

SCAMPIA: LA TRAPPOLA DELL'IMMAGINE

(English version)

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How an image is created?

Merleau Ponty: "the arts agree with philosophy in expressing man from an external point of view, it is not a whim of fashion, but a requirement of the human condition. . . the world is such that it cannot be expressed except in 'stories' and, so to speak, indicated".

The world is something abstract, ambiguous and with a thousand faces. We don't have the power to portray it as it is. The greatest that we humans can aspire to is to create manifestations and interpretations of the world through our creations. In them we show our relationship with the world and with others. Regarding to this characterization of vision, the imaginary cannot be conceived as a substitute faculty or as a substitute for reality. Rather, it is the germination of our vision, called creation, of our sensitive relationship with what surrounds us.

Photographer Diane Arbus had a similar theory which she applied to her social photographs. For her, the camera is a pattern that presupposes a double existence. On the one hand, the observing subject, on the other hand, the observed otherness. Language, that is, photography, bridges the gap between object and subject.

It is physically impossible to show everything around us. First of all, because we don't have the capacity to see it, let alone realize it. The only thing we have access to is our perceptions of him, and the materializations we can make of him.

Any kind of image, be it advertising, artistic or of any kind, is nothing but a perception, a filter that renders nonexistent everything that remains outside of it. But it's hard to escape the aggressiveness of some screens, some images. That is why they have been described by WJT Mitchell as “*quasi-subjects*”, having an agency over us and putting aside their passivity.

The photographic image:

Joan Fontcuberta: "Photography is a recording of what we see or a revelation of what we cannot see (...) in the end, every photograph is a fiction that presents itself as true. Photography lies because its nature does not allow it to do anything else. The important thing is with what intentions it is used by the photographer. This will determine the ethical direction you want to give to your lie. The good photographer is the one who lies the truth well."

Photography appears as a technology at the service of truth, it is imposed on us as a device that generates evidence in which we must blindly believe. But that's just appearances. Behind the innocent sense of certainty lie cultural and ideological mechanisms that influence our assumptions of reality. The innocent sign hides an artifice full of purpose and history. The medium is the message. It is impossible to make an objective documentary work, starting from the point that creation is always subjective. It is said about our sensitive relationship with the world. Many masters of documentary photography have realized that they cannot tell an objective truth, like Sebastiao Salgado himself. He saw that his mission was not to shape truth, but persuasion.

In this photo reportage I show the sensitive relationship I had with this reality and also the one they wanted to show me. The problem comes when many humans no longer create images from their humble perception, but now create images from the way we want others to perceive a certain object in order to do business with it. And this is a very dangerous weapon, with great consequences for humanity. An example of this, among the many there are, would be the stereotype received by Le Vele di Scampia, Naples.

Starting from this base, we realize that images are completely conditioned and conditioning entities and that the repetition of some of them ends up becoming people's thoughts, ideas and common sense about certain objects. The world has a thousand different faces, but the mass media only show us the ones they can make money with. Currently, a multiplicity of ideas (images) have been created about Scampia that converge into a mother image.

Scampia as a living image

T. Mitchell, “we are stuck in our magical, pre-modern attitudes toward objects, especially their images. And our task is not to overcome these attitudes, because we will never succeed. Our job is to understand them. The images express and highlight only the desires that we ourselves already have, giving free rein to our imagination and our plague of fantasies.”

WJT Mitchell, in his book *What do pictures want*, the first question is: *if pictures are not alive, why do people have such a strange attitude towards them? Why are the same people acting like they're alive?* We are all aware that images influence us in many ways: they persuade us, they annoy us, they seduce us... In general, we generate a dialogue with them. Both in our early years as a species, and in the contemporary era we live in now. We'll never fail to hear her *punctum*. Nothing can stop them. Moreover, we have seen that they are not passive entities, but agents that change the way we think, see and dream. And here is their great social potential, which can be used for good or bad. It is not strange to conceive the image of Scampia as a living image.

