

The Seen and the Unseen in Art

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Abstract: This article provides a discussion of the relationship between visible and invisible following some ideas of Jean-Luc Marion. Its main argument is that both in art and in iconography it is not the visible that offers a way of access to the invisible, but it is the invisible that makes possible the organization, the depth and, finally, the meaning of the visible. Thus, the gaze is not an instrument that follows the forms and the things of the world, but a response to the calling of the invisible that is neither recognized, nor interpreted, but still present and irreducible.

Keywords: Visible, Invisible, Gaze, Icon, Painting, Jean-Luc Marion

Introduction

In his essay about the obsolescence of man,¹ Günther Anders wrote, decades ago, that the modern man' relation to the world (to the "entire world," in fact) is mediated by images. In exchange, the word, that used to be seen by the Romantics as the genuine mirror of the world, become more and more silent. The fact that images – mostly when they overwhelm the world – constantly entail the danger of becoming a means of mind-numbing tools because, unlike texts, they fail to show the relations making up the world, and they only depict isolated pieces of it; hence, they hide the world by showing it. The above defines a "post-literary illiteracy" derived from the "global wave of images" specific to 20th-century society. Several researchers have pointed out the image abuse, the essentially iconographic character of current information. Such authors were interested in finding a code to "decipher" the current cultural products. The outcomes of these researchers may be

¹ Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Band I. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1956).

summed up as follows: our world craves the image that “shows” and represents everything as accurately as possible without leaving anything undepicted. Man’s search must not exceed the “seen” because it already says everything. Whatever is not encompassed in an image is non-essential, illusory, and phantasmal.

Due to its sufficiency and completeness, the image – especially televised – replaces the world. A model, an emblem, thus replaces the real. Things per se are forgotten; image is all there is for the contemporary man. What is the use of thinking about the world when its images say all there is? However, Günther Anders notes that a model must meet another condition other than reliability to be “believed:” to be “sensational.” Paradoxically, the model image replacing the world is equally real and sensational. Thus, its goal is to make the “public” believe in the *sensational*. This is where lies subtly insinuate. The image lies and conceals through its essence. The essential difference between it and the world represents the game space of lies. From this moment on, the effects are all-encompassing: the manipulation power of those “ruling” the images is one of them; the isolation and gradual shutdown of man into an impersonal pattern is another example. The marginalisation of those who fail to fall into the pattern, do not believe in it, and try to be free thinkers is the most apparent sign of the total domination of the imaginary over the real world.

Retrieving the Distance

The source of the impasse is the attempt to forget the unseen, ultimately, to bestow a complete and absolute character upon those represented on screen. The rest of reality – left by the image, obviously – is completely forgotten. The invisible of the world is exiled. It is definitely one of the underlying causes for the lack of faith specific to our century.

Upon concluding this state of affairs, one problem is finding the real among the multitude of patterns structuring the culture of the time. However, given the statements above, the real becomes the equivalent of retrieving the distance separating it from the image. Finding the world in this context means retrieving the unseen, the undetectable, the infinite nuances impossible to perceive by all that is offered to the senses. The hidden dimension of things eventually saves them from the lie. Seeking the invisible becomes the foremost task of cultural soteriology. At that exact moment, though, another dimension opens, i.e., the religious one. The uttering of the unseen saves both this world and the other. The Creator and his creation are comprised within the same game of

conscience. Which brings us to the question: who takes on the task of seeking the invisible? One of the answers is art. Painting – using image par excellence – saves the image from the self-oblivion that contemporary media has thrown upon it. It is not so much painting per se but its specific reception. The gaze, the search of the eye guided by a painting or image, may restore the lost difference I mentioned in the beginning.

Anticipating, it may be stated that the spectator of a work of art must learn to see that the painting conceals and hides; the unseen supporting the things shown. Explaining the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, Martin Heidegger shows that the gaze within the Greek philosopher's allegory is directed towards what the sources of light in the cave and outside it makes visible. The eye catches what is immediately available to the sight. Subsequently, the gaze dwelling on the visible things must learn to get beyond them to reach the invisible, supporting the unconcealing. All representations of the world – regardless of their form – share this feature. Mircea Eliade – in *From Zalmoxis to Genghis Khan* and more – proves that, for archaic mythologies, the epiphanies (appearances/manifestations) are always preceded by an occultation, a concealment; they also end in another concealment. It leads to a new epiphany, and so on indefinitely. The same happens with works of art: all appearances and all images are supported by something unshown; the more significant the latter, the more mysterious and valuable the work of art. Understanding an artistic creation in this context means acknowledging the presence of the unseen and, secondly, letting yourself be immersed and dominated by it, not attempting to diminish and reduce it to the “seen,” which fades in time.

