

Proceedings

Narration through Images. The Social Role of the Graphic Story in the Work of Fortunato Depero. [†]

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[†] Presented at the International and Interdisciplinary Conference IMMAGINI? Image and Imagination between Representation, Communication, Education and Psychology, Brixen, Italy, 27–28 November 2017.

Published: 16 November 2017

Abstract: From a sociological point of view, what is the relevance of the early twentieth-century avant-garde artistic act in modern society? What theories and empirical realities could be used to argue this importance? This essay will proceed by developing three basic targeted points: (1) The importance of art as a social phenomenon in the theories of Duvignaud and Simmel, and in the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, together with Baudrillard's extreme criticism; (2) The specific role of the avant-garde as artistic social action; (3) the specific case of the artistic adventure of Fortunato Depero.

Keywords: social theory; arts; avant-garde art; images; social construction of taste; industrial imagination

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to argue how significant the change generated by the image society is in contemporary culture from a sociological point of view, while glimpsing partial inklings of it in the early twentieth-century artistic avant-garde. Better still, how the radical transformation of the artistic form had already created a reaction in the social situation starting from the first years of the twentieth century as a starting point for a thorough reinterpretation of the social dialectic between these terms. Today, art itself, as an activity dominated by images, or icons, seems to have lost its evocative power by virtue of a transformation whose first signs can be seen in the work of Fortunato Depero. The argument will be made by developing some basic points: (1) The importance of art as a social phenomenon in the theories of Duvignaud, Simmel and the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, taking in Baudrillard's extreme criticism of simulacra and concluding with Sartre's concept of imaginary in the critical review by Judith Butler; (2) The role of the avant-garde as an artistic social action in relation to imaginary and the reinvention of artistic but also social paradigms of an era; (3) The specific case of Fortunato Depero's artistic adventure as the overture to a collaboration between art and industry which seems, at least in part, to have actualized the scenarios propounded by the more attentive scholars.

2. Sociological Theories and Images of Reality in Art

As has been said, the avant-garde can be the manifestation of a rearguard country [1], and despite the phrase having its own power of suggestion, from a substantive point of view it grasps the key aspects of the sociological significance of the Futurist avant-garde. There is no denying the avant-garde's social function as a "deprovincializing" agent of Giolitti's Italy, and especially the widespread influence of futurist discoveries, which on the one hand tended to internationalize the movement, already cosmopolitan at birth, and on the other managed to mobilize the remotest and most entrenched Italian provinces at the beginning of the century. The avant-garde, wrote Depero, should

“catechize the new masses” for the new era. Into the bargain, it would be an instrument to nurture the fledgling forces of a new imaginary, linked to progress and speed. Futurism would include a fantastic reservoir capable of spanning the paradigms of modernity in a new way, i.e., through fresh images, sensations and experiences, too complex to explain in their evolution, and perhaps not completely exhaustible through rational insight. Just as mediaeval images served as a path of knowledge of the life of Christ and his teachings, in the new era preparing to open up to the communication domain in the early twentieth century, the avant-garde had the task of familiarizing collective taste with the perception of the new speed, altering citizens’ pace of life in the large or industrialized cities, but above all changing the relationships between things, bringing far-flung situations closer together, and effecting a progressive change in the perception of time and space that would also change production of the meanings of acting and objects.

The overexposure to images which the Communication Era was to impose on individuals, with or without adequate knowledge of the technical means, not only transformed ways of communicating, but also had an impact on individuals’ life experience. According to Baudrillard, the image has a relationship with the real that increasingly distances individuals from their ability to distinguish reality from its image or visual relationship with irreversible consequences on individuals’ own capacity to be real, in their thoughts and actions, but especially in their capacity of expectation on the actions they perform: “What I would like to evoke, about the image in general (the media image, the technological image) is the perversity of the relationship between the image and its referent, the ‘supposed real’, it is the virtual and irreversible confusion of the images and the sphere of a reality whose principle we can grasp less and less.” [2]

The steps we will be dealing with in this essay will be both a study of the social impact of art on society and the consequence of the diffusion of images on the ability to relate to reality. According to Jean Duvignaud, art is a society’s collective contribution in an emotional, experiential and historical sense. He spoke in this sense of “the rooting of creation in the collective experience” (*“enracinement de la création dans l’expérience collective”*) [3] as a prerequisite of its existence. At the core of sociological studies on art are individuals in relation to their environment and social context, and art, in turn, in relation to the specific conditions of an era, a group, an individual, and the context of a type of society, Duvignaud continued: “To have knowledge of the rooting of artistic creation, we must define it doubly in relation to conscious or implied artistic attitudes and in relation to the function of art in that specific society.” [3] (pp. 52–53). To penetrate the complex interconnection between art and society, forms and context, it is also necessary to examine the various dominant and emerging aesthetic approaches, as well as the diversity of roles that the assorted imaginary creations assume depending on social structures.

