

# GLOBAL HUMANITIES

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Editors Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

## *Aura in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**Editorial by**  
Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

**Texts by**  
Federico Biggio  
Maria Giulia Franco  
Francesco Mangiapane  
Carlo Andrea Tassinari





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## EDITORIAL

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*Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane*

88 years have passed since the first publication of Walter Benjamin's essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (English title: *The work of art in the age mechanical reproduction*) where the notion of aura has received a first assessment, referring to a quality allegedly missed by the mechanically reproduced work of art, that of its uniqueness, defined by its presence in time and space, at the place where it happens to be located.

All along the century, this concept has gained immense fortune, exerting its influence in heterodox fields of knowledge, firstly Theory of Art as well as Sociology, Semiotics, Literature, History, Political Sciences and still others. Aura's definition involves a number of philosophical and æsthetical problems related at least to the dichotomies of truth/false, authentic/in-authentic, unique/serial, beautiful/ugly, artistic/kitsch, which emerge as of central importance in the social discourse.

Indeed, within the current Socio-Technical assets, the problem of Aura continues to inspire the intellectual debate, showing up as a general and eminently political issue. Following the ongoing process of *artification* of daily life, the problem of the uniqueness may be intended as an effect, whose construction / translation / migration / dissipation has to be re-thought in terms of management: how do social forces construct such an effect? How do they capitalize on

it, in their activity? How does it get recognized and valued?

The four essays in this collection are drawn from a variety of contexts, including software culture and virtual reality, oenotourism and the representation of it in a classic film like Ridley Scott's *A Good Year* (2006), the role of photographs in the Antimafia movement in Sicily, and, finally, the changes that public spaces have undergone in the wake of the Pandemic of SARS-CoV-2. All of them explore new meaningful instances of aura's emergence in our articulated daily life.

Bodø, Norway and Palermo, Italy  
May 2023



# WHAT MAKES A DIGITAL AURA?

## CONSEQUENCES FOR THE “HERE AND NOW” OF MIXED REALITY AND MULTITASKING INTERFACES

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**ABSTRACT.** Since the notion of “aura” can be exploited to describe both the phenomenological sides of the viewing experience and the semiotic sides of digital images, the article will analyse Mixed Reality and multitasking interfaces with the aim of understanding how legitimately concepts such as “distance” and “proximity” can be used to describe the consequences of depicting world through such a kind of technologies for the “here and now” experience. On the one hand, their utopic understanding focuses the distancing process users are allowed for; on the other, their dystopic understanding focuses the negative consequences that the excessive of proximity of digital interfaces produces which, ultimately, coincides with the decay of the aura.

**KEYWORDS:** Mixed Reality, Interfaces, Aura, Virtual Reality, Digital Culture

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “aura” has been so long debated that discourses *about* the aura constitute an object of study *per se*. As highlighted by Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini (2012), the notion of “aura” keeps together very heterogeneous traditions: the Jewish mysticism, the spiritualist, occultist and mediumistic currents, the irrationalist philosophy of Klages and the Monastic Cosmists, as well as the

Goethean aesthetics of beautiful appearance, or the French one by Baudelaire, Proust, Léon Daudet. Hence, it has been heuristic for academics to associate from time to time the notion of “aura” with different kinds of referents and, as a consequence, the resulting meanings related to this notion are nowadays very heterogeneous ones.

Starting from this assumption, the article will try to outline the changes of

meaning in the understanding of this concept, in particular by highlighting the issue of the aura's renewal, translation and migration. In particular, to be pivotal will be the change of field of reference of the notion of "aura".

On the one hand, the philosophy of media experience understood such a term by focusing on the subjective and phenomenological sides of the viewing experience. By following this trajectory, it is important to assume that the idea of the decay of the aura after the advent of reproduction technologies proposed by Benjamin is collectively accepted as a "techno-deterministic" one and, in a sense, an *apocalyptic* one (Eco 1964)<sup>1</sup>. As it is known, the understanding of the "aura" by Benjamin is strictly interrelated with the critical historicism of which he was one of the most representative authors. According to this perspective, the aura is associated with "distance", as it invokes the "appearance of a distance" (Benjamin 1936 [Pinotti, Somaini 2012], p. 237), or that "atmosphere", "sheath", "halo" and "breath" that not only makes contemplation of the object possible, but also evokes that sense of nostalgia for a past that characterized the bourgeois imagination contemporary to Benjamin (as the image is conceived as a historical index) and that can emerge only from a process of distancing which allows viewers to recognize themselves as historically situated<sup>2</sup>. This ideological position is confirmed also by writings on Baudelaire where Benjamin spoke about a progressive "atrophy of experience" determined by the large print runs of newspapers, which exclude events from the scope in which they might affect the reader's expe-

rience. In such a view, the persistence of the aura would not be just associated to the issue of reproducibility but also with the one concerning the mediated (but also alienated) experience of the subject, which is ultimately made unable to recognize him/herself within the technology he/she is using.

On the other hand, contemporary reflection on media interfaces seems to foster the use of the notion of aura to denote specific visual features of the digital interface. In 2006, for example, Jay David Bolter and others (2006) dealt with the notion of "aura" by referring it to a "mystical breath that encircled the object", sense of the "here and now" that each such work possesses because of its history of production and transmission, and sense of nostalgia and remoteness (Bolter *et al.* 2006, pp. 24–25). He focused on Mixed Reality (MR henceforth): according to him, the digital aura enabled by those artifacts enables a new "sense of place" (Meyrowitz 1985), and thus a new "hic et nunc", as well as they allow the reproducibility at scale of digital artefacts stored in the Web.

Hence, the first question to account for concerns the possibility of conceiving the "aura" as an effect of meaning emerging from digital and MR interfaces. For Semiotics, effects of meaning are very important: for example, Greimas (1984) spoke about the effect of veridiction, to denote discursive strategies that allow something to be believed and accepted as true by the recipient of a communication. In accordance with Galloway's suggestion,<sup>3</sup> it is possible to speculate about the effects of meaning produced by MR interfaces. The effect of being al-

<sup>1</sup> As argued by Balides, while Benjamin's analysis of the implications of proximity associated with mechanical reproduction was not directly applicable to technologies of simulation and immersion, seventy years later, his essay [...] may be read as a de facto critique of the presumption that cultural critique should defend the aura of original works of art and that critical distance is the desired mode of consumption (Balides in Jenkins 2003, pp. 322–323).

<sup>2</sup> According to Ferris (1996, pp. 20–21), "in the case of the auratic work of art, the difference named by the distance is derived from the continuity of history as a witness of the past. [...] Since the authenticity of a thing is what cannot be reproduced, then, according to Benjamin's own argument, what cannot be reproduced is the aura's testimony to the history on which its uniqueness is based".

<sup>3</sup> According to Alexander Galloway, interfaces are not simply objects or boundary points, but they are autonomous zones of activity, processes that effect a result of whatever kind. For this reason, he spoke not so much about particular interface objects (screens, keyboards), but *interface effects* (Galloway 2012, p. VII).

ways connected – a term that has come back into vogue since the release of Apple’s latest iPhone in 2022 – for instance, is somewhat that can be said to emerge from the *always-on* display. But the responsiveness (i.e., the ability of a virtual environment to adapt and change in real time depending on the input it receives from the user’s tracing systems) is also an effect of the meaning of this kind. In this sense, the effect of responsiveness is an effect produced by the device’s computational enunciation, which is able to receive, compute and transmit information and multimedia content on the device’s screen in real time. The adoption of the semiotic concept of enunciation is functional to describe the genesis of the effects of meaning that take place at the level of the interface, and inscribes our reasoning within the methodology proposed by the Paris school in recent years, which prescribes thinking hierarchies of levels of immanence, between which *conversions* that are, in fact, *enunciative practices* (Fontanille 2008), take place. In the case of the computational enunciation of the aura, it will be a matter of thinking levels of immanence, that range from that of the material support, physical and electronic, of the binary code, to the screen, and thus to the visual signs that have elaborated on the basis of formal rules of inscription, up to the level of interaction practices and the effects of meanings that these ones produce (Dondero & Reyes 2016).

By following the analogy between the concept of “aura” and the MR interface proposed by Bolter, and accepting to use the notion of “aura” to denote floating and immaterial contents (often 3D ones and created by means of computer graphics techniques) that are superimposed on photographically reproduced images of reality, the article will try to understand the effects of meaning that emerge from MR interfaces and, as a consequence, to affirm the aura’s renewal (it is not a case that one of the former AR application is called *Aurasma*).

At the same time, it is possible to understand the MR interface as a sign of technological progress and, ultimately, to bear again the discourse to the critical paradigm of Benjamin.

In this perspective, inquiring about the possibility of calling “aura” such a form of overlapping content featuring MR interfaces means to understand how much its possible decay is featured by an actual connection with the issue of distancing, as well as how much its contrary, the shock, is involved, determined and in some way envisioned by technological innovation and MR interfaces.

By leveraging on the idea of the aura as the result of a process of distancing, the MR interface will be considered as a typology of text able to provide users with tools for distancing themselves from their actual *hic et nunc* (but just for a moment), for technically self-organizing their own viewing and cognitive experience and for enabling an “augmented” gaze over what they are seeing. In a such perspective, it is possible to embrace the Bolter’s suggestions, and arguing that the translation of the meaning of “aura” corresponds to an evolution in thinking about the atmosphere created by ubiquitous and immersive media which, in the wake of Silicon Valley’s techno-utopia appears less apocalyptic than that described by Benjamin, and more oriented towards a form of “technological re-enchantment”. In these terms, the virtual aura compensates the decay of Benjamin’s aura through an artificial and magic re-enchantment of the user experience.

On the contrary, the MR interface can be considered as a typology of text in process of being defined, able to canalize several ideological thoughts about contemporary reproductive technologies. If, as Bolter suggested, MR is not an exact reproductive technology as it keeps visible the so-called “real-reality”, the user as well occupies an in-between position, he/she is both here and there. If we read this sentence in a negative way, we could say that the user is neither totally here or totally there. Somehow, they are sus-

pended between the two “realities” (the travel souvenir, for example, it is a copy, i.e., something that is “here” – when the journey ends, it is moved into the everyday space – and, at the same time, “elsewhere”, and precisely where the original – and its memory – is located). The scepticism which emerges from this idea is not just a sign of our current *Zeitgeist*; it is also a starting point that allows to affirm the critical judgment toward this kind of “new” media experience: will MR lead to a rebirth of the aura? Or, on the contrary, will it lead us to shock because of it will become too close to our intimate space, preventing us from enjoying a total and immersive media experience by virtue of our in-between and undefined condition? According to this second dystopian perspective, the aura will fade out behind the MR interface; it will not allow users to achieve a totalizing and genuine media experience. In order to inquiry this second interpretative possibility, in the course of the article the multitasking interface will represent a case study.

## 2. AURA'S MIGRATION AND RENEWAL

In order to affirm the renewal of the aura in digital media, a first trajectory to be taken into account can be that of the “migration” of the aura. According to some authors, the aura does not dissolve with technical reproducibility, but rather it “relocalises” itself, by becoming “supple and elastic” (Davis 1995, p. 381).

In this regard, in 2008 Latour spoke about the “migration of the aura”, by describing the processes of duplication and digitalization of artworks and affirming the survival, rather than the “dissolution” of auras, in technical reproductions. According to the sociologist, the idea of the aura is strictly associated with a modern obsession for the “original version”. To confirm such an idea, Latour dealt with the ways in which the aura might be built as well as destroyed by the expositive context. The original piece of the Veronese's *Nozze di Cana*, for instance, is stored at the Louvre Museum in Paris. However, it is located in the room preceding the Salle de *la Joconde*. The copy of

the same artwork, on the other hand, is stored at the Fondazione Cini in the island of San Giorgio, in Venice. What a difference of meaning between the two pieces! The original one seems to suffer the closeness of the Da Vinci's icon. Instead, the pictorial reproduction that is stored in Venice assures to the piece the right context it deserves. Latour was sure about that: “the aura of the original had *migrated* from Le Louvre to San Giorgio” (Latour, Lowe 2008, p. 3).

Based on the Latour's suggestion, one could argue that the mere technical changings in the expositive contexts determined such a “migration”. However, as a sociologist (of technics), Latour nevertheless has been attentive to the communitarian making of artworks' meanings (and auras as well): indeed, as the technical configuration of the expositive environment as the little attention of viewers waiting to enter the Salle de *la Joconde* are signs of the values that the cultural communities associated from time to time to the Veronese's artwork. In particular, it could be argued that both the chaos of the exhibition environment and the consequent loss of attention to the Veronese artwork contributed to the decay of its aura.

The sociological facet of the aura is also the point on which Jay David Bolter, Blair MacIntyre and Maria Engberg insisted since 2004.

We propose the term aura to enrich the current language for designing and analysing media experiences, especially when using augmented reality, mixed reality and ubiquitous computing technology. Aura describes *the cultural and personal significance* that a place (or object) holds for an individual. A MR application can exploit aura to make the user's experience more compelling or educationally rewarding. Aura provides a necessary complement to the concepts of presence, which is commonly used to evaluate VR applications, and of place, which refers to the more generic significance of places, particularly in CSCW [Computer-Supported Cooperative Work] applications (MacIntyre et al. 2004, p. 36, *my italics*).

In this perspective, the aura of an object or place is understood as the com-

bination of its cultural and personal significance for a user or group of users: “aura can only exist if the individual can connect the object or place to his or her own understanding of the world [...] increasing the connection to a person’s understanding of the world can increase the aura for that person (MacIntyre *et al.* 2004, p. 37). Although the focus of the cited article was aimed at proposing digital solutions for expositive contexts<sup>4</sup>, it is nevertheless to be noted that it has been supported by a theoretical reflection upon the functioning of the aura as well.

In particular, the authors focused on the effects of meaning produced by MR technologies: according to them, MR technologies are able to reactivate the *hic et nunc* of the viewing experience. In such a perspective, the feeling of presence and the sense of “being-there” enabled by VR, as well as “the absence of mediation” or the “illusion of non-mediation”, have to be understood as the opposite of Benjamin’s aura (Bolter *et al.* 2006, p. 28): because the computer is capable of perfect reproduction of information, the same media experience can be offered repeatedly to a series of users, and VR experiences are completely repeatable wherever the VR equipment can be set up. On the other hand, instead, because they are not purely virtual, MR and AR experiences are not perfect reproductive technologies: they draw on the physical and cultural uniqueness, the “here and now”, of particular places (Bolter *et al.* 2006, p. 23).

Paraphrasing, if VR destroys the aura, the reason has to be found in the lack of users’ self-distancing it does not provide for (by recalling the Benjamin’s thought, it can be understood as a recognition process located in the here and now). On the contrary, MR and AR experience would protect the aura by transforming it into a

vague “*cultural and personal significance*” which, for the authors, denotes nothing more than a set of information to be enjoyed in context, physically, through MR and AR technologies.

Finally, it must be noted that within the field of media studies the renewal of the concept of aura has been advanced and suggested several other times. By dealing with ubiquitous computing, Ulmer & Freeman spoke about “ordinary aura” by referring to “the integration of the aesthetic attitude into lifeworld behavior and skills” (Ulmer, Freeman 2014, p. 69). According to them, the so-called “netizens”<sup>5</sup> are nowadays able to include aura not as separation from but syncretic with their other institutional behaviors. In this perspective, the aura is conceived as an aesthetic attitude that creates value, allowing to overcome alienation and to recover the experience of individual and of the collective agency. David Berry as well, in his *The Philosophy of Software*, wrote about visual or *aural* notifications that break the flow of user experience with disconcerting ease, by moving the user from a state of ready-to-hand, writing or using the computer to perform a task, to that of present-at-hand, which makes the entire computer apparent and available to inspection (Berry 2011, p. 134). Again Bolter, dealing with MR technologies, proposed to think about “aura” as a kind of cultural radioactivity (Bolter *et al.* 2021, p. 42).

As we will see in the next section, such interpretation of the aura term concerns the evolution of the concept of aura: from a sign of the aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of experience to another one concerning the semiotic and visual dimension of a text, and precisely a digital interface. In fact, since a consistent whole of theoretical contributions located into

4 For instance, the authors explained that Augmented Reality might enhance the aura of a place for a particular visitor by providing historical and cultural context through the visualization itself or through text or audio delivered on the device (Bolter *et al.* 2006). In this perspective, art and history museums acquire from their original sites or makers the aura of the objects they contain, since concentrating auratic objects in a building can make the building itself auratic.

5 Netizens or ubizen is a hyphenated word referring to “citizen of the net” or “net citizen”. It describes a person actively involved in online communities or the Internet in general (source: Wikipedia).

the field of art and historical criticism, it is fruitful to understand the “aura” not only as an abstract element of the user experience (which would recall the transcendence of the artwork), but also as a concrete and tangible aspect of a *text*.

Hence, if digital technologies were able to welcoming the migration of the aura, it would remain to be understood in which forms this aura is re-presented.

### 3. THE AURAS OF MIXED REALITY

Based on the ideas exposed in the previous section, it is possible to inquiry through visual semiotic lenses the visual imagery of auratic digital interfaces’ realm.

Augmented images, i.e., digital images produced through the use of augmented or mixed reality technologies, can represent a starting point. Commonly they are featured by floating and immaterial contents (often 3D and created with computer graphics techniques) that has been superimposed on images of reality produced by the camera. In some cases, as in tourism apps, such contents could exert an indexical and referential function, i.e., they could point toward some point of interest which is located into the environment; in other cases, as for filters in social media, they could exert an expressive and emotive function.

In any way, they feature a certain degree of pervasiveness and hypertopia-ness (Casetti 2015; Biggio 2021). Pervasiveness is a fundamental characteristic of augmented images, which allows to differentiate the images produced through MR from those produced through VR. The VR image, in fact, is immersive but not pervasive, as it enables a 360 degrees experience in which the totality of what is perceived by the user coincides with the plane of expression of the computer-generated text. In this sense, the concept of “immersiveness” denotes a unitary and limited space within which the subject “dives” by totally suspending his or her prehension of the surrounding physical world. On the contrary, AR and MR images, the concept of “pervasiveness” is comparable to that of “emergence” and it

can be described in terms of an infiltration or diffusion (of a smell, for example) within an environment that is permeated by it. The concept of “hypertopias”, on the other hand, has been adapted by Casetti (as it is known, the original theorization of the notion of “heterotopia” has been advanced by Foucault) to describe the points of a moving image that attract and absorb other dimensions into themselves. By means of such an artifice, a “other” world is made available to us, responds to our summons, and comes to us, it fills our “here” with all possible “elsewheres” (Casetti 2015, p. 131).

