

The New Life of Images. The Case of Postmodern Cinema

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1. Technology and Fear

One of the most prominent discourses related to the identity of the “postmodern condition”¹ is directly associated with the role played by science and technology in Western society. In 1977, Winner’s *Autonomous Technology. Technics–out–of–Control as a Theme in Political Thought*² offered an accurate reconstruction of this debate, setting out ideally the field and key words for the intense relaunch of this debate in the eighties. In fact, the idea of an “autonomous technology” summarizes a vast number of topical issues (both in the past and present time), from the automatization of labor and life to the obliteration of human agency, from the substitution of the master–servant relationship (with machines now holding the power) to the advent of a “technological society” (to quote the title of the crucial book by Jacques Ellul, published in 1954 and translated into English in 1964³) whose complexity and self–sufficiency take humans away from a real comprehension of their design and function (the basic idea is that of the “machine” as a black box⁴). Winner’s aim is clear and becomes clearer in his

¹ J.-F. LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.

² L. WINNER, *Autonomous Technology. Technics–out–of–Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, MIT Press, Cambridge–London 1977.

³ J. ELLUL, *The Technological Society* (1954), Vintage Books, New York 1964.

⁴ If today the “black box” metaphor is quite common, especially associated to the algorithm culture — see among others P. DOURISH, *Algorithms and Their Others. Algorithmic Culture Context*, «Big Data & Society», vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–11, and F. PASQUALE, *The Black Box Society. The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*, Harvard

following book, published in 1986, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*⁵: it defines the history, field, and tasks of a philosophy of technology (set apart from a philosophy of science), essentially seen as a critical inquiry into the nature and significance of artificial aids to human activity⁶. And if this task appeared particularly urgent to Winner in the mid-eighties, it is precisely because technology is now playing a very different role in everyday life (which it has not done so before now).

This is remarkably evident if we think that the seventies and eighties witnessed not only the spreading of computer and information technologies, which were increasingly common and “tamed” (the term “telematics” was coined in 1976), but also the advent of new technological means such as fax machines, Walkmans, compact discs, and camcorders (introduced by Sony in 1982), which radically changed the way in which people could communicate, exchange information, and interact with and represent reality. As Winner sums up

if one observes how thoroughly our lives are shaped by interconnected systems of modern technology, how strongly we feel their influence, respect their authority and participate in their workings, one begins to understand that, like it or not, we have become members of a new order in human history [...]. Observing the structures and processes of these vast systems, one begins to comprehend a distinctively modern form of power, the foundations of a *technopolitan culture*⁷.

With respect to this new “world order”, which affects all social layers and everyday activities, a philosophy of technology refers not only to a new domain — essentially the attempt to see, read, and understand the “machine” and the culture it enables or imposes. It also means that philosophy *tout court* has more than

University Press, Cambridge–London 2015 —, one of the first account of this image is in J. BAUDRILLARD, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Sage, London 1993.

⁵ L. WINNER, *The Whale and the Reactor. A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1986.

⁶ Ivi, p. 4.

⁷ Ivi, p. IX, italics mine.

ever to take technology into account as a crucial aspect of reality or, to put it in other words, that technology has to be integrated into the contemporary philosophical agenda as an unavoidable content, filter, or layer, whatever the main inquiry or question might be. If, in the end, philosophy is or should be a way to frame and scrutinize the meaning of reality and human existence in order to act in the world through ideas and concepts, then contemporary philosophy cannot escape confrontation with the problem of technology.

On this subject, *On the Question Concerning the Determination of the Matter for Thinking*, the lecture held by Martin Heidegger in 1965 to commemorate the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger⁸, has great relevance. This is especially because in the lecture, in order to stress the ultimate point of the evolution of the Western metaphysical and historical idea of being human, the philosopher deals directly with the relatively new concept of cybernetics, popularized by the publication of Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* in 1963, the very same year in which Dennis Gabor, the "father" of holography, published *Imagining the Future*. In particular, Heidegger — picking up on the idea of the end of philosophy previously mentioned in his 1964 lecture *Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens* ("The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking"⁹) — looks at cybernetics as «a science which unifies all sciences in a new sense of unity»¹⁰, imposing a realm based on the orderability of presence, which manifests itself through the power of information, calculation, and technical control. Besides the specific role it plays inside

⁸ M. HEIDEGGER, *On the Question Concerning the Determination of the Matter for Thinking (Das Ende des Denkens in der Gestalt der Philosophie)*, «Epoché», vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 2010, pp. 213–223. The English translation is based on the German text of the expanded version of the talk edited by Hermann Heidegger and first published in Europe in 1984 as *Zur Frage nach der Bestimmung der Sache des Denkens* by Erker-Verlag, St. Gallen, Switzerland.

