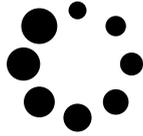


AN-ICON



# Caravaggio's gyroscope: on the two "moments" of the virtual experience

by Francesco Zucconi

Caravaggio

Frank Stella

Michael Fried

Immersion and Specularity

Virtual Reality Cinema

# AN-ICON Studies in Environmental Images

Issue №2 Year 2022

→ Just an illusion? Between simulation,  
emulation, and hyper-realism

Edited by Pietro Conte  
and Lambert Wiesing

# Caravaggio's gyroscope: on the two "moments" of the virtual experience



FRANCESCO ZUCCONI, Università IUAV di Venezia – <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9580-1000>  
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/18191>

## Abstract

In the first of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures that he gave at Harvard in 1984, Frank Stella focused on “The necessity of creating pictorial space that is capable of dissolving its own perimeter and surface plane,” and claimed that “No one helped lighten this burden more than Caravaggio.” At a certain point in his talk, the American artist went so far as to say that Caravaggio anticipated the invention of the gyroscope, the technological device which makes the virtual experience possible. Stella’s lecture is the starting point for developing an anachronistic path through pictorial and digital media, in light of their ability to produce illusionistic effects on viewers. In particular, building on Michael Fried’s theory of art and image, this paper investigates virtual experience with reference to two different moments: the “immersive” moment, in which one has the impression of stepping into the frame, and the “specular” one, where the illusionistic effects are revealed; the attraction, when sinking into an image that has become an environment, and the distancing, when the image itself beckons to us and we are invited to reflect on our position as viewers.

## Keywords

[Caravaggio](#)

[Frank Stella](#)

[Michael Fried](#)

[Immersion and Specularity](#)

[Virtual Reality Cinema](#)

To quote this essay: F. Zucconi, “Caravaggio’s gyroscope: on the two ‘moments’ of the virtual experience,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2 (2022): 67-88, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/18191>

## Introduction

I put on the headset and immerse myself in another world – in a theme park or in a refugee camp, in a disaster-stricken village or perhaps in the city of Hiroshima immediately after the launch of the atomic bomb.<sup>1</sup> In some cases I am a mere sightseer, while in other cases I am the “witness” to significant events. I have to enter into an empathetic relationship with those who dwell very far from me, I am expected to “put myself in their shoes” and to experience their condition “directly.”<sup>2</sup> Yet I cannot help but realize, sooner or later, that I find myself physically in the safe spaces of a museum or a gallery, in the section dedicated to VR cinema at the Venice International Film Festival, or perhaps in the pavilion of an NGO that uses virtual reality as a form for raising public awareness on sensitive topics. No matter how effectively illusionistic this virtual environment is. Always, in the media experiences of VR cinema, something pushes me inward, draws me into the virtual environment, while, at the same time, something else pushes me out, reminding me that I am just facing an image, and bringing me back to the spatial and temporal coordinates of our physical world.<sup>3</sup>

This article does not intend to analyse immersive videos by trying to deconstruct the nonchalant use of the notion of “empathy” and the ideology of “transparency” that has characterized their promotion, which has already

---

1 As an example of a virtual theme park experience, see “Disneyland Paris - 360 VR - Main Street,” Disneyland Paris, YouTube video, 1.19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNly6mSF0-o>, accessed January 10, 2023. Regarding the applications of such technology to the field of humanitarian communication, see <http://unvr.sdgactioncampaign.org>, accessed January 10, 2023. As for the fourth example, please refer to the official web page of the project <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/new-virtual-reality-experience-drops-you-hiroshima-right-after-its-been-bombed-180968903>, accessed January 10, 2023.

2 As an emblematic example of the promotional use of a term such as “empathy” and on the idea of putting oneself in another’s place through VR cinema, see <https://youtu.be/vAEjX9S8o2k>.

3 These issues can be conceived with reference to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological lesson and the relationship among the notions of *Bildding* (the physical thing), *Bildobjekt* (image-object) and *Bildsujet* (image-subject). See E. Husserl, “Phantasy and Image Consciousness,” in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*. *Edmund Husserl Collected Works*, vol 11 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005). On the illusionistic forms of virtual reality, examined through a rereading of Husserl, see P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2020): 46-52.

been the subject of several studies.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I would like to take up and further develop some issues present in my previous works, with the aim of opening a space for reflection on immersive technology following an anachronistic path through pictorial and digital media by referring to some concepts of art history and theory.<sup>5</sup>

The main objective is to focus, in analytical and theoretical terms, on the double effect of attraction and distancing described above, as structuring the experience of VR cinema. While the impossibility of fully capturing and keeping the viewers within the virtual environment has mostly been conceived as a negative limitation of such technology, in this paper I try to argue otherwise. Through the reference to a repertoire of images from the past, the aim is to describe the paradoxical character of an experience that is made up as much of attraction as of distancing. But before this can be sustained there are some intermediate steps.

