Reality and truthfulness. Abstraction, (hyper)realism and the "post-pictorial condition"

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Introduction: pictorial visuality and virtual visuality

Whenever we speak of what an image is about, or what it represents, or what it tries to achieve – we then speak of something different in relation to what the particular pictorial object "qua" object essentially is. This means that being an image is ontologically different from being-a-representation-of or being-about something. In everyday use of the term, "image" never corresponds to a pure visuality, a sheer visual phe-nomenon, or virtually anything that one sees in front of one's eyes. Im-age, or picture, must stand in capacity of something or somebody that one sees, it must be ontologically different from what is seen and it must be other than what is seen. Pictures are not what one sees in them, no matter how realistic they are and regardless of the fact that sometimes the illusion of reality that certain kind of images create can be very con-fusing for those beholding them. As long as the difference between reali-ty and (pictorial) illusion is discernible, visual experience can exist as ei-ther purely phenomenal or materially pictorial. As Gottfried Boehm has shown, the ontology of pictorial experience is characterized by conscious discernment of the discontinuity of picture plane in regard to the overall field of vision. After contemporary digital technology allowed for images to interfere with the field of vision making it indistinguishable from the picture plane, the ensuing question was this: can we still understand this kind of immersive visuality as "pictorial visuality" or should we establish a completely new ontological level of visuality – a sort of "virtual visuality" – characterized by the continuous, non-differentiated field of vision? Elsewhere I have argued that along the lines of fundamental relations in the construction of visible reality today, two positions emerge as both counterposed and paradigmatic, confirming the contingency of the ima-

ge both in the material and nonmaterial (virtual) world.[1] The mentioned positions show that the status and the perception of images is today paradoxically influenced by, on the one hand, the image as a distinctive sign, and, on the other hand, the image as a phenomenological fact. The first stream, inspired by art history and semiotic insights insists on that which Gottfried Boehm calls the "iconic difference", that is, the fundamental possibility of differentiation between images and non-images (Boehm 1994), while the other is based on the basic impossibility of that differentiation, i.e. that which Oliver Grau calls "immersion" that leads to the belief of the observer that what happens in images or visual installations is actually true, so that immersive images create a new dimension of reality in which we see some sense or enjoy it because it has become non-distinctive in relation to its original reality (Grau 2003). Following this strict opposition, the iconic difference would enable us to esteem classical artworks and communicate through visual signs, while immersion would draw us into virtual reality, i.e. the reality of that which it depicts, thus ceasing to be a traditional pictorial phenomenon. A sort of antiessentialist, counter-stance is offered by Lambert Wiesing who contends that equalization of immersive images with virtual reality too much limits the notion of "immersion" into virtual worlds, because it happens only in a very small number of cases. He says that the notion of immersion is equally used for virtual reality in strict sense, like matrix or cyberspace and for the instances of "virtual reality" that still show distinctive characteristics of images, for example in video-games, where the iconic difference is still present (Wiesing 2010, p. 88). Wiesing suggests that the concept of immersion should be additionally explained, in order to more precisely define to which kind of virtual reality we refer: immersive virtual reality that causes «assimilation of the perception of the image object to the perception of a real thing» or non-immersive virtual reality that represents the «assimilation of the image object to the imagination» (Wiesing, p. 89).

In the history of representation, from cave drawings in Lascaux all the way up to contemporary immersive cinematic representations, the visual experience of all those depictions was characterized by the more or less

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[1] I am referring here to my article: Purgar, K. (2015) *What is not an Image (Anymore)? Iconic Difference, Immersion, and Iconic Simultaneity in the Age of Screens*; in «Phainomena». Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, no. 92-93, pp. 145-170.

visible difference between what is represented and the representation as such. From the art-historical imaginary (based on classical art and created disciplinarily in the 19th century) came out the general concept that classical realism and Renaissance perspective should be the measure of truthfulness that any pictorial representation must achieve should it wish to be called realistic. From this standpoint, it became natural that concepts of reality in art and reality in pictures followed the same logic of mimetic representation. As is very well known, from the advent of Impressionism onward these parallel paths of art and pictures changed irreversibly: in the same way as realistic pictures no longer necessarily qualified for artistic domain, technologies of depiction that allowed for realistically capturing the material world (like early photography and film) were not automatically seen as capable for making of art either. On the other hand, unlike in the beginning of the 20th century, in contemporary theory it is no longer disputed why abstract or non-figurative art can or can not be art, but how to draw a clear-cut distinction between reality in images and reality as such. Although this dilemma does not belong any longer to an exclusive domain of art and art history, paradoxically as it may seem, it is still more easily dealt with within the domain of art then within more specifically confined theory of images. As we will refer to later, it is so because artistic images let us focus either on pure visibility or pure medium; artistic images are easier to cut-out from reality, and their surplus value may be set apart from their pragmatic purposes. In this article I will try to present reasons why we cannot inadvertently and automatically disentangle the medium from its content and why is this bond so important for understanding of the traditional pictorial representation; that is, for the understanding of the image ontology that was once based on the reciprocity of reality and truthfulness in images. In order to define these points of disentanglement where (hyper)realistic images find themselves in need of a completely new ontology, this article will make references to several different but clearly interrelated concepts: 1) the "natural generativity" of images proposed by Flint Schier; 2) "presumption of virtuality" by Paul Crowther; 3) the "pictorial appearing" based on Martin Seel's concept of "aesthetics of appearing" and 4) Dieter Mersch's difference between "pictorially visible" and "non-pictorial visual".

