The Rhetorical Dimension of Images: Identity Building and Management on Social Networks

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The Rhetorical Dimension of Images: Identity Building and Management on Social Networks

This article proposes a semio-rhetorical epistemology for visual documents, one capable of accounting for both their internal configuration, which we shall call the compositional dimension, and their persuasive force within public space, or their rhetorical dimension. The field of reference will be that of identity-related images on social networks, because compared to other kinds of images, such as artistic or professional ones, they adopt new compositional solutions and new dynamics of circulation. To test this theoretical framework, we will conduct an analysis which has never been carried out in semiotics and which, as far as we know, remains very rare even in the overall field of *visual studies*, that is, the analysis of the profile of an Instagram influencer's visual production, that of Canadian artist Rupi Kaur. Taking into account the flow of images shared over time, we will focus primarily on the compositional dimension that articulates the specificity of the language of images. The most appropriate model for investigating social network photos seems to be that of the portrait, thanks to which we will identify a first series of regularities and deviations. Secondly, we will turn towards the rhetorical dimension – the persuasive strategies found within, through, and towards images – focusing on the analysis of a single photo: on the one hand, it is a shot which presents greater compositional richness than others; on the other hand, it has greatly impacted the notoriety of the influencer, due to the censorship incurred on Instagram, its abundant coverage by traditional media, and the heated debate it triggered on social media. We will thus propose a reinterpretation of Paul Ricœur's theory of identity in order to balance the rhetorical and the compositional dimensions through a unitary theoretical hypothesis. Visual identity on social networks is always the result of a negotiation between two opposite tendencies: on the one hand, the experiential pressure expressed through images related to the body and everyday practices; on the other, the algorithmic pressure due to the delegation of the management of identity to software. The case of Rupi Kaur is a rare example of a critical mediation between these two pressures and helps us build a methodology for the examination of images belonging to other social domains.

Keywords: visual studies, social network, rhetoric, identity, Kaur (Rupi)

Introduction

With the diffusion of portable devices and social networks, images have gained a new importance within society: they play a central role in the processes of definition of social personalities and in the management of their presence on the public scene. One may only look at politics, where the rise of social networks has revolutionized the relationship between political representatives and citizens, inaugurating more direct forms of communication, and where traditional media often have to cover news and debates taking place on Twitter and Facebook. This is a dynamic exhibited in an exemplary manner by the political movements of the "Gilets jaunes" in France and of the "Sardines" in Italy, where the sharing of images of cities and of public squares during demonstrations has given rise to a peculiar overlap between social aggregation and ideological action, through a process of dissemination regulated by the mechanisms of social networks and amplified by traditional media.

This situation presents unprecedented challenges for the humanities and in particular for the broad field of image science. As stated by Virginia Kuhn (2012), traditional approaches to images risk being unprepared for this task. Approaches such as those of art history and aesthetics, but also film and media studies, have traditionally adopted a broadcast perspective: they have mainly focused their attention on images produced by artists or professionals, reserving the label of "amateur" to the many groups that do not fall within the first two categories. Today, such a perspective proves to be problematic, because images have become an everyday language, used by all social actors, each with their own communicative aims, their own strategies, and their own communities. This widening of the use of images is due to the fact that each actor, whether a professional, an institution, or a simple citizen, produces and shares images in the course of everyday life and practice. The result is the rise of new kinds of images, new rhetorical strategies, and new visual "dialects" that risk being neglected by traditional approaches.

Together with the anthropology of images (Belting, 2011), and more generally with the methodologies linked to the field of *Visual Studies* (Mitchell, 2005), semiotics has the advantage of avoiding any methodological a priori restricting it to a single domain, as it rather considers visual communication as a matter of social and formal meaning, of which the internal articulations and relations to identity must be studied over time. Its ambition is to describe the semantic configurations expressed in different social domains (art, religion, politics, fashion, etc.), thanks to a general epistemology and to a set of analytical tools adaptable to different kinds of texts, images, and social meanings (Eco, 1999; Greimas & Courtés, 1982). However, there are many difficulties which prevent the full application of its models. On the one hand, there is the risk that its highly formalized methodology might paradoxically be too elaborate (Greimas, 1989; Dondero, 2020). Having been perfected through its application to artistic compositions and gradually extended to other fields, semiotic methodology faces the risk of

being composed of too narrow a grid, one unable to account for simple images such as selfies, subjective videos, and live broadcasts shared on social networks. Secondly, visual semiotics has so far approached small corpora of images, analyzed thanks to careful and close readings. On the contrary, images on social networks are characterized by massive flows, where it is more important to understand the general trajectory of meaning, instead of analyzing the compositional details, according to a quali-quantitative approach.[1]

The promising advances in computer vision and in visual data feature extraction (Nixon & Aguado, 2012) have opened a new frontier where the formal and plastic characteristics of images can be modeled so as to enable the automatic analysis of large amounts of visual data. Low-level characteristics pertaining to the organization of colors, lines and shapes, processed by appropriate algorithms, allow a renewed approach to art history. However, their application remains limited for other kinds of images whose semantic mechanisms are not linked to a grammaticalized domain such as art, whose peculiarities are studied during education. Such is the case with news and citizens' images, which are firstly characterized by free circulation and by a social construction of meaning. In these fields, the power of computer science approaches must be accompanied by multidimensional theoretical hypotheses, starting from the necessary assumption that the internal composition of images is the first and foremost aspect of their meaning, along with the rhetorical operations they carry out in the public arena.

Globally, there has been a steady increase in the number of academic works dedicated to social networks, and in particular to the images they circulate, with articles devoted to the peculiar form of temporality activated by the continuous sharing of shots (Hand, 2019), to

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[1] For a comparison between close reading as usually carried out in the humanities and distant reading supported by computer tools applied to large corpora of data, see Moretti (2013). One of the first examples of a quantitative analysis of a large corpus of identity images on social networks is *Selfiecity*, a project carried out by Lev Manovich and the Cultural Analytics Lab (http://selfiecity.net). This pioneering quantitative analysis is exemplary of the power of computational methods of analysis, which are able to automatically process thousands of images. However, this project also shows the limits of computational approaches, as they need strong theoretical hypotheses in order to produce significant results. The algorithm recognized the sex and the approximative age of the subjects based on the shots, the inclination of the head, the possible presence of smiles, etc. In order to grasp more complex features such as cultural values, stronger hypotheses are necessary.

identity representation (Rettberg, 2017), to the role played by algorithms (Finn 2017), and to the general economy regulating social media interactions, described as an economy of attention (Lanham, 2006) and as a gift economy (Casilli, 2011). What seems to be missing however are transversal hypotheses that can correlate these axes in order to increase the overall intelligibility of social networks and of the way they are changing the construction of meaning in every area of our society.

This is a gap which this contribution intends to fill, by proposing an epistemology and a methodology for identity-related images on social networks, one capable of taking into account the multiple dimensions involved in their meaning. The case of a successful influencer, Canadian artist Rupi Kaur, will guide the conceptual development on the basis of two exemplary features. On the one hand, her visual production embodies some of the dynamics that are characteristic of social networks, including the preeminence of simple identity images shared over time according to a temporal management of the self. On the other hand, the episode that brought her to notoriety presents peculiar characteristics due to the richer compositional complexity of the images and to the strong rhetorical responses they triggered from different social actors. To meet the challenge of a quali-quantitative analysis, we will try to account for the influencer's entire visual production.

In the first part of the paper, we will briefly present the social profile of Rupi Kaur, providing contextual elements pertaining to her public trajectory. We will then proceed with a typological description of the images produced over time, identifying regularities and singularities in comparison with the attested visual genres, mainly that of portraiture. We will then focus on the *period* series, a visual essay consisting in six photographs dedicated to the theme of menstruation. We will focus on one image in particular, in order to show how its internal articulations can be profitably analyzed using the tools of visual semiotics in dialogue with art history, especially with respect to the most typical canons of the main genres. We will

call this dimension of the image, entirely situated within its plastic and figurative organization, the compositional dimension.

