

Art and Human Practice in the Image Society

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1. *Introductory remarks*

Horst Bredekamp, a great art and image historian, recently noted that "people have not engaged in such a powerful reflection on the status of images as in the past four decades since the Byzantine iconoclasm and radical Protestant movements."¹ This is due, continues Bredekamp, to the considerable quantity of images derived from a variety of sources that spread across the globe: thanks to smartphones, newspapers, television channels and so on we are now witnessing - and suffering - a real invasion of images.

Many questions are raised in this context. For example: what does it mean when the canon favours images over writing? This is a turnaround, as it were, in our cultural tradition. The conflict between image and word as a medium of transmission of tradition and as a means of communication has been addressed many times in our history, and was seemingly resolved in the late eighteenth century with the overt and incontrovertible victory of the written *logos* - and yet, this victory was only provisional, it seems.

The path that goes from this point to the birth of aesthetics is truly meaningful: through Winckelmann and Kant, it leads to a definition of aesthetics as a universe of pure forms, devoid of any interest other than aesthetic contemplation. In fact, thanks to Winckelmann's description of Laocoon in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, Lessing was able to separate word and image. The aesthetic *perceptum* thus became something abstract that prescind from the synaesthetic unit of perception realised in senseful forms. Based on this powerful abstraction, it would be easy to make aesthetic

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¹ Cf. H. Bredekamp. *Der Bildakt. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen* 2007 Neufassung 2015, Berlin, Wagenbach. 2015, p. 23.

experience utterly unappealing - as Kant did. I will come back to this point. For now, I'll state that the birth of aesthetics marked an important turn in the history of the image. Through Kant, its alleged meaninglessness would be passed on to contemporary aesthetics as an almost incontestable tenet, with truly significant and unforeseeable consequences.

1.2. *The conflict between logoi*

Let's take a step back. In line with an undeniably Platonic legacy, the image gradually freed itself from its relation with the *logos* and entered in conflict with it. Plato relegated the image to the realm of appearance because it foments a misleading illusion much akin to that underlying the opposition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*.² The image is a copy of a copy because it is ineluctably illusionary: the two dimensions that are proper to it are flanked by a third one, depth, which is the source of illusion. And it is the more illusionary the better it is technically crafted.

Here one can see some disturbing conceptual sequences. The image is misleading because it produces illusions, and this is because the image is not such by nature but is technically (artificially) built so as to produce the dimension of depth, which doesn't really exist, in addition to the other two. If the image is exclusively bi-dimensional, it is a-logical: it is hard to dwell in it mentally, as it is an artificial product generating confusion. In a way, Madame Bovary can be already found here, as the catastrophe of her life is anticipated in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*: woe to those who identify with appearances! They shall find deadly perils.

To address the image one must "Mithridatize" against it, that is, deliver it to the land of appearance, which is detached from reality. At its core, the aesthetic consciousness that would arise with Kant is already here. On the other hand, the rise of aesthetic appearance marks a final decision in the plurimillennial conflict between word and image, in which the logic of communication is at stake. But there's more: at stake here is also technique, understood as a treacherous artifice producing an illusory and

² Cf. Pliny The Elder, *Natural History Vol. IX of Ten* (Loeb Classical Library, XXXIII-XXXV Books). For the analysis of Plato's appearance, particularly in the context I am proposing here, see V. Stoichita, *Breve storia dell'ombra. Dalle origini della pittura alla pop art*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2008.

potentially dangerous over-world.

Indeed, this dispute significantly influenced European culture for a long time: this conflict was triggered repeatedly in a very powerful way and, finally, was ended by the birth, contradictory itself, of a new philosophical discipline - aesthetics. The birth of aesthetics paradoxically tried to end this very strong debate that had been in place since Byzantine iconoclasm, in an effort to control its significant effects.³ The issue was removed, as it were, from the collective subconscious and then suddenly re-emerged with the image society - a scary return of something we didn't want to face.

