

Interview

NOSTALGIA — BETWEEN FICTION AND (HYPER)REALITY

A CONVERSATION
WITH KREŠIMIR
PURGAR

Dario Vuger

VUGER: *With this interview, we aim to outline a preliminary map of the phenomenon of nostalgia in the context of contemporary visual culture. You have been at the forefront of researching modern visual phenomena for some time now – establishing the Center for Visual Studies in Zagreb, leading various scientific projects, and editing volumes for prestigious publishers (such as The Palgrave Handbook of Image Studies, Iconology of Abstraction – digital images and the modern world, W.J.T. Mitchell’s Image Theory – Living Pictures, Theorizing Images, etc.), which are regarded as significant resources for the study of contemporary art theory, image theory, and media studies. Recalling our conversation during the Nostalgia Movements conference opening, could you briefly position the phenomenon in the context of contemporary artistic practices?*

PURGAR: First and foremost, we need to distinguish between nostalgia as an artistic or political tendency and nostalgia as a feeling inherent to modern humans. The Renaissance marks the period in human history where two different views on nostalgia intertwined, creating a dichotomy between the emotional and the rational – a dichotomy that has haunted us from the Renaissance to the so-called Anthropocene. The Renaissance can be considered the first institutionalized nostalgia because the mentioned dichotomy was based on an ancient understanding of nature as perfection, mimetic representations, proportional depictions of the human figure, “photographic” portraits such as those by Albrecht Dürer or Antonello da Messina (Fig. 1), and linear perspective as seen in Perugino’s painting “Christ handing the keys to St. Peter” or Raphael’s “The School of Athens” – this was the rational component of nostalgia. Within such a naturalistic scopic regime, the emotional component also found its mode of representation, based on Western Christianity and its iconography. The Western Christian variation of Jesus as a being with a dual nature, divine and human, allowed Renaissance nostalgia towards the ancient as natural and rational to blend with the divine-emotional. In the Renaissance, nature is no longer (only) the bucolic world of anthropomorphized gods but also the site of hyper-realistic suffering of God-Human, best exemplified in Andrea Mantegna’s painting “Lamentation over the Dead Christ” (Fig. 2). The emotional power of this painting lies not in Mantegna’s distinctive linear style but in the sense of a cinematic perspective, a radical observer’s point-of-view shot, as if the camera (in this case, the painter) brought us closer to something we could never



Fig. 1. Antonello da Messina, *Portrait of a Man*, oil on poplar wood, cca 1475-76; National Gallery of London

approach in real life in that way. Thus, the symbiosis of the divine and human, the natural and the represented, is the birthplace of nostalgia. Contemporary nostalgia stems from a similar conflict of opposing yet intertwined principles, but in a value sense, it is different: the emotional,



Fig. 2. Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the dead Christ*, tempera on canvas, 1470-7; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

i.e., the divine, has been replaced by the national, ideological, class, gender, etc., within capitalism as the rational and techno-scientific. As art has always done from the Renaissance to today, I believe that contemporary art too reflects these same aporias. As we can imagine, the situation today, at least in terms of art, is much more complicated. In other words, incentives for interventions in cultural memory have become highly instrumentalized. Every artistic act carrying a nostalgic subtext or hypertext is always tied to some allegedly personal trauma, political action, historical-educational sentiment, mourning for a better, more humane, fairer world. Looking at such art, we could almost conclude that the world was indeed better, more humane, and just than it is today. Of course, this is a short circuit of the emotional and rational structure of nostalgia. I will try to explain. What we could call iconoclastic nostalgia in the woke culture of the West seeks to rectify history by removing traces of what, according to an idealized version of a perfect world, does not fit the picture of the current or future perfection. In the United



Fig. 3. Jefferson Davis statue torn down in Richmond (Virginia), June 10, 2020; photo: Parker Michels-Boyce

tes, there has been a popular movement in recent years to remove Confederate monuments, i.e., memory of that part of American history that “enlightened” parts of American society want to disown today. One such example is the monument to Jefferson Davis, erected in 1911 in Richmond (VA) and demolished in 2020 (Fig. 3). However, the problem with iconoclastic nostalgia is that history inevitably has already happened, and in that case, all you can do is make access to memory more difficult. It will no longer be part of the society’s memory spectacle but rather something deeply hidden in the archival catacombs. In Croatia, in that sense, we are a bit more advanced though. After the iconoclastic anti-nostalgia of the 1990s, when many monuments commemorating the part of the victims of World War II who ended up on the right side of history were destroyed, some of them have been restored recently. To avoid any confusion: the restoration of anti-fascist monuments should be supported because we cannot consider it a nostalgic revival simply because these monuments were erected in a specific historical context and commemorate the only consensually accepted mass crime in the history of humanity. In our country, another phenomenon is developing today, often associated with art, and that is iconophilic nostalgia, which parasitizes on anti-fascist monuments and places of suffering by recycling them as empty pictures, thereby detached from the histori-

cal causality of place, time, and ideology. Such artworks themselves do not possess the substance drawn from real historical monuments they visualize simply because, through the recycling of the memory place via media transfer and a change in form, they always lose what the original monument possesses – commemorative pathos of the place and the formal uniqueness of the original. Admittedly, something is gained: pseudo-nostalgic ideologized object as a modest contribution to the capitalist economy of “engaged art”.

