THE IMAGE IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE IMAGE!
DISAPPEARANCE AND EVOLUTION IN VISUAL CULTURE

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DISAPPEARANCE OF THE IMAGE
ICONOSPHERE
RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GAZE
EVOLUTION

This contribution critically investigates the recurring theme of the 'death of the image' in contemporary thought, relating diagnoses of crisis that have marked its status to the persistent proliferation of images in present-day society. Drawing on a theoretical genealogy that spans philosophy, visual studies, and media theory, the article identifies four levels at which the disappearance of the image manifests itself: technical, political, functional, and semiotic. These 'declarations of death' are not, however, understood as the definitive exhaustion of the image, but rather as signals of an evolution −understood in a biological sense− of its role and value. From this perspective, the crisis of the image opens onto a process of regeneration grounded in the ethical nature of the gaze, which addresses the viewer in terms of responsibility and critical awareness. The image thus survives as an unstable and mutable form, capable of adapting to media contexts and renewing its potential for meaning.

INTRODUCTION: THE IMAGE IS DEAD

The image is dead. The theme of its disappearance is among the most pervasive and widely debated in contemporary critical thought. From the late nineteenth century onward, and consistently throughout the twentieth century, philosophical inquiry, art theory, and media studies have repeatedly announced the exhaustion of the image's function, proclaiming the loss of its authenticity and of its semiotic and symbolic value, thereby undermining its very status at its foundations. In the age of media multiplication and digital circulation, the image has been declared to have irreversibly lost its role and its spectrum of meanings, having been reduced to a mere surface incapable of actively communicating, embedded within an incessant visual flow devoid of depth. This inauspicious and seemingly irreversible diagnosis is nevertheless counterbalanced by a constant and irreducible productive proliferation of images, which not only continue to appear and multiply, but also to exert influence and produce effects within society.

This article, whose title echoes the paradoxical statement "*le roi est mort, vive le roi!*", aims to critically relate these two tensions: on the one hand, the crisis of the image's status, and on the other, its capacity to maintain an evolutionary nature and thus to regenerate itself through transformation. The premise from which this reflection proceeds is that the disappearance of the image is not so much attributable to its nature as a visual object, but rather to the betrayal of the promise of truth that derives from its existence. It is therefore not possible to speak of a material disappearance of the image, but rather of a crisis of its role on perceptual and interpretative levels, which leads to a reassessment of its value and to the necessity of regenerating its meaning.

From a methodological standpoint, this article adopts a theoretical-critical approach and situates itself in a liminal field between image theory, visual culture, and media studies. By identifying and examining four levels at which

the disappearance of the image manifests itself –technical, political, functional, and semiotic–, the article ultimately underscores how a renewed identity of the image can emerge only on a plane that synergistically evolves and integrates these contexts within an ethical perspective.

DECLARATIONS OF DEATH

The theme of disappearance, and the study of the testimonies and rhetorical modalities that document this phenomenon within a given cultural context, have accompanied the image since its very origins. Visual culture studies and image theory have long acknowledged and progressively consolidated the original connection between the appearance of the image and the event of death: "the image is born, constitutively, together with the experience of death and its conscious apprehension by human beings" (Pinotti & Somaini, 2016, p. 235, translation by the author). Emblematically, Hans Belting identifies the origin of the image in humanity's need to replace the physical presence of the deceased person with a 'container of meaning' capable of symbolically embodying their role and value (Belting, 2013). The very myth of the birth of painting, narrated by Pliny the Elder through the famous episode in which the daughter of the Greek potter Butades traces on a wall the outline of the shadow of her beloved before his departure, vividly confirms the powerful role of the image, capable of evoking and at the same time substituting that which is no longer present.

Theoretical speculation on the disappearance of the image thus analyzes the behavior of an object –since the image may be understood as a visual object– that is itself a document of disappearance. Discourse on the crisis of the image has been repeatedly and consistently nourished, above all, by the evolution of the technical possibilities of image production –and reproduction– and by the multiplication of the media contexts in which images are introduced and operate.

