

THE AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE IMAGE IN CYBERSPACE

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Premise

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The birth of the internet has given rise to the diffusion of images on a previously unimaginable scale. Furthermore, in this digital era the status of the image has changed, taking on new distinctive features. In parallel, we are witnessing in the academic world, at international level, a renewed centrality of the *visual*, as theorized in the field of *visual culture studies*.¹ In particular, in the Anglo-American world, Mitchell has introduced the concept of the »pictorial turn«, while, in the German-speaking world, Boehm has coined the expression »Ikonische Wende«.²

With this new approach to the visual, the aim is to overturn the Rortyan

1 The origins of this subject can be traced back to the studies of the 1920s, which describe the transformation produced by photography and cinema. Béla Balázs wrote of »visuelle Kulture« in Béla Balázs, *Der Sichtbare Mensch oder die kultur des Film*, Deutsch-Österreichischer Verlag, Wien 1924; while Moholy-Nagy used the expression »Schaukultur« (»culture of vision») in László Moholy-Nagy, *Pittura Fotografia Film* (1925, 1927), Antonio Somaini (ed.), Einaudi, Torino 2010, p. 31. Cfr. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, London 1999; Antonio Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Einaudi, Torino 2016.

2 Cfr. in particular: William J. T. Mitchell, »The Pictorial Turn«, in: *Artforum*, 30, 7, 1992, p. 89–94; Gottfried Boehm, »Die Wiederkehr der Bilder«, in: G. Boehm (ed.),

paradigm based on the supremacy of language as the main vehicle of knowledge.³ This shift has also necessarily involved the internet, a space within which our choices and our actions are also, to a large extent, related to images.⁴ In the »videosphere«⁵ images seem to have become entities with their own *agency*. They generate actions and reactions in observers in their online as well as their off-line world.⁶ They appear in all their communicative and interpretative power and ambiguity. But above all, we are dealing with autonomous images with their own ontological status, that are easily manipulated using everyday software and highly performative. Consequently, in relation particularly to these three characteristics of the visual in cyberspace, changes seem to have occurred: changes regarding the responsibility of the individual towards the image as well as that of the image towards the individual. As regards the responsibility on the part of the image, it is necessary to consider the preliminary specification below. Particular reference is made to Mitchell and his reflections on the new status of the image, in his essay »What do Pictures Want?«.

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He states that, »Images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that have desires [...]; therefore, the question of what pictures want is inevitable«. In particular, Mitchell refers to »What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of viscosity adequate to

Was ist ein. Bild, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, 1994, p. 11–38; John Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, Routledge New York 2003; Antonio Pinotti, Antonio Somaini A. (eds.), *Teorie dell'immagine. Il dibattito contemporaneo*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2009; Olaf Breidback, Federico Vercellone, *Pensare per immagini. Tra arte e scienza*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2010; Federico Vercellone, *Il futuro dell'immagine*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2017; Krešimir Purgar, *J.T. Mitchell's Image Theory: Living Pictures*, Routledge, New York 2017. Cfr. Veronica Neri, *Immagine nel Web. Etica e ontologia*, Carocci, Roma 2013, to which this essay is intended as a continuation, in light of the new horizons opened up by new technologies and by continuing academic debate.

3 Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1967.

4 Krešimir Purgar, "What is not an Image (Anymore)? Iconic Difference, Immersion and Iconic Simultaneity in the Age of Screens", in: *Phainomena*, XXIV/92-93, June 2015, p. 155–170; Žarco Paič, Krešimir Purgar (eds.), *Theorizing images*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2016.

5 Term coined by Régis Debray in relation to the mediasphere theory: cfr. *Vie et mort de l'image*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1992, cap. VIII.

