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WORD AND IMAGE

In Literature and the Visual Arts

Edited by Carmen Concilio and Maria Festa

With a Preface by Federico Vercellone

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WORD-IMAGE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION HYPOTHESIS FOR A COMPLEX AESTHETICS OF THE AUDIO-VERBAL-VISUAL

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In the experience of art we see the realization of an experience that really changes the one who makes it. This is a new way of presenting the problem of truth of that “comprehension” pursued by spiritual sciences.

Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*

We are not really capable of comprehension, except at the cinema. This comprehension, which is so alive in imaginary life is what we lack in everyday life.

Edgar Morin, *La Méthode 3. La connaissance de la connaissance*

Considered in the context of a complex aesthetics on which we will here try to propose some methodological hypotheses, the audiovisual media consist in an interrelationship of iconic and sound forms — dynamic images, sound (noise and music), spoken and written words. Evolving in time and space, these bring about a flow in which the author’s and spectator’s thought and sensibility appear to be subsumed, as if in a sort of dialogue, a single act of comprehension of the world and its changes.

In both the spectator’s and the author’s aesthetic experience, the dynamism of the iconic and sound forms of the audiovisual media gives rise to what Merleau-Ponty called a “temporal form”¹ which we could also designate as a *complex system* — from the Latin *complector*: I comprehend, I embrace, I conceive; from *cum*: together, and *plecto*: web; in other words, a heterogeneous, unitary, but at the same time multi-faceted whole, which cannot

1 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie’, in Id. [1966], *Sens et non-sens*, (Paris: NRF-Gallimard, 1996).

be reduced to its single reciprocally connected elements and which produces the emergence of sense, triggering perception, sensibility and thought all at the same time. The continuous metamorphosis of iconic and sound forms — unfurling over time as acceleration, slowdown, suspension, rhythm, etc. — actually brings about a progressive and reciprocal transformation of their functions, their

status and their meaning. This modifies the time and the space of the experience and comprehension,² effecting a mediation between the spheres of the perceptible and the conceivable, the phenomenal and the symbolic, the real and the imaginary.³

In over a century of history of media and post-media technologies (from cinema to television and from internet to wearable technology), the audiovisual media have effectively defined an aesthetic whose complexity derives not only from polymorphic and polyphonic interrelations — dynamically put in place by a vast heterogeneous range of materials: kinetic image, montage, written word, noise, sound, music, spoken word) — but also from the relationship that these interrelations in turn entail between different domains, namely that of *mythos* and that of *logos*.

Although the sphere of sound also plays a fundamental role, it is the image and the word that have been historically indicated as the primary agents, particularly in the field of cinema studies, which was the first of the audiovisual or audio-verbal-visual media to make a novel proposal on the old question of the

2 The space-time experienced in audiovisual media especially implies a cognitive and epistemic elaboration setting aside single perceptive stimuli and regarding the *complex system* of their reciprocal relationships, in terms defined by Erwin Panofsky as “dynamization of space” and reciprocally “spacialization of time” and by Gilles Deleuze as “image-movement” and “image-time”. See Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge–Massachusetts: Mit Press, 1997); Id., [1955], *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (London: Penguin, 1996); Gilles Deleuze, *L’image-mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, 1983); Id., *L’image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).

3 See, among others, Edgar Morin [1956], *Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire* (Paris: Minuit, 2013); Christian Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire*, (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1993).

relationship between verbal and visual registers. It progressively institutionalized an authentic *image-word dialogic*, in other words a complementarity, an antagonism and a reciprocal and generative influence between the two elements.

The history of the aesthetic and theoretical debate on cinema has sometimes investigated the principles, functions and articulations of this dialogic, but it has more frequently privileged the study of one or other of its factors, generally to affirm singularity and independence, sometimes correlating the superiority of *mythos* over *logos* or vice-versa.

