

Carte Semiotiche 2025/2

L'oggetto teorico

**A quarant'anni da *La macchina della pittura*
di Omar Calabrese**



la casa
USHER

Carte Semiotiche

Rivista Internazionale di Semiotica e Teoria dell'Immagine
Annali 13 - 2025/2

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A cura di
Giovanni Careri, Tarcisio Lancioni, Mirco Vannoni

SCRITTI DI

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LANCIONI, MANCHIA, MINNA, PEZZINI, PURGAR, SARAÏS,
STOICHITA, TRISCARI, VANNONI

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Learning from Caravaggio

Art history, semiotics, and the birth of the epistemic observer

Krešimir Purgar

Abstract. Even the most famous paintings remain “only” pictures, whose universal essence of representing something and appearing in a certain way they can never escape. A similar thing can be said for popular, purely informative, or commercial visualizations, but from the opposite perspective. Despite not belonging to the same value system, images cannot elude their intrinsic condition of representing something they themselves are not. The layers of the visible and the invisible, the recognizable and the unrecognizable, the crossed and missed glances, the overlapping perspectives—we find them all in pictorial representations. In this article, it will be explained why newspaper advertisements, art photographs, and journalistic snapshots should be regarded as very close relatives of Caravaggio, despite their historical and cultural distance. Analyzing the old master’s paintings while following the “economy of the gaze on a grammatical basis” proposed by Omar Calabrese, we aim to prove that the ways pictorial characters imply or ignore their physical observer have been a transhistorical trope of picture-making for more than five hundred years. Our examples include an *intra-pictorial gaze*, where the lines of sight remain within the frame of the picture; an *extra-pictorial gaze*, in which the lines of sight extend beyond the frame of the picture but not including the physical observer; a *hyper-pictorial gaze* that expands the image area toward the physical observer; a *cross-pictorial gaze*, in which multiple views create vectors of divergent directions; and most dramatically, a *meta-pictorial gaze*, where one of the gazes directly meets the look of the physical observer. Each of these gazes can assume the role of main protagonist because they possess a credible visual position, as the extensive concept of the image can legitimize them all. Nevertheless, what distinguishes them is the intensity with which they penetrate or escape imagined reality. In this article, we propose a transhistorical approach to Caravaggio’s painting—specifically, to his construction of gazes—thus making it semiotically relevant for the interpretation of contemporary images.

Keywords: picture, gaze, Caravaggio, Omar Calabrese, staged photography, Baroque painting

1. Introduction

In the present era of immersive visual experiences, the person looking at a picture should be able to determine its essence as something different from what is visible on its surface and recognize the intensities of pictorial appearing by adapting his or her own ways of looking to the specific visualization techniques of each individual image; just as every observer must have been able to do throughout the millennia long history of images. Some of the greatest difficulties in distinguishing images from reality, and thus the most exciting moments that pictorial representations can provide, occur when the observer has the impression of participating in the depicted scene, being surrounded by the drama of events that are close enough to seem real and far enough away if one turns a gaze just a little. Baroque illusionist representations are one such immersive experience that depends on the viewers' desire to expand his physical space through their gaze. But many times the scene depicted stays with us even after it is no longer materially before our eyes, and what remains imprinted on the mind are only the glances and gazes from the picture that have met our own.

It is usually thought that the realism of the portrait, or the artist's mastery of pictorial fiction, is what allows us to penetrate the character of the depicted person, even though all we have really encountered in such case is one's motionless, two-dimensional face. We remember a painted figure especially well when the *mise-en-scène* does not distract our attention, and the person portrayed looks straight in our direction, as in Antonello da Messina's *Ritratto Trivulzio* from 1476 or Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait from 1500. In this article we want to examine in what way and to what extent is the subject of observation involved in the events in the picture, be that an oil canvas, the surface of a photograph, or a film screen. In traditional art history, gazes are most often studied within the thematic framework or genre of portraiture, with the indispensable condition that we should be able to identify the depicted person based on the available material evidence. If this is not possible, as in Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo il Vecchio* from 1475, potentially important genealogical and iconographic information remains unknown to the discipline and to that extent, for positivist reasons, knowledge of the painting is considered incomplete.

Following in the footsteps of Aby Warburg and Louis Marin, the Italian semiologist Omar Calabrese suggested that we perceive art objects not only as a source of knowledge about the time in which they were created, but also as "theoretical objects concerning the production of meaning through forms [...] while remaining rigorously within the forms themselves" (2012/1985: 38), in other words, as objects capable of producing always new and different kind of knowledge. What particularly encouraged the implementation of the transhistorical method in the following pages was Calabrese's definition of the theoretical object as "concatenations of entire and, sometimes complex, narrative sequences through a series of implications and deductions", and especially as "the fact of signalling, through the mechanisms of enunciation, *the contemporaneity of the representation with respect to the spectator*" (1993, my emphasis). On that trail, the topic of the present article is the possibility of constructing a transhistorical observer as a pictorial "time traveler".

We will begin with the birth of the modern gaze in Renaissance portraits and then, through numerous transhistorical and transmedial parallels, we will set forth the genesis of the *epistemic observer*, a completely different breed of beholder who recognizes in the power of the gaze his role in creating the image. In the central part of this es-

say, we will explain why we believe that the modern observer was born precisely with Caravaggio and why this happened thanks to his paintings that were not portraits in the strict sense. In order to demonstrate this convincingly, the positive insights of art history will have to open up to visual culture, and the gazes of Caravaggio's characters will join us in a semiotic game of signs. Ultimately, we aim at conceptualizing the ways of looking as the epistemic consequence of the "wandering spectator", a new kind of the observer who will have to begin to experience the static, two-dimensional picture not only as a surface full of familiar forms but also as a representation that changes in intensity with each new gaze directed toward it, as well as with each gaze within it.

