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Visual Education and the Care of the Figuring Self. Mr. Palomar's Exercises as Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper engages with Italo Calvino's lecture on Visibility, included in his last—and testamentary—volume *Six Memos*, by understanding it in an educational and pedagogical key. While the question of pedagogy is expressly addressed by Calvino himself in his lecture, the interpretation here provided is not merely an application of his tenets but an elaboration on and an autonomous development of them. In particular, in the spotlight there is the intimate bond image-cum-writing which seems to preside over Calvino's insights and is here suggested as key to tackling the challenges of the contemporary mediascape and the "tautological vision" dominating therein. While a part of the educational discourse invokes "homeostatic" pedagogical solutions, namely the (ultimately confrontational) deployment of writing to compensate for the iconic ruling regime, this paper explores the possibility of a specific kind of visual education (instantiated by comics and Otto Neurath's Isotype), which combines the role of the image with some features traditionally attributed to the pedagogy of writing (e.g. the cultivation of abilities of abstraction, of reflection etc.). A pedagogy of figuration is, accordingly, proposed as an interruption of the tautological vision of the new media and as conducive to educating readers of the unwritten world and of the world of digital images, Mr. Palomar—the hero of Calvino's last novel—possibly being the archetype of this kind of (new?) readership. By referring to two influential notions in the contemporary debate in educational philosophy and theory, this pedagogy is finally interpreted in term of (visual) thing-centredness rather than (visual) subjectification.

Introduction

The role that visuality and the sense of sight play in Italo Calvino's works is well known and amply studied (Belpoliti 2006; Grundtvig et al., 2007); thus, it comes as no surprise that "visibility" is proposed by the Italian writer, in his *Six Memos* (Calvino 1993; henceforth SM when quoted), as one of the virtues or qualities to be preserved and cared for in

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the new millennium in the field of literature (see SM, pp. 81–99). One may wonder, however, whether this holds also for education: in what sense, if any, does visibility represent a value in educational theory and practice? How should we construe visibility in order for it to have an educational relevance? What kind of visibility do we recommend as educational? And, more fundamentally: what do we mean by visibility? The property of being a possible object of looking or also—through an etymological twist (vision-ability)—the ability to come into play as a subject both *of* and *to* looking? Does visibility take place in the very dynamic field in which these two forms of being-subject meet in their very distinction?

The following reflections will unfold by moving—to adopt an enthralling formula used by David Hansen (2011, p. 3) in a different context—"closer and closer *apart*" the way in which Calvino himself engages with the *pedagogical* significance of visibility. Indeed, while arguably *Six Memos* as a whole has an educational relevance (this is at least the wager of the present special issue), it is to highlight that the Visibility lecture is the one in which the theme of pedagogy is explicitly addressed (and, indeed, the very word is introduced) as the culmination of Calvino's inquiry. In this respect, my argumentation, on the one hand, will move "closer and closer" to the insights (and the concerns) of Calvino but, on the other, it will not confine itself to applying or developing his tenets to educational issues, but rather it will tackle the theme by integrating also other sources, possibly deviating in part from Calvino's interpretive orbit.

Against this backdrop, this paper will be structured as follows: first, I will situate the *Visibility* lecture in the totality of *Six Memos*, by insisting on its role as a hinge, and I will pinpoint the aspects of Calvino's text which I am going to valorize; secondly, dialoguing with but also departing from Calvino's "pedagogy of imagination," I will explore some forms of visual education adequate for contemporary challenges; and, finally, I will distinguish between the ascetical practice of vision advocated by Ivan Illich, culminating in what we could call "visual subjectification," and that intrinsic to the exercises of Mr. Palomar, the eponymous hero of Calvino's (1983) last novel, whose adventures may be interpreted as a kind of educational itinerary in the age in which *Bildungsroman stricto sensu* is no longer possible.[1]

Images and Writing: Towards a Pedagogy of Figuration

Famously, Calvino was an extremely skillful builder of textual architectures, ruled by an adamantine order, and *Six Memos* arguably manifests this sophisticated craft as well. A passionate commentator (Piacentini 2014) of this testamentary volume has suggested thinking of the first three as the lectures of the "crystal"—focusing on regular structures and a view from distance—which shift, with *Visibility*, to those of the "flame," in which the consistency of the external shape does not hide the internal agitation (this crystal/flame

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[1] In a valuable article on Calvino's last novel, Mauri Jacobsen (1992) speaks of "formazione" (educative formation and *Bildung*) but it is moot whether the notion of *Bildung* is apposite for Mr. Palomar: indeed, *Bildung* implies (also) an interior development of subjectivity which may be at variance with how Calvino thought of his figure (it is even debatable if we can call Mr. Palomar a character in any proper sense: cf. Belpoliti 2006; see also below fn. 2). It is appropriate to specify that mine will not be an interpretation of Calvino's last novel and/or of his eponymous character but an educational re-appropriation of some aspects of them.

distinction being introduced as pivotal by Calvino himself in *Exactitude*: see SM, pp. 70 ff.).

Regarding the question of visibility, one may note that in the first lecture of the 'crystal part' (*Lightness*) visibility is epitomized by the image of the shield of Perseus (see SM, pp. 4–5), without which it is impossible to—literally—*face* Medusa (= reality in its mesmerizing confusion and petrifying heaviness), whereas the first lecture of the 'flame part' (*Visibility*) starts with a verse of Dante mentioning a "raining down" of images into the fantasy: thus, in the former case we have the reference to the need for an indirect, mediated and 'shielded' vision to face reality as a subject, while, in the latter, the evocation of a direct, interiorized vision, to which one is exposed and subjected.

In line with his reading according to which the transition from the crystal to the flame lectures marks also a passage to the domain of the self, which would have culminated in *Consistency* (see also Piacentini 2016),[2] Piacentini suggests a shift from a discourse of the external sight to that of the internal sight and imagination.[3] I am not going to follow more in detail this lead of the internal sight but in my argumentation I will valorize the hinge-character that *Visibility* has—in close connection with *Exactitude* (the third and culminating 'crystal lecture')—by considering it from a different viewpoint.

