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Pictures of Modernity
The Visual and the Literary
in England, 1850-1930

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Analogies between the arts have long been sought; and the idea of a universal aesthetics, unifying all different sign systems, from musical to visual and verbal, is a persistent utopia. Yet no common basis of the arts has been found, notwithstanding the efforts made.

Years ago in an essay on the subject I tried to identify fallacies and possible blind alleys in the various ways of comparing different artistic media, from the vague and impressionistic notion of "family air" or "Zeitgeist", where likenesses depend on the "sensibility" of the receiver, to the metaphorical use of terms such as "figure", "picture", "image", referring to mental representations, or rhetorical tropes. Even the study of biographical relations between artists, and of references to other arts in literary works, seem to be inconclusive. Focusing on what Charles Dickens, or Henry James, wrote on painting, or on their direct acquaintance with painters, cannot be considered useful to establish any connection between their works and specific pictures, but can only reveal their critical attitude or a common cultural milieu. I concluded by considering two cases which seem less arbitrary: when an artist is at the same time a painter and a poet, or a musician and a painter, and when two artists belong to the same artistic movement, and therefore share aesthetic positions. But even here, "when trying to find common features, one runs the risk of analysing intentions and demonstrating tautologically merely one's own basic assumptions; as if, starting from the programmes of Futur-

ism, one were to reach the useless conclusion that Marinetti and Boccioni were futurists"¹.

The only way to face problems of verbal and visual expression and to grasp possible analogies is, in my view, to compare different arts *in a diachronic and contextual dimension*, trying to retrieve the cultural background and to reconstruct a *semiotic* background, analyzing how, historically, sign theory and practice, and different matter of expression, have been meaningful objects of theoretical debate.

The observation made by Svetlana and Paul Alpers, that "the important differences are not between the arts, but between cultural epochs"² still sounds very acute, and seems particularly useful when we consider the span of eighty years – 1850 to 1930 – chosen as the chronological delimitations of the conference topic. At the turn of the century a remarkable epistemological break as well as an aesthetic revolution took place: they had long been prepared for, but were radically brought into view in avant-garde and modernist movements.

In the early twentieth century, the mimetic representation of reality, which seemed to be the basis both of visual illustration and of verbal realistic description, gave way to a stress on the formal, non-referential, and conceptual aspects of texts. Boundaries between the arts began to vanish in the artists' experiments in representing time and space. Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, as well as Modernism, albeit in different ways, renewed and "defamiliarized" one's perception of the world. Synaesthesia, simultaneity, speed, and psychic reality, all imply a new and different way of conceiving spatio-temporal relationships. The invention of new optical instruments, such as the camera, experiments with photographing movement, and above all the cinema as "moving pictures", furnished artistic expression with a new way of "seeing" reality.

When considering the artistic movements of the early twentieth century, formal spatial categories become not only useful, but a different way of analyzing the relation between images and words. Patterning, construction, collage, montage, typographical organizations, rhythm, perspective as point of view, even movement, are categories which can account for common aesthetic and epistemological assumptions, for a similar or different conceptual way of comprehending the object.

¹ L. Innocenti, "'Language thou art too narrow': reflections on visual and verbal iconicity", in *Textus*, I (1999), pp. 11-36.

² S. and P. Alpers, "*Ut Pictura Noesis?* Criticism in Literary Studies and Art History", *New Literary History*, III, 3 (1972), pp. 437-58.

The abstract term “visuality”, which was coined by Carlyle, shows a tendency, already present in the second half of the 19th century, to enlarge the concept of the visual to include more formal and structural issues and categories, beyond descriptivism.

This tendency towards abstraction can also be accounted for if we consider the influence which the encounter with the Far East had on Western imagination in the same period. When Japan opened up its borders in the 1850s, alongside an interest for new markets and political control, Europe and America found there artistic experiences which seemed to match the aesthetic visions the West was elaborating. Both American Imagism and British “Vortex” were partly conditioned by Pound’s reading, or misreading, of the ideogram as a cluster of meaning or a vivid shorthand picture of action. Visual evidence and energy were felt to be the basis of the notion of “spatial form”, which combined a static “visual” image with dramatic movement. At the same time the apparent and epigrammatic simplicity of haiku met the need for synthetic and sudden revelation, for immediate epiphany, and Nō and Kabuki theatre provided the idea of a highly symbolic, non realistic action, which kept together conscious convention, distancing, and visual power.

But it was in the larger scope of all the arts that Japan was influential, through two notions which were alien to the western mind: that of spontaneous gesture, or the channelling of spiritual energy into a brushstroke or line, and that of the void as a space filled with spiritual energy. They both originated from the encounter with Japanese traditional painting, but became particularly appealing to the post-war artists who found in the East the ideas of complete concentration and the voiding of the mind as necessary conditions for performing creative acts, as well as the coincidence of “simulated” spontaneity and the constraints of rigorous discipline.

Again it was often through a – fruitful – misreading that these notions were brought to the West, less spiritual and more concerned with the results than with the gesture and preparatory discipline.

But once again, this shows in my view that it is only considering the issues of different media, matters of expression, sign systems, in short, of representation theories and strategies – and all this from an historical and contextual perspective – that we can compare different arts, and see how images and words, or the visual and the verbal, interrelate.