

The Statutes of Audiovisual Images: The Perception of Truth between “Fiction” and “Reality” [†]

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Abstract: In the context of the media, in which industrial means of communication (cinema, TV, telephony, informatics) converge and integrate various visual languages and stimulate the interconnection of different communicational models, audiovisual technical factors that seem marginal are actually capable of conditioning the perception and sense of the image. In particular, those that characterize it as artificial are combined to heighten the quality of the image, just as those that denote it as authentic and real contain the imperfections of an “amateur” image. In this framework, the article aims to investigate how these technical formats, in various communicational devices, perceptual qualities, paradigms, and forms of visual design, are transformed to guide the perception of fiction and reality.

Keywords: developing and communicating ideas; theory of images; statute of images; images and collective imagination; audiovisual design; mass communication

1. Introduction. Audiovisual Media and the Technical Statutes of the Image

Edgar Morin writes, “the only reality we are sure of is the representation, the image, that is, non-reality, given that the image refers to an unknown reality” [1] (p. 18).

Audiovisual media, due to its effectiveness in soliciting interest and relationships, has become a privileged tool of information, the place *par excellence* for cultural influence [2] (pp. 15–16). It represents “one of the all-encompassing languages that are redefining communication”, in the sense that it assumes different connotations until it becomes a “digital object, a concentration of communicational functions”, an evident example of the “linguistic cross-over represented by multimedia” [3] (p. 37). Perceptual and sensory stimulation by audiovisual media resides “in the syncretism of its constituent material and in the heterogeneity of the codes that preside over its meaningful manifestation” [4] (p. 7). Today in the audiovisual world, different types of codes converge (graphics, photography, cinematography, etc.) and, like photography, audiovisual media is the fruit of interrelationships among the object before the objective lens, the creator that observes and interprets it, the characteristics of the means to produce it, the relationship between the creator and subject, the cultural content, and the communicational codes used for production and interpretation [5] (pp. 63–66).

With the spread of television and video, relationships between image and reality have undergone profound changes. According to Régis Debray, they have led to the construction of a hyper reality viewed as an idol. Debray writes: «The immaterial nature of reactive video has the virtues of the archaic colossus. It is a self-referential image without an author automatically placed in the position of the idol, and we as idolizers try to adore it directly instead of venerating through it the reality that it indicates» [6] (p. 412). For Mario Perniola, the media has turned the image into a “resemblance” that does not “reproduce an external prototype, but an effective image that dissolves

the original”; in other words, an “image without identity”, without an “autonomous originality” [7] (pp. 128–129). Perniola categorizes the mediation between image and reality into television reality, television image, and something “videomatic”. The first, which dates to 1968, is connected to the spread of television transmission and the idea that TV could modify reality. The second is realized through the “‘videoization’ of reality” and the spectacle made of it. Finally, the third, which began in the 1980s, is carried out with the possibility of registering and archiving reality with different supports (video cameras and videocassettes), and demonstrates how video is capable of transforming the image of reality into a “thing” that can be manipulated and modified [8] (pp. 199–200). This possibility, which today is further amplified thanks to digital devices, has favoured the development of the linguistic eclecticism of independent and self-productions, opening new approaches; it has defined original experiences and developed new codes and visual registers. Digital devices have also allowed for connections between different statutes of images, determined first by cinema and then by television, and those originating at the margins of official languages. These hybridizations highlight the complexity “of the (infinite) transformations that languages can experience in encounters among different image heritages and different communicational histories” [9] (p. 38).

In audiovisual media, factors capable of conditioning the perception of reality have matured over time. They predispose the public to perceiving the image as authentic and real. Among these, some depend on the system of mediation and on the context in which the audiovisual material is transmitted. Others instead are technical in nature, instilled with supports of which the audiovisual image is the product and through which it is consumed. These factors were consolidated as aesthetic qualities capable of signalling the authenticity or inauthenticity of the image and its connection with reality. Photography, first of all, has established a direct perceptual connection between image and reality, between image and the sense of what is true. As Roland Barthes maintains, not only photography is an image produced by chemical and optical systems and can be replicated infinitely, while painting, for example, cannot simulate reality without having seen it, but also photography adheres to and is the emanation of its referent, that is, that “necessarily real thing that was placed before the objective lens, without which there would be no photography” [10] (pp. 77–78). Cinema has then reinforced this adherence, imposing itself through dynamic figurative levels that determine an imagery in which spectators “narcissistically” identify themselves. In this regard, Barthes writes: «(...) the image captivates me, captures me: I am *glued* to the representation, and it is this glue that establishes the naturalness (pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene (...) the Real knows only distances, the Symbolic knows only masks; the image alone (the image-repertoire) is *close*; only the image is “true”» [11] (p. 148).