So, affirming that floating contents overlapping the image exert some kind of communicative function means to affirm that their function is that of bringing out a sort of “cognitive gain” to the user experience, by allowing the visualisation of overlapping signs that, for example, inform or instruct the user about the surrounding reality. In this case, the digital reproduction and MR interfaces do not determine any aura’s decay but, according to Bolter, they allow users to enhance through pervasive and hypertopic discursive strategies the “here and now” of particular places: places where they are physically located. In such a view, they provide users with tools for *distancing* themselves from their actual *hic et nunc* (but just for a moment), by requiring them to technically self-organize their own viewing and cognitive experience and to enable an “augmented” gaze over what they are seeing.



FIG. 1. AR AURAS IN AUGMENTED CITY AND PEAKFINDER (© AUGMENTED.CITY; © PEAKFINDER).

In several films and series, it is equally possible to detect sequences where overlapping elements unfold a similar function: some of them are created with cinematic technologies, others with com-

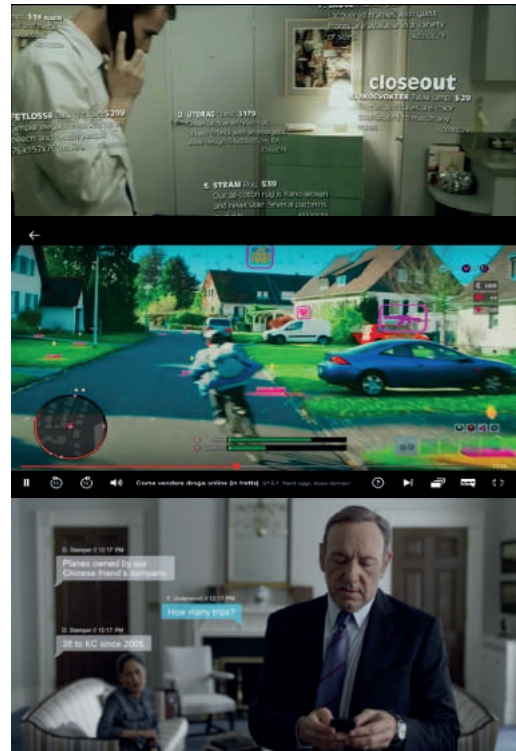


puter tools. For instance, we can distinguish between *captioning* auras, in which overlapping elements are used to support a discourse about something within the frame (parallel to the purely visual discourse); *gamification* auras, in which they are used to engage the viewer by translating the visual discourse in a gameplay interface; and *dialogical* auras, in which we observe characters sending messages and, at the same time, the same messages that the he/she receives, by reading them in real time. These images can be interpreted as kind of a “false subjective” (Casetti 1993)<sup>6</sup>.

In the language of television, as well, we find formats that are naturally predisposed to processes of overlapping “syncretic elements”. These are all those discursive forms in which it becomes indispensable, for example, to place alongside verbal communication written CG texts, subtitles, interactive graphics and so on. We detect overlapping mechanisms of this kind in news broadcasts, where the overlapping element may be an information banner bearing the name of the journalist; or in quiz shows where the overlapping elements are, again, contextual information banners useful for the viewer to “participate” in a pseudo-interactive way in the broadcast. Moving away from a purely visual conception of superimposition, the same could be said of the addition of recorded and replayed laughter within specific television programmes whose aim is, again, to produce a certain kind of gain in the viewing experience and, in this case, to appeal to and sympathetically prompt the viewer to laugh.

What is important to emphasize here is that this series of overlapping elements work together to create a pervasive and hypertopic effect which, on a diegetic level, describes an aspect of the character’s experience and which, on an extra-diegetic level, constitutes a syntagmatic element of the narrative flow in the same

way as any dialogue or scene portrayed by live actors.



**FIG. 2.** CAPTIONING AURAS IN *FIGHT CLUB* (1999), GAMIFICATION AURAS IN *HOW TO SELL DRUGS ONLINE (FAST)* (2019) AND DIALOGICAL AURAS IN *THE HOUSE OF CARDS* (2013).

Into these different kinds of augmented images, the auras result from a post-production process, which is often linked to the utilisation of the chroma key composition. This means that the aura is not created in the context of a factual interaction. Hence, the superimposition of the aura is not the result of a linguistic process, but rather of a meta-linguistic one. Nevertheless, such images are interesting as those created through augmented reality: they testify to an emerging visual imaginary linked to the – still elementary – use of immersive technologies and are representative of emerging compositional grammars and reading pragmatics.

#### 4. MULTITASKING AURAS

As we argued in the previous section, the auras enabled by MR interfaces can

<sup>6</sup> The false subjective is that shot that simulates a subjective, that is, a point of view, but is not: in fact, the character (or part of him/her) is always visible, so that the transition to the objective shot is seamless.

be said to provide users with programs of action that require them to adopt a *distant view* upon the same interface. In this sense, distance is not just a characteristic of the auratic experience as it was described by Benjamin (actually as an effect of the feeling of being situated in history) but, on the contrary, it is a kind of attitude – a set of gesture and interaction *stricto sensu* – to be assumed *in order to* interact with the aura, without which the aura would not be realised.

A similar operation occurs in interacting with multitasking interfaces. The term derives from the computer world, where it nevertheless has a positive connotation: the more a device is multitasking, i.e., the more a computer is capable of executing multiple task segments in an interlocking manner, thanks to common processing resources shared in central processing units (CPU) and memories (RAM, ROM), the more efficient it is.

According to Raluca Budiu, Director of Research at Nielsen Norman Group:

“Multitasking refers to the ability to run multiple applications at the same time and easily switch among them. Users often engage in multitasking when they perform complex tasks that require putting together multiple sources of information. In fact, collecting, comparing, and choosing between multiple items are the most mission-critical tasks people do with information technology”. (Budiu 2015)

In this sense, multitasking is synonymous of multiple modes of interaction.

Besides, although multitasking is a topic that is more concerned with psychology and cognitive science – the interest is in multitasking behavior, rather than in the analysis of interactive text as an interface, semiotically organized in a multitasking way – Semiotics has also had its say. For instance, in a book entitled *Interfaces of Writing Objects*, Alessandro Zinna (2004) defined the multitasking interface as the result of a *mise en abyme* process. In this view, the multitasking interface results from the writing of a succession of topological units (interaction with the multitasking interface is therefore a practice that has to do with

the interactive writing of virtual space): electronic writing has the particularity of multiplying the inscription surfaces, which, once written, contract relations of dependence or autonomy according to an order of succession between the units in relation to an assembly scheme with which they are linked. The main operation is that of the “zoom-out”, the stepping back, which allow to activate a comprehensive and distant view over the observed object.

Moreover, the multitasking interface implies the establishment of an interstitial and transparent device capable of supporting the users, providing them with operational tools to organise the contents of the experience (the prosthesis, the interface). From the point of view of the Anthropology of technology, the multitasking interface is the representation, the textualization, of the human faculty to think in advance about its actions, to control them and, consequently, to control its environment and to obtain an evolutionary advantage. In such a view, the distancing operation provided by the multitasking interface is strictly related to the enjoyment of the cognitive gain we have described in the previous section.

However, the MR interface and the multitasking one as well can also be deconstructed according to the critical perspective of Benjamin. This perspective will allow to consider not only the utopic ideology according to which MR and multitasking interfaces would be able to recover and enhance the aura by consequently bringing out an experiential gain; it will allow to reconsider reproductive technologies as determining a certain kind of shock which, ultimately, would destroy the aura of emerging technologies.

The field of Cognitive Ergonomics has often inquired this aspect of multitasking in human-computer interaction. In formulating solutions for designing the learning, communication and content clarification within the interface, it provided designer with solutions aimed to *reduce* the cognitive load of the user (Nielsen 1993; Tosi 2019). This paradigm

of design implies that the main risk for technological progress is the *cognitive over-loading* and its mission is ultimately that to prevent and contrast the affirmation of the continuous partial attention in digital users.

On the other hand, it has to be highlighted that it is not the actual multitasking interface to determine a cognitive over-loading. Rather, it is its representation into the media to convey cultural meanings that can be associated with the issue of cognitive ergonomics.

This is a pivotal point: the representation of MR and multitasking interfaces in the media not only does not emerge from a factual interaction, but they are commonly associated to semiotic discourses featured by a certain degree of expectancy for the future of technological progress. In this perspective, the historical criticism of Benjamin becomes relevant again<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, Benjamin itself understood the decay of the aura not only as an aesthetic issue but rather as a technological one, which is related to the changing of mediums. On the basis of Benjamin's historicist perspective (as well as Baudelaire's philosophical one) we could understand the aura (and in particular its dissolution) as the element of a theoretical discourse mainly aimed at the critique of innovation and technological shock (Pinotti, Somaini 2012).

Utopic and auratic multitasking interfaces are, for instance, those depicted in the film *Minority Report* (dir. Spielberg, 2002). In these compositions, we see an individual equipped with HMD (but not necessarily), placed in front of a series of hologram windows of different sizes that can be interactively manipulated. In *Minority Report* the protagonist intends to manipulate images of his own premonitions of future crimes, displayed (or rather, projected) on a screen of holograms. Here, the multitasking interface is portrayed as a tool at the service of the user

and, in particular, of justice, as it is used to predict crimes.

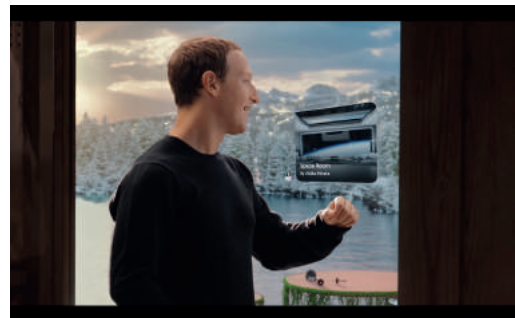
In such a situation, the user is empowered by the interface, as he/she occupies a distant point of view and the place of the orchestrator of his/her own experience. This is precisely a utopic representation of MR interfaces, in fact the movies dated 2002! However, the idea is valid for further kind of representation of technological futures.



FIG. 3. FUTURISTIC MULTITASKING INTERFACES IN *MINORITY REPORT* (DIR. SPIELBERG, 2002)

In Meta's presentation video, for example, we initially see Zuckerberg answer a phone call through a wearable gadget on his wrist. Then, we see him enter an immersive space where he is involved in a game with other players; finally, a call from a friend distracts Zuckerberg from the game to show him a piece of AR street art that, ultimately, he shares with others.

In this perspective, it could also be argued that Meta will not be a platform capable of bringing cognitive gain to the user at all, but at most an experiential one. As can be seen in figure 4, Mark or his avatar are constantly arrested by pop-up windows that interrupt the "natural" flow of the user experience.



<sup>7</sup> In our perspective, in order to understand the meaning's changes of the "aura" term, it is possible to understand *Æsthetics* not just as a philosophy of beauty into artwork, but rather as a "Techno-Æsthetics" (Simondon 1982).



FIG. 4. SHOTS FROM META CONNECT 2021.

In this regard, we can argue that the multitasking interface is not just a typology of text, or at least it refers to something more general, i.e., to a paradigm. For Semiotics, a paradigm is the set of elements that constitute a linguistic system and to which one refers in order to communicate. However, to say that a certain paradigm exists is also to say that a certain specificity – a set of positive qualities – belongs to this paradigm. A paradigm is, in this sense, a rule implicit in the symbolic forms that are elaborated from this paradigm.

With regard to the paradigmatic configuration of the multitasking interface, the syncretic and multifocal perspective that characterize the digital image emerges. In this sense, not only is the computing machine, at the hardware level, to be

capable of running multiple computational processes simultaneously (parallel execution), but the augmented mind of the user as well, insofar it is projected onto a space such as that of the multitasking interface, is capable of carrying out cognitive processes, through a modulation of the flow of thoughts. This idea concerns the possibility of augmenting human cognition with machines and digital technology which is a rule of composition, hence a paradigm that our culture has assimilated since at least the 1960s, with Doug Engelbart, if not before<sup>8</sup>.

At this point, we could wonder if, on the contrary of what is represented in *Minority Report* and in the Meta's teaser, is there a point at which the multitasking interface becomes pervasive, in a negative sense. If we think about the user experience enabled by push notifications, pop-up ads or multitasking content display the answer is positive; designed for PC browsers, if moved into the user's field of view and made to float, they would result in overexposure to the multiplicity of signals received, exposing the user to a kind of anaesthesia of experience. In addressing the ethics of communication in relation to substances and affordances (i.e., the actual access to functionality that the medium provides to users), the semiotician Gunther Kress (2010) has also expressed a pessimistic perspective on the issue of attention, arguing that the king of multiple framing and multiple attention is likely to be the norm rather than the exception in most cases of communication. According to a certain ideology of computing, multitasking is strictly related to a social and cognitive isolation of the user in a self-referential space.

Such a form of cognitive overload could be legitimately described as a "shock" – the contrary of the aura – and, as a consequence, as a form of interaction that does not allow user to distance themselves toward the modalities ex-

<sup>8</sup> This is also the case with the Oculus rift interface or Quest, in which an attempt is made to recreate not so much the desktop interface, but the televised – but interactive – interface designed, for example, for curved and, indeed, immersive screens.

plained in the previous examples<sup>9</sup>. Rather, to be at stake is the excessive proximity of technology to obstruct users' distancing operation.

If the utopian future of *Minority Report* is a good example to focus on the cognitive gain resulting from the process of distancing that the MR interface enables, the dystopian future depicted in *Omniscient* (2020), a Netflix series, offers interesting insights on non-distancing effects, shock and alienation, which ultimately coincide with the vanishing of the aura.



**FIG. 5.** DRONE'S SUBJECTIVE IN *OMNISCIENT* (DIR. AGUILERA 2020).

In this series, diegetic shots often alternate with subjective shots of drones, central actors in the narrative, whose function is to monitor citizens at all times.

In addition to the fact that, as can be seen in Figure 5, such shots are often enunciated in the forms of multitasking (these are, actually, computational entities), it is in the attitudinal disposition of human characters towards such entities that the sense of the fading aura is expressed. While the protagonist continually performs distancing operations, imagining in advance the automated behavior of the drones and behaving in such a way as to evade them, all the other citizens, having accepted to be surveilled in order to obtain security, no longer do so. However, in this case, the process is reversed: the user-machine interface does not allow users to distance themselves,

to self-regulate and self-organize, as the protagonist does, but the processes of distancing carried out by the protagonist denote the disappearance of the aura and the recognition of her own state of alienation, understood, in the Marxist sense, as the impossibility of recognizing herself<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the auratic interface would only be that which drones possess and, as a consequence, humans would not have access to it. However, this condition would not determine the experience of shock for common users, since it would only be situated where such an impossibility of distancing, which is an awareness of one's own condition, would be realized. The proximity of the technological entity is in connection with a new aura typology that derives rather from the experiential gain emerging from surveillance.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS. THE AURA OF TECHNOLOGICAL RE-ENCHANTMENT

As we have argued before, both the MR and the multitasking interface can be conceived as symbolic forms that clearly express the evolution of the notion of "aura" in the contemporaneity.

On the one hand, if we accept as a valid one the use of the notion of "aura" proposed by Bolter and others, we can welcome the idea according to which innovative media such as MR and multitasking interfaces, as reproductive technologies, do not lead to the decay of the aura: whenever they provide users with tools for distancing themselves, they enable a new "here and now" and, as a consequence, they allow users to achieve a cognitive gain from the syncretism the same interface created.

On the other hand, whenever the MR and multitasking interface would fail in providing users with tools for distancing themselves, they become alienating technologies as the reproductive ones de-

<sup>9</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to retrieve the prototype of the so-called "Project Aura" whose objective was actually that to minimize distractions on a user's attention, by creating an environment that adapts to the user's context and needs (Garlan *et al.* 2002).

<sup>10</sup> This polysemy derives from the different meanings that can be attributed to the notion of "alienation", cf. the article "Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà" in Eco (1962).

scribed by Benjamin were. In this sense, they would come much too close to the users and would prevent them to enjoy that renewed sense of “here and now”, by ultimately bringing them to loss the “authenticity” of the experience of the place. In others words, they would realize the dystopic previsions about the users’ attention that the current critique of multitasking argued for. In this view, in accordance with Latour’s idea, the decay of the digital aura would be lawfully associated with the users’ distraction.

However, as according to Benjamin there is a dialectical principle of sensory experience, in which proximity, distance, aura and shock are opposed, the digital aura is both innovative (it produces a cultural shock, such as the one aimed at by Zuckerberg’s Meta) and “auratic” (in the Benjamin sense), i.e., it is a vehicle for “authenticity” and a return to the “immediate dimension” that characterizes by difference the condition of digital non-mediation. The emerging of this new kind of digital aura has to overcome a diachronic process of assessment. As the theorist of the remediation, Bolter argued as well that media forms always oscillate between offering a non-auratic, reflective experience and reasserting the importance of immediacy and aura (Bolter et al 2006, p. 34).

In fact, as we have seen in the case of *Omniscient*, even where technology takes over and distancing operations are no longer possible (or necessary), a form of aura is still traceable. Such a form is probably referable to the one Erik Davis, theorist and philosopher of techno mysticism, has spoken of, by matching this notion with a religious sense.

The powerful aura that today’s advanced technologies cast does not derive solely from their novelty or their mystifying complexity; it also derives from their literal realization of the virtual projects willed by the wizards and alchemists of an earlier age. Magic is technology’s unconscious, its own a rational spell. Our modern technological world is not nature, but augmented nature, super-nature, and the more intensely we probe its mutant edge of mind and matter, the more our disenchanting produc-

tions will find themselves wrestling with the rhetoric of the supernatural (Davis 2015, p. 48).

The dimension of magic and religion, as Simondon (1958) had already explained, is one of the fundamentals to be retrieved whenever we need to make sense of technology. This explanation, however, is not merely suggestive and vague. It provides an escape route from the apocalyptic interpretation of technological determinism. In this sense, the notion of “delegation” to the prostheses of the body – a concept again proposed by Simondon and alluded to by Benjamin himself when speaking of the loss of the *hic et nunc* – is to be understood as a form of technological enchantment, similar to that resorted to by the citizens of *Omniscient*, a solution to the fact that human brains cannot satisfactorily compass this hyperspace of collective information.

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# FALCONE AND BORSELLINO

## THE AURA OF SYMBOLS

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**ABSTRACT.** By putting together Walter Benjamin's and Bruno Latour's work on aura with contemporary semiotic takes on cultural process of symbolisation, the paper explores the idea of "aura of symbols". Drawing from this, we propose for an empirical analysis of the "symbolic career" of an iconic picture of antimafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino: an image whose process of symbolisation, marked by gains and losses of "symbolic aura", has had a profound influence on Italian culture and memory, far beyond the domain of the struggle against the mafia.

