

# GLOBAL HUMANITIES

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Editors Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

## ***Aura in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

**Editorial by**  
Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

**Texts by**  
Federico Biggio  
Maria Giulia Franco  
Francesco Mangiapane  
Carlo Andrea Tassinari





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# FALCONE AND BORSELLINO

## THE AURA OF SYMBOLS

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**ABSTRACT.** By putting together Walter Benjamin's and Bruno Latour's work on aura with contemporary semiotic takes on cultural process of symbolisation, the paper explores the idea of "aura of symbols". Drawing from this, we propose for an empirical analysis of the "symbolic career" of an iconic picture of antimafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino: an image whose process of symbolisation, marked by gains and losses of "symbolic aura", has had a profound influence on Italian culture and memory, far beyond the domain of the struggle against the mafia.

**KEYWORDS:** Antimafia; Symbolization; Photography; Remediation; Semiotics of culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging aspects of the notion of "aura" lies in its vagueness. In order to grasp and define its pertinence in 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural phenomena, we propose to double the stakes: we will try to explore the idea of an "aura of symbols". Our bet is that putting in relation two vague ideas, the "aura" and the "symbol", may be a good strategy to shed new light on both, counting on the effect

of their reciprocal determination. Indeed, the notions of "aura" and "symbol" have a similar, very long history of over-uses and dismissals: a never-ending battle of definitions that we would not dare to reconstruct. Instead, we propose to take up some valuable insights bringing these two notions together within a safe (and sound) semiotic framework: one that aspires simultaneously to produce heuristic tools for culture analy-



sis and solid theoretical standpoints on meaning-making mechanisms.

Our hypothesis is that the concept of aura can be very useful to a better understanding of the symbolic career of texts, by which we intend the cultural and discursive process making a symbol out of a random object of meaning. In order to prove it and shape our theoretical reflection on the “aura of symbols” starting from empirical and analytical observations, we will focus on a particular case study: the raise, fall and transformation of a contemporary Italian symbol of justice, the antimafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. In particular, the study will be carried out on the “symbolic career” on the image of the two characters which became infamous after the terrorist-style mafia bombings that killed them in May 1992.

The paper develops this argument starting from a theoretical clarification of what we mean by “aura of symbols”, recognising, thanks to Bruno Latour, the foundational role of reproduction in the creation of “auratic effects”. Henceforth, we will present the case study and explain why it is so relevant for a better understanding of the “aura of symbols”. In line with the work carried out in the last two editions of the Urbino seminars on symbols, the approach I propose to follow is the study of the discursive process of symbolization: that is, an “isographic” (Calabrese 1999) set of its resumptions, translations, uses, and alterations. This approach makes it possible to tie the symbolic efficacy issue to that of aura, which concerns the unstable relationship between the original work and its copies. Outside the essentialist problem of establishing what is original and what is degraded to mere imitation, the theme of the aura of symbols raises a central question: how does the extension of the series, constitutive of the becoming symbol, modify the value of each element in relation to the others? Moreover, how does this variation contribute to the enhancement or destruction of a symbol? We will try to answer in three steps, exploring the mi-

gration of the aura through journalistic, militant, and administrative discourse. We will conclude this essay trying to pull the strings of what we learned from the trajectory of this image about aura and its relevance in the semiotic life of symbols.

## 2. THE AURA OF SYMBOLS

It is well known that Walter Benjamin, in his seminal writing on the work of art, didn't provide a univocal definition of the concept of “aura”. One of them is “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.” (Benjamin [1931] 2008, p. 23). Now such “uniqueness”, issued from “space and time”, appears to be strictly related to the materiality of the art piece. Earlier on in his essay, Benjamin suggests that the reason why materiality matters is because it tells the story of the artifact, “issued” with the most various, yet meaningful circumstances. This story does not include only the traces of the labor of the artists themselves, but also

the changes which [the art piece] may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. The traces of the first can be revealed only by chemical or physical analyses which it is impossible to perform on a reproduction; changes of ownership are subject to a tradition which must be traced from the situation of the original. The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day (Benjamin [1936] 2008, p. 21)

It is striking how the idea of “authenticity” of the work of art, which guarantees the permanence of the objects as identical to itself throughout time, is here linked not to the stability of its aesthetic configuration, technically reproducible, but to specific semiotic features, “the traces” (Eco 1975: 289; Violi 2014: 160), marking the material constitution of the work of art. Some are so microscopic that special physical or chemical techniques are needed to detect them. Others presuppose a vast knowledge of “situations” in which the artwork circulated. In any

case, these variations require from the viewer a particular awareness, a sensitization, through instruments or knowledge, to differences otherwise imperceptible. Once detected, however, those traces start to tell the history of the artefact: where it was exposed, who owned it, in which conditions, and maybe even why and how long the art piece has been preserved and used that way. In other words, materiality and its traces express an history of causes, which are precisely the contents of the story that guarantee uniqueness and authenticity to the artefact, allowing the sharp observer to tell it apart from copies. Here's a first definition of aura as "auratic effect": a semiotic feature pertaining the story of artefact's sociotechnical trajectory, rather than the story that artefact's internal, formal structure apparently intended to convey<sup>1</sup>. If we think of the artefact as an utterance, the auratic effect pertains its enunciation rather than the utterance itself. It is this context of enunciation that make up for the "tradition" establishing the object in its identity, confirmed precisely by variations in material traces.

From this perspective, it's clear that a work of art, as a material object, may have an history within society that a fresh copy can't reproduce easily, especially when technical reproduction focuses solely on the aesthetic, internal configuration of the work of art (as a poster of a painting sold in a museum giftshop). However, while Benjamin seem to view the opposition between the "original" and the "copy" as if the latter, by flattening the material traces marking the former, negated the possibility of any auratic effect, Bruno Latour suggests that it is precisely the "lack of materiality" of the copies that awakens and sharpen the sensitivity of the connoisseur towards the materiality of the original.

