Andrea Pinotti

The Avatarization of the (Self)-Portrait
Notes for a Theological Genealogy of the Virtual Self

1. Avatāra: the theological background

In the last decades, a major transformation in the representation of personal identity has occurred within the contemporary iconosphere: the advent of the "avatars", digital pictures operating as proxies allowing the users of the Web, of social networks, of a cyber-community or of video games to interact with synthetic objects or other avatars in the virtual world[1]. From the point of view of medium, style and genre, the spectrum of avatars is vast and varied, spanning from simple drawings or photographic (self-)portraits to elaborated figures produced in CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery).

As a surrogate or representative of the subject's identity, the practice of the avatar is at the same time old and new. The very term "avatar" belongs to the ancient Hinduist tradition: the Sanskrit word *avatāra* designates the terrestrial descent of a divinity, mostly Vishnu, who decides to temporarily mingle with earthly affairs when these perturb the cosmic order and assumes, therefore, an appearance visible to humans. The specific forms in which the deity can embody vary according to the circumstances: for instance, Vishnu can appear as a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, the Buddha. Every single *avatāra* constitutes a partial manifestation of the deity it renders visible. Once the assigned task is accomplished, the *avatāra* merges back into its deity[2]. As studies in the comparative history of religions have shown, far from being an exclusive Hinduist doctrine, the essential process performed by the *avatāra* (making visible and sensible the

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[1] See R. Schroeder, ed., *The Social Life of Avatars. Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (London - New York: Springer, 2002); R. Cooper, *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators* (London: Chris Boot, 2007); E.-A. Amato, E. Perény, eds., *Les avatars jouables des mondes numériques. Théories, terrains et témoignages de pratiques interactives* (Paris: Lavoisier, 2013).

[2] P. Hacker, "Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 4 (1960): 47–70; D. Kinsley, "Avatāra," in L. Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition, (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 1987): vol. 2, 707–08.

invisible divinity) can be found in various creeds: let's just think of the "incarnation" of God in Christ[3].

In Western languages, the occurrence of the term "avatar" can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Théophile Gautier employs the word to entitle a short novel published in 1856[4]. In more recent times, the widespread fortune of the term has been determined by its extensive diffusion in the context of video games (the eponymous *Avatar* was developed in 1979), chatrooms, social networks, and more generally in digital communication. The worldwide success of James Cameron's movie *Avatar*, released in 2009, has definitively contributed to its planetary fame[5].

The theological line of descent can also be reconstructed for other key terms in the contemporary digital culture vocabulary, such as "icon" (from the Greek *eikon*: picture), which long before designing a pictogram or ideogram displayed on a computer screen to offer the user an interface to navigate a computer system, was a key notion in semiotics (let's think of Peirce's tripartition of the sign into "icon – index – symbol"), and much earlier it identified the painted wooden panel of Christ and the saints in the Byzantine tradition of the sacred images[6].

2. Presence vs. representation

As I will try to show in what follows, such theological pedigree, far from being a cyber-curiosity, accounts for a central issue in the phenomenology and ontology of contemporary digital pictures, namely for the oscillation between two opposite poles: *presence* and *representation*. This oscillation corresponds to the very same polarization that, *mutatis mutandis*, had characterized the excruciating Byzantine debates between iconophiles and iconoclasts back in the 8th century, culminating (although not in a conclusive way) in the Second Council of Nicaea (787). The *horos* (definition) of the Holy, Great, Ecumenical Synod established to preserve and defend the "reproduction in painted images" of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the angels and saints, decreeing that "venerable and holy images, made in colours or mosaic or other fitting materials, in the

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[3] E. G. Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997); N. Sheth, "Hindu Avatāra and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison," *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 1 (2002): 98–125.

[4] Th. Gautier, "Avatar," in *Clarimonde and Other Stories* (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2011).

[5] See N. Depraz, *Avatar: "je te vois": une expérience philosophique* (Paris: Ellipses, 2012).

[6] See the classic study by H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

same way as the figure of the honourable and life-giving cross, are to be dedicated in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and in the streets"[7].

