

Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America
at Columbia University, New York
Luncheon Seminar, January 26, 2005

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Signa et res - The pictorial discourse of the imaginary in Early Modern Italy

1. Preconditions: the Intentionality of Pictorial Representation in the Christian Understanding of the Middle Ages

The hermeneutics of the Christian Middle Ages assign the religious image and its aesthetic function a status rich in an ambiguity and tension. The ambiguity is rooted in the question of the identity of the image, what Gadamer calls its “mode of being”. The tension occurs on account of the divergence between the various aspects of the image: its independent actuality and its existence as a reproduction, its concrete irreplaceability and its suspension of its own status.

On the one hand, the image owes its special effectiveness to the relation attributed to it of verisimilitude (*similitudo*), which predetermines its power to make present in visible, materialized representations the experience of the invisible, immaterial reality of heavenly persons. In the resulting paradoxical experience of the real presence of the numinous, which can even lead to the indistinguishability of copy and archetype, the immeasurable gap separating the earthly and the divine, the worldly and the transcendent appears to close. The medium of the image lends concrete form to the desired experience of the proximity and presence of the divine.

On the other hand, at the same time the image also indicates the utter inaccessibility and insurmountable distance of the divine, in so far as it remains in its fundamental purpose a means of intentional reference to something which it *per se* is not. It is the mediating role of all relations of similarity, which is inalienably inherent in the image. The image thus functions in its true sense as a medium, which must be transcended as part of an anagogically defined process leading to a recognition of the divine through a surpassing, penetrating vision of what cannot be captured in images. “[...] to see God without any means, that’s contemplation”

(“[...] *got sehen ane miteli, daz heiz contemplieren*”) -- this is how in the late thirteenth century the “*Büchlein von der Tochter Syon*” (“The little Book of the daughter Syon”) describes the ideal of imageless vision in the sense of a mystical perception of grace. One encounters a similar concept of “de-imaging” (“*entbildung*”) and “imagelessness” (“*bildlosigkeit*”) in Henry Suso, Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and other mystics of the fourteenth century.

It is well-known that this conception of the image is based in large measure on a pictorial theory for which the foundations had already been laid in Antiquity by Platonic metaphysics and that subsequently was adapted in medieval Platonism and applied to Christian ends. Here is rooted the basic ontologically invalidating tenet that, as the mere appearance of true, eternal being, the image fails to contain in itself an exemplary existence and therefore possesses only an inessential existence. The metaphors according to which the work of a painter merely functions as a “shadow-image” of an always preexisting nature, which in turn only possesses anamnestic powers by virtue of its reflection of metaphysical validities, also provides the foundation for this hypostatically defined world view. On the basis of premises such as these, the exegetical tradition of the Middle Ages since Augustine continuously reformulated pictorial meditation as a preliminary, lower level along the contemplative ascent that leads, “*per visibilia ad invisibilia*”, from the visible to the invisible.

This Christian hermeneutics or theory of symbolism endow the corporeal, painted image with a paradox inherent in the merging of its dual determination, which consists of being both realized in itself and referring beyond itself. Images provide the incentive and impulse for perception, which, while it requires them, nonetheless is directed at a truth that always lies beyond them. On this paradox is founded the value as well as the futility of the image: the desire for perception oriented beyond the image can envisage the truth only through the appearance of the image. Only in this way, which is founded in the subsequent insight into the intentionality of the representation, can one realize even more emphatically the categorical alterity of what remains pictorially incomprehensible.

To understand the intentionality of the representation was a theoretical objective that had an impact, not only on mystics and on arguments concerning theological aesthetics, but also on concrete practices involving the daily use of images. Practice, be it in the production or reception of images, joined theory in increasingly identifying the image as a specific medium. These two areas -- the aesthetic conceptualization of the image and its pragmatic applications -- do not represent independent levels of discourse. They interact as part of a

complex dialogue and exchange that involves affirmation as well as contradiction and that provides the basis for various forms of continuity and discontinuity.