Only the original possesses an aura, this mysterious and mystical quality that no second

hand version will ever get. But paradoxically, this obsession for pinpointing originality increases proportionally with the availability and accessibility of more and more copies of better and better quality. If so much energy is devoted to the search for the original — for archaeological and marketing reasons — it is because the possibility of making copies has never been so open-ended. If no copies of the Mona Lisa existed would we pursue it with such energy — and, would we devise so many conspiracy theories to decide whether or not the version held under glass and protected by sophisticated alarms is the original surface painted by Leonardo's hand or not. In other words, the intensity of the search for the original depends on the amount of passion and the number of interests triggered by its copies. No copies, no original. In order to stamp a piece with the mark of originality, you need to apply to its surface the huge pressure that only a great number of reproductions can provide (Latour [2008] 2011, p. 4).

Here, the reconsideration of the work of reproduction is key. From a process that erases aura, it becomes what let remarks its absence, therefore rising awareness towards the traces that constitute auratic effects. In this perspective, "the real phenomenon to be accounted for is not the punctual delineation of one version divorced from the rest of its copies, but the whole assemblage made up of one — or several — original(s) together with the retinue of its continually re-written biography" (*ibidem*). Broadening the view from the "original" alone to the structural pairing of the "original(s)" and the "copies", Latour not only pinpoints the relational nature of auratic effects, but also raises the question of their "migration". Indeed, if the original may be told apart from copies because of the traces of its material history, concerning not the work of art's internal structure but its contextual, enunciative uses, the copies themselves have a social and material life of which they can bear traces. In that case, one or some copies may acquire their own "uniqueness", becoming more culturally relevant, in a given con-

<sup>1</sup> For "intention", we refer here to the idea of *intentio operis* defined by Umberto Eco (1979, 1990) as the structural configuration of a text, as opposed to the intentions attributed to the author, the *intentio auctoris*, or to the interpreter, the *intentio lectoris*.

text, that what in a previous context the “original” was, thus taking its place as a socio-semiotic construct.

This leads us to the second pivotal concept of our work, symbol. Reproduction is a foundational condition of symbols, and even more so its strategic re-use in different contexts. Indeed, for Umberto Eco (1984, pp. 143–153), to recognise a symbol it is far more relevant the use a given text, which he calls “symbolic mode”, than its internal structure. This idea has recently been taken up and re-elaborated by the International Center for Semiotic Sciences of Urbino (Marone, ed. 2021) under the hypothesis of a “symbolic becoming” (Sedda 2021, pp. 13–32): if there is no such a thing as an “internal” definition of “symbol”, there is, however, a discursive process that makes room and defines a specific “place” for symbols in a given semiosphere (Lotman 1987, cited by Sedda 2021, p. 14). For Sedda (*ibidem*), these uses have strategic cultural functions such as i) bringing together different actors within a collective identity, ii) creating a shared space for interaction, and iii) bridging the present with supposed origins and possibilities of transmission to new generations.

Now, capitalising on the notion of auratic effect delineated thus far, we could hypothesise a fourth and fifth feature to be aware of when dealing with symbolic becoming. The fourth one concerns the fact a symbolic use of a text is inseparable from the chain of other uses of which it bears memory, linking together different users’, spatial’s and temporal’s configuration’s. As Latour remarks regarding the work of art, no text would be questioned, valued and passionately used as a symbol if it wasn’t previously used by different persons, in different spaces and in different times. It is, again, the continually rewritten biography of a text, constitutive to its “symbolic becoming” or, more prosaically, to its “symbolic career”, that give a specific use of a text its particular, unique aura of symbol. In the same line of work, we could hypothesise a fifth feature of the symbolic mode related to auratic effect:

the capacity of a symbol of bringing together different types of discourses, different regimes of enunciation, different cultural domains. The memory of previous uses of a symbol, even though vague, links together the different cultural contexts in which they were deployed. Every symbol draws its strength from a cultural backdrop from which it distances itself, while penetrating a new discursive domain and giving way to a new interpretation: many political symbols came from religious backgrounds, as well as many pop icons refer back to religious or political contexts. This translation of a cultural domains into another entails, of course some risk of oversimplification. Which bring us to a last line of questioning: the migration of the aura of symbols. By trespassing from a cultural domain toward another, while translating the values associated to an old context into a new one, the earliest use of the symbol can pass its aura to the latest one, creating a new frame of reference for further reproductions.

These hypothesis raise several questions. What reproductions of a text, including their context, make a supposed “original” so special? How do these reproduction reveal connections between cultural domains that are unthought of? Do the trajectory of some copy make them more interesting of the so called original, explaining the raise, fall and transformation of a symbol by a sort of migration of symbolic aura?

### **3. SYMBOLS OF JUSTICE: FALCONE AND BORSELLINO**

We will try to answer by focusing on a specific case study: an image of the anti-mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, born as a photograph by the photojournalist Toni Gentile in 1992 (Fig. 1). This image has been the object of countless re-uses and public endorsements. It has been reproduced on supports as diverse as newspapers, photography magazines and manuals, demonstration banners, sheets, T-shirts, bodies (as a tattoo), façades (as murals), even national stamps and, more recently, it has been engraved on the national side

of the Italian 2 euros coin. Through this proliferation of semiotic translations, it spread across multiple spaces and times, exceeding by far the original context of information it came from: it appeared (and still appears) in public offices, schools, tourist roots and on the stage of national commemorations, cultural events, demonstrations, anniversaries, inaugurations. As the antimafia journalist Attilio Bolzoni wrote on the occasion of its coinage on the national side of the 2 euros piece, in January 2022, this “symbolic” image, also referred to as “icon”, is so powerful that it can be chosen as a guide for the righteous, but also as an alibi for mediocrity, when not corruption itself (Bolzoni 2022). Apparently, the aura of such a symbol doesn’t always lies where its uses place it. Undoubtedly this hesitation on the value and meaning of this iconic image is related to its long history and multiple discursive context of use. In one word, it depends on its trajectory, delineating the path within which its aura circulates, dwells, and sometime loses itself.