To start with, it is to note that the threshold-position of the Visibility lecture goes hand in hand with a sort of 'chiastic' configuration of the ending of the third lecture and the beginning of the fourth: Leonardo, albeit "omo sanza lettere" (= 'illiterate,' viz. unschooled, man), concludes *Exactitude* as a representative of a writing pursuing the precision of the drawing and he passes the baton, at the beginning of *Visibility*, to Dante—the Italian poet *par excellence*—who is evoked, instead, for an elaborate theory of imagination and the description of a sort of "mental cinema" (SM, p. 83). This 'chiasmus'—in which Leonardo, the 'illiterate' master painter, occupies the pole of writing, whereas Dante, the master poet, presides over the pole of the image—refers, in the interpretation here advanced, to one of the main thematic axes of the question of visibility, especially if approached through an educational lens: the intimate interlacing of image-*cum*-writing. This is a theme recurring both in the narrative and essayistic works of Calvino and it is reaffirmed also in the conclusion of *Visibility* through the reference to Balzac's tale pivoting on painting, which according to Calvino may also be read as a theory of writing.

There is a sophisticated economy governing the relationships between the "written world and unwritten world" (Calvino 2015b): Calvino refuses the late modern/postmodern reduction of the world to a language effect (whether in the Derridian "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," or in the Rortyan enthusiasm for "the world well lost" or in the Gadamerian

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[2] The progressively increasing focusing of the 'flame lectures' on the self is also captured by Wiebe Koopal in his contribution to this special issue. Engaging with Calvino's unwritten lecture on *Consistency*, he takes his cue from von Kleist's idea of a *Lebensplan*. As I understand it, the mention of von Kleist is a sort of litmus test to assess the specificity of Calvino's "consistency" in comparison with the tradition of *Bildung*. In this respect, as I read it, Koopal makes a point convergent with what I have hinted at above, namely that Mr. Palomar's may be a model of educational trajectory when a *Bildungsroman stricto sensu* is no longer possible (see also above fn. 1).

[3] "Sight alone in *Visibility* is no longer sufficient. In the *Visibility* of Dante, as in the visions of Leonardo that are its prologue at the ending of *Exactitude*, eyes do not serve any longer because visibility is the faculty of seeing images with one's eyes closed, it is the capacity of producing images in absence. Visibility is the internal sight" (Piacentini 2014, pos. 9449. My translation).

statement that Being that can be understood is language)[4]; rather, Calvino moves between "nausea" and "vertigo" (Fabbri 1987), between the sensing of the world as a lump, intricacy or clot and the universe of the articulation, between the feeling of being engulfed in the noisy complexity of the world [with a nod to Michel Serres (1995, p. 8) we can speak of nausea qua noise and seasickness in front of the wave-like nature of reality, which also Mr. Palomar confronts[5]] and the 'enlightening' movement 'upwards,' which enables one to make models of the world.[6] Along with an implicit reference to the tradition of Enlightenment, in 'enlightening' we should hear resonating lightness rather than the metaphysical illuminating power which claims to shed a final light on the opacity of the phenomena. Indeed, we should not misconstrue the Calvinian movement 'upwards' in the Platonic meaning of an exit from the cave and the attainment of a vision illuminated by the Sun, which grants us truth. To put it bluntly: Calvino's exactitude is not the *orthotēs* of the Platonic doctrine of truth (Heidegger 1996) as little as his visibility—even the interior one—is a kind of intuition of essences.

We could express this also in another way: the movement 'upwards' (the vertigo) is ex-planation, idiosyncratically construed as a disengagement from the plane of the 'nause-ating'-noisy intricacy, which must be, however, experienced as such and cannot be simply evaded or *written off*. However, this movement does not culminate in a pursuit of profundity or in the discovery of an invariant essence but rather in 'explanation' as the *study of surfaces* and an exercise of describing them. This is the kind of exercise in which Mr. Palomar is involved, when making experience of the world and endeavouring to learn to see it.[7] Calvino himself presents this kind of activity as a sort of *school exercise* (SM, pp. 75–76). Accordingly, this movement—which does not disanchor the subject from the world but re-orients her/his relationships to it, by turning her/him into a *student of the (surfaces of the) world*—is intrinsically educational [and, indeed, even 'scholastic' in the acceptation of Masschelein and Simons (2012)]. It is a form of *paideia* as *periagogē holes tēs psuchēs* (cf. Plato's *Republic*, 517c-d; see also Heidegger 1996), that is, a conversion of our being-in-the-world as a whole, providing that we do not understand, as aforementioned, this Platonic phrase through a Platonic lens.

The written world never solves (or dissolves) the (riddle of the) unwritten, as Mr. Palomar knows very well. Indeed, his exercises in perception, which are always also and fundamentally exercises in describing, in circum-scribing the phenomena, often end with

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[4] See a forceful passage of *Six Memos*: "The word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that it is desired or feared, like a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss. For this reason, the proper use of language, for me personally, is one that enables us to approach things (present or absent) with discretion, attention, and caution, with respect for what things (present or absent) *communicate without words*" (SM, p. 76. Emphasis added).

[5] See the first chapter of *Mr. Palomar* with the latter's attempts to describe *one* wave in an exhaustive way.

[6] The nausea/vertigo (as movement upwards) polarity can be put in relation with the labyrinth/map polarity examined in depth by Belpoliti (2006, ch. 1) in the works of Calvino.

[7] This complex movement is already 'inscribed' in the very name of Mr. Palomar: on the one hand, as stated also on the front flap of the first Italian edition, the name "recalls a powerful telescope" (thereby indicating a view disengaging one from the nauseating intricacy); and, on the other, it bears an assonance with the Italian word "palombaro" (=deep sea diver) with the important specification that he is "a *palombaro* of surfaces" [as Calvino recognized in an interview with Lietta Tornabuoni (1983)].

malaise and discomfort (which may be construed as the pathetic—inescapable—resonance in subjectivity of the world as a clump).[8]

In this complex economy, the image—as the primal framing (the primordial circumscribing as out-lining and 'figuring *out*') of the fluidity and inexhaustibility of the world—is what stands in-between the sensuous, 'passive' perception and the written word.

In the *Visibility* lecture this intimate bond between image and writing is 'analyzed' by Calvino in terms of two vectors: from the word to the visual image, viz. the operation of *reading*, and from the image to the verbal expression, viz. the operation of *writing*. At the same time, what 'mediates' the two poles is spelled out in terms of imagination as *the power to evoke images in absence* and as *thinking through images*. Preserving this ability—and countering the risk of losing it in the contemporary mediascape—is what Calvino sees as a major civilizational challenge:

> Will the power of evoking images of things which are *not there* continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by prefabricated images? […] We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. […] If I have included visibility in my list of values to be saved, it is to give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of image. (SM, pp. 91-92)

And, once again, this is structurally interlaced with worries aired in *Exactitude*: "It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty—that is, the use of the words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic anonymous and abstract formulas" (SM, p. 56), a pestilence one of the main therapies of which is the "evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; in Italian we have an adjective that doesn't exist in English, 'icastico,' from the Greek *εικαστικός*" (SM, p. 55).

