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War, image, art: From vision to judgement

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Abstract. There are excellent research papers in the field of visual studies that examine the relationship between war and images. This paper has other and additional aims. The first is to examine not so much how war is transferred from the ground to image production, but how war, as intrusion of the real, forces a general reflection on image techniques. The second is to examine whether there is an instance of art that is somehow different from the instance of the mere image, which is always related to something that manifests itself in war, and which, especially on the occasion of a war, invites a broader reflection on existence, judgement and the world. The paths taken for these investigations are rooted in the idea that a (political) theory of art cannot be reduced to an internal classification of image theory, since it investigates aspects that go beyond the definition of the image itself.

Keywords: theory of images, theory of art, political theory of art, difference, judgement.

1. THIS WAR, ALL THE WARS

The world is somewhere always at war, and this is an obvious and necessary premise. What follows, even though it has been occasioned by the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing conflict between the invaders and the invaded, could be applied to all wars.

In any case, the event of war forces those who study aesthetics, image theory or art theory to focus their attention on certain fundamental themes of these disciplines: the relationship between things and images, the sense of reality, perception, and history.

Since the first days of the invasion, the current conflict has been defined at all levels (from specialist essays to infotainment television programmes) as a highly significant example of a "hybrid" war. In truth, I do not believe that there has ever been a war that has not been hybrid, if by hybrid we mean the combined use of weapons, words, images, sabotage of all kinds, the use of all means to weaken not only the enemy army but also the will of the civilian population and the governments.

There are excellent research papers in the field of visual studies that examine these aspects. However, this paper has other and additional aims. The first is to examine not so much how war is transferred from the ground to image production, but how war, as intrusion of the real, forces a general reflection on image techniques. The second is to examine whether there is an instance of art that is somehow different from the instance of the mere image, which is always related to something that manifests itself in war, and which, especially on the occasion of a war, invites a broader reflection on existence, judgement and the world. The paths taken for these investigations are rooted in the idea that a (political) theory of art cannot be reduced to an internal classification of image theory, since it investigates aspects that go beyond the definition of the image itself.

2. THE WAR OF IMAGES, IMAGES AT WAR

A few weeks after the beginning of the Russian invasion (24 February 2022), in the city where I live (Rome), the Association for Ukrainian Catholics "Saint Sofia" published an appeal to the population to bring basic necessities (food, clothing, medicines, etc.) to the collection centre set up in the Basilica of Saint Sophia, to be sent to Ukraine by convoys of some humanitarian organisations. Although the collection was managed by a Christian association under the leadership of the Rector of the Basilica, Father Marco Yaroslav Semehen, a luminous figure of peace, bringing something to this collection centre immediately took on a double meaning. At the time, Putin's propaganda was offering Russian-speaking Ukrainians or Russophiles from the Donbass the opportunity to be transferred to Russia, thanks to convoys of buses organised for the occasion, in order to "save themselves" from the repression and reprisals of the Kyiv army. Bringing food and medicine to Saint Sophia thus meant both bringing aid to the civilian population and helping to strengthen the will of the population to remain in the towns close to the front, at great risk. In other words, it was a joint

Figure 1. *Guerra totale*, 2022. Leaflet for the St. Sophia war collection.

contribution to the civil and military resistance to the invasion. This double meaning is made clear in a leaflet I found by chance in an underground station in those days. The anonymous leaflet shows the famous Uncle Sam, designed by James Montgomery Flagg for the First World War US recruitment campaign, dressed in the yellow and blue of the Ukrainian flag and pointing his finger: «I want you to help». Above it, in capital letters, are the words «Total War» and «It would now seem certain the futility of street protests». However, the flyer does not invite people to enlist, but to take part in the St. Sophia collection. The association is thus confirmed: bringing food or medicine is tantamount to contributing to the war effort.

