On the definition of image as a representation of reality

En torno a la definición de imagen como representación de la realidad

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Abstract:

This essay aims to examine and discuss the canonical definition used to refer to visual images, which states that every image is a representation of reality. The purpose is to qualify from different perspectives the definition that is so commonly used in the teaching of visual and communicative disciplines. To do so, the diverse nature of images is addressed, differentiating between material images, indexical images and digital or e-images, seeking to establish the different relationships that the images from these categories have with reality and with materiality. It also explores the difference between diverse images according to the field to which they belong, drawing distinctions, for example, between those of journalism and those of art. Finally, the nature of virtual reality and augmented reality is questioned in order to rethink not only said definition, but also to address the nature of the visual in the current scenario.

Keywords:

Visual image; digital image; reality; augmented reality; realism; materiality.

Resumen:

Este ensayo se propone interrogar y discutir la definición canónica que se emplea para hacer referencia a las imágenes visuales y que enuncia que toda imagen es una representación de la realidad. El objetivo es matizar desde diversas perspectivas la definición que tan habitualmente se emplea en la enseñanza de las disciplinas visuales y comunicativas. Para hacerlo se aborda la naturaleza diversa de las imágenes diferenciando las imágenes matéricas, las indexicales y las digitales o e-imágenes, buscando establecer las diferentes relaciones que las imágenes que podemos ubicar en cada una de estas categorías pueden tener con la realidad y con la materialidad. También se explora la diferencia entre imágenes diversas según el campo al que pertenezcan trazando distinciones, por ejemplo, entre las del periodismo y las del arte. Por último se interroga la naturaleza de la realidad virtual y de la realidad aumentada para repensar no solo la definición referida sino para abordar la naturaleza de lo visual en el escenario actual.

Palabras clave:

Imagen visual; imagen digital; realidad; realidad aumentada; materialidad.

1. Introduction

What is a visual image? This question is unescapable in any art or audiovisual classroom, but considering the generalized prominence of the visual in contemporary expressivity and communication, we suggest the suitability and pertinence of tackling this question in all possible educational fields since reflection upon images encompasses areas ranging from advertising to politics, leisure to science, personal communications to social communications, etc. Deliberating upon images, as such, is a task that should be assumed as a contribution to a general reflection upon culture, society, ways of life, and freedom. This text is a proposal for rethinking the canonical response normally used and that has been employed for many decades when we question the nature of visual images, namely: *an image is a representation of reality.*

In general, and undoubtedly rightly so, the idea conveyed is that representing is presenting something again: re-presenting it, and also that all representation does this in a *certa maniera*. Representing is a viable act through using resources of a language, in this case, the language of images, which has expressive, grammatical, poetic, and other types of elements and codes. Representation is not to be confused with the object of representation since both have a differentiated existence, heterogeneous substance, specific functions, diverse temporality. Along the lines of these conceptualizations, it is always useful to point out that, in spite of this overwhelming and easily demonstrated evidence, there is often a tendency to confuse the images of the world with the realities of the world. The expressive force of images can be impacting and persuasive as shown by the fact that religious images have been a source of adoration and fear throughout the centuries. In this same vein, at cinema's beginnings, the first movie audiences jumped to their feet in fear, ready to flee, upon viewing the Lumiere brothers' images on the screen of a train pulling into a station. As the public has become accustomed to living in a densely visual environment, a certain type of learning has come about regarding the nature of the imagistic, although this has not eliminated the strong symbiosis existing between images and reality that has historically prevailed. It has somewhat of ectoplasmic nature for which an image can be taken as a vicarious substitution for a given reality or person. Furthermore, as Sontag pointed out in her essay on photography (2008), the tendency to interpret reality through what images offer us is very real, and even if since ancient times, philosophers such as Plato have attempted to erode this symbiosis proposing to capture reality by taking away the weight of the visual. However, after centuries of a "battle of images" (Gubern,1999:51,own translation), neither philosophic arguments nor the subsequent humanism, nor advanced scientific thought, mitigated the persuasive force of the visual, its vivid nature, its potential realism, its appearance of reality.

