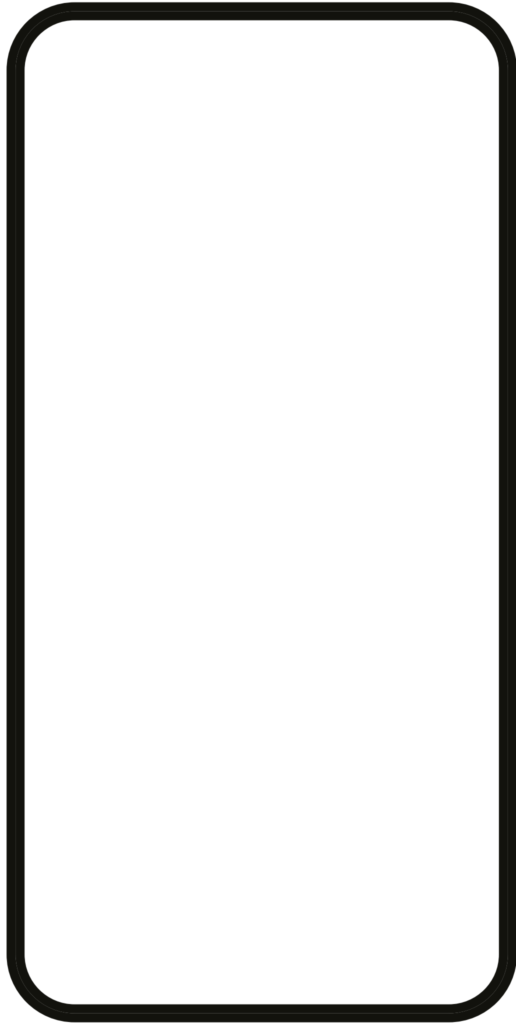

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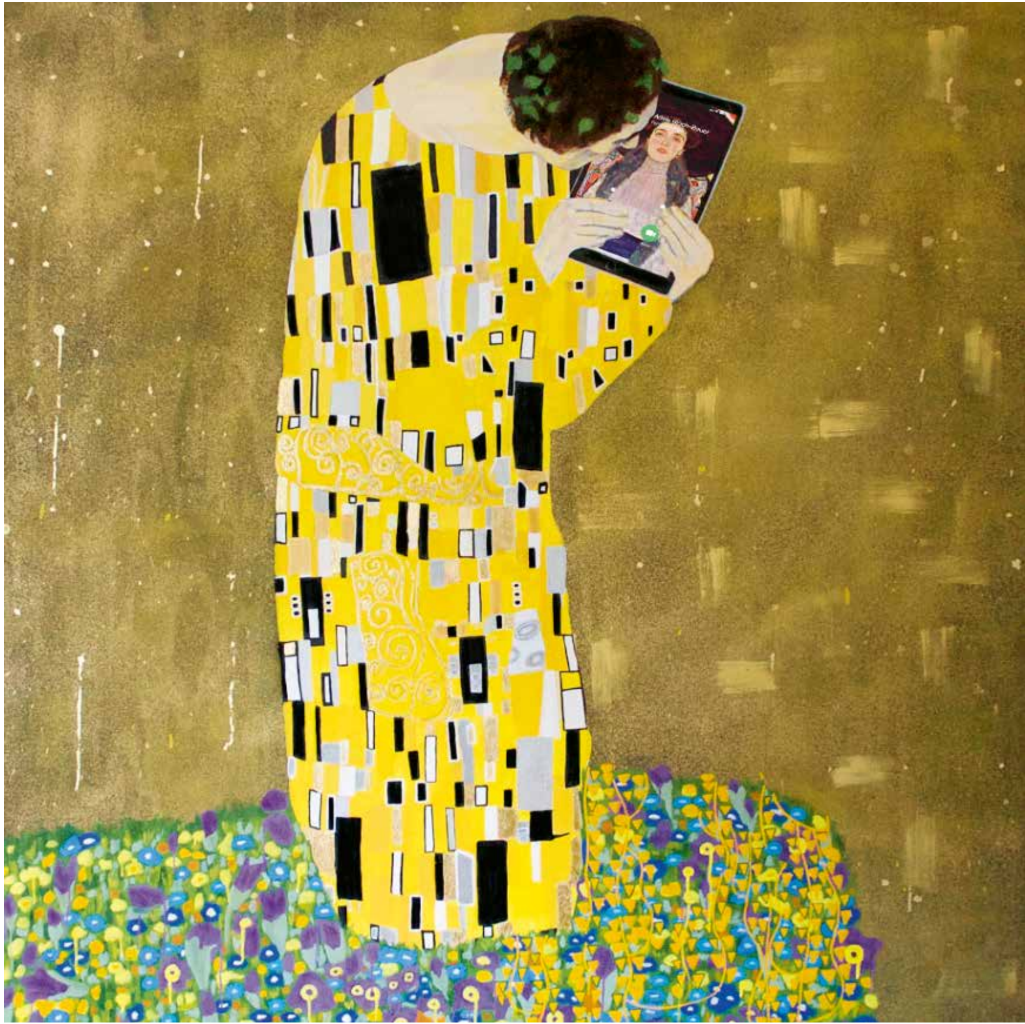
What Art Tells Us About Social Media

Hannibal

Koenraad Jonckheere



iHeart, *Long Distance Lovers – Part 1*, one in a set of three NFT artworks

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I must have been about seventeen, maybe eighteen years old when I first read the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The book was sitting in our bookcase at home, on the same shelf as *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Albert Camus's essay famously ends with the words, "*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*"[1] Instead of a punishment, Sisyphean labour seemed more of a blessing in disguise in the writer's eyes. In this absurd life between birth and death, getting to roll an immense boulder up a mountain over and over again would have filled his heart with happiness. Finding beauty and pleasure in man's powerlessness. There's something to be said for it.