⁹ Which appears in English translation in M HEIDEGGER, *Basic Writings*, San Francisco, HarperCollins 1993.

¹⁰ M HEIDEGGER, *On the Question Concerning the Determination of the Matter for Thinking*, cit., p. 215.

Heidegger's constant thought about technology, this later lecture is particularly interesting not just because it sketches out a slightly but undoubtedly technophobic scenario, which will be a kind of standard "representation" for the next two decades (at least), especially in arguing that

the conspicuous successes of the inexorable development of technicity continue to give the appearance that the human being is the master of technicity. In truth, however, he is the servant of the power that thoroughly dominates all technical production¹¹.

On the Question Concerning the Determination of the Matter for Thinking will also resonate in future philosophical considerations about technology and contemporary society because of its emphasis on the replacement of previous authoritative categories such as consequence, cause, and effect by operative terms such as information, steering, feedback (the leading ideas of cybernetics), and for the characterization of a human being as someone who lives in a constant "need for information". To quote Lyotard, «"development" is the ideology of the present time, it realizes the essentials of metaphysics, which was a thinking pertaining to forces much more than to the subject»¹².

This idea about a "new techno-scientific metaphysic" is particularly evident among those continental thinkers that mastered the debate during the seventies onwards — including Jean Baudrillard, Vilém Flusser, Jean-François Lyotard, Gianni Vattimo, and Paul Virilio — and whose primary aim was to provide an analysis of the evolution of modern ideals within contemporary society. The matter is almost never technology *per se*, but rather its significance, on the one hand, for the material, economic, and political organization of society, and, on the other hand, for the actual experience and reality perception of man. Not surprisingly, this matter is quite often framed along with the problem (a classical modernist issue) of the ethical equilibrium between the

¹¹ Ivi, p. 218.

¹² J.-F. LYOTARD, *The Inhumane. Reflections on Time* (1988), Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991, p. 6.

progress and “natural” limits of techno–science (that is, the marriage between technology, science, and capitalism). Despite the numerous differences from one scholar to another, we can recognize common ground in pointing out a sort of twofold crisis: that of the symbolic and material relationship between technology and man, and that of the dialogue between scientific progress and social and natural order (human beings, time, space). To quote Virilio, writing in 1980 about “the extraordinary progress” made by prostheses during the previous forty years,

we’ve passed from quasi–inert anthropomorphic instruments to systems of active assistance in the sensorial domain in particular, a subliminal succor that ushers in a crisis of dimensions at the same time as one of representations¹³.

Or to quote the Lyotard of *The Inhumane*, who reflects on, among other issues, telegraphy,

current technology, that specific mode of tele–graphy, writing at a distance, removes the close contexts of which rooted cultures are woven. It is thus, through its specific manner of inscription, indeed productive of a sort of memorization freed from the supposedly immediate conditions of time and space. The question to follow here would be as follows: what is a body (body proper, social body) in tele–graphic culture? It calls up a spontaneous production of the past in habit, a tradition or transmission of ways of thinking, willing, and feeling, a sort of breaching, then, which complicates, counters, neutralizes and extenuates earlier community breachings, and in any case translates them so as to move them on too, make them transmissible. If the earlier breachings remain there at all, resist a bit, they become subcultures. The question of a hegemonic teleculture on a world scale is already posed¹⁴.

But it is easy to find similar conclusions or observations about the crisis of a “previous” condition, outside the continental philosophy. *The Myth of the Machine*, the ambitious project by Lewis Mumford, is fueled by the feeling that

¹³ P. VIRILIO, *The Aesthetic of Disappearance* (1980), Semiotext(e), New York 1991, p. 50.

¹⁴ J.–F. LYOTARD, *The Inhumane*, cit., p. 50.

in contemporary art and politics and technics [...] man may be on the point of losing it [the expression of the human personality] — becoming not a lower animal, but a shapeless, amoeboid nonentity¹⁵.

