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In copertina: Mario Giacomelli, *Il mare* (detail), Courtesy Archivio Mario Giacomelli

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# Post-Symbolic Images in Platform Capitalism

## An “Impolitical” Aesthetic Space

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Platform capitalism brings several processes to completion that were already apparent during post-industrial capitalism. One of these involves images and their gradual loss of a symbolic dimension. The mechanisms that platforms employ to direct the production of media content reduce images to objects of immediate use and consumption. Consequently, images fail to synthesise the multiplicity of the social reality: instead of inscribing it within a horizon of meaning, they simply reflect it. This article reconstructs the “de-symbolising” process of images during the various phases of capitalism and explains why a post-symbolic aesthetics should also be viewed as “impolitical”. If the political is indeed symbolic, since the giving of meaning and direction to society (a political task par excellence) also takes place through the construction of symbolic systems, the post-symbolic aesthetic is instead imposed by platforms for purely economic reasons.

Keywords: Symbol, Platform Capitalism, Post-industrial Capitalism, Aesthetics

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### Introduction

Starting in the post-industrial phase of capitalism, aesthetics has been progressively integrated into the mechanisms of production and consumption of goods and media content. This process has prompted several critics from Marxist and other schools to speak of an “aesthetic” capitalism, identified specifically with the production and consumption of an ever-increasing number of images – to the point that they saturate the social space or even replace the objectivity of the real with a hyperreality made of simulacra. As I show in this article, the effective integration of aesthetics into the mechanisms of post-industrial capitalism has been brought to completion by “platform capitalism”, an economic system associated with the “platform

society”: a concept that in recent years has become central to the study of the connected society and gradually superseded the previous paradigm of the “network society”. During the post-industrial and platform phases of capitalism we have witnessed two co-determining processes. The first is the proliferation of images mentioned above, fuelled in platform capitalism by a set of processes that are distinctive to the way algorithms and socio-technological apparatuses work. This proliferation also leads, however, to a crisis of the symbolic dimension of images, which lose their ability to unify the multiplicity of the social reality: to give it a meaning, a direction, and a purpose, through the representational workings of the symbol.

During the phase of late capitalism, the crisis of the symbol was associated with a simultaneous crisis of modernity’s master narratives and meaning systems: in platform capitalism, the mechanisms platforms use to capitalize their activities require the circulation of immediately comprehensible images that generate continual emotional responses from users and repeated social actions (such as posting likes or sharing content). All this has led to a crisis in the “interpretative” dimension of images as well. Even though symbols are unmediated, they still require decoding – an act that also involves reflective thought. However, platform capitalism’s business model requires images to be produced that can capture users’ scarce attention, that are immediately “consumable” and, for this reason, exploit the primary psychological processes. We thus pass from symbolic to post-symbolic images – images that do not refer to any meanings beyond what they represent, which are much more immanent in a social reality that they decline to make sense of, and which are strongly associated with the ludic aesthetic culture promoted by the platforms.

I conclude by defining the aesthetic space produced by platform capitalism as an impolitical one: the circulation of post-symbolic images is conveyed by a platform system that operates for purely commercial purposes, but whose apparatus today is intrinsic to the construction of meanings and values in the

public space. In this context, the only option for politics is to adapt to the aesthetic processes of platform capitalism (as it is, inevitably, already doing) by conforming to a post-symbolic order – an order in which images are used according to their commercial, ludic function, and in which the mechanisms for persuading a voter or a consumer are entirely similar.

## 1. The Crisis of the Symbolic Dimension of Images in Post-Industrial Capitalism

The transition into a post-symbolic aesthetic dimension, as I will define it in this paper, was caused by processes that, beginning in post-industrial capitalism and continuing in platform capitalism, drain individuals' capacities to reflect on and decode the media content they receive, including images. Images increase exponentially in number, but also become pure objects of consumption, which, as such, must be immediately comprehensible and available for use. What does this have to do with a post-symbolic aesthetic order?

