

ALTERING IN OTHERNESS ETHNO-SEMIOTIC EXPERIENCES IN JAPAN

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Abstract

We consider otherness in an interactive and bilateral triple conjugation: in the subject-subject relationship, in the subject-object relationship and in objectuality itself, as remitting iconicity to the possibilitating condition of otherness. In order to do so, we perform and propose an action of implicated ethno-semiotics, collaborating with a museum (the Museum of Oriental Art of Turin) and choosing a piece of art (a xylograph from the Japanese collection belonging to the Ukiyo-e period), and interacting with students (from the University of Turin, the University of Tokyo and MAO). The resulting storytelling in a dual configuration, both visual and narrative, is selected, exhibited and analysed here and serves a resource for conveying the meaning of alteration in diversity from a creative-pragmatic, semantic and poetical point of view.

Keywords: Ethno-Semiotic, Iconicity, Otherness, Japan, Visual Art, Storytelling.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The content of this article was presented in a fragmentary manner within three contexts: under the title *Reifying the face between storytelling and *téxvn**¹ in *Technologies of the Facial Sense*, the Seminar of Philosophy of Communication directed by Massimo Leone within the 2023/2024 research theme of the Turin School of Semiotics: «*Semiotechne*» – *Semiotics and Engineering*; under the title *Altering in Otherness. Ethnographic Experiences in North-East Asia* in the Congress *Semiotic and Cognitive Approaches to the Face, between Alterity and Alteration* at CUMO in Noto²; and finally *Faces and Backgrounds of an Objectual Performativity: a Japanese Print on a Journey* in the 2023/2024 edition of the *Material Culture Course* organised by the Museum of Oriental Art in Turin (MAO)³.

The topic was also addressed and enriched in a module of the *Interactive Storytelling and Art*⁴ 2023/2024 course held at the Univer-

sity of Turin, within the Master's Degree Course in Media Communication and Cultures⁵: here, an in-depth thematic study and a workshop were proposed, the creations of which made by students were selected and shared in this article.

Certainly, however, the driving force came from Japan: between October and November 2023 I carried out a research and teaching visit at Tokyo College⁶, setting up a bilateral relationship with the University of Turin: specifically, I collaborated with Prof. Michael Facius, the main tutor of my residency and lecturer of the course *Software Studies: Interactive Digital Storytelling* Software Studies within the International Master's Degree Programme: Information, Technology and Society in Asia⁷. Thanks to my two interventions in his course⁸, the interaction with students and his guidance and mediation as an expert and informant on site, it was possible for me to refine the fieldwork to make the ethnosemiotic experience scientifically valid, creative and gratifying.

This publishing venue is an excellent opportunity to crystallize the process so that it not only forms the basis for future research experiences⁹ on the topic, but is also a model that can contribute retroactively to the disciplines that study signs, languages and related practices.

DIALOGUE WITH OTHERNESS: MEANING IN OBJECTS AND INTERACTIVE USE PRACTICES

The basic idea was to choose an object from the Japanese section of the MAO's collection and perform it, bring it back to Japan, relating it to other local images, narrative practices, and then convey it back and re-enact it and, again, interact with various actors through it, integrating the numerous pieces into a common narrative. We could call it a semio-geography performance of the artefact: the piece of art in its materiality, as well as its simulacrum immersed in its image are approached, studied, appreciated in their sign-like wholeness in a sort of animistic cult of the object, an assumption of the importance of the visual text in subjective and cultural transmission. The artefact adopts an iconic role that, while not assuming a solution of continuity, nevertheless establishes a «sign-like relationship between each of its implementations» (Proni *et al.* 2007: 3), a typical characteristic of the icon in the Peircean sense.

The intrareceptive relationship between subjects and landscape depicted in the chosen piece of art, as well as the exteroceptive relationship between the latter, the subjects involved and the cultural context, can be philosophically enhanced through the lens of Tetsuro Watsuji (2006), whose universe imbricated with mysticism sees the space between living and non-living beings as a resource to be probed, experienced and listened to. I have immersed the research in that transitional space, sometimes focusing on the emptiness of the middle rather than the fullness of the edges and the tangibility and my role therefore consisted in a sort of mediator between the cultural memory of the sense inherent in the chosen object and the reinvigoration of another latent sense yet to be discovered and enhanced. Director Davide Quadrio straightaway accepted my proposal and Eva Morando, in charge of Educational Services, followed its development closely, also guiding me within the museum dynamics. Quadrio, during one of our first meetings, told me that the museum is an *osmotic* place: usually referring to chemical language, osmosis, however, renders the argumentative and productive apparatus of the MAO well. The museum, comparable to the semi-permeable membrane that lets the solvent pass through, is a dynamic, malleable, welcoming space, receptive and attentive to the cultural, artistic and philosophical-aesthetic needs to which it must respond: with respect to the objects, it houses in its collections and temporary exhibitions and with respect to the people it hosts. It not only allows passage but also absorbs and nourishes, coordinates, and collaborates, bringing the artifacts to life and transforming spectators into active participants – welcomed and fully engaged in the research initiatives rather than mere observers of an exhibition.

