

ART IN HISTORY: RESISTING SOCIAL INVISIBILITY

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Abstract

I seek to understand the skill of looking, the solid basis of art history, but specifically the “how to” of it that we take too easily for granted. That looking leads to seeing is not obvious. In this article I develop a theoretical metaphor that is social, ethical, and visual, and can help art history in its mission. This is how it came to me. Once, on the street, I heard a man, of obviously foreign background, murmur to himself: “they don’t even look at me”. That was the moment when the seed of the short film embedded in this article was sown, and the theoretical metaphor of *visibilisation* came up. The consequence of this not looking and not talking in some sort of engagement with him, is that he radically does not belong, is not part of, the group within which he exists physically – the crowd.

Keywords: Image; Interdisciplinarity; Metaphor; *Refugeedom*; *Visibilisation*; *Inter-ship*.

Resumen

Busco comprender la habilidad de mirar, la base sólida de la historia del arte, pero específicamente el “cómo hacerlo” que damos por sentado con demasiada facilidad. Que el mirar lleva a ver no es algo obvio. En este artículo desarrollo una metáfora teórica que es social, ética y visual, y que puede ayudar a la historia del arte en su misión. La metáfora surgió de casualidad: una vez, en la calle, oí a un hombre de origen extranjero murmurar para sí: “ni siquiera me miran”. Fue entonces cuando apareció la semilla del cortometraje contenido en este artículo y surgió la metáfora teórica de la *visibilización*. La consecuencia de este “no mirar” y de la ausencia de compromiso con él a través del habla, es que él no pertenece, no es parte del grupo dentro del cual existe físicamente: la multitud.

Palabras clave: Imagen; Interdisciplinaridad; Metáfora; *Refugeedom*; *Visibilisation*; *Inter-ship*.

INTRODUCTION: RELATIVISING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Academic disciplinary fields cannot be isolated. Borders between them are always dubious, ambiguous, and mostly meaningless. This counts especially for a historical discipline such as art history. Hence my plea, now decades old, to develop interdisciplinarity as the key approach for all disciplines, especially those in the humanities, and of those, the ones with a historical priority more than all. This puts art history on the table. Especially today, with the omnipresence of visual images so dense, if it is to retain relevance, art history needs a basis in social thought in order to contribute useful knowledge to today's world. In order to connect social problematics with art from, or in, history, studying art requires an attitude that is eager to forge such connections, rather than clinging to a dogmatic disciplinary methodology based on "policed" borders. Yes, this is not a call to reject the forms of knowledge and the concepts that the discipline has developed over the years. Instead, it is the isolation of these that I have questioned.

I had developed this principle in a book, *Travelling Concepts*, now twenty years old, that demonstrates how this can be done without neglecting the conceptual tools that have been articulated in the discipline's tradition. Its chapters concentrate on well-known concepts frequently invoked in art-historical studies, such as Tradition, Intention, Mise-en-Scène, Framing, Performance/Performativity, and of course, the particularly relevant, indispensable one of *Image*. And in order to encourage a critical and friendly attitude, the book ends on Gayatri Spivak's inventive term "critical intimacy". That concept advocates an attitude that is both critical, and based on profound, "intimate" knowledge of what one criticizes. This concept avoids the habit of "trashing", consisting of over-critical, solely negative renderings of other scholars' work. I have both been guilty of trashing and suffered from it.¹

One of the fruitful ways to go about such bridge-building I had not yet considered separately from "image", is the concept of "metaphor". This concept can be deployed, not only for the sake of its own "travels" between areas, disciplines, and time periods but for its inherent interdisciplinarity. The concept of "metaphor" imposes itself in that in-between space where "image" is the meeting-place between language and vision. A metaphor is "travelling" by definition, in all sorts of ways, between all kinds of domains we tend to separate. Travel implies movement. I am very committed to movement; to do it and to recognize it. To begin with, to the moving image – not only or simply as in cinema or video, but to the conviction that all images are "moving". Whether the image itself moves or the viewer who cannot, ever, see an entire image in one look, as "still", images move in all kinds of ways, including emotionally and politically, by impressing us or soliciting us as witnesses. This indispensable presence of movement in art and literature, as in all cultural practices, has a solid background in the concept of metaphor, which sets meanings in movement through a fundamental multiple ambiguity.²