The phenomenon of perceiving pictures: naturally or referentially?

Natural generativity, as Schier argues, holds that a system of representation is iconic provided one is «naturally» capable of recognizing the object represented in the image. When somebody has the capacity of interpreting and understanding new images, symbols and representation – without the need to resort immediately to some other system of knowledge – then we can be sure that what we are dealing with "is" a picture (Schier 1986, pp. 43-46). So, if one is able to recognize, let's say, Palazzo Ducale and Canal Grande or, at least, a big old ornate dwelling, sea, boats, churches and people scattered all over a huge *piazza* when looking at some of Canaletto's paintings, the odds are pretty high that one knows «what counts as picture, what counts as pictorial system and what counts as pictorial competence» (Schier, p. 46). The problem with natural generativity, as Flint Schier himself warns us, is certain epistemic restrictions that practically make it impossible for us to know to what extent our pictorial judgment is based on purely iconic – that is, natural – interpretation and to what extent it has been made on other, non-iconic sources of knowledge, like written or spoken language. Schier is perfectly aware that «there is more to an icon than its iconic content» (Schier, p. 52), therefore to be able to fully comprehend the meaning of an image other epistemological systems must always be kept at hand.

In my opinion, the theory of natural generativity, with all the details uncovered by Flint Schier's analytical mind, works very well primarily (or, perhaps, exclusively) when used for explaining how we make sense of mimetic pictures "as" pictures, apart from their textual, or "non-iconic" meaning. The problem arises when one's natural recognitional abilities are confronted with abstract paintings, but even more with novel, digitally generated visual information that cannot be retrieved from some previous real or imaginary experiences in life. In other terms, what is to be done with pictures that do not represent anything «naturally» discernible: how do they essentially relate to other artefacts and phenomena that we call images? Do such images need a different ontology, are they to be considered images at all, or do they have, exactly by being exempt from non-iconic meaning, some deeper icono-ontological justification in order to be called images?

There is a very interesting point in this respect made by Paul Crowther. He raises an aporetic question that has been part of the discussion on abstract painting ever since Clement Greenberg set his theory of pictorial

surface in the seminal text *Towards a newer Laokoön* of 1940 all the way up to the "iconic difference" by Gottfried Boehm of 1994, then *Thirteen statements on the picture* by Martin Seel from 2000 and to *Au fond des images* by Jean-Luc Nancy of 2003. Like Boehm and Nancy, although on a different genealogical path, Paul Crowther says that «in the most basic terms, in order to perceive an item [pictorial or other] one must be able to distinguish it from other items in the perceptual field» (Crowther 2012, p. 146). In everyday life perception of everyday objects is seamless, being normally performed by anybody without him or her being particularly aware of so doing. When it comes to the recognition of pictures, the fact that their framed structure limits one's perception to a two-dimensional, strictly delimited surface, one's attention is likely to be grabbed more easily when the gaze is directed to a surface made "iconically different" (Boehm) or "cut-out" from the continuity of reality (Nancy).[2] What happens then, says Crowther, «rather than simply perceiving something "as" a configuration of a certain kind, our perception of it takes on a more reflective character». With abstract pictures perception becomes even more focused because «the perceptual discontinuity» between a non-mimetic picture and surrounding space is far more conspicuous than the discontinuity between figurative pictures and surrounding space (Crowther, p. 147).

That is the reason why German philosopher Martin Seel says that what are called abstract pictures «prove to be more concrete and therefore

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[2] In relation to images, Boehm's concept of "iconic difference" is largely known, but the problem of "difference" is crucial for Jean-Luc Nancy too. Difference can be established either through the lack of connection or the lack of identity relation. That is, says Nancy, the characteristic of the image: «it does not touch» and «it is dissimilar». The image «must be detached, placed outside and before one's eyes... and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially» (Nancy 2005, p. 2). What is in Nancy clipped from the ground and has margins that constitute the frame of the picture resembles Boehm's «surveyable total surface», while the *distinctive* (*le distinct*) is conceptually similar to that which in Boehm makes a visual contrast – the *iconic difference*. For both authors the picture does not exist there where we are unable to spot discontinuity in the levels of visual perception anymore, no matter what an image represents and what is its possible status as sign and meaning. This equally applies to maximally illusionist images and the ones that do not represent "anything"; the image remains phenomenologically present no matter what we see in it as long as we can ontologically "pull it away" or "clip" from the continuity of some imagined ground.

the paradigmatic case of the picture» (Seel 2005, pp. 150-161) and that is why being-a-picture differs greatly from being-a-representation-of. Seel thinks that it is a characteristic feature of the image to refer to itself, but not necessarily in such a way as at the same time to represent something or someone, but so as to refer to its own surface, which refers above all to the actual image, and only then (and only sometimes) to the referential reality behind it. He claims that the foregrounding of the aspect of its own depiction is the determining pictorial operation that refers equally to the abstract and to the figurative image surface. Even when it refers to some other things outside its own surface – thus, when it represents something in a strictly semiotic sense – even then it primarily draws attention to its own production as visual representation of itself (Seel, pp. 172-175). The essential aspect of the picture is not then contained in its semiotic status as a symbolic substitute for something outside the picture, but in its character as phenomenon that is separable from what is outside the pictorial surface.[3]

