

# The Jealousy of Rembrandt

## Transparency and Opacity in the History of Visual Media

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TITOLO ITALIANO: La gelosia di Rembrandt: trasparenza e opacità nella storia dei media visivi.

ABSTRACT: The technological progress of devices of representation and control in both religion and law promises to bestow upon their users an increasingly perfected mastery of the real, conceived as a collection of items on which direct and computable agency can be exerted. In the domain of law, the discourse of technicians swerves more and more towards an imaginary of cold revelation, in which the patient accumulation of data and their quantitative treatment lay the ultimate truth of human nature bare. The contemporary religious discourse too does not escape this ideology. The chapter bears on the genesis of this epistemic trend at the onset of modernity and on its dialectic with alternative approaches. It then follows the outcomes of such contraposition until the present era.

KEYWORDS: Transparency; Opacity; Visual Episteme; Semiotics; Early Modern Culture.

Quid? Formae ipsae et habitus nonne arguunt ludibria et dedecora deorum uestrorum? (Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 38, 5)

### 1. Introduction

An ideology of progress is implicit in the practice of technology. The domains of law and religion are not excluded. In both, the conviction persists

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that a different arrangement of technical signs is able to grant better access to an invisible realm: on the one hand, religions fine-tune liturgies with the certitude that a change in words, gestures, architectures, and other sensorial devices shall lead to a shortening of the metaphysical distance between immanence and transcendence, between the community and the divinity; on the other hand, legal systems adopt increasingly sophisticated strategies and tools so as to look into the truth of human life and its legal predicament. Ideologies of technological improvement, however, are seldom neutral, and often introduce a dimension of bias, a polarization between two or more abstract polarities of signification. In the present paper I explore one of these polarities, which affects the domain of law, that of religion, and, more generally, the gnoseological approach of human cultures to the invisible. Modernity seems to consist in the more and more pervasive spreading of a quantitative prejudice, according to which “seeing more” is equivalent to “seeing better”. From the genesis of modern anatomy in the late Renaissance until the development of extremely sophisticated machines for the analysis of “visual big data”, such prejudice suggests that religious, legal, and other representations linking the visible and the invisible gain a firmer grasp on their object and, as a consequence, agency by simply increasing the quantity of items that are included into the sensorial scope, and by merely subjecting these items to a sort of computation. In the paper I seek to relativize this ideological turn through focusing on early objections to it, essentially deriving from two sources: on the one hand, philosophers like Thomas Browne, yielding to a sort of mystical reading of nature in contrast with the empirical and diagrammatic perusal of it promoted by coeval rationalist philosophers; on the other hand, artists like Rembrandt, casting an ironic meta-gaze on the gaze of anatomy so as to downplay its epistemological buoyancy and underline, on the opposite, the virtue of the painter’s gaze.

## **2. Ideologies of Transparency and Opacity**

Throughout the paper, I shall explore a dialectics between two kinds of optical ideologies: a visual rhetoric of transparency, whose social and political counterpart is a hierarchy of control; and an opposite visual rhetoric of opacity, which tends to spot fallacies in the former so as to subvert its strategy of optical control. In simpler, more evocative words, and from a historical

point of view, I shall deal with that which could be defined, with a slightly tongue-in-cheek expression, the “jealousy of visual media”: every time that, in history, societies develop and adopt more perfected means of visual representation and, therefore, control of the environment, previous and less efficient visual media can be referred to so as to build a metaphor of social liberation. This dialectics between transparent and opaque media, in which transparency and opacity are always relative to the specific media at stake, inevitably affects the domain of law.

