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“TO SEE AND TO BE SEEN”
Gaze, Desire and Body in the Christian ‘Dramatic’

Abstract
This paper aims to analyse how, from the second to the fifth centuries AD, Christian thought re-defined the dynamics of the human gaze through a dramatic device that put forward a profound argument about the individual’s identity in the context of their relationship with other individuals. Through the writings of the Church Fathers set against the spectacular system of the ancient world – especially as expressed, for example, by Tertullian and Augustine – this paper will highlight how the unity of the Christian “dramatic” has proposed a revolution in sight, which implies not only a new way of seeing oneself and the other but also a new order of desire, and especially of action. At the centre of this revolution is the body of the God-Man on the cross: that specific exposed body transforms the idea of “to see and to be seen”, a concept that no longer represents a game of appearances and images but real relationships between and among human beings, thus offering the contemporary debate on visual culture an innovative, original interpretation of the meaning of performativity of vision.

Keywords
Theory of representation; Christian drama; reflection on mimetic desire; performative vision; exhibition vs action; visual culture.

1. BODY, IMAGE AND GAZE

In 2011, the exhibit entitled Bodies Exposed. Aesthetics and Anesthesias of the Body in Contemporary art opened in Milan. Curators suggested to understand the word “exposure” not only for its current own meaning, as an *ex-ponere* (that is “to put outside”), but also figuratively and symbolically, as an *ex-peau-sition*, that is to say “to put the skin outside”. In this sense, twenty artists were called to give an answer to some questions such as: what is the body in contemporary art, after the body broken by the deluge of last century and while now it is a technological and virtual body? How is it possible to show the body? What do artists feel when they represent a body? How does the body represent itself and what does survive of body’s identity in the work shaped by the body? And, finally, which is the relationship between physical body, reality and representation?

Since 1995, another exhibit is travelling many countries, achieving a great public success: *Body Worlds*, an artistic path that explains the human body through the expo-
sure of skeletons, organs and whole bodies once belonging to living people, who gave
their own bodies to science. The display admittedly promotes health awareness and a
broader understanding of the functions of the body, showing, for instance, the circula-
tory system or the breathing apparatus. The exhibit’s curator is a Polish researcher, who
had patented in the Seventies a technique to stop the decomposition of deceased bodies,
by replacing fluids with plastic material. This particular technique, moreover, makes
it possible to shape the body, which looks like been set in pose; it allows to knead and
“pose” the bodies, which seem caught precisely in a moment of veritable acting. The
result is that such bodies are exposed in a paradoxical way: firstly, the inside is literally
turned outside and offered to the vision; secondly, the intimacy of the body in action is
exhibited.

I have begun with the discussion of these two exhibits because both play with the
ostentation of the body in order to talk about aesthetics or knowledge, as if the heart of
question wasn’t the body, but the relationship between the real body and represented
body. Indeed, in both cases the body is displayed on an ambiguous line between what
you can see and what you can’t see, what is inside and what is outside, what is “true”
and what appears. On this ambiguous border, the body seems to exist and to have sense
only in so far as it devotes itself to sight, only when it is exposed.

The sight and its dynamics, as it is well known, are central to theoretical and phil-
osophical debate, and are directly connected to the identity of the individual and one’s
personal acquisition of a point of view. How we see ourselves, how we expose our-
selves to the others’ gaze, how we look at the others, these are all issues that concern
the concept of “person”, with its being “related” and, lastly, with the subject’s cognitive
faculties.

In her latest works, Marie-José Mondzain confronts these issues, exploring, in par-
cular, the difference between the meaning of the act of seeing (“to see”) and that of the
act of showing, which implies, instead, shaping a “visible” and manipulating the gaze.
She argues for the crisis of the intrinsic, negotiated meaning of images and, at the same
time, she underlines the unseverability of knowledge and the dynamics of vision and
representation: if the human being is sapiens just because he/she is a spectator, she says,
images have an own existence because their meanings are created and decided by the
encounter of gazes. When this special encounter (which she calls “commerce”) becomes
a “business”, the image dies and visibility triumphs.

The position of Mondzain is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, she clearly distin-
guishes the concept of image from that of visibility. Mondzain abandons the idea of an
absolute image (essential or substantial, with an autonomous ontology, namely able to
identify itself with the truth or “to tell” the truth), and works on the image understood as
something relative, because it refers itself to something else – like a veil or a direction
indicator –, and also because it cannot be separated from sight. The image itself does
not hold the value of “true” or “false”: it constitutes the subject as a beholder or, in other

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2 For Gunther Von Hagens’ Body World see the official website www.bodyworlds.com. See also C.
Masson, “Modified Image of the Body: New Forms of Identity with a Note on the Cadavers of Gunther Von
Hagens”, in Body Image and Identity in Contemporary Societies. Psychanalytic, Social, Cultural and Aesthet-
3 See A. Somaini, “Introduzione”, in Il luogo dello spettatore. Forme dello sguardo e cultura delle im-
magini, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2005, 7-26, for a useful synopsis of several theoretical positions on the topic.
words, its existence, meaning and functioning depends on the gaze. The gaze that determines the image, however, is not an individual gaze, but a shared gaze: indeed, despite the fact that the experience of seeing is linked to the experience of the individual self, it is rather “seeing together” that participates in the constitution of the image, as the point of view from which the beholder looks is informed by communal values (historical, cultural or traditional). Such “imaginary constituents” allow the viewer to form images and, then, to read them, to give them meaning, to recognize them, judge them, and to experience them as affective. On the contrary, visibilities are what comes to vision in absolute terms, without otherness; they exhaust themselves in vision: they are an abuse of the visible. They threaten the image, since they involve capturing and imprisoning the gaze. Visibility is the negation of the gaze’s active role, of its intentions and of its affective nature: that is to say, it is the negation of the entire process of negotiation on what someone sees. No longer does gaze define images, but it is, in turn, defined by visibilities.