Modernist painting offers us numerous examples that the essential separability of image from reality outside the image can become a problem and that then neither hermeneutic nor semiotic analysis is any longer capable of helping us, irrespective of whether we are concerned with the figurative or the abstract image. We might advance a thesis that the image loses its essence, i.e. becomes anti-image or non-image, the more it comes close to the imitation of extra-pictorial reality, not the more it is distanced from this reality. Thinking in terms of image theory, art history indicates to us a similar phenomenon when, on the one hand, Baroque

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[3] I have spoken at more length about the phenomenon of distance in the article in which I proposed that the concepts of "Ikonische Differenz" of Gottfried Boehm and "le distinct" of Jean-Luc Nancy are at base phenomenologically established as the difference between the surface of the actual image on the one hand and the continuity of the extra-pictorial surface on the other. The criterion, or degree of imageness in this case, is not the representational character of the image (the greater or lesser similarity to something outside the image), but whether we are at all capable of experiencing something as image. This criterion is particularly important if we look at electronic or digitally generated images that are capable of totally erasing the line of the cut between the pictorial and the non-pictorial surface. See more on this topic in my previously mentioned article: Purgar, K. (2015) *What is not an Image (Anymore)? Iconic Difference, Immersion, and Iconic Simultaneity in the Age of Screens*; in «Phainomena». Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, no. 92-93.

illusionist frescos complicated the relation between pictorial surface and spatial depth, and also when radically abstract painting led to the creation of completely non-representational images. We can call both kinds of phenomena "anti-images": illusionist painting because it does away with the difference between image and the continuity outside the image, and monochromatic abstraction because by achieving objectlessness at the very borders of visual perception it annuls the premise from which it started and thus it is completed within itself.

Martin Seel thinks that the representational and figurative aspects of the image, what they depict or reproduce, particularly when we mean commercial images with a marked use value, is not also what most essentially characterises them. Quite to the contrary, «in the context of the question of the constitution of the picture and its perception, the so-called abstract picture proves to be the most concrete and therefore the paradigmatic case of the picture» (Seel, pp. 150-161). The fundamental difference between artistic and non-artistic image does not lie in the first not having a concrete purpose while the latter endeavours to sell us some product, inform us about some event or perhaps stimulate us sexually. It is about something more important: the artistic image, above all, deals with the way in which it is produced; it is only about how it is made. Seel says that artistic images operate with what all other images a priori take for granted. The concept of visibility is certainly within this: the advertising image will never make a theme out of visibility for visibility is the basic and taken for granted condition for visual communication. On the other hand, for the understanding of artistic images it is crucial to notice the difference between the visible (on the image surface) and the presented (via the painted surface). «The artistic picture reveals how it reveals what it reveals» (Seel, p. 170).

Images regarded as relations of priority

The difference between "reality" and "truthfulness" or "pictorial visuality" and "virtual visuality" is the key in understanding of the contemporary status of images. The thesis is basically this: the more one is able to distinguish the surrounding space from the pictorial space the more one will be able to perceive pictorially. In the post-pictorial condition pictures are to be sought after in the realm of abstract and conceptual art instead of, as one may reckon, in painterly hyperrealism or in superrealistic digital photographic printouts. Abstract pictures have apparently succeeded

in distinguishing themselves from extrapictorial reality by simply casting off the burden of non-iconic figurative meaning. But let the reader be warned that not all abstract pictures either strived to or achieved this status: for example, Ad Reinhardt's *Black Paintings*, if presented on a black surface, are hardly distinguishable from the surrounding space. As Stephanie Rosenthal observes, the hardly perceptible square surfaces on the Reinhardt's canvases occupy a transitional space between the visible and the invisible, between sensory presence and absence. Only on extremely attentive observation do the orthogonal forms suggest an artist's intervention into what are the otherwise more or less impenetrable differences between the individual parts of the image surface (Rosenthal 2006, pp. 39-40). Since art criticism has traditionally concentrated on the events within the surface of the image, exhibition set-ups necessarily privilege the semiotic-value aspect of the work itself and so such paintings are most often placed on the kind of ground that can most precisely reveal the character of the artist's intervention. However, if we were for the moment to ignore the fact that works from the series *Black Paintings* are artistic objects, and if we were to try to see them as pure image information, then their imageness is no longer self-evident. For example, placed on a black ground, these canvases would differ from the ground only minimally or in some extreme case not at all.

The meaning of Reinhardt's black canvases as art objects should thus be seen from at least three cognitive-theoretical angles: the art historical, semiotic and phenomenological. In the first case, the meaning of the artistic object is to be found in the type of the highly modernist experiment, i.e. in the process started with Malevich's Suprematist abstraction and the historical avant-gardes in general. The semiotic angle reveals to us the problematising of the function of visibility as theme of the art work. This approach is closely connected with the art historical, for we cannot deny the earlier mentioned fact that the problem of visibility is equally present in the Baroque fresco, for example, in Andrea Pozzo's fresco paintings in the church San Ignazio in Rome, and in the monochrome painting of the 1960s. In the third approach, the phenomenological, we are interested in what happens at the place of transition, at the moment when the pictorial presentation de-ontologises itself, just as the art work is paradoxically constituted through the observer's inability to perceive the differences between image and the continuity of the reality outside the image. The example of the illusionist frescos of the Seventeenth century shows the extent to which the art historical approach is

important for the understanding of the contemporary phenomenology of the painting, and how much all three approaches are important for an establishment of a general theory of visual representations.

