

# *Aesthetics, in a Nutshell* \ Menahem Goldenberg

***The senses and passions speak and understand nothing but images.***

***The entire store of human knowledge and happiness consists in images.***<sup>1</sup>

Johann Georg Hamann

## **1. Ecce Vulgus – Behold the Masses**

The video *La Rivoluzione* (2014) is composed of footage taken at a projection event of the Italy-Spain Euro final. The immediate context hinted by the piece is the political context. Evident already in its title, it is also reiterated in the flags, in the singing of the national anthem, and in the torrent of ecstatic people, united by the Italian national context, who wash over the piece. Specifically, the video associates the aesthetics used in entertainment with the political that manifests itself in culture – an age old bond connecting the stadium in Rome to the amphitheatre of the Roman Empire, and the football match to the gladiator battles. Indeed, Rome provides the video *La Rivoluzione* with a fitting context and a rich (albeit ultimately degenerate) tradition for the relation between entertainment and politics: from the days of Pax Romana, through Christianity and the Catholic Church, to mid-twentieth century Fascism. And so, in *La Rivoluzione*, people of all religions, races, and genders come together under national cultural representations, driven by hope and faith.

The darkness that opens the work conjures a sense of crowded intimacy. Even in the dark, we can tell that we are watching a football match projected on a screen. This is not merely a symbolic gesture – a metaphor for the dark urges lurking within the human psyche: in the finest tradition of Italian painting, this darkness is also and mostly meant to produce an emotional effect. However, the darkness does nothing to prepare us for the realization that we are in a natural stadium in the heart of Rome, replete with fans and flags, brimming with life. The editing and transitions from light to dark (or *chiaroscuro*, as the Italians would call it) are prescribed by the logic of drama, aimed at generating an emotion. The duality and contrast elicit an emotional tension that builds and retreats and erupts and withdraws. In the video, we come across and shift between a wide spectrum of emotions: joy, pride, contempt, violence, disappointment, astonishment. In the turmoil, in the chaos of the excitement, we meet a human being, an individual, who has a (handsome) face and (at least) one trick up his sleeve (opening a beer can with a key). We meet the authentic man who is replicated into the many and becomes the masses through the law of affinity: like attracts like. We meet the individual who becomes a corpus and a force by the power of the imagination. Announcing himself: behold, the masses.

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[1] Johann Georg Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce* (1760), in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

The work *La Rivoluzione* seems to trap us between the walls of a natural crater turned stadium tribunes, between the camera and the screen, between two images, within the beats of the editing. It places us in the heart of “mass culture,” renders us willing-subjects, a part of the hegemony (as another Italian, Antonio Gramsci, would suggest), a part of everyone. We are trapped and gathered through the image, standing amongst people for whom the image is the real, the image is what happens in reality. Here the predominantly masculine crowd waves flags, raises hands in a salute, flips a finger, shouts, swears, sings, and is enthralled. Surrenders. Not to a change in the conditions of reality, but to the projected image. Surrenders to the atmosphere, to the possibility, a possibility of a victory, which in itself is nothing more than a part of a system of signifiers’ exchange. Marx is not the one we need now. What we need here is a cameraman and an editor, a producer and a director.

We can learn of the nature of the revolution from the song that accompanies the work, which seems to overcome it, gives it its title, and marks the fate of the times that have set aesthetics as the decisive criterion. At first, the sentimental 1960s Italian song is muted. Then, it is drowned by the background noises, fading out to make room for them. Towards the end, the song is once again heard clearly, as though overcoming and masking the sounds of reality. It is a “cultural revolution” or “entertainment revolution,” which the work heralds in the voice of Gianni Pettenati. We are viewers/participants in an event which, more than anything else, is a part of an all-encompassing mega production. The sound of the song calling for a revolution overcomes the vigorous sounds of life that call for a victory, that deflate with disappointment. It offers them and us a limited liability happiness (Happiness LTD.), a questionable hope: there will be another match. And while the song lures us to celebrate the triumph of the aesthetic revolution – to celebrate the precedence of the image as what enables experience – this is a Pyrrhic victory, since after all what we are witnessing is Italy’s loss to Spain.