What is more specific, and original, in continental philosophers' thinking is the calling of the problem of images, media, and representation into the analysis of the (new) relationship between the freedom and identity of human beings and of the realm of an increasingly autonomous technology. Particularly in Baudrillard, Flusser, and Ellul, the reorganization of media, communication and informational systems, the role of scientific representations, and the advent of new kinds of images — computer, digital, and holographic ones — have been seen as an organic element on the new technical system, the standpoint of a new sense of the *technicality of the reality*, as Jacques Ellul would say: «Techniques replace me in a growing number of activities, and the universe of images to which I belong facilitates this substitution to an incredible degree»¹⁶. Images — especially media images — are perceived and interpreted more and more as a techno-product among others, released by the “machine” whose work-for-itself agency passes directly onto its products and affects users. The broad, theoretical argumentation about the “problem of images” is actually built upon the same axis which squares the reflection about technology, and particularly upon the ideas of humans losing control of productive systems, of the subversion of the subject-object dialectic, and of the con-

¹⁵ L. MUMFORD, *The Myth of the Machine. Technics and Human Development*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1967, p. 10.

¹⁶ J. ELLUL, *The Humiliation of the Word* (1981), William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1985, p. 90. In the next paragraph it is written: «Images are indispensable for the construction of the technological society. If we remained at the stage of verbal dialogue, inevitably we would be led to critical reflection. But images exclude criticism. The habit of living in this image-oriented world leads me to give up dialectical thought and criticism. It is so much easier to give up and let myself be carried along by the continually renewed wave of images. They provide me from moment to moment with exactly the amount of stimulus I need. They give me the emotional level (the anger, the tender feelings, and the degree of interest) that I can tolerate and find indispensable in this gray world. Images are essential if I am to avoid seeing the day-to-day reality I live in. They glitter continuously around me, allowing me to live in a sort of image-oriented fantasy».

cealing of the meaning behind sign — a reified, autonomous sign. Especially in Baudrillard and Ellul, the path that links contemporary, consumer, objectified and hyper-technologized society, the emergence of a new symbolic order, and the hyper-realistic power of media and technical images is fairly linear and evident: images, exactly like any other modern “object”, are seen both as the sublimation of man’s subjectivity and desire and as the pillars of an autonomous realm which veil reality and entrap human agency. Since *The System of Objects* — focused on the analysis of the myth of “everything to work for itself” and its consequences for humans — Baudrillard explicitly reversed the perspective of the influential essay *The Age of the World Picture*, in which Heidegger looked at the modern age as a period characterized by the domain of science and its metaphysics, which undergird the objectification (in the form of representations) of the world led by a new human subject (new in its own subjectiveness)¹⁷. The Heideggerian thesis of the possession of the world through and thanks to representations — the conquest of a distanced “view of the world”, a *Weltanschauung* — is replaced by the idea of the desertification of reality led by visual hyper-reality, in which objects and representations take “life”, freeing themselves from human ratio in order to stand in the world as pure entities, to “put forward” (to represent means exactly that) just themselves. Therefore, no symbolic exchange can take place any longer between the material, objective world (doomed to dissolution) and its representations (which stop being such, that is staying in reality as a medium clearly perceived as non-reality).

A slight iconophobia normally surrounds these kinds of conclusions. This is quite evident in Baudrillard, whereas in Flusser there predominates a feeling of unawareness and cultural unpreparedness which limits human capacity to grasp the “secret” of

¹⁷ M. HEIDEGGER, *The Age of the World Picture*, in ID., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York–London 1977, pp. 115–154. The essay, written in 1932, was originally published in ID., *Holzwege*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt 1952.

technical images, forged by a “second degree of imagination” — images that, again by reference to Heidegger, stop being «a map for interventions in the three-dimensional, concrete world»¹⁸. However, this iconophobic reaction to the emergence of a new visual realm, not just full of images but also populated by new kinds of images (the informatic, digital, and holographic ones previously mentioned) and by new production processes (modelization and computation along with “classical” representations), should be evaluated as a specific dimension of the technophobic attitude which spans the debate about the modern world of the machine and autonomous, independent, and in some ways out-of-control technology. At the same time, from the seventies onwards the spreading and increasingly specific debate about the “problem of images” (held by philosophers, sociologists, and media theorists) about the fact that we live in «a society made by, for, as a function of, and by means of visualization»¹⁹, should not be seen as a mere consequence of a new social order. The centrality accorded by philosophers to the study of images also stems from the awareness that, from now on, the visual is going to represent a crucial space in order to understand wider changes. In other words, the analysis of visual space, visual media, visual techniques, and visual representation becomes, especially by the eighties, a pivotal (and transdisciplinary) field or an unavoidable point of departure to grasp and define the essence of contemporary, technology-driven society.