From the origins of silent films to the advent of talking cinema,⁴ for example, the aesthetic specificity, dignity and autonomy of film

4 We must remember that the adjective “silent”, used to define cinema at its origins, wrongly denotes the absence of sound (words, noises, soundtrack music), almost as if it were a sort of deficiency. It was introduced only after the invention and widespread use of the soundtrack, when — to go back to Robert Desnos’s thoughts on the cinema — the average cinema-goer gradually went “deaf” because of the advancing “verbal-centrism” of the cinema. Effectively, however, the contemporary spectator’s presumed “deafness” is due not so much to the word in itself but to how it is used in film. The cinema has been verbal-centrist since its birth through the quantity and functions of written captions and the words uttered by narrators and story-tellers. Before the advent of sound, they would read aloud the writings on the screen to a largely illiterate audience or they would explain the temporal, spatial, associative and cause/effect links between the projected sequences to spectators who had not yet learnt the founding principles and the aesthetic foundations of the new medium. In this sense, it could be said that the audio-verbal-visual was initiated as an aesthetic illusion with the very birth of cinema. Otherwise, just as there is a belief in the existence of a “silent” cinema, so it should be believed that a “blind” cinema may exist, with a so-to-speak Brownian motion of sounds — words, music, noises — that are completely indistinct and so non-interpretable, that cannot be referred to any specific situation and are consequently unintelligible and incapable of activating imagination and thought. It can easily be noted how, in this hypothetical Brownian motion, a single recognizable spoken or written word would be enough to set off the relationships of the imagination with memory, thought and sensation. See Barthelémy Amengual, *Clefs pour le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1971); Michel Chion [1990], *L’audiovision. Son et image au cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); Id., *Un art sonore, le cinéma. Histoire, esthétique, poétique*, (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2003).

has often been affirmed in the name of its presumed iconocentrism and at the cost of a deliberate devaluation of the role played by both music and the written and spoken word. Consequently, there thus developed with the very birth of cinema (besides the spread of photography) the field of visual culture studies. They were somehow placed in the channel of theories that Croce had previously defined as “pure visibility”, and starting from the pioneering research of artists and theorists like Béla Balász, László Moholy-Nagy and Jean Epstein, they were subsequently further explored through definitions of film like “visual spectacle” or “moving picture”. Thanks to the contribution of historians and theorists of the figurative arts, gestaltists or iconologists, such as Rudolf Arnheim, Erwin Panofsky or Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, among others, these studies somehow merged into the iconic turn or pictorial turn between the last years of the 20th century and the first of the 21st. These terms delineate a specialized and at the same time transdisciplinary field of inquiry into the consideration of static and dynamic images, which increasingly interests scholars of aesthetics, media, and also anthropology, sociology, psychology, cognitive sciences and neurosciences.⁵

If it is true that the speculative horizon of visual culture studies is rooted in an old tradition that includes, among others, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein and Lacan, and whose beginnings go back to the origins of western thought (from the Greek *theoria*, which echoes *θεαομαι*: I look, observe, contemplate), it is equally true that they are responsible for the reappraisal of an imaginal way of knowledge, historically a minority view or often expunged from the dominant direction of western thought and knowledge. In the

5 For a good summary on visual culture studies see Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini (eds.), *Teorie dell'immagine* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2009); Id., *Cultura visuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016). On iconocentrism in cinema studies see, among others, at least: Rudolf Arnheim [1957], *Film as Art* (University of California Press); Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, *Arti della visione I. Cinema* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976); Id., *Arti della visione II. Spettacolo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976); Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*.

context of visual culture studies, reflection on cinema has also contributed to an unprecedented clarification of the ontological and gnoseological status of the image, which cannot be traced back to conceptual and predicate logic.

The identification of an expression of meaning that is not otherwise substitutable nor assimilable to extraneous logics has recently been applied to the static, dynamic and audiovisual or audio-verbal-visual image, also as a reaction to a cultural tradition which in the second half of the 20th century had almost been proposed as a hegemonic and transdisciplinary tendency through the linguistic turn codified by Rorty following studies by Peirce, Hjelmslev, Jakobson, Lotman, Greimas and others. Through subsequent derivations, such as the semiotic turn, the narrativist turn and the pragmatic turn, there was effectively a use of methods, concepts, principles and terminologies that were transferred from linguistic research to the sphere of the image per se and not just the audio-verbal-visual one. This resulted in the attribution of a forced verbal-centrism to the image and to its specific way of shaping and interpreting the world, thus disregarding the peculiarity of its own aesthetic-epistemic dimension. Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* gave rise to an investigation into the audio-verbal-visual that was made by "difference" with regard to the verbal sign and aiming to include it in the sphere of *logos*. The semantic and structural discontinuity was admittedly pointed out, yet Metz, Pasolini, Barthes, Casetti, Bellour, Bordwell and others attributed to it specific "discursiveness", "syntax", "textuality", "narrativity", "statements", etc.⁶

Let us remember how the first and most notable contributions in the context of linguistics-based studies on the word-image