*'La rivoluzione', 2015 HD video, 5'07" (Still Photograph, Detail)*

## 2. Constellations

*Culture is in very truth the pious and regulating, I might say propitiatory entrance of the dark and uncanny into the service of the gods.*<sup>2</sup>

*The Moon, Mars, Jupiter Trilogy* (2015), also known as *The Japanese Trilogy* takes us to other worlds.<sup>3</sup> Worlds where order and cleanliness reign supreme. Here we meet the individual engrossed in his toil for the common good, working as an organ of the group. Once again, Eyal Segal's work presents us with an aspect of "culture," like a mirror image of the Italian *mise-en-scène*, or an antinomy of the "aesthetic revolution" in which the images are the foundation of reality. If in *La Rivoluzione* Segal replaced the binary aspect of rational thought and the dichotomies through which we perceive things with the dramatic duality of darkness and light – in the trilogy he marks the deviation of aesthetic thought to the dialectic, trifold, logic. The trifold logic allows the intertwining of one thing with its polar opposite, creating a new, other, additional sense, in which the contrast is contained and enhanced. In this sense, the transgression demonstrated by *The Japanese Trilogy* acts as a subtle nod to the possibility of perceiving multiplicity and abundance – both of the world of things and of man's mental world – and giving them shape.

With this nod, *The Japanese Trilogy* points us to a constellation of stars, in a way that brings to mind Walter Benjamin's use of the term. Benjamin introduces this term in connection to the meaning of historic and concrete events formulated within an idea that shapes them through affinities and associations.<sup>4</sup> Like the shapes we find in the infinite starry sky, aesthetics also looks for a shape through which the phenomena in the world could manifest themselves. That is, aesthetics places phenomena in an arrangement that gives them presence as a certain (historic/concrete) thing, which produces them as meaningful, and as such, allows them to act and take part in our world. According to Benjamin, such action does not add up "merely" to display, in the sense of representation. It allows the "deliverance" of phenomena from their solitude and the historical oblivion that is the fate of any ephemeral phenomenon. For him, the aesthetic action that wishes to connect phenomena, to unravel the ties, and rearrange them again within new shapes, is in fact the organizing principle of human meaning. Or, in short: "ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars."

Thus, in *The Japanese Trilogy* – and this is particularly evident in the trilogy's video installation – Segal directs us to look at the concrete, the mundane, the prosaic recurrent events. And to do so with a gaze that turns towards the sky and the whole of the universe, towards the plateau of infinite possibilities of shapes and images and formulation of experiences and meaning.

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[2] Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 1947, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter, pp. 9-10.

[3] *The Japanese Trilogy* is a video installation, composed of three separate videos: *Moon Walkers*, *Jupiter Marching* and *Mars Runners*.

[4] Benjamin formulated the concept of constellation – a constellation of stars – in his essay *The Origin of the Tragic Drama* (on the baroque tragedy) and later in the Arcades Project. See also *Wandering Star: The Image of the Constellation in Benjamin*, Giedion and McLuhan, July 2013.

The trilogy on its part wishes to create a “constellation of stars,” a possible triangular formation: Moon, Jupiter, Mars. Strange worlds, which seem to echo a familiar promise:

*“When the moon is in the seventh house,  
And Jupiter aligns with Mars,  
Then peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars.”<sup>5</sup>*

If thus far we have pointed to the meaning of “the aesthetic revolution” in the context of the image as the source of reality and its association with the political (the regulation of human activity), then an examination of the three works comprising *The Japanese Trilogy* allows us to trace the conditions that make the manifestation of the image possible, to reflect on the three basic elements of the aesthetic experience: display; effect; meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The question of display, as it emerges from the work *Moon Walkers*, is based on two essential characteristics: the ability “to see through” – reflected in the act of cleaning the windows, and the windows “grid” – as the surface on which the image appears. These allow the worker’s organic-mechanical movements – efficient gestures acquired through experience and honed to proficiency – to become a dance in the “heavens,” a performance. As mentioned earlier, the aesthetic experience does not concern only the representation of things but also seeks to turn representation into an expression. With – or through – the image, it wishes to let us see things as they could be, that is, to be meaningful for us.