Fig. 1 René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, 1929, oil on canvas, 60,3 × 81,1 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Retrieved January, 10, 2025 from https://www.flickr.com/photos/profzucker/3320751204

It is therefore possible to trace a concise genealogy of theoretical approaches to the disappearance of the image, identifying the fundamental stages that have diagnosed a loss of its value or a 'betrayal' (Figure 1) of its role, thereby problematizing its function. One of the foundational moments of this genealogy is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin's well-known reflection on the loss of the aura of the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility (Benjamin, 1936/2008): the possibility of indefinitely reproducing an image dissolves its spatial and temporal uniqueness, compromising the ritual bond that connects it to the present dimension. The image thus loses its authority as an 'original' and opens itself to mass circulation, which enables its emancipation while simultaneously destabilizing its role.

Throughout the twentieth century, this diagnosis is repeatedly invoked and reaffirmed, intensifying the negation

of the relationship between representation and truth and emphasizing the autonomous value of the image with respect to reality. Jean Baudrillard (1981) formulates one of the most radical theses in this regard, asserting the complete autonomy of the sign as a "simulacrum" that declares only itself, rendering the role of the real referent irrelevant. From this perspective, the disappearance of the image coincides with the disappearance of the primordial relationship linking sign and referent and, ultimately, with the total self-referentiality of the sign. With the exponential multiplication of images and the emergence of the concept of the iconosphere –a totalizing visual universe in which human life increasingly unfolds through interaction with digital images and in the absence of direct experience of reality– the definitive loss of meaning of the image becomes concrete, a condition that Fontcuberta (2018) identifies as "post-photography." We inhabit the image, but we are also inhabited by it, immersed in a context of visual 'fury' that sanctions the dissolution of authorship, originality, truth, and memory: the death of the image thus occurs through redundancy, saturation, and, inevitably, indifference.

On the basis of these considerations, it is possible to identify specific domains in which the loss of meaning of the image manifests itself, for which particular 'declarations of death' may be issued. Specifically, these domains are articulated along technical, political, functional, and semiotic lines.

Technical death

The disappearance of the image first and foremost has a material and technical nature. Every image, in relation to the historical period, the available technological apparatus, and the cultural context in which it is produced, possesses intrinsic technical qualities determined by conceptual intentions and production processes, as well as by the modalities and trajectories of its circulation and preservation. From private to public images, from 'disposable' images to those destined for diffusion and iconic proliferation, the technologies, supports, and devices that enable their production and

'consumption' directly affect their survival. The discipline of media archaeology (Parikka, 2011/2019) demonstrates in this regard that images are not abstract entities, but objects that are always historically and technologically situated, thereby foregrounding the importance of the materiality of the image. Every support –from stone to film, from paper to magnetic tape, up to the variety of digital formats– is subject to processes of deterioration and aging that may ultimately decree the death of the image in the form of mute inaccessibility.

The rapid technological obsolescence of supports and production processes thus represents one of the principal threats to the survival of contemporary images, constituting a crucial factor in decisive fields such as the safeguarding and conservation of art and, more broadly, of cultural heritage. The need to conceptualize new media (Manovich, 2001) precisely from their material condition leads to reflection on the transience of the digital image, which, often perceived as durable precisely because of its immateriality, is in reality extremely fragile, since it depends on hardware, software, protocols, and platforms subject to rapid transformation. The promise of global digital archiving therefore clashes with the reality of an unstable and selective memory, and the archive itself, understood as a place of preservation, becomes at once the custodian of memory and the tomb of images that, no longer readable, become invisible.

