

**Images in (Con)Text.  
Intermedial and Intersemiotic Paradigms  
of Representation in the Old Media.**

By

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## Abstract

The rise and constant development of new media have made us more aware of the overwhelming presence of images. This is a striking characteristic of the era that W. J. T. Mitchell referred to as the *Pictorial Turn* and Gottfried Boehme as *Ikonische Wende*. Yet the questions of meaning creation and interpretation across media, modalities, and sign systems have not been fully studied and explained in the domain of the old media. The theorisation of mixed media has contributed to revive scholarly debates on the image-word relation, demonstrating the ideologically loaded discourses that underlie conceptual oppositions such as nature/convention, space/time, iconic/symbolic, epistemic/rhetoric.

In light of theoretical reflections on visibility proposed by scholars across different disciplines, this study sets out to frame intermediality and multimodality within the word-image paradigms. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that a ‘dialectic of the dialogic reason’, as intermedial and multimodal frameworks entail, is more useful for critical analysis than a dialectic of stark oppositions. Indeed, an either/or logic underlies the age-old word-image *paragone* itself: the very rhetoric, in other words, of the epistemic turns (such as the Pictorial Turn), and the ontological monism that governs Western traditions.

In particular, this study examines the word-image relation from four different perspectives: 1) as a dialectics built on hegemonic discourses and specific regimes of representation. 2) as situated between media and semiotic modalities in the old media and thus as essentially intermedial and multimodal; 3) as a translation process; 4) as a semiotic relation that requires complementary notions – such as Bakhtin’s dialogue, the *hyphos*, the rhizome – to be appreciated in full; These perspectives intertwine and complement each other, illuminating the complexity of the ways in which words and images interact: an interaction that cannot be reduced to total correspondence (*ut pictura poësis*) or total disagreement (*paragone*).

Methodologically, this argument is developed in three stages. First, I analyse intermediality and multimodality from the perspective of media studies, using the semiotic theories of Charles S. Peirce and others. Second, I demonstrate that intermedial and multimodal creation is in its essence a logically abductive process, as formulated by Peirce. This process illustrates how intermedial and multimodal creation are fundamentally rhizomatic, to revisit Deleuze and Guattari’s definition. Third, I examine the intersemiotic recoding from one sign system to another as an act of translation. Since the dialectic unfolding in any act of translation is fundamentally dialogic and open to alterity, it follows that intermediality and multimodality

play a pivotal role in disrupting the parameters of ontological monism that scholars have traditionally used to evaluate the word-image relation.

Finally, this study provides a deeper as well as a wider insight into word-image debates by proposing additional conceptual frameworks for and definitions of multimodality, intermediality and mediality of culture. Indeed, the interconnectedness of all semiospheres – as particularly emphasised by the notion of mediality of culture – means that the image-word relation must be examined both within and outside the traditional literary field of analysis. In view of this, I have integrated definitions from literary criticism, Visual Culture Studies, media theory, theological and postmodern semiotics, art history and aesthetic theory.

The three *exempla* examined illustrate the problem of ontological monism in the word-image relation, advocating for a dialogic approach to the essentially rhizomatic processes of intermedial and multimodal translation. In Chapter 1, I introduce the *paragone* between the visual and the verbal as interpreted in postmodern literary works, which allow me to articulate the slow transition from the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn. Antonio Tabucchi's *Il gioco del rovescio* and Daniele Del Giudice's *Nel museo di Reims* are quintessential examples of the ambiguous translation of the visual into the verbal, which underlies the epistemology dismantling the *ut pictura poësis* model of representation.

The irreducibility of the word-image relation to paradigms of correspondence and the distance between source and target text do not compromise the possibility of dialogue and translation: mimetic translation is still achievable. In Chapter 2, I focus on how the poetics of representation of Antonio Tabucchi and Fra Angelico interact and intersect in the creative meaning making space I refer to as 'intermedial difference'. In Chapter 3, I develop the notion of intermedial difference further through the study of the artist as a double (or multi-) talent, and the peculiar convergence of genres in the form of the *ex voto*. The intermedial encounter between the eclectic and innovative Dino Buzzati and the avant-gardist Yves Klein illuminates two aspects. First, the role of abductive creation; second, the need for a dialogic approach that includes elements of Otherness. In turn, these analyses warrant the reassessment of interpretive categories dominated by the logic of ontological monism and the paradigm of identity in representation.

In conclusion, this study of intermediality and multimodality in the old media contributes to shedding light on the word-image relation from an epistemological perspective. More specifically, it widens and deepens the ways in which the dialectic of alterity versus identity can be understood and interpreted within word-image paradigms.

Moreover, this interdisciplinary research radically reframes the role of intermedial and multimodal creation as catalyst for the introduction of elements of otherness – which are not only indispensable to open up new ways of meaning creation but also, and above all, to continuously (and creatively) unsettle monist and purist epistemologies – and offers a new, integrated methodological framework to accommodate and celebrate the hybridity of all cultural formations.

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### List of Abbreviations:

RG – *The Reverse Game* (Antonio Tabucchi)  
 LM – *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez)  
 RM – *In Reims Museum* (Daniele Del Giudice)  
 FC – *The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico* (Antonio Tabucchi)  
 OiS – *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* (Dino Buzzati)  
 CP – *Collected Papers* (Charles S. Peirce)  
 MS – *Manuscript* (Charles S. Peirce)  
 NEM – *New Elements of Mathematics* (Charles S. Peirce)  
 TLP – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

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## INTRODUCTION

*Images in (Con)text* contributes to the long-debated history of literature and the visual arts in the old media. While the main trend in intermedial studies now is to explore the frontier of the new media – hypermedia and the virtual realms of digitality<sup>1</sup> – there are unsolved tensions in the old media’s domain, namely in the old ‘word-image’ paradigms, a clarification of which will benefit studies both in the analog and digital forms of interartistic exchange.

I focus on case studies relevant to Italian literature; however, a number of terms relevant to a number of disciplines will be explained and adopted – medium, mode, multimodality, intermediality, interarts, intersemiotics. The need for terms susceptible to potentially endless interpretations, as I shall explain later, motivates my investigation into interarts studies. By examining how literary works interweave with other art forms, especially the visual arts, I shall revisit the old debate of the sister arts and the *paragone*, and examine, in each case study, which theoretical aspects have been given insufficient attention. Although subverting the chronological order, I have selected the following *exempla* to study different degrees of visuality in literature: a “zero degree” in Chapter 1, where I examine the interaction of words and images through postmodern *ekphrasis* in Antonio Tabucchi’s *The Reverse Game* and Daniele del Giudice’s *In Reims Museum*. The prevalence of the literary component on the page – effectively dominated by words – is also a characteristic of Chapter 2, where I analyse Antonio Tabucchi’s *The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico*. Here, however, the dialogue with the source – Angelico’s frescoes at San Marco in Florence – and Tabucchi’s rework on Angelico’s own exegesis allow for an analysis that delves deeper in art history and Visual Studies. By following Didi-Hubermann, I trace the analogy between painterly (Angelico’s) and literary (Tabucchi’s) exegesis. In Chapter 3, I turn to examine literary works offering a higher degree of visuality by introducing the notion of double talent (i.e. a writer who is also a painter), and the iconotext (a text where both images and words equally contribute to meaning creation). Dino Buzzati invites to be studied under both categories, and remains one of the most prominent modern pioneers of hybridisation of semiotic codes in literature. His artistic kinship with artist Yves Klein tests the limits of intermedial and abductive creation even further. Therefore, the *exempla* selected

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<sup>1</sup> A neologism in 1995. See Negroponte (1995).

follow, in a sense, the evolution of the word-image paradigm from the Linguistic to the Pictorial Turn, from word-based to hybrid semiotic modes in literature.

On the one hand, the theorisation and liberation of the arts from pre-established canons have dramatically changed the current perception of contemporary art forms. On the other hand, however, there is still uncertainty in addressing what used to be perceived as the self-contained boundaries of arts and media. Despite the investigation and exposure of discourses such as that of iconoclasm and iconophilia – respectively the hatred and love of images – this fundamental dialectic governing the interaction of words and images still remains largely overlooked. The dialectic of hatred and love of images has governed the ways in which the word-image opposition has been perceived, with practical consequences for artistic production over centuries.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the rise of methodological approaches such as intermediality, multimodality, and intersemiotics has too often been used for descriptive purposes instead of being explicitly connected to pressing theoretical issues such as iconophilia and iconoclasm, and, as I shall turn to in this study, identity and alterity.

Iconoclasm and iconophilia, as underlying discourses of the word-image relation, introduce a theoretical crux – the identity and alterity of signs and sign systems – which I will discuss from different perspectives in the case studies I present. One of these is the so-called Pictorial Turn, the seminal definition coined by eminent scholar William John Thomas Mitchell in 1994 to connote the era we live in as one dominated by the ubiquitous presence of images. The formulation of the Pictorial Turn was concerned above all with reversing the paradigm referred to as the Linguistic Turn, a definition which philosopher Richard Rorty coined in 1967. Decades after Mitchell's definition was coined, the formulation of the Pictorial Turn is still summoned in the debates on the nature of media – i.e. media's hybrid disposition as well as the trend to void the notion of medium by theorising a post-medium condition. The debates from the mid-nineties onward are milestones that contributed to the liberation of the *ut pictura poësis* paradigm from its dualistic opposition, as epitomised by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his seminal *Laokoon* (Lessing 1979).

The subject matter of the sister arts – traditionally poetry and painting, here the visual arts and literature – reframed through the lens of intermediality, multimodality, Peircean semiotics and intersemiotic translation, is a vast one that has to be addressed by different approaches, each contributing new theoretical insights. In this study, I have adopted intermediality and

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<sup>2</sup> On iconoclasm, see W. J. T. Mitchell. "The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm" in Mitchell (1986); Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft (2011); Besançon (2000); Latour and Weibel (2002).

multimodality as the main frameworks within which the fine-grained aspects of remediation are conceived. Remediation is, in effect, the process of appropriation and refashioning of representational practices from older forms. As a composite phenomenon, remediation (and therefore intermediality and multimodality) will involve further interdisciplinary approaches that I will introduce in detail in each case study. For instance, notions from continental philosophy, semiotics, art history, and Visual Culture studies are often invoked to complement literal visuality and literary criticism.

A wider theoretical framework within which one can read meaning-creation and exchange as intermediality, multimodality, and remediation is that of semio-translation, which, by virtue of its all-encompassing definition, also includes intersemiotic translation. Semio-translation, as defined by Gorlée (1994, 2003, 2004, 2004a, 2007), or interpretation semiotics by Petrilli and Ponzio (2005a, 2014) is influenced by the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce. I shall devote a section to the sign theory of Peirce in this introduction. In the meantime, according to Susan Petrilli, Peirce was vital as a theorist because he

clearly demonstrated that meaning is not in the sign but in the relation among signs, whether these are the signs of a defined system, like those forming a code, a langue, or the signs of dynamic interpretive processes, passing from one type of sign to another or from one sign system to another. Interpretation is not mere repetition, literal translation or substitution by synonyms, but rather re-elaboration and creative reformulation in order to arrive at an interpretation-translation that takes a risk given that it does not appeal to a pre-established code (Petrilli 2010, 368).

Likewise, as Bakhtin had already recognised,<sup>3</sup> the dualistic model proposed by De Saussure's semiotics was too reductive of semiotics. As Petrilli and Ponzio explain,

Bakhtin already saw in the 1920's what interpretation semiotics recognizes today: in real signifying processes the sign does not function in a state of equilibrium or on the basis of equal exchange between the signified and the signifier. Interpretation semiotics proposes a sign model that is far broader, more flexible, and inseparable from its pragmatic and valuative [sic] components (Petrilli and Ponzio 2017, 32).

As they go on to argue, in general, interpretation semiotics has been framed as part of semioethics, which alludes to an approach to sign studies that is not purely descriptive with

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<sup>3</sup> Three main continuities have been identified between Bakhtin and Peirce. See Gurdin (1994).

claims to neutrality, but rather extends beyond abstract logico-epistemological boundaries of sign processes to concentrate on problems of an axiological order, that is, on problems pertaining to values, to ethics and aesthetics and to ideology theory (Petrilli 2014, xxxiii).

The semiotic processes analysed here are taken to be part of what Sebeok has theorised as global semiotics (Sebeok 2001). Taking into account global semiotics means that the linguistic element – language – is not the privileged subject. Semiotics as a global discipline requires

focus[sing] on translation processes interconnecting different sign systems and different languages, which implies the language of different domains, ordinary languages and special languages. As a non specialized and non sectorial domain, one that is not closed, but rather practises an interdisciplinary approach, semiotics is a dialogical science ready to experiment different signs and sign systems and translate them into its own language (Petrilli 2014, ix-x).<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, postulating a dialogic dimension of the sign (Ponzio 2006) implies that the sign's otherness is always present. Therefore, this methodological perspective always accounts for communication – of any kind – “converg[ing] with the unspeakable, the unsaid, the vague, the ambiguous, with inscrutability, concealment, reticence, allusion, illusion, implication, simulation, imitation, pretence, semantic pliancy, polysemy, polylogism, plurilingualism, alterity” (Petrilli 2010, 378).

To these approaches, I shall add the perspective of Visual Culture – a movement, rather than a non-discipline<sup>5</sup> (Morra and Smith 2006, 270) – that expands the purview of traditional

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<sup>4</sup> Also: “global semiotics” has developed categories, methods and perspectives that involve biosemiotics, whether directly or indirectly. [...] The founder of biosemiotics, the Estonian-born, German biologist Jakob von Uexküll made a truly extraordinary contribution to research on signs and meaning, communication and understanding in the human world. On the basis of his scientific research in biology, which he conducted in dialogue with the general science of signs, he evidenced the species-specific character of human modelling. Modelling precedes and is the condition for human communication through verbal and nonverbal signs. According to Sebeok, Uexküll made a crucial contribution to renewing the sign science itself, or “doctrine of signs,” especially when it [the sign science] elects an issue like the problem of modelling as one of its main objects of research. “Biosemiotics” is at once the name of a relatively new branch of semiotics (which includes zoosemiotics and as part of the latter anthroposemiotics) and a foundational dimension of general semiotics”, *ivi*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “the explosion of Visual Studies [...] has provoked extensive questioning in the academy. The more prominent it has become, the more vigorously its character has been debated and its value challenged. [...] What is Visual Culture, first of all? Is it a discipline, an interdisciplinary, a multidiscipline, an anti-discipline, a post-discipline, a de-discipline, a non-discipline, an indiscipline? Does it have a coherent purpose, object, or method, or is it an excuse for academic anarchy? [...] The questioning of Visual Studies marks potential insecurity, but also real promise: the very vibrancy of the debate provides for a lively and interesting discussion”, Morra and Smith 2006, 270. See also Heath (2013, 41-42).

art historical research and media studies. The field of Visual Studies is itself heterogenous<sup>6</sup> and well suits a diversified methodological approach. As Mieke Bal has noted,

any attempt to articulate goals and methods for visual culture studies must seriously engage both terms in their negativity: ‘visual’ as ‘impure’ — synesthetic, discursive and pragmatic; and ‘culture’ as shifting, differential, located between ‘zones of culture’ and performed in practices of power and resistance (Bal 2003, 19).

Indeed, the majority of studies quoted here will emphasise how the adoption of multiple approaches and methodologies ought to be favoured over any specific perspective when considering intermediality and multimodality. As Guido Isekenmeier notes, Visual Culture studies, for instance, weds

literary visuality studies’ concern with the culturality of vision, the “symbolic form of visual perception” (Davis 2011, 230), [it] also entails a challenge to the concentration on the ways texts relate to pictures (and their media) either in praesentia (word and image, media combination) or in absentia (intermedial reference and its progenitor, ekphrasis) which is characteristic for intermedial studies of literature’s engagement with the visual. “Practices of looking” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001), the “logistics of perception” (Virilio 1989), “scopic regimes” (Jay 1988), “hyper-dispositifs” (Paech 1988) or the “techniques of the observer” (Crary 1990) are all partly situated beyond pictoriality and do not completely condense in pictures (Isekenmeier 2015, 326).

Generally, the approaches and the methodologies I have selected strive to overcome clear-cut distinctions such as the word-image relation, pointing instead toward a knowledge model advocating for different *Umwelten*. *Umwelt* – German for ‘environment’ – is a “characteristic endowment of each living organism [which] in human beings [...] allows for change and involves each individual in its singularity. In other words, a species-specific feature of human *Umwelt* and modelling is the capacity for creativity” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2017, 26).

This model largely coincides with the notion of mediality of culture. Coined by Hungarian scholar György E. Szönyi (Szönyi 2014), the phrase “mediality of culture” implies that culture:

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<sup>6</sup> The underlying assumption is that “the theoretical sources which have produced the recent interest in visual culture are diverse” (Rose 2012, 13).

- a) functions as a symbolic system
- b) is in essence multimedial (which summons the complementary notions of multimodality and intermediality)
- c) is a social practice and as such presents ideological and pragmatic aspects for consideration.

Szönyi interprets culture as a self-reflective practice of telling ourselves stories about ourselves:<sup>7</sup> for this reason, “if storytelling and culture are practically the same, we can also claim that culture is at the same time a cultural representation, a symbolic system and social practice by which a community constructs, interprets, and represents its own identity” (Szönyi 2014, 74). It follows that storytelling (or culture, which is the end-product) is

a social practice of multimedial, self-reflexive, and narrative representations by the help of which a community constructs, interprets and operates its own identity. To which we can add as a caveat: And by othering it separates itself from other communities. The historically most common forms of othering are elimination, assimilation and appropriation. Eventually, and rarely, we also find efforts for cooperation (Szönyi 2014, 74).

As the idea of mediality of culture entails the theoretical aspects outlined above, Szönyi advances the appropriate disciplinary frameworks. I agree that,

- If we admit that culture is a symbolic system, then we are obliged to study the structure of symbols, as well as their behavior and working (Charles Sanders Peirce, Carl Gustav Jung, Aby Warburg, Ernst Cassirer, or in Hungarian scholarship S. Janos Petofi, Mihaly Szivós, Vilmos Voigt).

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<sup>7</sup> Here following Geertz (1973, 448, 452): “Culture is the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves”.



- If we admit that culture is a multimedial representation, then we are obliged to study the nature of mediality and the characteristics of the various media. Historiography shows that in relation to these questions the greatest theoretical challenge has been the relationship of words (language systems) and pictures (visual representations). Not mentioning centuries of philosophical debates, enough to think of the two great theoretical ‘turns’ of the last century: the linguistic (Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson) and the pictorial (Mieke Baal, Hans Belting, Nicholas Mirzoeff, W. J. T. Mitchell). [...]
- If we admit that culture is a social practice and a mechanism to construct identity, then we are obliged to study the ideological contexts and the pragmatics of the symbolic signs. This research has two main aspects: the interpretation of symbols (the late Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans Georg Gadamer) and the politics of their use (Karl Mannheim, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, W. J. T. Mitchell) (Szönyi 2014, 75).

These recommendations alone suggest the all-encompassing character of the study of cultural representations.<sup>8</sup> Here I refer mainly to Charles Sanders Peirce, Augusto Ponzio, and Marie-José Mondzain, to cite a few, for the aspect of culture as symbolic system; on W. J. T. Mitchell, Lars Elleström, Irina Rajewski for the nature of mediality; on W. J. T. Mitchell and James Elkins for the ideological contexts and the pragmatics of symbolic systems.

Despite remarkable progress in the field of new media, there are avenues of theoretical enrichment in the study of the old media. I set out to show that the very word-image divide that theorists sought to surmount in the last century has been often radicalised by certain theoretical formulas – such as the Pictorial Turn and its German counterpart (*Ikonische Wende*) (Mitchell and Boehm 2009). Second, an interpretation through the lens of intersemiotic translation, understood within the context of “interpretation semiotics” (Petrilli 2014), is necessary to uncover further avenues of critical reflection. By making the connection between interpretation semiotics and intermediality more explicit, I aim to highlight the dialectic of identity versus alterity at work in the intermedial and multimodal exchanges on which translation theory has reflected deeply. The importance of stressing the dialectic of identity versus alterity lies in the

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<sup>8</sup> “To look through the above listed fields of research and the problems associated with them we are able to conclude that the study of cultural representations is complex and intricate and needs the cooperation of multiple disciplines from semiotics and cultural history through linguistics, visual studies, the history of ideas, religions and ideologies, art- and literary history, to cognitive and social psychology as well as anthropology. It is also important to emphasize that since cultural representations are tied to specific periods from the past to the present, one of the most important aspects of their study is the historical approach and contextualization”, Szönyi (2014, 75).

teachings of Peircean and Bakhtinian semiotics, to mention the main theoretical strongholds of this study. The distinction between difference and negativity, and alterity, is fundamental, since as Dan Zahavi notes:

in traditional metaphysics (Spinoza and Hegel), negativity is essential for self-determination but whereas negativity can be [...] assimilated into a totalitarian system, this is not the case for true alterity [...]. As long as the Other is conceived as being related to, or correlated with, or dependent upon subjectivity, as long as it is something that can be absorbed or integrated into the subject, we are not dealing with true alterity, but merely with a game of internal difference. According to Lévinas, Western philosophy has been characterised by this attitude toward alterity. It has been inflicted with an insurmountable allergy, with a horror for the Other that remains Other, and has consequently and persistently tried to reduce alterity to sameness. [...] In other words, difference has been reduced to identity, transcendence to immanence, the Other to the same (Zahavi 1999, 196).

Such a tendency to reduce the Other to the same is essentially at the basis of the conventionality of signs (and thus the creation of symbols); similarly, one could speculate that the irreducibility of images, their otherness (in particular, the special kind of images that are icons) is the underlying factor of iconoclasm and iconophobia. I aim to emphasise this tendency of assimilation of the Other to the Same, and to analyse the instances where certain degrees of alterity (those elements inassimilable by the dominant discourse) are maintained in the case studies I analyse. In light of Lévinas' critique of Western ontological monism, both Peirce's semiotics' acknowledgement of alterity as being essential for the creation of meaning and Bakhtin's focus on dialogue as an impossible closing to alterity, are the appropriate frameworks in which to carry out my investigation.

Moreover, an integrated analysis of the medial and semiotic aspects at play would not only find a methodological balance but also offer conceptual frameworks borrowed from different domains, in line with the hybridity that intermedial and multimodal works bring to the fore. This study benefits from the notions of dialogicity and polyphony (Bakhtin), as well as the interextendability of the intermedial/multimodal work as rhizomatic potential for semeiosis (from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome). By highlighting the different aspects of the interarts relationships, my adapted notion of rhizome here shows the transformative potential and the infinite combinations of intermedial and multimodal practices.

I shall define the key terms in the following section (§1. “*Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus*”. *Definitions*). Interarts, a field of study which has extended the traditional boundaries of comparative literature, is the main framework within which I apply the terminology in use. Claus Clüver, a scholar whom I also follow closely on the questions related to ekphrasis, concisely sums up the evolution of intermedial studies:

The transdisciplinary discourse on intermediality that has begun to establish itself incorporates the traditions of what some fifteen years ago began to be called ‘Interart(s) Studies’ and the discussion of intermediality carried on within the ‘Media Studies’ disciplines as well as the more recent investigations into the ‘New Media Poetries’ based on the digital media (Clüver 2007, 20).

With regard to ‘interarts’, it is unrealistic to give a unanimous definition, since there are also ‘regional’ differences.<sup>9</sup> The field of interarts studies has, however, a strong academic tradition in Northern Europe and has been theorised more and more frequently since the modernist attempts at integrating different artforms, as the Romantic aspirations to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total artwork] testify.<sup>10</sup> I am using the term ‘interarts’ to indicate that this is the broad field with which this study deals, whereas the more used ‘intermediality’ is referred to as its methodological counterpart.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, Creative New Zealand, The Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, provides its own definition: “Interarts are recognised around the world as a specific area of emergent and contemporary experimental arts practice that blurs and crosses boundaries between artforms. Sometimes referred to as ‘hybrid art’ (Australia Council), it’s based on the fusion of different arts practices within a particular artwork or arts activity. It can also specifically involve moving images and digital media. As part of our review, we examined how comparable arts councils define and support interarts (for example, in Australia, Canada, Ireland and Québec). As a result, our Arts Council has approved the following definition for ‘interarts’ at Creative New Zealand: “Interarts projects integrate artforms of any cultural tradition, combining them to create a new and distinct work. The result of this integration is a hybrid or fusion of artforms outside of Creative New Zealand’s existing artform categories.” *Review of Interarts and Multidisciplinary Arts*, Final Report, June 2015. <[http://www.creativenz.govt.nz/assets/paperclip/publication\\_documents/documents/388/original/final\\_report\\_-\\_review\\_of\\_interarts\\_and\\_multidisciplinary\\_arts.pdf?1433389721](http://www.creativenz.govt.nz/assets/paperclip/publication_documents/documents/388/original/final_report_-_review_of_interarts_and_multidisciplinary_arts.pdf?1433389721)>

<sup>10</sup> 1917 Germany is often quoted as the location of the inception of the field, thanks to the Wölfflin lecture by Oskar Walzel, Humboldt University, on the ‘Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste’, [The Mutual Illumination of the Arts]. See Finney (2006). The term ‘interart’ is the focus of Lagerroth, Lund, and Hedling (1997). Here it is also specified that both ‘interart’ and ‘interarts’ are used by the contributors.

<sup>11</sup> Claus Clüver (2007, 21): “The need to reconceive ‘Interarts Studies’ as ‘Studies of Intermediality’ or ‘Intermedial Studies’ arose both from a realization that there had been a gradual change within the theoretical orientation and the practices of the interdisciplinary discourse and from an approximation of the areas of Interarts Studies and Media Studies”.

Interarts studies are also useful for locating ekphrasis, a staple rhetorical trope examined in Chapter 1 as a type of intermedial device.<sup>12</sup> The modern interpretations of this rhetorical trope condense the vast critical debate on representation across modes and media that Lessing's *Laokoon* (Lessing 1979) canonically started. The extended boundaries and functions of the current notion of ekphrasis makes it an ideal candidate for exploring the status of the interarts relations. With regard to its significance for translating worldviews, ekphrasis is second to no other rhetorical trope. As Chapter 1 will show, Antonio Tabucchi's and Daniele del Giudice's ekphrasis has assimilated the postmodern attitude to representation. The issues of representation I examine belong to postmodern theory and indeed introduce the challenge for intermedial representation in an era of ontological relativity.

In Chapter 2, the religious themes carried by Fra Angelico's painting are transformed into an implicit discourse underlying the act of recreation – also able to be conceived of as adaptation – that is Antonio Tabucchi's reading of Fra Angelico. Although, I argue, fidelity is maintained in the 'intermedial' translation offered by Tabucchi, it is also rewarding to consider Tabucchi's fine interpretation of the late medieval *mentalité* as an act of intersemiotic remediation proper which enriches our own understanding of the original (as, for instance, Eco and Berman maintain). Indeed, one should heed the fact that “in a translation there is not only a certain percentage of gains and losses; [...] there is another level where something of the original appears that does not appear in the source language” (Berman 1992, 7). Here I examine whether it is viable to understand intermedial relations as the product of alterity (namely, as Derrida's *différance*) – yielding not to pure negativity (apophaticism and the languages of the unsayable, and *différance*) but, on the contrary, to rhizomatic (generative) potential for semeiosis (the creation of meaning). Derrida's negative deconstruction clashes here with a Deleuzian positive outlook.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, while the infinite deferral of signs, as introduced by Peirce in semiotics, resonates with Derrida's philosophy, the overarching view that

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<sup>12</sup> 'Ecphrasis' in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Vol. I* (Oxford: OUP, 1971): 831 [henceforth OED]; 'ekphrasis' is included in the index of Baldwin 1928, 12, and in Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1968, 526).

<sup>13</sup> The concept of rhizomatic is borrowed, with variations, from Deleuze and Guattari. See also Bearn (2000, 441): “The difference between Derrida and Deleuze is simple and deep: it is the difference between No and Yes [...] the difference between Derrida's No, which reeks of the thick smell of Schopenhauer [...] and Deleuze's Yes, blowing in, fresh and salty, off Nietzsche's new seas. It is the difference between a philosophy trapped in the frame of representation and one which breaks on through (to the other side). It is the difference between playing a Derridean game you can never win and Deleuzian game you can never lose. It is the difference between No and Yes.”

intermedial relations bring about new meaning in alterity finds a more valid ally in a Deleuzian conceptual framework.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 3 develops the notion of intermediality in a twofold way. First, the debate on the artist as a double- and multi-talent (for simplification described as *Doppelbegabung*, ‘double talent’), that is, the artist thinking and making intermedially and multimodally, will introduce in more detail the application of the identity/alterity framework to intermedial and multimodal artworks. Second, tracing the connections between, respectively, painter-writer Dino Buzzati and multimedia artist Yves Klein, who both ponder the ontology of representation, serves as a double moment to disentangle the question of intermedial affinity in the network of all possible relations. Third, this case study highlights the particular historic moments where the notion of medium-specificity started to crumble, yielding to further advancements in the theorisation of the intermedia. The fact that Buzzati and Klein are here examined systematically together for the first time, is indicative of the further attention that intermediality and multimodality in the old media warrant.

Attempts to widen the understanding of intermedial and multimodal phenomena in the old media inevitably cover a variety of genres. From the literary and visual arts realms: these might include short stories, picturebooks, book illustrations, emblems, book covers, Renaissance religious painting, conceptual art. In the multiplicity of perspectives which this study touches upon, I seek to establish whether the categories of dialogicity, polyphony, and rhizome are applicable through the lens of intersemiotic translation, intermediality, and Visual Culture studies, proposing an approach that acknowledges the mediality of culture and its inclusion of alterity, with the view of overcoming the dualistic oppositions of the word-image relation, as the hyphenated expression itself suggests.

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of rhizome has been differently interpreted since Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s theorization (derived from Jung), first in Deleuze and Guattari 1976 and then in Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

# 1. “*Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus*”. Definitions

The terms mentioned above – medium, mode, multimodality, intermediality – have all been widely researched both in the context of the old and new media. Due to the impossibility of including each debate in its entirety, I have selected a few theoretical hubs that support my claim for a more integrated approach in the study of the interarts in the old media. Eco’s famous hexameter in the title of this paragraph suggests how quickly definitions may change and multiply, and therefore invalidate certain terms of the interarts in the old media. Before I turn to the definitions I assign to each of the terms adopted, I shall explain the notion of (con)text appearing in the title of this study. My reflection is generated from Bakhtin’s assertion that “the text lives only through contact with another text (context)” (Bakhtin 1986, 162).<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva’s formulation of intertextuality derives, in effect, from Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism.<sup>16</sup>

The way I have bracketed the word ‘context’ signals my intention to look at what accompanies the text (*cum + textum*),<sup>17</sup> within the text proper and in the wider paratext. As an expanded version of the notion of paratext advanced by Genette in his seminal *Paratexts* (Genette 1987), I examine both the traditional paratextual thresholds that form the (con)text, as per Genette’s reading, and the paratext’s virtual ramifications that lead back to all that has contributed to the making of the work, including the cultural ‘intertext’ present in absentia. On the one hand, there is the text itself, as in its Latin origin of woven ‘artefact’, which has a medial materiality that cannot go unnoticed. On the other hand, I will follow the traces and potentialities of a virtual expansion that are intrinsic to the text as a medium but exist outside it. The expanded purview of the paratext is similar to what Barthes called *hyphos*, “le tissu et la toile d’araignée” [the fabric and the spider’s web] (and *hyphology* as “la théorie du texte”<sup>18</sup> [the theory of the text]) (Barthes 1973, 85-86). The *hyphos* I shall focus on is woven in the spaces between media and modes, that is, as a virtual reticular structure which explains metaphorically the dynamics of intermediality and multimodality. The *hyphos* as well as the (con)text are here

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<sup>15</sup> Also studied in Petrilli and Ponzio (2005, 146).

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed genealogy, see Zbinden (2006).

<sup>17</sup> See Scheid and Svenbro (1991). Moreover, “Quintilian uses two distinct terms, *textus* for individual parts of linguistic expression (periods) and *textum* for the overall texture (and style) of a speech. This distinction, however, is only found in Quintilian. [T]extus will later be used in both senses” (Viljamaa 2007, 136-137).

<sup>18</sup> Barthes (1990, 64) [“the tissue and the spider’s web”, “the theory of the text”, English edition].

deployed as conceptual categories to situate my inquiry in the field of the interarts. It is in the interstitial spaces between and across media that the question of identity and alterity has to be formulated, to overcome binary oppositions of predominance and subjugation, original and copy, source and target text.

The *hyphos* is therefore another instrument for conceiving that “all kinds of sign systems and also specific media productions and works of art must be seen as parts of a very wide field including not least the material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic aspects” (Elleström 2010, 4). These aspects, following Lars Elleström, are modalities belonging to media. Media are “both different and similar”, a consequence of which is that intermediality can be conceived of as “a bridge between medial differences that is founded on medial similarities” (Elleström 2010, 12).

There are numerous and often heterogeneous definitions of what a medium is, without mentioning those branches of the debate which state the need to go beyond such a concept. Guattari’s post-media era (Guattari 2009), Krauss’ post-media condition (Krauss 2000), and Manovich’s post-media aesthetics (Manovich 2001) are symptomatic of the incessant debate on media. If one lesson is to be learned from the rhetoric of the ‘post-media’, the era of the specificity of media – one of Greenberg’s seminal teachings (Greenberg 1940) – is officially past. However, the notion of medium is still relevant insofar as one abandons the idea of media purity. The layered complexity of the term ‘medium’ consists, as mentioned, of the manifold aspects, or modalities, it displays. As Elleström suggests, media do not necessarily have to mix and merge with each other for the motto “all media are mixed media”<sup>19</sup> to hold true. One has to conceive of the ‘border’ separating the media as an oxymoron, in fact as a flexible category which allows intermediality. As theorists like Mitchell have remarked, borders are made to be transgressed, yet they exist at once in a precarious balance and in an umbilical relationship with what they mediate.

I take the idea of borders to be similar to that of permeable membranes, where exchanges with the ‘outside’ are not an exception. The metaphorical spider’s web, or *hyphos*, is the ‘outside’, the extracellular space where many physiological functions are carried out, as in the intracellular space within the medium. If the physiological functions in the human body allow life, in a medial context these sustain the production of meaning and its communication.

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<sup>19</sup> I will elaborate further on this seminal lesson by W. J. T. Mitchell. See Mitchell (2002, 170).

Among the definitions that the OED provides, particularly relevant is the traditional view of medium as “something which is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes; a middle state” as well as that of “an intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; *esp.* a means or channel of communication or expression”. The former definition makes us reflect on the passive role assigned to ‘medium’. The passive agency reflects the availability of the medium to take on different values. Therefore, it becomes an essential component of communication, especially as a transactional act:

chiefly in medium of exchange: anything commonly agreed as a token of value and used in transactions in a trading system; *esp.* (also medium of circulation, circulating medium) freely circulating units of money, as banknotes, coins, which fulfil this role (OED 2001).

This explains why there is a sense in which ‘medium’ is also taken to be a conveyor of meanings and values. Nevertheless, the most common meaning of medium in artistic parlance involves passive acceptance: a medium is “any of the varieties of painting or drawing as determined by the material or technique used. Hence more widely: any raw material or mode of expression used in an artistic or creative activity” (OED 2001). Yet, a sense of active agency is associated with medium when it is interpreted as: “an intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses; any substance considered with regards to its properties as a vehicle of light or sound” (OED 2001).

The polysemic notion of medium itself already hints at the complexity of the relation of media and art forms. It is indeed impossible to define ‘medium’ as an isolated entity. Every medium subsists because it is in relation with other media. Elleström comments that:

Earlier efforts to describe the relations between different media and art forms as a rule start off with conceptual units such as image, music, text, film, verbal media or visual media, presuming that it is appropriate to compare these entities. [...] The first problem is that the units compared are often treated as fundamentally different media with little or nothing in common. Thus, every intermedial relation seems to be more or less an anomaly where the supposedly essentially different characteristics of allegedly separate media are presumed to be more or less transformed, combined or blended in a unique way. Mitchell has successfully criticized this way of thinking by pointing to the way various important traits are in fact shared by art forms that are generally seen as opposites, yet Mitchell’s discourse is also paradoxically but profoundly trapped in the tradition of treating art forms as separate entities. In spite of the efforts to erase most of the differences between poetry and painting, he anthropomorphizes the two art forms and emphasizes the ‘struggle’ between them,



which makes it difficult to grasp the exact nature of the similarities of media as conceived by Mitchell (Elleström 2010, 14-15).

I shall return to the stark opposition that Mitchell's idea of the Pictorial Turn promoted, and to the specificity versus hybrid nature of media. For now, I want to stress that the notions of intermediality and multimodality, as well as their metaphorical counterparts, the *hyphos*, are embedded in a context of both passive and active agency (receiving and creating new 'impressions'). This means one could equally say that intermediality and multimodality necessitate a heuristic framework which allows for this faceted character of agency to emerge, a framework that avoids privileging one extreme over the other. While Mitchell's analysis proved seminal, his discourse is still subject to the either/or rhetoric of the word-image divide. This is why I have chosen interpretation semiotics, which I discuss in the next section: it looks holistically at organic sets of relations – either passive or active – within the multiple arrays of configurations in which meaning production happens, within and outside 'permeable' media borders.

It is worthwhile noting that the term 'medium' has long been dependent upon the classical notion of mimesis, before it assumed specific connotations with the rise of modern communication systems (Guillory 2010, 321-362). In the process of shifting attention from the aesthetic qualities of mimesis to that of the more and more pressing issue of media in this day and age, namely to transformative – transmutative, in Jakobsonian terminology – phenomena, the concept of media border must be considered, albeit as a conceptual category to be used consciously: the concept of border itself is being questioned by postmodernism in many fields, and it seems to respond to the urge of the past era to contain, quarantine, and catalogue.<sup>20</sup> The mediation process, that started on a large scale with the inception of print and dramatically rose with the so-called 'new media', is responsible for this shift of focus. "A medium is that which remediates" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 65)<sup>21</sup> – state Bolter and Grusin in their attempt to define

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<sup>20</sup> The artificiality (conventionality) of the concept of media (and therefore medium border) is noted by Rajewsky (2010, 61): "the functioning of intermedial configurations is always based on relations between media or 'medialities' that are conventionally perceived as distinct, or, to put this in other terms, it is based on the possibility of calling up specific medially bound frames in the recipient. Despite their conventionality and constructedness, these variable conventional 'ideas' and concepts associated with specific individual media are nevertheless at one's disposal, both for the production and inner functioning and the reception of a given medial configuration. Conventional and constructed as they may be, they are still available for partaking in the constitution of a media product's overall signification."

<sup>21</sup> For example, a film based on a novel remediates the novel into a new form (medium).

‘remediation’. Remediation, however, is not a neutral process: it consists of “appropriating and refashioning the representational practices of [the] older forms” (Bolter 2005, 14). Therefore, the medium itself is not neutral.

I will limit the use of remediation as a term as Bolter and Grusin coined it mostly for the new media. Nevertheless, to think of remediation as a process of medial transmutation and as adding complexity to the term ‘mediation’ (either in its passive or active agency) is useful as a starting point to think about the process of intermediality. What is, exactly, the object of remediation – that can be seen as a special form of intermediality? If the motto “the medium is the message” is partially relevant (McLuhan 1994, 7),<sup>22</sup> then the remediation process involves consequences on the meaning plane that would corroborate the adoption of what I have generally defined as interpretation semiotics.<sup>23</sup>

If the term medium is irreducible to a simple definition, the term intermediality can be even more confusing. Intermediality is correctly understood insofar as one acknowledges that

to speak of ‘a medium’ or of ‘individual media’ ultimately refers to a theoretical construct, to a ‘theoretical abstraction’ [...]. Moreover, even a slightly more precise engagement with the variability of media conceptions brings to light the constructed character of each of them (Elleström 2010, 54).<sup>24</sup>

Irina Rajewsky, after acknowledging its nature of ‘umbrella term’, refers to intermediality in its broadest sense as

relations between media, [...] medial interactions and interferences. Hence, ‘intermediality’ [...] as a flexible generic term [...] can be applied, in a broad sense, to any phenomenon involving more than one medium and thus to any phenomenon that – as indicated by the prefix inter – in some way takes place between media. Accordingly, the crossing of media borders has been defined as a founding category of intermediality (Rajewsky 2010, 51-52).

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<sup>22</sup> It is outside the scope of this thesis to examine the long debate on Marshal McLuhan’s seminal *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* [1964].

<sup>23</sup> An equivalent in media studies of ‘code semiotics’, which I reject here, can be traced back to Weaver and Shannon (1949).

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem: “The question of how a medium should be defined and delimited from other media is of course always dependent on the historical and discursive contexts and the observing subject or system, taking into account technological change and relations between media within the overall media landscape at a given point in time”.

Rajewsky then discusses the broad spectrum of fields to which intermediality has been applied, once theorised under the aegis of intertextuality (Rajewsky 2005, 47-48). The vast scope of analysis inherited from intertextual methodologies can be quite daunting:

Even if we confine ourselves to an understanding of intermediality as a critical category for the concrete analysis of individual medial configurations [...], one still has to cope with a vast and quite heterogeneous range of subject matter. In fact, in literary studies as well as in fields such as art history, music, theatre and film studies, there is a repeated focus on an entire range of phenomena qualifying as intermedial. Examples include those phenomena which for a long time have been designated by terms such as filmic writing, ekphrasis, musicalization of literature, as well as such phenomena as film adaptations of literary works, novelizations, visual poetry, illuminated manuscripts, Sound Art, opera, comics, multimedia shows, multimedial computer ‘texts’ or installations and so forth (Rajewsky 2010, 54-55).

Intermediality, as a “critical category for the concrete analysis of individual media configurations” is no less useful than the category of intersemiotic translation which scholars apply from a different perspective. Similarly to Jakobson’s formalisation (Jakobson 1959, 233),<sup>25</sup> Rajewsky’s distinguishes three kinds of intermediality:

- a) medial transposition (meant as medial transformation, such as film adaptations);
- b) media combination (where different modes come into being across different media, opera, film, theatre, illuminated manuscripts, art installations, comics<sup>26</sup>);
- c) intermediality as references across media such as, for example, references in a “literary text to a specific film, film genre or film qua medium (that is, so-called filmic writing), likewise references in a film to painting, or in painting to photography and so on” (Rajewsky 2010, 55).

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Jakobson also refers to intersemiotic translation as ‘transmutation’. The transformative character of semiosis across semiospheres has been variously defined: for instance, Louis Hjelmslev’s *transduction* (Hjelmslev 1943), and Greimas’ *transposition* (Greimas 1966, 14).

<sup>26</sup> Irina Rajewsky also speaks of “multimedia, mixed-media and intermedia forms” (2010, 55).

These distinctions are fundamental. First, the second and third kinds – media combination and reference across media – are at stake in the case studies examined here. Second, these two definitions of intermediality are easily recognisable as “an interpretation of [verbal] signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”, as Jakobson seminally defined in 1959. I put the adjective ‘verbal’ in square parentheses: in light of the critique of the Linguistic Turn<sup>27</sup> and of the tendency of structuralism to read the world as a linguistic text, intersemiotic translation could be defined simply as “intersemiotic transposition - from one system of signs into another” (Jakobson 1959, 238).<sup>28</sup> In the next section, I set out to explain how semiotic and media theories complement each other in this study.

With regard to the definition of key terms, multimodality, another term of wide application in this study, is here understood as the combination of modes, that is, aspects of the medium (material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic, as previously defined) within a very broad spectrum (“any semiotic resource [...] that produces meaning in a social context; the verbal, the visual, language, image, music, sound, gesture, narrative, colour, taste, speech [...]) (Elleström 2010, 14). Elleström argues that

[i]f one wants to understand the complexity of individual media in a more precise way, however, [...] it is wise to differentiate between medium/intermediality and mode/multimodality. [...] there is nothing in the etymology of the words ‘medium’ and ‘mode’, or in the established conceptual uses of them, that clearly determines how they should be related to each other (Elleström 2010, 14).

Since multimodality originated in the field of social semiotics, an understanding of the formation of meaning in social contexts has proved paramount. What defines meaning in multimodality is, first of all, the mode(s) involved in meaning creation. Gunther Kress notes how a definition of ‘mode’ cannot be fixed once and for all; on the contrary, it will vary according to different approaches (Kress 2010, 57). For Kress a mode is “a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning in representation and communication” (Kress 2010, 53), which is “used in recognisably stable ways as a means of articulating discourse”

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<sup>27</sup> As in Richard Rorty (1967). Rorty’s edited volume is at the apex of a phenomenon that flourished in positivist formulations at the turn of the century, such as, Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics.

<sup>28</sup> Although Jakobson goes on to specify: “e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting”, *ibidem*.

(Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 25). A relatively loose notion of ‘mode’ understood here as an “open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems” (Page 2010, 10) – in other words, as a system of choices used to communicate meaning – reflects the degree of flexibility of an approach that first takes media borders as permeable, and, second, considers intermediality and multimodality as complex meaning generators, bridging and overlapping media qualities. My position is therefore similar to that of Rajewsky, who postulates a “process of rethinking the notion of border: it should be shifted from taxonomies to the dynamic and creative potential of the border itself” (Rajewsky 2010, 65). Multimodality, as it appears in emblems, picturebooks, and artwork, is central to Chapter 3 and, in more loose forms (for example, book covers in dialogue with the text), is also relevant to Chapter 2.

I use the terms ‘multimodality’ and ‘mode(s)’ and ‘intermediality’ considerably in Chapter 3, as compatible frameworks, although one should be aware of the fundamental difference:

a semiotic mode is always tied to a specific material or medial carrier, but media in themselves do not produce meaning. This is a substantial conceptual difference between intermediality theories and multimodality theories. Whereas in the former the verbal text and a visual image are regarded and described as different, interrelated media, text-image relations in the multimodal novel (as in multimodal texts in general) are not conceptualized as intermedial relations, but as an interplay of two distinct semiotic modes (textual entities) in the same ‘medium,’ i.e. the printed book, which jointly contribute to the production of one whole meaning in a single act of communication. In multimodality theories, therefore, the emphasis is on the meaning that the single mode (textual entity) produces, and on the combination of various modes that result in one (transmodal) meaning of a multimodal text. An analysis of the multimodal novel has to account for the contribution of these single semiotic modes to the constitution and characterization of signifying, communicative and socio-cultural practices in the fictional world as well as to the kind of meaning it produces there, and the role of a specific mode in the text-reader interaction. (Hallet 2015, 642)

There are several ways to approach multimodal and intermedial studies, ranging from social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006) to various combinations of linguistics and cognition (Forceville 1999); from cognitive poetics (Gibbons 2012) to multimodal discourse analysis (O’Halloran 2004, O’Toole 2011) and interaction analysis (Norris 2009, Norris and Maier 2014). Nonetheless, some research questions posed by social semiotics are relevant to this and other studies mainly concerned with ‘interpretation semiotics’ and other responsive heuristic approaches:

‘What meaning is being made here? How is meaning being made?’, ‘With what resources, in what social environment?’ and ‘What are the meaning potentials of the resources that have been used?’ (Kress 2010, 87).<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, intermediality and multimodality are the strongholds of interarts studies and provide useful insights for investigating the theoretical conundrums of ‘old’ media. The reader could, however, encounter many other critical terms related to the field of the interarts in academic works, such as, for instance, transmediality, multimodality, and remediation.

I have introduced the definitions of the critical terms for the case studies at hand. A clear-cut distinction among these concepts is neither foreseeable nor desirable due to the multiple avenues of interpretation this field allows. While it was necessary to define ‘intermediality’ and ‘multimodality’ jointly with the core notion of medium, I shall now turn to the methodological framework within which I will employ them.

## 2. Intermediality, Multimodality, and The Rhizome: A Paradigm for Plurality

Just as there many definitions of medium, so are there many discourses about intermediality. What is very relevant to this study – whose research questions delve into the ontology and epistemology of images and words – is the so-called dimension of ontomediality. The category of “ontological intermediality or ontomediality [...] highlights the fact that media always already exist in a medial network and never in splendid isolation” (Neuman 2015, 527). What I defined as *hyphos*, earlier, is an additional term that emphasises the ontological interconnectedness of medialities. It is a conceptual tool that, ontologically, presupposes the question:

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<sup>29</sup> The inconsistencies of Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach, influenced by Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, have long been exposed. See Forceville (1999), Bateman (2008).

Do the clearly defined unities that we call media and that are characterized by some kind of media-specific materialities precede the intermedial relation, or does a sort of primeval intermediality exist that conversely functions as a prerequisite for the possibility of such unities? (Schröter 2012, 28).

The notion of the *hyphos*, which defines the infinitely potential network of possible and actual intermedial relations, is an additional term to use when thinking of intermediality as ontomediality:

We have to recognise that it is not individual media that are primal and then move toward each other intermedially, but that it is intermediality that is primal and that the clearly separated ‘monomedia’ are the result of purposeful and institutionally caused blockades, incisions, and mechanisms of exclusion” (Schröter 2012, 30).<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, I shall use the categories of overt and covert intermediality as defined by Werner Wolf (Wolf 1999, 37-44) and Hallet (2015a, 605):

- a) overt intermediality, where the presence of two or more media is tangible in a work of art; this approach naturally overlaps with multimodality (as different semiotic modes apply to different media). For example, overt intermediality and multimodality apply to composite artworks such as those of the Fluxus movement and multisensory art installations;
- b) covert intermediality’, where the presence of one or more media is only indirectly reproduced – according to the affordance of the semiotic modes of expression bound to the elected medium/media whereby the artwork is realised.

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<sup>30</sup> See Herzogenrath (2012, 4): “Intermediality is rather the ontological *conditio sine qua non*, which is always before ‘pure’ and specific media, which have to be extracted from the arch-intermediality”. For the types of intermediality, see *ivi*, pp. 12-14.

Therefore,

scholars of intermediality investigate how meaning is generated in/by inter-, multi and transmedial constellations and cross-medial references. This task asks for interdisciplinary engagement, which is why any study of literary texts or other cultural phenomena should be – as Mieke Bal puts it – interdisciplinary, at least in its framework of interpretation. [...] We live in a world in which we are surrounded by images but, more crucially, in which images and language jointly participate in a much wider and more ‘mixed’ cultural life. [...] The question of words and images is not, therefore, a matter of definitions of essences and separation of practices, but of how people communicate: with one another, with the past, with others (Rippl 2015, 2).

In other words, the notion of mediality of culture underlies every framework that takes intermediality and multimodality in artworks as complex and plural events. It thus justifies the need for an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the diverse range of ‘cultural life’ produced by the encounter of words and images.

With the view of articulating the diversity and pluralism of such cultural life, I have employed the concept of rhizome in a specific way. The rhizome represents, in the seminal lesson by Guattari and Deleuze, the generative potential that disrupts binary, orthodox thinking: it is the diverse, the heterogeneous, the multiplicitous. As a botanical term (from the Greek ‘rhiza’, i.e. root) the rhizome can be defined as opposite to the model of the tree: subterranean, acentered and, therefore, anarchic. Most importantly, “the rhizome is an assemblage of connected multiplicities, without center or origin, an essence or hierarchy to the assemblage” (Sprouse 1997, 83). Guattari and Deleuze develop the notion of rhizome in their analysis of the book as well as that of assemblage and assemblage theory “to counter all claims to presence or centre in favour of the many material ways the objects come together over time” (Felluga 2015, 20).<sup>31</sup> The rhizome is a metaphor to unmask pseudomultiplicitous tree-like structures that are hierarchical and favour clear-cut, binary oppositions. For example, the rhetoric of the epistemological turns, as criticised by Jacques Rancière, and of semiotics (the science of signs) as conceived by De Saussure (his *sémiologie* opposing signified vs. signifier) and his followers embodies the tendency of human thought to reason in terms of opposition and to assign unity,

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<sup>31</sup> A book “is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. [...] In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 3).



identity, and authority to a centre. The rhizome, on the contrary, undermines the idea of unity, centre, the existence of a whole. However, “throughout their formulation of the rhizome theory, Deleuze and Guattari consistently refuse to posit a binary opposition between the arborescent and the rhizomatic” (Sprouse 1997, 83), since “there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes and rhizomatic offshoots in roots”. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari are not proposing another dualism to subvert the preceding one. Indeed,

The important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel. It is not a question of this or that place on earth, or of a given moment in history, still less of this or that category of thought. It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again. No, this is not a new or different dualism. The problem of writing: in order to designate something exactly, anexact expressions are utterly unavoidable. Not at all because it is a necessary step, or because one can only advance by approximations: anexactitude is in no way an approximation; on the contrary, it is the exact passage of that which is under way. We invoke one dualism only in order to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models. Each time, mental correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we pass (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 20).

The rhizome (or assemblage) as “a multiplicity [,] has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). That is, “[a]n assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). The increase in dimensions, and expansion in connections that intermediality and multimodality allow for, do not follow the ‘arborescent’ logic. The creation of signs in multimodality and intermediality is, in principle, rhizomatic although it does not exclude the ‘arborescent’.

To continue the metaphor of organisms, parts of the rhizome may entertain relations that are not subject to the control of a centre: “these relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different” (DeLanda 2006, 9). The rhizome itself is therefore a dialogic and polyphonic concept that accounts for the potentiality of signs. Ultimately, to conceive of rhizomatic semeiosis is to acknowledge the existence of sign creation not rooted in unity but in

diversity. The rhizome, for Deleuze and Guattari, can indeed infiltrate the tree. The ontological monism Lévinas encountered is encroached by the pluralism that the rhizomatic brings about. Multimodality and intermediality are, in this sense, the quintessence of the rhizome. Only when they are crystallised in fixed forms does the arborescent prevail.

As a consequence, intermediality has to be theorised as

rhizomatic intermedia[lity] [sic] [,] the quasi-ontological plane underlying all media, out of which the specific media that we know percolate [...]. Then there is also an epistemological side to it: we can only refer to media by using other media [...] So, in a way, there is one intermedia[lity] [sic] that comes first, which is the quicksand out of which specific media emerge, and a second intermedia[lity] that focuses on the various interconnections possible, from the very perspective of these specific media forms (Herzogenrath 2012, 3).

