Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts

Edited by
Alessandra Violi,
Barbara Grespi,
Andrea Pinotti
and Pietro Conte

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3. Cinema, Phenomenology and Hyperrealism

Pietro Conte

Abstract
Traditionally, hyperrealistic mannequins have embodied the dream (or rather the nightmare) of animating the inanimate: by imitating the living model to such an extent that any distinction becomes (almost) impossible, they blur the threshold between life and inert matter. It thus comes as no surprise that wax figures have often been taken as a symbol of cinematic creation and its attempt to recreate motion (a quality immediately associated with life) by means of a sequence of static frames. By focusing on three classic movies—Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Paul Leni's *Waxworks* (1923) and Michael Curtiz's *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933)—the essay explores the tension between reality and unreality as the crux of cinema *tout court*.

Keywords: Aesthetics; film studies; mummy complex; animation; hyperrealism; wax figures

In his renowned essay first published in 1937 and then revised in 1947, *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, Erwin Panofsky reminds readers that the earliest narrative movies were not at all just trivial imitations of the *genus proximum* of theatre plays; rather, they preferred to add movement to originally stationary works of art, such as the wax figures '*à la* Madame Tussaud'.[1] Without providing any further explanation, the art historian touched upon a crucial topic for cinema studies, that of the animation of the inanimate and the paradoxical attempt to recreate *motion* (a quality immediately associated with life) by means of a sequence of *static* frames,

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[1] Panofsky, *Style and Medium*, p. 17.

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pushing mimetic strategies to the limit by trying at the same time to escape the fate of photographic images, unavoidably condemned to immerse reality in a 'stop bath (*bain de fixation*)' and to 'cut into the living so as to perpetuate the dead'.[2] Providing mummies with the ability to move: this is the logical conclusion of the 'obsession with realism'[3] that André Bazin was mulling in the very same years Panofsky's essay was published.

It should therefore come as no surprise that between cinema and wax statues there was love at first sight, possible only when both sides have something to benefit from the encounter: by animating (even though only in an image) the inanimate, cinema celebrates its own triumph, whereas mannequins, conversely, obtain what they need to finally end the eternal chase after their models, namely, motion. After all, what difference is there between a wax figure and its alter ego in the flesh? What differentiates them? Perceptually, absolutely nothing if not the lack of motion or—in case the statue is equipped with devices enabling it to perform more or less complex gestures—its mechanicalness and jerkiness. When all is said and done, the wax modeler's dream is the same as Pygmalion's: to breathe life into something that has none. It is no coincidence that Ovid's famous tale directly refers to the metamorphic power of wax, just at the moment when the ivory that Galatea was made from starts turning into the flesh of a real woman: 'Again he kissed her; and he felt her breast; the ivory seemed to soften at the touch, and its firm texture yielded to his hand, as honey-wax of Mount Hymettus turns to many shapes when handled in the sun, and surely softens from each gentle touch. He is amazed; but stands rejoicing in his doubt; while fearful there is some mistake, again and yet again, gives trial to his hopes by touching with his hand. It must be flesh!'[4]

Wax is poised between the organic and the inorganic: it is the ambiguous material *par excellence*, characterised by 'a viscosity, a sort of *activity* and intrinsic force, which is a force of metamorphism, *polymorphism*'.[5] Edmund Husserl long meditated on the topic of hyperrealistic images, making the most of wax mannequins to unpick the thorny problem of the distinction between perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and image consciousness [*Bildbewusstsein*]. The following is an account given by Hans-Georg Gadamer recounting the stages of his own education and recalling the time when he visited Freiburg to meet Martin Heidegger and to attend some lectures by

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[2] Dubois, *L'acte photographique*, pp. 161, 163.

[3] Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, p. 12.

[4] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 282-289.

[5] Didi-Huberman, 'Viscosities and Survivals', p. 155.