After this introduction, in the second section, taking up a hypothesis advanced by Frank Stella, I explain the idea that gives the title to this paper: that Caravaggio, anticipated the invention of gyroscope technology and therefore made possible the first immersive experience in the history of Western painting. In the third, fourth and fifth sections, building on Michael Fried, I try to emphasize the two moments that characterize Caravaggio's paintings: *immersion*, the formal device that attracts within the image, and *specularity*, understood as the set of figurative and compositional elements that produce an effect of awareness on the viewer.<sup>6</sup> In the conclusion, I reconsider Fried's analysis and the concepts that characterize his theoretical

---

4 The literature on the notion of empathy is vast and constantly evolving with reference to new technological and expressive forms. For an early critical reflection on the facile use of this concept in relation to VR cinema, see W. Uricchio, S. Ding, S. Wolozin, and B. Boyacioglu, *Virtually There: Documentary Meets Virtual Reality Conference Report* (The MIT Open Documentary Laboratory, 2016): 17-18, [http://opendoclab.mit.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MIT\\_OpenDocLab\\_VirtuallyThereConference.pdf](http://opendoclab.mit.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MIT_OpenDocLab_VirtuallyThereConference.pdf), accessed January 10, 2023.

5 I refer to F. Zucconi, *Displacing Caravaggio: Art, Media, and Humanitarian Visual Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

6 On these two notions, which will also be referred to in the following pages, see M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

work in relation to contemporary media. What emerges is an opportunity for developing an ethic of VR: to what extent, can immersive technology facilitate the assumption of a testimonial gaze? Under what conditions can the gesture of wearing a virtual reality headset assume a critical value?

### **Frank Stella's hypothesis**

The American artist Frank Stella is, without a doubt, someone who understands visual surfaces and media frames, their ability to offer illusionistic effects. One only has to think of his works in the 1960s, where a series of frames relentlessly squeeze against each other, leaving a small coloured square in the centre. Taking inspiration from Louis Marin's analysis of *Gran Cairo* (1962), it is fair to ask whether these squares-frames are a well or a pyramid (Fig. 1). As the French historian and theorist notes, they are "a well *and* a pyramid, but never at the same time. The eye cannot predict the necessary and the arbitrary moment of conversion in which all the serious play of the frame and its modern and contemporary figures seem to be concentrated: the play of the rhythm of presentation and representation, the play of the subject of the art of seeing and the art of describing."<sup>7</sup>

If we compare them to the famous example of the rabbit/duck illustration investigated by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ernst Gombrich, Stella's paintings do not merely work on the viewers' perceptual and cognitive limits in the recognition of the figures depicted. Rather, the representational undecidability and instability of image produce a spatial effect, by modulating the relation between the observing subject and the observed object. In other words, when confronted with the rabbit/duck illustration, the viewer does not have the illusion of being confronted with a duck or rabbit coming off the page; rather, the graphic representation produces an illusionistic effect that makes it impossible to visualize the two animals at the same time. In contrast

---

<sup>7</sup> L. Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 372.

to that, Stella's paintings produce an illusionistic effect to the extent that they alternately draw the viewer inward – as in a well – or push him or her out, as if the surface had a pyramidal shape. Those who observe Stella's paintings are thus subjected to the rhythmic redundancy of the “opacity” of the painted frame that becomes recognizable – we might say that makes itself “transparent” – in the metaphors of the pyramid and the well.<sup>8</sup> In more general terms than those used by Marin, we might speak of Stella's work as a gestalt effect capable of inducing, alternately, in the viewer both the impression of attraction and that of rejection or distancing. In fact, beyond the series of concentric squares, Stella's artistic research would continue in the 1970s and 1980s by focusing on the relationship between the space