The Aestheticians of the Invisible

The aim of painting is not to reproduce or abandon the visible but, as Paul Klee suggests, to “make visible the invisible,”² thus turning the latter into the true protagonist of the painting. The discovery of the concealed and mostly grasping that they provide all the visible through their essence represents the ultimate model of aesthetic contemplation. What becomes visible proves the existence of the other; the latter are those out forward and pointed out. According to Nietzsche, art “is the great means of making life

² Paul Klee, “Creative Credo,” in *The Thinking Eye. The Notebooks of Paul Klee I*, ed. Jürg Spiller (London: Humphries & Co., 1961), 76.

possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life”³ (*Posthumous*). In *The Will to Power*, the German philosopher sees, in the same spirit, art as a countermovement of the “decadence” forms of man, i.e., modern religion, morality, and philosophy. The “aestheticians of the invisible” do not contest the affirmation of life, either. To them, though, the passion of the visual takes a deviated route: to avoid self-enclosing, it must do justice to the invisible with all its mysteries and creative energies. Hence, a contemplator of the work of art acquires more freedom concerning the object of his gaze. The visible, with its forms and colours, does not limit or enforce a specific orientation once it is considered as born from the essentially free space of the invisible.

Following a suggestion made by Andrei Pleșu – according to whom the pedagogy of silence is, first and foremost, free of violence – it may be stated that the unseen or, more likely, its foresight highlights the shapes of the painting or the sequence of sounds as a game providing other alternatives, too, not exhausting the world, but only paving the way to its depths. Various works within the History of Philosophy try in their own way to do justice to the invisible in art.

Notably, Heidegger’s interpretations of Plato point out this topic. According to the Greek philosopher, the goal of forms is to announce and conceal the in-formed simultaneously. They mediate just as beauty mediates between the sensuous and the intelligible; this mediation lifts the soul from mundane things to eternal ideas. It occurs because, among those “far away,” beauty is the closest, revealed to the most “terrestrial” sense, i.e., the eye. Upon commenting on the fragments within *Phaedrus* expressing the idea, M. Heidegger states, “The beautiful is what advances most directly upon us and captivates us. While encountering us as a being, however, it at the same time liberates us to the view upon Being.”⁴ An offspring of remoteness, beauty chooses the nearest proximity as its dwelling. By loving it, we may embark on the paths of Being. Hence, eros is man’s answer to this beauty. Both the Platonic and the Christian traditions develop these ideas specifically.

Hegel may also serve as a reference point. In the prefatory remarks to his Aesthetics Lecture, the German philosopher shows how the origin of *aesthetics* from the Greek *aisthesis* may seem deceitful. In his aesthetics, he does not focus on the senses, the

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 452.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 196.

investigation of the sensible, i.e., of the direct things. On the contrary, “the beauty of art is beauty born of the spirit and born again, and the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature.”⁵ Hegel continues, “spirit is alone the true, comprehending everything in itself, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only as sharing in this higher sphere and generated by it.”⁶ Thus, for Hegel, artistic beauty acquires its nobility by referencing the spirit – concealed in their appearance and supporting them from a higher point. Hence, the unseen spiritual movement dominates the artistic object by mysteriously suggesting visible forms, colours, or sounds. This time, too, the unseen is the one that sets in motion the gaze to provide meaning to the directly depicted things.

In the same context, it is worth noting Bergson, for whom aesthetic contemplation is a way to live the connection between the intimacy of the world, the individual and unrepeatable creative evolution, and the surface of things (categorisable and discursively identifiable).

In this case, Bergson’s philosophical ideas include that beauty is one of the appearances taken by the depths of the world. It is provided by intuition – in our case, aesthetic intuition – penetrating beyond the world of senses and reason to detect directly (through unmediated experience) the hidden background of things. This time, too, an artistic work aims to depict the invisible. The lines traced by the painter are mere support facilitating the passage to the “other side,” the silent field of essences. Thus, the infinite, the unseen, reassert their presence. At the same time, the visible things only now acquire genuine value.