The notion of intermediality and multimodality as rhizomatic allows me to conceive of media specificity only in the single manifestations that are the artworks here examined. The *hyphos* and the rhizome reinforce the idea that all media are interconnected and that media borders are permeable. In effect,

To speak of specific media forms does not imply that ‘medium’ is understood in an essentializing way, but rather underlines the fact that when we speak of individual media we refer to conventional conceptualizations, material restrictions, and affordances of individual media (Rippl 2015, 3).

The idea of the *hyphos* and the rhizome also contributes to widening the range of artifacts taken into account. As the rhizome expands without having to depend on a pivot, so do intermediality and multimodality, which privilege meaning-creation unbound by rules and hierarchy. This is the case, for example, in Dino Buzzati’s multimodal storytelling (Chapter 3), thanks to which the first prototype of the graphic novel in Italy was born in 1968: *Poema a fumetti* [Poem Strip]. The diversity on which intermediality and multimodality thrive is also at the basis of the more democratic way of including “all kinds of cultural configurations, be they performances, products of popular culture or the new media” (Rippl 2015, 6). Assuming intermediality and multimodality as the main framework of this investigation in the old media also means rejecting the opposition of ‘highbrow’ versus ‘lowbrow’ cultural products.

Furthermore, intermediality and multimodality fit well in the wider context of postcolonial studies, which confute Eurocentric views and epistemologies, such as the ontological monism of the Western tradition. By

unsettling colonial epistemologies, which typically embraced cultural homogeneity and notions of purity, postcolonial literatures frequently mix and merge opposing principles and practices. From this perspective, intermediality may bring to the fore the heterogeneity and plurality of meaning-making and, in a wider sense, reflect the impurity and – to use a central concept of postcolonial studies – hybridity of all cultural formations (Neuman 2015, 514).

In conclusion, intermediality is susceptible to infinite re-elaborations. Scholars have often proposed alternative definitions, each one with different nuances, such as: “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006), “culture of remediation”, “postmodern culture of recycling”, “adaptation”, and “remediation” (Rippl 2015, 18). This term – remediation – previously defined as “appropriating and refashioning the representational practices of [the] older forms” lays bare the fact that “all mediation is remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55), that is, “each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other to function as media at all” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 55).

A multimodal framework is also paramount to a paradigm of plurality which strives to overcome binary oppositions. Every semiotic mode is determined by the materiality of its medium, that is, it is endowed with a specific affordance. The choices made within a multimodal layout are “laden with communicative, epistemological and ideological significance” since “different modes are modes in their own right” (Thurlow 2015, 622). Since multimodal texts are composite, multimodal analysis should focus on genre-specific characteristics that, layered or juxtaposed in particular ways, create specific meaning configurations. Every mode is characterised by its own specific limitations (material and cultural), that is, its affordance:

the affordance of these [...] semiotic modes of expression, representation and communication (like, e.g., the cartographic map or the film) must in itself be investigated in order to determine what their specific cultural or communicative value is and why they arouse interest in the sphere of literature. Intermedial [and multimodal] analysis therefore entails a comparative approach through which the effect of these other semiotic modes on or their ‘translation’ into a literary text can be apprehended [...]. It is obvious that, as a consequence, a certain degree of multidisciplinary expertise in the

‘language’ of the non-literary medium, e.g. in musical or art history, is an indispensable pre-condition of every intermedial approach (Hallet 2015a, 608-609).

Interdisciplinarity is constitutive of any analysis of rhizomatic configurations, such as those of multimodal and intermedial semeiosis. In this context, the choice of literature as the main field, where multimodality and intermediality can be analysed in the old media, is not inconsistent. The permeability of literature to new media is indeed quintessential to this study. It has been observed that this responsive interaction between literature and other media

points to one of the cultural functions [...] of literature as a medium of cultural reflection and a critique of media of communication and representation, the role of media in people’s lives, social and communicative practices connected with them and the various ways in which media shape the world (Hallet 2015a, 609).

Intermediality and multimodality, therefore, encourage the adoption of a composite, interdisciplinary framework for reading the complexity and diversity of the world and its cultural forms. Ultimately, they contribute to igniting the diversity and plurality of which signs and life itself are carriers, as exemplified by the metaphor of the rhizome and by the rhizomatic potential of semeiosis with which these practices are endowed.

### 3. Dialogicity and Alterity of Signs

The dialogicity and alterity of signs complement the intermedial and multimodal frameworks. This semiotic perspective sheds light on how intermedial and multimodal meaning is allowed to come into existence. Only then may one ask technical questions such as:

how can shifts of meaning be conceptualised across semiotic resources which are fundamentally different in nature? What meanings are retained and changed as a result of resemiotisation? How

can such meanings be modelled theoretically and tracked analytically? (O'Halloran, Tan, and Wignell 2017, 200).

The semiotic perspective I am going to discuss will add more depth to the understanding of the creation of intermedial and multimodal meaning. Moreover, it will clarify why the debate around old media, like words and images, is not at all redundant. The semiotic approach I will follow derives from Peirce's notion of dialogicity of signs as elaborated by Augusto Ponzio in the wake of Bakhtin. The case studies I will examine all point to a dialogicity dominated by the logic of alterity where "dialogue is characterized by its readiness to interrogate standpoints, interests and values so that nothing is preconstituted, prefixed and guaranteed" (Ponzio 2006, 9). Dialogism, as meant here, does not necessarily involve verbal signs: whenever a semiotic relation comes into existence, a certain degree of dialogism is involved.<sup>32</sup> The relational nature of the sign is then *dia-logic*<sup>33</sup> for *logos* itself "in Greek, is not discourse and is not reason. It is just a relation between two terms, nothing more" (Marie-José Mondzain 2011, 61).<sup>34</sup>

Such a relation is never neutral. Ponzio agrees with Bakhtin's view that "dialogue is not something we choose, on the contrary we suffer dialogue, we are subjected to it. Dialogue is not the result of an open attitude toward the other, but, on the contrary, it is the impossibility of a closing with the other" (Ponzio 2006, 10-11). The focus on dialogism is a premise of the kind of intertextuality I will examine in depth. As mentioned in §1. "*Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus*". *Definitions*, the notion of intermediality stems from that of intertextuality provided by Kristeva 1980. Her work draws heavily on that of Bakhtin, who maintained that

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<sup>32</sup> "Dialogism indicates a situation of involvement with the other, of both active or passive involvement, which is not necessary involvement due to a choice, to initiative taken by someone who decided to get involved. Consequently dialogism is not only present in dialogue on a formal level. Indeed, formal dialogue may only be endowed with a low degree of dialogism, while discourse that is not dialogical in formal terms, namely that does not assume the form of a dialogue, may, in fact, be endowed with high degrees of dialogism. Dialogism is not only present in external discourse but also in internal discourse" (Ponzio 2006, 9-10).

<sup>33</sup> The Greek prefix *dia-* stands for a number of prepositions indicating the act passing: "through, across, between. etc.". Dialogic as referred to dialogue and *dia-logic* as referred to the logic of otherness is the key to understanding the logic of signs.

<sup>34</sup> See also Mondzain (2011a): "Cosmos fait entendre ensemble l'ordre et la beauté du monde, beauté de l'ordre impensable pour l'esprit grec en dehors du double registre soutenu par le logos, qui désigne ensemble la construction d'un rapport et les opérations du langage. La langue est par essence opération de mise en rapport, ce qui ne signifie pas pour autant que tout ce qui est mis en rapport ne relève que du seul geste linguistique".

The text lives only through contact with another text (context). We underline that this contact is a dialogic contact between texts (utterances) and not a mechanic contact of opposition between abstract elements [...] behind this contact there is contact between people and not between things (Bakhtin 1986, 162).

The (con)text I refer to in the title comes to be defined as the environment where textual, medial, and cultural antecedents rest, without necessarily being summoned by the works examined here; however, the existence of the works here examined vitally depends on the (con)text they arise from. It is vital to understand how the dialogicity of signs expands the perspective of interarts studies focussing on intermedial and multimodal approaches. Ponzio conceives the dialogic relation beyond the verbal to include *semeiosis* (the creation of signs) at large: “any sign situation, sign process, or semiosis is a dialogic process, and as such it presents different degrees of dialogism” (Ponzio 2006, 12). It is Peirce’s triadic system that allows for the dialogicity of signs to be formulated. While De Saussure’s semiotics (sign system) involved only the signifier and the signified in a static opposition, Peirce’s triadic relation is pragmatic as it takes into account the context of interpretation and the effects on the interpreter. The process of semiosis calls for different degrees of ‘signicity’. Peirce identifies the representamen (first), the object (second), and the interpretant (third). The representamen is the sign representing the object, although this can also exist as a possibility (in the mode of Firstness). The object represented by a representamen exists within the mode of Secondness, that is, it has to exist in relation to something else in the semiotic process. Thirdness, the mode of the interpretant, is what links Firstness and Secondness, what makes both possible and the semiotic process complete. The interpretant is therefore what mediates representamen and object in the interpreter’s mind: it is a purely abstract construct but is a determinant of the sense that we make of the sign/object relation. The way the interpretant comes to exist, however, is influenced by the constraints that the object necessarily reflects on the sign that represents it. The sign, for its part, contributes to the interpretant by being the result of a certain relation (Secondness). Thus, the interpretant is a more complex sign itself that

cannot be identical to the interpreted sign, [...] cannot be a repetition, exactly because it is mediated, interpretive and as such it is always new. As to the previous sign, the interpretant is a response and as such it inaugurates a new sign process, a new semiosis. In this sense it is a more developed sign.

By being a sign the interpretant determines another sign that acts, in turn, as an interpretant: therefore, the interpretant opens to a new semiosis, it develops the sign process, it is a new sign occurrence (Ponzio 2016, 13).

Whenever there is a sign (First), an interpretant (Third) is already mediating that sign and the objects it stands for (Second). The signs' interrelatedness and, at the same time, their continuous deferral will also be mentioned later: signs' modes of representation are never pure (never merely iconic, indexical, or symbolical, according to Peirce's sign typology, as defined in Chapter 2).

The fact that the interpretant (Third) is in turn a sign (First), and that the sign (First) is in turn an interpretant (already a Third) places the sign in an open network of interpretants: this is the Peircean principle of infinite semiosis or of the endlessness series of interpretants (see Peirce, CP 1.339) (Ponzio 2006, 14).

The responsive reaction solicited by the endless chain of interpretants, as stressed by Ponzio, is what makes signs dialogic. The quality of being dialogic explains the characteristics of signs as changeable, ambivalent, and multi-voiced. The sign-interpretant relation, being dialogic and *dia-logic*, is open to alternative interpretations:

To comprehend a sign is not to merely recognize the stable elements constantly repeating themselves. Signs are characterized by their semantic and pragmatic flexibility which makes them continually available to new and different contexts. Signality and self-identity are overcome by the characteristic features of signs: changeability, ambivalence and multi-voicedness (Ponzio 2006, 17).

In semiosis and argumentation, the *dia-logic* is realised through abduction, where "the relation between premises and conclusion is iconic and dialogic [...] in other words, it is characterized by high degrees of dialogism and inventiveness as well as by a high margin of risk for error" (Ponzio 2006, 21). Interpreting signs contemplates other methods, such as induction and

deduction. The abductive method that Peirce identifies, however, is instrumental to understanding intermedial and multimodal exchanges. The level of dialogicity of signs also determines their intermedial and multimodal potential. Such potential, which is at the centre of this investigation, realises itself through the abductive process. The focus on abduction as a logical process is crucial since

The connection between semiosis and interpretation implies the connection between sign and argument, and therefore the connection between semiotics and logic. Taking Peirce's viewpoint into consideration, we are led to awareness that the problem of the connection between identity and alterity in the sign is not just a problem of semiotics, but also concerns logic as theory of argumentation. In Peirce this problem directly concerns logic which, as theory of argumentation, also involves the problem of dialogue (Ponzio 2006, 23).

Deduction and induction are not relevant for a study focussed on mapping the dialogism of signs via intermedial and multimodal approaches. On the one hand, deductive processes involve a minimal degree of dialogism as the relation between premises and conclusion is indexical (cause/effect, spatiotemporal contiguity); on the other hand, the conclusion in inductive processes depends on habit and is, therefore, symbolic in essence (Ponzio 2006, 21). Instead, in abduction the relation between premises and conclusion is iconic and dialogic. For this reason, considering abductive processes means privileging “sign processes at the highest level of otherness and dialogism”. Consequently, the case studies examined here all present, to varying degrees, an inclination to exceed their respective boundaries, resulting in “procedures [,] mostly tentative and hypothetical with just a minimal margin for convention (symbolicity) and mechanical necessity (indexicality)” (Ponzio 2006, 21).

Abduction is, in Peirce's own words, “the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea” (CP 5.172).<sup>35</sup> Abduction is, in essence, a very common logical procedure to which humans constantly resort, including the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes. In abductive processes, the sign carries the highest degree of alterity, whereby it counteracts the identity and sameness that are intrinsic to symbolic procedures. As a consequence, this type of inference is highly creative as the quality of icons – Firstness, or *Orience* – represents pure originality. The conclusions in abductive procedures are

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<sup>35</sup> CP 5.172: “Deduction proves that something must be; induction actually shows that something is operative; abduction merely suggests that something may be”, *ibid.*



no longer bound to the premises (as in deduction), and are substantially iconic and dialogic (unlike inductive procedures). The iconic character of the abductive conclusion – based on a hypothesis of similarity between what is not naturally related – is also dialogic, for it brings together the unlinked elements in the premises.

Thus, the clash between the sign's alterity and the horizon of expectation (based on convention, hence symbolicity) produces the innovative force in creation which this study attempts to frame as intersemiotic exchange. Contrary to the Western tradition (the myth of Narcissus, for example) and its ontological monism denounced by Lévinas, Peircean semiotics conceives the icon not as a carrier of identity but as an instrument to uncover alterity within the self: "rather than as confirmation and repetition, a moment of encounter and recognition, [...] the image is *déplacement*, an opening towards alterity, the beginning of a voyage in which the return *chez soi* is not guaranteed" (Ponzio 2006, 30). Abductive procedures, from this point of view, are always at work in intertextuality, intermediality, and multimodality, where the creative genius does not merely replicate, in full compliance to established canons, but innovates and surpasses the datum, demonstrating its own self-sufficiency. The case studies of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 present examples of intermedial and multimodal creation that is, in essence, abductive. In Chapter 2 I analyse Antonio Tabucchi's ekphrasis, loosely based on Fra Angelico's paintings, which highlights abductive creation at work as an interpretive strategy of intermedial and intersemiotic translation. In Chapter 3, abduction is investigated from the point of view of the double talent – the multi-talented artist who embodies the human tendency to act and think multimodally and multimedially. Dino Buzzati's multimodal works also frame multimodality in a precise historical context – where literature was still seen as a bastion of the culture summarised by the Linguistic Turn – therefore reinforcing the relevance of abduction as an innovative force. Thus, the interpretation of signs from older forms (which I earlier called remediation) destabilises the signs' identity and sameness by introducing elements of originality (Firstness, or *Orience*). The end results display high-risk choices that are perceived as clashing with conventional codes. The two case studies I examine combine different semiotic codes both iconically and dialogically; therefore, they deserve attention as abductive procedures yielding to the renewal of the semiotic cycle by avoiding sclerotization and by introducing into it different degrees of alterity. While the reigning ontological monism of the Western tradition may still prevail, abductive creation instils elements of change and diversity that are vital for the semiotic cycle on a global scale.

In this brief section, I have highlighted how Peircean semiotics integrates the perspective offered by interarts studies. First, it offers the view that signs carry an irreducible otherness,

theorisable thanks to the triadic conception of sign (interpreted), object, and interpretant. Second, it brings into sharp focus the connection between identity and alterity in the sign as part of the theory of argumentation, for which we are able to explain creativity as substantially abductive, that is, as intrinsic to a critique of dialogic reason.<sup>36</sup> Viewing traditional intertextuality as well as intermediality and multimodality as fundamentally abductive processes is a rewarding perspective that will allow me to discuss: first, the infinite deferral of signs, and the creative role that images and words play against and within each other in the case study of Chapter 2; second, the intermedial dialogue of Dino Buzzati and Yves Klein in Chapter 3, which resolves into two different yet interconnected artistic experiences.

#### 4. Image-Word Relations. Theoretical Frameworks and Approaches

Mitchell's perspective is essential to my approach to the analysis of the image-word relation, as is his formulation of the Pictorial Turn:

With semiotic distinctions between words and images, or between media types, the opening out of a general field of study does not abolish difference, but makes it available for investigation, as opposed to treating it as a barrier that must be policed and never crossed. [...] As a practical matter, distinctions between the arts and media are ready-to-hand, a vernacular form of theorizing. The difficulty arises [...] when we try to make these distinctions systematic and metaphysical (Mitchell 2002, 173).

Mitchell's response to Rorty's Linguistic Turn (Mitchell 1994, 11)<sup>37</sup> reveals the shift toward less text-centred analyses in a post-structuralist era. The premises of such a shift were already

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<sup>36</sup> Ponzio (2006) defines the critique of dialogic reason in opposition to Kant's critique of pure reason and Sartre's critique of dialectic reason. The critique of dialogic reason inaugurated by Bakhtin is "a critique of the concept of autonomy among individual bodies: in fact, autonomy is an illusion. Consequently, Bakhtin's critique is a critique of individual identity (such as consciousness or self) and of collective identity (such as community, historical language, or cultural system), where identity is conceived in terms of separation from the other following dominant ideological tendencies" (Ponzio 2006, 44).

<sup>37</sup> Gottfried Boehm proposed the term 'Iconic Turn' in Boehm (1994); Martin Jay proposes 'Visual Turn' in Jay (2002), 67-78. Also see Boehm and Mitchell (2009, 103-121).

maturing in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition underpinning the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Nelson Goodman and, in Europe, in the work produced by the Frankfurt School, in discourse analysis (especially on scopic regimes), and by Jacques Derrida. On the one hand, as a result of the increasing interest in nonverbal sign systems, and especially images, semioticians developed a set of methodologies that included visual literacy as a fundamental tool to decode hybrid semiotic texts. Nevertheless, their studies were embedded in a framework dominated by textual discourse, as in Barthes 1977 and, in his Barthes' wake, Klopfer 1977 and Spillner 1982. On the other hand, countless semiotics approaches (Greimas and Rastier for example) have been adapted to interpret hybrid works: that is, presenting the hermeneutic challenge of multimodality and intermediality.

At the core of any approach questioning the essence of images and words, especially in their interaction, one should first address the significations of 'text' and 'image', since they are value-laden, nonneutral terms in past and current scholarly debates. John Bateman notes how it is far from agreed what the narrative component is in visual texts, beyond the "unassailable ontological difference in their forms or material" (Bateman 2014, 24). More often than not, the ontological difference has radicalised the epistemological categorisation, as the phenomena of iconoclasm and iconophilia have demonstrated. As noted by Mitchell (1996, 57),

the word/image difference is not likely to be definitively stabilized by any single pair of defining terms or any static binary opposition. 'Word and image' seems to be better understood as a dialectical trope. It is a trope, or figurative condensation of a whole set of relations and distinctions, that crops up in aesthetics, semiotics, accounts of perception, cognition, and communication, and analyses of media (which are characteristically 'mixed' forms, 'imagetexts' that combine words and images). It is a dialectical trope because it resists stabilization as a binary opposition, shifting and transforming itself from one conceptual level to another, and shuttles between relations of contrariety and identity, difference and sameness.

From a theoretical point of view, Mitchell (1994, 89)

employ[s] the typographic convention of the slash to designate "image/text" as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term "imagetext" designates composite, synthetic works

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(or concepts) that combine image and text. “Image-text”, with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal.

Despite the impossibility of framing the word/image difference as a binary opposition because it is a ‘trope’ that transversally crosses manifold areas of human experience and knowledge, Mitchell’s terminological coinage stresses this irreducibility. This is the case of ‘image-text’ but also of the phrase ‘Pictorial Turn’. Among other outcomes, the formulation of the Pictorial Turn has contributed to reviving the scholarly debate on the image-word relation, demonstrating the ideologically loaded contents underlying oppositions such as nature/convention, space/time, iconic/symbolic, epistemic/rhetoric, and so on. Along these lines, Mitchell also clarifies once and for all that along with any discourse related to the love for, or the supremacy of images automatically summoning the notions of iconophilia, iconolatry, and idolatry, one ought to consider coterminous notions such as iconoclasm, iconophobia, aniconism, and the like. These competing discourses have been pivotal to interpreting contemporary phenomena such as the 9/11 attack, the destruction of the great Buddhas of Bamyán, and, more recently, the iconoclastic actions of ISIS. Likewise, the relatively new ‘movement’ of Visual Studies confirms that the paradigm shift has contributed to an accentuated self-awareness about critical and exegetical practices of scholarship focussed on word-image relations. Visual Studies has traversed and reached beyond traditional disciplines by focussing on a variety of topics, for instance, the theatricalisation and dematerialisation of war through images, as W. J. T. Mitchell (2011) reasserted. Moreover, Martin Jay’s definition of scopic regimes (Jay 1988) has laid bare hegemonic ways of seeing – à la Foucault – while the intersection of visual and cultural studies of race and gender has produced new forms of criticism, as pioneered by the work of John Berger, Laura Mulvey, and bell hook.

Mitchell warned that “whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial presence” (Mitchell 1994, 16). Nevertheless, such a warning risks being overshadowed by a series of problems. First, the late twentieth-century formalisation of the takeover of images has contributed to undermining the role of words – the previous episteme referred to as Linguistic Turn. This definition was coeval with the publication of Derrida’s seminal work *Of Grammatology*, where logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence were exposed in the wake of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lévinas. Further definitions of logocentrism,

based on one-dimensional translations of ‘logos’ as ‘discourse’ or ‘reason’, have precluded more nuanced and rewarding ways of interpreting the age-old problem of word-image interaction. Mitchell himself admitted that his notion of the Pictorial Turn has too often been rendered into a simplistic formula. The phrase ‘Pictorial Turn’ evokes a Manichean divide between two points in time. Moreover, the whole rhetoric behind the logic of the turns has been harshly criticised by Rancière (2009, 12). In other words, “the interaction of images and text is constitutive of representation as such”, as Mitchell (1994, 5) again notes. Speaking of images alone, Jacques Rancière has noted that there is an irreconcilable duality in the way images are theorised: “the image as now, material presence” and as “discourse encoding history” (Rancière 2007, 11); “the anti-textual poetics of the icon”; “the poetics of the montage that makes these icons the endlessly combinable and exchangeable elements of discourse” (Rancière 2007, 67). To avoid stalling progress toward a more integrated model of knowledge, I propose to consider the framework of mediality of culture, within which one may consider the word-image relations in terms of rhizomatic multimodality and intermediality. Thus, I aim to contextualise the dialogic and polyphonic interaction of words and images (including pauses, silence, and stutter) by examining their givenness, materiality, and performances enacted through their mediality.

## 5. Italian Literature as a Case Study: A Brief Overview.

### 5.1 Ekphrasis as Intermedial-ontological Device: Antonio Tabucchi, Daniele Del Giudice.

Antonio Tabucchi (1943-2012) is one of those postmodernist writers who have effectively combined images and words in such a way that these are inseparable from his poetics. As the authors examined in the subsequent case studies, Tabucchi’s very own poetics exemplifies the quintessential relation of postmodernism to reality: a fragmented ontology, an imperfect symmetry, an impossible correspondence that shakes the foundations of the tropes of classical representation – such as ekphrasis. While the use of images and words is present to varying degrees in the work of other Italian authors – to name a few and in no specific order, Cesare Pavese, Vincenzo Consolo, Leonardo Scascia, Carlo Levi, Elio Vittorini, Alberto Savinio, and Umberto Eco – Antonio Tabucchi and Daniele del Giudice (both examined in Chapter 1) share the consistent use of visual tropes aimed at questioning the nature of representation and the use

of explicit references to visuality and the visual arts. Moreover, in the works examined here, they both adopt the short-story form and the setting of a museum, from which their ekphrasis – bearing specific ontological (and consequently epistemological) consequences – arise.<sup>38</sup> In *The Reverse Game* and *In Reims Museum* respectively, Tabucchi and del Giudice have channelled in very specific and similar ways the postmodern mistrust of representation, truth, and referentiality. While this is a wider trend in Italian literature, I have focussed on the tendency to using a cryptic kind of ekphrasis. Via this cryptic mode (which is not to be confused with the enigmatic mode adopted, for example, by Leonardo Sciascia), I set out to illustrate how both words and images can be ambiguous, deceiving, and can forge other realities.

Tabucchi variously employs ekphrasis, *mise en abîme*, and anamorphosis, as well as techniques comparable to those of cinema (Brizio-Skov 2002, Rimini 2007). In this sense, the use of ekphrasis is strategic to outline Tabucchi's poetics: it conveys underlying meaning, causing confusion and uncertainty in the fictional self and, by extension, the reader. The use of visual elements in Tabucchi's narrative is instrumental to dialogue with his repressed memories, thus provoking unexpected epiphanies that do not necessarily reveal a logical truth. In fact, Tabucchi's complex way of incorporating the visual lies in its twofold effect: to make visible and to disguise; to illuminate the path of meaning as well as to disperse its traces.<sup>39</sup>

The use of rhetorical devices 'for the eyes',<sup>40</sup> of which Tabucchi's writing provides plentiful examples, deserves attention, for it introduces the postmodern debate on words and images as interfaces of multi- and intermediality. After publishing his first two books – *Piazza d'Italia* (1975) and *Il piccolo naviglio* (1978) – Tabucchi was more and more drawn to incorporating images into his writing. He combined the visual and the verbal in two ways: through allusion (employing ekphrasis and other rhetorical figures) and juxtaposition (text and illustration). *Il gioco del rovescio* [*The Reverse Game*, 1981], which I analyse in Chapter 1, is an example of allusion. Tabucchi's collaboration, to varying degrees, with illustrators and

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<sup>38</sup> While Umberto Eco's works also combine the verbal and the visual in multiple ways, only a monographic study would do justice to the breadth of his work. Here I have selected different authors to test more widely the applicability of the proposed framework.

<sup>39</sup> The postmodern literary translation of artwork does not mirror the ancient paradigm *ut pictura poësis*; on the contrary, it insistently questions our perception of reality and, ultimately, our ability to know it. In addition, and with variations, Sicilian writers Leonardo Sciascia and Vincenzo Consolo, as well as Daniele Del Giudice, have also adopted those literary devices to express some aspects of reality that cannot always be decipherable. Ekphrasis and other similar expedients used as a strategy to mislead the audience and to reveal the intrinsically ambiguous nature of reality are of course relevant to my study, which is ultimately an investigation of the possibilities given by the visual arts as an added medium to the text.

<sup>40</sup> The expression has already been used in scholarly literature: see, for instance de Armas (2004).

painters, such as Tullio Pericoli (1936-), Davide Benati (1949-), and Isabella Staino (1977-), yields to cases of juxtaposition. The posthumous book, *Isabella e l'ombra* (2013) was originally a tale dedicated to painter Isabella Staino by Tabucchi, then illustrated by Staino herself after Tabucchi's death (2012). This children's book is examined in the conclusions of this study: after reviewing the role ekphrasis has assumed in postmodernism, one may wonder whether a reverse ekphrastic encounter concludes, *à rebours*, Tabucchi's poetics of pictorial quotation.

Chapter 1 introduces the word-image divide and the sclerotization of the dialectic of identity versus alterity: Daniele Del Giudice's poetics is relevant here. In his writings, Del Giudice – discovered by Italo Calvino – reinforces the idea that ekphrasis and the use of mimesis do not follow logical procedures or promote a propositional truth, that is, a logically verifiable truth. The themes of the opacity of reality, the invisible emerging from the visible, and the ungraspable introduce an alternative paradigm of representation that translates the ontological relativity of an era into literary themes and motifs. A museum, the *lieu par excellence* of artistic creation and appreciation, is the setting where the two protagonists of *Nel museo di Reims* [In Reims Museum, 1981] dialogue ekphrastically. Their dialogue is not rooted in identity but promotes blindness (embodied by Barnaba's decaying sight) to explore sign making according to a reason that is dialogic and open to the Other.

## 5.2 Semiotic Difference as Abductive Creation: Fra Angelico and Antonio Tabucchi

The theme of the visible as insufficient to the essence of things and of words as incapable of conveying full meanings is also present in the late-medieval world of Fra Angelico. In Chapter 2, I examine Antonio Tabucchi's postmodern interpretation of Angelico – whose work was immersed in theological principles of representation. Antonio Tabucchi's short story *I Volatili del Beato Angelico* [The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico, 1987] showcases an example of intermedial allusion: what, traditionally, literary criticism used to refer to as ekphrasis. However, ekphrasis has come a long way from its classical use. In fact, in Chapter 2 I show how the new ekphrastic paradigm is central to Tabucchi as a way to mimic Beato Angelico's painting while simultaneously emphasising the unbridgeable distance of a bygone era. The lack of religious tension – which instead pervades Angelico's world and its exegesis – is mediated by Tabucchi's ekphrasis. This is an exercise in Derridean *différance*, a concept which expresses

the primacy of difference over identity (and therefore is paramount to differential ontology). The alterity that Tabucchi's intermedial allusion brings about is the only end result of intermedial and intersemiotic translation available to a postmodern writer. The intersection between images and Word (Fra Angelico's painting and Scriptures), and the intertwining of Tabucchi's re-elaboration and Angelico's exegesis, sheds light on two epistemologies of representation. The contrast between these two epistemologies adds depth to the use that Tabucchi makes of intermedial allusion. Indeed, Tabucchi's ekphrasis lays bare the ruptures, collisions and connections of the image-word relationship at two points in time, demonstrating the usefulness of erasing binary oppositions in favour of an ontology that contemplates both identity and diversity – tree-like and rhizome-like structures infiltrating each other, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms.

### 5.3 Dino Buzzati, the Iconotext, and the Ex Voto across Modes and Media.

A distinctive and towering figure in twentieth-century Italian literature, Buzzati (1906-1972) combines images in literature in different ways. A notable example of what critics refer to as *Doppelbegabung* (a writer who paints and a painter who writes), Buzzati's double talent shifts the verbal/visual, identity/alterity dialectic toward a more complex level of analysis. Right from the beginning, his writing is interspersed with visual elements such as drawings and sketches. His letters to his childhood friend, Arturo Brambilla (1920-1951), already exemplify how the young Buzzati was drawn to multimodal composition. From Tabucchi's and del Giudice's verbal ekphrases, Buzzati's case study on multimodality allows me to frame the progression – from the standpoint of Visual Studies – of the image-word paradigm toward a more balanced ratio: Buzzati's case study bears witness to a slow transition from a word-dominated paradigm to one that allows for the compenetration of codes, modalities, and 'media borders'. While Tabucchi's and del Giudice's postmodern ekphrases allow me to introduce the rhetorical trope and its evolution, Buzzati's work can be analysed as the multimodal production of a *Doppelbegabung* that existed at the junction of two eras. It is not a coincidence that Buzzati himself is considered a pioneer of the graphic novel in Italy, his *Poem Strip* (1969) being an exquisite prototype of the genre. Buzzati's choice of nonprescriptive 'forms' in favour of



expressive freedom is the quintessential example of multimodality in the image-word relation. After experimenting with a long-established tradition (illustrated narrative), Buzzati explored the newest frontier of multimodal creation (the graphic novel) and a fictional collection of ex voto dedicated to Saint Rita presenting popular themes and motifs of Buzzati (1971). Moreover, Buzzati's poetics investigates a dimension of reality that is never clear-cut – that of Magic Realism<sup>41</sup> – which, for certain aspects, echoes Tabucchi's and del Giudice's pluralistic attitude to representation.

Buzzati's works never denied his unfulfilled vocation as a painter, yet he gained fame as a novelist, a short story writer, and a journalist. Interestingly, critics agree that *Il Deserto dei Tartari* [The Tartar Steppe, 1940] contains an ekphrastic structure *sui generis* as it focuses mostly on architectural elements (Dell'Omo 2014). The most important aspect of his artistic creation is, indeed, the focus on story-telling that he carried out through literature, painting, illustration, the first prototype of the graphic novel in Italy, and theatre. Buzzati's work is also crucial for this study as it shows a high degree of openness to the Other. As an author of picturebooks, Buzzati represents a determined attempt at eradicating the misconception that literature has to be a pure domain. Not only does he intersperse images and words in his works; mixing and confusing genres is another quality of Buzzati's eclectic work. For instance, the genre of the ex voto – a votive offering made in exchange for a divine miracle – is mixed with that of the iconotext in the singular book that is *I miracoli di Val Morel*. The ex voto and its relevance for Buzzati's poetics demonstrate that intermedial and multimodal practices are 'democratic' and open to the inclusion of foreign elements in the literary tradition.

The definition of iconotext is particularly relevant to the word-image relationship in Chapter 3. I follow Peter Wagner's definition of iconotext, that is, "an artefact in which the verbal and the visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the co-presence of words and images". The iconotextual is a quality that can be applied to "pictures showing words or writing, but also to texts that work with images" and has no chronological limitations (Wagner 1996, 16-17). However, I will not go as far as Wagner in

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<sup>41</sup> Magic Realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new trend in the visual arts (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). It was later adopted by South American literary critics (including Gabriel Garcia Márquez). Many features of Magic Realism accurately capture the works of previous generations of writers: in Italy, to cite a few, Bontempelli, Tomasi di Lampedusa, Buzzati, Pavese, Calvino. See Orestano (2013).

extend[ing] the term iconotext semantically by applying it not only to works which really show the interpenetration of words and images in a concrete sense [...] but also to such art works in which one medium is only implied (e.g. the reference to a painting in a fictional work.) (Wagner 1996, 16).

Such an extension and consequent application would overlap with the terminology proposed, namely with the rhetorical trope of ekphrasis. ‘Iconotext’ is a term employed to describe the text-image dialectic that prevails in multimodality: an iconotext does not necessarily privilege the iconic or textual component; on the contrary, it employs them to create meaning in different modalities (the verbal and the visual for example).<sup>42</sup> The iconotext is therefore only a specimen of the wide range of possibilities offered by multimodality. Examples of iconotexts range from picturebooks, to emblems and emblem books, to graphic novels and comics. A film with subtitles destined for a hearing-impaired audience is also an iconotext, as the two components are strictly indissoluble in the meaning-making process.

The iconotext lies at the centre of a composite framework that involves semiotics, discourse analysis, deconstruction, the study of *mentalité(s)*,<sup>43</sup> and intermediality. In order to preserve the rich theoretical grounds on which the notion of iconotext rests, I do not take into account Liliane Louvel’s views. Louvel opts for excluding “homogeneous work” that derives from the “exchange between two artists” as well as “occurrences of word/image conjunctions found in comic strips, graphic novels, or series”. Louvel’s main monograph on the topic argues that the analysis of works conceived together by different authors requires a specific study; thus, she mainly focuses on “literature including two-dimensional works of art [...] or vision-related artefacts” (Louvel 2011, 15). Louvel, on the one hand, rightfully recognises that the iconotextual mode of expression

conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity. It is therefore a perfect word to designate the ambiguous, the aporetic, and the in-between (Louvel 2011, 14-15).

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<sup>42</sup> Wagner derives the term iconotext from Nerlich (1990, 255-303). Wagner states that the term was coined by Nerlich, whose publication appeared in 1990. However, I have encountered a previous use of the term while reviewing picturebook criticism, namely in Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) who mention Kristin Hallberg (1982) as the scholar who coined iconotext.

<sup>43</sup> Here and henceforth I use the French term as I am referring to the Annales School and their ‘histoire of mentalités’.

On the other hand, I share the concerns expressed by Claus Clüver about Louvel's view of iconotexts as "textual events", the limitations of her investigation consequent to adopting notions of ekphrasis challenged since the mid-nineties, and the following singling out of intermedial perspectives, including intermedial reference and transposition (Clüver 2012).<sup>44</sup>

The notion of iconotext – an artefact that present different modes without which meaning making would be impaired – rests on sound theoretical bases:

1: [...] all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes

(Mitchell 1994, 89).<sup>45</sup>

2. [...] [t]he postulate of mixed, hybrid media leads us to the specificity of codes, materials, technologies, perceptual practices, sign-functions, and institutional conditions of production and consumption that go to make up a medium. We are also allowed to notice that literature, in techniques like ekphrasis and description, as well as in more subtle strategies of formal arrangement, involves virtual or imaginative experiences of space and vision that are no less real for being indirectly conveyed through language (Mitchell 2002, 174).

A few principles deriving from art history reinforce this study's broad direction toward a pragmatic approach. One of these is objecthood, as seminally defined by art historian Michael Fried in 1967. Mitchell has remarked that the modern preoccupation with the ontological reverberates in the attention paid to materiality: "'Matter' seems to 'matter' in a newly vivid and urgent way. Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*, Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* are among the most prominent contributions to this revival" (Mitchell 2005, 153). Focussing on objecthood means "a return to fundamental theoretical reflection on the constitution of material objects, as if our virtual age were compelling us to start all over with the ontology of things, renewing Heidegger's obsessive questions about the Being of beings" (Mitchell 2005, 153). A modified notion of objecthood

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<sup>44</sup> What Clüver finds weakest is, ultimately, in the second part of the book, "a reflection on the usefulness of her typology, which should extend beyond the ability to recognize and classify pictorial moments in verbal arts" (Clüver 2012, 3).

<sup>45</sup> See also W. J. T. Mitchell (2002, 170): "There are no visual media. All media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types".

will be applied in Chapter 3 where I examine the question of multimodal art and materiality through ex votos, picturebooks, and conceptual art. The pragmatism of this notion balances the theorisation of the *hyphos*, the network of all multimodal and intermedial relations, actual and potential.

Buzzati's inclination to the semiotic mode and genre hybridisation converges, in a specific zone, with the poetics of French artist Yves Klein. In this zone are the ex voto as a malleable genre, and a saint, St. Rita of Cascia. This encounter in the network – *hyphos* – of all possible intermedial relations shows the creative force of abduction, at work in both Buzzati's *Imiracoli di Val Morel* and in Klein's small plexiglass case dedicated to Saint Rita. The end results are iconic and dialogic, as I aim to show, and therefore the whole creative process, for both Buzzati and Klein, is abductive. On a methodological level, the framework of interpretation semiotics is supported here by abductive reasoning, without which theorising Buzzati and Klein's convergence would not have been possible.

As mentioned, Chapter 1 addresses the essential questions surrounding the word-image relation in the old media from a literary frame of reference. This is preliminary to the discussions of the following chapters, examining respectively the word-image paradigm both from a philosophical perspective (Chapter 2) and from one based on media and materialities (Chapter 3).

## Chapter 1

# Rhetorical Writing for the Eyes' Mind? Ekphrasis as Intermedial Translation

In this chapter I analyse the role of images in postmodern literature. In this sense, the phrase “writing for the eyes” (de Armas 2004) becomes paradoxical as the images produced are first and foremost mental. I set out to investigate ekphrasis specifically, one of the most fortunate tropes to have captured the presentification – in Husserl’s terms – of images *in absentia*. This will introduce pivotal aspects of my analysis of the relation between images and words that will also be relevant to the following case studies.

The critical contributions I have adopted share a ‘borderline’ approach: they are marginal, liminal, and intersect theoretical thresholds. However, there is an underlying and firm principle – one on which many scholars agree, especially in the light of the poststructuralist relativism of signs and sign systems: the notion that ‘correspondences of the arts’ have exhausted their potential.<sup>46</sup> Horace’s phrase *ut pictura poësis*, in its classical signification,<sup>47</sup> does not meaningfully portray the current epistemological orientation. A shift in the classical meaning of *ut pictura poësis* had already taken place in the eighteenth century (Wettlaufer 2003, 62-68); at present, the “[non]complete legibility” (Bann 1989, 28) of the two domains – images and words – signals the contemporary shift in perspective. The new theoretical paradigm bridges Murray Krieger’s studies on ekphrasis and representation (1992), and Mitchell’s theories on media and their purity (1994).<sup>48</sup> The dispute about which art prevails – Leonardo da Vinci’s *Paragone* (da Vinci 1498) and 1766 Gotthold E. Lessing’s *Laokoon* (Lessing 1979) being exemplary texts of either faction – as well as the theoretical stance that the two arts are equal

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Meyers (1975); Nisbet and Rawson (1997, 783-87).

<sup>47</sup> It is now widely accepted that Horace’s phrase, like Aristotle’s implications in his *Poetics*, has been misinterpreted. See Lee (1940, 197-269); Hagstrum (1958, 6, 9, 60); Willems (1989).

<sup>48</sup> Krieger (1992) includes his previous work (Krieger 1967). Krieger declares: “What is being described in ekphrasis is both a miracle and a mirage: a miracle because a sequence of actions filled with before and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant’s vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem’s words” (Krieger 1992, xvi-xvii). See Mitchell (1994), especially “Ut Pictura Theoria: Abstract Painting and Language”, 213-240.

and fully translatable, provide the historical context for the shift toward the integrated frameworks of intermediality and multimodality adopted here. Ekphrasis is considered here methodologically relevant as an umbrella term grouping multiple strategies at play in literary visuality and visual literature that intersect, creating and reshaping meaning. Of the many “manifestations of writing for the eyes” (de Armas 2004, 2008),<sup>49</sup> a rich trope like ekphrasis – “the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (Clüver 1997, 26) – represents an ideal field of investigation of how images and words can interact, and a potential interpretive mode for intersemiotic crossings. It is not an exaggeration to argue that this is the most studied and debated rhetorical trope concerning visuality in literature.<sup>50</sup>

In Tamar Yacobi’s words, while comparing and contrasting ekphrasis and *simile*,

in ekphrasis, the two domains (the representing vs. the represented) belong to two media (verbal vs. visual) or two art-forms (literary vs. graphic), each with its own peculiar conditions of representation [...]. Where the figure boasts semiotic unity, ekphrasis entails semiotic variety or bi-polarity. The one is essentially language, the other is language replacing and “crossing” a sign-system outside language

(Yacobi 1997, 36).

However, Claus Clüver remarks on the democratic and inclusive character of ekphrasis: absolute music, non-narrative dance and architecture can all be objects of intersemiotic translation, of which ekphrasis is a definite type (Clüver 1997, 26). Indeed, since Jean Hagstrum’s modern definition (1958), ekphrasis has progressively widened its traditional meaning thanks to the contributions of Svetlana Alpers (1960) and Svetlana and Paul Alpers (1972), Leo Spitzer (1962), and Claus Clüver (1989, 1997, 2012). Consequently – as Macdonald (1993) first pointed out – the term should be treated as a neologism<sup>51</sup> to avoid the

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<sup>49</sup> I follow again de Armas’ list of rhetoric contrivances defined by him as ‘writing for the eyes’: “anamorphosis, cartography, metamorphosis, mirrors and mirroring techniques, paragone, theophany, the book as visual object, the visual triggers of memory, and imagination and the many objects that permeate the text” (de Armas 2008, 83).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Clüver vs. Yacobi: (Yacobi 1997, 1998); (Clüver 1998).

<sup>51</sup> Macdonald comments Alpers’ reconceptualization of *ekphrasis* as a “transforming alchemy [...]”. She severs its connection with its methodological context (a stylistic technique), she severs it from its literary genre (poetry), she severs it from Curtius’s qualifying description (elaborate delineation), and she severs it from Curtius’s catalogue of objects [...]. Thus disencumbered of every local feature and function described by Curtius, [...] the term is

falsification of “the rhetorical and poetical bases of classical criticism of the visual arts” (Macdonald 1993, 85). Indeed, the quest for a definition, since Alpers’ extrapolation, has so greatly expanded the original boundaries that it would now be unrecognizable to the ancients.<sup>52</sup> In its classical definition, the trope of ekphrasis had to display, first, *enargeia*, i.e. “that vividness or luminosity usually associated with figures of amplification that offer circumstantial evidence to the eyes of the mind” (Altman 2010, 185); second, clarity (*saphêneia*)<sup>53</sup> to create a mental image (*phantasia*).

While the sister arts’ paradigm and the ‘boundaries’ of ekphrasis have been gradually dismantled, Grant F. Scott argues that originally, “the term pushes beyond the traditional collaborative relations between the sister arts implied in Horace’s maxim” (Scott 1991, 301). Modernity would then have simply rediscovered the disposition to intermediality and multimodality that ekphrasis held at one point in time. Modern definitions are innumerable, continuously re-working its meaning, boundaries and applications. In this regard, Bernhard F. Scholz (1998) and Macdonald (1993) noted the problematic wealth of definitions, and suggested a more flexible approach, that is, to understand it as “a term with a ‘family of meanings’, with each member of that family calling for a separate definition” (Scholz 1998, 73). A stratified (rhizomatic) notion of ekphrasis is indeed rewarding so as to understand intermediality and multimodality as complex phenomena irreducible to a single discipline or perspective.

Ekphrasis is also part of a discourse characterised by ideologies, subject to laws of hegemony and resistance – recalling teachings by Foucault, Althusser, and Goffman. The visual’s supposed helplessness is reinforced by the credo that “like the masses, the colonized, the powerless [...], visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse” (Mitchell 1994, 157), echoing Wittgenstein’s thought.<sup>54</sup> James Heffernan’s canonical definition “the verbal representation of visual representation”, later to become “the verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan 1991, 3; 2004, 199),<sup>55</sup> has in fact

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treated as coterminous with description of subject-matter of an art-object” (Macdonald 1993, 85). <sup>51</sup> This position is also supported by Wagner (1996, 13).

<sup>52</sup> For the meaning of ekphrasis in antiquity, see Webb (2009).

<sup>53</sup> See Webb (2009, 185).

<sup>54</sup> Wittgenstein (1922), especially #2.172-2.18, #4.121, #4.1212.

<sup>55</sup> Similar to Heffernan’s is the definition given by Scott (1991, 301, fn. 2), quoting W. J. T. Mitchell who later offered a complementary definition in Mitchell (1994, 151-52; 157, fn.19).

become outdated in light of the variety of media, old and new, to which it can be applied. Claus Clüver provided the foundations to widen the meaning of ekphrasis. His position is particularly fitting to intermedial and multimodal interpretive models whereas “[Heffernan’s] definition offer[s] aspects for critical inquiry that are not, or not primarily concerned, with the representation of extra-textual phenomena” (Clüver 1997, 30). In addition, Peter Wagner – in the wake of Heffernan (1991) and Carrier (1993) – took a more radical stance to extend the use of ekphrasis “to encompass ‘verbal representation’ in its widest sense, including critical writing”, for

we should drop, once and for all, the tacit assumption that the verbal representation of an image must be ‘literary’ to qualify as ekphrasis—in our age of the arbitrary sign it has become extremely difficult to distinguish between a ‘literary’ and a ‘critical’ text. [...] The difference between ekphrastic and critical writings is one of degree, not of mode or kind (Wagner 1996, 14).

Wagner is echoed by Stephen Cheeke, who is likewise in favour of expanding “what we are actually prepared to think of as ekphrastic writing”, also including literary descriptions of artworks in his study on poetry and ekphrasis (Cheeke 2008, 7). Also, Paola Spinozzi usefully highlighted the postmodern shift from the content of ekphrasis to ekphrasis as container, a claim based on turn-of-the-century publications like *Musical Ekphrasis* by Siglind Bruhn (Spinozzi 2006, 223).<sup>56</sup>

To return to the debate about the sister arts, postmodern perplexities about this discourse signal that the ‘schism’ is irreversible. Foucault’s reflection on the multiple perspective through which Diego Velázquez challenged his beholders in *Las Meninas* [1656] is a precise discovery of the epistemological fracture:

[...] the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. And the proper name, in this particular context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the

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<sup>56</sup> See also Lara-Rallo (2012, pp. 97-109); Preston (2007, 115-129); Bal (2000, 79-99); Clüver (1989); Bruhn (2000).



space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as though they were equivalents. But if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names and preserve the infinity of the task (Foucault 2001, 10).

The visual cannot be adequately described, which means that the verbal cannot be satisfyingly translated into the visual. If one asks whether this has been a critical impasse for both theory and practice, the answer should qualify two aspects. On the one hand, the postmodern notion of the infinite relation of language to vision (and vice versa) has indeed fostered critical debate. The complexity of such a relation has been explored from different standpoints, resulting in open-ended approaches willing to take the risk of not offering any definitive answer. On the other hand, the phenomenon of literary visuality here at stake has not petered out. Ekphrastic practice is also on the rise, as the increasing bibliography on the subject demonstrates (see, for example, Denham 2010; Spaccini 2008).

With the crisis of classical representation, “language is paradoxically weakened and empowered as it loses its ability to immaculately relay reality into representation” (Migernier 2006, 14). Michele Cometa’s claim of ekphrasis revived, since at least the Romantic period, hinges upon this assumption (Cometa 2004, 7-20). Cometa is a scholar of literary visuality who investigates the consequences on vision and gaze following Foucault’s thought. Specifically, he examines the effacement of traditional ekphrastic practice in Thomas Bernhard’s *Old Masters* (1985), the last work of his trilogy on the arts, which brings to life an “extinction and deconstruction of the biographical coherence, a continuous decomposition of the self, now divided into its self-projection of the painting [...] and into the opinion that others form about it” (Cometa 2004, 157, my translation). The refuting of the classical certainties of ekphrasis<sup>57</sup> in Bernhard’s work, both at fictive and descriptive levels, exemplifies the tendency of postmodern ekphrasis towards self-reference and self-commentary. Commenting on Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, Gugleta argues that

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<sup>57</sup> See Cometa (2004, 153): “The paintings in this novel are non-places, they exist for words (and music) apparently cannot interact with them; gazing at their ‘beholders’ is their only action [...] yet any sort of communication is precluded”, (my translation).

the Classical representation posits itself as referential while hiding its referentiality; the role of the signifying function of representation is something taken for granted or neutralised, so that the material exteriority of representation remains invisible and only the Idea that it ostensibly refers to shines in its full presence, without residuum. Such representation is, according to Foucault, tautological, because it moves back upon itself, enclosing itself in a concave and arbitrary space. Yet, it is precisely this tautological nature, we hold, that makes representation non-referential, non-resembling, thereby dismissing any claim about its supposed transparency (Gugleta 2011, 3).

The mediated character of representation, its being “non-referential” and “non-resembling” is what brings the non-neutrality of representation to the fore. Representation, as an infinite relation of signs (and therefore across sign systems), is infinite deferral and re-mediation: the post-classical notion of representation as substantially relational and not purely mimetic recalls the concepts of Peirce and Bakhtin examined in the introduction. Moreover, in Gugleta’s words,

Representation does not essentially refer to the origin, manifests not a necessary presence or an expression of it; rather its office is in being a mediated structure that entails the split between itself and the other of the referent. Not a simple dualism, but a structuralism, anchored in negativity or difference, is what the purity of pure representation inevitably connotes. Pure representation has little to do with transparency, and much to do with affirming only itself, having a pure origin within itself. Representation is hence still an operative term, and the crisis of representation Foucault attributes to the post-Classical period must be reformulated as the crisis of representation formerly seen merely as an imitation (Gugleta 2011, 4).

I shall illustrate in the following sections how the “negativity and difference” on which postmodern thinking is based yield fruitful results: from the uncertainty of perception – especially vision – more interpretative routes may emerge. The analysis of selected works by Antonio Tabucchi and Daniele Del Giudice will shed light on how the use of ekphrasis as the rhetorical trope of vision *par excellence* implies a shift in the paradigm of representation. Understanding the modalities in which the schism between the sister arts occurred is a prerequisite to investigating recurring hermeneutic issues arising from the analysis of multimodal or intermedial works in the next case studies.

## 1.1 Ekphrasis as Epistemological Device: the Alterity of Representation

È come un sogno che sai di sognare, e in questo consiste la sua verità: nell'essere reale al di fuori del reale.

— Antonio Tabucchi<sup>58</sup>

Thought was born blind, but Thought knows what is seeing.  
 Its careful touch, deciphering forms from shapes  
 Still suggests form as aught whose proper being  
 Mere finding touch with erring darkness drapes.  
 Yet whence, except from guessed sight, does touch teach  
 That touch is but a close and empty sense?  
 How does more touch, self-uncontented, reach  
 For some truer sense's whole intelligence?  
 The thing once touched, if touch be now omitted,  
 Stands yet in memory real and outward known,  
 So the untouching memory of touch is fitted  
 With sense of a sense whereby far things are shown  
 So, by touch of untouching, wrongly aright,  
 Touch' thought of seeing sees not things but Sight.

— Fernando Pessoa<sup>59</sup>

La lueur timide et fugitive, l'instant-éclair, le silence, les signes évasifs – c'est sous cette forme que choisissent de se faire connaître les choses les plus importantes de la vie. Il n'est pas facile de surprendre la lueur infiniment douteuse, ni d'en comprendre le sens. Cette lueur est la lumière clignotante de l'entrevision dans laquelle le méconnu soudainement se reconnaît.

— Vladimir Jankélévitch<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> From "Messaggio dalla penombra", Tabucchi (2013, 187).

<sup>59</sup> "Thought was born blind, but Thought knows what is seeing", XXI, Pessoa (1974).

<sup>60</sup> Jankélévitch (1980, 179).

Antonio Tabucchi's *hyphos* is particularly relevant to the discussion of his ekphrastic thinking: Pessoa as a constant reference in Tabucchi's work, Jankélévitch as a great philosophical influence on his thinking. Both Pessoa and Jankélévitch represent two constant sources for Tabucchi's poetics. Literary intertextuality, however, is not the only kind of referencing Tabucchi adopts: Tabucchi's network of connections between texts is always complemented by the visual arts, especially painting. The visual arts have indeed held a paramount role in Tabucchi's formation years.

The main work examined in this chapter, *Il gioco del rovescio* [The Reverse Game, <sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup> henceforth RG 1981] deals both with ekphrasis as (mis)representation and with Velázquez's most famous painting, whose seminal reading by Foucault (2001) as well as Lacan's ideas left a mark on Tabucchi's thinking.<sup>63</sup> Foucault selected this painting as a quintessential example of how distant the model of classical knowledge is from postmodernism. While Foucault's contribution to Tabucchi's poetics of representation is undeniable, Lacan's standpoint should also be considered:

For Lacan, the mirror in the painting is rhetorically polemical and non-substitutable for the painting's ground. Its meaning is, "This is what I am *not*." Indeed, Lacan goes to considerable lengths to oppose, not only Foucault's interpretation of *Las Meninas* – according to which the turned canvas is a royal portrait – but also *another* popular art-historical interpretation – in which the turned picture depicts the very scene shown in the painting but *itself* as painted in a mirror. This second interpretation, too, depends upon a mirror, in this case a large looking-glass placed at the "viewpoint" and stretching across the audience chamber from which we (the viewers) seem to see the picture (Brockelman 2013, 278).