Political death

The death of the image on the political level is often a violent death, the consequence of a deliberate act of destruction, removal, or interdiction, which targets the image because it is the bearer of symbolic, political, or affective power. In this case, the image does not die from obsolescence, excessive saturation, or loss of meaning, but because it is deemed dangerous, offensive, or responsible for the dissemination of ideologies to be opposed. Iconoclastic practices, from antiquity to the present day, demonstrate the persistent historical recurrence of this mode of erasure

(Pinotti & Somaini, 2016, pp. 240-243; Bettetini, 2016): from Byzantine iconoclasm to the destruction of religious images during the Protestant Reformation, up to more recent acts involving the demolition of monuments, the systematic vandalization of iconographic testimonies in wartime contexts, or the removal of visual content from social media platforms. Iconoclasm, aimed at the negation of the image (Freedberg, 1989), paradoxically ends up implicitly acknowledging its efficacy and relinquishing any attempt to counter its power to act, influence, and generate behavior, destroying it instead as an admission of manifest impotence. In the contemporary context, the violent death of the image may also be expressed in less spectacular and visible, yet equally incisive and insidious forms: the algorithmic removal of content, preventive censorship exercised by digital platforms, de-indexing, and selective invisibilization produce a death of the image that leaves no material traces, but profoundly shapes the field of the visible (Cicalò, 2022). Controversies surrounding so-called cancel culture once again reveal how the death of the image is a political act (Maifreda, 2022): deciding which images may circulate and which must be removed, thereby constructing the framework within which access is permitted, means recognizing that the disappearance of images is never a neutral process, but is always inscribed within relations of power.

Functional death

The disappearance of the image also manifests itself on a functional level, insofar as it loses its capacity to generate an experiential form of engagement and to convey meaningful content. In the contemporary iconosphere, images do not die because their visual nature is removed, but because they cease to function as artifacts capable of engaging the gaze, generating attention, and provoking cognitive responses: the sheer quantity of images and their modes of consumption compromise their effectiveness. This occurs paradoxically even in the case of images that, by virtue of their emotional

content, should most strongly elicit feelings of pain and unsettle our conscience. Susan Sontag (2003) describes this phenomenon as a form of "emotional anesthesia", whereby continuous exposure to violence and the spectacle of suffering produce indifference and habituation rather than awareness and empathy. At this level, the progressive transformation of visual practices and modes of looking also plays a decisive role (Berger, 1972; Cousins, 2018): the shift from looking to browsing –scrolling–, from contemplation to 'consumption', and from slowness to speed determines a profound mutation of the visual experience. At the end of the 1990s, Jonathan Crary (1999) focused on the crisis of attention as a defining feature of contemporaneity, one that nonetheless has its roots in nineteenth-century modernity, when the development of new technical devices for vision introduced a plurality of possible visual experiences, depriving the gaze of duration and concentration and anticipating the loss of the image's efficacy that today manifests itself as functional death.

Semiotic death

The semiotic disappearance of the image concerns the crisis of its status as a signifying sign and, more specifically, the loss of its capacity to establish a reliable relationship with a real referent. From this point of view, we may state that the image dies when its representative nature is compromised: it becomes self-referential and deprived of a direct anchoring in reality. Once again invoking the concept of the simulacrum, in this context the image substitutes itself for reality, generating a hyperreality that no longer requires the criterion of originality. The Peircean semiotic triad of referent-sign-interpretant, now deprived of the referent, thus becomes a binomial in which the institution of meaning is entrusted to the visual-interpretive relationship between sign and interpretant, producing a plurality of possible meanings all placed on the same level of authority, since the nature of the relationship with the referent has become unknowable. Consequently, the semiotic crisis of the image does not

imply an absence of meaning, but rather an uncontrolled proliferation of meanings, all equally possible, which refer to nothing other than their own circulation. The image does not signify, but rather, simply and non-hierarchically, operates, nonetheless producing its effects. In this sense, William J.T. Mitchell's question *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005) invites a shift of attention from the referentiality of the image to its agency. The semiotic death of the image thus seals the epilogue of a pact of trust with the observer-user, insofar as it is no longer possible to establish a stable relationship between sign and meaning. The image survives as an unstable, ambiguous, and opaque sign, whose interpretation can only be entrusted to the responsibility of the gaze.

