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# Intermediality and Immersion in Gaudenzio Ferrari's "Adoration of the Magi" in Chapel V of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo

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**Abstract**

Questo studio propone che l'intermedialità nell'arte rinascimentale ha un forte impatto sia sullo spazio estetico che sull'attenzione, la memoria e l'immaginazione dell'osservatore. Nel fare ciò, il saggio si concentra sulla visione dell'*Adorazione dei Magi* che Gaudenzio Ferrari realizzò nella Cappella V del Sacro Monte di Varallo. Come suggerito nel manuale *Zardino de Oration*, che sottolinea la relazione tra la mente dell'osservatore e le storie percepite, il dialogo tra le arti che convergono nell'immagine di Gaudenzio ha uno scopo specifico, vale a dire, facilitare l'immersione nella scena osservata. L'impatto dell'intermedialità sull'osservatore è accentuato dalla verosimiglianza sia delle figure statuarie che di quelle dipinte. Come suggerisce l'evidenza empirica, alcuni tipi di risposte (ad esempio sorpresa, approccio o distacco) sembrano essere coinvolte durante la contemplazione di spazi estetici simili, a seconda di dove gli spettatori focalizzano la loro attenzione, attivando specifiche reti neurali nel cervello degli osservatori. Inoltre, l'intermedialità sembra guidare alti livelli di attenzione visiva; di conseguenza, ciò che è depositato nella memoria è maggiore per le esperienze di intermedialità che per le tipiche esperienze estetiche, confermando così le affermazioni sulla memoria contenute nel *Zardino de Oration*.

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This study proposes that intermediality in Renaissance art makes a strong impact on both the aesthetic space and the beholder's attention, memory, and imagination. It does so by focusing on the vision of the *Adoration of the Magi* that Gaudenzio Ferrari realised in Chapel V of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo. As suggested in the handbook *Garden of Prayer*, which stresses the relation between the beholder's mind and the stories perceived, the dialogue among the arts converging in Gaudenzio's image serves a specific purpose, namely, to facilitate immersion in the scene observed. The impact of intermediality on the observer is enhanced by the verisimilitude of both the statuary and painted figures. As empirical evidence suggests, certain types of responses (e.g., surprise, approach, or withdrawal) seem to be involved during the contemplation of similar aesthetic spaces, depending on where the viewers focus their attention, activating specific neural networks in the observers' brain. Furthermore, intermediality seems to drive high levels of visual

attention; consequently, what is stored in the memory is greater for experiences of intermediality than for typical aesthetic experiences, thus confirming the statements on memory contained in the *Garden of Prayer*.

**Keywords**: aesthetic response; imagination; immersion; intermediality; memory; visual attention.

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## 1. Introduction

The Sacred Mountain of Varallo, located in Piedmont, consists of a basilica and forty-four frescoed chapels enriched by about eight-hundred life-size statues, in polychrome terracotta or wood.[1] It was conceived in 1481 by the Friar Minor Bernardino Caimi with the intention of replicating the sites of the Holy Land that he had visited. Once the papal permission for building this sanctuary was obtained, in 1486, a long and intense period of activity followed until 1610.

Some of the most distinguished artists of the region participated in the work, beginning with Gaudenzio Ferrari (1475/1480-1546), who contributed to different branches of the arts deployed there – painting, sculpture, and architecture.[2] The main purpose of the entire plan was to immerse the pilgrim in the various episodes of the life of Christ, following the instructions of contemporary books, like the handbook *Zardino de Oration* (*Garden of Prayer*), written by Niccolò da Osimo in 1454 and printed in Venice in 1494.[3] Gaudenzio fulfilled this goal by applying an intermedia approach to image making, thus becoming one of the first artists in the early modern period to undertake this artistic method, so original and effective in terms of the viewer's contemplation. Thus, the instructions of Niccolò da Osimo were accomplished: to reinforce the relation between the beholder's mind and the stories observed. In this regard, in the *Garden of Prayer* we read:

