In My End is My Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

edited by
Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli,
Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

In my End is my Beginning

Quaderni di *Venezia Arti*

Serie diretta da
Matteo Bertelé, Angelo Maria Monaco, Simone Piazza

8

Quaderni di *Venezia Arti*

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

edited by
Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli, Andrea Golfetto,
Maria Novella Tavano

In my End is my Beginning. Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
edited by Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli, Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

edited by Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli, Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

Abstract

The volume comprises a selection of papers presented at the 6th Postgraduate International Conference organized by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Venice, 9-11 October 2024): *In my End is my Beginning. Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis*.
Both in the past and the present, humanity has been witnessing the collapse of its own identity, sociopolitical system and cultural order, as well as their restoration. In this imbalance, Ernesto De Martino acknowledges the roots of crisis, elaborating how the end of the world represents the culmination of the issue of existence, caught between the risk of downfall and the quest for redemption. At that moment, an apocalypse happens to reveal when a specific order needs to be replaced by new symbolic formations that correspond to the changed *Zeitgeist*. The vitality of an apocalyptic thinking, which continually transforms and produces new images of the crisis, leads us to consider a dimension in which the clash between the past and the future creates a generative power. In this liminal space between different meanings of 'crisis' and their translation into images, it is fundamental to consider what Walter Benjamin conceptualized as a dialectical image, a fragment wherein "what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (*Arcades Project*, 1999, 462).
The 6th Postgraduate International Conference was aimed at investigating the liminal space between different meanings of 'crisis' and 'apocalypse', discovering how, through multiple processes of translation into images, these notions reveal new, unexpected beginnings. This volume therefore investigates the image as a representation of this dialectical moment.

Keywords Apocalypse. Crisis. Dialectical Image. End. Beginning.

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

edited by Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli, Andrea Golfetto, Maria Novella Tavano

Table of Contents

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

Introductory Remarks

On October 9th, 2024, I had the privilege of inaugurating the 6th Post-graduate International Conference, an initiative fostered by the Ph.D. program in History of Arts at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. As new coordinator of the doctoral program, I shared this honor with Prof. Giovanni Fara, Director of the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, here representing the administrative headquarters of the Ph.D. program which co-finances this initiative.

For the sixth consecutive year, this time in the magnificent setting of Aula Mario Baratto – the lecture hall overlooking the Grand Canal from Ca' Foscari –, a willing group of our Ph.D. students organized a three-day conference on the history of arts. This year's organizing committee, consisting of Asia Benedetti, Angelica Bertoli, Andrea Golfetto, and Maria Novella Tavano, curated autonomously and with remarkable commitment a scientifically rigorous and successful event.

The conference stood out for its high academic standards, thanks to the excellent program organization, the depth and breadth of the selected presentations, and the extensive chronological span of the topics addressed – ranging from the Middle Ages to the present day. Furthermore, the diversity of interpretative approaches and the variety of national and international academic affiliations of the participating Ph.D. students demonstrate the interest in creating an opportunity for an interdisciplinary dialogue of wide scholarly reach.

The thematic choice, as reflected in the title drawn from T.S. Eliot's evocative verse "In my End is my Beginning" (1940), along with the subtitle, "Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis", also proves particularly relevant. Effectively, it conveys an overarching message of optimism, which revolves around the concepts of death and rebirth, end and new beginning. Even the term 'crisis' itself contains a positive connotation, as it preludes a turning point: not coincidentally, the Greek noun it derives from (κρίσις) means 'choice', 'discernment', 'judgment'.

To keep up with the conference tradition, the organizing committee has overseen the publication of the conference proceedings in a dedicated volume of "Quaderni di *Venezia Arti*", published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari. The open-access feature of the series ensures the immediate and global circulation of the volume, as was the case with the proceedings from the previous five editions. Therefore, I wish to all the authors a favorable dissemination of their scientific findings, and to all those interested in the topics discussed an engaging and stimulating read.

Congratulations to the organizers for successfully achieving this significant and impactful goal, and to all the participating Ph.D. students, who contributed with original and insightful papers to this initiative.

<div align="right">

Prof. Simone Piazza
Coordinator of the Ph.D. Program in History of Arts,
Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage,
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

</div>

Through Language: On Form and Meaning

Painting in Vernacular
Languages at the Crossroads in Sixteenth-Century Venice

Andrea Golfetto
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   Identifying the *questione della lingua* as a moment of rupture for the cultural scenario of sixteenth-century Italy, the paper addresses Aretino's reaction to the anachronistic ideas of Pietro Bembo, which urge the author to promote a language derived from the experience of nature, in contrast with tradition. In such context, the Tuscan writer finds in Titian's style his pictorial counterpart. An analysis of the principles that characterize the naturalistic poetics adopted by both painter and poet leads to a mutual comparison of Aretino's *Humanità di Christo* and Titian's depiction of Magdalen, where words and brushstrokes tend towards each other.

Keywords   Aretino. Titian. Nature. Language. Style.

Summary   1 Ephemera. – 2 Language Against Tradition. – 3 Art as *Habitus*. – 4 Perpetua.

Sólo hay originalidad verdadera cuando se está dentro
de una tradición. Todo lo que no es tradición es plagio.
(Eugenio d'Ors, *La Veu de Catalunya*,
31 October 1911)

1   Ephemera

In the collections of graphic works of the Albertina Museum in Vienna
lies a nearly unexplored document, a voice in the wilderness: a broad-
sheet (a single sheet printed on one side only) measuring 29.9 × 22
cm, commonly referred to as an *in quarto*, dating back to the sec-
ond quarter of the sixteenth century.[1] The sheet features a woodcut
in the upper half, followed by three distinct poetic compositions be-
low, organized in separate columns [fig. 1]. Each section is given equal
space, with no visual hierarchy imposed: image and text coexist, en-
gage in dialogue, yet do not translate one another; they are not ek-
phrastic in nature.

The woodcut depicts a shepherd seated, leaning against a felled
tree trunk, as he recites verses addressed to a winged mermaid
floating among the clouds, surrounded by a crown of stars. Executed
using the chiaroscuro technique with two blocks, it serves as the
frontispiece for the *Stanze in lode di Madonna Angela Serena* by
Pietro Aretino, a collection of verses celebrating the poetess Angela
Tornimbena, published in Venice in 1537 by Francesco Marcolini.[2]
Although the identity of the engraver remains uncertain, likely drawn
from Aretino's circle or found possibly in the publisher himself, the
invention of the design is now confidently attributed to Titian.[3] The
painter is believed to have produced the final drawing, faithfully re-
flecting the fifth *stanza* of Aretino's poem.[4]

---

[1]   This refers to the document cataloged under the inventory number DG2002/544.
For the catalogue entry, see Bartsch 1811, 144.

[2]   Aretino dedicates his verses to an oxymoronic 'angelic mermaid', imbuing her with
a religious devotion that overcomes the seductive nature typically associated with the
mermaid (cf. Luchs 2010). In doing so, he plays on the wordplay created by the poet-
ess's name, Angela Serena. For the genesis of the work and its publication history, see
Waddington 2018, 10-12.

[3]   Although well-known and thoroughly analyzed, the frontispiece has only partial-
ly been connected to the woodcut production derived from the drawings of Titian and
to the broader context of the illustrated Venetian book: Muraro, Rosand 1976, 118: 43;
Takahatake 2018, 191-3: 78; Bisceglia, Ceriana, Procaccioli 2019, 150-1: 3.18. For the
only survey of the broadsheet here discussed, see Urbini 2020.

[4]   "Il Thoscano Pastor [...] sopra un tronco assiso | Gli occhi al ciel volti, e la sua Dea
il pensiero | Così a dir move in suon piano, et altero" (The Tuscan Shepherd [...] upon a
trunk reclined | His eyes to heaven raised, his thoughts on his fair Goddess | Thus he
begins to speak in voice both soft, and proud; Aquilecchia, Romano 1992, 226; Author's
transl.).

IL BEVAZZANO AL ARETINO.	M. PIETRO ARETINO ALLA SIRENA.	IL BEVAZZANO AL ARETINO.
F uor del uago orto de l'ingegno uoſtro	Q ueſta del ciel SIRENA ha ne' bei chrini	A retin mio ; mentre a la caſta , & bella
Opre ueggiamo uſcir ricche de l'arte ,	I raggi , che i capei fan biondi al Sole :	Sirena ordite de la gloria il manto ,
Chiare da i lumi e da le gratie ſparte	Ne gli occhi ha il foco , del qual ardor ſole	Et celebrate quel , ch'è in lei ; ch'è quai
Da pareggiarui à quei del ſommo chioſtro .	Il puro zelo a li ſpirti diuini .	Non diede altrui mai largità di ſtella
H or de le muſe col piu uiuo inchioſtro	H a ne le guancie i uiui color fini ;	D e le uirtù del dir fatta una ſchiera
De la caſta Sirena pinto in carte	Ch'accendono le roſe et le uiole :	Conforme al bel deſir , che u'arde ; tan
Le marauiglie hauete , è poſte in parte	Ha l'angelico ſuon ne le parole ;	Inſieme col ſubietto alzate il canto
Doue ir non ſa chi ueſte il mortal noſtro .	Che parton fra le perle e fra i rubini .	Che giunge al ſommo ciel di ſpera inſpe
D al gran romor di queſte lode eſtreme ,	H a nel pio lampeggiar del Santo riſo ,	I ndi moſtrate quanti freggi & fiumi
Di cantando a uoi farſi hoggi uicino	Et nel fiſar del guardo quel diletto ;	Habbi la lingua piu elegante , & pura
Si uergogni il deſir , manca la ſpeme .	Che ſi proua laſſiſo in Paradiſo .	Donde le piante al uolo il cor s'impiun
G ia qual fuſſe nel dir Pietro Aretino	L e tempre ha del deſio nel caſto petto ;	Q uanti ha fior la poetica pittura
Quindi ſcorgerà il mondo ; e ſaprà inſieme	Di Natura i miracoli nel uſo :	Fate uedere ; & quanto d'ombre & l
Quanto appreſſar ſi ſò l'huomo al diuino :	Et cio , ch'è di gentil , ne l'intelletto .	Vn'ingegno arricchir puo la Natura

Figure 1 Pietro Aretino and the Mermaid, with text. Ca. 1540. Print with chiaroscuro woodcut in two blocks, 29.9 × 22 cm. Vienna, Albertina Museum

In this instance, however, the image is detached from its original book context and printed separately to be paired with three independent sonnets. In their arrangement, the first and third compositions are signed by Agostino Beaziano, a poet from Treviso, and are dedicated to honoring the author of the central sonnet, who is none other than Aretino himself. Although the origin of Beaziano's

compositions remains undocumented, the Tuscan's sonnet can be traced to the final pages of the *Stanze*, where it is likewise dedicated to his 'Sirena'.[5]

As of today, the sheet has primarily been examined for its engraving, rather than for its ephemeral nature, perhaps considered too fleeting to be fully explored. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to situate it within the publishing tradition that Salzberg (2014, 19-20) defined as "cheap print" – a category of ephemeral material characteristic of sixteenth-century Venice, which allowed news and texts to circulate more quickly and widely than ever before. Closely tied to quotidian events and shared experiences, cheap print was often read aloud or performed in some way (98-9), but it also played a key role in the widespread distribution of printed images. As a rapid and responsive medium, it could be used to quickly disseminate information to the public, spread ideas, and advertise new book releases. In other words, it was highly accessible, serving as a crucial threshold into the world of print for everyone, while also holding the potential to be a powerful tool for mass communication.[6]

As Murano and Rosand (1976, 195) suggest, the Vienna sheet should be treated as a "broadside". However, the piece does not align with any known category of popular print production in sixteenth-century Venice.[7] Given the ephemeral nature of such publications, the surviving examples are too scarce to fully contextualize their distribution and fruition. This might explain why Achim Gnann (2013, 272-3), when discussing the document in the Viennese museum, made no mention of this cultural legacy, nor did those who followed or preceded him.

While one might consider pursuing certain research paths, the specific interest raised here by the Albertina sheet relates primarily to

---

5 It is possible to partially reconstruct Aretino's attempt to obtain, through his collaborator Lodovico Dolce, a sonnet from Pietro Bembo in praise of the *Stanze* (Procaccioli 2015, 47-2). We also know that Aretino received several sonnets for the same occasion from Benedetto Varchi, Francesco Maria Molza, and Giulio Camillo, which were although never published (Procaccioli 2003, 293: 304). Eventually, the only sonnet paired with the one from Aretino would be that of Veronica Gambara, Countess of Correggio (Aquilecchia, Romano 1992, 246).

6 Grendler (1993, 476-8) has proposed that some of these characteristics also indicated that a work was popular in a broader cultural context, meaning it was easily accessible to a wide audience, including those with a low level of education, or "intended for a non-critical audience which read for pleasure".

7 I am primarily referring to the classifications outlined in the title of Corongiu (1999), further elaborated in Rozzo 2008, 29. Regarding broadsheets, the most frequent cases involve the publication of notices, almanacs, and *pronostici* (many of which were authored by Aretino himself), as well as woodcuts with brief commentaries related to significant events.

its visual layout.[8] Considering its context of origin, the distribution of image and text on the page not only establishes a synchronic relationship between the two media but also identifies this synchronicity as a means for widespread cultural diffusion. As Gombrich (1967, 136-41) noted, later echoed by Bredekamp (2015, 39) in his theorization of the Image Act, although ephemeral literature is intended for a transient use, the display of images along with words prompts an intuitive pause, making the reader linger on the textual surface longer than expected. Indeed, the visual medium allows to engage more thoughtfully with the object, fostering an awareness that every image extends beyond its mere representation. Since Titian's invention of the shepherd does not visually describe the accompanying sonnet by Aretino, it instead suggests to the observer an echo beyond itself, referencing the book it aims to promote. The text, in turn, complements the role of the image, hinting the reader at the content of the publication by means of the evocative power of poetry. Through this compelling dialectic, the woodcut and the sonnet establish a relationship of domesticity, where observer and reader become deeply intertwined.

The Vienna broadside is an exemplary symptom of a tradition that was increasingly examined throughout the sixteenth century, especially in Venice. This exploration extended beyond the fields of publishing and visual arts to encompass the broader notion of 'language' as a mode of expression: that is the unity of purpose between words and images.

2 Language Against Tradition

In this scenario, the role played by both Aretino and Titian stands emblematic.[9]

In a letter of December 18, 1537, dedicating the sixty *stanze* of his poem to empress Isabella of Portugal, the Tuscan poet effectively points out a chiasmatic proportion:

---

8 As for circulation, documents produced for personal or private interests were not typically subject to the regulations of the commercial publishing market, except for what regards the publisher's mandatory license, which in 1543 was extended by the Council of Ten to include "Quelle veramente che vendeno de tal libri et opere pronostici, hystorie, canzone, lettere, et altre simel cose sul Ponte de Rialto et in altri loci de questa cità" (Those who sell such booksand works, prognostications, stories, songs, letters, and other similar things on the bridge of the Rialto, and in other places of this city; ASV, CX, Parte comuni, f. 32, fasc. 234). However, regarding more 'literary' texts, it is likely that in most cases, the entire print run was handled by the patron and intended as material to distribute among friends and acquaintances (Rozzo 2008, 24). In the case of the Viennese example, it could be a broadsheet commissioned by Aretino and Marcolini themselves, who likely requested Beaziano's laudatory sonnets for the publication of the *Stanze*.

9 On the topic of the mutual friendship between the two, and their relation to each other's work, see especially Waddington 2019

Tiziano, nobile Isabella (amato dal mondo per la vita che dona lo stil suo a l'imagini de le genti; e odiato da la natura perché egli fa vergognare i sensi vivi con gli spiriti artificiosi), infiammato dal desiderio di mostrare per virtù de le sue mani Cesare istesso a Cesare proprio, fece sì [...] che Carlo consentí che rassemplasse la fatale effigie sua. [...] Onde io, bramoso che il nome vostro diventi simulacro de le carte mie, mosso dal giudicio del saggio pittore, tento, [...] tal che gli inchiostri, e le penne da me apparecchiate per fare statua del candido nome de la vostra inclita Maestade, si assicurino a cominciare di intagliarla.

Titian, noble Isabella (beloved by the world for the life that his style breathes into his painted depictions; and despised by nature, for he makes living senses blush before his crafted spirits), inflamed with the desire to show, by the power of his hands, Caesar to Caesar himself, moved such that [...] Charles consented that he might render his own fateful effigy. [...] Thus I, eager for your name to become the emblem of my writings, driven by the judgment of the wise painter, attempt [...] so that the inks and pens, prepared by me to sculpt the pure name of your renowned Majesty, assure their beginning in engraving it. (Procaccioli 1997, 423-4: 307; Author's transl.)

Just like Titian portrays the figure of Charles V in painting, Aretino aims to ensure that by sending the empress a sample of his own poetic work, he may begin to sculpt her virtues in verses. While this is mainly a rhetorical move designed to forge a strong connection with the emperor,[10] it is crucial to observe how the poet constructs this parallel. Referring to Titian, who appears to have encouraged sending the *Stanze*, Aretino reflects on the painter's language: nature, in fact, resists him out of jealousy, given how he manages to render figures vibrant and alive through mere brushstrokes. In the painter's effort, the poet identifies his own intentions and draws a comparison between Titian's objective and his own, seeking to follow his footsteps in the attempt to vividly represent human nature – only this time, through words.

Throughout Aretino's epistolary, the poet frequently engages with Titian's artistic language, clearly identifying the pictorial counterpart to his own poetic ambition. By drawing this connection, he establishes a fundamental parallel between painting and literature, both of which are dedicated to the vivid representation of nature.

Similarly, though less often, Titian also refers to his own artistic creations in literary terms: in a letter to his patron, Philip of Spain,

---

10　Regarding the strategy Aretino developed toward a more secure relationship with the imperial court, see Checa 2019.

probably of September 10, 1554, Titian referred to a series of paintings with mythological subject that he was painting for the young Habsburg prince and future king (Puppi 2012, 213: 177). Here the artist sounds confident in his decisions on what to portray: he is not seeking approval, but rather informing his patron with the choices he has made regarding the pictorial narration.[11] When addressing the paintings, Titian calls them *poesie*. In his use of such term, instead of *istorie*, or *quadri* or *pitture*, can be traced a sense of creative authority. Although the most immediate answer to what the term *poesia* meant is that the subject of these works relied on poetry, another answer may arise. In calling his pictures *poesie*, Titian may be claiming that his paintings share certain qualities and effects with the poems they are based on, that they make stylistically visible the poetic nature of the particular text, or of poetry in general (Puttfarken 2005, 10). This comparison with poetry implies that, rather than looking for scholarly knowledge or the painter's erudition expressing itself through intellectually charged themes, one should instead focus on the inherent poetic nature of the art of painting. Therefore, if Titian set for the painter the same rank as that of a poet, both relying on different media to pursue the same purpose with the same language, Aretino did so conversely.

This will not be the occasion for an in-depth analysis of the ontological relationship between the arts and literature.[12] Rather, the aim is to identify the practical outcome of a theoretical approach deeply rooted in sixteenth-century Italy, as exemplified by the relationship between Titian and Aretino. What makes this comparison particularly significant is that the interplay between the poet's language and the painter's style takes shape during a pivotal historical moment, when the various Italian regions were undergoing a crucial transition in defining their cultural identity.

The so-called *questione della lingua* – a broad debate over the normative standards of the Italian language – engaged court humanists and intellectuals for centuries, spanning from the time of Dante to

---

11   This is not the only instance in which such term is used by Titian in reference to painting: *poesie* seems to appear for the first time in a letter to Philip of March 23, 1553 (Puppi 2012, 200-1: 165).

12   The theory of the equation between poetry and painting is also grounded in the supremacy of the sense of sight: both poets and painters think through images, with one expressing them through poetry and the other through painting. Thus, the idea that painting, sculpture, and poetry share a common origin – namely, the thought expressed through imagery – is a concept that unites a whole humanistic tradition, from Simonides of Ceos (who is credited with the first comparison between poetry and painting) to Aristotle, from Horace's *ut pictura poësis* to Giordano Bruno's *Sigillus sigillorum*. For further insights, see especially Yates 1984, 234-7.

the unification of Italy.[13] In its initial phase, the discussion primarily focused on legitimizing the vernacular in contrast to Latin. But it is during the second phase, which occurred in the early Cinquecento, that the discussion on which regional dialect should form the basis of a unified Italian language took place. Although this phase was marked by intense disputes and personal conflicts, most participants reached a consensus on one key issue: the Italian language should be rooted in the finest literary models (Ruffini 2011, 137).

The most representative voice of early modern thought on language and literature is found along the *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) by the venetian Pietro Bembo, the most influential treatise on the matter. In its early stages, this debate centered on Bembo's proposal that poetry and prose should be written in a Tuscan language modeled on Petrarch and Boccaccio.[14] Bembo's critical stance on the use of literary Tuscan prevented Venetians from proposing their own dialect as a valid alternative for literary production. Being a folk language, the Venetian dialect lacked the prestige to be considered a national language due to its absence in a distinguished literary tradition. Thus, it could not contribute to shaping the language Bembo sought to establish (Hochmann 2004, 35). However, Bembo's position, considered by many to be conservative, faced one of its main opponents in Venice itself, and nonetheless, in a Tuscan poet: Pietro Aretino precisely.

Although Aretino's relationship with Bembo has been often inspected, his role as an 'antipedantic' has received little recognition in the broader study of the history of the Italian language, aside from specialized research on the poet himself.[15] Opposed both to the courtly ideas (Golfetto 2023, 88-9) and to the approach promoted by

---

13   The discussion covers a long timespan, but regarding the sixteenth century see at least: Vitale 1960, 22-63; Migliorini 1994, 309-28; Trovato 1994.

14   Its main alternative was courtly or common language, that is the adoption of the finest dialects spoken in the courts across the Italian peninsula. Advocates of this alliance, popular in Urbino, Mantova, and Rome, challenged the primacy of Tuscan but agreed with Bembo on the need for a literary foundation for the language. Only a substantial minority stood against this ideal and it was championed by a group of Florentine intellectuals: their perspective shifted the terms of the debate by asserting that language evolves naturally, independent of its literary formulations: they argued that a literary masterpiece was not inherently the best model to address from the perspective of the language. Using Vincenzio Borghini's metaphor, they likened the relationship between literature and language to that of fruit and a tree: literature is a product of language, not the source of its growth ("Una lingua parlata senza scrittori non si può definire lingua"; A spoken language without writers cannot be called a language; Author's transl.), in stark contrast to Bembo's statement (Migliorini 1994, 210). On the ideas of the Florentine writers (namely Pierfrancesco Giambullari, Carlo Lenzoni, Cosimo Bartoli, and Vincenzio Borghini, also editors of Vasari's *Lives*), see Ruffini 2011, 137-60.

15   On the relationship between Bembo and Aretino, see Weinapple 1995; Procaccioli 2002. On Aretino's own literary direction, Borsellino 1995; Cottino-Jones 1995.

Bembo and his supporters, Aretino articulates on these matters in a programmatic letter of June 25, 1537 written to Lodovico Dolce, in which he discusses his naturalistic poetics.[16]

The tone of the letter is driven by a sharp critique of the slavish literary use of outdated terminology, which writers feel entitled to employ solely because it revives the language of great poets.[17] This rigid reliance on the forms and stylistic features of a bygone tradition only serves to make poetic texts seem archaic, distancing them from the contemporary reality in which they are situated. According to Aretino, few poets still use language that truly reflects their own time and everyday life. He urges poets not to imitate the obsolete works of ancient poets in an attempt to elevate their own; instead, they should draw inspiration from nature, capturing its vitality in words without clinging to any reference other than their own experience and judgment. In this letter, Aretino declares himself *scriba Naturae* (Marini 2016, 128 fn. 22), affirming his belief in the supremacy of nature (that which is alive) over tradition (that which belongs to the past). In doing so, the Tuscan writer breaks away from Bembo's pedantic historicism and paves the way for a vital renewal of literature, one rooted in the present.

With a seamless transition, Aretino shifts to discussing painting. Just as he had criticized literary imitation, he now condemns passive imitation of nature, praising Michelangelo and his drawings for transcending mere reproduction.[18] In this way, Aretino bridges literature and the visual arts, establishing a meaningful parallel between the two disciplines:

> Sì che imparate ciò ch'io favello da quel savio dipintore, il quale nel mostrare a colui che il dimandò chi egli imitava […] volse inferire che dal vivo e dal vero toglieva gli essempi; come gli tolgo io parlando e scrivendo.

---

16 Procaccioli 1997, 229-32: 155. Initially addressed to Niccolò Franco in the first edition of the first volume of the *Lettere*, but featuring Dolce as the recepient in subsequent printings.

17 "Andate pur per le vie che al vostro studio mostra la natura, se volete che gli scritti vostri faccino stupire le carte dove son notati […]. E per dirvelo, il Petrarca e il Boccaccio sono imitati da chi esprime i concetti suoi con la dolcezza e con la leggiadria con cui dolcemente e leggiadramente essi andarono esprimendo i loro, e non da chi gli saccheggia non pur de i 'quinci', de i 'quindi', e de i 'soventi', e de gli 'snelli', ma de i versi interi […]. O turba errante, io ti dico e ridico che la poesia è un ghiribizzo de la natura ne le sue allegrezze, il qual si sta nel furor proprio, e mancandone il cantar Poetico diventa un cimbalo senza sonagli, e un campanil senza campane […]. La natura istessa, de la cui semplicità son secretario, mi detta ciò che io compongo […]. Sì che attendete a esser scultor di sensi, e non miniator di vocaboli" (Procaccioli 1997, 231: 155).

18 "Che onor si fanno i colori vaghi che si consumano in dipingere frascariuole senza disegno? La lor gloria sta ne i tratti con che gli distende Michelagnolo, il quale ha messo in tanto travaglio la natura e l'arte, che non sanno se gli sono maestre o discepole" (Procaccioli 1997, 230-1: 155).

> Learn, then, from what I say, just as from that wise painter who, when asked whom he imitated, wished to imply that he drew examples from life and from truth; just as I do in my speaking and writing. (Procaccioli 1997, 231-2: 155; Author's transl.)

With this statement, the poet formulates a powerful analogy, not merely between painting and literature, but more specifically between painting and language: both seek to grasp the vivid energy of nature (*enargeia*; Rosen 2000, 186-97) to translate it into brushstrokes and words respectively.

While Aretino's praise of Michelangelo throughout his epistolary aligns with the sixteenth-century artistic literature that celebrated the artist as the one who surpassed the ancients, he finds the true parallel to his own naturalistic poetics in Titian's painting language.[19]

Enthusiastic appreciation for Titian's brushwork is hardly novel: since his own contemporaries, the master's canvases were brilliantly invested with value and meaning, though Aretino was the first to publicly address them (Rosand 1982, 16). Since his arrival in Venice in March 1527, the poet frequently invoked the distinctive abilities of the painter from Cadore in rendering the vividness of flesh through colour, enhancing his reputation. Publishing Titian's name in many of his dialogues and comedies soon reflected the intention of portraying him as a synonym for the art of painting beyond nature. Indeed, at the heart Titian's work lies a profound engagement with nature and an immanent vision of beauty. However, over time, there can be traced a mounting transcendence of traditional figurative abilities: the artist's body of work increasingly centers the representation of nature not simply as a passive subject, but as an active, life-giving force (*natura naturans*; Gregori 1978, 303-6), a dynamic principle that operates from within and animates his compositions.

But it is in Aretino's epistolary – itself the first ever *libro di lettere* in vernacular and the main workshop for the poet's poetics – that one traces the painter's transformation of nature into art becoming both the inspiration and foundation for the author's literary work. In this way, Titian's techniques and style were not just subjects to be described in ekphrastic sonnets, but integral elements that infused and informed the structure and substance of Aretino's writings (Rosand 2010, 184-5).

Nevertheless, such sphere of influence must have operated the other way round as well. Titian's formal education may have been

---

19 Studies on the stylistic permeability between literary and pictorial texts are not new in scholarly literature, though they are relatively uncommon. Notable considerations can be found in Longhi [1940] 1956, 160; as well as more comprehensive discussions in Nova 1994; Riccomini 2008.

limited: joining a painter's workshop at a young age likely meant he missed out on a traditional grammar school education and never learned to read Latin (Puttfarken 2005, 71). However, this lack of formal learning did not diminish his prominence as a painter of *poesie*.

Being contemporaries in Venice, Titian and Aretino maintained a long and close relationship, sharing common cultural and artistic experiences, many of which developed around the Venetian circle that Aretino himself likely pulled around him – a subject still under further exploration. Such intellectual circle, around which gravitated Paduan academicians, fellow artists, *poligrafi* and noble men, embraced Titian, and his limited formal education was never seen as a barrier to engaging with the foremost thinkers in Venice.[20] Instead, Titian's deep understanding of art and narrative allowed him to contribute to the intellectual currents around him, even without the scholarly credentials of some of his peers.

3 Art as *Habitus*

In the 1530s, when Aretino polemically rejected Bembo's lead, it was his voice that felt discordant with the prevailing opinion. He reasoned that Trecento Tuscan was a dead language, to be read to understand its contextual significance, but not to be taken up anymore. Thus, Bembo's idiom hovered at one remove from life, but Aretino wanted his to be derived from nature directly. Also, an ability to perform without models indicated independence and artistic stature. This was as true for leaders of style in painting, such as Michelangelo and Titian, as it was for poets. And it meant that inborn talent, not just training, was crucial to creativity. Whereas *arte* was the skill or competence that was learnt by rule and imitation, *ingegno* was the innate talent that could not be learnt (Baxandall 1971, 15) and this notion became an inalienable part of Aretino's theory on the arts. For the Tuscan author the coupled *arte* and *ingegno* became a necessity for both poets and painters, once again compared with the same creative and controlling principle, which becomes manifest in the finished work.

The most effective function of Aretino's letters on the arts was to provide a theoretical discussion of what style should be: literature and painting were not to be understood through their representation of the subject, but rather through form and aspect. The interpretation of nature in Aretino lies in the process of creation (the

---

20 There are several instances in which Aretino discusses academic meetings and informal gatherings among the members, but the most relevant in this occasion appears to be the infamous letter addressed to Gianiacopo Leonardi on 6 December 1537, called *Sogno del Parnaso* (Procaccioli 1997, 383-90: 280). On Titian's portraits of some members, see Puttfarken 2005, 71.

how), just as David Rosand argues (1981, 85) about Titian's pictorial structure, whose meaning is not to be found in the iconographical depictions (the *what*), but in the affective and mimetic function of the painter's brushstrokes.

As far as it concerned both the artist and the poet, especially in Venice during the Cinquecento, style is their main preoccupation, matter his servant. Learning to examine a work of art for what it truly is means focusing on its execution, its *maniera*, autonomous from its resemblance, expression, or moral purpose. To appreciate its appearance is to see the work as it requires to be seen: in this sense, style turns from being a mere technical skill to a demonstration of the act of creation itself. This objective is the approach through which art historian Robert Klein delves into sixteenth-century art history.

Klein finds in the manner of making art both a disposition of the being and a conduct theorized in practice, a *habitus* in the Aristotelian sense (Koering 2024, 64). And to posit such a conceptual construct, the art historian uses Benedetto Varchi (1503-1565) as the starting point of his inquiry, an academic figure whose relationship with Aretino was very close.[21]

The principle of finding in nature, our own and that which surrounds us, the guideline for artistic production, places Aretino and Titian among those *artifices vitae* that Klein identifies in a number of stylized lives during the Renaissance.[22] Again, his ideas intertwine visual art and poetry, as well as intending style as the product not of acquired and reproducible art, but of a germinative phenomenon, mixing inborn qualities and experience.

Considering the points discussed thus far, the perspective explored in Klein's studies appears to be the most suitable for conducting an insightful comparison between one of Aretino's works and a painting by Titian, both sharing the same iconographic subject: Mary Magdalene.

Published in March 1535, the four books of the *Humanità di Christo* were partially preceded by a single part called *Passione di Gesù* in 1534, then profoundly revised and included as the third chapter of the life of Christ on earth. When first published, this religious text stood out as a significant departure from the satirical writing for which Aretino was best known. However, it is important to note that his sacred works – which would continue through 1551-52, with new volumes and reprints – did not constitute a separate phase in his career,

---

21   "L'arte è un abito fattivo, con vera ragione, di quelle cose che non sono necessarie, il principio delle quali non è nelle cose che si fanno, ma in colui che le fa" (Barocchi 1960, 9; "Art is a factive *habitus*, accompanied by true reason, by those things that are not necessary, and the principle of which is not to be found in the things that are made, but in the one who makes them", Koering 2024, 64).

22   On this topic, see Klein 1979, 201; 2017, 229.

nor a separate field within his body of work. Rather, Aretino's *corpus* as a whole is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of his long literary and socio-cultural trajectory, which encompassed both sacred and profane themes (Boillet 2007, 25-42).

Frequently examined for its content as evidence for the author's alignment with Nicodemism,[23] what is important in this context is the value of simplicity emphasized by Aretino's narrative style, as he himself asserts throughout the *Humanità* (308). While declaring a straightforward use of paraphrase, as Agostino Ricchi suggests in his letter to the poet included in the *Salmi* (1534), Aretino clarifies that the work will serve as evidence for the author's doctrine, stemming from an unconventional study of religious sources, tied to his poetics of invention in opposition to tradition, and of nature in contrast to art (601).

The episode of Mary Magdalene's conversion exemplifies the creative use of language to express the Saint's profound devotion, making it one of the literary peaks of Aretino's work as a religious writer. Although none of the evangelists directly narrate this episode, Aretino develops the whole story of Lazarus's sister and her intimate relationship with Christ. Having in mind the traditional portrayal of Magdalene as a repentant courtesan, the author unfolds a sensuous narrative, whose elaboration spans a few pages in the *Humanità di Christo*, reflecting his unique interpretation of the figure.

Upon entering the temple, her eyes meet those of Christ, and she feels struck by that first encounter. Christ commences transforming her earthly beauty into spiritual grace, her erotic desire into divine love. Speaking in a poetic language of transcendence, he uplifts the astonished Magdalene, praising her new spiritual light, and recognizing the nobility of her eternal soul. In this moment, however, the blush that once colored Mary's cheeks shifts to shame, and Aretino starts depicting the downfall of the woman. Now in her room, Magdalene locks herself in, she undresses and tosses her jewels, and the poet follows her tormented penitence, her self-denunciation of the vanities that made her sinful, and eventually her self-flagellation conveyed through a visceral, carnal description of the scene:

> Percotendosi le carni con quella crudeltà che se le percuote la stoltizia de la disperazione, ecco spruzzare fuora il sangue cadendo per la delicatezza del nettissimo corpo. [...] Mentre le pioveva pel dorso l'umore che nutrica gli spiriti de la vita dentro le vene, Maddalena [...] parlava con Dio confessandogli le colpe sue senza aprir bocca.

---

[23]   For insights on the Nicodemite tendencies within the book, see Waddington 2006; 2009.

Striking her flesh with the cruelty that the folly of despair inflicts, behold, blood spurts forth, falling from her delicate, pure body. [...] While the essence that nourishes the spirits of life within her veins rained down upon her back, Magdalene [...] spoke with God, confessing her sins without uttering a word. (Boillet 2017, 349-50; Author's transl.)

The following horror of her maids upon discovering the terrible spectacle of the bloodshed, and the comforting intervention of Martha, carry the reader to the final transformation of Magdalene, finally consumed by wholesome love:

Maddalena [...] astratta con l'animo ne la imagine di Cristo che ella aveva ne la mente, era già ripiena de lo splendore del fuoco d'Iddio, e a poco a poco divenuta ingorda de la dolcezza de le sue fiamme, quasi ebbra fuor di se stessa, sentiva consumare da lo ardore divino quanto le era piaciuto del mondo. [...] E di queste proprie fiamme ardano tutti gli angeli e tutte le anime che fruiscano la gloria de lo amore eterno; perciò, essendone non pur calda ma bollente la femina di ch'io parlo, si discostò tanto dal mortale, che non se le poteva più dir donna.

Magdalene [...] absorbed in the image of Christ that dwelled in her mind, was already filled with the brilliance of God's fire. Gradually, she became intoxicated by the sweetness of His flames, feeling consumed by the divine ardor for all that she had cherished in the world. [...] And from these very flames, all angels and souls basking in the glory of eternal love shall burn; thus, the woman I speak of was not just warm but boiling with fervor, so much so that she distanced herself from the mortal realm, perceiving herself no longer simply a woman. (Boillet 2017, 352; Author's transl.)

Aretino's use of language recollects the episode while having the reader picture the scene and feel the ongoing change of feelings, something the author allows through vivid images and evocative descriptions. In doing so, apart from the more poetic discourse Christ adopts, the tone never loses its vernacular feature of simplicity, which directly conveys the vitality of the description. As Yates (1984, 238) reminds, the concept of visual narration recalls Aristotle, who believed that to think one must inevitably depart from natural, sensory images: coupled with his accurate use of language, the description of Mary Magdalene's conversion epitomizes Aretino's pictorial imagination. To the same extent, Titian's devotional portrayal of the Saint does not break away with such process.

The Mary Magdalene of Palazzo Pitti **[fig. 2]**, Florence shows the Saint to the waist completely naked, only covered by her thick mantle
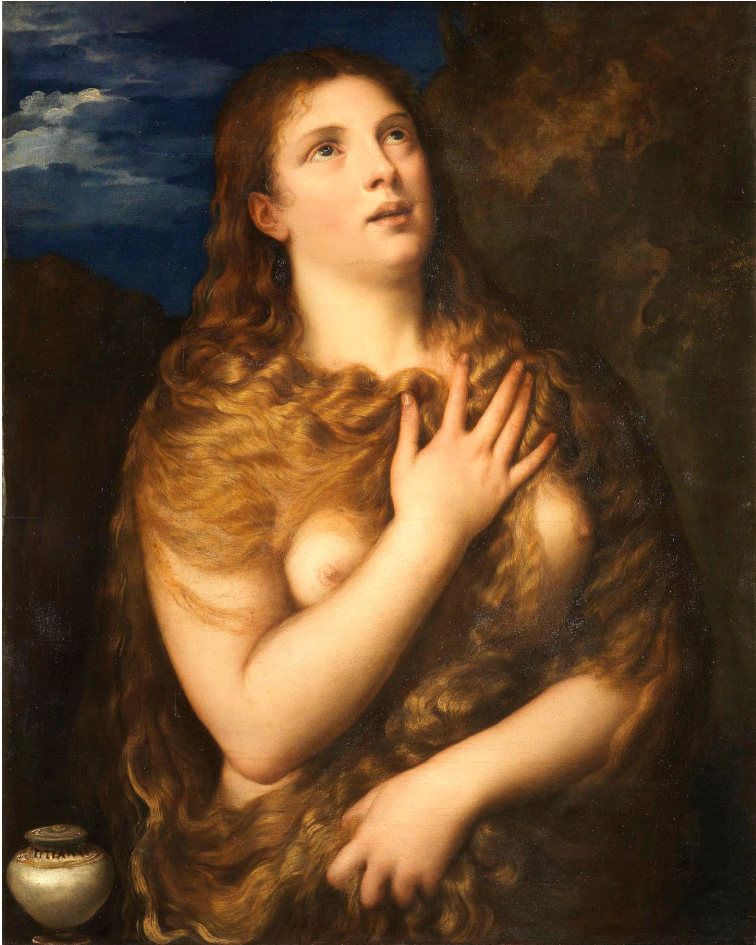
Figure 2   Tiziano, *The Penitent Magdalene*. Ca. 1531-35. Oil on wood, 85.8 × 69.5 cm. Firenze, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912, nr. 67

of reddish hair, which emphasizes the silhouette of the figure but do not conceal her bare breasts, framed by the position of the hands alike those of a *Venus pudica*.

Shrouded in cogitation, Magdalene, clinging to her hair, looks up to the dark sky, with her eyes watering and her lips slightly parted. An ointment jar, her iconographical attribute, sits right beside her, and a rocky backdrop sets the scene behind. The figure, pushed forward and almost filling the whole space of the panel, is invested by divine light, which highlights her polished skin and contrasts with the gloomy surrounding where she is spending her penance.

While most critics agree on stylistic grounds that the Pitti painting dates between 1531 and 1535, its original commission remains uncertain, although it is known that the work eventually became part of the Della Rovere family collection in Urbino. The earliest recorded mention of a Magdalene by Titian appears on March 5, 1531, when Federico Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, requested such iconography from the artist, intending it as a gift for the Marquis of Vasto. Just six days later, Gonzaga informed Vittoria Colonna, the Marquis's cousin by marriage, that the painting was meant for her.[24]

This painting and its following reiterations are usually tackled with discussions about their iconographical meaning, which often overlook their stylistic persuasiveness.[25]

With her cheeks, ears and fingers flushing, Titian's response to the traditional iconography of Magdalene introduces a new sensuality that departs from earlier depictions of the Saint, animated and eroticized by the movement of hair over motionless flesh. The viewer is brought into direct confrontation with the monumental female figure, whose vitality is powerfully conveyed, not just by the intimate proximity but even more so through the dynamic energy of Titian's brushstrokes. This painterly technique amplifies her presence, emphasizing her lifelike immediacy.

These associative correspondences of the brushstrokes, hair and blush acquire a more specific, metaphorical resonance, in relation to a poetic context, rather than purely visual one (Rosand 1981, 88). Titian's technique communicates a deeper significance, one that transcends the subject matter being depicted. This meaning is embedded in the visible marks of the painter's gesture, which let us participate in the process of becoming of the image.

As in Aretino, in this case too, Magdalene is first and foremost a woman facing the experience of the divine. Whether in prose or oil painting, the authors' intention is to convey her humanity as it is consumed by the fire of God. The meaning carried by Titian's brush and Aretino's narration takes us beyond the sacred theme and its allegorical meaning to make us grasp the tangibleness of the subjects they portray. They speak the same language.

---

24 "Vorrei che mi faceste una Santa Maddalena lacrimosa più che si può […] e che vi metteste ogni studio sì in farlo bello" (Puppi 2012, 56: 19; I would like you to paint a Magdalene as tearful as possible…and for you to depict her as beautiful as you can make it; Author's transl.). In a letter dated 14 April 531, Titian responded to Federico Gonzaga, stating that he had completed the work (Puppi 2012, 58: 20). For a detailed reconstruction of the commission, see Bodart 1998. On the contrary, Augusto Gentili (2012, 163 fn. 94) emphasizes how counterintuitive it would be to refer to the Pitti *Magdalen* as the painting commissioned by Federico Gonzaga for Vittoria Colonna, since it in no way depicts the figure as 'lacrimosa' as requested. The scholar then supposes (155) a direct commission from Guidobaldo Della Rovere to Titian as a good omen for the birth of his daughter Virginia, which took place in 1544.

25 See especially: Aikema 1994; D'Elia 2005.

4　　Perpetua

At a time when the foundations of a national language are being established, Aretino stands out against the anachronism that defines them, criticizing its impersonal nature and encouraging writers to engage with the world around them through a language that is vibrant, contemporary, and authentic. Similarly, Titian distances himself from Giorgione's now outdated tonal painting and from the classical pictorial traditions, envisioning the image as something alive and breathing.

To recognize in the fight against slavish adherence to tradition and plagiarism the intersection between painter and poet, the point where their mutual naturalistic poetics are reinforced, means embracing T.S. Eliot's notion that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (1919, 55). If the inspiration for the arts is deeply rooted in the cultural legacy history hand us down, then individual talent is the only path worth following. By doing so, one can draw from tradition with the intent of renewing it, offering a glimpse of the contemporary world, while also leaving an enduring imprint on history.

In this sense, the Viennese broadsheet emblematically reveals this intent: on the one hand it clearly shows the dialectic between image and word between Titian and Aretino, but on the other, since its function was inevitably intended for broadcast, it allowed for a wider public to witness the unity of purpose between poetry and woodcut, while also becoming itself a historical record. Eventually, what once represented a moment of rupture has, over time, transformed into a tradition in its own right.

Bibliography

Aikema, B. (1994). "Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and Its Critics". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 57, 48-59. https://doi.org/10.2307/751463

Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), CX, Parte comuni, f. 32, fasc. 234. Venice: State Archive.

Aquilecchia, G.; Romano, A. (1992). *Pietro Aretino: Poesie varie*. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Barocchi, P. (a cura di) (1960). *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*. Vol. 1, *Varchi, Pino, Dolce, Danti, Sorte*. 3 voll. Bari: Laterza.

Bartsch, A.V. (1811). *Le peintre graveur: Les clairs-obscurs de maitres italiens*, vol. 12. Vienna: Degen.

Baxandall, M. (1971). *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bisceglia, A.; Ceriana, M.; Procaccioli, P. (a cura di) (2019). *Pietro Aretino e l'arte nel Rinascimento = Catalogo della mostra* (Firenze, 27 novembre 2019-1 marzo 2020). Firenze: Giunti.

Bodart, D.H. (1998). *Tiziano e Federico Gonzaga. Storia di un rapporto di committenza*. Roma: Bulzoni.

Boillet, É. (2007). *L'Arétin et la Bible*. Genève: Droz.

Boillet, É. (a cura di) (2017). *Pietro Aretino. Opere religiose*, vol. 1. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Borsellino, N. (1995). "Aretino e i diritti della letteratura". *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita = Atti del convegno* (Los Angeles, 27-29 ottobre 1992), vol. 2. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 913-32.

Bredekamp, H. (2015). *Immagini che ci guardano: Teoria dell'atto iconico*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Checa, F. (2019). "Pietro Aretino, Tiziano Vecellio y la corte imperial de Carlos V". Bisceglia, A.; Ceriana, M.; Procaccioli, P. (a cura di), *"Inchiostro per colore": arte e artisti in Pietro Aretino*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 153-74.

Corongiu, A. (a cura di) (1999). *Guida alla catalogazione di bandi, manifesti e fogli volanti*, vol. 1. Roma: Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche.

Cottino-Jones, M. (1995). "I 'Ragionamenti' e la ricerca di un nuovo codice". *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita = Atti del convegno* (Los Angeles, 27-29 ottobre 1992), vol. 2. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 933-58.

D'Elia, U.R. (2005). *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eliot, T.S. (1919). "Tradition and the Individual Talent". *The Egoist*, 19, 54-5; 72-3.

Gentili, A. (2012). *Tiziano*. Milano: 24 Ore Cultura.

Gnann, A. (Hrsg.) (2013). *In Farbe! Clair-obscur-Holzschnitte der Renaissance: Meisterwerke aus der Sammlung Georg Baselitz und der Albertina in Wien = Katalog zur Ausstellung* (Wien, 29. November 2013-16. Februar 2014). Vienna: Albertina.

Golfetto, A. (2023). "Words For/Against Power. Pietro Aretino's Poetical Devices as Demystification of the Present". *A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power = Conference Proceedings* (Venice, 4-6 October 2023). Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 87-102. http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-771-5/005

Gombrich, E.H. (1967). *Kunst und Illusion: zur Psychologie der bildlichen Darstellung*. Köln: Phaidon.

Gregori, M. (1978). "Tiziano e l'Aretino". Pallucchini, R. (a cura di), *Tiziano e il Manierismo europeo*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki editore, 271-306.

Grendler, P.F. (1993). "Form and Function in Italian Renaissance Popular Books". *Renaissance Quarterly*, 46(3), 451-85.
https://doi.org/10.2307/3039102

Hochmann, M. (2004). *Venise et Rome 1500-1600: Deux écoles de peinture et leurs échanges*. Genève: Droz.

Klein, R. (1979). *Form and Meaning: Essays on Renaissance and Modern Art*. New York: Viking Press.

Klein, R. (2017). *L'esthétique de la technè: l'art selon Aristote et les théories des arts visuels au XVIe siècle*. Paris: Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art.

Koering, J. (2024). "Manners of Making, Manners of Being: Robert Klein and the Modal Conception of the Work of Art". *Robert Klein. A Meteor in Art History and Philosophy = Conference Proceedings* (Fiesole, 8-9 November 2018). Rome: Officina Libraria, 63-78.

Longhi, R. [1940] (1956). *Officina ferrarese: seguita dagli Ampliamenti e dai Nuovi ampliamenti*. Firenze: Sansoni.

Luchs, A. (2010). *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers.

Marini, P. (2016). "Tra lirica e epistolografia. Appunti sull'opera poetica di Lodovico Dolce". *Italique*, 19, 113-30.
https://doi.org/10.4000/italique.444

Migliorini, B. (1994). *Storia della lingua italiana*. Milano: Bompiani.

Muraro, M.; Rosand, D. (eds) (1976). *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut = Exhibition Catalogue* (Washington, Dallas, Detroit 1976-77). Meriden: Meriden Gravure Company.

Nova, A. (1994). "Folengo and Romanino: The *Questione della Lingua* and Its Eccentric Trends". *The Art Bulletin*, 76(4), 664-79.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1994.10786610

Procaccioli, P. (a cura di) (1997). *Lettere*. Vol. 1, *Pietro Aretino: Lettere*. 6 voll. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Procaccioli, P. (2002). "Due re in Parnaso. Aretino e Bembo nella Venezia del doge Gritti". Patrizi, G. (a cura di), *Sylva: studi in onore di Nino Borsellino*. Roma: Bulzoni, 207-31.

Procaccioli, P. (a cura di) (2003). *Lettere scritte a Pietro Aretino*, vol. 1. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Procaccioli, P. (a cura di) (2015). *Lodovico Dolce. Lettere*. Manziana: Vecchiarelli Editore.

Puppi, L. (2012). *Tiziano: L'epistolario*. Firenze: Alinari 24 ore.

Puttfarken, T. (2005). *Titian and Tragic Painting: Aristotle's 'Poetics' and the Rise of the Modern Artist*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Riccomini, E. (2008). "Antiraphael: tre contrasti circa la lingua italiana dell'arte". Emiliani, A.; Scaglietti Kelescian, D. (a cura di). *Amico Aspertini (1474-1552). Artista bizzarro nell'età di Dürer e Raffaello = Catalogo della mostra* (Bologna, 27 settembre 2008-11 gennaio 2009). Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 45-51.

Rosand, D. (1981). "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush". *Artibus et Historiae*, 2(3), 85-96.
https://doi.org/10.2307/1483103

Rosand, D. (ed.) (1982). *Titian His World and His Legacy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rosand, D. (2010). "Pietro Pictore Aretino". *Venezia Cinquecento*, 40(2), 183-215.

Rosen, V.V. (2000). "Die Enargeia des Gemäldes. Zu einem vergessenen Inhalt des Ut-pictura-poesis und seiner Relevanz für das cinquecenteske Bildkonzept". *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 27, 171-208.
https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00002852

Rozzo, U. (2008). *La strage ignorata: i fogli volanti a stampa nell'Italia dei secoli XV e XVI*. Udine: Forum.

Ruffini, M. (2011). *Art Without an Author: Vasari's Lives and Michelangelo's Death*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Salzberg, R. (2014). *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Takahatake, N. (ed.) (2018). *The Chiaroscuro Woodcut in Renaissance Italy = Exhibition Catalogue* (Los Angeles, June 3-September 16, 2018). Munich: Prestel Publishing.

Trovato, P. (1994). "Il primo Cinquecento". Bruni, F. (a cura di), *Storia della lingua italiana*. Bologna: il Mulino, 75-121.

Urbini, S. (2020). *Atlante delle xilografie italiane del Rinascimento*, (ALU.0939).
https://archivi.cini.it/storiaarte/detail/45112/foglio-volante-45112.html

Vitale, M. (1960). *La questione della lingua*. Palermo: Palumbo.

Waddington, R.B. (2006). "Pietro Aretino, Religious Writer". *Renaissance Studies*, 20(3), 277-92.

Waddington, R.B. (2009). "Aretino, Titian, and 'La Humanità di Cristo'". Treherne, M.; Brundin, A. (eds), *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 171-98.

Waddington, R.B. (2018). *Titian's Aretino: A Contextual Study of All the Portraits*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki editore.

Waddington, R.B. (2019). "Tiziano and Pietro Aretino. Portraying a Friendship". Bisceglia, A.; Ceriana, M.; Procaccioli, P. (a cura di), *"Inchiostro per colore": arte e artisti in Pietro Aretino*. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 93-104.

Weinapple, F. (1995). "Aretino e Bembo: alla ricerca di un elusivo punto di contatto". *Pietro Aretino nel cinquecentenario della nascita = Atti del convegno* (Los Angeles 27-29 ottobre 1992), vol. 2. Roma: Salerno Editrice, 843-58.

Yates, F.A. (1972). *L'arte della memoria*. Torino: Einaudi.

Facing Bonnard's *Le Boxeur*

Mario De Angelis
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract Pierre Bonnard's *Le Boxeur* (1931) is usually considered as an intimist allegory of the painter's fight against his medium. Challenging this perspective, in this article I will explore the representational strategies and scopic regimes that the painting mobilizes, as well as the connections it establishes with Bonnard's public works, his (other) self-portraits, and some of Vuillard's. As I will attempt to demonstrate, drawing on texts by Fried, Stoichita, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, this painting serves a site of 'figural incandescence' where the schizoid and irreconcilable forces that drive the artist's entire artistic enterprise come into the open, colliding upon the artist's body.

Keywords Bonnard. Self-portrait. Le Boxeur. Embodied reflexivity. Décoration.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Question of 'Genre'. – 3 Structures of Beholding: A Few Proposals. – 4 The Pellicle of Being. – 5 The Picture as Tension Field. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The second supplement to the *Catalogue Raisonné* of Pierre Bonnard's painted work, recently published by Henry and Jean Dauberville, offers among other things a collection of captivating photographs **[fig. 1]**. These images were taken in 1933, during the important retrospective *Oeuvres récentes de Bonnard* at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, which ran from June 15 to 23 of that year (Dauberville, Dauberville 2021, 23).

In addition to illuminating a previously obscure aspect of critical historiography – specifically, the manner in which Bonnard's works were presented in exhibitions prior to 1950 – these photographs hold

further significance: they offer visual confirmation of a previously un-verified[1] claim made by several sources (Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 42; Serrano 2021, 53, among others) – namely, that on this occasion, the painter exhibited a self-portrait for the first and only time in his life (aside from a few reproductions that appeared in art magazines between 1942 and 1947,[2] none of Bonnard's other self-portraits were ever exhibited during his lifetime; only two were sold,[3] while all the others remained hidden in his studio, only to be discovered after his death).[4]

The work in question is *Le Boxeur* of 1931 **[fig. 2]**. Appearing in many retrospectives and considered by leading critics like Yve-Alain Bois and Jean Clair as one of the most powerful and enigmatic self-portraits of the twentieth century, this painting is usually seen as an allegory of the painter's fight against his medium, where the intimist drift constituted by the self-portrait genre as a whole in Bonnard's practise reaches its acme. The catalogue entry of an important exhibition in 2006, for example, stated: "the fists and head are cast against the light, enveloped in a bloody shadow. The gaze – without glasses – appears absorbed in its struggle against painting" (Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 42). The same idea is echoed by Cahn (2001, 27), Serrano (2001, 27) and the authors of the important exhibition *Pierre Bonnard. Peindre l'Arcadie*, in which the

---

1 As the director of the Bonnard Museum observes in her essay for the exhibition *Face à face. L'autoportrait de Cézanne à Bonnard* (2021), although Barnheim-Jeune acquired the painting in January 1932, "il est curieux qu'aucun des comptes rendus – nombreux – que nous avons pu consulter ne font état de ce tableau engage" (Serrano 2021, 60). While the work is indeed listed among those displayed with the title *Le Boxeur* in the 1933 exhibition, the absence of any references to it in critical texts or related documents raised legitimate doubts about its actual presence in the exhibition. Nevertheless, the publication of the 1933 exhibition setup photographs effectively dispels any lingering uncertainties regarding this matter.

2 Building on Serrano's insightful account in the aforementioned catalogue essay, *Le Boxeur* was reproduced in the 1943 issue of *Le Point* dedicated to Bonnard. *L'Autoportrait à la glace du cabinet de toilette*, previously part of the J. Gould collection and now housed in the Centre Pompidou, was featured in 1944 in *Seize peintures de P. Bonnard*, prepared by André Lhote for Éditions du Chêne (repr. no. XIII). Bonnard's last self-portrait was included in Joachim Beer's book, written in 1944 but published later (*Pierre Bonnard, éditions françaises d'art*, Marseille, 1947, plate XXIV, 149). This work also appeared in the catalogue *Le Noir est une couleur*, published by *Derrière le miroir* in December 1946, and was subsequently featured in the Triton Foundation's catalogue, reproduced in *Arts de France* in 1946. Meanwhile, the earliest, unfinished, self-portrait from the 1920s was reproduced in the magazine *Formes et couleurs* while still and later in *Le Point* in 1943 (Serrano 2021, 54 fn. 3).

3 One of these works is *Le Boxeur*, which we are discussing, while the other is the selfportrait from 1938, acquired directly from the painter by Georges Wildenstein (Serrano 2021, 54 fn. 3).

4 In one the photographs Brassaï took in 1946 in the painter's studio and house in Le Cannet, just a few months before his death, we can see one of his last self-portraits leaning on a bench, in the background: *Portait du peintre à la robe de chambre rouge* (1942); cf. Brassaï, *La Palette de Bonnard*, ca. 1946, gelatin silver print, 29.5 × 22.5 cm, private collection, reproduced in Serrano 2021, 12).

Figure 1 Photograph of the installation view for *Oeuvres récentes de Bonnard*
(Galerie Barnheim-Jeune, Paris, June 15-23, 1933)

catalogue record of the work, edited by Nicholas-Henri Zmelty, presents the painting as "a place where the painter's own existential struggle is exposed, a struggle that […] confronts man with his torments and the painter with the torments of his art" (Cahn, Cogeval 2015, 24; Author's transl.).

Turning then to a recently published and significant monograph, art historian Lucy Whelan interprets *Le Boxeur* as a 'Jansenist' image reflecting Bonnard's "chronic painterly indecision" (Whelan 2021, 134). Based on the observations that the painter seems "here engaged in a boxing fight that stands for the fight of painting itself", and that the face "evokes the muddy tone that accidentally results from mixing too many hues", the author concludes that the work serves both as an allegorical manifestation of Bonnard's desire for self-discipline in his work and an outlet for his struggle to achieve it (Whelan 2021, 133-8).

Despite the evocative nature of their descriptions, critics have yet to fully address some of the fundamental questions raised by this work. First of all, why did the sober and discreet Bonnard choose to exhibit this particular painting, rather than one of the way more conventional pieces he had created in the previous years? What debts and connections does it establish with the French and European tradition of self-portraiture and contemporary works by related artist like Matisse and Vuillard? But above all: how does *Le Boxeur* relate to Bonnard's other self-portraits and his public production, namely the large and colorful *machines* that brought him fame?

While not aiming to exhaust these topics, my contribution seeks to initiate a critical examination of the historical and theoretical significance of *Le Boxeur*.

This undertaking involves, first and foremost, shedding light on two false or, at the very least, highly questionable assumptions that

the few existing critical accounts on Bonnard's self-portraits have taken for granted:

1. Self-portraiture for Bonnard is mostly a private exercise, secondary and disconnected from his 'public' production.[5]
2. *Le Boxeur* is a self-portrait like any other the painter created during his lifetime.

---

5 Bonnard's self-portraits are entirely absent from Georges Roque's 2006 influential book, *La Stratégie de Bonnard.* Similarly, only brief and general remarks are devoted to the subject by Stéphane Guégan and Isabelle Cahn, authors of the most up-to-date works on the painter's mature phase. Although intriguing insights can be drawn from the aforementioned monographs by Lucy Whelan (2021, 133-8) and Timothy Hyman (1998, 170-9), as well as from the quoted catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Face à face. L'autoportrait de Cézanne à Bonnard* (2021), self-portraiture remains an underdeveloped topic in studies dedicated to Bonnard. Their limited number – only 14 in total – and their haunting character, difficult to reconcile with the narrative of Bonnard as a mere *peintre de la joie* (a view still prevalent and echoed even in more recent exhibitions), likely contributed to the scant critical attention they received in the decades following the 1980s (this period, paradoxically, witnessed a growing critical reappraisal of the painter's work, yet the self-portraits remained on the periphery of these discussions). What remains lacking is a thorough inquiry into the exact relationship, whether thematic, iconographic, or stylistic, that these self-portraits establish with Bonnard's public works. This research will not be pursued here, due to space constraints and the need to focus on a single work that, in itself, poses equally intricate questions and challenges. Nevertheless, the analysis of *Le Boxeur*, with its liminal and oblique position in relation to the other self-portraits, may provide unprecedented insights for a re-evaluation of this genre within the broader framework of Bonnard's oeuvre.

In the following analysis, I will aim to demonstrate why these two assumptions must be reformulated. To this end, concerning the first point, the focus will shift from psycho-biographical and conceptual projections to the "structures of beholding" (Fried 1992; Marin 2001) and the scopic regimes the work activates. In other words, the painting will be approached as an iconic act rather than an allegorical entity – emphasizing what we directly see and experience in front of it, rather than what we know or may imagine about it. The second point, by contrast – the straightforward and uncritical identification of *Le Boxeur* as a self-portrait – merits immediate attention.

2 The Question of 'Genre'

Since at least the 1980s, all catalogue entries for the numerous exhibitions featuring *Le Boxeur* have regarded the work as a self-portrait, alongside others in the genre (cf. i.e. Régnier 1984, 163; Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 42; Cahn, Cogeval 2015; Serrano 2021, 75). This classification may be supported by the fact that, despite its depersonalized quality, the figure's features bear a distant resemblance to those of Bonnard as depicted in contemporary photographs. Moreover, the sidebar on the right suggests the painted surface as a mirror, a detail that – combined with the perceived aura of self-reproach and discouragement – may have reinforced the impression that *Le Boxeur* portrays no one other than the painter himself. While it is undeniable that this work 'closely' aligns with the self-portrait genre, it is equally important to emphasize the factors that complicate a straightforward identification of the work as such.

Firstly, and banally, the title does not explicitly identify it as such, something that instead happens in all of Bonnard's other self-portraits – 14 in total.[6] Although there is no definitive proof that Bonnard himself assigned the title, as with most of his works, we know he was aware of – and likely approved of – the name, since a 1942 letter from his bank manager, a reproduction of which is available for consultation in the Archives of Bonnard's museum in Cannes, informs him of a transfer of funds from the sale of the piece *Le Boxeur*, precisely, which had been held in deposit at Bernheim-Jeune (Bonnard 1942). Even if we assume that Bernheim-Jeune selected the title for the 1933 exhibition without consulting the artist (a scenario which seems highly improbable), we nevertheless know that Bonnard was fully aware of the title by which the work was being referred to.

---

6 This includes even allegorical and depersonalized works like *Autoportrait avec Barbe* (1920), which, despite its abstract qualities and depiction of the painter as a satyr in a riot of warm colors, clearly indicates its nature as a self-portrait (the striking coloristic resemblance between this work and *Le Boxeur* may have reinforced the inclination to view the latter as a mere auto-representation).

Secondly, the image lacks the defining features of the traditional genre: the artist neither contemplates himself nor attempts to explore his identity as a painter (there are no tools of the craft of painting like brushes and palettes, like in some of his previous or other traditional and contemporary works from Chardin, Manet, Picasso and Vuillard).[7]

Above all, however, it is the very mechanics of the image that compel us to re-evaluate its classification. Considered the interplay between the title, the figure's features, and the modes of depiction, I would argue that more than to the plain self-portrait, this painting bears a closer resemblance to one of its 'ancestors': what Stoichita calls the "disguised self-portrait", where the autobiographical nature of the work is implicitly suggested, rather than unequivocally affirmed (Stoichita [1997] 2015, 233). Originated in the Middle Ages and flourished during the Renaissance, this proto-genre reached its peak in the early sixteenth century with daring masterpieces (or details of masterpieces) such as Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (1606-10) in the Borghese Gallery e and Michelangelo's Saint Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel's *Last Judgment* (1537-41) – it is notable that in the latter's sagging, monstrous skin, James Hall have intuitively recognized a connection to *Le Boxeur*.[8]

This is, of course, not the only instance where a twentieth-century artist depicts himself in disguise or assumes the guise of another figure, whether historical or typological. However, what distinguishes *Le Boxeur* from works like Ensor's *Autoportrait au chapeau fleuri* (1883-88) or Beckmann's *Selbstporträt als Clown* (1921) is that in these cases the artist employs disguise as a transformative commentary on their own identity. The disguise here enhances the artist's process of self-analysis and self-definition, as their titles make clear – something that, for the reasons mentioned earlier, is not exactly the case with *Le Boxeur*.

Like the deformed figures of the aforementioned old masters, whose concealed identities were soon revealed,[9] this work seems to operate on a subtle yet decisive ambiguity – a palpable tension

---

[7] Consider Chardin's *Autoportrait au Chevalet* (1775-79), Manet's *Autoportrait avec Palette* (1878) – two works we will revisit later –, Picasso's 1908 painting bearing the same title, and Vuillard's *Autoportrait avec Waroquy* (1889).

[8] "In The Boxer (1931), he is a flat-faced homunculus throwing his emaciated arms around in a tantrum; Michelangelo's self-portrait as the flayed skin of St Bartholomew was first identified as a self-portrait by the psychoanalytically inclined Italian physician Francesco La Cava in a booklet published in 1925. For La Cava, Michelangelo was a near-suicidal tragic hero who veered between 'Dantesque anger' and 'infantile timidity'. It is a good description of Bonnard in these self-portrait" (Hall 2014, 228).

[9] For Caravaggio's work see Bellori [1672] 1976, 255 quoted in Stoichita [1997] 2015, 233; for Michelangelo's see Hall 2014, 228.

between the artist's need for 'first-person' involvement in the image and a contrasting desire to distance his historical persona from it as much as possible.

Added to this ambiguity is a kind of dismissing of the iconographic tradition from which it derives: *Le Boxeur* differs radically from the works of other painters and photographers who have explored theme of boxing around the same time or earlier – consider, to make only some examples, John Hamilton Mortimer's *Portrait of Jack Broughton* (1767), Géricault's *Boxeurs* (1818), or August Sander's photographs such as *Der Boxer Heinz Heese* (1929). To my knowledge, *Le Boxeur* is truly unique in early contemporary visual culture for its portrayal of a wounded and vulnerable masculinity through an activity deeply associated with 'macho' imagery. To conclude this point, rather than fitting neatly within a single genre, *Le Boxeur* inhabits an interstice between three: the portrait of the artist by himself, the typological iconography of the fighting boxer and the 'moral' allegory. While the work draws upon elements from each of these categories, it ultimately resists classification within any one of them.

3 Structures of Beholding: A Few Proposals

The figure's eye sockets are barely discernible, appearing more like recesses carved out of a red-brown pictorial welter flecked with orange and purple. In a face marked by minimal detail, the eyes become a site of near-complete indeterminacy (both directional and emotional). Together with the strong bodily agency, this characteristic brings *Le Boxeur* closer to the self-portraits of a prominent figure within the recent French realist tradition: Gustave Courbet. In his book on the master of Ornans, Michael Fried observed:

> Until now I have presented Courbet's self-portraits of the 1840s [...] as the work of a painter who, far from desiring simply to reproduce his outward appearance, to analyze his character or personality, or to record the external signs of various transient inner states, found himself compelled to seek to express by all the means at his disposal his conviction of his own embodiedness. [...] The devaluation of the sitter's gaze, in fact the frequency with which Courbet portrayed himself with eyes closed or all but closed, are, I have suggested, expressions of that emphasis on the body as experienced from within rather than as observed from without. (1992, 78)

A little further on, Fried also highlights Courbet's ability to draw attention to the proximity of the sitter to the surface of the painting

and, by extension, to the beholder – sometimes to the point of breaking what Fried terms the "ontological impermeability of the pictorial surface" (59). [10]

Turning back to *Le Boxeur*, it is striking to observe that it exhibits, to a remarkable degree – perhaps even more so than Courbet's self-portraits, or at least more explicitly – the qualities that prompted Fried to regard Courbet's entire artistic endeavor as "an enterprise that has for its primary aim the accomplishment of a quasi-physical merger between painter, beholder, and painting" (218): what the crititc calls the "emphasis on the body as experienced from within rather than observed from without" (78) here borders on the limits of bestial catatonia. By charging at himself – yet without ever meeting his own gaze – the figure remains ensnared in a solipsistic loop that precedes self-recognition, immersed in a kind of introjective bodily ecstasy.

Reinforcing the sense of a human figure deeply attuned to its own inner sensations are the preparatory drawings Bonnard made in the months leading up to the creation of the work: I refer to two sketches in the painter's diary, dated 27 and 30 November 1931, along with a 1930 drawing preserved at the Musée Marmottan in Paris [fig. 3]. When observing these drawings, the anecdotal identification of the figure as a boxer is even weaker than in the finished work. They seem more like the result of 'proprioception tests' – attempts by the painter to capture sensations in motion, exploring the extensibility of limbs and the flexibility of the body. In this sense, these drawings also evoke a piece by Cézanne, *Nu de jeune baigneur* (1876), which Bonnard owned and from which he created a lithograph.

In addition to reconsidering Courbet's influence on Bonnard, which has likely been underestimated,[11] these observations may allow us to extend Roque, Hyman, and Whelan's insights into the role of the body in both the creative process and the reception of the post-Impressionist painter's artistic enterprise as a whole.[12] It is indeed surprising to realize how, although reinterpreted and internalized through his own sensibility, almost all the 'quasi-corporeal merger' techniques

---

10 By this expression Fried means the ability of Courbet and others to deny the the painting's "standing as an imaginary boundary between the world of the painting and that of the beholder" (1992, 59).

11 Encouraging further inquiry into Courbet's influence on Bonnard is the observation that Bonnard's *La Source* (1916) can be interpreted as an intertextual inversion of Courbet's painting of the same name. This refers specifically to the 1868 version, which was exhibited in Georges Petit's gallery on 9 July 1919, and later became part of the Louvre's collection (cf. des Cars, de Font-Réaulx, Tinterow, Hilaire 2007, 386) – therefore Bonnard was likely aware of it. In Bonnard's composition, all elements of Courbet's work are subverted: the natural setting is transformed into a domestic interior; the nude figure, previously seen from behind, is now oriented toward the spectator; and the jet of water that flowed from behind the model now cascades from the model toward the viewer.

**12** See Roque 2006, 93-112; Hyman 1998, 158-70; Whelan 2021, 35-61.

Figure 3 Pierre Bonnard, *Homme Nu (autoportrait, étude pour le boxeur)*. Ca. 1930. Pencil on paper, 24.3 × 15 cm. Private collection. © Collection de Bueil & Ract-Madoux, Paris

identified by Fried in Courbet's work are also present in Bonnard's mature oeuvre, encompassing interior scenes, landscapes, and nudes: as in *Courbet's Les Cribleuses de Blé* (1853) and *Les Casseurs de pierres* (1849), respectively, Bonnard's oeuvre also feature figures depicted from behind that serve as "surrogates" of the painter at work in front of the canvas (Fried 1992, 152) – see *La Glace du cabinet de toilette* (1908) and *La Terrasse à Grasse* (1912) –[13] as well as objects

---

13 About the woman with her back turned in *Les Cribleuses de blé* (but similar remarks are also made about *L'Après-dînée à Ornans* and *La Source*), Fried writes: "thus for example it's possible to see the central, kneeling female figure as a surrogate for the painter-beholder by virtue of her posture (analogous to though not identical with his posture when seated in a chair before the picture), her orientation (facing into the picture and so roughly matching his), and the character of the effort she is putting forth (concentrated, physical, requiring the use of both hands). The seated, drowsy sifter plucking bits of chaff from a dish can also be considered such a surrogate; in fact I would go further and propose, by analogy with the Stonebreakers, that her relative passivity, subordinate status, and place in the composition make her a figure for the painter-beholder's left hand holding his palette in distinction to the kneeling sifter understood now as representing specifically the painter-beholder's right hand wielding a brush or knife" (Fried 1992, 152). Looking at a painting such as Bonnard's *La Glace du cabinet de toilette* (1908), it seems evident that the female figure seen from behind functions as what Stoichita would call a 'filter-character' – a figure who simultaneously guides our view within the image (specifically here, the reflection) while at the same time obstructing part of it, much like what occurs in some of Caillebotte's works, such as 1875 *Intérieur* (Stoichita [1997] 2015, 52). Yet, beyond this function, it also seems clear to me that this figure serves as a surrogate for the painter at the canvas, in the sense that Michael Fried describes. The nude figure mirrors the painter's own position as seen in photographs, standing with a *chiffon* in hand (even the circular shapes of the basins and other toiletry utensils in the foreground recall the spots of colour on the palette). In this sense, the painter is both inside and outside the painting, just as the model is both inside and outside the mirror. If one may speak here of a painter-beholder, our identification with this figure unfolds in a manner more perverse and elusive, I believe, than in most of Courbet's works, where such identification, though difficult to spot consciously, remains direct, instinctive, and unmediated. In *La Glace du cabinet de toilette,* full empathic or bodily identification is thwarted by two key elements: first, by Bonnard's use of the mirror, or rather by the transpositional incoherence (or visual paradox) it creates. If we truly occupied the model's position in front of the mirror, we would see ourselves from the front, not from behind. Second, the spatial construction and point of view are misaligned with the model's gaze within the painting, which is elevated and shifted to the right – completely incompatible with the perspective from which we, as spectral observers, are invited to witness the scene. Similarly, our point of view conflicts with that of the face of the figure seated on the sofa. This is not only because our perspective is elevated and positioned closer to the mirror, but also because, were we to occupy her place, it would be impossible not to see the naked person directly in front of us – not in the mirror, but in the 'real' world. Another intriguing case is that of *La Terrasse à Grasse* (1912) where the figure in the lower right corner functions as both an implicit self-representation of the painter and a surrogate for the artist standing before the canvas. However, rather than 'doubling' the painter in front of his free-standing canvases attached to the wall, as in famous contemporary photographs showing Bonnard at work, the figure seems instead to evoke the contemplative moment preceding the actual act of painting – the moment when the artist, seated, 'reflects and dreams', as he himself confided to his nephew, Charles Terrasse, within the ecstatic silence of the atelier. It is the moment when he attains a state of complete passivity, allowing space for memory to surface and unfold. This process of recollection, its layering and gradual unfurling, is mirrored in the overlapping planes of vegetation within

or gestures that subtly reference the tools and craft of painting – the oil early study *Intimité* (1890) and the famous *La table devant la fenêtre* (1934-5), where the back of the chair visually interlocks with the wooden slab of the window to form the outline of an easel, ambiguously denouncing the external view as a painting-within-a-painting.[14] But above all Bonnard is a master at undermining the "ontological impermeability of the picture surface", as one can easily realise by looking at two works like *Le Grand Nu Bleu* (1924) and *Dans la salle de bains* (1940). By disavowing 'separatist' interpretations, what we have just examined reveals the porous relationship in both style and intent between *Le Boxeur* and the other renowned works Bonnard created for sale and public display [figs 4a-b].