Secondly, contrary to the opinion that between the 20th and 21st century an “iconic turn” has occurred, bringing with it a change in paradigms of thought, Mondzain argues that, since the birth of photography, not images have multiplied, but visibilities, iconic streams flooding sight uncritically and fruitlessly. As a result, our era should be understood not so much as an iconocracy, the triumph of the image on both spirit and body, but as an idolocracy: the empire of visibility. In Mondzain’s opinion, today’s misunderstanding about visibilities and images is due to an historical myopia that doesn’t take into account discussions that took place around the concept of image for nearly two millennia, which have their roots deep in the Jewish denial of idolatrous images, and especially in the elaboration of the Christian concept of eikon, first articulated at a theological-trinitarian level and, then, at the economic and aesthetical one. Mondzain analyzes the viewer’s relation with our contemporary images in the light of the theoretical device founded by the iconic Christian thought in “a context both philosophical and political, where in the ‘commerce’ of gazes and words played a key role”.

An aspect of this is crucial and represents an intrinsic characteristic of visual relationship: it is the active and operational dimension of the gaze, involving a creative and participatory role of the viewer. Mondzain finds its roots in the anti-essentialist idea of the image, developed in the course of the debate between the iconoclasts and the iconophiles throughout the Eighth and Ninth centuries. In this period took place a process that moved from the idea of image as an imitative copy to the idea of image as a demonstrative form. The semantic field that Christian thought will use to describe images will no longer be that of “mimesis”, but instead that of “inscription”, or, even more explicitly, that of “impression”. The concept of impression both gave to the icon the role

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8 Christian thought about images is closely related to the doctrine of incarnation and to the meaning of Christ as image of the invisible God. When, later, the idea of eikon is related to art’s objects, it keeps this theological profile: the focus will be on gnoseological and anthropological aspects of the images, more than on their ornamental function or the pleasure that they could give (cfr. Lingua, “L’immagine indecidibile”, 280).

9 Ibid. The translation is my own.
of a medium closely connected to its ontological status as “relative”, and changed the
quality of the gaze, establishing a new, active relationship between icon and spectator.

In the same vein, many historians of Byzantine art have spoken about “acting images” and the idea of “performative vision” has been at the heart of international medieval studies. Such studies, embracing an interdisciplinary approach and re-reading sources and documents from a variety of different perspectives, have pointed out that this peculiarity of the eye depends upon the way in which Christianity binds the image to the Incarnation\(^\text{10}\).

However, this is a pivotal problem: the Incarnation, indeed, offers an image that is not only something “to see”, but is Word, becomes flesh, and acts in history\(^\text{11}\). Thus, the Christian gaze cannot be only “acting”, and vision cannot have only some performative characteristics: it has to be more deeply “dramatic”. I take “dramatic” in the meaning proposed by theologian Hans von Balthasar. In founding his Theo-Drama, Balthasar underlines that, unlike other religions or philosophies, the Christian concept of drama merges both aesthetics – as the doctrine of the perception of form – and logic – as discourse on truth:

\[\text{What God does for man [...] is simply good. [...] The good has its center of gravity neither in the perceiving nor in the uttering: the perception may be beautiful and the utterance true, but only the act can be good. Here, in the act, there is a real giving, originated in the personal freedom of the giver and designed for the personal benefit of the recipient. [...] This good [...] cannot be contemplated in pure ‘aesthetics’, nor proved and demonstrate in pure ‘logic’. It takes place nowhere but on the world stage [...] , and its destiny is seen in the drama of a world history that is continually unfolding\(^\text{12}\).}\]

If, therefore, there is a theoretical device that can help us explain the relationship we have today with images and if, as suggested by Mondzain, this device has got Christian roots, I believe it can not be fully grasped by an only iconic thought, but it requires a “dramatic thinking”. It is precisely this “dramatic thinking”, which concerns the human being’s act in the world, that could explain why sight’s dynamics – “to see” and “to be seen” – profoundly questions the identity of the individual and his/her relational body.

Through the analysis of some patristic sources – especially of St. Augustine – I will seek to outline the dramatic device and its working principles, focusing on the act of seeing (the dramatic of gazes), on the affective relationships (the dramatic of affections) and, finally, on the vision and perception of the body.