We can know little about the reaction that visual expressions generated in the Paleolithic Age, but we do know that during centuries the potential of the visual has served myriad purposes, whether for magic, for worship, for defense, or for storytelling, including demonstration, exaltation of beauty, or just the contrary. It is true that since photography brought us its galvanizing novelty, to which movement was subsequently added with the invention of cinema, the means for recording and communicating images endowed a particular aura of authenticity. If there is a visual record of something, and that record has been made by mechanical means, it must be supposed that the event took place under the gaze of whoever was operating a camera.

At present, digitalization, together with the proliferation of resources for creation and channels for emitting images, has introduced the need to reformulate questions, since a good number of activities occur and unfold in virtual spaces that

generally are shown on screens and have an extremely high visual component with myriad sources: from a file created in a camera to a pure design that emerged in the process of using codes from computing language, without previous material existence.

In relation to the numerous available options to produce and disseminate visual creations, the idea of audiences and viewers now seems, to say the least, an incomplete denomination, only capable of dealing with one of the aspects of our ways of being and relating to images. Today almost all of us, besides being an audience, are also image producers, and we do this to an extent that is incomparable to preceding eras, but we can also be visitors who frequent, as if it were a new habitat, diverse spaces of a virtual nature capable of producing effects of reality. The digital and digitalization has extended to an infinity of environments. Transition towards the digital is a strategic proposal of governments, administrations, businesses, educational systems, science, as well as the arts and communications, among others.

The digital implies a sleeping universe: it is not awakened until the activation of the mechanisms by which the code will be read, and consequently, transformed into something visible on the screen. At its heart, the digital image is an unintelligible binary composition, but its virtue is always being available to be roused in some device responding to one sole command: click, and with a click, then there was light, another way to refer to the image (since the image is light).

Images change and make us change the way we examine the concept of the image itself as representation of the reality that can be found in innumerable texts and that is repeated in countless classrooms. The objective of this essay is not to propose a new definition of the visual image, much less one of reality, but to put the canonical definition in perspective and to update it. Perhaps we do so in order to leave behind the idea or even the need to find an all-encompassing formula.

2. The image as representation of reality and the issue of realism

The mediatization of our lives and the perpetual availability of accessible technologies to produce, distribute and view images, to which we have to add what is disturbingly called: virtual reality and augmented reality –all derived in essence from digitalization– leads us to ponder not only the representative capacity of images, but also the nature of the referential reality that these images would supposedly represent. This query is not new and there have been attempts to respond in diverse ways, which were not only shaped by the epistemological perspective of their approach, but also by the different stages in which images were produced. This outcome requires some specific considerations.

To begin, we should point out that our view on the matter tends to be influenced by a platonic perspective that assumes that the arts, in contrast to philosophy, serve to imitate and can only produce mere illusions or appearance of things without reaching the truth, since it beyond the sensitive and corresponds to the world of ideas. Images, as they are located at the level of the sensitive, the changeable, the potentially deceptive, could not be apt for obtaining true knowledge whose nature is to be universal. Inquiry into the value of images runs through the history of Western thought up to the present day, steering through river bends and heading into new waters. The purported fragility of images comes up against evidence that their expressive strength is capable of generating mysteries, effects of truth and of persuasion. Images are a valuable commodity.

It is true, as pointed out by Hans Belting (2007), that during the height of periodic debate arising about images, we tend to talk in the same way about different images, generating a tug of war for monopoly on the definition, or we could say: a quest for one sole definition. Is it possible to contemplate in the same way images from fine arts, visual arts, mass media, social networks, documentary, journalism, a child's drawing, etc.? Initially, it seems hardly prudent, although, it would also be valid to affirm that the image, on being a differentiated language, has its own definable and isolatable characteristics, and the means and purposes for which images are used modulate and orient the use of that language. What is a visual image?