The examples provided above can represent a foundation for a new philosophy of the image freeing the end of times from the tyranny of the visible.

By recognising – behind each painting or photograph – the existence of an inexpressible *rest* that supports the expressible, it is possible to show the world its richness and the irreducibility to patterns or simulacrum.

This reform in the way of looking at an image leads to a better relation to the real and even to the image itself. Iconoclasm – as another attitude generated by the excess of the image – does not represent only an early ecclesiastical attitude. The abstract

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art I*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

painting of our century – through the categorical marginalisation of the forms reminding the world – is the same thing, essentially. Thus, we may find a common point in that – from both positions – we try to find an “absolute” beyond the world, for which visible forms can only be inadequate.

*The Invisible revealed in the Visible*⁷

Understanding the game that intertwines the visible and invisible and reducing the latter within the painting, the work of art, in general, may restore the lost dignity of the image. Together, they also solve the problem of accessibility of the unworldly. Jean-Luc Marion’s attempt seems exemplary from this perspective.

In his writing *The Crossing of the Visible*, the French philosopher indicates two ways of the invisible revealed in the visible. The first way is the one of perspective, which “in its own way, also provokes a paradox. Rather, it imitates the paradox by inverting the relation it has established between the visible and the invisible. (...) The paradox offers a counter-appearance, while perspective suggests a breakthrough of the gaze. The paradox poses a visible that belies the visible.”⁸ The paradox perspective exceeds and contradicts the visible. The gaze seeks the void in its contemplation. However, as J. L. Marion notes, not the dazzling vacuum of the absence of things but the void making their elevation possible. Upon analysing a painting such as *The Marriage of the Virgin* by Raphael, the French philosopher notes that the sky framed by a door of the building (not the real sky that is painted usually among others as an element of the decor but an ideal, abstract sky) supports and provides a space to “play” for all the objects of the painting. “The visible is able to reduce itself since the invisible – the space of the sky encased by the door which is opened onto and by nothing – enables it to be in the open space.”⁹ It is the invisible in the painting that provides reality to the visible of lines and colours. However, the sky is not the one bringing the

⁷ The next two sections were partially published in “Ce este de văzut,” *Teologie și filosofie între Orient și Occident. Actele simpozionului internațional organizat de Centrul „Sfinții Petru și Andrei” și Academia Catolică Val de Seine*, eds. Iulian Dancă, Jean-François Petit, Lucian Dîncă (Târgu-Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2020), 45-57, and „Eros and Charity: On Seeing the Other,” in *Phenomenologies of Love* (Leiden et. al.: Brill, under press).

⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

imperceptible in the painting; the potential imaginary lines to be traced fulfil this role (e.g., *Lamentation of Christ* by Dürer).

Without these elements “opening” things to the unseen, the gaze of the one contemplating the painting gets tangled in an overwhelming and unreal world due to the agglomeration of the forms within its composition. The invisible renders authentic what can be perceived by the senses, not their mere perception. A painting is all the more “masterful” as the suggestion of the ineffable discovers the traces of things better.

As seen by J. L. Marion in his observations, the treatment of the work of art suggests another phenomenon discussed by the French philosopher, i.e., the revelation. At the beginning of a 2001 conference on the pericope describing the encounter on the road to Emmaus, Marion asks, “Why do we believe so strongly in God Our Father and so little in Christ?” The solution provided by the French philosopher may be understood starting from a strange type of phenomenological object, i.e., *the saturated phenomenon*, which should make visible what could not be objectified.¹⁰

Following Kant’s scheme of constituting the phenomena, the saturated phenomenon becomes, in fact, possible as intuition overflows the conceptual frameworks of the intellect, “according to quantity, invisible phenomena; according to quality, phenomena the look cannot bear; according to relation, absolute phenomena; finally, according to modality phenomena that cannot be looked at.”¹¹

The one who “receives” the phenomenon in such a manner receives it with the implied vagueness given that the intellect fails to order the data of the intuition. Experiencing the phenomenon this way actually means experiencing an inability, making clear the experience of one’s finitude. The subject receives a “pure donation” without being able to describe anything in its field. Thus, the donating intuition of the phenomenon manifests itself in its entire purity and completeness, unrestricted by the conceptual limits inherent to the subject. The “paradox” of such a relationship is apparent in reversing the relation between the *phenomenon* and the ego.

In the case of the classic phenomenon, dependence is clearly expressed in the idea of constituting the phenomenon into a subject.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: the French debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 176.

