

NIHILISM AND THE NEW FORMS OF LATE-MODERN IMAGINARY

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The article deals with the invasion of the images in our world that has produced a revolution of the aesthetic experience. Images are no longer recognised as pertaining to a universe, distinct from the real world that is apparently “suspended” in opposition to reality. They can even incorporate the medium. It is the medium that renders an image recognizable. It makes it perceivable as an image and allows us to avoid confusion with reality. This is the barrier that has been torn down, not only today, but time and again, in the history of the image, starting from Zeuxis and Parrhasius up to, with a few omissions, the phantasmagoria of the Eighteenth Century and 3D today. And it is this barrier that, from the Eighteenth Century until the present day, we have got used to defining as Nihilism. Naturally all this produces some theoretical and ethical problems. This also depends on the fact that, particularly now with digital media, we are dealing with a peculiar kind of medium, with which we enter into a relationship of exchange, it is a medium we are in. According to the author, we could define it as a “living” medium thus subverting the technique/subjectivity relationship, as it is traditionally conceived in the philosophical tradition of the Twentieth Century, so that humanity is dominated by technology and not the other way round. One more element has to be added: this is a narrative medium. It works only within the framework of an interactive relationship of exchange and dialogue with the subject that uses it. Therefore, a relationship that has great consequences develops when we come into contact with images: for example, since we are dealing with a narrative, the distinction between verbal communication and visual communication becomes fluid. This interactive relationship with the image highlights its performative virtuality and raises the ever more pressing need to develop ethics for images and new technologies. On the basis of this “living” relationship with the image, we can assert that today we are dealing with a “secular” mythology, a mythology without gods. We could say a problematic “re-enchantment of the world”.

Keywords: image, technology, medium, performative virtuality.

The invasion of images in our world, in these last decades, has produced a revolution of the aesthetic experience. Images are no longer recognised as pertaining to a universe, distinct from the real world that is apparently “suspended” in opposition to reality. They can even incorporate the medium. It is the medium that renders an image recognizable. It makes it perceivable as an image and allows us to avoid confusion with reality. This is the barrier that has

been torn down, not only today, but time and again, in the history of the image, starting from Zeuxis and Parrhasius up to, with a few omissions, the phantasmagoria of the Eighteenth Century and 3D today. And it is this barrier that, from the Eighteenth Century until the present day, we have got used to defining as nihilism. If we go to the origin of the question of nihilism, when it first appeared in the open letter that Jacobi wrote to Fichte in 1799, we find that we are

dealing with precisely these issues, which refer to the dissolution of reality into appearance as the tendency of the contemporary world (Jacobi 1980: 3–57).

In such cases, which Jacobi summarised so effectively in his criticism of Fichte's philosophy (criticism which had great influence and meaning), the image is confused with its surroundings. It is presented as *the* real thing or as something disturbingly close to reality. We find ourselves, in Oliver Grau's own words, "immersed" in the aesthetic experience of the image. We are drowning in it, and the relationship we have with it is no more contemplative, but interactive. The image takes on the menacing role of the subject, although we are perfectly conscious that we are not dealing with a living creature.

It must be said, however, that nihilism does not introduce, at least in this regard, an absolute novelty. The old consciousness that the image beholds a subjective attitude takes over contemporary society, making it a world of ghosts. That images possess their own subjectivity is an old story that we all, more or less consciously, know. We only need to think back to fairy tales or the gothic novel right up to Paul Klee. The image acquires, in all these cases, a subjective status. It is a ghost, a *revenant* that comes from far away. From this ambiguous attitude it threatens daily lives in their most ordinary objective aspects. It seems to hint to a death that is not final so that what was a subject is not definitely a corpse, an object.

That the deceased be truly dead is one of the pillars of our culture, and thus objectivity is based, in Georg Hegel's own words, on the necessity of the Intellect "to hold fast what is dead". In other words, objectivity exists, as it is the *mortuum* what has gone by

and is stiff. Objectivity is, as is well known, the basis and the premise of knowledge and scientific research.