This path also defines a perimeter – a spacial, historical and cultural grounding – that accompanies the symbol from birth. This fact is underscored by an internationally recognized Sicilian photographer, Ferdinando Scianna, who speaks about “an Italian icon” that probably doesn’t have “the same evocative power in the United States or England that it has for us” (Scianna 2017). However, this doesn’t diminish the least the “iconic” value of the image, which he takes as a privileged example of symbolization processes in photography:

[...], a photograph can also become iconic because of its iconographic background. But not only that. It can become so by accumulating historical facts sedimented in the image. My friend and a very good photographer, Tony Gentile, the author of a great contemporary Italian photographic icon, the image of Falcone and Borsellino talking with complicit confidence and irony, says that at the time he took that photograph did not particularly strike a chord, no one wanted it. Then Falcone was assassinated by the Mafia. But that was not enough. They also had to kill Borsellino for

that image to become an icon of the victims of justice and the fight against evil. [...] In this case, it is the story that transforms the image, although if we want to look for an iconographic background, the infinitely reproduced detail of Raffaello’s painting of the two little angels talking with complicity may perhaps unconsciously have helped its recognizability by adding the chrism of innocence (Scianna 2017).

Scianna’s opinion on Gentile’s photograph is one of the most quoted when evoking the question of how images acquire a particular relevance in antimafia culture (cf. Ravveduto 2019). This fact itself is significant for the cultural “career” of photographs, developing at least on two levels which is theoretically necessary to distinguish: the discourse *on* photography – often carried out by photographs themselves along with critics, journalists, and institutional prizes – and the discourse *of* photographs, whose visual and semantic properties have to be determined by further analysis (Floch 1986: pp. 12–20.). It is interesting to notice that, while being largely commented on and cited, Gentile’s work has never been awarded with significant photographic prizes. However, Falcone and Borsellino’s photograph was the reason for his receiving the highest civic recognition, notably with his entitlement to the “Order of merit of the Italian Republic” in 2018 by President Sergio Mattarella, brother of Piersanti Mattarella, a well-known mafia victim (Lupo 1993; Schneider 2002; Santino 2009).

What happened to this image in the meantime? What did it do to Italian antimafia culture? What transformations, reprises, and translations, way beyond the photographic discourse on photography, has this image undergone on its way to becoming a symbol, igniting vibrant dialectics between original and copies? Furthermore, what did this culture do, in turn, to this image?

Scianna’s opinion on the photograph of Falcone and Borsellino also makes some interesting points. Firstly, it consistently uses the word “icon”, questioning the relation between the symbolization process and the domain of religion (Otto [1917] 1923). Secondly, it assumes



two core mechanisms of this process, the influence of an iconographic background and the one of historical events, but it does not specify how these different aspects concur to determine the same effect. Thirdly, it evokes the push for the reproduction of “iconic” images. All three aspects are related to the concept of the “aura of symbols” we seek to discuss in this work. Consistently to the methodological stance we proposed at the beginning, we will assume that no text or image is born as a “symbol” only because of its iconic background, nor any text or image can become a symbol through the historical events that arbitrarily make them so. Instead, we posit that i) a symbol is a semiotic entity – may that be a character, a phrase or an image – that follows a “career” within a precise cultural environment; ii) and that this “career” depends on a strategic production of “copies”, or semiotic translations, whose description may be considered as a valuable angle for any semiotic analysis of culture.

#### 4. THE JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

Before becoming an antimafia symbol, the image taken by Gentile was merely

a good photo. Nevertheless, as Scianna anticipated, it was not immediately used. Gentile was covering a press conference for *Il Giornale di Sicilia* for the candidacy of the former magistrate Giuseppe Ayala as Senator of the Republic. It was March 1992. Among the guests supporting the candidacy, there were Falcone and Borsellino. They had no explicit connection to the merit of the event. However, as top Mafia experts, who had suffered the tough blow of the final verdict of the “Maxi Trial” a month earlier, their photos could have been valuable in the market. Gentile approaches the speakers’ desk and shoots until he fixes, in the last four images of the negative, a joking exchange between the two. Those images, however, are predictably preferred to an overview showing Ayala together with the director of the local newspaper *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, sponsoring the meeting.

Once developed and decontextualized from the event, these images would have turned into perfect archival photos, becoming what Lorusso and Violi (2004), reworking Floch (1986, 1990), call “symbolic photos”: photographs that transcend the punctuality of the event to



FIG. 1. A DETAIL OF THE FRONT PAGE OF *IL MESSAGGERO* ON JULY 24TH, 1992, SHOWING THE FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPH BY TONI GENTILE.

activate abstract thematizations, recalling individuals to their functions in the collective imagination. In this kind of institutional images, the persons portrayed in these photos – to be used into banners, gallons, recognizable institutional architectures etc. – would have been considered as “roles” more than as individuals.