> The better to impress the story of the Passion on your mind, and to memorise each action of it more easily, it is helpful and necessary to fix the places and people in your mind: a city, for example, which will be the city of Jerusalem – taking for this purpose a city that is well known to you. In this city find the principal places in which all the episodes of the Passion would have taken place – for instance, a place with the supper-room where Christ had the Last Supper with the Disciples... and other like places.[4]

Clearly, this transformation of the traditional image introduced by Gaudenzio in some of these chapels has a specific purpose, that is, to establish an empathic relationship

1. For more on the Sacred Mountain of Varallo, see the recent catalogue Agosti and Stoppa (2018), where further and recent bibliographical references can be found. Also see the classical texts like Freedberg (1989, pp. 192-201); Hood (1984, pp. 291-311); Bianconi, Colombo, Lozito and Zanzi (1981); Testori (1965); Bernardi (1960); Galloni (1909); and Fassola (1671). For an overview of this and other *sacri monti*, see, among others, Wittkower (1978); Langè (1967); and Butler (1882).
2. The frescoes are attributed to Gaudenzio since Fassola (1671, p. 86). For Gaudenzio as author of the sculptures, see Arienta (1899). For Gaudenzio as architect of the chapel V, see Galloni (1914, pp. 130-132).
3. Niccolò da Osimo (1494).
4. Baxandall (1988, p. 163): "La quale historia acio che tu meglio la possi imprimere nella mente, e piu facilmente ogni acto de essa ti si reducha alla memoria ti sera utile e bisogno che ti fermi ne la mente lochi e persone. Come una citade, laquale sia la citade de Hierusalem, pigliando una citade laquale ti sia bene praticha. Nella quale citade tu trovi li lochi principali neliquali forono exercitati tutti li acti dela passione: come e uno palacio nelquale sia el cenaculo dove Christo fece la cena con li discipuli... e altri simili lochi." Translated in *Ibid.*, p. 46.

between the beholder and the episodes narrating the life of Christ. In this sense, as the aforementioned passage indicates, the chapel serves as a point of reference for the observer, who must imagine him/herself, during religious meditation, in the city of Jerusalem at the time of the occurrence of the events narrated. This emphasises the importance of introducing a type of sculpture characterised by a high level of verisimilitude, which may help the pilgrims to fix the stories in their minds. In this sense, the text of the handbook goes on to say:

> And then too you must shape in your mind some people, people well-known to you, to represent for you the people involved in the Passion – the person of Jesus Himself, of the Virgin, Saint Peter, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Mary Magdalen... and the others, every one of whom you will fashion in your mind. When you have done all this, putting all your imagination into it, then go into your chamber. Alone and solitary, excluding every external thought from your mind, start thinking of the beginning of the Passion, starting with how Jesus entered Jerusalem on the ass. Moving slowly from episode to episode, meditate on each one, dwelling on each single stage and step of the story. And if at any point you fell a sensation of piety, stop: do not pass on as long as that sweet and devout sentiment lasts.[5]

These passages explain the kind of activity involved during and after the contemplation of images like those represented in the forty-four chapels of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo, where the intimate atmosphere recommended in the handbook has been expanded to the public level. Impression, memory, and imagination are three keywords that express the need for internal representations during the prayer recitation.[6] This system of chapels was built precisely to fulfill this purpose, that is, to impress, shape and memorise each christological episode in the minds of the faithful. The instruction of the handbook to the faithful is to exclude any extraneous thought from their minds during the process of spiritual meditation, bespeaking the need of immersion in the contemplated scene. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that, as we read at the end of the second passage, the stories constructed to help the devotees imagine themselves