Husserl too: 'To demonstrate deceptive perception, he [Husserl] described his visit to the Berlin Panopticum on Friedrich Street. Much to his embarrassment, a young lady at the entrance winked at him. Then it dawned on him: "This was a doll".'[6] With its real clothes, hair and so on, indeed, even with movements artificially mimicked by means of mechanical devices, the wax figure so closely resembles the real human being that we always find ourselves in a quandary: 'We indeed "know" that it is a semblance but we cannot help ourselves—we see a human being.'[7]

From a purely phenomenological perspective, this tension between knowing and seeing is crucial, as it implies the impossibility of coping with the problem of hyperrealism by means of purely ontological considerations: images and reality are only distinguishable by virtue of a different intentional act of consciousness. Consciousness itself, however, is in trouble before a wax figure, being indefinitely on the tightrope between perception and image consciousness: the excessive similarity to the original obscures the 'unreal' nature of the image, thus removing the tension between similarity and difference that is necessarily inherent in the concept of 'representation' itself.

It was in 1923 that Gadamer heard Husserl speak about his curious encounter with the lady-mannequin. That very same year, Paul Leni filmed *Waxworks*, a milestone in the history of expressionist cinema that investigates the topic of hyperrealistic figures in the light of a poetics that has as one of its theoretical cornerstones the ambiguous relationship between the real and the unreal. The plot is well known: intrigued by a newspaper ad, a young poet comes to a fairground booth, where the owner and his daughter offer him a lavish recompense for writing three stories, each with three wax statues as main characters, which would make the *Panoptikum* show even more fascinating, engaging and convincing.[8] The task consists in giving a story—and therefore a life—back to those figures: a classic example of the relationship between words and images, were it not that the tales invented by the writer are in this case not actually *read* but are instead immediately shifted onto the visual plane thanks to film editing. Words conceived to animate static objects are, in turn, animated by the moving images in Leni's film, so that the viewer may penetrate deep into the heart of both the writer's and the filmmaker's creative processes.

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[6] Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, p. 35.

[7] Husserl, 'Phantasy and Image Consciousness', pp. 43-44.

[8] Originally, there were supposed to be four episodes, but financial issues forced him to give up the one dedicated to Rinaldo Rinaldini, inspired by the adventure novel of the same name written by Christian August Vulpius.

The transition from the level of reality on which the young poet lives to the unreality of his invented stories is immediately highlighted in the first episode by a purely expressionist setting with phantasmagorical streets and buildings. On closer inspection, however, the distinction between the two levels gradually grows more complicated and uncertain: from the fairy-tale-like landscapes of Baghdad, which are well-suited to the style of the stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* like the one about Sheik Harun al-Rashid, we are first led to the much more realistic dungeons that act as a backdrop to Ivan the Terrible's wrongdoings. Then we are caught in the dream of the young poet who, overcome with exhaustion before being able to start on the final story, finds himself chased by Jack the Ripper inside that very pavilion that should represent the impregnable bastion of reality, the borderline where the imaginary world created by the writer's imagination ends and the reality where he himself lives begins.[9] However, it is noteworthy that the shift between reality and imagery takes place even *before* the poet falls asleep, just as he scrutinises the wax figure to find inspiration: suddenly, the statue seems to blur, double and move, forcing the unfortunate fellow to rub his eyes so as to realise it is only an illusion brought on by the fatigue of overwork. However, thanks to one of the very few special effects in the movie, the doubled image calls the spectator into play as well, suggesting that the ambiguous relationship between reality and unreality does not apply just to the storyline of the film but also and more generally to cinema as a medium of animation. Hidden under the false appearance of a casual fairytale lies nothing less than the style of cinema *tout court*, based precisely on the tension between reality and unreality: before the (image of the) statue of Jack the Ripper, the inner and the outer spectator relate and overlap.