In Latin, the equivalent would be "translation"; to carry beyond; in Greek, "metaphor" is the word written on moving vans. Hence, "moving" as in changing locations would be an important aspect. This is why, instead of opposing linguistic to visual, abstract to figurative or concrete to abstract "representations" – a term I avoid – I propose a different, aberrant terminology, with invented words that in my view come closer to all the ambiguities the concepts of metaphor and image harbour. This moves away from habitual, classical usages of these words. Instead, I will try to set art history in movement by alleging some neologisms: invented, non-existing words, that can be considered metaphors, because they do what this issue of *Quintana* sets out to do: challenging rigid disciplinary boundaries through conceptualizing horizons of meaning, so that diverse disciplines can dialogue with each other. The special contribution of metaphors is ambiguity, which entices readers, listeners, or viewers, to develop the possible associations

more widely and in more depth. Hence, no word or image stays still. This widening serves goals of the order of the political, ethical, aesthetic and, of course, theoretical, within my continuous search to improve and expand the conceptual tool-kit of cultural analysis.³

MOVING AWAY FROM EXISTING WORDS

Whatever we do, language is part of it. Yet, language is not only an indispensable tool; it is also an obstacle, limited as it is by traditions, logics, and other ways of establishing and maintaining boundaries. Let me start to counter that limiting tendency with an example from an intensely interdisciplinary writer, Walter Benjamin, one of the prominent philosophers of modern thinking. Reflecting on translation, which is the Latinate term for metaphoring, he wrote: “While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds”.⁴

This is totally understandable. Yet, it transgresses quite some boundaries. Benjamin is not speaking here about art but about language; specifically, about translation. Clearly, he is not speaking in ordinary, straightforward language – if such a thing exists – but in that special use of words meant to bridge gaps between practices we tend to oppose, such as literal and figurative, or the visual and the verbal imagination. He wrote this in an essay on translation. Comparing the task of the translator with that of the poet – since he is writing about the French poet Charles Baudelaire – he creates a powerful image of the translator’s product as both rich (royal) and encompassing (ample); expansive yet enveloping. His image is a theoretical metaphor, rich in particular points about both language and its possible translations, including intermediality. The metaphors he is proposing, the fruit and its skin, which he contrasts with the robe with its folds, merge the two domains of cultural activity. One *sees* forms and texture, even if seeing, here, in turn, solicits other senses, like smell and touch. The metaphorical quality deployed here enables mixing and merging, what we could call “con-fusion”, if we bring in the hyphen between the preposition “con-”, meaning “with”, and the verb become noun of “fusion”, merging.⁵

In cultural analysis today, few predecessors are more frequently quoted, alleged, discussed, or “applied” than this figure. Inspired by Benjamin’s con-fusing metaphors I want to propose a few theoretical, conceptual metaphors that are non-existing words with powerful contents for understanding in the widening horizons of the current intellectual climate and social world. The primary neologisms, or non-existing words I propose here as theoretical metaphors, are *Refugeedom*, *Visibilisation*, and *Inter-ship*. Since none of these words exist, I propose them as metaphors in the best, most inspiring sense: as dialogic, expanding the horizon of understanding, and relating to the connections between art history and other domains in the humanities and social sciences. Given the current political tensions around the welcoming of refugees, especially in Europe, I selected the refugee as my topic. Refugees are on the move, in search for a safe place to live; a social problem for the world of today. What is their state, existence, life – their “refugee-*dom*”? With its anchoring in poetics, fictionality, imagination and above all, *imaging*, art can contribute more usefully than ever to the social world by (re-)connecting disconnected people (living in “refugeedom”) with a culture where they must be noticed (“*visibilisation*”), and through reciprocity and contact (“*inter-ship*”). It seems *pre-posterous* – to invoke another of my made-up words as theoretical metaphors: pre-posterous as con-fusing pre- and post-, hence, to replace chronology with a mutuality of time – to just come up with non-existing, new words, composed of older ones. Preposterous! In other words: how dare you! Ridiculous! For, the new / old word, as is the enriching effect of metaphors, also resonates with the ordinary sense of preposterous.⁶