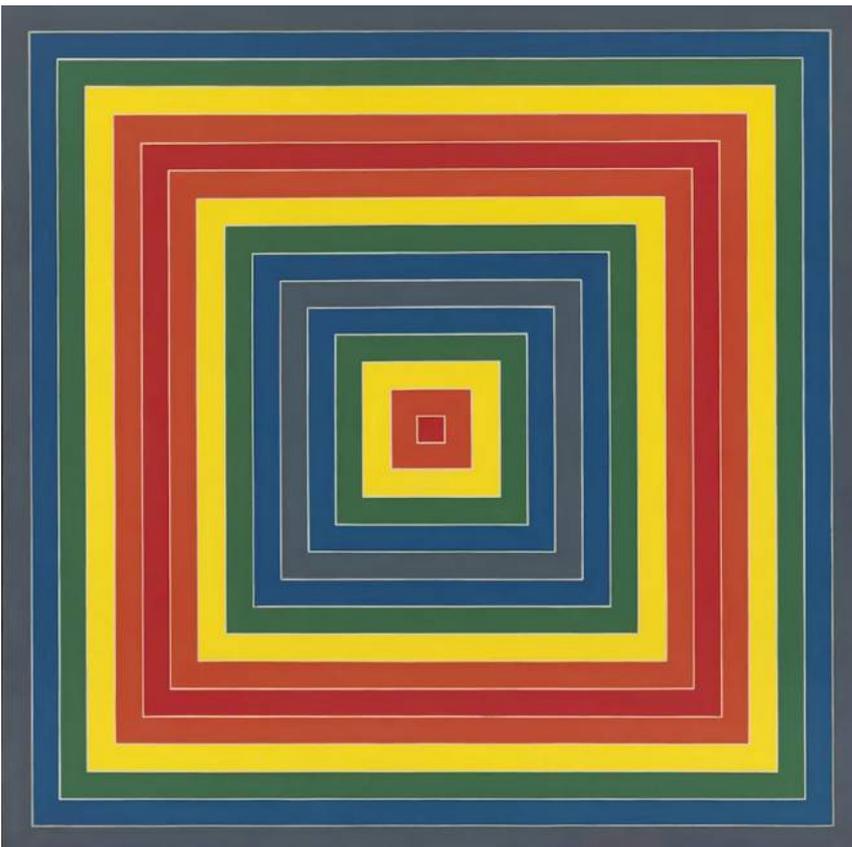


Fig. 1. Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*, 1962, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art; © Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

<sup>8</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Pearson, 1973); E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

of the canvas and the pictorial space, between the surface and depth (Fig. 2).

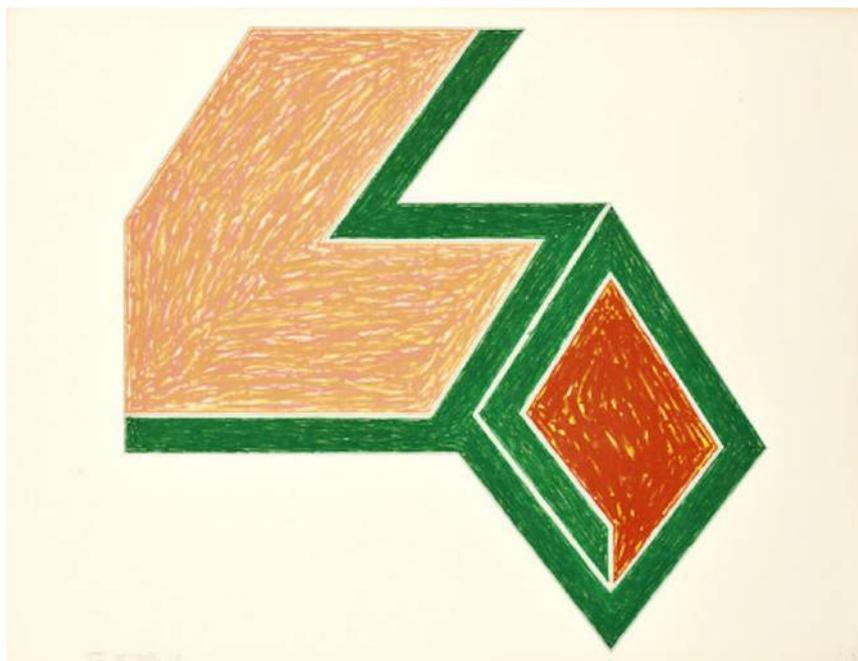


Fig. 2. Frank Stella, *Eccentric Polygon*, 1974, Jane Kahan Gallery, New York; purchased by Walter and Joan Wolf, Indianapolis, Indiana; ©Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Beyond the theory of art that is implied in Stella's works, it behoves us to pay particular attention, then, to what he had to say in the first of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures that he gave at Harvard in 1984. In developing a line of thought that sweeps from Leonardo da Vinci to Seurat, and from Vermeer to Velázquez, Stella focused on a theoretical problem that is crucial in the history of arts and images; a problem that equally concerns both "old" and "new" media. "The necessity of creating pictorial space that is capable of dissolving its own perimeter and surface plane," he says, "is the burden that modern painting was born with."<sup>9</sup> And immediately afterwards he goes on to state that "No one helped lighten this burden more than Caravaggio."<sup>10</sup>

As often happens, when artists are willing to share their theory, their tone tends to be assertive: Stella's remarks are full of ideas for creative practice but possibly a font of perplexity for art historians. Still, how can one not appreciate his attempt to concisely express the transformation

---

9 F. Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1986): 10.

10 *Ibid.*

that Caravaggio's painting forced on the regimes of pictorial representation of space and bodies? Stella's observations aptly describe Caravaggio's propensity for experimenting with the phenomenological limits of the idea of "realism," by creating environments in which the viewer's gaze must grope its way around, wrapped up in the composition but equally attracted by the vivid emphasis on colour, and by the chromatic nuances seen in some of the details.