The testimonies and reports provided by hagiographical writings and visionary literature -- the literary forms which provide the point at which the two levels of discourse on the image meet and converge -- lend eloquent expression to this set of ideas. Time and again, these writings describe visions that were experienced during the viewing of painted pictures and that were stimulated by the images' powers of communication. For example, the vita of Pope Gregory VII from the late eleventh century relates how Peter once appeared to him in an vision in a manner that he recognized from pictorial representations, "*ut in picturis videre solebat.*" A female admirer of Chiara da Montefalco experiences the saint, whom she had never encountered during her lifetime, in an inner vision in the very way in which she appeared in the painted image above her tomb: "*in forma cuiusdam picturae quae est super sepulchrum dictae Sanctae Clarae.*" "Raising her eyes to the sky," ("*levando gli occhi in verso il cielo*") Catherine of Siena experienced repeated visions of Peter and Paul, John and Dominic "in the form in which they are seen painted in the church" ("*in quella forma che veduta l'avea dipinto nella chiesa*") according to a hagiographic legend of ca. 1375. One could easily adduce additional reports of this kind. Something similar, according to legends handed down from the late Medieval period, was experienced by Catherine of Alexandria, who was once given a painted panel by a hermit which depicted the Virgin with the infant Jesus. She surrendered to the image in such a state of inner, self-absorbed contemplation that on the same night, in the silent darkness of her chamber, she actually experienced an apparition of the Holy Virgin, an event which, as we know, culminated in her mystical marriage to Christ. In their repeated tropes, accounts such as these testify to the ambiguity attributed to the type of reality inherent in the representation. The material image supplies the source for an internally imagined image, in which it is reproduced and replicated, but at the same time also dissolved. The image is thus capable of generating a form of perception that combines the perception of similarity with the experience of difference.

Reports of visionary experience were always able to lend a special authenticity to materially manufactured images, which they initially only credited as reflections of a higher reality. In this way, the assumed relationship between the original image and its representation functioned at the same time as mutual accreditation. The notion of the image as mediator and membrane between the *visibilia* and the *invisibilia* thus enabled instrumentalizations that diminished, often to the point of their disappearance, distinctions between the represented and the representation, the prototype and its painted reproduction. Whenever the image was

imbued with the reality of a personal presence, its reception allowed for the repression of any consciousness of its supposed openness or transparency to a being belonging to a higher reality. Images of this kind, which contained their own powers of grace, and which acted independently by speaking and moving, by crying, sweating and bleeding, could themselves be endowed in this manner with the privilege of a revelatory essence. As materialized emanations of the divine, they themselves became objects of a *revelatio*. At festively staged moments of their own unveiling, they were revealed to the gaze of the faithful like a mystery unveiled.

2. Transparency and Opacity: the new meaning of autoreflexive signs

Examples such as ‘miraculous’, ‘speaking’, or even ‘moving’ images underscore that for the image to refer in a self-conscious fashion to its status as a medium required in a categorical sense a distancing attitude on the part of the viewer. This distancing first allowed for an aesthetic differentiation between the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of the representation, and vice versa. Therefore it becomes clear that the marking of the image as a medium came up as a claim on its own aesthetic conception, i.e. the marking itself formed part of the image’s task or function. This claim became increasingly urgent as in early modern times the image, in acquiring what Louis Marin and others call the dimension of “mimetic transparency,” increasingly lost its material character as a medium of presentation. The more the image defined itself as an imitation of visible reality, as an “open window” in Alberti’s sense (“*finestra aperta*”), the less it opened a view onto a meta-pictorial reality. The tension resulting from two such different demands on the image required a fresh approach to basic issues of representation. In self-referential fashion, the aesthetic practice elevated the problem of representation in new and hitherto wideley unexperienced ways to a productive moment within the representation itself.

In Renaissance painting -- and in its related aesthetic theories as well (Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Filarete, Leonardo ecc.) -- the image becomes transparent, but whatever can be seen through it no longer participates in the metaphysical dimension of the object based on the Platonic idea, but only in their optical mode of being. With this shift there occurs a remarkable change in what Blumenberg would call the “the sense of ontological foundation” of painting and, moreover, in the conceptual framework of the image’s epistemological function. This newly coined function claims that the painted representation is defined first and