6 Antonio Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, op. cit., p. XXI.

their ontology». ⁷ The image can only be thought of as being “responsible” if we engage in an imaginative game in which we choose to consider it a “living thing”, something with desires and which participates in the construction of reality. ⁸ In this sense, the image takes on responsibilities beyond those evoked by the etymological meaning of the Latin verb *respondeo*. ⁹ In the digital world, the concept of responding to something, in terms of adhering to a referent, assumes a lesser importance than in the past. Without radicalizing this theory, it is, however, necessary to hypothesize a new interpretative paradigm for the visual on the web. One which cannot be reduced to language systems, nor to the exclusive iconic system of the off-line world. ¹⁰ Such a paradigm necessarily overturns the traditional relationship between the image and the observer.

Certain ethical issues emerge in relation to this. Of particular importance are those relating to the acceptance of the responsibilities outlined above, regarding the autonomy, mutability and power of the image to “make us do things” on-line and off-line. The purpose of this essay is to try to understand how best to exploit these particular features of the visual in order to promote conscious and respectful behaviour, both in the online community as well as in society in general. Another aim is to understand how, or even *if*, it might be possible to limit these images when they become the vehicle for messages that are ambiguous, or even potentially dangerous for the community. Such limits might be put in place by the individual, or even on the part of the image itself. One possible solution could be a more critical interpretation of the image, in order that the image reveal itself, one might say an “ethics”, which would operate above and beyond the boundaries of the law and deontology.

Such interpretation would need to be sure to identify all those elements

7 William J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. 11; William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.

8 William J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: the war of images, 9/11 to the present*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2011, p. XVIII–XIX.

9 Adriano Fabris, *Etica della comunicazione*, Roma, Carocci 2014, p. 47–51.

10 Alberto Martinengo, “La fine dell’arte e il ritorno dell’immagine”, in: Francesca Iannelli *et al.* (ed.), *Fine o nuovo inizio dell’arte. Estetiche della crisi da Hegel al pictorial turn*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2016, p. 381–383.

that make up the image and to contextualize them. To properly understand the meaning, beyond mere face value. Moreover, it would require an understanding of the consequences related to the presence of the image and of its viewing, a viewing which might be either attentive or distracted. It is an interpretation which seeks to understand “what pictures want”, to refer back to Mitchell. Distorted interpretations convey distorted values and concepts. On the web, such messages are spread to a potentially infinite audience. Consequently, interpretation occurs on various levels, from the most basic analysis of the signs, to a level of analysis that leads to inferences as well as links to concepts that are unrelated to the images.¹¹ Indeed, it is only through such interpretation of images, that one fully grasps their performative character, and, therefore, the potential consequences for individuals. What’s more, it is only after this attempt at interpretation (which by the way is also typical of communication processes based on dialogue and understanding), that one can choose whether or not to accept the values and imaginary conveyed by the image. This is the case of the »unspeakable and the unimaginable« images, to borrow an expression used first by Mitchell, and later expressed in similar terms by Didi-Huberman, relating to images of terror.¹² We must, therefore, attempt to find our way through this iconic overdose, which could lead to a new age of iconoclasm. Here, iconoclasm is to be understood, above all, as the will to destroy the meanings of certain images, even through the actual destruction of the (electronic) image itself, to avoid becoming prisoners of its fascination. Nevertheless, the permanent removal of certain images from the network is not an easy task.

2. Features of the digital image

To understand the ethical issues related to the visual sphere on the web, a brief reference to the peculiarities of the digital image is necessary. Its numerical nature is certainly its most fundamental feature. This aspect has made

11 *Ibid*; Federico Vercellone, op. cit.

12 William J. Thomas Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror”, in: *ELH*, 72, 2, 2005, p. 291–308; William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, op. cit; George Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2003.

it possible to go beyond the imitative and referential dimension of reality. In fact, as pointed out by Lévy, it »opens itself to immersion«. This process is increasingly the aim of web communication, »[r]epresentation makes room for interactive visualization of a model; simulation replaces resemblance«. ¹³ And, as Boehm also states, digital images »are able to simulate the mode of representation or even the very referents of the representation«. ¹⁴ What comes into play, therefore, is the self-referentiality of the image.