The justification of *representing* such motives was based on a specific Christological argumentation: Christ himself as the Son is the image of the Father God, and looking at him means looking at the Father himself incarnated and thus made visible to human eyes, i.e. put into image. The main authorities on this point are John and Paul. As John puts it, "no one has ever seen [*heoraken*] God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him" (John 1, 18). Adopting the profoundly Greek identification of knowledge and vision, his Jesus affirms: "If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him [*ginoskete auton kai heorakate auton*]" (John 14, 7). Paul is even more explicit, declaring that Christ "is the image of God" [*eikon tou Theou*] (II Corinthians 4, 4); "He is the image of the invisible God" [*eikon tou Theou tou aoratou*] (Colossians, 1, 15).

Nevertheless, this Christological foundation introduces a crucial hierarchy in the iconic system: as had been fully promulgated in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, Jesus is one person with two natures, divine and human (dyophysitism), what is explicitly reminded in the Second Nicene *horos*: "We acknowledge the two natures of the one who was incarnate for our sake from the immaculate Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, recognizing him to be perfect God and perfect man"[8]. Therefore, Christ is at the same time the direct presence of God and his *eikon*. The sacred *eikones* made by human hand, on the contrary, are just pictures devoid of divine presence (if they had it, they would be divine in themselves, thus promoting a polytheistic multiplication of divinities). In this respect, they can be the object of reverence and veneration (*proskynesis*) as merely transitive representations referring to the divine prototypes, but not the object of true adoration (*latreia*), which is exclusively reserved to the divine prototypes (included the "special", as it were, *eikon* that is Christ himself): "The honour paid to the image passes over to the prototype, and whoever venerates the image venerates in it the hypostasis of the one who is represented"[9].

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[7] *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea*, ed. by R. Price (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018): 564–65.
[8] Ibid.: 563.
[9] Ibid.: 565.

While overcoming the aniconic prohibition expressed in the Ancient Testament ("You shall not make to yourself an idol [*eidolon*], nor any representation [*omoioma*]": *Exodus* 20, 4) and the traumatic event of Aaron's golden calf (*Exodus* 32) by introducing a rigorous separation between veneration/representation on the one side and adoration/presence on the other side, the creed expressed as a conclusion of the Second Nicene Council has not succeeded in evacuating presence from the Christian ritual practices. According to the Catholic Church and other Christian confessions, during the consecration the rite of the Eucharist performs the "transubstantiation" (a term introduced by the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council), namely the transformation of the substances of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, which are considered not just symbolically or metaphorically or representationally, but "really" present.

Despite this polarization between representational icon and presential eucharist, the popular Christian faith has tended to restore presence in various ways: let's just think of the prayer cards – *santjes* in the Netherlands, *santini* in Italy, *kleine Andachtsbilder* in Germany –, miniaturized icons of sorts which have been so often fetishized as objects in themselves miraculously powerful, namely by virtue of their sheer talismanic presence and not just of their being re-presentational[10].

3. The resurgence of archaic idols

Why this theological excursus? Because the polarization between real presence and mere re-presentation that qualified the Christological and iconoclastic disputes over the centuries constitutes a deep tension in the Western conceptualization of the image experience which has a very *longue durée* and seems to resurface nowadays with a particular strength, albeit reformulated, in the contemporary discussion on digital images in general, and on digital images representing the self (avatars) in particular. Presentness, often referred to with the formula "being there", is one of the most salient properties of immersive virtual environments, which in their unframed and seamless continuity surround the users in a 360° iconic world, provoking in them the feeling of being present within an *Umwelt* rather than standing in front of a picture. I feel present in the environment, and the digital objects populating the environment seem present to me, in the flesh as it were and not just as mere re-presentations of objects.

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[10] See D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 126–28.

A specific disciplinary domain, namely "presence studies", has developed in order to address the manifold issues related to (tele-)presence – a term coined by Marvin Minsky back in 1980[11] –, and has also institutionalized its research activities through an MIT journal (*Presence: Virtual and Augmented Reality*, founded in 1992)[12] and a scientific society (The International Society for Presence Research, founded in 2002)[13].