Now, Gentile’s shots do not stand as ordinary institutional photos since their frames establish a complex relationship between the “official” and the “human” side of the subjects. On the one hand, Falcone and Borsellino are perfectly recognizable as public figures: the most celebrated antimafia magistrates in Italy, perhaps in the world, whom the objects around them place within a relatively undetermined official ceremony: the desk, the microphone, the elegant suits. The framing is tight, and the exact context is impossible to reconstruct. On the other hand, rather than the abstractness of their function, the pictures enhance the union of the two magistrates in a personal gesture of friendship while joking by themselves. The shot thus contains a variation on the theme of unveiling the human beneath the institutional armor. A humanity that shirks all the more clearly from the usual institutional pose of antimafia magistrates surrounded only by escort men, disconnected from ordinary social interactions. By contrast, we are in full, albeit intimate, sociality here. This aspect enriches the images with an “oblique” dimension: it is a “non-official photo” that reminds us of how plastered official, “symbolic” photos habitually are.

Gentile sends the photos the agency “Sintesi”, which distributes them to all subscriber newspapers. However, when Falcone dies on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, those photos found a place only in the *Giornale di Sicilia*. Furthermore, the photo appears only on page 6, far from the frontpage, in a context article aimed at putting into perspective the assassination of the judge, which of course, made the first five pages, within the controversies in which Falcone was involved in the last years (the title reads “Under the fire of controver-

sies). As for the front page, the newspaper aligns itself with the standard editorial and iconographic choices with which the national press breaks the news of the Capaci massacre on May 24<sup>th</sup>: on one side, stock photos of the dead man alone; on the other, images of the crater left on the Palermo-Capaci highway, a trace of the dramatic event.





FIG. 2. IL GIORNALE DI SICILIA, MAY 24TH, 1992; FOLLOWING FROM LEFT, THE FRONT PAGE, THE SECOND, AND THE SIXTH PAGE.

The stock photos are rather conventional: close-ups of Falcone isolated, huddled in the shoulders, hands clasped, frowning; in some cases, as in *La Repubblica*, somehow foreboding death, with those shiny pupils turned upward, towards an area towering at the top of the frame, recalling the iconography of the *Annunciation* (cf. Dondero 2007, p. 99). Interestingly, in *La Repubblica*, which had sided unconditionally with the anti-mafia magistrates in the historic controversies involving them, in-depth articles are devoted to the relationship between Falcone and his spouse. In contrast to this choice of humanizing topicalization, *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, historically close to the Sicilian Catholic party called Democrazia Cristiana and critical of the “excesses” of the anti-Mafia, chooses to recall the controversies in which Falcone was involved<sup>2</sup>. This diversity in thematizing the backdrop against which the massacre stands – humanizing and pacifying

on the one hand, committed and polemical on the other – also tells us something about the images accompanying the articles. In particular, it points out an aspect of Gentile’s photo that, after this first, little-noticed appearance in *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, will no longer be taken into account: although positive, relaxed, and joking, it is an image of two crucial public figures exchanging confidences; very similar, figuratively speaking, to those “stolen from power” images that news photographers make in parliaments (or stadiums) to expose the tactics that ran in the behind-the-scenes political-institutional (or sports) playing field. In a field of discourse dominated by the value of transparency, such as journalism, the image of intimate, somewhat secretive communication does not necessarily enjoy a euphoric connotation. Placed under the *Il Giornale di Sicilia*’s title “Under the fire of controversy”, this picture stands ambiguous: of course, the intimate joke of a dead man, Falcone, with the colleague that survived him, can be seen as an act of transmission of a positive legacy; but, concerning the “controversies” evoked by the title, the intimacy depicted on the photo could also connote the lack of transparency typical of the so-called “Palaces of Power”. Interestingly, however, the successive uses of Falcone and Borsellino’s picture thoroughly shake off this dysphoric interpretation. As opposed to the secrecy of the Palace, it will provide an image of friendly intimacy.

In these unambiguous terms, the myth of Gentile’s photo was born on July 20<sup>th</sup>: the day after Borsellino gets torn apart by a car bomb in Via D’Amelio along with five escort agents. The standard iconographic strategy for giving the news of the massacre is well represented here by *Il Corriere della Sera*. It opens with a picture of the street wasted by the explosion, with the carcasses of two cars in the foreground, sensationalizing the violence of the attack.

2 For the positioning of *Il giornale di Sicilia* in former antimafia controversies, and notably the most iconic one about the so called “professionisti dell’antimafia” [antimafia professionals] involving, among others, the writer Leonardo Sciascia and Paolo Borsellino, see Tassinari 2022.



In the right column, a three-quarter stock photo of Borsellino, the target. Deviating from this are *Il manifesto* and *Il Messaggero*. Let us take a closer look at their visual communication strategies.

One of the hallmarks of the *Il manifesto* is opening with a half-page photo strategically themed by the headline. In this case, it shows an image of Borsellino, on the right, turning his back on a Carabinieri squad car. The cut of the image, the orientation of the actors, and the gap between them express a movement away, which the title, “the order of the Mafia”.

unambiguously thematizes. Borsellino’s movement unfolds between a pole of personal safety, to the left, and a pole of death, to the right, out of frame. That is where the magistrate sets out, head down “by order” of a “sovereign”, “invisible”, and “all-powerful” Mafia, also suggesting a hopeless “order of things” where magistrates die, and criminals prosper. It cannot be seen, but outside the image, to the right, the image narratively implies something standing in for a gallows or a sacrificial altar. We are just a moment



FIG. 3. LA REPUBBLICA, MAY 24TH 1992. LEFT: PP. 2-3; UP, RIGHT: THE COVER PHOTO; DOWN LEFT: DETAIL OF THE FRONT PAGE WITH THE SAME PHOTO (BY TONI GENTILE) OF THE DESTROYED HIGHWAY OF PP. 2-3.