Let's go the dictionary as a starting point to see the academic translation of its uses. Checking first with the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española* (Royal Academy of the Spanish Language), we find the definition of the word *image*, a noun referring to: "a figure, representation, similarity or appearance of something". This provokes immediate criticism because we know that the terms similarities and appearance are not essential or required. The respected Gombrich argued for identical reasons with the dictionary –in his case with Oxford– in the "Mediations on a Hobby Horse" (Gombrich, 1999), and established the differences between representation, substitution and similarity. We will not deal now with what has already been so well expressed, but we do have to take something that has been presented to us as a given: that to create images is to represent. And what is to represent? In this case, the definition we get turns out to be redundant with respect to our query that says the transitive verb *represent* consists in: "making something present with words or figures that the imagination retains". We take with interest this "something", at least initially, probably more interesting than "reality". We would say that the unclear nature of this "something", compared to the arrogant presumption of clairvoyance of the word "reality", leaves room for the imagination, for variety, for certain indeterminate nature. "Something" can float, "reality", in contrast, plummets to the ground due to its platonic weight.

Thus, in this first allusion, we begin to weigh up that the matter of pondering what a visual image is, its weight seeming to tilt the scale towards the side of the term "reality", a term that provokes an association with the materiality of the visible, of what occurred, of what is tangible, even unequivocal.

Image is not reality and reality is not image. The image is a representation of reality, of one reality. Phillipe Dubois explained that "every reflection on any medium of expression is obliged to pose the basic question about the specific relationship that exists between the external referent and the message produced by said medium" (Dubois, 2008:21, own translation) In the understanding that any given image represents a reality, it has been established that according to the specific characteristics of visual language, if the image has a high degree of iconicity, the greater its proximity to the reality it represents. This is so given that the image has a specific quality not shared with other languages: its capacity to generate similarities with its referents. Neither musical nor linguistic writing, for example, share this nature since their expressive codes are of an arbitrary nature. In the visual field, the possibility of moving within the terrain of similarity or the lack of it is optional. As soon as we begin to penetrate the pathways of abstraction, recognizable signs get lost, the capacity to evoke diminishes, generating something different, more detached from the object originating it and more enigmatic in its deciphering for whoever is observing. Thus, the viewer can be conducted into the position of an interpreter regarding the image they are looking at.

But, who can certify that reality must necessarily refer to that which has a visible existence, that is: evidence? The painter David Hockney accurately points out that reality "is a slippery concept, because it is not separate from us" (Hockney and Gayford:

2018:23, own translation) We can affirm, as such, that reality is also internal and that to a large extent it concerns those who make images, but also those who look at them. Both appear with an inalienable reality: that of their subjectivity, their context, their time. Whoever creates an image will inextricably do so with his or her sensitive, intellectual, cultural, or psychological singularity, with their talent, their own artistic or professional trajectory, their inclinations, their artistic affinities, their phobias, etc. The feasible discord between the idea presented in the work by an artist and the interpretation or emotions that it stirs in a person observing it, places us not only in spheres of different realities, but also in experiences that are potentially very dissimilar with respect to the representative reality the work refers to.

Numerous texts on the history of visual arts place the breaking point between reality and representation within the avant-garde and abstract painting movements (as of the end of the 19th century). However, rarely is the nature of the reality questioned in classical, medieval, or renaissance painting, which brims with angels, immaterial beings, mythological characters, holy or satanic divinities that no one has ever seen except in dreams and hallucinations. What relation does realism or the appearance of realism have with reality? In the painting by Goya of "Saturn Devouring his Son", to give an example, we get images of a powerful realistic appearance, but the reality represented there pertains to mythological register, and as such, to storytelling. The painting could additionally possess politically or socially critical content, but its title, initially, anchors the meaning leading us in the direction that the painting takes us, at least as a representation of mythological nature in the midst of a very specific act of cannibalism.