However, Sisyphus never quite had the same impact on me as that other mythological drama, namely the adventures of Orpheus and Eurydice as told by Ovid in Book X of his *Metamorphoses*.[2] I was considering studying art history, but ultimately, I ended up going with history. However, it is thanks to Orpheus and Eurydice, among others, that the visual arts insinuated themselves into my life again a few years later. The start of a lifelong love affair.

Even those who are well versed in art history may frown at the idea of a direct link between reading Orpheus's story and a passion for visual arts. Music seems like a much more obvious choice. After all, Orpheus was the musician who knew how to charm men, animals, and even cypress trees with the music that poured from his lyre. Didn't Monteverdi lay the foundation for what we call opera today with his masterpiece *Orfeo* (1607)?[3] Although Orpheus and Eurydice have always been a source of inspiration in music and the theatre, this is much less the case in the visual arts. Sculptures and paintings, such as Rubens's canvas [**Fig. 1**] which beautifully captures the story's dramatic

[Fig. 1]

Peter Paul Rubens
Orpheus and Eurydice, 1636–1638, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

climax, are the exception rather than the rule. Unlike many other passages in Ovid's book-length poem, the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice is rarely depicted. And yet, their love story continues to haunt me to this day, playing a role in everything I undertake because of one single sentence:

> "The lover, fearing for his partner and eager to see her, turned his eyes."[4]

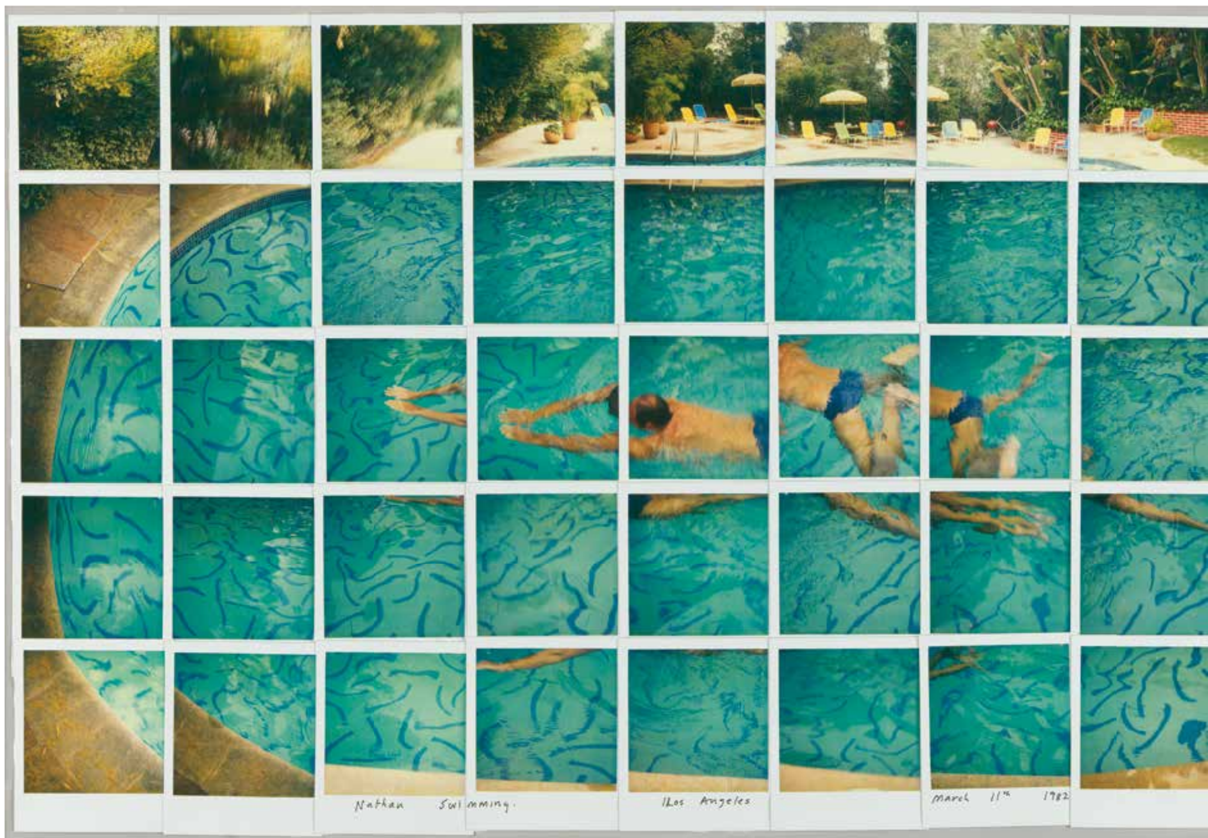
To understand this verse and a half, you need to know what preceded it. Orpheus, the desirable son of the King of Thrace and the muse Calliope, was madly in love with the nymph Eurydice. However, events took a tragic turn on their wedding day when Eurydice stepped on a snake, got bitten, and died. Overcome with grief and in an ultimate attempt to win back his beloved, Orpheus decided to descend into the afterlife and find her. There, he played his lyre for Pluto and Proserpine, the king and queen of the underworld. Even the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance, wept when they heard his music. The gods of the underworld decided to grant Orpheus his wish, moved as they were by the couple's love. And so Eurydice was given permission to follow Orpheus up the path out of the underworld, back to the light, on one condition: he must not turn around to check whether she was following him "until he had left the Valley of Avernus".[5] Rubens's work shows us Orpheus, overcome with uncertainty, grabbing Eurydice's hand as they embark on their journey.