The story of history began, another story, a catapult into the potentially infinite inference that here takes on a frame, makes itself readable and circumscribable, becomes text and hypertext and metatext and with it becomes a vehicle for singular *parole* as well as collective forms of life.

This mode of execution, at once freewheeling and conducted, was aimed at a heuristic praxis: artefacts, as conveyance of meaning and sedimented stratification, carry with them traces of their workmanship and genealogy; their circulation, as a dynamic network of signification, eludes death by forgetfulness, welcoming instead participation and reactualisation in the present. Becoming part of the story, the art collection and the image itself, increases the level of involvement and leads us to contemplate belonging to a storydoing rather than a storytelling: the

image must itself be considered participant and factual, in act, desire and will, with a language of its own that wants the same rights as other languages without being enclosed in their same dynamics¹⁰.

The relationship with the art object, with the artefact as a partner, as a medium through and thanks to which a singular and at the same time collective *modus operandi* is set in motion, is a synchronic and diachronic reflection into a meaningful matter, is the condensed actualisation of a complex apparatus of values, ideologies, beliefs and practices of doing (see Landowski 2009). From the syntactic point of view, codifiable sequential grammars are created, from the paradigmatic point of view, parts of the plastic-figurative and semantic associations become manifest from the selection of a latent extension.

In order to make sense of the practices performed, we will present sequentially and synthetically a list of actions we have undertaken. Afterwards, the chosen image will be shown and explored and then the new artefacts (both narrative and visual) will be analysed, explaining the semiotic and heuristic nature of this achievement.

1. Scouring and contemplation of the MAO collection on display.
2. Selection, investigation and request for permission of use/circulation/publication of the xylograph by Hiroshige¹¹.
3. Identification of the field and the relational network to be involved in the two territories.
4. Outline of the two performative activities to be carried out with the storyteller-storydoer actors:
 - 4 a. Appropriation, reworking, invention of a new image starting from the evocative stimulus of the original image.
 - 4 b. Collective performance of an automatic writing practice on the surrealist style «The Exquisite Corpse» and then individual edition and refinement of the text received.
5. Fieldwork: involvement of students in Japan (Tokyo) and in-depth study of the Asian context.
6. *In situ*: local fieldwork, involvement of students in Italy (Turin) and performative interaction.
7. Collection, sorting, selection of collected data and interpenetration into the theoretical framework developed in the meantime.
8. Fine-tuning, theorising, back-feeding and return to participants.

SELECTED ARTEFACTS

All the images referenced in this section, presented as a list of original artefacts and new ones created during the workshops and training processes mentioned earlier, can be accessed at the following link: <https://iris.unito.it/handle/2318/2030491>.



FIG. 1. Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858). Mie river (Yokkaichi, Miegawa) from the series «Fifty-three stations of the Tokaido». Color woodblock print – Ukiyo-e period – MAO Collection. With the kind permission by MAO and Fondazione Musei.



FIG. 1a. Cropping of the *Pertinence* of Fig. 1.

The *ukiyo-e* (from the Japanese ideogram 浮世絵 meaning images of the floating world) is a type of artistic production of the Edo period, between 1600 and 1900 mainly conglomerated in Edo (present-day Tokyo), Osaka and Kyoto. Considered to be among the first mass visual productions, it is a polychrome printing technique, carried out by engraving on various wooden matrices (from ξύλον, *xylos*: wood) which, following the natural colouring on the areas in relief, are transferred by *flotage* onto paper, thus filling in pre-established fields and forming, step by step, field by field, the complete image. In the late 1700s, with the increase of colours and the evolution of the technique, the images were called *nishiki-e*¹².

Although the complete image (Fig. 1) has been considered, the focus has mainly been on its fragment, a part of it (Fig. 1a) chosen between the two *punctos* corresponding to the two characters depicted. This choice is to be regarded in the light of the interest in back portraits, unusual but very evocative. One of the artists of reference and inspiration with respect to this type of artistic reproduction in the same geographical area but in a different chronological context (Japan, end of the 20th century) is certainly Masahisa Fukase¹³: for example in his work *Family* (家族: *Kazoku*)¹⁴ of 1991 it is evident how some of the family members portrayed in the 34 images are partially or totally from behind and this creates a partial and ambiguous sense of presence.