For Simmel, art represented a privileged point of view to study modern society since it was the actual form, or crystallization, of the perception of events. The notion Simmel used to analyse the degree of rational aspiration not so much of art, but of the society that generated it, was the concept of symmetry: “The origin of all aesthetic themes is found in symmetry. It is in symmetrical structures that rationalism first gains visible form. As long as life remains compulsive, emotional and irrational, the aesthetic release from it appears in rationalist form. Once intelligence, reckoning and balance have penetrated it, the aesthetic need once again changes into its opposite, seeking the irrational and its external form, the asymmetrical.” [4].

Art is the “undefined” part of society, its living part, but also its representation, processed through aesthetic canons. For Adorno and Horkheimer, art was “the unconscious historiography of society” [5], structures and institutions were the organization to guarantee continuity of the system but also represented a hindrance to the active life of society as a community. Art provided the final opportunity for community in industrial society, it represented both the living soul and critical awareness.

For the Frankfurt School, the production of culture became a parallel and accomplice of the economic system. It no longer arose as an alternative system since it accepted the production logic. And it was for this reason that artistic production, instead, continued to operate within the framework of the possible, offered resistance, “refuse[d] to become common” [6], allowing the

construction of a new world through the instrument of imagination. The imagination as an action that does not necessarily arrive at an image, given that the latter irreversibly sets the boundaries. If imagination is a quality of thinking, the image is its product. If images are fed to us from outside, the violence on the imagination seems clear; as Ferrarotti wrote: “It is still necessary, despite everything, to imagine, to design and envisage. That is to say, to mentally depict a reality to oneself that does not yet exist, but is possible, i.e., not absurd, to understand it beyond its circumscribed empirical determinations—to conceptualize it, and ultimately to conceive it. Therefore, imagining means anticipating, dreaming the dreams of dawn, those which for Dante were prophetic (...)” [7].

Instead, Baudrillard directly questioned not only the production of culture, but the production of culture through the creation of images: “(...) in the dialectical relation between the real and the image (that is, the relation that we wish to believe dialectical, readable from the real to the image and vice versa), the image has been victorious and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral logic; an immoral logic without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity; a logic of the extermination of its own referent, a logic of the implosion of meaning in which the message disappears on the horizon of the medium. In this regard, we all remain incredibly naive: we always look for a good usage of the image, that is to say a moral, meaningful, pedagogic or informational usage, without seeing that the image in a sense revolts against this good usage, that it is the conductor neither of meaning nor good intentions, but on the contrary of an implosion, a denegation of meaning (of events, history, memory, etc.).” [2]

According to Baudrillard, therefore, the secret of the image must not be sought in its differentiation from reality, and hence in its representative value, but, as he wrote, must be sought “in its ‘telescoping’ into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally, in the implosion of image and reality. For us there is an increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality *which no longer leaves room for representation as such*” [2] Contemporary society is transfigured in aesthetics, according to Baudrillard, but even more, “What we’re seeing, beyond commercial materialism, is a semiotic materialization, a semiology of everything through advertising, media, and images. (...) Images and culture transform the world into a secondary residence” [8], a criticism that goes beyond that of Horkheimer and grasps the transformational value of the image, which from a utopian imaginary becomes crystallized and, at the same time, aestheticism emptied. And if the world is consecrated to the aesthetic, the contemporary world, Baudrillard continued, leaves art no other possibility but to disappear: “[...] like all vanishing forms, it tries to multiply in simulation, but soon it will have completely disappeared leaving behind a huge artificial museum and the unbridled advertising industry.” [8] (p. 47). According to Baudrillard, today the image is a sign of the vacuum, the disappearance of meaning: “Like those of the Baroque period, we are irrepressible creators of images but secretly iconoclasts. Not those who destroy images, but those who manufacture a profusion of them *where there is nothing to see*. [...] And they are nothing but this: the trace of what has disappeared.” [8] (p. 48).

