

PERSPECTIVES ON A NEW MORPHOLOGY.
PRESENTATION

Presentación. Perspectivas para una nueva morfología

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Raising questions about the topical interest of the morphological perspective today, more than two hundred years after Goethe first introduced it, has a precise and wide ranging significance. It means asking ourselves if and how the relationship between form and image as postulated by Goethe still makes sense today. As far as Goethe is concerned, as is well known, this relationship applied to nature, it defined, in other words, a science of nature that interprets it as an organic whole that expresses itself in its parts, inversely, its components are looking towards this whole¹. What we aim to achieve, by applying the science of morphology to today's issues, is the possibility of rendering the image intelligible as form endowed with its own autonomous syntax.

There are numerous and well known reasons for considering the issue and for bringing the idea of morphology to the fore. We will try to summarize them here albeit briefly. Recently one of the foremost art historians and image theorists, Horst Bredekamp, wrote that “not since the age of Byzantine iconoclasm and radical Protestant movements, has the status of images been debated with the same intensity as in the last four decades”². Bredekamp adds that all this depends on the sheer number of images that

1. See BREIDBACH, O./VERCELLONE, F., *Thinking and Imagination. Between Science and Art*, trans. W. Kaiser Aurora, Colorado, Davies, 2015; BREIDBACH, O./VERCELLONE, F., *Anschaung Denken. Zu einer Morphologie des Unmittelbaren*, München, Fink, 2011.

2. See BREDEKAMP, H., *Der Bildakt*, Berlin, Wagenbach, 2015, p. 23.

are disseminated throughout our world involving both the public and private spheres which often overlap rendering them indistinguishable. A variety of media broadcast an incommensurable quantity of images worldwide. From smart-phones to television channels, to newspapers we are increasingly dealing with a profusion of images that make up the context of our lives. What we are witnessing is, therefore, a shift in cultural traditions without precedent. The criteria of cultural transmission are changing dramatically, leaving the written tradition in an uncertain half-light to bring forth a memory bank founded on profoundly different hermeneutic mechanisms. With images, we are moving from the logos of the written tradition that is realised on a linear timeline constantly aiming towards the event of Salvation, be it historical or eschatological, towards criteria that create de-synchronisation, pathic identifications, given the radical transformation of the subject's spirituality³. In this context it is the very notion of interiority that is modified and, at heart, it is this that enters a profound crisis. This passage presents contradictory features. On the one hand the hyper production of images answers the individual need to find oneself in strong and reassuring identities, whereas, on the other hand, it is this same hyper production that produces ever increasing disorientation. We are moving from the classical conceptualisation of interiority, represented by the faithful or the scholar, by that "buffered self" that Charles Taylor talks about in *A secular Age*⁴, not porous and founded on the principle of individual responsibility, towards identifications that are strongly pathic-affective. This new subjectivity is manifested using powerfully corporeal symbols which can even be embedded. This produces a deep transformation in the subjects at play on whose motivations morphology can intervene and exercise its enquiry. We have to do with an amplification of the senses, in particular with an anthropologic transformation that brings back into the game proximity senses, such as the sense of touch, but also the sense of smell broadening our sensory universe which presents a synesthetic quality. On the other hand the "buffered self", heir of classical modernity, tends to dissolve towards this exteriorization with widespread ramifications in the anthropologic, aesthetic, political and epistemological spheres.

3. See DIDI-HUBERMAN, G., *L'immagine insepolta. Aby Warburg, la memoria dei fantasmi e la storia dell'arte*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006; DIDI-HUBERMAN, G., *Storia dell'arte e anacronismo delle immagini*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2007; VERCELLONE, F., *Il futuro dell'immagine*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017.

4. See TAYLOR, C., *A secular Age*, Cambridge Mass and London, Harvard University Press, 2007.

Cultural contexts and the living world itself are profoundly influenced by these changes. The world of image is pressing to be coded as a new life form, having created it. To ask oneself whether culture and the civilisation of the image can take on the appearance of a life form is akin to asking oneself whether the possibility inscribed within the image can exhibit a dialogic relationship which is at the same time ancient and new and has still to be defined.