In order to understand this nodal passage with respect to the entire development of practices, we will begin with three level analysis, the plastic one partly related to the figurative one, and finally move on to the performative level, delving into textual and attentional performativity. We start referring to visual utterance and the two conceptions put forward by Dondero: according to the first, in order to understand a visual utterance, the internal grammar and the relationship between *langue* and *parole* must be taken into account: the metadata and the technical information of the images partially meet this need; according to the second one, on the other hand, «it concerns the act of appropriation of the langue via an individual selection that flows into a closed and accomplished linguistic product (the word) called enunciation [...] which is the result of an act *objectified* on a support» (Dondero 2020: 41). The enunciational gesture, also known as *debrayage*, allows for the creation of enunciation, both in the case of the original xylography (in which originality, being printmaking, is multiple and can perhaps only be attributed to the wooden matrixes),

and in the case of new visual utterances. As systems of signification, Dondero, on a Greimassian basis (*Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique* of 1984), tells us that we can analyse images thanks to the typical classical tripartition that identifies in the positions/spaces, colours and forms, the main differential relations in order to understand the visual utterance: we are therefore talking about the three plastic categories, i.e. topological, chromatic and eidetic.

It is interesting to note the gap in these three categories between the original and the new creations and understand how the contemporary young community interpretate the image revisiting it and appropriating it.

– On a topological level: two main spaces can be identified, corresponding to the character from the back and the landscape (syncretism between bridge, tree, horizon). Although the landscape forms are sometimes retained (Fig. 2) and sometimes distorted (Fig. 3) or even cancelled and reinvented (Fig. 6), the character's form is usually retained (the hat, the cloak, the back).

– On a chromatic level: we have seen that in the original, the colors have a great deal of relevance, especially for its inscription mode, an element that is not maintained in the new representations where the colors vary enormously and seem to want to harmonize in an internal congruence. In the new images we have contrasts (Fig. 8a and 8b) and monochromes (Fig. 9a and 9b): «Two bridges, two alternatives. One stable, the other somewhat less so. Contrary to expectations, the subject decides to take the same old bridge instead of the newly built one, a more modern, unknown bridge that looks more comfortable. However, the wayfarer, sheltered in habit, resists the call of the unknown, the reason being the confidence gained over time, of the certainty of the bridge», writes DeMaria (author of Fig. 9a) linking us to the figurative level where signifier (bridge) and signified (certainty and rooted in the old bridge as symbolic space of the path in/of knowledge). In Fig. 10, on the other hand, the color level is isotopic to the title *Color Confluence: Homage to Hiroshige through Rothko's Harmony*; its resolution is similar to Fig. 11 of Zhuge Rongrong.

– On an eidetic level: the positions of the entire xylograph (Fig. 1) are iconic of a successful three-dimensionality given above all by the contrast between the moving foreground figure and the static background figure. While the former on a figurative level seems to emphasise a contact with the dynamic and naturally frenetic

environment (identifiable mainly in the wind), the latter occupies a figurative level animated by a semantic area belonging to the state of contemplation and calm. And this is where we remain, and this is indeed the character with which the creative interpreters converse. It is in this conversation, between the new authors and the *ukiyo-e* protagonist that the new visual enunciation develops, and it is in the relationship with the new proposed landscapes, inspired by the *ukiyo-e* of which sometimes very distant traces remain, that the new contemporary context expressing restlessness and poetry, calmness and contemplation but also horror (Fig. 4) and the need for consciousness and action develops.

There are also images corresponding to sculptures, mini-installations. Fig. 12 is made from recycled materials, transmitting shapes, positions, colors, thus becoming iconic of our times: with everyday tools, the author roots herself in the positional elements of the original image and transposes them onto an innovative plane. Fig. 13, on the other hand, develops various hypotheses regarding the agentivity of the subject involved, thus performing a threefold option of attentional simulacrum (here shown option 13b fishing and 3c photographing).