EVOLUTION AND SURVIVAL

Declarations of the technical, political, functional, and semiotic death of the image seem to lay the foundations for an irresolvable dilemma concerning its future. However, the multiple facets of the crisis that places the role of the image at its center provide the very conditions for its vital regeneration, which can manifest itself only through a mutation of its status. The domain of the image is neither fixed nor immutable; rather, it is a fluid and mobile field and, as such, capable –like a language– of adapting, evolving, and expanding according to the uses made of it (Debray, 1999). Precisely by virtue of this fluid and constitutively mutable nature, the contemporary image can overcome the limits imposed by the materiality of supports, political erasure, functional impoverishment, and the loss of its relationship with reality, transforming itself and constructing a renewed identity.

In this sense, the regeneration of the image assumes an ethical character, since, freed from its original promise of truth, it now addresses the spectator by calling for the acquisition of critical consciousness and awareness. Georges Didi-Huberman (2003) had already observed that it is precisely those images

that display fragility, incompleteness, or degradation that are capable of generating a more authentic experience of reception, compelling the observer to engage in a critical labor of looking, an assumption of responsibility through reflection on the meaning and implications of the visual act. This perspective appears to enter into dialogue with the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1961/1980), according to whom the face of the Other is not an object of knowledge or a representable form, but a demand for responsibility that materializes in the moment of encounter between the observer and what is observed. Judith Butler (2009) likewise identifies an ethical path for the survival of the image in its role as an active provocation, which requires attention not only to what is visible but also to what is absent from the image, and therefore may no longer be seen or heard. In the digital context, Hito Steyerl also reflects on the circulation of what she defines as "poor images" (Steyerl, 2009), articulating their taxonomy and listing their characteristics –technical degradation, fragmentation, imperfection– in order to highlight their resilience. Thanks to their free and democratic circulation, which makes them instruments of global connection and information, these images prove to be even more alive and powerful than 'high' images: it is their instability that determines their strength, constructing new networks of visibility, fostering interpretive multiplicity, and overturning traditional hierarchies of value and authority. The survival of the image may also be read through a biologically inflected evolutionary perspective, as an open and heterogeneous process, often governed by contingency and chance. In *Darwin Architect*, Roberto de Rubertis (2012) discussed the application of Darwinian thought to architecture, emphasizing how architectural development does not necessarily unfold according to a logical or consequential design, but rather through contingent adaptations influenced by environmental factors, unforeseen uses, mutations, and selections that are not always controllable in advance. Drawing a parallel with this view, we may conceive of the image as matter in