This numerical nature opens up numerous other possibilities for the image. It enables, for example, an infinite duplication. ¹⁵ On this point Mitchell, with his term »biopicture«, uses the metaphor of the biological cloning process to emphasize the ability of the image to multiply on the web. ¹⁶ This numerical nature allows for a high degree of manipulability, for adaptation to various media and the highest levels of definition and “readability”. This is fundamental, for example, in scientific research. And, as Montani writes, it represents »a cognitive mode that allows us, through the images (*eikones*) that it produces, to see something more than the phenomenal reality that underlies it«. ¹⁷ As regards manipulability, there are two options that invite ethical reflection. The first is the option of respecting the original sense of the image. Therefore, acting responsibly, improving the quality and readability of the image, without modifying the actual meaning or the salient visual characteristics; the identifying elements of people or places may be cancelled for reasons of privacy or security; deontological and regulatory constraints, when present, are respected. Therefore, the individual participates in the im-

13 Pierre Levy, *Cyberculture* (1997), Engl. trans. by R. Bononno, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2001, p. 130.

14 Gottfried Boehm, “Vom Medium zum Bild”, in: Yvonne Spelman, Gundolf Winter (eds.), *Bild-Medium-Kunst*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, 1999, p. 177–178. Regarding the loss of the representational element in the relationship between the virtual image and the real object, cfr. Oscar Meo, “Ontologia ed estetica del cyberspazio”, in: *Anthropos & Iatria*, 3, 2006, p. 56–61.

15 Gottfried Boehm, “Vom Medium zum Bild”, cit.

16 William J. Thomas Mitchell, *The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable*, cit; William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Pictorial turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, Michele Cometa (ed.), Duepunti Edizioni, Palermo 2008, p. 15–17.

17 Pietro Montani, *Arte e verità dall'antichità alla filosofia contemporanea. Un'introduzione all'estetica*, Laterza Roma-Bari 2002, p. 93.

age, transforms it, and becomes, in a certain sense, co-author.¹⁸ However, this characteristic can also lead to a second option, that of performing unethical actions.

Huge transformations alter the original meaning of the image, turning it into something other than was originally intended.

Yet, only certain image manipulation processes can be legally and deontologically sanctioned, that is if they affect the privacy or the dignity of the person, or if they breach copyright, etc. There is, for example, no legislation that permits the blocking of images published by ordinary users on the social media.¹⁹ Rules, charters and codes of conduct for the web, though much needed, cannot take the place of a sense of responsibility, both on the part of the individual and of the web community. Particularly in an era where *post-truth* seems to have taken on an important role.

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What emerges, therefore, is another characteristic of the image in cyberspace and, indeed, among the most important from an ethical point of view: the autonomy of the image in relation to the individual's actions.²⁰ Once an image enters into the web circuit, its path is not always predictable, and neither are the consequences that can result from its viewing. The individual aims to control the movements of the image, as well as the consequence of these movements, in relation to pre-defined procedures. These procedures may, however, escape the control of the individual and the images may end up circulating around autonomously in cyberspace. The case of Abu Graib is emblematic, in which the intentions of the photographers were not properly accomplished.²¹

18 Pierre Levy, op. cit., p. 130.

19 See Adriano Fabris, "Etica e internet", in: Adriano Fabris (ed.), *Guida alle etiche*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2011, p. 98–99; Paolo Passaglia, "Privacy e nuove tecnologie, un rapporto difficile. Il caso emblematico dei *social media*, tra regole generali e ricerca di specificità", in: *Consulta Online*, 3, 2016, p. 332–348.

20 Regarding the autonomy of the image, cfr. also, Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2010, it. trans. by Simone Buttazzi, with introduction by Federico Vercellone, *Immagini che ci guardano. Teoria dell'atto iconico*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2015. Regarding the autonomy of the Internet in general: Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 101 ff.; Adriano Fabris, *Etica delle nuove tecnologie*, La Scuola, Brescia 2012, p. 55.

21 William J. Thomas Mitchell, "Realismo e immagine digitale", in: Roberta Cogli-

This type of de-contextualization of the image leads to a misunderstanding of its original meaning. The observer sometimes finds himself having to re-contextualize and interpret the image based on his own imaginary and time and, as such, risks changing the meaning and function.

