearer.... (della Porta, *Natural Magick* 363)

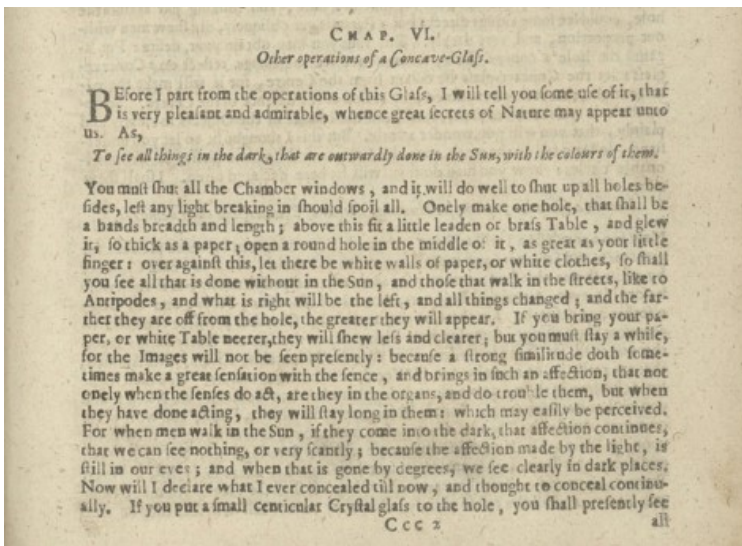


Figure 2

What is of interest here is the way Della Porta describes the image created in the *camera obscura*: people, he says, will appear in it “like to Antipodes, and what is right will be the left, and all things changed.” The process of creating an image involves a significant displacement, a change in location. He goes on to explain how it is possible to produce a much more striking effect with the use of a lens: “Now will I declare what I ever concealed till now, and thought to conceal continually. If you put a small centicular Crystal glass to the hole, you shall presently see all things clearer, the countenances of men walking, the colors, garments, and all things as if you stood hard by. You shall see them with so much pleasure, that those that see it can never enough admire it” (della Porta, *Natural Magick* 363).



Figure 3

Nearly three centuries later in 1845, Marx and his collaborator Engels will use the *camera obscura* as a metaphor to describe how ideology works:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (47)

In this passage, the *camera obscura* metaphor does more than convey the process by which reality is inverted. Marx and Engels emphasize the fact that the inversion is not autonomous from the reality that is inverted. Again, from *The German Ideology*: “The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence” (47). Returning to Giambattista della Porta’s description of the *camera obscura* it is possible to understand Marx’s argument from the perspective of media studies. A common, if unfortunate reduction in media studies consists in the reification of the concept of media. From this standpoint, media are conceived as autonomous apparatuses. Whenever one thinks of media as *the television*, *the press*, or, more recently, *the Internet*, one is granting the power of autonomy to a process that can consequently—but mistakenly—be thought of as being separated from our own “life process.” One way to illustrate this mistake is to consider what it would mean to reduce the entire *camera obscura* system to the sin-

gle crystal glass described by della Porta. A lens alone, however, does not make for a *camera obscura*. It is the whole darkened room where one stands—along with the lens, the light, and the world—that is, in fact, producing an inverted image. Many different things, carefully arranged together, along with an observer and other subjects, actually account for what is named a *camera obscura*. The miniaturization of the *camera*—as we know it today—does not invalidate this argument. Like its primitive ancestor, the digital camera cannot function outside a delicate network of carefully arranged relations of various natures: technological, economic, social, political, and so on. To a large extent, we too, in our disparate plurality, belong to this same *milieu of relations*. We are, in fact, this very *milieu*.

To a certain extent, Louis Althusser may have been trying to convey a similar idea when he compared ideology to cement in an unsigned essay published at the end of 1966, which is attributed to him:

If, instead, we want to suggest the concrete form of existence of the ideological, it is better to compare it to a “cement” rather than to a floor of a building. The ideological seeps, in fact, into all the rooms of the building: in individuals’ relation to all their practices, to all of their objects, in their relations to science, to technology, to the arts, in their relations to economic practice and political practice, into their “personal” relations, etc. The ideological is what, in a society, distinguishes and cements, whether it be technical or class distinctions. (14–15)

With Marx and Althusser, two general ideas are expressed through spatial metaphors involving rooms and building. First, ideology is an inversion of our life-process, akin to the way the *camera obscura* works. From this perspective, the image produced inside the room imitates reality in a specific way: by presenting a copy that has been turned upside-down. Second, ideology—no more than the image itself if we understand it in an extended way—is not an autonomous thing, but the very *milieu* in which our lives are embedded. It seeps, as Althusser suggests, right into our personal relations.