4   The Pellicle of Being

Given the strongly haptic dimension of the pictorial workmanship and the encaustic fusion between figure and background, we might assert that in *Le Boxeur* to the proprioceptive aura transitioning from the preparatory drawings to the finished work "respond" something like a proprioception of paint itself. In other words, the work exhibits a deliberate focus on what Louis Marin has termed the reflexive opacity of medium, that power – always present but varying in discernibility – by which the medium 'presents' itself while re-presenting something (cf. Marin 1992, 60). From this perspective, some details take

the composition. Here too, Stoichita's reflections on the 'system-of-filters' offer a valuable lens for understanding the shift from the realist paradigm still present in Caillebotte and Courbet: in *Intérieur*, the female figure acts as the first layer of a 'system-of-filters' that obstructs our ability to see what she sees. In *La Terrasse à Grasse*, instead, the painter literally 'steps aside' to allow the viewer to confront nature's deflagration, unnaturally rendered as a monstrous and dense accumulation of self-evident pictorial substance.

14   These examples represent only a fraction of the countless instances in which Bonnard subtly thematizes his own artistic means and processes. It is precisely this obsessive recurrence of such 'clues' that justifies a more detailed examination of the hypothesis that views Bonnard as an 'incestuous' painter par excellence, if we understand this term as James Elkins defines it in *What Painting Is* ("In painting, incest becomes a theme whenever the paint refers to itself. Increasingly, that moment seems to occur in every painting: self-reflexivity is endemic in modernism, and it is not possible to imagine an interesting work that does not in some measure speak about itself", 2000, 145). Consider, for instance, the poised nib resting on the white sheet in the renowned *La Fenêtre* (1925), where the abrupt cascade of spatial construction in lived perspective appears to arrest and 'converge'. Placed almost 'within reach' of the viewer, through these surrogates of brush and canvas Bonnard seems to invite the viewer to 'inscribe' him/herself into the painting, thereby engaging with the curious visual rebus represented by its elements. Similarly, Bonnard's repeated suggestion of the blank canvas is evoked through the depiction of the tablecloth, most vividly in the late painting *Fruits sur une nappe rouge* (1943). To further consolidate these observations, we encounter the direct – yet always concealed or camouflaged – representation of the painter's palette, most clearly discernible resting on the chair in *La Fenêtre ouverte* (1921).

on an unprecedented value: first of all, the small square in the top left corner – a sort of reproduction in *abîme* of the painting before us, poised between pure color and potential meaning. This 'tâche' bears something of the "burst", of the "sovereign accident" (2005, 251-2) that Didi-Huberman attributes to the red thread in Vermeer's *Lacemaker* (1665), though where Vermeer's *fil rouge* embodies a delicate "rebellion of the hand over the eye", borrowing Deleuze's words (2023, 104; Author's transl.), here we encounter a kind of analytic-recursive persistence – a trace of the effort exerted by free pictorial matter in its journey of 'becoming-picture' (see how the protruding matter threatens to spill beyond the barely discernible borders of the square). In this respect, this Stain/Form, which 'shouts' its own ambiguity, becomes almost a literal transposition of Bonnard's reflections in his private notebook: "L'art abstrait est un compartiment de l'art" / "L'abstrait est son propre départ" (Bonnard 2019, 56).[15]

A second detail that attracts our attention is the painter's hand. Jutting forward with an almost antinaturalistic prominence, the figure's left hand recalls Manet's hand at work *Autoportrait avec palette* (1878). Drawing from Stoichita's analysis of this painting in his essay "Vaporisation et/ou centralisation" from *L'Effet Sherlock Holmes*, one similarly senses here a "chaos of pictorial matter" where the boxer's hand dissolves into a formless mass of paint, making it impossible to discern individual fingers or anything resembling flesh. However, in contrast to Manet's self-portrait, where, as Stoichita writes, "having reached the end of his own hand at work, the painter preferred to succumb to the task of representing himself" (Stoichita 2015, 64-6; Author's. transl), here Bonnard appears to focus less on the inherent difficulty and paradoxical nature of self-representation and more on the contracted, tense quality of the hand – its immersion in colour and solvent during the act of creation. In this respect, it is important to note that the left hand was indeed the one stained with paint during the creation of the work, as Bonnard – being right-handed – typically worked with both brush and rag simultaneously. As he recorded in his diary: "Le pinceau d'une main, le chiffon de l'autre" (Bonnard 2019, 57).[16]

What has just been observed invites us to reconsider the point made in the first paragraph: although *Le Boxeur* lacks explicit references to the act of painting (brushes, palette etc.), everything in it implicitly refers to the painting 'process' – the tactile contact of the painter with his substance, the emphasis on the constitutive

---

15 These two notes are part of the undated reflections that Bonnard selected in the autumn of 1946 for the special issue of the magazine *Verve* (*Couleur de Bonnard*, 5(17-18)), which was published just a few weeks after his death in 1947.

16 This note is also one of those selected by the painter for the special issue of the magazine *Verve*.

Figure 4a-b Pierre Bonnard, *Le Grand Nu Bleu*. 1924. Oil on canvas, 101 × 73 cm. Private collection (left); Pierre Bonnard, *Dans la salle de bain.* Ca. 1940. Oil on canvas, 90.1 × 60.3 cm. Private collection (right)

properties of the medium and, given what we have just seen, the gesturality of painting itself. The Boxer's right hand ventures toward – or perhaps returns from – its journey to the canvas, coinciding with both the surface of the painting and the mirror. In contrast, the left hand remains closed in on itself, completely saturated with paint, 'as if' gripping a palette or rag.

Before proceeding further, two additional points deserve attention: the singular mode of depiction of his left hand at work had already been explored by Bonnard a year earlier in his self-portrait *Portrait de l'artiste par lui-même*. This self-portrait, as is well known, was created by Bonnard after he had seen Chardin's *Autoportrait au Chevalet* (1775-79) the exhibition *J.B.S. Chardin* at the Galerie du Théâtre Pigalle in October 1929 (Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 40). In Chardin's painting, the artist firmly grips his working tool – a red pastel – which he prominently displays, almost offering it to the viewer. Bonnard's swirling mass of lines and aqueous matter in *Portrait de l'artiste par lui-même* – the work was executed in gouache and pencil on paper – can

thus be interpreted as a negative counterpoint to Chardin's proud gesture, a notion supported by the fact that many other elements in Chardin's work are likewise inverted or subtly reinterpreted in reverse in Bonnard's (from the light sources to the orientation of the figure, via the clothing and the chassis of the painting seen from behind; the latter, in particular, visible only for a small portion on the right in the foreground in Chardin, slips to the left in Bonnard, passes behind the painter and is enlarged out of all proportion, merging with the raw support itself).[17] Affirming the enduring significance of this expedient – painting the hand as an active force on the verge of surpassing the retinal dimension of self-representation – is its reappearance, radicalized, in a self-portrait from 1940, where Bonnard, now unmistakably intent on depicting himself, once again adopts a boxer's stance.

The second point to consider is that Bonnard's public oeuvre includes several depictions of female figures whose hands are enveloped in gloves or cloth, as seen in *Nu au gant bleu* (1916) and *Le Gant de Crin* (1942). In these works, the hand is transformed into a cohesive, projecting pictorial element, formally akin to the gestural entities we have been examining. In this light, it is not far-fetched to perceive in this detail a veiled reference to the 'chiffon', much like the subtle allusions to brush and canvas present in the aforementioned works. Furthermore, at least to a certain extent, the recurring motif of Marthe's washing her own body, prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, can be interpreted as a symbolic surrogate for the act of painting itself, given the relationship between a semi-liquid substance and the embodied, reflective experience of one's own seeing and touching body.

In a note from *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The flesh is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body. Mirror = […] extraction of the essence of the thing, of the pellicle of Being or of its "Appearance" (To touch oneself, to see oneself, is to obtain such a specular extract of oneself) I.e. fission of appearance and Being – a fission that already takes place in the touch (duality of the touching and the touched) and which, with the mirror (Narcissus) is only a more profound adhesion to Self. (1968, 255-6)

---

17 The authors of the quoted 2006 catalogue were the first to observe a formal coincidence between the pristine expanse of 'virgin paper' on the left side of Bonnard's self-portrait and "the back of a painting" (Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 40), as suggested by a sketch resembling the grid typically found on the reverse side of a canvas affixed to its support.

In addition to highlighting the mirror's potential for diffraction and de-figuring fragmentation, [18] this observation helps to contextualize and clarify remarks by critics who have described the figure in *Le Boxeur* as a 'body-without-skin' – for example, Cogeval described the torso as a "corps décharné abandonné sur un pan de peinture tel une carcasse" (Cogeval 2015, 32), while Hyman defines the head as a "red lump of raw meat" (Hyman 1998, 170).

However accurate, these descriptions fail to establish a latent connection that, in my view, is crucial to understanding the stakes of the work: the relationship between the painter's act of adding and removing layers of material from the support and the flaying of his own body. In this context, as Merleau-Ponty suggested, the mirror appears to be employed by the painter to "extract the essence of the thing", to strip Being – the Self – of its "pellicle" (1968, 255-6). Indeed, the artist's body implicitly manifests as a resonant surface that accommodates a matter that is always revocable – a threshold capable, like the canvas, of rendering perceptible the "two-sheet structure" of the visible world, using Gottfried Boehm's words (2009, 49). As is well known, the 'pellicle' serves as a historically operational metaphor for painting – Pontormo referred to the "little curl" (lett. "riciolino") rippling on the support.[19] But not only that: the concept of 'pellicle' is also a functional metaphor for the stratification of the Ego. As Didier Anzieu demonstrates in *The Skin-Ego*, every form of flaying – whether psychosomatic or symbolic, actual or imagined (or painted) – is symptomatic of a rift within the ego and a disjunction of touch from the other senses. Moreover, as the psychoanalyst underscores through an analysis of the Greek myth of Marsyas (and its contemporary incarnations), such laceration is invariably tied to a sacrificial dimension (1989, 45-54; 158-63). *Le Boxeur*'s emphasis on processual layering and the self-reflexivity, coupled with the unsettling presence of this faceless figure advancing toward us, stirs our anxieties of incorporation. It unveils appearance through the embodied 'fission' of the senses, making us feel – almost as if on our own skin – an echo of the painting's *tâche infinie*: the irrepressible effort to bring the artist's own body into play as a conduit of sentient resonances, thus – and only through this process – arriving to "express

---

18   If in *L'œil et l'Esprit* and earlier writings Merleau-Ponty had emphasized the fusional faculties of the mirror ("Quant au miroir il est l'instrument d'une universelle magie qui change les choses en spectacles, les spectacles en choses, moi en autrui et autrui en moi", Merleau-Ponty 1960, 17), in *Le Visible et l'Invisible* he appears more concerned with the analytical-recursive aspects of the mirror image, exploring its diffraction and fragmentation, as well as the symbolic and anthropological connections it bears with the other senses.

19   "E la pittura panno acotonato dello inferno, che dura poco et è di manco spesa, perchè levato ce gl'ha quello riciolino, non se tiene più conto" (Jacopo da Pontormo 1548, 324).

what exists" (Merleau-Ponty 1948, 23-5). In this context, a manuscript note by the painter dated 8 May 1936 acquires perhaps unprecedented significance: "Identité de l'individu: le caractère, les sensations d'ouïe et d'odorat. Conscience, le choc de la sensation et de la mémoire" (Bonnard 2019, 42).

5 The Picture as Tension Field

It is noteworthy that a certain disjunction between the senses, tied to the deactivation of the anxiogenic potential of modern life (Watkins 2001), was at play in the Symbolist sensibility *tout court*. Indeed, it must be emphasized that the confusion between figure and background was one of the hallmark characteristics of the Nabis movement and pictorial symbolism, coinciding with a purist conception of painting as a "surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées" (Denis [1890] 1920, 1). In this light, we recognize the *Nabis trés japonard* beneath the painter's mature 'skin', the artist who like his companions conceived expression as a mere "decorative entity", realized through the sole "harmony of form and color" (Denis [1895] 1920, 27; Author's transl.).

Considered in these terms, however, the confusion between figure and background stands in open contrast to the corporal agency noted earlier. This is a crucial point, because in this contrast, or aporia, lies the stakes of the pictorial device that Bonnard began developing from 1910 onwards. Although we cannot fully explore this topic here, it is important to acknowledge, for the purposes of this essay, that Bonnard, as a perceptive collector of pictorial ideas, began in 1910 to incorporate key strategies of Nabis symbolism (but also from other pictorial systems and artistic languages) in order to re-signify them. By the 1930s, however, he no longer seemed interested, as he had been in his youth, in the simple leveling of representation for retinal pleasure and decorative purposes. Instead, his focus shifts toward 'setting against' or 'making react' – in an almost alchemical sense – this tension towards textile flattening with figures that are intensely attuned to their own internal sensations, yielding a highly physical treatment of space and postures. Broadly considered, we might say that in *Le Boxeur*, as well as in his more celebrated public works like *Grande salle à manger sur le jardin* (1934-35) and *Paysage du Midi et deux enfants* (1916-18), Bonnard orchestrates a controlled short-circuit between two opposing spectatorial regimes. This tension is not chaotic but leads to a new, unexpected balance. In this sense, rather than serving as an allegory of the painter's struggle against his own medium, *Le Boxeur* emerges as tensive battlefield where these two forces – embodiment and a sort of becoming-flat or coating of the visible – clash and 'come into the open'

It is primarily from this encounter and conflict, rather than solely from the neurophysiological laws he manipulates, that the perceptual slowing we experience before Bonnard's works emerges. Yet more crucially, it is from this very conflict that the unsettling potential of Bonnard's mature domestic scenes derives – that sense of encaustic layering, where life seems to still 'breathe' beneath the strata of pigment, much like the initial image or sensation continues to pulse beneath the sediment of memory. This is something Jean Clair had already intuited when he spoke of "silhouettes quasi-spectrales" or "fantômes décolorés" (1975, 61). By making the figure a thickened extension of the background, while simultaneously imbuing it with an intense degree of introverted bodily agency, Bonnard's 'chameleonism', as later Clair would call the same phenomenon (1984), revisits in fact one of the central aspects of the 'Uncanny' as theorized by Freud, following Jentsch: the unsettling doubt that arises "when an apparently animate being is really alive" and conversely, "when a lifeless object is not by chance animate" (Freud 2003, 168). In this respect, further deepening Clair's bio-naturalist suggestion, it may be beneficial to briefly refer to what Lacan in the *XI Seminar* wrote about animal mimicry and and its links to the deep structures of the Ego. Criticising the adaptation model, Lacan identifies the stakes of mimicry in the subject's insertion "into a function whose exercise grabs him" (1998, 100), distinguishing three "major dimensions in which this mimetic activity unfolds: "disguise, camouflage and intimidation" (99). Now, it is interesting to observe that, in this regard, the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist elaborates on a note by the biologist Roger Caillois, in which the latter identifies in art, and particularly in painting, the "analogue [*sic*]"[20] of mimicry found in animals. While in sexual union and the struggle for life and death a "schisis of being" is articulated, in mimetic disguise – just as in painting for human beings – "the Being decomposes, in an extraordinary way, between its essence and its semblance" (107).

Before moving to the conclusion, I believe it is crucial to underscore – as a prompt for future research – that not only the self-portraits Bonnard produced from 1930 onward, but also several portraits by Vuillard, reveal a progressive dulling of the model's gaze paired with a pronounced bodily agency and a distinctly haptic or processual quality in the painterly technique, often accompanied by metatextual references to the craft or the act of painting itself. Consider, for instance, the lesser-known yet highly intriguing

---

20   I quote the original text, emendated in the english translation: "dans ce qu'il s'agit, concernant les faits du mimétisme, il ne s'agirait de rien d'autre que l'analogue, au niveau animal de ce qui, chez l'être humain, se manifesterait comme art et nommément celui de la peinture" (cf. the available online version at `https://lacan-con-freud.it/lacanseminaires/s11_fondements.pdf`, 149).

Figure 5a-b   Pierre Bonnard, *Portrait de l'artiste dans la glace du cabinet de toilette*. 1939-45. Oil on canvas, 73 × 51 cm. Centre George Pompidou, Paris, France (left); Pierre Bonnard, *Portrait de l'artiste à la lampe*. Ca. 1908. Oil on canvas, 68 × 41 cm. Private collection (right)

Portrait de l'artiste à la lampe (ca. 1908) **[fig. 5b]**, where the painter hold an elongated object in his hand and seems to act directly on the reflective surface. The tangible brushstrokes, or fine dust-like particles, grow denser and more concentrated toward the bottom right, precisely where the elongated object terminates, conjuring the processual illusion of a painting coming to life before our very eyes. Turning then to Vuillard, we might examine *Autoportrait au miroir de l'atelier* (1923-34) **[fig. 5c]** and *Autoportrait au miroir de bambou* (1890) **[fig. 5d]**. In the former, Vuillard's blind gaze stands in stark contrast to the golden jubilation of images surrounding the mirror's surface, yet simultaneously resonates with them, as both the painter's gaze and our own share the same indistinctness when perceiving these painted reflections and the paintings-within-painting. In the 1890 work, however, Vuillard used the self-portrait genre to create an even more radical representational paradox. While a full exploration of its theoretical complexities and connections to tradition is beyond the scope here, it is worth noting that is first and foremost the contradiction in terms represented by the general procedure of the self-portrait, the realisation of which presupposes a

Figure 5c-d   Édouard Vuillard, *Autoportrait au miroir de l'atelier* (ou *Autoportrait de l'artiste se lavant les mains*. 1923-24. Oil on cardboard, 81 × 97 cm. Private collection (left); Édouard Vuillard, *Autoportrait au miroir de bambou*. Ca. 1890. Oil on canvas, 44.5 × 53.3 cm. Private collection (right)

more or less prolonged vision of the artist of himself, and the actual effigy before us, namely the image of the artist himself with his eyes closed. What we are looking at is an image that asserts its own nature as an "hypothesis" (Derrida 1993, 67). It is noteworthy how this effect is formally crafted by the contrast between the "deictic, iconic demonstrative" function (Marin 2001, 357) of the triple level of framing, on one hand, and the evanescence of the image's center on the other, where the painter with eyes closed retreat from both our and his own sight into a blurred mist punctuated by discernible brushstrokes.

It is precisely this semantic triangle – comprising self-reflexivity, the veiling of the gaze and embodiment – that Derrida illuminates in a book significantly entitled *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*:

The spectator's performance, writes Derrida, as it is essentially prescribed by the work, consists in striking the signatory blind (frapper le signataire d'aveuglement), and thus in gouging out (crever) – at the same stroke – the eyes of the model, or else in

making him, the subject (at once model, signatory, and object of the work), gouge out his own eyes in order both to see and to represent himself at work. [...] If to draw a blind man is first of all to show hands, it is in order to draw attention to what one draws with the help of that with which one draws, the body proper (corps propre) as an instrument, the drawer of the drawing, the hand of the handwork. (Derrida 1993, 2, 5)

6 Conclusions

What has been discussed so far allows us to revisit some of the initial key questions, particularly why Bonnard might have chosen or consented to exhibit *Le Boxeur* over his other self-portraits, and how this work relates both to his other self-depictions and to the broader trajectory of his oeuvre. Starting from the latter point: as I have attempted to demonstrate, it is inaccurate to regard self-portraiture as merely a private or ancillary facet of the painter's oeuvre. Whether this genre represents, in essence, the 'hidden side' or the 'reverse' of his public production – as subtly hinted at by the latticework of the chassis sketched onto the blank canvas of *Portrait de l'artiste par lui-même* – this does not imply a path disconnected from his public endeavors. Instead, the bathroom and the mirror delineate the contours of an experimental sanctuary, an *hortus conclusus* where the painter feels liberated to surrender to his impulse to merge corporeally with both the work and the viewer – an impulse that, in his public works, is often tempered by the demands of patrons or his own cultivated discretion. It is not surprising then that of all the self-portraits made up to that time, Bonnard chose to exhibit *Le Boxeur*: as a "disguised self-portrait" (Stoichita [1997] 2015, 233) this work did not explicitly reveal Bonnard's historical persona as the author of his works, thereby maintaining the implicit or latent sense of participation that his other exhibited pieces suggested (or, using the painter's words, the oscillation "between intimism and decoration"[21] that he himself saw a suitable description of his enterprise).

Indeed, Bonnard may have come to realize, perhaps upon completing the piece, that it was capable of clearly and directly communicating the "almost schizoid" nature of his artistic endeavor (Pagé, Munck, Michaud 2006, 42) – specifically, the underlying tensions and opposing forces at play within his pictorial device, forces

---

[21] "Je flotte entre l'intimisme et la décoration. On ne se refait pas". Thus, Bonnard revealed to his friend, critic, and patron Georges Besson towards the end of his life. This statement is documented in a letter to his friend Pierre Betz, which appeared in issue 24 of *Le Point* magazine in 1943.

that contemporary critics and avant-garde artists struggled to recognize. In fact, as Georges Roque elucidates in the first part of his book (2006, 27-74), by the early 1930s, a prevailing opinion had emerged suggesting that onnard was merely the product of a "degenerate" Impressionism, a "pot-pourri d'indécision", as Picasso remarked (Gilot, Lake 1964, 338), a painter of bourgeois *joie de vivre*, unconcerned with the most pressing challenges of history. However, it was Zervos, with his openly hostile editorial published in *Cahiers d'Art* a few days after the painter's death (Zervos 1947), who, more than anyone else, was instrumental in shaping the critical (mis)fortunes of the painter before the 1980s:

> Dépourvu de nerf et faiblement original, il était impuissant à donner de l'essor à l'impressionnisme, en transfuser le sang dans une langue neuve […] En mettant ainsi son œuvre à la portée de leur pouvoir de pénétration et des possibilités d'excitation de leurs fonds de plaisir, il favorise leur propension à se suffire de l'acquis. […] Bonnard se garde bien de tourmenter les spectateurs. (Zervos 1947, 4)

One might reflect upon whether the exhibition of *Le Boxeur* could stand as an implicit, perhaps ironic, response to such critiques. Indeed, considering Zervos' acute critical insight, it is worth contemplating whether a direct confrontation with *Le Boxeur* and the other self-portraits – works he likely never saw – might have led him to reevaluate, and perhaps profoundly reconsider, his assessment of Bonnard's mature oeuvre. For our purposes, drawing upon Zervos's own words, it could be argued that *Le Boxeur* operates as a site of 'figural incandescence', uniquely revealing the mutual 'torment' that, beneath the apparent joyfulness of the whole, traditional scopic regimes of painting inflict upon one another, dialectically confronting and erupting 'on' the artist's own body.

Bibliography

Anzieu, D. (1989). *The Skin Ego*. Transl. by C. Turner. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Besson, G. (1943). "Lettre à Pierre Betz". *Le Point*, 24.

Boehm, G. [1995] (2009). "Il Ritorno delle immagini". Pinotti, A.; Somaini, A. (a cura di), *Teorie dell'immagine*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 39-71.

Bonnard, P. (1942). *Manuscript Letter from M. Colliton (bank manager) to Pierre Bonnard*. January. Reproduction available for consultation at the archives of the Bonnard Museum in Le Cannet.

Bonnard, P. [1947] (2019). *Observations sur la peinture*. Préface de A. Lévêque; introduction de A. Terrasse. Paris: L'atelier contemporain.

Cahn, I. (2001). "Nouvelles acquisitions". *48/14 La revue du musée d'Orsay*, 27, 18-29.

Cahn, I.; Cogeval, G. (éds) (2015). *Pierre Bonnard. Peindre l'Arcadie = Catalogue d'exposition* (Paris, 17 mars-19 juillet 2015). Paris: Hazan.

Clair, J. (1975). *Bonnard*. Paris: Hazan.

Clair, J. (1984). "Les adventures du nerf optique". Régnier 1984, 62-70.

Cogeval, G. (2015). *Bonnard*. Paris: Hazan.

Dauberville, G.-P.; Dauberville, F. (2021). *Catalogue raisonné des aquarelles, gouaches, pastels, crayons de couleurs et lavis. 2e supplément du catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint*. Paris: Dauberville Éditeurs.

Deleuze, G. (2023). *Sur la peinture*. Édition preparé par D. Lapoujade. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Denis, M. [1890] (1920). "Définition du néo-traditionnisme". *Théories 1890-1910. Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*. Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin, 1-13.

Denis, M. [1895] (1920). "Préface de la IX exposition des peintres impressionistes et symbolistes". *Théories 1890-1910. Du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*. Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin, 25-8.

des Cars, L.; de Font-Rélaux, D.; Hilaire, M.; Tinterow, G. (2008). *Gustave Courbet = Catalogue de l'exposition* (Paris, octobre 2007-janvier 2008; New York, février-mais 2008; Montpellier, juin-septembre 2008). Paris: RMN.

Derrida, J. (1993). *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Transl. by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2005). *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of Certain Art History*. State College: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Elkins, J. (2000). *What Painting is*. London: Routledge.

Fried, M. (1992). *Courbet's Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Freud, S. [1919] (2003). *The Uncanny*. Transl. by D. McLintock. London: Penguin Books.

Gilot, F.; Lake, C. (1964). *Vivre avec Picasso*. Paris: 10/18 éditions, 338-40.

Hall, J. (2014). *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Hyman, Th. (1998). *Bonnard*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Lacan, J. (1998). *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fondamental Concepts of Psychoanalisis*. Edited by J.-A. Miller; translated by A. Sherdian. London; New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Marin, L. (2001). *On Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1948). "Le doute de Cézanne". *Sens et non-sens*. Paris: Nagel, 23-5.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1960). *L'œil et l'Esprit*. Paris: Gallimard.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Pagé, S.; Munck, J.; Michaud, F. (2006). *Bonnard. L'oeuvre d'art: un arrêt du temps = Catalogue d'exposition* (Paris, 2 février-7 mais 2006). Paris: Paris Musées & Ludion.

Jacopo da Pontormo [1548]. "Lettera a Benedetto Varchi", 18. *L'opera completa di Pontormo*, vol. 2. A cura di L. Berti. Milano: Rizzoli, 324.

Régnier, G. (éd.) (1984). *Bonnard = Catalogue d'exposition* (Paris, 23 février-21 mais 1983; Washington, 9 juin-20 août 1984; Dallas, 16 septembre-10 novembre 1984). Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou Éditions.

Roque, G. (2006). *La stratégie de Bonnard. Couleur, lumière, regard*. Paris: Gallimard.

Serrano, V. (2021). *Face à face. L'autoportrait de Cézanne à Bonnard = Catalogue d'exposition* (Le Cannet, 26 juin-3 octobre). Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale.

Stoichita, V.I. [1997] (2015). *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting*. New, improved, and updated ed. with an introduction by L. Pericolo. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

Stoichita, V.I. (2015). *L'Effet Sherlock Holmes. Variations du regard de Manet a Hitchcock*. Paris: Hazan.

Watkins, N. (2001). "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic". Groom, G. (ed.), *Beyond the Easel. Decorative Paintings by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890-1930 = Exhibition Catalogue* (26 June-9 September 2001). New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1-26.

Whelan, L. (2021). *Pierre Bonnard. Beyond Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zervos, C. (1947). "Pierre Bonnard est-il un grand peintre? Éditorial". *Cahiers d'art*, 22, 1-6.

"Cronotophes" in the Aftermath of Displacement: Traumatic Memory in Šejla Kamerić's Body Poetic

Asia Benedetti
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   This paper seeks to examine the artistic practice of Šejla Kamerić as a phenomenon emerging from a 'cultural apocalypse' as the dissolution of presence in the wake of war. The artist survived the siege of Sarajevo, and her artistic language is characterised by the presence of 'after-images'. The artist's use of the body as evidence serves to restore her deferred presence, which emerges in the interplay of diverse spatial and temporal dimensions through the deployment of visual strategies. In particular, the analysis seeks to comprehend the role of the body as a 'chronotope' as the material dimension in which time is embodied into space.

Keywords   Body. Presence. Trauma. Memory. Cronotophe.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Body as Evidence. Anachronistic Memory in After-Images. – 3 Cronotophe: I Survived with the Body, with the Space, with Sarajevo. – 4 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

On 18 April 2024, during the inaugural days of the Biennale, a tattered white flag, hoisted at half-mast, was installed on a red pylon at the centre of Campo Santo Stefano. This isolated element evokes a reenactment of the surrounding space [fig. 1]. The structure simultaneously exhibits rigidity and movement, as well as a state of both

stability and dissolution.[1] The formal aspects enacted in this system evoke the key to understanding the relationship between space, time, body, and memory. The rigidity of the flag, as a shroud draped over a dead body denied from the gaze, in terms of sense and meaning production, relates to the actual aspect of an absent body.

As stated by Pollock:

> Reading works of art that may be shaped by trauma […] It involves acute attention to the aesthetic and formal movements of that which symbolization is attempting to touch, to connect with and transform while registering that there is always another dimension, not available for symbolization but not, therefore, entirely beyond its negative referencing. (2013, 23)

Rather than believing that the trauma preceded the artwork, it could be argued that it is:

> only being revealed by it for the first time as an event when it was spoken or represented as a memory in the process of artmaking. (114)

Evoking also the official exclusion of the artist from her participation in the national pavilion, the sculpture can be viewed as an 'after-image' – taking up Pollock's studies (2013) on this subject matter – of the artist's body, making an absence present. Interaction and isolation, as well as presence and absence are indeed negotiated in this installation. As Kamerić processes her body as both a semiotic marker and a sculpture, her entire being seems to be present as standing there, radiating a compelling force of will and determination with minimal gesture. The formalisation of time and constructive dimension of space in the installation are pertinent to our semiotic discourse on the formal relationship with the body. Moreover, faced with this frozen figure, we are confronted with the 'chronotopic' operation that the body undergoes. The process of fixation, herein shown by the material choice, presents us with a dual challenge: on the one hand, it confronts us with the formal aspects of the work, and on the other, it invites us to engage with a deeper discourse on the significance of the space-time dimension.

---

1 Upon its initial appearance, the installation initiated a psychodynamic interaction with the viewers. Kamerić posits communication and empathy as the foundational communicative mechanism between herself, her subjects, and spectators. `https://re-imagine-europe.eu/community/22005/`.

Figure 1 Šejla Kamerić, *Cease*. 2024. Sculpture in fiberglass, 13 m.
Curated by Giulia Foscari. UNA / UNLESS, Campo Santo Stefano, Venice.
Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio. © Sasha Vajd

This paper sets out to examine the phenomenon of cultural, socio-political and identitarian trauma in the context of displacement, through the concept of "cultural apocalypse" as developed by de Martino (2002, 219): "come rischio antropologico permanente" (as a permanent anthropological risk; De Martino 2023, 38). This concept, explored as both a dimension of 'crisis' and a potential recovery of presence, addresses urgent questions pertinent to the contemporary world. Crisis posits the potential 'collapse' of the "being-there" (the Heideggerian *Dasein*) (De Martino 2023, 100) – that is the presence, historically and culturally rooted – because of the erosion of

historical and cultural frameworks (2023, XIV). This condition of being registers the loss of the 'settled' world that is defined as a "cultural concept" (297). As stated by De Martino:

> come orizzonte degli utilizzabili [...] e come sistema di rinvii che riceve senso e orientamento dallo strumento-limite [...], cioè dal corpo. (2002, 571)[2]

Therefore, in his anthropology the question of "cultural homelands" are the "phenomenological rootedness of settling that gives a horizon to presence and mutually founds world" (Louis Zinn 2023, XV). The experience of displacement in the aftermath of war uproots the presence through the collapse of the familiar horizon. This unsettling historical condition induces a disruption in the being-there, in spatial-temporal frames of reference and structures of identity; in other words the "*Dasein* is torn away from its historical continuity" (100). In this liminal condition, women artists play a pivotal role in reconstructing a counter-history of the I-World relationship and reconnecting with a lost context through their bodies. This reconquest of presence takes place precisely through the body. It serves as a *cronotopo* (Bachtin 1979, 232) in which time assumes spatial characteristics and is condensed into portions of space through embodiment. The liminal zone of the body registers the 'crisis' – as the rupture in presence as well as its reintegration – becoming a post-apocalyptic territory of resistance in a state of exception (Agamben 1995).

The objective is to examine the visual representation of this crepuscular moment through the artistic practice of Šejla Kamerić. The visual strategies of presence and absence are negotiated through bodies and in space. The relationship between the visible and the invisible is fundamental to the construction of the discourse on crisis and trauma, without providing a reading that is solely thematical. Kamerić's work addresses these issues exploring how her personal experiences align with the collective memory. The artist survived the siege of Sarajevo, and her artistic language is shaped by this traumatic event and its incomprehensible aftermath. *Cease* well captures the loss of presence in 'critical' times. Nonetheless it signals the impulse of presence that transcends a situation, – what De Martino calls *imperativo doveroso* (quoted in De Martino 2023, 310), – through which the artist asserts her ethical practice as a duty-to-be and regains the sense of intersubjective value, peace, and hope.

---

2 "A horizon of things, a system of spatial and temporal reference" that experience "sense and orientation from the body (De Martino 2023, 294-5).

2 Body as Evidence. Anachronistic Memory in After-Images

The public art project *Cease* was curated by Giulia Foscari and commissioned by the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo.[3] The title already carries an *ethos* of engagement, which runs throughout the politics and poetics of Šejla Kamerić.[4] From a distance, the outline of a flag is drawn by the hue of white in slight contrast with the sky [fig. 2]. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that the flag is rigid, and the apparent movement is merely the result of open slits in the figure. The white colour and its unyielding materiality evoke the image of a shroud over a body.[5] A corporeal

---

[3] The artist was initially invited to represent the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. However, at the last moment, her work was censored. The Bosnian nationalist government opted instead for the Stjepan Skoko's innocuous urban monuments *The Measures of the Sea*, which were more aligned with the principles of political fairness (https://www.zetatielle.com/biennale-venezia-larte-anne-ga-tra-censura-politica-e-polemiche/; https://www.artribune.com/arti-vi-sive/2024/04/opera-censurata-sejla-kameric-biennale-venezia/). In an interview conducted by the author on 6 September 2024, Šejla Kamerić elucidated the evolution of the project in relation to, and subsequently in opposition to, the concept of the national pavilion. As she commenced a discussion with the curator Giulia Foscari regarding the potential locations for the realisation of her artistic project, she came to recognise that it would be the public domain that would offer the optimal conduit through which her artistic message could be conveyed. The concept of a public project situated within an existing space would represent a moment of reflection on the present, a contemplation of despair, but, overall, a sign of hope. This intervention within a social space aligns with her notion of art as a vehicle for communication and the artist as a 'corrective of society'. *Šejla Kamerić: Being a Social Corrective, in Conversation with Marko Milovanovic* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-80-QpovxoE, 0:52′).

[4] As will be discussed subsequently, the installation constitutes a striking, yet minimal, presence within the context of a public space. The artwork situates its core at the very gesture that positioned it there. It could be proposed, drawing upon the conceptual framework put forth by Agamben, that the work belongs to the domain of ethics and politics, rather than being confined to the realm of aesthetic (Agamben 1996, 51). About the politics of installations, Groys (2009) has argued: "the installation is material par excellence, since it is spatial – and being in the space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the empty, neutral, public space into an individual artwork – and it invites the visitor to experience this space as the holistic, totalizing space of an artwork". In this instance case the artist elected to address the wars occurring in our immediate vicinity. Indeed, the project is also dedicated to the victims of all conflicts, assuming a universal meaning. She postulated, as stated in an interview with the author (6 September 2024), that the public domain remarked by the flagpole would serve as optimal conduit for the dissemination of her artistic message.

[5] The sculpture-flag is made of white fiberglass. It could be argued that this motif becomes a *pathos formula* – taking up Warburg's concept – retaining memory. Indeed, the form is in dialogue with the connotational level. However, an interval between the two occurs that visually and spatially employs the past and the present, the personal and the collective history, seeking a form of presence and absence. Kristeva speaks of 'after-affect' defining the *pathos formula* as "psychic representation of energy displacements caused by external or internal traumas" (Kristeva 1992 quoted in Pollock 2013, 62), as "the gestural and representational mnemonic formulations of intense and affective states" (244). As suggested by Pollock, Warburg's work may elucidate our understanding

from gradually takes shape. The drape became a rigid material, scattered in shreds, which seems to indicate a kind of 'formal surrender'.[6] Instead, the sign goes beyond the traditional meaning of the symbol.[7] If the fragmentation clearly evokes something traumatic in the figurative, what is of particular interest is its residual nature which signals a 'beyond sense' that transcends the narrative and thematic

of contemporary *pathos formula* in relation, also, to the bodiless presence (245). The contribution of Pollock is one of the most relevant on the question of trauma in aesthetic and feminist art. Her studies will be referenced on several occasions in this text.

6 The reference is to the work by Fabio Mauri *La resa* (2002) realised for the exhibition *Arte in memoria* (16 October-30 November 2002, Sinagoga di Stommeln, Ostia Antica; 17 October-30 November, Centrale Montemartini di Roma, a cura di A. Zevi). https://www.fabiomauri.com/opere/installazioni/la-resa.html. In a text written by Mauri on 19 September 2002 on the occasion of the exhibition the artist discusses the title of his work. https://tinyurl.com/5b8dd85z.

7 During times where the world is being torn apart by wars, *Cease* serves a transhistorical memory of the victims of all conflicts. Nevertheless, the artwork's essence is not a mere expression of despair; rather, it is an impassioned plea for hope. In the interview conducted by the author (6 September 2004), the artist elucidates that the installation is concerned with a phenomenon that transcends the mere experience of suffering. Instead, it activates a mechanism of memory that tries to overcome it. Indeed, occupying a vacant place and filling the void are ones of Kamerić's main themes.

level of 'legibility'. This calls for an alternative aesthetic discourse that extends the scope of a mere mimetic representation and examine how the work actually exploits the temporal relationships that the double-faced traumatic structure re-presents. Moreover, as in a dispositive of the space of enunciation, both the symbolic layer and the textual invocation of a necessary *Cease* is revealed in the aesthetic formulation. In general, this installation discloses the artist's linguistic research made of the residues of personal and collective traumas.[8] As stated by Lyotard:

> by working towards a phrasing – not merely linguistic, but gestural [...] – a touching or encountering of some affective elements capable of shifting us both subjectively and collectively that do not arrive at containing event in a finite form. (1990; 1999, quoted in Pollock 2013, 27)

The sculpture explores the square through form, relationality, and emptiness, entangling different temporalities in a textual structure played with filled and unfilled spaces, silences and echoes. Having survived the Siege of Sarajevo at the age of only 17, Kamerić's gesture offers poignant social commentary that invites reflection against war as a form of deep commitment with post-conflicts traumas. Given her own experience of the psychological and physical devastation that war can bring, her 'imperative' opposes the deadly project of a conflict with no return. In the installation, as in Kamerić's wider artistic practice, past and present, personal and collective memory are intertwined to a significant extent.[9] Her research constructs a politics of memory as a mode of resistance distinctively in relation to women's struggles.[10] Across the surface of her works, and her body as well, she deals with the questions pertinent to her identity, namely issue relating to stereotypes and borders. Investigating the phenomenon of identitarian self-construction and representation, she challenges marginalized conditions of women and constructs a

---

8 The gravity of her themes often contrasts with her distinctive aesthetic approach and choice of delicate materials.

9 As stated by Seidl: "The traces of the Balkan wars and the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 remains anchored in the people's collective memory" (2010). The artist merges "Aesthetics and history in a way that reveals a dichotomy between visual manipulation in mass media [...] and the actual events" (Seidl 2010). Her work also considers the relationship between formal expression and its significance, employing traditional materials and crafts to challenge the residual influence of male dominance in cultural production (Seidl 2010).

10 As it will be discussed in greater detail later, this happens in her photographic series *Behind the Scenes* (1994).

counter-hegemonic discourse (Merewether).[11] Furthermore, her artistic language, shaped by the necessity to survive and the impulse to create, juxtaposes texts and images. For example, in *Bonsian Girl* (2003) it is precisely at the collision between these disparate linguistic forms – namely, the written language all over the photography of the body – that the articulation of trauma becomes manifest (Trakilović 2023, 82) **[fig. 3]**.

Indeed, photographic works facilitate the recollection of past experiences, serving as a proof of identity and translating material evidence in visual strategies. The regimes of social, political and identitarian oppression, in which she must struggle to exist, are visually recreated in layered works, where personal and non-official narratives embody and challenge stereotypes. This emerges, for example, in the photographic series *Behind the Scenes*.[12] The underlying process discloses her vision on the body both as evidence of a traumatic past and a territory of negotiation. The photographic works are imbued with an 'afterwardness' as they are reanimated through a temporal delay. In *Behind the Scenes II* she is embracing a young soldier of the ARBIH (Bosnian government defence forces), carrying an automatic rifle; the barely visible words, handwritten all over the photograph, reveal her own testimonies of that time (Pejić 2023, 77) **[fig. 4]**.[13]

In *Behind the Scenes I* the artist is stepping on a machine gun meaning ceasefire (Pejić 2023, 76). This body gesture connects to the installation, not merely because of the same meaning, but through

---

11 Her practice is constituted above all self-portraits and textile works embedded with diverse memories and temporalities. In Cixous's feminist writing theory, the act of writing is regarded as a form of subversion against patriarchal structures. In the artist's case, her works relate to the identitarian inscriptions on female bodies, and the body itself becomes a critical means of rewriting history. For example, in *Bosnian Girl* (2003) the artist examines her body as an open entity which incorporates alterity, specifically the language of a sentence pronounced by a Dutch soldier is written all over her body: "No teeth…? A mustache…? Smel [*sic*] like shit…? BOSNIAN GIRL!" (Trakilović 2023). https://sejlakameric.com/writings/representing-the-self-improperly-by-milica-trakilovic/. This work also was conceived as a public art project and disseminated in the form of posters, postcards and advertisements in various print media (Jurišić 2013, 115).

12 The black-and-white photographs were taken in 1994 by Hannes M. Schlick for magazine *Moda Italy* during the siege of Sarajevo. The images represent the young artist as a model, wearing high fashion military clothing (Trakilović 2023, 82). In this series is clear how her poetics wants to create alternative spaces of understanding the politics of power in conflicts that oppressed primarily women. https://tanjawagner.com/works/sejla-kameric-behind-the-scenes-2019/.

13 The artist wrote these words over the photographs: "This photo was taken during the hardest and most brutal part of my life. But the image shows something else. We try to imply deception in which our mind constantly functions. The culture we live in gives us the guidelines – points of understanding or total misunderstanding. I wonder what exactly do we see and what do we want to see from the vastness of images that are being imposed on us on an everyday basis" (Pejić 2023, 77).

the formal composition.[14] The verticality of the sculpture resumes the position of the artist's body, as opposed to the horizontal axis of the laying weapon **[fig. 5]**.[15]

The linguistic method, central to her visual practice, lies in the possibility of looking at the shreds of reality and examines their intelligibility (Pejić 2023, 76).[16] Therefore, her practice is an "*afterward*

---

[14] In this case the original photograph was reproduced in oversized dimensions (250 × 180 cm).

[15] Kamerić's practice evolves into new media but continue to process this trauma resonating upon the urge to move forward. The *fil rouge* is about archiving the past and speak up for it. What she experienced in the siege was isolation and something very prominent in her works are presence and absence, as well as the exploration of female condition.

[16] In accordance with Benjamins theory, the impact of the past on the present, and vice versa, represents the fundamental tenet of her poetics. Kamerić proposed that reclaiming past events is analogous to archiving and reactivating them through the lens of her traumatic memory (Pejić 2023, 76). The collective trauma of the Siege of Sarajevo persists in "afterwardness", operating in a manner analogous to Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit.* The "ashes", as previously mentioned, represent the traumatic vestiges of Sarajevo under siege that resurface in the present (76).
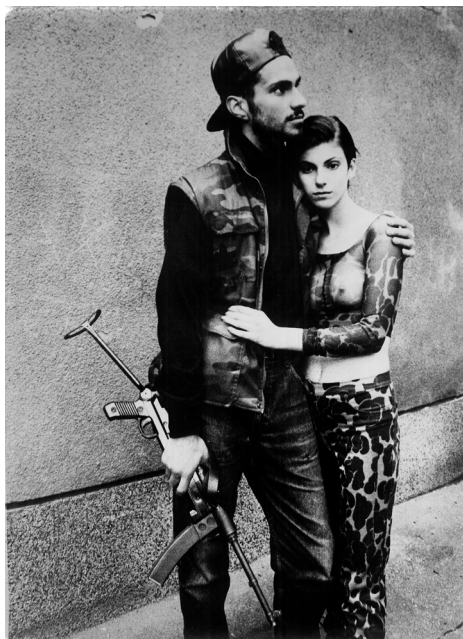
Figure 4 *Behind the scenes II*. 2019. Graphite pencil handwritten text on c-print, 55 × 40 cm, 64 × 48.5 cm (framed). Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024
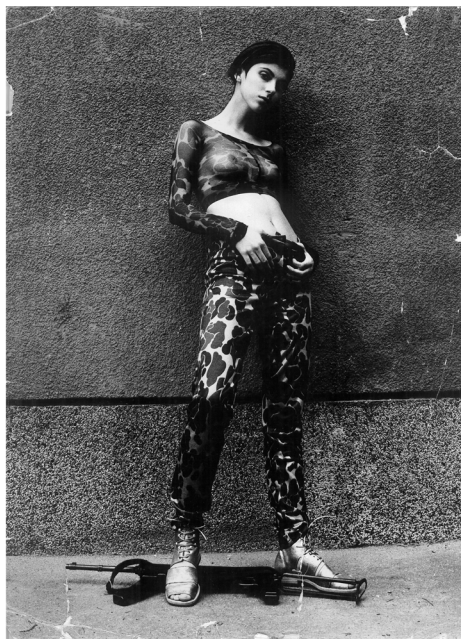
Figure 5 Šejla Kamerić, *Behind the scenes I*. 2019. Wallpaper photo, 250 × 180 cm. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

working through", which means that the traces of trauma, "lie dormant [...] and are therefore marked by with 'afterwardness'", reanimated in the present moment of the work (76).[17]

Shifting to works that relate to strategies of re-presence, in non-representational ways, she 'defers' her presence to material residues of past events – as it happens in her photographic installation *June is June is Everywhere* (77) **[fig. 6]**.

As stated by Pollock:

> The concept of *after-image* enables us to recognize that formalization produces an image as a dense network created to carry subjective significance, which acquires its urgency from the 'truthfulness' of the self who made it through formal research and from the resonances its affects have for those who encounter *their own histories*. (2013, 92)

---

17 This echoes Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (Pejić 2023, 76). Cf. Pollock 2013.

The wall scarred with bullet holes is both an index (indexical reference) of their impact and a memorial reference to the artist's survival in the past **[fig. 7]**. An analogous mechanism is exemplified in the installation *Cease*, where the symbolic body of the flag is a reference to self-representation, however not mimetically, but in a way that presence defers to an object.[18] While we may agree on the time (2024) and the place (Venice) where the artwork appeared, the traces of trauma are in a particular place (Sarajevo) and time (during the Siege). As the layers of meaning unfold, the site-specific installation connects with her past, re-enacting a temporal delay in its material structure which inherently articulates a complex evocation of meaning.[19] It is here, therefore, imperative to emphasise the distinctive characteristic of Benjamin's dialectical image that involves a collision between different temporalities (Mengoni 2012, 50).[20] The

---

18   The idea of the solid flag as a gesture of self-representation, whereby becoming a 'symbolic' body, was discussed with the artist during an interview with the author (6 September 2024).

19   Her artistic practice speaks about what she experienced in a universal way that even who didn't have the experience can understand the point of being segregated and forced to migrate. The work encapsulates a specific moment, which is indeed universal, when we are confronted with the ongoing conflict within our own borders.

20   This idea of 'collision' emerges as a central characteristic of the reception process. As stated by Silvia Burini, in her afterword of Lotman's writings, "this posed the question as dialogue between the historical context and the contemporary text" (Burini 1998, 140; Author's
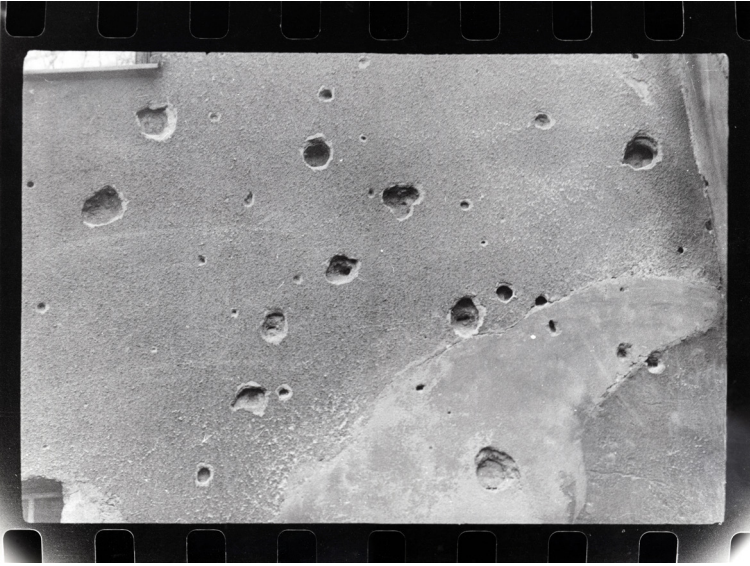
anachronism of the dialectical image (*dialektisches Bild*) has a cognitive and heuristic value exercised from the perspective of the present moment.[21] Benjamin's historical dialectic rests on an image-based epistemology and a dialogical model in which the 'legibility' of history appears through it.

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather [dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation [...] image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation to the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin 1982 quoted in Mengoni 2012, 47; Author's transl.)

transl.). The productive trait of collision within an artistic text is transmitted through memory and conscience (Lotman 1998, 40). Lotman's concept of culture as non-hereditary memory underlines the continuous process of self-interpretation. As stated by Lotman "The process of recombination entails the analysis of the underlying essence" (1994, 82; Author's transl.).

21 This reflection was developed by Benjamin in a variety of parts within the *Passagen-Werk* (1982) and found his theory on historical epistemology (Mengoni 2012, 45).

Accordingly, the dialectical image is not constrained by the linear progression of historical events (determined history), but rather serves as a means of beholding the moment of awakening and contestation. The reading of the dialectical image provides a means of seeing the past and the present as intertwined and mutually influenced. However, the 'legibility' of the image refers also to the body, as a personal archive of memory. It is therefore important to emphasise that the concept of the dialectical image relates also to consciousness (cultural and personal), as a dynamic, open system. This reconnects with the cultural semiotic discourse, which attributes a pivotal role to anachronistic relations within the dynamic of culture. To illustrate, Lotman's (1993) contributions to the field of cultural semiotics, particularly his insights into the temporal dimensions of memory – and their inherent role in dynamics of cultural process – when considered in dialogue with the spatial characteristic of culture, will prove invaluable in shaping our discourse on the interconnections between space and memory as articulated by Kamerić.[22] The semiotic mechanism of the artistic text depends on its articulation of meaning, which is produced in relation to the external context, memory, space, and the various temporal layers involved (Lotman 1993, 25). As stated by Lotman:

> In time, a text is perceived as still-image sui generis an artificially freeze moment between past and future. […] The past lets itself be grasped in two of its manifestations: the direct memory of the text, embodied in the internal structure, […] in the immanent struggle with its internal synchronism; and externally, as a correlation with the extratextual memory. The spectator, placing himself with his thoughts in that present time, […] is as if turning his gaze to the past. (25; Author's transl.)

This statement is replete with methodological and theoretical implications: the single text must be read within a contextual framework. The installation *Cease*, in addition to the memory inscribed and embodied in the internal structure of the text and of the event which has created it, activate its mechanism also on what might be termed

---

22 The 'semiosphere' is characterised by heterogeneity and has a complex diachronic aspect, given that it encompasses the complex system of memory and cannot function without. The dialogue between different times constitutes the intrinsic nature of culture. Lotman's (1998) writings on the semiotic of art contain the most interesting elaborations on this (23-37). The artist conceives art as a means of communication within cultural sphere and society at large. This allows us to better situate the discussion of her oeuvre within framework of a semiotic analysis of artistic texts. Therefore, there is an inherent quality in Kamerić's work that challenges traditional notions of confined space, particularly in terms of political and social aspects. This concept is also closely intertwined with the notion of the body poetics, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this article. This discourse helps us posit the idea of body as a 'chronotope'.

the 'extratextual memory', a temporal memory that creates interrelations from the artwork-system to a contextual reality (Lotman 1993, 25; Mengoni 2012, 50). Thus, the 'readability' of the artistic text is shaped by a cultural system, which continuously enhanced it by new sensibilities (Mengoni 2012, 48-9).

The idea of the body as evidence, as a relic, returns in her poetics in relation to the process of collecting and archiving traces of traumatic realities. In this sense *Cease* appears also an 'after-image' of a past event, with scars still visible in its structure. The body is a central element, not thematically referenced, which dialogues with the plastic aspects in a 'deferred' way. In other words, the status of this artwork is contingent upon its "sensible residue" (Subrizi 2012, 138; Author's transl.). This concept provides a useful point of reference and is linked to what Lyotard (2008) called the "figural opaque" (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 139; Author's transl.). The invisibility of an image turned in a field of vision is constituted by a complex interplay between memory and affectivity, by what we see and what we do not see, which project our gaze at other aspects of what we see. It is not that the artist has left the body outside this intervention, but, as Marin has argued (2001), that she has worked with different layers of visibility about presence and absence (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 140). In this sense her work can be approached through the lens of a semiotic analysis as a long-term creative structuring that only afterward produced narratable and retroactive understanding of her traumatic experiences, visually seeking the intervals that register rupture and delivers meaning.

In the shift from photography to film to installation, her engagement with physic and psychic dimensions of memory emerges. *Cease* is what remains of a real, truthful, and decisive gesture. It gains the centre of the scene through a radical outcome as the only possible hope in crisis. The non-presence of the artist in the national pavilion is radicalised in this fractured 'after-presence'. The flag traces, signifies, and substantiates a transhistorical meaning that she constructed in a paradoxical mode of presence, embodying the meaning of crisis that pervades also the artistic world.

Taking up what Greimas (1996) has argued, the discourse is not inscribed in the artwork itself, however it is a process in action which gives rise to a series of questions between image, subject, and reality (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 140).[23] Furthermore, the perception of the work, as proposed by Fontanille, necessitates to "reconsider in

---

23 The testimonial significance of the aesthetic form opens a possibility of beyond meaning in figurativeness (Greimas 1986). As Mengoni stated: "it could be argued that a potential connection can be made with the field of semiotic thought that has investigated the possibilities of this 'beyond-sense' (*outre-sens*)" (Mengoni 2024, 76; Author's transl.). In considering the 'aesthetic of fracture' as explored by Greimas (1986), figurative art can be viewed as a revelation of a "beyond-sense" (quoted in Mengoni 2024, 76; Author's transl.).

particular the role occupied by the body in semiosis" (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 142; Author's transl.).

The installation is concerned with both spatial and temporal dimensions, disrupting the sequence of events and prompting a reimagining of historical narratives. In addition, the Benjaminian concept of the 'dialectical image' can be observed in this fragment of reality, in this singular date which evokes a tension between the dual perspective of personal and collective memory. Thus, the installation serves also as a dispositive which activates the vision and opens an anachronistic process which traverses different levels of textuality (Subrizi 2012, 156). If the logic of the visible is understood as the process of articulation that the eye is compelled to undertake where no predisposed image exists (156), then the sense of the work resides in the crisis of the present moment in relation to the past. Meaning is produced at the liminal point between the aforementioned 'formal surrender' and the structure of re-presence of the body.[24]

This sculptural object overall functions as a linguistic figure which dislocates the meaning to another place, within a specific cultural context. Thus, *Cease* is a spatial structure of embodiment where the present and the past are condensed, and it semiotically operates as this dialectical condensation produces knowledge. Kamerić's practice understands historical fragments as remains of an 'explosion' fixed in visual narratives whose meaning release in a constellation between past and present.[25] The present is capable of revealing a new meaning in the encounter with the past (Mengoni 2012, 25).

3 Cronotophe: I Survived with the Body, with the Space, with Sarajevo

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Kamerić's artistic practice relates to the idea of body as evidence, as trace, but also as a territory of negotiation through space. In *Cease* the artist has effectively streamlined the artistic process, distilling complex memories and emotions into a straightforward form that, even if it does not explicitly thematize the body, it opens a semiotic perspective to explore its presence in absence.[26] That is, the frozen flag restores the artist's corporeal presence in a spatial mark.[27] In this paragraph the pres-

---

[24] The body is substituted by a non-figurative and minimalistic sculptural element.

[25] The term 'explosion' refers to Lotman's (1993) understanding of the dynamics of culture.

[26] This is part of the artist's reflection itself, as stated during the interview with the author (6 September 2024).

[27] This reflection was discussed with the artist during the interview (6 September 2024).

ence would be analysed from a spatial perspective, erasing the distance between artist, work, and context. The flag makes space in the sense that it belongs to the place in which it appeared and opens a "vasteness" (Heidegger 1984, 27; Author's transl.). It becomes the boundary necessary to perceive her historical existence and narration. In this sense, the space of art is making space also in memory.

The sculpture, functioning as a semiotic marker, facilitates to interpret the time-space-body relationships and opens a path to analyse the structures of spatialization and embodiment of time. The body, as a repository of spatial-temporal memories, is the medium through which the most profound and enduring marks of history are inscribed. Looking at the personal story of Kamerić, the significance of her artistic action unequivocally delivers the deepest engagement with her own life.

If space and body are the building elements which constituted the artist's work, the intriguing aspect of *Cease* is the function in space as the substitute for a 'deferred body'. In this sense the 'embodiment' of time in spatial concretizations (cronotophe) gains relevance for a deeper understanding of the role of the body in relation to this object. Thus, the body can be seen through Bachtin's "chronotope" (1979, 231).[28] Time, both personal and historical, assume spatial aspects and this encounter happens in bodies, always in dialogue with others (Bachtin 1979, 397).

The body serves as the initial point of contact with the external world, orienting itself within it and writing stories of resistance. During the interview conducted by the author the artist stated: "I survived with my body, I survived with the space (Sarajevo)" (Sejla, 6 September 2024). And this illuminates the central argument of this paper. That is, the space constitutes an integral element of time and memory in her practice, despite her reluctance to be defined by it and its militarized borders. In displacement, dislocation implies also separation from culturally constructed spatial-temporal frames, thereby occurring a double 'cronothopical arrest' (Peeren 2006, 69). The 'cronotophe', as the time-space unity in arts, can serve to analyse this dimension, related to displacement of bodies, as configured in

---

28 In 1908, Minkowski coined this concept and its definition as a four-dimensional space, comprising three spatial coordinates and time. This notion was subsequently adopted by Bachtin, who employed it to illustrate the interconnection between space and time within a narrative. A 'chronotope' can in fact be the precise time-space unit in which a narrative is set or it could be a generic place (for example a street) which is connected to a specific idea of time. Generally, it is a place where time and space are condensed. A whole imbued with meaning and concrete form. In this context, time becomes a tangible and perceptible entity, imbued with artistic significance. Space, too, undergoes a transformation, becoming a dynamic and integral component of the temporal continuum, intertwined with the intricate tapestry of history.

Kamerić's artistic works.[29] Indeed, the 'cronotophe' assumes a semiotic relevance as a "dispositivo dello spazio enunciazionale" through which the cultural process can be analysed in art (Migliore 2013, 1).

Bodies in relation to space emerge also in her film *1365 Days Without Red* where the overlapping of physical and mental territory occurs through the shots. Ghostly presence of people moving in the streets spatially renders temporal layers of memory. The film's narrative coordinates evoke a traumatic past that is persistently re-emergent. The passing of time, as a loop of identical days, is translated in the recurrence of movements through the reticular streets of the city. Consequently, the spatial movements materialise the eternal return of time.

Moreover, the image of a fixed 'body' in motion – extracted from her film – establishes a *fil rouge* that encompasses throughout her works, crystallizing a sentiment of spatial-temporal fixity and eternal returning into a form **[fig. 8]**.

The idea of "history as standstill" (Mitchell 2011, 62) emerges in this filmic shot. Frozen figures, as moving in endless repetition, constitute a particular form that reveals the process that manifests trauma in a narrative distilled to its essential elements.

The bodies of people running through horizontal axes and their shadows leaving erratic marks on the streets effectively convey a traumatic memory.[30] In the performative character of space, in relation to bodies, the past gradually seems to lighten, thereby bringing

---

29 The concept of chronotope, which arises in the context of natural phenomena, is transferred to the domain of literature with an explicit purpose. The term 'chronotope' is used to describe the significant interconnection between spatial and temporal relationships that literature has embraced artistically. The term is used in the mathematical sciences and is based on the concept of relativity (Einstein). Our interest lies not in the specific meaning attributed to it in the theory of relativity, but rather in its transfer to the theory of literature as a metaphor (although this is not a complete transfer). Our focus is on the fact that this term expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space) (Bachtin 1979, 231). A substantial portion of the book *Estetica e Romanzo* is devoted to the concept of the chronotope. In the chapter entitled "Le forme del tempo e del cronotopo nel romanzo. Saggi di poetica storica" and constitutes a separate investigation, from 1937-38, which Bachtin completed in 1973 with a series of 'Remarks' (Migliore 2013, 2). Cf. Bachtin 1979, 231-405.

30 The siege of Sarajevo lasted 1,395 days. From 1992 to 1996, thousands of citizens had to cross streets threatened by snipers everyday: to go to work, to buy food, to visit a relative. The citizens wore dark colours, for fear of alerting the snipers watching from the hills above with their movements. The film was screened for the first time at the 2019 *Luogo e Segni* (Place and Signs) show at the Punta della Dogana in Venice. The project was developed by Šejla Kamerić and Anri Sala in collaboration with Ari Benjamin Meyers. The artists choose not to depict the tragedy of war head-on. Only the mad, hesitant running of the protagonist, constantly exposed to danger, suggests the hardship of daily life. Shot in 2011 in a city that is now at peace, the film recreates in the present the traumas of a past that have left their mark on the body and emotions forever. `https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcol-lection.com/en/artwork/1395-days-without-red`. "The fear of the populace transmuted into absurd relay races at the crossroads, rubbernecking in the shadow of buildings, the same feelings of solitary, hopeless exposure, the shuffled herding at street corners.

Figure 8 Šejla Kamerić, *1365 Days Without Red*. 2011. Still from HD video, colour, 5.1 sound. 63 min.
Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

the situation into sharper focus. The filmic form structures also a temporal dimension of latency, thereby manifesting this concept of memory in the space-body relationship. The protagonist's erratic and perilous gait, a consequence of their constant exposure to danger, serves to illustrate the challenges and difficulties inherent to the daily struggle for survival in a scenario which appears to perform the 'autopsy' of a city **[fig. 9]**. From the body as a territory to the territory as a body. The ghostly presence of people evokes death, yet simultaneously illuminates something about life. Indeed, the spectral silhouette of the protagonists, inside the field of vision, recalls the artist's shadow photographed by Milomir Kovaćevic **[fig. 10]**.

Through the ruins of Sarajevo, the bodiless outline of the girl is drawn by light from outside the visual field and projected into a street (Wagner 2009).

As Wagner stated:

the shadow is the only living thing in the photo. The light falling through the door drawing the outlines of Kamerić on the asphalt creates the brightest spot in the picture, almost a picture within a picture, framed by the door opening. It is like a projection cast

The two films become a stereoscopic view of the same thing. Or is it the same thing?" (Searle 2011). https://www.artangel.org.uk/artwork/1395-days-without-red-sk/.

Figure 9   Šejla Kamerić, *1365 Days Without Red*. 2011. Still from HD video, colour, 5.1 sound. 63 min.
Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

onto this scene of death from a distance, an image from some other, imaginary world. (2009)

The idea of the body as embodiment of 'bare life' may be even more applicable in this particular case.[31] The shadow of the body is the

---

[31]   Aftermath of war and displacement disrupt time-space relations to a reality and the 'visibility' of bodies through which that recovery of the presence is mediated. Indeed, diasporic situations are characterised by a condition 'in-between' which interrupts the present and enlightens the past (Bhabha 1994, quoted in Demos 2013, 9 and in Rogoff 2000, 8), thereby configuring a liminal condition of existence. Thus, the concept of "double conscience" (Du Bois quoted in Rogoff 2000, 6) defines also the question of identity as a continuous and dialectical process of negotiation. The body itself becomes an object of scrutiny in the context of the struggle for what Benjamin designated as "bare life" (quoted in Pollock 2013, 145). As Agamben stated: "Il bìos giace [...] nella zoé come, nella definizione heideggeriana del Dasein, l'essenza giace (liegt) nell'esistenza" (Agamben 2018, 168). It could be argued that this liminality is embodied in Kamerić's artistic language, where time-time condensed into bodies. Moreover, the question of being a woman entails facing primarily the crisis to not be recognized as a person in the world, and coping with the alienation and the struggle to participate in patriarchal society, because "the humanity of a woman is at odds" (de Beauvoir [1949] 1997, quoted in Pollock 2013, 147). Thus, art even more becomes an urgent project of existence (Pollock 2013, 147). This concerns to be able to speak up in society with new languages, even if not verbal ones, that are deeply linked with reality. Kamerić's language serves to established herself as a woman, as both an 'alienated' and a diasporic subject, dislocated and relocated within complex geopolitical and social contexts. Clement and Kristeva on the matter of the female body as a liminal zone, biologically

Figure 10   Milomir Kovacevic, *The Shadow of Šejla Kamerić*. 1993. Photograph, silver print, 40 × 50 cm. Sarajevo. Image courtesy of Milomir Kovacevic, © Milomir Kovacevic

testimony of her own survival. Thus, hers would be always a post-humous statement. This links to the functioning of memory (after-memory) and language (after-image) as she testifies an original and irreplaceable event that she survived that can only be 're-present-ed' in memory. It has argued that the body is the territory, and vice versa, where history and memory are re-activated. The struggle for presence defers to different locations (Sarajevo, Venice). As afore-said, the city of Sarajevo is the original zone of the apocalypse. The territory is imbued with a temporal quality that is closely associat-ed with memory. Sarajevo is not merely a physical space but also a psychic time, a traumatic memory sets in space. Also in this sense, time assumes spatiality and becomes the fourth dimension of space, embodying it in material structures. And the body is always where these constructions take form and the territory where the traumat-ic memory are translated into space.

4 Conclusion

This paper has undertaken the investigation of Kamerić's artistic prac-tice through a selected yet multifaceted corpus. In general, her artis-tic practice demonstrates a gradual emergence of traumatic reality, imprinted upon the body, while simultaneously embracing continuous aesthetic transformation. Indeed, the artist's presence is re-enacted in the inner articulation of her works, through the evocations of different temporal layers. *Cease* functions as a semiotic marker, thereby initiat-ing a discourse on the 'legibility' of her practice in relation to crisis and trauma. In questioning the plastic relationships (*latu sensu*), it emerg-es a two-time structure and a distinctive mode of deferred presence, which formally produces sense in relation to an absent body. Moreover, both the fixation of the flag and the still images from the film re-enact those spatial-temporal relationships in a 'chronotopical' mechanism.

The artist registers crisis in culture and history, but also the mean-ing of making and relating memory in crisis. The latency and 'after-im-ages' were subjected through a semiotic analysis, thereby elucidating this mechanism from a constellation of texts in dialogue with diverse conceptual frameworks. In this paper, the analysis has proceeded in an anachronistic way. From the aforesaid 'deferred strategy of pres-ence' in *Cease* (2024), to the strategy of self-representation in the art-ist's photographic works (*Bosnian Girl*, 2003; *Behind the Scenes I, II*, 1994-2019), to the visualization of traumatic memory in the film (*365*

---

and culturally rooted: "The human body, and, even more dramatically, the body of a woman, is a strange intersection between zoo and bios, physiology and narration, ge-netics and biography" (Clement, Kristeva 2001, 14).

Days Without Red, 2011). Finally, it looks at that 'burning image' from Sarajevo (*The Shadow of Šejla Kamerić,* 1993). At the nexus of life and art her work is a segment of life detached from the context of the individual biography and a piece of art that is removed from the neutrality of aesthetic principles (Agamben 1996, 65; Author's transl.).

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (1995). *Homo Sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Einaudi.

Agamben, G. (1996). *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Agamben, G. (2018). *Homo sacer. Edizione integrale 1995-2015*. Macerata: Quodlibet

Bachtin, M. [1975] (1979). *Estetica e romanzo. Un contributo fondamentale alla scienza della letteratura*. Torino: Einaudi.

Benjamin, W. (1986). *Parigi capitale del XIX secolo. I Passages di Parigi*. A cura di R. Tiedemann. Torino: Einaudi.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.

Burini, S. (1998). "Jurij Lotman e la semiotica delle arti figurative". Lotman 1998, 131-69.

Clement, C.; Kristeva, J. [1998] (2001). *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Translated by J.M. Todd. New York: Columbia University Press.

De Beauvoir, S. [1949] (1997). "Introduction". *The Second Sex*. Transl. by H.M Parshley. London: Vintage Books, 13-29.

De Martino, E. (2002). *La fine del mondo: contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. A cura di C. Gallini. Torino: Einaudi.

De Martino, E. (2023). *The End of the World. Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*. Transl. by D. Louis Zinn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Demos, T.J. (2013). *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During the Global Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Groys, B. (2009). "From Medium to Message. The Art Exhibition as Model of a New World". *e-flux Journal*, 2.
https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/

Jurišić, D. (2013). *The Lost Country Seeing Yugoslavia Through the Eyes of the Displaced* [PhD Dissertation]. University of South Wales.
https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/3417260/DRAGANA_JURISIC_phd.pdf

Heidegger, M. (1984). *L'arte e lo spazio*. Genova: Il Nuovo Melangolo.

Lotman, J.M. (1985). *La semiosfera. L'asimmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture penanti*. A cura di S. Salvestroni. Venezia: Marsilio.

Lotman, J.M. (1990). *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London; New York: Tauris & Co.

Lotman, J.M. (1993). *La cultura e l'esplosione*. Trad. di C. Valentino. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Lotman, J.M. (1994). *Cercare la strada. Modelli della cultura*. Trad. di N. Marcialis. Venezia: Marsilio.

Lotman, J.M. (1998). *Il girotondo delle muse. Saggi sulla semiotica delle arti e della rappresentazione*. Trad. di S. Burini e A. Niero. Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali.

Louis Zinn, D. (2023). "Introduction". De Martino 2023, XI-XVII.

Mengoni, A. (2012). *Ferite. Il corpo e la carne nell'arte della tarda modernità*. Siena: Salvietti&Barbiuffi.

Mengoni, A. (2024). "Lacune, fratture, lacerazioni. Arte e testimonianza". *La Rivista di Engramma*, 209, 73-7.
https://doi.org/10.25432/1826-901X/2024.209.0019

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2011). "Migration, Law, and the Image: Beyond the Veil of Ignorance". Mathur, S. (ed.), *The Migrant's Time. Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*. Yale: University Press, 59-77.

Migliore, T. (2013). "Il cronotopo. Un dispositivo dello spazio enunciazionale". *EC. Rivista on line dell'Associazione Italiana di Semiotica*, 31 luglio, 1-13.

Pejić, B. (2023). "Me Like Me: On Selfhood, Memory, And…laughter". Kleindienst, Ž. (ed.), *Mother is a Bitch*. Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 76-81.

Peeren, E. (2006). "Through the Lens of the Chronotope: Suggestions for a Spatio-temporal Perspective on Diaspora". Baronian, M.; Besser, S.; Jansen, Y. (eds), *Diaspora and Memory*. Leiden: Brill, 67-77.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401203807

Pollock, G. (2013). *After-Affect/After-Images. Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Rogoff, I. (2000). *Terra Infirma. Geography Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

Searle, A. (2011) "Manchester International Festival: A Return to Sarajevo". *The Guardian*, July 4.
https://tinyurl.com/5yexkw27

Seidl, W. (2010). "Šejla Kamerić". Transl. by M. Taban.
https://sejlakameric.com/writings/sejla-kameric/

Subrizi, C. (2012). *Azioni che cambiano il mondo: donne, arte e politiche dello sguardo*. Milano: Postmedia.

Trakilović, M. (2023). "Retrospecting and Revolt: The Politics of Repetition". Kleindienst, Ž. (ed.), *Mother is a Bitch*. Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 82-130.

Wagner, A. (2009). "A Portrait". Kamerić, S., *Šejla Kamerić: Two Words, Deux Mots*. Geneva: La Baconnière, Arts, 27.

The Archive, Memory and Media in Crisis: Jon Rafman's Poetic Disruptions of the Present

Luja Šimunović
University of Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract   The article considers three video works by artist Jon Rafman as a poetic negotiation of digitally mediated subjectivity, with the aim of showing how an artwork may engage with the present affective complexes which escape objectification and rationalization. Drawing from archival, memory and media studies the analysis will show how the works unsettle established dichotomies and open space for new temporalities and subjectivities. Traditional binaries come undone within the digital subject, whose liminal position points to cultural preconditions and limitations of objective truth and rationality – putting the works at the center of utopian thought.

Keywords   Digital media. Mediated memories. Hauntology. Cyberflâneur. Utopian imagination.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Unsettling the Archive. – 3 Slipping Through Mediated Memories. – 4 Broken Times and Spaces. – 5 A Wandering Stranger. – 6 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

Launched in 2007, Google Street View is added to the services Google Maps and Google Earth: a technology which allows the user to interact with panoramic shots from around the world. Recorded by a car mounted with nine cameras enabling a 360 view of its surroundings, up until 2017 it has covered over 80 countries around the world. These indiscriminate snapshots make up a supposedly neutral and

objective photographic record of actual times and places, protecting passerby's identities with face-blurring technology. Today, anyone can add their own image or 3D model to the service, becoming one of the biggest publicly available photographic archives of today – a site where technology explicitly shapes our collective memory. In 2008, Canadian artist Jon Rafman started developing the still ongoing project *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* in which he collects and curates snapshots from Google's service. Available online on the artist's official website, Rafman's selection ranges from poetically charged, bizarre and ridiculous, to haunting and depressing digital snapshots – empty landscapes, wildlife, house fires, prostitutes, clowns, or active crime scenes. *Nine Eyes* is a subjective interruption of an automatized and technologically mediated recording of the world, disrupting the idea of a rational, neutral eye where unexpected things appear and unforeseen events happen. From this entanglement of the subjective and objective, rational and irrational, personal and collective emerges the question of how these new technologies have impacted our memory, and, consequently, our subjectivity – the dynamic state through which our beings are constituted. Like *Nine Eyes*, the three works analyzed in this article are composed from various images, texts and audio found online with the same underlying theme of memory, questioning the ways in which digital mediation has impacted our subjectivity as the very way we experience ourselves and everyday life. *You, the World and I* (2010) takes us to Google's photographic and 3D archive of the world, combining images which are part of the *Nine Eyes* series and screen recordings from the service Google Earth. *Remember Carthage* (2013) is composed from screen recordings of PlayStation 3 games and the online multiplayer simulation Second Life, while *A Man Digging* (2013) takes place in the virtual space of neo-noir shooter game Max Payne 3 (Rockstar Games 2012), in what seems to be the aftermath of a massacre. The works are also formally interconnected by the same digitally processed voice of an anonymous narrator who tells stories of longing, wandering through virtual landscapes his search becomes more abstract. First, seeking digital traces of a long lost love (*You, the World and I*), next, a virtual space of total solitude (*Remember Carthage*), and finally to an introspective mediation on the virtual experience of our memories and our present (*A Man Digging*).