VUGER: *Moreover, it seems to me that this recent case – which is most clearly visible in the way we deal with monuments of the antifascist movement in the territory of the former Yugoslavia – produces, besides popular art with an engaged face, artifacts of everyday consumption, designer objects, and distinctive nostalgic embellishments of the living space precisely because, in our case, contemporary artistic tendencies and aesthetic principles have closely intertwined with the dominant political regime, thus creating a short circuit that is only now beginning to be observed separately, yet with its own set of contemporary issues. Monuments by Džamonja or Bakić could soon – even in necessary modifications to avoid any infringement of copyright – be found on the tables and shelves of enthusiasts of designer artifacts from bygone times (like replicas of ancient busts and temples...). The power of separation (inherent in the spectacular or cinematic mode of production) seems to have done an important job here, enabling the objects of a political, economic, and social era to be viewed almost as artifacts “found outside of history”. Can we say that nostalgia in this regard could be approached archaeologically?*

PURGAR: I think that labeling this phenomenon as “archaeological” in a narrower sense would be somewhat unfair to archaeology as a discipline, and even if you are referring to all possible interpretations of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, it would be an overstatement. Here, we are talking about mere commodification, not a conscious historical reflex, or even marginally conscious like nostalgia. However, in your question, I recognize the desire to shed light on another aspect of nostalgia: why it arises in the current time. The historical memory of the generation born between the two World Wars, people who created our recent past, is marked by two war traumas after which the world, despite everything, became a better place than it was in any previous period. In recent times – starting with the terrorist attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, and

an even more radical response from America, the occupation of Iraq, and the second Gulf War two years later, then the creation of the terrorist theocracy known as the Islamic State, followed by Russian aggression on Ukraine and the latest war of Israel against the terrorist group Hamas – the world no longer seems like a good place to live. When conversations about nuclear apocalypse became a common topic during a coffee break, instead of football or TikTok trivialities, what nostalgic illusion of security can one refer to? To the chaos in the 6th century after the fall of the Roman Empire, to the beginning of humanism in the mid-14th century when the Black Plague decimated a third of the European population, or perhaps to the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century? The timeframe of those periods upon which the contemporary figure of nostalgia could be formed seems severely narrowed. In our local context, it's even more challenging because we have been taught that the nations inhabiting the territories of the former Yugoslavia, except in deep history, have always been victims, confined in the dungeons of various occupying nations. And of the three Yugoslavias, only the second one was “good and just”. So, after the Greater Serbia conquest wars in the territories of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the space for politically correct nostalgia has been narrowed to just about forty years. Therefore, if we want to be in that nostalgia trend, we simply had no choice but to mourn the second half of the twentieth century. Going back to your question, our Croatian “archaeology of nostalgia” is still just an ideological construct. The artistic, and even commodification aspects of Bakić and Džamonja that you mention have nothing to do with it because these artists in their “second life” have not been either rediscovered, rehabilitated, nor reinterpreted in that nostalgic rearview – they are simply being reused.

VUGER: *The phenomenon itself seems to escape definition and tends to dissolve as soon as one points at it, but the fact remains that a new type of aesthetics has infiltrated our visual culture and thus became relevant to contemporary art production – a tendency to reimagine the past or to develop just such experiences that allow us to “re-live” the past in some commodified form or rather to experience the past as a product. And while these same tendencies have been around for some time now – in fashion, design, etc. – it is only now that they visually saturate our experience of the world to an extent that some would say we live in the “culture of nostalgia”. Is this something that is also confirmed by your experience and research in visual studies?*

PURGAR: I think that no discipline exists without an inherent relationship with history – both general history and the history of its own or other disciplines. But, of course, not every area of human knowledge is equally susceptible to history, does not have equal “responsibility” for writing history, and therefore does not have equal predispositions to reimagine or commodify the past. When it comes to visual studies, it is essentially not a discipline but a worldview most interested in the ways images and visuality in general change meanings concerning technology, religion, art, communication, and other areas where images play a crucial role. What confuses the academic community most about visual studies is that it does not see in an image only the meaning predetermined by a completely predictable hermeneutic development, which is inherent in every humanistic discipline. Instead, it leaves the possibility of a much broader range of potential meanings. In principle, this works in such a way that humanistic disciplines recognize in images only those symptoms for which each of them is responsible – it’s about the division of labor, a kind of epistemological contract that regulates what is allowed to know within disciplinary boundaries.