Its uniqueness also lies in the fact that it can be viewed in real time, i.e. immediately after being uploaded onto the web. Furthermore, the present has become “eternally present”. However, what also emerges is the difficulty in erasing traces of certain “presences” that we may, in time, come to regret. What we have is a (potentially) eternal preservation of images in ever accessible electronic archives. These are archives in which the images do not undergo deterioration, but if anything, are subject to interpretative distortions due to changes in the time and context of the viewing. With regard to the spatial dimension, however, apart from the physical space between the spectator and the image, there is also an imaginary space, within the image on the web.²² It is a “social space”, subjective, a place of interaction, with the observer at its centre. This same space, however, in the case of the social media, can also create, paradoxically, a communicative isolation from the off-line world.

The online image can thus be seen as an “event” and extremely peculiar in that it can be repeated indefinitely, or be ever present. The (virtual) image »happens«, as Belting would say. There is no pre-defined viewing time on the *web*. It is the viewer who decides when to view the images, the order in which to view them and, indeed, whether or not to repeat the experience.²³

In this context, anyone can publish and manipulate an image and use it on the web; they can also make it interactive, encouraging involvement on the part of all web users. Therefore, even the role of the author of the image has changed, intersecting with the viewer in a constant exchange of roles. Thanks also to immersive technologies, such as virtual reality or augmented reality, the possibility of perceiving images *in presentia* is even greater, creating a genuine

tore (ed.), *Cultura digitale. Paradigmi a confronto*, Duepunti edizioni, Palermo 2008, p. 81–99: 89.

22 Jean Aumont, *L'immagine*, it. trans. by Valentina Pasquali, Lindau, Torino 2007, p. 138–141.

23 Hans Belting, “Immagine, medium, corpo. Un nuovo approccio all’iconologia”, in: Antonio Pinotti, Antonio Somaini (eds.), op. cit., p. 75, 165–172.

dialogue between the subject and the image.²⁴ A context of hyper-reality is created, which renders the image “realer than reality”. However, this technological development, though opening up a space for possibilities, also creates barriers: if one does not keep up with technological innovations, certain applications cannot be used.

In light of the above, compared to the images of the off-line world, those on the web appear much more ambiguous. Their potentially unlimited and autonomous circulation can lead to interpretations that are (in)voluntarily partial, undefined, or even false.

This manipulability would imply that a web image is to be considered “good” if it reveals itself, its technical characteristics and, therefore, any measures to which it has been “subjected” in order to appear the way it does.²⁵ But is this always the case? Or is it perhaps that, rather than the actual manipulation of the image, we ought to worry more about the lack of hermeneutical skills on the part of individuals who view it? Every image should be subject to an ethics of interpretative doubts. We should ask ourselves whether we have adopted an attentive reading, taking into account our own subjectivity. Only such a critical and responsible reading can penetrate the veil of spectacularization, on the part of contemporary society, within which images often find themselves trapped.

And it is only through such an ethical interpretation, which takes into consideration all the figurative elements and the communicative and meta-communicative levels of reference,²⁶ that one can appreciate the “responsibility” of the image. Images are responsible, therefore, due to their autonomy to move on the web without control; in relation to “what they want”, *à la* Mitchell, and thus to their own performativity, making people act; but they are responsible,

24 Giovanni Avveduto *et al.*, “A Scalable Cluster-Rendering Architecture for Immersive Virtual Environments”, in: *Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, and Computer Graphics*, International Conference on Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and Computer Graphics, AVR 2016, p. 102–119; Federico Vercellone, *op. cit.*, p. 117–118.

25 Cfr. Adriano Fabris, “Die Selbständigkeit der Bilder”, in: Adriano Fabris, Annamaria Lossi, Ugo Perone, *Bild als Prozess. Neue Perspektiven einer Phänomenologie des Sehens*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2011, p. 207–222.