He is tempted to look back but knows he should not. He hesitates momentarily. Then, as they have almost made it to the end of the dark, steep path, fate strikes for the second time.

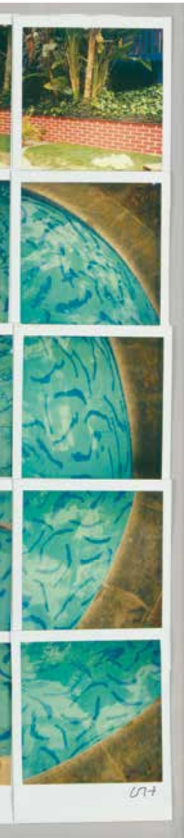
of personification and beauty. This book ends by looking at the wonderful way in which sight and touch interact. In the conclusion, I examine how implicit expectations often determine what we see, using as my guiding principle some thought patterns from over two thousand years of European art history.

#imagetrinity

[Fig. 12]



David Hockney
Nathan Swimming, Los Angeles, March 11th 1982, 1982, private collection



When trying to better understand a complex phenomenon, it pays to go back in time, descending into the darkest depths of history, much like Orpheus on his quest for a lost idea. Imagery, or rather the torrents of images that are unleashed on us these days, is such a complex phenomenon. It has been part of our lives since people started carving bison into rocks, but the amount and ease with which it is now created and distributed is simply phenomenal. As a result, several scientific disciplines have set themselves the task of trying to understand images. Disciplines such as art sciences (the oldest), visual sciences, communication sciences, perceptual psychology, neuropsychology and even computer sciences are, independently and each with their own vocabulary, looking for ways to make sense of this overwhelming phenomenon, which for now still seems difficult to comprehend.[25] This is complicated because, unlike linguistics or mathematics, the theoretical study of imagery does not have a long history, and unlike language and mathematics, it does not have a consistent, logical structure. Moreover, we do not "read" images in a structured way. Our eyes dart from left to right and from top to bottom in an uncoordinated manner, non-stop gathering a tangled chaos of impressions in just nanoseconds. The brain uses these pieces of information to build a coherent image, a bit like in David Hockney's *Composite Polaroids* [**Fig. 12**]. While rational systems for understanding language and numbers were already developed in antiquity (grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry...), this was much less the case for visual language.[26] This only happened when visual arts began to play a prominent role in politics and religion, becoming part of the power system – whereas spoken and written language were co-opted much

earlier. When visual language gave rise to fierce conflict, as in early Christianity, the image finally received attention as a sister of the word.[27] In those early centuries after Christ, not everyone was convinced that the new religion could or should also develop its own visual culture. From the origin of the empire, the Romans followed the example of the Greeks, relying heavily on visual art as a propaganda weapon. However, the originally Jewish faction in early Christendom took a much more reserved stance. The Torah (the Jewish holy book; the Old Testament for Christians) contains numerous prohibitions against the creation of imagery. The Germanic tribes that conquered the western part of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries and converted to Christianity en masse from the sixth century onwards did not exactly have an "iconic" culture either. Initially, they showed very little interest in visual arts with a strong political-religious slant, as developed by the Romans.[28] It is at this crossroads of cultures that Christianity came to maturity and "image" became a bone of contention. Proponents and opponents of the use of imagery developed their arguments based on religious motives. Quintus Septimius Florens (or Tertullian) was a Roman centurion from the North African city of Carthage. He converted to Christianity at the end of the second century, becoming one of the foremost defenders of the new faith. The vehement text *(De idolatria*) in which he criticised the Roman worship of images was widely quoted well into the seventeenth century. Tertullian despised deified emperors whose grandiose effigies were installed in temples and the household deities *(lares* or *teraphim*) that Romans worshipped on house altars. The many Olympic gods also found no mercy in his eyes. "The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged

upon the world, (...) is idolatry," Tertullian reminded his readers in the first sentence.[29] He did not like the statues we have now come to admire around the world. This is a very euphemistic summary of his views.

Other church fathers, including Athanasius of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory the Great, contributed all manner of arguments to the divisive debate on the pros and cons of images and idolatry for Christians.[30] However, some of their centuries-old ideas provide a guideline for comprehending the twenty-first-century explosion of images. Their insights cut to the chase, capturing the absolute essence of the concept of "image". They help us get a grip on the avalanche of images on social media. This may sound absurd, but to better understand social media, we need to revisit an ancient Christian dogma, namely the Holy Trinity.