Following the thematic flows of each work as they narratively become more and more abstract, the structure of this article highlights three interrelated positions this informal trilogy puts into question, subverting traditional notions of the archive, memory and our experience of space and time. The analysis of the work *You, the World and I* opens an examination of how virtual archives have impacted the way we experience our past and the modes in which we articulate knowledge. Following an essay titled *The Reframing of Loss: Jon Rafman's*

Virtual Archives (2013) written by Jon Rafman's mother, trauma psychiatrist Sandra Rafman, the artist's work is explored in relation to Jacques Derrida's dynamic and somewhat abstract notion of the archive. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* Derrida (1995) understands the archive not as a certain place filled with information about the past, but as a dynamic structure whose shape and materiality determines the modes in which we engage with our past, present and future. It is a structure filled with gaps and uncertainties, constantly in the process of negotiation of what may or may not belong. The analysis of *You, the World and I* will show how the work interrupts Google's machinic eye with a subjective gaze, simultaneously highlighting the nature of these virtual archives as well as providing an opportunity for new, unsettling ways of interacting with them. *Remember Carthage* also makes a case for this archival unrest, but will, building on the subjective position of the works, lead to the next segment of the analysis which concerns memory. Memory, like the archive, is not stable, but is a dynamic and subjective process through which, again, we position ourselves in relation to the world. The analysis will follow media and culture scholar José van Dijck's (2007) notion of 'mediated memories' developed in her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* as a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic way in which media and memory are mutually shaped. Like the archive, memory is bound to the structure and materiality of our experiences and knowledge – it is a way we shape our relationship to the past, how we project our expectations of the future. It is also a medium through which we negotiate the distinction between ourselves and others, the private and the public, the individual and the collective. The digital sphere transforms and unsettles these boundaries, and, as will show the analysis of the works *You, the World and I* and *Remember Carthage* – opens new mediated experiences for the contemporary subject caught between the physical and virtual, the technological and biological. *A Man Digging*, echoes these new experiences and will lead to an attempt to qualify the mediated affective conditions and set them within the context of cultural production. The unsettling of the virtual archive and the entangled modes of remembrance point to disruptions of space and time – once secure grounds for linear progress, Rafman's works show today's perspectives have shifted and expectations of the future have been dismantled. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher's (2012) notion of hauntology proposed in the text *What is Hauntology?* ties to this crisis of future-oriented imagination, showing the ways in which contemporary media grapples with these uncertainties, reflecting both a sense of broken time and space. The works will be analyzed against these ideas, and will lead to artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl's concept of vertical perspective developed in the essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective* (2011). Linear perspective is tied to a sense of stable ground – allowing for an objective, neutral view implying a

linear progress of time. Steyerl suggests that today, thanks to surveillance and targeting technologies this neutral eye has been supplanted by a vertical, all encompassing gaze. This sense of groundlessness and verticality will be analyzed in relation to Rafman's works, showing how they disrupt traditional temporalities and give way, again, to new modes of being.

You, the World and I, *Remember Carthage* and *A Man Digging* are bound by a subject wandering through digital material the artist has collected online, as well as the same digitally processed voice which is actually the artist's. The final part of the analysis will unite these narrative, formal and methodological functions through literary theoretician Robert G. Beghetto's figure of the modern stranger which he develops in the book *Monstrous Liminality: Or, The Uncanny Strangers of Secularized Modernity* (2022). This figure is found in literature from the nineteenth century onward, and, like the modernist *flâneur*, finds home at the heart of modernized, technologized, urbanized society and its contemporary advancements. A liminal figure – both inside and outside, at home nowhere and everywhere – the stranger is also a disruptive force as he points to cultural preconditions and limitations of objective truth and rationality. The stranger disturbs the dominant order of reality, which, according to Beghetto (2022), puts him at the center of utopian thought. The work's subjects and Rafman's artistic method tie to this figure – as reflective as they are disruptive to the contemporary experience. Rather than thinking of a utopian elsewhere, the utopian function will be connected to marxist theoretician Frendric Jameson's (1982) analysis of science fiction literature in the text *Progress Vs. Utopia: Or, can We Imagine the Future?*. Jameson proposes a reading of science fiction as "strategies of indirection" (152), breaking through to an otherwise evading experience of the real present. Reflected in the artist's method, the trilogy works on the very boundaries which make up the present experience, between the digital and the physical, reality and simulation, fiction and fact. Built from the very material that makes our present, this analysis aims to show how an artwork may create an active rupture engaging with the present affective complexes which escape objectification and rationalization.

2 Unsettling the Archive

You, the World and I can be understood as a contemporary reimagination of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: the narrator searches high and low for a digital record of his long lost love – able to find a single image **[fig. 1]**, this motivates his search around the virtual globe, only to come back and to find this single image has been lost (or deleted) forever **[fig. 2]**. In the beginning of the video, the narrator suggestively explains:
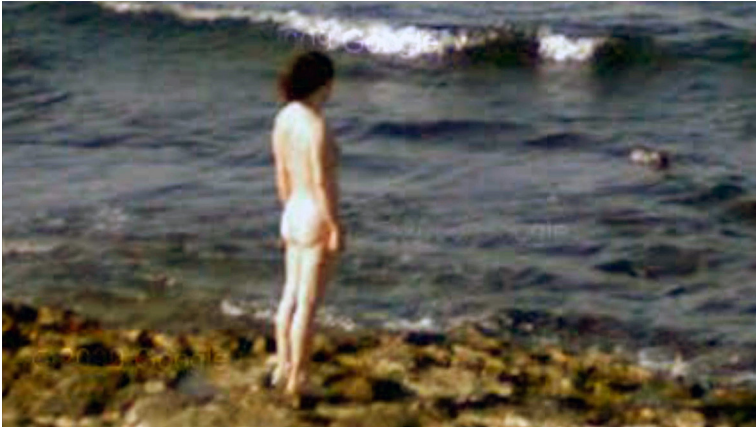
Figure 1 Jon Rafman, *You, the World and I*. 2010. Video, sound, 6'23".
© Jon Rafman, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

> She never let anyone take pictures of her. She said she would rather think of things the way they were in her memory. The truth is I think she believed a picture could steal your soul or something like that.

Google's vast collective archive is transformed into an unstable space of personal remembrance, a site where an intimate and emotionally charged history is transposed onto technologically mediated representations of urban spaces, historical ruins and desolate landscapes. In a text published in 2013, Rafman's mother, trauma psychiatrist Sandra Rafman, highlights the central position of the archive in his artistic practice, showing how the artist provides new methods of engaging with the pervasive digitalisation of knowledge (2013, 2). In his seminal essay *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* published in 1995, Derrida introduces a deconstructionist and psychoanalytic reading to the archive, proposing it as a site of conflicting forces: the pleasure principle turned to remembrance and preservation, and the death drive pulling to amnesia and destruction. According to Derrida, this site always works "against itself" (1995, 14), at once affirming the past, present and future while working to annihilate memory itself. Following Derrida's notion of the archive which is as much a site of remembrance as a site of loss, S. Rafman argues Rafman's work delves into these tensions, exploring both "an anxiety about the presence and absence of the past" (2013, 1).

Scholar Marlene Manoff (2004, 17) summarizes Derrida's notion of archive fever as an impulse to hold on to past material, as to grasp a history we can never fully know. Or, to quote Derrida:
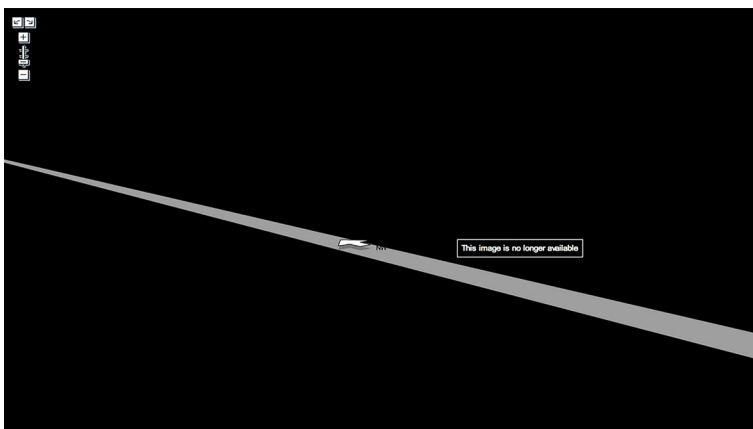
Figure 2 Jon Rafman, *You, the World and I*. 2010. Video, sound, 6'23".
© Jon Rafman, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (1995, 57)

Constantly searching for evidence of his lover, the narrator in *You, the World and I* longs for this point of origin, understood as the totality of their experience together. The only image of his lover haunts him: "That Google Street View image began to replace all other memories of her. It seemed to contain our whole relationship but yet it was so blurry". Rather than a simple amalgamation of past knowledge, Derrida (1995) points to the importance of the archive's very structure, shaped at once by political, social, as well as technical conditions. This 'archivization' is that which conditions what may or may not be archived – it "produces as much as it records the event" (1995, 17). He goes on to emphasize the contemporary shift to digital communications, specifically email as a form of correspondence which has transformed the whole of the public and private space. S. Rafman analysis reflects Derrida's positions, arguing how Rafman's works show the unsettling of traditional archives found in museums and libraries to virtual spaces which allow for different subjectivities and temporalities (2013, 5). In *You, the World and I*, the digital world is the only one which exists, a world where proof of love replaces physical

intimacy, a space through which the protagonist forms his relationship to the world. The archive produces knowledge, and through that its subjects: and here, we are met with an archive that differs from the traditional one – unstable, constantly in translation, recombination, reconfiguration. Derrida's archive also has an important future-oriented position, as what constitutes an archive also determines the way in which we may live and experience the world (1995, 18): it is a "pledge" or "token" of the future, a "question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (27). Recalling this "pledge to the future", Sandra Rafman suggests a new quality to this digital archive as a place through which we form new, collective or individual stories (2013, 3). *You, the World and I* replaces all material reality by digital images: not as perfect representations of the physical world, but something that strongly affects our experiences. The narrator's world is defined by this new archival reality, his experience defined by the blurring of traditional dichotomies: the virtual and the real, factual and fictional, subjective and objective, personal and collective, private and public, while his relationship to material reality is a site of constant negotiation.

3 Slipping Through Mediated Memories

In *Remember Carthage*, the same digitally processed voice opens to a simulation of the famous Las Vegas strip:

> I had moved to Vegas in the hopes that I had finally found a place that suited me, that did not pretend to be anything other than its surface, but the people ruined it for me.

The narrator looks for a space of solitude, one that may be understood as a site of pure simulation. His search begins in Las Vegas, but this is not enough, so he moves on, to a place he has read about online – a fictional, abandoned Uqbar Resort, the 'Las Vegas of Sahara'. He obsessively searches online for its location, which takes him to a ship that leads him to Tunisia, to the city of Tataouine. From there he goes on into the desert **[fig. 3]**, but each time he finds himself back where he started. While the protagonist in *You, the World and I* longs for a totalizing recollection of his past experience, in *Remember Carthage* this longing transforms to a total erasure of personal history and an overwhelming desire to negate any kind of experience of the material world. These two works may be understood as the opposite faces of the same coin, in Derrida's (1995) terms, one enacting the pleasure principle's aim for recollection, and the other the death drive's draw to annihilation. In both, the protagonist's desires are unfulfilled – these desires which are ultimately bound to the condition of

Figure 3 Jon Rafman, *Remember Carthage*. 2013. Single channel video, 13'43" min.
© Jon Rafman, Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

the digital space they occupy. While the notion of the archive has helped situate this space's structure, the question of memory as an active and subjective process of the mind remains to be explored as the central theme of the trilogy.

In her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007), media and culture scholar José van Dijck proposes 'mediated memories' as a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic way in which media and memory are mutually shaped. Broadly speaking, remembering is essential to our well-being: it allows for a sense of continuity between the past and the future, as well as a sense of continuity between others and ourselves (van Dijck 2007, 3). van Dijck rejects the idea of a sharp distinction between public and private, individual and collective memories, as the way they are shaped involves an interaction of individual acts and cultural norms, it is "a tension we can trace in both the activity of remembering and in the object of memory" (2007, 3). The concept of 'mediated memories' reflects these positions, also rejecting the distinction between media – as an external tool – and memory – as an internal psychological capacity (2007, 15). The concept thus involves an entanglement of memory and media, which together forms dynamic relationships on two axis: the first, relational, involves a negotiation between self and others, private and public, individual and collective, while the second axis articulating time negotiates the relationship between the past and the future. 'Mediated memories' are, according to van Dijck, "manifestations of a complex interaction between brain, material objects and the cultural matrix from

which they arise" (2007, 29), wherein digital technologies more than ever foreground the question of how they are "embodied, enabled, and embedded" (29). What van Dijck asks is how the changing materiality of our world changed how we remember – how the fact that digital media can be reproduced, stored and manipulated changes the way we negotiate relations and times. According to her, digitization, multimedialization and googleization are the three major types of transformation which have integrated how we "store, retrieve, and adjust memories in the course of living" (2007, 150). A creative play between fact and fantasy has always been an essential part of memory retrieval, as the human brain is not equipped to memorize everything. The body makes mistakes a computer wouldn't make: the machine does not forget, it can copy, superimpose or relocate data at an instant. The very same media can exist at different places and in different contexts, it can be an exact copy or it can be manipulated – creating a new fiction altogether.

In *You, the World and I* and *Remember Carthage*, historical places and historical events intertwine with fiction, in the digital sphere where the past, present and future intertwine. *You, the World and I* engaged with one of the largest publicly available archives of today, injecting an intimate position of the yearning narrator. While the work exposed this virtual archive as a space of instability, it also put – as Sandra Rafman notes (2013, 3) – the human gaze at the center. The narrator's memories define his experience of the past relationship and these memories are now located in a sprawling network of images which belong to everybody. This subjective position is held in both works as the narrator occupies simulations of real or imagined spaces. Time loops, overlaps or simply stops. Subjectivity forms thorough memory, and as van Dijck has shown, splits and slips between the personless voice and digital found footage. The trilogy shows how the concept of 'mediated memories' affects a subject, exploring a new kind of subjectivity which emerges with the proliferation of digital technologies – one, like the very media that makes our memories – that can be constantly recombined and reconfigured, that unbinds traditional dichotomies.

The way in which these new media technologies have impacted our memory has also been explored by scholar in the field of memory studies, Alison Landsberg (2000) who develops the concept of 'prosthetic memories'. These are memories that do not emerge from actual, lived experience, but are in some way implanted – unsettling the distinction between reality and simulation, as well as subverting the boundary of our body and any sense of subjective autonomy (2000, 175). Memory, as van Dijck has also stated, validates our experience of the world, it positions us not only by relaying the past but understanding our present and future. Mass media, Landsberg argues, has brought "the texture and contours of prosthetic memory

into dramatic relief" (2000, 176) – creating experiences, imprinting memories which were never actually lived. She connects this to Jean Baudrillard's (Landsberg 2000, 176) critique of postmodernity as a total lack of authentic experience, and the notion that all lived experience has become so mediated we live in a state of hyperreality. Landsberg (2000, 176) rejects Baudrillard's notion of a loss of reality and real experience, provoking the reader to ask if there ever even was a reality to begin with. Setting aside the idea of the death of the real, she (2000, 186) posits that today we are living in a time obsessed with the experience of the real. What matters, ultimately, is not if the memories were lived, but that we experience them: memory, media and our bodies together form the ground for actually experiencing the world (2000, 187).

4 Broken Times and Spaces

"But I know that memory is not a tool for exploring the past, but a medium. It is the medium of my experience, just like the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried" concludes the nameless voice in the final video of the trilogy, *A Man Digging*, echoing Landsberg's argument. Waiting rooms, corridors and other transit areas prevail – at times empty **[fig. 4]**, at times littered with dead NPC's (Non-Playable Character) **[fig. 5]**. The narrative framework is loose, the familiar processed voice of the narrator leads us while a meditative, electronic piece plays in the background. "One afternoon, I traveled back to the edge of my memory. Images of the past, layered with nostalgia, obstructed my enjoyment of present beauty." – the narrator introspectively digs through the meaning of time, memory, experience and subjectivity. While we have seen the way in which memory mediates the digital experience, at this point we may be more precise in articulating the affective conditions of digitally mediated reality – what this experience feels like. Here, time and space are completely broken: there is no ground as there is no past or future, states we may have glimpsed at with the two other works.

Subsequently, two spatio-temporal conditions may help in revealing these affective qualities, while simultaneously positioning the works within a broader context of cultural production: first, that of broken time, and second, that of groundlessness. Broken time relates to cultural theorist Mark Fisher's (2012) notion of hauntology. Originally a neologism developed by Derrida (1993) in his book *Spectres of Marx*, Fisher applies the notion to the contemporary cultural condition. Hauntology refers to a sense of "failure of the future" – a haunting of "all the lost futures that the 20th century taught us to anticipate" (Fisher 2012, 16). According to Fisher, this has brought on a failure of social imagination and a cultural position

Figure 4   Jon Rafman, *Remember Carthage*. 2013. Single channel video, 13'43".
© Jon Rafman, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

Figure 5   Jon Rafman, *A Man Digging*. 2013. Video, sound, 8'21".
© Jon Rafman, courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

in which it is impossible to imagine radically different futures. Music, film and other media from the 1990s and later nostalgically reverberate familiar aesthetics, mourning the loss of any kind of effective future different from our current times. In the same year of Fisher's article, Jon Rafman states in an interview:

> In the past we relied on dystopian and utopian views of the future. The future was thought of as fundamentally different from the present. Today, there is a sense that the future is going to be a lot more banal, that we are already living in the future [...], that the future is going to be more of the same... more apps and technologies that are designed to mediate and 'improve' our experience of reality. It is essentially a more Facebook-like future. (Feustel 2012, n.p.)

In the whole of the trilogy temporalities are dismantled and any kind of cyberutopian future is played back through low quality virtual simulations. Hauntology, Fisher argues, does not only concern time – but also space. He recalls Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard whose writings on hyperreality have shown how these new technologies have collapsed both space and time (Fisher 2012, 19). The proliferation of "non-places" – airports, chain stores, retail parks, malls – intensifies this "erosion of spatiality" (19). These non-places are everywhere in Rafmans's works, and ultimately the place the narrator seeks refuge in *Remember Carthage* is a resort. Hauntology encompasses both a loss of space, as that of time, something which *A Man Digging* puts into full view: time is suspended, as the protagonist moves through dead transit areas contemplating the meaning of our digitally mediated experience. Interestingly, Fisher concludes, hauntology also confronts us with this overarching stagnation, perhaps pushing us towards genuine modes of creativity (2012, 19).

Groundlessness, according to artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl, may be understood as the condition of the present moment: a loss of stable ground in relation to any kinds of "metaphysical claims or foundational political myths" (2011). In the essay published on the platform e-flux, Steyerl proposes we are experiencing a new type of visuality: from the linear perspective which dominated through to the Enlightenment, towards a vertical perspective developed with the rise of new technologies of surveillance and targeting. Although a fiction, linear perspective implied a natural, objective and scientific position held by a single, static spectator. Linearity also implied linear time, progress, as well as a "calculable future" (Steyerl 2011). New technologies opened new times and spaces: multiple and simultaneous perspectives, all-encompassing aerial or God's eye views. While linear perspective safely ratified colonialist objectives, the new vertical norm has coded, according to Steyerl, "a new subjectivity safely folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction"

(2011). This has, she continues, enabled a detached, mobile and mechanized gaze – both militaristically and pornographically intrusive. Rafman's trilogy obviously plays into this verticality: multiple visual perspectives play a great part, while surveillance technologies are arguably the very foundation of the works. While the first two works seem to still hold on to a sense of ground – grasping, albeit unsurely, to times and places – *A Man Digging* is in a continuous state of free fall. Not the speeding kind of free fall towards a stable ground, but one which has lost any kind of relation between the past, present and future, as well as the delineation between what is real and what is not. Like Fisher, Steyerl concludes with a perspectival shift, an opportunity for a formation of different kinds of subjectivities:

> Finally, the perspective of free fall teaches us to consider a social and political dreamscape of radicalized class war from above, one that throws jaw-dropping social inequalities into sharp focus. But falling does not only mean falling apart, it can also mean a new certainty falling into place. [...] It promises no community, but a shifting formation. (2011)

5 A Wandering Stranger

In a number of interviews from this time, Rafman identifies with the role of the 'cyberflâneur', a contemporary counterpart to the modernist wanderer of busy urban streets, "trying to draw a historical line between a classical, modern, or romantic quest for fullness in a world that is completely fragmented" (Kholeif 2014, 195). In the *Painter of Modern Life* published in 1863, poet Charles Baudelaire draws out the role of this new figure who rises out of the accelerated urbanization, modernisation and industrialisation of everyday life. The *flâneur* is a "passionate spectator" (Baudelaire 1863, 9) one with the crowd, for him "it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, and the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (9). He is at home nowhere and everywhere, at the same time hidden and at its very center – "a mirror as vast as the crowd itself" (9). Equipped with a brush or a pen, the goal of this elusive figure is to find the essential quality of the new modern era. The 'cyberflâneur' thus dwells in much the same way online, roaming through forums, life simulations and other media sharing services trying to understand the essence of our digitally mediated reality. Online we find new kinds of anonymous crowds, new landscapes and new ways to connect.

Literary and cultural theoretician Robert G. Beghetto (2022, 9) explains that for Baudelaire, the idea of modernity was tied to an ephemeral or fleeting experience of modern life: constantly in flux

with the unchangeable and eternal, "this sensation had a profound effect on the relationship between past, present and future". Not only characterized by new industries, technologies and rational discourse, modernity facilitated for Baudelaire a sense of freedom and free investigation. Beghetto ties Baudelaire's *flâneur* to a figure of the modern stranger – a simultaneously anti-modern figure, immersed as well as critical to the paradoxes of modernity. These paradoxes are, for Beghetto, related to modernity's project of secularization and its ambiguous position towards the sacral. A stranger, according to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1999, 79), is, like the *flâneur*, "an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever arriving". His in-between position challenges the worldview of natives – as it renders visible the particular mode of life which is "effective only in as far as it stays transparent, invisible, codified" (79). A stranger thus puts into question the very structures of a community and its ideology, turning everyday life to a contested, insecure and problematic site (79). Expanding on this notion, for Beghetto the modern stranger challenges the objective truths and rationality of modernity, also finding ways to "uncannily resacralize itself within the liminality of secularized modernity" (2022, 14).

The digital sphere becomes an important liminal site for the modern stranger, continues Beghetto (127), as one which has blurred the boundaries between physical and virtual reality, ourselves and others, the private and the public. Absent and distant, the Internet as an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient site reflects the sacral notion of God, but in actuality it is more akin to Frankenstein's creature – a liminal entity reflecting "the fractured human existence" (127). Rafman, as we have seen, explicitly addresses this contemporary fragmentation, looking to the modern stranger in order to find the lost stability and fullness. In *You, the World and I*, this modern stranger interjects emotionally charged histories to a disinterested, machinic and anonymizing site – in *Remember Carthage* he embraces this cold virtuality which is usually hidden and in *A Man Digging* he looks for the meaning of experience in virtual massacres. The modern stranger of Rafman's trilogy wanders through these everyday digital spaces, exposing the ways in which they affect us and our experience of the world. This motion is reflected in the method of the artist whose practice at the time was very much based on an almost compulsive method of browsing and collecting material online. The material from which the trilogy is composed is, to a degree, real – at least as real as anything can be in a virtual setting. Once again, the boundary between fact and fiction comes into play, complicated by the fact that the anonymous, digitally processed voice is actually the artist's. This fact does not intend to suggest an autobiographical reading, but should highlight – once again – the ambiguous materiality of digital media and its shaky relationship to traditional dichotomies. The

artist-Jon Rafman and the protagonists of his works may thus be understood as modern strangers, resacralizing, in Beghetto's terms, the cold, distant and disinterested network streams they flow through.

The modern stranger may aimlessly wander, but he is no passive figure. By dangerously questioning existing structures and reflecting the way they operate, Beghetto proposes we may think of the stranger as a key figure in utopian thought (2022, 15). According to Beghetto, the very fact of the stranger's 'undecidability' can be understood as a form of resacralization and thus, a potential insight to social change. Utopia, for Beghetto (2022, 15), following Ernst Bloch, is to be understood as a dynamic, dialectic process – not an abstract 'elsewhere' but a present potential for change. Through his analysis of cyberpunk literature, Beghetto shows how, like Rafman's protagonists, these cybernetic modern strangers embrace alienation and fragmentation as a "continuous process of becoming," powerless in the physical world, digital spaces become sites of potential power and control – "a liminal space where one can challenge both the boundaries and authority of the overshadowing culture" (2022, 137). That this utopian quality does not belong to some distant future, as it does not belong to some other space, shows marxist literary theoretician Fredric Jameson (1982) in his analysis of science fiction literature. Science fiction, in its basis, may be understood as having the social function to accustom the reader to the rapid changes and progress brought about by capitalism. In this sense, Baudelaire's works provided a "shock-absorbing mechanism" (151) for the reader first visiting this new, modernized environment. For Jameson, this function is more complex: rather than a future-oriented vision of the world, here he recognizes processes of restructuring and defamiliarization of our own, actual present (152). The present is essentially unavailable to the human subject as s/he is habituated and numb to its effects, thus making these works "elaborate strategies of indirection" (152) – as ones which are able to break through "our monadic insulation" and to "experience, for the first real time, this 'present'" (152). What these strategies show is thus not a future, but precisely "dramatize our incapacity to imagine" (Jameson 1982, 152) it. For Jameson this means Utopia cannot be imagined, as it posits a radical difference and otherness to a present of which we are all prisoners. While this failure of utopian imagination permeates Rafman's works, as its connection to Fisher's notion of hauntology has precisely shown, as a 'strategy of indirection' it manages to break through the numbing ways in which we interact with digital media. Just as the trilogy searches for meaning in this new experience, so it exposes this experience to the viewer on a direct, affective, sensious level. Just as the formal and narrative structure of the trilogy, so the artistic method points to this experience. Composed of actual found footage and using the artist's voice, the present permeates Rafman's work,

affirming that utopia cannot be imagined, as individual and collective pasts and imagined futures become undone within the slipping subjects. Settled firmly in the present, the trilogy also shows its limitations and proposes how we may engage with the pervasiveness of digital media in new, creative, unsettling ways.

6   Conclusion

In 2020, Google announced their photo sharing and storage service Google Photos had in five years accumulated over 4 trillion photos and videos, growing every day by approximately 28 billion new uploads. As read in the official statement, it was launched in 2015 with "the mission of being the home for your memories," as "a place to reflect on meaningful moments in your life" (Ben-Yair 2020, n.p). Personal memories created through digital devices, fed on a digital cloud belonging to a sprawling network of instantly available private and public flows of information. In 2019, Paris's Notre Dame cathedral was heavily damaged due to a fire, and rumor was the developers of the action-adventure video game *Assassins Creed: Unity* (Ubisoft 2014) could help in its ensuing reconstruction. Famous for its life-like accuracy of actual, historical places, the developers had done extensive 3D scanning of the monument. In the game, you can sprint through the church, swing from its towers and, of course, assassinate your enemies. While the rumor ended up being exactly that – a rumor – it bears witness not only to the slippage of the virtual into the physical, but also to a new kind of experience of history and lost times. How we remember depends on our experiences, on the context and medium, and ever more often this medium is the virtual sphere.

This article has aimed to trace these growing transformations by engaging with three of Rafman's video works which are formally, narratively and methodologically interconnected in different, important ways. Made up from Google's Street View archive, *You, the World and I* unraveled the insecurities we face when dealing with digital databases as holders of knowledge. By injecting a subjective gaze to the automated motion of a technological eye, the work exposed how the ways we engage with virtual archives blurs traditional dichotomies and allows for new temporalities and subjectivities. Set in various virtual simulations of real and imagined places, *Remember Carthage* reverberated these new losses and gains, while the work's analysis opened to the question of memory as a subjective process of the mind. Memory was to be understood as a dynamic process which actively joined with media to negotiate relations between ourselves and others, the personal and collective, private and public, as well as the past and the future. Again,

both works have shown how the digital sphere perturbs these distinctions and how memory – and, consequently, our subjective beings – have been shaped by the ways in which we engage our past and present. For Rafman's subjects, there is no outside to the virtual and the technological. Their beings, their sense of self reflects the flows of networks in which they reside. Experience in these subject's worlds may be digital or not at all. Again, *A Man Digging* reflects both this new archive and mode of remembrance, and has led to the point of the analysis which has, on one hand, aimed to qualify these new experiences and, on the other hand, aimed to position the works in the context of broader cultural and visual production. The shifts of time, place and perspective came into play as phenomena the digital sphere and technological progress have dismantled, towards a world of broken futures and slipping grounds. Non-places and temporal confusions imbue the three works as their subject's experiences slip between what is real and what is not, what has been or may be. Horizons are broken, as the subjects flutter above and between digital scraps longing for an escape of their fractured existence. As they wander through these splintered sites where reality – whatever it may have been – is lost, the artist's method reflects this by his process of collecting and recording found digital material. His own voice is that of these lost subjects, shifting the works from a position of representation towards actual presence. These wanderers are strangers, pointing to the present, mediated conditions they also pose a danger to the world as they disrupt the order we have grown accustomed to. In a sense these strangers give way to utopian imagination – but not one which belongs to another place or time – it is here and now, strategically breaking down the numbness of everyday life towards some sense of truth. This truth is ambiguous, fleeting and affecting, revealing itself only momentarily as we lull back to the overwhelming networked flow.

Bibliography

Baudelaire, C. (1863). *Painter of Modern Life*. Edited by J. Mayne. New York: Phaidon Publishers.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833125-26

Bauman, Z. (1998). *Modernity and Ambivalence*. London: Polity Press.

Beghetto, R.G. (2022). *Monstrous Liminality: Or, the Uncanny Strangers of Secularized Modernity*. London: Ubiquity Press.
https://doi.org/10.5334/bcp

Ben-Yair, S. (2020). "Updating Google Photos' Storage Policy to Build for the Future". *Blog.google*, 11 November.
https://blog.google/products/photos/storage-changes/

Derrida, J. (1995). "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression". *Diacritics*, 2(25), 9-63.
https://doi.org/10.2307/465144

Feustel, M. (2012). *Interview: Jon Rafman, the Lack of History in the Post-Internet Age*.
https://www.marcfeustel.com/eyecurious/interview-jon-rafman-the-lack-of-history-in-the-post-internet-age

Fisher, M. (2012). "What is Hauntology?". *Film Quarterly*, 1(66), 16-24.
https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16

Jameson, F. (1982). "Progress Vs. Utopia: Or, can We Imagine the Future?". *Science Fiction Studies*, 2(9), 147-58.
https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474248655.0027

Kholeif, O. (2014). *You are Here, Art After the Internet*. London: Cornerhouse & SPACE.

Landsberg, A. (2000). "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner". Featherstone, M.; Burrows, R. (eds), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*. London: SAGE Publications, 175-90.
https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446250198.n10

Manoff, M. (2004). "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines". *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 1(4), 9-25.
https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2004.0015

Rafman, S. (2013). "The Reframing of Loss: Jon Rafman's Virtual Archives". Johansson, K. (ed.), *Communicating the Archive*. Gothenburg: Gothenburg Press.

Steyerl, H. (2011). "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective". *e-flux Journal*, 24, 1-9.
https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/

van Dijck, J. (2007). *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Cultural Memory in the Present.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804779517

**Through Exhibitions and Archives:
Inquiries on the Sociopolitical Engagement
of Cultural Institutions**

History in Fragments: What Does *A Photogenetic Line* Tell Us About Dialectical Images?

Santasil Mallik
Western University, Ontario, Canada

Abstract The essay explores how the composition of the photo-architectural installation *A Photogenetic Line* (2019) by the Mumbai-based CAMP studio redounds in stretching Walter Benjamin's multiform conceptual schema of the 'dialectical image' on two essential fronts: the flash-like nature of its appearance and its monadic configuration. Decoding this function proffered by the installation, in turn, reveals a revisionary historical materialist approach that rearticulates the question of violence in light of resurgent authoritarian populisms in South Asia.

Keywords Monads. Flash. Curatorial. Photo archive. South Asia. Authoritarianism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Photography and Historical Materialism. – 3 A Contemporary 'Line'. – 4 Timing the Flash. – 5 Is the Line a Monad? – 6 Historiographic Revision.

1 Introduction

In their installation *A Photogenetic Line* (2019), the Mumbai-based collaborative art studio CAMP (Critical Art and Media Practices) assembles a 100-foot-long architectural montage of cutouts from the photo archives of the 146-year-old Indian newspaper *The Hindu*. CAMP was co-founded by Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran, along with a set of practitioners, to experiment with various media for creative research, documentation, and infrastructural interventions.

With this work, they reframe existing photographs to intertwine disparate narrative strands in South Asian history, beginning from the waning days of British colonial presence, encompassing several landmark moments in the emergent postcolonial states, and following through to the contemporary. The cutouts do not separate the individual elements in photographs from the surroundings but variably redraw and incorporate the photographed backgrounds to initiate a conversation with other images in the installation. Hence, characters, objects, motifs, and stories cross-contextually interact to generate a layered, polyvocal account of the subcontinent. The curatorial design of the sequence methodologically follows one or more of the three self-devised patterns: people growing older or younger over the pictures, things emerging from or receding to the background, and captions referentially connecting two images (CAMP 2019).

At one point in the sequence, for example, a cutout frame depicts a paramilitary recruit in Srinagar, Kashmir, carrying a stack of plastic chairs against the faraway background of the command center's gate [fig. 1]. This reference to the gate matures to become the central element in the following cutout, showing the entry to the Aman Setu bridge that connects the borders of India and Pakistan. Incidentally, the person who clicked this photograph, Shujaat Bukhari, was later shot dead by unnamed militants in Srinagar. The next cutout up the sequence shows a group of people carrying the corpse of a person in the streets of Srinagar as a cloud of tear gas disperses in the background. Correspondingly, a teargas explosion in the lawns of Osmania University, Hyderabad, during a student protest becomes the subject of the succeeding image, followed by another cutout of men sleeping unheeded – resembling lifeless bodies – in a different lawn on a hot afternoon in Hyderabad. It further leads to an image of women occupying the lawns of the Police Commissioner's Office in Chennai and so on. In this way, CAMP envisions an alternative historiographic method where photographic signifiers constellate across geographical and temporal borders to reconceive how we narrate the past.

CAMP's construction of *A Photogenetic Line* critiques the logic of historicism because, though the installation architecturally maintains a linear composition of historical fragments, it frustrates the principle of causality. Contingency and chance guide the current of the imagistic chain, tantamounting to an ensemble unbound by the additive imperative of universal history. Here, it would not be an empty presumption to claim that the cutouts operate akin to the structure of quotations that Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* considered essential for the "materialist presentation of history"; and the object constructed in the actualization of the method is what he called the dialectical image ([1982] 1999, 475). The installation offers a veritable scope to measure and reassess the conceptual contours

Figure 1   CAMP, *A Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Installation view. Kolkata, Experimenter.
https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/

of the dialectical image in materialist historiography. This paper is not concerned with using the artwork to validate the concept or vice versa but in signposting it as a vantage point to test the elasticity of some of the propositions underlying dialectical images. However, before proceeding with this inquiry, it is relevant to recapitulate the relationship between Benjamin's philosophy of history and his critical affiliation with the medium of photography.

2 Photography and Historical Materialism

For Benjamin, as evident in his "The Work of Art" essay, photography emerged as the "first truly revolutionary means of reproduction" ([1925] 1968, 224) that transformed how we perceive art and its social operations. His thesis has become something of a truism in photography criticism. Of course, he did not foreclose the possibility of the medium's co-optation by oppressive regimes or, to speak in Benjaminian terms, its redeployment in the aestheticization of politics. But, he primarily directed attention to the qualitative changes in apperception

brought about by the advent of photomechanical reproduction as a symptom of the historical transformations of the time. Esther Leslie reminds us how Benjamin himself was not immune to this. Besides the fact that photography recurrently surfaced as a thematic element in his work, his form of writing and philosophizing increasingly imbibed a photographic style (Leslie 2015, 31). It bore a significant influence on his historical materialist approach. In his monograph *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Eduardo Cadava further dwells on this relationship in Benjamin's corpus. Cadava approaches Benjamin's understanding of history by focusing on the latter's persistent leveraging of motifs like lighting, flashes, the past as a fleeting image, etc., in thinking through a historical method (1997, xix). Drawing on a Benjaminian analysis, he writes:

> Both historiography and photography are media of historical investigation. That photographic technology belongs to the physiognomy of historical thought means that there can be no thinking of history that is not at the same time a thinking of photography. (xviii)

A photographic mode of rendering history legible challenges the linear setting of causal relationships in traditional historiography and does not abide by sweeping philosophical categorizations *à la* Hegel. One of the central doctrines of historical materialism stated by Benjamin is that history "decays into images, not into stories" ([1982] 1999, 476). Here, the task of the dialectician is to seize these images – through historical construction – with a firm grasp as they suddenly flash up in the "now of recognizability" (473). The dialectical image emerges through a constructive force that also entails the destruction of historicism. What is crucial to connect here is Benjamin's sketches surrounding the nature of the concept are conditioned by his recourse to a photographic register of historiographic thinking.

A Photogenetic Line echoes Benjaminian understanding of history, not least because it uses photographs but because its construction relies on a photographic mode of address to cast historical light onto the archival records of *The Hindu*. Like the camera shutter, the cutouts break the illusion of temporal continuity, precipitating image fragments and staging the possibility of dialectically grasping them in the present. To return to a segment of the installation referred to above, the images indexing moments from the long-term political crises in Kashmir acquire a resonant, if not a prognostic, significance in the context of the work's presentation in 2019. Shortly after CAMP presented it in an exhibition at the Experimenter gallery, Kolkata, from mid-April to mid-July (Experimenter 2019), India's Hindu-nationalist government abrogated the semi-autonomous status of Indian-administered Kashmir. The decree scrapping the constitutional privileges of the only Muslim majority state in the country

came in the aftermath of months-long security clampdowns and communication blockades in the region. While the government considered its coercive move as an end-all solution to the Kashmir question, the state forces' ongoing legacy of human rights violations in the disputed territories remains unaccounted for since India's independence in 1947.

3 A Contemporary 'Line'

In the installation, fragments from Kashmir's violent past meet the present era of the crises to form what Benjamin would call a constellation. They do not establish a causal link, for facts become causes to materialize history only in long-delayed retrospect. Benjamin contested the idea of history as a succession of events arranged like the "beads of a rosary" ([1940] 1968, 263). In his posthumously published essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", he restated that a historical materialist captures the constellation crystallized when the historian's present era momentarily encounters "a definite earlier one" ([1940] 1968, 255). It, however, does not entail seeing the past in its supposedly 'true' form. The goal is to "seize hold of a memory" or retain the "image of the past" as it appears during "a moment of danger" (255). From this postulation, one can also infer that times of crisis provide the most conducive grounds for the historical construction of dialectical images.

The divergent trajectories of events evidenced in CAMP's photo-architectural composition variably react with the epoch of their exposition. Coinciding with the exhibition of the work, the Narendra Modi-led right-wing government got re-elected to power in May with a stronger mandate. Indeed, the government's revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir barely three months later was the first major post-election decision rallying Hindu nationalist sentiments around India's imagined past. A slew of policy decisions further exacerbated ideological impositions, including the banning of beef, censoring films, fabricating history textbooks to concoct India's Hindu ancestry, passing discriminatory citizenship laws, etc. State-supported mob violence and anti-Muslim pogroms became even more prevalent as well. Amid the ongoing political crises, CAMP endeavors to take hold of images from the debris pile of history that flare up with the light of the present.

The installation rethinks historical materialism in the Benjaminian sense. In the essay *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History*, political philosopher Ronald Beiner lays out how Benjamin intervened in the tradition of historical materialism in his time. Firstly, Benjamin reversed its future-facing perspective of revolutionary expectations and proposed what Beiner calls a more "redemptive relation" to the

Figures 2-3   CAMP, *A Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Installation view. Kolkata, Experimenter. https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/

past (1984, 424). His sketches for a radical historical method unambiguously betrayed a disposition toward retrieving the past rather than making the future. Secondly, Benjamin denied attributing any rational, straitjacketed purpose behind the dialectical movement of historical materialism. He was uninterested in tracing – and, in the process, inventing – a shape of totality ordering the images of the past. Since history is an ever-increasing accumulation of fragments against the storm of progress, he suggested making whole what already lies shattered (425). The 'line' of cutouts relies on a photographic language of holding the past to structurally orchestrate a historical materialist process, provoking the construction of dialectical images where present forms of crisis collide with those of the past over a constellation of associations.

4 Timing the Flash

At this point, it is opportune to explore how *A Photogenetic Line* complicates the shape and form in which dialectical images appear during times of crisis and, adjacently, to understand the implications it holds in rethinking Benjamin's understanding of historical materialism. Turning to the metaphor of flash will be a befitting entry point to the following discussion. The pervasive element underlining dialectical images is their necessarily sudden form of emergence. In the "Convolute N" of *The Arcades*, which reflects on the epistemological concerns of the project, Benjamin stresses that "the relation of what-has-been to the now" encounters each other in a 'flash' ([1982] 1999, 462). The image formed therein is "dialectics at a standstill". The flash is morphologically crucial for Benjamin due to its unforeseen, startling effect. He counts on it to generate instantaneous insight or cognition like the illumination of a camera flashbulb, to "jolt the dreaming collective into a political 'awakening'" (Buck-Morss 1991, 219). In Benjamin's photographic idiom of thinking, the potential of historical images relates less to the notion of representation and more to the fleeting, abrupt form of their emergence. One might claim that he speaks with a Marshall McLuhan-esque twist, which is that the form and mode of the appearance of the messages determine the meaning they carry.

Benjaminian scholar Sigrid Weigel, in *The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images*, argues that the 'flash' and the 'image' explain and substitute each other; both signal the philosopher's epistemological position. The "flashlike image" is a cognitive mode in which an "instant can illuminate an entire situation" (2015, 348). Weigel draws a philosophical genealogy of the 'flash' in Benjamin's thought and mentions how his engagement with the temporality of photographic images made him think about the value of shock or suddenness – a "mode

of perception" characteristic of "the temporal structure of modernity" (362). She fleshes out a principal difference between Benjamin's "flashlike cognition" (362) and language as the place of reflection. For Benjamin, she argues that the image is always on the verge of disappearing and almost impossible to capture. The only way to condense the image and render it "fruitful for thinking" is through "linguistically constructed reflection," which Benjamin conceives as the "long-rolling thunder" following the flash (366). By referring to this distinction, she outlines the "latency of images" (352), a temporal caesura separating the insightful flash from conscious reflection.

Benjamin's 'flash' is also structurally seen as an element in crisis, owing to its transience and involuntariness. If historical images unexpectedly flash up in moments of danger, then the threat is also of never seeing them again altogether (Hamacher 2005, 65). To put it another way, the crisis or threat Benjamin hints at appears to belong to "the innermost structure of historical cognition" (65). But the question remains: is the flash an obligatory form for historical insight and consequent reflection? CAMP's installation provides us with an avenue to stretch the conceptual nature of the flash and reflect on the corresponding historiographic implications. The work does not diffuse the political potentiality of flashes but 'times' them differently. To return to the context of photography, the magnesium or aluminum wire flash bulbs in Benjamin's time – which exploded to illuminate a scene with a burst of light – had a specific temporal character. They cloned the jolt of momentary illumination caused by natural lightning. That is why, as the art historian Kate Flint maintains in her article *Victorian Flash*, it becomes difficult to qualify the material connotations of the flash in Benjamin's vocabulary, as it interrelatedly signifies the camera flashbulb and the lightning strike (2018, 488).

A different order of the photographic flash is productive for maneuvering *A Photogenetic Line*, especially the more modern rear-curtain sync flash or long-exposure stroboscopic flash mechanism made possible in Single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras. The results of these modes become apparent with longer exposures. Usually, the flash fires when the shutters open to expose the camera plates or sensors to light. But in the rear-curtain mode, the flash fires at the end of the exposure time when the shutter is about to close. It makes a qualitative difference in the image because the camera captures the entire trajectory of an object's movement before freezing it with artificial light. As a result, a motion trail becomes visible leading up to the point of the object's last position of capture. The long-exposure stroboscopic mode takes it further by firing multiple rounds of flash to freeze a moving object at several points of its movement within the frame while preserving a blurry trail. Imagistically speaking, a vague 'line' of the object's trajectory manifests in the frame with different junctures of clarity. These flashes produce results analogically related to

the structure of the installation. In place of a single element, CAMP constructs a line containing fragments of various historical objects from across contexts. It is as if the installation freezes divergent narrative intersections over a single stretch of 'exposure', signaling the many possible messianic interventions in an opening of history. These temporal orderings are not altogether unforeseen in Benjamin. Nor is the question of movement remote from his articulation of the flash. Weigel claims that Benjamin's "image of a flash" and "image as a flash" were predicated upon images of motion from natural phenomena like the 'vortex' or 'eddy' (2015, 356). Especially in his early reflections on painting, she writes, Benjamin sought a "counter-image" to historicism's idiomatic "flow of time" metaphor (357). The eddy, for him, served as an alternative imagistic reference synthesizing the interaction between "the past and the present," "the eternity and the instant," and "pre- and posthistory" (357).

The line is a motion captured in its course. In the installation's rendering of historical time, a long-exposure scene appears stitched with numerous flashes. It is not the blinding flash of singular historical insight but a series of multi-angulated and prismatic flashes that multifariously illuminate the present. A review of the work points out how different cutout segments connect contemporary political crises to South Asian history. References to anti-Tamil sentiments based on language and ethnicity, which resulted in the Sri Lankan Civil War from 1983 to 2009, relate to Hindi language imposition in India; images of leaders from the Dravidian movement relate to the Hindu nationalist party's continuing attempts to undermine Dravidian identity; a narrative thread referring to a Dalit Panthers event shed light on the rising caste-related violence against Dalits and Muslims in the country (Arora 2019, n.p.). And, so, the line goes on. A *Hand Guide* for the installation captions the individual fragments and elaborates their paratactic relation in the architectural line. It is unimportant here to outline the exact basis of the dialectical encounters between the individual images of the past and the contemporary situation. The point of the work is precisely to structurally emulate the temporal dilation of the shutter's exposure to allow for multiple points of insightful flashes seaming a line of disjunctive continuity.

Critics often overlook Benjamin's comments on the long exposure by only focusing on the snapshot character of his thought. His *A Short History of Photography* includes a thorough discussion of the early long-exposure Calotype portraits by the Scottish painter-photographer David Octavius Hill, in which the protracted procedure demanded the models to "live inside rather than outside the moment" (Benjamin [1931] 1972, 17). As opposed to the snapshot, Benjamin noted how the subjects' steadfast awareness of the time-consuming photographic principle made them grow into the picture as subjects, albeit with bourgeois sensibility. Even in his appreciation of
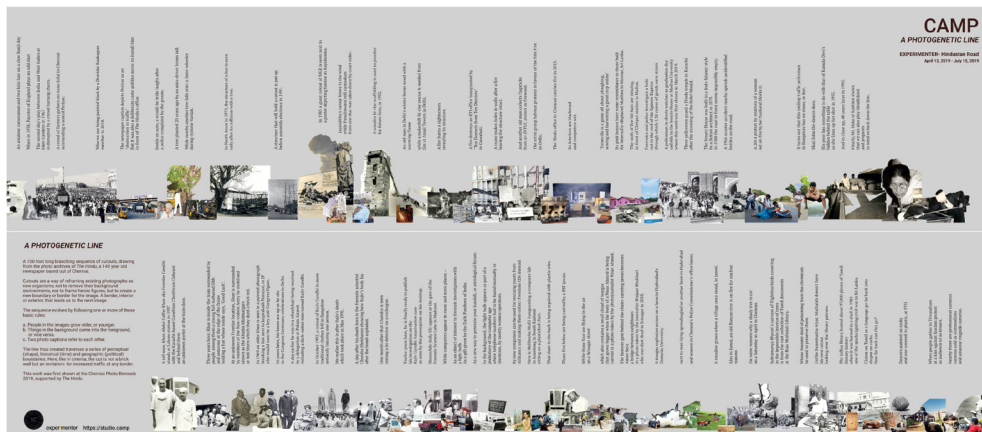
Figure 4 CAMP, *A Photogenetic Line*. 2019. Catalog. Kolkata, Experimenter.
https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/

Karl Blossfeldt's close-ups of plants and flowers, Benjamin particularly paid attention to their hypervisible quality rendered through long exposures, enlargement, and meticulous printing. He lauded how Blossfeldt's magnification disclosed "a whole unsuspected treasury of analogies and forms" ([1928] 2015, 124) within the plants. Such revelation or actualization inherent to long exposures receives a dialectical torque when flashes of historical light saturate them.

5　Is the Line a Monad?

The centrality of flashes in Benjamin's historiographic reflections closely relates to his understanding of monads. A historical materialist, he asserted, "approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad" (Benjamin [1940] 1968, 263). His emphasis on the monadic configuration is evident in *The Arcades*, where he declares that any dialectical process is inconceivable without "dealing with a monad" ([1982] 1999, 476). However, he first engaged with Leibniz's monadology in *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama* to postulate the monadic nature of ideas or historical insights:

> The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings – concealed in its own form – if indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. ([1928] 1977, 48)

Benjamin configured the monad as a site of clarity and revolutionary potential that disrupts historical continuity, drawing upon the Leibnizian precept of seeing monads containing within themselves the entire scope of history. The monad as an indivisible unit abbreviates "an immanent totality of perceptions" (Schwebel, 609). It yields endless insights, not because of mythification but the secularization of history. Though Benjamin began thinking about the monad primarily in terms of its metaphysical reality in *The Origin*, his later writings enriched it with historical materialism.

Historian Elsa Costa interrogates the place of the monad in Benjamin's thought to complicate further the oft-proclaimed separation between the metaphysical and theological occupations of his early writings and the historical materialism of his late years. She writes how the philosopher sought messianic transcendence – in all its theological dimensions – through "the science of extracting the revolutionary moments or monad" (Costa 2019, 132). Hence, monads stand for a "bridge between matter and the divine" (94). Like Leibniz, Benjamin was ambiguous about the relationship between the "self-generating" monads and their relationship to God or a higher ordering principle (133). Yet, he was committed to the idea of messianic redemption. Costa works out this conceptual discrepancy by stating that "historical moments" are not "discrete moments whose connection to each other is unknown" (137). Rather, Benjamin's historiography brings them together through "the 'string' of messianic time" (137). Philosopher Frédéric Neyrat brings Benjamin's understanding of monads in conversation with the nature of flashes. While Leibniz constituted an ontology of monads where each substance embodies a world by itself, for Benjamin, the worlds apart "is to be constituted and it is constituted in a flash" (80). It also marks Benjamin's fundamental departure from Leibniz's idea of monads belonging to an ontological order of being with an immaterial yet definite and indestructible existence. Benjamin, on the other hand, conceives the monad as an 'event' that does not exist before its unfolding, an element signifying the dazzling, flash-like "event of existence itself" (80).

In Benjamin's monadological proposition of history, individual events are fragmented, "self-contained specimens" reflecting the past (Laurentiis 1994, 33). On dialectically grasping the fragments, they unveil the "essential features of human history" and "social relationships" otherwise opaque to whom Marx would call alienated subjects (33). If flashes invoke the temporal aspect of Benjaminian history, monads refer to the speculative shape of history's appearance. But, more importantly for Benjamin, monads fold into each other, perhaps, like a Möbius strip. *A Photogenetic Line* provides an apposite model for imagining this fold in play, as the cutout fragments correspond to disparate historical worlds illuminating the present and vice versa. The fragments are the visual counterpart to monads,

and the architectural rendition of delayed or long exposure strobo-
scopic flashes stages the possibility of them intersecting and pass-
ing through the contemporary. Though the contexts of the individ-
ual cutouts vary widely, they encounter the ongoing political crisis
in concrete ways.

The principle of montage comes closest to mirroring CAMP's col-
lective enunciation of monadic histories. It is not because the instal-
lation employs photomontage as an aesthetic device but because it
embodies montage as a historiographic principle. Regarding the role
of montage in Benjamin's construction of history, cultural theorist
Max Pensky explains:

> Benjamin's decision to carry the montage principle over into criti-
> cal historiography implies that *historical* fragments... can be con-
> structed by removing them (via historical research) from their em-
> beddedness in a particular context (in which they are recorded
> only insofar as they are insignificant, the "trash of history"), and
> "mounting" them in a series of textual juxtapositions – informed
> by a so-far missing principle of construction – such that the juxta-
> posed fragments constitute a constellation. (2004, 186)

The dialectical images emerging from the constellation facilitate an
epistemological shift to generate new "interpretations of the frag-
ments' relationships with one another" (186). In the context of *A Pho-
togenetic Line*, montage becomes a dialectical means to disclose his-
torical consciousness through multiple monads.

One can construe that the installation plays out Benjamin's exten-
sion of Leibnizian monadology as it traverses a 'metaphysical' togeth-
er with a 'historical materialist' conceptualization of monads. The
'line' by itself transfigures into a monadological structure 'contain-
ing' other monads within a messianic temporal thread. Each frag-
ment recontextualized in the installation also refracts the rest, spot-
ting Benjamin's claim that every individual monad "contains, in an
indistinct way, all the others" (Benjamin [1928] 1977, 48). There is a
play between the intensive singularity of revelation and the multi-
plicity of worlds underlining the philosophy of monads, a relation re-
markably manifest in *The Arcades*. Indeed, Benjamin crafted his un-
finished curatorial compendium with a "monadological armature",
where he sought to reveal the historical essence of the nineteenth
century in the Paris arcades – as if they represented a singular, min-
iaturized cosmos – while assembling an enormous array of materials
(Friedlander 2024, 55).

Benjamin's pluralist conception of interactive monads refines
Leibniz's. The fundamental premise of dialectical images constel-
lating in a flash, where thought arrests history, sits at odds with the
Leibnizian notion that only God, the absolute monad, can intervene

with the perceptive continuity of other monads, a continuity arising out of their independent, isolated existence. It is where Benjamin comes in to reorient "each monad's eternal isolation from every other", turning them into potentially associative historical objects (Fenves 2003, 84). Marxist critic Frederic Jameson (2020) rightly observes that the oft-interpreted 'standstill' moment of the formation of the dialectical image does not bring our hermeneutic movement to a stop. Instead, it permits us to analyze the multiple choices, outcomes, or a "shared dilemma" (2020, 223) the messianic moment provides. It is a radical explosion of thought into fragments rather than its cessation. CAMP's installation efficiently drives home this aspect, stringing heterogeneous narrative worlds with the long exposure 'nowness' of the present. The architectural model of the work is of utmost relevance as it inducts the viewers into a participant interaction with historical knowledge. So far, the dialectical images discussed in relation to the work considers the involvement of the viewers as an implicit aspect.

In the Introduction to their book *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (2017) dwell on Benjamin's passing reference to the stereoscopic image to highlight the participant dynamics of dialectical images. The stereoscopic image is, after all, "a virtual image" (2017, 9) that comes into being when the binocular perception of human sight interacts with the stereoscopic device. Benjamin believed it crucial to harness people's "internal mechanism of perception" to develop a historical materialist project. Therefore, his approach of collecting miscellaneous notes, images, and anecdotes from the Paris arcades implied that the readers would complete them by bringing their respective historical circumstances to bear on those artifacts. The resulting "doubled images," similar to those formed in the stereoscope, are to crystallize into a revelatory dialectical image. Benjamin's dialectical images are not materially evident objects in the world; they emerge through "the imaginative interaction between reader and text" to galvanize past subjects into an "awakening" (11). *A Photogenetic Line* architecturally perpetuates this interaction by taking the viewers through a 100-foot line of fragments with remarkable historical valencies vis-a-vis the present.

6 Historiographic Revision

The installation presents an aesthetic context to reexamine the conceptual order of dialectical images, primarily its intrinsic modalities of the flash and the monad. Against the backdrop of resurging authoritarian populism in India, the work acquires a discernible critical edge. Whereas India's right-wing populist agenda claims a unified and essentialized image of the country's past, CAMP takes up Benjaminian historiography to 'fragment' its authoritarian dreams.

Today, social media platforms have become the mainstay for spreading disinformation by anti-democratic forces globally, where the relationship between the content and the image appears sublime or inviolable. Fake news with misconstrued visuals transmutes into tools for implementing anti-minority pogroms, as was the case during the Delhi riots in 2020. Contrarily, Benjamin's historical materialist approach exposes images to the light of history and politics. Unlike the grammar of disinformation that relies on shock and abreaction, dialectical images emerge at the site of critical thought to expand political understanding (Ferreira 2021, 491). The temporal setting of the cutout fragments in *A Photogenetic Line* is also markedly different from the doom scroll temporality of images fueling platform economy, making the viewers slow down as they navigate the 100-foot-long architectural line and work with possible semantic associations.

For Benjamin, the continuing presence of oppression is made possible by a particular approach to history involved in fabricating the origins of the present in ways that downplay the marginalized. Such modes of narrativizing history routinely perpetuate oppression (Fritsch 2001, 299). He conceived critical historiography as a retroactive endeavor to "free the present for a memory of the downtrodden in history" (299). This attention to the oppressed from among the pile of historical debris brings the "present inheritors" in touch with not a so-called originary past but with those whose "legacy is most difficult to identify and decipher" (299). Thus, the construction of dialectical images is ineluctably related to a revisionary historiography of violence and oppression. In the context of South Asia, postcolonial criticism following the development of the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s indicated a similar shift to listen to those at the fringes of officiated narratives about the region's past.

Subaltern Studies scholars like Gyanendra Pandey (2006), Shahid Amin (1995), and Partha Chatterjee (1994) have attended to the notion of 'fragments' to process the multiple intersections of subalternity based on gender, caste, ethnicity, etc. In their archival research, the fragment conceptually refers to a locus of difference for tracing alternative stories and methods. For instance, their investigation of sectarian conflicts in India focused on the fragmentary nature of oral narratives, literary productions by survivors, rumors, or FIR reports to write 'minor' histories against the totalizing tendencies of statist narratives. CAMP's work corresponds to the same critical lineage, as it splinters the photo archives of a national newspaper and recontextualizes them to speak to the present. There is no panoptic historiographic design that places the cutouts in a line, and all they follow is a contingent, though playfully coded, pattern. The installation's curatorial and critical-archival strategy lays out the constellatory connections between ongoing forms of violence and multiple past events.

The imagistic quality of the photo-architectural stretch calls to attention Benjamin's understanding of dialectical images. But, more importantly, the installation helps us reassess the key elements underlining his unfinished treatment of the concept. Though prevailing comprehensions of the dialectical image view it as a singular, nucleated burst of historical light that constellates in crises, *A Photogenetic Line* foregrounds the possibility of imagining its multiplicitous, temporally recursive, and kaleidoscopic modes of appearance. It bears considerable implications in working out an alternative historiographic method building on Benjamin's historical materialist approach. The monad and the flash are but two constituent elements in his theoretical apparatus, based on which this article tests the tensile strength of dialectical images under the duress of the ongoing contemporary. It is not to claim that the installation provides a readily applicable prototype to write counter-histories of violence, for the nature and form of dialectical images are contingent upon the time and site of their conception. Yet, it shows us how reworking the elementary materials of history in terms of their medium and mode of presentation reevaluates the foundational principles of dominant historiography. Perhaps, between dream and awakening, we can imagine other patterns of historical emergence besides the lightning strike.

Bibliography

Amin, S. (1995). *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Arora, A. (2019). "How Do You Revive a Newspaper's Photo Archive in Present-Day India?". *The Wire*, June 29.
https://thewire.in/media/a-photogenic-line-newspaper-photo-archive-present-day-india

Beiner, R. (1984). "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History". *Political Theory*, 12(3), 423-34.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591784012003005

Benjamin, W. [1925] (1968). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Arendt, H. (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Transl. by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 217-52.

Benjamin, W. [1928] (1977). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Transl. by J. Osborne. London: NLB.

Benjamin, W. [1928] (2015). "New Things About Flowers". Leslie 2015, 123-32.

Benjamin, W. [1931] (1972). "A Short History of Photography". Transl. by S. Mitchell, *Screen*, 13(1), 5-26.
https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5

Benjamin, W. [1940] (1968). "Theses on the Philosophy of History". Arendt, H. (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Transl. by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 253-64.

Benjamin, W. [1982] (1999). *The Arcades Project*. Transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Buck-Morss, S. (1991). *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Massachusetts University Press.

Cadava, E. (1997). *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CAMP, Critical Art and Media Practices (2019). *A Photogenetic Line*.
https://studio.camp/works/photogenetic/.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Costa, E. (2019). "When the Angels Played: Monadology and Divine Abscosion in Walter Benjamin". *Doctor Virtualis*, 15, 91-138.

Experimenter (2019). *A Photogenetic Line*.
https://experimenter.in/artists/54-camp/works/775-camp-a-photogenetic-line-2019/

Fenves, P.D. (2003). "Of Philosophical Style – From Leibniz to Benjamin". *boundary 2*, 30(1), 67-87.
https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-30-1-67

Ferreira, M.C.P. (2021). "Dialectical Images and Contemporary Times: Thinking Critically About Authoritarian Populism". Morelock, J. (ed.), *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*. Leiden: Brill, 473-93.

Flint, K. (2018). "Victorian Flash". *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 23(4), 481-9.
https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcy045

Friedlander, E. (2024). *Walter Benjamin and the Idea of Natural History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503637719

Fritsch, M. (2001). "History, Violence, Responsibility". *Rethinking History*, 5(2), 285-304.

Hamacher, W. (2005). "'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time". Benjamin, A. (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and History*. London: Continuum, 38-68.
https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472547828.ch-003

Jameson, F. (2020). *Benjamin Files*. London: Verso.

Laurentiis, A.D. (1994). "A Prophet Turned Backwards: Materialism and Mysticism in Walter Benjamin's Notion of History". *Rethinking Marxism*, 7(4), 28-43.
https://doi.org/10.1080/08935699408658121

Leslie, E. (ed., transl.) (2015). *On Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.

Pandey, G. (2006). *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Pensky, M. (2004). "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Image". Ferris, D.S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-98.
https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521793297.010

Schwebel, P.L. (2012). "Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and Its Sources". *MLN*, 127(3), 589-610.
https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2012.0093

Smith, S.M.; Sliwinski, S. (eds) (2017). *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*. Durham: Duke University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822372998

Weigel, S. (2015). "The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History". *Critical Inquiry*, 41(2), 344-66.
https://doi.org/10.1086/679079

Through the Zone of Interest:
Reframing the Identity and its Geographies

Lullaby for the End of the World
Post-Identitarian Bodies
for a Haunted Writing
of the Collective Future

Alessia Prati
Università Iuav di Venezia, Italia

Abstract   The essay analyzes the short film *Sommerspiele* (2023) by choreographer Eszter Salamon as a queer transfeminist science fiction, drawing on the epistemological tools provided by Dance and Performance Studies. Within the empty spaces of Berlin's Olympia Stadium, Salamon calls forth echoes of the past through a post-identitarian body. The life, work, and distinctive style of Valeska Gert (1892-1978) – a German dancer, actress, and cabaret performer who escaped Nazi Germany due to racial laws – are referenced to question the ongoing exclusion of non-normative bodies and materialities by prevailing white, Western, and heteronormative discourses. To cite a definition developed by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), *Sommerspiele* is a "speculative fabulation" in which the past haunts the present, creating space to imagine and shape an alternative collective future.

Keywords   Olympics. Choreography. Speculative fiction. Eszter Salamon. Valeska Gert.

Summary   1 Introduction. Olympic Games | Paris 2024. – 2 Lullaby for the End of the World. – 3 An Afterlife on Paper of *Sommerspiele*. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction. Olympic Games | Paris 2024

Sommerspiele (2023)[1] is a "surreal fiction"; this is the term used by the choreographer and performer Eszter Salamon during its public presentation at the *Le sport en spectacle series*, organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris in February 2024. The theme of sport, which lies at the heart of the exhibition, aligns with the short film set within the Olympia Stadium in Berlin, designed by Werner March between 1934 and 1936 during Adolf Hitler's regime. The analysis situates the work within the broader context of international sporting events, focusing specifically on the 1936 Olympics, and interprets it as a generative dialectical image that serves to critique and potentially destabilise the cultural and sociopolitical frameworks reinforced by the 2024 Paris Olympics.

In the months leading up to the Games, we have witnessed an increasing intensification of policies aimed at marginalising the most precarious and vulnerable bodies. Those affected have been removed from the Île-de-France region and relocated to temporary facilities in other areas, clearing space for the exceptional bodies of the athletes. As the games began, the critique of policies affecting marginalized bodies had already been dismissed as mere gossip among those who thrived on controversy. The Italian discussions then turned to focus on bodies and identities, rather than on the athletes' performances, skills, and results. Racism, sexism, and misogyny, spurred by comments from a wide range of sources, have driven the discussions surrounding the gender identity of Algerian boxer Imane Khelif and the distinctive physical traits of Italian volleyball player Paola Egonu.

In light of these events, drawing on the epistemological tools provided by Dance and Performance Studies, *Sommerspiele* is analysed as a queer transfeminist science fiction piece. The scenario within the empty spaces of Berlin's Olympia Stadium evokes, through a post-identity body, echoes of the past, paving the way for a radically different future that critically engages with the present. The artist's body is the locus for a process of multiple afterlives, extending beyond

---

1 *Sommerspiele* (2023) is the second short film by choreographer Eszter Salamon. Director Eszter Salamon; Voice and Performance Eszter Salamon; Director of Photography Marie Zahir; Editing and Story Advisor Minze Tummescheit; Colour Grading and Special Effects Arne Hector; Sound Design and Mixing Christian Obermaier; Production Botschaft GbR / Alexandra Wellensiek, Studio ES / Elodie Perrin, Institute of Speculative Narration and Embodiment; Production Manager João Carvalho; Production Assistant Héctor Calderon, Laura Gönczy, Sonja Schreiber, May Dugast. Supported by the NATIONAL PERFORMANCE NETWORK – STEPPING OUT, funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media within the framework of the initiative NEUSTART KULTUR. Assistance Program for Dance, KHiO - Oslo National University of the Arts; Funded by Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Community, the Regional Directory of Cultural Affairs of Paris – Ministry of Culture and Communication, French Ministry for Culture – DGCA (Direction Générale de la Création Artistique).

gender, race, and nationality. It is a dynamic entity that brings forth from obscurity other artists – such as the performer Valeska Gert,[2] who inspires the entire *Reappearance*[3] series, as well as the singer Dora Gerson[4] – along with other forms of animality and the bodies of the outcasts, relegated to the margins both past and present.

Inspired by Eszter Salamon's invitation to establish a "trans-historical space that bridges artistic and political realms" (Salamon 2023), the core of this essay is an ekphrasis that keeps *Sommerspiele* alive within the text of a book, while also summoning a broader array of artists and scholars in a fluid and unconventional manner. The essay is conceived as an afterlife[5] of the film, serving as an additional link in the extended chain of trans-media transformations that features Salamon's choreographic project on Valeska Gert.[6] Traversing from performance to cinema to book, the Berlin artist initially engages with Salamon's body and subsequently with my words – two perspectives that inevitably introduce new dimensions and shifts. Julietta Singh, Saidiya Hartman, Ursula Le Guin, Donna Haraway, and Astrida Neimanis contribute their voices to a viscous[7] constellation that unsettles the present.

---

2 Dancer, actress, and cabaret artist Valeska Gert (1892-1978) was a central figure in the German avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Her innovative works, blending dance, theatre, cabaret, mime, and poetry, expose the marginalisation of bodies, especially women, in the German bourgeois society. Due to her Jewish heritage, she was forced to emigrate during the Nazi period, first to Paris and then to the United States. After the war, she returned to Germany, becoming a revered figure in the artistic community and paving the way for forms of expression later explored by Theatre of Cruelty and Performance Art.

3 According to the artist, "the film series *Reappearances* is a cinematic speculation on history and memory" (Salamon 2023), which reflects on the impermanence of performance. "As a cinematic manifesto against oblivion, the series celebrates the genealogy that connects female artists from different periods by composing a transhistorical body, a kind of hybridisation formed of the visions and gestures of two artists, Valeska Gert and Eszter Salamon" (Salamon 2023).

4 Dora Gerson (1899-1943) was a Jewish-German singer and actress, whose performances in Yiddish conveyed the experiences of the Jewish community in early twentieth century Europe. Following the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, Gerson was arrested and deported with her family to Auschwitz, where she perished.

5 The concept is drawn from the discussion within Dance and Performance Studies regarding the specific ways in which bodies and performative works persist, as explored by theorists such as Diana Taylor (2003), Bojana Cvejić (2014), André Lepecki (2010), José Esteban Muñoz (2019), Rebecca Schneider (2011) and Amelia Jones (1997), among others. Building on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and yielding diverse outcomes, these reflections have redefined the idea of disappearance as a fundamental ontological principle of performative practices. In this context, the term refers to the notion of a possible transmedial survival of Sommerspiele within the pages of this essay.

6 Since 2014, Eszter Salamon has been working on *The Valeska Gert Monument*, a series of performative acts related to the life and work of Valeska Gert. The *Reappearance* series articulates a tribute to the Berlin artist, extending it into the cinematic medium.

7 The notion of viscosity is informed by Timothy Morton's work in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013). Viscosity captures the enduring and 'sticky' presence of hyperobjects as they infiltrate all dimensions of daily life.

2   Lullaby for the End of the World[8]

As the second chapter in the *Reappearance* series,[9] *Sommerspiele* is a cinematic speculation that delves into the artistic practices of Valeska Gert drawing on her works and anecdotes from her autobiographies *Mein Weg* (1931) and *Ich bin eine Hexe. Kaleidoskop meines Lebens* (1968).[10] Salamon's process of affective re-evocation employs fabulation techniques – using the conditional tense, as Saidiya Hartman (2021, 33) might describe – to narrate an impossible story in which Gert might not have recognized herself:

> I hope we could have a discussion while walking on the beach at Kampen or go to see a movie. She would say: "I didn't recognise my dances except [sic] one or two movements here and there. I think your orgasm scene was totally hilarious, and also the monkey moves, though I don't remember ever doing them. I loved the ventriloquist animal. So, you have read my book. I don't know why, but I was missing the quote: 'Kill that animal!' And curiously the hints on sport are shy". So, I would respond: "More will come in the next films". "I want to see that" she would answer and add: "And you are a very good dictator", and suddenly both of us would break into laughter. "Do you remember my poem at the end of the book about the rat? Use it". Then, she would look me directly in the eyes: "You know I never liked museums… but I got your point. And you know that I never performed naked on stage. Why do you do that?" I would tell her my thoughts and she would reply: "Sure. But why are there no more closeups? Anyhow, as I said, I want to live, even if I'm dead". (Salamon 2021, 66)[11]

The affective re-evocation through which Valeska Gert navigate the empty spaces of Berlin's Olympia Stadium is a speculative

---

[8] The title references a concept from Eszter Salamon's essay "The Road to *Reappearance*: How Artistic Vision, Research, and Practice Confront New Possibilities in a Time of Crisis" (2021).

[9] The first act of *Reappearance*, filmed in 2022 at the Muzeum Susch in Zurich, juxtaposes the affective re-evocation of Valeska Gert with the architecture and artworks featured in the monographic exhibition *Body Double* about the work of the Belgian pop-surrealist artist Evelyne Axell (1935-1972).

[10] The re-evocation approach used by Eszter Salamon in the *Reappearance* series reflects what Vanessa Agnew refers to as the "affective turn in history" in her essay "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and its Work in the Present" (2007, 299). This method moves the focus away from historical events and processes to center on individual experience, everyday life, and emotions. For understanding Salamon's work, it is particularly important to note how this affective turn, along with its situated perspective, highlights the political and ideological implications that specific uses of history can generate.

[11] The quotation is a fictional conversation with Valeska Gert, conceived by Salamon in 2021.

representation. It transforms past, present, and future simultane-
ously, drawing from a situated materiality – Salamon's own – to rec-
reate, as André Lepecki puts it:

> A whole economy of the temporal [...] that harnesses futurities
> by releasing pastness away from its many archival 'domicilia-
> tions' – and particularly from that major force in a work's forced
> domiciliation: the author's intention as commanding authority over
> a work's afterlives. (2010, 30-5)

Through a process of speculative imagination, Salamon fills in the
gaps left by the German performer's recollections, who lost the orig-
inal screenplay after dictating it for three weeks to a drug-addicted
transcriber, whose notes ultimately proved illegible. *Sommerspiele*
allows Salamon to "feel the boundless relationship of the body with
other bodies, [...] an act of love against the exclusions of reason" (Sin-
gh 2018, 29). Through a trans-historical 'body-archive'[12] that con-
fronts the failures of collective memory and the persistence of lives
and practices, the relationship with the inherent limits of the official
historical archive is renegotiated.

From a biographical standpoint, Salamon reclaims the 'degener-
ate' pasts that were erased or silenced by the National Socialist re-
gime by reenacting Gert's stylistic innovations, her characters, and
her experimentation with the voice. She reintroduces non-human an-
imality, exuberant and loud gestures, disrupting the present to serve
as a "canary in the coal mine" (Salamon 2023), alerting us to the
ongoing presence of biopolitical mechanisms of erasure and exclu-
sion. These mechanisms are rooted in the modern concept of a sin-
gular identity, which views the subject as "emotionally contained"
(Brennan 2004, 2) and bodies – both organic and inorganic – as clas-
sifiable within a value hierarchy. Echoing Julietta Singh's arguments,
Salamon reminds us that "the body is not and has never been singu-
lar", but rather an "endless collection of bodies" (Singh 2018, 31) that
we can nurture in different ways.