Hence a hidden transformation of the cultural canon that hasn't been greeted positively, because the apocalyptic effect has ended up taking precedence over the sober analysis of communication and the cultural transmission systems. The definition "society of the spectacle," which has come to constitute a kind of emblem, is an expression of discomfort with the change in course rather than a true understanding of it.⁴ The idea of a derealized world influenced very negatively the assessment of the ongoing changes. It's as if the Platonic scheme - which is the root of ancient and modern iconoclasm - had gathered extremely different problems and issues around it. The demonization of what is described as the "society of the spectacle" or "image society", indeed, doesn't account for all the problems that were introduced by this transformation.⁵

To make a few examples: what does it mean, from a pedagogical point of view, to face the changes of the canon? Is there even still *one* canon? How can it be presented today? What does it mean to be faced with a dumbfounded tradition? And is it dumbfounded or is it simply moving to other spheres? One could go on asking what it means, from an ethical point of view, to live within a culture dominated by the image. In other words, there are new questions arising within a universe densely populated by images: for example, what images do we want to live with (or not)? There are many ontological questions that are important and not at all abstract: in fact, what does it mean to live in an environment made up by images turned into life forms? What kind of ontological connotations can be attributed to an image that has become a second nature

³ On this, Cf. H. Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte. Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1975. As for the history of iconoclasm cfr. M. Bettetini, *Distuggere il passato. L'iconoclastia dall'Islam all'Isis*, Milano, Cortina, 2016.

⁴ G. Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

⁵ See my *Dopo la morte dell'arte*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013.

very similar to the first? We are confronted with a disappearance of appearance, of the image as fiction and illusion. This is a fundamental problem in order to understand where we are going with our perceptions, feelings, and so on.

1.3. *Logos contra logos*

The background to all this is a huge subterranean conflict of the *logoi*, which produces a series of overthrowings that lead to today's situation. The *logos* of the image seems to be written off by Plato, almost violently and with great effectiveness, only to be readmitted in stages. Consider the exemplary neo-Platonic reaction to Plato himself, which gives way to a number of oscillations that lasted until the aesthetics of the eighteenth century. In what follows I will focus very briefly on this path. The antagonism between the *logoi* here turns into their cooperation, enhancing the effectiveness of communication and semantics. All of this will be lost in eighteenth-century culture in the light, as will be seen, of Winckelmann's hostility towards the emblematic tradition and above all of the iconology eminently represented by Ripa.

If one wants to consider the general conflict - both explicit and implicit - between word and image, which runs through the centuries up this day, one has to do so historically. It is worth repeating that this is no conflict between reason and deception, between truth and appearance, but a clash involving two modes to produce reason as a system of relationships which reveals the texture of what there is. If the attribution of a predicate to a subject is the minimal definition of discursive rationality, the reason or reasons of the image might be defined as the reflexive ability to welcome the other into one's reflection only to come back to oneself. This model was explicated in successive stages mainly in the Cappadocian Fathers, to resurface many centuries later in the emblematic and iconology of Ripa and Francesco Colonna.

So, one could define the reason of the image as a generally "hospitable" model of rationality, thanks to its self-reflective ability to involve the other in its *logos* and make it its own. This perspective keeps reoccurring from the antiquity to the eighteenth century, only to disappear for a very long time with Winckelmann and with the birth of aesthetics thanks to Kant. What may be defined as the superficialization of the image is thus the result of a titanic conflict that starts with antiquity, with the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*,

and has not yet come to an end. This codification of the ontological structure of the image is certainly strategic, aimed at hiding the iconic face of the *imago* represented by the speculative chance to go back to oneself in self-reflection. The image, in this context, is in effect a subject that sees itself in the otherness that hosts it as a narrative, as a discursive extension of its purely iconic core, as a performative ability to act as gaze on the world and as *exemplum*. In short, it presents itself as a community logos.