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<sup>61</sup> See Joseph Francese's translation in Francese (2006). I am aware of the existence of additional translations of the title into English: see, for example, 'Game of Reversals', Baranski and Pertile (1997, 203); 'Backwards Game', Bondanella and Ciccarelli (2003, 215). The latter is also the title of the first translation into English which appeared in Tabucchi (1986a).

<sup>62</sup> Despite the intertwining of Tabucchi's Leitmotifs and symbols throughout his work, I will not examine closely the novels *Requiem* and *I volatili del Beato Angelico* in which a painting is again pivotal to the narrative.

<sup>63</sup> See Smith (2000); Stoichita (1997).

Lacan's standpoint ought to be taken into account as it expands the complexity that Foucault identified in the structure of *Las Meninas* [LM]. As a consequence, Lacan's position problematizes further Tabucchi's representation, as Tabucchi himself aimed at 'challenging mere representational illusion' by confusing the reader about 'what's going on?' in his *Reverse Game*, and not vice versa:

For Lacan, the task that Velázquez gives us is not to figure out "what's going on?" in the illusory represented space but rather both to investigate what this strong illusion *hides* and to examine what produces the power of the representational illusion that we *might* enter the space of the artist's studio in the Alca'zar palace, passing through the "open window" of the painting.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Lacan insists that we pay attention to the way *Las Meninas*, like [Magritte's] *The Human Condition*, challenges mere representational illusionism (Brockelman 2013, 279).

The role played by the painting is paramount as it appears in the brief narrative RG, which, in turn, holds a pivotal role within Tabucchi's entire work (Meschini 2007, 2018; Greco L. 1998). The interest in literary viscosity appears at a crucial intersection of literary experimentation where Tabucchi employs ekphrasis and other pointers to the visual arts (Francese 2006, 200). Nevertheless, the ekphrastic moment is partial: the description focuses only on select elements of the painting *Las Meninas*. The illusion of the "open window" is indeed undermined by elements – or pointers – in the painting with which Tabucchi provides the readers. Moreover, the reticent example of ekphrasis is nestled in a narrative that is never concluded: its ending is left open to the possibilities of oneiric vision. In short, the story's conclusion entrusts to the reader the responsibility of figuring out the illusion of representation, including the possibility of abstention from any form of judgement.

In this short story, in addition to LM, Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms are closely interwoven with Tabucchi's poetics. In RG, the puzzling character Maria do Carmo – the creator of the reverse game, and a mysterious figure never fully accounted for – is present in absentia, her death unmasking all her irreconcilable dualities. The idiosyncrasies of the poet's fiction – which reminds us of Pessoa's statement, that *O poeta é um fingidor* [The poet is a pretender] – pertain to the postmodern "split personality" (Scott 1991, 303) of ekphrasis as well. As Francese argues, after Tabucchi's "five-year period of formal research", his prose achieves "the decentralisation of the subject of narrative [...], the capacity to look at himself nonsubjectively, 'as if in a mirror'", that is, Tabucchi reaches further than the mere "identification with

(an)other” (Francese 2006, 198). The open-ended nature of Tabucchi’s fictions, of RG itself, and the flexibility with which different sign systems are interspersed, make this a dialogic and polyphonic work that is the product of abductive creation. This use of ekphrasis is indeed a re-mediating strategy – in its being dialogic and polyphonic – that highlights the fracture between narration and the horizon of expectations.

The themes underpinning the short narrative – the double, the reverse, the unknown – also support the role played by ekphrasis in fabricating a fictional world open to alterity. As a doubling artifice – translating an ‘object’ from one plane to another, thus remediating, and creating another version – ekphrasis can be seen as a rhetorical magic lantern that modifies the image’s (or any other object’s) semantic denotatum. When being projected on optical devices such as the camera obscura and the magic lantern,<sup>64</sup> images must be prepared upside down and backwards in order to see them right way up and forwards. Likewise, the magic of ekphrastic projection betrays the original image by dislocation and recontextualisation. The fantascop, invented by the Belgian physicist Étienne-Gaspard Robert (1763-1837), is a magic lantern adapted to produce phantasmagoria. The ekphrastic distortion reveals a correspondence to phantasmagoric projectors: both are modifiers of semantic connotatum. As a phantasmagoric, mannerist-inspired projection of ghosts (Maria do Carmo; Pessoa; Velázquez himself; the author’s, perhaps Pessoa’s heteronym’s heteronym) – the brief narrative plunges into blurred, dream-like atmospheres. The reverse game fundamentals require a certain degree of vagueness and ambiguity. Its corollary is: “una certa cosa che era così era invece anche in un altro modo” [something that was in a certain way could also be in another way] (Tabucchi 2006, 5). Rimini pushes the definition of ‘reverse game’ even further, claiming that it stands for “il gioco del mondo”, a game that governs the interpretation of the world, an epistemology in its own right (Rimini 2011, 109).

A keyword for the game is provided: ‘sever’, intentionally deprived of any diacritic signs. This suggests an inclusive, yet open-ended relation among the producible meanings (also including the verb ‘sever’ in English). Thus, the keyword in the story is itself a sign of indeterminacy in its dialogic openness to the other: a token of the uncertain boundaries of what is and what is not, and of what reality may be. Moreover, the order of things can be interpreted variously in relation to ekphrasis, as suggested by the the Spanish meaning ‘revés’ [reverse] and by the French meaning “rêves” [dreams]. ‘Reverse’ is also a key to interpretation located

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<sup>64</sup> Tabucchi’s ekphrasis and optical illusions have been studied further. For instance, Pezzin (2000) refers to Amos’ room to draw a parallel with *Las Meninas*.

in the verso of things – as per Foucault’s reading in *The Order of Things* – the threshold figure in the painting on the edge of it, caught indefinitely either exiting, entering or staying, ontologically and physically.<sup>65</sup> ‘Reverse’ is, ultimately, the gnoseological process to which readers are prompted, that is, the mental game that implies an ontological disposition to go beyond (and to unmask) the illusion of representation, to acknowledge the illusion of the ‘window’ – as per Lacan’s interpretation.

The anchor of the wordplay sever/revés (as revés and rêves) is in the third letter, also recalled by the v-shaped perspective lines departing from the vanishing point located near the elbow of the background figure of the painting. Tabucchi’s ekphrastic conclusion relies on the role of the background figure, who is an all-seeing character from his vantage point. After her death, the enigmatic persona of Maria do Carmo is superimposed on the background figure in the painting:

Forse Maria do Carmo aveva finalmente raggiunto il suo rovescio. Le augurai che fosse come lo aveva desiderato e pensai che la parola spagnola e quella francese forse coincidevano in un punto. Mi parve che esso fosse il punto di fuga di una prospettiva, come quando si tracciano le linee prospettiche di un quadro, e in quel momento la sirena fischiò un’altra volta, la nave attraccò, io scesi lentamente dalla passerella e cominciai a seguire i moli, il porto era completamente deserto, i moli erano le linee prospettiche che convergevano verso il punto di fuga di un quadro, il quadro era *Las Meninas* di Velázquez, la figura di fondo sulla quale convergevano le linee dei moli aveva quell’espressione maliziosa e malinconica che mi ero impresso nella memoria: e che buffo, quella figura era Maria do Carmo, col suo vestito giallo, io le stavo dicendo: ho capito perchè hai codesta espressione, perchè tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?, dimmelo, aspetta che vengo anch’io, ora vengo a vedere. E mi incamminai verso quel punto. E in quel momento mi trovai in un altro sogno (Tabucchi 2006, 24).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Tabucchi (2006, 11): “la chiave del quadro sta nella figura di fondo, è un gioco del rovescio” [“The key to the picture is in the figure in the background – it’s a backward game”, trans. Janice M. Thresher (Tabucchi 1986a, 105)].

<sup>66</sup> English version in Tabucchi (1986a, 118-119): “Perhaps Maria do Carmo had finally achieved her backward side. I wished for her that it was as she had desired, and thought that the Spanish word and the French one perhaps coincided at one point. It seemed to me that this was the vanishing point of a perspective, as when the perspective lines of a picture are drawn. And at that moment the siren wailed again, the ship docked, I went slowly down the gangplank and began to walk along the quays. The harbor was completely deserted. The quays were the perspective lines that verged toward the vanishing point of a picture. The picture was the *Young Ladies in Waiting* by Velázquez. The figure in the background, on which the lines of the quays converged, had that malicious and melancholic expression that was impressed on my memory. And how funny – that figure was Maria do Carmo in her yellow dress. I was saying to her, “I understand why you have that expression, why you see the backward side of the picture. What do you see from that point? Tell me. Wait for me to come, too. I’m coming to see now.” And I walked toward that point. And at that moment I found myself in another dream”.

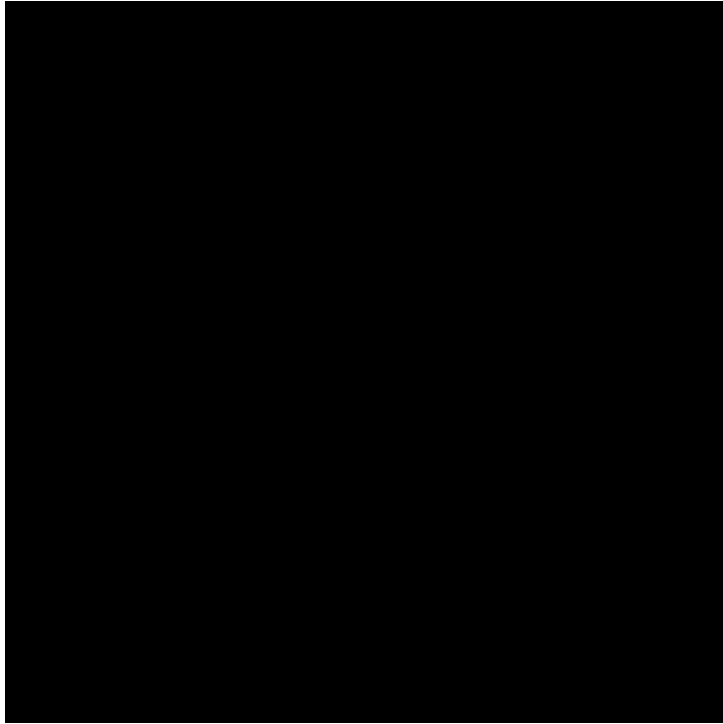


Figure 1: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, Museo del Prado, Madrid

The game in RG, played through an ekphrastic moment, sets up an ontological system informing Tabucchi's poetics. The optical plane affects the gnoseology of the interpretive subject, projecting what was seen in a certain way to in yet another one. Maria do Carmo's game can ultimately be interpreted in Calvino's words: "i giochi, da quelli infantili a quelli degli adulti, hanno sempre un fondamento serio: sono soprattutto tecniche d'addestramento di facoltà e attitudini che saranno necessarie nella vita" (Calvino 1999, 767).<sup>67</sup>

The disruption of the knowledge model of the reader/holder is implicit in the English meaning of 'sever'. According to the OED, the definition of this verb is: "1. divide by cutting or slicing, especially suddenly and forcibly. [...]; 1.1 Put an end to (a connection or relationship); break off" (OED 2010). This implication of sever/reves emphasises the similarities of the ekphrastic trope in RG to the processes of phenomenological *epoché* and eidetic reduction.<sup>68</sup> By looking, unbiased, at *Las Meninas* (and the background figure in

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<sup>67</sup> "Games – be they for children or adults – always have a serious purpose: they are, above all, techniques of and training in indispensable abilities and attitudes in life", my translation

<sup>68</sup> Roy (2010): "the phenomenological description of a given act and, in particular, the phenomenological specification of its intentional content, must not rely upon the correctness of any *existence assumption* concerning



particular), the beholder manages to ‘reboot’ her cognitive system. The process starts by temporarily abstaining from any form of judgement. In the next stage of the *epoché*, by retuning the subject’s knowledge of consciousness and experiences, a deeper, purer understanding of the object of cognition is gained. Both bracketing (holding in abeyance, suspending any form of judgement) the object of the cognitive action – the painting – and reducing it to its invariable *eidos*, the structure upon which warp and woof depend, are paramount to the phenomenological method. A structural element of the painting, specifically, is the figure in the background where the perspective lines converge.

The other side of the canvas, what cannot be seen, is at the centre of philosophical investigations as much as the pivotal part on which RG’s structure rests, the enigmatic figure in the background. This figure disrupts the distinction between spatial and temporal arts (respectively, painting and poetry), as theorised by Lessing. The temporal dimension seems to break through the painted canvas as the background figure appears to be captured in the instant where he is either exiting, entering, maybe even lingering on the threshold. Pinzuti (2008) noted that Tabucchi was influenced by French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, author of *Du mensonge* (1942) and *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (1957/1980). The instant, for Jankélévitch, “designates the ungraspable threshold where being ceases to be something and where nothing ceases to be nothing” (Jankélévitch 1953, 210). The ontological impasse of the figure in the background suggests here the endless implementation of *epoché*, as we are undecided whether we are the object of the gaze or the subject of vision. The parallelism with the phenomenological method can reach further to include the category of *Erlebnis* [lived experience]. Rimini notes the dissemination of elements of the painting in the short story that intersperse the two semiotic planes, the verbal and the visual: “ekphrasis yields to *Erlebnis*. [...] The temporal dimension bursts into the still nature of *Las Meninas*. The distinction between temporal and spatial arts theorised by Lessing does not apply” (Rimini 2011, 113).<sup>69</sup> Not only that, the confusion between subject and object, the frame and the framed, is a symptom of the coexistence of both the eye and the gaze. In Lacan’s terms, the eye is the viewing subject and the gaze is the object that stares back at the subject and demands participation. For Lacan, “the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object, but a point in the

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the object(s) (if any) the respective act is about. Thus, the *epoché* has us focus on those aspects of our intentional acts and their contents that do not depend on the existence of a represented object out there in the extra-mental world”.

<sup>69</sup> My translation.

Other that resists the mastery of vision” (Lacan 1978, 73). The request for participation of the object in the painting (the background figure) is dialogic and open to alterity. Likewise, in the short story the quest for knowledge is experienced through tropes of vision.

It has been observed that rhetorical tropes involving vision “studiously replicate the effect of Lacan’s topological models of mental functioning, where the inside is continuous with the outside, and the whole cannot be grasped in a single moment. The most easily described is the Moebius band” (Smith 2000, 88). Francese also refers to the Moebius strip as the path to knowledge sought by the knowing subject in Tabucchi’s fiction:

going off in one direction, then turning over, then back on itself over again, back to its point of departure – outside the self toward the Other, and then inward, backward in time through the formation of the unconscious to the moment of birth, the ‘place d’effroi’ [place of terror] where one moves from nonbeing to being (Francese 2006, 199-200).

Tabucchi’s epistemological model can be said to be at work in the complexity of Velázquez’s masterpiece. In LM, Velázquez quoted in turn two paintings with scenes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, more precisely copies by Juan Batista Del Mazo. The painter’s choice to quote, indirectly, Rubens’s *Pallas and Arachne* (as well as Jordaens’s *Judgement of Midas*)<sup>70</sup> is a twofold *mise en abîme*, since he would paint *Las Hilanderas* one year after LM.

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<sup>70</sup> “Both paintings are part of the lot of 63 commissioned by Philip IV from Rubens for his hunting lodge the Torre de la Parada (from which the term the Torre cycle). The latter is painted by Jordaens after a Rubens’s sketch (Brussels) and often conflated with the competition between Apollo and Marsyas” (Georgievska-Shine and Silver 2014, 145-146).

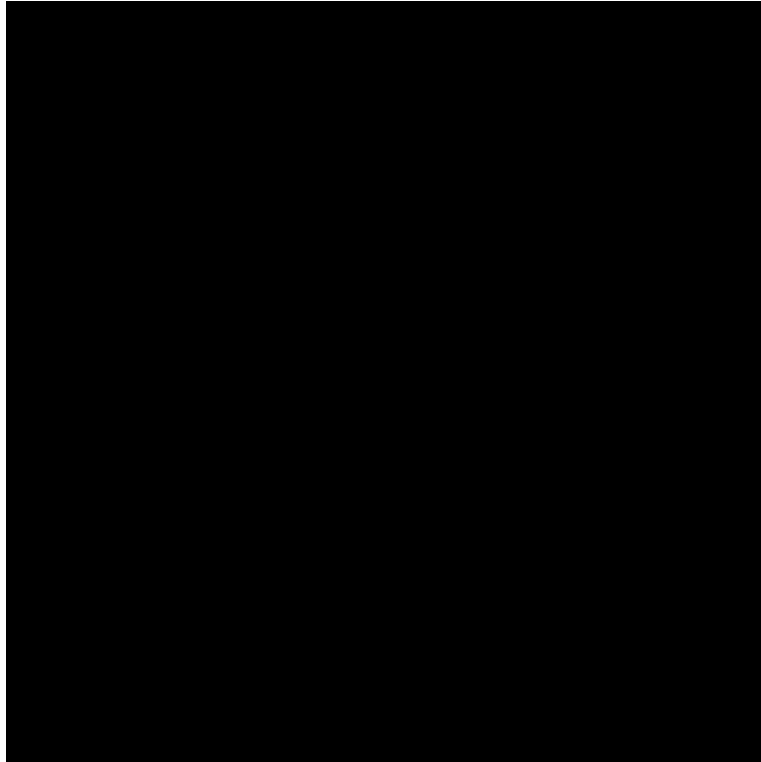


Figure 2: Diego Velázquez, *Las Hilanderas*, ca. 1655-60, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Interestingly, *Las Hilanderas* [The Spinners] also goes by the name of *La Fábula de Aracne* [The Fable of Arachne], an allusive meaning critics acknowledged only in the twentieth century (Íñiguez 1947). For whichever reasons – ideological, political, self-congratulatory? – Velázquez decided to insert those paintings, Tabucchi's nestled quote of LM develops a further theme, potentially independently of the author's original purposes. As a reflection on the dynamics of the reverse game and the theme of gnoseological processes, a proposed interpretation of the two mythological scenes can be set in a typically allegorical frame, namely in the category of fallible judgement, as exemplified by Arachne's hybris-blinded reason and King Midas's vanity. Fallible judgement is recognised only *à rebours*, re-vising reality through a new interpretation. Conversely, the defiance towards the established order of things embodied by those myths is crucial to adopting the reverse *forma mentis* as suggested by Tabucchi. Arachne's is an allegory of the painter's and writer's creation:

as in Montale and Gadda, the world is seen as a tangle, an endless criss-crossing of threads and of lines; all we can do is to keep unravelling these threads, wondering, or ceasing to wonder, where they will lead (Surdich 1997, 160)<sup>71</sup>

Ekphrasis, therefore, as an intermedial device laying out the epistemology of the dialogic reason, while it opens up the infinite possibilities of alterity, also selects definite relations in the *hyphos* out of all possible combinations, existing and potential: in opening up to alterity, it also combats the entropy of the *hyphos*.

It is not only the painting *Las Meninas* that requires a certain degree of openness to alterity and dialogue; Tabucchi's paratext is an act of collaborative (dialogic) interpretation of the meaning-making process. The reverse game predicates that only a gaze out of the range of vision can get to the 'other side' – the reverse and right side of possible interpretations.<sup>72</sup> The book cover, portraying Irving Penn's *Optician's Windows* (1939), fittingly glosses over recurring motifs and symbols related to vision that are constant in Tabucchi: frames of vision (the windows, the falsifications of photography...), modalities of vision (chromatic palettes, baroque references, Goya's spectres, Bosch's creatures), its rhetorical applications and limits (the frame, *Indian Nocturne's* "morceaux choisis" of the metanarrative reflection of photography).

Studies on the identity and the role of the background figure (beyond the historical datum, according to which it is the queen's chamberlain, Don José Nieto Velázquez) share the common ground of theatre theory, namely the fourth wall and the consequences of crossing such a (meta)physical barrier. The illusion of representation is indeed brought to the fore by the opening to 'another side' (the dimension to which the open door in the background leads). This recalls the Pirandellian hole in the paper sky of the theatre staging *Orestes* since "the embrasure of the door [...] functions as a frame and introduces an 'existential' cut at the back of the painting" (Stoichita 1997, 249): it *severs* two planes. Thus, the beholder is confronted by a twofold question: what is beyond the threshold where the figure is lingering? What consequences does the hybrid role of viewing subject (eye) and dialogic object (gaze) bear?

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<sup>71</sup> My translation, "[ne]l senso montaliano-gaddiano del mondo come intrico, come sterminato incrocio di fili, di line, che si può continuare solo a dipanare, chiedendosi o non più chiedendosi dove condurranno".

<sup>72</sup> A parallel can be drawn with the inversion of the roles of writer and translator in *Requiem* (1992). Tabucchi wrote *Requiem* in Portuguese and was translated by his friend Bernard Comment, so that "writer and translator both infiltrate and overcome the uniqueness and singularity of each other" (Francese 2006, 199).

The same questions are replicated by the dramatic gaze on RG's paratextual threshold: this gaze consists of the allusive and never self-referential game of staring and being stared at. The unrivalled philosophical debate around LM indicates that the innovation this painting introduced is unprecedented. Tabucchi's choice of highlighting the enigmatic aspect of LM – namely the conundrum of vision and the focus on representation as the main subjects – reflects the short story's ambiguous conclusion. Here, the main character identifies the background figure with Maria do Carmo, both 'gamemasters' of, respectively, the painting and short story. Tabucchi's measured ekphrastic description is nevertheless key: it reinforces the idea that reality is open to interpretive adjustments. After all, the reader will discover that the short story is probably the recounting of a dream ("E in quel momento mi trovai in un altro sogno" (2006, 24) [And at that moment, I found myself in another dream" (1986a, 119)]). The dream-like atmosphere that Tabucchi particularly cherishes (see *Requiem*, and *Indian Nocturne*, for example) is a surprise factor that forces one to acknowledge that "una certa cosa che era così era invece anche in un altro modo" [something that was in a certain way could also be in another way] – that is, to acknowledge the dimension of the Other. The verbal and the visual elements come together to emphasise that representation is not mere copy but, first and foremost, illusion.

## 1.2 Ekphrasis as Intermedial Translation: a Metacritical Strategy

The illusion that the visual element, through ekphrasis, brings to the fore, is an aspect that Tabucchi's works strive to emphasise. The visual element and its translation into Tabucchi's verbal poetics become indeed a metacritical tool for reflection on writing itself. The quintessential example of metacritical ekphrasis appears in *La traduzione* [*The Translation*, henceforth TT 1987/2013]. The autodiegetic narrator takes on the role of guidance without revealing his source: like a playwright, he stages an ekphrasis from Vincent Van Gogh's *Le pont de Langlois à Arles* (1884). However, it is unclear whether the autodiegetic narrator is addressing the reader or a silent fictive character. The ambiguity is never dispelled, so that the reader does not know whether she or a fictional figure is the addressee of the narrating subject. In this sense, the reader is unable to see the writer's diversion, to recognize the ekphrastic grid

of *Le pont de Langlois*, bound to be caught in a trap like the woman character in the process of crossing the bridge:

Quel grazioso ponticello [...] secondo me è una trappola bella e buona. La vecchia signora non lo sa [...] ma ora muoverà un passo e sarà un passo fatale, credi a me, sicuramente metterà i piedi su un perfido meccanismo, ci sarà un clic inavvertibile [...], e lei zàcchete, resterà schiacciata come una frittella.<sup>73</sup>

The narration reveals, in its conclusion, its real nature: a riddle for the reader, an unhelpful translation of the unnamed painting, which the lived experience [Erlebnis] and the temporal dimension burst into.

Mi dispiace che tu non abbia ancora capito, ma se ti sforzi sono certo che ci arriverai, tu sei una persona intelligente, non ci vuole poi molto a indovinare, o meglio, forse ci vuole un po', ma mi sembra di averti dato sufficienti informazioni; ti ripeto, probabilmente devi solo collegare gli elementi che ti ho fornito, ad ogni modo guarda, il museo sta per chiudere, vedo il guardiano che ci sta facendo dei cenni, questi guardiani non li sopporto, hanno sempre una spocchia che non ti dico, ma semmai torniamo domani, tanto anche tu non è che abbia troppe cose da fare, no?, e poi l'impressionismo è affascinante, ah, questi impressionisti, così pieni di luce, di colore, dai loro quadri viene quasi un profumo di lavanda, eh sì, la Provenza... io ho sempre avuto un debole per questi paesaggi, non ti dimenticare il bastone, sennò poi qualche automobile ti investe, l'hai appoggiato qui a destra, un po' più in là, a destra, ci sei quasi, ricordati, a tre passi sulla nostra sinistra c'è un gradino (Tabucchi 2013b, 205).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “That graceful little bridge [...] is really a very nasty trap. The old woman doesn't know [...] but now she's going to take another step and it'll be a fatal one, believe me, she's sure to put her foot on the treacherous mechanism, there'll be a soundless click [...], and, wham, she'll be crushed flat as a pancake”, my translation.

<sup>74</sup> “I'm sorry you still haven't understood, but if you make an effort I'm sure you'll get there, you're a smart person and it doesn't take much to work it out, or rather, maybe it does take a bit, but I think I've given you details enough; I'll repeat, probably all you have to do is connect together the pieces I've given you, in any event, look, the museum is about to close, see the custodian making signs to us, I can't bear these custodians, they give themselves such airs, really, but if you want let's come back tomorrow, in the end you don't have that much to do either, do you? and then Impressionism is charming, ah these Impressionists, so full of light, of colour, you almost get a smell of lavender from their paintings, oh yes, Provence... I've always had a soft spot for these landscapes, don't forget your stick, otherwise you'll get run over by some car or other, you put it down there, to the right, a bit farther, to the right, you're nearly there, remember, three paces to our left there's a step”, my translation.

Here, the reader discovers there is an additional figure in the frame of the narration, with whom the reader shares the condition of blindness. Both have been first guided through the dynamic description of *Le pont de Langlois à Arles* and then, upon closing, out of the museum and story, respectively. The power of ekphrasis as intermedial translation lies, for Tabucchi, in the utmost dependence it establishes with the reader for meaning creation. Yet, the ambiguity of rendering signs into a different sign system and from one medium into a different one, is certainly as risky as crossing the Langlois bridge, which metaphorically stands for the peril of mediation across different semiotic domains and media borders. The reference to the colour yellow in TT – one of Van Gogh’s favourites – is more than just reminiscent of Proust’s quote (*petit pan de mur jaune*) of Vermeer’s *View of Delft*. Indeed both fictive selves, the unknown narrator guiding his blind friend in TT and Proust’s alter ego, Bergotte, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, bring words and images on intersecting plans through a synesthetic simile. Although the yellow area described by Proust in *View of Delft* does not appear to be unequivocal (Renzi 1999, 61; Carter 2000), the colour plays an epiphanic role in both sequences, like the lemons peeking out through a gate left open in Montale’s poetry. The question of *gnoseological reliability* (Platt 2011, 83) is left open. It is the magic worked by what Deleuze refers to as *répétition différente* (Deleuze 1968/1994).

Ekphrasis, as a metacritical strategy of intermedial and intersemiotic translation, is a ‘forging’ tool of vision that adapts meaning making to specific medial and semiotic configurations. Meaning creation is a collaborative act between the reader and the the traitor-translator, where the former accepts the abductive forgeries of the latter. In this sense, “what Goldhill suggests for the function of ekphrasis in poetry of the Hellenistic era could be true for the novel as well: what is dramatised in ekphrastic passages ‘is the moment of looking as a practice of interpretation’” (Karastathi 2015, 95; Goldhill 2007, 2). Since ekphrasis assumes the role of a metacritical device highlighting pivotal epistemological tenets of poetics, “it is important to note that the referent that the ekphrastic [narrative] creates and represents is never the same as the initial ekphrastic object. It is a story imagined around the context of the original” (Kennedy 2015, 85). Ekphrasis as a translation device acts on different planes: intersemiotic, intermedial, and cultural. A wide notion of translation here is to account for ekphrasis as an interpretive category:

Just as in critical epistemology it is shown that there can be no objective knowledge, or even the claim to such knowledge, if the latter consists in reflections of the real, so [...] no translation would

be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity with the original. For in its continuing life, which could not be called so if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed (Benjamin 1997, 155).

The process undertaken in ekphrastic writing is, in essence, akin to translation. Here, I refer to a certain dimension thereof: as the previously mentioned framework of interpretation semiotics, I take translation to be an interpretive process in the first place. For this reason, “we need not see its afterlife as a totalizing by-product of a failed imitation game but the production of something else” (Maitland 2017, 124). As in abductive reasoning, where the relation between the premises and the conclusion is no longer obliged, ekphrastic translation carried out via intermedial means shows a high margin of risk, for it essentially asks the reader to re-interpret and re-create the original datum. In this sense, my stance is that “translation [...] makes a virtue of the appropriative hermeneutic at the heart of every translation process: of the proliferation and extension of meanings and possibilities beyond the finite horizons of the original” (Maitland 2017, 129).

The ekphrastic strategies employed here by Tabucchi in both short stories (RG and TT) and by Daniele del Giudice in the next section, thrive exactly on the proliferation and extension of meanings beyond the original source of their intermedial explorations. Del Giudice’s and Tabucchi’s works share exactly the hermeneutic view that intermedial translation, as any other kind of translation, “is a cunning act of knowledge-creation across the border-limit, never complete, never neutral, always partial and always embodied. It is here that the journey of [...] translation begins” (Maitland 2017, 35).



### 1.3 Daniele Del Giudice's *In the Reims Museum*: Ekphrasis as Intermedial Distortion

Another link between Tabucchi's ekphrastic games and the Del Giudice's literary expedient is offered by this enthusiastic review of Del Giudice's 1988 book by Tabucchi:

Tabucchi applauded Daniele Del Giudice's novel *Nel Museo di Reims* [*In the Reims Museum*], attributing the felicitous artistic rendering of the novel to the enigmas, "lacunae, meanings to be expanded upon, and other interrogatives" [...]. The "elliptic, allusive" character of Del Giudice's novel is enhanced by reference to paintings [...]. By refraining from defining the images, the verbal text traces "an interrogative way of [...] narrating (Francesco 2006, 196).

Both Tabucchi and Del Giudice's fictions take place – respectively, partially and totally – in a museum, the *lieu par excellence* of the metacritical reflection on art and its role in society. Spaccini reviews the effects of the gaze that rests inevitably on the object of art: the psychological upheaval before the beheld described by Didi-Huberman as *évidence obscure* and as a psychosomatic illness in Magherini's *Stendhal Syndrome* (Spaccini 2008, 241-304). Both narratives, Tabucchi's and Del Giudice's, are autobiographical and both focus on the triad "painting-dream-museum" (Spaccini 2008, 247), despite the absence of the Stendhal syndrome's major symptoms. I agree with Spaccini that in the museum as *locus reconditus* the knowing subject can retrieve repressed desires and re-awaken the unconscious through the oneiric activity: *sogni, rêves* channelling into *restos diurnos* [day dreams], to follow the Spanish hint dropped by Tabucchi, and adapted accordingly to the psychoanalytical terminology (Spaccini 2008, 254). Del Giudice entitles his novel *Nel museo di Reims* (*In the Reims Museum*, RM 1988), where the paintings revisited do not exemplify the narrative nor does the text adhere to the paintings.<sup>75</sup>

According to George Steiner's hermeneutic of translation in *After Babel* (Steiner 1975/1998), there are four moves in the hermeneutic motion that makes translation possible. The first move is one of "initiative trust": the writer and intermedial translator (or translator across modalities) demonstrates "an investment of belief", that is, accepts that "there is

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<sup>75</sup> Del Giudice (1988, 81): "i quadri non illustrano il racconto così come il racconto non accompagna i quadri", with reference to the paintings accompanying his narrative by Nereo Rotelli.

‘something there’ to be understood” in the source text (Steiner 1998, 312). However, “as he sets out, the translator must gamble on the coherence, on the symbolic plenitude of the world. Concomitantly, he leaves himself vulnerable [...] to two dialectically related, mutually determined metaphysical risks” (Steiner 1998, 313). In general, the two are risks the translator faces are:

1) Almost anything can turn out to mean everything, as it was for medieval translators, who thrived on the proliferation of meaning in the Scriptures thanks to the hermeneutic of the ‘four senses’. This aspect will become clear in the next Chapter, where the description of Fra Angelico’s exegetical model (the four senses) is essential to explain Tabucchi’s strategy in *The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico*.

2) There is the risk of finding nothing meaningful, as is the case of nonsense rhymes or where meaning and form participate in a unique bond. Both risks are pertinent to intermedial translation, namely here, where the writer sets out to translate details of well-known paintings.

The second move of the hermeneutic of translation described by Steiner is “aggression” (Steiner 1998, 313-314). In short, “The translator invades, extracts, and brings home. The simile is that of the open-cast mine that left an empty scar in the landscape” (Steiner 1998, 314). Del Giudice’s work, like Tabucchi’s, does not display such extreme features of aggression. This is because, in the third move, that of “incorporation” (Steiner 314-316), a “complete domestication” does not occur, rather it yields to “permanent strangeness and marginality”. The assimilation process results in a conflictual translation, for reasons I will explain later in this section. Here, in *In The Reims Museum*, what Del Giudice accomplishes is witness to the fact that “the failings of the translator [...] localize, they project as on to a screen, the resistant vitalities, the opaque centres of specific genius in the original” (Steiner 1998, 318). The failings of the postmodern translator are, ultimately, the failings of postmodern representation. In translation, which is still a model of representation, postmodern uncertainty is balanced by “the

enactment of reciprocity”, which is “the crux of the *métier* and morals of translation” (Steiner 1998, 316).

These moments are part of the last move of the hermeneutic of translation: compensation. “The ideal, never accomplished, is one of total counter-part or re-petition – an asking again – which is not a tautology. No such perfect ‘double’ exists. But the ideal makes explicit the demand for equity in the hermeneutic process” (Steiner 1998, 318). In the phase of compensation, the dialogic moment between original and translation provides an enrichment to the former: translation, as an “echo enriches, [...] it is more than shadow and inert simulacrum” (Steiner 1998, 317). In the dialogue with the other, the enrichment is mutual, “the reciprocity is dialectic: ‘new formats’ of significance are initiated by distance and by contiguity. Some translations edge us away from the canvas, others bring us up close” (Steiner 1998, 317). Del Giudice’s *In The Reims Museum* translates close-up details of paintings that, by polarising the reader’s attention, also edge us away from the canvas.

The authorial intention results indeed in a narrative that never fulfils the reader’s expectations, since the halo of mystery and incompleteness surrounding characters and paintings is never lifted. The lack of details forces the reader to sharpen his/her senses. The reader’s challenge is similar to that of the main character, Barnaba, who fumbles his way to and around the museum while pouring all of his efforts into simulating normal sight conditions. Indeed, Barnaba is on the brink of becoming blind because of an unspecified disease,<sup>76</sup> his impaired vision allowing for short sight only – an extreme close-up of any selected object. All the rest is involuntarily cast into semidarkness.

An excerpt from *Elogio dell’ombra* offers a persuasive example of how Del Giudice’s literary world revolves around the reverse side of vision – the penumbra, the unseen:

Every time one words an image [...] a small ray of light is created and around it a twilight zone is simultaneously generated. I believe that it is in that twilight zone, in that inscrutable patch of invisibility emerging from the very action of making visible, that the most important things in a narrative occur (Del Giudice 1991)<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Spaccini (2008, 260) advances that Barnaba is affected by cerebral achromatopsia, also known as colour agnosia.

<sup>77</sup> My translation. Original quoted by Zublena (2003, 143 n.2, 146 n.35). See also Colummi Camerino (2002, 71-72).

The title of this theoretical essay reminds one of Jorge Luis Borges's *Elogio de la sombra* [In Praise of Shadow], where the poet experiences a form of semi-blindness like Barnaba in RM (*Vivo entre formas luminosas y vagas que no son aún la tiniebla*) and the uncertainty of perception (*las esquinas pueden ser otras*) (Borges 1994, 395).<sup>78</sup> With regards to the postmodern taste for intricate intertextual references (Palmieri 1997, 137), Tabucchi collaborated with artist Davide Benati. Benati authored a work entitled *Infinite gradazioni del buio* [Infinite Gradations of Darkness, 1985], which contains a quote from a 1933 essay by Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Dusk*. Tabucchi's short text in *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi* is curiously entitled *Messaggio dalla penombra*, [Message from the Shadows], with the more colloquial term 'shadows' preferred over the specialised 'penumbra'. This crepuscular mood indicates that the indistinguishability between metaphorical darkness and light is the favoured space from which writing is conceived and to which it is bound, thus creating the possibility for reflections on its ontological and teleological nature.

Del Giudice's sustained interest in the theme of the gaze creates the opportunity for an additional intertextual quotation glossing over Barnaba's mode of vision: "I've been thinking about aligning the gaze by convergence and divergence; about how attainable it is to focalise simultaneously what is closest and what is farthest" (Del Giudice 1997).<sup>79</sup> It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the first sentence of the novel informs us that the protagonist has developed an unexpected interest in painting since the news of his irreversible condition. Is this a strategic threshold to lure naïve readers, a declaration of poetics and/or an acknowledgement of the modern supremacy of sight above all senses? To ascertain this, one ought to observe that Del Giudice's Reims Museum is, in some aspects, similar to Tabucchi's Del Prado: the character introduced right after the beginning, a feminine figure, Anne, takes further the game played by Maria do Carmo, for whom "something that was in a certain way could also be in another way". Anne's character does not give the reader the freedom of ontological doubt, instead it shows only the reverse of the order of things – the mendacious, the deceitful, the betrayal of representation. She literally gives voice to ekphrasis, as if she were moved by deep sympathy with Barnaba's maladroitness attempt to hide his vision decay. However, Anne's descriptions never faithfully replicate the artwork. The difficulty of the main character to

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<sup>78</sup> The lines quoted translate as "I live among vague and luminous forms that are not yet darkness"; "one street corner might be another".

<sup>79</sup> My translation. Original: "Ho continuato a riflettere sullo sguardo per collimazione, sulla possibilità di mettere a fuoco in una sola visione quello che è vicinissimo e quello che è lontano".

distinguish shapes and colours is similar to the gnoseological difficulty of knowing in Plato's myth of the cave.

However, not only does Anne lie in order to agree with Barnaba's altered memories of the painting ("Does she lie out of compassion?", Barnaba wonders) but she also misrepresents deliberately crucial details of the paintings, thus offering falsifications or inexact copies of the originals: a "re-petition – an asking again – which is not, however, a repetition", as Steiner would have it. The ekphrastic representation is applied by means of omission, deviation, lie, and allusion (Klettke 2008). The translation process that Del Giudice offers is here intentionally focussed on signalling the relation of unbalance with its original. What is left to be ascertained is whether Del Giudice's translation is preoccupied with compensating for its inevitable alterations – by gains or losses – or leaves this matter open to the reader's interpretation. In the former case, Del Giudice's translation across modes would enact reciprocity, "the crux of the *métier* and the morals of translation". In the latter, it would intentionally focus on emphasising the inevitable gaps of representation as proposed by postmodernism, through the quintessential trope of the word-image paragone. Intermedial translation, to be effective, should display "equity in the hermeneutic process" (Steiner 1998, 318).

As explained in the paratext, the occasion for Del Giudice's narrative forgery are some small, black-and-white photos of paintings sent to him by that museum: blurry as they were, it was almost impossible to recognise the subjects represented.<sup>80</sup> However, there is no certain proof confirming the paratextual precedent; therefore, the game of lying could be staged for its own sake.

Del Giudice's poetics of representation is ultimately elucidated by Calvino's theme of visibility. Critics have highlighted the literary influence exerted by Italo Calvino (1923-1985) on Daniele Del Giudice, as demonstrated by the constant inclination to avail himself of the theme of visibility – one of the *Six Memos* lectured on by Calvino at Harvard University. The transfiguration of Taunay's, Corot's, David's, and other painters' work represents indeed the actualisation of Calvino's visibility: "the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of thinking in terms of images" (Calvino 1988, 92).<sup>81</sup> In his memo on visibility, Calvino

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<sup>80</sup> Spaccini (2008, 263 fn.62), clarifies that the author's declaration appears both in the final note to the final edition of *RM* and in Borsari (1989, 16).

<sup>81</sup> Original text in Calvino (1993, 103) and the Italian edition: "il potere di mettere a fuoco visioni a occhi chiusi, di far scaturire colori e forme dall'allineamento di caratteri alfabetici neri su una pagina bianca, di *pensare* per immagini." (1988, 92)

points out aspects of the word-image relation that are relevant to both translation and the dynamics that contributed to the theorisation of the Pictorial Turn a few decades later. He starts with a question about the creation process and the role that the visual and the verbal share:

Let us return to purely literary problematics and ask ourselves about the genesis of the imaginary in a time when literature no longer refers back to an authority or a tradition as its origin or goal, but aims at novelty, originality, and invention. It seems to me that in this situation the question of the priority of the visual image or verbal expression (which is rather like the problem of the chicken and the egg) tend definitely to lean toward the side of the visual imagination (Calvino 1988, 86)

In literature, the verbal mode remains primary.<sup>82</sup> The creation phase proper, however, is realised through a process of association of images (mental images, or *phantasmata*) – literature as combinatorics was the main principle of the French group Oulipo, in which Calvino participated – later to be translated into a different modality.

The poet's mind, and at a few decisive moments the mind of the scientist, works according to a process of association of images that is the quickest way to link and to choose between the infinite forms of the possible and the impossible. The imagination is a kind of electronic machine that takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose, or are simply the most interesting, pleasing, or amusing (Calvino 1988, 91).

Following the examples of Roland Barthes and scholars from other disciplines, Calvino's main concern was, however, that the surplus of images to which postwar society was exposed could negatively impact not only creativity, but also the entire cognitive human experience. In this sense, Calvino's preoccupation was to preserve the faculty of human imagination from the contamination of dull and forgettable images:

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<sup>82</sup> Calvino (1988, 89): "At the same time, the writing, the verbal product, acquires increasing importance. I would say that from the moment I start putting black on white, what really matters is the written word, first as a search for an equivalent of the visual image, then as a coherent development of the initial stylistic direction. Finally, the written word little by little comes to dominate the field. From now on it will be the writing that guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along".

Will the power of evoking images of things that are not there continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images? . . . We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump, and it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out (Calvino 1988, 91-92).

While this invective against the multiplication of external images may appear iconophobic at first, Calvino's most dreaded scenario was that humankind's most valuable gift, inner vision, would turn into "confused, ephemeral daydreams". On the contrary, inner vision should enable "the image to crystallize into a well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form, the icastic form" (Calvino 1988, 92). From the Greek *eikazein* (to make like, to depict), something that is 'icastic' is bound to be something memorable and unmistakable. The roots of this apprehension about the role of images are to be found in the teaching of Roland Barthes, who in turn drew on psychological research. As Modena (2011) explains,

Calvino "diagnosed a pathology (the plague of images, a concept that became, after his reading of *Psychosomatic Research*, more than metaphorical) and prescribed a therapy. The therapy of course relied on literary means [...] "Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague" (*Six Memos*, 56). Both healing and preventive, the power of image making is the therapeutically sound means offered by imaginative literature (Modena 2011, 53).

[In "Loyola", from *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 1971] Barthes qualified a dearth of images as a symptom of a sickness that made those afflicted incapable of producing phantasmata, and he called for exercises to stimulate the production of images in therapeutic terms. Barthes mentioned explicitly *Psychosomatic Research: Seven Clinical Cases* (1971) by Pierre Marty, Michel M'Uzan, and Christian David, which in turn made Calvino reflect on the relationship between scarcity and pathology, and reconfirmed his formulation of the imagination as a force capable of confronting the most intractable individual and social problems of a frenzied era (Modena 2011, 54).

Ignatius of Loyola is the main influence for Roland Barthes and, then, for Calvino as reader of Barthes. Moreover,

In the chapter on visibility in *Six Memos*, Calvino refers explicitly to [Loyola's] *Spiritual Exercises* as a lesson in how to recreate icastic representations (83-86). As Barthes, Calvino highly esteemed Loyola's revolutionary efforts to break free from the abstraction of language and establish the image

as principal tool of meditation, ascribing to inner vision the primacy of perception. [...] The creation of *phantasmata* thus becomes the alphabet of the penitent's inner vision (or the reader's inner city). Loyola's form of visual meditation enables the practitioner to experience, identify, and judge specific spiritual experiences, thereby acquiring perceptual, cognitive, and decision-making skills (Modena 2011, 52).

Del Giudice seems to have inherited Calvino's desire to reinstate the power of inner vision: "the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of thinking in terms of images". This is part and parcel of the mendacious strategy of the lying character Anne, who embodies a lying ekphrasis and the potential for imagination to break free from conventional norms. For Calvino, Loyola's method was particularly of interest because of "the shift from the visual image as a way of attaining knowledge of the most profound meaning" (Calvino 1988, 86).

However, Del Giudice seems to go beyond this principle, by disrupting both the roles of images and words. Anne's words, by giving voice to falsification of reality, bring forth the unleashed potential of imagination. By losing their referent by way of the *phantasmata* they create, words break free of the traditional constraint of ekphrasis. Contrary to Calvino's visibility, Del Giudice's quest for (un)knowledge in RM is a lesson on (imminent) invisibility. Therefore, *gnosis* can be reached but intermittently. Dolfi remarks that Del Giudice's narrative strategy is aimed at fragments (of knowledge): "the hues and shapes on the canvas, the hue of Anne's hair, the colour-metaphor, the inner *enargeia*" (Dolfi 1993, 91; Dolfi 1994, 22). The quest for (un)knowing delves inwards into the self: memories are unsteady as the outer experience is likely to betray; in addition, memory can be further altered not only by words but also by vision. RM's first edition (1988) includes sixteen paintings by the eclectic artist Nereo Rotelli (1955) that "play a disconnection between form and content" (Marrone and Puppa 2006, 599).

The same disruption between the sign and its referent is reproduced in the last match of the game, when Barnaba uncovers Anne's lies. By lying in turn, he participates in counterfeiting Reims' *Marat Assassiné* [also known as *La mort de Marat*, The Death of Marat]. The forgery is not selected randomly. Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793), as a physician, was interested in the treatment of blindness, and therefore is a symbol of Barnaba's redeemable vision. Interestingly, there exist at least four versions of the *Marat Assassiné*. Of these, Bruxelles' original and Reims' version differ significantly in the inscription on the wooden crate. The lengthy caption



“*n’ayant pu me corrompre, ils m’ont assassiné*” [not having succeeded in corrupting me, they murdered me], is on Reims’ copy; “*A Marat, David*” [To Marat, David], the brief one appearing on the original in Bruxelles.<sup>83</sup> The pristine memory of these words prompts Barnaba to gather that Anne has been a mendacious guide for the entire tour in the museum. Indeed, the variant sentence “*n’ayant pu me corrompre, ils m’ont assassiné*” was the reason for Barnaba to travel to Reims. Anne’s lying game gains a sinister connotation here if one remembers that Marat’s murderer was Marie-Anne Charlotte Corday (1768-1793). Klettke notes that Nereo Rotelli’s abstract paintings and RM itself reproduce the differential relation of word-image (Klettke 2008, 56); hence, the disconnection between form and content is already endorsed by the couple Del Giudice-Rotelli: “the relation with [Rotelli’s] sixteen paintings is allusive and marginal. The relation stands out on the aesthetic plane. Rotelli’s paintings reflect an unfocused vision corresponding to the state of semi-blindness” (Klettke 2008, 56).<sup>84</sup> The death – by annihilation – of mimetic resemblance is not only conveyed by a process of intermedial translation that celebrates its losses as much as its gains; the paratextual threshold absorbs, in its visual immediacy, this tendency.

As already mentioned, Tabucchi commented on RM’s conciseness and compared it to that of the tradition of the baroque exemplum and that of the *conte philosophique* (Tabucchi 2013a, 141). However, the narrative does not unfold convincingly the concepts that fascinate Del Giudice. The tendency towards fragmented narrative in Del Giudice has been observed by Dolfi: in lieu of providing stories, Del Giudice writes of “moments; in lieu of linearity, fragments; in lieu of feelings, an emotional geometry” (Dolfi 1998, 315). I agree with Ferroni that the brief narrative is too vague (Ferroni 1994, 83) to provide a definite interpretation of the ‘game’ of lying; however, a tentative answer to the question of the “enactment of reciprocity” is still viable. As Tabucchi’s reverse game introduced the fallacy of (Neo)classical representation, Del Giudice’s ‘poetics of (un)knowledge’ explores the potentiality of inner vision, which defies precise exegesis.

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<sup>83</sup> “David’s recognition of the pretense of movement in any lifelike portrait, captured at the moment that its possibility is stolen by death, not unlike the ‘there-and-then-ness’ of the still photograph, makes the same claim through the copyist/viewer’s re-enactment, repetition of vision as testimonial. In this sense, as Deleuze/Péguy commented of Monet’s *Wheat stacks*, it is David’s portrait that repeats all its replicas” (Kahng 2007, 21).

<sup>84</sup> My translation. Original Italian sentence: “Il rapporto con i sedici dipinti [...] si rivela allusivo e marginale. L’affinità risplende sul piano dell’estetica. [...] [I] dipinti di Rotelli riflettono visioni sfuocate corrispondenti allo stato di semiceccità”.

To illustrate Del Giudice's view of writing as a source for (un)knowing – thus, as a source exerting inner vision – I shall mention Dolfi's comment on the phrase 'Light Knowledge'. This is a quotation from Del Giudice's *Dillon Bay* (Del Giudice 1997, 99), a military novel that is more in line with the French *école du regard* than with Calvino's legacy (but for a stylistic element). Also, the theme of visibility is a constant through Del Giudice's work. Again, this is complemented by the topos of the lack of knowledge, specifically rendered as invisibility" (Dolfi 1993, 91). "Light Knowledge" is a polysemic phrase, as Dolfi remarks:

[...] those words [...] could mean 'knowledge of the light', 'light of knowledge', 'luminous knowledge', 'light (not heavy) knowledge' in a mixture of pure meaning, ethereal, luminous, and weightless – perhaps the ultimate form beyond form, the diagram of feeling independent of event, the meaning behind things which Del Giudice is always straining for in the search for the elusive, almost impossible point of contact between writing and truth, between literature and life (Dolfi 1993, 97).

Zublena specifies that the translation 'conoscenza leggera' seems particularly appropriate to Del Giudice's epistemological model of knowledge: "Perhaps the interpretation *conoscenza leggera* (light knowledge) is the most appropriate, as it stands for a metamorphic knowledge malleable on the multifarious reality, like the star fort in the story ever changing its shape to tackle exterior attacks" (Zublena 2003, 127). In *Dillon Bay*, the main object of interest is an enigmatic star fortress (as enigmatic as precisely geometrically built) bewitching the soldiers, a maze of interpretation similar to the inescapable prison in Calvino's *Il Conte di Montecristo* or Borges's *Laberinto*: a rational visualization of the irrational prison-fortress-world. Here, the labyrinth of interpretation is embedded in the frame of the museum, the repository, *par excellence*, of human knowledge and culture. For the process of unknowing to take place here, the word-image discrepancy is the pivot of the quest for unknowing. The model of (un)knowledge as proposed in RM is similar to the procedures the scientist Brahe faces in daily experiments at CERN in *Atlante Occidentale* (*Lines of Light*, 1985):

There isn't an image to visualize for what Brahe has to *see*, since contemporary models of infinitely small matter are totally different from our notion of the atom [...] they are constructions of pure

numbers, almost impossible to be mentally pictured geometrically. That is, Brahe has to see and work with what cannot be really represented as mental images” (Del Giudice 1995, xx).

The distance from a geometrical Euclidean model of knowledge ([atoms] almost impossible to be mentally pictured geometrically) reveals at the same time a longing for rationality, as Del Giudice’s precise writing sets out to emulate, and an inevitable drift away from the search for exact knowledge, which is unattainable. The quest for knowledge attained through vision and its artifices becomes consequently a quest for (un)knowledge, reflected in Del Giudice’s fragmentariness and elusiveness of style. Description as full translation of reality is therefore irrelevant. Narration is, instead the ultimate purpose of description:

I don’t believe in description as a faithful translation of reality but I do believe in description as a narrative form since description only enables me to intertwine complex relations and sustain them as well as to account for the mutually interchangeable positions of the observer and of what is observed (Del Giudice 1986, 85).

The narrative form enables the inner vision to be enhanced from the privileged “mutually interchangeable positions of the observer and of what is observed”. This occurs if and only if the writer is not preoccupied with intermedial mimesis. Instead, his poetics of (un)knowledge brings forth a new version of reality (a ‘double’ of the painting we know, so to speak) that adds something, compensates for its use (its abstraction in words) and appropriation in intermedial translation. The hermeneutic process thus concludes with a surplus given back to the original source, as it were, with a compensation to the ‘appropriation’ and ‘invasion’: the enactment of reciprocity is here achieved.

Del Giudice’s style, however, conflicts deeply with this poetics of uncertainty. Del Giudice’s stylistic rendering of the themes of vision and gaze can be compared to what Pointillist and Impressionist painters set out to do, dividing reality into fragments of knowledge, and classifying the factual by means of extremely precise adjectives and technical terms. According to Zublena, the realm of science and technology – especially microphysics – offers fertile ground for the elaboration of a new mythos, a realm where precision and objectivity give room to possibility and indeterminacy (as in *Lines of Light*, 1985). Nevertheless, Del Giudice opts for a perfectly denotative function of the language as a valuable tool to reveal what is in

those interstices, to glimpse what seems invisible, to say as exactly as possible what seems unsayable (Zublena 2003, 120-122).