The image of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at the passer-by and glaring at him shouting "I want you" is analysed by W.J.T. Mitchell in a well-known essay significantly titled *What do Pictures "Really" Want?*. Uncle Sam, with his tried-and-

tested visual attributes, the gaze and the finger, is an image that leaves no escape. It persuades you by virtue of its lack, its senile sterility, or rather its sterility as an image, as Mitchell suggests, which as such has a grip on those who are in "flesh and blood" and who can really go to war. In this sense, the way images can participate in war is exclusively to convince someone to go to war, i.e. to perform no more and no less than their communicative and propagandistic function. However, Flagg's Uncle Sam is truly the icon of any recruitment campaign, and even if it lends itself to the most diverse uses, it retains a precise reference. The anonymous leaflet calling for a mobilisation drive for the Ukrainian war relies precisely on this reference: Uncle Sam calls to arms the citizens of the democratic West, or "free world" as they say, against the threat of dictatorships. It is a crystallised image of the conflict between civilisation and barbarism, no more and no less than the gigantomachies and amazonomachies of ancient Greece, a transfiguration of the wars of the Greeks against other peoples, first and foremost those against the Persians. In other words, in the context of the St. Sophia collection, with the appearance of Uncle Sam, history begins to make its entrance.

3. PLASTIC VS. GRAPHIC: THE COVER OF *TIME MAGAZINE*

There is another example of the use of images that deliberately draws on memory and history, and even more so, invites us to question the very concept of history. In March 2022, *Time* magazine dedicated a special issue to the invasion of Ukraine (14 March). The issue provoked an international debate on many levels because of the topics and, perhaps even more, because of the cover, which shows a photograph of an advancing tank under the title *The Return of History*. The reference of the image is quite direct, a double reference to the history of the 20th century. The first, in reverse chronological order, is the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops on 20-21 August 1968, which put an end to the Prague

Figure 2. "Time" magazine, 14 March 2022. Cover image appeared on "Time"'s Twitter account on 25 February 2022. Archived in https://web.archive.org/web/20220228211419/https://twitter.com/TIME/status/1497010566581346307?s=20&t=nZJB25NFUrNAwn2ZSyhmBQ (last accessed 16/07/2023)

Spring. On the occasion of that event, *Time* published a similar image, a drawing of an advancing tank with the word *Invasion* at the bottom. The iconographic reference is established by the continuity of the support, the cover of *Time*. The analogies between the two issues are well analysed in a fine article by Francesco Giosuè in the magazine *Engramma* (2022).

The second reference is further back in time: the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939. Shortly after its publication, a fake *Time* cover went viral. It makes an explicit

reference to Nazi Germany. The fake cover, created by the graphic designer Patrick Mulder (Das [2022]), features an image of Putin ripped off at the level of his nose, with Hitler's unmistakable moustache in the background. The two images – Putin in the foreground and Hitler in the background – are aligned to create a kind of *decollage*, revealing Putin's "true" face beneath his "mask": Putin is like Hitler.

The title of the original cover is maintained in the one redesigned by Mulder: *The Return of History*. The title is extremely significant, an excellent introduction to the magazine's articles and in itself a cue for other debates, as it refers directly to the essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) in which Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history after the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, there is a significant difference in the modes these two covers refer to the past and history.

In the case of the fake cover, it is a kind of *resurfacing* by analogy. Hitler's features replace those of Putin, as happens in dreams when one face is superimposed on another, revealing a hidden association, another level of truth. History as "the past" returns to the psyche of the Western world in the form of something repressed. Instead, in the case of the original cover there is a kind of *direct* re-presentation. The tank in the photograph does not recall by analogy the tank of the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968 or of the German troops in 1939, but is simply the *same* tank. What returns is simply *the* tank. While Putin's face and even Hitler's moustache are immediately recognisable to the average reader, a reader who is not an armaments expert cannot identify a tank by period or model, or by belonging to one army or another.

In short, for the average reader, the tank could be any tank used in any war or drill at any time anywhere in the world. Only a caption could confirm that it is a Russian tank photographed advancing across the Ukrainian border at the end of February 2022. But the beholder of the cover does not need this information to know the true content of the image. It is not "the past" that returns, neither by analogy nor by actual return (as if the old tank from 1968 or 1939 had been

Figure 3. Patrick Mulder, Fake *Time* cover, 2022.

restarted for a new invasion), but it is history itself that returns, as the title correctly states, that is, the very concept of history, which finds a chosen protagonist in the image of the advancing tank.

In fact, however much one may wish to identify the domination of the air (Douhet [1921]) as the key point of modern mobile warfare, it is on the ground that the final destiny of conquest and the redefinition of borders between nations is played out. And if history is this redefinition of space, the tank is its engram, not as an image but as a plastic, moving object. Images, by "flying" rapidly from support to support, enter the war in their own way; the plastic engrams of history, must march on the ground.