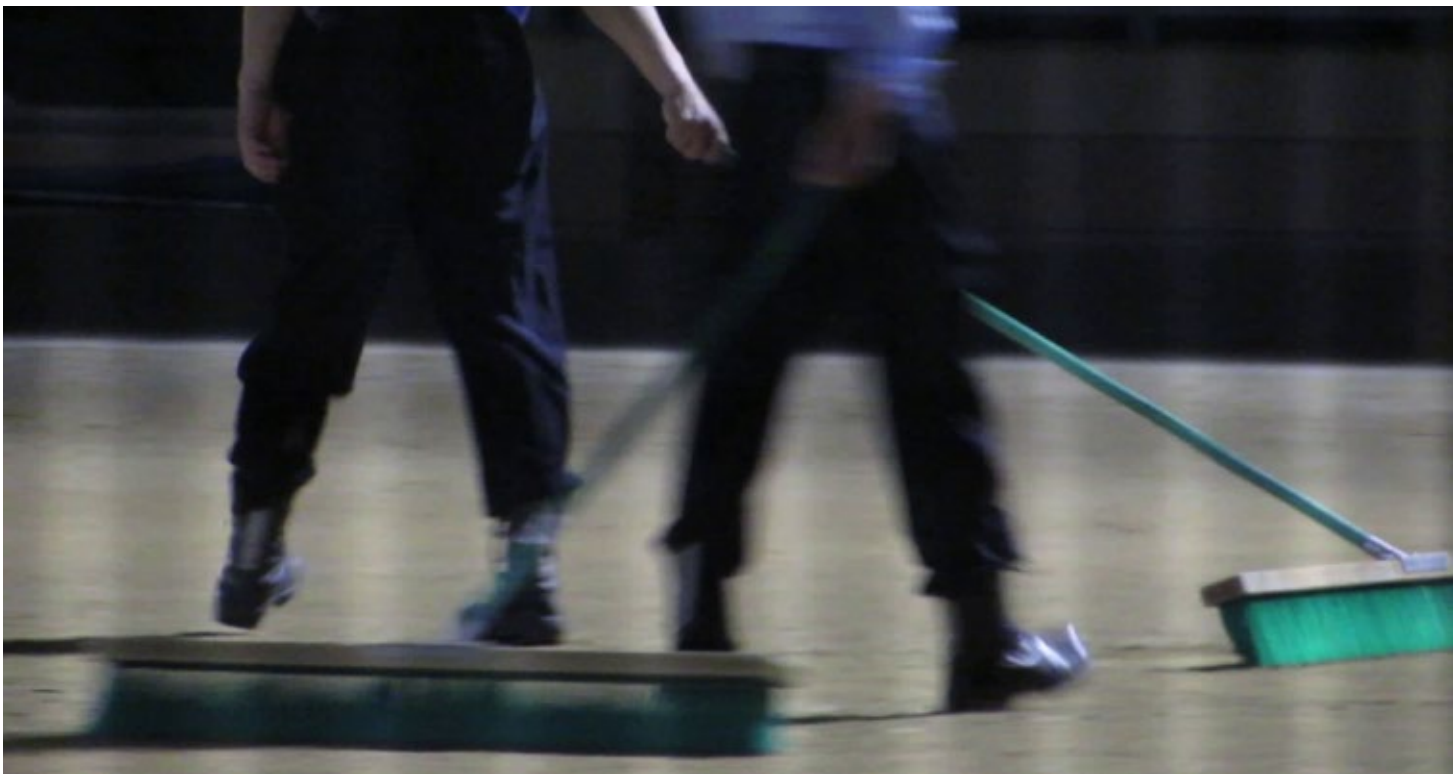
*Moon Walkers*, 2015 HD video, 5'07"

[5] *Aquarius*, from the musical *Hair*.

[6] *The Japanese Trilogy* and the way it references the three basic elements of the aesthetic experience – which is essentially a “mental experience” – generates affinity to the three orders of the psyche, as these were formulated by Jacques Lacan: the Imaginary (display, reflection-identification), the Symbolic (effect and law relations, the repetition), and the Real (meaning/a-meaning). This context is only implied in the following pages, and requires a separate expansion.