#

The Holy Trinity, also called the *Trias* (Ancient Greek) or *Trinitas* (Latin), is one of the central tenets of the Christian faith. It was conceived in the first centuries after Christ, giving rise to fierce debates and conflicts. The Arians are the best-known apostates, but even today, many Christians do not accept this dogma, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons. The largest factions within Christianity do accept this tenet of their faith.[31]

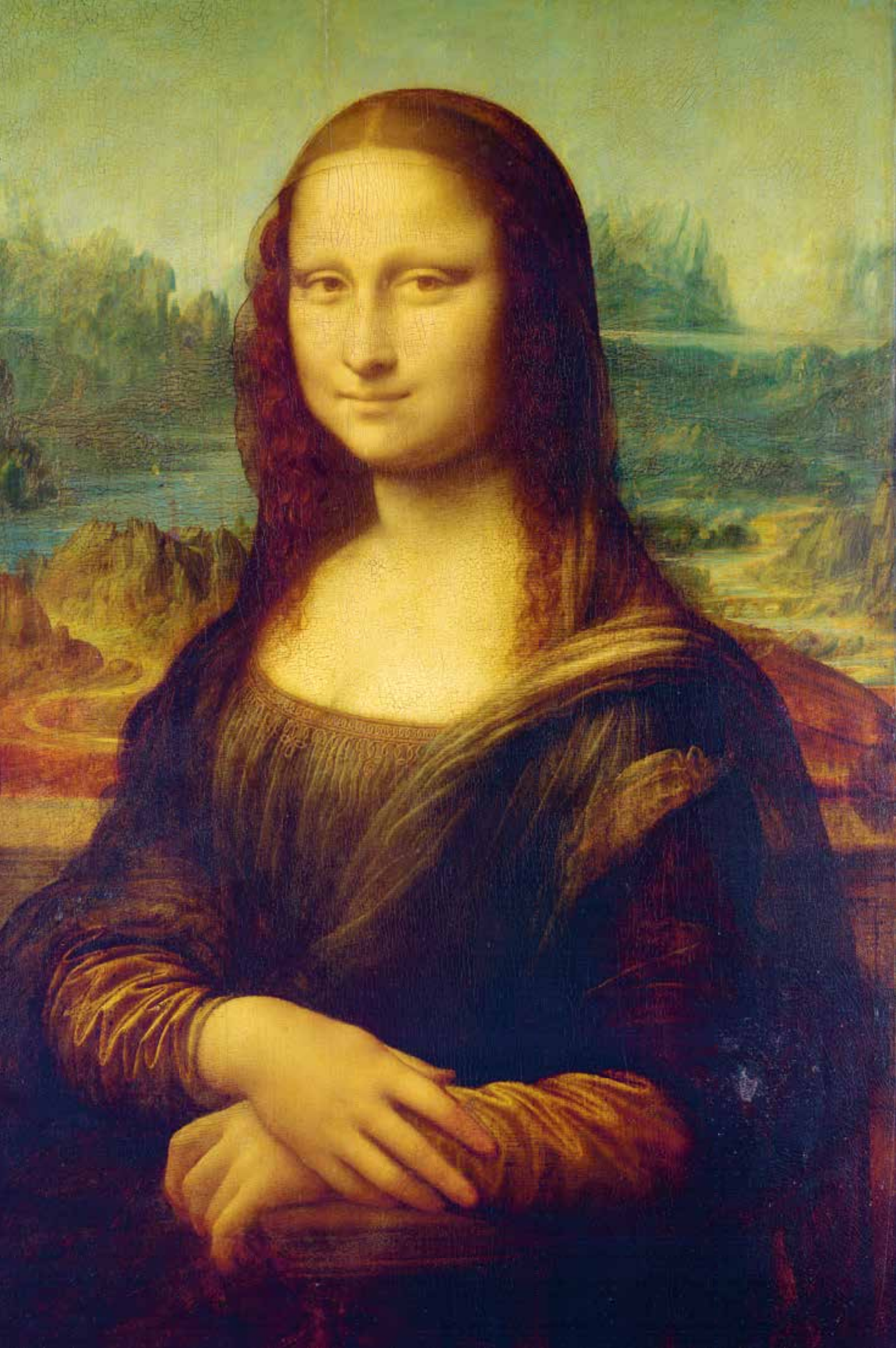
The dogma of the Trinity basically states that there is only one deity, but it is made up of three "parts": the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three aspects are not identical, but together they make up the divine.[32] This reasoning was visually developed in an illustration of a text by the medieval theo-

other social media today acquire these same properties with just a few taps on a touchscreen.[52] While Leonardo's panel was solely enjoyed by the happy few who had the privilege of admiring it in private art collections over the centuries, similar images are now viewed by millions in a single day and even in seconds, only to evaporate into the cloud.

Instagram filters have the same effect. They enliven the image of a face or a landscape precisely through its manipulation. *Sfumato*, an example of such a technique in painting, softens the colour and contours, creating a much more evocative image. The *Mona Lisa* is a textbook example of this effect, which Leonardo studied at length.