The Olympia Stadium serves as the stage for a series of afterlives
that unfold on the performer's body as it moves, crawls, and inhabits
the spaces of the building, swimming pool, and open-air theatre. The
stark nakedness of the slender body stands out in sharp visual con-
trast to the grandeur of the architectural and sculptural forms. Wide
shots render the body a microscopic presence within the monumental

---

12 The notion of the 'body-archive', as discussed in André Lepecki's essay "The Body
as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances" (2010), is employed to high-
light the distinct memory processes inherent to bodies, which contrast with those of an
archive conceived as a repository of documents or a bureaucratic body.

environment, while perspective cuts challenge its integrity by fragmenting it. The trans-historical presence disrupts the ordered geometric landscape of the sports complex. Grotesque expressions defy the depiction of the efficient and functional body of the universal, rational Subject – defined by race, gender, and species – that the space continues to uphold. Valeska's expression of femininity, diverging from the graceful movements of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance) and the social constructs of early twentieth-century bourgeois German society, intertwines with the materiality of the outcasts. It is both the erased past of silenced[13] artists and the present of exploited animals that rewrites the future, haunting the present.

Sommerspiele is a surreal transfeminist queer science fiction work, or, as scholar Antonia Anna Ferrante more succinctly describes it, a 'sci-fi tfq'. Unlike 'universal male sci-fi', it conceives:

> visioni di mondi e soggetti già post-identitari, non per questo senza Storia, non per questo senza resistenza [...] per interrogare i pilastri dell'epistemologia bianca, occidentale, straight e ovviamente sfidare il capitalismo. (Ferrante 2019, 127)

> visions of worlds and subjects that are already post-identitarian, yet still historical and resistant... to question the pillars of white, Western, straight epistemology and, of course, to challenge capitalism. (Author's transl.)

An inhospitable environment, seeming to be detached from the present time while still revealing unmistakable aesthetic and political connections, is inhabited by a singular biological presence that moves, crawls, and croaks. The body is an assemblage of intra-actions, pushing us to transcend the familiar binaries of nature/culture, human/animal, and male/female. Much like the sci-fi tfq explored by Ferrante, Salamon's work envisions a world with a "super-empathic, symbiotic, sympathetic" (112) figure, reaching towards the future through an ongoing process of decomposition and recomposition. The environment it operates within is one transformative, gestational, and hyper-connected water, where the body extends beyond the confines of the skin in the film's final scene. In *Sommerspiele*, the dystopian 'no future' is replaced by a vision of new collective coexistence, rejecting conventional categorizations and value scales, where bodies persist through trans-media migration.

---

[13] Despite surviving Nazi racial persecutions, Valeska Gert encountered significant difficulties in advancing her art in both the United States and post-war Germany. Her satire of social constructs and female stereotypes, along with her transdisciplinary grotesque style, were major reasons for her lack of public recognition.

3 An Afterlife on Paper of *Sommerspiele*

Against a cerulean sky, a building emerges with harsh, straight edges. From our low vantage point, we gaze upward at two parallelepipeds stretching out in parallel directions. A gleaming section of a railing suggests that we are observing diving platforms. From the lower platform, a face and a hand appear – pieces of a body that we assume to be human, which we can reconstruct in our minds, much like figures that form by connecting dots on a page with uncertain lines. On a face made pale by whitish makeup, a vivid red mouth, two eyes highlighted with blue makeup, and jet-black hair rise. The scene might seem like an extended still, were it not for the sun's reflection connecting the water to the structure, subtly indicating that everything is in motion. After a sudden tilt of the head, the imagined body's arms – belonging to Eszter Salamon – surrender to gravity, swinging down toward the earth beyond the architectural edge. The mouth hints at a sneer before releasing fluids that quickly flow downward.

The body drips, infiltrating.

A stretch of water reveals a wider view of the diving board. The shifting reflection forms the backdrop of the film: *Sommerspiele* (*Sommerspiele*, 00′26″).

From our low vantage point – where we, as viewers, are confined for most of the film – we follow the performer as she ascends the final metal steps of the diving tower. Clad only in makeup, a short jet-black wig, and white sneakers, she moves up the steps of the building, that dominates the central part of the frame. The sound of footsteps is accompanied by the calls of birds – seagulls, ducks, or crows. For the moment, we rely on our knowledge of bird calls. The face in the distance, barely visible on the screen, makes a movement that seems to turn upwards from our perspective. We take this hint and find ourselves gazing at a sky covered by white clouds.

A flock arranged in a triangular formation, moves towards the highest point of the frame: a contemporary *Symphonie Diagonale*.[14]

As the flock begins to drift out of the frame, our focus shifts back to the diving tower, where the performer, with her back against the wall, surveys her surroundings while nervously nibbling her nails. After a brief pause, she exits the scene. We soon spot her again on the opposite side of the building. Salamon peers over the railing, glancing first to the right, then to the left. She retreats and strides

---

14 The allusion is to the abstract cinematic experiments conducted in the 1920s by Swedish painter and filmmaker Viking Eggeling (1880-1925). His film *Symphonie Diagonale* (1927), also known as *Diagonal-Symphonie*, was highly esteemed within the French and German Dada art movements. The movement explored through the montage of simple geometric shapes, lines, and curves creates a formal resonance between the animated drawings in *Symphonie Diagonale* and the low-angle shots of a flock in *Sommerspiele*.

along one of the diving boards, her movements marked by exaggerated, almost theatrical gestures. Valeska Gert haunts Eszter Salamon.

> Water is between bodies, but of bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently this body, too. Deictics falter. Our comfortable categories of thought begin to erode. Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, differentiation, relation. (Neimanis 2012, 85)

We look up again from below at the diving platforms. She reaches the most exposed end of the building and stops. She tilts her head, flexes her muscles, and points in different directions, extending one arm, then the other, and then both, giving commands and nodding at her own instructions. Each movement is accentuated by the rhythmic, fast sound of her breath, which flows out without ever drawing back. Everything follows a single straight direction.

The shift in framing represents a shift in perspective. For the first time, we view an Olympic swimming pool from above. Once again, the illusion of a static image is disrupted by the movement of the water.

> We are all bodies of water. To think embodiment as watery belies the understanding of bodies that we have inherited from the dominant Western metaphysical tradition. As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: *I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation*. (Neimanis 2012, 85)

A more claustrophobic horizon takes the place of the water. The upper part of the horizon is a rationalist tangle of concrete and metal, slicing through and dividing the view. The 'biological', chaotic composition of *Symphonie Diagonale* is now the geometric, orderly layout of *Rhythmus*.[15] From behind a pillar, Eszter Salamon and/or[16] Valeska Gert appears with a monkey-like gait. The body, slightly hunched forward, shuffles along the edge of the pool, using all four limbs. It then stands upright, with the abdomen exposed, legs bent and slightly apart. The arms swing in a conspicuous, exaggerated manner. She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. She moves back, with her arms swinging even more, disturbing the surface of the water. She advances, making her arm complete a full circle to stir the water even more dramatically. She then retreats and disappears behind a pillar.

---

[15] The reference pertains to *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and *Rhythmus 23* (1923), abstract films produced by the German painter and avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter.

[16] I use the expression to emphasize both the simultaneous presence and the interaction of the two performers.

Als ich auf die Bühne schoß, war ich so übermütig und so sehr er-
füllt von dem Trieb, das Publikum aufzurütteln, daß ich wie ei-
ne Bombe in diese von den andern geschaffene Atmosphäre der
Lieblichkeit hineinplatzte. […] und dieselben Bewegungen, die
ich auf der Probe sanft und anmutig getanzt hatte, übertrieb ich
jetzt wild. Mit Riesenschritten stürmte ich quer über das Podium,
die Arme schlenkerten wie ein großer Pendel, die Hände spreiz-
ten sich, das Gesicht verzerrte sich zu frechen Grimassen. (Gert
1931, 30)

As I rushed onto the stage, I was so exuberant and so driven by the
urge to shake up the audience that I exploded into the atmosphere
of loveliness created by the others like a bomb. […] and the same
movements that I had danced gently and gracefully during
rehearsal, I now exaggerated wildly. I stormed across the podium
with giant strides, my arms swinging like a large pendulum, my
hands splayed, and my face contorted into bold grimaces. (Author's
transl.)

The performer, now seated on a diving board in the top left corner,
is fragmented by the railing, which divides her abdomen and lower
legs at the bottom, her upper torso in the middle, and her face at the
top. The "frechen Grimassen" (bold grimaces) (Gert 1931, 30) and
the grotesque expressions of her face are intensified by a vocal dis-
junction that suggests multiple identities and materialities, both hu-
man and non-human. She yells, croaks, and moans. These vocaliza-
tions lead into the next sequence. In a reverse motion, we once again
see the pool from a frontal view. The performer moves sideways,
like a crab, looking around in fear as she retreats from us. A stone
wall dominates the entire next frame, erasing any sense of perspec-
tive and horizon. Two bas-reliefs – possibly the mythological figures
Terpsichore and Calliope, shown from head to mid-thigh – firmly im-
pose their classical presence. Against this backdrop of conventional
formality, the face that opened the film offers a contrasting element.

A series of static shots of architectural elements reiterates the can-
on of the bas-reliefs, shifting it from the body to the space. Balancing
this assertive and unmoving presence is a metallic sound, fore-
shadowing the gate beyond which the performer reappears. Eszter
Salamon and/or Valeska Gert appears as a grotesque, parodic, auda-
cious, and degenerated shadow on the stadium walls.[17]

---

[17]   In 1937, Valeska Gert was listed among the artists presented in the *Entartete Kunst*
(Degenerate Art) exhibition, curated by Adolf Ziegler and the Nazi Party at the Institute
of Archaeology in Munich. Between 1937 and 1938, several of her photographs were
shown in the *Der ewige Jude* (Eternal Jew) exhibition at the Library of the Deutsches
Museum in Munich.

The gate, once closed, swings wide in front of the performer's 'body-archive', which begins to move swiftly with expansive gestures. The architectural canon's perfection gives way to contemporary ruins, now occupied by the 'citational body'.[18] Watching over the body are two towering statues of male athletes, frozen in place, representing normative ideals.

Set against the backdrop of the two pillars that frame the entrance to the Olympic Stadium, Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert is positioned at the center of a wide shot, allowing for ample sky space.

> My body tenses itself slowly, the struggle begins; my hands tighten into fists, my shoulders hunch up, my face is distorted by pain. The pain becomes unbearable, my mouth opens wide to utter a silent cry. I bend my head back; shoulders, arms, hands, my whole body grows numb. I try to defend myself. Senseless. For a few second, I stand there motionless, a column of pain. Then, slowly, life drains out of my body. Very slowly it relaxes. The pain leaves, the mouth becomes softer. My shoulders fall; arms and hands grow limp [...] My head falls quickly, the head of a doll. Finished. Gone. I am dead. (Appignanesi 2004, 190)[19]

The two male statues, viewed from behind, face one of the six pairs of pillars of the Olympic Stadium, directing our attention to the symbol of disputes among the Olympic super-bodies. In response to the call for a return to order, Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert invokes animal identities: "I'm a birrrrrrrrddddddd" (*Sommerspiele*, 8′10″). The calls of several crows echo the desire for engagement with otherness. It is the occurrence of a juxtaposition between a fragmented identity arising from "an intra-activity iterative" (Barad 2011, 125) and a stable identity defined by its exceptional nature.

> If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming *with* – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake. (Haraway 2007, 244)

The focus narrows on the stands. One of the seats, numbered 11, is taken by the performer, now for the first time in very close proximity

---

18   The concept was first introduced by philosopher and Gender Studies scholar Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), where she used the notion of 'citationality' to emphasise how repeated norms and performative acts construct gender identity. This idea has had a profound impact on Performance Studies, influencing the work of scholars such as Peggy Phelan (1993), Diana Taylor (2003), José Esteban Muñoz (1999), and Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995).

19   The quotation presents a description of the Death-Agony Dance by Valeska Gert herself.

to the audience. The performer's face is overtaken by a range of emotions: surprise, disappointment, anxiety, anger, fear, and joy. Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert is a scattered kaleidoscope of voices, and afterlives, contaminating the epistemic horizon of an ideology that originates from the past and persists into the present. Seat number 11 is now occupied by a liminal body that oscillates between the human and the animal. Animality, beyond "the other-than-us", becomes "the other-within-among-us" (Filippi, Monacelli 2020, 14). Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert is "within-among" the crows.

> L'incontro con l'altro-da-noi che è con-in-noi (e, spettralmente, tra-noi) è un evento devastante e sconvolgente poiché ci interpella fin dentro le viscere più intime di ciò che chiamiamo *respons-abilità*, capacità di rispondere e capacità di lasciar rispondere, che richiede, da tempo e con sempre maggior forza, di sottrarre le/gli altr* alla categoria dell'Altro (grande o piccolo, non importa), anticamera per il loro inaudito sfruttamento e la loro ininterrotta messa a morte non criminale. Questo riconoscimento [...] porta a galla l'oscenità del quotidiano, del normale, del solito: della struttura sacrificale della nostra società, della malvagità del banale. (Filippi, Monacelli 2020, 14)

> The encounter with the other-than-us, which is-within-us (and, spectrally, among-us), is a profoundly disruptive and unsettling experience as it challenges us at the very core of what we term *respons-ability* – the ability to respond and to allow others to do so. This growingly urgent imperative requires us to eliminate the categorization of others as the Other (whether capitalized or not, which is inconsequential), a classification that paves the way for their unparalleled exploitation and ongoing, non-criminal erasure. This awareness [...] exposes the obscenity embedded in the everyday, the ordinary, the familiar: the sacrificial framework of our society, the banality of evil. (Author's transl.)

Another presence haunts the oversized but otherwise conventional statues of the athletes. *Vorbei* (It's Over) (1935) is the song that allows Dora Gerson to reappear. Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert and/or crow and/or Dora Gerson moves among the sculptures. She slithers, infiltrates, and contaminates. Through its porousness, the body absorbs the eloquent gestures of an epistemic violence that spans the past and present. The grotesque serves as a form of resistance, consuming without consigning the violences to oblivion. The Olympic torch is depicted as a toilet upon which one can urinate.

> Und Weil ich den Bürger nicchi liebte, tanzte ich die von ehm Verachteten, Dirnen, Kupplerinnen, Ausgeglitschte und Herabgekommene. (Gert 1931, 48)

And since I had no affection for the bourgeois, I chose to embody those whom they despised: the outcasts, the prostitutes, the pimps, the oppressed, and the disreputable. (Author's transl.)

A prolonged series of shots portrays the 'body-archive' of Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert and/or crow and/or Dora Gerson, further amplifying its presence. Lying down, abandoned, positioned, stretched out, cast aside – she embodies a drowning Ophelia, Saint Teresa in ecstasy, a dreaming Hecuba, sleeping Ariadne, a nightmare, a deposition that challenges the space and prevailing narrative.

Vorbei, vorbei vorbei | Ein letzter Blick, ein letzter Kuss | Und dann ist alles aus | Vorbei, vorbei, vorbei | Ein letztes Wort, | Ein letzter Gruß zum Abschied | Ich hab' so fest geglaubt | Es müsste ewig sein | Nun gehst du von mir fort | Und lässt mich so allein. (*Vorbei*, 00′20″)[20]

Gone, gone, gone | A final glance, a last kiss | And then it is all over | Gone, gone, gone | A final word, A last farewell | I believed so firmly | That it should last forever | Yet you are leaving me | And leaving me so alone. (Author's transl.)

As night descends, ghosts disrupt our rest. A "modern canary in the coal mine" alerts us to contemporary dangers: "I lost my memory" (*Sommerspiele*, 21′01″). Eszter Salamon and/or Valeska Gert and/or crow Dora Gerson and/or crab and/or monkey is a relational body composed of water.

Even while in constant motion, water is also a planetary archive of meaning and matter. To drink a glass of water is to ingest the ghosts of bodies that haunt that water. When 'nature calls' some time later, we return to the cistern and the sea not only our antidepressants, our chemical estrogens, or our more common place excretions, but also the meanings that permeate those materialities: disposable culture, medicalized problem-solving, ecological disconnect. (Neimanis 2012, 87)

---

20 The ballad *Vorbei* (1935), composed by Rolf Marbot, Bert Reisfeld, AJ Mauprey and performed by Dorsa Gerson, which recalls pre-Nazi Germany, reverberates through Berlin's Olympia Stadium via the voice of choreographer Eszter Salamon.

4   Conclusion

The essay explores a fiction to uncover words and visions that, while rooted in the present, can suggest radically alternative configurations. Straddling the realms of reality and fantasy, autobiography and myth, and intersecting socio-political and imaginative concerns, Eszter Salamon's *Sommerspiele* is analysed as a science-fiction[21] piece. To imagine an alternative collective future through visionary fabulation, I have identified a body that intersects genres, bridges human and animal realms, and spans multiple temporalities. A fragmented corporeal form challenges the analytical and epistemological frameworks shaped by years of capitalism and colonialism.

Sommerspiele is a choreography whose "pathological potential" (Gotman 2018, 3) allows for an understanding of the crisis of 'contemporary modernity'.[22] Drawing on the arguments presented by Kélina Gotman in *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder* (2018), the essay interprets the choreography as a form of disorder that both threatens and reveals the social order:

> an act of articulation, one that negotiates a border zone between order and disorder, planned and unplanned motion [...] as an apparatus of articulation investigating the part movement plays in structuring how we see, talk about, or embody relationships between order and disorder, historically and aesthetically.

I turned to the film *Sommerspiele* by choreographer Eszter Salamon to explore the failures of collective memory.

---

21   The term, drawn from the debate between Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood featured in *The Guardian* on the distinctions between science-fiction and speculative fiction, aligns with the perspective advocated by Le Guin. In response to Atwood's argument that "science fiction has monsters and spaceships", (Potts 2003), she counters by pointing out the definition's unjustifiably restrictive nature, that "seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders" (Le Guin 2009). In the 1976 introduction to her science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin had already remarked on the matter, defining the genre as a form of narrative set in the future that is not about the future: "I don't know any more about the future than you do, and very likely less. [...] I am not predicting or prescribing. [...] I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies. [...] Science fiction is metaphor. [...] The future, in fiction, is a metaphor" (Le Guin, Mitchell, Anders 2019, xix-xx). A summary of the debate between Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin can be found in Cecilia Mancuso's article (2016).

22   The definition, drawing on Julietta Singh's insights (2018, 29-56), underscores the connection between the current cultural and socio-political system of body discipline and a line of thought that originated and evolved in Modern Europe.

Bibliography

Agnew, V. (2007). "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present". *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 11(3), 299-312.
https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520701353108

Appignanesi, L. [1975] (2004). *The Cabaret*. 3rd ed. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Barad, K. (2011). "Nature's Queer Performativity". *Qui parle*, 19(2), 121-58.
https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121

Brennan, T. (2004). *The Trasmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471377

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Cvejić, B. (2014). *Choreographing Problem. Expressive Concepts in Contemporary Dance and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437396

Ferrante, A. (2019). "Sesto senso transfemminista. Telepatia in un mondo nei guai". Curti, L. (a cura di), *Femminismi futuri. Teorie, poetiche, fabulazioni*. Roma: Iacobelli, 112-29.

Filippi, M.; Monacelli, E. (a cura di) (2020). *Divenire Invertebrato. Dalla Grande Scimmia all'antispecismo viscido*. Verona: Ombre corte.

Foster, S. et al. (1995). *Corporealities. Dancing Knowledge, Culture, and Power*. London; New York: Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203645338

Gert, V. (1931). *Mein Weg*. Leipzig: Devrient.

Gert, V. [1968] (2019). *Ich bin eine Hexe Kaleidoskop meines Lebens*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag Berlin.

Gert, V. (1995). "From *I am a Witch* (1950)". Drain, R. (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Theatre. A Sourcebook*. London; New York: Routledge, 33-4.

Gotman, K. (2018). *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder*. New York: Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2019.1639323

Haraway, D. (2007). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Hartman, S. (2021). *Venus in Two Acts*. S.l.: Cassandra Press.

Jones, A. (1997). "'Presence' in Absentia. Experiencing Performance as Documentation". *Art Journal*, 56(4), 11-18.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1997.10791844

Le Guin, U. (2009). "The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood. Margaret Atwood Doesn't Think She Writes Science Fiction. Ursula K Le Guin Would Like to Disagree". *The Guardian*, August 29.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood

Le Guin, U.; Mitchell, D.; Anders, C. [1969] (2019). *The Left Hand of Darkness*. 50th anniversary edition. New York: Ace Books.

Lepecki, A. (2010). "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances". *Dance Research Journal*, 42(2), 28-48.
https://doi.org/10.1017/s0149767700001029

Mancuso, C. (2016). "Speculative or Science Fiction? As Margaret Atwood Shows, There Isn't Much Distinction". *The Guardian*, August 10.
https://tinyurl.com/3ek2necy

Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, J. (1999). *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, J. [2009] (2019). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 10th ed. New York: New York University Press.
https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479868780.001.0001

Neimanis, A. (2012). "Hydrofeminism. Or, on Becoming a Body of Water". Gunkel, H.; Nigianni, C.; Söderbäck, F. (eds), *Undutiful Daughters. New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 85-100.
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-91713

Parker, A.; Sedgwick, E. (1995). *Performativity and Performance*. London: Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699928

Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359433

Potts, R. (2003). "Light in the Wilderness". *The Guardian*, April 26.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood

Powell, B.; Stephenson Shaffer, T. (2009). "On the Haunting of Performance Studies". *Liminalities. A Journal of Performance Studies*, 5(1), 1-19.
http://liminalities.net/5-1/hauntology.pdf

Salamon, E. (2021). "The Road to *Reappearance*: How Artistic Vision, Research and Practice Meet New Potentialities in a Moment of Crisis". *Magazin Museum Susch*, 2, 57-67.

Salamon, E. (2023). *Sommerspiele*.
https://esztersalamon.net/Sommerspiele-2023

Schneider, R. (2011). *Performing Remains. Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London; New York: Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852873

Singh, J. (2018). *No Archive Will Restore You*. Montréal: Punctum Books.
https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2353890

Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385318

Los Alamos and its Contemporary 'Remains': Cormac McCarthy and William Eggleston

Virginia Gerlero
Università IULM, Milano, Italia

Abstract Los Alamos, New Mexico – a largely uninhabited desert area – became the site of the Manhattan Project, the federal programme launched during the Second World War to develop the atomic bomb. As a secret city and the ultimate symbol of US scientific, military and economic 'progress', Los Alamos also evokes the image of 'ultimate things'. This paper focuses on two great American authors who, through different media, have considered Los Alamos as a key to offering their own image of the contemporary landscape and its 'remains'; the writer Cormac McCarthy and the photographer William Eggleston.

Keywords Photography. Literature. Eggleston. McCarthy. Landscape. West. Remains. Image. Novel.

Summary 1 Vestiges of the Western World. – 2 The Faults of the Fathers. – 3 The Ultimate Things.

> To all archaeologists, guardians of all ends.
> (Alice Rohrwacher, *La Chimera*, 2023)

One of the photographs included in one of William Eggleston's most important works, *Los Alamos* (2003), is called *Las Vegas*. The picture shows a horizontal white neon light, almost blinding and annoying to the eye. It illuminates part of the wall of a dark room, revealing part of a dark bed, a small white table, and a light-colored chair. On

the coffee table are an old telephone, an ashtray and a napkin holder. The atmosphere is somber, and the piercing power of the cold neon light makes the room seem both sinister and austere. One can hardly imagine what the space is like and what lies beyond the bed and the lights. It could be a hotel or a hospital. There are no characters, no narrative, just the neon bar consisting of two lights that stare and question the viewer like barred eyes.[1]

The photograph reveals a deep sense of loneliness and restlessness. The same feeling is felt and visualized in the opening lines of Cormac McCarthy's latest novel, *Stella Maris* (McCarthy 2022b). The room Eggleston photographed could be one of the rooms in the Stella Maris psychiatric hospital where Alicia Western, the novel's protagonist, is being treated for schizophrenia. The entire development of the narrative revolves around the dialogue between Alicia and the psychiatrist, Dr. Wegner, in the clinic room where the patient will spend the last days of her life. The sister of Bobby Western, himself the protagonist of the previous novel, *The Passenger* (McCarthy 2022a), published a few months before *Stella Maris*, Alicia alludes several times to the figure of her father in her conversations with the psychiatrist. He participated as a scientist in the Manhattan Project, a federal program established during World War II to build the atomic bomb. The family lived for years in Los Alamos, a desert location in the state of New Mexico chosen by the government to house secret nuclear test laboratories.

Both William Eggleston and Cormac McCarthy, among the most influential contemporary American 'voices', have looked at Los Alamos in different ways to offer their personal narratives of the present: hallucinations, restlessness, shadows, and dreams populate their worlds and draw their plot lines. What dually emerges is a peculiar and disturbing sense of the end, of the 'ultimate'. Los Alamos, a symbol of U.S. military, economic, and political progress in the years since World War II, is taken up here in a metaphysical sense as a force of destruction, and art becomes a glimpse of the end. Through the analysis and a careful observation of their works, one wonders what is left of this world. The threat of nuclear power, the prevalence of individualism and consumerism leave traces in the

---

1 William Eggleston (Memphis, 1939) is one of the best-known living American photographers. The first color photographer to have his work exhibited in a major museum (*Photographs by William Eggleston*, curated by J. Szarkowski, New York: MoMA, 1976), Eggleston became famous for choosing to print his photographs using the dye-transfer process, then used exclusively for advertising, in order to make the colors more vivid and the contrasts stronger. Apart from *Los Alamos*, some of his publications are: *William Eggleston's Guide*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976; *Election Eve*. Washington: The Gallery, 1977; *The Democratic Forest*. Doubleday: New York, 1989; *William Eggleston, for Now*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2010. See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/757104.

landscape and in the community. Literature and photography influence each other to make these traces visible and to build new narratives and archives of images, of contemporary 'remains'.

This essay aims to present the work of the two authors, their narratives of the contemporary world, and their unique ways of looking at Los Alamos as a symbol. In doing so, it proposes to suggest how these forms of expression – photography and literature – can be the starting point for a new 'visual and narrative alphabet'.

1 Vestiges of the Western World

> – What is it? What is it?
> Jack put the little toy on the table. – It is,– he
> replied, – a magnifying glass.
> Robby looked at it. – It's not very big.
> – Well, you have to start somewhere.
> – Start what?
> – Looking for clues. Here. I think I have a stain on
> the cuff of my shirt. What does it look like?
> Robby looked at it with the little lens. – It just looks
> like a stain to me.
> Jack shrugged. – Well, there you go. Case closed.
> (Robinson 2008, 244)

A stain on the cuff of a shirt. It could be an indication of something that happened, a reminder of a certain situation. Or it could be 'just a stain'. The child Robert's eye sees nothing more than a spot of color where Jack's sly adult eye could, in all likelihood, build a narrative from that detail. Now, imagine that instead of a magnifying glass, Jack gives the son of the Presbyterian minister of Gilead a camera. Would he, Robert, photograph the spot on his cuff, even if he thought it was 'just a spot'? Or would he have to think of it in relation to a story to photograph it?

Stains on asphalt, telephone wires, coke bottles, mannequins, paint cans are just some of the objects photographed by William Eggleston and collected in the masterpiece *Los Alamos*. Anonymous, banal things about which we know nothing except where they were 'found' and portrayed.

This work originated from a series of travels through the southern United States from 1964 to 1968 and then from 1972 to 1974. In 1973, Eggleston and his curator friend Walter Hopps were driving through New Mexico. They stopped in Los Alamos, a village near Santa Fe, where Eggleston decided to name his near-completed project after the secret town. Three years later, John Szarkowski organized the groundbreaking exhibition *Photographs by William Eggleston*

at the MoMA in New York. The publication of the exhibition's catalog, *William Eggleston's Guide* (1976), marked the beginning of the photographer's publishing career. Other important works followed, but it took almost thirty years before *Los Alamos* was published.[2]

If we think of other important photographic projects whose titles bear the name of a place – from William Klein's *New York* (1995) to Lewis Baltz's *San Quentin Point* (1986) – they consist entirely of photographs taken there. They thus become 'documents' of a particular place, city, or neighborhood. The case of Eggleston is different: none of the photographs that make up the project were taken in Los Alamos. There are images made in New Mexico, but the purpose is not to document the place chosen as the title. If Los Alamos is not a place to be documented or shown, why choose as a title the name of a place that so immediately evokes one of the darkest chapters of twentieth-century history?

> That day in New Mexico, passing through the pinon woods of the Jemez Mountains, past the guard gates of the National Laboratory, Eggleston turned with a small smile and said, "You know, I'd like to have a secret lab like that myself". It seems clear from the investigations collected in *Los Alamos* that he already had found the key to his proper place of research. (Hopps in Eggleston 2003)

For Eggleston, Los Alamos was a place of transit, a part of a journey throughout the southern United States, but more importantly, it was the 'key' to his personal and artistic quest. His secret laboratory. His way of thinking and looking at the world, at reality. The enigmatic images are often presented in the book without titles, precisely to avoid a too direct reference to physical places. They take us on a journey through anonymous subjects and unidentified landscapes: whether it is a motel near Albuquerque or a grocery store in Memphis, what matters is not the reference to a geographical location,

---

2 Thomas Weski, the editor of the first edition of the volume, had seen an excerpt of five or six images in a magazine called *Grand Street*. Hopps, who was the editor of the magazine, had written a brief introduction, which would later be included as the preface in the 2003 edition. After seeing these radically new and revolutionary images – even compared to the *Guide* (Eggleston 1976) – Weski began visiting Eggleston at his home in Memphis to learn more about this still-unknown work. He discovered that Eggleston had made a large number of photographs from the color negatives. He had left the negatives with Hopps to be processed later. However, Hopps died of a sudden heart attack shortly thereafter, and no one knew about the project or the whereabouts of the negatives. Weski reports that some of the negatives were eventually found, and a selection was made for dye transfer printing. They were divided into groups by Eggleston himself and his gallerist Howard Read to be sold separately as portfolios. Taken together, they would make up the entire Los Alamos project. The entire series was first shown to the public at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne – where the volume was produced – and the work was exhibited in several European and American institutions.

but rather the desire to make visible a given reality through a story, a narrative in images.[3] As the artist claims:

> the series of photographs is like a novel. If a person went slowly through that body of work, it would be roughly like reading a novel. (Ferris 2013, 249)

In this sense, as will become clearer later on, this work constitutes an interesting parallel with McCarthy's novels: both move from the epistemological need to understand reality and the desire to represent it adequately. Through their works, they both represent one of the most vivid 'geographical imaginaries' of the United States of America: a concatenation of non-places, fragmented spaces that do not allow the establishment of an identity. How does one represent a fragmented reality to which the author's point of view will always remain partial? Photography and literature use real facts and places and return them as 'artificial' realities through an always singular point of view: the goal is to reveal some truth about the world. In photography, light becomes the creator of 'fictions', color associations produce 'abstractions', and often the truth lies in the shadow, in what is hidden or outside the frame of the image. The shadow plays a central role in Eggleston's photographs. Consider, for example, his first color photograph, titled *Memphis*, which shows a grocery store clerk pushing shopping carts to collect them outside the store.[4] He is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a light gray apron covering his legs. He is portrayed in profile, with his left arm extended over the carts. White skin, short hair in a top knot, very reminiscent of the iconic figures of the time, from Elvis to James Dean. Formally, the shot is slightly tilted from top to bottom: in the background, the blurred image of a woman wearing black sunglasses and, above all, the boy's shadow on the white wooden wall of the shop. Next to it, the shadow of the photographer. If we were to isolate the upper left part of the photograph, we would have a kind of negative of the whole image. The photographer's shadow, which recalls one of the characteristic stylistic elements of his friend Lee Friedlander,[5] rep-

---

3   We know only from the curator's note that the proposed journey in Los Alamos includes the center of his world – the city of Memphis and the mysterious Mississippi Delta – but it also traces his westward movement from New Orleans to Las Vegas and Southern California, ending at the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles.

4   See https://tinyurl.com/9hufcv24.

5   Lee Friedlander (Aberdeen, 1934) is an American photographer among the most important of his generation in the field of street photography. His work was exhibited in 1963 at the George Eastman House in Rochester and in 1967 in the major exhibition *New Documents* curated by John Szarkowski at MoMA in New York. In his photography, the shadow plays a fundamental role as it interrogates the photographer's 'presence' in

resents, as Ugo Mulas masterfully states in *Verifica 2*, "the obsession to be present, to see myself as I see myself, to participate, to include myself" (Mulas 1973).

Every photograph is the result of this 'being in the world', of being present, of seeing and being seen: the camera is the point of contact between what is in front of us and the photographer, between reality and the observer.

But in Eggleston's case, the shadow goes beyond this desire for 'authorship': it is an extension of the subject, its appendage and 'spirit'. The shadow becomes a 'character',

> it has as much presence as the body. But the shadow acquires this presence only because it escapes from the body, it is itself a body that has escaped through a precise point. (Deleuze 2004, 41)

The shadow pushes, forcing the subject out of itself and out of the representable. Take, for example, another photograph in Los Alamos, *Mississippi*:[6] it shows a faucet attached to a brick wall in an outdoor setting. It is not so much the banal object that attracts attention, but rather its shadow. Or better said, the faucet is inseparable from its shadow, it is 'made visible' by the presence of the shadow, just as Francis Bacon's figures, according to Deleuze's reading, become optical thanks to the *malerisch* shadow.[7] A shadow that escapes from the body, leading the viewer's gaze elsewhere.

Eggleston's photography works on 'decentering', constructing compositions that move the *punctum* to ever different and 'unstable' places in the image. The mystery that his photographs conceal lies in this instability, which is absolutely desired, which disorients and attracts the viewer, challenging his imagination. The photographer constructs a narrative through small clues, hidden details and athletic shadows. The people portrayed are always anonymous, there is never a trace of empathy or knowledge of the subjects, even when they are friends. The objects are absolutely ordinary and banal; clear blue skies alternate with rainy, gray, almost post-apocalyptic landscapes.

---

the image. His publications include: *The American Monument*. New York: Eakins Press, 1976; *Letters from the People*. New York: DEP, 1993; *Lee Friedlander*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2000; *The Little Screens*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2001; *New Mexico*. Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2008; *America by Car*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2010; *Signs*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2019.

6 See https://tinyurl.com/3vpevhbj.

7 "And here, at the very moment when the form loses its tactile character, a purely optical world tends to break out. Now it is the light that gives the form a purely optical and airy, disaggregating clarity; now, conversely, it is the *malerisch* shadow, the darkening of the color, that overwhelms and dissolves the form, severing all its tactile connections" (Deleuze 2004, 204).

As if everything, every bottle, every landscape, every sign, is waiting for the end, for an explosion. The photographs create a distance from reality and refer to it with greater force, evoking both violence and mystery.[8] They transcend a specific place and time to open up to an idea of a fading West, of which perhaps only a 'story' remains. The gaze is not nostalgic: it searches for some truth in the objects of consumption, in the detritus of a broken Western civilization. Like the landscape of *The Road* (McCarthy 2006), littered with the material remains of an archaeology of consumer society, the sites of *Los Alamos* are filled with 'consumer waste'. Now part of the landscape itself, they constitute contemporary fossils, the ultimate things of our civilization. Eggleston's narrative framework, like McCarthy's, takes the form of a kind of salvage mission,

> an archaeological – and epistemological – quest [capable of] unearthing the submerged wreckage of Western civilization – the removed corpses, the horrors that the mind and history have tried to forget. (Simonetti 2023, n.p.)

In this sense, the photographer, like an archaeologist, has made visible in the landscapes of the South the signs of the imminent disappearance of our civilization. The gaze becomes a means of reading the world and revealing its common hidden traces, unseen and often denied by recent history. The sense of the end imbued in these landscapes cannot help but challenge the idea of History, which sees in Los Alamos one of its darkest chapters. "All recent history is about death" (McCarthy 2022b, 72); in McCarthy's latest novels, the collective history blurs with the individual history and opens up new, disarming questions.

---

[8]   The artist's last exhibition, organized at C/O in Berlin between 2022 and 2023, was accurately titled *The Mistery of the Ordinary* (cf. Eggleston 2023).

2　　The Faults of the Fathers

> You grew up in Los Alamos.
> Yes, we lived there until my mother died. Well. She
> actually died in Tennessee.
> Do you remember Los Alamos?
> Yes. Of course.
> How old were you when you left?
> Eleven.
> Eleven.
> Yes.
> What was it like?
> Los Alamos.
> Yes.
> During the war I think it was pretty primitive.
> Supposedly there were eight thousand fire
> extinguishers and five bathtubs. And endless mud.
> (McCarthy 2022b, 63)

Born in Los Alamos on what is known as Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, Alicia Western is the protagonist of McCarthy's latest novel, *Stella Maris*. The mother, originally from Tennessee, gave birth to her daughter in that endless mud and remains a secondary character throughout the story. The character of the father, on the other hand, appears several times in both Alicia's stories at the Stella Maris mental hospital and in those of Robert – known as Bobby, Alicia's brother and the protagonist of the first novel in the diptych, *The Passenger*. Both Alicia and Bobby were strongly influenced by the figure of the father. He worked with Oppenheimer and several important scientists on the experiments for the atomic bomb and he continued studying and experimenting, even after Hiroshima and the end of the Manhattan Project. Perhaps this is why Alicia is a mathematical genius, and why Bobby also tried to make his way in the hard sciences. But the burdens of their past are too heavy: Alicia ends up with schizophrenia, and Bobby decides to take up motor racing in Europe and then diving in New Orleans.

> I suppose you want to know if he [the father] felt guilty about building the bomb. He didn't. But he's dead. And my brother is brain-dead and I'm in the nuthouse. (McCarthy 2022b, 61)

Wracked with guilt and secretly in love, Alicia commits suicide in the clinic on Christmas Day – the opening image of *The Passenger* – and Bobby, recovering from the car accident that left him in a coma, can only running away. Escape the memories, the guilt, the places and the past.

As stated by Sheddan, Bobby's close and 'criminal' friend:

> Today I met a man named Robert Western whose father attempted to destroy the universe and whose supposed sister proved to be an extraterrestrial who died by her own hand and as I pondered his story, I realized that all which I took to be true regarding the soul of man might well stand at naught. (McCarthy 2022a, 156)

Since childhood, Alicia has been visited by groups of characters, as she calls them, headed by the Thalidomide Kid: in an absolutely brilliant way, McCarthy builds the rhythm of *The Passenger* by alternating descriptions of Alicia's hallucinations with accounts of Bobby's mysterious affairs. The brother hangs out with characters on the fringes of society who are not hallucinations but have something in common with his sister's hallucinations: they are rejects, oddballs, drunks, outcasts criminals. They are only 'seen' by Bobby, and only dialogued with Bobby. As in all McCarthy's novels, the narrative unfolds visually: each character, object, or setting is described 'from the outside'. We can easily imagine Bobby walking through the streets of New Orleans toward Galantoire's, the historic restaurant where he will meet his transgender friend Debussy for one of the novel's most passionate dialogues, but it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand what he is thinking. It is a 'petrified' humanity, as Baricco writes in the introduction to *Trilogy of the Frontier* (McCarthy 2015), that has much in common with Eggleston's humanity, both visually and socially: the friend portrayed naked in a red-walled motel room a few days before his death from an overdose could be one of the protagonists of McCarthy's novels.

Alicia and Bobby are also characters on the margins: their controversial incestuous love fuels their image of madness and misunderstanding. Where does Alicia's madness come from? And Bobby's loneliness? The two brothers in love are the 'children of the bomb', of nuclear experiments. They carry on their shoulders the faults of their father, who, like Nazi hierarchs or doctors, put his intelligence at the service of the political and military power of the United States.

> You don't think your father lost any sleep over the bomb.

> My father didn't sleep before the bomb and he didn't sleep after. I think most of the scientists didn't give that much thought to what was going to happen. They were just having a good time. They all said the same thing about the Manhattan Project. That they'd never had so much fun in their lives. (McCarthy 2022b, 62)

The amused scientists in Los Alamos offered their experience and know-how in the service of the bomb and destruction. The end of the world. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with Auschwitz, are the events that marked the beginning of the end of the West, from which the West has never recovered.

Alicia claims that the Manhattan Project was a major historical event and that the making of the atomic bomb "compete with the discovery of fire and language" (McCarthy 2022b, 62).

The question, then, is: what is History for McCarthy? And, consequently, what does Los Alamos – and the entire West – represent in this conception of history?

> History is not a thing.
> Well said. If problematic. History is a collection of paper. A few fading recollections. After a while what is not written never happened. (McCarthy 2022a, 371)

As in other novels, most notably *The Road* (2006), which won him the 2008 Pulitzer Prize, History is what the world is made of, the paper on which the past has deposited his images. Only in the present, in the time 'filled with now', we can judge and choose what to remember and how to remember it. History is storytelling, non-linear narrative, interweaving discursiveness: we read in *The Crossing*,

> There is never an end to telling. [Storytelling] is not itself a category, but rather the category of all categories, for there is nothing outside its boundaries. Everything is a story. (McCarthy 2015, 234)

But every story, as Giorgio Agamben argues, is "the memory of the loss of fire" (2023, 206). What the narrative tells, the story, is loss and forgetting. "We carry the fire" (McCarthy 2008, 87), the father argues to reassure his son in the scenario of *The Road*, where everything seems lost forever and where the only prevailing law is that of violence and survival.

The question is, then, what will be the legacy of these collections of papers for future generations, and whether there is any possibility of a re-writing of history.

> Where do you imagine all this is going?
> I've no idea.
> I think I have some idea. I know that you think we're very different, me and thee. My father was a country storekeeper and yours a fabricator of expensive devices that make a load noise and vaporize people. But our common history transcends much. I know you. I know certain days of your childhood. All but weeping with loneliness. Coming upon a certain book in the library and clutching it to you. Carrying it home. Some perfect place to read it. Under a tree perhaps. Beside a stream. Flawed youths of course. To prefer a world of paper. Rejects. But we know another truth, don't we Squire? And, of course, it's true that any number of these books were penned in lieu of burning down the world – which was the

author's true desire. But the real question is: are we few the last of lineage? Will children yet to come harbor a longing for a thing they cannot even name? The legacy of the world is a fragile thing for all its power, but I know where you stand, Squire. I know that there are words spoken by men ages dead that will never leave your heart. (McCarthy 2022a, 154-5)

The words that will never leave Bobby's heart are the story that Bobby will hold. "The fire that can only be told, the mystery that has been integrally deliberated in a story, now takes our word, has locked itself forever in an image" (Agamben 2023, 211). What remains is an *image*. "She knew that in the end you really can't know. You can get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture" (McCarthy 2022a, 318). It is in the image that literature and photography combine to offer access to new alphabets of seeing, maps that allow for a new orientation in the contemporary darkness.

3 The Ultimate Things

Eggleston's Los Alamos closes with a photograph that has become iconic: part of a dark car in the foreground, behind which are two African American women and a child, suggesting three different generations of the same family. Taken in profile, the three figures look toward the horizon. Behind them, the ocean.[9]
We certainly cannot reduce this photograph to a trivial thought that is both nostalgic and hopeful about the future of the United States and the West. What at first glance appears to be a reference to Pictorial Romanticism and American photographic pictorialism is muted and negated by the presence of the dark car and shiny wheel, which impose themselves on the eye and push the human figures into the background. Eggleston's cars, wires, neon signs, and cokes have become part of the symbolism of the recent American past. The same thing happened to the previous generation with the photographs of Walker Evans, not coincidentally one of Eggleston's main references. As John Szarkowski points out in the afterword to Evans' volume *Message from the Interior*,

> the hand-lettered promises on empty shopfronts, the stoic, noncommittal faces, the tattered movie posters, the anonymous facades of forgotten builders – these things all shown with perfect clarity, with nothing hidden except their ultimate meaning – have helped define the American's sense of his past and his problem. (Szarkowski in Evans 1966, 36)

---

9 See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/757119.

The sense of the American past, constantly questioned, sometimes deliberately constructed because of the 'lack' of a solid national memory,[10] approaches the sense of the future, the legacy left to children, to future generations.

The West is the land of sunset, of self-destruction. Of consumerism and capitalism. It is no coincidence that Bobby and Alicia's surnames are Western. The two siblings carry on their shoulders the weight of the United States and the whole West, of previous generations that tried to burn, to destroy, to consume the planet. They carry the racism, the social divisions, the violence and the abuse of their parents. As writer Nicola Lagioia writes, "if you want to hear an era, listen to the voices in the rooms where mental distress is treated" (Lagioia 2022, n.p.).

In Alicia's voice we hear the weight of guilt, the living horror of the world, the astonishing clarity about the events of the last century:

> Because I knew what my brother did not. That there was an ill-contained horror beneath the surface of the world and there always had been. That at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium. All religions understand this. […] And that to imagine that the grim eruptions of this century were in any way either singular or exhaustive was simply a folly. (McCarthy 2022b, 152)

Just as in the other novel that deals directly with the idea of the end, *The Road*, it was instead the voice of the child who "carries the fire" (McCarthy 2006, 87) that represented hope, the possibility of a life 'to the south', beyond the horror of this incinerated world.

> The world's a deceptive place. A lot of things that you see are not really there anymore. Just the after-image in the eye. So to speak. (McCarthy 2022a, 318)

What is an *after-image*? A remnant image? The image that 'remains'?

Everything we see in Eggleston's photographs and through McCarthy's novels is an 'after-image'. The landscapes and objects that dot their worlds are both 'still' and 'no longer': they are fading scenarios. The tension of McCarthy's narrative to 'show', to make characters and environments visible, intersects with Eggleston's

---

10   Consider, for example, Edward Curtis's masterful photographic work *The North American Indian Project*, produced in the early twentieth century and published in five volumes. The project aimed to document the ceremonies, beliefs, customs, daily life, and leaders of Native Americans before they 'vanished'. It was funded, in addition to Theodore Roosevelt, by Pierpont Morgan, an American financier and investment banker who controlled most of the railroad system. He who had first invested in 'civilizing' and 'removing' the Indians from American territory, thereafter funded the photographic expedition to 'save the Indians from oblivion' and build a peaceful national image. See Goetzmann 1996, 83-91.

desire to 'narrate', to make photography a new language. On the one hand, the story that is 'reduced' to an image, on the other hand, the image that becomes a story. An ultimate image and at the same time an image of ultimate things, in which the past converges with the present. Photography and narrative become a method of deduction for discovering things, capable of bringing back to life – as an archeology – something one would like to have lost, invisible, abandoned. In this sense, the subjects of Eggleston's photographs, everyday, mundane, never really observed, only consumed, do not refer to the mythical and nostalgic past of the South, but are the cipher of contemporary contingency. They transcend the merely 'descriptive' and documentary, revealing instead the universality hidden in the detail, waste, and detritus of contemporary consumer culture. Eggleston's world, like McCarthy's – both from Tennessee – is one of alienated people, where relationships are increasingly complex and unbridled consumption dominates everyday life. What he calls "democratic photography" (Eggleston 1989, 171) goes beyond treating an everyday subject as a capital event: the 'democratic gaze' is another way of looking at things. It is the decision to 'duck down' and take the perspective of a child, a dog, a homeless person.[11] To show the scenes, the objects, as they might appear to another gaze – while belonging to the eye of a white American male raised in a family of landowners originally from Mississippi, with African American servants at home and an unbridled passion for guns. "Losing face", in Deleuze's words, acquiring a clandestinity (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 52).

"Reconstructing worlds from their remains: this program is literary before it is scientific" (Rancière 2016, 47): through the residual images, the remnants and traces of disappearing landscapes, art can think about reconstructing worlds. 'Still' natures are what remains, what is still, what lasts. Whether it is a glass, a tube of barbecue sauce, or a snot leaning against the railing. Or the shadow of an ordinary faucet.

And the ultimate image that becomes the first of the 'reconstructed' world is the image of love. The only way to rewrite history, to revise it, without overcoming it. In Alicia's cosmic pessimism, with seemingly no way out, the only movement still possible is that of 'escape'. "On the lines of escape there can be only one thing: experimentation-life" (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 43). It is never an escape in art – if anything, it is an escape from art. "To escape, on the contrary, is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon" (Deleuze, Parnet 1998, 44). In a world riddled with violence, horror, and disease, the

---

11   "The title refers to my method of photographing – the idea that one could treat the Lincoln memorial and an anonymous street corner with the same amount of care, and the resulting two pictures would be equal, even though one place is a great monument and the other might be a place you'd like to forget" (Eggleston 1989, 171).

ultimate weapon for McCarthy is love: this, his testament, his ulti-
mate 'escape', the shadow that potentially accompanies every human
being and reveals his presence, his being-here.

> I wanted him to see the truth of his situation.
> That he was in love with you.
> Yes. Bone of his bone. Too bad. We were like the last on earth.
> We could choose to join the beliefs and practices of the millions
> of dead beneath our feet or we could begin again. Did he real-
> ly have to think about it? Why should I have no one? Why should
> he? I told him that I'd no way even to know if there was justice in
> my heart if truth that has no resonance. Where is the reflection
> of your worth? And who will speak for you when you are dead?
> (McCarthy 2022b, 163)

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (2023). "Il fuoco e il racconto". *La mente sgombra*. Torino: Einaudi, 203-98.
Baltz, L. (1986). *San Quentin Point*. Essay by M. Haworth-Booth. New York: Aperture.
Child, B. (2011). "Mapping the Democratic Forest: The Postsouthern Spaces of Wil-
    liam Eggleston". *Southern Cultures*, 17(2), 37-54.
Deleuze, G. (2004). *Francis Bacon. Logica della sensazione*. Macerata: Quodlibet.
Deleuze, G.; Parnet, C. (1998). *Conversazioni*. Verona: Ombre Corte.
Eggleston, W. (1976). *William Eggleston's Guide*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
Eggleston, W. (1989). *The Democratic Forest*. New York: Doubleday.
Eggleston, E. (2003). *Los Alamos*. Köln: Scalo.
Eggleston, E. (2023). *Mystery of the Ordinary*. Göttingen; Berlin: Steidl; C/O.
Evans, W. (1966). *Message from the Interior*. Afterwards in J. Szarkowski. New York:
    The Eakins Press.
Ferris, W. (2013). *The Storied South: Voices of Writers and Artists*. Chapel Hill: Univer-
    sity of North Carolina Press.
Goetzmann, W.N. (1996). "The Arcadian Landscapes of Edward S. Curtis". Castleber-
    ry, M. (ed.), *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West*. New York:
    Abrams Inc, 83-91.
Klein, W. (1995). *New York*. Manchester: Dewi Lewis Publisher.
Lagioia, N. (2023). "Alle domande si arriva col linguaggio, alle risposte con l'inconscio:
    'Stella Maris' di Cormac McCarthy". *Lucy sulla cultura*, 19 ottobre.
    `https://lucysullacultura.com/alle-domande-si-arriva-col-linguaggio-`
    `alle-risposte-con-linconscio-stella-maris-di-cormac-mccarthy/`
McCarthy, C. (2008). *The Road*. New York: Penguin Random House.
McCarthy, C. (2015). *Trilogia della Frontiera*. Prefazione di A. Baricco. Torino: Einaudi.
McCarthy, C. (2022a). *The Passenger*. New York: Penguin Random House.
McCarthy, C. (2022b). *Stella Maris*. New York: Penguin Random House.
Mulas, U. (1973). *La fotografia*. Torino: Einaudi.
Rancière, J. (2016). *La partizione del sensibile*. Bologna: DeriveApprodi.
Robinson, M. (2008). *Home*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
Simonetti, P. (2023). "Immergersi negli abissi e poi sparire. Cormac McCarthy tra let-
    teratura e cinema". *Fata Morgana Web*, 1 luglio.
    `https://www.fatamorganaweb.it/mccarthy-letteratura-cinema/`

The Disembodied Magic Body
Situating the Self and its Clone in Laurie Anderson's *Dal Vivo*

Angelica Bertoli
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   The exhibition project *Dal Vivo*, conceived by Laurie Anderson and Germano Celant in 1998 for Fondazione Prada in Milan, explores the relationship between the body, its translation into image and the related perception. The project features Santino Stefanini, incarcerated in San Vittore prison, whose presence is simulated through video transmission, disrupting temporal linearity and awakening consciousness. It invites reconsideration of unconventional existences, rather than focusing on prison conditions. Through theatrical, narrative and performative viewpoints, this paper aims at questioning the nature of art and life in a shared experiential space through the definition of a dialectical identity.

Keywords   Laurie Anderson. Germano Celant. Body. Identity. Theatrical. Dialectical. Performative.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Between the Body and Its Clone: Experiencing Floating Identities in a Liminal Space. – 3 The Exhibition as a Theatre of Encounter. – 4 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

> Decadence is usually associated with the hope of ren-
> ovation. (Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending.*
> *Studies in the theory of fiction*, 1967)

> The stage presents things that are make-believe;
> presumably life presents things that are real and
> sometimes not well rehearsed. (Erving Goffman, *The*
> *Presentation of Self in the Everyday Life*, 1956)

In 1998, American visual performance artist[1] and musician Laurie
Anderson, together with curator Germano Celant, realized *Dal Vivo*
(12 June-12 July), a multimedia installation project conceived for
Fondazione Prada exhibition space,[2] in collaboration with San Vittore
prison in Milan.[3]

   The primary aim of the project was to explore the specular dimen-
sions of life, which can be lived and experienced in different and un-
conventional fashions, although these often remain incomprehensible

---

1 It is deemed appropriate to clarify that the combined use of 'visual' and 'perfor-
mance' reflects a deliberate choice by the author, emphasizing the multidisciplinary
nature of Laurie Anderson's practice, her ability to engage with different media and to
casually move "between disciplines, creating seamless borders by frequently crossing
them" (Goldberg 2000, 12). Her aptitude for blending different media and transcend-
ing categories constitutes a pivotal element for a coherent understanding of the pro-
posed topic, which will be further examined throughout the text. As an important in-
troductory reference, it is compelling to consider RoseLee Goldberg's insightful mon-
ograph on the artist, *Laurie Anderson* (2000), in which the author highlights the diffi-
culties in classifying and categorizing her practice, identifying her work as a "fine tap-
estry" that intertwines "many disciplinary threads", including music, visual arts, per-
formance, theatre, sculpture, and multimedia installations (22).

2 Fondazione Prada opened its doors in 1993 and was originally located at via Spartaco
8, Milan. Its headquarters were then moved to Largo Isarco, in the southern area of
Milan, in a former distillery dating back to the 1910s. The architectural complex was
designed in 2015 by OMA, led by Rem Koolhaas.

3 *Dal Vivo* was originally conceived for the Kunsthalle in Krems, a small Austrian
town nearby Vienna, where exhibitions were held in a deconsecrated medieval church.
The museum proposed that Anderson project a site-specific video and sound work for
this peculiar space. During the planning phase, the artist was most surprised to dis-
cover a maximum-security prison in the town center: from the bell tower of the church,
she could directly see into the prison yard, including an armed guard stationed atop
the security tower. This experience inspired *Life*, a live video feed projecting the im-
age of an incarcerated person onto a life-size sculpture inside the church. "The piece
shows contrasting attitudes to the body of the church (incarnation) and of the pris-
on (incarceration)", Anderson stated (Goldberg 2000, 180). Curators were thrilled by
the project, especially as the artist expressed her interest in telepresence and the
ways in which cameras were "changing the world and some things about attitudes to-
wards the human body (incarceration versus incarnation) that distinguish the pris-
on and the church" (Anderson 1998, 31). In fact, although the plan was not eventual-
ly completed in Krems, it served as a model for *Dal Vivo*, which was later exhibited at
Fondazione Prada in Milan.

to many, like fairy tales, for instance. "And yet the story remains rooted in reality; it deals with the desire for transformation and the need to change one's own present state" (Anderson in Celant 1998, 233). In the case of *Dal Vivo*, the artist engaged in narrating a real, personal story: Laurie Anderson decided to meet with people jailed in San Vittore and, after speaking with dozens of them, she finally encountered her 'matching' collaborator, Santino Stefanini.[4] "I see it as a virtual escape", he claimed when the artist asked for feedback on her project (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 183). Stefanini ended up emboding the potential for reflecting on life as a multidimensional entity, from the perspective of the interplay between two institutions – prison and exhibition gallery – as well as the value of what each seeks to preserve. In this respect, Anderson was particularly interested in exploring the concepts of "incarceration and prison as a form of institution for ensuring public order" (Anderson in Corio 1998; Author's transl.).

The exhibition took place in two rooms preceded by an oblong dark gallery, its floor covered in black sand, with a projection of the prison's layout. This introductory space led to the first room, which displayed an installation of twenty-centimeter-high clay statuettes. On the surface of each statue, Anderson projected videos or films depicting herself seated, thus presenting different self-representations in the same space, with each of them simultaneously narrating different stories [fig. 1]. By speaking through physical alter egos, or even surrogate bodies, the artist transformed herself into a multifaceted storyteller. In the meantime, in the second room an almost hieratic life-size clay statue embodied Santino Stefanini, who was transported from the prison cell onto the surface of the cast via live cable projections [fig. 2].[5] His figure, as well as all the others, was obtained "by carving the image from light" (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 180): this movement of the body through the light, its transportation along different times and spaces, contains a magical feature representing the so-called

> magic of the disembodied body. The prisoner is present in time but spatially remote. Voiceless, unseeing. *Dal Vivo* looks at the way telepresence has altered our perception of time and the body. (180)

---

4 Alfredo Santino Stefanini was a member of the so-called 'banda della Comasina', one of the most feared criminal gangs in Milan and its suburbs, led by Renato Vallanzasca between the 1970s and the 1980s. He was convicted multiple times, not only of his crimes (including armed robberies and one murder), but also because of his numerous escapes. Today, he lives under the custody of social services with permission to leave his apartment from 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

5 The replica of the body was obtained through both recording and live broadcasting – "dal vivo".

Figure 1
Laurie Anderson, *Dal Vivo*.
1998. Installation view.
Photo Travis Roozee.
Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Through the process of de-materializing the bodies and then re-embodying them into the exhibition space, Laurie Anderson explored the existence of a dimension beyond the gallery walls, crafting a metaphoric journey across the contrasts of the human condition suspended between dichotomies such as incarceration and incarnation, escape and invasion, as well as direct experience versus storytelling. It is right in this imbalance that a blurring space, or rather, a 'liminal' dimension, emerged following Turner's insights (cf. Turner 1982; Fischer-Lichte 2008) on how the linear interaction between the past and the present had been overturned through an image that can disrupt temporal regularity and awaken consciousness.[6]

---

[6]   The concept of 'liminal' space as a blurring and non-linear temporal dimension, as introduced by Victor Turner (1982) and later analyzed by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), will be further explored throughout the text.

Figure 2 Laurie Anderson, *Dal Vivo*. 1998. Installation view.
Photo Travis Roozee. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

2 Between the Body and Its Clone: Experiencing Floating Identities in a Liminal Space

Before delving into a deeper analysis of chronological disruptions, it is worth taking a step back to briefly consider Laurie Anderson's prior filmic and psychological projection, *At the Shrink's* (1975),[7] as an instrument for identifying the key aspects that defined the artist's research on identity and its physical alter egos. At that time, she was already looking for systems to provide "a surrogate for herself as a solo performer" while engaging in experimentations with time alteration (Goldberg 2000, 54).

---

[7] The installation was exhibited again, after twenty-one years, in 1996 at the Guggenheim in Soho.

Exhibited at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, the performative installation included a miniature statue sculpted in light. It represented "a fake hologram" of Anderson herself (54), in the form of a small Super-8 film projection of her image being cast on a clay sculpture carefully molded to conform to the proportions of her filmed body. Approaching the living sculpture, the audience could see the image moving while narrating a recorded story about a visit to a psychiatrist. This latter experience marked a significant turning point in Anderson's research on her identity, her thoughts, and the ways in which she would perceive her personality. In 1975, at the age of 23, Anderson was suffering from a psychological disorder that led her to see a psychiatrist. While searching for words that would facilitate a dialogue with herself, this personal journey deeply inspired *At the Shrink's*. During the sessions, every Friday, Anderson would notice lip marks on the mirror in psychiatrist's consulting room, while on Mondays it was perfectly clean, but the doctor couldn't see them from of her position. It was later revealed that her twelve-years-old daughter used to kiss the mirror every week. Anderson thought they needed to change their sitting position, so that the psychiatrist could see the marks on the mirror's surface. It was right then that Anderson realized they were seeing things from such different points of view that she wouldn't have to see her again (cf. Anderson 1993, 84). She was surprised that it was the psychoanalyst who couldn't see, so much so that it was necessary for her to change their roles. "This is the crux of psychoanalysis" the artist explained, "to transfer yourself from one situation to another so as to observe yourself" (Anderson in Celant, Anderson 1998, 254).

By projecting a recorded video of herself recounting her feelings about this personal story onto the surface of the clay statue, Anderson used it both as a mirror and as a surrogate entrusted with her thoughts, thereby manipulating the perspective of the storytelling. This 'delegated' persona inevitably addressed the audience, which was Anderson's aim from the beginning, although direct communication with them was altered by "doing a performance without being there" (Anderson in Goldberg 2000, 54). In this respect, Anderson's open reference to 'performance art' is particularly significant as one of the most powerful aspects of *At the Shrink's* – which will further resurface in *Dal Vivo* – insofar as it questioned the *hic et nunc* performance traditionally requires. Apropos of this nonlinear performance, Eu Jin Chua (2006) noticed that the use of 'performance art' in relation to *At the Shrink's* is contradictory in its "alternative temporality" (Pensky 2004, 177), which deviates from the intrinsic *immediacy* of performance.

> One of the most important notional definitions of performance is
> that it is predicated on the presence of both performer and au-
> dience in a particular time and particular space, on the embod-
> ied *immediacy* of the performance event, on 'live gestures'. (Chua
> 2006, 3; emphasis added)

This essay does not intend to discuss the origins and the evolutions of
performance art, nevertheless it is worth mentioning Goldberg's in-
sights on the 'notional definitions of performance', starting with how

> by its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition
> beyond the simple declaration that it is lice art by artists. Any
> stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of per-
> formance itself. (Goldberg 2018, 8)

Subsequently, the term performance artist appropriately describes
Anderson,

> not least because it is her unique contribution to the field that has
> made it so easy to use the phrase in mainstream journalism. Since
> it remains hard to define, though, […] the reply to the question, 'So
> what is performance art, really?' is frequently that it is live art by
> a single artist – as amalgam of many disciplines, including music,
> text, video, film, dance, sculpture, painting – as in the work of Lau-
> rie Anderson. (Goldberg 2000, 22)

In the light of this set of connotations associated with specific vo-
cabulary and definitions, I would argue for considering the notion
of the 'performative', rather than 'performance art', as introduced
by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008).[8] According to the author, the term
reflects the questioning of boundaries between concepts and con-
texts of action, transforming them into liminal spaces by crossing

---

8　"The dissolution of boundaries in the arts, repeatedly proclaimed and observed by
artists, art critics, scholars of art, and philosophers, can be defined as a performative
turn" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 22). The latter notion, as introduced by Fischer-Lichte, has
been repeatedly discussed with reference to the visual arts, theatre, and dance. In par-
ticular, numerous academic fields such as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and anthro-
pology have re-examined performance as a means of addressing central issues in the
social sciences, shifting their focus from a structuralist approach to the study of pro-
cesses. Culture, especially in connection with ritual practices, staged situations, and
the overall process of civilization, is now regarded as a form of performance. The idea
is to invert the common understanding of performance in its everyday use and to dem-
onstrate how it now signifies a state of alteration in what has historically been system-
atized and known as 'performance' (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).

thresholds (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).[9] Within this performative device, Anderson did indeed activate a chronological short circuit by introducing what Max Pensky called "alternative temporality" (2004, 177), where the 'fake' performer's body did not exist in the same time and place as the audience.

The use of sculptures as repositories for multiple personalities may indeed seem the most straightforward connection with *Dal Vivo*, although in fact it precisely in the discrepancy between real and projected time, and between real and 'magic' existence, that this connection fully emerges, especially in terms of methodology and theoretics. Laurie Anderson's multimedia performative installations have always used special effects to dissolve boundaries between

> the live and the mediatized, between perception and reality, and between the human and the inhuman. Technological interactions have transformed her storytelling projects from monologues into dialogues; 'I' easily becomes 'we' through the introduction of composited duplicates or electronic prostheses. (Ramirez 2011)

Santino Stefanini's projected body progressed through the nonlinear stages of transformation first descending into the self, then experiencing its rebirth eventually leading to the discovery of a renewed dimension (cf. Celant 1998). This projection significantly differed from that of *At the Shrink's*, as it was produced via a live cable broadcast from the prison.[10] The title of the project, which is the Italian translation for 'live' – as in live telecast – indeed played on the echoing power of its wording, reflecting its multiple recurring meanings of "life-like, life-size, *live* […] life sentence" (Chua 2006, 5); and at the same time recalling Anderson's early unaccomplished Austrian installation, titled *Life*. In addition, these related projects also relied on entirely different dimensions for the statues: Stefanini's image was projected onto a life-size sculpture, unlike Anderson's miniature clones in the adjacent room.

---

9   The term *liminal* derives from Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold' (cf. Turner 1982, 41). As part of the act of dissolving boundaries, Erika Fischer-Lichte focused on the need for humans to cross thresholds in order to "(re)turn to themselves as another. As living organisms endowed with a consciousness, as embodied minds, they can become themselves only by permanently bringing themselves forth anew, constantly transforming themselves, and continuing to cross thresholds" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 205). It is precisely in this self-transformation that *Dal Vivo*, as a project on bodies and identities in time and space, seems to visualize the blurred and nonlinear temporal dimension of liminal space.

10   Anderson has often combined recorded and live elements in her performative projects: according to the artist, the live image conveys a sense of familiarity and intimacy, in which the filmed subject and the audience seem to share the same experience, in the same place, at the same time. Through this multimedia system, the performance appears to emerge simultaneously in both the past and the present (cf. Anderson in Celant 1998).

In the light of these tangible aspects, it is worth considering how oppositions slowly blended together within *Dal Vivo* incarceration and incarnation, real and projected body, live and recorded lives, material and unmaterial. It is precisely in the distortion between diametrical dimensions that a metaphorical flux of energy explodes, and a unique image comes to the fore "wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (Benjamin 1999, 463, N3, 1).[11] Despite the very blurring feature of the 'dialectical image', it is possible to draw a parallel between *Dal Vivo*'s temporal overturning and the notion of "alternative temporality" proposed by Max Pensky (2004, 177) when discussing the role of time within Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image'.

> Under conventional terms 'past' is a narrative construction of the conditions for the possibility of a present which supersedes and therefore comprehends it; Benjamin's sense, on the contrary, was that 'past' and 'present' are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles, only subsequent to which the victorious parties consign all that supports their vision of the world to a harmonious past, and all that speaks against it to oblivion. [...] Benjamin was convinced that behind the façade of the present, these otherwise forgotten moments could be recovered from oblivion and reintroduced, shoved in the face of the present, as it were, with devastating force. (Pensky 2007, 180)

Hence, the impact of the past on the present and vice versa represents a turning point in the perception of such temporalities and lives of the image, thereby revealing Anderson's performative installations as states of in-betweenness, as

> places of passage, or 'rhythms' [...]. In so doing, they attempt to wake the body – the performer's and the spectator's – from the threatening anaesthesia haunting it. (Féral, Lyons 1982, 174)

---

11   This is particularly relevant, especially with regards to the broader framework of N3,1 section, in which Benjamin asserted that "Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural" (1999, 463, N3, 1).

When oppositions merge, attention gravitates towards the instable transitional phase from one state to the netx. The space that forms between these opposites becomes central, emphasizing the importance of this interstice as positive and active, especially "where that 'threshold' is protracted and becomes a 'tunnel', when the 'liminal' becomes the 'cunicular'" (Turner 1982, 41). The aesthetic experience enabled by this performative multimedia installation can particularly be described as a "liminal experience, capable of transforming the experiencing subject" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 174). In this context, the *liminal* represents thus a context of social and cultural hybridization, defining a border space where new models and paradigms could potentially emerge (cf. Bazzichelli 1999).

Hence, it is increasingly evident how *Dal Vivo*'s two opposite realities become intertwined within a liminal space that contains both and activates a flow of awakening, a re-semantization of identity reshaping the perception of dual isolation.

3 The Exhibition as a Theatre of Encounter

"I've made *Dal Vivo* because I'm interested in the theater of real time" (Anderson 2000, 180).

Instead of creating an art object, *Dal Vivo* produced an event[12] that involved not only Laurie Anderson and Santino Stefanini, but also the observers, listeners, and spectators (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008). By adopting the form of an event, the project underwent a theatrical manipulation to "achieve the desired consonance" (Kermode 1967, 9). This transition from art object to art event led to the collapse of traditional binaries – particularly the pairs subject/object, spectator/artist – resulting in a theatricalization of the environment, where the scenography was redefined as a participatory space. Anderson used *Dal Vivo*'s theatrical setup as a medium to immerse both herself and participants into the intense, almost metaphysical experience of confinement, going through Stefanini's life in prison and personally taking part in the event. By interweaving theatrical practice with visual arts, Anderson

---

12 *The Transformative Power of Performance* highlighted the emergence of performance as an art *event* in its own right. By tracing the origins and the development of this conceptual and historical framework, Fischer-Lichte provided a pivotal contribution to defining the power of the event in tying the living process of the theatrical event to the fundamental processes of life itself. It is precisely in this convergence that *Dal Vivo* reveals its impact and opens to a shared experience with the spectators. Considering also Richard Schechner's insights on the activation of participation within meeting spaces, it is possible to identify a correspondance between Anderson's manipulation of time and space and the consideration that "participation occurred at those points where the play stopped being a play and became a social event – when spectators felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals [...] to 'join the story'" (Schechner 1973, 44).

introduced a new approach to performance and performativity within this liminal space, where the transformations and social shifts prompted by the liminal phase affected not only the participants' social statuses but also their perception of reality. During such flexible temporalities, individuals could step outside their everyday roles and engage in behaviors that challenge societal norms and expectations.

This movement shifted the focus of artistic practice from the artwork – typically understood as an object – to the audience mirroring the transformation that antrhopological thinking had brought to the field of performance. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of experimental procedures emerged around the performative, with a particular emphasis on practices that expressed a plurality of forms already oriented towards the interchangeability of genres. Within this chronological frame, some performative practices started questioning the relationship with the realm of experience, thus abandoning the central role of the object (i.e., both the artwork and the text). As Claire Bishop pointed out,

> Some of the best conceptual and performance art in the 1960s and '70s similarly sought to refute the commodity-object in favour of an elusive experience. (2012, 6)

Anderson set about reshaping this complex structure engaging in a critical reflection on entrenched aspects of society, thereby fostering a shift in social awareness insofar as performance, as both a response to sociocultural change and a potential catalyst for it, can generate transformation when it assumes an oppositional stance, often carrying a retroactive and reflexive dimension

Hence, it is worth noting how staging became a strategy of creation for her, with artistic and technical means enhancing Santino Stefanini's presence and the 'magical' feature of things; they directed the spectators' attention to "phenomenal beings, and rendered this phenomenal being conspicuous" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 186). Consequently, the body of the protagonist, the object (i.e., the clay sculpture), the sound and video projections bared themselves to the spectators "in their own ephemeral presence" (2008, 186). The audience could experience that 'amalgam' RoseLee Goldberg described Laurie Anderson's practice as, which reunite multiple media under theatrical experimentation. By transforming the exhibition into an event, the artist bridged the gap between the artistic event and real life, inviting spectators on a journey from their own private space into the staged yet authentic, unacted prison environment. This is precisely the 'staging process of reality' that Goldberg envisaged as an instrument to guide the audience's wandering gaze and to reshape the traditional experience museums use to display (cf. Goldberg 2018).
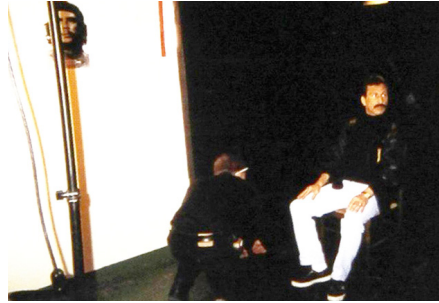
In the case of *Dal Vivo*, there is no role to play, as the script has been replaced by the image. Staging the presentation of the image and ensuring its survival are practices that can be connected to the 'rehearsal process' introduced by Richard Schechner (1981; 1985). Schechner developed ideas about how rehearsals serve as a kind of liminal phase or space for exploration, much like the space between structured performance and lived behavior. In his *Restoration of Behavior* (1985), he explored how rehearsals are not just occasions to get prepared or memorize but a space where behaviors are restored and reshaped, particularly emphasizing how, performers can often experience moments of profound self-revelation, as the boundaries between performance and real life collapse.[13] The rehearsal process allows for deep reflection, self-discovery, and an alignment between the lived experience and the role being performed. What unfolds in *Dal Vivo*, therefore, is precisely this process of modification of the body, which came to assimilate both Anderson and Santino Stefanini, occurred "through an immersion into the self and a rebirth, culminating in a discovery of renewal" (Celant 1998, 244).

> Unfortunately I'm still in prison, but after eleven uninterrupted years there are excellent prospects of obtaining benefiting through sustained good behavior and the reformation of my life, a life lived outside the rules of civil convention. Here I've reflected upon a past season. A mistaken journey that has produced a lot of grief for a lot of good people, and that has ruined more than thirty years of my life. But I still want so much to live. (Stefanini in Celant 1998, 176)

Subsequently, it is possible to affirm that one of Anderson's main purposes was to connect "the interior, visceral spaces of the body [...] to

---

[13] Rehearsal process is utterly relevant within this subject, as it also "makes it necessary to think of the future in such a way as to create a past" (Schechner 1985, 39).

the architectural space", evoking Richard Schechner's insights on the function of rehearsal (1990, 102), by using such theatrical and performative strategies **[fig. 3]**. By exasperating the art-life union, space in *Dal Vivo* became a place of encounter, with the spectator directly involved in the story, attempting to reach the balance between prevailing information and an increasingly difficult attempt to experience.