Stella's reflections did not stop here. He developed his argument by examining Caravaggio's entire body of works and focuses on a few paintings. He used anachronistic terminology to highlight several aspects that prefigure artistic and technological developments that took place in the following decades as well as to identify their potentialities:

To be able to carry in our minds the space of Caravaggio's large commanding works, such as the Vatican Deposition and the Seven Acts of Mercy from Naples, we need some kind of image to help form an idea about the design and purpose of Caravaggio's pictorial space. The image that comes to mind is that of the gyroscope—a spinning sphere, capable of accommodating movement and tilt. We have to imagine ourselves caught up within this sphere, experiencing the movement and motion of painting's action. [...] The space that Caravaggio created is something that twentieth-century painting could use: an alternative both to the space of conventional realism and to the space of what has come to be conventional painterliness. The sense of a shaped spatial presence enveloping the action of the painting and the location of the creator and spectator is a by-product of the success of Caravaggio's realistic illusionism.<sup>11</sup>

Within a reflection on VR cinema and immersive media, it is the idea of "realistic illusionism" and even more the metaphor of the gyroscope that attracts attention. The gyroscope, invented in the 19th century by French physicist Jean Bernard Léon Foucault is still the basis of virtual reality devices. It is also thanks to it that the visors worn

---

11 Ibid.: p. 11.

by viewers can track head movements and thus accurately detect movement along one, two or three axes, thus making the virtual experience possible. Without the gyroscope, there is no possible balance between the viewer's gestures and movements in the virtual environment, nor any possibility of orientation within it.

It is time to give a chance to Stella and his hypothesis that Caravaggio invented the gyroscope and with it virtual reality helmets. But I would like to develop this suggestion in a key that is not merely "technological," by investigating the forms of composition that characterize the pictorial medium and the effects they produce. To do so, it is necessary to re-conceive the American artist's hypothesis into a series of operational questions: what is or would be, exactly, in Caravaggio's painting capable of prefiguring the conditions of illusionism made possible by contemporary technologies? How do his paintings help us understand the dual effect – hitherto described as one of attraction and distancing – that we experience within immersive environments like those of VR cinema?

### **The two moments of Narcissus**

To my knowledge, no contemporary photographer or artist has yet investigated in detail the instant when viewers put on or take off their virtual reality helmets. This is really a pity, because the image of that precise instant could make us think a lot about the potentialities of such technology. We must therefore be content with the myths of the past and their survival in our contemporary practices.

About to plunge into a virtual world, we find the figure of Narcissus. As noted by Andrea Pinotti – who has identified in Narcissus a kind of "conceptual character" of the an-iconic tradition in Western visual culture – there are two versions of the myth: the first aimed at producing a "naïve" image of the young boy who falls into the illusionistic trap of the image (recurring in Plotinus, Pausanias, Marsilio Ficino, etc.); the second coinciding with a "conscious" Narcissus (Ovidian variant), who is aware of the, so to speak,

media environment with which he is confronted and with which he is about to make one body.<sup>12</sup>

It matters little that the *Narcissus* painted at the end of the Sixteenth century is not a signed work by Caravaggio but only an attribution, widely discussed by art historians (Fig. 3). For the purposes of the reasoning proposed in this paper, it should be noted that the young man is already fully rapt and about to plunge into the world of image. Yet, the figure of the double reflection still reveals a gap between two representational and sensible worlds or regimes.



Fig. 3. Caravaggio (attribution), *Narcissus*, 1597-1599, Rome, Palazzo Barberini.

Explicitly taking up the terms proposed by Michael Fried, *Narcissus* constitutes an explication of the two “moments” that Caravaggio’s painting produces on viewers. According to Fried – let it be said in passing: a friend

---

12 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021): 3-6.

and one of the most important interpreters of Stella's work – Caravaggio's pictorial corpus involve a moment defined as "*immersive*, imagining the painter as so caught up, so immersed, in this phase of his work on the painting as to be less than fully aware of any sharp distinction between the painting and himself."<sup>13</sup> The second "'moment,' notionally instantaneous, of separating or indeed recoiling from the painting, of becoming detached from it, which is to say of no longer being immersed in work on it but rather of seeing it, taking it in, as if for the first time; I call that 'moment' *specular*, meaning thereby to emphasize the strictly visual or optical relation between the artist - viewer and the image, or image - artefact, that has just brought into being."<sup>14</sup>

Reading these pages on Caravaggio, thoughts evidently run to the dialectic between "absorption" and "theatricality"<sup>15</sup> identified by Fried himself in the painting of the eighteenth century, or to that between "art" and "objecthood"<sup>16</sup> as a key to theoretical and critical interpretation of the relationship between media, art and spatiality in the second half of the twentieth century. Even before the eighteenth century, well before the twentieth-century and, we might add, contemporary media experience, Caravaggio would have had the ability to reflect in an original way on the tension between the painter and his work (through the use of self-portraiture), between the canvas and the pictorial space (the composition of volumes, the relationship between light and shadow) producing unprecedented effects on viewers, now driving them inward, now pushing them outward.