This is the step that leads us to enter the, by now, vast panorama of *visual studies* in which morphology finds its appropriate place, a reason that could be defined as therapeutic in a broad sense. From this point of view it is irrefutable that, right from the start, *visual studies* have borne a political press-mark indissoluble from the epistemological one. They define the space in which images become in turn models of a dominant politics and cultural strategy and the medium to circumscribe life spaces renewed by the new digital technologies. Just in the background a momentous issue is being outlined which is extremely vast and quite remote. The question, if one dare to pose it in its extreme amplitude, is whether the estrangement introduced into the modern world by the Christian God, whose extreme distance had led to interpreting the sense of life as an effort and impulse towards the infinite, can be reduced within the precarious sphere of artistic forms and human communities. On the basis of this we can glimpse, referring back to Hegel, the foundations of the estrangement of this modern world. In this frame the premises of this tendency of Modernity, to which we are addicted as if it were second nature, seemed set. Moreover, on the horizon one could begin to see the rising of a fundamentally country-less community, incapable of developing a common shared narrative. And narrative, as has been recently observed⁵, helps us to live, it creates and re-creates a common horizon that suspends our anxiety towards reality. In this context, the Romantics had talked about the need for a “new mythology” in a poetic and not neo-pagan sense. A similar proposal, and its realisation, aims to mix cultural worlds following a pattern that reunites the *humanities* and the so called hard sciences, joining them within a varied but coherent narrative scope, as Edgar Morin⁶ teaches us first and foremost.

Schiller’s distance from the gods cannot be sustained for long. Human responsibility that should be part payment for this distance is not a sufficient prize for lives that have been dealt the raw deal of being expropriated form

5. See COMETA, M., *Perché le storie ci aiutano a vivere. La letteratura necessaria*, Milano, Cortina, 2017.

6. See the three volumes of *Méthode*, which originally appeared in six volumes, published by Seuil and in 2008 assembled, by the same publisher, in two volumes.

their own protective divinities. In this context, Homeric memories come to our aid. The fog of appearance can protect and safeguard us. Was it not Priam who had access to his son's body thanks to a invisibility that was both fictitious and real, aptly produced by Hermes, making the impossible possible? As we all know, it was this that allowed Achilles' tent to be reached by the most noble of his enemies, and the beloved body of Hector to be given back to his family. The original need for presence reveals and allows the intrinsic need for narrative to come to the surface as a way to lessen pain, to allow us to return to our origins, as a way to remove the anxiety of loss. We could say, going back to Ricoeur's *Temps et récit*⁷ that fiction acts as a medium to restore identity when the lifeless body of Hector is given back to the care of his loved ones. So here, in this case, the insubstantiality of appearance becomes the harbinger of benevolent and effective results. The purpose of appearance is not illusion but salvation.

The need for fiction, coincides therefore with the very real need of restoring or building identity whenever this is in danger and runs the risk of being undermined. The risk both in a metaphorical and real sense, is mortal. It is maybe from this ancient if not atavistic, point of view, that we need to look at the rise of these new digital technologies, but even more so at their taking hold in the late-modern world. In a universe tainted by growing estrangement the anthropological need to revive identities that resort to the medium of fiction is accentuated, we could go further and say that resort to necessary fiction. This goes hand in hand with a technological revolution without equals in which, thanks to these new technologies, we have to do with cultural contexts, dominated by images that tend to become naturalized. It is evident that the nature vs. technology antithesis is dissolving, while the technological implementations relating to images entail their transformation into world-environments that bring human communities closer while at the same time dividing them.

It is interesting to look at the premises of this process before outlining its most recent outcomes and presenting the papers written for this monographic issue of *Azafea*, to show in what direction things have been going and, therefore, in what sense the ancient idea of morphology is integrated into a more complex cultural process, and can legitimately present itself as an attempt to assess the current situation in a significant and forward-looking manner.

Once again the temptation is to start from afar and, as we are here, to do a prospective assessment of the situation today. We venture a thesis

7. RICOEUR, P., *Temps et récit*, 3 vol., Paris, Seuil, 1983-1985.

that will take us not from antiquity to today, but from the day before yesterday, a by now remote yesterday, to today. However, it is through this transition that we can define the present. This tendency towards a radical change of direction, which presents many ambiguous and heterogeneous elements, that steers us from a civilization based on the word to a civilization based on the image, is connected as we can see, –taking that step forward we mentioned– with the crisis of the bourgeois world. The latter had found a form of systematic hope in the Hegelian idea, imbued with St Paul’s message, of a subjectivity that could become a world.⁸ The concept of the ecclesia as the spiritual body of Christ, coming from St Paul, expands in Hegelian thought to become the idea of a spirit that becomes effectuality. The universality of the bourgeois world, of its hopes, but also the representativeness of its *élites* are all founded on these presuppositions that today seem to have dissolved. All this entails the demise of the logos of the Word as the founding principle of the dominance of a reason that is founded on this. And it is a prelude, on the other hand, to the rise of a world that sees the dominance of this logos come crashing down producing disorientation and a profound identity crisis. This has paved the way for our current situation with its contrasting scenery in which the vision of fragmentation is offered after and within globalization, it is the revolt of the community against society, extreme and lacerating result of the demise of that universality whose roots are to be found in the Hegelian thought that characterized our past.