Legal systems customarily intertwine the epistemological dimension and the optical one (Resnik 2004). All senses can be important in the construction of a legal judgment, yet none of them is as prominent as sight. A sometimes naïve visual rhetoric permeates the entire history of law, a rhetoric according to which seeing better is tantamount to becoming closer to truth. This connection between visually grasping the environment and cognitively controlling the relations between causes and effects in it is deeply and cross-culturally rooted in legal anthropology (Marrani 2011). Legal societies, however, show an enormous range of variation as regards the particular definition of “seeing better” that they adopt. The effort of elaborating a categorization of these ideologies of optical and, therefore, epistemological excellence has not been fully undertaken yet.

An important divide across such categorization is that between quantitative and qualitative optical utopias. On the one side, societies and, hence, their legal systems adhere to the idea that encompassing a larger quantity of objects in the visual scope will result in more apt assessing of the visual and legal scene. During the campaign preceding recent Italian administrative elections, a right-wing Turin candidate had as a key point of his program installing “one security camera for every condominium”, as his political manifestos would loudly promise. Quantitative ideologies of visual excellence always tend to end up advocating a panopticon. Against such utopia of “seeing it all, ergo, seeing it better”, contrasting ideologies propend for a more selective visual exploration of reality. From a certain point of view, the dialectics between these two approaches can be juxtaposed with the one opposing smooth and striated spaces in Deleuze and Guattari’s famous philosophical topology (1980).

Quantitative optical utopias are inclined to implicitly believe in a mono-dimensional model of space, which can, therefore, be perused without envisaging any insurmountable obstacles. In technological terms, the combi-

nation of a panoptical ambition with a smooth environment topology often gives rise to delusions of total automatizing. Societies that embrace this kind of utopia invest important cognitive and also economic resources in engineering all sort of automatic eyes, able to scan the environment in a way that would be precluded to organic sight.

On the other side, though, qualitative ideologies of optical excellence suggest, often in a contrastive, dialectical relation to quantitative views, that the visual environment is not smooth but striated. In particular, they are keen on positing a multi-dimensional model of the social space, as a consequence of which what matters is not to scan reality but to acquire the ability to navigate across the various layers of it. If quantitative explorations of a smooth topology bring about automatic utopias, qualitative meandering through a striate topology results in extolling that which could be called “metaphorical utopias”: what matters is not to see it all, but to see behind it all.

Needless to say, humanities and especially semiotics are almost naturally inclined to endorse the second kind of visual and also legal understanding of the environment. The primary object itself of the discipline, that is, the sign, is actually a theoretical hymn to the conviction that there is always a “something else” behind the “something”, and that this “something else” can never be accessed directly but only through the somehow mysterious and unfathomable mediation of a third element, for instance, the interpretant in Peirce’s semiotics.

### **3. Transparent and opaque anatomy**

Positing this dialectics is perhaps not as relevant as pinpointing the passages marking the transitions between them, passages in which tensions and torsions arise in a collectivity’s ways of looking, representing, and judging. A fundamental step in the construction of the modern visual ideology has been constituted by the birth of anatomical science. Anatomical investigation had been performed since antiquity, and had reached an extraordinary level of sophistication in the Renaissance. Yet, even one of the greatest masters of it, that is, Leonardo da Vinci, although offering to posterity paramount insights in this field, still associated the exploration of the body with the pictorial representation of it. The best way to know what was inside a corpse was not only dissecting it, and looking through it, but also turning this pragmat-

ic, haptic, and optic experience into an inevitably subjective representation. Constructing the syntagm of knowledge as based on both dissecting and drawing meant seeking to reconcile two apparently opposite semiotic movements: on the one hand, the analytical decomposition of the corpse, so as to turn its striated topology into a smooth field of visual and surgical perusal; on the other hand, the synthetic re-composition of the body, so as to pass from the three-dimensional smoothness of its dissection to the bi-dimensional striatedness of its representation.