The question of display is therefore associated with the question of the relation between the imaginary and the real. Here we unfold the importance of the grid, which provides the image with the abstract support on which it can be perceived as real.<sup>7</sup> This laying of a grid is what allows to hold the treacherous duality of the imagination, which on the one hand is anchored in experience, and on the other hand is untethered by the laws of logic nor nature. In that sense, the grid, reiterated throughout the trilogy, serves as the ground and the condition for freeing the imagination to act, hovering between heaven and earth, much like the window cleaner. The video *Moon Walkers* sets the grid as the factor that facilitates the conditions for viewing the image as real. These, in turn, allow the image to show us the world through it, allow us and the world to be present in the image created like this. In a mundane, prosaic, everyday manner. Like walking. On the moon. Without gravity.

In *Jupiter Marching* we are once again watching an everyday routine. Here too we are in the midst of preparations, watching foundations being set up for a performance. However, on planet Jupiter (whose name in Hebrew is *Tzedek*, which means “justice”) the action serves a different purpose. Unlike window cleaning, which like any task will eventually come to a conclusion, one returns to the military drill square every day, time and again, each time like the one before it. This specific mode of repetition is how the Law operates. And while work indicates a purposeful action that comes to conclusion and fulfilment, then the action of the officers of the law seems to repeat itself for repetition’s sake. With that it demonstrates a specific type of action: an action aimed at setting a purposeless purpose, like sweeping the square.



*Jupiter Marching* 2015 HD video, 3'33"

[7] We could mention in this context Albrecht Dürer’s engravings, which depict the method of using grid in geometrical perspective paintings – the dawn of “the age of representation,” and present these two qualities quite literally and explicitly.

The emphasis on pointless repetition in *Jupiter Marching* creates a context for examining the Law as a space and as a function. This repetition does not create or do anything, yet it shapes time itself: creates an effect. In that sense, the work underscores the link between the shape of the image and its content; the relation embodied in the image, between what we might call the “Law” and “the effect of the truth.” Hence, ultimately, the marching, the formation – or forming – wishes to create an effect of control over the effect of the action. Or in other words, to produce a measure of correlation between effect and effect, which is nothing but a measure of justice.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the spectrum of display that Segal unfurls between *La Rivoluzione* and *The Japanese Trilogy*, and the resultant effect. In Italy, the cradle of European Humanism, the camera is assimilated as a human point of view, as if standing in the crowd as one of the fans, as one of us. In *The Japanese Trilogy* on the other hand, the grid is present – as a background or as a fence – and as a result, the act of filming is also present. In *La Rivoluzione* Segal engages with the force of the “human” manifested as a crowd through intensive editing. In the trilogy, editing fades into the background in favor of the camera’s presence: in favor of the regulation of movement and image (from the outset); in favor of the presence of the projection, in favor of the video installation.