Perhaps we should consider the idea that Hockney proposes when he affirms that: "all text is fiction to some degree, isn't it? The same happens with images. None of them just represent reality" (Hockney and Gayford: 2018:24, own translation). The mimesis that is attributed to the visual arts of painting and sculpture for their capacity to generate similarity (*vera icon*), in what concerns its essence, could be as virtual, as vicarious, as reality is in an abstract painting. Eduardo Ripoll Perelló (1986) explained in his work on Paleolithic art, which if we put aside the zoomorphic imagery and focus on the abstract images found in numerous caves, we will see that at the dawn of iconic creation, production of non-mimetic symbolic forms, was possible. These images provide abstraction, and consequently, a greater ability to read them is required compared to naturalist art. Very likely, for those initiated in the mysteries of symbols, secrets inhabited these images that do not bear any resemblance to things.

Finally, something essential for visual language and its abstractive nature must be considered: beyond the representational adornment that given images offer us, beyond the ability of an artist to vividly create the atmosphere of the image's scene, the stitch of a dress, the nuances in a face: all of them are two dimensional. The two dimensionality inherent in images does not exist in the context of nature or of material things, and this condition in itself holds a degree of essential abstraction that not only affects painting but also photography that has been considered a figurative art with a high degree of fidelity.

3. Manual, indexical and digital images: dematerialization

Science established that the production of iconic activity started approximately 30,000 years ago. This activity was attributed to the species *Homo sapiens*. However, this information has been updated through findings and dating techniques that have been able to add new evidence. In 2018, the journal *Science* published research conducted by a team of scientists who established that Spanish rustic cave paintings found in Cantabria, Malaga, and Caceres date back more than 60,000 years, and as such, before *Homo sapiens* came to dominate Eurasia. From this it has been deduced –contrary to existing theories– that Neanderthals already had a capacity for symbolism and material ability to create stable images outside of the mind (Hoffman et al., 2018). Scientific knowledge, as can be confirmed, goes back much earlier than the mythical moment formulated by Pliny the Elder in the 7th century A.D, referring to the origin of painting as the work of a young woman from Corinth who painted the shadow of her lover projected by a light onto a wall, before he went off to war. Faced with the uncertainty of her young man's destiny, she decided to capture and keep his image. The story is a lovely one, but there had been paintings centuries earlier before the Greeks created this explanation. In contrast, what does correspond to scientific information and this Greek tale is that the images were made on walls. Not only Neanderthals and Homo sapiens did so, palace and religious temple walls were also the basic surface for visual expression of numerous cultures during many centuries, when visual images were linked and conditioned by the materiality of a stable surface: the cave, palace or temple. Time would pass until painting found a place independent from the cave murals. In short, the truth is that throughout its history, mankind has not ceased to produce visual representations, giving rise to what we call today: plastic arts. These arts are those that take materials and transform them plastically. They create by molding, arranging, spreading, applying, conducting and securing different materials on a surface. Plasticity refers to the attributes of the materials as well as to as activity of the artists who use them. From the initial cave art executed by means of techniques such as blowing pigments, coloring prints, tracing pictograms, drawing, painting or the creation of petroglyphs, the visual arts have been marked by human intervention on a material, a task performed using the body, specific tools and materials with the capacity to fix, leave a trace or mark of a stroke. There is a materiality inherent to the act of creating images and to the nature of these visual productions that is radical.

The image-materia, inscribed on a medium and considered lasting is, as José Luis Brea said: "the product *par excellence* of the life of the spirit, which, confronting the generalized experience of change, remains unaffected" (Brea, 2010:12, own translation) The pictorial process educates the gaze to find the visible part that has endured, the vestige of a past reality. The image-material, in what we know, is the original one and has survived throughout human existence up to the present day. But it is no longer the only one.It was during the techno-scientific positivist setting of the 19th century when photography was born, and in accordance with the spirit of that era and its technical nature, it was endowed with the corresponding prestige for being a media capable of certifying a scene and also creating a memory of it. As is clear, photography supposed a qualitative step in what concerns the materiality of the visual since the activity of the person who handles the instruments to generate images is reduced to: having the device, looking through it, and shooting.