2. Renaissance portraits and the foundation of the "wandering gaze"

Although portraits on two-dimensional surfaces created in the early Renaissance are by no means the first visualizations of concrete persons in the history of art, what sets them apart from earlier portraits is the subjectivity of the depicted person. Here, we are not thinking only of their historical identity but also, and above all, of the combination of individuality and cultural context that the portrait conveys. It is precisely because of this conceptual limitation that we cannot call numerous depictions of Christ in the Middle Ages portraits. Christian icons do not represent the person the painter saw and then visualized, but rather only one of the numerous iterations of the so-called prototypical image as the symbolic presence of the Son of God (Fig. 1). For example, even if we did not know that it was Francesco d'Este in the painting by Rogier van der Weyden from 1460, we would always know that both the picture and its motif represent a concrete time and cultural space (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 - Unknown artist, *The Christ Pantocrator*, 6th-century, encaustic on wood, 83 x 45,5 cm. St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, Egypt.



Fig. 2 - Rogier van der Weyden, *Portrait of Francesco d'Este*, oil on wood panel, 29,8 x 20,3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

On the other hand, the depiction of Christ Pantocrator is always a visualization of a universal sign: the artifact has a time and place of origin, but the motif is prototypical (that is, timeless) and, to that extent, supra-individual (cfr. Mondzian 2005: 69-118). The ontological difference or status of what is visible on the surface of the painting does not arise from what is painted and how, but from the role intended for the observer: either to constitute the painting as a representation that requires an appropriate kind of gaze, or to witness the ubiquitous moment, that “anytime” and “anywhere”.

We could interpret the prototypical depictions of Christ in the Middle Ages as an intermediate stage between prehistoric votive pictures and the modern (Renaissance) portrait, because the icon is at the same time a representation of a person who actually existed and a not-yet-portrait. Unlike the icon, which is a medium of symbolic presence, the portrait is, as Hans Belting put it, a “medium for the face”. The consequence of this difference is not only the consolidation of the concept of mimesis, which has thus remained at the center of Western culture, but also the creation of a new, threefold subject, which is composed of the observer, the observed, and the one who facilitates this “encounter”—the portrait artist. The latter’s role is particularly important because it balances ancient mimesis, the *Kunstwollen* of the period in question, with the picture of a real person. To this extent, the portrait is, according to Belting, an “image of an image” because it simultaneously individualizes a real figure and generalizes the cultural epoch as an imprint of its own world. The starting point of this permanent latency is, for the German art historian, an anthropological given: the principle of representation that is common to *homo sapiens* as a species, regardless of where he was and when he lived, is the understanding of the face as a mask, with the only epochal change brought about by the Renaissance when, as we said earlier, multiple subjectivity was added to the mask: “Portraits inevitably transform the face that they represent into a mask that always stands at a remove from the real face; indeed, it is a substitute for the face. In modern European culture, portraits have taken the place that masks occupied in ancient cultures” (Belting 2017: 20). However, for our discussion, the effect of the portrait’s multiple subjectivity is even more important because the picture itself “becomes the locus of many images. It follows that the face is not merely an image but also produces images. Its appearance changes rapidly between active and passive, between image and bearer of images” (Belting 2017: 21).

The Italian semiologist Omar Calabrese calls the Western pictorial canon a “*macchina della pittura*”, a formulation first made in his 1985 eponymous book. One of the important conditions for the functioning of this “machine” is the establishment of empirical gazes of both the painted person and the observer, which can intersect, barely meet, or completely bypass each other. Calabrese attempts to outline a kind of “grammatical economy of the gaze” (2012: 158) that precisely demonstrates how Renaissance portraits, between the mere evidence of the depicted person and the emphasis on the artist’s skill, establish a completely new scopic regime that is no longer (just) a static Albertian “window” as a mathematically constructed space of the picture, but is constituted over and over again when someone looks at the picture by means of their own volitional act—through a specific visual dialogue with the depicted person. With this thesis, Calabrese pointed to a significant semiotic intervention not only in the history of art but in visual culture in general. Such reasoning is placed between very principled discussions with a strong meta-theoretical undertone, as can be observed in Bal & Bryson (1991), and Eco (1979, 1989, 1992,

1994), and which preceded Belting's (2017) anthropological approach to the human face as a fusion of subject and object. Calabrese's method is significantly different from those of the mentioned authors insofar as it combines a double strategy: by using the first, he makes the boundaries between different disciplinary approaches more porous, and with the second, he proposes new methods that can be shared by seemingly incompatible theoretical approaches, each still directed toward its own particular goal, in order to explain the work's general cultural role. Calabrese turned Eco's metatheoretical principle of the openness of the work, that is, its "tendency toward *controlled* disorder, toward a circumscribed *potential*, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by the germ of formativity" (Eco 1989: 64-65), into a concrete semiotic procedure. Although it may seem that visual works are "allowed" more than literary works and that the boundaries of interpretation, especially in abstract art, will probably never be clearly defined, the practice of traditional iconology and art historical connoisseurship has shown that classical works of art are still mostly treated by their parent discipline as texts rather than as very specific objects in the sphere of visible reality.