¹¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner, and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 112.

The structures of the cogito provided the phenomenon with one form or another. In the case of saturated phenomena, though, the ratio changes: far from constituting the phenomenon, the ego perceives it constitutes it.¹² The ego is staggered by the intuitive overflow of the phenomenon. The latter precedes and cannot be included in an intellectual setting. The saturated phenomenon uses the subject to show itself, to tell its truth but does not accept being reduced to it. The phenomenon, in general, can only be completed, as such, through a limit-case: appearance only starts from itself in this case. Furthermore, the ego itself can be understood as starting with the saturated phenomenon, which realises, on the one hand, its finitude and, on the other, its constitutive possibilities. Such an “appearance that is purely of itself and starting from itself, that does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination”¹³ is called, according to Jean-Luc Marion, *revelation*. The invisible, as the onlooker’s inability to understand or speak about what he sees, plays a fundamental, even constitutive, role in the revelation. Such an example is the theophany, where an inconceivable “invisible gaze” ultimately envisages and loves me.

The Invisible Gaze

The issue of interpreting the episode of the road to Emmaus can thus be clarified, along with the answer to the initial question raised by Jean-Luc Marion in the conference mentioned earlier. The sight of the Risen Saviour and His reconnaissance as Christ is in a principled inconsistency. The revelation of the Risen Christ occurring in Emmaus is a relevant case of a theophany – essentially, a saturated phenomenon. Jean-Luc Marion shows that the disciples’ certitude regarding the identity of the Risen makes it impossible to adjust the exemplary donation phenomenologically. Christ appears (gives Himself) in excess of intuition and free of intellectual limitations. Once the latter tries to dominate the donating intuition, the donation itself disappears. The finite egos of the disciples cannot encompass the infinite. The encounter featured in the pericope above is an example of a meeting between the subject and the saturated phenomenon.

The answer to Marion’s initial question becomes apparent: faith – the French philosopher notes – does not overcompensate for a “deficit of evidence,” but it makes an excess bearable. It replaces the intellectual receptivity incapable of coping with the

¹² Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” 210.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 215.

overwhelming intuition. Unlike God the Father, Christ is always at the origin of an overwhelming revelation; hence, it always requires faith from the faithful. And sometimes the need to believe is overwhelming and tested, as we know well: Peter's apostasy is such an example.

Thus, revelation is a privileged example of how the invisible and the "unseeable" can dominate and structure the entire field of the visible. The case is very particular: concerning the paintings, as Jean-Luc Marion states in another place, the visible remains the spectacle's protagonist. Though it references the "beyond", another world, his gaze remains possible. Concerning the theophany, as we have seen, the gaze is, by definition, helpless. The two cases presented above are at the two extremes of the visible and invisible relationship.

An intermediary case, edifying through its complexity and capacity to reunite contrary solutions, is the icon. In *The Saturated Phenomenon*, it is defined as "a particular face that I love, which has become invisible not only because it dazzles me, but above all because in it I want to look and can look only at its invisible gaze weighing on mine."¹⁴

The icon (an encounter of the crossing gazes, as I will detail later) is a particular way in which the invisible does not violently refuse the visible. Still, it also does not leave it immovable.

The permissiveness of its unseen and its discretion justifies, on the one hand, the dispute around the icon. However, the fundamental role acquired by a significant part of the Christian tradition can also be explained starting with the particular embodiment of the ineffable into stone or wood.

The icon depicts a face every time. Moreover, not the lines within it count, but the *gaze* of the onlooker. Whereas not represented graphically, the saint's gaze makes an icon what it is, for a faithful prays, and, as he looks at the icon, his prayer becomes an address as undetectable as the saint's gaze. "The painted gaze invisibly responds to the invisible gaze of the one in prayer, and transfigures its own visibility by including it in the commerce of two invisible gazes – the one from a praying man, taken through the painted icon, to look upon an invisible saint, the other the gaze of the invisible saint covered with benevolence, visible through the painted icon, looking upon the one in prayer."¹⁵ The colours and lines of the icon mediate the surprising encounter between the two "invisible." Without them, the face-to-face encounter between God

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 20.