Take, for example, the most famous version of Caravaggio’s *St. John the Baptist* from 1604, located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City (Fig. 4): this painting can be a “typical Caravaggio” because of the characteristic chiaroscuro technique; the adolescent figure of the saint can then be analyzed as a psychologically broken person who does not believe in his own mission on earth; we can focus on the ambivalent semiotic ensemble of the semi-nude body, red drapery, and dense darkness. The sexual aspect of the image can interest us again in various ways: as an alibi for depicting erotic content within religious mainstream but also as a reflection of the artist’s own sexuality; we can recognize a phallic symbol in the left knee emerging from the darkness, but it is also a purely technical solution by which, in a very modern manner, the mere anatomy of the human body is defined by a reflector beam of directed light. So, what do we really see in that painting? We see what we want to see, i.e., what we are looking for in it and for which we are sure that some discipline will give us legitimacy. Visual studies approach its theoretical objects differently. It uses the methodology of different disciplines, and the results of the visual “anamnesis” are never known in advance. Visual studies approaches its theoretical objects with an extremely high level of tolerance for uncertainty. In contemporary jargon, it is easiest



Fig. 4. Caravaggio, *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, oil on canvas, 1604; The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City

to understand this today if we call it a *queer* approach to visual material, and that's why it will never, at least I hope, be "disciplined".

When you ask me about the relationship of visual studies to the culture of nostalgia, what is crucial is its queer position that prevents it from succumbing to the academic mechanism of disciplinary commodification. If such a non-discipline lacks its own ideology, strict procedures,

and is therefore not particularly popular, it cannot develop a nostalgic sentiment towards any aspect of culture, society, art, etc. Nostalgia as a current condition or a study of memory, ruin porn, Marxist demiurges, awakened interest in the non-aligned movement, and, entirely locally, the trendy revival of socialist culture in Croatia are all symptoms of fear of a new descent into war, ecological, or economic catastrophe. However rational and real these fears may be, they are, by the logic of the democratic order, necessarily ideologically directed; the problem is not whether the threat is real but who will be blamed if the catastrophe occurs. And it's always the *other*. I think it's good that visual studies, for the reasons I just mentioned, cannot be easily harnessed institutionally in ideological battles on the margins of science and art.

VUGER: *The discourse established in visual studies through W.J.T. Mitchell talks about the power of images, their will towards some goal, etc. Can we consider nostalgia – outside of it being characterized as a defining emotion of our time by Grafton Tanner – a special kind of visual phenomena? Namely, what can visual studies offer us to critically engage with nostalgia?*

PURGAR: Okay, I see that you insist on giving some meaning to visual studies in times that demand a cool head. Visual studies can only offer methods that would enable us to consider visual phenomena from perspectives that do not cling to pre-known answers. In the circumstances we find ourselves in, that *could* help, despite my generally pessimistic position. Because of their non-disciplinary queer status within the academic world, visual studies is capable of creating a methodological approach that I have called “theory on demand”. This involves formulating a visual problem that we want to address, and then, like a puzzle, assembling theoretical tools that we believe can help us illuminate that problem. If we start from the premise that the object of nostalgic sentiment can be any produced thing or thought to which we have emotionally attached, whether it originated in the Paleolithic or is related to the trash aesthetics of vaporwave, then it is clear that we must focus on something paradigmatic; otherwise, the set of possible tools would be immeasurable and therefore unusable, or, as it happens, we would come to conclusions that were already known to us because we were looking exactly for them. I am currently laying the foundations for a project that would seek to identify what is common to all images from prehistory to the present because it

is quite obvious that they have changed very little until the advent of digital technology. If we can detect and convincingly explain that there are anthropological constants common to all images, then a completely new dimension of the relationship between past and present, old and new media, painting and film, artistic and technological visualizations opens up to us. Then we will find out that disciplines do not serve the production of knowledge but its organization, institutionalization, and limitation.

VUGER: *My previous question aimed at a certain de-territorializing effect modern visual culture has on our experience of the world. Specifically, if “all that was immediately lived receded into representation” (a famous paraphrase by Guy Debord), we are invited to consider the following: modern images replace and augment our experience of the world on the fundamental level, replacing everywhere the real-time and real space of experience with images and synthetic visualizations of experiences (on a primitive level of a certain Total Recall movie scenario). Can the overwhelming sense of nostalgia come from the mere fact that we are surrounded by experiences that are only evocative of the real but no longer there to give us a sense of here and now but rather – excuse my rhetoric here – being nowhere (now-here) in particular?*

PURGAR: Yes, certainly, that is something we are inevitably moving toward, but it has not happened yet. What you are talking about could be called radical nostalgia from today’s perspective because it will no longer be motivated by the conflict between the emotional and the rational, which, as I mentioned at the beginning, is at the very foundation of Western culture from the New Age to the Anthropocene. Technology does not currently allow us complete penetration into machine-created otherness. In fact, the transformation of life experience into representation, as Debord notes, is not specific to the society of the spectacle but is the ability of humans of any era to turn something into an image. Ancient Egyptian depictions of harvest work on papyrus and Jackson Pollock’s abstract painting reflect the anthropological given that leaves a trace of lived experience in the image in the same way. Considerations of styles, periods, artistic genius, the Hollywood star system, and the commodification of the past cannot reveal anything essentially significant about these representations, except that these cultural conventions prepare images for permanent recycling within their respective disciplines. Even visualizations we observe using virtual reality devices,