If we now place the problem of the gaze at the center of our interest, the genre that depends most on the gaze in the figurative arts of the classical tradition is undoubtedly the painterly portrait, since it always already implies the existence of (at least) two observers who are essentially dependent on each other and are only constituted by the simultaneous activity of looking. However, Calabrese reminds us that not all gazes are truly relevant in a semiotic sense and that the gaze establishes different types of relationships that concern both the existence of the image itself and events in extra-pictorial reality (Calabrese 2012: 152). Furthermore, he distinguishes the observer's gaze that "produces" the image, the one directly directed at the gaze of the depicted person, from the so-called "vectorial" gaze of the observer, which, with its changing orientation, regulates the intensity of communication with the depicted subject. On the other hand, Calabrese describes the physical observer not only as an agent who makes the exchange of gaze with the portrait possible at all but also as a kind of semiotic consequence of the act of looking: he expands the image into the observer's physical space, into an extra-pictorial reality, with the consequence that the boundaries of the image become extremely unstable.

Particularly interesting for our topic is the way in which the Italian author applies insights from the field of social semiotics, that is, interpersonal communication, to the field of image semiotics, in which at least one participant in the communication—the image itself—cannot be considered a living being. Calabrese here refers to the French semiologist Eric Landowski, who interpreted the communication of two people through the regime of their mutual visibility, that is, through the negotiation of how each of them wants to participate in that regime. The point, Landowski believes, is that physical visibility is always under the influence of the volitional moment of any of the participants, and thus the physiology of looking depends on the modality of the gaze. In other words, each observer may or may not want to look at another observer, just as any observed person may or may not want to be looked at. The application of this simple principle can lead to countless situational effects, that is, to different intensities with which participants affirm (active volition) or deny (passive volition) their will to communicate (cfr. Landowski 1989). Calabrese is, of course, quite clear that such a thing cannot be directly applied to the dynamics of the gaze in portraiture, since the person depicted cannot possess any real will. But,

Instead of comparing an active volition and a passive volition (of the one who looks and the one who is looked at), we can and must superimpose the two wills in a single subject (embodied by the individual or collective actor represented in the painting). Also because [...] their superimposition in a single subject not only defines the attitude of the portrayed character, but also prefigures an attitude, inscribed in the text, of the one who looks: the depicted character, through the comparison of his two volitions, active and passive, implies for the viewer (the spectator) a duty. That is, while defining the role of the [portrayed] subject, it simultaneously establishes the role of the spectator. (Calabrese 1985: 154-155, my translation)

From the above quote, it is clear that Calabrese uses semiotics as a discipline that not only interprets signs but also produces them (just as the observer “produces” the image)—in this case, by treating the image as an object that allows any of its constituent elements to be theoretically relevant, provided that it has a clearly defined place within the object-system. For Calabrese, attributing both an active and a passive role to the depicted person in the process of constituting the picture through the observer’s gaze does not mean realizing Pygmalion’s mythical desire to bring inanimate matter to life or returning to the image as an animistic fetish, but rather proposing a new scopical regime made possible precisely by the image as a theoretical object. In this article, we use the concept of theoretical object in the sense of recognizing the role of the observer in the construction of the pictorial meaning or, more precisely, as the epistemic potential of two incommensurable types of gaze: the physical one belonging to the observer and the multitude of those that occur on the surface of the picture. The dilemma of whether such an intervention will still be considered semiotic, art historical, or, perhaps, non-disciplinary does not concern the merits of the theoretical object and belongs to metatheoretical discussions that Calabrese completely bypassed in his later works, especially in *L’età neobarocca* (1992). Thus, the portrait, as a type of representation aimed at showing the smallest details of physiognomy and expressiveness of the human face, through a radical theoretical turn, begins to serve (also) other, much broader goals, now as a metaphor for pictorial representation in general, regardless of the identity of the depicted persons. In other words, “portrayal becomes a fundamental question of the semiotics of painting” (Calabrese 1985: 158).

From this lucid insight comes a multitude of interrelated questions that we would not be able to ask ourselves without his help. Firstly, it refers to the problem of portraiture as a genre: can a portrait be defined as a visual dialogue of a predetermined number of persons, or can the portraiture genre also become a “victim” of Eco’s unlimited semiosis, a potentially undefinable category that definitively leaves the domain of art history and enters the realm of the general theory of pictorial representation? Secondly, more importantly, do the represented gazes then become a mechanism by which the characters usurp the primacy of seeing that traditionally belonged to the physical observer in order to establish their own iconology? Thirdly, and most importantly, should the physical observer take over the prerogatives not of the one who only looks and describes, that is, reconstructs what is happening in the picture, but of one like the eccentric scientist Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) from the Robert Zemeckis 1985 movie *Back to the Future*, who allows Marty (Michael J. Fox) to travel to the past—although not to fix it, as in the movie, but to give it a new meaning in the present? Instead of Brown’s modified “macchina”, a DMC DeLorean car powered by plutonium and equipped with a flux capacitor for time travel, we will use Calabrese’s “macchina della pittura” with a modification we have called the *epistemic observer*.

3. Caravaggio and the rise of the epistemic observer

The discipline of art history interprets Caravaggio as an artist who largely rejected the classical tradition of mimetic painting based on ideal models, lavish historical scenes, spatial depth, narrative expositions and harmonious composition of the painting. Walter Friedlaender places this artist in a very brief but distinctive transition period between Mannerism and Baroque: in Caravaggio's painting *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, the German art historian sees "nothing of the playful mannerism of Parmigianino nor of the rather tumultuous baroque of Lodovico Caracci" (Friedlaender 1955: 21-26). Following the biographical comments of Caravaggio's contemporary Giovanni Baglione, Louis Marin argues that the revolutionary effect of Caravaggio's painting should be regarded as the use of new formal expressions that, in historical perspective, took on the characteristics of a kind of institutional critique of painting as a medium (Marin, 1994/1977: 107-109). The French art historian summarizes four main reasons why Caravaggio was called the "destroyer of painting": 1) His overall pictorial design does not exist as an "idea" (*disegno interno*), a judgment that is wholly in the mind of a painter, nor is it the basic organizational structure of the painting, its *prospect*; 2) by rejecting the tradition of copying or imitating ancient models, essentially sculpture, he undermines the primacy of drawing; 3) Caravaggio's gesture reveals a preference not for the pictorial depth but for its appearance on the surface; and 4) in his paintings the history does not immediately manifest itself in the present before one's very eyes (*ibid.*, 108). All these revolutionary contributions to European art were described by Marin as "the opposition between the moment of representation and the moment of sight" (*ibid.*, 106). In other words, Caravaggio is a painter of the moment, that infinitesimally short instance of time that is needed for everything to change, while seemingly remaining the same. No part of the human body can react as quickly as the eye, and Caravaggio was precisely a painter of the sights, glances and gazes. With him the epistemic observer was born—a unique concept built on the interaction of different kinds of gaze, those depicted within the picture and physical ones coming from outside the picture.