Following Charles Sanders Peirce's well-known classification<sup>1</sup>, the symbol uses a signifier that does not resemble the concept expressed in reality, thus making it less immediate and requiring it to be decoded<sup>2</sup>. The fact that the symbol is tautegorical, as Schelling states, does not imply that the immediacy

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Peirce, "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism", *The Monist*, XVI/4, 1906, pp. 492-546.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the symbol is broached less frequently in Saussure's dyadic conception of the sign than in Peirce's theory; it also assumes a different meaning. Before his courses in general linguistics, Saussure still uses "symbol" with a meaning similar to that of "sign", i.e., something related to the signified in an arbitrary fashion. This idea of the symbol approximates Peirce's. It changes, however, starting in the courses in general linguistics. From then on, Saussure always makes it clear that the symbol differs from the sign specifically because of its non-arbitrary nature: the image shown in the symbol is a likeness to the object represented and thus establishes a direct relationship with the signified. From this perspective, Saussure's definition of "symbol" appears to approximate Peirce's notion of "icon", that is, something connected to its referent through similarity. For more on this topic, see G. Manetti, "Breve nota sul termine e la nozione di 'simbolo' in Saussure", in M. W. Bruno, F. Cimatti, D. Chiricò, A. De Marco, E. Fadda, G. Lo Feudo, M. Mazzeo, C. Stancati (a cura di), *Linguistica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Mimesis, Milano 2018, pp. 335-354.

of its meaning is detached from an interpretative act. As Paul Ricoeur explains, the symbol is “food for thought” because, in ordering the multiplicity, it contains a sense that goes beyond the meaning manifested by the image. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to symbols relates to what can be defined as an aesthetic *logos*: for him, the symbol «puts in meaning»<sup>3</sup> and is in every way compatible with the «mediacy of thought»<sup>4</sup>. For these reasons, there can be no symbolic language without hermeneutics: even the mythological or religious function, which belongs to the sacred sphere and passes through the symbol, involves *believing* – it remains an act of *interpretation*, precisely because the symbol unifies different levels of experience and representation<sup>5</sup>.

There thus exists a link between the symbol’s immediacy and the reflective mediation involved in understanding its meaning. To borrow from Emilio Garroni,

whereas the signified is linked primarily to the model of an intellectual unification of the sensible multiplicity, the “meaning” pertains instead to a model of aesthetic unification. The two models [...] mutually presuppose one another, and in fact there will never be meaning without a signified or a signified without meaning<sup>6</sup>.

When images are transformed into objects of pure consumption, they no longer order the multiplicity into a representative *unicum*, aesthetically or from the point of view of meaning (as we have seen, the two aspects are connected); rather, they merely conform figuratively to a non-synthesised multiplicity. This is when the symbolic dimension enters into crisis, and, along with it, any reference to the images’ political signification.

The partial obsolescence of the symbolic dimension of images is also tied to the progressive increase in their circulation. From this point of view, these

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<sup>3</sup> P. Ricoeur, “The Symbol... Food for Thought” (1959), tr. by Francis B. Sullivan, *Philosophy Today*, IV/3, 1960, pp. 196-207, quoted: p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, pp. 124-126.

<sup>6</sup> E. Garroni, *Senso e paradosso. L'estetica, filosofia non speciale*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1986, p. 31.

processes can be traced to the historical phase preceding post-industrial capitalism. For example, in Georg Simmel's study of metropolises it emerges that people in metropolitan environments are bombarded by a frenetic succession of images that directly affects their nervous system<sup>7</sup>. This overstimulation leads to what Simmel describes as a necessary intellectual defense: it transforms people into "calculating" individuals, making them perfect representatives of capitalism's rationalist spirit, embodied in the medium of money and understood as the universal equivalent – as the measure of every relationship. But this rational mask is simply a required defense mechanism, which individuals adopt to avoid being overwhelmed by the unsustainable nervous stimulation. The predominance of primary processes – of the figural – in the reception of images and the consequent loss of the interpretive dimension, associated, as we have seen, with the symbol, is thus a process whose roots run deep in modernity and industrial capitalism. As Mike Featherstone points out:

many of the features associated with the postmodern aestheticization of everyday life have a basis in modernity. The predominance of images, liminality, the vivid intensities characteristic of the perceptions of children, those recovering from illness, schizophrenics and others, and figural regimes of signification can all be said to have parallels in the experiences of *modernité* as described by Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel<sup>8</sup>.

The reference to Benjamin here helps to further clarify the issue: the exponential increase is also what prevents images from communicating a unified symbolic reference. Clearly implicated in this is their mechanical reproducibility, which leads to the loss of the aura and uniqueness of the work of art<sup>9</sup>. For example, Benjamin sees the "cultic" value of the painting being

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<sup>7</sup> G. Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), in K. H. Wolff (ed. by), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Free Press, London 1950, pp. 409-424.