foremost in terms of an aesthetic logic premised on a subject-centered, pictorial vision. Rather than aspiring to the status of an ontological representation, it displays ‘reality’ as conditioned by its human point of view. In this context, it is important to note that Alberti’s famous treatise on perspective (and in general on painting: *Della pittura*, 1435) does not constitute subjectivism *avant la lettre*. Rather, it focuses on the intersubjective rationalization of pictorial vision, which Alberti and his contemporaries employ to establish the ‘reality of representation’ as *costruzione legittima* and to justify painting against the suspicion of an arbitrarily deceptive, shadow-like image. In this way, painting becomes a form of knowledge, a matrix of human understanding, and an interpretation of reality based on scientific, rhetoric and ethical competence (the doctrines of perspective, expression and affects ecc.). At the same time, however, it removes itself from demands that the image be anchored within an objective, prestabilized ‘truth’. Nobody seems to clarify this point better than Alberti’s younger contemporary Filarete (ca. 1460-64), who appears to side with the critics of perspectival design when he cites what he sees as their inherent danger of providing a thoroughly deceptive and superficial illusion, in so far as painting is capable of simulating something which does not really exist. At the same time, Filarete nevertheless stresses that the design of the image itself, or rather its character as a *sign* (“*disegno*”) possesses a meaningful truth of its own, which does not reside in signifying a pre-existing object, but rather in the demonstration that the represented object is defined by the conditions of vision and pictorial representation.

What we see here is a ‘new truth’ of the image, a truth that in the end manifests itself in its own aesthetic logic of representation, to be precise, in the principle of its visual mode of existence. In so far as this logic adheres to the rational and implicitly ideal laws of measure and order, painting creates beauty. Not only that, it also conveys the concept and categorical knowledge of beauty at the same time. Alberti already understood this and argued accordingly by superimposing the leading law of proportionality (“*compositio*”) over the arrangement of *signs* i.e. of the dots, lines and planes, which are the elementary building components of the representation of an object. In accord with the same principles Alberti elevated as the maxim of painting their systematic composition on the picture plane in keeping with their rational coherence: “Composition we call that procedure in painting (*ragione di dipigniere*), after which the single parts of seen things (*cose vedute*) are arranged and harmonized in the painted picture (*in pictura*). [...] Parts [...] are the bodies, parts of the bodies are the members, parts of the members the surfaces. At first painting is concerned with surfaces. The composition of surfaces (*compositio della superficie*) has the effect that the bodies possess

that grace, which is called beauty (*bellezza*).” Beauty, which had previously, in the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition, been understood in terms of the harmonious order of the cosmos, now is turned into an immanent category, in the sense of the image itself as a harmonious totality. In other words, the image itself becomes the actual locus of beauty.

It should be pointed out that more and different issues are here at stake than the realization of an art apostrophized as ‘autonomous.’ In an elementary fashion, the arguments touch on the issue of aesthetic reality and its significance, more precisely on the nature of pictorial mimesis. Alberti had already recognized this dimension of the problem in addressing the momentous shift that occurs when in the aesthetic perception of the image the divine quality inherent in the artist’s work comes to cloak the divinity of the person represented *per se*. When this substitution occurs, the implied identity of the represented subject is, as it were, absorbed into the aesthetic reality of the representation itself, and the effect of the former depends increasingly on the aura of the latter. This nexus is characterized by an inner paradox, in that for Alberti the “brilliance” of the representation results first and foremost from the artist’s mimetic performance and his ability to conjure up for the viewer the subject’s illusionistic presence. As Alberti puts it: “painting contains a truly divine force (*forza divina*). Not only does it, like friendship, cause people from far away to be present before us, even more, it makes it seem that the dead come alive after many centuries, so that we view the work with great admiration for the artist (*molta admiratione del artefice*) and with great pleasure of our own (*con molta volupta*) time and again. [...] As a result, it is certain that the appearance of someone who deceased long ago lives a long life through painting.”

Alberti attributes to artistic mimesis the almost salvific grace of bestowing life upon the person represented after his death. He thereby presumes a dual effect created by painting in the viewer: on the one hand, the effect of illusion, on the other hand, the effect of the aesthetic experience of that illusion. What this implies for the representation of religious subjects, he makes clear in the continuation of his comments: “And it is certainly the greatest gift for the mortals, that painting would make present the gods, which were venerated by the peoples, by so supporting that piety, which joins us to the gods and keeps our souls full of religion. They say that Phidias in Aulis created a god Juve, whose beauty (*bellezza*) considerably strengthened the religion than current”.

