



Angelo Titonel: reality and the revealing pretence of art (1971)

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Many of the artists whose fate was to live through the terrors and misery of the war during their adolescence have never managed to shake off the nightmares of those dark days. Those nightmares have weighed heavily on the backs of men – and still bear down with all their weight today, in the fullness of those men's maturity – not only of those men who are by nature more vulnerable in disposition, but also of those who, supported by a due degree of clear-sightedness with respect to the world around them and by a due degree of their intellectual and ethical rigour, have demonstrated their ability to embrace – and to dazzle, as observers, actors and witnesses – the terms and responsibilities of the great social conflicts of the post-war period. One example that will suffice to illustrate them all could be Guerreschi, who “[...] perpetually agitates in front of our eyes the possibility that history may – in forms that are different, yet similar in their substance – repeat itself”.

Well, I believe there is no option but to progress by means of reflections of this kind if we are fully to understand both the factors held in common by the generation that has now passed the watershed of forty years of age and by that other generation whose memories of the hell of the war are of the kind that are dissolved in the mists of the bad dreams of infancy – and what separates them.

To be sure, the artists who belong to the later generation – when they are responsible men – share their predecessors' apprehensions, concerns and commitments. But what differentiates the later from the earlier generation is substantially the fact that its members are capable of exploring the heart of today's real world without first having to go through that erosive 'struggle with themselves', without having to come to terms ceaselessly with the obsessive memories of the past: in short, the fact that they can apply all their best energies to understanding the present (a present that actually benefits from the advances that have meanwhile taken place in the process of human emancipation, so that it now offers perspectives that are significantly different from the outlook of the Cold War years, when today's forty-year-olds were growing to maturity).

So marked is this separation that it is even perceptible on the level of cultural choices. Today's forty-year-old (and again the example I have in mind is one of the calibre of Guerreschi) continues to aim, as in the past and like today's younger generation, at a cold, lapidary language, but, unlike his younger counterpart, he has always had to convince himself, before all others, of the contemporary ineffectiveness of an art of protest based on shouting and gesturing (in short, on any 'apocalyptic' behaviour).

Things are rather different for those artists who have come to maturity in that rather different objective situation that somehow includes among the order of 'spontaneous' reflections the idea that it is necessary to come to grips – today – with forms of power capable of indulging in the bloodiest manifestations of violence, should they prove to be 'productive' (such as what we know as the 'local wars' being fought in the shadow of the nuclear threat), yet governed – wherever possible or, rather, inevitable, to avoid being check-mated – by ideas of domination based on an approach as methodical as it is apparently attractive, one of everyday 'pacification', of the everyday, painless sterilization of consciences.

It is in the light of these de facto situations – and convictions – that we must see the widespread tendency, among the committed artists of the younger generation, to achieve as active as possible an exchange between the image charged with cognitive and critical value (in short, with the power to liberate) and, respectively, the – variously intended – images whose value is recognitive (and which can be found in *réportages*) or conventional and instrumental (and which come from the optical repertoire of mass propaganda). Of all these various currents – well worth studying, but not the matter in hand here – that can be grouped under the heading of this tendency, the one we know as the documentary is not developing these days as one of the many possible alternatives in view of an authentic form of mass communications, free of all

mystification, but to a massive extent, in a way that could well be described as abnormal. So much so as to run the risk that the severity of an objective need may turn into the volubility of a display of technical resources: so that the inexperienced observer may risk confusing the passive adoption of the analytical tools of photography and cinema with the mediated use of their lenses, with competition with them and even with the unmasking of certain tricks they play.

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It is in a context of this kind – one of generation, of tendency and of troubled awareness of the chances and of the snares lying in wait for the research in question – that we can place the painting (I should mention in passing that the author does not make use of any techniques of application) of young Angelo Titonel.