5. Balthasar Neumann, Basilica Vierzehnheiligen (near Lichtenfels, Bavaria, Germany), a view of the altar, 1743-1772; photo: Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0

the so-called environmental images, are very similar to classical two-dimensional representations – of course, not in the context of art but within the concept of an image. It is just as easy to take off a VR headset to make the digitally produced illusion disappear as it is to lower one's gaze from the ceiling fresco by Andrea Pozzo in the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome and return to the earthly reality from the glory of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The best early example of real physical immersion – and not just a two-dimensional *trompe-l'œil* as with Pozzo or neural simulacrum as with VR headset – is the interior of the Basilica Vierzehnheiligen by Balthasar Neumann from the second half of the 18th century (Fig. 5). Here, ceiling frescos virtually overlap and intertwine with stucco ornaments and three-dimensional interior design of the church. But, the real erasure of boundaries between two-dimensional representation, which we call an image, and three-dimensional artificial environment will come only when we are no longer aware of the illusion, when we experience the artificially created environment as entirely identical to what we now call reality. Until then, let's enjoy the self-imposed illusion

because what awaits us afterward probably won't be of our own choice.

VUGER: *Hyperrealism in contemporary art can then also be considered in that respect symptomatic of this cultural shift (nostalgia for the real...).*

PURGAR: I wouldn't say so, although your question assumes that such a conclusion would be possible. As a matter of fact, original hyperrealism, that of Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Don Eddy, Chuck Close, and Robert Cottingham from the late 1960s and early 1970s, emerged in the United States during the height of neo-avant-garde, conceptual art, minimalism, and hard-edge painting. Therefore, art history interprets it as a regressive, today we would say "nostalgic", phenomenon in art, a mere sentiment for something irreversibly gone. For art historians, things ideally aligned in the case of hyperrealism because it seemed that the unfortunate teleology of art history, according to which everything has an inevitable course and final purpose, actually worked. Visual arts then entered the era of high-modernist self-awareness; abstraction and reduction were at their peak, and mimesis was finally and definitively abandoned. In such a context, of course, hyperrealism could only be disdainfully rejected as "nostalgia for the real". However, the discipline of art history once again showed that it is not capable of understanding contemporary art because it always expects art to develop, to show causality, the transmission of influence, or to break with the past, to make visible artists' geniality and skill, to adhere to connoisseurship and social spectacle. Unlike the neo-avant-garde and its radical concepts, hyperrealism had nothing of that (except skill), not even in traces; instead, it made a confusing and unexpected leap from the problem of form to the problem of media. I know that this seems entirely counterintuitive, but the essence of understanding hyperrealism is not in admiration of form or the artist's skill in imitation but in the fact that it radically places the problem of the painterly image, the relationship between photography and painting, and the intensity of reality in the image at the center of interest. Upon closer consideration, conceptual art by Joseph Kosuth and hyperrealism met at the same point in the theory of representation, although they started from different premises: works of conceptual art always offered more information than the artists, enthralled by proclaimed tautology, were willing to admit, while hyperrealistic paintings always offered less information than the photographs from which they were made. The artistic

and theoretical value of both of these directions is that they ask what an image really is, to what extent and in relation to what. Should I mention that it is entirely irrelevant to me that posing these questions was not the intention of the authors? Fortunately, for us observers, art is usually much more (or much less) than what its authors want it to be.

VUGER: *Could we, in that respect, consider “the culture of nostalgia” to be a part of a larger and certainly wider social (pictorial) development (iconic turn, society of the spectacle, etc.)?*

PURGAR: Well, of course, all of these are cultural and theoretical tropes, a kind of metalanguage we use to legitimize ourselves as humanistic scientists. How else could we converse and produce surplus meaning? I’m not saying this in an ironic tone, but I genuinely believe that the humanities will do the most for this world if they stop indulging in endless self-understanding as a path to truth, or worse, as the ultimate source of truth. Limiting disciplinary knowledge is the main obstacle to making the humanities truly relevant. So, the problem is not that we use tropes like the iconic turn, culture of nostalgia, or society of the spectacle, but the real question is how we do it. I think the entire humanities should become queer in a way that we will no longer be slaves to academic nomenclature and that we will no longer automatically turn our social, economic, gender, or any preferential or disciplinary position into theoretical argumentation. I don’t know why it is so, but I have the impression that we simply do not want to discover the spaces of freedom that our academic metalanguage opens for us.