It is remarkable that, in order to demonstrate the “divine force” (“*forza divina*”) of art, Alberti both draws on portraits of persons and cult images of the Gods. He refers to one genre to buttress art’s claim to authenticity based on its mimetic capacity, and to the other to demonstrate its persuasive force aimed at persuading the viewer. The religious image should,

on the one hand, create a convincing, and in fact 'believable' impression of the represented subject; on the other hand, however, it should first and foremost affect the beholder on account of its beauty ("*bellezza*"). Not by accident, this discussion had recourse to Antique prototypes. The praise of art's mimetic powers, which makes it possible for images to represent things that do not exist as if they actually did, is a topos in the art critics of Antiquity. Philostrat draws on it directly in commenting on the creation of statues of the Gods. A Phidias or a Praxiteles, he remarks, certainly had never ascended to heaven to fashion "portraits" of the Gods. Consequently, such creative achievements must be attributed to their artistic "*phantasia*". Mimesis alone, Philostrat insists, merely recapitulates visible phenomena, while is also capable of representing the invisible. In the same vein, Alberti connects the believability of the representation, and hence its religious powers of persuasion, not so much to the qualities of similarity or authenticity, but instead far more to the purely aesthetic criterion of beauty ("*bellezza*"), and, still more, to its essential quality of ambiguity and vagueness ("*vaghezza*") and its impact upon the beholder. The conclusion following from this for the semiotic structures of such images of gods or saints will be readily apparent: the psychological impact, the beholder's expectations of and yearnings for heavenly grace associated with the contemplation of images have their points of departure in the visible - not the invisible - aspects of the representation.

3. Emancipation and Authority: the Control of the Gaze

Alberti's position, which is based on antecedents from Antiquity, reveals a conception of representational credibility that depends fundamentally on the artist's creative competence and the allure of his work. Alberti's arguments mark the beginnings of a long development that increasingly emphasized art's "*bellezza*" and the individual artist's creativity to be the critical criteria on which the religious efficaciousness of the image depended. In the act of painting ("*dipingniendo*"), the painter infuses the work with the effective force of his artistic aura as if by the secularized power of grace ("*quasi uno iddio*"). It is the same "*bellezza nuova e più viva*" that at a later date Vasari also has in mind when, in the course of his discussion of the development of art during the Quattrocento, he states that people gathered in astonishment around as if in the presence of a revelation of absolute, even divine splendor.

The process of this "transfer of artistic objectivity into the realm of the phenomenal", as Panofsky described it, and accordingly, the whole contemporary question about the

image's constitutive ambivalence between materiality and transparency, between original and reproductive existence, between similarity and difference ecc. is intimately bound up with its effects on the beholder. More precisely, we encounter the question whether the potency of pictorial experience on the part of the observer leads *either* toward the fixation in the beholder's mind of something he regards as concrete and objective, thereby reducing the scope available to the play of fantasy by delivering the imprint of a complete and coherent illusion, *or* whether the image instead activates and liberates the imagination, facilitating the production of individualized interior images.

Needless to say, behind this question lies another of far-reaching complexity, namely that concerning the social and religious effectivity inhering in relations between authority and emancipation, and not least of all questions concerning the criteria, exegetical competence and norm-defining powers of pictorially generated authenticity. The ongoing process of the 'desubstantialization' of the invisible, that is to say, of the accumulation of insights into its categorical dependency upon the medium of presentation, opened up a multitude of ways in which images were exploited especially during the Counter-Reformation and in the context of its struggles for discursive hegemony and for the domination of the imaginary. Art theorists of the Catholic reform such as Giovanni Andrea Giglio, Giulio Castellani, Gabriele Paleotti, Johannes Molanus and many others opposed the proceeding dissociation of religious and aesthetic experience, which they presumed in Renaissance art, by a program that aimed at a reintegration of artistic aspirations and sacred function. They actively took issue with the criticisms presented by Protestant reformers and joined them in deploring continued improprieties, mistakes and errors ("*errori*") that artists committed in the representation of religious subjects and, not least, the vain striving for ostentatious splendor, artistic effect, and beauty. By linking their criticism, however, with a call for a moral renewal of painting, they aimed at bringing about a different result, a rebirth of art out of the spirit of a new artistic ethic.