#

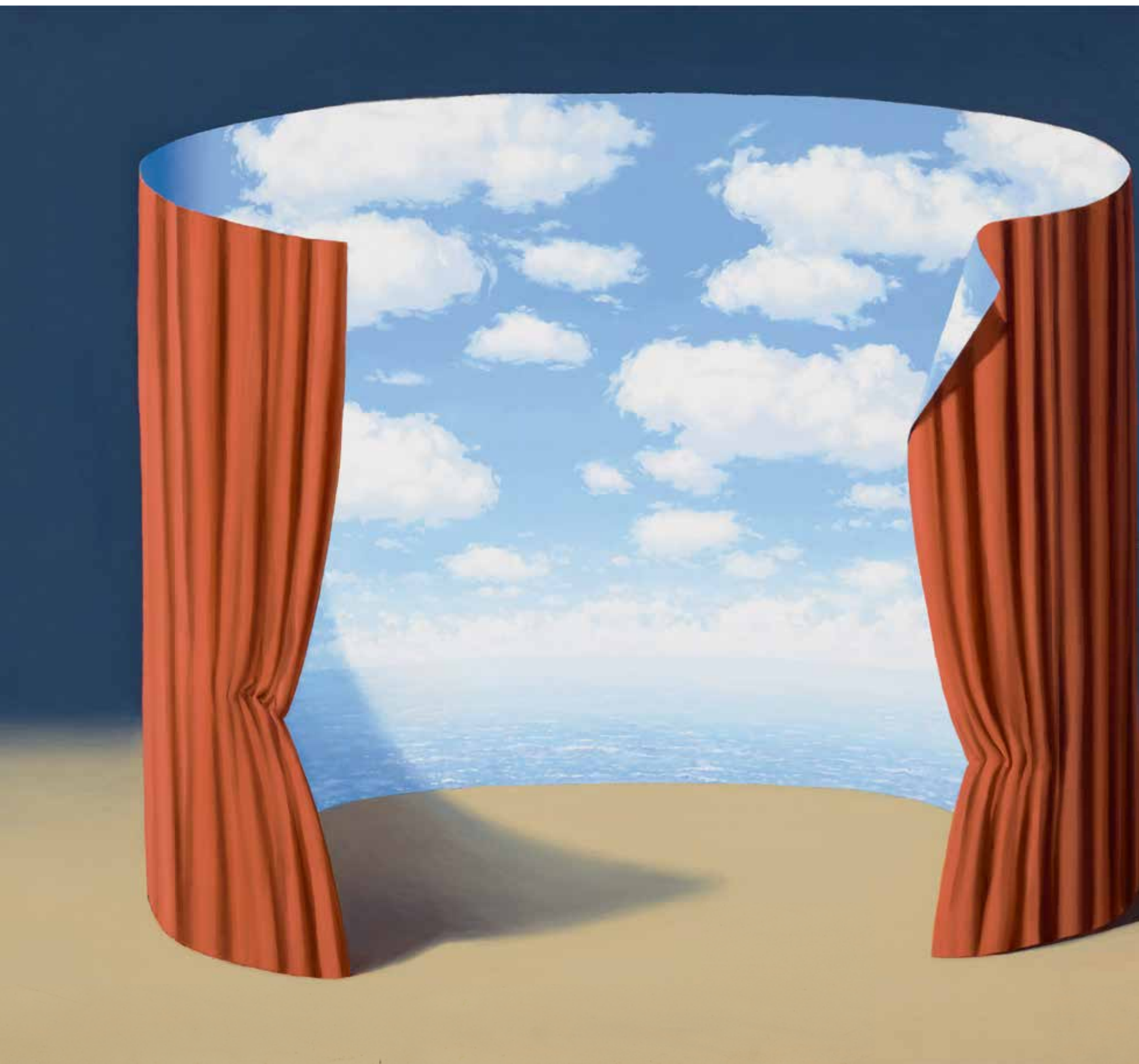
Obviously, the unstable relationship between visible reality, our imagination, and counterfeit was already being explored long before the emergence of social media. People were already thinking about this well before Christian theologians decided to get involved. When democracy was installed in Athens in the fifth century BCE and great thinkers and artists such as Socrates and Plato, and Phidias and Polyclitus strolled in the shadows of the Acropolis, a quest was set in motion that would ultimately give rise to photography, film, and, today, AI: the ambition, in other words, to emulate, or better still, surpass this visible world.[53] The Roman writer Pliny, who gave a brief overview of the most important Greek artists in the first century CE, recounts how a contest was once organised between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius to determine who was the better.[54] Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes that appeared so lifelike that birds flew from the sky to peck at the grapes. He then smugly walked over to



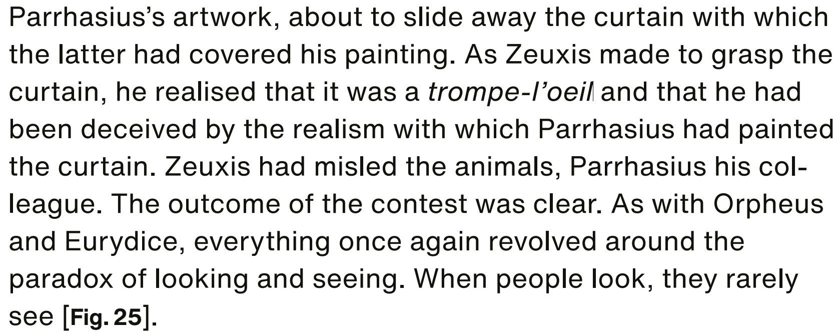
[Fig. 24]