FIG. 4. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: FRONT PAGES OF CORRIERE DELLA SERA, IL MANIFESTO, AND IL MESSAGGERO ON JULY 20TH, 1992, THE DAY AFTER THE VIA D'AMELIO MASSACRE.



before the execution of a death sentence (see Marrone 2019).

As always, the construction of the *Il manifesto* front page is complex and refined. However, it is also desperate. Compared to this dysphoria, the image chosen by *Il Messaggero* gives partial solace. It is the first big step of Gentile's picture toward his long symbolic career: an image that strongly affirms the value of life against that of death. Yes, these are two dead men but, at the moment of their death, they are depicted joking with each other as if they were still alive. It is a solid phoric contrast with the *Il manifesto*, which thematizes death as condemnation or unavoidable order of things, and with *Il Corriere della Sera*, which also verbally ascertains the killing with the anonymous tombstone stock photo of Borsellino beside the gutted road. It is a sharp contrast, too, with *Il Messaggero*'s verbal apparatus, at least on the front page, where it does not speak of the man's death but of an "Assault on the state" – except then, on page 4, devotes a report to the friendship between Borsellino and Falcone. Here, the ambiguity casted upon the image by using the photo in *Il Giornale di Sicilia* on May 24<sup>th</sup> is wholly vanquished. In opposition to the images of death, depicted a moment before or after its inevitable administration, the secrecy staged by the pose of the two magistrates loses all dysphoric connotations. It appears now unambiguously as the visual representation of friendly intimacy, firmly grounded in the morality of self-sacrifice: the opposite of a power tactic. As we will show later, this friendly intimacy's (im-)penetrability will give this image a relevant narrative drive for his "symbolic becoming". However, it is important to underscore here the feature of the "livingness" of the picture compared to the visual strategies deployed by the ones on the other front pages.

This photographic emphasis on life in death registers, in terms of "enunciative praxis" (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998), an actual operation of "surfacing" from the virtual to the actual, of symbolic status of

the image we were talking about at the beginning: its ability to establish a continuity between actors and between times in the face of a rupture event. Between actors, because friendship rebuilds the bond that death breaks, foreshadowing the possibility of human transmission, of a legacy; between times, because death does not stop the fight against the Mafia, but, on the contrary, immortalizes it on a higher plane.

We can finally ask why this particular picture was chosen out of the four images of the negative staging the same movement and not one of the other several, very similar captions of the negative. Indeed, sensing the effectiveness of *Il Messaggero*'s choice, the following day, *La Repubblica* and *Il manifesto*, unable to retrieve the same image, will use the last of the four shots (Fig. 5). But the effect is not the same. For what reasons?

Following Scianna's suggestion, which aligns with a common opinion in iconography and Visual Semiotics, the shot chosen by *Il Messaggero* would be remarkable because it taps into our visual memory: the resemblance of the pose of Falcone and Borsellino with, for instance, the gesture of the apostles Giuda Taddeo and Simon in Leonardo's *Last supper* is indeed worth noticing. However, we think the main reason for its effectiveness lies in the intensity, in the aspectualization of the conjunction of the actors, rendered by a peculiar figurative and figural configuration (Greimas 1986). From the figurative point of view, the second frame is the precise, punctual moment when the message "passes", transmitting the smile from Falcone to Borsellino. From the figural point of view, it is the image where the lines of force converge most sharply towards each other, from bottom to top and from the sides to the center, forming a perfect isosceles triangle. The intimacy we were speaking about above can be considered a visual manifestation of a regime of the interaction of reciprocal "adjustment" (Landowski 2006) that unite and transforms Falcone and Borsellino into a "dual actant" (Greimas [1976] 1988): two

different persons, two different actors, of course, but defined by a single axiology and single ideological program of action, devoid of internal differences or articulations. It is no coincidence that “Falcone and Borsellino”, according to a recent study of public history (Ravveduto 2018), is one of the favorite street names in Italy. The shoulders of the magistrates who touch each other in the photo seem never to come off again. A very different kind of interaction is depicted in the frame chosen by *La Repubblica* and *Il manifesto*, taken seconds later, where the actors’ figural separation shows their individuality. They share a smile, not a legacy. A legacy that, in the most successful shot, virtually includes possible investigative leads along with the moral heritage of friendship and self-sacrifice<sup>3</sup>.

##### 5. THE MILITANT DISCOURSE: SHEETS, FASTS AND TREES

An essential step of the symbolic career of this picture is taken when it crosses the boundaries of the newspapers and becomes a visual marker of the antimafia movement unfolding the attacks. However, in order to understand this critical transition, we have to take a step back to the essay by Umberto Eco on the “symbolic mode” and consider how the textualized image of intimacy intertwines with a peculiar feature of the “symbolic use” at the level of its (re-)enunciation: that of the mysteriousness of symbols.

This aspect of Eco’s work has not been sufficiently taken up so far, although it is related to another, much discussed. The much-discussed one is the presupposition of semantic indeterminacy of the symbol. It has often been mentioned that Eco considers symbols as signs or texts whose content plane is a “nebula of meanings”. Instead, I do not think it has been sufficiently emphasized what this semantic indeterminacy invites, namely a hermeneutic practice that unravels the skein of indeterminacy (Eco 1984, p. 228). In other words, the “symbolic use”, as he says, involves an enunciating instance called upon to tell the truth about the symbol; to dissipate its vagueness and seek its supposed, unapparent core. Not much has been said about the construction of this qualified enunciating position. Let us be precise – and Eco is not very clear on this: we do not consider that the text used as a symbol is really “mysterious” and therefore it needs further interpretation; instead, it is the symbolic use of the text that presupposes it as such, and therefore the necessity for someone to clarify the mystery. In other words, a relevant step towards a symbolic use of a text consists in looking at it as mysterious; this creates a social space for speech specifically designed to seek the “hidden truth” of the text. This gift of speech to those who construct themselves as enunciating subjects is also an important feature of the symbolization process.