2. THE DRAMATIC OF GAZES: PROXIMITY

The first elaboration of a “dramatic thinking” emerged as an opposition when, between the Second and the Sixth century, the Church Fathers and the Apologists attacked the shows of the Roman Empire, which were understood as part of an “epistemological system”, that is to say as a way of ordering reality and, then, of knowing and representing it. The principles on which they based their criticism were also epistemological: the show is a knowledge device that doesn’t allow to grasp the revealed truth but, rather, is an obstacle to it. Indeed, it deploys simultaneously two kinds of strategies: the distance, because it takes the viewer away from the scene, making him extraneous to it and unable to see what really happens, and the gap between what is real and what is represented.

The result is that the show modifies the visible: what is displayed is not what it seems. According to Augustine “what is not what it seems” is the falsum (“[falsum est] quod non est ita ut videtur”), which, in turn, has two distinct modes: the first is that of “simulation” – understood as pretending to be something that one is not (deception) –, and the second is that of “replacement” – that is to say to look like something to the point of taking its place (illusion). Deception is “something represented” that dissembles the reality’s appearance, manipulating it and making it fake. The illusion is “something represented” that replaces reality with an imitation.

The Fathers have unmasked the spectacular dynamics of distance and alteration, criticizing each ludus considered as a specific representation device, which likewise produces a specific emotional effect on the audience. The formula “spectacula furiosa, vel cruenta vel turpia” in my opinion, indicates three distinct devices that somewhere else I have called “vision machines”. Thus the circus furiosum would be based on illusion and would work as a “machine of blindness”, which intends to celebrate a world order made by idols and vanities that doesn’t exist, and which stimulates emotions towards something useless or someone unknown. The cruenta arena would operate on the basis of a physical, social and legal separation between those who act and those who watch; it becomes a “machine of distance” that keeps man away from the man, leading the viewer to believe that he is ontologically superior and has the right to kill anyone, and thereby making him cruel. The theatre turpis would function as deception and concealment, as a “machine of defacement” in which representation disguises the reality as fabula and alters it and its perception very strongly; the outcome is that the viewer can’t recognize reality and loses the sense of the truth in his life, therefore even deforming his behaviour.

On one hand, the discourse of the Fathers dismantles the process through which what is shown is shaped; on the other hand, it argues for the perspective of the vision, i.e for the way in which one sees. In this regard, the spectacle turns out to be an

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13 Cfr. Tertullian, De Spectaculis, II, where he distinguishes the knowledge de proximo (the Revelation) and the knowledge de longinquo (before the advent of Christ): “Having no intimate acquaintance with the Highest, knowing Him only by natural revelation, and not as His ‘friends’ – afar off, and not as those who have been brought nigh to Him – men cannot but be in ignorance alike of what He enjoins and what He forbids in regard to the administration of His world” (transl. by S. Thelwall).
14 Cfr. ibid. XXIII: “The Autor of Truth hates all the false; he regards as adultery all that is unreal”. See also Id., De cultu feminarum, II, 5.
15 Augustine, Soliloquia, II, 6, 10.
16 Id., Sermo 264, 4. For discussion about the loci where is possible to find this formula – from Tertullian to Isidore of Seville – cfr. J.A. Jiménes Sánchez, Los juegos paganos en la Roma cristiana, Roma: Viella, 2010, 270.
“attitude”, a “seeing and being seen”, which blends “being” with “appearing” and is founded on the ambivalence-ambiguity that informs the notion of “double”, the latin duplicitas, deemed as duplicity as much as duplication: “Cavete, fratres mendacium; […] omnis simulatio, et omnis duplicitas mendacium est: ergo non solum in falsis verbis, sed etiam in simulatis operibus mendacium comprobatur”18.

Against the spectacular attitude, Christianity opposes the dramatic attitude, the only one able to grasp the truth of the world order, which has been revealed by the Incarnation (paradoxical union of visible with invisible). Tertullian explains it clearly: before the Incarnation, man couldn’t see the order of the well-regulated universe because of the adulterative action of the aemulator, who had alienated man from God and had acted upon the appearance of creation, corrupting its unitary integrity19. After the rules have been overturned, the world has been dominated by duplicity, the ambiguity that makes it difficult to discern what it is true from what is not. From the moment God manifested Himself in the flesh, man can choose to go back to see the truth in its own integrity and fullness (veritatis integritas or plenitudo veritatis), in that unity which doesn’t exclude anything or anyone and never fails in any place and at any time20.

The economic unity of God’s plan – Tertullian calls it administratio or dispensatio21 – is, thus, a dramatic unity and has only one time, only one place, and only one action: the time, place and action of the drama (dromenon, the event) of Redemption. Man takes part in the drama played on the “theatre of the world”: he is never a spectator, but always an actor. This performative inclusion removes the spectacular distance and redefines the dynamics of the vision. The point of view from which the sight originates is indeed transposed inside the scene, preventing man from choosing the disengagement of spectare: he can’t consider himself totally unrelated to what he is seeing or different from who he is looking at. On the contrary, he partakes in what happens and always answers “to” what he sees and “for” what he sees: “to look at” becomes an action “in response to” or, in a word, responsible.