VUGER: *Maybe this is a problem of the abundance of academic resources and the overall quantification of the field which is becoming increasingly hard to navigate, and since anything can be made into a research subject closes in to a truly spectacular science, the one which, like a 1:1 map, covers the whole “territory”. I can appreciate and fully endorse your attitude towards queer humanities – which is quite an engaging concept in itself – but the question remains if the quality of the research will inevitably become circumstantial and inessential to the principle of quantity. Wouldn’t that turn even the researchers to the observers without any claim to “objective validity”? This is a departure from our main topic, but I think the problem does inform an attitude taken up here at least in suggesting a cautionary approach to the phenomena in question.*



6. Barnett Newman, *Cathedra*, 1951, oil on canvas; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; photo: Peter Tijhuis

PURGAR: I completely understand your doubt. Most of academic humanities likely share it, whether they are more focused on historical facts or engaged with urgent social issues. I am obliged to clarify my position, but before that, I have a rhetorical question: do we really believe that it is possible to assess the “objective value,” for example, of a painting like *Cathedra* by Barnett Newman (Fig. 6) or films such as Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*? I am not talking about the cult status of individual works, their (un)popularity, or market value, but about their “objective” value as works of art. All we can do objectively is give them a positivist dimension: determine when they were created, in what artistic, social, or political context; we can engage in the genealogy of styles and their branching, but even the potential diagnosis of the influence of one artist, director, or writer on another (which disciplinary histories particularly love), as you say, is circumstantial, and I would be even more radical and admit: claims of direct influence can be correct, but they can also be entirely arbitrary. Simply put, there is no way we can objectively establish the genealogy of influence, let alone whether such claims are meaningful; formal or ide-

ological similarities are not evidence, they are just an expression – of a critic, theorist, or the artist himself. Nevertheless, let's try with Barnett Newman. Besides a few undeniable facts about his paintings, such as format, technique, and possibly the year of creation, what eludes any interpretation of his paintings is what they mean, whether they represent something, and especially what is artistically valuable in them. The only thing we can do is describe in as much detail as possible what we see: colors, their intensity, formal relationships between lines and surfaces, etc. But if we do that, we haven't objectified the artistic value; instead, we have only translated visual experience into a textual or spoken statement. Claude Cernuschi, an excellent historian of modern and contemporary art, found in Barnett Newman's writings that this American artist referred to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger in some places. After that, he wrote a book called "Barnett Newman and Heideggerian Philosophy", in which he innovatively discussed how elements of Heidegger's philosophy are reflected in Newman's paintings. Do I even need to mention that traces of any articulated discourse, especially Heidegger's thought, cannot truly be seen in radically abstract paintings because these are two media that cannot be entirely translated into each other; there is always something that goes beyond the interpretation or something that fails to reach it. So, in terms of objective accuracy, Cernuschi's book is incorrect, indeed, it is entirely arbitrary, but without such or some other interpretation, Newman's work would lack any cognitive substantiation, and therefore would be even less understandable, in consequence even less meaningful. Even if Newman gave his word that his paintings were inspired by Heidegger, we can never know if that is true, and even if it is true, who says that connecting with some other philosopher, writer, or musical work, minimalism by La Monte Young comes to mind, wouldn't yield even more interesting results?

Cernuschi at least found some kind of trace in Heidegger, and what about Donald Judd and the entire Land Art, especially in the light of ecological paranoia? I think for most modern and contemporary art, from Duchamp to today, we couldn't say anything worthwhile without incessant struggling for meaning; otherwise we would just be inventing ever new ekphrastic acrobatics, and that would be reducing visual art to literature. Cernuschi's book on Newman and Heidegger is a real example of what I consider good practice in visual studies and "theory on demand". In the end, it is just one of many intellectual offers; the truth is that there is no truth in art.

VUGER: *You have stated (radically if not famously) on several occasions that contemporary art has left the domain of art history. Does that fact give us an opportunity to consider and critically engage contemporary artistic practices from the standpoint of popular culture? Does that development also bring us closer to considering contemporary art an accomplice in the overall “weaponization” of the past against our better judgment of our place in the world?*

PURGAR: Art is the most effective “soft weapon” that humankind has ever created. Of course, I am not referring to classical art and everything that art history declared its own domain until the beginning of the 20th century. I mean the moment when art ceased to serve cultic, religious, or instrumental purposes of any kind, or, as you reminded me, the moment when art abandoned the domain of this once glorious and powerful discipline. However, here I would not follow your suggestion. When it comes to contemporary art, we can replace the discipline of art history with any other discipline, but art itself, whether old or new, cannot be replaced by popular culture. The status of an artist or a work of art is not acquired through merits in a specific domain but through institutional or, to put it less elegantly, bureaucratic confirmation. We usually consider comics part of popular culture, but if they are exhibited in a museum, then they become works of art. The same goes for movies: they are usually in the domain of popular culture, but if they receive an award at a festival or gain some other kind of legitimation over time, then they become works of art. Unlike products of popular culture, which only become art under certain conditions, contemporary works of art in the narrow sense come into being by the very act of exhibition; they do not need to first gain popularity or any verification outside of what Arthur Danto calls the “art world”. Although this still does not tell us anything about the value of these works of art, paradoxically, institutionalization is what makes art such an effective soft weapon. It doesn’t need to be good or valuable; it is not necessary for anyone to understand it – it cannot be objectively evaluated or, even less, interpreted. Regardless of the fact that in the star system every work is turned into gold, art remains the ultimate space of freedom precisely because we cannot rationally evaluate it.