In the second part of the paper, we will widen our gaze to situate the shot within the flow of images shared by Rupi Kaur. The examination of the censorship operated by Instagram's algorithms and of the influencer's reaction, in particular, will allow us to illustrate the way in which identity is managed over time, thanks to the rhetorical positions assumed within, through, and towards images.

Finally, we will propose a new reading of Paul Ricœur's theory of identity (1992) in order to build a general framework for the study of identity-related images on social networks. Our hypothesis is that social network images always express a strategy of negotiation between an experiential and an algorithmic pressure, leading to the adoption of more or less effective and more or less personal solutions. This theoretical framework will allow us to review the case of Rupi Kaur and to analyze the correlations between the rhetorical and the compositional dimension expressed by her images, describing the particular way in which the influencer has critically built her identity over time, through the reflexive construction of an identity narration.

1 The compositional dimension of images: regularities and singularities in visual flows
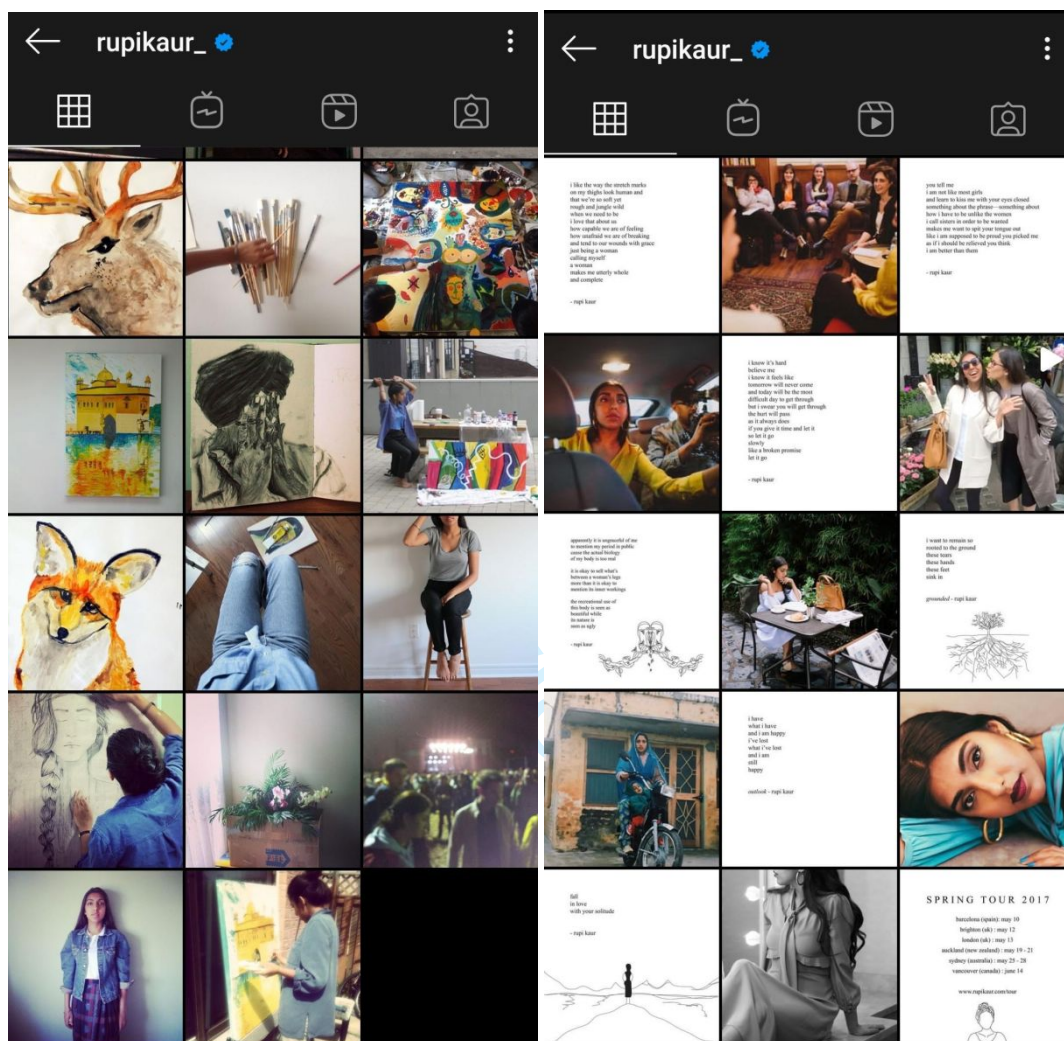
A Canadian poet of Indian origin, Rupi Kaur began by publishing her texts on a Tumblr blog before joining Instagram, where she accompanied her poetic compositions – usually very short ones – with stylized black and white images made by her. She has, over time, gathered more than 4 million followers, has appeared numerous times in fashion and entertainment magazines, and several broadcast shows have covered her literary and social activities. Her poetry books, dedicated to sensitive issues such as femininity, abuse, ethnic minorities, and sexuality, all of which she approaches in a straightforward and inclusive manner, sell millions of copies and have been translated into dozens of languages. Her success has paved the way for

a new generation of insta-poets and has stimulated further artistic production and inaugurated new socialization practices, attracting large readerships of young people.[2]

As far as her Instagram profile is concerned, scrolling through the posts from her debut in 2013 until today, it is possible to identify a first series of regular features. Among the posts shared over time, three main kinds of images seem to emerge: first of all, a large set of selfie and identity-related images stands out; secondly, the poetic compositions, almost always accompanied by a simple illustration made by Kaur herself, occupy an equally important place; finally, the third group of images is composed of other kinds of shots, related to special occasions such as reading tours, meetings with friends, and other collaborations. An additional group of posts, composed of short videos of interviews, readings, performances, and workshops stands out for the very high number of *likes*, presumably for the way these posts manage to merge identity-related images and poetic compositions read aloud by Kaur. We won't cover the latter group nor the Stories, as we prefer to keep the focus on still images and on the specificities of their meaning.

The opportunity to scroll through the profile in its entirety, from the first shared images to the latest, allows us to identify a number of important changes within Kaur's social practice. The first shots, in particular, dating back to May 2013 (Figure 1), have some unique features compared to later ones (Figure 2).

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[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/fashion/rupi-kaur-poetry-the-sun-and-her-flowers.html, accessed on June 12, 2020.

Figures 1-2. Screenshot of the first images shared by
Rupi Kaur on her profile in 2013 (left). On the right, a screenshot of images shared later.

First of all, in the posts shared during the first year, many images have for subject the drawings

and paintings made at the time by Rupi Kaur, an activity she later abandoned. If we consider

the fact that her first poetic compositions were not accompanied by images, but only presented

verbal text, it is possible to reconstruct a series of turning points in Kaur's artistic activity: after

her first attempts as a painter, Kaur devoted herself completely to poetry, and only after a first

exclusively verbal phase, she identified her personal visual-verbal formula, in which very short

compositions are illustrated by stylized black and white drawings. This is the format that characterized her artistic work from then on, also adopted in her print books.

Secondly, the very first shots are characterized by a much lower frequency of published posts than the subsequent phases: one may notice, for example, the passing of almost a month between each of her first five posts, a sign that there was no scheduling established a priori, nor a planning of her presence within the public space.

Thirdly, the very first images are characterized by a much lower quality than the subsequent ones, and the same can be said of the aesthetics of the profile as a whole. On the one hand, the lower quality certainly owes to the evolution of photographic capture devices: since 2013, smartphones and cameras have indeed made huge strides in technological terms, with an increase in the quality of photosensitive sensors, better resolution, and even the use of AI to automatically adjust the photographic parameters in function of the kind of visual scene they are capturing (landscape, portrait, nature, etc.). However, this is only one of the reasons that explain the lower overall quality that characterizes the first shots: it is clear that the staging was less studied, relied on less evocative poses and resulted in less balanced and impactful compositions. In the same way, the choice of lighting was not optimal, resulting in underexposed or unevenly lit photos, sometimes even blurred. The grid view of the profile, which may be seen in Figures 1 and 2, also shows how Kaur's page is now characterized by a regular arrangement of photographic shots and poetic compositions, which confers it a chessboard-like visual structure. Conversely, the photos of the first period do not present a comparable planning, and the grid view shows a simple sequence of photos.