Since the role of pure viewer is no longer there, there is not even anything merely “to be shown” to a distant audience. The unique spectator of drama is God, who in turn, however, is the protagonist Himself. Therefore, man has no reason to build a “spectacle for the eyes”, manipulating appearances and working on creating his own image. Rather, he must be aware of his own identity and of his personal role in the drama. In other words, he must play his being an actor fully and individually. However, he mustn’t be the hypokrites who, following the concealing logic of spectacle, pretends “to be some-

18 Ambrose, Sermo XXX. See also Tertullian, De cultu feminarum, II, 5; Philo of Alexandria, De vita contemplativa, 39.
19 Cfr. Tertullian, De spectaculis, II: “They must be ignorant, too, of the hostile power which works against Him, and perverts to wrong uses the things His hand has formed; for you cannot know either the will or the adversary of a God you do not know. We must not, then, consider merely by whom all things were made, but by whom they have been perverted. We shall find out for what use they were made at first, when we find for what they were not. There is a vast difference between the corrupted state and that of primal purity, just because there is a vast difference between the Creator and the corruptor”.
20 Cfr. ibid.: “We, therefore, who in our knowledge of the Lord have obtained some knowledge also of His foe – who, in our discovery of the Creator, have at the same time laid hands upon the great corrupter, ought neither to wonder nor to doubt that, as the prowess of the corrupting and God – opposing angel overthrew in the beginning the virtue of man, the work and image of God, the possessor of the world, so he has entirely changed man’s nature (created, like his own, for perfect sinlessness) into his own state of wicked enmity against his Maker, that in the very thing whose gift to man, but not to him, had grieved him, he might make man guilty in God’s eyes, and set up his own supremacy”. See also Lactantius, Divinae Institutiones, I, 1.
one who is not” and wears a mask over his face; instead, he has to be the agonistes who, following the dramatic principle, equates “to be” and “to appear”, “to see” and “to be seen”. This perfect correspondence is semplicitas:

Simple against double, truth against falsehood, because simplicity against duplicity. Be simple of heart; don’t be hypocrite, showing one thing openly, covering up another; and you will defeat the one who in his is duplicity, transfigures himselfs as an angel of light (2Cor 11:14).

The “simple” man, then, is monopropos and has only one face and only one heart; everything he does and says corresponds to what he thinks and feels, and also his appearance (the way he looks) has the same shape of what he himself is. Semplicitas – which, as St. Paul says, is the opposite of ofthalmodoulia, being slaves of the eyes – characterizes also the way of looking, which won’t be fooled by appearances.

Ultimately, dramatic thinking demands the involvement of the whole human being, of his own identity. Now, the man’s “being” is ad imaginem Dei; through the Incarnation, God became like man in Christ, revealing that the image on which He has moulded man at the beginning was His Son, and showing that He is the Father. Then, this is the identity that man has to play in the drama of life: he, every single day, should choose to look like the image that shapes him ontologically, and he should behave like a son of God and a brother to other men. To do that, he first must recognize his likeness to God and with other men.

The acknowledgment of likeness is the main characteristic of “looking closely”. As Augustine well explains, closeness mustn’t be interpreted in spatial terms:

If you want to see something clearly, and so be equipped to speak of it, you come close to get a good view, for if you were content to look only from distance you might make mistake. [...] If the impious are far away, and therefore in darkness, if in their darkness they have such damaged eyes that they not only do not desire light but even dread it, what is said to us who have been found in our far-off place? Draw near to him and be enlightened. [...] Thus the human soul draws near, the inner person recreated in God’s image because in that image it was created from the first. This person had been far away to the extent that he or she had lapse into unlikeness, for it is not by spatial intervals that we approach God or distance ourselves from him. By your unlikeness to God you have gone far from him; as you become like him, you draw very near.

Then, Augustine specifies that “getting close” means “being a neighbour”:

Therefore the Lord is very nigh, in that the Lord was made very nigh unto us. What so far away, so remote, as God from men, the Immortal from mortals, the Just from the sinners? Not far in place in space, but in unlikeness. [...] For as much then as the Immortal and Just

22 Cfr. Philo of Alexandria, Quod Deus sit immutabilis, 10; Id., De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratiae, 61-66; John Chrysostom, In Matthaeum Homiliae, 37, 6; Id., De Davide et Saule, 3, 2.
23 Augustine, Sermo 301/A, 2 (transl. by E. Hill). About the concept of semplicita see Bino, Il dramma e l’immagine, 92-95.
one was far from us, as from mortals and sinners, He descended to us, that That Far One might be made very nigh unto us\textsuperscript{27}.

Therefore, being a neighbour means resembling each other, and resembling each other means being close. By binding to similarity, neighbourliness becomes an indicator of a mutual relationship, which does not exclude anybody ("for the name ‘neighbour’ is a relative one, and no one can be neighbour except to a neighbour")\textsuperscript{28}, because it doesn’t depend on blood bonds ("we mustn’t understand ‘the neighbour’ in the sense of who has parental relationships")\textsuperscript{29}, nor on a common law and religion (for example the Levite and the priest who, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, saw the poor man but passed by on the other side). “Neighbour”, or similar, is just he who plays his role of “God’s son” in the drama, that is to say he who acts like a neighbour: “the one to which you have mercy, this is your neighbour. If the foreign Samaritan, showing mercy and rescuing, became neighbour, anyone who doesn’t help you in tribulation becomes foreign for you”\textsuperscript{30}. The neighbourliness of mercy is the attitude of dramatic thinking.

