

HYPER-REALISM

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It. *Iperrealismo*; Fr. *Hyperréalisme*; Germ. *Hyperrealismus*; Span. *Hiperrealismo*. The term is derived from the Ancient Greek *hyper* (“beyond”) and the late Latin *realis* (from the ultimate traceable word *res*, “thing”). Introduced in 1973 as the title of an exhibition at Belgian art dealer Isy Brachot’s gallery, it firstly denotes the practice of creating paintings and sculptures so meticulously detailed as to give beholders the illusion of being dealing with actual reality instead of just its representation. In contemporary visual culture and media studies, Hyper-realism has become more and more topical as a result of the diffusion of new media and technologies which provide a previously unattainable degree of life-likeness and truthfulness.

VISUAL ARTS

The cultural dream (or nightmare) of human-made images capable of perfectly simulating reality could be easily traced back to classical antiquity, as the legendary account of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius (which was to be retold over and over again from the Renaissance down to modern times) paradigmatically shows. Yet the *longue durée* of this story reached a crucial turning point only in the 1960s, when artists such as Chuck Close, Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes started painting canvases which looked almost indistinguishable from photographs. Despite their mimetic accuracy, however, these artworks could not be regarded as mere attempts to perfectly mirror actual reality, if only because they still remained – just as photographs – two-dimensional. But as soon as Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* paved the way to Duane Hanson’s and John de Andrea’s hyper-realistic sculptures, the age-old question came up again of how far can an artist go in replicating reality to the last detail.

At that time, the traditional, Platonic depreciation of illusory artworks had already found its contemporary version in Husserl’s banishing of hyper-realistic artefacts from the realm of high art. Taking the commonplace example of wax figures, the founding father of phenomenology critically reflected on those pictures that try to conceal their pictorial character, thus challenging aesthetics both as the science of perception and as the theory of art. As for the former, what is at stake is the possibility of clearly distinguishing between a real object or person and the corresponding image: when realism turns into

Hyper-realism, similarity turns into identity, with the result that a picture can be perceived as if it were the real thing or the living being depicted. As for the latter, the course of *argument seems faultless*: i) talking about art means talking about images; ii) images must clearly exhibit their representational character; iii) hyper-realistic images do not, then they actually are not images, and thus they cannot even be considered art. Any excessive similarity between the depicting picture and the depicted reality seems to obscure the “unreality” of the picture itself: as Husserl (1904-1905: 43-44) clearly states, in front of a wax figure we indeed *know* that it is a semblance, but we *see* a human being. This tension between knowing and seeing is crucial to understand the contemporary criticism of illusionistic artefacts as raised in so different research fields as art history, *Gestalt* psychology, and analytic philosophy, with reference invariably being made to wax puppets. While Ernst Gombrich (1959: 60) argues that unpleasantly lifelike dummies overstep “the boundary of symbolism” in which genuine artworks are expected to dwell, Rudolf Arnheim (1959: 72) maintains that a wax replica of a museum guard aims to be regarded as a real human being belonging to actual reality, not to the iconic sphere. By focussing on this very same example, Kendall Walton (1984: 4) enumerates wax figures among the most complete instantiations of those contemporary “transparent pictures” which fool the onlookers by means of their hyper-mimetic qualities.

Despite such a widespread criticism, the last decades have witnessed an ever-growing production and diffusion of hyper-realistic artworks all over the world, from the United States to Europe, from China to Japan and Australia. Artists the calibre of Robert Gober, Ron Mueck, Kiki Smith, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, John Isaacs, and Tomoaki Suzuki have taken advantage of the specific properties of particular materials (from traditional wax to the more “technological” silicone, fiberglass, and polyester resin) to reach a redundant level of verisimilitude and adherence to reality. This trend in the visual arts raises the question why such hyper-realistic figures should be considered as a genuine form of art, whereas ordinary wax figures *à la* Madame Tussauds – although being *materially indiscernible* from their much more appreciated (and valuable) counterparts – should not. A first clue to answer this question already came from Julius von Schlosser’s seminal *History of Portraiture in Wax*, which can still be regarded as the standard work on artistic Hyper-realism. Towards the end of the essay, as a kind of theoretical conclusion, Schlosser clearly states that the unaesthetic, spooky quality of a hyper-realistic figure can stem only from the fact that the material has not been brought to life, either because the artist has failed in some way, or simply because there has been no artist involved. From this perspective, there is no theoretical reason to exclude a priori Hyper-realism from art.

