Acting upon the consequences of virtual imaging : a major challenge for our universities

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Introduction

Since both my teaching and my research interests tend to be centred on art of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, I have chosen to tackle a period that has been mentioned too rarely in this colloquium until now. I should like to consider the impact of the computerized image on our perceptions and, more particularly, the use of images which are the works of the Old Masters translated into pixels. It is becoming apparent that the most recent generations of students have grown up with, are now accustomed to and partake in a visual culture that is entirely different from ours. Be this for the better or for the worse, we need to accept this as a fact; in turn, we must now define a model which will allow these same students to come to terms with the historical dimension of their perception, and this at a moment when the changes which are occurring are, to say the least, significant.

The reproduction image is a cognitive instrument and, at the same time, a replacement for an original, providing a substitute for it.[1] A computerized image can be manipulated as much as we wish. Two experiments illustrated by Mitchell show that a simple tweak of a button can deform faces, schematize or render much more complex even the shadows on a sculpture. It becomes clear that the degree to which a reproduction can be deemed to be faithful depends upon the settings of the computer and upon the quality of the screen. The degree of luminosity is an important feature, comparable to that of a slide. Whereas slides have largely been reserved for use by art historians, this more modern version is now available to any member of the public who wishes to look up and look at images on a computer.

A drawing by Pier-Leone Ghezzi depicts two amateurs examining *intaglie*.[2] Their posture betrays a close, experimental way of looking at the object; by their heightened awareness of the fact that they are in the presence of an original work of art they are typical representatives of the Enlightenment period. Arthur Pond reproduced and simplified this drawing in a later engraving. Despite his modifications, the print does represent a good working copy. The general structure of the scene is communicated, and thus the engraving, a document in many copies that can be transported and diffused, is a

1   Diego Velazquez, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, c.1650, Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome

faithful source of information regarding the subject of the original sheet which itself exists in only one copy. The line is, however, inaccurate and the colour of the engraving certainly does not pay full justice to that of the drawing itself. In this respect the copy is faulty and approximate. Therefore, a copy is never valid *in abstracto*. In the case of the Ghezzi drawing and its reproduction by Arthur Pond, the copy is a totally valid reproduction inasmuch as the iconography is precisely rendered, but far less so in terms of its treatment of the handling and the style of the original. Arthur Pond's contemporaries were aware of this fact, whereas we often choose to ignore it. Many of us base our work on reproductions more often than we should care to admit. An image whose function should be very strictly limited is often used by us as a complete *Ersatz*; it becomes, in popular thought, a substitute for the original. And this is an essential element of my hypothesis: if the conditions of reproduction are not very carefully controlled, then there is a risk that when we rely upon 'substitutes', the originals themselves are going to be irrevocably transformed.

In 1796, Quatremère de Quincy was the first to reflect upon the creation of a scholarly world divided up into two groups: those who publish art objects that they have actually seen or visited, and those who produce large syntheses on art without needing to travel, by basing their judgement upon a large corpus of printed reproductions. What is more extraordinary, Quatremère saw this as being the equivalent, in the world of scholarship,

to the division of labour expounded by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776.[3] Within such a system, it became paramount to invent new ways of controlling the accuracy of any reproduction, and to negotiate with considerable care and skill the use of copies and the use of originals[4] – hence the birth of the fac-simile. An important reflection on the epistemological consequences of the culture of the reproduction was thus under way. In a world where virtual imagery is so pervasive, such history is highly relevant today.[5]

Nowadays the problems connected with this question have been examined with considerable finesse by contemporary art. In the field of art history itself, a profound reflection on the matter has not yet been undertaken. Walter Benjamin's theory of technical reproduction managed to fill this gap but, unfortunately, in a way that is misleading and faulty.[6]

Francis Bacon's life was marked by a passion for a famous painting by Velazquez, the portrait of Innocent X (fig. 1). And yet he always kept a poor-quality colour photograph of it and repeatedly refused to see the original. He studied this masterpiece at great length, made tireless efforts to imagine the skin-tones of the Velazquez, and to translate their impact into his own painting. Hence, in his own re-working of the picture, he added

