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## The Matter of the Image: For a Material Aesthetics between Ontology and Linguistics

**Abstract:** This essay aims at understanding the role of matter and outlining material aesthetics in the age of the digital image. To do so, it first analyses the traditional link between matter and form within the framework of classic ontology and aesthetics, according to which matter is the passive principle of reality subdued to the action of form and its *logos*. It then attempts to rethink this relationship through the activation of matter in its metaphysical, as well as aesthetical and linguistical dimensions. Such activation is outlined through the analysis of the concept of “concrete sense” and “concrete metaphysics” developed by Pavel Florensky in his inquiry into the Orthodox icon, and through that of “vital semantics” defined by Roland Barthes in his essay on 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter Arcimboldo. The argument is that these two concepts allow for a different relationship among art’s praxis, ontology, and linguistics, leading to the first formulation of a material aesthetics, while also rethinking the temporality of both traditional and digital image.

**Keywords:** matter and form; material aesthetics; metaphysics and ontology; metonymy and metaphor; Pavel Florensky; Roland Barthes; icon; Arcimboldo; anachronism.

### Image, form, and matter

This paper takes its cue from a somewhat anachronistic question: how is it possible to understand the material dimension of the image in contemporary aesthetics, and, more precisely, in the age of the internet and digitalization? While form, in its abstraction, seems to be able to endure through different concepts and praxes of the image, matter instead, traditionally linked to contingency and becoming,<sup>1</sup> finds itself somehow in a fallback position. Such a position results from the peculiar knot which ties together the different elements that are involved in any artistic<sup>2</sup> production: the

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<sup>1</sup> On the classic formulation of the connection between becoming and matter see: Richard Sorabij, *Matter, Space, and Motion: Theories in Antiquity and Their Sequel* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘artistic’ must here be understood in its broadest meaning of artificial and handcrafted, rather than in its connection with the aesthetic theory of beauty and taste.

techniques and the materials, which are bound to be outdated or to re-emerge from a recent or remote past; the archaeological character of any artwork, which locates it in a specific point of time and space; the handcrafted dimension of the artistic process, as compared to the automatism of technology – which seems to aim first and foremost at the abstraction and the extraction of form from its disposable material support.<sup>3</sup>

The anachronism of this investigation must, therefore, be better specified: on the one hand, it seems to relate to an intrinsic archaism of matter, one that concerns the production of the artwork and its auratic existence. That is, it concerns matter as the heavy element of the image, which records the encrustations of the ages, holds it in the time of restoration, and marks its antiquary regression. On the other hand, it seems to relate to the theoretical notion of matter in its complex relationship with that of form. The very concept of the image seems, in fact, to be linked in many respects to the ancient ontology of matter and form, insofar as it arises from the combination of these two far ends of the ontological order, and their conflicting temporalities.

According to their classical scheme, form names the eternity, the atemporality, the duration, the permanence, that is, the lasting element unaffected by the dialectic of generation and corruption, whose *logos* (that is, its logic and linguistic order) organizes reality; matter, on the contrary, names the process of becoming, the substrate of changing and decay, and therefore, the time of genealogy (the timeline of the generations).<sup>4</sup> Ever since the first “aesthetic”<sup>5</sup> investigations into it, image – be it mimetic or poietic – has been framed within this ontological scheme and the peculiar order of time it outlines. In fact, the gnoseological value of the image seems to depend on its relationship with the ontological dimension of form, that is, with the ability of this latter to remain untouched by the dialectics of becoming, and to last through its material epiphenomena. At the same time, the very existence of the image – as well as, from an equal and opposite perspective, its deceptive power<sup>6</sup> – depends on its coming to being in this material phenomenal world and its modifications.<sup>7</sup> Each modification leaves a material trace of its existence and its ruin, therefore drawing an ‘archaeological’ path within this same ontology.