Fig. 3 - Caravaggio, *The Head of Medusa*, 1597, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Let's start our more in-depth examination with the following assertion: In Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa* from 1598 (Fig. 3), the iconicity of the gaze is established on a conceptual level through the abolition of the possibility of participation (cfr. Wiesing 2016: 140); it is a kind of zero point of the gaze before it is established as the first person singular in the epistemic/physical observer. As is well known, in Greek mythology, Medusa was a woman who had snakes for hair, and her gaze was deadly to anyone who encountered her. According to the story, Perseus beheaded Medusa while she was sleeping so that there was no danger that her gaze would kill him; at no point during the decapitation did she open her deadly eyes, and she was not even aware of what was happening. However, Caravaggio probably found this mythical text insufficiently heroic—today, we would say it was not cinematic (or, more radically, Instagrammable). Therefore, instead of the original mythological script, he relied more on his own method of directing the stage situation, which he also applied to many other paintings, such as the oil on canvas *The Cardsharps* (1594), *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1600), and *The Entombment of Christ* (1603).

Why do we claim that the scene with Medusa was staged, even though there are no other characters in the painting or any *mise-en-scène* that could explain what is happening in the picture? Because the artist interpreted this myth by painting Medusa as if she were aware of what was happening the moment immediately after Perseus beheaded her: in the painting, she is still alive, her eyes are still open, and her mouth is gaping in horror. However, her gaze does not meet Perseus's (because he is protected by the invisibility granted to him by the gods), nor her own in the reflection of Perseus's shield, nor the observer of the painting. At this point, we reach the central theme of our discussion: we are interested in all those gazes that are frozen within the picture, as well as those that escape beyond it, the invisible ones that come "out of nowhere" and are then reflected in the picture or immersed in it. These are both the wandering gazes of the depicted figures and those of the observer, the gazes of those who, according to Calabrese, both "produce" the painting itself and perform the "vectorial" gaze of the viewer—all of which Caravaggio manipulates in order to create an epistemic observer.

The concept of the epistemic observer that we propose here necessarily arises from the possibility that we are able to experience a picture as a theoretical object. In doing so, we do not mean simply that the picture becomes a starting point for various interpretations that seemingly have no direct connection with what is visible on its surface. Rather, we imagine a situation in which it points to the mechanisms of its own creation, that is, to itself as a physical object that provokes reality, tries to show it, but also constantly resists it. The American theorist W.J.T. Mitchell called such images "metapictures", which "are used to show what a picture is" (1994: 35). Metapictures always leave the impression that the barrier between intra-pictorial and extra-pictorial reality has been violated in some way, but it is left to the observers themselves to decide precisely what has disrupted the Western Renaissance canon of picture as representation and, above all, non-presence. In his impressive study of Caravaggio, Giovanni Careri explains that such a meta-pictorial character of representation is paradoxically recognizable even in classical paintings that we would today call hyperrealistic, those that resemble photographic snapshots, rather than self-reflexive or meta-pictorial. When discussing Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* (Fig. 4), Careri, referring in part to the insights of Lorenzo Pericolo (2011: 447-480), claims that "The material sup-

port, of which [this] painting denies the planarity to construct the appearance of a three-dimensional space, manifests itself as a condition of possibility of the painting itself” (Careri 2017: 36). Since the painting in question does not suggest any spatial *mise-en-scène*, the three-dimensionality here refers to the palpability of Christ’s wound, which St. Thomas penetrates with his finger, thus giving the impression that the surface of the painting is not an impenetrable barrier but a place of entry into the depicted event.



Fig. 4 - Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, 1601-1602, oil on canvas, 107 x 146 cm. Palazzo di Sanssouci, Potsdam.

In our “grammatical” approach to the problem of the epistemic observer, the meta-pictoriality of *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* cannot be directly transformed into meta-pictorial gazes because the particular painting is about multiple intra-pictorial gazes that not only do not break the imagined “fourth wall”, in other words, do not interact with the physical observer (we can see all four characters while they ignore our existence), but also seem to not participate in any reality whatsoever. This effect is reinforced by the impression of Caravaggio’s characteristic blacking out of the background, which separates the scene from any context other than the purely iconographic one. It is a hybrid moment of the painting in which we find elements of a theatrical scene, a film frame, and a photographic snapshot. However, it is also a moment trapped within the format of the canvas, because there is absolutely nothing to suggest that any of the four characters is aware of anything other than the story to be enacted. Even in the equally undefined space and similarly staged depiction of the *Supper at Emmaus* (the Milan version, the London one is another story), Caravaggio leaves open the possibility that there is at least something outside the painted scene: the female figure on the right seems to have just entered the stage from outside, bringing a plate to be placed on the table. Careri has rightly observed that Thomas’s extremely realistic penetration of Christ’s wound with his finger has a strong impression of immersion in the picture for the observer, and to that extent, naturalism challenges the very medium through which it was created. However, as important as it is, especially for classical Western art, in our typology of the gaze that follows, we will not be concerned primarily with the effect of pictorial form but with the semiotics of the gaze as a

theoretical object in the strict sense.

