



Exit Literacy: Educating the Gaze Between Iconic Overload and Critical Imagination [†]

Luca Bianchin ^{1,*} and Silvia Capodivacca ²

¹ Department of Educational and Sport Sciences, Faculty of Human Sciences, Education and Sport, Pegaso Telematic University, Centro Direzionale Isola F2, Via Giovanni Porzio, 4, 80143 Napoli, Italy

² Department of Literacy, Linguistic, and Philosophical Studies, Faculty of Human Sciences, Education and Sport, Pegaso Telematic University, Centro Direzionale Isola F2, Via Giovanni Porzio, 4, 80143 Napoli, Italy; silvia.capodivacca@unipegaso.it

* Correspondence: luca.bianchin@unipegaso.it

[†] Presented at the Learning and Teaching Strategies Mediated by Visual Education: Horizons of Research and Action (ASTERA 2025), Bari, Italy, 2 October 2025.

Abstract

The algorithmic overproduction of images that increasingly characterizes our media environment reveals a radically new relationship with visual representation. What emerges is not merely an inability to distinguish an iconographic model from its real referent, nor simply the dissolution of the boundary between true and false, reality and simulacrum (Baudrillard), but rather a growing indifference toward such distinctions. The incapacity to discern between “real” and “fabricated” images no longer appears problematic; the very categories of true and false tend to collapse into one another, resulting in the abandonment of interpretative engagement. After analyzing this phenomenon, the article proposes a pedagogical framework designed to respond to such a condition. It argues that neither image decoding (visual literacy) nor creative production alone are sufficient. What is required is a form of training in imagination, enacted through an ethics of the gaze and a digital archeology; through practices of digital estrangement; as well as through exercises in embodiment and sensory re-anchoring. The ultimate goal is to develop tools that shift the relationship with images from consumptive to interrogative—fostering what we call Exit Literacy: the capacity not only to read the world, but to desire to exit its passively offered version, reclaiming an active role in critique and meaning-making.

Keywords: iconic overload; society of the spectacle; critical imagination; ethics of the gaze; Exit Literacy



Academic Editors: Berardinetti
Valentina, Giusi Antonia Toto and
Piepaolo Limone

Published: 19 May 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.
This article is an open access article
distributed under the terms and
conditions of the [Creative Commons
Attribution \(CC BY\) license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. From Reality to Image: A Brief History of a Disappearance

We are certainly not the first to claim that one of the defining features of our time is an iconic overload [1–3]. As a hallmark of the contemporary condition, this unprecedented overproduction of images is now making its effects increasingly visible. Over the past two decades, the rise in algorithmic systems generating and circulating visual content has produced a form of perceptual saturation in the viewer, leading to a growing indifference toward the epistemic status of what is being observed. Numbed by the constant interchange between image and reality, the observer seems to stop at the level of mere esthetic consumption, abandoning that interpretive impulse which should safeguard them from adhering uncritically to representation alone.

Today, then, images are marked by a condition of neutrality: they no longer conceal the world, but rather absorb it, making it impossible to distinguish what is real from what is the appearance. In this sense, iconic overload is not merely a quantitative escalation in image production, but the symptom of a qualitative mutation of the gaze—namely, the loss of the capacity to interrogate what one sees.

While it is true that this particular relationship to the visual sphere is characteristic of advanced digitalization, it is equally true that its roots go back to the mass-media society of the twentieth century.

Günther Anders is among the first authors to address this phenomenon. In *The Outdatedness of Human Beings*, he analyzes the widening asymmetry between the productive capacities of technology and the anthropological limits of the human being. He introduces the notion of “Promethean shame”, the existential sense of inferiority that emerges when human beings are confronted with the technical perfection of their own machines:

His shame, then, consists in his *natum esse*, in his “lowly origins”—which he (not unlike the biographer of religious founders) judges as “low” precisely because they are origins. And if he is ashamed of this outdated beginning, he will naturally also be ashamed of the flawed and unavoidable result of that beginning: himself [4] (p. 24).