26 Ruggero Eugeni, *Analisi semiotica dell’immagine. Pittura, illustrazione, fotografia*, I.S.U. Università Cattolica, Milano 2004, p. 20–21.

in a certain sense, for the values and imaginaries they convey. It is, nevertheless, a partial responsibility, on the part of those who create the images, those who publish or use them, and those who simply observe them. Let us then try to understand which choices open up to the individual in relation to the images on the web. And let us try to understand what consequences may derive from such choices. However, it is also important to understand in what way these images may act upon us, in light of the autonomy, manipulability and performativity mentioned above, which are greatly amplified on the web.

3. Responsibilities and limits of the individual towards the image

More specifically, in relation to the autonomy, manipulability and pervasiveness of the image, a further two issues emerge. The first concerns the responsibility of the individual towards the image; the second concerns the limits that can be set by the individual or other “subjects” such as, for example, corporations, regarding the characteristics of the visual.

With regard to the first aspect, the responsibility of the individual would appear to be threefold. Firstly, in either responding or not responding to the principles that inspire the creation and conveyance of the image. This is where the use of image manipulation tools comes into play. For example, one chooses whether to opt for the principles of verisimilitude and truth regarding the image of the event to be represented, or not. An emblematic case of this is the photographic image published after the bombings at the Bataclan in Paris, in 2015. This image is meant to represent a deserted Paris immediately after the attack. In this case, however, the picture was published as true, despite being false.²⁷ It is in fact an overlaying of various images, most likely taken at different times. The other choice is to upload arbitrary images onto the web, obvious fruits of fantasy, which may either represent a mere *divertissement* or convey meanings.

Secondly, it is important to clarify what actions we wish to accomplish, or have others accomplish, via these images: whether to inform, entertain, instigate action, shock, etc. We are, therefore, responsible for what we publish.

27 Giovanni Scarafile, “Etica delle immagini, spectatorship e la questione ingenua dell’oggettività della rappresentazione”, in: *Teoria*, 2016/2, p. 137–148.

Finally, we must reflect on the responsibility we bear for technological images, in light of the autonomy mentioned above. It is a concept of responsibility closely linked to that of the control, both of the individual and the community, over various technologies.²⁸ It is a responsibility that concerns the present, but also the future, the duration of a message and the (un)predictable consequences which may ensue. An image may arrive directly before the eyes of individuals who either cannot understand it due to lack of critical tools, could be indifferent to it or may be upset by it. The individual can, in spite of himself, become both an acting entity (conveying the image) and indeed a performative entity. What's more, he can also be subject, at the same time, to the conditioning power of the image.

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As regards the limits that may be placed on the image by the individual, we can certainly identify those deriving from technological knowledge. This know-how allows us to bypass at least some unwanted images. Consider, for example, those for commercial purposes. However, we ought to focus, above all, on the significant role played by corporations, such as Google, Facebook, Yahoo, etc. Such companies have played an increasingly significant role in the dissemination of images, directing them on the basis of specific research conducted on the web by the individual user. This *ad personam* procedure, which acts on the basis of specific algorithms, can reach the wrong user, who, in turn, (un)consciously becomes a conveyor of the image and its (dis)values, to other users or virtual communities. This opens a potentially endless circuit. In a certain sense, the corporations seek to “exploit” the autonomy of the image to their advantage, “limiting it”, i.e. shaping it according to a certain procedure. In this way, its autonomy is further accentuated. The images are inserted into a new communication circuit, thanks to which they can act freely.

4. Responsibilities and limits of the image towards the individual

As we have seen, the image on the web is an entity in its own right. Let us therefore now try to look at it from the opposite perspective: what responsibilities can the image, as conceived by Mitchell, assume towards individual? And what limits can this image impose on individual?