The kinds of gazes we find in Caravaggio's paintings are specific to the artist, and their role in establishing the scene is key to understanding the relationship between viewer and image, not only in the early modern period but also in our moment of time, when the erasure of the distinction between representation and immersion, image and physical environment, is considered the ultimate technological achievement. The relationships between the characters in Caravaggio's paintings, as well as the epistemic role of the physical observer, appear in strikingly similar ways in 20th- and 21st-century pictures, regardless of their vastly different artistic, popular, or commercial status. This is not to suggest, of course, that every contemporary author has followed Caravaggio's inventions, but rather that Caravaggio was the first to fully grasp the power of images and, in particular, the role of the gaze in the moments of the viewer's metaphorical negotiation with the picture, then wandering over the enacted scenes, and finally leaving the picture surface. The purpose of the following examples is not to provide an exhaustive inquiry into this cyclical process that takes place in most of Caravaggio's paintings, but rather to propose a new transhistorical connection and, precisely as Omar Calabrese suggested, to point to the anachronistic dimension of contemporary spectatorship through the mechanisms of enunciation.

3.1 Intra-pictorial gaze – lines of sight remain within the picture frame

In *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art and Preposterous History*, Mieke Bal explains what her understanding of upgrading art-historical hermeneutics with the tools of semiotics looks like. One of them, as we saw earlier, stems from the belief that signs do not have fixed meanings and that they are just wandering signifiers – semiosis was supposed to serve this as a kind of supra-disciplinary legitimacy or a model for permissiveness in the historical observation of art (Bal 1999: 129-164). The other tool, offered from her earlier work in narratology, is focalization and point of view (Bal 1997: 143-146). Although she relies almost entirely on the recognition of the problem and the basic terminology introduced by Gérard Genette, in her analyses, she devotes herself more to focalization as a universal inter-medial problem common to all textual and visual narrative forms while drawing attention to the technical nature of this term, appropriate to the manipulative nature of photographic and film media. In our case, focalization is the relationship between different viewing actors who occupy their point of view—it is an intra-image relation of who or what someone is looking at, as well as what is or who is being looked at.

One of the first things a contemporary observer can learn from Caravaggio is the construction of a stage using focalization points, that is, discerning who is looking at whom in a painting and how this exchange of gazes influences the constitution of the scene. Unlike a literary work, where A (the narrator) says that B (the first character) sees what C (the second character) is doing (Bal 1997: 146), here we propose an extension of that model to pictorial representations in a following way: A (the observer) sees that Bx (one of the characters) knows what Cx (any of the other characters) is performing within the scene. In other words, for pictorial focalization to have epistemic potential, what we see must be limited by the scopic field at our disposal (which is the surface of the picture) and the intra-pictorial disposition of the characters (their gazes and gestures that replace the third-person narrator), and thus together “recounting” a story through a unique fragment

of time instead of a narrative through time. A characteristic example of a contemporary focalization snapshot is Jeff Wall's 1989 photograph *Outburst* (Fig. 5), which vividly demonstrates the narrative possibilities and limitations of frozen time and the possibilities of manipulating action—all of which have been around for four hundred years thanks to the snapshot aesthetic of many of Caravaggio's paintings. Although focalization is not the only way to create a pictorial scene, nor is it in strict terms Caravaggio's invention (the proto-focalization of Giotto's *Kiss of Judas* was created three centuries earlier), he is certainly the painter who exemplified the use of gazes as the crucial part of visual storytelling. In addition to *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, this group includes, among others, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1599-1600), *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (1600-1601), *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (1601), *The Crowning with Thorns* (1602-1604), and, probably most famously, *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1600) (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5 - Jeff Wall, *Outburst*, 1991, silver dye bleach print, 45,8 x 61,5 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 6 - Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1599-1600, oil on canvas, 322 x 340 cm. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.

Nicolas Poussin allegedly said of this latter painting that it was created to “destroy painting”, primarily because it lacks the dignity of the scene that Christ’s act of inviting a sinner to follow him on the path of humility and goodness deserves. However, even more than the fusion of the profane and the sublime in the setting of the obscure exterior *mise-en-scène* (an atypical one for the Italian painter, present mainly in the depictions of St. John the Baptist), *The Calling of St. Matthew* destroys the classical tradition also because it is impossible to determine with certainty from the gazes and gestures of the four figures positioned on the left which is St. Matthew and whom Christ is actually calling to him. As Careri argues, Caravaggio here interweaves two scenes and two genre models (everyday life and history painting) in order to “edit” the scene and emphasize the power of the call itself and its universality, rather than the person to whom the call refers (Careri 2017: 192-204). This unexpected contingency of the subject of the painting gave birth to the epistemic observer.

3.2 Extra-pictorial gaze – lines of sight extend beyond the frame of the picture but do not include the physical observer

One of the key resources at the disposal of the epistemic observer is an immediate and full insight into the painted or photographed scene. Unlike a literary descrip-

tion and the time required for the reader to create a mental image of the narratively presented scene, the observer does not need time to establish control over the scene, except for the very short instant needed to reconstruct the intra-pictorial relationships between the depicted characters as a key aspect of any visual communication. On the other hand, the observer also faces an insurmountable handicap in relation to the reader, since the omniscient narrator can reveal to the latter everything that, if not visible in the picture itself, may be available to the observer's perception only as an imaginary superstructure of the already imaginary (represented in the picture) situation. But is this really a handicap or, paradoxically, is it precisely the invisibility and imagining of what could happen outside the canvas that makes the scene truly realistic, or even much more credible than representations that insist on the causality of the place and time of the action?