Fig. 2 Top: Carlo Enrico Bernardelli, *Ritmi di materia in trasformazione*, 2012 (de Rubertis, 2012, p. 78). Bottom: Eric Kessels, *24 Hours in Photos*, 2011. Retrieved January, 10, 2025 from https://www. kesselskramer.com/project/24-hrs-in-photos.
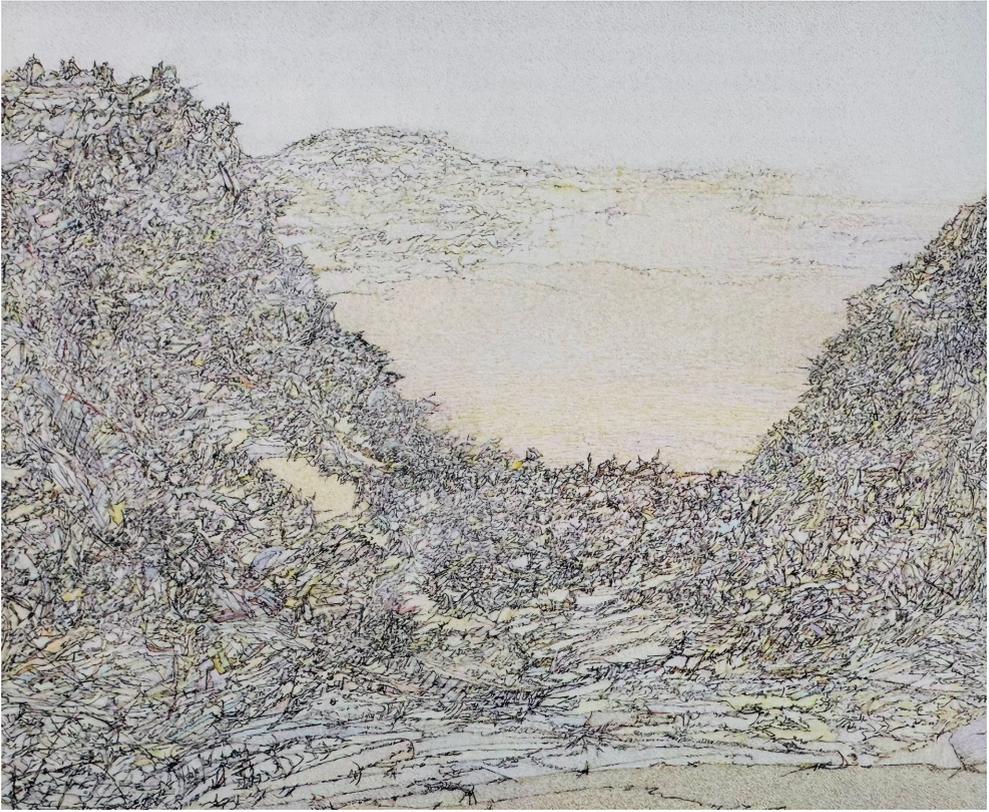
transformation, destined to adapt to contexts and to undergo continuous re-semantization. Its regeneration is thus the result of a process of natural –and cultural– selection that leads to the persistence of certain images –those that spread and take root because they impact society– and to the extinction of others, which instead remain unused or latent. In this sense, the evolution of the image is a process in which chance, error, repetition, and everyday use play a decisive role, calling into question any attempt at total control over the production and circulation of the visible. This evolutionary dynamic finds a powerful visual translation in the striking similarity (Figure 2) between the drawings from the series *Ritmi di materia in formazione* by Carlo Enrico Bernardelli (2012), which illustrate de Rubertis's volume, and the work *24 Hours in Photos* by Erik Kessels (2011): in the former, matter is represented as a chaotic system traversed by tensions that precede the formation of stable structures, depicted in a critical phase in which it is forced either to change configuration or to collapse; in the latter, the physical accumulation of millions of printed photographs constitutes a formless mass with high entropy, likewise destined to organize itself into a new structure of meaning. The excess of images that characterizes the contemporary iconosphere can thus be interpreted as a liminal condition, analogous to that of evolving systems, in which the loss of order opens up the possibility of new constitutive forms.

CONCLUSION: LONG LIVE THE IMAGE!

Like a language that changes and renews itself through everyday use, like matter awaiting the assumption of new forms dictated by evolutionary principles, the contemporary image transforms and evolves, embracing mutation as a condition of survival and offering new tools for critical interpretation. The image never dies definitively; rather, it changes its status: the acknowledgment of its disappearance is the necessary precondition for the possibility of a new

form of life, perhaps more fragile, yet at the same time more conscious and enduring. In a context characterized by visual saturation and medial instability, the image survives no longer by imposing itself, but by opening itself to relational forms of interpretation and by demanding to be looked at with attention and responsibility. The epilogue announced in the title thus unfolds in the awareness that the vital energy of the image leads it toward continuous mutation, toward a process of adaptation that invites human beings to exercise a critical gaze with ever greater awareness. Long live the image!

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