<sup>8</sup> M. Featherstone, "Postmodernism and the aestheticization of everyday life", in S. Lash, J. Friedman (ed. by), *Modernity and Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford-Cambridge 1992, pp. 265-290, quoted: p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in H. Arendt (ed. by), *Illuminations*, en. tr. by H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York 1969, pp. 217-251.

supplanted by the display value of photography. The image's reproducibility implies a loss of authenticity; it also changes the ways the images are used: increasingly, they are "consumed."

These references explain how the processes involved in the image's loss of symbolic unity relate to social changes (such as those described by Simmel) as well as to technological ones (such as those described by Benjamin), both of which can already be found in the first half of the twentieth century. These processes later become established in post-industrial society. The latter is identified generally with the transition from an economy based on the production of goods, typical of the industrial society, to an economy centred on services, which became gradually dominant during the decades following the Second World War<sup>10</sup>. In the post-industrial phase of the economy, technology becomes one of information and networks, which also generate processes in the economy's functioning that are new with respect to industrial capitalism – such as immaterial labour and the equally immaterial movement of goods and capital – and accompany globalisation-related processes<sup>11</sup>. In this scenario, the increasingly rapid, global circulation of objects becomes primarily a circulation of cultural artefacts, images and signs, conveyed by means such as televisions and, later, computers.

Many authors associate post-industrial society with the paradigm of postmodernism. According to Frederic Jameson<sup>12</sup>, postmodernism would be the "cultural logic" of late capitalism, because in mature capitalism the aesthetic sphere is entirely integrated into the commodity production cycle. This is a specular dynamic, complementary to the one in the cultural philosophical sphere that signals the loss of aesthetic distance in the culture of capital.

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<sup>10</sup> M. Rose, *The post-modern and the post-industrial*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 20-25.

<sup>11</sup> D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York 1976.

<sup>12</sup> F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1991.



Simultaneously, when the metanarratives that mark the transition from modernity to postmodernity come to an end<sup>13</sup>, capitalism therefore assumes an exclusively “aesthetic” character: images increase in number because they are tied to the mechanisms of production and consumption; and they circulate at increasing speeds, thanks to new means of communication and information.

As Scott Lash points out, this is the backdrop against which a new middle class takes form, becoming the ideal public of postmodern society.

The post-industrial middle classes [...] have a whole range of different sources of identity than the older groupings and are likely to perceive their own ‘ideal interests’ in terms of a whole different range of symbolisms and a whole different range of cultural objects than do the older groupings. Hence the populism and image-centredness of postmodernism is more appealing to the new groupings than to the old elite<sup>14</sup>.

This new post-industrial middle class, the expression of a mass society stabilised and equalised by average cultural standards, is interested almost exclusively in consuming popular cultural products, such as Hollywood films or Pop Art, thereby helping to put an end to the transcendent character of the artistic aesthetic sphere.

For this reason, the “new symbolisms” Lash speaks of concern an order that is already post-symbolic, and that also contributes to postmodernity’s crisis of master narratives and meaning systems. If considered in terms of images and their circulation, this crisis points to the rise of an aesthetic universe that has been reduced to a consumption of signs, in strict conformity with the objective, consumeristic order of late capitalism. Not surprisingly, Lash argues that postmodernism, with its well-known equation of high and low culture, gives rise to “realist” cultural forms, which also encompass images that are no longer differentiated from the social sphere they

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<sup>13</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), en. tr. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London-New York 1990, p. 20.

represent: images that do not unify the multiplicity into a symbolic unity but, rather, refer to a direct, immediately “consumable” objective referent<sup>15</sup>.

In modern reason, with its ability to produce metanarratives and all-encompassing systems of meaning, the role of the image also extended to harnessing its symbolic power to express the founding myths of a society, that is, «the mental construct of a social whole»<sup>16</sup>. There is a clear analogy here between the unification of the multiplicity, proper to the symbolic image, and the same work of synthesis that takes place when a disaggregated social whole is unified to further a political project. For this reason, too, it can be said that the political is symbolic, since the function of the political, like that of the symbol, is to give the multiplicity a single form. For this reason, symbolic images are not restricted to conforming to the reality they depict; rather, they transcend it in some way – analogously, in this respect, too, with the transcendent function of the political, which does not reflect the social reality as it is but, rather, inscribes that reality into a wider horizon of meaning (identity-forming, oppositional, universal, and so on).

