

## **6. Worlds, Systems, and Previsions. Images join the fray. A small list of image typologies. The theory of creative action. Sharing. The internal conflicts for truth. Only artists exist. Social categories. The battle of images.**

The use of the word *system* was once almost exclusively limited to the world of mathematics. Nowadays we have the operative system, the art system, the consumerist system and we can predict that soon this term will probably cover a much looser and broader meaning than the one it commonly covers today. Every system, via the slow modification of the meaning of this word and people's assimilation of its new meanings, will become, at least apparently, an open space, because it will be a territory where everyone will be able to act, but where no one will be able to exert any real influence. This means that we will not be able to modify the system's structure, but only have access to a variety of options and possibilities while using it, in order to become part of it.

For the time being and in the rest of this discourse, the word "system" will therefore be synonymous with "globally established order". Furthermore, this type of system is an entity that retains a structure – or that adheres to a type of structure – often associated with money and power jurisdiction. To access and remain inside this system means accepting its rules unconditionally. For Jurgen Habermas the system is counterbalanced by the **lifeworld**, as defined by the philosopher in his *The Theory of Communicative Action*:<sup>2</sup> "The lifeworld is [...] the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, or subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements".

The lifeworld is therefore a real world, it is the composite and stratified result of the combination of different cultures, and at the same time, the stage and the stalls area of daily life. If therefore the system is an apparatus superintended by power and money – agents injecting passivity and separation – that system will clearly be in contrast with the vital world, that very place where a communicative action is possible.

The presence of a system also makes itself apparent through images, and through images the system can successfully corrupt and colonize the lifeworld. The consequence is that the more the system (and the images it produces) becomes complex and its interference *spectacular* and methodical, the harder it becomes to understand our original bond with the lifeworld itself. Again according to Habermas, there exists a public scene, which is physically put on stage (where the organizer and the audience are recognizable) and an abstract one, which is instead created by mass media (people, users, spectators, *singularly* collected together).

As a consequence, in the lifeworld there appears a humus, a humus where people tend to emulate and simulate their identity: a power and an authority that actually are not and will not ever be owned. Emulation generates from a sense of security stemming from owning and exhibiting objects but also from the display of aggressive attitudes and behaviours. Lack of authority and direct interference in decisions made by those in power, paired with the behaviours and the actions that said power requires from the population, are therefore sublimated by the constitution of a

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<sup>1</sup> K: termine reperito dal testo indicato nella nota successiva/ term sourced by the publication mentioned in the following footnote.

<sup>2</sup> K: citazione reperita qui/quote found here Jurgen Habermas, THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION, Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press Boston, [https://uniteyouthdublin.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/4421-the\\_theory\\_of\\_communicative.pdf](https://uniteyouthdublin.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/4421-the_theory_of_communicative.pdf)

pseudo (other) presence in the world (both in the immaterial world and in the material world) which is generated by images (in the broadest sense of the term) because images themselves allow and constitute an easy representation of something other than our selves.

Each system (even a State, or a union of states) is a *body, a simulacrum* created by written words and images, which operates thanks to the dispositions it emits and to the trust individuals place in its organs, but also and most importantly thanks to the attention that people cannot help but pay to it. The State system, for example, introduces itself into the lifeworld through a tightly-woven network of different types of messages.

The media, therefore, are born and exist as a substantial and inevitable part of this physical place (both real and tangible) that is the system, that is however made incorporeal and therefore distant and that cannot be reached by individuals thanks to communication strategies. The economic and juridical world we live in does not allow us to achieve authentic emancipation, it prevents us from enjoying freedom at its fullest. We live under the obligation of belonging to this world and with the additional awareness that there is no alternative.

As Diego Fusaro wrote in *Il futuro è nostro (The Future is Ours)*, “As Aristotle reminds us in the *De Anima*, just like animals living in water do not realize that a wet body is touching another wet body, today we are the unaware servants of the global market, we are not aware of the naturalizing factor of ideology that permeates and embraces everything. We live in an iron cage without knowing it, believing that it coincides with freedom in its highest expression.”