Ultimately, the reverse game in Tabucchi's TT and the lying game in Del Giudice's RM share a common ground. Not only do both narrators offer riddles, clues, and fragments – they both insist, in their intermedial exercises, on blindness and impaired vision. I find myself in agreement with Palmieri's claim that the eighteenth-century debates on the topic of blindness became a metaphor for the whole gnoseologic question. Since then, rhetorical devices of vision in literature have expanded the metanarrative possibilities of postmodern literature. Talking about his own *I volatili del Beato Angelico* [The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico, 1987], Tabucchi admitted: "I am someone who is often affected by bad moods, and many times I write about them. [...] These texts represent my bad conscience as a writer: they are erroneous accounts, failures cut short: to sum up, the least noble part of me" (Gumpert Melgosa 1995, 169).<sup>85</sup> The postmodern conscience has always been aware – and wary – of the mediation of literature and its falsifications (which is a consequence of the infinite mediation of signs, as per Peirce's lesson). In this cultural climate, ekphrasis, as one of the most privileged tropes of vision, has unveiled a thematic crux with hermeneutical and gnoseological intents. Indeed, as I have shown in this chapter, among the consequences of the reflections on representation, the politics and economy of postmodern ekphrasis include the doorway to alterity – to the Dialogic Reason, and to rhizomatic semeiosis – by way of intermedial and multimodal configuration.

The falsifications of literature (especially in ekphrastic writing) have indeed prompted metacritical reflections in the form of both declarations of poetics and literary writing itself. Here I have shown how the word-image relation is particularly apt to emphasise the epistemological ruptures of representation. In the next chapter, I will examine such a relation in two distant epistemologies, whereby I will be able to characterise intermedial translation as a practice open, simultaneously, to the Same and to the Other. This trend is exemplified by the case study on Antonio Tabucchi's re-elaboration of Fra Angelico's painting.

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<sup>85</sup> My translation.

## Chapter 2

### Words and Images: Double Variation on Presence and Absence

The images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance. Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. In the first place, the images of art are, as such, dissemblances. Secondly, the image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consists wholly in words. But the commonest regime of the image is one that presents a relationship between the sayable and the visible, a relationship which plays on both the analogy and the dissemblance between them. This relationship by no means requires the two terms to be materially present. The visible can be arranged in meaningful tropes; words deploy a visibility that can be blinding.

— Jacques Rancière<sup>86</sup>

Here I set out to continue the discussion of issues of postmodern representation at the intersection of Visual Studies, literature, theology, and translation studies. My aim is to demonstrate how ekphrasis – whose evolution was introduced in Chapter 1 – can be a device to both confuse and illuminate meaning because of its plural and abductive potential.

This chapter is devoted to the question of the word-image relation from the viewpoint of ontotheology – the tendency to explain existence metaphysically by grounding it in religion.<sup>87</sup> Specifically, the critique of ontotheology has contributed to shaping the debate on Visual Studies. The metaphor in the title, ‘double variation’, is a technical term borrowed from music,

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<sup>86</sup> Rancière (2007, 7).

<sup>87</sup> “A metaphysics is an ‘ontotheology’ insofar as its account of ultimate reality combines—typically in a confused or conflated manner—two general forms of metaphysical explanation that, taken together, aim to make the entirety of reality intelligible to human understanding. These are an *ontology* that accounts for that which all beings have in common (universal or fundamental being) and a *theology* that accounts for that which causes and renders intelligible the system of beings as a whole (a highest or ultimate being or a first principle). Traditionally interpreted, Platonic metaphysics is a paradigm case of ontotheology in the Heideggerian sense insofar as it explains the existence of particular beings by recourse to universal forms (ontology) and explains the origin and intelligibility of the whole of beings by recourse to the Good as that from which everything else emanates (theology)” (Halteman 1998).

which will help me explain the endless variations and re-elaborations of the notions of absence and presence as an intermedial flux of semiotic exchange. I will refer variously to these two essential notions in various ways: ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ as implicit discourses of, respectively, theological and artistic cataphasis (affirmation) and apophasis (negation), and presence as implied in the metaphysics of presence, a major area subject to criticism in the twentieth century yet intrinsic to it. These two major notions also carry a host of ancillary terms such as ‘difference’ (and *différance*, along with other Derridean terms), ‘the One’, ‘the wholly other’, ‘Being’ and ‘beings’, all more or less relevant according to the perspective from which one looks at the question of presence and absence. Moreover, I will introduce the notion of the postmodern sublime, which is indispensable to understanding how Tabucchi and Fra Angelico connect.

The epistemic shift I will analyse is twofold. I examine late medieval, pre-Renaissance conceptions of religious painting that I take as Word-to-image (or better, Scriptures-to-image) intersemiotic translations. A quintessential example of the transition between medieval and Renaissance *mentalités*, Fra Angelico’s work is examined in the first section of this chapter. This provides essential background to the section dedicated to postmodernism and its offshoots. In order to link negative theology and the deconstructionist critique of logocentrism – the system where logos as speech is privileged over writing – to artistic practices, here I will focus on the intersemiotic and intermedial path from sacred Images to words. The second part of my case study focusses on Antonio Tabucchi’s short story *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1986), which is a postmodern ekphrastic reading of three paintings by Fra Angelico. By analysing the different ways Fra Angelico and Tabucchi deal with negation as either a verbal or visual communication strategy, I aim to illustrate a new role that ekphrastic writing can assume in the era of the Pictorial Turn. Through this exploration I expect to add more depth to the dynamics of the epistemic shift of word-image interaction, as well as to outline the shortcomings of deconstructionist word-image theory.

In the first chapter I highlighted the core concept of the ‘as if’ character of representation, and its intrinsic disposition to intersemiotic and intermedial translation. Nonclassical ekphrasis embraces *mimesis* not as “resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance”, that is, “resemblance understood as the relationship between ways of making, modes of speech, forms of visibility, and protocols of intelligibility” (Rancière 2007, 73).

There is a host of ways to refer to the intrinsic aptitude to human and artistic, creation, of which ekphrasis, classical and modern, is only a fraction. I have focussed specifically on *mimesis* and ekphrasis as, respectively, the quintessential concepts ruling the rhetorical trope of

word-image interaction. When the concept of mimesis is disrupted, Mitchell's motto "all media are mixed media" surfaces to reveal the nature of intersemiotic translation. This has been a constant in the history of the multimediality of culture, reasserted by the nineteenth-century crisis and revolution of artistic creation, which radically transformed the notion of representation itself, including systematic categories thereof, such as ekphrasis. The expanded purview and applicability of this term notably gained momentum from synaesthetic theories yielding to the doctrines of correspondences and of the total artwork. However, these romantic aspirations did not erase the tension between paradigms of iconoclasm and iconocentrism, as – among others – Mitchell's critique of Burke's aesthetic system has shown. The ideological biases of the word-image paradigm were to survive this and following eras unscathed.

Such premises are useful for examining a special case of the 'as if' character of representation based on word-image interaction, which adds to the complexity of relations of which ekphrasis has become a synonym. Most importantly, I aim to highlight the theoretical consequences of some postmodernist positions by exploring the relation of words and images within and about religious themes. As strange as it may seem, the separateness of religious art from secular fine art connects both with contemporary discourses of word-image relations in terms of method – this separateness I will name 'negative (a)theology' – and with the idea of the original duality of word and image within the Christian tradition.

Before I turn to what brings together religion and secular word-image interaction in this chapter, I first ought to attempt to answer why religious art as well as its way of staging the 'as if' are conferred a special status. This reflection will be useful for sketching underlying ideologies that are at play in both kinds of art. James Elkins' argument about the reasons for the usual distinction between religious and nonreligious art offers an interesting perspective. Moving from a critique of the momentous 1967 *Art and Objecthood* by Michael Fried (discussed in Chapter 3), Elkins has investigated two implicit religious discourses in art history, iconoclasm and the sublime. The sublime, according to Elkins, is both an outdated critical term of art history and a crucial factor of the existence of art history. As he puts it:

There is another, possibly deeper reason why the sublime matters to a contemporary sense of pictures, and why it is important – and so vexed, and often so opaque in literary theory. Talking about the sublime is a way of addressing something that can no longer be called by any of its traditional names, something so important that worlds like art would be crippled without it: the possibility of a truth beyond a world of experience (and not merely beyond the world of articulation, or representation). In past centuries, some of the ideas now contested under the name 'sublime' were known more directly as religious truth or revelation. Today, writers in the humanities mostly

shy away from open talk about religion. Such words as ‘sublimity’, ‘transcendence’, and ‘presence’ shrouded in clouds of secular criticism, serve to suggest religious meaning without making them explicit. For many reasons, the sublime has come to be the place where thoughts about religious truth, revelation, and other more or less unusable concepts have congregated (Elkins 2011, 60-61).

The difficulty with combining two complementary discourses – on one hand the sublime and its covert religious nature, on the other contemporary writing practices – is due to a progressive ‘division of labour’ or ‘sphere of interest’. For instance, in Italian literature Dante, Tasso or even Manzoni would not be labelled as mere ‘religious’ writers. The rise of Positivism and Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God also yielded to an ineluctably progressive shying away from religious themes in literature and literary theory. The same can be said for art history, where Elkins identifies a certain reluctance to scope religious interpretations where vaguely present (Elkins 2004, 12). Interdisciplinary studies in art history and anthropology (as conducted by Marie-José Mondzain), philosophical accounts (Goodman and Peirce), and modern and postmodern art history criticism clearly look at images from a secular perspective (Elkins 2011a, 141-146).

What is at stake is the investigation of how postmodern criticism, including Deconstruction, coped with the irreducibility of antithetic terms and systems of thought by sourcing its strategies from equally binary, dichotomous systems, such as monotheisms.<sup>88</sup> This tendency is reflected to a certain extent in the naming habits of cultural criticism, and in the label itself of Pictorial Turn. The traditional approaches to speaking of and representing the divine – apophaticism and cataphaticism – played a pivotal role in twentieth-century cultural criticism and artistic practice. To quote Elkins again, here I am concerned with showing that

the Kantian sublime and the different modern sublimes run nearly exactly against the structure of poststructuralist thinking, in that they posit a sense of presence, and a nonverbal immediacy that short-circuit the theorizing of art in recent decades, which are nearly all concerned with mediation,

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<sup>88</sup> Two major interpretive frameworks to study the image are, according to Elkins, that of iconoclasm versus iconophilia, and the sublime. While the former has been a constant point of reference throughout history, the latter – the sublime – has not, having undergone a transformation of its referential meaning that dates back at least to the Baroque. Indeed, the concept of the sublime was by then severed from the idea that all art was religious. Both these frameworks point toward the problem of representation, the same problem tackled by pre and postmodern ‘negative’ approaches. For this reason, the notion of iconoclasm and iconophilia are relevant along with discussions on the sublime, as both underpin the political nature of representation. Moreover, iconoclasm, iconophilia and the sublime all come together when one considers one of the classes Mitchell has identified as surplus-values images, namely idols, and their ability to instil sublime awe.



translation, deferral of meaning, miscommunications, and the social conditions of understanding (Elkins 2011a, 146).

In this sense, the critique of ontotheology is instrumental to understanding the genealogy of these poststructuralist concepts. This critique sees ontotheology as an exercise in metaphysics, more specifically a metaphysics of presence yielding to a metaphysical sublime. The correlation of ontotheology and presence, and postmodernism and absence may not be as simplistic as it seems. There is a whole palette of meanings that these two terms acquire depending on the context; what is more, absence and presence are not opposed as antagonists but integrated by poststructuralist discourse into functional theories. For example, one would be tempted to associate immanence – the plane of presence – with the philosophy of Deleuze, and absence with the philosophy of Derrida – his quasi-concept (as a fully-fledged ‘concept’ would be regressing to metaphysics), *différance*, being the banner of poststructuralist transcendental philosophy. However, Derrida’s philosophy leaves room for presence as part and parcel of our own existence provided that it is not assumed to be the primary mode of existence. The relation of immanence and transcendence has much more to it than binary opposition; I will extract only a few concepts from the long lineage of the debate to analyse the intermedial relation between Angelico’s and Tabucchi’s work.

Following Derrida and transcendence, the sublime is here treated as an indispensable category for understanding the workings of postmodern thinking and is articulated in two ways. Its articulation will be double. First, as anticipated above, I will investigate the classical interpretation of the sublime as presence: however, my analysis shows how the sublime stands mostly for absence. Second, according to Elkins’ definition, I will look at the sublime as a category naming the unnameable in secular art (history) – the religious inspiration behind the artwork. Last, I will build on the critique of the postmodern sublime, by highlighting the effects of an integrated model of absence and presence on word-image theory. Here I conceptualise the long-standing themes of Western theorization – presence and absence – as a way of transcending the word-image divide by introducing bridging concepts such as difference, trace, supplement, and secret.

## 2. Representation at the Crossroads of Presence and Absence

Iconoclasm and iconocentrism would not exist without the success of highly hierarchical religions, namely monotheisms. The divine prohibition on representing God – a key trait shared by the principal monotheistic cults – has shaped artistic practices dealing with the divine. In order to describe more accurately approaches to thinking and speaking of God, and consequently to create art representing God, one has to familiarise oneself first with notions such as apophasis and cataphasis, and then analyse whether these ways of thinking and writing also have other functions unrelated to divinity. The issue of the representability of God, that is, the ‘as if’ regarding the possibility of divine representation in the first place, is relegated to the realm of theology. In fact, as deconstructionist criticism has shown, such an issue posits questions of representation and representability as such. The critique of ontotheology and of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ – conducted, among others, by Heidegger and Derrida – is no less radical than the epistemic turn described by W. J. T. Mitchell, and has consequences for representation. Derrida’s post-ontotheological perspective, in particular, may help to explain the milieu of contemporary works concerned with the possibility of translation as representation, and with that, the possibility of using intersemiotic strategies.

Although paradigmatic shifts in the realm of cultural forms are usually difficult to pinpoint as individual phenomena, artworks can sometimes provide the starting reflection for the analysis of cultural and societal changes. The ways in which the verbo-visual relation is articulated in the post-ontotheological world can shed light on the premises of the Pictorial Turn and on the limits that intersemiotics and intermediality can claim for themselves.

### 2.1 As Above So Below? Apophasis and Figuration of the Divine

The religious figuration of pre-Renaissance Western art delved deeply into negative theology or apophaticism, which is an approach to conceiving, and therefore representing the divine, the God of monotheisms. In Greek, ‘phasis’ refers to a style of communication that does not carry

cognitive (i.e. propositional) content. Instead, this kind of utterance is used to express feelings ('empathy' shares the same root).<sup>89</sup> The apophatic approach – the *via negativa* to God – dates back to Neoplatonism – if not Platonism proper, or even earlier – though I will consider mainly its influence on Christianity through the work of Dionysius the Pseudo-Aeropagite. To deny (*apophemi*) means to take the stance that human language and ultimately understanding cannot embrace the infinitude of God: hence, no attribute or description is appropriate to name God. This means one is only able to know, and therefore say, what God is not. In its loose forms, apophasis can be linked to the formation of myths and visual representation, which attempt to mediate the impossibility and difficulty of representing the unknowable, in a similar fashion to the *via negativa*. Christian apophasis was also a privileged way to conceive of God as, for instance, in the medieval mystical tradition. Medieval mystic texts reinstated both the unknowability of God precisely by means of individual, mystic epiphanic experiences, and the desire to tell (cataphatically, i.e. affirming what the divine is), thus triggering the desire for the ekphrastic and synaesthetic accounts of such experiences. While ekphrasis is the mediation of extrasensory mystical experience, synaesthesia acts as a filler for the necessity of un-naming God (Barbetti 2011, 90-94).<sup>90</sup>

The famous quote “as above so below” (appearing in this section heading) attributed to the representative of late Platonism, Hermes Trismegistus, appears as the title of this section as a question. This dubitative attitude belongs to apophatic thinking for it suspends, as it were, the intrinsic preference of the human brain to reason analogically, in order to promote distance and difference as valid interpretive frameworks of the divine (Grau 2014, 21). The dubitative attitude of apophaticism has also influenced the matrix of postmodern criticism: difference is key to many thinkers, in various ways. While I will examine only the first one in detail, among the more recent philosophical stances on difference are Derrida’s *différance*, Deleuze’s difference and repetition, and Lyotard’s differend. As Grau argues:

Given the human brain’s predilection to analogical reasoning, or inference of relation by similarity, and the temptation to conflate similarity with deeper relations and even causation, forms of mystical

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<sup>89</sup> Modern linguistics recognise phatic communication as a peculiar style for an appropriate understanding of which pragmatics relies heavily upon context and other factors: see Malinowski (1923), in particular his notion of ‘phatic communion’ and Jakobson (1960).

<sup>90</sup> This complementary function is also true of those utterances that have a phatic function, according to linguists, but not are not strictly definable as phatic or non-phatic, instead as more or less phatic, as claimed by Lyons (1968, 417).

reasoning and apophatic thought can represent a strategy of resistance to such overwhelming dynamics of thought (Grau 2014, 21).

There are, of course, overt references from the same thinkers to negative theology. It is a well-known fact that despite Derrida's claim that he is not writing a negative theology in his critique of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1981, 77), he devoted several essays to the topic (mainly to argue that negative theology is still embedded in an ontotheological frame).<sup>91</sup> Although negative theology, in Derrida's words, is "an immediate but intuitionless mysticism", this topic nonetheless provides fertile ground for discussion of the postmodern image-word relation.

What I hope to achieve in the first place is to show that postmodern negative (a)theology, or in other words, the postmodern attitude to negation, is an apt tool to criticise the image-word relation created under the premises of postmodernism. Strategies strictly identifiable as apophatic do not undermine at all times the possibility to draw analogies and build similes, that is, to reason analogically, thus generating never-ending binary systems to categorise (even politically) culture and its theory. I will adopt an (a)theological point of view to explore strategies of negation. To do this, I must first create an analogy (Angelico and Tabucchi) and determine whether distance and difference can disrupt, by negation, the intermedial analogy of word-image relation. We shall see that Tabucchi, by betraying Angelico's subjects, is able to grasp the exegetical complexity of the intermedial translator.

## 2.2 Absences as Sign of a Presence: Co-existence, or the Metaphysical Tension of Analogy

The extremely rich period of transition from the late medieval to early Renaissance *mentalité* furnishes an exemplary case study to evaluate salient traits of postmodernism, especially from an epistemic point of view. This section illustrates how theological principles influenced early Renaissance artistic practice, which tended to be both conservative and innovative, as I hope to

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<sup>91</sup> See Derrida (1984); Derrida (1989).

show in this chapter. At the same time, this section will provide the basis for the discussion of two complementary notions widely addressed by postmodern criticism: presence and absence. With regard to religious art inspired by mystic encounters, the visual-aesthetic experience inspired by the divine Word is usually defined as the product of apophatic utterances in conjunction with theologically inspired imagination (Karnes 2011, 99-110). More specifically, I shall focus on the diffraction of the divine message, mediated by the artist, onto a medium.

Scripture deeply influenced the works I am going to discuss. Fra Angelico (1395-1455) was a friar of the Dominican order, as well as a painter and miniaturist. His art exemplifies the transitional phase between late medieval and Renaissance art. Masaccio, Lorenzo Monaco, Gentile da Fabriano, Brunelleschi, Nanni di Banco, and Donatello were all coeval. It is therefore not surprising that Fra Angelico is considered a precursor of the new artistic era boldly established in the Quattrocento: he was an innovator of his time alongside Van Eyck and Nicholas of Cusa, applying new techniques to an old episteme (Hoff 2013, 60; Ainsworth and Christiansen 1999, 99). On the other hand, however, cloister life and direct exposure to theological debates bound the expression of the *Angelicus pictor* – who, according to Vasari, always prayed before taking up his brush – to the persistence of motifs that rightfully belong to the Gothic. It is the combination of both the perceived halo of mystical inspiration and the bias about the typically medieval didactic function of painting that brought about the myth of a devout painter friar whose faith exceeded his talent. The lack of critical consensus was exacerbated by the ‘mystical force’—attributed to the gilded light of his paintings, whose inspiration may have derived from his training as an illuminator as well.<sup>92</sup>

Fra Angelico held a unique place at the heart of the early Florentine Renaissance, which led to a turning point in European art. He was both in tune with the cultural renewal of the time and at odds with pivotal artistic principles such as those advanced by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De Pictura*. According to Georges Didi-Huberman, the understated rejection of some Renaissance theoretical staples makes Fra Angelico still medieval, deeply grounded in a theological disposition. At the same time, by no means was Fra Angelico unaware of the new techniques that would be held as the hallmarks of the Rinascimento. Following Giotto’s and Masaccio’s innovations, for example, Fra Angelico mastered the use of linear perspective. He employed these new techniques to serve old purposes, tied as they were to an essentially medieval mindset and discourse. As a Dominican, Fra Angelico was profoundly influenced by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. He could read their works and the works of other

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<sup>92</sup> Fra Angelico was later widely praised, for example, by John Ruskin, Lord Lindsey, and Anna Jameson.

Fathers of the Church in the library commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici for the Dominicans at the Convent of San Marco. In addition, the theologians Saint Bernardino da Siena and Saint Antoninus of Florence were his contemporaries. The latter was the prior at the Convent of San Marco where Angelico, as his disciple, was completing the cycle of frescoes in the cells. One can compare these, I argue, to similar paintings by other Italian Quattrocento artists with a caveat. While Renaissance art tended to become more and more public, Fra Angelico's cell paintings at San Marco, in virtue of their singular location, purpose, and addressees are best described as visions and meditations in paint. Although no record exists of visions 'received' by the friar, intense contemplation and deep meditation of the mysteries of faith are nevertheless part of the painterly preparation of Angelico. The cycle of frescoes in the Convent of San Marco served indeed as 'spiritual canvasses' to induce the same practices and experiences in the monks occupying the cells. My analysis will be limited to three of these. However, let me first delve further into how Fra Angelico absorbed theological dogmas to proceed with a clear overview of his profound motivations.

As noted above, the Dominicans, especially at San Marco, were deeply versed in Thomist theology. Besides the author of the *Summa theologiae* – Thomas Aquinas – the Dominicans relied on many other theologians dating as far back as the Fathers of the Church. However, here I focus on how Thomism – the main target of Heideggerian critique of metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction – provided a centuries-old tradition that would also inspire Angelico's art. Interestingly, Angelico's cell frescoes became – five hundred or so years later – the object of a close reading by Antonio Tabucchi. This allows us to glimpse the debate of postmodern critiques of logocentrism (namely, the metaphysics of presence) and theorisations of the sublime from the privileged perspective of spectators after the Pictorial Turn.

An often understated aspect of Thomism, rarely mentioned in the context of postmodern criticism, is that the Thomist conception of God does not imply a total adherence to the affirmative mode of cataphatic theology. On the contrary, following the Neo-Aristotelian threefold doctrine (*via triplex*) of Dionysius the Areopagite, Aquinas reinstated a third way, the so-called *via eminentiae* (in addition to *via affirmativa* and *via negativa*), to develop his account of analogical thinking. There is a notion of 'excess' in all of these three categories: In other words, Aquinas presupposed that human language is inadequate to speak of God, so nothing true can be said about God in a literal way. Instead, using analogy allows one to attribute imperfect qualities to God: "all these finite perfections belong to God in a higher degree, in a more sublime manner, and, in fact, in a simply all-surpassing way (*eminenter*)" (Kasper 2012, 97). The idea of *via eminentiae*, and of analogy acts in a third way, mediating between pure

negation and pure affirmation; therefore, it ultimately signifies that something can be said, no matter how imprecise or imperfect. This (no matter how veiled or displaced) presence is the object of the criticism of metaphysical presences.<sup>93</sup>

The term ‘diffraction’, mentioned earlier in relation to the different ways of interweaving sign creation and mediality, is a technical term largely used in the field of optics, which I find a particularly useful metaphor in the discussion of visions and painting. For instance, the diffraction grating is an optical device used to distinguish the different wavelengths of colours contained in a beam of light. Similarly, Fra Angelico’s paintings aimed at diffracting the light of the mysteries onto their beholders in order to discern, at least partially, the consequences those mysteries bear for humankind – with the illumination to do so coming from the Scriptures and from dogmatic notions of its interpretation. As Didi-Huberman has remarked, one cannot look at the religious art of the early Renaissance without turning back to the medieval exegesis of Scriptures. This practice is reflected in Angelico’s strategies of articulating the mysteries of faith in painting. Strictly speaking, only one of the paintings analysed here – *The Annunciation* in the North Corridor; *The Crucifixion* in Cell 23; and *The Agony in the Garden* in Cell 34, at the convent of San Marco in Florence – is thematically concerned with a mystery proper, that is, the mystery of the incarnation. In Didi-Huberman’s account, the principle of medieval exegesis is indeed taken as the foundation of Fra Angelico’s pictorial elaboration of a tradition that of course includes Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Henry de Lubac, but also Angelico’s contemporaries such as Giovanni Dominici and Saint Antoninus of Florence. I agree with Didi-Huberman’s position that

we have no reason to suppose that his life as a painter, his encounters with Masaccio’s innovations in particular, could have dried up this source of his thinking: there is no reason to oppose in his case a so-called avant-garde ‘pictorial’ humanism and a so-called backward-looking ‘scholasticism’ (Didi-Huberman 1995, 17).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The interpretation I have provided is in line with generally Thomist-oriented readings of Aquinas’ *triplex via*, and it shall suffice for now to understand the principles underlying the operational frame of mind Fra Angelico was immersed in, not exclusively but especially at San Marco.

<sup>94</sup> Didi-Huberman builds on Kristeller (1984, 553-583).

The notions I will employ in this case study derive from Didi-Huberman's *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance and Figuration*. The metaphysics of presence, on which I will comment later, is implicit in the two coefficient terms – dissemblance and figuration. This is possible by virtue of the immediate counterpart – absence – as in Thomist terms truth and presence are absolutely linked: for Aquinas, revelation presupposes the existence of God and not vice versa.<sup>95</sup> The apophatic approach, then, does not imply the absence of God; on the contrary, in stating God's indefinability it brings forth God's existence. The notions of dissemblance and figuration become operative only in a context that presupposes God and the certainty of naming. The apophasis works strictly with what Didi-Huberman calls "the paradox of any figuration" whereby the "unfigurable in the figure, the unnarratable in discourse [...] the invisible in vision" (Kasper 2012, 97) is functional to "*imitate the paradox* [...]" to include within it the unfigurable, to include in its place the uncircumscribable, to include in its visibility the invisible, and to include in its *storia* the unnarratable" (Didi-Huberman 1995, 35). The paradox consists exactly in the figure – of the painting, of the mystery, of the history – not presenting any resemblance to its referent – the sign is indexical, a trace that never discloses the aspect of its agent, a remnant (*vestigium*, in Saint Augustine's terms) of a past cause. Otherness and dissemblance are indeed constitutive of this doctrine of signs for anyone who understood Scripture as "admirable depths (*mira profunditas*)" (Karnes 2011, 99-110), "a treasury of meanings, a bottomless well, an immense sea or sky, a labyrinth, and an abyss" (Aquinas 1981, Ia 2.2 obj. 1). Painting as the interpretation of the vestigial signs of the mystery may well be seen as an intersemiotic practice that is less guided by aesthetic treatises than by exegesis, "the *act of leading out* [...] a biblical story unfold[ing] a series of pathways and associations capable of leading us out of the story itself, towards the moral – or doctrinal, or mystical – depths of its figural meaning".<sup>96</sup> Dissemblance and figuration are then intimately bound to biblical exegesis as a means of recreating of biblical figures,

*figurae* in the Latin and medieval sense, that is, pictorial signs understood in theological terms, conceived to represent mystery in bodies beyond bodies, eschatological destiny in stories beyond stories, the supernatural in the visible and familiar aspects of things, beyond the aspect. Figures in this sense belong to the world of exegesis, and it is clear that great religious painters such as Giotto, Lorenzetti, and Fra Angelico, and later Crivelli and Bellini, knew how to make their work authentic fields of exegesis: not only brief, illustrated repetitions of textual exegesis, but even exegetical

<sup>95</sup> Fra Angelico later received praise by many, including John Ruskin, Lord Lindsey, and Anna Jameson.

<sup>96</sup> Didi-Huberman here quotes Arasse (1984, 5).



inventions, that is, the ever-renewed and diversifiable production of a thousand and one networks of sacred meanings (Didi-Huberman 1995, 35).

Didi-Huberman stresses the inventive character of painterly exegesis, which is an implicit consequence of the threefold conceptualisation of the image as it appears, for instance, in the *Catholicon* by the Dominican Giovanni di Genova. Resemblance, re-creation and creation (*similitudo*, *recreatio* and *creatio*) are all potential modes of the image; however, to enter the admirable depths of Scripture, one has to engage with a conception of ‘story’ that comes nowhere near the ‘positive’ realism of the notion of *istoria* developed by Leon Battista Alberti (Didi-Huberman 1995, 37).<sup>97</sup> Such an “epistemology of vision” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 37) puts an end to the painter’s concern with the invisible depths of the mysteries by focussing instead on the surface, reproducible from the natural data graspable by the naked eye. The new order put forth is the basis of art history, and “its quest for the ‘meaning of history’”:

Art history, as its name implies, is first of all a consideration of history. Imagining [art history] is a science, a ‘scientific discipline in any case, it has little appreciation for the shifting ground of equivocation and theological mysteries. [...] It was in fact during the quattrocento that Alberti [...] required that the *istoria*, the narrative, constitute the supreme stakes of painting, its *grandissima opera* (Didi-Huberman 1995, 110).

An in-depth discussion of this epistemological shift is beyond the scope of this thesis. The passage in question, however, frames dissemblance and figuration as the debris of a paradigm in decline. For this reason, one can rightfully define Fra Angelico’s art as ambivalent: his works, in some respects, are in tune with early-Renaissance innovations; on the other hand, specific motifs of his painting nestle apophatically in a metaphysics of presence. In contrast with the conception of *figura* as surface, this term had a different meaning at the time of Fra Angelico. As Didi-Huberman notes, “in trying to reconstitute the ideal library and universe of thought in which Fra Angelico had evolved and worked, [he] realized that this problematic of dissemblance had to be called figuration [...] for as late as the fifteenth century, ‘figures’

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<sup>97</sup> Didi Huberman quotes Saint Augustine, *Confessiones*, 12.14.17.

signified the reverse of what we understand today” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 3). For Christianity, God’s ‘withdrawal’ has meant, paradoxically, that the mystery is only figurable; nevertheless, Thomist interpretation maintains that one can know God, though in a limited manner, by construing asymmetrical analogies. A *detour of figures*, as Didi-Huberman defines the multiplication of meaning of medieval exegesis, creates amazement – it misleads our finite understanding through the maze of its (un-)winding paths. Augustine’s denial of the figure as *signum proprium*, which nevertheless necessitates the *signa translata*, explains strategies of figuration that seek to displace and evoke “the virtual in figurability”.<sup>98</sup>

The practice of summoning the virtual calls for the notion of dissemblance, which pertains to the semantic sphere of diffraction mentioned earlier. Scotus Eriugena translated Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin, an enigmatic source which contributed to a revival of apophaticism. Now, dissemblance is the opposite of resemblance: a deviation from the semblance.<sup>99</sup> The diffraction of meaning takes place in difference and concealment: the analogy only occurs as *eironeia* – Greek irony meaning dissimulation and dissimilitude (from the infinitive *eirein* which means ‘to speak’, also related to *eiros*, ‘dissembler in speech’). As in dramatic irony, the appearance of things presupposes another reality, another truth – if one wants to follow the cue of tragic irony in this context, humankind has lost its privilege of being with God; the original sin has created instead a distance, the Augustinian (and Platonic) *regio dissimilitudinis*.

The polysemous nature of the ‘medieval figure’ and the irony of dissemblance then underlie the relation between our limited point of view and the omniscient knowledge of God. As with many forms of irony, this dissembler irony likewise requires a competent reader to sense the gap between the conventional and covert, unspoken dimensions of the painting, which twist the conventional character of observation. However, this mode of irony does not engender any ‘comic’ pleasure. Instead, more like tragic irony, it is the key to spiritual catharsis as an exercise in exegesis based on the four senses of Scriptures (Didi-Huberman 1995, 123).

As a prelude to more advanced degrees of spiritual meaning, theologians considered the literal sense of the biblical story simplistic in opposition with the manifold meanings of the higher senses of exegesis, exactly counter to the naturalistic and positive view of Alberti’s story as a landmark of Renaissance *mentalité*. On one hand, some etymology of ‘story’ (Todd 1995,

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<sup>98</sup> “Segno qui appello qualunque cosa stia alla superficie per modo che l’occhio possa vederla. Delle cose quali non possiamo vedere, neuno nega nulla appartenersene al pittore” (Alberti 1435/1950, 1.2).

<sup>99</sup> Eriugena’s Latin rendering, *dissimilitudo*, in French is *dissemblance*, whose primary meaning (in modern French) is an archaic meaning of its homograph equivalent in English. See also Carman (2014).

xiii) sheds light on the “suspicion of theatrical visibility with its risk of excess, hysteria, and idolatry”,<sup>100</sup> when its ‘excess’ recalls *ysteron*, promiscuous, unorthodox gesticulation (*gesticulatio*). Nevertheless, the more physical of the senses, the *sensus litteralis*, while particularly appealing to the sense of sight, was the foundation of the edifice on which the *sensus spiritualis* was built (the allegorical, moral and anagogical sense). Similarly, the former was likened to the body, the latter to the soul for it should be able to reach higher degrees of understanding. In other words, “[t]wo systems were developed to understand the divine truths contained in history. One was based in hermeneutics—the science of biblical interpretation; the other on the concept of the figure—the interpretation of one event as foreshadowing or fulfilment of another” (Greenstein 1992, 25). While the *literal sense* of exegesis provided a springboard for metaphors and analogies to create meaning (*recreatio* and *creatio*) by its own constant displacing, the concepts of figure and figuration are nonetheless pivotal to understand dissemblance. The virtual made present by Fra Angelico’s medieval figures contradicts the principle of realism as well as the Panofskian tenet that figure is a positive datum, discernible throughout Panofsky’s three-step analysis, and was ultimately assigned the locus of meaning making, whereas the ground where the figure is anchored only supports the figure-function, just like a prop. By contrast, Didi-Huberman has stressed how vital this ancillary portion of the plane is, by paying heed to the (often neglected) “great subtlety of relations between texts and images” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 15). The importance of re-construing the intricate network of relations between the world that bred the images and the images themselves was to a certain extent advanced by Warburg and Panofsky, although with differences. The shortcomings of a certain art history have been a constant preoccupation of Didi-Huberman, and Panofsky’s method is no exception. Didi-Huberman looks at the ground of Fra Angelico’s works – the prop, the non-essential, non-figurative part of them – to disclose in absence a universe of meaningful connections with Fra Angelico’s world of coeval and past exegesis. While Panofsky looked at historically determined, signifying values, Warburg’s methodology was less structured as it looked for ‘symptoms’ rather than for ‘structure’: “[t]hanks to Panofsky’s warnings, [...] we know better just how we need not be afraid of *knowledge*. But despite Panofsky’s exorcisms – and thanks to the risks taken before him by Aby Warburg – we also know how we needn’t be afraid of *not knowing*” (Didi-Huberman 2005, xxiii-xxvi).

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<sup>100</sup> G. Didi-Huberman dedicates an entire section to contextualising the role of the four senses and exegesis (1995, 36-45).

My aim here is to stress how Didi-Huberman interprets the binary opposition of ground and figure bequeathed to us by Panofskian iconology. While underlining the importance of knowing the positive facts – the *sensus litteralis* – that are more easily graspable in Fra Angelico's painting, Didi-Huberman also rehabilitates, so to speak, the *necessity* of not knowing. For this reason, he takes up the ground and adds depth to it, just as it was the quintessential locus of exegetical analysis of the *mira profunditas* – the unfathomable depths of the mystery. The reasons for which the *historia* could have been attributed a reason (*ratio*) an order (*ordo*) and intelligence (*intelligentia*) rest with Biblical exegesis (Greenstein 1992, 26).

The absence of painterly exegesis in the figure, however, does not substantiate any real presence in the ground. Instead, when Didi-Huberman magnifies the ground and finds Fra Angelico's most genuine meditations on the mysteries of faith (and their multiplications) in it, he can of course analyse the rationale behind these dissemblant techniques of Thomist analogy, but he cannot unfold the 'rationale of the mystery' itself: this is neither given to the painter nor to the art historian, the modern 'lay' exegete. For the same reasons, one will not be able to disentangle, for instance, what the small figures in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* exactly pictured as their miniscule appearance, spread all over the main panel of the triptych, seems to suggest the entire plane of figuration coincides with the ground.

Bosch is mentioned here for two reasons. First, the uncertainty of defining which is the figure and which is the ground, or the exact meaning at the core of this pictorial choice, resonates with considerations about the apophatic nature of the religious painting of the ground. Second, as I will explain, Bosch becomes more than a pre-(text) or the phantasmagoric lens in Tabucchi's short story about the flying creatures of Fra Angelico.

I will now analyse some theoretical tools of postmodernism to determine what they can reveal about intermedial translation, its relation with logocentrism, and its relation with otherness.

### 2.3 Absences as Signs of a Presence: Dissemblant Analogies, or of Splashes of Colour

In this section I will be looking at the materiality of Angelico's artistic practice to contextualise the topic of dissemblance and figuration so far addressed through secondary sources, and to introduce the relevance of Antonio Tabucchi's reading to this practice. The discussion on the materiality of the pictorial process is pivotal to understanding Tabucchi's endeavour in reimagining Angelico's pictorial activity.

Tabucchi informs us that three paintings preserved in the upper level of the San Marco convent – *Annunciation* in the North Corridor; *Crucifixion* in Cell 23; and *Agony in the Garden* in Cell 34 – underlie his fictive reimagining of Angelico's pictorial activity. However, these paintings are not key to understanding Angelico's *modus operandi* for painterly scriptural exegesis. For Angelico as well as other medieval-minded artists, artistic licence derived from deliberate gestures and appropriate techniques – here splashes of colours imitating marble. This was a way to connote rather than denote, by disguising or erasing. The creative act of erasure may anticipate modes variously theorised in the twentieth century by postmodern criticism, when the faith in an ordered, and fundamentally linguistic-based semiotic model of assigning meaning had already crumbled. Yet, the medieval Gothic attitude to painting what cannot be laid out on a surface is allegorical, “an allegory emptied of aspect because it is the allegory of an unintelligible mystery, not susceptible to a human image (*imago*), not even an internal one (*phantasma*)” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 66).

Consequently, one can start exploring those patches of colour in some of Angelico's paintings that are, at least by Panofskian standards, difficult to define. In other words, it is important to look closely at liminal areas – like those referred to as *marmi finti* – marginal to the main narration. For instance, *Madonna delle ombre* [Madonna of the Shadows] is divided into two parts. While its lower section of *marmi finti* is part of the painting (despite being neatly separated from the ‘narration’ of events in their main portion), it is often omitted from reproductions.

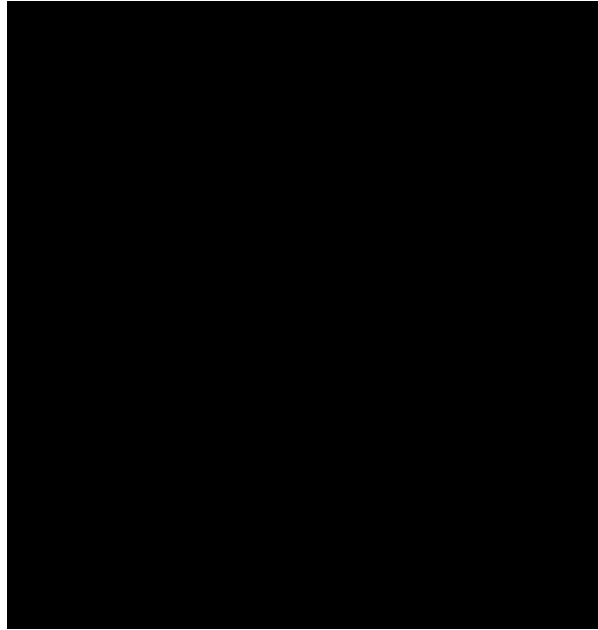


Figure 3. Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows*, ca. 1438-1450, Convent at San Marco, Florence

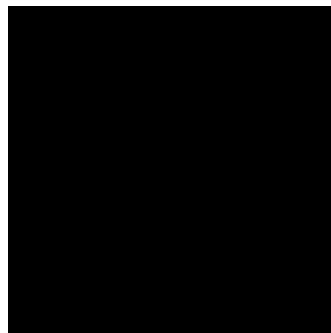


Figure 4. Fra Angelico, Detail of 'marmi finti', lower panel, *Madonna of the Shadows*



Figure 5. Fra Angelico, close-up detail of the 'blotching' technique, lower panel, *Madonna of the Shadows*

The second image represents the lower panel taken in isolation. This portion, a detail of which appears almost Pollock-like to the contemporary eye, is exactly an empty allegory as described by Didi-Huberman. That it served a decorative purpose is a simplistic view. Didi-Huberman asks a series of questions that are relevant here: “Why were these blotches painted precisely at eye level? What particular virtue were they aiming at?” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 87).

These surfaces are not even anamorphic, that is, they do not create an illusion; rather, they enclose a presence, a quality indicated by their “proximity, frontality, immediacy of colours” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 87). In effects, these splashes “do not presuppose any play with perspective, overlapping of different planes, or illusionist constructions”, for which reason one cannot call them “foregrounds, but only patches of projected colour” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 87). The key to understanding this deviation from the most common norms of representation is to subvert, in controlled areas, representation itself.

Representation as a practice of embedding presence has, for Didi-Huberman, “an anagogical virtue with the aim of ‘rendering a presence’” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 87). Angelico’s work exceeds, in plain words, the mere representation of Scripture. The painterly act which motivates the intersemiotic aspect of such a gesture requires a personal approach to intermedial transposition of the most unintelligible level of Scripture from the painter. This obliges the exegete Angelico to represent the sacred mystery in the only way a human hand possibly can; by eliminating intelligible form, by signalling an intrinsic incongruence, which amounts to revealing an anomaly, a patch of uncharted territory in a surface otherwise dedicated to the most refined representation of sacred stories. This is an example of dissemblant analogy: dissemblance as an exegetical instrument concerns the form, analogy as a theological tenet the content.

Angelico devised more ways to deploy dissemblant analogies in the form of painting and gilding. For instance, for a painter of Gothic motifs and symbols selectively adopting early quattrocento stylistic innovations, mysteries were part and parcel of painterly exegesis which conferred upon the ground (as opposed to the figure) an intrinsic theological function. Well-documented examples of the flowery lawns in Gothic painting come to mind. Specifically, Angelico’s brush scattered red blossoms to recall the mystery of the Passion of Christ (Didi-Huberman 1995, 163). As Didi-Huberman explains, the lawns of *Noli me tangere* are an authentic field of exegesis, as these tiny index-signs reconcile the istoria of Christianity: “Christ’s humanity blossomed on the day of the Annunciation and was sacrificially scattered on the day of the Passion [...]. But finally, the entire garden blossoms anew [...] with its new

gardener, since Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene with a spade on his shoulder” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 163).

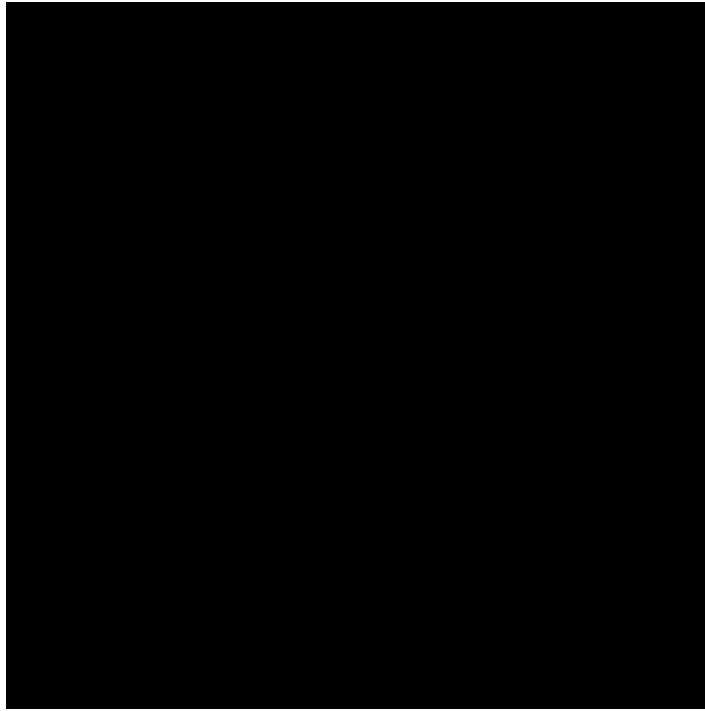


Figure 6. Fra Angelico, *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1438-1450, Convent at San Marco, Florence



Figure 7. Fra Angelico, detail, *Noli me tangere*



Another exegetical strategy for the Gothic painter was the symbolic use of colours (pink, blue, yellow-gold), which is typical of the mystical traditions – the Angelicus Pictor would be a chromophiliac as per Michael Taussig’s definition (Taussig 2009).<sup>101</sup> This is another ‘symptom’ of the specific semantic intensity – or density, according to Goodman’s system – assigned to non-naturalistic representation.

Lastly, the art of gilding is another form of dissemblant analogy. Angelico was particularly well-versed in gilding, having received training as an illuminator, and subsequently produced illuminations for a number of liturgical manuscripts, such as the San Domenico Missal (Missal 558, ca. 1425). A remark on gilding and the use of precious metals such as gold will clarify further the specific form of dissemblant analogy I am concerned with: painting *in limine*, the *parergon*, the accessory, the decorative. That Alberti was against the use of gold in the *ergon* of the painting (Hoff 2016, 54-55) bears witness to the Renaissance mindset oriented to the virtualisation (in the sense of progressive abstraction) of representation – boldly advanced with Brunelleschi’s *arte prospettica*. The ‘as if’ episteme Alberti subscribed to would in fact prohibit the use of gold to represent, paradoxically, objects made of gold. I would like to stress here the aspect of virtualisation – a progressive abstraction of the real semblances through, for instance, de-materialising devices such as mathematically calculated proportions and abstract grids, to produce more realistic effects. For this reason, the virtual representation of the fully-fledged Renaissance – officially initiated by Alberti’s treatise in Latin and in the vernacular (1435-36) – was to be contained by the *ergon*, whereas any decorative function was to be relegated to the *parergon* – as later Kant would popularise this opposition in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*.<sup>102</sup> Postmodernism and its rediscovery of liminality and deferral rehabilitated the notion of marginality. It is with this lens that one should look at Angelico’s and Tabucchi’s marginalia, for “it is not simply their exteriority that constitutes them as *parerga*, but the internal structural link by which they are inseparable from a lack within the *ergon*. And this lack makes for the very unity of the *ergon*. Without it, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*” (Derrida 1979, 24). This hierarchy, indeed, is not as stark in Angelico’s suspension between the two

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<sup>101</sup> Oversimplifying, for Taussig the *philia* for colours belongs to the ‘uncivilised’: the non-naturalistic use of colour not so strangely – but with not strictly religious purposes – reappears in numerous avant-garde movements such as Expressionism, and the Fauves in particular. Colour is another non-syntactical indicator of Angelico’s theological endeavours in painting. The lapis lazuli of the ultramarine blue – in modern times marketed as ‘Fra Angelico Blue’ – was later superseded by chemical versions. The ultramarine blue patented by Yves Klein (IKB) and the synaesthetic devices of poetry and poetics (especially in the early twentieth century) are just examples of the chromophiliac tendency of much contemporary art.

<sup>102</sup> For Kant the *parergon* is an accessory part, “not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object”, see Kant (1790/2007, 57).

worlds. On the contrary, the virtual and the naturalist representations interlace: the blossoming lawns in red, the colourful wings of angels and precious gowns of saints are all on the main plane of representation, i.e. disseminated within the story proper. The *Madonna of the Shadows* fresco, however, presents at first sight a ‘rupture’ of the two planes – a decorative segment and a main panel. This apparent schism functions as a metaphorical diffraction grating which splits and diffracts the light of the mysteries from the upper to the lower portion. Nevertheless, I do not intend to imply that a mere binary opposition is involved here. In order to show how opposite and continuous this relation could be, I will refer to Krauss’ use of the logic of the double negative. Krauss imagines a square that has assigned the values of ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ in each of its upper corners, and their negative correlatives symmetrically opposed in the lower corners. This square allows for the same opposition to be reinstated through semantically varying elements (e.g. figure versus not-figure amounts to figure versus ground, and so on).

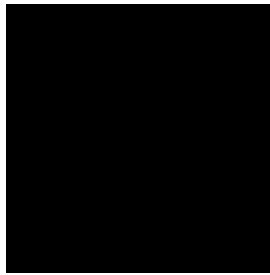


Figure 8. Semiotic Square (Krauss 1994, 14)

For Krauss, the play on the (dis)continuity of figure and ground is based on their interplay with their negatives:

Not-figure/not-ground of the ‘neutral axis [of the square] is that peculiar conversion of empirical vision’s figure/ground distinction that can be seen to have generated one modernist icon after another: the grid, the monochrome, the all-over painting, the color-field, the mise-en-abyme of classical collage, the nests of concentric squares or circles. And while each is its own version of the neutralizing of the original distinction, none is an erasure of the terms of that distinction. Quite to the contrary. The terms are both preserved and cancelled. [...] Empirical vision must be cancelled, in favor of something understood as the precondition of the very emergence of the perceptual object to vision. [...] [The graph] puts the dynamic of the logic on display. It shows the difference between the two axes – upper and lower – as two different forms of vision (Krauss 1994, 14-15).

The painting surface is indeed one but discontinuous: two different modes of vision are required. Krauss' structuralist graph, despite its intrinsic limitations as the author admits (Krauss 1994, 27), is useful insofar as it outlines, likewise, the limitations of

the semiotic square, or structuralist's graph [as] a way of picturing the whole of a cultural universe in the grip of two opposing choices, two incompatible possibilities. Cultural production is the creation of an imaginative space in which those two things can be related. The conflict will not go away. But it will be, as it were, suspended (Krauss 1994, 21).

I have presented this graph with the purpose of disrupting a strict bi-logic swinging between two extremes, Gombrich's and Panofsky's, the *ergon* and the *parergon*, and in certain respects, Cusa's and Alberti's views, as seen later in this section.

To put this in context, I turn to *Madonna of the Shadows'* four panels reproducing *marmi finti*, which elude decorative mimesis in favour of exegetical figuration by rendering "the unfigurable in the figure". 'Un-figuring' amounts to displacing the iconic value so that one cannot establish what is, or what is not. One could conjecture, of course, that the un-figurable condensed in the fresco splattered with paint to intensify the marble-like surface stands for, or evokes, the marble of Christ's sepulchre, and indirectly the main 'story' narrated above, alluding to the future sorrow of the Virgin for the loss of her son. First, if this painting were to be transposed into metadata for digital conservation, defining synthetically the lower portion would posit the question of creating new cataloguing rules better suited to connotation than denotation, as Goodman and his notational systems have shown.<sup>103</sup> Second, one would need to refer to a wide corpus of texts – theological and artistic – to provide context for this 'blotching' practice. While almost any artefact can be digitally preserved, it would be difficult to record the subtlety of the image. To elaborate further Didi-Huberman's reading, I take these splotches of colour as both indexical (the symptom of something) and intrinsically iconic. Icons, in fact, point back to a prototype; Christian icons' prototypes are substantiated by faith, i.e. they are motivated solely by the divine revelation with which God disclosed himself to humankind

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<sup>103</sup> Connotation, or semantically density – in Nelson Goodman's terms – as found in Angelico's patches of colour may still be problematic to define, for example, in the Iconclass classification system. While this system provides an accurate indexing method, the ambiguity of elements such as the lower panel of *Madonna of the Shadows* would not be accounted for: is the panel part of the religious scene above (see category Bible 7), or is it mainly non-representational patch? In the latter case, please note that the category 0 - Abstract, Non-representational art does not have any subclasses. See Rafferty and Hilderley (2017).

(divine economy, the original meaning of *oikonomia*). This account of iconicity does not rely entirely on Peirce's system, for these sorts of icons ought to resemble a mystery: therefore, they dissemble. Marie-José Mondzain provides a deep insight into this 'iconic-mimetic' process:

The icon aims at resemblance to its prototype without trying to maintain with it the relation of similitude that the prototype maintains with its own substance. [...] The icon *mimetai*, that is to say that it renders the relation to the Word (*pros logon*) present and visible, that is *ad-verbum*, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart, who speaks both of man and the image as an adverb. [...] Mimesis refers therefore to *homoiōma* [resemblances] as a directed emptiness. Ladner writes [...] "identity between image and original does not exist with respect to the former's matter or the latter's nature ... The identity is only a formal ideal, a relational one". [...] From this perspective, the icon is perhaps the best historical introduction to the development of abstraction. Within it, form has a non-objective reality very close to Mondrian's admonition to "no longer be concerned with form as form" (Mondzain 2005, 83-89).

Angelico's exegetic work is essentially iconic: the identity relation with the divine prototype is only ideal; the image-icon becomes "directed emptiness". As Didi-Huberman maintains, without Angelico's orientation to 'iconic painting' – not stylistically as much as conceptually – he "would be only a rather backward popular painter within Florentine humanism of the quattrocento" (Didi-Huberman 1995, 22). Instead, Angelico's innovative potential anticipates later concerns of the avant-gardes and puts him out of synch with his own time.

Alberti's praise of naturalistic mimesis would not account for the richness and subtlety of Angelico's painterly exegetical episteme. While *inventio* was still an essential component, Alberti's precepts directed it exclusively toward the natural realm: painting a world of *shadow* was not admissible in the Parnassus of the laws of vision (Greenstein 1992, 41-42).<sup>104</sup> As the example of Angelico's *creatio* is precisely a *Madonna of the Shadows*, let us turn to how the concept of shadow relates to the blotches of colour and the dissemblant analogy they stand for. The shadow is, in my reading, the ultimate tie to biblical exegesis of painting, a stronghold of the supremacy of the Word received over the visual perceived, as it ties back the *figura* to an

<sup>104</sup> Alberti's *Anschaung* of painting does not include semiotic ambiguity: "In book 1, he argued that painting could be a convincing representation of the visible world. In book 2, he proposed a series of rules or steps through which painting took on the narrative significance and moral appeal of *historia*. In book 3, he showed that intellectual content of painting was allegorical". Moreover, quoting directly Alberti, "no one would deny that the painter has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is solely concerned with representing what can be seen" (Greenstein 1992, 40-41).

already established *historia*. From this theoretical rather than expressive point of view, Alberti priord opened a new way of conceiving painting as separate from Scripture and literary texts.