2   Igor Kopystiansky, *Ante rem, in re, post rem*, installation, 1992, Bode Museum, Berlin

the pieces of meat, one on either side of the pope's figure. Their presence here serves to underline, metaphorically, the almost unbearable presence of the original work, one which he was afraid to confront directly. Recent installations, such as that by Kopystiansky, *Ante rem, in re post rem*, thematizes this material, almost mortal, dimension of painting, so often overshadowed in museum displays (fig. 2). In this way contemporary art, as illustrated by these examples, has managed to put and to discuss this question intelligently, and yet the study of older art has not dealt in depth with the problem.

The disembodied, abstract hanging that dominates in many museums nowadays aids in dematerializing works of art. What is occurring in this case is that one culture becomes dominant: that of aesthetic or photographic reproduction.[7] In 1998–9, an exhibition devoted to the *Stuppacher Madonna* by Matthias Grünewald offered an astonishing sight: the panel had been set in a large and flat piece of aluminium, whose shape and proportions evoked unmistakably the frame of an ordinary colour slide.[8] This rendered the work of art no more or less than an optical phenomenon. Over the past few years this separation of the work from its materiality has increasingly been accompanied by a presentation of the scientific study and analysis of masterpieces. One cannot help but see in this a compensatory device: the aim is to present once again a work of art in terms of its material form. Paradoxically, material research on painting is often presented with the help of dematerialized media.

I should now like to examine two important transformations which are, in part at least, understandable in terms of changes in attitudes towards artistic reproduction over the years. The work becomes dematerialized, and it is presented alone, isolated, in order to allow it to be seen better.

The dematerialization of the work of art

The revolution of the computerized image is doubtless far too recent to allow for an objective estimation of its effects on original works of art. But maybe we could prepare an analysis of this change by turning our attention to the effects of earlier revolutions in artistic reproduction. As was seen earlier, the luminous image that appears on a computer screen is a continuation, and a reinforcement, of the culture of the slide. The slide manages to transform an oil-painting, which reflects the light falling onto its surface, into a 'stained-glass'. This transformation has certainly left its mark on our perception of originals and their reproductions. In 1990 the Royal Academy chose for its Monet exhibition a hanging that was certainly not new but has the merit, for my hypothesis, of providing a convenient caricature. The paintings were hung with large spaces between them, the room itself was plunged into darkness and powerful lamps lit each individual work of art.

3   Picture display,
Frick Collection, New York

The last Brueghel exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna took this one step further by ensuring that the lighting was confined only to the very surfaces of the paintings.[9] These were thereby transformed into slides, or stills from a film. Such a de-materialization of art is not a new practice, and came about for a number of reasons. When the great art dealer Edward Duveen sold a large number of Old Master paintings to Henry Clay Frick, he insisted that the works should be hung in the American billionaire's palace. Powerful lamps were mounted above each work, and Frick was advised to admire them at night, in near complete darkness – and this he did with considerable en-thusiasm (fig. 3).[10] Strong lighting of masterpieces, new at the time, was a means of justifying the importance of photography for dealers hoping to make a transaction. The customer received a photograph of the works that he was being invited to purchase; often, in fact, Berenson only used photographs when preparing his expertises.[11] As an actual material object the painting is given a certificate of guarantee by the dealer and does not therefore necessarily need to be seen by the client. Duveen even modernized and retouched Renaissance paintings and then covered the traces of his intervention by hiding them under a thick carriage varnish which was very glossy and very smooth. The result was, literally, a painting reduced to an image.[12] More recently it is the use of colour photography on glossy paper that has managed to adulterate several private col-lectors' or even museum curators' perception of art. And this to such an extent that some paintings by Impressionist artists have been varnished so that they are more in accordance with the vision of an eye that has become accustomed to colour photogra-phy on special, glossy paper.

