The Image in a Vat?

Michele Di Monte
Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Italy

Abstract   The relationship between frames and works of art, or more generally between frames and images, is a classic problem of aesthetics and art history, which has however become a hot topic today, since new digital technologies seem to promise completely frameless virtual and fictional worlds. Nonetheless, it is perhaps useful to frame the question of the frame, and of the thresholds of the images, with a colder look, taking into account the cognitive, phenomenological and ontological implications of their variable and multilayered relationships.

Keywords   Frame. Image. Art Ontology. Picture Thresholds. Fictional Worlds. Virtual Reality.

Summary   1. Trespassing the border. – 2. Unframed illusions. – 3. Thresholds and frames. – 4. Framing frame. – 5. Really virtual.

1   Trespassing the Border

On 8 February 1638, in Rome, a comedy by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Flooding of the Tiber*, was staged, probably in Barberini Palace. The pièce, which dealt with a topical theme (alas, not only at the time), became famous above all for the invention of spectacular effects of theatrical illusionism, devised by the versatile artist. Precisely for this reason, the best thing to do here is to give the floor to an eyewitness of the time, who attended the show and who describes the most dramatic and for us most interesting moment of the staging in these words:

> As the curtain rose, an enchanting scene appeared with a view of Rome showing very distant buildings and in particular the Church of St. Peter, Castel Sant'Angelo, and other buildings well known to those who live in Rome. Closer one could see the river Tiber, which with artful movements and with unusual invention seemed to swell, for Bernini wanted to show those effects that had unfortunately occurred the previous year when the Tiber threatened to flood the city. Closer still to the stage, where the actors were performing, there was real water, contained by certain barriers that had been intentionally built along the whole stage; and real men ferried other people from one side to another, as if the river, having occupied the lower sections of the city, had impeded the normal business, as exactly happened the previous year. While everyone was amazed by such a spectacle, some officers inspected the bank, arranging beams and reinforcements, so that the river would not submerge the city. But suddenly the embankment collapsed, and the water pouring onto the stage rushed furiously towards the audience. The spectators sitting closer to the stage, really fearing being swept away, jumped up to run away. But just as the water was about to fall on them, a shelter was suddenly raised at the edge of the stage, and the water dispersed without harming anyone.[1]

Here is what today would be called a truly 'immersive' experience, which moreover risked turning into a less 'virtual' and much more literal experience than the spectators themselves would have liked. Inclusive effects of this kind were not so rare in the art of the Baroque

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[1] The account is taken from a dispatch from the ambassador of the Duke of Modena in Rome, Massimiliano Montecuccoli, dated 13 February 1638, quoted in Fraschetti 1900, 263-4. A more concise and slightly different version can be read in the biography of Bernini written by his son, Domenico Bernini (2012, 133). For a commentary on the play and its historical context, see Fahrner, Kleb 1973, 6-8. On Bernini's theatrical work see also, more extensively, Tamburini 2012.

age, and indeed they were systematically pursued, not only in theatrical works, with the aim of stimulating the classic question in ever new ways: "what is image, what is reality?" – to quote the words of Rudolf Wittkower, who, commenting on Bernini's work, added that "the very borderline between the one and the other seems to be obliterated" (Wittkower 1958, 106).

As we know, the question is still fashionable, and many even think that today contemporary art and new technologies – we may even say modern *techne* – push us as never before to take the question very seriously. And yet, the case of Bernini's spectacle already raised a series of puzzling questions that touch on the relationship between images and reality, not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also from a psychological, or phenomenological, and ontological, or even metaphysical point of view. Needless to say, it is unlikely that Bernini's spectators, at the sight of the water overflowing from the stage, stopped to ask themselves: "is this an image?", especially if it were true that – as another version of the event relates – the beholders, "taking this simulation for a real flood, became so terrified that, believing an accident that which was in fact done artfully on purpose, rose in haste to escape; some climbed atop the benches in order to raise themselves above danger and in the general chaos trampled over everything between them" (Bernini 2012, 133). Nonetheless, the question remains relevant. And the answer is less obvious than it might seem.