Thus, image is caught between the opposing concepts of form and matter which define this ontological order, and, moreover, between their conflicting

<sup>3</sup> Cf. William John Thomas Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> On the link between matter, generation and genealogy see: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘aesthetic’ does not refer here to its modern meaning but, rather, to the peculiar premodern knot among ontology, the science of the sensible, and art which endures, to a certain extent, next to modern and contemporary aesthetic theories.

<sup>6</sup> I am referring here in particular to the Platonic tradition and its critique of mimesis. Cf. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> This correspondence between ontology and art dates back to Plato and, even more so, to Aristotle, whose theory of form and matter will be formalised by scholastic hylomorphism and will define most aspects of the premodern aesthetics’ debate. Cf. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*; Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002).

temporalities. In fact, two anachronisms coexist within this scheme. On the one hand, there is the anachronism of the form, both as an ontological eternal principle and as the lasting element of any artistic representation. Form in fact exists outside its phenomenal manifestations, lingering and resisting throughout the material modifications of the image, thus “opening”, by virtue of its haunting presence, the time of history;<sup>8</sup> that is to say that the anachronism of form is both that of the *eidos* – which names its ontological separate existence – and that of the *Nachleben* – which names its persistence through its material manifestations.<sup>9</sup> On the other side, there is the anachronism of matter, both as the figure of becoming and as that of the archaeological remains, insofar as it is both the substrate of the microscopic and macroscopic movements of the coming to being and the disappearing of forms and the ‘recording’ of their aoristic phenomenal existence. The anachronism of the matter is both that of the *hyle* – one of classical names for the material receptacle of forms<sup>10</sup> – and that of archaeology – that is, of the material remains of this onto-aesthetics.

The anachronism of this inquiry, therefore, depends not only on the fading of this ontological and aesthetical scheme – hastened by the advent of the digital, which seems able to set down the form-matter theory even more than the advent of mechanical reproduction<sup>11</sup> – but also by its very same structure. In contemporary aesthetics, however, this anachronism seems to concern particularly the material element, while form, far from being dismissed along with the hylomorphic model, becomes, especially in the context of the study of digital images, the main focus,<sup>12</sup> thus leaving aside any possibility for something as a ‘material aesthetics’. However, I argue that such aesthetics is possible as long as one firstly recognizes the metaphysical paradigm to which the concepts of matter and form are linked, along with its peculiar anachronisms, and secondly shakes such a paradigm from the inside, triggering at the same time the clash of those same anachronisms. My claim is that, in order to do this, one must first activate that heavy, passive, material element which appears to be less suited to stand the test of time. In fact, once matter starts ‘acting’ – which is the most paradoxical thing matter can do within the classical scheme outlined here<sup>13</sup> – that very same

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<sup>8</sup> George Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 15–35.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The term *hyle* is first employed by Aristotle with the meaning of ‘matter’. Cf. Enrico Berti, “La materia come soggetto in Aristotele e nei suoi epigoni”, *Quaestio*, 7 (2007): 25–52.

<sup>11</sup> The mechanical reproduction of art as outlined in Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. James Amery Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008) does not necessary overthrow the paradigm of form and matter. Cf. George Didi-Huberman, *La rassemblement par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme, et modernité de l'impression* (Paris: Minuit, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. William John Thomas Mitchell, “Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science”, *Ikon* 7 (January 2014): 27–32.

<sup>13</sup> As seen above, the domain of form depends on the passivity of matter understood as the receptive and inactive principle. This theory finds its best formulation in Aristotle's hylomorphism and his concepts of act and potency. Cf. Norbert O. P. Luyten, “Matter as Potency.” In *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1965), 102–13.

ontological and aesthetical order is upset, entailing a whole different configuration of its terms. In this article, I account for the procedures and the consequences of such activation by bringing together different traditions and theories that have focused on matter not just as the substrate of form or as its negation, but rather as a principle able to act and speak for itself<sup>14</sup>. I will do so firstly by analyzing the peculiar nexus between aesthetics and metaphysics outlined by Pavel Florensky's analysis of the artistic praxis of the icon, secondly by focusing on the vital semantics discussed by Roland Barthes in his essay on the paintings of Arcimboldo, and finally by defining the peculiar anachronism of the materiality of the image resulting from such a theoretical inquiry, and showing how it can help to outline a contemporary material aesthetics.