The shame that arises from the awareness of this discrepancy leads the human being—unable to match the perfection of the objects they create—to imitate them, to become machine-like. Anders notes that this self-reification takes place primarily on the level of the image. This is what he calls “Ikonomanie” [4] (pp. 3–4), through which the human being voluntarily reduces itself to its visual representation in an attempt to compensate for its constitutive flaw—namely, its irreducible finitude and inescapable individuality—thus incarnating itself in its media-generated alter ego.

The Ikonomanie that unfolds in cinema, television and, today, in the obsessive “presence” of our faces and bodies on social networks is a large-scale countermeasure against the fact that the human being exists only once. While in all other respects the human being is excluded from mass production, once photographed, it becomes a “reproduced production”. Thus, at least in effigy, they acquire a multiple existence—at times even multiplied into thousands of copies. And although they themselves live “only as” the original, in some way “they” also exist within their copies [4] (p. 57).

The overwhelming quantity of images in which we are immersed radically reshapes our relation to the world, which now seems to slip away from the epistemic certainty with which the subject once apprehended and represented it. Indeed, reality becomes reduced to its iconographic reproduction and thus, in Anders’s vocabulary, assumes the status of a “ghost.” Once the world is transposed into an image, it acquires a paradoxical ontology: it appears present and seemingly real while, at the same time, remaining absent and therefore fundamentally unreal. Just as a spectral entity makes itself present only in an elusive and immaterial way, the image (or rather, the simulated version of the world) asserts its form while withholding its substance. And just as a ghost haunts a dwelling, condemning its inhabitants to perceive it endlessly without ever truly encountering it, so too do images continuously reach the observer, whether sought or not, preventing the gaze from accessing what they purport to represent. Moreover, whereas the world requires encounter, the image requires only perception; a proactive and engaged disposition is thus replaced by a passive and receptive one. For this reason, the real is progressively supplanted by its reproduction—and the serial consumer of images, after countless photographs, and a couple of documentaries and perhaps a film or two, may eventually come to believe they have truly seen Mount Everest, even if they have never once stepped outside their living room.

In this replacement of the “real world” with its fairy-tale iconographic counterpart, it is not merely the former that fades in favor of the latter; more radically, the latter becomes the source of meaning for the former. The image does not simply displace reality: it ultimately produces it. In this sense, its role is not only spectral but generative—not only a ghost, but a matrix. Within the context of overproduction, a peculiar inversion of hierarchy takes place: representation no longer follows what it represents; rather, the represented must reshape itself in order to become representable—as if reality had to ascend to the status of its own image. Examining the effects of television on American society in the 1950s, Anders observes that the real—in its bare *realitas*—gradually loses its appeal, unable to compete with the carefully engineered allure of talk shows, studio entertainment, and televised reality. In these formats, dazzling lights, accelerated rhythms, and meticulously scripted performances hold the viewer captive before the screen, offering a pre-digested experience that no longer requires effort, inquiry, or encounter. In the media image, the world discovers an unexpected competitor, and in attempting to recover the distance opened by this unequal contest, it eventually adapts itself to the rules imposed by its “rival”.

The real—the supposed model—must therefore be adjusted to its possible reproductions; it must be reshaped according to the model of those reproductions. The events of the day must pre-emptively conform to their own copies. Indeed, countless events already occur in precisely the way they do only so that they may be used as broadcasts; there are even events that take place solely because they are desired or required as broadcasts [4] (pp. 190–191).