This perspective went on in the Middle Ages due to the dispute with the Byzantine world inaugurated by the *Libri Carolini*, where the image takes on a purely figurative value, at odds with the Byzantine world that, in the Carolingian circle, was seen as a barbarian world by Alcuin and his entourage. In the *Libri Carolini*, the image plays a role of *aide-mémoire* - a memory-helper, in a world in which only a few can write - and has no value as such.⁶ This was a sort of forerunner of the modern aesthetic consciousness, which was nonetheless challenged many times in the Renaissance and the Baroque. In particular, as mentioned, this involved the emblematic tradition, especially Francesco Colonna's *Hypnoteromachia Polyphili*, Andrea Alciato's *Book of Emblems* and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia, or, Moral Emblems*.

Based on Horace's *ut pictura poesis*, here there is a strong link between word and image, and the word itself acquires unprecedented imagistic power. In fact, these texts owe their good fortune to their iconography of inscriptions, whereas in reality they were initially published without it. As said, in the background of this path stands Horace's "Ut pictura poesis", the homology of image and word that coagulates in the term *ekphrasis*, where the latter establishes the most important ontological question, at least for our purposes. In fact in the presence of a profound correspondence between words and images we can say that neither the first can decay into sophistic license nor can the second fall into fallacious appearance.

This is the basis on which, in the sixteenth century, there is a great revival of the tradition of hieroglyphs understood as a successful combination of thing and designation.⁷ This opens up a long path that leads from Horace's *ut pictura poesis* to

⁶ Cf. M. Bettetini, *Contro l'immagine*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006, pp. 125-129.

⁷ Cfr. of course R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London, Nelson 1964; M. Gabriele, Introduzione a A. Alciato, *Libro degli Emblemi*, cit., in particular pp. XLIII-IV. This brings to mind Emily Dickinson's "I would not paint — a picture — I'd rather be the One". On the topic of *ekphrasis* cfr. G. Boehm-E. Pfotenhauer, *Beschreibungskunst/Kunstbeschreibung. Ekphrasis in der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, München, Fink, 1995. and M.

Lessing's *Laocoon*, when he declares the separation of the arts of the word from the figurative ones. What led to this passage is as fascinating as it is subtle. The *edle Einfalt* and the *stille Ruhe*, the noble simplicity and quiet grandeur that stand out in Winckelmann's description of the *Laocoon* in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* are the reason for silent arts, based on the sole evidence of sight, as opposed to eloquent arts that rely on sound.⁸ This is the premise for a historicization of art, relativising its meaning and scope while affirming its exemplary value. So a whole chapter of classical German aesthetics revolves around the question "Why does Laocoon not scream?"⁹

The division of the arts according to their means prepares the aestheticism of the image - its purely modern status - which is a whole new chapter in the millennial conflicting history dividing Iconodules and Iconophiles. The image is now about pure forms with the value of paradigms or stylemes, whose meaning is now simply aesthetic, irenic and uneffective. This is a very important passage, and yet it is ambiguous. In fact, as we will see, it also leads to the peak of the anaesthetization of the image that, in modernity, replaces the violent side of the conflict about it. This is the premise for the "society of the spectacle", which will be nothing but the boom of the aesthetic image, freeing art from the sacrality it had been relegated to, giving it access once again to the secular world along with its original power.

The formalization of the image through the medium of history prepares something like a huge falsification of its meaning, which is dragged into a formal sequence that weakens its ability to give meaning and create worlds so as to deliver it to a sequential, merely historical history of pure forms and cold profiles, devoid of hospitality duties. The image no longer reflects. Winckelmann is the forerunner of two parallel events: with the description of Laocoon in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755) and with the primacy of drawing as it emerges in *History of Ancient Art* (1764) begins a separation between word and image. "The arts which are dependent on drawing have,

Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini. Letteratura e cultura visibile*, Milano, Cortina, 2012.