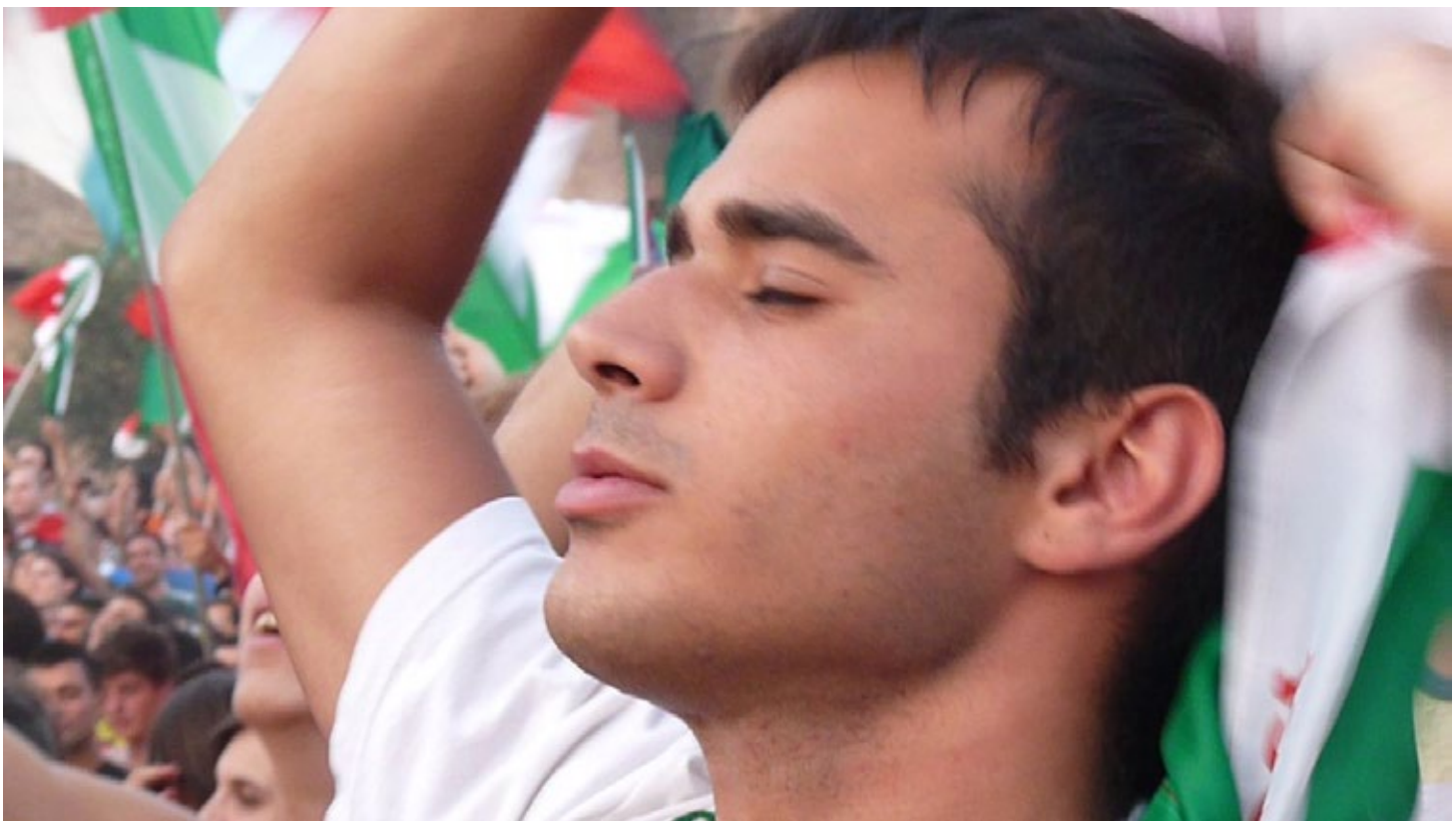
In *Mars Runners*, we find yet again a cyclical action. And once again, through a fence. Only here, the action is expropriated from the world of purposefulness and purpose in favor of the world of competition and game. The repetitive action receives the form of training, as though



*Mars Runners*, 2015 HD video, 2'20"

welcoming the future, without determining it in advance. The infrastructure workers and the designers of the conditions are replaced by children in a relay race. Except that it seems that the focus of Segal's interest in this work is the fence, stressing the fact that aesthetics constitutes a separate, extra-territorial space. And indeed, the logic of the game and of the training marks another, complementary, dimension of action: one that is not confined to the laws of logic and is not subjected to the values of reason – something imagined, fabricated, human. Like a relay race. In contrast with the purposeful action and the operation of the Law, the game and the training are spaces of possibilities and inclusiveness. In these spaces, the action enacts a purposeful purposefulness: creating human meaning for humans.

*Mars Runners*, which depicts an exuberance of youth, physicality, competitive passion, and children's games, can now take us back to the Italian boys in Rome. A line extends from the gestures of the Italian fans – reiterated like general schemes that allow the multiplicity, abundance, and excess of their expression – to the motions regulated by work, by practice, by a daily routine. A line extends from the young naked body, jumping and bellowing, to the children joyfully exercising their body. A line extends from the flag donned as a cape to the policeman uniform. A line is formed between the flag waving and its ubiquitous use in Italy, to the lopsided flag in the military drill square on the one hand, and the fluttering of the worker dangling from the rope on the other hand. And another line extends back from the grid of the skyscraper and the fences through which Segal films in Japan, to the grid of Renaissance Italy.