2. The New Life of Images

Most of the key words that mark the debate about modern technology, consumerist society and its subverting power, especially with regards to man’s freedom, agency, and identity (from autonomy to animism, from anthropomorphism to unknowability) return in the analysis of visual landscape and images. After all, as antic-

¹⁸ V. FLUSSER, *Into Immaterial Culture* (1986), Metaflux, United Kingdom 2015, p. 27.

¹⁹ J. ELLUL, *The Humiliation of the Word*, cit.

ipated, the latter are treated as specific products or objects of a new social structure when they are not, as in Baudrillard, its topical language and “fatal strategy”, which reinforces, with respect to man, the conformism, unchangeable stereotypical behavior and absence of activity brought by the system of objects²⁰. More generally, for all the aforementioned scholars who by the seventies start dealing with this particular aspect of postmodern society, the main problem (as suggested by Baudrillard’s idea of the advent of a third simulacrum order, by Flusser’s statement about the rise of a new imagination, and by Ellul’s claim that the “invasion of images” and the unconditional victory of the visual are profoundly changing our minds and ways of thinking²¹) is confronting a new territory, a hiatus in the history of visibility, with images partially or completely detached from previously established historical definitions, limits, and behaviors. Not by chance, during the seventies and eighties metaphors of the invasion or the “escape” of images are quite recurring, suggesting that images are now living (or starting to live) a very different life with regards to three main axes: the symbolic, the referential, and the material. That means, respectively: i) a transformation of the social and aesthetic tradition of the presence and use of images, which triggers an attempt to define the present as a further and quite autonomous stage in the history of representation²²; ii) a transformation of the linguistic and structural relationship between images and reality, and, as an inevitable consequence, between man and reality (both Baudrillard and Ellul are quite definitive in asserting the disappearing of truth behind images, and, consequently, the reconfiguration of the cognitive role of representations in grasping and understanding the world); iii) a transformation of the structure, technical production procedures, and circulation of images, which conceals the previous idea of technology as either a functional extension or a interpretative tool of human being.

²⁰ J. BAUDRILLARD, *The System of Objects* (1968), Verso, London–New York 1996, p. 112.

²¹ J. ELLUL, *The Humiliation of the Word*, cit.

²² See V. FLUSSER, *Bilderstatus*, in C. JOACHIMIDES, N. ROSENTHAL (eds.), *Metropolis. Internationale Kunstausstellung Berlin 1991*, Stuttgart 1991.

As anticipated, metaphors such as autonomy, independence, agency, and vitality are quite recurring inside this theoretical scenario, either to describe the fact that images are now the whole reality, or to depict the advent of new relationships between visual objects and man. Before the definitive claim that images should be interpreted and treated as “quasi–person”²³, throughout this debate we can observe a tendency to look at images as powerful entities which act freely, surrounding us up to the point of becoming a menace to our own independence, autonomy, and vitality. This warning — by the media and visual scholars — about a new “vital exchange” between humans and images is actually one of the most interesting traits amongst the various attempts to grasp the nature of contemporary visual “revolution”. The general idea — sometimes explicitly formulated, other times implicit and not completely followed up — is that the realm of contemporary visual is not just built upon the proliferation and quality, structural changings of images and their spectacular, fascinating taking control of human life. It’s also built upon the idea — chiming with the broad debate about consumerism and technology — that images are literally stealing men’s lives, reducing man to a minor or a weaker version of himself, as though he was entrapped in a dictatorship of seeing and deprived of his ability to think. In claiming this, Baudrillard and Ellul are probably the most explicit scholars, as shown by *The Evil Demon of Images* (1984) and *The Humiliating Word* (1981). But like the *topos* of the autonomy technology analyzed by Winner as a general culture complex, the idea of the new power of images, with its side effects on human integrity, agency, and self–determination, is quite recurring even in journalism. Ellul opens his *The Humiliating Word* quoting from a 1978 article published in «Le Monde»: «Words withdraw behind images, more every day. Not just any image gets watched: only the moving, speaking image. It is not like pictures in books, but like life itself». And we can look at *The Humiliating Word* as a sort of paradigm of the argumenta-