4. ENTERING AND HOLDING THE SCENE

Whether or not they refer back to other events, we believe it is appropriate to treat all the

events as «jets of singularities» (Deleuze [1969]: 53), as Gilles Deleuze puts it. For Deleuze, this definition is also a methodological tool that allows us to get rid of any reading in terms of essences, but also to restore the event to its "double" character, personal and impersonal, present and non-present at the same time. For this reason, the event par excellence would be the death, which Deleuze recalls in precisely the terms in which Maurice Blanchot describes it in his *Espace littéraire* (1955):

No one has shown better than Maurice Blanchot that […] death and its wound are not simply events among other events. Every event is like death, double and impersonal in its double. «It is the abyss of the present, the time without present with which I have no relation, toward which I am unable to project myself. For in it *I* do not die. I forfeit the power of dying. In this abyss they (*on*) die – they never cease to die, and they never succeed in dying».
How different this "they" is from that which we encounter in everyday banality. It is the "they" of impersonal and pre-individual singularities, the "they" of the pure event wherein *it* dies in the same way that *it* rains. The splendour of the "they" is the splendour of the event itself or of the fourth person. This is why there are no private or collective events, no more than there are individuals and universals, particularities and generalities. Everything is singular, and thus both collective and private, particular and general, neither individual nor universal. (Deleuze [1969]: 151-152)

Therefore, in view of the emergence of the event of war, it is appropriate to introduce Death or, better, a specific *Triumph of Death*, an extraordinary fresco painted between 1440 and 1450 and preserved in Palermo, in the Palazzo Abatellis, home of the Regional Gallery of Sicily, a true masterpiece whose author, despite decades of research, is still unknown. The work is linked to the fear of the plague (which had recurred in various parts of Europe for a century, and in Palermo in 1430-1431 and in 1437-1438), but it is nevertheless a work that somehow found its way into the war. The fresco was in fact in the courtyard of the 14th

Figure 4. *Triumph of Death*, around 1440-1450. Detached fresco, 600×642 cm. Palermo, Regional Gallery of Sicily Palazzo Abatellis.

century Palazzo Sclafani, from the 1530s the home of the Ospedale Grande e Nuovo (Great and New Hospital), then in the 19th century used as a barracks and finally as a gendarmerie. The palace was severely damaged by Allied bombing in the first half of 1943 and, after the war, it was considered necessary to dismantle the fresco for conservation purposes. In 1954, after a long restoration, it was moved to Palazzo Abatellis as part of Carlo Scarpa's layout, in which it obviously played a central role.

The Death rides from the left on a skeletal horse and bursts into a *hortus conclusus*, firing his arrows. All social classes and ages are represented in the scene: poor, rich, intellectuals, clerics, old and young people. Historical figures can be recognised among the others: Pope Eugene IV, Antipope Felice V, Cardinal Nicolò Tudeschi.

This fresco has been the subject of a book by Michele Cometa (Cometa [2017]). Deliberately leaving aside questions of art history, such as the identification of the author, the core of the essay is the analysis of the overcoming of the medieval logic of death, to which the depiction refers thematically and iconographically, and the opening up to very modern sentiments: nostalgia, astonishment, expectation, indignation, consolation, care (Cometa [2017]: 135-148). The author shows how this new set of meanings is activated not by

the figures themselves (which are in fact linked to a largely traditional and international iconography), but by the very rich interplay of glances and hand gestures that weave a series of relationships between the figures and engage the beholders on this side of the surface of the picture. I believe, however, that something can be added to this admirably conducted reading in terms of visual culture. In particular an analysis can be carried out, that tries to go beyond the boundaries of the theory of the image, in order to enter fully into the field of the theory of art. An analysis that addresses the question of the singular physicality and specific presence of the work, the relationship between figuration and this physicality and presence, then the relationship between interior and exterior space, as it is also concretely given in the margins of the fresco, and finally the instance of the specific support.