3. THE DRAMATIC OF AFFECTIONS: DESIRE OF LIKENESS

Dramatic thinking is a discipline of vision, emotions and actions, diametrically opposed to the spectacular attitude, which isn’t only a “seeing like a spectator”, but is also a “feeling like a spectator” and, finally, deals with human behaviour. The Fathers always underline that what one sees corresponds to what he feels, to what he desires, and to what he does\textsuperscript{31}. It is once again Augustine who explains the connection between the mechanisms of vision, their emotional dynamics, and their outcomes. He believes that the affectus (desires and emotions) have not an autonomous nature, but are just inclinations of the soul and depend on its moving towards the attainment of something or, in other words, they are dependent on the will\textsuperscript{32}. Whenever an affectus is negative, it is simply a movement of the soul wounded by original sin, which is understood as a voluntary rebellion towards the will of God: indeed, believing himself self-sufficient, man swelled with pride and fell away from God and away from himself too. By losing God, he lost the likeness with His image\textsuperscript{33}. Since then, the sick-soul tends to desire curved on itself, away from God\textsuperscript{34}. Augustine explains that the “desire away from God” is the dilectio...

\textsuperscript{27} Id., Sermo 171, 3. In this case, I preferred the anonymous english translation of this sermon in Sermons on selected lessons of the New Testament by S. Augustine, II, Oxford, Parker, 1845, 882.

\textsuperscript{28} Id., De doctrina christiana, I, 30, 31 (transl. by J.F. Shaw).

\textsuperscript{29} Id., Epistula 155, 4, 14 (this translation is my own).

\textsuperscript{30} Id. In Psalmum 48, I, 14: “cui misericordiam facis, proximus tibi est. Si ergo extraneus samaritanus faciendo misericordiam et subveniendo proximus factus est, quicumque tibi in tribulatione subvenire non sunt, alieni a te facti sunt”. I follow the latin numeration and the latin text as in Enarrationes in psalmos, edited by E. Dekkers, J. Fraipont, in Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 38, 1956. The translation is my own.

\textsuperscript{31} Cfr. Bino, Il dramma e l’immagine, 66-68.


\textsuperscript{33} Cfr. Augustine, De vera religione, 12-15.

\textsuperscript{34} Note the affinities between the words of Lactantius and those of Augustine. Augustine, Sermo 110/A, 6: “si enim ‘cor sursum’ habes, curvus non es. Si terrena semper queras, si de terrenis felix esse desideras, si non te putas fructuose colere Deum, nisi tibi abundaverit terrena felicitas, curvus es: cor tuum non est cum Domino”. Lactantius, Divinis Institutiones, II, 2: “o curvae in terras animae, et coelestium inanes! Coelum potius intuemini, ad cujus spectaculum vos excitavit ille artifex vester Deus. Ille vos sublimem vultum de did; vos in terram curvamini: vos altas mentes, et ad parentem suum cum corporibus suis erectas, ad inferiora deprimitis, tamquam vos poenitent non quadrupedes esse natos. Fas non est coeleste animal cum terrenis, in
mundi and is a kind of love adulterinus, because it consists of loving what God has created in itself (according to the logic of frui) and not of loving the Creator (according to the logic of uti), putting the creation in the place of the Creator and thinking that being satisfied with it amounts to happiness.

“To desire away from God”, therefore, is the outcome of a wrong orientation of the human soul, which isn’t able to desire in accordance with the ordo amoris, and desires in reverse or, rather, imitates God’s love “pervertedly”. This is only a simulation of the love of God.\(^\text{35}\)

Pride wearing the mask of high-spiritedness […]. Ambition seeks honor and glory […]. The powerful man seeks to be feared, because of his cruelty […]. The enticements of the wanton claim the name of love […]. Curiosity prompts a desire for knowledge […]. Indeed, ignorance and foolishness themselves go masked under the names of simplicity and innocence […]. Human sloth pretends to long for rest […] Luxury would fain be called plenty and abundance […]. Prodigality presents a show of liberality […]. Covetousness desires to possess much […]. Envy contends that its aim is for excellence […]. Anger seeks revenge […]. Thus the soul commits fornication when she is turned from thee, and seeks apart from Thee what she cannot find pure and untainted until she returns to Thee. All things thus imitate Thee – but pervertedly – when they separate themselves far from Thee and raise themselves up against Thee.\(^\text{36}\)

The “desire away from God” produces false affections, which can be both self-referential and misleading, and, together, they amount to “feeling like a spectator”. These false affections prevent man from establishing a real love-relationship.