In more acceptable terms: the problem of the conjunction “and” that lays at the heart of metaphor, is vital in the examination of art, (re?)presentation, and social reality; in particular, as my primary focus here, of *seeing* the life of refugees as members of our social world. My vision concerns an issue that is both strongly socio-political, and raises artistic, educational and intellectual questions; an issue that invokes some serious concerns about social life, in its relation to art; and the helping hand they can give each other in the attempt to make both “better”: more relevant, meaningful, mutual, and compassionate. This will assist me in making the case for learning through/from/with art, literature, and other dialogically oriented fields, such as urban sociology. I wish to consider such learning as, necessarily, an educational *internship* in looking. The *n* in that better-known term that indicates “learning through practice”, connects this learning with the interconnectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality I call *inter-ship*.

I seek to understand the skill of looking, the solid basis of art history, but specifically the “how to” of it that we take too easily for granted. Looking-seeing is not obvious; looking does not automatically yield seeing. How did this idea of a theoretical metaphor that is social, ethical, and visual, and can help art history in its mission, come to me? This is how it happened. Once, when I was walking in the street, I heard a man, of obviously foreign background, murmur to himself: “they don’t even look at me”. That was the moment when the seed of the short film embedded in this article was sown, and the theoretical metaphor of *visibilisation* came up. The consequence of this not looking and not talking in some sort of engagement with him, is that the foreigner radically does not belong, is not part of, the group within which he exists physically – the crowd. Loneliness is not a choice. He is doomed to it. He just *is* in solitude, without connections. But he is not alone, on the contrary. The crowds that surround him seem the more oppressive because of the lack of engagement. The cause of his solitude is his underlying state of refugee – his *refugee-dom*, of a person without state, without nation – which in our film is not articulated in language but *figured, imaged*, with more and more insistence by the indirect takes at varying rhythms. The verb *imaging* is another theoretical metaphor, away from normal words. It alludes to the effort to make an image, a visible one, in relation to an invisible or non-visualisable person, situation, or item. That imaging opens the object up for others to see. Our point was that the man, unseen, lonely, in the busy street, has the right to be seen. The film is, therefore, an exercise (intern-ship) in *visibilisation* – making visible, and teaches looking. It solicits viewers to become engaged witnesses, making an effort to visibilise the hitherto unseen refugee. This solicitation is the mission of an art history that heeds the call for social relevance, and thereby helps art to be, as it should, connected to society. The words that don’t “officially” exist, precisely because of their solicitation of our understanding that doesn’t come automatically, can be crucially important in this building of connections.

HELPFUL CON-FUSIONS: INTERDISCIPLINARITY, INTERMEDIALITY, AND PRE-POSTEROUS HISTORY

Before encouraging the readers of this article to watch the film, let me just say a few words about how the film begins its “lesson in looking” through metaphorizing our traditional binaries and turning them, through the conjunction “and”, into metaphorical ambiguities; *con-fusions*. In distinction from traditional film, this short film has no dialogue; it *is* dialogic, interdisciplinary, as well as pre-posterous, in itself. While a voice-over reads from the story of Joseph in the biblical book of Genesis, a character who passes for one of the very first refugees, the film begins with a manifold figuration, anchored in art history. The story is well known; it is a canonical example of a misogynistic view of women.

What we see is a fragment of the engraving by Rembrandt from 1634, pre-posterously made to move metaphorically. After half a minute or so, the image becomes blurred, and for a brief moment, illegible. But then it merges, *con-fuses* into a “real” scene: the biblical literary text and the work on paper are con-fusing into a theatrical enactment. That beginning is an exercise in the “reading” of the fine line between the still and the moving image, the image drawn and the image enacted; abstraction and narrative. Thus, it alerts us to the con-fusion of the two central modes of showing with which art history is concerned. The camera enters the figured scene from the bottom right and brings the viewer close to the voyeuristic position. This closeness to a position that is ethically problematic, figures a moment of choice for the viewer. That moment is itself a metaphor. It triggers a hesitation: if and how we can look at the “bed-scene” that follows. Its goal is to make the viewer responsible, and turns looking itself into an ethical act.