Hovering between the classicism of the myth and the technological actuality of the present, *Narcissus* is

a virtual allegory of the 'moment' of immersion, or perhaps I should say of absorption becoming immersion, conjoined with the strongest

---

13 M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*: 39.

14 Ibid.

15 M. Fried, *Theatricality and Absorption: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

16 M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

possible statement of the specular separation of the viewer — originally the painter–viewer — from the painting. There is in it also the strongest imaginable thematization of mirroring as distinct from painting, another of the basic polarities that, in varying ratios and combinations, structure much of Caravaggio's art. And of course, it is a scene of hyperbolic self–portraiture, the core practice of his lifelong endeavor.<sup>17</sup>

*Narcissus* is in a sense, for the purposes of the anachronistic reasoning I am proposing here, a portrait of the exact moment when the viewer is about to put on the headset to access the virtual experience: it is in the middle, between plunging and retreating.

### **Within Caravaggio: immersion and reflection**

Beyond the myth, the comparison between contemporary media and the tradition of western art can be developed through other Caravaggio masterpieces, in which the effect of spatial encompassment is strong. Even better, it is possible to argue that some of Caravaggio's paintings represent the virtual experience as viewed from the outside but not without investigating the effects it produces in those inside.

Let us focus on the *Taking of Christ* (1602) and *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (1610). In the first of these two paintings (Fig. 4), the centre of attention is located on the left, at the point of Judas's dramatic gesture of betrayal, toward which all eyes converge, except for those of the disciple, who flees terrified toward the edge of the frame. In the second painting, considered to be the last that Caravaggio completed before his death, what is represented is the exact moment when Saint Ursula is wounded by Attila after she refuses his advances. What connects the two works, in addition to the horizontal composition and the precise staging of a dramatic event, is the presence of

---

17 M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*: 139.

a figure located on the right side of each painting. This is a man shown in profile: he has a black beard and bushy eyebrows. His head is stretched up, as if he were standing on tiptoe so as to better observe the violent scene unfolding just a few steps in front of him. In the 1602 painting the man is attempting to lighten the darkness of the night and illuminate Judas's kiss by means of a lantern, which he holds in front of himself with his right hand.

This figure is of particular interest for at least two reasons. The first, which Roberto Longhi divined earlier, is that the man on the right side of the image is Caravaggio himself. This is a self-portrait, one of the many in his pictorial corpus, confirmed moreover by its reproduction – like a



Fig. 4. Caravaggio, *Taking of Christ*, 1602, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland.



Fig. 5. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1610, Naples, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano.

signature – in the *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> The second reason concerns the role that this figure plays in both works. The art historian Sergio Benedetti – who has the merit of having rediscovered the original *Taking of Christ*, after years of investigation into various copies – noted that the figure of Caravaggio “is well defined and holds up a lantern, the function of which is purely compositional as it appears to throw no light, the true light source being high on the left, beyond the scene depicted.”<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit noted how, in this work, “Caravaggio puts himself within the painting not in order to get closer to his historical subject but rather in order to see himself both illuminating and experiencing congested spaces.”<sup>20</sup> Even more explicitly, Giovanni Careri identified in this self-portrait a kind of declaration of intent of the artist that invites us to reflect on our position as spectators: “I paint with light, with light I show a scene that belongs to the past, but also to the present, the armour testifies to this. I am here to see the arrest of Christ but I cannot intervene, as you spectators, witnesses safe from a violence that outrages and fascinates.”<sup>21</sup>

By re-conceiving such analytical insights in Fried’s terms, the artist’s self-portrait with lantern can therefore be conceived of both as being in the process of becoming immersed in the pictorial environment and as becoming “expelled from it in a ‘moment’ of specularly which was to all intents and purposes the aim and purpose of that work (the establishment of the painting as a painting, as an artifact to be looked at.)”<sup>22</sup>

Retracing our steps to the theoretical notions structuring this paper, with these paintings we are confronted with two different and apparently contradictory effects. At first, like Caravaggio trying to observe the scene, with

---

18 R. Longhi, “Un originale di Caravaggio a Rouen e il problema delle copie caravaggesche,” *Paragone* 121 (1960): 23-36.

19 S. Benedetti, “Caravaggio’s *Taking of Christ*, a masterpiece rediscovered,” *The Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1088 (1993): 731-741, 738.

20 L. Bersani, U. Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1998): 57.

21 G. Careri, *Caravaggio. La Fabbrica dello Spettatore* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2017): 234.

22 M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*: 217.

or without his lantern, we are pushed into the painting as a medial environment made of light and shadow. Then later, once we have searched the environment and once we have recognized the figure of the painter-witness, we are pushed outward, that is to say that we begin to reflect on the pictorial composition and on our position as viewers: in front of an image, with our feet planted on the museum's floor, in Dublin, Naples or in another city.