FIG. 5. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THE FRONT PAGES OF *IL MESSAGGERO* AND *LA REPUBBLICA*, AND THE THIRD PAGE OF *IL MANIFESTO*, ON JULY 22ND, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Dario Mangano for this remark.

All the newspapers we have mentioned thematize the Mafia attacks as the manifestation of an underlying tension: the war between the Mafia and the State, the economic crisis, Italy's presentability to the Maastricht Treaty, "Mani pulite" [Clean Hands] trials. Especially "Mani pulite", a nationwide judicial investigation into Italian political corruption held in the early 1990s and highly mediatized, stages an actual "rite of degradation" of the Italian political class in the midst of the transition from the First to the Second Republic (Giglioli, Cavicchioli, Fele 1997). One of the most striking effects of these investigations is that they prevent any political representative from being fully entitled, at least from a moral point of view, to perform any public mourning when the mafia attacks State representatives. This is evidenced by the screaming, kicking, punching, and throwing of coins at the political class that shows up at Falcone's funeral. At the same time, at Borsellino's, politicians are even excluded *a priori* from funerals which will be celebrated only in private form, with the significant exception of President of the Republic Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. By the public opinion – as trained by TV programs such as *Un giorno in pretura*, broadcasting the sessions of the most important "Mani pulite"'s trial (against the financial consultant Sergio Cusani) – the funerals are interpreted as the spectacle of "fake mourning", crocodile tears.

In opposition to the places and images of "fake mourning" – the Tribunal of Palermo, the Church of San Domenico – citizens' committees get formed to designate the places and images of a "real mourning" – the Falcone tree, private homes, sheets hanging from windows. This is the time, in fact, of many civil movements like, for instance, the notable "Committee of Sheets", known for launching the initiative of sheets hanging from windows in memory of Falcone. While refusing to identify with any party, such movements definitely and consciously act like political subjects.

Now, to take the floor and act politically, creating spaces of public speech is mandatory to qualify as public speakers. The picture by Gentile had a relevant role in this. In the course of the demonstrations, Toni Gentile's photo became an important tool for demarcating gathering places, as well as a distinctive image of the groups' communication material, used as a logo. Gentile himself will take photographs of these re-uses, attesting to their ability to mark utopian places, sources of value, and identity for the movement in the making. These are, as we shall see, real spaces of enunciation. The reproduction of the image now acquires a new strategic function: connect the spaces for taking the floor. Moreover, as anticipated, one of the drive for this connection is the intimacy of the relations between the two magistrates, now elevated to a certain degree of mysteriousness on the level of its re-use.

Initially, the image is printed on paper and T-shirts and subtitled "for that smile to live forever". Then it begins to be mass-produced in the form of a branded sheet. The sheet is designed by Gabriella Saladino, sister of journalist and writer Giuliana Saladino and aunt of the committee's founder, Marta Cimino. Under Gentile's picture, a paraphrase of a sentence from an interview with Giovanni Falcone stands out: "you did not kill them: their ideas walk on our legs". This is precisely an exegesis of the image's meaning that reactivates it from heterogeneous materials. By enhancing the actorial and temporal continuity that the photo made available in the post-massacre journalistic discourse, this version of the image calls upon someone willing to wield it, testify a presence, and interpret its signifi- cance for the new generations (see Puccio-Den 2009). Indeed, its study can contribute little to a history of "veridiction". Tapping into a venerable tradition of characters that, in Catholic and Western Culture, are identified with the duty to tell the truth publicly despite any risk, the one wielding the image is now a "militant-exegete" (Foucault 2009). A



stereotypical, “thematic role” of someone charged to state publicly uncomfortable truths in the name of justice, allowing the one who wears it to fill the void left by the body politic. It is no accident, we believe, that the one with Gentile’s photo is one of the few sheets actually branded by the committee, making collective and personal a practice, that of sheet display, initially thought to be individual and anonymous, albeit widespread. This enunciated statement seems to clarify the symbolic effect as a technique of subjectivation. The “we” inscribed in the sheet actually combines a plurality of enunciating instances: the photograph, Falcone’s text, and the sheet itself as a synecdoche of the committee. This collective chaining of enunciation helps to bracket the void left by the process of disintermediation in Italian society. By marking, at the same time, the places of aggregation of this form of anti-mafia subjectivity. To this day, the Falcone tree (see Tassinari 2021), in the variety of messages and drawings

left on its trunk, hardly lacks a copy of the sheet with Gentile’s image printed.

This creative transition, translating the intimacy and the temporality of the image within a political space of enunciation, represents a migration of the aura that pulls the “original” photograph in a “symbolic becoming” through a first series of “facsimiles”. Inheriting and transforming the photograph’s semiotic and cultural relevance, this series opens the path for other uses that would not have been conceivable with the photo alone. Gradually, Saladino’s reproduction of the photo steals its aura from the original photograph: its memorial and political use make the image a symbol to those who wield it even more than the photograph appeared in the newspapers. The image takes another step towards its symbolic becoming as it re-elaborates journalistic discourse into a militant one.



FIG. 6. ON THE LEFT, ONE OF THE SHEETS PRODUCED BY SALADINO IN THE NINETIES, CONSERVED AT THE ISTITUTO GRAMSCI OF PALERMO; ON THE RIGHT A PICTURE (© GOOGLE IMAGES) OF THE FALCONE TREE.