VUGER: *I would like to once again take a few steps back in our interview and – going even beyond the timeframe suggested in your first answer – ask you about W.J.T. Mitchell’s early *The Last Dinosaur Book* and your thoughts about the suggested “reading” of the visual culture exposing the certain nostalgia for, literally, big narratives as the radicalization of “post-modern” attitudes towards profoundly cynical consumption of history as a product. One of my fairly simple examples would be the fascination with “old” consumer brands of foods, like wearing a Pepsi t-shirt but not drinking Pepsi because it is not good for you.*

PURGAR: Mitchell’s book is an incredibly sharp portrayal of the development of visual culture in the 19th and 20th centuries through the observation of a relatively bizarre fascination with a period for which we have very modest material evidence – the era of dinosaurs. The book tells of an extreme form of pseudo-nostalgia, but its main theme is the past as a culturally produced narrative. Mitchell posed a much broader problem because he was interested in how nostalgia is created (and indeed produced) for something that is in every sense so detached from us while made familiar and close through popular literature, movies, picture books, children’s figurines, amusement parks, and prize games. It’s not about a cynical consumption of history but its production from scratch, so an extremely modern phenomenon of creating a craving for something entirely insubstantial. The example you give, the Pepsi t-shirt, is an excellent, hard-core indication of nostalgia in the era of the internet, radical political correctness, and cultural simulacrum. It is a typical example of proxy-experience, a false involvement through a material intermediary. In the 1970s, there was a commercial on Zagreb Television, I don’t remember if it was for Pepsi-Cola or Coca-Cola, in which a group of cheerful young men and women played volleyball on a wooden raft gently sliding down a river. Let’s compare such an experience, even if it was just an advertising exaggeration that no one really encountered, with TikTok challenges or the “excitements” offered to us as we surf virtual spaces on the internet. Recalling movies like Kathryn Bigelow’s *Point Break* from 1991, which offered the illusion of real surfing on waves in Malibu along the coast of California or, even earlier, Bruce Brown’s *The Endless Summer* from 1966 (Fig. 7), in which surfers search for that perfect wave along the coasts of Australia and New Zealand, Tahiti, Hawaii, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, with what experience can we compare today? Today, we surf through *Transformers*, docu-fiction, survival



7. Bruce Brown, director and producer, during the shooting of the film *Endless Summer*, 1966.

tips in the rainforests of Borneo, and true crime. Somewhere between fiction, reality, and hyper-reality, staged reality has nested, a typical internet genre that forces us into a daily but futile search for authenticity because only lived experience can provide it. Therefore, preferring today “unadulterated fiction” does not mean living in contradiction – for me, it is a kind of moral obligation. I know, now I’m becoming nostalgic.

VUGER: *This is excellently articulated, and at this pop-cultural moment, we completely agree. The fact that the “dream factory” has outgrown its possibilities and become a power apparatus with its own politics and economies of visibility (or, as Grafton Tanner puts it, the politics of nostalgia) is something that surpasses the frameworks of the spectacle theory into a superior structure that I often refer to as the culture of visualization. Slavoj Žižek aptly described this in his Pervert’s Guide to Ideology, a popular exploration of film and ideology, using the example of the movie They Live, where the positions of reality and illusion are turned upside down. We don’t wear ideological glasses; rather, the nature of reality itself has become ideologically manufactured, visualized with a maximum 1:1 effect. Our “resistance” lies in counter-constructions of visibility, in glasses that not only reveal the state of things but, perhaps more importantly, hide our own view from the possibility that “images see where we look”, when and which images become the object of our attention.*

PURGAR: I might disappoint you, but I think no “countervisuality” (borrowing the term from Nicholas Mirzoeff) is possible. Not because the dystopian future is inevitable but because it is already happening right now; it is the present and reality. Let’s keep in mind that Carpenter’s film *They Live* was made “way back” in 1988. Back then, we could still assume the existence of some invisible force controlling our lives, and we could believe that science would provide us with weapons against the invisible invader. In this particular film, it was assumed that there were mechanisms – in this case, glasses, so prosaically cool and trashy! – that would make the invisible reality visible. Today, resistance is impossible simply because we see our *conquistadores* very well and run towards them joyfully. For example, advertisements used to be in places we could isolate, but now, as we walk through the city, people dressed from head to toe in hyper-branded clothing come towards us, a walking textile tattoos. The endless lines in front of Apple stores every time a new version of the iPhone is released also testify to voluntary subjugation. Social networks have normalized visibility to such an extent that the various regulations concerning privacy, and the supposed ability to manage our own visibility offered to us by both corporations and national governments, are perhaps the most cynical form of nostalgia. The narrative goes that there is voluntary and imposed visibility. Perhaps it was like that in the era of analog media; if you wanted to deny your visibility, you would sometimes make a phone call from a public phone booth, something you even had to do so because, at least in my early youth, phones were not yet in every home. Today, smartphones are considered a fundamental human right and an essential need, like food, drinking water, and freedom. In the modern world, there is a consensual agreement on visibility. Both sides have voluntarily agreed to it.