Finally, another noteworthy aspect is that the posts and shots belonging to the first period are not structured along the lines of a strong thematic organization. In contrast, the images related to the subsequent phases, developing the three kinds of posts we have identified, give rise to a thematic organization of the content while presenting strong social themes, artistic

aspirations, and an inclusive manner of interaction with her community. In other words, the semantic structure underlying the production of images expresses a management of the self over time – both in terms of practice and of stylistic choices – which is completely absent from the production of the first period.

This brief examination of the qualitative and compositional variation within the production of Rupi Kaur allows us to see how her activity on Instagram was completely superimposable with the activity of a common user. Following the classification proposed by Manovich (2017, pp. 42-70), we can define Rupi Kaur's activity during the first year as *casual* practice: photos taken on the occasion of daily events, without any particular planning, and presumably addressed to an audience composed of people close to her, her social niche, completely superimposable with her "real" social niche. Conversely, from a certain point onwards, the frequency of the shots increased exponentially and followed a temporal planning and a precise semantic structure, arranged so as to constitute a recognizable style, both in terms of the themes addressed and of the compositional and technical quality of the shots. In other words, the temporal analysis of Kaur's visual production allows us to easily identify the passage from a practice of *home mode photography* (Chalfen, 1987) to a competitive practice, the latter being characterized by a strategic management that aims to achieve as many views, *likes*, and *follows* as possible, competing with other influencers for the attention and appreciation from large audiences.

1.1 Selfies and identity-related images on social networks

We shall now focus on one of the three groups of images in Rupi Kaur's production, because it is representative of overall visual production on social media: selfies, and more generally, identity-related images. In her book on the semiotics of the portrait, Anne Beyaert-Geslin (2017, pp. 165-183) attempts to define selfies in relation to artistic portraits in painting

and photography. The selfie is conceived of as a sub-genre of the portrait that is closely linked to its medium of production – the smartphone – as dictionary definitions also attest. Comparing selfies to self-portraits in painting, Beyaert-Geslin identifies some characteristic features. As far as formal similarities are concerned, they essentially pertain to the fact that the author of the shot and the subject portrayed correspond to one another, owing to the self-referential gesture of putting oneself into figuration. However, many aspects differ profoundly: on a temporal level, the production of a painted self-portrait requires technical skill and a slow transduction of visual appearance *via* manual production. The semi-automatic production guaranteed by photography, on the contrary, makes the production of the selfie instantaneous and easily repeatable over time. In a similar manner, the temporality of reception and interpretation is also transformed, because in the case of the self-portrait, which is the result of an authorial work, it constitutes a long and distant temporality: the self-portrait is an image which comes from the past and addresses the future, in a temporal regime that Beyaert-Geslin qualifies as *memorial*. Conversely, selfies are linked to a fugitive present, to an immediate and socialized reception, temporally very close to the acts by which they are produced and shared. Being characterized by their quantity, selfies being images that present themselves in accumulating flows to be consumed, the temporal dimension is somehow absorbed by the spatial dimension due to the multiple productions, in a sort of *pellicular* temporal regime.

With respect to these considerations, it is possible to go one step further, because the production of multiple simple images also involves a qualitative difference in the management of identity: in the case of the self-portrait, there is a qualitative dominance linked to the *iconization* of the character, to an efficient stylization of the physical appearance and of the gaze, so that it is able to summarize and condense the personality into a single image. On the contrary, with the selfie, it is not a matter of iconizing and synthesizing the multiplicity of the self, nor of presenting it in an emblematic way; the production of several images over time

rather belongs to a quantitative management of the self. A self to be accumulated, renewed, controlled in response to multiple pressures: the physical changes due to the passing of time, the ongoing social debates, and the images shared by others. It is not the singularity of the salient photo that characterizes the selfie, but rather a flow of identity-related images that attempts to tame time through a potential daily multiplication and fragmentation of the self, one that needs to be constantly socialized and reaffirmed in the public space.

With respect to this context, the case of Rupi Kaur is no exception, because we find in her profile an important flow of identity-related images. However, her case is interesting because it expresses multiple visual styles and multiple identity strategies, giving us the opportunity to build a general typology of identity-related images on social networks.

1.2 Around the portrait genre: a temporal typology

A comparison of the ideal characteristics of portraits in photographic and pictorial art, as recently condensed in an important visual semiotics book by Maria Giulia Dondero (2020, pp. 49-60), allows us to characterize the strategies adopted by Rupi Kaur in her identity-related images and, more generally, in those produced on social media. The artistic portrait genre is defined by three fundamental characteristics, on the basis of which it is possible to identify a more or less successful portrait – one which deviates more or less from the classical canon.

The first characteristic is the *relationship between the figure and the background*. In principle, the background must be neutral, it must not stand out or attract attention, so that the figure placed in front of it can emerge with the right intensity and affirm its presence. However, this configurational nucleus can be applied by artists in many ways, so that a constitutive tension is built up between the background and the figure, to a point where the figure has to struggle to show itself. A dark background may threaten to engulf a figure partially covered by

shade, for instance, or the background and the figure may be characterized by a similar chromatic tone, preventing the full affirmation of the identity in presence.

The second characteristic of the portrait is *the compactness and centrality of the figure*. The subject represented must constitute a cohesive totality, appearing as an effective condensation of the life path of the subject, ideally capable of coalescing its past, present, and destiny. Even in such a case, the compactness and the centrality of the figure can be put into question or displaced in order to obtain effects such as the fragmentation of the personality or the opacification of the view, for instance by accentuating the provisional character of the subject portrayed.
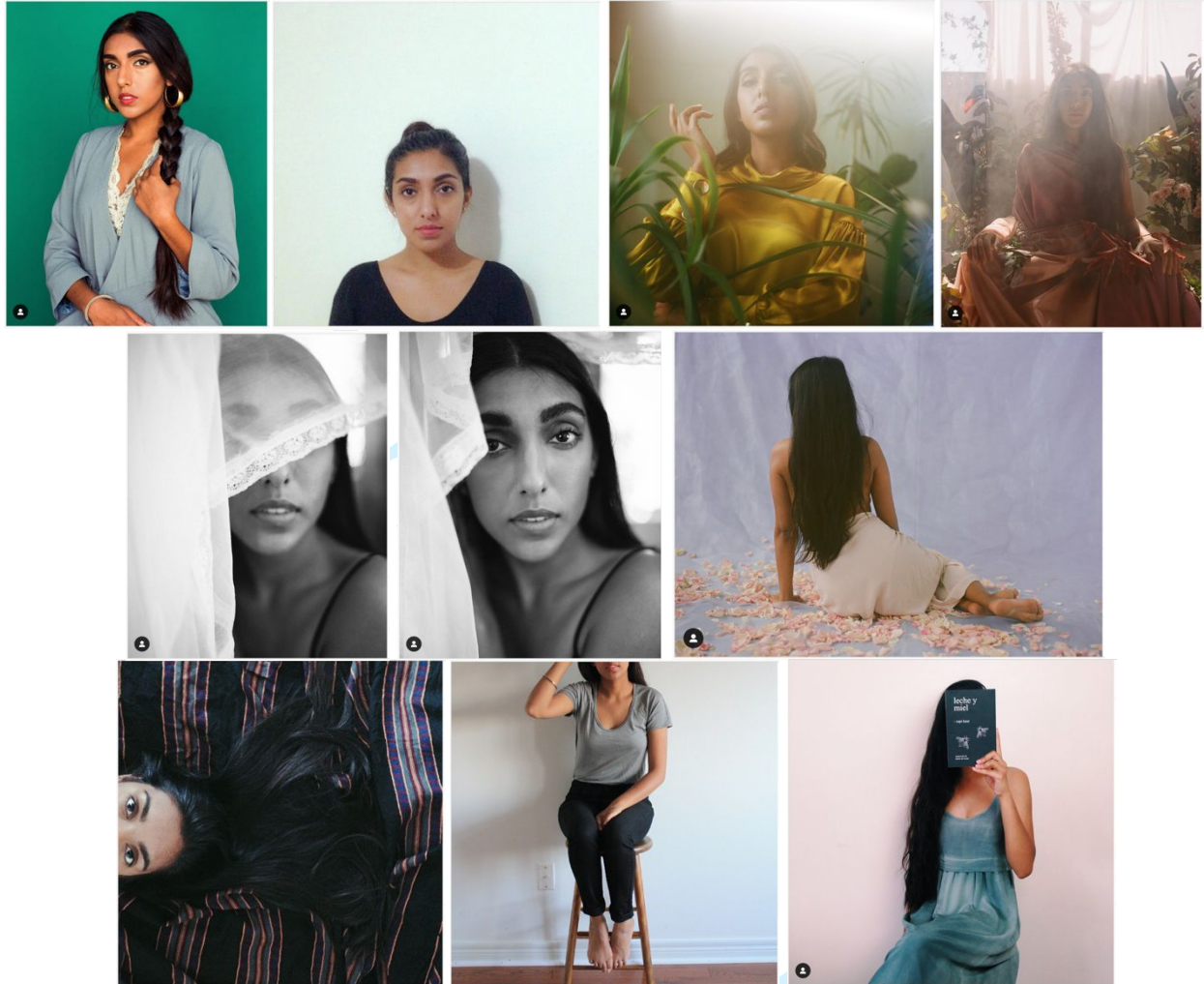
The third and final characteristic is *the lack of action*. The subject of the portrait must not be engaged in any activity other than that of resembling him or herself (Pontévia, 2000, p. 16). Each action, forming the germ of a potential narrative, disturbs the subject's self-directed concentration and the communication of his or her personality to the spectator. The static pose, conceivable as an absence of action that aims to offer something intimate to the gaze of the spectators, is the preferred configuration of the body in portraiture.