This is an issue and a mode of looking in which art history cannot avoid societal relevance. When the slowly moving camera meets the face of the woman who is lying in bed, the camera almost seems to stutter, in con-fusion, when the lines and dots become a face, this one not drawn but “real”, enacted by a live human being – the film scholar and actress Catherine Lord. The camera is doing the metaphoring here, moving between still and moving, etching and acting, historical art and a contemporary societal issue. It then moves more, and the image changes drastically when a servant appears, bringing breakfast to the woman who is still in bed. The bedding, the curtains, preserve in their physical reality the ambiguity of the artwork and the “real” enactments as metaphors. The woman begins to touch the man, desiring him.

He withdraws slowly from the woman’s grip, and then his state of refugee becomes substantial – let’s say, *visible*. He flees; he feels no longer safe in the house of the master. So, let’s practice the new words as metaphors by showing the refugee in his *refugee-dom*, and offer him *inter-ship*: connection, through the theoretical metaphor of *visibilisation*. This is a demonstration of the limit between a traditional art history and a mode of bringing that discipline into the present and into a wider societal frame. At the same time, it is an internship of dealing with intermediality. Rembrandt, that hero of art history, is moved to deal with a situation that is as millennia-old as it is actual, firmly relevant for the present. Let me now invite the readers of this journal to watch the short film in and through which we, as the makers of it, invite you to learn through practice (internship) that many aspects of historical and contemporary con-fuse.⁷

This link gives direct access to the film: <https://vimeo.com/836809823>

What do we see, and how does this either draw or reject limits around art history? On everyday television, we see images of people walking with luggage, small children and exhausted faces. This tends to fill most of us with compassion; perhaps some with irritation, for the repetitiveness of such imagery, and others, political right-wingers, with hostility. Repetition triggers boredom. But also, that viewing situation is limited to the Western viewer – “us” – who look at the people in the television images as “others”. Is it possible to make the focalisation – another theoretical metaphor – *double*, two-sided, mutual, so that the refugees can also shed light on the environment they enter and the people therein? This is what cultural analyst Esther Peeren, academic director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) proposed in a book in which refugees are central (as specters, according to her book’s topic): “a re-focalization that looks *with* rather than *at* the specter and recognizes that this specter is always also a self as I am always also an other” (Peeren 2014, 29).⁸

The phrase “lonely but not alone” that we used as the subtitle of the film, comes from a very unusual, indeed, opposite framework: an autobiography of former Dutch queen Wilhelmina, published in 1959. There, she used the phrase to describe her life as always surrounded by a dense crowd of people at court but still, always feeling lonely. For, the workers at court served

her, but did not personally communicate with her. The status difference between the queen and her servants precluded that possibility. The two qualifiers, lonely and alone, which seem to be synonymous, but... are here, through the oppositional conjunction “but”, rather presented as an opposition; an opposition metaphorically qualifying a non-existing noun.

The metaphorical language with its focus on opposition helped, for, *contradiction* is key to the life of refugees. So, we took that contradiction as our guideline, for the political tenor but also to invent a mode of filming and editing. “But” does not produce an opposition but a complementary, even causal-logical continuation. What it says is that the bond between political thinking and audio-visual art-making is tight, and not at all contradictory. I have called that, in a recent book, “image-thinking”. In consequence, espousing the contradictory situation of the refugee, the aesthetic verging towards abstraction is also steeped in contradiction: on the one hand, the viewer is compelled to keep looking for the main figure to which the film is devoted, the lonely refugee; something the usual conception of abstraction considered superfluous, even misplaced. On the other hand, once we start following him visually, the man constantly seems to vanish, blur, or fade into indirection; or, when the topic of this man as a refugee is more or less concretely figured, it takes some effort to discern him as distinct from the surrounding crowd (fig. 1). This tension, or if you like, contradiction between visibility and invisibility became the central mode of “imaging”, enticing a practice of looking where things stay in tension while coming together; a *con-fusion* of refugees and residents. Hence, we also toyed with a somewhat didactic subtitle that accompanied us during the filming and editing: “a lesson in looking”.