### The icon paradigm

As seen above, the image emerges from within the cracks of the ontological and aesthetical nexus of form and matter. In light of this, the image can be either what exists in a suspended time beyond its material support – therefore always reproducible on a different medium<sup>15</sup> – or the very same border between form and matter, defined by its ambiguous liminal status. Such an ambiguity depends on the fact that, by virtue of its mid-position, the image is both what makes the form visible through a material 'incarnation', and what always threatens to derail this formal individuation back to the "puddle of matter" from which it emerged.<sup>16</sup> In the Western tradition, there seems to be no escape from this dialectic between the formal *principium individuationis* and the material formless becoming – at least, none that does not involve the shift of focus from the status of the image to the perception of the subject, as in modern aesthetics. Thus, in order to rethink this relationship, one has to step outside of the "art galleries of the West"<sup>17</sup>, whose works and expositional ratio are defined by this very same dialectic.

On the edge of the Western world, along the same line of the Christian artistic tradition that characterizes most of pre-modern aesthetics, one comes across a peculiar form of art, which, by virtue of its proximity, is both similar and dissimilar to what has been described so far: The Orthodox praxis of the icon. This latter, in fact, by virtue of the peculiar status it acquires as an object of cult, arranges in a different scheme that same nexus between form and matter, and, in so doing, defines a new ontological and aesthetic paradigm. Moreover, it does so by giving a peculiar theoretical emphasis

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<sup>14</sup> For a theory of matter as the negation of form see: Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone, 1998). For a theory of an active matter drawn from a different tradition than the one presented here see: Diana Coole, "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh," in *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samatha Frost (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), 92–115.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mitchell, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science*.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Image and Violence," in *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

to the materiality of the image – an emphasis which in turn defines a different link between its mimetic and poietic characters.

According to one of the most important theorists of its aesthetics, Pavel Florensky, the main difference between the icon and Western sacred images depends on the former's ability to work as a threshold between the human and the divine by virtue of a peculiar 'clearness' which characterizes it. The icon works as a sort of window opened inside the phenomenal world: looking at it means looking through it, directly at God and the saints.<sup>18</sup> Such a clearness – i.e., its ability to make the invisible visible – does not depend on the fact that the form reproduces, in the contingent substance of the material support, a supersensuous truth. Rather, it relies on the fact that the form (and the truth it displays) exists as such *as* substance and *as* a material structure. That is to say, the procedures of its poietic production and its material composition are what allow for the icon to act as the border between the human and the divine worlds, a border drawn by the transcendent visibility it enables:

If we think about the surfaces of iconopainting – about the exact biology and physics of the artistic surfaces (i.e., their chemical and physical natures), about what precisely coheres the color-pigments as well as their chemical constituents. If we think about what various solvents and varnishes exactly do in the icon; if, in short, we think about all the myriad *material* causes operating in any art, then we have already directly engaged in reflecting upon that profoundly metaphysical disposition which the creative will expresses in and as its wholeness.<sup>19</sup>

None of the elements or the procedures which allow for the creation of the icon are too trivial or insignificant: each one participates in the “concrete metaphysics” which defines its peculiar liminal status between the phenomenal world and the divine one.