Beyond the figurative/plastic analysis, an interesting note concerns the enunciational set that occurs visually in the new works: while the enunciational imprinting of subjectivity and intersubjectivity concern in particular personal pronouns, verb tenses and adverbs in relation to places, thus implying a triple *debrayage* (actoral, temporal and spatial) in each enunciational act, in the image it happens differently. (Dondero 2020: 44-45) I would dwell on the attentional *debrayage*: while the frontal subject seems to establish an I-you relationship with the observer, and the one in profile seems to maintain a «third person» attitude, I find that the back subject can incorporate a direct communication between enunciator and enunciatee by advancing the possibility of an attentional I-me coincidence. This is highlighted by some collages in which we are projected into new subjective realities, new regimes of presence and interaction; even by the descriptions of some authors as Casagrande for Fig. 6: «The main subject is in the back and for this reason one can identify with that character, thus having a similarity of horizon: the protagonist walks the illuminated catwalk, which represents the path and route of his life, under the eyes of other people who observe and judge every detail, movement and decision of

the character. But only the latter is aware of what is present behind the scenes: his future, unlit and hidden from the spectators».

In other cases, is the transposition into the local context to be translated, too, as a case of attentional I-me *debrayage*: in Fig. 7, the subject is lost in and between the background and the observer's attention expands into the whole. As it is a collage from a photograph, there is greater indical intensity, and the landscape absorbs within itself not only the represented subject but also the observer: both are crossing the bridge. The observer's power of vision is totalising and the identification with the represented figure is partial: accessibility vs. exposure must be considered here. In *Making Presence Present: Around the Portrait*, Dondero analyses the subtraction and addition of presence within the portrait genre. The inaccessibility of our character continually represented in different contexts to the extent that we travel as if we were him, would only be partially exposed and accessible: on an eidetic level we could speak of retro-presence. What turns out to be inaccessible is precisely the face and with it the gaze, thus denying the first cardinal elements of what is defined as a portrait, to the point of blurring and almost annulling itself in a landscape: in this sense, Dondero claims that the images are a conflictual space.

To conclude this section, Fig. 14 is reported as one of the most emblematic images where we have a geolocation system that takes us back, following careful research by the author, to the place where Hiroshige would have handled his wooden plates and the prints corresponding to them.

In his essay on Algorithmic Camouflage, Paulsen (2018) analyses various forms of camouflage from the study of pixels and pixelization processes. In this sense, he turns to Hito Steyerl's work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational* to compare the development of technology and especially pixel size (in 1996, the resolution was 12 mt/px per pixel) but in the date of the article, the author said «in the contemporary era, in which one is surreptitiously surveilled from space or by invisibly hovering drones, the basic strategy for camouflage is to become "smaller or equal to one pixel"» (Paulsen 2018: 426). Geolocalisation acts in the opposite sense, it makes everything visible, not only in space but also in time. This work shows the contemporary emblem of the chronotopic urban transition, as well as making us aware of the geo-tracks we leave behind during our movements, virtual and physical. Like the artists visualised in this article, Prya Murugeswaran

focuses on the power of the interface as an index, developing through collage, his strategy of subjectivisation in the regime of presence and interaction, actively operating in regimes of control and surveillance, effectively «the regime».

Having probed the plastic level with its tripartition, and partially suggested the figurative level by emphasising the relationship to possibilating semantic areas, we turn to the performative level for the following two images. In the first case (Fig. 15) we refer to the performative agentivity of artificial intelligence, in the second (Fig. 16) and third (Fig. 17) to the performative agentivity of human creativity.



FIG.17. Barbotto Silvia. *With aliwen translating the Ukiyo-e xilography of a subject and three rivers. We are in Koichiro Osaka «Asakusa» Taito-Ku Tokyo Gallery, where «Jasatsu Kito Sodan: Dark ecology» is exposing his visual storytelling about a special collective of Buddhist monks of 1970. Forwarded by Michael Facius. Digital photography with performer aliwen 2023, Tokyo (JP).*

«Since the assigned image depicts a man standing on a bridge. I tried to connect it to another famous painting about a man standing on a bridge – Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, which has a radically different style compared to the ukiyo-e. I asked Stable Diffusion to do the job and it comes out something like these», says Huang Jiebai, the author of Fig. 15. In *潜在AI, face-perception and latent magma* in the collective volume *Latent face* (2023), I identified performance as a variation resulting, by deviation, from the latent field, a kind of ac-

tualisation of the virtual, the surfacing of an anteriorly subterranean aspect. «Latency as situated expectation is a significant interpretation also suggested by the composition of the Japanese ideogram *Senzai* 潜在 which means precisely latent/potential. [...] to submerge, to conceal and to exist, to situate» (Barbotto 2023: 49).