Photography, cinema, and television present different technical statutes regarding the referent and its representation. In photography, light reflected from the object strikes the plate, producing a sort of cast of the object. In cinema, this effect reality is reinforced by movement, but in television the electronic image is no longer a cast of reality, because it is characterized by a process of decomposition and recomposition by which the object is divided into minimal units (pixels) by the camera, which are transformed into electrical impulses transmitted in the form of electromagnetic waves, to the television that recomposes them [4] (pp. 82–83).

According to Sandra Lischi, if cinema is characterized by the succession of static images, video joins the family of simultaneous media like radio and TV from which it inherits the characteristic of being composed of impulses of light: “an incessant formation of signals are born and die at the speed of light and ‘weave’ a plot of lines and points in constant vibration” [12] (p. 12). Television and video and the consequent possibility of documenting reality live, as it occurs, lead to the rise of technical factors that condition the perception of truth and the relative involvement of the public, which joins on the level of defining the image itself. In this regard, Marshall McLuhan maintains that the quantities of visual information are determined to distinguish a “warm” medium such as radio or cinema from a “cold” one such as the telephone or TV.

“Warm media extend a single sense up to a “high definition”: up to the state, that is, in which it is abundantly full of data. From the visual point of view, a photograph has a factor of “high definition”, while a cartoon entails “low definition”, in that it contains a limited quantity of visual

information (...) warm media do not leave much space for the public to bridge or complete; therefore, they entail limited participation, while cold media imply a high degree of participation or completion by the public (...). A warm medium allows for less participation than a cold medium" [13] (pp. 31–33).

Essentially, the imperfection of the "TV mosaic", the incompleteness of the electronic image, seems to establish more "intimate" contact with the public [12] (p. 15) because the television image "visually lacking data" unknowingly constrains the spectator to recompose the visual stimulus reconfiguring "the dots into an abstract work of art on the pattern of a Seurat or Rouault" [13] (p. 333).

In this framework it is useful to investigate how figurative dichotomies between the "projected", professional image and the imperfect, "amateur" image are consolidated, along with their use and effects in different communicational devices.

2. Dichotomies and Integrations between the "Professional" and "Amateur" Image Formats in Relationships between Fiction and Reality

According to Pietro Montani, the audiovisual paradigm assumes an "active debate among the different technical image formats (optical and digital, for example) and among its different discursive forms (fiction and documentary, for example). In this way, one can render justice to the irreducible otherness of the real world and the testimony of facts—both in the media and not—that occur" [14] (p. XIII).

According to Bernard Stiegler, "our beliefs depend on the prostheses that mediate perceptual processes" [15] (p. 169). Reading the technical formats of the image allows one to recognize if this is "artificial", that is, expressly created with a specific objective, or if it documents reality and is therefore true. Pierre Sorlin uses the framework of analogous images to distinguish four types of "true" images: authentic, fabricated, falsified, and non-authentic. In particular, the non-authentic image is always a true image, but is used in a different context that does not pertain to it, for example, the catalogue images used in newspapers to make up for the absence of authentic snapshots. Fabricated images can be said to be true but not authentic in that they are produced artificially, while falsified images are intentionally modified to appear authentic [16] (pp. 80–81).

The construction of an image alienated from technical defects, that is, one that overcomes the defects of traditional media (for example, flickering or twinkling) should, in high definition, confer on the image a level of greater realism. Instead, it "(...) tends towards a model of perfection of the sign and not the object that it represents: better saturation of the technical icon leads to an improvement in the surface of the image, without increasing its 'depth' or, that is, its relationship with the referent". In other words, there is an improvement in the signified which does not affect its degree of realism [4] (pp. 85–86).

