Chapter 9
Towards a New Ethic: Building Transgenerationality – Digital Images to Orient the Future

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Can digital images help build a stronger transgenerational bond? One of the most interesting features of human sociality is the disposition to transgenerationality. Transgenerationality is the willingness to organise aspects of social reality by devising mechanisms for the passage of material and immaterial goods from one generation to another. This disposition evidently constitutes one of the foundations that have contributed to the development of our species.

Images, especially digital ones, have two particularly interesting features: they can be reproduced quickly and easily, and they can also be easily archived and preserved. This means that they are a very effective tool for conveying information and memory. This is confirmed by the increasingly pervasive spread of social media (e.g., Instagram) that use images as their essential communicative vectors.

The present article consists of four parts. In the first part, I will briefly examine the ontology of digital images. In the second and third parts, I will analyse the notion of transgenerationality to highlight the main characteristics of the transgenerational bond and transgenerational actions. In the fourth and last part, I will discuss the photos of sculptures found at the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre, developing some reflections on the transgenerational scope of this kind of images. But let us start by clarifying what we mean when we talk about digital images.

I. Digital Images

Images represent a particularly interesting object from an ontological point of view. The ancients were already fascinated by them. The myth of Narcissus, in addition to its many symbolic implications, captures the

enigmatic nature of the image.[1] As is well known, Narcissus saw his image for the first time on a reflective surface, discovered his own face and tried to capture this irresistible figure. Psychoanalysis has built a fundamental part of its narrative on the interpretation of this myth. Narcissus is someone unknown to himself, so he does not recognise himself when he sees his reflection in the water. He is also constantly engaged in exploring his own self, while being doomed to never find it. As we know, this fate awaits all who are affected by pathological narcissism, where narcissism is a dominant trait, so that the fixity of the image becomes a bubble from which the subject generally cannot get out.

The image reveals two important characteristics. It is fixed, but at the same time it is elusive. It is fixed – and in fact, Narcissus remains stuck in contemplation of it – because it gives an account of the fixity of the personality that is incorporated in it. The element of elusiveness, on the other hand, is the deepest truth of the myth. The image, in fact, resembles the thing, but is not the thing. More generally, we can identify at least two types of images. Images of things like chimeras and images of material objects that exist in space and time. In other words, images of things that do not exist in reality (chimeras), and images of things that do exist. The latter are characterised by specific properties and suitable for the purpose of imitation.

That the image is not the same as the thing is therefore somehow evident. This is similar to the fact that although there is a link between a thing and its image, there is always a gap between them, just as between Narcissus and his reflected image. This gap is interesting because it bears all the meanings that are conveyed by the image, while not necessarily belonging to the thing. All this is to say that the image of a thing is never a re-proposition of the simple thing but is rather "about" the thing that is represented in the image, because it ultimately constitutes a sort of gaze on the thing. Even in the most faithful of representations, the image – whether pictorial or photographic – is always an added meaning to the thing.[2] For example, it is the thing seen through the particular instrument that allows for its representation.

Now, the question is roughly the following: can we argue that the digital image differs from traditional images, i.e., those reflected in mirrors,

1 Cf. e.g. Filippi (2020).

2 The works of Eduard Stieglitz are significant in this regard. He often points out that photography is both a tool aimed at the mere reproduction of reality, and (most of all) a tool for the artistic representation of the thing, i.e., in Stieglitz's words, a tool that allows one to display the essence of the thing photographed.

painted by painters, or captured by photographs? The medium, i.e., digital technology, certainly does make a significant difference. A photographic image created using digital technology has many uses. It can be archived, classified, duplicated, and diffused in incomparably more effective ways than in the pre-digital era. Photographs taken with a Polaroid required a rather laborious and time-consuming process to make copies of the original. Today, instead, every photo we take with our phone can be reproduced a virtually infinite number of times and can be disseminated in extremely powerful ways via social platforms that, unsurprisingly, specialise primarily in distributing images.

On the other hand, we also know that images created using digital tools and technologies not only convey meanings in the same way as Polaroid photos or paintings, but also carry *information*. This information is made available in the form of metadata which, in turn, are related in part to the contents of the image, in part to the image itself (when, where and who took the photo, the tool that determined the photographic rendering, etc.). In short, digital images bear all the information that belongs to the photographic object, the author and the relationship between the object, the author, and the global environment.