Should we ever want to, how can we resist and defend ourselves from all this? And most importantly, what has all this to do with photography?

Photography as a practice, in this context can play a crucial role, as an indicator, as a form of care, as a defence and, above all, as a form of creation.

Care and defence can happen through a constant (re)appropriation and (re)affirmation of one's personality through images. Repeated and constant representations and digital sharing of our image or of facts of our life manifest an otherwise *hidden* daily existence that creates a continuous swing of emotions provoked by the fact of being seen and seeing others. This course of action creates a dialogue and can lead to the understanding of *the other* and of image languages.

The indicator function reveals itself through the observation and the examination of subjects contained in the images. This is how we *visualize* both the macro trends that frenetically appear in different ambits of the network and of social categories as well as the individualities. For instance, *logging in* on a social network and *visiting* someone's (or a company's) profile and scrolling the image actions that individual has carried out, we realize that inside that setting we perceive that person in a specific way. This means we get an idea of that person, understanding, for instance, his or her political preferences and tastes in general.

Furthermore, being creative is an ontologically human characteristic (*to create is to give shape to one's fate*, affirmed Albert Camus) and this disposition of ours, our industriousness (artistic, communicative) is made even easier in our day by the congenial *communication* tools we have at hand. The photographs and images that are made and *published* using digital technology via IT systems and platforms generate new and ubiquitous settings that unseat physical limits that up to until a few years ago defined communications and relations.

We are clearly facing a new way of experiencing life and creating it. However, in my view, this change, this *mediamorphosis*, or what we could call *digital turn* we are undergoing is (still) more connected to economic, political and control aspects than to an authentic social metamorphosis.

The word *turn* indicates the will to go beyond the consolidated reasons of a practice or of a discipline.

According to Neil Postman, television was attractive because it provided a fascinating spectacle thanks to the thousands of images it aired which did not require any intellectual effort by the viewer. Jean Baudrillard, again about television, used to say that it introduced a lack of reflection and depth. Internet, social media, mobile phone communication, could be subject to the same criticism because ultimately they generate entertainment and can lead to the same results: alienation and fragmentation. What is certain is that media and devices turn us into different creatures because they change our habits and our perceptions. In fact, we do not fully realize that *tools we create in turn become the tools that shape us*. For all these reasons it is necessary, in order to be part of this world, to understand the mechanisms of digital media: we must be *trained* to use them, not only to be able to use them, but also to be *digitally* participative, because, after all, our cognitive power is inexorably tied to the environment we find ourselves in.

Sharing is something that belongs to us. We share public transport, a meal, an open space, this very moment: sharing is in all ambits of our lives. Bla-Bla Car, Spotify playlists, papers on Academia.edu, Instagram reposts, car sharing, bike sharing: everything can be shared. Sharing is also part of the market, it generates wealth, so to speak (although this does not mean that the creation of wealth for me is necessary, important nor fundamental).

By *sharing* each of us shows who he or she is, releasing a press review of our daily life: words and images that the transmitter believes are important. Digital sharing allows us to channel images across the world in the blink of an eye airing a message that is not designed to address specific receivers. Those who believe that these digital images belong to the fleeting moment of the present to be eventually swallowed into the black hole of oblivion I believe are mistaken. There is always somebody collecting, archiving, preserving, researching, finding, interpreting and reusing. It's true, images (just as words, after all) can be issued with one purpose and then escape the creator's hand and be for instance picked up by a third party and serve functions that are completely different in another context. But sharing has on the other hand expanded the capacity to reveal and describe a sort of collective subconscious. Each one of us can read this subconscious and compare it with the *order of things* that is understanding the dynamics and the rules of the system it belongs to and understand, therefore and also, the role of his or her individuality inside the system itself.

Societies that consume great quantities of images have always been societies where there is less consumption of books. The systems of contemporary societies provide many images that serve to direct individuals towards specific thoughts and behaviours. This is one of the reasons why I believe photography falls into the sphere of semiotics, that as Umberto Eco used to say "is a federation of different approaches that share language, languages, and communication" (*La Forza delle Immagini*, Franco Angeli, 2015).