However, there are some counter-strategies, but they are not aimed at depriving visibility but at diverting attention to other topics that should act as analgesic and enlightening; first, because they calm the anxiety produced by alleged collective guilt for social inequalities, and second, they point us to our human rights that we didn’t even know existed. The impossibility of invisibility is what we got in exchange for the possibility of choosing endless identities – gender, internet, avatar, computer-filtered, artificially created. The tactical methods of woke culture in the west, which seemingly advocates extreme sensitivity towards the other and different, enable the acquisition of institutional forgiveness for par-

ticipating in strategic inequalities. It is forgotten that equal rights will never, by themselves, create equal opportunities, especially if we identify the two and then build political correctness on the attractive illusion of identity. Behind different personalities, there is always only one person.

VUGER: *Could we, perhaps, dwell a little bit on the aesthetics and popular culture in the environment of nostalgia. Namely, when I think about movies like Blade Runner with its somber aesthetic and moral outlook, there seems to be a certain design at play that sells us not only a certain vision of the future but a type of visualization of longing that is proper not to the imagined future but to the immanent present(ness) of our condition. The majority of the film is set in a rather dark, hyper-urban yet socially disengaged environment, and everything seems at the least extra-ordinary (sic). The reference material is clear; the environments of this dystopian imagination already really exist at the time of their cinematic visualization; they are just aesthetically augmented to provide us with a certain feeling. A similar point can be made about the aesthetics of American indie cinema, with Gummo being just one example (but also Virgin Suicides, Clerks, Before Sunrise, Thumbsucker, etc.), in which contemporary everyday life is directed in such a way that it produces (in a way) already implied, if not mentioned – but restated – “longing for the real”, which is in itself not a radical theoretical conception but a very smart way to optimize visual commodities.*

PURGAR: It is very difficult for me to speak about films in the context of reality, especially those that have gained cult or even artistic status. They have unintentionally and often unwantedly transcended their own status from entertainment to artistic. This process is not without consequences; as I mentioned earlier, unlike art in a narrower sense, which acquires its status at one moment, works of popular culture can become art over a longer period of time. During this transition, various things happen: for example, we can project universal fears of one period onto a film, which may appear funny or even more frightening a few decades later, and yet, both reasons can be triggers for their transition to a new, more esteemed status. A good example of this is David Cameron's *Terminator*. I think American indie cinema gained popularity because it was intentionally different from the Hollywood dream factory; it was more real, certainly, but that reality was always romantically portrayed in films, at least in the examples you mention. Whether this is a consequence of

a reflexive desire for the real in American cinema or the optimization of reality as a consumable commodity, probably both; whether we will notice more the first or the latter again depends on whether we watch movies to see reality in them or look for an empty place in them that we would like to fill with our own meaning. In this context, the process of cultural commodification that happened with Italian neorealism is interesting. For example, Vittorio De Sica's film *Ladri di biciclette* from 1948 shows the cruel reality, poverty, and hardship in Italy after World War II. The film quickly became a work of art, in part because the magazine *Sight and Sound* included it in the list of the best films of all time as early as 1952. In my opinion, an equally well, if not better-made, comedy like Ettore Scola's *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi* from 1991 (Fig. 8) never reached the status of De Sica's film because Scola shifted the expected convention of neorealist drama into naturalistic comedy. As a paradigmatic popular-cultural genre, *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi* could not achieve the status of *Ladri di biciclette*, although it portrays reality in a much more dramatic way – no longer as material poverty and ethical dilemmas arising from it in the earlier film, but now as a very bitter fact that poverty can have much more complex, institutional sources, even during the period of the so-called Italian economic miracle from the 1960s to the 1980s. How the extended family of Giacinto Mazzatella, the *pater familias*, lives in Scola's film, we can easily connect with the reasons why millions of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan are flocking to Europe today. Although neorealist, the harshness of *Ladri di biciclette* can evoke a nostalgic sentiment in us because it speaks of a period when the creation of a better world began. On the other hand, precisely because it is much closer to our time, while watching *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi*, we are left only with bitterness because we know perfectly well that in a such world not everyone can participate with equal dignity, regardless of the identities one perform.