Therefore, images represent an extremely powerful communication tool. They can be duplicated endlessly, they are more direct and quicker than words, and they are distributed through powerful tools such as social platforms that produce serial images. This type of seriality enables a communication that, though generally unsophisticated, is fast and effective. By displaying his *Brillo Box* in a series, Andy Warhol highlighted the serial production mode typical of modern industry. However, the seriality Warhol refers to was very little compared to the ability to produce, reproduce, catalogue and archive images made possible by digital technologies today.

So, let us try to summarise: we said that the characteristic of most images is that they refer to the thing they represent, while having different properties with respect to the thing. The image maintains this characteristic independently of the medium used to create it. The medium, however, has a significant impact on two aspects: on the one hand, the possibility of duplicating and circulating the image; on the other, the wealth of metadata that the image conveys. This depends both on the tool used, and that this tool is generally connected to a network that makes it possible to identify and trace the author of the image, the image itself, and its web of relationships by the tools of digital communication.

Which means that this type of image not only says something about the thing that it captures, but also provides a range of potentially interesting

information about the author of the image, their location, habits, tastes, the world related to the image and so on. In other words, any digital image is an object that says something about its object and, at the same time, provides a lot of information about the context it belongs to, the uses made of the image, and the world in which it exists. When Narcissus contemplated his own image reflected in the mirror made of water, filled with love and admiration, he is unable to recognise himself. Clearly, the traces of what he has been do not take the shape of his reflected image.

Therefore, I would like to suggest the following idea: digital images can strengthen the transgenerational bond in effective ways by virtue of two fundamental characteristics. First, they convey content about what is being reproduced, always referring to something else. Second, they also carry much information about the world to which the image belongs. Digital images are therefore, at the same time, bearers of meaning and information, which are both fundamental aspects for the construction of the transgenerational bond.

II. The Transgenerational Bond

By "transgenerationality"[3] I mean the bond that unites different generations. This bond takes two forms. Firstly, the biological bond relates parents to their children and is characterised by a peculiar psychological structure in the relationship between mother and child. Secondly, the bond that unites different generations in the course of history. This bond characterises some social actions that we shall define as "transgenerational actions". The basic idea is that transgenerational actions have a peculiar structure that must be understood and described to adequately portray social reality.

When we reflect on the transgenerational bond, we focus on the diachronic structure of social reality, i.e., the conditions that allow societies to last over time. As has been widely noted by philosophers,[4] this means that the question of the passing of generations is a matter of primary importance for at least two reasons. The first is that it is a necessary transition, to which there is no alternative except atom-like societies, which would not last long enough to develop complex social actions. Secondly, because this model involves a presumed but not required consensus on a given

3 More detailed considerations can be found in Andina (2016).
4 Cf., e.g., Kant (2011), 250; Hume (1994).

course of action. Now, current generations generally consider it obvious that those who will follow, i.e., the generations that will be called to continue what they have started, will agree to do so. This model's background has delicate questions on transgenerational justice,[5] related to the structure and dynamics of transgenerational relations and actions. Let us therefore briefly consider what I mean by transgenerational actions.

III. Transgenerational Actions

By transgenerational actions I mean a particular class of social actions that have the characteristic of lasting considerably over time. The existence of these actions has important implications. The first concerns a fact of reality: the decision makers of these actions set in motion long-term processes that require the collaboration of social actors different from those who have undertaken these processes. Now, let us suppose that a certain action (which we will call "a") is initiated by a certain generation. Presume that "a" implies the massive exploitation of fossil fuels to electrify a country with a low development rate. This action requires a rather long process to be fully realised. So, the political decision makers who authorise the series of actions that are "part of a" nourish the belief that future generations will continue "a", Further, that the actions required are linked to "a" through a spirit and intentions similar to their own, i.e., sharing their underlying values and strategies. Therefore, current generations implicitly assume that future ones will give their consent to "a" and to the actions required for the realization of "a".

In this regard, it is useful to observe two things. The first observation is that future generations are a fictional subject. This is because when they are imagined by present generations they obviously do not yet exist, so they cannot express their consent. Therefore, to simply suppose that they will consent to "a" is a stretch in every respect. However, this stretch comes with a degree of practical utility because, ultimately, it allows decision makers to implement "a" with the belief that it will be completed by future generations. It is worth noting that the fictional subject "future generations" plays a decisive role. The subjects who decide to do "a" not only need future generations (and in fact bet on their future existence), but

5 For a first approach to the issue of transgenerational justice see Tremmel (2009); Gosseries/Meyer (2009); Tremmel (2006); Westra (2006); Dobson (1999).

also need the fictional subject, when it becomes real, to behave in the way they have predicted.