Generally, people have a magical attitude towards Le Vele, as if they were surrounded by a mystical nebula full of taboos, fear stories, superstitions. One factor to consider is the fact that, especially today, we live in a society of entertainment, surveillance and simulation. These three things make us understand why people have such a voyeur attitude towards everything that is presented as morbid, because what attracts us is what is given to us by the media as “freaks”. Bored of living in our daily lives, we are attracted to the Other. We like to get out of our daily boredom whenever we know that “the weird one has to do with someone else, not me”. I stay in my safety and comfort zone. Like *Alberti's window*, or *Plato's cave*, we see a certain “reality” through a frame, a screen given to us, from the distance and comfort of our home, of course. It's like we're trapped in the cave of certain media, and they're reproducing in the shadows those images that want to present us as real, or a specific window where they modify what we see out there. As Alberti said, the window becomes the apparatus, that is, the model of our way of seeing the world.

The fact that we are attracted to the disease is not only given to us almost by nature, but we are also taught to do so. Media compete with each other to oversize an event and generate a wider audience. Miguel de Cervantes has already pointed out *that generating disease produces profit, and not only economic, but also professional prestige*. And we have seen this after the great success of the book and series by journalist Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra*. As a result of Saviano's work, most of the media, many of which are already sensationalists, have worked hard to perpetuate a certain perception of Scampia, conditioning our perception, our memory, our imagination, our desire.

Something he continues to say today, not only with the institutional media, but we also see it in many videos of independent content creators. Many people go to Le Vele just to make a video and earn a lot of views, which then turn into money. Many people today eat stigmatizing Le Vele and making money with that stigmatization.

The information business is based on superstition and spectacle. Contrary to what is instilled in us, photography belongs more to the realm of fiction than to that of evidence. Today nothing is more obvious. We navigate the nebula of ambiguity.

Image of Scampia as FETISH

If we add the past history that this object has had, together with the role that the media has played in public opinion and the voyeur nature of the human being in looking at the other, the result is a great fetishization of the image of this neighbourhood.

A series of events have taken place that have materialized this image to the point of transforming it into one's own commodity, a money machine, a consumer item bought and sold daily.

As Marx taught us, a commodity is not only an object of consumption, but behind it there are a series of relations of class domination which we ignore. We know that of all the money that this picture moves, the people who get rich because of him aren't the people in the neighbourhood.

Fetish images, in addition to producing economic value, also produce an aesthetic surplus value. An added value in the image is when the image accumulates values that seem very disproportionate to their real importance. Obviously, the seriousness of the events in the neighbourhood and the role of the media have generated this great added value. There are many other neighbourhoods in Naples that have the same history as that of Scampia, in fact many of them are today much more dangerous than Le Vele, but its image is not even half that of Scampia. This conversion to the fetish generated a surplus which made it the bearer of the ideological fantasies of the people.

IDOL to be destroyed

Scampia was a place very idolized and still is by many people, as if it worshipped it. Just as the “politically correct citizens” worship historically established religions, the “bandits” worship politically incorrect objects. In Mexico, drug traffickers have their Saint, *Jesus Malverde*, and their goddess, *La Santa Muerte*, both symbols of underworld, crime and their Romanization. And with Scampia, something similar happens.

Like all tragic stories, those who once were the leaders, now they are gone. In the tattoo studio I was in Le Vele, a lot of people come to ask for tattoos from these great leaders, as objects of idolatry. And it's not an attitude that surprises me, today the neighbourhood has gained a lot of tranquillity, but it has lost many other things that in the past made them feel powerful, like the most respected people. Another important thing the Camorra benefited from years ago was the attraction the little ones felt for her. Many children and adolescents saw the mafia as an opportunity to gain money and power, and, attracted by the charisma of their rulers, and in the absence of other models and references of authority, many risked their lives for them.

Like the famous sheep *Dolly*, the image (perception) that most people have of Scampia is considered “offensive”. In the sense that it is a symbol of life feared and despised, offensive to the Italian State, to the system, to society itself in general.

Although an image that has caused so much rejection, like the Twin Towers or Dolly the sheep, it has been a target to disfigure, and the moral imperative is to offend it, as if that image were a living symbol of evil. Thus began the great iconoclasm towards the image of the neighbourhood, which obviously has direct and devastating consequences on the living object representing the people who live today.