To make the specificities of Calvino's position stand out, I want to situate it within an Italian constellation, with which he shares some concerns and qualms, while arguably providing different educational responses. A decade after Calvino's death, a leading theorist of democracy, Giovanni Sartori (1997), suggested that television was producing "a metamorphosis that regards the very nature of *homo sapiens*. Television, indeed, is not simply a communication medium; it is at the same time *paideia*, an 'anthropogenetic' means, that is, a medium which generates a new *anthropos*, a new kind of human being" (p. 14).[9] From *homo sapiens*, "a product of the civilization of writing" we would be moving to *homo videns*, a human being for whom "the word is replaced by the image" (p. XV) and whose main faculty is not reason but sight. Sartori warned about "our children watch[ing] hours and hours of television before learning to read and write" (p. 14) and intimated that "the child, whose first school […] is television, is a symbolic animal that

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[8] This has led many critics to emphasize the aporia of the gaze (and, more generally, of perception) experienced by Mr. Palomar in his confrontation with a complex world. However, as Waage Petersen (2007, p. 163) has nicely highlighted by insisting on the visual strength of Calvino's written images, this is only half of the story, as "the visual images of the texts tend towards contradicting the parts that express *aporia*, thus providing a different way of looking at the world."

[9] Unless otherwise specified, all translations from non-English works are the present author's.

receives its imprint, its educational mould, from an utterly sight-centred world" (p. 15). Thereby, children would risk growing up destitute of any abstractive attitude:

> *Homo sapiens* [...] owes all his knowledge and all his progress in understanding to his abstractive capacity [...]. [O]ur capacity to deal with the political, social, and economic reality in which we live [...] is based exclusively upon thinking through concepts, which are invisible and inexistent entities to the naked eye. [...] Summing up: all the knowledge of *homo sapiens* develops in the realm of the *mundus intelligibilis* (made up of concepts and mental conceptions) which is not, in any circumstances, the *mundus sensibilis* perceived by our senses. And the point is this: television inverts the progress from the perceptible to the intelligible and reverses it into the *ictu oculi*, i.e. into a return to mere sight. Television produces images and effaces concepts: but by doing so, it atrophies our abstracting capacity and, consequently, all our capacity for understanding. (Ibid., pp. 22-3)

Also Raffaele Simone (2000, p. 130), a linguist, harped on a similar score, by distinguishing—and, indeed, opposing—"propositional cultures," which draw upon and promote analysis, the identification of differences and the establishing of logical and syntactical hierarchies, and "non-propositional cultures," like our image-oriented world, where the fundamental epistemic attitude is "generic," "vague in referential terms" and "destructured."

While joining in advance this cultural atmosphere and advancing an analogous kind of diagnosis and concern, the educational way out of this predicament proposed by Calvino, as I read him, is different. Indeed, while clearly distinguishing image and writing, it does not establish an axiological antithesis, according to which the *paideia* of *homo sapiens* consists in cultivating his[10] writing abilities at the cost of and ultimately in contrast with his imagining powers or in fostering a kind of thinking which installs itself in a sort of purely 'noumenic' (=non-phenomenic) dimension.

The aforementioned 'chiastic' configuration, referring to an intimate bond between writing and image, excludes the possibility that Calvino's can be seen merely as a homeostatic approach such as that of Neil Postman (1979), opposing the hidden curriculum of the visual media (essentially television in the concluding decades of the twentieth century) to the curriculum of the school. Calvino could have (a) agreed with Postman's (1985) condemnation of the society of Show Business (that is, the society dominated by television and its fragmented and desultory rhythm), (b) shared the qualms about what the US American scholar calls Peek-a-Boo World (which must in no way be confused with the invocation of lightness and quickness as qualities) and (c) recognized in Postman's (1985) elegy for the Age of the Exposition (viz. the age dominated by typographic media) some features of his own virtue of exactitude. However, the educational response of the Italian writer does not pivot on the exclusive privilege of writing but rather refers to a "pedagogy of imagination." The 'method'[11] of the latter may be drawn from Calvino's autobiographical account of his

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[10] I will use the masculine adjective in accordance with the gender of the Latin word.

[11] When speaking of his pedagogy, Calvino specifies that "I have in mind some possible pedagogy of imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall, on the other hand, into confused, ephemeral daydreams, but would enable the images to crystalize into well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form, the *icastic* form. This is of course a kind of pedagogy that we can only exercise upon ourselves, according to methods invented for the occasion and with unpredictable results" (SM, p. 92). Thus, he does not give us ready-made pedagogical recipes but he outlines a horizon of possibilities, which we have to creatively inhabit. In this spirit, the educational strategies introduced in § 2 may be not Calvinian *stricto sensu*, while being arguably faithful to his fundamental spirit.

self-formation *as a "reader" of images before the age of the school and the related familiarization with the reading of words*:

> In my own early development, I was already a child of the "civilization of images," even if this was still in its infancy and a far cry from the inflations of today. Let us say that I am a product of an intermediate period, when the colored illustrations that were our childhood companions, in books, weekly magazines and toys, were very important to us. […] However, being unable to read, *I could easily dispense with words—the pictures were enough*. […] I would spend hours following the cartoons of each series from one issue to another, while in my mind I told myself the stories, interpreting the scenes in different ways […] When I learned to read, the advantage I gained was minimal. (SM, pp. 92-93. Emphasis added)

Calvinian pedagogy is, thus, situated in the field between this early reading of images without words and the exercises of "a schoolboy whose homework is to "Describe a giraffe' or 'Describe the starry sky'" (SM, p. 75), as happens with the poet Francis Ponge (and also Mr. Palomar!); that is, between images which invoke the act (=reading)—typical of writing but here referred to images—and a writing which culminates in images, both options embodying, in a different way, that intimate bond of image and writing which is called to counter the expanding pestilence of "un-icasticity."

Visual Education Versus Tautological Vision

Both the authors of the Italian constellation I have mentioned in the previous section and Neil Postman expressed their misgivings and advanced their educational responses fundamentally under the impression of what Umberto Eco (1983) called neo-television (=the proliferation of TV channels). The visual regime has obviously dramatically changed since then, with the emergence of the new electronic media that have arguably exponentiated some tendencies diagnosed between the 1970s and 1990s.

In the 1970s, Antonino Paraggi—the protagonist of *The Adventures of a Photographer* (Calvino 1970)—and Susan Sontag (1977)[12] presented a similar concern about the dissolution of the present experience(d) into the photographed experience that has always—ontologically—a "commemorative" (Calvino 1970, p. 38) character and risks "exclud[ing] the dramatic contrasts, the knots of the contradictions, the great tensions of will, passion and adventure. Thus, you believe that you save yourselves from the folly but you fall into mediocrity and hebetude" (*Ibidem*). As Sontag (1977, p. 9) puts it, "[a] way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir […] The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation […]."