²³ See W.J.T MITCHELL, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

tion with which, especially during the eighties, the “problem of images” was framed. The starting point is generally the realization that «today we can no longer live without the reference and diversion provided by images. For a large proportion of our lives we live as mere spectators», while the conclusion normally tends to outline the fact that people have been turned «into passive recorders of images»²⁴ and that «artificial images, passing themselves off for truth, obliterate and erase the reality of my life and my society. They allow me to enter an image-filled reality that is much more thrilling. Even television news, when it deals with catastrophes, disasters, and crises, takes the drama out of them by making them extraordinary and thrilling — by literally converting them into something metaphysical. The more terrible the spectacle, the calmer the hypnosis of the images makes me»²⁵.

3. The Role of Cinema

But during the eighties the examination of the new presence, identity, and agency of images was not just a media theorists’ or philosophers’ matter. In that moment, cultural production and particularly cinema seemed to develop — of course, by other means — a similar inquiry into the problem of images, trying to answer the very same questions faced by the theory. Moreover, it is in and through movies that some facets of the question are posited with more evidence, or related to each other, and some historical and cultural strands which link present and past were unearthed. This is particularly true with regards to the ancient *topos* of images as living presences²⁶, which CGI, electronic manipulation of image surfaces (also empowered by the advent of chroma key), and holograms seem to level up, opening up a new horizon to the idea of *animation of images*: either they

²⁴ J. ELLUL, *The Humiliation of the Word*, cit., p. 89.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 90.

²⁶ See D. FREEDBERG, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989, and C. VAN ECK, *Art, Agency and Living Presence*, Walter de Gruyter Inc., Boston–Berlin–Munich 2015.

proceed from reality or come as pure sign from a computer. As previously mentioned, the idea of a new autonomy and agency of images — especially techno-images — is quite recurrent in books and essays, as well as the tendency to treat images as if they were “quasi-person”, empowered by new forces and finally no longer perceived as mere representation. But working directly with and on images, cinema helps to reveal and better understand not only the contemporary “reloading” of cultural behaviors and interpretations that have gone with images since ancient times. For example, from an archaeological media perspective realistic computer-generated images can be related to the history of *tromp-l’oeil* paintings, while we can easily pair phantasmagoria and holograms with the ancient idea of *simulacrum*. On the other hand, with regards to images as living, active, and vital presences, postmodern cinema offers an intriguing, updated version of the way in which images are, or try to be, alive: a version, as anticipated, aligned with the debate about techno-science and consumeristic society, in particular with the idea that man, driven by an ultimate desire to extend his own power of control through technology, is actually, in some ways, losing that control in favor of the machine, its intelligence and operational power.

The movies we can refer to in order to support our ideas are numerous, some of which, including *Videodrome* (D. Cronenberg, 1984) and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (W. Allen, 1985), have already been well studied. Aside from the Baudrillardian thesis that undergirds the former, these two films clearly suggest the idea of the vital impulse of images towards evolution and the lucid consciousness of their own identity. Leaving aside their more or less romantic or homicidal intentions towards reality, the images portrayed in these two movies emerge as dynamic and malleable entities, material and immaterial, technological and carnal; “intelligent” images, in search of another body and another form of life, to be able to take over their own historical and behavioral rules; anthropomorphic and alien images, in transformation, which change skins, extend themselves, resemble reality and, at the same time, invade and deform it, dub it. In short, restless and out-of-definition images,

which openly call into question their historical identity and their functioning. This begins by subverting a dictionary definition, which would frame images as «sign or symbol characterized from a sensitive resemblance to what it represents»²⁷, to continue with the exaltation of the ambiguities and duplicities that characterize their nature, like their being, at the same time, present and absent realities, tangible and spectral entities. In other words, *no longer just images or images in excess*, enigmatic and unpredictable bodies, in which, as anticipated, some of postmodern society's main terms of definition seem to collide and be revealed, especially with regards to the new techno-scientific "realm" which seems to enchant and imprison contemporary viewers.