In concrete terms this call for Catholic reform meant that the preservation of images as a medium of religious communication required careful pastoral control of their use and theological oversight of their production. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) placed special emphasis on the stipulation that bishops and, in the last instance, the Pope, have the right to oversee images. Lodovico Dolce recommends systematic forms of censorship or punishments for painters who do not conform to the commands of artistic ethics. Authors such as Raffaele Borghini, Paleotti and, before them, Giglio da Fabriano, demand that artists always seek thorough counseling from a theologian. Lomazzo takes this even further in recommending not

only that painters frequently engage in intellectual exchange with theologians (*“frequente conversazione con teologi”*), but further that they consider as indispensable the independent acquisition of theological knowledge. These demands ultimately coalesce with the call for an all-encompassing renewal of the style of Christian representation and rhetoric, the creation of a new *rhetorica divina*.

The attainment of so thoroughgoing a goal required not only the theological schooling of artists, but, still more important, their ethical integrity and a correct Christian attitude. Time and again Fra Angelico functions as the prototype of the ideal painter, who, as Paleotti phrases it, was so filled with faith *“ut interiorem devotionem ac pietatem foris etiam penicillo repraesentaret [...]”*. The work of the artist can be understood as the product of internal adherence to a pious way of life. The Bolognese Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti praises in his treatise on images (1582) the example of *“alcuni pittori, scultori et altra formatori de immagini, che sono stati nel numero de’ santi e beati, o riputati di buonissima et esemplare vita,”* and holds up the Evangelist Luke, the painter of the Madonna and the patron saint of painters as an exemplary model. In the Bull of 1577 that marked the foundation of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, Pope Gregory XIII expressed his expectation, that artists of deep religious convictions and pious conduct would be educated within its walls. In keeping with this program, common prayer formed part of the educational program as did lectures about matters of Christian faith and pious conduct. In framing the artist as a practitioner whose way of working was prefigured by God’s act of creation and whose production testifies to the emanation of a higher, divine grace, the Catholic reform’s conception of artistic practice represents basically a continuation of Byzantine and medieval conceptions.

In accordance with these trends, after initial reluctance, the decade of the 1560’s witnessed renewed efforts to revive the cult and propagation of venerable miracle-working image and *acheiropoieta*. The same strong interest asserting the continuity of sacred traditions related to images is seen, when, in 1564, less than a year after the stipulations of the Council of Trent, Giovanni Andrea Giglio requested of painters that they should *“dipingere le sacre immagini oneste e devote, con que’ segni che gli sono stati dati dagli antichi per privilegio della sanità.”* Paleotti, Molanus and many others concur with this demand. Caveats such as these all supplies evidence of a desire to restrict or even redirect artistic mimesis. Rather than focusing directly on the object of representation (i.e., on Christ, the Virgin, or the saints), it should, according to these critics, reflect its reality indirectly and in a fashion mediated by the established rules and bequeathed paradigms of a sacred tradition.

Considered in its entirety, the Catholic call for a recontextualization of Christian art seeks to legitimize and provide new justification of its claims to an inherent sacrality. The focus of the reform is the reintegration of the process of artistic production with the religious character of the product, an integration of aesthetics and function that would overcome the dichotomy that, from the theologians' point of view, had opened up between art and religion in the wake of an erroneous historical development.

4. Authentification vs. Fictionalization: the pictorial discourse of the imaginary

A reintegration of artistic practice and production defined in these terms does not, however, alleviate or eliminate the problem of the offending dichotomy, it only displaces it. The problem now manifests itself in the radical reduction and restriction of art's purpose and efficacy. As stipulated by representatives of the Catholic reform, the new, theologically informed notion of art's "virtue" (*"virtù de l'arte"*) and of the artist's *"ingegno"* can be understood only as a retrospective response to the novel formulations of artistic independence and genuine poetic license as they were developed in humanist art theory of the Quattrocento and then put into practice under the rubrics of, inter alia, *disegno*, *invenzione*, *fantasia*, and *giudizio*.