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164: "Anchora e dibisogno che ti formi nela mente alcune persone, le quale tu habbi pratiche e note, le quale tute representino quelle persone che principalmente intervenero de essa passione: come e la persona de Misser Iesu, della nostra Madonna, Sancto Pietro, Sancto Ioanne Evangelista, Sancta Maria Magdalena... e altri simili, liquali tutti formarai nella mente. Cosi adunque havendo formate tutte queste cose nela mente, si che quivi sia posta tutta la fantasia, e entrarai nel cubiculo tuo e sola e solitaria discaciando ogni altro pensiero exteriore. Incominciarai a pensare il principio de essa passione. Incominciando come esso Misser Iesu vene in Ierusalem sopra lasino. E morosamente tu transcorrendo ogni acto pensarai faciando dimora sopra ogni acto e passo, e se tu sentirai alcuna divotione in alcuno passo ivi ti ferma: e non passare piu oltra fino che dura quella dolcecia e divotione." Translated in *Ibid.*, p. 46.

6. The allusion to the need of imagination during religious meditation is evident in the following excerpts from the above quoted passage: "...you must shape in your mind..." and "alone and solitary... start thinking...". In this sense, imagination and memory are related, inasmuch as without memory it would be impossible for the devotee to imagine the episodes of the life of Christ during the solitary meditation.

in the city of Jerusalem must evoke sensations and sentiments. All these instructions pose a problem for the artists, namely, to involve the pilgrim both emotionally and spiritually, the solution of which will be analysed in detail in the following sections.

## 2. Intermediality in Chapel V of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo

In the first chapels of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo, Gaudenzio introduced an approach to image making that we may call "intermediality," which had such an impact that it was maintained over the following decades by the artists called to complete the remaining chapels.[7] In the three-dimensional depiction of the *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 1), realised between circa 1521 and 1525, the relation among the three arts – painting, polychrome sculpture, and architecture – leads to a transgression of the usual boundaries between the walls and the beholder's aesthetic space, creating a sort of an augmented painting. The scene illustrates the arrival of the Magi, the main characters (and therefore fully 3-dimensional), followed by a large procession of secondary characters (and therefore painted), which head towards the cave of the child Jesus. The impact of this practice on the viewer is enhanced by the verisimilitude of both the statues and the painted figures, as also testified by the writings of the time. Indeed, this scene is described for the first time in Francesco Sesalli's guide (1566) with the following words:

> How they went to worship Christ, | You will see the well-sculpted Holy Magi, | Shaped by such rare manners, | That their appearances have signs of life, | Nor can they be fully praised. | Other horses among the jumble of people | they are of excellent art, and a Moor servant.[8]

Distilled in this passage is what distinguishes this representation, that is, a level of artistry and craftsmanship that produces an astonishing grade of vividness. In this sense, the allusion to animism is clear in Sesalli's phrase that attributes life to these sculptures: "their appearances have signs of life."[9] Intermediality and the lifelike quality of paintings and sculptures combine to create an aesthetic space where the boundaries between art and life is extremely minimized. This not only drives the pilgrims to immerse themselves in religious contemplation, but also makes them imagine themselves as actually being in the Holy Land, in this case in Bethlehem. They must imagine themselves as contemporary witnesses of the events in which Christ was involved, as reliving and experiencing his very emotions, as well as those felt by the people around him. This ambience was created for this specific purpose, and both the founder and the artist fully achieved it.

7. For the fortune of Gaudenzio in Varallo, see Filippis (2006, p. 80).

8. Sesalli (1566): "Come andorono Christo ad adorare, | Ben scolpiti vedrai i Magi santi, | Formati di maniere così rare, | C'hanno inditio di vita i lor sembianti, | Né si possono a pien questi lodare. | Altri cavalli tra la turba loro | Vi son d'eccellente arte, e un servo moro." Unless noted otherwise, subsequent translations are my own.

9. *Ibid.*: "C'hanno inditio di vita i lor sembianti."

Fig. 1 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1521-1525, polychrome clay statues and frescos, Chapel V, Sacred Mountain of Varallo.