A generic structure emerges from these three characteristics: the portrait frontally exhibits a subject offering to view the noblest and most individualized parts of him or herself – the face and the gaze – so as to be completely exposed to the viewer. As explained by art historian Meyer Schapiro (1983), the profile and frontal views in images correspond respectively to the opposition between the *he, she,* or *they* pronouns and the *I/you* pair in verbal languages. A gaze directly addressing the spectator configures an *I/you* relationship, while a scene devoid of any form of addressal produces an impersonal perspective, as if it were unfolding on its own, according to a *he, she,* or *it* pronominal arrangement. The first conceptualization of this linguistic theory was proposed by linguist Émile Benveniste (1966), and allowed for the construction of the famous dichotomy between *historical enunciation*, a linguistic utterance

characterized by impersonality; and *discursive enunciation*, where the presence of the *I/you* pronouns entails the direct addressal of the spectators. The portrait genre normally obeys this second regime of communication, because the subject portrayed, addressing the spectator with his or her gaze, configures a reversible *I/you* relation.

However, these canons can be tweaked and transgressed in many ways in order to build particular semantic effects. For instance, in the sub-genre of writer portraits, the background is not neutral, but furnished in such a way as to characterize and thematically complete the personality of the figure, usually through the display of books. Stronger variation can be seen in cases where the subject portrayed refuses to meet the viewer with a direct gaze, and may even refuse to show him or herself at all, for example turning his or her back to the camera. Portraiture in painting, especially from the twentieth century onwards, and photographic portraiture abound in cases that destabilize the genre while nevertheless developing on the basis of its rules.

With respect to these characteristics, the identity-related images shared on Rupi Kaur's profile exhibit a variety of declensions of the portrait genre, some of which follow the canonical model, creating more or less successful accomplishments, while others openly transgress its rules in adopting alternative configurations. We can divide the shots into a series of groups, according to their divergence from the ideal type of portraiture.

Figures 3-12. Screenshots of a selection of different portrait types in the production of Rupi Kaur. From left to right: a successful portrait, an imperfect portrait, two atmospheric portraits, two portraits of either discovery or rediscovery, a denied portrait, a portrait fragment, a cropped portrait, a promotional portrait.

A successful portrait (Rupi Kaur, December 23, 2016)
https://www.instagram.com/p/BOVwfKMAk5P/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

An imperfect portrait (Rupi Kaur, December 3, 2013)
https://www.instagram.com/p/hchbzPHA0y/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Two atmospheric portraits (Rupi Kaur, October 4, 2017; December 15, 2017)
https://www.instagram.com/p/BZ1AxIEAFup/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
https://www.instagram.com/p/BctK-sDAUP6/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Two portraits of either discovery or rediscovery (Rupi Kaur, July 4, 2018; July 8, 2018).
https://www.instagram.com/p/Bkyl0jhAlRo/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
https://www.instagram.com/p/Bk85OhSgkYN/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

A denied portrait (Rupi Kaur, June 20, 2018)
https://www.instagram.com/p/BkQuBslg_Ck/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

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A portrait fragment (Rupi Kaur, April 16, 2014)
https://www.instagram.com/p/m3WbDnnA2o/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

A cropped portrait (Rupi Kaur, July 25, 2013)
https://www.instagram.com/p/cLKostHA7a/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

A promotional portrait (Rupi Kaur, May 15, 2015)
https://www.instagram.com/p/2r0ieInAyp/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

We can first of all note the cases of *successful portraits* (Figure 3). These are shots, mostly taken once the celebrity has been acclaimed, which constitute formally perfect portraits: the figure of Kaur is central and compact, occupies the entire image by filling the whole space of representation, and stands out for sharpness and contrast against the background, as she presents her face to the viewer while addressing the latter with her gaze as a *you*.

Other shots, especially from the first period, while following the characteristics we have identified for portraiture as a genre, can be defined as *imperfect portraits*, because despite an adherence to some of the formal rules of the genre, the figure of Kaur fails to impose its presence with adequate intensity. Sometimes, the background invades much space in proportion to the figure of Kaur, who struggles to occupy the center of the representation and therefore to impose her presence and personality (Figure 4). This kind of dynamic is not new, because artists such as Laura Henno and Rineke Dijkstra adopt the same strategies by which the presence in the portrait is thrown into question – by means of backgrounds that diminish the force by which the figure may emerge – in order to build an identity that remains provisional or questioned (Dondero, 2020, p. 57-60). In the case of the first phase of Rupi Kaur's visual production, however, we would be inclined to assign the final effect not to a precise rhetorical will expressed through the image, but rather to inexperience and lack of adequate technical tools.

A further variation is what we might describe as *atmospheric portraits*. In these images, Rupi Kaur does not emerge with intensity against the background, but a sort of fusion between the figure and its environment is achieved. The dialogic gaze between Kaur and the viewer is

modulated through a mediation effect that filters it. This occurs, for example, with the reverberation of the sun in the shot shown in Figure 5, which softens the presence of Kaur and illuminates her facial features, making them less distinguishable. On the other hand, this obstruction gives Kaur an ethereal and solar appearance, through an atmospheric absorption process. The same happens in shots where other elements stand in the way of a clear view, as is the case with the shot in Figure 6, where it is not only the sun that blinds the viewer, but also the smoke evoking a sort of ritual, which partly hides Kaur sitting in meditation, adding a mystical nuance to her appearance and personality.

The following portraits can be defined as *discovery portraits* and *denied portraits*, two types that have been widely explored in art, but which assume a different meaning on social networks. Discovery portraits concern those images that offer obstacles to vision, in the form of veils, doors, niches, or mirrors – in short, any element that partially obstructs vision, allowing, through its overcoming, to generate an effect of visual discovery. To fully understand these cases, it is necessary to take into account the production and observation strategies that are inscribed within the image. The simulacra of the author and of the spectator within the images, in fact, can result in a variety of perceptual and cognitive regimes: contractual, polemic, conciliatory, discordant (Fontanille, 1989). In the two cases of atmospheric portraits mentioned above, where the reverberation of the sun and smoke partially obstruct the view, a regime of *accessibility* is realized, because the production strategy inscribed within the image poses obstacles that can be overcome by the viewer through a precise syntax of vision, allowing for a route of discovery. In Figure 7, on the contrary, the veil that covers Kaur's face generates a regime of *obstruction*, because the strategy of production inscribed within the image poses insurmountable obstacles to observation, making the view incomplete.[3] However, the fact that

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[3] In addition to obstruction and accessibility, visual semiotics has identified two other regimes: *exposure* occurs when the simulacrum of production within the image shows what is represented clearly and unobstructedly to the viewer. Such is the case, for example, with perfect portraits. *Inaccessibility* is the exact opposite, as it is characterized by a complete prohibition

this image is inserted within a series in which the face is progressively revealed (Figure 8) changes its compositional and interpretative value: since it is not a single author's shot, the discovery of identity is serialized over time and inserted within the context of the profile of an already known social figure. For this reason, we can qualify images of this kind as portraits of rediscovery.