The superseding of strongly politicized identity systems and the rise of a post-industrial aesthetic capitalism thus go hand-in-hand with a gradual loss of the symbolic power of images. All this took place at the peak of image proliferation, caused to some extent by the very circulation that now pervades all of reality. For Lash, then, while the symbol is associated with the construction of identity-forming spaces that are intimately connected with modern reason, post-modernity and its accompanying aesthetic order pertain to the «mimesis of an objective order»<sup>17</sup>, that is, to the lack of unification of the multiplicity, which images aim solely to reflect. This is precisely the kind of image that proliferates in late capitalism, signalling a shift from symbols

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<sup>15</sup> Ivi, pp. 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> M. Maffesoli, *La transfiguration du politique. La tribalisation du monde*, La Table Ronde, Paris 1992, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> S. Lash, J. Urry, *Economies of signs and space*, SAGE, London 1994, p. 52.

to “commercial” images: those that are easily understandable, immediately consumable, and whose decoding does not require any particular reflective efforts (which, in some measure, also aid in synthesizing).

The transition during late capitalism toward a post-symbolic aesthetic dimension more in conformity with the objective reality – that of the unmediated consumerism of signs – had been noted earlier by some of the major theorists of postmodernity, starting with Lyotard. In his (partly positive) view of capitalism, Lyotard traced a link between capitalism and postmodernism, identifying it specifically in the dismantling of the representation system<sup>18</sup>. Because everything in capitalism becomes a commodity, the circulating cultural artefacts lose all symbolic value; they lose any reference to an ultimate meaning, a *telos*, a hierarchical system, or a social order endowed with meaning. The dismantling of representation causes a slippage from symbols to «energetic flows»<sup>19</sup>.

In the words of Gianni Vattimo

For Lyotard, the end of art’s sacred function is tied to its impossibility to communicate beyond the practical activity. There is no longer a collective myth, a symbolic unification of the social, because figural forms have not withstood capital’s demands for reproduction, that is, for the end of representation and the reduction of every symbol to a pure and simple exchange value<sup>20</sup>.

In Lyotard’s perspective, the exhaustion of the symbolic value of images in post-industrial capitalism must be linked to the end of the master narratives that characterised the postmodern age.

The “end of the symbol” and the transition to purely “energetic” images causes both a crisis of representation and a crisis of interpretation – the latter linked specifically to the symbolic value of the images and to their reference to a dimension that transcends unmediated sensation. Interpretation calls for

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<sup>18</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (1974), en. tr. by I. H. Grant, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993.

<sup>19</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> G. Vattimo, preface to J.F. Lyotard, *A partire da Marx e Freud*, Multhipla Edizioni, Milano, 1979, p. 18.

something further, involving reflective thought – something that goes beyond the merely “energetic” aspect. It is no coincidence that Susan Sontag, in a text considered a precursor of the postmodern sensibility, writes about an “anti-symbolic” power of the popular, frivolous, merely entertaining aesthetics typical of Camp art<sup>21</sup>. At the time, it and other artistic forms were gradually replacing the modern discursive paradigm with a figural paradigm that completely superseded the concept of “interpretation”.

Taking a perspective that is different from Lyotard’s but also focused on an analysis (in this case strongly critical) of aesthetic capitalism, Jean Baudrillard also describes how it leads to the effective end of the symbolic. Baudrillard highlights a dichotomy between the symbolic and the semiological. The system that arises in a consumer society, as a general accounting between signs and power’s monopoly over the means of signification, is in fact semiological. We pass, says Baudrillard, from beauty to aesthetics: the latter «no longer has anything to do with the categories of beauty and ugliness». The aesthetic is no longer a value that refers to content but, rather, to communication and sign exchange. For this reason, «the category of the aesthetic succeeds that of beauty (liquidating it) as the semiological order succeeds the symbolic order»<sup>22</sup>.

The reason this takes place under capitalism is that everything traditionally associated with the aesthetic now has only one true purpose: to perpetuate the privileged condition of the dominant classes. Fashion, for example, uses innovative aesthetic forms not to set a new paradigm of beauty but, rather, to furnish a renewed repertoire of the social signs of distinction. Objects lose almost all their aesthetic value per se and serve purely to order a system of relations. Each object distinguishes itself based on a code of hierarchized meanings imposed by those who hold the power over the means

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<sup>21</sup> S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Dell, New York 1966.

<sup>22</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a critique of the political economy of the sign* (1972), en. tr. by C. Levin, Telos Press, St. Louis 1981, pp. 187-188.

of signification – a code whose ultimate purpose is to legitimize class privilege<sup>23</sup>. To serve the capitalist system, says Baudrillard, objects are thus reduced to their function as signs, so that they can be assumed by the differentiating logic of fashion and social distinction. In this scenario, art itself is deprived of its symbolic value and its capacity to subvert the existing social order. Art too is reduced to the logic of the code, to the relationship between aesthetic signs.