This brings us to the key characteristics of abstract paintings. Paul Crowther claims that no matter how distant from figurative reality an image is, it will always already be included in the fabric of culture; such non-mimetic images will always already "mean" something or, at least, might mean something. What we are able to discern and recognize in abstract images – the meaning we are ready to ascribe to them – Crowther calls «presumption of virtuality», whereas for him the cultural and art-historical background against which any meaning of abstract images could be visualised is a «contextual space». Why is this important for us? Because, if we accept Crowther's dichotomy, then it turns out that every work of abstract art entails meaning on top of its pure formal qualities, but it cannot be reduced to either of the two: the «meaning» of abstraction lies somewhere between what we know "about" them and what we see "in" them (Crowther, p. 152). I think Crowther is right in positioning abstract paintings in a sort of semantic limbo, between seeable and sayable, because I can think of no one who could claim to have grasped or understood all there is or could be found in any non-mimetic picture.

Crowther makes a compelling remark that works of abstract art are «open», both in terms of their intrinsic meaning and in terms of the general hermeneutics with which one approaches the particular work of art.[4] In other words, if Flint Schier's "natural generativity" accounts only for a theory of depiction, realism, representation and pictorial convention (as remarkably as it does) leaving out non-mimetic art and therefore does not bring us closer to answering the question of how we make sense of abstract images, so Crowther's theory of abstract art, on the other side of the spectrum, rightly enlarges the scope of our understanding of abstract images. Albeit dealing with different types of images, both authors come to the equally inconclusive point that is nevertheless of great importance for our discussion: in both mimetic and non-mimetic art there is always a residual, non-iconic, narrative, «natural» or «contex-

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[4] Likewise, Flint Schier argues that the abstract painting is an *open image* to the extent of its cognate visual possibilities in contextual space (Schier 1986). So, it is open to a certain "range" corresponding to one's abilities to inscribe meaning into it. Strictly speaking, the meaning of abstract work of art is "restricted" to this range, but is open to whatever an interpretation "within" this range comes about.

tual» meaning that determines one's perception and to a certain degree obfuscates what should or may be purely iconic in an image.

Tom Mitchell has already shown in his chart «family of images» thirty years ago that ontological concerns of images would eventually come down to iconological concerns, and that images themselves should be, at least in part, held responsible for their meaning (Mitchell 1986, pp. 9-14). His concept of "metapictures" was one way of dealing with this twofold icono-ontological structure of images that is at the center of dispute in every theoretical survey: namely their "iconic nature" and "non-iconic meaning". Abstract images, if we want to ascribe anything ontologically specific to them, should not possess any extrapictorial meaning, not even the metapictoriality introduced by this American theorist because metapictures are pictorial surfaces that discuss, question and challenge, according to Mitchell, various levels of their iconic structure. Abstract images, on the other hand, structurally, iconologically and even etymologically (to begin with) are not descriptive formations: their purpose is only to prove what an image is and what makes it ontologically so distinct an entity. Abstract paintings are playgrounds of various imaginary contexts that are being uncovered in front of pictorial surfaces by acts of "looking" and "gazing". There is a problem, however, with artworks that deliberately withhold from the gaze parts of important information (or all of it) that could provide art-historical and hermeneutical explanations of the work being gazed at. This is particularly the case with pieces of immaterial art, like analytical propositions and performances attributable to conceptual neo-avant-garde experiments that flourished during the Sixties and Seventies. When confronted with such artworks, American analytical philosophers – Arthur Danto first and Gregory Currie after him – suggest we ask for help from theory.

Currie contends that a conspicuous problem with conceptualism, and at the same time one of its principal artistic achievements, inheres in its creating a theoretical discourse around a work of art which (work of art) consists in this very theoretical discourse. According to him, tautological and theoretically minded conceptual art was therefore «a response to – perhaps even a revolution against – modernism», especially against its convictions summed up by Clement Greenberg who strongly advocated in favor of «two conditions of purity: purity of the medium and purity of looking» (Currie 2009, pp. 33-49). This is a turning point for our discussion insofar as conceptual art has definitely shown that the ontology of the image after modernism has not taken the road that contemporary

art has, and that visual studies and Bildwissenschaft were right to make a distinction between the two while taking both the general notion of the image and specific artworks equally into account. The claim to purity of medium and gaze so famously ascribed to Clement Greenberg is in part contested by Gregory Currie who thinks that neither should high-modernist painting be exclusively accessed by acts of gazing nor is conceptual art purely notional and philosophical. For him, it is a matter of priority, of what comes first and what comes second: in the case of traditional pictorial art the marked surface of the picture has priority over the act of making it, while conversely in conceptual art the act of making has priority. But without the traceable residue of that conceptual act (in picture, sound or text), we would have no information that it took place in the first place (Currie 2009, p. 5).