In the 1960s, Guy Debord radicalizes this analysis within the broader framework of a more complex social critique. He claims that the spectacle is not “a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images” [5] (p. 6). It is, therefore, the means by which advanced capitalism arranges perception and, in turn, the experience of the real. Sharing Anders’s phenomenology of the iconographic world—in both its causes and its effects—Debord reiterates the loss of reality that characterizes the new era of spectacularization. The human being becomes an alienated subject, excluded from any active shaping of their own life and from the deeper dynamics underlying social structures, which remain opaque to them. Habituated to the voracious consumption of images (and of commodities), the contemporary subject wanders in isolation, even when massified, entertained, and hypnotized by this iconographic carnival. Published in 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle* still bears the Marxist premises shared by its author, who believed that this condition could be redeemed through a socio-political awareness capable of intervening directly at the level of reality—“breaking through” the all-encompassing apparatus of the spectacle in an act of revolutionary liberation. Yet by 1988, when the insurrectionary impulse had lost its force, Debord, in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, would look back on his earlier enthusiasm and be compelled to acknowledge its failure. It is precisely in these years that he develops the notion of the “integrated spectacle,” and his diagnosis takes on a dark, if not outright apocalyptic, tone. The spectacle is no longer something separate from the real; it has absorbed reality entirely into itself, irradiating it from the inside out in a pervasive and finely grained manner.

The final sense of the integrated spectacle is this—it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien. When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality [6] (p. 9).

With a foresight that verges on the prophetic, Debord seems to anticipate the advent of social media, where relations between individuals are displaced into the virtual sphere.

What emerges here is not, as he still maintained in 1967, a set of images interposing themselves between social relations and altering them, but a transposition of the relations themselves onto an ontologically autonomous domain, organized according to its own internal laws. The society of full digitalization of the real thus becomes an apparatus of perpetual visibility, in which the distinction between reality and representation becomes entirely untenable.

A few years later, Jean Baudrillard would confirm Debord's conclusions and push this hermeneutic line to its extreme consequences. In *Simulacres et Simulation*, the loss of the real becomes complete: the society of the spectacle has given way to the society of simulation. Baudrillard distinguishes three orders of simulacra: the imitative order of counterfeit, typical of the Renaissance; the productive order, characteristic of the industrial era; and finally the order of simulation, proper to the postmodern age. This last type of simulacrum is the most dangerous, for the image no longer needs to refer back to any original, having entirely effaced the objective referent to which it would theoretically be tied. The simulacrum, therefore, is not a falsehood that conceals something true; it is the new truth that hides the fact that there is no longer any truth at all. With the advent of digital media, the traditional distinction between reality and appearance becomes obsolete, for these media have ended up producing a reality "truer than the true"—what Baudrillard calls "hyperreality." Ours is a world, the French philosopher argues, in which the difference between sign and referent dissolves into a closed circuit of continuous signification, where the sign comes to signify only other signs. Contemporary society thus becomes akin to an immense screen, as a continuum of self-referential images detaches itself from the substantive matrix that ought to ground it, neutralizing any possibility of experience. What Debord called spectacle, for Baudrillard, becomes a total semiotic system in which reality is never actually encountered. From this perspective, iconic overload represents the terminal point of a long trajectory marked by the disappearance of reality and its replacement by image. From Anders's Promethean shame to Debord's society of the spectacle, and finally to Baudrillard's simulacra, what emerges is a progressive process of dematerialization of the real and a corresponding loss of experience. The image not only replaces the world; it ultimately effaces it, rendering the human being a spectator from whom neither interpretive effort nor critical judgment is any longer required.

2. Imagination as a Formative Practice: A Few Suggestions

The analysis developed in the first part of this contribution, centered on the condition of iconic overload, outlines a cultural landscape that calls—indeed, with some urgency—for an attempt to address the issue also at the educational level. Faced with the drift that has led us to indifference toward the status of the image, strategies are needed that go beyond those already established. Visual literacy, essential for educating the gaze and providing critical tools for decoding, as well as the promotion of creative production, remains indispensable approaches: the proposal advanced here aims to remain in continuity with them, while also suggesting an integration capable of reactivating imagination as a critical and transformative resource.