The reduction of aesthetic perception to a mere question of an optical phenomenon

It was during the nineteenth century that an important category was to reduce substantially the aesthetic experience. This category is the 'innocent eye' much beloved of John Ruskin. In his *Elements of Drawing* (1857), Ruskin speaks in a lengthy footnote of a new type of perception, one that is fresh, a different vision of nature: he called it the innocent eye. 'The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.'[13] Ruskin is here speaking as one who favours the focussing of the eye on a single work of art at a time, thereby removing it from its environment. During a parliamentary enquiry on the National Gallery in London (1857), he complained that the paintings were juxtaposed with one another, present in large numbers on the walls of the Gallery.[14] He was the advocate rather of an idea that was revolutionary at that time, that is a more sparing hanging of the paintings, with each one at eye level. This presentation of the works would allow for the contemplation of a work of art to become a spiritual experience. All attention would be fixed on one painting which would be the sole object of the viewer's regard, and would be detached from the outside world. In order to understand the opportunities offered by such a display it suffices to read *Colour as a means of art* (1838), where Frank Howard developed a new type of comparison between Old and Modern Masters, a comparison which was based on purely visual criteria: 'The eye is excited by Colour, and the object of painting, independent of poetical expression or character, is to excite the eye agreeably.'[15] Such a strategy enabled the theoretician to stress the modern element in the Old Masters' production. A Claude Lorrain became a kind of 'Turner' when reduced to its main colour components; and a Turner could lend itself to a clear comparison with a painting by Claude. Howard *abstracted* the two compositions, to show how both could be reduced to a common, purely formal denominator. The hanging adopted by the first American museums of modern art, such as that proposed by Alfred Barr in 1936 in his famous 'Cubism and abstract art' exhibition, and also, more recently, that chosen for the Beyeler Museum in Riehen are entirely in accordance with this theory.

Photography provided the possibility to produce what André Malraux called an imaginary museum, an art book illustrated with photographs.[16] This offers an ideal home for the ideology of the single work of art. Much as is the case in a museum, with its background of white walls, in the book also the work of art is reduced to a formal proposition: the photographs themselves and their presentation in an art book thus abet the

schematization of art. The medium and the form in which works are represented in a book help to preserve a formalist myth. Awareness of this should incite us to consider critically the ideological consequences of the development of image databases to be used for educational purposes.

Somewhat paradoxically, it is a more distant past that offers us a source of inspiration, even if we might not have hoped for it from that quarter. For, two centuries ago, work with cognitive images and the analysis of the cognitive value of an image reached a point of considerable perfection, one which we should take as our example nowadays. First of all, the comparative nature of the reproduction was acknowledged and systematically emphasized. During the eighteenth century, reproduction engraving, usually in black and white, represented the only way in which

4   Quinten Massys, *The misers*, line engraving after a painting, in Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Handbook of painting*, London, 1860, vol. 1, facing p. 116

original works, paintings, sculptures and architecture could be widely diffused. It was at this time that the faithful reproduction of a master's drawings began to become more widespread. The reason behind this was simple: a drawing was much more likely than was a painting to allow for the illustration of a master's manner. It was his writing, in some way, that was being illustrated, and this could be imitated far more easily in an engraving or in an etching. The technical reproduction and the object being reproduced are adapted to one another in some way and, finally, the object being reproduced is awarded a precise and a carefully-limited cognitive function. A *recueil* such as that by Pierre-Jean Mariette, le *Recueil de Testes*, offers what amounts to almost a philological analysis of reproductions after Leonardo.[17] Each one of these reproductions is recognized as being a document on which two hands have been working: one is the hand of the artist who drew the original, the second is that of the artist who reproduces that work. Whenever a reproduction work is examined this must always be borne in mind. The commentary on the image accepts not only its power but also its limits and warns the viewer against

using it as a perfect substitute for the original. In addition, during the nineteenth century especially, an engraved image was seen as a simplification of an original which could be used for teaching purposes. The image may well deform the original but it also brings out all the better the basic characteristics: analytical sketches of ears drawn by different artists were chosen for this purpose by Morelli, and line engravings singling out pictorial compositions were favoured by the art-publisher James Murray (fig. 4).[18] A line engraving seems to be a rather simplified manner of reproducing a work, but it proved to be a very important cognitive instrument for demonstration at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

