



The rest of the image. On the subject of Angelo Titonel (1999)

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"A painting I describe is not always a good painting" wrote Diderot in his critique of the 1767 Salon, "but the one I do not describe is certainly a bad painting".

Diderot was not mincing words: if you cannot translate it into a concept, it does not belong to the body of good painting. In his opinion, legibility is a necessary, though on its own not sufficient, condition of a painting's aesthetic quality. All it takes to condemn it for all time as an expressive failure is its refusal to be translated. The question now is whether art criticism has ever really managed to shake off this assimilation of the visible to the legible, of the painting to the written word. To be sure, the position of honour that Humanism reserved for painting by raising it to the status of a liberal art contributed decisively to this misleading reduction of the sense of representation to the meaning it conveys. After all, the liberal arts are first and foremost arts of discourse and the celebrated Humanist slogan *ut pictura poesis* only serves to confirm this primacy of the word.

Although contemporary criticism has had to come to grips with countless infringements of the conventional space of representation, it has never seriously questioned this hermeneutic criterion. Instead of disputing this reduction of the visible to the legible, a category such as abstraction, for example, apparently diametrically opposed to that of figuring, actually confirms it unconditionally. What, in fact, is abstraction ultimately "abstracted" from? This can only be defined in terms of a difference, a difference with respect to that which is fully legible, the degree that evidently continues to act as the landmark paradigm. Abstraction starts where the painting's legibility ends. Which means that, as a matter of fact, the operative, effective presence of sense is only acknowledged when there is something that can be translated into linguistic meanings. And wherever it cannot, such as in the case of pure abstraction, there would automatically be no sense: there would be nothing but a 'visible purity', without meaning (that literally says nothing), without thought; charged, if at all, with nothing but emotional, psychological or, worse still, symbolic values which – let there be no mistake about this – still require the accompanying discourse of the critic or the psychoanalyst to be brought to a state of intelligibility.

In short, regardless of whether the starting point is the figure or the intention of abandoning it, there is no way in which the image as such, in its autonomy and its constitutional difference with respect to the order of the discourse, can think or manifest any sense. The primacy of reflection, of the concept, of poetics – ultimately of theory – is in any case asserted over the practice of representation.

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This is why research of the kind conducted by Angelo Titonel is useful. It questions that paradigm and obliges the critic to reappraise his basic apparatus of categories. Just look at his trains, for example, or his human presences, which uninhabit metropolitan non-places, like cut-out silhouettes. It is that selfsame scrupulous illustrative accuracy that is used to reproduce them – those ironic fumes that rise almost like stereotypes, those tired bodies wearing soulless faces – that compromise the recognisability of what is presented on the canvas. Titonel does not need to write a caption under the image to specify that it is not what it represents. All he needs is his painting, used with extraordinary skill and with false immediacy, to deny representation. "This is not a train, this is not a station, these are not human beings" is what his paintings seem to be saying time and again. Whatever the order of the discourse identifies is denied by the practice of his painting, as he displays a sense that overturns Diderot's dictum, refusing as a principle to be translated into meaning, a sense that only painting is capable of probing and presenting. This is because the truth about the world attended by painting is not the same as the one that is revealed through the word. Its rigour is not that of syllogism. Its persuasive force is not that of rhetoric. Its critical capability is not a form of dialectic.

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Titonel has been initiated to the mystery shared by those who measure up, in painting, to a 'new objectivity'. The

expression does not refer to the legible material that is deposited on the canvas. The figure is not the reassuring element that confirms the user's expectations, reproducing the familiar or unusual aspects of his world. Objectivity is 'new' when it is the absolutely indescribable that occupies the foreground, under the guise of a meaning, of a recognizable form. But this indescribable dimension presented by painting is neither meaninglessness, nor the 'visible purity' charged with who knows what emotional values. Rather, to cite an elegant formula coined by Louis Mann, it is a remainder of an image, "as though its expressive medium, the visual, the iconic, caused it to be superfluous in relation to the discourse that tries to say it, incommensurable to it". The indescribable dimension is the image as a remainder: in other words, as what would remain outside the discourse, even if that discourse had said everything. Every authentic gesture of painting wagers on this intransitive remainder. It makes it into its own form of truth, into the specific way that the world 'happens' in painting. Thus what the order of discourse confines to the scope of the residual becomes the painter's usual home, the specific sense that he never tires of presenting and repeating. And so the relationship in which the visible is subordinate to the legible is replaced by the paradoxical experience of their real incommensurability: although it is possible to say everything that is on the canvas, this still says nothing about the truth of the painting.