Putting it in anachronistic terms, one could first argue that the contemporary experiences offered by VR cinema are also characterized by an “immersive” moment: here the field of view itself coincides with a “portable lantern” located on the forehead of the spectator; a wearable lantern that illuminates a spherical space that coincides with full darkness, except for the frontal portion framed from time to time. Darkness that the VR cinema viewer will never have occasion to see or feel, except when it is diegetized in the production of a given narrative effect. At the same time, a “specular” moment, always persists: primarily in the glitches of the digital environment; in the very fact that lowering my gaze to look for my body I tend to find nothing or at least the scarcely credible simulation of arms and legs; in the presence of extradiegetic music, in all those compositional effects – whether intended or not by the video-makers – that invite us to see the image behind the simulation of a virtual environment and in so doing to “reflect” on our position as viewers.<sup>23</sup>

### **Regarding the image of the pain of others**

As in many VR cinema projects, the two paintings described above are about situations of suffering or violence, scenes which invite the viewer to assume the position of a witness but in which, at the same time, it is impossible to immerse oneself completely. One painting by Caravaggio seems capable of interrogating, more than

---

23 On the limits of VR cinema, through some concrete examples, see F. Zucconi, “Sulla tendenza utopica nel VR cinema,” *Carte Semiotiche* 7 (2021): 118-126.

any other, the paradoxical character of virtual experience, as well as the idea of being able to experience a world and a living condition that are profoundly different from those characterizing the viewer's everyday life.

At the centre of Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1600) is the half-naked, fully lit body of the assassin (Fig. 6). On the left, a group of men in seventeenth-century clothing recoil, trying to shield themselves from the violence. While an angel hands St. Matthew the palm of martyrdom, on the right we see the gesture of a novice walking away. In the foreground, some catechumens lying on the ground observe the scene. The composition is centrifugal: the viewer's gaze gradually moves away from the centre as it moves from one body to another. In the background, one meets a figure characterized by a particularly intense gaze who seems to stare at the act of violence before his eyes. This is the bearded man leaning out from the black background behind the assassin. Again, that man is Caravaggio. Also in this large painting, the painter portrays himself in the role of a witness to a violent act.

Those who would try to go even further in their analysis might go so far as to argue that what Caravaggio painted in *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* is not simply a self-portrait, but a "self-portrait as painter." To support this hypothesis, I would like to emphasize the inclination of the figure's head to the side to observe the scene as if he had a canvas in front of him (Fig. 7). One could also conceive of the left hand reaching forward as a transfiguration of the palette, while the right hand holds the brush. The artist's sad gaze might then be re-conceived as a concentrated, absorbed gaze. If this were the case, it would be an anticipation of some of the traits that characterize the extraordinary visual *dispositif* that is *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez, notoriously and masterfully analysed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*:

Now he [the painter] can be seen, caught in a moment of stillness, at the neutral centre of this oscillation. His dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and the invisible: emerging from

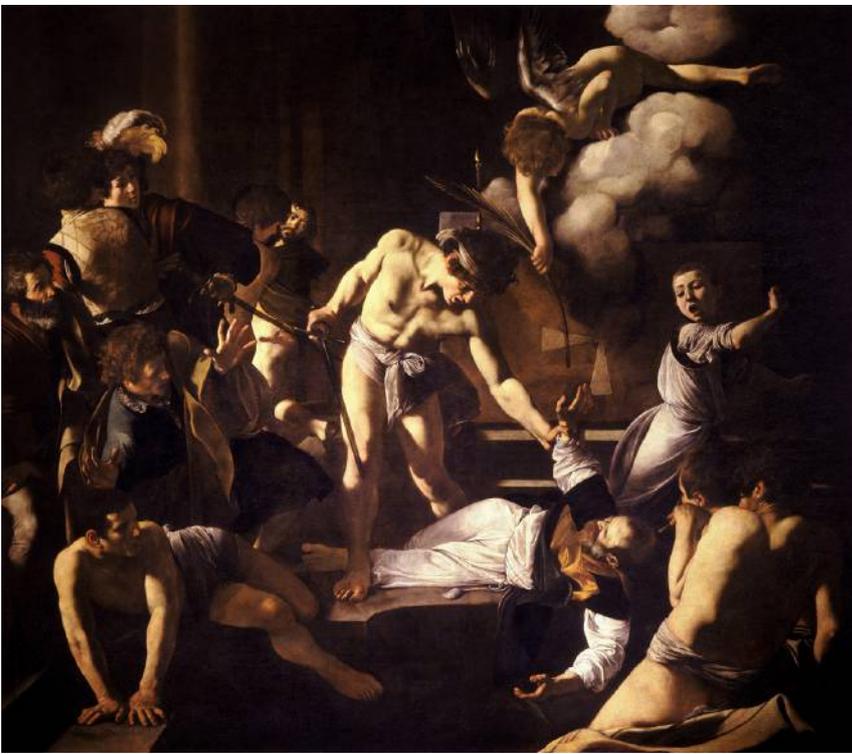


Fig. 6. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, 1600, San Luigi dei Francesi Church, Rome.