The act of taking a photo discharges the doer from the work of drawing and painting, frees him or her from the requirement of having a nimble hand in exchange for a good eye: the photographer must know how to look and choose. And then, simply shoot. Nevertheless, that activity gave way to images of a mimetic appearance, with a surprising realism. Paradoxically, the

images produced this way hold an incomparable materiality that emanates from the required physical presence of those who are being photographed. As Roland Barthes perceived, "photography is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations with ultimately touch me, who am here" (Barthes, 2008:126). Photography, therefore, testifies about something that has taken place, and in doing so, makes it visible again. But on what condition? That the emanation of material reality converts its models into spectrums, transforming them into lights and shadows.

If an artist paints a portrait of some models or paints a still life based on a set of elements placed on a surface, we suspect without being sure, that people of flesh and blood or the fish, fruits and flowers could have been there when the artist made them visible with his colors. This is something very distinct from what light emanating from bodies on a surface involves. In photography there is thus a specific process of dematerialization, but there is also an unprecedented materiality for the field of visual creation since the referent in the photographic image has emitted a ghost of light that has been captured. In this respect Susan Sontag (2008) observed that photographic images seem to be like pieces of the world, more than statements about it.

At the same time, photographic and film images obtained by technical means have the quality of being easily reproduced, and consequently, capable of parting with the sumptuous and exclusive nature flaunted by the unique and auratic image painstakingly produced by an artist. In a short time, the mechanically produced images gave rise to a new industry that made images potentially available for an enormous number of viewers who were integrated into the category of audience, for example, the cinema audience, and who,-as such- could have access to them in exchange for a price. This affordable payment did not turn them into owners of the images but rather into those who would circumstantially enjoy them. Thus, and as a result of these new practices, an industry that creates visual products for leisure, and no longer for testimony, grew vertiginously.

With the passage of time and the development of computational technologies, a new leap forward came about which take us to the present day. Digitalization, a new great shaking up of the image, brings with it a revolution that affects the visual but also countless other areas. Let's observe, to mention one of them, that of the increasingly generalized accessibility of digital photo and video cameras. We all are transformed into potential visual creators, at times, incontinent ones, and in this context, the perpetual act of taking photos and recording images becomes many different things that range from enjoyment to a social rite, from a document recording to the search for the most photogenic. Sometimes we observe that the image is reduced to an experience in itself, and the experience of the factual becomes somehow submerged under the weight of constantly taking photos (Sontag, 2008).

We are contemporaries of an era in which the process of dematerialization implied by digital technology places us before a new paradox: the image generated can be even more spectral than the photographic image from the past. Let's say it in another way: it is not material of oil and canvas, nor is it on a thin film to which lights and shadows are affixed thanks to the chemical development process, the digital image is immaterial and invisible. If we say this it is simply because the digital image is a binary code and can only be seen if the necessary computational mechanisms are activated. Vilém Flusser holds that technical images are synthesized and do not have the same ontological level of traditional images since they are surfaces constructed by points, although without volume. We no longer refer to the two dimensionality nor to their one dimensionality but to their zero dimensionality: with nothing behind them (Flusser, 2017).

We live in a time in which there is fluidity between the online and offline. This can come about as an effect of blurring in the conscience certain distinctions between the material world and the virtual world because everything happens in temporal simultaneities in which the dimensions criss-cross and mix together influencing each other with an agility that is very naturally assumed, and occasionally goes unnoticed (Ruas dos Santos, 2020). Flusser envisioned a future for society in which the interests of human beings will be concentrated in technical images and foretells that society will be utopic, that is: without *topos*, lacking a place beyond that which is of "imagined surfaces" (Flusser, 2017:29, own translation). Likewise the temporal dimension will be highly modified to the extent that the here and now depends on the activation of each file, of each image that will make present some contents or experiences in specific moments that are not necessarily synchronized with others, going towards a type of a la carte temporality.