The perception of living presence, mentioned by Sesalli, is mainly due to the polychrome sculptures, which seem to merge with the paintings of the background and side walls. It is here, indeed, that the dialogue between and among the three media (hence, inter-media-lity) begins; more precisely, in the horse on the left hand side that does not fully emerge from the wall (Fig. 2); in the rocks of the floor that continue into the painting (Fig. 3); and in the figure of the knight with the red beard and hair, painted in the center of the back wall, which today appears dressed in white but, originally, wore metal armor, so as to dominate the viewer's space (Fig. 4).[10] The dialogue between painting and sculpture is echoed by two other figures, one painted and the other carved (Fig. 5). The first seems to react to the progress of the second, the king who carries incense as a gift in a glass and, with a gesture of reverence, heads for a cave open in the mountain wall to pay tribute to the newborn child. In essence, different art forms invade each other: the painting invades the sculpture, inasmuch as each statue is painted with colours similar to those employed in the mural paintings; the sculpture, in turn, intrudes upon the rudimentary architectural space, proper to the visitor, and, together with the architecture, penetrates the wall, the usual space of painting.

This image, both observed in detail and as a whole, plays a critical role in inducing the receptive mind to a pious or aesthetic response. It is the realism of the figures and the setting, together with the intermediality of the image, that channel the attention of the beholder and activate an empathic engagement between the viewer and the observed scene(s). In this sense, the next section will focus on the process of immersion, by exploring the biological underpinning of the empathic response.

10. For more on the figure of the knight, see Filippis (2006, p. 324); and Arienta (1899).

Fig. 2 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the horse.

Fig. 3 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the rocks.

Fig. 4 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the knight with red beard and hair.

## 3. Naturalism and Immersion

As previously stated, the intermediality of Gaudenzio's representation contributes substantially to the impressive verisimilitude of the scenes, particularly the sculpted ones. In this regard, the painter and historiographer Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538-1592), in *The Ideal Temple of Painting* (1590), comments on the striking system of images realised by Gaudenzio.

> He [Gaudenzio] adopted different manners, because the one he held in Varallo's tomb was the main, delicate and admirable way, and also in the plastic relief, and inferior are all the others held elsewhere. Thus, the one who has not seen that tomb, cannot say to know what painting is and what its true excellence is. Because there one see how affections can be vividly represented, seeing in the faces of angels, who mourn, the pain and passion, and in children laughing the feast and jubilation, which nature does not show more vividly. And one can also see the excellence of the Attic [ancient?] architecture and the truth flaunted by the foliage and the friezes of the columns, in which he was unique in the world.[11]

It is worth commenting, among other aspects, on Lomazzo's praising of Gaudenzio for his ability to render the emotions and expressions of the figures in such a way that they appear like living beings. Gaudenzio, as we read, challenged nature also in depicting other elements, such as foliage and ornaments. Vividness and truth are the two key-adjectives in Lomazzo's text that introduce us to the realistic details of the *Adoration of the Magi*.

Fig. 5 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, Saint Caspar greeting a painted figure.

11. Lomazzo (1974, I, pp. 139-141): "Diverse maniere sono state ancor le sue [di Gaudenzio], perché quella che ha tenuto nel sepolcro di Varallo è stata via principale, delicata e mirabile e nel rilievo di plastica ancora, et inferiori poi sono tutte le altre tenute altrove. Onde chi non ha veduto quel sepolcro, non può dir di sapere che cosa sia pittura, e qual sia la vera eccellenza di lei. Perché ivi si vede come si possano rappresentare vivamente gli affetti, vedendosi nelle faccie degli Angioli che piangono il dolo e la passione, e nei fanciulli ridenti la festa et il giubilo, che la natura più vivamente non gli dimostra. E si vede anco l'eccellenza dell'architettura attica [antica?], e la verità sfoggiata dei fogliami e de i fregi delle colonne, nella quale egli è stato unico al mondo."