Baudrillard’s position is radical and at the same time reflective, in which there is no chance for alternative revisions. In an aestheticized society, how can the image be saved from externalization, and ultimately, from irrelevance? And if, with Ferrarotti, our same ability to imagine is invaded by external images without leaving any more room for interior images, how can an original thought, a discordant opinion, or an individual vision of things possibly form? Furthermore, what value can an original thought have in an era dominated by collective thinking? What is the cypher of this era? In a certain sense, the Futurist avant-garde did not ask itself this question, it lived the social triumph of art to the full, seeing it as an instrument of action in the reality and perception of individuals. Meanwhile, the propaganda of the great totalitarianisms at the beginning of the century demonstrated how the use of images could create “containers” to harness fantasy or imagination. The censorship of the theatre, but also of “degenerate” art during Nazism in Germany, or of the avant-garde and even Futurism in the Soviet Union during the years of totalitarianism, were a solid test of the relationship between art and consensus, images and seduction, and thought and imagination.

3. Fortunato Depero and the Industrial Imagination

Depero was not to join the frantic world of the Futurists until 1914. He met Giacomo Balla and came to know and witness his artistic genius and extraordinary inventiveness, and in 1915 would sign the manifesto for an ambitious brand-new art with him, entitled *The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe* which was the realization of a series of aesthetic-ludic experiments begun the previous year. The innovative idea was conveyed by the term, “reconstruction”, which heralded the theorization of a new way of conceiving artistic work in a mix of pictorial, sculptural, sound and olfactory variations that leaned towards a fusion of the arts, in an ambitious project to reinvent the canons of the artistic universe. Hence, a shift from the concept of art as a commemoration of past worlds to the imaginary recreation of new universes. Balla and Depero’s manifesto was the pretext for an imaginary passage from a first to a second Futurism, an innovative movement which, for a second time, sought the rebirth of itself, passing from artistic theory to the concrete realization of its inspirations. An equally fundamental watershed within the movement from which came the notion of ‘First and Second Futurism’. In fact, through this frantic liberation of the imagination, both Balla and Depero would achieve a concrete utopia to merge the creative realities of the artist with the pragmatism of industrial production. The passage was developed further in the experiments conceived for the “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe”.

Balla invented artificial landscapes, marked by lines of speed and sight, and the next step was the metallic animal: the first real attempt to unite artistic unruliness and scientific rigour. The realization of plastic complexes was a construction of abstract ideas using materials of varying composition that included metal wires, mirrors, foil, cardboard, tissue paper, celluloid, metal mesh, colourful fabrics and glass, mechanical, electrical, musical and noise-making devices, bright liquids with iridescent chemical reactions, tubes and springs. A sort of artistic creation that automatically attracted others, serial production to bring creativity, tools, and a new strength. Nevertheless, Balla’s industrial work would be confined to a few pieces, above all for the textile industry, for example, the famous Futurist *gilets*, characterised by bright colours and contrasting geometric patterns. But if on the one hand, the enthusiasm that gripped Depero in his New York period, in alternate spells between 1928 and 1930, about the discovery of machines to produce his ideas, enabling him to potentially live off his works, meant that he was swept away by serial production, on the other, he soon became aware of the limit that this operation posed on the insatiable desire for novelty that characterized his production: “You must know that in America everything is made up of series—so it is dreadful to begin anything new [9] (Letter from Depero to Marinetti, New York 27 May 1930), he wrote in a letter to Marinetti who admired his resourcefulness and energy. Depero’s peculiarity, which Marinetti saw as “a Futurist gift” was an extraordinary blend of the processing of external visual perception and the artistic form of his works. He seems to have had a look with an “internal perspective” which in his artistic works created the inner projection that the visual stimulus of external reality brought out. Depero wrote on his artistic processing: “My painting is a complex architecture of internal emotional values expressed in organic visions” [10], hence, thought painted with colours, perspective and light.

In Depero’s artistic practice, the eye assumes the function of a tool that projects images rather than absorbing them. In this artist’s creations and marionettes, the eyes are empty, like the lens of a projector which when turned on lights up the exterior of forms. Consequently, the images tend to exit rather than enter Depero’s eyes. The interpenetration between the act of seeing and the individual turns into visual thinking in Depero. For him, observing was already a way of thinking about reality, or better, a way of organizing the image by favouring a thought.

According to Arnheim, the existence of “visual thinking” meant that “In the perception of form lies the ‘beginnings of concept formation’.” [11] and it thus seems plausible to understand that Depero’s fevered artistic work—often unacknowledged—was born from a visual perception of the new, from “seeing in relation to ...”. The act of vision was already a perception of the relations between objects, a perception of movement, which resulted artistically in an observation of the shifting social situation [12] (pp. 61–63). But if it is true that the world of images influences and contributes to a formation of modern society’s collective imagination, visual thinking becomes

immediate language, while leaving open the problem of the critical distance, and reflection as a place where original concepts form.