Therefore, from this standpoint the crisis of this universality represents a political problem, of primary importance that is also indissolubly epistemological. We have to do with a universality that has disappeared giving way to ever more dismembered and needy identities, constantly requesting an answer to the question: who am I? Which means: who are we? –questions that do not correspond to a global identity, but to one which is increasingly local and localized. All this coincides with a technological shift that becomes also an anthropological shift. The fall of the estranged universality coincides with the decline of the imaginary and the technological systems that had gambled everything on estrangement. The estranged universality of technology, which seems to monstrously refract that of the long lost God, is substituted by a more domestic, more personal technology of appearance that goes from

8. See VERCELLONE, F., *Il futuro dell'immagine*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017. In this context it would be worthwhile to re-read LÖWITH, K., *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche. Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. Stichweh/M.B. De Launay/B. Lutz/H. Ritter, vol. 4, Hamburg, Meiner, 1995.

*interaction design*⁹ to digital technologies, to “body sensory technologies”¹⁰, to achieve a domestication of the technological universe based on the notion of style. Globalisations seems to pose its contradictions within a shared style that is also a community of technological styles that uniforms its cultural context even though there are incredible differences between the diverse cultures that come together in a common space. The latter also represents a community of shared styles, which are welcomed, however, with mixed feelings and so pave the way to the need to separate once again into individual vernacular entities, to set aside the global present to go back to a local us.

At this point, after such a long introduction, we must go back to the issue set forth at the beginning: why ever can we talk about morphology in this context? In what sense does the ancient Goethean perspective acquire a new, and according to the writer, significant relevance today? In essence the answer is but one: in a panorama that is brimming with a variety of requests and identities, image technologies renew the analogic intelligence which pertains to morphology. It represents a thought structure that brings different identities into contact without squeezing them into one place. We have to do with thought structures, whose contents do not belong primarily to individuals, but to the interactive community that leads this common intelligence down its own path. This is the issue and the problem: we are in a common room, as Weinberger postulates, that shares, a common style that is also a community of communication styles. But the contents come from the most diverse subjects. As with any style we are dealing with uniformity, with a unified vision that creates a common albeit partial space, analogous and similar to the universal community envisaged by Hegel, but expressed by community worlds with limited boundaries, each with its own language, almost intimate and familiar. This common room is also a common intelligence that emerges through a variety of differences¹¹.

It is within this indissolubly political and cultural frame of community building, that the problem of morphology is posed. It relates to an identity that has profoundly changed its logos, whose features must be defined anew, that is, individualizing itself and searches, in particular for those answers that it is not able to give using a universal reason that in the end reveals itself as

9. See *Theories and Practices in interaction Design*, ed. S. Bagnara/G. Crampton Smith, Ivrea, Interaction Design Institute and London, Lawrence Elbaum Associates, 2006.

10. See MONTANI, P., *Tecnologie della sensibilità. Estetica e immaginazione interattiva*, Milano, Cortina, 2014.

11. See the old issue: WEINBERGER, D., *Rethinking knowledge now*, New York, Basic Books, 2012.

impersonal. It is a reason that resorts to images and to their interconnections revolutionizing the hermeneutic models of self-recognition.

The issue of morphology is, therefore, an epistemological one whose political and even bio-politic implications are becoming increasingly evident. The morphological constant moves from the epistemological sphere to that of life form changes, to a truly bio-politic one where these last features act like *à rebours* effects, as a feedback on the first. We could describe this transition as that from an abstract reason to an incarnated reason. This poses a series of significant alterations as we have to do with a change in the symbolic and its structures that tends to become embedded, a symbolic-enveloping body in the true sense. Ideally distant identities share the same space, like a kind of global village in *imago* that should be the “globalized” world. The alterations of the physical body produce in turn an incarnation of symbolic identity that ends up shattering the criteria of a universal reason, to produce, individual identifications, that we could define as “flagship identities” that invest the ideal nudity, which also symbolizes the enlightenment’s individuality, to cover it right from the start in symbols. The classic symbolic nudity of man, bearer of the equal rights that belong humanity¹² as a whole, no longer exists in this context, as testified for example by the presentation manifesto and many of the designs by Jean Paul Gaultier for *THE ONE Grand Show* the great revue presented in 2016 at the Friedrichstadt-Palast of Berlin by the show maker Roland Welke. Every man is born metaphorically tattooed. No man truly bears the same rights, but everyone bears his own incarnations. And these incarnations mean symbolizations of the individual that cannot be universalized, but are embedded in his/her own body. Going down this path, as we were saying, it is the ideal nudity of the human being that is disappearing, in favor of an incarnation of symbols that divide instead of uniting. Images pose questions and answers of such relevance and at times of such intensity that we ask ourselves how even the relative unity of this new logos, which they incarnate and expand ever more, is determined. Such a unity must probably be found in the notion of style. Style is the new tenet of the new common grammar within which a symbolic unity, as new as it is contradictory, is defined, previously represented mainly by the Verb. The styles of vision determine a unity of frame that produces a grammar of the visible founded on cutting what is not within the frame and is, therefore, excluded from sight¹³. Therefore, the image’s grammar becomes

12. See FERRONE, V., *Storia dei diritti dell’uomo. L’illuminismo e la costruzione del linguaggio politico dei moderni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2014.