Let us therefore read again the fresco from this perspective. Death rides from left to right. The string of the bow in Death's hand is not taut, the last arrow was shot before everything was frozen in a static image. In particular, the last two arrows shot are those that hit the young woman in the foreground dressed in red, who collapses to the ground supported by two other women, and the man on the far right dressed in blue brocade edged with ermine. Neither of the latter two arrows are on axis with the bow in its current position, which means they were shot when Death was far to the left. This misalignment, which is a simple detail when one looks at the reproduced image, becomes a fundamental aspect of movement when one observes the fresco on site and finds oneself with the eyes more or less at the level of these two figures and Death dominating from above. The viewer is led to imagine the scene kinematically: the movement began before Death gained the centre of the scene, the arrows were shot and hit their targets when he was perhaps even out of the frame. Only now, when the man and the woman are resting their hands on the ground, does Death reach the current position.

The insertion would be violent, but the artist succeeds in restoring a sense of slow motion

through the play of lines and soft contrasts, which create the effect of a strange swaying of the figures. He forces us to follow the scene as it unfolds, down to the last drop of paint: the gaze glides slowly, capturing the dying of the figures moment by moment. In her movement, the Death creates a kind of depression around which everything else is distributed, admittedly in a somewhat mechanical way. The effect of the juxtaposition and disarray of the levels and of the figures would be fatal if the Death, and above all her horse, did not form a plastic knot of extraordinary intensity among them. The horse is skeletal or bony, but the neck is indecipherable: a negative cast, almost as if the skin had been sucked from within, highlighting the nerves but not the cervical vertebrae, which have disappeared. A play of concavities and convexities links the advancing groups (the poor on the left), the centrifugal movement of the figures on the right, the other scattered figures and the hedge in the background.

As an image, Death enters a *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden. As a plastic phenomenon, Death enters the physical left margin of the painted scene, from a margin that is not part of the image, but an integral part of the support, and therefore of the work. The relationship between image and work is a question of art. Would the plastic force of this movement be fully perceptible without the direct experience of the instance of the support? In this case, support means the painting turned into stone (with the fresco technique) and the relationship with the base level, but also, inevitably, the giving of the work to time: its patina, its wounds and fragility, its having risked destruction. And so the detachment from the original wall, with the necessary cutting into four parts.

The American painter Cecily Brown was struck by this fresco during one of her visits to Palermo and painted her own version of it, her *Triumph of Death*. The Palermitan painting is practically reproduced in her style. But what interests us here is that her large painting is painted on four canvases that were later reunited, a solution that has not technical but artistic reasons. Brown's work wanted to reproduce the caesuras

Figure 5. Cecily Brown, *The Triumph of Death*, 2019. Oil on canvas, in four parts, 534,6x534,2 cm. © Cecily Brown. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.

of the fresco detached from Palazzo Sclafani evidently because she sees in these an element that is now, accidentally and in spite of itself, part, of the instance of the support, and therefore an element of plastic accentuation.

Ultimately, a dialectic of different spaces is delineated. Death on horseback physically presses on the space of the beholder, on the one hand because through the instance of the support it plastically presses on the boundaries of the scene, and on the other because it plastically creates and articulates a space within the work towards which we are sucked. We enter the scene ourselves and participate in this atrocious slow-motion dance. And then immediately we find ourselves here, in the space of existence, together *with* the work, with its potential fragility and durability, like that of everything connected to matter.

Thus, if the interplay of gazes establishes a visual relationship with the beholder (like Uncle Sam, Putin-Hitler), the sense of movement, internal time, style, plasticity and the instance of support establish the incidence of the work of art in space. It is not the death as image or medieval or moral concept that interests us, but this very

Death that rides, a plastic device in movement, like the tank, that enters the scene and keeps us there. It anchors itself to the ground and wedges itself into the space of the viewer, but not from the surface of a screen, but by bending the space in front of it, thanks to the strong plasticity of internal spaces and the hard edges of its support.

If this triumphant Death and the tank of *Time* are figures of history, it is not because they represent the way history enters the scene, but because they enter the scene by showing something that goes beyond being a mere "flying" image. An entry into the scene that finds its analogy in the peculiar way in which the work of art becomes present and wedges itself into the world.

