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A Sign of Times. Omar Calabrese and the Pictorial Turn

The pictorial or iconic turn that Thomas Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm proclaimed two decades ago has become in recent years a very important point of reference whenever we want to speak about the radical changes that the proliferation of images has brought into our everyday social interactions and communications with others. On the one hand, there is this very simple idea that the majority of our contemporary interactions are made visually, «through» and «with» images, but on the other hand, as Mitchell continually insists, the pictorial turn is not specific for our era. It has nothing to do with the pure «amount» of images presently in circulation: what is more important than quantity or flux of images is the shift from words to images, from texts to pictures. So, the pictorial turn is basically about a change of paradigm, which has only in our time had the chance to be named and theoretically analyzed but which occurred many times in history whenever there was a particular friction related to images – «any» kind of images, not just those graphically printed or digitally produced.

Mitchell makes the distinction «between the pictorial turn as a matter of mass perception, collective anxiety about images and visual media, on the one hand, and a turn to images and visual culture within the realm of the intellectual disciplines, especially the human sciences». He says that the popular version of the pictorial turn is a «perennial and recurrent phenomenon», a sort of a «cultural trope» that «recurs whenever a new image technology, a new medium, or new apparatus of spectacularization or surveillance comes along»¹. What makes our contemporary pictorial turn so special, then, is not so much its visual nature but the fact that it gets noticed by a variety of disciplines, like philosophy, sociology, literary studies and so on, while the flux of images gets properly understood as just one more (if very powerful) shift in paradigm.

In my opinion, the main topic of the book *L'età neobarocca* written by Omar Calabrese in 1987 was based on a very similar idea: how different

¹ A. GRØNSTAD, Ø. VÅGNES, An interview with W.J.T. Mitchell, «Image & Narrative», Vol. VII, Issue 2, n. 15, November 2006, *Battles around Images: Iconoclasm and Beyond*, <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/iconoclasm/gronstad_vagnes.htm> (last accessed 11.07.2015).

societies evolve and change over the centuries prompted by a constant urge to transgress self-imposed boundaries of both scientific knowledge and artistic form². Drawing on Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, Calabrese argues that every cultural system at some point of its historical development starts to encroach upon the boundaries that had hitherto constituted its mode of existence. According to this theory, periods of stabilization of artistic and cultural canons within any given society can be called classical, while disturbances and attempts aimed at questioning the existing rules can be called baroque. It is clear that in Calabrese's terminology «baroque» is a state of mind, a cultural trope, as much as it is a recognizably different historical period with its distinctive artistic profile and stylistic rules. Calabrese does not confine his analysis of contemporary times exclusively to visual phenomena, although he makes numerous references to films, television and popular culture in general. Consequently, in *L'età neobarocca* he does not refer to the notion of the «image» as to a theoretical term per se, which term is, inversely, fundamental for the understanding of the pictorial turn. What interests him is a formal system that allows for all these changes in styles and attitudes to become visible – not primarily as pictorial artifacts but as cultural formations.

However, there is one recurrent trope in his book that reminds me irresistibly of the pictorial turn: it is the notion of «excess». Calabrese remarks that any excessive action, work of art, or individual in fact casts doubt upon an existing order, as well as possibly destroying it or constructing a new order: «All societies or systems of ideas, in any case, accuse of excess that which they cannot or do not want to absorb. Each order isolates itself and defines excess by forbidding it»³. When it comes to visual media today, we can speak of excess on at least two principal levels: the first level deals with their spectacular character in terms of formal structure, size and visual impact – think only of giant cinema screens, LED displays or photographic light-boxes. The second level regards the shift in quantity: from the ubiquity of images in urban spaces to the extreme amounts of digital data produced on and transmitted over the internet. The neo-baroque paradigm is thus comparable to the pictorial turn inasmuch the excess of which we are speaking is, as Calabrese says, «transformed from a representation of excess into an excess of representation, a kind of formal *too much*»⁴.

The pictorial turn is a philosophical and theoretical coming-to-terms with the excess of images, and Mitchell explains it in a way very similar to the Italian semiotician: as a sort of anxiety and unrest that predicts an imminent

² O. CALABRESE, *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*, translated by Charles Lambert, Princeton University Press, 1992. Italian edition: *L'età neobarocca*, Laterza, Bari 1987.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

change in the cultural universe. Calabrese contends that the baroque spirit in any given era precedes the actual baroque representations in art and culture; only then does it take some kind of excessive form in order finally to become naturalized or normalized in terms of recurrent visual paradigms or styles. Similarly, Mitchell discerns the first symptoms of the pictorial turn neither in some excessive quantity of images nor in significant changes in their formal structure. He sees the first symptoms of it where there should be no images at all: in language and philosophy. Mitchell locates a philosophical enactment of the pictorial turn in the apparent paradox that occurred in the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in the shift that Wittgenstein made from his earlier «picture theory of meaning» to the later iconoclasm, «a critique of imagery that led him to renounce his earlier pictorialism and say “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat itself to us inexorably”»⁵. Mitchell says it is precisely this anxiety and the need to defend natural language against visual images that is «a sure sign that a pictorial turn is taking place»⁶.