The separation between the living and the *mortuum* has been questioned by the peculiar "reality" of the image that has come back to life in the contemporary world, thanks to a particular dumfounding atavism. Therefore, also Hegel is questioned from the point of view that does not seem to deal with aesthetics directly, but which in truth touches it deeply. This demonstrates that the meanings that art unlocks have a much wider scope than those that are traditionally reserved to it, if we think only in terms of superficial beauty. Paradoxically, the limit between the living and the dead, which seemed consolidated, is questioned by technologies that subvert the limits dictated by classical rationality.

This is not actually a novelty. It has been long in the making. The first modern steps take place almost at the same time as the event that is considered the birth certificate of modern aesthetics, the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, in which, as is well known, he expresses the concept of beauty unrelated to all interests and, therefore, independent. This paves the way to museum art and to the "end" of art as Hegel sees it. At the same time, another path was being created, the one that was not very respectful of orthodox aesthetics but was very prolific and had great influence, where the aesthetic culture of a work of art is set aside in favour of a new culture: that of show. It is the realisation of nihilism, that which will fall two centuries later under the axe of authors as far apart as Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.

This path was already taking shape at the end of the Eighteenth Century, as Oliver Grau recollects, thanks to the phantasmagoria techniques. Grau recalls that the shows, where phantasmagoria was presented, produced, starting from the Seventeenth Century, truly terrifying effects on the public. For example, the travelling showman Rasmussen Walgenstein proposed a show to the court of king Frederik III of Denmark, with a *magic lantern* in which, through the spectrum of the lantern, stories and bizarre tales were represented (Grau 2006: 142–143). The effect of this show was so impressive and alive, at least in the imagination of some of the spectators, that the king had to order the show be repeated three times to demonstrate that it was in effect “only” fiction. Grau observes that if the lantern had not ended up in the hands of a showman like Walgenstein but of unscrupulous individuals, the effects could really have been unpredictable. These were false supernatural manifestations, horrific apparitions of ghosts. Going back to what has been said previously, this was a spectacular way of going beyond the limit that divides the world of the living from the world of the dead. In the Nineteenth Century, the magic lantern continued to evolve thanks to technological developments becoming more articulated and even allowing moving images (Grau 2006: 145). It was a forerunner of motion pictures and represents, according to Grau, an “immersive medium”¹.

“Immersive media” exclude a contemplative approach towards the object in question, attracting the spectator into the space of the performance.

These horrific effects were obviously magnified by the technological improvements that subsequently allowed, as we were just saying, the projection of moving images. At the end of the Eighteenth Century, a strange Belgian, doctor, painter, pilot and priest, Etienne Gaspard Robertson, exported his lantern to Post-Revolutionary Paris. The fame his representations attained is a testimony to a sort of incipient crisis in the sensibility of the Enlightenment, which yields its prerogatives to the lure of darkness and the summoning of spirits. The stage design of the show was of paramount importance. Spectators accessed the place where the performance was to begin through a cemetery. The gloomy atmosphere, to be expected in a cemetery, was the introduction to the performance, which took place in the dark. Here, announced by lightning and rain, accompanied by evocative music, sometimes that of great composers such as Mozart and Beethoven, no less than the apparition of the deceased was prepared. Among these could be also important politicians recently passed away such as Danton and Robespierre. The effect on the public and its reactions were truly bewildering, so much so that pregnant women were advised against attending the performance for fear they would loose their child.

Therefore, what we are witnessing is a trend towards the disappearance and concealment of the artistic medium according to what Oliver Grau writes. And, if we want, what we could define as the principle of the frame, or better still the actual frame

¹ Cf. Grau 2006: 145, 144–149 regarding the Eighteenth Century evolution of the magic lantern and Etienne Gaspard Robertson’s shows. Relating to the history and the modernity of the aesthetic experience of “immersion”, cf. Grau 2003.

as the principle of identification of the image is disappearing.