## 6. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE AMBIGUOUS CASE OF STREET ART

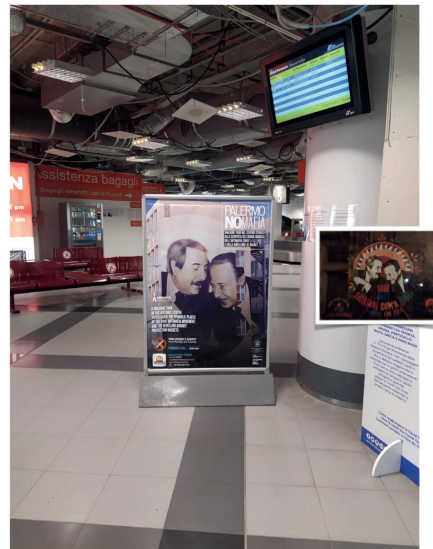
Indeed, since the picture of Falcone and Borsellino became a powerful tool to take the stand and fill the credibility gap left by politicians, it also became a strategic tool to claim credibility for institutional subjects themselves.

In 2002, as the Falcone Foundation took on the organization of the May 23<sup>rd</sup> commemoration with the Italian Ministry of Education, the state issued a stamp with a design from the photo. In 2022, on the 30th anniversary, the image was struck on the national side of the two-euro coin. In the meantime, it is hung in almost all public offices, schools, and civic associations. However, deprived of new alterations, new translations, and new exegesis, the image ceases to derive from its reproduction the necessary effect of authenticity, registering a rhetorical saturation that, in counterpoint, immediately ignites the controversy over the insincerity of its uses.

A borderline case of this type is given by the street art commissioned by the

municipality of Palermo, which captures the potential for re-writing the space given by the image. The most striking example in this regard is the gigantic mural by street artists Rosk and Loste (Fig. 7). It was created at the Cala marina in 2017 on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre. The technique, size, shape, and placement of the image load the series of constituent variants of the symbolization process with new semantic qualities related to a displacement of the aura from the previous uses.

First, the mural painting technique is very popular. This choice allows for setting up a simulacrum of enunciation that opposes the institutional language expected by the commissioner, the municipality of Palermo. Just as the movement, paraphrasing him, spoke through the language of Falcone, so the municipality uses street art to speak through the language of the people. However, it also achieves the opposite effect, namely the institutionalization of street art, which was born as a spontaneous and unauthorized practice (Mondino 2014, 2017, 2018).



**FIG. 7.** LEFT: THE CALA MURAL PAINTING BY ROSK AND LOSKE (2017); RIGHT: AN ADVERTISEMENT OF ADDIOPIZZO TRAVEL TOURISTIC TOURS OF PALERMO STAGING THE CALA MURAL PAINTING (PHOTO TAKEN IN 2020).

Visually, the image also undergoes some changes. Not so much on the figurative level, which points to the photographic realism in which Rosk and Loste specialize, but on the plastic level. Two lines of a circular painting frame the image; and most importantly, it is enlarged and suspended in mid-air, like the stone faces of American presidents carved on Mount Rushmore. Both the frame and the leap in scale, recently brought back into the realm of plastic properties by Tiziana Migliore and Marion Colas-Blaise's book on the format (Migliore, Colas-Blaise 2022a, 2022b), produce an effect of domination and sacralization of the image, placing the viewer in a position of humility and admiration.

Finally, it is relevant to note the location, the Marina district. The image, painted on a wall of the nautical institute, faces the harbor entrance, addressing tourists approaching by ship, or even better, students arriving in Palermo on the so-called "ship of legality" every May 23rd. It is no coincidence that this street art work stands as one of the mandatory stops on the antimafia tourist tours organized by Addiopizzo Travel. Their advertising posters at the arrival area of the Palermo airport feature a picture of this mural. Sacred and touristy together, the image re-writes Palermo's identity not only for the use of citizens but also for

the use of tourists to whom it offers itself as a new marker of territorial typicality. Hence, a whole tradition of folklorisation and typification of the antimafia makes possible the juxtaposition of the image of Falcone and Borsellino as much to the work of the puppets as to gastronomic heritage. Falcone and Borsellino become local products, the image of which can be easily found in many restaurants of Palermo (but not only). For the sake of brevity, here I produce only two visual examples: the one of an excellent Sicilian-Trapanese pizzeria, opened in 2021, which displays in its window a photo of Falcone and Borsellino surrounded by a circle with typical Sicilian cart decorations, underscoring the "folkloric" element; and the one from a restaurant called "*Locale*", "local", opened in 2017, pairing a photographic detail of the mural – not the picture by Gentile! – with a reproduction of a generic painted blue sky with some clouds, underscoring "artistry" and "creativity" along with a stereotypical representation of "hope". Here again, we can observe the progressive autonomization of the image from the original picture. It is a clear example of the migration of the aura towards a different realization (the mural one), more compatible with the domain of the touristic experience of consumers and with the relation of spectatorial reverence demanded by sacred icons<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 8).



**FIG. 8.** FALCONE AND BORSSELLINO IN PALERMITAN RESTAURANTS FOCUSED ON "LOCAL GASTRONOMY".

<sup>4</sup> On the liminalities between religious and touristic experience, see Pomian 2003, pp. 12–13.





FIG. 9.

STENCILS OF FALCONE (2021) AND BORSSELLINO (2022) REALIZED BY TVBOY ON THE EVE OF THE CAPACI MASSACRE ANNIVERSARY.