Fig. 7. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, 1600, Rome, San Luigi dei Francesi Church. Detail.

that canvas beyond our view, he moves into our gaze; but when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence.<sup>24</sup>

---

24 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) (London-New York: Routledge, 2002): 4.

In both Velazquez's and Caravaggio's masterpiece, the self-portrait takes on a theoretical and critical function; they are within the painting and, at the same time, they explicitly invite the viewer to reflect on visual representation, on the point of view that structures it and on the limits of the composition.<sup>25</sup>

This may seem a bold interpretation. Yet, looking closely at the figure of Caravaggio, it can be argued that the image presented in *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* is not only an image of self “regarding the pain of others” but also and at the same time – turning Susan Sontag's famous expression – an image of self “regarding the image of the pain of others.”<sup>26</sup> If in the *Taking of Christ* and *The Martyrdom of St. Ursula* the self-portrait is first and foremost functional in expressing an idea of immersion of the painter-witness in the pictorial event – a closure and full autonomy of the pictorial as an “immersive environment” – in *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* there is a shift that calls into question the composition of the image and the effect of immediacy of representation. Reading Fried again, this is a work “in which a Caravaggio *semblable* at once rushes to leave the painting and looks back in evident distress, thereby enabling the viewer to recognize his characteristic features on the far threshold of the depicted space.”<sup>27</sup> It is not so much or simply that the figure depicting the painter seems about to leave the scene but, as the art historian and theorist writes with great acumen, “rushes to leave the painting” and pushes the viewer's gaze to the threshold of the image. If the self-portraits of 1602 and 1610 tend to provoke an identification between painter and viewer and reinforce the effect of immersion, that of *The Martyrdom*

---

25 For a more in-depth reflection on this painting and on the modernity of Caravaggio's self-portrait, capable of activating paths of critical reflection on contemporary media and visual culture, see F. Zucconi, “Regarding the image of the pain of others: Caravaggio, Sontag, Leogrande,” *Humanities* 11 (2022), 44. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11020044>.

26 The reference is to the title and thoughts developed in the famous book by S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

27 M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*: 209.

of *St. Matthew* traces the effect of immediacy back to the pictorial composition that produces it.

As Sontag herself points out in the above-mentioned book, from the seventeenth century to the tradition of twentieth-century reportage, a self-portrait of the painter, photographer, or director is certainly not enough to validate the authenticity and effectiveness of the testimony or its ethical value. The risk of a self-referential drift, even a “narcissistic” tendency, is also discernible behind this trend: why represent ourselves when we are faced with the pain of others? Rather than glibly promote all self-reflexive tendencies, the self-portrait of Caravaggio in *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* is useful and interesting to the extent that it is a manifestation of the fact that, despite its illusionistic realism, it remains an image among many other possible images of this event and does not claim to coincide with it and reproduce it through the media for the viewer’s benefit.

The self-portrait on the threshold thus becomes a way to intensify the “specular moment” or, in other terms, to underline the fact that even during the more immersive virtual experience, we are just facing an image, a very well structured one. On the one hand, with his gaze, Caravaggio invites the viewer to immerse himself in an encompassing pictorial image; on the other hand, with his positioning and posture, he leads the viewer to observe the theatricality of the scene from another point of view, to analyse it as seen from the outside.

### **Attraction and distancing**

Picking up the thread, Stella’s hypothesis was taken up and developed in this paper as a theoretical and analytical metaphor, certainly not in mere technological terms. If the gyroscope fitted in virtual reality helmets makes possible the stable connection between the movements we actually make in the physical world and those in the world of images, talking about Caravaggio’s gyroscope meant reflecting on the strategies of producing illusionistic and counter-illusionistic effects, on the balance between the

“immersive” and “specular” moments. Reference to the theoretical and methodological notions proposed by Michael Fried thus made it possible to observe the co-presence of such moments or, rather, such spectatorial effects that persist, by transforming, from the history of Western painting to contemporary immersive devices. Through reference to Susan Sontag’s critical theory of photography, it was thus possible to propose a hypothesis for an ethical and political approach to VR. In particular, what has emerged is that the co-presence of illusionistic and counter-illusionistic effects does not constitute a weakening of the experiential and testimonial value of immersive experience. On the contrary, a conscious ethical and political approach to VR seems to be able to develop precisely by making viewers feel the threshold between the environment in which they are physically situated and the virtual one. This is why it is not necessary to rely on technological implementations devoted to perfecting, once and for all, the immersive character of VR cinema and other technological devices. While the slogans that accompanied the launch of many virtual reality projects relied on the simplistic use of the notions of “empathy,” “compassion,” and “immersion” in a geographical elsewhere, the most interesting aspect of such technology seems to involve its capacity to produce both identification and estrangement.

