

ON THE DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY OF A VISUAL OBJECT AS A CHIASMIC NOTION

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Through a series of short analyses of visual objects the article questions the nature of the dialectic distance/proximity. This dialectic actually concerns a boundary that is at the same time necessary for its articulation, but also only partially expressible within it: the boundary between spectator and observed object/image/medium. By trying to understand what

distance is through the definition of some of its opposite forms (immediacy, oceanic feeling, Merleau-pontian flesh of the world), we will look for an answer to this complexity through the intelligence of the images themselves. The chiasmic nature of the relationship between the seeing subject and the seen object therefore seems to become a central theme.

IN FRONT OF THE IMAGE

The wish to reduce the distance between the image and its user has a very long history. It is not a question of thinking about the physical distance between subject and object, but rather about how much the dialogue that is established between them can lead to a confusing of the boundaries that apparently divide them. So the genealogy in question is that of the precarious border between two spaces, that of the spectator and that of the image, ontologically distant, but specularly constituent. So much so that the image is re-defined every time the subject looks at it, so that the spectator receives from the image a certain effect of subject that is also a spatial position, to which he can adhere or not adhere. The break that creates distance (the being able to say “this is an image!”) is also the trigger for a continuous desire for rapprochement, founding the dialectic of the aesthetic relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

The dialectic that we suppose here does not necessarily want to take up the question from a strictly philosophical perspective from which access to the object, the experience of the object itself, can only be mediated, that is, summarily, the condition to which the Kantian *a priori* refers, the pre-experiential condition of a power of knowledge. In the same way, it is not directly inspired by a Husserlian phenomenological point of view that focuses on the intentionality of consciousness—which is always consciousness of something—that makes the appearance of objects in their phenomenality possible: in other words a distance that is indispensable for the visible to happen. Therefore, if this article is placed against the background of these founding problems that focus on distance as the very presupposition of the distance/proximity articulation, it cannot but question the aporiae of the dialectic we mentioned before. Every process of mediation seems to be consubstantial with a process of immediacy, building in fact an irresolvable tension between the two polarities of the mediate and the

immediate: if theoretically productive, these two polarities are never empirically given.

In a more strictly semiotic jargon, the process of *débrayage*, which frees the utterance and makes it usable within space-time boundaries, thus rendering it transparent and distant, will inevitably be accompanied by a process, however minimal or unnoticed, of *embrayage*¹, i.e. a return to the effects of enunciative subjects, inscribed in the image itself, but projected outside it, recreating a dimension of opacity that somehow questions distance. This release and reconnection to the imponderable situation of presence has to do with the effects of distance and proximity that can be created by mediations. Among these effects, therefore, more than a dialectic, a form of vertigo is established, around which a weave made up of polarities such as transparency and reflexivity and other concepts such as mediation (with the various suffixes hyper, re etc.), presence and immersion, is worked.

SOME NOTES ON IMMEDIACY

Let us try to grasp what it means to be distant from an image, starting from the opposite meaning. Frequently quoted in support of research hypotheses or in a critical sense, Bolter and Grusin's passage on immediacy says:

We have so far used the term immediacy in two senses: one epistemological, the other psychological. In the epistemological sense, immediacy is transparency: the absence of mediation or representation. It is the notion that a medium could erase itself and leave the viewer in the presence of the objects represented, so that he could know the objects directly. In its psychological sense, immediacy names the viewer's feeling that the medium has disappeared and the objects are present to him, a feeling that his experience is therefore authentic. (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 69)

Fig. 1 Domenico Zampieri called Domenichino, *The Archery Contest of Diana and Her Nymphs*, 1616, oil on canvas, cm 225 × 320, Galleria Borghese, Rome. Retrieved October, 15, 2020 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archery_Contest_of_Diana_and_her_Nymphs



The question is therefore whether one can consider immediacy thus defined as the dialectical opposite of distance. And this effect of immediacy, when is it produced? Is it the case when the aesthetics of the image conceal the intervention of the person who produced it, triggering an intensified effect of reality? Or when the image remains ambiguously suspended between its space and that of the spectator? Or when it tries to imitate the sensory perception of the sensitive world, embracing the viewer in the flow of images, following the more or less finely captured body movements (compare today the different experiences that go under the name of virtual reality)?

In the 'sensible' logic of images, the semantic axis consisting of the distance/proximity opposition hardly seems to be practicable within a simple polarity. Besides the fact that there can be a constituent or attractive distance (that of the subject of power or more generally of worship) and a repelling proximity (that of an abject image), there are mechanisms that produce this complex interweaving that are specific to the very intelligence of the images. The aim of this article will be to briefly analyse some of them in order to draw out some perspectives for study and some conclusions.

In the rooms of the Galleria Borghese, Domenichino's large painting, *The Archery Contest of Diana and Her Nymphs*

(1616), provides what could be a perfect example of how the frontier between the space of the image and that of the spectator is managed in a dimension of distance (Figure 1).

Although in a completely original way, reconstructing a typically male hunting scene with female figures, Domenichino depicts a well-known mythological episode –an archery competition inspired by the Aeneid– where the characters are arranged in a theatre of action, absorbed in watching and wondering at the virtuositities of archery and bird hunting, with an extraordinary movement in the dog held back by a woman in the act of launching into the capture of the prey. We could say that the scene takes place without explicitly considering the spectator's presence, reiterating the boundary between the object being watched and the subject watching.

In the lower part of the painting, however, this enunciative situation is overridden by what seems to be the only gaze that does not go towards the prey in the hunt, that of a young bather who, ignoring the call of the figure beside her, persists in an intense stare which projects outside the painting, as if immersed in looking at something in the museum room. This figure therefore seems to belong to a different time to that of the painting, as if she were turning her back on the latter, already projected into the present of the spectator's space. The whole painting is affected by this figure, and so is our reading of it, as we look for other clues of this kind, which we have no difficulty in finding, with, hidden among the leaves of the shrubs depicted on the right edge, the gaze of a male who is telling us to keep silent with his finger to his lips, while his companion is spying on the scene. From mere contemplative detachment we suddenly find ourselves plunged into a dialogue of glances that presupposes the secret of the *voyeur's* condition and a dual complicity: with the male duo hidden among the leaves at the edge of the painting and with the nymphet lolling in water, morally

unspeakable, but impudently and inevitably highlighted by the internal light of the painting.

Does this look towards our space attract us or keep us at a distance? Although it undoubtedly involves us with an effect of unexpected presence, reducing the distance, at the same time it pulls us back to awareness from a momentary credulity, from our temporary suspension of disbelief. Moreover, we are not only faced with the interpellation, a typical gesture of return towards the virtual space of the enunciation that captures the spectator's attention, but also with what we could call an 'environmental' quality of the image: the image is made environment thanks to the multiplicity of times and spaces it encloses.

This stratagem is recurrent in the history of painting, so much so that it has become a recognizable formal structure. It is often used precisely to undermine the detached perception of a painting whose theme is an established religious motif. In the Pinacoteca di Brera, the page holding the book for Saint Anthony Abbot in Veronese's painting² is making fun of the solemn structure of the presentation of the saint enthroned, not only throwing the symmetry of the scene into disarray, but also creating a direct contact with the spectator's space. In addition, the large book that the page is holding shields from the saints' gaze the twisting of his head causes his gaze to impertinently exit towards the outside of the painting. None of the saints represented can see the page's face and expression, which are, offered only to the spectator (Figure 2).

In this regard, speaking of this effect of 'looking into the camera' in cinema, where it is much less present than in painting, Casetti rightly evoked the case of the theatrical 'aside', that convention whereby the actor, speaking to himself and therefore sheltered from listening by others, is actually informing the spectator about narrative elements and thus partially including him in the theatrical play.

The viewer "participates in the game while remaining apart from it" (Casetti, 1998, p. 49): although aware of

Fig. 2 Paolo Caliari called Veronese, *Saint Anthony the Abbot with St. Cornelius and St. Cyprian*, 1565-1571, oil on canvas, cm 270 × 180, Pinacoteca di Brera. Retrieved October, 15, 2020 from <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/santantonio-abate-tra-i-santi-cornelio-e-cipriano/>



the phantasmagorical nature of the image, the spectator connects by visual contact to the other space-time of the image itself. In this type of connection there is, at the same time, a suspension of the detachment between the work and the observer (by *embrayage*), but also an inevitable awareness of an external role. Inside and outside suspend their own boundaries, reaffirming them. It is not a matter of erasing the medium, as Bolter and Grusin suggested, to explain the immediacy, but somehow just by acting on the nerve centres of the medium, the image triggers this dialectical movement, potentially vertiginous.

OCEANIC FEELING AND THE LOGIC OF ATTRACTION/
PROJECTION

In psychoanalysis Freud calls “oceanic feeling” what a subject one feels when they fully adhere to the external world, experiencing a complete immersion of the ego in the world, i.e. when the boundaries between inside and outside are temporarily blurred. The feeling of ourselves, Freud writes, can be a good example of oceanic feeling. It can also be exemplified in two spheres, that of religion and that of falling in love, situations in which the subject merges with his faith or with the otherness of the loved one. Freud’s hypothesis is that oceanic feeling can emerge in those moments in which the newborn child’s ancient ego is reactivated.

This ego is still confused with the mass of external sensations, and in the non-pathological development of the child, and then of the adult, it gives way to an ego capable of drawing the boundaries between its own person and the world around it. The original ego of the newborn child survives alongside that of the adult, and this now feeble memory, in the experience of oceanic feeling, nourishes the sensation of a ‘return’ to an origin.

Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling -a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world. (Freud, 1949, p. 14-15)

Oceanic feeling therefore seems to be one of the conditions that moves further away from the concept of distance, deconstructing its own presuppositions since it originates from the disappearance of the sensation of bodily boundaries, the latter underlying the opposition distance/proximity.

Looking, *ante litteram*, for this kind of psychological effect, the period of Baroque painting and architecture experimented, with great inventiveness, with old³ and new strategies of dissolving boundaries, with great use of *trompe l’oeil* and



Fig. 3 Andrea Pozzo, *Triumph of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 1685, fresco, Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola at Campus Martius, Rome. Retrieved October, 15, 2020 from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/80/Frescos_of_Ignatius_of_Loyola_HDR.jpg

foreshortening. Just think of the phenomenon of *quadratura* at work in numerous ceilings of churches or baroque palaces, for example in the case of the *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power* fresco in the Palazzo Barberini by Pietro da Cortona or Andrea Pozzo's *Triumph of St. Ignatius of Loyola* in the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome (Figure 3).

The latter fresco in particular plays on the dual movement of attraction and projection effected by the image in its dizzying foreshortened perspective: the architecture in *trompe l'oeil*, through a series of columns, parapets and arches that continue the masonry architecture, captures and draws the gaze upwards, magnifying the central figure of St. Ignatius wrapped in a dazzling light. A whole series of characters set in the threshold of this architecture seem to stand in the way of this ascension, recalling our 'terrestrial' space. The hypothesis is therefore that beyond the *grandeur* of the scene above the believer, it is once again threshold mechanisms that induce the dual movement of attraction/projection, as if these *impasses* that germinate in the spaces of the frame, obstacles to the ascension towards the celestial dimension, constitute the real nucleus of a confusion of boundaries between the space of the spectator and the space of the image. If one can speak of pseudo-oceanic feeling, one can do so considering that it is precisely the duplication and the indication of what is sup-

posed to be eliminated, the boundaries between the two spaces and their avatars, as frames and thresholds, that constitute the suspended time that allows such pseudo-oceanic feeling.

In the Baroque period, the same strategy was found in paintings of rather small dimensions⁴ which present images of more intimate fruition: think of Juan Sánchez Cotán's *bodegones*, where the *trompe l'oeil* recess of the niche, combined with the not insignificant contribution of the completely black background, was nothing more than a way to a better 'jutting-out' effect for the fruits and vegetables represented. By creating a depth effect, therefore, in order to better provide a feeling of projection into the spectator's space, the *trompe l'oeil* frame offers us the co-ordinate of this suspension of two opposite movements (Stoichita, 1997).

It is not dissimilar to the movement in 3D cinema experiences, which exploits the general perspective of the photographic nature of the image at the same time as the jutting-out effects of the figures that appear to move from the screen into the room space. Casetti in his recent book described the mechanism of 3D as an overturning of perspective:

When an object extends off the delineated space of the screen and into the theatre, the object attains a real presence and is in an actual relationship with the apex of the vision, which, instead of being an arbitrary point, is now the actual viewer's eyes. (Casetti, 2015, p. 147)

Perspective and 3D, however, most of the time coexist, and it is these incessant comings and goings between the perspective points and the projections of figures in the spectator's space that create a remediation of the distances.

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE FRAME

The various versions of today's virtual experiences, equipped with more or less sophisticated tracking systems, where the image develops on an immersive bubble following,



Fig. 4 Chung Lee, *Mr Buddha*, 2018, 360° film. Retrieved October, 15, 2020 from <https://www.tribecafilm.com/films/mr-buddha-2019>.

without difficulty, the horizon of the viewer's points of view, are the most recent stage in this desire to reduce distance. Although this *dispositif* tends towards a progressive annihilation of frames, often and deliberately willingly the aesthetic level of the experience tries to re-propose within it thresholds to capture the viewer's attention in order to satisfy basic narrative needs (Figure 4).

As in other experiences we have already written about⁵, the recent case of Chang Lee's film *Mr Buddha* seems to be quite emblematic of this trend. Without going into the narrative details of the short film, in which thieves steal an ancient statuette and cannot agree on the division of the loot, let us say that even though he is aware of the freedom to look in all directions, the viewer's gaze is repeatedly redirected by diegetic frames. In this case, the logic is one of positioning the gazes in diegetic containers: our point of view is in fact located in the same place as the stolen statue inside a box. The characters will drill a hole in this box, thus recreating for the viewer a situation very similar to that of the cinematographic apparatus. Once the action passes from the inside of the van carrying the box to the outside, it is the opening of the van doors themselves that recreates the situation of a framed view.

Mr Buddha therefore offers us an aesthetic of virtual reality still in its beginnings, which is limited to enjoying the possibilities of its all-encompassing nature, a characteristic due not only to its nature as an enveloping phantasmagoria, but also to its ability to reproduce within it an inventory of the vision apparatuses that historically preceded it. Among the aesthetics encompassed by virtual reality, we must obviously not forget those developed over the years in the field of video games and in particular that of the 'delegated observer' through the appearance of an avatar through which we 'act' in the represented space. The interactivity of video games turns the spectator into a player and increases the proximity between the latter and the image: however, the fact of being able to act in the represented space does not necessarily create the effect of presence, and the temporary dissolution of boundaries is caused rather by the strategies described above.

This series of examples bring us to the hypothesis that in many mechanisms that lead to making the distances of mediations closer, the frame and its figures play a fundamental role. In general, in order to reduce the distance, this distance must be emphasized. The spectator is required to circumvent the attractive obstacle of the frame or threshold figures and this circumvention feels like a necessary *pendant* of the distance reduction effect.

This hypothesis can be useful when dealing with a genealogical discourse on the reduction of the distance between spectator and image. The recent spread of virtual reality devices has had the merit of reactivating the debate on immersion, another concept to be put in a dialectic with distance. Much of the current literature on immersion and its figures focuses on the all-embracing image, the environmental image, i.e. the fact that the image is built as a 360-degree spherical vault around the spectator, dissipating the frame as a constitutive element of the image itself. This phenomenal fact, in addition to a visual rhetoric of empathy, opens up to a precise genealogy of the effect of immersion that questions the nineteenth-century

panorama as a paradigm that emerged only belatedly, but in fact can already be found in ancient painting, and that somehow survives in the immersive techniques of virtual reality. One of the texts that has provided a model in this sense is that of Olivier Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to immersion* (2003), where the author focuses more on the fact that to have an immersive effect one must have a circular image that develops around the spectator rather than on the importance of threshold effects. His genealogy therefore appears somewhat lacking, because it does not project a wider spectrum of semiotic pertinences. For example, when Grau rightly notes an immersive effect already in the *triclinium* of the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii, he fails to underscore how the line of characters that develops around the spectator adopts a whole series of postures that covers the borders marked by the threshold of the base on which they are placed. This negligence seems to run through Grau's important study, favouring the thesis of the primacy of the spherical image as an immersion apparatus.

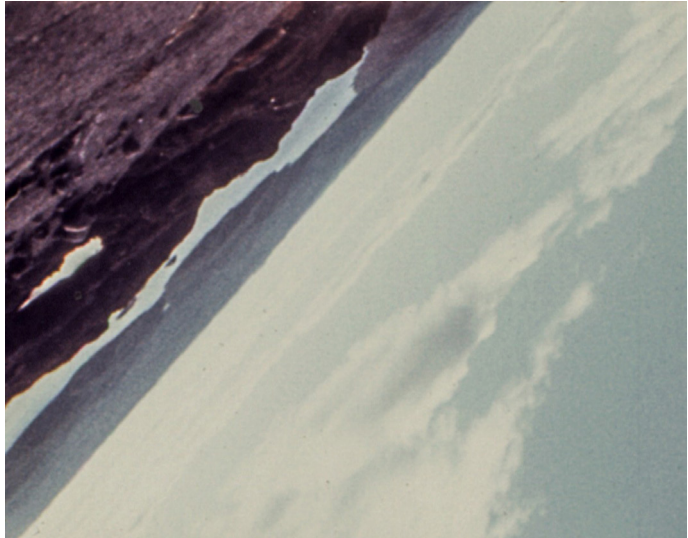
REMEDIATING DISTANCES THROUGH LONG-TAKE AESTHETICS

On the other hand, however, it is possible to give examples of distance remediation in cases where neither the frame, the interpellations or the various threshold effects, nor the image physically surrounding the spectator, are explicitly present. In fact, we might think that they are only the manifestation of mechanisms that, even in a latent way, can act on the proxemics of the image. Regardless of the numerous narrative strategies that capture the spectator, starting from the simplest forms of identification, which we will not discuss here, we will limit ourselves, in conclusion, to highlighting one of the environmental quality forms of the images: the long take and, subsequently, its use as a form of extenuation of the figurativeness peculiar to some experimental films.

The long take, which has been part of the grammar of cinema since its origins, has seen, over the history of cinema, periods of glory, for example in the Hollywood films of the 1940s, driven by the exceptional innovations of a director like Orson Welles. Recently, thanks also to the new virtuosités offered to the long take by digital techniques, it has once again become established as an aesthetic and narrative strategy: think of the recent *Gravity* by Alfonso Cuarón or the emblematic *The Russian Ark* by Sokurov, a 96-minute film consisting of a single sequence shot. This comeback does not seem so alien to the parallel spread of narratives in virtual reality, which are themselves poor in editing cuts and therefore characterized by a strong use of the long take. In fact, it is not secondary that one of the directors who in recent years has made the long take one of his recognizable trademarks, see for example the films *Birdman* (2014) or *The Revenant* (2015), the Mexican Alejandro González Iñárritu, has moved on to the experimentation of narration in a virtual reality experience, of the kind included in the installation *Carne y Arena* (2017). The mediation of distance offered by the long take is only partially referable to its presumed effect of reality provided by the continuity of the unfolding of the action. The camera movement, instead of tending towards its cancellation, imposes itself on the spectator, paradoxically adding a further mediation effect. This new agency of the camera movement seems, however, to bring back an effect of environmental totality, of potential cancellation of the off-screen, thus compensating for the lack of narrative possibilities offered by the editing.

The long take returns as a strategy in many experimental films of the 1970s that somehow push its implications to the extreme. In particular, the use that Michael Snow makes of it in some of his films and emblematically in *La Région Centrale* (1971), where the persistence of the camera eye, accompanied by continuous camera movements performed at different speeds by a gyroscope, ends up extenuating the figurative possibilities of a landscape (Figure 5). This condition of

Fig. 5 Michael Snow, *La Région Centrale*, 1971, film.
Retrieved October 15, 2020, from
<https://lcmf.co.uk/16-Dec-Lockwood-Snow>



extenuation is accompanied by a growing vulnerability of the spectator who exhausts himself in the attempt to find a subject effect to adhere to during the three hours of the film's duration. This condition of the spectator ends up triggering a somatic and phenomenological conversion to the revelation of the landscape: in a more Merleau-Pontian sense, the vision of the film produces the place of that flesh of the world where the chiasm between the viewer and the visible object is possible, thus seeming to share the same matter, the same 'rhythm of existence' dissolving borders and distances (Acquarelli, 2016). The film seems then to be a non-linguistic expression of the experience of the Merleau-Pontian flesh and its chiasmic phenomenology, which is detached from the Husserlian one, briefly recalled at the beginning of this article, more centred on the 'meaning donation' by the consciousness.

Although the methodological precautions cannot be negligible, given the unifying direction of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and that, more disjunctive, of psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Lacanian, the notion of the flesh of the world could in fact reach that of oceanic feeling, if we think of them both first as effects of interobjectivity rather than

as gnoseological assumptions. Effects that refer us back to the problem of distance mediations, which at this point we must understand no longer in a simple dialectic of distance/proximity, but in a wider spectrum of possibilities that stand out on the always potentially porous border between subject and object, in the chiasmic nature of this relationship.

NOTES

- 1 I leave the two terms in French, taken from the lexicon of the semiotics of the enunciation. For more details see Greimas and Courtés, 1982.
- 2 Veronese (Paolo Caliari), *Saint Anthony the Anthony the Abbot with St. Cornelius and St. Cyprian* (1565-71), Pinacoteca di Brera.
- 3 Think, for example, of the oculus of the *Camera degli Sposi* by Andrea Mantegna (1465-74).
- 4 However, Renaissance *trompes l'œil* do not seem to be any less effective. Think, for example, of the great experimentation of a painter like Carlo Crivelli in placing fruits and vegetables in the architectural thresholds reproduced inside or at the edges of a painting.
- 5 See the case of *I Philip* in Acquarelli, Treleani, 2019 and that of *Carne y Arena* in Acquarelli, 2020.

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