Fig. 6 – Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of Saint Caspar.

The sculpted figures are realised with great attention to detail: they are carefully painted with the naturalism of polychromy, the realism of clothing, and lifelike physiognomic expressions (Fig. 6).[12] The eyes, instead to being merely painted, are made by glass, to make them more vivid. For the same purpose, the hair is either real hair or made of a realistic fibrous material. Even the setting is planned with extreme cure: the uneven floor, with mounds, stones and rocks, simulates an external environment; whereas the maximum degree of illusion is achieved by the leap of the aforementioned horse, which detaches itself from the painted procession, on the left wall, to break into the real space (Fig. 2).

All this serves to enhance the sense of realism, which elicits an empathic engagement between the observer and the scene observed, similar to the one that the observer would have in witnessing an actual procession, as Nelson Goodman, in *Languages of Art* (1968), suggests, when he writes that "what counts... is not how closely the picture duplicates an object but how far the picture and object... give rise to the same responses and expectations."[13] The fact that the viewer's empathic response is alike for both a naturalistic representation and a real situation, as Goodman states, is also confirmed by recent neuroscientific research on the perception of motions and emotions, both in life and in visual art.[14] At the origin of the revival of empathy in art history, aesthetics, and neuroaesthetics is the discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain, which respond to the execution, observation, and imagination of the actions and emotions of both ourselves and others, whether in real life or in still works of art. Mirror neurons are a category of visuomotor neurons that were first discovered in area F5 of the monkey premotor cortex, in 1992, by Giacomo Rizzolatti, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese. Subsequent neurophysiological data indicate that mirror neurons are also present in the human brain, including the ventral premotor cortex (encompassing Brodmann's area 44) and posterior parietal cortex.[15] The role that this class of neurons

12. For the craftsmanship of the plastic figures, see Filippis (2006, p. 331).

13. Goodman (1976, p. 34).

14. See, for instance, Tononi (2020); Freedberg (2017); Gallese (2017); Gallese (2014); Gallese and Freedberg (2007); and Freedberg and Gallese (2007).

15. See Rizzolatti and Craighero (2004).

plays in daily life is wide, since they are involved in different critical tasks. Since they are activated during the execution, observation and imagination of goal-oriented actions – such as reaching out, grasping, and holding – mirror neurons are responsible for the understanding of the actions performed by both oneself and others. For this reason, they seem to play a decisive role in both intersubjectivity and empathy.[16] It is mainly due to the role played by mirror neurons that when someone contemplates a series of realistic figures, such as those represented in Gaudenzio's *Adoration of the Magi* on the Sacred Mountain of Varallo, he or she is led to imagine real people, moving, walking, and feeling/expressing emotions or sensations.

From Robert Vischer, Theodor Lipps, and Wilhelm Worringer to Antonio Damasio, Vittorio Gallese, and David Freedberg, the claim is that one feels the same emotions and inwardly simulates the same actions of the person or figure observed. Vischer was one of the earliest to theorise the phenomenon of empathy in art, that of *Einfühlung* (literally, "in-feeling").[17] For Vischer, in empathy, the subjects project their own bodily form into the object's form, extending one's self into the contemplated object.[18] According to Vischer, to contemplate an object means to "mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it."[19] Lipps, adopting Vischer's notion of *Einfühlung*, describes empathy as the projection of one's own self into the perceived object, introducing, without mentioning the term, the idea of inner simulation, which has been developed recently in the cognitive neurosciences:

> The *object* of my activity is not my own activity, which is different from the observed one, but only this activity which I behold. I feel active in the movement or in the moving figure, and through projecting myself into it I feel myself striving and performing this same movement.[20]

Worringer, for his part, linked the concept of naturalism with the process of empathy.[21] According to him, the contemplation of naturalistic figures leads to a form of loss of self, with consequent immersion of the viewer into the work of art observed.[22]