The dissemblant analogies of Angelico's paintings, reminiscent of Kandinskij's spiritual yearnings,<sup>105</sup> align with Cennino Cennini's description of late medieval Tuscan masters whose painting required "*fantasia* and skill of hand in order to find things not seen, seeking them under the shadow of natural objects [...] showing that which is not as if it were" (Greenstein 1992, 41).

More than Mondrian's flat surfaces, Angelico's technique of *marmi finti* comes closer to the splashing of paint à la Pollock, the overlaying of which fictively added depth – figuratively, the depth of the mystery – to the surface.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) is another figure who, like Angelico, still referred to the medieval episteme in a time of cultural renewal. In his works, Cusa mentions the all-gazing icon, an undistinguished entity whose gaze is directed to all angles. Angelico's *marmi finti* are comparable to the true icon (*vera icona*) in that the beholder does not know what is concealed behind the splotches. Therefore, the undistinguished splotches are comparable to a variety of focal points that can look while being looked at (Hoff 2013, 31). The lower panel where the splotches of colour are located is a reminder that painterly realism as we know it is but a canon that took over the "directed emptiness" of the icon, as Mondzain put it. Cusa's all-gazing *vera icona*'s collective experience would qualify it more as a performative form than as a painted surface. The space in which this art is lived and experienced has more to it than a museum's: it is a liturgical space where "apparently oxymoronic combinations" (Pickstock 1998, 229) coexist since liturgy – which literally means 'a duty performed for the public' – "imagines something in excess of everyday life" (Pickstock 2000, 165). This patch of 'liturgical space' still preserved on the upper floor of the Convent at San Marco is therefore strikingly distant from our contemporary sensibility. It is not just a matter of abstraction and dissemblance; it is the artist's personal recreation of what Johannes Hoff called 'misty space', a dogmatic import from the deliberation of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), following philosopher and theologian John Milbank (Hoff 2013, 70 fn. 31). Here worldly existence and divine perfection are defined at the same time as inseparable and unconfused (Hoff 2013, 118). This creates a place for liturgy as the practice that brings

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<sup>105</sup> See Kandinsky (1912/1968, 155-170): "the spiritual value, searching for a form of materialization, finds matter. Matter is merely a storeroom. It is from this storeroom, that the spirit chooses what is specifically necessary for it to reveal itself. [...] the form (the Material) in general, is not the most important thing, but rather the content is the most important thing (the Spirit). Consequently, the form can have a pleasant or unpleasant effect without affecting the content". See also Klee (1920/1968, 182): "art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible".

a new focus on analogical ‘in-between’ spaces: ‘misty spaces’ that resist not only the analytic fallacies of modern sciences, but also the dialectical counter-reaction against this representationalist obsession, namely the subjectivist inclination to outsource the suppressed, symbolic dimension of our everyday world into a sentimentalized ‘private sphere’ (Hoff 2015).

The dissemblant analogy functioning from within the layered splashes of colour is a form of artistic liturgy which implies much larger consequences than one would think a moderately innovative painting would. The misty space to which it adheres, with its earthy fog of pigments, represents a significant challenge for anyone seeking to translate it into a different text (in its semiotic sense) and into a different medium. In a modern twist of the term, it could be argued that this misty space has the same character of in-betweenness as Paul Klee’s *Zwischenwelt*, “between-world” (Rodowick 2001, 16) or “interworld” (Bogue 2014, 114). Here the artist can express freely what cannot be commonly presented through a drive fuelled by the desire – that in Freudian terms is suppressed under normal societal circumstances – to uncover what in the between-world she is able to glimpse, which is not given to others. In other words, Angelico’s misty space whose splattered pigments conceal and reveal the mystery meets “the space of the virtual and the unforeseen, a pictorial polyphony that is the special province of the *Zwischenwelt*” (Rodowick 2001, 17). Klee’s artistic motto – “art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible” – takes on new meaning when re-read through Angelico’s lens. Moreover, the misty space itself resists both the analytic obsession of modern sciences and the representationalist inclination to present one’s perceptual experience as private (Hoff 2013, 82-84). When looking at words and images as Scripture and its representation such as Angelico’s treatment of the mysteries, one will find in its modern rendering a vantage point to investigate the *Zwischenwelt*.

This misty space, and by extension Angelico’s abstract panel, virtually encloses, as it were, what Rodowick has called the figural, the domain of a “semiotic regime where the ontological distinction between linguistic and plastic representations breaks down” (Rodowick 2001, 2). This is valid in the case of Fra Angelico and Antonio Tabucchi, even though they meet in a setting of traditional (old) media whereas Rodowick’s concept is applied to the disruptive scenario of the philosophy of new media. The figural is another critical term suited to investigating the role of images and words beyond any irreducible dualisms.<sup>106</sup> Following

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<sup>106</sup> “I do not want to imply, however, that my argument is founded on a technological transformation of discourse. And if later I draw an association between the figural and the virtual, this has little to do with the already debased informatic currency of the term. No matter how ‘figural’ they may be, the so-called new media still fall within a long and complex genealogy whose lines of descent include both the history of philosophy and the history of art.

Lyotard, the “figure resides in discourse as the intractable opacity of the visible” (Rodowick 2001, 6), therefore as a “spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken, an exteriority that it cannot interiorize as signification” (Lyotard 2011, 7). We should recall here that the medieval etymology of ‘*figura*’, as Didi-Huberman has pointed out, implies the reversal of modern categories of figure and ground: Angelico’s *figura*, albeit delving into theological principles, shares essential features with the notion of the figural as outlined here. It is through the figural that my analysis of Angelico’s paintings and their distant echo in Antonio Tabucchi’s *The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico* can come full circle.

#### 2.4 *The Flying Creatures* of Antonio Tabucchi: Ekphrasis Rooted in Postmodernism

The increasingly polymorphic nature of ekphrasis has been investigated in intermedial and intersemiotic studies. While I am considering mainly ekphrasis in old media, the debate on the ‘new media’, as Rodowick’s seminal book suggests, and its influence on the current theorising of intermediality, adds depth to the insights previously furnished by intersemiotic translation. Antonio Tabucchi’s *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1986) [*The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico*, 2012, henceforth FC] offers an example of postmodern ekphrasis. I describe this case of ekphrasis as borderline because many objections could be raised to classifying this short story as ekphrastic. I argue that the pictorial exegesis of Fra Angelico and Tabucchi’s fascination with the world of the visual each present a version of ekphrastic disposition that interpenetrates the other, illuminating recesses often neglected by literary critics and art historians alike.

The worlds of these two different ekphrastic species are very distant. On the one hand, Angelico’s world requires the beholder to understand the principles of theological exegesis applied to painting. On the other hand, the postmodern world of Tabucchi’s stories rests instead on the certainty of the death of God. It epitomises metaphysical disenchantment in an era of

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The figural is something both new yet very old. Lyotard himself readily admits that the figural has an autonomous existence with a long history. The history of art, or more deeply the history of representation, is full of ‘authorless’ examples of figurative text and textualized figures” (Rodowick 2001, 3-4).

relativism and volitional deconstruction of given epistemic certainties. Tabucchi's imagining of Angelico's creatures, then, necessarily interprets an historical source into postmodern taste.

However, I aim to show how Tabucchi's unconventional ekphrasis becomes an instrument of intersemiotic fidelity. The polymorphic way in which the practice of intersemiotic translation appears in Tabucchi's FC demonstrates how the text preserves intermedial difference while transmitting the thickness of meaning of the original version. 'Thickness' is a keyword in Derrida's vocabulary, which I will use extensively. Derrida derives the notion of 'thickness' from his reading of Husserl, in particular *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*.<sup>107</sup> In his critique of Husserl, Derrida's interpretation of the 'thickness' of time appears as a questioning and a deconstruction of "the thick now or living present, realizing that with a point 'now' the presence of the perceived moment can appear as such only by containing a nonpresence" (Rosenthal 2000, 33). Time and space are two major categories whose unity is disintegrated in Derrida's philosophical system. Here, the thickness of time – the referential, self-identity of the now moment that was – disintegrates in the *parerga*, the *lieu par excellence* of nonpresence – another keyword for Derrida and for the analysis of Tabucchi's FC. According to Derrida, a different kind of thickness applies to liminality, such as the marginal spaces where Angelico meditated in paint on the mysteries of faith.

Thickness, the *parerga*, and the trace: I will employ these concepts to articulate my analysis of Tabucchi's short story. The trace is, in Derrida's philosophical work, "the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign", since "the sign, phonic as well as graphic, is a structure of difference" and "half of it [is] always 'not there' and the other half always 'not that'". This amounts to saying that "the structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent". These definitions pave the way for the popular notion of trace as "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin which is the condition of thought and experience".<sup>108</sup> Tabucchi's short story offers all of these concepts for a contextualised analysis, while also bringing to the fore a revisited notion of icons that "*mimetai*", that present its intrinsic mimesis as ad-verbum (following Mondzain's quote above), as residing in a misty space where identity and otherness cohabit unconfused.

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<sup>107</sup> The 'phenomenological thick present' intertwines the three components, so to speak, of retention, protention and a 'now moment'. See Husserl (1991).

<sup>108</sup> All the quotes on difference are from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Translator's Preface", in Derrida (1997, xxxv-xxxvi).



The following is a brief summary of FC. At the beginning, the friar from Fiesole is portrayed as a vegetable gardener rather than as a painter. Tabucchi introduces a character who is not the mystic painter of angels of Vasari's story. Instead, Fra Giovanni of Fiesole preserves ties with earthly things in that he "privately [...] still thought of himself as Guidolino, the name he had left behind in the world when he came to the cloister" as well as because "he hadn't wanted to abandon the vocation of his father, Pietro, who was a vegetable gardener" (FC, 3). Fra Angelico is gathering onions at vespers when the first of the three flying creatures arrives. The opposition between the earthly focus of Fra Angelico – according to Ayurveda, onions are among rajasic foods, which interfere with meditation – and the flying, ascensional character of his celestial visitor underlies the structure of this brief narration. In the *parergon* of the garden at San Marco, the first visitor appears to Angelico "through onion tears filling his eyes" so that "the shape was magnified and distorted by his tears as though through a bizarre lens: he blinked his eyes to dry the lashes, then looked again". The fascination with the visual and the possibilities of sight are a constantly explored and developed theme in Tabucchi's work, of which the short story analysed in Chapter 1, *Il gioco del rovescio* [The Reverse Game] is just one example. In particular, the fallibility of sight as perception – and, namely, of sight limited by framing devices (Tabucchi 2013b)<sup>109</sup> – has been a constant in Tabucchi's work. Here, the Convent at San Marco itself becomes a misty space welcoming the Other – the celestial creatures. These are far from resembling angels as traditional iconography would have them, nor do they seem to bring an explicit message from any deity. The first was "a pinkish creature, soft looking, with small yellowish arms like a plucked chicken's, bony, and two feet which again were very lean with bulbous joints and calloused toes, like a turkey's". The second and third creatures, appearing in the vegetable garden the following morning evoke either a "dragonfly" or – upon a second look – a "large cricket",

so long and thin, and all gangly, with frail slender limbs you were afraid to touch in case they broke, almost translucent, pale green, like stems of unripe corn. And his chest was like a grasshopper's too, a wedge-shaped chest, pointed without a scrap of flesh, just skin and bones (FC, 13).

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<sup>109</sup> "Méfiez-vous des morceaux choisis" – a declaration of poetic purpose – said the photographer Christine Roux in the final pages (pages not numbered).

The description of the third creature borrows again from the insect world as this resembles a “rolypoly” having “the shape of a loop, or of a figure eight, though cut in half, since he was really no more than a bust terminating in a beautiful tail, and no bigger than a baby” (FC, 14). These extraordinary creatures are harmless, and are visible only to Angelico “because that’s how it was” (FC, 9). It is also inexplicable that the creatures can’t speak any human language yet their feathers’ concerted movements and their eyes’ opening and closing are sufficient for Fra Giovanni of Fiesole to understand them. He is also able to be understood by them; however, the way he is able to communicate with them is not described at all. Nevertheless, the fictional Angelico can easily reassure the creatures about the earth, which they have never experienced, and prepares a small open shelter in the garden since they “can’t conceive of space if it’s not open” (FC, 9). The outsider traits of the creatures reveal them to be in-between, temporary guests of an-other dimension.

The guests’ radical otherness suggests we look for their alterity in medieval bestiaries more than in angelic iconography. Their insect-and aviary-like bodies collocates them closer to Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, or even to the ‘crickets’ of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. The cricket itself is a particular subject in painting, “the so-called *grillo* (cricket), a species of grotesque imagery purportedly invented by the Greek master Anthipphilus” (Koerner 2016, 100).<sup>110</sup>

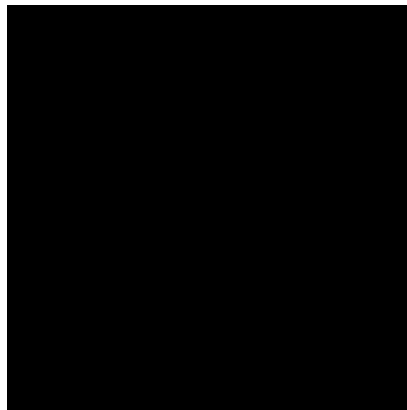


Figure 9. Hieronymus Bosch, detail, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, ca. 1501, Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

<sup>110</sup> See also Göttler and Neuber (2008, 22); Baltrusaitis (1955, Chapters 1-2); Werner (2008, especially Part Three). *Grilli* are also a form of representation of ‘glittica’, the art of carving stone and gemstones: “Grilli si dicono nella Glittica quelle rappresentanze libere e capricciose, e quelle ancora che noi sogliamo chiamare *caricature*” (Vermiglioli 1822, 277).

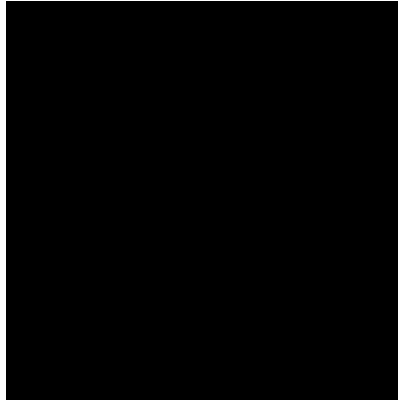


Figure 10. Hieronymus Bosch, detail, *The Last Judgement*, ca. 1482, Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna

The front cover of the English edition of Tabucchi's book shows a detail of two flying beings from Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. The colour of the book and the choice of the detail bring together the colours of the mystical tradition (pink, blue, and here, a very light yellow). Wondrous bodies and sacred colours: the flying creatures of FC are hybrid beings just like the gothic crickets.<sup>111</sup>



Figure 11. Antonio Tabucchi, *The Flying Creatures*. Translated by Tim Parks. New York: Archipelago Books 2012.

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<sup>111</sup> This kind of figure is often catalogued under the rubric 'Hybrid': see for instance "grillus (body with no torso: head replaces genitals)" (Leo 2013, 399 fn 1).

Tabucchi's opening note, a liminal commentary on the short fiction that names the collection of short stories, summons both a sense of tension toward the unknown, as in meditative mystical practices, and a sense of doom, like many of the disquieting subjects of Bosch's brush. Tabucchi asserts that

hypochondria, insomnia, restlessness and yearning are the lame muses of these brief pages. [...] Many of them seem to wander about in a strange outside that has no inside, like drifting splinters, survivors of some whole that never was. Alien to any orbit, I have the impression they navigate in familiar spaces whose geometry nevertheless remains a mystery; let's say domestic thickets: the interstitial zones of our daily having-to-be, or bumps on the surface of existence (FC, vii).

The alterity is prefigured in Tabucchi's previous collection of short stories *L'Angelo Nero* [The Black Angel 1991], which is also populated by disquieting animal creatures (Dolfi 2006, 211-248). Here in FC the 'crickets' assume a specific function for Tabucchi, as much as they did for Bosch. Interestingly, according to Felipe de Guevara (c. 1500-1563),<sup>112</sup> "unlike his imitators, Bosch never in his life painted anything unnatural, except—and this is admittedly a big exception—when he wanted to portray scenes in Hell, and for that subject matter it was necessary to depict devils and imagine them in unusual compositions" (Koerner 2016, 100).

Similarly, Tabucchi describes beings fallen from the sky, improbable archangels subject to a force of ascension only at nighttime that keeps them floating around "like a splinter cast adrift" (FC, 10). In Fra Giovanni's reported speech to his father superior, the first creature got lost and "had arrived from another dimension, wandering about; there'd been three of them and they'd got lost, a small band of creatures cast adrift, they had roamed aimlessly through the skies, through secret dimensions, until [the first] one had fallen into the pear tree (FC, 10)".

The guests to the cloister appear to have landed there by chance. Yet, one night, the dragonfly creature visits Fra Giovanni in his cell, requesting him to paint them. This is the first reference to painting in the brief narration, and the request is addressed by means of a "must": "tomorrow you must paint us, that's why we came" (FC, 16). The peremptory command is spoken by the dragonfly creature, which resembles Angelico's youthful lover Nerina as it had "a woman's face, because the features were feminine, albeit on a strange insectlike body". The dreamy atmosphere reinforces the ambiguity generated by this figure. Moreover, it/she

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<sup>112</sup> See De Guevara (1560/2016).

approaches Fra Giovanni who is “confused by the night” and by the distinctive olfactory mark of this creature, “an intense odour of basil, so strong it gave [Angelico] a sort of heady feeling”. The ambiguity already of the gender of the dragonfly – an alien creature – and the superimposition of the friar’s former lover Nerina onto it dramatically intensifies as the nocturnal scene (and the accompanying eerie atmosphere of a full moon) reveals the friar not only in his present as a clergyman, but also in his past as a layman – whose name was Guidolino. While this scene does not have evident sexual references, its lingering ambiguity magnifies the promiscuous gender of the insectlike creature, whose body closely reminds one of Bosch’s devilish creatures.

To complete my analysis, I shall now conjure up an intertextual superimposition. Bosch’s painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* plays a pivotal role in Tabucchi’s *Requiem* (1992) as it symbolises guilt, namely contained in the detail – the *morceau choisi* by the Copyist in *Requiem* – of the flying fish, and of remorse, which manifests itself somatically through the Herpes Zoster virus. By extension, these literary themes symbolise the author’s (Antonio Tabucchi’s) guilt and remorse. Whereas this guilt and remorse have to do with the mysterious figure of a woman in Tabucchi’s work (2013c),<sup>113</sup> where many hints are disseminated, it is never really defined in the fiction or autobiographically. In *Requiem*, the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Bosch stands out because of its thaumaturgic properties: those afflicted by skin diseases – in particular the so-called St. Anthony’s Fire, or herpes zoster – used to invoke the intercession of Saint Anthony through the painting that used to be at the Antonian Brothers’ Hospital in Lisbon. Remorse is metabolised as herpes zoster, ultimately, by means of “a unique and witty metaphor, among the pathogenic factors of infectious herpetic viruses”.<sup>114</sup>

Bosch’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* reminds Tabucchi’s main character in *Requiem* of his guilt; yet, this painting could cure the sick. Likewise, the dragonfly creature is disquietingly ambiguous in its genderlessness and hybrid aspects; yet, it demands a sacred task from Fra Giovanni: that he translate the creatures into painterly exegesis of an Annunciation, an Agony, and a Crucifixion. Thus, there is a Story (the Gospel) within another story (FC), a *mise en abyme* that stresses that the main narrative is deeply rooted in an interminable network of intertextual references, from Tabucchi’s own to Bosch’s to the Gospel.

The creatures themselves are *morceaux choisis* of Angelico’s paintings as he treats them as accessory elements to the divine *historia*, neither too close to nor too far from the *ergon* or

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<sup>113</sup> Tabucchi (2013c) represents the final ‘chapter’ of the author’s quest for appeasement with his past.

<sup>114</sup> My translation from Italian (Giusti 2004, 48).

*parergon* to be identified as either figure or ground. Their ekphrastic value spikes as Angelico gets ready to paint them. Two facts are relevant here: the *energeia* they liberate is unconventional, which is the cause of an ekphrastic anomaly. The first creature to find a place in Angelico's compositions is the "little round creature [...], tail elusive as a flame" (FC, 16) whose carefully chosen location is the painting of the twenty-third cell, where Angelico had painted the crucifixion of Christ a few days before. In the first ekphrasis, Tabucchi modifies Husserl's 'thickness' of time, the "thick now or living present". The little rolypoly creature contrasts with the colour of the background painted *verdaccio*, "a mixture of ochre, black and vermilion, since [Angelico] wanted this to be the colour of Mary's desperation as she points, petrified, at her crucified son" (FC, 16). In contrast, this creature fulfils a major role in the composition as a "divine being who, as instrument of the heavenly plan, consented to bang the nails into Christ's hands and feet" (FC, 16-17), thereby modifying the atmosphere as this would "lighten the virgin's grief and have her understand how her son's suffering was God's will" (FC, 16).

Tabucchi's description of the painting process recalls the clumsiness with which the creature a few days before had found itself in the lettuces, making it even more of an improbable example of classical ekphrasis<sup>115</sup>. The same process of addition to an already existing painting in the thirty-fourth cell is repeated for the dragonfly with Nerina's face. This time, the addition seems ancillary to the main story as the narrating voice affirms that "the painting looked finished, as if there were no more space to fill" (FC, 17). Nevertheless, Angelico "found a little corner above the trees to the right and there he painted the dragonfly with Nerina's face and the translucent golden wings. And in her hand he placed a chalice, so that she could offer it to Christ" (FC, 17).

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<sup>115</sup> "He thus took the creature into the cell, set him down on a stool, on his stomach so that he looked as though he were in flight, and painted him like that at the corners of the cross, placing a hammer in his right hand to drive in the nails" (FC, 17).

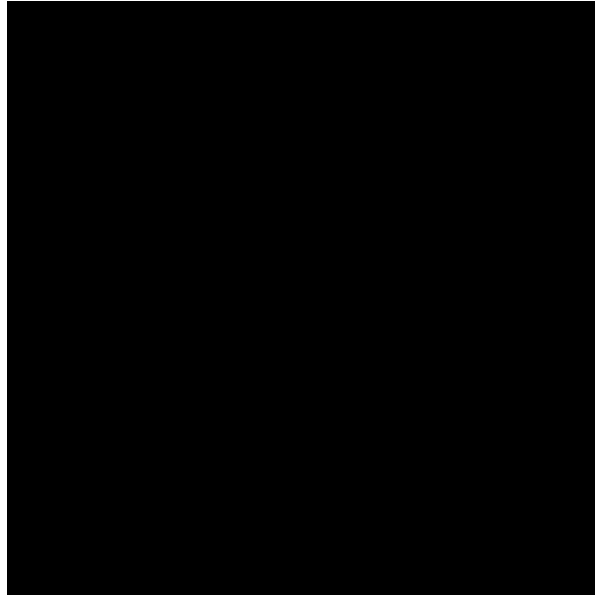


Figure 12. Fra Angelico and followers, *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint Dominic*, ca. 1438-1450, cell 23, Convent San Marco, Florence



Figure 13. Fra Angelico, *The Agony in the Garden*, ca. 1438-1450, cell 34, Convent San Marco, Florence.

The angel, whose lower body is roughly sketched, does indeed seem like a marginal entity of the composition. However, it is decidedly more in the *ergon* than the *parergon*, as the theme of the painting, the agony in the Garden, suggests – the lush green portion of the *Gethsemane* being in the upper left outskirts of the painting.

Our gaze moves from the *ergon* to the *parergon*, reversing the dynamics of figure and ground. Tabucchi's narrative as well as Angelico's exegesis deconstruct, by reversal and negation, foundational concepts such as before/now/after, and figure/ground: time and space as linear entities are disrupted. However, the postmodern attitude to restoring value to the margins is a sign that deconstruction, once carried out, helps advance understanding. The *parergon* becomes a sign of

[t]he self-protection of the work, of the *energeia* which only becomes *ergon* (because of) the *parergon*: [...] not opposed to the lack as a posable or opposable negativity, substantial void, or determinable and contained absence [...], but against the impossibility of fixing *différance* in its contour, of halting heterogeneity (*différance*) in place, of localizing, even in a metaempirical way, what metaphysics calls [...] lack [...]. Apparently opposed – or because opposed – these two bordering determinations of that against which the *parergon* works (the operation of free energy and pure productivity or the operation of the essential lack) are the *same* (metaphysics) (Derrida 1979, 39).

Derrida's *ergon* and *parergon*, Didi-Huberman's revisited concept of Panofskyan figure and ground, introduce the third ekphrasis. *The Agony in the Garden* has a thematic link to the next ekphrastic cameo, an Annunciation: the garden. Here in the fresco of Cell 34, the *amoenus locus par excellence* becomes a place for anguished prayer – Christ's agony. It does not contain the red blossoms that Angelico had scattered on the lawns of other works such as *Noli me tangere*, semiotic indexes of the Passion. Tabucchi has so far chosen two of Angelico's works, a crucifixion, and an agony. With the *Annunciation*, he brings his narration full circle.

Angelico gives a special place to the bird-like creature, the first to land in his vegetable garden. According to the story, he chose to paint it on “the wall in the corridor on the first floor, because he wanted a wide wall that could be seen from a good distance” (FC, 18). The attribution of intention may hold true for the imposing Annunciation in the North Corridor, which is the first picture seen by those climbing the stairs to the first floor.



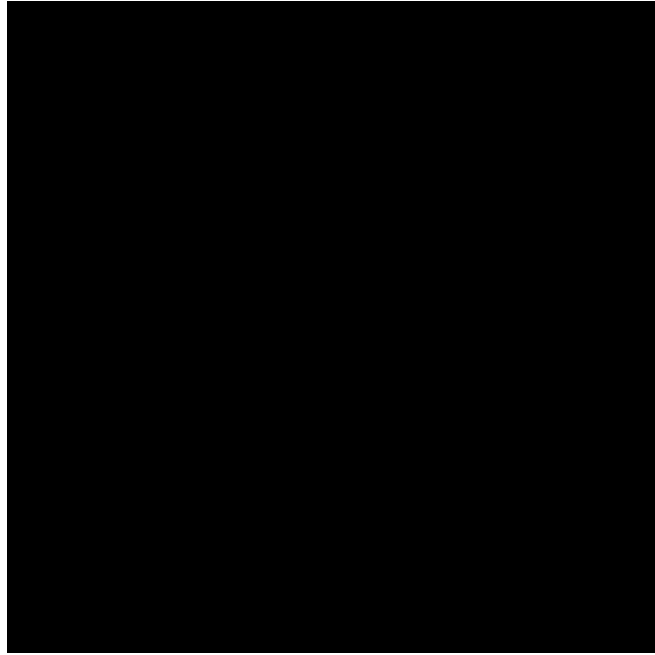


Figure 14. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 1438-1450, North Corridor, Convent San Marco, Florence

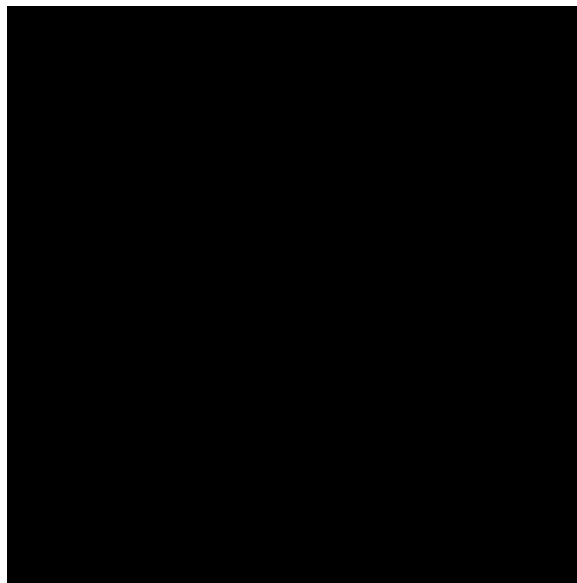


Figure 15. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 1438-1450, North Corridor, Convent San Marco, Florence

The last ekphrastic moment is not only relevant because of its position of *explicit* reconnecting in a circular movement with the *incipit* of the first sky-wrecked creature. This is the first occurrence in the story of a fresco Angelico paints impromptu:

First he painted a portico, with Corinthian columns and capitals, and then a glimpse of garden ending in palisade. Finally he arranged the creature in a genuflecting pose, leaning him against a bench to prevent him from falling over; he had him cross his hands on his breast in a gesture of reverence and said to him: “I’ll cover you with a pink tunic, because your body is too ugly. I’ll draw the Virgin tomorrow. You hang on this afternoon and then you can all go. I’m doing an Annunciation (FC, 18).

With the last of the three descriptions, it becomes clear how close Tabucchi’s strategic rendering of the creatures – the *grilli*, the sinister, the other, the unknown – is to Angelico’s dissemblant analogies. Each is the counterpart of the other: Angelico’s angels are the faithful translation of Scriptures just as his splatter techniques are the faithful ‘rendition’ of the Mystery; Tabucchi’s clumsy creatures are inspired by *muse zoppe* [lame muses], his a-theological writing finds substance in stories, “survivors of some whole that never was” (FC 12). They both displace and defer meaning, for what they want to express is not sayable in plain words. Tabucchi’s ekphrastic descriptions are faithful in replicating Angelico’s dissemblant techniques, while also remaining faithful to themselves in their a-theological grounding. Even displacement as a signature technique to highlight themes and symbols is matched in Tabucchi’s story.

Didi-Huberman argues that Angelico’s displacement of meaning through intertextual strategies is clear in the *Annunciation* where the flowers “are painted with a thick red, similar to blood”. This is directly linked to the flowers of the Passion, “trac[ing] something like a dotted line leading from the Fall – the flowers in the lost Eden – to the Incarnation, and from the Incarnation to the redemptive sacrifice: flowers of martyrdom” (Didi-Huberman 1995, 161). Nevertheless, the relation between the subjects of agony and annunciation are closely linked: in “a garden, the Christ-flower was born (*inventus*); in a garden, he sweated blood [...], then he suffered on the cross and was buried (*sepultus*) in a garden; finally, he rose from the dead forever, was reborn (*inventus*) under Mary Magdalene’s eyes (Didi-Huberman 1995, 163).

Similarly, Tabucchi’s dissemblant descriptions of the creatures that we ultimately identify as angels in Angelico’s frescoes resemble Bosch’s *grilli*. The distant connection, however,

treads a path of analogy. First, Tabucchi manages to speak of both the divine and the secular without having to resort to a fixed vocabulary and imagery, such as that of the Catholic faith. As a consequence, this story is not religious although it expresses a personal interpretation of the modern sublime. Interpreting the sublime by adapting it into his recurrent themes (the guilt, the quest, the play on appearance) makes it effectively undetectable in a ‘misty space’ of Magic Realism à la Tabucchi. However, this translation strategy based on theological analogy (Aquinas’ *via eminentiae*) may also disguise the reluctance to deal with religious issues in literature as well as, in general, in art history practice and criticism. After Neorealism, Tabucchi and other writers who did not identify as religious demonstrated a keen interest in spirituality and transcendence.<sup>116</sup>

The second outcome of this strategy reflects the ways in which the postmodern attitude to deferral and its acknowledgement of *différance* and trace wed exegetical practices rooted in negative theology and apophysis, as explained above with regards to medieval mystical experiences. The result is a postmodern negative (a)theological literary writing, which, in the specific case of Tabucchi, is simultaneously secular and transcendental. The metaphysics of presence so harshly critiqued by the philosophical tradition that began with Nietzsche and Heidegger returns between the lines of postmodern works as an unsolicited inheritance. Metaphysics always privileges one side of an irreducible dualism – the ‘positive’ side, presence over absence, centre over margins, figure over ground, *ergon* over *parergon*. When one examines this perfect symmetry, one can find the trace – Derrida’s *trace* – which is not a trace of the deconstructed dualism but one that undermines metaphysical certainties by bringing to the surface their intrinsic anomalies. Derrida considers the trace a key to uncovering metaphysical workings. The deconstruction of the text in terms of trace is often performed by individuating what Leo Spitzer has called deviation from the norm (*scarto dalla norma*, in Italian). The French word *écart* as well as the Italian equivalent (*scarto*) means both deviation and waste matter. In essence, *écart* is “a palindrome of ‘trace’, suggesting that the play of

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<sup>116</sup> See Klopp (2009, online), who also quotes Tabucchi’s interview with Gumpert: “Nei libri di Tabucchi queste regole [i dieci comandamenti che fondano le etiche laiche successive] sono alla base delle tante riflessioni di questo autore sulla presenza del male nel mondo, l’inevitabilità del rimorso (menzionato anche da Eco) e il senso di colpa che tutti sentono nei confronti di questo male, insieme alla necessità di trovare espiatione per aver fatto del male – se non in un contesto istituzionale, magari nel foro più laico e secolarizzato della letteratura. La disamina di coscienza, inoltre, che Tabucchi propone non si limita ai suoi personaggi o al suo io narrante, ma si estende con grande insistenza anche ai suoi lettori, nei quali l’autore vorrebbe stimolare una ‘inquietudine’ morale che li costringa a esaminare le loro coscienze a proposito dei problemi sollevati dalle sue narrazioni. “Di una sola cosa forse posso essere orgoglioso,” dice nella stessa intervista con Gumpert, “di non essere uno scrittore che placa le coscienze, perché credo che chiunque mi legga riceva per lo meno una piccola dose di inquietudine e chissà che un giorno questa inquietudine non finisca per germogliare e dare i propri frutti” (C. Gumpert 2001, 104)”.

paradox is always on even when not clearly noticeable or explainable: both these terms represent the archi-originary divide and its consequences”.<sup>117</sup> This paradox lies in the absence of an origin and the origin as an absence, which Derrida summarises as ‘archi-trace’ (Derrida 1997, 61).<sup>118</sup> For example, Derrida locates a dualism in the term ‘religion’, as its Latin etymology has often proved problematic. The dualism of *relegere/religare* (to gather, to harvest, to bring together/to tie, to bind) (Borradori 2003, 155) here encompasses both attitudes of Tabucchi’s FC: it cursorily gathers clues of metaphysical import (the invisibility of the creatures, their remote travels from the sky) and ties them at the heart of Tabucchi’s poetics, who, in the opening note of the collection, declares his inspiration from “lame muses” such as “hypochondria, insomnia, restlessness and yearning” (FC, vii-ix).<sup>119</sup>

#### 2.4.1 Ekphrasis as Differential Ontology in Fiction

What are, ultimately, the postmodern lessons to apply to the word-image relation? How can Derrida’s critique and his terminology apply to ekphrasis and intermedial translation? First of all, the ekphrastic moment in this short story is a balancing act between two attitudes, the grounding in metaphysics veiled by the halo of Magic Realism, with which the story is infused, and its un-grounding – the eerie discovery that appearances are unmatched, models not ideal or archetypal: or the postmodern fate. It could be argued that it is a balancing act between ontotheological and post-ontotheological creation, one that channels the difference between the two creative modes into intermedial and intersemiotic supplement, in Derrida’s terms. By

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<sup>117</sup> My translation from Boatto (2011, 141) “Significativamente “écart” (scarto), è un palindromo di ‘trace’ (traccia), quasi ad indicare che il gioco del paradosso è sempre all’ “opera anche laddove non è chiaramente visibile o esemplificabile: entrambi questi termini rappresentano la frattura archi-originaria e gli effetti che essa porta con sé”.

<sup>118</sup> “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme which would derive it from a presence or from an originary non-trace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace” (Derrida 1997, 61)

<sup>119</sup> More keywords to identify a deconstructionist literary mood: incompleteness (“a whole that never was”, “quasi-stories”, “larval nature”, “fragments of novel and stories”), uncertainty (“real or presumed emotions”, “I have the impression”, “many of them seem to wander”, FC, xii-ix).

achieving this balance, the ekphrastic distortion – or art historical pastiche of Angelico’s cherubs and Bosch’s *grilli* – operates as the force of *différance* against the metaphysics of presence.

The narration of the painting process is a prime example of ekphrasis unfolding as *différance*, which is Derrida’s formulation of differential ontology.<sup>120</sup> The import of differential ontology here translates into the postmodern rejection of classical mimesis: the ekphrastic moments transform the vividness (*energeia*) of pictorial memory into an act of pure creation that privileges difference and otherness within the visual and literary tradition to which it constantly refers. The ontological difference filters through the intermedial flux of semiotic meaning-making that subverts the *ut pictura poësis* canon by interrupting any rational – à la Panofsky – gaze at the picture. Standardised iconographic vocabulary does not apply here. Ekphrasis as *différance* also benefits from another trope, ellipsis, which Tabucchi frequently uses in his works.<sup>121</sup> Here the lack of details, the scarce communication (either in direct or indirect speech form) from the creatures sustains the atmosphere of extra-ordinary realism. Ellipsis prepares the grounds for an improbable ekphrasis by getting the reader used to *not* knowing (à la Gombrich), *not* identifying these beings with given recognisable entities. The differential being, as proposed in the last painting – the description of the artistic process of the *Annunciation* – stresses, by subtraction of identity, the role of ekphrasis as a rhetorical counterpart of Derridean *différance*.

The frescoes painted by Angelico become a dysmorphic lens that directs Tabucchi’s and the reader’s gaze onto peculiar details and necessarily diverts it from others. The ensuing movement, however, brings forth minuscule *parerga* instead of the grandiosity of the *erga*. The *marginalia* celebrated by postmodernism actively contribute to intertextual memory activation and to the displacement of ‘presence’ – the subtraction of Angelico’s archangels. By superimposition, FC brings about the onset of literary somatic *topoi*, such as guilt in the guise

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<sup>120</sup> In plain terms, differential ontology “understands the *identity* of any given thing as constituted on the basis of the ever-changing nexus of relations in which it is found, and thus, identity is a *secondary* determination, while *difference*, or the constitutive relations that make up identities, is primary”. What differential ontology does not conceive of is identity as a self-contained set of properties. This is true, instead, of “the essentialist tradition, in contrast to the tradition of differential ontology, [which] attempts to locate the identity of any given thing in some essential properties or self-contained identities, and it occupies, in one form or another, nearly all of the history of philosophy” (Cisney, n.d.). For a more in-depth account of the genesis of differential ontology, see De Beistegui (2004, especially 29-71).

<sup>121</sup> Iovinelli (2011): “Mi pare che non si possa trovare migliore definizione dell’uso dell’ellissi in Tabucchi, di questa sua arte di trasformare una storia in narrazione mediante le sequenze scelte e quelle escluse, quelle rappresentate e quelle non rappresentate. L’universo umano gli appare degno di essere raccontato anche nelle situazioni di minor spessore”.

of herpes zoster, and *grilli* as the pictorial counterpart of the writer's "lame muses". Abnormality and otherness are disquieting elements, as if they enabled one to sense the implications of *différance*. The multiple creatures evoked in FC cohabit the horizon of the reader – a well-versed *icononauta* (Brunetta 1997) – as inseparable entities, different and One: like Dante's or Goya's demons, are Bosch's *grilli*, Angelico's archangels, and Tabucchi's lame creatures, traces of an irretrievable whole, witnesses to the end of the metaphysics of presence and to the onset of *différance*.

*Différance* is difficult to pinpoint as it has no univocal definition. In itself, it is a neologism based on the French word 'différence'; however, the play on words is evident only when reading the written word, not when listening to or pronouncing it. *Différance*, as both difference and deferral (as in the Latin *differre*) is central to Derrida's critique of logocentrism, that is, the privileging of speech over writing endorsed by Saussurean linguistics, which, for Derrida, was already sanctioned in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Such logocentric predominance is also reasserted in the New Testament, where "the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians, 3:6). Writing, in its more generalised aspects, is a never-ending activity of deferring meaning through a network of signs, signalling a difference in time, space, circumstances, of the 'original' message. The very notion of 'original' for Derrida is flawed, as 'original' is given only through the filter of its trace.<sup>122</sup> Rather, he speaks of arche-writing, which is the archetypical divide at the base of human language, and beyond. Arche-writing, as Enwald explains, is

a general method of thinking and structuring of meaning, which also produces the contents of consciousness materialising in the form of dreams. Arche-writing can thus be interpreted as a kind of mental process and in particular as the structure of retentional trace and memory. In *La voix et le phénomène* Derrida describes 'a proto-writing' i.e. arche-writing 'at work at the origin of sense'. Just as 'the living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of retentional trace', the sense springs forth from the possibility of retentional trace (Enwald 2004, 145)<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Derrida (1997, 61): "The trace is not only disappearance of the origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin".

<sup>123</sup> Enwald refers to Derrida 1986 (312) and Derrida (1996).

For Derrida, “the critique of logocentrism is primarily the search for the ‘other’ and the ‘other of language’” (Derrida 1982, 123). The other that is constantly deferred in absence presupposes, however, a presence. Presence, in the theothanatological aftermath, can only be defective.

The ‘supplement’, another key term in Derridean critique, betokens a presence as much as it signals a lack:

The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techné*, image, representation, convention etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. [...] But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void (Derrida 1997, 144-145).

The mediation of representation possesses the quality of the supplement: the un-retrievable ‘original’ appears as the same shortcoming of any form of mimesis, always destined to betrayal and unfaithfulness. The supplement supplements; therefore, critics can debate only the trace of the arche-originary divide. Both writing and visual representation of an ‘original’ subject have to be understood as a supplementary presence indicating a lack, an absence.

However, if this is true, just as it was for Angelico’s field of exegesis, there is a *creatio* to this process that is part and parcel of both absence and surplus presence. The surplus presence that replaces the absence comes to the fore in manifold ways, certainly not by privileging any definite semiotic code or medium; these just fulfil a function as a result of *différance*. *Différance*, by deferral and subtraction, is the real sparkle of creation: it subtracts any divine meaning in the disquieting figure of the *grilli*, while at the same time underlying the ekphrastic moment of narrating (either verbally or visually) in absentia. *Différance* is the dissemblant analogy that simultaneously acts like the index of an absence and the creation of a new semiotic mode, a modified trace of the other that filters from an incommensurable distance in space and time. Dissembling, leaving traces behind, is *différance* striving to manifest itself as something that is not. Even better, Derrida suggested to use, in conjunction with *différance*, this form of the verb ‘to be’: ‘~~is~~’. This strategy of putting being ‘under erasure’ – originally proposed by Heidegger – translates as the being of *différance*, which can never be exposed by its very nature. *Différance* ‘~~is~~’ by repeating itself, and the only way it can repeat itself is by being iterable. Iterability implies the notion of repetition, another pivotal theme.

I shall bring this chapter to a close by considering the role that *différance* and difference play on the intermedial displacement of meaning and intersemiotic ways of worldmaking as shaped by postmodernism. Although the philosophical tradition examining difference (often in conjunction with repetition) would invite a broad monographic study on its applicability to interartistic discourse, I will focus on the historical outskirts of the debate. Both Derrida and, as per the title of his seminal book *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze, wrote about difference. However, Derrida's and Deleuze's respective concept diverge in the extreme. When Derrida speaks of difference as *différance*, he fundamentally speaks of absence and negativity – hence he is indebted to negative theology. On the contrary, when Deleuze speaks of difference, he conceives of a reality too complex to be accounted for, an 'excess' of Being that cannot be described in orderly structures as it cannot be reduced to a definite order. Derrida's *différance* is close to medieval mysticism and Aquinas' theory of eminence; Deleuze looks at immanence as understood in the tradition of univocity, from Duns Scotus to Spinoza to Nietzsche, with the result that

in Deleuze one finds an ontology that seeks to expunge from Being all remnants of transcendence, whereas in Derrida one finds an ontology that seeks to trace the eruptions and movements of transcendence within Being.

[...] Although Derrida refuses to assign any content to this transcendence, what he retains from the tradition is its formal structure. [...] Deleuze, for his part [...] is equally critical of both analogy and negative theology. [...] The reason is clear: the sole *raison d'être* of negative theology is to preserve transcendence (Smith D. 2003, 54-55).

The concept of transcendence qualifies Tabucchi's ekphrasis. His constant referencing and play on intertextuality is akin to Derrida's deferring of meaning. Every rhetorical artifice, in Tabucchi's work, is more or less closely linked to the dimension of the search. The quest that many of his characters undertake remains, more often than not, incomplete. The baffling sensation that many elliptical endings evoke (Iovinelli 2011)<sup>124</sup> implies a lack rather than an essence. The role of the parergon is quintessential: the ergon is always somehow deficient while

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<sup>124</sup> In relation to the function of ellipsis, and here specifically the elliptical ending of *Indian Nocturne*, Iovinelli stresses not only the lack of any certainty due to the lack of a real closure, but also it results in discrediting the main character – the hero of the quest: “[Il finale] non solo non arriva, ma nel momento in cui il testo si chiude rimette in gioco la figura del protagonista, cioè di colui che cercava la verità e che si perde”.



Tabucchi usually adds crucial details about the *ergon* in the *parergon*. This continuous postponement of a proper ‘closure’ to the story narrated could be read in Freudian terms. The author’s reticence would, at the same time, indicate the desire for and the impossibility of closure. The irreconcilability of desire grounds it in transcendence rather than immanence: “from Plato and Augustine to Hegel and Freud, desire has been defined, ontologically, as a function of a field of transcendence” (Smith D. 2003, 58).<sup>125</sup> According to this view, “desire thus presents us with a tragic vision of humanity: as humans, we are incomplete and riddled with deficiencies, and ontological desire is the sign of our incompleteness” (Smith D. 2003, 58).

The incompleteness of Tabucchi’s creatures, half bodies, or his lame muses, recalls the dynamics of desire. The Latin word for desire is *desiderium*, a word that reminds one, etymologically, that humankind is doomed to fall from above – in a Christian perspective, from the Garden of Eden – and the distance from the One (*de + sidera*, “drifting from the stars”). Desire as a transcendental form of experience is an aporia, a ‘double bind’ (Derrida 1998, 28-37), that is, our desire for the ‘absolute other’ can still be experienced without getting to know this entity (Derrida 1992, 29). The desire for the absolute other is intrinsic to the process of invention – a notion which earlier in the chapter I also referred to as artistic creation and exegetical *creatio*. In Derrida’s work, there is an equivalent notion to indicate this poietic activity. While Derrida (1995) mentions the ‘secret’ allegedly conveyed by literature, in Derrida 2007, he provides a complementary – but not exhaustive – analysis of what this secret may consist of. Secret as a concept is related to both meanings of *inventio* in Latin,

a concept [...] that retains both the singularity of an event (a genuine discovery or “*finding for the first time*”) and the possibility of its repetition or iterability (i.e., the possibility of its transmission and reactivation *in and for the future*).<sup>126</sup>

Inspired by the reading of Francis Ponge’s poem *Fable*, Derrida sets out to distinguish two kinds of invention in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. J. Hillis Miller described Derrida’s

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<sup>125</sup> “From Plato and Augustine to Hegel and Freud, desire has been defined, ontologically, as a function of a field of transcendence” (Smith D. 2003, 58).

<sup>126</sup> See Dika 2008. Iterability is, for Derrida, a pre-condition to any language. It is also an intrinsic property of literature, which provides valid samples of speech acts, in radical disagreement with Austin (1962) and Searle (1977, 198-208); see also Derrida (1977/1988).

distinction as “the invention that returns to the same and the invention that responds to a call from the wholly other” (Miller 2001, 68). The first kind is an “invention [that] amounts to the same, and it is always possible, as soon as it can receive a status and thereby be legitimized by an institution that then it becomes in its turn” (Derrida 1992a, 339). Ponge’s poem develops the latter, a form of invention that disrupts normal speech acts, or rather, goes “beyond speech acts” (Derrida 1992a, 318), as their value indefinitely oscillates between constative and performative. In this ‘beyond-ness’ lies the secret, the impossible of language and literature. Derrida’s speech act theory is here relevant as the ‘inventive’ function at play “does not discover the other through a performative utterance”; instead, the invention “allows the other to come”, but “by no means ‘makes’ it come” (Miller 2001, 69). The secret remains undisclosed although the impossible of the secret is exactly what these utterances “beyond speech acts” aim for:

The other is not the possible. One must say that the only possible invention would be of the impossible. But an invention of the impossible is impossible, the other would say. Certainly, but it is the only possibility: an invention must announce itself as an invention of that which would not appear possible, without which it does no more than make explicit a programme of possibles, within the economy of the same (Derrida translated in Hillis 2001, 69).

A speech act like this “cannot be invented except by way of the other, by way of the coming of the other who says ‘come’ and to which the response of another ‘come’ appears to be the sole invention that is desirable and worthy of interest” (Derrida translated in Hillis 2001, 70).

Another essential characteristic of the Other is its multiplicity. Other is always plural: “the call of the other is a call to come, and that happens in multiple voices” (Derrida translated in Hillis 2001, 70). For Miller, “multiplicity of voices is crucial” as “it forbids or forecloses the temptation to think of the other, the wholly other, as some Platonic ‘One’ (Hillis 2001, 70). For Derrida, “these voices speak, allow or make come” (Derrida 1995, 29) without the need of revealing the ‘secret’. Derrida notes

There is in literature, in the exemplary secret of literature, a chance of saying anything without touching upon the secret. When all hypotheses are permitted, groundless and ad infinitum, about the meaning of a text, or the final intentions of an author, whose person is no more represented than nonrepresented by a character or by a narrator, [...] when there is no longer even any sense in making decisions about some secret behind the surface of a textual manifestation (and it is this

situation which I call trace or text), when it is the call [*appel*] of this secret, however, which points back to the other or to something else, when it is this itself which keeps our passion aroused, and holds us to the other, then the secret impassions us (Derrida 1995, 29).

Desire, as referred to above, is triggered by the deferred secrecy of the wholly Other, whose distant echo is refracted in a multitude of voices. The split personality of early twentieth century literature (Schwarz Lausten 2005, 29-47; 88) shares its multiplicity with Tabucchi's soundscapes. Relevant examples come to mind: Pessoa and his heteronyms (literal *other* selves) as well as Bakhtin's polyphony, Pirandello's *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*. While Tabucchi's characters are, in many respects, an interpretation of Pessoa's heteronyms, they also live in fictions where the soundscapes are as varied as they are puzzling. For example, the short story *Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa* [Voices Brought by Something, Impossible to Say What], is now in the collection *L'Angelo nero* [1991, The Black Angel], "the first work by Tabucchi where the subject of narration demonstrates the ability to observe himself as other" (Francese 2006, 192). The split personality of Tabucchi's postmodernist poetics finds an allegory in *Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa* as the title refers to the narration's strategy. The narrator here embeds, in his stories, excerpts from conversations overheard in the streets (Schwarz Lausten 2005, 112): "who knows what you will come up with tonight [...] Everyone gave you a small piece, a tessera you picked up, selected, put in its own place, each to their very own, to create the mosaic you will look at with thirsty eyes [...], to create a matter that didn't exist and that now exists: your story" (my translation, Tabucchi 1993, 14). The voice is a volatile medium which incorporates alterity in Tabucchi's stories. As Derrida argues, "the call of the other is a call to come, and that happens only in multiple voices" (Derrida translated in Hillis 2001, 70).

Tabucchi's polyphony is reflected in his heteronymy. The ekphrastic temptations of Antonio Tabucchi become, in his novels, the temptations to sin of Bosch's Saint Anthony, of which a small *morceau choisi* symbolises guilt, a recurrent theme of Tabucchi. The reason for guilt, one of the motives for the narrating subjects to start their quest, is never fully developed, both fictionally and autobiographically: from his works we know that the character(s) Isabel/Magda is/are key for the sense of guilt experienced by the male character who undertakes the quests. The secret – the discovery, the aim of the investigations – is not fully disclosed, except for a few clues. The freedom of speech in literature translates, for Derrida, in the freedom

not to disclose, not to respond. Writing is fuelled, however, by desire. The desire to fully disclose is, in Freudian terms, always castrated, as full disclosure is itself impossible.

The problem of the other and of the self, and the continuous shifting between these focal points, creates a bedazzling confusion as if Tabucchi's characters were escaping themselves. For Derrida, however, identity requires repetition, for Derrida: the concept of iterability, as discussed above. A repetition is not identical to what it repeats as it is subject to different 'economical' forces.<sup>127</sup> For postmodernism, it is only by desire that one may evoke the wholly Other, and this is channelled into many forms, including writing, which

as well as general economy, describes the ruptures that belong to the presence and the closure of metaphysics. Neither writing nor general economy describe the 'unknowledge', that is, 'the loss of meaning', because it [is] unknowable. [...] Thus, the economic character of *différance* is conceived as a play in which whoever loses wins: the loss of meaning, death and expenditure without reserve are the conditions for the possibility of new meaning, representation and dissemination. Hence Derrida claims that *différance* maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternatives presence and absence (Enwald 2004, 106).

In light of what has been discussed so far, what Tabucchi *necessarily* misconstrues is the ontotheological framework where Fra Angelico's works thrived. What exceeds the alternatives of presence and absence – the age-old lineage of immanence and transcendence – is an act of creation, an act of supplementation which originates in *différance*. The supplemented value is both at once a sign of an absence which hints at a presence (the archi-originary divide of Being from beings) and a presence that does not need to point to its origin. Literature allows for 'irresponsibility' as long as it is guaranteed by democracy.<sup>128</sup> The freedom of speech allows for the right to not respond: thus, a literary text is not bound to disclose or explain itself. The ekphrastic difference – resulting in the sum of the palindromes *écart* and *trace* – mediates the absent structure of an exchange (such as the absence of an immediate act of interpretation and

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<sup>127</sup> Economy here refers to the psychoanalytic category of psychic economy, the regulating force of the incessant interplay of death-Eros impulses. Enwald clarifies that "representations, images, observations and memories are not stable and ideal entities but, like economy, lie within the continuous process between consumption and income, Enwald (2004, 107).