There is, therefore, a tendency toward the identification of the image with its medium, which produces the most feared aesthetic effect: illusion. The spectre of the conflict between Zeuxis and Parrhasius comes back forcefully in this context. Illusion provokes sensory confusion, it leads to error. But after all, this is but one aspect of the question. In phantasmagoria, another aspect of the question is defined, which may be the most significant. Illusion, in fact, interrupts the calm of the aesthetic conscience and calls the spectator on to the stage. It creates an unprecedented passage. It produces a form of fruition of the work of art that is quite different from the contemplative aloofness proposed by the modern aesthetic conscience as described and interpreted by Hans Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 2010). The connoisseur's contemplative look, which is typical of modern art, is lost. Illusion is not actually simply an error but it creates a peculiar relationship between the subject and the work of art and prepares a new world-environment, considered as fictitious only on the basis of a previous unvoiced presupposition concerning the ontology of the image, which therefore renders it "nihilistic", as we would be dealing with an unreal, fictitious universe. Image is now something real. The operation is perhaps ambiguous but, after all, it demonstrates the big and threatening creativity implied by the concept of nihilism. Thus, a decisive revolution takes place not only in relation to fruition but also to the concept of work of art as completed and untouchable.

This ties in with the disappearance of the prohibition concerning the passage

between the realm of the living and that of the dead that the "phantasmagorical" show seems to promise. This is the ambiguity of phantasmagoria that creates a novelty in the aesthetic experience which now participates in life and takes on a performing role: it can produce behaviours, actions, and even serious consequences, such as the loss of a child in a pregnant woman.

The "aesthetic" neutralisation of art comes from the obscure perception of a really devastating risk. This could compromise, as has been mentioned, one of the fundamentals of Western rationality, the distinction between the world of the living and that of the dead. From this point of view, Plato's criticism of the illusionary image, stated in the tenth book of *The Republic*, would show its deepest meaning. It is not so much about avoiding the error produced by seeing something similar to a mirage, as much as defending the foundation of reason from a very powerful opponent. Plato's "Enlightenment", accusing the mimetic art of being a lying illusion, denies the image its status of subject and, in so doing, sends the departed back beyond the rivers of the Styx. This step allows us to grasp one of the pillars of modern reason. And this allows us to go back to Hegel and then to the present. Art dies, according to Hegel, almost asphyxiated by the development of the concept after being reduced to a purely aesthetic experience in order to be welcomed into the world of mature and enlightened reason. Reason that condescends, so to say, to create aesthetics as a secondary and peripheral discipline that becomes then the philosophy of art, to somehow give a place to the foreigner that has sneaked into the house.

2. The rebirth of the image after the death of art

Paradoxically the ancient power of the image seems to be coming back from the dead and is able to present itself today with unprecedented strength also thanks to digital techniques. At this point, one of the mysteries of the situation comes to light and allows us to analyse the issue of the rationality of the image, as any discussion on contemporary rationality could not really avoid addressing it. This brings with it also the question of technique. As a premise to all this, it must be said that, naturally, it is not possible to presume a division in principle between the realms of image and those of theoretical discursive construct². Fundamentally, this distinction would not take into account the fact that writing has also a figurative aspect and that an image can also be a sign, a state that it can always revert back to almost by catachresis, for example, when its mimetic and / or expressive quality is lacking. Image is nothing more, from the point of view that we intend to adopt, reserving the right to explore this thesis in depth somewhere else, than a means of expression that is realised on a particular medium without which it could not be realised and, therefore, express anything³. From this standpoint, an image is always technological, whereas contemporary technology resorts more and more frequently to the image which peculiarly expresses its own particular effectiveness

in this way. This acknowledgement should partly silence, or at least allow a revision, of the diagnosis of contemporary nihilism, as the present situation would be something like “the real world invaded by images”. At least nihilism, i.e. the history of the invasion of images, has had time to evolve, making it somehow a more relative phenomenon.

