A Driving Force: On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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edited by
Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

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Serie diretta da
Silvia Burini, Giovanni Maria Fara

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi, Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

Abstract

The volume comprises a selection of papers presented at the *5th Postgraduate International Conference* organized by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Venice, 4-6 October 2023): *A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power*. In the introduction to his well-known *The Power of Images* (1989), David Freedberg claims not only that images hold power over us, but they are also, inevitably, related to 'power' itself. Art is therefore a powerful and non-neutral tool. Its forms and expressions influence and manipulate the realm of the real. Throughout human history, the artist's creative power gave form, substance, and meaning to otherwise inert matter. This process turned the artist into a demiurge. Furthermore, once images are given their final form, they circulate and live a life of their own. The *5th Postgraduate International Conference* was aimed at investigating the rhetorical nature of the intersection between image and power. In 1979 Yuri Lotman claimed that "rhetoric" is the displacement of the structural principles of a given semiotic sphere into another semiotic sphere. The Tartu semiologist's approach implies that the "correlation with different semiotic systems gives rise to a rhetorical situation in which a powerful source of elaboration of new meanings is contained". In exploring these meanings from a multidisciplinary perspective, this volume investigates two main themes: the power of the image, as an autonomous device, endowed with a pervasive and persuasive character; the image as a form for representing power which addresses questions concerning the sense of authority, and its negation, namely a sense of dissidence and counter-narrations.

Keywords Power of the images. Rhetoric. Power representation. Arts. Semiology. Authority. Dissidence.

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi, Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

Introductory remarks

The proceedings of the conference *A Driving Force: On The Rhetoric Of Images And Power*, edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi, Andrea Missagia, and Maria Novella Tavano, explore from a multidisciplinary point of view the rhetorical nature of the intersection between images and power. The collection features a diverse array of themes and topics, spanning a vast chronological and geographical range including Byzantine art, Late Medieval and Renaissance Venice, France during the revolution and the Directory, Russia in the early twentieth century, Italy in the 1970s, and contemporary China, thus intertwining a multitude of subjects and images.

This is the Fifth Postgraduate International Conference organized by the Ph.D. students in History of Arts at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. This event has now firmly established not only its staying power – which I saluted as so upon its third edition, a testimony to its consolidation and to its becoming an upstanding point of reference – but also its richness and significance, as demonstrated by the remarkable level of involvement on both a national and international scale. What is more, the organizers' outstanding efficiency has made it possible for the proceedings to be published just shortly after the conference was held, from 4 to 6 October 2023.

Besides the customary introductory lines, having reached the end of my term as Coordinator of the Ph.D. Program, and without any rhetoric, I would like to thank the Ph.D. students who have passionately, intelligently, and curiously brought to life the five conferences

that have truly, and most certainly not to my credit, accompanied my years as Coordinator within the broad and shared horizons of the many disciplines or fields that represent the Doctorate. This is further demonstrated by the diverse and inclusive composition – beyond the Department and the University – of the Faculty Council.

I hope that this Conference, which has now become well-established, may continue into the future, once these most committed doctoral students earn their degrees and find new forces to carry on with an enterprise that has become, through their work, central to and defining for the Ph.D. Program in History of Arts.

Prof .Pier Mario Vescovo,
Coordinator of the Ph.D. Program in History of Arts,
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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power is the Fifth Postgraduate International Conference of the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. As Vice-Coordinator of the Doctoral Program in History of Arts and Full Professor of Contemporary Art History, I am proud to have conceived the idea for this annual meeting and encouraged its development. Such moments serve as the perfect opportunity for our doctoral candidates to develop their research skills as well as to gain managerial and organizational experience. I would like to thank Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi, Andrea Missagia, and Maria Novella Tavano for all their efforts in organizing the conference that took place in 2023 and editing its proceedings. This volume is a tangible proof of their endeavors. It explores the rhetorical nature of the intersection between image and power from a multidisciplinary perspective, by bringing together the various contributions to this year's conference theme. I would like to point out the problem – as well as the potential – of the complex, and ambiguous, relationship between art and power expressed by images as both objects of human creation and visual vectors of power. Art played a crucial role during the Cold War as much as in today's global politics. It has an ideological function which makes it a powerful tool even when subjected to the market's fiats of inclusion and exclusion. Politically charged art was produced under Totalitarianism, Socialism, and post-Communism. In today's mainstream Western Art, as it frequently adheres to the norms of ideological propaganda, this art continues to exist, often as a mass product and features at international exhibitions, biennials, and festivals. The paradox of contemporary art is that art can be an image, a critique, or a negation of images themselves.

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Self-Definition and Self-Questioning: Image-Making as a Political Tool

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

Image and Imagery in the Age of the Directory (1795-99)
The Political Symbolism of the Revolution between Old and New Horizons

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Abstract The creation of a new relationship between power, its image, and the people is one of the numerous innovations that have made the history of the Revolution a pivotal moment in the broader European context. After the experience of the Terror, a new era opened, characterised first and foremost by a political body, the Directory, which would soon become the symbolic epicentre of public power, drawing from symbols and strategies both ancient and modern. Through a combination of institutional analysis and the examination of emblematic cases, this text aims to elucidate the methods of creation and the defining characteristics of a specific public image of the newly dominant power.

Keywords French Revolution. Directory. Revolutionary festival. Image and power. Public sphere.

Summary 1 Introduction: A New Public Dimension. – 2 The Image of Power and the Power of Image in the Revolutionary 'Middle Ages' (1795-99). – 3 From Theory to Practice: The Festivals of the Directory. – 4 Conclusions: The 'Unfathomable' People.

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Le principe de toute souveraineté réside
essentiellement dans la nation. Nul corps,
nul individu ne peut exercer d'autorité
qui n'en émane expressément.

Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen, art. III

1 Introduction: A New Public Dimension

Article 3 of the celebrated *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* of 26 August 1789,[1] represents one of the cardinal documents for the foundation of a modernity understood not only in a political and theoretical sense but also, and above all, in a social and experiential dimension. Indissolubly linking every public authority to national sovereignty, the provision in question would lead to a general redefinition of the foundation and legitimacy of every political role. From then on, every public official would have to grapple with the popular origin of his power, namely with that generality known as Nation, People, or citizenship (depending on the historical-political context), which was vying for the unprecedented role of a leading political actor.

The revolution in the basis of legitimacy necessitated an intrinsic redefinition of the appearance, symbols, and, in general, the image of power, which had to bear witness to its privileged relationship with the new collective protagonist.

The forging of an unprecedented and original relationship between power, its image, and the people thus represents one of the distinguishing features of the so-called Age of Revolutions. It was precisely this new tripartite connection that enabled the development of numerous innovations across various domains, ranging from the political to the economic, from the social to the religious.

Jürgen Habermas, in his groundbreaking study on the public sphere,[2] already emphasised the foundational role of the year 1789 (along with the cultural transformations that preceded it and, to some extent, laid the groundwork)[3] in shaping a "functioning public sphere

1 See Godechot, Faupin 2018.

2 See Habermas 1991.

3 While the Physiocrats, for the first time, formulated a precise definition of public opinion in which it came to coincide with evidence and reasonableness, Jacques Necker, in a work that has rightfully gained renown, had already, a few years before the great event, highlighted the emergence and the affirmation of a 'supreme tribunal' with the ability to assess and, to some extent, guide every individual holder of a political office: *l'opinion publique*. "C'est ainsi que la plupart des étrangers, par des motifs différents, ont peine à se faire une juste idée de l'autorité qu'exerce en France l'opinion publique : ils comprennent difficilement ce que c'est qu'une puissance invisible, qui sans trésors,

in the politic realm" on the continent, a concept that had already been evolving in the British context for several decades.

As the German philosopher teaches, in order to fully embody the status of public opinion, it had to undergo further development, specifically achieving a deep awareness of its role, power, and potential; in other words, this particular 'public sphere' was called upon to become self-aware. The holders of public power were therefore tasked with a dual mission: from then on, they would not only have to attest to the popular origin of their office, but they would also be called upon to educate the people themselves (or the more or less restricted portion that, depending on the case, would be made to coincide with public opinion) about its new and crucial public function.

A dual and reciprocal relationship is thus established between principals and representatives in which their respective roles become confused and, in some cases, even seem to reverse. An example of the reversal of roles occurs when the latter, who remain mere custodians (not owners) of their office, turn to the holder of the power from which it emanates to remind him of his founding and legitimising function.[4] The most astonishing reversal of perspective can be observed when, as Mona Ozouf has sharply pointed out, one comprehends how the *opinion publique*, to attain its full value and achieve its "plénitude philosophique", must be refined, cultivated, and illuminated by the beneficial influence of one or more enlightened men: "non pas un médiateur, mais un conducteur de l'évidence" (Ozouf 1987, 427), as Condorcet would have theorised. The sender and the receiver of power intersect and hybridise in a complex tangle in which both simultaneously become subjects and objects, superiors and subordinates.

It is not our intention here to delve into the intricate meanderings of the historical and philosophical dimensions of public opinion, its divergent interpretations (Rousseau's critique, for instance, contrasting particular opinions with the uniqueness of the general will,

sans garde et sans armée, donne des loix [*sic*] à la ville, à la Cour, et jusques dans le palais de Rois" (1784, LXI-LXII). On these topics see Baker (1987, 204-46).

4 On the relationship between public opinion and the French Revolution, reference must be made to Mona Ozouf's essay (1987, 419-34). References to the *opinion publique* and its pivotal role in the proceedings of the assembly debates throughout the revolutionary decade are continuous and strongly emphasised. In this context, it is customary to cite an impassioned speech delivered by the representative Nicolas Bergasse on 15 September 1789, in which he proclaimed, before the National Constituent Assembly (and, by extension, before the French people) the supreme authority of his judgment: "Et vous savez que ce n'est que par l'opinion publique que vous pouvez acquérir quelque pouvoir pour faire le bien; vous savez que ce n'est que par elle que la cause si longtemps désespérée du peuple a prévalu; vous savez que devant elle toutes les autorités se taisent, tous les préjugés disparaissent, tous les intérêts particuliers s'effacent" (*Archives Parlementaires* 1875, 8, 118).

la volonté générale)[5] and its various theoretical theorisations during and beyond the revolutionary decade. Rather, what is crucial to emphasise from the outset is the reciprocity underlying the novel relationship formed between custodians and owners of public power, between citizenship and political officeholders.

Indeed, it is from this specific configuration of mutual legitimation that the complex symbolic and iconographic mechanisms underpinning the representation of the diverse organs of power established by the Revolution trace their origins.

2 The Image of Power and the Power of Image in the Revolutionary 'Middle Ages' (1795-99)

In order to address this question, it will therefore be necessary to adopt a bifocal perspective. Firstly, we will have to briefly explore the impressive production of images during the final decade of the 18th century, which marked an explosion in the dissemination of precise representations of public authorities and figures among segments of the population previously untouched by similar propaganda efforts. This phenomenon was a direct outcome of the second element to be examined: the intrinsic connection that the multitude of images, symbols, and visual representations had with political purposes and, therefore, the original aims of the various regimes that succeeded one another during the revolutionary decade. While revolutionary iconography has received considerable scholarly attention, not all revolutionary political periods have received equal scrutiny within the historiography.[6] Only in recent decades have we witnessed a surge in investigations and research into the historically most neglected period of the revolutionary era. This age spans the years between the 'heroic phase' of the Revolution, which culminated in Robespierre's triumph and rapid decline, and the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte, an unstoppable force heralding a new public order and guiding principles. Despite presenting itself under the guise of continuity, this period marked a new historical rupture through another wave of political upheaval.

5 See Ganochaud 1978.

6 As illustrative examples, we reference the fundamental work by Vovelle (1986). Turning to the Italian scenario, which was swiftly engulfed by the revolutionary wave, we refer to Vovelle 1999. Regarding research into the Directorial period, notable studies on the French side include those by Bernard Gainot (2001; 2010) and Pierre Serna (2005). Serna himself has conducted extensive research into this era from a European perspective, delving into the realm of the 'sister republics'. See Serna 2009. The Italian Revolutionary Triennium occupies a central place within a broader and well-established tradition of scholarship. For a comprehensive albeit somewhat dated overview, see Rao, Cattaneo 2003.

Yet the Directory era (1795-99) holds significant importance in the development of modern political culture and practice. Despite numerous challenges and difficulties, it undeniably constituted the longest-lasting political system of the revolutionary decade. It also marked the period characterised by the highest number of electoral appointments, whose destabilising consequences ultimately led to its downfall. Consequently, it served as a fertile ground for experimenting with theories and principles, extending beyond mere rhetoric, and contributing to the development of a distinctive form of democratic practice.[7]

After the tragic experience of the Terror, and perhaps more significantly because of it, there arose a pressing need to reconstruct society on new, uncorrupted and, above all, stable foundations. It became evident that the *pars destruens*, or the dismantling of the institutions of the Old Regime alone, would not suffice. Rather, the primary objective was to establish a new public order and new principles that remained untainted by the rhetoric of the previous regime. These principles were to be forged, in part, through a reclamation of the heritage from a past that was no longer demonised and entirely rejected. As the Thermidorian era commenced, we witness, to borrow Bronislaw Baczko's words, the rediscovery and reappropriation of the past, along with a re-evaluation of experiential knowledge:

> En 89, l'accent est mis sur le refus radical du passé; élaborer une Constitution, c'est redéfinir le contrat social des Français et celui-ci ne peut être qu'un contrat de fondation. Les Français forment, certes, une nation ancienne; la Révolution l'a pourtant régénérée et, du coup, elle peut agir comme si l'Histoire venait de commencer avec elle. La Nation régénérée, assumant dorénavant pleinement sa souveraineté, tout ouverte sur l'avenir, fonde son identité non pas sur son passé, marqué par la tyrannie et les préjugés, mais sur le projet politique et moral à réaliser. En l'an III, la nouvelle Constitution se propose de cimenter la Nation en s'ouvrant sur l'avenir et en formulant un projet de société, mais l'identité collective est imaginée en fonction du passé que la Nation et, partant, la République doivent assumer. La Révolution a derrière

7 While recognising various merits to this crucial historical period, one cannot overlook the distortions and contradictions that at the same time characterised it. It was precisely in the aftermath of electoral events that actions and measures of the most patently illegal nature were undertaken to suppress the enemies of the directorial regime, coinciding with the extreme factions represented by the monarchists and the so-called *anarchistes*. The *coup d'état* of 18 Fructidor, Year V (4 September 1797), is paradigmatic in this sense, which led not only to the arrest and exile of journalists and writers but also to the removal of two out of five directors, the dismissal of over 100 representatives, and the annulment of elections in numerous departments.

> elle un passé dont elle ne peut se débarrasser; son présent succède au passé immédiat de la Terreur. (Baczko 1989, 339-40)

In this veritable rediscovery of both ancient and recent history, the visual and iconographic sphere carries significant weight and proves itself capable of playing a crucial role in presenting the new political institutions. As paradoxical and even contradictory as it may appear, numerous indicators allow us to discern the revaluation and exploitation of rituals and symbols associated with the *court*, a social and political phenomenon emblematic of the Old Regime. These symbols were carefully purged of any anachronistic references and meticulously ‘resemanticized’. In the absence of a monarch who could serve as the pivot and focal point of this hybrid court, in order to understand the visual and political strategies associated with its surprising revitalisation, it becomes decisive to recognise the authority called upon to receive its heritage.

Testifying to the intrinsic connections between iconographic strategies and political authority, it is not coincidental that the most representative body of the Constitution of Year III, namely the Directory, assumed the role of a new and unprecedented ‘revolutionary court’. The Directory, aside from defining a specific revolutionary era (an exceptional characteristic in itself) held undisputed authority in the executive function, complemented by a recognised governmental role, and possessed specific prerogatives in the realms of foreign policy and even legislation. The excessive power of the legislature, often blamed for facilitating the ascent of figures of representatives like Robespierre and of organs like the Committee of Public Safety, was remedied through a series of constitutional devices, including the introduction of bicameralism and, most importantly, the substantial reinforcement of executive authority. The reasserted centrality of this executive power, long marginalised after the traumatic experience of Louis XVI’s flight and betrayal, thus represents the most distinctive feature of the third French constitutional document.[8] While, at least in theory, the primacy of legislative power as a direct expression of popular choice remained unchanged, starting from 1795, the second branch of the State’s power began an ascent that, despite occasional interruptions and ruptures, would pave the way for, or at the very least make possible, the rise of the Napoleonic order.[9]

For these reasons, it becomes particularly interesting to analyse and uncover how this strengthening of executive power, from a political perspective, corresponded to an overexposure in symbolic and visual terms. This phenomenon happened primarily at the expense

8 For an analysis of the drafting and features of the Constitution, see Troper 2006.

9 See Colombo 2000.

of the legislators and led the Directory to assume the role of the true symbolic 'representative' of the nation, both domestically and abroad. With the establishment of the new order that emerged from the rubble of the Terror, there arose an urgent need to recognise specific symbolic and representative figures. In other words, the desire to meticulously shape the public image of the state and its representatives, distinguishing them from both their predecessors and the general citizenry, became increasingly pronounced.

The events of 1 Prairial, Year III (20 May 1795) mark a crucial turning point in this regard. The irruption of the Parisian mob and, above all, the assassination of deputy Jean-Bertrand Féraud (whose head was gruesomely displayed on a pike to Convention President Boissy d'Anglas as part of a recurring macabre ritual), compelled the representatives to make a historic decision. It was Deputy Louis Legendre who, amidst the turmoil, resurrected an idea that had been proposed on occasion but never fully implemented.

> Je demande que dorénavant nous délibérions en costume et armés. Si nous l'avions fait aujourd'hui, nous aurions été délivrés deux heures plus tôt, parce que les bons citoyens auraient, au premier coup d'œil, distingué le représentant d'avec le révolté.[10] (*Gazette Nationale, ou le Moniteur Universel*, 25 May 1795)

The need to distinguish the representatives from potential rebels and, more broadly, from the populace, conferred significant political symbolism onto a visual element, the *costume*. Henceforth, those in positions of authority were to be instantly recognisable: the style of their clothing, the components of their garments, the colours and symbols they contained were meant to signify not only the distinction between public officeholders and the general populace but also to facilitate the identification of each specific public role.

The Commission of Eleven, tasked with drafting the new constitution, adopted this principle, envisioning a precise ritualisation of

10 The journalist Claude-Joseph Trouvé, writing in the *Moniteur* of 4 June 1795, adopted a similar stance: "Ne négligez point, a dit l'auteur du Contrat Social et d'Emile, une certaine décoration publique; qu'elle soit noble et imposante. On ne saurait croire à quel point le cœur du Peuple suit ses yeux, et combien la majesté du cérémonial lui en impose. Cela donne à l'autorité un air d'ordre et de règle qui inspire la confiance, et qui écarte les idées de caprice et de fantaisie attachées à celle du pouvoir arbitraire. Nous oserons ajouter, en faisant l'application de cette maxime, que si les Assemblées nationales eussent continué à porter un costume uniforme, elles se seraient épargné ce long avilissement dans lequel les factieux les ont jetées […]. Qu'ils nous soit donc permis d'espérer que l'heureux effet d'une pareille séance ne sera point perdu pour l'avenir, et que la Convention se convaincra, par ce succès, de la nécessité de conserver une décoration qui assure à ses délibérations un caractère solennel et une marche plus prompte et plus facile".

the image of power. Every political authority would be bound by a series of stringent regulations pertaining not only to their appearance but also to their public conduct, and in some cases, even their private lives. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in the final document, the image of the Republic's two most important branches of power received dedicated attention in the form of two distinct constitutional articles, 165 and 369.[11] The first, relating to Directors, stipulated that they:

> ne peuvent paraître, dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions, soit au-dehors, soit dans l'intérieur de leurs maisons, que revêtus du costume qui leur est propre. (*Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III*, art. 165)

The second article of the pair, directed at representatives and any other public official, required that:

> dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions, le costume ou le signe de l'autorité dont ils sont revêtus : la loi en détermine la forme. (*Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III*, art. 369)

The most immediate and theoretically coherent solution for the creation of a visual and symbolic authority would have been to select the legislative body, which was considered the quintessential representative of the people. Despite the increased importance of executive power, the legislative body remained the custodian of national power and sovereignty. However, there was a significant problem both for domestic public events and international representation: its sheer number, since, according to the new constitutional text, it would reach as many as 750 members. Consequently, as indicated in the mentioned articles, the role of the symbolic representative of the French Republic would have been assumed by the rival power.

Firstly, it is essential to observe that, while the Constitution includes the article regarding the costume of the legislative body in its final Title, which pertains to General Provisions, the requirement for the Directory to wear specific attire is outlined in the Title dedicated to it. This seemingly minor detail implies that, even in the Commission's initial plans, the visual aspect was intrinsic and crucial particularly for the Directory.[12]

Comparing the two provisions, it is also worth noting that, while the former solely regulated the public activities of those delivering addresses, in the case of the directors, their private lives were subject to regulation as well, specifically pertaining to the image they

11 See Godechot, Faupin 2018.

12 See *Projet de Constitution pour la République française* 1795.

were expected to maintain within their own homes. This disparity suggests that, even more so than the legislators, it was the directors who assumed the role of symbols and representatives of the Republic. This mismatch is further supported by additional constitutional provisions aimed at adorning the Directory with *éclat* and grandeur designed to amplify the authority of the new revolutionary state. Articles 166-8 established, for instance, an exclusive guard force of no fewer than 500 men and mandated that each director should always be accompanied by two of them. Article 172 even outlined the construction, at the Republic's expense, of a dedicated residence for the directors, ultimately selecting the magnificent *Palais du Luxembourg*, formerly the residence of the Count of Provence, the brother of the king, who would later become known as Louis XVIII.[13] Lastly, Article 173 stipulated a remuneration exceeding fifteen times that of the representatives.

Figure 1 Anonyme, *Costume des Membres du Directoire Exécutif de la République Française*, s.d. Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris

The imbalance in the portrayal of political representatives (namely, the members of the two legislative branches) and those destined to serve as the symbolic representatives of the Republic was also evident in other articles of the new constitutional text. These measures

13 To enhance the splendour of the building, which had served as a prison during the Terror, the directors did not hesitate to employ the old furniture of the royal palace. This serves as another sign of the increasingly apparent connections between the previous royal court and the new revolutionary one. See Mathiez 1933; Vauthier 1914.

simultaneously reinforced the paradoxical characterisation of a revolutionary court that appears to aptly describe the Directory. For instance, by granting the authority to appoint the highest-ranking officials in the state, ranging from generals to tax collectors, from colonial civil servants to commissioners dispatched to local administrations and tribunals, the directors were able to establish a network of connections, affiliations, and even patronage, which did not escape criticism and led some to decry the resurgence of shady courtly practices.[14]

3 From Theory to Practice: The Festivals of the Directory

Above all, it was the public celebrations that would serve as the barometer of the media's excessive coverage of the Directory, which increasingly projected an almost regal aura. The subject of celebrations, as one might surmise, occupies a central position within the theme examined, because it is capable of uniting and sustaining the various factors and individual dynamics discussed thus far. In fact, festivities had been a pivotal element of the revolutionary discourse since the initial parliamentary debates.[15] However, it was only after the general refounding following the fall of the *Incorruptible* that an organised and precise system of republican celebrations was first conceived and, most importantly, implemented. Through the law of 3 Brumaire, Year IV (25 October 1795), dedicated to public instruction, French representatives established a comprehensive system of no less than seven national festivals to be observed annually in each canton of the Republic:

> Celle de la Fondation de la République, le 1er vendémiaire; celle de la Jeunesse, le 10 germinal; celle des Epoux, le 10 floréal; celle de la Reconnaissance, le 10 prairial; celle de l'Agriculture, le 10

14 Even before the official approval of the constitutional text, Representative Jean-Philippe Garran expressed his outrage during the session on 27 July 1795: "Pour moi, bien loin de craindre que le pouvoir exécutif n'ait pas assez d'indépendance sous ce rapport dans votre constitution, et qu'il ne soit trop facilement accusé, je crains bien qu'investi, comme il sera, de tant de moyens de se faire *des créatures*, il n'échappe souvent à des condamnations justes, et même à l'accusation" (*Gazette Nationale, ou le Moniteur Universel*, 2 agosto 1795; italics added).

15 The capacity of images to symbolically cement and institute a new social order was carefully considered from the earliest days of the French Revolution. As stated by Mazeau (2018, 14-15): "Redoublant les grandes collections de portraits politiques qui se constituent dès 1789, les fêtes et leurs images permettent d'habituer le regard aux visages des nouveaux fondés de pouvoir et, parfois de les reconnaître. Elles exercent donc un rôle fondateur dans l'établissement du nouveau régime représentatif, fondé sur une nouvelle culture visuelle de la reconnaissance physique du charisme politique, tout en explorant les porosités entre célébrité et popularité".

> messidor; celle de la Liberté, les 9 et 10 thermidor; celle des Vieillards, le 10 fructidor.[16] (*Collection générale des décrets* 1795, 100)

We can observe the reemergence of the reversal of roles between those who held and those who wielded sovereign power, a topic to which we had previously directed our attention. It was through these festivals that the new revolutionary order sought to present itself to the French people. By evoking astonishment and appreciation for their grandeur, these festivals aimed to symbolise the implicit endorsement and approval of the elusive yet pivotal public opinion.

Within this context, it fell upon the Directory once again to assume the predominant and visually striking role during public celebrations. Even prior to the individual ceremonies, this choice had been established within the constituent assembly, where the at least symbolic subservience of the legislature to the executive authority was unmistakable. In fact, Articles 72 and 167 of the constitutional text stated:[17]

> Le Corps législatif n'assiste à aucune cérémonie publique, et n'y envoie point de députations.
> […]
> Le Directoire est accompagné de sa garde dans les cérémonies et marches publiques où il a toujours le premier rang. (*Constitution du 5 Fructidor an III*, artt. 72, 167)

The stark contrast between the 'transparency' exhibited by the legislators and the flamboyance displayed by the directors could not have been more conspicuous. In addition to the symbolic components, a precise and rigid ceremonial framework, reminiscent of the much-maligned Old Regime, was also revived. This revolutionary etiquette allocated specific positions to each public office during processions and public parades.

When we shift our focus from the numerous theoretical provisions to the actual unfolding of these grandiose republican celebrations,

16 Three additional festivities were subsequently introduced: the anniversary of the king's death (stipulated by the law of 23 Nivôse, Year IV); the commemoration of the fall of the Bastille and the end of the monarchy (both specified by the law of 10 Thermidor, Year IV). On 13 Pluviôse, Year VI, the annual celebration of the sovereignty of the people was decreed (to be observed on 30 Ventôse) and on 2 Fructidor, Year VI the annual celebration of 18 Fructidor was established. Finally, it's worth noting occasional festivities stemming from exceptional events, such as the public funeral held for General Hoche on 10 Vendémiaire, Year VI (1 October 1797). It is important to acknowledge that Robespierre, drawing from a prior report by Mathieu, had already outlined a calendar featuring four annual public celebrations during his renowned speech on 18 Floréal, Year II (7 May 1794). However, the events of 9 Thermidor and the fall of his own creator did not allow the project to be fully realised.

17 See Godechot, Faupin 2018.

it becomes evident that the visual and symbolic prominence of the five directors consistently remained a central concern for the organisers. Among these celebrations, this concern was most pronounced in the one that served as a reminder to French citizens of the victory achieved by the three directors (Barras, Reubell, and La Révellière-Lépeaux) over monarchical intrigues. This is the celebration that, in the words of Mona Ozouf, represented 'the quintessential manifestation of executive power': the festival of 18 Fructidor.[18]

As expected, the directives issued by the central government emphasised the symbolic and visual significance of the Directory during the celebration. On this exceptional occasion, the members of the Directory were authorised to don the distinguished *grand costume*. This attire consisted of an elegant blue gown and a nacarat cloak, both embellished with intricate gold embroidery, along with a fine silk sash, vest, and plumed hat. This attire, in and of itself, conveyed to the spectators, and by extension to the populace, the impression of the Republic's power and grandeur.

If France and the French Nation were to assume a visage for this particular occasion, it could only be that of the President of the Supreme Executive Body. In the Program for the First Anniversary of 18 Fructidor, drafted on the 8th day of the month (25 August 1798) by the Minister of the Interior and former Director François de Neufchâteau, the absolute centrality of the symbolic leader of post-Thermidorian France is readily evident:

> Le 18 Fructidor, à six heures du matin, une salve d'artillerie annoncera la Fête. Cette salve sera répétée, le même jour, à midi. Les cérémonies de la Fête seront exécutées l'après-midi dans le *Champ-de-Mars*. […] À quatre heures de l'après-midi, *le Directoire exécutif* et les Ministres, les Ambassadeurs et Agents des puissances étrangères, les Autorités et Administrations qui auront été convoquées, sortiront de la maison du Champ-de-Mars pour aller prendre place sur l'amphithéâtre élevé autour de l'Autel de la Patrie. […] À l'arrivée du Directoire et du Cortège sur l'amphithéâtre, le Conservatoire de musique exécutera une symphonie. *Le Président du Directoire* prononcera un discours, après lequel le Conservatoire exécutera le chant *du 18 Fructidor*. Ensuite *le Directoire*, précédé des Ministres et le l'État-major, descendra vers l'Obélisque, ôtera des mains de l'Hypocrisie le Livre de la Constitution, le portera en triomphe, et le posera, ouvert, sur un cippe placé au centre de l'Autel de la Patrie.[19]

18 Cf. Ozouf 1976, 219.

19 De Neufchâteau 1798, 1-5, italics added.

Figure 2 Philippe Joseph Maillart, *Grand costume du Directoire exécutif: «Le Directoire exécutif est le dépositaire du pouvoir de la nation. Il est la première des autorités constituées, celle qui surveille toutes les autres»*. Collection de Vinck. Un siècle d'histoire de France par l'estampe, 1770-1870, vol. 49

4 Conclusions: The 'Unfathomable' People

On both theoretical and legal fronts, as well as in practical and experimental terms, it was the responsibility of the Directory to represent the newly established French Republic, both domestically and internationally. As illustrated by the examples provided, holding the iconographic monopoly of power became indispensable for fulfilling this role. It was only by visually presenting and flaunting its magnificence that the revolutionary state could instil in its citizens and allies the respect due to a powerful, stable, and firmly rooted political entity. In this sense, it can even be argued that the role the Directory had to assume in the tumultuous years leading up to Napoleon's rise (which would usher in a new and unprecedented era of interplay between image and power) was part of a mechanism largely beyond its control, with the Directory serving as a pivotal, albeit temporary, component.

Ascribing the intricate system of visual power representation (of which we have been able to offer only a few albeit significant examples here) solely to the efforts of the directors would be to burden their responsibilities excessively and ultimately overestimate the

capabilities of individuals who were periodically elected and at times replaced within a matter of months. The reconfiguration not only of the image but, first and foremost, of the imaginary of power, is indeed a complex undertaking. It involves various personalities, both as individuals and as part of collectives, who contributed to it, often in a somewhat unconscious manner. This process included French representatives who sought a distinctive attire to set them apart from the common crowd, constituent deputies who responded to this call by introducing specific regulations into what would become the longest-lasting institutional order of the French Revolution, and commentators, publicists, and journalists who, during the same months when the groundwork was being laid for the new public order, acted as advocates for this iconic representational endeavour.

Within this framework, we must not overlook another pivotal actor, seemingly reduced to the role of a recipient of this effort to visually affirm power but, upon closer examination, an active participant and influencer in turn. While the symbolic trappings that public authorities adopted in the wake of Robespierre's downfall (particularly the Directory) gained significance through their presentation to the French people, the latter did not simply passively receive this imagery.

As we mentioned at the outset, the revolutionary era also inaugurated a new phase in the legitimisation of power, which could no longer be divorced from the demonstration of its popular origins, the ultimate source of all authority. While not all power could be directly wielded by the people, all authority had to, to varying extents, originate from and be traced back to a unique source. Consequently, even the acquired visual splendour of political officeholders had to be nothing more than a reflection of the mandating subject. Thus, in the midst of the constituent work, Boissy d'Anglas could symbolically declare:

> C'est dans la dignité des magistrats qui brille la majesté d'un peuple. […] La gravité, la dignité, la parure décente du magistrat, disposent les esprits au respect et à l'obéissance. (*Gazette Nationale, ou le Moniteur Universel*, 1 July 1795).

It was not sufficient, therefore, merely to hold power and exhibit its authority; it was imperative to continuously demonstrate the connection that one's position maintained with the most significant tribunal of the century: *l'opinion publique*. Thus, during the few but significant years under examination, we observe the deployment of various means and instruments, both old and new, to publicly reaffirm the relationship between power, the people, and authority.

The main subject, the formal source of all public power, inevitably occupied the focal point of systematic efforts in education and 'moralisation'. While these endeavours aimed at the noble objective of aligning French customs with the standards of the new public

institutions, they were not exempt from pursuing intentions linked to specific propaganda goals. Public celebrations, in this context, assumed paramount significance as the ultimate expression of an 'aesthetic ritualisation of power' destined to endure for decades and centuries to come. Their primary role was to illustrate how a precise political order intended to present and offer itself to the community through imagery, which, even before it was respected, needed to be visually recognised as the new dominant authority.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Reworking National History
The Representation of Power and its Subsequent Overturning in Relation to Postcolonial Art in Italy

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Abstract This presentation aims to analyse the representation of power and its subsequent overturning, in relation to postcolonial art in Italy. Works such as *Pays Barbare* by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia* or *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* by Theo Esthetu, use editing process and the video medium to decolonize images through artistic postproduction of archival material related to imperialist visual propaganda. In this way, the same picture is placed and recontextualized within another picture, leading the image to take on a different meaning, calling into question its relationship to power.

Keywords Postcolonialism. Decoloniality. Contemporary Art. Italy. Fascism.

Summary 1 Decolonizing Italian Visual Identity. – 2 Resemantization. Three Case Studies.

1 Decolonizing Italian Visual Identity

Dealing with coloniality in Italy nowadays, in the words of Massimo Vaschetto means embarking on a path of self-critical reflection, moved by the intention of questioning our own "subjectivity, social position, and, above all, our responsibility to the community" (2021, 21). Italian colonialism seems too often unjustly underestimated as if it were legitimate to consider it as a secondary plot compared to other similar ventures. The scant attention paid, especially in the past, to this not edifying page of our collective history shows the

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burden of the failed historical, cultural, and political reworking of Italy's colonial past. Certainly, the management of the military campaigns themselves, as well as the different economic, social, and cultural policies adopted since World War II, delineate a radically different scenario than, for example, that of France or Britain. Yet, the onset of Italian colonialism dates back to the late nineteenth century, with the acquisition of the African ports of Assab Bay and Massua, on the Red Sea. As early as 1890, Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony, anticipating the conquest of North African regions of Tripolitania, Dodecanese, and Cyrenaica promoted by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti in the second decade of the twentieth century. The advent of Fascism and the subsequent foundation of Italian East Africa (AOI) are nothing more than the tip of this bulky iceberg. The impact of Italy's expansionist aims, though reduced and sometimes downgraded in the collective imagination, to the rank of 'ragged colonialism', is actually considerable. The estimated victims are indeed almost 40,000 between Libyan, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali civilians and militaries. These are without a doubt remarkable numbers that attest to the heinousness of the crimes committed by the Italian occupation troops. The massacre of Debra Libanòs or the establishment of what Achille Mbembe called a "state of exception" (2003, 26) such as the Danane concentration camp – about 40 km south of Mogadishu – for the internment of political prisoners are just a few notable examples. Italy therefore is by no means free from faults. However, the history of Italian colonialism is still underestimated, as if it were just a subplot or a negligible fact of little relevance. The economic miracle in this sense seems to have overshadowed the end of eighty years of Italian colonialism, sanctioned by Somalia's independence achieved in 1960, only seventeen years after the fall of Fascism. From a certain point of view, it is as if the colonial project began precisely with the unification of Italy, playing a relevant role in the national identity-building process. But the pressing need to leave the regime behind soon proves decisive for the stringent identification of colonialism with Fascism, while encouraging the spread of self-congratulatory and opportunistic narratives. This process of removal contributes even today to the consolidation of that false and execrable myth of the 'good Italian', centered on the supposed pitiful and fair attitude of Italian soldiers toward colonized populations. Just as the apologetic support of the arts for expansionism, following the fall of the Fascist regime, gives way to a kind of aphasia, a nostalgic falsification of national colonial history. The removal of our colonial past from public debate and its almost total absence in the educational curricula of the national school system further confirm this lack, highlighting the critical nature of a very complex issue that is still unresolved. It is almost a collective amnesia, rooted in the mythology of conquest moved by the will to trace

a phantasmatic Romanity. However, it seems more appropriate to speak of amnesty, which is a self-absolution without trial, of a suspension of judgment towards the Italian colonial past, rather than of an oversight. Perhaps, in the words of Vasco Forconi, Italian identity itself is conditioned by a kind of underlying "victimhood" (2018). The deceptive myth of mutilated victory, for example, takes its cue from this attitude. The construction of the nation-state in Italy passes through the building of an essentially invented tradition, that is a set of symbolic and ritual practices assembled to instill specific values in the community and to affirm a supposed continuity with the past. But in the case of Italy, this past must be invented in order not to jeopardize the uncertain stability of national sentiment. Probably also because of this, Italian historiography seems to have systematically erased, at least until the 1970s, the chapter about the centrality of national colonial enterprises in the development of our collective identity. As if Italian troops were not going to conquer African territory, but were ideally returning home, right where the Roman Empire once thrived. The Italian people therefore cannot so easily identify with the unusual role of the executioner. And not surprisingly, it is said that Italy has not yet dealt with its past. Even in art history as much as in national contemporary art, as a result, a postcolonial research perspective is struggling to establish itself. Although there is no shortage of positive exceptions, both critical and expositive, it is a phenomenon in the making and still rather marginal. Studies published in Italy regarding the colonial question often seem to leave out or summarily address the Italian postcolonial scenario, just as a critical engagement with contemporary art production appears diluted, sometimes out of focus, and attenuated. The colonial exercise seems to be enacted in the silencing, in the constriction of a power matrix that inscribes the relationship with the other in an oppositional and binary code, concretizing Western – and therefore Italian – identity through the systematic denial or internalization of what is not Western. It is not a matter of reaffirming the existence of a voice of subordination, but rather of hindering its failure to be heard. The need to interrupt this silent connivance is seen in the necessity to examine the very concept of removal, passing through the decolonial decentering of subjectivity. Decolonial and not post-colonial, precisely because, using this specific term, the focus is on the need to highlight the criticalities consequent to the reproduction, in the sphere of knowledge, of a colonial device of domination and prevarication that is still difficult to unhinge. Therefore, one should not attempt to understand differences by fitting the other into already existing categories, but should instead claim one's right to opacity, to one's own singularity sometimes elusive in its entirety. Reminiscences of Italian colonialism persist in contemporary visual reciprocity, both in observing and being observed. The white hunter's

racialized gaze on former colonies and Africa more generally is still relevant to this day. It continues to crystallize, dissect, and define the black body. The posterity of toxic imaginaries, consciously or unconsciously shared and reproduced by the 'imagined community' of the Italian nation, adopts this view. But while the images of the past show the colonial violence, they can also take on a new meaning through their own resensitization. It is a form of posthumous coloniality, that is a way of acting and thinking that has become entrenched in the daily structuring of the collectivity through the consolidation of an intersectional system of privilege and prevarication. A coloniality that is evident, yet often invisible. Contemporary art, therefore, could become a vector of representation in order to subvert the dominant colonial gaze and the reductionism of otherness, opening a third way, a third desovranizing and aporetic space. The medium, after all, represents a matrix, a possibility, and a set of operating principles. But this is by no means to equate visual production with a field devoid of rules. The work of the artists is inseparable from a conscious deconstructive investment in material and institutional space, in their own perceptual habits, interpretive grids, or prevailing ideological segments. Indeed, the relationship between power and art appears to be inseparable, complex, and enduring. This is an equivocal relationship: while power is irresistibly attracted to aesthetics, it is art that expresses its will to power. This means that power looks with awe at the influence of art on its collective perception precisely because it needs it. Representation basically means making a political gesture through the more or less explicit conveyance of a specific message. Popular consent, then, must necessarily come through art and thus through one's own image or risks giving way to doubt, rejection, and consequent rebellion by the national community. From classical antiquity to contemporary times, art has always played a diriment role in the construction of the visual identity of power. And Italian colonial history is just another dark page in this complex and ambiguous book. Throughout the duration of national colonialism, in the words of Alessandra Ferrini and Simone Frangi, there is a kind of fruitful, as much as problematic, the "complicity between artistic, architectural, and cultural practices and colonialism" (2017, 113). The intent of this tacit agreement is to strengthen the popular support for the imperialist project through the necessary structuring of incisive yet reassuring imagery. Exhibitions, advertising, and architectural productions thus contribute to the delineation of a new colonial consciousness. Similarly, the widespread erection of monuments in Italian cities plays a decisive role in the process of ideological indoctrination promoted by the fascist regime, as if they were affective garrisons made to fulfill a precise pedagogical function. Fascism in fact restores the imperialist attitude intrinsic to the national imaginary itself, formed around the misleading value emblem of the

Mediterranean. A paradigm that still survives in Western critical thought today through an uncertain form of post-colonial populism, centered on the idea of a supposed ideological south. However, this attitude seems to shy away from the intimate complexity of the colonial question, staging the reproduction of an ideological coloniality that is all but dormant, precisely in the constant denial of the Eurocentrism inherent in the very idea of the Mediterranean culture. This is the more or less direct consequence of the depoliticization of monuments, buildings, and artworks, perceived and treated by the community as aesthetic objects. Similarly, however, merely removing certain visual expressions of power from public space is just a palliative measure. The failure to reframe the national colonial past, therefore, enables the survival of racist ideologies as well as today's settling of the radical right through the instrument of cultural habituation. But then, how might contemporary art production attempt to subvert the relationship between images and power by enacting a process of decolonizing national visual identity? There are certainly many answers to this question, yet the intent of this paper is to examine three specific case studies as paradigmatic examples of the possible figurative re-signification of colonial power.

2 Resemantization. Three Case Studies

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Pays Barbare*, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia*, and Theo Esthetu's *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, in fact, use editing and the video medium to turn the meaning of images upside down, through the recontextualization of archival materials related to Italian propaganda and imperialist history. Although with due differences, these works implement a conceptually similar creative process, focusing on the semantic function of selected images in a specific and unprecedented predicative context. It is then a matter of addressing what Kader Attia called the "Paradigm of Repairability" (Pesarin, Tinius 2023, 73), synonymous with the Western obsession with putting back together what has been destroyed, or rather thinking that everything can be repaired, hiding the wounds, as if it were impossible to even admit the existence of cracks, fractures or imperfections. These works show the wounds, making them tangible. It is not, therefore, a matter of denial, trying to restore a body or object to its formal integrity, but rather the will to visualize the signs of these wounds, which are often still open. They are scars that cannot, sometimes do not want to heal. And for this very reason, the importance of these works lies in the strenuous reaffirmation of the relevance and demeaning topicality of these injuries, through their own complex resemantization. Not surprisingly, Angelica Pesarini and Jonas Tinius have recently put forward the

proposal to set up an unusual "Museum of Undoing" (2023, 65-81), so as to highlight the incompleteness of healing processes with respect to painful colonial wounds. The works of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, Eshetu, and Ferrini retrieve different images and symbols of Italian colonial history and then place them within a different narrative dimension, but without altering their aesthetic characteristics. In this way, the picture remains unchanged, but the image becomes something else, taking on a meaning quite antithetical to the original monument or archival document. If in the past, these pictures represented, narrated and above all exalted Italian colonialism, now those same pictures show its disastrous consequences. After all, images are weaker than we think: they are subject to change. It is then a matter of scaling back the authority of the images themselves. Of course, these are by no means powerless figurations. On the contrary, they are certainly capable of exerting considerable influence on the surrounding reality. But they often seem to hide their own inner fragility. In *Pays Barbare* (2013), Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi recover unpublished images of the Italian colonial enterprise in Ethiopia to continue their research work on the Italian colonial past, specifically addressing the reciprocity between power and representation. The film opens with the bodies of Benito Mussolini, Claretta Petacci and other members of the Italian Social Republic displayed upside down in Piazza Loreto, Milan, on April 25, 1945. In the process of postproduction, the two filmmakers and artists slow down and zoom in the original footage so that the viewer can take a closer, more attentive look at details that would otherwise be elusive and secondary to the bodies displayed in the square. The first ten minutes of the film proceed without any sound intervention. It is silence, in fact, that introduces the scenes shot in the so-called Abyssinian colony. Almost as if it were an undiscovered story, kept hidden too long under the burdensome weight of time. The work then continues by dwelling on the time span between 1922 and 1936. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi juxtapose images of a parade held in the streets of an unspecified Italian city, with participants disguised as Arabs or blacks, with those of a plane intent on flying over the Ethiopian capital – perhaps to conduct a reconnaissance of sensitive places to bomb. After this unusual and alienating juxtaposition, there are some scenes shot on the streets of the Ethiopian capital, alternating with the arrival of the Italian troops. The heinous physicality of the Ethiopian conquest emerges from the montage, through the racialization and sexualization of subjugated bodies, the use of chemical weapons banned by international treaties, and the structuring of a complex propagandistic communication system. As in other previous works by the two, this movie also focuses on the construction of colonial consensus during the Fascist regime, showing letters, photographs, and heterogeneous film material from both private collections and works

funded and commissioned by the LUCE Institute. Indeed, these are mostly unpublished images that more or less fortuitously escaped confiscation by the U.S. military after the end of the conflict.

> Con la nostra camera analitica siamo tornati a frugare negli archivi cinematografici per trovare fotogrammi dell'Etiopia Abissinia del periodo coloniale italiano. Abbiamo trovato diversi film privati di un medico. L'erotismo coloniale. Il corpo nudo delle donne e il 'corpo' del film. Vedute aeree del territorio. Sui bombardieri si caricano bombe all'iprite, il cui utilizzo è sempre stato negato. Fotogrammi militari sconosciuti che mostrano gli uomini e le armi della violenta impresa italiana per la conquista dell'Etiopia. (1935-36)[1]

> With our analytical camera, we went back to rummaging through film archives to find stills from the Italian colonial period. We found several private films by a doctor. Colonial eroticism. The naked body of women and the body of film. Aerial views of the territory. Mustard bombs are loaded on the bombers, the use of which has always been denied. Unknown military stills showing the men and weapons of the violent Italian enterprise to conquer Ethiopia.

As seen in other works such as *Il fiore della razza*, *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, or *Lo specchio di Diana*, for Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi fascism cannot be reduced to public expressions or its explicit manifestations alone. The legacy of the regime, on the contrary, can be found in all those objects, in all those images that have fully entered the private sphere of Italians, settling in the family's everyday life. Therefore, the two seem to move backward, starting from the epilogue of Fascism to narrate Italian colonial imperialism. The title of the work, not surprisingly, takes its cue from the propagandistic language used by the regime to promote the campaign in Ethiopia: "Per questo Paese primitivo e barbaro l'ora della civiltà è ormai scoccata" (For this primitive and barbaric country, the hour of civilization has struck).[2]

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's analytical gaze and rigorous research constantly move in the balance between personal posture, attitude, working methods, and personal obsessions. Their works implement a cataloguing process that is anything but static and definitive, through the recontextualization of archival and stock images. In this way, this reflection on the often controversial concepts of barbarism

1 *Pays Barbare* (2013) by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Torino Film Festival. https://www.torinofilmfest.org/it/31-torino-film-festival/film/pays-barbare/16326/.

2 *Pays Barbare* (2013) by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Torino Film Festival. https://www.torinofilmfest.org/it/31-torino-film-festival/film/pays-barbare/16326/.

and civilization places the emphasis on the invaders, who are rude, violent, and ignorant, rather than on the conquered population. The images shown, then, take on an unprecedented significance: if they originally served to consolidate consent at home and abroad, they now highlight the atrocity of a reckless enterprise, while underscoring the many alarming critical issues resulting from the failure to reframe Italy's colonial past.

> Non siamo archeologi, entomologi, antropologi, come spesso veniamo definiti. Per noi non esiste il passato, non esiste la nostalgia ma esiste il presente. Far dialogare il passato con il presente. Dialettica tra passato e tempo presente. Non usiamo l'archivio per se stesso. Usiamo il già fatto con un gesto alla Duchamp, per parlare di oggi, di noi, dell'orrore che ci circonda. (Lissoni 2012, 16)

> We are not archaeologists, anthropologists or entomologists, as we are often called. For us there is no past, there is no nostalgia, but there is the present. To make the past dialogue with the present. We do not use the archive for itself, we use the already made, with a Duchamp-like gesture, to talk about us, about today, about the horror that surrounds us.

Similarly, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia* (2015) investigates Italy's lingering colonial legacy through materials from the Alinari Archives and the National Library in Florence. The artist's research, specifically, focuses on the collective amnesia related to the Ethiopian War (1935-36), examining images from public and private archives by means of a narrative voice and text folders. This film essay is divided into four chapters, dialectically analyzing – as reported in the artwork description published in *Coloniality and Visual Cultures in Italy*, a collective volume edited by Lucrezia Cippitelli and Simone Frangi – the relations between memory, visuality and cultural heritage from two specific collections: the Pittana fund held at the Alinari Archives and the Ughi private photographic collection. Photographs from the occupation of Ethiopia and propaganda postcards from Italian East Africa are reactivated by the artist through a process of analyzing the visual language of the colonial archive. Ferrini's narrative voice, in this way, emphasizes the centrality of the sometimes elusive link between personal and collective unconscious. However, the intent of the subjective encounter with this photographic material is by no means anecdotal, but rather to raise different questions related to the colonial legacy, attempting to stimulate an often still uncertain awareness by the community. Above all, it is a matter of firmly questioning that do-gooding and deceptive narrative centered on downplaying Italy's colonial past, proposing to make connections between past and present in order to pose questions to the

viewer. The work was presented for the first time at the 56th Festival dei Popoli in Florence, alongside the installation *Notes on Historical Amnesia*, which instead documents the pedagogical approach of the complex research and projects carried out with high school students to make the video. As the artist states, much of her rigorous work, constantly straddling theoretical, political, and visual research, consists of creating constellations, situating these materials in a more expanded context, and bringing out patterns that invite reflection on collective thought processes and systems. Indeed, Ferrini's work focuses on deconstructing the Eurocentric and, specifically, post-fascist Italian gaze, always keeping at the center the duty to listen respectfully and to share the daily conflict of the subjects prevaricated by such gaze resulting from a privileged and hegemonic whiteness. It then becomes crucial to examine the histories of each testimony or collection, dwelling on their function, their dispersal, dismemberment, or preservation as well as on the authors' ideological motivation. And again, the artist recontextualizes archival visual material to enact a process of resensitization: if previously these images exalted and, in a sense, corroborated the Italian colonial enterprise, now they implement a severe and pointed critique of national expansionist aims, showing the responsibilities of an empire.

> In general, I am interested in working with material that has not been invested with a status of authority or exceptionality, but whose triviality or apparent innocence nevertheless reflects, in a more latent way, the detritus of an imperialist, racist, orientalist, and fascist ideology underlying the Italian nation-state thought system – and deeply embedded in the way of seeing, thinking and imagining of each individual part of this imaginary community. Or that it has the potential to expose this debris and challenge it. (Ferrini, Zalukar 2021, 250)

The decolonial resignification of the work, albeit with due methodological differences, is similarly crucial in the third and final case study, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* by Theo Eshetu (2009). It is a video installation consisting of fifteen 4:3 monitors arranged in three rows of five, in the manner of the frames of traditional Ethiopian painting, divided into narrative pictures placed in non-linear sequence. The work relates back to the Ethiopian foundation myth of the Queen of Sheba, as recounted in the 12th century by the Kebra Nagast, reaffirming through the introduction of Christianity the link between Ethiopia and the Holy Land. Not only, in fact, did the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia predate that of Rome, but the myth has it that the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and became pregnant. Her son would later visit Jerusalem, then return to Ethiopia with the Arc of the Covenant and rule as King Menelik

I. Eshetu juxtaposes the symbolic power of Queen Sheba's narrative with the symbolic shifts associated with Axum's monumental obelisk. As the title suggests, the work recounts the return from Italy to Ethiopia and the subsequent erection of the Axum stele. The artist documents the complex gestation of this important restitution supported by UNESCO – a mediating institution in the diplomatic agreement between the two states involved. With a detached gaze, the artist captures every single detail of the workmanship from different points of view, highlighting the engineering nature of this operation. The work lingers especially on the ritual of transformation that recodes the symbolic bearing of the obelisk, from imperialist memory to an object of postcolonial discussion to an unprecedented symbol of emancipation. The artist calls into question the role of public monuments as spaces of representation and projection of collective memory through the narrative of this complex return.

> Harmonious compositions created by multiple repetitions and time shifts have counterpoints in compositions that unify fragments into a complete image across all fifteen screens. This is a work that fuses the painterly, the sculptural, the kinetic, the theatrical, the ritual, and the poetic, accompanied by varied musical counterparts. The technical complexities of the video installation echo, in miniature, the complexities of this engineering feat. (s.d.)

The imposing stele of Axum, mistakenly referred to as an obelisk in Italy, is a funerary pyre stele of the monarchs of the Axumite empire, dated 3rd century AD. After the introduction of Christianity, Axum became the religious capital of Ethiopia, and this along with other stelae erected in the oldest part of the city represent Ethiopia's pre-Christian civilization. However, the stele was taken to Rome during the Italian occupation and erected in front of the then Ministry of Colonies in 1937. This is a highly significant act, as it symbolizes the coveted revenge of the Battle of Adwa – when the Ethiopian forces defeated the Italian invading force on Sunday 1 March 1896. At the end of the conflict, the Ministry of Colonies became the headquarters of FAO, but the stele remains in front of the building, in a way marking the post-colonial continuation of the relationship between the two states as if Ethiopia was the main recipient of Western and Italian aid. Compounding its colonial connotations, the stele has long been the subject of political and diplomatic debate over whether or not it should be returned to Ethiopian citizens. But the resolution of the dispute is far more random and trivial than we think: in 2002, lightning severely damaged the stele, and the Italian state, rather than venture into costly restoration, decided to disassemble it and store it for three years at the military airport in Rome, and then bring it back to Axum in 2005. The stele, once returned to Ethiopia, was

paradoxically renamed by the local community as the 'Stele of Rome'. One of the main characteristics of the work lies in Eshetu's ironic decision to align the fifteen screens only once throughout the duration of the video to project the seemingly insignificant image of the two wheels of a truck placed under the erected stele. In fact, as the artist states, it is a monument with undoubted phallic reminiscences, and the collective fervor towards such a symbol is most peculiar. Other subtle references and visual games could be the parade of the three engineers on a camel-mounted construction site as if they were contemporary magi, the analogy between the vivid polychromes of the umbrellas of the Italians thronging in front of the stele and those of the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, as well as the image of a hand raised to reveal the obelisk, could easily be interpreted as a sly parody of the Roman salute. The point then is precisely to emphasize the resemantization of the stele over time. Again then, the picture remains unchanged, while the image changes drastically, several times: from a phallic emblem of power to a religious symbol, from a booty of imperialist violence to a postcolonial symbol, and later decolonial monument of an unprecedented balance between the global north and south in the age of globalization.

> Because Africa is often imagined through images, it is in art, photography, and video that powerful changes can take place and the realities, not covered by traditional media, can be exposed. Everything seems to come full circle with this work. (Wendt 2014, 100-13)

As can be seen from these three case studies, the dialectic of power and desire decisively conditions the relationship of the community with images. It is a double bind that affects both the subject and the object of racism, and it represents, after all, a form of visual violence perpetrated for the sole purpose of making the subject in question hypervisible and at the same time paradoxically invisible, that is, an object of abomination and adoration. The power of images, is ambivalent, often manifesting itself more as a lack than as actual possession. The national colonial legacy itself seems to creep into contemporary times, though it rarely shows its face. Italian colonialism appears as a troubling absence rather than a suffocating presence. As much in the critical deconstruction of the physical, visual, and verbal prevarication of otherness as in the survival of racist attitudes, the Italian colonial ventures seem to be nothing more than a faded memory. As demonstrated by the three works in question, however, art has the potential to play a diriment role in the articulated process of reworking a past that is still near, yet not so immediate as to prevent a lucid understanding of what happened. For this very reason, then, it becomes necessary to define the very evaluation

of the power of images, shifting the focus from what they do to what they want, from meaning to desire, from the dominant model to be opposed to the subordinate one to be listened to. After all, global art history, by its very definition, is postcolonial and contemporary (Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, 178-85).

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Artistic Expression and Political Power in Late Medieval and Renaissance Venice

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
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Reflections of Venetian *Cittadini Originari*
The Zamberti Family: A Case Study

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Abstract The category of *cittadini originari* in Venice had rather blurred contours at least until 1569, and this fluidity had an impact on the image they aimed to portray of themselves. As bureaucrats of the Serenissima and prominent members of the Scuole Grandi, they aimed to demonstrate their possession of *mediocritas* and *onorevolezza*, underlining the hereditary nature of such attributes. Through the case study of the Zamberti family, the experiences of three generations of *cittadini* will be followed to reconstruct various aspects of their visual culture, focusing on the role of images in conveying, asserting, and confirming their social status.

Keywords Venice. Cittadini originari. Renaissance. Scuole Grandi. Visual culture

Summary 1 Being a *Cittadino Originario* between the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. – 2 The *cittadinesca famiglia Zamberti, soprannominata dall'Avogaria*. – 3 The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista: A Father-to-Son Connection. – 4 The Inventory as a Mirror: Reflections of Daily Life, Devotion, Collecting, Portraiture, and Public Commissions.

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1 Being a *Cittadino Originario* between the Quattrocento and Cinquecento

Defining the characteristics of the class of *cittadini originari* is a complex task. Historiography has highlighted the numerous obstacles encountered in trying to define the boundaries of this social group.[1] Only from 1569 did the *Maggior Consiglio* establish criteria for obtaining recognition of this status: for at least three generations, male members of the family had to have been born and resided in Venice and refrained from engaging in *arti meccaniche*.[2] This law is functional to the final regulation of access to notarial and chancellery positions within the complex bureaucracy of the Serenissima, following various fifteenth-century attempts to reserve public service posts for *cittadini originari*.[3] This fluidity is reflected in the writings of historians attempting to frame the components of Venetian society,[4] and it is only in the works of Antonio Milledonne that the mention of *cittadinanza originaria* as a defined category appears for the first time.[5]

Similarly, the cultural features of this group are equally debated: the most recent studies take an intermediate position, highlighting the continuous approaching and distancing of citizens from the cultural models of the patriciate.[6] They are distinguished by certain traits, which will be explored later, primarily related to the concepts of *mediocritas* and *onorevolezza*. It is not coincidental that these elements are common denominators of the core values of the Republic's bureaucratic body: it is here that the majority of *cittadini* are employed, serving as notaries or secretaries in the offices of the Palazzo Ducale. The honour demanded by the status of "elite citizens" (Grubb 2000, 339) did not allow for much deviation from these professions, simultaneously allowing ample space for the formation of a composite middle class. As Zannini (1993, 46) emphasizes, the basic criterion for defining a *cittadino originario* was primarily linked to "the 'social recognizability' of the individual as native, Venetian, and 'ancient' in the acceptance of their social role". This observation is essential to understanding the weight of the cultural expressions,

1 Pullan 1971; Trebbi 1980; Neff 1985; Casini 1992; Zannini 1993; Grubb 2000; Zannini 2013; Setti 2014; Casini 2016.

2 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Maggior Consiglio, reg. 29, c. 45*r*.

3 ASV, Inquisitori e revisori sopra le Scuole Grandi, b. 1, capitolare 1, cc. 3*r*, 5*v*-6*r*. ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, Misti, reg. 19, c. 99*v*. ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, Misti, reg. 21, c. 194*r*-*v*. ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, Misti, reg. 23, cc. 108*v*-109*v*. ASV, Avogaria di Comun, b. 13, c. 5*v*. ASV, Consiglio dei Dieci, Misti, reg. 27, c. 202*r*.

4 Pullan 1971, 99-100; Grubb 2000, 339-40.

5 Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venezia, MS It. VII, 709 (8403), cc. 3*r*-4*r*, 44*r*-46*r*, 51*r*-52*v*.

6 Humfrey 1993, 108-9; Schmitter 2004; Zannini 2013, 385-6; Casini 2016, 70.

especially artistic ones, that they pursued to convey their image as members of this elite. This aspect suggests that their cultural activity should be viewed as a manifestation not only of personal inclinations but also of proud adherence to the class closest to the patriciate. In fact, as Sanudo notes, the patricians are indistinguishable in outward appearance from the citizens, as *tutti vanno vestiti quasi a un modo* (1980, 22). Nevertheless, as we will see, it is possible to define a more precise image of the aspirations and values of this "imperfect order" (Zannini 2013).

The protagonists of this article are the members of the Zamberti family. Through the analysis of testimonies spanning three generations, some of the cultural themes dear to *cittadini originari* will be brought to light, as manifested in their visual culture.

2 The *cittadinesca famiglia Zamberti, soprannominata dall'Avogaria*

One of the tools for reconstructing the history of *cittadini* families is the collection of *Genealogie dei cittadini veneziani* compiled by Tassini.[7] In the fifth volume (Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, MS P.D. c. 4, 5: 120), we can find an extensive family tree, along with additional information: the family, residing in Venice since 1361, has Florentine origins, and their burials are located at the Frari and Sant'Andrea della Zirada. They are known for having given the name 'dell'Avogaria' to the bridge and *calle* near San Barnaba, where they owned some properties. This appellation is linked to the *primarie cariche sostenute in quell'uffizio* by several family members. The Zamberti family became extinct with the death of its last male descendant, Giulio, in 1615, leaving its assets to the Superchi family. Three variations of the family coat of arms are presented in sketches, consisting of three stars in a field delimited by horizontal and parallel lines. In the present article we will focus on Alvise *quondam* Filippo, viewed through the lens of his wife Brigida de' Franceschi; Bartolomeo *quondam* Alvise, and Elena *quondam* Alvise **[tab. 1]**.

These individuals are of particular interest because documents concerning their lives, professions, and some traces of their material and visual culture have been preserved.

The four acts of Brigida's will[8] shed light on her husband Alvise – of whom no will has been preserved – and their children Filippo, Bartolomeo, Giovanni, Maria, and Cristina. The profession of Alvise, a

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7 http://lettere2.unive.it/manoscritti/tassini/.

8 ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Trioli, b. 974b, 205; ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60; ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Rizzo, b. 1229, 93, 94.

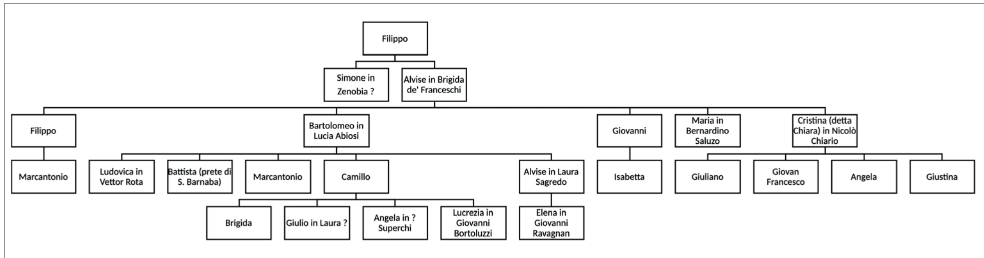

Figure 1 The Zamberti family tree

notary of the *Avogaria di Comun*, is prominently mentioned by Brigida, firmly placing him within the broader framework of the *cittadino originario* outlined earlier. Brigida and Alvise resided together in a "grande casa *a statio*" in San Barnaba and owned an adjacent building that was rented out. The nature of the family's residence warrants attention: as Matino (2020, 18) emphasizes,

> living in a *casa da stazio* was an expression of material wealth and personal standing, particularly when non-noble tenants were concerned. Originally built as seats of patrician families, Venetian *case da stazio* were often rented to well-off middle-class families seeking an upper-class residence that, among other things, would proclaim their professional achievements and advance their social aspirations.

Owning, and not just living in, a *casa da stazio* is thus a strong indicator of the family's aspirations, and in terms of projected image, it is one of the most effective signals that the Zamberti family could display in the city, especially in the residential district of Dorsoduro. Brigida specifies that the house was built by Alvise "suis pecuniis", emphasizing the exclusive nature of this possession and the alignment of the architectural and functional choices with the desires and needs of the *cittadino*.[9] She orders that, after her and her husband's deaths, the "cameram in qua nos iugalis habitamus cum suis fulrimentis" be inherited by their youngest son, Giovanni, as the other two sons already have their own private rooms.[10] This indicates the family's affluence, enabling them to provide two of their male heirs – while the parents were alive – with their own personal chambers. Brigida's will gives further insight into the family's

9 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c.1*r*.

10 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c.1*v*.

substantial real estate holdings: beneath the family's *casa da stazio* lies a "domuncula",[11] rented by Caterina and Giorgio da Scutari. Brigida instructs not to "ampliare, mutare velut alterare de forma et stato" this property, perhaps to preserve the meticulously crafted family image.[12] Brigida bequeaths her garments to her daughters and "certas meas perlas" to Maria, the eldest.[13] The significance of clothing and jewelry for the family will be explored further, but it is noteworthy that the memory of such objects often resurfaces through writings by women.[14] Brigida's will also indicates a strong connection, which will be encountered in other family documents,[15] with two specific churches: San Barnaba and Sant'Andrea della Zirada. Another relevant detail is worth noting: in Brigida's last will, drawn up for the third time in 1515,[16] following her husband's death a year before, a significant change in the distribution of bequests is evident. As a widow, Brigida possesses the entire family estate and orders that, after her death, the *casa da stazio*, the adjacent *casa da serzenti*, her remaining dowry, and assets pass to her youngest son, Giovanni.[17] This reversal of fortune for the elder sons is easily explained: while Alvise managed to secure "condecentibus officiis" for Filippo and Bartolomeo during his lifetime – posts akin to his prestigious role in the Venetian bureaucracy – his death prevented him from ensuring that the youngest son would similarly obtain such a position.[18] Therefore, Brigida seeks to compensate Giovanni with material assets that allow him to maintain a status befitting the family's respectability, despite lacking a chancellery job. This underscores the key role of a chancellery appointment in the image of a *cittadino originario*.

After examining the extent of the legacy of Alvise and Brigida, let us now see how one of their heirs position themselves in relation to this family tradition. We gain insight into this through the extant wills of Bartolomeo (Venice, *ante* February 19, 1473-1548),[19] the

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11 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c. 3*r*. Given the complex structure of this residential complex, we could consider the building constructed by the Zamberti family as a "casa doppia" (Gianighian 2008).

12 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c.1*v*.

13 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c.1*r*.

14 As Palumbo Fossati Casa highlights in her research (2013, 258) and as we will see in Elena Zamberti's inventory (ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, 345/10, 45).

15 For example, in Bartolomeo's and Giovanni's wills. ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 193, 141, c. 1*r*; ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, cc. 111*v*-112*r*, 116*r*; ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Priuli, b. 776, 226, c. 1*r*.

16 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, cc. 3*r*-*v*.

17 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c. 3*r*.

18 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, notaio Rizzo, b. 1227, 60, c. 3*r*.

19 ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Branco, b. 221, 43-4; ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Cavaneis, b. 193, 141; ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Cavaneis, b. 197, 85;

second son of Alvise and Brigida. Bartolomeo, a renowned philologist, notary of the *Consoli dei Mercanti*, and later secretary of the Senate, left several lengthy and detailed *in scriptis* wills, which reveal much about his personality. A strong bond with his family members emerges as he names his "charissimo fratello" Giovanni as executor of the will, along with his sons Camillo, Alessandro, Alvise, and his son-in-law Vettore Rota.[20] A connection to the church of Sant'Andrea della Zirada is also evident, as Bartolomeo requests to be buried "nella mia archa" there.[21] Regarding his funeral arrangements, Bartolomeo espouses the citizenly value of *mediocritas*, stating that "pompa funebris nihil aliud est quam fumus".[22] However, he does request, as was customary, that a suitable sum be spent to have masses said for the salvation of his soul over ten years, to be celebrated by his natural son Battista, the parish priest of the church of San Barnaba, complete with candles to illuminate the Blessed Sacrament.[23] Alms are also to be distributed to various charitable institutions in the city.[24]

Valuable details about the extent of Bartolomeo's library are provided. He orders that "tute le opere in logica et nele mathematice le quale io ho traduto de greco in latino le quale sono molto utile ali studenti et anchor necessarie le quale sono in una cassa nela camara mia" be printed, mentioning the presence of an inventory of his works.[25] Additionally, he mentions that "la mia libraria nela quale sono molti libri latini, greci et hebraici" should be shared among all his sons but primarily administered by Alessandro.[26] This suggests a sort of handing over the reins to the heir who perhaps displayed more passion for his father's interests. It is plausible that Bartolomeo's residence had a designated *studiolo* where he kept his codices, and the emphasis on the shared usefulness of these texts suggests that it was a semi-public space accessible to scholars and friends. Due to his service in the chancellery, Bartolomeo possessed "repertori [...] de le cosse della cancellaria della illustrissima signoria nostra",[27] which were bequeathed to Alvise, who was employed in the same profession and on the verge of becoming an ordinary chancellery member. This confirms another commonality among *cittadini originari*,

ASV, Notarile, Testamenti, Notaio Ragazzola, b. 88, 81.

20 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 112*r*.

21 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 112*r*.

22 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 112*r*.

23 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, cc. 112*r*-*v*.

24 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 113*r*.

25 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, cc. 113*r*-*v*.

26 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 113*v*.

27 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 114*r*.

where specific career paths are often divided among male offspring.