Fig. 1 Mieke Bal and Lena Verhoeff, *Refugeedom: Lonely But Not Alone*, 2023 (video, 24:41). Camera: Lena Verhoeff



The idea of contradiction stayed with us when Lena Verhoeff and I were commissioned by Palestinian-Dutch professor Ihab Saloul to make a film on refugees on behalf of an event he was planning to organize, *Encountering Absence*. This two-weeks-long event – with a starkly contradictory and idealistic title – was organized by the international organization SPEME, of scholars and artists and others from Italy, the Netherlands, Argentina and Colombia. The

project emanated from the Umberto Eco chair in Bologna, where Saloul is a permanent visiting professor. The contradiction in the everyday life of refugees stuck with us: having left behind their emotional ties, they are lonely; but being surrounded by a dense crowd of unknown people, they are never alone. Just like Queen Wilhelmina and the likes of her: people in power positions that isolate them. The powerful and the powerless share that contradiction.⁹

The institutions collaborating in SPEME were keen on opening up the silence around the situation, this fate of refugees, in order to activate the social consciousness of what, in fact, we are doing when we continue to let this situation endure. Passivity is also an act, because a choice, and the indifference of it, ethically deeply problematic. To awaken that social consciousness, Lena and I thought, we must make that situation *visible*. For, visibility is bound both to the present tense and to the public sphere. But how do you do that – showing, making visible, without falling into the trap of the usual voyeuristic look that philosopher Theodor Adorno worried about in relation to the suffering in concentration camps, the inner, emotional state of people we don't know?¹⁰

Visibilisation was the metaphorical word. To make that word/concept more concrete, I will point out a few elements of the way we did this, to bring up a few of the aesthetic strategies that help visibilisation along. Visibilisation, or making visible, is thus the neologistic metaphor I am proposing. The verb inherent in the term implies movement, the indispensable nature of images, imaging, and figuring. In order to stay within the Adornian modesty, avoiding voyeurism, the set-up was fictional. Apart from the short narrative beginning and end, the images are all video takes we imagined, according to what we knew and imagined of the life of refugees. Let me begin with the end, to stay with the metaphoric contradiction.¹¹

Towards the end of the film, as a transition to the credits, a photograph from the collection of historical photos of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, made over a century ago, by American artist Clarence Sinclair Bull in 1916 titled *Refugees*, slowly *moves* through the screen. The historical status of the photograph works as a reminder that refugeedom has a long history that won't end any time soon. Migration, exile, and refugeedom as the saddest of those movements, are of all times. But we are responsible for our now-time, our contemporary world. And in this now-world we aimed to make a statement of recognition of the long-duration of refugeedom.¹²

The early picture as an inter-temporal metaphor as well as an inter-medial instance of the moving quality of even still images, gives an adequate impression of the conception of our film. The shadow of a view, the emotional torment, the danger, the visual allusion to the turbulent sea, enhanced by turning the still image into a moving one – the sea that so frequently throws the refugee onto the coast, alive or drowned: all this is “visibilised”. As a metaphor, it can serve as a summary, derived from that photograph from over a century ago. We placed this most abstract image of the film at the end of it because the elements I just mentioned are more visible after having seen the metaphorical integration of abstract and figurative images that constitute the body of the film. During the watching of the film, viewers will have acquired some skill in practicing *visibilisation*.