Fig. 7 - Caravaggio, *Salome with the head of John the Baptist*, 1610, oil on canvas, 106 x 91 cm. National Gallery, London.

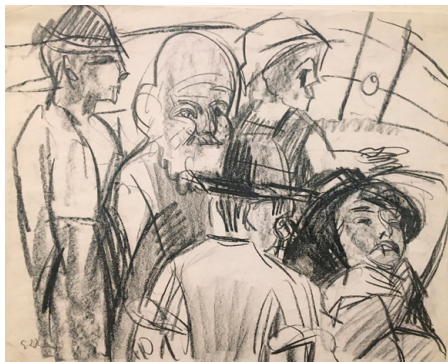


Fig. 8 - Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Peasants*, 1922, charcoal on card. Kirchner Museum, Davos.



Fig. 9 - Frances Kearney, *Her Father's Favourite Daughter I*, 2001, C-type print, 122 x 151 cm.
<http://www.franceskearney.com>



Fig. 10 - Florent Vergnes, AFP, Soldiers from the Ukrainian 33rd Separate Mechanised Brigade eat on the grass during a break in a training exercise at an undisclosed location in eastern Ukraine on June 6, 2025.

If we look at four completely different pictures, Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (1609) (Fig. 7), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's charcoal drawing *Peasants* (1922) (Fig. 8), Frances Kearney's staged photography *Her Father's*

Favourite Daughter (2001) (Fig. 9), and AFP photographer Florent Vergnes's reporter's snapshot of Ukrainian soldiers taken in Ukraine in 2025 (Fig. 10), we can easily see that they are connected by two key things. The first stems from an insight we owe to the Enlightenment playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argued that each frozen moment in a painting could have looked completely different if the artist had decided to freeze time in some other instance: "Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible" (Lessing 1767: 78). Here, we may deal with the artist's decision that simply had to be made due to the inexorable duration of time and a series of consecutive situations of which only one could be shown, therefore only as a consequence of the necessity to stop time. However, equally—which is the thesis advocated by the German philosopher—it can be a consequence of an artist's decision based on specific aesthetic or dramaturgical reasons. In the context of classical painting, especially from the period before the affirmation of Flemish genre scenes, it is difficult to dispute the validity of Lessing's claim. Nevertheless, the transhistorical significance of the "pregnant moment" is, of course, not what crucially connects Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* (1602), *Ecce Homo* (1605), *Christ at the Column* (1607), *The Burial of St. Lucy* (1608) and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (1609) on the one hand and Kirchner's drawings or contemporary artistic and reporter photographs on the other. But then, how are they actually related?



Fig. 11 - Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602, oil on canvas, 133,5 x 169,5 cm. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Despite the fact that most of Caravaggio's paintings look like pictorial representations whose original staging could have been rendered, for example, on the scene of some contemporary black box theater, and we can also imagine them as snapshots from the set of Lars von Trier's movie *Dogville*, the impression that they leave on the observer is not that of an enactment limited by the edges of the canvas but of the gaze of one of the characters who breaks out of the frame and thus

makes the entire scene part of a much wider whole. In addition to the frozen moment, it is this other, even more important element that connects modern visualizations with the Italian Baroque painter's oeuvre: two of his figures condensed in a cluster of human bodies, especially in *The Taking of Christ* (far left) (Fig. 11) and *The Burial of St. Lucy* (right, far in the background), as if they cannot bear the drama of the moment and want to step outside the picture. This strikingly shows that, for Caravaggio, the *tableau* is much more than a surface—it is a pictorial plane, a medium or a screen, which allows the two-dimensional space to breach its planarity. What extends the set to an imagined space outside the painting in Caravaggio is never the illusion of spatial depth, but the use of extra-pictorial gazes that allude to the traces of life in the reality of the physical observer. This invention enables representations with both deep perspective and those with an emphasis on planarity to penetrate beyond the given format, just as the Ukrainian soldier on the far right in Vergnes's photograph and the girl in the background of Kearney's *Her Father's Favourite Daughter* respectively do.

3.3 Hyper-pictorial gaze – expansion of the picture area toward the physical observer

If we want to get even closer to the role of an epistemic observer, then we will intuitively, perceptually and culturally experience the *Prison Guards* newspaper ads from Nick Allsop's "Originals Never Fit" series for Levi's (Fig. 12) or Simon Veksner's "Cops" for Volkswagen (Fig. 13) as very close descendants of Caravaggio's *Medusa Head* (1594), *The Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist* (1603) and *Madonna of the Rosary* (1607).



Fig. 12 - Simon Veksner and Nick Allsop, *Originals never fit*, ad campaign for Levi's, 2008, photographer: Joseph Rodriguez. Advertising agency: Bartle Bogle Hegarty, London, UK. <https://www.adsoftheworld.com>

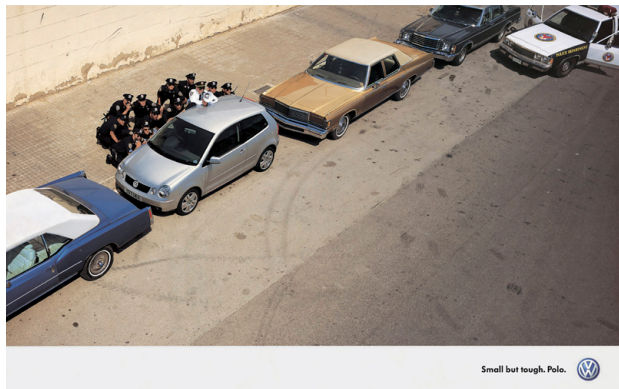


Fig. 13 - Simon Veksner, *Small but Tough*, ad campaign for Volkswagen Polo, 2004, photographer: Paul Murphy. Advertising agency: DDB London, UK.