For his silverware, Bartolomeo stipulates that some items can be sold to satisfy bequests and creditors.[28] However, he requests that certain pieces, adorned with the family coat of arms, be retained.[29] This emblem is likely one of the variations of the sketches by Tassini seen at the beginning and emulates a custom originally associated with the patricians, which over time becomes "no proof of nobility [but] simply the sign of a certain level of *politia* as Sansovino would have understood it" (Fortini Brown 2000, 316). Did this emblem also appear on the façade of the family's *casa da stazio*? This is not far-fetched. Bartolomeo also provides information about the layout of his house, which he had improved in various areas, including his room, the *portego*, other bedrooms, the cellar, the laundry room, the firewood storage, the attic, the chicken coop, and the garden.[30] This suggests a rather complex building, most likely corresponding to the *casa grande* built by his father Alvise. Together with previous clues, this demonstrates a solid economic standing and particular care for the family's image. Bartolomeo also showed concern for preserving the family's legacy, specifying that the entirety must pass to legitimate male heirs and under no circumstances to natural children.[31] This emphasizes his almost compulsive concern for the family's *virtus*. Only in the absence of such heirs should everything be inherited by his daughter Ludovica, and finally, after her death, by the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista.

3 The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista: A Father-to-Son Connection

This marks the beginning of another significant chapter for the Zamberti family – the strong generational connection with the Scuola Grande. The presence of prominent families among the ranks of these confraternities and the recurring participation of their members in leadership positions without interruption are well-known facts and a consistent pattern for multiple clans of *cittadini originari*.[32] As highlighted by Fortini Brown (1988, 254 fn. 95), between 1498 and 1525, 35% of the *Guardiani Grandi* and 21% of the *Quattro Capi di Banca* are drawn from this group, often challenging the period of *contumacia* and

28 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, cc. 113*v*-114*r*.

29 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 114*r*.

30 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, c. 115*r*.

31 ASV, Notarile. Testamenti, Notaio Cavanis, b. 197, 85, cc. 115*r*-*v*.

32 Pullan 1971, 64-116; Neff 1985, 269-92; Fortini Brown 1988; Bellavitis 2001, 131-7; Matino 2015; 2016.

the prohibition on closely related individuals being elected to key roles in the governance of the Scuola (Bellavitis 2001, 135; Matino 2016, 20).

The family's connection with the Scuola can be traced back to the father, Alvise, who joined the confraternity in 1469[33] and held several prestigious positions. He served as *degano* in 1473, 1478, 1480, and between 1483 and 1484, eventually becoming *Guardian da Matin* in 1494 and *Vicario* in 1498.[34] His sons followed the same path, with Bartolomeo being the most successful, achieving the position of *Guardian Grande* in 1540.[35] Some authors focusing on the group commissions of the Scuole and emphasizing the significance of the *Quattro Capi di Banca* and their connections with artists have already been cited. In the case of the Zamberti family as well, certain junctures are worth highlighting. The years in which Alvise held prestigious positions were crucial for the commissions of the paintings in the cycle of the Miracles of the Relic of the True Cross, proudly preserved by the Scuola. In 1494, precisely when Zamberti served as *Guardian da Matin*, Carpaccio delivered his painting depicting the *Miracle of the Cross at the Rialto Bridge*; Mansueti portrayed the *Miracle of the Cross at Campo San Lio*; Lazzaro Bastiani depicted the *Presentation of the Relic*, and Perugino contributed with the *Rescue of the Ships of Andrea Vendramin*. Concurrently with other significant commissions for the Scuola, the Zamberti family members assumed leading roles. This is the case with the hiring of Codussi, who in 1498, when Alvise is *Vicario*, creates the Scuola's monumental staircase. Notably, during the *guardianato* of Bartolomeo, in 1540, the renovation of the hall of the *albergo* finally commenced (Schulz 1966, 89; Humfrey 1989, 316). Four years later, Bartolomeo, member of the *Zonta*, still held influential status within the Scuola and it was then that Titian was engaged as an advisor for reconfiguring some canvases in the *Sala della Croce*, making way for two doors leading into the nearly completed *albergo*.[36]

The pivotal role of the *Quattro Capi di Banca* in the commissions of the Scuole, as emphasized by Matino (2015), encompassed fundamental tasks that carried responsibilities and certainly personal inclinations. These ranged from "defining projects in minute detail, estimating expenses and execution times, selecting artists, to drafting contractual terms" (Matino 2015, 89). Holding such positions also meant being entitled to be depicted in the crowd witnessing miraculous events, perpetuating one's image and, above all, one's status, in a prominent position – always with the appropriate deference to the

33 ASV, Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, hereafter SGSGE, reg. 13, c. 56*r*.

34 ASV, SGSGE, reg. 73, cc. 9*r*, 14*r*, 18*r*, 19*v*, 20*r*, 30*r*, 34*r*.

35 ASV, SGSGE, reg. 73, c. 77*r*.

36 ASV, SGSGE, reg. 141, c. 135*v*.

relic, the true protagonist – in the construction of the pictorial layout. It is almost certain that Alvise, then *Guardian da Matin* (who held the essential role of supervising the ceremonies and processions of the Scuola), was also immortalized in one of the four paintings delivered in 1494, implying an even more direct relationship with engaged artists and a deep emotional and personal involvement. Considering the constant presence of family members in various roles, it's conceivable that youth and children figures depicted alongside more mature *confratelli* might include Alvise's three sons, who would have formally entered the Scuola only a few years later. Lastly, it's noteworthy that the Scuola Grande of San Giovanni Evangelista boasts the highest number of secretary officers among the *confratelli*. The correlation between *cittadinanza originaria* and service within the Ducal Chancellery, as demonstrated by Neff (1985, 292), suggests that the presence of *cittadini originari*-bureaucrats among the *Quattro Capi di Banca* and the inclination toward enriching the Scuola's artistic heritage is not coincidental.

4 The Inventory as a Mirror: Reflections of Daily Life, Devotion, Collecting, Portraiture, and Public Commissions

Finally, we come to the last generation of the Zamberti, which we will examine through the figure of Elena. Daughter of Alvise *quondam* Bartolomeo and Laura Sagredo, and widow of Giovanni Ravagnan, Elena passed away shortly before August 21, 1613. On behalf of her great-grandson Agostino, the inventory of her assets was compiled on request of Marco Antonio Rota, Agostino's guardian.[37] The document details the items present room by room in the "già solita habitatione della quondam signora Helena Zamberti posta in contrà de san Bernaba".[38] This inventory allows us to roughly reconstruct the structure of the dwelling: it consists of seventeen rooms, including five chambers, a study, a *portego*, and an attic on the first floor, and four chambers, a kitchen, a laundry room, a wood storage, a second *portego*, a passageway, and a "horto" on the ground floor.[39] The building overlooks the canal, "il ponte che vada nella calle longa", a courtyard and the *Calle Longa* itself.[40] Taking into consideration this description along with information provided by Tassini and Bartolomeo's will, discussed earlier, it seems plausible to identify Elena

37 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45.

38 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 1*r*.

39 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 1*r*, 2*r*-*v*, 3*v*, 4*v*, 5*v*-7*r*, 8*r*-9*r*.

40 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 1*r*, 2*v*, 3*v*, 4*v*, 5*v*, 6*v*-7*r*.

Zamberti's dwelling with at least a portion of the houses constructed by the family patriarch Alvise near the present-day bridge and *calle dell'Avogaria*. The diversity and quantity of rooms also suggest a considerable level of prosperity, confirmed by the array of movable goods stored within.[41]

In addition to a substantial amount of furniture, three categories of objects hold significant positions in the inventory: clothing, jewelry, and paintings. It is primarily due to the wide variety of garments described that Elena's house appears vibrant with colour. Each piece is detailed with its style, material, and colour. The number and types of clothing (including men's, women's, children's, and infants' attire), along with a frequent usage of the attributes *usado* and *vecchio*, portray a wealth accumulated over time and passed down through generations. Also appearing among the various pieces are also the *vesti di color* and the *barette negre de ormesin o de velludo* worn by the *cittadini originari* leading the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista in the paintings of the *Sala della Croce* – a compelling concordance between diverse visual and written sources. The level of economic well-being achieved by the family is confirmed by the number of jewelry items described, followed by an additional section at the end of the document, prepared by two goldsmiths, which provides the specific value of each jewel.[42] Among these are some noteworthy pieces, such as "un zugiello con un caval alato smaltado con cinque perle et una pietra bianca et una rossa et quattro altre piccole" and "una veretta d'oro rotta con l'ongia della gran bestia dentro".[43] Also, multiple pieces of silverware are engraved with "l'arma zamberta a tre stelle",[44] providing tangible evidence that matches the heraldic sketches presented by Tassini. Exotic items further enrich the inventory, including *tappeti cagiarini*, *turcheschi* and *siriani*, leather chairs from Bulgaria, two Levantine *tachie* (a type of skullcap), *scatole alla turchesca*, and colorful and figured cloths and *cuoridoro* covering the walls.[45]

Elena's house also boasts a significant collection of paintings. The officials of the *Giudici di Petizion* count a total of forty-five paintings, variously arranged throughout the different rooms, indicating in twenty-nine cases their subjects.[46] Referring to Hochmann's re-

41 As highlighted by Palumbo Fossati Casa (2013, 102, 131), only the residences of the wealthier citizens reached fifteen to twenty rooms. The residential district of Dorsoduro itself is also indicative of a high standard of living.

42 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 9*r*-10*v*.

43 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 1*v*, 5*r*.

44 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 5*v*.

45 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 2*v*, 3*r*-*v*, 5*r*, 8*r*.

46 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 2*r*-*v*, 3*r*-*v*, 4*v*, 5*v*, 6*v*, 7*v*, 8*r*.

search (2008, 25), this collection far surpasses the average number of possessed paintings among citizens during 1610-15, which stands at around 10.9 units. It can be assumed that such a collection was gathered over the course of more than one generation. The list includes: five portraits, an *Annunciata*, the Adoration of the Magi, the Marriage at Cana, a depiction of Mary Magdalene, two representations of Christ, one of them on the cross, a "retratto de cupidine vecchio", four paintings of the Seasons, two Madonnas, one referred to as "greca", a *Pietà*, two Madonnas with Child, eleven small paintings, and another four larger ones not further identified, along with nine paintings labeled "di divotione" and "un quadro de hebano in vero con una pittura dentro". Notably, there is a certain variety in subjects: although religious themes predominate (not always in traditional ways, as will be discussed), mythological subjects and portraits are also present.

Among the religious paintings, we find some highly popular themes, such as the Annunciation, the Magi, Mary Magdalene, the *Pietà*, Christ on the Cross, and the Madonna with Child. Therefore, many variants of paintings for meditative prayer appear, which focus interest on one or at most two figures, showing a strong connection to the Venetian tradition of private devotions from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The presence of a Greek Madonna,[47] that is, a Byzantine icon, still suggests the existence in the household of a group of paintings acquired at least one or two generations before Elena's. Moreover, a Marriage at Cana is mentioned,[48] which indicates an interest in the narrative aspect of religious painting. The popularity of the theme of *cene* reached its zenith in Venice between 1560 and 1575, and for this specific episode from the Gospels, examples such as Veronese's work at the Prado come to mind, where sacred events, social life, and grand scenography are combined (Brown, Elliott 2002, 263). Furthermore, the vague references to "quadri di divotione",[49] in two cases, as Corsato (2013) aptly pointed out, do not solely frame works of 'openly' religious subject matter. Such references can include paintings of diverse nature, where "subjective devotion was more important than its object" (Corsato 2013, 170 fn. 28). In this context, it's significant to note the presence of a Cycle of the Seasons in the *portego*.[50] The adherence of this iconographic series to meditative themes has been extensively discussed, particularly in relation to the "'genre' iconography" by Jacopo Bassano, inherited by

47 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 6*v*.

48 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 3*v*.

49 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 7*v*-8*r*.

50 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 8*r*.

his workshop.[51] The proximity of these four paintings to “doi quadri del signor et della madonna” and “cinque quadretti de devotion piccoli” confirms this reading. Similarly, as in the case of Simone Lando discussed by Corsato (2013), we encounter a family of *cittadini originari* strongly linked to the chancellery. Elena’s cousin, Giulio, a ducal secretary, appears on the back of the sheet containing Lando’s will,[52] suggesting an affiliation with a similar cultural milieu. These were cultivated collectors capable of a devotional interpretation of the Seasons cycle that did not necessarily require explicit religious references within the paintings.

Moving on to the group of mythological paintings, the notaries only mention a representation of Cupid,[53] although we cannot exclude the possibility that other examples might have been present amidst the “quattro altri quadri de pictura parte fornidi et parte desfornidi”.[54] The little god of love is common in Venetian collections, both in sculpture and painting.[55] For example, he appears in the collection of the *cittadino* Francesco Zio, also from a chancellery family, who possesses other works with ancient subjects, such as a nymph and a *quadretto de Mutio Scevola, che brusa la propria man, finto de bronzo* (Michiel 1800, 63). The identification of the work as a portrait and the addition of the attribute *vecchio* suggest that the painting could depict Cupid in a portrait-like style and could have been passed down through multiple generations within the family. This work might even be attributed to the same period when Zio commissioned his painting from Giovanni Cariani (Michiel 1800, 63). Considering the fondness for antiquity of Elena’s grandfather, Bartolomeo, who, as we have seen, owned an extensive library of Greek and Latin texts, it is plausible that he acquired this artwork. Inventories such as this one allow us to perceive the accumulation of interests and predispositions within families over time.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting the presence of five portraits. As we know, the presence of this genre of painting is not uncommon in Venice and is documented in houses of various social classes.[56] Their mention within the residence of *cittadini originari* is particularly appropriate, given the value placed on *mediocritas* and *onorevolezza* by this group: it is essential for them to demonstrate the continuity

51 Aikema 1996, 131-8; Corsato 2010; 2013; Eskelinen 2014; Corsato 2016; Nichols 2018; Heimbürger 2022.

52 ASV, Notarile Testamenti, Notaio Secco, b. 119, 572.

53 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 8*r*.

54 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 7*v*.

55 Michiel 1800, 17, 20; Schmitter 2004, 925; Lauber 2008, 326.

56 Hochmann 2008, 31; Cecchini 2008, 174; Humfrey 2011; Palumbo Fossati Casa 2013.

of these attributes over time. In no case does the notary provide the name of the depicted figure, specifying, however, that two of the paintings represent a woman, leading us to conclude that the other three had male subjects. In the room above the garden, we find “un rettrattin legado in hebano”, “un rettratto de donna in un bossollo de rame indorado”, and “un retratto in un bossollo di bosso tondo”, all stored within a “scrigno de noghera bollado”.[57] These are artworks of diminutive size, intended for private and intimate contemplation rather than public display. They are characterized as precious objects, with two of them stored in boxes – one in gilded copper and the other, a circular one, in boxwood.[58] These portraits may evoke the solutions of Jacometto Veneziano or the *Giovinetto* in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham by Bellini (Baseggio Omiccioli 2015). They might have featured an allegory or a motto on the cover of the case. Therefore, the Zamberti family were sophisticated patrons who fully understood the value of such artworks, as evidenced by their decision to store them alongside coins and jewelry within a chest.[59] This choice contrasts with the opulent sixteenth-century portrait favored by non-native *cittadini*, *nouveaux riches*, who emulated patrician models in their self-representation – exemplified by Titian’s *Portrait of Alvise Gradignan* (DeLancey 2017). Regarding the two female portraits,[60] which are quite common in Venetian inventories (Palumbo Fossati Casa 2013, 20), the absence of identification with a specific woman should not lead us to think that they are allegorical or impersonal images (Palacios Méndez 2018, 101-2). Rather, they most likely represent unidentified family members. The role that this genre of painting played for the Zamberti family must have gone beyond the mere remembrance of relatives. The notaries report in the *portego* “cinque quadretti de devotion piccoli computado un quadretto de retrattin”.[61] The inclusion of a small portrait among devotional paintings seems to confirm what Morse suggests – that private portraiture was integrated into the spirituality of early modern Italy, highlighting the frequent association of portraits and religious images in the *portego* and the “shared formal strategies” (2019, 128) of the two genres.

In addition to the comprehensive inventory of movable goods, the notaries from the *Ufficio di Petizion* provide an extensive index of family archive documents.[62] These include records concerning gener-

57 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 1*v*, 2*r*-*v*, 7*v*.

58 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 2*r*-*v*.

59 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 2*r*.

60 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, cc. 2*r*, 7*v*.

61 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 45, c. 8*r*.

62 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 51.

ations preceding Elena's, ranging from Bartolomeo *quondam* Alvise's will to the "albero della descendenza Zamberti".[63] This index extends even to the marriage contract between Alvise *quondam* Filippo and Brigida, dating back to 1470.[64] The number of writings from Elena's generation is also quite substantial, and among them, one document stands out as significant to conclude this article. It pertains to a grant by the chapter of the church of San Barnaba to Giulio Zamberti *quondam* Camillo, Elena's cousin.[65] The grant involves "un loco in terra all'Altar della Beata Vergine Maria in ditta chiesa nel qual possi far costruir una sepoltura": this adds a final piece to the visual culture of these *cittadini originari*. By constructing their own *casa da stazio*, playing prominent roles in the commissions of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, and acquiring private artworks, the Zamberti family did not miss the opportunity to establish a concrete and visible sign of their devotion and prestige in the public environment of their parish church. Information about San Barnaba is scant, making it currently impossible to identify the family tomb. The church underwent multiple renovations until the mid-fourteenth century due to repeated fires. It was later rebuilt in 1749 based on a design by Lorenzo Boschetti (Cornaro 1749, 5: 379-83; Tassini 1872, 70-1). Sansovino (1663, 246) reports the presence of a *pala à guazzo* in the left chapel, depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin amidst Angels and Saints*, painted by Giovanni (probably d'Alemagna) and Antonio Vivarini; of a painting featured on the main altar portraying *Saint Barnaba and Saints*, attributed to Damiano Mazza or Tintoretto; and additionally, of Antonio Foler's *Nativity of the Virgin* (prior to 1591) and Palma il Giovane's *Last Supper*. With the mention of this document, the lively cultural panorama of these *cittadini originari* is further defined. Remaining attentive to conveying a virtuous and recognizable self-image in both private settings and public contexts, while maintaining prominent roles in the chancellery and the Scuola Grande until the end of their lineage, the Zamberti family demonstrated a sustained commitment to artistic practice, constructing an enduring image of *mediocritas* and *onorevolezza* that has persisted to the present day.

63 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 51, cc. 4*v*, 13*r*.

64 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 51, c. 13*r*.

65 ASV, Giudici di Petizion, Inventari, b. 345/10, 51, c. 3*r*.

Abbreviations

ASV = Archivio di Stato di Venezia
SGSGE = Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista

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Beyond the Image of Submission
At the Origin of the Distorted Portrait of the Byzantine Emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) in the Latin West

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Abstract This article explores the origin of the distorted image of the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) in the Latin West. It opens with an examination of a submissive iconographic representation of John V in a seventeenth/eighteenth-century Venetian painting. The second section reflects on the initial stages of negative deformation that this emperor's portrait underwent in historiography. The rationale behind these distortions seems to be closely linked to John V's adherence to, then rejection of the Latin faith: in 1369, he converted to Latin Christianity, but over time his conversion came to be no longer considered valid.

Keywords John V Palaiologos. Byzantine Empire. Religious submission. Latin faith. Distorted portrait. Historiographical bias.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Beyond Da Canal's Painting: At the Origin of an Iconographic Distorted Portrait. – 3 The Literary Portraits of John V in the Work of Philippe de Mézières: At the Origin of a Historiographical Distortion. – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The Venetian church of Santa Maria del Carmelo, known as the 'Carmini', houses a canvas painting entitled *Un imperatore innanzi a un vescovo*, 'An emperor before a bishop'. This painting, which cannot be dated precisely, is the work of the Venetian painter and scholar

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Vincenzo da Canal (seventeenth/eighteenth century). It depicts the Byzantine emperor John V Palaiologos (r. 1354-91) prostrating himself before the Latin bishop Peter Thomas; they are surrounded by many bearded men **[fig. 1]**.[1] By representing John V in the act of publicly submitting to a Western figure, da Canal's painting conveys the image of a submissive ruler.

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the 'origin' of John V's submissive portrait: the reasons for its iconographic representation in da Canal's painting. It will then investigate the related phenomenon of the development of a distorted literary representation of this emperor in the West. After reviewing a few contextual elements of John V's reign, it considers the story told by Philippe de Mézières in *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* (1366) about the encounter between the emperor and the bishop, highlighting the historiographical biases that may have influenced da Canal's depiction of the former. The last section advances some reflections on the initial stages of the emergence of John V's distorted portrayal in the West.

2 Beyond Da Canal's Painting: At the Origin of an Iconographic Distorted Portrait

2.1 The 'Conversion' of John V According to *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* by Philippe de Mézières

When John V Palaiologos ascended to the Byzantine throne in 1354 – he would rule until 1391 – the empire was in the midst of a complex crisis that had been shaking its foundations since the early fourteenth century. Religious conflicts and civil wars had torn apart the social fabric of the empire whilst Byzantine territorial domination had given way to the Turks in Asia Minor and to the Serbs and Bulgarians in the Balkans. These challenges continued throughout the second half of the fourteenth century, further weakening and impoverishing the Byzantine state. However, as soon as he came to power, John V took a number of measures to readapt the Byzantine state to this context of crisis.[2]

These measures included the policy of dialogue and rapprochement with Western powers that John V pursued until at least the early

1 In the Beni Culturali general catalogue: NCTN 00152509. Information about this painting remains scarce in the archives of the Patriarchate of Venice as well as in twentieth-century restoration notes (see for example Fiocco 1942, 163-4). As for its creator, Vincenzo da Canal, his career as an artist remains largely unexplored. He is mainly known as the biographer of his contemporary, the better-known Venetian artist Gregorio Lazzarini. See below.

2 The most important works on John V and his reign are Halecki 1930, Radić 1993 and Estangüi Gómez 2014.

Figure 1 Vincenzo da Canal, *Un imperatore innanzi a un vescovo*. Church of Santa Maria del Carmelo (Carmini), Venice. ©Author. Courtesy: Ufficio Beni Culturali – Patriarcato di Venezia.

1370s. Several times, John V turned to Latin-faith lordships, hoping to obtain financial or military help to curb the advances of the Turks. As a result, he became the first Byzantine emperor to travel outside of imperial territory for diplomatic reasons. In 1365-66, he went to Hungary looking for the support of King Louis of Anjou (Gill 1979; Nerantzi-Varmazi 1989). Similarly, in 1370-71, he sojourned in Venice, where he pursued some intricate negotiations concerning a financial loan that he hoped to obtain from the Republic (Loenertz 1958; Bertelè 1962). Shortly before, in 1369, he had visited Pope Urban V in Rome where he had converted to the Latin faith (Halecki 1930). However, despite these efforts, John V did not receive the assistance he sought, at least in the short term.

It is precisely in this climate of dialogue and rapprochement with the Latin Church and the West, that the story of the meeting between John V and Peter Thomas – the two characters in da Canal's painting – occurs. This story is reported only in *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas* (henceforth, this work will be referred as the *Life*), a hagiographic text written around 1366 by the French scholar Philippe de Mézières (1327-1405) with the aim of securing the bishop's canonisation.[3]

3 Philippe de Mézières, who knew Peter Thomas personally and accompanied him on his last missions (though not to Constantinople), wrote the *Life* shortly after the latter's

Peter Thomas (ca 1305-66) was a Carmelite friar, which likely explains the presence of the painting in the Carmini church. His ecclesiastical career as a bishop and archbishop culminated in his appointment as the Latin patriarch of Constantinople in 1364. He is also known to have played an important role as apostolic nuncio during the pontificate of Innocent VI. Among his undertakings, at the beginning of the 1360s, he was a legate in Cyprus, where he oversaw the conversion of many of the island's inhabitants, eventually provoking a reaction from the patriarch of Constantinople Kallistos I.[4] Shortly before, between 1356 and 1357, he had been sent to Constantinople with the mission of educating John V, an orthodox ruler, in the Latin faith.

According to Mézières' account, Peter Thomas entered the empire's territory while John V was on a military campaign (Smet 1954, 74). Having explained the purpose of his mission, the apostolic legate began to assiduously visit the emperor and, as time passed, John V and his men became more and more convinced of the bishop's religious arguments. Once back in Constantinople, Peter Thomas converted the emperor: John V was made "a true Catholic and subject to the Roman Church, through confessing the articles of faith one by one and through declaring that the holy Roman Church was his mother".[5] He is then said to have received communion from him (74-5). After describing John V's conversion, Mézières includes, as proof of his words, a copy of a letter in Latin that John V is supposed to have sent to Pope Innocent VI on the 7th of November 1357 attesting to the emperor's conversion before Peter Thomas (76-9). Mézières' account concludes by mentioning the conversion of other Christians of the empire (80).

The historicity of this conversion has been a subject of debate among historians. Firstly, no other extant sources record the act of religious submission reported in the *Life*. Secondly, and most importantly, an official document preserved in the Vatican Secret Archives confirms that John V personally converted to the Latin faith more than ten years later, on the 18th of October 1369 in Rome.[6] In addition to these problems, some aspects of Mézières' account invite

death. On Peter Thomas, the main work remains that of Boehlke 1966; on Mézières, see the collection of articles dedicated to him edited by Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Petkov 2012.

4 See the letter written by Kallistos I and sent to the clergy and notables of Cyprus regarding the attempts at conversion conducted by Peter Thomas on the island (late 1361-early 1362), where the legate is described as a 'ferocious beast': Darrouzès 1977, 370-2, no. 2443.

5 Smet 1954, 75: *ipse imperator factus est verus Catholicus et obediens ecclesiae Romanae, articulos fidei sigillatim confitendo, et sanctam ecclesiam Romanam esse matrem suam asserendo*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

6 Vatican, ASV, *A.A. Arm. I-XVIII*, n. 401. Written in Greek and Latin, this document also comprises the emperor's signature and a notarial act full of details as to how and where the conversion took place. For the edition and a commentary, see Pieralli 2016.

scepticism. For instance, the imperial letter that the author integrates into his account as proof of John V’s conversion is absent from the register containing papal missives for that period (Vatican, ASV, *Reg. Vat.* 62) due to a lacuna, so that it is impossible to know with certitude whether or not the letter was actually sent to the Curia. Furthermore, although many historians consider this letter reliable (since it presents all the characteristics of authenticity),[7] they have nevertheless interpreted its contents differently. For some, it is clear that, in his letter, the emperor abjures the schism and offers the union of the Byzantine Church with Rome in return for military aid (Smet 1954, 202-4); others, however, consider the communion that John V would have received in the Latin rite to be, if true, the only guarantee of his conversion (Halecki 1930, 62).[8]

Finally, to some extent, Mézières’ characterisation of his protagonists seems to affect the factual content of his narrative. In a study published in 2009, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski concludes that Mézières’ *Life* is dominated by hagiographic discourse and the ideology of crusade, with Peter Thomas as the incarnation of the dual ideal of saint and crusader (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 2009, 224). The account of Peter Thomas’ mission to Constantinople also features a number of motifs drawn from these discourses. The nuncio is here presented as an indefatigable traveller, who arrives in Constantinople after many pains and dangers and keeps tormenting his body with afflictions and fasting. His rhetorical skill is remarkable: his words “penetrated the heart of the emperor and softened it, as well as that of very many other Greek lords”.[9] Above all, Peter Thomas is represented as a *confessor gloriosissimus*, a most glorious confessor. The author’s attempt to construct an image of Peter Thomas as a saintly guide to the Byzantines creates what we might consider to be a ‘positively’ distorted portrait (cf. Blumenfeld-Kosinski 2009, 230, 237).

Kiril Petkov, in a study published in 1997, argues that Mézières’ depiction of the Byzantines produces a sense of religious ‘otherness’ (1997, 259). This is indeed the impression given when we look at the above-mentioned account: the Byzantines “had been separated from the Church for a long time and deceived the Roman Church many times in treaties”.[10] Pope Innocent, in sending Peter Thomas, “did not

7 Cf. Halecki 1930, 62 fn. 2.

8 See also the doubts expressed by Sebastian Kolditz, who considers that the deferral of the promises contained in John V’s letter – such as that he would depose the patriarch and put in his place a man of the Latin faith – “do not mitigate the impression of a rather balanced, if not reluctant, response” to the pope (2022, 510).

9 Smet 1954, 74-5: *verba ipsius Domini Fratris Petri in cor imperatoris intraverant et ipsum mollificaverunt, necnon et aliorum quam plurimorum baronum Graecorum*.

10 Smet 1954, 74: *ab antiquo Graeci separati sunt ab ecclesia, et multoties in tractatibus ecclesiam Romanam illuserunt*.

remember the sins of his sons [the Byzantines]"[11] and the Byzantine patriarch, whom the emperor had promised in his letter to depose in favour of a Latin-faith one, is denounced as "perfidious".[12]

Such literary portraits suggest that, in Mézières' text, there is an imbalance in the relationship of power between the Byzantines and Peter Thomas, nor can it be *a priori* excluded that, in order to celebrate the latter, the author deliberately falsified some important aspects of the mission itself. If then, as it seems, da Canal was familiar, either directly or through intermediary sources, with the *Life*, it would mean that his depiction of John V was inspired by quite an unbalanced (if not a deliberately biased) account.

At this point, it should be noted that da Canal's iconographic representation further unbalances this power relationship, presenting a completely falsified image of the emperor. In fact, Mézières describes John V's conversion before Peter Thomas, but never alludes to the emperor bowing before the bishop. For the Byzantines, the emperor was the *defensor*, the 'defender' and representative of the Church.[13] Publicly kneeling before a Latin bishop in Constantinople would likely have meant acknowledging the latter's spiritual supremacy. This would have been a powerful symbolic act, one fraught with danger for the Byzantine emperor and his religious authority.

An account of John V bowing before a western churchman is found among the curial sources that record his 1369 visit to Rome and official conversion there.[14] This detail is provided by the *Iter Italicum Urbani V* (henceforth, the *Iter*), recorded by the Occitan writer Bertrand Boysset in the fifteenth century but dating back to an eyewitness, a certain Garoscus de Ulmoisca.[15] The *Iter*, which only covers the period from Urban V's departure for Rome until his return to Avignon (1367-70), contains a vivid description of the emperor's reception at St Peter's: the pope, surrounded by his cardinals, was seated at the top of the steps. Upon arrival, the emperor knelt three times, then kissed the pope's feet, hands, and mouth. The pope took the emperor by hand, and they entered the church singing *Te Deum*, where

11 Smet 1954, 74: *filiorum peccata non recordans*.

12 Smet 1954, 75: *patriarcham Graecum perfidum*.

13 See above all Dagron 1996.

14 These sources are: the *First Life* of Pope Urban V, an anonymous text, and the *Second Life*, written by the apostolic secretary Werner of Hasselbeck, a contemporary of the related events. The *Second Life*, in particular, after referring to the chrysobull of John V containing his profession of faith, describes the encounter between the emperor and the pope which took place the next Sunday (21st October): John V ascended the stairs of St Peter's, then he entered the basilica with Urban V, and the pope celebrated mass. Cf. Kolditz 2022, 497-501.

15 See Ehrle 1900 and the Introduction to the recent edition of this text by Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 5-45.

Urban V celebrated mass in the presence of many Byzantines.[16]

The precise significance of this ceremony has recently been discussed by Sebastian Kolditz in his 2022 article dedicated to the reappraisal of John V’s conversion in Rome.[17] In particular, he insists on the clear separation between this ceremony, a public one which took place on 21st October, and the act of conversion of John V, which took place on 18th October. The latter was, according to him, orchestrated as a private, if not secret event, and designed by John V himself and his advisers in such a way as to avoid the news of it being made public, especially in Byzantine circles. In fact, John V pronounced his profession of faith in the private chamber of a deacon, far from the gaze of the public, without the pope even being present and in front of few Byzantines (Kolditz 2022, 501-6). Now, since the curial sources do not report that the profession was read during the public ceremony on Sunday, John V’s appearance on the steps of St Peter’s, with his prostration to the pope, would have manifested itself, as Kolditz states (2022, 505), “not as a gesture of humiliation but of reverence to the supreme pontiff”. Thus, if we accept this interpretation, it is possible that the act of bowing before the pope was in no way symbolically connected to the emperor’s personal conversion.

In any case, some doubts must be raised about the very credibility of the account of John V’s prostration in Rome provided in the *Iter*. This text contains some obvious inaccuracies,[18] and several difficulties persist in identifying the author of the text (Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 36-8).[19] It must therefore be handled with caution.

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16 Gautier Dalché, Bonnet, Rigaud 2018, 56: *Item die XXII [sic!] mensis octobris que fuit die dominica, dominus noster papa Urbanus quintus exivit de palacio suo Rome et ivit coram ecclesia sancti Petri super scalam; et ibi erat una catedra bene parata pro eo cum omnibus cardinalibus et prelatis indutis cum eo. Et papa sedebat in catedra solus in pontificalibus. Et statim venit inperator Grecorum alias de Costantinnoble ad eum. Et tam cito quod vidit papam flexit genua tribus vicibus. Isto facto venit ad papam et osculavit pedes eius, manus et os. Et postea surexit et accepit dominum dictum inperatorem per manum et incepit dicere “Te Deum laudamus” etc. Et intraverunt in ecclesiam Sancti Petri insimul. Et in eadem ecclesia ppapa tancito cantavit missam. Et ibi erat presens dictus inperator cum multa congregatione Grecorum. Et eadem die dominus inperator pranssus fuit cum papa et eciam omnes cardinales.*

17 See also Pieralli 2016, 102.

18 According to the *Iter*, the encounter between John V and Pope Urban V took place on Sunday, October 22nd (see *supra*). But the 22nd of that month was actually a Monday.

19 Boysset borrowed this passage written in Latin from another chronicle, known as the *Iter*. In the manuscripts conveying Boysset’s chronicle, the *folii* containing the *Iter* also present a subscription: *et ego talis vidi omnia ista et fui praesens* (Genoa, Bibl. Univ. E.III.18, f. 45r), and *et ego **** et fui presens* (Paris, BnF, Ms. fr. 5728, f. 3r). Some scholars read in this latter subscription the name of ‘Garoscus de Ulmoisca Veteri’. However, others have given some different readings of this subscription – such as *et ego iacobus develino ista vidi*, claiming that *develino* meant ‘from Avellino’ and thus attributing it to a certain Jacobus de Velino. Yet, no chronicle by Jacobus de Velino is known, and this reading is also considered doubtful.

Consequently, as it is the only text to mention John V bowing to the pope, the historicity of the latter's public prostration in Rome cannot be confirmed but deserves further investigation.

Even if this prostration actually took place as the author of the *Iter* claims, given the prudence with which John V seems to have orchestrated his own conversion, this whole scenario not only further weakens the possibility that John V publicly converted in 1357, as reported by Mézières in the *Life*, but above all confirms the subversiveness that the emperor bowing in Constantinople before a Latin bishop who had just witnessed his conversion would have represented. Since it does not feature even in Mézières' account, such a prostration must be regarded as completely improbable. Da Canal's painting, depicting the prostration of a Byzantine emperor in the presence of many Byzantines and influential orthodox clergymen, must therefore be regarded as the visual representation of a historiographical bias.

2.2 The 'Poisoning' of John V's Image in Historiography

At this point, one question remains unanswered: why does such an image of prostration and submission exist if no written source alludes to it? As has been said, it is probable that da Canal was familiar with Mézières' work, but it remains difficult to know exactly how the story of Peter Thomas' mission to Constantinople reached the Venetian artist – possibly through some intermediary sources that had become partially corrupted. It is also conceivable that da Canal confused different events in the life of John V, combining elements from the public ceremony that took place in Rome in 1369 with some from the supposed conversion in Constantinople in 1357. Nor can it be ruled out that he drew inspiration from other pictorial representations of the time that depicted similar scenes.[20] However, it is very probable that da Canal, in depicting John V's prostration, was influenced by a historiographical trend that has continued, over several centuries, to blacken and 'poison' the image of this emperor.

Even today, John V has one of the darkest images of any Byzantine emperors, and his reign is still the subject of much negative commentary by contemporary historians: some have spoken of a decline that was so discouraging that no Byzantine historian of the latter half of the fourteenth century wanted to recount the unfortunate events of

20 Interestingly, among the six allegorical paintings that the Venetian Senate commissioned from Gregorio Lazzarini in 1694, one depicts the personification of the reconquered Morea region on her knees in front of the representation of Queen Venice. Da Canal knew of this painting, as he describes it in his biography of Lazzarini (da Canal 1809, XXX). The painting in question has been the object of an interesting analysis by Anastasia Stouraiti (2023, 105).

his reign (Nicol [1972] 1993, 253) and have described him as a completely incapable ruler, the laughing stock of the Turks and of the West, indebted in every way to their support in order to remain in power.

The roots of these comments are to be found in previous centuries, when the modern historiographical prejudice towards the 'decadence' of the empire was being created and nurtured. Edward Gibbon, for instance, in his *History of Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), qualifies John V as a "careless spectator of the public ruin". He continues by stating that:

> Love, or rather lust, was his only vigorous passion; and in the embraces of the wives and virgins of the city, the Turkish slave [Constantinople] forgot the dishonour of the emperor of the *Romans*. (Womersley 1995, 825)

Gibbon, like others of his contemporaries, allowed himself to be inspired and drawn into this description by the unflattering and humiliating portrayals that some late accounts, both Byzantine and Western, had given of this emperor after his death in 1391. The histories of Doukas and Laonikos Chalkokondyles, the two best-known Byzantine chronicles of the fifteenth century, and long the most widely used for reconstructing the reign of John V, describe him as a man incapable of handling state affairs, who devoted himself to pleasures rather than to the obligations demanded by his position.[21] However, although they are rich in information, these chronicles contain numerous errors. Today's specialists therefore handle them with caution. A fifteenth-century Western chronicle known as the *Chronique de Savoye*[22] and Chalkokondyles' history also report distorted accounts of John V's diplomatic missions to the West, characterising his stays in Hungary and Venice as periods of captivity (Chaubet 2006, 195-6; Darko 1922, 46-7). Even though the historicity of such 'imprisonments' has been disproven (Chrysostomidis 1965; Pall 1971), these versions have long been given credence by modern historiography, becoming emblems of John V's supposedly poor governance. These stories also seem to have spread in Venice: the scholar Francesco Sansovino takes up Chalkokondyles' account of John V's alleged imprisonment in his city in his *Gl'annali Turcheschi overo vite de' principi et signori della casa* (1571).[23]

21 Grecu 1958, 41; 65-7; 71 and Darko 1922, 75-6. On these two chroniclers, see Déroche, Vatin 2016, 105-9 (for Doukas) and 323-41 (for Chalkokondyles). On Chalkokondyles, see also the monograph dedicated to him by Kaldellis (2014).

22 On the author of this chronicle, Jean d'Orville, better known under the name of Cabaret, see the article by the text's editor: Chaubet 1992.

23 Sansovino 1571, 14. On Francesco Sansovino, see the recently published collection of articles dedicated to him by D'Onghia, Musto 2019.

Profoundly influenced by these *légendes noires*, modern historiography has also long interpreted John V's conversion to the Latin faith as an act of political submission, to the point that even some recent publications assert that "no other Byzantine emperor had abased himself so profoundly to the papacy, which *ipso facto* reveals the extent of John's despair over the future of his realm" (Reinert 2002, 269).

Given his education, it is very likely that da Canal was influenced by this historiographical tradition. His figurative portrait of John V should therefore not only be regarded as a product of this tendency, but also as a means of its perpetuation, proposing a distorted relationship of power in which John V stands in a position of forced submission. Da Canal's painting accentuates the supremacy of the Latin Church over the Byzantine one, but also, especially given the early modern context of its creation, that of the West over the East. As the only known figurative representation of this emperor in the West, da Canal's painting is emblematic of one of the counterfeit images that traditional historiography has spread of John V: that of a Byzantine emperor subjected before the Latin West.

3 The Literary Portraits of John V in the Work of Philippe de Mézières: At the Origin of a Historiographical Distortion

In the face of this traditional perspective, historians have begun to refute the decadent vision of John V and his reign, and to reassess his actions as ruler of a state in crisis. As we have seen, some traditionally accepted facts about this emperor's life, such as his alleged imprisonments, have been disproven, and a new interpretation of his personal conversion, with an emphasis on his own initiative, has also been recently proposed.[24] Above all, Raúl Estangüi Gómez (2014), in his monograph dedicated to the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire, has shown that John V was able to adapt the functioning of the state to changing circumstances on several fronts. As a result, even though the Byzantine state suffered an important territorial collapse during the reign of John V, largely as a result of the Ottoman advance, it seems that the intense criticism of this emperor cannot simply be attributed to his poor governance. The reasoning behind such invective must be sought elsewhere.

Sources contemporary with the reign of John V, both Byzantine and Latin, should therefore be examined anew in response to this historiographical shift, in order to reconstruct the 'origin' of the criticism

24 See *supra*.

of this emperor, and thus of his blackened image.[25] To this end, and in the light of the importance of these events to da Canal's painting, the following section will reflect on the association between the literary motif of John V's adherence to, then rejection of, the Latin faith and the emergence of his distorted portrayal in the work of Philippe de Mézières. Another text by Mézières, written towards the end of John V's reign, also concerns the emperor and provides a useful comparison to the already analysed passage regarding the encounter between Peter Thomas and John V.

In the *Life*, as has been said, John V and the Byzantines stand in an unbalanced relationship of strength. What has not yet been emphasised, however, is the disappearance from the narrative of the negative traits associated with the Byzantines after John V's (alleged) conversion. His submission, together with that of some of his subjects, seems to endow them with a more positive characterisation at the end of the account. Once converted, in fact, the Byzantines are renewed in their vigour for holy war against the Turks and the establishment of peace in the Church.[26] Not only can the conversion therefore be understood as a passage to 'sameness', which for Mézières means becoming the representatives of a 'crusading' ideology, but the future of John V's realm itself depends on this act of obedience.[27] Conversion is thus no longer just a religious act, but also a political one, involving the salvation of the empire.

This suggests that John V's profession also represented, in the eyes of the author, a qualitative passage from 'bad' to 'good'. As noted by Petkov (1997, 258), Mézières indeed spares the Byzantines "any negative connotation for the time being" because of the recently concluded conversion. More proof in this regard is provided by another episode recounted in the *Life*: the mission that Peter Thomas carried out in Serbia in 1355 to convert another sovereign, the tsar Stephen

25 My doctoral thesis, on which I am currently working under the supervision of Marie-Hélène Blanchet, deals with political criticism of John V in Byzantium. It is entitled *La critique politique à Byzance à la fin de la période paléologue: transgression, subversion et contrôle de l'espace public durant les règnes de Jean V et Manuel II (1354-1425)*.

26 Smet 1954, 80: *et laetantes animabantur contra Turcos ad sustinendum bella Dei in pace ecclesiae*.

27 Similarly, the curial accounts that speak of John V's conversion in Rome, which have been analysed by Kolditz in his aforementioned article (2022, 497-501), limit themselves to reporting details about the emperor's adherence to the Latin faith and never venture into denigrating comments on the imperial figure. There is no evidence of John V being humiliated in these sources, and the depiction of the emperor himself does not carry any negative connotations. On the contrary, one account even emphasises the spirit of conviviality that developed between Urban V and John V after the latter's conversion, when the emperor, it is said, would attend the pope's meals to discuss matters of faith with him (Albanès, Chevalier 1897, 392).

Dušan (r. 1331-55).[28] This time, Peter Thomas was unsuccessful in his conversion attempts, and the mission was a failure. Mézières gives a caricatured description of this ruler's physical appearance, providing details about his enormous stature and terrible face (Smet 1954, 67-8). He states that the sovereign claimed that his subjects kissed his feet and goes on to describe the extreme measures Dušan adopted towards those who attended Latin mass, gouging out their eyes.[29] While John V is depicted as a pious sovereign, whose conversion brings the possibility of salvation for his realm, Dušan acquires all the characteristics of an 'evil ruler', eventually becoming a *tyranno indurato* (68).

The opinion of Mézières on John V, however, seems to have changed by 1389 (two years before the emperor's death), when the French scholar published *Le songe du vieil pèlerin* (henceforth, *Le songe*), an allegorical treatise written this time in Middle French and dedicated to Charles VI of France (r. 1380-1422) as a manual of instruction in matters of personal virtue and royal behaviour. By this time, the political landscape of the Byzantine state had drastically changed. During the second half of John V's reign, his policy of rapprochement with the Latin West tapered off. Apart from the failure of the negotiations with the pope and the Venetians in 1369-71, the possibility of a cohabitation with the Ottomans was beginning to take shape in Byzantine society over those years, especially among the elite. In 1376, John V's firstborn son, Andronicus IV, usurped the throne and recognised Ottoman sovereignty over Byzantium (Cf. Estangüi Gómez 2014, 222-69). John V's policy after his resumption of power in 1379 therefore had to adapt to this condition of vassalage towards the Ottomans. Despite imperial efforts to ensure the survival of the empire, the Ottomans set out to conquer a large part of the Balkans in the last quarter of the fourteenth century (271-313).

Mézières' *Le songe*, which recounts a journey undertaken by Queen Truth, accompanied by Peace, Mercy and Justice in search of a realm worthy of their presence,[30] also contains a little-known depiction of John V and the situation in the Byzantine Empire at the time. In the 23rd chapter, Queen Truth meets Desperate Devotion, a dishevelled old lady who has arrived from the East (from the *isles d'orient* and *de l'Archepelegue*), hoping to obtain help against the Turks – exactly as John V had done some twenty years earlier. The

28 On Stephen Dušan's reign, see Soulis 1984.

29 Smet 1954, 67: *fecit etenim praeconizare quod nullus Christianus ecclesiae Romanae sub privatione oculorum missae ipsius Domini Fratris Petri nuntii papalis interesset*. Cf. Petkov 1997, 259.

30 The manuscript, Paris, BnF, Ms. fr. 22542 (fifteenth century), f. 31r contains a miniature of their journey through the lands of schismatic Christians: for a description, see Bourassa 2015, 100-1; for the miniature, see https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53247203h/f79.item.

queen, however, refuses to help the lady, feeling that "your people of the islands have abandoned me" (*vos gens des isles m'ont habandonnee*) (Blanchard 2015, 241), and, in justifying her decision, she cites emperor John V as the reason for her indignation.

> Les uns de vos gens par envie ont faulsé le testament de mon Pere, et fait division des enfans a la mere, de l'espouse au mary, ensivant celui qui s'appele moderateur des Romeeins, c'est l'empereur sismatique de la cité jadis Bisance appellee, et ores Constantinoble, et ses calogeros aussy, orgueilleux et ypocrites, en la montaigne le peuple decevant, voire celui empereur appellé Jehan Paliologos, souverain chief de la division de la cote de mon tresamé Pere, et contre son sacrement et sa profession. Car .II. fois depuis .XX. ans il a esté reconsiliés a l'esglise de Romme, et renoncié en publique au sisme tresmaudit, l'une foiz en la main de frere Piere Thomas, solempnel maistre en theologie, de l'ordre des Carmelites, et le legat apostolique a l'empereur susdit; l'autre fois en la main du benoit Urbain quint, en la cité de Romme. Et tantost qu'il fu retournés en Constantinoble, il ne donnast pas un noble de sacrement qu'il avoit fait. Si demeure chetis et habandonnés de mon Pere, comme dessus est plus plainement desclairié, tel chief de sisme et de heresie, avec son obstiné patriarche, vostre gent sivent et tu, vieille messagiere, en moy laissant, et la clarté de ma saincte doctrine. (Blanchard 2015, 244-5)
>
> Some of your people, out of envy, have betrayed my Father's wishes and have separated the children from their mother, the wife from her husband, following the one who is called moderator of the Romans – that is, the schismatic emperor of the city formerly called Byzantium and now Constantinople – together with his monks, proud and hypocritical, deceiving the people on the mountain, namely that emperor called John Palaiologos, the sovereign captain of the separation from my most beloved Father's side, in spite of his communion and his profession. For twice in twenty years he has been reconciled with the Church of Rome, and has publicly renounced the most cursed schism: once through the hand of brother Peter Thomas, the famous master of theology of the Carmelite order and apostolic legate to the aforementioned emperor; the second time through the hand of the blessed Urban V, in Rome. Yet as soon as he returned to Constantinople, he gave no proof of the communion he had made. So this captain of schism and heresy remains captive and abandoned by my Father, as has already been more fully explained, along with his obstinate patriarch, followed by your people and by you too, old messenger, abandoning me and the clarity of my holy doctrine.

This account has been briefly commented on by Petkov (1997), who highlights how Mézières began to attribute responsibility for the territorial collapse of the Byzantine state to the sins of orthodox Christians. The possibility of a crusade was, in Mézières' eyes, less and less conceivable, because the expedition would be caught in the Turkish danger on its way to the Holy Land. For this reason, according to Petkov, Mézières created in *Le songe* a "highly negative picture to undermine their [the Byzantines] image in the West" (1997, 265): the French scholar was prepared to let the Ottomans keep what they had conquered in order to punish the orthodox sinners (265).

The overwhelmingly negative picture found in the passage above stems from a specific cause: namely, John V's non-fulfilment of his commitment made to the Latin Church. In fact, in *Le songe* the orthodox Byzantines represent a subversive otherness, an entity which produces 'dissention'. John V, despite his (alleged) double oath and conversion, is no longer perceived as subject to the Latin faith, but has become a "schismatic emperor", while the Byzantine monks and the patriarch are described as proud, hypocritical, and obstinate.

All of them, as rebels, are "captives" and "abandoned" by God.[31] This portrait is overflowing with negative traits, both religious and political. Mézières not only blames the character of the Byzantine people, but also inveighs against the condition of the Byzantine state in this moment of crisis: it is a kingdom abandoned by God. Just as submission to the Latin faith had once offered John V a chance of saving his country, his opposing actions of betrayal and disobedience here serve as a pretext for tracing the portrait of an evil ruler, a tyrant who is responsible for the desperate situation of his ungodly empire. The origin of the literary deformation of John V in Mézières' production therefore seems to maintain an important link with the emperor's rejection of the Latin faith.

31 On the Latins' perception of the Byzantines as 'schismatic', see for example Chrissis 2019.

4 Conclusions

The origin of the negative distortion of John V's literary image in Philippe de Mézières' work seems to be intimately bound up with the emperor's slide away from his conversion and the Church of Rome. Whilst Mézières' *Life*, written in the 1360s, presents a neutral, if not positive, opinion of the emperor as a result of his religious submission, *Le songe*, composed at the end of John V's reign, focuses on his 'rebellion', and apostasy from his profession of faith. Such 'disobedience' on the part of John V engenders an increasingly negative portrayal of Byzantium, one which involves not only religious elements, accusations of schismatism and heresy, but also critiques concerning the difficult political situation of the empire, for which he is responsible. The image of a 'captive', submissive emperor, in the political as well as the religious sphere, paradoxically originates, in Mézières' work, from his perception of John V's rebellion.

While the early portraits of John V in these fourteenth-century Western accounts are varied, and even conflicting, later and modern historiography has focused almost exclusively on the subservient characterisation of this emperor, relegating his religious submissions to humiliation and passivity and nullifying his political initiative, creating a false historiographical bias against him. The same process can be seen at work in da Canal's representation. None of the written sources attest to the prostration of John V before Peter Thomas. Da Canal's painting is therefore not only a product of this calumnious historiographic tendency, since the image itself combines different events in the life of John V as told in Latin sources that are unbalanced or of doubtful credibility, but has also played a role in propagating this enduring tendency through its distorted representation of John V.

Abbreviations

ASV = Archivio Segreto Vaticano
Bibl. Univ. = Biblioteca Universitaria
BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Words For/Against Power
Pietro Aretino's Poetical Devices as Demystification of the Present

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Abstract Investigating the *Ragionamento* (1534) and the *Dialogo* (1536), this paper aims at reviewing Pietro Aretino's relationship with power, both political and cultural. The author takes advantage of his poetical abilities as means of self-affirmation and political blackmail, developing between Rome and Venice a new poetic language, in which metaphor takes on a value that is anything but literary. Aretino wants to establish a concrete relationship with the recipients of his texts through the very act of writing. To do so, he credits the idea of a physicality and complete reality of all the elements that make the message possible, creating political images that reveal the vile nature of the corrupted authority.

Keywords Pietro Aretino. Power. Metaphor. Image. Sex.

When Pietro Aretino was inevitably forced to leave Rome in October 1525, he had greatly foreseen the imminent despair the city was bound to suffer, and never did he retain from condemning the political and moral *status* of the Papal court.

While the Venetian residency played a pivotal role in shaping Aretino's artistic output from the 1530s,[1] his time in Rome holds particular importance for his intellectual growth. Throughout this time, except for the early iteration of *La cortigiana* (1525) which falls within his later creative period, there is a noticeable absence of surviving

1 On this topic, see the thorough proceedings of the 2018 Venetian conference *Pietro pictore Arretino* (Bisceglia, Ceriana, Procaccioli 2019), as well as the most recent and comprehensive anthology on Pietro Aretino (Faini, Ugolini 2021).

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compositions that demonstrate literary consistency. Indeed, Aretino's artistic decisions during this era were mostly shaped by the political and sociological environment that surrounded him, and by his strategies for engaging with influential figures in positions of authority (cf. Crimi 2019).

Being close to a neophyte and a financially disadvantaged intellectual, Aretino seemed to be on the sidelines of influential official appointments, which usually favored individuals with either noble lineage or literary acclaim. Aretino likely recognized quite early that, given his absence of inherent or circumstantial qualifications that bestow social privilege, he needed to play different cards than those employed by esteemed intellectuals of renowned stature. Without the ability to provide economic and social assurances, Aretino had to depend on attributes of an alternative kind, such as literary production being a product of naturally gifted individual genius – a notion he explicitly explores in his later epistolary. He defined genius as a natural quality capable of remedying the injustices wrought by fortune and nature, aiming to rebalance the prevailing societal disparities, driven by both historical and social considerations.

The political satire from the author's Roman period, mostly voiced by the only public *persona* assigned with such role which is Pasquino, is of particular significance as it helps define his relationship with power (cf. Procaccioli 2006; Faini 2017). In the 16th century, State, instead of functioning as a public service, was frequently perceived as the personal domain of the ruling prince. Thus, opposition to power inherently meant opposition to the individual wielding it, effectively personifying authority; conversely, any affront directed at the individual constituted an immediate challenge to authority itself. Satire was therefore more direct and held immediate practical implications. In this context, the author's role grew in strength when confronting the state's representatives because, by using a potentially dangerous weapon, he not only showcased his literary skill but also publicly denounced the prevailing authority on an ideological level.

At a time when the increasing exploitation of the sale of indulgences, the profitable appointment of new cardinals, and the imposition of new taxes by the papacy had stirred scandal in both Italy and Europe, Aretino's satires were a means of holding the powerful accountable for their actions, while also providing an outlet for public frustration with the political and moral shortcomings of the ruling class (Falaschi 1977, 20).

The exercise of this political instrument suggests that Aretino must have contemplated the agency of words as a means of influence: since satire targeted a wide audience and carried profound consequences, words in satirical compositions were akin to weapons that inflicted metaphorical wounds, if not literal ones. Written in a direct and unequivocal language, the poet-Pasquino practices a form

of expression in which vocabulary, rhythm, and themes are strongly influenced by the principles of immediacy and adherence to colloquial speech. This tone of voice allowed for a more immediate connection of the compositions to a broader audience, with whom Aretino engages through the most honest vernacular. When Aretino discusses these *tempi pessimi* (times at their lowest; Procaccioli 1997, 148), he paints a picture of significant discontent by attacking the courtesan structure: in his *Lamento de un cortegiano* (1522 ca.) he addresses the Papal *corte fallita* ('failed court'; Faini 2012, 52) for not being able to provide any fortune or gratification, while directly taunting the cardinals for their impious behaviours in his *In cardinales* (Faini 2012, 64-5). These allegations are also employed in a more general moralizing tone, but the prevailing sentiment is one of diagnosis and accusation towards the societal afflictions. Only literature, the arts, and 'inventions' elevate the contemporary age, which nonetheless is not *buona come è bella* (as virtuous as it is beautiful, Procaccioli 1997, 343, Author's transl.): the world's illness stems from an imbalance between the products of the intellect and the socio-political structure. Aretino then employs art as a device for power and political blackmail, and the Pasquinian contribution serves as a privileged tool for advocating a new paradigm in the interaction between intellectuals and authority. Therefore, we cannot speak of Aretino in terms of political literature; instead, we should view his approach as a political exploitation of literature. In this sense, his obliged departure from Rome becomes of fundamental significance.

After his flight from the Papal court to the Gonzaga's Mantua, Aretino ultimately landed in Venice in March 1527. Here, a strongly anti-court ideology takes root in the author, which, following the Roman example, dictates that he should not place himself in the service of a single lord within the confined space of their own state. Aretino's goal now, therefore, is to engage in a professional activity that meets his needs for artistic autonomy while also receiving public and social resonance. In the Venetian *acque sicure* (safe waters; Procaccioli 1997, 288, Author's transl.), the polymath must have felt at ease with the republican ideals and free scope of action, which led him to achieve his independency as an artist in the cultural scene.[2] This is

2 Aretino is not theoretically interested in the various forms of government, but his political judgment is consistently, as his usual approach, based on a sociological evaluation. In 1537, writing to Bernardo Navagero (Procaccioli 1997, 305-6), he praises the Republic of Venice, where "l'occhio del dovere che ogni ora guarda l'utile comune ne le occorrenze universali converte la malivolenza in amore" (the eye of duty that constantly watches over the common good in universal emergencies turns malevolence into love; Author's transl.). He also draws an institutional distinction between a republic and a monarchy, focusing on the condition of subjects. This reveals that his primary concern lies in considering the options between the court and its alternatives.

why, in a letter to Doge Andrea Gritti (Procaccioli 1997, 49-51), Aretino admits that he finally found his long-sought freedom in Venice, a city to which he devolves all his affection, as much as identifying it as the reason for his gained individual power and public influence, which will eventually lead him to be known as the 'scourge of princes'.

From his Venetian time, Aretino develops a more mediated and formally complex language, where the writer himself speaks no longer from the point of view of the prophetic Pasquino. Now, immediacy has been replaced by rhetorical reworking of his poetics. And it is not just a matter of vocabulary and rhythm, or of images and rhetorical patterns; fundamentally, there is a difference in approach that arises from a new perception of Aretino's own public role that the writer is called to embody, also in terms of a specific poetic innovation (Procaccioli 2009, 231).

Despite his recent elective affinities with the lagoon city, Aretino consistently kept his gaze fixed on Rome and its moral corruption, especially in his first years of literary production in Venice, in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome (1527). He addressed the event through various genres – prophecies, letters, poems, comedies, and dialogues – creating a wide range of depictions, stretching from deeply tragic to comically absurd (Goethals 2014). Among these, two texts in particular stand out as emblematic in their critique of authority for the themes they employ to challenge the powerful; they also serve as significant examples of the author's artistic maturity, thanks to Aretino's astute and eloquent use of poetic devices. Published in April 1534 and October 1536 respectively, the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* together constitute a unified and comprehensive work, each unfolding its narrative over three days. The first features a dialogue between two courtesans, the veteran Nanna and the young Antonia. Nanna, facing the task of guiding her teenage daughter Pippa toward her future, engages in a spirited exchange regarding the three potential paths of womanhood Pippa might undertake: should she choose to become a nun, a wife, or a courtesan herself? Drawing from her own experiences in each role, Nanna narrates her adventures to Antonia, dedicating each a day of the dialogue to delve into its merits and drawbacks, to determine the most favorable. After thorough consideration, Nanna and Antonia reach the consensus that Pippa's best path lies in the profession of a courtesan. Thus, in the second part, the conversation continues with Nanna imparting wisdom to Pippa about her prospective career and cautioning her about the treachery of men.

While the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* have conventionally been labeled as pornography, this is true to the understanding that in the early modern period, pornography was often employed to depict a world turned "upside down" (Findlen 1996, 53). Its marked satirical elements made it a subtle device for tracking evolving social

hierarchies and the instabilities of intellectual and political norms within the intricate web of courts that constituted Renaissance Italy. Indeed, by delving into the most suitable professions for women and the education of younger generations of females, the two dialogues overexpose vivid explicit imagery in order to criticize the social customs and political climate among sixteenth-century Italian states (Talvacchia 1999, IX). These encompass the role of women and their mistreatment by men, corruption within the Church, the hypocrisy of marriage, and how courtesans skillfully exploit the vanity of their clients. Excluded from Aretino's critiques are only the Venetians: residing in a republic that was renowned for its contentious relationship with the institutional church and radically distinct in its governance from Rome, they were involved in practices considered more upright. In stark contrast to the courtly atmosphere of Rome, Venice prided itself on being a city of boundless opportunities and freedom, all firmly rooted in the principles of republicanism.

The two dialogues, then, deserve much more than the reputation of a pornographic masterpiece, which for centuries would be the main source of Aretino's poor standing among the prudes. By using pornography as a vehicle to attack everything from clerical piety to the vicissitudes of court life, Aretino exposed the vices of the upper classes to an indiscriminate readership, something that he had nonetheless been known for since his Roman days.

The first organic text in which Aretino explicitly aims at making an accusation against power and corruption of moral judgment is the aforementioned comedy *Cortigiana* of 1525. Regarding the coeval Rome under Leo X as a new Babylon (Aquilecchia, Romano, Romei 1992, 63.7) the work presents us with an image of a degraded and corrupted city, placing its perspective on a sociological plane, and astutely documenting, through the actions of the courtiers, the distortion of society. The vivid evocation not only of monuments, churches, and taverns frequented daily by the Roman public, but also of distinctly named characters from various social strata, intensifies the immediate connection with reality. This creates a powerful juxtaposition between the theatrical fiction and the truths of real life. *La cortigiana* is not just a literary work; it stands as a revolutionary literary manifesto within the political and cultural context of its time. It signifies a bold challenge to a society that would soon forcefully expel the author from the city.

Revised and published in Venice in 1534, following a process spanning at least a year (Larivaille 1997, 441 fn. 26), the second edition of this work attests to the rapid consolidation of the author's position that had occurred in the meantime, along with reflecting his newfound greater freedom of expression. Aretino aims to perpetuate a narrative of the papal city as the "coda mundi" (Aquilecchia, Romano, Romei 1992, 237.1), scattering in the comedy a more irreverent

portrayal of Roman decadence, where references to the times of Leo X coexist with others from after 1527 (cf. Damiani 2014). Furthermore, now firmly established in Venetian territory, the author explicitly celebrates the uniqueness of Venice and its cultural life.

Throughout the comedy, Aretino's attitude of sharp criticism towards social norms and political culture becomes more entrenched. While both the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* follow a similar critical path, it is in the dialogues that the significant use of sex as a means of social analysis makes its debut. Sexual intercourses among the clergy, lustful adultery and convenient prostitution in Aretino become vehicles through which to metaphorically interpret the internal corruption of power structures, morality, and essentially, the ethical norms imposed by a courtly society. The author's sentence, in these terms, is indeed clear from the very declaration of intentions in the letter *al suo monicchio* (to his darling monkey; Rosenthal 2005, 3), which opens the first dialogue:

> se non credessi che la fiamma della mia penna di fuoco dovesse purgare le macchie disoneste che la lascivia loro ha fatte nella vita d'esse. […] Onde spero che il mio dire sia quel ferro crudelmente pietoso col quale il buon medico taglia il membro infermo perché gli altri rimanghino sani.[3]

> If I did not believe that the flame of my fiery pen would clean away the shameful stains which their lewd behaviour has left on their lives. […] Therefore I hope that my book will be like the scalpel, at once cruel and merciful, with which the good doctor cuts off the sick limb so that the others will remain healthy. (5)

Sex and its abuses in these works stand as a structuring principle, asserting their author's expressive freedom: through his audacious literary intentions and his scandalous approach to nature, he stressed the need to depart from the prevailing models of his time. To achieve this, Aretino employs a theatrical narrative voice, Nanna, who takes on the roles of both a character and the author's *alter ego*. She simultaneously embodies the roles of spectator, actress, and director, thus overlaying the account of past events with their current presence, always adopting a mimetic language and a declared adherence to reality.

In the very first of the three sections that make up the work, where Nanna recounts her youthful experiences in the convent, a refuge for the most audacious sexual practices of the clergy, a true mastery of

3 From here on, all the Italian quotes regarding the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* reference the Italian unified edition of both texts by Giovanni Aquilecchia (1969).

description and narration emerges. When her interlocutor Antonia asks her to speak freely and without shame, Nanna asserts that *l'onestà è bella in chiasso* (respectability looks all the more beautiful in a whorehouse; Rosenthal 2005, 36) and dedicates herself to systematically 'veiling' the ongoing passionate encounters she describes.

From the most primitive and bestial acts to the more sadistically refined ones, Aretino employs a rhetorical layer in his narration that prevented the most depraved acts from being too explicitly depicted, partly due to the censorship of the time (Larivaille 1997, 198-9). This leads the entire narrative to serve as a platform for continuous stylistic experimentation.

The atmosphere of heavy eroticism that pervades the convent lightens thanks to the proliferation of visual metaphors and comparisons. According to Antonia's terminology, these *oscurità* (obscurity; Rosenthal 2005, 45) not only do not diminish the poetic outcome, but instead introduce a multitude of vivid visual, tactile, and olfactory nuances far more evocative than the blunt repetition of sexual expressions.

> NANNA […] che posto il suo pennello nello scudellino del colore, umiliatolo prima con lo sputo, lo facea torcere nella guisa che si torceno le donne per le doglie del parto o per il mal della madre. E perché il chiodo stesse più fermo nel forame, accennò dietrovia al suo erba-da-buoi, che rovesciatogli le brache fino alle calcagna, mise il cristeo alla sua Riverenza *visibilium*.
>
> NANNA […] placing his paintbrush, which he first moistened with spit, in her tiny color cup, he made her twist and turn as women do in the birth throes or the mother's malady. And to be doubly sure that his nail would be driven more tightly into her slit, he motioned to his back and his favorite punk pulled his breeches down to his heels and applied his clyster to the reverend's *visibilium*. (Rosenthal 2005, 20)

Here the sexual act is undeniably present, yet it is never depicted using explicit language, even when openly portrayed. Instead, the deliberate cultivation of metaphorical audacity serves as a genuine expression of poetic intent. Regarding Nanna's discourse, Aretino might have defended his commitment to metaphorical expression in alignment with a moral objective: to elevate truth and condemn corruption (Procaccioli 2022, 373).

Nonetheless, Aretino persistently directs the reader's perspective toward his own, effectively 'framing' the visual description to highlight sensory perception. By positioning his viewpoint, and that of Nanna in this instance, as a crucial component of his poetic style, the author ensures that the reader not only empathizes but also delves

beyond the metaphor to vividly visualize what they are reading. As a result, the reader successfully steps into the narrator's shoes. This duplication or superimposition of the reader's perspective onto that of the writer guarantees an initial acceptance and empathy with the genuine emotions of the author (Waddington 2009, 113).

On the second day, which is dedicated to the Lives of Wives, a series of frescoes depicting everyday life follows the lamentable portrayal of the conventual world. This day is structured in the manner of those in the *Decameron*, as a critique of the crafty sixteenth-century legacy of the Boccaccian tradition. Love in its most mundane and primal forms remains ever-present, however, the instances of pure eroticism – along with their scandalous metaphors and comparisons – decrease, gradually giving way to apparent novellas. Yet, it is in the Lives of whores on the third day that Aretino's creative vigor reaches its utter effectiveness and originality. In the expressive tone of the narrator, which omits excessively crude and potentially censorable vocabulary while incorporating popular terms and expressions, the experiences of the preceding days harmoniously blend into an expressive balance.

In Aretino's fully developed prose within the Lives of whores, the stylistic approaches previously experimented are interchanged, combined, and eventually merge into a lively and rhythmic carnivalesque excess, guided by the fragmented syntactical structures of everyday speech. The technical virtuosity, though still present, now takes on a more subtle role, resulting in a discourse that flows more effortlessly and feels more organic. This fluency eliminates the distinction between spoken language and written word, as well as any lingering gap between author and narrator. Aretino has now become one with Nanna. This authenticity in language also mirrors the authenticity in the scenic representation of society: Aretino's plurality of languages employed in the dialogue responds to the early realistic need for a language to suit the diverse range of characters portrayed, reflecting the existing varied social conditions and cultural backgrounds (Procaccioli 1993, 366).

It is in this adherence to reality that the three days of pure narration transform into a vast polemical allegory of society. The entire city of Rome emerges as the idyllic setting for what Aretino calls the *civiltà puttanesca* (whorish politeness; Rosenthal 2005, 145), marked by a past that reinforces its fate: *Roma sempre fu e sempre sarà, non vo' dir delle puttane per non me ne avere a confessare* (Rome always was and always will be – I won't go so far as to say the whore's plaything, so as not to have to say it again to my confessor; Rosenthal 2005, 150). Nuns, married women, and prostitutes, rather than merely representing *i tre strati delle donne* (the three conditions of women; Rosenthal 2005, 7) as the author ironically suggests in the title of the work, embody the primary categories that constitute the societal

decay, the *mondaccio* (filthy world; Rosenthal 2005, 7) denounced by Nanna from the very beginning. In the deceitful clergy that betrays its vows and its pious mission, in the respectable society that doesn't hesitate to betray marital bonds and all its norms, and in the rest of society that identifies personal interest as its only ideal, Aretino identifies the material failure of any religious, moral, and cultural canon.

Within this framework, the use of sex as a recurring theme in the dialogue further delineates the various levels of authenticity present in the work. Aretino liberates himself from classical paradigms by adopting an unsettling perspective provided by the explicit semantic register, which stands as both a representation and an embodiment of a new poetics grounded in the ideals of nature and naturalness. Also, as Nanna states in the first day of the dialogue, *si salva l'anima nei trionfi del corpo* (the soul shall be saved through the triumphs of the body; Rosenthal 2005, 17), the corrupted moral customs of Christianity do not allow the salvation of the souls anymore, but is sex that, in turn, permits redemption through the natural act of ecstasy. Aretino hereby denounces the decline of the monastic institution and states a completely new approach toward nature.