The birth of anatomy as modern science coincided with the breaking of this equilibrium between analysis and synthesis, dissection and representation. 17<sup>th</sup>-century anatomical treatises are still lavishly illustrated, as present-day handbooks of anatomy are. Yet, an epistemological abyss seems to divide Leonardo from Andreas van Wesel: in modern and contemporary anatomy, images do not artistically recompose the dissected corpse but offer a mere rendering of its verbal articulation. If in Renaissance anatomy one still witnesses the transition from the indexes of disarticulation to the icons of representation, in modern anatomy icons do not directly transpose the body but illustrate the symbolical and, therefore, standardized verbal articulation of it.

As was suggested at the onset of this paper, skepticism toward this new visual rhetoric of truth first materializes under the form of “media jealousy”. Whereas displays of anatomical achievements attain great popular success and gain widespread acclaim, those who refrain from partaking in the general enthusiasm are exactly the heralds of a previous modality of visual exploration of the body: painters. Facing the visual and epistemological arrogance of the new science of the body, the old art of the body skeptically wonders: is this really the best way to look at things? Is it the best way to know things? Is it the best way to judge over things? Isn't there perhaps a mystery, within the body, in its folds, in its consubstantially striated topology, that only the indirect, oblique, and metaphorical gaze of the painter can attain? These questions are particularly thorny when anatomy, as it was soon the case since its modern inception as science, turns into an instrument of legal knowledge, assessment, and judgment: is it possible to infer a visual truth from the dissection of a corpse, if this corpse is not visually and also artistically recomposed into a body, into the relic of a living individuality?

The dialectics between old, artistic anatomy and new, scientific anatomy transposes at the level of representation a more abstract epistemological opposition between universality and singularity. If painters like Leonardo dissected

generic corpses in order to subsequently recompose them, through drawing and above all through painting, into the singularity of a represented body, anatomists like Andreas van Wesel would, inversely, draw individual bodies in order to visually render the objective universality of human anatomy. The disappearing of color from most 17<sup>th</sup>-century anatomical drawings is certainly due to the technicalities of the history of printing, but it also befits a visual ideology according to which anatomical engravings must not, like painters, “resurrect” a body through the color of an incarnate but simply propose an iconic transliteration of the scientific anatomy’s verbal knowledge.

#### 4. The jealousy of Rembrandt

In no early modern visual work is the skeptical “media jealousy” of painters towards anatomists more provocatively visible than in Rembrandt’s<sup>1</sup> famous *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (Figure 1).

On January 16, 1632, in the Waagebouw of Amsterdam, the famous Dutch surgeon Nicolaes Tulp<sup>2</sup> executed the public dissection of the corpse of Adriaan Adriaanszoon, alias Aris Kindt, a 41-year old robber who had just been hanged. The dissection was part of the public lesson of anatomy yearly offered by the Amsterdam guild of surgeons. Doctors, anatomy students, scholars from several countries, as well as curious citizens attended the show, sitting on the benches of the circular tribune.

The dead body of Aris Kindt, its dissection, and the surgeon who executed it would have been soon forgotten, hadn’t Rembrandt, then aged twenty-six, immortalized them through depicting them in one of his most famous and enigmatic paintings, presently at the Mauritshuis Museum at the Hague. Reams of paper have been used so as to unveil the mystery of this canvas, in which a detail, in particular, has attracted the still unsatisfied curiosity of art historians, philosophers, and simple spectators: the left hand of the corpse, whose tendons one sees exposed up to the forearm by Dr. Tulp’s forceps, has been wrongly represented: judging from the disposition of the hand bones, indeed, one would say it was a right hand (Koolbergen 1992; Ijpmā *et al.* 2006; Jackowe *et al.* 2007; Masquelet 2011).

1. Rembrant Harmenszoon van Rijn, Leiden, Dutch Republic (now the Netherlands), 15 July 1606 — Amsterdam, Dutch Republic (now the Netherlands), 4 October 1669 (aged 63).

2. Claes Pieterszoon; Amsterdam, 9 October 1593 —The Hague, 12 September 1674.



**Figure 1.** Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. 1632. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. 216.5 cm × 169.5 cm (85.2 in × 66.7 in). Oil on canvas. The Hague: Mauritshuis.