Remarkably, this specific research domain in VR and AR seems to belong to a much broader scholarly reviviscence of the interest in the notion of "presence", as paradigmatically attested by Hans Gumbrecht's 2004 seminal book *Production of Presence*. Although addressing a very ample domain ("'production of presence' points to all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that 'present' objects can have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified"), the author does not neglect the particular context of our media environment, whose paradoxical condition is highlighted as follows: "It has alienated us from the things of the world and their present – but at the same time, it has the potential for bringing back some of the things of the world to us"[14].

Avatars (both as total-body simulacra and as partial substitutes of our bodily image, namely as faces, half-length self-portraits or even just hands in the case of virtual gloves) perform precisely the function pointed out by Gumbrecht: when I wear a VR HMD (Head Mounted Display), I lose the visual perception of my own body and become so to say blind to myself, perceptually distanced and alienated from myself; but at the same time I regain a kind of self-perception via the embodiment in my own avatar: that is to say, via a self-portrait of a sort, which can, but does not need to, be imitative, and mostly is not.

In his explorations of the imagery in 19th century Baudelairian Paris (but also in the Kafkian world)[15], Walter Benjamin pointed out that the most advanced progress in civilization and technology goes hand in hand with the resurgence of archaic and mythical experiential traits: "Only a thoughtless observer can deny that correspondences come into

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[11] M. Minsky, "Telepresence," *Omni Magazine*, June (1980): 45–51.
[12] https://direct.mit.edu/pvar
[13] https://ispr.info/
[14] H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004): xiii and 140.
[15] See Benjamin's remarks on the archaic and forgotten "swamp world" stage in Kafka's work: "The fact that this stage is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is present by virtue of this very oblivion". "Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005): vol. 2/2, 809.

play between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology" [N 2a, 1][16].

The phenomenon of the avatarization of the self(-portrait) in the contemporary scenario of digital communication corresponds precisely to such dynamics of resurgence of archaic presential traits. In this respect, in addition to the religious experience of Byzantine icons, we could consider even more archaic iconic artefacts, like those investigated by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his thought-provoking research on the Greek pre-Platonic image production and reception. Vernant has convincingly shown that the usual (alleged) starting point of Western aesthetics, namely Plato's theory of mimesis, should be deemed as a late point of arrival if considered from the perspective of more archaic ways to experience the image, in which the preoccupation for a realistic and imitative re-presentation of the sensible model had no room yet, to the advantage of an immediate presence of the invisible (either the god or the dead) in the idol carved in wood or stone. Vernant remarks that the many Greek expressions to designate the "divine idol" in the many forms it can take – *baitulos*, *dokana*, *kiōn*, *herma*, *bretas*, *xoanon*, *palladion*, *kouroi* and *korai*, *hedos*, *agalma*, *eikōn* and *mimēma* – do not entail a mimetic implication: "Of all these terms, excluding the last two, there is no single one that has any relation whatsoever to the idea of resemblance or imitation, of figural representation in the strict sense"[17]. Instead, it is a question of visualization, in the literal sense of making visible the invisible: "Whatever the *avatars* of the image may have been, this impossible quest is one that perhaps continues to remain valid to a large degree – that of evoking absence in presence, revealing the elsewhere in what is given to view"[18]. Although Vernant employs here the term "avatars" in the generic sense of the multifarious transformations and inflections of the image experience, we could apply his insight to the avatar properly so-called in the contemporary cyberspace.

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[16] W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999): 461.

[17] J.-P. Vernant, "From the 'Presentification' of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance," in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2006): 333–49. See also "The Figuration of the Invisible and the Psychological Category of the Double: The Kolossos," ibid.: 321–32.

[18] Vernant, "From the 'Presentification' of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance," cit.: 336 (italics mine).

4. Performative and operational images

Digital avatars, archaic idols and religious icons seem all to belong to the broad class of "performative" images, whose functional meaning is triggered only in the context of performative action, namely of a ritual. *Proskynesis*, the veneration reserved to Byzantine icons, consisted not just in a still and static optical contemplation but rather in prostration of the whole body of the devotees and in kisses that progressively consumed the material support of the picture. Commenting on the *xoanon* (a wooden idol succinctly carved with no mimetic worries), Vernant observes: "When a *xoanon* is involved, the plastic representation can never be wholly separated from ritual action. The idol is made in order to be shown and hidden, led forth and fixed in place, dressed and undressed, and given a bath"[19].