As in the paintings of the old master, both examples from the world of contemporary advertising imply the presence of a physical, extra-pictorial subject who is identified with the intra-pictorial subject insofar as the latter is not seen, although

it is implied that he is also present, but remains slightly outside the picture. The physical observer in this situation can identify with his new role as an equal protagonist because he is offered credible visual positions that, in all three cases, we can easily imagine as positions of the intra-pictorial observer. However, if it were only a question of the gaze toward the observer—directly into the *macchina*, as Calabrese would say—then we could contend that the vast majority of commercial advertisements are *caravaggieschi* because they all imply a person to whom they are addressed, and that person is always the observer as the addressee of the visual message. The fundamental difference is that in the aforementioned Caravaggio paintings, as well as in the Levi's and Volkswagen advertisements, the observer is not addressed directly; he is strongly implied but not explicit. In *The Head of Medusa*, the gaze is both the means and the subject of the painting, and therefore we experience its drama mostly through the fiction of a mythical pretext. However, in the *Madonna of the Rosary*, the donor's gaze in the left edge of the painting is the gaze of a 17th-century person directed toward the right edge of the painting where it leaves the picture frame, thus implying the presence of a multitude of potential physical observers from all future periods after the painting's creation.

The hyper-pictorial gaze defines the intensity of the image by intentionally missing the physical observer, as in *Medusa*, or almost passing him by, as in the image of the donor and the prison guard, where the observer's position is only slightly offset from the guard's axis of gaze, or the observer is intensely "searched" by a dozen pairs of police officers' eyes hidden behind a Volkswagen. In the latter example, the physical observer is (almost) identified with the gaze of the implied observer on the roof of the building, participating with the police in a game of hide-and-seek, and we can easily imagine what is going through his mind at that moment (while watching the ad): "They don't know where I am, but I know where they are". Unlike the prisoner's position, which is much more dramatic but not entirely precise, the physical (slightly detached) observer of the advertisement can independently decide whether he wants to immerse himself in the intra-image reality or whether he will be satisfied with the simple position of a neutral consumer of the advertising message because, to repeat, despite the proximity of the two vectors, they do not collide.

All the examples listed depict a paradoxical situation because the principle of immersion as enthrallment and immediate moment of change, "a passage from one mental state to another" (Grau 2003: 13), coexist in parallel on the one hand, while the principle of cut, separation, and difference as an affirmation of pictorial dissimilarity coexist on the other (Nancy 2005: 2-4). What is a prerequisite for precisely such an experience of all these representations is that we view them all as a special kind of reality, then that we agree to the changing dynamics of the relationship between images as objects and what we see in them, and, finally, that we recognize the intensity with which they, while we are looking at them, affect our, the observer's, reality.

3.4 Cross-pictorial gaze – multiple gazes create divergent direction vectors

At the very beginning of Clint Eastwood's 1973 film *High Plains Drifter*, the main character—the Stranger, played by Eastwood himself—arrives in the small town of Lago in the Wild West. The opening scene already reveals all the key protagonists of the plot, their physiognomies, the type of work they do, or even just how

they sit in front of the local saloon, waiting for the trouble they might cause. The scene is set so that the Stranger rides a horse along the main (and only) street of Lago, and we find its inhabitants engaged in various activities that they interrupt to look at the newcomer. The scene itself is edited so that we alternately see the main protagonist in the right profile and then in a countershot of a supporting character looking at him from the right, then again the main protagonist, this time from the left, and then again a countershot of a supporting character looking at him from the left. This process is repeated several times, and thus we are introduced to a total of thirteen characters whose identities are subsequently reconstructed within the film's diegesis (Fig. 14, A-N). Due to the nature of the film medium as a temporal-narrative form, the viewer cannot know how the plot will unfold at the very beginning of the movie. However, the director's idea of introducing us to them within the possibilities and limitations of the film medium—that is, in a very short but iconic introductory part of the film—has much deeper historical origins.



Fig. 14 - Clint Eastwood, *High Plains Drifter*, stills from the movie (The Stranger enters the town of Lago, A-N), 1973.

When it comes to still representation, the only way for the author to reveal a character's specific, non-iconographic identity is to show him clearly enough in a single, frozen "frame", that is, to show his face or to reveal his gaze sufficiently. Earlier, we mentioned Careri's insight that Caravaggio superimposes genres and "edits" the scene in order to achieve his own realistic impression of Christ as a man of flesh and blood. To this, it should be added that Caravaggio also constructs the scene by showing groups of characters from multiple angles. The visual impres-

sion is that his characters are extremely dynamic, looking in all directions. However, in addition to physical gesticulation, what moves them is primarily Caravaggio's *macchina* as a device of conceptual intervention with which he captures faces and gazes, even if these are not, or *especially* if they are not, completely recognizable. This mechanism of revealing the gazes of all characters, which we have called cross-pictorial gazes, is particularly noticeable in *The Cardsharps* (1594), *Martha and Mary Magdalene* (1598), *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1598), *The Fortune Teller* (1598-1599), and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (1607), as well as border cases such as *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (1605).

The communication through the cross-pictorial gazes of all the characters in Caravaggio's paintings can be described in phenomenological terms as a state between the two extremes of empathy, which Michael Fried called "absorption" and "address" (2010: 69-83, 117-39). In absorption, the viewer is completely drawn into the scene with a deep sense of introspection and empathy toward the depicted characters, while address refers to the characters' emphasized bodily gestures as a kind of invitation for the viewer to participate in the scene. The "neutral" method of depiction using cross-pictorial gazes is particularly noticeable in *The Cardsharps* (Fig. 15) because it positions the viewer at a safe distance from the scene. The neutrality arises not only from the fact that the characters give the impression of being present at an event that is already condensed within the picture frame, but also from the fact that their reactions, reduced to the state of affairs, are not dramatic enough to provoke a response from the viewer, just as the opening, neutral scene of Eastwood's Western *High Plains Drifter* does nothing to betray its dramatic, absorbing ending as a metaphor for hell on earth.