By virtue of their hyperrealistic features, waxworks become a symbol of that 'indecisive nature of the boundaries between the artistic and the living'[10] which represents one of the fundamental cruces of Expressionism. Where does 'reality' end, and where does the 'unreality' of the image begin? Can we establish the exact moment when one stands out from the other? Or is the image (and in particular the cinematic image) perhaps not itself *structurally* ambiguous, and does it not inevitably raise Ernst Jentsch's famous doubt—later re-proposed by Freud precisely in reference to wax figures[11]—'as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate'?[12]

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[9] On the gradual transformation of landscapes that act as backdrops to the three episodes, see Pitassio, 'Wachsfiguren?', pp. 76-77.

[10] Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on the Frame*, p. 189.

Some details in the screenplay of Leni's movie, written by Henrik Galeen, point specifically in this direction, beginning with the words used by the owner of the *Panoptikum* to describe his beloved statues: 'Magnificent works of art, equipped with mechanisms which make them move, almost life-like.'[13] Moreover, in imagining the character of Harun al-Rashid, Galeen specifies that his face in close-up must seem 'waxy',[14] just like the corresponding mannequin: once again, the plane of reality where the writer and his patrons live is blurred with the fantastical stories invented for the occasion. The process of animating the inanimate quickly evolves in a crescendo over the following episodes: if the statue representing al-Rashid is completely immobile, that of Ivan the Terrible starts moving thanks to a crank mechanism even before the story of which he is the protagonist has begun, while the final figure—that of Jack the Ripper—pursues the writer and the owner's daughter among the fairground tents.

The overlapping of reality and unreality turns into a dizzying game of mirrors when Leni, following Galeen's suggestions, introduces in the first episode a statue (in wax, obviously)[15] that replaces the Caliph while he wanders nightly through Baghdad streets in search of new flirtations. The reference, which in fact sounds like an actual quotation, is to Robert Wiene and to that symbol of expressionist cinema—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—which had been released in movie theatres just three years before, in 1920.[16] In this case, too, the diabolical protagonist resorts to a mannequin that faithfully reproduces the features of the sleepwalking Cesar (played by Conrad Veidt, who in Leni's film stars in the role of Ivan the Terrible), providing him with an alibi while he, in a state of hypnotic trance, perpetrates horrific crimes. Kracauer expressly states (even if it remains unclear on what basis) that this is 'a wax figure',[17] thus underlining once more the extraordinary power of a material that proves perfectly suited to bridge the gap between image and reality: the representation becomes re-presentation, and the copy, platonically meant as a defective and degraded imitation, becomes a double, a surrogate, and ends up identifying with the original, literally taking its place.

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[11] Freud, 'The Uncanny'.

[12] Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', p. 11.

[13] *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett. Drehbuch*, p. 23.

[14] Ibid., p. 25.

[15] Ibid., p. 51.

[16] In a review in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* for 14 November 1924, Herbert Ihering wholeheartedly states that: '*The cabinet of wax figures* is the *Caligari* of Paul Leni' (quoted in *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, p. 141).

[17] Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 64.

It may also be that the image does not limit itself to *reproducing* but actually *is* the model. This is what happens in a 1933 movie directed by Michael Curtiz, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, whose main character is a young wax modeler, Ivan Igor, who at once has a definite artistic talent but very little business sense. His partner, disappointed by the low profit margins of the museum because he had invested a great deal of money in it, decides to set fire to the entire building and cash in on the insurance money. When faced with this criminal plan, the sculptor furiously bursts into cries: 'You are asking to burn these people?'[18] The screenplay leaves no doubt about the fact that Ivan Igor regards his creations (or maybe it would be better to say his 'creatures') as real human beings: as he displays them to two expert art critics, he claims that he engaged in heated debate with Voltaire and was reassured by Marie Antoinette, his favourite, concerning the imminent success of the whole exhibition.[19] And as soon as these two visitors—enthusiastic about the quality of the works—leave, the artist approaches his beloved creatures: 'And you, my friends—Robespierre, Danton, Marat, Maximilian, Savonarola, all of you—how will you feel to be famous again?'[20]