Similarly, we dress and undress our own avatars, display them in certain circumstances and hide them for the most part of the time, as happens with the entire iconosphere of digital pictures living the majority of their obscure life secluded, concealed and sheltered in their invisible nature of bytes, to which they return every time we pause our smartphone or shut the screen of our laptop, ready to reappear, i.e. to resurface to visibility, every time we need to retrieve them: "What's truly revolutionary about the advent of digital images – Trevor Paglen argues – is the fact that they are fundamentally machine-readable: they can only be seen by humans in special circumstances and for short periods of time. […] However, the image doesn't need to be turned into human-readable form in order for a machine to do something with it"[20]. Analogously, occult things can go on between the invisible god and its avatar secluded in the *sancta sanctorum* of the temple, regardless of its being perceived by a human eye.

In his reflection about machine-readable images, Paglen draws on Harun Farocki's notion of "operative Bilder", as presented in his 2001 video installation *Eye/Machine*: "operative" or "operational" images" that are made neither to entertain nor to inform […], images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation"[21]. Albeit the

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[19] Ibid.: 338.

[20] T. Paglen, "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)," *The New Inquiry*, December 8 (2016) (https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-picturesare-looking-at-you/). On Paglen's view see A. Somaini, "'Unlearning to See Like Humans': Trevor Paglen on Machine Vision," in G. Plaitano, S. Venturini, P. Villa, eds., *Moving Pictures, Living Machines. Automation, Animation and the Imitation of Life in Cinema and Media* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020): 63–68.

[21] H. Farocki, "Phantom Images," *Public* 29 (2004): 12–24, here p. 17. On the notion of "operative" or "operational" image see: T. Paglen, "Operational Images," *e-flux journal* 59 (2014) (https://www.e-

primary examples are drawn from the military applications of such images (like for example the cameras installed on bombs offering a subjective POV-Point of View of the weapon), warfare does not exhaust the applicative domains of such images. Their main functional property seems "visualization" of data and algorithmic processes that are in themselves not perceivable by the human eye and that determine and govern operations and interventions of transformation of reality. Visualization as the procedure of making visible the invisible and its powers, as we have seen before, was also the function performed by archaic Greek idols and (in their mediated way passing through the visible person of Christ) of Byzantine icons.

The performative effectiveness of contemporary avatars is confirmed by the fact that they do not merely grant the user's access from the real into the digital world, but also empower a two-way relation, enabling transformations from the digital to the real: despite their being low-level bodily representations, these mediators are capable of modifying high-level attitudes and beliefs, like gender and racial biases, via a full-body ownership illusion: the assumption of an avatar of a different gender or skin colour, as has been demonstrated through experiments, can successfully contribute to emend stereotypes and prejudices[22].

5. Avatars between painting and photography

Further properties shared by ancient idols and digital avatars seem to encourage the pursuit of a comparative parallel. Vernant reminds us that, as to their origin, the *xoana* "are not considered to have been made by the hand of a mortal artisan. Whether a god made them and offered them as a gift to one of his favorites, whether they fell from heaven or were carried in to shore by the waves of the sea, they are not human works"[23]. In this respect, they are veritable "acheiropoietic" images (from the Greek *acheiropoietos*: alpha privative + *cheir* = hand + *poiein* = to produce), i. e. not made by human hand, just as the

flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/); V. Pantenburg, "Working Images. Harun Farocki and the Operational Image," in J. Eder, C. Klonk, eds., *Image Operations. Visual Media and Political Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016): 49–62.

[22] S. Seinfeld et al., "Offenders become the victim in virtual reality: impact of changing perspective in domestic violence," *Scientific Reports* 8, no. 2692 (2018): 1–11; B. S.Hasler et al., "Virtual Race Transformation Reverses Racial In-Group Bias," *PLoS One* 12, no. 4 (2017); T. C. Peck et al., "Putting Yourself in the Skin of a Black Avatar Reduces Implicit Racial Bias," *Consciousness and Cognition* 22, no. 3 (2013): 779–87.

[23] Vernant, "From the 'Presentification' of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance," cit.: 337.

most famous icons obtained through a direct "autographic" contact of Christ's face with a cloth, like the *Mandylion* of Edessa or the Shroud of Turin[24].