5. THE IMPOSSIBLE TESTIMONY OF ART: I WAS NOT THERE

On 17 April 1944, on Herbert Kappler's orders, the SS carried out a brutal sweep in the Quadraro district of Rome. Almost a thousand men from this suburb, inhabited mainly by workers from southern Italy, were taken from their homes and deported to concentration camps in Germany. The action, which was prompted by the killing of four German soldiers, was intended to go beyond the limits of reprisals and to inflict a punishment that would serve as an example to the entire population and discourage any form of resistance. The Quadraro was defined by Kappler himself as a "hornet's nest", precisely because of its widespread collective participation in civil resistance, and was therefore a perfect target. For this episode, the district was awarded the Gold Medal for Civil Merit in 2004. Every year on 17 April, a commemorative ceremony is held, with tributes from the authorities and the participation of local associations in a series of events, including artistic and cultural ones, under the title *Q44*. For *Q44* in 2023, the Roman artist Marco Bernardi presented a work created for the occasion at the Camera Frigo gallery. It is an installation consisting of an inscription made by upholstered structure and an empty armchair. The inscription reads «Io non c'ero»

Figure 6. Marco Bernardi, *Io non c'ero (I was not there)*, 2023. Wood, foam, fabric, armchair, variable dimensions. Courtesy the artist.

("I was not there"), which is also the title of the installation. The curator of the exhibition is the critic Ilari Valbonesi, whose writings have for years questioned the themes of presence and testimony. In 2013, one of her articles appeared in the magazine *Arte e Critica*, focuses on precisely this theme: it is a path that links the film *Reality* (2012) by Matteo Garrone, the famous performance by Marina Abramović at MoMA, *The artist is present* (2010) and a very interesting work by Rabih Mroué presented at *Documenta 13* (2012), entitled *The Pixelated Revolution*.

Mroué's work was a kind of lecture, supported by video documents found on the Internet, that explored a paradox of witnessing. The videos, shot by ordinary citizens with mobile phones during the war in Syria, showed soldiers firing on civilians. Mroué was particularly interested in the vid-

Figure 7. Rabih Mroué, stills from *The Pixelated Revolution*, Part I of the series *The Fall of a Hair*, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

eos in which armed militiamen were filmed and, as soon as they realised they were being filmed, turned their guns on the filmmakers and fired. In order to document the entire action, the witness must, of course, continue filming until the very end. Hence the paradox: the testimony can only be truthful if the person filming is killed by the incoming bullet, but if the person filming is hit by the bullet and his mobile phone is probably destroyed or lost, how can he testify? If this testimony reaches anyone, does it lose its truthfulness?

In short, these art forms tell us something about the constitution of an «idea of reality itself as an impossible testimony» (Valbonesi [2013]: 74). Indeed:

Obviously, either the filmmaker has just been wounded or the mobile phone has been picked up by someone else. What is being testified to is the interruption of the physical continuity that makes the evidence veridical, and this discontinuity could cast a shadow of non-absolute truthfulness over the footage. But the impossible testimony does not checkmate the real, which can only occur at the moment when one accepts the testimony in its intrinsic impossibility […]. The solution, in fact,

does not lie in the image, but in a logical or ethical questioning: if we have a certain number of impossible testimonies of assassinations, we would surely have an infinitely greater number of assassinations so real that they could not be recorded, because the filmmaker was undoubtedly killed and his mobile phone destroyed. (Valbonesi [2013]: 75)

Bernardi's exhibition seems to follow the same line of thought and offers an opportunity to complete these reflections: art is always an impossible testimony.

In a commemoration such as *Q44*, the protagonist is the memory of the survivors, the memory of those who "were there" and saw with their own eyes. As the years go by, the possibility of having direct witnesses to the events of the Second World War or the extermination camps inevitably becomes rarer and rarer. The installation *Io non c'ero* addresses the issue of a whole generation who were not able to be there because of their age, but who do not want to renounce the civic duty of remembering.

This work is a complex machine, so much so that its action is also difficult to place in the classification of speaking images one can find in Bredekamp (Bredekamp [2010]: 41-69). At first glance, it appears to be the artist taking the floor and saying "I was not there" (and for Marco Bernardi, born in 1969, it could not be otherwise). However, the spectators are invited, if they wish, to sit in the seat next to the inscription and also be photographed. Then, that "I was not there" for a moment becomes the phrase exclaimed or thought (as in a comic book balloon) by the visitor. But ultimately, as Valbonesi warns us in the exhibition's presentation text, «it is the work itself that takes the floor». The armchair in front of the inscription opens up a space within the work, an empty scene in which all the elements create a play of cross-references and slips that cannot be untangled. "I was not there" echoes the words of the work in a space occupied by an armchair that makes an absence visible. We are not in front of a scene abandoned by someone, nor is the work itself absent; on the contrary, by pronouncing the words, by being

these words, it makes itself maximally present. It does not activate the easy paradox of declaring "I am not here", but pronounces an "I was not there", which makes absence and presence, past and present, clash in a continuous shifting of planes. This installation clearly exemplifies how the work of art can show that "difference" that the Italian critic Cesare Brandi called *astanza*, a «presence-absence, for a trace that is only insofar as it is not, but divides, detaches, incises: as presence, therefore, that does not refer to *ousia*. *Parousia* without *ousia*» (Brandi [1974]: 72).