'La rivoluzione', 2015 HD video, 5'07"

### 3. Human, All Too Human

*But Beauty only concerns men, i.e. animal, but still rational, beings — not merely quâ rational (e.g. spirits), but quâ animal also; and the Good concerns every rational being in general.*<sup>8</sup>

In the scope between *La Rivoluzione* and *The Japanese Trilogy* emerges a realization that revolution shares a character trait with the motivation for regulation: both wish to confront man with his fate as a social animal; to bring us together with our fate as cultural animals. In the scope between the two aesthetic manifestations of political power – that of the ecstatic crowd and that of law and order – lies the strength of the human and its salvation. The aesthetic trinity – which appears both as a transcendence to the dialectical logic and in the work’s title – harnesses the revolutionary demands for triumph and the upheaval of reality on the one hand and the insistence on regulating the action to ensure production on the other hand, for a cosmic goal of peace and love; for the hope of having an ideal society. As is the aim of any revolution and regulation in the first place.

Both the revolution and the critique or regulation – i.e. the political logic brought about by the (aesthetic) demand and hope for happiness – are rooted in the positioning of the image as preceding reality, and in its definition as real. In both cases we wish to give things a shape, to create an image and work towards its attainment in reality. In both cases, in aesthetics as well as in politics, man can make good use of the power of imagination, and draw pleasure from it as a power of possibilities, of connections, and combinations and associations; draw pleasure from it as a power that allows to bring people together, in a group and in society.

Segal’s latest works – *La Revoluzione* and *The Japanese Trilogy* – direct us to Italy and Japan as the setting in which the narrative unfolds. Italy and Japan stand as two cultures where taste prevails, as two countries in which aesthetics seems to be the mode of examining and perceiving reality. While on the Mediterranean coast, the Italians associate aesthetics with the body and its desires, the Japanese in the Far East seem to use aesthetics in order to overcome these and create imaginary fanciful worlds where they realize their freedom. And despite these differences – contrasts, even – between the two works, both of them outline the figure of the stylized individual through his habitat and habits, through and in the realm of imaginary worlds. Both of them examine and shape the connections between man and society, examine and shape the connections between the aesthetic and the political as the focus of culture.

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[8] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p. 54.

[9] “Poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race; even as the garden is older than the ploughed field, painting than script; as song is more ancient than declamation; parables older than reasoning; barter than trade.” *Aesthetica in nuce* (1760), p. 2.



The aesthetic space in which culture operates and regulates the affairs of man is a space in which the affinities and relationships between things and the modes through which things take shape and are manifested, precede and determine what man considers real. That is, they are the essential conditions for human meaning. It is a space in which dangling from a rope or brushing and combing will formulate a method of work; a space in which the efficiency of labor will dissolve and become a dance and a performance. It is a space in which one can find reason and shape in being completely carried away; a space in which the private, personal expression may replicate and reoccur over and over. It is a space in which “the garden is older than the field and song is more ancient than declamation.”<sup>9</sup> Or, as they are articulated in Segal’s works, and in the spirit of the conditions that have matured and the times that have changed: song overcomes poetry and game overcomes order.

There are two protagonists in this story of ours: man and the imagination. After years of dilemmas, quarrels, and deliberations, it seems that the two have tied their fate to one another in what may be called an “aesthetic revolution.” The alliance forged between them is attested by the people who roam free in the space between the camera that captures them as images and the screen that projects images for them, free to share clothes, and haircuts, and gestures with their doubles. The long road that our protagonists have walked, marched, and ran together will be attested by the worker who dangles in the sky, the policemen crouched in their task, trapped in a loop of purposeless purpose, as well as the children who are engrossed in the relay. Which also runs in loops.



*'La rivoluzione', 2015 HD video, 5'07"*

It is a story of a turmoil and revolution on the one hand, and repetition, habit, and practice on the other hand. It is a story of dedication and devotion: “a human story.” It is a story of “like attracts like”: of aesthetics and politics. It is a story that in the historical context, particularly that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we might also call “a German story.”

And here we have a covenant of fate (the work of the devil), which brings man together with what defines and allows his humanity: the power of the imagination; which holds an image before his eyes; which deems him (and us) to be “human, all too human.”

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*'La rivoluzione', 2015 HD video, 5'07" (Stills Photograph)*