From this vantage point, the theme of sexuality emerges as both an embrace of an expressive style that mirrors the rhythm and sound of everyday language, and a deliberate condemnation of the decline of power.

Given its expansive depiction of the social landscape, the use of body and sex as tools for examination, and the expressive effectiveness of the language, the text extensively embodies Aretino's anti-academic and anti-classical inclinations. These tendencies, which were already *in nuce* in Aretino's earlier pasquinesque works, allow him to reach the pinnacle of his linguistic mastery.

Sex in the *Ragionamento* encompasses not only individual sexual desire, but also how it is experienced within society, particularly in the context of Medicean Rome. This perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of the author's broader social commentary in the *Dialogo*, which, in a more daring manner, addresses the economic aspect of sex. Additionally, the strong unity of the first dialogue, fundamentally told by a single narrator who recalls the events with spontaneous vigor, is succeeded in the *Dialogo* by a more composite structure, built on the juxtaposition of diverse content, vocabulary, and styles.

The first day of the *Dialogo*, where Nanna *insegna a la Pippa sua figliuola a esser puttana* (teaches her daughter Pippa the art of being a whore; Rosenthal 2005, 157), logically follows the conclusion of the *Ragionamento*. The instructive tone adopted by the mother – the same that will later be preferred by the second narrator, the Comare, in the third day – immediately signals the shift in Aretino's approach, which is now more demonstrative and didactic than openly polemical.

What the Nanna imparts to her daughter, satirically referencing but not explicitly naming Baldassarre Castiglione's recent treatise, is a detailed handbook for succeeding in a world entirely driven by appearances (Larivaille 1997, 205).

Even the condemnation of *poltronerie degli uomini inverso de le donne* (betrayals that men wreak on women; Rosenthal 2005, 231) in the second day – the one closest to the days of the *Ragionamento* due to its satire of male mentality, symmetrically aligned with the anti-feminine polemic of the Lives of Wives – is explicitly presented as a supplement to the education of the aspiring courtesan.

From a different but equally complementary perspective, the Comare's account of the perfect *ruffiana* (adulator) in the third day serves the same educational purpose. In fact, the concluding day seems to not only acknowledge but also surpass the previous defense of prostitution. It is as if Aretino discovers in the art of the adulator and in her ability to assert authority over both men and women indiscriminately, the most suitable weapon to confront the escalating hypocrisy of society.

What is most striking about the *Dialogo* is its highly systematic examination of human behavior and underlying social structures across the three days. The author achieves this by transcending his narrative role, bypassing the narrative filter of characters once again to directly address the reader. This immediate connection polemically portrays a way of living in which the 'art of fiction' is the only essential virtue. As a result, while one cannot speak of a true book against the principles of the *Cortegiano* (1528), the *Dialogo* can be viewed as a parodic departure from Castiglione's treatise. Rather than emphasizing the display of virtues believed to be authentic, it highlights the portrayal of superficial virtues:

> NANNA Ma sopra tutte le cose, studia le finzioni e le adulazioni che io ti ho detto, perché sono i ricami del sapersi mantenere.
>
> NANNA But above all study deceit and flattery, as I have told you, for these are the embroideries that adorn the gown of the woman who knows how to get by. (Rosenthal 2005, 178)

While both narrators, Nanna and later the Comare, reiterate the same views on language as previously expressed in the *Ragionamento* – a repulsion for overly formal speech and a desire for free expression in their own language –, and fill the narration again with imaginative metaphors, there is a discernible trend towards artificiality

in the *Dialogo*.[4] This tendency largely coincides with the incorporation of a diverse range of literary references along the text: from the Virgilian episode of Aeneas and Dido at the start of the second day, to the medieval story of Renart and the *mulattieri* (muleteers), and even to Aretino's own poems composed in various periods. These additions turn the final two days into a patchwork of genres, styles, and tones, breaking away from the thematic, linguistic, and stylistic coherence that characterized the *Ragionamento* (Larivaille 1983, 97).

Despite a somewhat looser thematic and structural cohesion, and an anti-conformism made more unclear by the ironic revival of literary works, one must accurately assess a work that stands not as a mere extension or rejection, but as a progressively coherent evolution beyond the previously discussed dialogue. Such progression is, in fact, foreshadowed right from the dedication, in Aretino's newly declared intentions. The purifying *penna di fuoco* from the initial letter of dedication of the *Ragionamento* now morphs in the *Dialogo*'s dedication into a brush, a tool with which he endeavors to capture the essence of others with the same vitality that the remarkable Titian portrays various faces; *ritrarre le nature altrui con la vivacità che il mirabile Tiziano ritrae questo e quel volto* (describe other kinds of characters with the same vividness that admirable Titian portrays this or that face; Rosenthal 2005, 154). The moralizing Aretino, who once aimed to reform the world, has been replaced by an Aretino who is a *conoscitore dei costumi delle genti* (wise knower of the customs of the peoples; Rosenthal 2005, 154): a moralist less preoccupied with condemnation and more focused on depicting and laying bare the mechanisms of the world.

The *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* are texts imbued with political undertones, critiquing a range of social injustices, and aiming to influence the real power dynamics among Italian states in the sixteenth century. Nanna is identified as the unifying focal point of a degraded historical reality, where the courtesan embodies both an intellectual and political figure in a fragmented world. It is her own perspective that holds significant dominance over every layer of society, allowing her to assert a position of control. Given her comprehensive understanding of the entire social spectrum, Nanna does not

4 Aretino himself is fully aware of the proliferation of metaphors in the *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo*, and he finds a way to emphasize it several times along the works: "Buone e naturali fai le somiglianze" (What apt and natural comparisons you make; Rosenthal 2005, 13); "Che similitudine che voi fate" (What a strange comparison you make; 165); "Voi fate le simiglianze bellissime" (You make some lovely similes; 191); "Son pur nuove di zecca le similitudine vostre" (Your comparisons are always brand new; 232); "Io non credo che la natura, che fa le cose da le quali togli le somiglianze, sapesse come te trovare le similitudini" (I do not believe that nature itself, which makes the things from which you take your comparisons, would be able to discover so many likenesses; 350).

confine herself to defining solely the prerogatives of the female universe. Her unique perspective inevitably leads her to broaden the discussion to include men, conducting a thorough and perceptive analysis of the male world and psyche. This ultimately enables her to outline an effective record almost as comprehensive and reliable for both genders. Although, on one level, the stories Nanna recounts serve as a form of self-criticism that exposes the faults of women to men, Aretino implies more than once that a similar collection could be compiled from the lives of priests, monks, and laymen (Moulton 2000, 96). Both the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo* frequently use the profession of the courtesan as a metaphor for other forms of employment and service in Renaissance Italy, including doctors, soldiers, courtiers, and grooms. This analogy serves to emphasize the parallel between courtiers and courtesans, suggesting that the relationship between words revealed even stronger affinities between the groups described (Findlen 1996, 99).

The close intertwining of the realities surrounding Nanna and the biographical dynamics of Aretino, as previously discussed, establishes a firm equivalence between the author and the narrator. However, this parallel relationship isn't solely defined by biographical aspects; it predominantly lies in the narrative extension of the dialogues. Aretino explicitly asserts the complete naturalness and spontaneity of his writing, demonstrating an absolute disinterest in any form of linguistic indoctrination. The language employed in these exchanges adheres to a poetics that dictates truth be unveiled through the language of nature, employing rhetorical devices and lexical tools that bring the written text as close to actual reality as possible. As stated by the author in the dedicatory letter to Bernardo Valdaura:

> E quando io non fosse degno di onor veruno mercé de le invenzioni con le quali do l'anima a lo stile, merito pur qualche poco di gloria per avere spinto la verità ne le camere e ne le orecchie dei potenti a onta de la adulazione e de la menzogna.
>
> And though I might not be worthy of any honor because of the inventions with which I infuse life into my prose, I do deserve some tiny mite of glory for having pushed the truth into the bedrooms and the ears of the powerful, rather than flattery and lies. (Rosenthal 2005, 155)

In the dialogues, Aretino as author, taking on the role of the Nanna as narrator, becomes the voice of a corrupted and unspeakable truth: this is why the language he employs is inherently metaphorical. Through this process, the integral relationship between word and image emerges throughout the text as a fundamental component of his writing (Procaccioli 2009, 219). This occurs both in the

broader sense where these two elements interact and mutually influence each other, as well as in the more specific sense where words are often transformed into images and vice versa. This imaginative intention of the written word will, eventually, characterize Aretino's account on the arts, rendering his own descriptions of the artworks "so essentially visual" (Shearman 1992, 208).

Furthermore, with the openly anti-Petrarchan aim of freeing the language from classical models and aligning it with the addressed social fabric, Aretino achieves a genuine praise of direct and explicit vocabulary, all in pursuit of the naturalness of his intentions:

> COMARE Cento volte ho pensato per che conto noi ci aviamo a vergognare di mentovare quello che la natura non s'è vergognata di fare.
>
> COMARE A hundred times I have tried to explain myself on whose account we must be ashamed to mention that which nature is not ashamed to create. (Rosenthal 2005, 317)

Therefore, it can be asserted that there exists an intimate, osmotic relationship between Aretino and his writing, as it harmonizes perfectly with his own identity. The naturalistic poetics implies that all aspects of the writer converge within the work, that is, everything he is naturally and ultimately, everything he possesses as an individual. The act of literary production is truly creative because it is absolute and total. This also means, above all, that the author employs a writing in which the intentions are declared: the *Ragionamento* and the *Dialogo*, in this regard, are a perfect example.

Beyond reinforcing the growing symbiosis between the author and the narrator, which is increasingly implied by their linguistic inventiveness, the explicit acknowledgment of the decay of power in the dialogues, closely aligned with Aretino's daily concerns, gives the texts a blatantly autobiographical dimension, that retrospectively sheds a new light on Aretino's entire corpus. As a matter of fact, in the author's works, regardless of which, there always exists a complete correspondence between the individual and the overarching poetic, political, social, and artistic intentions. The topic does not matter: Aretino's texts consistently address the themes close to the author's heart, with a particular emphasis on that of language.

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Me, Myself and I: Reframing the Concepts of Identity and Otherness

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
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Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish
Deconstructing the Performance of Labour in the Bureau of Melodramatic Research

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Abstract The advent of neoliberalism was accompanied by a substantial ideological and visual apparatus required to promote and legitimise the new forms of labour and mechanisms of power it generated. Concurrently, labour garnered significant attention from artists, particularly feminist artists, who started misappropriating the visual vocabulary of work as a means of political reclamation. This paper examines the practice of the artistic duo The Bureau of Melodramatic Research and the aesthetic strategies they implement to deconstruct the contemporary performance of labour and shed light on the distress, precarity and paradoxes of contemporary work.

Keywords Feminist art. The Bureau of Melodramatic Research. Labour of love. Neoliberal imaginary. Socially engaged art. Melodrama. Occupational realism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Choose a Job You Love or The Moral and Political Economy of Neoliberal Imaginary. – 3 Occupational Realism and the Artist as Blueprint. – 4 The Dramatisation of Labour by The Bureau of Melodramatic Research. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The turn of the twenty-first century marked a significant change in the organisation of the production system and labour market in Western countries, which in turn had substantial implications on a worldwide level. Following the 1970s transition to neoliberalism, an economic and productive framework centred on privatisation,

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deregulation, and the free market, the new millennium witnessed the establishment of production paradigms that heavily relied on the affective and relational features of individuals. This trend was particularly evident in sectors such as the service industry as well as in the informational and digital economy. Beyond the establishment of new productive paradigms, this shift caused major disruptions in the social and cultural realms, generating new aspirational models and values (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005; Lazzarato 2012; Lorey 2015). This process of assimilation was sustained by a significant ideological and visual system. Cultural products and trends have, in fact, played a significant role in the formation of the neoliberal worker. Through the production of compelling and enticing media imagery, the system managed to produce an ideal worker eager to accept fewer benefits and protections in exchange for greater freedom, autonomy, and creativity. This mindset is well captured by the slogan 'Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish' with which Steve Jobs concluded his infamous 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, an appeal to one's 'hunger' for success and innovation that is still used to motivate precarious and 'hungry' individuals.[1]

Passion was a key feature in this process. Reminiscent of the 'labour of love', a term popularised by Marxist feminist theory in the 1970s to challenge the capitalist gendered division of labour and women's unpaid caregiving responsibilities (Dalla Costa, James 1975; Federici 1975; Fortunati 1995), the rhetoric of love has gradually expanded into all areas of work and is used to legitimise forms of free labour, precarity and exploitation in the name of professional sacrifice and devotion.[2] According to cultural analyst Angela McRobbie (2016), the concept of passionate work serves as a means of re-establishing conventional gender roles by channelling women's ambitions for emancipation towards lower-paying yet highly idealised professions. The focus on emotional language and the feminist movement reflects another important aspect of this shift, which is the process of 'feminisation of labour' (Cohen, Wolkowitz 2017), that is the incorporation of traditionally gendered traits, such as communication, empathy, and hospitality, as essential elements in the mechanisms of capitalist valorisation. Feminist researchers such as sociologists Emma Dowling (2007) and Arlie Hochschild (2012) and writer Sara Ahmed

1 This study was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 860306. A transcript of the speech can be found on the Stanford News website at: `https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/12/youve-got-find-love-jobs-says/`.

2 In Marxist and post-Marxist theory, work and labour are used to denote two distinct modes of human action. The former generally refers to all productive activities, whereas the latter is associated with capitalist exploitation. Operating within a materialist feminist theoretical framework, this distinction is followed by the author.

(2014) have extensively examined the topic of affective labour, looking into the efforts and techniques used to manipulate and control one's emotions in the contemporary workplace.

The art industry is in an interesting position with regard to these economic and cultural changes. In line with the rise of neoliberalism, it is possible to observe an incorporation of the theme and visual vocabulary of labour in the work of neo-avant-garde artists (Molesworth 2003; Bryan-Wilson 2010; Child 2019; Cras 2019).[3] On the one hand, artists began to increasingly take on management tasks and outsource manual labour to external workers; on the other, they started to enact everyday tasks under the guise of art as a means to deconstruct and confront the conditions of production. A tendency that has been described by art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson (2012, 33-5) with the analytical subcategory of 'occupational realism'.

Of particular significance in this context is the deconstruction of reproductive labour initiated by second-wave feminist artists in the 1970s. As will be discussed further on in the text, feminist artists misappropriated and represented gestures of work, in different contexts and through different media, in order to denaturalise domestic labour as an inherently gendered practice and provide a different representation of women beyond the stereotype of the happy housewife and mother. This was achieved through both documentary forms of representation and the use of sarcasm and parody, which generated caustic depictions intended to elicit a sense of unease in the audience.

At the end of the twentieth century, the relationship between artist and work underwent a further transformation, marked by a departure from mimetic approaches and the recognition of the artist as an economic subject, along with a growing inflation of the topics of labour and capital as a subject of artistic production (Dimitrakaki 2016, 45-6). Feminist art provided again a strategic standpoint. From the 1990s, women artists started using their practice to discuss the process of economic subjectivation they were exposed to or to consider women's position and entanglement in global capitalism, problematising the ramifications of the feminisation of labour beyond the confines of the art field.

A comprehensive analysis of the relationship between art and labour is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, drawing from the crucial experience of feminist art, the author is interested in examining how these visual strategies are reimagined and re-actualised within the contemporary social and productive landscape. From this

3 While Andy Warhol and Larry Rivers incorporated the visual language of business and economics as iconographic elements in their artworks, artists such as Robert Morris, Edward Kienholz, and Richard Serra demonstrate a distinct manifestation of this influence, increasingly identifying themselves with manual workers and working class aesthetics.

perspective, the analysis focuses on the practice of the artistic duo The Bureau of Melodramatic Research (BMR). By adopting some of the aesthetic and scenic mechanisms of melodrama, BMR engages with and manipulates common visual tropes in order to generate a dissent imaginary that would challenge the post-Fordist performance of labour, shedding light on the distress, precarity, and paradoxes of contemporary work.

2 Choose a Job You Love or The Moral and Political Economy of Neoliberal Imaginary

Several scholars have discussed the archetype of the neoliberal worker, accurately captured by digital culture researcher Brooke Erin Duffy's concept of the 'aspirational labourer' (2017, 4-5), indicating an individual who continues to engage in creative endeavours based on the anticipation of future economic and social benefits, all while cognisant they are unlikely to materialise. Grounded in the principles of autonomy, passion, and vocation – encapsulated by the motto 'Do what you'll love, and you'll never work another day in your life' – this ideology manages to suppress the complex interplay between material conditions, social and cultural background, and capitalist mechanisms of valorisation.

Despite recent economic and social crises, which render appeals to autonomy and freedom even more ludicrous, and the social movements that arose in opposition to them, neoliberalism (in its various forms) continues to exert a strong hold on the individual and collective imagination. This is primarily due to the invention of an extensive ideological apparatus that granted neoliberalism the ability to exercise influence on the psychological domain of the people. Sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello ([1999] 2005) have extensively examined what they refer to as the 'spirit of capitalism', that is the ideology construction, comprised of moral justifications and cultural products, that serves to uphold and justify capitalist accumulation and varies in accordance with changes in the economic-political system in place. This idea, which can be traced back to Antonio Gramsci's theory of 'cultural hegemony' ([1948-51] 2012), is further articulated in post-Marxist scholarship, examples of which include Susan Buck-Morss' concept of the 'political imaginary' (2000, 11-12) and Mark Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism' (2009, 2-5). All these instances highlight the strategic role of the imaginative apparatus in the continuation of capitalism. Ideology, in fact, operates beyond the symbolic domain to shape the institutions and material structures that constitute the system, directing the consensus of the masses so as to normalise a specific social and economic structure. The capitalist imaginary, as noted by Fisher (8-9), not only precludes the

envisioning of viable alternatives by entirely occupying "the horizons of the thinkable", but also manages to pre-emptively incorporate and outdo any potential forms of counteraction.

Within the scope of this analysis, the focus lies on examining how images and words have contributed to shaping a distinct type of labour performance, characterised by an unwavering and seemingly enthusiastic devotion to work. William J.T. Mitchell (2005) emphasises the dynamic nature of pictures, characterising them as 'living organisms' that possess intrinsic needs and desires that circulate across media and contexts. In a comparable direction, Hans Belting (2011) directs his attention towards the 'politics of images', arguing that images serve as intermediates between the material reality and people's psyche. Given their major role in shaping human imagination, pictures possess the capacity to exert influence over an individual's psycho-physical disposition with regard to particular issues or circumstances. Expanding upon the works of Mitchell and Belting, philosopher Pasi Väliaho (2014) departs from the notion of imagination as a purely individual phenomenon and instead examines its collective nature. According to Väliaho (2014, 92), by actively engaging with the normative influence of images, and thus generating new ones, it is possible to generate 'new materialisations' that would facilitate the envisioning of alternative modes and frameworks of interaction and existence. An argument that evokes Rancière (2004) and his concept of the distribution of the sensible.[4]

In the workplace, the mantra of 'Do What You Love' has traditionally been conveyed through consistent visual imagery consisting of motivational posters and quotes, as well as various forms of digital content centred on personal development. In his analysis of the graphic design context, designer Silvio Lorusso (2019, 133-6) cites the *Work Hard & Be Nice to People* poster by British designer Anthony Burrill as the progenitor of the numerous posters and neon signs to be found today in offices, co-working and co-living spaces. Even more well-known are the Successories posters, which are motivational posters with a single word or phrase, such as TEAMWORK, EXCELLENCE, or MAKE IT HAPPEN, set against a black background and accompanied by a photograph of a wild animal or natural landscape, and which served as a prototype for earlier internet memes. Through the use of concise, straightforward language and a minimalist design, these visuals seek to instil a sense of confidence and enjoyment, suggesting

4 Rancière employs the term '*partage du sensible*' to denote the mechanisms and power dynamics that regulate what is visible or sayable within a society, and thus illustrate the role of aesthetics in processes of political configuration. As this is not a neutral concept, it is also used to analyse the potential forms and sources of disruption or dissension that could disrupt the established order. To further explore the concept, see Rancière 2004.

that diligent work, despite obstacles, paves the way to a prosperous future. Together with other activities and protocols, they contribute to the definition of what management theorists Sigal Barsade and Olivia A. O'Neill (2016) refer to as the 'emotional culture' of a company, meaning the affective control system that underpins a workplace and influences the psychological well-being of employees as well as patterns of collaboration and the overall structure of the organisation.

Today, the message (and thus control) is transmitted not merely through two-dimensional images, but also through video tutorials designed to retrain the individual in her daily activities, regulating both work and non-work time. Exemplary trends are motivational YouTube or TikTok formats such as *How to Be Productive*, *The Perfect Daily Routine*, or *My 5 to 9 Before the 9 to 5*, all of which offer advice on how to improve sleeping and working patterns, nutrition, appearance, life and working settings based on those of famous wealthy entrepreneurs such as Apple founder Steve Jobs or Facebook initiator Mark Zuckerberg. Images, memes, and videos have been appropriated as a form of social programming designed to address the individuality of the worker and her need to survive in a hyper-competitive system. Failing to acknowledge the diverse material conditions and structural factors that significantly influence an individual's life, these videos perpetuate problematic notions of success that encourage individuals to focus solely on their own bodies and immediate surroundings, thus proposing standard individual formulas to address often systemic issues. In contrast to the motivational props discussed in the previous paragraph, in which the human body is almost never depicted, the main protagonists of the videos are the creators with their healthy and attractive bodies and aspirational lifestyles.

The neoliberal imagery targets all individuals, irrespective of their gender, race, and socioeconomic class, as it is crucial to sustain the perception that its lifestyle is potentially attainable by everyone. Aligned with the key focus of this paper, it is important to draw attention to the visual representations aimed at women and their significant role in diminishing feminist political potential, all the while appearing to comply with requests for more equality and autonomy, especially in the job market. As previously mentioned in the introduction, McRobbie (2016, 110) argues that the concept of passionate work should be considered a mechanism of gender 're-traditionalisation'. In her analysis, McRobbie discusses the image of the enthusiastic 'working girl' and the sophisticated aesthetic structure designed to conceal the unequal conditions that characterised the increased participation of women in the labour force and the general deterioration of living and working conditions. In films and television programmes such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *New in Town* (2009), and *Girlboss* (2017), the protagonists' exploitation, mobbing, and economic constraints serve merely as plot devices to further a love story or a

narrative of personal empowerment. McRobbie (2016, 87) uses the term 'post-feminist masquerade' to refer to the rituals established by the fashion-beauty-complex that give women a sense of power and independence while maintaining firm control over their bodies, both at work and at home. A 'masquerade' that is more ubiquitous in the previously discussed video tutorials, in which the obsessive curation of one's digital and physical presence responds to requirements of self-monetisation and self-representation. By directing attention towards instances of individual success under neoliberal constraints, these examples fulfil the need for bodily and financial autonomy advocated by second-wave feminism, thereby undermining the anti-capitalist demands and the various forms of collective political mobilisation and opposition they embodied.

As the ideology of capitalism and its productive and managerial paradigms become ingrained in the individual's body and psyche, any form of resistance would need to occur within the worker's consciousness. The contemporary phenomena of the 'great resignations' and 'quiet quitting', along with the worldwide escalation of the anti-work movement, signal an interesting fracture in the system and an increasing disaffection towards work (Coin 2023). The issue of disaffection is central because it implies the emotional separation from an ideal and its associated identity. Similar to neoliberal imagery, these phenomena have their own visual identity, memes, and trends, which are frequently derived from anti-global and anti-capitalist social movements. While not posing a substantial threat to the stability of the capitalist system, these movements reveal a crucial distancing from and questioning of a particular idea of work, shedding light on the exploitative practices that have long been concealed behind the rhetoric of passion and merit.

3 Occupational Realism and the Artist as Blueprint

When considering the historical development of the neoliberal organisation of work, artists occupy a privileged position, serving as both an influential precedent and a cautionary example of this mode of production. Sociologist Pascal Gielen and artist Paul De Bruyne (2009, 7-10) explicitly discuss the artist as a blueprint of the post-Fordist worker ethic. The authors, like Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), note how, beginning in the 1970s, capitalism increasingly adopted the artistic values of autonomy, authenticity, and creativity exemplified by the Bohemian artist and incorporated them into the new neo-manager's toolkit. During this time, the neoliberal productive-economic transformation generated a new thriving art market, transforming contemporary artists into entrepreneurs wholly immersed in the new productive paradigm.

As discussed in the introduction, various artists associated with the neo-avant-garde, such as Richard Serra and Gordon Matta-Clark, also began to explore the convergence between the figure of the artist and the worker as labour became increasingly immaterial under neoliberalism. In these instances, however, the temporary adoption of working-class identities often served the purpose of constructing a radical artistic person rather than contributing to a broader political discourse. A different application of these representational tactics may be observed in the deconstruction of (reproductive) labour undertaken by feminist artists in the 1970s.

As previously noted, labour, and contextually social reproduction, were at the centre of the Marxist feminist movement of the 1970s. Influenced by this political ethos and the resulting imagery and cultural context, feminist artists began to represent and perform reproductive labour with the intention of denaturalising its underlying social and production relations. Through a recontextualisation of actual care actions within the museum institution, Lea Lublin in *Mon fils* (1968) and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracts, Maintenance Inside* (1973) aim to challenge the merging of art and life claimed by avant-garde artists, demonstrating the impossibility for a mother-artist to successfully reconcile these two commitments and how this condition has been systematically disregarded. Conversely, Margaret Raspé and Martha Rosler, in their works *Alle Tage wieder – Let Them Swing!* (1974) and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), respectively, engage in the performative re-enactment of gestures of maintenance in the kitchen setting, infusing their gestures with progressively more and more anger and tension. A technique also used by director Chantal Akerman in her first film *Saute ma ville* (1968), which culminates with the explosion of the house and therefore the off-screen death of the protagonist. Despite employing distinct approaches, all these artists share a common objective of deconstructing the image of the happy housewife, shedding light on the inherent challenges faced by women in assuming the 'double burden' of motherhood and employment. This collective effort aimed to present a more realistic depiction of women's duties and formulate a broader critique of the patriarchal-capitalist system and the societal divisions it enforces.

Vishmidt (2017, 11) captures this distinction in posture by distinguishing between the heroic and anti-heroic approaches. While the first is characterised by an identification of the artist with the worker "as the agent of history", the second consists of a misappropriation of gestures of work, marked by emotions such as failure, entropy, and absurdity, in order to destroy established categories of art and labour and the moral proposition they entail. Although not restricted to feminist art, this second strategy is particularly visible in these instances as artists often create unsettling depictions of everyday life,

underlining its viciousness through slight deformations and deceptions that destabilise its familiarity. Without attempting to produce stilted or rough caricatures, the author contends that it is the tension between the dullness of ordinary acts and the apparent triviality of their replication, whether photographic, video, or performance, that makes these depictions especially poignant.

The feminist depiction of labour was not limited to the domestic, despite this being its most historically recognised form; rather, as in the case of *Women and Work* (1975) and *Who's Holding the Baby?* (1978) by The Hackney Flashers, it comes to represent the experience of women in factories, commerce, the service industry, sex work, wage cleaning, and caregiving. In most of these instances, though, what is enacted is again the deconstruction of a specific work performance, namely that of the 'labour of love' and the discrimination both in terms of tasks and wages that this rhetoric restated even outside the domestic realm.

Following the idea that resistance must emanate from the individual's psyche, the discussed artworks explore the specific psychological processes of contemporary production. Through an explicit dramatisation of the typical labour performance, the BMR seeks to disrupt the mood by producing interruptions in the personal and professional routine that denaturalise it and reveal it as the social and cultural construction that it is. In examining the practice of the BMR, the author aims to explore potential reinterpretations of this artistic and political legacy within the contemporary social and productive framework. Rather than focusing on the portrayal of the female body image, these representations prioritise the labourer, irrespective of their gender, within the framework of the feminisation of production and the extant exploitation of affective resources.

4 The Dramatisation of Labour by The Bureau of Melodramatic Research

The Bureau of Melodramatic Research (BMR) was an artistic duo founded in 2009 in Bucharest by Irina Gheorghe and Alina Popa.[5] Popa died in 2019, leaving Gheorghe as the sole member of BMR. On the occasion of *Heartbeat Detection Systems*, the duo's last solo show at Suprainfinit Gallery in Bucharest in 2022, Gheorghe teamed with other Romanian artists, who also happen to be their close friends, to collaboratively refine and perform some of their works. Despite this

5 While recognising the significant impact of feminist theory and politics on a personal and professional level, BMR refrains from explicitly categorising their artistic work as feminist so as to preserve a certain degree of strategic ambiguity.

compelling effort, which effectively materialised the broader network of practitioners and allies developed by the duo over a decade, Popa's untimely death represents a significant turning point, requiring an examination of the multitude of practices and knowledge generated thus far, as well as possible future developments.

Drawing inspiration from the work of photographers such as Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, and classical Hollywood movies, BMR uses film staging to critically explore the use of emotions in the public sphere in contemporary politics and economics, as well as the construction of history in post-Soviet Romania. Following scholar Elaine Hadley's book *Melodramatic Tactics* (1995), which posits melodrama as a behavioural model shaping social interactions across personal and public domains, the artists use melodrama as a lens through which to examine society, labour and the way affects are organised and valorised in the late capitalist economic system (Fiocco, unpublished interview to Gheorghe).

The trilogy *Alien Passions* – comprising *Protect Your Heart at Work* (2012-13), *Lovegold: A Cosmic Cooking Show* (2013-14), and *Above the Weather* (2015-16) – mimics the format of vintage TV instructional programmes to reflect on the relationship between capitalist extraction of natural and human resources and the impact this has on the individual well-being and social interactions. The first episode in the series, *Protect Your Heart at Work*, reflects on the impact that both manual and affective labour exacts upon the psycho-physical well-being of workers. The video, designed to replicate a work-and-safety instructional video, features the artists in work attire, executing a sequence of upsetting yet comical physical exercises intended to safeguard the worker's body and thus improve productivity for, as stated by Popa, "efficient bodies and a proper economy of movement will bring higher profits and make our industries flourish" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2012-13).[6] Passing from industrial attire to that of an office worker, denoting the transition from manual to cognitive labour, the artists move on to reflect on the dangers of affective labour, with the 'perfect smile' serving as a primary symbol. Maintaining an ambiguous stance, blending motivational suggestions and bombastic affirmations with sombre reflections on the reality of contemporary work, the artists insist on the need to protect one's heart and one's self 'at work and as work'. With an abrupt shift in tone, Gheorghe and Popa undertake their final change of clothes, baring their 'new uniforms', that is their bare bodies, so as to emphasise the pervasiveness and the physical and psychological effects of a production system that puts the entirety of the individual's being

6 The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, *Protect Your Heart at Work*, 2012-13, quotes from the video.

at work, as well as the self-exploitation and exhaustion this often entails. Discarded any ironic intent, the artists inquire the viewer on how to protect our bits of life from the constant attacks of capitalism, inviting everyone to work together to develop tools and practices of everyday resistance and solidarity. Along with the artists, the 'glass lady' is the other protagonist of the video. Brought to Poland from East Germany and exhibited in the Warsaw Technical Museum of Technology in 1972 for the educational show *Man and Work*, the mannequin was meant to help workers understand the functioning of the human body so as to better take care of it. It is particularly telling that the mannequin represents a woman's body and that all workers, regardless of their gender, were and are expected to recognise themselves in this transparent and silent body in a society where labour is increasingly becoming feminised.

Lovegold: A Cosmic Cooking Show, the second episode, is a 'cosmic' cooking show in which Gheorghe and Popa discuss the processes of capitalist valorisation of human emotions, weaving together reflections on the immateriality of love and materiality of gold, materialism and idealism, in a context in which, as summarised by Gheorghe, "love is the new gold" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2013-14).[7] Drawing from the Marxist analogy that likens alchemy to capitalist exchange, the artists establish an additional comparison between cooking and alchemy, thus shifting the attention to cooking as a reproductive work and reaffirming the material value of this seemingly immaterial element. Through this metaphorical device, the artists aim to expose the mechanisms of self-exploitation embedded within processes of production, captured in Popa's claim: "It doesn't matter what we cook but how we are being cooked through our own cooking" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2013-14). Furthermore, the mention of gold alludes to a coeval socio-political occurrence, especially the demonstrations against cyanide mining for gold in Roşia Montană, a mountain area in Romania.

Finally, *Above the Weather* is the concluding episode of the trilogy. This instalment adopts the road movie style and moves away from the thematic focus on labour, completing the process of progressive abstraction begun in the previous films. Popa and Gheorghe are shown while driving across a contemporary industrial environment dressed as old Hollywood divas, engaging in debates about love and the threat of human extinction. Within their dialogue, reference is made to Sara Teasdale's poem *There Will Come Soft Rains* (1920), a nuclear science fiction radio show from the 1950s, and the Turkish Eurovision song *Pet'r oil* (1980), a seemingly romantic composition that paradoxically

7 The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, *Lovegold. Contemporary Alchemy*, 2013-14, quotes from the video.

glorifies petroleum as the nation's source of wealth. The forced optimism performed by the artists serves to intensify the sensation of dread and terror caused by the current economic and environmental problems. Realised over the course of four years, the *Alien Passions* trilogy undertakes an odd deconstruction of the human body, not only as a worker but also as a consumer and producer. It seeks to highlight the interrelation and interdependence between economic and social phenomena, and how the ramifications of specific choices emanating from the organisation of production trickle down from society to the individual, thereby constantly shifting between the personal and the collective and systemic dimensions.

Mixing and distorting genres and media, Gheorge and Popa intervene in rhetorical modes of representation and action. However, their images do not offer a new insurgent political imaginary, nor do they convey a clear political project. There is no overt radicalism in these depictions, which take place inside familiar frameworks and do not involve any explicit remarks. Similar to the works of Akerman, Rosler and Raspé, dissent manifests itself in the tiniest of slip-ups in the traditional representation, whether of the housewife who cooks or the worker; these linguistic glimmers and shifts break the self-performance, revealing its construction and hinting more or less directly at the intentions that drive it. The discomfort produced in the viewer is the result of observing something that breaches the implicit norms of social performance, forcing them to become explicit.

The decision to engage with these discourses in a nonlinear and fragmented manner, deploying specific gendered tropes drawn from melodrama, forms a central aspect of the trilogy's approach. Political theorist Olivier Marchart (2019, 63-7) discusses the proliferation of melodrama after 1789 in relation to the dramatisation of political action. In the context of a heated political climate, melodrama was used, according to Marchart, to synthesise multiple and possibly conflicting positions, operating on a somatic level of action to induce specific emotions in the spectator/revolutionary subject. It would be misleading to describe melodrama or parody as an inherently gendered genre, but it is worth noting that it possesses specific gendered historical connotations and that it exists a legacy associated with the use of humorous representations in women's art practice. In the nineteenth century, due to the emphasis on the performance of emotions, melodrama became a means of contemplating the inconsistencies of gender ideology, proposing transgressive examples of femininity and challenging toxic expressions of masculinity (Williams 2018). Notably, women playwrights played a significant role in this endeavour while facing considerable censorship and revisions. Furthermore, Jo Isaak (1996, 194-5) discusses the feminist deployment of laughter and how the distortion of representation through mimicry and the carnivalesque has been used by contemporary women

artists to resist and destabilise forms of domestication and the sexual roles assigned to them.

These strategies are reminiscent of what Vishmidt defined as the anti-heroic approach as well as the concept of 'weak resistance' devised by the philosopher and activist Ewa Majewską (2021) to designate ordinary forms of political action frequently adopted by marginalised subjectivities. In the same way that Vishmidt's anti-heroic approach is constructed in opposition to heroic identifications with the working-class, Majewska's notion of weak resistance emerges in opposition to the prevailing macho imagery that characterises militant activism. While not having a utopian reach, these narrative devices effectively accentuate the cultural specificity of capitalist and patriarchal social configurations, emphasising their most paradoxical features and thus initiating a process of deconstruction of established narratives and beliefs. In BMR's videos, the aesthetic and emotional exuberance of the melodrama is counterbalanced by moments of bleak sobriety, to which the artists reserve the sorest statements and political vindication.

As was previously mentioned, the gender performance enacted by the artists does not try to limit the scope of discussion to the impact of broader economic and political transformations on women alone. Affects are used as a lens through which to examine these changes while addressing the feminisation of production that is characteristic of the current system. The artists do not assume distinct identities in terms of occupation or class, embodying ambiguous yet familiar figures. There is no clear depiction of labour as there was in feminist art of the 1970s or in instances of occupational realism. Reflecting the alleged dematerialisation of labour, the patterns of production are not immediately visible; rather, they occur within the characters, with gestures and words serving as only fragmentary manifestations. Using readily recognisable props, slogans, and buzzwords, the primary purpose of the videos is to challenge the post-Fordist performance of labour and the ideals of passion and sacrifice. This is done both literally, as in *Protect Your Heart at Work*, which addresses the theme of psycho-physical well-being in a meticulous manner and with varying degrees of gravity, and figuratively, as in the other two videos, in which the image of the two elegant and smiling women, who should convey a sense of warmth and security, is juxtaposed with jarring settings, highlighting an underlying sense of unease and distress.

5 Conclusion

The term 'labour performance' incorporates a form of representation and an evaluative criterion for which the worker is observed and assessed to determine her efficiency and success. While these evaluation mechanisms become more specific and pervasive, being assimilated and enacted by the worker himself, some recent cultural phenomena seek to challenge these identity and production models by accomplishing the bare minimum or even withdrawing. However, these minimal breaks in neoliberal ideology occur in a context where capitalism remains dominant.

In this article, reference is made to the legacy of occupational realism and to the practice of deconstruction and denaturalisation undertaken by feminist artists throughout the 1970s in connection to reproductive labour to discuss how this tradition has been recontextualized in the current artistic and productive context. Analysing the example of the BMR, the author examined how these representations attempt to challenge the affective and cognitive mediations prevalent in contemporary visual culture by distorting slogans and archetypes. Through interventions and distortions that aim to destabilise the familiarity and power contained in common visual tropes, the artists trigger processes of re-signification and open gaps of creation in the individual and collective imaginary.

The three videos discussed showcase three different forms of performativity by the artists, as they endeavour to generate disruptions within the prevailing systems of signification. In the concluding remarks of her text, Bryan-Wilson (2012, 46) posits the existence of a paradox within the framework of occupational realism, which arises from the artist's identification with 'other' professions, such as cookers or cleaners, that would negate her own identity as an art worker and reveals the class divide that exists between these two realms. Acknowledging the validity of this argument, the author contends that BMR's portrayals serve as a compelling illustration of artists who abstain from assuming any role beyond that of the precarious worker, hence emphasising a prevalent state and position within certain systems of production.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Gendered Allegories of Power and Warfare: Warrior Women as Personifications in Early Modern Art

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Abstract Geographical personifications during the early modern period, focusing on sixteenth-century Italian painting. It analyses, through case studies, the ancient origin of these predominantly feminine allegories, the circumstances in which they appeared in painting and the role played by warfare in their proliferation. Additionally, the study delves into the gender dynamics at play, emphasizing how the visual portrayal of cities, countries, and republics as women, metaphorically positioned them as mothers, lovers, wives, or maidens within rhetorical discourses and propagandistic imagery.

Keywords Geographical personifications. Allegory. Sixteenth-century Italian art. Gendered bodies. Politics. Warfare. Iconography.

Summary 1 *Roma(e) Resurgen(te)s*: Vasari's Cities in Palazzo Vecchio, 'Rediscovery' and Reinterpretation of an Ancient Phenomenon. – 2 Valiant Soldiers and Virgin Lands: Geographical Personifications in Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain*. – 3 Power, Governance, and Erotic Allegory: Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese*. – 4 Conclusions.

1 *Roma(e) Resurgen(te)s*: Vasari's Cities in Palazzo Vecchio, 'Rediscovery' and Reinterpretation of an Ancient Phenomenon

In 1554 Cosimo I de' Medici commissioned Giorgio Vasari to renovate the Palazzo Vecchio. A few years later, Vasari completed *I ragionamenti,* a text in which the artist described the newly decorated rooms of the palace through a fictional dialogue between himself and the

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young Francesco de' Medici, son of Cosimo I (Le Mollé 2007, 24; Manucci 2014, 19-33). In this narrative, Vasari acts as a cicerone, guiding both the prince and the reader through the palace for three days. He sheds light on the artistry behind his compositions and the allegorical meanings of his paintings, all of which were ultimately intended to honour the Medici family. During the second day of the tour, when Vasari and Francesco reach the Sala di Cosimo I, the prince draws the attention of the reader to an unusual detail of the ceiling decoration, saying:

> Or venite qua a dirmi quello [che] avete fatto in questi ottangoli, che non mi pare ci aviate fatto Virtù come in quelli della camera del signor Giovanni, anzi ci veggo una femmina ginocchioni dinanzi al duca. (Vasari [1567] 1906, 192)

> Come over here now and tell me what you have done in these octagonal spaces. It does not seem to me that you have painted Virtues, as you did in those of the room of Sir Giovanni, instead, I see a woman kneeling before the Duke.[1]

This passage introduces a long iconographic description of the eight corners, where Vasari deliberately chose not to paint Virtues, deviating from the usual conventions. Instead, he portrayed personifications of the cities under Cosimo's rule: Arezzo, Borgo San Sepolcro, Cortona, Pisa, Pistoia, Prato, Fivizzano, and Volterra, each appearing in one of the corner sections of the ceiling, kneeling or sitting before a youthful Cosimo armed *all'antica* **[fig. 1]**.

To differentiate the eight cities, the artist incorporated significant elements of their history into the depiction. He explains this in *I ragionamenti*, where he tells his interlocutor that Volterra is portrayed as aged to represent the city's antiquity and that Pistoia is half-armed to reflect its history of enduring conflicts between opposing factions (Vasari [1567] 1906, 194). The cities' attributes are also carefully chosen. Arezzo, for instance, wears the ancient augur's headband, a reference to the Etruscan rites once practiced there. Arezzo, Cortona and Volterra are depicted while receiving the mural crown by Cosimo, who had reconstructed their walls (193-4).

Although Vasari carefully explains details of the cities' appearances and attires to Francesco de' Medici, the decision to depict them as men or women requires no explanation. This choice follows the ancient convention of assigning gender to personifications based on the grammatical gender of the corresponding noun (Gombrich 1971, 247-57; Warner 1985). For this reason, Pisa is depicted as a woman while Arezzo appears as a man.

1 If not indicated otherwise, all the translations are by the Author.

Figure 1 Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the city of Pisa with Cosimo* I. 1556-59. Mural painting. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. © Catalogo generale dei beni culturali

In Ancient Greek, Latin, and Romance languages, abstract concepts are often given the feminine gender. As a result, in literature and art, female personifications are predominant (Warner 1985). For example, the Latin word *virtus*, despite etymologically deriving from the masculine word for man (*vir*), grammatically takes the feminine gender and is thus visualised as a woman.

While this is not the case for Vasari's description, which includes an equal number of masculine and feminine city names, in general, this female predominance applies to geographical personifications as well.[2] Some of the most important cities of antiquity, for instance Athens, Rome, Constantinople and Antioch, have grammatically feminine names.

2 There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule. For what concerns geographical personifications, for example, the city of Fivizanno, while being described as a man in Vasari's *Ragionamenti*, is then depicted as a woman (Scorza 1995-96, 64-74). Again, in Giambologna's sculpture *Florence Triumphant over Pisa*, Pisa is represented as a man. See Baskins (2017, 91-104).

From the outset, these cities were endowed with patron deities. The Homeric poems suggest that by the second half of the eighth century BC, Athens was already under the divine protection of the goddess Athena, from whom the city derived its name (Broucke 1994, 34). This goddess provided the iconographic model for several geographical personifications, including that of Dea Roma and Britannia. Other civic divinities included Tychai, localised versions of the goddess of chance, Tyche, who governed the prosperity and fortune of a city.

Vasari was probably familiar with Enea Vico's *Imagines*, a set of prints representing the medals issued by the first twelve Roman emperors. In the iconographic programme for the cities under Cosimo I's rule, he made several references to these goddesses and personifications, widely employed in Roman coinage (Scorza 1995-96, 66).

Firstly, his arrangement of figures was directly inspired by a classical motif, that of the *Roma resurgens* (Rome rising again). In this motif, emperors were symbolically portrayed as reviving the personification of Rome, who would kneel before them. Through this imagery, the city was depicted as being reborn and restored by the emperor after times of turmoil or neglect, a homage that Vasari clearly thought his patron deserved (Scorza 1995-96, 66).

Secondly, a number of details in the iconographic programme drew inspiration from antiquity. The mural crowns of Arezzo, Cortona and Volterra, despite holding ideological significance within the context of Cosimo I's domain, were modelled after the primary attribute that identified Tychai in antiquity. Tychai often appeared in art wearing a turreted crown resembling the city walls and carrying a cornucopia symbolising abundance and prosperity (Broucke 1994, 34-49).

Vasari also incorporated the cornucopia into his cycle, in the representation of Pisa **[fig. 1]**. Described in the *Ragionamenti* as wearing a helmet *all'antica* crested with a fox (Vasari [1567] 1906, 192), Pisa was then depicted by Vasari without her helmet, which found its place at her feet.[3] With her breast-revealing dress however, she still had something of the Amazonian lore that also characterised ancient depictions of Dea Roma.[4]

Clearly more warlike than Pisa is the personification of Pistoia, described in the *Ragionamenti* as *mezza armata* or half-armed and depicted wearing a Roman helmet and armour (Vasari [1567] 1906, 194) **[fig. 2]**. While her martial aspect was employed as a reference to the tumultuous situation experienced by the city before Cosimo restored peace, her warlike appearance, combined with the olive branch

3 Scorza states that while the helmet is found in a drawing of Pisa now at the Louvre Museum, it is not visible in the mural painting (1995-96, 69). However, there is a helmet depicted on the ground near Cosimo's feet.

4 For the iconography of Dea Roma see Joyce (2014-15).

Figure 2 Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the city of Pistoia with Cosimo I*. 1556-59. Mural painting. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. © Catalogo generale dei beni culturali

gifted to her by the duke, presented Pistoia as a figure akin to the peace-bringing Athena.

Vasari's ceiling, with its depictions of cities, is only one of the numerous examples of the early modern reinterpretation of civic personifications. In the early modern period, geographical allegories armed *all'antica*, visually deriving from the Athena/Roma protype, became increasingly common in literature and art. The proliferation of these allegorical representations may be attributed, in part, to the widespread violence that affected Italy and Europe in the sixteenth century and beyond. Wars, invasions, and political conflicts were common occurrences at the time, and artists and writers often sought to convey the impact of these events through their works. By personifying cities and countries as warlike figures, they often represented the fortitude of these places and their people in the face of adversity. But if it is no surprise that warfare was at the heart of the political and religious discourse, it is interesting to notice how often gender was implicated in it.[5] The traditional personification of a territory as a woman meant that the metaphors used to refer to that territory were linked to femininity and the sphere of female sexuality. A land could be pure and unconquered like a maiden, fecund like a mother and faithful like a wife. The case studies that follow analyse, through an iconographic lens, the ideological significance of warlike women personifying cities and counties and the importance of their gender roles in the rhetoric discourse of power.

5 See Milligan (2018), who explores the role of women in warfare in early modern times and the widespread discussion around female militancy in literature.

2 Valiant Soldiers and Virgin Lands: Geographical Personifications in Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain*

Pallas Athena was, in ancient Greece, the virgin goddess of wisdom, justice, law, victory, handicraft and warfare. In war she was described as a prudent strategist in opposition to the bloodthirsty Ares (Homer, *Il.*, 10.503-14). She was also the protectress of the eponymous city, a role that extended from Athens to Rome. In Rome, with the name Minerva, she was venerated as the patron first of the Republic and then of the Empire. As the patron of the arts, she supervised Roman industry and as a martial goddess she provided the city with military protection (Hodapp 2019, 20).

Distinguished from Athena/Minerva for her Amazonian attire, Dea Roma, another warlike goddess venerated in the city, also embodied the martial qualities and military aspirations of the Romans (Joyce 2014-15, 6-9).

In accordance with these ancient models, the warlike look of some early modern personifications served as a generic reference to the military inclination of the people they embodied. Corsica, Marche and Liguria, three martial figures which feature, alongside other geographical personifications, in the third edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, are all described as having excellent and courageous soldiers (Ripa [1603] 2021, 204-41).[6]

However, depending on the historical and political circumstances, these belligerent women could carry more intricate and layered meanings, which extended beyond a generic reference to warfare. A well-known allegorical composition by Titian, which went through a series of alterations, perfectly exemplifies the multifaceted nature of these personifications.

In 1566, when visiting Titian's studio, Vasari recorded a painting that the artist had started many years earlier for Alfonso I, Duke of Ferrara, and which remained incomplete after the duke's death in 1534. The painting, briefly described by Vasari as showing a young, naked woman bowing before Minerva, was set in a seaside landscape, with a figure of Neptune in his chariot on the background (Vasari [1568] 1881, 458).[7] With such a brief description, the subject of this

6 See for example Corsica: "Si dipinge che sia armata, e che con la destra mano tenga una corsesca, per essere tali armi molto usate dalli Corsi, liquali sono stimati buoni, e valorosi soldati" (She should be depicted armed and holding a corseque in her right hand, as these weapons are widely used by the Corsicans, who are esteemed as good and courageous soldiers) (Ripa [1603] 2021, 237).

7 The entire quote is: "Comminciò anco, molti anni sono, per Alfonso primo, duca di Ferrara, un quadro d'una giovane ignuda che s'inchina a Minerva, con un'altra figura acanto, ed un mare; dove nel lontano è Nettunno in mezzo, sopra il suo carro: ma per la morte di quel signore, per cui si faceva quest' opera a suo capriccio, non fu finita e si

work, now lost, remains obscure.[8] However, the presence of Minerva and Neptune suggest that it depicted a mythological/allegorical scene.

Around 1568, when Titian revised the painting after a span of over thirty years, he transformed its original mythological subject into a religious allegory dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II (Tietze-Conrat 1951, 130; Panofsky 1969, 190). Although this second painting has also been lost, an engraving of it by Giulio Fontana provides some insight into its content through an accompanying inscription **[fig. 3]**.[9]

In the forefront, the youthful figure mentioned by Vasari now takes the form of a vulnerable young woman, identified as Religion by the presence of a cross at her feet. She is threatened by poisonous snakes, symbolising Heresy. Coming to her aid are Virtue, in the guise of Minerva, carrying a banner with the two-headed Habsburg eagle, and Peace, who holds an olive branch.

Only a few years after the production of this engraving, in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Lepanto's, Titian employed this composition for a third time, again changing its meaning according to the historical circumstances (Wittkower 1939a, 138-40). The third painting was created for Philip II of Spain to celebrate the victory of the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire **[fig. 4]**.

In this version, Minerva/Virtue is transformed into a personification of Spain through some minor alterations. The shield, which in the engraving bore Medusa's head now bears Philip II's coat of arms, (Beroqui 1946, 61), while the gorgon on the breastplate has been replaced by a cherub. Accompanied by a cohort of female warriors, Spain approaches the distressed figure of Religion, threatened by Turkish forces. The character referred to by Vasari as "Neptune in his chariot", seen in the sea in the background, here assumes the guise of a Turk, leading an Ottoman armada (Wittkower 1939a, 140; Tietze-Conrat 1951, 131).

In the three allegories illustrated, while the compositions remained more or less unaltered, the iconographic attributes changed,

rimase a Tiziano" (Vasari [1568] 1881, 458) (He also started many years ago a picture for Alfonso I Duke of Ferrara showing a young woman naked and bowing before Minerva, and another figure next to her; and the sea, where far away Neptune appears in his chariot. But, on account of the death of the Duke, according to whose idea he was executing the work, it was not finished and remained with Titian; Wittkower 1939, 138).

8 Tietze-Conrat suggested that this painting, unfinished, could be the one, with the same subject, in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome (1951, 131).

9 The inscription reads "Caearis invicti pia Religionis imago; Haeresis anguicoma, et saevus quam territat hostis Christigenfim; passura dolos (ut cernis) utrimque Virtuti, et Paci se se commendat amicae" (The pious likeness of the invincible emperor's Religion Which Heresy with serpent locks and the furious enemy of Christians threaten; She will, as you see, overcome the plots of both, Entrusting herself to Valor and Peace, both her friends; Tietze-Conrat 1951, 130).

Figure 3
Giulio Fontana, *Allegory of Religion*. Ca. 1568. Etching, laid paper, height: 405 mm; width: 312 mm. Madrid, Prado Museum

enriching the paintings with different political meanings. Among these changes, two are worth deeper scrutiny in the context of geographical personifications.

First, Spain is modelled on Minerva and represented as a warlike figure not just as a reference to the martial glory of the country, but also to its religious role. We have already noted that Athena/Minerva was a virgin goddess in antiquity. In the early modern period, this allowed her to be reinterpreted as a generic symbol of virtue as she began appearing in scenes depicting the struggle between 'good' and 'evil', known as Psychomachia. Despite being a pagan goddess, Minerva could thus be incorporated into artworks with religious undertones.[10] Her pure and militant character facilitated a connection between her and the Church (Wittkower 1939a,

10 Wittkower goes as far as saying that the comparison between Minerva and Mary was a common convention (1939b, 204).

Figure 4 Titian, *Religion saved by Spain*. ca 1575. Oil on canvas, 168 × 168 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid

139; Panofksy 1969, 189). The association between Minerva, the Church, and Spain is particularly meaningful in the context of Philip II's political role, as this king was a staunch supporter of militant Catholicism.

But if Minerva is turned into the Spanish Church, in its role as protector of Religion, who is the woman who accompanies her in this enterprise, sword in hand? The second relevant alteration of the painting could reveal a veiled reference to the religious significance of another city, Venice. Widely interpreted as Justice (Wittkower 1939a, 139) or Fortitude (Panofsky 1969, 189) this figure was associated with Venice by Frederick de Armas on the basis of text-image comparisons between the painting and Lope de Vega's *La Santa Liga* (1978, 346). In this play, which makes suggestive references to Titian's allegory, the battle of Lepanto is narrated by

the personifications of members of the Holy League: Spain, Venice, and Rome.[11]

Iconography could provide support to this theory. Less warlike than other geographical personifications, the republic of Venice was not normally associated with Minerva but compared to another virgin, Mary, the "Regina del cielo" (Queen of Heaven), as Luigi Detrico defined her in 1585 (Maissen 2013, 254). Venice was also frequently depicted carrying Justice's sword (Rosand 2012, 31; Maissen 2013, 148-63). Occasionally, Venice is shown fighting in wars that involved the republic directly, for example in *The Allegory of the Victory over the League of Cambrai* by Palma il Giovane.

The sword is the only attribute of the woman following Spain in Titian's painting. We can assume that the artist needed a reason to transform Peace's olive branch into a weapon. That reason might have been to pay homage to the Republic of Venice for its crucial role in the battle of Lepanto. Perhaps the amazons who follow Spain and Venice are other countries and cities involved in the struggle, a crowd of chaste warriors ready to fight in the name of the Church.

3 Power, Governance, and Erotic Allegory: Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese*

One of the main virtues of the goddess Athena was, as noticed, her maidenhood. Such a feature allowed her to become a personification of Virtue itself and to be re-interpreted as a Christian symbol. Notwithstanding this, by virtue of being the nurturer of the Athenians, Athena was also invested with symbolic maternal qualities (Joyce 2014-15, 11). Something similar applied to Roma as well, who, with her exposed breast, could potentially become symbol of maternal nurture (22). Other stereotypical female roles of geographic personifications included that of lover or wife. A city like Venice, repeatedly compared to the virgin Mary, was metaphorically joined in a mystical marriage to the Doge (Maissen 2013, 116).[12]

Considering the overlapping of these roles, it can be difficult to unravel the symbolic meanings of an allegorical painting featuring geographical personifications. A particularly complex example is Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese* **[fig. 5]**.

11 They appear together, embracing, also in Giorgio Vasari's *The Battle of Lepanto*, fresco in the Sala Regia in the Vatican Palace, dated 1572 (Strunck 2011, 219).

12 As evident in a 1580 poem written after the election of a new Doge, which called him both "sposo", namely bridegroom of the Republic (Maissen 2013, 116).

Figure 5 Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli, *Parma embraces Alessandro Farnese*. ca 1556. Oil on canvas, height: 150 cm, width: 117 cm. Galleria Nazionale di Parma, Parma

In the "Life of Parmigianino", Vasari mentioned that his cousin, Girolamo Bedoli

> ritrasse, per madama Margherita d'Austria duchessa di Parma, il principe don Alessandro, suo figliolo, tutto armato con la spada sopra un mappamondo, et una Parma ginocchioni et armata dinanzi a lui. (Vasari [1568] 1759, 366)

> portrayed, for Madama Margaret of Austria duchess of Parma, prince Don Alessandro, her son, all armed with a sword on a globe, and a Parma kneeling and armed before him.

While Vasari a few years later used the same expression – "una femmina ginocchioni dinanzi al duca" (a figure of a woman kneeling before the duke) – to describe his Personification of Pisa in Palazzo Vecchio, a comparison between the two shows a clear difference in posture. Parma and the young Alessandro seem to enjoy a more intimate relationship than any of the cities depicted by Vasari with Cosimo I, as, unlike those, they are embracing.

Alessandro, only about eleven years old at the time of this portrait, produced in 1555-56, is depicted fully armed, sitting on a globe. He carries the baton of command in his right hand and throws his left arm around Parma. The city, helmeted and armoured, is identified by the coat of arms on her shield and by the bull, one of Parma's symbols, mounted on her helmet and sword. She kneels on the duke's side and, gazing into his eyes, returns his embrace. Resting on her arm, a palm branch symbolising glory decorates the right side of the picture (Giusto 1998, 68).

The difference in age between the two figures, and the fact that Alessandro is depicted as the son and the heir of the Farnese dynasty, could suggest that the embrace is a motherly one. As noted above, according to Vasari, the painting was commissioned by Alessandro's mother Margherita of Austria (Vasari [1568] 1759, 366)

A few years later, Margherita was the sitter for an interesting medal designed by Jacques Jonghelinck, in which she appeared as an allegorical figure (Rossi 1888, 339), a sort of Minerva Pacifera-Justice, iconographically similar to Bedoli's Parma.[13]

Like Parma, this allegory wears a dress with a Roman cuirass on top and carries the sword and the palm among other attributes.

However, unlike Jonghelinck's allegory, Bedoli's Parma is an idealised woman whose face cannot be mistaken for a portrait. Moreover, between Bedoli's painting and this medal eleven years had passed and Margherita's political role had changed. In 1559 her half-brother Philip II appointed her governor general of the Netherlands, where she faced growing discontent, insurrections and revolts (Steen 2013, 49-74). The medal inscribed *Favente deo* (if God so wishes) could then refer to her attempts to quell the riots in a country with growing Protestant influence, a country far away from Parma.

13 The attribution to Jonghelinck is confirmed by the letter from Francesco Marchi, executor of the medal to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Margherita's brother-in-law, dated 7 July 1567. The letter also confirms the identification of the female figure on the reverse with Margherita (Rossi 1888, 339).

Less than two centuries after it was completed, Bedoli's artwork was moved to Naples. There it was seen and briefly mentioned among many others by Giuseppe Maria Galanti in his description of the city. Galanti refers to it as "il Quadro allegorico di una Parma in sembianza di amante che abbraccia Alessandro Farnese" (the allegorical painting of Parma in the guise of a lover embracing Alessandro Farnese) (Galanti [1792] 1838, 82). Later on, in a *Gazzetta Letteraria* dated 1883 we find the following description:

> Alessandro Farnese, duca di Parma [...], era un bel giovane, e il Parmigianino gli fece il ritratto in questo modo: alla città di Parma diede la forma di un'amante e questa, bella, grecamente vestita, si accosta al giovane per abbracciarlo. (*Gazzetta Letteraria* 1883, 225)

> Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma [...] was a handsome young man and Parmigianino painted his portrait in this way: he gave the city of Parma the form of a mistress, and this beautiful, Greek-toned mistress approaches the young lord to embrace him.

Despite not being indicative of the intentions of Margherita of Austria and Bedoli (in the *Gazzetta* mistaken for Parmigianino), these accounts suggest that from the late eighteenth century the embrace between Parma and Alessandro was seen as an erotic one.

A detail of the painting seems to confirm this hypothesis. In an emphatic position almost in the centre of the picture, the hilt of Alessandro's sword resembles an erect penis. It points to the centre of Parma's breasts and, more precisely, to a jewel set into the armour from which hangs a pearl, suggestive of semen. Phallus-like swords are not rare in Renaissance art and weapons are often used as sexual metaphors in literature (Barolsky 1978, 113). As we noticed, not uncommon too is the idea of a geographical personification as a lover. While some were presented as virgin territories, others were instead described as beautiful women who many wanted to possess.

In rhetoric and political speeches, the act of engaging in sexual relations with a city or a country was employed as a metaphor to symbolise power and governance. This metaphor was especially prevalent in Florence. For instance, in a song from the late fourteenth century, the city was depicted as a slumbering bride, embraced by council members during an era of oligarchical rule (Lazzaro 2015, 361; Randolph 2002, 69-71). As time passed and the Medici's power became hereditary, Michelangelo lamented in a madrigal that while the city should have many, even a thousand lovers – her citizens – she was instead taken by only one, all for himself (Saslow 1991, 423).

In other contexts, kings and rulers were portrayed as the bridegroom to their lands or communities. This portrayal aimed to

illustrate the close connection between the ruler and his people and legitimize his power (Maissen 2013, 93-120).

There is reason to believe that the union between Parma and Alessandro Farnese is a legitimate one. The shield that Parma holds in her right hand shows two coats of arms combined, bisected by a vertical line. This design, 'an impaled shield bisected in pale', was a heraldic convention to denote union, the most common one being marriage. Where the union *was* marriage, the husband's arms would be shown in the *dexter* half (on the right-hand side of someone standing behind the shield), being the place of honour, the wife's arms in the *sinister* half (Boutell 1863, 102). In Parma's shield, the Farnese coat of arms is shown in the *dexter* part while Parma's emblem in the *sinister*.

The painting could then suggest an allegorical marriage between Alessandro and Parma. It is noteworthy that the picture was made in the years of Alessandro's move to the Spanish court in Brussels, where he then stayed for several years (Giusto 1998, 68). In the painting, the statuette of Fame blows upon his future achievements, and even the gaze of the young man seems to be directed towards the future. However, Parma holds him close, observing him with a languid look, as if to demonstrate the loyalty of a conquered woman who will await her lover's return.

4 Conclusions

Vasari's cities in Palazzo Vecchio, Titian's *Religion Saved by Spain* and Bedoli's *Parma Embraces Alessandro Farnese* are three interesting examples of how sixteenth-century artists interpreted geographical personifications to meet different communication objectives.

Through these case studies, the present article has attempted to examine a specific angle of a wide and complex phenomenon, that of personification, which lies in the interplay between language, art, politics and religious symbolism.

Vasari' s depiction of different personified cities served as a starting point to focus on the roots of these predominantly feminine allegories, whose lineage can be traced back to ancient civilisations and cults, such as those of Athena and Roma. As martial goddesses, they provided primary prototypes for geographical personifications during the sixteenth century, a period characterised by wars, invasions, and political conflicts. Modelled on these martial figures, are, among many others, the personification of Spain in Titian's painting and that of Parma in Bedoli's work.

Within the article, the analysis intertwines the iconographic and symbolic examination of the military aspects of these personifications with an exploration of their gender roles. In rhetorical discourses and propagandistic imagery, these predominantly female

personifications are often referred to as maidens, wives, mothers, lovers, and widows. In Titian's intricate allegory, Spain is portrayed as a militant virgin who bravely rescues Religion from her enemies. On the other hand, Bedoli's painting depicts Parma as a loving wife, deeply enamoured with the heir of her sovereign.

While this analysis does not aim to be exhaustive, it endeavours to shed new light on the multifaceted nature of warlike geographical personifications and their significance within the broader socio-political context of sixteenth-century Italy. By examining these case studies, we gain a deeper understanding of how artists employed personification as a means to convey complex ideas, engage with historical and mythological origins, and participate in the political and religious discourses of their time.

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Art, Patronage, and Prestige: Visual Representations of Power in the Modern Era

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Protected and Protecting
Dual Relations between the Sapieha Family and the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Kodeń

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Abstract In the light of traditional approaches to the post-Tridentine coronation of images in East-Central Europe, the aim of this paper is to analyse the coronation of the miraculous icon of Our Lady of Kodeń in 1723 from a different point of view, highlighting the unique dual relationship between the image and the Sapieha family. Using the specific example of the Madonna of Kodeń, this study will emphasise the political influence of divine images beyond their religious meaning. It will also provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into the creation of a family legend about their special relationship with the Mother of God.

Keywords Jan Fryderyk Sapieha. Sapieha family. Our Lady of Kodeń. Coronation of Miraculous Images. Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Kodeń.

Summary 1 Phenomena of Miraculous Images. – 2 Two Engravings from Leipzig. – 3 Family Gallery. – 4 The Adventures of Mikołaj Sapieha. – 5 Latin Issue. – 6 Preparation for the Coronation. – 7 Conclusion.

1 Phenomena of Miraculous Images

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the doctrines and regulations of the Council of Trent "started to spread across the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an element of the growing Catholic Reformation" (Augustyniak 2008, 393). The special veneration of the Virgin Mary was "one of the essential aspects of the growing local piety"

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(Ciesielski 2004, 195). Amid the critical times of the *Swedish Deluge*[1] and the frequent plague epidemics that followed the war conflicts, the impoverished population of Poland sought refuge in the Mother of God with a plea for protection. In 1656, King John II Casimir Wasa[2] took a holy oath at the Assumption Cathedral in Lviv, officially recognising the Virgin Mary as the guardian of Poland. The monarch urged people to fight against numerous enemies and placed the Commonwealth under the protection of the Mother of God, calling her the queen and patroness of the whole country and all its inhabitants.[3]

The veneration of the Virgin Mary was expressed in a variety of rites and ceremonies. The most spectacular of these became widespread during the Wettin period (1709-63). The coronation of images of the Virgin Mary was the "sumptuous and opulent" (Nowakowski 1898, 61) manifestation of devotion to her.[4] On 8 September 1717, Krzysztof Jan Szembek crowned the first miraculous image of the Mother of God in modern Poland, known as the *Black Madonna of Częstochowa*. The third coronation,[5] on which I will concentrate, took place in 1723 in the village of Kodeń,[6] which had been in the possession of the wealthy Sapieha family since 1511.[7] The coronations of the divine images such as *Our Lady of Kodeń* has been studied by historians according to the traditional approach used to analyse all

1 The *Swedish Deluge* (potop swedzski) was a series of military conflicts in the mid-seventeenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Between 1648 and 1660, the Cossacks of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Russians and the Swedes sacked the Commonwealth on a number of occasions and destroyed its capital, Warsaw.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all names of persons and places, with the exception of the monarchs, are given in their original Polish/Ukrainian form.

3 The subsequent victory of John Casimir's army was attributed to the miracle of the Virgin Mary. Her role in the success of the war also strengthened the already growing Marian devotion.

4 In addition to its liturgical significance, this ritual was used for dynastic and political propaganda. Coronations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth united the nobility and peasants through pilgrimages and mutual participation.

5 The second coronation after Częstochowa took place in Trakai, in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Trakai Mother of God was crowned on 4 September 1718 by Bishop Konstanty Kazimierz Brzostowski.

6 Kodeń has a fortunate geographical location at the crossroads of various trade routes. Situated on the banks of the Western Bug River, Kodeń had been trading with the Baltic ports of Gdańsk, Elbląg and Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) since the Middle Ages. The river enabled the exchange of goods with Volhynia, Podlasie and Red Ruthenia along the border between Poland and Ukraine, as well as with Belarus and Lithuania.

7 Members of this family, who claimed to be descended from the Gediminids, vied with the Radziwill family in the second half of the seventeenth century to become the most influential house in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Sapieha family had a reputation as wealthy patrons of the arts and culture, in addition to their role as benefactors and supporters of the Catholic Church in Poland. The Sapiehas were divided into two main branches; the older one was based in Różana and became known as the Różansky branch. The younger Kodeńsky branch gathered around Kodeń.

revered Baroque images: firstly, as a magnificent homage to the Virgin Mary,[8] secondly, as an example of Baroque performance culture,[9] and finally, as a significant post-Tridentine influence in East-Central Europe.[10] I have developed another hypothesis explaining the liturgical act as a personal achievement of Jan Fryderyk Sapieha,[11] who owned Kodeń at that time.

Sapieha was aware of the fact that the image had a special connection with his family, since his great-grandfather, Count Mikołaj Sapieha, had brought it back from abroad in 1630, thereby laying the foundations of a Marian shrine in Kodeń. Although most aristocratic families in Poland and Lithuania possessed valuable paintings and other treasures, few items were so closely associated with specific members of the family as the icon from Kodeń was with Count Mikołaj. Jan Fryderyk decided to use the Marian devotion for his purposes, knowing about the unique position of the Virgin Mary in Polish society and people's incomparable love for her. He developed an elaborate plan that would lead to the creation of a cult of his family icon to emphasise this unique relationship and draw attention to his house, which was fighting for its position at the royal court. The project of the 'Madonna of the Sapiehas' was a twofold one. On the one hand, it promoted the family's relics among pilgrims and ordinary people; on the other, it was a celebration of the family's unique relationship with the Virgin Mary, which set it apart from other aristocratic houses. The Sapiehas' popularity among the common people would also increase by presenting their family as a house chosen by the Mother of God. From 1707 to 1723, when the coronation took place, I determined several tasks that Sapieha completed in order to unite the noble family with a venerated image. Following in the footsteps of Jan Fryderyk, the process of establishing the veneration of the image of *Our Lady of Kodeń* is presented here in chronological order.