The art theory of the Catholic reform was ultimately predicated on the presumption of a dichotomy, a distinction between two kinds of art. As Paleotti stated, a painter can be seen either as a pure artist (*"puro artefice"*) or as a Christian artist (*"artefice cristiano"*). He accordingly distinguishes between the painting of sacred and profane images (*"imagini sacre e profane"*). The differences between the two modes manifest themselves in the works as well as in the viewer and his manner in which he responds to them. This kind of argumentation sets a pattern. For example, when Raffaele Borghini condemns the lascivious elegance of the naked figure of an angel in Bronzino's famous "Resurrection of Christ" (1552) in SS. Annunziata in Florence as "something unfitting" (*"cosa disconvenevole"*) in an ecclesiastical image, it does not prevent him from admitting at the same time that, were it in a private collection, the image would be of the highest artistic value.

The stipulations of Catholic reformers do not address the question to what extent images can both function as instruments of religious revelation and at the same time integrate this form of functioning with their aesthetic character as works of art. The two aspects are rather construed as divergent, even incompatible options. The dichotomy that opens up in the

art theory of the Catholic Reform between religious and aesthetic experience as two heteronomous, hierarchically distinct spheres of signification is predicated on the authority of a narrowly defined notion of artistic imitation. The emergence of this dichotomy could be characterized as an effort to revise the precept of art's independence from or superiority over nature as it was developed in Renaissance and Mannerist aesthetic theory, in which it served to uphold the artificial and the artistic as realities in their own right as opposed to the natural. Paleotti requires that the artist bind his representation exclusively to the reality represented by nature and history, i.e., to the tradition of Scripture and hagiography. He emphatically denies painters the right to represent designs of their own imagination (*"cose che s'hanno imagnate"*) in the interest of visualizing the divine: "[...] *diciamo che, essendo l'officio del pittore l'imitare le cose nel naturale suo essere e puramente come si sono mostrate agli occhi de' mortali, non ha egli da trapassare i suoi confini, ma lasciare a' teologi e sacri dottori il dilatare ad altri sentimenti più alti e più nascosti*" By these standards, art can only reproduce what can be seen in nature: *"Altrimente seria un confondere ogni cosa e passare tumultariamente dallo stato della natura a quello della grazia o della gloria."* Paleotti excludes the infusion of divine grace (*"grazia"*) from the artist's actual process of design. In its wording, Paleotti's postulate recalls Alberti's argument that "the things that we cannot see [...], do not concern the painter." Its actual intent, however, is utterly different, in that it is not predicated on the notion of perspectival, pictorial vision, but instead on an ontologically binding correlation of appearances and nature's essence.

Paleotti argues in favor of a normative understanding of imitation that is framed and justified in spiritual terms. His position denies to aesthetic fictions the potential to create religious meaning or the capability of prompting the confession of Christian truth. It also leaves no room for either artistic invention or an aesthetic of the obscure or vague, the artistic or multi-dimensional (*"pitture oscure e difficili da intendersi"*). As literal, factual modes of existence, nature and history present themselves as expressions of a universal and authoritative divine will. Any willful deviation from this will represents a presumptuous violation against transcendently guaranteed truth and as such an aesthetic offense. What we witness here is a revival of the kind of thinking that, in keeping with a tradition that can be traced back to Isidore of Seville and others, attempts to play off truth against fiction, history against poetry, and which believes that Christianity's claim to a higher spiritual 'truth' can only be secured by artistic forms of "anti-fiction."

Prompted in part by criticism from the Protestant quarter apologists of the Catholic Reform sought to free Christian art from the odium of illusion and falsehood. The theoretical

position of the Reform represents a retrograde attempt to save art by restricting it to religion. In the end, however, the reformers failed to come to terms in a relevant, productive way with the issue of how to integrate aesthetic and religious experience in appropriate ways. The recourse to an understanding of imitation that insists on the close equivalence of reality and the works that seek to represent it resists a new, pluralistic and contextualized notion of ‘truth’ no longer being capable of supplying a securing standard for the creation of meaning. Once the closed frame of reference linking *res* and *signum*, thing and sign, had lost its validity as a definitive way of defining the human cognition, there occurred a momentous shift in the relationship between *dicere* (speaking) and *significare* (signifying), fiction and truth. “Truth in its strict sense of *adaequatio* henceforth remains possible only for whatever man has created by him self and what can therefore be present entirely and without symbolic mediation [...]. The relation of truth ranking absolute can no longer be considered between the representing work of art and the represented nature, but between the understanding subject engaged within art and the artistic entity, which he regards as a piece of reality created at least according to his potential. Man no longer competes in relation with nature as a creation alienated from him, but in his own cultural works with the immediacy, which God can use in the treatment of his works as their creator and spectator. The metaphysical dignity, which had never before been known, of the work of art is founded in this transformation and split of the term of truth, which signifies restriction and intensification at the same time.”