In 1990s, Damasio theorised the "as-if" response to the movements of others, by investigating the cortical activation that occurs in the human brain during the contemplation of movements similar to one's own.[23] Subsequently, the study of mirror neurons in connection to the observation of purposeful movements enabled a rigorous comprehension of what Gallese called embodied simulation.[24] With this concept, Gallese

16. See Ammaniti and Gallese (2014).
17. See Vischer (1994).
18. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
20. Lipps (1979, pp. 374-375).
21. See Worringer (1953, p. 24).
22. *Ibid.*
23. See Damasio (1994).
24. See Gallese (2019); Gallese (2018a); Gallese (2018b); Gallese (2011); and Gallese (2005).

refers to the bodily sense that viewers have of feeling the emotions and imitating the goal-oriented movements of others. It is, most of the time, through this inner process that we empathise, consciously or not, with others, be they human beings or representations thereof. As further neuroscientific experiments show, viewing a gesture or an emotion activates many of the same cortical and subcortical areas and networks in observers as would have been activated in the figures they observe. It is through this common coding, as Wolfram Prinz called it, that we have a form of direct access to, and intimate understanding of, the motions and emotions of others.[25] Freedberg then applied all these results, both alone and in cooperation with other neuroscientists, to the study of the aesthetic and biological responses to the depiction of motions and emotions.[26] He did so by taking up the whole discourse on empathy, aesthetic enjoyment, and bodily sensations during the contemplation of visual works of art inaugurated by the nineteenth-century German theorists and updating it on the ground of recent neuroscientific achievements.

Returning to Gaudenzio's chapel, everything in the scenes constructed in the shrine of Varallo encourages this mode of involvement, to such a degree that even the two-dimensional paintings on the walls acquire a presence that the pilgrims perceive and respond to as living. Such empathic engagement is the precondition of pious meditation with the aid of images, and the scenes staged at the Sacred Mountain of Varallo are suggestive of the possibility of such response.

## 4. Visual Attention, Memory, and Imagination

Visual attention, memory, and imagination are therefore the three key phenomena that may lead to the immersion in the scenes of the *Adoration of the Magi*. "Art demands concentration from the spectator."[27] With this statement, Walter Benjamin touches on one of the most important aspects of both art making and art perception. Whereas during the process of art making the artist must take into account the fact that his/her work must capture the attention of the recipient, the observer fulfills his/her role only if he or she commits to a contemplation of the work before him/her. This argument finds support also in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (circa 371 BC), which stresses the importance of the ability of the artist in creating life-like statues:

> On another occasion he [Socrates] visited Cleiton the sculptor, and while conversing with him said:

25. See Prinz (1997).

26. For the studies conducted by Freedberg alone, see, for example, Freedberg (2017); Freedberg (2014); Freedberg (2010a); Freedberg (2010b); and Freedberg (2008). For the neuroaesthetic research carried out by Freedberg in cooperation with other neuroscientists, see, for instance, Mineo, Fetterman, Concerto, Warren, Infortuna, Freedberg, Chusid, Aguglia and Battaglia (2018); Gallese and Freedberg (2007); and Freedberg and Gallese (2007).

27. Benjamin (2003, IV, p. 268).

> "Cleiton, that your statues of runners, wrestlers, boxers and fighters are beautiful I see and know. But how do you produce in them that illusion of life which is their most alluring charm to the beholder?. Then isn't it by accurately representing the different parts of the body as they are affected by the pose – the flesh wrinkled or tense, the limbs compressed or outstretched, the muscles taut or loose – that you make them look more like real parts and more convincing?".
>
> "Yes, certainly" (III, 10. 6-8).[28]

Therefore, the naturalism of the figures goes hand in hand with the ability of the observer to identify him/herself with the observed sculpture, to the point of actually feeling the same muscular tension and poses.