4 Conclusion

At the end of this complex journey through the "theatralization" (Groys 2018, 73) of *Dal Vivo*, it is possible to attest the mutual and active exchange between theatre, performance art and visual arts, placing scenography in an 'unconventional' space where interpretation has been replaced by action (cf. Roman 2020). This marks a significant moment where scenography and contemporary installation converge in the exhibition space, thereby displaying an event and shifting the focus toward how contemporary art has become the

> medium of investigations of the eventfulness of the events: the different modes of immediate experience of the events, […] the intellectual and emotional modes of our relationship to documentation. (Groys 2018, 77)

Fondazione Prada's exhibition space has therefore turned into a critical environment where the overlap between ordinary human gaze – present at the beginning of the exhibition – and controlled gaze – emerging at its conclusion – does not only take place but also becomes revealed. Despite its contrasting elements, the final experience appears strangely familiar, addressing that

> need to speak humanly of a life's importance [and to experience] a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end. (Kermode 1967, 4)

Bibliography

Anderson, L. (1993). *Stories from the Nerve Bible: A Retrospective 1972-1992*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Anderson, L. (1998). *Some Backgrounds on "Dal Vivo"*. Milan: Progetto Prada Arte.

Bazzichelli, T. (1999). *Pratiche reali per corpi virtuali. Per una riformulazione del concetto di opera d'arte attraverso la sperimentazione performativa coevolutiva con l'ausilio delle nuove tecnologie* [tesi di laurea]. Roma: Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza".

Benjamin, W. (1999). *The Arcades Project*. Edited by R. Tiedemann; transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge (MA); London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.

Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York: Verso.

Celant, G. (1998). *Laurie Anderson. Dal Vivo*. Milano: Progetto Prada Arte.

Celant, G.; Anderson, L. (1998). *530 Canal Street, New York, May 13*. Milan: Progetto Prada Arte.

Chua, E.J. (2006). "Laurie Anderson's Telepresence". *Postmodern Culture*, 16(2).
https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2006.0016

Corio, O. (1998). "Laurie Anderson". *Virus*, 14.
https://1995-2015.undo.net/it/magazines/933692070#

Féral, J.; Lyons, T. (1982). "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified". *Modern Drama*, 25(1), 170-81.
https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1982.0036

Fischer-Lichte, E. (2008). *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*. London; New York: Routledge.

Goldberg, R. (2000). *Laurie Anderson*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.

Goldberg, R. (2018). *Performance Now: Live Art for the 21st Century*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Groys, B. (2018). *Entering the Flow: Museum Between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk*. Bast, G.; Carayannis, E.; Campbell, D. (eds), *The Future of Museums. Arts, Research, Innovation and Society*. Cham: Springer, 67-79.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93955-1_8

Kermode, F. (1967). *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marranca, B.; Dasgupta, G. (1999). *Conversations on Art and Performance*. Baltimore; London: The John Hopkins University Press.

Pensky, M. (2004). "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images". Ferris, D.S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-98.
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521793297.010

Ramirez, K. (2011). "'What You Mean We?': Video-Cloning Laurie Anderson". *In Media Res, a Media Commons Project*, November 8.
https://mediacommons.org/imr/2011/11/05/what-you-mean-we-video-cloning-laurie-anderson

Roman, M. (2020). *Habiter l'exposition. L'artiste et la scénographie*. Paris: Manuella.

Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theater*. New York: Hawthorn Books.

Schechner, R. (1981). "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed". *The Kenyon Review*, 3(4), 83-113.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/4335238

Schechner, R. (1985). "Restoration of Behavior". *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 35-116.

Schechner, R. (1990). "Behavior, Performance, and Performance Space". *Perspecta*, 26, 97-102.
https://doi.org/10.2307/1567156

Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publicatioins.

Valentini, V.; Marranca, B. (2006). *American Performance 1975-2005*. Roma: Bulzoni.

**Through the Human: The *Anthropos*
on the Stage of Crisis**

Under the Surface
Archaeology of Memory and Renovation of Meanings in Giorgio Vasta's *Il tempo materiale*

Alessandro Cenzi
Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italia

Abstract   This proposal aims to analyse Giorgio Vasta's *Il tempo materiale* through the concept of the mythological machine, showing the short-circuits and the layers of meaning generated by a moment of deep crisis. Set during the Years of Lead, the novel deals with the complex theme of armed struggle that has rarely found proper literary representation. Emphasis will be placed on the processes of estrangement and allegory that make it possible to explore the imagery of the period and the historical facts from an unusual perspective, capable of reconfiguring memory thanks to an explosive reaction between past and present elements.

Keywords   Giorgio Vasta. Estrangement. Allegory. Mythological machine. Years of Lead.

Summary   1 The Armed Struggle: A Literary In-Digestion. – 2 Terrorism and Mythological Machines: Escaping Gazes. – 3 For a Pervasive Estrangement: Gazes from Below and Linguistic Shifts. – 4 The Alfamuto as a Method: Resemantisation Through Linguistic Pressure. – 5 The Temporal Dimension of Allegory: Taking Care of Mourning. – 6 Archaeology of the Past: A Coring.

1 The Armed Struggle: A Literary In-Digestion

Critics pointed out *Il tempo materiale* (2008),[1] Giorgio Vasta's novelistic debut, as one of the most accomplished Italian novels of the new millennium. The effectiveness of this work originates from the particular literary processes deployed, making it a complex textual object, for which many attempts have been expended trying to categorize it. It is also the only fully and freely novelistic work by the Sicilian author: *Spaesamento* (2010) is strongly affected by the topographical character of the Contromano collection; *Presente* (2012), its a four handed collaboration with Andrea Bajani, Michela Murgia and Paolo Nori, and it is the result of the Diario in Circolo project conceived and curated by Vasta for the Circolo dei Lettori in Turin. The 2017 novel *Absolutely Nothing* is a particular travel report through the American deserts made in collaboration with the photographer Ramak Fazel, and the recent *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce* (2022) is an autofictional short story also made in collaboration with the American photographer.

In addition to the literary context of the new millennium animated by discourses on the 'return to the real',[2] Vasta's novel also fits into another tradition: the literature on the Years of Lead. Following the example of Donnarumma (2010), I wish to indicate only the narrative literature which has as main theme the armed fight or that refers to that imaginary. Indeed, writing operations attributable to other literary genres such as essays, theatre, and inquiry, or to other narrative forms such as film and television, do not match with it.

The most striking feature that has started many studies is the lack of a novel that can be called canonical about that period. In other words, it has been observed the inability of a great historical moment to produce great literature. The reason for this phenomenon can be summarized in three points: first, as a premise, it should be remembered that an alignment between history and representation, between history and literary history, is never guaranteed and therefore should not be assumed. Second: the narrative elaboration of the armed struggle is strongly affected by the hegemony of Postmodernism, which promoted the absence of events by rejecting

---

[1]   Since the novel *Il tempo materiale* has been largely studied, I will discuss it taking for granted the readers' knowledge of the plot and the main thematic points.

[2]   There has been much talk about a 'return to the real' and a possible extinction of postmodernism, internationally, following the tragic events in New York in 2001. To inflame the debate in the Italian cultural scene, however, was an investigation conducted by Raffaele Donnarumma and Gilda Policastro published in 2008 in the magazine *Allegoria*. For a reconstruction of this scenario, see: Bertoni 2007; Casadei 2009; Ceserani 1997; Contarini, De Paulis, Tosatti 2016; Donnarumma, Policastro 2008; Ferraris 2012; Serkowska 2011.

arguments of realistic relevance (Simonetti 2011, 109). Finally, it must be considered that the Years of Lead represent an historical parenthesis with a strong traumatic connotation, and traumas, as Ernesto de Martino has well explained, activate compensatory mechanisms aimed at hiding, distorting, dislocating facts and governing the insurgence of crises (1995, 144-5).

Indeed, it is no coincidence that during the 1970s it was mainly journalists, sociologists and historians who talked about terrorism, while literature, with a few exceptions, maintained a lateral attitude. Authors avoided handling a subject that the mainstream media colonized quickly and, when they decided to write about it, they made use of ostentatiously artificial forms, evasive and ineffective narrative solutions. The most common choices are in fact: processes of fantasmization, which propose dreamy scenarios that are so opaque that they dissolve the real; distancing dislocations, in both chronological or geographical instances; and the recurrence of the family topos, which almost always has the effect of flattening the armed struggle to a family matter (Donnarumma 2010, 340).

From the early 1980s something begins to change and who speaks out and narrates terrorism are the terrorists themselves, encouraged by the cultural industry and the cessation of fighting. New narratives begin to appear and stabilize in the hybrid forms of the book-interview or the four-handed book. These narratives have a primarily cautious and reassuring intent: their goal is the integration through self-justification.[3] The success is guaranteed by the autobiographical authority of the narrator, but themes are banalized and the layers of complexity are reduced. Violence is elided, alluded to or rendered by periphrases. The wide use of armed struggle as a narrative theme clearly does not satisfy the needs of literary research, but is because of the great public interest in this topic. The result is a symbolic subjection of literature to the media (Simonetti 2011, 110).

The 1990s confirmed this subordinate relationship: the narrative about the armed conflict breaks away from the pattern of confession and is now colonized by noir fiction. Even if the end of the aphasic parenthesis of the 1970s is to be considered a step forward, this decade confirms even more the crisis of the novel, which fails to match the complexity of reality hiding the contradictions behind a plot effect. It is precisely the strong codification of the genre noir that shows itself to be the greatest limitation to an effective and authentic portrayal of history. The thinning of the layers of meaning, the constant recourse to stereotypes concerning the figure of the terrorist and the reduction of the victims to simple targets to advance the

---

3 In Tabacco (2010, 71) the author defines these narratives as "piloted autobiographies" underlining how the rendering of facts is bent by editorial needs.

plot flatten terrorist action to an easy ingredient capable of bringing mystery and violence.

With the onset of the new millennium, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers, books on terrorism have increased exponentially. The growing demand for storytelling consolidates the success of the noir, which continues to function because of its ability to combine entertainment and inquiry. A comforting effect prevails almost always: the problematic nature of events is flattened into lazy manichaean distinctions capable of satisfying from a spectacular point of view, but cognitively and emotionally sedating[4] (Simonetti 2011, 121).

2 Terrorism and Mythological Machines: Escaping Gazes

What certainly complicates the assimilation of this historical period is the phenomenon of terrorism. As Daniele Giglioli has shown well in *All'ordine del giorno è il terrore* (2007), the category of terrorism generates great embarrassment in anyone who attempts to give it an univocal and universally acceptable definition. The only identifiable characteristic is that 'terrorist' is a label that is only attributed to others, it is never used for self-determination. This term shows itself as a pseudo-concept "a rhetorical weapon without any potential for veracity, not only capable of hiding the truth, but also of generating realities" (Giglioli 2018, 12-13).

What terrorism facilitates is the setting in motion of mythological machines. The theorization of this concept goes back to the 1972 essay *Lettura del "Bateau ivre" di Rimbaud*, but it is in the later *Cultura di destra* (1979) that Furio Jesi really tested this theoretical construct. The mythological machine is described as a linguistic machine that

> proceeds by accumulating a large number of clichés, stereotypes, catchphrases, formulas that seem clear but do not need to be understood, which indeed seem clear precisely because they do not need to be understood. (2011, 8)

---

4 Simonetti (2011, 115-17) specifies that "much of the recent narrative production about the years of the armed struggle insists on the iconography of terrorism, and especially of brigatism, in the forms and ways through which it has become a repertoire in the Italian imagination during recent decades". Indeed, what is returned is an image of the armed conflict completely distorted by the media's incessant work: "while it seems to be talking about a burning past, a lot of contemporary fiction is perhaps talking about the way the mass media act in the present; the way they absorb it into the aesthetic dimension in order to achieve suggestions, emblems and myths". Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the Author.

Jesi speaks about 'ideas without words', pointing out to an inexhaustible and tireless process. In its constant reference to heterogeneous images and materials, the mythological machine merely fills, always provisionally, the void that generates it in a kind of interminable self-justification.

The solution, if there is one, does not consist in the destruction of the mythological machines, which, as Jesi says (2013, 106), "would reform like the hydra's heads" but rather in nullifying the context that makes them real and productive. Therefore, if terrorism moves in an out of sight sacred sphere, it is necessary to respond to this consecration with an Agambenian profanation[5] of that myth, returning it to common use. It is again Daniele Giglioli (2018, 25) who refers to literature as a means capable of respecting this purpose, since it is the carrier of an 'existential posture' aimed at the familiarization with traumatic otherness.

A good example of how the mythological machine works is shown by Chiara Cremonesi, in her article entitled *A Genova tra il Messico e il Cile* (2020). The text investigates the processes that led to the media effectiveness of the two expressions "macelleria messicana" (Mexican butchery) and "notte cilena" (Chilean night) in reference to what happened during the G8 in Genoa at the Diaz school and the torture committed at the Nino Bixio barracks in Bolzaneto. The first refers to the Pinochet regime, taken as a paradigmatic example of a systematic violation of human rights and the use of torture. As for the second, the references are less direct, but no less effective, and seem to evoke an idea of wild Latin America. These enunciations

> do not need to be told in order to be activated [...] [they] are immediately comprehensible formulas precisely because there is no need to understand them: they allude and elude at the same time, evocative even for those who know absolutely nothing about the history of Chile, Mexico, and Argentina. (348)

If, therefore, in the case of Genoa the mythological machine acted by making sure that, although the gaze of Italy was at the chronological and geographical epicenter of the events, the gaze evaded in a process of exoticization by dislocating the violence in an allotopic and allochronic dimension (leaving no space for an Italian night or an Italian butchery), Giorgio Vasta with *Il tempo materiale*, seems to follow an inverse path: from a periphery that is geographic (Palermo), historical (2008), and anagraphic (the protagonist is 11 years old, Nimbo), he turns his gaze toward a particularly dense core of Italian history (1978 and the 1970s). If the

---

5 See Agamben 2005.

language of ideas without words presumes to be able to truly say, therefore to say and at the same time to hide in the secret sphere of the symbol. (Jesi 2011, 27)

Vasta creates a fictional space in which he recalls those elements that, by sedimenting, composed the imagery of those years, and then observes them through Nimbo's eyes. Through estrangement and allegorical processes, Vasta digs a distance between the evoked elements and their meaning; in this way, he lays bare the mythological machine. Giorgio Vasta does not narrate history, but how imagery suffers history (Donnarumma 2009). Within his novel, all those elements that are part of the mainstream imaginary of the 1970s are corroded, showing themselves rather as cultural residues that the present has inherited and onto which seems possible to attribute a new value.

3 For a Pervasive Estrangement: Gazes from Below and Linguistic Shifts

Among the literary processes Giorgio Vasta deploys in this novel, those of estrangement are certainly the most obvious. When speaking about estrangement Šklovskij's essay *L'arte come procedimento* (1917) is essential. In the text the author states that we are in front of an artistic event whenever a process has been intentionally removed from automated perception, so whenever an object is experienced not through recognition, but through vision. Estrangement for Sklovsky (1968, 81-2) is the procedure of the dark form that increases the difficulty and duration of perception. The temporal dimension is therefore a key feature of estrangement as an artistic process: the author intentionally creates a longer way to reach the subject so that perception persists and achieves greater intensity.

A second fundamental contribution comes from Carlo Ginzburg (1998), in particular from his essay "Straniamento. Preistoria di un procedimento letterario". In this text, Ginzburg outlines a tradition of estrangement by traversing different authors who have reflected on this topic: from Marco Aurelio's erasure of misrepresentations, Montaigne's *naifveté originelle*, La Bruyère's and Tolsoj's dislocation of points of view, to the conflict between the freshness of perceptions and the intrusiveness of ideas present in Proust. The result is an empowerment of Šklovskij's concept. Estrangement operates in a dual distance: the one from the referent, which allows the assumption of a new unseen point of view, and the consequent temporal distance, which is the suspension of recognition that intensifies the vision.

Referring to this tradition, the first words with which *Il tempo materiale* starts are enough to introduce the first element of estrangement: "Ho undici anni" (I am eleven years old). The narrator is a

young boy; the protagonist's anagraphic age leads his profile to what Victor Turner (1972, 112) calls 'liminal' subjects, in other words, subjects characterised by an interstitial condition, on the edge between dissimilar social and cultural worlds and who are, for this reason, activators of meaning (Martelli 2015, 96). In the literary sphere, this is nothing new: by proposing a view from below (Zinato 2016, 146) we generally witness a series of shifts that have the effect of formulating an alternative view of reality. We do not need to move far back in time to find literary examples, we only need to think of some Italian novels of the twentieth century, such as *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) by Italo Calvino. Pin, the protagonist, understands the facts as far as his cognitive maturity develops. For example, the sexual relations engaged by his sister enter Pin's perception and consciousness as "sogni strani" (strange dreams), in which naked bodies are chasing and fighting each other (Calvino 1987, 44). This description duplicates the point of view on the same event, providing the reader a different focus able to activate new connections of meaning. Nimbo, starting from the incipit, is put into dialogue with this tradition, but it is always in this border zone that Giorgio Vasta operates a second shift: that of language.

From the very first line, Vasta decides to blow up all mimesis and all plausibility by attributing an adult language to the eleven-year-old protagonist (and his two other fellows). Nimbo, already in a liminal position because of his age, also goes outside the horizon of expectation that a reader might have for a child protagonist. Nimbo finds no counterpart in the real world, a child like him is not improbable, but impossible, and it is the novel itself that declares it: "un non-ragazzino" (a non-child) (Vasta 2008, 25). This choice by the author, goes beyond the category of the 'supernatural of imposition' (Orlando 2017) because a true normalisation of the facts is never achieved by the reader. The estrangement effect is pervasive because it returns in every sentence pronounced by the protagonist and, by doing this, it exemplifies what Lotman says about the transmission of artistic information.[6]

---

[6] "The transmission of artistic information comes from an explosion of meaning: something previously unknown is suddenly illuminated by the encounter with something unexpected, unpredictable, and it immediately becomes clear, obvious" (Lotman 1994, 11).

4 The Alfamuto as a Method: Resemantisation Through Linguistic Pressure

Palermo was a geographic periphery in regard to the events of the armed struggle, which mainly affected cities such as Milan, Rome and Turin. It is thanks to radio, television and newspapers that the three protagonists learn about the actions of the BR (Brigate Rosse). For the three boys, terrorism is above all a linguistic event. Indeed, their subversion starts precisely from language and is animated by a double refusal: on the one hand for dialect, perceived as something prehistoric in which everything is shouted and the tonal and prosodic level always prevails over the semantic one (Vasta 2008, 59); on the other hand for the ordinary language of television, journalism and cinema, which is functional to indistinction (85).

What the three subversive kids intercept and are bothered by is the continuous work of the mythological machine. In the chapter "Comunicare" they explain this feeling using words very close to those used by Jesi:

> Every week, he says, everything is renewed. New records, each with its own cover, new films, new TV characters. New magazine editions appear on newsstands. The combination of these innovations produces a common imagery that Italy needs to hold together. Because actually everything is falling apart. Every character that appears on the cover or on a screen becomes a centre, something that should provide stability. And so bodies and postures accumulate. But the centre is unstable, it only lasts a week and then moves on, in a cycle of hypocritical revolutions that only function to keep time always identical to itself. (129)

It is this desire for emancipation that leads to the creation of the *alfamuto*: a communicative system that exemplifies and sums up the work of deconstruction of the imagery. The alfamuto is characterised by a process of emptying and re-assigning of meaning applied to the most common images of the film, television and music panorama:

> Let me get this straight, says Bocca. We take a famous form, we leave it as it is outside but we modify its content. Right? That's right, I confirm. We take the most stupid poses that everyone knows and make them into coded messages. (128-9)

The re-reading of the world by the three kids is a "process of selection and rejection of some limited fragments of the culture they belong to" (Martelli 2015, 99). The common imagery is broken down into its constituent icons (the cover of *Yuppi Du*, the dead body of Aldo Moro, the pose of Elvis…) and then recomposed and re-signified.

As it has been shown, the alfamuto exemplifies the work of decon-struction of the collective memory, but even outside this communi-cative system, the elements summoned fail to activate the mytholog-ical machine because they are shifted from the plane of history into another territory in which, through linguistic pressure, they are es-tranged and distorted. Everything that could have a political rele-vance is not elided, but moved from the level of the chronicle to a figurative-imaginative level. This choice does not depend on a lack of bravery to face the reality, but rather on a precise stylistic and ethical choice for which the author prefers to render the facts under a different lens. This is not a device aimed to anaesthetise the real like the many used during postmodernism, but a way to amplify it.

In this way *Il tempo materiale* fully embraces Lotman's vision of the function of art.[7] Vasta's novel acts in two directions; on the one hand what is already known is disfigured and rendered foreign to ordinary perception. On the other hand, as the best literature does, it is also able to familiarize us with the most extreme otherness by asking us what we can experience, recognise or disconfirm about our experience by becoming subjects of someone else's predicates. Recognition and judgement on reality are suspended, allowing the reader to activate new cognitive processes and to question the usu-al view of that chapter of Italian history and of the present day by al-legorical resemantization.

5 The Temporal Dimension of Allegory: Taking Care of Mourning

To fully describe the evolution of the concept of allegory over the cen-turies is a tough challenge. The tradition of this concept is long and closely linked to one of the symbols with which it experiences peri-ods of co-presence, alternation or mutual exclusion (Luperini 1990, 7). Here, I will only report the main passages that led to the rediscov-ery of this practice in the modern era, and in particular on Walter Benjamin's reflections.

The nineteenth century was certainly the century of least artistic success for allegory. The reasons are to be found in the influence of

---

7 According to the Russian theorist, the relationship between extra-artistic reality and that of art moves along two axes: "On the one hand there is the dismembering of extrartistic reality, and the recomposition of its elements into new combinations: trans-lation into the language of art gives these fragments of reality a surplus of freedom, and fills them with new meanings. [...] However, the reverse is also possible. Art can not only create an analytical image, in which what is usual and similar becomes unu-sual and dissimilar: art can follow the path of synthesis, transform the dissimilar into the similar" (Lotman 1994, 82).

Romanticism, which promoted values such as organicity and the recon-
struction of meaning. The lack of success of allegory depends there-
fore on an aesthetic assumption that is not respected: that of unity
and synthesis. By referring to something external, allegory is pointed
out as an imperfect practice, a "conceptual effort" (Rustioni 2016, 63).

For a rehabilitation of allegory in the artistic sphere, we have to wait
until 1926, the date of publication of Walter Benjamin's essay *Il dram-
ma barocco tedesco*. This text completely overturns the Romantic view
of allegory and restores its strength. The steps taken by Benjamin that
led to the redemption of this practice are mainly two: the first is to con-
sider the imaginative value of allegory. The image that this proposes
on each occasion is not to be considered as an enigma to be solved in
order to reach the true meaning of the work (this position comes from
Benedetto Croce), but is to be understood as an instant and synthetic
expression of the ego, in other words an image without which an idea
could not have been expressed.[8] By this Benjamin affirms "the scrip-
tural character of allegory and the allegorical character of writing"
(Luperini 1990, 46), guiding us to the second step, which is to recog-
nise the conventional character of allegory, as well as that of writing.

The relationship between words and things is the result of an arbi-
trary assignment and exists only because of a social pact to make com-
munication possible. Likewise, allegory makes use of these arbitrary
signs to create new meanings. Allegory consequently takes on the sta-
tus of metalanguage and is not "convention of expression, but an ex-
pression of convention" (Benjamin 1999, 149). Allegory for Benjamin
is not limited to the rhetorical figure, but is understood as authentic
expression that uses a conventional sign system to create other mean-
ings. This non-dogmatic and non-univocal relationship between sign
and meaning opens up the dimension of temporality: allegory estab-
lishes a distance between sign and meaning and "renouncing any nos-
talgia or desire to coincide, it establishes its own language in the void
of this temporal difference" (DeMan 1975, 263-4).

Allegory does not require an immediate relationship, but a kind of
suspension that digs a distance between sign and meaning (Muzzioli
2010, 183). This distance, as Walter Benjamin well explained, is tra-
versed by brooding, that is, the act of one who, confused, meditates,
creating new dialectical connections between fragments (Benjamin
2000, 214).

Regarding the ways in which it takes root in a story, it is possible
to say that allegory takes place where fiction does not hold up, where

---

8 See Benjamin (1999, 137), in which he affirms: "allegory is not a simple rhetorical
device, but full expression, as language is, or even as writing is. And this is the *expe-
rimentum crucis*. It was precisely the writing that appeared as the conventional sign
system par excellence" (Author's transl.).

the mimetic naturality of the tale is lacking, where the perception of the 'as-if' remains unsatisfied and therefore opens up space for an intervention by the reader (Todorov 1986).

As a result of these considerations, the points of contact between allegory and estrangement should be obvious: both base their effectiveness on a temporal and conceptual separation between sign and meaning; both ask the reader to be an active participant in the reconstruction or completion of meaning; both propose to redefine the edges of certain elements by betting that an alternative pathway will reinforce the resulting effect. It should come as no surprise, therefore, if various textual passages that can be identified as the site of estranging processes are also valid for allegorical evaluations; the places in the text where mimesis fails are fertile gaps in which processes of re-attribution of meaning can flourish.

Particularly illustrative of this functioning in the novel is the role of Aldo Moro. In the novel, the ex-president of the DC appears sporadically, always in different contexts. The first occurrence is in the fourth chapter *Al centro della terra* (At the Centre of the Earth): it is 18 April 1978 and following what is believed to be the seventh announcement from the BR, the search for the president's body is concentrated on Lake Duchessa. Nimbo learns this news from the TV which immediately triggers his mythopoetic fantasy:

> I get back to my seat. On the television there is still the lake and the helicopters. I drop my gaze to the soup, my lake of clear ash: the whole of Italy is looking for Aldo Moro and Aldo Moro lies at the bottom of my plate […], I take the spoon and slide it over the edge of the plate towards the bottom […], Aldo Moro is frozen, his arms are folded tightly against his sides, his head is closed between his shoulders, his knees are against his chest, the honourable man is exhibited, displayed, elevated in his inox steel cradle and is offered as sacrificial nourishment, as a host to be taken in the mouth and swallowed without thought, all of Italy and all Italians, eating the president of the Christian Democrats, taking communion, not chewing, swallowing, feeling inside the taste of Lent and of wheat, of medicine and then looking into each other's eyes and finding them bright and without anguish, the full and proud Italian gazes. (Vasta 2008, 69)

Later we meet him during the construction of the alfamuto, of which he becomes one of the twenty-one poses chosen by the three protagonists:

> We get to "die". Scarmiglia crouches in the sand, on his side, one arm bent, his hand resting on his hip, his head slightly reclined to the left: Aldo Moro dying and emerging from the metal womb of the Renault 4. In the space of two months we saw that photo so many times that for us it became the photo of all deaths. (Vasta 2008, 139)

Lastly, it is implied in the character of Morana who shares a similar name and destiny with the president. The element that all these passages have in common is that, through processes of association and estrangement, Aldo Moro is never considered as a real referent, opening up predictable considerations on the political situation, but is shifted. In the first case, the chronicle of events immediately leaves space for a reflection that associates the Moro kidnapping to metabolic-digestive processes, with references to the practice of Christian communion as a moment of expiation of guilt. In the second, it is only the figural value of an image that is emptied of all its contingent implications and re-signified. As regards Morana's character, on the other hand, the evident parallels must be related to the differences that do exist, contributing to an effect of suspension of judgement and inviting a revaluation of both Morana's character and Aldo Moro's role. The ex-president of the DC is therefore alienated from Nimbo; in this way he is free to establish relationships and cross-references with other points in the text, inviting the reader to a reconfiguration of his view of the events. In this sense, the scene of Aldo Moro's swallowing is in clear dialogue with an episode contained in the chapter "Eclissi", in which, after a family loss (a miscarriage by his mother), Nimbo observes his brother Cotone taking care of a rotting sandwich:

> Indeed, since the day of the miscarriage, something in Cotone had changed. He was always carrying a sandwich. So far so normal, he could be hungry. But the sandwich was always the same. Sometimes he picked it up, contemplated it and put it back. Never a bite, nothing, the sandwich was untouched. [...] Sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning slightly forward, Cotton removed small pieces of the sandwich he was holding with his left hand using the middle finger and thumb of his right hand. He peeled them off and ate them. Hearing me come in, he paused for a moment and looked at me, then resumed peeling off small pieces and eating them. They were green and blackish, crumbling between his fingers. Without saying anything to him I sat down next to him. I stayed like that, with Cotton, unable to speak to him. Then, considering that every connection is silence, I had stretched out a hand towards the sandwich, peeled off a piece of it and started to eat the mourning too. (Vasta 2008, 164-7)

This comparison on a metabolic level highlights profound differences between the two episodes: Moro's swallowing is associated with Christian communion: a swallowing without chewing with an immediate saving effect that allows people to return to normality guilt-free. On the other hand, the phase of slow chewing and digestion of the sandwich is preceded by a period of waiting, a period of care, of

grief. If, as Leonardo Sciascia also suggested in his *L'Affaire Moro* (1978), the death of the DC president had the effect of strengthening and uniting the State, Vasta seems to prolong that suggestion by adding that his killing also absolved the whole of Italy of guilt, by preventing the nation from understanding the depth of events and stopping history, and it is precisely this stasis that the three young boys try to unblock through subversion.

6   Archaeology of the Past: A Coring

Throughout the novel, Vasta prevents the mythological machine from functioning by translating its elements into a different plane. The figure of Aldo Moro in particular constitutes one of the most complex aspects to probe: dealing with his history and therefore to Italian history as a whole requires anyone to relate to a dense common encyclopaedia full of contradictions, approximations, removals and stratifications of events. However, these doubts did not prevent his figure from being taken as a paradigm of the victim during the season of political violence in the 1970s. The fact that the Day of remembrance of the victims of terrorism was fixed on 9 May (the day Aldo Moro's body was found) and not, for example the 12 December, the anniversary of the Piazza Fontana massacre, as many associations of victims' families had proposed (Ghidotti 2016, 182) demonstrates the importance of Aldo Moro's memory compared to all the other victims and testifies, at the same time, the desire that his death should sum up all the others. In this regard, David Moss speaks of 'memorisation without memory' in reference to the fact that a pervasive representation of the figure of Moro throughout Italy is not followed by a shared memory on the meaning of his life and death (Ghidotti 2016, 182).

If, with good reason then, Daniele Giglioli speaks of Moro as an "unburied corpse" (2014, 23), Giorgio Vasta with *Il tempo materiale* goes exploring what has been buried in his place by making his way through the cultural residues that make up our imagination. The operation that Vasta conducts with this novel is archaeological: it is not aimed at rereading the past, but at investigating it ex novo, perforating the surface of things and sinking into it until it shakes the layers of meaning and symbolic concretions (Raccis 2013). The logic of coring, an explicit method of investigation also underlying the short story *Spaesamento* above mentioned, drives this novel and is traceable in the chapter "Lander". Nimbo is the literary probe with which Vasta investigates 1978; his exasperated perceptiveness is functional to an operation of excavation and discovery of what Benjamin would call the 'rags' of history (Agamben 2008, 74). Vasta as an author is therefore comparable to the figure of the chiffonnier so much appreciated first by Baudelaire and then by Benjamin. In this, the residue

(as a concept) shows its relationship to the scrap and the fragment and "appears as the testimony of a subversive marginality" (Valdinoci 2019, 5), and the bearer of new possibilities. The power of this novel lies precisely in the construction of a constellation of known elements that are rendered unusual. A past historical moment is made to react violently with elements of the present, realising that revolutionary dialectical process that Benjamin attributes to the monad.

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (2005). *Profanazioni*. Roma: Nottetempo.

Agamben, G. (2008). *Signatura rerum. Sul metodo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Benjamin, W. (1999). *Il dramma barocco tedesco*. Trad. di F. Cuniberto. Torino: Einaudi. Trad. di: *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1928.

Benjamin, W. (2000). *Opere complete di Walter Benjamin*. Vol. 9, *I "passages" di Parigi*. Trad. di E. Agazzi, G. Backhaus, G. Carchia, M. De Carolis, F. Desideri, A.M. Marietti, A. Moscati, F. Porzio, G. Russom R. Solmi. Trad. di: *Das Passagen-Werk*. Von R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983.

Bertoni, F. (2007). *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia possibile*. Torino: Einaudi.

Calvino, I. [1947] (1987). *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. Milano: Garzanti.

Casadei, A. (2009). *Stile e tradizione nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Ceserani, R. (1997). *Raccontare il postmoderno*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Contarini, S.; De Paulis, M.P.; Tosatti, A. (a cura di) (2016). *Nuovi realismi: il caso italiano. Definizioni, questioni, prospettive*. Massa: Transeuropa.

Cremonesi, C. (2020). "A Genova tra Messico e Cile. Violenza, trauma e mitodinamiche contemporanee". Cremonesi, C.; Zago, M.; Scarpi, P.; Agnolin, A.; Ferrari, F. (a cura di), *In viaggio verso le stelle: storie di miti, culti ed eroi*. Roma: Aracne, 323-52.

De Martino, E. (1995). *Storia e metastoria: i fondamenti di una teoria del sacro*. Lecce: Massenzio.

DeMan, P. (1975). *Cecità e visione. Linguaggio letterario e critica contemporanea*. Trad. di E. Saccone. Napoli: Liguori. Trad. di: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Donnarumma, R. (2009). "Review of *Il tempo materiale*, by Vasta, G.". *Allegoria*, 60. https://www.allegoriaonline.it/300-giorgio-vasta-qil-tempo-materialeq

Donnarumma, R. (2010). "Storia, immaginario, letteratura: il terrorismo nella narrativa italiana (1969-2010)". Cataldi, P. (a cura di), *Per Romano Luperini*. Palermo: Palumbo, 438-65.

Donnarumma, R. (2014). *Ipermodernità. Dove va la letteratura contemporanea*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Donnarumma, R.; Policastro, S. (2008). "Ritorno alla realtà? Otto interviste a narratori italiani". *Allegoria*, 57, 9-25.

Ferraris, M. (2012). *Bentornata realtà*. Torino: Einaudi.

Ghidotti, C. (2016). "'Giace sul fondo del mio piatto'. Deformazioni e riuso di Aldo Moro ne Il tempo materiale di Giorgio Vasta". Casalino, L.; Cedola, A.; Perolino, U. (a cura di), *Il caso Moro: memorie e narrazioni*. Massa: Transeuropa, 181-96. Pronto Intervento 13.

Giglioli, D. (2014). *Critica della vittima*. Roma: Nottetempo.

Giglioli, D. (2018). *All'ordine del giorno è il terrore*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Ginzburg, C. (1998). "Straniamento. Preistoria di un procedimento letterario". Ginzburg, C., *Occhiacci di legno. Nove riflessioni sulla distanza*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 15-39.

Jesi, F. [1979] (2011). *Cultura di destra*. Roma: Nottetempo.

Jesi, F. (2013). *Il tempo della festa*. Roma: Nottetempo.

Lotman, J.M. (1994). *Cercare la strada. Modelli della cultura*. Trad. di N. Marcialis. Venezia: Marsilio.

Luperini, R. (1990). *L'allegoria del moderno*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

Martelli, M. (2015). "Memorie sensibili di fronte alla storia. I bambini ideologici di Giorgio Vasta". Lorenzi, F.; Perrone, L. (a cura di), *Nuove forme dell'impegno letterario in Italia*. Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi, 95-107.

Muzzioli, F. (2010). *Materiali intorno all'allegoria*. Roma: Lithos.

Orlando, F. (2017). *Il soprannaturale letterario. Storia, logica e forme*. Torino: Einaudi.

Raccis, G. (2013). "Giorgio Vasta: la militanza del linguaggio". *Nazione Indiana*. https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2013/07/23/giorgio-vasta-la-militanza-del-linguaggio/

Rustioni, M. (2016). *Allegoria, storia e interpretazione*. Pisa: Pacini.

Simonetti, G. (2011). "Nostalgia dell'azione. La fortuna della lotta armata nella narrativa italiana degli anni Zero". *Allegoria*, 64, 97-124.

Serkowska, H. (a cura di) (2011). *Finzione, cronaca, realtà. Scambi intrecci e prospettive nella narrativa italiana contemporanea*. Massa: Transeuropa.

Šklovskij, V. (1968). "L'arte come procedimento". Todorov, T. (a cura di), *I formalisti russi*. Trad. di G.L. Bravo. Torino: Einaudi, 73-94. Trad. di: *Théorie de la littérature*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965.

Tabacco, G. (2010). *Libri di piombo. Memorialistica e narrativa della lotta armata in Italia*. Milano: Bietti.

Todorov, T. (1986). *Simbolismo e interpretazione*. Trad. di C. De Vecchi. Napoli: Guida. Trad. di: *Symbomisme et interprétation*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978.

Turner, V. (1972). *Il processo rituale. Struttura e anti-struttura*. Trad. di N. Greppi Collu. Brescia: Morcelliana. Trad. di: *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Valdinoci, F. (2019). *Scarti, tracce, frammenti: controarchivio e memoria dell'umano*. Firenze: Firenze University Press. https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-6453-977-5

Vasta, G. (2008). *Il tempo materiale*. Roma: minimum fax.

Zinato, E. (2016). "'Sguardo dal basso' e 'sguardo all'indietro'. Punti di vista sull'infanzia nel romanzo italiano del Novecento". *Richard & Piggle*, 24(2), 145-57.

Art in the Capitalocene from Awareness to Action
The Work of Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola

Virginia Vannucchi
Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italia

Abstract   Over the past two decades, 'eco-art' increasingly focused on issues related to climate collapse and the so-called Anthropocene, often embracing apocalyptic and destructive narratives. Through two case studies of Italian artists Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola, this contribution aims to highlight how some of these practices can range from raising awareness to inspiring action, using tools such as the archeology of social imaginary, utopia, and practices of commoning, effectively promoting sustainability and societal change. The article underscores the ability of eco-art to generate new imaginaries that transcend visual representation, acting as catalysts for cultural and environmental change.

Keywords   Eco-art. Capitalocene. Social imaginaries. Marzia Migliora. Luigi Coppola.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Nature Versus Culture: How Social Imaginaries Shape Reality. – 3 The Artist as an Archaeologist of Thought: Marzia Migliora's *Paradoxes of Plenty*. – 4 Cultivating Communities: The Agricultural Turn in Recent Italian Artivism. – 5 *He Who Sows Utopia Collects Reality*: Luigi Coppola and Casa delle Agriculture. – 6 Conclusion.

1　Introduction

The rise of global ecological awareness in the 1960s and 1970s, which ushered in what is now termed the Anthropocene, compels humanity to reevaluate its relationship with the Earth. This environmental crisis has triggered a shift in global consciousness, necessitating a

rethinking of the social framework, starting with the concept of 'nature' – often viewed as subordinate to 'culture' in Western thought. As this mindset contributes to phenomena such as forced migrations and environmental degradation, contemporary artists increasingly advocate for new terrestrial policies. While some visual culture still adheres to apocalyptic narratives, eco-artists like Marzia Migliora and Luigi Coppola transcend mere representation of environmental collapse. They actively engage in creating and structuring new social imaginaries and future-oriented creative laboratories. This contribution examines the intersections between eco-art and social imaginaries, focusing on how the works of Migliora and Coppola demonstrate a trajectory from awareness to action.

2 Nature Versus Culture: How Social Imaginaries Shape Reality

A central issue in today's environmental debate is examining modern perceptions of nature, including the language used to describe it. Addressing the relationship between ecology and social imaginary in modernity, Cornelius Castoriadis argues that the concept of nature has lost significance due to the relentless pursuit of rational control typical of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. This economic perspective views nature merely as a resource, devoid of cultural value. Castoriadis suggests that ecological thinking challenges this view by questioning the creation of needs and advocating for self-limitation in relation to our planet:

> It isn't a love of nature; it's the need for self-limitation (which is true freedom) of human beings with respect to the planet on which they happen to exist by chance. (Castoriadis 2010, 203)

Timothy Morton further develops the theme of extractivism, by critiquing in terms of causality the romanticization of nature, seen as a backdrop for human events, a *locus amoenus* or a pure space to be preserved (Morton 2009, 79-139). Morton argues that viewing nature in this way reinforces its image as an 'Other', separate from humanity, turning it into a commodity and reinforcing the nature/culture divide. In contrast, postnatural studies propose concepts like 'ecosophy'[1] and Gilles Clément's 'symbiotic man':

---

[1] The core idea behind the concept of 'ecosophy' – a term first introduced by Arne Næss in 1960 – involves a fundamental shift away from anthropocentrism, viewing humans not as occupying the top of the hierarchy of living beings, but as equally interconnected with every other being in the ecosphere, forming part of a whole together with other species. See Næss 1989; Guattari 2018.

colui che è idealmente in grado di restituire all'ambiente la totalità dell'energia che gli sottrae. (Clément 2015, 65)

By linking environmental collapse with social imaginaries, as Morton and Castoriadis do, we are prompted to examine the roots of the current economic system. This perspective suggests that ecological crises are deeply connected to the capitalist imaginary, since:

Ecology's capacity to apprehend environmental crises as a problem of the social imaginary gives its questions and arguments a radicalism in the sense of going to the fundaments of the capitalist imaginary. (Adams et al. 2015, 37)

Comparing ecological thought with theories of social imaginaries reveals a direct link to what is conventionally called Anthropocene.[2] In light of Nicolas Bourriaud's question, "Cosa significa l'arte in un mondo dove predomina l'urgenza?" (2020, 7) the image – understood as an active field rather than a passive simulacrum – takes on renewed importance. It is within this conceptual frame that ecological art practices are situated.

3 The Artist as an Archaeologist of Thought: Marzia Migliora's *Paradoxes of Plenty*

Italian artist Marzia Migliora (Alessandria 1972) uses carefully selected, recycled, and reworked images to create new visual landscapes. Her series *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza* (2017-22) explores the relationship between capitalism and agriculture, highlighting how extractive practices from the early twentieth century to the present have transformed harvests into mere products, erasing traditional land care methods. The series, translated as *Paradoxes of Plenty*, takes its title from the final chapter of Tom Standage's book *An Edible History of Humanity* (2009), which is a key reference for Migliora. Standage's work reveals how food has always been more than sustenance: it has been a means of power, global trade, social cohesion, ideological influence, and conflict. This transformation of harvests into products reflects a broader trend of domination over plants, animals, and people.

---

2 The polysemy around the term 'Anthropocene' is not the focus of this contribution. However, it is important to note that each of the terms currently in use (Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Anthrobscene, Technosphere, Plantationocene) highlights specific nuances in describing the impact of human responsibility on climate collapse, shedding light on different aspects of the same phenomenon. See Parikka 2014; Haraway 2015.

The series includes over fifty collages in various sizes, created using techniques such as collage, *papier collé*, drawing, and watercolor on paper. Raised by a family of farmers in northern Italy province of Alessandria, the artist grew up in close contact with plants and animals. Her childhood memories constitute one of the pillars of her aesthetics and poetry, also characterized by a strong sense of belonging to the Italian peasant civilization. Migliora utilizes a diverse array of sources, such as vintage agricultural manuals inherited from her grandfather, American Tall-Tale postcards,[3] and advertisements from the 1960s, a decade renowned for its pronounced consumerism. Despite their different origins and chronologies, these sources share a common thread: they reflect a historical perspective that views nature as a manipulable resource, shaped by industrial, economic, and green revolutions. For Migliora, creating art involves an archaeological approach to thought. She excavates pre-existing visual sources as remnants of the collective imagination, rearranging them through what Cristina Baldacci terms a 'metabolic process':

> l'appropriazione e la risignificazione delle cose [...]. Una "Durcharbeitung", per riprendere un termine che Lyotard modella sulle orme di Freud. (2020, 14)

This process, influenced by Lyotard's concept of 'perlaboration,' aligns with what James Gibson describes as one of the primary characteristics of the image in relation to knowledge and cognitive processes:

> It can be suggested [...] that images, pictures, and written-on surfaces afford a special kind of knowledge that I call mediated or indirect, knowledge at second hand. Moreover, images, pictures, and writing, insofar as the substances shaped and the surfaces treated are permanent, permit the storage of information and the accumulation of information in storehouses, in short, civilization. (Gibson 2014, 37)

---

3 Also known as 'exaggeration postcards', Tall-Tale postcards typically spread in rural areas of the United States, particularly in the north, during the early twentieth century. Accompanied by humoristic captions, they often depicted enormous animals and crops being transported by train or wagon, reinforcing the American myth of abundance. Their popularity persisted until World War I, when the government imposed a ban on German postcards. Following this, the production of Tall-Tale postcards gradually declined, though some continued to be created until the 1960s (https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS364).

Figure 1 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #14*. 2017. Collage and drawing on paper, 29 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy the artist

As noted by Pier Luca Marzo, Migliora uses images to layer information and connect different temporalities:

> una sorta di supporto della memoria adatto a viaggiare nel tempo sociale ritessendone il significato in termini di continuità tra passato e futuro. (Marzo 2015, 102)

Baldacci compares Migliora's practice to the 'best tradition' of photomontages and *papier collés* by artists like Hannah Höch and Martha Rosler, highlighting how her image combinations create "relazioni anacroniche e frizioni semantiche che inducono a pensare" (Baldacci 2020, 14). The absurdity and paradox within her works aim to spark viewer awareness. Artworks such as *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #14* **[fig. 1]** and *#19* illustrate the deceptive narratives surrounding food in the twentieth century. For instance, the corn plant, central to the artist's family history, is depicted being tamed by circus performers or inflated with an air pump to symbolize genetic manipulation.

Figure 2 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #17*. 2018. Collage and drawing on paper, 20 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy of the artist

These works examine the shift from traditional land stewardship to intensive, depleting practices driven by capitalist agriculture: a loss experienced by Migliora's family, as the artist states:

Ho passato la mia infanzia in una casa circondata da campi coltivati e popolata da molti animali. Le coltivazioni intensive di mais e di grano allineate in file ordinate hanno rappresentato il mio paesaggio domestico, e da tempo sono anche oggetto della mia ricerca artistica. La vita contadina, la cura della terra e la determinazione delle specie vegetali, credo abbiano formato il mio sguardo d'artista. La mia famiglia è solo un caso fra le innumerevoli vittime di un sistema di industrializzazione che ha scambiato il cibo per merce e l'idea di sviluppo come progetto meramente economico. Oggi un contadino vende cento chili di mais all'incirca al prezzo di una pizza: credo che questa semplice comparazione mostri una distorsione di metodi, economie e valori di un mercato il cui modello economico corrente non protegge l'agricoltura

Figure 3 Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #16*. 2018. Collage and drawing on paper, 29 × 42 cm. Milan; Naples; Galleria Lia Rumma, Courtesy of the artist

familiare – diventata ormai impraticabile – perché ideato per le aziende agricole su larga scala. (Lucchetti 2020, 10)

In *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #16* [fig. 2] and *#17* [fig. 3], Migliora presents a child manipulating nature amidst a backdrop of industrial pesticides[4] and figures in protective suits, evoking a war metaphor against intensive monoculture. These pieces highlight the shift from biodiversity to monoculture and the industrialization of agriculture. Featured in *Rethinking Nature*, an exhibition at the MADRE Museum in Naples (17 December 17 2021-2 May 2 2022), the three works *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #38*, *#39* [fig. 4], and *#44* address contradictions in agriculture through the lens of farmers, seasonal migrants, and former colonial

---

[4] From research, the image of the child seems to come from a 1927 illustration that appeared on the packaging of the toy kit for scientific experiments *Amusing and Mystifying Tricks*, produced by Maryland's Porter Chemical Company.

Figure 4   Marzia Migliora, *Paradossi dell'Abbondanza #39*. 2021. Collage and drawing on paper, 70 × 100 cm. Milan; Naples, Galleria Lia Rumma. Courtesy of the artist

laborers. Focusing on imported products like coffee, sugar, and cocoa, these pieces reveal the racial and exploitation systems behind agricultural production, exposing how capitalist practices have 'whitened' and commodified these products through strategies of visual marketing and pop culture. By combining images of field workers and portraits of white women enjoying coffee in their homes as a bourgeois status symbol, Migliora reveals how the modern colonization process "si è […] spiritualizzato, emancipandosi dal suo corpus geo-culturale d'origine" (Marzo 2011, 8), embodying what we call 'globalisation'. Migliora's art, through its exploration of human-environment relationships and social imaginary, helps visualize the potential for change. As Migliora stated during the exhibition *Marzia Migliora. Lo spettro di Malthus* (10 October 10 2020-12 March 12 2021) at Museo MA*GA in Gallarate, she aims not to provide solutions but to raise awareness:

L'arte ha, ha avuto e avrà sempre un forte potere di attivazione-generazione di pensiero. In qualità di artista […] credo che il mio

ruolo sia quello di dar voce a situazioni scomode. Le mie opere sovente nascono da un fastidio, da qualche cosa che ci accade, da un problema che non posso risolvere materialmente, ma su cui intendo attivare delle riflessioni attraverso il mio fare. (Lucchetti 2020, 19)

4 Cultivating Communities: The Agricultural Turn in Recent Italian Artivism

In the context of Socially Engaged Art (SEA)[5] and as to artists committed to contemporary issues, the influence of Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas is significant. Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, which focus on the interactions between people and the social dimension of art, has been foundational. However, since the early 2000s, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in art has evolved, surpassing Bourriaud's framework. Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini notes that while Bourriaud's work was pioneering, it lacked a sociological dimension in understanding relational aesthetics, making it less effective for examining socially engaged artistic practices and their interactions with both urban and agricultural spaces (Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 70). In the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of activism within art, opposing globalist capitalism. This has led to a divide in art criticism between those who prioritize the aesthetic value of artworks and those who focus on the ethics of the interventions. Key figures in this debate include Claire Bishop and Grant H. Kester.[6] Rinaldo Meschini summarizes this divide:

> L'*ethical* imperative che per Bishop moralizzava la critica artistica, per Kester rappresentava, con altri termini, una responsabilità ed una condizione che diventava essa stessa opera nel momento in cui informava e comunicava in maniera partecipativa l'intero processo creativo. (Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 75)

[5] In this respect, see Sholette 2010; 2022; Helguera 2011. While both authors examine Socially Engaged Art (SEA), they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives. Helguera provides a practical and accessible guide, focusing on the methodologies and collaborative strategies artists can employ to engage with communities. His work is anchored in the 'how' of SEA, offering concrete tools for artistic practice. Sholette, by contrast, explores the political dimensions of SEA, critically assessing the intersection of art, activism, and the economy of invisibility. He introduces the concept of 'dark matter' to describe the vast array of socially and politically engaged artistic practices that, while significant, remain marginalized or unrecognized by mainstream art institutions.

[6] Since the 2006 debate in the pages of *Artforum*, the differences between the two apparently incompatible viewpoints gradually narrowed, due to the emerging of increasingly hybrid practices. In this respect, see Rinaldo Meschini 2021, 74-85.

The debate between ethics and aesthetics becomes particularly relevant in eco-art related to the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway cautions against the risk of creating "miti autoindulgenti e autoappaganti" (Borselli 2023, 39) that propose a clean slate rather than learning from and inheriting the past.

From the 1990s, some artists have moved from urban interventions to agricultural ones, notably Joseph Beuys in Bolognano and Gianfranco Baruchello with Agricola Cornelia. Over the past twenty years, a growing number of individual artists, collectives, and communities have turned to agriculture as their focus. These practices are often described as new genre public art, relational art, dialogic art, community art, participatory art, or political art.[7] Antonella Marino describes this 'agricultural turn' as a shift in the relationship between art and agriculture "da sensi largamente naturalistici, georgici o poveristi" (Marino, Vinella 2018, 56) towards alternative thoughts and actions counter to industrial and consumerist urban models. In Italy, agro-ecological art has unique characteristics, including an educational model based on experiential learning that integrates scientific research with agricultural practice. This approach fosters continuous knowledge exchange through workshops, meetings, and transdisciplinary educational programs. Additionally, residencies organized by institutions, foundations, companies, and curatorial collectives offer artists opportunities to develop projects on-site (see Marino, Vinella 2018). Notable examples in Italy include PAV – Parco Arte Vivente in Turin, a contemporary art center that features an open-air exhibition site and a museum, intended as a venue for fostering interactions between art, nature, biotechnologies, and ecology. The Fondazione Baruchello in Rome merges art with social practice, offering a platform for experimentation and community engagement. Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, spearheaded by artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, integrates art into a broader vision of social transformation, focusing on sustainability and ethical practices. Connecting Cultures in Milan is distinguished by its international collaborations and interdisciplinary approach, fostering dialogue between diverse cultural and artistic perspectives. Curatorial collectives such as BAU and Aspra.mente in Trentino, Liminaria in

---

7 The aforementioned genres share common characteristics centered around active public engagement. While emphasizing different yet related nuances, these approaches focus on direct interaction between the artist and the audience, aiming to foster dialogue and collaboration. They often address social and political issues, using art to challenge conventional practices and provoke critical reflection on societal concerns. By involving the public as active participants rather than mere spectators, these genres seek to transform the role of art in society. Claire Bishop offers a comprehensive analysis of these themes, examining the implications of participatory art practices and their impact on both the artistic process and societal dynamics. In this respect, see Bishop 2012.

Campobasso and Foggia, and Giuseppefraugallery in Sulcis-Iglesiente are respectively recognized for their contemporary art projects that address pressing issues of our time, transcending the boundaries between nature and culture; initiatives aimed at revitalizing rural areas through artistic processes; and projects of public art and artist residencies. A notable concentration of agro-ecological art is found in Puglia, with initiatives like Free Home University of Lecce (funded by Ammirato Culture House), which explores the intersection of art, agriculture, and community building. Fondazione Lac O Le Mon emphasizes cultural and environmental sustainability through its diverse artistic programs. Parco dei Paduli engages with the local landscape and heritage, while Casa delle Agriculture (see Marino, Vinella 2018), a long-term project by artist Luigi Coppola, investigate the relationship between art and rural environments. The latter will be the focus of the next case study, highlighting its distinctive approach to integrating art with agro-ecology and local traditions.

5 *He Who Sows Utopia Collects Reality*: Luigi Coppola and Casa delle Agriculture

Since 2013, Luigi Coppola (1972, Lecce) has been involved with Casa delle Agriculture (House of Agricultures) in Castiglione d'Otranto, a small village in the municipality of Andrano, Lecce. Here, he established a rural development project focused on revitalizing abandoned land, repopulating the countryside, and fostering a sustainable economy through social cohesion. Collaborating with farmers, agroecologists, activists, and journalists, Coppola integrates agricultural and aesthetic practices, viewing art as a catalyst for cultural and societal change. Coppola's work is grounded in agroecology and permaculture principles, aiming to activate long-term projects and participatory processes, with particular attention to commons and building communities. He emphasizes the regeneration of landscapes, drawing inspiration from nature:

> Io provo a imitare la natura, operando in modo rigenerativo. Costruisco colline vegetali, scavando solchi e interrando prima i tronchi più grandi fino ai rami più sottili, rimettendo in circolo la materia organica. [...] Come in una grande scultura vivente. (Ascari 2022)

Coppola's practice addresses the challenges of Salento's depopulation, driven by over-tourism, consumerism, and phytopathologies like *Xylella fastidiosa*. This epidemic has drastically altered the landscape, transforming lush olive groves into bare, desolate areas. Coppola advocates for new behaviors, recognizing that even non-productive trees contribute to the ecosystem:

Si parla di ulivi morti, ma il più delle volte hanno ancora le radici vive, forse non sono produttivi, ma bisogna imparare a convivere con questi fantasmi, prendersi le proprie responsabilità, pensare che anche noi 'siamo' il paesaggio. Dobbiamo includerci in quel dramma e metterci le mani per recuperare un contatto con l'ecosistema a cui apparteniamo. (Ascari 2022)

Casa delle Agriculture works to "revive abandoned lands, repopulate the countryside, generate solidarity-based economies, and strengthen the bonds of the community by building a new cultural and social model of living together based on natural agriculture".[8] The collective organizes initiatives to revitalize neglected areas, cultivate native crops, and explore commons and circular economy principles. Coppola highlights the importance of maintaining the balance between aesthetics and practical outcomes, emphasizing that collaborative practices can offer substantial space for experimentation and narrative development:

Lavorare su pratiche collaborative o collettive non significa orizzontalità e appiattimento nella mediocrità. [...] Personalmente ho moltissimo spazio di azione e di sperimentazione nel tessere i fili di una narrazione del possibile e delle relazioni ordinarie e straordinarie. Il mio approccio in questo progetto è essere al fianco e non al di sopra e provare a comprendere come la mia azione artistica tiene aperto il processo. Dirò di più, utilizzo questo spazio che mi è concesso come linfa per il mio processo artistico [...]. La mia azione non è esclusiva rispetto alle istituzioni artistiche, anzi per quello che è possibile cerco di ridurre le distanze che separano queste ultime dalle istanze del reale. (Marino, Vinella 2018, 108)

Direct examples of this concept are evident in his artworks, where aesthetic value is consistently preserved alongside functional outcomes and politically motivated actions. *Dopo un'epoca di riposo* (After an Epoch of Rest) is an installation comprising a video and a series of painted banners, which Coppola presented at the 16th Quadriennale di Roma in 2016. This artwork visually represents the Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori (Minor Fruits Park), one of several initiatives developed by Coppola within the framework of Casa delle Agriculture. This participatory project converted former illegal dumping sites into cultivated areas, focusing on biodiversity and the common good. The practice of mixed seeding, referred to as 'evolutive population,' implemented at the Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori allows the soil

---

8 Luigi Coppola, "Portfolio 2020-2012", https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-2g9Uq-w0oE0L7FuhDoMC8VO07QMYukZd/view (2024-08-23).

to naturally determine which seeds will thrive, thereby challenging traditional agricultural methods. In *Dopo un'epoca di riposo*, Coppola recalls this approach as a metaphor for the integration of contemporary migrants, asylum seekers, and the local community. The artwork contrasts the utopian vision realized in Castiglione d'Otranto with text from banners inspired by William Morris's *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest* (1891), a novel that combines elements of utopian socialism and speculative fiction.

Among the initiatives of Casa delle Agriculture and Parco Comune dei Frutti Minori are Scuola delle Agriculture (School of Agricultures), aimed at knowledge exchange and interpersonal relationships; and the festival *Notte Verde: agriculture, utopie e comunità* (Green Night: agriculture, utopias, communities) **[fig. 5]**, co-directed by Coppola annually. Coppola's work aligns with the concepts of commoning and the commons,**9** striving to create "common spaces for uncommon knowledge" (Tan 2016, 15). His approach reflects a broader international trend towards

> alternative societies, social movements, and urban transformation" in response to "accelerating financial and ecological crises, and massive migration flows paired with aggressive waves of selective enclosure. (Baldauf, Gruber, Hille et al. 2016, 21)

The educational and pedagogical focus of Scuola delle Agriculture emphasizes the link between commoning spaces and artistic research methodologies, fostering collective thought and action over imposed structures. As shown by his interest in Morris's novel and the inclusion of its principles in his artworks, Coppola's practice is deeply rooted in utopian ideals and social imagination. He believes that art can play a crucial role in constructing commons and challenging cultural and economic limitations (Ascari 2022), and states:

> il potenziale che ha l'artista di scardinare le invisibili barriere culturali presenti nella nostra società e aprire nuovi immaginari è incredibile, perché ha la possibilità di abbandonare la logica meramente produttivistica e agire seguendo criteri di riproduzione sociale e culturale. (Marino, Vinella 2018, 107)

---

9 David Bollier and Silke Helfrich offer a definition of commons as dynamic social systems where individuals and communities fulfill their needs through self-organization and collaboration, relying less on the marketplace and monetary exchange. Within a commons, a specific community manages a shared resource and its use. This approach encourages people to recognize their interdependence and foster relationships focused on collective well-being, equity, fairness, and mutual support. Examples of commons include time banks, food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), community gardens, and alternative or local currencies, among others. See Bollier, Helfrich 2019.

Figure 5 Marco Zeno Rizzo, view of the artwork *Tavole della Maddalena* by Luigi Coppola on the occasion of *Notte Verde: agriculture, utopie e comunità*. 2014. Courtesy Luigi Coppola

His motto is "Chi semina utopia raccoglie realtà" (He who sows utopia collects reality), reflecting his commitment to creating new futures through artistic and community engagement.

6 Conclusion

The evolving frontier of eco-art showcases a rich diversity of approaches, with action being one of its prominent forms. This does not imply that non-action-based practices are merely descriptive, as demonstrated by Migliora. The focus here is on how various eco-art practices, whether they involve visual representation or direct human action, can effect change and foster a new awareness or tangible impact on the environment. Eco-art, defined as artistic practices addressing climate collapse, includes both catastrophic narratives of the Anthropocene and more constructive, imaginative works. Marzia Migliora's approach underscores the significance of addressing underlying social and cultural ideas alongside direct environmental

action. Her work illustrates how addressing historical human behaviors contributing to climate collapse requires challenging the dichotomy between nature and culture. Ecosophic imaginaries – those integrating human and natural worlds – promote positive, non-damaging actions toward the environment. They emphasize that humans are an integral part of nature, challenging the rigid separation between the two. This perspective encourages a deeper, more nuanced political responsibility, suggesting that re-evaluating our relationship with nature can lead to more meaningful and constructive environmental actions.

Bibliography

Adams, S. et al. (2015). "Social Imaginaries in Debate". *Social Imaginaries*, 1(1), 15-52.
   https://doi.org/10.5840/si2015112
Ascari, E. (2022). "Luigi Coppola: 'Chi semina utopia raccoglie realtà'". *Terra Nuova*, 6 agosto.
   https://www.terranuova.it/Il-Mensile/Luigi-Coppola-Chi-semina-utopia-raccoglie-realta
Baldacci, C. (2020). "L'arte come processo metabolico". *Artedossier*, 382, 14-15.
Baldauf, A.; Gruber, S.; Hille, M. et al. (2016). "Introduction. Having to Make It, Without Being Able to…". *Spaces of Commoning. Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday*, 18, 20-31.
   https://doi.org/10.21937/9783956792663
Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York: Verso.
Bollier, D.; Helfrich, S. (2019). *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.
Borselli, D. (2023). *Tristi tropi. Sulla possibilità di un'arte pubblica alla fine del mondo*. Pistoia: Gli Ori.
Bourriaud, N. (2020). *Inclusioni. Estetica del capitalocene*. Trad. di S. Castelli. Milano: postmedia books. Trad. di: *Inclusions. Esthétique du capitalocène*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2020.
Castoriadis, C. (2010). *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates – 1974-1997*. Transl. by H. Arnold. New York: Fordham University Press. Transl. of: *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats (1974-1997)*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005.
Clément, G. (2015). *L'Alternativa ambiente*. Trad. di G. Lucchesini. Macerata: Quodlibet. Trad. di: *L'Alternative ambiante*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2014.
Gibson, J.J. (2014). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. New York: Psychology Press.
   https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315740218
Guattari, F. (2018). *Ecosophy*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
Haraway, D. (2015). "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin". *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), 159-65.
Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books.
Lucchetti, M. (ed.). *Marzia Migliora. Lo spettro di Malthus = Catalogo della mostra* (Gallarate, 10 ottobre 2021-12 marzo 2022). Gallarate: Museo MA*GA.

Marino, A.; Vinella, M. (2018). *Coltivare l'arte. Educazione Natura Agricoltura*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Marzo, P.L. (2011). "La colonizzazione dell'immaginario". *Quaderni di Intercultura*, 3, 1-11.

Marzo, P.L. (2015). "L'immaginario sociale. Una prospettiva ambientale". *Quaderni di Teoria Sociale*, 2, 97-114.

Morton, T. (2009). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Næss, A. (1989). *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parikka, J. (2014). *The Anthrobscene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rinaldo Meschini, E. (2021). *Comunità, spazio, monumento. Ricontestualizzazione delle pratiche artistiche nella sfera urbana*. Milan: Mimesis Edizioni.

Sholette, G. (2010). *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto Press.

Sholette, G. (2022). *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*. London: Lund Humphries.

Tan, P. (2016). "Artistic Practices and Uncommon Knowledge". *Spaces of Commoning. Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday*, 18, 14-19.

**Through Montage: Choreographies
of Thought in a Field of Forces**

Between *Crisis* and *Critique*: A Consideration About Montage Starting from Walter Benjamin

Marco Ortenzi
Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italia

Abstract   Considering the etymological bond that links *Crisis* and Critique and reflecting on some important fragments of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the paper intends to propose a consideration about montage, conceived both as an epistemic principle and as an hermeneutic method aimed at the implementation of a cognitive practice to be understood in experimental terms, based on the heuristic quality of images and on the mobilization of heterogeneous times and iconic materials.

Keywords   Montage. History. Anachronism. Dialectical image. Legibility. Figurability.

Summary   1 Polychronic. – 2 Montage. – 3 Figurable. – 4 Imagination. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Polychronic

Crisis and *Critique*, respectively derived from the Greek words *Krisis* and *Kritiké*, share the same etymon – from the verb *Krino*, 'to separate', 'to choose', 'to decide' – which implies a separation, a transformation and, consequently, the need for a choice, a judgment.

We know how every *seeing* calls into question and puts into play all *knowing*. The appearance of an image, regardless of its 'power' and its effectiveness, 'overcomes' us and undresses us, it silences and suspends language. Thought and knowledge then intervene so that this questioning can be transformed into the possibility of an act of critique, so that in the face of the complex in-constancy of images, our language and our thought are renewed and enriched with new combinations and new

categories. Being in front of an image then means, at the same time, calling knowledge into question and putting it back into play.

In the famous fragment in which he conceptualizes the "dialectical image", Walter Benjamin distinguishes "images" from the "essences" of Phenomenology because of their "historical index", since not only "they belong to a particular time", but above all "they attain to legibility only at a particular time" (Benjamin [1940] 2002, 462). And since "every present day – he writes – is determined by the images that are synchronic with it" and "each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability" (463), "the image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded" (463). This moment of *legibility* "constitutes a specific critical point" in the movement of thinking. It imposes that necessary standstill, that moment of arrest, of crisis of thought, "in a constellation saturated with tensions", but it also opens a breach in the historical continuum, from which emerges the counter-rhythm of the act of critique, where "the dialectical image appears" (475).

In 1999, reflecting precisely that same fragment from *The Arcades Project*, Georges Didi-Huberman defined images as "originary phenomena of the exhibition", that delimit "their own space" (*Bildraum*), where a "power of collision", through which different objects and times collide (Benjamin [1940] 2003, 471 writes "télescopés") and are put into crisis, and a "power of lightning", as if an electrocution produced by such collision made the impure historicity of things visible, take place: the image "appears", "makes visible" and, at the same time, "dismantles" (*démonte*), "disperses" and again, reconstructs and "crystallizes in works and effects of knowledge" (Didi-Huberman 2000, 117-18; Author's transl.).

Now, *conflict* is precisely the force that is set in motion by what Sergej M. Ejzenštejn first defined as the "principle of montage",[1] "principle of dismemberment and recomposition" ([1937] 1991, 167) which generates a qualitative leap that imposes an epistemology of imagination. The same principle that, in another fragment of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin ([1940] 2002, 461) suggests "to adopt in History", to reorganize a multiplicity of heterogeneous singularities into constellations saturated with tensions, dialectizing time as a function of anachronism. A principle that, once recognized as a cognitive tool, enables for the construction of morphological knowledge, in a game made of accumulations, comparisons, correlations and stratifications, which do not mean indistinct assimilations, simplifications, but proliferations of differences: something capable of accounting for a structural complexity: just think about Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

---

1 See Ejzenštejn [1929] 1987, 135.

2   Montage

As early as 1929, in the notes with which he intended to integrate his Stuttgart essay *Dramaturgy of the Cinematographic Form*, Ejzenštejn highlights the possibility of transforming montage into a cognitive and displaying tool to be applied well beyond cinema: montage is then presented as a "comparative activity" that proceeds precisely like that "correlative-comparative activity" which is "mental activity" (Ejzenštejn [1929] 1986, 37). A mode of thought based on the ability to relate what is distant and apparently heterogeneous, according to an idea that, once again, brings the Russian director closer to Benjamin, who in two short essays dated 1933 elaborates the concepts of 'Mimetic Faculty' and 'nonsensous [or 'immaterial'] similarity' to account for this anthropological phenomenon:

> Nature produces similarities. The very greatest capacity for producing similarities, however, belongs to human beings. [...] The similarities perceived consciously – for instance, in faces – are, compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip one sees rising out of the water. These natural correspondences assume decisive importance, however, only in light of the consideration that they are all, fundamentally, stimulants and awakeners of the *mimetic faculty* which answers them in man. [...] It is not enough to think, for example, of what we understand today by the concept of similarity. [...] The reference to astrology may already suffice to make comprehensible the concept of a *nonsensuous similarity*. [...] Since this nonsensuous similarity, however, exerts its effects in all reading, at this deep level access opens to a peculiar ambiguity of the word 'reading' in both its profane and magical senses. The schoolboy reads [*lessen* in the original] his ABC book, and the astrologer read [*herauslesen* in the original, which literally means 'to extract by reading', which is to say 'understanding through reading'] the future in the stars. (Benjamin [1933] 1999a, 694-5)[2]

However, Ejzenštejn's strictest formulation of the 'principle' emerges around 1937 in *Towards a Theory of Montage*: here, montage is conceived as an operation aimed at composing different iconic materials, which he calls 'representations' (*izobrazenie*), produced by a 'cut' (*obrez*) in a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual components, an 'image' (*obraz*) that, however fragile, temporary and full of tension, is at the same time both 'synthetic', as it is capable

---

[2] See also Benjamin [1933] 1999b.

of giving a general meaning to the elements of which it is composed, and 'effective', agentive as we would say today, or capable of acting on the spectator, pushing him to retrace and, inevitably, to reproduce that same hermeneutical-creative process, and to continue that same process.[3]

Finally, during the last years of his life, at the height of a long reflection on the temporality of images, Ejzenštejn reworks the paradigm developed within the German *Naturalphilosophie* of the late eighteenth century – according to which the development of the individual (ontogenesis) recapitulates in a shorter time that of the entire species (phylogenesis) – to describe whether the creative act from which the single picture is generated or the entire history of pictures in which it is placed.[4] Through this process, the director maps out his own original formulation of something that is very close to Benjamin's concept "dialectical image": suddenly, the present meets the past, giving life to an 'image' (*obraz*) that emerges as a 'flash' or a 'spark' (in English in the original Russian text) from this collision through which, to use now Benjamin's words,

> every dialectically represented historical fact polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. (Benjamin [1940] 2002, 470)

In this way it is transformed by the present. The epistemic force, the cognitive 'dynamization' produced by the principle of montage, draws its strength from the continuous 'temporal conflicts', from continuous anachronistic juxtapositions that spark those instantaneous images by which the forms of history become legible. Montage becomes in all respects a morphological device for thinking, comparing and figuring time through the forms *of* and *in* history. An image, whether understood as an 'obraz' or as a single montage cell, is not *unitary*, static and *whole* but *multiple* and *moved* within itself. In front of the images, the gaze learns that these are themselves constituted by an intrinsic relationship between many different images and temporalities, by a heterogeneous and polychronic montage:

---

3 Cf. Ejzenštejn [1938] 1991, 309: "The strength of montage lies in the fact that it involves the spectator's emotions and reason. The spectator is forced to follow the same creative path that the author followed when creating the image. The spectator does not only see the depicted elements of the work; he also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and formation of the image in the same way that the author experienced it. This is obviously as close as it is possible to get to conveying visually the fullness of the author's thought and intention, to conveying them 'with the same force of physical perception' with which they faced the author in his moments of creative vision".

4 See Somaini 2011, 389.

The "Unique": this, in fact, is what the image must now be freed from. This is what we must give up: that the image is 'One', or that it is 'All'. Rather, let us recognize the strength of the image as what destines it to never be the "unique-image" [l'"*une-image*"], the "all-image" [l'"*image-toute*"]. As what destines it to multiplicities, to gaps. To differences, to connections, to relations, to bifurcations, to alterations, to constellations, to metamorphoses. To montages, to put it bluntly. To montages that know how to punctuate for us the apparitions and deformations: that know how to show us in images how the world appears and how it is deformed. It is in this taking of position in each montage that the images that compose it – by decomposing its chronology – can teach us something about our history. I mean something else. (Didi-Huberman 2009, 256; Author's transl.)

On this point, starting from Ejzenštejn, Didi-Huberman meets one of his masters, Hubert Damisch, who concluded his essay *Montage du désastre* by stating that

through the detour of montage, a new notion of the image emerges which is equivalent to thinking of it not so much as a prerequisite available to montage as its product, its result. (2005, 78; Author's transl.)

This same assumption allows Didi-Huberman to comment elsewhere: "If I refer to a 'knowledge through montage', it is because cultural and historical objects are constituted as a montage" (Eco, Augé, Didi-Huberman 2015, 64; Author's transl.). Montage transforms an image, a crisis, into a field of investigation, a forces field and, at the same time, a forms field, from which the possibility of an act of critique is generated.

3 Figurable

Within the discipline of Art History, Hubert Damisch has sketched the guidelines for an *Iconologie analytique*, based on an original reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's concept of 'figurability' (*Darstellbarkeit*), as a project aimed to grasp this phenomenon. Started in the early 1990s from the need to overcome both Panofsky's iconological paradigm and structuralist Semiology, this project of a theory, a science, "a discourse of images" (Damisch 1992, 272-3) that, far from being reduced to an 'applied psychoanalysis', derives from the latter the concepts that are necessary for this overcoming, and proposes a research aimed at investigating not the origin, but the History of which pictures become part of as a function of the dialectical relationship they establish with the observer in the present. An History of survivals, effects, traces, associations; History without

direction or end; a timeless History because it is played out in that 'out of time' space that is the unconscious, whose only fixed term is the participation of the spectator. Because of this, the Alsatian art historian later comes to the formulation of a 'second type' figurability, compared to the one he first elaborated in an earlier phase of his research, from 1992, when he published *Le jugement de Parîs*, to 1997, the year of *Un souvenir d'enfance par Piero della Francesca*.

This second type figurability, which emerges from his study on Luca Signorelli's frescoes in San Brizio's chapel (*La Machine d'Orvieto*),[5] proceeds, firstly, from Damisch's interest in the mnestic trace and, secondly, from a shift in the reference model from the "dream work", described by Freud's 1899 *Traumdeutung* (fundamental in the first phase of his reflection), to the "analytical work" of the "construction" (Freud 1937, 461) which "takes place on two separate scenarios", in which analyst and analyzed are respectively called to take their place (see Damisch 1997, 171-3). This movement shifts the focus of the discourse onto the work that the spectator does *with* the picture, and not *on* the picture; picture that are recognized as having the capacity to "operate" (Damisch 2010, 34) in the relationship that they establish with the spectator's gaze, a gaze "inhabited by desire" (Marin 1990, 54), capable of composing form and time, of assembling, of imagining constellations.