There is a second lesson that we could draw from earlier art history if we wish to rediscover the virtues of a visual juxtaposition that produces many meanings. Current museum display remains faithful to Ruskin in many cases, and thus each work is exhibited in its own space to be viewed individually and against a neutral background. This is also characterized by a linear display, one which is almost narrative, a discourse on the history of art. Until the nineteenth century displays were much more densely packed and this meant that the effects of the paintings were multiplied by the very fact that they were in close relation to others; a truly rhetorical technique of visual display was at work, whose principles were understood by an *élite* of viewers. Today this effect of a large number of images appearing on one surface could be achieved on a computer screen. We now need to rediscover the knowledge that was contained in these older and densely-packed displays which in turn can lead to new interpretations being developed. This could also take a more concrete form in our museums.[19] Throughout history, from Séroux d'Agincourt to Aby Warburg, all too few are the art historians who have been able to make the most of a spatial model as opposed to a discursive one.[20]

Taking as illustrative material a relatively limited sector of art history as practised in universities – the history of earlier works of art – I have attempted to show how much the media which we use for our interpretation of art – museums, web sites, long distance web learning programmes or books – cause and have caused transformations of the very objects that they purport to be reproducing in order to explain them. At the time of virtual imaging, it is impossible for art history, or any branch of it, to avoid a critical and historical analysis of these media. The historiography of art in its widest sense, that of a historical anthropology of the perception of images, will allow us to adopt a critical and objective distance towards the present, and to find a suitable language of display for the new museum.

1   Hillel Schwartz, *The culture of the copy: striking likenesses, unreasonable facsimiles*, New York, 1996; W.T.J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago and London, 1994; Jack Goody, *La peur des représentations*, Paris, 2003; Georges Vignaux, *Du signe au virtuel. Les nouveaux chemins de l'intelligence*, Paris, 2003.

2   Michael Jaffé, *The Devonshire Collection of Italian Drawings: Roman and Neapolitan Schools*, London, 1994, p. 77, cat. 194.

3   Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the Wealth of Nations*, London, 1776, Book I, chapter 2; Quatremère owned a copy of it. It should be pointed out that Adam Smith was acquainted with the arts; he owned copies of the works of Bellori (cat. 11), Vasari (cat. 138), Vitruvius (cat. 140), as well as de Piles's works (p. 107), see Tadao Yanaihara, *Catalogue of Adam Smith's Library*, New York, 1966.

4   Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *Lettres*, 1796, Paris, 1989, pp. 106–7, p. 119.

5   See Pascal Griener, 'Invisible Perfection. Eighteenth-century Artists' perplexity over Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura*', in Johannes Nathan and Antoinette Roesler-Friedenthal, eds., *The Enduring Instant. Time and the Spectator in the Visual Arts*, Berlin, 2003, pp. 71–9.

6   Walter Benjamin, *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, in *Ecrits français*, Paris, 1992.

7   Anthony J. Hamber, *A Higher Branch of the Art: Photographing the Fine Arts in England, 1839-1880*, London, 1996.

8   Brigitte Barz, *Die Stuppacher Madonna von Matthias Grünewald*, Stuttgart, 1999.

9   *Pieter Breughel der Jüngere – Jan Brueghel der Ältere. Flämische Malerei um 1600. Tradition und Fortschritt*, exh. cat., Kulturstiftung Ruhr, Villa Hügel, Essen / Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna / Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen, 1997-8.

10 Pascal Griener, 'Old Masters/Modern painting. A dialectic construction of art history for the American market during the 30s', in Peter J. Schneemann and Thomas Schmutz, eds., *Masterplan. Konstruktion und Dokumentation amerikanischer Kunstgeschichten*, Bern, 2003, pp. 173–90; Pascal Griener, 'Histoire de l'art/ Marché de l'art. Le musée d'art moderne en Suisse', *Traverses*, *Revue d'histoire*, 2002, no. 1, pp. 17–28; Pascal Griener, 'La jouissance du Même. Les maîtres anciens comme fétiches modernes', *Kunst und Architektur*, 2001, no. 4, pp. 35–41.

