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DICO Toolkit for Digital Career Stories

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Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage

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DICO Toolkit for Digital Career Stories

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A “Flood of images”. Notes on the fate of the “figure seen from behind” in the Digital Career Stories by the UniMC team

Giuseppe Capriotti*

Abstract

The paper analyses the way in which UniMC students have used personal photos for the preparation of their Digital Career Stories during a workshop held in Macerata in January 2022. The phrase “flood of images” expresses the freedom with which students have used numerous photographs taken during their leisure time and travels. In this “flood of images” we can notice a predominant presence of a powerful image, which is recurrent in almost all the stories: it is based on the theme of a human being seen from behind, showing his/her back to the observer. In some images the protagonist (or the protagonists) is looking at an amazing landscape, while in other cases he/she is admiring a framed picture, a work of art in a museum. The figure of a human being seen from behind could be an effect of the significant impact of some Friedrich’s paintings (also in the European handbook of general history, literature, and art history). Within the frame of the “visual studies” (and using Mitchell, Freedberg, Lester and Belting categories), the paper deals with a singular case of the “power of images”.

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A “flood of images” entails the impression that an art historian dealing with “visual studies” can get while watching the Digital Career Stories made by students of the University of Macerata (UniMC) in Italy, within the frame of the DICO project. The workshop, held in Macerata in December 2021, proved to be very interesting as it verified some assumptions of the “history of images”, regarding in particular the issue of the “power of images”¹.

According to W.J.T. Mitchell, the first concept of the “image science”, the science of images, is the “pictorial turn” (often associated with the notion of the “iconic turn” introduced by Gottfried Boehm)². We are living in a world of images; we are bombarded by images. The pictorial turn is in a sense a revolution: images have become predominant over words; the biblical “golden calf” is revered more than the written word, the law. In addition, while we are flooded by images, many scientific and academic disciplines have started to use images in their different fields of research. Art historians are no longer the only image specialists. Many other scholars, coming from other disciplines, have started to deal with images³.

Not only advertisements, TV and cinema, which are the media of the twentieth century, but Facebook, Instagram and TikTok have already conquered our minds. Instagram and TikTok are the social media used by our students, more than Facebook, which is still focused on words, texts sometimes associated with images. Thanks to these social media, images are gaining more and more power, and we risk being convinced and cheated by images on a daily basis. In social media, famous images and works of art can be modified to create “memes”, which are able to live in a clonal way, repeated over and over, and modified, in our screens and in our minds⁴.

In the Digital Career Stories produced by the UniMC students, words, images, and videos are matched together. In comparison to the Digital Career Stories prepared by professors during the training workshop, one difference can be emphasised: professors have used only old and recent photographs, and in some cases hard copies of photographs; professors did not use videos at all, whereas students used them abundantly. Therefore, the first remark we can make is that students are simply more familiar with the video, with moving images. In some Digital Career Stories of the students, the camera (or the mobile phone used as a camera) is the protagonist in the production of images used to build stories and it is represented, that is, quoted in the image (fig. 1).

¹ The power of images is a core theme for art history and visual studies, in particular after the seminal work written by Freedberg 1989.

² Mitchell 2014. Cf. Boehm 1994.

³ See for instance Lester 2011.

⁴ Marino 2015. On the concept of clonal image see Mitchell 2012 and 2014.



Figs. 1-3. Images from students' Digital Career Stories

In addition to these general considerations, in this “flood of images” we can notice a predominant presence of one image which is, as we will see, recurrent in almost all the stories as a mental image. This image is based on the theme of a man or woman represented or seen from behind, showing his/her back to the observer. I believe this is a very strong and powerful image. In some photos the protagonist (or the protagonists) is looking at the landscape, which is often rather amazing (fig. 2). In other cases, he/she is admiring a framed picture, a work of art in a museum (fig. 3). These two elements seem to be very important and meaningful in relation to the education that UniMC students receive at university lectures. In effect, from the point of view of the “cultural heritage”, the landscape is the context, that is, the container of the complexity and the network of relationships among the single elements that we can see in it; while on the other hand, a work of art in a museum is a picture without its context, a picture that has lost its original function, acquiring a new function in a museum⁵. Without any intentionality, in the Digital Career Stories made by UniMC students of cultural heritage and tourism we have images featuring a person looking at a framed painting (that is, an object, a tangible testimony) and we have images featuring a person looking at a more inclusive context, the tangible and intangible value of a landscape or an urban landscape. It can also be assumed that in this looking at a work of art or at a landscape, the protagonists are also looking at their future, maybe a future as workers in the field of cultural heritage and tourism.

Because this is an image massively recurrent in the stories, I wondered why this type of image – always different, but always the same – is so frequently encountered in this context. In my opinion it is an interesting case of “power of images”. There is a picture (or more than one picture, but with the same theme) which is massively present not only in the European handbooks of art history, but also in the European handbooks of general history, literature, and philosophy: the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (fig. 4) by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, painted in 1818 and now preserved at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg. This painting is considered the manifesto of Romanticism: the wanderer seen from behind is a man looking towards his future of freedom and independence⁶. Just to give an effective example, we can compare this Friedrich’s painting with the photo, taken on a misty day and used by a student (fig. 5). The idea of travel is underlined by the backpack and this photo is also an example of the abovementioned camera as the second protagonist of the picture.