If Calvino and Sontag diagnosed this irrepressible impulse especially in reference to tourism (or the weekend trips of the Italian families in the case of Calvino), Emmelhainz (2015) has sagaciously noted that "[a]lmost 40 years later, posing for, taking, sharing, liking, forwarding, and looking at images are actions that are not only integral to tourism; they actually *give shape* to contemporary experience. Arguably, representation has ceased to exist in plain view and manifests itself as experience, event, or the appropriation

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[12] On the proximity between Calvino's and Sontag's positions see Musarra-Schrøder (2007).

and sharing of a mediatic space" (p. 5). The emergence of new digital devices has deeply impacted on our 'visual condition':

> Aside from the fact that images and data are taking the place of or giving form to experience, automating our will and thought, they are also transforming things into signs by welding together image and discourse, bringing about *a tautological form of vision*. With the widespread use of photography and digital imaging, all signs begin to lead to other signs, prompted by the desire to see and to know, to document and to archive information. *Thus, the fantasy that everything is or can be made visible coexists with the increasing automation of cognition* […]. (Ibid., p. 7. Emphasis added)

The incunabula of this *tautological form of vision* may have been already present at the end of Calvino's tale, when Antonino, in his search for "the total photograph," understands that "photographing photographs" (Calvino 1970, p. 45) was the only way that was available to him; however, this tendency has reached its peak in our screen-ruled experience.

It can be plausibly argued that we should not cede to "apocalyptic" (Eco 1964) attitudes towards these phenomena and, instead of indulging in forms of iconoclasm against the new digital-iconic regime, as educators we should rather "cal[l] for an 'iconomical' practice of *care*-ful experiments with the screen's plastic technologies" (Koopal and Vlieghe 2022).[13]

In the following, however, I will take another path and suggest some practices which can come to terms with the tautological form of vision reigning nowadays. In this endeavour, I will take my cue from an idiosyncratic appropriation of an idea of Emmelhainz, when she "draw[s] a distinction between *images* and imagery, or pictures. Although it is related to the optic nerve, the picture *does not make an image*. In order to make images, it is necessary to make *vision* assassinate perception; it is necessary to *ground* vision, and then *perform* (as in artistic activity) and *think* vision (as in critical activity)" (Emmelhainz 2015, p. 9). Decontextualizing these indications from the original argument, I intimate interpreting them as follows: we need to assassinate perception to the extent that it is colonized by prefabricated digital pictures, viz. the noisy—'nauseating' flux in which we risk suffocating but which we cannot simply escape towards Sartori's *mundus intelligibilis*; rather, we should develop other ways of in-habiting vision, which enable us to ground, perform and think it. In the new mediascape, not only does it rain down into the high fantasy but an actual deluge takes place; in imposing the hectic, desultory and ever-flowing presence of pictures, this jeopardizes our ability to imagine, that is, to think through images or evoke images in absence. As a consequence, we need to assassinate *this* kind of perception—when and to the extent that it is destructured and inarticulate—and to cultivate the possibility that images come into view.

To re-adapt the vocabulary of Bernard Stiegler (2006, 2008), we need a "therapy of images," so that what risks acting merely as psycho-technology turns into noo-technology.[14] In keeping with the argument of the previous section and the stress upon

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[13] Also Samira Ali Reza Beigi and Sara Magaraggia, in their contribution to this special issue, avoid any 'apocalyptic" tone and endeavour to rather explore the pedagogical opportunities within contemporary digital school education through a revisitation of Calvino's virtue of quickness and the establishment of an ingenious distinction/opposition between the latter and the pervasive cult of speed in the current educational discourse.

[14] By psycho-technologies Stiegler understands the new media to the extent that they are colonized and subjugated by neoliberal capitalism and come to exert a psycho-power, finally undermining attention as a social competence; by noo-technologies he understands these same media to the extent that they are serviceable for the formation of "a new form of critical attention" (Stiegler 2006, p. 98), the promotion of collective intelligence and of maturity in the Kantian acceptation of *Mündigkeit*.

the intimate image-*cum*-writing bond, in the remainder of this section I will indicate a couple of forms of visual education that may embody this interlacement and operate in the direction of what I will call a "pedagogy of figure/ation." Indeed, the word "figure"[15] conveys the meanings of a written symbol, of the outline and silhouette of a thing, of structure or design, and finally of something resulting from a process of giving shape; in this way, it may belong both to the field of images and to that of writing, without deleting however their distinctions.

To begin with, if we have to counter the pestilence of an 'un-icastic' visuality, which prevents us from thinking in terms of images, we need to find ways of cultivating "process[es] of abstraction, condensation and interiorization of sense experience, a matter of prime importance to both the visualization and verbalization of thought" (SM, p. 95). The visual media we need should, accordingly, operate as a vehicle of 'figuration,' thanks to their 'protocols' drawing upon abstraction and condensation. I will refer to two distinct media: comics and Otto Neurath's Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education). Despite their differences, I will privilege what I see as their affinities, especially in view of a pedagogy of figuration.

The pedagogical significance of comics has already emerged above in Calvino's autobiographical account of his early education but I want to analyze it in the wake of some brilliant tenets of Scott McCloud (1994).[16] In his wide-ranging reconstruction of what comics are, undertaken in a volume which is itself a comics book, he first provides a sophisticated definition of them: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9). This allows him to date the history of this medium much earlier than is usually the case and to consider as comics, for instance, also a pre-Columbian picture manuscript discovered by Cortés or the Bayeux tapestry (and, we can add, also some experiments in the tradition of Vienna Circle: see *infra*). Without being able to present his rich argument as a whole, I will pinpoint only some aspects and I will recontextualize them to the present reflection, sometimes with some hermeneutic twists.

First, after introducing the general concept of icon as "any image used to represent a person, a place, thing or idea" (p. 27), McCloud focuses on the pictorial icons and establishes a sort of spectrum going from photographs and realistic pictures, "which are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts" (p. 28) to cartoons[17] "as a form of amplification through simplification. When *we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details*. By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (p. 30. Emphasis added). This provides cartoons with a particular intensity and universality and situates them in the conceptual realm: "By de-emphasizing the

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[15] Actually, in *Visibility* Calvino expressly speaks of "figural fantasy," possibly also with an implicit reference to Erich Auerbach (see Belpoliti 2006, p. 30), but I will not embark on an examination of whether and to what extent the reflections here proposed converge on Calvino's tenets.