13. Allow me to refer again to my *Il futuro dell’immagine*, ed. cit., pp. 57-88.

a style grammar that substitutes discursive articulation founded on the verbal attribution of an attribute to a subject. With the image we have to do with an analogic revolution of the logos that supersedes the logic of univocal attribution that pertains to the verbal logos. Actually –in passing– also the research on mirror neurons and the more recent ones on atmosphereology¹⁴, point to a revolution in which the boundaries of subjectivity become fluid, fuzzy in favor of a pathic-emotional redefinition which at the same time is epistemologically and neurologically founded on the statute of configuration of subjectivity.

The papers on morphology proposed in this issue of *Azafea* come within this framework. They are testament to an ever increasing common articulation of the philosophical, aesthetic, epistemological and scientific research, concerning morphology. If, in one sense, Félix Duque in *Art as a Self-Denial of Technique* starts from the standpoint that “art is a way of seeing and a way of being [...] the conjunction of man and earth’s collaboration, repeatedly concealed by technique” in a huge confrontation with the modern and contemporary Aesthetic tradition, Maria Antonia González, in *Agenciamientos materiales y formales. Variaciones sobre morfologías*, portrays the issue of form as a *non transcendens* transcendental, bringing us to the central issue, in which the legal aspect, reverberating in Duque’s speech, is connected to metaphysics proper in a historical-philosophical context that leads us from Aristotle’s *Metafisica* and the synolon of matter and form to the central point for any morphological understanding which is Kant’s teleological judgement. From here, we move with González Valerio’s essay to that fundamental turning point in the philosophy of biology represented by Von Uexküll. Thus, organism, environment and form find themselves together in one context that does not depend on any one element but on their encounter. In this frame we present Alessandro Minelli’s fundamental epistemological contribution, *Lichens and Galls. Two families of chimeras in the space of form*, where the interaction between differing organisms produces “chimeras”, individuals that oscillate between the animal and the vegetable worlds. Paolo Vineis, in *Images, morphology and metaphors in biomedical research*, defines a metaphorical dynamic of knowledge that starting from Wittgenstein and ending with Goethe and Klee, shows how the semantic invention slides and redefines observed phenomena producing the extremely interesting hypothesis of an understanding that moves on the fuzzy boundaries created by a semantic

14. See in this respect GRIFFERO, T., *Atmosferologie. Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Roma-Bari, 2010; GRIFFERO, T., *Quasi-cose. La realtà dei sentimenti*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2013. Laterza.

definition/closeness that qualitatively reformulates the object (think about the homology between crab and cancer). Sara Franceschelli in *Arguments of stability in the study of morphogenesis*, undertakes a long journey into the theories of twentieth century morphogenesis, developed within theoretical biology, to highlight those concepts and images that produce both instability and stability. Here, the connection between mathematical models and empirical morphologies is of primary importance.

From this standpoint we can find a profound affinity between what we have said so far and the paper by Maria Filomena Molder, *Method is a digression. A Benjaminian reading of Goethe* where method is to be found in the exteriorization of the subject that comes into contact with the phenomenon following a non linear progression that can advance by empathy and digression. The empathic, immersive relationship redefines the styles of knowledge. It evokes a need for a different kind of universality of the symbol that is transformed into a dialogic identity between the subjects. At this point, therefore, dialogue makes a comeback as a medium among differences, fulfilling its ancient and renewed duty. Discourse in turn moves the symbol, it dislodges it from its stable and fixed position to introduce it to an exchange that no longer pertains to human *societas*, but to the human communities that belong to a biological species that is endowed with extremely diverse symbolical codes. In conclusion we can't but look to the future with Chiara Simonigh's paper, *Anthropomorphism, Cosmomorphism, Metamorphosis. Between images and media environment*. It represents the link between ethics and aesthetics, where *mimesis* is a central element for the development of a non-anthropocentric viewpoint. The technological medium is central to establish connections both in space and in individual relationships, between the Self and the others. From the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* to Deleuze, to the *nouvelle vague* and neorealist cinema, to cite but a few of the points covered in this paper, what is advanced is the overcoming of anthropocentrism in favor of a new cosmocentrism, that modifying the symbolic universe determines a profound transformation in the man/cosmos relationship that is realized not despite technology, but because of it.