⁵ Toscano 2006.

⁶ Koerner 2009.



Fig. 4. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle

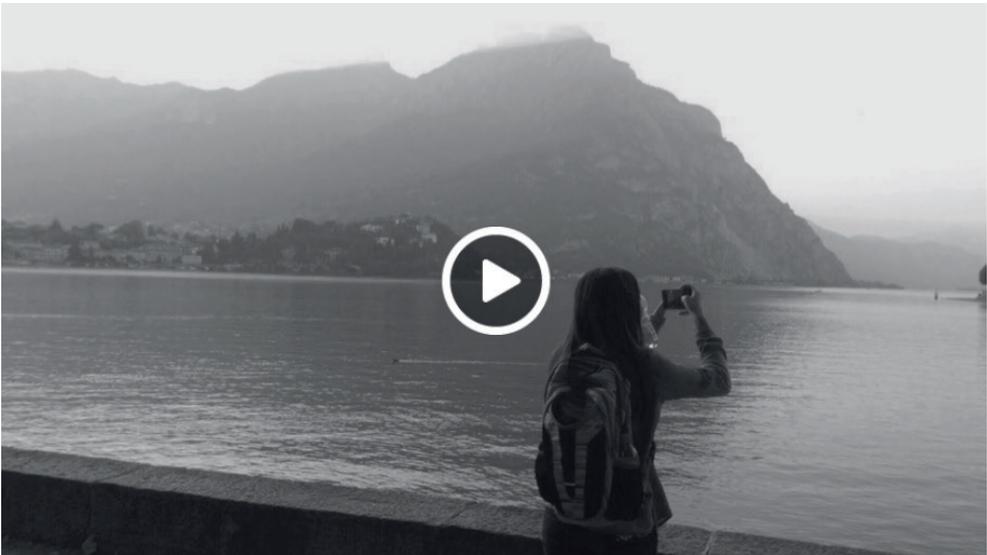


Fig. 5. Image from a Digital Career Story



Fig. 6. Caspar David Friedrich, *Moonrise over the Sea*, 1822, Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie



Fig. 7. Image from a Digital Career Story

Friedrich reused this scheme in many other paintings, always depicting one or several persons seen from behind and looking at the landscape, such as in the *Moonrise over the Sea* (fig. 6), painted in 1822 and now in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin⁷. The three characters in this painting can be compared with the three girls who are looking at a marine landscape in this photo (fig. 7): the background of the painting with three sailing vessels becomes the skyline with skyscrapers in the photo, whereas the foreground with rocks is replaced by the perspective lines of the quay. The shoes which appear in the very foreground of the photo are a vivid and playful symbol of the photo's author, like a parody of the signature of the artist. The last comparison that we can make, as an additional example, is between the *Woman before the setting sun* (fig. 8), painted in 1818 and now in the Museum Folkwang in Essen⁸, and this photo (fig. 9), in which a girl is looking at the landscape opening her arms in the same way as the woman in Friedrich's painting.

The recurrent reproduction of this scheme is an extraordinary example of the "power of images", in particular of a powerful image that can remain impressed in the mind of the observer (in our case, of young students). According to Paul Martin Lester, the power of an image consists in its ability to be memorable, to be remembered, and to remain in the mind of the observer as a part of a personal archive⁹. Using the categories introduced by the German art historian Hans Belting, we can say that the human mind is an extraordinary archive of powerful images which are impressed upon our brain: our body is infected or haunted by images¹⁰. Belting theorised his "anthropology of images", which is focused on three elements: the *image*, which can also refer to the mental or literary image; the *medium*, that is, the screen on which the image appears, a framed painting or sculpture, but also the screen of a laptop; and the *body*, represented by the human mind and able to memorise and remember powerful and impressive images. This theory erases the difference between the mental image and the real picture, because mental images also have a medium – the human mind (body) – just like pictures have a concrete medium. From our personal and mental archive of images, we reactivate the appropriate image when we need to express a content or deliver a message.

The image of the wanderer or of the figures seen from behind in Friedrich's art has a long history. From the paintings by Giotto and Masaccio, it has been used by the Renaissance and Baroque painters to express the point of view of the observer inside the painting: the figure seen from behind shows to the observer the correct position, that is, the correct mood and behaviour to take in

⁷ Börsch-Supan 1976.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Lester 2011, p. 3. For a discussion on the Lester proposals, see Capriotti 2018.

¹⁰ Belting 2005.



Fig. 8. Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman before the setting sun*, 1818, Essen, Museum Folkwang



Fig. 9. Image from a Digital Career Story

front of the image¹¹. Friedrich isolated this character, transforming a very old strategy of communication into a powerful icon, creating an icon. This icon is so strong and powerful that it came out from the mind of UniMC students on two occasions: in the moment of the production of the photo, in front of a landscape or a work of art in a museum, during a holiday or a visit; and in the moment of the production of the Digital Career Story, to express the need of looking towards a future of freedom, achieved through working in the field of cultural heritage and tourism.

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¹¹ For an in-depth discussion about the polysemantic meaning of this figure in Renaissance art cf. Lee Rubin 2018.

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