To understand conceptual art as a different category of artistic practice it is necessary to establish «different relations of priority» in regards to concepts of the image on the one hand and particular artwork or artistic style on the other. But the relation between pictorial visuality and virtual visuality is also the one of priorities: in order to depict material or imaginary world pictorial representation makes visible the traces of the acts of depiction – picture frame, brush-strokes, material/physical ground – and therefore often making the very traces the purpose of artistic intervention. On the other hand, what I call "virtual visuality" erases the traces of its pictorial source because contemporary digital images lack performative aspects or residues. In the latter case the pure visual information-as-sensation has priority over the process of "production" of sensation.

Pictorial appearing: between the "pictorial" and the "virtual"

Should we wish to come to terms with the opposing concepts of "pictoriality" and "visuality", we need first to see what preceded this antagonism. Gottfried Boehm's concept of iconic difference – like the Crowther categorisation of transhistorical images outlined earlier – was sufficiently comprehensive a concept for the differentiation of the image from what was not the image for all visual artefacts that were created during the several-millennia-long era of pictorial representation. That era started in the first Palaeolithic drawings, covered the whole of the visual production in the period "before art" and all those visual representations that were created in the new age outside the needs of the religious cult, eventually being changed during the digital era. However, since the digi-

tal technology is characterised by increasingly developed systems of pictorial immersion, from the OLED screens and IMAX cinemas available to everyone, to totally immersive experiences that recreate synaesthetic visual and tactile impressions, the ontological differentiation of the pictorial plane from extra-pictorial reality can no longer be put in place with only the help of the idea of difference.

The concept of difference could have served as a qualificative for the definition of the relations between separate categories of object – in our case, pictorial and all those others that are not pictorial – only as long as the reality in which they are found was equal or comparable. For example, nobody calls into question the clear ontological separation of the two-dimensional represented reality that is set up within film fiction from the non-represented, i.e., real reality that exists outside the fiction of film. Many films and artworks actually count on this assumed separation and so many of them test out the borders between one reality and the other: primarily to call them into question within a strictly artistic discourse. Boehm's theory of iconic difference, like Nancy's concept of cut, established semiotic-phenomenological criteria for the theoretical delimitation precisely of those experiences that are innate to the human experience of the world. In other words, the difference or ontological cut between image and non-image can exist only because every normally capable individual can understand these two categories experientially. However, the iconic difference turns out to be an inadequate concept of this ontological cut not only because in the time and space of the digitally created realities human experiences radically change their status and capacities, but because this new kind of experience is not yet normalised within the process that Flint Schier once called natural generativity.

The time and space of the "technical images" require us to approach pictures no longer as the Ancient Greek *eikon*, i.e. reflection or representation, but as experiences, events and a special kind of phenomena.[5] We

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[5] The term "technical image" has been introduced by the Czech-German media theorist Vilém Flusser and extensively described in his book *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* from 1985. Flusser generally contends that technically produced images – that is, film and photography, but also «electronically synthesized images in the future» – depend on completely different kinds of distancing from concrete experince. His universe of technical images is described as a particular moment in history that changed the way we see things, from observation of objects to computation of concepts: «When images supplant texts, we experience, perceive, and value the world and ourselves differently, no

can recognise modalities of pictorial appearing in our epoch of technical images as symptoms of the most recent pictorial turn, in any event the first in the 21st century, i.e. that which no longer occurs in the clash of image and language, as described in masterly manner by Mitchell and Boehm, rather in the clash of analogue and digital images, representation and post-representation, reality and virtuality, semiotics and phenomenology. Although still used as signifiers in the uninterrupted chain of semiosis, images today mean increasingly little and even less seldom do they represent. The availability of digital coding led to the manner of their appearing (that is, the ontological level of pictorial cognition), being in terms of information and communication more important than the iconological and semiotic level of pictorial cognition. The very appearing in someone's mind of some sensorily discernible object, irrespective of content, form or the virtuosity of the artist, becomes a distinct object of beauty. In order to better understand the distinction between the two concepts, it will prove helpful to consider in more detail one of the most thoroughly developed and phenomenologically founded interpretations of art and pictures provided by Martin Seel, which he calls «the aesthetics of appearing» [Ästhetik des Erscheinens].

Seel's concept is designed, above all for the sake of an aesthetic analysis of systematically new phenomena of beauty that in our time are realised no more as signifiers of the classic European metaphysical tradition but as visual phenomena that are realised aesthetically and artistically through their own mechanisms of sensoriness. An aesthetics of appearing can at first sight pose two principal, presumably very serious, restrictions for our analysis of pictorial phenomena: 1) Seel in the phenomenon of appearing sees above all the possibility of the perception of aesthetic objects, while here we are dealing with pictorial phenomena in

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longer in a one-dimensional, linear, process-oriented, historical way but rather in a two-dimensional way, as surface, context, scene. And our behavior changes: it is no longer dramatic but embedded in fields of relationships. What is currently happening is a mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior, a mutation of our being-in-the-world (...) More specifically, technical images rely on texts from which they have come and, in fact, are not surfaces but mosaics assembled from particles. They are therefore not prehistoric, two-dimensional structures but rather posthistorical, without dimension» (Flusser 2011, pp. 5-6).