**KEYWORDS:** Antimafia; Symbolization; Photography; Remediation; Semiotics of culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging aspects of the notion of "aura" lies in its vagueness. In order to grasp and define its pertinence in 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural phenomena, we propose to double the stakes: we will try to explore the idea of an "aura of symbols". Our bet is that putting in relation two vague ideas, the "aura" and the "symbol", may be a good strategy to shed new light on both, counting on the effect

of their reciprocal determination. Indeed, the notions of "aura" and "symbol" have a similar, very long history of over-uses and dismissions: a never-ending battle of definitions that we would not dare to reconstruct. Instead, we propose to take up some valuable insights bringing these two notions together within a safe (and sound) semiotic framework: one that aspires simultaneously to produce heuristic tools for culture analy-

sis and solid theoretical standpoints on meaning-making mechanisms.

Our hypothesis is that the concept of aura can be very useful to a better understanding of the symbolic career of texts, by which we intend the cultural and discursive process making a symbol out of a random object of meaning. In order to prove it and shape our theoretical reflection on the “aura of symbols” starting from empirical and analytical observations, we will focus on a particular case study: the raise, fall and transformation of a contemporary Italian symbol of justice, the antimafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. In particular, the study will be carried out on the “symbolic career” on the image of the two characters which became infamous after the terrorist-style mafia bombings that killed them in May 1992.

The paper develops this argument starting from a theoretical clarification of what we mean by “aura of symbols”, recognising, thanks to Bruno Latour, the foundational role of reproduction in the creation of “auratic effects”. Henceforth, we will present the case study and explain why it is so relevant for a better understanding of the “aura of symbols”. In line with the work carried out in the last two editions of the Urbino seminars on symbols, the approach I propose to follow is the study of the discursive process of symbolization: that is, an “isographic” (Calabrese 1999) set of its resumptions, translations, uses, and alterations. This approach makes it possible to tie the symbolic efficacy issue to that of aura, which concerns the unstable relationship between the original work and its copies. Outside the essentialist problem of establishing what is original and what is degraded to mere imitation, the theme of the aura of symbols raises a central question: how does the extension of the series, constitutive of the becoming symbol, modify the value of each element in relation to the others? Moreover, how does this variation contribute to the enhancement or destruction of a symbol? We will try to answer in three steps, exploring the mi-

gration of the aura through journalistic, militant, and administrative discourse. We will conclude this essay trying to pull the strings of what we learned from the trajectory of this image about aura and its relevance in the semiotic life of symbols.

## 2. THE AURA OF SYMBOLS

It is well known that Walter Benjamin, in his seminal writing on the work of art, didn't provide a univocal definition of the concept of “aura”. One of them is “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.” (Benjamin [1931] 2008, p. 23). Now such “uniqueness”, issued from “space and time”, appears to be strictly related to the materiality of the art piece. Earlier on in his essay, Benjamin suggests that the reason why materiality matters is because it tells the story of the artifact, “issued” with the most various, yet meaningful circumstances. This story does not include only the traces of the labor of the artists themselves, but also

the changes which [the art piece] may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original. The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day (Benjamin [1936] 2008, p. 21)

It is striking how the idea of “authenticity” of the work of art, which guarantees the permanence of the objects as identical to itself throughout time, is here linked not to the stability of its aesthetic configuration, technically reproducible, but to specific semiotic features, “the traces” (Eco 1975: 289; Violi 2014: 160), marking the material constitution of the work of art. Some are so microscopic that special physical or chemical techniques are needed to detect them. Others presuppose a vast knowledge of “situations” in which the artwork circulated. In any

case, these variations require from the viewer a particular awareness, a sensitization, through instruments or knowledge, to differences otherwise imperceptible. Once detected, however, those traces start to tell the history of the artefact: where it was exposed, who owned it, in which conditions, and maybe even why and how long the art piece has been preserved and used that way. In other words, materiality and its traces express an history of causes, which are precisely the contents of the story that guarantee uniqueness and authenticity to the artefact, allowing the sharp observer to tell it apart from copies. Here's a first definition of aura as "auratic effect": a semiotic feature pertaining the story of artefact's sociotechnical trajectory, rather than the story that artefact's internal, formal structure apparently intended to convey<sup>1</sup>. If we think of the artefact as an utterance, the auratic effect pertains its enunciation rather than the utterance itself. It is this context of enunciation that make up for the "tradition" establishing the object in its identity, confirmed precisely by variations in material traces.

From this perspective, it's clear that a work of art, as a material object, may have an history within society that a fresh copy can't reproduce easily, especially when technical reproduction focuses solely on the aesthetic, internal configuration of the work of art (as a poster of a painting sold in a museum giftshop). However, while Benjamin seem to view the opposition between the "original" and the "copy" as if the latter, by flattening the material traces marking the former, negated the possibility of any auratic effect, Bruno Latour suggests that it is precisely the "lack of materiality" of the copies that awakens and sharpen the sensitivity of the connoisseur towards the materiality of the original.

Only the original possesses an aura, this mysterious and mystical quality that no second

hand version will ever get. But paradoxically, this obsession for pinpointing originality increases proportionally with the availability and accessibility of more and more copies of better and better quality. If so much energy is devoted to the search for the original — for archaeological and marketing reasons— it is because the possibility of making copies has never been so open-ended. If no copies of the Mona Lisa existed would we pursue it with such energy — and, would we devise so many conspiracy theories to decide whether or not the version held under glass and protected by sophisticated alarms is the original surface painted by Leonardo's hand or not. In other words, the intensity of the search for the original depends on the amount of passion and the number of interests triggered by its copies. No copies, no original. In order to stamp a piece with the mark of originality, you need to apply to its surface the huge pressure that only a great number of reproductions can provide (Latour [2008] 2011, p. 4).

Here, the reconsideration of the work of reproduction is key. From a process that erases aura, it becomes what let remarks its absence, therefore rising awareness towards the traces that constitute auratic effects. In this perspective, "the real phenomenon to be accounted for is not the punctual delineation of one version divorced from the rest of its copies, but the whole assemblage made up of one — or several — original(s) together with the retinue of its continually re-written biography" (*ibidem*). Broadening the view from the "original" alone to the structural pairing of the "original(s)" and the "copies", Latour not only pinpoints the relational nature of auratic effects, but also raises the question of their "migration". Indeed, if the original may be told apart from copies because of the traces of its material history, concerning not the work of art's internal structure but its contextual, enunciative uses, the copies themselves have a social and material life of which they can bear traces. In that case, one or some copies may acquire their own "uniqueness", becoming more culturally relevant, in a given con-

<sup>1</sup> For "intention", we refer here to the idea of *intentio operis* defined by Umberto Eco (1979, 1990) as the structural configuration of a text, as opposed to the intentions attributed to the author, the *intentio auctoris*, or to the interpreter, the *intentio lectoris*.

text, that what in a previous context the “original” was, thus taking its place as a socio-semiotic construct.

This leads us to the second pivotal concept of our work, symbol. Reproduction is a foundational condition of symbols, and even more so its strategic re-use in different contexts. Indeed, for Umberto Eco (1984, pp. 143–153), to recognise a symbol it is far more relevant the use a given text, which he calls “symbolic mode”, than its internal structure. This idea has recently been taken up and re-elaborated by the International Center for Semiotic Sciences of Urbino (Marone, ed. 2021) under the hypothesis of a “symbolic becoming” (Sedda 2021, pp. 13–32): if there is no such a thing as an “internal” definition of “symbol”, there is, however, a discursive process that makes room and defines a specific “place” for symbols in a given semiosphere (Lotman 1987, cited by Sedda 2021, p. 14). For Sedda (*ibidem*), these uses have strategic cultural functions such as i) bringing together different actors within a collective identity, ii) creating a shared space for interaction, and iii) bridging the present with supposed origins and possibilities of transmission to new generations.

Now, capitalising on the notion of auratic effect delineated thus far, we could hypothesise a fourth and fifth feature to be aware of when dealing with symbolic becoming. The fourth one concerns the fact a symbolic use of a text is inseparable from the chain of other uses of which it bears memory, linking together different users’, spatial’s and temporal’s configuration’s. As Latour remarks regarding the work of art, no text would be questioned, valued and passionately used as a symbol if it wasn’t previously used by different persons, in different spaces and in different times. It is, again, the continually rewritten biography of a text, constitutive to its “symbolic becoming” or, more prosaically, to its “symbolic career”, that give a specific use of a text its particular, unique aura of symbol. In the same line of work, we could hypothesise a fifth feature of the symbolic mode related to auratic effect:

the capacity of a symbol of bringing together different types of discourses, different regimes of enunciation, different cultural domains. The memory of previous uses of a symbol, even though vague, links together the different cultural contexts in which they were deployed. Every symbol draws its strength from a cultural backdrop from which it distances itself, while penetrating a new discursive domain and giving way to a new interpretation: many political symbols came from religious backgrounds, as well as many pop icons refer back to religious or political contexts. This translation of a cultural domains into another entails, of course some risk of oversimplification. Which bring us to a last line of questioning: the migration of the aura of symbols. By trespassing from a cultural domain toward another, while translating the values associated to an old context into a new one, the earliest use of the symbol can pass its aura to the latest one, creating a new frame of reference for further reproductions.

These hypothesis raise several questions. What reproductions of a text, including their context, make a supposed “original” so special? How do these reproduction reveal connections between cultural domains that are unthought of? Do the trajectory of some copy make them more interesting of the so called original, explaining the raise, fall and transformation of a symbol by a sort of migration of symbolic aura?

### **3. SYMBOLS OF JUSTICE: FALCONE AND BORSELLINO**

We will try to answer by focusing on a specific case study: an image of the anti-mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, born as a photograph by the photojournalist Toni Gentile in 1992 (Fig. 1). This image has been the object of countless re-uses and public endorsements. It has been reproduced on supports as diverse as newspapers, photography magazines and manuals, demonstration banners, sheets, T-shirts, bodies (as a tattoo), façades (as murals), even national stamps and, more recently, it has been engraved on the national side

of the Italian 2 euros coin. Through this proliferation of semiotic translations, it spread across multiple spaces and times, exceeding by far the original context of information it came from: it appeared (and still appears) in public offices, schools, tourist roots and on the stage of national commemorations, cultural events, demonstrations, anniversaries, inaugurations. As the antimafia journalist Attilio Bolzoni wrote on the occasion of its coinage on the national side of the 2 euros piece, in January 2022, this “symbolic” image, also referred to as “icon”, is so powerful that it can be chosen as a guide for the righteous, but also as an alibi for mediocrity, when not corruption itself (Bolzoni 2022). Apparently, the aura of such a symbol doesn’t always lie where its uses place it. Undoubtedly this hesitation on the value and meaning of this iconic image is related to its long history and multiple discursive context of use. In one word, it depends on its trajectory, delineating the path within which its aura circulates, dwells, and sometime loses itself.

This path also defines a perimeter – a spacial, historical and cultural grounding – that accompanies the symbol from birth. This fact is underscored by an internationally recognized Sicilian photographer, Ferdinando Scianna, who speaks about “an Italian icon” that probably doesn’t have “the same evocative power in the United States or England that it has for us” (Scianna 2017). However, this doesn’t diminish the least the “iconic” value of the image, which he takes as a privileged example of symbolization processes in photography:

[...], a photograph can also become iconic because of its iconographic background. But not only that. It can become so by accumulating historical facts sedimented in the image. My friend and a very good photographer, Tony Gentile, the author of a great contemporary Italian photographic icon, the image of Falcone and Borsellino talking with complicit confidence and irony, says that at the time he took that photograph did not particularly strike a chord, no one wanted it. Then Falcone was assassinated by the Mafia. But that was not enough. They also had to kill Borsellino for

that image to become an icon of the victims of justice and the fight against evil. [...] In this case, it is the story that transforms the image, although if we want to look for an iconographic background, the infinitely reproduced detail of Raffaello’s painting of the two little angels talking with complicity may perhaps unconsciously have helped its recognizability by adding the chrism of innocence (Scianna 2017).

Scianna’s opinion on Gentile’s photograph is one of the most quoted when evoking the question of how images acquire a particular relevance in antimafia culture (cf. Ravveduto 2019). This fact itself is significant for the cultural “career” of photographs, developing at least on two levels which is theoretically necessary to distinguish: the discourse *on* photography – often carried out by photographs themselves along with critics, journalists, and institutional prizes – and the discourse *of* photographs, whose visual and semantic properties have to be determined by further analysis (Floch 1986: pp. 12–20.). It is interesting to notice that, while being largely commented on and cited, Gentile’s work has never been awarded with significant photographic prizes. However, Falcone and Borsellino’s photograph was the reason for his receiving the highest civic recognition, notably with his entitlement to the “Order of merit of the Italian Republic” in 2018 by President Sergio Mattarella, brother of Piersanti Mattarella, a well-known mafia victim (Lupo 1993; Schneider 2002; Santino 2009).

What happened to this image in the meantime? What did it do to Italian antimafia culture? What transformations, reprises, and translations, way beyond the photographic discourse on photography, has this image undergone on its way to becoming a symbol, igniting vibrant dialectics between original and copies? Furthermore, what did this culture do, in turn, to this image?

Scianna’s opinion on the photograph of Falcone and Borsellino also makes some interesting points. Firstly, it consistently uses the word “icon”, questioning the relation between the symbolization process and the domain of religion (Otto [1917] 1923). Secondly, it assumes

two core mechanisms of this process, the influence of an iconographic background and the one of historical events, but it does not specify how these different aspects concur to determine the same effect. Thirdly, it evokes the push for the reproduction of “iconic” images. All three aspects are related to the concept of the “aura of symbols” we seek to discuss in this work. Consistently to the methodological stance we proposed at the beginning, we will assume that no text or image is born as a “symbol” only because of its iconic background, nor any text or image can become a symbol through the historical events that arbitrarily make them so. Instead, we posit that i) a symbol is a semiotic entity – may that be a character, a phrase or an image – that follows a “career” within a precise cultural environment; ii) and that this “career” depends on a strategic production of “copies”, or semiotic translations, whose description may be considered as a valuable angle for any semiotic analysis of culture.

#### 4. THE JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

Before becoming an antimafia symbol, the image taken by Gentile was mere-

ly a good photo. Nevertheless, as Scianna anticipated, it was not immediately used. Gentile was covering a press conference for *Il Giornale di Sicilia* for the candidacy of the former magistrate Giuseppe Ayala as Senator of the Republic. It was March 1992. Among the guests supporting the candidacy, there were Falcone and Borsellino. They had no explicit connection to the merit of the event. However, as top Mafia experts, who had suffered the tough blow of the final verdict of the “Maxi Trial” a month earlier, their photos could have been valuable in the market. Gentile approaches the speakers’ desk and shoots until he fixes, in the last four images of the negative, a joking exchange between the two. Those images, however, are predictably preferred to an overview showing Ayala together with the director of the local newspaper *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, sponsoring the meeting.

Once developed and decontextualized from the event, these images would have turned into perfect archival photos, becoming what Lorusso and Violi (2004), reworking Floch (1986, 1990), call “symbolic photos”: photographs that transcend the punctuality of the event to



FIG. 1. A DETAIL OF THE FRONT PAGE OF *IL MESSAGGERO* ON JULY 24TH, 1992, SHOWING THE FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPH BY TONI GENTILE.

activate abstract thematizations, recalling individuals to their functions in the collective imagination. In this kind of institutional images, the persons portrayed in these photos – to be used into banners, gallons, recognizable institutional architectures etc. – would have been considered as “roles” more than as individuals.

Now, Gentile’s shots do not stand as ordinary institutional photos since their frames establish a complex relationship between the “official” and the “human” side of the subjects. On the one hand, Falcone and Borsellino are perfectly recognizable as public figures: the most celebrated antimafia magistrates in Italy, perhaps in the world, whom the objects around them place within a relatively undetermined official ceremony: the desk, the microphone, the elegant suits. The framing is tight, and the exact context is impossible to reconstruct. On the other hand, rather than the abstractness of their function, the pictures enhance the union of the two magistrates in a personal gesture of friendship while joking by themselves. The shot thus contains a variation on the theme of unveiling the human beneath the institutional armor. A humanity that shirks all the more clearly from the usual institutional pose of antimafia magistrates surrounded only by escort men, disconnected from ordinary social interactions. By contrast, we are in full, albeit intimate, sociality here. This aspect enriches the images with an “oblique” dimension: it is a “non-official photo” that reminds us of how plastered official, “symbolic” photos habitually are.

Gentile sends the photos the agency “Sintesi”, which distributes them to all subscriber newspapers. However, when Falcone dies on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, those photos found a place only in the *Giornale di Sicilia*. Furthermore, the photo appears only on page 6, far from the frontpage, in a context article aimed at putting into perspective the assassination of the judge, which of course, made the first five pages, within the controversies in which Falcone was involved in the last years (the title reads “Under the fire of controver-

sies). As for the front page, the newspaper aligns itself with the standard editorial and iconographic choices with which the national press breaks the news of the Capaci massacre on May 24<sup>th</sup>: on one side, stock photos of the dead man alone; on the other, images of the crater left on the Palermo-Capaci highway, a trace of the dramatic event.





FIG. 2. IL GIORNALE DI SICILIA, MAY 24TH, 1992; FOLLOWING FROM LEFT, THE FRONT PAGE, THE SECOND, AND THE SIXTH PAGE.

The stock photos are rather conventional: close-ups of Falcone isolated, huddled in the shoulders, hands clasped, frowning; in some cases, as in *La Repubblica*, somehow foreboding death, with those shiny pupils turned upward, towards an area towering at the top of the frame, recalling the iconography of the *Annunciation* (cf. Dondero 2007, p. 99). Interestingly, in *La Repubblica*, which had sided unconditionally with the anti-mafia magistrates in the historic controversies involving them, in-depth articles are devoted to the relationship between Falcone and his spouse. In contrast to this choice of humanizing topicalization, *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, historically close to the Sicilian Catholic party called Democrazia Cristiana and critical of the “excesses” of the anti-Mafia, chooses to recall the controversies in which Falcone was involved<sup>2</sup>. This diversity in thematizing the backdrop against which the massacre stands – humanizing and pacifying

on the one hand, committed and polemical on the other – also tells us something about the images accompanying the articles. In particular, it points out an aspect of Gentile’s photo that, after this first, little-noticed appearance in *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, will no longer be taken into account: although positive, relaxed, and joking, it is an image of two crucial public figures exchanging confidences; very similar, figuratively speaking, to those “stolen from power” images that news photographers make in parliaments (or stadiums) to expose the tactics that ran in the behind-the-scenes political-institutional (or sports) playing field. In a field of discourse dominated by the value of transparency, such as journalism, the image of intimate, somewhat secretive communication does not necessarily enjoy a euphoric connotation. Placed under the *Il Giornale di Sicilia*’s title “Under the fire of controversy”, this picture stands ambiguous: of course, the intimate joke of a dead man, Falcone, with the colleague that survived him, can be seen as an act of transmission of a positive legacy; but, concerning the “controversies” evoked by the title, the intimacy depicted on the photo could also connote the lack of transparency typical of the so-called “Palaces of Power”. Interestingly, however, the successive uses of Falcone and Borsellino’s picture thoroughly shake off this dysphoric interpretation. As opposed to the secrecy of the Palace, it will provide an image of friendly intimacy.