The hermeneutic fantasy of interpreters burst at the sight of this corpse with two right hands, as it bursts any time that an unexpected double shows in the image (Heidegger *docet*; Leone 2012). The hypothesis of a mistake due to the painter's ignorance has been immediately discarded: Rembrandt was an infallible specialist in matters of human anatomy (O'Bryan 2005: 64–7); furthermore, it would be hard to believe that such a coarse ignorance of the discipline could find place in a painting supposed to celebrate it. What is, therefore, the meaning of this monstrosity?

It is striking that such radical a gap manifests itself between the gaze of the implicit observer of the image — the gaze that the painting predisposes thanks to Rembrandt's pictorial mastery — and the gazes of the observers represented as “simulacra” in the painted scene. Whereas our own gaze is supposed to be immediately captured by the detail of the flayed forearm — which attracts us because of its central position in the visual structure of the scene, because of the brutality of the exposition of flesh, and because of its



anatomical deformity — the eyes of the observers within the scene, instead, do not even glance at the dissected corpse. It is among them, at the center of the scene; they surround it with their own bodies, their gestures, and their faces; yet, it remains as though invisible and absent to their eyes.

What are they looking at, then? Dr. Tulp, on the right, does not look at the corpse. By his forceps he pulls its skin, cut wide open so as to better uncover its internal mystery, but he does not direct his gaze towards it. Instead, his eyes are addressing the audience, not as much the one that is closer to him, but rather the crowd of curious spectators filling the amphitheater all around. The four characters on his right — the one with a sheet of notes in his hand as well as the other three bending toward the corpse — do not look at it either, neither they reciprocate the gaze of Dr. Tulp. On the contrary, as they stretch their bodies toward the center of the scene, that is not in order to better observe the dissected flesh of the robber, but in order to better read from a volume that Dr. Tulp, during the dissection, keeps well open at the feet of the corpse, a copy of the *De humani corporis fabrica* by Andreas van Vesel, 1543. No image appears in this big in-folio, but only writing. It is precisely on this writing, indeed, that the four characters in the middle of the scene cast their gazes, thus neglecting the corpse under their eyes; it is with the lines of this writing, moreover, that one of the characters, the farthest one, compares his own notes.

As regards the two observers sitting at the left of the corpse, they constitute a sort of diptych, meant to suggest — through the static disparity of their gazes and the resemblance of their visages — the movement of a single man: on the right, he looks at Dr. Tulp's face; on the left, he turns to the open volume. Neither of them, however, looks at the corpse.

What is the reason for this macroscopic distraction? Why, in an amphitheater filled to capacity with spectators and gazes, during the ritual spectacle of anatomic dissection that decorticates the corpse of a hanged robber — thus discovering two right hands therein — this killed, open, exposed, and monstrous body is left alone, looked at by none, and at the center of the scene?

Perhaps, the key to the mystery hides in the posture, the visage, and, above all, the gaze of the character who, standing above the others, looks neither at the corpse, at Dr. Tulp, or at the open volume at his side. This character, on the contrary, looks at us; he beckons us by a gaze that is simultaneously calm and inquisitive. What does it mean, this gaze directed at us, and what



does it wonder about our own gaze, about the way in which we, prisoners of Rembrandt's pictorial trap, cast our eyes on the center of the scene, where none of our simulacra looks at, on the impossible flesh of a forgotten corpse?