⁸ In *Versuch einer Allegorie besonders für die Kunst*, in der Waltherischen Hof-Buchhandlung, Dresden, 1766, as noted by Sonia Maffei in Introduzione a Ripa (pp. CXIV-CXV), one can see Winckelmann's very negative judgment of Ripa, accused of being very far from the spirit of classicism to which he theoretically aspires: "Ripa's images are formed, invented and hewn. It's as if they belonged to real ancient monuments, but one has to think that he has no knowledge of statues, carved marbles, or coins"

⁹ Cf. F. Vercellone, *Perché il Laocoonte non grida? Sulla teoria di un detto*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2006, pp.131-146.

like all inventions, commenced with the necessary; the next object of research was beauty; and, finally, the superfluous followed: these are the three principal stages in art.”¹⁰

1.4 The image as a new technological canon

Investigating the present of the image, therefore, means dwelling on its origin, to find out whether it is true that the new canon is truly such, that is, new. The issue is combined with technology from more than one point of view. In particular, the image ends up facing a destiny of de-realization as it is considered a technological artifice producing illusionistic effects. This is the common thread that runs through the history of thought from Plato to Fumaroli: the de-realized and de-realizing character of the image derives precisely from its being artificial and not natural. The antithesis between technology and nature is thus what determines the fate of the image and of technology itself.

Hence a new, unitary, chapter of thought that overthrows the oppositional relation between ancient and modern in order to claim their substantial continuity. In fact, historical determinations - or rather, determinations of the philosophy of history - are here overcome and relativized by a sort of philosophical-anthropological conceptualization of the relation between man and technology, so that the latter - from Plato to the early twentieth century - becomes the fantasmatic, artificial double (as shown by the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius narrated by Pliny the Elder). This is an extremely delicate shift that makes technology independent from - and almost functional to - historical development. The implied assumption is that the opposition between nature and man is a sort of premise of historical development - a kind of unnatural-natural supplement of nature itself which relates to the latter as illusion does to the truth. In this context, the man - nature duplication is produced as an infra-historical and partially trans-historical variable.

2. Perfectio sensitive

In this context, aesthetics is a contradictory science. It wants to implement an

¹⁰ J.J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, Boston: James R. Osgood And Company, 1873, p.191.

oxymoron, by making perfect something that is faulty by nature. When it was born, with Baumgarten, it aimed to reach the *perfectio* of the *cognitio sensitiva*: for Baumgarten the issue was epistemological. However, it is easy to see what is implied here: long before Schelling and the Romantics, aesthetics seems to yearn for the *plenitudo realitatis*. Those who see beauty aim for a synaesthetic perfection in the apperception of the object, which is given to our senses in its full fragrance, totality, and sensuous fullness. From this point of view, the object isn't essentially an aesthetic object in the modern sense of the word - namely something that gives us joy when we contemplate it. Rather, it is a middle term where sensations meet, allowing us to apprehend the world in its completeness. The perception of beauty gives us the world itself at its fullest. It gives us the world as the fullness and integrity of its forms under the features of the complete perception of the object - a perception made up by all the senses.

The perceived object, then, is defined beautiful because it can be apprehended synaesthetically, making full use of the potential of our sense organs. The outcome of this process appears contradictorily as a “clear and confused” knowledge as opposed to “clear and distinct” knowledge typical of conceptual cognition. In short, this knowledge has form as its object. Therefore, it refers to a simultaneous apprehension of the object that contrasts with conceptual knowledge, which instead realizes an analytical - sequential knowledge of the object. The latter ends up being a knowledge that interrupts the object's synthetic unity - its “aesthetic unity”, as it were. Aesthetic nature, therefore, is obviously linked to the synthetic apprehension of the object: the fact that it gives itself *all* at once.