In these unambiguous terms, the myth of Gentile’s photo was born on July 20<sup>th</sup>: the day after Borsellino gets torn apart by a car bomb in Via D’Amelio along with five escort agents. The standard iconographic strategy for giving the news of the massacre is well represented here by *Il Corriere della Sera*. It opens with a picture of the street wasted by the explosion, with the carcasses of two cars in the foreground, sensationalizing the violence of the attack.

2 For the positioning of *Il giornale di Sicilia* in former antimafia controversies, and notably the most iconic one about the so called “professionisti dell’antimafia” [antimafia professionals] involving, among others, the writer Leonardo Sciascia and Paolo Borsellino, see Tassinari 2022.



In the right column, a three-quarter stock photo of Borsellino, the target. Deviating from this are *Il manifesto* and *Il Messaggero*. Let us take a closer look at their visual communication strategies.

One of the hallmarks of the *Il manifesto* is opening with a half-page photo strategically themed by the headline. In this case, it shows an image of Borsellino, on the right, turning his back on a Carabinieri squad car. The cut of the image, the orientation of the actors, and the gap between them express a movement away, which the title. “the order of the Mafia”.

unambiguously thematizes. Borsellino’s movement unfolds between a pole of personal safety, to the left, and a pole of death, to the right, out of frame. That is where the magistrate sets out, head down “by order” of a “sovereign”, “invisible”, and “all-powerful” Mafia, also suggesting a hopeless “order of things” where magistrates die, and criminals prosper. It cannot be seen, but outside the image, to the right, the image narratively implies something standing in for a gallows or a sacrificial altar. We are just a moment



FIG. 3. LA REPUBBLICA, MAY 24TH 1992. LEFT: PP. 2-3; UP, RIGHT: THE COVER PHOTO; DOWN LEFT: DETAIL OF THE FRONT PAGE WITH THE SAME PHOTO (BY TONI GENTILE) OF THE DESTROYED HIGHWAY OF PP. 2-3.



FIG. 4. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: FRONT PAGES OF CORRIERE DELLA SERA, IL MANIFESTO, AND IL MESSAGGERO ON JULY 20TH, 1992, THE DAY AFTER THE VIA D'AMELIO MASSACRE.

before the execution of a death sentence (see Marrone 2019).

As always, the construction of the *Il manifesto* front page is complex and refined. However, it is also desperate. Compared to this dysphoria, the image chosen by *Il Messaggero* gives partial solace. It is the first big step of Gentile's picture toward his long symbolic career: an image that strongly affirms the value of life against that of death. Yes, these are two dead men but, at the moment of their death, they are depicted joking with each other as if they were still alive. It is a solid phoric contrast with the *Il manifesto*, which thematizes death as condemnation or unavoidable order of things, and with *Il Corriere della Sera*, which also verbally ascertains the killing with the anonymous tombstone stock photo of Borsellino beside the gutted road. It is a sharp contrast, too, with *Il Messaggero's* verbal apparatus, at least on the front page, where it does not speak of the man's death but of an "Assault on the state" – except then, on page 4, devotes a report to the friendship between Borsellino and Falcone. Here, the ambiguity casted upon the image by using the photo in *Il Giornale di Sicilia* on May 24<sup>th</sup> is wholly vanquished. In opposition to the images of death, depicted a moment before or after its inevitable administration, the secrecy staged by the pose of the two magistrates loses all dysphoric connotations. It appears now unambiguously as the visual representation of friendly intimacy, firmly grounded in the morality of self-sacrifice: the opposite of a power tactic. As we will show later, this friendly intimacy's (im-)penetrability will give this image a relevant narrative drive for his "symbolic becoming". However, it is important to underscore here the feature of the "livingness" of the picture compared to the visual strategies deployed by the ones on the other front pages.

This photographic emphasis on life in death registers, in terms of "enunciative praxis" (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998), an actual operation of "surfacing" from the virtual to the actual, of symbolic status of

the image we were talking about at the beginning: its ability to establish a continuity between actors and between times in the face of a rupture event. Between actors, because friendship rebuilds the bond that death breaks, foreshadowing the possibility of human transmission, of a legacy; between times, because death does not stop the fight against the Mafia, but, on the contrary, immortalizes it on a higher plane.

We can finally ask why this particular picture was chosen out of the four images of the negative staging the same movement and not one of the other several, very similar captions of the negative. Indeed, sensing the effectiveness of *Il Messaggero's* choice, the following day, *La Repubblica* and *Il manifesto*, unable to retrieve the same image, will use the last of the four shots (Fig. 5). But the effect is not the same. For what reasons?

Following Scianna's suggestion, which aligns with a common opinion in iconography and Visual Semiotics, the shot chosen by *Il Messaggero* would be remarkable because it taps into our visual memory: the resemblance of the pose of Falcone and Borsellino with, for instance, the gesture of the apostles Giuda Taddeo and Simon in Leonardo's *Last supper* is indeed worth noticing. However, we think the main reason for its effectiveness lies in the intensity, in the aspectualization of the conjunction of the actors, rendered by a peculiar figurative and figural configuration (Greimas 1986). From the figurative point of view, the second frame is the precise, punctual moment when the message "passes", transmitting the smile from Falcone to Borsellino. From the figural point of view, it is the image where the lines of force converge most sharply towards each other, from bottom to top and from the sides to the center, forming a perfect isosceles triangle. The intimacy we were speaking about above can be considered a visual manifestation of a regime of the interaction of reciprocal "adjustment" (Landowski 2006) that unite and transforms Falcone and Borsellino into a "dual actant" (Greimas [1976] 1988): two

different persons, two different actors, of course, but defined by a single axiology and single ideological program of action, devoid of internal differences or articulations. It is no coincidence that “Falcone and Borsellino”, according to a recent study of public history (Ravveduto 2018), is one of the favorite street names in Italy. The shoulders of the magistrates who touch each other in the photo seem never to come off again. A very different kind of interaction is depicted in the frame chosen by *La Repubblica* and *Il manifesto*, taken seconds later, where the actors’ figural separation shows their individuality. They share a smile, not a legacy. A legacy that, in the most successful shot, virtually includes possible investigative leads along with the moral heritage of friendship and self-sacrifice<sup>3</sup>.

##### 5. THE MILITANT DISCOURSE: SHEETS, FASTS AND TREES

An essential step of the symbolic career of this picture is taken when it crosses the boundaries of the newspapers and becomes a visual marker of the antimafia movement unfolding the attacks. However, in order to understand this critical transition, we have to take a step back to the essay by Umberto Eco on the “symbolic mode” and consider how the textualized image of intimacy intertwines with a peculiar feature of the “symbolic use” at the level of its (re-)enunciation: that of the mysteriousness of symbols.

This aspect of Eco’s work has not been sufficiently taken up so far, although it is related to another, much discussed. The much-discussed one is the presupposition of semantic indeterminacy of the symbol. It has often been mentioned that Eco considers symbols as signs or texts whose content plane is a “nebula of meanings”. Instead, I do not think it has been sufficiently emphasized what this semantic indeterminacy invites, namely a hermeneutic practice that unravels the skein of indeterminacy (Eco 1984, p. 228). In other words, the “symbolic use”, as he says, involves an enunciating instance called upon to tell the truth about the symbol; to dissipate its vagueness and seek its supposed, unapparent core. Not much has been said about the construction of this qualified enunciating position. Let us be precise – and Eco is not very clear on this: we do not consider that the text used as a symbol is really “mysterious” and therefore it needs further interpretation; instead, it is the symbolic use of the text that presupposes it as such, and therefore the necessity for someone to clarify the mystery. In other words, a relevant step towards a symbolic use of a text consists in looking at it as mysterious; this creates a social space for speech specifically designed to seek the “hidden truth” of the text. This gift of speech to those who construct themselves as enunciating subjects is also an important feature of the symbolization process.



FIG. 5. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THE FRONT PAGES OF *IL MESSAGGERO* AND *LA REPUBBLICA*, AND THE THIRD PAGE OF *IL MANIFESTO*, ON JULY 22ND, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Dario Mangano for this remark.

All the newspapers we have mentioned thematize the Mafia attacks as the manifestation of an underlying tension: the war between the Mafia and the State, the economic crisis, Italy's presentability to the Maastricht Treaty, "Mani pulite" [Clean Hands] trials. Especially "Mani pulite", a nationwide judicial investigation into Italian political corruption held in the early 1990s and highly mediatized, stages an actual "rite of degradation" of the Italian political class in the midst of the transition from the First to the Second Republic (Giglioli, Cavicchioli, Fele 1997). One of the most striking effects of these investigations is that they prevent any political representative from being fully entitled, at least from a moral point of view, to perform any public mourning when the mafia attacks State representatives. This is evidenced by the screaming, kicking, punching, and throwing of coins at the political class that shows up at Falcone's funeral. At the same time, at Borsellino's, politicians are even excluded *a priori* from funerals which will be celebrated only in private form, with the significant exception of President of the Republic Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. By the public opinion – as trained by TV programs such as *Un giorno in pretura*, broadcasting the sessions of the most important "Mani pulite"'s trial (against the financial consultant Sergio Cusani) – the funerals are interpreted as the spectacle of "fake mourning", crocodile tears.

In opposition to the places and images of "fake mourning" – the Tribunal of Palermo, the Church of San Domenico – citizens' committees get formed to designate the places and images of a "real mourning" – the Falcone tree, private homes, sheets hanging from windows. This is the time, in fact, of many civil movements like, for instance, the notable "Committee of Sheets", known for launching the initiative of sheets hanging from windows in memory of Falcone. While refusing to identify with any party, such movements definitely and consciously act like political subjects.

Now, to take the floor and act politically, creating spaces of public speech is mandatory to qualify as public speakers. The picture by Gentile had a relevant role in this. In the course of the demonstrations, Toni Gentile's photo became an important tool for demarcating gathering places, as well as a distinctive image of the groups' communication material, used as a logo. Gentile himself will take photographs of these re-uses, attesting to their ability to mark utopian places, sources of value, and identity for the movement in the making. These are, as we shall see, real spaces of enunciation. The reproduction of the image now acquires a new strategic function: connect the spaces for taking the floor. Moreover, as anticipated, one of the drive for this connection is the intimacy of the relations between the two magistrates, now elevated to a certain degree of mysteriousness on the level of its re-use.

Initially, the image is printed on paper and T-shirts and subtitled "for that smile to live forever". Then it begins to be mass-produced in the form of a branded sheet. The sheet is designed by Gabriella Saladino, sister of journalist and writer Giuliana Saladino and aunt of the committee's founder, Marta Cimino. Under Gentile's picture, a paraphrase of a sentence from an interview with Giovanni Falcone stands out: "you did not kill them: their ideas walk on our legs". This is precisely an exegesis of the image's meaning that reactivates it from heterogeneous materials. By enhancing the actorial and temporal continuity that the photo made available in the post-massacre journalistic discourse, this version of the image calls upon someone willing to wield it, testify a presence, and interpret its signifiante for the new generations (see Puccio-Den 2009). Indeed, its study can contribute little to a history of "veridiction". Tapping into a venerable tradition of characters that, in Catholic and Western Culture, are identified with the duty to tell the truth publicly despite any risk, the one wielding the image is now a "militant-exegete" (Foucault 2009). A

stereotypical, “thematic role” of someone charged to state publicly uncomfortable truths in the name of justice, allowing the one who wears it to fill the void left by the body politic. It is no accident, we believe, that the one with Gentile’s photo is one of the few sheets actually branded by the committee, making collective and personal a practice, that of sheet display, initially thought to be individual and anonymous, albeit widespread. This enunciated statement seems to clarify the symbolic effect as a technique of subjectivation. The “we” inscribed in the sheet actually combines a plurality of enunciating instances: the photograph, Falcone’s text, and the sheet itself as a synecdoche of the committee. This collective chaining of enunciation helps to bracket the void left by the process of disintermediation in Italian society. By marking, at the same time, the places of aggregation of this form of anti-mafia subjectivity. To this day, the Falcone tree (see Tassinari 2021), in the variety of messages and drawings

left on its trunk, hardly lacks a copy of the sheet with Gentile’s image printed.

This creative transition, translating the intimacy and the temporality of the image within a political space of enunciation, represents a migration of the aura that pulls the “original” photograph in a “symbolic becoming” through a first series of “facsimiles”. Inheriting and transforming the photograph’s semiotic and cultural relevance, this series opens the path for other uses that would not have been conceivable with the photo alone. Gradually, Saladino’s reproduction of the photo steals its aura from the original photograph: its memorial and political use make the image a symbol to those who wield it even more than the photograph appeared in the newspapers. The image takes another step towards its symbolic becoming as it re-elaborates journalistic discourse into a militant one.



**FIG. 6.** ON THE LEFT, ONE OF THE SHEETS PRODUCED BY SALADINO IN THE NINETIES, CONSERVED AT THE ISTITUTO GRAMSCI OF PALERMO; ON THE RIGHT A PICTURE (© GOOGLE IMAGES) OF THE FALCONE TREE.

## 6. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE AMBIGUOUS CASE OF STREET ART

Indeed, since the picture of Falcone and Borsellino became a powerful tool to take the stand and fill the credibility gap left by politicians, it also became a strategic tool to claim credibility for institutional subjects themselves.

In 2002, as the Falcone Foundation took on the organization of the May 23<sup>rd</sup> commemoration with the Italian Ministry of Education, the state issued a stamp with a design from the photo. In 2022, on the 30th anniversary, the image was struck on the national side of the two-euro coin. In the meantime, it is hung in almost all public offices, schools, and civic associations. However, deprived of new alterations, new translations, and new exegesis, the image ceases to derive from its reproduction the necessary effect of authenticity, registering a rhetorical saturation that, in counterpoint, immediately ignites the controversy over the insincerity of its uses.

A borderline case of this type is given by the street art commissioned by the

municipality of Palermo, which captures the potential for re-writing the space given by the image. The most striking example in this regard is the gigantic mural by street artists Rosk and Loste (Fig. 7). It was created at the Cala marina in 2017 on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre. The technique, size, shape, and placement of the image load the series of constituent variants of the symbolization process with new semantic qualities related to a displacement of the aura from the previous uses.

First, the mural painting technique is very popular. This choice allows for setting up a simulacrum of enunciation that opposes the institutional language expected by the commissioner, the municipality of Palermo. Just as the movement, paraphrasing him, spoke through the language of Falcone, so the municipality uses street art to speak through the language of the people. However, it also achieves the opposite effect, namely the institutionalization of street art, which was born as a spontaneous and unauthorized practice (Mondino 2014, 2017, 2018).



**FIG. 7.** LEFT: THE CALA MURAL PAINTING BY ROSK AND LOSKE (2017); RIGHT: AN ADVERTISEMENT OF ADDIOPIZZO TRAVEL TOURISTIC TOURS OF PALERMO STAGING THE CALA MURAL PAINTING (PHOTO TAKEN IN 2020).

Visually, the image also undergoes some changes. Not so much on the figurative level, which points to the photographic realism in which Rosk and Loste specialize, but on the plastic level. Two lines of a circular painting frame the image; and most importantly, it is enlarged and suspended in mid-air, like the stone faces of American presidents carved on Mount Rushmore. Both the frame and the leap in scale, recently brought back into the realm of plastic properties by Tiziana Migliore and Marion Colas-Blaise's book on the format (Migliore, Colas-Blaise 2022a, 2022b), produce an effect of domination and sacralization of the image, placing the viewer in a position of humility and admiration.

Finally, it is relevant to note the location, the Marina district. The image, painted on a wall of the nautical institute, faces the harbor entrance, addressing tourists approaching by ship, or even better, students arriving in Palermo on the so-called "ship of legality" every May 23rd. It is no coincidence that this street art work stands as one of the mandatory stops on the antimafia tourist tours organized by Addiopizzo Travel. Their advertising posters at the arrival area of the Palermo airport feature a picture of this mural. Sacred and touristy together, the image re-writes Palermo's identity not only for the use of citizens but also for

the use of tourists to whom it offers itself as a new marker of territorial typicality. Hence, a whole tradition of folklorisation and typification of the antimafia makes possible the juxtaposition of the image of Falcone and Borsellino as much to the work of the puppets as to gastronomic heritage. Falcone and Borsellino become local products, the image of which can be easily found in many restaurants of Palermo (but not only). For the sake of brevity, here I produce only two visual examples: the one of an excellent Sicilian-Trapanese pizzeria, opened in 2021, which displays in its window a photo of Falcone and Borsellino surrounded by a circle with typical Sicilian cart decorations, underscoring the "folkloric" element; and the one from a restaurant called "*Locale*", "local", opened in 2017, pairing a photographic detail of the mural – not the picture by Gentile! – with a reproduction of a generic painted blue sky with some clouds, underscoring "artistry" and "creativity" along with a stereotypical representation of "hope". Here again, we can observe the progressive autonomization of the image from the original picture. It is a clear example of the migration of the aura towards a different realization (the mural one), more compatible with the domain of the touristic experience of consumers and with the relation of spectatorial reverence demanded by sacred icons<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 8).



FIG. 8. FALCONE AND BORSELLINO IN PALERMITAN RESTAURANTS FOCUSED ON "LOCAL GASTRONOMY".

<sup>4</sup> On the liminalities between religious and touristic experience, see Pomian 2003, pp. 12–13.



**FIG. 9.** STENCILS OF FALCONE (2021) AND BORSSELLINO (2022) REALIZED BY TVBOY ON THE EVE OF THE CAPACI MASSACRE ANNIVERSARY.

The Marina mural is interestingly contrasted with recent stencils by Palermo street artist TvBoy, created in May 2021 and 2022 (Fig. 9). The work is located on a side street of Piazza Marina. It does not capture Gentile's photo but a more anonymous one. Falcone is standing, facing the viewer frontally. He apostrophizes and questions us. He holds a spray can in his right hand, stretched along his side. It is as red as the heart pinned on his jacket. But also like the writing he seems to have penned himself, that stands out behind and above his head, like an invitation he addresses to us with his gaze: "It is time to move on". In 2022, on the Eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Capaci massacre, the work was completed by a second stencil, predictably depicting Borsellino. The character has the same human size. Slightly three-quarters, he does not look directly at the spectator. Like the former, he is thematized as a "street artist" (which in turn thematizes the street artist as Falcone and Borsellino, in a superposition of the subject of enunciation and the subject of the utterance) by the depiction of the grey paint used to write the message over his head. A message that, furthermore, may easily be read as a continuation of the phrase written on top

of Falcone: "For smelling the fresh perfume of freedom".

