Lucia Veronesi. A Visual Pandemia

Marco Senaldi

1.What images don't say

Every attempt at grasping some kind of truth by looking at an image "straight in the eye" is fruitless, because of the ingenuous claim to "force" it to speak.

Nonetheless, what you see does not tell everything; with their own presence, images are ambiguously dialectical. Every image, even the silliest one, maybe downloaded in low resolution, "says" something – and, in spite of this, *something else* remains untold, that is to say something goes beyond and is other from what is visually apparent.

Recently, Georges Didi-Huberman has admitted he learnt everything he knows about images in Italy while observing Beato Angelico's works: "I realized that getting concentrated on sacred faces was not enough, I had to explore all the image surface, especially the areas on the margins that normally escape". And he goes on and states that

> Panofsky never talks about the background of a portrait, but that is exactly the place where many things are hidden. In the pictures, surreptitiously stolen from Polish insurrectionists in a crematorium in Auschwitz, there is the dark frame of the door behind which the photographer, between terror and bravery, hid to extort the image of an event that had to remain invisible. In my opinion, that shadow where "nothing can be seen" (as a matter of fact, in the remakes it is often cut away) lies the extraordinary sense of those images.[1]

2. Kuleshov effect

Every image, then, is in itself dialectics, its background, its borders, or patina – in a word, everything it "does not say" – plays a role as fundamental as everything that "stands out". Walter Benjamin – we owe him the concept of dialectical image – gets to the point of saying that:

> Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. (...) Such an image is the prostitute – seller and sold in one.[2]

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[1] *La Repubblica*, 17th June 2010 [IT].

[2] W. Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, Harvard U.P., 2008, p.105.

The dialectical image is not only a nostalgic flashback (in a romantic sense, the intuition flash that lights the mind up) – it is exactly *dilektik im stillstand* – it is still, *but at the same time* it moves dialectically between true and false, present and absent, positive and negative. Historically, this is true for cinema, suffice to think to the famous "Kuleshov effect", which was found out by the Russian director Lev Vladimirovic Kulesov in 1918, and that consists in editing different images and then comes a close-up perfectly identical to the very same actor.

While explaining this effect during a television interviewin 1964[3], Alfred Hitchcock, showed the close up of his smiling face followed by two images: *first* a mother with her child (the result was a gentleman who was smiling to a scene of family love), *and then* a girl in bikini (the result was more a lascivious sneer than a smile). The point is that the same and identical image can say different things: the association of two or more images highlights their hidden, or even, if considered separately, inexistent side.

Now, can one imagine the Kuleshov effect *without editing* – that is to say a non-sequential Kuleshov effect – *inside* one image only? One might suggest that the result of a superposition of this kind is nil or black: the white square on white background by Kasimir Malevich, or else Piero Manzoni's *achrome* white assemblages, or Ad Reinhardt's layered black, up to Guy Debord's legendary film *Hurlement en faveur de Sade* (1952), made of empty (white) or undeveloped (black) film.

However, all these attempts – that at their epoch were considered complete, absolute, supreme goals of avant-garde modernism – should now be intended as intermediate and temporary stages, just phases towards a radical change in the interpretation of visual matter. For this reason, they should be compared to apparently opposite episodes – like *Destino*, the baroque cartoon designed by Salvador Dalì for Walyt Disney in the 40s, or *Le mystére Picasso* (1956), the docu-film by Henry-George Clouzot, in which Picasso paints behind the canvas and triggers a radical resemblance between painting and screen, up to ambiguous objects like Andy Warhol's television contributions, or art documentaries/videos as *The Secret Knowledge* by David Hockney (2003), or the colored and fragile super8 installations by Tacita Dean, or else the stop-motion animation films by William Kentridge.

3. The burden of proof

Lucia Veronesi's work follows this research line, whose main aim is a debate without compromises with the universe of images around us. Her task is not free from considerable risks, since we are immersed in a "visual pandemia", which is viral, not only in a positive way (the lively co-existence and infiltration of different languages), but disturbing as well (uncontrolled instant superimposition of a million images, devastating iconological bulimia). To face all this, the artist uses two basic devices:

3[!] Now available on YouTube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCAE0t6KwJY&NR=1

on the one hand, the construction of "serial" actions; on the other hand, inside these series, a "controlled demolition" of the visual elements.

In the series *Ho preso il mio orizzonte e l'ho spostato più in là* (I caught my horizon and moved it farther) 2012, for example, the first element that catches the eye is a sharp contrast between photography and painting. As a matter of fact, like the artist herself states, neither of them has come first; it is not that firstly came the selection of photographs and then the decision of painting on them. At first was the idea of reducing the arena to two media only – the seemingly poor, obsolete and almost barbaric language of the pictorial gesture, and the advanced, elegant and up-to-date language of the photographic image.