Like Caravaggio observing the Martyrdom of Saint Matthew, even the gap between the physical world, in which the viewer is placed, and the virtual one can be re-conceived in positive terms within artistic experimentations capable of reflecting critically on the asymmetrical relations between the observer and the observed, between the *here* in which we find ourselves and the *elsewhere* of which we claim to have “direct” experience. In fact, the very ideas of virtual “presence” must be conceived as a media effect, resulting from specific compositional and

technological determinations capable of modulating the relationship between subject and environment.<sup>28</sup>

Examples of artistic projects aimed at investigating such limits are few, but their number is certainly growing. The survey and in-depth study of such experiments exceeds the specific objectives of this paper. To name but one – the most important, and often-addressed<sup>29</sup> – the installation *Carne y arena* (2017) by Alejandro González Iñárritu seems precisely to spur spectators into experiencing their own awkward extraneousness and powerlessness toward a group of refugees from Mexico who are trying to cross over the border to the United States (Fig. 8). Iñárritu's subtitle for the installation – “Virtually present, physically invisible” – expresses, perhaps, the urgent need to tackle the paradoxical character of virtual experience.

Beyond Caravaggio, building on the analysis and concepts elicited by his painting, the field of experimentations of VR cinema and, more generally, virtual reality seems to be able to develop only by taking into account the co-presence of the different moments or effects that define our relationship with such media. Of course, in contemporary virtual experiences, the viewer never has the opportunity to mirror himself or herself, that is, to see his or her own image reflected inside the media environment. The notion of “specularity” as understood in *Narcissus* and Caravaggio's self-portraits seems in this sense to lose relevance. But at this point it should be clear that this notion

---

28 On this point, see V. Catricalà, R. Eugeni, “Technologically modified self-centred worlds. Modes of presence as effects of sense in virtual, augmented, mixed and extended reality,” in F. Biggio, V. Dos Santos, G.T. Giuliana, eds., *Meaning-Making in Extended Reality* (Roma: Aracne, 2020): 63-90. For reflection in the different forms of exposure, interactivity and modes of presence, see R. Eugeni, *Capitale algoritmico. Cinque dispositivi postmediali (Più Uno)* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2021): 127-174.

29 For an analysis of Iñárritu's installation, see P. Montani, *Tre Forme di Creatività: Tecnica, Arte, Politica* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2017): 132-138; A. D'Aloia, “Virtually present, physically invisible: virtual reality immersion and emersion in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*,” in *Senses of Cinema* (June 2018), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2018/feature-articles/virtually-present-physically-invisible-virtual-reality-immersion-and-emersion-in-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritus-carne-y-arena/>, accessed January 10, 2022; A.C. Dalmasso, “The body as virtual frame. Performativity of the image in immersive environments,” *Cinéma & Cie* 19, no. 23 (2019): 101-119; L. Acquarelli, “The spectacle of re-enactment and the critical time of the testimony in Inarritu's *Carne y Arena*,” in F. Aldama, A. Rafele, eds., *Cultural Studies in the Digital Age* (San Diego: San Diego University Press, 2020): 103-118; R. Diodato, *Image, Art, and Virtuality: Towards an Aesthetics of Relation* (Cham: Springer, 2021): 72-74.

expresses not so much or only the mirroring of one's own image, but the possibility of observing and reflecting on the relationship between subject and environment, between what separates us and what binds us to the image.



Fig. 8. Alejandro González Iñárritu, *Carne y arena*, 2017. ©Emmanuel Lubezki/Alejandro González Iñárritu

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me propose, in conclusion, to call these moments by two very simple terms that I also used in the introduction: *attraction* and *distancing*, where – as in the case of the oppositions proposed by Fried – the second term encompasses the first, constituting a form of meta-reflection on the forms of artistic and media experience.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, attraction defines the concave side of images, the one capable of becoming environment and drawing the viewer to show solidarity with them. On the other hand, distancing expresses the convex side or the modular spatiality of images, the one pointing at the viewer as such and forcing him or her to reflect on his or her own position, on the complex character of every experience. Whether such terms are convincing or not, the articulation of the two “moments” seems to define the ethical and political limits of both old and new immersive

---

30 For a reflection on the notion of “distance” in the field of media studies, I refer to the introduction and the various contributions in M. Treleani, F. Zucconi, eds., “Remediating Distances,” *IMG Journal* 3 (2020).

technologies. Hence the need to keep the door of art history open, imagining an anachronistic approach and aiming for artistic experimentations poised between different media, between two different moments.

**AN-ICONOLOGY**  
**History, Theory, and Practices**  
**of Environmental Images**



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO  
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA  
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON. The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.