One thing I found scary, but at the same time interesting, is how images themselves can create wars. And this is due to its “real” value, that is, to the importance of the social and ideological construction that has been given to it. Wars in the “*Holy Land*”, such as Palestine or Kosovo, concern images, understood as idols of the place. This great added value of certain images in particular is what makes history, creates revolutions and wars. Le Vele can be considered an idol-place by the mafia and by all those who are interested in the disease of what it represents. In general, this idol-place is, institutionally and socially speaking, an offensive image. That is why it must be destroyed, burned or mutilated. And destroying idols, iconoclasm, has a much more symbolic than material value. The Italian State is aware of this, and has decreed war on the image.

The State, for the time being, has demolished four of the original seven Vele, and intends to demolish all but one. The project, called “Restart Scampia”, will be redeveloped. In addition, where there used to be one of Le Vele, the H, last year a university faculty was built. This destruction and reorganization have great symbolic power, representing the end of the war and the victory of the state. A declaration of intent that exalts and exonerates the State, which has never taken over the neighbourhood and the people who live there. Destroying people's homes to build a university that symbolizes the “literacy” or “culture” of this illiterate area is something that many residents have felt very rejected.

In my opinion, the state, in order to exalt itself and demonstrate its status of power, as a last act of iconoclasm, is destroying the object itself, in order to win the image. What they don't know is that it's immortal, the more effort you make to kill an image, the stronger it becomes.

TOTEM of the “bad life”

In addition to gaining strength, in the case of Scampia is gaining totemic value. Resisting their demolition automatically strengthens the sense of community and class struggle. The totemic value of an image refers to the brotherhood it represents and creates.

Today, the image of Scampia has established a collective identity. During the time I spent there, I saw many admirers of the neighbourhood from other parts of Italy going to get tattooed in my friend's studio at Le Vele. Some travel hundreds of miles every two weeks just to spend a day in the neighbourhood and take pictures. To feel part of it, his community and his people, even if they are not. As if Le Vele were the emblem of a clan or a *tribe*. People who, in my opinion, want to prove they're dangerous or have a hard life always end up in Scampia. This is also something that is also seen in many video clips of emerging Italian rappers.

Today only the armour remains, the external representation, understood as an index, or trace of what happened there in the past. A ruinous imprint of the catastrophe of war, totemism here also refers to the sentimentality of what once was that place.

They tell me stories about how powerful their families were, the struggles and wars their parents had, the money they had... They're happy not to see their family die. They may no longer have the power and money they once had, but at least today they won peacefully.

A major consequence: The stereotyping of the object

Mitchell defines stereotype as *an image we love to hate and hate to love*. Stigmatisation is particularly important because it occupies a space between fantasy and reality. On the one hand, it's a very hard thing to erase from people's minds, and on the other hand, they show they don't have it, or they want to make people think they don't have it. We see it in the way stereotypes are confirmed, with a disclaimer: *"I have nothing against... but..."*

I don't think the image of Scampia is a stereotype as such, because years ago there was reason to link Le Vele to crime. What I think is a big stereotype is the idea people have of all the people who live in Le Vele today. You put everybody in the same sack. Reality is a multifaceted prism, and you have to take into account all the different ways of life that there are in the neighbourhood. Not just to show one as if it were "the only truth to tell".

Most of the women in Scampia I trust, they all work six days a week as cleaners, from the youngest to the oldest. There are many people who every day make great efforts to bring bread in their mouths. And the only respect they get from society is fear. It's true there's everything, but I can consider it a big stereotype about the people in this neighbourhood. Of course, like everything else, stigma has a great impact and social power, and when something is repeated to us, say on television, day after day, in a certain way and approach, it obviously has an impact on our consciousness. It's about the way we talk, think or look at each other. If the media, minute by minute, induce us distorted and ideologized images, on which people then base their thinking, we have the consequences we see today.

There are no images without objects. It is also true that there are some people who live in a paradox. They don't like to live the aggressive tourism suffered by Le Vele, but still showing its danger to the outside is a way of feeling respected, through fear. This was almost the only way to gain the respect of a society and a system that discriminated and segregated them.

The object cannot escape the large black cloud that represents it.