## 5. Decartes versus Browne

In the first chapter of *Die Ringe des Saturns* (*The Rings of Saturn*), published in 1992, the German writer W.G. Sebald<sup>3</sup> subtly suggests some paths for the identification of this character, of his history, and of his gaze. An unusual work, mixture of travelogue, biography, philosophical meditation, and many genres more, *Die Ringe des Saturns* opens and develops by an irregular line, whose subtle semantic unity deploys in a sibylline manner, as barely visible filigree (Leone 2004a and 2004b). A chain of digression whose logic remains mysterious leads Sebald to take an interest in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century English doctor and polymath Thomas Browne<sup>4</sup>. Sebald surmises that Browne, in a period in which he was fascinated by the mysteries of the human body, probably attended the anatomy lesson of Dr. Tulp. The German writer does not identify the mysterious character in Rembrandt's painting with Thomas Browne but provides some veiled clues for such identification, whose consequences are of paramount importance for the interpretation of the painting itself.

The first clue that Sebald offers consists in reminding the reader that another great scholar probably observed the autopsy of Aris Kindt in Amsterdam: René Descartes<sup>5</sup>. Why does Sebald mention it in a passage devoted to Thomas Browne, a passage that wonders about the presence and the gaze of the English scholar in the Waagebouw?

The second clue, narrowly linked with the first one, consists in suggesting that, although the precise perspective by which Browne observed the dissection of the corpse is not for us to know, it might be nevertheless inferred from what he wrote about the mysterious white fog that, on November 27, 1674, fell on ample regions of England and Holland. According to Browne, as Sebald reminds us, this fog was emanating from the hollows of a corpse that had just been dissected; Browne was convinced that, during our lives, such fog surrounds our brain when we sleep or dream.

3. Wertach, Germany, 18 May 1944 — Norfolk, England, 14 December 2001.

4. London, 19 October 1605 — Norwich, 19 October 1682.

5. La Haye en Touraine, Kingdom of France, 31 March 1596 — Stockholm, 11 February 1650.

A mysterious character who looks at us from a pictorial scene in which nobody looks at what we are looking at, that is, the flayed and monstrous hand of a hanged and dissected robber; the presence of Descartes among the spectators of the autopsy; the presence, among the same spectators, of Thomas Browne; the intuition, suggested by the evocation of the fog, that the gaze of Descartes and that of Browne are somehow opposed, and that both hide among the characters of Rembrandt's painting: Sebald proposes a *literary* enigma whose ultimate finality seems to be that of helping us to solve Rembrandt's *pictorial* enigma; a sort of meta-enigma, then. But, again, where is the key of the mystery?

In the following pages, Sebald proposes a new chain of digressions. The fog about which Browne wrote looks to the German author like the fog that had blurred his sight because of the analgesics that he was taking in the aftermaths of a surgical operation. Through the window of his hospital room, Sebald could therefore observe the trail of a plane, realizing that the aircraft that had traced them was as invisible as the passengers within it: "*Die Maschine an der Spitze der Flugbahn war so unsichtbar wie die Passagiere in ihrem Inneren*" (Sebald 2001: 29). This biographic digression, apparently random, works in reality as all Sebald's digressions: it discloses a novel perspective on the profound meaning of the tale. As Sebald wonders on Rembrandt's painting, and as he speculates on the opposite perspectives by which Thomas Browne and Descartes observed the anatomy lesson represented by it, what is at stake is always the same subject: the relation between gaze, distance, and knowledge. The characters surrounding Dr. Tulp are close to the object of their perusal, yet they try to know it not through direct observation, but rather by concentrating their gazes on writing, probably that of a treatise of anatomy. Nevertheless, it is not through comparing the writing of the treatise with the image of the body that these characters develop their knowledge; Rembrandt underlines it in a very — almost ironically — clear way: one of them compares the teacher's writing to his own, to the writing of his notes; the other three compare the writing of the teacher to his word; however, none of them looks at the corpse, none of them compares his writing to the flesh.