<sup>128</sup> "[T]h[e] *authorization to say everything paradoxically* makes the author an author who is not responsible to anyone, not even to himself [...]. This authorization to say anything [...] acknowledges a right to absolute nonresponse" (Derrida 1995, 28).

the naturally deferred nature of the interpretant, in Peirce) and the surplus of the sign (what we cannot see and what cannot be disclosed, the secret that impassions us – the readers).

While the cohabitation of absence and presence may generate objections from a philosophical point of view, this nuanced perspective offers a wide array of complementary notions to define intermedial exchanges in the context of the old media. Krauss' notion of 'differential specificity' is a correspondent concept in the theory of media that closely matches Derridean difference applied to intermedial exchanges: "the specificity of mediums, even modernist ones, must be understood as differential, self-differing, and thus layering conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support" (Krauss 2000, 53).

The differential specificity of intermediality and multimodality can be articulated further. The concept of virtuality – the being there/not-being there exemplified by the progress of new technologies – is applicable to the old media as well and recalls what earlier I defined as the *hyphos*. Fra Angelico's intermedial quotation is virtually present in Tabucchi's *Flying Creatures*. The surplus of presence and its necessary counterpart – absence – are part of a dynamic process of creation, remediation, and interpretation of signs.

The notion of medium-specificity as embraced by Lessing and later by Greenberg, has been dismantled by the overcoming of boundaries that Derrida's critique has described. Rosalind Krauss is right in attributing to him, ante Mitchell, the merit of having identified the non-purity of any aesthetic experience:

From the theory of grammatology to that of the parergon, Jacques Derrida built demonstration after demonstration to show that the idea of an interior set apart from, or uncontaminated by, an exterior was a chimera [...]. That nothing could be constituted as pure interiority or self-identity, that this purity was always already invaded by an outside, indeed, was the argument to scuttle the supposed autonomy of the aesthetic experience, of the possible purity of an artistic medium (Krauss 2000, 32).

Ultimately, one can look at the exchange between Tabucchi's creatures and Angelico's holy cherubs as a double variation, that is, as a faithful variation at a distance, an independent development which has indeed attained another and contrasting character, an a-theological one. The 'double variation' of the title of this chapter is a metaphor for the never-ending differing repetition which highlights the balancing force of *différance*-driven ekphrasis:

each of [the] elements follows on with exemplary logic from its predecessors; each forms part of a careful tonal argument setting out the key relations that will be important in the movement as a whole, and each continues the emphatic gesture that sets them all in motion. And yet each is capable of independent development, through which to attain another and contrasting character (Scruton 2009, 105).

## Chapter 3

### **Dino Buzzati: the Multimodal Artist, the Iconotext, and the Ex Voto as Intermedial Practice**

Following a thematic rather than a chronological order and proceeding from word-based discourses towards a more balanced ratio of verbal and visual, I have so far introduced the often difficult relation between words and images through the trope of ekphrasis. This has allowed me to discuss the history of, and biases on, both the visual and the verbal. Here, I set out to study the intersection of images and words on the same medium – the iconotext – and the coexistence of artistic talents in the same person. The iconotext requires a higher degree of visual literacy and thus realises a more balanced approach to the visual component, which coexist with verbal.

This chapter examines indeed a different degree of the visual-and-verbal relation, that is, the word-image from a multimodal perspective. The multimodal aspect of the word-image relation presupposes not only visual literacy but also interpretive frameworks that can shed light on the mutual significations of word and image mingled to varying degrees. Not only will this chapter take into account composite works in which images and words contribute to create meaning by being both present on the designated medium; it will also examine those cases where the same person creates both texts and images. This is known to be a case of double talent, for which I will adopt the German *Doppelbegabung*, as in German art-historical and literary studies this notion found its first theoretical applications. Although that of the multi-talented artist is not a new figure, the interartistic experiments during Romanticism and beyond (William Blake, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, David Herbert Lawrence, Oskar Kokoschka, Ernst Barlach, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinski, Oskar Schlemmer, etc.) – many of them on the wake of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* – have encouraged further study on the phenomenon of double and multi-talent in the arts. Böttcher and Mittenzwei claim that almost the entire generation of writers during the Romantic period can be defined as double talented (Böttcher and Mittenzwei 1980, 6).

From the point of view of multimodality, the interaction of talents corresponds to the interaction of the artist's creativity across modalities. I shall examine the interartistic discourse

enacted by the practice of *Doppelbegabung*, in particular in the production of multimodal artefacts (different modalities on the same medium). I shall focus on Dino Buzzati (1906-1972), who worked across different modalities (predominantly painting and writing). His contribution to the hybridization of genres is exemplary as he pioneered the verbo-visual revolution which started with picturebooks and comics. The hybridization of literary works with the visual have emphasised “the cleft between reality and its representation” (Ljungberg 2012, 3). This explains the attention to issues of materiality and mediality,<sup>129</sup> which are paramount to analyse

the shift in focus [that] addresses matters of spatiality such as borderlands and interfaces; it explores how cultures create and transgress boundaries between outside and inside, between subject and object, between reality and virtuality, and between humans and technology (Ljungberg 2012, 3).

This is why a descriptive analysis of the production of hybrid texts is the first methodological step to explore the material surfaces of existence of images and words on and across different media. The potentialities of multi-modal in(ter)ferences have gained weight dramatically over the last few decades in academic circles.

In multimodal artworks, the visual component is analysed following Peirce’s semiotics: not only does the visual represent by way of similarity; the ‘Firstness’ (likeness) of Peircean icons always points to something else, as in the case of the *ex votos*, a fictional example of which is *I miracoli di Val Morel* by Dino Buzzati (1971/2012, henceforth VM). Furthermore, the specificity of multimodal artworks resides in the suspension between and across medial thresholds. The iconotext here exemplifies the field of investigation of multimodality. The sign creation of multimodal artworks not only relies on the ability to interpret signs from different sign systems combined together; it also requires that the interpretation process be challenged by the dialogic and polyphonic nature of the work. Dino Buzzati’s VM demonstrates this tendency to dialogic, polyphonic, and essentially abductive creation.

Last, I shall engage in the discussion of how a multimodal work also reframes intermediality from a different angle. Yves Klein’s votive work to Saint Rita and Buzzati’s fictional collection of *voto*, likewise offered to Saint Rita, present mutual sources and

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<sup>129</sup> Ljungberg refers in this regard to Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer (1994). See also Jäger, Linz, Schneider (2010).



characteristics that encourage us to look at multimodality as a catalyst of intermediality in the *hyphos* of all possible relations.

### 3.1 Perspectives on Double (and Multi) Talents; on Similarity and Otherness

The evolution of ekphrasis reveals a great deal about the attention accorded to inter-art studies. These have created more flexible definitions and frameworks within the landscape of multimodality and intermediality,

which address[es] not only formal stylistic, and aesthetic aspects, but also technological, and cultural questions [that is] the specifically historical context of certain media texts, as well as their relationship to larger culture with special places in its system for different media, and their connection to power relations on other textual terrains (Süss 2012, 179).

The topic of the *Doppelbegabung* addresses the aspects outlined above. This analysis will also clarify why many double- and multi-talented artists have been acclaimed for the talent expressed in only one art (or one modality). For instance, when one of the talents an artist may have is not recognised as artistic, then scholars tend to refer to the artist not as having a *Doppelbegabung*, but rather as *Doppelbetätigung* (carrying out multiple creative activities) (Hooper 1987, 9). By analysing the aspects above, the field of my investigation extends to cases where criticism overlooked multimodality in favour of a single artistic modality. Thus, Dino Buzzati's example is very relevant as he was both an acclaimed writer and a less well-received painter. The relevance accorded to Buzzati as a writer rather than as a painter not only lies in an iconophobic tendency in literary criticism (especially during the Linguistic Turn) but also in the exclusion of multimodal art from the domain of what was considered art.

There are objections to the legitimacy of studying the interrelatedness of intermedial works produced by the same person, in that each discipline would require a different methodology; other contentions are based on claims of the autonomy of the pictorial.<sup>1</sup> Hooper points out other

biases affecting *Doppelbegabung* studies: if one takes the artist rather than the work as the starting point of one's research, important aspects can be missed if focussing exclusively on the psychology of the creative process,<sup>1</sup> on the cultural 'climate' producing the manifold talent (e.g. interartistic friendships), on finding parallels by way of metaphor bringing together two semiospheres that cannot share the same terminology, i.e. the same underlying operating principles. Hooper maintains that it is unrealistic to weigh the respective features in two different semiotic domains, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Like others, Hooper turns instead to the Peircean approach to describe cognitive processes within which one can frame "an understanding of the process that allows one to think in terms of relations in the context of sign systems." (Hooper 1998, 50). To understand the phenomenon of *Doppelbegabung* Hooper acknowledges that

relational thinking lies at the heart of attempts to outline stylistic similarities among works of differing media, wherein identity is seen to derive from the 'deeper common structure' that governs more than one phenomena (Hooper 1987, 80).

Similarly, he notes, the aim of studying the phenomena of double- and multi-talents is

to identify those signs, to trace a system of signification rules which allow these signs to acquire meaning, and to interpret relationally these signs and signification rules by means of abductive reasoning.<sup>130</sup>

Peirce's concept of signs provides a valuable framework in which hybrid art forms can be framed for a better understanding of their meaning-making process. For example, taking into consideration the definition of hypoicons, diagrammatic relations can be used to provide an additional perspective to the study of crossing semiospheres as is the case in the *ex voto*

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<sup>130</sup> Where abduction "is a method of forming a general prediction without any positive assurance that it will succeed", C. S. Peirce in Hooper (1987, 86).

mentioned later on in this chapter. The canonical definitions given by Peirce<sup>131</sup> are the following:

a sign may be iconic, that is, may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being. If a substantive be wanted, an iconic representamen may be termed a hypoicon. Any material image, as a painting, is largely conventional in its mode of representation; but in itself, without legend or label it may be called a hypoicon (Peirce CP, 2.276).

Hypoicons may be roughly divided according to the mode of Firstness of which they partake. Those which partake of simple qualities, or First Firstnesses, are *images*; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are *diagrams*; those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors* (Peirce CP, 2.277).

At the same time, signs cannot be pure Firstness (icons), Secondness (indices or indexes), or Thirdness (symbols), but “we have to use a mixture of likenesses, indices, and symbols. We cannot dispense with any of them” (Peirce CP, 2.281, 2.285, 2.297-2.302) also, “one sign frequently involves all three modes of representation; and if the iconic element is altogether predominant in a sign, it will answer most purposes to call it an icon” (Peirce MS 491, 3). This description of signs applies, for instance, to the painting discussed in Chapter 1, *Marat Assassiné*, which transcends the mere status of likeness (Marat’s death) in light of “a series of interpretants that translate one and the same painting into different levels of meaning, so that finally more than the depiction of a male corpse lying in water may be perceived” (Arnold 2011, 11).

For Peirce, diagrams are also closely linked to relational thinking, that is, human thought is deployed through mental diagrams that are “moving images of thought” (Peirce CP 4.8).<sup>132</sup> According to Peirce, “many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists” (Peirce CP, 2.282). Also, “a *diagram* is an *icon* or schematic image embodying the meaning of a general predicate; and from the observation of this *icon* we are supposed to construct a new general predicate.”

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<sup>131</sup> When quoting from Peirce’s *Collected Papers*, it is standard to abbreviate them as CP, followed by the volume and paragraph numbers.

<sup>132</sup> Aristotle suggested that thinking is iconic: “the soul never thinks without an image”, *De Anima* (III, 7, 431 a-b).

(Peirce, NEM 238). This is exemplified by the following comparison: “the consistency of resemblance between map [the diagram] and territory [the object] lies not with cause but rather in the event of their overlaying – an asignifying semiosis of relays between difference and resonance that generates a new relational plane of consistency” (Munster 2013, 25). The issue of iconicity in language and thought and the relation between similarity and the image have long been discussed from different perspectives – besides Peirce, among others, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>133</sup> These were the premises concerning the nature of icons and diagrams as a subcategory of icons.

Moreover, I agree that “the concepts of image and similarity [...] are regulated by the logic of identity or of otherness” (Petrilli 2014, 94). With regard to this, Peirce introduced the distinction between “assemblative logic” and “elective similarity”. The following sections will deal with both these aspects, as

iconicity plays a fundamental role in artistic discourse [...]. The artistic vision reveals the iconic dimension of signifying processes, of the indirect word, of singularity as theorized by Husserl, of absolute otherness as theorized by Levinas and by Bakhtin (Petrilli 2014, 95).

An additional reading of the relation of image and similarity is the parallel distinction made by Luciano Ponzio between the logic of figuration (image-icon) and the logic of representation (image-idol), the former expressed in terms of depiction, the latter in terms of representation, identification and repetition (Petrilli 2014, 95)<sup>134</sup> By way of this qualification, we appreciate that

the question of iconicity is connected with the search for the invisible in the visible, with depicting the invisible, the unsaid or the implied. As firstness, iconicity in figuration (image-icon) transcends the image associated with representation, with the logic of adjustment to the object, the image based on the logic of identity (image-idol). Instead, iconicity in relation to depiction tells of the relation of asymmetry, incommensurability between the visible and the invisible; the tendency to transcend objectifying thought and the boundaries of the subject as established by the monologism of representation and official ideology. Firstness, iconicity, the image-icon (whether verbal or nonverbal) favour the capacity to reorganise worldviews thanks to their capacity for distancing from

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<sup>133</sup> See Wittgenstein (1922/1961); Merleau-Ponty (1968); Levinas (1960/1994); Husserl (1980).

<sup>134</sup> See also Ponzio L. (2000; 2012); Petrilli and Ponzio. (2012).

the known, the given, the world-as-it-is, ontological being. The sign most open to the logic of otherness and dialogism, the sign most capable of depiction beyond the boundaries of identity and the logic of representation is the icon (Petrilli 2014, 95-96).

What I undertake in the next sections is an analysis of the diagrammatical relations that exist between different semiospheres (otherness in themselves and between themselves) whose element of resonance (similarity) is given, in the case studies selected, by the consistency of being created by the same author.

Dino Buzzati's relation with otherness and dialogicity presents multimodality as an intrinsically abductive meaning creating process. In particular, Buzzati's fictional *ex votos*, a case of complex iconotextual narrative, offer a diagrammatic interpretation (of the relation of the parts) of the *ex votos* as composite whole. From the analysis of the parts, an additional interpretation originates (in this case, Peirce's "construction of a new predicate"). Multimodality questions image as an entity both similar and dissimilar. We can indeed refer to the opacity of the image in two ways: first, as being referentially opaque, that is referring to something other than its referent; second, as another kind of 'opacity', that of being 'translucent', speaking in Quine's terminology (Quine 1960/2015). Although not fully acknowledged by Quine,<sup>135</sup> the slippage of meaning due to the opacity of the mediating sign provides an initial frame to the problem posited by *ex votos* as examined in the next sections. The idea of the opacity of the image was proposed in a similar context by Levinas – as noted by Petrilli (2014, 97-98) – who, like Peirce, believes that the image (the icon), does not exhaust reference within itself, since

In what does an image differ from a symbol, a sign, or a word? By the very way it refers to its object: resemblance. But that supposes that thought stops on the image itself; it consequently supposes a certain opacity of the image. A sign, for its part, is pure transparency, nowise counting for itself. Must we then come back to taking the image as an independent reality which resembles the original? No, but on condition that we take resemblance not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image. Reality

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<sup>135</sup> "In a referentially transparent context, the words are associated with their normal referents, and nothing else matters about their meaning there. In referentially opaque contexts, on the other hand, the words are associated with something else entirely (on the view which Quine favours, they're associated just with *themselves*, rather than anything else in the world). What he can't allow is the possibility of referentially *translucent* contexts, since these would be contexts in which words are still associated with the usual things in the world, but there is more to their meaning here than which things in the world they're associated with" (Morris 2007).

would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image. Being is not only itself, it escapes itself (Levinas 1948/1989, 135).

The relation of image and word can be elusive, as if one of the two terms of the equation keeps changing its intrinsic value(s). Therefore, from this perspective the image-word relation, in light of the role of the image, becomes at least ‘not transparent’. There are multiple ways to read the non-transparency of this relation.

### 3.2 Painter Writer, Writer Painter. A Case Study in Doppelbegabung: Dino Buzzati

“He was made of that impalpable substance that is commonly called *illusion* — even if it is real.”  
— Dino Buzzati<sup>136</sup>

Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) is often compared to Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), the former having played the same role in literature that the founder of the Italian metaphysic school had for painting.<sup>137</sup> Buzzati’s double talent is also similar to that of Alberto Savinio (1891-1952), Giorgio de Chirico’s brother. All these three prominent figures in the Italian cultural and artistic scene shared an interest in Magic Realism, the fantastic, Surrealism, and Metaphysics. Giorgio de Chirico was the maestro of metaphysical painting and its atmospheres could very well host Buzzati’s narrative accounts of Magic Realism and appear to have inspired the settings of Buzzati’s paintings.

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<sup>136</sup> Lawrence Venuti’s translation (Buzzati 1983, 122) of *Il Babau* [The Bogeyman] in Buzzati (2006): “Era fatto di quell’impalpabile sostanza che volgarmente si chiama favola o illusione: anche se vero”.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, the magazine *New York*, August 1983: “Like that metaphysical painter, who saw the world as an enigma, Buzzati had a philosophical imagination. Human life, observed with irony and scepticism, seemed to him to be at best a kind of poetic nonsense, and at worst a nightmare of anxieties”. See also Billiani and Sulis (2007).

The fantastic mode in Italy appeared in fluid forms and consequently is found in several genres.<sup>138</sup> Fantastic painting and writing engage with themes in a way that cannot be defined anti-mimetic, but neither realistic: for instance, the theme of the double, the reflected image, allegorical representation through the use of fantastic reveries, are present in Buzzati's entire production. The fantastic mode<sup>139</sup> manifests itself differently in Buzzati's and Savinio's cosmos: a line must be drawn when it comes to the mood. The fantastic mode is euphoric, cheerful at times, in Savinio, perhaps reminiscent of the classical, Greek irony, in the guise of dissimulation – a graceful *mise en scène* of the hardest feelings. On the contrary, in Buzzati the sombre atmospheres mirror a dysphoric *Weltanschauung*. The negative approach of Buzzati's fantastic reaches high levels of abductive meaning creation: its dialogic nature and openness to otherness make it an ideal candidate to discuss multimodality via the iconotext.

According to Calvino (1993, 103), “pensare per immagini” was the quintessential quality of a writer who aimed to make a literary world vividly visible. Buzzati's imagination achieved exactly that, delving deeper into that type of visual thinking, illustrating his worlds not just by the vivid re-presentation of the written sign but literally, through his drawings, illustrations, and paintings. The visual and the verbal mix on a number of occasions: *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio* (1935), *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* (1945), *Il libro delle pipe* (1945), *Le storie dipinte* (1958), *Il colombre* (1966), *Poema a fumetti* (1969), *I miracoli di Val Morel* (1971).

In the discussion of the *Doppelbegabung* as a multimodal creator, I will discuss how words and images cohabited Buzzati's imagination from childhood. In this regard, scholars have usually proposed *Lettere a Brambilla* [*Letters to Brambilla*]<sup>140</sup> as an example of Buzzati's reasons for this resilient inclination. Many clues lie in the personal correspondence between the two friends directly pointing at painting and multimodality as an imprinting during Buzzati's childhood. Drawing from Laganà Gion's previous research,<sup>141</sup> Polcini (2014) offers one of the most recent contributions that illustrates Buzzati's intertextual and intermedial attitudes with a refreshed critical perspective. Besides tracing the genealogy of Buzzati's disposition for the

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<sup>138</sup> See Lazzarin (2004).

<sup>139</sup> A distinction of mode/genre is sometimes made: for example, Buzzati and Savinio are sometimes ascribed both to the fantastic mode (Brand and Pertile 1999, 523), at other times Savinio is described as remaining in a “decidedly Surrealist area (Biasin 2001, 151).

<sup>140</sup> Buzzati (1985).

<sup>141</sup> Laganà Gion has extensively focussed on the relations of words and images in Buzzati, adopting a pioneering approach to the study of the intermediality of his works. See, for example, Laganà Gion (1981).

fantastic mode, Polcini also points out that the correspondence with Brambilla – especially in the form of commentary, reproductions and illustrations – has the merit of

provid[ing] great insight into the process of Buzzati's later intermedial translation. If in the letters Buzzati verbally describes the pictures he is looking at, in his novels and short stories this sort of interartistic description functions as a narrative technique (Polcini 2014, 43).

One of the intertextual sources returned to quite often – or which influenced him to an extent that they were assimilated into his pictorial memory – are Arthur Rackham's illustrations (Polcini 2014, 40-72). Polcini remarks that

many passages from his works are so directly evocative of Rackham's visual world, that they can be said to be descriptions of visual art decoded through literary language or, in short, examples of ekphrasis. However, Buzzati uses a special kind of ekphrasis, because pictorial memory is part of the process and therefore a lesser degree of authorial consciousness is involved. [...]

No intentional experimentation can be detected in Buzzati's uncontrived ekphrasis, yet it is undeniable that Rackham's imagery influenced Buzzati's fantastic writing, especially in the early stages of his career when he was inclined to follow his models more precisely (Polcini 2014, 44).

Buzzati's full deployment of core themes, motifs, and symbols arise from his own process of intermedial translation, from painting to writing and vice versa. Buzzati's work is interspersed with pictorial pre-texts, as Polcini shows. That makes it 'hypopictorial', in Louvel's terminology: Buzzati's work unearths the pictorial repressed of the text (Louvel 2011, 56-57).

Despite the critiques of being unoriginally 'Kafkaesque', Buzzati developed a vast repertoire of motifs, themes and symbols. He drew, of course, from a variety of intertextual sources, which help illuminate Buzzati's creative process. One of the ways in which the fantastic takes shape<sup>142</sup> is exemplified by the quote in epigraph to this section: "Era fatto di quell'impalpabile sostanza che volgarmente si chiama favola o illusione: anche se vero". This is in the finale of *Il Babau*. The quote is self-explanatory, uncovering Buzzati's *fanciullismo*

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<sup>142</sup> The four categories include: irony and parody, nostalgia, fantastic as a repertoire, fantastic as allegory. See, Lazzarin (2008, 25-31; 33-47).



and the positive energy that he associates with imagination (allegorised as *Il Babau*), and childhood, a great part of which he spent drawing and fantasizing about “North European and American classics, around which Rackham produced fantastic and eerie images that are now part of Western collective imagination” (Polcini 2014, 44). The aversion to the stereotypical traits adulthood imposes is more or less explicit in a few of Buzzati’s statements released at different times, a feeling that can be deciphered as ‘nostalgia’. ‘Nostalgia’, is also one of the categories listed by Lazzarin to describe Buzzati’s Mannerism in the fantastic mode of writing. Nostalgia is thematised, for instance, in *L’uccisione del drago*, *Il Babau*, *Era proibito*, as a response to the impracticability of the traditional fantastic: “al giorno d’oggi, ci dicono queste storie, il fantastico non è più ammissibile”: il drago e il Babau sono stati uccisi, la poesia è stata vietata in nome della produttività” (Lazzarin 2008, 26).<sup>143</sup> The notion of a Mannerist Buzzati – re-writing the fantastic mode on top of a tradition whose materials have ‘exhausted’ their potential – is key to understanding his intermedial and intermodal efforts. Nonetheless, the Mannerist definition does not charge Buzzati with the negative reputation of a writer who imitates but does not innovate; instead it opens up to the opportunity of positioning his work in a more appropriate context<sup>144</sup> through intersemiotic, inter-cultural, inter-discourse perspectives.<sup>145</sup>

Furthermore, Lazzarin warns that it is not possible to discern exactly the nostalgic and the modernist streams in fantastic literature: nostalgia and modernism are two modes, not genres; what is more, often the nostalgic and the modernist cohabit within the work by the same author (2008, 34). Buzzati’s acceptance of modernist elements is indeed very selective, if not conflictual: for example, technology is a recurring theme in his works. However, Buzzati does not equal Futurism’s enthusiasm for technological advancements, rather he employs technology as a sinister element, in surrealist and oneiric tones that contribute to the atmospheres of Magic Realism. Buzzati’s modernist inclination – surrealist and beyond – to incorporating heterogeneous elements in his work also proves fruitful for the word-image relation: as with

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<sup>143</sup> Buzzati complains that the modern world banned the fantastic, killed childhood creatures and, with them, ‘poetry’: all that matters is productivity.

<sup>144</sup> See Lazzarin (2008a). It is worth noting that such a Mannerist vein has been recognised in Tabucchi as well: a fact which confirms the legitimacy of and encourages researching the nature of and the reasons for blurring the boundaries of visual and verbal to varying degrees.

<sup>145</sup> The quote is from a specific contribution on Buzzati and English literature; however it is well suited to propose a frame of reference to study his entire work. See Giannetto (1998, 38-58).

modernism and nostalgia, Buzzati dares to intertwine two domains apparently incompatible – words and images as co-signifying modes in a literary work of art.

The nostalgia for the world of Buzzati's childhood indicates the paramount role the author attributed to imagination and creativity; it is 'nostalgia' in its etymological meaning, ("the pain of returning home") that translates as a longing for a bygone cultural milieu, experienced at the same time as awareness of the impossibility of its second coming. Buzzati's Mannerism consists in resuming the fantastic mode by mixing it with elements of modernism. An accurate picture in line with Lazzarin's classification links specifically this incitement to the re-use of fantasy core strategies and contents to a specific individual paradigm:

According to Buzzati, the loss of imagination is both the result of a natural process (growing-up makes human beings rational and pragmatics) and a social condition (there is no space for fantasy in a technology-dominated world). Especially through the adoption of intertextual strategies – such as intermedial translation, allusion, inversion of a genre's stereotypes, ironic treatment of the sources – Buzzati laments the lack of imaginative urge in contemporary society and at the same time he attempts a recovery of the fantastic imagery created by the authors he took as models (Polcini 2014, 2-3).

The role of nostalgia is in close relation to the expression "il coraggio della fantasia" coined by Buzzati scholar Nella Giannetto (1989). Polcini has already extrapolated three levels of this courage: to choose a genre against the tide of literature socially and politically *engagée* of Buzzati's time; to find an original voice through a skilful experimentation on the fantastic mode; the persistence in committing to the risky exploration of the literary and existential fantastic (Polcini 2014, 11).

As a consequence, the awareness of literature as pure fiction – Buzzati knowing exactly the subtle line between reality and fantasy, having served as a reporter for *Il Corriere della Sera* – also reflects on the visual counterpart created by Buzzati. Giannetto pointed out the interdependence of word and image throughout Buzzati's work while remarking that his habit of "pensare per immagini", as coined by Calvino, was developed through the practice of both writing and drawing during adolescence, as it appears from the correspondence with his friend Arturo Brambilla.<sup>146</sup> As an adult, after having received critical praise for *The Tartar Steppe*,

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<sup>146</sup> Giannetto (1998a, 585-602). Besides *Lettere a Brambilla*, mentioned above, another source to map the genesis of Buzzati's talents is Buzzati (1973).

Buzzati emphasised the higher consideration he had for his ‘primary’ vocation, painting. He expresses his views both in fiction and in his interviews. For example, he claims to be victim of a terrible misunderstanding: he claims to be a painter in the first place, who is also an amateur writer and journalist. Buzzati’s illustrious attempts to seek acknowledgement are frustrated, as in *L’equivoco*: Pablo Picasso, having already experienced the ostracism (“legge fatale”) of a double talent, warned him against this eclectic approach:

Se non vuole fare indigestione di veleno, smetta di fare il pittore. [...] Il mondo, intendo il suo mondo, piccolo o grande che sia, la prende in considerazione come scrittore. Fuori della letteratura, stia pur certo, non le è consentito di uscire. Può darsi anche che in questa rigida divisione in categorie sia utile, altrimenti chissà quante confusioni (Buzzati 1967).

Ironically, when Buzzati appeared on national television to be interviewed about his activity as a painter, the presenter referred to him as such only at the end of a long list: “l’autore di libri, il romanziere, il drammaturgo, il commediografo, il giornalista ed il pittore”.<sup>147</sup>

Not only in the publishing networks had Buzzati to face more or less covert mockery, but also in his closest circles.<sup>148</sup> An anecdote recounted by the son of Orio Vergani, the latter being Buzzati’s colleague (while also a competitor “double talent”)<sup>149</sup> at *Il Corriere della Sera* sheds light on the derogatory attitude toward Buzzati’s ‘second’ talent:

A ingoiare rospi, il pittore Buzzati dovette farci l’abitudine che era ancora un ragazzo. Aveva scritto *Barnabo delle montagne* e *Il segreto del bosco vecchio*: due romanzi brevi in un unico dattiloscritto che ai margini aveva illustrato con disegni e schizzi. Erano gli inizi degli anni Trenta. Un giorno, chiese un giudizio e, se possibile, un appoggio editoriale a un collega poco più adulto di lui ma già famoso. Il responso fu ad un tempo entusiasta e spietato: straordinari i due lungi racconti, ma ridicoli quei disegni che doveva assolutamente cestinare, eliminare se non voleva essere scambiato per Yambo, se non voleva che prendessero la sua narrativa alla stregua di “Ciuffettino”. Buzzati piegò il capo, ma considerò quel consiglio come un colpo basso, un insulto alla sua professionalità

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<sup>147</sup> “Book author, fiction writer, playwright [of comic and tragic plays], journalist and painter”, my translation. Buzzati appeared in a TV programme aired on 8 December 1962”.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comv7f2DGpw>

<sup>148</sup> Michael Nerlich (who coined the term ‘iconotext’ using it in the same way as here *passim*), both a writer and an artist, also laments that his theory is not taken seriously because it is not grounded in scientific discourse.

<sup>149</sup> Buzzati participated in collective exhibitions with Orio Vergani and Virgilio Lilli. See Viganò (2006, 252). Orio Vergani was also one of the few to review positively Buzzati’s first solo exhibit. See Buzzati (2013, 7).

artistica. Non lo dimenticò mai, quell' 'affronto', e bonariamente continuò a rimproverarne l'amico che oltretutto era afflitto dalla sua stessa malattia: scrittore, giornalista principe, si credeva migliore come pittore nel segreto delle sue ore alla tavolozza e al cavalletto. Quell'amico era mio padre. A testimoniare la pervicacia di quel 'rancore' c'è la dedica all' ultima edizione di Bärnabo verso la metà degli anni Cinquanta: "A Orio, il suo Yambo" (Vergani 1991).

The dismissive comparison with Yambo (pen name of Enrico Novelli) was perhaps serendipitous. Unbeknown to Orio Vergani, Buzzati's future work *Poema a fumetti* (1969) was to bring the narrative potential of the comic strips to an adult audience. Furthermore, Yambo, pen name of Enrico Novelli (son of the actor Ermete Novelli) had a *Doppelbegabung* in his own right, as he possessed an extraordinary versatility in the arts, being illustrator, writer, journalist, war reporter (like Buzzati), film director, and comic artist. Yambo and Buzzati also shared an interest in science fiction. Yambo's interest derived more from the echoes of nineteenth-century phantasmagorias than from Positivist, Futuristic instances:<sup>150</sup> this shows in his silent film *An Interplanetary Marriage* (1910), inspired by George Méliès' *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902). Likewise, Yambo's tales, such as *Dalla terra alle stelle* (1890), *Gli esploratori dell'infinito* (1906), and *La colonia lunare* (1908), deal with the theme of the unknown. Similarly, Buzzati pursued the unknown through the fantastic; his major attempt at science fiction, *Il grande ritratto* (1960), as well as his collected stories, like *Il disco si posò* witness his keen interest in exploring the unknown from a sci-fi angle (Buzzati 1968).

Despite the recommendations made by Orio Vergani to Buzzati to quit the painting brush, the following quote testifies to Buzzati's faith in the possibilities unleashed by the two orders, the visual and the verbal, and his ultimate scope: "Dipingere o scrivere per me sono la stessa cosa. Che dipinga o che scriva, io perseguo il medesimo scopo, che è quello di raccontare delle storie" (Buzzati 1967).

Another quote from Buzzati's work is helpful in understanding that his attitude toward painting and writing. The altercation in *Il lasciapassare*, the opening story of Buzzati 2013 (30-32)<sup>151</sup> is a poetics declaration. The guard forbids Buzzati's entrance to the city of painters, for he is a writer:

<sup>150</sup> Borrowing Adorno's imputation to Benjamin's study, phantasmagoria could be defined as "crossroads of magic and positivism", see Benjamin (2006, 101-102). See also Saglia (2016, 752-770); Clarke (2001).

<sup>151</sup> Here Buzzati outlines his synaesthetic attitude: "Si dà il caso che oggi io sia a due dimensioni. Le cose che mi vengono in mente sono larghe e sono lunghe, per di più colorate, e per esplicarle non c'è altro modo possibile che...".

“Ma...ma... – balbettò il tutore dell’ordine – questa non è pittura, ehm ehm. I valori tonali – qui la voce si fece sarcastica – dove sono? Questa è letteratura bella e buona [...] – Così dicendo si sarebbe detto, dall’espressione, che gli desse di volta lo stomaco”.

Buzzati considered images as another means of expression, in an era where the ‘purity’ of the media – especially the literary medium – was emphasised. Buzzati’s multimodal works have long been dismissed as children’s literature. Far from proposing the view of a naïve Buzzati, I will analyse the picturebook as a critical genre for Buzzati’s production. I argue that picturebooks are essentially multimodal texts (namely, iconotexts), and often intended for (at least) a dual readership. This discussion will lay the foundations of my analysis of the *ex voto*, which, in many aspects, can be considered a more elaborate version of Buzzati’s early picturebooks. These are, for instance, *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* (1945), *Il libro delle pipe* (1946), and *Le storie dipinte* (1958/2013).

### 3.3 Picturebooks Criticism in Buzzati’s Dual Works

As Buzzati’s main purpose is to narrate across modalities, he employs images and words in a number of ways. For instance, images can be involved to a greater or lesser extent (architectural ekphrasis in *The Tartar Steppe*). However, Buzzati’s picturebooks highlight how the word-image combination is pivotal to the meaning creating process. Picturebooks are complex works crossing and blurring the boundaries of genres. However, analysing picturebooks implies asking question about their readership as Buzzati’s picturebooks have been long dismissed as children’s literature or aimed at less engaged readings. Another issue in examining picturebooks by Buzzati is his critics’ opinion that his art is naïve. This opinion was never contested by Buzzati, who was instead overly self-conscious about his technical skills in painting (Buzzati 1967). Asserting Buzzati’s naivety in painting is too reductive of an artist who did or could not

choose a single modality for narration. In fact, Buzzati himself stated that, although lacking a mature technique, he had the impression to express something that others do not.<sup>152</sup>

The visual component in Buzzati's work cannot be read separately from what is considered literature, nor is it a paratextual apparatus. I object to verbocentric views investigating the linguistic qualities in Buzzati's paintings ("nei quadri di Buzzati è anzitutto chiara una disciplina linguistica") but I agree that "si realizza una sintesi ottica - letteraria".<sup>153</sup>

The newest trends in picturebook criticism acknowledge that a greater readership can be attracted by such works. At times, boundaries are deliberately blurred so that it is uncertain to what extent the author meant to involve one readership or the other. This confirms that a single-sided analysis is insufficient. As mentioned, studies in intermediality and multimodality represent a productive tool for tackling the issues of the rhetoric of identity versus alterity; in addition, picturebook criticism offers valid contributions touching upon a number of pivotal aspects (i.e. narratological issues in hybrid semiotic systems; authorship: individual vs. collaborative work; implied readership; verbo-visual devices that deepen the interpretive strategies laid out in the picturebook).

The issue regarding different versions of the term picturebook (hyphenated, 'picture-book'; two-word term, 'picture book'; or, as adopted here, a single word, 'picturebook') has already received accurate scholarly discussion.<sup>154</sup> The adopted term 'picturebook' stresses the focus on books functioning as symbiotic wholes of image and text to create meaning. Such distinctions are not redundant technicalities since they provide insights into different understandings, and likewise on different research scopes. Many critical interpretations of picturebook typologies have been made, a few of which refuse to demarcate the boundaries of the picturebook and illustrated books. All these contributions prove useful: they offer an account of the potential of multimodal creation as different combinations of words and images.<sup>155</sup> I share Nikolajeva and

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<sup>152</sup> From the already mentioned interview when he appeared in a TV programme aired on 8 December 1962: "avrei bisogno di lavorare molto per avere una tecnica che invece ancora non c'ho ma mi sembra di poter dire qualche cosa che altri non dicono" [I would need to practise a lot to master a technique that I still don't have but, it seems to me, I can express something that others do not.]. He answers positively the question "Qualche cosa di nuovo?" choosing the example of the potential of images in comics.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comv7f2DGpw>

<sup>153</sup> [Sic], Bruno Alfieri in Buzzati (1967, 7). Alfieri maintains that language pervades Buzzati's painting, thus creating a synthesis of visual and literary components. I agree that Buzzati often synthesises the two components but object to treating painting as subject to the linguistic element.

<sup>154</sup> See Arizpe and Styles (2003, 22); Lewis (2001, 68); Wolfenbarger and Lawrence Sipe (2007, 273-280); Gerrard (2008, 8-9).

<sup>155</sup> For example, Torben Gregersen, Kristin Hallberg, Perry Nodelman, Ulla Rhedin, Joanne Golden, cited by Nikolajeva and Scott (2006).

Scott's remark that an effective and synthetic way to define the word-image symbiosis has yet to be found:

None of the many ways of labelling the text-image interaction seems satisfactory to us: "duet" and "polysystemy", which Lawrence Sipe refers to, as well as his own suggestion, "synergy"; "imagetext", used by W. J. T. Mitchell; to name a few. While all these notions, like Hallberg's iconotext, capture the essence of picturebooks, they ignore the wide diversity of word-image relationship.<sup>156</sup>

While Nikolajeva and Scott aim to fill the gap in the classificatory effort made so far, my view is that the ontological resistance of word-image relations to being mapped will continue to leave room for epistemological research.

Moreover, the notion that the picturebook is a genre has been challenged: "rather than confining itself to exploring the byways of one particular type of text, verbal or pictorial, it exploits genres" (Lewis 2001, 65). This phenomenon was more recently defined as "crossover of genres" (Beckett 2012). The implication of these claims, it has been noted, leads to the cognizance of fluidity as its characteristic trait:

as a non-genre that transforms other genres, picture books offer great imaginative possibilities for young readers precisely because these readers do not yet have any expectations of what books are or should be (Nel 2002, 57).

Genres have become consistently more open to crosspollinations, thus breaking their normative statuses – a process that started with the innovations introduced by the avant-gardes. The epicentre of a 'genre revolution' encourages us to look at the borders of the picturebook as permeable, rather volatile. Therefore, the picturebook reveals itself as an incubator of the new:

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<sup>156</sup> Nikolajeva and Scott (2006, 8). The genesis of the term iconotext here is assigned to Hallberg (1982, 163-168). See also the term "interanimation" in Lewis (2001, 36).

Where does the picturebook end and the comic book, the artists' book or the graphic novel begin? [...] The picturebook has not only been the source of innovative experiments in genre blending, but it has contributed to the creation of new genres and sub-genres [...] including the "album-poème" (picturebook-poem) and the "album-théâtre" (picturebook-theatre). [...] some of Yvan Pommeaux have been designated "album-bandes-dessinées (picturebook-comics) and completely blur the boundaries between the two genres. Raymond Briggs's classic *Fungus the Bogeyman*, published in 1977, has been called a picturebook, a graphic novel, and a cartoon or comic strip book (Beckett 2012, 309, 311, 338 fn. 9-10).

The different terms proposed above indicate the different layers of complexity typically found in picturebooks, which are often overlooked by the general public "largely unaware of the sophistication and power of a genre that challenges and stimulates culture and society" (Beckett 2012, 316).

Another assumption challenged by picturebooks is that they are necessarily destined for a young readership. Jacqueline Rose questions the teleological end of children's fiction (including picturebooks) by negating its educational purpose (Rose J. 1984, 9). According to Rose, the children's world is unknowable to the adult who then tends to idealise and project the children's world back to a golden age. Beckett suggests that picturebooks are seen as less engaged readings as they are frequently labelled "all-ages-literature" (Beckett 2012, 3). Children's fiction as colonisation (Rose J. 1984, 2; Nodelman 2010, 231) – the desire for domination either by instilling values or to domesticate the children's primeval state – is also another critical analysis of this open genre. This aspect is not present in Buzzati's picturebooks, which show ante-litteram 'decolonising' elements (Truglio 2001).

For instance, scholarly readings of Buzzati's *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* [OiS] have highlighted that this work offers stylistic solutions that do not necessarily dovetail with the plural readings sprung from it. The graphics and the texts re-present children's narratives; yet, its style does not adhere to core values of children's literature: it aims, on the contrary, to 'decolonise' the realm of children's literature from the dominating discourse (the adult). Buzzati's decolonising attempt debunks traditional narrative schemes by adhering to the formal etiquette – style. Instead, what makes OiS a dissonant text in relation to the adult discourse in children's literature and with Italy's dominating discourse(s) of the time – among which, World War II and Nazi-fascism – is not a matter of style. According to Truglio, the narrative in OiS



redeploys but ultimately subverts three major strategies that are typical of children's literature generally and Italian children's literature in particular: the home/away binary, the heroic protagonist, and the didactic fable (Truglio 2001, 2-3).

I follow Truglio's interpretation (Truglio 2001, 4-5) which excludes any reading of intellectual escapism in *La famosa invasione*. When Buzzati explained the genesis of this picturebook in the interview released to Yves Panafieu, we discover that Buzzati originally intended this as a special kind of "silent picturebook" in progress, but accompanied by oral recounts by Dino himself to his nephews. The idea of the fable took shape first as a group of sketches to entertain his nephews, and only later did it become a symbiotic whole: "[T]he book came later, from the drawings. The text did not appear in the first instance. It was only written later, during the war. And the last drawings, I created them after the war".<sup>157</sup> This statement involves, in terms of "stylistic allusion" to a codified genre or mode, that the archetype is a children's story with the potential to accommodate new material: a fluid matter into an apparently fixed time-space. Not only is the reader engaged with a story narrated across two modalities and able to disclose more than one "meaning"; she is also challenged by the modalities in which meaning is constantly negotiated by what Truglio defines as "multi-valenced semiotic modes". Multi-valenced semiotic modes are explained in terms of the reading/seeing order the reader has to determine. To clarify, these strategies are not reader-friendly: in other words, not friendly to passive readers. Interpretation semiotics is a valid framework as these strategies are essentially dialogic and open to incorporate Otherness in the reader's experience. The use of conflicting images and text disrupting the reader's experience, forces her to be vigilant, to look out for discrepancies in meaning. Buzzati ambiguously endows the reader with higher interpretive responsibilities, those of uncovering the truth, lies, and opacities that can affect the hermeneutic process of the word-image relation.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the mirroring of image and word is mostly not meant to be crystalline in postmodern re-presentations. Truglio uses the example of the plate representing the bears' battle and its corresponding text (Buzzati 1963, 19): there is a metaphorical battle of image against word. Truglio remarks that the strategy to sabotage the interpretation based on a few subtle hints is very often alluded to in "overt reference[s] to the image jolt[ing] the reader out of the narrated world and back into the materiality of the book in a manner that would seem

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<sup>157</sup> "L'opera è nata dopo, dai disegni. Non è nato direttamente il testo. Questo è stato scritto solo dopo. Era durante la guerra. E gli ultimi disegni, li ho fatti subito dopo la guerra" (Buzzati 1973, 160; my translation).

to break the spell of the fantasy” (Truglio 2001, 15). Truglio refers to the episode in *OiS* where the Duke observes the battle through a telescope, whose lens has been manipulated: through the text we understand he is not seeing the facts taking place in reality (as illustrated in the plate). The illusion of a transparent vision, reinforced by the cinematic introduction of the lens as a naked-eye-like device, is dispelled through a conscious operation of meta-reflection both on the making of the work and on its genre as a whole (Truglio 2001, 15, fn, 33-34). As in cases of ekphrasis debunking the notion of art as pure imitation, the iconotextual strategies deployed in *OiS* participate in a paradigm that has been defined as “antropologia del falso” (Cometa 2010), a proper anthropology of counterfeit, imitation and disguise that connotes one of the most important trends in the often blurred fields of literature and the visual arts. According to Cometa, when such devices are at play, not only is at stake “the question of art as possible experience of truth [...] but also truth itself, which [...] can paradoxically be disclosed only through the complexity of deliberate strategies of counterfeiting” (Cometa 2010, 190). If in the example the category of disguise would apply more adequately – the truth is simply concealed by means of an altered telescope lens – the final effect is still that of counterfeiting reality (two contrasting versions are proposed).

I have provided some context for Buzzati’s reflection on multimodality<sup>158</sup> through the picturebook, which is a special kind of iconotext. In the next section, I turn to examine the iconotext as *ex voto*. The multimodal meaning creation required by the *ex voto* is often more complex, as required by its original destination. After providing some context on the practice of the *ex voto*, I shall explore how the image-word relation as multimodal *ex-voto* is highly dialogic and open to alterity.

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<sup>158</sup> For simplification, I have not considered the wider multimodal creation of Buzzati as a playwright, costume designer, and screen writer.

### 3.4 The Image-Word Synthesis in Dino Buzzati. *I Miracoli di Val Morel*

Many of the issues revolving around word-image relations are epitomised in works such as *Le storie dipinte* (1958) and *I miracoli di Val Morel* (VM, 1971), still untranslated into English. The paratextual apparatus has been extensively analysed (Giannetto 1998a; 2001) and it is widely accepted that the text does not possess an ancillary function to the image, or vice versa. This means that these print books, originally designed as exhibition catalogues, cannot be defined as illustrated books. They do not possess substantial numbers of easily recognizable features identifying them with a given genre; they could be described as picturebooks, the use of the single word implying the theoretical consequences described above. Either crossing over multiple genres or creating their own, these works require a reconsideration of the word-image relation particularly with regard to Buzzati's own poetics as well as to the traditions they both draw from and renew at the same time.

#### 3.4.1 Ex Votos as Iconotextual Incubator

In this section, I will introduce the nature of the ex voto as a multifarious art form bringing together different artistic experiences. Since ex votos are not encompassed by the notion of devotional painting only, ascribing them to a medium-specific genre is unhelpful. As with iconotexts in general, the definition of the ex voto will hinge upon the function of and the medium used in specific artefacts.

An ex voto is a votive offering that materialises faith as saving grace. Over time, votive offerings also became the subject of artistic practice. As a result, ex votos have embraced a wide range of multimedial and multimodal options. This versatility and openness, in some respects, places ex votos and picturebooks in a close relationship. Originally an offering made to fulfil religious vows (coming from the Latin expression *ex voto suscepto*), it represents a material concretisation of the vow's fulfilment. It can be made either before the requested divine intervention or after the miracle has been granted: the object stands as the material representation of the miracle itself, received or invoked. Ex votos can be presented in manifold formats, including three-dimensional reproductions in various materials (e.g. wax, terracotta,

ceramic) of the organs for which a miracle is invoked, or reproductions drawing from religious iconography (e.g. the Sacred Heart of Jesus); two-dimensional reproductions (painted, drawn) on and with more or less expensive materials. Ex votos can also be symbolic objects such as real-life objects of some significance to the religious instance initiated: examples include human vestiges like a strand of hair, objects representing the liberation from addictions such as empty cigarette packets, poker cards, or alcohol bottles.

Over time, ex votos (also less frequently called ‘susceptos’) have evolved in different directions. Modern forms of the ex voto may exist without the traditional religious message: see, for example, the evolution towards the ready-made and the commercialisation of cheaply crafted objects, which have desacralised the ex voto’s aura. Traditional and modern forms can shed light both on VM by Buzzati (1971), and on the ex voto dedicated to Saint Rita by Yves Klein, who gifted it anonymously to the monastery of Cascia in 1961. The reason for selecting these works is their common addressee, Saint Rita of Cascia, and the artistic kinship between Klein and Buzzati. An interesting key to the interpretation of this hybrid form is given by contemporary re-uses, including Buzzati’s secular *Miracles* as a prompt for narration, which does not presuppose the devotional afflatus of Yves Klein’s offering.

As far as picturebooks are concerned, Buzzati chose a modality – crossing over genres – that was and still is usually considered subaltern. The clichés explored above depict picturebooks as intended and produced to educate young readers. On the other hand, ex votos have been considered as a naïve art form made by uneducated people for their peers. Popular culture appropriated (Salvatori Rizzi 2016) the ex voto and made it less exclusive and therefore less appealing to the wealthy patrons who commissioned them. Today, according to Mariolina Salvatori Rizzi, “[i]n Mexico, as in Italy, the tradition of commissioned painted ex votos is dying out” (Salvatori Rizzi 2016). It is worth noting that elsewhere – specifically, in Mexico, where the tradition was exported by the Spaniards during the colonisation of Central and South America – different, secular traditions of ex votos are still flourishing. As it was continued and revived by popular culture in Italy, a non-Western culture offers an after-life to this tradition by introducing significant variations. The new practice and subsequent experience of votive offerings in Mexico is then operating a second shift on the aesthetic reception of ex votos.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> “Unlike Italian culture, Mexican culture has deployed several “popular” ways of keeping alive, re-appropriating, and transforming the ex voto tradition: ex votos as souvenirs, commercially produced and sold on the streets of Mexico; ex-votos embroidered by women living in small rural communities, mainly in central Mexico, who sell them to support their families (Salvatori 38-42); decorative uses of ex votos hung in homes, offices, public places or painted on room dividers, fire place screens, refrigerator magnets” (Rizzi 2016).

Mexican religious *retablos* appear to have been a source of inspiration for Frida Kahlo's art, just as the Italian *ex votos*, presumably in the Bellunese area in particular, seem to have influenced Buzzati's fictional *ex votos*.

The incredibly rich spectrum of (re-)uses of the *ex voto* tradition in contexts other than strictly religious ones within and outside Western culture is also embodied by the Japanese *Sangaku*, considered by some a scientific or cultural, rather than religious, kind of *ex voto* for the solution of geometrical and mathematical problems.

Further examples closer to our times and to Italian culture can foster a more comprehensive understanding of the versatility and adaptability of *ex votos*. The latest re-uses in Italy have been characterised by polemical purposes. The first example is the exhibition organised as a protest against the absence of Italian artists at the Italian Pavilion during the 2005 Venice Biennale. One of the project co-ordinators, art historian and curator Philippe Daverio, recalls the reasons behind the call for devotional artwork: "L'idea del Padiglione Italia extra Biennale ufficiale è carichissima di ironia: si è deciso che la Biennale è malata e ha bisogno di 'curatori', quindi chi vuole la può curare e chiunque può divenirne curatore".<sup>160</sup> The title of the exhibition was *13 x 17 www.padiglioneitalia*. In the title, the format of *ex votos* in the commissioned (13cm x 17cm)<sup>161</sup> emphasised the critical situation that Italian art was facing.

Intermedial and multimodal creations unlock infinite combinatory possibilities because of their intrinsically abductive procedures: that is why *ex votos* have been promptly adopted by avant-gardes and post avant-gardes. For example, the revival of *ex votos* is witnessed by the collective exhibition *Aiuti divini. Fenomenologia dell'ex voto e patrimoni ferraresi*,<sup>162</sup> showcasing secular artwork that after more than 30 years is still in dialogue with Buzzati's signature *Miracles*. Buzzati's iconotextual *ex votos* are depleted of religious significance: Pierpaolo Cornieti took a playful approach and added a satirical purpose to the stylistic template

<sup>160</sup> "La Contro-Biennale di Daverio". *Il Mattino di Padova*, 6 June 2005. The play on word is based on 'curatore', which in Italian also means 'healer'.

[http://ricerca.gelocal.it/mattinopadova/archivio/mattinodipadova/2005/06/06/VT1MC\\_VT101.html](http://ricerca.gelocal.it/mattinopadova/archivio/mattinodipadova/2005/06/06/VT1MC_VT101.html)

The text originally part of the call for artwork was written by Daverio's assistants, Elena Agudio and Cristina Alaimo, appeared on the website [www.padiglioneitalia.com](http://www.padiglioneitalia.com): "The Biennale is diseased. A dangerous virus roams I Giardini and stagnates on the Laguna" [my translation] [La Biennale è malata. Un grave virus si aggira per I Giardini e stagna sulla laguna], text from the introductory contribution by Daverio. "1000 artisti per un'indagine eccentrica sull'arte in Italia", (Daverio and Blanchaert 2007, pages not numbered).

<sup>161</sup> "Two numbers [...] traditionally associated with bad luck [in Italy] [...], but which [...] necessarily produce a positive figure when they are mathematical multiplicand and multiplied", Daverio in Daverio and Blanchaert (2007), (pages not numbered; my translation).

<sup>162</sup> The exhibition held in Ferrara from 3 to 19 October 2008 has a dedicated catalogue enriched with critical essays by the curators. See Falbo and Roda (2008).

borrowed from Buzzati's *Miracles*; Bruno Vidoni also created works in the vein of Buzzati – albeit unknowingly according to Falbo and Roda – by creating a fictional patron saint to whom a fictional town offers ex votos (Falbo and Roda 2008, 40).

The utilitarian function of the ex voto – a logic of *do ut des* – has weighed negatively on its aesthetic appreciation. One of the purposes of the ex voto is to propitiate miraculous healing; the other common purpose is to express materially one's gratitude for the miracle granted. The pragmatic stance of the institutional theory of art – art is what the interpretive community shares as art<sup>163</sup> – does not deny ex votos an aesthetic status. Dal Lago-Giordano argue that elements of popular culture have been repeatedly integrated or sourced by twentieth-century art – statutory boundaries of so-called highbrow art have been questioned and made outdated by similar operations. Nevertheless, the vulgarity deriving from the ex votos's blunt corporeality is a detracting element as it is considered repugnant and disturbing. The material aspect of the ex voto is unavoidable as it aims to make visible and tangible the divine occurrence of the miracle. In other instances, the artefacts proposed as ex votos do not exemplify by way of direct likeness, but indexically. Objects-indexes represent by way of their own aptitude for referral, to point towards the representamen: for instance, talismans of victories against vice that narrate the story of perdition and redemption, such as an empty bottle of liquor, whose label was substituted by the devotee with a prayer, not only “allude to a battle”, but also “show the enemy defeated and gagged by the label-prayer” (Dal Lago and Giordano 2008, 22-23).