8 In the second half of the nineteenth century, the importance of the cult of the Virgin Mary on the territory of Poland became an important topic for Polish historians. Books from this period summarise all known information on images of the Virgin Mary, although they generally lack a critical analysis of the sources. For the period from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century see, for example, Pruszkowski 1898; Fridrich 1907. The special emphasis on the role of the devotion to the Virgin Mary continues to this day as one of the approaches to the theme. See Dywan 2014; Chomik 2003 for further information.

9 The analysis of divine coronations as part of the Baroque phenomenon of street performances and theatricality is mostly represented in modern Czech historiography, see Royt 1999; Vrabelová 2012; Malý 2019. For the most detailed information about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, see Baranowski 2003.

10 See Augustyniak 2008; Witkowska 1988; Nabywaniec, Lorens, Zabraniak 2019.

11 Jan Fryderyk Sapieha (1680-1751) was the most famous representative of the Kodeń branch of the Sapieha family. He held several positions in the government of the Commonwealth, serving as Grand Recorder of Lithuania, Castellan of Trakai and Minsk. In 1735 he was appointed as the Grand Chancellor of Lithuania.

2 Two Engravings from Leipzig

In 1707 as part of his 'Grand Tour'[12] the young Jan Fryderyk "wandered all over Europe" (Sapieha 1995, 429), studying at the universities of Halle, Rostock and Leipzig, before moving to Holland to continue his education in Utrecht and Leiden. While in Leipzig, the nobleman paid a visit to the workshop of the famous artist Martin Bernigeroth, who was the most important supplier of engravings to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (cf. Huber 1796, 39). Sapieha asked him to engrave a picture of *Our Lady of Kodeń*. The engraving was used for the first time by Jan Fryderyk on the cover of his book, which was published in Toruń in 1720. Historians have not yet accepted the purchase of the engraving as part of the long process of creating a Marian family legend (Kałamajska-Saeed 2006), probably due to the considerable time gap between the moment of the order and the first use of the image. The Latin inscription written by Bernigeroth on the base of the image suggests that Sapieha had already thought of its future use.

Below the silhouette of the Virgin, we can read the following text:[13]

> Virgini Deiparae Reginae Poloniae in cunctis adversitatibus Protectici Haeres devotissimae Praedecessorum Suorum rendarius Magni Ducatus Litvaniae Brestianensis, hanc Beatae Mariae Imagerali Codnensi, innumeris Benecifius Claram in Coden Sapieha, Castelanum Vilnensi anno 1636 obtenam, & Roma allatam lica, in Diecesi Luceoriensi, Palatinatugium aeterna Devotionis excudi unicae Domus Sapieahane & in nuperrimis malis expertae Patronae venerationis Joannes Sapieha Gubernator cum Juris diction Palatinatenem de Guada Luppe, in Ecclesia Prapositus & Gratiosissimam per Nicolaum Comitem nensem ex speciali Sancta Sedis Favore ae in praedicta ab Eodemque fundata Basi Brestianensi sita, depositam, in Homa curavit Anno Domini 1707.
> Bernigeroth Sculps. Lips. (Walicki 1720, 9)

> Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Poland in all adversities, the most devoted heir of her predecessors, the Brest Voivodeship in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, this image of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Kodeń, which was obtained by Nicolaus Sapieha, the Castellan of Vilno, in 1636, together with numerous other luminous

12 The Grand Tour was the custom of a traditional trip through Europe undertaken by noble and upper-class young European men. This tradition was established at the end of the seventeenth century and survived until the nineteenth century. One of the key destinations was pilgrim shrines in Italy and Spain.

13 In this case, the first names of Jan Fryderyk and Mikołaj Sapieha were kept in their Latin form.

> donations, was brought from Rome to the diocese of Łuck in the Voivodship of Poland, to be forever worshipped by the House of Sapieha; and to be venerated as the patron saint of Joannes Sapieha, the Governor of the province of Guada Luppe, who suffered from malicious evils. With the special favour of the Holy See, the image was placed and taken care of in the most virtuous and gracious Basilica built by Nicolaus Sapieha in the aforementioned Brest Voivodeship. Anno Domini 1707.
> Bernigeroth, sculptor from Leipzig

Two main concepts contained in the text are at the centre of Jan Fryderyk Sapieha's subsequent activities. Firstly, the readers realised that the image appeared in Poland only because of Mikołaj Sapieha's unique position and special relationship with the Holy See. Of all the families in Europe, the Pope chose to give the precious relics to one Sapieha, and it was his house that was chosen by the Virgin Mary and has been protected by her ever since. Secondly, the Sapieha family presented themselves as the main worshippers and protectors of *Our Lady of Kodeń*. A significant fact is that the engraving was purchased from the most prestigious workshop that supplied portraits of the royal family. Sapieha's actions at this moment show that he had no regrets about the expenditure of money and that he was only using the services of the monarch Augustus II.

Two years after the creation of the first engraving, Sapieha returned to Leipzig for a new commission for Bernigeroth: "a personal portrait with the insignia of the Grand Recorder of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania" (Łomnicka-Żakowska 2003, 284). Sapieha then began the second phase of his outstanding project of the Sapieha ancestral icon, in which he could use his new portrait.

3 Family Gallery

Since the end of the 1630s, the painting of the Virgin Mary has been kept in the Church of St Anne in Kodeń.[14] Count Mikołaj Sapieha, who founded the church and supported its construction, was buried there in 1644 together with his wife Jadwiga Anna. After their burial, the Church of St. Anne served as a necropolis of the Kodeń line of the Sapieha family. At the beginning of 1710 Jan Fryderyk ordered 76 portraits of his ancestors, starting with the Lithuanian prince Witold.

14 The construction of a stone church in Kodeń began in the summer of 1629 with the financial support of Mikołaj Sapieha and his wife, Jadwiga Anna Woyna. The couple promised that their church would not be inferior to Saint Peter's Basilica. The new church was consecrated in 1635.

The portraits were painted by various local and foreign masters. The family gallery[15] became known as *Tabula genealogica domus Sapieharum* (Genealogical Table of the Sapieha Family; Tłomacki 1996, 275). Sapieha's distant cousin Kazimir Jan, the head of the Różanski branch of the family, helped his relative to collect information and data about their common heritage and sent him a number of materials relating to their famous ancestors (cf. Kałamajska-Saeed 2006, 59).

The family tree is presented on a large table with nine rows of portraits of the famous Sapiehas, arranged in chronological order, with a short description of each one. Two heroes of the history of the Kodeń shrine are in the most prominent place: Count Mikołaj, who brought the divine image to Kodeń, and Jan Fryderyk, who was the main benefactor and the creator of the gallery. The portrait of the second Sapieha is based on an engraving made by Martin Bernigeroth in 1709. He is depicted as a young man, the most splendid representative of his family, in the full splendour of all the orders and titles he had acquired in his lifetime.

The fact that the paintings were not placed in the Sapieha's main palace in Kodeń, but in St Anne's Church, could be explained as follows: this gallery symbolises the monumental epitaph of the family, which for many generations has placed itself under the protection of the Mother of God. At the same time, all the visitors to the church and the numerous pilgrims could see the family portraits next to the miraculous icon, which again emphasised the inseparable history of the icon and Sapiehas. The portrait of Mikołaj Sapieha, holding the temple of Kodeń with the miniature of *Our Lady of Kodeń* behind him, confirms once again that this church was founded by the Sapieha family, who also purchased the icon for all pilgrims. Visitors may feel as if they are under the silent control of all the family members watching them from the walls. The presence of the Sapiehas around the divine image was maintained by the numerous tombs of family members near the high altar.

15 Similar ancestral galleries began to be built during the reign of Augustus II (1709-33), when the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania was gradually recovering from a long period of war. The time of peace allowed the wealthy aristocrats to satisfy their desires, which not only served the common good but also their personal interests. Sapiehas' pedigree became one of the first galleries of its kind.

4 The Adventures of Mikołaj Sapieha

In 1720 a book was published in the Toruń typography in Polish, entitled *History of the Miraculous Image of Kodeń*. The author of this edition introduced himself as Jakub Walicki, the chaplain in Kodeń and "the lowest servant of the most honourable *pan* 'lord', the founder and benefactor Jan Fryderyk Sapieha" (Walicki 1720, 6). Walicki's book was the first written account of the story of Sapieha's great-grandfather, Mikołaj, and his visit to Rome, which was briefly mentioned under the engraving of *Our Lady of Kodeń* from 1707. Walicki described the adventurous story of Count Mikołaj the Pious, who contracted an unknown but dangerous disease shortly after 1629. Despite his doctors' care, Mikołaj's health deteriorated rapidly and soon all that could be done was hope and prayer. Aware of the nearness of death, Count Mikołaj promised God that if he survived, he would make a pilgrimage to Rome. Sapieha and his wife Jadwiga Anna visited Italy in 1630, although the illness did not disappear. After seeing the divine icon of the Virgin Mary in the Pope's private chapel, Sapieha miraculously recovered. However, as soon as he left the chapel, he began to feel ill again. Sapieha asked Pope Urban VIII for the image, realising that only its constant presence could bring him a healthy life. Attributed to the hand of the Evangelist Luke, the Pope refused to sell or give away the icon. Sapieha had the option of accepting the will of the Pope, as a faithful Christian would do, but he chose not to do so. Having bribed the guards with 500 golden ducats, he removed the icon from the wall of the Chapel and fled the city before dawn. Urban VIII soon discovered the loss of the precious image, suspected that Sapieha was the culprit, and sent his armed men in search of the thief (cf. Walicki 1720, 10-15). "Sapieha left Italy, hurrying along mountain roads, in the dark, faster than the wind", wrote Walicki, "travelling through Hungary and Lviv, and after a year returned to Kodeń" (15), where he placed the image in the family church of the Holy Spirit until a more presentable stone church was completed.

In the following years, according to Walicki, Sapieha exchanged letters with the Pope and his Apostolic Nuncio in Poland, Honorius Visconti, explaining his actions. However, both remained adamant and Sapieha was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. The nobleman reconciled with Rome only in 1634, when he opposed the possible marriage of Władyslaw IV Wasa with the Lutheran princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate, and rejected this proposal in the Polish Parliament, using the right of '*liberum veto*'[16] (cf. Walicki 1720, 15).

16 The right of the *liberum veto* was granted to all members of the Parliament (Sejm) in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. It allowed any member of the Sejm to force

For more than two centuries, historians did not doubt the author's personality and the veracity of his story;[17] they considered Walicki a true representative of the Church. In accordance with today's generally accepted interpretation,[18] there has never been a chaplain by the name of Jakub Walicki; this name is completely fictitious. The real author of the book was Jan Fryderyk Sapieha, who pretended to be a monk who used the authority of the Catholic Church and took advantage of the momentum in the statements of its members. Whether we consider Sapieha's sacrilege to be a fact or not: the publication has fulfilled its purpose. In a simple and engaging language that was understandable to the majority of the population, the author presented an 'objective' view of the history of the image. He emphasised once again the unity of the icon and the Sapieha family. The rapid distribution of the book also contributed to the spread of information about the image of *Our Lady of Kodeń* and the adventures of Mikołaj Sapieha throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

5 Latin Issue

One year after the publication of the *History of the Miraculous Image of Kodeń* Jan Fryderyk prepared another edition on the family icon in Latin, which was published in Warsaw in 1721 under the title *Monumenta antiquitatum Marianarum* (Ancient Monuments of the Virgin Mary). This was the first time that Sapieha published under his real name rather than a pseudonym (cf. Zajac 2020, 99). The appearance of his name was not the only innovation of his new Latin book. The 1720 edition was aimed at a wide range of readers, regardless of their status; the second book was intended for the ecclesiastical elite. In the preface, Sapieha dedicated this text to

> Santissimo Ac Beatissimo Patri Innocentio XIII. Divina Providentia Pontifici Maximo.
>
> The Most Holy and Blessed Father, by Divine Providence Pope Innocent XIII. (Sapieha 1721, 7)

an immediate end to the current session and nullify any legislation by vocally expressing his wish to stop the activity.

17 The novel *Błogosławiona wina* (Holy Guilt) (1957) by the famous Polish writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka popularised the possible sacrilege of Mikolaj Sapieha in the twentieth century.

18 For further analysis of Jan Fryderyk Sapieha pseudonym Walicki see Carl, Wrede 2007; Chemperek 2020.

The devotion to the Pope also influenced Sapieha's style. The first difference was in the language of the edition, which was written in Latin only. In the 1720 book, Sapieha's ancestor was portrayed as a rebellious, free-spirited adventurer who was supported by the author and won the sympathy of the readers. The 1721 book presents a different portrait of Mikołaj, with many dark and contradictory traits. He is portrayed as a "criminal man full of sins" (Sapieha 1721, 150) who stole the miraculous painting because of a "serious illness that affected his mind and nerves" (151). *The Ancient Monuments of the Virgin Mary* allowed Jan Fryderyk to use all his writing skills and his knowledge of classical philosophy and ancient literature. He recreated a kind of ancient tragedy, criticising his great-grandfather and his scandalous behaviour, being "shocked by his actions" (147-8) in Rome and admiring the wisdom and calm of Urban VIII, who did not take immediate revenge.

Sapieha's portrayal of Mikołaj Sapieha as a criminal corresponds with Jan Fryderyk's own dubious actions: in the last part of the book, Sapieha frequently referred to letters written by Nuncio Visconti, in which he was supposed to praise Mikołaj's heroism and courageous defence of the Catholic Church during the parliamentary session on the marriage of Władysław IV Wasa and the Lutheran princess Elizabeth of Palatinate (444-52). This at first sight credible source is completely fictitious, the archive of the Polish Parliament doesn't mention any statements ever made by Mikolaj Sapieha, so his possible dispute with the king probably never happened. In addition to the correspondence of Nuncio Visconti, Sapieha provided other convincing sources: a list of votive gifts to the miraculous image[19] and a list of miracles that occurred after the icon was transferred to Kodeń[20] (474-90). Neither of these documents related to the icon was real, and fabricated sources were used to prove the antiquity and miraculous character of the icon. The actions of Jan Fryderyk and his lies to the head of the Church are no less shocking than the possible sacrilege of Our Lady of Kodeń.

When analysing the nobleman's plan, I was struck by one moment in particular: his effort to describe his ancestor as a thief, which is in sharp contrast to his previous actions. In the gallery of the Sapieha family in Kodeń, Mikołaj is portrayed as a devout and almost saintly man who built a stone temple and received the icon of *Our Lady of Kodeń* as a special gift from the Pope. What was the reason for this dramatic change in the narrative? Baroque *curiositas* 'curiosity' is one possible reason. An important element of Baroque consciousness

19 Most of them were given by Sapiehas as the most faithful and devoted family.

20 Many of the miraculous healings were of members of the Sapieha family, but ordinary peasants could also be found on the list.

was "curiosity about people, places, the laws of nature and wonders, the desire to learn and the passion for new knowledge" (Strużyńska 2016, 35). In the eighteenth century, journals reporting unexplained, miraculous and rare events were sought after. The society liked to read stereotyped stories, in which the famous aristocrat Sapieha as a cheeky thief was a perfect fit.

When Jan Frederyk wrote his works, there were more than 400 Marian shrines in the Crown Lands of Poland. Not far from Kodeń, in the town of Sokal, there was a miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary from the fourteenth century. The *Madonna of Sokal* was considerably older than the one of Kodeń and had been known to pilgrims for several centuries. In 1746, when Benedykt Chmielowski published the first Polish encyclopaedia *Nowe Ateny* (New Athens) in the definition of 'divine icons', only twelve verses were devoted to the medieval *Madonna of Sokal*, while 33 verses were devoted to the relics of Kodeń (cf. Chmielowski 1746, 941-2). Equally important for Sapieha was the need to speed up the process of fame of the Kodeń image: with two coronations already held in Częstochowa and Trakai, he was in a hurry to make 'his' or 'Sapieha's' coronation one of the very first, so that people would remember it before many others took place.

6 Preparation for the Coronation

In 1721, fourteen years after he had visited Leipzig and ordered the engraving of the Virgin Mary, Jan Fryderyk almost fulfilled his plan. He had already published two books, one in Polish for the common readers with a taste for adventure and scandal, and another in Latin, in a peculiar and high language for the eyes of the Pope. Both editions attracted attention and helped to glorify the Sapiehas and their family icon, which was reproduced on the first pages as a copy of the original engraving made by Bernigeroth. The only thing that was missing was the coronation itself. Realising how many Marian shrines were waiting for their chance to catch the Pope's eye, Sapieha decided in the second half of 1722 to accelerate the process and approach the Holy See. Together with Stefan Bogusław Rupniewski, the Bishop of Łuck, they began to correspond with the delegates of the Catholic Church. In September 1722, Rupniewski wrote a letter to the new Apostolic Nuncio in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Vincentius Santini, in which he reported on the "passionate desire of Jan Fryderyk Sapieha"[21] to crown the image of Kodeń. In November, Santini sent another letter to Cardinal Annibale Albani,

21 Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Archivio del Capitolo di San Pietro, Madonne Coronate 5, f. 271c.

the archpriest of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. In his letter, Santini informed Rome of Sapieha's wish to crown his miraculous image and he also added documents proving the antiquity and divinity of *Our Lady of Kodeń* prepared by Jan Fryderyk Sapieha and Stefan Rupniewski.[22] Pope Innocent XIII gave his approval in May 1723, less than six months after having received the necessary information, and reacted exceptionally quickly.[23] The fact that, for the first time, the golden crowns for the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus were not made from the special fund of the Count Pallavicini may have prompted such a swift reaction from the Holy See.[24] Jan Fryderyk suggested paying for the crowns from his savings.[25] The coronation of Our Lady of Kodeń took place on 15 August 1723, during the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Stefan Rupniewski, who helped Sapieha prepare the documents for the Pope and wrote letters to the Apostolic Nuncio, was chosen to crown the divine image. When the golden crowns touched the heads of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, Sapieha's plan was complete.

7 Conclusion

Although Jan Fryderyk, like the majority of the Polish *szlachta* 'nobility', was a devout Catholic, his desire to organise a canonical coronation of his family icon was more than a desire to praise the Mother of God. His actions were mainly an attempt to show off his family and himself and to increase the fame of Sapiehas. Over the course of two decades, Jan Fryderyk gradually built up a legend about the theft of a precious icon from Rome and spread information about its miraculous nature. The magnate established a link between his family and the divine icon by means of five basic steps. Sapieha's portrait gallery showed all the parishioners and pilgrims who came to Kodeń that this family was under the care of the Virgin Mary, who in turn was under the protection of Sapiehas. Jan Fryderyk's two books

22 Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Archivio del Capitolo di San Pietro, Madonne Coronate 5, f. 271b.

23 Usually, the Pope gave his permission within a year. However, there were cases when the coronation was delayed for several years. The preparations for the coronation of the icon of Pidkamin were delayed for twenty years, and the Madonna of Bołszowce was coronated after eight years of waiting.

24 In the first half of the seventeenth century, Alessandro Sforza Pallavicini, Count of Piacenza, who was famous for his devotion to the Virgin Mary, with the blessing of Pope Urban VIII, set up a special fund for the sponsorship of golden crowns. The first crowned image to be paid for by Pallavicini's donation was the Madonna della Febbre in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome in 1638.

25 Sapieha set an example for other aristocrats in Poland and Lithuania, who also began to sponsor the crowns.

helped in their own way to distribute information about the image in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Kodeń branch of Sapiehas started relinquishing their status as the preeminent representative of the Commonwealth. They lost half of their property and never regained their previous glory and influence from the era of Jan Fryderyk. The Church of St. Anne has not exhibited the gallery of family members since the twentieth century, and historians have revealed more secrets about the story concerning the acquisition of the icon, yet Sapieha's legacy endures. Through assiduous labour, Jan Fryderyk erected a lifelong tribute to himself as the patron, contributor, and supporter of the Catholic Church, but, above all, as a Sapieha – a member of the family, which was chosen, among others, by the Virgin Mary.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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An Exercise of Style and Power
Hans Holbein the Younger and the Painted Facade of the Hertenstein House in Lucerne (1517)

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Abstract The exercise of power through art will be presented with the case of the Hertenstein house in Lucerne (Switzerland), whose decoration was destroyed in 1825. Owner and patron Jakob von Hertenstein (1460-1527) asserted his authority in the city with signs of prestige. The facade's exterior embellishment, done by Hans Holbein the Younger, is based on a complex set of visual means underpinned by political rhetoric (*exempla*, *Gesta romanorum*, heraldry). Faux architecture builds rapport and expresses the owner's ethics. Hertenstein linked himself to Caesar's grandeur with a variation on Mantegna's Triumphs of Caesar, painted for the Marquis of Mantua.

Keywords Painted facade. Lucerne. Holbein. Power. Rhetoric.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 A Patron, a Talented Artist and a Blank Canvas. – 3 The Iconography: Between Antiquity and Modernity. – 4 The Iconographical Message. – 5 For a Rhetoric of Power. – 6 Conclusion: Imitation, Opulence and Influence.

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> Doing and making things appear: “Things do not happen because of what they are, but because of what they appear to be. To be worth and to know how to show it is to be worth twice. What is not seen is as if it were not”.
>
> Baltasar Gracián*, El oráculo manual y arte de la prudencia,* 1647

1 Introduction

The imminent destruction in 1825 of the Hertenstein house (Lucerne), decorated by Hans Holbein the Younger, precipitated the urge of art amateurs to gather as much information from the house as possible. At the end of the nineteenth century, Schneller (1873), Vögelin (1884-87) and von Liebenau (1888) looked at the history of the Hertenstein family and of the house itself with a timid attempt to put in relation the iconographic composition with the organization of the walls and windows. The question of attribution is addressed at the end of the century by Woltmann (1864) and La Roche (1884-87). The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a shift in the research with Schmid (1913) organizing the documents available (drawings or letters mentioning the house) and bringing some elements of explanation, like a supposed travel of Holbein from Lucerne to Italy.[1] The research is refined in terms of stylistic discourse: Hugelshofer’s research (1929) shows that Holbein’s formative years in Augsburg were put into practice by the skilful application of Renaissance innovations on facades. Most of the following research focus on the decoration via copies before the house’s destruction.[2] Later, scholars will discuss influence and innovation of the iconography (Salvini 1984; Azzi Visentini 1986).[3] The focus on the patron’s ambition and desire is a breakthrough in research (Jehle-Schulte Strathaus 1985; Bätschmann 1989). Eventually, an important exhibition is organized in Lucerne in 1992, giving the opportunity to researchers to publish extensively on Holbein (Hermann, Hesse, Wechsler 1992; Weder 1992), raising anew the interest for the Hertenstein Haus (Hermann, Hesse 1993). This article follows in the footsteps of Bätschmann (1989) and Hermann and Hesse (1993), launching the debate on communication

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1 See Gauthiez (1897-98) and Ganz (1909) for presence in Italy, paternity of present works and influences.

2 See Lauber 1942; 1962; Reinle 1954; Riedler 1978.

3 See Salvini 1984; Azzi Visentini 1986 for Holbein’s travel to Italy and circulation of motifs.

between the materiality of the facade and the dynamism of the decoration, serving the client's purposes.

The case study here presented will be the entry point and conducting line to apprehend the way the patron (Hertenstein, influential nobleman and skilful politician) and the artist (Holbein, promising painter) work together to establish an image of the self in the urban landscape to assert his power while Renaissance ideas are circulating via important centres. The iconographic themes will reveal Hertenstein's intentions: probity, legacy, and influence. Besides, the porosity of spaces and points of encounter in terms of image and culture highlight the dialogue between painting and architecture.

2 A Patron, a Talented Artist and a Blank Canvas

The Hertenstein family is one of the ancient Swiss patrician families that have played a key role in Switzerland's political and cultural history (Herman, Hesse 1993, 173): the family counted many dignitaries,[4] contributing to several of the country's most important peace treaties and taking part in the Diet in the name of Lucerne in the sixteenth century. The family wished to preserve its history, but a series of fires[5] at the end of the fifteenth century (von Liebenau 1888, 1-3) destroyed one of the precious family archives. This loss shows just how important the House of Hertenstein was to this notable family, whose reputation Jakob wished to perpetuate: in this way, the frescoes presented here are a 'concreteness of image' which, when affixed to stone, become a chronicle-monument at the service of the family's posterity. Jakob von Hertenstein (1460-1527) was a prominent merchant and rentier who held crucial political positions, including Grand Councilor in 1485 and Councilor from 1486 until his death. He was also Treasurer (1514-19) and Provost (1516-19). From 1502, he was a member of the Diet on several occasions, and his skilful alliances through four marriages enabled him not only to make a fortune but also to participate in the political life of the city and the country (Klinger, Hoetler 1998, 267).

Lucerne was a prosperous city due to its position and expansion between the fourteenth and sixteenth century. Noble and powerful families, such as the Hertenstein's, played an important role in the emergence of the city of Lucerne as they were confronted with

4 Twenty Grand Councilors, thirteen Councilors, three Governors General and three Provosts. See von Liebenau 1888, 2; Messmer, Hoppe 1976, 13-23; Lischer 2006.

5 Fire at Caspar von Hertenstein's house (Lucerne, 1481) and Buonas Castle (near Zug, 1478).

Figure 1 Benedikt von Hertenstein, *Hans Holbein the Younger*, 1517. Oil and gold on paper mounted on wood, 51.4 × 37.1 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. inv. 06.1038

foreign and domestic political turmoil (Walter 2016, 65-71).[6] As a result, they took part in the campaigns, assuming leading positions.[7] Furthermore, the economic expansion of the city, via the entry of booty and later in the fifteenth century, via pay and pensions, followed the military victories. Thus, some families switched careers, moving from trading to banking, for instance. This special position in the city life also implied a more central voice in the affairs of the city when it came to active participations in political events, a status that they wished to pass on to their offspring (Messmer, Hoppe 1976, 16-17).

Hans Holbein the Younger,[8] was born in Augsburg, Bavaria, in 1497. This city was the creative cradle of many influential Renaissance artists, such as Albrecht Dürer, Martin Schongauer, Hans Burgkmair and the Holbeins, particularly the young Hans, who encountered the world of painting from an early age.[9] In 1515, he went to Basel as an apprentice to the Basel painter Hans Herbster. There, he developed his knowledge of engraving, in the company of his brother Ambrosius, and even received the honour of drawing in the margins of a copy of Erasmus's in Praise of Folly (Buck 1999, 10-13; Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 15-16), who was himself interested in this artist and commissioned him to illustrate his work. Two years later, father and son went to Lucerne to paint the interior and exterior of Jakob von Hertenstein's residence. During the winter of the same year, Holbein the Younger might have travelled to Milan,[10] where he could have been in contact with Andrea Mantegna's cartoons and engravings on the theme of Caesar's Triumphs. The influence of the Italian Renaissance, which Holbein had experienced first-hand, became apparent, but he was able to free himself from it in his works, producing pieces which demonstrated of his ability to incorporate ideas and make them his (Wilson 1996, 65): it may be said that Holbein the Younger was a link between the Northern and Southern Renaissance. Holbein, evolving in the rich and inspirational cultural cluster of Augsburg, known for its painted facades (Buff 1886, 58-9; Riedler 1978, 25-6), demonstrated virtuosity by painting the portrait of Benedikt von Hertenstein **[fig. 1]**, Jakob's eldest son. With the portrait, Holbein showed his sensitivity to the Italian style: a three-quarter view, in a less formal pose, looking at the viewer (Wilson 1996, 61-2). In the background, there is a frieze showing a triumph, directly

6 Battle of Ravenna (1512), Battle of Marignano (1515).

7 The Hertenstein men will be present in the Marignan Battle (1515) and the Pavia battle (1525).

8 For an extensive collection of research on Holbein the Younger: Michael 1997.

9 See Wilson 1996, 9-32; Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 7-8.

10 For a discussion on Holbein's presence in Italy, see Wilson (1996, 64-5), Bätschmann, Griener (2014, 109-12).

inspired by Mantegna's Triumphs of Caesar (Buck 2001, 60-3),[11] a theme chosen by Holbein to highlight Benedikt's victories in Swiss campaigns[12] (von Liebenau 1888, 150; Ainsworth, Waterman 2013, 131). The painting underlines the prestige of the House of Hertenstein (Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 210). Besides, this double use of the same motive connects the interior (the face of Benedikt superimposing over the frieze) and the exterior of Jakob's house, the building as extension of his persona. The theme of Caesar's Triumphs had already been treated by Mantegna, between 1486 and 1492, for the Marquis Francesco Gonzaga in his palace of Mantua.[13] This material from the court of the Gonzagas, to materialize the triumph of the Prince, can be seen as an imperial theme, which can be paralleled with the Diet of Constance, where the Empire sought advice from the notables on military, political and judicial matters, and in which the town of Lucerne and, by extension, the Hertenstein family took part.

The city of Lucerne enjoyed an attractive position on the river Reuss, with a rocky plateau on the right bank, leading to the Monastery of Im Hof in addition to well-developed connections for mercantilism thanks to the creation of bridges and the setting up of a weekly market. The city is also a crossing point from Basel to Italy via the Lake of Lucerne and the Gotthard Pass. The house is located on the Kapellplatz, a few steps from the Kapellbrücke, a fourteenth-century medieval wooden bridge spanning the River Reuss to the Chapel of Saint Peter. This was Lucerne's central point for trade from the north to Italy, as the town had a busy port where goods were loaded for distant lands or arrived in Switzerland before being transported inland. The city continued to expand from around 1300 to the sixteenth century when we started having depiction of the city, notably Martin Martini's bird's eye engraving, dating of 1596 and with details of luxurious town houses, such as the one belonging to Jakob von Hertenstein and built in 1510 (Manetsch 2013, 399-401). **[fig. 2]** Moreover, this panoptic map of Lucerne also shows the importance of the city by means of a multiplication of coats of arms of the local patrician families in the lower part, the upper part surmounted by a phylactery held by angels, placing the city under the auspices of the protecting divinity. Hertenstein, being an influential man, used the central area after crossing the bridge to stage the story of his family, until the building's destruction in 1825. The only surviving traces

11 Andrea Mantegna, *The Triumphs of Caesar*, 1484-92, tempera on linen canvas, 268 × 278 cm (for each painting), Hampton Court Palace, London, inv. 403961.

12 Benedikt von Hertenstein (ca. 1495–1522) served with Swiss Mercenaries and died on April 27, 1522, during the Battle of Bicocca.

13 Bätschmann 1989, 2-4; Wilson 1996, 64-5; Campbell 2002, 91-105; Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 108-12.

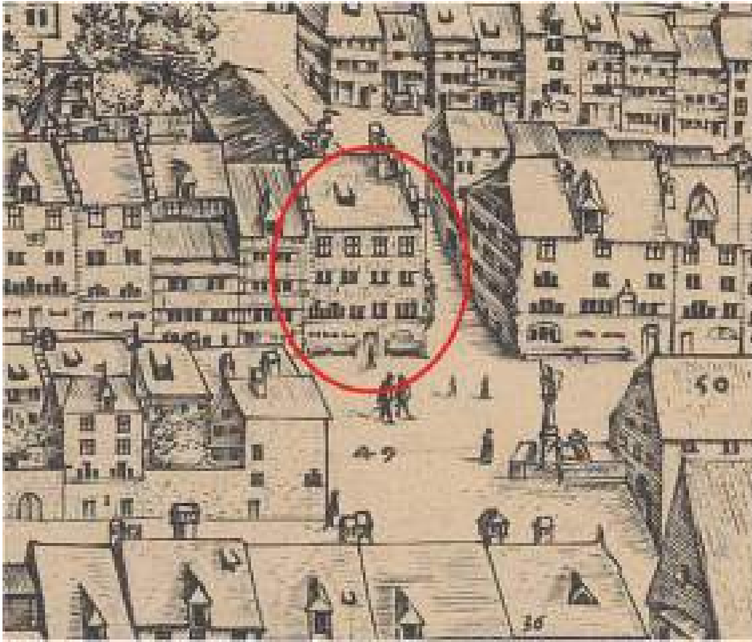

Figure 2 Martin Martini (1566-1610), *Map of the city of Lucerne*, 1597. Detail of the map showing the Hertensteinshaus. Staatsarchiv Luzern, no. inv. PL 5255/1-3

are watercolours and letters from members of the Fine Arts Society describing the decoration and a few drawings by Holbein.[14] On top of being strategically placed, this house was of particular importance because it allowed its owner to establish his prestige physically in an urban frame. The house as a *domus* is not just a material construction but also a social entity, represented by the owner, or *dominus*.[15] The building becomes an open book telling the story of the family through chosen compositions and figures, developed, and painted by Holbein, and which will translate the ambition of the Hertensteins. Thus, family values and the power of ancestry are portrayed on the facade, which remains an ambivalent and highly porous place: it is not only a wall, but also a metaphorical projection surface on which

14 For a thorough account of the history of the house until its destruction: Schneller (1873), Vögelin (1884-87) and von Liebenau (1888); Herman, Hesse 1993, 173-5; Buck 1999, 20.

15 Cicero in *De officiis* (44 BC): *nec domo dominus, sed domino domus honestanda est*. The house is fit to the master inhabiting it, underlining the relationship existing between the house (*domus*) and the building (*dominus*). See Benveniste 1969, 300-4; Richard 1971, 759, Koering 2016, 196.

Figure 3 Albert Landerer, *Facade of the Hertensteinhaus*. 1871. Watercolour, 55.5 × 68 cm. Prints and Drawings Department, Basel Art Museum, no. inv. 1871.1.a

oppositions between private and public, inside/outside or past/present/future are played out while being also an outer face, with the associated lexicon (Koering 2016, 215).[16]

After having his house built in 1510 in the vibrant centre of Lucerne, Jakob von Hertenstein called on the Holbein family to decorate it: the works took place between 1517 and 1519. Holbein the Elder, a respected artist, travelled to Lucerne and asked his two sons to help him. The father was responsible for the interior decoration, while the sons, notably Holbein the Younger, oversaw the exterior with mainly public themes (Bätschmann, Griener, 2014, 104-5). The relationship between private (inside) and public (outside) is highlighted by the decoration and the choice of corresponding iconographic themes, and thus the private is made public. The Hertenstein House decoration was one of a kind in terms of innovation and decoration, thanks to Holbein and Hertenstein's vision. Indeed, from the end of the Middle Ages and until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the decoration was mainly religious, with depictions of the Virgin Mary or Saints related to the activity of the house. Furthermore, distinctive characteristics were used to signal the house: we would

16 Alberti (1443-52) uses the word *cortex*, referring to the vegetal world while Vasari (1550) and Aretino (1538) think of facade as a face, *faccia* in Italian, making parallels with facial features.

Figure 4 Hans Holbein the Younger, *Drawing for the Ground Floor of the Hertenstein House in Lucerne*, ca. 1517-18. Pen drawing in brown and black ink, grey wash, 30.9 × 44.4. Basel Art Museum, no. inv. 1662.131

find house signs, coats of arms or symbols of the trade in place. The peculiarity of the Hertenstein House resides also in the fact that few buildings offered such a surface to deploy a grand iconographic programme and that few artists were able to complete such a monumental task. This adds to the prestige of the house and to Hertenstein, who knew how to get the best out of exercising power in his city (Hermann, Hesse 1993, 180-1).

3 The Iconography: Between Antiquity and Modernity

On the ground floor, Holbein's sketch shows a *trompe-l'œil* to the right of the front door **[figs 3-4]**.[17] This interplay of perspectives and illusions greatly enriches this apparently simple ground floor and now invites passers-by to enter, if only in spirit. These partial openings fire our imagination to recreate spaces on the other side of the wall. The illusion is created by the representation of columns judiciously placed in the foreground, bringing out the panelled arch that stands

17 For records of the facade decoration and further details, see Schwegler's (1870) one image per plate, Landerer's (1871) building in its entirety, Schmid (1913). See Riedler 1978, 149-50; Hesse 1999, 20. Original sketches: Holbein's ground floor and Leaina before the Judges (1517-18). See Schmid 1913, 173-206; Riedler 1978, 15-38, 134-7; Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 107-14.

out against the pillars and steps (Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 112-13). Holbein's sketches indicate that the painter would have drawn on the border motifs of architectural prints for printed books, such as the *Isagoge in musicen* by Henrich Glareanus (1516). Similar motifs can be found in the friezes of the Hertenstein house, particularly the putti on the facade, discussed later in this article.

On the first level are mock statues, in *grisaille*, representing the Virtues. On this facade, there are three of them: Prudence (cardinal virtue), Fortitude (cardinal virtue) and Hope (theological virtue) (Heinz-Morh 1971, 294-5; Riedler 1978, 21). By personifying the virtues, Holbein enables Hertenstein to legitimize his position within society, because, if we follow the reasoning of a facade-face, the virtues presented are an extension of his personality, making him fit to govern in the eyes of the population. The scenes with the battle of young boys, on the right above the windows on the first level, and the putti on the left, evoke passions. According to Dempsey (2001, 63-4), these playful cherubs are akin to fleeting thoughts, moments of panic or uncontrolled desires. The notable therefore needs to control or eliminate them to govern well. Moreover, the dynamic serves a formal goal: the putti surround the building, creating a subtle *gestaltist* link, between form and meaning, subject and architectonic use.

The main scene, in the centre of the facade, is an episode taken from the *Gesta romanorum*, a medieval work of legends compiled in Latin in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century (*Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*; Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 107), the German edition of which was published in Augsburg in 1489. This story was mainly depicted in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the form of illuminated manuscripts, which were later engraved or painted (Stechow 1942, 213-23; Riedler 1978, 21). In this episode, three sons must compete in a shoot-out over their father's corpse to prove who will be the rightful heir to the throne. The last son, the most loyal, reveals himself by refusing to shoot the body. The presence of this theme, associated with the noble exercise of arms, is a warning from the owner to his children: you must be the one to respect your father.[18] The moment Holbein chose to depict is that of the legitimate son emerging as he breaks the bow and refuses to take part in this challenge. The depiction extended, unlike the others, to the first-floor windows, is the largest image on the entire facade. Holbein succeeded in conveying the family's desire for transparency.[19] In the foreground, a man, his face hidden by a column, is leaning against a

18 See *Gesta romanorum* (Oesterley 1872, 91).

19 There is a sense of warning from the patriarchal power, hence the importance of understanding the notion of *home* from an anthropological point of view in relation to kinship structures.

false ledge to take part in the scene, like the viewer. Normally the gaze is directed from the inside (fiction) to the outside (the 'reality' of the street) (Serlio 1537): the spectator in the street is fictionalized and takes part in the *gesta*. It's all about aiming, not seeing. Panofsky (1975, 161-2) argues that the use of perspective draws the viewer nearer to what it is to be seen and draws a focus on the abolition of distance: perspective creates a distance between man and things. But in return it abolishes this distance by bringing into the human eye that world of things whose autonomous existence was asserted in front of man. On the right, a curtain pulled back next to the old man indicates the privilege to access this family scene in the loggia: the private/public discourse extends out into the street through this space, which acts as a buffer between the two spheres.

Jakob von Hertenstein perhaps had a particular reason for issuing this warning, with the story of the three sons, being the crux of the entire facade, making it very performative: this fictitious opening contributed to the readability of the message. Having married four times with offspring each time (Klinger, Hoetler 1998, 267), the central image was between the family coat of arms, revealing a desire for continuity between the history of the family, Lucerne, and the owners, who, through their virtues, are well-placed to serve the *res publica*, the common good.[20] The coats of arms are double, a characteristic often found in Switzerland (Hartmann 1956, 53-62), particularly on stained-glass windows or everyday objects, such as plates or cake moulds (Koering 2021, 193-201, 251-66, 435-9). The coats of arms of the facade evoke the unions of Jakob von Hertenstein (gold with lion sable) at different times in his life, from left to right: Hertenstein and Seevogel 1489, Hertenstein and Mangolt 1495, Hertenstein and von Wattenwyl 1512 and Hertenstein and von Hallwyl 1514 (DHS; Riedler 1978, 21-2, 150).

The Triumphs of Caesar cycle covers the entire space between the second and third floors. In the vertical continuity of the windows framing the scenes, the artist has chosen to extend the frames with engaged columns to give the story a multi-episodic rhythm, as in Serlio's theatrical model, where the architectural elements "articulate, subdivide and even enlarge the space".[21] The figures move from right to left, to reproduce the movement of the procession coming from the lake gate where the Swiss soldiers disembarked on their return from Italy and entered the city, heading towards the town hall and the town centre. Holbein drew direct inspiration from the cycle

20 Maggi 1998, 13; Burroughs 2002, 14-15; Pastoureau 2004, 249-54; Belting 2011, 63-83; Koering 2013, 66-7.

21 "Perspective is used to represent, by means of artificial lines, all the things – as Vitruvius also says – to be found in a place" (Scamozzi 1615, 47).

Figure 5 Hans Holbein the Younger (workshop of), *Mary and Child*. 1519. Preparatory drawing on paper, ink, chalk, grey wash and white highlights, 42.2 × 46.6. Basel Art Museum, no. in.v 1662.36

of Mantegna, one of the first Italians to translate these paintings into engravings, popularizing this technique and enabling a wider distribution and exchange of motifs, associated with a new link being created between engraving and painting. As for the theme of triumph, during the Renaissance, it was highly valued because, according to Campbell, it was part of a *translatio imperii*: the relocation of material culture, the superiority of the City.[22]

From right to left, in the direction of the procession's entrance, Holbein has partially taken up these themes. The difference between the work of Mantegna and Holbein lies in the transformations made by Holbein, who simplifies the composition of the historiated scenes by removing Caesar himself, leaving him to the viewer's imagination as being in a space flanking the house. Could this be a way of letting

22 In relation to Rome, which had fallen. One could also reflect on the hegemony of imperialism. See Campbell 2002, 98-9.

Jakob von Hertenstein subtly take Caesar's place in the viewer's imagination? Holbein replaces Mantegna's fifth vignette with bearers of military trophies and booty, echoing the history of the Hertenstein family: the ancestors of Jakob von Hertenstein and his last wife, Anna von Hallwyl, took part in the Battle of Grandson in 1476, during which Charles the Bold's Burgundian armies were defeated near Lake Neuchâtel, and as a result the Confederation received the greatest war booty in its history (Bätschmann, Griener 2014, 108-10).

The scenes on the top level are *exempla*, inspired by Aristotle (*Constitution of the Athenians*, ca. 328-322 BC) and Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, late fifth century before BC), and play on the moral theme. The lessons we learn from them include both masculine and feminine aspects, providing examples for the master of the house and his wife (Baur-Heinhold 1975, 27-8). The themes depicted here, from left to right on the upper part of the building, are: The schoolmaster Falerii punished for treason. This is an episode from the Roman History of Titus Live (*Ab urbe condita*, 5.27, 27-9 BC), which recounts the greatness of the soul of Camillus, a Roman soldier, who refused to take hostage the children brought to him by the treacherous schoolmaster. Camille's behaviour is an *exempla virtutis* of antiquity. In this depiction, the schoolmaster is led back to town by the booing pupils. For the master of the house, this episode is a reminder of his values of clemency and justice. The second story is that of Leiana, who, according to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 7.87, AD 77), bites her tongue to keep from denouncing her two lovers, Armodio and Aristogitone, who were involved in the murder of the tyrant Ipparchus.[23] This episode highlights the model for the virtue of silence. The third episode on the theme of morality is mentioned again by Titus Livius (2.12): a young patrician by the name of Caius Mucius Scaevola seeks to kill the Etruscan king Porsenna, who is sitting in Rome.[24] After his arrest, he shows his bravery in front of Porsenna and sacrifices his right hand to the fire, his body being of no importance in the eyes of glory. The representation of Scaevola, as well as being an example of valour, is a hidden signature of Hans Holbein. Holbein, who is also left-handed, identifies with this ancient figure. Bätschmann and Griener prove the link between Scaevola and Holbein by means of a signature on a sketch for a stained-glass window **[fig. 5]**. To the left of the medallion, he places the following inscription: MVCIVSFEZ (*Mucius fec[it]*). The next featured exemplum is of

23 See Kapparis 2017, 99-100. A sketch by Holbein of this episode is kept in the Drawing Room of the Lucerne Art Museum (Inv. 1162.159).

24 Similar motif on wood engraving (Holbein 1516, Ausstellung Katalog Basel 1997, fig. 160). Reuse of framing motifs for the printing of books and facade projects (Bätschmann, Griener 1997, 70, fig. 19): Scaevola with a triumph of children on the title page for Johann Froben in Basel. See Schmid 1941-42, 249; Garen 2002, 104-5.

Lucretia's honour and is found in Titus Livius' *Roman History* (1.58). Lucretia, wife of Collatinus,[25] is raped by the king's son, Sextus. Instead of living in dishonour, she kills herself in front of her husband. Finally, the last *exemplum* presented is that of Marcus Curtius, who throws himself into the abyss on Rome's forum as a sign of self-sacrifice (Liv. 7.6). By also jumping into Lucerne, the sponsor's dedication is at the heart of the scene, with a moral injunction to dedicate oneself to the greater good, i.e., the City of Lucerne. The monumental dimension of the jumping character, crossing the aesthetic frame, is valid both pictorially and morally, which confirms the porosity of the two spaces and gives a focal point to the viewer (the crucial angle point of the building). Moreover, the crossing of the liminal border creates a connection between the public and private spheres.[26] What's more, by stepping outside its assigned frame, the horse is invested with a force of its own and wants to leave the narrative space. This creates a formal approach and a tension in the architectural order of the painted facade. In this way, the subject, and the form work together to 'animate' the house.

4 The Iconographical Message

The Hertenstein house offers a reflection on the dialogue which exists between painting and architecture, but also a dialogue with the wishes and aspirations of the client. We see a connection between the private, the internal space of the owner's place and the public, a connection that is made through illusionist architecture. The *trompe-l'œil* on the ground floor marks an 'availability', giving the illusion of political 'transparency'. This is also the case in the central scene, where the human-sized figures appear to be real, close to a balustrade that is like an opening onto the interior. In this way, the facade programme acts as a membrane, translating the permeability of the spaces. Once crossed, this membrane gives the client access not only to the domestic level but also to the private level, in terms of values.

This double dialogue is activated by Hans Holbein the Younger's choice of composition, which transforms the partially articulated facade through an architectural structure. Initially, a rhythm is created

25 The only direct evidence of Holbein's work is a fragment of the facade depicting Collatinus from behind: oil on plaster, 136 x 65 cm, Lucerne Museum of Art, Inv. Nr. 27x. For an in-depth approach of Lucretia's theme, see Kraft (2020) and De Riedmatten (2022).

26 For a more detailed account of *exempla virtutis*, see Langlands 2018. Scaevola and Curtius refer for instance to the "the nature of the archetypal Roman exemplum and the moral values with which it is typically associated and decisive acts of patriotic self-sacrifice, always violent and usually disturbing" (Langlands 2018, 5).

by feigned architectural elements (bays, engaged columns, friezes, etc.). Then, thanks to this feigned architecture, the stories unfold, in the form of exemplary images, like paintings to ponder but taking the path of illusionist representation.

The discourse is tiered: we move from the general to the particular. The virtues are the foundation of the ethics of the owner and his wife, who emphasize the cardinal and theological virtues. The putti in the decoration on the second floor represent the passions that people must fight against. To do this, the virtues come into play, virtues that are later exemplified by the scenes at the top of the facade. Between these two levels, the virtues are deployed: the mayor and his wife govern themselves well and, in return, they can govern well, as can also be seen in the enactment of the *exempla et gesta*. The distribution of the scenes and the organization of the facade give rise to the development of a domestic and political programme (the place of the patrician in the city and within the community).

Apart from the virtues and qualities of good government, the basis of the programme remains genealogy. A superimposition of registers works to legitimize the power of Hertenstein and his descendants. The *trompe-l'œil* balcony is the crux of the story told on this facade. It depicts an episode from the *Gesta romanorum*, a story set in antiquity, but which returns to the level of the family, through an illusionist treatment that directly links our view of this family with the interior of the house, in other words the private sphere. The owner, through this opening, is conveying a message of virtue and transparency, as well as warning people to show themselves worthy of the values handed down by the father of the family. In order to link the exemplary ancient history with that of the family, the temporality between the two periods is achieved through the clothes: it's Roman history with updated clothes. Finally, the coats of arms are full of meaning, as they represent, around the scene of filial fidelity, the unions with the four families and indicate that the descendants are linked to the history being played out at the centre, signifying the responsibility incumbent on the descendants of the master of the house. The illusion of transparency makes the political programme with the family and the urban space topical and puts it into action.

As for the stylistic aspect, the Hertenstein facade is a meeting point between two image cultures. The northern part of the Alps is represented using heraldic elements in the form of the *Allianzwappen*, and the Italian part by a programme based on the theme of Triumph, with an antique slant, via the pictorial programme of Mantegna. On this facade, we are indeed at a crossroads of visual cultures, both stylistically and conceptually. There is a dialogue here between 'small' local history (that of the Hertenstein family) and 'big' ancient history (Republican or Imperial). This configuration of time and spheres is made possible by the specific nature of the facade, which acts as a

surface in the urban space, allowing a programme to be constructed through an accumulation of images of different origins.

It is also worth noting how the facade combines images of different origins, such as the representation of virtues, coats of arms and elements of ancient culture and history as they were understood during the Renaissance, particularly in Italy. As an element of comparison, we can mention the Casa Cazuffi[27] of Trento and the Adlerhaus am Weinmarkt in Augsburg (1515). The Casa Cazuffi (Trento, 1531-36) bears similarities with the Hertenstein House in terms of central positioning and choice of iconographical themes: it is situated on piazza del Duomo, a vast area where streets converge and is bordered by buildings. The owner, Tommaso Cazuffi, Doctor of Law, and consul of the town chose to modernize the building from the gothic style (as proven by the remaining frieze in the upper part) to a Renaissance style. The artist, Marcello Fogolino, continued in the lineage, fashionable in Rome at the beginning of the sixteenth century, of simulating architectural apparatus. He also produced allegorical and symbolic images with moral admonitions, set up in friezes, inspired by Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum liber*, in the first edition published in Augsburg in 1531. The values exhibited here are for instance Justice, Chance, Mercy, Generosity. The second example is Adlerhaus am Weinmarkt, now Maximilianstrasse, 46 in Augsburg. The house was destroyed, but some engravings give us an idea of the decorative programme (Hascher 1996, 375-88). Like the Hertenstein Haus, the facade, completed in 1500, bears illusionistic architecture. Virtues and prestige are emphasized via large allegorical female statues and male figures in armour, representing rulers and monarch. The artist gave an idea of verticality by combining small, seated figures in the niches between the statues. The ornament of this facade served the ambitions of the highly respected merchant and financier, Philipp Adler, who evolved in the entourage of Maximilian I. (Hascher 1996, 54, 393-6).

5 For a Rhetoric of Power

To apprehend the way architecture and painting can be put at the service of the powerful, we shall start with an overview of the phenomenon. According to Burroughs (2002, 12-13), Renaissance became an interesting turning point in terms of decoration as we moved from "the fluid space" of a medieval house to an "even rectilinear surface". During this period, self-representation was central, and it was important to be seen from the outside. In this context, the facades

27 For a more detailed account of the Casa Cazuffi, see Dal Prà (1985, 1: 5-52).

ceased to be a mere wall belonging to the physical house but became a public canvas on which the patron could design his ideas and assure strong visibility. The notion of visibility on the public space was framed by the development of new media and ways of communication, which served the spreading of ideas and motifs[28] to help the patron express his design on the wall of his house.

In Trento, the Palazzo Geremia[29] uses similar themes and composition to share the vision of the patron, Giovanni Antonio Pona. Here, we can see new spaces created on the surface, with the use of colour and the complicity of the existing architectural elements. On this example, we will focus first on the upper part of the building and the space between the windows. The artist invented another dimension which gives the illusion of the inhabitants of the building facing out behind a balustrade. The viewer has the impression of being part of the celebration or event taking place beyond these walls. In this instance, it seems to be a type of loggia and we can guess subtly a landscape in the background. The effect is emphasized using tapestry and carpets which seem to be in movement, hanging from the balustrade, giving to the composition an even more dynamic outcome. The middle part, on the left side of the facade, shows an intimate setting, with a group of persons seated around a table. Behind them is a window with four panels. The window is opened, and we distinguish once more a landscape. The artist has played on a superposition of spaces with the exterior (the facade) representing an interior (the sitting space of the building) with an exterior (created with the opened windows). The result of this composition is a *mise en abyme* of the story that the patron and the artist wish to display, with a reference to the *storia* being developed, in the lines of the Albertian theory of windows.

Furthermore, we can observe, as in the Hertenstein case, the use of the figure of Marcus Curtius, sacrificing his life for the city and jumping into the chasm. Again, the illusionist treatment of the figure is executed with vibrant colours and movement, resulting in an interaction between the viewer's space and the painted surface, which stops being flat and becomes animated and transparent, with intermediate spaces created with the colours. Further thematic compositions present on the Hertenstein House can be found on the Palazzo Geremia such as the suicide of Lucretia or the sacrifice of Mucius Scaevola. These stories are *exempla virtutis* showing that the patron

28 "The dynamics of migration are complex and difficult to classify chronologically; they escape the identification of linear evolutionary traits. The influences often come directly from Italy, but these processes can also be the result of shared affinities or specific objectives on the part of the patron, as shown by certain examples" (Frommel 2016, 118).

29 For further details on Palazzo Geremia (end of fifteenth/beginning of sixteenth century), see Castelnuovo, Bellabarba (1988).

of the house adheres to antique and noble values and wish them to be displayed on the facade of this house, bringing together the message and its reception.

This way of creating new spaces on a wall can also be found in exterior in the case of our painted facade on the Hertenstein House, more specifically on the ground floor or the balustrade of the central scene. The creation of intermediate spaces between the viewer and the scene allows the patron once more to assert its ascendance on his subjects: he allows the viewer to penetrate, with the eye only, in his space, by his goodwill. Moreover, this fictitious space proposes a two-fold theatricality: on the one hand, an *exemplum virtutis* (via the scene of the balustrade where the virtuous son is worth bearing the legacy of his father) and on the other, a link with dynastic stakes where the viewer understands that the heir of the family will carry the noble work of Jakob von Hertenstein (Riedler 1978, 21). The consent he gives demonstrates his power and allows him to get closer to his subjects, within the limits that the patron chooses to establish, just like the liminal modalities.

Another example will be the one of Nuremberg's townhall. The anonymous artist of one drawing[30] gives an idea of the illusionist effect with architectural elements. On the wall, two spaces are created, an intermediate one with characters close to the balustrade, then the idea of an interior with doors and windows inserted in the central pilasters, framing the central arcade/scene. Behind, we distinguish yet another area with doors in the background, creating a multidimensional composition, mixing interior and exterior. The faux architecture is integrated into the existing architecture of the facade. The painter proposes an effect of transparency that perfectly translates the term 'porosity of spaces' as we are projected towards the inside, which enters the outside through illusionist architecture and *trompe-l'œil* effects.

In the case of the Hertenstein house, it's the same principle but in reverse, with an exterior that gives the illusion of an interior. It should be noted that the inside of the house featured wall decoration on the theme of hunting or procession, so once again the outside enters the intimacy of the household (Riedler 1978, 26-38). In instances of illusionist architecture depicting an exterior or interior, the effect of transparency is perfect, making the wall disappear, moving from the status of support due to its consistency to that of a surface on which to develop the patron's discourse and assertion of his power. Another instance of interior/exterior dichotomy is the of flight of stairs on the ground floor of the house: the solid surface becomes transparent, the wall giving place to a multi-layered space, the stairs

30 Anonymous, *Nuremberg Town Hall around 1530*, Albertina, Vienna.

enticing the viewer to enter the house.

Another means of expressing power is via the display of grandeur. In this scope, the patron will have to choose a strategic place to build the house, symbol of his domus/lineage land prestige to gain great visibility. As a converging point, the Platz or Piazza is a place of choice. In Verona, the Piazza delle Erbe is the place of an important market, dating back to the Middle Ages. The pictural composition adheres to the owner's activity (apothecary) and the business carried out on the square.[31] On the other hand, Kapellplatz is essential for the city as a point of convergence for the surrounding streets, the end of the bridge route leading from the outside to the inside of the city. The location of the church on the square and the Hertenstein house on the chapel square creates a religious association for this pious family. Once again, we find the dialogue between the physical and spatial position of the house and the message conveyed by the patron: it'll be a message of probity, military distinction, and moral virtues, all to be taken as examples by the passer-by on top of being a token of good faith for his roles in city affairs.

6 Conclusion: Imitation, Opulence and Influence

This case study has given us a better understanding of the stakes involved in representing power in the form of an iconographic programme, and we have been able to define the methods of the rhetoric of power, which can be translated in three areas: imitation, opulence, and influence. Hertenstein imitated the Duke of Mantua by using the Triumph of Caesar that he had had painted by Mantegna in his palace. He also associated himself with ancient history by using the theme of Caesar and his triumphal entry into the city. By doing so, he makes a reference to the military feats of arms of the family and inserts the latter into the greater Swiss history.[32] The choice of theme also shows that Hertenstein is aware of the new fashions of Italy's prestigious courts, Italy being of importance in setting artistic

31 The Mazzantis were apothecaries having business on the piazza. A scene on the facade shows the giving of a gift from above. These two elements can be associated and translate as a dialogue between the physical space of the building and the intention behind the choices of themes and ambition of the patrons.

32 Ulrich von Hertenstein, (1384-1454), father of Kaspar: battle of Milan (1425) and lord of Buonas. Kaspar von Hertenstein (1416-86), father of Jakob and Peter (1450-1522): knight and leader of the Confederate rearguard in battle of Murten (1476); Jakob (1460-1527): captain in Pavia campaign (1512) and battle of Marignano (1515). Peter (1450-1522): recruiter for Pope Julius II of men for the pontifical Swiss Guard. For a detailed history of the Hertenstein's family, see von Liebenau 1888 (29-38 for Ulrich the Eldest, 55-64 for Ulrich the Youngest, 65-92 for Kaspar, 93-6 for Peter and 100-23 for Jakob; *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse*).

and cultural trends. For opulence, Hertenstein used colour to give the impression of elaborate architecture on a simple wall. Finally, he called on a painter who was gaining increasing attention, Hans Holbein the Younger. From 1516 onwards, the latter painted portraits of influential members of the commercial bourgeoisie, such as the Meyer family, whose husband Jakob also commissioned Holbein to paint the Madonna of Darmstadt. Both examples of Holbein's work show how the artist used feigned architecture as part of his composition. Hertenstein could exert his influence by the continuity of his lineage, using heraldry. As Alberti mentioned in *De re aedificatoria* (IX 1), the aim of such an undertaking is to leave wisdom and power to posterity. Moreover, noble values are conveyed by the choice of iconographic themes. In our case, it is choosing *exempla* and *Gesta romanorum* to show his probity and legitimacy to rule or have his say in the *res publica*. Finally, the effect of transparency shows his probity in the sense that he has nothing to hide. He uses *trompe-l'œil* to show his interior, but what he chooses to display, i.e., scenes of the *exempla* type, drawing on the father, etc. while using a *trompe-l'œil* on the door. Lastly, for the patron, it is a proof of knowledge in terms of materials and production to use simulated materials intelligently to serve the owner's cause, i.e., show one's power in the city. The use of characters in 'exemplary' scenes show the capacity of proposing a good government, also in relation to 'negative' scenes. The use of colour and faux architecture give the illusion of an extraordinary building when in fact it is a flat surface. Even if this deceives the viewer, we can still admire the patron's intelligence in making his facade stand out from the other buildings around it.

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Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face: On the Image as Social Response and Counterculture

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
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Countercultural Images and Technological Visions in the Italian Alternative Press Around 1977

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Abstract The contribution provides an overview of the speculations on cybernetics, automation, and politics in the Italian alternative press around 1977, focusing on the Italian alternative press that linked these topics. On the one hand, the relationship with mass media and the notion of 'general intellect' of the magazine *A/traverso* was concretised in the opening of a free radio station, Radio Alice, and in its graphic solutions and texts. On the other hand, the article focuses on *Un'Ambigua Utopia*, whose editors were interested in science fiction and technological imagery from a political perspective.

Keywords Technology. Alternative press. General intellect. A/traverso. Un'Ambigua Utopia.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Trajectories about Commonality and Technologies from the Italian Leftist Press in the Sixties. – 3 Technological Visions in the Seventies. – 4 Desire, Communication and Airwaves: *A/traverso*. – 5 Utopia and Science Fiction, in Practice: *Un'Ambigua Utopia*. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

During the Seventies, in Italy, several antagonist groups appropriated, through a range of tactics, various mass media, starting with radio and the press. This came as no surprise, as between 1974 and

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1976 a series of judgments declared the state monopoly of telecommunications by wire or over the air unconstitutional (Judgments of the Constitutional Court No. 226/1974 and No. 202/1976), paving the way to free radio and local televisions (Fleischner 1976, 2-3). On the other hand, the production of periodicals remained subject to State control, as stipulated in Article 5 of Law No. 47/1948, whereby "Nessun giornale o periodico può essere pubblicato se non sia stato registrato presso la cancelleria del tribunale, nella cui circoscrizione la pubblicazione deve effettuarsi" (no newspaper or periodical may be published unless it has been registered with the clerk of the court). This constraint could easily be circumvented through the wording "numero singolo in attesa di autorizzazione" (single issue awaiting authorization) or by publishing it as a supplement to another regularly registered periodical. The copious production of political periodicals – whose format could span from underground zines to voluminous journals – investigated strategies of overthrowing and reappropriation from below. Moreover, the blossoming of alternative press was early ratified by several authors (Alfierj, Mazzone 1979; Balestrini, Moroni 1988). The appropriation of media by countercultural and subcultural movements hence characterized the national landscape and followed the techno-scientific innovations of the Information Age (cf. Uva 2015). The entanglement of printed matter and technology was confirmed by the rise of magazines such as *Altrimedia*, founded in 1976 and regularly registered, which published several lists of free radio stations and advertised tools for 'Do It Yourself' communication technologies, addressing radio, television and videotape with the contribution of prominent scholars (Baldelli 1976, 9-10; Eco 1976, 4-6). Giving an overview of the intertwinement between political and cultural aspects of the debate upon technological tools in Italian alternative periodicals, this essay questions whether it is possible to recognize an interpretation of technology as a shared tool, rather than an apparatus of capitalist exploitation. Without the ambition of comprehensiveness, it finally traces the stories of two alternative magazines, *A/traverso* and *Un'Ambigua Utopia*, that around 1977 established different discourses on technology and information technology as common ground.

2 Trajectories about Commonality and Technologies from the Italian Leftist Press in the Sixties

The fascination for calculators and their aesthetical potential recurred throughout the Sixties. It is important to highlight the establishment of numerous artists' groups that developed kinetic research, such as Gruppo T and Gruppo N, that were supported by scholars like Umberto Eco, and, to some extent, by the Italian leading producer of calculators and computers Olivetti (Morando 1961; Alicata 2022; Caplan 2022). Although some of these groups had strong political beliefs, most of their operations did not have a precise perspective on the appropriation of technology, but rather had an interest in interactivity. Other examples of the speculation about technology during the 1960s include the linguistic experimentations conducted by visual poets, among others the Florentine Gruppo 70 (1963-68) (Saccà 2000). Even though any determinism should be avoided when referring to leftist thought on technology (Marx 1964; Tomba, Bellofiore 2014; MacKenzie 1984), information systems, calculators, and telecommunications undoubtedly informed the design and contents of the artistical and political alternative press. Moreover, if the printed production informed any alternative use of technology is yet to be clarified. The far-left current of *Operaismo* (workerism) (cf. Galimberti 2022), that emerged in Italy in the early Sixties, informed several journals and magazines; among them, *Quaderni Rossi* had a specific political theoretical cut. Involved in the theorization of autonomist Marxism, the periodical published the Italian translation of the *Fragment on Machines* by Karl Marx (1964) and promoted an extensive discussion upon machines. As an excerpt from the *Grundrisse* (*Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*), the *Fragment* outlined the fortunate notion of 'general intellect' as the "social general knowledge" (Marx 1964, 300) related to intellectual and technical knowledge, and produced by the industrial development as part of social vital processes. Later on, this concept underpinned the multimedia expressions of the 'creative wing' (cf. Salaris 1997) of the Movement of 1977 (cf. Mariscalco 2014, 22-3). In recent years, Pasquinelli (2014) investigated *Operaismo* and information machines through the work of Romano Alquati on *Quaderni Rossi* (1962; 1963) and outlined the relationships between Alquati's theories and the subsequent concept of 'machinic' by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972; 1980), derived from *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Consisting of the two volumes *L'Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, first published in French in 1972 and 1980, and then in Italian in 1975 and 1980 (the texts of *A Thousand Plateaus* were already partly published in 1976 under the title *Rhizome*, followed by several Italian editions, cf. Dogheria 2018, 26-7), the *oeuvre* was one of the fundamental points of reference for many experiences related to the Movement of 1977. According to

Echaurren and Salaris, Deleuze and Guattari's thought has been a catalyser for a generation devoted to an hyperproduction of ephemera, that soon became a political practice which embodied the utopia of collective writing (Echaurren, Salaris 1999, 208).

3 Technological Visions in the Seventies

During the Seventies, characterized by the rise of autonomist political currents in the extra parliamentary left rows (the so-called *Autonomia*) (cf. Lotringer, Marazzi 1980; Galimberti 2022), information and telecommunication technologies became key themes in the 'movement' press. Pio Baldelli (1972) theorized the explicit connection between new technologies, such as videotape and radio, and counter-information. The scholar defined counter-information by underlining its multiplicity – a trait that will be inherited by the Movement of 1977:

> La controinformazione e i suoi circuiti vengono caratterizzati […] dalla polivalenza di tattica e strategia. Quindi […] la controinformazione opera in formule clandestine, irregolari o 'regolarmente' incuneate nelle strutture: insomma, un lavoro che sappia moltiplicare e concentrare elasticamente azioni nel sistema e fuori del sistema. (Baldelli 1972, 14)
>
> Counterinformation and its circuits are characterized […] by the polyvalence of tactics and strategy. So […] counterinformation operates in clandestine, irregular, or 'regularly' wedged formulas in structures: in short, a work that knows how to multiply and elastically concentrate actions in the system and outside the system.

Concerning magazines, journals, and newspapers run by the far-left movement, arguments on technology mostly involved workers and industrial production. On this matter, *Controinformazione*, founded in 1973, recalled problems of media communication starting from its title, and explicitly addressed technology when related to workers' conditions. Designed by leading figures in Milan's politically engaged art scene, such as the painter Paolo Baratella and the photographer and graphic designer Rino Del Prete, the covers fully interpreted contemporary visual culture.

Another example is the periodical publication of *I Volsci* by Autonomia Operaia in Rome, where a long text called *La ristrutturazione dello sfruttamento* (The Restoration of Exploitation) (1978, 5-9) was illustrated by several images of robots (among the others, there was an image taken from the American series *Lost in Space*), ironically highlighting the Fiat factory's automatization and the use of technology in information control.

Figure 1 Cover of Quaderno 1, *A/traverso*. October 1975. MPI-BH / Collection Pablo Echaurren PE-8179

Moving forward from the concept of counter-information, groups related to the creative wing and to the subcultural phenomenon of the *indiani metropolitani* (metropolitan Indians) (Eco 1977, 34-5) reinterpreted the Avantgarde lesson (Calvesi 1978, 55-94) and systemically involved a critical discourse on technologies. Furthermore, they abandoned the concise language of counter investigation (crucial, for example, for *Controinformazione*), that somehow recalled an institutional lexicon, to introduce a principle of liberation of bodies and desire, appropriation of the surplus, right to party, through ironic, estranged writing, and collective practices related to Situationist *détournement*. One of the most significant experiences is the Bologna-based *A/traverso*, whose interest in communication strategies

Figure 2 Enrico Scuro, *Controinformazione in Piazza Verdi, Bologna*. 25 March 1977. Courtesy Enrico Scuro

concretised in the opening of a free radio station, Radio Alice, in graphic solutions close to the punk circuit, and in texts that anticipated many issues related to the electronics of the following decade. This experience may be related to another periodical, the Milan-based *Un'Ambigua Utopia*, which approached the theme of the technological imagery from the literary field of radical science fiction. *Un'Ambigua Utopia* carried out the reflection on new media and politics from the literary sphere and, similarly to *A/traverso*, organised some urban happenings, claiming for the freeing of bodies and desires in the urban space.

4 Desire, Communication and Airwaves: *A/traverso*

The recomposition of the working class from the connection of desire, language, and political activity was one of the prerogatives of the cross-media experimentation of *A/traverso*. Created in 1975 by a “piccolo gruppo in moltiplicazione” (small collective in multiplication) (“Piccolo gruppo in moltiplicazione” 1975) based in Bologna, the non-periodical magazine was initially published as *Rosso* supplement. The collective – initially composed by Potere operaio (Workers’ Power) militants Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, Maurizio Torrealta, Stefano Saviotti, Luciano Capelli, Claudio Cappi, Paolo Ricci, Matteo Guerrino and Marzia Bisognin (Chiurchiù 2017, 54) – published more than twenty issues and five numbered *quaderni* (notebooks) between 1975 and 1981 (44-5). The masthead of the magazine was composed of the typographic characters of various leftist magazines of the same period, declaring at the same time its transversality and its network. As Galimberti summarizes, the title of the magazine

> referred to *transversalité* (transversality), a concept coined by Guattari. For Guattari, ‘transversalité’ coded an attempt to seek new ways to understand subjectivity, moving beyond the duality between hierarchical groups and ineffective horizontal forms of self-organisation. (Galimberti 2022, 311)

Its points of references can be recalled starting from Klemens Gruber’s *L’Avanguardia inaudita* (1997) and, of course, from the book edited by the collective itself (1976). It is useful to linger on an article published in September 1975, and entitled *Soggetto collettivo emette A/traverso* (Collective subject emits A/traverso), in which the collective recorded its desire to build a movement radio, emphasising the fact that it aimed to

> trasformare il modo della comunicazione/informazione, ma anche la forma stessa del linguaggio specifico (il linguaggio radiofonico in questo caso; ma il discorso varrebbe anche per il linguaggio teatrale, il linguaggio grafico) partendo da una situazione e dalle caratteristiche specifiche che questo linguaggio ha. (“Soggetto collettivo emette A/traverso” 1975)

> transform the mode of communication/information, but also the very form of the specific language [radio language in this case; but the same would apply to theatrical language, graphic language] starting from a situation and the specific characteristics that this language has.