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Seen in this light, some of Titonel's paintings have a truly programmatic, maybe even a didactic value. In strange diptychs that disturb both the orthodox adherents of figuring and their proud iconoclastic and abstract adversaries, alongside the bold faces of trains, entrances to subways or large clocks, we find indecipherable signs, splotches of pure painting, beautiful and unfathomable. Other paintings resort to a strange comparison between human figures, rendered with photographic realism, and skillfully composed abstract backgrounds. I believe that these are neither quotations, nor simple contrasts of perceptions. In these compositions, which represent the extreme development of Titonel's research, the linguistically transposable figure and its remainder of image are actually presented together.. The effect is one that calls on the observer to jump brusquely from the one to the other: oscillations that enable you to experience how truth comes about in painting. To the painter's insatiable eye, the world is never bereft of an indecipherable residue. It always contains more things than are listed by language. And it is precisely that part that is not expressed by the 'spoken', 'pronounced', 'meaningful' world that is essential to the painter: it is the very sense of that world, in other words the absolutely unique way in which those absolutely ordinary objects – trains, bodies, subways – are given to his eye. This sense is incarnate in something less than an image: in a gesture, in the direction put into a line, in the obsessive repetition of a barely sketched pattern (there are some fine examples of this in Titonel's very first works, especially the studies he did from 1962 to 1967).

As I look at these splashes, I recall the beautiful definition of sense coined by Bergson: "more movement of thought than something thought, more a direction than a movement". But then sense is never rendered as such, regardless of a meaning: sense is always the sense of something defined and definable, it is the sense of this train, of this subway, of this clock. A sense per se, bereft of any structural reference to its meaning, would be a pure meaninglessness, an abstraction in the worst sense of the term. For the same reason, any figure without sense would be totally transparent to the concept, in other words bereft of a wrinkle where it transcends the confines of its own meaning.

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If we want Diderot's statement to reflect the way in which the truth is enshrined in painting, it really has to undergo some quite radical alteration: the necessary, though on its own not sufficient, condition of a good painting is its incommensurability to description. If it does not contain this excess, it is declassified to the level of an illustration of an already expressed meaning. This is a risk run by all the painting known as "figurative" and in particular by that painting that believes it can avoid the risk by falling back on surrealist montages, symbolism of various kinds or the sublimeness of its subjects. If representation is not kept under control on this point, it bares its flank to being attacked by those who have always discredited it as a pointless replica of reality, only then to restrict it to the Indian reserve of didactics by images (Plato).

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So the fact that Angelo Titonel, a brilliant young advertising graphic designer in the early sixties, should have suddenly decided to throw such a profitable career up in order to lose himself in his dream of painting is not merely a feature on his CV. To a certain extent, advertising is the most radical subordination of the visible dimension to the domain of the legible. Its effectiveness is directly proportional to its transitive quality, to the immediate recognisability of the message (of the product) it conveys. At the same time, with an intensity quite foreign to the artist who has trained in an Academy, where

even the most sublime of images immediately decay to the level of objects of historiographical erudition, the advertiser learns all about the occult power of the image. He knows that it is anything but a mere vehicle, but actually acts, thinks rigorously, displays unprecedented senses. And it is actually only by virtue of this effective autonomy that the image is so good at carrying out the communicative function it is called on to support.

So if advertising is an excellent school, the reason is not because it educates the hand, but because it familiarizes its creator with the thought behind the image, with its paradoxical logic. But once this awareness has been achieved, the subordination of the image to effective communication becomes unbearable. The visible dimension monopolizes the painter's eye: it wants it all for itself. Whatever is put into it as content – because the visible dimension has to make something visible – now only functions as an event, as an occasion, as an alibi for painting. Once it comes of age, the game of representation becomes intransitive and self-referential. Not because it is lacking in a serious approach or prefers evasion, but because the world with its everyday things and trivial meanings (trains, subways, clocks and so on) turns up in the demonic space of painting, as the remainder that is always left to be painted, even when everything that can be expressed with the word has been said.