## 2. The Aesthetics of Online Immediacy

As Michel Maffesoli points out, postmodernity brings a «transfiguration of the political» to completion: the political loses its ability – conveyed in part by images and symbols – to bind individuals together in a shared project or, as the symbol also does, to unify the multiplicity<sup>24</sup>. This happens, according to his reading, because political symbolism contains a purely rational element: images are inscribed in a higher order of meaning that, as such, can only be formed through reason. The proliferation of images fostered by new technologies, says Maffesoli, gives rise to a new type of symbolism, to an «atmosphere of idolatry», which leads to the transition from political symbols to the «icons of today» in popular culture<sup>25</sup>.

These icons correspond better to the new aesthetic order that network technologies help to form: images become expressions of “effervescences” and generate ephemeral, momentary aggregations, based on the simple desire to feel emotions along with others. The transfiguration of the political constitutes a crisis of the representational dimension that engulfs images: just as for the thinkers who analysed the crisis of symbolism in the post-industrial society, here, too, a shift takes place toward an iconography that

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<sup>23</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), en. tr. by J. Benedict, Verso, London-New York 1996.

<sup>24</sup> M. Maffesoli, *La transfiguration du politique*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> M. Maffesoli, *Iconologies. Nos idol@tries postmodernes*, Albin Michel, Paris 2008.

conforms more strictly to the social sphere and is no longer capable of transcending it. In this setting, influenced in part by emotions produced by images, individuals pass from one community to another, following a logic of “social consumerism”, which replaces modernity’s long-term (and more properly political) affiliations. The aesthetic space conveyed by the images of postmodernity – as Zygmunt Bauman defines it<sup>26</sup>, in opposition to the moral space – generates episodcity: swarms of community that form around an event or a celebrity, but then break apart when the pleasure that originally brought them together fades.

The aesthetic space, for example, is what Bauman associates with the attitude we have toward a foreigner, considered someone who creates novel, unaccustomed sensations. But as soon as the novelty wears off, as soon as the stranger puts pressure on us to become an established figure in our setting rather than an occasional source of amusement and curiosity, the aesthetic space begins to fade away. Aesthetic and moral spaces are therefore complete opposites in Bauman’s thought. The latter refers to long-lasting commitments and continuity in action whereas the former presents the peculiar features of a domination of immediate sensations, the pursuit of pleasure, and an absence of moral constraints. The aesthetic thus becomes an aesthetic of immediacy, and the distinguishing dynamics of the aesthetic space are the same as those Bauman associates with online communities and social networks, in which one click is enough to make or break a friendship.

According to this reading, the shift from the political symbols of modernity to the popular and commercial icons of postmodernity is therefore also fostered by the aesthetics of the Web: an aesthetics made of speed, immediacy, a breaking with a reflective order associated with the symbolic dimension of images, and their reduction to objects of instant consumption.

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<sup>26</sup> Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford-Cambridge 1993.

### 3. The Crisis of the Symbolic Dimension of Images in Platform Capitalism

These authors describe processes that took place at the beginning of the so-called network society, the type of society associated with the rise and proliferation of social networks. With the transition to the “platform society” and platform capitalism, these same processes intensify, further eroding the symbolic and political value of images.

As we have seen, in post-industrial capitalism the symbolic dimension of images gradually faded, in part due to the rise of an aesthetic paradigm that became integrated into the economic mechanisms for the production and consumption of goods. In platform capitalism, the circulation of iconic images, more immediately anchored to a multiplicity that is never synthesised but only consumed, is brought to completion thanks to a few processes that the platforms themselves use to direct the general production of content.

“Platform capitalism”<sup>27</sup> refers to a system in which «social and economic traffic is increasingly channelled by an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data»<sup>28</sup>. These platforms are distinguished, among other things, by their promise to offer personal services that are disintermediated, that is, no longer dependent on organisations and traditional institutions.

The ecosystem of platforms is organised on two levels. First, there are the so-called “infrastructural platforms” (identified largely with the “Big Five”: Amazon, Facebook, Google, Apple, and Microsoft). These are platforms that act as online gatekeepers, offering a myriad of services, handling most online data flows, and forming the infrastructures on which the «sectoral platforms

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<sup>27</sup> N., Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge-Malden 2016; B. Vecchi, *Il capitalismo delle piattaforme*, Manifestolibri, Roma 2017.

<sup>28</sup> J. Van Dijck, T. Poell, M. de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018, p. 4.