The loneliness felt emotionally and sensuously by refugees when they are stuck in foreign places, is very painful because, as the Indian artist Nalini Malani says so poignantly, simply, and clearly, in one of her works on paper from 2020-2021, quoting a poem by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire: “You only leave home if HOME won't let you stay”. Malani made that work when she was herself in a kind of exile. Due to the corona crisis lockdown she was stuck in Amsterdam on her way back from Barcelona, where she had just celebrated, with a solo exhibition, the Miró prize that was awarded to her. It took a year and a half before she could return to Bombay. So, although her situation was not at all tragic, not comparable to that of refugees at all, it made her feel a strong emotion of what she expressed in that artwork; a solidarity through double

focalisation, foregrounded by the ambiguity of “you”. *YOU*, as inter-ship: the central theoretical metaphor.¹³

The loneliness of the refugee surrounded by people is so strongly felt, emotionally and sensuously, because the contrast between the lonely person recently arrived in an unknown place, unable to speak the local language, and then, on the other hand, the busy multitude around him, is so intense and imposing. The contrast is what *makes* their emotions. The refugee feels it, experiences it, without having the opportunity to express or share it. That contrast was, in fact, the central metaphor of the film – the thematic, semantic word “topic” would have been totally misplaced. That contrast is the main point of our aesthetic “visibilisation”; making that emotionally “feelable” through the sense of vision was our goal.

Making the contrast itself visible takes a variety of forms, all metaphorical. Some takes present reflections in shop and restaurant windows; there are blurry takes of people walking fast in the streets; there is a tiny reflection of the man in a reflecting globe in a shop display. We can also see or sense the temporal contrast between the movements of the crowd and the stagnation of the man standing still in the street, alone. All these formal “takes” convey metaphorically a sense of loneliness. At some point, we see the man’s hesitation to steal a piece of fruit in a shop display outside. He must be starving (fig. 2). Then he decides to not fall into that stereotype of the foreigner as a thief. That decision is not reflected intellectually or through internal monologue; we just *see* it happen. At another moment, we see him intensely looking at a canal boat full of tourists, probably hoping to greet them and be greeted by them. But no; nothing communicative happens. These are just some examples of the visibilisation of the refugee’s loneliness.

Fig. 2 Mieke Bal and Lena Verhoeff, *Refugeedom: Lonely But Not Alone*, 2023 (video, 24:41). Camera: Lena Verhoeff



The confused lines of the opening image of the etching by Rembrandt are filmed in both slow movement and blown-up details; the one metaphoring the other. Bringing in a famous artwork is a way to allude, not only to the very long history of refugeedom, but also to the status of “high”, canonical art in relation to the issues that great artists like Rembrandt broach in their work, through figurations of canonical stories. This is what artists often do, and Rembrandt in

particular. Art history roars its head, within the frame of an inter-medial con-fusion where imaging and poetics join forces. The slow movement and the blown-up details in the filmic image in *Refugee-dom* that make the etching almost illegible, can be seen to, in the literal sense, *make sense*. Due to that intervention, it becomes abstract, generating a sense of alienation. And that alienation is precisely the point of the depiction of a famous story of refugeedom, misogyny, and as the koranic version of the story teaches us, the latter's opposite: solidarity among women.¹⁴

Estrangement is the metaphor of the consequence of distancing, hostility, suspicion, indifference: all general features of the social attitudes towards refugees. The foreigner/stranger is estranged, as that metaphor has it, from the local inhabitants who refuse to engage with him. They don't speak to him, they don't look at him. If and when they do, it is in the sense of hostility, such as, in our film, of the young men who bully him, just after he escapes from the grip of the woman who wants him in her bed. The bullies punch him and blame him for not speaking English; they mock him, and when the refugee takes to the street outside, they follow him for their own amusement (fig. 3). This is the moment that the body of this non-narrative film begins, in all its abstraction that is a metaphor in itself. It focuses exclusively on this man, who is never alone, yet never in contact. After a short hard-cut he finds himself in a busy city street, and a bit later, close to a mirroring globe, which is the outside wall of the new depot of the museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In the utmost metaphor, thanks to Lena Verhoeff's creative interventions in the editing, we see the reflections of the passers-by walking through the refugee's face. This almost violent-seeming imaging enhances the strong, close presence of the crowd that the refugee does not manage to connect with. They are not so many, not a dense crowd; but their walking on his face says enough of what it feels like for him. This is a visual intervention that displays the paradoxical contrast between the man whose face is all we see, and the people walking on it, not looking at him at all (fig. 4).