In this framework, the material existence of the image becomes essential. It does not simply determine its specific aesthetic configuration but also defines a different ontological paradigm rooted in a peculiar and original relationship between form and matter. In fact, the mimetic power of the image – that is, its ability to reproduce its transcendent model – depends entirely on its poietic nature, i.e., on the handcrafted work subdued to the rules of material activation. The traditional link between matter, form, and its *logos* which defines the classic scheme outlined above, is replaced by a different nexus between a metaphysical material sense and the artwork:

The fact of the matter is that the true sense of the icon is precisely in its concrete rationality, or its rational concreteness, that is, in its incarnation

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<sup>18</sup> Pavel Florensky develops this image of the window directly in opposition with the Albertian window of Renaissance art. Cf. *Iconostasis*. (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 65–69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

[...]. Both metaphysics and iconpainting are grounded on the same rational fact (or factual rationality) concerning a spiritual appearance: which is that, in anything sensuously *given*, the senses wholly penetrate it in such a way that the thing has nothing abstract in it but is entirely incarnated sense and comprehended concreteness.<sup>20</sup>

Such concrete sense and meaning are rooted in the matter's ability to shape form – and not the other way around, as in the case of both hylomorphism and the eidetic paradigm – and, therefore, to define a peculiar material metaphysics and aesthetics. These latter emerge not from a simple overturn of the classical model, but from an original understanding of the role of matter, which becomes the horizon of meaning, artistic praxis and ontology, according to which the position of form is defined and in which image comes to being. Neither form nor the image in fact exist in their aesthetical and metaphysical dimension outside of their material configuration, in so far as only the materials and their poietic manipulation are able to reveal – along the icon's lines drawn according to a strict set of theological and practical rules – the boundaries between the phenomenal and the transcendent.<sup>21</sup> On the basis of the peculiar status that the image acquires in this theological and aesthetical framework, the icon's cultic dimension is defined not by the *logos* of the form but rather by the “concrete sense” of matter, which implies a different dialectic between mimesis and poiesis, as well as aesthetics and metaphysics. In fact, there is no likeness (mimesis) outside of the material molding, and there is no aesthetics that is not also necessarily a “concrete metaphysics.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Florensky's theory of the icon defines a different role of matter and, along with it, a different genealogy of the image: far from being the passive substrate for the manifestations of forms, the matter becomes the active principle that makes visible and articulates the borders between different ontological planes. On this basis, image, both in its artistic and aesthetic dimension, can acquire an original liminal place. In light of this, it represents the best starting point for a material aesthetics and a material rethinking of metaphysics. The problem now is to see what happens once one transfers this peculiar constellation from its theological and religious context to the materialistic perspective adopted here.

### The Arcimboldo paradigm

The first effect of this transfer is that those lines that marked, both metaphysically and aesthetically, the boundaries between ontologically separated orders of existence – the human and the divine, the phenomenal and the transcendent, life and

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 151–2 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Clemena Antonova, *Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy: Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

metaphysics<sup>23</sup> – now become mobile. That is, they are no longer the axes along which the invisible becomes visible without compromising the ontological separateness between these two realms. Rather, they become modifiable borders of modifiable forms. These latter, in fact, are not guaranteed anymore in their endurance and stability by a transcendent *logical* order; their mutual relationships, along with their inner configurations, draw an image which in turn can no longer be secured in its epistemological validity, its ontological persistence, and its disembodied existence. In this framework, the image starts looking less like an icon of the Orthodox tradition, and more like a patchwork of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian painter Arcimboldo. The main character of Arcimboldo's art is, in fact, the fickleness of its composition, that is, its ability to continuously change its forms, shapes, and even its subject-matter. This is particularly evident in the case of his *Composed Heads* series that portray the seasons, which are defined by constant movements of the lines of the objects represented, and the continuous change of the logical relationship among them. In so far as their mutability makes it impossible to be accounted for by the static order of form, such movements occur along the material lines of the image and their 'concrete sense':

If you look at the image close up, you see only fruits and vegetables; if you step back, you no longer see anything but a man with a terrible eye, a ribbed doublet, a bristling ruff (*Summer*): distance and proximity are promoters of meaning. Is this not the great secret of every vital semantics? Everything proceeds from a *spacing out* or *staggering* of articulations. Meaning is born from a combination of non-signifying elements (phonemes, lines); but it does not suffice to combine these elements to a first degree in order to exhaust the creation of meaning: what has been combined forms aggregates which can combine again among themselves a second, a third time. [...] In short, Arcimboldo's painting is *mobile*: it dictates to the "reader", by its very project, the obligation to come closer or to step back, assuring him that by this movement he will lose no meaning.<sup>24</sup>