We are dealing also with the growth of technological reason that has gone beyond the classical theoretical constructs of modern rationality, which had thought it would develop without restraints, but within an enveloping, rigid, and monocratic technological frame. This thesis is shared by thinkers as far apart as Max Weber and Martin Heidegger. Therefore, based on this, it will be necessary to: a) analyse the fundamentally technical aspect of the image that is always in need of a particular support; b) explore the changes that technological rationality develops when it comes into contact with the image. All this produces as well a profound transformation both of art and of the aesthetic experience on the verge of what one might define, with a bit of courage, the new contemporary mythology⁴.

It should be sufficient to observe that, starting with the avant-garde and progressing to video art and, more in general, to the experience that is produced with the new digital technologies, we are witnessing a real transformation of the aesthetic experience that goes from contemplative to “immersive” or “interactive”. It is an interactivity that is spreading, as is well known, also thanks to the experiences offered by the World Wide Web. As we have said before, as the experience of art goes from contemplative

² Cf. regarding the birth of a rationality based on (theoretical discursive construct) concept-writing, Bettetini 2006.

³ Naturally with regards to this debate Hans Belting has to be mentioned (Belting 2011).

⁴ Cf. in this respect Vercellone 2013.

to interactive, we are dealing with a profound transformation of its characteristics. The contemplative aesthetic experience moves you from one instant to the next without continuity. The interactive experience, which puts you in contact with new technologies, is an experience which offers continuity and dialogue enhanced by the contact with a medium that usually “pays attention”, not at all nihilistic, but at times plastic, which answers our expectations and in some cases even our requests.

Naturally, all this produces some theoretical and ethical problems. This also depends on the fact that we are dealing with a particular kind of medium with which we enter into a relationship of exchange; it is a medium we are in. We could define it as a “living” medium thus subverting the technique / subjectivity relationship, as it is traditionally conceived in the philosophical tradition of the Twentieth Century, so that humanity is dominated by technology that should be instead its means of dominating the world. One more element has to be added: this is a narrative medium. It works only within the framework of an interactive relationship, of exchange and dialogue with the subject that uses it. Therefore, a relationship that has great consequences develops when we come into contact with images: for example, since we are dealing with a narrative, the distinction between verbal communication and visual communication becomes fluid. This interactive relationship with the image highlights its performative virtuality and gives rise to the ever more pressing need to develop ethics for images and new technologies.

On the basis of this “living” relationship with the image we can assert that today we

are dealing with a “secular” mythology, a mythology without gods⁵. It is, in effect, a “mythology of reason”, as postulated by Schelling and the Jena romantics, which exists in the constant renewal of the intense technological and interactive relationship with its end-users. The nature of this creation is, therefore, essentially “open”, ontologically fluid. It goes beyond the classical aesthetic experience to host the interaction with the environment, within itself, and, therefore, create new unprecedented forms of subjectivity aimed to design real life environments. This new mythology is reborn in the form that Hegel would never have envisaged in his debate with the romantics.

Therefore, works of art have a tendency to become the world, not to be portrayed as a completed work of art, but as a creation that modifies its surroundings somehow answering to an increasingly felt need to be rooted. In this case, images would not uproot human existence from its context and meaning, the criticism that is implicit in the accusation of nihilism from Jacobi right up to the present day.

To tell the truth, today we need art and especially such art forms. The post-modern experience of a hybrid coexistence of styles and traditions, Marc Augé’s vision of life in “non-places”, which is truly nihilistic, is more and more unfeasible. And a new need is coming forward not without reason – a need to be rooted that the work of art is testament to, through the medium of images, calling forth a rebirth of public art to come side by side with museum and

⁵ For a more detailed discussion, allow me again to refer you to my *Dopo la morte dell'arte* (Vercellone 2013).

gallery art, whose significance as selective treasure chests of artistic and cultural memory, naturally cannot be set aside. On many occasions, we deal with artworks that wrap and entrench themselves in the lives of individuals and the community. These are works such as the *Weather project* by Olafur Eliasson or the *Big bean* by Anish Kapoor, which bestow a collective identity or at least contribute to creating it. These are characteristics that were normally, talking about art, attributed to myth. In this sense, we have said that a mythological rebirth is taking place. We are dealing with “today’s myths” according to Roland Barthes, with new “mythologies of reason” going back to the teachings of the romantics, conscious, however, of the strong technological mediation on which these mythologies found their public effectiveness (Barthes 2005).