Fig. 15 - Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps*, 1594, oil on canvas, 94 x 131 cm.
Kimbell Art Museum, Forth Worth.

3.5 Meta-pictorial gaze—one of the gazes directly meets the look of the physical observer

Although in principle any representation could be called meta-pictorial if one of the figures looks at the observer (from early Christian icons to the present), here we will limit ourselves to cases when the meta-pictorial gesture represents a kind of excess within the scene, that is, when only one of the many gazes goes be-

yond the reality of the picture and thus “stages its fictiveness [...] by involving the beholder as an active or even indispensable component of the image” (Pericolo 2015: 13). In other words, it creates an effect that we, like Louis Marin, could call “the violence of the effect of representation” (Marin 1994: 28, 100). In *The Musicians* (1595), an allegorical depiction of the love of music, three young men are absorbed in their activities, while the fourth (who is said to represent Caravaggio himself) looks directly at the physical observer. Nevertheless, its meta-pictoriality does not seem intrusive, precisely because the painting does not depict a historically relevant moment, nor is it directed by the characters’ dramatic gestures. On the other hand, in *The Entombment of Christ* (1603) (Fig. 16), the meta-pictorial turn produces discomfort in the physical observer, partly because it destabilizes his position as a subject and places him in the position of the observed, in a situation he did not hope for and did not want. Perhaps even more than the unwanted inversion from observer to observed, the discomfort is then created by the disintegration of the very concept of representation as a different and, above all, pictorial reality; in other words, because the drama of the depicted moment becomes alive again with each look. Caravaggio’s realism in the depiction of the frozen moment is so ruthless that it simultaneously produces a “surplus of mimesis” (Marin 1994: 100) and nullifies all mimeticity in the meta-pictorial gaze of Nicodemus at the physical observer. By questioning its own meaning, this painting takes us back to the beginning of our discussion and, more radically than any other, to the role of the epistemic observer.



Fig. 16 - Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ*, 1603-1604, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm. Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome.

When, in his 1986 film *Caravaggio*, the British director Derek Jarman is deliberately attempting to create an extratemporal and historically non-credible interpretation of the life of a famous painter using a nonlinear structure and conceptual aesthetics, he is employing both a “violent” and a paradoxical identification of

the painter, the work, and the historical reference. There is a scene in which Caravaggio (called “Michele” in the film), as a boy dressed in white attire as an angel, watches an Easter procession in his village (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17 - Derek Jarman, *Caravaggio*, still from the movie, reenactment of Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ*, 1984.

At one point, he draws open a curtain on the side door of the house and enters a room from another space and time. Living there are characters in the poses we know from Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ*—a work that was to be made in the film diegesis many years later. However, within the structure of the film, the scene we see was not envisioned as a *tableau* on the basis of which the painter builds his composition (the film has a number of similar scenes reenacting Caravaggio's actual paintings, including *St. John the Baptist* and *The Passion of St. Matthew*), since the role of the dead Christ is assumed by the painter himself, who therefore lies dead in a powerful metafilmic intervention in the scene which he is yet to paint. According to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (1999: 45-46), Jarman's aim was to show through this scene the strength that art possesses so that it could breathe life itself into the artist. In this case, the artist's identification with his crucified subject (Christ) is so strong that the two of them exchange places, as if the work's completion had been postponed until the strength with which the work has taken control of the artist permits it to be completed.

4. Conclusion

Recalling Calabrese's suggestion that it is necessary to superimpose the positions of beholder and beheld because, in the end, they constitute each other, we still lack an answer to one crucial question. If the primary participants in the chain of elusive identities, transitive subjectivities, and (in)conspicuous gazes in the painting are the observer and different depicted subjects, is there any firm ground for the contemporary beholder to step on? Does the position of the present article betrays a radical anachronistic reading of pictures? First of all, we hope that the answers offered throughout the previous pages advocate that it is the observer's own epistemic intuition what is at stake here, rather than any essentialist category of interpretation. The very concept of a picture, and especially of a work of art as a theoretical object, always already involves friction between its changing histor-

ical role, from an object of worship, then an artifact, to its contemporary status as an object of particular value. Although we used contemporary pictures in our analysis, our intention here was not to detach Caravaggio from his historical dimension, quite the opposite: through the concept of the epistemic observer, we sought to reach the very source of a method of producing pictorial meaning that is now widespread. Can we imagine the persuasiveness of reportage photography without capturing that pregnant moment that lasts only a fraction of a second? Before the technical possibility of doing so, first with a camera and now with a smartphone, there had to be some initial idea of the disruption of movement as a substitute for the temporal dynamics. But, the image of stopped movement is no more a prosthesis of the mind than moving images are a reflection of real life. Both are part, first of all, of the mental evolution of the way of thinking in and through images, and only then of concepts such as art, realism or (re)production techniques. We need not relativize any of the traditional aspects of understanding artworks to conclude that advances in visualization technologies are merely a consequence of the original human invention of the concept of image. From Caravaggio we learned that a picture is a fiction that we often cannot or do not want to accept as such, and that its permanently unstable status does not depend (only) on the truthfulness of the depiction but, perhaps even more, on the observer who always seeks something different from what the particular picture was meant to give him. This is where the epistemic observer in Caravaggio's paintings meet with the contemporary observer of pictures in general.

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