



REVIEW OF BOOKS

Agamben: Ninfe

Reviewed by

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s if returning to the origins of a reflection that for over thirty years has acted as a powerful and innovative theoretical incentive first in Italian and them European critique, in *Ninfe* Giorgio Agamben presents an analysis of the eminently sexual content of the images and of the icons that reveal it, showing its pervasive range of cultural manifestations, from the physiological to the theological, through the aesthetic. If in his work of 1977 (*Estancias*. *Las palabras y el fantasma en la cultura ocidental*) the emphasis fell on the poetic imaginary, as the troubadours originally modelled it, and on the linking of desire with the feminine phantasm evoked by the poetic word, with *Ninfe* this philosopher casts light upon the mythical aspect of the phantasmatic image, which coincides with feminine beings represented as half-way between animals and men, and which awaken sexual desire thanks to the powers of seduction of their nature, somewhere between the material and the spiritual.

With his characteristic conceptual style (inheritor, more than any other, of the style of Walter Benjamin), systematically fluctuating between the aphorism and the essay, Agamben takes us on an action packed visit to the hermaneutic sanctuaries of the image, places of western culture (literary, philosophical, artistic) in which its ambiguous and problematic state emerges with dazzling conceptual evidence. The analysis passes through apparently unconnected places, which, on the other hand, the acuity of the critic shows as substantially coherent and pertinent in illustrating the theme in hand. The imperceptible movement of video-images on display in a museum, a renaissance treatise on dance, an essay by Aby Warburg on Durero, the illustrated memoirs of an old aged American obsessed by girls... and so on until the controversial relationship between sensitivity and intellect which had Aristotelic theologians and Averroist philosophers at loggerheads in the 13th century: each chapter surprises us with an unexpected, fascinating image of culture, thought or art, enigmatic in its initial formulation, and then

clarified in its meaning and its relationship with all of the others. Especially impressive is the relationship between the fixation of the image (to which the movement of the dancing body and the photograph tend along different paths) and the capture of time, dynamic energy that turns the image into the phantasm, that is to say the main asset of disturbance and fascination of the mind of the spectator. The comparison of the body fixed and sublimated in image with the victim of Medusa (the mythical infernal goddess who turned to stone those who looked at her), suggests an extraordinary chain of connections between the gazes of the lover, of the painter, of the photographer.

In order to find analogies or models of this peculiar way of thinking (which expands by successive intuitive fulgurations) we must resort to Benjamin's great essay on *German baroque drama*, in which the allegory is described as the new meaning the world receives after the collapse of its theologically ordered meaning. Under the allegorical sight of Agamben, occidental cultural history (at the present moment in history in which said history seems to disintegrate into unconnected fragments of foolish aesthetic experiences) acquires once again a unitary sense, an ideal justification, albeit in the conceptual snapshot of a dazzling critical intuition.