Are we, therefore, proposing a mythical re-enchantment? Certainly. But we are not talking about nihilistic mythologies, as we have no new gods to guide us. This is the challenge, and a healthy one it is, which we need to make our own looking, through the new forms of imaginary, not

only beyond nihilism, but also beyond the idea itself of nihilism.

We are certainly dealing with a profound transformation in the possible models of rationality that seem to point to an unprecedented pluralism in the modern reason (and maybe not only in the latter). Dealing with a model that uses images intensely, it is more difficult to define the technological reason as a *ratio* based on a monologic and monotonous expression *à la Metropolis* by Fritz Lang. We are talking more about a kind of reason that modifies its languages through the different media it uses to express itself. The differentiation of media produces an objective change in the possible models of rationality, since the latter represent life forms, *chances* of transforming that rationality allowing it to evolve from the stage of necessity to that of possibility. Thus, we have a new opportunity which is not altogether unprecedented, which in truth has already been explored in the opposition of the Jena romantics to the Enlightenment. It is that of reason that invents worlds instead of testifying their immutability.

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NIHILIZMAS IR NAŪJOSIOS ĮSIVAIZDUOJAMYBĖS FORMOS MODERNYBĖS PABAIGOJE**Federico Vercellone**

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas (at)vaizdų įsiveržimas į mūsų pasaulį, sukėlęs estetinės patirties revoliuciją. (At)vaizdai jau nebelaikomi priklausančiais visatai, skirtingai nei realus pasaulis, aiškiai „suspenduoti“ kaip opozicija realybei. Jie gali net įtraukti mediją. Būtent medija paverčia (at)vaizdą atpažįstamu. Ji padaro jį suvokiamą kaip (at)vaizdą ir leidžia mums nesupainioti jo su realybe. Tačiau ši užtvara buvo griauinama, ne tik šiandien, bet labai dažnai (at)vaizdo istorijoje, pradedant Zeuksidu ir Parazijumi, o baigiant XVIII a. fantasmagorija ir 3D šiandien. Būtent šia užtvara naudodamiesi nuo XVIII a. iki šių dienų apibrėžiame nihilizmą. Žinoma, visa tai sukuria teorinių ir etinių problemų. Mat dabar, skaitmeninių medijų atveju, susiduriame su tokia medija, su kuria sueiname į mainų santykį, su medija, kurioje esame. Autoriaus teigimu, ją galėtume apibūdinti kaip „gyvą“ mediją, taip sugriaudami tradiciškai XX a. filosofijoje įsitvirtinusių technikos / subjektyvybės santykį, kai technika dominuoja žmonijos atžvilgiu, o ne atvirkščiai. Be to, tai naratyvi medija. Ji veikia tik interaktyviame mainų santykyje ir dialoge su ja besinaudojančiu subjektu. Šis santykis labai reikšmingas, kai susiduriame su (at)vaizdais: pavyzdžiui, kai turime reikalą su pasakojimu, skirtis tarp žodinės ir vaizdinės komunikacijos tampa taki. Šis interaktyvus santykis su (at)vaizdu išryškina jo performatyvų virtualumą ir primygtinai reikalauja plėtoti (at)vaizdų ir naujųjų technologijų etiką. Remdamiesi šiuo „gyvu“ santykiu su (at)vaizdu, galime tvirtinti, kad šiandieną turime reikalą su „sekularia“ mitologija, mitologija be dievų. Kitaip sakant, „pasaulio vėl užkerėjimo“ problematika.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: (at)vaizdas, technika, medija, performatyvus virtualumas.