In this framework, the object is self-imposed. It is endowed with a self-reflective structure that constantly transcends itself, always denying what we thought it was. Paradoxically, this beauty is immediately akin to modern beauty - a sublime and surprising event. It is beautiful-sublime because it always takes us beyond what we already know and have. The *perfectio sensitiva* takes us to a perfection of perception that has an undeniable erotic background. This brings us to Goethe's inauguration of morphology, as opposed to its later developments. The experience of beauty and art is fundamentally one of sympathy in which the individual doesn't contemplate the object, but abandons herself to it, almost religiously, to the point that it is hard to define it as an “object” in the strict sense. This is Goethe's perspective.

On the other hand, also due to aesthetic habits acquired and transmitted in this

kind of philosophy of art, we are used to perceiving objects by referring to *qualia*, which are real abstractions. This produces faulty perceptions that usually only concern one of the senses, according to a system of correspondences for which color is exclusively assigned to sight, hearing to sound, and so forth. The first steps of aesthetics seem to promise something fundamentally different. Through the idea or the ideal of *perfectio sensitiva* we are referred to a synaesthetic system in which every sense is related to the others in the attempt to grasp the sensible fullness of the object and, as a consequence, of the world.

It is therefore worth considering the beginning of aesthetics, which was born in the mid eighteenth century in Germany thanks to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. As is well known, in the opening pages of his work, Baumgarten defines aesthetics as a sort of synthesis - albeit premature - of the entire universe of knowledge:

A e s t h e t i c a (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis,) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae.¹¹

This concise definition is extremely important and, in my opinion, strategic. It should be noted that this definition brings together fields that were becoming more and more independent: the sphere of positive, philosophical and scientific knowledge and the knowledge that is the object of the *Aestheticus*. Secondly, one should focus on something that might appear strange: the fact that this intuition is knowledge. More precisely, this is knowledge of the image, where the genitive is both subjective and objective. In other words, this perception has argumentative power (§ 26) and a universal nature (§ 27), so that even something that we would define a scientific insight has to have «omni venustati cognitionis».¹² In the light of this, aesthetic knowledge is analogous to rational knowledge: «analogon rationis».

Thus, the rise of aesthetics comes to coincide with a new knowledge that sees the perceptual datum as a significant totality. We will discuss this later in more detail, but I can already say that this is a perceptual utopia, which refers from the completeness of perception to the completeness of the world. If erotic perception is the one where also

¹¹ *Aesthetica* scripsit Alexand. Gottlieb Baumgarten, Frankfurt a.d. Oder, 1750, rist. an. . Hildesheim, New York, 1970, §1, p.1.

¹² Ibid, § 42, p.17.

the eye “hears”, one could say that aesthetics inaugurates an erotic utopia with regards to perceiving the object as “love”: totality endowed with complete meaning. From this point of view, a partial perception of the object, transmitted through only one of the senses, would be a sort of failure - an opening to a faulty, intransparent world that is now incomprehensible.

But if perception is fragmented following the autonomous - almost schizophrenic - unfolding of the senses it means that the world itself can no longer be grasped as a meaningful totality. In this sense, there is a very important relation between sensible perception (through the five senses) and the question of the meaning of things. Due to a divided and abstracted perception the world itself has lost its meaning, becoming opaque and akin to the dense, impenetrable surface described in Sartre *Nausée*. In other words, it is true that the rationalization of the world takes over aesthetics and its objects, as shown by Hegel’s prognosis that “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past”. This means, for Hegel, that the universal no longer appears in the sensible and, for us, that the rational world is far from the perceived: reality has become less coherent and perhaps more schizophrenic, broken up into its *qualia*.

From this perspective, there was undoubtedly a progressive rationalization of aesthetics, where originally, with Baumgarten, there had been an aestheticization of logic. This obviously had powerful consequences on both reality - or at least the idea of it - and logic. The point was not only to deny but also to widen the borders of rationality: aesthetics became the limit of rationality, which felt the need to transcend itself. This can be easily seen in the developments of 18th and 19th century aesthetics, which paved the way to a trend that is still going on today.