Instead of accumulating examples, in this final part of the essay I will focus on one single film, *Looker*, written and directed by Michael Crichton in 1981. This film brings together the themes of living images, that of their new techno-life (which of course directly affects their manifestation, materiality, and recognition), and probably the most uncanny modern issue, which is not simply the anthropomorphism of technology, but rather the vital exchange between technology and bios, the "stealing" and reproduction of life's secret by artificial, hyper-powerful, and intelligent technology — an issue that, in the end, links technophobia and iconophobia. At first sight, *Looker* seems to be a dystopian thriller à la Baudrillard: it tells the story of an american company, Digital Matrix Incorporated, engaged in the development of computer technology for the creation of digital, empowered (in terms of persuasion) replicas of flesh-and-blood actors to be used in television advertising. This substitution represents the first step towards the production of a kind of hypnotic communication: in fact, once reduced to computer-generated images, the actresses (the research is limited to the female body) would perform according to the parameters established by the Looker (Light Ocular-Oriented Kinetic Emotional Responses), a computer device which allows images to produce an optical

²⁷ W.J.T MITCHELL, *Image*, in W.J.T MITCHELL, M.B.N. HANSEN (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2010, p. 39.

pulse synchronized with the alpha rhythm of the viewer, inducing a sort of trance condition. *À la Baudrillard*, indeed: *Looker* seems to bring into reality some of the French philosopher's theses about reality's desertification conducted by the combined action of technological science and mass-media culture, with the "veil" of images which finally conceals (instead of revealing) reality and, through the "cold seduction" of an attractive and hypnotic visual, imprisons man in a perennial hallucination. In short, an almost perfect translation of the theory of the "third order of the simulacra" and of the "metaphysics of the code", in which human beings are reduced to surfaces of signal reception²⁸.

The *Looker*'s philosophical approach and its interpretation of the growing integration between mass media and information technology could today appear more "historical" than futuristic: a consequence of a technophobic culture and, in particular, of a "computerphobia"²⁹ which was, at that moment, quite common and understandable — as revealed precisely by such movies as 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (S. Kubrick, 1968), *Demon Seed* (D. Cammell, 1977), *War Games* (J. Badham, 1983), and *Brainstorm* (D. Trumbull, 1983). At the same time, however, in the folds of the apocalyptic development of the story, the "problem of images" is clearly identified by *Looker* in terms of a series of transformations (which are still original and current) that interest, first of all, the origin, the structure, and the materiality of images. The film, in this sense, seems to respond with great clarity to one of the fundamental questions of contemporary visual culture, namely "What are images made of?". On the one hand, *Looker* is already intertwining the problem of the *matter* with that of the origin, the *matrix*³⁰, as the name of the company immediately suggests. On the other hand, it questions and explores the nature and the logic of the exchange between physical forms and computer

²⁸ See J. BAUDRILLARD, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, cit.

²⁹ L. REED, *Domesticating the Personal Computer: The Mainstreaming of a New Technology and the Cultural Management of a Widespread Technophobia*, «Critical Studies in Media Communication», vol. 17, no. 2, 2000, pp. 159–185.

³⁰ *Matter* and *Matrix* as intended in J.-F. LYOTARD, *Les Immatériaux. Inventaire*, Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1985.

language — between human beings and machines — which presides over the synthesis of the *matrix*, from which a new species of image takes life.

In fact, as a long psychedelic sequence set in the Digital Matrix laboratories shows, these images originate from the analysis and the computer processing of data collected by human body scanning: living matter traversed by the light of a scanner, deconstructed into its discrete elements, and finally reconstructed, as an image, through mathematical computing. The result is a digital version that is, at the same time, similar (the model, after all, has been chosen because it is “perfect”) and better (a “more perfect” copy, consistent with the logic of the Looker), and a digital version which represents the codification of a standardized model, a “genetic code” that can be used both to replace that particular model in the commercials and to digitally touch up other models. The dematerialization of the human body operated by the Digital Matrix scanner does not, therefore, only represent a recoding process necessary to produce a digital, retouchable copy of that body. It also aims to decipher and recode the structure of the body, its matrix, taking the term both in its etymological meaning of “mother”, “uterus”, and in its technical meaning as an original from which identical copies can be obtained. That’s exactly why the interpretation of the computer-generated images of *Looker* appears particularly interesting: it places a process of appropriation and physical conversion of the structure of the human body, of its “soul” and its skeleton, at the base of the image’s generative principle. Thus, the digital version of the model is not a simple reproduction of a previous image in another format, but rather a real double, a body-image generated by a matrix identity, such that the similarity between the model and its image appears to be the effect of a procedure that is both a cloning and a genetic manipulation.