– which operate instead in specific, circumscribed areas – rely»<sup>29</sup>. For the purposes of this article, it is important to emphasise that platform societies generate several processes that, when applied to images, reduce the latter completely to objects of immediate consumption, devoid of any symbolic value that could otherwise give meaning and direction to the social reality by unifying the multiplicity. Most importantly, the production of content (including images) occurs consequent to the datafication process, that is, the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, and capitalization of users' data<sup>30</sup>. Datafication also describes, among other things, the capacity to transform into data aspects of the world that have never been quantified before<sup>31</sup>, including images, whose “conformation” and circulation depend specifically on their being quantified through data.

Secondly, platforms organise the data flow by means of algorithms that reward interactions, and, consequently, the content's viral success or “spreadability”<sup>32</sup>. Economic value in a platform society is a function of the number of interactions that a single item of content can generate. For this reason, content itself, including images, are heavily loaded with emotion. The circulation of “media objects” on platforms is not only data-driven but also “emotion-driven” (two closely related aspects): media content with the strongest and most immediate emotional impact is able to generate users' “signal data”, such as likes, shares, retweets, comments, and so forth. The economic value generated this way is bidirectional: users' signal data allow the accumulation of further data by platforms, which can thus produce content that, in a predictable fashion, based on past interactions, will generate future interactions and economic value. In this way, a

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<sup>29</sup> Ivi, pp. 12-16.

<sup>30</sup> J. Van Dijck, “Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data Between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology”, *Surveillance & Society*, XII/2, 2014, pp. 197-208.

<sup>31</sup> V. Mayer-Schönberger, K. Cukier, *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2013.

<sup>32</sup> H. Jenkins, S. Ford, J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York University Press, New York 2013.



commodification process takes place, understood as «transforming online and offline objects, activities, emotions, and ideas into tradable commodities»<sup>33</sup>. This platform-directed mechanism inevitably influences media content producers, starting from news outlets, who are prompted to produce texts and images with a high viral potential that can generate immediate responses from users, thereby increasing clicks and revenues.

But the mechanism just described applies to all the actors engaged in capitalising their media products, including political parties and leaders. By means of images with a strong emotional impact, they can generate interactions that will make them more visible to the algorithm, and then capitalise on them to persuade voters and gain their votes. Indeed, as highlighted recently by Sinan Aral, platform capitalism can be understood as a “hype machine”: a continuous generator of emotional excitement that uses emotionally charged media content to produce economic value (in the case of businesses) or electoral value (in the case of political parties and leaders)<sup>34</sup>.

The other distinguishing feature of platform capitalism that helps explain the circulation of post-symbolic images pertains to the attention economy<sup>35</sup>. Digital technologies have created an information overload, bringing into reality what Nobel prize-winner Herbert Simon foresaw in the 1970s, namely, that a wealth of information would lead to the poverty of what it consumes: attention<sup>36</sup>. Platform capitalism foments a fierce struggle to grab users’ (scarce) attention, which media actors obtain by generating content that provokes an unmediated emotional response, leveraging the primary psychological processes. Inevitably, in this setting, like the postmodern turn that accompanied the aesthetic regime of late capitalism, images that are

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<sup>33</sup> J. Van Dijck J., T. Poell M. de Waal, *The Platform Society*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> S. Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy and Our Health – and How We Must Adapt*, Harpercollins Publishers, London 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Y. Citton, *L'économie de l'attention. Nouvel horizon du capitalisme?* La Découverte, Paris 2014.

<sup>36</sup> H. Simon, “Designing organizations for an information-rich world,” in M. Greenberger (ed. by), *Computers, communication and the public interest*, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1971.

easily consumable and devoid of any meaning beyond their immediate appearance prove to be more effective. This is because they are better able to elicit responses linked to the primary processes, which do not require any deciphering from consumers and, consequently, are less anchored to the interpretive dimension of the symbol. On social networks, images, photos, and videos tend to be shared more than texts and attract more attention from users: also, as noted earlier, the kind of media content produced is determined by data on interactions and their quantification. Inevitably, this generates an overload of images on the Internet as objects of unmediated consumption and their prevalence over anything else that might demand a response involving reflection rather than just emotion.