Denied portraits, on the other hand, develop another kind of obstruction strategy. The production inscribed within the image is characterized by an explicit will to negate: the subject portrayed openly rejects the gaze of the viewer, turning his or her back to the latter. The viewer, conversely, would like to see, as occurs with Figure 9. The strength of this refusal is once again mitigated by the exposure guaranteed by the other photos presented in the profile, thereby qualifying it as a temporary negation.

Finally, another series of interesting strategies related to the transgression of the ideal type of portraiture characterizes the first phase of Rupi Kaur's visual production: we can define it as *fragmentations and perturbations of the portrait*. These are shots in which the model does not refuse to be seen, but does so only partially. In Figure 10, for example, we only see Kaur's eyes and forehead, because the rest of her face and body is out of frame. In other shots, exactly the opposite happens: it is Kaur's body that is exhibited, while her face is totally out of frame, cut at the height of her nose. This group of shots is interesting for two reasons: on the one hand, it is a significant variation on the ideal type of portraiture, but it does not rely on solutions already explored in art. On the contrary, it employs a set of strategies that specifically characterize images on social networks: as already noted by Manovich (2017, pp. 118-124), together with various types of compositions of objects and first-person shots that show the photographer's feet in front of a scene, these fragmentations and identity cutouts represent a set of specific sub-genres of images on social networks. In the same way, however, we must point

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of vision by the simulacrum of production, whereas in the obstruction regime, as we have already seen, there are only partial prohibitions.

out that these are portrait configurations that then disappeared from Kaur's production, as if they expressed a momentary alignment with the compositional norms in force on social networks, before being abandoned in favor of more personal configurations.

The serialized character of these images must be stressed: portraits on social networks are organized not as a condensation of a personality into a single meaningful and autonomous photo, but as a flow of images that express a temporal and episodic management of it. The proliferation of portraits can therefore be interpreted as an expression of Kaur's provisional personality, which is being defined over the shots, and thus over the months and years of her activity as an influencer and individual. The unsuccessful shots of her debut and the perfect shots of her most recent period represent the extreme phases of a path that must be interpreted in temporal, existential, and rhetorical terms. The management of presence on the public scene is accomplished through the immediacy of performative shots, which affirm the personality in correspondence with all sorts of social occasions. This tendency to manage one's own actions in concert with the multiple appearances of one's identity was unequivocally confirmed during the promotion phase of her first book. To the posts containing the illustrated poems, and the personal ones portraying Rupi Kaur, are added a long hybrid series, in which the influencer appears in more or less studied poses while exposing the paper volume next to or above her body. Some of these shots are more interesting than others, for example, the shot in which Kaur's face is covered by the volume (Figure 12), in a sort of identification and fusion between her physical identity and her poetic identity, but overall they confirm the deep welding between any thematic specialization – in this case poetic – and the visual identity.

2 The *period* case: between compositional and rhetorical dimensions

The typological description we made of the identity shots posted by Rupi Kaur lays the ground for an analysis focused on her most eccentric and complex images. The *period* visual

essay, composed of a series of shots taken by Rupi Kaur for a visual rhetoric course and dedicated to the theme of menstruation, allows us to test our reflection on social network images.

We will focus in particular on the first image of the series (Figure 13), because it is the most interesting from a compositional point of view and because it is the image that made Rupi Kaur's celebrity explode inside and outside of social networks. When consulting her Instagram profile starting from its debut in 2013, one will notice that this is the post that has received by far the largest number of *likes*, with more than 110k to date, whereas few of the previous posts currently stand above 10k. It has also given rise to heated diatribes and extensive coverage by the traditional media, especially the press and television news, contributing decisively to confirming her as a public figure. We will take these social and rhetorical elements into account in the next section. For the moment, we will carry out a compositional analysis of the image, paying attention to all the internal features, both on the expression and content planes.

Figure 13. Screenshot of the first image of the *period* series, dedicated to the theme of menstruation (Rupi Kaur, March 25, 2015) https://www.instagram.com/p/0ovWwJHA6f/

The first question that may arise when looking at this image is whether it really is an identity image or not. Certainly, there is the fact of its having been shared on her personal profile and of its staging a woman who, thanks to the other images already shared on the same profile, we recognize as Rupi Kaur, even without seeing her face, which both qualify the shot as being strongly linked to identity. However, it does not seem to be a portrait or a derivation based on the genre. If it is an identity image, but not a portrait, how can we describe its internal composition, its genre affiliation, and the overall effects of meaning it generates?

We have already seen that one form of deviation from the portrait genre is achieved through a strategy of obstruction: the subject refuses to show his or her face, breaking the *I/you* relationship normally established through the gazing towards the viewer. At first glance, the shot in question seems to lie within this group of obstructed portraits, but some considerable differences direct towards a more complex hypothesis. Turning one's back is in fact a gesture of rejection that nevertheless assumes the presence of a spectator. Here, on the contrary, the gesture of turning one's back seems to take place within an intimate occasion that is completely autonomous: in reference to historical enunciation as defined by Benveniste, this is a scene having the character of an impersonal event, which the spectator attends without being involved in any sort of visual dialogue.

2.1 Verticality and horizontality: the tension between pictorial genres

Another compositional element reinforces the idea that the dialogue with the viewer is not only rejected, but completely suspended: normally, the format preferred in the portrait genre is a vertical one, because it is the most suitable to accommodate the identity of the individual in an upright position, and thus to facilitate a symmetry between the verticality of the subject showed in the image and the viewer observing the portrait (Beyaert-Geslin, 2017, pp. 34-36). Conversely, the image shown in Figure 13 presents a horizontal format, which opens up a

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panoramic view, breaking the symmetry between the viewer's gaze and the subject in the image. To fully understand this opposition between vertical and horizontal formats and to analyze the particular solution developed by Rupi Kaur, it is necessary to refer to the process of historical and formal autonomization of classical pictorial genres.

In his fundamental work *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight Into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (1997), art historian Victor Stoichita described the process of emergence of modern genres in painting (portrait, landscape, and still life) as the result of a progressive autonomization from religious painting. As summed up by Maria Giulia Dondero (2020, pp. 85-87), what was relegated to the margins of the religious image became, through a process of centralization and autonomization, the heart of the representations seen in modern pictorial genres. An important role in this process has been played by the so-called *metapictorial devices*, elements within the representation capable of orienting, focusing, and duplicating the process by which it is viewed. They include objects such as doors, mirrors, paintings, niches, veils – i.e. all the devices which, by modulating the internal composition of the image, impact the modes by which it is viewed, producing peculiar syntaxes of the gaze, specific to the language of images.[4]

With respect to the present case, the process of emergence of the pictorial genres is of particular interest to us because of its impact on image formats. In fact, the genre that has most benefited from the panoramic horizontal format is the landscape genre, which has progressively become autonomous from religious painting, bringing to the forefront views which were

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[4] Contrary to what is often stated within visual studies, visual semiotics has long since abandoned the verbocentric perspective of Roland Barthes' semiology (1961), according to which the only way to study images is through verbal translation, in accordance with a general translinguistic approach. The indicative date of this turning point is 1984, the year in which the essay by Algirdas J. Greimas, leader of the generative approach, *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1989), was published in french. Taking for reference this reductionist idea of semiology, Hans Belting, in his seminal work, states for example that "in semiotic discourse even pictures often seem to be reduced to iconic signs, a symmetry between linguistic and visual signs (as well as the primacy of language as the guiding system) being elementary for semiotics. Such a functionalist approach was soon imposed on the concept of image" (Belting, 2011, p. 11). We hope to have demonstrated in our compositional analysis that visual semiotics goes in exactly the opposite direction.