The group's objectives were further elucidated by the technical means it deployed:

> La scelta del mezzo implica una intenzione politica […] presuppone una disponibilità degli strumenti tecnici (l'elettronica) ad esser piegati alle necessità del movimento; presuppone l'individuazione di un quadro sociale proletarizzato […] capace di appropriarsi del mezzo elettronico e di mutarne la funzione. ("Soggetto collettivo emette A/traverso" 1975)

> The choice of medium implies a political intention [...] it presupposes an availability of the technical tools [electronics] to be bent to the needs of the movement; it presupposes the identification of a proletarianized social framework […] capable of appropriating the electronic medium and changing its function.

Alluding to the proletarianization of intellectual labour and diffuse knowledge that echoed Marxian definition of 'general intellect', but also to the relationship that McLuhan pointed out between medium and message, the collective wrote that the medium is already a message (see "Soggetto collettivo emette A/traverso" 1975; Fiore, McLuhan 1967). Marx was still the starting point for reasoning about capitalist abstraction and the computerisation of labour, which concerned, at one time, the intellectual and industrial proletariat ("Informazione e appropriazione" 1976, 11). Technical-scientific intelligence remained a junction of recomposition and a terrain of struggle for the collective, and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi exposed its contradiction and complexity. For the philosopher, it was precisely knowledge that had to be freed from its capitalist function in favour of creativity (see Berardi 1977a, 10).

The shift from counter-information to a different communication struggle became evident when the collective wrote that it refused to build structures of service to the movement but rather to "determinare terreni di pratica" (determine terrains of practice) ("Soggetto collettivo emette A/traverso" 1975) even in the airways. The proletarianization of intellectual labour, a fundamental axis around which the reasoning on the collective intellect moves, was also addressed in *Quaderno 1* (notebook 1), that presented the principles of Mao-dadaism, and linked the Chinese revolution and the European Avant-garde, passing through the examples of Majakovsky, Artaud, and the collective writing experiences of the 1920s (Berardi 1975, 21-9). If intellectual labour was then fully inscribed in capitalist production, the new proletarian subject, according to *A/traverso*, could find an original terrain of struggle in the appropriation of the instruments of its activity: information (cf. "Informazione e appropriazione" 1976, 11). Consequently, the opening of Radio Alice, "più grande

Figure 3 Giuliano Spagnul, *Fantascienza e realtà: Il caso del nucleare*. Milan, Centro Puecher. 10 February 1979. Courtesy Giuliano Spagnul

marxista-leninista della nostra epoca" (Quaderno 3 1976, 10) (the greatest Marxist-Leninist of our time), was announced as follows:

> Informare non basta. Ki emette ki riceve? […] non si tratta di informazione più vera sui medesimi fatti […] si tratta di informazione diversa. ("Assolutamente virgolette" 1976, 12)
>
> Informing is not enough. Who issues, who receives? […] it is not about truer information about the same facts […] it is about different information.

Again, in the same notebook, page twenty-four opens with the title *Radio Alice is as obscene as the class struggle*. In the radio, desire and body were given voice:

> Diamo una voce al nostro desiderio
> ogni collettivo un microfono
> trasmettiamoci addosso. ("Radio Alice è oscena come la lotta di classe" 1976, 24)
>
> Let us give a voice to our desire / Each collective a microphone / Let us broadcast on ourselves.

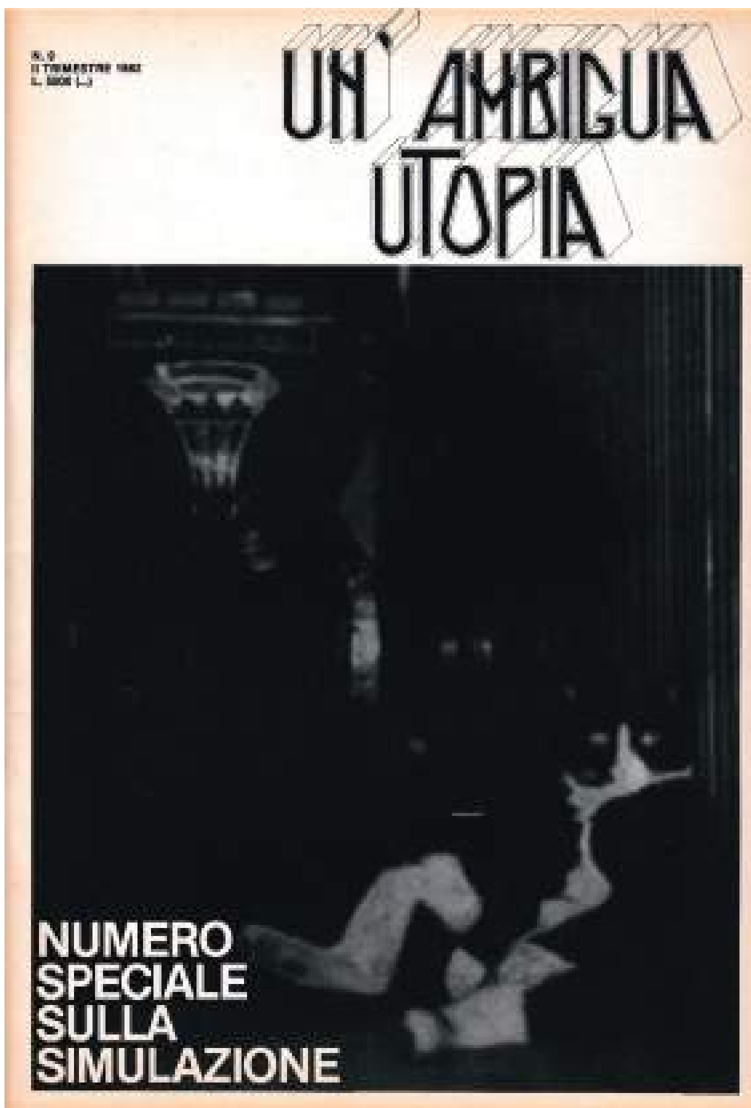

Figure 4 Gianni Sassi, illustration on the cover of *Un'Ambigua Utopia* no. 9. 1982.

The flows of the spoken and written word begun to blur: *Alice* did not circumscribe the uninterrupted stream of events and sought full adherence to them. The chronicle made by *Alice*'s multiple voices in *Alice è il diavolo* (Alice is the Devil) (1976) thus recorded that flow: part of the texts of *A/traverso* were republished, with transcripts of tapes, communiqués, photographs. The paradox was that, in the meantime, *Alice* was always elsewhere: she coincided with the instants of life, trying to dissolve any distance between representation and represented event (see Collettivo A/traverso 1976, 92).

On the radio, anyone could call in and receive an immediate, live feedback; *Alice* walked the line between communicative practice and existence. In doing so, it passed from the space of written and spoken words to the urban space: on 28 March 1976, in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna, the group organised a *Party for repression*, embracing the 'weapon' of irony and joke. Cross-dressing and happenings proved that the phenomenon of 'carnivalization' (Gruber 1997, 134) had spanned throughout the decade. The urban manifestation was thus incorporated in the recomposition, as a real desecrating and liberating, hence political, practice. According to the same hyperbolic procedure, linked to what Eco has called "Semiological Guerrilla Warfare" (Eco 1973, 290-9; Gruber 1997, 44), false information could reverberate into true events (*A/traverso* 1976).

Therefore, on the threshold of the tragic March 1977, *A/traverso* laid bare the delirium of power by issuing false signs "con la voce e il tono del potere" (with the voice and tone of power):

> Quando il potere dice la verità e pretende sia Naturale va denunciato quanto disumano ed assurdo sia l'ordine di realtà che l'ordine del discorso (il discorso d'ordine) riflette e riproduce: consolida. ("Informazioni false che producano eventi veri" 1977)
>
> When power speaks the truth and claims to be Natural, it must be denounced how inhuman and absurd is the order of reality that the order of discourse (the discourse of order) reflects and reproduces: it consolidates.

The information short-circuit at the basis of this homeopathic procedure, of uncovering falsification through falsehood, would find "una sua verifica nella risposta bestiale del potere" (its verification in the bestial response of power) ("Alice scrive per l'autonomia" 1977). After the riots that followed the death of Francesco Lorusso, on the evening of Saturday 12 March 1977 the police burst into the editorial office of Radio Alice, in via del Pratello 41. The transcript of the last minutes of the broadcast was then published in the pages of *A/traverso*. Its animators were imprisoned or wanted, Bifo arrived in France. The pages of the newspapers on Bifo and the closure of Radio

Alice followed one another: by way of example, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* wrote that the radio had overseen the urban guerrilla warfare that erupted in Bologna ("La voce di Radio Alice a Parigi ultimo atto della 'vicenda Bifo'" 1977, 7). In France, several intellectuals signed a manifesto against repression; from 22 to 24 September, the Conference against Repression was held in Bologna (see Autori Molti Compagni 1977; Berardi 1987). Meanwhile, a joint issue of *A/traverso* and *Zut* – a Roman periodical – came out and, responding to the above strategy, closed with these words:

> Questo foglio esce come supplemento al Corriere della Sera. Non lo chiediamo al direttore resp. P. Ottone perché, certi come siamo della sua vocazione democratica, non dubitiamo che sia contrario alle leggi corporative sulla stampa. Non lo avevamo chiesto neppure ai compagni di Stampa Alternativa, per i fogli di aprile, e di questo con loro ci scusiamo come anticipatamente con Ottone. (*Zut A/traverso*, April May 1977)
>
> This paper is published as a supplement to the Corriere della Sera. We did not ask the editor-in-chief P. Ottone because, certain as we are of his democratic vocation, we do not doubt that he is against the corporative laws on the press. Nor did we ask the comrades of Stampa Alternativa, for the April sheets, and for this we apologise to them as we do to Ottone in advance.

No longer certain of the function of recomposing the real through its theoretical-operational proposal, and aware of the problems in the autonomous political area, the October issue of *Zut & A/traverso* claimed: "La rivoluzione è finita. Abbiamo vinto" (*Zut A/traverso* October [s.d.]) (the revolution is over. We won). A year after the Bologna convention, the September 1978 issue published *Requiem per Alice*, accompanied by illustrations by poet and artist Corrado Costa, taken from *William Blake in Beulah*, published in 1977 by Squilibri – a Milan-based publishing house that had also published *Chi ha ucciso Majakovskij* (Berardi 1977b) and *Finalmente il cielo è caduto sulla terra* (Berardi 1978), both by Bifo.

The two issues opening the following decade, once again anticipated the times: from the small collective in multiplication of the first issue of the magazine, to the video-electronic tribes foreshadowed by Marshall McLuhan ("Tribù videoelettroniche" 1980-81). The collective wrote that it was interested in forms of retribalisations, which "presentano i caratteri mostruosi di una mutazione che occorre però saper rendere esplicita" ("Tribù videoelettroniche" 1980-81) (present the monstrous features of a mutation that we must however be able to make explicit). The planetary nomadic mobility characterizing the new tribes seemed to discuss again the complete subsumption

of the real by the capitalist system and allowed the belief in a "rete di sopravvivenza" (survival network) ("Tribù videoelettroniche" 1980-81) that had to be rhizomatic, mobile and temporary: the terrain of struggle seemed then to move beyond *Alice*'s voices. The following issue, in the summer of 1981, picked up on a new electronic psychedelia in its graphic solutions, going beyond the previous results, which were close to punk stylistic features, often determined by the overlapping of sheets and cuttings, by the union of typographic and manuscript characters. While the Burroughsian cut up had always been a point of reference, it was only made explicit in this issue, where a text by the writer was published (see Capriolo 2020, 114). Anti-artistic dadaist experimentation, which the collective had been inspired by since 1975, was now to be reconnected to the 'general intellect', as it unfolded, according to Bifo, "le possibilità liberatorie dell'intelligenza tecnico scientifica" (Berardi 1981) (the liberating possibilities of technical-scientific intelligence). From musical to multimedia experimentation, the perception of an 'animistic' infosphere, in which "ogni oggetto è segnale e fonte di informazione" (Berardi 1981) (every object is a signal and source of information), heralded the advent of electronic culture.

5 Utopia and Science Fiction, in Practice: *Un'Ambigua Utopia*

The dimension of syncopated, oral storytelling, characterised by a language defined as "dirty" (Enzensberger in Collettivo A/traverso 1976, 106; Gruber 1997, 89-106), informed *A/traverso* and the first steps of several other magazines, which proliferated around the crucial year 1977. One of the most relevant Italian expressions of the interweaving between leftist political groups and science fiction utopia, around 1977, was the experience of the Milan-based periodical *Un'Ambigua Utopia* (An Ambiguous Utopia). Various themes that reflected more general trends found space in the magazine, first and foremost the growing interest in fiction in militant leftist circles – determined by the same need to release the desire underlying *A/traverso*.

The magazine acquired considerable importance when compared with the developments of a culture of the fantastic that would have resulted in ideologically committed outcomes in the following decade. Its story was fully embedded in the network of political and human relations woven daily by members of the group, and developed in close relationship with free radio stations, such as Radio Montevecchia and Radio Popolare, as well as social centers, that hosted and promoted its initiatives. Among others, the Centro Sociale Santa Marta, from which came some of the graphic designers with whom

the group collaborated, the Circolo La Comune in Via Festa del Perdono, where the first meetings were held, the La Fornace farmhouse (on Via Ludovico il Moro 127, had hosted the 'Martian Invasion' of September 1978), the Isola Social Center, which had housed the editorial staff for some times, and which was very active at the level of theatrical experimentation.

The activities of the collective and the magazine had developed under the banner of a liberation of the "principio di piacere" (pleasure principle), whereas "la fantascienza era segno di rivolta contro la realtà impostaci sia dalla società che dal maschio" (Ambigue 1978, 14) (science fiction was a sign of revolt against the reality imposed on us both by society and by the male). In the group's happenings – such as the aforementioned 'Martian Invasion' throughout the streets of Milan – prevailed the idea of cross-dressing, of lively and kitschy processions, of *détournement*, of destabilising both the practice of political protest and that of literary criticism. Such events had a much wider response than the narrow circle of fandom: the most significant public occasions had been the September 1978 party, which started at the occupied La Fornace farmhouse in Milan, the participation in the Piacenza conference *The Mental Work. Production and Market*, in late October 1978, the nuclear-related non-sensical debate entitled *Science Fiction and Reality: the case of the nuclear power*, held on February 10, 1979 at the Puecher center in Milan, the conference *Marx/z/iana* at the Ciak theater, also in Milan, in March 1979. The conference was followed by the publication, in November 1979, of the anthology *Nei labirinti della fantascienza* (*Nei labirinti della fantascienza. Guida critica a cura del collettivo Un'Ambigua Utopia*, Milano, Feltrinelli 1979) born on the inspiration of Goffredo Fofi and reviewed by Oreste Del Buono in *Linus*, followed by a regular space in the magazine directed by Del Buono. Moreover, the group organised a contestation at the science fiction convention *Eurocon* in Stresa in 1980, and finally the exhibition *Il Gatto del Cheshire. Rassegna di teorie e pratiche della simulazione* (The Cheshire Cat. Review of Simulation Theories and Practices). The title of the magazine was an explicit homage to *The Dispossessed*, a novel by American writer Ursula K. Le Guin first published in Italy by the Milan-based publisher Nord in 1976, whose subtitle was *An Ambiguous Utopia*.

The first issue was published in December 1977 thanks to Giancarlo Bulgarelli, Gerardo Frizzati, Danilo Marzorati, Marco Abate, Giuliano Spagnul and Michelangelo Miani, who also was the illustrator. This collected heterogeneous contributions, and the group conceived the subsequent issues as monographic ones, for a total of nine releases (see Caronia Spagnul 2009).

The first issue of 1980 significantly introduced themes and debates around the notion of *simulacrum*. In this issue, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's contribution at the 1978 conference *La*

fantascienza e la critica (Science Fiction and Critique) in Palermo was published before its first 'institutional' translation in 1980 by Feltrinelli (Baudrillard 1980b). The text, translated by Antonio Caronia – who begun to collaborate with *Un'Ambigua Utopia* in September 1978 (Caronia 1999, 26) – emphasised the connections between the sociological speculations of texts such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, Or, the End of the Social*, translated from French into Italian between 1978 and 1979, and science fiction literature, indicating three orders of simulacra. The first was that of positive simulacra, of "natura a immagine di Dio" (nature in the image of God) (Baudrillard 1980a, 25). The second was that of the tendency towards expansion, the release of energy and the drive of desire, while the third order was that of "simulacri di simulazione, fondati sull'informazione, il modello, il gioco cibernetico" (Baudrillard 1980a, 25) (simulacra, based on information, the model, the cybernetic game) and therefore on the notion of the 'hyperreal'. Each order was related respectively to utopia, science fiction and a genre yet to come, which concerned both literary fiction and non-fiction, and which was the order of simulacra to which Baudrillard, like his translator Caronia, paid most attention.

The only issue of 1982 was dedicated to simulation and constituted the catalogue of the exhibition *Il Gatto del Cheshire. Rassegna di teorie e pratiche della simulazione*, held in the cloisters of the Società Umanitaria in Milan from 20 to 23 May 1982. With this release, the economic collapse and the division of the group put an end to *Un'Ambigua Utopia*, marking with the same exhibition the relationship between intermedial practices, science fiction and militancy. The exhibition was conceived as an extensive overview, which included visual arts, theatre, and music, as well as a series of literary contributions. The cover image was conceived by Gianni Sassi and depicted a drunk cat in front of a jukebox, inviting the viewer and reader to immerse themselves, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, in a hyperreal and paradoxical universe of simulation. Sassi was probably involved by Caronia himself, who, together with Patrizia Brambilla (who oversaw general coordination) and Daniela Brambilla (who was in charge of the visual arts section), was the main promoter of the initiative. The exhibition was organised by the Cooperativa Un'Ambigua Utopia together with Gianni Sassi's Cooperativa Intrapresa, which involved the editorial staff of *Alfabeta*, with whom Caronia was in contact, having published a text for the magazine the year before (Caronia 1981). Among the participants in the organisation of the exhibition, several had approached the collective only a short time before, while many members of the initial group had already left. The chosen theme – simulation – anticipated digital culture (Caronia 2014) and was influenced by the Italian reception of Baudrillard's theories.

As far as concerns the visual arts section, the collective had made a considerable effort by inviting several artists, all resident in Milan, some of whom were already well known; in addition to the visual arts, a section was dedicated to theatre and one to three-dimensional photography and holography – in the catalogue there was also a section on music. This breadth well represented the pioneering and encyclopaedic character of the initiative.

In 1983, the bookshop previously opened by the collective closed, marking the conclusion of *Un'Ambigua Utopia*. The Movement of 1977, within which the magazine was created, had been, according to Caronia, a key moment of affirmation of creativity as both an individual and collective practice. However, it was also the triggering of the capitalist restauration process, which starting from those practices was leading to a new valorisation device, the creation of a new proletariat of creativity and its expropriation.

> *Un'Ambigua Utopia* […] oscillò sempre fra il riconoscimento di un cambio di passo epocale delle condizioni del conflitto sociale e della lotta politica, e l'attaccamento disperato al mantenimento di una agibilità immediata del conflitto, all'illusione di una possibilità di incasso immediato dell'ipoteca contenuta in quel 'abbiamo vinto' proclamato da A/traverso. Senza accorgerci che non eravamo noi i beneficiari di quella cambiale, che la rivolta del *general intellect* si stava interrompendo a metà del cammino, che il gioco stava passando di mano. (Caronia 2014)

> And so *Un'Ambigua Utopia* […] always oscillated between the recognition of an epochal change of pace in the conditions of social conflict and political struggle, and the desperate attachment to the maintenance of an immediate viability of the conflict, to the illusion of a possibility of immediate collection of the mortgage contained in that 'we won' proclaimed by A/traverso. Without realising that we were not the beneficiaries of that promissory note, that the revolt of the general intellect was breaking down midway, that the game was changing hands.

6 Conclusion

The two magazines reinterpreted many of the founding aspects of the Seventies movement, foreshadowing new technological possibilities. In the case of *A/traverso*, in the Eighties there have been other issues, and a number of small volumes, which were among the first to collect and republish in Italian some cyberpunk texts (Berardi 1989; 1992). Many other 'fake stories' would have made real events happen: this subversive communication strategy would be systematically adopted by *Il Male*. Antonio Caronia would devote himself to science fiction, but also to media and electronic culture, as well as the multifaceted panorama of cyberpunk. Le Guin's model of *fabula speculativa* as political strategy, fundamental to *Un'Ambigua Utopia*, opened new horizons, not only for fiction, once recovered by Donna Haraway and other leading theorists. Thus, certain experiences of the time certainly paved the way to the subsumption of the real in the hyperreal, but also to other multiplying groups, to other networks.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

The Power of Contemporary Chinese Photography
Capturing Moments, Shaping Perspectives

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Abstract China's contemporary photography scene has witnessed a remarkable growth and transformation over the past few decades. With its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and rapidly changing society, China has become a fertile ground for photographers to explore and capture the essence of the present moment. This article will delve into the world of contemporary Chinese photography, highlighting its unique characteristics and notable photographers. Contemporary Chinese photography emerged as a distinct art form in the 1990s, coinciding with China's economic reforms and the country's opening up to the global stage. This period of societal transformation provided photographers with a wealth of subjects to document, ranging from the effects of urbanization to social and political issues. Chinese photographers began to experiment with different styles, techniques, and themes, pushing the boundaries of traditional documentary photography.

Keywords Contemporary Chinese Photography. Chinese Society. Social Issues. Educational System. Pandemic. Materialism. Traditional Chinese Cultural Aesthetics. Northern Series. Southern Series. Passersby.

Summary 1 Introduction to Wang Qingsong. - 2 Wang Qingsong's Iconic Works. - 3 Evolution of Wang Qingsong's Artistry. - 4 Introduction to Hai Bo's Photography. - 5 Themes in Hai Bo's Works. - 6 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction to Wang Qingsong

After the 1990s, in China came a time where the art world opened up to a new gaze and new opportunities. Chinese artists are exposed to the world in order to contaminate their work thanks to the new political situation. From this time on, after this isolation that lasted several years, many photographers also leave the communist scenario of a governmental art to overlook a vision more related the independence of personal expression.

Wang Qingsong, this contemporary photographer, has made an indelible impact on the Chinese art scene since the beginning of the 21st century. Through his delicate and insightful perspective, a series of his works have culminated in a profound reflection on the contemporary state of Chinese society. Wang Qingsong skillfully employs humor and metaphor to delve deeply into serious social issues.

His works not only reveal the public's deep desire for material prosperity but also critically point out China's unrestrained pursuit of commercial value in its modernization process. This rapid modernization has led to significant urban-rural migration and drastic changes in social structure, further resulting in mounting societal pressures. Through Wang Qingsong's lens, we can sense the helplessness and anxiety of the masses in the face of these societal changes, and how these challenges become legacies passed down from one generation to another.

Wang Qingsong candidly shared his artistic philosophy: "My goal is to capture and comment on the absurdities within the modernization of socialism with Chinese characteristics through photography, and to clearly articulate my stance".[1] The critical and playful tone in his works not only challenges the conventions of traditional photography but also offers a new experimental dimension to contemporary art. Truly remarkable art should not be confined merely to the display of technique but should deeply explore and represent human nature and life.

Interestingly, Wang Qingsong often integrates himself into the scenes of his works, becoming part of the narrative. This unique method of self-inclusion not only differentiates his works but also endows them with an intimate and direct appeal. These pieces, in essence, become mirrors reflecting society's current state, allowing viewers to see their own reflections.

Wang Qingsong's art incisively portrays the expanding desires in a commercialized society, along with the resultant feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. From his highly artistic expressions to straightforward interpretations, Wang Qingsong believes that everything he presents closely resonates with his inner world.

1 王庆松：戏谑荒诞背后的严肃诘问 http://www.99ys.com/home/2022/03/22/14/213875.html. All the translations are by the Author.

Figure 1 Follow Me, 120×300 cm, 2003, © Wang Qingsong

Starting from the 1990s, Wang Qingsong embarked on a distinct narrative style in photography, combining post-modern language, grand setups, striking visuals, and popular aesthetics with a grassroots perspective. He firmly believes that true art should emphasize its deep connection with societal realities, and thus, he considers his works to be more akin to 'documentary photography'.

2 Wang Qingsong's Iconic Works

Wang Qingsong's iconic piece, *Follow Me* (2003), was auctioned at Christie's in London in 2008, fetching an astonishing RMB 11,751,799, instantly garnering widespread attention. The inspiration for this piece traces back to the early stages of China's reform and opening up in 1982 when the Central Television Station aired a beloved English-teaching program named *Follow Me*. During that pivotal period, countless Chinese relied on this show to learn English and expand their horizons, making the program a vivid emblem of China's transition from isolation to global engagement.

Back in 2003, against the backdrop of China's rapid economic transformation and growth, Wang Qingsong revisited and reinterpreted the Follow Me theme, drawing from the societal shifts of the time. At the Beijing Film Studio, he erected a massive chalkboard filled with a mix of Chinese and English phrases, some of which were deliberately playful. Wang positioned himself in front of this board, pointer in hand, immersing himself in a teaching scene as if guiding the audience through a lesson. He elaborated on his creative intent, saying, "From the previous generation's Follow Me TV show to my current photography piece Follow Me, my aspiration remains constant: to witness China's integration into the global stage and, through this, enable the world to delve deeper into the heartbeat of China".

Figure 2 *In the Fields of Hope*, 2020, © Wang Qingsong

Subsequently, Wang Qingsong introduced *Learn from You* and *Learn from Him*, forming a conceptual trilogy spanning an entire decade. Within these works, he portrayed various characters shaped by the prevailing educational system, each bearing its symbolic significance. In *Follow Me*, the English teacher character highlights the trend of pursuing short-term gains in education; *Learn from You* portrays a young individual grappling with the oppressive educational regime; while *Learn from Him* represents a student who, stripped of critical thinking, blindly absorbs information. Collectively, this series epitomizes Wang Qingsong's profound reflection on the human distortions brought about by the current educational system and his contemplation and concern for future generations.

Amid the pandemic's havoc in 2020, the artist Wang Qingsong unveiled his new piece titled *In the Fields of Hope*. Ingeniously, the artwork adopts the setting of China's art examination as its backdrop. The scene presents rows upon rows of easels, each with an examinee meticulously recreating the same photograph, which features the likeness of Wang Qingsong himself. These identical images create a potent visual impact, echoing the relentless replication of a virus. Deep within the frame, majestic mountains stand as a backdrop, offering a stark contrast to the foreground.

In the original plan, Wang Qingsong intended to recruit 500 participants for an outdoor shoot. However, due to the severity of the pandemic, this plan could not come to fruition. When naming the piece, a familiar tune resonated in Wang Qingsong's mind: "Our homeland lies in the fields of hope; our dreams rest in the fields of hope; our

future is envisioned in the fields of hope…" (the words are from the song by the same name). Amidst these pandemic-shadowed times, Wang Qingsong aspires to instill a glimmer of aspiration and hope in both himself and the public through *In the Fields of Hope*.

3 Evolution of Wang Qingsong's Artistry

Starting from the end of 1996, Wang Qingsong gradually realized that we should not oversimplify or mockingly view the culture of a nation. Instead, we should delve deeply into why such a culture is fragmenting. Consequently, he shifted his focus to more abstract concepts and sought to express them through photography. Wang Qingsong also became one of the pioneering artists to incorporate Photoshop techniques into photographic creation. In 1999, he released the piece *Requesting Buddha Series No. 1*, utilizing Photoshop to depict those obsessed with money and materialism, as well as the societal scene characterized by rampant materialism, pretension, and ostentation.

Two decades later, in 2019, even though his new piece *Requesting Buddha Series* had a composition similar to the previous work, its content underwent a significant transformation. In the image, objects held in hands changed from Yanjing beer to Lafite, from brick phones to smartphones, and from film to digital. The objects of bygone days are scattered amidst steel bars and rubble, seemingly symbolizing the shifting consumer perceptions across different eras.

Drawing inspiration from the classic ancient Chinese painting *Night Revels* of Han Xizai, Wang Qingsong created *Night Revels of Lao Li*, a work reflecting contemporary societal issues in China. This piece cleverly contrasts the situation of modern Chinese intellectuals with that of ancient times. Wang utilized the scattered point perspective technique to alter the original painting's context, thus presenting the ambiance he wanted to convey more intensively. Deeply influenced by the society's strong yearning for money and desire at the time, Wang transformed the melancholic night banquet scene of Han Xizai in the original painting into a depiction of Lao Li (Li Xianting) confronting the gaudy and decadent life scenarios of modern society.

In this work, Lao Li refers to Li Xianting. He is not only one of the most influential art critics and curators in contemporary China but also a significant figure who has witnessed China's societal transformation since its reform and opening-up.

Wang Qingsong was born at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Over half a century, he has witnessed China's transformation from a closed-off nation with relatively outdated production technologies to a global powerhouse with profound influence worldwide.

Figure 3 The Northern Series No.11: Nameless Plain, 130×830 cm, 2005, © Hai Bo

The core of Wang Qingsong's creations lies in his acute capture of societal phenomena, as well as reflections and introspections on his life experiences. His artistic works both unveil the Chinese public's desire for emerging material wealth and critically display China's impulsiveness in pursuing commercial benefits. Furthermore, they highlight the profound societal impact of a massive influx of migrant workers into cities. As he stated in *In the Fields of Hope* "I hope my photographic works can authentically reflect and critique the absurdities within China's unique socialist modernization process, thereby clearly expressing my views and stance".

4 Introduction to Hai Bo's Photography

Wang Qingsong's works delve deeply into the society's excessive pursuit of materialism, while Haibo's art represents a pure interpretation of traditional Chinese cultural aesthetics, showcasing its intrinsic charm in the most minimalist way. Haibo, an artist from northern China, is deeply rooted in his place of birth and has engaged in long-term creation against its backdrop. In his *Hometown series* spanning several decades, characters, landscapes, interiors, and objects are presented without embellishment, as if they are fully immersed in their own existence, with no distractions. Whether it's the sprawling horizon, the extended rooftops, or the lines on window grids, they all reveal the most natural and unadulterated state. This simplicity and authenticity are not deliberate but rather their true essence.

Haibo's photography is filled with love for simplicity, tranquility, and everyday elements. The vast harvested plains, endless horizons, disappearing roads at the end of the sightline, and the few figures seemingly frozen in time, the elderly strolling – they all present moments of serene life. It could be the warm ray of sunlight indoors, the contemplative expression, or the calendar gently hanging on the window, turned to a specific date – these images seem to intentionally avoid overt visual impact and excessive emotional expression. They are more like softly sung melodies, reminiscent of distant whispers of the wind, the awakening silence, or the whispers among blades of grass. These sounds seem to briefly pause within the frames, waiting for the viewer to listen, and then gradually submerge into endless silence.

Figure 4 The Southern Series No. 13, black and white photograph, 2012, © Hai Bo.

In his *Hometown series*, spanning several decades, every person, every landscape, every room, and various objects are portrayed truthfully, without the need for additional embellishments. They all appear to be immersed in their own worlds, maintaining the purest form of existence: whether it's the boundless horizon, the straight lines of extending eaves, or the orderly lines in window grids. This beauty of straightness is not a result of deliberate construction but rather dictated by their nature and essence. As for the wind, it simply naturally rustles the trees on the open field, without conveying any specific emotions or human sentiments.

5 Themes in Hai Bo's Works

In the *Hometown series*, especially those large-scale images, we are often struck by the vastness of the landscape displayed: an open, exposed, and unobstructed scenery, where the horizon seems to stretch this land and sky infinitely, forming both a stable and profoundly abstract visual structure. His work vividly portrays this magnificent scene. On that massive nine-meter-long printed canvas, what people see is a world where the sky and earth share equal prominence. Here, the pale sky and the deep wilderness form a sharp contrast. The only line in the image is a lightly colored road, leading to a vanishing point at the center, where a shadow, possibly of a vehicle in the distance, is faintly indicated. The transience and fragility of everyday life are replaced here by a form and ambiance that transcend time, almost divine in nature. In other smaller black and white photographs, the horizon not only delineates light from darkness but also reveals the silhouettes of figures. They appear like dark silhouettes against the backlight, seemingly standing there since ancient times, narrating timeless tales.

Haibo describes his hometown with deep emotion: "There, there are no magnificent landscapes, no majestic mountains, and no flowing rivers. There's just the vast land and the distant horizon. In this

Figure 5 The Southern Series No. 55, black and white photograph, 2012, © Hai Bo

expansive space, people seem as insignificant as dust".[2] He once reminisced with overwhelming sentiment about a winter trip back to his hometown during his childhood. At that time, the heavy snow seemed to cover everything, leaving only a tranquil expanse of white in the universe. Everything else seemed to disappear. This powerful force of nature might have given him the initial shock of his life, leaving a lasting impression, compelling him to return and explore time and time again. From this perspective, one could say that what Haibo's lens captures of his hometown is both a fleeting moment in the passage of time and a moment frozen in eternity, much like the last rays of the setting sun on the horizon before nightfall, leaving a final image behind.

In 2012, Haibo put aside his continuous and exhausting creation in the *North series*, choosing to head south and embark on an upstream journey along the Yangtze River from Shanghai. Although from certain perspectives, the landscapes he encountered might not entirely embody the typical southern characteristics, for Haibo, who had long resided in the north, the novelty and uniqueness of this unfamiliar land became a profound emotional comfort. In his heart, the distinction between the North and the South transcends geographical

2 故乡，海波和他的北方 https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_10479469.

meanings; the north represents the pursuit of materialism, while the south leans more towards a spiritual haven. As he put it: "I am fond of the sceneries that hover between reality and dreams". For this reason, perhaps the identity of a passerby best interprets his understanding of life's roles. He witnessed temples shrouded in mist, observed young people inquiring about their destinies from a blind person by a wall, noticed the distinct marks made by weeds and branches on pedestrians' clothing, and the river water imbued with life, flowing quietly along the Yangtze.

Haibo's hometown is Changchun, Jilin. He spent decades of his life in the north, and it was on those not-so-nurtured plains that his works thrived. For him, the South and dreamland almost became synonymous. He once said, "Being a northerner, I have little understanding of the South. The South carries meanings of fantasy and illusion for me. Therefore, the South I captured is filled with a northerner's fantasy of the South. It can even be seen as a representation of my own dreams, rather than the South in the real world".[3]

Haibo noticed that when mentioning the South, colorful images often come to people's minds. However, he unexpectedly found that many artists prefer to present their feelings about the South in black and white, just as shown in his *Southern series*. While color photos might have a higher degree of reproduction, black and white photos leave a deeper emotional aftertaste for him. The choice behind this is not merely based on aesthetics; for him, it's more about an emotional outpouring, expressing the confusion, bewilderment, doubts, and regrets deep within his heart.

In fact, for Haibo, there isn't much essential difference between the South and the North. As previously mentioned, his works often depict a path with a person walking along it. Even in the South, his creative approach hasn't changed significantly. However, the South provides him with more opportunities to fantasize and reproduce dreamscapes. The South has become the source of his dreams and also the medium through which he manifests his dreamscapes.

Haibo's works often feature scenes of mist and falling snow. These aren't just visual representations; they reflect more deeply the artist's inner sentiments and emotions. Faced with the world, the various facets of life, and even the scenery right in front of him, the artist is always accompanied by a sense of exploration, confusion, and bewilderment. As he said, many real scenes often become reflections of the dreams in his heart.

The works in the Northern series feature Haibo's friends and relatives, as well as the native soil of the North, closely tied to every aspect of his personal life. However, the South appears abstract to

3 故乡，海波和他的北方 https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_10479469.

Haibo, devoid of specific connections. Hence, even though it relates to Haibo's personal experiences, the South seems more like an illusory realm in his fantasies.

For example, in the *They series* created by Haibo in the North, the characters are not distant strangers, but his relatives, close friends, and neighbours. The bond he shares with these people is profound; this is also the land where his parents and ancestors have lived for generations. In contrast, the South doesn't have a direct material connection to him, but at a deeper spiritual level, it resonates with his soul.

To Haibo, the Northeast China where he lives visually appears somewhat desolate. This desolation does not refer to material scarcity, but rather the endless horizon where occasionally a few ant-like figures hurry by. This is his fundamental impression of the North: simple, clear, starkly contrasting with the South's lush, intricate, graceful, and complex landscapes.

From a creative perspective, due to its historical background, the Northeast does not have the rich cultural heritage like the South. It lacks ancient artifacts like stone tools, tombstones, city walls, temples, calligraphy, and other objects. This results in a stark visual contrast between the Northeast and the South. The South, with its relics, ancient cities, and moats that represent Chinese and even broader Eastern cultures, is something Haibo never experienced during his upbringing. Yet, surprisingly, even though these were not the backdrop of his growth, they deeply resonated with his inner world. This is because China possesses vast geographical and cultural breadth, leading to potential misalignments and asynchronies between physical experiences and one's inner realm.

6 Conclusion

In Haibo's works, the frequently appearing pedestrians symbolize his feelings of inner detachment. Although at times these passersby in his art may walk in groups or bustle about, ultimately, each person will separate from the crowd, returning to their own solitude. Unlike the clearly labeled characters in the Northern series, those in the Southern series don't have explicit identity definitions; they are not merely farmers or elderly people. This reflects Haibo's perspective when conceiving the *Southern series*. He observes the South from a distance, because both the South and the North constitute chapters of his fate. Yet, in this vast world, he is but a fleeting passerby.

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Unveiling Perception: Altered Reality Through Surveillance and AI Imagery

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

Countersurveillance Aesthetic
Resistance Through Wearable Technologies

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Abstract Countersurveillance designs are a dynamic form of resistance, creatively responding to pervasive surveillance. The imaginary these designs created is a response to the virality of camera footage and a reflection on the current reality of power imbalance. This article explores their evolution from the WikiLeaks Scarf by Metahaven to modern wearables, emphasizing their empowerment, subversion of norms, and political statements. Case studies include Adam Harvey's iconic work and new contemporary brands. These designs challenge norms, and raise awareness about privacy protection, ultimately safeguarding one's personal identity in the digital age.

Keywords Countersurveillance Fashion. Wearable Technologies. Surveillance. Drone. Design. Speculative Design.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Intrusive Power of the Camera . – 3 A Decade Later: Surveillance Core. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

> We will not solve the problem of the present with the tools of the past.
>
> James Bridle, *New Dark Age*, 2018, 120

In 2010, the world was shaken when WikiLeaks released the classified US military video known as 'Collateral Murder'. This video, recorded by the gunsight camera on a US Apache helicopter, depicted three airstrikes that took place on July 12, 2007, in New Baghdad, Iraq, resulting in the tragic deaths of at least eighteen people, including two Reuters journalists. This leak revealed the stark realities of

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modern warfare. In 2011, the design duo Metahaven, founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden, embarked on a project exploring the visual identity of WikiLeaks. Their work delved into the paradox of an organization striving for transparency through whistleblowing and secrecy. The result was the creation of the *WikiLeaks Scarf*, a unique piece of clothing, adorned with camouflage patterns, challenged the idea of visibility and opacity, with proceeds from its eBay auction going to support WikiLeaks during a financial embargo. For better understanding of the designers creative process, their publication *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance* (2015) unveils the research and source of their visual projects.

The combination of the viral images of the videos and the response from the design studio are at the origin of this research that is aiming to highlight the point of encounter between the surveillance resistance and the constant upgrade of wearable technologies. On one side, with the presence of an overlooking eye that puts us in a modern form of Panopticon, there is the need to regain agency over our image, once it is somehow taken away from us and shared in an invisible and pervasive network. On the other side, wearable technologies can offer solutions to explore form of resistance through clothing and our personal image. As it is discussed in this article with the help of various case studies from both pioneering efforts and more modern attempts, a new usage of textiles and patterns allows one to be protected from the cameras and at the same time find space to embark on a self-definition journey. There are many narratives to approach this discourse, in this article the chosen *fil rouge* is the eye of the camera (mainly CCTVs) as the leading imaginary of contemporary surveillance.

Case Study: Adam Harvey

The year 2013 saw the emergence of further discussions on surveillance and privacy. Famous artist Hito Steyerl's video *How not to be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational.mov File* provided ironic insights into evading surveillance in the digital age. Concurrently, artist and designer Adam Harvey introduced *Stealth Wear*, a visionary concept in fashion addressing the rise of surveillance. Inspired by traditional Islamic dress, this collection incorporated silver-plated fabric that reflected thermal radiation, allowing wearers to evade thermal surveillance from drones. These developments in art, design, and technology shed light on the ever-increasing presence of a specific kind of surveillance in our lives: drone footage. Grégoire Chamayou's book *A Theory of the Drone* (2015) laid out the principles underpinning this surveillance, highlighting the psychological impact of constant aerial scrutiny. In particular, because of their

massive use in war zones, these items have now another layer of significance. Wars are characterised by an invasive surveillance of civilians, remote-control weaponry, and the use of drones as a mechanism for delivering both weapons and propaganda to a target population. Once armed, drones grant persistent aerial surveillance which, when fused with other data, can create an archive of movements, establishing life patterns and targeting individuals. Chamayou describes drones as petrifying that are causing a "psychic imprisonment", because of the absence of a physical perimeter and an induced sense of persecution instilled by these flying watchtowers.

To prevent a possible negative output or behaviour, constant surveillance is seen as the lesser evil, without acknowledging the installed feeling of restriction of one's life and therefore personal definition. Adam Harvey's project explore the aesthetics of privacy and the potential for fashion to challenge authoritarian surveillance technologies, by pointing at the implications in war zones. Even to this day, it remains one of the more comprehensive case studies, incorporating multiple perspectives, with Chamayou delving into various aspects. One noteworthy perspective is the concept of the camera serving as the eyes of an overlooking God, which is explored through its connection to the hijab and burqa.

A previous project by Harvey, useful to better understand his explorations in these fields, is an unexpected form of camouflage, revolving around dazzling patterns and with a long history with the renowned example of ships painting in World War I. Dazzle camouflage, or razzle dazzle, comprises intricate patterns of geometric shapes in diverse colours that intersect and intertwine. Its primary purpose is not literal invisibility but rather an emphasis on unrecognizability. During WWI, this type of camouflage found extensive use on ships, as it confounded attempts to gauge their range, speed, or direction, rendering them more elusive targets. In 2010, designer Adam Harvey developed CV Dazzle (Computer Vision Dazzle) as part of his NYU Master's thesis, an open-source toolkit designed to thwart facial recognition software. This innovative approach involves altering hairstyles and applying asymmetrical, colourful makeup to obscure key facial features, thus manipulating the features that computer vision algorithms use for object identification. This effective strategy mitigates the risk of remote and computational visual information capture while disguising itself as a fashionable statement. By preventing digital surveillance from capturing one's identity, it grants individuals agency and a choice in self-representation.

Two domains, fashion trends and technology, are in constant evolution, and Harvey recognizes the need for ongoing updates in his designs. What might currently appear eccentric could evolve into a future fashion trend. Simultaneously, as a style becomes mainstream, technology advances to keep pace. However, due to this rapid

technological progression, not all projects will remain relevant over time. Harvey's website notes that the 2010 examples were specifically tailored to the Viola-Jones face detection algorithm, a framework introduced in 2001. Contextually, if someone wants to reproduce one of *CV Dazzle* look today has to consider the fact that it might need to update it to a more modern face detection system.

2 The Intrusive Power of the Camera

Drone-evading hoodies, signal-blocking cases, reflective jackets, anti-AI masks or hairstyles, are some of the tactical gear now at our disposal to prevent being tracked and recognized. Why are these tools being produced outside the sci-fi and utopian propositions in popular culture? Because in our current age of oversharing and over-representation of our image, there is an increasing necessity of finding private spaces where our personality can be safely developed and displayed. Choosing these wearable pieces of smart tech is now a fashion choice not dissimilar to any other, especially in our relations with an outsider's gaze. How did we get there?

The evolution of intrusive cameras has been marked by a remarkable shift from traditional Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) systems to the sophisticated realm of facial recognition technologies and other system constantly gathering sensible data as biometric information without prior consent. In the earlier stages, CCTVs primarily served as monitoring tools, recording footage for later review and analysis. However, it soon emerged the improper use made by police forces and the governments. With advancements in digital technology, these cameras gained remote access capabilities, allowing real-time monitoring and the integration of facial recognition algorithms. Facial recognition cameras, equipped with AI and machine learning, have the ability to identify and track individuals in real-time by analysing unique facial features. While proponents argue that such technology enhances security and efficiency, critics raise significant concerns about privacy and civil liberties. In the midst of rising social justice concerns, the use of facial recognition systems has raised alarms about the widespread usage and the embedded bias surfacing. By 2018, the global stage witnessed the Amnesty International's 'Ban the Scan' campaign, particularly active in New York City, opposing the use of facial recognition technologies as tools of harassment against minorities and instruments of mass surveillance for law enforcement. The campaign highlighted alarming inaccuracies, with facial recognition systems being up to 95% inaccurate, exacerbating discriminatory policing and stifling peaceful assembly. Additionally, it unveiled a map of the New York Police Department's surveillance apparatus, compiled by vigilant volunteers who meticulously tracked street-level surveillance cameras.

Another pivotal moment in surveillance studies was the publication in 2019 of Shoshana Zuboff, American scholar and social psychologist, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*.

The element that characterised our age, in Zuboff's research, is the widespread collection and commodification of personal data. At a certain point, analysing massive data sets was executed by the state apparatuses and also companies. In fact, she claims that two companies, Google and Facebook, invented and transferred surveillance capitalism into "a new logic of accumulation" (2019, 20). Selling personal data with the core purpose of making profit, makes this an economic mechanism, here defined with the concept of surveillance capitalism. For Zuboff, this economic force is not merely a higher expression of capitalism, but a perversion of it since the companies understood that they had a new, untapped and unexpected data to deal with, our *behavioural surplus*:

> Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary behavioural surplus, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as 'machine intelligence,' and fabricated into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioural predictions that I call behavioural futures markets. Surveillance capitalists have grown immensely wealthy from these trading operations, for many companies are eager to lay bets on our future behaviour. (Zuboff 2019, 14)

Zuboff reports how the tech giants unilaterally decided that these resources were theirs for the taking and thought nothing of it. The absence of regulations and laws came a long time after the companies' first moves. The interesting factor is that all these data are given by the user, by us. Indeed, this is leading back to the prosumer reflection and how user generated content is harvested, and our freedom is at stake. Zuboff concludes, advocating for the need for new kinds of policies to approach those issues.

From the wide spread of CCTV cameras, that lead to initiatives highlighting inequality biases of the technology, to the comprehensive analysis of Shoshana Zuboff for a generalized audience, the purpose of this paragraph was to depict the situation in which countersurveillance fashion thrives.

Case Study: Vexed Generation

A peculiar example is the one of Vexed Generation, conceived by the designer duo Joe Hunter and Adam Thorpe in 1994, emerged as a bold response to the threats on civil liberties and the proliferation of surveillance cameras in London's most impoverished neighborhoods. Their unique approach bore semblance to groundbreaking ventures in other domains, akin to Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's pioneering *SEX* boutique in 1970s London. Vexed Generation's clandestine retail shop, hidden away behind Carnaby Street, bore no identifiable logo or conspicuous signage, deliberately shrouded in anonymity. The interior mirrored this covert atmosphere, featuring a stark white room and basement with clothing racks and tape-letters adorning the walls, offering a contextual narrative about the clothes' significance in the struggle for personal safety. The sole piece of furniture, a television, broadcasted grainy footage of riots. Their clothing designs, marked by the use of military-grade ballistic fabrics, knife-resistant, and bulletproof materials, pursued two principal objectives: increasing awareness about air pollution and surveillance concerns, while satirizing prevailing fashion trends.

The iconic *Vexed Parka*, conceived in 1994, embodied their vision. This balaclava-hooded jacket could be fully zipped up to eye level, serving as protective armour. Crafted from fireproof military nylon originally developed for NASA, it also featured additional padding at the kidneys and groin. This design responded to the controversial Criminal Justice Act of that year, which sought to curtail unlicensed rave parties and suppress certain social behaviours. This legislation sparked intense opposition, culminating in demonstrations and acts of resistance. The *Vexed Parka* was designed by Hunter and Thorpe as a parody of police riot gear. It offers safety by hiding the wearer's face and serving as a barrier against unnecessary police violence. Another notable creation was the versatile *Ninja Hood*, introduced in 1995-96 and reissued annually until its discontinuation. It served a dual purpose, safeguarding the wearer's identity and providing a filtered mask to combat London's polluted air. Unique zippers and Velcro pockets were the design identifiers for Vexed Generation.

Committed to their principles, as their creations became increasingly commercialized and copied by fast-fashion chains, Hunter and Thorpe opted to shift their practices to different endeavours, ultimately leading to the label's cessation. Adam Thorpe transitioned into a professorship in responsive design at the University of the Arts London, while Joe Hunter assumed the role of a lecturer specializing in fashion design and fashion futures at the University of East London.

Fast-forwarding to the early 2000s, several significant events unfolded and the problematic surveillance of CCTV cameras which are now embedded with facial recognition systems, an even scarier

threat to urban safety and personal protection. All of this revived Hunter and Thorpe desire to propose a relevant change through responsive garments, therefore in 2019 they released an eleven piece capsule collection, a reissue of the most famous designs, in conjunction with Byronesque (a well-known vintage store) and Farfetch (an online luxury fashion retailer). The urgency to return after twenty years was given by the need to remind new generations that there is the possibility to respond creatively to the things that concern us. This recreation of archive pieces is deeply rooted in a new way of engaging the communities by choosing local manufacturers, so that the designs are the same, but the quality is higher, and they are more sustainable. In an interview about their comeback, the duo shows the coherent choices made towards hiding as a recognition of one's identity declaring:

> A preference for privacy or anonymity is not a threat unless it is received as one. The old adage of CCTV advocates in the 90s was, 'If you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear' – scarily, this phrase has been attributed to Nazi Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. Conversely, we could argue: 'If we have nothing to fear from the anonymous, then why do we need to know their identity?'. ("We Speak to Resurrected Cult '90s Label Vexed Generation about Its New Capsule" 2019)

3 A Decade Later: Surveillance Core

Roughly ten years after 'Collateral Murder' shook public conscience and raised awareness towards the possibility to retrieve images from cameras meant to be private, countersurveillance design has gained resonance and importance. From being images representative of speculative design projects, they become products of emerging brands, therefore showing how an actual subversion of power can come in forms of anti-surveillance. Upon confronting the probing gaze of a drone and subsequently that of the camera, it is worthy mentioning other designers who are embarking on the formidable task of engaging with the invisible web of the infosphere. This is the case of project KOVR (to be read as 'cover'), described as a wearable countermovement that has a profound impact on safeguarding personal privacy within an increasingly data-driven global landscape. In this era of an ever-expanding invisible network, individuals are exposed to the potential risks of having their personal information tracked and exploited. Project KOVR takes proactive measures to address this pressing issue by harnessing the potential of metalliferous fabrics, effectively providing a protective shield for the electronic components embedded in items like cards, clothing, and keys.

This innovative technology not only renders your devices untraceable but also serves as a robust barrier against incoming and outgoing signals, thereby safeguarding individuals from radio waves and radiation. A standout example of their innovative approach is the Anti-Surveillance Coat Type II. This privacy-focused coat empowers individuals to remain connected on their own terms, allowing for a reassertion of control over one's personal data and privacy, all while doing so in a stylish and fashion-forward manner. It represents a powerful statement about achieving disconnection within an interconnected world, ultimately preserving what it means to remain distinctly human in an environment increasingly defined by information and connectivity.

The term 'surveillance core' is a play on the concept of core style aesthetics in the world of fashion. Core refers to the idea that clothing and accessories should not only serve a practical purpose but also embody style and align with the latest fashion trends. It emphasizes the fusion of fashion and functionality, ensuring that garments are not just utilitarian but also aesthetically pleasing. When applied to the term 'surveillance core', it suggests that there is a fashion trend or aesthetic emerging around the concept of surveillance. This could involve wearable technologies, clothing or accessories designed to incorporate surveillance-related elements, reflecting the influence of the current situation in modern society on fashion choices and aesthetics.

Three Case Studies of Countersurveillance Design

The three case studies that will follow show how countersurveillance design has changed from the early pioneering examples, occasionally straddling the line into speculative design, to fully enter the world of fashion. They demonstrate the extent of this trend by travelling from Germany to Italy and then into Belgium. Because of space constraints, the author chose examples from Europe, acknowledging the limitations on what can be described as a global phenomenon. In two of the following case studies, the aforementioned surveillance core is given by a specific pattern designed to misguide the eye of the camera reproduced on knitwear, bringing this manual/artisanal fashion aspect in touch with technologies.

The first to mention is Urban Privacy,[1] a brand – founded in 2017 by Nicole Scheller in Germany – that reimagines digital privacy through fashion. They believe that digital privacy doesn't have to be

1 Urban Privacy – Fashion That Empowers Your Privacy https://urban-privacy.com/.

an either-or choice. Their approach involves creating clothing that empowers individuals to regain control over their private information without sacrificing the advantages of the modern digital age. For example, *Of'lain* is their design for a smartphone bag that blocks unwanted data harvesting. In essence, the slogan of the brand is 'make privacy wearable', enabling people to handle their information in a self-determined manner. *Faception* is similar to an oversized dress, made with a knitted adversarial pattern that not only shields your face, but uses wide silhouettes to obscure your gait, which is another people identifier's trait.

A similar case is the Italian start-up Cap_able, a brand that operates at the crossroads of fashion design and technology. In 2021, Cap_able CEO Rachele Didero prototyped and patented its first capsule collection of knitted adversarial patterns, with the sponsorship of Politecnico di Milano. The *Manifesto Collection*[2] by Cap_able serves a dual purpose: raising awareness about the critical need for privacy protection while offering a practical, consciously designed addition to one's wardrobe. Their mission revolves around embracing self-expression within a technological and cultural avant-garde, shaping the future through community collaboration. Cap_able's innovation lies in applying these adversarial patches to knitwear, partnering with Italian company Filmar to source sustainable yarns that offer the necessary intensity of colours for the pattern to be effective. Cap_able's future plans include expanding their fashionable collections and exploring ways to make them more economically accessible.

The last case study presented is the one of Elmo Mistiaen, a young visionary artist behind the Brussels-based brand aidesign.png. He transforms outerwear into biomorphic outdoor fashion, using AI-generated concepts that draw inspiration from the world of insects. His creations, generated with Dall-e text-to-image software, are not mainly focused on surveillance, but in May 2023 he posted on Instagram his SS24 Look Book concepts captioning them 'surveillance core'. Trending puffers and coats presents a wardrobe conceived as a warm and cosy cocoon, tainted by the unsettling presence of surveillance cameras instead of human faces. His designs take outerwear to an otherworldly realm, combining AI innovation with a keen sense of style to create unique, biomorphic fashion statements. The work of Elmo Mistianen allows us to catch a glimpse of another intertwined narrative to the one presented in this article: the introduction of the machine in the creative process. Exiting the field of wearables and entering the complex discourse of using artificial intelligence as a tool for speculative design.

2 "La nostra missione". *Capable*. `https://www.capable.design/it/mission`.

4 Conclusion

In an attempt to conclude a much wider discourse on the power of a needed anti-surveillance practice, it is crucial to consider the point of view presented by previous researchers and in particular Dr. Torin Monahan, Professor of Communication at The University of North Carolina. Already in 2015 addressing some of the groundbreaking works of artistic countersurveillance resistance, he noticed a trend or an increase towards a certain aesthetic that tackled in his more recent works and which posed a base for the current further research of the author of this article. In Dr. Monahan words:

> The aestheticization of resistance enacted by anti-surveillance camouflage and fashion ultimately fails to address the exclusionary logics of contemporary state and corporate surveillance. These anti-surveillance practices emerge at this historical juncture because of a widespread recognition of unchecked, pervasive surveillance and popular criticism of government and corporate overreach. […] What gets left out of this framing is a serious discussion of race and gender differences, a critique of surveillance commodification, and reflexive awareness of the possibility that the artistic interventions could contribute to the harmful conditions they seek to change. (2015, 171)

Another consideration to be made is linked to the chronology chosen in this article. Willingly, the turning point presented is the Wikileaks video of 2010 in order to present the almost ten-year evolution of a shift in visual culture, where camera footage is part of our daily lives and overused in artistic practice. For the sake of this article, no digressions were done towards two main points of the research: the moment internal cameras were embedded into smartphones, the global phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, the investigation of fashion countersurveillance is led by the interest in the strive for personal identity in a hyper-surveilled world. The resistance motioned by these designs lays in a layered structure that can be summed up in two main parts. First, it begins by raising awareness and educate the public, fostering a broader conversation and spreading the knowledge of which tools, or textile, or accessories to use in the subversion of a normative surveillance system. Therefore, wearing countersurveillance clothing become a political statement. Second, it moves into empowering the individuals to reflect on their identity through clothes, drawing attention to legal and ethical questions. Ideally, while regaining agency of their personal image and identity, people develop a stronger will for a genuine community outside the surveilled world that can lead to collective action towards this form of power, aimed at safeguarding personal

freedoms and civil liberties in the digital age.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Poor Power Images in the Work of Hito Steyerl

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Abstract In 2009 German video artist, documentary filmmaker and essayist Hito Steyerl releases her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*. Her definition of the 'poor' image as "a copy in motion" can be transferred to contemporary mostly digital images in general. But with the new image technologies the artist diagnoses a replacement of poor images by power images, in the multiple meanings of the word 'power'. In contrast to the proclaimed shift from poor images to power images the author rather speaks about poor power images. Instead of a replacement of poor images by power images one can observe poor images unfolding their powers while power images show various shades of poorness.

Keywords Poor power images. New media installation art. Image theory. Materialism. Post-representation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Poor Images. – 3 Power Images. – 4 Poor Power Images. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This contribution follows the traces of images through Hito Steyerl's *œuvre*, within her essays, films and video installations. Images, besides a particular subject, are protagonists and permanent subjects of her thinking in filming and writing. Her works reflect contemporary image economies, surroundings, production and consumption under digital surveillance capitalism.

In the following descriptions and analyses, there will be no differentiation between her filmic and her text based works, which the Author considers as equal artistic concepts by Hito Steyerl.

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First, the concept of the poor image will be amplified on the basis of the artist's own work while reflecting the notion 'poor' in relation to images. Afterwards the text is considering Steyerl's newer concept of the power image. Again, examples of her own work are consulted. Observing qualities of poor and power images occur simultaneously the author finally unites both concepts proposing to speak about rather poor power images.

2 Poor Images

Nowadays, the most powerful images are poor images. What does that mean? And first of all, what is a poor image? It is German video artist, documentary filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl who first coined the expression of the 'poor image' in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*, written in 2009. She refers to experimental and noncommercial films which are displaced from cinema in favor of high-end capitalist studio productions in the course of neoliberal triumphant success (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 148).

Already in the first sentence she gives the decisive definition of such images: "The poor image is a copy in motion" (147). Hence, poor images are images, which are post-produced by sometimes uncountable recipients, copy-pasted and then re-distributed via different channels all around the world. Such handling transforms their aesthetic parameters, for example their resolution, format and sometimes even their content. "[C]ompressed, […], ripped, remixed" (147) by their recipients [users] the 'original' images are damaged, in other words they become poor images. Here it becomes already clear that not only the experimental and noncommercial films Steyerl relates to in her essay, but most of contemporary images can be considered poor images. A great amount of poor images can be found in the realm of spam – the digital waste of our time (cf. Steyerl 2012d, 161). They are favored by digital technology because of the practices and infrastructures which come along with it, but there are likewise press printed poor images, poor images on 16mm like on BetaSP, on VHS as on DVD. With postproduction and redistribution as parameters, all sorts of images (and pictures) that can be technically reproduced are potentially poor images. The easier the post-production, processing, copy-pasting and redistribution works, the more poor images emerge. The poorness of the images becomes visual in their iconic and substantial dimensions:

> Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. […] The poor image tends toward abstraction […]. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. (Steyerl 2016a, 147)

'Poorness' as a term, which is normally used in a sociological context and in reference to material poverty, for example homeless people, first might seem inadequate to characterize something in the sphere of digital images. Actually, this sociological context is also present in Steyerl's essay as she speaks about poor images as "lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances" (147), as "illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image" (147) and, after Frantz Fanon, as *Wretched of the Screen* (147).[1] With the help of this wording she speaks about images as she would speak about human beings. Their mutual exchangeability that is implicitly suggested, points on the strong relationship between both, images and people: images infiltrate every part of daily life, they influence, help to direct and control the people; while the latter use images online as their proxies. It is this social aspect, that the notion 'poor' brings into the image discourse, which makes it more productive compared to other proposals as "travelling images" (Steyerl, *November* 2004), "invisible images" (Paglen 2016), "viewing copies" (Lütticken 2009)[2] or "instable images" (Oxen 2021) just to mention a few.

There are poor images all over Steyerl's own filmic work. They appear as poor on various levels: they are poor on a technical, visual, programmatic or conceptual level.

First of all, Steyerl is using a lot of different image techniques and media over the years which in the visual quality lead to quite different results. Her early films on 16mm and Beta SP, still exposed next to more recent works, look jittering and scratchy (from a today's point of view).

Image carriers and devices appear as protagonists in the form of *mise en abymes* in almost all of her works (cf. Ebner 2020, 83). In *Normality 1-X* (1999) for example, she uses grainy and discolored recordings of a surveillance camera. Then she is zooming in and out the printed raster points of a black-and-white photograph in a newspaper **[fig. 1]**. In *November* (2004), instead, she is filming a TV-screen which produces a flickering interference.

Steyerl often also quotes her own works by integrating footage from older films and videos in recent ones – which can be seen as a practice of recycling the own creative debris.

1 The philosopher Frantz Fanon describes in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (The Wretched of the Earth, 1961) the dehumanizing effects of colonization. Steyerl adopts his title in changing 'Earth' into 'Screen' to write about the effects of digitalization on images, their 'de-imagination'.

2 Sven Lütticken's essay *Viewing Copies. On the Mobility of Moving Images* (2009) is inspiration and reference to Steyerl's essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*. In *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* he deepens, continues and expands the analysis of his earlier essay: Lütticken doesn't examine the generic moving image but videos which are set in motion.

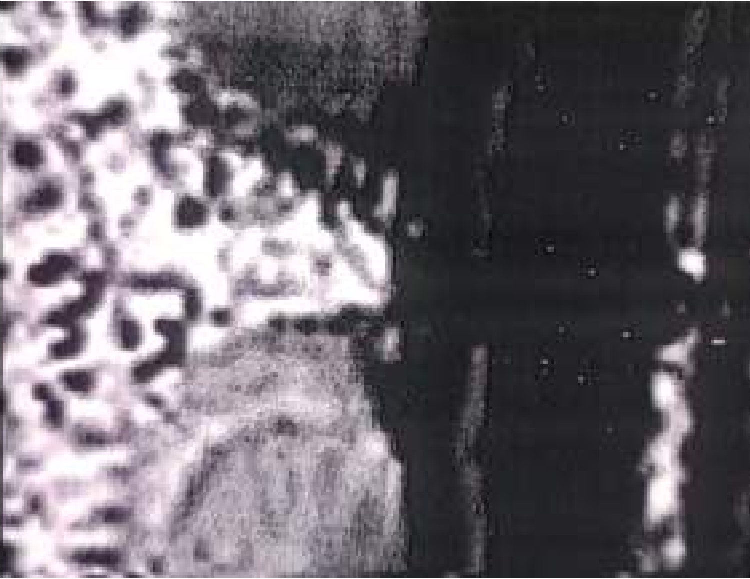

Figure 1 Hito Steyerl, *Normality 1-X*. 1999-2001. Video still, Beta SP (colour and sound), 37:11 minutes, 0:20'20". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

Since COVID-19 when her huge exhibition *Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive* was affected by museums closings, she started to expand into the virtual sphere in translating several works or parts of them into virtual copies of the 'original' (cf. Wessel 2020, 52-67).

Also, with regard to the content, one could claim there are poor images, like the one showing Steyerl herself as a bondage model. When the artist, documented in *Lovely Andrea* (2007), is travelling to Japan searching her picture among thousands of others of the same kind in the archives of questionable Gentlemen, the poorness can be understood more as shadiness.

The most iconic poor image Steyerl produces is the one in *Strike* (2010). Armed with a hammer and gouge, the tools of a sculptor the artist attacks a black Samsung screen. Her strike does not only bring the screen to strike in preventing every further flow of images, but at the same time produces a new powerful image of a colorful abstract structure **[fig. 2]**.

The images' poorness – in some cases owed to the "Eigensinn des Technischen" (obstinacy of technique)[3] (Oxen 2021, 39), in others induced – is always intended by the artist. But it is not poorness just

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

Figure 2 Hito Steyerl, *Strike*. 2010. Video still, single channel HD digital video, sound, flat screen mounted on two freestanding poles, 28 seconds, 00:00'21". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

for the sake of poorness. All the various filmic practices and means of post-production which lead to aesthetics of poorness always imply a critical conceptual and programmatic approach.

There are filmic instruments like the one of the wipe Steyerl applies in *Die leere Mitte* (1998) producing poor images with the fading out of the first image slowly being replaced by a new one **[fig. 3]**. In here she excavates the layers of history: with their destruction the buildings of one historical period are replaced by constructions of the next dominant ideology. Like on the wipe she also reflects on digital renderings as a "design of killing" (Steyerl 2017a, 9). Such renderings become "powerful political symbol[s]" (12) when the visual replacement of one image by another is followed by a 'real' cleansing of the physical space and the people who lived there.[4] Her video *How not to be seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV file* (2013) shows such rendered future inhabitants as grey shadows as the ancient inhabitants after the realisation of a gated community won't be able to afford the rent anymore.

4 Steyerl refers to the reconstruction of the destroyed Kurdish city of Diyarbakir with the help of a 3D render video. For her such renderings function as projections into the future (cf. Steyerl 2017a).

Figure 3 Hito Steyerl, *Die leere Mitte*. 1998. Video still, 16mm transferred to digital video (colour, sound), 62 minutes, 00:43'34". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

For her even the cut is not only a cinematic term, but also an economic one generally indicating reductions (cf. Steyerl 2012e, 177). Equally, the way of combining and organizing different elements can be interpreted in a deeply political and economic way insofar a montage "organized according to the principles of mass culture will blindly reproduce the templates of its masters" (cf. Steyerl 2012b, 86). The artistic filmic montages of Steyerl consist in disrupting the medial sequences and chains of productions of images while at the same time her assembling technique creates strong visual contrasts and hierarchies inside of the individual work such as between popular culture and high theory, kitschy animations and historical documentary images. Meanwhile the work as a whole appears as poor, meaning trashy again.

After constantly discussing and reflecting on today's production, infrastructure and processing of images also, her choice of words in her description of the poor image spells her deeply materialist take of digital images, their becoming and acting.[5] As already the notion

5 In the manner of historical and dialectical materialism Steyerl not only foregrounds the production conditions, material basis, the acting and developing of digital images but also tells stories of single objects like the one of the bullet which killed her friend Andrea Wolf, or follows the trace of stones in urbanism and architecture.

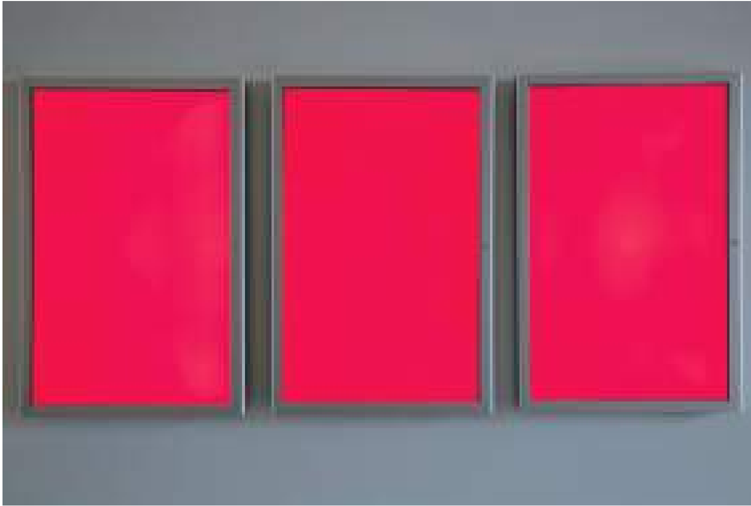

Figure 4 Hito Steyerl, *Red Alert*. 2007. Installation view, triptych, three 30-inch HD Cinema Displays, three Mac Minis, mounting system, connected hardware, three videos, silent, 30 seconds each. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

'poor' does, such emphasis of the material dimension of the digital image provokes an irritation during reading: because even if the immense infrastructure on which this technology is based and the ecological footprint it produces are well known, one still links the digital to immateriality.

Besides her essay about the poor image, her video *In Free Fall* (2010) conveys this material dimension of circulating digital images in a visual way. There, she is following the biography of the image as an object, precisely the ones of plane crashes in action films.[6] After crashing the carbon parts of the wreckage, the aluminum is recycled into blank CDs, on which new films of plane crashes are recorded while producing new wreckage for further CDs, and so on. Also, Steyerl's installations give a very literal expression to this material dimension of the image when she transfers single elements of the exposed video as physical objects into the exhibition space.