This presence and its action are characteristic not of a simple image but of a work of art, as a device that implies the creation of an interior space, even a concretely inhabitable one, and at the same time a plastic extension outwards, thanks to the «specificity of a material and [the] continuity of a support», as Valbonesi states always in the presentation text of the exhibition. That is to say, the upholstered material, which establishes precise plastic relations between the elements and connotes the experience of contact, and the support as a figure of continuity. The latter enters into the play of the "differences" of art, as fading and consumption, as promise of a duration and risk of destruction, and thus as the condition for that testimony, impossible but effective, that only the work of art seems able to transmit.

6. LAS MENINAS AND VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez (1656) is perhaps one of the most studied paintings in the world and the bibliography about it is enormous. It is also an object of great interest outside the sphere of art history, starting with the famous pages dedicated to it by Foucault in his *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), for the complex mechanics of the gaze it brings into play. The viewer sees the back of the canvas at which the painter (Velázquez) is intent, while next to him are distributed in space *las meninas* (the damsels) and various characters from the court of Philip IV and above all the *infanta* Margaret. Who is the

Figure 8. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 320,5×281,5 cm. Madrid, Prado Museum. © Archivo Fotográfico Museo Nacional del Prado.

painter looking at? Whose portrait are we seeing on the back? Philip IV himself and his consort Mariana of Austria, as we can deduce from the mirror in the background of the painting, which would reflect the foreground. This ought to be questioned as it would not be congruent in terms of perspective. Then it is Velázquez's painting of the Spanish Royals that is reflected in the mirror in the background, as pointed out by other scholars, as well reconstructed in Nova (1997). This further confirms the comment by Foucault, for whom the final result is in any case the evidence of a sort of elision of the subject in itself (Foucault [1966]: 30). On closer inspection, however, the rules of perspective would not allow even this last mirroring. But who cares, anyway? Is a painter not allowed to depart from the strictures of the rule to tell us what he wants to tell us? Surely it is permissible for a painter like Velázquez, who could have rendered the same image in a perspectivally correct manner. In short, the painting is an extremely complex machine, but what remains in

the end? What remains is what comes to the eye with the greatest visual evidence: the *infanta* Margaret, luminous, at the center of the picture. This complex interplay of relationships is functional to her simple gesture of self-ostentation. In the end, everything is annihilated and suspended before her. The *infanta* gives herself up to the gaze and everything becomes marginal: the Velázquez-Foucault concettism, the figures of the *meninas*. The *infanta* is the "seeing" in itself, but not as a play of gazes, but as *attention*. A firework that solidifies as it continues to shine, thanks to a pictorial texture that in some places verges on informalism (as can be seen, for example, on the jewelled bow that closes the dress on the chest). All the more so because the gesture of self-ostentation, which stops all in a pause that seems never to end, is soon to be abruptly interrupted: in a moment the Pyrenean mastiff, a big shepherd dog, one of the most calm and protective breeds known, and itself an image of temporal suspension, will feel the footsteps of the court dwarf Nicola Pertusato, will move with sudden movement and the whole scene will come alive with him. In none of the analyses I have read of this painting I have found the description of this simple kinematics. But if you go to the Prado, the *infanta* immediately enchants you, whether you are a 21st century tourist or the embodiment of Philip IV or Mariana of Austria, she simply says: "Look!". Her simple gesture opens the scene, the dog in the foreground will close it in a second. We are in the middle. The whole play of mirrors and spaces is contained in this interval of time. And the *infanta* emerges from it, present, real.