The second point is that future generations are a fictional subject to which we have attributed peculiar characteristics. Their ontological status involves the passage from potentiality to actuality (sooner or later, in fact, they will exist). Moreover, they are necessary for the completion of transgenerational actions. Therefore, let us suppose that a certain future generation commits itself to complete "a" or to take on the consequences of "a", without – I repeat – ever having decided to initiate "a" or anything necessary for the realization of "a". This point obviously has important consequences on both a practical and ethical level.

It is easy to see that there are several areas in which actions with a transgenerational structure emerge with particular clarity. We can think of climate change, or of those decisions, which take the form of actions, which lead to more public debt – depending on how they are implemented, these actions can be either positive or negative, i.e., they can or cannot protect the transgenerational bond. We can also think of those types of actions that more clearly convey the positive character of transgenerationality and are clearly committed to protecting it. In this sense, the preservation of cultural heritage and scientific progress are transgenerational actions. Likewise, money is also an eminently transgenerational instrument that functions as a store of value.

These considerations lead us to make two important observations. Firstly, it should be noted that transgenerationality cannot be acquired once and for all. It can be protected and strengthened or, vice versa, weakened – even severely. The second observation concerns the intrinsic transgenerational disposition of the human species. Our species, particularly in its need of care when compared to species, has been able to evolve precisely because of its disposition to transgenerationality. In other words, human beings are naturally inclined to be transgenerational, at least as far as family relationships are concerned (i.e., in the area of primary transgenerationality), while they develop secondary or social transgenerationality with greater difficulty.

However, when they succeed in adopting fully transgenerational practices and attitudes even in extra-family social environments, the quality and level of well-being of a society generally improves significantly. Through educational and caring relationships, parents give their children individual autonomy and a set of notions, knowledge and skills that enable them to navigate the world, while through secondary transgenerationality, social institutions and bodies enable societies to last.

IV. Transgenerational Images

In May 2019 I was in Nanjing, China for a series of conferences at Nanjing Normal University. Anyone who has some time to visit the city and wants to understand more about the ancient capital of China should visit The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall. This space is dedicated to the victims of the massacre perpetrated against its citizens by the Japanese army. In 1937, Japanese troops invaded Nanjing, the capital of the Republic of China, after the Japanese air force had severely weakened the resistance of the ground forces. The city was quickly taken. The massacre that followed and lasted for six weeks is considered one of the most horrific in human history. The city was sacked, set on fire and about 300,000 people, women, men, and children, were massacred. About 20,000 women were raped.

The memorial was built in 1985, with the design by two famous Chinese architects, Qi Kang and He Jintang (Figs. 1 and 2). The goal of a memorial is to make it impossible to forget what the memorial commemorates. Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall is no exception. The names of the 300,000 victims of the Nanjing massacre are carved in marble and visually convey the idea of carnage. Behind the will to never forget, there is a strong bond between generations: those who have acted and those who keep the memory and reflect on it. The transgenerational bond kept alive by the memorial marks the memory of what some human beings have done. The warning never to do this again is crystallised in the ritual of symbolic and transfigured repetition that each visitor makes through the artistic and iconographic narration of that massacre. The memorial exhibits innocence and fury, two ways of life that often humankind expresses, and that art undertakes to reveal. The path inside the memorial unwinds through a wise selection of what ought to be remembered: on the one hand, the names of the 300,000 dead are carefully written to preserve their memory at least as long as human history lasts. On the other hand, what counts is clearly not their individuality, which is lost in the very long ranks of names that make up the list, but the number of deaths that made that tragedy so brutal.

Keeping a record of all the people killed recalls Arthur Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History*, where the Ideal Chronicler takes note of everything that happens, at the exact moment it happens.[6] The idea of keeping track of every single name, indeed, resembles the Chronicler's constant recording. However, in this case the names were written *ex post*, due to the

6 Danto (1965).

will to remember only what was necessary not only, and perhaps not so much, to honour the dead, but to enable future generations to understand what the human being is capable of under certain circumstances. The memorial makes it impossible not so much to forget the names, which are lost in the countless number of traces, but also the actions carried out and their macabre cruelty. It is impossible not to face absolute horror when witnessing images like these.