To follow Steyerl's concept of the poor image, the Author suggests with Nicolas Oxen to come from a process-related ontology of the digital image, not from a being but a permanent becoming (cf. Oxen 2021, 7). Afterwards her choice of materialist expressions for her description of contemporary images becomes even more

6 Steyerl refers to Sergej Tretjakov's *Die Biographie des Dings* (1929) here.

comprehensible. Furthermore, it goes together with Steyerl's earlier theory of the *dokumentarische Unschärferelation* (documentary uncertainty relation). In her essay of the same title, published in 2008, she observes a fundamental functional change concerning the image: from representation to expression respectively form. With the rise of digital technology and the loss of indexicality, the relation between reality and its images changes. With the flood of post-produced, layered, poor, grainy and low-resolution images, uncertainty is the only certainty one can still have towards images (cf. Steyerl 2008, 9).

This end of representation finds one decisive expression in Steyerl's screen triptych *Red Alert* (2007) consisting of three upright computer screens broadcasting nothing but red pixels. The powerful color of these energy fields signals a permanent state of emergency without mediating any reason **[fig. 4]**.

For her as a documentary filmmaker, this functional shift from representation to expression and form does not mean to give up neither the documentary nor its images. Instead, and for not leaving the field to cynical constructivists (cf. Steyerl 2008, 11-12), she suggests to search "the truth […] in its [the image's] material configuration" (Steyerl 2012a, 51). This means to take the image as a fossil, in which various commercial, political and social tensions condense and leave their traces behind (cf. Steyerl 2012a, 53). Then the image's "poverty is not a lack, but an additional layer of information, which is not about content but form" (Steyerl 2012c, 156).

3 Power Images

Studying Steyerl's œuvre, her concept of the poor image appears consistently, both as theory in several essays and lectures, as well as visual means in her films and videos. Serving as a key to her artistic work, the concept of the poor image contributes beyond this reading to an understanding of the global contemporary image world, in which poor images can be discovered everywhere and every time. Even more surprising: around twenty years after publishing *In Defense of the Poor Image*, Steyerl suddenly explains in an interview in 2022: "Es gibt sie so nicht mehr" (there are no poor images anymore) (Haberer et al. 2022, 249) but that instead "power images" took their place (cf. 249).

Today, because of their number and ubiquity, the power 'of' images can easily be understood as power 'over' their recipients. Yet, what exactly is a power image?

Here, the double meaning of the English notion of 'power' as 'energy' on the one hand, and 'might' on the other is brought to bear. Concerning the former, power as energy, Steyerl mentions the capitalization of images, which comes along with new image technologies

as NFT, neural networks and CGI-renderings (Computer Generated Imagery), with video surveillance, gaming, streaming services such as Netflix (cf. Haberer et al. 2022, 249) and recently text-to-image models. These "images are literally electricity" (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 226). Not only

> image consumption, which relies on the consumption of energy to circulate them, is growing at an astonishing rate. […] image production will also account for a great deal of global power consumption. (226)

She explains "Our machines are made of pure sunlight. Electromagnetic frequencies. Light pumping through fiberglass cables. The sun is our factory" (*Factory of the Sun* 2015, 00:02'08''), sounds the steely female voice over of Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015). Meanwhile a "Pseudo-expert" (supposed expert) (Riff 2015, 190) proclaims: "Speed of Light Doubled! High Frequency Trading up 400%" (188). When software-based trading and crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin proof the equation of power – precisely electricity – and money, while likewise digital images consist of electrical signals, Steyerl can create a new formula: "electricity is money is image" (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 226).

In the context of power as energy her critical reflection and articulation of the social conditions in the contemporary image world turns into a contradiction: in accordance to her growing success, the artist's own video installations become bigger, more and more elaborated and therefore quite energy intensive – they are literally orgies of energy.

In a lecture with Trevor Paglen, *The Autonomy of Images* (2018), the artists also talk about the latter, power as might. After Steyerl's formula "electricity is money is image", the one who controls the images has the power. AI algorhythms in form of sensor- and imaging systems are already installed everywhere in today's urban environments and people's devices, where they serve to analyse and generate images. Accumulating as much information as possible, AI depends on the planetary infrastructures, which are monopolized and controlled by only a few tech-giants such as Google, Amazon and Facebook (cf. Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 224-5). These machines "see through the forms of power that they are designed to enhance and to reproduce" (221). But the majority of images is not any longer made by and for 'human beings', but by and for 'machines' (214) – they surveil and control the people.

After criticizing images as tools of permanent surveillance, Steyerl offers another perspective on images as camouflage in giving five lessons in her video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV file* (2013). As representation already came to its end, images as filmic means can be used to escape the contemporary data-capitalism of surveillance, she suggests in here.

In the realm of contemporary images, power as might works also through another fundamental functional shift Steyerl observes: from representation to projection. After the end of indexicality computational photography, as already mentioned, is programmed after specific, for example "moral, aesthetic, technological, commercial and bluntly hidden parameters" (Steyerl 2017b, 32). Unfortunately, their programming follows the particular ideology of their programmer and thus at least leads to deeply political, often racist and even fascist (cf. Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 219, 226) results. Thus, the images to be generated do not "depict reality so much as produce it in the first place" (Steyerl 2016b, 182). They do not record anymore but project things and actions (cf. Steyerl 2017b, 33). In other words, images have the power to create whole new realities, they are power images. This functional shift of images from representation to projection explains the entrance sentence into another of Steyerl's videos: "These are documentary images of the future. Not about what it will bring, but about, what it is made of" (*This is the Future* 2019, 00:00'05").

While in this video the interframe image prediction holds the positive vision of a garden hidden in the future, Steyerl's video *November* (2004) instead tells a very tragic story of an image becoming reality: it is the one showing her friend Andrea Wolf as a female guerilla successfully riding into the sunset on a motorbike after having defeated all the bad guys she met. Later on, Wolf in fact became a female fighter in the Free Women Army of Kurdistan, where she was violently killed by Turkish militia. After her death she is adjudged a martyr and as such becomes a travelling image, a powerful political icon.

In consequence, while before the relationship between images and political, social and religious power still was a representational one, nowadays

> the relationship between images and power has become even more direct. It's not even mediated by money, but images are, quite literally, power. (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 225)

Because of these financial and energetic efforts, which are spent into images, Steyerl suggests to rather speak about "power images" (Haberer et al. 2022, 249) from now on instead.

4 Poor Power Images

Hito Steyerl diagnoses the end and disappearance of the poor image while the power image takes its place. Looking behind the seemingly advanced image-techniques, as Steyerl uncovers herself in her latest essay *Mean Images* (2023), it becomes obvious that those power images in contrast nevertheless stay poor images (on various levels).

Firstly, the image output of machine learning networks as renderings are composites without any indexical relation to the real world, which "no longer refer to facticity […]. They converge around the average, the median; hallucinating mediocrity. They represent the norm by signalling the mean" (Steyerl 2023, 82), she writes – confirming her theory of the "documentary uncertainty relation" also for such images. In consequence, the results calculated on probability are blurry, meaning poor again – not to speak of the multiple glitches mainly concerning heads (the "Janus problem") and human hands (to many or to less fingers) (cf. Timm 2023). The same for all sorts of 3D-rendering-techniques producing blind spots and missing parts that are simply invented and added after.[7] Despite their speculative mode of operation, already precedent 3D-technologies were integrated in political and military decision making. For example, *PowerScene* virtual reality program was applied during the Bosnian peace negotiations to shape the spatial composition of the country without respecting the territorial complexity (cf. Steyerl 2017c, 194-6). Most of the energy- and cost-intensive results of these new techniques – like for example the derivative images text-to-image models produce noise. Regarding their visual quality, such new power images resemble a lot the 'old' poor images in her essay from 2009 – while increasing in their quantity.

Also, Steyerl's own newer videos do not only analyse the 'rhetoric of images and power', but present this rhetoric as poor visual language. Although, the artist always uses the latest high-tech for her visuals, the results like in her early films and videos still look low-tech – and this is not based on an inability to handle their programming, but happening on artistic purpose one can presume.[8] Steyerl herself frames her ongoing conversation with Trevor Paglen

7 Steyerl applies a 3D scanner and printer in her work *The Kiss* (2012) to point to the blind spots and missing parts that are simply invented and added by such technologies.

8 Concerning the use of new image generating technologies Steyerl explains: "Für mich ist es sinnvoll mit Leuten zu kollaborieren, wenn ich eine Grundvorstellung davon habe, was sie machen – das heißt, wenn ich die Programme zumindest rudimentär bedienen kann und um die Parameter weiß. Ich habe mindestens Grundkenntnisse in den Techniken, die ich anwende" (For me it is expedient to collaborate with people, when I got basic notion of what they are doing – which means, when I know how to operate the programs at least rudimentary and know about the parameters. I got at least basic knowledge about the technology I operate) (Haberer et al. 2022, 241).

Figure 5 Hito Steyerl, *Power Plants*. 2019. Stainless steel scaffolding structures, LED panels 3,9mm pitch, multichannel video loop (12 video motifs, colour, silent), LED text panels, installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2021

as "discussing images and whatever is left of them" (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 213). This points to the fact that even this energy- and cost-intensive images are still rags and debris (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 147).

As a live simulation of CGI dancing figures, *SocialSim* (2020) for instance, even though based on high-tech computational programs, offers low-tech aesthetics: the officers' faces and hands look clunky and lumpen rendered. Their awkward, almost morbid 'dance' movements, which are regulated by statistical data about instances of police brutality resemble more a stumbling, tremoring, and hobbling. Also, the related narrative video exhibited next to the simulation assembles various sorts of images of different sources, like video gaming, images generated by an Artificial Intelligence, data visualization techniques,

chatrooms, found footage, and extracts of others of her work. Despite the cool aesthetics of this technologically dominated installation, the whole work looks kludgy and amateurish in a way. Even the sound is 'poor': while being trained to pronounce "social simulation", the employed neural network is stuttering– this is how the work's title occurs, *SocialSim*. Again, instead of showing a perfect flow of data Steyerl undertakes wild experiments in "amplify[ing] the process to the point where it becomes grotesque" (Lista 2020, 116) in order to excavate and deconstruct the functions of the basing technique.

Secondly, the new image techniques "rely on vast infrastructures, of polluting hardware and menial and disenfranchised labour, exploiting political conflict as a resource" (Steyerl 2023, 84).

The task to get the bias out of image automation is favourably outsourced to "underprivileged actors, so-called microworkers, or ghostworkers" (90). Most of these people are disenfranchised refugees, who are forced to accept often traumatic labour and demeaning working conditions. Here it becomes clear, that the 'new' power images also [re]produce poorness in a social dimension. Beside these postmodern slaves, also the general users are integrated in the machine learning industries. They deliver the training data for AI for free, for example with the uncountable images they are uploading every day. This everyday work almost everybody has to do to be able to navigate online doesn't produce the same precarity as the hidden labour behind Artificial Intelligence, but is nevertheless unpaid.

Such immaterial "Arbeit in postfordistischen Zeiten" (labour in post-Fordist times) (Riff 2015, 167) is subject to Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015). Likewise the un- or underpaid workers behind the hidden layers of neural networks, the gamers of her unplayable game of the same name are "Zwangsarbeiter in einem Motion-Capture-Gulag […] wo jede […] Bewegung […] in Sonnenlicht umgewandelt wird" (forced laborers in a motion-capture-gulag where every of their movements is transformed into sunlight; Riff 2015, 175).

In one of her latest essays Steyerl relativizes the specious powers of Artificial Intelligence (she likes to call "Artificial Stupidity") (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 219) like the promise of a god-like super-intelligence and the magical visual effects they sometimes produce. In opposition to her statement about the disappearance of poor images the power images turn out to deliver destructive powers producing social, financial, material and ecological poorness.

After discovering a certain poorness in all of the results of the employed power image-techniques, the other way round a re-lecture of Steyerl's essay about the poor image already mentions the subversive power of poor images. Even though her description of such images does not turn out favourable at all, Steyerl's essay, as its title already declares, is a defense. In referring to the pleading *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969) by Juan García Espinosa as a counterpart

to the perfect and therein reactionary and elitist cinema of "high-end economies of film production" (Steyerl 2016a, 148), she foregrounds their democratic and emancipatory potential.

> [T]he economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. (150)

Again, this subversive potential becomes visible mainly on the iconic and material level – which means in their poorness.

The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, re-edit, or upload them (151).

Obviously the connection between the power and poorness of images is nothing new, just changed direction. The early poor images, experimental and noncommercial films, on the one hand developed subversive powers after their expulsion from cinema: resurrected as copies, they created "an alternative economy of images" (151), connecting "dispersed worldwide audiences" (152). The new high-tech images on the other hand reveal more and more destructive powers leading to various shades of poorness.

It is Steyerl's *Power Plants* (2019) that represents these poor power images in all their ambiguity very literally. The colorful flowers growing on LED-Screens are generated by a neural network based on inter frame calculation. They bloom just to collapse back upon themselves in a second, again and again. Fed with documentary images of vegetable growth in time-lapse, their curious morphing is to ascribe to Steyerl's experimental programming **[fig. 5]**. While totally blurred in their ongoing morphing, these ruderal plants nevertheless possess fantastical social and ecological powers as they "grow in the wake of digital disruption, political breakdown and pathological austerity" (Gad 2019, 11).
One of them "[v]ertreibt [...] Trolls und Melancholie, macht Kunstwerke feuerfest und beugt Grünwaschung vor" (drives out trolls as well as melancholia, makes artworks fireproof, obviates greenwashing), another "[m]acht Mietsteigerungen rückgängig" (withdraw rent increase) or "bindet Gift aus sozialen Medien" (bind the poison emerging from social media) (Babias 2019). The power plant as a symbol of industrial waste of energy in the realm of art (and thanks to this English play on words) transforms into a CO2-provider, a ruderal vegetation growing on ruined ground. At the same time Steyerl's *Power Plants*, based on inter frame prediction algorithms, is an electricity-hungry work. As such her critical reflection and articulation on the one hand turns into a contradiction. On the other her

Screen-Plants explicitly represent the ambiguity and paradoxical nature of contemporary poor power images.

5 Conclusion

Considering the dystopian dynamics concerning images she is working on, the healing and emancipatory powers of poor images, one can find in Hito Steyerl's work, might seem naive, idealistic or in case of her works which are based on energy intensive inter frame prediction algorithms even hypocrite. Nevertheless for Steyerl, as an artist working with and on moving images, apparently the potential of images still predominates. Like before with poor images, now she is working on and particularly with power images. She is not giving them up, but instead, as shown above, not only accepts them in their poorness but integrates them as such into her own practice and work. She decided

> to process […] the paradoxical nature of images and practice[s] a different kind of image processing before the operational images process us themselves. (Ebner 2020, 90)

In awareness of the pluralistic commercial and political interests, which [trans]form images into ambiguous objects and their areas into battlegrounds (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 150), she chooses an affirmative handling, searching for moments of rebellion and possibilities of resistance in the cracks of the poor power images and in the gaps of their endless streams. With the help of post-producing practices as appropriation and montage, she transforms the tools of postmodern systems of control into means of an artistic reflection and critique. At the same time, entering and distancing from these powerful technological tools she creates her own specific often humorous critical space. Florian Ebner calls the artist's decision to stay with the images, despite their poorness, destructive power and dystopian evolution, a "(negative) redemption of images" (Ebner 2020, 81).

In contrast to the artist's assumption of a shift 'from' poor images 'to' power images and because of the delineated paradoxical simultaneousness of poorness and power, which are mutually dependent on each other, the Author suggests that there is no 'from' to 'to', no replacement of poor images by power images, but only 'poor power images'.[9]

9 The Author develops the theory of the poor power images in the first part of her dissertation about *Conditions of Becoming in the Work of Hito Steyerl,* yet unpublished.

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Symbolism and Identity in Ancient Societies: Negotiating Power Through Material Culture

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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The Power of Statues in Byzantium
The Wooden Effigy of Saint George in Omorfokklisia as a Talismanic Device

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Abstract Sculpture in Byzantium was viewed with suspicion. However, in Omorfokklisia, near Kastoria, is preserved a thirteenth-century wooden effigy of Saint George that defies this assumption. The colossal dimensions – the height reaches almost three meters – and the all-relief technique, typical of ancient statuary, detach it from all the rest of the Byzantine production. It is thus argued that this object was specifically manufactured following the model of classical monumental sculpture to enhance the power already indwelling in the depiction of a saint.

Keywords Byzantine sculpture. Wood. Saint George. Palaiologan Renaissance. Macedonia.

Summary 1 Introduction: Byzantine Attitude Towards Statues. – 2 Saint George in Omorfokklisia. – 3 Wooden Sculpted Icons in the East. – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction: Byzantine Attitude Towards Statues

It is common knowledge that the practice of sculpture went into disuse after the collapse of the cultural landscape of the Roman Mediterranean. After the rise of Christianity, statuary was seen with suspicion due to its perceived strong links with ancient paganism, and its production was strongly discouraged (Chatterjee 2021, 13). Interest

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in sculptural expression resurfaced in the tenth century during the Macedonian Renaissance, with small-scale bas-reliefs alongside more monumental marble artifacts (Lange 1964, 12-14; Grabar 1976, 16). This trend continued to grow until the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, when every aspect of Byzantine society faced a setback. After the catastrophic parenthesis of the Latin Empire, a slight cultural resurgence was registered in the wake of the city's recapture by the Palaiologans, especially under the emperors Manuel VIII and Andronikos II, when the ancient heritage of Byzantium played an essential role in the reconstruction of the Empire's identity (Nicol 1993, 162; Melvani 2013, 95). There were even attempts to recreate full-relief sculptures, such as the bronze statue of the Archangel Michael commissioned by Michael VIII Palaiologos after recapturing the city (Castiñeiras 2020; Chatterjee 2021, 13).[1]

Besides Christian foundations, Constantinople, as well as other cities throughout the empire, hosted a plethora of ancient statues, most of which were of pagan background (James 1996, 15; Walker 2015, 227; Chatterjee 2017, 210). When Constantine decided to turn the small settlement of Byzantium into an imperial capital, he had many of these artifacts brought from all corners of the Empire (Cameron, Herrin 1984, 31). They remained an essential feature of the urban landscape for centuries, as testified by Niketas Choniates in his narration of the fall of Constantinople in 1204, where he lamented their destruction at the hands of both his fellow citizens and the Latins (Chatterjee 2017, 215; 2021, 13).[2] With the advent of Christianity, the original meaning behind statues scattered around Constantinople – and other urban settlements – got lost; the sculptures did not, however. Legends began circulating, and different meanings and abilities were attributed to them. A disturbing allure surrounded them, as they were believed to be the nesting place of demons. For this reason, they should not have been destroyed (Tóth 2019, 407).

The belief in the supernatural power of statues is an ancient one, rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition. They were considered able to predict catastrophic events but also treated as apotropaic and

1 See Pachymeres, *Historia*, IX, 15: "καὶ ὁ ἐκεῖσε χαλκοῦς ἀνδριὰς τοῦ Ἀρχιστρατήγου, ὁ ἐπὶ κιονώδους μὲν ἐρηρεισμένος τοῦ ἀναστήματος, ἐς πόδας δ'ἔχων τὸν ἄνακτα Μιχαήλ, τὴν πόλιν φέροντα κἀκείνῳ προσανατιθέντα καὶ τὴν ταύτης φυλακὴν ἐπιτρέποντα, ὁ τοιοῦτος οὖν ἀνδριὰς καὶ ἡ ἀνὰ χεῖρας τῷ βασιλεῖ πόλις, ὁ μὲν τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀφαιρεῖται, ἡ δὲ τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἐξολισθαίνει, καὶ πρὸς γῆν ἄμφω πίπτουσι" (and the bronze statue of the Archistrategist [the Archangel Michael] which was there, the one which rested on a column of the building and which had at his feet Prince Michael carrying the City to consecrate it to him and to hand over him its custody, therefore this statue [of the Archangel], and the City in the hands of the Emperor, the first lacks the head and the second slips from the hands of the sovereign, and both fall towards the ground). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

2 See Choniates, *Chronologia*, X.

talismanic objects, such as those enchanted by Apollonius of Tiana in the first century CE (Saradi 2011, 101). An 8th-century pamphlet, the *Parastaseis Syntomoi chronikai* (Brief Historical Expositions),[3] records much of the Byzantine attitude towards them (Cameron, Herrin 1984). The main concern for the author was to document beliefs, legends, and anecdotes surrounding the sculpted images of the capital. These appear as fearful objects capable of killing men, but they could also predict the future and bend it in one's favor if the person knew how to do it.[4]

One of the ways the aid of a statue could be gained is a ritual known as *stoicheiosis*, described by Michael Psellos in one of his letters (Papaioannou 2019, 312-20). The practice involved the insertion of herbs, stones, or metals inside the statue, which were believed to be able to influence it through the theurgic process of *sympatheia* (Mango 1963, 61). It was deemed possible to harness the power intrinsic to sculptures and direct it toward the master's benefit. It is still to be determined if the practice occurred for real, but it is essential to remember that this was believed to be a concrete possibility for the Byzantines. Alongside *stoicheia*, statues enchanted through the above-described ritual, there is evidence of another category too: *thelesmai*, sculptures considered protective talismans, such as the ones created by Apollonius of Tiana. *Thelesma* is a term that appears to have been used since late antiquity, then replaced with the more common *stoicheion* (Walker 2015, 227; Tóth 2019, 424).

In recent times, scholars have noticed how statues were sometimes perceived as more powerful and effective than icons in military and defensive matters, as some historians did not hesitate to register the latter's failure on multiple occasions (Chatterjee 2021, 3, 93; 2021b, 113-15). Bissera V. Pentcheva (2006-07), thanks to an in-depth theological and lexicographical analysis, has even argued that the most potent and venerated icons in Byzantium were, in fact, bas-reliefs, not easel paintings.

Unfortunately, artifacts in complete relief are documented only by written sources, and they are very few anyway. Besides the already mentioned statue of the Archangel Michael, it is possible to find another one in Stephan of Novgorod's narration of his pilgrimage to Constantinople, which took place in the middle of the fourteenth century. In the Nea Ekklesia, he states that:

> и в одинои церкви ту Христос велми гораздо, аки жив человѣк, образно стоит, не на иконѣ, но собою стоить.

3 Paris, BNF, Grec. 1336, ff. 111*r*-134*v*. For a digitized copy of the manuscript, see `https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10722877z/f117.item`.

4 See Mango 1963; Freedberg 1989; James 1996; Walker 2015; Tóth 2019.

> In one of the chapels is a very large image of Christ, the size of a living man, and it is freestanding, not an icon. (Majeska 1984, 36-9)

George P. Majeska (1984, 249) argued that this was an effigy of Solomon, which emperor Basil I had reworked into a representation of himself and placed in the foundations of his church. To the author, such an image could be mistaken for one of Christ since the imperial iconography is similar. This may be true, but it should be remembered that for the Russian pilgrim, it was, in fact, Christ that was depicted and, as such, was perceived. Sculpture, although not widely practiced, probably played some role in the Orthodox Church and might have even been invested with the power of ancient pagan statues, as the only extant example seems to indicate. This is the wooden effigy of Saint George in Omorfokklisia, which will be examined in the next paragraph. It is, in fact, a relief, but it is carved to a depth where it generates the impression of a freestanding statue.

2 Saint George in Omorfokklisia

On the outskirts of Kastoria, in modern-day Greece, lies the village of Omorfokklisia, previously known as Gallista or Kallista (Tsamisēs 1949, 121-2; Nicol 1956, 96). The settlement derives its name, meaning 'beautiful church', from the temple consecrated to Saint George **[fig. 1]**. The original core of the architecture can be dated to the eleventh century; significant additions were then made at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as testified by an inscription above the entrance of the building (Stikas 1958, 100-6).[5] Inside the naos, a wooden effigy of Saint George finds its place in a niche on the South wall near the iconostasis. This was obtained by blocking a door, as evident when looking at it from the outside **[fig. 2]** (Stikas 1958, 109; Moutsopoulos 1993, 36; Tsigaridas 2016, 88).

The saint housed here is carved in high relief from a single piece of wood, and it occupies the whole space of the niche, with a height reaching 2.86 m and a width of 0.68 m, whereas the depth of the relief is 22 cm. The saint is depicted as standing up, with a now lost spear in his right hand and the left resting on a kite shield incised on the back panel **[fig. 3]**. The head is rendered in almost round relief and encircled by a halo, slightly detached from the background. Moreover, it is surrounded by an inscription, which is certainly not

5 This inscription has sparked much controversy, for its date, 1286-87, does not correspond to the documentation of the people mentioned. The problem has been solved by Velenēs (2004), who demonstrated how the inscription was repainted after two hundred years, generating a misunderstanding of the date.

Figure 1 Church of Saint George (North view). 11th-13th cc. Brickwork. Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. © Elena De Zordi

contemporary with the artwork. It reads Ο ΑΓΙΟS // [Γ]ΕΩΡΓΙ/ΟS / ὁ τροπε/οφόρος, an epithet that also recurs in the previously mentioned dedicatory inscription **[fig. 4]**. The saint is clothed in a typical Byzantine armor, with a cloak covering his left shoulder. The effigy was initially painted, as evidenced by the pigment traces on the mantle and shield. Previous scholars also registered the presence of hints of gold on the armor (Sotiriou 1930, 180; Moutsopoulos 1993, 38; Tsigaridas 2016, 88), but today, it is impossible to distinguish them. Besides losing the painted layer, part of the feet, and the spear, the overall conservative condition is excellent.

The first scholar to mention the relief was N. Papadakis (1913, 443), who associated it with two others, one in the same church and one in the nearby village of Nestorio. Interestingly, to describe them, he employed the term *xoana*, which indicates pagan cult statues made of wood. Ten years later, N.I. Giannopoulos (1923, 94-6) noted its resemblance to ancient fourth and third-century BC statues and stated that it was enclosed in a case that covered its lower part since the feet were damaged **[fig. 5]**. G.A. Sotiriou (1930, 180) claimed that the object once held in the saint's right hand was a cross, but the source of this information is unclear. P. Tsamisēs (1949, 123-4) once again linked it to the depiction of Saint Demetrius from the same church and that of Saint George in Nestorio. The author also registered damage to the lower parts due to rot. Tsamisēs, too, employed the term *xoanon* to identify this type of production. D.M. Nicol (1956,

Figure 2
Church of Saint George (South wall), walled-up Door. 13th c. Brickwork. Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. © Elena De Zordi

Figure 3
Saint George church. Last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm. Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. Source: Καστοριά. Πολιτισμός, λαογραφία. © Region of Western Macedonia, reproduced with permission

98) described the effigy as missing a significant part of his limbs. It is unclear where this information derives from, considering that all the previous scholars only mention damage to the feet, as it appears today. Two years later, E.G. Stikas (1958, 109) stated how the relief must have been a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century production heavily influenced by Western art. R. Lange (1964, 123) noticed a similarity to the slab of Saint George on the façade of Caorle Cathedral, near Venice. However, this seems to be only a superficial resemblance due to the elongated proportions of both figures.[6] The following year, Saint George appeared in three publications; all authors noted some common traits between the statue from Omorfokklisia, another relief of Saint George from Kastoria, and the depiction of Saint Kliment Ohridski in the Peribleptos church of Ohrid in North Macedonia. Due to the supposed Western features, M. Ćorović-Ljubinković

6 Although the similarities are very thin, it is worth mentioning that they are close in the panorama of Byzantine monumental reliefs of saints, as they are two of the four known depictions of Saint George standing. The other two are a relief icon in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens and another in the Art Museum of Kyiv (Mason 2011, 377).

(1965, 39) proposed their provenance from the court of Boniface of Montferrat in Thessaloniki at the beginning of the thirteenth century. This statal entity, however, had a very brief existence, spanning a couple of decades, so the theory was immediately discarded. The other two scholars, A. Xyngopoulos (1965, 79) and J. Maksimović (1965, 32), considered the provenance from Epirus more plausible. The saint appeared in the corpus of Byzantine sculpture composed by A. Grabar (1976, 156), who, following Lange, leaned towards an attribution to a local atelier. N. Moutsopoulos (1993, 38) reported some local lore surrounding it, such as its arrival from Epirus aboard a wagon towed by two oxen and led by two nuns (Xyngopoulos 1965, 81; Moutsopoulos 1993, 38). E. Drakopoulou (1997, 70) noted the presence of another similar artifact in the village of Lakkomata near Kastoria. E.N. Tsigaridas (2000, 149-53) emphasized the supposed Western elements in the art of Macedonia's wooden relief production, arguing that they may have depended on contacts with Italian cities via the Adriatic Sea and the Balkan peninsula. The author returned to the subject in 2016 and 2018 (Tsigaridas 2016, 88-90; 2018) when he pointed out that the statue belonged to the first period of decoration of the church, that is to say, the end of the thirteenth century, when Western influence is noticeable in the style and iconography of the frescoes inside the temple. There is a brief mention of it in Catherine Vanderheyde's book on Late Byzantine sculpture, where she only noted its resemblance with that of Saint Kliment Ohridski (Vanderheyde 2020, 128). Lastly, M. Castiñeiras (2020) proposed a link between the statue and the political and cultural climate that arose after the battle of Pelagonia in 1259,[7] pointing out how a depiction of Saint George would have been particularly suitable for a recently reconquered territory, even more since the Palaiologoi paid particular attention to this saint.

All scholars agree on dating the relief to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. This seems particularly plausible due to the cultural climate in Byzantium then, because under the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1317) it is possible to notice new impulses in all areas of knowledge, especially concerning the retrieval of ancient culture – both pagan and Christian – inherited by the Empire (Nicol 1993, 162-3). Many scholars pointed out that contacts with Western Europe could explain the main features of the relief of Saint George.[8] However, the saint perfectly follows

7 This battle sealed the dominance of Nikaea over the other political entities that considered themselves descendants of the Empire in Greece and paved the way for the reconquest of Constantinople. See Geneakoplos 1953.

8 See Xyngopoulos 1965, 80; Maksimović 1965, 32; Ćorović-Ljubinković 1965, 39; Grabar 1976, 168; Ličenoska 1988, 44; Drakopoulou 1997, 70-1; Tsigaridas 2000, 149-50.

the Byzantine iconographical scheme (Grotowski 2010, 86), which is evident if we compare it, for example, with a twelfth-century icon from Mount Sinai.[9] Moreover, it shares specific iconographic details with other Byzantine reliefs, such as the knot that ties the military sash, which can be seen almost identical in the marble slab depicting Saint Demetrius, now on the Western façade of Saint Mark's basilica in Venice (279).[10] The saint's facial features resemble Theodosian productions and the statues realized in the capital at the end of the thirteenth century, which were heavily inspired by the former. Both groups show round faces with big, almond-shaped eyes rendered with deep carving and arched eyebrows. The cheek and lips are highlighted, demonstrating a familiarity with ancient specimens (Grabar 1976, 23; Melvani 2013, 89; Castiñeiras 2020). The resurgence of sculpture in Palaiologan times was short-lived, disappearing after the generation of intellectuals surrounding Andronikos II (Melvani 2013, 155). This might also explain why this effigy seems so isolated.

As seen in the first paragraph, ancient statuary was supposedly able to perform some supernatural activity. It is interesting to notice that even the simulacrum of Saint George, taken here into consideration, is still widely believed to be miraculous (Moutsopoulos 1993, 37; Tsigaridas 2016, 88). Its main feature is the ability to hold coins on its surface; if this happens, the request made by the worshipper will be fulfilled. The population often asks for its aid, especially concerning health matters, and it seems particularly compelling, judging by the series of ex-voto hanging around it.

3 Wooden Sculpted Icons in the East

To put this statue into context, it was necessary to identify a series of woodcarvings produced in Byzantine territories between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. However, despite some resemblance with a couple of them, the juxtaposition made all the more evident how the relief of Saint George is detached even from this kind of production.

This small group of woodcarvings has yet to be studied extensively due to the humble nature of their material and peripheral location. It was possible to identify at least thirteen specimens, all appearing to have originated from various centers near the Via Egnatia. All these, minus a few exceptions, depict warrior saints, such

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The first scholar to propose a Western influence behind the artistic production of Macedonia in this period is Mavrodinov (1936).

9 https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/2793#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-615%2C37%2C1924%2C948.

10 A list of other examples of this kind can be found in Grotowski 2010, 279.

as George and Demetrius, alone or in combination with each other. Another common characteristic is their miraculous nature, linked to water, healing, or both.[11]

Among these, it is possible to isolate various subgroups based on their provenance and technique. The first comprises five icons that originated in centers of Eastern Thrace. They are characterized by similar dimensions and shallow relief, complete with a thick layer of plaster and paint. The first one comes from Ainos, present-day Enez (Turkey), and today is housed in the Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in nearby Alexandroupolis after the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. It is dated to the twelfth century and depicts the Theotokos Hodegetria. It is believed to be able to perform miraculous healings (Pennas 1983, 397-405). Another comes from Perinthus, on the outskirts of Marmara Ereğlisi in Turkey. It shares a common fate with the previous one because it was brought to Nea Iraklia on the Chalkidiki peninsula after the population exchange. This icon is known as Saint George 'the Arabian',[12] allegedly for the dark color of the saint's complexion due to the natural color of the wood (Buzykina 2022, 159). This is one of the first depictions of the saint riding a horse, but it lacks the slain dragon under the mount, even though this feature became common in the eleventh century (Sotiriou 1928, 36; Walter 2003, 121). G.A. Sotiriou (1928, 33-7) righteously pointed out how the overall appearance of the saint is strongly reminiscent of the depictions of the 'Thracian horseman', a pre-Christian local divinity. This may be the reason for the lack of the dragon under the mount. The object is surrounded by a series of legends, such as its miraculous retrieval by a group of fishermen from the sea or on the site of the original shrine. This place was also the location of a *hagiasma*, a healing spring, and the woodcarving played an essential role in its rituals (Stamoulē-Sarantē 1943, 237-8). This depiction seems to have originated a devotional following, for it is possible to identify two fifteenth-century copies preserved in Athens, one in the Byzantine and Christian Museum (Kazamia-Tsernou 2015, 64) and one in the Benaki Museum. The last of this group was retrieved at the beginning of the twentieth century by Ivan Goshev in Sozopol, on the Black Sea, from the abandoned church of the Virgin (Goshev 1928-29). Today, it is preserved at the National Church Museum of History and Archaeology in Sofia, Bulgaria. This is a composite work, with the central panel consisting of a painted relief of both Saint George and Saint

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11 Healing powers are attributed to the depictions of Saint George of Omorfokklisia, Saint George 'the Arabian', and the Theotokos Hodegetria from Ainos. Powers tied to the realm of water are also attributed to Saint George 'the Arabian' and to the lost representation of Saint George from the village of Nestorio, near Kastoria.

12 Ο άγιος Γεώργιος ο 'Αράπης'.

Figure 4 Saint George (detail), last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm. St. George church, Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. Source: Europeana.eu / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – CC BY-NC

Figure 5 Saint George enclosed in a case (open), last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm. St. George church, Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. Source: Europeana.eu / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – CC BY-NC

Demetrius on horseback, surrounded by a wide frame with painted scenes from the legend of Saint George. Much debate surrounds the central portion, but dating to the fifteenth century seems plausible (Kuneva 2014, 30).

Another simulacrum of Saint George surrounded by carved scenes of his life was located in the Svyato-Georgievskiy Monastery in Sevastopol’, on the shore of the Crimean Peninsula. It is now held in Kyiv’s National Art Museum. Thanks to the C14 analysis, it was possible to date it to the middle of the eleventh century (Členova 2003). The object’s origin is unclear since the technique and the iconography are different from those found on the West shore of the Black Sea, and the deplorable state of conservation complicates the analysis.[13]

Another group can be found in historical Macedonia. Here, it was possible to identify at least seven artifacts, six located around Kastoria, Greece, and one in Ohrid, North Macedonia. The latter is a tall (1.60 m) relief depicting Saint Kliment Ohridski, dated to the end of the thirteenth century, which was first housed in the monastery of Saint Panteleimon and was then moved to the Peribleptos church (now Saint Kliment) in the fifteenth century (Ćorović-Ljubinković

13 Other specimens are found in the territories north of the Black Sea, but it is impossible to include them here due to limited space.

1965, 39). Today, the artifact looks like a freestanding statue due to the high relief and the loss of almost the entire bottom panel. Photographs taken at the beginning of the last century, however, show the figure still surrounded by pieces of it, confirming its derivation from the Byzantine tradition (Ličenoska 1988, 43).

Kastoria was the primary hub for this type of production, as at least six examples can be found near this center. One subgroup comprises three tall and narrow depictions of military saints, which strongly resemble each other. The saints are depicted in full-length and frontally. Two of them have been recognized as Demetrius, but the identity of the third remains unknown due to its deteriorated condition. The figures' outline is carved, with a maximum depth of three centimeters, and the remaining details of the face and clothing are painted. It is plausible that a local workshop realized them during the fifteenth century (Tsigaridas 2016, 105). They belong to the church of Saint George in Omorfokklisia[14] (Tsamisēs 1949, 124; Moutsopoulos 1993, 34; Petkos, Paracharidou 2000; Tsigaridas 2016, 99), the Genethlio tēs Theotokou church in Lakkomata (Petkos 1992; Drakopoulou 1997, 71; Tsigaridas 2016, 102) and the Koimesis church in Zeugostasio (Tsigaridas 2016, 103-4).

As for the remaining items, one is documented only in writings from the beginning of the twentieth century, and the other is a well-known piece housed in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens. The latter was previously inside Saint Paraskevi church in Kastoria (Grabar 1976, 168; Tsigaridas 2016, 92). Similarly to the Kyivan example, it is possible to see a central panel with a high-relief Saint George praying towards the upper right corner, surrounded by a frame depicting various events from the saint's life (Xyngopoulos 1965, 79). The last example was located in the Taxiarches church in the village of Nestorio but was lost or destroyed in the second half of the previous century (Moutsopoulos 1993, 47; Tsigaridas 2016, 92). This might have been the only artifact similar to the colossal statue of Saint George in Omorfokklisia, above all in the dimensions – 2.15 × 0.50 m – as P. Tsamisēs registered in 1949. He also noted that it was carved from a single piece of walnut but lacked facial features and hands (Tsamisēs 1949, 154). E. Drakopoulou (1997, 71) reported a communication from Manolēs Chatzēdakēs, who signaled the presence of a sculpted wooden hand from Kastoria among the possessions of the Benaki Museum, which might be linked to the lost statue of Nestorio. As of today, all attempts to follow this thread have been ineffective. N.K. Moutsopoulos (1993, 48) quoted the information given to him by M. Kōstopoulos, a local high school teacher, who said that the statue had arms attached to the body "like a *kouros*", and

14 Now, it is held in the Byzantine Museum of Kastoria (inv. n. KAS-20, not on display).

was called *sfeti-ger* by the local population, meaning 'holy priest'.[15] It was also employed in several rituals involving water, in which he was taken in a procession to a water source and dipped in it to favor the arrival of rain. At the same time, Kōstopoulos said that the object was washed in a nearby water stream on the day of Saint George.

The images found in Eastern Thrace and the group of fifteenth-century military saints from Kastoria are realized in a different technique from the statue of Saint George, for the carving is shallow and, in some cases, barely noticeable. Instead, the depictions in the Byzantine Museum of Athens and the Art Museum of Kyiv are realized in high relief. Still, they are surrounded by painted or carved episodes from the saint's life, thus rendering them entirely different objects. The only two examples possibly related to the colossal Saint George are the lost saint from Nestorio and the relief of Saint Kliment Ohridski. None of them, however, seems to be perfectly associable with the example from Omorfokklisia because, in both cases, the body is treated as a unique volume, as the arms are not detached from the torso. However, it is interesting to see how many of these items are deemed miraculous, for it is one of the main features of the effigy in question. It is especially true when considering the lost statue from Nestorio, which seemed to have had a complex set of rituals tied to it, and one must wonder if their miraculous capacities may have been connected to their nature of larger-than-life statues.

4 Conclusions

The wooden effigy of Saint George housed in Omorfokklisia is undoubtedly a unicum in the Byzantine artistic panorama. The similar artifacts presented above emphasize the freestanding position occupied by the sculpted Saint George. We have already seen how, during the empire of Andronikos II Palaiologos, sculptural production saw a resurgence fueled by the renewed interest in ancient art, particularly that of the Theodosian period. The trend was not exclusive to the capital, although it took its most advanced form there (Nicol 1993, 166). Kastoria was an essential imperial stronghold along the border. There, many noble families took refuge after the Fall of Constantinople in 1204, and it was home to many high-ranking functionaries during the thirteenth century, so it is natural to suppose that tendencies alive in the capital had some echo there (Sotiriou 1930, 179; Lange 1964, 38; Castiñeiras 2020). Located at the crossroads of

15 It is interesting to note the Slavic root of the word. This speaks of the ethnic composition of the villages on the mountains around Kastoria, which, until the population exchange, were primarily inhabited by ethnic Albanians and Slavic people.

different territorial interests, Kastoria faced a turbulent period between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being taken by Ivan II Asen in 1204, then recaptured by the Despotate of Epirus and shortly after by John II Dukas Vatatze, then again by Michael II Angelos of Epirus (Pelekanides 1978, 1194-5). In 1259, he was defeated in Pelagonia by Michael VIII Palaiologos, paving the way for the reconquest of Constantinople by the Empire of Nicaea (Geneakoplos 1953, 135). The Empire did not hold the city for long, as in the middle of the fourteenth century, it was captured by Stefan Dušan, who shortly after lost it to the Albanian family of the Mouzakis. Finally, in 1385, it became part of the Ottoman Empire (Pelekanides 1978, 1194-5). It may not be a coincidence, then, that during this period, the people of the area decided to realize a massive effigy of Saint George, since from the 6th century, he was treated as a talismanic saint linked to the army and the Emperor (Grotowski 2010, 121). In the Late Byzantine period, his representation inside churches gained great favor, mainly because he was regarded as an effective protector against foreign conquerors (Walter 2003, 134). Its most striking feature is the height and almost round relief, which we have demonstrated as deriving from ancient statuary. Keeping all this in mind, it could be argued that the depiction played a role comparable to that of a *thelesma* (Tóth 2019, 424), a talismanic statue whose role might have been protecting the people of the nearby countryside from foreign armies. The figure is still today considered very powerful by the local population, which regularly pays homage to it and leaves offers, even though its powers changed realm to that of miraculous healing, for after the Ottoman conquest, its primary function of protecting the population against foreign domination became useless.

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Crossing Boundaries: Exploring Interdisciplinary Practices and Moving Images

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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The Object Looks Back: Paraesthetic Vision in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* and *Optic Nerve*

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Abstract Focusing on Céline Sciamma's film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), and Maria Gaínza's novel, *Optic Nerve* (2014), I turn to two texts interested in the structure of vision to interrogate gendered dynamics of power. By formalizing alternate relations between subjects and objects, the portrait offers a space to negotiate the unidirectional and subordinating logic of the seeing subject. Focusing on interventions that interrupt and collapse the positions of the viewer and the viewed, both texts employ paraesthetic articulations of the gaze to redress the imbalance inherent in our conception of vision.

Keywords Visual culture. New Formalism. Crossmapping. Gaze. Paraesthetics. Autotheory. Portrait de la jeune fille en feu. Optic Nerve.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Disaligned Gaze. – 3 The Chiastic Eye. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

A veritable boom of films and novels plunging into the world of contemporary and historical painting characterizes the early 2000s. While Mark Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons* (2003), Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* (2003), or Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) fall on the early end of this spectrum, they seem to herald a revival of classical painting in the literary arts. Followed by Donna Tartt's *Goldfinch* (2013), Ali Smith's more experimental *How to Be Both* (2014), Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait* (2022), and Katy

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Hessel's historiographic *The Story of Art Without Men* (2022), the question at the centre of these texts remains the same. With so many other avenues open to the image in the digital age, wherein lies the textual interest in a medium long considered a rival art? Although the literary resurgence certainly mirrors our cultural turn towards images, most of these works specify their interest by considering it in relation to gender. It is through this lens that these contemporary works come to rewrite the chronically unrecorded position coded as female in the production of images. Where any artistic interest in self-imaging has long since between considered "narcissistic" and "uncritical" in the past (Fournier 2021, 6), this current turn to female-aligned perspectives relocates the issue outside the field of theoretical abstraction. Moving towards the self, works in the vein of Lauren Fournier's *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021) come to dissect the critical potential inherent in turning towards the self and the performative as a mode of enquiry. In reading the self-portraits and mirrors as tools of producing the self as subject, I turn towards artistic examples that bring together gender, the practice of image-making, and the operation of power through the gaze.

In her 2006 book, *Vision and Difference*, art historian Griselda Pollock engages with the topic through the relationship between visual culture and the representation of difference. The feminine-encoded position she examines is ultimately not interested in the empirical notion of woman, but rather signifies the structurally opposing position of what she terms a "Eurocentric masculinist conception of art and artist" (2006, XX). Thus, any interrogation of visual culture enables readers to interrogate images of the world that legitimize the "relations of domination and subordination" implicit to the organizing paradigms of culture (2006, 28). Focusing on the structure of seeing opens the visual as an arena to mediate discussions on power and its operation within the gaze. While feminist criticism has long since taken up the cause of women in art history, the interest in visuality and power has not yet been satisfactorily laid to rest (cf. Felski 1989; 2000; Pollock 1999; 2006; Bal 2004). In her earlier work, *Differencing the Canon*, Griselda Pollock discusses ways out of the oppositional position femininity is forced into and theorizes alternative ways to work through their exclusions from canonicity (1999, 25). Citing Susan Hardy Aiken, she asks for the breaking open of the narrative of art history, pushing for a "polylogue: 'the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative 'barbarism'" in the vein of Virginia Woolf or Adrienne Rich's work, famous for their multistranded and nonconventional experimentation in form (1999, 25).[1]

1 I would be remiss not to mention Mieke Bal's concept of hysterics as a feminist intervention that attends to the rhetoric of the image, reading the narratives of art history

Responding to the concept of the polylogue, Rita Felski pushes Pollock's position further and specifies the feminist parameters of art as containing grains of the "self-transgressive", that is, formal elements in a work that question "assumptions about the reality, coherence, and separateness of male and female identity" and thus consist of contradictory readings (2000, 182). The broader term she borrows for this aesthetic mode stems from David Carroll's *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (1987), in which he defines his key term as "an aesthetics turned against itself, pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered improper aesthetic" (2000, 181). Where Carroll examines the value of art in poststructuralist theory, Felski adapts the concept for the field of feminist visual studies, focusing on the manner in which formal elements of a work of art resist total mastery, abstraction, and coherence (Felski 2000, 181). Her privileging of the paraesthetic over the polyvocal strikes me as persuasive, as she argues this position includes all discourse, including male-defined conceptions of femininity, which ultimately do not cover up an authentic version of femininity, but are part of any discussion attempting to detangle the discourse (2000, 183). In focusing on paraesthetic practices that read for incoherence and disalignment, this article focuses on the gendered constellation of power as negotiated in contemporary cultural texts. By focusing on this nexus, these recent texts can be seen to rethink dominant paradigms that organize vision by theorizing alternative aesthetic relations between viewing subjects and viewed objects in the recurring motif of the portrait. In that way, these works both respond to the art historical concern of exclusionary canonicity, while simultaneously positing alternate aesthetic structures to mediate the act of looking in contemporary works.

In order to give shape to this alternate visuality, I take a new formalist approach in the vein of Caroline Levine's 'travelling concepts' from *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2017). Levine's approach considers concepts to function as flexible aesthetic formalizations that both give structure to and travel across different contexts, ranging from the medial to the socio-political. The move to forms beyond paintings takes place to grant this alternate gaze a *Denkraum*, a thinking space, to reformulate itself before travelling back into the realms of the image. In the vein of Elisabeth Bronfen's concept of 'crossmapping', such comparative readings focus on the process of (dis-)figurement inherent in any remediation and what can be gained in the act of translation. As she posits that the crossing of

against the grain. As Pollock outlines, her counterstrategy "exposes the implicit and misogynist violence within representation that canonical readings condone and naturalise" (1999, 16).

two medial formats is productive in tracing "those shapings that exceed or gall outside the aesthetic formulas" (2019, 134), bringing together an aesthetic structure across textual and filmic environments focuses on the dialogue both works enter over a shared concern. In following Levine's conceptions of flexible concepts and Bronfen's crossmappings, I look to trace how aesthetic formalization of the gaze renegotiates the dynamics of vision that organize medial, as well as cultural relations of power. This paraesthetic gaze thus functions as an intermedial travelling concept, seeking self-transgressive, disjunctive moments as a way out of the hierarchical conception of the subject and object of vision. Tracing this constellation allows me to trace the interrelations of the traditionally exclusionary gaze of art history into the contemporary context in which the gaze is reformulated in alternate medial products.

In seeking out the paraesthetic responses to the canon Felski proposes, I turn towards two works which think through the subject-object dynamics inherent in the act of looking. While the filmic example allows an interrogation of the perceptual facet of vision in representing the very act of looking, the narrative expansion in the literary text makes the spatial and temporal stasis of the image fluid. Emerging as part of this trend, Maria Gaínza's recently translated novel *Optic Nerve* (2019) uses descriptions of paintings as windows into the past and different perceptions of the image. Working in the mode of autofiction, the novel offers insight into the act of seeing through the remediation of the image. In this way, Gaínza's novel uses the image as a plane for reflecting both the image and the narrator, thus constituting the subject through the paintings in the novel. While there are many instances of classical ekphrases, Gaínza's approach to the image moves beyond the common conception of the rhetoric device as art description, weaving together the personal and the social, the past and present, in her textual self-portrait. The second example I would like to consider is the narrative of the painter who constructs a portrait out of a fragmented perspective. Céline Sciamma's acclaimed *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* treats the topic of female painters in eighteenth-century France, thus doubly engaging with the excluded position of the female in the trajectory of image making, while also articulating alternative medial parameters for engaging with the subject-object dynamic. Where *Optic Nerve* examines the narrativization of images in text, *Portrait* focuses on the act of perception inherent in the construction of vision, and thus, reality. Spinning a narrative from the perspective of the eighteenth-century painter, Marianne, who has been called to paint a wedding portrait of Héloïse on a secluded island, the film has been variously hailed as performing the female gaze, the queer gaze, in an attempt to pin down its position within the larger discussion of vision and power. The argument I aim to put forth is that both works think through a

paraesthetic conception of the gaze which rearticulates the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, modelling an alternative structuring of the act of vision.

2 Disaligned Gaze

Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* announces its interest in the creation and mediation of images in the very first stills of the film. The opening sequence follows a series of disembodied hands sketching on blank canvases, which are interspersed with the title of the film. The act of creating portraits comes into metonymic relation with the film's title, and thus, its larger project. As we hear a teacher's instructions from the off, the film cuts to a panoply of female students, all gazing towards the same object as they attempt to apprehend what they see in their individual sketches. This project of image making sets up the cinematic interest in the gaze underlying the creation of paintings (Sciamma 00:00'30''). Posing the question at the heart of the film as the relation between subjects and objects of painting, *Portrait* introduces its audience to the didactic project at the heart of the narrative – what structures of sight underlie the images we produce? The recurring interest in the visual moves beyond straightforward representation, instead announcing a reflective interest in the parameters that inform the creation of images.

Moving from the frame narrative to the portraits at the heart of the film, the first painting that looms over the film is the central betrothal portrait. When the painter Marianne arrives on the island, the Countess who employs her explains the task at hand – painting a clandestine portrait of her daughter Héloïse, while posing as her companion. During this discussion, the film gestures at the cyclicality of the betrothal portrait, introducing its predecessor in shape of the Countess' own portrait which hangs above her during this scene. "Quand je suis rentrée dans cette pièce pour la première fois, je me suis retrouvée face à mon image accrochée au mur. Elle m'attendait" she tells Marianne, describing her own encounter with the painting that negotiated her marriage (Sciamma 00:16'13'').[2] As she discusses her daughter's portrait with Marianne, the Countess' portrait functions as a visual double for the flesh and blood woman beneath it. Imagined for the husband-to-be, the implied viewer is coded as male, his implied presence looming over the dimly lit sitting room at the beginning of the film. In that sense, the image concretizes the role intended for both Héloïse and the Countess before her,

2 "When I entered the room for the first time, I found myself opposite my own image hanging on the wall. She was expecting me".

inflected with the future-orientated function of the portrait, namely transforming the daughter into a wife. Moreover, this role awaits both women, transforming their future subjectivity as wife into an image of the present. As the fact that Héloïse will be taking on her sister's place in this situation highlights, the second aspect at work here seems to be the interchangeability underlying this type of image. Comparing the failed portraits of Héloïse with the mother's successful painting, the similarities in the portrait begin with the pose of the figure. Captured in the same stance, facing the same direction, the portraits highlight the inherent conventionality, and to a certain degree, interchangeability of the two visual depictions of the women, not to mention the serial nature of the portraits. Héloïse's portrait features a smudged-out face, highlighting the conventionality that underpins this vein of image making. It is only in the painting of the face, the determining of the body's identity that the position of the wife becomes fixed. Thus, it is not their likeness that is being encoded in the image, but the act of painting that turns their subjectivity into exchangeable currency. In following the conventions of the betrothal portrait, the female object comes into being as inherently substitutable (as Héloïse stands in her for sister), passive in the way the visual logic of painting that implies the active male viewer, which culminates in her interpellation into the position of wife, implicit in the cultural logic that demands a betrothal portrait for the implied future viewer/husband. The film, through this first introduction of portraiture, points towards the underlying logic of domination and subjecthood that is negotiated over the betrothal portrait, specifically the interpellation of the female subject into social structures that are reified in their translation into image.

This way of seeing underlies the first betrothal portrait Marianne attempts to paint of Héloïse, mirroring the visual conventions of the portrait style. However, unlike her mother, the intended object of the painting refuses to comply. Resisting the painter's eye, as well as the camera's lens, Héloïse escapes from any attempt at being made image in the first half of the film. Invoking the dynamic of the active viewer and the passive object-muse, Héloïse's elusive presence implicitly responds to our demand for her visual presence by simultaneously invoking and refusing our desire to see her. These contradictory dynamics of absence and presence, vision and invisibility, interweave warring viewing positions in a paraesthetic whole. The camera eye simultaneously brings together multiple positions that are at odds with one another and refuses to offer a conclusive resolution. This is introduced in their first encounter: Héloïse is wrapped in shawls as she hurries out of the frame, careful not to reveal her face to the various viewers at large. In short, she resists the gaze that attempts to pin her down, moving across the screen as a gap, consisting of fragments of features occasionally revealed to us. As Marianne follows

her to the cliffs and the sea, the camera trails behind them both, allowing us to only see Héloïse from the back, making clear that our gaze not permitted access to her. In frustrating the visual contract set up for us, outlining her function as the visual object of the portrait, as well as the film, this late revelation of her face, expresses the underlying renegotiation of the visual politics of the film. In resisting our, and Marianne's gaze, Héloïse finds recourse in refusals and gaps as the mode of articulating resistance to the position of passive object. These contending lines of vision operate in the vein of the paraesthetic, in the sense that conventional positions of the viewer and viewed are invoked, but remain suspended and frustrated, resisting the conventions of scopic pleasure encoded in film.

While the film enacts multiple discordant perspectives in its visual language, Maria Gaínza's autofictive novel examines the issue of visual positions through the perspective of an art critic, describing clashing logics of vision in her textual ekphrases of paintings. Interweaving personal with historical anecdotes, *Optic Nerve* approaches its interrogation of visuality through eleven chapters. Guided by our narrator, the objects recreated for us cannot escape their pinning down in the same way Héloïse is able to. Instead, the text moves fluidly between past and present, the narrator and the artist, the painter and the painted, attempting to balance a way of translating the image into text. While the ekphratic dimension of the text is interested in the staging of the gaze, it also opens the image to discuss the art and the artist's role. As she moves to discuss El Greco, Gaínza discusses this very clash of ideologies within the battlefield of the image in more detail. At the beginning of his artist career, the narrator situates El Greco as conventional for the time, which all changes when "one winter's night, an icy wind began to blow through his paintings. The space inside them grew constricted, and his figures, as if to adapt to these new hollow climes, hollowed themselves out and lengthened upward" (Gaínza 2020, 168-9). Unfreezing the still images, suddenly El Greco's art becomes a space of movement, infused with winds, and highlighting the processes of adaptation and change. The processual lengthening and hollowing the narrator highlights unfixes the image from the stillness regularly associated with it, opening the space for alternative perspectives. The struggle that Gaínza focuses on is the ideological clash one experiences in later works:

> I went in on my own, which was a relief, but as soon as I set foot inside, I was reminded what a struggle El Greco is–a struggle with oneself. He's the kind of artist we fall for as teenagers, before we have taken the measure of painting as a whole, and while we're still at leisure to dive fully into our own private imaginarium. As we become more informed and, hence, cynical, we become less convinced. El Greco's unwavering dogmatism exasperates us, but

> so does his sensuality. We have difficulty accepting their coexistence in a single image; the mutual exclusivity of flesh and spirit has been drummed into us by now. (Gaínza 2020, 171-2)

As with Héloïse's encounter with the artwork, El Greco's portrait becomes a space that portraits the disjunctive perspectives that operate within it. Reflecting back one's identity, as the core of the image, becomes the pressure point for Gaínza's introduction to the image, who describes it as "a struggle with oneself" (171-2). Within the logic of his images, the cynicism and sensuality clash, as seemingly oppositional binaries in our cultural landscape. In combining these two things within the image, Gaínza sees the visual as a space to question mutual exclusivity and binarisms that organize our thinking. Moreover, her way out of the clash is to run counter to the institutionalized ways of looking at Greco. Instead, she suggests that

> [t]he correct way to look at it […] would be while doing a handstand; forget about the figuration and simply appreciate the scandalous sensuality of the brushstrokes strewing the oils this way and that across the canvas. (172)

In that sense, the narrator's function mirrors the film's perspective on the images in both works. Both modes of reading seem to suggest moving outside of the realm of the conventionally fixed. It also suggests the active potential underlying the passivity associated with the visual object, indicated through her the grammatical shift to the present and continuous tense, thus offering an alternative mode of viewing to the reader.

The filmic counterpart to Gaínza's disaligned gaze works through the creation and ultimate rejection of the binaries of subjectivity and objectivity in vision. Through the establishment of multiple warring perspectives within the same frame, the camera eye performs the disalignment usually afforded to narrative texts, and as *Optic Nerve* textualizes in its staging of El Greco's painting. While conventions are brought up and figured as potential frameworks of decoding the images in both works, they are resisted and refused in both cases, with an alternative logic of disunity governing the act of looking. The disalignment articulated in both texts interested in the interrelation of femininity and art does not fall into the traps outlined by Pollock or Felski in insisting on a unified field for women's art, but instead, engages with varying perspectives that inform the discourse on the matter. Rather than succumbing to alternative parameters, or essentialist frameworks, both works posit a position of refusal and disjunction as a response to the dominant balance of vision. However, in carving out their own proposals for seeing, they both move one step beyond disalignment and articulate an alternative gaze through the narrator's eye.

3 The Chiastic Gaze

Having explored disjunction and the unconventional as strategies beyond the hierarchical logic of vision, I turn to another formalization that intervenes in the implied unidirectionality of the gaze. Returning to Gaínza's novel, the textual conception of this type of gaze theorizes the reciprocity of the gaze. In the chapter "The Enchantment of Ruins", the narrator introduces the artist Hubert Robert's aesthetics of decay, while exploring her oppositional relationship to her own mother. At the end of the chapter, she concludes that this style of mock ruin, reaching back to antiquity, is "seen as a way of establishing a lost link with antiquity […]. With the move away from nature came an exaggerated melancholy for all that was lost, and the rich learned to delight in their sadness" (2020, 46). This appreciation, both descriptive of these figures, as well as their relationship (the narrator predicts she will obsess over her mother's heirlooms, but only after burning them down first), provides the context of the chapter. However, it is the form that is striking as an intervention. This section is written entirely in the present tense, insisting on addressing the protagonist of the story, the narrator, as 'you'. Beginning the section, this tone is already explicit in the first lines:

> You spent the first half of your life rich, the second poor. Not in penury, but always needing to be careful, always forgoing possible little treats, and often being forced to borrow when unanticipated costs arose. Hence the Silver Spoon syndrome that has always marked you out: the indestructible sensation that *the money will come from somewhere*. […] And you do always try to steer clear of another of the pathologies that attends comfortable upbringings: Poor Little Rich Girl syndrome. That, to you, is not to be entertained. (Gaínza 2020, 42-3)

The entire chapter continues in this tone – a stark contrast to the more conventional style of the previous chapters. What I would like to focus on is the grammatical structure of this section. In the 'you' of this chapter, two figures collide in the grammatical category, namely the reader, as well as the narrator's past self. Overlaying the subject and object of narration in this way proposes a chiastic structure of address that turns in on itself. This oscillation between reader and narrator, addresser and addressee, seems to be irresolvable – all the while, it highlights the reversibility that is inherent in both positions. The viewer is thus continually implied in the viewed; the narratorial position collapses, revealing in ambiguity and the reversibility between both.

Visual critic Norman Bryson offers a narratological access to the grammatical intervention that undergirds this formalization of the

gaze. Turning to his consideration of Benveniste's grammatical categories, he outlines the relationships between grammatical personal positions as a negotiation of power:

> Benveniste was the first to notice that between the first and second persons taken together and the third person, there is no 'symmetrical' relation. Let us stay, for a moment, with *I* and *you*. These are inherently reversible. The *I* can only say *I* to a *you*, and the *you* thus addressed is thereby given the right to lay claim to the first person in reply. It is important to grasp that these 'persons' are, however, only artifacts of discourse, not 'human beings'; basically they are 'points of direction' given to discourse as it moves. (Bryson 2004, 16)

What is striking about this formulation is the conception of these grammatical categories as points of direction in discourse. While Benveniste acknowledges the position outside of the 'I-you' dyad in the third person, he finds that this position is "permanently and logically absent from the utterance that names them" (16). Thus, this third position simply creates a field in which pronouns stand in for persons and cements the underlying asymmetrical axes of grammar, in which one position *a priori* may speak while the other exists as perpetual object (16). However, in moving the reader outside of this third grammatical position, unable to become a subject, Gaínza's choice in adopting the 'you' addressal for her reader becomes an interesting twist on the unidirectional dynamics of address that are involved in textuality. What we find is the simultaneous cutting out of the position of the reader as a bystander, as well as their conflation with the subject of narration – we find ourselves becoming the younger version of the narrator, addressed by her older counterpart. Moving beyond the conception that these positions are reversible in their relationship, Gaínza's narrator short-circuits the relationship and collapses the distinction between 'I' and 'you'. In this ambiguous and reversible play on categories, the mirror-like equivalence drawn between both positions is formalized in the type of gaze that is imagined in her narrator's address in this chapter.

Similar to these pronouns functioning as points of direction, the filmic vocabulary of the subject and object of vision seems to imply a similar condition of reversibility. However, where the visual counter positions have not often been acknowledged as reversible, the gaze being put forth in *Portrait* certainly underlines the objective positions capacity to withhold access to seeing, as well as taking up the subject position. Where above, I discussed the gaps created through Héloïse's control over her visibility, which are mirrored in the camera's perspective on her, this is framed by a series of frustrated reveals of Héloïse in face of the audience. Continually expecting to

glimpse the perceived object of the film, the viewer is denied her appearance time and time again. As in the scene in which we see an early attempt of the dress being brought in, we recognize the garment from the previous portrait and expect the daughter of the house to appear, only to find the maid Sophie in her place. A second instance of this frustration occurs at the half an hour mark, in which we see a body seated in front of a mirror, as well as a glimpse of a semi-finished portrait of Héloïse, pieced together by Marianne. As the camera tilts down, we see that the bodice has remained completely untouched. We then follow Marianne's gaze to a mirror, headless in its framing of in the green dress (Sciamma 00:34'41''). It is then revealed to the viewer that it is in fact Marianne herself who takes the place of her object, once more delaying the appearance of Héloïse as the visual object. More than a simple tongue in cheek trick on the viewer, or a comment on the continuing exchangeability of the female object, this scene touches upon the chiastic gaze outlined above. Where the novel conflated positions of address, the visual counterpart proposed in the film conflates the position of the viewer and the viewed. Thus the visual formalization of the reversible and ambiguous structure of vision moves away from the Cartesian eye as the centre of the look and highlights the instability of the subject and object positions. While traditionally, the art of painting implied a gendered relationship of the activity of painting and the object thereof, the film, through its visual vocabulary, as well as dialogue acknowledges that this has always been a reversible one too. We might follow the film through one of the characters eyes, but this does not mean that the object does not itself look back.

Having considered Gaínza's textual articulation of a mirrorlike gaze, *Portrait* employs the recurring motif of the mirror to map out the visual counterpart. Where the portrait seems not to match up with the identity of the object, the mirror, in picturing reality in reverse, in a placeless place, becomes a flat space that allows the renegotiation of the look. In visualizing the reversibility of the viewer and the viewed, the object thus gains subjectivity in a way that moves beyond the refusal articulated above. This is explored in an exchange between Héloïse and Marianne, once the former finally agrees to pose for her portrait.

MARIANNE Quand vous êtes émue, vous faites comme ça avec votre main.
HÉLOÏSE Vraiment?
MARIANNE Oui. Et quand vous êtes embarrassée, vous mordez vos lèvres. Et quand vous êtes agacée, vous necillez pas.
HÉLOÏSE Vous savez tout.
MARIANNE Pardonnez–moi, je n'aimerais pas être à votre place.

HÉLOÏSE Mais nous sommes à la même place, exactement à la même place. Venez ici. Venez. Approchez–vous. Regardez. Si vous me regardez, qui je regarde, moi? Quand vous ne savez pas quoi dire, vous baissez la tête et vous touchez votre front. Quand vous perdez le contrôle, vous haussez les sourcils. Et quand vous êtes troublée, vous respirez par la bouche.
(Sciamma 01:03'34'')

In the scene, Marianne makes a comment about Héloïse's underlying ire which comes to express itself in the painting, too. Deciphering Héloïse's body language, she comments on how clearly each shift in her emotions is legible within certain habits of her body, ranging from biting her lip, to hand gestures. The camera supports this list in a kind of blazonic montage, highlighting each of the features Marianne points out for the viewer in close-ups. Realizing she has gone too far in highlighting the degree to which the sitter is on display, Marianne steps back, apologetic. Rather than leave this visual imbalance at that, the film finds a response in Héloïse's position. The latter highlights that they are exactly in the same place, providing her own list of Marianne's mannerisms and nervous ticks. Viewed through the mirror from Héloïse's perspective, the film highlights the bidirectionality that is always at work in any visual address. While it certainly outlines the artist's vision, the lacking reverse focalization through the mirror allows us to forget that the instrument depends on visibility from all angles. Thus, this scene further pushes the argument that the one-directional relationship between the painter and the muse has for centuries been but a fiction, coming to be exposed within the interrogation both of character perspective, as well as the structures of vision encoded within the painting. The mirror, here, serves as an intermediary device, prefiguring the alternative logic of the second portrait, as well as a place that suspends the cultural conventions and rules Marianne spoke of in the first portrait. Instead, reflecting reality, it opens the doorway for a space to renegotiate the power dynamics behind the act of looking, highlighting not only the object's ability to look back, but the inherent reversibility of the gaze, as well as the conflation of the viewer and the viewed. Neither remains in the fixed, active position saved for the male viewer that Pollock speaks of, but they both oscillate and operate within a relational logic that relies on its counterpart to exist. Thus, rather than the portrait, the mirror is the more fitting metaphor for the type of vision this film proposes, namely inexistent without the originary look which engenders both the viewer and the viewed.

The companion portrait that Marianne produces of herself offers a final discussion of the mirror's function in the structure of seeing. The camera initially focuses on the mirror, showing us a close up of Marianne's mirror image, then moving to her portrait of herself,

before moving back to her reference. In the last image, we see Héloïse posing in the same position as Marianne sketches herself in, the artist's face doubling with Héloise's own. What strikes me here are the two translations that occur in this scene, one of them being the doubling of the bodies and their reclining postures of the traditional nude. The juxtaposition between the sketch and the mirror allows Marianne to interpose her own facial features onto a pose borrowed modelled by Héloïse. This first flip reverses the body and their subject/object relation in the translation of the image, highlighting once more the underlying chiastic structure in vision. On the other hand, the second translation requires the flipping of her own image, mirroring back her face in the opposing direction as she draws her face. Moving back to *Optic Nerve's* collapsing of the subject and object position, it appears that the same binarism visually falls together in the film, the artist-subject merging with the muse-object in this melding together of Marianne and Héloïse. We might find a relational logic at work, one that models the mode Felski describes as partial, fragmentary, and relational in its nature. This alternate logic of subjectivity becomes encoded in the type of gaze both Marianne and the camera perform in this scene and is pinned down within the logic of the self-portrait she sketches for her lover. Not only does the scene highlight the reversibility between the two positions of viewer and viewed, but the very unstable nature of these ideological positions as encoded within our culture. The mirror functions as a visual space that outlines this relationship, highlighting the reversibility of the subject and object of the gaze. The concomitant overlaying of the binary of activity/passivity, male/female, subject/object thus is exposed for its artificiality in the discussion of art history and the image per se and pushes towards a relational framework that collapses subjectivity and activity in all positions. While this reversibility and exchangeability is highlighted through the visual realm in the film, the novel finds recourse in the same topic through the field of painting, but ultimately, considers the structure of address, rather than the structure of visual address, as the forum for advocating this type of relationality.