This is a break with the iconographic tradition littered by the process of symbolization, segments of which we have recovered. First because, by bringing Falcone and Borsellino back to a human dimension, it opposes the sacralization of commissioned street art. Second, because, in this movement, he explicitly addresses the present of the viewer by proposing a new contract of reading, no longer based on memory, but, as the content uttered written in the first image suggests, on the open and indeterminate planning of the future; a concept reiterated at the level of enunciation though the lateral gaze of Borsellino, suggesting the spectator himself to raise his eyes. Thirdly, because apparently Falcone and Borsellino are no longer inseparable. This break, however, is not a clean one. The apparent stylistic, semantic, and syntactic continuity between the works reinstated the photo's two-actor structure, confirming the inseparability of Falcone *and* Borsellino. This continuity wouldn't be as clear if Gentile's photo didn't establish its visual standards. But his photo is not the only "standard", the only "original" this copy refers to, notably under the respect



of size, creating a semi-symbolism with the semantic opposition Divine vs. Human; an opposition in which the Divine, however, is somewhat comprised the exemplarity of some martyred humans, as the peculiar setting of the first stencil very close to an altar, doesn't fail to give off (not surprisingly, some months later its realization, someone laid a rose and a candle at her feet). So the aura migrates, and through this migration, through the variants of a text, it paves the way for its symbolic-becoming.

### 7. CONCLUSION

I cared to end up on TvBoy because it represents an escape line from the semantic universe covered by the process of symbolization initiated by Tony Gentile's shots. It is, in fact, both a form of closure and an opening of the discourse it initiated. A process in which, as can be seen, the photograph is just a segment.

Gentile's shot indeed had symbolic effects after its publication on *Il Messaggero*: it fostered the public elaboration of a discourse on death felt as a collective loss. This helps us take a stance on how an image become a symbol, departing from the idea that symbols derive their strength and significance from historic facts fundamentally different from semi-otic process: the photo become a symbol precisely because it is used as an argument within a discourse that reference, reconstruct and reinterpret an event as an historical, collective loss. From there, it stimulated multiple re-uses, connecting various domains of culture such as the infosphere, the political sphere, the public memory sphere, and even the economic sphere (through tourism, gastronomy, and folklorization of antimafia). Through these re-uses, however, it also induced a displacement of its "auratic effect", leading to its de-iconization: while within the infosphere the image broke an iconogra-

phy of death and gave way to a militant use affirming a collective political identity oriented towards the contingency of remembrance, in the later reproductions, notably from the Cala mural, the image took a new direction towards an idea of durable typicality.

While each of these "copies" forced on spectators the feeling of facing something bigger than a simple image, an isolated text, the cultural memory of the re-uses turned more than one corner, leading to an authentication of the typicality of the symbol instead of its historically determined political use. It is clear, however, that the "aura" was quickly stolen from the photography<sup>5</sup>. This allows us to go back on the idea of the "auratic effect of the symbol": *it is the activation of the shifts between a symbol and its genealogy*, tracing a trail of "symbolic career"; a "career" of strategic uses and semantic effects bound to convene a collective body within a specific semiosphere.

We could think of it as differentiating power lost through saturation precisely when reproductions are too faithful to their antecedents and successors, without adding much to them. This is what seems to me to have happened in the 2000s, where the image has been used to inform tourist-gastronomic content, articulated far more lavishly elsewhere. Instead, the rhetorical creativity – a real explosion in the Lotmanian sense – that the image on the sheets had in the context of political participation in the historical period of the 1990s is quite evident. Those sheets seem to me to be the best representative of the rhetorical power of the symbolization process series that is the photo in journalistic discourse. What we would like to emphasize, in short, is the mythic functioning of the symbol, that is, the importance of its reproduction, serialization, and putting into variation.

<sup>5</sup> We could interpret the recent campaigns for the respect of photographs' intellectual property started by Gentile, its trial against RAI (the national Italian broadcasting company) for intellectual property violation (Bolzoni 2022) and its high quality reprintings of Falcone and Borsellino's shot (see the author's commercial website, <https://www.tonygentile.it/>), as political, legal and commercial attempts to "bring back" the stolen aura to its work.

It is indeed a form of uniqueness that completely undermines the idea of the original. A strange and fascinating semiotic being, to whom it is not obvious to make room among the people of “semiphors” (Pomian 1990) that our culture recognizes. I hope I have given a few more elements for better representation.

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# VINEYARD'S AURA

## TOURISTIC DISCOURSE IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S *A GOOD YEAR*

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**ABSTRACT.** This essay – part of an ongoing project dedicated to highlighting the rhetorical and ideological representations of food and wine in cinema – carries out a semiotic analysis of the film *A good year* (2006) by Ridley Scott, with the aim of identifying the role that wine plays in it and therefore in the represented touristic imaginary. In this film, a spatial dialectic among city and country gets outlined which allows to identify two competing forms of life – one metropolitan, the other related to living in the country. By highlighting the differences among them, the article seeks to define the terms of the auratic proposal which oeno-tourism makes to the urban citizen tempted of visiting wine lands.

**KEYWORDS:** Wine, Tourism, Cinema, Semiotics, Aura

### 1. STUDYING THE TOURISTIC CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Touristic discourse is enmeshed in an inextricable web of textualities encompassing as wide a range of materials as promotional brochures, literary narratives, films, television broadcasts, journalistic reports, advertising campaigns, or even blogs and social streams managed by modish influencers. To these we may add gadgets and souvenirs offered as

gifts upon return or even the insufferable videos of one's holidays the viewing of which, up until recently (now everything happens in real time on social networks) was offered to the tourist's circle of closest friends specially invited for the purpose.

It is clear how in such a cauldron, narration (of a lived experience) and experience (to be recounted) end up supporting each other, playing the role of semiotic drivers of travel, acting as virtualizing

agents capable of instilling in others a wanting-to-do or a having-to-do related to tourism and condensing the reasons and passions for setting off towards the next destination. But, just for the fact of working as *senders*, these representations play their function also at the end of the process: it's to them that one must get back in order to assess their own experience towards the social discourse conveyed by the media and public opinion. The ability of the journey to constitute itself as an individual verification of a collective discourse will, hence, seal its success as a touristic experience. This implies that, regardless of the destination, the type of activity carried out, and the style of the settings chosen, the touristic discourse may be recognized by virtue of some characterizing mechanisms that are to be uncovered through critical reflection, as studying their articulation appears as an effective way to study tourism tout court.

Our analysis will proceed on the basis of these assumptions and take into consideration an aspect of touristic cultural imagery – that of wine tourism – by examining its representation in a 2006 romantic comedy, *A Good Year*. Directed by famous British director Ridley Scott and starring international stars Russell Crowe and Marion Cotillard, this rom-com is in turn based on a 'touristic' novel<sup>1</sup> by English writer Peter Mayle bearing the same title and published in 2004 (see Mayle 2004)<sup>2</sup>. Coincidentally, the film's genesis also lies in the acquaintance of the writer with the director, made possible by the fact of being 'neighbours' in Provence, where Mayle lived permanently (after moving there) until his death while Scott usually spent periods of vacation and rest.

This essay is part of a broader and ongoing reconstruction of gastronomic and oenological discourse in cinema (Man-

giapane 2013, 2014, 2021), therefore any given hypothesis and attestation around the film will take into account such an overall articulation.

## 2. A CONTRAST BETWEEN SENDERS

As I have pointed out in a previous work (Mangiapane 2021), the oenological discourse in cinema can be recognized by difference within a broader corpus of stories around food. In fact, it can be argued that stories about wine overturn the dialectic underpinning stories about cooking, without however changing their form. Whenever 'taste' is the subject of a film narrative, the latter usually involves 'nomadic' heroes, bearers of an intangible cultural heritage – their gastronomic know-how – which travels with them and will be established from time to time in the places where they choose to stay. The way these heroes cook and eat appears different from the way the same actions are performed in the community they enter. As a rule, this is enough to cause scandal, forcing the subjects who host them to take a public position in the face of their difference, either accepting it as a gift, or rejecting it.

As we said, in stories about wine things go the opposite way. These are stories that emphasize the 'return' (*nostos*) and existential repositioning of the protagonists which have been 'recalled' by chance – for example by a fortuitous inheritance – to the vineyard. Such unexpected event will take them back to the physical place from which they came originally and with which they had cut all ties, leading them to consider the possibility of re-focussing their identity in continuity with the symbolic system that they had previously traumatically abandoned. This is what happens in the novel *A Good Year* and in the homonymous film on which it is based. The story

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<sup>1</sup> We use this adjective in referring generally to the kind of plot-driven consumer literature, undemanding by definition and conceived as escapist, to be read during or around the holidays. Among the favorite themes of this genre is the dramatization of stories that have to do with the chosen tourist location, often presented as an exotic and intriguing place, whose narrative exploration can ideally take place in parallel with the physical exploration while travelling.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Mayle's literary production is mostly centered on Provence (see Wikipedia, *Peter Mayle*, ad vocem, [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Mayle](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Mayle), consulted on 1 September 2022).

narrated<sup>3</sup> is that of a successful London broker named Max Skinner grappling with the news of having inherited a large Provençal chateau from his late uncle, who has died without a direct successor. Skinner goes back to Provence to stay in his uncle's castle, where he used to spend the summer as a child, with the intention of ridding himself of the substantial inheritance as soon as possible and selling it at the first opportunity to then return to London. It will be during this process, while he is busy gathering the documents needed for the sale, that he will realize the symbolic value of his Provençal and more generally French affiliation, by contrast with his way of life in England.

The gap between the two situations is emphasized in the film through a semi-symbolic system: the London setting from which the protagonist comes is shot in a palette dominated by cold colours (shades of blue) while the Provençal setting is represented in warm colours, mostly brown and yellow (figg. 1–2). What emerges is a dialectic that connects these two chromatic universes to two forms of life: one characterized by the pre-eminence accorded to the 'urban' and abstract values of economic rationality and marked by fast living; the other proceeding slowly, linked as it is to the cyclical time of the seasons, to the primacy of 'community' values and the strong ties underpinning them. This dialectic, which prefigures a contrast between senders – the fascination of the city versus the exoticism of the vineyard – is the backdrop against which the film plays out. Thus Max, the protagonist, will find himself vacillating between the two horizons, and in the end opt for a life as a Provençal heir, not least because in the meantime he has fallen in love with a local innkeeper. It is therefore a story centred on the theme of conversion, which dramatizes the inner torment and the corresponding

hesitations of those who find themselves faced with a radical choice.



FIGG. 1-2. SEMI-SYMBOLISM BETWEEN PROVENCE AND LONDON

Although the theme of conversion may seem distant from that of tourism, the peculiar way in which this film puts into continuity the two thematic universes allows us to deduce an implicit theory of tourism from the events narrated.

### 3. TOURISTIC DISCOURSE AND THE AURA

A first important remark is how the 'touristicity' of *A Good Year* can only arise from paradox. The film in question appears, in fact, bent on actively denigrating the tourist's viewpoint. Indeed, it is precisely the superficiality of the occasional traveller's gaze that is opposed to the story's underlying invitation: that of delving into the experience, of chasing the ultimate, 'authentic' meaning of the traversed territory. Marco D'Eramo (2017, pp. 43–44) addressed the problem of authenticity in the tourism discourse drawing on Culler, who in his exploration of the possibilities of a Semiotics of Tourism had already noted how the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic could be considered as a 'powerful semiotic operator within tourism' (Culler 1981, pp. 127–140, now in Culler 1988, pp. 153–167).

<sup>3</sup> Given its complexity, the plot is briefly reconstructed, for the sake of the analysis that will follow. Such a simplification deliberately leaves out secondary narrative lines, proper subplots, which are not pertinent in the economy of analysis.

Following this suggestion, we can highlight a first characteristic of the touristic discourse: it can only constitute itself as a negation of itself, to the extent that the very fact of bringing to the attention of an audience a specific territory and its imagery emphasizing its presumed authenticity leads to its debasing and trivialization:

The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes. [...] The authentic sight requires markers, but our notion of the authentic is the unmarked. (Culler 1988, p. 164).

Such remark allows us to call into question the notion of aura. By the way, we intend to appeal to it in a restricted, so to speak, operational sense. The semiotic discipline, within a broader philosophical debate relating to the construction of a structural theory of culture, has developed an original reflection on this notion which ranges from Baudrillard ([1972] 1981) to Lotman (1974), from Eco (1985, 1990) to Greimas (1980, 1987) and Prieto ([1988] 1989), from Fabbri (2010) up to the latest contributions by Dondero (2007), Latour ([2008] 2011), Fontanille (2015) and still others. This essay, in continuity with this just drawn family of studies, tends to think of the aura as an effect of meaning constructed by the text, liable to be established under particular enunciative conditions. Starting from the problem posed by Benjamin ([1936] 1968) – that of circumscribing the problem of the authenticity and uniqueness of the work of art, as defined by its presence in time, space and in the relationship with its technical reproducibility

– a semiotic theory of everyday life will want to grasp its role as an asset, susceptible, as will be seen in more detail in the course of the analysis, of being involved in the construction of a sort of “perceptive pact” between enunciator and enunciatee. Such an approach will therefore be interested in revealing the procedural matrix of these aura effects, framing each of their manifestation within a tension between establishment and fall that also includes the problems related to its translation and migration. Seen as an effect and in its procedural matrix, the problem of authenticity induced by the aura will arise in terms of management, of administration. Effects of aura will be pursued by social actors for the valorisation of their discourses and their goods, even more so in a contemporary scenario marked by the artification (Heinich and Shapiro 2012) of everyday life. The case of tourism, among others, is exemplary in this regard, being, as we have seen, the paradox of authenticity consubstantial with its very determination.

Having made these dutiful clarifications, we can return to *A Good Year*. At first, the film’s protagonist considers the period to be spent in Provence as a harmless parenthesis in a life solidly hinged on the urban values of the London financial district. The immersion in the daily life of the Provençal village in which he finds himself and the progressive assimilation into it will in fact allow him to experience a proper identity shift<sup>4</sup>, which, precisely by virtue of its alleged authenticity, will succeed in determining his decision to move to Provence.

But tourists are not all the same and in order to let such a transformation – from tourist to expat – happen, a trip is not as good as any. This is why it is es-

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4 In sociological and marketing terms, for some time now, a trend towards “experiential tourism” or even “transformative” tourism (Reisinger, ed., 2013) has been distinguished from the more traditional modes of confirmatory tourism. In the canonical approaches, the journey was mostly understood as a confirmation of the tourist’s departure identity so that upon the return of the journey, his beliefs could be strengthened. Transformative tourism thinks of the moment of travel as an opportunity for the tourist to acquire some know-how, to experiment with some qualifying challenge. Upon return from the trip, these experiences will therefore give the tourist a transformed image and perception of himself and of society. For a semiotic reading of the phenomenon and a case study of experiential tourism see Puca 2021, p. 117–161.



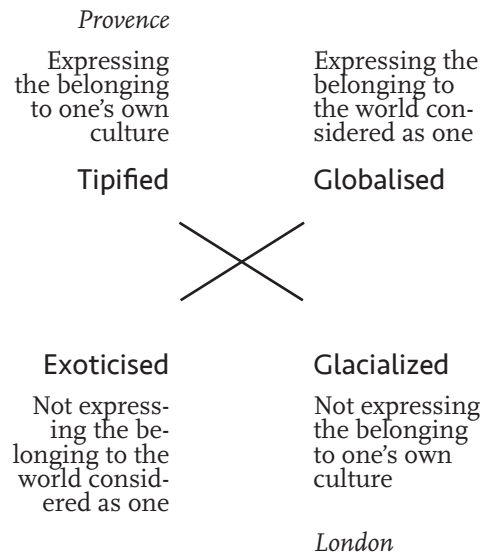
essential to wonder what value Max actually seeks in his explorations, a value that cannot already be traced in his comfortable life of a successful broker as he is. Answering this question will let us draw from Max's concrete experience a general understanding of the "lack" felt by the "urban" spectator postulated by the film as well as of the foundation of his eventual desire to travel.

**4. SPATIAL GENRES**

Answering the questions outlined above requires first of all a more accurate description of the spatial dialectic between London and Provence the way it is staged by the director through the chromatic semi-symbolism described earlier. For this purpose, reference can be made to a square proposed by Giannitrapani (2013, pp. 137–140) who, with regard to restaurant venues, recognizes four forms of spatiality based on the opposition between restaurants that represent themselves as bearers of a local identity (typical restaurants) and restaurants which, on the contrary, pose as bearers of a cosmopolitan identity (globalized restaurants) in that they use signs and icons of globalisation. From this fundamental opposition, Giannitrapani recognizes two other positions whereby negating the 'globalized' will yield an *exoticized* restaurant – that is, one that will tend to mark its belonging to some cultural otherness – and, on the other hand, negating the *typified*, a *glacialized* space will be obtained, the explicit aim of which is to erase any signs of cultural belonging. It can easily be observed how the dialectic between London and Provence, in the film in question, also takes the form of a dialectic between opposing spatial models. On one side are the city offices where Max Skinner's character moves: they are characterized by minimalist design, in line with a contemporary aesthetic which, by rejecting any decoration (according to the assumption that 'form follows function'), erases all expressions of identity or any setting that may be ascribed to some identifiable cultural affil-

iation. These can therefore be identified as 'glacialized spaces' (fig. 3). Conversely, the spaces in Provence are inserted within (stereo-)typically French landscapes and architectures – the *chateau*, the *dehors* of the Provençal restaurant full of round tables managed by Max's lover, its interiors characterized by saturated colours, and so on – and appear as *typified* spaces (figg. 4–5), in logical contradiction with the *glacialized* ones of the London setting.