The all too simplistic identification of Hyper-realism with a passive, almost mechanical reproduction of reality was also strongly criticised by Jean Baudrillard. In his famous essay *On Seduction*, the French philosopher reversed the common way of interpreting illusory artworks by claiming that if there is any *trompe-l’œil* miracle, it never resides in the “realist” execution: “Miracles can never take place in a surplus of reality but exactly in its inverse, in the sudden failure of reality and the vertigo of being swallowed up in its absence. [...] The *trompe-l’œil* does not attempt to confuse itself with the real. Fully aware of play and artifice, it produces a simulacrum by radically questioning the principle of reality. Release from the real is achieved by the very excess of its appearances. Objects resemble too much what they are, and this resemblance is like a second state, their true depth. It is the irony of excess reality” (Baudrillard 1979: 58).

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENARIOS: COMPUTER GRAPHICS, VIRTUAL REALITY, IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

In the very last decades, Hyper-realism has become a more and more topical issue in research areas extending far beyond the field of visual arts, as is the case of media, game, and presence studies. The challenging landscape of contemporary image production and consumption is characterized by an ever-increasing blurring of the distinction between real world and iconic world. Subjects immersed in and interacting with virtual environments are no longer visual observers in front of images clearly separated from actual reality: they become experiencers living in a quasi-world that provides multisensory stimuli and allows sensorimotor affordances, thus eliciting in the user an intense feeling of being embodied into an independent and self-referential world. This transformation of images into environments undermines the dominant paradigm of Western image theories based on the notion of representation: virtual reality technologies give access to alternative, perfectly coherent worlds that do not necessarily refer to actual reality. According to Vilém Flusser (1990), what is radically new in the development of these technologies is that they enable an assimilation of image and imagination. Yet this unprecedented ability to give possible worlds a concrete existence is counterbalanced, in simulated virtual environments, by what Lambert Wiesing (2010: 98) has called “an artificial retraction of the assimilation achieved”: unlike surrealist phantasies, digital simulations possess material properties and are therefore subject to an artificial physics which can (but does not have to) be the same of extra-pictorial reality. What remains constant is the “production of presence”, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) puts it: the experiencer feels as if being immersed *into* a virtual world which obeys a logic of transparent immediacy (Lombard and Ditton 1997; Bolter and Grusin 1999) and promotes a perceptual illusion of non-mediation.

The question as to how to precisely define notions such as “presence”, “immersion”, and “absorption” is currently at the centre of a heated debate, and scholars have begun to address this issue from different disciplinary perspectives. So-called presence studies have played a pioneering role by focussing on how remotely operated machinery (Minsky 1980) and virtual reality technologies (Held and Durlach 1992) can convey a sense of being in a place other than the actual, physical location. More recently, contributions in art and media history and theory have focussed on 360° illusionistic environments in the attempt to extend the notion of “immersion” not only to contemporary virtual environments, but also to the Roman frescoes of Pompeii villas, to medieval cathedrals, panoramas, planetariums and IMAX cinemas (Grau 2003). On the contrary, Gordon Calleja has proposed to replace the rather equivocal concept of “immersion” with “incorporation”, sharply distinguishing between those systems which simply provide users with a feeling of being-there and those which actually recognize users and directly react to their actions. If “immersion” seems to suggest a unidirectional plunge into a virtual world, “incorporation” implies a twofold, bidirectional process: “The player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated through the avatar into that environment” (Calleja 2011: 169). From this perspective, Hyper-realism is not at all a necessary attribute of immersion, for incorporation can well be provided by non-realistic (e.g. cartoon-like) virtual environments.

Further discussion about Hyper-realism can be found in robotics engineering and computer graphics with regard to the so-called Uncanny Valley effect, a hypothesis according to which the more androids or digital characters look like real human beings, the more they seem familiar, until a point is reached at which the likeness level will be so high that the affinity level will suddenly steep down. Androids thus pose a question which immediately calls to mind the wax figures, since the uncanny effect they elicit is due to a similar kind of mismatch: on the one hand, they are too similar to human beings not to be perceived as real human beings, but on the other hand some of their features – first of all the lack of movement or its mechanicalness – unveil them as artefacts, not real people. Conversely, their being motionless immediately reveals them as simple dummies, but such disclosing is contrasted by Hyper-realism, which successfully strives to let them be perceived just like real human beings. Since its original formulation by Masahiro Mori in 1970, the Uncanny Valley hypothesis *has been subjected* to numerous criticisms and *reformulations*. Nevertheless, numerous studies seem to offer empirical support to the hypothesis that the uncanny experience is due to a peculiar “framing effect” (Bartneck *et al.* 2007), “mismatch” (Green *et al.* 2008), or cognitive dissonance between different and conflicting apprehensional acts.

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