Keeping in mind Warburg's *Nachleben* and reasoning on the concepts of 'reproduction' – with which Freud indicated the process of 'remembering' (*Erinnerung*) of proper nouns or sequences of words – and of "technical [or *mechanical*] reproducibility" (*technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*) – introduced by Benjamin in his famous 1936 essay – Damisch finally theorizes the concept of "mnestic reproducibility" (Damisch 2002, 216), by which a picture becomes both the object and the agent, the origin and a link, of and in the chain of associations (a "*tresse*" of images) functional to the construction of the gazing subject.

The 'clash' (*chiasme*) of gazes that sparks within the active relationship with the picture constitutes the necessary condition for the appearance of the image(s) *within* the picture, which becomes, in this case, the field of emergence of figurability. Whereas the chain of associations, the "*tresse*" (Damisch 2002, 212) of images that a picture, acting as an agent of figurability, will be able to produce in the mind of the observer, constitutes the possibility for the latter to find and constitute himself as a subject within a dialectical work of construction.

Conceptualized as an instance that works representation from within to let a 'figurable latency' (*latence figurable*) emerge,

---

5 See Damisch 2003. See also Coletta 2021a; 2021b.

figurability produces a shift from the paradigm of the picture as *forme-cadre*, understood both as a device of individuation (modeled after the single vanishing point perspective model) and as an aestheticizing product that describes the projective surface of a mimetic-narrative representation, to the paradigm of the picture as *function-cadre*: a function of catalyzing and disseminating images that form themselves *from* the picture, or rather, images that *fait images* within the picture (see Damisch 1995).

Imagining themselves, looking at me, exercising their agency over me, pictures reach to the observer at the same time in which they elude direct vision and disseminates themselves in visual in-presence, in a 'formation' (in terms of the formation of the unconscious, of the symptom, of the dream) which is always fragmentary and condensed, assembled and, nevertheless, continually displaced. In this sense, as Louis Marin wrote, "the power of the image establishes it as an author in the strongest sense of the term, through production outside its own bosom" (1995, 18; Author's transl.).

In this regard, let us recall how, in his writings of the 1930s, Benjamin had come to formulate the concept of "aura", understood as "a singular interweaving of space and time" [*ein Gespinst von Raum und Zeit*] (Benjamin [1931] 1999, 518), defining a visual paradigm that intertwines the 'power of the distance', as a dialectical 'space-time form', and the 'power of the gaze', according to the equally dialectical ambivalence of the 'looking' and the 'looked at'. In this distance of a gaze operated by time, Benjamin identifies a "power of memory":

> it is *auratic* the object whose appearance unfolds, beyond its own visibility, what we must call its images, its images in constellations or clouds, which impose themselves on us as associated figures, sources, which approach and move away to poeticize, operate, open up its form and meaning together, to make it a work of the unconscious. (Didi-Huberman 1992, 105; Author's transl.)

4 Imagination

Finally, figurability calls for 'Imagination', a word whose meaning is stretched between Aristotle, who defines it as a form of movement that occurs in beings endowed with sensation, capable of composing images both in relation to objects present to the senses and freely constructing them without immediate reference to the objects themselves (Aristotele 2018, 209), and Baudelaire (as Didi-Huberman reminded us), who recognizes it as the faculty of "guessing the intimate and secret relationships between things, correspondences and analogies" (Baudelaire [1859] 1976, 621-2; Author's transl.). For the French poet, imagination is "analysis" and, at the same time, "synthesis":

imagination "breaks down all creation, and, with the materials collected and arranged, creates a new world" (621-2; Author's transl.).

Around the same time Ejzenštejn wrote his last works, Henri Focillon wrote that form "suggests other forms":

> It expands, it spreads in the imagination, or rather we are moved to consider it as some sort of crack, through which we can enter an uncertain realm, which is neither the extended nor the thought, a crowd of images that aspire to be born. (1934, 4; Author's transl.)

In this sense, the value of knowledge cannot be intrinsic to a single image and an image without imagination is simply an image on which not enough time has been spent working on and with. Because imagination is work:

> it is *that time of work of images* that act ceaselessly one upon the other by collision or by fusion, by fracture or by metamorphosis … all acting on our knowing and thinking. (Didi-Huberman 2003, 151; Author's transl.)

To know, one must therefore truly imagine: "the speculative work table [*table de travail*] is always accompanied by an imaginative montage table [*table de montage imaginative*]" (Didi-Huberman 2003, 149; Author's transl.).

Overall, paraphrasing Bloch, we can say that History, conceived as an imaginal phenomenon, exists only as a 'decantation' (Bloch 1952), dismembered and recomposed in the dialectical relationship that the past maintains with the gaze of/in the present. Images are necessary impurities capable of opening time to the unseen. The moment we observe them, a process of reactivation is implicit which undermines temporal continuity and requires an hermeneutical act.

To tackle History "against the grain" (as Benjamin [1940] 2003 suggested) means betting on knowledge through montage, which makes the original, swirling, discontinuous, dialectical images the object and the heuristic moment of its own construction. As Jean-Luc Godard wrote, "montage shows" (1980, 415; Author's transl.), it shows all this in a "form that thinks" (1998, 55; Author's transl.), and showing means giving time to look, to think.

5   Conclusion

So far, we've tried to briefly outline some of the main theoretical implications of a form of knowledge that can occur through the application of the principle of montage, the study of which is at the core of my PhD research project, with the aim of creating a model of exploration and exposition that is both theoretical and pragmatic. For this purpose, the critical study of the works of Walter Benjamin, Sergej M. Ejzenštejn, Hubert Damisch and Georges Didi-Huberman are and have been a constant inspiration. Like stars within the same constellation, together with others, they have contributed to the development of those conceptual tools that make concrete the possibility of a transversal (Didi-Huberman 2011, 11) and experimental knowledge, based on the recognition of the heuristic power of images and the implementation of their use value.

Conceived both as an epistemic principle and as a hermeneutic method aimed at the construction of a "gai savoir visuel" (Didi-Huberman 2011, 6), montage shapes a form capable of opening memory to the in-thought and pictures to the in-seen. A form that embodies the possibility of a morphological knowledge based on the mobilization of heterogeneous times and iconic multiplicities, following the modal rhythm of a paradoxical dialectic, always open and tensive, which does not contemplate synthesis, which does not reabsorb conflicts and contradictions, and whose states of quiet are always provisional, always threatened by an immanent push towards insurrection.

In conclusion, we believe that the principle of montage can constitute an important tool for the enactment of that *Kulturwissenschaft* already proposed by Aby Warburg, which conceives the form as formation, as a product of a metamorphosis, of which the historian-anthropologist-iconologist finds himself having to study the dynamic relations, the phenomena of attraction, the contradictions and the repulsions in-image. Finally, like images, we will (re)find ourselves continually moved. Wanting to quote, as a reminder, some lines from a 1969 essay by Michel Foucault, we could end by repeating:

> The time has come to wander, but not like Oedipus, poor king without a scepter, blind with an inner light. To wander, to err in the dark feast of crowned anarchy. The time has come to think about difference and repetition: no longer to represent them, but to make them and set them in motion. Thought itself, at the height of its intensity, will be difference and repetition; it will make different what representation had tried to make similar; it will activate the indefinite repetition whose origin metaphysics has stubbornly sought. (Foucault 1969, 36; Author's transl.)

Bibliography

Aristotele (2018). *L'anima*. A cura di G. Movia. Milano: Bompiani.

Baudelaire, C. [1859] (1976). "Salon de 1859". Pichois, C. (dir.), *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 608-82.

Benjamin, W. [1931] (1999). "Little History of Photography". Jennings, M.W. (ed.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 2. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press, 507-30.

Benjamin, W. [1933] (1999a). "Doctrine of the Similar and Addendum". Jennings, M.W. (ed.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 2. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press, 694-8.

Benjamin, W. [1933] (1999b). "On the Mimetic Faculty". Jennings, M.W. (ed.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 2. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press, 720-2.

Benjamin, W. [1940] (2002). *The Arcades Project*. Edited by R. Tiedemann. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press.

Benjamin, W. [1940] (2003). "On the Concept of History". Jennings, M.W. (ed.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 4. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press, 389-400.

Bloch, M. [1946] (1952). *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin.

Coletta, E. (2021a). "Damisch e Freud al cospetto della cappella di San Brizio a Orvieto. Un problema di figurabilità". *Immagine e parola*, 2, 91-103.
http://doi.org/10.19272/202114601007

Coletta, E. (2021b). "Da Piero della Francesca a Andrej Tarkovskij. L'iconologie analytique au travail". *Ricerche di storia dell'arte*, 3, 90-103.
http://doi.org/10.7374/102403

Damisch, H. (1992). *Le jugement de Parîs*. Tome 1, *Iconologie analytique*. Paris: Flammarion.

Damisch, H. (1995). "L'image dans le tableau". Widlöcher, D.; Fédida, P. (éds), *Actualité des modèles freudiens. Langage-image-pensée*. Paris: PUF, 39-54.

Damisch, H. (1997). *Un souvenir d'enfance par Piero della Francesca*. Paris: Seuil.

Damisch, H. (2003). "La mise du sujet". Cohn, D. (éd.), *Y voir mieux, y regarder de plus près: autour Hubert Damisch*. Paris: ENS, 211-27.
https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsulm.1764

Damisch, H. (2005). "Montage du désastre". *Cahiers du cinéma*, 599, 72-8.

Damisch, H. (2010). "Le maître, c'est lui". *Savoirs et clinique*, 12, 13-37.
https://doi.org/10.3917/sc.012.0013

Didi-Huberman, G. (1992). *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. Paris: Minuit.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2000). *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*. Paris: Minuit.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2003). *Images malgré tout*. Paris: Minuit.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2009). *Quand les images prennent position. L'œil de l'histoire I*. Paris: Minuit.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2011). *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet*. Paris: Minuit.

Eco, U.; Augé, M.; Didi-Huberman, G. (2015). *La forza delle immagini*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Ejzenštejn, S.M. [1929] (1986). "Appunti per le integrazioni all'articolo di Stoccarda". Montani, P. (a cura di), *Il montaggio*. Venezia: Marsilio, 36-52.

Ejzenštejn, S.M. [1929] (1987). "The Arsenal". Taylor, R. (ed.), *Writings, 1922-34*. Vol. 1, *Selected Works*. London: BFI Publishing, 136-7.

Ejzenštejn, S.M. [1937] (1991). "Laoöcon". Taylor, R. (ed.), *Towards a Theory of Montage*. Vol. 2, *Selected Works*. London: BFI Publishing, 109-202.

Ejzenštejn, S.M. [1938] (1991). "Montage 1938". Taylor, R. (ed.), *Selected Works*. Vol. 2, *Towards a Theory of Montage*. London: BFI Publishing, 296-325.

Focillon, H. (1934). *Vie des formes*. Paris: Éditions Leroux.

Foucault, M. (1969). "Ariane s'est pendu". *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 229, 36-7.

Freud, S. (1899). *Die Traumdeutung*. Leipzig; Wien: Franz Deuticke.

Freud, S. (1937). "Konstruktionen in der Analyse". *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, 23, 459-69.

Godard, J.-L. (1980). "Alfred Hitchcock est mort". Bergala, A. (éd.), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*. Vol. 1, *1950-1984*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 412-15.

Godard, J.-L. (1998). *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, vol. 3. Paris: Gallimard-Gaumont.

Marin, L. (1990). "Le concept de figurabilité ou la rencontre de l'histoire de l'art et de la psychanalyse". *Nervure. Journal de Psychiatrie*, 3(1), 52-8.

Marin, L. (1995). *Des pouvoirs de l'image*. Paris: Seuil.

Somaini, A. (2011). *Ejzenštejn. Il cinema, le arti, il montaggio*. Torino: Einaudi.

Mary Kelly's 'Montage du Désastre', a Work of Death and Rebirth

Mattia Cucurullo
École des hautes études en sciences sociales, EHESS, France

Abstract   Mary Kelly's *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* is a work that recounts an episode from the Kosovo war, reflecting on the paradoxical nature of traumatic events. In my essay, I will examine the anachronistic layering of semantic levels that the work exhibits, assuming that it creates a dialectical image" through the discontinuous relationship between death and rebirth. Hubert Damisch's concept of the 'montage du désastre' helps us to re-read the parable of the child in the title of the work, by reflecting on the mechanisms of the spectacularisation of the chronicle and on the ultimate possibility of giving a 'figurability' of the testimony.

Keywords   Trauma. War. Montage. Death. Rebirth.

Summary   1 Cultural Memory and Trauma: Story of a Work and a Life. – 2 The Responsibility of Survivors and the Figurability of a Testimony. – 3 Conclusion.

> Nous avons l'habitude de parler des tragédies
> comme si elles se produisaient dans le vide, alors
> que c'est l'arrière-plan qui les conditionne.
> (Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le coup de grâce*, 1939)

> Et puis ma mémoire, oh la la! ma mémoire! J'envie
> ceux qui ont de la mémoire. La vie est simplifiée, je
> vous assure.
> (Jean Cayrol, *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour*, 1963)

1 Cultural Memory and Trauma: Story of a Work and a Life

It is Françoise who exclaims this phrase in Alain Resnais' film *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour* (1963). The French director's third film, with a screenplay by Jean Cayrol, it tells a fragmented story, depicting the post-traumatic effects of war. Hélène welcomes her former lover, Alphonse, who had abandoned her ten years earlier, into her home in Boulogne-sur-Mer. However, Alphonse arrives at the woman's house with the young aspiring actress Françoise, who turns out to be his current lover. In a cinematic work like this – which depicts painful memories, intertwining the need to remember with the impossibility of fully doing so – her remark sounds highly paradoxical. In this context, there is a disruptive element in this reunion, which concerns another conflict, this time in Algeria, a taboo for the collective consciousness of the time, something that many representatives of French culture of the period sought to break. In the house where they are staying, Bernard, *Hélène*'s adopted son, also lives. He had participated (albeit passively) in the abuse and killing of an Algerian girl, Muriel, by French soldiers, which has caused him a deep and tormenting sense of guilt. In any case, this doubling of violence – now situated on two historical and geographical fronts – intersects with the psychological consequences of survival a drama that we can perceive not only on the faces of the protagonists but also through a restless direction that obsessively focuses on details, creating elusive, off-center associations, as if visual integration with all the elements in play is never fully achieved. Furthermore, deepening this division is the fact that we, as viewers, neither hear nor see the thoughts and inner lives of the characters. Unlike what happens in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), there is never a stream of consciousness that creates alignment between the order of inner and outer experience. The film – in its fits and starts, in this intermittence – pauses and continually asks itself, 'How do you tell this story?' between private and social history, without finding an answer.

In a different context, and with a different artistic language, Mary Kelly relates to a historical fact that has been poorly digested by the culture, again war-related, on the fringes of the Western European context: the Kosovo war. The work is *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*,

created in 2001 for the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Los Angeles, a cross-media work consisting of an installation occupying a large room, the opening of which hosted a performance by the Nyman Quartet with the voice of Sarah Leonard. Born out of the collaboration between the artist and Michael Nyman himself, who had appreciated the EP *Six Celan songs* (1991), written between May and July 1990 for Ute Lemper, which took Paul Celan's poetics as its spiritual soul.[1] The reference to the war in Kosovo takes place in a decidedly indirect way: Griselda Pollock, offering her insight into the work in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image* (2010), through an in-depth examination, stated that the artist:

> Seems to offer nothing to see – in the form of image or representation. What she offers is not the story but an architecture for the transmission of the affective residue of trauma precisely in order to create an order of theoretical seeing, insight, into that which we are called to witness, but which the mythic translation by our media and cultural apparatuses of daily exposure render so already known that it ceases to instigate reflection or affective response. (Pollock in Pollock, Bryant 2010, 207)

This work stages a piece of art created as a commentary on the ways of seeing and knowing typical of our culture, an approach that, I argue, Resnais' *Muriel* also embodied. Confronting *The Ballad*, Pollock reworks the current theorization of trauma, delay, and belated witnessing, challenging the widespread preconception that trauma is an immediate experience (Pollock, Bryant 2010, 214). Here, Kelly's work takes 'a step beyond' the modernist product in French cinema, offering a postmodern critique of the psychological effect of these historical traumas as recorded and reproduced through the media. A strip made of fabric scraps unfurls along the walls of the room, forming an almost decorative, undulating pattern that echoes both the musical element of the performance and the flow of time, which might correspond to the experience of the viewer as they move through the space to engage with the work. Paradoxically, this continuous and regular movement intersects with another type of temporality – the repressed – which has very different characteristics. This motif, made of lint produced by the washing machine as textile waste, also, in my view, alludes to a process of 'cleansing' the conscience, which describes the communicative methods of today's journalistic culture more than those of

---

[1] The texts are taken from the following collections: "Chanson einer Dame im Schatten" and "Corona" from *Mohn und Gedachtnis* (1952), "Nachtlich geschurz" from *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (1955), "Blume" from *Sprachgitter* (1959), and "Es war Erde in ihnen" and "Salm" from *Die Niemrose* (1963).

Kelly. Today, news of war tragedies appears in our social media feeds like lint – something irritating that then disappears. The repetition of content presenting war testimony, in a crescendo of horror that never reaches its peak, can create a condition of virality, but this mechanism also allows for the possibility of its sudden and insensitive disappearance, even from the minds of hyper-alert yet distracted consumers. The 'washing' cycles are never perfect; lint exists, of course, but in its inconsistency, it becomes an image of the repressed itself.

The event that inspired Kelly in the creation of *The Ballad* was triggered by reading an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on 31 July 1999, with the emphatic title "War Orphan Recovers Name and Family". Accompanied by a photograph, it recounts – with a somewhat novelistic tone – the reunion of a 22-month-old Albanian boy with his parents, who had believed him dead when he was 18 months old after they fled a Serbian attack during the Kosovo war. Before returning home, he acquired two names, Zoran and Lirim, and two identities – one Albanian and one Serbian – until he became Kastriot again, at the age when a child begins to speak, acquiring language and the ability to name the other, to say 'I'. In this case, like in a fairy tale, the journalist assures us that the first word, despite this troubled journey, was a classic 'dad' (Pollock, Bryant 2010, 206). In light of this media story of death and resurrection, Pollock reflects with Kelly, citing Roland Barthes in his analysis, specifically his theory of myth as a 'depoliticized discourse' (cf. Barthes 1970; Pollock 2010), where history is neutralized in favour of the backdrop hidden behind the cliché of a news photograph, assimilating this scene to an ideologically oriented symbolic order. Significantly, the essay in which Pollock discusses this theoretical structure reflects on the concepts of indexicality and virtuality, offering an interpretation that restores to the latter term its ancient origins, linked to scholastic philosophy, and its psychic dimension, related to the realm of dreams and desires (Pollock, Bryant 2010, 15). However, the 'virtuality' experienced in the consumption of war news on social media today, even in the absence of a semantic framework providing pseudo-cathartic narratives, has absorbed predefined modes that both flatten the shock, making it a constant in scandalous aesthetics, and prevent genuine empathy, except in a falsely pietistic perspective. An immediate emotional reaction implies an adherence to ideology without us realizing it: there is no time for processing, only for the frantic consumption of content.

Turning to another seemingly ethereal element, at least until it resonates in the listener's ear, the music of the Nyman Quartet combines both symphonic and folk elements that refer to Kastriot's context. The voice in the cantata, Sarah Leonard, as Kelly notes, with its low tone, would have sounded like that of a young boy (Pollock, Zemans 2007, 103). The identification with the child here arises from a heterogeneity of elements – connected both to cultural background and

personal identity – divided between voice and music, and not reconstructed from a personalized perspective, as is common in the storytelling that dominates social media today. The artist, in fact, describes her work, paradoxically, not as a ballad – a celebratory piece dealing with themes of martyrdom and heroism – but as an anti-ballad (Kelly 2008, 85). Focusing on the music, it's also important to note Nyman's lyrical eclecticism in his collaboration with Kelly, which followed the end of his partnership with Peter Greenaway. That collaboration ended in 1991 with *Prospero's Books*, where the meeting of the two individualities resulted in a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, combining various artistic expressions such as mime, dance, opera, and painting. In bringing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-11) to the screen, which features a plot with a happy ending, like Kastriot's story, the drama is resolved within the narrative. However, what *The Ballad* shares with *Prospero's Books* is a meta-reflective component, as the director himself notes:

> The Tempest is a self-referential work, and I always feel a strong sympathy for those works of art that exhibit self-awareness, that say: "I am an artifice". (Rodman 1991, 38)

This way of storytelling – whether it's about a news event or an adaptation of a classic from Western culture – clashes with the common media languages of today's society, shaped by technological advancements and changing historical conditions. Andrea Pinotti, in *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (2021), reflects on the progressive 'disappearance' of the medium, the utopia pursued by devices that aim to annul themselves to enable an ideal continuum with the user's body (xiv-xv). In this way, the screen, increasingly responsive to gestures thanks to touch functionality, works in tandem with immersive virtual environments. Among the various artworks created with VR that Pinotti mentions is Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena. Virtually Present, Physically Invisible* (2017), which tells a painful story of immigration and allows the viewer to be at the center of the scene, experiencing the event 'without filters' in order to trigger an empathetic reaction (Pinotti 2021, 180). This forced identification is built on a clearly defined background, where the drama is perfectly readable, without requiring any particular sensitivity or imaginative capacity from the viewer. Clearly, we cannot compare an authorial endeavor of this kind with the war and oppression scenes we see in short reels on TikTok,[2] which increasingly

---

2 "This sharing, however, is not meant in the way it is usually (and superficially) conceived in our hyperconnected world of digital devices and social networks. Iñárritu calls for a personal experience of sharing [...] the viewers of *Carne y Arena* are, in fact,

form the basis for news articles, yet we cannot think of them as completely isolated phenomena either. I see them as offspring of the same cultural condition and visual regime. The appeal to empathy (no matter how well-intentioned) in addressing such issues risks, if not aestheticization, then at least a rhetorical use of violence and the victim.

Byung-chul Han, in *Die Krise der Narration* (2023), cites Walter Benjamin's *Ausgraben und Erinnern* (1933), focusing on the lack of narrative capacity after the war. The philosopher asserts that we live in a post-narrative era, where the absence of a separating interval destroys both distance and proximity (Byung-chul 2024, 21). From a literary perspective (but not only), where narrative could once change the world, today's popular 'storytelling' merely signifies commerce and consumption. We are far from the disarticulation performed by Kelly, which allows for a different type of understanding, with its empty spaces and aniconism. There is no figurative reference to the child's face in *The Ballad*, a type of face that today's algorithms increasingly focus on, fostering a morbid voyeurism towards childhood. Similarly, in Resnais' film, we never truly see Muriel – a perfect victim, being young and female – who appears as a memory distorted by recollection and the grainy image of Bernard's recording.[3] Her ghost transcends time and space in the film, haunting it. Here too, the montage presupposes a heterogeneity that emphasizes breaks and spatial-temporal gaps, in opposition to the continuity of a narrative that seeks to connect with our body and emotions 'insensibly,' denying the medium and the potential mediation with our subjectivity.

At this point, the reasons for the parallel between *The Ballad* and *Muriel* are evident, but it is necessary to draw another line of comparison to continue our argument, with another of Resnais' films, *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), a work that confronts the horrors of war and the ultimate possibility of bearing witness. While the former was constructed on an elliptical series of sequences abruptly edited to compare the old and new Boulogne-sur-Mer, a city semi-destroyed by bombings, the Holocaust documentary, with its black-and-white footage from the concentration camps, aimed to create a condition

---

required to leave their phones at the entrance, and thus are unable to share their experience in real time during the six and a half minutes of the installation" (Pinotti 2021, 182). Unless otherwise specified all translations, all translations are by the Author

3 "As well as the papers with Muriel's name, we see photographs from Algeria – as the film collages evidence, documents – and most importantly we see a film, footage with which Bernard has returned to France. The showing of this film, and the voice-over that accompanies it, are critical in Muriel. Naomi Greene describes the scene as 'a black hole at the center of Muriel'; this black hole is the film's point of origin and point of (no) return. [...] If the scene is a black hole, it really is at the center of Muriel structurally and temporally, as well as semantically" (Ward 1968, 91).

of non-integration.[4] The screenplay is again by Jean Cayrol, a novelist and former Mauthausen prisoner, who collaborated with the director and was in contact with Paul Celan, whom he asked to translate the German-language version. The translation, which the poet worked on diligently, deeply disturbed him, as did the fact that in 1956, *Nuit et Brouillard* was initially selected for the Cannes Film Festival, only to be excluded at the last minute in response to an appeal from the Federal Republic of Germany, which feared that such a screening could damage Franco-German relations (Gnani 2010, 35).

Celan, exposed in his life and work to the risk of censorship, hermetic to the limit of the unspeakable, also figures as an invisible trace in the verses that Kelly writes on tapes of fabric scraps on *The Ballad*, citing Nyman's precedent of *5 Celan Songs*. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in an essay dedicated to him, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans Gedichtfolge "Atemkristall"* (1986), argues, in contrast to Adorno, that his poetry would not attest to the shipwreck of the cryptic word in an anguished and obscure silence, still intending to safeguard with a desperate act the human possibility of uttering names and words, resorting to the metaphor of the message in the bottle (Gadamer 1989, 3). To poetically claim Kastirot's name, then, at the end of the series of new personal and cultural identities that followed his supposed death would be a vindication that restores his story beyond the generality of a mythical narrative, provided we accept the reverse of his tormented process of reacquisition. Kastriot, then, also becomes the last word in his parable of death, heralding his return to life.

2 The Responsibility of Survivors and the Figurability of a Testimony

The encounter, the dialogue, the collaboration – but we could also say the asynchronous montage of Kelly/Nyman, Nyman/Celan codes and languages – takes off in the face of Kastriot's inability to process the experience of his own mourning, not assuming, however, this datum as a status quo, an existential failure of the capacity to communicate, to renegotiate responsibilities and the distribution of roles in victims and executioners, spectators and spectacle. Kelly, in addressing this condition, takes up a conceptualisation of Giorgio Agamben's "the communication of communicability", (cf. Agamben 1996, Pollock, Zemans 2007) stating that:

---

[4] The title of the documentary comes from a secret order signed by Hitler on 7 December 1941, in which he commanded the arrest and disappearance "in the night and fog" of anyone who might pose a danger to the "security" of Germany (Gnani 2010, 35).

My interest in his thesis has been provoked by the growing realization that any attempt to visualize the traumatic experiences of war-related atrocities would require more intricate forms of displacement than those | have used in earlier projects; a shift not only from iconicity to indexicality and from looking to listening, but also from the art object itself as means to the viewer as witness or being a means. (Pollock, Zemans 2007, 133)

Maurice Blanchot, in *Le dernier à parler* (1984), sought to engage with the silence of Paul Celan's poetry, as well as his ultimate desire to bear witness despite everything. In this essay Blanchot creates a dialogue between the two writings – his and the poet's – without a passport, so much so that this formal choice also led to copyright issues, delaying the publication of the text by cutting, dismantling, and reassembling Celan's poems in the process (Blanchot 2019, 60-1). The French writer sees in his poetic quest an attempt to establish a form of solidarity with the death of the other, constructing a paradoxical act of adherence to their death, identifying with it in order to bear witness.[5] Reflecting on the theoretical possibilities of *The Ballad*, Kelly cites Jacques Rancière, (cf. Rancière 1998; Pollock, Zemans 2007) who discusses the importance of identifying a moment of disidentification before committing to the cause of the other, recognizing them as such (140). It is not simply about annihilating oneself or abstracting in relation to an 'other' reality. We, as viewers, paradoxically identify with Kastriot when faced with the work, inhabiting this impossibility, his death, his rebirth. It is only through this passage that do we gain access to the inhumane conditions of the Kosovo war, with all its social and psychological implications, reconstructing it retrospectively. This moment, or rather this movement, consistent with Blanchot's ethics, allows us to bridge the gap that characterizes the disparity between the viewer's experience of Kastriot and the subjectivity of the work in its self-referential and other-referential nature. The absence of an immediate empathetic reaction – such as the presentation of the child's face – allows us to work with imagination, appealing to our sensitivity. However, this faculty is not always freely exercised.

---

[5] Mario Ajazzi Mancini, who edited the Italian edition of *Le dernier à parler*, writes in the text's afterword: "Death is this unrelated force that weakens the subject in relation to their own faculties, and entrusts them to that passivity in which Blanchot allows us to glimpse the ways of relating to the outside. If a friend – the other who is near – is such in their excess, the relationship one can have with him/her is primarily one of dispossession of identity, a separation from oneself that finds its truest form in dying, in death; and for this reason, it exposes one to closeness in friendship, opening up an immense (*ungeheure*) space where each individual existence is outside itself, yet nonetheless thrown into the encounter with others. A kind of sharing" (Blanchot, [1984] 2019, 109-11).

Author of *L'écriture du désastre* (1980), Blanchot provided the theoretical framework for Hubert Damisch's concept of the 'montage du désastre',[6] which once again calls upon a cinematic example, Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (1946). The film depicts an investigator from the War Crimes Commission searching for a Nazi criminal who has escaped justice, hidden under a false identity in a quiet town in Connecticut. The art historian asserts that this film merges a type of image understood as the result of editing work that reveals the truth of cinema (Damisch 2005, 78), aiming to bring forth the 'figurability' of what is unrepresentable to consciousness. This concept, rooted in Freudian theory, refers to the dream mechanism that brings forth a repressed – traumatic or primal – content in the dreamer's psyche in a manner that cannot be articulated through verbal language. Within the film's narrative, this occurs in the scene of the interrogation of the Nazi officer's wife, when a series of frames from the extermination camps are projected in front of before her in an attempt to get her help in incriminating him. Welles manages to show how these images imprint themselves and act within the woman's unconscious, working internally against the censorship aligned with the subject's defensive strategies, who does not want to admit the man's complicity (74). Once again, a harsh montage works in an anti-empathetic way, forcing the acceptance of a reality that seems more indigestible than death, yet is necessary to access a psychic and ethical vitality.

Montage, referring to the work of consciousness (or the unconscious) calls into question, with its whites and blacks, a contested dimension between the visible and blindness, life and death. Laura Odello, in *AUT AUT issue 348*, edited together with Raoul Kirchmayr, entitled *Georges Didi-Huberman. An Ethics of Images*:

> To translate into a language that is not Didi-Huberman's, I wonder if this survival, which he invites us to seek in the night, should not be thought even more radically – not so much in literal terms as a community that resists, but rather as a death that passes through life. If montage is interruption, shouldn't it help us to rethink the political starting precisely from the absolute disconnection, the ungraspable disjunction? That is, to help us dismantle the fatal reterritorializations that a 'we' inevitably produces? In short, to help us show ourselves that even the 'we' is an image, an effect of montage? (Odello in Kirchmayr, Odello 2010, 31)

---

6 Blanchot, in the course of his discussion, offers a fragmented definition of what disaster is. Through the same fragmentary structure of the essay, it becomes evident that the only way to convey disaster is through the fragment. Understood as a condition of separation, as that which is most separate, disaster is not experienced – it is what escapes all possible experience, the limit of writing. It is the disaster of thought, of the first-person narrative, and of language itself (see Blanchot 2021).

The lint that makes up the ribbon in *The Ballad* reveals an entropic nature: it is the anti-Image, the isomorphic image of clothing, representing the loss of contact with the human form. The poetic word, inscribed on this layer of waste, confronts the ephemeral nature of its medium, creating an inference with the very consistency of language, which, like the body and its remnants, is destined to return to dust. The two registers, visual and verbal, do not integrate: their union exists in a shared tension toward annihilation, just as oblivion threatens to fall over Kastriot's story and the drama of the Kosovo war. Melanie Klein, who expanded on Freud's concept of the death drive, argues that – contrary to Freud's view – death is 'representable' in the deeper layers of the psyche because it is inscribed within the life principle, acting as a driving force for psychic functioning.[7] Such coexistence would also allow for the possibility of renegotiating the negativity that tension entails, through complex forms of representation. A shaping of these operations, however, does not guarantee a resolution of the conflict, or the annulment of negativity, but may exhibit the failure, even analytically, of this artistic and therapeutic strategy.

Returning to Resnais' *Muriel*, regarding the character of Bernard, we see that at the end of the film – after writing in his diary that since the girl's death he has not been alive – he decides to take revenge by killing one of her tormentors. In reality, this is not a conscious decision, as there are several clues indicating his psychological instability. In a particularly emblematic scene, we see him become agitated when Françoise accidentally plays a tape that briefly, for a few seconds, contains a recording of the girl's voice (Ward 1968, 77). The intrusion of that sound acts as the return of the repressed. What his character expresses, along with the experiences of other characters like Alphonse and Hélène, and Resnais' direction itself, is the impossibility of taking responsibility due to their inability to assimilate the fragmented and disjointed memory, presented in the film through a multitude of framed details, serving as diversions within a defensive strategy.[8] Maurizio Balsamo, in *Il negativo del trauma* (2020), argues that in the clinical sphere denegation would be understood as an absence of montage, where the psyche would be

---

[7] "In tracing the metamorphosis of the death drive into what Klein refers to as 'psychization', one cannot help but find the mother of psychoanalysis to be eminently Shakespearean. Is it not the case that the playwright's sonnet 146 already implies that the sublimating excess of 'Death once dead', or 'putting Death to death', is realized only through the internal life of the 'poor soul', and only then if the soul is capable of consuming within itself the death that originates from the outside?" (Kristeva [2000] 2001, 90).

[8] "Bernard's problems follow from his tendency to fragment the past, a fault which we have discovered in the protagonists of all Resnais' feature films. He has failed to provide the *Muriel* episode with a context, but instead of allowing it to torture him he has channelled it into a desire for action" (Wilson 1988, 78).

a terrain where operations of assembling and disassembling take place, and thus the theatre of a certain flexibility of bonding and disbonding, stating that:

> The traumatic nature of the event thus lies not in a representation of it, but in the breakdown of the connections between processes, in the failure of the possibilities of linking and psychic figurability, and in the formation not of a memory trace, but of a perceptual trace. (Balsamo 2020, 19)

In this sense, the girl's mourning – like surviving her death – seems impossible, in the resolving utopia of a dramatic gesture, incapable of redeeming and restarting life. Cayrol states that he is not interested in drama (Wilson 1988, 87), but in what happens afterwards: there is no future at the end of that film, only a repetition that obsessively re-proposes the past in order to freeze it in a traumatic present, suspended between the impossibility of rejection and the violent explosion of the symptom.[9]

Giuseppe Zuccarino, in *Immagini sfuggenti. Saggi su Blanchot* (2018), recounts a biographical story of Maurice Blanchot, a misadventure that put him in extreme contact with death, in a way like Kastrioth, but more correctly like Dostoevsky. Captured by the communists during the Second World War, on the verge of being shot, he is saved at the last second by the captain of the militia, who orders him to escape. The writer recounted this experience in a fragmentary manner and spread out over the years, probably due to the difficulty of processing it psychically.[10] The reason he would be spared relates to his noble ancestry; in fact, the place of execution would be on the slopes of the family castle (Zuccarino 2018, 72-3). Faced with horror, Blanchot's guilt acts like that of Bernard's character:

---

[9] "Bernard leaves at the end of the film, further reiterating the film's warnings against return and repetition […] The film ends in desolation, in an empty search and blind movement onwards. This again may be read as an inflection of its subject. Muriel shows, through Bernard's failures, that it can never reach or trace the pain at its centre. Hence the film's pessimism, its erosion of sensuality at every turn, its refusal of release or reprieve" (Wilson 1988, 106).

[10] "As for the French writer, it should be noted that the first mention of the 1944 experience already appeared in one of his stories published in a magazine five years later, *La folie du jour*. […] The staging we encounter in *L'instant de ma mort* appears much more complex, a paradoxical text from the title itself. In fact, strictly speaking, it is impossible to narrate, as if it had already occurred, the moment of one's own death. Philosopher Alexandre Kojève observes: "My death is truly mine; it is not someone else's death. But it is mine only in the future, because one can say: 'I will die', but not: 'I am dead'". In Blanchot's story, however, nothing is so straightforward, as can be understood from the very opening line […] A passage, then, has occurred, but it did not result in the end of life; rather, on the contrary, it marked the beginning of survival, the waiting for the second death" (Zuccarino 2018, 69).

when it is not 'assembled' by the psyche it blocks acceptance, breaking down into a formless heterogeneity. The guilt of survival also affects the 'innocent', because responsibility is distributed in such a way that no one really is.

3 Conclusion

Returning to the Marguerite Yourcenar quote at the beginning of this article, from *Le coup de grâce* (1939), we see how, in wartime reporting, the close-up easily becomes a hyper-mediatized spectacle, while the real drama fades into the background, almost disappearing like a speck of lint – where guilt and frustration over the inability to respond are found. However, the background, where we ultimately also reside in front of these events beyond our reach, needs to be re-articulated in continuity with the close-up. A work like *The Ballad*, by re-editing an impossible experience, moves us away from a hierarchy often too complacent with an imaginific addiction that blocks our imagination, leaving behind an unassimilable residue. Offering an alternative version of a famous Benjamin's statement, from *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*,[11] we can assert that to historically articulate a traumatic past does not mean to recognize it as it truly was: rather, it means to grasp how it can be presented, ultimately, beyond how it flashes in the moment of danger, offering an alternative to destruction. The German scholar conceives the 'historical object' as a dialectical image and monad of materialistic historiography, representing a revolutionary opportunity to redeem the past (Benjamin [1942] 2012, 11). In my view, Mary Kelly's work serves as a voice for a messianic intrapsychic time, that of figurability, of the repressed returning through an aniconic montage – not iconoclastic, but rather bearing the reasons for what has been excluded, the reasons that, once processed, can be reintegrate into consciousness. We are not only responsible for the social dramas of our present but also for the unexpressed traumas of our inner experiences threaten to explode every day – two interconnected realms of reality that present us with the true risk, that of an ethical choice. We have the duty to actualize the virtuality of a past moment, turning it into memory, redeeming it, in other words, saving it. Only then can there be a genuine rebirth, along with the experience of an artwork that reveals this latent possibility to us.

---

[11] "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognising it as it was. It means grasping a memory as it flashes in the instant of danger" (Benjamin [1942], 2012, 13).

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (1996). *Mezzi senza fine: note sulla politica*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Balsamo, M. (2020). "Il negativo del trauma". *Frontiere della psicoanalisi*, 1(1), 11-26.

Barthes, R. (1970). *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Benjamin, W. (2012). *Tesi di filosofia della storia*. Trad. di R. Solmi. Milano: Mimesis. Trad. di: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1942.

Blanchot, M. (2019). *L'ultimo a parlare*. Trad. di M. Ajazzi Manzini. Napoli; Salerno: Orthotes. Trad. di: *Le dernier à parler*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984.

Blanchot, M. (2021). *La scrittura del disastro*. Trad. di F. Sossi. Milano: Il saggiatore. Trad. di: *L'Écriture du désastre*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1980.

Byung-chul, H. (2024). *La crisi della narrazione. Informazione, politica e vita quotidiana*. Trad. di A. Canzonieri. Torino: Einaudi. Trad. di: *Die Krise der Narration*. Berlin: MSB Matthes & Seitz, 2023.

Cayrol, J. (1963). *Muriel*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Coletta, E. (2021). "Damisch e Freud a cospetto della Cappella di San Brizio a Orvieto". *Immagine & parola*, 2, 91-103.

Damisch, H. (2005). "Montage du désastre". *Cahiers du cinéma*, 599, 72-8.

Gadamer, H.G. (1989). *Chi sono io, chi sei tu. Su Paul Celan*. Trad. di F. Camera. Genova: Marietti. Trad. di: *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du? Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans Gedichtfolge 'Atemkristall' revidierte und ergänzte Ausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986.

Gnani, P. (2010). *Scrivere poesie dopo Auschwitz. Paul Celan e Theodor W. Adorno*. Firenze: Giuntina.
https://doi.org/10.1515/arb-2012-0064

Kelly, M. (2008). *La Balada De Kastriot Rexhepi/The Ballad of Kastroit Rexhepi*. Murcia: Espacio Av.

Kirchmayr, R.; Odello, L. (2010). *AUT AUT 348. Georges Didi-Huberman. Un'etica delle immagini*. Milano: Il saggiatore.

Kristeva, J. (2001). *Melanie Klein*. Transl. by R. Gubermann. New York: Columbia University Press. Transl. of: *Melanie Klein*. Paris: Gallimard, 2000.

Pinotti, A. (2021). *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*. Torino: Einaudi.

Pollock, G.; Bryant, A. (2010). *Digital and Other Virtualities. Renegotiating the Image*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.
https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755696611

Pollock, G.; Zemans, J. (2007). *Museums After Modernism. Strategies of Engagement*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776636.index

Rancière, J. (1998). "The Cause of the Other". *Parallax*, 4, 25-33.
https://doi.org/10.1080/135346498250217

Rodman, H. (1991). "Anatomy of a Wizard". *American Film 16*, 10, 35-9.

Ward, J. (1968). *Alain Resnais, or the Theme of Time*. Norwich: Sight and Sound.

Wilson, E. (1988). *Alain Resnais*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Yourcenar, M. (1939). *Le coup de grâce*. Paris: Gallimard.

Zuccarino, G. (2018). *Immagini sfuggenti. Saggi su Blanchot*. Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis.

Navigating an Eco-Material Apocalypse with *TITANE* (France/Belgium 2021)

Babylonia Constantinides
University of Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract   Embedded in petromodernity and the automotive industry, our history is permeated by fossil and metallic materialities. Chemical traces cling to the corpse, the living and the not yet born, indexing the interconnectedness between them, between the earthly and the mechanical. With the figure of the pregnant posthuman (Rodante van der Waal), the paradigm of placenta politics (Rosi Braidotti), and the concept of systemic crisis (Laurent Berlant), the film *TITANE* (Julia Ducournau) shows the ecological, technological, and social world in an apocalyptic dance of pulsating endurance.

Keywords   TITANE. Petromodernity. Pregnant posthuman. Placenta politics. Systemic crisis.

Morbid vocals and synthesizer elements echo through the dark hall where Alexia leads us past illuminated cars, exposed engines and hostesses draped over them. Our gaze glides along the flame pattern depicted on the polished body of a Cadillac. The camera rises from the radiator and Alexia, lying on her back on the hood, spreads her legs in neon yellow mesh tights. As if the vehicle had been set on fire and she were part of the blaze, the athletic young woman dances to the song "Doing it to Death" from the album *Ash & Ice* by The Kills (2016):

> Baby save it, we're wasted
> I know we gotta slow it down
> But when the waves come you face them

And you know we can't stop it now
Heads up we're in a dead club
Put your hands up and do your dipsy and dropsy
And line up, we're hanging up
We're double sixing it, night after night
Doing it to Death
Doing it to Death

With pulsating endurance, Agathe Rousselle as Alexia swirls and twists the visual regimes in the hall and on the screen. Focusing on the audience next to and behind the lens of the camera, she repositions herself "from the object being gazed at to the subject acting" and "controls her own narrative", as director and screenwriter of *TITANE* (2021, France: Diaphana Distribution; Belgium: O'Brother Distribution) Julia Doucurnau (2021) explains in an interview.

As a child, Alexia mimics the sounds of the combustion engine in order to behave and become similar. By imitating and resembling the vibrating machine, the girl merges with the car.[1] The noises are accompanied by the band 16 Horsepower with their song "Wayfaring Stranger" from the album *Secret South* (2000) issued by the Peugeot's sound system. To drown out her humming, her father turns up the music. Immediately, Alexia changes her means of expression, translating and amplifying the car's jerking on the road by kicking her feet against the backrest of the driver's seat. Her father admonishes her with a repeated "Arrête!". After a while, she indeed not only stops her kicking, but also causes the whole vehicle to stop. She unbuckles her seatbelt and turns around. "I'm only goin' over home" (16 Horsepower 2000). Trying to grab his daughter, the driver loses control of the car. As if in a mechanical and metaphorical translation of her turning away, the steering wheel releases from his hand and causes an abrupt turn. The vehicle comes to a halt facing backwards on the road after colliding violently with a white concrete block beside it.

From the very beginning, history seems to race towards the end like an automobile. But this movement is, according to Hannah Arendt ([1958] 1998, 246), more than an automatic process determining the course of life: There is hope in stopping and restarting. At full speed an accident occurs. On the threshold of survival, something remains, something is lost – and something is added.[2] The im-

---

[1] On the mimetic faculty of childhood see Benjamin ([1933] 1977) or Lyotard, according to whom infancy "knows something about *as if*" and "the real openness to stories" ([1991] 2023, 44).

[2] Raising the question of responsibility and asking what is lost or forgotten and what remains or is passed on in survival, Lyotard ([1991] 2023) refers to Arendt's notion of natality and the possibility of political action to describe the transformative power of acting *as if* life has a purpose whereby birth becomes something more than just the postponement of death.

pact leaves a mark on the car's windshield and on the child's skull. A titanium plate is implanted in her head. After being discharged from hospital, the seven-year-old nestles her face against the window of the repaired car in an embracing gesture of reunion. A shot from the inside shows the stapled skin above her ear, a mark by which we recognize the young woman years later. Then, against an black screen, glowing cyan X-ray images of little skulls hover within the form of the letters of the title: "TITANE". As the bodily implant and the films' title graphic, "TITANE" creates a visual connection between the flattened profile of the shorn child at the parking lot and the side view of the adult at the entrance to the car show, the girl and the woman, the actresses Adèle Guigue and Agathe Rousselle.

At an airport terminal, stages of life and representations of identities are framed and united on an illuminated panel. One side of the public LED display shows an appeal for witnesses. A search is being conducted for Adrien Legrand, who disappeared at the age of seven. The photograph of the boy morphs into a digitally aged portrait of a seventeen-year-old, with the computer simulation substituting the ten years that have passed. The calculated transposition of Adrien's face corresponds to the cinematic shift in Alexia's story. In addition to this analogy of temporal bridging, the double-sided panel also holds a sort of spatial connection. For on the one side of the LED frame there is the morphing portrait of Adrien and on the other side or back-to-back, so to speak, there is a sketch of the adolescent Alexia who is the subject of a search warrant. Because she is classified as dangerous, in the instructive text below the image people are warned of intervening themselves if they come across her. On the run from the police Alexia, however, intervenes immediately when she recognizes herself in the identikit picture and a moment later mentally projects herself into the missing boy. Aiming to impersonate Adrien, a drastic modification of her body once again ensures her survival. Now, to escape the legal consequences of the murders she committed and to leave the phantom image behind her, she appropriates the computer-simulated image of the lost person, translating it into a physical simulation based on her own body. In pretending to be the reappeared and meanwhile adolescent man, she first and foremost must take control of her female, pregnant body.

The scenario of giving birth to parts of a car engine has been a recurring nightmare for Doucurnau (2022), who developed the film's narrative backwards from this idea for the final scene, embedded in the continuum between dead metal and new life. After having sex with a car, a hard and polished metallic ball grows in Alexia's belly and motor oil leaks from her breasts and vagina, before she ultimately gives birth to a child with a metallic, shimmering spine. Her T-shirt, featuring the image of a robot and the words 'WOMAN INSIDE', is a premonition of herself as a pregnant posthuman and the

new being inside of her, which only little later is clearly announced by the two vertical lines in the window of a pregnancy test.

The cross of a pharmacy glows above her head, wrapped in a black hoodie, as she walks along the corridors of the airport, trying to leave her former appearance behind. A pack of bandages and clanking instruments fall into the sink of a public bathroom marked with a wheelchair. The sound of the scissors cutting her hair is followed by the friction of the razor on her lathered brows, the unrolling and tightening of the bandages on her breasts and belly, and the moaning and gagging as her organs are squeezed. In rapid cuts, we follow this plastic metamorphosis, the results of which she inspects in the mirror. Then she feels her face with her fingers, clenches them into a fist and strikes herself. The bones and cartilage of her hand and face collide without consequence. She then examines the white cuboid washbasin and, after a few tests, hurls her nose against it. The collision causes the intended swelling. The 'Original Pirate Material', which labels Alexia's body in tattooed lettering under the skin and quotes an album title by The Streets, points to the physical nature of the simulation, its embedding in cultural contexts, and its creative potential to undermine the hierarchical dualism between original and copy, archetype and reproduction.[3]

After identifying Alexia as his missing son at the police station, fire captain Vincent, played by Vincent Lindon, takes her home. There she removes her bandages and goes to lie down in Adrien's bed. The bedroom appears to be unchanged since Adrien disappeared ten years ago. A poster on the wall depicts the cover of the Queen record *News of the World*, showing a giant robot playing with humans. Frank Kelly Freas had adapted one of his paintings replacing the dead body in the robot's hand with the four band members.[4] To prevent the father from noticing that his son has been replaced, the substitute child shrouds her body with the blanket and tells him to turn away. Keeping her eyes fixed on him, like the metallic robot with the spherical belly, Alexia hastily gets out of her clothes, which Vincent wants to wash and replace with a firefighter's uniform.

To what degree Vincent at this point or whether he at all believes in the reappearance of his son is kept open in his behavior and statements. But those around him do not hide their vehement rejection of Alexia or at least their skepticism regarding her identity and her

---

3   According to Deleuze (1983, 53) in his overthrow of Platonism the simulacrum "contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy* [...]. The nonhierarchical work [of the simulacrum] is a condensation of coexistence, a simultaneity of events".

4   Queen (1977). *News of the World*. UK: EMI Records; USA: Elektra Records. See, for example, https://thepressmusicreviews.wordpress.com/2022/04/07/queen-news-of-the-world-1977/. The original version of Freas's painting was also printed to illustrate "The Gulf Between" by Godwin (1953). See Rowe 2022, 132-3.

role. In any case, as the single parent of an adolescent child, Vincent cares for Alexia as if she where Adrien, whose parents have obviously separated and whose mother has moved out. In the parents' former shared bedroom, Alexia finds a photograph of Adrien on his father's shoulders and one that indexes his presence by depicting his heavily pregnant mother. She tries on a yellow dress and looks at the contours of her own body in the mirror. When Vincent comes home, she hides in the closet, but he finds her and shows her pictures of Adrien as a young boy wearing the very same dress. "They can't tell me you're not my son", Vincent says. During a shot visit Adrien's mother unexpectedly walks into the heavily pregnant Alexia and expresses a different concept of care:

> Whatever your twisted reasons for exploiting his fucking folly, I don't care, just take care of him. Look at me. You take care of him. He needs someone, you or another.

Seeking a connection with Adrien, Vincent approaches Alexia in soft twists and turns. She reciprocates those movements on the dance floor at a party with the other firefighters.

> And this is where we were
> When I showed you the dark
> Inside of me, in spite of me
> On a bench in the park
> And this is where we are
> In your bed, in my arms
> Outside of me, in spite of we
> I showed you the dark
> And you said to me
> You know
> What you know is better, is brighter
> (Future Islands, "Light House", *Singles*, 2014)

Alexia takes Vincent's hands and dances with him. Vincent takes Alexia horizontally on his shoulders and spins with her to "Light House" by Future Islands. Immersed in warm floods of light, the two of them find the same pulse in another scene. When responding to a call Vincent intubates a drugged man lying in his vomit, the man's mother faints next to Alexia, who then is tasked with resuscitating the woman by performing chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth. After a quick briefing, Vincent sets the pace. While he squeezes the son's resuscitation bag at regular intervals, Alexia presses on the mother's chest.

Follow me. Press as hard as you can, okay? Da, dadada, dadada
Macarena
Da, dadada, dadada, cosa buena
Da dadada dadada Macarena, oh Macarena! Blow or she dies!
Blow!
Go again: Da dadada dadada Macarena
Da dadada dadada cosa buena
Da dadada dadada Macarena, oh Macarena! Blow!
Go again: Da dadada dadada Macarena
Da dadada dadada cosa buena, da dadada dadada Macarena.
He got her!
(Monge; Perigones, "Macarena", performed by Vincent Lindon,
1993)

Vincent also supports Alexia with the frequency and duration of her contractions when she goes into labour. "My name is Alexia", she replies firmly when he addresses her as "Adrien", encouraging her to push and holding her body with all his strength. But when the child is born, Alexia's strength deserts her. His attempt to revive her fails, accompanied by the overwhelming opening chorus "*Kommt ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen*" from Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (1727, BWV 244, no. 1, chorus I/II). While the mother dies in the glistening black puddle of liquid discharged from her mouth, her vagina, and her abdomen, the oil-smeared infant survives.

> [It] initiates, in the death of what was there, the miracle of what is
> not yet there, of what is not yet identified. (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 47)

Vincent cuts the umbilical cord and takes the newborn in his arms. The petrochemical traces cling to the corpse, the baby, and Vincent's hands as an index of the interconnectedness between them, between the earthly and the mechanical. This final scene reverses the opening. The close tracking shots of the crashed vehicle's propulsion system were accompanied by 16 Horsepower, as well as mechanical blasts of air and a tinny dripping sound. The parts of the machine had shone a deep red, drenched in dripping blood. Alexia had survived the accident, but the scar ripped open while giving birth, as does the abdominal wall over the metal bulge of her oil-pumped and leaking body. Embedded in petromodernity and the automotive industry, the course of life is permeated by fossil and metallic materialities.[5] The control over the narrative and the physical transformation make these limits even more palpable. Circumventing the legal

---

5 On petromodernity and the automotive industry in relation to *TITANE*, see Engemann 2021.

consequences does not mean to escape the biological, ecological, technological, and social world which one is part of.

When the consequences of the automobile entanglements tear Alexia apart from within, nothing can help her. But before applying the much-used bandage one last time, she looks down at her belly, and responds to the movements inside her with a caress and apologizes. Then she mingles with the crowd of her pogo-dancing colleagues in the festively decorated fire station, who welcome her into their midst, and then lift her onto the ladder of a fire engine. In the spotlight, she looks down at the muscular men, who expectantly chant "A-drien, A-drien, A-drien". The soft and slow vocals of Williams' "Wayfaring Stranger" performed by Lisa Abbott for the *Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* represent a departure from the fast and harsh music from the audio system of the car she resembled as a child:

> I'm goin' there to see my father
> Said he'd meet me when I come
> I'm only goin' over Jordan
> I'm only goin' over home
> I know dark clouds gonna gather 'round me
> I know my way'll be rough and steep
> Yet beautiful fields lie just before me

Alexia's dance echoes the movements that transformed her from an object being stared at into a controlling subject. Her body wrapped in her bandages and concealed by the firefighter's uniform given to her by Vincent, she fluidly and performatively moves between identities. She takes new directions, embedded, enclosed, and bound to her surroundings. Relationships and protective belts are loosened, and new ones are forged. Strapped into her father's Peugeot as a child, she unfastened the black three-point buckle of the seat belt.[6] During sexual intercourse with a Cadillac, she bound her arms with its red straps. In white bandages she protects herself against identification and slips into another life covering the new one that is emerging. At the end, she removes the stretched and oil-stained bandages. Like a simulacrum that breaks its chains to claim its rights alongside the archetypes and images.[7] Alexia writhes as a dancer in the fire and as a dancing fireman, she somersaults as a mimetic human-machine and

---

[6] The three-point seat belt serves the paradigm of 'passive safety', in that it does not prevent accidents, but is intended to make them survivable". In traffic accidents, people and machines collide as does responsibility and failure, whereby external interests determine the allocation and the connection between the human and the machine. (Beckman 2010, 118 and 126).

[7] Having been repressed and "chained in the depth" (Deleuze 1983, 48) simulacra can "ris[e] to the surface" (48) and raise up "to assert their rights over icons or copies" (52).

original pirate material and flits between the prodigal son and the mother-to-be. Creating space and making room for the new Alexia as a pregnant posthuman, an entity which "intuitively and intimately understands change and becoming", captures "the movements of matter and the borders of life within herself" (Van der Waal 2018, 368).

> She is in a singular plural state and in intimate experience with the new, the relational, plurality, [...] and engages [...] with the world-to-come in the depths of [her] being, in the darkness of [her] flesh. (368-70)

Uniting "critical reflection and [...] radical imagination" (369), she

> capture[s] the movement of new materialism right inside of [her]: the affectionate, intimate relation with matter, with objects that determine who [she] become[s], maybe even more than [she] is able to determine their becomings, [she] live[s] inside their history as they live inside of [her]. (370)

Rodante van der Waal's description of the pregnant posthuman shifts the focus to an intimate "embodied and embedded" (369) relationship with the wayfaring stranger, unknown within the immanently transgressed self. Relying on the paradigm of placenta politics as "a model of generative relationality" suggested by Rosi Braidotti (2018, 316), posthuman subjectivity is split

> from within, in a non-dialectic process of internal differentiations that predicates the primacy of the 'other within'. (315)

Braidotti (2006, 9) describes the placenta as an assemblage and figuration that conceptualizes the subject as hybrid, in transit and fluid, and she emphasizes the cooperative and co-creative forces of "affirmative relationality and multiple becomings" (2018, 317).

The jointly created narrative between Alexia, her child, and Vincent unfolds with reciprocal impulses and gliding perspectives after being announced with two lines in the window of a pregnancy test and as a computer-generated, two-dimensional sketch on a double-sided LED screen. The two faces on the information panel correspond to the two vertical lines of the pregnancy test, each of which interrupts the course of the story like a pause sign, containing the past and the now, and pointing to the new as "possible radical alteration [...] of what is not yet identified" (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 47).[8] "I am here. I'm here",

---

[8]   "[M]y birth is always only recounted by others, and my death told to me in the stories of the death of others, my stories and others' stories. The relationship with others

Vincent whispers echoingly, holding the oily creature skin-to-skin, while the shimmering metallic spine and head hold it from within.

Throughout the film the entanglement of dead metal and new life, the scenario of birth and death, the collisions of human and machine with the concrete and ceramic cubes, or the two lines in the lateral flow test flash up like dialectical images of crisis. But all those apparent clashes are embedded in the continuum of biological, cultural, ecological, and technological worlds as well as in "the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories" and "stories about navigating what's overwhelming", to quote Laurent Berlant (2011, 10). Given that "environmental, political, and social brittleness" (11) have increased and asymmetrical axes of othering and discrimination have intensified the "structural contingency" (11) of existential inequality, it seems even more necessary to shift away from the historical and personal narrative of an exceptional form of shock as a specific rupture. In this sense, a temporally and spatially expanded concept offers Berlant in terming the "systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness'", where "[c]atastrophic forces [...] become events within history as it is lived" (10).

Like the back of a light box, a white rectangle with the title functions as a closing bracket to what was opened at the beginning of the film with the hovering skulls glowing cyan against a black background. Now, foetuses float on the surface of the capital letters as petrol-coloured sonograms. "TITANE" refers to the transitional generation of gods in Greek mythology, whose name derives from the verb *titaino* 'to strech', and to the transition element in the periodic table named after them. Against the background of our relational posthuman subjectivity in a "nature-culture continuum" (Braidotti 2018, 318), and pregnancy as "an act and a state" (Van der Waal 2018, 369) of constant change, *TITANE* stretches the dialectical images into the bodily performances of the cinematic continuity. A lateral flow assaying intended to detect the catastrophic circumstances that are swimming into and within the body, where the floating "dance with unfolding matter takes place" (370) between the title fade-ins, making visible the transformative path into the future, where ecological, technological, and social worlds require new courses.

is, therefore, essential to this relation with the nothingness of its being that is reported to me (whence I come and where I am going), and also essential to the presence of the absence of which the relationship with *others* (this presence of absence) comes *back* to me. Essential, too, is the *fabula* to which the pulsation of beginning and end lends rhythm" (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 43).

Bibliography

Arendt, H. [1958] (1998). *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Beckman, K. (2010). "Doing Death Over: Industrial-safety Films, Accidental-motion Studies, and the Involuntary Crash Test Dummy". *Crash. Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis*. Durham (NC); London: Duke University Press, 105-36.

Benjamin, W. [1933] (1977). "Über das mimetische Vermögen". von Tiedemann, R.; Schweppenhäuser, H. (Hrsgg.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 210.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham (NC); London: Duke University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press.

Braidotti, R. (2018). "Placenta Politics". Braidotti, R.; Hlavajova, M. (eds), *Posthuman Glossary*. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 315-18.

Deleuze, G. (1983). "Plato and the Simulacrum". Transl. by R. Kraus. *October*, 27, 45-56.

Engemann, C. (2021). "Petrotraumata. Öl, Körper und Autos bei Julia Ducournau". *Cargo. Film, Medien, Kultur*.
https://www.cargo-film.de/film/spielfilm/petrotraumata/

Godwin, T. (1953). "The Gulf Between". Campbell, J.W. (ed.), *Astounding Science Fiction*. Street & Smith Publications, 8-56.

Lyotard, J.-F. [1991] (2023). "Survivor: Arendt". Harvey, R.; Bamford, K. (eds), *Readings in Infancy*. London; New York; Dublin: Bloomsbury, 39-60.

Rowe, A. (2022). *Worlds Beyond Time: Sci-Fi Art of the 1970s*. New York: Abrams.

Van der Waal, R. (2018). "The Pregnant Posthuman". Braidotti, R.; Hlavajova, M. (eds), *Posthuman Glossary*. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 368-70.

Interviews

Doucurnau, J. (2021). *Der wandelnde Todestrieb*. Interview with T. Abeltshauser. Berlin: TAZ Verlags – und Vertriebsgesellschaft.
https://taz.de/Regisseurin-Ducournau-ueber-Film-Titane/!5801700/

Doucurnau, J. (2022). *Interview for the Blue-Ray Extras to TITANE*. Mittelbiberach: Koch Media Home Entertainment.

**Through the History of Things: On Objects
and Their Role in Cultural and Historical Crises**

Paganism and Christianity in Thirteenth-Century Sweden
The Skog Tapestry as a Testimony of the Conversion Process

Elena De Zordi
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   The Skog tapestry was found in 1912 in the church of Skog in Sweden's Hälsingland region and is dated to the second half of the thirteenth century. The technique and the tapestry format are rooted in the pre-Christian culture of Scandinavia, as can be observed when confronting the object with other specimens found in Överhogdal and Oseberg. On the other hand, the figurative content is a testimony of Sweden's Christianization process. This textile object works as a synthesis of the pagan past and the Christian present, inserting the new religious teachings into an already existing system of artistic practices.

Keywords   Skog tapestry. Pagan Scandinavia. Christianisation of Scandinavia. Textiles. Thirteenth century.

Summary   1 Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Christianisation of Sweden. – 2 The Skog Tapestry. – 2.1 Open Questions on the Nature of the Tapestry. – 2.2 The Problem of the Three Figures. – 3 Conclusion: The Tapestry as a Bridge Between Old Norse Religion and Christianity.

> The accusation of overly imaginative theorising is perhaps vertiginously close. Fully aware of this but simultaneously convinced that it is necessary to present new hypotheses in a discussion that shall bear fruit, I take the risk... and continue. (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 23; Author's transl.)

1 Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Christianisation of Sweden

Scandinavia was one of the last regions of Europe to accept Christianity and enter the broader European cultural framework tied to these beliefs. There are countless works devoted to studying this phenomenon. For this, only the main lines of its development will be given here, with the sole intention of putting the object of this study, the Skog tapestry, in its historical context.

The acceptance of Christianity in Sweden was not a straightforward or immediate event but rather a gradual process that unfolded over time. The first tentative steps by Western European missionaries to establish contact with the Norse population in this territory can be dated to the ninth century, when there is evidence of a missionary expedition to Birka, an important trading centre on the shore of Lake Mälar (Brink 2004, 172; Winroth 2012, 103). However, about a century later, the Christian community established there seemed to have been reabsorbed by the pagan majority (110). Even though the bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen advocated the right to convert Scandinavia (Sawyer 1988, 46; Winroth 2012, 107-8), Christian impulses reached the area from a vast array of places located in what is now Great Britain and Germany (Sawyer 1988, 56-7; Lagerlöf 2005, 140). Furthermore, there are indications that a part of today's Swedish territory, the island of Gotland, first could have received Christian impulses from Byzantine and Slavic territories. (145).

The Norse religious views presented a loose structure, with no officially appointed clergy or missionary programme (DuBois 1999, 42; Winroth 2012, 146; Sundquist 2024, 356); even the use of the term 'religion' to indicate this set of practices and beliefs is problematic (Andrén, Jennbert, Raudvere 2006, 12; Sundquist 2024, 26-30). The polytheistic nature of the Norse pantheon allowed the insertion of foreign entities and divinities without any particular resistance. This is how Christ was first incorporated into the religious practices of the Scandinavian population as *Vite Krist*, whose nature of glorious and powerful king had only a few elements in common with the evangelical Jesus (Melnikova 2011, 101-2). Thus, it is impossible to indicate a specific date for the shift in cult practices that occurred in Sweden, for it was a gradual phenomenon that could be considered completed only in 1164 with the institution of the diocese of Uppsala

(Sawyer 1988, 49; Winroth 2012, 104; Sundquist 2024, 358). This allowed for a period in which the two ways of life co-existed and were even practised by the same people, as evidenced by several episodes registered in some of the Icelandic sagas and documented by archaeological finds (DuBois 1999, 60; Melnikova 2011, 105).

2 The Skog Tapestry

In 1912, the then-student Erik Salvén was tasked with visiting several churches in Northern Sweden and compiling inventories of their liturgical possessions in the perspective of an exhibition of ecclesiastical art in Hudiksvall in 1913. When he visited the church of Skog in Hälsingland, he gained access to all items except the bridal crown, which the church steward deemed useless to show him, stating that it was exactly like many others. Salvén did not desist and asked a local school child to get the key to the box where it was stored. The bridal crown was wrapped up in a piece of cloth, which later proved to be much more interesting than the object it was supposed to protect (Tornehed 1996, 58-9). The textile at hand, now housed at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm with inventory number 15275, is a tapestry woven in the *soumak* technique, which had been widespread in Scandinavia since the Migration period, only to disappear in the fourteenth century [fig. 1]. Thus, the tapestry is woven and not embroidered (Sylwan 1921, 220).

The current length of the item is 175 cm, although a tear on the right side indicates that it was initially longer, probably around 192 cm (Salvén 1923, 23-4; Sylwan 1949, 331; Tornehed 1996, 60).[1] The width varies between 38 cm on the extremities and 35 cm at the centre; the difference seems original and not the result of wear and tear. The upper part is sewn together with a piece of coarse linen cloth that served to attach the whole piece to the walls of a building (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 31). The format of the tapestry leads us to identify it as a *borði*, a type of weaving mentioned in medieval sources, primarily Icelandic church inventories and sagas. These textiles were decorated with images and were usually hung inside buildings, specifically churches. Like the most common textile category of the *refil*, *borði* specimens were probably not stand-alone pieces but were

---

[1] It was hypothesised that the missing length on the right end of the cloth housed additional figures, which could have helped determine the overall meaning of the depiction. In particular, it has been proposed that the three main gods of the Norse pantheon were depicted here (Lindqvist 1951, 184; Sundquist 1977, 89). On the contrary, it has been thoroughly demonstrated how the missing piece would have been only around 16 cm long, just enough to complete the interrupted figures along the tear and house a decorative band (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54).

Figure 1   Skog tapestry. Middle-second half of the thirteenth century.
Wool and linen threads, soumak technique, 175 × 35-38 cm.
Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, CC BY 4.0. Photo by Ola Myrin

accompanied by similar ones meant to be hung simultaneously along the internal walls of a religious or secular building (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 90-2). Thus, it could be argued that the Skog tapestry was originally part of a larger decorative project.

Passing on to the tapestry's figurative decoration, the cloth's centre is occupied by a section of a wooden church and a bell tower, which takes up the width of the entire object. Both buildings house a series of stylised persons. Several are depicted while pulling the chords that ring the bells on the upper part of both architectonic structures. The identification of the building at the centre as a wooden church, whose identification is rendered possible mainly thanks to the cross on top of the bell tower and the dragon-head terminations applied on the upper part of both buildings (Salvén 1923, 65). Even today, this kind of decoration can be seen on the exterior of several surviving stave churches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Norway. These elements were part of the standard sculptural decorative repertoire of wooden churches, especially in the Scandinavian Early Middle Ages (Salvén 1923, 60; Sundquist 1977, 86). The Christian sanctuary depicted on the Skog tapestry, besides being surrounded by several persons, who mostly gather where the entrance to the building should be, seems to be attacked by two flocks of beasts of uncertain nature – most of them probably lions – and horse riders, who appear to be going towards the church in two superimposed rows coming from both sides. The 'expedition' gives the impression of being led by a figure depicted at the head of the lower row on the left of the church, characterised by three heads **[fig. 2]**. The left end of the representation is occupied by three anthropomorphic figures that stretch for the entire width of the cloth; they are standing on a podium and are holding weapons, of which the only recognisable ones are an axe and possibly a hammer. Following the

horror vacui principle, all the resulting spaces are filled with several animals, either birds or mammals. Decorative geometric bands mark the borders of the tapestry (Salvén 1923, 124; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 10).

Scholars have always agreed on the overall Christian character of the depiction and its general meaning of a struggle between Good, represented by the church and people inside it, and the forces of Evil incarnated in the horde of beasts and horse riders led by the three-headed figure.[2] The scholarly debate actually focuses on two main themes: the dating of the tapestry and the identity of the three figures on the left end of the representation, although never questioning its general meaning of a struggle between Good and Evil. As for the first matter, the archaic appearance of the figures, together with the general sense of the depiction, led some to believe it to be a product of the middle of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth, the years marked by the conversion of Sweden to Christianity.[3] The dating was first moved to the thirteenth century by Agnes Branting and Andreas Lindblom (1928, 13-14), who confronted the headdresses of the three figures on the left with helmets from that time.[4] For several decades, dating fluctuated between the

---

2 Salvén 1923, 103-8; Anjou 1935, 257; Sylwan 1949, 332; Sundquist 1977, 86; 1978, 33; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 53.

3 Ekhoff 1914-16, 349; Salvén 1923, 145; Thordeman 1948, 131; Sylwan 1949, 339; Lindqvist 1951, 184.

4 Erik Salvén later agreed with this dating (1944, 242). Branting and Lindblom's argument regarding the shape of the helmet was disproven by Bengt Thordeman (1948, 125-7), who stated that it was also widespread in earlier periods in Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

middle of the eleventh century and the end of the thirteenth century.[5] A final word on the matter was put by Anne Marie Franzén and Margareta Nockert (1992, 101-2), who provided a radiocarbon dating of the object, carried through by The Swedberg Laboratory in Uppsala, giving the result of 1245-90 CE for the linen samples and 1275-1395 CE for the wool. Thus, the period in which the weaving of the tapestry most likely took place is the second half of the thirteenth century. As for the three anthropomorphic figures on the left, their identity is still a matter of discussion, and this question will be tackled further below.[6]

The Skog tapestry is an extremely rare specimen, with possible parallels identifiable only in three of the Överhogdal tapestries, specifically I A, II, and III, dated to the beginning of the eleventh century (Tornehed 1996, 58), and a textile fragment found in the Oseberg burial mound in Norway, dated to the ninth century (Graham-Campbell 2021, 56-8). All these weavings are realised in the *soumak* technique and show a similar iconographic scheme, with a scene of bigger proportions in the centre flanked on either side by several superimposed rows of smaller figures (Hougen 1940, 90). Although the content of both these examples still has to be established with certainty, it is clear that at least the Oseberg fragment originates in a pagan context. In contrast, there are still some doubts about the content of those found in Överhogdal (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 34). Thus, relying on them to understand better the meaning behind the figures on the Skog tapestry is nearly impossible. The comparison with these weavings only helps to ascertain the longevity of the *soumak* technique in the area and the conservatism of the iconographical schemes employed. Considering the dating of the item to the thirteenth century, it can be observed how weaving patterns and iconographical conventions seem to maintain a greater deal of conservatism compared to other figurative mediums, such as painting, since the figurative scheme of the Skog tapestry was kept intact for at least four centuries, apparently untouched by the developments that occurred in other media, which in the second half of the thirteenth century were already entirely lined up with the Gothic style widespread in the whole Europe (Hougen 1940, 98).

---

[5] An intermediate position was taken by Bengt Thordeman (1948, 127) and Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 13).

[6] The iconographic models behind the animals in the procession, the church, the decorative bands, and the clothes have been explored in depth primarily by Erik Salvén (1923, 86-104). Therefore, they will not be taken into consideration in the present study.

2.1 Open Questions on the Nature of the Tapestry

Even though the iconographic content of tapestries such as those found in Överhogdal and Oseberg is still partly a matter of debate, it could be safe to assume their narrative character. Even the most famous figurative textile of the Middle Ages, the Bayeux embroidery, is known to be a long narrative strip (Barral i Altet 2009, 202-6; Tornehed 1996, 61). Therefore, it should be suspected that the figural content of the Skog tapestry is also of narrative character and should not be considered as a standalone depiction of purely symbolic value. The representation on the tapestry of a generic conflict between Good and Evil (Thordeman 1930, 5; Tornehed 1996, 61) or the victory of Christianity over Old Norse beliefs[7] seems to require a theoretical reflection that belongs more to the present times than to the thirteenth century, especially in a society that became a steady presence in Christian Europe not even a century earlier, as postulated by Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 8). It seems more credible that these concepts are vehiculated by a concrete event, possibly related to the story of a specific ecclesiastical seat, which would have been of particular significance for thirteenth-century Swedish Christians (Branting, Lindblom 1928, 14; Thordeman 1930, 1930, 5; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 8).[8] In this sense, it is interesting to keep in mind that figurative textiles in a primarily oral society such as pagan Scandinavia served the purpose of recalling important events and even functioned as a mnemonical trace for narrative poetry (Sylwan 1949, 343; Norrman 2005, 139). This argument is corroborated by the fact that a *borði*, like a *refil*, as already anticipated, was probably not supposed to be a standalone piece; instead, it should have been an element of a series of similar items destined to be displayed together (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 26; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 90-2). Since it is generally accepted that the Skog tapestry was hung inside a church (Ekhoff 1914-16, 349; Salvén 1923, 139), with its original length of almost two meters, it is indeed not long enough to cover the whole perimeter of the nave. This leads to the hypothesis that this tapestry could constitute the initial piece of a series (Salvén 1923, 24; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 26).

On the subject matter, it must also be pointed out that, when the tapestry was found, it was clear that it had not been initially realised for the church in Skog since its foundation was first mentioned

---

7 Anjou 1935, 257; Thordeman 1948, 123; Sylwan 1949, 330; Lindqvist 1951, 184; Axel-Nilsson 1952; 184, Sundquist 1977, 86; 1978, 33; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54; Tornehed 1996, 60.

8 It seems too risky to completely agree with Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 24-7), who sees in the Skog tapestry the first episode of a cycle narrating the life of Saint Erik, for the evidence is too scarce. However, interpreting the Skog tapestry as the first item in a narrative cycle is worthy of consideration.

in 1312 (Salvén 1923, 139-40; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13). Even though there is not enough evidence to support it fully, the original production of the tapestry could have taken place in an environment near the bishopric seat of Uppsala since the church of Skog was located in the territory of that diocese (Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 339; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13). Indeed, during the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for peripheral churches to acquire older liturgical furnishings crafted initially for more central locations when the latter received a newer and more up-to-date decoration.