We can find an example of how these false affections work at the beginning of The Confessions’ third book, where Augustine tells about when, in Carthage, he was swamped with shameful loves as a consequence of aboundless desire to love something. He defines this ravenous desire “loving to love” (amans amare) and gives it the characteristics of a desire bent on itself, which exhausts itself with the consumption of the beloved body and thereby depletes itself.\(^\text{37}\) Then, Augustine proceeds to describe the emotional dynamics of the theatre:

Stage plays also captivated me, with their sights full of the images (imaginibus) of my own miseries: fuel for my own fire. Now, why does a man like to be made sad (dolere) by viewing doleful and tragic scenes, which he himself could not by any means endure (pati)? Yet, as a spectator, he wishes to experience from them a sense of grief, and in this very sense of grief his pleasure consists. What is this but wretched madness? For a man is more affected by these actions the more he is spuriously involved in these affections. Now, if he should suffer them in his own person, it is the custom to call this “misery”. But when he suffers with another, then it is called “compassion”. But what kind of compassion is it that arises from viewing fictitious and unreal sufferings? The spectator is not expected to aid the sufferer but merely to grieve for him. And the more he grieves the more he applauds the actor of these fictions. If the misfortunes of the characters – whether historical or entirely imaginary – are represented so as not to touch the feelings of the spectator, he goes away


\(^{36}\) Augustine, Confessiones, II, 6, 13-14 (transl. by A.C. Outler).

\(^{37}\) Ibid., III, 1.
disgusted and complaining. But if his feelings are deeply touched, he sits it out attentively, and sheds tears of joy.\(^{38}\)

Augustine underlines the emotional paradox perceived in attending a show, when fiction is able to move the affections just enough for the pleasure of feeling, but doesn’t involve the beholder so much as to cause a real affective identification. On stage there are no real reasons either to feel a personal grief (miseria), nor to suffer for someone other (misericordia). Indeed, the scenic simulatio separates the beholder’s emotions from the actor’s action and, in doing so, doesn’t imply sharing pain or helping others. The beholder partakes fictitiously in what happens, experiencing only emotions that are exhausted within themselves. Therefore, “loving to love” and “loving to suffer” are self-referential feelings, aimless, trapped\(^{39}\), which lead man to deformation and take him further away from God\(^{40}\). This is, precisely, what “feeling like a spectator” means.

The badly-directed affects, however, not only miss their target, causing unnecessary emotions, but they can also make mistakes and confuse their object, without transforming themselves into affective relationships. What can help us better understand the difference is the mechanism of mimetic desire. Augustine explains it by describing the spectator’s desire as imitating the actor (mimes, comedians, charioteers, gladiators, whoever). He highlights the fact that even though the beholder feels affection towards the actor, he wouldn’t imitate him, because he doesn’t want be like him at all: “go and watch the actor, watch the ballet dancer; I will say to you: ‘You should be like that’ and please don’t be angry. But it if I say to you ‘You should be like that’ and you are angry [...] what you love is what you dread being like"\(^{41}\). What someone admires in the actor is exactly what he wouldn’t find within himself: “I did not want them to praise and love me as actors were praised and loved – although I myself praise and love them too. I would prefer being unknown than known in that way, or even being hated than loved that way"\(^{42}\). How is it possible to love a man, who is just a man, for what you wouldn’t be\(^{43}\)? The reason, maybe, is that the affectus turns to something different and not to man. In fact, Augustine points out that what the viewer admires in actors is not their being men, but what they do, or their fame; in the same way, those who make gifts to a disciple of Christ only to get benefits, don’t donate to the wise man, but to the role that he plays\(^{44}\). Ultimately, one ends up wanting to imitate someone on account of who he is, but on account of what he has, or of his position and of his look; in a word on account of his “appearances”, there by following the spectacular logic of the “desire away from God”. And this is a simulative desire.

Dramatic thinking, instead, overturns both “feeling like a spectator” and simulative desire. The man who acts the drama does it from within the scene, taking an active part in what he sees and always regarding what he looks at as something concerning him. By having a neighbouring-attitude, he recognizes that other men share with him the resemblance with God and, therefore, perceives them as neighbours, emotionally. This is an affective posture that redirects the affectus according to the ordo amoris so that

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 2, 2.

\(^{39}\) According to this meaning it’s possible to read also the amor ludendi in ibid., 1, 10, 16.

\(^{40}\) See also Id., In Psalmum 94, 2; Id., Confessiones, 1, 13, 21 and III, 1 e 2, 4.

\(^{41}\) Cfr. Id., Sermo 301/A,7 (transl. by E. Hill).

\(^{42}\) Id., Confessiones, IV, 14, 22.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Cfr. Id., In Psalmum 102, 13.
they change from self-referential to transitive. “Loving to suffer” is replaced by a shared feeling of someone’s pain, that is to say, mercy:

So when you perform a work of mercy, if you’re offering bread, feel sorry for the hungry; if you’re offering drink feel sorry for the thirsty; if you’re handing out clothes, feel sorry for the naked; if you’re offering hospitality, feel sorry for the stranger and traveler; if you’re visiting the sick, feel sorry for the people who are ill; if you’re burying the dead, feel sorry for the deceased, if you’re patching up a quarrel, feel sorry for the quarrelers. We do none of these things, if we love God and our neighbour, without some sorrow of heart

In the same way, “loving to love” is unseated by “loving the neighbour”, which is really loving the man for who he is, in his being the image of God: “[man], in loving man, loves nothing but the man, the creature of God, made according to His image”. When man loves others by virtue of this common likeness, he loves them as he loves himself and he hasn’t got any other reason to desire anything else. How he might desire what he already fully has and which he cannot lose?