Another crucial passage in the aforementioned ancient text is when Socrates links the realistic representation of the feelings expressed in bodies in action to the beholder's aesthetic enjoyment:

> "Doesn't the exact imitation of the feelings that affect bodies in action also produce a sense of satisfaction in the spectators?"
>
> "Oh yes, presumably."
>
> "Then must not the threatening look in the eyes of fighters be accurately represented, and the triumphant expression on the face of victors be imitated?"
>
> "Most certainly."
>
> "It follows, then, that the sculptor must represent in his figures the activities of the soul" (III, 10. 8).[29]

The beholder, to accomplish his/her aim – that is, to be engaged in an aesthetic contemplation – must be alone in front of the work of art in question, with the necessary circumstances that facilitate concentration (for instance, silence, good illumination, a pleasant environment, and, most necessarily, a mental state predisposed to attention), as indeed Benjamin points out: "painting, by its nature, cannot provide an object of simultaneous collective reception."[30]

Thus, the viewer oughts to be in the proper mind-state that facilitates the aesthetic experience through focused attention on the artwork.[31] In this sense, attention is the indispensable precondition for an empathic response to art. Without attention there will be no empathy, but rather its opposite, detachment, the latter being a consequence of distraction. The difference between attention and distraction is well explained, once

28. Xenophon (2013, p. 249).
29. *Ibid.*
30. Benjamin (2003, IV, p. 264).
31. See Gallese and Di Dio (2012).

again, by Benjamin, who states: "a person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work."[32] Therefore, according to Benjamin, only in the act of attention can the beholder establish an empathic engagement with the work of art observed, whereas the opposite happens in distraction: "by contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves."[33] These two states, attention and distraction, determine the kind of relationship that will prevail between the work of art and its recipient. It is the direction of the absorption that indicates whether this relationship is empathetic or not. As Benjamin claimed, the phenomenon of absorption plays an important role in this polarization (i.e., empathy/detachment). In the first case (in empathy), it is the work of art that absorbs the viewer, whereas, in the second case (in detachment), it is the viewer that absorbs the work in question. Vischer also acknowledges this distinction between empathy and detachment (or apathy) when he states that "by sensation I mean the sensory process only and, more particularly, the sensory response to an observed object. The first distinction to be made is between emphatic and unemphatic sensations. An image perceived unconsciously is unemphatic, vague, and indifferent."[34]

What has been argued so far suggests that, both in the sixteenth century and today, the effects of intermediality and naturalistic scenes (such as Gaudenzio's *Adoration of the Magi*) on viewers may be manifold. We can regard this representation as an augmented painting, since the polychrome statues are, in a sense, painted figures detached from the walls, and thus, precisely for this reason, more corporeal and more vivid. This interpretation allows us to apply neuroscientific findings on the perception of augmented reality to this kind of image.[35] In this regard, as empirical studies suggest, there are at least three ways in which augmented reality affects the brain: (i) it activates high levels of visual attention; (ii) it elicits a 'surprise' response; and (iii) what is stored, or encoded into memory, is much greater for augmented reality experiences than for normal reality experiences.

In this respect, we can suggest that an aesthetic experience that is had with "intermedia" works of art would strengthen the viewer's visual attention, which, together with the vivid rendering of the figures, would open two possible (alternative) ways of engaging with the scene, depending on where the observer focuses his/her attention. First, the viewer is capable of distancing him/herself from the image observed, avoiding involvement and simply admiring the artistry and craftsmanship of the artist; or, second, the viewer could approach the image by immersing him/herself in the scene through a process of embodied simulation, experiencing inwardly, with the aid of imagination, the motions and emotions expressed by the figures observed. Finally, as confirmed by the written sources of the time, and as suggested by neuroscientific research on immersion, embodied simulation and augmented reality, these modes of engagement have a

32. Benjamin (2003, IV, p. 268).

33. *Ibid.*

34. Vischer (1994, p. 95).

35. See Andrew (2018).

direct effect on the beholder's memory, greatly strengthening it – a process crucial for subsequent religious meditation.