28 Adriano Fabris, *Etica delle nuove tecnologie*, cit., p. 41–43.

As for the responsibilities, those images which may be considered true iconic acts, *à la* Bredekamp, and therefore modify the observer's intentions are, as such, responsible for their ability to guide the choices, behaviour and sensibilities of the viewer. This aspect is true, not only regarding what the images communicate, but, above all regarding the cloning process that characterizes them on the web. This ability to generate other images can cause confusion, misunderstanding or even indifference, to the point of generating a new iconoclasm. Their strength lies in their ability to jump from a state of latency to one of agency, through visualizations.²⁹ So once again, it is this autonomy and adaptability to different spaces on web that make the image responsible for its own movements in cyberspace and for its effect on the observer.³⁰

As for the limits imposed on the individual by the image, these would seem again to depend on the autonomy of the image. This factor can certainly limit the actions of the individual and their options, for which it is responsible. It is an autonomy that reinforces the pervasive power of the visual. Consider the advertising image, for example. Or the scientific image, which shows what we would not otherwise be able to see with the naked eye. By means of a particular symbolic system, it provides an analysis of phenomena that can affect the life-style choices of an individual. Such limitations on the individual's freedom of choice "work" especially well in the case of a distracted viewing of the image. However, its pervasiveness may even trigger the opposite effect: the refusal on the part of the individual towards an image whose content, appearance, or goals he does not share.

Another limit for which the image is responsible and which, in a sense, it imposes upon the individual, is the possibility of taking a glimpse into new worlds. This is a process which, from another point of view, could also represent an opening, a stimulus for dialogue and comparison. In this way, the image conveys social imaginaries, acting not only on the individual but on virtual communities in general. By social imaginary we do not mean something that relates exclusively to the imagination. We mean, to quote Taylor, those shared

29 Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, op. cit., p. 36.

30 Regarding the autonomy of new technology and the image, see: Adriano Fabris, *Die Selbständigkeit der Bilder*, cit.

values at the heart of an understanding of reality and our actions within it, values also at the heart of our relationship with ourselves and with others. They are ways of understanding the social, which themselves then become social entities, mediators of collective life. They exist by virtue of implicit representations, but also represent the means through which people understand their own identity and their place in the world.³¹

This communication process also affects two further aspects, sometimes implicitly, at other times explicitly: on some websites, certain imaginaries are reinforced, whereas others are criticized on different sites. Such inputs can then spread to vast segments of the population. What we have, therefore, is a multitude of imaginaries “brought before our eyes”, each potentially different from the others. These strongly direct our individual and collective choices, to the point of becoming mirrors in which to observe ourselves.

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The behavior of the individual can therefore be limited on the basis of the imaginary conveyed; but, at the same time, the individual interprets both the proposed image and the imaginary on the basis of his own imaginary of reference. In this process the interpretation of the image appears to be extremely relative. Nevertheless, in the present-day era of the image, the western imaginary still appears to dominate. Furthermore, it is strongly permeated by the logic of the corporations, by frequent migration, by globalization and by mass communication (including the web itself). These aspects are making it more hybrid, “weakening” its uniqueness, and further complicating the hermeneutic aspect of the image. Consider, for example, the images of terror increasingly circulated on the web; they serve to raise awareness for the war on terror in the case of many individuals, but as incitement to terror for others.

This iconic typology opens up new possibilities, for both acquiring knowledge and for acting, on the web. Therefore it opens up new responsibilities on the parts of both the image and the individual. Care must be taken not to become either indifferent to or addicted to the proliferation of such images. Rather, we must act co-responsibly, reporting not only the possible non-objec-

31 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, London 2004, p. 23; Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “Toward New imaginaries. An Introduction”, in: *Public Culture*, 14, 1 (Winter 2002), p. 1–4.

tivity or untruthfulness of the image, but also any misleading or inappropriate contextualization. Otherwise, these spaces may give way to a vicious circle in which the images of terror are spread, inciting dysfunctional behavior, rather than discouraging it. This is the «cloning terror» mentioned by Mitchell. In this way, all its ethical unacceptability is revealed. “Information at any cost” can become a double-edged sword in these situations. A disturbing objectivity which can also be interpreted amorally by those, for example, who believe in the imaginary of terror.³²

These are representations that pave the way for a media war, fought with visual “weapons” that cause emotional shock. This war between images and imaginaries, in parallel with the real one being perpetrated in objective reality, can have important consequences for the imaginary of both the individual and the community, and, as a result, in their off-line world. As Paul Virilio affirms, the most modern means of mass communication have turned into weapons of mass destruction.³³