Nonetheless, the resulting "Kuleshov effect" changes both terms: photography – which is blocked by brush strokes or even by colour sprays - tends to lose its effect of absolute verisimilitude and seems to become the backstage of itself; painting – on an already overfilled visual surface – reveals its nature of simple chromatic opacity, of skin pigment, like those games whose golden surface, although refined, has not got a value in itself, except for being a patina that shall be scratched to find a picture or a number below. Hence, this can be considered a "controlled demolition" of iconographic forms and media languages that comes out from her video works. In *Andante sospeso (la casa nella foresta)* – Suspended andante (the house in the forest) 2012, the photographic fragments that snake in the video flow dramatically reveal the limits of both media; the whole visual field ends up resembling the wall posters from the 70's that were intended to give the illusion of a forest or of a sunset in a domestic scale and were, in fact, dirtied by children or unglued in the corners by the passing of time, and therefore showed the limits of fiction.

In the previous *Difesa personale* (Personal defence), 2011 and *L'inabitabile* (Unhinabitable) 2012, the relationship between video and collage – two editing methods in themselves – seems an intense full contact. Even if the evident content of these works is the pile of objects that trap our post-consumerist life (literally, we cannot "consume" the things we possess and end up by being buried), their artistic meaning is a reflection on the image accumulation that risk to jeopardize any form of visual art. Thus, the fight between the avant-garde technique of collage and the "updated" language of video reveals the inadequacy of both. The collage highlights the imperfection of physical work that, in the age of digital definition, seems to be unsuitable and hesitant, while the video, which shall take on the burden of proof that what we are seeing is "true", when limited to the hopping and uncertain rhythm of stop-motion, reveals its inadequate tendency to "realism". This is a contrast that one can find also in the relationship between video and drawing in *Pandemia domestica* (Domestic Pandemic), 2011, in which the traces left by graphite (black on white) are reversed and, instead of subsequent additions, they seem a series of scratches on the white screen that gradually reveal the black layer underneath.

This gradual "undressing" of the rhetoric identity of these devices (the documentary vocation of photography, the poetic nature of painting, the chronological attitude of drawing, etc.) give back a respectable poverty and a silent decorum. I think this is particularly true in the work in progress the artist is doing on

a series of audio-video recordings of Uruguayan women that worked for the international crime as "mules" (they carry drugs in ovules, which is extremely dangerous) and were arrested in Italy. Although they have accepted to tell their stories in front of an anthropologist's video camera, these perforce criminals do not want to show their face, so that the result is a sound band almost "without images". The artist's work consists exactly in creating a "visual track" underneath this spoken line. This visualization - instead of simply "illustrating" what one listens to - increases even more the ontological and moral separation between the fragmentary dialogues and the baffling visions they evoke.

This "visual track" that the artist fills with her signs is a bit like the dark border before the picture taken in Auschwitz that is considered by Didi-Huberman: apparently it constitutes an obstacle, but instead it represents the hidden side of images, their deep "truth".

As Slavoj Zizek said, referring to (once again) dialectics:

the most elementary figure of dialectical reversal resides in transposing an epistemological obstacle into the thing itself, as its ontological failure (what appears to us as our inability to know the thing indicates a crack in the thing itself, so that our very failure to reach the full truth is the indicator of truth).[4]

Marco Senaldi teaches contemporary art history and media at IULM Milan. He has curated contemporary ary exhibits, namely *Cover Theory* (Scheiwiller catalogue, 2003), *Il marmo e la celluloide* (Silvana Editoriale catalouge, 2006), *Athos Ongaro* (Museo Pecci, Prato, 2011, Allemandi catalogue). Among the others, he published: *Enjoy! Il godimento estetico*, Meltemi, 2003 (20062); *Van Gogh a Hollywood. La leggenda cinematografica dell'artista*, Meltemi, 2004 (20072); *Doppio Sguardo. Cinema e arte contemporanea*, Bompiani, 2008; *Arte e Televisione. Da Andy Warhol al Grande Fratello*, Postmediabooks, 2009; *Definitively Unfinished. Filosofia dell'arte contemporanea*, Guerini, 2012; *Rapporto confidenziale. Percorsi tra arte e cinema*, Mimesis, 2013. He has hold conferences and meetings in Italy and abroad (Rome Quadriennale, Modena Philosophy Festival, MAXXI Rome, Mart Rovereto, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, etc.). His contributions and articles have been published in *Il manifesto, Corriere della Sera, Flash Art, Interni, Around Photography, D – la Repubblica delle donne*; Rai RadioTre, etc.; he is a tv author of cultural programmes for Canale 5, Italia 1 and RaiTre.

4" S. Zizek, *Less than nothing : Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism*, Verso, London, 2012, p. 20.