and man searches for other vehicles to manifest itself. The inner voice and the voice heard in prayer are also places of encounter. However, the specificity of the icon resides in immediateness, which may also lead to contrary phenomena. Christ's face, as seen in the icons, is sought more likely through his gaze, and when it is absent (i.e., the invisible of the prayer does not receive an answer), faith is shattered. Looking at *Christ dead* by Hans Holbein, prince Mishkin exclaims: "Why, that picture might make some people lose their faith!"¹⁶ The empty gaze and the cadaveric hues of the Son of Man strike the one who looks at the painting mentioned above. Any prayers uttered when looking at it would remain unanswered, and the absence of the gaze makes it impossible for the two worlds to make contact. The painting strikes the onlooker with its cruel materiality. The excerpt from *The Idiot* shows that the physical details (i.e., the tumefied face, the open eyes, the traces of torture) are apparent to the one looking at Hans Holbein's masterpiece. The absence of the invisible gaze shades the divine into oblivion.

All study of the icon from a theological and aesthetic perspective starts with the phenomenological understanding of the gaze and its characteristics. The invisible and the infinite insinuate between those of the world, now more than in any other case of phenomenological object.

According to Marion, standing in front of an icon already means being called by it. The faithful do not focus on a saint's clothes, mouth, or gestures when looking at an icon. "Not his or her mouth, nevertheless more expressive of the intentions than other parts of the body, but the eyes—or more exactly the empty pupils of the person's eyes, their black holes open on the somber ocular hollow. In other words, in the face we fix on the sole place where precisely nothing can be seen."¹⁷ Hence, the icon concerns precisely the excess of presence that one cannot grasp, the meaningless hyperbole of the interpretation: the gaze. Invisible, non-presentable, it is outside the constitution of the cogito. Its trait as a phenomenological object is another: "The icon gives itself to be seen in that it makes me hear [understand] its call."¹⁸ The answer of the one who looks at an icon is an endless hermeneutics of the invisible gaze.

Without making up a particular meaning, the calling gaze becomes an endless history of meanings for the recipient. The excess of intuitions is the cause of invisibility, namely, a failure to make

¹⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnet (London, Melbourne, Toronto: William Heinemann, 1913), 212.

¹⁷ Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-19.

oneself visible. The underlying donation is excessive, infinite, “an event, renewed without ceasing.”¹⁹ Its truth becomes a history of this renewal to be followed persistently. Hence, prayer and faith prove their eschatological dimension unequivocally.

Consequently, the gaze as a fundamental element of the icon has a paradoxical status: unseen, it calls the faithful and compels him to a never-ending answer. Thus, the visible components, constituted by the cogito, are transferred to the background and only facilitate the ineffable encounter of the two gazes. To this end, the icon’s image is “weakened” to prevent its self-sufficiency. We get an even greater insight into the “constitutive” function of the invisible within the icon due to the observations made by Marion in *The Crossing of the Visible*. The author states that all icons reference God the Father, ultimately, though he is rarely featured in Christian art. “But Christ does not offer only himself to my gaze to see and be seen; if he requires of me a love, it is a love not for him but for his Father; if he demands that I lift my eyes to him, this is not at all so that I see him, him only, but so that I might see also and especially the Father.”²⁰ Already invisible, Christ’s gaze actually suggests another level of the invisible – an invisible “prototype.”

Hence, the logic of the image is shattered. It no longer becomes a standard of the real or self-sufficient. It becomes a mere (and entirely inadequate) vehicle. In this point, both the similarity and difference concerning the painting show their power. The similarity lies in the constitutive role of invisibility, in bestowing upon the real and the representable the nobility of what goes beyond the apparent. The difference, on the one hand, is that, in the case of the painting, it is the perspective that transforms the work of art into an “un(fo)reseen” climb towards the visible. In the icon, it is the gaze weakening the visible and submitting it to the unseen. The game between the two registers is still on, but the rules and requirements have changed.

However, in every example above, the visible is not self-sufficient. The unseen presence is necessary for the onlooker to perceive the work of art as such. Often, to receive it properly is precisely to make the imperceptible present by forgetting all that falls into the realm of the senses.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁰ Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 57.

Conclusion

The paradoxical nature of the artistic images reminds me of a short story by Borges titled *The Disk*. It features a bizarre object – the disk of Odin – with only one side, as per the legend. It belongs to Isern, the king of the Secgens. It is invisible but perceptible through a quick gleam. Whoever has such an item – invisible and suggested by the sun’s rays – is perpetually sovereign. Indeed, power is not provided by mundane things but solely by their unexpected intertwining with what lies beyond the world.

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