In the square:



**FIG. 3.** GLACIALIZED SPACE OF THE LONDON OFFICE



**FIGG. 4-5.** TYPIFIED SPACE OF THE PROVENÇAL SCENERIES

There is more. The *glacialized* space of the financial offices where the broker Max works is mostly unpartitioned and brightly lit, reproducing the open space model that is typical of the offices of large global corporations. Its internal articulations are organized through clear panels allowing the light to circulate freely (to quote Fontanille 1995, as *glow*) and determining a regime of absolute transparency which, as a result, qualifies the managers as hyper-competent, complacent custodians of the power that comes from visual domination over what is happening. Such condition of hyper-competence also proceeds from the exploitation of the potential offered by the opposite strategy, that of hyper-mediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000, pp. 21–50). The screens that dot the offices here and there (fig. 6), standing out for the vividness of their colours, serve as optical prostheses, control devices oriented towards some elsewhere worthy of attention: in short, they play the semiotic role of informants (Fontanille 1987) at the service of the managers, ‘increasing’ their pre-established knowledgeable position, and consequently their self-perception as eminent subjects, custodian of a more than enhanced capability to do. However, it is the system itself that tells the viewer of the fragility of a structure so conceived, if we consider that, as Bolter and Grusin have pointed out (*ibidem*), transparency is a utopia that the media have always pursued and yet can never be completely achieved. This is why, in the pursuit of such an ideal of total transpar-

ency, the structures that divide the rooms are ultimately confusing and make it impossible to distinguish the organisation of the space into planes<sup>5</sup>. The proliferation of transparent panels, moreover, produces annoying visual glares (fig. 7): by disturbing the vision, they contribute to maintaining the awareness of the artificiality of such articulation. Finally, the multiple screens, each of which beckons the attention of managers, do nothing but increase the general level of confusion; therefore the finely crafted regime ultimately implodes<sup>6</sup>, assuming the appearance of its opposite, that of a noisy and chaotic market square<sup>7</sup>. Understandably, the perception of the vulnerability of such an arrangement also agitates the mind of managers like Max who, although apparently confident, cannot fail to feel, in their hearts, the intrinsic fragility (indeed the primary material quality of glass) that underlies their position of power.

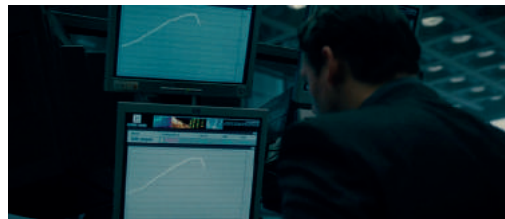


FIG. 6. INFORMANT SCREENS.



FIG. 7. FLATTENED PLANES AND MULTIPLE VISUAL GLARES

<sup>5</sup> According to Wölfflin [1984] 2015, the articulation of space as a sequence of planes is one of the qualities of classic art in opposition to that of Baroque which, in this regard, prefers to create effects of depth, confusing the planes of representation. Following Wölfflin's observations (imported into Semiotics by Floch cf. [1995] 2005, pp. 85–115, and further discussed by Marrone 2007, pp. 276–285), the office space of the film could be comprised and understood within a baroque vision (within a general disposition of the contemporary oriented, to quote Calabrese, 1987, towards the neo-baroque). Baroque aesthetics, in its reinterpretation by semiotic theory, is associated with a form of life oriented towards non-continuity, characterized, among other things, by the ‘loss of cognitive mastery by a subject faced with a world apprehended as an event’ (cf. Floch [1995] 2005, p. 100).

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Marrone (2007a) in his work dedicated to the analysis of Steven Spielberg's film *The Terminal* (2007), points out how the airport – a space of modernity comparable to the London offices where Max works – founded as it is on transparency as an architectural code and on the *panopticon* as a control device for its passengers made possible by this quality, ends up obstructing the vision of the surveillance cameras: the diffused glares that spread uncontrollably in space in fact determine the implosion of the panoptic regime (see especially pp. 145–149) and the ‘failure’ of its control mission.

<sup>7</sup> This is what the viewer of the film can appreciate during the stock market trading sessions in which Max exercises his savoir-faire as a broker: they always degenerate into bedlam.

The *typified* space of Provençal environments is also peculiar. According to Fontanille (1995), it always appears as ‘matter-light’ (fig. 8), a stratified space, an extension to be traversed in depth: the opposite of the flattening of the planes achieved for the city offices. Precisely for this reason it is full of pitfalls: there either are no screens or they do not work, just as the GPS in charge of guiding Max through the narrow streets does not work: navigating this space without a map is an incredibly difficult as well as dangerous undertaking, it only takes a trifle to fall into a disused swimming pool and get trapped there, as happens at one point in a famous scene of the film. In Provence, every perception is situated in such a way that seeing becomes one with feeling, that is, with the conjuring up of an overall and all-encompassing perceptive universe in which distinguishing between the five canonical senses is nearly impossible.

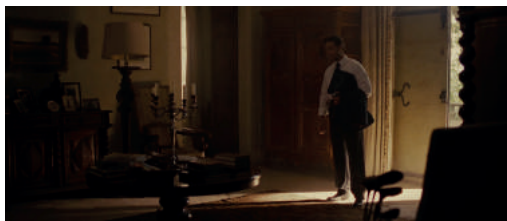


FIG. 8. LIGHT ‘MATTER’ IN THE PROVENÇAL INTERIORS

As we will see, it is precisely the perceptive gap between the two environments that takes on increasing significance for the protagonist.

##### 5. DISCOURSE ON THE AURA<sup>8</sup>

At a certain point in the film – precisely at the beginning of Max’s exploration of Provence – the camera lingers on a

detail of the hall of the restaurant where Fanny, the woman Max will fall madly in love with, works. None of the characters is involved in this fleeting vision which, therefore, is constituted as a “description”, an extradiegetic relationship that the text establishes between enunciator and enunciatee. In this passage, apparently secondary, we see Fanny quickly passing in front of the wall where the till is located, painted in a very intense yellow, on which hangs a tourist poster reproducing a famous work by Van Gogh, painted during his stay on site in 1890, *Country Road in Provence by Night* (fig. 9). It is precisely the tourist discourse that marks the base of the painting with the wording “Provence” that informs the viewer that the picture hanged on the wall is a copy. Interestingly, next to the poster we can glimpse a vase full of sunflowers (fig. 10). Both details, the tourism poster and the flower vase, pass, as we said, literally unnoticed, in the sense that they are not ‘looked at’ by any of the characters. The fact remains that Van Gogh’s work is doubly invoked, as an explicit quotation framed by the touristic discourse of the poster and, more subtly, in the figure of the vase of sunflowers, which evokes the famous series of paintings the artist dedicated to that subject around the same period. What effect is produced by juxtaposing these images? Although they are interchangeable from the point of view of the themes and figures represented, which refer to the special geo-anthropological makeup of the Provençal territory (with its starry nights, its paths, and its peculiar vegetation as well as with its artists), they differ from the point of view of their putting into discourse. On the

<sup>8</sup> The discourse on the film’s aura is more articulated than that which we will outline below, bringing into play at least two other narrative strands identifiable in the plot. The first has to do with a photograph of Max’s uncle, which Max is shown by an American girl who, at one point, knocks on the door of the castle. She will tell Max that she is looking for her father, the man portrayed in that very photo alongside her mother. The fortuitous discovery of another print of the same photo among the uncle’s papers will provide the proof of his lineage. The second concerns the forged autograph letter that Max decides to produce in order to remedy the lack of supporting documents proving the girl’s status as his late uncle’s closest relative and consequently as the legitimate recipient of the inheritance. This letter, precisely by virtue of being ‘by the author’ (written by the nephew with a calligraphy he had learned directly from his uncle, and with his ink and paper) is believed to be true. For our purposes, it is important to remember how these narrative strands allow us to place the discourse on the film’s aura not on the veridictory level (the aura that tells the ‘truth’ of the work) but, as we will see, on the level of its perceptual and therefore existential value.

one hand, the poster's discourse is the result of a *debrayage* that literally frames Van Gogh's artistic discourse, roughly quoting it through a reproduction where the space of representation has been flagrantly defaced (by the superimposed touristic slogan) and the textural qualities of the paint have been flattened in a two-dimensional photographic reproduction<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, the vase of sunflowers is presented in the first instance as part of the environment, so that the viewer can picture it more vividly filling the restaurant with its perfume and impacting with its strong scent the perception of its patrons.



FIG. 9-10. THE YELLOW WALL WITH THE TOURISM POSTER

Thus, the director has developed a veritable theory of perception by silently juxtaposing the two objects – the vase of sunflowers and the tourism poster – in order to show their irreducibility. If it is

intuitive to assume the coarse tourism poster of Van Gogh's painting as a decline of the aura resulting from its technical reproduction, the presence of the vase of sunflowers plays a more subtle role of re-activator of the same touristic discourse by staging a return to the semiotic source of the poster, thanks to that which in Semiotics is known as an *embrayage*. Through this expedient, the objects of Van Gogh's artistic representation faintly echoed by the tourism poster can be regained without mediation, in their primordial guise, so to speak, that is before being 'selected' by the artist's gaze and through it by the institutional tourism discourse on the territory. Unlike *Country Road in Provence by Night*<sup>10</sup>, the sunflowers are not explicitly referred to as works within the narration: their eventual recognition – clearly 'facilitated' by the fact that sunflowers are among the Dutch painter's most famous subjects<sup>11</sup> – is ultimately left to the interpretative activity of the spectators who will thus be able to indulge in the illusion of having come to that revelation by themselves. In line with Culler's observations I have cited at the beginning of this essay, it is only in this way that the flowers can in fact appear to them inviolate, auratic sources in a relationship of non-discontinuity with the instances of the *I* that perceives, the *here* that emanates, and the *now* that flees. The juxtaposition of the tourism poster and the vase of flowers therefore demands acknowledging their

<sup>9</sup> Bruno Latour (with Adam Lowe, 2011) dwells at length on the effects of the decline of the aura in the photographic reproductions of art masterpieces. He observes that it can be attributed to the lack of accuracy with which they are usually made. Taking for example the case of the *Wedding at Cana* by Veronese, a work kept in the Louvre in an unsuitable space whose conditions are far removed from the intended location, Latour notes how the copy of this masterpiece made for the refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice substantiates the possibility of a 'migration of the aura' from the original to its copy.

<sup>10</sup> In the film we are also shown *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (1893) by Paul Gauguin, the famous artist who lived for a time in Provence with his friend and rival, Vincent Van Gogh.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Goody, in his famous book devoted to the *Culture of Flowers* (Goody 1963, p. 207) refers to Van Gogh's sunflowers as a subject whose printed reproduction was highly popular for decorating dining rooms in private houses in the early XX century, a sign (and an effect) of a peculiar process of "democratisation" of floral culture in Europe, what he later (*ibidem*, p. 404) defines as the "sunflower effect". As claimed, however, the reference to Van Gogh's sunflowers does not even require to be underscored, to exert its semiotic power. Any effort of a pedagogical order, aimed at facilitating the recognition of their iconic value, being obvious to most, would have probably determined the decline of their aura.

difference<sup>12</sup>. The coarseness of the reproduction<sup>13</sup> determines the collapse of the perceptive depth of the work, deleting all multisensory aspects – for instance, tactile or olfactory – in the name of the primacy of the visual and cognitive spheres. The result is, therefore, impoverished to the point of making the painting appear as a faded image of itself. Whereas the reproduction anesthetizes, the vase of flowers empowers – in other words, it *hyperesthetizes*<sup>14</sup>. Illich (1987) offers a cogent account of the role that the olfactory dimension plays in such a juxtaposition:

Both living and dead bodies have an aura. This aura takes up space and gives the body a presence beyond the confines of its skin [...] it blends into the atmosphere of a particular space. Odor is a trace that dwelling leaves on the environment. As fleeting as each person's aura might be, the atmosphere of a given space has its own kind of permanence, comparable to the building style characteristic of a neighborhood. This aura, when sensed by the nose, reveals the non-dimensional properties of a given space; just as the eyes perceive height and depth and the feet measure distance, the nose perceives the quality of an interior (Illich 1985, pp. 51–52).

The olfactory imprint of the flowers is invoked in its quality of primordial inspiring force capable of exerting a deep influence, freeing the subject from the slavery of the visual. The film audience is thus given an enunciative position that constructs them as perceptive subjects, enabled to glimpse the possibility of experiencing the depth of those same impressions that must have pushed Van Gogh's genius towards the pictorial representation: in a certain sense, offering them the possibility of putting them-

selves in his shoes. But all of this, as has been said, lasts for the time of a fleeting shot at the beginning of the film.

## 6. FIGURE AND BACKGROUND

Meanwhile Max Skinner, stuck in the village preparing the papers for the sale of the newly inherited chateau, has the opportunity to experience himself in such an immersion. The space of the castle where, as a child, he used to spend time with his now deceased uncle becomes a veritable mine of impressions. In it everything resonates, triggering, through its materiality, a true aesthetic grasp in the form of vivid memories or imaginative projections: in these poetic moments it is the space that speaks through the simulacrum of the uncle, manipulating Max. For the rest it is an evolution without real twists that revolves around the funny aspects of the protagonist's 'adjustment' to the new context. Thus, we witness a progressive shift of the values at stake: what should be considered as a figure and what as a background of the action? What should be considered pertinent to give meaning to one's life? The question – always deferred – will become pressing once Max's London boss Sir Nigel backs him into a corner, criticizing his excesses as an Englishman seduced by the oddities of the 'frog-eating' French, and, on the other hand, offering him a life-changing opportunity, that of becoming a partner of the studio with a view to definitively assuming its values. It is at this point that Max is forced to take stock of his life: the dispute between the two is revealed as a discourse on perception whose terms are realized by Max again through an aesthetic grasp<sup>15</sup>, the results

12 Yuri Lotman (1986) has devoted an essay to the problem of the relationship between words (signs) and things in painting, claiming that still life may be recognized as a style which problematizes such a relationship, in two opposite directions, from *signs to things* (promoting a "total reification of the thing" represented) and from *things to signs* (as in allegorical still lifes such as *Vanitas*).

13 We agree with Latour (see footnote no. 9) in stating that the decline of the aura does not depend on its technical reproducibility, as Benjamin claimed, but by the poor quality of the reproductions.

14 Following Hetzel (2002), Boutaud (2005, 2007, 2016) proposes a model of sensory regimes derived from the dialectic between *emphatic*, *empathic*, *pathic* and *phatic*.

15 Semiotic theory, following Greimas (1987), refers to the 'aesthetic grasp' (*saisie esthétique*) as a moment of non-narrative transformation of the subject induced by the perception that combines with the trial schema represented by the canonical narrative schema. Marrone writes ([1995] 2013, p. 393): 'The aesthetic grasp would then be

of which he will promptly accept and defend in front of his interlocutor.

### 7. FIRST AESTHETIC GRASP

What happens is impassively recorded by the sidereal gaze of the camera which shoots the conversation between the two, held behind closed doors. However, the detached viewpoint aimed at reporting the diegetic relationships between the characters is preceded by a scene which calls into question the enunciative relationship with the spectator's instance. Once again, it is an apparently unimportant, passing sequence. Max is summoned by his boss and, while he is standing on the threshold waiting for the latter to finish talking on the phone, his eyes are drawn to the works of art displayed in the studio. His gaze rests on a black sculpture depicting two lovers wrapped in a passionate kiss. As soon as it enters the frame, the director turns to the viewers, proposing a visual exploration for their exclusive consumption. It is a true change of perspective: the referential representation gives way to a close gaze that seeks to bring out its material, haptic, erotic aspects in the literal sense<sup>16</sup>. This exploration anticipates Max's gesture: once he gets close to the sculpture, he can only double the course of his action by effecting a further exploration of it, this time tactile (fig. 11): his hand covers the surface of the sculpture in the same way as the camera, in a point of view shot<sup>17</sup>. This exploration is the moment in which something changes.

Max can now turn his attention to another work of art: it is the same *Country Road in Provence by Night* (fig. 12) whose reproduction hangs on a wall in Fanny's restaurant.



FIG. 11. THE TACTILE EXPLORATION OF THE SCULPTURE

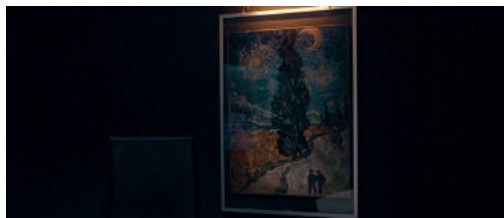


FIG. 12. COUNTRY ROAD IN PROVENCE BY NIGHT IN SIR NIGEL'S OFFICE

He recognizes Van Gogh's painting and challenges his interlocutor: how can a man whose life pivots on the abstraction of money choose to display such valuable work in his office without fearing it will be stolen? Sir Nigel rejects this charge of naivety by informing him that the picture hanging on the wall in plain sight is only a very expensive copy of the original painting, which is securely stored in a safe. He motivates his vocation for art collecting as another 'passions' of his, alongside that for women, horses, and so on; whims that he indulges in his busy life. Max quickly retorts: 'are they passions or vices, sir?'. The question remains unanswered as Sir Nigel goes on to illustrate the terms of his offer of making Max a partner of the firm: taking it up will mean accepting the life choice founded on the primacy of economic rationality. Sir Nigel gives Max an hour to think about it, which the latter spends pensively in front of the office window, closed against the lashing

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that astounding, dazzling, pungent, elusive moment about which it is not possible to express judgments or knowledge except when it is no longer there, it has vanished to make way to a cognitive representation of it and a consequent sense of nostalgia and imperfection'.

<sup>16</sup> From an enunciative point of view, there is a change from a referential communication style to a substantial one (see the articulation of a square of advertising styles proposed by Floch 1997, pp. 231–276 and the progressive generalization of the model within an overall brand discourse in Marrone 2007b, pp. 197–206, and finally converging into a general semiotic theory, see Marrone 2022, pp. 216–234).

<sup>17</sup> In cinematographic language, the POV shot is a filming technique "that shows what the character is looking at" cf. Wikipedia, Subjective, ad vocem, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point-of-view\\_shot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point-of-view_shot), accessed September 1, 2022.

rain (fig. 13). Again, an aesthetic grasp will guide him in his choice.

### 8. SECOND AESTHETIC GRASP

Max's gaze is drawn to the rain drops running down the window pane. This image gives way to a flashback of his childhood in Provence, in which he is alone by the swimming pool with an equally very young Fanny – who therefore turns out to be an old acquaintance of his – by the opposite side. As they are lying in the sun waiting for their guardians to return, Fanny does not hesitate to dive into the pool to swim to him and kiss him (figg. 14–15).



**FIG. 13.** MAX GAZES PENSIVELY AT THE WINDOW WHILE THE RAIN TAPS ON THE GLASS PANES



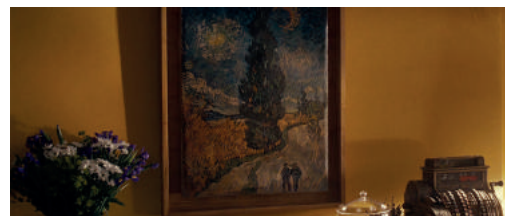
**FIG. 14–15.** AFTER DIVING IN THE POOL, FANNY RE-EMERGES AND KISSES MAX

It is the nostalgia<sup>18</sup> of the moist little kiss that the girl had given him that

strikes him, establishing itself by contrast with respect to his own condition of blasé city dweller<sup>19</sup>, forced to pay with his perceptive split for the protection guaranteed by the screens. After all, the window that shelters him from the rain can only appear to him as yet another interface that separates him from a situated perception of his own existence. The search for himself as a single unified perceptive unit negated in *glacialized* environments dominated by sight will push him towards the ultimate choice of giving up his job and with it his former existence as an urban man. Max has understood: he is now ready to challenge his boss in terms of the valency<sup>20</sup> of values at stake: what is more worth, the 'abstract' life guided by money or that situated and 'concrete' foreshadowed by Provence?