This is why, in my introduction to a uniquely committed personal of his held last year in Rome, I complained of the shortage of critical studies (sensed, obviously, to a particular degree in such a cultural context) that provide the necessary continuity to the acute observations about photography as a tool of investigation and document of evidence of the historical process of a Walter Benjamin: in other words, of the shortage of studies that build on that discourse, expanding it to embrace the question of the convergence and divergence between the processes of inquisitorial observation generated by photographic documentarism and, respectively, by pictorial objectivism, such as were outlined during the forty or fifty years we have left behind us, starting with the experience of a certain branch of German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (that branch of research that oscillated between documentarism and 'magical realism' and that was headed by Grossberg, Völker and Räderscheidt) and with the more or less contemporary experiences of a Sheeler and a Demuth in the field of what is known as American Precisionism.

What convinces me to reason along these lines was (and is) the belief that painters who think along the same lines as our young Titonel here and, in other countries, the German Nagel, who is of much the same age as he is, or elsewhere the rather older Monory and Colville, are to some extent continuers of that culture and have nothing whatsoever to do – ideologically and formally – with that art of reportage, impassive and cynical, that comes under the heading of the many-branched, heterogeneous experiences of American and European Pop Art.

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So while the difficulties with which artists of this bent are obliged to reckon are not, therefore, in any case inherent to the 'art of reportage', we must still discern whether it poses a question for them of keeping a sharp lookout for the traps of a completely different nature into which more than one of the 'magical realism' painters of the twenties and thirties risked falling, and some actually fell.

The traps into which some of the Americans and some of their German counterparts fell – because of their excessive trust in progress (motivated ideologically by a curious confluence of pragmatism and 'dogmatic' idealism) – were those of a sort of 'reverse neo-classicism'.

One detail that we should not neglect is the fact that both Sheeler and Demuth (the former with a past in photography, the latter in technological studies, but both also nourished by European artistic culture) on occasion acritically identified the appeal of exactitude that emanates from the urban and industrial panorama with the measures (values of synthesis and of perspective ordering) of one or another expression of ancient or early Renaissance art, regardless of any considerations about the respective sociocultural contexts.

It is not just the structuring of certain of their paintings that tells us this: in some cases, it also transpires from their choice of

titles: titles such as *My Egypt* (Demuth) or *Classical Landscape* (Sheeler), for compositions inspired by the 'spectacle' of industrial complexes looming at the edge of a city. Well, the least that can be said when faced with episodes of this kind, at least with regard to these specific paintings, is that both the artists in question saw the factory as an object of contemplation and not as a place of conflict (although this was something that did not happen to the Germans).

A lot of water has certainly passed under the bridge since those days, but that by no means signifies that similar attitudes may not crop up again, in other guises. As a matter of fact, I have the feeling that today's artistic panorama is not exactly miserly with examples of this kind: starting with the showiest form, known as 'technological art', and ending with the most modest, but no less symptomatic, manifestations of a certain type of 'new figuring' and 'combination-based' montage art, in which it is so obvious that the underlying conflicts of our day and age are quite simply foreign to these art forms that the matter does not even require explanation.

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Well, while it is true that a young artist of the calibre of Titonel has demonstrated that he is aware of risks of this kind, it is also true that this selfsame awareness invests the difficulties inherent in the task he is devoted to. In order to grasp those difficulties by the horns, we have to go back to the question that was mentioned at the outset: the question of the convergences and divergences between photographic documentarism and pictorial objectivism.

As I already dealt with this question in my introduction to Titonel's previous personal in Rome, I shall merely quote an extract of that essay here, because it still expresses my point of view (and because it has the advantage of being brief).

For the artist whose vocation or ideological background makes him unwilling to accept the aesthetic of the specular nature of the image, it is not a matter, as I said on that occasion, of "cutting selectively into a pre-existing reality, as the photographer does when applying himself to extracting 'circumstantial evidence' from a visual document. But it is a matter of disassembling and re-assembling the scaffolding of reality, of experimenting with the various possible relationships between things. In short, of plotting a clear graph of reason that aims at the maximum of ambiguity between the quotation of current events and the revealing fiction of art, so as to evoke in the observer a variety of possible interpretations; so as to give him the illusory impression that he enjoys a freedom of choice" (in the same way as is used by the techniques of mass propaganda), "while nevertheless channelling his impressions and his judgements within a given order of ideas" (within the bed of a critical view of reality).