The ex votos, like picturebooks, can be described as a genre escaping fixed, prescribed features, by virtue of their fluid characteristics. A few examples of ex votos include: the anatomical ex voto (often three-dimensional reproductions of parts of the body); parts of animals (sometimes exotic or imaginary); objects, whose relation to the miracle varies from case to case; the public ex voto in shrines; the painted ex voto; the photographic ex voto; sacred tattoos; nonreligious ex votos (related to veterinary cures, or postcards from war).

The open-ended nature of ex votos which allows them to synthesise human and divine instances relates them to conceptual art. Dal Lago and Giordano maintain that devotional art has been influential up to the present day – for example, on the Italian Transavanguardia – in a similar way to the contributions of primitive non-Western art to early twentieth-century Western art. Furthermore, Dal Lago-Giordano point out that the anthropological attention paid to ex votos questions the validity of traditional aesthetic critique, which has a limited perspective. Even art critic Federico Zeri defined ex votos as “la Sistina dei poveri” [The Sistine

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<sup>163</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to resume the debate on Fish (1980).

Chapel of the poor]. In fact, his intention was to acknowledge that the ex voto reflects refined pictorial traditions and a complex amalgam of religious, cultural, social and scientific instances, which together make an accurate snapshot of the values of an epoch.<sup>164</sup> Ultimately, Dal Lago-Giordano question the validity of judgements expressed by traditional aesthetics toward the ex voto: how not to suspect, then, that traditionalism lies in the beholder's attitude rather than in the beheld? (Dal Lago and Giordano 2008, 41).<sup>165</sup>

Lastly, the materiality of the ex voto can be read through the lens of objecthood. Here, I revisit the term objecthood – which was coined by Michael Fried in 1967 to describe a series of properties of Minimalist Art. By assigning a positive connotation to it, I aim to extend further the foundations for understanding the ex votos by Klein and Buzzati.

Fried developed this concept to oppose Minimalist and Modernist Art to prove how radically opposed these two are.<sup>166</sup> In Fried's analysis of Minimalist Art, this term is considered as negative. In the context of this discussion, however, objecthood is an ontological condition implying a set of properties for which Fried ultimately establishes that Minimalist Art is not art<sup>167</sup>. Likewise, the ex voto itself has long been discredited for being a popular, often folkloristic, or naive, form of expression.<sup>168</sup> Objecthood as the “perverse incarnation” of non-art thus provides an adequate framework to categorise the “abject materiality” of the ex voto.

The complexity of intermedial and interart relations risks to turn any discussion about them into an empirical scrutiny on media and materiality. Fried realised this risk and exemplified it through the most ‘perverse’ aspect of objecthood: “theatricality”. Given that Minimalist Art feeds on theatricality, Fried ascribes it to the realm of non-art. The following quotes help us understand how close Klein's art is to the theatricality described by Fried:

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<sup>164</sup> Federico Zeri coined this phrase during a speech given on the occasion of the book launch *Vittore Crivelli e la pittura del suo tempo nel Fermano*. See Papetti (1997; 2005).

<sup>165</sup> My translation [Insomma, quando lo sguardo dell'estetica si posa sugli ex voto, vede esattamente quello che vuole vedere, e cioè qualcosa di inevitabilmente antropologico. Viene allora il dubbio che il tradizionalismo non risieda in ciò che si vede, ma nell'occhio con cui lo si guarda].

<sup>166</sup> For example, the preoccupation with shape and the idea of wholeness and ‘Single Object’ characterises, according to Fried, the work of Donald Judd and Robert Morris. From the comparison between Modernist and Minimalist Art, it is clear that the latter that engages with objecthood, while modernist painting denies it or tries to ‘defeat it’. Since Fried maintains that Minimalism fails to take over the research initiated by Modernism, he engages in a deconstructionist scrutiny of Minimalist art to uncover its real character of pseudo-art.

<sup>167</sup> Modernist Art is for Fried the touchstone against which Fried can discuss of Minimalism as a case of non-art.

<sup>168</sup> For the evolution of the ex voto from niche to popular art form, see Cole and Zorach (2009, 180).

Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist [i.e. Minimalist] work. [...]The largeness of the piece, in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, distances the beholder – not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question...an object [...] a kind of stage presence.

[...]The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre (Fried 1967/1998, 155, 43).

Theatricality, as described in these excerpts, is an essential component of Klein's art, and is also relevant for Buzzati. Here, I propose to superimpose a positive meaning to objecthood and theatricality because it enables intermediality to enter that space lying between the arts – Fried's "theatrical" space – albeit offering a paradigm that does not grant the complete readability of the world. Instead, the revisited notions of objecthood and theatricality help in the understanding of creative processes and of the interrelation of artistic practices.

The reason for attributing objecthood and theatricality a positive connotation rests with the potential of objects such as the *ex votos* to represent an alternative artistic genre, precisely because they adopt subversive strategies. In this way, objecthood erodes from within the "rhetoric of empire and colonialization" Mitchell recognised as endemic to the "division between art objects and mere, unredeemed objecthood, between art and nonart" (Mitchell 2005, 147). I argue that objecthood aptly describes the levelling and leverage that objects such as the *ex votos* have with respect to the "rhetoric of empire and colonialization". By de-colonialising art history, objects such as the *ex votos* introduce elements of otherness in artistic discourses where identity is prevalent. Therefore, the Other forcibly impose dialogue on its dominant counterpart; rhizomatic meaning creation contaminates arborescent semeiosis; thus, the abductive processes triggered contribute to the creation of new and highly original signs.



### 3.4.2 Reading-Seeing/Seeing-Reading Words and Images: Ex Votos as Iconotextual Strategies

The complex structure, and the many interpretive layers of VM make the determination of a prevailing iconotextual strategy arduous, provided only one can be ascertained. Investigating different interpretive strategies is key to a more comprehensive understanding of the work itself. The reader is dealing with an adult iconotext where a high degree of visual literacy and a sound knowledge of Buzzati's pictorial and narrative repertoires are required. The last of Buzzati's works, VM, contains themes, motifs and symbols covering most of his production: an iconotextual summa of the entire corpus, painted and written. Michele Cometa – a leading exponent of the so-called Sicilian school of Visual Studies – has actively contributed to the dissemination of this area of study and its key concepts in Italy. The vast interdisciplinary connections of this area of study entails an exam of:

“[i] an anthropology of the image [...] with a focus on the vestiges [of images], on how processes of resignification operate on images and their constitutive elements (*Pathosformeln*, themes and motifs) ex-novo or via previous stratifications of meanings; [ii] an archaeology of optical devices [...]; [iii] lastly, a phenomenology of the gaze and all of its implications, from sexuality to politics to mass control, and economy (Cometa 2008, 12<sup>169</sup>)

A notion that serves adequately the aspects implied in carrying out research within the field of Visual Culture is that of the scopic regime. In Martin Jay's re-elaboration of Christian Metz (Metz 1977/1993), the scopic regime is functional to adopting a plural understanding of reality in terms of virtual spaces of the visual, or languages of visibility (Jay 1988, 3-23). Jay

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<sup>169</sup> My translation [Un'antropologia dell'immagine [...] interessata alle sopravvivenze, alle risemantizzazioni e alle riattivazioni semantiche delle immagini e dei loro elementi costitutivi (*Pathosformeln*, temi e motivi); a un'archeologia dei dispositivi della visione [...] e infine a una fenomenologia dello sguardo con tutte le sue implicazioni, dalla sessualità alla politica, dalle pratiche di controllo all'economia]. A note on the choice of “vision devices” which does not translate literally “dispositivi della visione”, which instead would be “optical devices”: this offers a more pragmatic option: a device (e.g. camera obscura) is involved in generating a reproduction medium (e.g. light, or the refraction of certain beams of light), which is what is viewed in the end. However, “vision devices” allows for a broader inclusion, not only of objects but also of concepts related to what is seen: it is the same use that Michel Foucault had for “dispositif” as a physical and metaphorical notion referring to those constructs engendering systems of thought that represent the dominant order. See Foucault (1977).

The study of optical and vision devices is related to the broader category of “media archaeology”, a study area that stemmed from the common pool of studies leading to the development of Visual Culture, for example Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, New Film History, Siegfried Giedion, Aby Warburg, Marshall McLuhan, John Berger. See, for example: Parikka (2012); Huhtamo and Parikka (2011).

distinguished three major scopic regimes, three “set[s] of visual conventions determining our action of seeing: how and what we see. [...] It is dominant ways of seeing and organising visual culture” (Sendyka 2013, 104)<sup>170</sup> Although Metz does not explain the adoption of scopic regime in his comparative analysis of the effects of vision in cinema and theatre, a relation of subjugation of the reader to the paradigm of vision is obvious. ‘Regime’ is indeed a non-neutral term indicating subjection and therefore oppression. On the other hand, ‘scopic’ clarifies the domain in which the perverse relation takes place: because of its etymology indicating the tension to see in depth, to examine (-scopium) and to attain something (scope). Jacques Lacan, who drew from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (and its notion of “scopic fields”), pushed even further the implications of seeing and being seen (Lacan 1978, 67-78): according to this theory, the subject has his subjectivity alienated by a gaze which observes the subject. The pleasure of being looked at in turn triggers a yearning for scopic satisfaction. The notion of scopic regime was essential for the development of Visual Studies and has been used extensively to search cultural, social, and technological aspects of vision enacted within certain discourses (politics, desire). The scopic regime methodologically matches the complexity of the manifold aspects of VM.

Coglitore, from the same Visual Studies research hub, builds her analysis of VM on this concept. As the story frame hints, “the linguistic and the discursive have not, to be sure, been simply replaced by the pictorial and the figural but rather in complicated ways infiltrated by them” (Jay and Brennan 1996, 3). Indeed, the study of optical devices contributes to unearthing matter that would not have been taken into consideration otherwise: for instance, the structural homologies between technologies and text, from thematic, poetological, and anthropological perspectives, can add further insight into interart studies (Coglitore 2012, 97).<sup>171</sup> Coglitore proposes a thematic analysis of the discourse expressed in the texts accompanying the painting on the left-hand side. This kind of analysis implies gaining insight and comparing “legends, hearsay, news, pseudo-scientific information, religious beliefs” (Coglitore 2012, 98) through which the gaze(s) engendered by the normative rules promoted by mutually non-exclusive discourses (religious, aesthetic, institutional) can be revealed.

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<sup>170</sup> The three major scopic regimes Jay discerns are Cartesian perspectivalism (where Science replaced the interpretive frame of Scriptures), the descriptivism arising with Flemish painting, and the Baroque.

<sup>171</sup> Coglitore clarifies that “When considering the thematic aspect, the objects of analysis are the media adopted and those mentioned in the work; when considering the poetological aspect, homologies between the pictorial and the literary discourse are analysed; lastly, an anthropological analysis will focus on the changed perception of manhood and his body”, [my translation], 97-98, [all’aspetto tematico si ascrivono i media utilizzati e riportati come argomento dell’opera, all’aspetto poetologico va ricondotto lo studio delle omologie tra discorso pittorico e letterario, e a quello antropologico lo studio delle modificazioni prodotte nella visione dell’uomo e del suo corpo].

An iconographic search – an incomplete one, of the many that this case study invites – for instance, discloses that Buzzati drew, more or less consciously (Zucco 1997), from the popular repertoire of ex votos. For example, compare the diabolic imagery in VM's *Attacco al Vescovo* [*Assault on the Bishop*], and the two ex votos in honour of Saint Nicola (Papetti 2005, 49, 57):

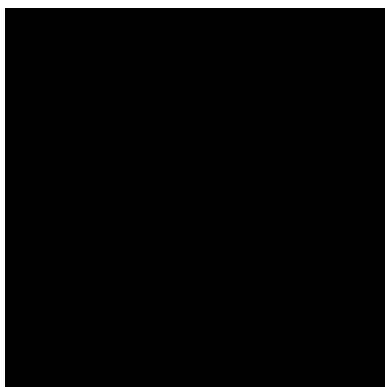


Figure 16. Dino Buzzati. “Attacco al Vescovo”, in *I miracoli di Val Morel*.

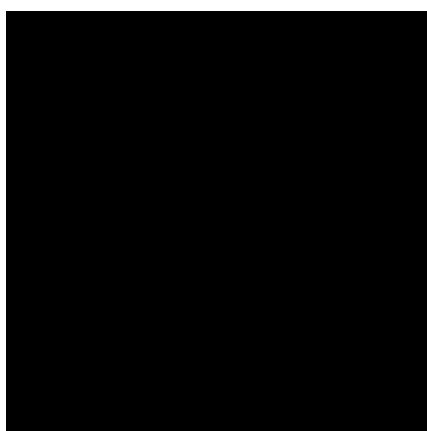


Figure 17. Anonymous. “San Nicola libera una donna posseduta dal demonio”, in Papetti 2005, 49 (Figure 2).



Figure 18. Anonymous. “I parenti di Chiara da Camerino, liberata dal demonio, ringraziano Sant'Agostino e San Nicola”, in Papetti 2005, 57 (Figure 3).

In this case, the religious discourse is there in absentia as Buzzati's primary aim is not to craft a work of religious significance. Religious significance – as a direct experience of divine grace received – is dismantled as the aesthetic discourse subverts the normative order of the *ex voto*. Resemantisation, in this case, removes the religious import but appropriates few other invariants: the contemporary *ex voto* is a very loose genre/fluid non-genre. The resemanitisation of the *ex voto* as an expression of popular culture is not only relatable to coeval examples of conceptual art but also pioneered artistic forms (see Falbo and Roda 2008).

By way of a thematic approach, the religious discourse in absentia leads to rethinking traditional aesthetics and its critique with regard both to the artificial division of lowbrow and highbrow art, and to the legitimisation of a hybrid art form (the “let-pittura”<sup>172</sup> which Bruno Alfieri had envisaged ten years before). Moreover, Buzzati's constant themes resurface as part of the constant critique to the dominant discourse of the profit-oriented, rational society: the right of the fantastic to survive in a technology-dominated era, the right of the subconscious to exist as anthropological necessity and, as a consequence, the legitimization of the irrational nature of man unfettered by standardised society. From this viewpoint, VM could be read as a summa of the author's intellectual and artistic legacy.

A poetological analysis focuses on the similarities between literary and pictorial meaning-making processes. Painting and writing, in VM as well as in his entire work, are one language for the double-talented Buzzati, regardless of the value judgements he and critics earmarked for his visual activity. The study of structural similarities does justice to a hybrid work written in a binary code: an intricate product of *Doppelbegabung* expressed across modalities condensed in one medium.

However, the material irreconcilability of word and image lies in the position of the long captions outside the paintings, which did not appear in the original exhibition and are later additions to the print editions. Here, the position of the text on the left-hand side and that of the plates points out their relation of alterity. Nevertheless, alterity within the word-image relation still makes VM an iconotext as each semiotic mode relies on the other for semeiosis. Two issues arise: (i) the relation of the newer text to the painted text in the plates; (ii) the ambiguity engendered by the verbal recount on one hand, and the images on the other, a relation of falsification and dissonance.

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<sup>172</sup> See Coglitore (2012, 68, 83).

The discrepancy between words and images fosters new interpretive routes. Coglitore suggests to read these *ex votos* as a reworked prototype of the emblem.<sup>173</sup> The relation of the three components of emblems (*inscriptio*, *pictura*, *subscriptio*, i.e. motto, the image often engraved, the short explanatory text) is disrupted. I will give an account of the theories on emblems and *imprese* in relation to VM in § 3.4.3.

Lastly, an anthropological analysis of the discourse underlying the fictional *ex votos* shall contribute to revealing how worldviews are created, especially those in relation “with mankind, the body, and life in communities” (Coglitore 2012, 99). I argue that the fictional nature of these *ex votos* negates the possibility of a genuinely religious purpose. Transferring the *ex voto* from a religious to a literary discourse opens otherwise unforeseen possibilities, such as the embedding of erotic discourses underwritten by an ironical component overarching the entire work (Coglitore 2012, 99).

These three levels of analysis are complementary. The ‘Object’ per se (the miracle asked and/or received), the ‘Representamen’ (the *ex voto*), the representation (Interpretant) thereby originated, can each be analysed through thematic, poetological, and anthropological perspectives. However, reading the *ex votos* as artefacts from a specific visual culture does not do justice to the multimodal dimension. In the next section, I will follow the lead offered by Coglitore to investigate the potential of Buzzati’s *ex votos* as a special kind of emblem. Although Buzzati was not reworking the emblem and the *impresa* as a genre in the first place, the grounds for comparison can be pushed thanks to the *ex voto*’s fluidity. As for ekphrasis, which has expanded its original boundaries in the analysis of intermedial relations, the *ex voto*’s potential to widen its own definition is ideal for discussing the many possibilities of multimodal creation.

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<sup>173</sup> My clarification that the emblem triplex is only the most frequent case and thus the prototype is due to the awareness that this is no way exhaustive of the diversity of the production of *emblemata*. For the comparison of Buzzati’s *ex votos* with emblems (to which I add the variant of the *impresa*), I draw Coglitore (2012, 87).

### 3.4.3 Metanarrative Thresholds

Buzzati's 'paratextual' note about the nature of his VM expresses a clear idea of the aesthetic properties of his ex votos. However, the paratextual note is a fictional threshold, and therefore is as fictive as the rest of the book. As an introduction to the modalities and reasons behind the iconotextual strategies deployed in VM, this note is indicative of at least one scopic regime at play. Buzzati, in a fictional *Spiegazione* (the author's explanation) speaks of the votive offerings in the following terms: "to define those ex votos as naïf was a euphemism, given the rudimentary craftsmanship they showed". This is at odds with Buzzati's choice of dedicating an entire book (and before that, exhibition) under the form of the ex voto.

I believe that the original Italian text translated above contains further implications: "ex-voto, che definire «naïfs» era eufemismo, tanto erano di fattura primordiale" (VM, 10).<sup>174</sup> One should pay heed to the noun variation operated by the adjective "primordiale" [primordial, with reference to artwork, comes to mean rudimentary, unrefined artwork]. This adjective is not extraneous to Buzzati's work: rather, it defines a *Leitmotif*. Buzzati's leanings toward the fantastic mode and *fanciullismo* previously mentioned, place nonetheless his poetics in the field of the primordial. First, the primordial evil in the fear of death and of the unknown expressed in his fantastic writings; second, the primordial good in the portrait of unsullied worlds – often rendered through the trope of the mountain – like that inhabited by the bears before they come into contact with humans in *OiS*, or like that of *Il segreto del Bosco Vecchio*; third, the primordial appeal of the elements in his paintings (rocks, deserts, oceans, underworlds), of mythical creatures; last, the conception of art as a basic necessity of man – not in a simplistic way; this is witnessed by his admiration for conceptual art. The recurring use of writing and painting as two equivalent media responds instead to the need of storytelling, an ever-present necessity in Buzzati as much as in the history of humankind.<sup>175</sup> On the other hand, Buzzati's work is not 'primitive' in that he spearheaded innovative change – "coming from the year two thousand" – Buzzati is addressed in this way during a TV programme.<sup>176</sup> A few examples of

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<sup>174</sup> Buzzati also states that the strange man taking care of the minuscule tabernacle possessed "una fantasia, quale è rara nella gente di nulla o minima cultura" [such a vivid imagination that is hard to find in mostly or completely uneducated people], VM, 11 [my translation].

<sup>175</sup> "Storytelling can be something more than entertainment [...] something primordial, something that the very existence of people may depend on" (Vargas-Llosa 1990, 94).

<sup>176</sup> I refer to a YouTube video reproducing the TV programme aired on 8 December 1962.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comv7f2DGpw>

his artistic farsightedness include: understanding and advocating for the potential of comics and ground-breaking art work for that time, i.e. conceptual artwork, contributing to artistic freedom from traditional constraints. As a matter of fact, all these features inform Buzzati's entire work.

The primeval component in Buzzati's work is more important than his fictional self is prepared to admit. In the field of conjectures, one could suppose that the ascription of the ex votos to a "lowbrow" culture in such a significant threshold is a sort of *excusatio non petita*: as if he were suffering from some complex of inferiority due to presenting this collection of paintings once and for all in print. In contrast to this defensive position, it could be argued that Buzzati had a twofold intention of pleasing and mocking the critics through a self-conscious alibi. In the author's explanation, Buzzati informs us that he reproduced the ex votos he had seen in mysterious circumstances. Undeterred by the label of 'rudimentary' given by the fictional self, Buzzati discovered an ideal form that allowed him to move freely within the word-image/image-word domain. As an apparently simple form, the ex voto embraces an incredible host of variations, as the secular re-uses described in the previous paragraph testify.

The fantastic halo, as in *Rip Van Winkle* (VM, 11) surrounding the preliminary occasion to the explanation of the book reflects Buzzati's *modus operandi* in his writings on art criticism. In this case, the fantastic mode lays the foundations of a secular re-use of the ex voto as it undercuts the credibility of any religious afflatus. Moreover, Buzzati's own admission that the first-hand source may have been forged reinforces the impression that beyond the story frame one could expect literally anything but the traditional ex voto.<sup>177</sup> The fantastic mode informs the iconotextual strategies by re-using themes and motifs along a well-trod path, yet producing innovative and complex outcomes. It all starts in the narrative threshold: Buzzati warns the reader of the motive dragging him to start his search about the curious "quadernetto" he had found:

It clearly lay outside the domain of traditional popular folklore. There were sharp irony and the grotesque, together with the great unlikelihood of the events, which, I must admit, intrigued me a great deal (VM, 10).<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> "Il vecchietto [...] mi raccontò a spizzichi una storia la quale, anche se non era vera, anche se era soltanto frutto di una solitaria esaltazione, mi parve, e mi sembra ancora, adorabile" [The little old man told me bits of a story which, even if it was not true, even if it was the result of solitary fervour, it seemed, and still seems to me, adorable], Dino Buzzati. VM, 10 [my translation].

<sup>178</sup> "Si usciva qui, era evidente, dall'ambito della tradizionale fantasia popolare. C'era, con l'estrema inverosimiglianza della vicenda, una spiccata carica di ironia e di grottesco che, lo confesso, mi incuriosì grandemente" [my translation].



The strategy of resorting to the iconotextual hybrid form seems to derive from concurrent factors condensing around the following points. First, the concept of the work recalls the votive traditions of Buzzati's native area (Valmorel is a small town in the Belluno province, only 21 kilometres from Villa Buzzati Traverso), especially the *sacre edicole* often found along mountain tracks. Second the genesis is informed by the *topos* to which these traditions are anchored: the mountain, the inspiration *par excellence* of the Buzzatian fantastic<sup>179</sup> (as, for example, in *Barnabo delle montagne*, in *OiS*, and in numerous short stories). Third, from a teleological viewpoint, the iconotextual strategies of this hybrid form perfectly respond to Buzzati's urge to narrate. Fourth, the reworking of *susceptos* gives voice to the literary appearance of decidedly evil, sinister themes more consistently portrayed in Buzzati's work since the publication of *Un amore* [A Love Affair, 1963] – although the presence of evil, and of imminent catastrophes (real or only prefigured) are constant in his narrative.

A metanarrative threshold influencing Buzzati's poetics in VM is also the location where the exhibition took place. The paintings were commissioned by the gallerist, Renato Cardazzo, for Buzzati's solo exhibition opened on 3 September 1970 at Galleria Naviglio-Venezia. The narrative potential of the *Miracles* matched the vertical unravelling of a physical narration: the exhibition had to be experienced spatially since the narrated stories hanging on the wall were arranged in such a way as to accompany the visitor from the ground to the third floor of the Galleria Del Cavallino Venezia.

In view of a different destination than the one of the exhibition, the editorial line adopted in the 1971 publication is clearly directed at giving the former edition (the exhibition catalogue) a narrative imprint.<sup>180</sup> The geographical toponym added to the title, a variation in the sequence of plates, the author's explanation: changes were adopted to uncoil a narrative thread, from the fictive threshold (the frame story) to the last, fortieth painting added to the 2012 edition by Mondadori, which follows philologically the 1971 Garzanti edition – its genetic process culminating in the 2012 reprint adopted here. It should be borne in mind that the iconotextual

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<sup>179</sup> See Biaggi (2001, 39-57, 201); Buzzati (1973, 53-54).

<sup>180</sup> The original title of the exhibit was *I miracoli inediti di una santa* whose catalogue was printed for the types Edizioni del Naviglio, 1970; it consisted of 34 paintings. The book was also published in 1971 by Garzanti, with the current title *I miracoli di Val Morel*. Five more were added here (*Il Colombre*, *Il Gatto Mammone*, *Il pettirosso gigante*, *I marziani*, *Caduta della casa Usher*), as well as the preface by Indro Montanelli and the Author's Note (*Spiegazione dell'autore*). The book was published again in 1983 by the title of *Per grazia ricevuta* (Milan: Grandi Edizioni Italiane, 1983). In 2012 the Mondadori edition restored the original title and format (changed in the 1983 edition) and added for the first time a fortieth painting. See Lorenzo Viganò. "Postfazione", VM, 95-7.

strategies evolved from the painted text-image (i.e. words painted) of the 1970 exhibition catalogue to the text (long captions) appearing beside the paintings in the 1971 “narrative” book: a layer of complexity adding to the original concept of the work. Of course, text-image alone would not be less problematical than the text-image captioned; one should wonder instead why Buzzati, a self-declared painter (by inner disposition), decided to modify the original plan of the work. It is possible to hypothesise that Buzzati doubted himself as a painter to be able to entrust his artistic message to images: he used to complain about his elementary skills as a painter. This self-consciousness, which nevertheless extends to his entire work, is independent from the critics’ judgements. As he had received critical acclaim as a writer, in fact, one could wonder whether he felt more reassured to bring back painting under the writing’s wing, just as it was in origin – his drawings accompanying the letters to his friend Arturo Brambilla and the very first literary experiences. Moreover, there is footage of Buzzati declaring that the painting about to be described in a TV programme is the translation into images of one his stories.<sup>181</sup> One could then suppose that image and word cannot be divided in Buzzati’s work, because of their cohabitation since the beginnings. They cannot even be separated in contexts where traditionally it is painting that is on display: the minimal presence of the word peers out from the painted words of the ex voto paintings in the 1970 exhibition *Miracoli inediti di una santa* and in the long captions (or legitimate short texts) accompanying the title of Buzzati’s first solo exhibition *Le storie dipinte*, held in 1958. As these are only conjectures that can coexist but that cannot be ascertained, there is but one lead to follow: the complementarity of word and image in Buzzati’s work, translated into precise iconotextual strategies.

These iconotextual strategies all pivot on VM’s chief difference with traditional ex votos: the lack of the religious message. Therefore, the re-use of ex votos becomes functional in a twofold way: they are both a pretext for the enactment of fiction and a pre-text as a cultural and artistic heritage to draw from. The pretext to narrate is given in the author’s *Spiegazione*. After the cover reproducing one of the miracles, this is the second autograph threshold that the reader encounters opening the book from the start. The second threshold represents, as mentioned, the frame story. Giving credit to the author’s claims, what we are going to experience is literature in the second degree, taking the cue from Gérard Genette’s seminal study (Genette 1982/1997) Buzzati is tacitly asking for the suspension of disbelief from the very beginning, signposting

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<sup>181</sup> “La traduzione in immagini di un mio racconto, *La ragazza che precipita*, e anche qui è utilizzato il sistema del fumetto”. From the already mentioned YouTube video reproducing the TV programme aired on 8 December 1962. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comv7f2DGpw>

that the realm of fiction is being entered: “These paintings of mine are but imaginary ex votos attributed to Saint Rita of Cascia, unknown until today” (VM 7).<sup>182</sup>

Buzzati’s words in *Spiegazione* introduce the event of the retrieval of a singular notebook, “a curious little notebook roughly 40 pages long” (VM, 7),<sup>183</sup> in a prose style recalling news reports. Although the pretext is fictitious, its effect is nonetheless realistic. As typical of Buzzati’s fantastic writings, the linear unfolding of events in *Spiegazione* is threatened by a few elements creating tension, uncertainty, and contradiction. The unfolding is eventually upset by inexplicable, unaccountable facts.<sup>184</sup> Following the authorial threshold (the story frame) is the muted form of what was the material for the exhibition *I miracoli inediti di una santa* – images accompanied symmetrically in the print version by words, on the other page. The question of mode and genre can be resumed with caution. VM can be described as a picturebook (i.e. a book, interspersing word and image as seen in the previous paragraph) whose readership is adult. The divertissement created presupposes indeed advanced degrees of verbal and visual literacy. However, the fluidity of the forms<sup>185</sup> in which the book is presented extends the discussion to manifold possibilities. Roberta Coglitore proposes a few keys to interpretation. For instance, provided one considers the author’s explanation as a metanarrative story frame which comments on the following content, VM can be defined as a modern Decameron (Coglitore 2012 from Giannetto 2001). Second, the long stories (or captions) should be read as the recounting of the painting, as if they were the (then missing) texts accompanying the paintings of the exhibition; another interpretation looks at the affinities between the emblem (and the *impresa*), and the ex voto. The multimodal nature of and abductive procedures behind both the emblem and the voto encourage a further discussion on this interpretive key.

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<sup>182</sup> My translation [Questi miei quadri, non sono che immaginari ex-voto per miracoli attribuiti a Santa Rita da Cascia e finora inediti].

<sup>183</sup> My translation [Un curioso quadernetto di circa quaranta pagine].

<sup>184</sup> “[C]osì aveva sentito dire”; “quand’ecco, ebbi l’impressione”; “si mostrò assai dubbioso circa la sua attendibilità”; “Ma il sentiero [...] non esisteva più”; “Mi parve di trovarmi nei panni di Rip Van Winkle”; questions expressing doubt, perplexion (e.g. “O era un rudere quel confuso mucchio di vecchi calcinati sassi che sembravano rammemorare antichissime illusioni pedute?”), Dino Buzzati. “Spiegazione” (VM 7-12).

<sup>185</sup> For this reason, it will be preferred “mode” to “genre” when referring to the structure of the work, as outlined in the previous paragraph.

### 3.4.4 Reading Ex Votos as Emblematic Works

The Renaissance re-discovery of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* led to the diffusion of the genre of emblems and *imprese*, thanks to Cristoforo de' Buondelmonti's import to Italy of a manuscript from the Greek island of Andros (1419), which appeared later as *editio princeps*, in Greek, in an imprint by Aldus Manutius (1505) and in other extended versions (e.g., Piero Valeriano, 1556). In the context of the Neoplatonic culture rediscovered by Marsilius Ficinus in the fifteenth century, the written language of ancient Egypt was regarded as the most perfect and the most intuitive – the cognitive process condensed in a perfect synthesis of thinking and seeing brought together. This re-discovery paved the way to the modern reinterpretation of *ut pictura pöesis*. The verbo-visual allusion to concepts of emblems and *imprese* contributed to the cultural and literary trend of conceptism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was the faith in, and the fascination with, allegorical and metaphorical signification to exemplify ideas that granted this classical multimodal genre an enormous success. Nevertheless, both Paolo Giovio and Torquato Tasso mention numerous ancient examples of *impresa* which is the next of kin, so to speak, of the genre of emblems whose canon was dictated by Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata* (1531).<sup>186</sup>

*Imprese* and emblems share the same theoretical and philosophical background. Understanding how multimodality works in emblems and *imprese* will undoubtedly widen the understanding of Buzzati's *ex voto* as a multimodal artefact.

However different in structure, content and scopes defines the emblem as having, beside the common element of the *pictura*, a longer text (*subscriptio*, an epigram, or more generally prose text; or a poem commenting on the motto). The *impresa*'s verbal component, on the contrary, consists primarily of a motto (in some cases not considered indispensable).<sup>187</sup> Moreover, the emblem was used more frequently in popular contexts than the *impresa*, which was instead adopted for military purposes as well as for ciphered, often romantic, messages. The *impresa*, for some scholars, derives from the French *devise*, brought to Italy by the French

<sup>186</sup> Giovio (1555/1978, 35-36); Tasso (1594/1993, 95-96).

<sup>187</sup> I agree with Daly 2014: "I shall use the Latin terms [...] inscription, pictura and subscription because they imply nothing about the form or function of the part in question. The translation into English of Praz's *Studies* uses the English terms motto and epigram [...]. But not every inscription of an emblem is in fact a motto, and not every subscription is an epigram".

troops of Charles VIII.<sup>188</sup> Perhaps by virtue of this last point, the *impresa* is considered as a kind of emblem whose destination is very specific (originally military), whereas the emblem is an iconotext meant to be understood by a wide public (Insolera 2004, 8).

At first glance, the ex votos in VM can be aligned to the emblem, both for its structure – the presence of a longer text – and the choice of a traditionally popular genre such as the ex voto painting. VM could be considered as a collection of modified emblems, the *subscriptio* appearing in the recto, separately from the image, in the verso. However, if the *subscriptio* (the long text accompanying the image and the text) were to be ignored for a moment, one would immediately realise that in almost all cases there is a correspondence of title (motto) and image. VM in the original status, then, before the narrativisation of the 1971 print edition, could then be taken as structurally similar to the *impresa*. The coincidence of title and image would also presuppose an in-depth knowledge of Buzzati's work: as the *impresa*, VM before 1971 – the exhibition catalogue – was a niche work. On the other hand, the circulation in print with the addition of the texts (*subscriptions*) would make VM more akin to a collection of emblems than to *imprese*, just as the first religious paintings were meant to illustrate salient moments of Scriptures. In general, an 'emblematic' interpretation – with or without the distinction of emblems and *imprese* – is in line with the representative ethos of the ex votos as “[l’emblema] alla sola moralità attende, e questa [l’impresa] al concetto delle cose rimira”.<sup>189</sup> The moral inspiration holds true for religious ex votos; Buzzati's lay ex voto stimulates the intellect as it is often presented as a riddle to solve or as a paradox. *Imprese* also depict “un attione nobile ed elevata, che l’uomo [...] intraprende per effettuarla o già si pregia d’haverla attualmente operata”,<sup>190</sup> which makes it comparable to the votive or thanksgiving purpose of the ex voto.

But in which way do emblems and *imprese* create meaning? Let me point out the etymology of emblem. The Greek verb *embállein* (to throw in/on), is at the core of the original meaning: something inserted into something else.<sup>191</sup> *Emblemata* was indeed the term used to describe Hellenistic or Roman luxury mosaics, which, unlike other mosaic techniques, were created not directly in the final location, but in workshops, to be then relocated to the buyer's

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<sup>188</sup> Giovio (1555/1978, 36-37).

<sup>189</sup> Carpacci 1592, 2-3. Carpacci argues that the emblem is adopted to suggest moral truths whereas the *impresa* – being more conceptual – stimulates wit.

<sup>190</sup> Picinelli 1653, pages not numbered, my translation [a noble action, that one has to undertake or accomplished].

<sup>191</sup> 'Symbol' derives from the verb 'symbállein' (to throw together). See Giehlow 2015, 244.

dwelling. *Emblemata* were relocated and re-encrusted on surfaces other than the originals as they were easily transportable thanks to the reduced dimensions. On the other hand, *impresa* seems to derive from the French *devise*, that is “rappresentazione simbolica d’un proposito, d’un desiderio, d’una linea di condotta – ciò che si vuole “imprendere”, intraprendere – per mezzo di un motto e d’una figura che vicendevolmente s’interpretano”.<sup>192</sup>

Because of the heterogeneous interpretations, modern and early modern, of the nature of emblems and *imprese*, as well as of the emblematic structure itself (whose fixed triplex structure has been challenged), I will draw only from theories which shed light on the ‘emblematic’ nature of Buzzati’s ex voto paintings (Daly 2014, 1-11).

A snapshot of the still controversial debate on the stylistic features of emblems and *imprese*, (although more frequently dealing with the latter), with regards to structure, content and purpose, reveals the way in which these were meant to be used in many instances, and, consequently, how they were meant to convey their message(s). In general:

- 1) a balanced proportion of body and soul [“giusta proporzione d’anima e di corpo”]: that is, a balanced ratio of the visual (body) and verbal (soul) component, was required.
- 2) Number 1) must be accomplished to avoid creating a solution too cryptic or disclosing it without some interpretive effort on the beholder’s part.
- 3) Therefore, without a balanced proportion of body and soul, the *impresa* is not satisfactory,<sup>193</sup> which is more or less the same as defining the ontological status of the modern iconotext. Also, that the image is necessary to the text and vice versa, it means choosing both equally transparent and equally opaque at the same time, so to speak in Quinean terms again, and that both should possess, or united as one should possess, some sort of ‘translucency’ to point in the direction of what they signify as a whole.

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<sup>192</sup> Praz 1933, 938-940, my translation [the symbolic representation of a purpose, desire, resolution – what one wants to undertake – through a motto and an image that translate each other].

<sup>193</sup> “Mancando o il soggetto all’anima o l’anima al soggetto, l’impresa non riesc[e] perfetta”. The quotations provided are Giovio (1978, 37-38).

It follows that the emblem – including the *impresa* – proposes a hybrid semeiosis whose components reveal a disposition to translation. Most importantly, this attitude to translation is intersemiotic: not only is the verbal component involved in the transaction (negotiation process) of translation, but also the performative utterances that contribute to the meaning-making process.<sup>194</sup> Looking at emblems and *imprese* from an intersemiotic perspective, I argue that the mutual relations of *inscriptio*, *subscriptio*, and *pictura* identified during the hermeneutic process clarify the difference between an illustration and an emblematic iconotext, which lies in the translational attributes of the iconotext's components.

The three invariant qualities that make an *impresa* such are also valid for qualifying the emblem. The difference between the two kinds is subtle and the numerous precepts listed by ancient and modern scholars only blur definitions. Emanuele Tesauro, with whom the treatises on *imprese* and emblems reached the apex, seems to level the differences listed by emphasising the shared inner workings: “both [the emblem and the *impresa*] are symbolic metaphors and as a consequence both have a perceivable meaning, and an intelligible meaning: by showing something they hint at something else”.<sup>195</sup> I will limit the discussion to these three invariants, around which the iconotexts in VM fluctuate. Structure-wise, the essential component of the image/*pictura* is meant as a non-transparent expressive means: “le immagini sono fatte per significare una diversa cosa da quella che si vede nell’occhio”,<sup>196</sup> that is the image has meaning beyond its referent (think of the Medieval four senses applied to the interpretation of the image). This meaning extension occurs with the support of other semantic extensions (the written text in whichever form it appears). For Tesauro, “the perfect *impresa* is a metaphor” (Tesauro 1678, 636-637)<sup>197</sup> as in Peirce’s definition of metaphor, which is creative (Hausman 1996, 195-197), the metaphoric relational thinking at play in *imprese* is creative, that is, abductive. Instead, in emblems the *representamina* are standard objects destined for a wide public; therefore, here allegorical thinking – thinking by way of pre-existent knowledge – is dominant.

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<sup>194</sup> “Siamo di fronte a una semiotica ibrida nella quale i vari elementi presentano questa ‘intenzione’ traduttiva e, cosa ancora più importante, lo fanno avendo come caratteristica fondamentale quella di tradurre non solo l’enunciato ma anche le strategie enunciative che lo veicolano”, Borgogni (2012, 15).

<sup>195</sup> “L’una e l’altra [the emblem and the *impresa*] sono metafore simboliche e per conseguente hanno l’una e l’altra un significante sensibile e un significante intellegibile, e mostrando una cosa ne accennano un’altra”, Tesauro (1678, 455, 462).

<sup>196</sup> Ripa (1593/1992, 7). Also see Innocenti: “il materiale iconico viene a farsi portatore e generatore di significati vicini alla matrice sia della percezione che della significazione, ma non distaccato dalla parola-scrittura [motto], bensì unito ad essa, fino a dargli il proprio corpo visivo per formare i vincoli”, (1978, 41).

<sup>197</sup> My translation. [La perfetta *impresa* è una metafora].

If one considers emblems and *imprese* as part of the same iconotextual genre, the underlying question remains: is the relation between the parts motivated or arbitrary?<sup>198</sup> Taking into account Daly's argument that the emblem was often the outcome of two separate authorships (the text and the image being produced separately, by writer and illustrator and arranged together by the publisher) would indicate the absolute arbitrariness of their making. This would reflect the alleged arbitrariness of the interpreting process, which is nevertheless influenced by the reader's knowledge, i.e. by the reader's verbo-visual literacy:

Emblematic and iconographic codes do not convey single signations, but potentially pluri-signations. [...]. Seeing is believing, but what we see is in a sense a function of what we believe, or what we know. What we see also depends in some measure on what we are looking for, and capable of finding (Daly 1993, 20).

Emblematic iconotexts had to produce meaning by the “paradox of language which names through difference, rather than identity” (Cavell 1990, 167). The ways in which the image may become polysemous lie in the discrepancy with the text. Daly raised four questions (Daly 1998, 7-8) that can help in the understanding of this ‘differential’ hermeneutic process, and are applicable to VM seen as a special, modern case of emblem/*impresa*:

1. What are the content and origin of the *pictura*; what is its relation to reality if any?
2. What are the content, origin, and purpose of the *inscriptio* and *subscriptio*?
3. What functional relationship exists between *pictura* and *scriptura*, i.e., between thing (pictured) and meaning (expressed in words)? How is the synthesis effected?
4. What is the overriding purpose of the emblem book?

As I have mentioned, the three levels of analysis proposed by Coglitore should be syncretic: The thematic and anthropological levels (the popular, traditional repertoire embedded in the fictional re-use glossing on anthropological discourses at play) address the first question. With

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<sup>198</sup> Borgogni (2012, 18 fn. 3) mentions, in favour of the arbitrariness, Freeman (1948) and Lewalski (1979); in favour of motivated relations, Praz (1964) and Schöne (1964).



reference to the second question, the *inscriptio* and *subscriptio* in VM are respectively the title and the long texts. The title is usually ‘transparent’ and so is the purpose: to exemplify, to sum up the representation offered by Buzzati’s paintings. The long text, on its part, has a narrative function: the image is cognitively inserted in a wider context, a temporal one in the first place. In addition, the longer text reinstates the stylistic features (such as the news-like report narrative) and the *Leitmotifs* of Buzzati’s work: the critique of dominant discourses and the irony that comes with it, the fantastic, and the incursion of Evil into ordinary life. This interpretive key is applicable to those plates in *Le storie dipinte* where the images contain painted text (as in VM); for instance, the plate *La morte nel solaio (Rebus)* recalls the visual riddles that emblematics contributed to popularise.

Overall, the long text added to the 1971 edition is not accessory. For example, the recurring theme of women and sensuality, often paired with diabolic forces, and violence, appears in the ex voto painting *Il tentatore* (VM, 72). The content of the image is re-presented by the long text and summarised in the title. However, in this case the ability of establishing intertextual references (the reader’s knowledge) can determine the success of the interpretive process. This episode can be linked to the many other concurring occurrences of diabolic forces, women, sexuality, violence, not only in VM but also for instance in *Viaggio agli inferni del secolo* (1966), *Le storie dipinte*,<sup>199</sup> *Poema a fumetti*, *Un amore*, and even a plate from *La famosa invasione*.<sup>200</sup> What the long text highlights is the figure of Saint Rita inexplicably missing from the painting: “l’opera di seduzione, da parte del demonio, era in fase abbastanza avanzata [...]. Come avrà fatto la brava Nunziatina a riprendere il dominio di sé e quindi, chiamando Santa Rita, dell’intera situazione?” (VM, 72).<sup>201</sup> This element will inform the hermeneutic process with questions about the relevance or irrelevance of this detail in relation to the whole. Since Saint Rita is portrayed in other erotic images, the reason for her absence is to be found elsewhere: perhaps it is the first sign of the fictional collapse in faith or the Saint’s defection, as Saint Rita is evoked numerous times for the wrong cause.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>199</sup> See the episode “Un utile indirizzo”: “Mi dissero che esisteva una casa clandestina dove si facevano dei supplizi bellissimi. Telefonai. Presi un appuntamento. Andai. Di più non posso dire.” (Buzzati 2013, 136).

<sup>200</sup> “Sono presenti esempi di immagini *bondage* in ogni opera doppia scritta e dipinta da Buzzati, fin dal 1945”, Lunardi (2015, 3).

<sup>201</sup> In the long caption, the author observes that the devil’s seduction is already at an advanced stage and wonders how Nunziatina regained control of herself and, by calling Saint Rita, of the entire situation.

<sup>202</sup> “graziato per intercessione di santa Rita la quale ebbe poi a pentirsene amaramente” (VM, 33), “Ella subito accorse e, misurata la situazione, esclamò: “Ma non vi vergognate di scomodarmi per queste vostre ridicole angosce letterarie?”. E se ne andò indispettita”. (VM, 43).

VM is emblematic in that it requires the reader/holder to engage in Buzzatian knowledge, to decipher ‘riddles’ by way of comparing and contrasting the verbo-visual content with the literary and cultural realm forming Buzzati’s *hyphos*. For instance, the ex voto *I dischi volanti* focusses on two themes cherished by Buzzati, dreams and science fiction:

Il fatto che l’aggressione sia avvenuta in sogno rende problematico il miracolo stesso. L’interesse dell’ex voto consiste piuttosto nella data: 1903. Epoca in cui la parola dischi volanti non era stata coniata. Si tratterebbe insomma di un sogno premonitore (VM, 18)<sup>203</sup>

The term ‘UFO’ had not been created yet, but Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *On Dreams* (1901) had instead been long available to influence Buzzati’s coeval culture. The sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the oneiric intersect. Not only do they produce ambiguity (the semantic field and the syntactic rendering of doubt and enigma being constantly drawn upon) but also give voice to Buzzati’s unconscious, most intimate thoughts. As seen, the answer to Daly’s fourth question – what the purpose of this emblem book is – is multi-faceted. Coglitore has proposed fascinating suggestions: it can be read at the same time as an anthropological rewriting; an iconotextual *divertissement*; an autobiographical instance behind which he could disguise the most intimate thoughts; an homage to his native birthplace.

To conclude, VM could also be read as the artistic legacy Buzzati left shortly before his death in the following year. The emblematic reading should elicit a cognitive process that yields an additional meaning not by resemblance but by difference; oversimplifying, it is Peirce’s “construct[ion of] a new general predicate”. The ‘emblematic’ book of VM can be imagined as the other side of the coin of Buzzati’s serial novel *Lo strano viaggio di Domenico Molo* [*The strange journey of Domenico Molo*] (1938),<sup>204</sup> which inspired the most famous film Federico Fellini [1920-1993] ever made, *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna* [*The journey of G. Mastorna*], whose screenplay Buzzati contributed to.

The novel, like the film script, takes place in a Purgatorial setting described as “a complex, confused, and fabulous city or circus” which “seem[s] to demystify the afterlife conveying an anticlimactic sense of disappointment for the hereafter” (Pacchioni 2014, 15). VM could then

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<sup>203</sup> Commenting on an attack by a UFO occurring in a dream, Buzzati stresses that the term had not been coined in 1903. That would make it a premonitory dream.

<sup>204</sup> It was later titled *Il sacrilegio* and collected in *I sette messaggeri*.

offer an earthly and more optimistic perspective of what is above (the limbo of Domenico Molo): the phrase ‘as above so below’ does not apply, since below Saint Rita rescues mankind, victim of the most disparate adversities, whereas above atonement is asked of a little boy already obsessed with fears of committing sins. Saint Rita, instead, is seen rescuing borderline cases of innocence, and clear cases of sin (e.g., *Fattacci al collegio*, *Il sorriso fatale*) (VM, 26, 44).

The conclusion of the novel *Lo strano viaggio di Domenico Molo* leaves also the impression that the protagonist has been only dreaming. In VM this is echoed by the oneiric terminology of some ex votos (“allucinazione”, “sogno”). The fictional nature of the story frame – with Buzzati’s constant doubting of what he has seen at the sanctuary – is also another focal point of the oneiric theme in the realm of the supernatural and the fantastic. The legitimacy of this comparison lies in the curiosity that fed Buzzati’s investigations, collected first as ten articles for the reportage *In cerca dell'Italia misteriosa* [*Searching for the Mysterious Italy*] to appear in *Il Corriere della Sera* (1965), and then in *I misteri d'Italia* (1978). The same interest in the *Unheimliche* [the Freudian ‘Uncanny’] made Buzzati and Fellini (who travelled Italy together) reflect separately on the theme of otherworldliness: though a supernatural halo in VM, and through uncanny atmospheres in Buzzati’s *Mysteries* and Fellini’s *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1965). The interpretive leads that I have followed through the intermedial and intertextual hints are the product of what has been defined as the ‘reader’s knowledge’, which is individual and subjective. Therefore, the presence of a vast repertoire of themes, motifs and symbols rendered both verbally and visually in Buzzati’s work appeal differently to different readers: it is the effect of the ‘translucence’ of the text. Reading VM as a case of modern emblematic re-working introduces the potential to extend the interpretive possibilities.

### 3.4.5 Yves Klein and Dino Buzzati’s Intermedial Dialogue

Dino Buzzati and Yves Klein share the devotion – whether fictional or real – to Saint Rita of Cascia (1371-1447). They also share the production of ex votos to Saint Rita. To demonstrate that there is a connection between the two ex votos, I shall propose a borderline case of interartistic comparison, one which enriches the debate on how images and words intersect in the elaborate multimodal artefact of the ex voto.

As seen, Buzzati's ex votos are a metafictional example of how the image-word relation can be the medium through which new artistic forms express their potential within the canon. In Yves Klein's ex voto to Saint Rita, the interaction of words and images underpins yet another modality of this eclectic genre, whose loosely defined style enables the artist to enjoy the broadest creative freedom.

Yves Klein (1928-1962) was one of the innovative artists of post-war France. He revolutionised the definition of art, as in general did the other acolytes of the (amorphous) artistic movement of *Nouveau Réalisme* [New Realism]. The French Riviera artistic scene inspired art critic Pierre Restany to coin the name *New Realism*, although Klein himself was opposed to this definition in favour of '*réalisme d'aujourd'hui*' [today's realism].

A lack of realism puts in relation Klein and Buzzati, who both situated their work beyond reality. Buzzati's Magic Realism staged the potential of a primordial way of thinking and thus affirmed ancient values through the deployment of fantastic narratives. It was a new realism for Klein, who advocated the advent of a new reality for mankind through the liberating potential of art. Klein was the more visionary, in that he optimistically envisioned a new reality to come. Buzzati's artworlds, on the contrary, were too often a critique of the real world, though failing to present any viable alternative, grieving as they were a bygone cultural milieu. Buzzati's visionary trait lies in the realm of the 'fantastic' itself: envisaging the potential of multimodal and intermedial works ahead of time, such as in picturebooks and comics.

The reason that makes possible such a distant comparison with Buzzati are Klein's devotion to Saint Rita, whose cult was common in the region of Nice in which he was born (Klein himself was initiated into the cult by his aunt Rose Raymond Gasperini), and the ex voto he offered to the Saint. The object offered during the 1961 pilgrimage to Cascia is nothing more than a small Plexiglas box, with pink, blue and gold pigments in separate compartments. A scroll manuscript is inserted in the box as well, interrupting the vertical projection of the three pigments. This is Klein's prayer to the saint, which also voices the general principles underlying the creation of the ex voto: "The Blue, the GOLD, the PINK, the IMMATERIAL, the VOID, the architecture of the air" are the first words that present the formal structure of the voto, recall Klein's art in his single manifestations, and bring this collected summa under the Saint's protective wing.

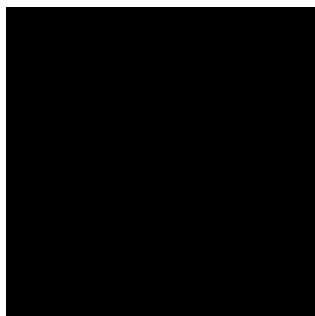


Figure 19. Yves Klein, *Ex Voto to Saint Rita* (front), 1961, Monastery of Saint Rita, Cascia

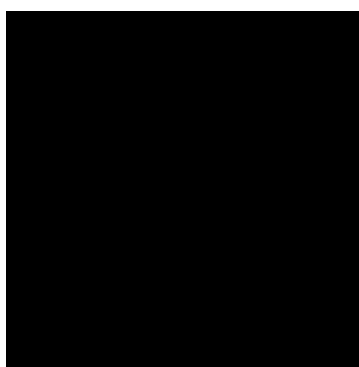


Figure 20. Yves Klein, *Ex Voto to Saint Rita*, 1961, Monastery of Saint Rita, Cascia

I shall now introduce the figure of Yves Klein as an artist before turning to the discussion of the two ex votos. Despite his religious devotion, Klein's teleological views were imbued with theosophical doctrines, in particular Rosicrucian. It is well known that his art was greatly influenced by theosophical ideas, "although the critical historiography concerning Klein's involvement with alchemical ideas is limited" (Szulakowska 2011, 52). As a matter of fact, alchemy was one of the aspects that impregnated Klein's search for the invisible: his conceptual artworks are intricate to the extent that they necessitate the artist's glosses to explicate his intentions. Fortunately, due to both the theatrical display of his art and his desire to spread 'higher' knowledge, Klein accompanied his beholders in the exegesis of his works. His writings bear witness to his intentions to bring about a new reality: "The newly developed sensibility, 'a new human dimension, guided by the soul', will in the future transform the spiritual and climatic conditions on the surface of our earth"<sup>205</sup> – we read in one of his projects for the

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<sup>205</sup> Yves Klein, Werner Runhau. "XIX Project for an Architecture of Air", in Klein (2007, 175).

architecture of air. I share the view that Klein “desired to inhabit the space literally”, aiming at “suppressing the space that exists in front of the painting, meaning that the painting’s presence is invading the space of the audience itself”.<sup>206</sup> Based on the previous discussion on emblems, I suggest that, if not emblematic in the traditional sense, Klein’s conceptual art indicates a path to meaning by dislocation: for instance, the traces left in his series of fire paintings; or his *Anthropometries* (1960) where the traces are left by ‘living brushes’, voluptuous bodies of models dipped in paint leaving their mark on the canvas; or the traces contained in *Wall and Fire Fountain* (1961), where fire recalls the alchemical flames, blue, gold and red.