But the absence or non-intervention of the human hand is precisely what has been predicated of the prototype of the technical images, namely of photography. Explicitly identifying it with a kind of "molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light" and directly recalling the Turin Shroud, André Bazin has insisted on its being acheiropoietic too: "For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man". And it is precisely such handlessness that reinstates sheer presence instead of referential representation: "The photographic image is the object itself […], it *is* the model[25]. The subject of the photographic picture appears to operate as the direct cause of the picture itself (just as Christ was the direct cause of the *Mandylion*), to the extent that photography has been qualified as "the secular icon"[26].

One may argue that this is true for avatars based on analogue photography but not for digital photography. In the still ongoing debate between "continuists" and "discontinuists" – the former claiming that the advent of digital photography has not substantially modified the very essence of the photographic, the latter arguing that analogue and digital are two entirely different iconic worlds –, I line up with continuists with respect to "handlessness" and interconnection object-objective: in fact, both in analogue and in digital photography an object needs to be present in front of the camera lens so that a picture can be produced as the effect of a cause. And this holds regardless of the manipulability and editability of the photographic picture, which, far from being a recent "photoshop" implementation, has always been a constitutive and intrinsic property of photography since its earliest times.

This is patently true if we consider the massive phenomenon characterising our contemporary iconosphere in the last decade, triggered by the pervasive diffusion since

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[24] On the iconographic and theological tradition of the acheiropoietic images that started in the 6th century, see H. Belting, *Das echte Bild. Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen* (Munich: Beck, 2005), especially the chapter "«Nicht von Menschenhand gemachte» Bilder?": 56–62.

[25] A. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005): vol. 1, 12 and 13-14.

[26] P. Maynard, "The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 2 (1983): 155–69. More generally on the notion of "imprint" see G. Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2008).

2010 of smartphones: the selfie[27]. Which brings us to an additional feature suggesting a final comparison between digital avatars and ancient religious icons and idols: frontality, in opposition to profile. As Meyer Schapiro remarked in a brilliant essay,

> The profile face is detached from the viewer and belongs with the body in action (or in an intransitive state) in a space shared with other profiles on the surface of the image. It is, broadly speaking, like the grammatical form of the third person, the impersonal 'he' or 'she' with its concordantly inflected verb; while the face turned outwards is credited with intentness, a latent or potential glance directed to the observer, and corresponds to the role of 'I' in speech, with its complementary 'you'. It seems to exist both for us and for itself in a space virtually continuous with our own, and is therefore appropriate to the figure as symbol or as carrier of a message[28].

The first-person address embedded in frontality is, again, The "self" implied both in portraiture and in self-portraiture determines its avatarial status, its "mineness": avatars necessarily need the reflection of one's own identity as their condition of possibility, its doubling, enabling both the separation between the self and its depiction[29] on the one hand and their embodied identification on the other (once again, the polarization between representation and presence).

In order to institute an avatarial relationship with its iconic surrogate, the 'I' outside the image must address the other 'I' within the image in an 'I-You' connection to trigger a mirror-like self-recognition. This requisite has most probably contributed to the statistically higher number of frontal or semi-profile portraits and self-portraits than the profile ones: a constraint which has remarkably been reasserted by the practice of selfies, given the need to address the camera frontally to control the framing.

A remarkable counterpoint to the frontal avatar is offered by its 180° rotation, the so-called *Rückenfigur*[30]: the figure seen from behind, a representational scheme that dates

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[27] See E. Godart, *Je selfie donc je suis. Les métamorphoses du moi à l'ère virtuel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016); C. Raymond, *The Selfie, Temporality, and Contemporary Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[28] M. Schapiro, "Frontal and Profile as Symbolic Forms," in *Words and Pictures: on the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973): 38–39.

[29] I use here the term "depiction" not in the strict sense of "painterly representation" but in the broad sense of "pictorial representation," where "pictorial" is assumed as referring to "pictures" in general, not only to paintings.