The claim that art can generate a new and alternate nature stems from its liberation from the standards of truth and verisimilitude. Its ‘reality’ presents itself not as proof and confirmation of a given world or as a premonition of a higher truth. Instead, it presents itself as an aesthetic presence that is of value in its own right. The truth of substance is replaced by a novel form of truth that manifests itself in art as an effect of its beauty. As Julius Caesar Scaliger states in 1557: “Whoever is knowledgeable about painting praises its perfection, even though he knows very well that it is fiction (*tametsi fictam esse*). He prefers a beautiful image (*pulchram imaginem*) to one that resembles nature (*naturalem similem*). For in this respect art is superior to nature.” The notion, already present in the humanist tradition, that art should prompt “admiration and praise (*admiratione et lode*)” for the artist, receives a more radical interpretation within this aesthetic framework. Art now indulges in self-conscious play on the discrepancy between reality and meaning, things (*res*) and signs (*signum*). “Image practice divorces itself from any obligation to reality, which can no longer be comprehended. Instead, it indulges in witty games of deceiving the eye and illusionistic effects that invite detection.

Its rationale is no longer representation per se, but rather self-conscious reflection on the production of images and how they in turn produce their effects.” (G. Schröder)

That the beauty that art makes evident takes on a reality of its own indicates that the effects it produces are no longer determined objectively. Instead, they can only be gauged from the intensity and power of the impression that they make on the perceiving subject. Art’s reality, seen from this point of view, is defined in terms of an experience that takes place within the process of its perception by the viewer. The derivation of art’s authentic value from the power of the impression that it makes represents the kernel of the aesthetic (respectively rhetoric) category of *admiratio*. Developed from premises laid down in Humanism, *admiratio* in various forms became a leading principle in poetics and art theory of the sixteenth century. It brought with it an increasing emphasis on art’s performative function according to which the emotional impact on the viewer is created, not primarily what is represented, but rather by the means by which it is represented. Another product of this tendency was celebration of invention as opposed to reproduction, and of fiction as opposed to history. By creating things ex nihilo, bigger and better than nature had ever been able to generate, the artist creates wonderful things (*admirabilia*). This for of wonder no longer signifies a divine truth communicated by the work, but art as admirable in itself: the artist “*ex nihilo confingendo admirabilia producit: neque res gestas historicorum modo pronuntiat, sed divina quadam et singulari ratione novas [...]*.” At this category converge the various aesthetic categories of Cinquecento art theory such as *maraviglia*, *stupore*, *terribilità*, *accutezza*, along with many others that form part of a wide spectrum.

Ultimately, the artistic procedures employed in the realization of this task must also be set against the larger context of intellectual history and of the social conditions under which visual media of communication were accorded a growing significance in the early Modern era, a significance in rendering the world intelligible and in assigning an ideological system of values. And if the -- epistemological, theological, ecc. -- situation of the early Modern period was, briefly put, stamped by a fundamental scepticism concerning the ‘visible,’ then it was nonetheless also characterized by persistent demands for ‘sensory evidence.’ From such conditions emerged a multifaceted and increasingly reflexively visual media which served to identify and to exercise control over the ‘deceptive gaze,’ over ‘appearances,’ over ‘false images,’ ecc. Again one could state that within the ongoing process of the ‘desubstantialization’ of the invisible, that is to say, of the accumulation of insights into its categorical dependency upon the medium of presentation, painted images were accorded ever greater importance. The multitude of ways in which images were exploited during the Counter-

Reformation in the context of struggles for discursive hegemony and for the domination of the imaginary is only one chapter, if a central one, in this larger process.

(For all references see my forthcoming book: *Veiling the Invisible. Art and Aesthetic Illusion in Early Modern Italy*, New York: Zone Books 2006; for the time being: *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Aesthetische Illusion in der Kunst der Fruehen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich: Fink Verlag 2001)