To know images means to know how to read their *information*. The so-called *Visual Literacy* is based on the idea that images can be "read". *Literacy* (that is reading and writing, alphabetization) is in fact the capacity to interpret, negotiate and give meaning to the information presented in the form of an image. Images and words, it's a fact, are understood in different ways and according to different conventions and certainly images do not retain the rationality that belongs to words, but it is also true that we live in a society where images and words are often mixed together. The same also happens with different languages, with sentences incorporating different idioms or using words borrowed from other languages which seem more effective to describe or represent what we mean. We do the same with images, perhaps borrowing figurations made by others, and to which we might add further signs to underline or alter the original meaning.

What matters is that until I keep on believing I am describing the world with a type of image that we may call *standardized image*, I won't have understood much about the possibilities that images offer their creator and I won't ever be able to *defend* myself from images, such as the images of the system. We need to draw a line between what concerns a current fashion and what the present has generated or will generate. Photography can tell a story, but that is not its greatest skill. A photograph that tells a story is a spark, while a photograph that interprets is, usually, an object. This is the essential difference between those who use photography to tell a story, therefore working on *what has been*, and those who instead interpret, who are far more interested in *what is* and prepare something for what they would like things to be. I believe that the battle of images can be fought much more effectively with this second type of images.

The photos we find in the press and on social networks, blogs, in the Internet in general, are all very different. And this type of digital images, which are addressed to a wider public and often taken by the public itself, is the type I would like to describe drawing up a brief list – a list that deliberately leaves out scenes of violence, executions, oppression, abuse, brutality, and in general any type of image that might incorporate acts of violence.

One of the main motivations that have accompanied me in my research has always been that of finding (and isolating) the symptoms that generate malaise in western society. Often one of the thoughts that has guided me has been that of reflecting on the awareness that the conflict pervading (our) society is something interior, within individuals and as a consequence, within the community.

So here is a list of image typologies that can be referred to the western or westernized world that belong to a *way of life* that, simply put, may be defined middle-class or belonging to social categories that can be defined *average*.

Images therefore,

1. can be *colonizing* images stemming directly from the persuasive activity of the system: they often show a plausible private or everyday reality. These are often *mainstream* images that show characteristics that typically refer to a lower middle class *crepuscular* world. An example of this typology may be the photos we find in banks with smiling people engaged in domestic or leisurely activities set in clean, bright, and safe environments;
2. can try to represent the abstract, glamorous, and captivating world created by mass media. In this typology, I also include the rather vulgar and obvious images that play on sex, myths, and morality: malicious images, with poses generally drawn from fashion magazines, portraits of celebrities, films. This typology also includes images that deliberately or subconsciously emulate images drawn from advertising: through these images, individuals try to tell their own system of relations that they might very well belong to that immaterial world.
3. can be candid photos taken to capture a happening, or a place, an individual person, or a group of people. Usually these photos are taken by elderly people or individuals who do not follow fashion or trends and who use photography as a tool to remember an event that was special or important to them. These images have little grip on people who have no emotional connection with the situation captured in the photo.
4. can be photos that rebuild that naivety and that resemble those described in point no.2 of this presumptive and brief list: these images rely on a metacommunication language skill

and are used especially to complement a discourse, an article, an advertising campaign. They are similar to images that common people would take, apparently without any technical or stylistic sophistications, but precisely because they are placed in a context where they do not usually belong, they become highly persuasive.

The study and the appropriation (or more aptly and poetically said, the adoption) of images produced and shared in such a way can be the tool through which the system can absorb information and rapidly regenerate through an almost infallible semantic binomial of adaptation and parasitism.

Observing this internal struggle between images, this battle between the media-driven system that devours the lifeworld and the democratic image understood as a form of resistance in defence of the *agorà*, or in defence of public space, that place of human action composed of individuals, we must quote, and probably agree, with Ernst Gombrich when in *The Story of Art* he declares that art as such does not exist and that “*there are only artists*”, those entrusted with a sincere and free search for truth. It is therefore up to the artists to provide directions and indications, to show a vast public an ecological and ethical way of using images. According to Lucio Fontana, it is the artist’s task to intervene “*in society to keep alive the reason of being ‘human’.*”

For Renato Barilli, aesthetic operators have the “*fundamental task of exerting the ‘determined negation’ against the positive values of dominant structures*” (see pag. 29 of the aforementioned book by Roberto Signorini). Perhaps this might be utopia, but I am convinced that we should all try to be aesthetic operators or artists in order to find and propose truth and beauty in things.

While clarifying that what we are talking about is far from creating an alarming pseudo-conspiracy theory on the gruesome effects that could arise from a battle between system-images and lifeworld-images, I also believe that it would be in any case appropriate to make a tangible example of images’ socially constructive force. An image is in fact able to create categories and social systems.

Let’s imagine we are on a web site (a news website): our gaze, concentrated on seeing the crude realism of a news story, is eventually attracted by another image in the box on the side: what attracts us is a paparazzi photo showing us the round backside of a seductive young lady squeezed in a rubbery yellow dress. With a click we can enter the spicy and sparkling world of celebrities, pervaded by bright lipsticks, plunging necklines, beads, tuxedos, muscles, tattoos, parties, jewellery, luxury cars, thighs, stiletto shoes, tights, smiles and camera flashes.

This is probably the most obvious and clear case in which images are able to produce a social category: the celebrity category. Celebrity is certainly a product of images and, as a consequence, we can affirm that the representation of a person, the effigies of a person, create a character. Indeed, as Nathalie Heinich writes *De la visibilité. Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique*, Gallimard) “*ce n’est pas la vedette qui est à l’origine de la multiplication de ses images (car à l’origine, il n’y a qu’une personne dotée de certains talents), mais ce sont ses images qui en font une vedette*” meaning “*it is not the celebrity who is at the origin of the multiplication of images portraying her (because all there is to start with is a person who has certain skills); it is the images themselves that make her become a celebrity.*”

The person becomes a celebrity when that person owns what Heinich terms a visibility capital. A visibility capital is nothing more than the set of photographs and in general of all the media events referring to a subject. Those with a visibility capital belong to or define a social category.

It is interesting to see how this visibility capital is a capital in every way, that is, a cultural, economic, and social capital (just think of how this capital can be handed down the celebrity's inheritors, even in terms of monetary value). It is also important to note that the great power of celebrity lies precisely in a factor that always forms in the realm of vision: celebrity in fact is an almost exclusively visual element; celebrities are those who are seen and recognized by the adoring crowds while, on the other hand, they – the celebrities – cannot and will not reciprocate. Searching the web for information on the aforementioned book (which at present has not yet been translated into Italian), I came across an interview with Heinich by Stefano Montefiori that was published in the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper where the author affirms that “*the fact that talent is no longer a necessary condition for celebrity induces millions of people to seek it. Celebrity in these cases becomes an end in itself.*”

If there is often a lack of talent in some of those who reach celebrity, and if often what we celebrate about that celebrity is his or her ability to reach that level of celebrity, creating a reliable visibility capital, perhaps we should come to the conclusion that we should keep away from those images, since the creation of myths, as we should be well aware, is not always healthy for humanity. We should then be concerned with teaching the psychological processes that trigger this phenomenon and explaining the possible effects on the cultural values they are producing.

The merely celebratory images should in fact be identified as such because the visibility capital they represent is often ephemeral, or unsubstantial. And since the *democratization* of celebrity - which in itself could become a way of becoming accustomed to this desire for fame - leads to a substantial production of superficial images, we must consider that seeking to gain celebrity in general, as an end in itself, nowadays has spread to all human activities and professions: from the tailor to the philosopher, from the photographer to the doctor, from the cook to the performer, from the lawyer to the politician.

In <sup>3</sup>*The Outdatedness of Human Beings 1* Anders writes “*it is only logic that those among us who manage to have the most extraordinary multiple existence [...], that is film stars, have become our most envied models. The homage we pay to them derives from their victorious irruption into the realm of mass produced products, which we acknowledge as 'ontologically superior'. We idolize them because they have triumphantly realized our dream of being as things, of becoming the parvenus in the world of products.*”

One thinks that the few who are excluded from this are the criminals for whom celebrity could turn into a visibility capital with very different characteristics than those mentioned above. But, in our society of *integrated spectacle* (in which we live while also participating in its creation) this might not be always the case. I think I might be right, talking about criminals, to think that Ando Gilardi when he titled his book *Meglio ladro che fotografo* (*Better thief than photographer*) besides reflecting on the inability of amateur and professional photographers of understanding that making images is a matter of great responsibility, he also meant to highlight how the ecology of circulating images (even on the internet) is a way of leading people to reflect on society and its languages.

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<sup>3</sup>K 3.7.19: Il titolo originale tedesco è *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*. A quanto pare non esiste una traduzione completa di questo doppio volume in inglese e dunque ci sono in circolazione varie possibili traduzioni, ovvero *The Outdatedness of Human Beings 1* (oppure *The Outdatedness of the Human Species 1* oppure *The Obsolescence of Man*). Non essendo (a quanto mi risulta) questa opera stata pubblicata in inglese, lascio la mia traduzione del passo. Tra i tre titoli, io personalmente preferisco il terzo, ma non conosco il tedesco (e dunque non colgo se *Antiquiertheit* sia più “essere antiquato” o “obsolescente” o *Menschen* sia più “esseri umani” o “uomo” ) e non conosco nemmeno i contenuti dell’opera in questione, quindi la mia scelta è meramente basata sulla “sonorità” dei tre titoli in inglese. A te la scelta finale.

Returning to the subject of those images described as mere bearers of unsubstantial and frivolous contents, I would like to make a clarification: while personally considering that a certain type of images is ugly and superficial, my objective is certainly not to trigger a form of icono-phobia that may then lead to a form of iconoclasm. By the way, an iconoclasm could more easily destroy material images rather than mental ones which can of course be *deliberately* brought back into existence or resurfaced as impromptu and uncontrolled apparitions.

Closing this digression on visibility capital and the definition of images as a creative force of social categories, another aspect to consider here is visual culture. The latter is a little distant from the so-called field or system or world of art and information. Visual culture democratically and unconditionally encompasses all images, without making any distinction: ranging from mental images, celebrated history of art images, children's pictures and pornographic photos.

Images tell us of a society's vitality and freedom. They are the mirror, the stage, the thermometer, the X-ray, the deep probes of society. Therefore lifeworld images should or will necessarily be able to corrode the system of the apparatuses through an ecological generation of open worlds. In my opinion, this is creative action. And it is true, there is no way of controlling images, but in my utopian and probably romantic vision, *the battle of images* is not an actual war, but a way to meet others, their images, their selves, their desire to see, know, be seen and recognized.

Furthermore, the term "battle" incorporates the idea of a confrontation, of a face-to-face duel that refers to a utopia understood as an ideology-destroying force, a clash of contrasting troops, the living defence of free thought, of a conviction, and I personally prefer the word "battle" to "war" that the dictionary defines as "a series of hostile acts, a violent conflict".

As long as there are human beings, there will always be pictures and images. We should therefore realize that <sup>4</sup>"the social construction of the visual field must insist on exploring the chiasmic reversal of this proposition, the visual construction of the social field" (*Pictorial Turn*, J.W.T. Mitchell) and for this reason knowing and *talking* using images means learning to read but of course also to write. It means considering images (especially the optical ones) as a media to build, to build an archive for *another or new world* whose purpose it is to remove the presence of systems. This also means temporarily deleting them to restart and see things afresh. It means knowing ourselves and the world we live in, it means stimulating reality, it means creating new social connections. With this type of awareness we can shape reality and most importantly we should (be able) to do all this being aware of our freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> K: citazione reperita qui <https://books.google.it/books?id=1RdGM4teKDcC&pg=PA8&dq=Pictorial+Turn,+J.W.T.+Mitchell+visual+construction+of+the+social&hl=it&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7uIDQgZTjAhUMIMUKHQfpBKIQ6AEILjAA#v=onepage&q=Pictorial%20Turn%2C%20J.W.T.%20Mitchell%20visual%20construction%20of%20the%20social&f=false>