Over time, the specific aesthetics of the audiovisual image have matured. These have instilled statutes that, with different narrative languages, contribute to building an immediate perceptual convention: what is observed is not true reality, but "filmic fiction". These statutes are fully integrated into the language of publicity, which largely aims to build and organize seductive visual lexicons in which audiovisual communication generally simulates a reality free of a true referent, substituted "by widespread social knowledge that is mythical, allegorical, or fantastical" [4] (p. 129). This is basically an artificial reality that narrates and promises a world "that everyone would want to enter" [17] (p. 34). This is evident in advertisements, both when they present an "illustrative and didactic" character oriented mainly towards presenting the product and when the narration prevails to intensify "situations and emotions" [18] (p. 148). The brand, beyond being a vector of sense, has essentially become a story, and in order to build imagery around the brand itself, more than for communicating the product, it appropriates narrative paradigms from cinema. This marketing trend began in the 1990s and marked a move from the brand image to the brand story, that is, from communicating the image of the brand to the image of its history [19] (p. 17). For example, in the case of advertisements decomposed into a series of episodes in which the times of the narration are broken and reconnect, or in cases where the launch of the advertisement is formulated with an

extended story, followed by shorts of reduced duration, which, like film trailers, recall the narrative essence of the initial advertisement.

If imaginary realities are established through “designed” professional, simulated (for more information on visual simulation: [20]), images, amateur—and not professional—filming, due to its instability, defines perceptual regimes that make the images authentic. Basically, given its “imperfections”, the documentary aspect of the audiovisual image means the image is perceived as true. Philippe Dubois reveals how video, whose use spread beginning in the mid-1960s, due to its capacity to recount reality directly, represents an “independent form” of the electronic image, a “light TV” within everyone’s reach [21] (p. 28). It is an “image-act” [21] (p. 18), which documents reality and initially assumes the character of counter information according to social, cultural, political phenomena, but it also represents a means to experiment with new forms of linguistics, cinema, and artistic expressions [21] (p. 28). The documentary aspect of audiovisual media is already clear in early cinema, in the work of the Lumière brothers, and is transformed into theoretical assumption in the cinema of the Russian avant-garde, for example, in those that support the “cine-eye” of Dziga Vertov, for which documenting reality becomes visual poetry. In the French New Wave movement, “amateur” footage rejected the stylistic features of the filmic fiction of Hollywood, to initiate narrative forms capable of critically involving the public. In the cinema of the 1960s, different forms of documentary cinema can be found, for example, in the experimental works of Arthur Lipsett (in particular, the film *Very Nice, Very Nice*, Canada, 1961), or in the cinema of Chris Marker (in particular, the documentary film *Sans Soleil*, France, 1983), and then in the principles of the group of film-makers in *Dogma95* (founded in Copenhagen in 1995 by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg), which, by opposing the “cosmeticizing” of cinema and the use “of illusions to communicate emotions”, establishes the mandatory use of a hand-held camera (for further information: [22]). In addition to these ideological positions, which use the “documentary” statute to transform it into a new syntax, examples can also be found in the practice of the commercial cinema system, in which inserts present subjects or images filmed directly with a desired lack of quality in order to really connote the filmic aspect (like, for example, the full-length film *The Blair Witch Project*, USA, 1999, by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, which was filmed entirely through the statute of the “amateur” image).

With the expansion of recording means, “amateur” images realized using digital supports (webcam, smartphone, video camera, video-surveillance systems, etc.) have spread in the media system on the Internet, in cinema and television, in news reports, in satirical and variety transmissions, to show the authenticity of the visual information. In this way, a figurative dichotomy is consolidated between the professional “planned image”, which brings onto the stage a reality codified as “artificial”, and a self-produced one, generally deemed to be “genuine”, “authentic”, and perceived as real (Figure 1).

The “imperfect” aesthetics of the self-produced image, beyond being rooted in the lexicon of film and advertisement feeding the construction of an unreal imagery, is used strategically in the political communication apparatus to form public opinion. One example is the 2013 election campaign of the Italian *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five-Star Movement), for which the set-up of visual communication was developed with the aim of rendering the Movement completely alien to the stereotypes and rhetoric produced by the political machine up to then, in order to adhere to the widespread dissatisfaction with the political system. The Movement, the expression of the digital culture, openly declares its connection with the “democracy expressed by the network”. With streaming connections, assemblies, and interventions are documented exclusively with digital supports and present a “spontaneous” aesthetic, which is contrasted with the artificial aesthetics of traditional politics.



Figure 1. Frame from footage taken on 1 May 2009 with a video-surveillance system, which records the murder of Mariano Baciotterracino in the Sanità neighbourhood of Naples. (Available at: ubblica.it/cronaca/l-esecuzione-di-mariano-baciotterracino/38503/38650, last accessed: 21 August 2017).