What is indispensable is an epistemological shift, through which the reader and producer of images—and, prior to both, the imagining subject as such—might be formed. What is needed, then, is a training of the imagination, understood as a critical and constructive faculty rather than as a mere escape from the real: a space of resistance and of the elaboration of meaning. It is a matter of cultivating the capacity to establish unforeseen relations, to see—beyond the given immediacy—the non-visible and the possible inscribed within the visible.

After all, thought does not consist in bringing the possible into reality, as the demons urge you to do, but in making the real possible—in finding a way out of the inevitability of facts that the dominant ideology seeks to impose in every domain. [...] While in the infernal din around you everyone strives to realize, diabolically and technically, the possible at any cost, for you, every state, every thing, every blade of grass—if you perceive them in their truth—becomes once again, silently and lucidly, possible [7].

This pedagogical sketch unfolds along several methodological–operational axes, drawing implicit nourishment from an interdisciplinary dialog that spans from the phenomenology of perception to cognitive neuroscience, from art education to the philosophy of the image. Crucial points of reference are, respectively: Cornelius Castoriadis’s notion of radical imagination [8]; John Dewey’s reflections on esthetic experience as a form of knowledge [9]; and the conception of the artwork as a device of interruption and redefinition of the perceptible, developed by theorists such as Jacques Rancière [10], which together provide a further foundation for an educational practice aimed at awakening the gaze from its passivity. The brief pedagogical proposal that follows aims to sketch the contours of such training, structuring it along complementary dimensions: a perceptual–critical axis, directed toward refining sensitivity and the capacity for judgment; an operational–experiential axis, grounded in manipulative practice and in the deceleration of the creative gesture; and, thirdly, an ethical–projectual axis, oriented toward collectively rethinking the role of images within the shared world of the everyday. By integrating these planes, it may become possible to cultivate cognitive and emotional antibodies capable of enabling a conscious engagement with the current complexity of the visual, thereby transforming passive spectators into active interpretive agents.

The first axis, essential for establishing a critical awareness of the conditions under which the visual is produced, may be defined in terms of promoting an ethics of the gaze and a digital archeology. This approach is ideally addressed to university students in both the humanities and the technical–scientific fields, and aims to expose the opacity of the algorithmic processes that govern the overproduction and circulation of images. Without limiting itself to a technical examination of generative AI mechanisms or recommender systems, it seeks to problematize their multiple ethical implications: What visions of the world are naturalized through these algorithms? What forms of attention are solicited or inhibited? What power relations are consolidated in the ways images are produced and distributed? The task is to conduct an inquiry that brings to light the biases, attention economies, and worldviews embedded within such systems. The objective is to equip students with the tools to understand that every algorithmic image is always the result of a choice, of training on specific datasets, and of a particular interest: in this way, they are invited to develop a critical awareness of the symbolic architectures that shape their perception.

Critical deconstruction alone, if not accompanied by a direct experience that engages the perceptual and sensorial sphere, risks remaining abstract. It is at this level that the second axis intervenes, dedicated to practices of digital estrangement. Borrowing and adapting techniques from conceptual art, critical design, and the poetics of the glitch, this operational module is addressed to secondary-school students and art-academy cohorts, with the explicit aim of breaking the automatisms of the gaze and the perceptual wear produced by overload. Exercises in dysfunction—the deliberate misuse or improper use of a digital tool—are encouraged, as is the creation of glitch art as a way of restoring opacity and ambiguity to the image. These practices find an antecedent in the Russian Formalists’ notion of *ostranenie* and are oriented toward awakening an interrogative faculty by short-circuiting technical regularity. Through them, the hope is to initiate a training in

defect, in the unforeseen and the erroneous, as fissures through which one may glimpse the functioning of the system itself and the possibilities of its alternative and disobedient use.