In more analytical terms, on Bernini's stage there were two visual representations of the water of the river Tiber, one materially fake, made with paint, canvas, wood, or similar means, the other obtained with a body of real water present on the stage. However, both were visual representations. Even real water still represented the river Tiber, which therefore was present only by depiction, just as an ordinary man (even a professional boatman) could represent the fictional boatman in the world projected by Bernini's work. But what happens when the water overflows the banks and the scene? Does it lose its representational status and simply remain water, the real thing? Not really, although it may seem counterintuitive. Indeed, if it had been a real accident, not planned by the comedy script, the situation would have been different, the water that accidentally invades the room would then really be just water and nothing more. But the *coup de théâtre* contrived by Bernini was still within the fictional world of his comedy, and the water pouring onto the stage, despite its material identity, still possessed representational properties that it would not have had in the other case.

We could glimpse here a metaphysical identity problem somewhat similar to the much debated one of the so-called coincident or colocated objects, whereby one can ask, for a typical example, whether a statue and the lump of marble it is made of are a single object or

should be counted as two distinct objects.[2] But such a problem would lead us astray here. Rather, we must consider what role the frame plays in the 'immersive' effect devised by Bernini. And, again, from this point of view, the two cases we have compared have different implications. In the first counterfactual hypothesis of the truly unforeseen accident, the water, going beyond the edge of the conventionally recognized frame of the theatre, loses its representational and fictional status. Instead, in Bernini's most sophisticated staging, the river Tiber floods the stage, pretending to return to being simply yet menacingly water, but in fact extends the theatrical frame beyond the thresholds expected by the spectators. The frame, so to speak, 'swells' and 'overflows' like the (fictional) river, and in a certain sense it multiplies, because the *material* frame of the scene is trespassed thanks to a different and more dynamic *logical* (or phenomenological) frame, that, however unexpected, coincides with the implicit pact of fictionality that the artist establishes between the work and its beholders.

Derrida's well-known and oft-repeated questions, "where does the frame take place", "where does a parergon begin and end?" (Derrida 1987, 63, 57), are therefore less rhetorical than they might appear. But if the distinction between the work and its framing 'supplement' can be mobile or vague, this does not however mean that it must necessarily be arbitrary, as someone has suggested commenting on Derrida's text.[3]

2 Unframed Illusions

As we have seen in examining Bernini's *The Flooding of the Tiber*, the frame does not always behave according to the logic of the "milk cartons", as Gerald Mast shrewdly defined it (1984, 83),[4] and above all it is not always the material frame that sets the boundaries of the work, for sometimes the opposite happens. Certainly, Bernini's stagecraft can be considered an extreme case of hyperrealism and ingenious technology, at least for that time, but the illusionistic force of the work, even its ability to effectively cast doubt on the distinction between image and reality, between reality and fiction, does not

[2] On this subject see, among many others, Thomasson 2007, 73-86; Fine 2008, 101-18; Sutton 2012, 703-30.

[3] For example, according to Heikkilä 2021, 91.

[4] Dealing with cinema, Mast argued that "the cinema frame is nothing like the frame of a photograph, a painting, or the theater's proscenium arch. These other frames operate analogously to milk cartons: what is inside the frame of a painting is the painting and what is outside it is not" (1984, 83).

necessarily depend on complex technology, nor even on a high degree of accurate pictorial or mimetic realism.[5]

If it is true that the three alleged key features to produce virtual reality experiences are immersion, presence, and interactivity (Mütterlein 2018, 1407-15), it is equally true that very elementary means are often sufficient to induce an effective confusion between reality and fiction. The phenomenological indiscernibility, in cases of fiction, is affected in the first place by the subjective and environmental perceptual conditions, which can require even very 'economic' deceptive strategies.