Another important characteristic of the neo-baroque that makes it in a way similar to whatever happens in the era of the pictorial turn is that it both rejects normative discourses that try to normalize what may have once been regarded as *ab-normal* or *un-acceptable* and, perhaps not so paradoxically, makes of *ab-normality* a new norm. Calabrese contends that «static epochs» revolve around their systemic center, while «dynamic epochs» favor periphery and boundary, but he is ready to admit that in the era of contemporary baroque these differences are not so sharply visible. On the contrary, as he says, neo-baroque:

«adopts a limit and yet makes it seem excessive by trespassing on a purely formal level; or, alternatively, [neo-baroque] produces excess and yet refers to it as a limit in order to render acceptable a revolution in terms of content; or, finally, it confuses or renders indistinguishable the two procedures»⁷.

In my opinion the concept of «metapicture» that Thomas Mitchell proposed in his *Picture Theory* of 1994 is paradigmatic of this neo-baroque dynamics between limit and excess. Let me just remind you that with metapictures Mitchell tried to overcome the limits of various hermeneutical methods that were meant to explain the meanings of images and that

⁵ W.J.T. MITCHELL, *Picture Theory*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1994, pp. 12-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ CALABRESE, *Neo-Baroque*, cit., p. 66.

were speaking «on behalf» of images, like art history or semiotics. Mitchell advanced the idea that images should be able to speak for themselves, that they should somehow contain proper interpretive mechanism, or «language», if you wish, unbound by other, universalist principles imposed by established disciplines or languages. Metapictures are images that clearly show how and why they were made, how they should be interpreted, offering, at the same time, the key to interpretation. Metapictures generally offer an insight into how and why people make images and what they mean to them. Mitchell's concept of metapictures is based on, or preceded by, the pictorial turn. It wouldn't be possible to conceive of images as self-explanatory mechanisms had we not already mastered the idea that images can both speak and tell, as much as they can show and represent. The pictorial turn has shaken and pushed to the limit not just the boundaries of our visual world but also the limits of disciplinary epistemologies.

Famous metapictures are, for example, the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, or René Magritte's painting *This is not a Pipe*, but also the iconic photographs of Dolly the Sheep. All these images mean much more than they show or represent both art-historically and semiotically; they impose their own interpretive frames, or «limits» but only in order to push forward, to «exceed» the patterns of interpretation of «all» images. Approached in this way, they foster a twofold in-stability of our understanding of the world: firstly, of the politics of representation – as challenge to our «visualisation» of the world, and secondly, of biopolitics – as rupture with the 'normal' «creation» of the world.

Following the terminology proposed by Omar Calabrese, metapictures might be considered artifacts that possess «unstable uses». Let's see how it works: Calabrese argues that:

«the phenomenon of instability appears in “neobaroque” objects on at least three levels. One, that of the themes and figures represented. Two, that of the textual structures that contain the representations. Three, that of the relation between figures and texts, and the way in which these are received. The three levels can be more or less concurrent. One thing, however, appears to be clear: although figures, textual structures, and patterns of consumption cannot be divided without analysis, they usually coincide in neo-baroque objects. In other words, if instability is represented, it inevitably follows that its representation is also unstable, and that the user's guide for these representations (...) will indicate unstable uses»⁸.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

The uses of metapictures are unstable too, but only in the last two respects: in terms of their textual structure and in terms of how figures and texts are received by the viewer. It is precisely here that the neo-baroque and the pictorial turn meet together: in the moment of reception and understanding of images.

But Omar Calabrese is perfectly aware that instability can be regarded as both pure formal device and a sign of the change of paradigm. *L'età neobarocca* abounds with examples showing how difficult it might be to differentiate between the two. For instance, when Calabrese is speaking about representations of monsters in our contemporary visual culture (primarily in cinema, television and comics) we realize that monsters are here to challenge our understanding of both cultural and moral norms: «they challenge, in short, both the regularity of nature and that other form of regularity, human intelligence, as it adapts to nature»⁹. Natural perfection is based on, so to speak, 'mean values', on not too big or not too small; normality is never composed of excessive values. But, there is a specific character to modern monsters «rather than corresponding to categories of value, our new monsters suspend, annul, and neutralize them»¹⁰. Modern monsters are presented in *L'età neobarocca* as unstable forms that belong to no precise point in our value systems, either because value systems are today less about values and more about intensities, or because normality as such has lost any real meaning. In my opinion, Calabrese here offers a striking premonition that the most insidious monsters are going to be those that don't look like ones. For example, those that look perfectly natural: Dolly the Sheep, to start with.