This peculiar non-static poetic creation happens on the edges of the image and its elements and recombines forms and meanings, thus outlining a "vital (material) semantics". Such a semantics is characterized by a rhetorical play between metaphor, that is, the figure of substitution, correlation, individuation, and metonymy, the figure which addresses the whole through the part (or vice versa), and the cause through the effect, by virtue of a material connection and proximity.<sup>25</sup> It is, in fact, long the material

<sup>23</sup> Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, "Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriqueur," in *The Responsibility of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 141–2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 135–40. On metaphor and metonymy see: Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), 69–96; Luisa Muraro, "To Knit or to Crochet. A Political-Linguistic Tale on

lines of metonymic signification that Arcimboldo's patchworks can be shaped over and over again in new formal metaphorical (i.e., individualized) figures, whose configuration is never definite. The composition of his artworks can indeed always be revoked according to a new material combination of forms that occurs through the mobility of their material borders. These latter, in so far as they represent the active principle allowing for a new artistic arrangement and meaning, are no longer "non-signifying elements" but rather name the metonymic signifying ability of the material element of the image – that is, the "concrete sense" of the concrete metaphysics characterized by the logical and aesthetic activity of matter. In this framework, metaphor vice versa names the aesthetic and logical determination of form, which can always be reshaped by the "vital semantics" of material composition.

Outside the rigid ontological partition which defines the order of form – and that still characterizes the theological horizon of the icon – in the context of this vital rhetorical semantics, with its peculiar dialectic between metaphor and metonymy, the matter becomes both the active and signifying principle of a new metaphysical, logical and aesthetical order. Thus, matter, far from being the abyssal, chaotic, and irrational principle of the eidetic tradition, is one and the same with the metaphysical, aesthetic and logical movements of lines, borders, and limits between forms, which define in turn a new peculiar status of the image – as in the case of Arcimboldo's patchworks. The image, in fact, results from this new dialectic between form, with its determinations of figures and objects, as well as with its metaphorical nexus of analogy and substitution, and matter, with its metonymical and aesthetical ability to revoke and reshape the formal element.

All this outlines a material aesthetics which, far from being the science of the heavy and undefined principle of becoming, or of the material remains of the various incarnations of the immaterial formal principle, allows for the study of the material ontological and logical variable connections between ever-changing forms. In this sense, the materiality of the image does not coincide with its auratic (i.e., unique, original, archaeological) nature, but rather names the poietic work of composition and decomposition of pieces, lines, forms, figures that characterize not only its pre-modern and modern configurations but also its contemporary digital existence. In fact, in so far as this material aesthetics defines a poietic composition characterized by a vital semantics, it applies to 'traditional' as well as digital images. Moreover, that immense aesthetic archive of images, which is the internet, allows for an even more radical rhetorical and metaphysical play between form and matter, metaphor, and metonymy. Here, the combinatory possibilities defined by the mechanism of composition and signification outlined above are not limited by any spatial or temporal presence. However, such an expansion of the physical and chronological boundaries implies that the temporalities of form and matter, along with their anachronisms, must be rethought in the light of this new material aesthetics and metaphysics.

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the Enmity between Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*, eds. Cesare Cesarino, Andrea Righi (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 67–119; Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London, New York: Verso, 2014).