In addition, the choice of the Movement not to appear in institutional media contexts, held to be the contaminated expression of the political system, became an “exclusive” for the informational apparatus to analyze and publish. In other words, in an attempt to preserve its image, the Five-Star Movement, avoiding pollution that would associate it with traditional politics, feeds media interest, exploiting spaces and dynamics that govern the information. In fact, this favoured the introduction the statute of the “rarefied” and “imperfect” self-produced image in the visual dictionary of political communication, becoming the “simulacrum” of a new propaganda capable of exploiting the perceptual regime that denotes the image as real (Figure 2). This new political aesthetic contrasts with the artificial and “lacquered” aesthetic, which, twenty years ago, had characterized the entrance on the political scene of the *Forza Italia* party (Figure 3). The aesthetic was also effective, because it was borrowed from the visual culture fed by commercial TV publicity in the previous decade.



Figure 2. Frame from the direct stream documenting the consultations between Matteo Renzi and Beppe Grillo to form the government, 19 February 2014. (Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Sm6dF_moqc, last accessed: 21 August 2017).



Figure 3. Frame from the announcement of Silvio Berlusconi's entrance on the political scene and the Forza Italia party, 26 January 1994. (Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8-uIYqnk5A>, last accessed: 21 August 2017).

3. Visual Paradoxes in the Perception of Truth in the Propaganda of Islamic Jihad

The dichotomy between the visual statutes that denote the image as true or artificial encounters a paradox in jihad propaganda, however, which, making a spectacle of horror, strategically subverts this paradigm. Islamic jihad, which, even if iconoclastic, seems to have fully understood the pervasive potential of forms of audiovisual communication. In audiovisual production, the aesthetic apparatus of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization was initially shown to be meagre and basic. In fact, in direct communications to the West, the means of production were poor and the films were of low quality. The camera was fixed; the leader, Osama bin Laden, appeared in many cases in a cave, to testify to being in forced hiding and to his vocation to the clandestine fight. Through these videos spread throughout the television system by the Qatari station Al Jazeera, the terrorist organization constructed its unexpected subterranean and elusive nature in the Western imagination. After the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the amateur images that documented the tragedy invaded the media system (Figure 4), while the "dusty" one of bin Laden, who would generally claim the attack a few months later, formalized the visual aesthetic of Al Qaeda (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Frame from an amateur video filmed from within a police helicopter flying near the World Trade Center of Manhattan during the 11 September terrorist attacks. (Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDIZ2CdQgXE>, last accessed: 21 August 2017).



Figure 5. Frame from the video transmitted by Al Jazeera in which Osama bin Laden initially claims generic and partial responsibility for the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York (Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C5DeMdRcXI>, last accessed: 21 August 2017).

Today, ISIS has subverted this aesthetic and narrative imagery through a true marketing process, instituting a consistent production apparatus, a true “popular cinematography” [23] (p. 65). There is vast development of video material and dozens of cases of jihadi production; audiovisual material in different formats and social network announcements are published constantly and then hosted on various phishing websites around the world, accompanied by publicity flyers and banners—moreover, ISIS uses squads of filmmakers that follow and document the war [23] (p. 64). In addition, ISIS presents a propaganda machine that organizes formats into palimpsests that include entertainment programs with different objectives of informing, educating, and celebrating, in addition to informational rubrics, bulletins, and news [23] (p. 102). The presence of ISIS on the Internet is thus associated with a vast system of audiovisual production and distribution, organized by a central apparatus that coordinates the communication of the different terrorist factions [23] (p. 64).

The films of summary executions carried out by ISIS present strong analogies with Western cinematographic aesthetics. In these videos, the real dimension loses its “amateur” consistency, becoming a spectacle and artifice precisely of filmic fiction. The reality of the execution is documented with high-quality images, intercrossed fades, professional editing, balanced framing, and balanced chromatic values, and is connected to specific meanings like, for example, showing prisoners dressed with bright orange jumpsuits to recall those of Islamists detained in the American Guantanamo Bay detention camp on the island of Cuba. In other words, to build an image of the horror, ISIS exploits the same aesthetic statues of Western cinematography. This paradigm generates unease and instability in the viewer. In fact, if the executions were not documented in such a sophisticated way, they would certainly testify to the cruelty of the terrorists and generate shock, but they would be perceived as simple news facts (Figure 6). Instead, following the aesthetic conventions of filmic fiction and making a spectacle of the event, not only the scorn but also the sense of anguish is fed and is amplified in the public, because those fears that cinema simulates are dramatically shown to be real. This dynamics is well testified by the documentary film *Terror Studios: la propaganda dell’ISIS*, by Alexis Marant, in which the parallels between Western cinematographic language and that of ISIS’s audiovisual propaganda are shown. The documentary discusses how Western filmography has become the source of inspiration for ISIS’s propaganda videos.