In the language related to artificial intelligence and computer processing systems, latency is a very used term: Stable Diffusion, for example, is a pre-trained program that select images from the latent space and in based on the prompt given to it, let some of them to emerge and become manifest. Huang Jiebai brought Stable Diffusion to the pre-trained and acquired knowledge about Munch's works into dialogue with the Ukiyo-e work, creating surprising images and realising a human-no human performance. According to Greimas and Courtes (1982: 226), in fact, performance is the actualization of a competence, and «the term performance is supposed to cover the domain of realization of the competence in its double task of production and interpretation of utterance».

Gari Hill uses the camera as if it were a mirror and on various occasions portrays himself from behind: and in his work *Crossbow* (1999) he proposes a three-channel video/sound installation showing the head, the back rather than the face, while in *Namesake* (1999) he shows two videos projected on two opposite walls and representing two alternative selfies, in one image the name Gary appears and in the other image a head, certainly the topological and relational form of the selfie refers the two visual storytelling to a reciprocal dialogue: his performances are analysed by Giannachi, in his volume on selfie technologies, and although they have no presence of the face, they fall within the genre of the portrait. It is considered a representation of the fragmentariness of the subject, «the subject cannot here be perceived in its totality» (Giannachi 2023: 101). In Fig.16 Roccia uses photography and she too, in imitation of the *Ukiyo-e* print, portrays herself from behind, together with the subject wearing the mantle: they seem to share the same piece of the world, they have the same horizon in front of them but maybe they observe different part of it, we do not see them in their identifiable presence, but perhaps we identify ourself with them: who among us has not stopped at least once, contemplating a similar landscape, perhaps waiting for someone, perhaps stopping after a walk? She also puts it this way: «I love having my back turned, I like that within the picture I and the background have equal importance,

which would not be the case if I had been turned to the front. What inspired me was the idea of bringing past and present together, two worlds and two very different ways of representing reality, but not irreconcilable. The figure and I are both from the back, both looking far away, looking at the sea but not knowing what exactly. The title aims precisely at emphasising this closeness between me and the figure in which I imagine a dialogue: we do not always look in the same direction and see the same things».

Here we are again reflecting on the implicative character of the back portrait, this time a self-portrait that is perhaps also fragmented and fragmentary, but at the same time full and dense in its wholeness: «(T)he self in Self is no longer a subject, but rather it is formed by its irreconcilable and ultimately un-editable fragments that can no longer be composed into a unity» (Giannachi 2023: 103).

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ENDNOTES

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i22JtJJCjC4&ab_channel=FacetsERC.

² <https://cumo.it/convegno-approcci-semiotici-e-cognitivi-al-volto-tra-alterita-e-alterazione-noto-giorno-14-15-16-dicembre-2023/>.

³ <https://www.maotorino.it/it/> and <https://agenparl.eu/2023/09/18/al-via-il-3-ottobre-la-seconda-edizione-del-corso-di-formazione-di-cultura-materiale-dellasia-maomuseo-darte-orientale-torino/>.

⁴ ISTART 23/24 (Acronym inserted in the images creation to identify this belonging). Here the program: https://media.campusnet.unito.it/do/corsi.pl/Show?_id=x94l.

⁵ https://media.campusnet.unito.it/do/corsi.pl/Show?_id=x94l.

⁶ Part of University of Tokyo, <https://www.tc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/>.

⁷ ASIA 23/24 Acronym inserted in the images creation to identify this belonging: <https://itasia.iii.u-tokyo.ac.jp/>.

⁸ First talk titled Watch, play, listen... perform. From storytelling to storydoing and second talk Narrativity from, in, on, between facial devices.

⁹ In the meantime, the future has become the present: some of these themes have being explored in Barbotto Silvia (2024), "SENSI inVERSI" in «I Saggi di Lexia 55», Roma, Aracne

¹⁰ Please refer to the quotation: «Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language» (Mitchell 1996: 82).

¹¹ From the original in MAO collection: Confluenza di tre fiumi a Yokkaichi, Giappone, 1832-1834, Edo (Tokugawa), silografia su carta, nishiki-e, ōban yoko-e, Proprietà: Unicredit S.p.A., Milano.

¹² In both cases, ukiyo-e and nishiki-e, these were types of illustrations that could be used individually (even for kakemono) or included within books, narratives, posters. They generally represented city life, entertainment, urban happenings, political, social, sexual issues; but also countryside life and open spaces, landscapes. The inscriptions inserted in various places are called kanji and indicate information regarding the title, the series and the people involved in the printing process such as the artist, the publisher and sometimes also printers and assistants.

¹³ <https://masahisafukase.com/>.

¹⁴ <https://masahisafukase.com/family-kazoku-1991/>.

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