These two ideas find a striking synthesis in Guy Debord's well-known work *Society of the Spectacle*. It was first published in France in 1967, a few months only after Althusser's essay "On the Cultural Revolution." Although Debord does not use the expression *camera obscura*, many key aspects of his essay seem to be informed by it. In thesis 2, Debord is quite explicit about the inversion: "The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the non-living" (7). This point is further developed in chapter 3, "Unity and Division Within Appearances," thesis 54: "The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided" (27). Furthermore, Debord makes it clear early in the book that what he calls "the spectacle" is not some Broadway show or Hollywood blockbuster: it is not an autonomous image standing out there all by itself, different in essence from our life, like an objectified product. On the contrary, it is us. In thesis 4, he states: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (7). Images, in this view, do not circulate among us. They are the space or the gap through which we relate while always remaining plural.

One way to better understand how the spectacle is not a single, individual thing or phenomena is to go back once more to the 1658 English translation of Giambattista della Porta's *Natural Magick*. In the same book where the description of the *camera obscura* can be found, there is a chapter titled "How Spectacles are made" (Chap. XXI). In the Latin original, it reads "*Specilla quomodo fiant*" (*Magiæ* 571). However, it has nothing to do with the display of some kind of entertaining performance. Instead, it is all about the fabrication of lenses. "Spectacle," especially in its plural form, used to designate an optical instrument, such as reading glasses. This meaning is now obsolete, and certainly does not apply, in the strict sense, to Debord's theory. Similarly, the *camera* in *camera obscura* cannot be reduced to a given room, as a mere architectural entity. The room—related to the German *Raum*—is the name of a spatial event: it is the process by

which images take place as a set of relations, and through which a given *milieu* emerges.

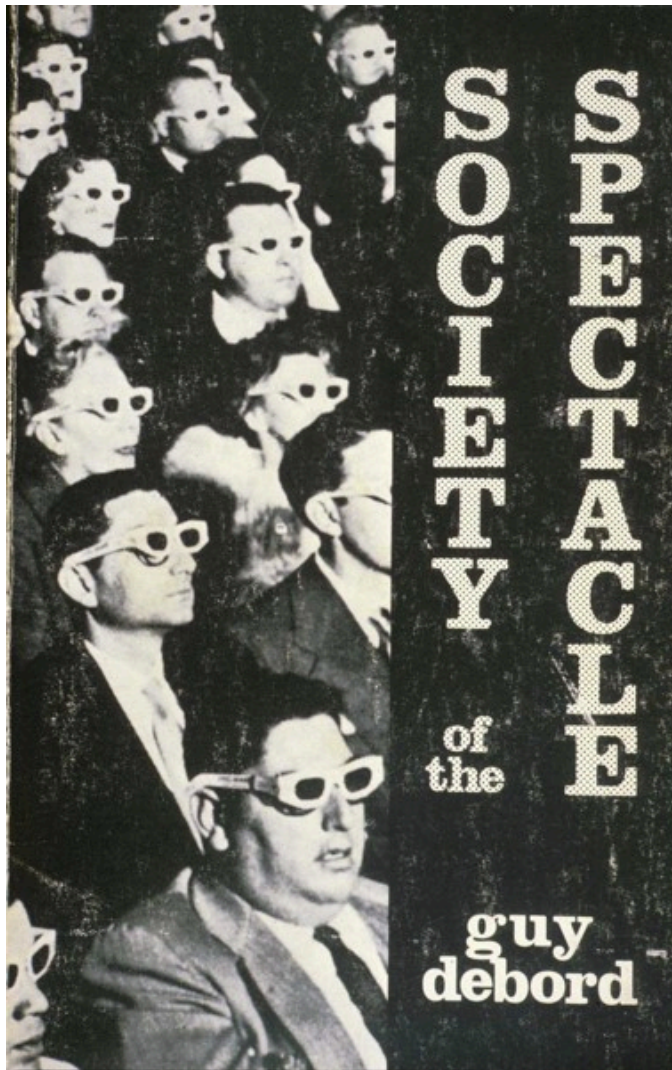


Figure 4

The cover of the 1983 English edition of *Society of the Spectacle* published by Black & Red shows an audience watching an early —although not the first—3D film with special glasses. Debord, however, never wrote a *Society of Spectacles*, in the plural, for he was not concerned with a mere thing (Figure 4). The problem named by the *Society of the Spectacle* is not reducible to the apparatus an audience would be using. His concerns instead were related to the current conditions of our coexistence, both as we relate to each other and as we relate to other things in the world. In thesis 8, he further explains:

One cannot abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided. The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society. (8–9)

It would be tempting to believe—as Debord may have very well himself believed—that the problem therefore has to do with the false reality we are living in and, consequently, that the solution lies with the unveiling of a true reality, beyond ideology and spectacle. Jean-Luc Nancy was perfectly aware of the dangers associated with such beliefs when he discusses the “conditions of critique” in regard to situationism in his book *Being Singular Plural*:

But this very intuition is interpreted only as the reign of appearance, as the substitution of the spectacle for authentic presence; appearance is understood, here, in the most classical way, namely, as “mere appearance” (surface, secondary exteriority, inessential shadow), and even as “false appearance” (semblance, deceptive imitation). In this respect, critique remains obedient to the most trenchant and “metaphysical” tradition of philosophy, “metaphysical” in the Nietzschean sense: the refusal to consider an order of “appearances,” pre-

ferring, instead, authentic reality (deep, living, originary—and always on the order of the Other). (55)

This is precisely the point where an understanding of imagination as translation provides some useful insights. Although Sarah Kofman makes no mention of Debord in her book *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*, she lays out the double inversion—an inversion of an inversion—that characterized this model (1–7). Indeed, before being the model for ideology—everything that is false—the *camera obscura* was first celebrated as a tool of great precision, capable of faithfully producing an almost exact image of the world. As a paradigm of truth and knowledge, it thus began its life as a positive model, before being turned on its head. It then started a second life as an exemplary model of the unreal and the unauthentic (see also Mitchell 160–208). In both cases, however, it remained faithful to the tradition identified by Nancy, which articulates the same and the other, the truth and the false, the real and the illusion in a relationship of opposition.

Here is not the place to fully develop on the ethical dangers associated with such a belief. It will suffice to suggest that the most tragic catastrophes of the past century have been the result of a longing for a more real existence, a more authentic life: a reliable origin. As Nancy has repeatedly argued, we need to explore other ways of dealing with the problem of our coexistence. For the issue at hand though, we will simply move forward to suggest a parallel between this issue and the way translation remains traditionally subordinated to what is being translated.

DISPLACEMENT: JOHN PECHAM

In *Perspectiva Communis*, a treaty on the science of optics written in the second half of the 13th century—three centuries before della Porta’s own treatise—John Pecham (alternative spelling Peckham) answered the question, “What is an image?” with the following words: “it is merely the appearance of an object outside its place [*rei extra locum suum*]” (171). The definition is offered in a section discussing the appearance of objects in mirrors as they are linked to er-

rors of judgment. Paul Feyerabend briefly alludes to this definition in a chapter of his book *Against Method* concerned with knowledge, scientific observations and illusions (89–90n17). Here, however, we are mainly concerned with two specific and complementary aspects of Pecham’s definition.

First, Pecham’s definition of what is an image involves a “place” or a location (*locum*). Second, as such it involves this place as a dis-placement or this *locum* a dis-location. In other words, it involves a translation at the very least in the sense of a spatial difference: a spacing, a shift, an offsetting. The image is not the object, but the translation of the object “outside its place”. While Pecham evokes the “true place” of the object in relation to which a “false place” could be asserted as a mere illusion, the image does not have its own place. The place of the image is not for the image to own properly. The image takes place as a transitive event, but never holds to a given place once and for all. It is not lost but found in translation, as translation. Its own site is always deferred somewhere else: it resides in permanent transit. Not unlike translation, its own self is always other.

THINKING AS IMAGINATION

Let us go back to the *camera obscura* and to Debord’s spectacle one last time. Because an image is not a discreet object, it is insufficient to think about it as a thing existing on its own, for us to look at and examine. The image does not appear in the *camera obscura*. Instead, the *camera obscura* makes visible the complex and intricate mediations that take place at a given moment and in a given context. The image as translation remains invisible, but it is the “primordial condition” that allows for contingent sets of relations to be perceived in the first place. For the *camera obscura*, that set of relations first was experienced as a model of truth, then as a model of an illusion. If instead of thinking about any given image, we allow ourselves to think with images, within the gaps of the relations from which stems the visible, it is not a finite object that becomes the center of our experience—identical to itself, one and the same—but the complex interplay of differences to which we relate, ourselves as others. In the process

the invisibility of translation is what becomes visible. This could be a way to begin understanding what Nancy had in mind when, in an essay titled “The Image—The Distinct,” he asserted: “The image is the obviousness of the invisible” (12).

George Didi-Huberman once suggested that imagination is not opposed to the real but manifests a “capacity for *realization*” (179). Insofar that imagination involves a process of translation, as the present essay argues, translation is subordinated neither to a common conception of language nor to an origin that would precede it. Instead, it realizes, it brings forth a reality which is not subordinated to a superseding ideal: otherness becomes real—and visible—to the extent that we can experience it, relate to it, and claim it as what we all share without owning it properly.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1. Frontispiece of Giambattista della Porta’s *Natural Magick*, London, Printed for T. Young and S. Speed, 1658. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

Figure 2. Description of a *camera obscura* in *Natural Magick* by Giambattista della Porta, London, Printed for T. Young and S. Speed, 1658, Book XVII, Chapter VI, p. 363.

Figure 3. One of the first drawings of a camera obscura in *De Radio Astronomica et Geometrica* by Rainer Gemma Frisius, first published in 1545, p. 39.

Figure 4. Cover design for the English edition of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, as of 1983 (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).

NOTES

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