What set that 'ambiguity' off in young Titonel's painting were then (and are still now, albeit with the acquisition of new means of expression, as we shall see) both the object's isolation in a plausible but unrelated environment (or in a space that, despite being equally 'pertinent', turns out to be uninhabitable on closer observation) and, on the other hand, through a highly filtered operation of painting based on a monochrome approach, the barely perceptible alteration of a detail or even the equally 'imperceptible' replacement of the detail itself. These resources were joined, albeit less frequently, by that of the combination – or grafting – of phenomena that were equally 'probable' but that, once associated (or rather integrated), contributed to the formation of an allusion of a new, autonomous image.

Typical of this, in that exhibition, was the large composition that superimposed crash helmets on top of piles of car wheel rims and set the lot against a horizon, generating an ambiguous oscillation between the idea of the photograph shot in the open, in one of those junkyards that litter the less salubrious of our urban suburbs, and that of the ironic representation of the modern day 'flesh and blood dummy' (the robot, or man of order).

Well, without prejudice to Titonel's basic objectives, the objectives of a critical realism with an alert eye for those social malaises that are nowadays an indiscriminate trust in the value of operating energy, the passiveness and serial nature of our choices of models of consumption and behaviour (practical, ethical and political), and also without prejudice to his firm

beliefs about the cognitive – and persuasive – power of art that pretends that the image has a specular nature (of art whose intentions are concealed), it is to that particular moment of his past research that Titonel ultimately gave a preponderance of development, with inventive verve that turns out to be rather surprising to the eye of the observer who knows that only one year has passed between his personal in Rome and this one here in Florence.

I believe that the motivation behind this current trend of his can be found in an order of reflection inherent to the very notion (and practice) of the 'pretended' specular nature of the image, on which Titonel has in the past based (and still does, but with other implications of language) his figurative 'method'.

In his latest works, Titonel actually demonstrates that he has spent the meantime measuring increasingly carefully the risk of identifying the revealing function of the cold and 'neutral' sign with the function of the sign that reduces the complexity of reality, with the function of the sign intentionally vested (by virtue of a misunderstood notion of essentiality and of total adhesion to the aspects and the problems of the present) with a well-defined cultural density.

To be sure, it is one thing to undertake suggesting to the observer the 'axiom' that reality is always out there waiting to be discovered; to undertake, in short, persuading him to look at things familiar to him in the same way that he looks upon things unexplored and unknown, with the eye and the mind free of the habits that prejudice knowledge; it is quite another thing to consider such a prerogative (which has always distinguished the specificity of the cognitive processes of art), convinced of the need to sacrifice to the 'social' requirements of the lapidary style such tools or processes that may, with the wisdom of hindsight, turn out to be useful or even indispensable, for the precise reason of that same stimulus to knowledge that has to be generated in the observer.

These are tools such as (in this specific case) the ductility of the analogical movement between one object and another, or between one detail and another; the energetic reference, made by activating a movement of this kind, back to forms of reality unlike the ones represented (to be suggested to the observer); ultimately, the reference back to the indirect experiences – to the experiences of culture – that dwell, albeit to an extremely variable extent and dimension, in the conscience of every human being and are liable to stimulate and increase his faculties of judgement.

The impression I have is that Titonel has profited visibly from focusing his attention over the last year on all of these points, but in particular on the last of them.

Already that composition made using wheel rims and crash helmets that I mentioned a short while ago would not have found anything foreign in the idea of hinting at a connection between immobility, vacuity or the 'terribleness' of the fictional personage created by building on a simple pile of objects and the forms of the bust or the herm, with their centuries of cultural inheritance. In short, in the idea of stimulating an awareness in the observer of the relativity of the 'unprecedented', as proposed by contemporaneity, whenever he considers the object being proposed (with all its novelty of form and function) in relation to the underlying motivations of mankind's eternal struggles for emancipation.