[16] Not only will I be unable to be faithful to the wealth of insights contained in McCloud's volume and focus on a drastically reduced number of ideas, but I will fall into a sort of performative contradiction: indeed, from a volume built as a comics book I will take just the word-part, moreover deleting the expressive qualities conveyed by the lettering and the use of different fonts.

[17] It is to note that according to McCloud, despite their "long-standing relationships" we should not conflate comics—understood according to the aforementioned definition—and cartoons, the latter being "an approach to picture-making—a style, if you like—while the [former] is a medium which often employs that approach" (p. 21).

appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (p. 41).

I will appropriate this first element of McCloud's argumentative device by highlighting that he grants us an access to the conceptual world (Sartori's *mundus intelligibilis*) through condensed and abstract images[18] and, therefore, not through a denial of *homo videns* but rather through a re-orientation of his powers of seeing.

Secondly, things are, however, more complicated (and intriguing!): McCloud contests the sharp separation of pictures and words and, in search of "a single unified language" (p. 47) adequate for that specific art which comics are, he insinuates that words are even more abstract icons, that is, they represent a step forward on the way of abstraction. Accordingly, we have a spectrum going from photographies and the most realistic picture through cartoons (which, in their turn, may present different degrees of abstraction) to words as completely abstract icons:

> Pictures are *received* information. We need no formal education to 'get the message'. The message is instantaneous. Writing is *perceived* information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality,' they require greater levels of perception, *more like words*. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, *more like pictures*. Our need tor a unified *language* of comics sends us toward the center where words and pictures are like two sides of one coin. But our need for *sophistication* in comics seems to lead us outward, where words and pictures are most separate. (p. 49).

I suggest reading this passage in the light of the image-*cum*-writing bond I have discussed earlier and I want to inflect McCloud's discourse—not without some grain of idiosyncratic interpretation—towards the argument developed thus far. In the contemporary mediascape, at least in some respects, the pole of 'reality' is occupied (also) by prefabricated images, the message of which is instantaneous and places us in the role of (passive) receivers. Invoking writing (qua the medium of concepts) as an antidote to this drift—in the wake of a homeostatic stance—is absolutely legitimate but risks being too one-sided and Manichean, implying a sort of total abandonment of the world of images in favour of that of concepts. Instead, a comics-oriented *periagogē* works abstraction out of the world of icons, remaining on their terrain and without (literally) writing images off. Or, to put it in another way: cartoons as a result of a process of amplifying simplification and condensing abstraction are *figures* which assassinate the flux of digital pictures, which as psychotechnology petrify us and obstruct our ability to ground and think vision.

There is a third element that I want to highlight: starting from perceptual closure, viz. "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (p. 63), McCloud lays a stress upon the significance of the "gutter," that is the space *between* the panels in comics: "Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (p. 66). Significantly, while "[t]he closure in electronic media is continuous, largely involuntary, and virtually imperceptible [,] closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary. Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader" (p. 68). The space of the gutter is a blank space which turns a passive receiver into a perceptive *reader*. To refer once again to Calvino's last hero, Mr. Palomar's

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[18] We could find an element of evocation of internal images also in cartoons, as McCloud thinks of them. However, due to restraints of space, I cannot follow in more detail McCloud's reflections on this issue.

exercises in observation can be taken precisely as an attempt to establish a sort of 'gutter' in the noisy/ 'nauseating'/seasickness-engendering chaos of the world.

Gerrymandering some tenets of McCloud I have insisted on those features of comics that may represent a tool for educating an 'abstracting' gaze and for becoming aware of and strengthening the workings of figural imagination. From this perspective, along with other educational merits (which lie beyond the scope of the present investigation) an educational deployment of comics (and possibly those in which the qualities of abstractness and condensation are particularly conspicuous) is primarily understood as the way of cultivating abilities of figuration and of thinking images out of the flow of pictures (in Emmelhainz's sense). Adapting (and betraying) a phrase of Gert Biesta (2006, 2010), comics should operate as a "pedagogy of interruption" of the tautological vision fostered by new digital media and enable the subject to come into play as a reader and a de-scriber (someone who 'enframes' what would otherwise flow and captivate us).

If we accept McCloud's general definition of comics ("Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer"), it might not be far-fetched to state that Otto Neurath's visual education can be interpreted as a form of comics. Indeed, for reasons that cannot be here explored in more detail, we could venture to say that his *Bildpädagogik* (Neurath 1991b) is to a certain extent a way of "cartoonized logical positivism." I will refer to this second form of visual education because, on the one hand, Neurath's Isotype consciously instantiates the image-*cum*-writing bond and educationally responds to some of the concerns about the perils of what he called "Age of the Eye" (Neurath 1996, 2010) and, on the other, present some specific features.

It is impossible to rehearse in few lines the political-educational significance of *Bildpädagogik* (from its inception in the climate of the Red Vienna of the 1920s to its international resonance) or its methodological achievements (Oliverio 2006; Groß, 2015). It is to specify that Neurath is fundamentally interested in how to convey factual knowledge of one's own environments and in humanization of scientific knowledge (Neurath 1996): this is necessary in order to educate for democratic citizenship, bridging the gap between experts and lay people that could re-propose also in advanced democratic societies those separations which plague civic communication. In many respects, despite their different ideological background, Neurath's concerns are close to and anticipate Sartori's but, differently from the latter, instead of simply condemning any kind of 'visuality' as anti-educational, he devices an ingenious methodology of visual education to cultivate those habits of abstract thinking—Neurath would rather speak of a "meditative mood" and habits of arguing (Neurath 1996)—which democratic citizenship requires.

In *Six Memos* this link between education for democratic citizenship and the risks (and/or chances) of images is not on the 'educational agenda' of Calvino. Thus, I will keep in the background this pivotal dimension of Neurath's undertaking. Moreover, as aforementioned Neurath spotlights the need to convey factual knowledge and to further habits of argumentation more than to develop and support what Calvino calls the power to evoke images in absence. And, though, both are on the same page in their invocation of a *thinking through images* and in their efforts to develop strategies and methods for the cultivation of the latter. Additionally, different as their general stances may be, they both seem to pursue an ideal of 'icasticity' to counter the spell of the pictorial luxury of the media in the "Age of the Eye."