The web has thus become a «synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios». It is no coincidence that Appadurai uses the metaphor of «modernity at large» in which, in his opinion, globalization does not so much homogenize differences, rather it locates them and further radicalizes them.³⁴ Therefore, what is significant is not simply the imaginary of the individual or of the community, rather how this aligns and fits in with that of other individuals or communities with which it interacts and shares different imaginaries.³⁵ Moreover, it seems important to maintain this pluralism, otherwise we risk radically closing ourselves within the imaginary of the environment in which we act.

32 William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, cit.; Gigi Didi-Huberman, op. cit.; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: the War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, Routledge, London-New York 2005; Pierandrea Amato, *In posa. Abu Graib 10 anni dopo*, Cronopio, Napoli 2014.

33 Paul Virilio, *Città panico. L'altrove comincia qui*, it. trans. by Laura Odello, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2004.

34 Arjun Appadurai (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2003, p. 30 and ss.

35 Dilip Gaonkar *et al.*, “Modern Social Imaginaries. A Conversation”, in: *Social Imaginaries*, 1, 1, 2015, p. 201–205.

5. Conclusions. Towards an interpretative ethics of the image.

The image on the web thus represents a window, opening up new worlds and imaginaries, unveiling multiple horizons of meaning. It is the tool through which we become conscious of our view, both of the world and of ourselves. Indeed, this has always been the role of media, starting right from the first medium used by the individual, his own body. This use of the body has made it possible to take possession of ourselves in the image.³⁶ The image, this window onto the web, for the first time offers us an indefinite number of possibilities, continually presenting the individual with choices. Whether to continue with the process suggested somehow by the links and by the images encountered from time to time whilst browsing, or whether to stop viewing and switch off the computer.

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Yet, at the same time, the image can consolidate already existing worlds and imaginaries, limiting our critical thinking skills and imagination. The image can transform, from being a window to becoming a screen. As happens with social media, for example: places where individuals often risk closing themselves within a micro-world, as if it were the only one available. This may even develop into dysfunctional behaviour in some cases.

How then can the autonomy and performative power of images on the web be limited, in order that they do not completely escape the control of the individual? And how can the individual be limited with regards to the image? Finally, and most importantly, is it possible to find the “right” way in both these cases?

We have looked at the individual’s responsibility towards the image on the web, and, vice versa, that of the image towards the individual. Limits to these responsibilities have emerged, often irrespective of the will of the individual and of the image itself. The “limits” imposed by the corporations, for example. This is actually a strategy, and not strictly ethical, for exploiting the autonomy of the image in their favour, and to strengthen what has become a true publicity “machine”. We have also seen the limits (openings?) imposed by imaginar-

36 Hans Belting, “Per una iconologia dello sguardo”, in: Roberta Coglitore (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 6–7.

ies that guide our interpretation of the image. But this, again, is a limit of a cultural nature, which can lead to a partial reading of the images.

In light of the peculiarities of images, as discussed above, it is clear that new interpretive *standards* are needed to understand the power of the image and, if necessary, to control it. Moreover, to understand the journey that images may take on the *web*, compared to other communication media.

National and transnational regulations, as well as the deontological rules of the web's leader companies, are often difficult to apply, therefore, they do not always serve as a deterrent against the publication of certain images. So it would appear necessary to appeal, firstly to the responsibility of those who convey the images, as well as to the co-responsibility of all persons using the web, to monitor and to request the removal or modification of the images displayed. This self-management, however, does not yet seem to suffice.³⁷