Fig. 3 Mieke Bal and Lena Verhoeff, *Refugeedom: Lonely But Not Alone*, 2023 (video, 24:41). Camera: Lena Verhoeff



Fig. 4 Mieke Bal and Lena Verhoeff, *Refugeedom: Lonely But Not Alone*, 2023 (video, 24:41). Camera: Lena Verhoeff



This is a moment that the body of this non-narrative film shows its metaphoricality in all its abstraction. It is a poignant instance of what French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has term “the figural”. This concept is a brilliant instance of the need of art history and literary studies to con-fuse. Lyotard’s concept of *the figural* argues for language as more dynamic, turning it into a force, a movement, closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation and intuition, and also spatiality. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

[...] nothing other than the energy that folds or wrinkles the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form... [...] And if it expresses, it is because movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations with a seism that makes sense...¹⁵

These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of “movement” rather than any technical specificity.¹⁶

The power of this concept, so well explained by Rodowick in relation to film and media, and by Ionescu more specifically in relation to art history, accounts for an enduring disproportion between different spheres, as Vlad Ionescu phrases it: “the broader and heterogeneous sphere of desire and sensation confronted with the narrower and regulating sphere of composition”. He aims to address representation as “a field of *differences* between registers and how they mediate the world, allowing us to understand it better from various perspectives” (Ionescu 2018, 12). In distinction from stable, enduring images, the figural “introduces the idea of an unexpected force disturbing any stable system of representation” (Ionescu 2018, 13). The key of Ionescu’s vision of the figural is that “it designates a force that is always already at work in visual representation” (Ionescu 2018, 13). The crucial word “force” denies the permanency of images.

Although these may have long durations as objects, they constantly change, or move, in the way they work on their viewers. And, whereas art in history may possess specific features that attach the art to the world and to our sense-perception, that historical position is not to be rigidly defined. In contrast, the key-word “force”, and Rodowick’s dynamism as implied in “seism”, bring life to both the images and the world to which their moving existences relate. The semantic kinship between figure and figurative, which the figural can be seen as “working through” (in the Freudian sense) contaminates the history of art as moving. The figural is “this *visual appearance* that disturbs, disrupts and deforms [...] the structured order of discourse” (Ionescu 2018, 19). That disturbing dynamic is, for me, the crucial way in which this concept can bring a new life to those places in art history where that discipline has sometimes succumbed to the temptation of methodological rigidity, even border-policing. Instead, the mobility of everything, from art objects to people, to cultures and ethnic background, that the concept of the figural foregrounds, helps develop a more productive vision of images and their conceptual cousins. In connection to the concept of the figural, my neologisms function precisely in that way.

NO CONCLUSION

This brings us back to the question of that man who murmured that people didn’t even look at him. Reading the fragment from the Coran, and thus, including the narrative and the sacred text from that *other* culture, seemed the best way to bring the imaging of the refugee into our orbit, with the help of a discursive medium that embraces the visuality of the figural. In making this film, Lena Verhoeff and I have been searching for means, modes, and media capable of encouraging viewers to *see* the foreigner, refugee and immigrant, from a perspective that is positive, receptive, and empathic, wishing them welcome. For this to be possible, making him visible was the primary requirement. The visibilisation, with all the ambiguities in the forms, was the permanent guideline in making the film. Metaphors, with their ambiguities and multiple meanings, can do this. And art history, with its limitations but also its accumulated insights, remains *indispensable*, especially, but not only, in view of its continued “lessons in looking”, but never as “boss”, as a dictator of methodological certainties.

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Notes

¹ *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: as Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). It has been translated early on into Spanish [*Conceptos viajeros en las humanidades: una guía de viaje*; traducción, Yaiza Hernández Velázquez, CENDEAC, Murcia, 2009] and Polish, and recently, with a delay of 22 years, into French. For “critical intimacy”, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). On trashing, see my article “Narratology and the Rhetoric of Trashing”, *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 3 (1992): 293–306.