Post-symbolic figural content must respond to what Daniel Kahneman calls the preponderance of System 1 over System 2 on the Web, that is, a preponderance of automatic responses to stimuli compared to reflective processing<sup>37</sup>. A Nielsen survey has shown that most web pages are viewed, on average, for less than ten seconds<sup>38</sup>. Out of ten visits to a website, fewer than one last longer than two minutes. Under these circumstances, information content, including that transmitted through images as aesthetic ludic content, having been reduced to mere consumption, has little chance of being brought to a level at which it is decoded reflectively. Hence, the image responds to commodification mechanisms that impact all media objects in platform capitalism and is hooked into another process typical of the digital public sphere: gamification. Mechanisms and linguistic codes proper to gaming are also used in contexts that are not ludic per se (such as journalistic or political communication)<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Straus and Giroux, New York 2011.

<sup>38</sup> F. Mello, *Il lato oscuro di Facebook*, Reggio Emilia, Imprimatur 2019, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> K. Robson, K. Plangger, J. H. Kietzmann, I. McCarthy, L. Pitt, "Is it all a game? Understanding the principles of gamification", *Business Horizons*, LVIII/4, 2015, pp. 411-420.

In post-industrial capitalism, images were already integrated into the economic system of production and consumption; in platform capitalism they can also be “quantified”: data accumulation makes it possible to calculate whether more revenue will come from pictures or words, and even what kind of images will generate the most economic value. Image production becomes integrated into the platforms’ artificial intelligence (AI) processes, insinuating itself into emotional AI<sup>40</sup>, namely, the scientific understanding of users’ emotional responses and subsequent generation of content that activates emotional responses (and, consequently, economic value). The hyperproduction of images responds well to this need and, as in post-industrial capitalism, the figural overload also leads to a loss of symbolic value. The digital sphere is, effectively, overloaded with images and signs, and the mediatisation of public discourse (especially through the most popular social media, such as Instagram and TikTok) is increasingly figurative and less discursive.

In platform capitalism, then, the “aesthetic of immediacy” that Zygmunt Bauman associates with postmodernity but also with the development of digital technologies is becoming a reality – an aesthetic in which the ludic emotional consumption of perennially new content saturates reality, stripping it of its interpretative dimension and preventing it from being inscribed into a wider horizon of meaning.

Memes offer one of many possible examples of this post-symbolic hyperproduction of images under platform capitalism. Through a vivid composition of words and images, memes convey messages in a directly apprehensible and immediate fashion<sup>41</sup>, in keeping with an objective order that is not “symbolised” but whose elements are simply “recombined”,

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<sup>40</sup> A. McStay, *Emotional AI: The Rise of Empathic Media*, SAGE, London 2018.

<sup>41</sup> L. Shifman, “Meme in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, XVIII/3, 2013, pp. 362-377.

according to a logic of “hypermediacy”<sup>42</sup>. It has been noted that memes and other figurative content that come under the communicative paradigm of humour are the most widely used media objects on the Web, not only by traditional media actors (politicians and newspapers) but by users themselves<sup>43</sup>. This confirms the massive circulation of post-symbolic figurative material in the digital public sphere, promoted by the system of content production and consumption (including images) typical of platform capitalism.

What W. J. T. Mitchell classifies as “image” (an immaterial entity that comes to light only through a material substrate, but which has the capacity to transcend its medium and be transferred into another) goes by the wayside. It is replaced by that of the “picture,” definable, like the image, by how it appears in a material substrate, at a specific time and place<sup>44</sup>. The “image” is a “metapicture”, something that in Mitchell’s theory safeguards a knowledge which goes beyond its specific manifestation and preserves a transcendental aspect: something that, in his view, consumers of images should reflect upon. “Images” make us think and establish a reflective relationship that surpasses their consumable materiality. As with the symbol, however, this transcendental aspect gets lost, replaced by a non-synthesized multiplicity that fails to “challenge” the image consumer.

#### **4. Platform Capitalism: An “Impolitical” Aesthetic Space**

If the political is indeed symbolic, since the giving of meaning and direction to society (a political task par excellence) primarily takes place through the construction of symbolic systems, it can be argued by antithesis that a post-

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<sup>42</sup> J. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge-London 1999.

<sup>43</sup> T. Highfield, “Tweeted Joke Life Spans and Appropriated Punch Lines: Practice around Topical Humor on Social Media”, *International Journal of Communication*, IX, 2015, pp. 2713-2734.

<sup>44</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015.

symbolic aesthetic takes an “impolitical” form. As we have seen, what steers the production of media content and images in the platform society are mechanisms such as datafication, the attention economy, gamification, and the “business of emotions”, guided by algorithms. All these processes are directed by private and non-political actors; above all, by the infrastructural platforms, who not only drive economic and social traffic flows globally but also generate new regimes of value. All public actors, from governments to supranational institutions, base at least part of their operations on the use of infrastructural platforms. For these reasons, at present, in the ecosystem of the platform-driven, digital public sphere «there is no real public ‘space’»<sup>45</sup>, precisely because «platform mechanisms shape every sphere of life», and, most importantly, they do so on the basis of an apparatus of values that «strongly correspond with the neoliberal reorganization of government and the penetration of market rationalities and principles in a wide variety of social activities»<sup>46</sup>.