A sympathetic, harmless animal happens to be one of the three «iconic creatures» that take a prominent place in Mitchell's image theory, while other two are the dinosaur and the Golden Calf. All three compose different stages in the development of the pictorial turn (as I have recently argued on another occasion). Mitchell and Calabrese would probably concur that Dolly the Sheep is «a beautiful monster»: its beauty would come from the fact that it impeccably resembles natural order and that it exceeds even the most perfect achievements of visual representation. Although an artifact, Dolly is not a representation of anything, it is «the» thing or, better still, the «being». Anyhow, as beautiful as it may seem, it is monster because it breaks the greatest taboo of all – that of the creation of life. Its perfection is thus ab-normal, but it would pose even greater threat had it been created

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

as human being, with whom one could fall in love, as Rick Deckard falls in love with the beautiful replicant Rachel in *Blade Runner* (R. SCOTT, 1982).

When Calabrese speaks of instability and metamorphoses, he brings to our attention that other famous movie character from a film by Woody Allen – *Zelig* (1983). Zelig is a human chameleon (or self-replicating or cloned creature) who

«transforms himself physically and spiritually by imitating the people and surroundings closest to him. Thus we see him in a brown shirt next to Adolf Hitler at a Nazi rally, as a Jew among Jews, and as a black musician in a jazz band. We witness a crescendo of situations in which Zelig becomes slim, fat, rich, poor, oil magnate, athlete, politician, German, Italian, American, and even psychoanalyst»¹¹.

As one of the characters in the movie explains, Zelig just wants to feel accepted and therefore he is doing whatever looks normal to him in a given moment. The instability and metamorphosis of Zelig represent fictitious romanticization of a quest for identity, sort of admonition that one's subject is not just constituted of identity and personality, but of «physical» uniqueness as well. The physical uniqueness which, in the time of real clones, can't be claimed any more, at least not by animals.

Can we then say that the neo-baroque instability – represented in the guise of movie characters like Zelig or Rick Deckard (whose genetic code remained rather mysterious) – ends when real clones, like Dolly the Sheep, march in? Or is it that Omar Calabrese would have even more evidences for his theory today, especially if we put it in the perspective of what is now called visual studies? Rather than tackle this question ontologically (in terms of role of images in contemporary societies) I would like to deal with it in terms of the methodology of both Omar Calabrese and Thomas Mitchell, as it is in methodological procedures that the two authors differ the most.

In *L'età neobarocca*, the Italian scholar has created a taxonomical grid of cultural symptoms in order to accommodate the most diverse aspects of artistic, social and scientific phenomena that best reflected the neo-baroque spirit of our time. This grid is appropriately divided in chapters that deal with rhythm and repetition, limit and excess, detail and fragment, instability and metamorphosis, disorder and chaos, complexity and dissipation, the approximate and the inexpressible and, finally, distortion and perversion. Calabrese is looking for formal qualities of objects or events that make the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

case for what is outside the pure form; in other words, he explains what various things are «like» (movies, pictures, TV serials, axioms in mathematics, physics and philosophy) in order to explain what they «mean».

On the other hand, Mitchell's approach is different inasmuch he is not conceptualizing his theories starting from formal qualities of a given artifact but focusing on ways in which various theories and philosophies of art and media get transformed and reconfigured under the more general influence of artistic practices and their technical conditions. Mitchell's method is based on intertwining different theoretical approaches and challenging the «limits of interpretation» of all relevant disciplinary epistemologies. Omar Calabrese, although remaining faithful to his semiotic vocation and disciplinary rigor, shows in a comparable vein that any change in the formal structure of our artistic or scientific universe may be regarded as visual and cultural symptom of a much larger order, meaning, that the pictorial turn may as well be regarded as «a sign of the times».

In conclusion, I would like to stress what I consider to be the most important thing that both the neo-baroque and the pictorial turn have helped us to realize: the change that has occurred in the way we look at images and how this has further influenced our theorizing of images. The fundamental premise on which Omar Calabrese establishes his contemporary turn toward the baroque is characterized by the general sense of instability, metamorphoses and transformation of known forms and values into new forms the value of which has yet to be determined. *L'età neobarocca* is therefore a book of cultural symptomatology that reaches far beyond merely gesturing at symptoms or «signs» of its time. It suggests that the boundaries of our visual and cultural universe at the end of the twentieth century have become so porous as to interfere with the very theories we use to understand this visual and cultural world. Paintings, movies and images of all kinds have «themselves» become living theories.

We might even say that the neo-baroque «excess of representation» has now turned into a sort of «excess of theory»: into a new way of thinking prompted by the pictorial turn and wholeheartedly embraced by visual studies, as it were. Although he never returned to the subject and we don't have his account of what might have been some imaginary «neo-baroque revisited», Omar Calabrese has certainly made us more attentive both to what was about to happen in the times just before the pictorial turn and to what it takes to be a smart spectator today, twenty years after «the turn».