11 Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: the Making of a Connoisseur*, Cambridge [Mass.], 1979; David Alan Brown, *Berenson and the Connoisseurship of Italian Painting: A Handbook to the Exhibition*, Washington D.C., 1979.

12 Colin Simpson, *Artful partners: Bernard Berenson and Joseph Duveen*, New York, 1986; on Duveen's restorations of sculptures, Alison Luchs, 'Duveen, the Dreyfus collection, and the treatment of Italian Renaissance sculpture: examples from the National Gallery of Art', *Studies in the History of Art*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 (1990), pp. 31–8.

13 John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing in three letters to beginners*, London, 1857 p. 6; Philippe Junod*, Transparence et Opacité. Essai sur les fondements théoriques de l'art moderne*, Lausanne, 1976, pp. 158 ff.; Kryzsztof Pomian, 'Vision & Cognition', in Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison, eds., *Picturing Science Producing Art*, New York and London, 1998, pp. 211–31; Susan P. Casteras, ed., *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye*, New York, 1993.

14 *Report of the National Gallery Site Commission [...] Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty*, London, 1857, p. 94, no. 2432 (6 Apr. 1857).

15 Frank Howard, *Colour as a means of art, being an adaptation of the experience of professors to the practice of amateurs*, London, 1838, p. 62.

16 Stefan Morawski, *L'Absolu et la forme: l'esthétique d'André Malraux*, Fr. trans. by Yolande Lamy-Grum, Paris, 1972; *André Malraux*, exh. cat., St Paul de Vence, Maeght Foundation, 1973.

17 Pascal Griener and Cecilia Hurley, 'A matter of reflection in the era of virtual imaging: Caylus and Mariette's *Recueil de Testes de Caractere & de Charges*, dessinées par Léonard de Vinci (1730)', in Juerg Albrecht and Kornelia Imesch, eds., *horizons. Essays on Art and Art Research. 50 Years Swiss Institute for Art*

Research, Zurich, 2001, pp. 337–44.

18 Ivan Lermolieff [Giovanni Morelli], *Kunst-kritische Studien über Italienische Malerei. Die Galerien zu München und Dresden*, Leipzig, 1891; on Morelli, Giovanni Morelli, *De la peinture italienne*, Jaynie Anderson, ed., Fr. trans. by Nadine Blamoutier, Paris, 1994; Franz Kugler, *Handbook of painting. The Italian Schools*, Eng. trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake, 2 vols., London, 1855; Martin Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World*, Princeton, 1978; Adele M. Ernström, '"Equally lenders and borrowers in turn": the working and married lives of the Eastlakes', *ArtHistory*, 1992, no. 4, pp. 470–85.

19 James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, London, 2001.

20 Pascal Griener, 'La fatale attraction du Moyen-Age. Jean-Baptiste Séroux d'Agincourt et l'*Histoire de l'art par les Monumens*', *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, 54, 1997, pp. 225–34; Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink, eds., Berlin, 2000.

Summary

In the field of visual reproduction, major technical revolutions have modified our very perception of images. On the one hand, reproductions of original art works may provide us with a good range of precise scientific tools, but on the other, our tendency – often subconscious – to see these images as perfect surrogates for what they reproduce obliterates our perception of the originals themselves. I should like to sketch out an analysis of such a dilemma, by considering the period, during the nineteenth century, when photography transformed our discipline; I shall parallel this phenomenon with an earlier, comparable, revolution which took place during the Enlightenment as a result of the development of the fac-simile. The outcome of this comparison enables us to call into question our entire vision of progress. It shall become evident that the sudden refinement of some techniques of artistic reproduction which occurred during the eighteenth century was destined to have a greater, and more positive, impact and that its negative side-effects were more quickly identified and neutralized, since most art historians of the period were able to develop a model which allowed for a controlled use of cognitive images. Examples of such careful and meticulous evaluations are clearly lacking in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, leaving us poorly equipped when confronted by yet another revolution – the new age of digital imaging. Today, departments of the history of art should devote much time to considering and evaluating both the advantages and the pitfalls of the new technologies which are at their disposal.