In this selective appropriation of some tenets of Neurath, I will take my cue from a passage in his fascinating "visual autobiography":

I found it rather amusing to compare schematic drawings in outlines and simplified colours with realistic pictures, and *in such a comparison I think there is something educational*. It is important, for instance, to be able to orientate ourselves when looking at a square in sunshine and to see a carriage with all the lights and shadows and to distinguish quickly between a black rod and black shadow of the same shape. But, on the other hand, if one wants to realize how this carriage works, it is useful to imagine a simplified drawing of it without more lines and shadows than are needed to understand its functioning. For making decisions in life *we need an adaptation of our eyes both to the multiplicity of overwhelming details and to a far-reaching schematization of the important correlations between the objects before us*. (Neurath 2010, p. 35. Emphasis added)

First, I suggest interpreting the double adaptation of our eyes in terms of the aforementioned Calvinian oscillation between "nausea" and "vertigo." Neurath's distaste—from childhood on—for realistic, unhelpfully detailed pictures can be interpreted in the sense that, in their wealth of minutiae, they risk simply reproducing reality in its abundance and, accordingly, do not enable us to navigate within it. The process of schematization, instead, may be construed as that enlightening movement upwards through which we build models of the world and, thereby, learn to orient ourselves in it. This is the educational potential of schematization, which should not be absolutized, however: we cannot completely leapfrog the abundance of 'reality' in its richness, discomforting as it may be (and as Mr. Palomar never ceases to experience it).[19]

To address the issue from a different angle: we need simplified, 'modelized' images of the 'world' in order to manage the plurality of stimuli we receive. In his sociological writings Neurath speaks of utopias as 'constructs' which enable us to engage with "the countless excitations and strivings which overwhelm us today" (Neurath 1991a, p. 137) and he appeals to a 'comparative utopistics,' viz. to a comparison of different models of assembling social reality. In a sense, *Bilderpädagogik* is the pedagogical counterpart of this endeavour, on two levels: on the one hand, as aforementioned it conveys factual knowledge in a way that allows people to easily detect crucial aspects of the facts illustrated and to compare them; on the other, it contributes to developing a habit of making comparisons, viz. of assaying and assessing the information under scrutiny. This is conducive to that 'meditative mood' that according to Neurath (1996, p. 267) "is an essential element of all kinds of education. To a certain extent, meditation is essential for all kinds of activity." By meditation Neurath essentially understands what Dewey would call reflective thinking, namely the scientific attitude which amounts to giving testable reasons for one's positions and building sound arguments: "[A]rguing and meditating […] form the backbone of serious education according to our tradition" (Ibid., p. 288). As already highlighted, it is noteworthy that, while recognizing the snares of the Age of the Eye with its charms that jeopardize the meditative mood, Neurath does not appeal to an escape from visualization but entrusts the furthering of habits of argumentation to a "consistent visual education" (p. 285). In this respect, his *Bildpädagogik* can be really interpreted as a 'therapy of images' turning the figurative medium into a noo-technology.

To adopt and idiosyncratically inflect a Calvinian polarity—that between labyrinth and map (see Belpoliti 2006)—, we could say that, in order to "challenge the labyrinth" (Calvino 2015a, p. 122) of the pre-fabricated images and not to yield to it, we need to map

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[19] It is to specify that reality is one of the words which Neurath would find "metaphysical" and that the reference to it betrays a closeness to Calvino rather than to the Viennese scholar.

it (*Ibidem*). Accordingly, we could re-interpret the pedagogy of figuration also as the invitation to a cultivation of our abilities of map-making, without remaining engulfed in the meandering self-sufficiency of the digital pictorial world. The exercises in de-scribing and circum-scribing which Mr. Palomar (Calvino 1983) performs are also "an attempt to map the world, to trace it back to a comprehensible and utilizable image" (Belpoliti 2006, p. 57). Also in Neurath we find a stress on the educational value of map-making and, indeed, an interpretation of the Isotype undertaking as a whole in terms of this activity: "The comprehensive goal of Isotype may be formulated thus: to present so many charts and models that everybody gets sufficient material for visual argument. The collection of Isotype material may be compared with a collection of geographical maps, which may also be used by everybody for very different arguments" (Neurath 2010, p. 125). In this respect, apart from the explicit educational aims of *Bildpädagogik* (linked, as aforementioned, with education for citizenship), we could think of it as an exercise in elaborating visual maps of our world and, thereby, developing attitudes of description and/or schematization, which ultimately may enable us not to cede to the temptations of the tautological vision and to the charms of pictures but rather to 'assassinate' the latter through images.

Finally, there is one more aspect of Neurath's stance that is relevant for the present context: in his autobiography he mentions,

> a plaything that [he] liked very much as a child because it enabled [him] to create composite pictures without drawing them. Its background consisted of a chart which changed colour gradually […] On it one could arrange single objects that one cut out: mountains, houses, figures, carriages, trees and other things, all painted in a more or less realistic way. Within a few minutes a landscape in the Alps would appear before [him] and, then, if [he] liked the picture of a desert with a little oasis in a corner and a few men and animals only. (Ibid., p. 12)[20]

This combinatorial playing with single elements manifests a characteristic pattern of thinking of Neurath (which we find also in his epistemological or sociological writings). What I am interested in highlighting in this context is that Neurath explicitly connects this inclination for the combinatorial activity "with the scheme of hieroglyphics" (Ibid., p. 13). The theme of hieroglyphics is key to Neurath:

> Hieroglyphics have never ceased to fascinate me – a fascination based partly, of course, on curiosity, but chiefly on the shapes and colours and *the obvious possibility of combining the little figures to form a picture writing*, as has never been done historically. In particular, I liked how the Egyptians were able to combine the same symbols in different ways without destroying their visual power. *This active element belongs also in special sense to writing when it is regarded as the putting together of single words*. […] I think it was this possibility of actively combining things which was at the bottom of the joy I took in symbols, whether they appeared in isolation and could be put together, or in combinations that could be split up and then recombined in a different way. I regretted that *the old picture writing* had gradually disappeared instead of becoming the source of a kind of international picture language which would be able to bring together all kinds of people. (Ibid., pp. 80-81. Emphasis added)

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[20] What Neurath calls here pictures are rather images in the vocabulary of Irmgard Emmelhainz, introduced above. Indeed, this playing can be interpreted as an example of an exercise in making images and performing vision as invoked by her to overcome the tautological vision.

In this passage, we find that image-*cum*-writing interlacement, which—in a different fashion—has been a *fil rouge* of the present reflection, from the Leonardo-Dante chiasmus in the transitions of the two central lectures of *Six Memos* through McCloud's understanding of comics. Indeed, in the argumentative trajectory unfolded thus far, visibility as an educational value has been construed as culminating in a pedagogy of figuration, which does not capitulate to the tautological vision of digital images and to the automation of cognition (which, we may add, pivots on that kind of programmed writing that algorithms are) but does not even simply impose writing—as the *organon* of abstract thinking—as the cure for *homo videns*; rather, it endeavours to perform a therapy of images by developing strategies of combination of writing and images, whether in the form of Calvinian exercises in description, in McCloud's valorization of comics or in Neurath's Isotype, as here re-contextualized.