The greatest breaking point concerning the image as a representation of reality in the era of the "*e-image*" consists, in essence, in that it deals with spectrums –as we have pointed out– but not in the indexical sense we referred to but in the most radical sense: they are spectrums since they are "alien to any principle of reality" (Brea, 2010:67, own translation), they are a pure intelligibility that only become clear at the moment in which the image appears by activation. In this sense, the digital images would be comparable to mental images or dreamlike images, however, the route of the analogic is a short one since, unlike the images that our psyche generates, these would always be available to be turned on and be visible again. In addition, these e-images can be shared and be seen by others, something that evidently does not happen with dreamlike content, unless it has been translated into oral or written linguistic record.

The images that are visible in an infinite number of screens coexist in their permanent availability with an infinite number of other images that are not mutually exclusive, as images in traditional mass media could be. It is now possible to open several at the same time and furthermore do so on the same screen. Each user will make their own activations, combinations, order, etc., with them.

How can we think of images in times of full screens, of dematerialization of the locus, of ubiquitous images that lie in insubstantial latency until a kiss awakens them on any screen? This ubiquity and at the same time the capacity to activate and deactivate them due to the essential immateriality of their existence as image file, of their telematic de-corporatization, of their existence outside ontological-material space, must necessarily make us reconsider our idea of reality in relation to the definition of images. The digital image no longer has a specific spot as material-image and print-image had. This potential capacity to make itself always present allows the digital image file to not only be outside the cultural logic of the original work of art but also distances itself from the image of the indexical era.

As we know, language used to execute digital images is mathematical, the images are made with numbers and logical thought. Its new technicities allow a degree of realism comparable to the mythical grapes painted by Zeuxis, but different from them, these grapes are tremendously malleable through activation of the interfaces and software, so much so that viewers can do things with them which were not possible before: play with the grapes, cut and paste them, edit them, put filters on them, share them, etc. (Machado,1998).

Let us now add to this scenario what has been called: augmented reality. Augmented reality is the result of integrating diverse technologies that allow experiences between bodies and holograms in fluid interactivity. In South Korea, to refer to a very mediatic case, an enormous public debate arose as a consequence of using technologies of this nature that through incorporation of the digital wearable devices (special glasses and gloves), allowed a mother to see her dead daughter, talk to her and hug her. The encounter that was broadcast on television caused intense reactions and debate. We are at the dawn of an era in which technology allows us to create illusions that at times are realistic and even hyper realistic, which places us to the point of entering into spheres where interaction between the physical and virtual world take place, a sort of realism of the inexistent. This provides us with new dimensions of reality.

It is very likely that the future will bring new experiences in which materially impossible realties will become doable by virtual means with a highly powerful authenticity, with a three-dimensional fiction and with capacity to generate emotion, reaction, and also knowledge. Some synthetic images do not need to attempt to represent the world, but ironically, they move at the edge of similarity and uncertainty, and that is what seems to make them so powerful. Among others, we have popular examples like the hologram singer, Hatsune Miku, whose image is projected on stages and provokes euphoric reactions in her human audiences who have purchased a ticket to the concert hall or stadium.

Evidently, and has been profusely pointed out, each new regime of visuality brings with it a new expressive sensibility, a new position for whoever is looking, some esthetic standards that must be adjusted, and a new modulation for the concept of the image: "Media change our concept of what an image is because they turn a viewer into an active user. As a result, an illusionistic image is no longer something that a person merely looks at and compares with his or her memory of the represented reality to judge their impression of reality. The new media images is something that the user actively goes into, zooming in or clicking on specific parts with the assumption the contain hyperlinks (...) The *new media converts images into interface images and instrument images and instrument images.* The image now becomes interactive, that is it now works like an interface between a user and a computer and other devices" (Manovich, 2005:245, own translation).