general, without requirements directed towards specifically aesthetic reflection; 2) focus on the perception of aesthetic objects restricts the phenomena of appearing to the class of objects that we call artistic and thus puts outside the compass of theory all those forms of appearing that cannot be covered by aesthetic criteria. However, what seems the most important contribution of the aesthetics of appearing is precisely the omission of criteria based on historical and theoretical canons of beauty, as well as the relativisation of art historical topoi. This does not mean that in his view classical artworks have ceased to be peaks of the humanist tradition; it does mean that their appearing, like the appearing of any other object, has to be comprehended in the light of the new paradigms of existing, coming into being and happening. Whether the object in its appearing will be constituted as aesthetic object or ordinary thing depends on the observer's capacities of intuition and imagination. This kind of stance clearly indicates Seel's polemical attitude towards the inheritance of metaphysical aesthetics, insofar as at the beginning of his analysis he distances himself from the tradition of the analytical philosophy of art following on from Arthur Danto: although he is in agreement with the American philosopher than any object can have aesthetic qualities (that is, «it can be aesthetically perceived»), Seel thinks that this fact is due to the manner of the appearing of the concrete object in the visible world, and not to the features that have been ascribed to this object in some institutional or social context.

Seel's theory is essentially phenomenologically determined for it is sceptical in equal measure about the philosophical and speculative source of aesthetic experience and about its conceptualisation. Accordingly, he moves aesthetic experience back from the domain of intellectual perception to the domain of sensoriness, from the activity of critical reflection to the event and phenomenality of appearing (Seel, p. 23). This is in a sense a return to the original Kantian teaching of "disinterested pleasure": it does not mean that the aesthetic object must not have any purpose other than being the object of pure aesthetic pleasure, rather that the human mind is capable of seeing or experiencing some object – outside or beyond its practical function – as an aesthetic object as well.[6]

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[6] For example, Duchamp did not draw attention to the neglected beauty of the urinal nor did he reveal its aesthetic dimension that had been suppressed for years, just as Cézanne's painting is not interesting because of his artistic experience of nature. We appreciate both, like most of the great artists of modernity, because of the change of paradigm of the creation of the artwork, from the indi-

But, how the things stand with pictures in general? Does (non-art) pictorial appearing have any other similarities with the much more exclusive Seel concept of aesthetic appearing, apart from the fact that in both cases we are more interested in visual and sensory phenomena than sign and textual narration? Can pictorial experience in the time and space of the technical images still be articulated as iconic difference? The main thesis of this article is that today it is precisely the perception of difference – i.e. the ability to differentiate a real from a virtual experience of the image – the place in which the drama of the real, to put it in Baudrillard's terms, is played out. It seems that in the age when traditional images are increasingly less differentiated from immersive synaesthetic experiences (which are also partly visual phenomena, but are not pictures alone), there is a need for an equal perceptual concentration for us to recognise either an original art object or some simple pictorial object.[7]

The logic of iconic structures of Dieter Mersch – yet another important German scholar – is also in essence the logic of the perception of the difference between picture and frame, that is, image and non-image, the iconic thus necessarily being something like phenomenon or occurrence, rather than text or sign. He claims that the «pictorially visible» is a diffe-

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vidual artistic genius to public critical judgment, that is, from work-as-object in the direction of observer-as-subject. According to this poststructuralist thesis, one should claim the artist responsible for the production or activation of new perceptive and receptive mechanisms, while the artefact itself is necessary only as instruction for the use of new and different artistic contents that can be but are not necessarily there in this work. For example, the works of Joseph Beuys or Jannis Kounellis, like the whole strategy of the Arte Povera movement, were aimed at sensitising people to the aesthetic dimension of the quotidian so that purely functional objects, known forms and unobtrusive textures are defamiliarised in their new "aesthetic" non-functionality and deformedness. In the domain of art, capacity for aesthetic perception will be enjoyed by those who have developed the sensitivity for remarking particular kinds of aesthetic appearing; among them there are the art public, critics or simply connoisseurs of the widest possible profile. If we are not capable of experiencing art irrespective of how we get through to it – metaphysically, analytically, as appearing, through conceptual construction or some other way – we shall be deprived of a specific experience that the aesthetic alone can provide us.

[7] For more on this argument see my article: Purgar, K. (2015) *What is not an Image (Anymore)? Iconic Difference, Immersion, and Iconic Simultaneity in the Age of Screens*; in «Phainomena». Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, no. 92-93.