The Marina mural is interestingly contrasted with recent stencils by Palermo street artist TvBoy, created in May 2021 and 2022 (Fig. 9). The work is located on a side street of Piazza Marina. It does not capture Gentile's photo but a more anonymous one. Falcone is standing, facing the viewer frontally. He apostrophizes and questions us. He holds a spray can in his right hand, stretched along his side. It is as red as the heart pinned on his jacket. But also like the writing he seems to have penned himself, that stands out behind and above his head, like an invitation he addresses to us with his gaze: "It is time to move on". In 2022, on the Eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Capaci massacre, the work was completed by a second stencil, predictably depicting Borsellino. The character has the same human size. Slightly three-quarters, he does not look directly at the spectator. Like the former, he is thematized as a "street artist" (which in turn thematizes the street artist as Falcone and Borsellino, in a superposition of the subject of enunciation and the subject of the utterance) by the depiction of the grey paint used to write the message over his head. A message that, furthermore, may easily be read as a continuation of the phrase written on top

of Falcone: "For smelling the fresh perfume of freedom".

This is a break with the iconographic tradition littered by the process of symbolization, segments of which we have recovered. First because, by bringing Falcone and Borsellino back to a human dimension, it opposes the sacralization of commissioned street art. Second, because, in this movement, he explicitly addresses the present of the viewer by proposing a new contract of reading, no longer based on memory, but, as the content uttered written in the first image suggests, on the open and indeterminate planning of the future; a concept reiterated at the level of enunciation though the lateral gaze of Borsellino, suggesting the spectator himself to raise his eyes. Thirdly, because apparently Falcone and Borsellino are no longer inseparable. This break, however, is not a clean one. The apparent stylistic, semantic, and syntactic continuity between the works reinstated the photo's two-actor structure, confirming the inseparability of Falcone and Borsellino. This continuity wouldn't be as clear if Gentile's photo didn't establish its visual standards. But his photo is not the only "standard", the only "original" this copy refers to, notably under the respect

of size, creating a semi-symbolism with the semantic opposition Divine vs. Human; an opposition in which the Divine, however, is somewhat comprised the exemplarity of some martyred humans, as the peculiar setting of the first stencil very close to an altar, doesn't fail to give off (not surprisingly, some months later its realization, someone laid a rose and a candle at her feet). So the aura migrates, and through this migration, through the variants of a text, it paves the way for its symbolic-becoming.

## 7. CONCLUSION

I cared to end up on TvBoy because it represents an escape line from the semantic universe covered by the process of symbolization initiated by Tony Gentile's shots. It is, in fact, both a form of closure and an opening of the discourse it initiated. A process in which, as can be seen, the photograph is just a segment.

Gentile's shot indeed had symbolic effects after its publication on *Il Messaggero*: it fostered the public elaboration of a discourse on death felt as a collective loss. This helps us take a stance on how an image become a symbol, departing from the idea that symbols derive their strength and significance from historic facts fundamentally different from semi-otic process: the photo become a symbol precisely because it is used as an argument within a discourse that reference, reconstruct and reinterpret an event as an historical, collective loss. From there, it stimulated multiple re-uses, connecting various domains of culture such as the infosphere, the political sphere, the public memory sphere, and even the economic sphere (through tourism, gastronomy, and folklorization of antimafia). Through these re-uses, however, it also induced a displacement of its "auratic effect", leading to its de-iconization: while within the infosphere the image broke an iconogra-

phy of death and gave way to a militant use affirming a collective political identity oriented towards the contingency of remembrance, in the later reproductions, notably from the Cala mural, the image took a new direction towards an idea of durable typicality.

While each of these "copies" forced on spectators the feeling of facing something bigger than a simple image, an isolated text, the cultural memory of the re-uses turned more than one corner, leading to an authentication of the typicality of the symbol instead of its historically determined political use. It is clear, however, that the "aura" was quickly stolen from the photography<sup>5</sup>. This allows us to go back on the idea of the "auratic effect of the symbol": *it is the activation of the shifts between a symbol and its genealogy*, tracing a trail of "symbolic career"; a "career" of strategic uses and semantic effects bound to convene a collective body within a specific semiosphere.

We could think of it as differentiating power lost through saturation precisely when reproductions are too faithful to their antecedents and successors, without adding much to them. This is what seems to me to have happened in the 2000s, where the image has been used to inform tourist-gastronomic content, articulated far more lavishly elsewhere. Instead, the rhetorical creativity – a real explosion in the Lotmanian sense – that the image on the sheets had in the context of political participation in the historical period of the 1990s is quite evident. Those sheets seem to me to be the best representative of the rhetorical power of the symbolization process series that is the photo in journalistic discourse. What we would like to emphasize, in short, is the mythic functioning of the symbol, that is, the importance of its reproduction, serialization, and putting into variation.

<sup>5</sup> We could interpret the recent campaigns for the respect of photographs' intellectual property started by Gentile, its trial against RAI (the national Italian broadcasting company) for intellectual property violation (Bolzoni 2022) and its high quality reprintings of Falcone and Borsellino's shot (see the author's commercial website, <https://www.tonygentile.it/>), as political, legal and commercial attempts to "bring back" the stolen aura to its work.



It is indeed a form of uniqueness that completely undermines the idea of the original. A strange and fascinating semiotic being, to whom it is not obvious to make room among the people of “semiophors” (Pomian 1990) that our culture recognizes. I hope I have given a few more elements for better representation.

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88 years have passed since the first publication of Walter Benjamin's essay where he firstly proposed the notion of aura. Following the ongoing process of artification of daily life, the problem of the uniqueness of the work of art, as identified by aura, continues to be inspiring for understanding and criticizing the social world.

This issue of Global Humanities proposes the idea that the concept of aura may be considered as an effect of meaning which demands to be managed by social actors in the mediasphere. Such a move enlightens the relevance of a proper struggle for "authenticity" to be pursued as an added value of daily life: How do social forces construct such an effect? How do they capitalize on it, in their activity? How does it get recognized and valued?

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