La haute et la basse définition des images. Photographie, cinéma, art contemporain, culture visuelle

sous la direction de
Francesco Casetti et Antonio Somaini

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Anyone who has delivered an article or volume with illustrations to a publisher will sooner or later have had one or more images sent back to them, accompanied by the prompt reprimand: 'the definition is too low. Please resend the file in higher definition'. The frustration of the author – who may have thought they could get away with a quick screenshot in .png format or who found themselves needing to reproduce an image that exists only as a lightweight .jpeg on the web – is usually followed by a frantic series of attempts to improve the source image by using image enhancement or image upscaling software (such as DeepImage), upgrading the original information so as to achieve an editorially acceptable result.

Low is bad, high is good. And not only in the merely numerical and quantitative sense of measuring the pixels contained in a digital file. The definition of images thus adapts to the millenary tendency to load the fundamental relations of space (high/low, but also right/left and front/back) — relations that are rooted in the *anthropos* as an oriented and situated body — with axiological and symbolic values: 'to start off on the right/wrong foot', 'to report a sinister', 'to be always one step ahead', 'low blow', 'to walk tall', 'State of right' (and not of wrong)…

Philosophy (Ernst Cassirer), phenomenological psychiatry (Erwin Straus) and cultural anthropology (Robert Hertz) have laid the foundations of an investigation that aims to explore those value investments and show their natural and cultural roots. The volume *La haute et la basse définition des images. Photographie, cinéma, art contemporain, culture visuelle*, edited by Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini, effectively collaborates with this investigation at the level of the theory and practice of images, with particular (but not exclusive) reference to technical and digital images, contributing to a problematization of that same polarity and the values associated with it (rich/poor, clear/confused, precise/imprecise etc.).

As the editors argue in their *Introduction*, the distinction between the definition of high and low takes on a meaning that is not only technological, but also aesthetic, epistemological, economic and political. At the *technological* level, the progress in devices for recording, encoding, transmission and manipulation of images constantly reshapes the high-low relationship. At the *aesthetic* level, the possibility of appreciating or not appreciating certain details of the image, according to its resolution, has an impact both on our sensory experience (aesthetics as *aisthesis*) and on our

artistic experience (aesthetics as art theory); it also has an impact to the point that we might even question whether we are dealing with the same image and the same work in the case of different definitions of the same one. At an *epistemological* level, the level of knowledge to which we have access depends directly on the informational content of the image. At the *economic* level, financial investments in increasingly sophisticated technologies make the pace of device obsolescence ever faster ('today's high definition inevitably tends to become tomorrow's low definition'). At the *political* level, the distinction between high and low definition negotiates the dialectic between the regimes of visibility and invisibility, with inevitable consequences for information accessibility (the investigations conducted by Eyal Weizman and the Forensic Architecture group he coordinates at Goldsmiths in London are a striking example of this with regard to military/civilian opposition).

These are levels that we can certainly distinguish in the analysis, but which are evidently intertwined in the concrete practices of the production and reception of images today. The contemporary situation, however, does not jump out of the blue; its archeology is inscribed in a *longue durée* that the editors propose to designate as the polarization between 'neat' and 'flou', crucial for the history of pre-digital images. They recall in this regard — in addition to the poetics of flou in the history of analogue cinema, and the difference between photographic pictorialism and New Objectivity — also the Renaissance opposition between linear perspective (based on the rigorous geometrization of the represented space) and aerial perspective (played instead on pictorial shading and atmospheric effects). We could add here that distinction between images to be observed from close up and images to be appreciated from afar, which was made famous by art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl respectively for the transition from Renaissance to Baroque and the transition from Egyptian to late Roman art, but which had already

surfaced in Plato's *Parmenides*. Once again, then, a dialectic that we could define as aesthetic-pragmatic, aimed at inducing in the observer a sensorimotor behavior of approaching or moving away from the image, and of lesser or greater perceptual integration on the part of the observer (a theme that would later become central to the mediological approach of McLuhan, not by chance a reader of Wölfflin).

The volume brings together contributions from specialists in film theory, media and visual culture studies (in addition to the curators, Erika Balsom, Raymond Bellour, Emmanuel Burdeau, Enrico Camporesi, Arild Fetveit, Filippo Fimiani, Jacob Gaboury, André Habib, Frédéric Monvoisin, Roger Odin, Peppino Ortoleva, Marie Rebecchi, Lina Maria Stahl, Peter Szendy). And, significantly, it gives voice to artists (Hito Steyerl, Jacques Perconte, Thomas Hirschhorn) who have placed at the center of their practice and reflection the questions of image definition and of the multiple senses — from the aesthetic to the political — produced by the dynamics of compression/decompression, impoverishment and pixelization.

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