In this path, art repeats the perceptive fragmentation typical of the “normal” relationship with the world. On this bases, from Batteux to Hegel to Adorno, aesthetic theories will base the system of arts on their respective senses. As mentioned, painting is about light and colour, and therefore belongs to sight; music belongs to hearing, and so forth. Starting with Charles Batteux, this will be the mainstream of modern aesthetic theory that, not surprisingly, will culminate in the 19th century philosophy of art despite all the differences between the two.

Before the distinction became somehow outdated, it has often been said that 18th century aesthetics was about subjective feeling and rationality, whereas the 19th century

produced a real philosophy of art.¹³ This distinction actually clouds the profound unity of a discipline born by commensurating perception and concept, image and reality, while constantly mortifying the former terms of comparison. Consider Charles Batteux's *Les beaux art réduits à un même princip*, where the principle of imitation takes over as aesthetic ideal and code of objectual reference. Artistic imitation, which for Batteux is the work of genius, is of course imitation of something. This might sound trivial, but hides a fundamental point. The objective genitive imposes a veritable breakthrough revealing the recesses of idealizing imitation. Hence the singular paradox by which imitation idealizes its object and breaks its sensible unity resorting - depending on the art in question - to expressive means that only address one sense. Because imitation refers to an expressive means that only relates to *one* sense, the idealizing fiction is always also a de-realization of the represented object. Batteux's argumentation is exemplary:

What then is the function of the arts? It is to capture the properties of nature and represent them in an artefact. In this way the chisel of the sculptor depicts a hero in a block of marble. The painter uses colours to fashion visible objects on a canvas. By means of tones, the musician makes a storm rage when everything is calm and, finally, the poet's invention and the harmony of his verses fill our minds with imagined images and our hearts with fabricated emotions, often more charming than if they were real and natural. From this I conclude that the Arts, properly understood, are nothing but imitations. They are resemblances that are certainly not nature but appear to be. It is in this sense that The fine arts are not real, but only seem to be real. [...] From all that we have said, it follows that poetry consist solely in imitation. Painting, dance, and music are the same. Nothing is real in these works. In them, everything is imagined, feigned, copied, or made. This is their essence and what distinguishes them from reality.¹⁴

The evolution of the philosophy of perception that characterizes the origins of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, in nineteenth-century philosophy of art does not simply signal a historical break that was much discussed in classic aesthetic

¹³ Cf. A.Baeumler, *Bachofen der Mythologie der Romantik*, 2^o edition Munchen 1965. ; P.Szondi, *Antike und Moderne in der Ästhetik der Goethezeit*, in *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie II, Studienausgabe der Vorlesungen*, vol. 5, Frankfurt a. Main, Suhrkamp, 1974.; E. Franzini, *L'estetica del Settecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002.

¹⁴ C. Batteux, *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, Oxford, OUP, 2015, pp. 7 and 10.

historiography.¹⁵ There is an underlying common thread joining these two ages, which generates aesthetic consciousness as exclusively contemplative of the object as it appears in Kant. In fact, for the philosopher beauty is disinterested - which paves the way to the idea of art as autonomous and detached from the world. The above considerations show that aesthetic consciousness is contemplative not based on positive prerogatives but because it cannot access the object in its totality. And this happens based on the presuppositions that guide its formation: it derives from the fragmentation of the overall perception of the object into its components. The *perceptum* comes to be articulated in *qualia* that refer to the model of scientific analysis.

This is the most common change from the 18th century aesthetics to the classic aesthetics of German Idealism. This paves the way to the primacy of the aesthetic experience as well as to aestheticism as the experience of an athenic art, completely ineffective on reality. So, the perception of the object coincides - contradictorily and paradoxically - with the abstraction of and from the object itself. In this frameworks, imitation is a principle of the rationalistic formalization of the object. The development of aesthetic knowledge thus seems to go hand in hand with the scientific method, which defines the object based on its *qualia* thereby breaking its integrity or, to be a bit more poetic, its living unity. The latter is replaced with an analytic unity of the object, which cannot be perceived but only gathered *post hoc*.