Fig. 1: Qi Kang/He Jintang (Architects) and Wu Weishan (Sculpture) – Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall

Fig. 2: Qi Kang/He Jintang (Architects) and Wu Weishan (Sculpture) – Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall

These photographs portray the sculptures placed at the entrance and along the path of the memorial. Here the typification of the human beings involved in the massacre becomes a symbol. Now, it is clear that viewing a photograph or walking through the memorial are not the same kind of experience. Entering the memorial and walking through it is tantamount to somehow allow one to get closer to witnessing inescapable horror. The art in the memorial appears secondarily. The photos convey a different experience: we can look at them even without knowing much about the Nanjing massacre. For example, we may appreciate the technical qualities of the photographs, or the beauty of the sculptures that are captured in them. Or else, we may immerse ourselves in a more complete artistic experience if we have both knowledge of history (the facts about the Nanjing massacre) and understanding of the typical characteristics of digital media.

The photographs I took at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall do not only capture images, but also produce a series of metadata that tell something about the world in which those photographs were taken. They reveal, for example, the author of the photo, the date it was taken, and its exact location. If I upload them to a digital platform – from Facebook or Instagram – to the "cloud" that contains my data – this metadata can be aggregated with other similar metadata produced by users who have been in the same or similar places (there are, unfortunately, many memorials around the world). This aggregation communicates something about, say, the type of people who tend to visit those places – for example, typifying them by age, gender, level of education, cultural background and so on. For example, one can discover to what extent visits to memorials are linked to memory preservation or, conversely, general tourism. And, again, one can find out how many children and adults visit them, how many visitors there are from year to year etc.

After all, this is not very different from what we do when we put our archives to work and make productive use of the information they store. What are photographic archives and artistic repertoires for, if not to preserve what (some thought) should be saved from the passing time and the oblivion that this inevitably entails? In the best case scenario, this allows us to creatively use the information we have decided to preserve. Uploading a digital image to an Internet platform means not only sharing the information conveyed by the image about the reproduced thing – possibly saving from oblivion something that, conveying certain properties, is seen as an art object. It also means making data available that allow us to process a rather precise description of the existing thing. Moreover, unlike paper archives, which also allow us to preserve considerable quantities of

material and data, the web allows us to place the data in a network of incomparably finer, extended, and articulated relationships.

Not only is it possible to extract information from the images taken daily by visitors to memorials all over the world, but it also allows the images to be cross-referenced with information provided by visitors to museums, concentration camps, other mausoleums and so on. And, of course, it is possible to compare this mapping of reality with other mappings, which reflect other contexts. All this information serves at least three purposes. Firstly, to provide an accurate description of what surrounds us, at least with regard to the aspects that seem crucial to us. Secondly, to select and store this information with a view to forming what I would call "transgenerational capital". The transgenerational capital, alongside the "documedia capital"[7] and what economists call "social capital",[8] is one of the three capitals that we have at our disposal to work on the present without ceasing to guide the future.

Based on this description, it will probably be possible to plan for the future based on knowledge of what we are like, what interests we have, what we value most, what behaviours we share and what attitudes mark distinctions and differences between us. Basically, through backcasting – the planning method used to design a future that a given society considers desirable and work backwards to achieve it – we can acquire informed and detailed knowledge of the present, creating both a regulatory and axiological framework of reference and a future horizon to be reached through the design of the present.

Therefore, digital images, in our example, serve a twofold purpose. Firstly, the more obvious one of selecting and preserving memory, both personal and public. Secondly, a perhaps more hidden, but also more crucial purpose, which is to offer data that delivers a fine and uninterpreted description of the present, based on the idea that what we do describes and qualifies us. Digital images are a trace of what we do, what we value, what we despise and so on. All this, in perspective, can allow us to reconstruct the blueprint of the great soul of humanity with its many faces and infinite facets.

The crucial problem that arises at this point concerns boundaries. In other words, it makes sense to ask oneself how much space should and can be given to correct or regulate the implicit anthropology that all this data allows us to outline. Also, one can wonder to what extent it is possible to

7 For the notion of documedia capital, see Ferraris/Paini (2018); Ferraris (2022).
8 Bartolini/Bonatti (2002).

intervene to modify this anthropology. These questions, of course, go beyond the sphere of understanding the mere data, the digital object, or the trends that emerge from data aggregation or disaggregation. Rather, they relate to what we mean by freedom, the delimitation of its boundaries and a possible modelling of human societies. So, it is not so much about the ethics of images, but about the construction of an ethics for the world to which those images belong, in the awareness that the hidden information conveyed by those images can be more useful and more crucial than the manifest information they bear.

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Figs. 1 and 2: Artchitecture: Qi Kang/He Jintang; Sculpture: Wu Weishan; Photos: Author