previously relegated to the latter's margins, and in particular beyond the windows depicted, which opened onto external scenes. In contrast to this, the portrait genre has become autonomous through the utilization of mirrors by painters portraying their own selves. It is precisely in the tension between these two generic forms that it is possible to understand and analyze the particularity of Rupi Kaur's shot. Concerning its likeness to portraiture, we have seen that there are some compatible compositional configurations and others that differ completely. The image certainly stages a single person, without other elements that disturb the figure, which moreover stands out against a relatively free and rather uncharacterized background. The woman portrayed, however, does not offer her gaze to the viewer, nor does she refuse to offer it, placing herself in a neutral manner with respect to the spectator's presence while allowing a moment of intimacy to be seen. There is an absence of action, as prescribed by the canons of portraiture, but the theme of menstruation entails an intimate moment that is characterized by a temporal development that dissipates the pureness of the subject's pose.

Concerning the links between this image and the landscape genre, its horizontal panoramic format is compatible with the landscape model and so is its staging of a wide space in which the syntax of the gaze develops as an erratic path rather than in accordance with a centripetal concentration upon a subject's face. In the classical landscape genre, however, the view of the exterior scene develops in accordance with the canons of perspective: the gaze penetrates the image, caught by the depth of field and by the vanishing point. Here, on the contrary, the field is almost immediately blocked by the white wall behind the woman, a device which operates in an opposite manner to the window: the window opens onto the distance and confers depth to the image, whereas the wall selects a portion of space close to the viewer. The resulting syntax of the gaze is very peculiar: the panoramic format allows the gaze to wander along the width, but the absence of depth of field prevents penetration into the depth of the

image. The vision remains blocked on the surface of the representation, wandering horizontally, before being pushed towards the foreground.

This opposition between landscapes and portraiture is not accidental because, as Anne Beyaert-Geslin pointed out (2017, pp. 30-34), these two genres arose in strong opposition to one another, precisely with respect to the characteristics that we have listed: depth of field vs. foreground; human subject vs. natural landscape; vertical vs. horizontal format; *I/you* dialogue vs. historical scene; concentration on the face vs. depth of field. However, with reference to 20th century painting and contemporary artistic photography, Beyaert-Geslin also explains that this opposition must be reconceptualized as a negotiable tension, capable of articulating the two genres into intermediate compositional solutions (2017, pp. 49-59). For example, in Laura Henno's portrait *Il deserto rosso*, the horizontal format makes it possible to construct an unresolved tension between the figure of the teenager portrayed and the background. The dark, natural landscape, not perfectly in focus, reinforces the indecision expressed by the pose and the character of the figure, building a dialectical unity that exploits the unresolved energy inside the image.

In Kaur's shot, the tension between the landscape model and that of portraiture is developed in an equally peculiar way. The characteristics that can be traced back to portraiture – the staging of an intimate and personal scene, the focus on a precise individual, even if the gaze is virtualized in an action of self-recollection – establish an articulation with the elements belonging to the landscape genre: both the horizontality of the panoramic format and the scenery are not natural. The result is something that we could define as an *intimate landscape* and, more precisely, and in light of the event shown and of the theme covered, a *gendered intimate landscape*.

With respect to this generic qualification, however, it is necessary to take into account the way in which the theme of menstruation is presented through the expressive resources of

the image. This theme is certainly manifested through the title *period*, but the picture presents it in an intimate and unequivocal way. The shot captures the woman from behind, her pants marked with a bloodstain. Another stain, closer to the viewer, stands out in the foreground. These two stains, together with the position of the body assumed by the woman, express a temporal development, because the woman presumably changed position after having stained the sheets. In addition, the local temporality expressed by the shot in reference to the woman's narrative movement must be situated within another type of temporality, the temporality of the female body, evoked in a more abstract way by the staging of menstruation. It is a natural and human time: the cyclical time of biological renewal, necessary for the perpetuation of human life.

This theme receives a peculiar development in light of the visual configuration we have previously detected: in the background, the wall not only blocks the view, but forms with the bed placed perpendicularly a sort of focus of attention, a sort of niche that encloses and frames the woman lying on the bed. These elements – the niche on the plane of expression and the theme of the cyclicality of life on the plane of content – characterize another classic genre: the still life genre. In still life painting, the niche frames common objects, such as fruit, glasses, mirrors, and sometimes skulls, which seem to invade the space beyond the picture: they seem to fall towards the viewer, and in doing so, they remind of the finiteness of life. The objects visually reaffirm the *memento mori*: the fact that, just like the perishable objects represented in the image will turn to dust, so will all living beings, including humans, among whom the viewer. As convincingly demonstrated by Maria Giulia Dondero (2020, p. 82-83), this reminder is not addressed to a single subject, as is the case with the portrait, in which an *I/you* dialogical relationship is established through the gaze, but to a collective viewer. The *memento mori* is addressed, through the falling objects, to the viewer taken as belonging to the human race: the still life does not address a singular *you*, but a collective totality, the plural *you* of humanity.

In the image of Rupi Kaur, something similar happens, although it doesn't show perishable objects, but a living body, and more precisely a female body, caught in a moment that expresses an unpleasant but necessary moment in the cycle of life. No object falls towards the spectator's space, but the bloodstain, being placed in the foreground, plays the same role: a role of spatial and thematic invasion. Besides being the element which is the closest to the spectator, it is also an element that stands out on a chromatic level: the bright red stands out in comparison to the rest of the composition, which is characterized by cold tones and by an anonymous white. The stain also contrasts with the rest of the image for its thematic and spatial concentration: it occupies a small portion of the image, characterized by a strong chromatic and thematic density.

We may summarize the dynamics pertaining to the stain by considering the following opposition on the plane of expression: /centrality/ vs. /periphery/; /intensity/ vs. /extension/; /warm colors/ vs. /cold colors/. By assuming the first value of each these categorial oppositions, the stain gains a particular preeminence, acquiring the role of a figurative, plastic, and thematic center of the whole composition. Reminding the viewer and humanity of the source of life in its cyclicality and presenting it for its unpleasant appearance and usually hidden suffering, Kaur's photo is a sort of inversion of the still life genre: rather than using a visually attractive object to express a tension towards a negative events – death – a body is here caught in an unattractive and indeed suffering moment, in order to express a tension with one of the most fundamental human dynamics, the cyclical renewal of life. We could therefore define this image as a *gendered intimate landscape*, which stages the cyclical phase of suffering necessary for the renewal of the species: the conditions for a *humanity which may be reborn.*[5]

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[5] In its French and Italian versions, the name of this genre is *nature morte*, *natura morta*, literally translatable as "dead nature." In contrast, the overall meaning expressed by Kaur's image could be defined as the conditions for a *living humanity.*

3 The rhetorical dimension: persuasion acts within, through, and towards images

The compositional dimension we have analyzed so far, however, is not sufficient to exhaust the overall meaning of this photograph or the mechanisms that characterize its persuasive force. It is necessary to take into account the rhetorical dimension[6] and to evaluate the way in which identities participate in the signification within, through, and around the image.

With regard to the *rhetorical dimension expressed by the image*, it is first of all necessary to examine the ways in which the identity of the woman and therefore of Rupi Kaur is staged. To begin with, the theme of menstruation, exposed in a moment of suffering, is immediately recognized by any kind of spectator, but is presumably assumed in a more personal way by menstrually experienced female spectators, who can identify themselves with this intimate scene, as it also characterizes their lived experience. This consideration also gives a new rhetorical meaning to the gesture of turning one's back. Rather than being a gesture of rejection, it can be understood as a gesture of depersonalization: Rupi Kaur renounces showing her face and making her person recognizable in favor of the recognition of a more general class, that of menstrually experienced women, caught in an intimate, painful, and natural moment. A process of identity virtualization, in this case the identity of Rupi Kaur, is implemented in favor of a process of universalization and generalization of identity, whose purpose is to offer a precise woman's figure, but depersonalized to the point of being able to embody an entire social and biological group: it is the suffering body of Rupi Kaur during the cycle, but it is also the suffering body of any, and therefore of all menstrually experienced persons.