Whoever does this and loves it, not only does not envy those who imitate him, but also treats them with the greatest possible kindness and good will. But he does not stand in any need of them. What he loves in them he himself completely and perfectly possesses. So when a man loves his neighbour as himself, he is not envious of him any more than he is envious of himself. He gives him such help as he can as if he were helping himself.

The spectator is above all an imitator who desires the ontological likeness and becomes similar to the one he loves:

Anyway, do you want to know, in a word, what the difference is between our shows and spectacles and those of the theaters? We […] would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching […]. Say “May you be like him!” I’m watching him, I’m delighted by him, as far as can I embrace him with the arms of my mind. […] Say to me “May you be like him!” See if I don’t jump at the idea, se if I don’t choose to be so […]. Let us love the sort of performers whom we would choose to imitate.

Thus, simulative desire becomes “imitation of likeness”: love. This is the dramatic affectus of being ad imaginem Dei.

4. EXPOSURE AND NAKEDNESS

If iconic thought has to do with the construction of images through which man portrays what he believes in and does so in a shared/communal way, dramatic thinking has to do with the knowledge of man’s identity and the construction of inter-human relationships: the communities. The iconic thought is just a single section of the epistemological system: it is the way in which Christianity disciplines visual representations and shapes their function (religious, social or political). But it is lacking in sense without dramatic

46 Id., De vera religione, 47, 90 (transl. by J.H.S. Burleigh).
47 Ibid.
48 Id., Sermo 313/A, 3 (transl. by E. Hill).
thinking, which concerns man’s history in the world ordered by God, that is the drama of the encounter between two freedoms: the divine and the human one. It is the dramatic thinking that reinstates the meaning of the individual, of his way of getting to know (his gaze) and, finally, of his action. Maybe, then, it is no coincidence that Christianity discusses figurative images long after discussing the shows. And, perhaps, it is no coincidence that the relationship between the gaze and images keeps a trace of dramatic device in those performative elements that all historians have pointed out. For this reason, I think that today’s relationship with “visibilities” assumes a different meaning when it is read in a dramatic way, or, to say it better, when it is considered within a relationship among individuals and not just on the basis of distinct devices of the gaze. It would be the exposure of Christ’s body that has proven it: iconic thought focuses on the “imaginal” condition of that exposed body (i.e., what kind of “visible” it builds), while dramatic thinking considers its being in personal relationship. 

To explain the difference between the two conditions, I want to go back once again to Mondzain’s analysis and to her iconic interpretation of the revolution produced by the Incarnation as the leading principle of the legitimacy of visible images and their negotiating value. According to Mondzain, it was the offer of the nakedness of the Son – she calls it “carnation iconique” – to operate the overturning of the biblical account of Noah’s nakedness and, thus, to reverse the law of vision, introducing the supremacy of images. The text of Genesis 9: 20-27, indeed, proposes two different ways to use the eyes in the presence of the authority’s body: one, that of Cam, is an idolatrous gaze because it stops itself on what is seeing and is satisfied with it. This gaze makes the father’s nakedness the truth. The other gaze – that of the brothers who cover the exposed limbs with a veil while they are walking backwards – suspends the vision of the eyes and preserves the symbolic truth built for the community. On the one hand there is a wish to see everything, to believe it possible to see everything and to claim to say everything, enslaving oneself to what had been seen. On the other, a veil is built to share a collective imagination and it is accepted that the gaze is a “not seeing”. In this way, Jewish thought, to defend itself from the temptation of a totalitarian vision, kept the separation from every “visible” and denied the image.

Christianity reverses the situation radically because, while it didn’t legitimize the idolatrous gaze, it made the unveiling a revelation of the veil itself, the veil of flesh:

Dans la mesure où le Christ eut un corps mortel qui offrit sa caduque humanité en spectacle, sa nudité fut à la fois la visibilité de son anéantissement (kénôse) et l’énigme derrière laquelle son invisibilité imaginale se maintint jusqu’à la résurrection. À partir de la résurrection, les termes se renversent et la disparition de son corps fait place à sa visibilité trasfigurée, c’est-à-dire à son image.

Therefore, Christ’s passion is a “passion of the image”, which ends with the “resurrection of the image”, inaugurating a transfigured visibility that needs a transfigured gaze. On this process Christianity founds its doctrine of images, with both the anti-substantialist concept of relative icon, (which refers to a model without identifying itself with it) and the idea of a free and critical gaze to which the icon offers itself.

50 Cfr. ibid., 35.
51 Cfr. ibid., 37.
52 Ibid., 58.
53 Cfr. ibid., 135-140.
Dramatic thinking, however, doesn’t read the revolution carried out by the offer of Christ’s nakedness as a redrawing of visible things, but both as a challenge to the spectacular gap and as the foundation of relational neighbourliness. It is a total challenge, which concerns the way of “seeing”, the way to “show”, and the way to “be seen”. First of all, the Incarnation transforms gaze into helpful gaze. Indeed, by becoming co-actor of man in the drama played on the world’s stage (Clement of Alexandria defines it literally synagonistes)\textsuperscript{54}, God breaks with the act of seeing from far away. “God doesn’t look that way”, says Augustine. He is engaged in the scene, he is inside the event and helps his wrestlers when they are in trouble. It is the logic of subvenire, that of charitas, which characterizes the “act of seeing” of the Christian God\textsuperscript{55}.