² On the moving quality inherent in images, see the volume I edited, *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*. Serie VII. Historia del Arte (New Era) Special Issue: *Art Moves: Performativity in Time, Space and Form*, no. 4 (May, 2016).

³ But my fondness of movement is not meant to privilege or restrict its point. See my article “Movement, Precarity, Affect”, in *Deleuze, Guattari and the Art of Multiplicity*, edited by Radek Przedpełski and S.E. Wilmer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 83–96.

⁴ “The Task of the Translator” in *Illuminations*, edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 75. This essay, central to my argument as my primary philosophical object, will henceforth be referred to by page numbers only. See also the discussion in Derrida *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93–161.

⁵ The hyphen and its consequences for this word were suggested to me by South-Korean philosopher Kyoo Lee (personal correspondence). On multiple ambiguities, see her brilliant book *Reading Descartes Otherwise: Blind, Mad, Dreamy, and Bad*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). To my regret I only came across that book after making the film on Descartes, from 2016, on which I comment more extensively in an article, “Thinking in Film”, in *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, eds. Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 173–201. Kyoo Lee is a key figure for the important philosophical journal *philoSOPHIA A Journal of Trans-Continental Feminism* established in 2008, of which she is an editor-in-chief.

⁶ On the potential of the play with “pre-posterous”, see my book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). The hyphen I now use and theorize frequently was not yet there. I wrote this book to explain how I conceived of the historical aspect in art history, to answer the critics who trashed my book *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), for not being historical. That misunderstanding required an answer; hence the later book.

⁷ The short film you can watch through the link is titled *REFUGEEEDOM: LONELY BUT NOT ALONE*, was made in 2022–23 by Mieke Bal and Lena Verhoeff, as an Abstract Essay film. 24.43’, colour, Dolby sound, voice-over but no dialogue.

⁸ Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), esp. 29.

⁹ For more information about SPEME, see <https://www.speme.eu/> For Saloul’s work, see his important article from 2020 “Postmemory and Oral History: Inter-generational Memory and Transnational Identity in Exile”, in a very relevant book, currently even more important than it has been before, *Visioning Israel-Palestine: Encounters at the Cultural Boundaries of Conflict*, ed. Gil Pasternak (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 244–263. See also Saloul’s earlier book, *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination: Telling Memories*, (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018 [2012]).

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and translated by Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1974]).

¹¹ In my account of the film, I use the pronoun “we” to enhance the collective nature of filmmaking. Especially the co-director Lena Verhoeff and the actor Sly Maceo Sampimon have worked together with me on the basis of total equality. Hence, this “we” is not the traditional evasive sign of quasi modesty.

¹² On the tension between the contemporary and the burden of its historical roots, see the very powerful article by W. J. T. Mitchell, from 2021 “Present Tense: An Iconology of the Epoch”, *Critical Inquiry* 47, (Winter 2021): 370–406. My short book from 2020 *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness, The Contemporary Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020) further theorizes the concept of the contemporary.

¹³ On Malani’s artwork, see my article “Inter-ships with Nalini Malani: The Foreshortening of Time”, in *Nalini Malani: My Reality is Different* (London: National Gallery Global, distributed by Yale University Press, 2022), 86–99. I had earlier written a book about her invented medium, Shadow-Plays, *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani’s Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2016).

¹⁴ The Genesis story has ideological problems, in particular in a xenophobic discourse that has been passed practically unnoticed. This contrasts sharply with the Koranic version. On the comparison between the two versions, as well as Rembrandt's etching, see my book *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁵ I quote from Rodowick's rendering of Lyotard's concept *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2001), 9–10. To grasp the concept in more detail and nuances, see Rodowick's first chapter, "Presenting the Figural", 1–44.

¹⁶ For another solid explanation of the *figural* in relation to and distinction from "figure" and "figurative", within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, see Vlad Ionescu, "The Figure in Time: on the Temporality of the Figural", in Laura Marin and Anca Diaconu, *Working Through the Figure: Theory, Practice, Method* (București: Editura Universității din București, 2018), 11–61. This author discusses the ideas of influential theorists of images. I discuss the conception of the cinematic as kinetic apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert's prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural (2017a, 24–43).