Once again this opposition can be expressed as a discourse around the work of art and its aura: 'When do you look at it? Do you make late-night pilgrimages down to the vault just to see it or?'

It is at this point that the story can return to Provence.



**FIG. 16.** COUNTRY ROAD IN PROVENCE BY NIGHT IN THE PROVENÇAL RESTAURANT

The scene cuts to the floor of Fanny's restaurant, on the wall of which we find *Country Road in Provence by Night* again, however without the touristic indication 'Provence' this time (fig. 16). What has changed? It won't take long for the view-

<sup>18</sup> The role of nostalgia in gastronomy and its connection to perception has been discussed by Marrone (2014 pp. 43–66, 2016b) with reference to the famous movie *Ratatouille* (dir. Brad Bird, 2007). Marrone notes that this passion, as activated by gustatory perception in the *saisie estétique*, actually liberates the surly food critic Anton Ego from misery, letting him glimpse unexpected options for a re-assessment of his life in the future. The bond which connects nostalgia and future has also been investigated in the psychoanalytic work of Recalcati (2022).

<sup>19</sup> Simmel and his works, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) and *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) spring to mind as a reference.

<sup>20</sup> In Semiotics, valency is understood as *the value of values* (see Greimas e Fontanille ([1991] 1992), pp. 18–19, Fabbri 1991, and the systematization carried out by Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998, pp. 11–27).

er to surmise what has happened: Max must have used his severance pay to buy the original painting by Van Gogh and reinsert it in its context of use, a miracle that only the viewer is privy to<sup>21</sup>.

## 9. CONCLUSION: A THEORY OF THE REST

At this point we could ask ourselves how to clarify the overall proposal of this film by reconstructing its touristic rhetoric.

### 9.1. WINE AS PERCEPTIVE PROMISE

A first consideration regards the role played by wine in the latter. As we have seen, although our analysis is devoted to one of the most viewed and appreciated ‘wine’ films set in one of the most visited wine areas in the world, it does not dwell particularly on the specificities of this drink. On closer inspection, there are few scenes in which wine is identified as a value in itself. It is true that the film opens precisely with the memory of a drink, a flashback in which Max’s late uncle tries to explain to his nephew as a child the value of wine<sup>22</sup> and makes him try some, not before having prudently watered it down; however, there is no narrative development that allows us to assign to it a precise actantial role.

As a matter of fact, expensive bottles of wine and sophisticated tastings already have a place in the story before the trip to Provence: they serve to characterize Max’s city life, the ‘abstract’ life that sees him as

a successful broker in the city of London. What is wrong with this way of drinking and therefore with this life? Remaining anchored to the notion of *tasty* (see Marrone 2022) linked to cognitive recognition, these drinking sessions do not reach the deep level of perception but remain on the surface as status symbols, trophies of a successful life to be exhibited.

Wine, in Provence, is, on the contrary, everywhere and nowhere. In order for its perceptual value (what Marrone 2022 calls *flavourful*) to emerge, it must be decentralized as an object. This is how Ridley Scott’s comedy proceeds, following Max in the re-exploration of his space and his lost time. In this context, wine is there naturally, it has a place, it is part of the scene without its presence taking over the rest. And it is ‘the rest’ that, therefore, becomes the merit of the proposed meaning, so that only in retrospect can wine become the emblem of everything that is impossible to reduce in travel. In the film, ‘the rest’ takes centre stage, manifesting itself through the thousands of substances that find themselves making the ‘circle of muses’<sup>23</sup> around Max, spontaneously harmonizing their voices to build a single voice. The muses circle around Max in a continuous play of correspondences that brings together different sensorialities – the rustle of the wind sweeping the fields of Provence, Fanny’s moist lips, the dust that covers the abandoned castle, the scents that spread from

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21 To all effects the film erases the tourist marker from the poster, asking the most attentive spectators to solve the enigma by themselves. It is a choice that goes in the direction pointed by Culler (see above) of preserving the effect of authenticity of the touristic discourse through a wise use of a marked (I point where to look) unmarked (I will not explain what could have happened and ask viewers to infer it by themselves, without the mediation of a narrator).

22 In this initial sequence, wine is defined as a drink that is “simply incapable of lying”, a statement that cannot fail to resonate in the semiotician’s ear with reference to the well-known definition of Semiotics led by Eco as a “theory of lie” (cf. Eco [1975] 1976, p. 6–7). As we have seen, the whole film is oriented towards shifting this assumption from the regime of the cognitive (the problem of objective truth) to that of perception (the problem of the truth of perception).

23 With this metaphor, Jurij Lotman (1974, It. transl. 1998, pp. 23–37) designates the pertinence of a unitary ‘perceptive grammar’ underlying the material specificity of the arts. Sculpture, poetry, painting, music, and so on, make up ‘the circle of the muses’, translating into each other thanks to this shared foundation that establishes comparability between them, leaving room for a transversal identification of a ‘spirit of the age’ or a ‘style of the time’. Lotman’s essay was included in a posthumous collection edited by Cesare Segre, entitled *Il girotondo delle muse* (Lotman 1998) and its approach was revived in Italian Semiotics. The latter has built upon the findings of Greimas’ work on visual arts ([1984] 1989) to further explore the shared foundation posited by Lotman. This research perspective, currently in a theoretical definition phase (see Marrone’s latest output, 2022), the recent republication of the collection of essays for the Campo Aperto series of Bompiani, founded by Umberto Eco and now directed by Stefano Barthezzaghi.



the kitchen – reactivating the atrophied sensitivity of the blasé city man.

### 9.3. FROM WINE TO AURA

This is how wine – and the touristic discourse about it that the film focusses on – can speak through the discourse on the aura which involves Van Gogh's artistic work, in a sort of double enunciative leap, who, through Max, addresses the viewer: the characters in the film live immersed in a context that cannot be reduced by the mediated touristic discourse. In the difference between the primitive force of the scent of the sunflowers and the two-dimensional 'reduction' exemplified by tourism posters, one can, therefore, grasp the perceptive gap that anyone wishing to go in the direction of the vineyard is invited to bridge. It is in these terms that *A Good Year* establishes a 'disunited' enunciator, one initially convinced that he is happy in his own perceptive divergence but then urged to acknowledge 'lack'. It will take time to realize how misleading such a belief can be, one will have to fall into the pool and find oneself soaked and without control<sup>24</sup>. It will be necessary to rediscover the anthropological condition of a fully perceiving subject, after being atrophied by the hypertrophy of the visual. It is precisely the rediscovery of that condition which represents the value of *the return* – a common theme in many films dedicated to wine – to allow the viewer to recognize Max's existential path (being heir to a castle in Provence) within a broader, more general and relatable condition: that of being split subjects capable of returning to an atavistic condition of perception. In this context<sup>25</sup>, wine is posited as a substitute for the territory from which it emanates; only thus can we acknowledge that its material and sensory

aspects correspond<sup>26</sup> to the habitat they come from and call us to: wine circulates in the city but in order for us to penetrate its meaning we must set off on a journey to reach it in its context of production and first consumption, and live with it. It is at this point, that is, once it has accomplished its task of 'attraction', that it can disappear, taking a more discreet place on the table as the local product of a general, pervasive perceptive configuration widespread in the territory, in which one can immerse oneself. *In loco*, it will not have a value in itself, or as an object, but as an experiential substitute, the sign of a future perceptive unity in the environment of which it is at the same time an emanation and a substitute. The implication is that if wine keeps its promise, when we reach our destination we will recognize its proposed meaning in everything: in the wind that blows through the fields, in the colours of its villages, in the smells and scents that emanate from its environments, in the rites and ceremonies that mark the community life in which it finds its place. This is how the discourse on the anthropological and existential value of wine can be carried forward through a disquisition around the aura in painting, with reference to Van Gogh's work.

### 9.4. TOURISM RETHORIC OF THE EXPATRIATION

The question remains of how to relate to this heritage. *A Good Year* offers its solution which is configured, oxymoronically, as 'anti-tourist' tourism rhetoric. Max's life path traced by the film stages precisely the transformation of his travelling identity from that of a tourist to that of an expat<sup>27</sup>. This has a lot to do with the 'authenticity dilemma' evoked by Culler (see above) whereby the touristic markers of authenticity end up causing the aura of

<sup>24</sup> Exactly as it happens to Max (cf. § 4).

<sup>25</sup> The relationship between wine and territory has been extensively examined by Æsthetic and Semiotic theory, cf. at least Mangano 2014; Mangiapane 2021, Marrone 2014 e 2016a; Perullo 2012 e 2016; Puca 2021, Sangiorgi 2011.

<sup>26</sup> On this particular aspect I am in agreement with Nicola Perullo's valuable work (see among others 2012, 2020a, 2020b).

<sup>27</sup> 'While you've been on your little holiday, I've been in a shitstorm!' Sir Nigel holds against Max during the fight that would lead to his choice of resigning from his job and moving to Provence.

the marked experience to decline. From this point of view, it can be seen how the touristic experience is identified in a process of gradual assumption of a system of values: it is valid as an intermediate step, a transitory phase of exploration of a proposed meaning which, to the extent that it will be considered pregnant, can only be taken seriously and assumed as a way of life in what appears to be a true conversion. This certainly depends on an attitude (let us say a willingness to let oneself be affected, overwhelmed), derived from postulating travel as a moment of necessary loosening of identity, an opportunity for a vacation from oneself, the possibility of letting oneself be manipulated and changed by it. This is how the experience of travel is transformed into a discourse on value, that is to say, into a contrast between senders, between the affiliation at the start (represented in the film by the 'disunited' corporate horizon) and that at the end (represented by community life) of the journey. Framing the question of tourism in these terms allows us to free ourselves from an 'ontological' definition of the tourist. Max Skinner, while entangled in the concerns of his journey, does not know if he wants to be a tourist or not. On the other hand, it allows us to look at the issue of *touristification* and gentrification of cities from a perhaps less apocalyptic perspective than the dominant one, postulating a *non-discontinuity* between the world of an 'authentic' sociality and its touristic representation: only *a posteriori* will we be able to determine whether the travel experience prefigured by touristic discourses about it can be considered as a holiday or, on the contrary, assumed as the trigger of a life change.

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# UNIVERSITY OF PALERMO DURING AND AFTER COVID

## AURATIC EFFECTS IN A RE-SEMANTIZED SPACE

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**ABSTRACT.** The main objective of this paper is to focus the attention on the transformations occurred during the period conditioned by the Covid pandemic within the relationships between subjects and the public space.

The analysis will focus on the specific experiential practices registered in some green areas of the University of Palermo and Catania. Such external areas, initially considered as empty places, without an official destination of use, were reacquired and filled with furnishings that re-semanticized them into places of socialization. This paper will describe the emergence of peculiar processes of reappropriation of them, which actually had the effect of reshaping their meaning. Doing so renovating the aura of attending university physically.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-pandemic, reappropriation, domestication, urban reconsideration, landscape.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of the Covid-19 has led to peculiar transformations in the lifestyles of most human societies.

This article wants to focus on describing the spatial transformations that occurred during the pandemic, namely those concerning the community of students, researchers and teachers at the University of Palermo campus (Italy). An analysis of these transformations will be

carried out with reference to other urban cases and, in particular, through comparison with another Italian university, that of Catania. To this end, we will rely on the re-reading and re-consideration of Walter Benjamin's ([1936] 1968) essay *The work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in the belief that this reflection can be useful for Semiotic research in topological species.

Benjamin's theories can, in fact, prove useful for understanding the transformations undergone throughout the pandemic, marked by the restrictive policies established by many governments in response to the spread of the virus:

Things change for an artistic practice as for a figurative practice, when the principle of the copy replaces the authority of the autographic copy" (Benjamin, 1939, Italian transl., p. 18).

Benjamin's words appear effective in indicating which problems to take into consideration to describe the effects that the logic of the pandemic and confinement, relating to both private and public spatiality, have caused in the daily lives of many.

One of the main effects concerns the transformation that the relational link between the physicality of the subjects and the physicality of the public space has undergone since the initial phase of the pandemic, in which spatial proximity was severely limited and, in some cases, denied. Since the beginning of the so called lockdown, most physical contacts between citizens have been replaced by virtual, hybrid and mediated experiences, leading to an increasing estrangement between people.

Despite this upheaval, the spatiality in which we have inevitably been immersed during the pandemic has allowed us to experience new opportunities for a relational contact.

As a result, foundations have been progressively laid for a hierarchical re-configuration of the value of authenticity attributable to the physicality of the place, its expression and direct experience of it. The analysis presented here therefore aims to demonstrate how the regime of isolation has been impacting in both social and urban relations. Indeed, as anticipated, every form of relation to the other was somehow feared to the point of extreme rejection of any form of human

contact (Esposito 2022). Such evenience set the conditions for establishing new forms of relational exchange, the indirect ones, which involved subjects in new perceptual experiences, during which their sensory and cognitive dimensions were virtually challenged by new demands for participation.

Once reached a new phase of coexistence with an increasingly less contagious virus, it has been possible to examine the new social processes by means of which external spatiality and bodily spatiality were reaffirmed as significant identities; external spaces considered more adaptable to the new social priorities of protection from all forms of contagion, as they were considered able to guarantee greater distancing and freedom of movement, as opposed to indoor spaces, considered dangerous and for this reason long denied and avoided.

A new pandemic and post-pandemic *proxemics*<sup>1</sup> emerges, made up of gestures whose expressive force derives from enhancing new dimensions of communication. Urban space, being dynamic by its very nature, is today articulated by a system of boundaries, characterised by physical and mental limits and thresholds (Zilberberg 1993), responsible for conditioning both relational and spatial modes of perception (Goffman 1973). Spaces were subjected to new reversals between the private and public dimensions, affirmed as the product of new resemantizations and re-articulations that altered their original textual configuration: their walkability, like their degree of perception and usability underwent transformations caused by the complex system of confinement induced by the Covid. Starting from this, those practices, made significant insofar as they were controlled by the new proxemic gestures acting in a space qualified as a common and shareable good, closer and more immediate, will serve as the object of analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Proxemics, a discipline founded by E. Hall in 1966, is the study of human use of space. Paolo Fabbri (2020, p. 185) specifies proxemic results attributable to the way in which humans structure and evaluate the distance between their space and that of others, "the study of how humans unconsciously structure microspaces" (Fabbri, 1969).

Therefore, the theoretical problem that the analysis intends to address emerges from the observation of what the logic of confinement has done to the semantic universe linked to spatiality, determining the decline of those “auratic” effects perceptible only from direct experience in a certain landscape. Furthermore, as a response to the pandemic effects described, the behaviors and practices of individuals aimed to renew every link with public space, urging its reappropriation and urban revaluation. In particular, the analysis will focus on the specific experiential practices implemented in different types of urban and university spaces, thanks to which it has been possible to recover the aura denied during the pandemic. The campus of the University of Palermo will be taken into consideration as a distinctive case of continuity between nature and culture<sup>2</sup> in which processes of re-appropriation and recovery of the external environment have been affirming, perceived by its users during the pandemic as closer and safer. These processes will be analysed with reference to the time frame characterized by the main phases of the pandemic: mainly, a first phase characterized by the progressive emptying of the social spaces whose use is limited or denied, up to a final phase in which the external spaces of the Campus were filled with new users and enhanced by innovative new practices. These spaces have been re-evaluated as places of aggregation, as a common good to be safeguarded and acted on using domestication<sup>3</sup> practices, places where identification can be found.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

This study has been approached with a Sociosemiotic (as the one traced by Marrone, 2006) methodology, which is considered determinant and pertinent

to bring out specific effects of meaning, produced by the signs, practices, and languages that are constituted in those places, selected as case studies. Indeed, it will be the Semiotic approach, through its categories, that will recognise a value identity to the new urban experiences, testifying to their significance thanks to a renewed auratic sense. In fact, the position of the semiotician is the bearer of a work of interpretation of what has been observed, returned to a value horizon, from which one can trace a renewed intensity and emotional-somatic grip given by the relationship with urban space.

Following the indications of Marsciani (2007), the course of the analysis was conducted starting from a direct observation of those spaces suspended for a period of time from any possible use, and of those practices responsible for reconsidering them as new social spaces; the observation of the new ways of inhabiting university and urban areas thus made it possible to grasp the processuality of the transformation related to the relationship and consideration of the inhabited space, grasping it from a dynamic point of view; this thanks to the practices, flows, relations and gestures present in them. In fact, the principle through which the case studies were selected is that they were involved, though according to different logics, in new processes of transformation that made them new significant spaces, restoring a renewed value to collective experience and living. The cases of spatiality are placed by the analysis in relation and comparison, thanks to a Semiotic observation that has recognised in them a coordination of relevant elements.

Thus, it is important to recognise the importance of the Semiotic methodology because it is the bearer of a particular gaze that grasps the new urban relations

<sup>2</sup> The pandemic has stimulated a reflection on the importance of a relational vision of the world in which nature and culture are thought of as interdependent poles. “Nature as an effect of meaning, as what appears as such, due to a series of social and cultural processes that have generated such habits, customs and codes” (Marrone 2012, p. 20).

<sup>3</sup> In reference to those practices brought up to date by the new degree of perception and habitability of public space, made into a place to take care of.

in a horizon of meaning, from which to draw a renewed auraticity.

### 3. HOW TO RETHINK THE AURA TODAY

Latour's essay *Where are the missing masses? Sociology of a Few Worldly Artifacts* (Latour 2008) takes up the issue of the aura, surpassing Benjamin's definition by identifying those of its points that are open to criticism. For a work of art, being the original means nothing more than being the original of a long lineage. What has no reproduction is not called original, but rather sterile and arid stereotype (Latour, 2008, p. 60).

In his paper focused on the restoration of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* by the Louvre in 2006, Latour recognizes how the copies define the "career" of the work. In light of this, Latour's theories are decisive today for understanding how the reacquisition and renewal of direct experience is acting in the culture of urban living.

Furthermore, epidemics and infections bring to light multiple underlying social and spatial logics. In fact, the conditions caused by the epidemic determine the emergence of renewed forms of spatiality and expression of new senses and values:

The virus does nothing but reproduce, materialize, extend and intensify the already existing dominant forms of biopolitical management for the entire population. Each society can therefore be defined by the epidemic that threatens it and by its organization when it occurs (Preciado 2020).

During the isolation, a reversal of the identity and value range of space emerged, caused by the denial (or reduction) of physical interaction in public spaces which were replaced by private, domestic ones:

The pandemic has brought out a map of spatial geographies completely different, determined by the new distances that we superimpose between us and the domestic universe

and between us and the collective universe (Bassanelli 2020, p. 2).