That’s precisely the point at which technophobia, iconophobia, and postmodern ratio collapse: the Digital Matrix procedure is the emblem of the (uncanny) “qualitative leap” in the rationalist, scientific attitude that guides modern man: the shift from the

desire to “decipher the object” to the desire to possess its laws of constitution in order to increase human possibilities — the extreme limit, as suggested by Lyotard, of the modern awareness that «what generates existence and meaning is not a divinity, but structure»³¹, precisely a matrix. Or, to refer to Mitchell, we could characterize the “thirst for knowledge” that drives the experimentation of the Digital Matrix as the emblem of a culture (which defines our era) marked by a progressive replacement of the old model of assembly line and mechanical copying with that of “biocybernetic reproduction”: a culture in which natural processes meet the new artificial possibilities offered by technology in order to produce living copies of living organisms — hence, according to Mitchell, the figure of the clone as a “hyper–icon” of the contemporary³². In all cases, the “new images” produced by the *Looker* witness the extreme consequences of a typical substitution of contemporary techno–culture: that of the man/nature interface replaced with the man/technology one³³.

Finally, along with other movies from the eighties — including but not limited to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (W. Craven, 1984), *Young Sherlock Holmes* (B. Levinson, 1985), *Neon Maniacs* (J. Mangine, 1986), *Prince of Darkness* (J. Carpenter, 1986), and *True Stories* (D. Byrne, 1986) — *Looker* stands as a milestone of the ongoing elaboration within postmodern culture of a kind of new paradigm of the material origin, social presence, and performance of images, in which traditional opposition, guided by the problem of realism and cultural reference, between physical original and visual copy, no longer represents a valuable or sufficient way of interpretation, even if we decide not to join Baudrillard’s perspective unconditionally. Most notably due to the works of Freedberg and Mitchell, we are now quite accustomed to looking at images as powerful, autonomous, independent “objects”, something that not only stands in front of us, but

³¹ *Ibidem* (intendedly, the book has not page numbers).

³² See W.J.T MITCHELL, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011; a first formulation in ID., *What Do Pictures Want?*, cit., pp. 309–335.

³³ É. THEOFILAKIS (dir.), *Modern, et après? Les immatériaux*, Autrement, Paris 1985, p. X.

with which we create a complex, quasi-personal relationship, treating them (and being treated by them) as if they were “real” in a very different way than that suggested by realism aesthetic theory. But we would cut out a very important phase of this new way of thinking (and its cultural implication) by not pursuing its starting point, which is equally split between theory and cultural production and which takes place in the second half of the seventies onwards. We would also miss the strong threads that link visual culture theory and the philosophy of technology. The most important and increasingly “commonsensical” perception of both technology and images — equal harbingers of “phobic” attitudes — bears on the idea of “forms of life”³⁴ exactly.

Of course anthropomorphism, independent intelligence, autonomy, and agency do not speak of some kind of simplistic animism. On the one hand, here “life” means that human existence could no longer be thinkable without and outside of images, and, on the other hand, that a series of cultural and anthropological assumptions which have framed the interpretations of the relationship between images and man since then are now outdated. Therefore in this cultural context, thinking about unanimated things or objects as if they were alive — like forms of life — could at the same time also be seen as an attempt to neutralize their excess and a cultural strategy to put them back in the realm (and eventually in the possession) of man. However, regarding the history of “new” techno-images and movies, what we can outline as a conclusion is the emergence of a way of thinking, writing about, representing, and imagining images (especially mass-media ones) which posits the idea of *animation* outside a merely technical box (including of course the opposition between digital and photographic images). In order to fully explore this “cultural frame”, a work similar to that undertaken by David Freedberg with regards to the history of artistic images would be needed; in summary, a history of a *credulity of vision*³⁵, both outside the borders of aesthetic representa-

³⁴ See L. WINNER, *Autonomous Technology*, cit.

³⁵ R. DEBRAY, *Media Manifestos. On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms* (1994), Verso, London–New York 1996, p. 136.

tions and that of technological means of production. What *kind* of images is the unfortunate priest seeing (or believes to be seeing) at the beginning of *Young Sherlock Holmes*? Evidently, neither is it just a religious stained-glass scene nor a digital animation. Rather, it is an event — a life that happens — no longer controllable by humans, the very same humans who have historically forged that precise visual space (a “frame”) and filled it with representation intended both as support for prayers and as a symbolical medium of the invisible. But, as professor Howard Birack (from *Prince of Darkness*, J. Carpenter, 1987) would claim: «Say goodbye to classical images».