This first rhetorical level – the rhetoric expressed by the image – obviously overlaps with the compositional dimension we have described so far, because the visual configurations inside the image affect both the way the image means and the way the image communicates. The same cannot be said of the subsequent rhetorical levels, which require us to describe the public

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[6] As regards the rhetorical approach within the semiotic paradigm, see Groupe μ (1992), Bordron (2010), and the recent publication by Badir & Dondero (2016) entirely dedicated to the forms of negation expressed through the language of images.

circulation of this picture. Created for a visual rhetoric course, the image was then shared by Rupi Kaur on Instagram, where it was not only censored twice by the algorithm, but also received hate comments from many users, presumably male. The rhetorical power of the image thus reveals another implicit effect: that of selecting public responses on the basis of belonging to certain rhetorical, ideological, and even biological communities. On the one hand, the supporting comments of the feminist and female communities, as well as of the more progressive groups; on the other hand, the explicit comments of haters; in between, the automatic behavior of the algorithms that censored the image. We could qualify this rhetorical level as a *rhetoric towards images*, because it concerns interpretative and language acts made to comment, censor, or support images.

A further level of rhetoric concerns the *acts performed through images*. This is precisely the type of act carried out by Rupi Kaur following the double censorship imposed by Instagram. The influencer reposted the image on Facebook, accompanied by a long verbal commentary, in which she protested against the algorithmic decision.[7] The arguments utilized where mainly two: on the one hand, the images do not contradict at all the terms of use of the social network, because they do not expose explicit nudity, nor violent acts; on the other hand, Kaur claims that Instagram censored the exact values that this image was criticizing: the algorithm admits the wide sharing and circulation of young girls in intimate clothes, while it considers worthy of censorship the staging of a completely natural process that affects a sizable proportion of women. We can frame Kaur's reposting of the image, accompanied by a verbal defense, as a rhetorical gesture of reaffirmation of values: on the one hand, there are the values expressed within the image, that we have analyzed while addressing the compositional dimension; on the other hand, there is the gesture, external to the image, of reaffirming it, of making the image

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[7] https://www.instagram.com/p/0ovWwJHA6f/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link, accessed on August 21, 2020.

present again within a public space – this being, precisely, a rhetorical gesture accomplished through images.

The rhetorical force expressed by this gesture has allowed Kaur to gain increasing popularity and support from online communities, as well as attention from traditional media broadcasts, which have extensively covered this case. As a result of this strong support, Instagram was led to review its decision: the image was put back online, accompanied by a message explaining to the influencer that it had been censored by mistake. Whether it was an error or a "voluntary" act, the behavior of the algorithm allows us to identify another important mechanism pertaining to social interaction on social networks: although being entities that automatically perform actions and which should therefore be limited to a technical role, the algorithms in this case assumed an overtly ideological behavior, choosing which images may be considered admissible on the public scene, and which are to be considered inadmissible, based on the implicit values expressed by their actions. For this reason, algorithms must be considered as proper social actors for the way they perform rhetorical and even ideological actions, in the same way as do humans, communities, and institutions.

3.1 The rhetoric of visual identity: a framework for social networks

In light of the analysis of Rupi Kaur's profile, it is possible to isolate two major trends that impact the formation and the management of identity on social networks: on the one hand, we have observed a sort of experiential regression in the interactions due to the abundance of simple images which are often adherent to lived experience, as in the case with selfie and identity images, as well as in the acts of *liking*, *following*, and *sharing*, which are the aims of the competitive practices pursued by influencers.

On the other hand, an outsourced management of identity behavior emerges, as it is increasingly delegated to algorithms. This is the way Facebook recommends us circles of

friends based on the ones we already have, or how Netflix offers us personalized audiovisual palimpsests based on our previous viewings and preferences, and even the way how, modelling our aesthetic dispositions and preferences expressed by the faces we liked in the past, Tinder and Grindr present us the profiles of potential partners (Finn, 2017). This management builds a new rhetorical perimeter of values, as exemplified by the case of the identity-related images of Rupi Kaur that have been shared and appreciated by users – and censored by Instagram's algorithms.

Our hypothesis is that images on social networks always express a negotiation strategy for dealing with these two pressures, even when it results in an ineffective solution which lets itself be pulled towards one pole or the other. In order to fully understand this dynamic pertaining to identity and to elaborate a theoretical framework capable of framing the fundamental dimensions of identity-related images on social networks, we may propose a reinterpretation of Paul Ricœur's theory of identity, exhibited in the now classic volume *Oneself as Another* (1992 [1990]). According to Ricœur, identity is made up of two interrelated poles, which form a dynamic unity. On the one hand, we have *identity-idem* as the permanence of human traits such as dispositions, habits, and more generally what is related to the permanence of character and body. In this work, Ricœur refers to character as "the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 119) and as "[designating] the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 121). The habits and dispositions of one's character, for example, are described in terms of "a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 121). In short, the definition of character and *identity-idem* tends to qualify the features of identity linked to permanence, even if they are the result of changes due to habits assumed over time. Becoming static, a habit of this kind must be understood as a trait: "a character trait, a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized,

reidentified as the same – character being nothing other than the set of these distinctive signs" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 121).

On the other hand, the *identity-ipse* is conceived of as the maintenance of the self in the long run, resulting from a management of behavior: "the selfhood of the self [implies] a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 118). It is formed through the choice of heroic role models, values, and ethical principles to which one remains faithful over time: a practical and ethical orientation resulting from the evaluative choices about one's own identity. It is therefore possible to distinguish the fundamental difference, together with the necessary articulation, between the tendency towards the permanence of the *identity-idem*, and the tendency towards innovation and self-preservation of the *identity-ipse*: in the choice of ethical principles, values, and heroic figures, "an element of loyalty is thus incorporated into character and makes it turn toward fidelity, hence toward maintaining the self" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 121). This innovative tendency of the *identity-ipse* will then be sedimented and internalized "in such a way that the person is recognized in these dispositions, which may be called evaluative" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 122). The *identity-ipse*, in short, is not linked to permanence of character, but to fidelity to the given word. The example of the promise allows Ricœur to further specify this second axis of identity: "even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, 'I will hold firm'" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 124). In other words, it is the "properly ethical justification of the promise" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 124) that exemplifies the fidelity to the given word, to the figures chosen as guides, to the durable values elected for the self.

Between these two poles of identity, especially as a consequence of the intrinsically temporal character of life, there is a persistent "*interval of sense*" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 124) that must be filled to build a durable identity. In order to manage these two polarities and constitute an identity that can resist throughout a lifetime, it is necessary, according to Ricœur, to build

an identity narration capable of linking them. The narrative intelligence of a story would be able to constitute a revisable and accident-proof identity unit, harmonizing the two poles through successive revisions – the permanence and resistance of the *identity-idem*, the fidelity to the given word and the variation of the *identity-ipse*. The meaning of the narrative unity of a life, in fact, "must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 162). According to Ricœur, the models of literary fiction are the most suitable to provide a repertoire of solutions to manage the complex tension between the two poles of identity, as they constitute a vast reflexive laboratory for "the *application* of fiction to life" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 161). It is through an imaginative and narrative appropriation that the course of a life, with all its accidents and choices, can be built into a meaningful form and hold up in the long run. This complex theory, which we present here in its essential characteristics, is summarized in the Table 1:
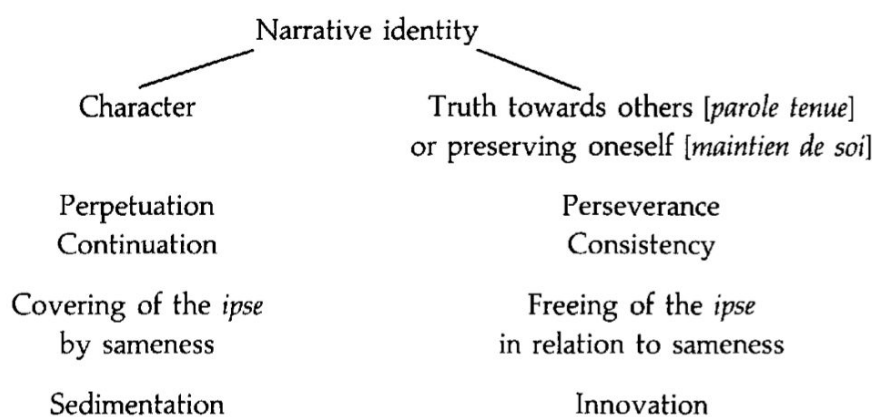
	Narrative identity	
Character		Truth towards others [*parole tenue*] or preserving oneself [*maintien de soi*]
Perpetuation Continuation		Perseverance Consistency
Covering of the *ipse* by sameness		Freeing of the *ipse* in relation to sameness
Sedimentation		Innovation