The internal space becomes that of representation and exhibition, made available by multiple digital platforms, with the aim of reintroducing new forms of media socialization to the detriment of the prohibited physical ones. All actions and practices are thus remodeled by a sort of widespread planning responsible for canceling that protective barrier relating to the domestic sphere.

In the light of the changes following the pandemic period, and therefore the overcoming of the phase described above, I recognise Latour's work as decisive in order to be able to highlight what is meant in the present study by a renewed auratic sense, captured by the new forms of both individual and relational urban experience. In fact, I consider this concept starting from Latour's overcoming of what was understood by Benjamin's thought, as original<sup>4</sup>, the only condition to be able to recognise an auratic sense. With respect to what has been said, I focus on direct as well as physical urban experience in order to understand the sense and orientation of the present study; experience from which to draw a passionate, cognitive, somatic intensity both individual and collective as a condition of existence in order to be able to rediscover a new value of auraticity in this field of investigation. Therefore, not to deny the conditions of reproduction of the urban experience, but on the contrary to start from this in order to be able to grasp all its significant transformation, which accounts for the constitution of an urban imaginary, characterised by a new idea of nature, sustainability and protection of inhabited space; from where one can perceive a potential 'migration' and diffusion of an auratic sense attributable to the new social and urban relations.

Therefore, taking what has been described – the effects of the restrictive measures that act on the identity of the

<sup>4</sup> In reference to this, cf. Prieto 1989.



public and private dimensions – as our starting point, it is possible to reflect on their consequences, considering the evolutionary path of those auratic effects reconquered in other forms through the constitution of imaginaries, responsible for promoting processes of re-semantization and urban reconsideration.

#### 4. REPRESENTATIVE CASES OF A NEW URBAN IMAGINARY: FROM VIRTUAL MEDIA TO REAL SPATIALITY

##### 4.1. THE UNIVERSITY OF PALERMO

It is crucial for the orientation of the analysis to refer to the different phases characterizing the pandemic period. The period of lockdown will be taken into consideration, a time when the virtual and digital environment served as an “intermediate space” (Granata, 2020), by difference with respect to a following phase of stabilization during which we lived with the virus. In the latter period, a drastic change has taken place in the relationship with space, which has set in motion new processes of rethinking social spaces, resulting in overcoming the utopia of the physicality of public places and the impossibility of a corporeal reality. Thus, the physicality of places gradually returns to meet with that of the users, with their corporeity. Reappropriating it therefore becomes the heart of the multiple urban experiences put in the pipeline from here on in, valued with respect to a sense of authenticity given by being there *in praesentia*. The space, which has become fluid and dynamic, is therefore built, and enhanced with respect to the movements, perspectives, uses and programs of the subjects.

The external spaces of the University can therefore appear as particular cases of a more complex, general system: that of public spaces. These spaces, in the planning that gathers around them, become a real opportunity to rethink the entire urban configuration in a more sustainable, ecological, and community-based way, focused on a new intertwining between humans and the environment, from which to draw new sensitive, perceptive and cognitive. As such, from the direct

encounter with the new forms of spatiality, the auratic phenomenon is once again conceivable and possible, continuously, and potentially the fruit of every potential experience and practice in relation to a space invested with new values. In fact, as Latour (2011) teaches, this is the moment when the auratic dimension of a topological experience is renewable and in continuous migration through numerous cases of direct relationship with new forms of spatiality, as we consider the external areas of the University.

Following the gradual emptying of social spaces as a result of the pandemic, which caused the denial or limitation of their use, the external spaces of the University of Palermo (figg. 1–2) were gradually refilled and enhanced by new innovative practices. They were re-developed as places of congregation, as common goods which, by also activating the affective sphere in the subjects, represent areas to be safeguarded and on which to act using domestication practices, in order to identify the places to be adapted to the needs of those who live there.

Due to its physical configuration, the campus of the University of Palermo assumes the identity of a microcosm, of a university citadel longitudinally bordering the road on one side and green areas, areas of open peri-urban countryside (example of terrain vague) on the other, even though they are excluded from the proper university space. Traces of this configuration remain in the presence of sections of green areas, cut at different points by paths for cars and pedestrians. Areas which, once reacquired, were invested with multiple uses, becoming an integral part of student dynamics. I am referring in particular, as the first two images to follow show, to those bordering the external bar located in one of the most frequented points for the university community: an intermediate position between the Architecture pole, that of Letters and the “Polididattico” pole. Although there is close continuity between the refreshment area and the analyzed area, there is no conflict with both actu-

ally coexisting perfectly, with both having established themselves as two permeable and easily influenced areas. The green area is in fact dedicated to consumption and is also made into an independent place, a point of reference, a union on which to act according to the different uses.

Initially an empty place with no official intended use, employed only as an area of passage, proximity and expansion for the impromptu consumption of food and drink, it was in fact considered a neutral space, a frontier space which made possible a coexistence among different practices (Hammad, 2003). Instead, in this new post-pandemic phase, this same empty space has been reacquired by grassroots multiple daily practices, responsible for translating it according to other uses that were not established *a priori*<sup>5</sup>. It has therefore become a semi-determined space (Hall 1966), as it is structured according to an improvised logic that does not impose itself on the territory and appears therefore in harmony with an eco-sustainable project in which the subjects relate to each other and the external environment, rediscovering new lifestyles.



FIG. 1. OUTDOOR AREA, UNIVERSITY OF PALERMO (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).



FIG. 2. FIGURE 2 - EQUIPPED AREA (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

Questioning, analyzing and reflecting on the current design trends may lead to recognize the importance that public outdoor space has assumed today, predisposed to multiple transformations and to constant re-semanticization and social reconsideration. The new green areas, once neglected and misunderstood, are nowadays invested with new values and meanings, qualifying as social and spatial actors, as Sender agents in the social and bodily dimension of the subjects and as referents of a new global imagination.

#### 4.2 THE UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA IN THE FORMER BENEDICTINE MONASTERY

In order to verify these considerations, it may be useful to make a comparison between two different university spaces, that of Palermo and that of Catania, on which to be able to track the effects caused by the pandemic. A relationship of both similarities and differences emerges from the topological analysis: the first is recognized in what the multiple practices of re-appropriation and interaction have caused, enhancing and re-semanticizing those external areas in which to rediscover a possible effect of nature. The relationship of difference, on the other hand, emerges in the history of their identity and consequently in their physical articulation, conditioning the emergence of different modes of behavior updated by a de-

<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon updates a case of enunciative practice (J. Fontanille, 1998), since the empirical subjects who interact with the described space do not correspond to the designated and imagined model users, as the type of fruition does not coincide with that originally proposed.

gree of perception and proximity of space that will vary according to where one is.

In Piazza Dante in Catania, one of the squares in the city's historic center, stands the former Benedictine complex, one of the largest in Europe, which today houses the humanities department of the University of Catania.



FIG. 3. BENEDICTINE MONASTERY, UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

This complex, as one of the most important and representative monuments in the city's history, is involved in the re-semanticisation processes brought about by the pandemic. The department sits within a complex spatiality, the result of a process of adaptation to an already established space which, despite keeping the link with its original identity as a religious institution alive, is reinterpreted by new uses and practices that endow it with a new *semiotic efficacy* (Fabbri 2017). The former monastery has therefore be thought of and experienced by the users as a space devoid of a stable identity, as it situates itself on a blurred boundary between what it is and what it was, a condition which never definitively excludes or narcotizes any of the two parties, neither past nor present identity. There will therefore be a continuous rebalancing produced by the different experiences of the subjects who will guide a potential destination and enhancement, activating different dimensions of meaning linked to action, passion or pure architectural aesthetics.

In this context, unlike the physical configuration of the University of Palermo, the external spaces are not distributed organically and as such, they are not immediately perceivable and traversable by the students, as there is no continuity between an external area and the other due to them not being connected. The original identity of the monument, which is linked to an undisputed degree of historical attachment to the city, is also confirmed by its current internal division, characterized by two external areas distinguishable by a certain degree of perception and proximity. The first, which can be reached from one of the corridors bordering the classrooms, is the Chioostro di Ponente (fig.4), a space that serves as a concrete example of what the consequences of the monumental constraint entail, as it has become the subject of restoration in recent months is therefore not usable. This is a condition that reflects the university's more general reality, as there are multiple constraints blocking creative planning from both a monumental and an environmental point of view. The latter controls those external spaces which, as in the case of the Cloister, act as potential for a new interweaving of the external environment and student practices. The second area, which has become one of the main places for socializing in the university, is the Chioostro di Levante (fig. 5). The Cloister, located within a garden, also consists of an upper zone, devoid of a specific function, which, as the image shows (fig. 7), takes part in the physical configuration of the external spaces on which the intentionality inclusive of the subjects acts through various socializing practices. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the new subjects who take part in the space, are the pluralities, the groups the individual joins for the realization of precise activities, such as study or other recreational uses involving forms of identity recognition, which also involve the affec-

tive sphere<sup>6</sup>. We are therefore witnessing a process of transformation of the sense of place, as the spaces described become the product of an encroachment in which the boundaries that enclosed those practices relating to internal spaces of an instrumental nature, such as study rooms, or those of a purely recreational nature, open towards the external areas. The latter, now invested with a new set of values, are used today with a certain degree of openness and reassurance. They are thus considered by the university community as a common good and of the closest and most immediate value. It will, therefore, be the new conditions of use and social habitability updated by the new relational and community spaces that will re-establish the significant phenomenon of bodily, sensory and perceptive approaches with the other, from which the new auratic experiences originate.

It therefore emerges that the two external areas (fig. 4, 5) occupy two different perceptive and temporal lines, since in the first, a space of impossibility and consequently only qualifying for its past identity, any form of social interaction is suspended due to the recognition of the conservation priority which enhances its historical-monumental identity. In the second, however, the regime of possibility is in force since the historical identity of the place acts as a potential for its own re-semanticization. In light of this, the space, subject to a previous emptying due to online teaching, is reconquered and rediscovered by the multiple practices that, stimulated by the consequences of the pandemic, recognize its potential as not only monumental. In fact, space is modelled according to the impact that pandemic effects have on the relationship between subjects and the external environment. In the analysis moved by a readjustment of the concept of *aura*, updated today by new social practices, the phenomenon described will be recognized as pertinent to the affirmation of a

new environmental priority: the university's external, specific cases, belonging to a more complex and general system than that of public spaces, offer a real opportunity to rethink the entire urban configuration in a more sustainable, ecological and community-based way founded on a new interweaving between humans and the environment. In fact, following the consequences of confinement during the pandemic, the subjects act with reference to different priorities than to those of the past, thanks to an intentionality of planning oriented both to social and urban practices, the latter being no longer mediated but now unique, direct, unrepeatable and authentic.



FIG. 4. CHIOSTRO DI PONENTE (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

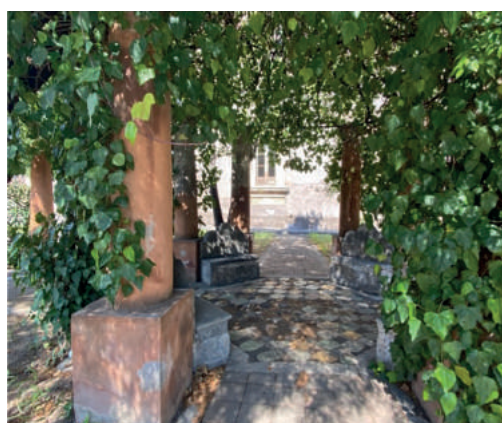


FIG. 5. CHIOSTRO DI LEVANTE (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

<sup>6</sup> Reference is made to the meta-semiotic system of enhancing procedures (Floch 1990), which includes utopian socialization which aims at the constitution of individual and collective subjectivities, cf. Marrone: 2010, p. 69.



FIG. 6. CLOISTER GARDEN (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).



FIG. 7. UPPER PART OF THE CLOISTER (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

**5. FROM VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS TO NEW URBAN TIES: DIRECT, SENSORY AND COMMUNITY**

As a further demonstration of what is described, I have extended my analysis to another case, this time not a university but an urban one. The urban landscape, in fact, of which the university space is a micro-case, becomes an active and dynamic *semiotic* space, promoting new experiences, lifestyles and habitability of the social environment.

Therefore, I recognize as significant for this object of study both the new practices of reconsideration and reappropriation acting in university outdoor spaces, and the new practices of fruition of specific external areas of the city. Areas that, for the fact of not being semiotized – they served as *terrain vague* as they had no intended use – have been re-semanticized since the pandemic and reconsidered as part of new sustainable, education-

al and cultural redevelopment projects. The consequences of the pandemic have meant that those external areas previously reserved for passing through or deprived of an urban identity due to often being in a state of neglect, have, thanks to new design initiatives, become potential epicenters of social and cultural life. In particular, one of the projects that stands as a demonstration of how much the new culture of urban living is acting on the identity and physical configuration of the new cities is that intended for a future redevelopment of an area of historic value and identity in the city of Palermo. The designated area, the neighborhood of Vergine Maria, appears coherent with the initiative to act on a space where a possible idea of nature can be recreated, thanks to the presence of both the sea and an urban green area. The objective of the project launched during a competition, promoted by the local Order of Engineers in 2020, were to implement a sustainable regeneration intervention through the creation of a green area that serves as a place of congregation and a multifunctional area, the latter intended for multiple educational and cultural uses, such as open-air theatre workshops.



FIG. 8. URBAN PROJECT "A THEATER FOR THE VERGINE MARIA" PALERMO, (© MARCO BELLOMO).

Demonstrating the extent to which space is a continuous result of the rearrangement of heterogeneous entities, we will analyse another spatiality, one that has proven itself to be relevant to the objectives of the study and shows just how much the pandemic has affect-

ed both processes and relationships of habitability, both private and public. The space in question is the new square in Palermo co-designed by the students of the “Finocchiaro Aprile” Institute and created in the area bordering the school. It is a participatory co-planning grassroots intervention, as the idea was realized thanks to the student body, which gave life to an example of post-covid planning consistent with the values of urban sustainability and citizen wellbeing, rediscovering new models of proximity and new forms of sociality. In fact, the area has been pedestrianized and dedicated to a double subjectivity – that of the student and of the inhabitant, identities that act to recreate an urban microcosm on a human scale, in dialogue and in continuity with the rest of the neighboring street. Thus, the denial of the boundary of what distinguishes a public space, such as the street, from a social one, such as a garden or a park, becomes increasingly evident as new forms of behavior invite you to take possession of the area, transformed into a meeting place where practices attributable solely to “pass through” are distinguished from those inviting people to “stay”.

In fact, as the image show (Fig. 9), the re-semanticization intervention has acted in giving life to new forms of social domestication through the creation of urban furnishings<sup>7</sup> – real eco-sustainable material artifacts, such as benches and seats in wood, whose function is to change the space by redeveloping it as a resting place where you can recognize yourself symbiotically. By redesigning the boundary between inside and outside, between the public and the private, the new micro-space favours new urban experiences in perfect synthesis with the environment, experiences which embody the possibility of rethinking the aura today. These experiences are playful, recreational or socializing ones that reconstitute a perceptive and sensory here and

now through the direct, and therefore bodily, relationship with the physical place that was denied during the confinement of the pandemic. The users are thus made participants of a new active and dynamic space.

It is therefore the body’s participation in spatial stimuli that affirms, as Marsciani recalls: “The somatic ability to respond to the here and now of presence, its ability to transform data into arrangements and sequences of meanings” (Marsciani 2022, p. 126, my transl.); corporeality conceived as never closed but dynamically open to the effects and new senses that define the new spatiality. A spatiality which today, once reacquired, takes on a new symbolic effectiveness, provoking passions and transformations in the subjects who experience, inhabit and come into contact with it: “Spatiality is a perfect case of symbolic effectiveness, in the sense of a communication that provokes reactions and passions in the subjectivities involved” (Marrone, 2001, p. 305); the identity of the space and its meaning will therefore be redefined in terms of the effective action that it provokes on the subjects who use it and who grasp its various motivations.

Thus, thanks to the new urban re-semanticisations, the here and now of the auratic experience is reconstituted, opening up the possibility of experiencing spatiality in a lasting, widespread and renewable temporality through the activation of the entire sensoriality, passionate dimension and affective sphere, all involved in active participation in new encounters and new habitable relationships.

“The aura is a gathering around a sensitive object that one experiences or has experienced” (Dondero, 2007, p. 57).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The city is a place of experimentation and innovation: inside it ideas are fluid and the urban space becomes a laboratory for the generation of interactions and combinations that can bring out new practices (L. Galluzzo 2021, p. 74).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Latour (1992), street furniture, objects as “missing masses” networks of objects capable of regulating our behavior and our relationships.



**FIG. 9.** URBAN FURNITURE DETAIL, PROJECT "FINOCCHIARO APRILE", (© MARIA GIULIA FRANCO).

This analysis of the transformations that have taken place in social spaces has aimed to demonstrate the emergence of a new culture of urban living, guided by the interdependence between spaces and bodies that are today involved in new processes of social and individual habitability. The pandemic, therefore, as the agent in the launching of a new "spatial biopolitics" (Mazzucchelli, 2021), has acted from the outset in re-establishing spatial systems guided by corporality which, as this analysis has described, have given life to the social rediscovery of a new proxemics. New experiential practices, new ways of use and new social and urban relationships have been observed and studied, demonstrating how it is possible today to rethink and rediscover possible auratic effects through a direct relationship with space. In fact, the semiotically analyzed cases of spatial transformation open themselves up to new reflections on how today's re-appropriation and re-functionalization of public space, once denied as it was replaced and only thought of as a hybrid, fluctuating and interconnected, is now made the destination of new values and effects of nature. Therefore, new models of residential proximity are established that enhance human and non-human dimensions, updating urban possibilities in which the community is directly involved and challenged by new spatial stimuli. And it is thanks to the latter that it is now possible to rethink the authenticity, the auraticity

of specific experiences during which the users are present in the physical place, activating the perceptive, sensory and affective dimension. In this way, new urban imaginaries, new social models, considerations and identity lifestyles are re-established which actualize sustainable habits, more humanised forms of daily, collective and inclusive behavior such as walking or stopping, which expose the subjects to continuous and renewed tensions and perceptive relaxations acting in recognizing an auratic value.

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88 years have passed since the first publication of Walter Benjamin's essay where he firstly proposed the notion of aura. Following the ongoing process of artification of daily life, the problem of the uniqueness of the work of art, as identified by aura, continues to be inspiring for understanding and criticizing the social world.

This issue of Global Humanities proposes the idea that the concept of aura may be considered as an effect of meaning which demands to be managed by social actors in the mediasphere. Such a move enlightens the relevance of a proper struggle for "authenticity" to be pursued as an added value of daily life: How do social forces construct such an effect? How do they capitalize on it, in their activity? How does it get recognized and valued?

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