## Anachronism and archeology

In order to rethink the temporalities of form and matter, one must look again at Florensky's *Iconostasis*. In fact, it not only contains the theory of the concrete metaphysics of the icon and the indications for a material aesthetics but also describes the peculiar temporal subversion these imply. Florensky's essay indeed begins with an investigation of the chronological inversion characteristic of the oneiric images, which are short after compared to the artistic images of Orthodox tradition. His analysis addresses the peculiar dream's subversion of the relationship between cause and effect. Florensky notes how while sleeping:

We plainly understand, in the dream, how one event causes another, and how (possibly quite absurdly) two or more events are connected because the first one is causing the next one to occur; moreover, as the dream unfolds for us, we see plainly how the whole chain of causation is leading toward some conclusive event, some *denouement* to the dream's entire system of cause-effect. Let us call this conclusive event X; and let us say, too, that X occurred because of some previous event T, which, in turn, was caused by S, whose cause was R, and so on: going from effect to cause, from latter to prior, from present to past, until we arrive at the dream's starting point, some usually quite significant, even meaningless event A: and it is this event A that is understood *in the dream* as the first cause of the entire system. But what about the tiny external stimulus, the quick sharp noise, the brief ray of light? To waking consciousness, this external stimulus is the cause of the whole composition: the cause, that is, of the whole causally interlocked system in which persons, places and events arose in the dream. Let us call this external cause  $\Omega$ . Now, what makes the dreamer awaken? When we look at this question from the viewpoint of waking consciousness, we might want to say that it is  $\Omega$  (the noise, or the light) that awakens us.<sup>26</sup>

The exchanges between the cause-effect series of the dream, and the cause-effect series of the wakefulness determine a characteristic inversion of the timeline, usually going from the former to the latter, from action to its consequences.

A peculiar circular temporal paradox takes place in the dream: the external cause, which entails the ending of the oneiric activity, also redetermines the sense of everything that happened before in the dream. The same fact – a noise, an alteration of perception – thus represents both the cause of the dream's ending and the reason for its beginning. Moreover, Florensky claims that the same temporal subversion also characterizes the artistic image (the icon) in so far as “art is [...] a materialized

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<sup>26</sup> Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 36.

dream”.<sup>27</sup> In fact, it represents “a crystal of time in an imaginal space”,<sup>28</sup> resulting from the ascent beyond the time of consciousness and above the limit between ontological planes. The temporal inversion of the icon, therefore, depends on its clearness – that is, its ability to work as a window opened to the transcendent, as seen above – that relies in turn on its specific materials and material organization.

This temporal description adds something important to the previous analysis of the icon’s concrete metaphysics. Not only is such a metaphysics rooted in the image’s poietic material existence and arrangement, but these latter also imply an original chronological scheme based on the inversion between cause and effect. This inversion depends on the rigid ontological division implied by the icon’s dialectic between the visible and the invisible, the transcendent, and the phenomenal. This means that the icon is an intrinsically anachronistic image in so far as its peculiar temporal inversion assumes the shape of a “crystal of time” displaying the odd connection – which occurs in the liminal time and space of the oneiric movements of consciousness – between different and inflexibly separated ontological planes. Thus, the very same existence of the iconic image is defined by this anachronistic presence of a crystallized piece of eternity inscribed in its concrete metaphysics.

This peculiar anachronism, which characterizes the aesthetics of the icon, assumes a different meaning when one transfers, once again, this temporal inversion of cause and effect from Florensky’s theological context to the material metonymical aesthetics drawn above from Arcimboldo’s paintings. The vital semantics of the *Composed Heads*, which has allowed for the recognition of the peculiar onto-linguistic nexuses determining the mutability of the image, makes it also possible to translate such a temporal subversion and anachronism into the analysis of the metonymical signification and metaphysics. In fact, the inversion between cause and effect is one of the most common ways in which metonymy signifies: along with the part-part and part-whole relationship, it also works through the logical and chronological subversion of the action-consequence order. Such a subversion assumes a specific configuration and importance in the context of the activation of matter which has been outlined here, in so far as it implies, as seen above, a rethinking of its traditional passive nature and its submission to the active principle of form. The active matter redefines the traditional configuration of potency and act by virtue of the linguistic movements it entails, which are rooted in the material proximity of its metonymical nature. This latter, in turn, allows for these movements because of its ability to rearrange the chronological and logical order of act and effect, cause and consequence. The spatial material contiguity between pieces and parts that shape the (transitory) forms of the image entails the reversibility of the classic active-passive, causal-affected relationship between form and matter, which in turn is made possible by the metonymical cause-effect inversion. That is to say, there is a mutual implication between the metonymical ability of matter to signify by proximity, and its activation through the metonymical ability to upset the order of cause and effect.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