To sum up: the birth of aesthetics derives from, emphasises and produces a dual abstraction. Modern art is forced to prescind from life by disclosing and admitting its fictional status,¹⁶ so that modern aesthetics denounces its Platonic roots, while proposing an art relegated to the sphere of illusionist mimesis.¹⁷ On the other hand, as a consequence, the consideration of single arts reflects the abstract network of the world it participates in. In short, the aesthetic gaze repeats and prefigures what happens in the so-called real world. It scientifically fragments the whole fragrance of the perceived world, dispersing it into unrelated perceptive units that are devoid of meaning, to follow Kant. As philosophy of art, aesthetics harbours the idea - hinted at by Hegel and developed by Croce - of the “death of art” in the modern world. This is a symbolic death

¹⁵ Cf. in particular A. Baeumler, *Op. cit.*

¹⁶ In this respect, see the fundamental analysis of the aesthetic consciousness offered by Hans Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, London, Bloomsbury 2004.

¹⁷ On this, see A. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.

due to the development of a reason that divides the various spheres of existence, pushing them away from the “world of life”, making them more and more abstract, in what Weber has defined the “disenchantment of the world”. The whole great chapter of the systematics of art in Romanticism and German Idealism after all only strengthens the idea of single autonomous arts, coinciding with a given sense medium, and abstractedly independent from one another.

3. *From the avant-garde to yesterday*

In this context, it is not surprising that the avant-garde would openly declare war on philosophy, wanting art to fall from the heavens of the ideal to the everyday world. This declaration of war finds its clearest example in Joseph Kosuth's, *Art after Philosophy*. Here Kosuth says very clearly: “Aesthetic considerations are indeed *always* extraneous to an object's function or 'reason to be'.”¹⁸ A few pages later, implicitly quoting Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Kosuth claims that the “viability of art” today responds to the Hegelian “spiritual needs of man”.

This descent of art from ideal to reality will somewhat culminate in Duchamp's ready-made, expressing a new iconicity of the contemporary world through Pop Art. This is a symbolic status evoking the symbiotic exchange between art and the world proposed by the notion of “classic”. I have argued elsewhere¹⁹ that there might be a new “technological classicism”, where the symbols of the late-modern world and those of art would coincide: if this is true, the new situation would be very significant. Warhol's late-modern icons undoubtedly outline a new, secular mythology where art finds its most authentic vocation. This mythology seems to announce a sort of revolution of art against philosophy and - at the same time - its pacification with the world, as Arthur Danto has shown.

According to Hans Belting,²⁰ late 20th century art tends to powerfully denounce the disappearance of the body from everyday experience which, in turn, echoes in the artistic one. On the other hand, though, to quote Hölderlin's couplet that appears in all

¹⁸ J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1991, p. 17 and 24.

¹⁹ Cfr. F. Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, Bologna, Il mulino, 2008, pp.177-185.

²⁰ Cf. H. Belting, *Bild- Anthropologie*, München, Fink, 2011⁴, pp.87 ss.

versions of *Patmos*, “where there is danger, A rescuing element grows as well.”²¹ In fact, the dissolution of the world into its own image entails many aesthetic, ethical and political issues. For example, it is interesting to note, in this regard, that a strictly ontological issue - about the questionable idea that the image is a form of unreality - comes to involve the much more concrete aspects of practical consequences.