Perhaps, this new nature of the visual, consequently with its architecture, could have us facing the end of the image that looks at the world, the one that presents itself as a mirror or window. Moreover, we could be at the end of the era of the image-reflection, which in its source was generated by the effect of light (Brea,2010).

4. Conclusions

An aspect that we have yet to mention and that must be kept in mind is that not all images belong to the same nature. If images are considered from the perspective of their purpose, it is logical not to expect the same from photojournalism, for example, as from art. In the first case, its rigor will be assessed in terms of its unquestionable tie to the facts that they are going to present since there is a factual reality that must be registered and communicated, and the highest possible fidelity make up part of the deontological codes that govern information practices. Many journalism images also have an undeniable technical and visual value. There are institutionalized prizes that award the accuracy, opportunity, eloquence, testimonial value, thematic novelty

and even the esthetic of informative photos. The informative image is one of the areas of the visual that is most subjected to the demands of precision, of mirroring.

In contrast, the artistic field can be handled and is handled with different aims. Martin Gayford says that "Images are a way of representing the world and also of understanding and examining it, that is, a way of knowledge and a means of communication. There is a lot we can learn in an instant based on an image. So then, what does it show us? Reality or fiction. Truth or lie?" (Hockney and Gayford: 2018:19, own translation). Is it necessary to know this? If we are speaking of art, the dilemma derives from its substance to a large extent.

For Paul Klee, for example, art is not what reproduces the visible, but what makes the visible, and for David Hockney, image is what adds importance to what is represented, which underlines its relevance, and consequently, it is not a representation of reality but a look at reality. As is usually claimed, if the image holds the power of allowing us to understand the world or to de-codify it, the artist will be capable of holding a mirror up to reality to then project illusory images of it. In an interview, Alberto Giacometti expressed the following: "I am persuaded that painting is only that which is illusion. The reality of painting is the canvas, which is reality. But a picture can only represent what it is not, that is, the illusion of the other thing" (Giacometti,2015:293, own translation)

By referring to abstraction in art, the U.S. painter Robert Motherwell, declared that its function is exactly that of getting rid of reality; along these lines, in `Manifesto´, a movie-essay on art by Julian Rosefeldt (2015), he observes that contemporary art has left the realm of objects and in it the objects fade away like smoke. We can appreciate in this handful of references how the relation between image and reality is presented in art from a multitude of perspectives, all of them surprising and productive, revealing that the reality of the world of things and facts and their representation is not an unavoidable aim, nor a preferred one, nor a rejected one, nor an embraced one. Where does this zeal to find what is real in images come from?

Eliseo Verón explained that, looking at modernity, and with the social availability of complex technological communication medium, a discursivity emerged that has been taken on in terms of "representational conception" (Verón, 2001:13, own translation), thanks to which mediatized society needs to place a boundary between what happens in the setting of everyday life and what happens in the ever present and myriad communication media through which society gets informed and communicates, but also in which society is presumably reflected.

When Susan Sontag published her book "On Photography" it was 1977 and in it she questioned the "widening abyss between image and reality" (Sontag, 2008:121, own translation). To this intuition, she proposes the following idea: that any given image generates an alienation from reality insofar as it cuts it up, highlights it, describes it, or transforms it. Image, as such, would in itself be a form of separation. We know that in traditional cultures, there is not an abysmal difference between image and reality since image and reality are two manifestations of the same thing or energy, and to some extent, from that the effectiveness of images is derived. As pointed out by Regis Debray, "magic and image have almost the same letters" (Debray,1994:31, own translation) for which, separating the image from what is real forms part of the process of taking away the sacred nature existing over centuries in the so-called Western world. Similarity generated by mechanical production of images, gave back, at least

for a short time and relatively speaking, the apparent identity between image and object, although doing just the opposite of ancient times: on many occasions the properties of images were attributed to real things and not the inverse.