[30] See R. Prange, "Sinnoffenheit und Sinnverneinung als metapicturale Prinzipien. Zur Historizität bildlicher Selbstreferenz am Beispiel der Rückenfigur," in *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, V. Krieger, R. Mader, eds. (Köln: Böhlau, 2010): 125–67. On the

back to ancient mosaics, frescoes, and vase paintings[31]. The *Rücken-avatar* seems to suggest the transitability of the threshold separating the real world from the iconic world, inviting the user to embody her own proxy from the back, assuming as it were its perspective and visual angle on the digital world.

6. Avatars between portrait and self-portrait

From the point of view of their relationship to the personal identity, avatars cover a wide range of possibilities, whose extremes are determined on the one side by the faithful and realistic (self-)portrait, on the other side by the mask, thus allowing a potentially infinite number of possibilities in the negotiation of selfhood and its visual display.

In its dialectical function of revealing and concealing the physiognomic traits of the subject's face or body, the avatar mobilizes the two opposite semantic implications of traditional (self-)portraiture. In fact, if we comparatively consider how the depiction of the self is designated in the European languages, we find a polarization between an inward and an outward direction: the Italian "ritratto" and the Spanish "retrato" derive from the Latin verb *retraho* (to hold, safeguard, protect), whereas the English and French "portrait" and in the German "Porträt" stem from *protraho* (to pull out, to let out, to reveal). Offering the possibility to assume multiple personalities in different cyber-spaces (swapping gender, race, age, profession etc.), avatars – just like Vishnu with his different incarnations – also allow a multifarious perspective-taking on the world as referred to the "others-in-me", therefore admitting various trends of self-identification and "auto-empathy"[32].

"A lesson about identity" is what the *Avatar Drawing – Identity Art Project* promises to offer. Teacher Stacey Peters invites students to draw their own avatar: "A choice we make based on our identity; what we prefer and what we want others to know about us. Many of these choices come from our culture and the groups we belong to"[33]. This is a communicative preference that entails inclusion and exclusion, revelation and secretion.

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iconographic lineage of the *Rückenfigur* in video games see B. Beil, *Avatarbilder. Zur Bildlichkeit des zeitgenössischen Computerspiels* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012): 131–70.

[31] M. Koch, *Die Rückenfigur im Bild von der Antike bis zu Giotto* (Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1965).

[32] See F. Tordo, C. Binkley, "L'auto-empathie médiatisée par l'avatar, une subjectivation de soi," in *Les avatars jouables des mondes numériques. Théories, terrains et témoignages de pratiques interactives*, cit.: 91–109.

[33] https://expressivemonkey.com/avatar-drawing-identity-art-proje/

However, while sharing many properties with the class of iconic objects that we traditionally identify as "portraits" (including self-portraits as its sub-class), avatars in frequent cases do not seem to fit in this category perfectly. This happens when the user is invited to "choose" his/her own avatar among a series of predetermined digital figures that have been realized regardless of the subject's physiognomic traits or personality. In this circumstance, the avatar rather resembles other typologies, such as the *objet trouvé*, the *ready-made*, the *found footage.* And its ability to represent the self consists in a "becoming-portrait" of a picture that was not originally conceived as such by virtue of a process of appropriation and assumption instated by the users themselves.

A hybrid case is constituted by "make your own avatar" apps and websites (like https://avatarmaker.com or https://getavataaars.com), in which you are "free" to compose your own avatarial self-portrait choosing among a pre-determined set of hair, eyes, noses etc. A condition of liberty on parole, as it were, which is the standard situation of the user operating in digital interactive environments, where the subject's freedom to choose and to express self-determination is always and constitutively limited by a pre-determined gamut of options, however numerous they might be – and this is another issue that is liable to a theological investigation...

To sum up what I have argued so far, many are the properties of contemporary digital avatars that call for a consideration dealing not only with the history and theory of (self-)portraiture but also with the comparative history of religions. The polarities "presence/representation", "visibility/invisibility", "revelation/concealment", "imitative/non-imitative", "handmade/non-handmade" constitute, I think, a solid bedrock to build upon in the perspective of a genealogy of these performative and operational images so crucial for our contemporary iconosphere.

I am evidently not claiming that the archaic traits of the image experience resurface nowadays unaltered from the ancestral past. I am suggesting that we can recognize a peculiar family resemblance in certain respects, albeit in the secularized context of our times, that can help us better understand certain crucial elements characterizing our iconic experience in a genealogical perspective.