There is also the need to make images more accountable for what they 'do'. They are *imagines agentes*, which impose on the observer a redefinition of their approach to the visual.³⁸ That is, a redefinition of our concept of viewing. The pictures on the web interact directly with the observer's gaze. They find themselves face to face only with the observer via his technological equipment. The observer is an individual who interprets, therefore, an understanding of how to observe, how to ask an image what it wants, as well as to act on the image before the image acts peremptorily on the observer, has become important in the field of research for "viewing ethics". This represents a necessary interpretative process, one which must take into account not only the observer and the image, but also the social context of reference. What emerges then is the importance of an ethics *of* the image and *in* the image, when trying to understand how to observe, and on the basis of which principles, to observe the image. An ethics *of* the image that defines and promotes adherence to its principles of behaviour, based on certain moral notions, which operate in communicative interaction.³⁹ An ethics *in* the image that should be inspired by the principles of understanding and interpretative co-participation, but also by the principles

37 Adriano Fabris, "Philosophy, Image and the Mirror of Machines", in: Žarco Paić, Krešimir Purgar (eds.), op. cit., p. 119.

38 Horst Bredekamp, op. cit., p. 11.

39 Adriano Fabris, *Etica della comunicazione*, cit., p. 34.

of truth and verisimilitude, when simulating facts or events that have actually taken place. This in order to appreciate not only what is present in the image, but also what the image would like to mean and, indeed, what it desires: its purpose and its sense. Some images, however, may not want anything.⁴⁰ An ethics, therefore, which investigates the persuasive power of the image, not only for ourselves, but, since the web is worldwide, from a potentially global perspective. So, an appeal for recognition of the importance, not only of an intuitive and subjective reading, but also of an inter-subjective and critical reading of the image.

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As Mitchell writes on this point: »Images [...] want to be taken as complex individuals which adopt a variety of subjective positions and identities«:⁴¹ from a »representative« to a »subjective« status.⁴² A subjectivity, fundamental to the reading of an artistic image, which it is now necessary to encourage in the reading of non-artistic images. Such subjectivity must be supplemented by an inter-subjective analysis, belonging to the social medium through which it is published. But, above all, what cannot be overlooked is the importance of a semiotic-communicative analysis. It is not enough merely to react emotionally to the image circulating on-line, it should be analyzed at various levels. The first, and certainly the most basic, allows the detection of signs (shapes, colours, figures and spaces, the author, etc.). The second, based on what is revealed by the first, aims for a more global understanding of the message. It identifies the relationship between signs in order to arrive at the narrative expressed in the image. Finally, a level that, to use Eugeni's words, we might define as »meta-communicative«. It is a fundamental level that enables one to reflect on the possible hidden meanings behind the message. This approach is essential for the identification of other interpretive perspectives, particularly in light of the image's own "will".

Therefore, in addition to a viewing ethics, we must take an interpretative ethical approach, based on the search for the deeper and more articulated meaning behind the image (what it wants, what it might mean for the ob-

40 Cfr. Margaret Dikovitskaya *The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 2005, p. 238 ss.

41 William J. Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, cit., p. 47–48.

42 Olaf Breidbach, Federico Vercellone, op. cit., p. 68.

server). The aim is to arrive at as complete an interpretation as possible. This is to ensure that the image does not act autonomously on the individual, without control. In order that the individual acts as responsibly as possible following the viewing, using his critical skills. But, above all, to create a virtuous circle of reciprocal exchange, within a dialogical paradigm, in which the image is one of the interlocutors.

However, the question of whether the autonomy of the electronic image may be limited can only be partially answered. It is not always possible to understand the genesis of an image, contextualize it properly, decipher its original meaning, the imaginary which it conveys, or indeed to which it is subjected. Moreover, an image can take us by surprise and remain in our memory. In this way, it acts upon our emotions, not giving the viewer time to understand its deeper meanings.

In conclusion, we can argue that the images on the web cannot act independently in the internet arena without provoking a reaction on the part of the individual. (Co-)responsibility is required in the publication and removal of images, and furthermore, (co-)responsibility is required for their interpretation and for the control of their movements in cyberspace. Otherwise, the web risks being perceived as a modern-day digital and interactive version of the Platonic cave, in the sense that, the images would appear merely to be shadows of the iconic off-line reality. These are shadows to which we might give little weight, as they could be perceived as misleading. Instead these images exert strong power over the viewer, and this is further amplified by the potential of the web and by the intrinsic characteristics of the digital image.