Even though the tapestry was radiocarbon dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, the archaic character of the figures is evident. The shape of the church, in particular, recalls much earlier models. It is easy to recognise the presence of a *stavkirke*, a stave church of the single-nave type, which was the most common in Northern and Central Europe immediately after the conversion to Christianity (Salvén 1923, 66-7; Ahrens 2001, 215-20). These churches are characterised by a very minimal layout, with a rectangular nave flanked by a smaller, almost cubical space serving as a choir. In this case, the design of the structure is embellished by the presence of what has been recognised by Nils-Arvid Bringéus (1958, 30) as a liturgical bell, which appeared in Sweden only in the thirteenth century.[9] In the same century, when the tapestry was weaved, more elaborate and expensive stone churches were already starting to replace these wooden religious buildings in almost all regions of Sweden (Ahrens 1981, 42; Lagerlöf 1985, 237; Brink 2004, 172). Although wooden churches continued to enjoy some fortune in Sweden throughout the centuries, especially in isolated and forested areas, the choice of representing a *stavkirke* with this kind of architectonic decoration could also be a deliberate tentative to allude to an earlier time, such as the moment of the initial Christianization of the land, when buildings of this type made their first appearance in Scandinavia.[10] As for the wooden bell tower, although there is no surviving example this ancient in Sweden, they probably were also commonly found, at least in the most important churches, as testified by the surviving bell tower of the Borgund church in Norway (Ahrens 1981, 74).

[9] Claus Ahrens (2001, 254) has evidenced how structures of this kind were far more common than what can be deduced from the surviving material, even though it is not sure if they were always used as bell towers.

[10] It has also been suggested that this tapestry could be a copy of a previous, more ancient one, hence the archaic-looking figures (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13).

2.2   The Problem of the Three Figures

The three figures occupying the tapestry on the left end constitute the focal point of the scholarly debate surrounding the object **[fig. 3]**. The main interpretations that have arisen over the years are five: the Three Wise Men (Salvén 1923), Saint Olof of Norway together with Saints Cosmas and Damianos (Collin 1923), the Holy Trinity (Lindqvist 1951), the three main gods of the Old Norse pantheon (Odin, Thor and Freyr)[11] and finally the three national saints of the Scandinavian countries (Saint Olof of Norway, Saint Erik of Sweden and Saint Knut of Denmark).[12] The last two interpretations gained greater favour, with the latter being the one generally accepted today.

While the lack of satisfying iconographical parallels and written sources allows for every interpretation to be plausible, it may be helpful to point out some problems that could emerge when considering these three figures as Christian saints. Firstly, they lack almost every common attribute associated with this iconographical category. Trusting the radiocarbon dating, the tapestry was weaved in the second half of the thirteenth century, a period in which Christianity was already well established in Sweden and iconographical schemes were past the experimentation and adaptation to the new culture typical of the conversion period. In that time frame, the pictorial and sculptural decoration of Scandinavian churches was no different from that of any other European region, including the conventional representation of saints (Nisbeth 1986, 9). The first element that catches the eye is the lack of haloes surrounding the heads of the figures: arguably, if the intention was to represent holy men, the halo should have been the first element for rendering them immediately recognisable to the eye of the worshipper.

On the extreme left, one of the figures holds an axe in his left hand, admittedly a common attribute associated with Saint Olof of Norway (Collin 1923, 56). However, it is rather difficult to interpret the other objects the figures hold, as the hypothetical Saint Olof also seems to carry either a bow or a shield (Salvén 1923, 90-1). The central figure has an item recognised as a hammer or a cross in his right hand (Salvén 1923, 91; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 56). As for this last interpretation, while its shape resembles that of the cross on the top of the bell tower, the weaver made sure to distinguish between the central pole and the horizontal element by changing colours. Thus, it seems more probable that this is another weapon, possibly a hammer (Anjou 1935, 259). As for the other objects held by the figures,

---

11   Anjou 1935; Thordeman 1948; Sylwan 1949; Axel-Nilsson 1952.

12   Branting, Lindblom 1928; Salvén 1944; Franzén, Nockert 1992. Due to space limitations, only the primary contributions will be included.

the state of the weaving is too degraded to allow any plausible hypothesis. Even Anne Marie Franzén and Margareta Nockert (1992, 59), the last ones to propose a Christian interpretation of these figures, pointed out how the only character that could be safely identified is Saint Olof of Norway, thanks to the axe held in his hand. Still, regarding the other two figures, the two authors admitted the possibility of different saintly identities because of the lack of unequivocal attributes.

The general scheme of the representation is divided into two main areas: the inside of the church and the outside world. The church constitutes a safe space for the worshippers, where they can find refuge from the evils outside, represented by a series of beasts and horse riders depicted while attacking the buildings from both sides (Salvén 1923, 97). Specifically, the left horde, guided by a three-headed creature, seems to spur directly from the three figures at the far left. The impression is that the outside world appears entirely dominated by evil forces. Three Christian saints at the far end of the scene, distant from the church, seem oddly placed, and their presence outside would be difficult to reconcile with the overall theme of the Christian sanctuary providing safety against evil forces.

Heading in the opposite direction and seeing the three major gods of the Norse pantheon in this triad of figures may not be entirely

correct either. The main element that led scholars toward this identi-
fication is the lack of an eye in one of the figures, which suggested an
identification as Odin. Due to the supposed hammer held in one hand,
the central figure was linked to Thor and the remaining one, by ex-
clusion, to Freyr (Anjou 1935, 259-60; Sylwan 1949, 330; Axel-Nilsson
1952, 21). This interpretation greatly relies on the account written by
Adam of Bremen regarding the heathen temple in Uppsala, where it
was supposedly possible to find the three statues of the gods (Anjou
1935, 260-1; Sylwan 1949, 330; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 14). However, it
was demonstrated by Margareta Franzén (1958, 195) that the lack
of an eye in the left figure of the triad was not intentional, but was a
result of the wear and tear suffered by the tapestry during the cen-
turies. In this way, the main argument favouring their identification
as heathen gods falls. Nonetheless, their position outside the church
and the fact that they seem to be the origin of the horde of evil forc-
es attacking the church could still be considered elements support-
ing their roots in a pagan context.

It might be possible to trace an alternative way to interpret this
group of figures, by no means trying to substitute the previous theo-
ries, but only presenting a different point of view that could dialogue
with the earlier readings of this object and hopefully get closer to a
more in-depth understanding of it. It has already been pointed out
how the models behind the three figures on the left could be found
in wooden sculpture, serving as an interesting starting point for a
new interpretation.[13] The figures stand on a platform, making it ev-
ident that they should be interpreted as a whole (Anjou 1935, 262;
Axel-Nilsson 1952, 22; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54). Moreover, their
appearance, although anthropomorphic, drastically differs from the
other human representations found on the textile, especially regard-
ing facial features.[14] It could be argued, partly following the foot-
prints of Sten Anjou (1935, 262), that this is not just a representation
of three human-like figures but a statuary group of pagan nature.
The primary indicator can be found in the shape of the faces, pri-
or examples of which could be identified in the wooden idols of pa-
gan times, whose memory might survive, for example, in a series
of masks that decorate the interior of several wooden churches in
Norway, such as those of the Borgund group (Blindheim 1965, 36-7;
Bugge 1993, 54). These might be the last reflection of the tradition of
the so-called 'pole gods' (Simek 1993, 258).[15] Idols of this kind make
an appearance in a passage of Ibn-Fadlan's account of his trip to the

---

13 Salvén 1923, 85; Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 345; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 60.

14 Erik Salvén (1923, 84-5) distinguished between three types of human representa-
tion in the tapestry. The three figures to the left pertain to the first type.

15 A comprehensive overview of this tradition can be found in Sanmark 2004, 153-71.

Volga Bulgars (Mackintosh-Smith et al. 2014, 154-5) and in stanza 49 of the *Hávámal*, a poem contained in the Poetic Edda, where it reads:

Váðir mínar
Gaf ek velli at
Tveim trémönnum;
Rekkar þat þóttusk,
Er þeir rift höfðu:
Neiss er nökkviðr halr.

My clothes
I gave them in a field to
Two wooden men;
Real persons they seemed
When they received the garbs:
A man is ashamed when naked. (Author's transl.)

As already evidenced, the tapestry was woven in the second half of the thirteenth century, a period in which these beliefs and cultic practices supposedly left space in favour of Christianity. Thus, it can be argued that the weaver might not have had direct knowledge of these cult objects, hence their ambiguous and imprecise depiction. This can also be due to their insertion in an overall Christian object, where it would have been out of place to represent them properly and unmistakably (Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 338). It may be hypothesised that the scope of the weaver was to hint at the existence of these cultic practices and to generically refer to pagan customs that were widespread in the region before the adoption of Christianity without further identification of the figures with specific Norse divinities. In this regard, it might be interesting to compare the three figures on the tapestry with an incision depicting a Samic cultic shrine documented by Samuel Rheen ([1671] 1897, 36), where three anthropomorphic idols with outstretched arms and weapons in their hands are positioned on an elevated podium surrounded by a forest.[16] Regarding the last detail, the three figures on the tapestry also seem to be depicted in an outdoor setting, hinted by some schematic depictions of vegetation around them (Salvén 1923, 84-5). As for their headdresses, scholarship tried to prove their derivation from helmets or crowns. Neither explanation seems to be entirely satisfying, but further research is needed to shed more light on this detail.

---

16 Although Rheen's testimony is dated to 1671, it is not difficult to suppose that idols of this kind stayed the same for several centuries, if not millennia, since their appearance seems similar to specimens dating to the European Bronze and Iron Age.

3   Conclusion: The Tapestry as a Bridge Between Old Norse Religion and Christianity

Despite the break in cultic continuity in Scandinavia caused by the shift to Christianity, at moments slow and gradual, in others painful and brutal, objects such as the Skog tapestry mend the fracture between the pagan past and the Christian present. As already evidenced, the technique employed, the *soumak*, was widespread in Scandinavia since the Migration period and had been used for the textile specimens found in the Oseberg ship burial, dated to the ninth century, one of the most significant finds to our knowledge of Viking art (Graham-Campbell 2021, 56-8). Even the textile format, long and narrow, with two rows of figures interrupted in the middle by a larger representation that occupies both registers, dates back to conventions developed during pagan times (Salvén 1923, 24-8; Hougen 1940, 90). The adoption of Christianity brought numerous alterations in artistic practices, most notably the development of stone buildings and their pictorial and sculptural decoration, along with manuscripts and their related crafts (Bagge 2004, 356-7; Bolvig 2004). However, some artistic productions, such as weaving, maintained their peculiar characteristics for a long time. The technique and decorative schemes employed in this craft stabilised during pre-Christian times and then were lent to new Christian ideas and worship places.

In analysing the Skog tapestry, it could be interesting to incorporate the methodology and the reflections developed by Lilla Kopár in her study of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in England (2012, 137-52). That context presents several points of contact with the Scandinavian environment during the religious shift. Equally to the Skog tapestry, in this case, the symbolic models in place before Christianisation were too effective to be replaced by entirely new ones that had no connection with the previous cultural practices of the region (151). Thus, these concepts had to be reinterpreted and integrated into the new belief system and symbolic language (152). This can be seen especially in the three idols at the left end of the tapestry and in the horde of evil forces attacking the church, led by a three-headed creature, clearly of a malicious nature. Keeping these iconographic schemes and adapting their meaning to the new cultural climate allowed the creation of a bridge between pagan times and a new pan-Christian culture without stripping the local population of their cultural identity (156).

The Skog tapestry works, in fact, as a synthesis of the pagan past and the Christian present, inserting new Christian teachings and practices in an already existing system of beliefs, helping to overcome and comprehend the shift in cultic practices and beliefs by referencing cultural codes already familiar to the population. This works both in a practical sense, employing a technique typical of the

Viking period, and in a spiritual sense, synthesising in an image the struggle between the old Norse spiritual world and the new teaching from mainland Europe. In this sense, the Skog tapestry could be considered a 'dialectical image', as defined by Walter Benjamin (Pesky 2004), since the past and the then-present come together to gather significance one from the other, crystallising a moment of crisis in which the old way of life is dying, and a completely different one is born.

Bibliography

Adams, J.; Holman, K. (eds) (2004). *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*. Turnhout: Brepols. Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 4.
https://doi.org/10.1484/m.tcne-eb.6.09070802050003050100080509

Ahrens, C. (1981). *Frühen Holzkirchen im Nördlichen Europa*. Hamburg: Archäologisches Museum Hamburg; Helms-Museum.

Ahrens, C. (2001). *Die frühen Holzkirchen Europas*, Bd. 1. Stuttgart: Theiss.

Andrén, A.; Jennbert, K.; Raudvere, C. (2006). "Old Norse Religion. Some Problems and Prospects". Andrén, A.; Jennbert, K.; Raudvere, C. (eds), *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives. Origin, Changes, and Interactions = Conference Proceedings* (Lund, 3-7 June 2004). Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 11-15.
https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.919497.4

Anjou, S. (1935). "Uppsalatemplets gudabeläten avbildade på Bonaden från Skog". *Fornvännen*, 30, 257-64.

Axel-Nilsson, G. (1952). "Om bildinnehållet i bonaden från Skog. Ett diskussionsinlägg". *Hälsingerunor*, 10, 7-26.

Bagge, S. (2004). "On the Far Edge of Dry Land: Scandinavian and European Culture in the Middle Ages". Adams, Holman 2004, 355-69.
https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TCNE-EB.3.4120

Barral i Altet, X. (2009). *Contro l'arte romanica? Saggio su un passato reinventato*. Trad. di V. Lucherini. Milano: Jaca book. Di fronte e attraverso 868.

Blindheim, M. (1965). *Norwegian Romanesque Decorative Sculpture*. London: Tiranti.

Bolvig, A. (2004). "The Adaptation of an Established European Visual Language in Denmark from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Centuries". Adams, Holman 2004, 237-51.
https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TCNE-EB.3.4112

Branting, A.; Lindblom, A. (1928). *Medeltida vävnader och broderier i Sverige*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Bringéus, N.A. (1958). *Klockringningsseden i Sverige*. Stockholm: Nordiska Museet. Nordiska Museets Handlingar 50.

Brink, S. (2004). "New Perspectives on the Christianization of Scandinavia and the Organization of the Early Church". Adams, Holman 2004, 163-76.
https://doi.org/10.1484/m.tcne-eb.3.4107

Bugge, G. (1993). *Stavkirker. Chiese lignee medievali in Norvegia*. Milano: Motta.

Collin, M. (1923). "Bildvävnaderna från Över-Hogdal och Skog". *Fornvännen*, 18, 39-59.

DuBois, T.A. (1999). *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. The Middle Ages Series.

Ekhoff, E. (1914-16). *Svenska stavkyrkor*. Stockholm: Cederquist.

Franzén, A.M. (1958). "Odens öga". *Fornvännen*, 53, 195-8.

Franzén, A.M.; Nockert, M. (1992). *Bonaderna från Skog och Överhogdal och andra medeltida väggbeklädnader*. Stockholm: KVA.

Graham-Campbell, J. (2021). *Viking Art*. London: Thames & Hudson. World of Art.

Hougen, B. (1940). "Osebergfunnets billedvev". *Viking. Tidskrift for norrøn arkeologi*, 4, 85-124.

Kopár, L. (2012). *Gods and Settlers. The Iconography of Norse Mythology in Anglo-Scandinavian Sculpture*. Turnhout: Brepols. Studies in the Early Middle Ages 25.
https://doi.org/10.1484/m.sem-eb.5.106277

Lagerlöf, E. (1985). *Medeltida träkyrkor II. Västergötland, Värmland, Närke*. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet. Sveriges kyrkor. Konsthistoriskt inventarium 199.

Lagerlöf, E. (2005). "Gotland och Bysans. Östligt inflytande under vikingatid och tidig medeltid". Janson, H. (ed.), *Från Bysans till Norden. Östliga kyrkoinfluenser under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*. Skellefteå: Artos, 139-52.

Lindqvist, S. (1951). "Några ord om bonaden från Skog". *Fornvännen*, 46, 182-5.

Mackintosh-Smith, T. et al. (eds) (2014). *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga*. New York; London: New York University Press. Library of Arabic Literature 17.
https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479844524.001.0001

Melnikova, E. (2011). "How Christian Were Viking Christians?". *Ruthenica*, suppl., 4, 90-107.

Nisbeth, Å. (1986). *Bildernas predikan. Medeltida kalkmålningar i Sverige*. Stockholm: Gidlunds.

Norrman, L.E. (2005). "Visual Poetry, Weaving Meaning. Micronarratives in the Nordic Oral Tradition". *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 1, 137-62.
https://doi.org/10.1484/j.vms.2.3017468

Pesky, M. (2004). "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images". Ferris, D.S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-98.
https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521793297.010

Rheen, S. [1671] (1897). *En kortt Relation om Lapparnes Lefwerne och Sedher, wijdskiepellser, sampt i många Stycken Grofwe wildfarellser Skrefwin aff Samuele Rheen*. Edited by K.B. Wiklund. Uppsala: Harald Wretman. Bidrag till kännedom om de svenska landsmålen och svenskt folkliv 17:1.

Salvén, E. (1923). *Bonaden från Skog: undersökning av en nordisk bildvävnad från tidig medeltid*. Stockholm: Tisell. Studier från Zornska institutet för nordisk och jämförande konsthistoria vid Stockholms högskola 4.

Salvén, E. (1944). "Sankt Olovs kyrka på Kyrkudden". Humble, N.C. (ed.), *Socknen på Ödmorden. Anteckningar till Skogs sockens historia*. S.l., 204-45.

Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion. A Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia*. Uppsala: University of Uppsala. Occasional Papers in Archaeology 34.

Sawyer, B. (1988). "Scandinavian Conversion Histories". *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 12-13, 46-60.

Simek, R. (1993). s.v. "Pole Gods". *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, Transl. by A. Hall. Cambridge: Brewer.

Sundquist, N. (1977). "Två tidiga 'symbolbilder' av den primära Trefaldighetskyrkan på Uppsala domberg?". *Årsboken Uppland*, 37, 75-95.

Sundquist, N. (1978). "Bonaden från Skog. Till tolkningen av bildfältet med 'hästar' och 'tyglare'". *Årsboken Uppland*, 38, 33-46.

Sundquist, O. (2024). *The Demise of Norse Religion. Dismantling and Defending the Old Order in Viking Age Scandinavia*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111198750

Sylwan, V. (1921). "Om brickband. Ett bidrag till Överhogdals- och Skogstapeternas teknikhistoria". *Fornvännen*, 16, 211-35.

Sylwan, V. (1949). "Bonaden från Skog: till frågan om dess innehåll och datering". *Fornvännen*, 44, 330-51.

Thordeman, B. (1930). "Kyrklig textilkonst i Sverige under åtta århundraden". *Ord och bild*, 30, 1-16.

Thordeman, B. (1948). "Skogtapetens datering". *Fornvännen*, 43, 123-32.

Tornehed, S. (1996). "'Vi vävde i bilder'. Om Skogbonaden och dess upptäckare". *Hälsingerunor*, 54, 58-65.

Winroth, A. (2012). *The Conversion of Scandinavia. Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300178098

Suspending the Crisis: *die Ewige Wippe* in the Eighteenth Century

Ester Giachetti
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   In his 1935 work, Paul Hazard identifies the period between 1680 and 1715 as the occurrence of a crisis in the European consciousness, marked by a transition from a prior belief system to the formulation of new sensitive frameworks for perceiving and interpreting reality. The 'oscillation' of the European mind finds a parallel in the artistic production of the time, notably French, which returns to display the previously disappeared image of the seesaw. Within three principal case studies, this paper questions the eighteenth century representation of the swing as a possible visual metaphor for the suspension of the European mind, deferring the consequences of inaction while preserving the latent potential for a playful renewal.

Keywords   Eighteenth-century art. France. Swing. Hazard. 1715.

Summary   1 Hazard's 'European Crisis' Between 1680 and 1715. – 2 The Suspended Oscillating Thread of the Swing: From Object to Images. – 3 Beyond the Dangers of Inertia: The Renewal of the Artist's Identity. – 4 Conclusion: The *Ewige Wippe*. From the Eighteenth Century to the Contemporary.

1   Hazard's 'European Crisis' Between 1680 and 1715

In his 1935 volume *La crise de la conscience européenne*, translated into English as *The Crisis of the European mind*, French historian Paul Hazard (1878-1944) explores a crisis that emerged in the 'European consciousness' between 1680 and 1715, notably within the

cultural and economic spheres of France. Hazard's thesis addresses the 'European consciousness' not in a geographical strictest sense, but as an intricate psychological construct, composed of prevailing ideas, beliefs, and convictions.

By the late seventeenth century, global exploration and transnational exchanges had intensified, fostering an unprecedented fluidity in economic, social, and intellectual boundaries across Western nations. This newfound and previously unobtainable ability to travel, accompanied by a new flurry of curiosity, lead many of the personalities of the century to embark on far-reaching journeys, also pursuing the teachings promoted to become a "galant homme" (Hazard 1935, 1: 6). According to Hazard, these movements served as catalysts for a shift and a put into relativity of the European mind's own identity. As individuals traversed distant lands and encountered diverse cultures, they began to challenge the entrenched worldview that had previously been perceived as unique and absolute. The 'European mind', through its exposure to the Other, grapples with the relativity of its own values and belief, questioning the once-unassailable singularity of its intellectual and moral framework. These confrontations, Hazard suggests, destabilized the certainties of early modern Europe, setting the stage for a re-evaluation of its identity and bringing a period of transformation. Moreover, Western countries were not shaped only by physical voyages beyond the borders of one's homeland, but also influenced by the forces of global trade and imperial expansion. Through these channels, Europe was infused with objects from distant and foreign worlds.[1] Travel literature achieved remarkable prominence during the century. According to Hazard, among the most significant cultural exchanges of the time was the introduction of stories and fables from the Orient, most notably through the translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* from a Persian manuscript by Antoine Galland. Moreover, different experiences from regions such as China, Persia and Turkey provided proofs that contested the dogma of a singular, homogenous reality. They illuminated the existence of a rich plurality of perspectives, undermining the notion of an absolute or universal truth.

The crisis that Hazard detects, manifests as a profound disequilibrium, a space of stirred tension which rather ended in the construction of new values, founded in a different imaginative and sensitive conscience. Indeed, the second part of Hazard's analysis shifts focus to the 'reconstruction attempts' of the century. The historian interprets how various philosophical currents of the eighteenth century sought

---

1 For recent insights into the exchanges between Western eighteenth art and non-European countries, as well as for the historiography of these global studies, see Nebahat 2015; Étienne 2018; Guichard, Van Damne 2022; Kobi, Smentek 2024; Tillerot 2024.

to restore a degree of stability, to mitigate the pervasive doubts and uncertainties, and to steer European thought away from the extremes of Pyrrhonism, an uncompromising form of skepticism. For instance, Locke's theory tried to reinstate confidence in the significance of the human spirit. The advance of scientific knowledge and the *esprit géométrique*, which was then imparted to ladies and gentlemen of the time through the circulation of manuals, further supported the endeavour towards intellectual renewal. Central to this reconstruction was the work of Isaac Newton, whose theories bestowed a newfound solidity and empirical reliability upon the understanding of natural phenomena. By the century's end, the scientific method provided a framework through which reality – once destabilized by the relativity of values – could acquire the gravitational weight as a proof of a stable and measurable existence. Moreover, from a literary perspective, texts like Fenelon's *The Adventures of Telemachus* (1699) contributed to the pursuit of happiness by advocating for a domain rooted in the earthly realm, lived with tolerance and joy.

The crisis delineates the transition from one intellectual system to a different emotional and cognitive framework. According to Hazard's reconstruction, eighteenth-century consciousness wanders between two poles of thoughts: from stability to change, from the ancient to the modern, from Catholic dogmas to the thoughts of the Protestant North, from the doctrine of divine providence to the secular ideals of progress, towards an intellectual development in the direction of experimental science, Lockean empiricism and Newton's theory, all of which are predicated on a trust in natural law and the empirical study of physical phenomena. The years that capture Hazard's attention mark a period of oscillation between these opposing systems, through the persistence, resistance and abandonment of past and future intellectual and moral forces. In this movement, the European mind discerns reality not as a harmonious integration of ideas, but as a dynamic interplay of contradictory forces which, rather than converging, reveal through their oscillation the terrain for a future resurgence of thought.

Despite its enthusiastic and novelistic tone, Hazard's analysis remains a model for reflecting on these centuries and discerning a moment of transition between historical antitheses. While certain refinements may be warranted – for instance, regarding Hazard's assertion of the eighteenth century's alleged incapacity to produce poetry – one of the essay's most profound contributions lies in its exploration of travel as a catalyst for psychological transformation. Paul Hazard does not recount the mobility adventures in terms of physical trajectory followed; he excavates within them the emergence of a radically altered conception of reality and emotional sensibility,

shaped by encounters with the Other.[2] Finally, the volume itself bears the symptoms of a European crisis, having been written in the looming shadow of rising fascism and authoritarian regimes in the 1930s. On one level, the text grapples with the formally unspoken question of what Europe, as the central figure of the work, profoundly signifies. With a measured optimism, it turns its focus towards the spiritual and intellectual forces that perpetuate the renewal of a shared European consciousness, even amidst its internal fractures. The efforts of otherwise anonymous journalists, translators, publishers, are depicted as essential in promoting and preserving evolving values. At the same time, the volume, published on the heels of Ernst Cassirer *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (1932), engages with the broader question of how to comprehend the intellectual legacy of Europe's eighteenth century and the revolutions that unfolded within the liminal space identified by Hazard. Finally, in Italy, *La crise de la conscience européenne* has been taken on and translated by Giuseppe Ricuperati, who discerned in Hazard's work an original as well as a critical source for recasting "the identity of Italian spaces in terms of circulation, reception, exchange, within a European reality" (Ricuperati 2006, 4).[3]

In addition to the causes that Hazard attributes to the fundamental rupture in the eighteenth century, several other events destabilized the increasingly fragile geopolitical order of the time. This contribution thus adopts a long-chronological frame of the eighteenth century, extending beyond 1715. In France, the collapse of John Law's experiment in bank credit between 1716 and 1720 marked one of the most dramatic steps toward the unveiling of a public debt whose insurmountable gasps in repayment would later be exposed with revolutionary consequences. Law's economic system relied on speculative investments in Louisiana and Est Indies – precisely rooted in the border expansions identified by Hazard, which also lay at the origins of the European colonial market and the transatlantic slave trades. Moreover, within the French context, the nation's ongoing internal conflict against adherents of Jansenist morality, driven by a persistent conservative agenda, ignited a fresh surge of anti-clerical and anti-dogmatic sentiment. Additionally, during the period Hazard examines, particularly between March and April of 1714, the Treaty of Utrecht temporarily halted hostilities in the War of the Spanish Succession.

---

2 Furthermore, the volume showcases an alternative chronology of the eighteenth-century, tracing the roots of the ideas "that appeared revolutionary in 1760" (Hazard 1935, 1: IV), back to the 1680s. This revised periodization resonates with more recent scholarly undertakings, for instance those of Gustave Lanson (1857-1934), who emphasized the intellectual groundwork laid in the French collective consciousness well before the era conventionally attributed to the Enlightenment.

3 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the Author.

2   The Suspended Oscillating Thread of the Swing: From Object to Images

Between 1680 and 1715, and broadly through the years leading up to 1798, the games of the swing and of the seesaw gained a total new popularity within the social habits and courtly amusements of the time. Initially constructed between two trees before their eventual mechanization, they became a core of leisure in private gardens and communal parks. The term coincides in the French language of the eighteenth century with the "escarpolette" described, for example, by the *Dictionnaire universel* di Antoine Furetière, as an

> exercise où on se brandille était assis sur un baston attaché de travers à une corde qui est pendue en quelque lieu haut. Les écolier et les laquais prennent grand plaisir au jeu de l'escarpolette. (Furetière 1690, 1: n.d.)

According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1695, the swing is defined as "une espèce de siège suspendu par des cordes sur lequel on se met pour être poussé et repoussé dans l'air" (Académie française 1695, 233). The *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* states more precisely the object as "un siège ou planchette que l'on suspend par deux cordes, et où l'on se place pour se balancer" (Larousse 1866, 849). The term also comes to designate a state of mind: "*fam.* Tête à l'escarpolette, tête folle; caratère léger, étourdi", to further indicate "*fig.* état. d'indécision" (7). As Larousse (1866) further explains, the mechanism of the swing requires that the same amount of force be applied both to move forward and to return: two opposite extremes are brought together, united by the equal effort of the *joueur*.

As the century progressed, the swing began to draw attention also from the burgeoning field of science. Medical treaties on physical education advocated swinging as a beneficial exercise for alleviating melancholic moods. In Joseph Raulin's *Traité des affections vaporeuses du sexe*, published in 1769, swinging is recommended as an exercise to restore from melancholiac moods, while Samuel Tissot, in his *Gymnastique médicinale et chirurgicale* (1780), echoes this therapeutic advice, further reinforcing the notion that this seemingly innocuous pastime held tangible physical and emotional benefits.

The motif of the oscillating swing emerges not only in the gardens of grand estates, such as the Domaine de Marly built by Louis XIV en route to the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye (see Denis, Klein, Nickler 1990), but also permeates the artistic production of eighteenth-century visual culture. An iconographic survey (Wentzel 1964) of swinging scenes in Western art underscored the disappearance of this image, during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. It first

appears in the genre of grotesques and in prints.[4] Furthermore, initially present in small easel paintings, such images frequently decorate eighteenth-century interiors.[5] In this genre, however, the swing does not function as a literal representation of the popular game, constructed between the trunks of a tree and in the open air. Rather, the image manifests as delicate figures, as acrobats, puttis, playing amid the gracefully suspended lines of finely decorative grotesques, adorning parietal spaces.

In a different way, as thus representing a widespread game in the social customs of the period, the swing becomes from an object to an artistic motif. In France, it achieves full resonance as a reflection of societal custom, particularly within the pictorial genre *fêtes galantes* – a term introduced in 1717 by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris to designate Antoine Watteau (1684-1721)'s *morceau de réception*. Indeed, the motif of the swing circulates fluidly across a variety of media imbuing these works with a dynamic practical mobility.[6] As also Posner stated: "It was at the beginning of the eighteenth century in France that the woman on a swing started to appear regularly in painting" (1982, 75). More specifically, "women swinging are almost the rule [...] and at no time they so much or so brilliantly depicted as in eighteenth-century France" (73). In these depictions, the scene typically portrays a female figure suspended in motion, propelled into oscillations by a male counterpart.[7] Far from a delicate expression of 'galanterie' this imagery is inextricably rooted in a libertine context, catering to a commercialized, sensual, and predominantly male gaze, laden with erotic undertones. As a result, these portrayals have attracted critical attention, particularly regarding the underlying power dynamics and entrenched gender hierarchies they reinforce.[8] A softened interpretation of this oscillation light-hearted play motif needs instead to be reappropriated, in the light of a deeper questioning of

---

4 In 1704, the artist Jacques van Shuppen (1670-1751) exhibited a painting the Parisan Salon, depicting a *Woman on a Swing* (oil on panel, 58 × 43 cm, Chateau de Parentignac, Georges de Lastic collection).

5 For instance, the oil oval panel of Pierre-Jacques Cazez (1676-1754), *La Balançoire* (1732), which decorated the Petit cabinet du Roi in Versailles (Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. 3177).

6 For a recent insight on the mobility of the image in eighteenth century production, derived from the shift in art-historical study from the reception to the production of images as objects: Pullins 2024.

7 See Faroult 2020; 2023. For a recent study at the crossroads of pornographic and visual studies, and for a bibliographical insight on erotic images in the eighteenth century, see Tauzière-Espariat 2022. For another analysis into the erotic body in Rococo space, and the male gaze in eighteenth-century French paintings, see Bryson 1981, 98.

8 For instance, Hubert Robert's watercolor *The Seesaw* (*La Bascule*) eventually forecasts gender and political tensions, although many of its formal aspects remain elusive.

the moral implications of this motif, as well as for the erotic atmosphere in which it unfolds.

In the particular instance of the swing as it emerges from set Watteau's atelier, the object does not fully realize its potential for motions. On the contrary, it remains firmly suspended; the woman appears poised in a state of immobility, with some imminent accident threatening to disrupt the delicate dance of amorous courtship. Within the suspended tension of the courtship moment, the image encapsulates an exuberance of life in stark contrast to the military conflicts just finished, echoing the historical suspension of crisis during the regency of Philippe II d'Orléans (1674-1723) between 1715 and 1723.

In an early known version of the motif, the artist from Valenciennes depicts the image of the *Escarpolette*, likely rendered as an arabesque motif, in a portion now preserved in the Sinebrychoff Art Museum of Helsinki. Rendered in delicate hues and framed by a perspective defined by two tree trunks, extending toward a temple adorned with caryatids, the composition portrays a female figure seated with ease between taut ropes. Behind her, a male figure prepares to initiate the swing's motion. A drawing of the woman, associated with this scene, is conserved as the National Museum of Stockholm.[9] According to the larger part of the artistic historiography,[10] the swing conveys the amorous atmosphere of the composition, its inconstant and erratic movement symbolizing the notion of fickleness traditionally attributed to women's desires in the cultural framework of the eighteenth century (Posner 1982, 76). The inscription beneath the printed image further elucidates the association between the seesaw's oscillation and the fleeting whims characteristic of courtship. Moreover, in its repetitive and wavering motion, the swing is transfigured into an explicit erotic metaphor.

This pleasure activity was depicted by Watteau in several scenes, as *Le Plaisir Pastoral* (Chantilly, Musée Condé) and *Les Agréments de l'été*. In *Les Bergers*, a painting now in Berlin (Grasselli, Rosenberg 1984, 375-8) the woman's is turned. This image was also engraved by François Bucher (1703-1770) in the second volume of the *Figure des différents caractères, de Paysages, et d'Études* (1728). From these early cases, the swing as a symbolic image moves into the intermediality of the eighteenth-century art market practices,[11] also by virtue of the publishing activity promulgated by Jean de Julienne from 1721.[12] Indeed, the motif is extensively re-adopted by his successors such as Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736) (*La balançoire*, 1695-1736,

---

[9] Rosenberg, Prat 1996, cat. 131.

[10] In particular: Posner 1982; Cusset 1999; Faroult 2020; Milam 2006.

[11] For updated scholarship on the subject, see Voghterr et al. 2021; Pullins 2024.

[12] In particular: Dacier 1922; Tillerot 2010.

oil on canvas, 46.3 × 56.5 cm, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, no. PD.22-1977) and Nicolas Lancret (1690-1743) (*L'Escarpolette*, 1735, oil on canvas, 70 × 89 cm, London, Victorian and Albert Museum, no. 515-1882).[13] Within the economic genre of the *fêtes galantes*, the swing generates and amplifies amorous tension between a couple of lovers. In the ephemeral, erotic and social ritual of courting, its movement exemplifies a perpetually excited equilibrium. In the fragmented composition between different images evoking the chronological moments of courting, it summons consequential temporalities.

3 Beyond the Dangers of Inertia: The Renewal of the Artist's Identity

> time she stopped
> going to and fro
> all eyes
> all sides
> high and low
> for another
> another like herself
> [...] another living soul
> (Samuel Beckett, *Rockaby and Other Short Pieces*,
> 1981, 9-10)

In 1980, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) composed a short play titled *Rockaby* for the director Alan Schneider, evoking the motion of rocking an infant back and forth, to calm and soothe them to sleep. The motif of oscillation, and its suspended time is reimagined in the form of a poetic mediation of an elderly woman – akin to a child cradled by a lullaby – seated in a rocking chair. Through the play, the woman's pre-recorded voice recounts fragments of her past. Meanwhile, the woman on the stage utters the word 'still'. This refrain, alongside with the motion, sustains a liminal space of introspective exploration. The rocking chair evokes the rhythm of a cradle: its movement instils reassurance, creating a space of comfort, reminiscent of childhood. By the play's conclusion, the woman fails to synchronize with the pre-recorded voice: the chair ceases its movement, the female voice pronounces the end of life. In Beckett's poem, the rocking motion embodies a rhythm of renewed activity. As long as the voice persists, as long as the woman continues to speak, and as long as the oscillating chair sways, life remains open to potential renewal. Against the dramatic static of inaction, the rocking motion enables the vitality of generational continuity and the ongoing quest for self-identity.

---

13 Posner 1982.

Prominent within the visual imagery of the eighteenth century, the seesaw can be interpreted as a metaphor for the dynamics of personal self-exploration and renewal. The present inquiry thus seeks to probe whether the moral implications of this ostensibly playful motif can be extended beyond its immediate social connotations and understood within the broader framework of Hazard's notion of the eighteenth-century crisis. Such a crisis is conceived as a period of oscillation between opposing forces, wherein the remnants of a prior intellectual or moral position are not fully relinquished but remain in a state of tension with emergent ideas. Moreover, this interpretation avowedly takes into account the situational contributions of modern codes developed since the 1960s. More specifically, among the interpretive lenses through which the symbolic form of the swing can be examined, it remains valid to mention Roger Caillois' (1913-1978) sociology of games and the understanding of the swing as a movement that conceals the intimate motion of an inner tension that opposes stasis and, in an abrupt moment of violent flinching, releases its hidden desire for disorder. As Caillois wrote:

> Ils consistent en une tentative de détruire pour un instant la stabilité de la perception et d'infliger à la conscience ludique une sorte de panique voluptueuse. [...] il s'agit d'accéder à une sorte de spasme, de transe ou d'étourdissement qui anéantit la réalité avec une souveraine brusquerie. (1967, 67-8)

From Caillois's perspective, the act of swinging incites an ephemeral yet exhilarating disruption of sensory perception. As a motion propelled by human agency, the equilibrium and disequilibrium inherent in the swing's arc are actively pursued by the participant. Not a static game, this oscillatory movement functions as a deliberate exertion of willpower in opposition to primal fear, whereby the individual manipulates their own corporeal mass to invoke the euphoric sensation of vertigo. The resultant dizziness, induced by physical exertion, finds its moral analogue in the individual's subconscious yearning for flux and dynamism, symbolizing a latent desire for chaos and destruction. It reveals itself as a sudden, all-consuming frenzy that overtakes both children and adults alike, serving ultimately as an assertion of personal identity and agency:

> Des traitements physiques variés les provoquent: la voltige, la chute ou la projection dans l'espace, la rotation rapide, la glissade, la vitesse [...]. Parallèlement, il existe un vertige d'ordre moral, un emportement qui saisit soudain l'individu. Ce vertige s'apparie volontiers avec le goût normalement réprimé du désordre et de la destruction. Il traduit de formes frustes et brutales de l'affirmation de la personnalité. (1967, 70)

An emblematic painting engages the imaginary of the swing through an artistic consciousness aware of its own underlying crisis. Shifting from secure positions to the disorientation induced by the sense of relativity, the artistic sensibility dissolves the perils of immobility by rediscovering the creative vertigo of ideas.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767-69) was realized under this creative tension. The recent restoration of the painting, undertaken by the Wallace Collection in 2021, has shed new light on the work with technical insight, allowing for the examination of documents pertaining to the work. The consequently recent analysis has advanced new hypotheses about the origin of the painting and identity-laden significance it holds within Fragonard's biographical and artistic trajectory.[14]

When realizing the work, Fragonard was facing difficulties with the Royal Academy and the 1767 Salon.[15] This ultimately led to a formal rupture between the painter and the institutional commissions.[16] However, this separation proved advantageous, as Fragonard consciously sought commissions in a private market. Within this context, the history of *The Swing* intertwines with the artist's tension in demonstrating his ability to fulfil the new patron's desire. Despite the work has been considered as a creation strictly aligned with the libertine preferences of the committee Charles Collé (1709-1783), recent scholarship by Jackall suggests that the patron's expectations failed to be entirely met (Jackal 2024, 456). A divergence occurred as Fragonard metaphorically pulled the string toward a more personal assertion of his artistic identity, thereby diminishing the patron's original intentions. This analysis therefore moves from the motif of the swing, present in Watteau and his followers as a representation of a moment of social pleasure, in the search for a suspension of the tension of desire and a present without destruction. The present interpretation actually moves to identifying how this heightened even formal dynamism, ignited by Fragonard's swing, serves as a catalyst for a reflection on the resilient identity of artistic individuality.

Firstly, the painting can be situated along the social rituals depicted by Watteau, his followers, and later Boucher, all of which engage with the imagery of the oscillating woman as seen through the lens of male erotic desire. However, Fragonard's painting introduces an enhanced degree of verisimilitude into this artistic lineage, primarily due to the inclusion of realistic portraits among the figures, a requirement explicitly stipulated by the patron. While Fragonard adheres to

---

14 The analysis is published in Jackall 2024.

15 See Sheriff 1990; Lajer-Burcharth 2018.

16 See Sheriff 1989; Catala 2002.

many of the compositional elements wanted by Collé, who sought to integrate religious and romantic elements, incorporating recognizable figures into the compositions and maintaining the iconographic codes of the swinging scene, the convergence between Collé's intentions and Fragonard's final work falters when Fragonard deliberately strips the figure initially intended to represent a bishop of all recognizable features. Also the young man on the left, supposed to be the patron, reclines awkwardly on the bare earth. The passivity of the male figure stands out in relation to the women adding a grotesque tone to the image. Furthermore, he reinterprets the traditional iconography of Cupid, drawing from Falconet's (1716-1791) *Seated Cupid* (*L'amour menaçant*, 1757, marble and copper, 185 × 47.5 × 68.5 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, no. BK-1963-101), transforming it into playful and almost grotesque allusions. Fragonard thus intensifies the erotic and mischievous undertones of the work.

This understanding can also be further enriched with Ewa Lajer-Bucharch's analysis of the eroticism expressed by Fragonard's works as more explicit and modern than that of earlier artists.

As Lajer-Burcharth (2018, 180, 181) notes, drawing upon Michel Foucault's history of sexuality (Foucault 1978, 53-73), the eighteenth century witnessed an increase cultural linkage between the 'true self' and sexuality, ultimately culminating to what Lajer-Burcharth describes as "the cultural individuation and personalization of sex" (2018, 180). As a result,

> Fragonard's œuvre formulates a new sexual imaginary in which erotic experience is redefined in individual, privatized, and through physical terms. (181)

More specifically, Fragonard subtly subverts Colle's commission by employing the compositional features of history painting as advocated by the very Academy, which has dismissed his previous work, *Groupe d'enfant dans le ciel* (1767, oil on canvas, 65 × 56 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, no. 144),[17] as insufficiently respectful of the institutional genre. Through his "reliance of citations from established artistic sources, the use of eloquence gesture, and a clear central narrative intended to instruct the viewer" (Jackall 2024, 457), Fragonard demonstrates his capacity to function as a history painter – while Gabriel-François Doyen (1726-1806), who initially declined the commission, has implicitly suggested Fragonard's lower status. Moreover, the artist's signature on the painting, inscribed as 'FPinxit', forecasts a declaration of this artistic individuality.[18]

---

17   Cuzin 1987, 92-3.

18   For the implications of Fragonard's particular signatures, see Guichard 2012.

Fragonard imbued *The Swing* with a degree of satire and melodrama, elements that Collé ultimately considered excessive and unsuitable (Jackall 2024, 545-6). In this divergence from the academic institutions and commissions, the motif of the swing acquires the significant weight of the artist's ambitions. Like a taut thread in the conflict over the misaligned expectations with the patron, the artist himself metaphorically ascends it. *The Swing* thus captures the "momentary fortuity" (Kavanagh 1996, 224) of this tension, balancing between artistic renewal and the patrons' demand. In doing so, Fragonard not only injects new layers of meaning into a narrative market by eroticism, but also reasserts his reinvention, the strength of his 'touch' and pictorial achievements, the refusals of the constraints imposed. Indeed, in considering the formal features of Fragonard's painting, Milam (2015, 192-209) further emphasized the work's significations. Fragonard's painting thus resists to only evoke women's inconsistent desire. The image, which Fragonard represented at least two other times,[19] engages in a visual interplay of distortion that challenges the viewer's perception. It combines the beholder's experience towards the "relativity of vision" (Milam 2006, 66), while simultaneously showcasing a dizzying manipulation of painterly materials. Fragonard thus "transformed emblematic conventions in order to muse on the vertiginous experience occasioned by a playful application of paint" (Milam 2015, 129). In terms of the painter's distinctive 'touch' (Lajer-Burchart 2018, 216), the oscillating image of the swing becomes a sinuous object through which he vividly displays the dynamic movement of his brushwork. As the motif revolves, it undergoes a seamless transformation akin to the reconfigurations of artists operating within a shifting art market. Ultimately, the dizzying choices of Fragonard ultimately proved to be, as the title of the painting suggests, as fortunate coincidences (*hasards heureux*).

During the years concurrent with the challenges faced by Fragonard, another artist incorporated the swing oscillation into a pictorial testament that does not conceal the drama of a present in crisis. Between 1793 and 1797, Giandomenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) decorates his personal countryside villa in Zianigo.[20]

The project is undertaken on his own initiative. The act has been largely recognized as one of a revolutionary freedom (Pedrocco 2000) and it is not much dissimilar to that considered for the history of Fragonard's swing. Indeed, Mariuz's analysis of Giandomenico Tiepolo's frescoes (Mariuz 1971, 81-9) shed light on the artist's ability

---

19 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The See-Saw*, 1750-52, oil on canvas, 120 × 94.5 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, no. 148; and *The Swing*, 1775-80, oil on canvas, 215.9 × 185.5 cm, Washington, National Gallery of Art, no. 1961.9.17.

20 The frescoes are now preserved in Venice, Museo di Ca' Rezzonico.

to renew his own visual language beyond a patronage system which favoured neoclassical tendencies, detracting from the splendours Giandomenico had learned from his father (Mariuz 1971, 87). As the art historian interpreted, the Tiepolo's Pulcinella mocked the pretended vision of history as a series of heros who accomplished sublime events; in his ambiguous figure, between laughing and crying, Pulcinella signified the relativity of every value (81-9). Additionally, in an historical proximity with French Revolution events and their impacts on Venetian political status, Tiepolo animates carnival figures, satyrs, acrobats, as protagonists of a moment of critical destruction of precedent orders. He shapes and embodies in his villa the contemporary surrounding world. The narrative unfolds with a rhythm that expands and contracts, characterized by increasingly lively tonal progressions, culminating in the emergence of the figure of Pulcinella among the depicted characters, a representation that evokes the "popular soul" (85) of mankind. In the final room, Pulcinella mounts a rope tied as a rudimentary swing. Might this scene be interpreted not only within the framework of the grotesque genre to which Tiepolo's fresco is inherently connected, but also as a contemplative reflection by the artist on the nature of his art and the existential condition of humanity?

Indeed, the placing of the swing's image in Giandomenico's house increases its significance. The rope is stretched on the ceiling of the room: the human gaze of the beholder has itself to twirl to endure a movement of vertigo, thus, to explore with a physical movement of the neck and the head the visual motion results of the swing itself. While a 'new world' approaches, this game is imbued with significant resonances with the nobles' figures that Giandomenico's father had made soar in his painted skies, alongside putti and mythical personifications. At present, rather the man wears a mask and can no longer ascend to the heavens. The vertiginous motion of the oscillating game provides a renewed impetus to endure movement. But rather than choosing stasis, in the aphasia of despair for a world in crisis, springing from the void of the scepticism (Mariuz 1971, 86) Pulcinella chooses to continue playing.

4 Conclusion: The *Ewige Wippe*. From the Eighteenth Century to the Contemporary

Giandomenico Tiepolo's satirical characters inhabit a suspended temporality, wherein the light of the past casts impenetrable shadows upon the future and glimpses of potential revolutionary outcomes. The space of history almost dissolves, yet the swing's movement articulates a temporal passage. In the interpretation of this seesawing tension, time assumes the rhythmic cadence of a rope stretched

between two poles: the extreme of stability, its relinquishment, and the opening to a hypothetical new beginning. The symbolic resonance of the swing understood as a moment of ascension relative to one's surroundings, on an elevated position in which one is propelled from one extreme to the other, in suspended air, as part of a broader reflection on both the response of the artist in times of crisis as well as the temporalities of images and their survivals, is also explored by the German cultural art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929). The idea is addressed in Didi-Huberman's study of Warburg's conception of artistic survivals (Didi-Huberman 2002).

Among Warburg's original sketches, *die ewige Wippe* (the perpetual swing) is illustrated (Didi-Huberman 2002, 185, no. 25).[21] The small sketch depicts two figures balanced on a seesaw. At the centre stands a figure and the letter K as in *Kunstler* identifies it as the artist. On either side, the weights of the painter (M as in *Maler*) and the beholders (Z as in *Zuschauer*) sustain the oscillation. Thus interpreted, this *Dynamogram* visually conceptualizes the oscillating temporalities of images, a non-linear rise and fall determined by the engagement between the artist and the audience. The 'perpetual swing' encapsulates a rhythmic conception of time, wherein the artist, like a tightrope walker, channels the energy to resist stasis. Positioned in an elevated yet intermediate state – neither on the ground, nor in the open sky – the artist's movements on the tightrope governs the ascendent and descendant of the two poles (Nicastro 2022, 29). The rocking mechanism installs duration between two reactionary forces, maintaining the movement in perpetual tension.

In accordance with the historical framework advanced by Hazard, this period of crisis in European consciousness is marked by an oscillation between two diametrically opposed conceptual realms. It vacillates between the past and the emergent future, inhabiting both poles simultaneously, and navigating the tensions inherent in these contrasting mentalities. Before progresses in temporality, it lingers in a fleeting yet euphoric experience of equilibrium. The metaphor of the 'perpetual swing' – from its role as an object of cultural fascination inducing a pleasing and salvific vertigo, to its depiction as a recurring visual motif in eighteenth-century French art – encapsulates the convergence of multiple forces. Much like the social resonance of Giandomenico's *Pulcinella*, the swing becomes a possible modern metaphor for the individual's existential pursuit of self-awareness amidst tumultuous conditions. Finally, the artist metaphorically mounts the swing, chose the highest position beneath the ceiling sky. The circular motion of the swing enables a continuous metamorphosis of forms

---

21 The small sketch is taken from Warburg's unpublished project for the *Monistic Psychology of Art*. See Didi-Huberman 2002, 177.

and ideas, defining permanence while suspending escape routes toward a final revolutionary destruction. In a moment of stasis, the swing introduces a moment of radical vitality, realized through acts of "transgressions, subversions, and reversals" (Kavanagh 1996, 237), where the boundaries of thought are tested. In this image, the challenges of thought are negotiated, seeking to resolve conflicts through the interplay of a balance, pleasant in its sensation of suspension and promising continuous exhilaration.

Finally, even in contemporary times, the swing serves as a chosen object not only to challenge hierarchies but also to provide a suspended space between two forces conceived as opposites, waiting oppressive conditions and political tensions. In June 2019, Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello and the *Colectivo Chopeke* constructed the temporary installation entitled *Teeter Totter Wall*. It featured three pink swings along the wall erected in the desert between Juárez and El Paso as part of Trump's anti-migration policy to divide the United Stated with Mexico (Harris 2019; Ludel 2021). Despite some criticisms levelled to the artistic intervention (Pearl 2021), the installation employed the swing as a symbolic medium, engaging with the concept of borders and the opposition of two entities defines as the opposite. It offered a playful solution for addressing tension, using suspension to achieve a balance of forces and envisioning possibilities for renewal.

Documented sources

Académie française (1695). *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française. – Le Grand Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise, dédié au Roy. Seconde édition, reveüe et corrigée de plusieurs fautes, et où l'on a mis dans l'ordre alphabétique les additions qui estoient à la fin de l'édition précédente*, vol. 1. Amsterdam: veuve de Jean Batiste Coignard.

Furetière, A. (1960). *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes, et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts…* 3 vols. La Hayne; Amsterdam: Arnout & Reinier Leers.

Bibliography

Beckett, S. (1981). *Rockaby and Other Short Pieces*. New York: Grove press.

Bryson, N. (1981). *Word and Image. French Painting of the Ancien Régime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Caillois, R. (1967). *Les yeux et les hommes: le masque et le vertige*. Paris: Gallimard.

Catala, S. (2002). *Fragonard. Collections privées*. Paris: Galerie Eric Coatalem.

Cusset, C. (1999). *No Tomorrow. The Ethics of Pleasure in the French Enlightenment*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Cuzin, P.F. (1987). *Jean-Honré Fragonard. Vie et œuvre*. Friburg: Office du Llivre.

Dacier, E. (1922). *Jean de Julienne et les graveurs de Watteau au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Rousseau.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2002). *L'image survivante. L'histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. Paris: Gallimard.

Denis, M.A.; Klein, M.; Nickler, P. (1990). *Divertissements à Marly au temps de Louis XIV (1686-1715)*. Marly-le-Roi: Musée-Promenade de Marly-le-Roi-Louveciennes.

Étienne, N. (2018). "The Trade in Non-European Artefacts in Paris and Versailles (1750-1800)". Savoy, B.; Guichard, C.; Howald, C. (eds), *Acquiring Cultures. Histories of World Art on Western Markets*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 15-30.

Faroult, G. (2020). *L'amour peintre. L'imagerie érotique en France au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Cohen & Cohen.

Faroult, G. (2023). "L'imagerie érotique sous la Régence". Los Llanos, J.; Jardat, U. (éds), *La Régence à Paris (1715-1723) l'aube des lumières*. Paris: Paris Musées, 196-7.

Foucault, M. (1978). *History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Grasselli, M.; Rosenberg, P. (1984). *Watteau 1684-1721*. Paris: ERMN.

Guichard, C. (2012). "Fragonard et les jeux de la signature au XVIIIe siècle". *Revue de l'art*, 117, 65-73.

Guichard, C.; Van Damne, S. (2022). *Les antiquités dépaysées: histoire globale de la culture antiquaire au siècle des Lumières*. Paris: Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme.

Harris, G. (2019). "Anti-Trump Seesaw by Architect Duo Unites Children on Us-Mexico Border". *The Art Newspaper,* July 30. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/07/30/anti-trump-seesaw-by-architect-duo-unites-children-on-us-mexico-border

Hazard, P. (1935). *La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*. 3 vols. Paris: Boivin.

Jackall, Y. (2024). "'The Swing' by Jean-Honoré Fragonard: New Hypotheses". *The Burlington Magazine*, 166, 446-69.

Kavanagh, T. (1996). *Esthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kobi, V.; Smentek, K. (2024). *Networks and Practices of Connoisseurship in the Global Eighteenth Century*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Larousse, P. (1866). *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle: français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique…* 17 vols. Paris: Librairie classique, Larousse et Boyer.

Lajer-Burcharth, E. (2018). *The Painter's Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ludel, W. (2021). "Seesaw Installation at US-Mexico Border Wins Design of the Year Award". *The Art Newspaper*, January 20. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/20/seesaw-installation-at-us-mexico-border-wins-design-of-the-year-award

Mariuz, A. (1971). *Giandomenico Tiepolo*. Venezia: Alfieri.

Milam, J. (2006). *Fragonard's Playful Paintings. Visual Games in Rococo Art*. New York: Manchester University Press.

Milam, J. (2015). "Rococo Representations of Interspecies Sensuality and the Pursuit of Volupté". *The Art Bulletin*, 97(2), 192-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2015.979104

Nebahat, A. (2015). *Artistic Practicies and Cultural Transfert in Early Modern Italy: Essays Dedicated to Dehorah Howard (with Allison Sherman)*. Farnham: Ashgate publishing

Nicastro, C. (2022). *La dialettica del Denkraum in Aby Warburg*. Palermo: Palermo University Press.

Pearl, M. (2021). "The Terrifying Cynicism of Teeter-Totter Wall". *Art in America*, January 21. https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/teeter-totter-wall-1234581905/

Pedrocco, F. (2000). *Satiri, centauri e Pulcinelli. Gli affreschi restaurati di Giandomenico Tiepolo conservati a Ca' Rezzonico*. Venezia: Marsilio.

Posner, D. (1982). "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard". *Art Bulletin*, 64(1), 75-88.

Pullins, D. (2024). *The Mobile Image from Watteau to Boucher*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

Ricuperati, G. (2006). *Frontiere e limiti della ragione*. Torino: Utet.

Rosenberg, P.; Prat, L.-A. (1996). *Antoine Watteau (1694-1721): Catalogue raisonné des dessins*. Paris: Gallimard.

Sheriff, M. (1989). "Love or Money? Rethinking Fragonard". *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19(3), 333-54.

Sheriff, M. (1990). *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tauziède-Espariat, M. (2022). "Hors du rang / Ordurant: le statut de la peinture obscène à Paris au XVIIIe siècle". Kirchner, T.; Raux, S.; Schneider, M. (dirs), *L'art de l'Ancien Régime: Sortir du rang!* Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 103-26.

Tillerot, I. (2010). *Jean de Julienne et les collectionneurs de son temps. Un regard singulier sur le tableau*. Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'homme.

Tillerot, I. (2024). *East Asian Aesthetic and the Space of Painting in the Eighteenth Century*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

Vogtherr, C.M. et al. (2021). *Antoine Watteau – L'art, le marché et l'artisanat d'art*. Munich: Fonds Mercator.

Wentzel, H. (1964). "Jean-Honoré Fragonards 'Schaukel'. Bemerkungen zur Ikonographie der Schaukel in der Bildenden Kunst". *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 26, 187-218.

Home Away From Home
The Crisis and Escape Addressed by Hussein Chalayan's *After Words* Fashion Show

Marta Del Mutolo
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract Fashion often mirrors societal crises, embodying both human finitude and the hunger for renewal. Ernesto De Martino's anthropological perspective highlights how crises challenge cultural continuity. Hussein Chalayan's 2000 collection, *After Words*, exemplifies fashion's power to address such themes, using garments to represent the displacement and survival of war refugees. Chalayan's conceptual approach underscores fashion's potential to provoke thought beyond conventional imagery. By blending creative, anthropological, and sociological insights, fashion can profoundly engage with and reflect on societal upheavals.

Keywords Crisis imagery. Fashion. Anticlimax. Dichotomy. War.

Summary 1 Introduction: Why Fashion Can Relate to Crisis. – 2 Hussein Chalayan's Fashion Show. – 3 Overcoming Desensitization to Crisis Imagery Through Anticlimax. – 4 Conclusions.

1   Introduction: Why Fashion Can Relate to Crisis

The notion of the end of the world is notoriously catastrophic for both single individuals and humanity as a whole, that is to say the social and cultural fabric our species has woven over the centuries of inhabiting this planet. What is particularly interesting about Ernesto De Martino's view on this theme is that his anthropological approach to

the end of the world and the inevitable catastrophe that would cause it diverges from a sympathetic sociological-anthropological analysis of what witnessing one's own end would mean for humanity. Instead, De Martino is concerned with the fear of loss that would accompany the disappearance of the cultural universe constructed by humanity over millennia. From this perspective,

> the ending is simply the risk of being unable to exist in any possible cultural world, the loss of the possibility of being operationally present in the world, the narrowing – to the point of annihilation – of any horizon of worldly operability, the catastrophe of any communal project according to values. (De Martino [1977] 2019, 244)

The end of the world, however, is only the final and most extreme consequence of far more common and less definitive crises from which humanity always manages to recover by reconstructing and revitalizing its cultural society in agreement with new needs. According to De Martino, it is precisely human culture and its products that enable the survival of the human presence, which goes beyond the survival of the individual (which is obviously not guaranteed) and allows for the persistence of a fundamental cultural base for a restart, a new beginning. It is in the crisis, De Martino discusses, that one can find a dichotomous aspect of human nature: its inclination toward finitude and, concurrently, its hunger for existence, or more precisely, humanity's awareness of its own finitude, coupled with its desire for immortality and survival.. This helps to understand how, in the face of every critical conclusion, whether it is severe or not, humans always find a way to move toward a new beginning.[1]

Various cultural fields have addressed themes of crisis, ranging from cinema to literature to visual arts, and beyond. However, it is rare to consider fashion, the art of clothing, as one of these, even though an important parallel can be drawn between fashion and the dichotomous nature of humans just discussed. Fashion, in fact, survives thanks to its dual nature, which consists of its tendency toward social equality and, simultaneously, its need for individual differentiation. As Georg Simmel already wrote in 1910:

---

1 Lombardi Satriani (in Bori et al. 1979, 244) writes: "Human culture in general is the solemn exorcism against this radical risk [of being unable to exist in any way]", while Cases (in Bori et al. 1979, 233) notes: "Even if… the operator and all of humanity were to disappear an instant after the work was completed, this immense material catastrophe can do nothing against the permanence that the work, according to its value, has founded on rock: the actuality of the act… has rendered the world immortal beyond any possible cosmic catastrophe (De Martino 1977) [...] We must 'act' to transform and reverse the catastrophe".

When even one of the two social tendencies that must converge to create fashion – the need for cohesion on the one hand and the need for differentiation on the other – disappears, the creation of fashion will cease, and it will be the end of its reign. ([1910] 2015, 27)

It is important to note that when Georg Simmel refers to the need for cohesion, he is alluding to the *trickle-down* theory, according to which the diffusion of fashion trends is rooted in social relationships, based on the assumption that

fashions are always class fashions, that the fashions of the upper class distinguish themselves from those of the lower class and are abandoned as soon as the latter begins to adopt them. (27)

However, this theory no longer fully aligns with contemporary social structures (there are still those who look up to and are influenced by affluent classes or celebrities, but many groups deliberately choose to go completely against the standards set by higher classes, with the only difference now being economic). An interesting point is that while the *trickle-down* theory is now anachronistic, the dichotomy Simmel identified as fundamental to the existence of fashion is still, and perhaps more than ever, applicable and relevant. In 2013, fashion was once again defined as

simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. Some actors may want to create differences, i.e., act to diverge from what is existing or too common. This is best interpreted as an act of individuality. Others aim to ensure that they too are on the bandwagon, which is to say that fashion may also be seen as an act of collectivity. (Aspers, Godart 2013, 186)

This dichotomous nature of fashion can draw a parallel with the intrinsic dichotomy of mankind and can show how it can relate to that and deeply understand this particular aspect of it, in order to be able to play a full role in addressing crisis themes, engaging with them and exploring their various aspects in the most unconventional ways. In fact, just as human beings continuously seek existential meaning in a world that pushes them towards crisis and transformation, fashion undergoes a similar process. Each time a trend becomes dominant, the necessity to surpass it arises, leading to a kind of death of the old fashion and the rebirth of new styles. In this way, fashion perfectly mirrors the nature of humanity, which, when faced with an ending, always searches for a new beginning. Thus, crisis, whether for the individual or for fashion, becomes an opportunity for renewal.

2 Hussein Chalayan's Fashion Show

One of the most successful examples demonstrating how fashion can address crisis themes is undoubtedly Hussein Chalayan's Fall/Winter prêt-à-porter collection titled *After Words*, presented at London Fashion Week in February 2000.

For this project, the designer began reflecting on the recently ended Bosnian War and the consequences that conflict had on the population, who were forced to abandon their homes to save their lives, facing a personal (and often more than just personal) human and cultural apocalypse before attempting a new beginning elsewhere. The topic resonated personally with the artist, whose Cypriot family had to leave their homeland and move to London due to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. As the designer himself stated:

> This was around 1999, and I was initially inspired by the war in Bosnia and by the people being displaced from their homes. That actually reminded me that we experienced the same thing in Cyprus. I wasn't born then, Cyprus was divided in 1974, but these events happened in the Sixties. I connected it to the idea of a universal upheaval of having to leave your home at the time of war. And what I wanted to do was to look at how you protect your possessions by having them as chair covers or how you can put the objects in a room into the pockets of your clothes and take them with you. So it was about that: carrying your home with you. (Salibian 2020, n.p.)

Therefore, in addressing the theme of forced abandonment of one's home, combined with the dramatic attempt to save as many everyday objects as possible, driven by the sole desire to start anew in a safe place, Chalayan created a performative action designed to provoke clear, painful, yet creative and highly innovative reflection on the plight of war refugees. During the show, he presented a series of garments with a strong Eastern European flavor, evidently designed to be practical in case of conflict or flight, such as coats with pockets large enough to hold a handbag or a weapon, which immediately made the central theme clear. The models walked in a setting reminiscent of an ordinary, modest living room, which featured a shelf, a television, and a table surrounded by four chairs. At the end, four models entered the scene wearing gray slips, and as they approached the chairs, they removed the covers and wore them, as they were cut to serve as garments when needed. The chair frames were folded into rectangular shapes with handles, becoming suitcases. The last model walked down the runway until she reached the table, the only remaining object, and stepped into the center of it, beginning to lift it, revealing an accordion-like structure that, attached to the model's waist, had formed a wooden, conical skirt. The entire

living room, when necessary, could follow its owner in flight.[2] It was a highly moving performance that told of a social tragedy deeply ingrained in the collective imagination, strongly embedded in history and contemporary reality, capable of engaging and provoking reflection in the spectator, who, unexpectedly, during a social event, was hit by a cold shower of awareness. The aim of this intervention was to address the theme of crisis through a fashion show that encapsulated the sense of the finiteness of life as it has always been known by those forced to flee their land and culture, and the hunger for existence that drives the desperate attempt to start over elsewhere.[3] With this show, Chalayan was able to describe and narrate a catastrophic scenario of crisis, conflict, flight, abandonment, hope, and rebirth, accurately presenting the dichotomy that resides in human nature with avant-garde garments that focus on the concept they want to express rather than on wearability or aesthetic appeal. It is, in fact, possible here to speak of conceptuality, because, following what Hazel Clark says, conceptual fashion identifies "the primacy of ideas over appearance" (Clark 2012, 67), an aspect that can certainly be considered close to the art world[4] and that both seek to emphasize, with the aim of moving away from the outdated notion (of which fashion is the most pointed victim) that these fields are primarily tasked with producing beauty,[5] when in fact they evidently possess communicative potential at both the social and political levels, capable of engaging and impacting the viewer, and sometimes even surpassing documentary approaches.

---

2 "Perhaps alluding to the double meaning of *prêt-à-porter* – 'ready to wear' or 'to carry'" (Degen 2016, n.p.).

3 To demonstrate that in times of crisis, the human instinct to preserve one's daily life (as much as possible) as a foundation for rebuilding is inherent, one can refer to a work by Simmel from 1904, where he discusses judicial conflict, though this concept can be extended to the reaction to any form of conflict, "the self-preservation of the personality which so identifies itself with its possessions and its rights that any invasion of them seems to be a destruction of the personality; and the struggle to protect them at the risk of the whole existence is thoroughly consistent" (Simmel 1904, 508).

4 This is certainly not the place to discuss whether fashion can be considered a form of art, a topic on which the debate is particularly heated.

5 "Both the artist and the scientist are driven by the desire to understand, to interpret, and to communicate their understanding to the rest of the world. The artist, let it be trumpeted, is not interested in decoration, and it is only because Non-Artists have worked as though decoration, fatuous reminiscence, and eye titillation were the highest ends of art that many persons still find themselves accepting or rejecting an artwork largely in terms of weather it is beautiful to the eye. Of course art can be beautiful, but not if it seeks beauty as its chief end. So [...] can science be beautiful though no one would suppose that even a mathematician is actuated fundamentally by the goal of beauty" (Nisbet 1962, 69). "We can already see the parallels with fashion, which should not be defined merely as the production of clothes, but also on the basis of fashion's preeminent relationship to time – past, present and future [...] giving it the capacity of a silent reflector of culture and society" (Clark 2012, 68).

3 **Overcoming Desensitization to Crisis Imagery Through Anticlimax**

Documentary images are often used as the primary means of visual dissemination of any event, even the most traumatic ones, such as a conflict or natural disaster. However, these types of images, which are undoubtedly the most raw and truthful available, are not always the ones that leave the greatest impact on the viewer. In contemporary society, there has developed a habit of viewing images of tragedy that have desensitized the eyes of spectators, who, being habitually bombarded with images of devastation and suffering, can no longer be genuinely moved or disturbed by them (partly for self-defense). For this reason, an unexpected and anticlimactic presentation of tragedy is increasingly likely to impress or shock a viewer who needs images anyway to recognize, pinpoint, and manage many external facts, precisely because

> the image is ascribed the ability to fix something that would otherwise be dissolved and scattered in the multiplicity of our experience, or the ability to make visible something we would otherwise avert our gaze from due to its horror. (Angelucci 2018, 69)

After Words can certainly be included in the set of works just described. In a society saturated with images, and even more so with images of violence, Chalayan hides suffering rather than showing it – he only hints at it, suggests it, implies it, making it all the more powerful. During the show, nothing alludes to an ongoing conflict – only the guns bring the mind to violence, but on this occasion, they are used to demonstrate the functionality of a pocket; thus, the audience does not see elements that might make them think of ongoing hostilities, yet as soon as the models wear the furniture, the reason, the context, the suffering becomes clear, each imagined differently, yet felt equally by all. *After Words* does not show the crisis, the tragedy, but compels the mind to think about it, to transport the viewer to a place from which that feeling can no longer be escaped.

Chalayan's fashion show in this sense can be compared to the work of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who in 2008, at the front in Afghanistan, created a series of "action photographs" (Innes 2014, 88) one of which was titled *The Day Nobody Died*. Although this series of photographs was taken in a war zone and thus should document what is happening, they are completely abstract. In the case of the photographers, the theme was not the desire to address a private or familial issue; rather, the desire to create this type of photography was driven by the need to evade American censorship (it was not tolerated that Americans see photos depicting their troops in difficulty or American soldiers killed or injured) and by the desire to criticize traditional photojournalism and the frequent aestheticization

of tragedy. To create their photos, Broomberg and Chanarin used a 50-meter-long, 762-centimeter-wide roll of photographic paper stored in a light-tight box.

> In response to each event that would normally be documented and disseminated by the media [...] we would unroll a 7-meter segment of paper and expose it to the sun for twenty seconds. (Baker 2014)

thus obtaining non-figurative images that only recalled the colors present in the scene of the shot. To understand what is being observed, the title becomes fundamental, the only precise information the artists provide to their audience. In this specific case, the image was created on the fifth day they were at the front, the first day when no one died: "It was a profound pause to the chaos which the artists compare to the calm eye of a storm" (Bucknell 2017, n.p.). Again, the viewer's focus is not on the image itself, which does not accurately tell what it is supposed to convey, but on what the image allows one to infer – specifically here, the improbability in that context of experiencing a situation that is almost taken for granted in peaceful zones: not seeing anyone die during the day. As Bucknell states,

> the viewer has no opportunity to witness and subsequently forget about harrowing documentation of the artists' trip. Instead, they are haunted by its absence. (2017, n.p.)

In both these cases, in the fashion show and in the photos, what captures the attention and strikes the viewer is not the image itself but the tragedy into which the observer is catapulted, the context it evokes, whose fundamental importance is indicated by Mieke Bal (2009, 225), who writes: "contextualization is a constant semiotic activity without which cultural life cannot function". But more importantly, it is precisely the importance of context in reading an image that underpins Didi-Huberman's argument in the first part of his *Images in Spite of All*. In this essay, the author reflects on four images clandestinely taken by a member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz in 1944, depicting piles of bodies killed in the gas chambers. Two of these were taken from inside the gas chamber, allowing the clandestine photographer to focus more carefully, while the other two were taken outside, hastily and in secret, resulting in images that are difficult to understand, except for the trees clearly distinguishable in a very tilted frame. To make these images more easily readable, it was thought to intervene and modify the framing and the alternations of light and shadow so that, at first glance, the subject of the photo would be immediately evident, the moment historically documented. Didi-Huberman vehemently opposes this type of intervention because

in these manipulations, what is eliminated is first of all the story of the circumstances in which they were taken: the clandestinity, the difficulties, and the fear behind this act – so desired – of photographing and bearing witness. Thus, by dissolving their darkness, their truth is eliminated. (Angelucci 2018, 71)

Once again, an indirect, ambiguous image proves to be an excellent ambassador of a message that is understood more clearly than if it were conveyed by an image with an obvious content. This is not to undermine the enormous usefulness of documentary images, but rather to draw attention to how sometimes "if real horror is a source of helplessness for us, horror reflected in the image can be a source of knowledge" (73).

4　Conclusions

Through the analysis conducted in this article, which seeks to explore the connections between images in times of crisis and the world of fashion, it has become evident that the latter can indeed serve as a powerful medium for addressing issues related to disaster. In today's world, marked by environmental, economic, and social crises, both individuals and the fashion industry are continually confronted with the dual pressures of impending collapse and the necessity of reinvention. Fashion, with its inherent dichotomy, balancing between the forces of inclusivity and exclusivity, as well as tradition and innovation, mirrors the human condition, especially in times of crisis. Just as humanity seeks renewal and reinvention in the face of existential threats, fashion too undergoes cycles of death and rebirth, constantly reinventing itself in response to external pressures. This dynamic makes fashion not only a possible reflection of societal anxieties but also a powerful tool for provoking critical reflection on issues ranging from war and displacement to environmental collapse.

The observed parallelism between fashion and human dichotomy can be considered a factor that enables fashion to remain firmly embedded in the present, in the *Zeitgeist*, while continually evolving alongside both society as a whole and the individual human experience. As a fundamental agent of change, a field that undergoes transformation each season while also possessing the ability to observe and interpret human environments, circumstances, and conditions, fashion is uniquely positioned to address, with awareness, the geographic, political, social, and environmental upheavals that humanity periodically encounters.

In conclusion, the intersection of fashion, crisis, and visual representation underscores the potential for addressing human suffering and environmental issues through aesthetic mediums. Fashion

holds the distinctive capacity to reflect and critique social crises by drawing on its inherent dualities. Chalayan's approach, which conceals rather than overtly displays the crisis, encourages deeper reflection and emotional engagement from the viewer, highlighting the importance of balancing artistic expression with authenticity. This example illustrates the potential of fashion as a medium for engaging with critical social and political issues, emphasizing the need for thoughtful, contextually sensitive representations that retain their communicative and empathetic impact without succumbing to mere aestheticization. Fashion, like the work of certain artists and photographers, can challenge viewers to confront the underlying realities of human suffering and survival in ways that are both subtle and profound. This capacity for indirect representation can be particularly effective in an era of visual desensitization, where more explicit images often fail to elicit genuine emotional responses.

However, the role of fashion in addressing crises is not always successful, as illustrated by the case of Chalayan, and it can prove particularly challenging, especially because the balance between artistic expression and authentic representation is delicate, as seen in cases like the Atacama Fashion Week, where an overly stylized representation blurred the line between activism and spectacle, thereby diminishing the urgency of the crucial issues at hand and fostering skepticism among the audience.