Since the production and consumption of media content, both informational and political, takes place predominantly on the platforms<sup>47</sup>, it is they who set the rules of the game. Thus, the production of post-symbolic images, destined for unmediated ludic aesthetic consumption, is not based on strictly political reasons, to provide meaning and direction, or on identity-forming, oppositional, universal mechanisms. Ideological bubbles, linked to the phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers<sup>48</sup>, can also be defined as bubbles of “ideological consumption”: they are created for purely economic reasons, tied to the need to capitalize interactions, and take form much more

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<sup>45</sup> J. Van Dijck, T. Poell, M. de Waal, *The Platform Society*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> No wonder that today we describe the public sphere as not only “mediatized” but, to all intents and purposes, as “digital”, to acknowledge the transfer of public debate to social media and to the Internet in general. See M. S. Schäfer, “Digital Public Sphere”, in G. Mazzoleni (ed. by), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Wiley Blackwell, Malden 2016, pp. 322-328.

<sup>48</sup> E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, Penguin Press, New York 2011.

easily between people who espouse the same value system than under conditions of cognitive dissonance. In this case, ideology has nothing to do with what is traditionally associated with the word; nor, strictly speaking, is there anything of the political involved: it serves solely to maximise revenues through interactions and emotions.

As Maurizio Ferraris has pointed out recently, platforms operate according to a data capitalisation system (which he understands in terms of capitalising documents) that responds exclusively to commercial interests<sup>49</sup>. This system informs every aspect of society but has nothing to do with concepts such as “surveillance capitalism” or “cognitive capitalism”, which refer to an ideological dimension completely absent from the methods and aims used by platforms in their operations. «The accumulation of documents bets on our future behaviors, but it is worth noting that these are styles of consumption, not ideological leanings»<sup>50</sup>. Ferraris considers platform capitalism to be the most apt definition to describe “documedia” capital, specifically because it implies a system that arises not from a political or ideological guidance but from a purely economic one, directed by actors (platforms) whose ends are also “capitalistic” in the narrow sense, that is, linked to the accumulation of money by means of data capitalisation.

It is evident that the “impolitical” production of content and images driven by this mechanism can, and in some way must, be used by politics: parties and leaders inevitably employ the images of immediate consumption that platform capitalism imposes in order to maximise voter persuasion and election returns. In other words, politics conforms to an aesthetic and consumeristic order of images, an order that it does not establish and that does not stem from any political guidance or will, and which, for this reason, I define as “impolitical”. We witness a shift from political symbols to the post-

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<sup>49</sup> M. Ferraris, *Documanità. Filosofia del mondo nuovo*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 33, tr. from Italian is mine.

symbolic images of pop politics<sup>51</sup>, which draw on the platform-driven representational universe of memes, icons, and images. All of these refer directly to a referent and, most importantly, must be immediately comprehensible to generate responses and interactions and be rewarded by the algorithms, and thus to “reward” in terms of consensus. Not surprisingly, some have spoken of an “aesthetic regime” of politics, which no longer mobilises for long-term projects but only invites flash mobilisations. This explains how communication technologies have desacralized even the aesthetic dimension of politics itself<sup>52</sup>. To use the words of Richard Sennett<sup>53</sup>, the culture of the new capitalism has imposed “a new me”, projected onto the short term, whose model is that of a managerial and thus impolitical aesthetic based on paradigms (including aesthetic ones) imposed by non-political actors.

This post-symbolic and impolitical turn, which, as we have seen, emerged in post-industrial capitalism, has been brought more fully to completion thanks to the distinctive mechanisms of platform capitalism. A common thread guides the evolution of these two phases of capitalism, a thread associated with the emptying of the interpretative dimension of images. This voiding of the symbolic is caused by the hyper-production and hyper-circulation of images and by the fact that this production and circulation take place in an economic system that capitalizes consumers’ unmediated emotional responses to the content that it generates.

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<sup>51</sup> G. Mazzoleni, R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online*, il Mulino, Bologna 2019.

<sup>52</sup> C. Salmon, *La cérémonie cannibale. De la performance politique*, Fayard, Paris 2013.

<sup>53</sup> R. Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2005.

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