Finally, to counter both the potential burnout produced by visual hyperstimulation and the disembodiment of the gaze, the third axis proposes exercises in embodiment and sensorial re-anchoring. Addressed in particular to Generation Z within contexts of informal education, this pathway is grounded in the recovery of a dilated temporality and of a bodily experience of the visible. The use of an analog photography workshop—with its long exposure, development, and printing times—or the practice of observational drawing compel a physical and patient relation to the referent, re-establishing a material and tactile connection with the production of the image. Periods of digital detox are also proposed not as an apocalyptic rejection of technology, but as a research methodology aimed at resetting perception for a delimited period and rebuilding a capacity for deep attention. This latter type of intervention converses with studies on embodied cognition and the phenomenology of perception [11–14], and seeks to rebalance sensory experience by opposing the logic of visual extraction and consumption with that of encounter and the co-constructed, embodied elaboration of meaning. Ultimately, only by reanimating the spectator's body is it possible to infuse once again a critical significance into the image that surrounds them. Consistent with the aim of fostering Exit Literacy, these methodological directions may translate into relatively simple pedagogical practices across different educational contexts. In university courses, for example, students may be invited to reconstruct the genealogy of a viral or algorithmically generated image, tracing its circulation across platforms and examining the datasets, assumptions, and attention economies that inform its production. In secondary-school or art-education settings, exercises in digital estrangement may involve deliberately misusing image-generation tools—introducing contradictory prompts, corrupted files, or interrupted rendering processes—in order to reveal the technical grammar of visual systems through their malfunction. Finally, embodiment-oriented activities may take the form of slow-image workshops, such as analog photography or observational drawing sessions, in which participants produce a limited number of images over extended periods of observation and collectively reflect on the perceptual and temporal conditions required for the emergence of the image.

The ultimate aim of this training of the imagination is to foster a practice of Exit Literacy, which may also take shape as a space of transgenerational sharing in which the products deriving from the three axes can be brought into dialog and drawn back into convergence. In this way, the different pathways, though addressed to heterogeneous targets, find a common ground for exchange, restoring to imagination its communal and transformative vocation. The expression Exit Literacy, coined as an ideal extension of media literacy, designates the individual's capacity to perform a twofold movement: on the one hand, critically decoding the languages and dispositif that structure the media ecosystem; on the other, cultivating the desire for—and the symbolic possibility of—withdrawing from its passively received offerings. It is a literacy of exit, a form of critical desertion from a prepackaged gaze, which coincides with the recovery of a communal role reached through the continuous generation and negotiation of meaning. It is the disposition to interrogate images on the basis of what they conceal and what they impose, returning to the gaze its political and poetic force at once.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.C. and L.B.; methodology, S.C. and L.B.; formal analysis, S.C. and L.B.; investigation, S.C. and L.B.; resources, S.C. and L.B.; writing—original draft preparation, L.B. and S.C. More specifically, Section 1 was written by L.B. and Section 2 was written by S.C.; writing—review and editing, S.C. and L.B.; supervision, S.C.; project administration, S.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Codeluppi, V. The screen age (L'era dello schermo). In *Convivere con L'invasione Mediatica*; Franco Angeli: Roma, Italy, 2013. (In Italian)
2. Han, B.-C. *The Transparency Society*; Stanford Briefs: Broadway, NY, USA, 2015.
3. Han, B.-C. *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2017.
4. Anders, G. The obsolescence of man (Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen). In *Band I: Über Die Seele im Zeitalter der Zweiten Industriellen Revolution*; C. H. Beck: München, Germany, 1961. (In German)
5. Debord, G. *Society of the Spectacle*; Black & Red: Detroit, MI, USA, 1970.
6. Debord, G. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*; Verso: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1990.
7. Agamben, G. Dove Siamo? Available online: <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-dove-siamo> (accessed on 19 September 2025).
8. Castoriadis, C. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1975.
9. Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*; Penguin Publishing Group: London, UK, 2005.
10. Rancière, J. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*; Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 2009.
11. Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*; Taylor & Francis: Milton Park, UK, 2013.
12. Noë, A. *Action in Perception*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2004.
13. Varela, F.J.; Thompson, E.; Rosch, E. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1993.
14. Manovich, L. *The Language of New Media*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2002.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.