Despite undeniable differences, some lines of convergence have been patent: on the one hand, the focus on the out-lining, the 'figuring-out' and the schematic drawing of phenomena, which prune the intricacy of details (suggestive and spellbinding as it is) and, thereby, may enable the subject to 'study' things by making a figurative model of them; and, on the other, the aim of cultivating a meditative mood, a habit of abstraction or a power to evoke images in one's own mind that is pursued not through an escape from the image but through it, insofar as it assassinates the passively received pictures and re-orients our vision-ability, viz. our disposition to visually attend to the world.

Visual Thing-Centredness and/or Visual Subjectification

The present reflection has taken its cue, in the introduction, by asking in what sense visibility can be construed as (also) an educational value and whether, if we understand visibility idiosyncratically as vision-ability and as the disposition to come into play as a looking subject, we can (or even should) interpret it as referred to being a subject both *of* and *to* looking and, indeed, as located in the entwining of these two positions.

The argument has endeavoured to move "closer and closer *apart*" the Calvinian tenets, that is, it has built on them without being, however, a strict comment,[21] let alone merely their application as such to the educational realm. In particular, *one* specific thematic trajectory has been followed, which may be captured in terms of the purpose of indicating strategies for a "therapy of images," which may challenge the ruling tautological vision of prefabricated images. Through the deployment of notions like schematization, simplification and condensation the stress has been laid on how to de-scribe and circum-scribe the 'noisy-nauseating' wealth of reality, and in particular of that virtual reality in which we are immersed, thereby 'figuring images out' of the latter.

In this respect, the subject who comes into vision—through a sort of pedagogy of interruption (Biesta 2006, 2010) instantiated by the forms of visual education introduced in the previous section—can be considered as a 'reader' who does not simply remain ensnared in a form of submissive reception. The status of this 'readership' (reading being another

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[21] In this respect, while drawing also upon the scholarship on Calvino, the present reflection is not understood as a contribution to it. Indeed, only some aspects of Calvino's views have been spotlighted and, moreover, often in a one-sided manner.

possible name for the study of the surfaces of the world[22]) is characteristic: as has been finely argued in reference to Mr. Palomar, in the latter's "experiences […] the ability of a reader of books is always implicit. […] [B]ut the difference […] consists in using a silencer on the ancient metaphor which wants the world to be equivalent to a book; in reading, in other words, the unwritten world, full of non-linguistic phenomena, by deploying all the tricks, abilities and memories of a 'linear' reader of books" (Perrella 2010, p. 151), while eliminating explicit references to books. That of Palomar "is a world in which books have mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind, however, their beneficial and ancient 'linear' trace in the mind of the last hypothetical reader" (*Ibidem*).

Appropriating this remark to the present argumentation, we can say that, while the 'homeostatic' approaches seem to invoke simply a 'bookish' readership as the only exit strategy from the pestilence of 'un-icasticity,' a pedagogy of figuration recognizes the value also of *this* kind of reading but endeavours to develop forms of reading of the realm of images as well.

There is another facet of this pedagogical challenge: ours could be much more than Mr. Palomar's a world in which books have disappeared (especially for the youth): how can we preserve "those tricks, abilities and memories of a linear reader of books"? Is the pedagogy of figuration sufficient? More specifically: is it an initial strategy, in order to circumvent the tautological vision and to open up the domain of readership of books as well? Or does it come *after* the acquisition of those tricks and, accordingly, is it merely *complementary* to the homeostatic approaches, which would, thus, maintain a fundamental priority? To some extent, and in different ways, the three forms of visual education presented in the previous section (Calvino's, McCloud's and Neurath's) seem to invite us to at least explore the possibility of a pedagogy of figuration being an entry to 'classic' readership in the epoch of prefabricated images.[23]

A last question should be raised: once we appeal to a pedagogy of visual interruption, are we allowed to speak (admittedly through a hermeneutical twist) also of a kind of "vision-oriented subjectification," to continue to harp on motifs drawn from Biesta (2006, 2010)? Understood as a genuinely educational idea, subjectification is intrinsically relational and, accordingly, discussing it could represent also a gateway to the question of what being both subject *of* and *to* looking may mean.

To flesh this question out, I will first turn to a completely different (and arguably to a large extent un-Calvinian) argumentative trajectory which could be pursued when engaging with visibility as an educational value. I am referring to Ivan Illich's (2005) reflections on the history of the gaze, which I am going to appropriate and understand in terms of a *visual subjectification*, from which I will distinguish the Calvinian/Palomarian stance, construed, instead, as a kind of *visual thing-centredness*. Thereby, I will marshal and inflect in the direction of the issue of (education for) vision-ability two concepts of the contemporary

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[22] As Calvino put it in an interview: "[…] *Palomar* responds to another problematic, above all the problematic of nonlinguistic phenomena. That is, how can one read something that is not written, for example [from the book's opening], the waves of the sea?" (Lucente and Calvino 1985, p. 248).

[23] The question of 'readership'—referred, however, to literary texts or, more generally, books—is also pivotal in Anna Blumsztajn's contribution to this special issue, within the framework of her reflection on the limitations of the modern understanding of knowledge and its educational counterpart, namely modern schooling. As I take it, her "education as multiplicity" and the pedagogy of figuration here outlined could be(come) two dimensions of one and the same endeavour. The latter could revive and re-inflect the project of Comenius of providing "a concept of the whole world and language" by avoiding, however, that hi-jacking which Blumsztajn diagnoses—via Gellner—in modern schooling thanks to the valorization of the idea of 'orbis pictus' and, thus, through the circuit image-*cum*-writing here introduced.

debate in educational philosophy and theory: Biesta's (2010, 2017) subjectification and Vlieghe and Zamojski's (2019) thing-centredness (see also Oliverio 2023).

I will focus only on one aspect of Illich's reconstruction, namely the importance that the controversy about images held within the Christian tradition and the fact that it resulted in a new status of the image, as a consequence of the overcoming of the iconoclastic positions. The latter were defeated through the idea that, while there is a difference "between gazing at an image and gazing at the flesh in front of you" (Illich 2005, p. 114), icons should be interpreted as a "threshold, […] a window into eternity where the risen Christ and his mother, also assumed *bodily* into heaven, are already in the glory of angels" (p. 114–115. Emphasis added). In this sense, the image is "a gateway, not for information, but for a *bodily reach* into the beyond" (p. 115. Emphasis added).