The play of fake mirrors in *Las Meninas* seems like a very distant reference, but one can detect in it strange assonances with our era, in which the means of digital manipulation of images are so sophisticated. Today, any image that purports to bear witness to the truth may soon be substituted by another that demonstrate that it is fake. Governments' choices are supported by public opinion, and the information and image war seems to play a more decisive role the greater the investment in technology.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, several videos have been made to document the disasters of war and to call on friendly nations to support the invaded nation. Some of them are carefully staged, lit, edited and sometimes accompanied by a soundtrack. In short, they follow a certain idea that visual intensification and persuasion go hand in hand. They aim to provoke indignation and awaken consciences with a language that is no more or less "filmic" than any propaganda video. And like any propaganda video, the visual intensification, in the sense of the image, even in the absolute drama of the moment, absurdly risks having the opposite effect, of giving the impression of falsehood.

The first video Zelensky made after the beginning of the conflict has a completely different tone. A few days after the invasion, Russian propaganda spread the news that the Ukrainian president had fled Kyiv with the members of the Government. On 25 February 2022, Zelensky posted a video shot with his smartphone to show that he had all but abandoned the capital and, far from surrendering to the Russians, was organising resistance from there.

This video should therefore be judged in its own right. Not only because of its obvious historical value (it communicates to the world that Ukrainian resistance is effective), but because it leads us to reflect on what elements strengthen presence. Which was vital in that moment, as through this video Zelensky had to demonstrate that he was maximally *present*.

Zelensky films himself in a Kyiv street with (from right to left) Davyd Arakhamia, Leader of the Faction Servant of the People, Andrij Ermak, Head of Presidential Office, Denys Šmyhal', Prime Minister and Mychajlo Podoljak, Advisor to the Head of the Presidential Office. He names each of his comrades declaring «is here» and closes the round with «the President is here, our troops are here, citizens are here. All of us are protecting the independence of our country […]. Glory to Ukraine». At one point, Šmyhal' shows the screen of his mobile phone, which displays the time: 6.33pm. It is a timid attempt,

Figure 9. Volodymyr Zelensky, Video posted on 25 February 2022.

and he almost immediately retracts his hand, partly so as not to interfere with the President's speech, partly because he perhaps realises the utter insignificance of his gesture. In the age of digital forgery, showing a smartphone display to certify the exact time of the announcement is ingenuous. Šmyhal's smartphone is thus reflected for a moment in another smartphone in a game of mirrors, in which the real instead of being reinforced dangerously uncovers the side of the illusory. The key element of the shot is another: it is the play of covering/uncovering the light of the lamppost in the background created by the movements of Zelensky's smartphone and those of the other people. The shot begins with the light of the lamppost pointing uncovered towards the lens, a beacon in the viewer's face, with elongated reflections disturbing the entire image and making Arakhamia almost unrecognisable against the light on the right. Towards the middle of the shot, the movement of Zelensky's arm brings the lens out of the light of the lamppost, the light ratio changes, and Arakhamia fully recovers his features.

The whole group is now best lit from the front. Zelensky plasticly emerges in the foreground. Towards the end of the shot, when the words "our troops are here" are uttered, the lamppost is uncovered again, the light again beats down on the lens, the reflection expands, almost reaching the centre of the frame with maximum interference effect, until it is almost blinding at the final words praising glory.

The shot is spontaneous, but the effect, not filmic but plastic, could not be more effective. Although the characters are almost still in the shot, the movement of the camera brings them into the scene, thanks to the play of lights in the background, and creates an internal space. A sensitive space *between* the surface of the lens and the people in the foreground, and between them and the background. It is an interstitial space that invites movement in itself. As the camera moves, it pushes this interstitial space towards the beholder, dazzling him with the background lights.

This video thus seems to transcend the sphere of the cinematic image: it shows a structural and plastic surplus. It begins as political communication and becomes politics *tout court*, a gesture that touches us, a beacon that points at our faces. And with a beacon pointed at our face, we either close our eyes, or we feel "enlightened", or we move, and in turn we somehow enter the scene. In a play no less complex than that of the works of art, the image is translated into a protrusion towards the space we inhabit, together with others. And this protrusion forces us to take a position. In other words, to judge.

7. CONFLICT AND JUDGEMENT

If the war in Ukraine so strongly invites us to reflect, I think it is not so much because of some inherent novelty in the use of images, but because it invites precisely us (Westerners, Europeans) to reflect. Because it is a war that *touches* us. This is why my path, which began with the image of trespass (the tank) and continued with the activation of the margins and the entry into the scene (the Death of Palermo), the impossible testimony, the presence-non-presence of the work of art and the plastic protrusion, naturally leads to the question of judgement.