Leonardo da Vinci
Portrait of Lisa Gherardini (Mona Lisa), c. 1503–1506, Paris, Musée du Louvre

[Fig. 25]



René Magritte
Les Mémoires d'un Saint [The Memoirs of a Saint], 1960, Houston, The Menil Collection



Parrhasius's artwork, about to slide away the curtain with which the latter had covered his painting. As Zeuxis made to grasp the curtain, he realised that it was a *trompe-l'oeil* and that he had been deceived by the realism with which Parrhasius had painted the curtain. Zeuxis had misled the animals, Parrhasius his colleague. The outcome of the contest was clear. As with Orpheus and Eurydice, everything once again revolved around the paradox of looking and seeing. When people look, they rarely see [**Fig. 25**].

#

Anecdotes such as the one about Zeuxis and Parrhasius show how art (history) aspired to a convergence of the spectra of the visible world, the mental world, and art long before the image was perceived as a kind of trinity. The ultimate goal – and this is still the case today – was to create an image of a world that differs in nothing from reality and in which the dividing line between divine and human creative power disappears altogether from the wax figures at Madame Tussaud's to 3-CPO. *Homo Deus*, according to Yuval Noah Harari.[55] The metaverse of Mark Zuckerberg's dreams. The creation of Galatea, as experienced by the mythological Pygmalion [**Figs. 30 & 31**], who fell desperately in love with a statue he had created.[56]

The anecdote about the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius became one of the most influential stories in art history. Seventeenth-century still-life painters referenced it when they diligently painted baskets full of grapes. The *Vorhänge (Curtain paintings*, 1964–1967) series by leading German painter Gerhard Richter touches upon this same phe-

[Fig. 26]

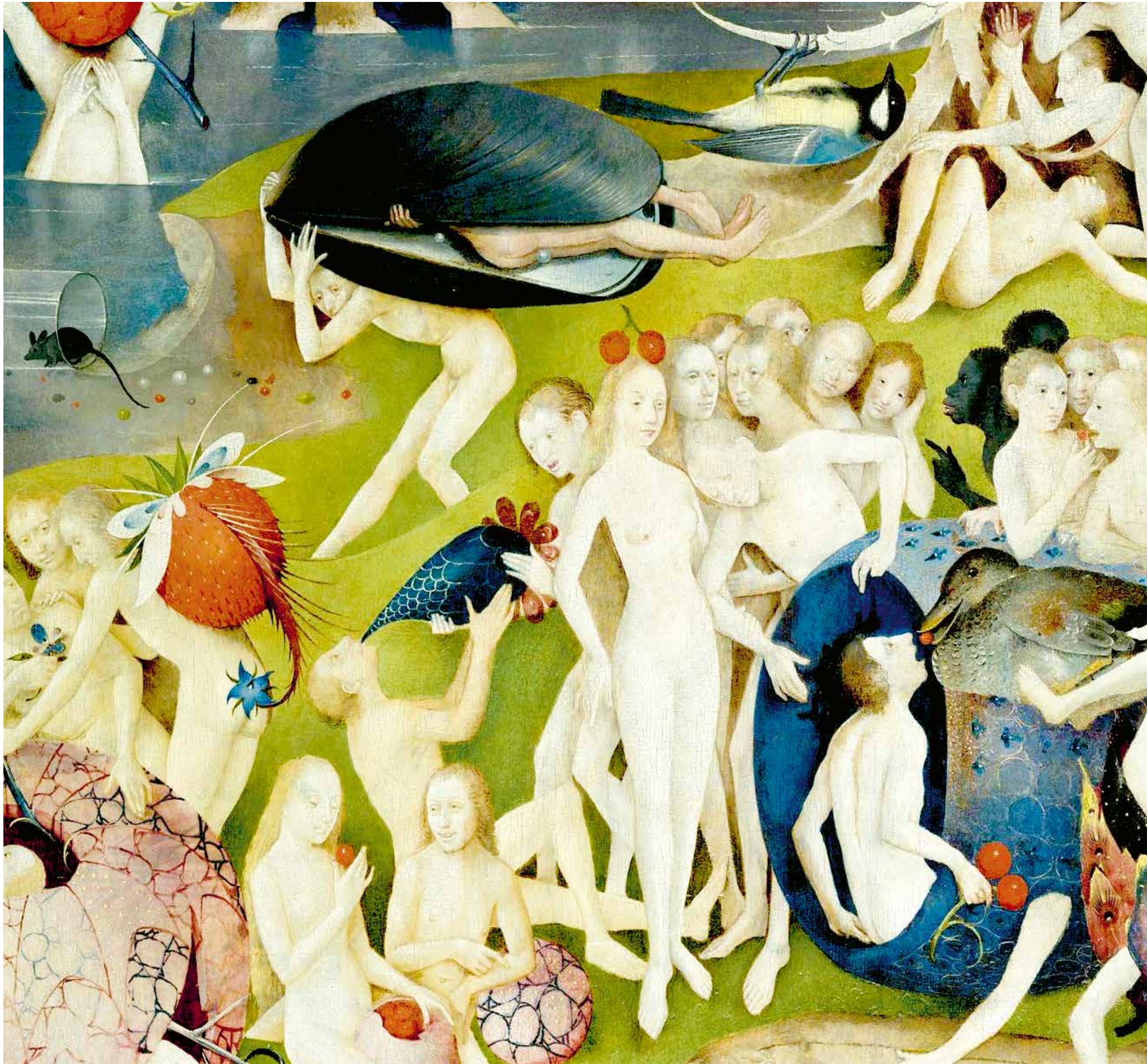
Gerhard Richter
Vorhang III (hell) [Curtain III (Light)] (56), 1965,
Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

nomenon, albeit from the perspective of the relationship between painting and photography [**Fig. 26**].