Therefore, here is the way in which the beckoning gaze that the mysterious character whom Sebald identifies with Thomas Browne casts on us could be interpreted: we are not like the bystanders of the dissection; thanks to the mediation of the painting, it is not simply writing that we observe; however,

we do not observe the corpse either; rather, we look at the pictorial image of it. And what do we discover in it? What can we detect in it, that the gaze of both anatomy and anatomists could not discover therein? The answer is both simple and terrible: what we discover in it is *an exception*. As many other great early modern polymaths, Thomas Browne was obsessed with the central questions of epistemology: what can be known? What cannot be known? And what distance, what gaze should be adopted so as to pass from ignorance to knowledge? Thomas Browne's epistemology, Sebald points out, develops in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, like many scholars of his epoch, Browne contributes to the development of the new sciences through seeking to bring about a unitary system of knowledge (Leone 2010). The British scholar never fails, hence, to find in the flabbergasting variety of nature some constant configurations, whose detection and description can lead to a deciphering of reality, of both nature and culture.

In *The Garden of Cyrus*, published in 1658, Browne is convinced that he has found one of the secret models that constitute reality in the quincunx, a disposition of five elements that he considers a sign of "the wisdom of God" (Leone 2005). He finds it everywhere: in the disposition of trees in the garden of Cyrus — whence the title of Browne's work; in some crystal formations; in sea stars and sea urchins; in the vertebrae of mammals; in the backbone of fishes and birds; in the skin of several species of reptiles; in the footprints of quadrupeds that ambulate obliquely; in the body configurations of caterpillars, butterflies, silk worms; in the root of water ferns; in the shell of sunflower seeds and parasol pines; in the heart of young chestnut burgeons or in horsetail stems; and also in human works, such as the Egyptian pyramids and Augustus's mausoleum, or the garden of Solomon with its pomegranate trees and its lilies planted in mathematical order. Browne dreams of reducing the entire reality — nature and culture — to a single mathematical formula, to a diagram that, in its extreme simplicity, can nevertheless explain the generation and appearance of it all.

Nevertheless, after following to its extreme this dream of geometrization of reality, Browne radically changes register. By a typical twist of his thought and prose, he writes that the constellation of Hyades, the quincunx of the sky, already disappears beyond the horizon, "and so it is time to close the five ports of knowledge. We are unwilling to spin out our thoughts into the phantasms of sleep, making cables of cobwebs and wilderness of handsome groves" (Browne 1669: 70).

In Thomas Browne, indeed, the ambition of uncovering the secret regularities of the universe, so as to be able to decrypt its ultimate meaning, coexists, in a typically baroque way, with an opposite passion, that for the exceptional, the irregular, and the monstrous. In the work entitled *Paradoxia Epidermica* — whose first edition dates from 1646, the fifth and last from 1672 — Browne focuses precisely on this subject: he wonders about the reality, or about the fiction, of monstrous beings, found or imagined during centuries of human history. Somehow anticipating Borges's<sup>6</sup> *Libro de los seres imaginarios* [book of imaginary beings], Browne takes an interest in the chameleon, in the salamander, in the ostrich, in the griffin, in the phoenix, in the basilisk, in the unicorn, in the amphisbaena. Moreover, he keeps in his laboratory a Eurasian bittern, whose cry as deep as that of a bassoon fascinates him.

Browne searches for the regularities of the universe, for the geometrical principles of its secret structure, and at the same time he never stops searching and collecting pathologies, exceptions, and monstrosities that, in nature or in human invention, transform this geometry, disfigure it, and introduce chaos and unintelligibility in such order (Leone 2014).

Given this dichotomy between the “geometrization of nature and culture” and the “search for monstrosity” — a dichotomy that is typical of Browne's scientific works and characterizes those of many of his contemporaries — what is, then, the relation of this dichotomy with those masterfully evoked by Rembrandt in his pictorial representation of Dr. Tulp's anatomy lesson: “gaze on the corpse” *versus* “gaze on writing”; Descartes *versus* Browne; etc.? And, even more importantly in this context, what is the relation between these oppositions and the dialectics of optical ideologies sketched at the beginning of the paper?