Table 1. A schematization of Ricœur's theory of identity (Floch, 2000, p. 32).

The structure of the narrative identity elaborated by Ricœur's theory seems of great value for our purpose here, but a series of adaptations must be made in view of its application to the sphere of social networks. First of all, it is possible to place the experiential regression due to

the diffusion of simple acts such as *likes*, *follow,* and *share*, as well as images adhering to experience and to the body, in the sphere of influence of *identity-idem*. These acts are linked to our disposition, to what we consider to be our character traits as sedimented over time. On the contrary, the modelling of user behavior by algorithms, and the resulting recommendations, concern a delegation of the *identity-ipse* – the maintenance of identity over time and the fidelity to oneself – to an algorithmic "intelligence." Analyzing our behavior and preferences, the algorithms model them and program a set of parameters for future propositions, on the assumption of a compatibility of preferences and of an overall continuity of practices.

In accordance with Ricœur's theory, we think that, in order to manage the tension between these two pressures – experiential and algorithmic – it is necessary to build an identity narration capable of mediating and harmonizing them in a suitable and durable form. However, the models of this narrative mediation are necessarily different from those described by Ricœur. They are no longer literary models, because the proliferation of photos on social media requires us to take into account the specificities of the language of images, their figurative and plastic devices, and their narrative structures, which replace the imaginative laboratory of literature. According to this framework, identity narrations are often expressed through simple images or performances in the case of videos, in which the *identity-idem* is exhibited according to solutions that can structure it temporally. As we have seen with the visual production of Rupi Kaur, it is through the portrait genre, explored as a serialized management of daily life, as well as through a set of canonical deviations, that it is possible to identify the ways in which the *identity-idem* and *identity-ipse* need to be narratively harmonized. In short, it is only by fully understanding the plastic, figurative, and generic characteristics of the identity-related images that we may understand the narrative pressure to which identity is subjected on social networks.

	Identity-idem	Identity-ipse
Identity on social media	The experiential pressure expressed by *like*, *follow*, *share* acts, as well as the diffusion of body and face-related images (selfies, subjective shots, direct feed videos)	The modelling of identity accomplished by algorithms and condensed into dynamic profiles of behavior; the delegation of the process of preserving oneself to an algorithmic "intelligence"
	Identity narration: new forms of visual narration, which adopt, deviate, betray, and serialize the canons of portraiture and other identity-related genres (*face reveals*, *reaction videos*, etc.)	

Table 2. Our reinterpretation of Ricœur's identity theory

The mediation between *identity-idem* and *identity-ipse* is often skewed towards one of the two poles, sometimes through a reduction of identity to a simple serial exhibition of one's own face and body, or sometimes even to a partial and stereotyped version of one's own character, i.e. a limited part of the *identity-idem*. The case of Rupi Kaur is emblematic of this difficult critical gesture, because she expresses, through her overall activity since 2013, multiple attempts to constitute an effective mediation between *identity-idem* and *ipse*, carried out through a progressive refinement of the models of appropriation. In the images shared in 2013, these models were random canons of visual "storytelling" (failed portraits, images of her pictorial activity). Immediately afterwards, she borrowed some of the techniques most widely used on social networks (portrait fragments, faceless portraits), before adopting more elaborate canons. In the most balanced forms of visual narration, the presentation of the *identity-idem* seeks a thematic correspondence with the values embodied by her behavioral activity, her *identity-ipse* (portraits filtered by atmospheric light or the smoke of a ritual), or professional canons (successful portraits, promotional photos).

Finally, in the *period* case, Kaur assumes an external and reflexive point of view with respect to her own images, choosing to virtualize her physical presence by not showing her face, so as to rhetorically embody a sizable proportion of women. By distancing herself from her *identity-idem* in order to visually embody an *identity-ipse* with a strong ethical connotation,

Kaur provides a model with which other persons could physically and morally identify: the suspension of the *identity-idem* of her physiognomy and of her character is accomplished in favor of the fidelity to her word, to the values expressed by her person and by her actions, *using the exclusive resources of visual language*. This case demonstrates that it takes a reflexive effort of appropriation to accomplish a successful identity narration, one able to frame the "visual" self as the self of another, and to use one's own set of identity-related images as an archive to be exploited in a critical way. In short, identity narration should result from a critical gesture on one's one visual archive, a gesture capable of harmonizing the physical presence of the body over time, the choice emanating from an ethical orientation.

The gesture following the censorship is also a gesture of appropriation, and more precisely of re-appropriation, as Kaur reaffirms her *identity-ipse* through a reflexive operation on her own visual narrations. By opposing herself to the action of the algorithms, she also protests against their role as guardians of a sometimes distorted and non-innovative canon of self-preservation. In this way, Kaur reaffirms through a reflexive gesture the values of her existential, physical, and ethical identity.

Conclusion

In this article, we proposed an epistemological model for the study of identity-related images on social networks in order to respond to the new challenges posed by the massive production of visual documents by all social actors. With respect to the compositional dimension, which concerns the specificity of the language of the image – its figures and themes, its plastic dimension (shapes, colors, spaces), its metavisual configurations, and genre canons – we proposed to integrate a rhetorical dimension articulated on three levels: the rhetoric expressed within the image, the rhetoric accomplished through the image, and the rhetoric

exercised towards images. In this way, we have outlined a semio-rhetorical approach able to account for both the specificity of the language of images and their public circulation.

The analysis of the profile of an influencer, Rupi Kaur, allowed us to translate the theoretical assumptions into an operational methodology: first of all, we built a typology of images shared over time, identifying the most recurrent thematic sets and visual configurations. We then studied how images shared over time constitute a trajectory of which the flow reveals afterthoughts, evolutions, and progressions in the management of the public presence of the self. Within the flow of images, we have therefore identified, thanks to the comparison with the canons of the portrait genre, a precise evolutionary sequence in the management of Rupi Kaur's identity. We then proceeded to the analysis of a particular case, a photo of the *period* series, showing how it filters the identity of the figure portrayed according to an ethical assumption, thanks to an original visual narration.

The analysis of this case has led us to propose a general schematization for identity management on social networks: identity images always express a negotiation between an experiential pressure – expressed by the massive diffusion of images related to the body as well as by instinctive acts such as *like*, *follow*, *share* – and an algorithmic pressure embodied by the way in which social network software becomes the guardian of the maintenance of our long-term behavioral identity. The narrative negotiation between these two trends can be more or less successful, more or less personal: the case of Rupi Kaur displayed a reflexive and critical way in which to realize narrative appropriations of one's own images: narrations capable of harmonizing one's own physiognomic and existential identity with one's own ethical orientation.

Other narrative solutions, realized with the aid of other semiotic and visual rhetoric tools, are certainly possible – solutions that can critically exploit the ways of irony, paradox, ellipse, or negation. The challenge for those image sciences that aspire to understand the implications

of visual languages in the digital age is to identify these strategies and analyze their structure

and impact with respect to the multiple domains that articulate social life.

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