4 Conclusion

In the face of the binaries of the viewer and the viewer, the subject and object of vision, or in fact, the painter-muse, which have structured the image, it is clear that this division has frequently come down along gendered lines of division. This renewed interest in visuality thus points towards these dynamics and reconsiders the inherited operational logic in the realm of contemporary works. While past attempts at staking out an exclusively feminist aesthetics, or in

fact, a canon of female artist, have proved inconclusive and limiting rather than breaking free of the dominant logic in art history, I turn towards the aesthetics Felski and Pollock propose in turning towards a more disjunctive, self-reflexive, questioning mode as one that is truly able to consider alternate logics that organize and reify relations of power. Following these alternate logics of vision in the realm of the textual and the filmic, this crossing between Gaínza's novel and Sciamma's film offers a dual position for tracing the aesthetic formalization of the gaze and its exploration both in its construction of the text and the positioning of its audience. What is gained by this crossmapping is the identification of larger cultural trends through the recurring formalization of similar concerns, albeit across different medial configurations and their discussion of the social roles implicit in the cultural imaginary.

In this case, the interest turns towards positions beyond the gendered, passive position of the visual object and its declensions across contemporary medial contexts. While both texts showcase strategies of the self-transgressive in the setting up and frustration of convention, the discordant aesthetic of frustrated expectations becomes one of the logics that offers a way out of the promised scopic pleasure of the image. In that vein, the insoluble knot between the inherited conventions and the simultaneous representation and refusal thereof operates in the vein of the paraesthetic Felski proposes. A second avenue comes through in the conception of the gaze as inherently reversible, as well as unstable in its conception of subject-object positions. In order to move beyond the dominant structuring logics we have inherited, it becomes necessary to destabilize and immobilize the forms of the gaze we have inherited, and instead move towards alternative logics that seek to redress the epistemological imbalance of the field. While the stakes of the field have been laid out in critical enquiry, the concrete material expressions of feminist aesthetics can only come to be articulated within contemporary works within the field. As the renewed dominance of the image has been far from surprising, the fact that its operating logics come to be expressed within alternate medial formats can be explained through the affordances of the later. In order to truly interrogate the aesthetic limits and conventions within a work, the medial constraints of incongruent arts, such as the textual and the filmic, allow the voicing of concerns that remain invisible in the realm of the image. As such, whether considering the lived perceptual structure of the gaze in film or in fact the ideological colouring expressed in the voiced construction of the image, each media format provides a forum for responding to the theoretical concerns through aesthetic formalizations that become embedded within alternate media logics.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
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Unseen Memories
Exploring Imagery in Jeremy Deller's *We're Here Because We're Here* and the *14-18 NOW* Project

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Abstract This essay aims to investigate the intricate interplay between visual arts and theatrical events by conducting an in-depth analysis of how their convergence can create impactful imagery; it will deal with *14-18 NOW*, a cultural program that took place around the United Kingdom to commemorate the centenary of the First World War. Within this context, the author will particularly focus on artist Jeremy Deller's performative and participatory project entitled *We're Here Because We're Her.* This case of study is significant as it represents a 'performative apparatus' that opens to some interdisciplinary artistic practices at the turn of the 21st century.

Keywords Performance. Theatre. Interdisciplinary practice. Jeremy Deller. Commemoration. Liminal Space. Archive.

Summary 1 Introduction . – 2 A Living Memorial. – 3 Questioning the Past: The Artist as Historian. – 4 The Liminal Space: Re-shaping the Commemorative Act Through the Interference of Theatre and Visual Arts.

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1 Introduction

In 2013, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport of the United Kingdom established a nationwide cultural programme known as *14-18 NOW* to mark the centenary of the First World War, creating "Extraordinary Arts Experiences Connecting People with the First World War".[1] The intention was to involve over 400 contemporary artists, musicians, filmmakers, designers, and performers by commissioning new artworks,[2] resulting in a network of artistic projects across 220 locations in the UK complemented by online broadcasts. Artists took their inspiration from the First World War British heritage, including the archives of the Imperial War Museum and other heritage organisations. By re-shaping the commemorative act, *14-18 NOW* projects presented heritage on an individual, human scale and enabled artists, participants, and audiences to connect emotionally and intellectually with the First World War. This prompted people to be more curious about those who had lived during that historical period and inspired them to find out more.

In 2014, the British artist Jeremy Deller was asked by *14-18 NOW* to conceive an artwork to mark the anniversary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, which took place between 1 July and 18 November 1916 and was one of the bloodiest battles in the history of the British army: on the first day of the Somme, over 19,000 British soldiers were killed and 40,000 were severely injured. The magnitude of this national tragedy could only be apprehended through the conception of a nation-wide arts project bearing witness to those who perished on that day. It constituted a traumatic national disaster, which is why Deller imagined these soldiers as evanescent figures emerging from the past, akin to ghosts immersed into the present **[fig. 1]**. The event offered a new approach to the long cultural tradition of memorialisation, and it can be asserted that the monumental nature of this project took the form of a "utopian dream" aimed at outlining an "organic community" (Pinotti 2023, 9).[3]

2 A Living Memorial

On 1 July 2016, thousands of volunteers took part in a public performative event conceived by Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre in London. The project,

1 The statement appears on *14-18 NOW* website: `https://www.1418now.org.uk/`.

2 The complete list of artists is available on *14-18 NOW* website: `https://www.1418now.org.uk/artists/`

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

Figure 1
14-18 NOW
We're here because we're here
by Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris, Belfast © Johnny Frazer

Figure 2
14-18 NOW
We're here because we're here
by Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris. People receiving the card, courtesy Madeline Littlejohns

Figure 3 14-18 NOW We're here because we're here by Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris, Glasgow, © Eoin Carey

entitled *We're Here Because We're Here*, was conceptualised as a 'living memorial' (cf. Deller 2017) that did not pertain to the celebration of war, but rather to the commemoration of unknown individuals who died for their country; as well as to the need to recount aspects of human history that are lesser known in the present. It represented a counter-narrative of history providing a distinct form of commemoration and approach to memorial practices.

Among all social rituals, commemorating the dead is considered the most important by Jeremy Deller (cf. Deller 2017). In the light of this reflection, he decided to use the participants as silent soldiers who would simply appear, walking on the street or sitting in the underground, thereby creating a shocking and surprising effect.[4] Volunteers were only given a rigorous set of written rules, permitting them to perform silent actions such as establishing eye contact with the public and handing passers-by cards providing the name of a soldier killed in action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme **[fig. 2]**. As well as their names, the cards provided details of the soldiers' age (where known), date of death, and the battalion and regiment in which they had served. They also included the hashtag *#wearehere*,

4 The 'surprising effect' is what RoseLee Goldberg highlights as a key aspect pertaining to the performance, especially at the turn of the twenty-first century. She states that "Bold and highly visual, close-up and personal, performance speaks of deeply human concerns, and does so with a level of experimentation that can keep the viewer enthralled, watchful and surprised" (Goldberg 2018, 75).

allowing people to share their images and videos from their direct experience. Metaphorically speaking, this represented the equivalent of tombstones and memorial inscriptions, as a plaque at the foot any traditional monument. The card was actually an instrument representing the soldiers, not a mere object that pretended to be them.

Throughout the day, the volunteers, who were not allowed to speak, would start singing 'We're here because we're here' **[fig. 3]**, a war song dating back to the First World War trenches set to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne', a British popular song based on a Scottish poem. The song represented a symbolic medium for establishing *pathos* and empathy within the public, serving as a form of direct interaction. 'We're here because we're here' did not have a specific theme. It was neither a love song nor a song meant to remember deceased companions. Instead, it was an expression of sarcastic resignation, much like a protest sung by the soldiers. Jeremy Deller himself highlighted that the project was a "large social experiment" based on the "unpredictability in which the participants, by their actions, took the memorial to the public".[5]

The participants, who were not trained actors, embodied the presence of the soldiers' ghosts, made real[6] (i.e., visible) by the military uniform of the First World War they were wearing. Within the context of this public artwork, the uniform could provide a powerful element belonging to imagery and identity transformation. It therefore offered a different way of remembering compared to that marked by traditional monuments "in bronze or stone that […] mark great tragedies or triumphs" (Lingwood in Guida, Pinto 2022, 274). From this perspective, the uniform does not configure an object, but rather a historically situated image that privileges the probing of the real and the historical into people, places, and practices that are lost (cf. Foster 2019). Hence, it envisages

> a different way of entangling the past with present, personal memory with shared history, of bringing a human face to a historic tragedy. (Lingwood in Guida, Pinto 2022, 274)

It is possible to claim that through the surprising effect, by avoiding a public announcement of the event, Deller further modified and manipulated not only the traditional concept of the monument per se, but also its intrinsically ritualistic function. In a seemingly paradoxical frame, he defused the memorial and revisited its relational

5 Deller, https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about/.

6 Following the analysis of Jeremy Deller's practice provided by Teresa Macrì, it is possible to affirm that "the artist's genius lies in his ability to produce the real, to make it happen" (2014, 162).

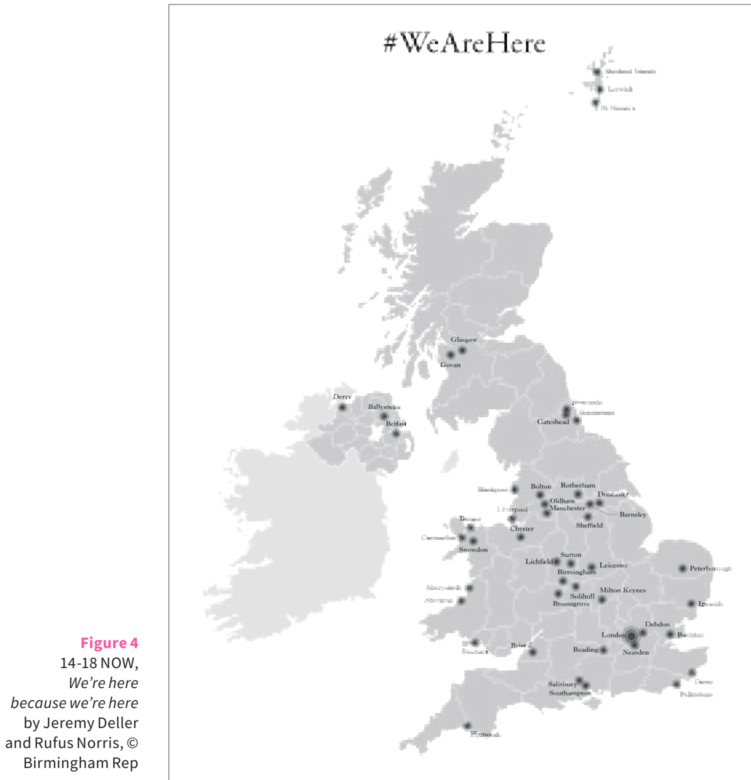

Figure 4 14-18 NOW, *We're here because we're here* by Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris, © Birmingham Rep

component. The phase of aggregation, of shared remembrance and commemoration through the laying of devotional objects on the monument, did not occur.[7] The artist's intention was to avoid any imagery or locations traditionally associated with war commemorative events, such as churches or war memorials. Instead of specific places embodying and empowering the spirit of a nation, there was a dispersed and simultaneous commemoration made real by the presence of soldiers throughout train stations, bus stations and shopping centres across the UK **[fig. 4]**. Through this "visual incongruity", Deller created this "kinetic, living memorial" in order to take it to places that did not exist in 1916 (Deller 2016, 14'41'').[8]

7 Andrea Pinotti provides a few examples of rituals that are closely related to the monument and practised by visitors: "military decorations, little sculptures, flowers, flags […], but also the practice of 'stone rubbing' – which consists in placing a sheet of paper on the engraved/carved name and reproduce the letters with a pencil" (Pinotti 2023, 204).

8 See the documentary realised by Jeremy Deller in collaboration with the BBC in 2016 (https://vimeo.com/199719532).

> Chacune de ces coordonnées est un point sur la carte, qui est mis en relation avec d'autres pour constituer un ensemble dynamique, un réseau de circulations. Cet espace est donc connecté, tissé en réseau. (Kihm 2007, 249)

Each of these coordinates represents a point on the map, which is connected to others to form a dynamic whole, a network of movements. This space is therefore connected, woven into a network.

3 Questioning the Past: The Artist as Historian

Deller's dynamic network sought to foster a sense of familiarity[9] with a history that has been inherited, but not personally encountered. Hence, it enabled the audience to engage with the tangible aspects of the physical environment and directly confront the unfamiliar, while imagining and experiencing history through the lens of narrative practices. Apropos of Jeremy Deller adopting a narrative methodology, Claire Doherty pointed out that it might be possible to identify an alignment between the act of commemoration and

> the strategies of storytelling, by which a particular history of the past is sanctioned by those in the present to bring about a particular future. (Doherty 2018, 14)

This narrative framework draws attention to the role of the artist as historian and to the close connection between history and the archival medium. Given that Jeremy Deller's raw materials are people and history, his aim has always been to weave historical events, archival tension and performative reinterpretation into the present.

In this context, it is worth considering his prior historical and performative project entitled *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) as a means of identifying the key aspects that define the artist's historical approach. The London-based artist re-enacted a confrontation that occurred in 1984 between striking miners and the police at the Orgreave Coking Plant in Yorkshire.[10] Since Deller decided

9 The use of this term is significant, as Alison Oddey noticed, in its relation to the act of walking through the landscape. Although many of the places involved in *We're Here Because We're Here* did not exist at the time of the Somme, the act of walking around the urban space while encountering ancient soldiers enabled people to create a narrative and to "re-contextualise self-identity" (Oddey 2007, 137).

10 *The Battle of Orgreave* was produced by Artangel in 2001. The event was documented by filmmaker Mike Figgis, whose film included footage of the re-staged clashes, archived material from the original event, interviews with the artist and some participants.

to use re-enactment as a medium, it is reasonable to assume that he adhered to the rules and guidelines associated with war re-enactment societies and living history museums, including rehearsal practices. This constitutes an instance of appropriating popular forms that is

> based on a popular type of reenactment immediately rooted in the American Civil War reenactments that took place during the war's centennial in the 1960s. […] These events can be seen as historicist happenings for a wide audience. (Lütticken, in Baldacci, Nicastro, Sforzini 2022, 2)

Identifying similarities between the descriptive and narrative strategies adopted in *The Battle of Orgreave* and *We're Here Because We're Here* does not aim to suggest identical methodologies and goals. Instead, this comparison intends to examine the ways in which different disciplines engage with the significant problem of "historicism: that of presenting, of making present, a past that has become problematic" (Lütticken 2022, 3). Theatrical and performative strategies were pivotal elements in the development of both projects, but it should also be mentioned that Deller employed them differently. *We're Here Because We're Here* was not configured as a war re-enactment, because the artist's intention was not to re-create the battle of the Somme, nor to re-stage it; in fact, Deller wanted to commemorate the victims through a narrative process in the form of bodies, gestures and glances. The most significant difference lies in the fact that the volunteers, unlike re-enactors, "were not acting" (Deller 2017, 63); they embodied a vehicle *representing* identity, rather than *interpreting* it.[11]

Representing soldiers from the Battle of the Somme required Deller to scrupulously adhere to the details of the original event, notably the uniforms, which constituted the primary connection between historical representation and archive research. It is compelling to consider Mark Godfrey's statement about how

> historical research and representation appear central to contemporary art. There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives, and others who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research […] These varied research processes lead to works that invite viewers to think about the past; to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory; and to reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in the wider culture. (Godfrey 2007, 142-3)

11 Jeremy Deller himself was adamant that the performers should not "play characters" but "represent people" (Lim in Deller 2017, 106).

Jeremy Deller defines himself as a "cultural archivist" (*Jeremy Deller: Joy in People* 2012)[12] who seeks to create a twofold approach towards the 'archival': on the one hand, he considers the archive as his primary source to gather information, images, texts, words, and possibly photographs or video. On the other, he aspires to extend the historical event into the present times, in order to "seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (Foster 2004, 4) and re-connect people with human history.[13] Within contemporary art, he indeed represents a pioneer in rewriting the rules of artistic practice through collaborative interventions, merging different media and disciplines, and engaging with historical representations beyond academic history. This clearly marks a shifting moment where the artist as historian,

> coming to historical representations outside the context of academic history, and aware of the critiques made of this discipline, [...] is able to work with a methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigor. (Godfrey 2007, 169-70)

As for the 'rigour' Godfrey assigns to historical representations, a connection should be made with the structure that Jeremy Deller assigned to his performative project. Interweaving historical event and theatrical practice, the artist had to face a more rigorous methodology belonging to theatre rehearsal guidelines (cf. Deller 2017, 105-6).[14] Emily Lim neatly pinpoints this methodological transition in approach from visual artist to theatre artist by drawing attention to the planning phase of the project:

> A challenge at the beginning was getting into your way of thinking and understanding your position as a visual artist. Your brain felt different to a theatre brain: you wanted to avoid imposing narrative, which is something as theatre-makers we often cling to. We had to unpick together the exact feeling and experience that you

12 `https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34189/jeremy-deller-joy-in-people/`.

13 According to Hal Foster's insights on the archival, it is possible to identify an alignment between Deller's approach to the archive and *We're Here Because We're Here*, as "the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private" (Foster 2004, 5).

14 It was Deller who praised the methodology used in theatres. He stated that "what I learnt quickly was that the theatre in Britain is very different from the art world in that they are very good at organising people. They are not intimidated by bodies, basically, and by people moving and by enthusiasm. The art world tends to be full of slightly miserable people, pessimistic about the world" (Deller 2016, `https://vimeo.com/199719532`).

> wanted the public to have, which was a process that needed lots of time and practical testing. (Lim in Deller 2017, 105)

Having Emily Lim openly referred to narrative as an essential feature of the project, it is worth noting how storytelling represents an unequivocal feature of the commemorative act.

We're Here Because We're Here served as a compelling illustration of the non-linearity of time within historical narration, prompting a reconsideration of how the past and the future are intertwined in the present. The audience could not only witness a narrative unfolding, but also engage with a profound exploration of time challenging traditional notions of a linear temporal progression. In echoing Boris Groys' insights that further amplify this perspective, the project was in fact an invitation to contemplate the future in its perpetual state of flux, where

> the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control. (Groys 2009, 4)

The concept of "proliferation" as movement (Deller 2016)[15] held a central position in Jeremy Deller's work, both metaphorically and visually. This was especially conveyed through in his intention to decentralise the bodies and question time and space, transcending any geographical boundary and border, from major cities to towns, across the United Kingdom – also including Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (fig.4).

According to Oddey, the urban landscape "for performance has always held a fascination for artists" (2007, 133); that was precisely the case with *We're Here Because We're Here,* as Jeremy Deller decided to involve his entire country in the making of his artwork, in order to rely on the audience as a witness to the event. Because the performative project was not built on a pre-determined script, the event needed to be experienced in its strict connection to time and place.

15 https://vimeo.com/199719532.

4 The Liminal Space: Re-shaping the Commemorative Act Through the Interference of Theatre and Visual Arts

The theatrical feature of this one-day event, through which the artist sought to re-evaluate the history of twentieth century art, especially comes to the fore from this perspective. It can thus be interpreted as an interdisciplinary opening within the artistic and cultural realms, as discussed by Claire Bishop (2012; 2018), Hal Foster (2003; 2019), and Alison Oddey (2007), among many others – the reification of artistic genres as well as the hermetic separation of performing and visual arts are rejected. Theatre, performance and visual arts are crucial to this case study, since participatory involvement tends to manifest more powerfully in the live encounter between embodied presences and the audience in specific contexts (cf. Bishop 2012).

The mutual influence between theatre and visual arts has been the subject of numerous pieces of research, many of which have long been institutionalised. These studies have traced the motivations and historical necessities leading to the so-called "performative turn" (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008), which continues to characterise a highly multifaceted research domain around the ongoing debate on artistic criticism. The concept of 'performative turn' has been repeatedly discussed with reference to the visual arts, theatre, and dance. In particular, numerous academic fields such as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology 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 processes. Culture, especially in connection with ritual practices, staged situations, and the overall process of civilisation, is now regarded as a form of performance. The idea is to invert the common understanding of performance in its everyday use and to demonstrate how it now signifies a state of alteration in what has historically been systematised and known as 'performance' (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).

At the end of the 1950s, sociologist Erving Goffman, in his well-known *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, focused on the constitution of identity as a performative act through the discussion of the socialisation process. This implied the development of a social identity based on daily acts and modes of social interaction shaped through the contact with people's everyday environment, all viewed as a form 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 to be directed towards the analysis of their relationship with the realm of experience,

abandoning the central role of the object (i.e., both the artwork and the text). As 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)

From the 1980s onward, the performative domain has progressively and significantly broadened into areas of social, linguistic and anthropological inquiry, leading to the recognition of the hybrid and open character of performativity.

Highlighting the challenges of categorisation is therefore instrumental in identifying an opaque and composite framework, a liminal space whose apprehension is increasingly complex. Consequently, it is utterly relevant to connect *We’re Here Because We’re Here* to the notion of “liminal experience” elaborated by Victor Turner in the 1970s and further advanced by Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, 175). The latter describes the “aesthetic experience enabled by performances in theatre and performance art as liminal experience” (2008, 175) within a conceptual sphere in which artistic and ritualistic performances differ. To this end, she underlines how as the demarcation between theatre and art grows progressively elusive, conventional dichotomies disintegrate. When one of these terms can concurrently assume the meaning of the other, attention gravitates towards the instable transitional phase and the transcendence of boundaries. This phenomenon results in an interstitial space between these opposites, identifying a state of in-betweenness[16] which is thus elevated to a privileged category. Aesthetic experience holds an immense significance within performative aesthetics, as it is closely related to the character of any event (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008).

We’re Here Because We’re Here has thus adopted the form of the event, introducing a new approach to ritualistic commemorations within this liminal space. The transformations and social changes brought about by the liminal phase not only pertains to the transformation of the participants’ social statuses, but also transforms their perception of reality. During certain performances, individuals may step outside their everyday roles and engage in behaviours that challenge societal norms and expectations. This demonstrates the significant advancement of the anthropological thought within the performative field, redirecting the focus of artistic practices from the artwork – generally speaking, the object – to the audience.

16 See Lacy, S. (2018). *Across and in-between, 14-18 NOW* website, https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/across-and-in-between/.

The diversion had a strong resurgence between the two centuries. The early twenty-first century revealed a notable involvement among contemporary artists in experimenting with interdisciplinary practices, identifying "cross-art forms" that explored the intersection of "art, performance, landscape and theatre" (Oddey 2007, 42). A close alignment between performance-making, theatricality, and elements of theatre was identified, aiming to produce a "cross-pollination" (Oddey 2007, 5) with architecture, urban space and visual arts, too.

With regard to visual arts, a similar shifting from the artwork to the spectator can be identified in relation to interdisciplinary practices. It is compelling to consider Hal Foster's analysis about this tendency applied to the research field, where he identifies the subject as a "repository of social relations" (2003, 84) within an unstable artistic space defined as "formless".[17] Apropos of formlessness as opposed to any attempt at labelling, it is crucial to mention Allison Oddey's insights into the critical debate on 'new' art forms:

> The vision of the twenty-first century performance-making culture is viewed in a disintegrated world that lacks connection and integrity. (2007, 43)

This is closely tied to digital fluidity, which is a distinctive feature of contemporary art, especially in the context of experiential situations. That was precisely the case with *We're Here Because We're Here*, as it was also designed to reach the maximum impact on social media.

Conclusions

The seemingly ephemeral event thus underwent a migration into a digital project appropriated by the audience, whose essential contribution laid in their presence. People took on the responsibility for project documentation, its storytelling, and even its archiving.

Between the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, the growing interaction between the artistic medium and the audience's presence culminated in the "practice of self-documentation", which further evolved into "a mass practice and even a mass obsession", as notably discussed by Boris Groys (2009, 9). The digital turn marked a social and cultural phase following the age of industrial production

17 The concept of 'social relation' recalls both Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and Claire Bishop's notion of "Social Turn" (Bishop 2012, 11).

and mass consumption, leading to the identification of the "post-production" era as discussed by Bourriaud (2005). This transition further marked a

> changed status in the work of art in an age of digital information [...] That such a new age exists as such is an ideological assumption; today, however, information does often appear as a virtual readymade, as so much data to be reprocessed and sent on, and many artists do "inventory", "sample", and "share" as ways of working. (Foster 2004, 4)

Approaching the digital transformation, the art world confronted a shifting interest away from the artwork in favour of art documentation (cf. Groys 2008), looking for a medium that could not only display and preserve the artwork, but also capture its experiential feature. The digital therefore turned into an archival device.[18] On the one hand, the advent of the Internet and social media, coupled with the impulse towards sharing live events, has undeniably entailed a significant change in both the production and consumption of artworks. *We're Here Because We're Here* therefore represents a suitable instance of an unexpected, ephemeral, one-day long project that incorporates the idea of sharing its live experience online. On the other, digitising the original image raises identity issues, blurring the distinction between the original and its copy,[19] as well as between the ephemeral and the permanent.

Illustrating this dual perspective enables us to outline the audience's disposition and expectations towards contemporary art. In the contemporary milieu, the audience willingly embraces the opportunity to actively engage in the constructive essence of the artwork, assuming an integral role. This willingness is particularly noteworthy, given the prevalent trend in contemporary art to involve the audience in such a participatory dimension. Within this framework, the element of transience enhances the connection between the artwork and the individual even further; hence, the concept of 'ephemeral'

18 The term 'device' is currently used in connection with Giorgio Agamben's definition of 'apparatus'. In his well-known essay *What Is an Apparatus?*, he further expanded the class of Foucauldian apparatuses, claiming that "an apparatus [is] literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions. or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy. agriculture, cigarettes. navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself. which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses" (Agamben 2009, 14).

19 See Boris Groys' *Insights in From Image to Image File - and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization* (2008, 83).

enables the audience to directly address the artwork, and actively engage with it. However, the act of collecting images came to take precedence over the art event itself, leading to the creation of genuine informal archives circulating online.

The causes of these trends can be traced back to the turn of the twenty-first century, when the attention towards performative events has "not only reactivated a place for performance but also recreated a community for it" (Foster in Goldberg, 2007, 10). Therefore, many artistic, mostly performative works reached people through their immediacy, enabling them to directly perceive the image created by the interaction of body and medium. Accordingly, the performative event establishes a connection in the way of the experience between private and public bodies. As Hans Belting also noted on this subject,

> private or individual bodies also act as public or collective bodies in a given society. Our bodies always carry a collective identity […], and a particular visual environment. (Belting 2005, 311)

At the conclusion of the one-day event, a dissemination of photographs and videos in the digital space occurred, spanning across social networks, blogs, online magazines, and transforming "the artwork into documentation of a life event" (Groys 2008, 58).

It is compelling to consider two pivotal events arising from *We're Here Because We're Here*, notably the documentary conceived by Deller, filmed and produced by the BBC, and the subsequent exhibition at theatres and venues across the UK between 2017 and 2018.[20] Both the production and the exhibition of the documentary highlight extremely significant issues of contemporary relevance. Within the contemporary art paradigm, there is a call to question traditional museum settings in favour of contexts shaped by media-generated taste (cf. Groys 2008). Nevertheless, active engagement and confrontation with museums persist as crucial components of the contemporary cultural and social system, considering that

> the very idea of abandoning or even abolishing the museum would close off the possibility of holding a critical inquiry into the claims of innovation and difference with which we are constantly confronted in today's media. (Groys 2008, 21).

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that Jeremy Deller has produced a long-term project, also conceived for its dissemination and

20 In 2017, the Tate acquired *We're here because we're here 201*6, a black frame containing twenty printed calling cards mounted in a four by five grid (`https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/deller-were-here-because-were-here-p82019`).

transmission, thereby establishing *We're Here Because We're Here* as an enduring and historically significant artistic project. The archival approach is evident, and a discernible tension with the museum is perceived: within this framework – and considering the exhibition resulting at the end of 14-18 NOW project – it is worth concluding the analysis on *We're Here Because We're Here* by establishing an analogy between Deller's methodology and Boris Groys insights on the museum (2008).

The latter therefore reflects on the exhibition space as a place in which the viewers can not only reflect on contemporary artistic tendencies by producing critical inquiries, but also extend their relational experience to both the artwork and other participants. Groys reflects on how

> Art today is thus social and political on a purely formal level, because it reflects on the space of the assembly, on the formation of community, and does so independently of whether an individual artist has a specific political message in mind or not. (Groys 2008, 182)

Therefore, by analysing Deller's project through Groys' words, it is possible to affirm that relying on the space of the exhibition especially comes to the fore as it enables the audience to confront the historical, the contemporary, and their mutual influences.

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Cultural Institutions and Power: On the Relationship Between Museums and Politics

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

The Rise of the Sursock Museum
The Power of the Image to Create an Image of Power

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Abstract The Sursock Museum is a cultural institution that has played a significant role in shaping the art scene in Beirut, Lebanon, and the wider region, since its establishment in the 1950s-60s. This paper examines how the Museum employed the rhetoric of images on multiple levels, including that of its donor, the architecture, as well as the art to consolidate its power in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, the Sursock Museum's policies helped construct its public image as a place of cultural and social significance, while also reflecting broader power structures and hierarchies in Lebanese society.

Keywords Sursock Museum. Beirut. Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock. Salon d'Automne. Modern art history. Lebanon.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Book. – 3 The Man. – 4 Art in Beirut before the Museum. – 5 The Imaginary Museum. – 6 The Fall Exhibitions. – 7 The Structures of Power. – 8 Passport to Society. – 9 Ivory Tower Politics. – 10 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The silver jubilee of the Sursock Museum was in 1986, eleven years into the Lebanese War. One may think art is a low priority in wartime; nevertheless, a couple of leading art critics took the time to write extensive reviews of the museum's output till then. Fayçal Sultan's review appeared in *As-Safir* newspaper in 1987 (and later in a compendium of his writings on art for the paper, *Writings Recovered from*

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the Memory of Beirut Arts;[1] see Sultan 2013); while Cesar Nammour's "Assessment" appears in his compendium of writings on painting, *In Front of the Painting* (Nammour 2003). In both cases, the Sursock Museum was the only institution dedicated a chapter in either book.[2] By many measures, the Sursock Museum was – at least till then – not only the primary, but also the sole art museum in the country. However, its ascent was not as smooth and uncontested as its polished appearance may intimate.

In a critical piece from 1967 (six years after the Museum's launch) titled "Sursock 'Museum'… When will it become a museum?", the weekly *Al-Ahad* declared: "The museum is not a museum (in the municipal or governmental sense). Rather, it is a seasonal exhibition hall […] So how can the Sursock Museum, in its current state, be called a museum if any person, student, critic, or art student is unable through it to know the Lebanese artistic heritage from its inception until now?" (Sultan 1967). It can be argued, however, that the Museum has since not only presented the Lebanese artistic heritage, but also helped construct it over the years. And through its rise, it has harnessed the power of the image – in both its literal artistic sense, as well as its metaphorical sociopolitical one – to create an image of power unparalleled in modern Lebanese art history.

2 The Book

By the year 2000, nearly half a century after the passing of Nicolas Sursock, the patrician who donated his mansion and its collections of fine objects to establish an eponymous museum, that museum was the uncontested preeminent establishment for fine arts in Lebanon. To celebrate the turn of the century, the Sursock Museum produced a glossy hardcover volume, in French, titled *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre* (Nicolas Sursock Museum, The Book) **[fig. 1]**. Written by leading figures of the Museum and amply illustrated in color with artworks and artifacts from its exhibitions over the years, *The Book* attempted to capture the museum's history and trajectory across the few rich and tumultuous decades of its existence. Its cover featured, like the covers of many of the Museum's catalogues, brochures, and posters before it, the "architectural jewel" that is the Museum's building, its "immaculate whiteness" (Aboussouan 2000, 43) lit dramatically at night. As the primary publication on the main art museum in the country, *The*

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

2 Nammour wrote another authoritative compendium, *Sculpture in Lebanon* (Nammour 1990), where – again – the Sursock Museum was the only institution to have a dedicated chapter.

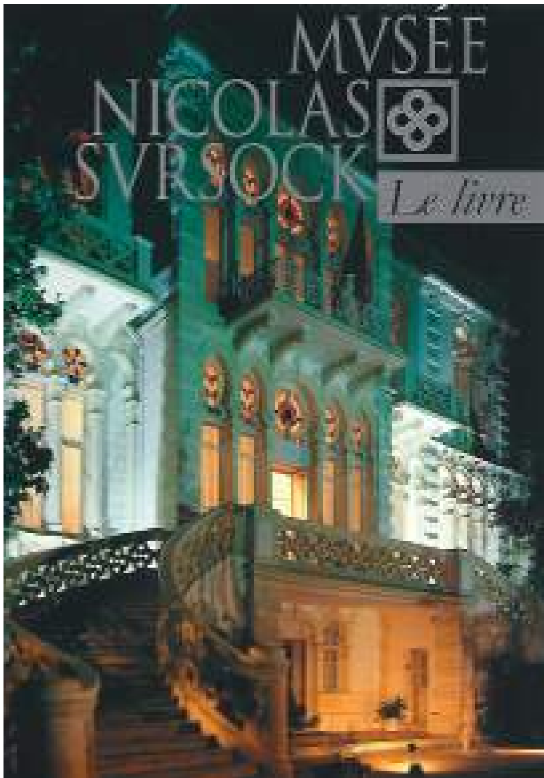

Figure 1 Cover of *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre*. 2000. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

Book presented a polished image of the institution and its chronology, but left several questions unanswered about the rise of the Museum from a private mansion with a rather modest collection to the imposing art establishment it became. That rise leveraged image, both in its literal sense of artistic product and in its more metaphorical sense of social perception, to consolidate power within the institution.

3 The Man

As an eponymous museum, the image and power of the Sursock Museum first emerges through that of its founding donor, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (ca. 1875-1952) [fig. 2]. The Sursocks were one of Beirut's most prominent and powerful aristocratic Christian (Greek-Orthodox) families that circulated within Ottoman and European high societies. "Illustrious" and "influential" (Trombetta 2009, 197) within an international Mediterranean bourgeoisie that spread among Alexandria, Beirut, Cairo, Constantinople, Paris and Rome, they were

Figure 2
Portrait of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock by Philippe Mourani. Circa 1920s. Beirut. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

wealthy landowners in modern-day Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. In his chapter on Nicolas Sursock in *The Book*, the conservator of the Sursock Museum (from 1980 until 2015), Loutfalla Melki, asks: “Wasn’t the child who had just been born in this district of luxury, calm and beauty – to which the Sursocks gave their name – predestined to venerate art and beauty?” (Melki 2000, 25). Thus, the link between luxury, wealth and power, on the one hand, and art, beauty and image on the other is implied as *fait accompli* from the start.

Obligingly, Nicolas Sursock embodied this privileged background as much as his ‘golden age’ of the ‘Nahda’, or Arab Awakening, the intellectual, cultural and political ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Renaissance’ in the Arabic parts the Ottoman Empire – mainly in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia – during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Throughout the transitional period between the French Mandate and independence, Nicolas Sursock had an intimate relationship with the artistic manifestations that gave Beirut its cultural face that is open to various artistic currents known to French art” (Sultan 2013, 264). His residence, home of the future Museum, reflected this ‘eclecticism’ as well: built in 1912, it integrated Venetian and Ottoman elements typical in Lebanon at the turn of the century. “Italian without really being Italian, imbued with Andalusia […]Moorish influence accentuated by the coloured stained-glass windows at

the top of the arcades" (Melki 2000, 27).

An "elegant" "aesthete", Nicolas Sursock was a "hardened bachelor" and "the perfect dandy". Thus, at a time when the patricians of Beirut built churches, mosques, schools, orphanages, and hospitals in the city, this "eccentric" patron chose a "most unexpected act of patronage there is: a museum" (Melki 2000, 17-19). He donated his residence and art collection to the city of Beirut to be preserved in a trust-fund or endowment (*waqf*) under the administration of Beirut's municipal government after his passing. The home was to be transformed into a "public museum for ancient and modern art from Lebanon, other Arab countries, or elsewhere" (Sursock 1952). With that, Nicolas Sursock enshrined his name, and that of his family, in Lebanese art history.

> By donating to the city of Beirut its first museum of modern art […] Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock inscribed his family in the history of his country, following all those who contributed to building the Lebanese nation. (Sursock 1961)

4 Art in Beirut before the Museum

Beirut did lack an art museum then, but the foundations of its art world had started decades earlier, in the Nahda era. The first generation of Lebanese artists who studied at academies in Paris and Rome returned to teach painting in Beirut at the turn of the century (Habib Serour at the Ottoman School of Bachoura and Khalil Saleeby at the American University of Beirut, then the Syrian Protestant College). The French Mandate (1920-43) saw the first public exhibitions in Beirut (at the School of Arts and Crafts, the Saint Georges Hotel, and the Parliament) of Rachid Wehbi, Georges Cyr, Philippe Mourani, and Moustapha Farroukh; and in New York, of Charles Corm and Youssef Hoyeck. The period also included the founding of such seminal institutions as the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) and the Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors. (cf. Chahine 1982, XXIX)

After independence, the Lebanese art scene continued to develop at home with the founding of the Lebanese Cenacle, which hosted exhibitions and lectures by and about artists like Bibi Zogbé, Moustapha Farroukh, and Omar Onsi; and abroad, with the participation of Lebanese artists in biennales and festivals of such cities as Alexandria, Washington, Vienna, Paris, and São Paulo (cf. Chahine 1982, XXIX). The closest and most influential in terms of institutional precedent for the Sursock Museum were the collective exhibitions organized by the Lebanese Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, the first of which was in 1947 at the National Museum (that is primarily archaeological). Following that, starting in 1954, the Ministry

organized semestrial exhibitions at the UNESCO Palace – first a *Salon d'Automne* and then a *Salon du Printemps* – both of which continued annually for at least three years; after which only the *Salon du Printemps* continued (cf. Lahoud 1974, XI).

5 The Imaginary Museum

It was during that decade that the Sursock Museum was to be born. However, after its donor's death in 1952, a presidential decree circumvented his will until 1957, turning the villa in the interim into a guest palace (*palais des hôtes*) for visiting heads of state. The will was eventually honoured with the formation of a committee to turn the estate into a museum.

For a few years, until its official inauguration in 1961, the Sursock Museum operated as a museum without walls, holding its first exhibition in 1957 at the UNESCO building in Beirut. Titled *The First Imaginary Museum in the World*, in the spirit of André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*, the exhibition featured 663 colour reproductions of masterpieces from Asia, Europe, and America, offered by UNESCO (along with the New Graphic Society of New York, the Japanese government and the Honolulu Academy of Arts; cf. Aboussouan 2000, 44).

The 'Imaginary Museum' was appropriate for the nascent Museum's first exhibition on more than one level. In addition to the cultural caliber of its sources, its didactic educational nature, the fit of the global selection to the donor's eclectic taste, and the pragmatic convenience of the material's availability, it significantly covered a more essential challenge for the museum, namely the dearth of its inherited collection when it comes to fine art. The first clue of that is in the donor's aforementioned last will and testament, which lists "furniture, the curios, the golden, silver and crystal objects, the Chinese objects and any other estate", but no mention of paintings or sculptures *per se*.

The earliest and closest thing to an inventory of artwork found so far in the archives of the museum dates back to 1971 and is in the form of *Notes for the Committee Highlighting the Curator's Program* (Agémian 1971). The *Notes* mention that the Museum owns thirteen works of "pioneer" artists including Philippe Mourani, Daoud Corm, Omar Onsi, Georges Sabbagh, and Georges Cyr; and 26 pieces by "Lebanese artists today", including 21 paintings and five sculptures. Of the latter group, the *Notes* clarify:

> This set was formed from the prize-winning works of the various *Salons d'Automne* organized by the Museum from 1964 to 1968 and which the artists – at least most of them – did not withdraw, the Museum Committee having given them the choice of take them back or leave them at the Museum.

6 The Fall Exhibitions

The *Salon d'Automne*, the most celebrated and longest running series of exhibitions at the Sursock Museum, both inaugurated it and helped build its image and power over the years, as well as its collection [fig. 3]. The selections for the first two Sursock Autumn Exhibitions/Salons[3] in 1961 and 1962 were done by the museum committee, which also featured works from private collections that the museum borrowed to expand the exhibitions. They were an effort to introduce the public to what the museum staff considered excellent works of Lebanese painters; so, the museum administration individually contacted the artists and extended an invitation for them to submit a selection of works.

Starting with the third *Salon*, the Museum invited all artists to participate, and the selection of the artwork became the prerogative of a jury nominated by the museum committee. This was seen as "an attempt to give cultural legitimacy to the generation of modernist artists at the Autumn Exhibition (after the Spring Exhibition, which was held by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Artists Association, turned into a salon open to all trends, currents, and levels of art prevailing in Beirut). And this is what helped stir the artistic atmosphere, giving an upward impetus to the trends of modern and contemporary painting and sculpture, which appeared in Beirut in the 1950s, with the feeling of the next generation of the Lebanese Academy that the Impressionist style had been exhausted and outdone by time" (Sultan 2013, 265). In addition to building upon the aforementioned custom of *Salons* established by the Ministry at the UNESCO Palace – and running parallel to them for many years – the *Salons* evoked an older French tradition rife with its own history of image and power (cf. von Maltzahn 2018, 254).

Dating back to 1903, the original *Salon d'Automne* emerged in response to the rigid traditionalism of the official Paris *Salon* of the French Academy of Fine Arts (École des beaux-arts). And in contrast to the *Salon des Indépendants*, an older alternative to the conservative official *Salon* characterized by the absence of both awards and a selection jury, the *Salon d'Automne* aimed to maintain high aesthetic standards by appointing an annual jury comprised of prominent cultural figures, including artists (cf. Altshuler 2008, 61). Like the

3 The Museum's official launch in November 1961 was with a group exhibition titled the *Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by Lebanese Artists*, in Arabic (or, in French, *Exhibition of Works of Lebanese Painters and Sculptors*). The exhibition's catalogue, and most reviews, did not mention 'salon' that year; however, the catalogues of all subsequent editions, starting from the following year (1962), had the title *Salon d'Automne*. The catalogues were typically bilingual, in Arabic and French, with the Arabic word *ma'rad*, or exhibition, used instead of the French *salon* (von Maltzahn 2018, 254).

Figure 3 Salon d'Automne catalogue covers over the years featuring the iconic building of the Museum. Beirut. © Author. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

French model, Sursock's *Salon d'Automne* did feature selection juries and awards (in many of its iterations); however, "since Lebanon had no dominant art academy or official salon to rebel against, it is likely that the name was initially chosen to reflect the time of year and create a counterpart to the ministry's spring *Salon*. It is evident that the Sursock Museum's *Salon d'Automne* aimed to institutionalize modern Lebanese artistic creation by guiding both the artist and the public" (von Maltzahn 2018, 256).

The fourth autumn exhibition (1964) was the first where prizes were given, which were seen as "entirely sympathetic to the

> abstract wave [...] This is what led in the end to the exacerbation of the crisis in the relationship between the Artists Association and the museum administration, which revealed for the first time in the history of Lebanese artistic life its absolute support for the abstract wave and its sharp attempt to inflame the conflict situation existing between abstraction and realism. (Sultan 2013, 265-7)

With that, the criticism and controversy began in earnest. "Judgment is a complicated process involving complicated emotions", wrote Dorothy Parramore in her review of this fourth *Salon* in 1964, "judgment, being a human activity, is prey to interest, faulty vision and many other human weaknesses". In her scathing review, titled *Sursock Museum Selections Described as "Disappointing"*, Parramore deemed the spectacle "a most disappointing and depressing panorama" and the selected works "as a whole, neither representative or of exceptional quality"; only some "merit the title 'works of art'" and "are achievements of which Lebanon should be proud". Of those, only one was featured in the single photo accompanying the review, and mentioned twice positively, "the great prize-winning sculpture of Viola Kassab in the garden. This figure is called 'Job' [...] the patient figure, in perfect symmetry" (Parramore 1964).

Kassab's *Job* was featured that year on the poster of the *Salon* **[fig. 4]**, the first in a long tradition of artists' posters that were limited in edition (and distribution), where the Museum provided exhibitors at the *Salon* with base posters bearing the printed text, the surface left blank to receive a painted or drawn composition, or photo (cf. Agémian 2000, 145). The sculpture was also the most featured work of art on the cover of the *Salon d'Automne* catalogues over the years, showing up in the foreground of five of the post-War catalogues in the nineties (with the Museum building in the background). It may have been its placement (in the garden, by the entrance), or its subject matter (the ever-patient Job enduring his travails), or the memory (of the 'golden era' of the city, and maybe the nascent museum); in any case, something about it seemed to resonate intensely.

Nevertheless, the questions lingered. "Why are certain other valuable painters not represented at all? Why was there no prize awarded to a figurative painter? Surely it seems an enormous joke, but on whom and why?" (Parramore 1964). The Museum was aware of the challenge it was facing, as expressed in the Museum's official *Book*:

> The great challenge of the *Salon* was that of being demanding at a time when there were no less than one hundred and fifty openings per season and when there was a certain confusion in the hierarchy of artistic values. (Agémian 2000, 134)

Figure 4 A unique poster of the 4th *Salon d'Automne* featuring the prize-winning sculpture Job by Viola Kassabcatalogs over the years. Beirut. © Autor

That confusion, however, was not exactly cleared by the Museum and its Salons. In fact, it developed along a few different axes of image and power that were not entirely separate.

7 The Structures of Power

As expected, one of the first issues to rear its head is the structure of power, or who gets to decide?

> The museum is managed by a small technical administrative body that works under a broad political umbrella. The head of the pyramid, the *Mutawali*, is the mayor of Beirut, based on his position, followed by an administrative committee composed of a president, vice president, conservator, treasurer, and about twelve members. Many aspects of its board of directors have changed during the different eras, but the museum was and still is very careful not

> to publish news about it, even though it is a semi-official institution that has a relationship with the public. (Nammour 2003, 50)

However, between the layers of this pyramid, as can be imagined, there is much room for disagreement and power struggle.

> The powers in the museum are lost, fluid and absolute. No one knows who is truly responsible: the mayor of Beirut in his capacity – by virtue of the will – as custodian of the museum, or the committee charged with its management. (Sultan 1967)

Outside of the Museum's own pyramid, the power struggle extended to the local art scene, as well. One aspect of that was with the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS), which had "contributed great efforts and pressure to achieve this transformation" (Nammour 2003, 48) of the building, following the death of Nicolas Sursock, from a guest palace to the museum he willed it to be, and therefore felt a certain sense of entitlement. A month prior to the inauguration of the Museum, the executive committee of LAAPS sent a letter addressed to the Conservator of the Museum with a list of seven requests in exchange for its participation in the next exhibition. The committee claimed to represent all its artist members (which were copied on the letter); however, several of them subsequently presented their resignation from the Association, which they saw as attempting "to control the Museum aimed at serving the interests of only a few". In turn, the Museum Conservator was dismissive of the letter, especially after the resignations were announced in the press, claiming that LAAPS was reduced to about twenty professionals: "There are two hundred painters in Lebanon; the tenth cannot, in any way, have the right of veto" (Khoury 1961).

The rift with LAAPS wasn't the only dimension, however, of the local power axis, but it brings us to another intersecting axis of the power struggle, that of the local vs. foreign. The participation of foreign critics "gave the Autumn Exhibition the legitimacy of complete openness to French culture and to the ambitions of transforming Beirut into a global capital of modern arts" (Sultan 1967). However, that is a realm of power fraught with complexity, especially in a post-colonial setting, only a couple of decades after Independence. The Museum was criticized of having "a 'hereditary' tendency to rely on French critics and journalists only and not great Lebanese artists to participate in the jury" (Sultan 1967). In the first eight salons in the sixties, around half of the jury members were Europeans or Americans, some of whom were residents of Beirut then (André Bercoff, Arthur Frick, John Ferren, and John Carswell), while others were invited especially for the event (Roger van Gindertael, William Townsend, Georges Boudaille, Jean-Jacques Lévêque, André Fermigier, Jean Salles, and

Roberto Pisani). But since the ninth *Salon*, which was the last before the war started (and possibly because of it), Lebanese citizens made up the majority of the jury (cf. von Maltzahn 2018, 257).

While it is true that some saw that the "presence of foreign arbitrators has given arbitration committees the status of impartiality" (Nammour 2003, 54), and that "Lebanon's art world has always been marked by a high degree of mobility both to and from the country" (von Maltzahn 2018, 267), even the Museum's own *Book* attests: "There were justified criticisms and contradictory opinions. The presence, for example, among the jurors, of foreign art critics, was far from unanimous" (Agémian 2000, 135). And as expected in a postcolonial setting, colonial policies had created power rifts on the inside by favoring certain groups over others, causing ripples of these preferences on the domestic academic level.

8 Passport to Society

A new and ongoing exhibition at the Sursock Museum takes its title *Je suis inculte!* (I Am Uncultivated!) *The Salon d'Automne and the National Canon*[4] **[fig. 5]** from a 1964 *Magazine* article by Jalal Khoury "whose acerbic protest of the museum's elitist bias toward abstraction anticipated crises to come", according to the exhibition's wall text, which references this academic bias of the Salons:

> Most of the *Salon*'s regular artists, and certainly the most renowned, either trained or taught at the *Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts* (ALBA). ALBA prepared the artists it graduated to pursue further study in France, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, and the Agémian, Kiwan experience proved to have helped them along in their endeavors […] Francophilia (the love of francophone culture) bound the newly founded institutions together […] But the museum's pro-Western orientation – grounded in the reigning Christian nationalist discourse of Lebanese exceptionalism propagated by Michel Chia – eventually sparked criticism.

Another related echo of the national vs. foreign power dynamic was reflected in the politics of the image (of artwork and the museum) in a pronounced figurative vs. abstract rift. The exhibition's wall text confirms this bias: "Although the *Salon d'Automne* was a battleground for competing artistic and critical positions, the museum

4 The exhibition, commissioned for the Museum's 60th anniversary and curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, was one of the reopening exhibitions of the museum after the devastating port explosion of 2020 which heavily damaged it.

Figure 5 Exhibition view: "Je suis inculte", curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, showing portrait of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock by Dutch fauve artist Kees van Dongen (circa 1930). 2023. © Walid Rashid. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

itself – the committee and jury members – advanced a consistently formalist agenda. It championed abstraction in painting and sculpture, and modernist experimentation more broadly". While that was generally the perception of the Museum's bias, it's worth nothing that the Jury of the eighth *Salon* did award two prizes (out of thirteen) to works of 'naive' art by Khalil Zghaib and Sophie Yeramian in 1969 (Sursock Museum 1968). And in the next (ninth) *Salon* (in 1974), the Museum Committee invited Italian art professor Roberto Pisani as the sole external juror, asking him explicitly "to pay particular attention this year to figurative art for this Autumn *Salon*, because it had noted that almost all of the last editions concerned abstract art" (Sursock Museum 1974). Such measures may be seen as responding to the outcry expressed in a central passage of the aforementioned eponymous article by Khoury:

> If a man of common sense and average culture, who does not necessarily believe what is printed, ventures into the Sursock Museum, what would be his reaction to this mess of colors and pastes commonly baptized 'Abstract Art' and which constitutes the common denominator of the works selected? [...] But if he dares to be dissatisfied, we will take care to stick the label of uneducated and vulgar on him and send him to join the platoon of vulgar people from all countries, united by their common lack of culture. (Khoury 1964)

As such, image politics were not limited to the stylistic preference of the art echoing a larger postcolonial setting, but also reflected a pronounced hierarchy in constructing the social image of the 'elite'. The Salons' attraction extended beyond mere 'high culture' to the social spectacle element, as "among Lebanese artists, many consider art a passport to society. Among them are those whose wildest dreams embody their reaching the *Salon* of the Museum" (Sultan 1967). As we have seen from the beginning, this elitist image has been manifold, starting with the aristocratic heritage of the donor and the palatial architecture, to the historical Francophile leanings of institution. But that image was becoming increasingly problematic.

9 Ivory Tower Politics

Even a generally sympathetic art critic like Nammour dedicated an entire section in his "Assessment of a Quarter-Century of Activity (1961-1988)" at the Sursock Museum to the "Autumn Exhibitions' Ivory Tower Politics" (Nammour 2003, 51). In it he highlights nine aspects of these politics, some of which have already been highlighted, while others haven't yet. In its conclusion, Nammour sums up:

> The museum's unclear policy and undeclared goals, the nature of which are difficult to discern through its works, between which it is difficult to see any connection, and past and current practices have led to the weakening of the fall exhibition […] It is as if the ivory tower practices have led the museum to a great void.

Among these practices, in addition to those already mentioned (such as the disagreements around the juries), were the prizes these juries started to mete out in the Fourth Autumn Exhibition (1964). "However, the policy of awarding these prizes, naming them, their number, and whether the museum had to buy the prize-winning works and at what prices were not specified in a written system" (Nammour 2003, 54). In the following five Salons, during the rest of the sixties, the museum gave out numerous prizes in painting and sculpture, which ranged – depending on the year – from three to 13 in total, and included various appellations, such as the Sursock Museum Prize, Special Mention, Sculpture Prize, and the Italian Cultural Centre Prize. To add confusion, there were also occasionally rankings from first to fourth place, each of which could feature up to six artists, as it did in 1969 **[chart 1]**. "This lack of clarity, and the various personal interpretations that follow, have generated negative feelings towards the museum and a decline in its moral status among Lebanese artists" (Nammour 2003, 55). That was the last year prizes were awarded until after the War, when they returned with a new prize

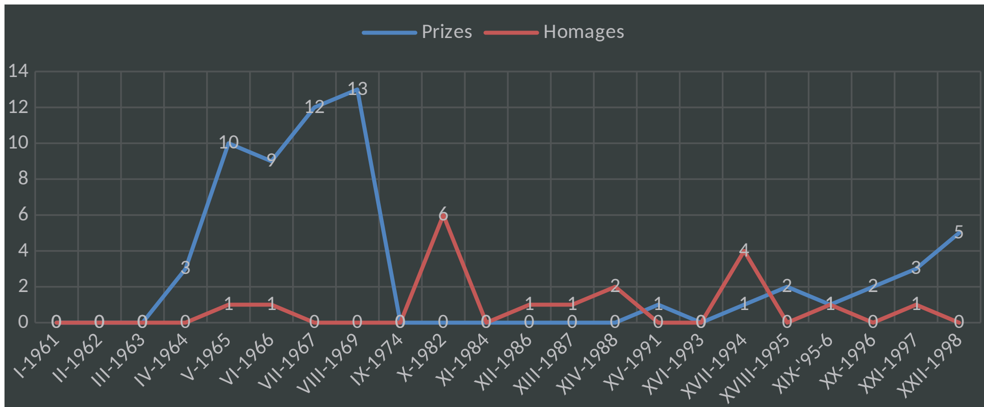

Chart 1 Charting *Salon d'Automne* Prizes vs. Homages over the years

for young artists named after Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, a pioneer of modern art ceramics in Lebanon who passed at the age of 48 in 1990.

During the War, prizes were replaced by homages, displaying limited works by Lebanese artists in honour of their memory. That tradition had started initially in the mid-sixties, before the War, with homages to pioneer artists, Cesar Gemayel and Moustafa Farrouk; but reached its peak in 1982, when the Museum reopened for the first time during the War, after seven years of no exhibitions since it started, paying homage to six artists who had passed in the interim. In the following years, retrospective exhibitions were held for Jean Khalifé (1992), Omar Onsi (1997), and Gibran Khalil Gibran (2000), but the museum held on to its policy of not holding retrospective or solo exhibitions for living Lebanese artists until 2017, when it held one for Amine El Bacha, a couple of years before his passing (cf. Nammour 2003, 55).

Such inconsistencies in museum policy, among others, irked artists and observers alike, to the point where the protests became part of the tradition.

> On days like these, every year, there is an uproar among Lebanese artists about the Sursock Museum and the autumn exhibition in the aforementioned museum. However, the uproar this year was very loud and intense, as was evident in an almost comprehensive boycott of the autumn exhibition by major artists, such that the currently held exhibition was described as a 'weak exhibition' that does not even represent the 'autumn' of Lebanese art. (Sultan 1967)

The unbalanced policy in dealing with the works submitted to the exhibition led to harsh criticism from a large number of artists, as well as calls for boycott. In 1969, a whole group of artists officially

boycotted the *Salon*, deeming the participation in the jury of a Lebanese painter, Jean Khalifé, to be inadmissible, although Khalifé was president of LAAPS, who had wanted to be part of the jury even before the very first *Salon d'Automne* was held (cf. Agémian 2000, 135).

It may well be that towards the end of the decade, the fault lines that were to split Beirut and Lebanese society during the War to come were starting to emerge in those "Golden Sixties" (Bardaouil 2023). The *Je suis inculte!* exhibition wall text suggests that: "With the blow of the 1967 June War, these antagonisms were increasingly decisive on the waning authority of the museum. Independent institutions such as Dar El Fan cropped up and numerous artists turned away from the museum permanently, or at least until the end of the Lebanese Civil War".

It is unclear whether these antagonisms were actually the reason that "numerous artists turned away", or even if in fact they did turn away at all (or who those were). While there is a marked contraction in the size of the Salons in the eighties (the number of works per *Salon* went down on average from 124 to 89) it is possibly as much the result of the War, as it may have been due to "artists turning away". It was in a divided city, after all; and while the Museum did have a collection point in the western half of the city, the situation must have had a dampening effect nonetheless. Likewise, it would be worth investigating to what extent the flourishing of Dar El Fan at the period may be attributed to the closure of the Sursock Museum from 1969 to 1974 for its first renovation and extension works.

10 Conclusion

What is clear is that – while the Museum may not have set out to do so – by that point it has arguably become 'the' art 'Institution' of the country. While we may not be able to tell when exactly the Sursock Museum became a museum, we can fairly say it did so in the period covered by *The Book*, somewhere in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps it's only appropriate to end where we started. The prologue of *The Book* reminds us:

> This book is not a balance sheet. It would like to be a promise. Beautiful, modest and happy like the Lebanon that was […] a country which suffers from not being able to reinvent itself yet. Marked by wars, it is all the more attached to peace […] Isn't the survival of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum an eloquent, albeit modest, testimony to this? (Tuéni 2000, 11)

Since that was written, the Museum has experienced the largest expansion in its history (which coincided with its longest interruption since the War), as well as more damage (from the catastrophic

explosion of 2020) than it endured throughout the years of the War. Resilience, for better or worse, is a descriptor that has become so attached to Lebanon, its people and institutions, that it is almost triggering at this point. But there is something comforting in the endurance of this Museum. It may not be so modest, and sometimes not as eloquent as could be; but hopefully, in its promise, in its ability to reinvent itself and create power from image, the Sursock Museum offers something from which the country, as a whole, can learn.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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‘Il cappellino all’ultima moda’ The Impossible Exhibition of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Turin

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Abstract The aim of this essay is to draw attention to an almost unknown and yet very significant moment in the history of museums and exhibitions in Turin. The exhibition of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, which, in actuality, never took place is, indeed, a *sui generis* litmus test of the political debate of the Italian post-war period. To reconstruct this episode were of fundamental importance various unpublished documents preserved both in the Archivio storico dei Musei Civici di Torino and in the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

Keywords The Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Vittorio Viale. Palazzo Madama, Torino. Venice Biennale. Second Post War Period.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 ‘La benedetta Mostra’: Organising the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Exhibition – 3 ‘Lei lo sa che non c’è niente da fare’: an Impossible Exhibition. 4 Conclusions.

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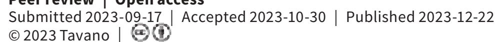
© 2023 Tavano | 
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1 Introduction

> Sono oltremodo felice dell'onore che la S. V. m'ha fatto invitandomi ad esporre la mia collezione nella città di Torino.
> Guggenheim, *Letter to Domenico Coggiola* 1948[1]

These are the words with which Peggy Guggenheim marks the beginning of this short and mostly forgotten case in the history of exhibitions during the Second Post War Period, in Turin. First of all, it is useful to recall that the XXIV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Biennale di Venezia had taken place from 1 May to 30 September 1948. Not only this was the first exhibition to be held after a six-year long interruption caused by the Second World War, but it was also the first one of the 'Pallucchini Era'. Among the historical and solo exhibitions that have made this edition famous, there is also that of Peggy Guggenheim's collection, set up by Carlo Scarpa in the Biennale Giardini's Greek Pavilion.[2]

2 'La benedetta Mostra': Organising the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Exhibition in Turin

Plausibly, among the Collection's visitors were also painter Luigi Spazzapan, sculptor Umberto Mastroianni and Angelo Stanlino, who, at the very beginning of this story, acted as mediators between the administration of Biennale and Turin's mayor, Domenico Coggiola, PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano). In fact, the first exchanges between the two are recorded by a letter written by Pallucchini to Mayor Coggiola on 13 October 1948,[3] two days after a meeting with the three members of the 'Premio Torino' Committee and with Giulio Baradel, inspector of the Biennale.[4] Another reference to this

1 In this short letter Peggy Guggenheim calls herself "contentissima" to be able to exhibit her collection in Turin, she thanks the mayor, and she says she is waiting for his emissaries to arrange "la cosa in ogni suo particolare".

2 As well known, Greece did not participate in the Biennale of 1948 because at that time the Civil War was still being fought.

3 Pallucchini, Letter to Domenico Coggiola 1948. The contents of the letter concerned some guidelines on the organisation of the exhibition, in particular on issues related to safety and insurance charges.

4 Giletti (?), *Handwritten communication to Vittorio Viale* 1948. Giletti was the head of the mayor's office. It should be noted that in this text the name of Pietro Bargis is mentioned alongside those of Spazzapan and Mastroianni. It is also noteworthy that Vittorio Viale, director of the Musei Civici from 1930 to 1965, had already been informed about this possibility; in fact, the Archivio storico dei Musei Civici preserves the draft of a letter, in which Viale volunteered to reach Venice to arrange all that was necessary to the exhibition's success. This letter was meant to be sent to Rodolfo Pallucchini

visit can be found in the Archivio storico dei Musei Civici di Torino: a short, hand-written communication with an illegible signature, addressed probably to Vittorio Viale. As the mayor had approved the text of the deliberation, Viale was asked to have the proposal signed by the councillor for fine arts, Elvira Pajetta. However, the most delicate task entrusted to the director was to underline "l'urgenza di assicurarsi la Collezione", before it was taken to Florence or other cities instead. For their part, the members of 'Premio Torino' had immediately spoken to Mrs. Guggenheim and to the Biennale's direction and had handed them a letter of presentation written by Coggiola himself. In the aforementioned proposal,[5] drafted on 25 October 1948, after briefly describing the content of a collection, that, with its about 160 pieces, testified "il sorgere e lo sviluppo delle più moderne tendenze dell'arte moderna dal Cubismo, all'Astrattismo, dal Surrealismo all'Espressionismo", Mayor Coggiola claimed that "una collezione così vasta e così importante di queste particolari espressioni artistiche non esiste[va] ancora in Italia" which was the main reason for the great interest it had raised in the artistic and cultural scenes of the country.[6] Mrs Guggenheim had already granted her

on 21 October, but in actuality, it was never sent. In fact, given the letter that Pallucchini sent to the director on 22 October we can reasonably presume that in the end Viale had decided to call him, instead. Cf. Viale, *Draft of a letter addressed to Rodolfo Pallucchini* 1948. Some of Viale's notes, preserved in the same archive, seem to confirm this: on a little piece of paper, the director wrote "Telefonata 22 ottobre" and added right after a short list of things, to ask, presumably, to Pallucchini, including: "incarico ritirare dipinti […], volume del carico […], la raccolta andrà altrove? […], consegna Venezia a me o a mio incaricato". Cf. Viale, *Notes* 1948.

5 Coggiola, *Proposal for an exhibition in Turin of Peggy Guggenheim's collection* 1948.

6 The exhibition had had a certain relevance in the Turin press too, raising of course conflicting opinions. To give an example, Alberto Rossi in the columns of *La Nuova Stampa* described it as an "accostamento di atmosfere veramente bizzarro, imprevisto". Cf. Rossi, A. (1948) «Tutto il mondo è presente. Alla XXIV Biennale veneziana». However much more *tranchant* opinions could also be read, those of Paolo Monelli and Marziano Bernardi, for instance. On 22 September 1948 Monelli wrote: "La pittura è un amore infelice della gente. Vanno a vederla, spasimano di vederla, questo sì […]. Ma quando arrivano alle sale dei cubisti, degli astrattisti, di certi surrealisti vivisezionisti alla Dalì o alla Ernst, e visitano la collezione Peggy Guggenheim che di queste tendenze ha gli esempi più audaci ed impensati, allora non osano più nemmeno parlare, par che li abbiano bastonati, vanno in giro con la faccia di chi gli è morto il più caro parente". Cf. Monelli, P. (1948). «La pittura è morta. Pensieri di un profano alla Biennale». As anticipated, Bernardi, one of the most influential voices of Turin's critique at that time, was of the same opinion. He explained that every expression "anche la più stramba e repellente" could then be legitimated in the name of contemporary art and he claimed as well that there was ample room in *connoisseurs'* minds for a "satanico dubbio" involving 'geniuses' disguised as 'idiots'. Such thoughts, he believed, were those of "tanti visitatori della Biennale, i quali, varcato il canale di Sant'Elena entrano nel padiglione dove la Signora Guggenheim ha esposto la sua collezione messa insieme in quasi dieci anni di ricerche, e che riunisce documenti dell'arte 'non-oggettiva' dal 1910 ad oggi, arte che la Signora Guggenheim incoraggiò a New York […]". He also indulged in an unusual and quite romantically expressed comparison between 'Art of this century'

approval, as long as the Municipality of Turin took charge of the organisation. The estimated overall cost was of approximately 550,000 Italian Lire, for an insurance value of L. 90,000,000,[7] some of which was to be offset by the tickets sold to the visitors of the exhibition that was to be held in the most prestigious venue in Turin: Palazzo Madama. On 16 November 1948, this draft, submitted by Councillor Attilio Aloisi (PCI), was approved by the Municipal Council.[8] As mentioned, a request for approval by the Town Council was added: they asked to collect the L. 500,000 needed to set up the exhibition from the 1948 budget, Art. 126 (exhibition, etc.), whose availability was of L. 1,870,000. However, while politicians were trying to sort things out as mentioned, on 29 October, an embittered Peggy Guggenheim wrote a letter to Spazzapan, Mastroianni and Stanlino. In it, she told them that she had thought that an agreement was reached and that, since a date had already been planned, "francamente", she had no way to explain such "inesplicabile silenzio", which led her to believe that they were no longer interested in the project.[9] The archive papers, nonetheless, testify that Viale had already begun the exhibition's planning: for instance, in a letter sent by Pallucchini to Musei

and Venice: "Arte di questo secolo mormorano quei tanti visitatori che sostano fra le 136 opere ed escono meditabondi, stupefatti poi d'un tratto al vedere ancora verdi le siepi del giardino, azzurro lo spirituale cielo di Venezia sulla gran pace della sponda silenziosa, in carne ed ossa i due remiganti che se ne vengon giù per il canale placido, sul solito barcone lagunare. E si stropicciano gli occhi, dopo averli spalancati, tanto la caduta è stata brusca dal mondo siderale della Luna a quest'umile mondo della Terra; e si toccano, si palpano 'non anch'io fossi dunque un fantasma'". He, moreover, underlined that contradictions of this sort were also clearly stated in the catalogue, where Giulio Carlo Argan explained that "la pura razionalità si confonde con la pura irrazionalità". Remarkably, not even Carlo Scarpa's staging was left unscathed, due to the use of a: "luce astrale – una luce fredda, abbacinante, che fa pensare a quella delle camere operatorie". Cf. Bernardi, M. (1948), "Con la Guggenheim nel mondo della luna. Surrealisti e astrattisti alla Biennale di Venezia".

7 This amount was obtained by adding to a general expense of 300,000 Lire: L. 150,000 for the transport from Venice to Turin and vice versa and L. 100,000 for setting up the central hall of Palazzo Madama. To manage these expenses the Municipal Council asked the Town Council to "aprire una partita di giro" of L. 600,000, to both withdraw for the expenses and pay the incomes. A copy of the draft was sent to Musei Civici director on 3 November. Cf. *Schema di Deliberazione che si restituisce al Servizio Museo Civico* 1948. In the end, the proposal compiled on 8 November, "alle condizioni minime possibili", by the insurance company amounted to L. 322,000. Cf. *Proposta assicurazione incendio [...]* 1948.

8 *Deliberazione della Giunta Municipale in data 16 novembre 1948. N. 64 Mostra a Torino della raccolta Peggy Guggenheim* 1948.

9 Guggenheim, *Letter to Luigi Spazzapan, Umberto Mastrojanni and Angelo Stanlino* 1948. It should also be pointed out that in this letter Mrs. Guggenheim reminded them of the ongoing negotiations to bring her collections to other cities and named Milan, the latest to reach out to her for such a reason. She also remarked on the special treatment accorded to Turin, considering that they had postponed "almeno tre volte gli impegni assunti con C. L. Ragghianti di Firenze e con le Ambasciate Americane Francesi [sic] a Roma, senza contare l'estero e le [loro] faccende private".

Civici director on 22 October, he apologises for having missed a call from Turin who was answered by Umbro Apollonio instead. Following this call the Biennale personnel began to pack the collection in 13 different crates.[10] A few days later Viale wrote a telegram to Mrs Guggenheim to reassure her, saying that the, the Municipal Council had finally approved the deliberation.[11] He then wrote her explaining the reasons behind such delay: the final decision had had to be made by a public institution, but from that moment onwards, he would be the one in charge of every aspect. Lastly, he informed her that the venue would be Palazzo Madama and that the opening could reasonably be expected to take place in the middle of December.[12] Now, it was Viale's turn to be worried about Venice's silence, and since he was not getting any answers to his inquiries, he decided to write to Pallucchini: "Questo mi preoccupa un po', prima perché non vorrei fossero sorte delle difficoltà, quindi perché una mostra siffatta comporta e vuole tempo e accurata preparazione".[13] A letter sent by Vittorio Carrain to the director on 26 November dispels any doubt: in it Peggy Guggenheim's collaborator thanked Viale for his reassurance concerning what he calls "benedetta Mostra a Torino", and agreed to an opening on 15 December. He also reminded him that Mrs. Guggenheim è "[avrebbe desiderato] curare personalmente l'ordinamento della sua collezione come [aveva] fatto a Venezia e come usa[va] fare".[14] In the following week, communications between Turin and Venice were interrupted due to some delays and errors of the postal system.[15] Eventually, on 6 December Viale managed to let Pallucchini know via express mail that he would arrive in

10 In the aforementioned call Viale must have told Apollonio that Palazzo Madama was going to be unavailable for some time due to the previous programming, because Pallucchini assured him that the Biennale could have stored the crates until the shipment. Cf. Pallucchini, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948. Proof of this can be found in the previously mentioned notes, taken by viale: "Data mostra – primi di dicembre – per indisponibilità locali". Cf. Viale, *Notes* 1948. In fact, during those months Palazzo Madama was hosting the exhibition *Mostra dell'Arazzo e del Tappeto*.