rently visible than the «nonpictorial visual», because the picture possesses a distinctive material status through which a difference is produced between on the one hand something that is visible precisely as image and, on the other hand, something that is also visible, but is a mere visual phenomenon that is not an image. Mersch says that even the totally immersive experience of IMAX cinema can be considered an image for there is still a border that frames the in-the-image from the surrounding visual (Mersch 2016, pp. 163-166). Although in this article I urge that in some cases of immersion the pictorial experience is marginal at most, nevertheless I agree with Mersch that immersion is still a matter of a pictorial phenomenon; but the question remains whether that is really because, as he says, in the cinema we see the frame of the screen and the seat in front of us and we feel the specific cinema arrangement, or whether it is actually because we know that cinematographic apparatus is involved, together with the traditional institution of the cinema, which has not changed its illusionist character since the beginning of the era of moving images? True, much more important for us than this epistemological speculation is the phenomenological insight of Mersch according to which it is the immersive experience of the image that wipes out the basis of pictorial ontology: «All technical illusionism, what can be called pictorial immersiveness, finds in it its dynamics and its futility». What the image attempts is equivalent to a paradox: «the effacement of that which constitutes the viewing of an image, and thus the erasure of pictoriality as a medium. The logic of technological progress exists due to this telos: a medium that negates its own mediality» (Mersch 2016, p. 166).
From this it follows that the observation of the modality of pictorial appearing is the fundamental precondition for both the possibility of aesthetic perception and also of the perception of the image in general as phenomena that have an interior logic different from that of reality (or continuum of reality) in which they are located as objects of perception. These modalities have to be precisely defined, for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, because they can throw a new light on the still unresolved aporias of the pictorial turn, primarily that part of it that dealt with the issue of the domination of the visual by the textual and vice versa; and secondly, because the technical images face pictorial mediality with completely new challenges: the question arises, that is, how to preserve one's capacity for the artistic transcending of reality when the experiences of pictorial representation – traditional painting and cinematography in the "old-fashioned" 2D technique, for example – vanish in the digital

worlds of virtuality, in which transcendence is actually no longer possible? If art in the pre-digital era was the only means through which it was possible to transgress the borders of cognition/perception and comprehend reality outside the framework of mere necessity, then the virtual space of some immersive reality makes art today equally impossible and unnecessary. As Martin Seel and Dieter Mersch suggest, a new strategy of art accordingly must be identical to the new strategy of the image: the "iconic" that in his text of 1978 Gottfried Boehm could still call "image-as-difference", in the epochal turn of the technical-scientific age has to be turned into the "image-as-appearing".

In order to set up a plausible model of universal pictorial appearing taking into account equally changes in the mediality of images as well as Mersch's contrast of the pictorial and the visual (one of the basic differences between digital and analogue production of images), it is necessary to liberate images of the surplus of their content, that is, approach them as abstract entities; I do not necessarily think here of pictures of abstract art, but of pictures as objects set free of culturally inherited aesthetic content.[8] Martin Seel in *The Aesthetics of Appearing* sets himself a harder task for not only does he attempt to split off the factual kind of appearing (constitutive for any object at all) from the concrete phenomenal appearing (which is a precondition for aesthetic differentiation), but also endeavours within the desired aesthetic norm to set up criteria for noticing those phenomena that take part *only* in the aesthetics of appearing. Unlike the approach to the aesthetic object in traditional hermeneutic disciplines, like art history for example, in which some object – painting or three-dimensional object – is ascribed artistic properties in the process of interpretation, Seel's method assumes a process of subtraction or abstraction of a multitude of the phenomenal features of some object and drawing attention to only those phenomena that are ae-

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[8] In the second part of the *Aesthetics of Appearing* is an essay entitled *Thirteen Statements on the the picture* in which the German author expressly states that the problem of the ontology of the picture is opened up more clearly if we start off from abstract images, since they do not bear the burden of representation: «Every theory of the image has on the one hand to explain how the pictured object is linked with the pictured depiction, and on the other how the pictured depiction is connected with representation» (Seel 2005, p. 163). In other words, the concept of representation in any event complicates what the picture itself is, for it is clear that representation is above all the relation between the presence of what is depicted in the picture and its absent referent.

sthetically relevant. He calls this process of aesthetic reduction of all those unlimited and never ultimately comprehensive phenomena that make up the universal facticity of some object «the simultaneous and momentary appearing of appearances» (Seel 2005, p. 46). In other words, something can occur or appear in a specific way, in some context and in a specific manner of looking, irrespective of all those universal and permanent features of that object according to which it would not actually be particularly aesthetically interesting. The "appearance" of an object is its universal factuality according to which we recognise the object within one class of visually and haptically perceptible objects. On the other hand, "appearing" is an aesthetic operation of visual focusing and sensory comprehension of the object in a new status: at once liberated of the multiplicity of its everyday appearance and also enriched with a unique «simultaneous and momentary» appearing.

Towards a "post-pictorial condition": challenging
the politics of visual representation

What is, then, the post-pictorial condition, in what way it is ontologically different from other pictorial phenomena and to what use can the concept itself be put? I would like to describe it as an epoch or a state in which notions like "degrees", "intensities" and "relations of priority" have started to shape a new, shifting image ontology where essentialism and the strict line of division between an object of representation on the one hand and a picture of an object on the other is no longer viable. In the post-pictorial condition images could no longer make any claim for difference between reality and truthfulness because digital technology and virtual spaces bring about completely different ontologies of visualization that is distinctly set apart from the ontology of representation.