If “the activity of the senses is an indispensable condition for the general operation of the mind” and “the continuous response to the environment is the basis of the work of the nervous system [11] (pp. 18–35)”, then cognitive operations are not the privilege of mental processes independent from perception, but essential ingredients of perception itself; consequently, the act of vision is already an almost “unconscious” thinking in progress. In this sense, the difference between reality and abstraction in art is a pseudo-problem, which returns to the issue of how to interpret reality and how to observe it, but above all, how change is perceived and interpreted in art. For Depero, who saw himself as an abstract painter in common with Balla, the term *abstraction* was equivalent to an extrapolation of the essential from shifting reality.

This, the creative development of Depero’s visual thinking was achieved through a constant need to build and design images, but also plastic and architectural complexes, and theatrical scenery [13]. The idea of putting this creative production of images at the service of serial production came to Depero through contact with the insouciant world exalted by the American market. While Marinetti began from an organizational approach to the artistic act, Depero was dedicated to an application of the New World’s art [14]. The result was an embodiment of contemporary art. Marinetti’s Futurist principle, which theorized a new role for art in society, became in Depero an interiorization and methodological overturning of the imaginary, proceeding to transform the world from the data of reality. He continuously alternated artistic creation with craft work, which he would transform as quickly as possible into serial production. The images that social change suggested to this artist’s creativity relied on the concrete serial production of a creative idea, or better, an artistic imagination in the service of industry. Almost as if he wanted to suggest an exchange of roles, which, in the present-day era, seems to have come true.

4. Concluding Remarks

The creative economy and conceptual art, installations, and the narration of economic forecasts today seem the realization of the premonitions and expectations of the avant-garde artistic explosion. In and for daily life nowadays, creativity is a characteristic of the communication society in which the domain of images is both a cause for concern and a facilitation. According to Baudrillard, a world dominated by images is potentially a world emptied of meanings, a world in which art can only provide traces of absence, having lost its “monopoly” of the creative use of forms. However, the key issue is not the image, but how much the production of “ready-made” images can prove more of a constraint than a stimulus for thought. If it is true that in the perception of form lie the beginnings of concept formation, in a world of virtual images without depth or form, how is the capacity of imagination affected? Imagination, as a fundamental quality of the experience of reality, allows us to complete a missing reality, to see the invisible in a form, in a relationship, or in an individual. Imagination is the faculty that reminds us that not everything essential is *visible to the eye*. The imagination is thus also a signal of desire, and is “crucial in the construction of objects”, as Judith Butler wrote, “imagination enables us to grasp the object in its completeness where the prospective or positivist thought would fail.” [15]. Thus, the graphic story, narration in images, as Depero wrote, is an ambivalent process: potentially innovative but methodologically regressive for those who “receive” it as a spectator; immediate in its capacity for impact, but at the same time, vaporous and insubstantial in an organized cognitive system. Explaining an image, as Ferrarotti wrote [7] (p. 46) is impossible, it leaves us emotions and sensations, but rationally it is difficult to verbalize, unless we are talking about purely technical aspects. According to Sartre, images are forms of intentional consciousness and the imagination therefore has an important existential foundation [15] (p. 114), but in turn, “an image is not an object or a content, but a *relation* in which an object is either posited as not present or not existing, or not posited at all but represented in a way that is neutral with regard to the question of existence. For both Husserl and Sartre, the imagination is a set of intentional relations directed toward the world; and in the case of Sartre it is a relation that seeks the *de-realization* of that world.” [15] (p. 122). The imagination is a form to complete reality and at the same time to de-

embody it; images are a form of relation with something that is not present, therefore, are the concretization of the function of the imagination. But once embodied in an image, this must be quickly dispersed in order not to curb the imagination, that existential faculty which produces and at the same time is produced by desire. Images are crystallizations, they tend to attach an intent, but are only the final product of a process of imagination, an existential processing to complete reality. Depero was a precursor of industrial design in his serial production of art objects. He stretched his imagination to complete the work of art from hand-crafted to serial [16]. The overexposure to images of contemporary life has arguably interrupted this relation that leads to the image from the imagination, since we are immersed in a world that produces images on a serial scale and no longer lets the imagination create its own personal images: the two-way relation between imagination and images has been disrupted, and what remains is a world of preconstructed images that might precede a world in which residual spaces remain to be filled through the imagination, while the formation of concepts is entrusted to advertising agencies, television formats, YouTube videos, or images contained on the Web, be they true or false.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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