In yet other words, the idea of inviting the observer to ponder on the fact that, seen from this standpoint, there is no such thing as a 'modern object', without any history at all behind it and whose context it cannot escape. Many of Titonel's latest paintings must be seen in the light of a creative and critical design of this kind. I particular – in my opinion – the entire cycle of his 'portraits' or compositions of runners who are also cosmonauts (or vice-versa, or again: suffice to remember Cocteau's celebrated movie invention that takes a modern version of a tale of Greek mythology and identifies need and destiny with the image of the modern-day motorcyclist), in which even the use of colour – or, if you prefer, the conflict between the various pictorial textures and the 'documentarist' monochrome – can be traced back to a similar aim.

Here we find overalls with folds that develop in a somehow 'modular' trend and with a colour scheme in the weave – ranging from a dull yellow to ochre and ivory – that are lengths of synthetic fabric and, at the same time, traditional cloth, drapery and 'winding sheets' (which gives them a reference back to the topic of the ultimate 'cost' of great human adventures, in the manifold treatments, both ancient and modern, related and reported to us by the centuries-old chronicle of art). And here, also, we find the formal tensions or 'fractures' – between faces marked by the brand of vulnerability and

objects (the crash helmets) that remain 'invulnerable'.

Here it is to the 'shells' and to the 'incorruptible' enamels of the objects that reference is made – and preponderantly so – by that analogical movement I mentioned before. It is a movement that branches out in depth – into immediately identifiable or vaguely 'inscrutable' levels – in the density of the history of art (and, if you like, in the history of technology) as the history of humankind.

It is easy to imagine those crash helmets with a segmented colour scheme or printed with geometric labyrinths, which refer the observer back from an illusory specular representation (or conventional representation, as in a printing press colour plate) to the splendid yet gelid (in more than one way inhuman), machinery-inspired decorativism of a certain American and European neo-geometric painting of today and, further back in time, to the hermetic 'cape' worn by De Chirico's dummy; or, again, to the sources (to the quattrocento iconography of the helm, the breastplate or the harness stud) from which that motif of the dummy was freely derived. To be sure, there is a certain unbroken – albeit underground – Leitmotiv that runs from objectivism interpreted in such a way to the proposals of metaphysical painting itself and, more in general, of the 'magical realism' that comes under a certain branch of German Neue Sachlichkeit: a Leitmotiv that is in any case more clearly perceived in Titonel's painting today than it was in the past (primarily as a consequence of that particular integration he has meanwhile achieved of colour in the 'documentary' context).

In the interests of avoiding any misunderstanding (although I believe I have ruled them out implicitly more or less everywhere as I go), I think it would be as well to underscore at this point that Titonel deals with these topics (along the lines, as we have seen, of a "symbolism without any symbolical apparatus") without any allusions of a nostalgic kind, but as an artist whose roots are planted firmly in his own day and age, in love with the 'modern object', albeit alarmed by the unknown quantities aroused by the conflicts between the rationality of production and the irrationality of the market, of consumption (in other words of the ultimate destination of the product), in the framework of today's technological developments; that, ultimately, every consideration about referring back to the processes of alienation set in motion by 'magical realism', and in particular to those generated by metaphysical painting, only has a clear meaning of its own on condition that it be taken for granted that the author is extraneous to those particular – and historically dated – forms of unease and malaise that the exciting, yet chaotic and cruel, growth of urban and industrial civilisation used to generate in one artist after another of the field of New Objectivity (and all the more so in a personality such as De Chirico, whose cultural background was neo-Romantic and who found it impossible to separate his amazement when confronted with the nascent machine age from his nostalgic or anxious ponderings on classicism as a form of Paradise Lost).

To be sure, once this point is properly clarified, the next step is not only to indicate, but to stress the increasing propensity towards an active dialectic relationship between modern documentarism and surreal experience as the distinguishing factor – today more than ever in the past – in the research undertaken by this young painter committed to a creative adventure which, like all adventures, involves a not inconsiderable amount of risk, but which, if it is maintained in future with the same tension that it enjoys today, may also go a very long way.