The history of military tactics and techniques amply demonstrates this, just to consider a field very distant from the Artworld and the entertainment industry, but in which the actual indiscernibility of the illusory boundary between reality and fiction (or more precisely deception) often has far more truly dramatic consequences.[6] And we did not have to wait for the twentyfirst century to find it out. The story is old, and many cases are famous. During the Gallic Wars, for example, it was enough for Caesar to rearrange and split up his troops (*apertis quibusdam cohortibus*) to make his enemy Vercingetorix believe that his entire legions were leaving, while two of these had instead remained hidden in order to cross then safely the river Allier (see Edwards 1917, 428-9).

But the best known and best documented episodes are those that date back to the Second World War, during which entire virtual or rather 'phantom' armies were created. Just think of the famous *Operation Fortitude*, which was intended to *simulate*, in the eyes of the enemy, the presence and position of massive Allied troops destined to land in France at the Pas de Calais, and at the same time to *dissimulate* the real presence of the real invasion army preparing to land in Normandy (Levine 2011, 175, 187, 200-1).[7] The complex operation also involved the construction and deployment of many dummy ships, aircrafts, and armored vehicles, some quite accurate and credible, from a 'pictorial' point of view, others much more roughly made, but obviously equally effective in certain conditions [fig. 1]. Indeed, in some cases, an excess of representational accuracy can even prove self-defeating. According to an oft-quoted story, during the Second World War the Germans built a fake airfield in Holland, made almost entirely of wood. However, its construction was so laborious and

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[5] For a recent and well-informed critical assessment about the controversial relationships between these different dimensions, see Conte 2020.

[6] The bibliography on this topic is truly vast. For a historical and theoretical overview, Rothstein, Whaley 2013.

[7] It is perhaps interesting to add that some of the soldiers recruited to design and build these fake weapons later went on to became famous artists, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Arthur Singer. See Beyer, Sayles 2015, 13.
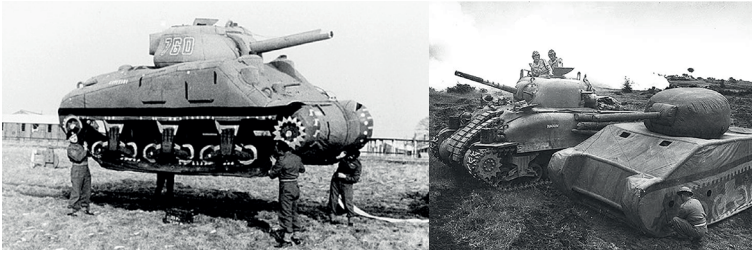
Fig. 1 Dummy tanks built during the Operation Fortitude, 1944

meticulous that British intelligence was able to observe it and keep it under control at all its phases. When the job was done, a RAF aircraft – so the story goes – attacked the fake airfield and dropped a single (dummy) wooden bomb on it.[8] Here is another somewhat ironic case of unexpected extension of fictional frames. Even Bernini would have applauded.

However, even the more peaceful everyday life presents several cases of uncertain distinction between reality and fiction, showing how the relationship between frame and images is not always so close and univocally determined. And there is no need to resort here to thought experiments such as those of the indiscernibles famously discussed by Arthur Danto.[9] Let us take the far more trivial case of dentures. Surely, they are an example of *trompe l'œil*, although, like other similar prosthetic interventions, they do not aspire to aesthetic merit, that is, to be finally discovered so that the skill and dexterity of their workmanship can be appreciated. Well-made dentures must remain undetectable and if possible indiscernible from the real thing. Equally surely their function is best performed also thanks to an adequate framing context. But whether they are in the mouth of their rightful owner or in the showcase of a Museum of Medical History, dentures are in any case (fictional) three-dimensional and visual representations of real teeth. Their ontological status as images remains the same even if we radically modify their usual functional frame and even if we deprive them of any frame.[10]

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8   There are doubts about the veracity of this story, which may be, ironically enough, a hoax (Shirer 1941, 575-6; Reit 1978, 60; O'Connor 2018, 219).