## 5. Conclusion

What, then, does it mean to contemplate an "intermedia" work of art such as the *Adoration of the Magi* that Gaudenzio Ferrari created in Chapel V of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo? In other words, how do viewers respond to such a complex image as that created by Gaudenzio in Varallo? This is the question that this essay addresses. As we have seen, Gaudenzio's "painting" titled *Adoration of the Magi* was constructed in such a way as to meet specific criteria, that is, those outlined in Niccolò da Osimo's handbook, *Garden of Prayer*. Firstly, the chapel must facilitate the pilgrim's subsequent religious contemplation. Secondly, it must stimulate the faithful's imagination, inasmuch as, he/she must imagine him/herself – both during the observation and during meditation after – at the same time and place where the scenes observed originally occurred. Finally, it must strengthen the observer's memory, so that, alone during prayer, it can help one to imagine oneself as one of the participants in the crucial scenes of Christ's life.

The comparison between the key elements of such scenes and the conditions that determine a process of empathy with and immersion in the figures observed, as outlined by both the nineteenth-century German movement of psychological aesthetics, *Kunstwissenschaft*, and the recent neuroscientific studies, confirms that the artist in this case fully achieved these goals.[36] In fact, the contemplation of Gaudenzio's *Adoration of the Magi* may involve an immersion, also facilitated by the intermediality and realism of the work itself, into the scene, which activates specific neural networks, particularly mirror neurons, responsible for the inner simulation of the external event observed. In this sense, through a process of immersion and embodied simulation, one would experience the gestures, movements, and emotions of the figures contemplated. Indeed, pilgrims were – and still are – supposed to experience what the Magi and those others present at the scene felt in that crucial moment of the life of Christ.

But we have also argued that different kinds of responses may be involved in this aesthetic space, depending on where the beholder wants to concentrate his/her attention. As a matter of fact, surprise, approach and withdrawal (distancing) may be possible responses evoked by such artworks. Surprise may occur at the moment when the viewer is entering the chapel, inasmuch as one expects an artistic representation but, for a few seconds, has the sensation of being in a real setting with real people (because of the realistic rendering of the figures and the setting). Approach consists in the automatic transition from seeing to empathy and involvement. This would activate the imagination of the observer and reinforce his/her memory, also facilitating a religious

36. On the *Kunstwissenschaft*, which addressed the problem of empathy and felt emotions in art – and that includes writers such as Conrad Fiedler, Adolf Göller, Adolf Hildebrand, Theodor Lipps, August Schmarsow, Robert Vischer, Johannes Volkelt, and Heinrich Wölfflin – see Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994).

meditation. Thus, by focusing on neuroscientific research, we advanced the argument that intermediality drives high levels of visual attention in the brain and, consequently, what is stored into memory is greater for "intermedial" experiences than for normal aesthetic experiences. This would support the statements on memory contained in the *Garden of Prayer*, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In this way, what is experienced during the aesthetic contemplation in the chapel would be very similar to what is experienced during solitary religious meditation, when the devotee has to imagine that same scene, without having it in front of him/her. Indeed, as Gallese points out,

> embodied simulation can also occur when we imagine perceiving something or imagine doing something. When we imagine a visual scene, we activate the same cortical visual areas normally active when we do perceive the same visual scene. Similarly, mental motor imagery and real action both activate a common network of cortical and subcortical motor centres, such as the primary motor cortex, the premotor cortex, the supplementary motor area, the basal ganglia and the cere-bellum... A recent high-density electroencephalography (EEG) study showed that the brain circuits that inhibit action execution are partly the same as those that allow us to imagine to act.[37]

Finally, a third type of response, which we called withdrawal response or distancing, would shift the attention of the viewer to the artistic quality of the work, enabling an aesthetic experience.

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37. Gallese (2019, p. 116).

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