11 Viale, *Telegram to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948.

12 Viale, *Letter to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948.

13 Viale, *Letter to Rodolfo Pallucchini* 1948.

14 Carrain, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948. In this letter Carrain asked how long the exhibition was going to last, so that he could be "finalmente preciso alla città di Firenze". Peggy Guggenheim's collaborator also demanded information on the director's decisions regarding the catalogue, as this was also an occasion for him to remind Viale that "il materiale in [loro] possesso sia fotografico che bio-bibliografico [era] abbondante e di buona qualità tale da assicurare la degnissima pubblicazione di un buon catalogo in questi casi oltremodo utile e gradito per [loro] esperienza ai visitatori".

15 On 27 November Viale sent a letter to Peggy Guggenheim to explain to her that he had not received her last letter and to ask her for a copy. Moreover, despite his busy schedule, he volunteered once again to go to Venice and meet her in person to set everything up. Cf. Viale, *Letter to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948. Meanwhile on 4 December

Venice on 9 December.[16] The day after the director's visit to Venice, Carrain wrote him again to thank him and to underline once more the Mrs. Guggenheim's intention of organising her collection according to her own criteria. He also added that in the meantime two additional works had been bought and included in the collection, and that these were to be part of the exhibition in Turin as well.[17]

3 'Lei lo sa che non c'è niente da fare': an Impossible Exhibition

After overcoming various bureaucratic obstacles and several other impediments related to communication everything was finally set in order for this important exhibition to be held in Palazzo Madama. However, it must now be said that, despite the fact that its organisation was almost completed this exhibition newer saw the light. In fact, exactly a month after being approved by the Municipal Council, the aforementioned deliberation concerning the exhibition was discussed by the Town Council during an extraordinary session called on 16 December[18]. After the reading of the text, a heated discussion broke out among those presents. The first to take the floor was Giuseppe Grosso, DC (Democrazia Cristiana), who began by saying that he didn't want to stand against Turin hosting a cultural event as such, since – he said – "la popolazione torinese ha sete di manifestazioni culturali in modo da riversarsi su di esse con quello slancio un po' provinciale". However, he also had to admit that in his opinion the Peggy Guggenheim's collection 'exceeded' in being 'provincial', "in quanto

Carrain wrote to Viale asking him to make the necessary decisions to end such a "laboriosa gestazione". Cf. Carrain, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948.

16 Viale, *Letter to Rodolfo Pallucchini* 1948. In that same folder another express mail from Viale to Peggy Guggenheim, bearing the same message, is also preserved. Cf. Viale, *Letter to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948.

17 Carrain, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948. In this letter important information on the catalogue can be found as well, in fact, Guggenheim's collaborator wrote: "Abbiamo pensato [...] che il catalogo sarebbe più attendibile se lasciata la cruda elencazione per ordine alfabetico si ordinasse con criteri di raggruppamenti rispetto alla affinità e alle tendenze degli artisti rappresentati". This sentence suggests that the Turin catalogue was originally thought of as an alphabetical list, probably due to the lack of experience in handling and valuing such expressions of modern art. For his part, Viale agreed to abandon the idea of the catalogue as a mere list and confirmed that the museum workers could come to Venice the following week to pick up the crates with the truck that would return the works lent by the venetian museums to the previously mentioned *Mostra dell'Arazzo e del Tappeto*. In addition, he reassured him by saying that: "per quello che riguarda l'ordinamento Le confermo che sarà senz'altro ben preziosa la personale opera Sua, per la disposizione dei quadri". Cf. Viale, *Letter to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948.

18 *Sessione straordinaria, Terza seduta – giovedì 16 dicembre 1948. Sommario* 1948, which collects all the councillors' interventions that will be mentioned in this article.

la presentazione che se ne è fatta, come l'espressione delle 'più moderne tendenze dell'arte moderna' ha il tono della signora provinciale che vuole il cappellino all'ultima moda".[19] Far from being a purely artistic consideration, Grosso's speech is more reminiscent of a political attack. In fact, the councillor also complained that such a decision, that involved public spending, instead of being taken by a committee of experts appointed by the Town Council, had been taken by the town councillor themselves. In his opinion, moreover, if "staccato" from the particular context of the Biennale and brought to Turin, "questa roba" would have not helped the visitors to figure modern art out, on the contrary it would have been slightly "disorientante"; solo exhibitions of Braque, Chagall,[20] Rouault or Picasso would have been much more appropriate to pursue such a noble purpose. Moving on, Grosso pointed out that Palazzo Madama was not a suitable venue for this kind of collection, and, ironically, proposed to have the exhibition take place in Castello del Valentino instead, where the *Mostra della Meccanica* had recently been held, so that "si sarebbe potuto vedere una certa affinità negli elementi che formano il substrato e l'espressione della crisi del tempo attuale". Then, to conclude, he declared that such an expense was completely "ingiustificata", since it would be very difficult to have all the money invested back "in quanto si è fatto troppo affidamento su un pubblico che vi andrebbe solo per ridere". Mario Chiarloni, FR.UQ (Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque), was of the same opinion and despite stating at the beginning of his intervention that he respected "in fatto d'arte [...] le opinioni di tutti", however, he ironically proceeded to immediately say that the need of organising an exhibition of Mrs. Guggenheim's collection could be confused with the lack of good art in Italy. He also opposed the proposal to set it up in Palazzo Madama: something that according to

19 While admitting that in 1948 the Biennale had shown "un vasto panorama istruttivo ed interessante dell'arte contemporanea con molte personali che permettevano al pubblico di orientarsi su quello che è la personalità dei diversi artisti", thus "quando si arrivava alla collezione Guggenheim si aveva l'impressione di giungere ad un limite, per cui se vi erano espressioni singole di tendenze artistiche che hanno rappresentato una pagina di storia, vi erano anche molte cose che andavano al di là e significavano posizioni puramente polemiche come, per esempio, i numerosi aggeggi che non si potevano intendere che come incubi sessuali, esasperazioni di tali interpretazioni freudiane". Giuseppe Grosso reiterated his point of view in a press article preserved in the Archivio storico dei Musei Civici as a clipping without a news source, nor a date. Here, he explains that his choice to reject the proposal was not "il frutto dell'invidia delle altre provinciali battute e superate" it was instead "una coerente e soppesata valutazione di ciò che può essere iniziativa culturale del comune". Cf. Grosso, «Perché mi sono opposto alla mostra Guggenheim» 1948.

20 It is interesting to remember that a few months earlier Viale had bought at the Venice Biennale *Dans mon Pays* by Marc Chagall for the GAM (Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Torino) for Fr. 200,000. Cf. Bazzoni, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948. Later, a Chagall solo exhibition was held in Palazzo Madama in 1953.

him could be easily considered "una mancanza di rispetto al patrimonio artistico torinese, ai sentimenti artistici della popolazione". Therefore, while he did not want to oppose the deliberation itself, he strongly suggested to have the collection showcased in one of the pavilions in Parco del Valentino or in the underground gallery in Via Roma.[21] The intervention of Roberto Cravero, PLI (Partito Liberale Italiano), is a special case: the councillor, in fact, to avoid criticising the collection itself decided to read some excerpts taken from an unspecified text by Salvador Dalì, in which he explained that his father had wanted to kill him after he had discovered his "bizzarrie". Cravero also brought to the councillors' attention some journals so that they could make an informed decision regarding the 'appropriateness' of the exhibition. Through such peculiar behaviour he believed to have expressed "meglio che col proprio pensiero un giudizio sull'opportunità della mostra, lasciando arbitro il Consiglio". In one of the shortest interventions of the session Assessor Luigi Bruzzone, PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano), asked rhetorically if such an exhibition could really be beneficial to the people, since, as he understood, "queste manifestazioni non [parlavano] né al cuore, né al cervello". He also thought that, due to its "carattere enimmistico", recovering the expenses would be very difficult. After four strongly critical interventions it was PCI Assessor Danilo Giorsetti's turn. He tried to explain that Guggenheim's collection was to be judged not upon aesthetic criteria, but as a "documentario storico". He also added that "rifiutare, con giudizi aprioristici, di esporre al pubblico la collezione, rifiutare di far conoscere determinate correnti artistiche, è indice di quella stessa mentalità che 70 anni or sono, ha fatto sì che si rifiutassero le esposizioni degli Impressionisti nei Salons parigini". Bringing this collection to Turin would not endanger the morality of young people and above all it could set Turin free from "quel carattere provinciale da tanti deprecato".[22] Right after Giorsetti's intervention, Andrea Guglielminetti (DC) took the floor to dispute Chiarloni's claim that this exhibition was an "espressione di estrema sinistra".[23] It is the Former PCI Mayor Celeste Negarville, to answer to Guglielminetti's political insinuation, explaining that "la questione non impegn[ava] i gruppi alla disciplina di partito". However, he generally

21 He also asked Attilio Aloisi and Danilo Giorsetti to give a conference about the collection, in order to help all the councillors to finally understand its supposed importance.

22 In his intervention Assessor Giorsetti also pointed out that recovering from the expenses, finding 5,500 visitors, would not be difficult, and as a proof of that he mentioned the interest concerning the exhibition that had risen in both the Municipal and Town Council. It is useful to mention that the Ente Provinciale del Turismo had agreed to allocate L. 150,000 to co-organise the exhibition. Cf. *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948.

23 No proof of such a statement in Chiarloni's intervention has been found in the documents preserved in the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino.

agreed that it was not right to have such an exhibition, where "la stragrande maggioranza delle 160 opere soffoca quel poco che vi è di buono", organised by the municipal institutions.[24] The last and conclusive intervention was that of Assessor Attilio Aloisi who firstly admitted to not having the necessary expertise but added that he was willing to learn and not simply "stroncare immediatamente". Afterward, he sarcastically complimented his colleagues who were able to investigate the collection in order to discuss about it with full knowledge of the facts. In his opinion a lot of citizens would like to visit such works "per interpretarl[i] con spirito serio, sereno e non polemico", contrary to what happened in that occasion, when "da tante parti si sono levate voci così severe contro questa mostra", that nonetheless would have had a more than national interest. However, before his conclusion, he once again tried to explain that he wanted to have an exhibition of Peggy Guggenheim's collection taking place in Turin, so as to not let the city fall in its usual 'provincialism' considering that such topics were being discussed all over the world. That was the reason why he would have liked to debate again concerning this matter, but with very different feelings, since an exhibition cannot be offensive, but severe judgements definitively could. Therefore, the extraordinary session ended with Aloisi withdrawing his proposal and finally obtaining the approval of all the councillors.[25]

On 19 December, Viale wrote to Peggy Guggenheim "con molto dispiacere e con viva mortificazione" to tell her that for the moment

24 He also said that the collection would have given "un contributo negativo" and he agreed with Bruzzone about considering it an incomprehensible form of art, "il linguaggio di una setta di iniziati".

25 The next day, such news was of course reported in the newspapers. For example, in *La Nuova Stampa* a journalist summarised the entire debate, highlighting that in the previous days the Municipal Council was already going through a crisis due to the supposed resignation of a socialist assessor. He amusedly described what he called "un piacevole intermezzo di carattere artistico". He mentioned Cravero showcasing the painting belonging to Peggy Guggenheim *Nascita dei piaceri liquidi* by Dali, to whose sight two councillors "sarebbero arrossite pudicamente" while among those presents "si diffonde[va] una risata irrefrenabile". The reporter also specified that when Aloisi decided to withdraw the proposal "i consiglieri si applau[dir]ono a vicenda con grande calore". Cf. «Ai nostri consiglieri comunali non piace la pittura moderna. Tornato il sindaco si parlerà della crisi in seno alla Giunta», 1948. This episode is also mentioned in «Voci di Crisi nella Giunta Comunale. Parere contrario per la mostra a Torino della raccolta d'arte moderna Guggenheim», 1948. Marziano Bernardi returned on this topic on 30 December in an article in which he presented a little exhibition of "briose fantasie pittoriche" made by Aloisi, who "con la sua proposta di portare a Torino la collezione Guggenheim scatenò recentemente al consiglio comunale quel putiferio che i bravi consiglieri avrebbero fatto meglio a contenere nei limiti d'una discussione amministrativa, anziché entrare in questioni d'estetica e di cultura artistica nelle quali evidentemente sono meno edotti". Cf. Bernardi M. (1948), «Mostre d'Arte. Una 'Via crucis' – Maschere – Al Circolo degli Artisti – Antichità». Aloisi's experience as a painter was also mentioned by Aloisi himself in his intervention, when he declared not to be an "estremista", nor a "cubista", but an "espressionista".

the exhibition had to be suspended. He explained that the deliberation, which was "ispirata ad alte considerazioni di indole artistica e culturale, che tenevano conto unicamente dell'importanza e della significazione della Sua raccolta", had been rejected by the councillors. He did not mince words to explain that the decision was taken according to a merely political, "illogico criterio", following "una condanna dell'arte astratta che sarebbe stata emanata di recente".[26] The political reason behind this rejection is also clearly mentioned by Viale in a Letter to Romolo Bazzoni, managing director of the Biennale: "Riservatissimamente Le posso dire che determinante è stato l'intervento contrario di uno degli autorevoli membri dell'Amministrazione comunista,[27] che aveva forse presente una recente condanna dell'arte astratta. – E quando c'entrano dei motivi politici Lei lo sa che non c'è niente da fare".[28] Three days later, when the echo of such news finally reached the lagoon, Carrain wrote to Viale to thank him once again for his commitment to the project and to end "malinconicamente" any communications concerning "questa raccolta tanto avversata".[29]

26 Viale, *Letter to Peggy Guggenheim* 1948. However, he ended his letter presenting the option of organising the exhibition in the future and in a different venue. Ironically, not knowing the outcome of the debate and not having received yet Viale's last letter, on 20 December Guggenheim wrote to Viale a short letter in which she gave him the latest instructions concerning how to unpack the works, to give an example: "Vorrei raccomandarLe a scanso di errate interpretazioni, come successo a Venezia, che nel disimballare la scultura mobile in ferro di 'Calder' qualche addetto all'operazione non la scambi per rottami di ferro od oggetti d'imballaggio". Cf. Guggenheim, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948.

27 This information is only partially true: please note once again that Attilio Aloisi, the main promoter of the deliberation, was a member of the PCI, such as Danilo Giorsetti, its main defender, while Giuseppe Grosso the first councillor to oppose it was a member of DC.

28 Viale, *Letter to Romolo Bazzoni* 1948

29 Carrain, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1948. In the post-scriptum Carrain asked Viale to explain to them in more detail what happened during the debate, since – he says –: "dopo le irrefrenabili risate dei Sigg. consiglieri vorremmo a nostra volta divertirci un po' alle uscite di una giunta di tanto senno e di tanta cultura estetica". Viale tried to mitigate these impressions on 3 January writing to Carrain to explain how the reporters had misrepresented the interventions and that what was being discussed wasn't art, nor aesthetics, but only "ragioni politiche [...] e contrasti interni e locali, per i quali possiamo essere dolenti noi torinesi; ma che debbono invece far sorridere Mrs. Guggenheim e ogni intenditore". Cf. Viale, *Letter to Vittorio Carrain* 1949. In this letter the director also asked that they accept the new proposal which a different unspecified institution in Turin would soon make: in fact, having received such a promotion the exhibition would certainly be a great success. As can be read in the letter that Carrain sent to Turin 7 January, the collection would not have been showcased in a different venue of Turin, but in La Strozzina, Florence. Cf. Carrain, *Letter to Vittorio Viale*, 1949. The exhibition was held precisely in order to inaugurate the new exhibition space. Cf. Savonuzzi, *Letter to Vittorio Viale* 1949.

Turin had to wait until 1975 to host the collection of Peggy Guggenheim: the exhibition was held in the GAM from 3 December 1975 to 29 February 1976[30]. In the catalogue, at the end of her introduction, Peggy Guggenheim recalls this episode:

> Anni addietro mi chiesero di imprestare i quadri della mia collezione per una mostra da allestire a Torino. Ma questo progetto non si realizzò e ora, nel momento in cui la mostra si apre, io sono davvero molto felice che la città di Torino abbia deciso di ospitare la mia collezione. (Guggenheim 1975)

4 Conclusions

There is not much more to say in order to comment further on this episode, an event that is certainly of secondary importance in the national cultural panorama. However, it nonetheless exemplifies how politics – powers – can have a voice in matters of art. It is necessary to consider that at the time Italy was trying, in different ways, to make up for the time lost during the Ventennio and World War II, and that as we have seen, artists are always ahead of their time when compared to their contemporary institutions. What emerges clearly in this story is that it shows once again how often to deny something is more significant than to simply accept it. This brings us to reflect upon an issue as old as time: behind who does the real power hide, censorship or the censored?

30 Turin's Mayor Diego Novelli, Assessor for Culture Giorgio Balmas, Ezio Gribaudo and, of course, Peggy Guggenheim made up the Organising Committee.

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Aby Warburg and the Political Iconography of Fascism: An Analysis of Symbols of Power

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Abstract This paper explores the crucial role of political iconography in conveying power and ideology. It highlights the importance of contextualising images within the public space, examining Aby Warburg's perspective on political imagery, with a focus on Fascist political iconography. Warburg's interest lies in how Italian Fascism revived ancient Rome and reinterpreted symbols of power. He underscores the fundamental role of ancient pathos in the emergence of twentieth-century totalitarianism. This paper seeks to consolidate and shed light on Warburg's reflections concerning Italian fascism, offering a fresh perspective on political iconography.

Keywords Aby Warburg. Political iconology. Political iconography. Fascism. Symbols. Propaganda.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Birth of Political Iconography. – 3 Aby Warburg and Political Iconography. – 4 Hamburg, July 16, 1927, Erich Rothacker at the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek*. – 5 The Hamburg Plate of 1927. – 6 Lack of Distance: The Violence of Fascist Re-paganization. – 7 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Since classical antiquity, the West has implemented a complex system of signs to identify itself. In his lecture, "The Capitol during the Renaissance: A Symbol of the Imperial Idea" ([1965] 1990, 186-212), Fritz Saxl proposed the fascinating view that the history of Europe can be understood and narrated through symbols. Saxl tells how symbols, born and raised in classical antiquity, dissolved with the advent of Christianity, only to reappear later in the Christian era, enriched

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by new ideas and forces. He affirms that symbols constitute the very fabric of European history.

Thus, Western identity presents a long series of survivals that reminds us how the history of our culture is a history of force and violence. Aby Warburg developed the Mnemosyne Atlas, a device to investigate these symbols. In particular, political iconography is the discipline that proposes to study the images and representations of power, starting from Aby Warburg's method.

2 The Birth of Political Iconography

However, what is political iconology? In 1999, Professor Lea Ritter Santini held a five-lecture course at the San Carlo Foundation in Modena, whose Italian title was unequivocal: "Iconologia politica".[1]

Lea Ritter Santini, a Germanist, philologist, and Italian literary critic, had a significant interest in the role of images in the history of art and literature, delving into the themes of literary iconology and political iconology. From March 15 to 19, 1999, Ritter Santini offered reflections and analyses to the audience at the Fondazione San Carlo regarding the origin and evolution of this still-defining discipline. She dedicated the first lecture to the question: "What does political iconology mean?".

Within the archives of the Fondazione San Carlo, transcriptions of the lectures do not exist, but there are recordings, which are now over twenty years old. Amidst the rustling of the lecture hall, the scholar ponders that defining political iconology is not as simple as it may seem. Political iconology is not just the study of political images – "that would be simplistic" – but also the political interpretation of these images. Ritter Santini begins by saying: "Among common people things penetrate more effectively through the eyes than through the ears because the populace internalizes what it sees better than what it hears", in the idea that visual perceptions make a stronger impression on the mind than words. Interestingly, Ritter Santini says that political instances primarily adhered to these visibility rules, resigning from direct argumentation.

The resignation from direct argumentation is the matter. "It is a visible sign which" Villacañas Berlanga (quoted in Carbone 2008, 16) says "[that] anticipates primarily a secret".

Ritter Santini's 1999 lecture is a genuine work proposal that is up to us to collect, with the suggestion to look at images differently. The

1 For further information, please see: `https://www.fondazionesancarlo.it/conferenza/iconologia-politica/`. I extend my gratitude to Fondazione San Carlo for granting me access to the lecture recordings.

scholar asserts that this concept of iconography does not immediately emerge from the studies of Aby Warburg. Although, of course, we must return to Aby Warburg.

As we know, Warburg did not leave a theoretical program. However, from his work and the work of his *Kreis*, from Bing, Panofsky, Saxl, and unpublished material, we know that there was a seed for the definition of the discipline of political iconography, mainly gathered by the Warburg's heirs.

In particular, it was Martin Warnke who dealt with political iconography. Art historian, Warnke worked as a professor at the University of Marburg and Hamburg, becoming later director of the Warburg House, which he transformed into a research centre focused on political iconography, equipping it with an iconographic thematic index of great relevance. Together with Uwe Fleckner and Hendrik Ziegler, Warnke wrote a substantial manual of Political Iconography (2011), and his study perspective was decisive in defining the discipline, influencing his students Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, who followed in his footsteps.

Politische Ikonographie

A concrete example in Warnke's essay "Politische Ikonographie" (1992) in *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*, edited by Andreas Bayer, can help us better understand the concept and method of political iconography.

> In 1742, in the Netherlands, a pamphlet was circulated that depicted and commented on a scene from Austrian history. Empress Maria Theresa, at the time of her ascent to power, faced a country in turmoil, beset by credit problems, divisions among ministers, and an unstable public opinion. Additionally, the Elector of Bavaria had occupied Upper Austria. In a desperate move, the empress wrote a letter to her field marshal, Count Khevenhüller, who had initiated the reconquest and defence. This letter was accompanied by a portrait of the empress and her son, suggesting an implicit appeal to their images: "You have before your eyes a young queen abandoned by the entire world: what do you think of her fate? What do you think of the destiny of this child? Look into the eyes of your princess…". The image in the pamphlet shows the field marshal's reaction as he stands before the tent with the portraits in his left hand and the letter in the other, displaying them to all his officers emerging from the tents. The pamphlet's text recounts how the soldiers covered the portraits with kisses, brandished their swords, praised the empress, and renewed their oath of allegiance. This gesture demonstrates how sending portraits profoundly and

> chivalrously influenced the military. In her most significant distress, they understood that their sovereign had made a final effort to communicate through supplicating words and her bodily image. (Warnke 1992, 23-8)

The role of the political image within the public sphere is crucial, as Frederic J. Schwartz (2020) aptly highlighted in his essay "Public Sphere". Schwartz outlines a concept of the public sphere that draws from Jürgen Habermas's theory of "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (141). This space is open to all citizens and is used for discussion and interaction among individuals, following Habermas's ideal type. Within this public sphere, the discussion revolves around matters of common interest, and participants are expected to seek consensus on the common good, transcending individual interests. Khevenhüller steps out of the tent to share it with others instead of examining it privately. It is crucial to differentiate and analyse how something initially private becomes a matter of public interest, especially when an image is used for political purposes. In such cases, it must be disseminated within a public space. However, it is equally vital to consider the originator of this image to ensure it has a substantial impact. The public sphere should be defined as a space with various actors, allowing the political image to serve different purposes. Considering this secondary aspect of the image, its political function, and its underlying message is essential.

We can agree that these ideas and this method are not all immediately linked to Aby Warburg.

However, they are "mediately" linked, as Ritter Santini asserts.

As a cornerstone of political iconology, Ritter Santini points to one of Warburg's essays, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther" ([1920] 1966). In this extensive essay about woodcut usage, he delves into the topic of employing astrological imagery during the German Reformation. He focuses on how both the Catholic Church and Luther's supporters harnessed visual elements for propagandistic aims. Scholars such as Philipp Jost Klenner (2007) and Horst Bredekamp, all agree that this essay is the foundational document "not only for political iconography but also for the history of visual media" (Bredekamp 2003, 418-28).

Warburg did not produce any other essay or didactic document specifically written and published on the subject. Nevertheless, he was deeply involved in investigating iconology to the propagandistic and political space, including that of his time.

3 Aby Warburg and Political Iconography

In his *scienza senza nome*, as Agamben called it (1984), Aby Warburg laid the fundamental visual foundations of Western culture, primarily focusing on the Renaissance. While he never explicitly coined the terms 'Political Iconology' or 'Political Iconography', he had a highly critical view of the political aspect, and his work intertwined with the political analysis of his contemporary era.

The writing of his essay "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther" emerged as a direct response to one of the most dramatic events in Warburg's life and contemporaneous world: World War I. In reaction to the propaganda of the First World War, Warburg noted that "the horror-fantasy of the ongoing war will be inconceivable without a picture-historical analysis of the belief in monsters" (Diers 1997, 29). Concurrently, he endeavored to develop such an analysis of his present, carrying out incredible work in collecting and analysing images from the war, striving to bring order to the complexity of an event that deeply frightened him.

De Laude (2015) notes that from the onset of the war, Warburg devoted time daily to reading ten foreign newspapers. He clipped war news, classified and organized them in his archive, accompanying them with comments or captions. Between 1914 and 1918, the Library acquired at least 1,500 works related to the war. Kriegskartothek was established the *Kriegskartothek* a collection of file cards designed to preserve and categorize elements constituting the complex 'psychomachia' of the modern era. The collected photographs included ancient buildings, religious structures, monuments shattered by bombs, military parades, Greek columns in ruins, aerial images representing modern warfare, and trench scenes entangled with barbed wire (Didi-Huberman 2011). Although not organized into an atlas as initially intended, this documentation exhibits images that already adhere to Warburg's cultural science principles with a precise political dimension. In his titanic effort, he tried to prevent Italy from entering the war and to keep the European intellectual context together, and initiated the publication of an illustrated magazine (*La Guerra del 1914* and *La Guerra del 1914-1915*) in Italian, founded with ethnologist Georg Thilenius and linguist Giulio Panconcelli-Calzia.

A proper analysis of modern *Schlagbilder* (recurrent images) would emerge only later.

The attention that Warburg dedicated to his contemporaneity also pertained to the revival of paganism in the modern era, particularly fascism disguised as Roman antiquity, the central theme of this paper. This observational approach becomes evident in several visual plates prepared for his Hamburg lectures. It is especially evident in the last few plates of the Mnemosyne Atlas, also known as 'political

plates', where Warburg observes his time: Plate 77: *Re-emergence of the Ancient in the Modern Age*, Plate 78: *Church and State*, and Plate 79: *Eating God: Paganism in the Church*.[2] Equally noteworthy are the annotations in the 1929 *Roman Diary* (Warburg, Bing 2005), compiled in collaboration with Gertrud Bing, and the letters sent to Hamburg (stored at the Warburg Institute Archive, therefore WIA). In these letters, particularly those to his wife, Warburg hastily sketched iconographic analyses of the resurgences he observed in Rome in 1929. Warburg closely examined how ancient Rome was reinterpreted and instrumentalized under the fascist regime, shedding light on the complex intersections between art history and politics in his work. His contribution to the emergence of political iconology reflects his dedication to exploring the intricate connections between art, culture, and politics.

Warburg and Fascism

During his stay in Rome on February 11, 1929, Warburg had the opportunity to attend the Mass, witnessing the signing of the Lateran Pacts between the Vatican and the Italian State. Although Warburg remained in St. Peter's Square, observing the crowd's reactions, he later participated in the following papal blessing. The scholar only saw the signing of the Lateran Pacts at the Lateran Palace a few days later at the cinema. In the diary of the KWB, Warburg commented on the cinematic documentation of the treaty signing:

> Im Kino die Conciliazione miterlebt. Eine zauber hafte Mithilfe des Erlebens, trotz allem. Kardinal Gasparri und Mussolini in ihrem Aufstieg aus dem Volk (ärmliche Dörfer erschienen als Geburtsstätten) der Volksseele präsentiert. Man sah vorher den Papst, wie er die Missionare (farbig zum Teil) empfängt, wie er sein neues Auto besteigt. […] Das Feinste: Mussolini erscheint am Versöhnungstage nirgends in der Offentlichkeit: nur die beiden Flaggen erscheinen nebeneinander auf dem Balkon. Ich war erstaunt über sein Lippenspiel: ein böser schöner caesarischer Mund. […] Kardinal Gasparn saß da unabhängig vom Bewußtsein des Beobachtet werdens, wie ein monumentaler alter gewiegter Dorfschulze.[3] (Tagebuch der KBW, S. 410, February 18, 1929)

2 For more information on this topic, please refer to the reading paths of the plates created by *La Rivista di Engramma* and related insights: `https://www.engramma.it/eOS/core/frontend/eos_atlas_index.php?id_articolo=879`; `https://www.engramma.it/eOS/core/frontend/eos_atlas_index.php?id_articolo=880`.

3 Translation by the author: "I experienced the Conciliation at the cinema. A magical participation in the event, despite everything. Cardinal Gasparri and Mussolini, in their rise from the people (poor villages appeared as birthplaces), presented to the people's

As Gino Querini (2015) notes, Warburg's interest in fascism was remembered by several witnesses. Arnaldo Momigliano (1987, 92) reports an account of the celebrations of the treaty as given by Gertrud Bing:

> There were tremendous popular demonstrations in Rome […] Mussolini became overnight the "man of providence", and in such an inconvenient position he remained for many years. Circulation in the streets of Rome was not very easy on that day, and it so happened that Warburg disappeared from the sight of his companions. They anxiously waited for him back at the Hotel Eden, but there was no sign of him for dinner. Bing and others even telephoned the police. However, Warburg reappeared at the hotel before midnight, and when he was reproached, he soberly replied something like this in his picturesque German: "You know that throughout my life, I have been interested in the revival of paganism and pagan festivals. Today, I had the chance of my life to be present at the re-paganization of Rome, and you complain that I remained to watch it!".

Starting from his studies on the visual survivals of Western tradition, Warburg undoubtedly realized how authoritarian regimes of the early twentieth century, including the rising German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, comprehended and exploited the survival possibilities of political, religious, or astrological symbols, using them for propagandist purposes. In the final part of his life, this theme captured his attention, so it was included within the Mnemosyne Atlas and can be found in panels 77-9, as well as in other studies.

4 Hamburg, July 16, 1927, Erich Rothacker at the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek*

According to the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek* diaries (hereafter: KWB), analysed by Fleckner and Woldt (2012, 135-40), Warburg's work on the political images of his time had already begun to take shape in 1927, in the dawn phase of the development of the Atlas.

On July 16, 1927, Professor Erich Rothacker, a philosopher of culture from Heidelberg, was invited by Warburg to deliver a speech at the KWB, as consideration was given to appointing him as a philosophy professor in Hamburg. The event, attended by a select group of university

souls. Previously, you could see the Pope receiving the missionaries (some of them coloured) and getting into his new car. […] The most remarkable thing was that Mussolini did not appear publicly on the day of reconciliation; only the two flags appeared side by side on the balcony. I was surprised by his lip movements: a wickedly beautiful Caesar-like mouth. […] Cardinal Gasparri sat there, regardless of the awareness of being observed, like a monumental old and shrewd village chief".

professors from the University of Hamburg, appeared to test Rothacker's academic qualifications in an unofficial scientific symposium.

Current research on Rothacker primarily highlights the ambivalence of his scholarly activity. On the one hand, the philosopher has been identified as one of the leading figures in the National Socialist philosophy of culture. On the other hand, he is remembered for laying the foundations of modern cultural anthropology. Erich Rothacker developed the concept of a philosophical-cultural dictionary and attempted to combine philosophical, sociological, psychological, artistic, historical, anthropological, and biological approaches. Since Warburg searched for criteria to establish a culture and image-oriented history of modern art, Rothacker's cultural and anthropological approaches must have piqued his interest. He thus arranged for a collaboration with the Heidelberg scholar, organizing the meeting at the KWB where the research project's foundations would be presented (Fleckner, Woldt 2012).

Therefore, at 5:00 pm on July 16, 1927, Rothacker delivered a lecture at the Library. According to Fleckner and Woldt (2012), Rothacker had clearly understood the implications the colloquial lecture would have for his research and career, and despite expressing genuine interest, after the conference, he was not hired by Hamburg University.

The complex figure of the philosopher was accompanied by a latent racial ideology, which could have been the reason for Warburg's rejection. This hypothesis is not unfounded, especially considering Rothacker's subsequent intellectual alignment with the Third Reich and, more importantly, the kind of exposure that Warburg presented to him that day.

On that occasion, Warburg also delivered a brief dissertation, speaking about the function of social mnemonics as engrams of ancient styles of the gestural language of passions. As documented in the KWB diaries on July 14, 1927, he asked his collaborators for assistance in designing an appropriate presentation: "For Rothacker, I must have a wall of images ready". The archive of the Warburg Institute in London preserves a small volume of photographic exhibition boards and schematic drawings that document the series of images created in a few days. However, a complete transcript of the lecture that would allow for the reconstruction of Warburg's exact words for this event cannot be found. Presumably, he improvised his approximately 75-minute speech, taking into account two exhibition boards set up for this purpose.

Once again, the assembly of images for Warburg served as an object of study and an operational and political tool. Perhaps a test for his guest.

The Rejection of Rothacker

As usual, Warburg presented a small series of images on two blackboards. The title of his speech referred only to his work on the "collective memory of expressions", which he illustrated with concrete examples. On the first blackboard, Warburg displayed images related to representations of *Fortuna* or *Kairos* and other motifs within visual usage. In contrast, on the other blackboard, he staged political symbols from the Assyrian Empire to the Renaissance, from Baroque to Fascism. Warburg demonstrated how ancient motifs continued to exist in modernity through images from Mussolini's propaganda. Once he had discovered that the traditional visual formation of this kind was a central topic of his research, Warburg certainly could not ignore how authoritarian regimes of the early twentieth century, including resurgent German National Socialism and Italian Fascism, understood and exploited the possibilities of survival of political, religious, or astrological symbols for propagandistic purposes. His speech undoubtedly drew apparent conclusions from the comparison of these images. His research led him to critically evaluate contemporary visual politics, which served as a testing ground for his theories about the history of culture.

Erich Rothacker, in all likelihood, could not ignore the criticism contained in those images, carriers of a state ideology that was closely aligned with his political convictions. Rothacker wrote twice to Warburg, complimenting him on the fascinating presentation,[4] but he referred only to historical iconographic material, such as *Kairos*, the sail, and the charioteer, without adding remarks on the 'political thrust' delivered by the Hamburg scholar. Sometime later, Rothacker himself gave a lecture in August 1933 titled *The Foundations and Ideas of National Socialist Cultural Policy*. In his lecture, he mentioned the historical underpinnings of fascist ideology, which had previously been critically analysed on Warburg's blackboards. He also discussed the role of Roman civilization in the thought of the Italian fascist state alongside the tradition of the Roman Empire.

The visual clues provided by Warburg regarding Mussolini and his efforts to connect with ancient influences demonstrate how fundamental he considered history in his image-based discipline. From this, Warburg developed an approach to the function of social mnemonics as a conservator of the dynamograms of the gestural language of passions. This approach allowed him to show historical and contemporary worldview forms through images, which he used here as a warning.

4 Letters from Rothacker to Warburg, after the conference: WIA GC/19229 21/07/1927; WIA GC/19230 30/07/1927.

Figure 1 Commemorative stamp of the Italian Social Republic, 1944, depicting the head of a destroyed "Italia turrita" statue with a *Fascio* as a symbol. *50 Centesimi* nominal value, issued as part of the 'Destroyed buildings and monuments – 2nd emission' series. Here reproduced for illustrative purposes, due to the presence of the *Fascio*

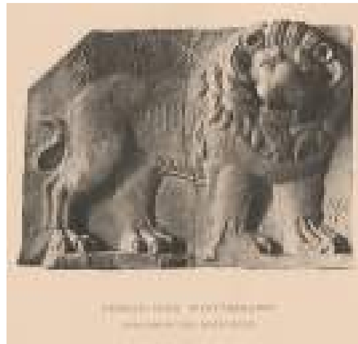

Figure 2 Lion Horoscope from the West Terrace of Nemrut Dağ, Mausoleum of Antiochus I (69-34 B.C.), Turkey

Figure 3 Postes Persanes, 10 kran Iran issue, 1909. Here reproduced for illustrative purposes, due to the presence of the lion

Aby Warburg and his tool, the *Kulturwissenschaft Bibliothek*, foreshadowed the scientific and political development of Rothacker, whose cultural theory would eventually transform into a racial theory in the service of an authoritarian state ideology.

5 The Hamburg Plate of 1927

According to the analysis of the KBW diaries conducted by Fleckner and Woldt, we do not have a precise title for the montage that Warburg presented on July 16, 1927. Instead, we have a description of the themes, which refer to the "collective memory of expressions".

During the preparation of his panels, Warburg took notes regarding the historical migration of images, the roots of reception, and the political consequences of analyzing the motif he was examining, following the continuous destiny of ancient motifs within Italian fascism. As previously mentioned, it is on the second panel that Warburg stages a discussion, if not a harsh critique, regarding the political iconography of fascism and, above all, Mussolini's self-representation.

On the panel, three sections featured a selection of contemporary postage stamps, including Mussolini's emblem of power [fig. 1]. Warburg considered postage stamps to be powerful image vehicles and means of transforming visual communications in which the pathos formulas already developed since antiquity continued their journey through time and space into modernity. According to Fleckner and

Woldt, during the conference, Warburg spoke about the motif of bundles of *fasci* and axes, which the Italian Fascists had appropriated. The bundles of *fasci* appearing on the stamps were described as an extension of the external body that conferred omnipotent awareness upon its bearers. For Warburg, it was a sign of an extended form of dominion, a tangible dominion of violent masses.

According to Fleckner and Woldt (2012), the composition of the 1927 table began with Assyrian representations of King Antiochus I Theos at Nemrut Dağ, where the lion symbolizes royal power **[fig. 2]**, and the ruler secures power through a handshake with the God of light, Mithra. The lion, understood as a celestial companion of the sun and simultaneously as the throne of justice, is juxtaposed in the montage with the cover of an Italian book by Paolo Ardali, published in 1926, entitled *San Francesco e Mussolini*.

Warburg's montage highlighted Mussolini's appropriation of numerous political and religious contents across cultures and eras, also based on his studies of postage stamps. He positioned images cut directly next to each other and inserted two Persian postage stamps with a lion emblem **[fig. 3]**, making it clear the fascist visual propaganda's intention to sacralize Mussolini for political purposes. Warburg's interest and fascination seemed to focus not on Mussolini as a person but on his manipulative visual rhetoric.

6 Lack of Distance: The Violence of Fascist Re-paganization

The fascist appropriation of ancient motifs appeared to Warburg as both fascinating and unbearably violent because, in the scholar's view, fascism did not make ethical use of symbols.

6.1 Fascist Emblem on Postage Stamps

In August 1927, Warburg joined a conference on postage stamps. His lecture, later incorporated into Panel 77 of Mnemosyne, revolved around two images that elaborated on ancient models. On one side, there was a postage stamp from Barbados featuring the King of England **[fig. 4]** seated on a marine chariot drawn by sea monsters, and on the other side, representations of *fasci* on Italian Fascist postage stamps **[fig. 3]**. Warburg argued that the King of England on the Barbados postage stamp did not pretend to be the God Neptune but metaphorically attributed power to himself. However, the same did not apply to the Fascist bundles of *fasci* on the stamps, which were seen as a symbol of violence not conceived metaphorically but as a sign that instilled fear and terror of political sovereignty. "Metaphoric distance

[is] destroyed through the immediacy of the violence in the symbol of the symbol, through Mussolini's axe" (Johnson 2012).

In his essay titled "On the Political Use of Images: Some Reflections on the Last Panels of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas" (2015), Gino Querini provides a dense reflection on this, highlighting the concept of distance at the core of Warburg's reasoning about postage stamps.

> The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the foundational act of human civilization. ([1929] 2017, transl. by M. Rampley)

For Warburg, the scientist is the one who seeks to "insert the conceptual space of rationality between oneself and the object" (Querini 2015, 7), the so-called *Denkraum der Besonnenheit*. Therefore, the difference between the postage stamp with the King portraying Neptune and the Fascist postage stamp with the axe should not be read as an opposition between reason and pathos but as an opposition between the balance of pathos and form against an imbalance.

As Warburg noted, the postage stamp featuring the King of England had a peculiar character of proximity and detachment that was lacking in Fascist iconography. Gombrich described Warburg's thoughts on this matter:

> Warburg was pleased to find a contemporary monarch who still exploited the inherent power of this ancient symbol on a postage stamp. According to Warburg's interpretation, this postage stamp obeyed the true laws of symbolism to maintain its metaphorical distance. It does not claim to be reality; it is shown in grisaille, the visual equivalent of the quotation mark in language. The King never pretends to be Neptune. He only compares his power to that of the old God. In Warburg's cryptic terms, a "dynamic symbol with metaphorical distance achieved through the mnemonic catharsis of archaeologisation". (Gombrich 1986, 264)

This use of postage stamps carries a form of respect from its viewers through the visual use of "as if". It is somewhat ethical: the legacy of antiquity acts as a "black box", explains Querini, as an intermediary that provides the right degree of distance and balance. The same cannot be said for the retrogressive representation of antiquity by fascism. Both England and Italy drew from the same mnemonic "figurative archive". However, while the English sovereign saw himself as Neptune, Mussolini saw himself as the "man of divine providence". The crowd manipulation effect was evident: Warburg was an eyewitness that not only did Mussolini present himself as a god but that the masses accepted this view.

Figura 4 'Colony Badge', The British King as Neptune in his Chariot, Barbados Stamp, 1916. Fragment of a stamp panel. © The Warburg Institute, London

Figure 5 Mussolini with his pet lion, press photo, 1924

6.2 Lion

The use of the lion symbol also posed significant problems for Warburg, expressed through the plate montage by juxtaposing Persian postage stamps **[fig. 3]** and the Assyrian representations at Nemrut Dağ **[fig. 2]**, where the lion is present as an attribute of power.

As noted by Jost Philipp Klenner in an essay with the emblematic title *Mussolini and the Lion: Aby Warburg as the Creator of Political Iconography* (2007), another symbol of power recognized by Warburg was precisely the lion as an attribute of the sovereign. Mussolini occasionally self-represented with the lion, in the form of self-stylization that Warburg had first observed in 1924 in a photograph depicting the dictator with a lioness in his vehicle **[fig. 5]**, published worldwide in the daily press.

Mussolini appeared in several photos with his lion. In a letter to his wife dated February 13, 1924, Warburg made notes on observations he had conceived while reading the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*: "Behind this lies something pagan; the domesticated 'Monstrum' (in miniature) as an amplification and elevation of personality; an imperial triumph".[5]

On the one hand, the photograph highlighted the dictator travelling with a conventional symbol of power. However, on the other

5 WIA GC/37309.

hand, according to Klenner (2007), something decisive has changed in the arrangement of symbols since the rise of photography. Mussolini's lion was no longer a symbol of classical origin, as found on coins, emblems, paintings, and sculptures; it was alive. In this way, the beast in Mussolini's arms functioned as a citation of classical sovereignty iconography: the sovereign next to the lion as a heraldic animal. Nevertheless, at the same time, that image was a photograph and immortalized Mussolini with his pet. The further change by photojournalism gave us a portrait of the sovereign through mass media, as underscored by Julia Modes in her essay "Pressefotografie als Spielball der politischen Ikonographie" (2022, 149-71).

6.3 Religious Motif

However, Warburg did not simply mean that the lion belonged to the classical symbols of political domination. "And yet, there is more behind it", Warburg insisted and referred to another newspaper clipping he had already noted in the fall of 1923. As Klenner underscores, Warburg found a sentence from Mussolini's socialist-era memoirs in a review of Fritz Schotthöfer's biography of Mussolini, in which the dictator claimed he was born on July 29, 1883, in Varano del Costa, "on a Sunday, at 2 pm… The sun had entered the constellation of Leo for eight days". Mussolini's astrological annotation inspired Warburg to interpret the photograph with the lion as a survival of an ancient power formula, the Sun god, who ascends to the sky with his chariot. Once again, the presence in the plate of the Assyrian representations of the lion relief at Nemrut Dağ is explanatory: the lion has the moon and several stars over his body, representing the horoscope of Antiochus I Theos.

In Warburg's eyes, the Duce allowed himself an *imitatio deorum*. Here, too, it was not about referring to the representation of the ancient but about the actual solar birth. Klenner highlights that Warburg's analysis went even further. In Warburg's understanding, Mussolini's iconography reunited the ancient and the modern through medieval *imitatio Christi*. By drawing on Italy's religious past, Mussolini positioned himself not only as a pagan god but as Christ, as a genuine saint.

Adjectives attributed to the name of Mussolini and his figure were: "august", "righteous", "saint", and "blessed". In his correspondence, many letters were also from priests or monks, caught up in the emotional involvement of the myth of Romanity and the Empire. The repetitiveness of the concept of Mussolini's divine is truly impressive. Pope Pius XI himself, after the signing of the Concordat in 1929, referred to Mussolini as the 'Man of Providence' who had managed to return "God to Italy and Italy to God". In his book *Duce tu sei un dio*,

Alberto Vacca (2013) identified other categories, as “Savior of Italy”, “Defender of Roman and Christian civilization”, the “Architect of the Concordat between the Church and the State” and “Angel of Peace”.

After his return from Rome in August 1929, Warburg noted: “That Mussolini is seeking the Italian Catholic Empire, these idiots do not know”.[6] The cover of Paolo Ardali’s book, *San Francesco e Mussolini*, was included in the 1927 plate as an indication of the religious foundation of this aspiration to power, in which the politician was stylized as the successor to Saint Francis (Fleckner, Woldt 2012, 140).

7 Conclusions

In conclusion, Warburg’s analysis highlights the two cardinal principles emphasized by Warnke and Ritter Santini: the image resignation from direct discourse and the agency of political images in the public sphere. Warburg notes that this imperialistic power is aesthetically violent because is no longer more allegory or prosopopoeia but an embodied and living idea. The process of decoding these images becomes more complex. Therefore, he fully comprehends that the image of fascist power aims to manipulate and control the masses. Using an aesthetic and aggressive Romanity is just one of the many tools employed by fascist propaganda. The objective of the fascist power is to create a fascist state: the manipulation of public space is intense in the attempt to make every Italian a fascist Italian.

As presented, the work carried out by the scholar is part of the continually evolving field of political iconography, which has garnered increasing attention in recent years, focusing on various themes.

I briefly recall the already mentioned German school, started with Martin Warnke and headed by Bredekamp, Diers, and the *Politische Ikonologie: Bildkritik nach Martin Warnke* edited by Probst (2022); the fundamental work of Didi-Huberman; the analysis provided by W.T.J. Mitchell, the father of American Visual Culture; Carlo Ginzburg’s essays on political iconography; and David Freedberg’s work on the power of images. I also mention here the work of Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (2005), which reintroduces a Marxist gaze into the science of culture and image that Otto Karl Werckmeister (2006) noted had disappeared in the heirs of Warburgian science.[7]

However, as pointed out by scholars Egea-Medrano, Garrido Rubia, and Rojo Martínez (2021), this discipline remains relatively

6 Tagebuch der KBW, S. 486, August 3,1929.

7 Cf. Barringer 2005; Didi-Huberman 2013; Freedberg 1991; Ginzburg 2015; Mitchell 1986; Schoell-Glass 2001; 2008.

unexplored. Its importance is undeniable since the image has proven to significantly impact reality, acting performatively and contributing to shaping public opinion and collective perception. However, political imagery can be violent and aggressive in its attempt to enchant or confuse us. It is up to us to disarm its power by investigating its hidden meanings.

In our image-centric era, political iconography plays a necessary role. It provides us with essential tools to analyze the hidden meanings of contemporary political images, how images contribute to constructing the collective political imaginary and to read and employ images as politically operative concepts. This discipline certainly needs to be reshaped and updated, preferably transforming it into a "post-colonial concept", as Matthew Rampley would like visual culture to be (2006). Building upon Warburg's experiment and with the support of more recent cultural studies, it can turn examining political images into a subversive discipline.

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A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power
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Shifting Roles
The Imperial Folk Arts and Crafts Revival's Narratives at the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition (1913)

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Abstract The essay investigates the role of the imperial revival of folk arts and crafts, and its development, at the October Revolution's threshold. On the occasion of the celebrations for the Romanov's 300th anniversary (1913), Tsar Nicholas II organized a series of events. Among these was the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition held in Saint Petersburg. Despite its economic and public success, the exhibition raises increasingly pressing questions regarding both the progressive disconnection among the concepts of "nation" and "empire" and the ever-changing relationship between national identity and folk visual and material culture.

Keywords Kustar. Exhibition. Russian style. National image. Russian Empire. Visual identity. Arts and crafts. Folklore.

Summary 1 Appropriating the Folk and Rural Element. – 2 The Russian Arts and Crafts 'Movement' and the 'Russian Style'. – 3. Pictures at an Exhibition: the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition (1913). – 4 Towards the End of an Era. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Appropriating the Folk and Rural Element

The article aims to investigate the role of the Russian imperial revival of folk art and crafts, and its development, at the threshold of the October Revolution. In 1913, on the occasion of the celebrations for the Romanov family's 300th anniversary, Tsar Nicholas II decided

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to organize a series of events to strengthen his relationship with the Russian people and, consequently, the imperial image. Among these events was the *Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition* [*Vtoraja Vserossijskaja Kustarnaja Vystavka*][1] held in Saint Petersburg. Although the exhibition had been organized under the strict control of the State, it turned out to be a clear indicator of the failure of the hegemonic imperial narrative, that the appropriated and reinvented folk tradition had helped to maintain.

Identified since the last third of the 19th century as a crucial element in defining and strengthening national identity and unity, folk art production, inspired by peasant crafts, and its display became, over time, a powerful tool of imperial propaganda. At the *Second All-Russian*, indeed, both the role and perception of folk and rural art underwent a marked shift: from an instrumentalized monolithic category to a plural concept. The complexity of the transition is better understood if other cultural factors are also taken into account: on one hand, and from an artistic point of view, the meanings that the Abramtsevo circle and the early avant-garde attributed to the rural and folk traditions and, on the other, the multi-ethical dimension of the empire, that threatened its unity.

Before exploring the context of development and the significance of the exhibition under consideration, it becomes necessary to understand what is meant by folk-rural art and how it came to play such an important role, not only in the economy of the Empire but also, and especially, in the power relationship between tsar and people. The discourse on the 'nation', on the constitutive and peculiar characteristics of each, began in Europe and reached Russia where it led to the rediscovery of a common national past on which to build its identity as a modern state. Russia was, however, a vast and composite empire, whose economy was mainly based on agriculture.

Since the 1830s, based on historical, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches, the discovery of 'Old Russia', with its wooden architecture, ornate manuscripts, myths and legends, and peasant artifact production, started to contribute to a reappraisal of its own history and laid the groundwork for the construction of a new visual identity in close connection with its past.

Consequently, if by the 1880s it was commonplace for educated Russians to believe that Peter the Great's 18th reforms had deprived educated classes of any defined Russian identity,[2] «the identification

1 The Russian name of the *Vtoraia Vserossiiskaia Kustarnaia Vystavka* in English has been also translated as *Second All-Russian Exhibition of Handicraft* or *Second All-Russian Exhibition of Cottage Industries*. Unless otherwise stated, in the translations are by the author.

2 Among the major reforms were the introduction of European educational institutions, dress, social customs, and of both the Russian language and the Orthodox church.

of pre-Petrine culture with authentic Russianness was an idea with its own distinct intellectual history»(Warren 2009, 747). Although, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, official imperial culture regarded Peter I as the founder of the Russian nation, at the same time, however, several leading figures in Russian culture began to doubt the effectiveness of his reforms. This negative reassessment, coupled with the consequent belief that only the peasantry had preserved Russia's native traditions and sensibilities, was expressed in the revival of folk art.[3]

Hence, beginning the 1860s to the October Revolution, we witness the gradual appropriation by different social actors of folkloric and rural production and the transformation of its role and meaning accordingly. Specifically, the subjects alluded to here are, on the one hand, artists along with representatives of the *intelligentsia* and merchant class, and on the other hand, imperial power. The differentiated appropriation contributed to an overall change in public taste, the establishment and development of economic enterprises, and a shift in its symbolic meanings. A more or less conscious and respectful process of recovery, enhancement, and modernization of the artistic heritage of this newly discovered Russian 'tradition'.[4]

2 The Russian Arts and Crafts 'Movement' and the 'Russian Style'

At the beginning of the twentieth century, radical economic changes and social instability were shaking the foundations of the empire. The period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century witnessed one of the most dramatic consequences of the development of mechanized industry: the decline of rural and folk artisanal production linked to manual labor and, consequently, of the material culture associated with it, with its system of values and symbols. Traditional crafts such as woodworking, lace-making, embroidery, and pottery, and the labor system that supported them, were disrupted by this crisis. In the 1870s and 1880s, prominent figures in the Russian cultural milieu – later acknowledged as among the founders of the folk revival – such as the music and art critic Vladimir Stasov and the artist Elena Polenova warned that these arts

3 Nevertheless, opinions around the role and future of *kustar'* art were ambivalent. On this issue, cf. Salmond 1996.

4 On the problem of tradition and its invention, cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds) (1983). For an in-depth look at the issues of art revivals and tradition building in relation to folk and rural production, cf. Dmitrieva 2020, 83-108.

were in serious danger of permanent extinction. In the process of rediscovering pre-Petrine Russia, the physical objects and evidences of this culture - belonging to a past considered untouched by modernity and Westernizing influences - came to reify the concept of nation.

The Russian arts and crafts revival, an expression of its folk and rural traditions, was not an isolated phenomenon. As in other European countries, it was a response to the collective identity crisis resulting from rapid industrialization. From the 1870s, thanks to Savva Mamantov – a merchant who belonged to the new entrepreneurial elite and was an eminent patron of the arts – the Russian revival became a key cultural factor in the process of rebuilding national identity. The Abramtsevo estate, located about 60 km from Moscow, became its epicenter. Purchased in 1873 by Mamantov and his wife, Elizaveta Mamontova, the estate soon became a meeting place for some of the most important artists of the time and a center for the rediscovery and development of traditional crafts.[5] It represented the origin of a new movement, later referred to by Netta Peacock, as the New Russian Decorative Art,[6] characterized by and based on the rediscovery of folkloric and peasant cultural heritage, as well as ancient Russian architecture and mythology. In this context, as brilliantly pointed out by Alison Hilton, folk art objects started to be seen as:

> authentic manifestations of a shared cultural identity […]. The intensity of feeling about Russian folk art was reflected in the overlapping concepts of *national*, *folk* and *popular* in the term '*narodnoe iskusstvo*', folk art. The word *narod*,[7] *people*, is closer to the Ger-

5 Although the Abramtsevo colony was the first private enterprise of its kind, other private *kustar'* training workshops, opened a few years later. Two examples well-known from the literature are Solomenko's Embroidery workshops set up by Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova in 1891 and Princess Maria Tenisheva's Talashkino estate near Smolensk,which was opened in 1900. During the 1870s, among the actions the imperial power undertook to safeguard and enhance the folk and rural heritage, it established dedicated schools, such as the School of Folk Art [Škola narodnogo iskusstva] in Saint Petersburg, and museums, like the Moscow Kustar' Museum [Moskovskij kustarnyj muzej].

6 At the beginning of the 20th century, Peacock describes as follows the attitude of the artists in the Abramtsevo circle towards the folk-inspired production: "So thoroughly have they impregnated themselves with the spirit of legend and fairy-tale as still told by the poet peasant, so genuinely do they feel the absorbing charm of that atmosphere of old-world simplicity, with all that it contains of dream-like and weird reality – its mingled fancy and belief – that their designs are distinctly national both in feeling and colour. This new movement is, in fact, an exaltation of the popular genius; and the designs of the artists are so perfectly executed because they answer to the inborn esthetic sense of the village artisan" (Peacock 1901, 270-1).

7 On the terminological and semantic issue of the words 'natsiia', 'narod', 'narodnost', cf. Miller 2008.

> man *Volk* than to English approximations of this idea. It connotes a sense of nationhood and national traditions. (Hilton 2011, XVI)

Another important term – inherently connected to the Abramtsevo practices and which is found in the exhibition title – is '*kustar*'. Indeed, it was a Russian word for a peasant engaged in cottage, artisanal, industry to earn an income, usually in combination with agricultural production.[8] As Wendy Salmond underlines the word '*kustar*' had first come into use in the early 18th century (and was thought to be a corruption of the German word Kunstler) thus originally implying a skilled craftsman. Many *kustar*' crafts had their origins in the natural economy of Muscovite Russia when households produced only what they needed for their own use. However, the term did not enter the common lexicon until 1861, when it came to denote a 'fashionable issue' [*modnyj vopros*] (Siegelbaum 1998, 39). From that time forward, the study, conservation, and development of *kustar*' production turned into a public issue, and a massive financial and social intervention involving public and private resources was implemented.[9]

In the context of the identity crisis of late imperial Russian history and in the course of the process of developing national consciousness, ornament and ornamentation take shape as a semantic device underlying the construction of what is called the 'Russian Style'. In its various manifestations, this deeply pervasive style served as a connective between an ideal Russia, that of the pre-Petrine past, and a modern Russia on the path to industrialization, as well as a tool for the construction and affirmation of the new national visual identity.

In 1991, in one of the very first scholarly works produced in the West specifically devoted to the subject, as well as one of the most relevant and comprehensive studies on the subject, Evgenia Kirichénko defined the phenomenon of 'Russian Style' with these words:

> The term 'Russian style' – or *style russe* – normally refers to a style of architecture and of the applied arts which flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century and which revived the traditions of Russian folk and medieval culture. In a larger sense, however, the term may be applied to the whole movement to express the Russian character and spirit in art – a movement that began around

8 As reported by Netta Peacock: "millions of Russian peasants are driven by the conditions of their life to divide their year between work in the field and the special craft peculiar to the village or district to which they belong" (Peacock 1916, 30).

9 A manner of supporting such production takes the form of exhibitions with designated sections. Between 1882 and 1913 in Russia were held four major *kustar*' exhibitions. Before these exhibitions, a section specifically dedicated *kustar*' was presented for the first time in 1872 at the *Polytechnical Exhibition* [*Politehničeskaja vystavka*]. For more on this matter, cf. Siegelbaum 1998, 37-63.

> the middle of the eighteenth century and reached the end of its development only with the October Revolution. (Kirichenko 1991, 11)

The scholar emphasizes how the style did not coincide with Russian art in its entirety, but it as a manifestation of it that could find full expression, particularly, in architecture and the decorative-applied arts. It represents one of the versions of eclecticism, which was formed and developed in the wake of the National-Romantic movement and which, in the course of time, will take a multiplicity of forms. Among the other key functions assumed by the style is that of an instrument of socio-political self-representation. Therefore, if the 'Russian Style' is inseparable from this politico-social dimension, its practice and use makes it possible to identify two directions within it: an official one, considered a 'state' version of the style, and an unofficial one, that may be considered 'democratic'.[10] In analyzing the *Second All*-Russian, we will focus on the appropriation, use and display of folk and rural art by the imperial power implemented through the official version of the 'Russian Style'.

3 Pictures at an Exhibition: the Second All-Russian *Kustar'* Exhibition (1913)

Among the main cultural spaces in which the 'Russian Style' formal and expressive potential is unfolded are: on one hand, the textual sources, such as ornamental grammars, and printed art journals; and, on the other, the exhibitions, domestic and international ones.[11] In the context of this analysis the exhibition 'device' assumes a central role.[12] Through the study of domestic and universal public exhibitions organized from the mid-19th century until the October Revolution (1917), it is possible to investigate the processes of construction

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10 For a detailed and comprehensive overview of the 'Russian Style', see Kirichenko 1991. A critical reading of the double register that characterizes this style, can be found in Pechenkin 2021.

11 Among the main works – referred to as grammars – regarding the history of Russian ornament, the following can be mentioned: Solncev, F.G. (1849). *Antiquity of the Russian State* [*Drevnosti Rossijskogo gosudarstva*]. Mosca: Semen. Butovskii, V.I. (1870). *History of Russian Ornament from the 10th to the 16th century* [*Istoriia russkogo ornamenta c X po XVI stoletie po drevnym rukopisiiam*]. Moscow: [n.p.]. Stasov, V.V. (1872). *Russian Folk Ornament* [*Russkii narodnyi ornament*]. St. Petersburg: Obshchestva pooshchreniia khudozhnikov; Stasov, V.V. (1887). *Slavic and Oriental ornamentation from ancient and modern manuscripts*. Regarding the main printed art journals, which wrote about the exhibition, we can report: *Art and Industrial Design* [*Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost*] (1898-1903), *The World of Art* [*Mir iskusstva*] (1898-1904), *Little Fire* [*Ogonek*], *Apollon*, *Sun of Russia* [*Solntse Rossii*], and *The Contemporary* [*Sovremennik*].

12 Cf. Dianina 2012.

of the official image of late imperial Russia, its constituent elements, as well as the perception and dissemination of that image both nationally and internationally. The exhibitions, – with their venue, organization, and exhibited objects – became the place for the national visual identity-building process *par excellence*; a process in which the 'Russian style' is assumed as signature style. Although since the 1870s other exhibitions had highlighted the importance assumed by rural and folk art, the 1913 exhibition showed unmistakably how its *revival* was marked by internal contradictions.[13]

In 1913, Nikolai II presided over numerous lavish events planned to celebrate the Romanov dynasty 300th. One such event, the *Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition*[14] opened on March 10, under the patronage of Empress Alexandra Fedorovna. The designated site was the new building for the herbarium and the library of the Imperial Botanical Garden on Aptekarskii Island in St. Petersburg.

Almost 6,000 exhibitors were chosen for the exhibition area with their *kustar'* goods. The exhibition committee mainly selected schools and workshops already supported by the government. However, committee members also travelled to provinces at the edges of the empire and invited individual *kustari* (handicraft or handicraft worker) to participate, so as to broaden the variety of the displays. Following the principles of presentation at other all-Russian and international exhibitions, exhibits in the *Second All-Russian* were displayed in sections decorated in local styles and organized according to the Russian provinces. All of the exhibits were divided into four main sections: *kustar'* goods; instruments and machines for *kustar'* production; institutions for the support of the development of the *kustar'* industry; and publications on *kustar'* industry, and within a section 21 classes of different items.[15]

As Sara Warren points out, by deliberately publicizing the products of rural crafts, the Second All-Russian thus had economic as well as ideological purposes. The economic purpose is, to some extent, self-explanatory. This kind of exposure was necessary because to compete with cheaper factory-made products, handicraft items had to be considered "aesthetically and ethically superior." (Warren, 2009). In this perspective, the promotion of folk art revival was both a political and economic imperative for the Russian state. Regarding the ideological purpose, as the scholar emphasizes, the importance

13 For in-depth and detailed literature on the history and critical analysis of the *Second All-Russian*, cf. Piters-Hofmann 2019, Warren 2009 and Siegelbaum 1998.

14 Held in St. Petersburg in 1902, the *First All-Russian Kustar Exhibition* was located in the Tavrichesky Palace. In this occasion, the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property divided the products into 19 thematic groups.

15 Cf. Piters-Hofmann 2019, 319.

of the rural aspects of the 1905 revolution should not be overlooked. Although the unrest began with general strikes in large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, the state was, in addition, faced with the concern and anger of the peasantry, plagued by oppressive land management policies and natural disasters. In other words, what was under extreme duress in 1905 was the supposedly sacred bond between Tsar and people. It was this mystical bond that provided the justification for Romanov autocracy.[16] As brilliantly summed up by Ludmila Piters-Hofmann:

> the Tercentenary celebrations could also be used to emphasize the Tsar's and the Imperial family's bond with the common people. An exhibition showing products by peasant workers was a valuable opportunity to confirm the court's interest in the 'real', non-westernized Russian people. Furthermore, in this context the link between the *kustar'* industries and the fashion for a 'neo-Russian' style was interpreted by the Tsar and the organizers as something that captured and revived the atmosphere of the early seventeenth century, and especially 1613, the year that the Romanov dynasty began its reign. (Piters-Hofmann 2019, 315)

In 1905 the state established the Chief Administration of Agriculture and Land Tenure (GUZZ), a section of the Ministry of Agriculture specifically dedicated to supporting peasant handicrafts. Under the regime of Nicholas II, in fact, the creation of the GUZZ and the promotion of rural crafts aimed to eliminate the rift that had ideally been created between the Emperor and the "authentic" Russian people, i.e., the non-Westernized peasantry. In 1913, the GUZZ was the main organizing body of the Second All-Russian Exhibition.

4 Towards the End of an Era

Despite its economic and public success, the *Second All-Russian* was critically reviewed.[17] Browsing through the exhibition catalogue,[18] it becomes apparent not only the challenge of sorting out the variety

16 See, for instance, Wortman 2014; 1989.

17 For a detailed and critical account and for primary sources on this matter, cf. Warren 2009.

18 *Russian folk art at the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition in Petrograd in 1913 [Russkoe narodnoe iskusstvo na Vtoroj Vserossijskoj kustarnoj vystavke v Petrograde v 1913 g.]* (1914, Petrograd). https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/books/6150753. It should be noted that there are two different words in Russian that can be translated into English as "Russian". The first is "russkii", which relates to the Russian language and Russians as an ethnic group. The second word is "rossiiskii", which describes Russia as

of objects, and the materials, that fell under the broad category of *kustar'*, but also, the difficulty of representing this variety in a timely manner. Furthermore, two other not insignificant problems arose: on the one hand, the professionalism of the *kustar'* craftsman and, on the other, the geographical extent of the Empire.

As a matter of fact, according to Warren, from the *kustar'* production point of view, among the most problematic factors of the exhibition, critics reported: the industrialization of *kustar'* goods by the administration, the presence of non-local workshop instructors, and the designs provided by artists rather than those derived from past traditions and the peasants' fantasy and imagination. For most critics, this development went hand in hand with the loss of authenticity, individuality. The very essence of *kustar'* art was at stake. Closely related to this aspect, the inevitable comparison with industrial *kustar'* products available in specialized shops in big Russian and foreign cities often led to the conclusion that goods for sale at the exhibition were of the same low quality, though significantly more expensive and less durable than 'real' *kustar'* items.

On the eve of the Revolution, *kustar'* production was affected by social unrest and rising political tensions concerning the 'nationalities question'. As the intelligentsia and the imperial state 'improved' indigenous Russian folk culture beyond recognition, the suppression of native languages, customs, and educational institutions for non-Russian nationalities led critics to fear that any form of genuine national character - and ethnic representation - was destined to be obliterated by imperial policy (Warren 2009, 756). Official promotion of the so-called 'Great Russian' nationality was thus also understood as repressive of authentic nationality in general, including Russian nationality.

In further contextualising the phenomenon of the revival of *kustar'* production in the arts of late imperial Russia, the presentation of the work of Abramtsevo and Solomenko workshops at the *Second All-Russian* as part of the exhibition decreed its appropriation and approval by state power. Kirsty Anson remarkshow, by the end of the nineteenth century, the relationship, between imperial power and artistic production was taking an increasingly ambiguous and controlling form:

> There was a widespread revival of interest in fairytale due to harsh censorship imposed in the wake of the assassination of Alexander II in 1882, making realism challenging throughout the ensuing reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II. Polenova's Russian fairy tales and landscapes were thus, according to Salmond,

a state or governing body. The Second All-Russian Exhibition was a "rossiiskii" (read "imperial") event.

> 'a tool for promoting concord within an empire of disparate nationalities' and the 'direct emotional link they provided between the present and a vanished past'. (Anson 2013, 22)

In a context where imperial control over artistic production is both still almost totalizing and in a state of crisis, a new art form is taking shape. Since the beginning of the century, avant-garde artists such as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova had begun a process of reappropriating and reinterpreting folk and rural art forms, creating alternative narratives to the official ones. Through lubki and icons, artists gradually discovered the dimension of folk art that was considered "primitive," genuine, and authentic. Thus, while the icon becomes the bearer of an otherworldly connection, the lubok unleashes a deeply earthly, satirical, and disruptive force.[19]

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the legacy of folk arts and crafts at the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an ideological, economic, and artistic battleground. Imperial Russia understood well that art was a powerful tool of nation-building. The case study of the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition allowed us to address pressing questions about both the progressive dissociation of the concepts of "empire" and "nation" and the ever-shifting relationship between national identity and folk and rural culture. Moreover, the 1913 exhibition demonstrated that the Russian revival was not a monolithic entity. In their plurality, folk arts and crafts also helped to expose the fault lines within the idea of nationality itself. While certain artistic, well-crafted projections of the nation could serve to further imperial hegemony, others, fiercely non-imperial, came into play to rethink the very concept of art and its relationship to nationhood.

19 Cf. Warren 2013 and 2009.

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The volume comprises a selection of papers presented at the *5th Postgraduate International Conference* organized by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Venice, 4-6 October 2023): *A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power*. In the introduction to his well-known *The Power of Images* (1989), David Freedberg claims not only that images hold power over us, but they are also, inevitably, related to 'power' itself. Art is therefore a powerful and non-neutral tool. Its forms and expressions influence and manipulate the realm of the real. Throughout human history, the artist's creative power gave form, substance, and meaning to otherwise inert matter. This process turned the artist into a demiurge. Furthermore, once images are given their final form, they circulate and live a life of their own.

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