Secondly, the Christian God comes upon the stage as a naked man, and this makes the difference. He chooses to show Himself without “appearing”. He is king and shows himself as king, but he doesn’t look like a king. He re-defines the meaning of “showing oneself” and limits it to the only nakedness of human condition. In this way, the concept of “exposure” has no longer the meaning of spectacular ostentation\textsuperscript{56}. Nevertheless, if Christ with his birth has voided the misleading device of shows, with his death he has even overturned it: on the cross he not only exposes his nakedness and his not looking like a king, but he shows his humiliation and his pain publicly, doing the exact opposite of what the kings of the Earth do, who hide their failures and defeats and exhibit their triumphs all around the world\textsuperscript{57}. The result is that, on the cross, Christ turns the image of the king upside down.

Finally, on the front of “being seen”, the naked body of the God-man takes upon itself the logics of the show and, actually, makes itself a show, becoming the object of a public gaze. Augustine writes:

Now what more marvellous, what more magnificent thing could our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and also the Son of man (for this also He vouchsafed to be), grant to us, than the gathering into His fold not only of the spectators of these foolish shows, but even some of the actors in them; for He hath combated unto salvation not only the lovers of the combats of men with beasts, but even the combatants themselves, for He also was made a spectacle Himself. Hear how. He hath told us Himself, and foretold it before He was made a spectacle, and in the words of prophecy announced beforehand what was to come to pass, as if it were already done, saying in the Psalms, “They pierced My hands and My feet, they told all My bones”. Lo! How He was made a spectacle, for His bones to be told! And this spectacle He expresseth more plainly, “they observed and looked upon Me”\textsuperscript{58}.

What is, then, the gaze that comes back on the upside down king who instead of the sceptre carries the cross?

A grand spectacle! but if it be impiety that is the onlooker, a grand laughing-stock; if piety, a grand mystery: if impiety be the onlooker, a grand demonstration of ignominy; if piety, a grand bulwark of faith: if it is impiety that looketh on, it laughs at the king bearing, in place of His kingly rod, the tree of His punishment; if it is piety, it sees the king bearing the tree

\textsuperscript{55} Cfr. Augustine, \textit{Sermo} 154A, 3; \textit{Sermo} 315, 7, 10; \textit{Sermo} 343, 10.
\textsuperscript{56} Cfr. Id., \textit{Sermo} 289, 6, 23 (transl. by E. Hill): “Everyman, notice how you were born: even if you were born a noble, you were born naked. What’s nobility, anyway? At birth, poor and rich are equally naked”.
\textsuperscript{58} Augustine, \textit{Sermo} 51, 1, 2. (transl. by R.G. MacMullen).
for His own crucifixion, which He was yet to affix even on the foreheads of kings, exposed
to the contemptuous glances of the impious in connection with that wherein the hearts of
saints were thereafter to glory.\footnote{Id., \textit{In Iohannis Evangelium}, 117, 3 (transl. by J. Gibb).}

The gaze depends on the attitude of the beholder, on the way in which he looks at. There
are a pitiful gaze and an impious gaze and they are opposite to each other. The pitiful
gaze corresponds to the dramatic attitude and, as we have seen, is an emotive posture;
it is to look closely, intimately and is based on the link neighbourliness-likeness, which
is a participatory relationship (mercy). This gaze demonstrates its proximity by acting,
because it can clearly see who the man exposed is, recognizes him, perceives him as
similar and, then, helps him. The impious gaze, instead, coincides with the spectacular
attitude and consists of looking from a far; it is proper of the man “away from God”,
unable to recognize the body exposed and therefore to perceive it as similar. This gaze
sees only the humiliation of a condemned man and the mockery of a crucified criminal.
It taunts the King of the Jews shown by the \textit{titulus crucis}.

The dramatic thinking, hence, doesn’t make Christ’s exposed body on the cross
merely the opposite of Noah’s body, but rather the antidote. The episode told in Genesis
doesn’t speak about a nakedness intentionally shown, but about a stolen nakedness, vio-
lated by a lawless gaze. For this reason, this story didn’t teach anything about the shows,
but simply rejected them. The crucified body, however, not only introduces a “visible”
that causes the fall of idols, but goes beyond and unmask the dynamics of the show,
making it an attitude of man. Crucifixion is not an image that redeems the images of the
world: it will never be an icon (even historically) or an image painted by the “commerce
of the gaze”. Alternately, it will be read as the mystery\footnote{About the close connection cross-crucifix intended as “mystery” and not as image, see the carolingian \textit{querelle}, in Bino, \textit{Il dramma e l’immagine}, 202-206.}: the “drama” through which
God displays and explains that He is not made in man’s image, but that man is made
in His image. In order to see this drama it is indispensable to get involved in it and see
closely; then, feel the others and act.

A body exposed can become an object on display, a self-exhibit, a show. Or it can
be a naked body, helpless, in danger, even abandoned. It depends both on the way the
body itself is “exposed” and on the way the body is looked at. In other words, it depends
on the personal relationship among the bodies. Dramatic thinking throws the challenge
of seeing others as though within a parental relationship. It is an emotional and affective
challenge: that of likeness.