The search for the purest essence of colour underlies the exemplarity of Klein’s artistic production, which yields to patenting the ultra-marine IKB, the famous blue of Klein’s *Monochromes*. The purest essence was sought not only quantitatively (monochromatically), but also qualitatively: the simplifying action of painting one shade would result in a simplified notion attached to it.<sup>207</sup> Gold and pink, together with his signature blue, later became the alchemical index of Klein’s search for the invisible behind the visible materiality of boundless colour. Blue, gold and pink (the rose of the Rosicrucians) (Szulakowska 2011, 54) are the mystical colours of longstanding pictorial traditions of religious subjects – *The Annunciation* by Beato Angelico examined in the previous chapter exemplifies the use of mystical colours. Klein’s decisive influence for a metaphysical turn was his adhesion to theosophical groups, through which his “visionary quest for the sacred and the absolute, testing the law” (Szulakowska 2011, 52) of “reciprocal balance between the mundane and the divine, between man and nature” (Klein 1982, 12) unfolded. As a few scholars have remarked, Klein’s episteme was greatly influenced by his mature readings of Gaston Bachelard. Besides Klein’s self-documented reading of Bachelard’s *Air and Dreams* [*L’air et les songes*, 1943], further influence, either directly or indirectly, could derive from *L’intuition de l’instant* [Intuition of the Instant, 1970], which now includes the essay “Instant poétique et instant métaphysique” [Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant, 1939], *The Dialectic of Duration* [*La dialectique de la durée*, 1936], *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* [*La psychanalyse du feu*, 1938], as well as *The Poetics of Space* [*La poétique de l’espace*, 1958]. A great deal of the explanation of Klein’s art

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<sup>206</sup> The first quote is from Philippe Vergne. “Earth, Wind, and Fire or to Overcome the paradox of Yves Klein, the Molecular Child who Wrote to Fidel Castro on his Way to Disneyland” in Vergne (2010, 45-65: 50), the second quote is from Vergne (2010, 50) but originally from Yves Klein. *Classeur Mon Livre*. Yves Klein Archives (online).

<sup>207</sup> “Pure pigment could take him away from painting” (Batchelor 2000, 107). The gestural, controlled component of painting was indeed growing less and less relevant in Klein’s and coeval art.

can be entrusted to Bachelard's words, as Bachelard's entire work is diffused with recurring concepts and terminology. The first idea recurring in Klein's episteme, is the possibility of human regeneration and liberation through poetry (painting in this case). This can be realized only because, in Bachelard's system, poetry can escape the normal order of events, "horizontal time": "It is this vertical time which the poet discovers when he rejects horizontal time, that is to say the time of others, the time of life, the world's time" (Parker 1989, 83). The notion of verticality opposed to horizontality is also typical of alchemical thought, and can be applied to Klein's work, when read from this perspective. Images, in Bachelard's system, exert their freeing potential from the matter of the world on human consciousness; thus, human consciousness would find the potential to renegotiate the interpretations of reality, to connect with its deeper self, or psyche, in Jungian terms:

we can, then, define a Copernican revolution of the imagination, by carefully limiting ourselves to the psychological problem of imagined qualities: instead of seeking the quality in the totality of the object... we will have to seek it in the total adhesion of the subject that is completely committed in what it imagines (Bachelard 1948, 81 transl. in Parker 1989, 85).

For Bachelard, images enact the same function that the *anima* carries out in Jung's system: the terminology *anima* and *animus* and their dialectic of archetypes are borrowed from Jung's inquiry through "the great cosmic reveries of alchemy", from *Psychology and Alchemy* [1944] to *Mysterium Coniunctionis* [1963] for example (Bachelard 1964, 60; Bachelard 1969, 70).

To relate Bachelard and Klein further, Klein's signature blue as the quintessential shade for infinity (the limitlessness suggested by the blue of the sea and of the sky) not only derives from the symbolic meaning assigned by many religions, but also by Bachelard's own influence. In his 1959 lecture at the Sorbonne, Klein quotes from Bachelard's *Air and Dreams*:

A document taken from Mallarmé in which the poet [...] perceives an azure that is too offensive and that wants to stop up with untiring hand the great blue holes that naughty birds make. [...] It is through the activity of the image that human psyche receives future causality through a kind of immediate finality [...] Also, in the realm of blue air more than elsewhere, we feel that the world may be permeated by the most indeterminate reverie. This is when reverie really has depth. The blue sky opens up in depth beneath the dream. Then dreams are not limited to one-dimensional images. Paradoxically, the aerial dream soon has only a depth dimension. The other two dimensions, in which picturesque, colored reverie plays its games, lose all their oneiric interest. The world is

then truly on the other side of the unsilvered mirror. There is an imaginary beyond, a pure beyond, one without a within. First there is nothing, then there is a deep *nothing*, then there is a blue *depth* (Yves Klein 2007, 86).

Bachelard's phenomenological system, based on the four elements, was alchemical in a sense, as was his notion of 'alchemical' thinking derived from Jung's, according to which

alchemy is not a theory of matter [...] it is a projection of the unconscious. It is a mystical, religious way, a sequence of symbols and symbolic acts which have a ritual, psychological function [...] It is with dream worlds and dream images, as revealing the structures of the unconscious, that Bachelard associates alchemy. It is for this reason the antithesis of science and belongs with poetry (Tiles 1984, 54-55).

Alchemy became for Jung a vast and insightful repertoire from which he could symmetrically develop psychological theories regarding the universal nature of symbols. As alchemy is relegated to the realm of pseudo-science by Cartesian modern thinking, the choice of adopting this *modus significandi* by Klein reveals the intention to convey meaning unconventionally, yet non hermetically. The mature artist, who has finally found his own style, becomes metaphorically the Master Alchemist who initiates his public. The premises of the scopic regime Martin Jay defined as Cartesian perspectivalism (Jay 1988, 4) are bound to crumble in the artistic quest for the supernatural – literally, for what is, or could be, beyond the physical realm. Alchemy and theosophical thinking became for Klein, like for many other artists,<sup>208</sup> an interpretive lens to decipher the world, one they relied so conspicuously upon that it could have been the symptom of a diffused scopic regime: I am referring to the multifarious currents that since Romanticism have frequently re-elaborated paganism and occultism. In Klein's case, Rosicrucian theories inspired by Max Heindel (1865-1919) played a pivotal role.

The 1948 reading of Heindel's *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* (1909) was the springboard into metaphysical systems of thought for Klein and his friends, the artist Arman

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<sup>208</sup> To cite a few: Marcel Duchamps, for example, *A Young Man and Girl in Spring*, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*. See Schwarz (1973, 81-98); Sigmar Polke in *Conjunctio, Lanterna Magica*; see Seegers (2003).



(Armand Fernandez) and the composer Claude Pascal. In 1948, Klein became a member of the Californian Rosicrucian Society of Oceanside, with which he would keep regular contact in the following three years. It is in such a syncretistic scenario that Yves Klein continued to conceive and practise his art, despite the very first phase of his artistic creativity being inseparable from orthodox beliefs.<sup>209</sup>

In this syncretic approach indecisively fluctuating between unorthodoxy and heterodoxy, many have pointed out the relations between Klein's modern adaptation of personal themes and Italian primitives, which lay bare the "link to the West's most ancient aesthetic practices" (Buisine 2000, 23). As a matter of fact,

in Klein's work it is as though the golden grounds of the Tuscan primitives or the Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna and Venice had swallowed up the rest of the representation, absorbed it. All that remains is the properly divine part of the medieval panels. In this sense Yves Klein is a true primitive of the Byzantine tradition, unlike Modigliani, for example, who decontextualizes and modernizes the aesthetic of the Quattrocento (Buisine 2000, 24).

This association is supported by Klein's own comments about Giotto, whose 'monochromes' he saw on his 1958 trip to Cascia to deliver his ex voto: "I consider the real precursor of the monochromy I practise to be Giotto, for his blue monochromes of Assisi (called patches of sky by art historians), but which are nonetheless unified blue monochromes)" (Yves Klein in Buisine 2000, 25). Blue, to Klein, is also "the obscurity becoming visible [...]. [It] shows a balance between day and night" (Klein 2007, 86). The Blue Period is only a prelude to the subsequent chromatic search that led him to the "cosmological trilogy of personal transmutation of colours: ultra-marine IKB blue, gold, and pink – not blue, yellow and red" (Restany 2005, 25).

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<sup>209</sup> "In 1951, at the age of twenty-three, he was horrified by the paganism of the costumed, baroque processions of the penitent brotherhoods during Holy Week. It was frightening to imagine, he wrote in his diary on March 23, that still in our time an entire nation lives with such a false and confused idea of God and Christ. At the time, he painted watercolors showing Christ bearing the Cross" (Buisine 2000, 22).

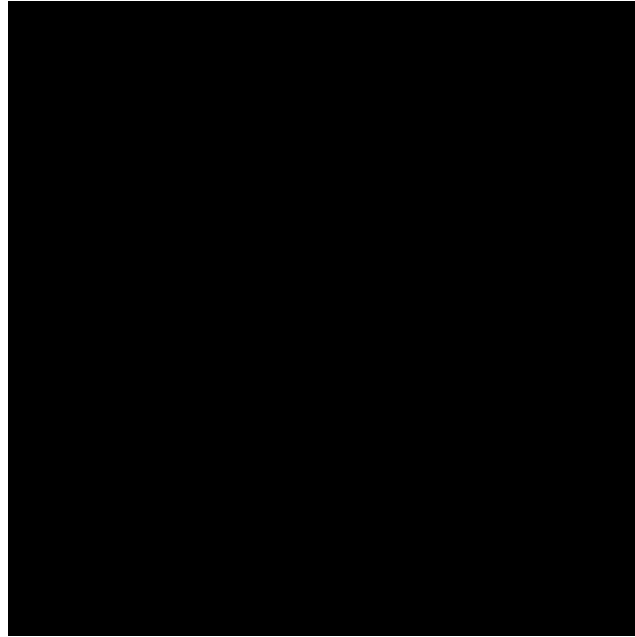


Figure 21. An example of Klein's *Monochromes* in the colours of the mystical tradition: pink, gold, and blue

This chromatic trilogy, as well as Klein's experimentations with Void and Fire, can be interpreted in the same terms as Duchamp's work is read as alchemical: the underlying Jungian notions on psychology and alchemy provide an ideal creative conversation with select artistic contexts. It is beyond the scope of the present study to trace a history of alchemical influences in modern and contemporary art. However, even with a superficial understanding of some basic principles, it is possible to comprehend a few correlations between alchemical and contemporary art. Klein's *ex voto* to Saint Rita itself presents the colours of the mystical and alchemical traditions, which warrants a deeper analysis of these.

Alchemy was a doctrine which dispensed higher knowledge through progressive stages. The highest result was to attain the transmutation of stone into gold – the Philosopher's stone. In Jung's system, the stone (*lapis*) became the end point of a metaphoric process for the self-individuation first, and then self-elevation. The lineage of human quest for knowledge, ranging from teleological physics to (pseudo-)Llullian alchemical thought for example, remained still unbroken in its Jungian variation where the "much-sought-after stone was a symbol of something that can be found only within the psyche of man" (von Franz 1968, 226). Achieving higher knowledge entails a *solve et coagula* process of one's conscience – destroying one's identity first, so as to create a new one. Then, a reconciled unity would reflect the primordial chaos of the cosmos before taking shape in determinate forms. Climbing the ladder of the

elevation process, the adepts would have to undertake different phases,<sup>210</sup> each identified by a predominant shade. The first stage, *calcinatio* or *melanosis* (blackening) would induce a kind of death – annihilation of the self – the perfect state of *tabula rasa*. The subsequent phase, *albedo* or *leucosis* (whitening), is the purification of the soul upon which rays of enlightenment shine (*citrinitas* or *xanthosis*). The last phase, *rubedo* or *iosis* (reddening) leads to the reconciliation of opposites at a higher level: from *materia prima* (the primordial chaos) the alchemical trajectory is drawn towards the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the *unio mentalis* – what Jung would define as ‘individuation’.

If Klein’s underlying principles of artistic creation were influenced by similar ideas applied to his *materia prima* –blank canvases, empty walls/spaces, for instance – then the small Plexiglass ex voto dedicated to Saint Rita combines religious and alchemical thought. In Klein’s words, “first there is nothing, then there is a deep *nothing*, then there is a blue *depth*” (Klein 2007, 86); therefore, the so-called blue phase can be seen as the *calcinatio* – the “blackening”, the annihilation of the self as a manifest entity on the canvas, a pristine evocation of infinity. The mono-gold (Klein gained mastery in gilding during his London apprenticeship at a framer’s workshop) and the mono-pink (which Klein decided to obtain by mixing crimson red and purified snow-white) (Restany 2005, 25) are subordinate to the ultra-marine blue. The ascending movement to higher stages retains that ‘space of pictorial sensibility’: “Dans la trinité de la flamme, le bleu reste dominant. Klein parle de ‘l’or du bleu’, du ‘rose du bleu’, et il écrit, en lettres majuscules, dans la marge de son album: ‘L’or brûle bleu!’” (Everaert-Desmedt 1997, 179).<sup>211</sup>

The monochrome trilogy, however, does not exhaust Klein’s artistic search.<sup>212</sup> The whiteness of *The Void*, in the empty gallery Iris Clert (1958) whose walls Klein painted white to achieve a purer effect, or the immaterial episteme that supports the *Leap into the Void* (1960) are still part of Klein’s ascending movement toward the liberation of mankind through the power of art. This feature is present in Buzzati under a different characterisation – mostly pessimistic – as the *fanciullismo* and the research of the primeval state of mankind through the fantastic. The search for an original state in Klein was behind the idea of a never-realized

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<sup>210</sup> As with emblems, there are numerous normative descriptions of the alchemical processes and stages. A few commentators mention more than 4 phases, while others tend to omit the phase of *citrinitas*, as Jung does.

<sup>211</sup> My translation [In the trinity of the flame, blue prevails. Klein speaks of gold blue, pink blue, and he writes, in capital letters, in margin to his book, gold burns blue].

<sup>212</sup> I am not following Restany’s interpretation here: “Madder rose represents the Holy Spirit before the gold of the father and the blue of the Son; gold for immortality and blue for sensibility. [...] The transmutation is accomplished”, Restany (2005, 25).

project, *The Five Rooms*, appearing in the same fake newspaper *Le Dimanche* (circulated on 27 November 1960) advertising Klein's sensational leap into the void.

In the first room, the visitors would find nine monochromatic IKB paintings of identical format; the second would be an empty room, with white-painted walls; the third room would host nine mono-gold paintings; the fourth would be empty and dark. Finally, the fifth room would host nine mono-pink paintings. (Szulakowska 2011, 56).<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, if one believes his intention to “create freedom in the first material state” (Klein 2007, 141) through painting, he did not entirely succeed in his de-materialising operation. In fact, “objects remained a necessary component to demonstrate his ideas. It was as if Klein were reluctant to meditate without providing traces of his thought process” (Vergne 2010, 53).

While such attempts halted with his premature death, Klein's art – because of its status of objecthood – continues to showcase his boundless visionary potential. The *ex voto* to Saint Rita is then a material relic of Klein's quest for the invisible: “my paintings are not my definitive works. They are leftovers of a creative process” (Vergne 2010, 47). The *ex voto* was created in 1961, the same year as *The Anthropometries*, where a de-metaphorization, as it were, of the Eucharist takes place.

The anonymous *ex voto* left at the monastery in Cascia does not presuppose any theatrical, attention-seeking apparition, and is a sincere offering. The multimodal nature of this artefact visual and verbal, and the proximity of Klein's and Buzzati's poetics, further stimulate the comparison.

The visual component in Klein's *ex voto* is a summa of his monochromes while the verbal – the dedicatory text<sup>214</sup> – goes beyond a simple prayer: it is a more precise exegesis of its alethic

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<sup>213</sup> A remark is due on the ritual aspect of the gallery ‘set design’, and in general the attention reserved by Klein to the modality in which his art was to be executed – which reflect his interests in spirituality and mysticism. Indeed, Vergne (2011) emphasised how in French the adjective “spirituel” contains a double meaning: namely, it signals involvement in spirituality, as well as a “humorous, witty” approach to life. This same nuance has been interpreted, in Klein's later work, as a tendency to exhibitionism: “it is difficult” for some “to distinguish where the initiate ended and where the charlatan in Klein began”.

<sup>214</sup> “1961, Feb. Y.K.// The Blue, the GOLD, the PINK, the IMMATERIAL, the VOID, the architecture of the air, the urban planning of air, the air-conditioning of the great geographic spaces for a return to a human life in nature, in the Paradisiac state of legend. The three fine gold ingots are the product of the sale of the first 4 ZONES OF IMMATERIAL PICTORIAL SENSIBILITY.// To Almighty God Father in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ and in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and in the name of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Virgin Mary. Through St. Rita da Cascia, under her care and protection, all my infinite gratitude. Thank you. Y.K. // St. Rita da Cascia, please intercede with Almighty God the Father that he may always grant me in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and the name of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Virgin Mary the favour of inhabiting my works and that they may become ever more beautiful, and also the favour that I may continually and regularly discover ever new and lovelier things in art even if alas I may not always be worthy to be a tool for the construction and creation of Great Beauty. Please let everything that comes out of me be Beautiful. Amen, Y.K. // Under the earthly care of St. Rita da Cascia: the Pictorial Sensibility [sic], the mono-chromes, the I.K.B.s, the sponge sculptures, the

and poetic value. The text allows the reader to infer and relate its narrative to Klein's writings on art, for instance, while the materiality of the *ex voto* allows reference to the cultural discourses at play ('cultural' in a broad sense, including the anthropological). Therefore, Klein's *ex voto* can be analysed according to the different perspectives assumed in Buzzati's case: thematic, poetological, anthropological, and emblematic. The *ex voto* was not created as an artwork to be displayed in public; however, we perceive Klein's artistic paradigm condensed in it, as it were a synecdoche and a metonymy at the same time: a quantitative and qualitative condensation of the poetics he developed during his brief career. Philippe Vergne shares this perspective:

[...] I like to joke that it would have almost been enough to have just the *Ex-voto* as the entire exhibition. On its own, it's kind of a mini-exhibition of Yves Klein's work: all of the elements are there, and it shows a commitment to the colors that he has always used, including the gold. There's also the relation of this work to his spiritual side. Klein always said that his paintings and sculptures were the "ashes" of his art, so to have to have some kind of a reliquary in the show was important (Vergne 2011).<sup>215</sup>

The *ex voto* to Saint Rita can thus be interpreted as a trace of a trace, a concise summary of Klein's art.

The interplay of images and words is distant from the word-image relation Buzzati proposed in VM. The hermeneutic conundrum in Buzzati's conflictual multimodality lies in the

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immaterial, the static anthropometrical imprints, positive, negative and in movement, the shrouds, the Fountains of Fire, of water and Fire, - the architecture of the air, the urbanism of the air, the air-conditioning of geo-graphic spaces thus transformed into constant Gardens of Eden rediscovered on the surface of our globe – the Void.- The theatre of the Void – all the particular variations in connection with my work – the Cosmogonies – my Blue sky – all my theories in general – May my enemies become my friends, and if that is impossible, may nothing which they might attempt against me ever be of any avail or ever affect me in any way whatever – Make me, and all my works, totally invulnerable. Amen.- May all my works at Gelsenkirchen always be Beautiful, more and more beautiful, and let them be recognized as such more and more and as quickly as possible. May the Fountain of Fire and walls of Fire, be executed by me in the Opera square at Gelsenkirchen without delay – May my Krefeld Exhibition be the greatest success of the century and be recognized by all. // St. Rita da Cascia, Saint of impossible and desperate causes, thanks be to you for all powerful, decisive and marvellous help which you have granted me so far – I thank you with all my heart. Even if I am not personally worthy to receive it grant me aid again and always in my art and always protect everything that I have created so that it may, despite me, be of Great Beauty for ever. Y.K." (Morley 2010, 86-87).

<sup>215</sup> Vergne was the co-curator of *Yves Klein. With the Void, Full Powers* in 2010, the most extensive retrospective of the artist's work in the United States since 1982, co-organized by the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Walker Art Center. The quote is from an interview with Vergne published on the blog the Walker Art Center: <http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2011/01/27/yves-klein-and-the-patron-saint-of-lost-causes/>

dissonant representations provided by words and images. The hermeneutic conundrum in Klein's *ex voto* lies in the high level of visual literacy required to go beyond the material form: most of the hermeneutic process has to take place by dislocation, in the critical apparatus provided by Klein himself. The enclosed prayer is useful for classifying this colourful object as an *ex voto*; moreover, the fact that Klein brought it to the Monastery in Cascia and that he used a precious material such as pure gold for it, attests to the high value conferred. If the words were missing or illegible, the visual component itself would suffice to indicate the extraordinary function of this object. In addition, the location where it was found (and recognised as Klein's *ex voto* after almost 20 years since its offering) qualifies its purpose as religious. Saint Rita is the patron saint of lost causes, as mentioned. Vergne links Klein's serendipitous devotion (instilled in him at a young age by his family) and his 'desperate' artistic undertaking:

This particular work, despite its small size, does seem to encompass so many of his ideas and so much of his philosophy. [...] I'm not trying to justify or find an explanation for his work within 20th-century art. I'm more interested to see Klein in a timeless way, beyond 20th-century modernity.

[...]

He has this passion for Santa Rita as the patron saint of lost causes, and then he has this absolute belief in the capacity of art to make a difference. And maybe there's something critical there, saying that in this culture, art—the absolute purity of art, art that is not compromised—is a lost cause. These absolute standards that Klein believed in were maybe for him like a lost cause. It's interesting to read the little prayer embedded in this work. He's praying to become a better artist. It's a very moving, genuine gesture (Vergne 2011).

Buzzati's work embarks on an iconotextual journey whose unfolding reveals the reciprocal shortcomings of image and word resulting in hermeneutical conundrums. As Buzzati – despite his frustrations and reservations – is still remembered and described mainly as a writer who also painted, the horizon of expectations weighs on his hybrid work more than in Klein's molecular, volatile art. The fictional, iconotextual narrative in Buzzati results as more obscure, hermeneutically speaking, than the bright colours of the small object which alone suffice to signify – provided one is familiar with Klein's artistic style such as his "chromophilia".

The purposes of these two artworks are very distant: Buzzati's is mainly literary and iconotextual, Klein's sincere *ex voto* gained aesthetic value once it was discovered it had been made by Klein, not because of the artist's will. However, they are both multimodal – combining words and images – and both require an understanding of thematic, anthropological,

poetological, and emblematic aspects. Although personal re-elaborations of the ex voto form, they represent an ideal case study to test the potential and limitations of the multimodal potentialities of words and images, be they iconotexts or texts and icons.

## Closing Note

Reflections on this order of words and images – appearing within the same medium, always inseparable in their meaning-making potential – have taken an explicit metaphysical turn with the analysis of Klein’s ex voto, touching on issues such as immateriality. The Kantian unknowability of the noumenic world is at once evoked and challenged by Klein’s art, attempting as it does to transcend the limits of the invisible and of the intangible. Buzzati and Klein both aimed at two worlds, the visible and the invisible – symbolically, the vertical projection of the mountain<sup>216</sup>, the architecture of air – and in so doing they were bound to overstep retinal boundaries (Badet 2008, 53).

The reasons for looking beyond the realm of the visible is intrinsic to the visible itself – just as for Wittgenstein “the metaphysical subject” is “the limit of the world – not a part of it” (Wittgenstein, TLP 5.641). Writing, painting, and the writing-painting iconotextual activity are examples of attempts at making visible what is not (a sound, an idea, a story, a divinity, and so on). Thus, they aim to push the boundaries of the visible a bit further into the invisible realm. I want to conclude this analysis of Klein and Buzzati by inscribing their experiences in two of the categories that Riccardo Donati has coined for the relationship of (poetic) words and other artistic experiences, from video art to painting to comics (Donati 2014).

First, there is the category of the gaze as event: the artistic gaze creating an event, an art world of its own which adds complexity to the existing world (Donati 2014, 19). Space – where art is created and where it dwells – is meant as a space of consciousness for the beholder who is absorbed by the creation. A random act (Pollock-like, as Donati calls it) of creation (like the traces left in Klein’s shrouds and *Anthropometries*) will enrapture the beholder out of himself/herself, as the etymology of ‘ecstasy’ suggests.

The second category, which also applies to Klein’s art, is the gaze as advent. The term ‘advent’ is meant as the coming of another reality, the one implied by the artwork. In this

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<sup>216</sup> On Buzzati’s relationship with the mountain, see Viganò (2010); De Anna (1997); Cecchin, Bertoldin, Dalla Rosa, Pilo, Ugo (1994); Crotti (1983, 195-199).

category, art becomes revelatory of another order of things, transcending mere appearances: the advent is revealed by the epiphanic moment art discloses to its beholders. However, it is by full immersion in the essence of the artwork that the new order – the Other – can be glimpsed. This second modality can be experienced in two ways: the advent can be purported either by an iconic or by an idolatrous way of looking at the artwork. Klein's offer a mix of the two modalities: his art is icon-like, both in the art-historical sense of the term (his tension towards a modern religiousness is obvious) and in the Peircean sense: it physically resembles what it stands for: the blue is the blue of the sky that Klein described after Bachelard. Nevertheless, it is not purely iconic in that it invites one to look for its meaning elsewhere – in alchemical, theosophical, and even Kleinian theories of how the world is or should be. Klein's art is then idolatrous – still adopting Donati's definition – because at times the artwork becomes pure essence itself: by dematerialising the form, for example, Klein's monochromes offer the interpretation of simulacra of immediate presences.

Not only in Klein but also in Buzzati can the attraction to the noumenic, unknowable world be found. As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, Buzzati's fascination rests with the fantastic, with the otherworld (Fellini's *Mastorna* is an example), with “what is in a way but can be in another way as well” – a reminiscence of the principles of Tabucchi's RG.<sup>217</sup>

Like Klein, Buzzati was inclined to metaphysical enthrallments. For example, he was the first buyer to honour the bill of sale of one of Klein's zones of immaterial sensibility (*Ritual for the Relinquishment of the Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility Zones*). *Relazioni impossibili* [Impossible Relations] by artist Luigi Manciocco, is the title of a small video-art exhibition (April -June 2016) dedicated to Klein, Buzzati, and their connection: Saint Rita.

Looking at the pictures of the ritual purchase of one zone of immaterial sensibility (see below), one wonders why it is not an established opinion that Klein's poetics has influenced Buzzati's, especially in his late works. Even if one cannot ascertain the extent to which Klein was influential, the respective attraction towards the immaterial is undeniable.

The ritual purchase consisted in the trade of a ‘zone of immaterial sensibility’ (‘relinquished’ to the buyer) for around twenty gold ingots (destined for the artist). The transaction was testified by a proof of purchase to be burnt. Through this ritual Klein claimed

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<sup>217</sup> I am alluding to the declaration of poetics mentioned in Chapter 1, where Tabucchi's RG, is based on the realisation: “l'essermi accorto, un giorno, per le imprevedibili circostanze della vita, che una certa cosa che era così era invece anche in un altro modo”.



to have overcome the problem of art,<sup>218</sup> in that he, as an artist, was able to ‘sell’ not even his art, not even a perceivable datum – a phenomenon – but the intangible: a noumenon. Part of the gold gained from the transaction was to be scattered into the Seine by Klein; the remaining gold was destined to the Plexiglas box of Klein’s *ex voto*. The second part of the ritual consisted of the ephemeral possession of the gold: “My purpose is to extract and conclude the trace of the immediate from any incidence of natural objects – human, animal, vegetable, or atmospheric circumstances” (Klein 2007, 196). Assuming his intentions were genuine, Klein attributed great significance to the ritual transaction. Predictably, many have seen a form of modern consumerism in Klein’s exceptional marketing abilities (one that later became commonly promoted by contemporary art markets), and a sign of idolatry in the sensationalism around the person of the artist as demiurge. The worst of Yves Klein has indeed been named: the Trickster, the Magician, the Marketeer Extraordinaire.<sup>219</sup>

Whether Buzzati did ‘gain’ something from this gold-for-void trade, whether Buzzati’s ‘painting’ of the invisible is a translation of a poetics of the invisible (and therefore, of fictional universes, whether this is an influence Buzzati derived from Klein, cannot be ascertained. However, the multimodal connection of the two *ex votos* – their iconotextual properties – suggests that Buzzati’s and Klein’s poetics met somewhere in the *hyphos* of all actual and possible relations.

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<sup>218</sup> Klein: “It’s not enough to say or write: I have gone beyond the problem of art. One must still have to have done it. I’ve done it. For me painting today no longer relates to the eye; it relates to the only thing in us that does not belong to us: our LIVE” (Perlein and Cora 2000, 75).

<sup>219</sup> Klein’s art was so marketable that one of his performances was counteracted by Arman, another artist close to New Realism, with a reversal of Klein’s exhibition *Le Vide* [*The Void*]: *Le Plein* [*Full Up*].

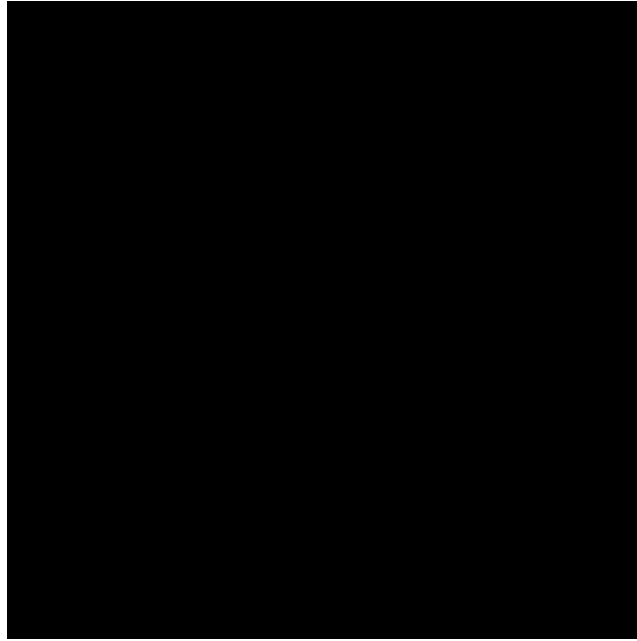


Figure 22. Yves Klein and Dino Buzzati performing *The Ritual for the Relinquishment of the Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility Zones*, Paris, 26 January 196

## Conclusions

The theoretical questions that the practice of intermediality and multimodality in the old media pose are still pressing and relevant. I have analysed the ways in which the dialectic of epistemic Turns here examined often radicalises discourses of paradigmatic supremacy, thus arguing that a broader/more inclusive/less reductive/less definitive/richer approach has more to offer in analysing interartistic and intermedial exchanges

First, the formulation of these come often belatedly: De Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* [Course in General Linguistics] was published posthumously in 1916, while the acknowledgement of its profound influence only came in 1967 with Richard Rorty's *Linguistic Turn*. Likewise, the prodrome of the staggering influence of images was already perceived, in the 70's and 80's, by Italo Calvino, Roland Barthes, and the group of psychologists from which Barthes drew. Again, it was only in 1994 that Mitchell theorised the Pictorial Turn.

Second, despite the usefulness of such definitions, the stark opposition promoted by the rhetoric of the Turns results in the scarce attention to fine-grained aspects which would otherwise add alternative, enriching perspectives.

In particular, I have highlighted how the identity/alterity dialectic, which Peirce's triadic system as well as Bakhtin's dialogicity further explain, underpins most configurations of the word-image relation. The whole dialectic of *difference* and *negativity* on which traditional metaphysics relies, contra *alterity* (the irreducible Other), as noted by Lévinas, is one of most significant forces that lie behind any attempt to translating. The intermedial and multimodal case studies I have examined in the three case studies each point to a different set of problems. Nevertheless, one can undertake a coherent discussion on the word-image paragone as intermedial and multimodal – and of course intersemiotic – translation thanks to Peircean semiotics and Bakhtinian dialogicity. Following Bakhtin and Peirce, I have examined why any dialectic involving stark oppositions would not account for intermedial and multimodal works. In these two modalities, meaning creation is essentially abductive, as in Peirce's formulation which differentiates abduction from deduction and induction. The relation between the premises and conclusion in the abductive creation of meaning is iconic and dialogic: similarity – not identity – governs the dialogue between source and target of such intersemiotic translation processes. In other words, as shown especially in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, “mimesis is not resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance”, that is, “[i]t is a way of making resemblances

function within a set of relations between ways of making, modes of speech, forms of visibility, and protocols of intelligibility” (Rancière 2007, 73).

This means that the end result of any intermedial and multimodal translation process is always original, though it has high margin of risks for it defies conventionality. Indeed, in abductive creation the dialogic component injects an element of otherness in the meaning-creation process, as dialogue is always “suffered” by a subject facing alterity. Such *semeiosis* is rhizomatic, that is, uncontrolled by a dominating centre and virtually unbound to any hierarchy. Nevertheless, as communication is the main purpose of meaning creation, a certain degree of conventionality is retained: the arborescent (the hierarchical, the canonical) interpenetrates the rhizomatic (the original, the unconstrained).

Chapter 1 highlighted the crisis of classical representation and of the model of the *ut pictura poësis* through the problematisation of vision and perception in Antonio Tabucchi’s *Il gioco del rovescio* [The Reverse Game] and Daniele Del Giudice’s *Nel museo di Reims* [In Reims Museum]. Both conceive writing as a game – à la Wittgenstein – that is supported by images. The ludic component of the intermedial configurations I have examined in my case studies has been widely used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: for instance, Symbolism, Dadaism, Metaphysics, and Surrealism (Sbrilli 2012). The combination of distant elements (characteristic of the artistic movements just mentioned), the allusion to residues and waste, the need for a preliminary and a subsequent reading, are elements of the dream, the collage, the rebus. It has been noted that Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), explained some aspect of oneiric activity through the rationale of the rebus, whereas Lacan would liken dreams to the charades (a game which is played by combining two words to form another) (Sbrilli 2012).

Rebuses, dreams, and collages function on a “mechanism that is isomorphic to the psychic-neurologic experience of dreaming, to the tradition of *serio ludere* through images and words, to the modern perception, all-encompassing and fragmentary, of the images reproduced and disseminated by the mass media” (Sbrilli 2012, my translation). Tabucchi himself overtly referred to the form of rebus, in *Requiem* (1992) and *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* [Little Misunderstandings of No Importance, 1985], a collection that includes the short story *Rebus* [A Riddle]. Tabucchi’s enigmas never provide the reader with the ultimate solution, but only a range of interpretations. Dreams, rebuses, collages, are therefore rhizomatic strategies of meaning creation that function particularly well in intermedial and multimodal context as they maximise the ambiguous potential of alterity these practices normally entail. This perspective, which I have not tackled from a psychoanalytic point of view, present enriching avenues of research.

The enigmas that ekphrasis present and never solves compensate for the impossibility of ekphrastic desire to fulfil its appetite. Ekphrasis manifests “the semiotic desire for the natural sign, the desire, that is, to have the world captured in a word”. However, “this desire to see the world in a word is what, after Derrida, we have come to term the logocentric desire” (Krieger 1992, 11). “According to Derrida, as soon as culture invents an arbitrary sign system, there arises a yearning to close the gap between the sign and the signified” (Bolter 1996, 264). In short, the logocentric fallacy consists in the paradox of crystallising the representation of the world through language. This means that ekphrastic writing is possible by virtue of ekphrastic desire. As Kennedy observes, this ‘possibility’ involves lack, surplus, and negative space.

Lacan’s distinction between demand, need and desire is a useful starting point for understanding this combination. Need is biological and derives from the organism’s physical requirements for life. The subject is born helpless and therefore relies on the Other to satisfy its needs. To achieve this, the baby or infant has to attract the Other’s attention by articulating its needs [...]. However, since in Lacan’s view the subject really wants the unconditional love of the Other, and since this can never be achieved, there is a surplus. This surplus is desire: ‘Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second’ (Lacan 1977: 287). Lacan elsewhere describes this difference as a psychological space: ‘the margin in which demand becomes separated from need’ (Kennedy 2012, 134).

The desire for ekphrasis to bridge the lacuna between the verbal and the visual is what Mitchell describes as “a [...] phase of fascination with the topic [called] ‘ekphrastic hope.’ This is the phase where the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see’” (Mitchell 1994, 152). Ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear – “the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually” – are also fundamental to the dialogic dialectic of ekphrastic creation, provided neither phase prevails and crystallises.

The central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called ‘the overcoming of otherness.’ These acts of verbal ‘conjuring’ are what would seem to be specific to the genre of ekphrastic poetry, and specific

to literary art in general, insofar as it obeys what Murray Krieger calls ‘the ekphrastic principle.’ Something special and magical is required of language (Mitchell 1994, 158).

Nevertheless, Mitchell has rightfully emphasised that this attitude toward ekphrasis stems from “a confusion between differences of medium and differences in meaning” as we take for granted

Marshall McLuhan’s dazzling and misleading metaphor, ‘the medium is the message’. In ekphrasis, the ‘message’ or (more precisely) the object of reference is a visual representation; and, therefore, (we suppose) the medium of language *must* approximate this condition. [...]. Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for language because communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called ‘speech acts’ are not medium-specific, are not ‘proper’ to some medium or other. [...] The mystery is why we have this urge to treat the medium as if it were the message, why we make the obvious, practical differences between *these* two media into metaphysical oppositions which seem to control our communicative acts, and which then have to be overcome with utopian fantasies like ekphrasis. (Mitchell 1994, 159-160).<sup>220</sup>

The dialectic, in ekphrasis, of identity and alterity, of rhizomatic and arborescent, indicates, paradoxically the way to an alternative model, which finds its main theoretical tenets in Peirce’s and Bakhtin’s doctrines. Mitchell phrases the issue of the triadic model in a fashion similar to Peircean semiotics. From a pragmatic standpoint, the chain of interpretants produced by the ‘ekphrastic poet’ (or composer) as the intersemiotic (intermedial/multimodal) translation of a visual representation, is re-mediated by the reader through his own formulation of interpretants. As in Peircean semiotics, the interpretive process is created by a chain of interpretants that defers, through signs, the objects of representation *ad infinitum*. Mitchell’s conclusion is, too, that the semiotics of ekphrastic translation follows a more complex process than the binary system of Saussurean linguistics. As Mitchell observes,

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<sup>220</sup> Mitchell goes on: “A phenomenological answer would start, I suppose, from the basic relationship of the self (as a speaking and seeing subject) and the other (a seen and silent object). [...] The ‘otherness’ we attribute to the image-text relationship is [...] certainly not exhausted by a phenomenological model (subject/object, spectator/image). It takes on the full range of possible social relations inscribed within the field of verbal and visual representation. [...] The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with others.” (1994, 163)

Ekphrasis is stationed between two ‘othernesses, and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader. The ‘working through’ of ekphrasis and the other, then, is more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a *menage a trois* in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed. If ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual object (whether to possess or praise), it is also typically an offering of this expression as a gift to the reader (Mitchell 1994, 164).

Interestingly, Mitchell annotated this passage with a comment on the affinity of ekphrastic and dream interpretation: “the manifest visual content of the dream is the ekphrastic object, the analysand is the ekphrastic speaker, and the analyst is the reader/interpreter” (Mitchell 1994, 164). The dimension of desire emerges in the analysis of the paradox of ekphrasis, once one acknowledges the fallacy that the medium is the message. This brings us back to the question of negativity and marginality, since desire can only exist in the margin as the result of difference between need and demand. Ekphrastic desire, thus, reproduces itself although “strictly speaking, has no object”. In Lacan’s view,

desire is a constant search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying it, in other words, extinguishing it. Desire is fundamentally caught up in the dialectical movement of one signifier to the next, and is diametrically opposed to fixation. It does not seek satisfaction, but rather its own continuation and furtherance (Fink 1996, 90).

As a definite answer to a permanent deferral, the main conclusion to draw from the analysis of intersemiotic ekphrasis is that the relation of words and images is an infinite one as mimesis always implies a *certain* regime of resemblance. In the brief narratives examined, two situations have emerged. On the one hand, writing never clarifies the image. On the other, the image only echoes and amplifies the uncertainty of perception and writing. The game that both narratives offer the reader is based on this discrepancy. *The Reverse Game* reflects a poetics of alterity, an invitation to see behind the limitations of the written page and its representation of reality. In the *The Reims Museum*, the game echoes the same purpose with an emphasis on the mendacious nature of fiction and the naïveté of the blind reader. The discrepancy of words and images is

captured in the distortion of quintessential details. The subject is able to perform a sort of Husserlian *epoché* – the reconstitution of cognitive faculties and retuning to reality after a voluntary distancing – by focussing on forged details, that is, by unknowing what she knew of the painting.

The role of details for translation across sign systems is cardinal and deserves further exploration. For instance, the paradox of ekphrastic description, as described by Mitchell, is evident in Antonella Anedda's *La vita dei dettagli. Scomporre quadri, immaginare mondi* [The Life of Details. Deconstructing Paintings, Imagining Worlds, 2009]. This is a collection of pictorial details presented as a short essay between narration and scholarly exposition. Anedda – both an art critic and an acclaimed poet – opts for the potential of the detail to expand without constraints the meaning of the original paintings, photographs, and installations: as a reader of art critic Arasse, who composed a monograph on the detail (1992)<sup>221</sup>, Anedda uses intertextuality as a catalyst of abductive creation. Thus, Anedda's own relation with the visual and intertextuality – framed as abductive potential for creation – offers further material for reflecting on the word-image relation.

In *La vita dei dettagli*, the process of ekphrastic translation is independent from the source text: “thought through my eyes” is the epigraph from Joyce's *Ulysses* shaping Anedda's narration of select painting details. The translation of the thought elicited by the visual is as unbound to the source text as a rhizome from its origin. Anedda's intention is to deconstruct, by isolation, the story that each painting proposes by accumulation of details, in a fashion similar to the vignettes of Buzzati's *ex votos*. As Stephen Bloom walking along the beach, Anedda's inspiration to think (and write) derives from the visible: “Ineluctable modality of the visible: thought through my eyes”. Bloom goes on: “Signatures of all things I am here to read” (*Ulysses*, Proteus, 3.1-2).<sup>222</sup> The phrase, inspired to mystic and theologian Jakob Boehme, refers to the wrecked tokens of a past existence encountered on the beach by Bloom. Similarly, Anedda meditates on the previous life of the details she examines but liberates them by gifting them with a second existence. “The enigma of recognition, after all, is that of a reality we often doubt; for this reason it can hurt, for the same reason it can comfort. As for everything in the

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<sup>221</sup> Didi-Huberman's work on Fra Angelico also draws from Arasse.

<sup>222</sup> This longing to interpreting the traces of the natural world seems to configure Bloom's *semeiosis* as global – exactly as in Sebeok's semiotics. This complements Bakhtin's notion of intercorporeality for which “the body is overwhelmed by an interference of voices which denies it self-sufficiency and univocality; the body does not belong to the hero, it is not its own, for it is exposed to the gaze and to the word of the other. [...] Despite separation, identification, membership, distinction, homologation functional to individuality, the body of each one of us remembers its constitutive intercorporeity” (Petrilli 2015, 126).



world, that often depends on the light” (Anedda 2009, IX). In *The Life of Details*, Anedda translates thirty-two cut-outs of widely known paintings and videos (Viola, Hopper, Magritte, Giotto, Pontormo, etc.) in her own personal stories. She provides the solutions separately, so that each detail is a riddle for the reader. The intention to deprive each detail of its context derives from “the necessity to [...] disobey distance” (Anedda 2009, X). For example, Anedda zooms in on a detail of a house with glimmering windows seen from outside, in a moment that could be late evening, early morning, either with the light still on or already on (Anedda 2009, 15). Those who look at the excerpted detail are forced to stay ‘outside’ the house in the cold, in a liminal space that does not dispel the ambiguity of the extrapolated detail. The painting she excerpts this detail from is *The Empire of Light* by René Magritte (1954). “We covet what the yellow-glimmering windows promise”, Anedda observes,<sup>223</sup> yet “the empire of light” – sheer presence and full recognition – “is a region as amphibious as a lake”. This is an excellent example of ekphrastic translation.

Where the original text in Italian would have “ambiguous” [“Parliamo di un regno ambiguo come un lago”; *ambigere*, ‘ambi-’: both ways; ‘agere’: drive, lead], I shall stress the duality of translation to create different worlds and possible lives [‘ambi-’: of both kinds; ‘bios’: life ]. Hence, the semiotic independence of the life of details. Ekphrasis is caught between the ambiguity of hope and fear, identity and alterity, medium and message, desire and the Other, margin and centre. This is why interpretation semiotics, Peirce’s semiotics in particular, Bakhtin’s dialogicity, and the notion of rhizomatic semiosis are highly suitable frameworks of research.



Figure 23: René Magritte, *Empire of Light*, 1954, detail

<sup>223</sup> Original text, “Proviamo invidia per quello che promettono le finestre illuminate di giallo”, my translation, Anedda (2009, 15).

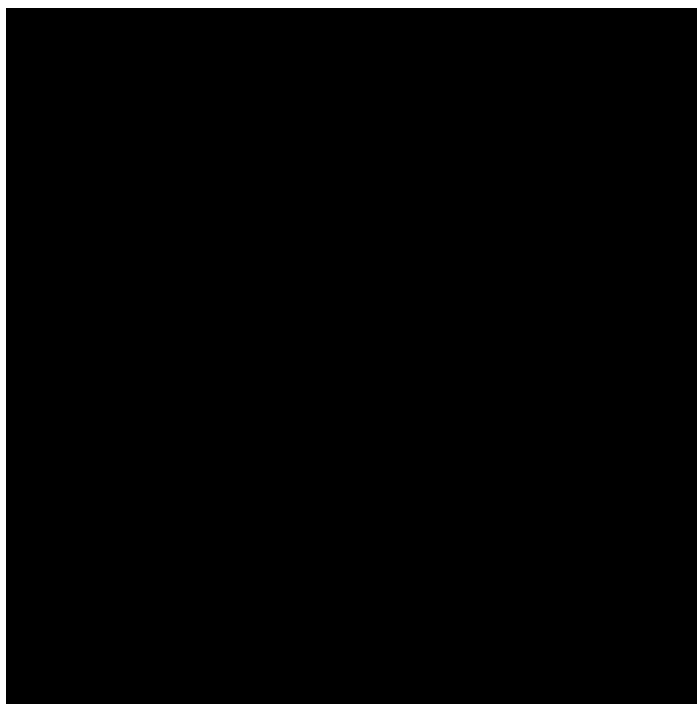


Figure 24: René Magritte, *Empire of Light*, 1954

While Anedda's close-ups provide a powerful invitation to further investigate the dynamics of desire, alterity, and the word-image relation, there is another work by Tabucchi that deserves immediate attention. The small and colourful booklet, *Isabella e l'ombra* [Isabella and the Shadow, 2013], illustrated by and dedicated to Isabella Staino, is introduced by Riccardo Greco, a former student of Tabucchi, founder of the literary imprint of Vittoria Iguazu Editore. Greco retraces the salient moments of Tabucchi's infatuation with art. First, the initiation of young Tabucchi: post-war and post-fascism Italy, taking the train with his uncle from the hometown of Vecchiano to Florence to admire Renaissance masterpieces. As Tabucchi recalls in his article "Giotto contro i barbari" appeared in *Corriere della Sera* [18 June 1993], his uncle's lesson was that art is "a universal value, as it belongs to all peoples, as the only language that brings them together".<sup>224</sup> After that, Tabucchi's investigations in art continued: those about Velázquez and Bosch, for example, whose work amplified Tabucchi's interest in liminality, the reverse of things, the background figures, the possibilities of a lesser reality as that of dreams and borders.

*Isabella e l'ombra* – narrated both as a fairy tale and as a miniature Bildungsroman – is not the only multimodal work by Tabucchi;<sup>225</sup> however, it invites further reflection on the dynamics

<sup>224</sup> An article commemorating the Georgofili massacre: "un valore universale, perché appartiene a tutti i popoli, è l'unico linguaggio che li affratelli", my translation, in Riccardo Greco. "Prefazione", in Tabucchi (2013, 3).

<sup>225</sup> See Antonio Tabucchi (2011). Tabucchi also collaborated with artists such as Davide Benati, Aroldo Marinai, Tullio Pericoli and Gian Paolo Barbieri.

of interart translation. The main character, Isabella, is a child who thinks by synaesthesia: that is, by colours. Staino's own illustrations on each odd page complement, at the same time, Tabucchi's narration on the even pages. The booklet is extremely brief: five illustrations and five written pages tell the story of Isabella, a character inspired to Staino, who grows up to be a painter.

Her vocation is clear since her childhood: when the teacher requires a written composition, Isabella 'writes' in colour. Colours, specifically, translate Isabella's world and vision. Even colours, however, are not what they seem; each one of them has a special meaning and purpose to Isabella: gray for boredom, golden yellow for happiness, blue to render the sound of a violin, etc. When Isabella becomes a painter, however, she encounters the Shadow [Terra d'Ombra] who wants to live in Isabella's paintings:

la Terra d'Ombra, come ha detto la sublime Vieira da Silva, è per accettare la nera malinconia. Sarò un'ospite discreta e silenziosa ma ti ripagherò dell'ospitalità, perché se mi accetterai i tuoi colori saranno più umili e più veri, come l'ombra della terra che li ha generati" (Tabucchi 2013, 15).<sup>226</sup>

Overcoming a personal challenge and advancing her formation, Isabella welcomes the Shadow in her palette. This corroborates the synaesthetic tendency of the main character. Her synaesthesia is also that of the writer who thinks via images. Synaesthesia confuses art borders and modalities: it is always at work in cases of *Doppelbegabung* and beyond. For instance, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (1908-1992) was a Portuguese painter who composed her *Testamento* [Last Will] as a poem. Here, she bequeathed eighteen colours to her friends, each taking up a specific emotion or function. In this view, Tabucchi's posthumous book, though written in 2003, is in turn a last will that embeds da Silva's synaesthetic legacy.

Tabucchi's fictional world translates the shadow – a shade of the Other – in multiple ways: the reverse game, the dream-like atmospheres, Pessoa's heteronyms, the quests never fully completed. The shadow, as a constant theme of Tabucchi, is the other side of the real that is

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<sup>226</sup> [As Vieira da Silva maintained, raw umber is the colour to help you accept black melancholy. I [the Shadow, the raw umber] will be a silent guest but will reward you for your hospitality; if you welcome me, your colours will be more humble and authentic, like the *umbra terrae* [Shadow of the Earth] that generated them] my translation.

constantly sought, as, for instance, in one of his quest stories, *Notturmo Indiano* [Indian Nocturne, 1984]. For Tabucchi – and, for that matter, for Buzzati – writing is first and foremost a journey “to explore this zone of shadow, to look around the corner” (Botta 1994, 424).

Tabucchi’s poetics has been widely studied from the perspective of Visual Studies, which has undoubtedly contributed to enriching the study of literary visuality in Italy. However, as I have shown, fundamental issues underlying intermedial and multimodal creation across sign systems remain understudied. The attitude of thinking synaesthetically ‘by colours’ becomes a metaphor of interart creation that deserves further space in both literary and intermedial/multimodal criticism. The dialectic of the dialogic reason versus the rhetoric of the epistemological Turns, the dialectic of identity versus alterity as well that of the arborescent and the rhizomatic are all part of the hidden discourses of the image-word relationship. Intersemiotic translation at large certainly provides an appropriate framework to study the polyphony and dialogicity of signs in context. More specifically, translation theory has effectively acknowledged the dialectic of Identity versus Alterity, and the necessity of studying the effects of Otherness. As Steiner theorised the fourth moment of the hermeneutic motion as compensation (the enactment of reciprocity), Berman argued that the “very [ethical] aim of translation is to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign” (Berman 1992, 4). I agree with this view as well as with the one for which there is a certain resistance from the “ethnocentric structure of every culture, that species of narcissism by which every society wants to be a pure and unadulterated Whole” (Berman 1992, 4).

The frameworks here adopted, from Bakhtin to Peirce, from my notion of the rhizome and the *hyphos* to the mediality of culture, show that the intermedial and multimodal translation processes are, in essence, “an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering. Translation is a ‘putting in touch with’, or it is *nothing*” (Berman 1992, 4).

I have shown that intermediality and multimodality in the old media still offer fruitful theoretical reflections. In particular, I have highlighted the rhetoric behind epistemic Turns, thus warning about the word-image relation as being subject to paradigms of supremacy, for instance that of identity versus alterity and that of iconophilia versus iconophobia. By adopting a balanced approach that acknowledges the potential of human creativity across media and modes, and by suggesting notions to theorise this creativity (such as the *hyphos* and the rhizome), I have shown that the prevailing abductive processes behind multimodal and intermedial works cannot be interpreted by using a single approach. The word-image relation in both intermedial and multimodal configurations is an infinite one: conceptual categories such

as *différance*, trace, and rhizome, are useful to frame this relation but suggest that it will continue to yield further reflections. By bringing together semiotics, translation, literary theory, and Visual Studies, I have shown that the complexity of the word-image relation, in the context of intermedial and multimodal artworks in the old media, will not exhaust in the near future; on the contrary, it will continue to stimulate interdisciplinary research.

Eu lego aos meus amigos  
 Um azul cerúleo para voar alto.  
 Um azul cobalto para a felicidade.  
 Um azul ultramarino para estimular o espírito.  
 Um vermelhão para o sangue circular alegremente.  
 Um verde musgo para apaziguar os nervos.  
 Um amarelo ouro: riqueza.  
 Um violeta cobalto para o sonho.  
 Um garança para deixar ouvir o violoncelo.  
 Um amarelo barife: ficção científica e brilho; resplendor.  
 Um ocre amarelo para aceitar a terra.  
 Um verde veronese para a memória da primavera.  
 Um anil para poder afinar o espírito com a tempestade.  
 Um laranja para exercitar a visão de um limoeiro ao longe.  
 Um amarelo limão para o encanto.  
 Um branco puro: pureza.  
 Terra de siena natural: a transmutação do ouro.  
 Um preto sumptuoso para ver Ticiano.  
 Um terra de sombra natural para aceitar melhor a  
 melancolia negra.  
 Um terra de siena queimada para o sentimento de  
 duração.<sup>227</sup>

— Vieira da Silva

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<sup>227</sup> da Silva (2010, 87).

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