#

Plato, a contemporary of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, saw even more possibilities.[57] He reflected on a reality more perfect than what humans could see, and he believed – after some initial scepticism – that images could be used to understand this supersensory world. Once human ingenuity comes into play, visual art is no longer limited to a perfect recreation of creation. With reason and fantasy, one can then search for a form of perfection that transcends nature: the ideal man, the perfect horse... Based on simple sensory perception, people can thus arrive at the most wondrous images, which sometimes no longer have anything to do with physical reality, such as Alice's or Hieronymus's wonderlands [**Fig. 27**]. The fact that Van Gogh could paint a chair [**Fig. 21**] the way he did is entirely due to the fact that man can form mental images of what we observe in the world around us, adding fantasy and reason (the ancient Greeks had a word for this, namely *aisthesis*) to the mix. Based on the perception of hundreds or even thousands of chairs, anyone can also form a mental image of the chair as a concept without being limited to one specific chair. That is precisely what Plato found so interesting about how images are used. Apart from being able to distort our understanding of the world, as with Bosch or Van Gogh, it also allows us to approximate a universal truth, as in classical Greek art. Plato found this infinitely more fascinating, although he also expressed his doubts. He called one extreme *eidolon* (*simulacrum* in later Latin translations), and the other *eikon* (or *similitude*).[58]

[Fig. 27]



Hieronymus Bosch
Garden of Earthly Delights (detail), c. 1480–1490, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

Sculptors continually manipulate reality to make their images seem more realistic, Plato wrote, divulging an artist's secret in the process.[59] He illustrated this fascinating paradox with the example of a marble sculpture to be installed at a height in a temple. If you were to sculpt this human image with the right human proportions, the head and upper body would appear far too small in relation to reality. When you look at an image from below, you see things in perspective, and everything gradually becomes smaller. In his dialogue, *The Sophist*, Plato explained how good artists manipulate human proportions in that case, adding a disproportionately large head and shoulders. He called these manipulations *simulacra*. For anyone wondering why Michelangelo's iconic David has such a large head [**Fig. 69**]: this statue was originally intended to be installed for eternity on the Campanile (bell tower) of Florence, next to the Duomo.

Both *simulacrum* and *similitudo* play a role in representation and in visual art and photography. These are the extremes between which they veer in relation to a natural image and objective perception. The greater the influence of an enhancement app or Instagram filter, the greater the level of *simulacrum*, millennials (might) say. A selfie without make-up or manipulation belongs in the similitudo category. All images that are shared online meander between these two extremes, even if they seem true to life.

Before the French post-modernists Baudrillard and Deleuze started using the terms *simulacrum* and *similitudo* (without in-depth knowledge of the fascinating medieval literature on this topic), both terms perfectly marked the spectrum of the axes of the image trinity [**Fig. 18**].[60] It is the space that one can fill in between the three extremes and in which the image of

reality – the counterfeit that one makes of it – and mental creativity interact. Plato saw the advantages and disadvantages, and so did medieval theologians.[61] The Greek philosopher was on a quest to find reliable, true knowledge and understood that you could create an ideal world through manipulation, starting from the observable world. This is a good thing because it promotes a better understanding of reality. At the same time, it is also dangerous because it is misleading. In a sense, the common denominator of all humans is the perfect human being. Or as Zeuxis once said to himself: if I combine the most beautiful "parts" of the most beautiful women in the city of Croton, I will have created the perfect image of womanhood [**Fig. 28**].[62] But the opposite is also true. If you are not careful, fantasy may undermine reason, and you will not get any closer to the truth. It is this that Christians have feared since the early Middle Ages: images that were human fabrications but so lifelike that people would give credence to them. It is precisely for this reason that they always considered these *simulacra* to be suspect, classifying them as *idola* (idols). Moreover, they were rigorously distinguished from *similitudo* (seemingly real images), as in medieval manuscripts [**Fig. 29**]. In these manuscripts, the boundary between what is truthful is radically separated from the unbridled fantasy in the margins: the *simulacra* and *idola*.[63]

#

The image trinity thus is not a triangle with fixed dimensions but a nuanced spectrum of ever-changing relationships in which "the visual" floats somewhere on this spectrum, a bit like "the divine". The three elements constantly interact, but they are also different. And that is where many philosophers and theologians

[Fig. 28]

François-André Vincent, *Zeuxis Choosing Models from the Beautiful Women of Croton*, 1789, Paris, Musée du Louvre

[Fig. 29]