Social transformations concerning the forms of mediation create imaginary spaces, are a source of meaning, and establish a new economy of the gaze. During the present digital era, when technological mediation takes on much more than the mere exhibition of contents designed with the pretension of referring to realties that exist in the material universe of life, what they can now do is quite a bit more than re-present. And at this point in time it seems legitimate to question if the fact of living in such a visual society will not end up transforming our very notion of reality.

If we leave these spheres and cast a panoramic look at the numerous current states of the visual, we can legitimately sense that e-images can help us too, but can also surprise us and throw us off kilter. A visit to a digital art show suffices to experience this. Likewise we can, for example, be driven in a virtual car into the center of a geode that in reality has forbidden access or is materially impossible, but the reaction of our skin and nerves reveal that the virtual journey can be more exciting for our body than a visit that actually takes place at the edge of a hidden cave inside a rock. On occasions, the image more than representing realities, transports us to where it is not possible, creating universes, virtually penetrating the impenetrable, and taking us with strong physical sensations just to where we would not be able to be, to places that no longer exist, or that never existed.

For now, in that which refers to the general population, the entertainment and social dimensions seem to be those most frequented for the image, and above all, the fact of taking photos or videos has converted them into a way of acting whose value is imposed many times over its meaning. The tic of taking a photo of almost everything is complemented by the fact that circulating the images has acquired immense importance, and this availability gives them a dizzying and lasting value contributing to making the value of the content secondary.

The photographer and essayist Joan Foncuberta (2016) warned about the excess of images, a sort of anti-ecology, fanned by the ease of taking a picture of everything and publishing it, that generates a repetition of the identical and difficulty or indifference to looking at what is buried by the individual photographic drive. The thousands and thousands of photos of sunsets that have been taken now mean nothing because what is aspired to is the photo of the sunset experienced in the first person, the testimony of personal experience. The photo is almost irrelevant beyond the supposed evidence that it provides. I was there. I was there becomes important as a mark of an experience, but as a type of experience that on occasion is more addressed towards exhibition than the experiential aspect: the photography can be embellished, and bewilderingly retouched with the purpose of causing an effect. I was there, in the most spectacular place. *Ergo, sum*. Once shared, it will soon become indifferent, pure residue, digital junk. Making everything visible could have a paradoxical effect: on one hand it would produce "the disappearance of the invisible" and, consequently, the availability of the visible could generate a type "nothing is valuable" (Debray,1994:305/6, own translation), or perhaps also "everything is valuable".

Let's examine a case close to us: in these times when a pandemic is globally afflicting humanity, with health, social, and economic measures, with infection and death rates; in times in which science speaks in the media because citizens need to understand and need orientation, negationist groups nevertheless, keep appearing. How potent does reality have to be to prove it? What are the instruments for correcting unfounded opinions?

For this laxness in social behavior, a suggestion is made: that the news media publish photos that confirm the condition of hospitals, that show what an intubated patient involves, the exhaustion of the healthcare workers, etc. It is hoped that the images, with their overwhelming strength of realism, would uncover the falsifiers of reality. The reaction doesn't take long and publications begin to appear on negationist social networks with photos that attempt to prove just the opposite: empty hospital admission areas, peaceful hallways, smiling and relaxed healthcare workers. Police receive the order to detain and fine the defamers.

In essence, these arguments allow us to sew and then unravel the thematic thread running through this paper, and we need to do it because the representative nature and the allusion to reality requires an infinity of precisions, discussions, and because it is a matter that seems to affect our way of being in the world, in our own existence. The conceptions of image and reality are not strange in themselves and both change at the same pace. Awareness about the temporariness of approaches is clear since we are referring to a phenomenon that is permanently simmering.

5. Acknowledgement

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