It is clear that, while fashion has demonstrated its ability to effectively engage with crises and reveal how it can "become an image of facts" (Coen Nicolini 2005, 5), there remains significant scope for further development of its methodologies and approaches. In this regard, close interdisciplinary collaboration with art historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers could prove invaluable.

Bibliography

Angelucci, D. (2018). "'Immaginario malgrado tutto'. Note su Didi-Huberman". Menduni, E.R.; Marmo, L. (a cura di), *Fotografia e culture visuali del XX secolo*. Roma: Roma Tre e-press, 69-76. https://romatrepress.uniroma3.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/«Immaginario-malgrado-tutto».-Note-su-Didi-Huberman.pdf

Aspers, P.; Godart, F. (2013). "Sociology of Fashion. Order and Change". *Annual Review of Sociology*, 39, 171-92.

Bal, M. (2009). "Leggere l'arte?". Pinotti, A.; Somaini, A. (a cura di), *Teorie dell'immagine. Il dibattito contemporaneo*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina editore, 209-40.

Baker, S. (2014). "Broomberg and Chanarin on *The Day Nobody Died*". Baker, S. (ed.), *Conflict, Time, Photography = Exhibition Catalogue* (26 November 2014-15 March 2015). London: Tate Publishing, 73. https://tinyurl.com/k4bdpyta

Bori, P.C. et al. (1979). "'La Fine del Mondo' di Ernesto De Martino", in "Questioni di confine", *Quaderni Storici*, 14, 40(1), 228-48.

Bucknell, A. (2017). "Against the 'New Normal': How Artists are Responding to Terror and Tragedy with Alternative Media". *Artnet News*, August 29.
https://tinyurl.com/2zsfkyf4

Clark, H. (2012). "Conceptual Fashion". Geczy, A.; Karaminas, V. (eds), *Fashion and Art*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 67-75.

Coen Nicolini, C. (2005). *Recensione «Immagini malgrado tutto»*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.

Degen, N. (2016). "Hussein Chalayan". *Artforum*.
https://www.artforum.com/events/hussein-chalayan-2-187127/

De Martino, E. [1977] (2019). *La fine del mondo. Contributo alle analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. A cura di G. Charuty, D. Fabre e M. Massenzio. Torino: Einaudi.

Innes, R. (2014). "The Day Nobody Died, War Photography, and the Violence of the Image". *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne*, 39(2), 88-99.
https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/racar/2014-v39-n2-racar01624/1027751ar/

Nisbet, R.A. (1962). "Sociology as an Art Form". *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 5(2), 67-74.

Pinotti, A.; Somaini, A. (2016). *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*. Torino: Einaudi.

Salibian, S. (2020). "Seminal Moment: Hussein Chalayan's Fall 2000 'After Words' Show". *Women's Wear Daily*, August 13.
https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/hussein-chalayan-2000-autumn-winter-fashion-show-1203660346/

Simmel, G. (1904). "The Sociology of Conflict I". *American Journal of Sociology*, 9(4), 490-525.

Simmel, G. [1910] (2015). *La moda*. A cura di A.M. Curcio. Milano: Mimesis edizioni.

Through Iconographies: Interpreting Symbols of Bewilderment

Crumbling Polyhedra
Perfection Falling to Pieces

Anna Bernante
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   The representation of regular and irregular solids in perspective is one of the hallmarks of Renaissance visual culture, accompanied by a rediscovery of ancient texts which emphasise the symbolic meaning of the *scientiae mathematicae*. Polyhedra are thought to be a visible representation of the harmony of creation, a mediating tool for approaching the very mind of God. What is the significance, then, of the depiction of crumbling polyhedra, shown as subject to fracture and disintegration? After investigating their meaning within intellectual, philosophical, and theological contexts, we will examine some case studies (paintings and woodcuts) in which specific apocalypses manifest as crumbling polyhedra.

Keywords   Polyhedra. Perspective. Renaissance. Visual culture. Crisis.

Summary   1 Polyhedra as Epitomes of Perfection. – 2 Perfection Falling to Pieces. – 3 The Fragment as Subject, the Fragment as Corollary.

1 Polyhedra as Epitomes of Perfection

The presence of geometrically and visually complex solids in the visual culture of the Renaissance is one of the symptoms of the renewed interest in mathematical studies, encouraged at the end of the fifteenth century by the rediscovery of scientific texts from Antiquity. Euclid's theorems fascinate not only mathematicians and philologists, but society as a whole, as Euclid redefined the innate concepts of beauty and harmony according to geometric-mathematical

principles. Or rather, those who study ancient writings realise that the aesthetic idea inherent in each one surprisingly matches ratios and proportions that can be precisely defined by calculation and drawing. Formalised thousands of years earlier by Greek scholars, these principles are still valid. Their eternity, timelessness and ubiquity drive the perfection of mathematics and geometry to the supreme perfection of God: by studying the *scientiae mathematicae*, in fact, one can approach the divine mind as never before, recognising its traces in the creation. Referring back to ancient philosophy and in particular to Plato (428/7-347 BC), who transited into the Christian era through Neoplatonism, mathematicians pay special attention to the five regular polyhedra. In the *Timaeus* (ca. 355-350 BC) they are associated with the five elements: to fire corresponds the tetrahedron, to earth the cube, to air the octahedron, to water the icosahedron, and to the quintessence of the heavens the dodecahedron, all inscribed in the sphere, which represents the cosmos, "the most perfect of all figures and the most similar to itself" (Plato, *Timaeus*, 33b).[1] These forms are characterised primarily by beauty and "[to] no one [...] could we grant that there are more beautiful visible bodies than these" (53e). For Plato, however, these are not forms that can be visualised in their uniqueness (56c), since they are imperceptible particles, exiled from the world of perception. Having established the meaning and highly symbolic essence of the five solids, it is Euclid (active ca. 300 BC) who provides a geometric description of them, giving substance to Platonic ideas. Euclid's thirteenth book of the *Elements*, in fact, plays a central role for Piero della Francesca, Luca Pacioli, Albrecht Dürer, and Daniele Barbaro, who devote some of their treatises to Platonic polyhedra.

The interest of artists and intellectuals is not limited to the five regular bodies, but investigates also the so-called *corpora irregulata*, or Archimedean solids. The first in antiquity to examine exhaustively these polyhedra is Pappus of Alexandria (ca. 290-c. 350) in the *Mathematical Collections* (ca. 320), in which he credits Archimedes with their discovery. Knowledge of Pappo's text, however, is not attested either in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and the treatises that bring to light the *corpora irregulata* seem to arrive independently at their discovery, manipulating (often by truncation) the five Platonic solids (Field 1997, 244). Artists play a major role here, since – from the late fifteenth century onwards – many of the Archimedean solids come to light thanks to their peculiar visual imagination. It was not until 1619 that the thirteen Archimedean polyhedra received their first mathematically and geometrically complete treatment since Antiquity, when Johannes Kepler described them in

---

[1]   The edition used here is Plato 2003.

Harmonices mundi libri V (242). Until the second half of the sixteenth century, in fact, it was thought that these bodies could be obtained in an infinite number by successive truncations of the five Platonic solids. Therefore, the extent of stereometric representations of the perfect mathematical universe was potentially unlimited.

In the illustrations of the Renaissance treatises, *corpora regularia et irregulata* appear side by side, as an integral part of the intellectual and visual culture of the Renaissance. Their representation becomes the epitome of the geometric-mathematical proficiency of those who depict them and of those who are portrayed with them (Andrews 2022, 13). The portrait **[fig. 1]** of one of the protagonists of the rediscovery of regular and irregular solids, the mathematician Luca Pacioli (ca. 1445-1517), for example, includes a wooden model of the Platonic dodecahedron and a glass rhombicuboctahedron, suspended from the ceiling by a thin thread. However, what fully justifies the widespread interest in these polyhedra is not so much that they symbolise a full appropriation of the sciences per se, but rather their role as concrete visualisations of the perfection of the divine laws that govern reality. This, in fact, is the theme that Pacioli,

the greatest populariser of mathematics at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, insisted upon most, delving into solids in his treatise *De divina proportione* (Venice, Paganino Paganini 1509). Initially conceived, around 1498, as a manuscript work destined for a restricted elite of nobles – Ludovico il Moro, Galeazzo Sanseverino and Pier Soderini – (Dalai Emiliani 1984), the text is then printed some ten years later, testifying to the existence of a wider public interested in the subject. The central theme is the golden section, called "divine" by the author because its characteristics and properties bring it close to those of the Trinity (Pacioli 1956, 20-1). The greater part of the work, however, is dedicated to the regular solids and the "infinite other bodies called dependent" (22), to which the golden ratio is inseparably linked and which, therefore, are also co-participants in the visible representation of the essence of the Divine. It is thanks to the *divina proportio*, in fact, "that so many diversities of solids, both of size and of multitude of bases, and also of figures and forms with a certain irrational symphony between them [are] accorded", producing "the stupendous effects […] [that] are not natural but truly divine" (23). It is essential for the construction of the pentagon, with which "the noblest solid among all the others called dodecahedron" is formed, associated by "divine Plato" with the heavens because it is the only one that can contain within itself all the other regular bodies (43-4). Pacioli frequently and explicitly cites the *Timaeus* as a starting point to corroborate his own intuitions: he intends to bring the symbolic power of the Platonic solids back into vogue, sustaining the topicality of the philosopher's teachings since they allow, through visible forms, the investigation of the invisible, with obvious repercussions on the visual universe of his audience. Like Plato, the mathematician repeatedly emphasises the "sweetest harmony" and the "worthy *convenientia*" (8, 46) of polyhedra, considering their observation and contemplation so important that the treatise is accompanied by a concrete visualisation of the solids in no less than two ways. In fact, he constructs three-dimensional models for the three recipients of the manuscript work, as he recounts in the printed edition,[2] considering them an integral part of the treatise. Pacioli, however, aware of the limited circulation possibilities of stereometric models, decided to also include the corresponding graphic representation in fifty-nine plates by the hand of

---

2 Pacioli 1509, c. 28*v*: "E le forme de dicti corpi materiali bellissime con tutta ligiadria quivi in Milano de mie proprie mani disposi colorite e adorne e forono numero 60 fra regulari e lor dependenti. El simile altre tanti ne disposi per lo patrone S[ignor] Galeazzo Sanseverino in quel luogo. E poi altre tante in Firenze ala ex[celenti]a. del nostro S[ignor] Confalonieri perpetuo P[ier]. Soderino quali al presente in suo palazo se ritrovano".

Leonardo da Vinci,[3] reproduced as woodcuts in the printed editions. The innovative perspective rendering of the three-dimensional models is not only an appendix to the text, but represents "[a] characteristically Renaissance mode of expression in which illustrations can carry information not found elsewhere" (Field 1997, 265). Pacioli exploits the persuasive power of perspectival figures and insists on the symbolic and theological significance of solids, disseminating these concepts not only through printed books. From the 1470s to the 1480s, the mathematician resides in Borgo Sansepolcro, Rome, Perugia, Zara, Naples, Milan, Florence, Pisa, Bologna and Venice, earning him great notoriety. His teachings truly reach everyone, as Pacioli also gives public lectures. This is the case of the inaugural *lectio* of the academic year of the Rialto School held in the church of San Bartolomeo in Venice on 11 August 1508, in the presence of no fewer than five hundred spectators, when he discusses some of the main themes addressed in *De divina proportione* (Benzoni 2014; Black 2013).

His popularity, the reception of his treatises, the close ties with the artistic world and his strong bent for theological-symbolic interpretation are the reasons why *De divina proportione* can be seen as an emblematic text for understanding the reception and role of the *corpora regularia et irregulata* in the Italian Renaissance.

2 Perfection Falling to Pieces

The context outlined above meets the "two limiting demands" placed by Michael Baxandall to establish the actual presence of a connection between ideas and painting:

> First, the science or philosophy invoked must be made to entail fairly directly a particular thing about visual experience and so about possible pictorial character. [...] Secondly, I shall demand some indication that it was conceivable, in the period, for the two universes to be brought into sort of relation. (1986, 76)

All the more significant, therefore, is the voluntary destruction of this "sweetest harmony" (Pacioli 1956, 8) that originates from the contemplation of the perfection of polyhedra. The literature[4] has not

---

3 On the actual authorship by Leonardo of the drawings contained in the two of the three surviving original copies of the manuscripts of the *Compendium de divina proportione* see De Toni 1911; Speziali 1953; Castiglione 1954; Marinoni 1974; Dalai Emiliani 1984; Daly Davis 1996; Field 1997, Nakamura 1997; Ciocci 2009; Ulivi 2009; Bambach 2019, 41.

4 Daly Davis 1980; Richter 1995; Field 1997; Farhat 2004; Andrews 2022.

yet analysed a phenomenon that is part and parcel of what Baxandall (1986, 77) would call a "vulgar" appropriation of the theological-philosophical bearing of the *corpora regularia et irregulata*: the conscious corruption of the flawless geometrical bodies and its powerful symbolic meaning. The representation of crumbling polyhedra cannot disregard this aspect, which characterises this visual representation as an indicator of crisis in the reading of the painting. Choosing to crumble these symbols into pieces, whose representation on a plane in perspective is particularly demanding for artists, uncovers a clue of anxiety and bewilderment, as well as a rupture in the immaculate universe of geometry.

The intention here is not to pursue an exhaustive survey of all Italian Renaissance paintings in which this type of representation appears. By limiting the analysis geographically and chronologically to Northern Italy between the end of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century, we will consider three case studies in which the viewer's attention is intentionally led to the ruined solid, which embodies the rupture of a harmonic system. In consonance with the subject of the painting, the corrupted polyhedron concentrates the ultimate meaning of the work of art or betrays the state of crisis to which the narrative content alludes. In the eyes of the public for whom the painting is intended, visual habit has deposited the perfect image of these forms, as rendered by the inlays of the wooden choirs, and in the memory of most of them the solids are brought back to the geometry and practical mathematics acquired in the widespread abacus schools,[5] depositing themselves – in their standard *facies* – as familiar images. Moreover, the case studies that will be analysed all bear a religious subject, an element that makes even more immediate the connection with the philosophical-theological substratum that we have seen permeating Luca Pacioli's *De divina proportione*. The special combination of mathematics and the Divine is a *topos* of the so-called Renaissance of mathematics (Rose 1975), and it is particularly interesting to investigate the meaning concealed in the denial of the incorruptibility of *certitudo mathematicae scientiae*. We will thus see how the concepts of crisis and rupture combine with sacred history and at the same time carry within them the seed of the hope of rebirth and redemption that the Gospels promise. Each case study will present a different way of corrupting geometrically-connoted solids and testify to the presence of an interest in the symbolic power of these figures, without them becoming the exclusive protagonists of the works – as happens, for example, in the inlays – but as elements which intensify the message of the figurative theme.

---

5 Van Egmond 1980, 13, 32; Baxandall 1986, 107-8; Gamba, Montebelli 1987; De Laurentiis 1995, 97; Ulivi 2008; Trachtenberg 2019, 26.

3 The Fragment as Subject, the Fragment as Corollary

The first case we consider is the *Meditation on the Passion* (ca. 1494-96) **[fig. 2]** by Vittore Carpaccio (1460/6?-1525/6). The panel is characterised by dense symbolism, which unfolds both in the foreground and in the landscape, crowded with animals, buildings, and natural elements. Christ, at the centre, is depicted as a *vir dolorum*, his gaunt yet serene face framed by a transparent halo. His eyes are closed, while his slightly open mouth suggests a state of drowsiness rather than death, which is instead evoked by the blackened stigmata and the dried blood trickling from the wound in the chest. Seated on a throne of sumptuous polychromy, yet in ruins, with the crown of thorns at his feet, he occupies the central third of the painting, flanked by two other figures, both characterised by the same lean and emaciated physique. On the left is Saint Jerome, covered by a simple blue tunic, his left hand placed on his chest in a gesture of penance, and directing his troubled gaze toward the viewer, while a placid lion emerges from behind a weathered pillar. On the right, Saint Job, with only a red loincloth remaining to cover his body worn by age and suffering, lowers his absorbed eyes, in a contemplative and meditative attitude, while pointing with his right index finger to something outside the painting. Although it has been suggested that the work may have been commissioned by the Scuola di San Giobbe, the relatively small format, the intimate and non-narrative subject matter, and the complex web of symbolic elements suggest instead that it was intended for a private devotional context (Humfrey 2022, 151; Sgarbi 1994, 158-60). The patron, likely the one toward whom Saint Job's deictic gesture is directed, could closely examine the details scattered across the surface of the panel, using them to guide his or her meditative path during personal prayer. The attention to detail is extreme and this meticulous treatment invites a thorough examination of all the elements in the painting, legitimising our search for a precise intention on the part of Vittore Carpaccio and his patron in the selection of gestures, animals, and objects. Moreover, this is a non-narrative subject, emphasising the symbolic and mediative nature of the image, designed to foster the concentration of the worshipper.

The theme of fragmentation recurs insistently in the foreground, emerging behind Saint Jerome, framing the entire figure of Christ, and serving as a seat for Saint Job. The pillar and throne, though characterized as ruins, do not stylistically resemble the ancient, but instead suggest comparisons with contemporary architecture: the rich polychromy, the red and grey-blue marble framing, the circular decorative elements bordered in white, and the low-relief decoration on the lower part of the throne recall some of the most distinctive features of Lombardesque architecture like the church of

Figure 2 Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation on the Passion of Christ*. Ca. 1490. Oil and tempera on wood, 70.5 × 86.7 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://tinyurl.com/yp6rxafx

Santa Maria dei Miracoli and the façade of the Scuola Grande di San Marco. Therefore, Carpaccio does not intend to depict pagan architecture in decline, but rather modernity assuming the guise of antiquity via the dignity of the ruin, which, together, crumble in the face of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. This approach, which Lorenzo Pericolo suggests naming a "heterotopia" (2009, 2-4), reveals the level of cultural sophistication of the patron and adds value to the concept of fragmentation employed by the artist. One final element in the foreground is depicted in a state of deterioration: the cube on which Saint Job sits. However, this object differs from the previous architectural elements for several reasons, suggesting that a different interpretation should be applied to this detail. From the late fifteenth century onwards, emphasis is placed on

the visualisation of *corpora regularia et irregulata*, as evidenced by Piero della Francesca's studies in his *Libellus de quinque corporibus regularibus* (Cod. Vat. Urb. Lat. 632), inaugurating a line of research that would continue to be fruitful until at least Daniele Barbaro's *La pratica della perspettiva* (Venice, Camillo and Rutilio Borgominieri, 1568), naturally exerting influence over artists. Carpaccio too insists on the precision used in rendering the stereometric form of the solid, further highlighted by the contrast with the irregular clump of grass and rock under Saint Jerome, a visual counterpart to the Old Testament saint. The uniqueness of the piece is accentuated by the choice of blue, intensified by the contrast with the saint's orange loincloth, which gives the marble block an almost unreal appearance. Carpaccio further emphasises the observer's attention to the cube by placing his signature on the face of the block, where he applies the *cartellino*.[6] The conspicuous inscription in pseudo-Hebrew characters[7] also contributes to drawing attention to the cube, which is bisected by the dark shadow of Saint Job's bent leg. The solid stands out for another aspect of singularity: one of its edges is broken. Unlike the other ruined elements, however, the missing piece is present and perfectly fits, as if the break occurred recently and was not the result of gradual wear over time. As we have previously seen, the cube is the solid Plato associated with the earth because it "has the firmest foundations" (Plato, *Timaeus*, 55e), a characteristic that gives it particular stability. Luca Pacioli also emphasises this aspect, noting that there is nothing "more fixed, constant, and firm than the earth" (1956, 104). In Renaissance thought, if the cube represents the earth, the break in one of its edges carries a strong sense of precarity. This interpretation aligns with the story of Job: a righteous and God-fearing man, he experiences a complete reversal of fortune at the hands of Satan, losing his material possessions, children, and health. Everything that was solid and certain for him is completely swept away, leaving him devoid of any sense of security and stability. Only God can intervene to restore what Job has lost, beyond any logical explanation attempted by him and his friends. Job's meditation is centred on suffering and undeserved evil, much like the suffering endured by Christ,[8] who is the

---

[6] Humfrey 2022, 152 fn. 5.

[7] Evelyn Cohen, along with Andrea Bayer and Dorothy Mahon, confirmed that the text is primarily pseudo-Hebrew, and that only the word 'Israel' can be identified with certainty (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435851).

[8] The interpretation of Job as a prophet of the resurrection is found in Saint Jerome's *Commentarii in Librum Job*, in Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob* (Gregorio Magno 1486, l. I, cap. 1, f. f8*v*), and reappears in the popular devotional text *Le devote meditazioni sopra la passione del nostro Signore Iesu Christo* by Pseudo-Bonaventure (Venice, Hieronymus de Sanctis, 1487) (Mori 1990, 185, 199 fn. 78).

focal point of the painting. The breaking of this chain of anguish, of this deep crisis that touches every person, is possible and lies in the resurrection of Christ: His depiction as the *vir dolorum* foretells salvation from sin and, at the same time, the shared participation of the Son of God in human suffering. The cube is broken, the earth trembles, and the rocks split, as described in the Passion according to Matthew (27:50-2), but from this, God can create a new order, a new life, establishing a renewed harmony.

Carpaccio is also the author of another painting featuring a shattered solid. *The Preparation of Christ's Tomb* (ca. 1505) **[fig. 3]** is a work of equal symbolic complexity and richness in detail, which prominently features, right at the centre, a broken column with an octagonal base. Although it is not a true *corpus regularium*, the attention to columns with regular bases is evident in *De divina proportione*, where they appear not only in the textual discussion (chapters 58-63) but also among the depictions of solids in perspective in the full-page illustrations that conclude the work. Gioia Mori (1990) has extensively discussed the devotional significance of the painting, particularly highlighting the relevance of the figures of Nicodemus and Job for interpreting the image in a soteriological context. According to the author, the column should be interpreted as the stone broken by the insertion of Christ's cross and stained with His blood, a relic venerated in Jerusalem and described in von Breydenbach's *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (183). Regardless of the validity of this interpretation, our interest here lies in the artist's choice to depict this column as a solid in perspective, with evident geometric perfection compared to the other elements in the painting, and at the same time deliberately crumbled and corrupted. Moreover, three-dimensional models of polyhedra are considered as objects of great intrinsic value, which "deserve to be adorned with precious metals and refined gems, rather than humble materials" (Pacioli 1956, 138). Therefore, choosing to break into pieces the fine red marble of the column is even more significant. As in the previous case, the central theme is the meditation on the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, emphasising the apocalyptic nature of the event, as suggested by the human and animal remains surrounding the altar on which lies the Son of God, and the devastated appearance of the landscape. The perfect solid falling to pieces condenses and amplifies a sense of crisis, and Carpaccio places it once again in a highly significant position within the compositional space, using colour to capture the viewer's attention and create internal references within the painting. The presence of both paintings in the collection of Marquis Roberto Canonici, as documented in the 1632 inventory (Menato 2016, 28), suggests that they originally came from the same location, and it is therefore possible that they were commissioned, albeit at different times, by the same person. The patron must undoubtedly have been

Figure 3 Vittore Carpaccio, *The Preparation of Christ's Tomb*. Ca. 1505. Canvas, 145 × 180.5 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, CC BY 4.0. https://id.smb.museum/object/867231/die-grabbereitung-christi

a figure of refined culture, and the presence of a crumbling polyhedron in both works, occupying a key position in the compositional space, is not insignificant.

The final case we consider does not involve a painting but two woodcuts, united by the persistent presence of geometric fragments. Engraved by the enigmatic and prolific Nicoletto Rosex da Modena (active from around 1497 to around 1522)[9] in first decade of the sixteenth century, they depict the Nativity **[figs. 4-5]**.[10] In these scenes,

---

[9] For an in-depth study of the figure of Nicoletto, see Licht 1970; Lüdemann 2007; Waldman 2007; Girondi, Crespi 2011; Bartlett-Rawlings 2019; 2023.

[10] Hind 1970, 118, 127-8. A state of the woodcuts is preserved in the British Museum (1845, 0825.629; 1845, 0825.628).

Figure 4   Nicoletto Rosex da Modena, *Nativity*. Ca. 1500-10. Engraving, 40.5 × 30.5 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, OA. https://tinyurl.com/mrrbztb4

Figure 5   Nicoletto Rosex da Modena, *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Ca. 1500-10. Engraving, 24.9 × 18.3 cm. Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, OA. https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1925.164

the narrative focus is clear: Mary, Joseph, the Child, the ox, the donkey, and the adoring shepherds. The architectural setting is one of the key elements within the composition, dominating over the group of figures. It takes the form of a hybrid between a stable and a modern church, uncovered and reduced to ruins. From this perspective, there are no particularly new or complex elements. However, this widely represented subject is accompanied here by a persistent use of solids as fragments: in the foreground, almost like a still life, incoherent geometric forms pile up, amplifying the sense of precarity expressed by the architectural ruin. In Renaissance visual culture, geometric still life especially inhabits the perfect and unreal space of the wooden *tarsia*, as in Santa Maria in Organo in Verona, the cathedral in Lodi or the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore (Baldasso, Logan 2017, 134), or marble floor decorations, as in the case of the polyhedron at the left portal of the façade in the Basilica di San Marco, traditionally attributed to Paolo Uccello (Field 1997, 289). Expertise in the

practice of perspective is undoubtedly a fundamental prerequisite for the creation of these solids:[11] *intarsiatori*, not by chance, were called *magistri perspectivae* (Ferretti 1982; Haines 2001; Bagatin 2004) and Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca and Carpaccio, artists who frequently depict complex stereometric forms in their work, have been always praised for their skill in perspective drawing. However, until Daniele Barbaro's treatise, published at the end of the 1560s, *corpora regularia et irregulata* do not appear in texts dedicated to perspective and the necessary information to represent them *in perspectiva* often lack (Field 1997, 253, 262, 267, 277, 284, 286, 289). Piero della Francesca does not examine polyhedra in *De prospectiva pingendi*, Pacioli includes them in a treatise dedicated to the supernatural properties of the golden section and even Dürer, who initiates the geometric-perspective virtuosity of the Germanic countries (Richter 1995, 95; Andrews 2022, 17-24), in his *Underweysung der Messung* (Nürnberg, H. Andreae, 1525) only shows the so-called 'net' of the solids and the their inscription in the circle on the plane, emphasising its geometric component rather than its potential as a perspective exercise (Dürer 1525, 142-56; Fara 2008, 126). It is likely, therefore, that, looking at polyhedra, the most immediate connection in the viewer's mind was with its meaning of harmony and superior beauty, rather than with the author's practical ability. In these engravings Nicoletto does not include solids to make a statement about his drawing expertise – as they are not challenging perspective exercises –, but he certainly includes them for another reason. The engraver must have been aware of the visual habit of his public to see geometric still lifes in perfect *tarsie* and deliberately decide to alter them and hence their meaning. Whereas in the previous case studies we encountered individual broken or crumbling polyhedra set within highly symbolic contexts, which acted as protagonists in the pictorial layout, here the solids serve as a backdrop to the theme of the engraving. More distant from a direct relationship with the textual sources of Plato's *Timaeus*, Euclid's *Elements*, and *De divina proportione*, they nonetheless testify to the spread of the same semantic content, simplified and vulgarised. The birth of Christ is the event that most profoundly disrupts human history, ending the world as it was known, which, like the architecture inhabited by the figures, is on the verge of collapse. The solids in the foreground – at the bottom in the first example, at the top in the second – resemble architectural elements but simplify their forms, emphasising their geometric nature. This reduced form exemplifies the deconstruction of the world *sub lege*, whose basic elements become, together, building materials for the era *sub gratia*.

---

11 Vasari [1568] 1966-67, 61; Daly Davis 1980, 188; Field 1997, 283; Daniele 1998, 32; Andrews 2022, 17.

In the cases we have examined, the crumbling polyhedra contribute to amplifying ruptures in history: the solids become almost iconic images, which, through their disintegration, draw the observer's gaze and disorient it. Once mastery over the complex representation of these bodies is achieved, polyhedra are no longer just Platonic ideas but become concretely part of the finite world, subjected to its ephemerality and the corruption of form to which all things are exposed. Artists, therefore, use them as carriers of meaning, even in the opposite sense from the original, reworking their perfect form in an antithetical manner to materialise a crisis. Their destruction, however, as Plato also suggested in the *Timaeus* (53e), is also synonymous with rebirth and the revelation of something other and new, perfectly embodying the original meaning of apocalypse: an unveiling that, though traumatic, allows access to a higher level.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Dürer, A. (1525). *Underweysung der Messung*. Nuremberg: H. Andreae.
Gregorio Magno (1486). *Moralia in Iob*. Firenze: Nicolaus Laurentii.
Pacioli, L. [1498] (1956). *De divina proportione*. Milano: Fontes Ambrosiani.
Pacioli, L. (1509). *De divina proportione*. Venezia: Paganino Paganini.
Plato (2003). *Timeo*. A cura di F. Fronterotta. Milano: Rizzoli.
Vasari, G. [1568] (1966-67). *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*. A cura di R. Bettarini e P. Barocchi. Firenze: S.P.E.S., già Sansoni.

Secondary Sources

Andrews, N. (2022). *The Polyhedrists. Art and Geometry in the Long Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge (MA); London: The MIT Press.
Bagatin, P.L. (2004). *Le pitture lignee di Lorenzo e Cristoforo da Lendinara*. Treviso: Antilia.
Baldasso, R.; Logan, J. (2017). "Between Golden Ratio and Semiperfect Solid: Fra Luca Pacioli and the Portrayal of Mathematical Humanism". Alexander-Skipnes, I. (ed.), *Visual Culture and Mathematics in the Early Modern Period*. New York; London: Routledge, 130-49.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315563435
Bambach, C.C. (2019). *Leonardo Da Vinci Rediscovered, the Making of an Artist: 1452-1500*, vol. 1. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
Bartlett-Rawlings, B. (2019). "Re-envisioning St. Sebastian. Nicoletto da Modena's Reworked Engravings of *St. Sebastian*". *Venezia Arti*, 28, 31-40.
https://doi.org/10.30687/va/2385-2720/2019/05/002
Bartlett-Rawlings, B. (2023). "'Verrai apigliare huna maniera propia per te': Developing Technique and Style in Early Sixteenth-Century Prints – The Case of Nicoletto da Modena". Aresin, M.; Dalla Costa, T. (eds), *Venetian Disegno. New Frontiers c. 1420-1620*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 122-30.

Baxandall, M. (1986). *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Benzoni, G. (2014). "Venezia 11 agosto 1508: mille orecchie per Luca Pacioli". *Studi Veneziani*, 69, 59-326.

Black, E.M. (2013). "La prolusione di Luca Pacioli del 1508 nella chiesa di San Bartolomeo e il contesto intellettuale veneziano". Bonazza, N.; di Lenardo, I.; Guidarelli, G. (a cura di), *La Chiesa di San Bartolomeo e la comunità tedesca a Venezia = Atti del convegno* (Venezia, novembre 2011). Venezia: Marcianum Press, 87-104.

Castiglione, T.R. (1954). "Un prezioso manoscritto del rinascimento in Svizzera. Luca Pacioli e Leonardo da Vinci a Ginevra". *Cenobio*, 3, 271-86.

Ciocci, A. (2009). *Luca Pacioli tra Piero della Francesca e Leonardo*. Sansepolcro: Aboca Museum.

Dalai Emiliani, M. (1984). "Figure rinascimentali dei poliedri platonici: qualche problema di storiografia e autografia". Marani, P.C. (a cura di), *Fra Rinascimento, Manierismo e Realtà. Scritti di storia dell'arte in memoria di Anna Maria Brizio*. Firenze: Giunti Barbèra, 7-16.

Daly Davis, M. (1980). "Carpaccio and the Perspective of Regular Bodies". Dalai Emiliani, M. (a cura di), *La prospettiva rinascimentale. Codificazioni e trasgressioni = Atti del Convegno* (Milano, 11-15 ottobre 1977), vol. 1. Firenze: Centro Di, 183-200.

Daly Davis, M. (1996). "Luca Pacioli, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci: tra 'proporzionalità' e 'prospettiva' nella *Divina proporzione*". Dalai Emiliani, M.; Curzi, V. (a cura di), *Piero della Francesca tra arte e scienza = Atti del Convegno* (Arezzo, 8-11 ottobre; Sansepolcro, 12 ottobre 1992). Venezia: Marsilio, 355-62.

Daniele, U. (1998). "*Urbs asserulis compacta*. Rappresentazione architettonica e simbolismo nelle tarsie marciane". Daniele, U.; Schmidt Arcangeli, C.; Vio, E., *Tarsie lignee della Basilica di San Marco*. Milano: Rizzoli, 11-50.

De Laurentiis, E. (1995). "Il disegno geometrico nei trattati d'abaco del Quattrocento a Firenze". *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti. Classe di Scienze*, 153, 95-125.

De Toni, G.B. (1911). "Intorno il codice sforzesco *De divina proportione* di Luca Pacioli e i disegni geometrici di quest'opera attribuiti a Leonardo da Vinci". De Toni, G.B., *Frammenti vinciani*, vol. 5. Modena: G.T. Vincenzi, 52-79.

Fara, G.M. (2008). *Albrecht Dürer, Institutiones geometricae – Cosimo Bartoli, I Geometrici Elementi di Alberto Durero*. Edizione, saggio introduttivo e note di G.M. Fara. Torino: Aragno Editore.

Farhat, G. (2004). "Contemplations des éléments: l'intelligible en perspective. Barbaro, Jamnitzer, Pacioli, Proclus et la visualization des éléments naturels". Brunon, H.; Mosser, M.; Rabreau, D. (textes recueillis et presentes par), *Les éléments et les metamorphoses de la nature. Imaginaire et symbolique des arts dans la culture européenne du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle = Actes de la conférence* (Bordeaux, 17-21 septembre 1997). Bordeaux: William Blake & Co. Art & arts, 93-109.

Ferretti, M. (1982). "I maestri della prospettiva". Zeri, F. (a cura di), *Storia dell'arte italiana. Parte 3. Situazioni momenti indagini, 11. Forme e modelli*. Torino: Einaudi, 1-200.

Field, J.V. (1997). "Rediscovering the Archimedean Polyhedra: Piero della Francesca, Luca Pacioli, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, Daniele Barbaro and Johannes Kepler". *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 50(3-4), 241-89. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00374595

Gamba, E.; Montebelli, V. (1987). "La matematica abachistica tra ricupero della tradizione e rinnovamento scientifico". *Cultura, scienze e tecniche nella Venezia del Cinquecento. Giovan Battista Benedetti e il suo tempo = Atti del Convegno*

internazionale (Venezia, 3-4 ottobre 1985). Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 169-202.

Girondi, G.; Crespi, M. (2011). "A New Print by Nicoletto da Modena". *Print Quarterly*, 28, 44-5.

Haines, M. (2001). "I'maestri di prospettiva'". Camerota, F. (a cura di), *Nel segno di Masaccio: l'invenzione della prospettiva = Catalogo della mostra* (Firenze, 2001-2002). Firenze: Giunti, 99-106.

Hind, A.M. (1970). *Early Italian Engraving*. Part. 2. Vol. 2. Nedeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint.

Humfrey, P. (2022). "No. 18 Meditation on the Passion of Christ". Humfrey P. (ed.), *Vittore Carpaccio. Master Storyteller of Venice = Exhibition Catalogue* (Washington, 20 November 2022-12 February 2023; Venice, 18 March-18 June 2023). Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 150-2.

Licht, M.M. (1970). "A Book of Drawings by Nicoletto Da Modena". *Master Drawings*, 8(4), 379-87, 432-44.

Lüdemann, P. (2007). "Der Dichter am Grab des Malers: Randbemerkungen zu Nicoletto da Modenas 'Apelles' und Giorgiones 'Tempesta' Bodo Guthmüller zum 70. Geburtstag". *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 68, 255-64.

Marinoni, A. (1974). "Leonardo, Luca Pacioli e il *De ludo geometrico*". *Atti e memorie dell'Accademia Petrarca di lettere, arti e scienze*, 60, 179-205.

Menato, S. (2016). *Per la giovinezza di Carpaccio*. Padova: Up.

Mori, G. (1990). "L''iter salvationis' cristiano nel *Seppellimento di Cristo* di Vittore Carpaccio". *Storia dell'arte*, 69, 164-200.

Nakamura, T. (1997). "Leonardo e Luca Pacioli: lo studio della proporzione". *Bijutsushigaku*, 19, 83-7.

Pericolo, L. (2009). "Heterotopia in the Renaissance: Modern Hybrids as Antiques in Bramante, Cima da Conegliano, and the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*". *The Getty Research Journal*, 1, 1-16.
https://doi.org/10.1086/grj.1.23005362

Richter, F. (1995). *Die Ästhetik Geometrischer Körper in der Renaissance*. Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje.

Rose, P.L. (1975). *The Italian Renaissance of Mathematics: Studies on Humanists and Mathematicians from Petrarch to Galileo*. Genève: Droz.

Sgarbi, V. (1994). *Carpaccio*. Milano: Fabbri.

Speziali, P. (1953). "Léonard de Vinci et la *Divina proportione* de Luca Pacioli". *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 15, 295-305.

Trachtenberg, M. (2019). "Perspective as Artistic Form. Optical Theory and Visual Culture from Giotto to Alberti". Dupré, S. (ed.), *Perspective as Practice. Renaissance Cultures of Optics*. Turnhout: Brepols, 19-70.
https://doi.org/10.1484/m.techne.5.117721

Ulivi, E. (2008). "Scuole d'abaco e insegnamento della matematica". Clericuzio, A.; Ernst, G.; Conforti, M. (a cura di), *Il Rinascimento italiano e l'Europa*. Vol. 5, *Le scienze*. Treviso: Fondazione Cassamarca; Costabissara: Angelo Colla Editore, 403-20.

Ulivi, E. (2009). "Documenti inediti su Luca Pacioli, Piero della Francesca e Leonardo da Vinci, con alcuni autografi". *Bollettino di storia delle scienze matematiche*, 29, 15-160.

Van Egmond, W. (1980). *Practical Mathematics in the Italian Renaissance. A Catalog of Italian Abbacus Manuscripts and Printed Books to 1600*. Firenze: Parenti.

Waldman, L.A. (2007). "Nicoletto da Modena and Giovanni Larciani". *Print Quarterly*, 24(2), 141-5.

Nalini Malani's
The Rebellion of the Dead
Dialectical Images in a Dialectical Exhibition

Maria Novella Tavano
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract   Between 2017 and 2019 a major retrospective was dedicated to Nalini Malani (Karachi, 1946) "artiste pionnère de la performance, de l'art vidéo et de l'installation en Inde"; such exhibition was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and at the Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Focusing on the Italian venue, this short essay questions the possibility of reading the exhibition through the lens of Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image. In order to do so, the main references are Mieke Bal's and Livia Monnet's essays in the Italian catalogue and unpublished documents preserved in the current archives of the Castello di Rivoli.

Keywords   Nalini Malani. Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Centre Pompidou. Dialectical image. Allegorical-palimpsest. Schizo-image.

Summary   1 The Retrospective. – 2 A *Linea Perplexa*. – 3 Making Visible the Invisible. – 4 Materialising the Absence. – 5 Conclusions.

1 The Retrospective

> I'm really looking forward to this project and I am confident that in this format we can really do something exceptional. (Malani, *Letter to Christov-Bakargiev*, 2017[1])

If one should identify an official date marking the beginning of this chapter in the history of exhibitions, titled *The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018*, it would be 31 March 2016. On this date, Bernard Blistène, who was the director of the National Museum of Modern Art – Centre Pompidou at the time, in a letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, then director of the Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, presented a project for a significant retrospective dedicated to the work of Nalini Malani,[2] and proposed

---

1 This e-mail is preserved in the current archive of the Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. It is necessary to thank Federica Lamedica and Sofia Biondi who made it possible to consult these unpublished documents.

2 Nalini Malani was born in Karachi in 1946, her mother was Sikh and her father Theosophist. She lived during a tormented period when millions of people were forced to migrate, because they suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the border after Partition, that in 1947 divided new India and Pakistan. "The trauma of those events and, above all, the acts of violence against women, indelibly marked Malani's artistic imaginary"; "her early life was marked by those times to the degree that her imaginary surfaces as the return of repressed psychic material or appears to be vomited up from the depths of a subconscious filled with horrors and trauma" (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). Such violence, which has been a central theme in Nalani's fifty-year artistic practice, is that of postcolonial history of India, of discrimination against women, and also of the continued exploitation of natural resources. Cf. *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead*, Exhibition Brochure 2018. After travelling on a regular basis to Europe in 1973 she decided to return to India, refusing a "diasporic life in the West" (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). In order to account for the complex figure and œuvre of Nalini Malani, it may be useful to turn to the word that Blistène addresses to Christov-Bakargiev: "Tu connais bien le travail de Nalini Malani, artiste pionnière de l'art vidéo et de la performance dans le monde indien. Cette figure de transition entre l'art moderne et l'art contemporain de son pays nous intéresse tout particulièrement pour son travail critique de la situation politique indienne, nourri d'une iconographie propre à la culture du sous-continent, mais qui s'appuie également sur une tradition artistique et littéraire occidentale" (cf. Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016). As stated by Blistène, Malani's art is deeply political and inspired not only by the archetypes of oriental culture, but also by the myths of ancient Greece and the contemporary theatre and literature she has encountered during her travels in Europe and the United States. Proof of this is the centrality of figures as Medea or Cassandra in her work, and the latest both in the version of the Greek myth and in Christa Wolf's reinterpretation and the fact that Malani derives the very title of this retrospective from a sentence pronounced by Sasportas, a character of 1979 Heiner Müller's play *Der Auftrag: Erinnerung an eine Revolution*. Christov-Bakargiev recognizes in Malani's multifaceted language the desire to oppose fluidity to the definiteness of a single technique; and it is for this reason that her discourse ranges from painting and drawing to photography, experimental theatre and 'video plays'. Another technique that recurs in Malani's work is projection, which she approaches in a very characteristic way, extending its boundaries to create immersive environments and true 'shadow plays'. To do this she uses painted rotating Mylar cylinders (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 38). In fact, according to Blistène it was of paramount importance to

a collaboration "Afin de faire connaître une artiste majeure de la scene indienne [au] public".[3] The reason behind this proposal was "l'important travail de recherche mené per [le] musée [français] dans le cadre de [l'] exposition" *The Rebellion of the Dead*, which led to propose the "projet à une autre institution, dont l'artiste comme le Mnam, appréci[ait] la programmation".[4] This laid the foundation for a major retrospective, Malani's first exhibition in France and Italy, to be held in two different museums, showcasing two different, complementary, selections of works, spanning fifty years of her career (Beccaria 2018, 42).[5]

Despite the profound differences between the two venues, which add to the specificity of this case, the artistic discourse that Malani interweaves is similar.[6] As an illustration, it is noteworthy to mention the way Malani dealt with the ceilings of the two galleries: "the famous

---

also show the public "la façon dont son art utilise de manière très novatrice les nouveau medias, et plus généralement, son travail d'expansion de la surface picturale dans l'espace" (Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016).

3 Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016. It may also be useful to note that the two directors are likely to have discussed this possibility in person during a previous Blistène's visit to Turin.

4 Blistène, *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev*, 2016. The French part of the retrospective, curated by Sophie Duplaix, was held at the Centre Pompidou from 10 October 2017 to 8 January 2018. In occasion of the exhibitions, both Institutions hosted conversations and lectures. The French museum organized the symposium *Memory: Record/Erase* that included Mieke Bal, Claudia Benthien, Andreas Huyssen and Jyotsna Saksena. The talks presented by the Italian venue, discussing violence against women and sponsored by Nicoletta Fiorucci, featured: Mieke Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* (17 September, exhibition opening), Coco Fusco, *The Fact of Violence and its Fictional Renderings* (11 November), Cauleen Smith (28 November), Milovan Farronato, *Tra verità e menzogna: le muse 'inquietanti' di Chiara Fumai – Christov-Bakargiev Su Medea, le madri e la crudeltà* (12 December). Cf. *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018, Presse release* 2017; *On Violence Against Woman, Public Program Press Release* 2018.

5 The uniqueness of this exhibition is described by the artist as follows: "I appreciate it very much that this retrospective is not conventionally static, but when it travelled it had the chance and capacity to change significantly. These changes depended on the history I have with curators, the different political vantage points chosen, the specific architectural setting of both museums, and of course my work in their collection" (Beccaria 2018, 42). The role of the curator is also highlighted by Mieke Bal, who, in the catalogue of the Italian exhibition, emphasizes the crucial responsibility of the curator to ensure the political efficacy of the works on display. This is achieved through the relationships that the curator facilitates between the individual works and between them and the viewers. Bal posits that these relationships are what constitute the essence of the art event (2018, 62). The curator of the second part of the retrospective was Marcella Beccaria who worked along the lines discussed with Christov-Bakargiev and the artist herself, in collaboration with the project manager Chiara Bertola.

6 Interviewed by Beccaria, Malani also explains: "For me the setting has to be immersive, all-encompassing. In both cases the inner walls of the exhibition galleries were like the usual white cube that 'attacked' by painting the majority of them black, grey, or ochre, to set the stage for my works which I see very much in the line of theatre" (Beccaria 2018, 44).

exposed skelton of the bright coloured tube architecture" in Paris, and "the third floor of the Castello building, with its imposing dark brown roof and massive chimney". The artist, in fact, opted to leave them visible, enabling a dialogue with the works on display.[7] In this sense, the unique ceiling of the third floor of the Castello di Rivoli, takes on a particular significance in relation to the meaning of the exhibition, since it "feels like a gigantic upside down stranded wooden ship. A refuge for telling stories while waiting for the deluge to stop" (Beccaria 2018, 44).

The main theme of the Italian part of the exhibition is the revolution of the twenty-first century, which should have "a profoundly feminine character" since, to quote Malani herself, "to overcome these dark times of orthodox masculine world-dominance, we have to learn to listen to the women who have lived before us" (58). The possibility that Malani presents is that a new justice might be achievable.[8] Her point of view is that in order to put an end to such violence – which is, it is worth clarifying, cyclical – [9]and in order to redeem 'the rebellion of the dead', we should think about a new approach to life, bearing in mind Hannah Arendt's words: "To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure" (Arendt 1978, 20).

The *leitmotif* of this whole second part is the figure of Cassandra, to the extent that the Castello became "a haunted space – haunted by the figure, the words, the screams, of the woman who set linear history on its head" (Bal 2018, 64). For Malani, Cassandra represents the positive intuitions of humanity that are set aside in the pursuit of violence, destruction, and death; she embodies everything that has been denied to women throughout history, personifying the unrealized feminine revolution. The artist is in fact convinced that there is a Cassandra in all of us since she is not actually endowed with supernatural powers: "she observes with attention, she memorizes, and this becomes a thought. Thought gives insights. And the insights give the prophecy" (Malani 2018). The artist works on this myth not only because it denies the truth, but also because it testifies to the fact that if we had listened to the women who came before us throughout history, as Hannah Arendt contended, we might have achieved what we commonly call progress (Malani 2018).

---

7 Furthermore, in an e-mail to Christov-Bakargiev dated 2 February 2017, Malani wrote "The selection of works fit very well in the rooms on the third floor of Castello di Rivoli. The spaces, with the giant roof beams and chimney, give it a very special theatrical feeling in which I think my art works fit very well". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria and Chiara Bertola*, 2018.

8 Christov-Bakargiev links Malani's vision with that of Karen Barad, a philosopher and quantum physicist, who imagines a new social, ecological and cosmic justice possible on the basis of the interconnected nature of the universe (2018, 31).

9 As cyclical as the violence suffered by women during the 1947 Partition and the 2002 Gujarat genocide. (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 36).

2 A *Linea Perplexa*

It is therefore not surprising that a distinctive aspect of this exhibition is its non-linear approach to the conventional retrospective journey: a strict chronological sequence is avoided in order to emphasize the recurrent themes and narratives that emerge across the artist's oeuvre, completely subverting the meaning traditionally attributed to the word 'retrospective'.[10] Chronology is indeed a fundamental concern of all historical disciplines, and art history is no exception. However, in this particular case the sense of perplexity is prioritized so that the visitors are left to their own devices, "perhaps confused, but also, and more significantly, empowered", assuming the role of an active agent in constructing their own experience and enhancing their own sense of personal responsibility (Bal 2018, 64). The non-linear character of this exhibition was also reflected in its itinerary, which both in Paris and Rivoli was circular and didn't follow a straight line: visitors could in fact start their visit either to the left or to the right.[11] The significance of such a decision lies once

---

10   Furthermore, *The Rebellion of the Dead* represents a unique retrospective because Malani created new works for both venues, including the 'erasure performance' *City of Desire – Global Parasites* (1992-2018). Cf. *Premessa – Draft* 2017. This is a wall drawing on which Malani's first stop-motion animation film *Dream Houses* (1969), part of the collections of the MoMA in New York since 2018, is projected. Prepared over the course of a week in late spring 2018, it was destroyed on 17 January 2019 with a public erasure performance using peacock feathers, involving young people aged between eight and eighteen, assisted by two young performers (Cavalli 2018-19, 162-5). Throughout the duration of the erasure performance, the declamation of a fifteenth century poem in which Kabir compares a "low cast weaver" to "God [...] the master weaver". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria*, 2018a. Malani wrote further information on the erasure performance in another e-mail addressed to Beccaria. "Six children can be asked to erase as there are six characters in the wall drawing. The taller children will be able to reach the top of the drawing and the younger ones can work on the lower part. The music is about 9 minutes. From the time the music starts the audience can be requested to be silent and the children can slowly start to erase. Please can you explain to the children the music of Kabir, this *Dalit* composer and the significance of understanding the meaning of *Dalit*". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria*, 2018b. Malani's emphasis on sound is evidenced by what she writes in another e-mail about *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*: "The ideal position of the viewer/listener is indicated [...] in relation to the speakers. Sound is a very essential part of this artwork and I have worked on this in detail [...] for hours". Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria e Chiara Bertola*, 2018. The word 'retrospective' takes on added meaning also when one considers that one of Malani's preferred techniques is to paint on the reverse side of translucent backgrounds, a traditional Indian technique that she has appropriated and modified. This art, first used to reproduce erotic scenes and later to depict sacred pictures, was originally imported from China. This method allows not only the superimposition of different images, typical of Malani's new iconographies, but also the possibility for the viewer to reflect on them. Bal also uses such term as an adjective to refer to a characteristic of Malani herself, who remains "acutely retrospective so that cultural amnesia doesn't have a chance to set in" (Bal 2018, 92).

11   In Paris, the central concept was that of a pivoted circularity, staged around the central axis constituted by the work entitled *Remembering Mad Meg* (2007-17), and starting

again in Malani's political view of the recurrence of violence in history. The risk of constructing a straight chronological line is that one might be tempted to relegate these events to the past, thinking that the world has become a better place over time. The convoluted line resulting from this argument is what Bal calls a *Linea Perplexa*, a Latin term which evokes notions of the English word "perplexed" (64).

Indeed, even according to the Bergsonian reading conducted by Bal in the analysis of different works by Malani,[12] the spectator's active involvement in the work serves as the driving force behind its 'creative evolution'. In fact, as Henri Bergson asserted, without comprehension, there can be no change and art cannot be political; it is clear, thus, that if Malani leaves the viewers perplexed, it is because she wants them to be more permeable.[13] This is also the reason why in her exhibition presentation speech, Bal offered visitors advice on how to engage with the works on display, encouraging them "to give the work the time it deserves", and predicting that by the time they left the exhibition, they would undergo a transformation, becoming "a somewhat different" person, since: "time, including the turbulent entanglement of different times in a refusal of chronological simplicity, is a strong element in the way Malani makes paint, pigment, charcoal, moves us into trying to change the world".[14]

---

from the wall drawing *Traces*, which would later be the subject of an erasure performance.

12 In Malani's works, not only the language of narration is identifiable, but also that of the archive. The central theme of multi-temporality – or heterochrony, as Bal calls it – is once again evident. Indeed, while Malani's combination of diverse literary and iconographic sources is inherently narrative, the resulting coherence is lacking. In fact, none of this many figures despite being "appealing to our desire for narrative, [...] satisf[ies] it entirely" (Bal 2018, 98). In other words, these works become "archives *of* narratives" themselves (98). It is the responsibility of the visitor to give a personal order to these images, otherwise the archive remains dead. Nevertheless, Bal specifies that the work does not constitute an archive itself, but rather "it 'does', it *performs* the archival mode" (98; italics in the original). It is worth mentioning, albeit necessarily superficially, that Bal notes that, according to Ernst Van Alphen (2014), the use of the archive can be read as a reappropriation of a tool long used by colonialism, gaining nowadays a further artistic insight due to the advent of digital technologies.

13 Bal recalls that, according the theory of the image developed by Henri Bergson, perception is both a physical "act *of* the body and *for* the body" (Bal 2018, 80; italics in the original). Furthermore, although being inextricably linked to the present, nevertheless perception is also necessarily woven with memory images and Malani's paintings, which exemplify the stylistic possibilities of multi-temporal images, can be considered an authentic exemplification of this principle. In the already mentioned presentation speech, Bal quoted Bergson (1991, 218-19), who stated that "our consciousness [...] prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition". The verb 'prolongs' introduces the theme of duration, which also recurs in Malani's artistic practice: in fact, as the images rotate, they evoke a quasi-cinematic sense of movement. In order to provide further support for her reading, Bal also refers to Gilles Deleuze, who posits that Bergsonian duration is not so much a matter of succession, but rather a state of *coexistence* (Deleuze 1988).

14 Cf. Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* 2018.

3   Making Visible the Invisible

As already stated, Malani is the author of an original language;[15] her work "concerns making visible the invisible,[16] foregrounding the shadows, blending the documentary and the urgent with the mythical and universal" (Christov-Bakargiev 2018, 32). To achieve this, she creates new iconographic gaps. In works such as *In Search of the Vanished Blood* (2012), for example, blood and the color red are completely absent. The blood, which has been forgotten by the passage of time, comes back in the narrative rather than in mere form, in fact: "the signs are able to muster the meaning of blood, precisely because they are not it but tie themselves to it" (Bal 2018, 104). The engine of this operation is time, which, by reiterating the narrative and prolonging the duration of the artistic experience, symbolically transfigures the materiality of blood. However, this is not to say that materiality is relegated to the background, quite the contrary, as all of the artist's research actually tends to that direction: it follows that blood becomes "both metaphor and the real thing" (106). But being both "*comparant* and compared" (106), it ends up undermining the intrinsic laws of metaphor.[17] This is thus where Malani's personal solution to the dilemma of depicting evil and violence begins: when they are shown and, in a sense, repeated, they can become the object of voyeurism and gain new power, while when they are censored, art can lose its purpose. The resistance to evil must certainly begin with art, but the artist cannot be alone in this endeavor. As a work of art is only activated when it is seen, the role of the viewer is fundamental, and in Malani's case, not as an observer, but as a co-protagonist of the work. To her, in fact, "the audience finally makes the work and gives it a new meaning" and even if the responses can be very personal and different, "the experiences […] still remain somewhere in a compendium of memory that we share in our cultural heritage" (Beccaria 2018, 54).[18] This is evident, for example, with the work *The Tables Have Turned* (2008):[19] a

---

15   Cf. *Loan request to Arario Museum* 2018.

16   Malani probably derives this inclination from the fact that she began her artistic practice, at the suggestion of her biology professor, as an illustrator of medical drawings showing anatomical parts and their functioning (Guy 2007).

17   Bal also states that in Malani's work painting is the sister of blood (2018, 106).

18   Beccaria identifies an "archaeological approach" (2018, 54) in this aspect of Malani's work, since everyone can be reflected in the transparent acrylic surfaces she paints. In her interview Malani confirms this intuition. The artist explains that one of the ideas underlying her poetics is that the world is made up of different layers and that humanity is "living in layered Memory Time, where the montages of memory give new configurations and subsequential meanings" (54). This is the reason why Nalini Malani considers herself "as an artist who is an architect of thoughts" (54).

19   *The Tables have Turned* also demonstrates Malani's aforementioned use of characters from Greek mythology and their interpretations. The title is inspired by Christa

shadow play, now in the Castello di Rivoli collection, that acts as the reverse of a camera obscura, in which the spectators also move, contributing to the work. The result is a "temporary togetherness" (Bal 2018, 72) in which the images painted on the rotating cylinders, their shadows and the shadows of the spectators coexist, to further generate an avoidance of the individualising sensation one usually feels in front of a work of art.[20] As a result, the viewers are "visually involved and politically implicated, gathering images to revitalise their own past in the present act of looking" (92). In addition, this work also shows that vision is actually dialogical, as observer and observed object mutually assume the status of both subject and object (74).

4 Materialising the Absence

Another theoretical insight into Malani's work comes from Livia Monnet, who dedicates her essay in the catalogue of the Italian part of the retrospective *"My Flight is my Rebellion" – History, Ghosting and Represencing in Nalini Malani's Video Installations* to the analysis of two works: *Unity in Diversity* (2003) and *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005). The point of her essay is to highlight once again the artist's ability to enact "a radical aesthetic of materialising absence", which Monnet calls "represencing" (2018, 112). It is the "wondering female ghosts and other allegorical figures" to make all this effective, in fact, they

> render visible ideological processes, subjectivities, social groups and representations that have been forgotten, erased, repressed, silenced or covered over in India, as well as the discourses and practices that produced their invisibility. In Malani's video installations, female ghosts haunt the hollow chambers of time and the archives of history, extracting its thoughts, movements, and processes. Through their haunting, they drag what is dark out into the light, represencing, reembodying, and reenacting the horrors of the past in order to render those horrors visible and palpable. (112)

In order to materialize absence, Malani uses two strategies: "allegorical critique and a feminist subaltern critique", and there are two types of images that can enable these two strategies, namely "the

---

Wolf's novel Cassandra. Like the heroine, the voice of the present is not heard, so that only the language of the past is left to describe what is happening in the world, as Cassandra states: "the language of the future has only one sentence left for me: Today I will be killed" (Wolf 1984, 14). Cf. *Draft for the Tables Have Turned Caption* 2018.

20　Bal, *How to Change the World with Pigment* 2018.

allegorical-palimpsest-image and the schizo-image" (Monnet 2018, 112): two variations of the Deleuzian 'time-image'. Therefore, according to Monnet, *Unity in Diversity* epitomizes the allegorical-palimpsest and *Mother India* represents the schizo-image.

Unity in Diversity[21] is an installation, where a single channel video is shown in the reconstruction of a typical Indian middle-class living room. The first image presented is the allegorical painting *Galaxy of Musicians* by Raja Ravi Varma's, dated c. 1884, that soon is violently covered by different layers of white and black paint, and later overlaid with crude footage of an abortion procedure. However, if this work can really be defined as a palimpsest, in the etymological sense of the word, the primary role played by sound cannot be overlooked. In fact, throughout the video, the testimonies in Hindi of the most violent episodes of the Gujarat massacre of 2002, as well as a child's voice reciting the role of the Angel of Despair, a character from the play *Der Auftrag: Erinnerung an eine Revolution*, by Heiner Müller[22] are played. According to Monnet, allegory has a significance for Malani similar to that theorized by Walter Benjamin, who posited that the "allegory evokes ruin, decay and the total subversion of hierarchies" (Monnet 2018, 114).[23] *Unity in diversity*

> is a dialectical image; a shocking flash that not only condenses disparate fragments of the past, present, and future but also has the capacity to shatter and conserve at the same time. (114)

It follows that the images in Malani's video installations, as dialectical images, are capable of bringing "historic discursive processes

---

21 *Unity in Diversity* was not shown in Castello di Rivoli.

22 "I am the knife with which the dead man cracks open his coffin. I am the one who will be. My flight is the rebellion my sky the abyss of tomorrow" says the Mülleran Angel. It is worth noting that in this case, Malani recasts "the Child Angel as a feminist Angel of History and a visionary Angel of Revolution" (Monnet 2018, 116), indeed such a figure cannot but evoke Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. In Malani's work, one of the musicians, who exits from Varma's painting and reaches Gujarat, becomes herself an Angel of History. Knowing evil and suffering and experiencing the subordinate fate of women, she finally takes on the role of a shaman "voicing the narratives of the dead" (Monnet 2018, 120). Nevertheless, according to Monnet, there is a difference between Malani's angel and Benjamin's, because the former's mission is not redemption but rebellion. That's why, while showing us horrific acts of violence, the film leaves open the possibility of a new future. "As unlikely as it may seems [...], *Unity* is a work that speaks of hope – the possibility of a sweeping revolution and a planetary uprising that may either provoke total destruction [...] or the dawn of new era. Unity's vision of the future evokes an all-encompassing revolution that will obtain justice for exploited subalterns and change the conditions of life itself" (Monnet 2018, 122).

23 See Benjamin [1928] 2009. Monnet also mentions Craig Owens (1980), Michelle Langford (2006) and Bliss Cua Lim (2009) who also analyzed the relationship between allegory and palimpsest.

and practices into view" (114). Furthermore, by using "both virtual and historical assemblages" (114) what is materialized are the historical processes that would otherwise have been forgotten (112).

Instead, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*[24] is a schizophrenic image, presenting pictures from very different contexts. Films celebrating India's independence and images of the mass migration imposed by Partition alternate on the screens with Gandhi's archival footage and scenes either inspired by Bollywood or created by the artist herself. The photograph of Gandhi's corpse is cyclically overlaid with portraits of women and photos of the anti-Muslim massacre in Gujarat, while a woman's voice laments that she is dead "at the border of the new nations, carrying a bloody rag as [her] flag" (124).[25] The subject of the work is the burden of violence and pain inherited as a consequence of Partition, which particularly affected women. Malani appropriates the words of Indian anthropologist Veena Das, who argues that the Indian nationalist project was actually based on the appropriation of women's bodies. According to Monnet, *Mother India*, with its various references, "can also be read as a paradigmatic allegorical-palimpsest-image", since "Malani presents India [...] both as a literal palimpsest [...] and a metaphorical palimpsest" (124). The professor focuses on what image "*does*" (Monnet 2018, 128; italics in the original), in particular mediating and enabling "a dismantling of subjectivating machines [...], allowing for the tracing of a line of light" (128). Despite the fact that these machines, which constitute identitary subjectivities, are instruments of oppression, nevertheless they "provide crucial clues and routes for the eventual realization of universal history and the permanent revolution" (128). Thus, this work can indeed be recognized as having revolutionary potential, because "in spite of its gloomy atmosphere [...] it anticipates the advent of a 'new earth' and

---

[24] This work, that was first exhibited in 2005 at a collateral event of the 51st Biennale di Venezia, in the exhibition *iCON: India Contemporary*, curated by Julie Evans, Gordon Knox and Peter Nagy in the refectory of the former Convent SS. Cosma and Damiano in Giudecca, is a five-channel audiovisual installation. Cf. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/42020/icon-india-contemporary/. However, for the first time since the work was created, in Rivoli it was projected on a single continuous wall 25 meters long (Cavalli 2018-19, 174).

[25] This figure is again a phantasmal image, embodying the "unmourned and wandering ghost" of an oppressed, so that the work highlights the links between nationalism and sexuality in colonial and post-colonial India and "articulates a subversive, allegorical genealogy" (128). It becomes a metaphor for the double death suffered by women victims of violence on the borders of the new nations that Veena Das also discussed: the 'living death' of the violations and the 'social death' of no longer being accepted by their kin due to such violations. The title of Malani's work itself echoes Das's essay *Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (1997).

'the people to come'" (130).[26] This can occur thanks to a whole new "topology of the shared pain", in fact "here, pain is shared through the 'body' of the image and effectively felt in our/the viewers' bodies" (132). It follows that once again this work, far from being a mere political and social critique, is "indicative of how art can and must change the world" (134). This is also the reason why Bal argues that what this image encourage is not an "overwhelming immersion", but rather an "*acrivating*" one (2018, 90; italics in the original).

5　Conclusions

To conclude this brief contribution, it may be useful to refer to the words of Malani herself, who, when asked by Beccaria about the possibility of realising WOMANTIME,[27] replied:

> I am an artist, so what I can do is make art and as such I believe in the strength of progressive art and culture. […] I am not a doomsday oracle, nor am I like what Müller famously once said: […] "a *dope* dealer nor a *hope* dealer." But in the very negativism of my art there is […] arguably both humanism and hope for the future. (Beccaria 2018, 58; italics in the original)

Malani is not a doomsday oracle. Malani – as Beccaria says – is like Cassandra, because through her painful images she opens up the possibility of a different, better future.[28] This analogy takes on a whole new meaning when one considers Malani's own comments on the great work done to organize this second part of her 'retrospective', when she wrote:

> I am sure that […] we should be very pleased with what we have achieved. The contents of the catalogue will have a long academic life and the exhibition looks monumental.[29]

---

26 Here Monnet refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2009) and derives these last concepts from Deleuze.

27 *WOMANTIME* is a concept Malani developed and explored on the occasion of her solo exhibition in Bombay in 2014. The concept does not refer to the feminine *tout court* but imagines a new way of living and organizing life in an "ecological sense" (Beccaria 2018, 59; Malani, Doshi 2013; capital letters are the artist's expression).

28 Cf. *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018, Press release* 2017.

29 Cf. Malani, *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria e Chiara Bertola*, 2018.

Bibliography

Arendt, H. (1978). *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Bal, M. (2018). "Linea Recta, Linea Perplexa: Moving through Entangled Time with Nalini Malani". Beccaria, M. (ed.), *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition Catalogue* (Rivoli, 18 September 2018-16 January 2019). Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 60-109.

Bal, M. *How to Change the World with Pigment*, text of the speech delivered at Castello di Rivoli (2018), AcCdR, N. Malani 2018 Mostra – Fatture Public program, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Beccaria, M. (2018). "To be Alive Means to Live in a World that Preceded Ons's Own Arrival and Will Survive One's Own Departure". Beccaria, M. (ed.), *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition Catalogue* (Rivoli, 18 September 2018-6 January 2019). Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 40-58.

Benjamin, W. [1928] (2009). *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Transl. by J. Osborne. London: Verso.

Bergson, H. [1896] (1991). *Matter and Memory*. Transl. by N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books.

Blistène, B. *Letter to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev* (2016), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 18 settembre-6 gennaio 2019 – Allestimento 2016-19, 31 March, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Cavalli, M. (2018-19). *"La rivolta dei morti". Analisi della produzione artistica di Nalini Malani dagli esordi alla retrospettiva al Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea* [Master Dissertation]. Venice: Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Christov-Bakargiev, C. (2018). "Indeterminacy in the Art of Nalini Malani: A Poetic Breaching of Rules". Beccaria, M. (ed.), *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition Catalogue* (Rivoli, 18 September 2018-6 January 2019). Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 28-39.

Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F. [1972] (2009). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Transl. by R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane. New York: Penguin Books.

Draft for the Tables Have Turned Caption (2018), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 2018 – Catalogo 2, 23 January, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Guy, J. (2007). "Nalini Malani in Conversation". *Circa Art Magazine*, September 27. https://www.jennieguy.com/nalini-malani-in-conversation-with-jennie-guy/

iCon: India Contemporary (2005). https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/42020/icon-india-contemporary/

Loan request to Arario Museum (2018), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 2018 – Catalogo 2, 23 January, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N. (2018). "Preface". Beccaria, M. (ed.), *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition Catalogue* (Rivoli, 18 September 2018-6 January 2019). Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, s.p.

Malani, N. *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev* (2017a), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 18 settembre-6 gennaio 2019 – Allestimento, 2016-19, 31 March, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N. *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev* (2017b), AcCdR, N. Malani 2018 Mostra – Fatture Public program, 2018, 27 March, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N. *E-mail to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Marcella Beccaria and Chiara Bertola* (2018), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 18 settembre-6 gennaio 2019 – Allestimento, 2016-19, 16 September, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N. *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria* (2018a), AcCdR, N. Malani 2018 Mostra – Fatture Public program, 2018, 23 November, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N. *E-mail to Marcella Beccaria* (2018b), AcCdR, N. Malani 2018 Mostra – Fatture Public program, 2018, 28 November, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Malani, N.; Doshi, A. (2013). *WOMANTIME = Exhibition Catalogue* (Mumbay, 9 February-15 March 2013). Mumbay: Art Musings.

Monnet, L. (2018). "'My Flight is my Rebellion' – History, Ghosting and Represencing in Nalini Malani's Video Installations". Beccaria, M. (ed.), *Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition Catalogue* (Rivoli, 18 September 2018-6 January 2019). Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 110-35.

Müller, H. [1979] (2001). *The Mission: Memory of a Revolution*. Transl. by D. Redmond. https://www.academia.edu/39708442/Plays_poems_and_prose_by_Heiner_Mueller

Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II = Exhibition brochure (Rivoli, 18 settembre 2018-6 gennaio 2019), Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Nalini Malani – The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018 = Press release (2017), AcCdR, N. Malani 2018 Mostra – Fatture Public program, 2018, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

On Violence Against Woman, Public Program Press Release (2018), AcCdR, Mostre – Nalini Malani 18 settembre-6 gennaio 2019 – Allestimento 2018, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Premessa – Draft (2017), AcCdR, Nalini Malani 2018 – Catalogo 1, Rivoli, Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'arte contemporanea.

Wolf, C. [1983] (1984). *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. Transl. by J.W. Heurck. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux.

Coda

Apocalypsis cum figuris, today

For the first time in history, the apocalypse is happening live. It is an archetypal, primordial figure that has permeated the Western imagination. Something epochal is happening. Perhaps Mariupol, Bucha, Gaza represent the most faithful and ruthless 'adaptations' of the distant prophecy of John. We sit in front of our televisions, stare at our computers and smartphones. And, in real time, we become spectators of an apocalypse that generates in us different emotional states: horror and compassion, but also helplessness and the urge to push the pain to the margins of daily life, depriving traumas of all traumatic charge.

We are witnessing a senseless yet real war, dreadful, above all hyper-visible, composed of images that make any commentary fragile: we are forced to seal our lips before the 'unverifiable'.

These are omens of the decline of the West. Frames of a bloody circus. Reports from a waste land, fatally wounded, with no place for God or redemption. Glimpses of an escalating alarm casting ominous shadows over us: nuclear war and the extinction of the last human being.

The revival of a medieval darkness, surfacing in the heart of the most advanced, digital modernity. In the foreground, scenes of the senseless invasion by Russian troops. In the background, the deafening noise of bombs that continue to erase life. A calvary. A barbaric massacre.

Destroyed cities, devastated schools and kindergartens, wrecked hospitals. Mass graves. Mass rapes. Children killed without mercy. Executed men. Ruins, blood, bodies.

Death, death, only death.

In this theater of Evil, there is something perversely spectacular. Unlike in the Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, now we do not participate in the horror of the Ukrainian and Israeli battlegrounds through the eyes of a few brave witnesses alone.

The media (such as television, internet, social network) deliver to us every minute an overwhelming flow of images impossible to falsify or manipulate, mainly captured by reporters. These are images that ask us to be reassembled into a sort of mental film.

This is what has been happening live every day for months, a few thousand kilometers from the safety of our daily lives. Apocalypse on earth. Something which Banksy echoes.

2023. Borodyanka, 50 km from Kyiv. No sign of life. Death was omnipresent. The landscape, littered with ruins, resembled relics of an apocalypse. A few days ago, in this end-of-history scene, some murals emerged, like visual stumbles.

Black-and-white frames of a single sequence. A young judoka takes down a man, an evident reference to Russian President Putin, suspended by the International Judo Federation after the invasion of Ukraine. And then: on some marble blocks, two children play on a seesaw that is actually a *cheval de frise*, a defensive obstacle used by Ukrainians. Finally, a ballerina dancing on a boulder, performing with a ribbon; and a young girl attempting an acrobatic move amid the ruins of a skyscraper.

Photographer Ed Ram shared these images on his social media, asking: "I wonder if it might be a #Banksy or an imitation?".

Finally, on his Instagram profile, the street artist who has made anonymity their authority claimed these guerilla writings as their own, additional chapters of the dramaturgy they have been arranging for years, committed to intertwining art and testimony.

Until then, faced with the absurd, real, and dreadful trauma of Ukraine, this original, special correspondent for the social and political emergencies of our time had remained silent. Not as a form of desertion, but as an acknowledgment of his own helplessness.

Months after the conflict began, Banksy chose to go to Ukraine. And, as he had done in the West Bank, he left his clandestine iconography on fragments of bombed architecture, treading a line between journalism, estrangement, and dark humor. Inverted tales: the chronicle is viewed with a skewed gaze. In a dreadful scenario of war, here are some naive, free characters. They are unconscious heroes who oppose Evil with the power of imagination, the strength of hope.

This is Banksy's ethical, aesthetic, and political program, as stated by himself in the tweet he pinned in his account: "Our generation thinks it's *cool* to not care. It's not. Effort is *cool*. Caring is *cool*. Staying loyal is *cool*. Try it out".

<div align="right">

Vincenzo Trione
IULM University of Milan, Italy

</div>

Quaderni di *Venezia Arti*

1. Piva, Chiara (a cura di) (2014). *Il restauro come atto critico. Venezia e il suo territorio*.

2. Redaelli, Maria; Spampinato, Beatrice; Timonina, Alexandra (eds) (2019). *Testo e immagine. Un dialogo dall'antichità al contemporaneo. Текст и образ. От античности к современности*.

3. Barozzi, Laura (2020). "*Italienisches Capriccio" di Glauco Pellegrini. Analisi e temi di un film sul teatro*.

4. Argan, Giovanni; Redaelli, Maria; Timonina, Alexandra (eds) (2020). *Taking and Denying. Challenging Canons in Arts and Philosophy*.

5. Argan, Giovanni; Gigante, Lorenzo; Kozachenko-Stravinsky, Anastasia (eds) (2022). *Behind the Image, Beyond the Image*.

6. Gelmi, Giulia; Kozachenko-Stravinsky, Anastasia; Nalesso, Andrea (eds) (2022). *Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy*.

7. Bertoli, Angelica; Gelmi, Giulia; Missagia, Andrea; Tavano, Maria Novella (eds) (2023). *A Driving Force: On the Rhetoric of Images and Power*.

In my End is my Beginning. Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis includes a selection of papers presented at the 6th Postgraduate International Conference organized at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Venice, 9-11 October 2024). Drawing from philosopher Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image, this volume develops the role of images of any sort of media which embody a turning point that allows a comprehensive narration of a specific rupture in history. 'Apocalypse' and 'Crisis' do not configure as mere descriptions of an ending, but rather open additional scenarios toward new historical and personal beginnings, here explored through the philosophical, artistic, historical, literary, or sociopolitical lens.

Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia