REPRESENTATION BETWEEN ART AND IMITATIVE STRUCTURE

Stefano Chiarenza[1], Barbara Messina[2]
[1]San Raffaele Roma Open University
Department of Human Sciences and Promotion of the Quality of Life
stefano.chiarenza@uniroma5.it
[2]University of Salerno
Department of Civil Engineering

IMAGE
ARTWORK
FALSE
REPRESENTATION
PERCEPTION

The present paper investigates the role of the image as a visual translation of concrete or mental realities, focusing in particular on the dichotomy between imitative function and intrinsic artistic expression. Since the image can be both a copy of a model and a representation with its own autonomy, it is therefore configured in some cases as a subordinate product to the original, in others as a work of art in itself. The representation then oscillates between true and false, translating into images quotes and references to concrete reality and —at the same time— to other images, which in turn become a source of inspiration. Retracing this dual nature through emblematic examples, the authors highlight the close integration of imitative and artistic functions of the image focusing on the different meaning connected to them. Attention also comes to the multiplicity that derives from the close relationship between reality and the image of reality that only the observer is able to recompose.

INTRODUCTION

The enchanting power of mimesis has long character-ized philosophical speculation linked to images. In par-ticular, the so-called figurative representation has been considered as a mental category based on concepts of belonging, similarity, imitation, image, simulacrum out-lined in opposition to the real. The theme of the false falls therefore implicitly in the concept of representation, it in-terpreted as a mirror of reality. When Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) advances the ontological Principle of Indiscernibles "*Eadem sunt, quorum unum potest substitui alteri salva veritate*" (Erdmann, 1840, p. 94) (that is: if, for every property F, object x has F if and only if object y has F, then x is identical to y) in some way influences the con-cepts of copy and true, putting them together. Reality de-materializes itself in the representation but at the same time the representation hyperrealizes reality making it more true than truth. The representation's ethos –if it can be defined as such– therefore oscillates between true and false, absorbing languages, quotations, repetitions, echoes and interferences not only from reality but also from other images and –to put it in Barthes' expression– only the observer is able to recompose this multiplicity. The truth then is not so much in the original model or in its representative emulation but in its destination, that is, the observer. And if sometimes the copy is indistinguish-able from the original, this is not only because it perfectly imitates the model but also because the model does not exist in many cases. Assonances and aesthetic differenc-es, however, may not imply perceptual differences in the same way that artwork and false are not always translat-able into perceptual predicates.

On these premises, this article seeks to investigate ima-ges intended both as imitative structures and as artistic representations, highlighting similarities and dissonances between an artwork and a copy. From the vast philosophi-

cal literature underlying the study of the image and its theories, the guiding thread of an original reflection by the authors on figurative representation and its contents is drawn, considering not only those properties detectable by the eye, but also those characters that, despite the graphic indiscernibility, characterize the works. The intent is not to make a contribution to the ontology of art but to highlight, through some indicative examples, the meanings of model and imitation and the multiple original and copy relationships regardless of the retinal indistinguishability of their controls. And therefore, not only the images but also the way in which they are presented and viewed are the object of exploration, thus separating the concepts of optical truth and perceptual truth, because –paraphrasing Frank Stella– not always "what you see is what you see" (Rosenberg, 1972, p. 125) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 John Dysktra, *Penalty Box*, 2016, photography, 40.6x40.6 cm. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://www.johndykstra.us/penalty-box>.

ART AND IMITATION

The image has always been a central theme in aesthetic reflection. If philosophy has neglected representation due to its proximity to *logos*, the aesthetic doctrine has focused its attention on it at various moments in history, often examining the anthropological role of representation and its function. Although related considerations are neither permanent nor universal, they presuppose the delineation of the concepts of imitation, appearance, likeness and image in their mutual relations and to reality (Vernant, 2010). In particular, the interactions between representation and image, when the latter is brought back to the field of mimetic activity, appear to establish a link between art, understood in its figurative meaning, and imitation. What Plato already identified as *mimesis* (imitation) and *eidolon* (mimetic artifice) actually appear as two closely related but ambivalent activities: on the one hand, the image can be read as a form of a model imitation (properly *mimesis*), on the other mimetic activity can be considered a producer of artifices (*eidola*) or images that are not bound to relationships of external resemblance with the imitated thing but represent it, implementing and realizing it in a concrete form (Figure 2).

In other words, there is a dialectic, in figurative representations, between the real form and the figuration, such that the second, although it recalls the exact appearance of the first, departs from it as its evocation, assuming an autonomous ontological dignity.

Therefore, in investigating the relationship between art and imitation, it appears essential to reflect on the similarity between image and model and the underlying concepts. In figurative artistic production, representation by images constitutes a form of expression even when all aspects of the real subject are meticulously reproduced. However, it seems acceptable to consider that pictorial imitative virtuosity does not in itself constitute an artistic value. For example, the works of Dürer, Leonardo da Vinci, Canaletto or Van Wittel

Figure 2 Albrecht Dürer,
Man Drawing a Lute, 1525,
woodcut, 13x18,2 cm, New York,
Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from
<https://www.metmuseum.org/
art/collection/search/387741>.
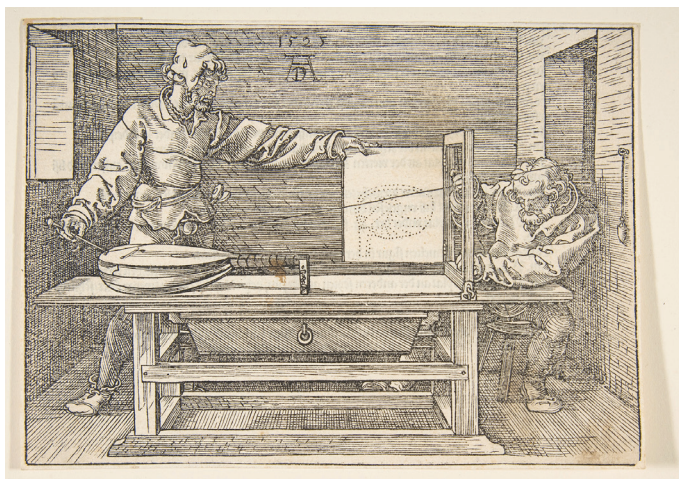
do not belong to the category of artworks for the sole fact of presenting realistic investigations of the painted subjects.

Indeed, they not only intimately represent the observed reality but reveal hidden aspects of it. They make what is not actually there appear, oscillating between presence and appearance. These are certainly imitations, but they do not simply bring back a copy of an original. Between subject, representation and observation, the emphasis is on the last two: in fact, the representation (or image) does not deceive the observer but makes a subject present, it simulates it. And, as the French historian and anthropologist Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914-2007) notes,

> simulating is not yet producing a work that is a copy of a model, but it is exhibiting a way of being that replaces the other, showing oneself as this or that, assuming its ways. The act of *mimeistai*, rather than a representation, is an effective action, a manifestation. (Vernant, 2010, p. 25) (Figure 3).

To the detriment of being, its apparent representation acts on the observer with a greater impact than the model. In terms of figurative arts, imitation can then be placed on the same level as illusion. The artifices capable of moving the image in the field of simulation (think for example of the

Figure 3 Canaletto, *Veduta di Palazzo Ducale e piazza San Marco a Venezia*, 1735, oil on canvas, 51x83 cm, Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Canaletto,_Veduta_del_Palazzo_Ducale.jpg>, CC BY-SA 3.0.

proportional corrections for optical purposes in ancient art or the perspective expedients for the evocation of space in Western perspective culture) offer the possibility of recalling reality or the model without reproducing its exact likeness. Error or falsity become intellectually valid acts that through similarities, comparisons and analogies allow us to see what is not evident or immediately visible (Rivier, 1956). The role of the observer is equally significant. Representation presupposes the viewer and therefore interpretation. The latter manipulates the image on different levels, generating the construction of meaning. We can say that vision and the visible refer in artistic figuration to the ability to see what is invisible (Merleau-Ponty, 2007). The expressive essence of an image, therefore, has a dual nature: on the one hand, it is the aesthetic vision of the artist it represents; on the other hand, that of the observer who interprets. This somehow excludes the search for simple visual truth.

The intrinsic link between image and thought, therefore, appears evident. The philosopher Elio Franzini writes that

the visible, in the image, always refers to the invisible, permitting, however, that the concepts of 'image' and 'representation', albeit analogous, cannot be superimposed. It allows, at the same time, that an ontological difference does not occur between the image in general and the artistic image: the distinction is only 'regional', and derives

from the difference of qualitative layers that settle in the images and not from a different descriptive and conceptual approach. (Franzini, 2011, p. 43)

The antithesis between model (and therefore reality) and phenomenal appearance (and therefore representation) is crumbling. As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) has rightly noted, if sometimes the copy is indistinguishable from the original this is not only because it perfectly imitates the model but also because the model does not exist in many cases (Deleuze, 2014).

The debate on the mimetic image remains an open point in the philosophical discussion. But Platonism in the distinction between an ideal image that allows us to see beyond its canonical codification and an illusory image, which as a fictitious representation of reality is in itself false, leads, in any case, to emphasize the duplicity of seeing.

Images have a formative sense for thought only when the sensitive side moves away from them, leading them to another form of vision, that is on an eidetic level, which saves their symbolic value by depriving them of aesthetic-sensitive illusionism. (Franzini, 2011, p. 47) (Figure 4)

The productions of so-called representative images that make up the set of artworks, therefore, rest their assumption on imitation through which it is possible to construct at times symbols, at times appearances, or illusory replicas that have no other reality than that of being similar to what they are not. On the other hand, it unleashes a real revolution in the visual arts.

AUTHENTIC AND FORGERY

Investigating artworks by considering them as imitative structures allows us to move from speculation between model and imitation to a more careful reflection on the concepts of original, or authentic, and copy or false in the visual arts. However, this reflection cannot disregard some considerations related to the temporal evolution of artistic expres-

Fig. 4 Andrea Pozzo, *Gloria di S. Francesco Saverio*, 1676, fresco, Mondovì (Italy), Church of San Francesco Saverio.
Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea_Pozzo>. Photo by: by Di Mattis - Opera propria, CC BY-SA 4.0, httpscommons.wikimedia.orgwindex.phpcurid=41764585.

sion and that of technologies and techniques of representation that allow the creation of a work. In particular, speaking about authenticity and copy implies the need to examine not only the time elapsed between the two artefacts but also the technique's mutation. As the art historian Ernest Gombrich (1909-2001) notes "Giotto's painting may have struck his contemporaries but his stroke appears rudimentary when compared with the image of a bowl of cereals drawn with an airbrush by a modern-day advertiser" (Gombrich, 2002, p. 21) (Figures 5, 6).

In other words, the technical possibilities and the means available involve the production capacity of artwork and as much of its copy. And if both are located on distinct temporal levels, the meaning of the copy takes on a completely different character. Indeed, the singular value of an authentic work of art lies in what the German philosopher, cultural critic and essayist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) defined the *hic et nunc*,

Figure 5 Raffaello Sanzio, *Ritratto di Baldassarre Castiglione*, 1514–1515, oil on canvas, 82×67 cm, Paris, Louvre. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Baldassare_Castiglione>. Photo by: by Elsa Lambert of C2RMF on 2010-06-23, Galerie de tableaux en très haute définition: image page, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15716848>.

Figure 6 Pieter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, after Raphael*, 1625-28, oil on wood, 90.2x67.5 cm, London, The National Gallery. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/peter-paul-rubens-portrait-of-baldassare-castiglione-after-raphael>.

the *aura*, the here and now which constitutes the concept of its authenticity on which the "idea of a tradition who has transmitted this object to the present day as something of the same and identical" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 108). However, it is clear that the copy of a 16th century artwork made in the 20th century, even though technically indistinguishable, is easily branded as a fake. As it has been correctly pointed out, "whoever painted like Leonardo today could not claim that the meanings of their works were the same as those 'incorporated' in Leonardo's works" (Velotti, 2011, p. XVII). In this case, we can say, taking up Benjamin's words, that authenticity is denied to any reproduction. In fact, for the German philosopher,

> the authenticity of a thing is by definition everything that can be passed on in it, from its origin, from its material duration to its historical testimony. Since the latter is based on the first, in reproduction, since the first is removed from man, the latter also ends up wavering as a result: the historical testimony of the thing. (Benjamin, 2019, p. 205)

However, the issue appears much more complex with historical progress and with the evolution of expression and artistic culture, especially when attention is focused on the retinal indistinguishability of two contemporary works.

The advent of photography –the 'pencil of nature' as William Henry Fox Talbot defined it– on the one hand, contributes to crumbling the idea of art as a perfect imitation and the 'Al-

bertian' conception that sees it as a search for visual truth. On the other hand, it unleashes a real revolution in the visual arts. In a progressive path of abstraction, the works of the artists are also populated with subjects that do not resemble anything recognizable, however rising to the dignity of art (Figure 7).

From the Impressionists to Cézanne, from Cubism to the Fauves to abstract painting, the Renaissance 'window to the world' closes its doors, revealing only images that can be traced back to visual stimuli, to actions that progressively break the connection between pictorial surface and reality. Up to even arriving at a surreality, which goes beyond reality itself, placing psychology of reality at the basis of art, hidden from the conscious mind. Surrealism, Dada, Suprematism, Geometric Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, are just some of the many artistic movements that in the twentieth century, while still exploiting consolidated means and techniques, abandon the imitative-descriptive representation; but we also witness the artistic production with the use of material things from the world of life *(Lebenswelt)*, from everyday experiences, so that the artistic object and the real object appear substantially indistinguishable (Figure 8).

Figure 7 Eugène Bataille, *La Joconde fumant la pipe*, 1887, illustration.
Gallica Digital Library, id: bpt6k2412478/f9., Public domain, Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6492753>.
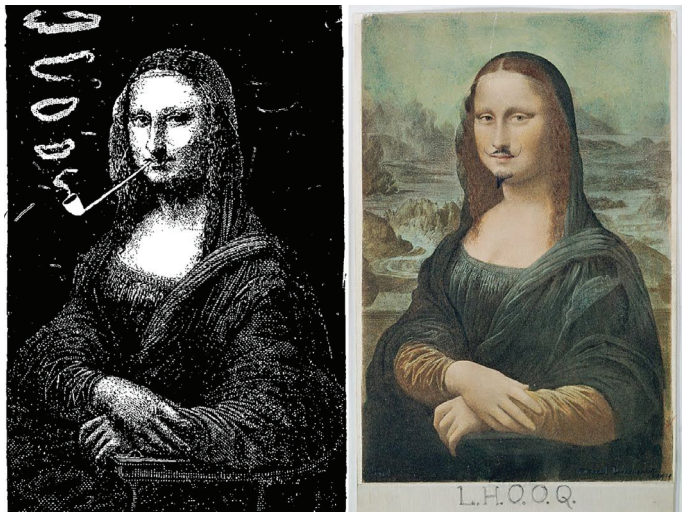Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, illustration, 19.7×12.4 cm, New York, MoMA. Public Domain, Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://it.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5027867>.

Figure 8 Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955, oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 191.1x80x20.3 cm, New York, MoMA. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78712>.

The discrimination between Authentic and False then takes on a completely different character from Benjamin's speculations and affects the philosophical themes of being an image or artistic object and of recognizing the image or object as such; or rather of the ontology and epistemology of art.

In the era in which an original and a fake could turn out to be completely free of perceptual differences upon observation, it is the observer's ability to establish the difference that determines the logical requirement of the distinction between the two. In the same way that in the consideration of art as mimesis of reality, the distinction between the real and its representation lies in the interpretation of the beholder. The art dealer Nelson Goodman, in one of his writings on the *Languages of Art* says: "The hardheaded question why there is any aesthetic difference between a deceptive forgery and an original work challenges a basic premiss on which the very function of collector, museum, and art-historian depend" (Goodman, 1998, p. 91). In analysing the problem, however, Goodman excludes the condition of indiscernibility, possibly considering it only transitory, and believes that perceptual discrimination is always identifiable. That is, any aesthetic difference would imply a perceptual difference. The American philosopher and critic Arthur Danto, on the other hand, admitting the indiscernibility of two works (in our research the authentic work and the copy) argues that the distinction may not necessarily be traced back to a perceptive or in any case sensitive property (Danto, 2011, p. 53). In fact, he writes that

> it is not clear if concepts like 'work of art' and 'forgery' are translatable into sets of simple perceptual predicates. We may in some cases be able to tell forgeries by inspection without its following that 'forgery' is a perceptual concept. Its being a forgery, one would think, has something to do with its history, with the way in which it arrived in the world. [...] but objects do not wear their histories on their surfaces. (Danto, 2011, p. 54)

A significant example brought by the American philosopher, and which eloquently falls within this discussion, re-

lates to the work of Andy Warhol, the iconic artist exponent of Pop Art. In particular, the reference is to the famous creation known as the *Brillo Box* (Figure 9).

When in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York, Warhol presented, along with other works, a series of boxes that perfectly simulated those designed by the graphic designer James Harvey of the then marketed Brillo soap pads, effectively eliminated the perceptible differences between art and reality. Danto even considers Warhol's boxes as a philosophical 'Rosetta stone' as they allow us to decipher two languages, that of art and that of reality and, we could extend this comparison to the reflection between authentic and copy (Danto, 2014, pp. 34-35). The boxes, perfectly identical in appearance, were distinguished by a substantial aspect: the originals contained the soap pads, while those made by the Pittsburgh artist certainly did not. In the absence of visible differences, therefore, what distinguished the original boxes from those of the artist could not therefore lie in the characteristics of visual perception but in not exactly visible ones.

Figure 9 Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*, 1964, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on wood, 43.3x43.2x36.5 cm, New York, MoMA. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81384>.

And for Danto, an invisible characteristic in a work is the presence of a meaning (works of art are about something). He writes

> the meanings are the result of inference or intuition, but they are never something material, moreover, instead of in a sentence with subject and predicate, in the case of an artwork the meaning takes shape in the object that transmits it. (Danto, 2014, p. 39)

It then comes back to the observer to interpret what are the aspects that bear meaning. Between authentic and forgery, therefore, the distinctions must be sought primarily between the non-visible properties (although they could be both in the object and in the meaning) and are the same that allow us to recognize a work of art from one that is not (Figure 10). The examples could be many, but in the economy of the present discussion, we seem to have reconstructed, on the basis of some significant philosophical orientations related to the study of the image, the distinctive character that today, more than ever, separates the authentic from the copy in the visual art production.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of Art and Imitation, Original and False in visual representation constitute aspects that have been investigated unevenly but whose contours have often been touched by philosophy since ancient times and more specifically by aesthetic doctrine starting from the modern age. However, the strong implications of mass culture, from the twentieth century to today, on the world of visual and artistic production, have offered philosophical thought and art criticism new and significant insights that have allowed us to redefine some assumptions on ontology and the epistemology of art. This research, in retracing some significant orientations, has intended to bring some fundamental principles back to the theme of the distinction between real and rep-

Figure 10 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of 'chair', New York, MoMA. Retrieved March, 31, 2021 from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435>.

resentation and between authentic object and copy. On the one hand, therefore, in analysing the conventional framework of imitative art, which characterized the orientations of preeminent Western culture up to the nineteenth century, the need to contemplate representation and expression in the work was highlighted, leaving the user with a key role. On the other hand, the field of the authentic and the false was explored, tracing the distinctive elements to primarily, though not necessarily, non-perceptive characters. In fact, René Descartes (1596-1650) wrote

> everything that up to now I have believed to be above all else true, I have received either from the senses or through the senses. But since I have realized that these sometimes make mistakes, prudence dictates that we never completely trust those who, even if only once, have deceived us. (Descartes, 1986, p. 212)

And the sense of perception, addressed to indistinguishable artefacts, especially in contemporary culture, often turns out to be fallacious in distinguishing the true from the false. This is what happens, for example, when observing a box of Brillo soap pads and a *Brillo Box* by Andy Warhol, absolutely identical in terms of visual aspect but not in meaning. Precisely the latter constitutes the invisible level

of an image and once again highlights the centrality of the observer, or if we want the user, who is entrusted with the burden of decoding it in order to access it. In an artwork, what you see is not always true but it could be; what is not seen is what instead denotes it.

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