VUGER: *I remember that during the conference talk, we discussed the phenomena of nostalgia first – and somewhat spontaneously – as an element of architecture (and) design. This was perhaps our initial foray into the immediate vicinity of nostalgia, making it an appropriate place to conclude our*



8. Ettore Scola, *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi*, screenshots from movie, 1991, 115 min;
cinematography: Dario De Palma

discussion with just a few remarks on this matter. From the buildings themselves to spaces and dwellings viewed from the inside, the way we embrace and understand certain designs as “homey” and “warm” or “distanced” and “cold” also has something to do with our sense of belonging to a certain temporal and spatial context, which can be constructed. Moreover, postmodern architecture and design seem to have internalized this way of thinking on the level of “style” and proper aesthetic outlook, in which fragments of bygone architectural eras play new roles in the visual (de)construction of our everyday life in real (material) space and time.

PURGAR: In the time when postmodern culture was in vogue, much ink was spilled explaining how it led to a reversal in the modernist idea of progress. This shift was most easily observed, especially in architecture, where its metaphorical nature was in such an obvious opposition to the modernist minimalism of form. But there are many more factors at play; it's not just about nostalgia, even though some painterly styles of the 1980s, such as transavantgarde, may initially seem to have a nostalgic component. It's not enough for something to resemble the past to carry a nostalgic scent; I think the awareness of a specific object is crucial for the nostalgic sentiment, what we actually crave and how that desired object transforms into a contemporary narrative. Using the ideas of Jean-François Lyotard, a pioneer of the theoretical discourse on postmodernity, it's easy to notice that, for this philosopher, it's about the breakdown of trust in knowledge, not about the figure of nostalgia. In his seminal work *La condition postmoderne* from 1979, he clearly states, “Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction”. Therefore, it might be more about the loss of the possibility for nostalgia and the imagination that stems from it, transforming a powerful human feeling into mere form, linguistic practices, and communication. I think postmodernity has much more to do with the development of liberal capitalism and instrumentalized society than with feelings. I admit that resisting the emotional and symbolic component of postmodern art is not easy, but I don't believe that Hans Hollein, Richard Rogers, James Stirling, or any other architect wanted to depict their specific relationship to any object of desire.

VUGER: *For a proper closure, I would maybe just ask you one more fairly trivial question, or rather a recommendation... Namely, are there some books, works (from art or popular culture), or practices that you found to be crucial in determining your “worldview”? What would be the source material for one to get closer to your point of view within the vast horizons of contemporary everyday life? It is something I tend to ask in many of my conversations, and this is perhaps even more important here since we aim to put this interview in a book that should ultimately act as a sourcebook not only for nostalgia studies but for the development of certain attitudes towards contemporary visual culture as a whole.*

PURGAR: I’m not fond of talking about myself and my preferences beyond what can be inferred from my texts, books, and usual academic CVs, which I believe reveal quite a bit, as does this conversation. Well, I think my “worldview” has been defined by those scientific books that did not reveal the “truth” to me but allowed me to build my proposals for discussion on them – those that are open enough, allowing me to build upon them without feeling the constant pressure to explain what the author intended. Perhaps because it is the first book through which I understood how I want to observe art, movies, read books, and, generally, look around, and because it still defines my approach to interpreting the phenomena of visual culture, Omar Calabrese’s *L’età neobarocca* holds an important place. I came across that book entirely by chance in 1988 when, during a scholarship in my third year of Art History and Italian studies, I wandered the narrow streets on the outskirts of the historic center of Florence. In a small bookstore, I found this book published just a year earlier. I tried to write my graduate thesis in art history following the model of this book. Of course, I couldn’t follow the combination of methodological rigor and the postmodern, anything-goes ethos of the Italian author (in my case, the emphasis was, as expected, on anything goes), but at that moment, I understood what Mladen Macchiedo, my then professor of contemporary Italian literature, meant when he revealed to us students that the secret to good research in the humanities is if we manage to connect our discipline with something outside it. I then interpreted it to myself in such a way that the principle must be functioning vice versa too – that we should allow other disciplines or entirely different cultural or scientific phenomena to disrupt our “parent” discipline. From today’s perspective, Calabrese’s book may

seem outdated because the cases he describes are strongly tied to specific examples of visual art, architecture, popular culture, and science of the 1980s. Still, his symptomatic linking of individual examples and their interpretation within the culture paradigmatic of that time remains an inspiration for me.

Among the films that define my personal *weltanschauung* and do not fall into the category of nostalgic sentiment, I can single out *Django Unchained* by Quentin Tarantino. What earned this film a cult and, consequently, artistic status for me is Tarantino's complete deconstruction of the genre and thematic determinants of the American Western. The movie further questions racial and gender stereotypes beyond cultural mainstream, providing a postcolonial critique wrapped in pop-cultural packaging. It involves a shift in the dynamics between the ruling and the subordinate, portraying Americans as the bad guys and Germans as moral pillars. Moreover, the role Tarantino assigns to fashion as a crucial ally to the main character in defining his self-awareness elevates this film to supreme entertainment and a boundless source of inspiration for critical thinking. Personally, I experienced it as a stimulus to transcend various boundaries of academic disciplining and to create a space for intellectual freedom in general.

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