Figure 6. Frame from the ISIS-made video documenting the execution of the American journalist James Foley (August 2014). (Available at: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/08/20/siria-isis-pubblica-video-decapitazione-di-un-giornalista-usa-rapito-nel-2012/1094477/>, last accessed: 21 August 2017).

The production system of ISIS propaganda cinema, which aims both to recruit through exaltation “of the heroes of Islamic jihad” and to institutionalize the Islamic state—a clear example are the films *Al-Ghuraba: The Chosen Few of Different Lands* and *Flames of War*, a truth documentary introduced by a trailer of about an hour that uses the same language as cinematographic trailers, even ending with the phrase “coming soon to theatres” [23] (pp. 158–175)—seems to parallel the strategies of Soviet propaganda at the beginning of the 1900s. Initially, with the goal of spreading the success of the proletarian revolution throughout the vast Soviet territory, Soviet Russia published agitprop films, short films that have largely been lost today. The Bolshevik power carefully planned their distribution, organizing trains in which wagons were equipped with scenes where agitprop communicated the changes that had occurred in the country and urged people to unite. The public, then, was convinced that all of what they were seeing was real. These choices, corresponding to the needs of propaganda, led filmic fiction to acquire the character of “truth”. In fact, the reality of facts, exhibited under the “real” form, was often mystified with tales of events that never happened (this is true of the film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*, USSR, 1927, by Sergei Eisenstein, which was filmed with Red Army soldiers and workers and citizens of Leningrad, in which the actor Vasili Nikandrov was believed by the public to really be Lenin).

4. Conclusions

In a system in which unidirectional media coexist with networked media within a single platform, hybrid communicational artifices share the same digital code [24] (p. 11), and the form of audiovisual communication plays the leading role, the level of veracity of the image is also conditioned by the figurative definition of the signals that compose it. Electronic and digital media and the spread of equipment to record reality have institutionalized perceptual qualities capable of connoting the image as “projected” or as true, which are rooted more or less knowingly in the community. In particular, amateur films that denote the image as true in the language of cinema become aesthetic statutes that identify “political” dissent regarding the treatment of the image, but are then integrated in the syntax of filmic fiction to signal what is “true”; in political conversation, they are strategic for forming public opinion. In other words, the error, the imperfection of the amateur image, in contrast to the treatment of the “planned” image of filmic fiction, renders the image genuine and authentic and testifies to the authenticity of the message, becoming a paradigm and form of visual design capable of conditioning the perception of reality and the sense of what is “true”. These different connotations of “artificial” and “true” of audiovisual reality seem to recall two different attitudes that Christian Metz identifies in cinematographic work. The first displays the linguistic conventions of cinema and is offered to the public with a language that “rejects the underhanded devices designed to give the illusion that it could be translated into the terms of reality; it rejects likeliness, in the full sense of the word, since it renounces the attempt to appear

true". The second uses the image in constructing what is credible, in other words, it "believes itself to be and wants us to believe it to be directly translatable into the terms of reality. At this point likeliness intervenes with all its weight" [25] (pp. 318–319).

However, these two figurative systems short circuit when this paradigm is subverted, i.e. when it is the "artificial" image that tells the truth of facts, in other words, when a spectacle is made of horror and appears with the same statutes of filmic fiction. In effect, they subvert the consolidated statutes of the image designed to signal artificial and real, rendering unbelievable what is true. Original perceptual levels and suggestions are developed that are capable of superimposing fiction on reality and altering the sense of truth and fiction. The manipulation and strategic use of the technical statutes of the image and the subversion of realization between amateur and spectacle and of that between reality and fiction, determines the effects on the perception of reality. This evidences how the meanings of the image are increasingly vulnerable and unstable, destined largely to organization and alternation, but above all can be manipulated and are subject to unexpected changes that are not only cultural and social but also secondary ones such as technical changes that define the figurative levels of the image itself.

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