This understanding of the image is completely faithful to the core of the Christian revolution, namely the valorization of a personal and, indeed, 'fleshy' relation to the other. However, Illich annotates that very soon another view of the image was placed side by side (finally becoming prevalent) in the West, that is, the idea of the *evangelium pauperum*: in it the image becomes the vehicle to transfer information to the illiterates (incidentally, this is the view still presiding over Neurath's *Bildpädagogik* as education for citizenship).

This valorization of the image has led to the modern visual scene, which is, according to Illich, a perversion of the Christian understanding of the image as a gateway to a personal and bodily relationship. It is appropriate to quote Illich (2005) in some length:

> The icon [as understood by Christian Fathers] was not yet a place *in* which to see things but *through* which to see them. The image of which we speak today is something very different. […] Through the art of perspective, an attempt was made to represent reality as it is and to allow the viewer to contemplate it at length and in detail. […] This idea of an optical facsimile was made possible by the modern optical theory. You cannot use a facsimile as a substitute for reality when the gaze is out-reaching. The possibility of making painting representational is deeply tied to the transition from seeing as a virtuous activity to seeing as a passive, or at least partially passive reception and digestion of images borne into the eye by light. (pp. 116-117)

The nineteenth century witnesses the emergence of a new way of thinking of images, which further radicalizes this story of 'disenfleshment' of the gaze and its morphing into an informational device: through the widespread experience of stereoscopes (see Crary 1990)—possibly the ancestors of the modern visual apparatus—people got accustomed to seeing objects and situations located in virtual spaces which they could not bodily access. As Illich (2005) comments,

> [t]he icon was conceived as a threshold to a super-reality into which only faith could lead. The virtual space asks you to look into a nowhere in which nobody could live. The icon, I would argue, cultivates my ability to see the misery of a slum, or to be present on a bus, or during a walk through the streets of New York. It allows me to shed, through my gaze, some light from the beyond on those whom I touch. Experiences in the virtual realm, on the other hand, lead me to see what is virtual and disembodied about others. (p. 119)

In the light of this evolution and in order to counter it, Illich (2005) appeals to an "ascetical practice" (p. 163) that would enable people to recover the 'fleshy,' embodied experience of the gaze, instead of yielding to the view that "they have a binocular camcorder in their skulls, and can only conceive the training of the gaze in terms of technical improvement in their rate of digital digestion" (p. 120).

Etymologically the pupil of the eye meant "that little image of myself that I find reflected in your eye when I look at you" (p. 105) and, thus, the gazing experience was primordially rooted in an I-Thou bodily (and, therefore, ethical) relation. Although Illich does not elaborate on his idea of an ascetical practice, I would propose interpreting it—in an educational key—as an appeal to *visual subjectification*: we would need ways "to prevent the face becoming an image, so that I will not look at you like a photographer fixing an image but remain constantly vulnerable to what looking at you in the flesh will reveal to me about myself" (p. 164).

I would tend to consider *this* Illichian stance as a "pedagogy of interruption" (of the tautological vision) that culminates in an 'existential-lived' sort of 'visual subjectification'; thus, it may be to some degree in keeping with some dimensions of Biesta's original insights, despite undeniable differences. Instead, while construable as forms of a pedagogy of interruption, the kind of 'Palomarian' exercises portrayed above seem to be oriented more in the direction of what we could define as *visual thing-centredness*.

Without wanting to provide any proper 'philologically correct' interpretation of Calvino's last character, in the present argumentation Mr. Palomar has recurrently peeped out as the representative of that study of (the surfaces of) the world by de-scribing it, which has been indicated as one possible trajectory of an education pivoting on visibility as a value. Mr. Palomar considers as his chief activity that of looking at things from outside (Calvino 1983, p. 114); his gaze is not enfleshed, he is a character almost without body and, indeed, he is an "eye-mind" (Belpoliti 2006, p. 45), pursuing a sort of "fully objective gaze" (Ibid., p. 53).

In this sense, he is at odds with the concerns of Illich but he should not be taken as the apotheosis of that process of perversion that Illich denounces but rather as *one more (and distinct) way out of it*, mental more than embodied, 'cognitive' more than existential. His search for objectivity exemplifies another possible strategy to counter the drift of the tautological vision, through de-automatizing our cognition and thought and letting things speak to us:

> [Mr. Palomar] tries to perform the experiment at once: now it is not he who is looking; it is the world of outside that is looking outside. […] That the outside looks outside is not enough: the trajectory must start from the looked-at thing, linking it with the thing that looks. From the mute expanse of things a sign must come, a summons, a wink: one thing detaches itself from the other things with the intention of signifying something … what? Itself, a thing is happy to be looked at by other things only when it is convinced that it signifies itself and nothing else, amid things that signify themselves and nothing else. (Calvino 1983, pp. 115-116).

While operating within a different horizon, also visual thing-centredness so understood meets some of Biesta's (2017) insights, to the extent that it opposes the temptation of any egological and hermeneutical attitude of meaning-making.

Accordingly, as two educational outlooks confronting the contemporary visual scene, 'visual subjectification' and 'visual thing-centredness' manifest what we can call a "parallel convergence," to deploy an oxymoronic phrase from the Italian political debate of the 1960s and 1970s (for a philosophical-educational appropriation of it, see Oliverio 2017).

In Calvino's novel, Mr. Palomar's efforts tend to constantly experience a failure but, this notwithstanding (or, maybe, thanks to this), they could be illustrative of a promising educational path. The exercises of description/study of the world are not primarily epistemic

deeds but rather spiritual exercises,[24] ways of shaping a different relation to the world, escaping the evaporation of the latter in a congeries of digital images passively digested; accordingly, we can speak of another (additional more than alternative to Illich's) ascetical practice.

With his idea of "the world looking at the world," Mr. Palomar seems to indicate the horizon of a visuality aspiring to a liberation from the (toxic) conditions of Anthropocene, to refer once again to Emmelhainz (2015). In this sense, this kind of visibility/vision-ability could be really an educational memo for this millennium.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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[24] Via Ignatius of Loyola and his stress on visual imagination, the theme of spiritual exercises is present in the *Visibility* lecture (SM, pp. 83–83). Also Joris Vlieghe, in his contribution to this special issue, moves in the direction of a Palomarian thing-centred pedagogy through exercises of exactitude construable as spiritual exercises. Indeed, Vlieghe builds part of his argumentation through Daston and Gallison (2010), who explicitly refer to the tradition of spiritual exercises (pp. 37–39 and 198 ff.).

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