There is no doubt that the idea of image as unreality harbours a negative evaluation of the world. There is another purely ontological question arising here, involving the development of our cultural horizons and our lifestyles. The above equation produces a sort of suspicious sequence assimilating reality to good, and image to unreality and therefore evil. It is evident that this assumption - subconscious in many respects - should be rejected. Why should we stick to unconfessed and yet all too obvious assumptions? After all, as we have seen, the idea that the image is a form of de-realization results from the process of rationalization that led to aesthetics.

3.1. The mithridatization of the image

And yet, the image itself can be a remedy to the evils attributed to it. The idea of an “image society”, after all, could be but the last stage of a reconstruction of the contemporary world, largely based on the ancient Platonic ontology in the light of the new processes due to the technological image. I am referring here to virtual art and the new media that, on the one hand, seem to be in line with the de-realization of art while, on the other hand, seem to significantly change the aesthetic experience by redirecting it towards a more complete relationship with the body and feeling. Upon closer inspection, the experience of de-realization, which coagulates around the image and is conveyed as the aesthetic model, comes from the idea of rationality produced by the disenchantment of the world that we have already mentioned. However, it should be noted that the aesthetic image - which produces a remote experience of the artwork - is today replaced by an interactive image that allows for a more concrete and active relation with it. This artistic practice also produces the necessity to deeply revise the concept and ontology of image - which I cannot dwell on here.

²¹ Cf. Hölderlin, *Patmos*, 1802.

As I have tried to show elsewhere, virtual art (think of Karl Sims) often creates an interactive relation with the observer. In Sims' works - which I here use a synecdoche, referring to similar artists as well - there is a significant interaction between man and the virtual environment. For example, *Primordial Dance* is aimed at rethinking this relationship in its consequences for evolution: the evolution of artificial, rather than natural, beings. This refers to an intimate and inextricable continuity between nature and artifice, between bios and technique, which is one of the leitmotifs of Sims' artistic research. The interaction with the virtual environment produces a narrative experience, full of events. It is about communication between inside and outside - an "immersion", to borrow Oliver Grau's terminology and definition,²² producing different stories. The landscape that is gradually proposed depends on the interaction with the viewer. So this is a narrative experience that comes from the epic integration of the creating subject with the work of art. The narrator is also the protagonist of his own story, part of the world in which the work calls for the spectator and the interpreter to cooperate.

It's as if these works created new worlds-environments and reconstructed a sort of integrated experience of objects - one that is no longer abstract and analytically divided according to the relevant senses. Therefore, one could understand the virtual medium as a way to reconstruct the object and its sensible experience after its fragmentation. In this framework, the image is no longer simply a loss of world. This is shown, for example, by the *Museo delle pure forme* designed at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna Pisa by Massimo Bergamasco and his team. This project clearly shows the intention to integrate sensible experience thanks to - not despite - the image. The "museum of pure forms" is an experience that multiplies museum paths in the same virtual space, allowing us to visit different museums at the same time, renewing their carefully studied ways of fruition. Also, this allows us to renew our relationship with the works of art - especially sculpture, which in this context can be also experienced with touch (which isn't allowed in traditional museums). In this sense, the image appears as the means to the integration and enrichment of sensible experience.

Sensible experience is paradoxically elevated by referring to the *reality* of the image rather than to sensible reality. This is undoubtedly an important possibility that the world of the image offers for the reconstruction of experience after its de-realization by the

²² Cf. O. Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge (MA)-London, Mit Press, 2006.

rationalistic process of the enlightened disenchantment of the world. This path leads us to the issue of the rationality of the image related to its media and its communicative functions. The process of integration realized by the virtual image seems to be a sort of therapeutic work done by a reason renewed in the image (not against it) which initiates a synaesthetic representation of its object. All of this requires reflection on the ontology of the image, but also a widening of the horizon of the arts, so as to include - say - cooking.²³ This would probably also lead us to conceive new strategies to address the image - ones that would go back to a “re-enchantment of the world”.

²³ Cf. N. Perullo, *La cucina è arte? Filosofia della passione culinaria*, Roma, Carocci, 2013.