9   The *locus classicus* is the first chapter of Danto 1981.

10   Clearly – and I thank my anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point – if we put dentures in a museum showcase, we defunctionalize them, since dentures normally retain some of the original functions of the teeth they replace. But this holds true for all images, albeit to varying degrees. The picture of an animal can be used to correctly identify the species or usefully study its morphology, just as the maquette of an airplane can be used to test its aerodynamics. In general, each image instantiates

Fig. 2   Albrecht Dürer, *Crab*, 1495, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

But, if so, what about the opposite operation? What happens if I frame real teeth? The situation is a little more complicated, but it would be hasty and inappropriate to say that in this way, *eo ipso*, I obtain an image. The shark teeth I see in the display case of a Natural History Museum (if they are not a cast) are not a picture of the teeth, they are the real teeth of a real shark. The difference is clear. However, this does not mean that the frame has no possible effects. Within the museum setting, for example, the teeth of the fish can reveal, more clearly than in another context, a further representational value. That is, they can be *seen as* a specimen that exemplifies a whole anatomical or taxonomic typology or category. It should be added, however, that even images can have different potential representational values pointing in different directions. The crab painted by Dürer, for example **[fig. 2]**, in addition to representing a certain animal (both the single individual and the entire species), can equally

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some of the properties (including functional properties) of the object it is an image of. From this point of view images or pictures function as homeomorphic iconic models, according to the classification proposed by Rom Harré. An iconic model represents (is the model of) something, its 'subject', by instantiating a certain number of morphological and functional properties of the modeled object, its 'source'. For an excellent discussion on the different relationships between subject and source, homeomorphic and paramorphic models, see Harré 2004, 5-20. On the reproductive (*Abbildungsmerkmal*) and pragmatic (*pragmatisches Merkmal*) features of models see also Stachowiak 1973, 131-4, and, on their iconic nature, Boehm 2007, 114-40.

be seen, on the one hand, as an exemplification of the distinctive features of the author's artistic style, or even of the German Renaissance painting, but on the other hand it could represent the iconotype of a certain species as well. In this case the cognitive frame depends on the attentional focus that selects and makes different properties of the same object relevant for different purposes.

If all images are representations, not all representations are images, at least if we want to hold the conceptual distinction and not simply make them synonyms. We will have to return to this point, but before proceeding further, it is perhaps useful to underline the importance of the difference between the ontological and phenomenological dimensions when we speak of images. Seeing a blurry image clearly is a far cry from seeing a sharp image blurry, even if in some cases the two lived experiences could be indistinguishable.

3 Thresholds and Frames

To say that frames of the works can be mobile and that it is sometimes the content that marks the boundaries of the container and not the other way around, means questioning the relationships, but also the differences, between the thresholds of the image and the thresholds of the frame. Reflection on this topic has often been conditioned, even if only involuntarily, by the fact that easel painting is usually assumed as the paradigm or focal model of the image kind in general, to the point that image, or painting, and frame could even seem consubstantial.[11]

In order to limit this typical framing effect, we can consider objects made with different techniques, for example sculptures, which could hardly be anything other than images. But identifying the material frame of a sculpture appears less obvious. What would be the frame of a self-standing sculpture, like a monument or similar? One could perhaps say that the urban or architectural context is the spatial frame of the statue, but this can be said in general for any material object that is still located in some particular place within a certain spatial context. However, painting too has often not only concealed but also openly challenged the constraint of the frame. In the Venetian church of San Sebastiano, Paolo Veronese painted the martyrdom of the titular saint by dividing the scene between the two opposite walls of the nave, the archers on one side and the martyr on the other, so that to hit their target the arrows would have to cross the real space (or virtual space, with respect to the reality of the world

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[11]   For a recent discussion and a useful anthology on the theoretical and historical problems involved by the presence and functions of the frame, see Ferrari, Pinotti 2018.

of the image) of the entire width of the church. The phenomenological space of the spectator here becomes the place where the real and the virtual meet and overlap.

The problem of the boundaries of the image therefore also arises independently of the presence of the frame, and it is the images themselves that thematize it. Boundaries are notoriously a metaphysically thorny question, which always risks falling victim to the sorites paradox. As regards the genesis of images, the problem was already perfectly clear to Plato, in the famous question of Socrates (*Cratylus*, 432b-c), which highlighted its elusive processual dimension.