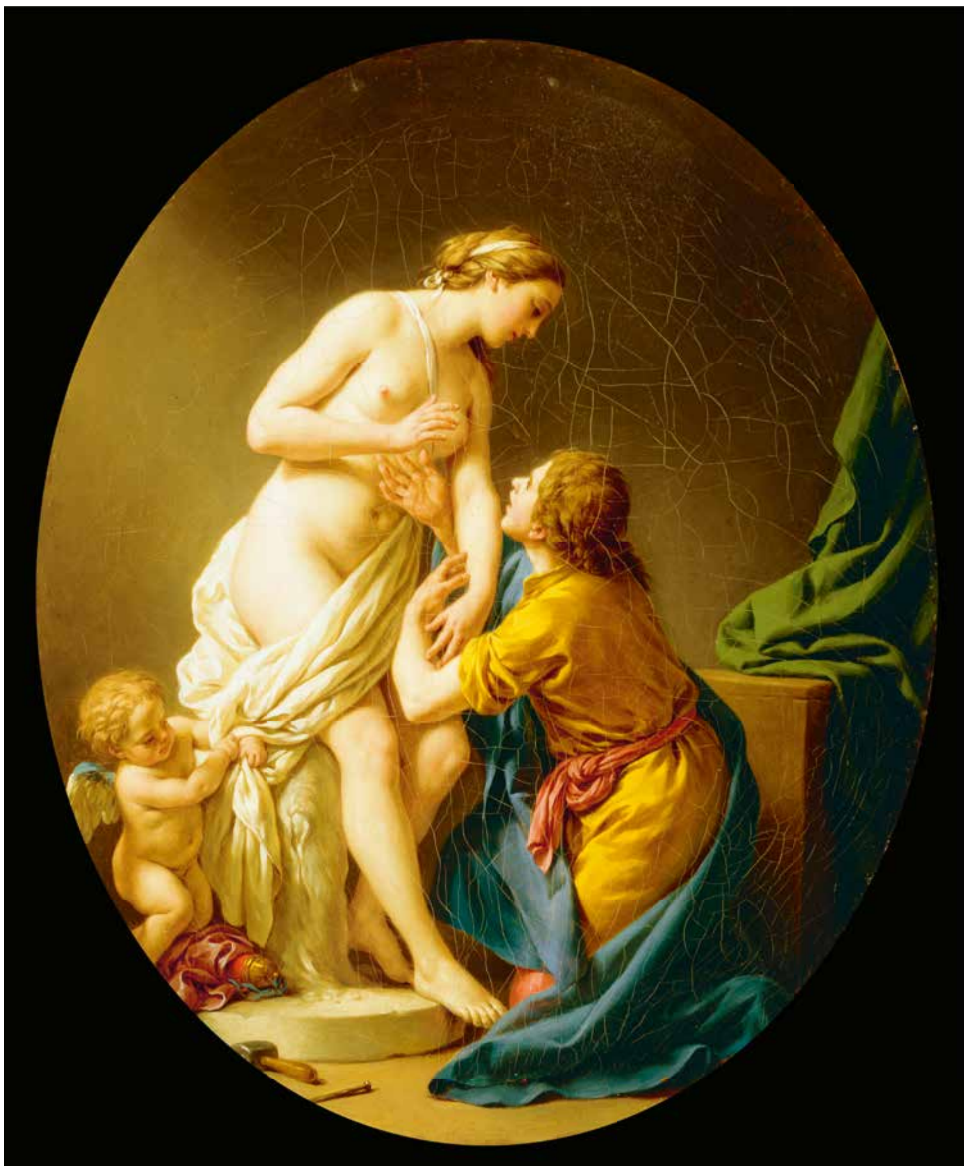
Rutland Psalter, 1260, London, British Library: Royal MS 62925, fol. 83v

begged to disagree. Humans tend to take their dreams for granted and put too much credence in the world they create themselves, whether physically or mentally. Or, in any event, that is what thinkers in antiquity and the Middle Ages postulated. They felt this was an obstacle to the gathering of real knowledge. To make their point, they referenced the endless numbers of stories about these issues, but the best known perhaps is that of Pygmalion, whom we have already mentioned – briefly ignoring Pinocchio. His fate is also described in Ovid's famous book about Greco-Roman mythology, the *Metamorphoses*.[64]

Pygmalion was a modest Cypriot who was appalled at the prostitution and wickedness of the *Propoetides* (daughters of Propoetus) on his island. That is why he made up his mind to carve a perfect female statue in ivory [**Fig. 30**]. Dazzled by the beauty of his own creation, he fell in love with the statue, showering it with jewels and other gifts. When he brought offerings to Venus/Aphrodite's altar on the goddess's feast day, he silently prayed for reciprocity. Aphrodite, who was deeply moved by Pygmalion's love, decided to fulfil his silent wish and bring the statue to life. The story continues to fuel the imagination, even among leading advertising photographers [**Fig. 31**].

In Pygmalion's myth, the dividing line between the living image and the counterfeit completely disappears. The sculptures come to life and become a part of reality that you can cherish. For Jews, Christians, and later also Muslims, this story illustrates the inherent danger of every image as images are capable of creating an alternative reality that people come to believe in, only to forget that only God is responsible for creating the world and the reality we live in. If, therefore, the relationships in the image trinity are thoroughly disrupted, this ultimately also has

[Fig. 30]



Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée
Pygmalion and Galatea, 1781, Detroit, Institute of Fine Arts

[Fig. 31]

Elisabeth Caren
Pygmalion and Galatea, 2014

colophon

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