In the light of this, the anachronism of matter and of the material elements of the image is not at all that of its thickness and slowness, grounding it to its archaeological existence. On the contrary, it is rooted in its linguistic and metaphysical mobility, which makes it possible for the image to exist through different times and forms. The image itself then becomes the point of catastrophe – i.e., the point of the overturn, inversion, condensation, and relocation – of the logical, ontological, aesthetic “distribution of the sensible”,<sup>29</sup> in so far as it records and displays its temporal and spatial movements and modifications. Thus, that same archaeological dimension, which seemed at the beginning to be intrinsically defined by its own tardiness and residual *archaic* nature, acquires rather a material *anachronistic* status, since it participates in the same clash of ontological and chronological levels that define the metonymical metaphysics, or onto-linguistics of matter. This clash allows for the coming together, within the same image, of different temporalities and possibilities of the assemblage of its parts and forms. The aesthetic and poietic signifying ability of the image’s material element outlines what George Didi-Huberman addresses as a peculiar *dissimilitudo* as opposed to the mimesis of form, whose hybridity stands against the ‘purity’ of this latter<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, such hybridity and “dissemblance” emerge from a critical inquiry into the history of art as the one developed by Aby Warburg which allowed him to formulate his notion of *Nachleben*:

In a famous essay on the Florentine portrait of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Warburg was brave enough to introduce into the notion of Renaissance [...] an underlying impurity [...]. Such an impurity made it possible to see, in the modern and expressive beauty of the faces painted by Ghirlandaio, suddenly, the cold plaster of the *Roman* funereal masks, the *Etruscan* terracotta and the wax of the *medieval* devotional objects. Different times collided and contradicted each other as symptoms in those images from which Warburg would evoke [...] a new model of temporality [...], a complex model of what he called ‘survival’ (*Nachleben*).<sup>31</sup>

Warburg’s notion of *Nachleben* concerns, in particular, the survival of the form, that is, its ability to dismantle any idea of progress and to anachronize the present and future of art.<sup>32</sup> However, the impurity of the image, its peculiar hybrid nature, and its temporal collision can also be observed from the material aesthetics outlined here. In this framework, in fact, they represent the never-ending work of poietic, linguistic,

<sup>29</sup> On this expression see: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. George Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Didi-Huberman, *La rassemblement par contact*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*; Carlo Ginzburg, “Le forbici di Warburg,” in *Tre figure. Achille, Meleagro, Cristo*, eds. Maria Luisa Catoni, Carlo Ginzburg, Luca Giuliani Salvatore Settis (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2013), 109–32.

and metaphysical processes of composition and decomposition of the lines and forms of the image and of its history. Such a process, as mentioned above, concerns not only its classical configurations but also its contemporary digital praxes. In fact, the possibility to recombine and reorganize them according to different chronological and aesthetic criteria depends on its very same anachronistic material existence.

## Conclusions

In this essay, I have attempted to define a material aesthetics able to account for both traditional and contemporary images. I did so by analyzing the traditional theory of form and matter, its ontological and aesthetical implications while trying to rethink its classic configuration through the critical instruments of different theories of an active matter. In particular, I have focused on Florensky's notion of a "concrete metaphysics" and Barthes' analysis of Arcimboldo's "vital semantics" in order to rethink the concept of matter in light of its rhetorical, ontological and poietic ability to reshape and change the order of reality. This, I believe, allows for a provisional starting point from which to develop a more elaborate material aesthetic theory.

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