Personally, this war makes me think not so much about the aestheticization of war itself or its development, or even about the relationship between images and war in general. It makes me reflect on the fact that this war touches us, not only because of the production of images that are

"touching", but in the literal sense of the word, in that it pushes and crosses the boundaries of a space that is the space we live in. When this happens, aesthetics and the theory of the image must come to terms with political theory, the theory of art, or, directly with what I call a political theory of art.

In Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the *Critique of Judgement* in her *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* (1982), the well-known antinomy of the judgement of taste has a pivotal role. This is Kant's text:

> The second commonplace about taste, which is used even by those who grant judgments of taste the right to speak validly for everyone, is this: *There is no disputing about taste*. That amounts to saying that, even though the basis determining a judgment of taste may be objective, that basis still cannot be brought to determinate concepts; and hence even proofs do not allow us to decide anything about such a judgment, although we can certainly *quarrel* [*streiten*] about it, and rightly so. (Kant [1987]: 210)

Taking it to the extreme, one could say that the «claim to other people's necessary assent» (Kant [1987]: 211) seems to be based primarily on conflict, on the possibility of quarrelling, on something that *forces* us to judge. And we are forced to judge because something plastically protrudes towards our space or breaks into it, and we are forced to take a position, *through* and with *respect* to it and with *respect to* others (Fransoni [2018]: 88). And this is another fundamental point that marks the transition from aesthetic to political judgement. Taking a position transcends the thing being judged and is quite different from the dual relationship established in the act of contemplation or interpretation, in which a recipient relates to originator through a "thing". It is a relationship in which the beholder appeals to (and possibly quarrels with) at least one further beholder. In short, it opens up an interaction between many, a political relationship.

Hence our insistence on the protrusion and actual plasticity of the physical artwork, rather than on the visual (two-way) relations between (one) beholder and the image.

It is a fact that in the encounter with any images there is always a kind of duplicity at play that allows us to transcend the mere dimension of the visual. This can be demonstrated through a wide range of concepts developed by different authors over the years. For example, the difference between "seeing-as" and "seeing-in", which we find in Richard Wollheim (Wollheim [1980]), obliges us to always consider the image in its dual nature, e.g. as representation and support. In this respect, Mitchell's well-known division between *image* and *picture* (Mitchell [2007]: 71-73) is, in my opinion, sufficient to define the entire field of investigation as far as visual studies are concerned. It is also interesting to mention Gottfried Boehm's concept of *iconic difference* (partly developed from the Heideggerian concept of difference), that describes the inherent duplicity of the images which «show something, even simulate something, and at the same time show the criteria and premises of this experience» (Boehm [1994]: 63).

On the other hand, if we consider the encounter with the physical work of art, such concept of duplicity involves also plasticity and the very notion of presence. An actual presence and not a mere "presence-effect", which, taking up some of Fischer-Lichte's arguments can be said to be typical of technological media (as opposed to live performance) and hermeneutic and semiotic aesthetics ([2004]: 29, 164-166 and 177). In order to better investigate this topic, it is also appropriate to refer to methodological tools that we find in art criticism, from the very beginning of its development in the modern sense. The dialectical pairs of Adolf von Hildebrand (Hildebrand [1893]) and of Alois Riegl (Riegl [1901]) are worth mentioning: vision from close/vision from a distance and the optical/tactile couple are fundamental concepts of modern art criticism. Michael Fried's pairs of terms (theatricality/objecthood or theatricality/absorption; presence/presentness) allow us to extend the investigation by bringing into play the temporal dimension and the space of the beholder (Fried [1967] and [1988]).

The reference to art theory and political theory helps to understand that the main point is not simply to establish the existence of different modes of seeing, or even their coexistence or conflict within the framework of the visual experience of the same object or image. With the physical work of art, one experiences both the "internal" difference of the image and the plastic insertion of *a* difference (the work of art itself) into the world, that is, a wholeness and singularity that simply *differs* from other things that are in the world (Fransoni [2018]: 36). And it forces us to take a physical position with the body and to recognise ourselves as many. So, if there is something this war forces us to think about in terms of aesthetics, it is that the experience of difference *as* movement and *in* movement can only be given exemplarily in the work of art, and that the concepts used to analyse the mere images in their theoretical autonomy from any support, acquire poignancy precisely from such experience.

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