In this respect there is a very interesting case made by hyperrealist art from the Sixties and the Seventies of the last century. Having flourished at about the same time as conceptual art and minimalism, and a decade after abstract expressionism, this style of excessive truthfulness has brought onto the artistic scene a sort of pictorial "uncanniness". The unease associated with it had to do not so much with extreme lifelikeness or believability that artist making part of the movement have seemingly tried to achieve, insofar "reality" in all its aspects served as a "purpose" of art throughout its long history. The problem was that hyperrealism created anachronism that somehow disrupted modernist teleology of

progress and permanent artistic revolution. The poetics od hyperrealist paintings could not have been grasped by asking «why would anyone insist to meticulously depict objects and faces that could more easily and more faithfully be represented using photographic or cinematographic technology»? Even more misleading would have been the question «why would someone do this almost a century after the apogee of the painterly realism performed by masters like Ingres or Courbet»? The dilemma – that may have not been so clear to those art historians that were contemporaries of Duane Hanson, Don Eddy and Richard Ester, to name just a few of hyperrealists – has today achieved its full historical justification making a case for a more important theoretical frame. From a standpoint of a contemporary technoscientific culture that gives practically everyone an access to a myriad of digital visualizations, it is much easier for us now to understand what was really at stake with hyperrealism. Although it belonged to a vast area of the post-avantgarde movements, compared to other artistic practices from the same period it brought about completely dissimilar list of "priorities", actually having been much more radical than it has been historically credited. Its major achievement was neither in reverting the attention to capitalist economy, trivial commodities or sequences from urban life (as Pop Art famously did) nor in engaging with anachronistic painterly techniques in order to achieve new level of realistic pictoriality in art-historical sense.[9]

From contemporary perspective, the consequences of hyperrealism were much more important: *to challenge politics of visual representation*. Hyperrealism of the Sixties and Seventies was the last historically and stylistically organized attempt to make use of a traditional artistic medi-

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[9] One of the first substantial assessments of New Realists was done by Linda Chase in her book *Les hyperréalistes américains* firs published in 1973 in Paris. In her book she has grasped the ontological specificity of Hyperrealism rightly associating its extreme insistence on truthfulness to concepts that dealt with the erasure of authorial signature, rather than to realism as such. Writing on Malcolm Morley she says: «Malcolm Morley, whose brutally precise renditions of travel posters and postcard scenes qualify him as an early New Realist, painted these upside down, and in grids square by square, deliberately obliterating the image in order to paint it. He thereby created the maximum distance between himself and the subject matter and disavowed any connection with the old realist tradition. It was his intention to create a painting which, when reproduced, would be indistinguishable from the original source material, thus letting art defeat itself in the spirit od Duchamp» (Chase 1975, p. 8).

um for a critique of the society of spectacle and its more and more di-
versified media of reproduction. Never again after hyperrealism, during
Eighties and Nineties – and before digital photography became commer-
cially viable in the first decade of third millennium – was the difference
between reality and illusion in paintings so inconspicuous and so difficult
to discern in what was still to be considered pictorial visuality. After wak-
ing up from a dream of postmodernism next thing we knew was full-
blown digital revolution and full immersion into virtual visuality provided
by oversized screens, IMAX cinemas and VR gear.

The post-pictorial condition is therefore a realm of unconditioned visual
experience in which (realm) all pictures and all objects are created equal
and in which the «firstness of images», as Charles Sanders Peirce wanted
it, is perhaps paradoxically achieved. In Peirce's semiotic theory, one of
the key places is occupied by the concept of «iconic sign», or hypoicon.
As we know, an iconic sign is related to what it represents (of which it is
the sign) by its visual qualities, i.e. the features that it shares with its ref-
erent, such as colour, shape, outline and so on. Irrespective of the de-
gree of similarity, the iconic sign always assumes a certain degree of ad-
justment to the medium in which it appears, some form of standardisa-
tion and conventionalisation, for it to be able at all to represent some-
thing that itself it is not. However, Peirce says that the iconic sign can be
so like the thing it represents that the difference between one and the
other can vanish totally. The iconic sign derives from the original iconic
sign – «firstness», as he calls it – that is still extremely like what it depicts
and in fact does not even differ from what is shown. Every representa-
tion starts with this zero degree of semioticity when the sign is still not
distinguished from its object. The original iconic sign cannot refer to its
object, cannot replace what it represents, for it has actually not yet been
distinguished from it (Peirce 1958, 2.92 and 2.276).

It is interesting that in Peirce the original iconic sign has to be under-
stood in two ways: as a kind of pre-semiotic state and yet also as a totally
immersive effect of representation. How is that possible? In such a way
that the total similitude of the sign to its referent leads to «a moment
when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of
the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream
– not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we
are contemplating an icon» (Peirce 1958, 3.326). I'd like to suggest that in
the post-pictorial condition of "virtual visuality" icons and their objects
are one and the same thing insofar as their "firstness" is one and the

same thing – that is, the digital. Post-pictorial condition is thus a pre-semiotic state in a Peircean sense that blends with a phenomenological state of immersive realities.

In the end, what I wanted to make clear is that, although they were at the center of our interest here, it is neither abstract and hyperrealist paintings nor conceptual art that are likely to prompt surveys like this one. The ontology of modernist art and the notion of "picture" in the pre-digital era probably would not have changed much if they had not been radically shaken up by the advent of new technologies, virtual reality and simultaneous satellite transmissions like those we see in movies such as *Eye in the sky* or in TV series like *Homeland* or in everyday reality simply by participating in social networks or communicating on Skype. It is ironical that one will be able to fully comprehend what this new technology brings to our understanding of contemporary reality only when one fully understands the ontology of the image as it "once was". Only then shall we be able to understand the "degree zero of representation" and what our reality was like when it was still possible to make a distinction between actual events and their representation in pictures – between reality and illusion, between pictures and the "post-pictorial condition".

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