## 6. Beyond the microscope

The earliest recorded working refracting telescope appeared in the Netherlands in 1608. Also in the Netherlands, the first compound microscope appeared by the 1620s, less than a decade before the hanging of Adriaan Adriaanszoon, the public dissection of his corpse by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, and their depiction in Rembrandt's painting. First in Amsterdam, then in the rest

6. Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges, Buenos Aires, 24 August 1899 — Geneva, 14 June 1986.

of Europe, the eye and the hand of the painter were challenged not only by optical instruments able to look into the infinitely far and into the infinitely close, but also by an optical technique, autopsy, promising to reveal the secrets of the body with no impediments. “Media jealousy” — in the contraposition between the old visual technique and the new ones — prompts painting to elaborate a rhetoric of opacity, contrasting the rhetoric of transparency incarnated in the new scientific usage of lenses and scalpels. Challenged in his visual primacy, Rembrandt reclaims the dignity of his art by organizing an ironic visual scene, in which anatomists are so confident in their scientific optics that they literally forget to look at the corpse, while the painter organizes the representation of it so that we, its observers, cannot miss that which the anatomists so ridiculously overlook: this corpse has two right hands. It is a lesson of singularity opposed to the universal claims of anatomy, but it is also a moral lesson (Leone 2013): Rembrandt’s painting is implicitly suggesting that it is only by looking into the complex folds of human individuality through the metaphorical, striated gaze of painting — rather than through the smooth, automatic look of autopsy — that the truthful secret of the body will be discovered. Opposing, as Sebald points out in *The Rings of Saturn*, the smooth epistemology of the Cartesian diagrammatics, and endorsing, on the opposite, the labyrinthine epistemology of Browne’s ballet with order and chaos, Rembrandt discovers that this robber, hanged few hours earlier, brutally dissected by the Amsterdam anatomists, and obscenely exposed in their arrogant display of new optical power, in reality had no left hand, the hand traditionally associated with evil, sin, and guilt. The moral judgment that the painting passes on the life of this body therefore subverts the adjudication of the panoptical law, discovering the intrinsic innocence of humanity where anatomists, microscopes, and the automatisms of law had only found deviation and culpability.

## 7. Conclusions

In this paper I have proposed a complex, sometimes even tortuous path across several epochs, disciplines, practices of representations, and epistemological domains. This path can be summarized as a plea for singularity; for attention towards singularity. The technological progress of devices of representation and control in both religion and law promises to bestow upon their users an

increasingly perfected mastery of the real, conceived as a collection of items on which direct and computable agency can be exerted. In the domain of law, the discourse of technicians swerves more and more towards an imaginary of cold revelation, in which the patient accumulation of data and their quantitative treatment lay the ultimate truth of human nature bare. The contemporary religious discourse too does not escape this ideology. Beyond spiritual differences, indeed, the digital versions of all present-day religions seem to stress the preponderance of accountability: counting one's sins, one's prayers, calculating festive dates and arranging the bureaucracy of faith appears as more important than igniting the risky duel between the singularity of an existence and its spiritual counterparts. Even more disquietingly, the digital casing itself of reality seems to turn into a sort of new spiritual credo, uncritically embraced by human communities across the globe and revolving around the belief that computational representation is tantamount to knowledge or, worse, morality. Every domain of representation today is inexorably prey to such demons of digital calculus, to a semiotic ideology that, inaugurated by early modern optical science, advocates for an orderly exploration of the human predicament, until its secret is turned into the tetragon structures of a diagram. The humanities must not deny the triumphal emergence of this attitude but must not blindly endorse it either. Recuperating alternative genealogies of the gaze from mystical philosophers, ironic painters, and visionary writers might, indeed, work as an antidote against an excessive rigidity of the representation, a rigidity that, by compressing the singularity of life into quantifiable grids, paradoxically risks losing track of that which is at the core itself of the modern understanding of reality, that is, the treasure of individuality.

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