> Would there be two things, Cratylus and the image of Cratylus, if some god should not merely imitate your color and form, as painters do, but should also make all the inner parts like yours, should reproduce the same flexibility and warmth, should put into them motion, life, and intellect, such as exist in you, and in short, should place beside you a duplicate of all your qualities? Would there be in such an event Cratylus and an image of Cratylus, or two Cratyluses?

Hard as it is to draw a sharp line of demarcation, in the end another Cratylus, or his double, *is no longer* an image of Cratylus. It would therefore be counterintuitive to deny that images have thresholds or borders, especially physical borders. The case of easel paintings (like that of photographs, drawings, engravings, etc.) can certainly seem to be little problematic, because the boundary of the image usually coincides with the boundary of the material support on which the image supervenes, whether it is canvas, paper, wood, wall or other. But there are much more nuanced cases, even without resorting to Plato's paradox. Let us think of a fresco painting like, say, the one in the so-called *Room of the Giants* by Giulio Romano at the Palazzo Te in Mantua, or like the vault of the Sistine Chapel [fig. 3]. Apart from the frames, are they a single continuous image or should we count multiple images, if it even makes sense to try? And what about monumental sculptures such as the portrait of American presidents on Mount Rushmore, or the Crazy Horse Memorial on the Black Hills of South Dakota or the Ataturk monument in Smyrna? [fig. 4] If it is impossible to speak here of frames, it is also difficult to establish where exactly the image ends and the rock or mountain simply begins. Yet this difficulty does not prevent us from immediately and spontaneously seeing the carved faces *in* the stone, and what else could they be if not images?

Naturally, if an artist in a more economical mood, in order to save sweat, money, and explosives, had decided to make a hastier readymade of Mount Rushmore or Thunderhead Mountain, it would be even impossible to see or recognize it without the aid of some frame

or other indexical visual device. This reminds us of two things. First, that the so-called abstract or aniconic works are images only in a derivative sense, or *equivoce*; and secondly, that precisely these objects need frames, and not just material frames, if we want to recognize in them the performative capacity to somehow focus the problematic status of images, even if only to try to deny or question it. The painted wall of my room is also an abstract, aniconic, or non-representational work of painting, but it says absolutely nothing about representation or the relationship between reality and fiction. It is not sufficient that an object *is not* a representation or *is not* an image for it to intentionally deny images or representation.[12]

In reality, the concept of aniconic is logically dependent or parasitic on that of iconic (or of depiction), and it cannot be otherwise. Slightly oxymoronic expressions such as 'abstract image' always have an implicit thematic reference to 'traditional' mimetic pictures and pictorial images. Thus, in order to be able to say, as Pietro Conte recently wrote, that with modern abstract art "the medium ceases to function as a medium [...] thus emancipating itself from its century-old subservience to representation", we must understand and recognize the object in question at least as a former medium, so to speak, and thereby precisely that logical 'subservience' from which abstract art strives to free itself (Conte 2020, 18). An object which has not already begun to function as a medium, and which therefore obviously lacks specific representational properties, does not need to emancipate itself. A 'zero degree of representation' is, in itself, simply and generically a property of all non-representational objects, such as the wall in my room. All ordinary material objects are obviously opaque, so if abstract art wants to exhibit and thematize its own material opacity it must not get confused but, on the contrary, *distinguish* itself from real things, and therefore it needs evident rhetorical and deictic devices, to resume an argument proposed by Louis Marin (2001), i.e., those tangible frames which the image *qua* image can do without. An intentionally exhibited materiality is still a *representation* of pure materiality.

We may want to say that a completely red canvas by, for a classic example, Barnett Newman, or a *Dirt Painting* by Robert Rauschenberg, do not represent anything, and rather *present* themselves. But why could we not say the same for any object that presents itself by its mere presence, just as we admit that, by virtue of the so-called predicate entailment principle, necessarily if something *is-f* then it exemplifies *f-ity*? Thus, if we are to distinguish the allegedly more artistic and more telling "presentation" of Newman's paintings we must materially and logically tell them apart from other ordinary

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12 On self-negating images, see Pinotti 2017; 2020.

Figure 3   Giulio Romano, Sala dei Giganti, 1531-36, Palazzo Te, Mantova

Figure 4   Crazy Horse Memorial, under construction since 1948, Black Hills, South Dakota

objects, first by the walls on which they hang. And if we do not like overly decorative traditional frames, the wooden stretcher is enough. In other words, we need to frame that kind of specific presentation as a "count-generated action," i.e., the action of using part of the painting to stand for or at least to "say" or "revealing" something, even "nothingness".[13] But this does not mark the crisis, let alone the end, of the representational paradigm, on the contrary, it is its hyperbolic revenge: the unrepresentable can only be grasped inasmuch as it is the object of representation (or of something that stands for representation).[14]

4 Framing Frame

It is clear, at this point, that we must speak of frames in the plural, because it is a polyvocal concept, which often lends itself to metaphorical use, and despite the conceptual affinities, the frame as a physical object is something very different from the frame as a cognitive perspective, a scheme of relevance or focusing pattern, as understood for example according to the point of view of the Frame Analysis developed by Erving Goffman (1974). Even images can have multiple frames at the same time. Indeed, we should say, for greater precision, that even works of art or images that are not physically framed produce virtual frames, which regulate our access to the fictional world, or to the make-believing game prompted by the work itself. It is that feature that Eugen Fink has called, in the wake of Husserl's phenomenology, *Fensterhaftigkeit*, a window-like feature (Fink 1930, 308). But such windows can open onto different fictional worlds, and even then it is not always immediately obvious where to locate the representational content properly framed by the image.

Consider for example the famous painted diptych by Van Eyck in the Thyssen Museum in Madrid **[fig. 5]**. The work brings into play an interaction between different frames of different order.[15] But what does it represent? Obviously, the scene of the *Annunciation*, however, not the world in which that event presumably took place, nor

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13   On count-generated actions and representation, see Wolterstorff (1980, 262-3).

14   Such a framing operation is even more necessary when we speak, if only metaphorically, of (abstract) contents, messages, subjects, or meanings, which always imply relational properties. Otherwise, it is trivially obvious that we do not need art (nor modern abstract art) to discover that "something could not be said in painting," as Barnett Newman himself once stated (Newman 1992, 275). Perhaps we should bear in mind that a sentence like the famous one by Henri Focillon, according to which "form signifies only itself" (Focillon 1942, 3) is after all, *proprie loquendo*, a logical nonsense.
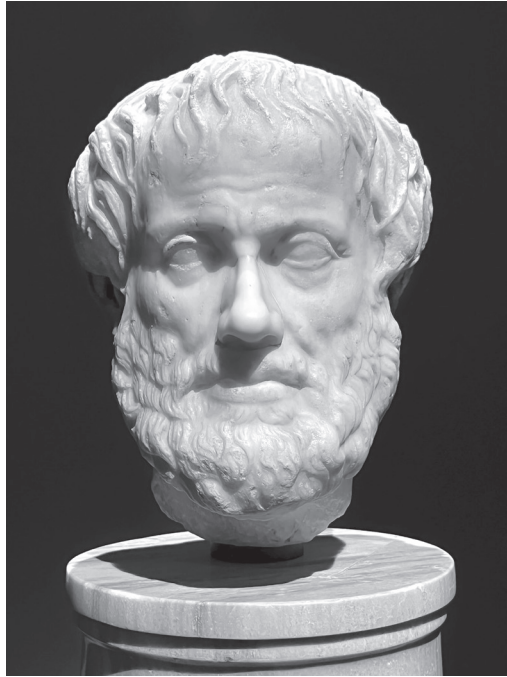
15   On the painting, see Preimesberger 1991. On the problem of the 'double vision' stimulated by the work, see also Belting 2013.

a symbolic place, as the Gothic church depicted in the other *Annunciation* by Van Eyck himself, now housed in the National Gallery of Washington. What we see in the window of the work is a virtual version of our actual world, in which we are faced, *hic et nunc*, by two sculpted statues in front of stone frames, yet representing, from within their virtual world, the world (virtual to the second degree) of the story of the Annunciation. The image is then built on a combination of different nested frames.

But the framing game can also be more puzzling. Let us take another example, the portrait of Aristotle in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna **[fig. 6]**. The sculpture is probably a copy of a Greek original by Lysippus, but in any case, it seems obvious to us to say that this is a portrait, a picture, of Aristotle. However, it would not be so implausible to suppose that the author of the work had in mind to represent not directly the head of Aristotle, but only the famous original model, the sculpture by Lysippus. In other words, we could imagine something like the use-mention distinction well known in analytic philosophy. Although the two hypotheses would be different from a philological and representational point of view, they would nevertheless coincide from a phenomenological perspective. For even if the artist intended only to faithfully copying a particular material object *qua* object (not *qua* image), in doing so he necessarily would

represent altogether the portrait, so making of the simple copy an image, the same image instantiated by the original sculpture. After all, the same image can have in principle a lot of different representational objects nested into one another, because the sameness is here warranted by a kind of transparency to content (and to nesting relations).

Such a situation is more common than our improbable experiment might suggest. A photographic scan of a book page is certainly an image, but it is also a copy or a recording – in the sense that John Haugeland gave the word (1991, 67-70) – of a text. In our most common usage, we usually prefer to bracket the image stratum to see and use the object as text. Even transparent frames do their job.

5 Really Virtual

It is often repeated that the advent of digital technologies, and the availability of increasingly immersive and increasingly frameless images, has led or will lead in the near future to a more or less complete confusion or indistinguishability between real and virtual, between reality and images. Daniel O'Shiel recently wrote, for example, that there is the "technological possibility or even probability, where holograms and a pervasive pure MR system could reach a level of

technological acuity that makes even foundational distinctions [...] – like perception and image, real and irreal, present and absent – all rather obsolete non-starters" (O'Shiel 2022, 210-11).

Here again, transparency plays a critical role, from an ontological point of view. Some time ago, Shimon Edelman, reviewing a book by Alva Noë, took up the well-known brain-in-the-vat experiment devised and elaborated by Daniel Dennett and Hilary Putnam. The entire passage is worth quoting here.

> [...] The dependence of the functioning of the mind on being in the world – Edelman wrote – can be qualified in an important sense: once my mind, perceptual systems and all, is fully formed – say, so as to become functionally equivalent to that of an average adult – the world can be safely detached (at least temporarily), without destroying the mind. If during such disconnection from the real world my optic nerve is artificially stimulated in a manner isomorphic to the spatiotemporal pattern of activity that would have been induced in it by a great white shark swimming in a deep blue sea, then by Zarquon I'll see a shark. Moreover, my perception of the shark will be none the less 'genuine' for being artificially induced than if I were to see the shark on my HDTV set, vegging out in front of which is a convenient homegrown substitute for a brain-in-a-vat experience. (Edelman 2006, 184)[16]

Today, as we know, there are much more immersive systems than an HDTV set to 'dive' into a deep blue sea and see a shark, but the specifically substitutional or vicarious function of these experiences still depends on some other reality out there from which the experiences themselves are (temporarily) 'safely detached'. Of course, if besides the brain (and perhaps the vat) there were nothing but electrochemical stimuli it would make no sense to say that reality is *just a virtual* image, because there would only and simply be that reality.[17]

After all, Plato was right. Even if we managed to have such a perfect technology as the one provocatively evoked by Socrates, to the point of being able to completely replicate every aspect of reality, we would not have transformed the world into images, we would have driven images out of the world.

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16   The book reviewed is Noë 2004.

17   For a recent discussion on the philosophical options about the 'reality' of virtual reality see Chalmers 2022, in part. chapter 10, which compares what Chalmers calls 'virtual fictionalism' and 'virtual digitalism'.

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