The confusion between images and reality is accentuated by the fact that Fay Wray, who plays the role of Marie Antoinette, does not at all look like an inanimate statue: 'Why Curtiz didn't shoot a few feet and then freeze-frame it, is somewhat of a mystery; the shot goes on for so long that Miss Wray can be seen all too clearly to be breathing, moving her eyes, and even twitching!'[21] This criticism by William Keith Everson, however, does not hit the mark: Curtiz *intentionally* avoids the freeze-frame in order to convey the impression that the wax figure is about to come alive, thus insinuating the doubt that the image is not 'just an image' and that all the Pygmalionesque efforts on the part of the sculptor—and of the film director, too—are indeed successful.

The fire has destroyed everything, and poor, disfigured, mad, cripple Ivan Igor comes up with the idea of recreating the museum exactly as it had been but with a slight difference: the statues are no longer statues but rather real human beings that have been murdered and transformed into wax figures. Mummification as the apotheosis of realism, leading to an incomparable (and for any artist unattainable) degree of similarity. The final result is so perfect that it completely overturns the relationship between images and reality so that, as Ivan Igor comes across the girlfriend of one of his employees who reminds him of the beloved Marie Antoinette, he exclaims: 'You would be amused if I were to tell you that I knew you before you were born.'[22] In the old sculptor's hazy mind, what was actually only a well-made copy has now become 'the original', whereas the real girl that should be the new model to imitate lends herself to becoming a copy of the old wax figure.

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[18] So runs the screenplay compiled by Mullay and Erikson and published in Mullay and Erikson, *Mystery of the Wax Museum. Screenplay*, p. 59.

[19] See Mullay and Erikson, *Mystery of the Wax Museum. Screenplay*, p. 54. For an in-depth analysis of the motives behind the choice of Marie Antoinette as the reference historical figure, see Bloom, *Waxworks*, pp. 124-127.

[20] Mullay and Erikson, *Mystery of the Wax Museum. Screenplay*, p. 57.

[21] Everson, *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, p. 108.

Visually, Curtiz accentuates the confusion between images and reality by using a fade-out special effect, thanks to which the young woman's face overlaps with that of Marie Antoinette's statue. If earlier the dream was to animate the inanimate, now the exact opposite is true, that is, making the animate inanimate. There is a macabre hint of irony when Ivan Igor, caught up in the excitement of having finally found the perfect 'copy' of his 'original', suggests that she be the model for a new Marie Antoinette: 'My child, you are that figure come to life. I wonder, some time, would you pose for one of my sculptors who does very excellent work?'[23] The intended victim cannot imagine the allusion to the crime and the dramatic change in roles: the wax figure, which is the copy of the historical real-life Marie Antoinette, now becomes the original, whereas the woman in the flesh invited to act as the model—that is, the original—is in danger of becoming a copy of herself.

From 1920s Berlin to 1930s Hollywood, hyperrealist mannequins materialised the dream (or nightmare, depending on one's point of view) of animating the inanimate: by imitating the model to such an extent that any distinction becomes impossible, wax figures questioned all consensual distinctions between reality and imagery, thereby becoming symbols of cinematic creation itself. If at the origins of painting and sculpture we find the 'mummy complex', at the root of cinema there is the mannequin complex, which provides further confirmation of André Malraux's famous statement (not surprisingly quoted by Bazin): 'Cinema is the furthermost evolution to date of plastic realism.'[24]

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[22] Mullay and Erikson, *Mystery of the Wax Museum. Screenplay*, p. 103.

[23] Ibid., p. 103.

[24] Malraux, *Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma*, quoted in Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, p. 10.

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About the author

Pietro Conte is a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Aesthetics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. His research focuses on illusion, hyperrealism, immersion and the multifarious practices of un-framing, a thematic cluster that he has addressed in the monographs *Unframing Aesthetics* and *In carne e cera. Estetica e fenomenologia dell'iperrealismo* (*Flesh and Wax: Aesthetics and Phenomenology of Hyperrealism*).