6 On the linguistic turn and its derivations in cinema studies see, among others, at least: Christian Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1993); Pier Paolo Pasolini [1972], *Empirismo Eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000); Roland Barthes [1964], *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); Roger Odin, *De la fiction* (Bruxelles: De Boeck, 2000); Francesco Casetti, *Dentro lo sguardo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1986); Raymond Bellour [1990], *L'Entre-Images: photo, cinéma, vidéo* (Paris: POL, 1999); David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fictional Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985).

relationship in audio-verbal-visual media include Roland Barthes's identification of verbal functions, under the categories of "anchorage", where the first term — the word — intervenes with its explanatory value towards the "fluctuating polysemy" of the second — the image; and of "relay", when the first term prepares and anticipates the temporal development of the second or after the event recalls what has not been represented, in both cases asserting its own evocative power. More generally, we can remember how, essentially, some of the contributions from the linguistic turn have opened up various sets of questions regarding the history and status of the audio-verbal-visual media and the presence of the word from the very start. The word has been studied in the context of the audio-verbal-visual media through the evolution of codes, forms of expression and significant configurations, which have included a great many systems of articulation: from captions to the proliferation of various vocal styles, from dubbing to subtitles. Another set of questions raised by linguistics-based studies concerns the typology of temporal relations, whether synchronous or asynchronous, given by montage within the same shot (vertical montage) or between several shots (external or horizontal montage). These are relations that together regard the issue of subjectivity and identity, since they call into question the free play between the presence and absence of the voice and/or body in audio-verbal-visual sequences and the consequent total or partial "acousmetre" theorized by Chion.⁷

In this framework of speculation, the most important set of problems in the theory and aesthetics of audio-verbal-visual media has been posed by both the linguistic turn and the iconic turn and concerns the aesthetic-epistemic relationship implicit in the image-word dialogic, with the relative implications for comprehension. In such a context, it may be noted how the first the linguistic turn and then the iconic turn seem to have operated methodologically within an interdisciplinarity and

7 Michel Chion, *L'audiovision. Son et image au cinéma*; Id., *Un art sonore, le cinéma. Histoire, esthétique, poétique*.

a transdisciplinarity that are marked by hegemonic or in any case antagonistic approaches. Their most fruitful results seem to consist not so much in the primacy of *logos* over *mythos* or vice-versa, nor in the assimilation of the figural to the linguistic or vice-versa and not even in the identification of the iconic dimension exclusively with the visual reason, but rather in an analysis of the aesthetic-epistemic functions performed *jointly* by the word and the image in the audio-verbal-visual media. In other words, the word-image relationship has been more frequently analyzed from a dialectical perspective, namely as a synthetic development marked by negation, rather than a dialogical one, where the generative movement results from the reciprocal influence between complementary opposites in metamorphosis. Overcoming a phase of agonal interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity might, on one hand, limit hyperspecialization and reductionism, while on the other hand, it would permit the development of a research method able to generatively combine the contributions of different disciplines in a complex aesthetic dedicated to the system of audio-verbal-visual media in order to grasp the word-image dialogic. This, in fact, merely repropose a *modus operandi* that unites sensibility and thought and that is found in the context of several disciplines: from psychology of perception to neuroscience, from aesthetics to epistemology.

As they interact, the word and the image of audio-verbal-visual media determine a union and a cooperation that unleashes a continuous and reciprocal transformation: the word passes through the image and changes its sense; crossed by the word, the image changes the word. A similar combination determines a semiotically heterogeneous system that is at the same time semantically unitary and in progress, in which the multidimensionality of the sense comes from a plurality of aspects of the sensible — including, incidentally, the concrete visual and auditory forms through which the word is transmitted.

In the context of developing a complex aesthetic, a first methodological hypothesis concerns the link between the aesthetic-epistemic unity and plurality of audio-verbal-visual media and the synaesthesia peculiar to it, which is unprecedented

as it is dynamic. This synaesthetic *dynamis* is consubstantiated with a semantic coalescence: the impossibility of isolating in “pure” or “autonomous” sensitive data the single percepts of the author’s and spectator’s sensorial experience provokes a sense that is situated in a literally imperceptible transversal dimension and thus entrusted to the elaboration of the thought and the imagination and their respective inferences, inductions, deductions, associations, etc. We could define this type of thought as *trans-sensorial*, referring to the notion of “sensorial thought” formulated by Ejzenštejn, and to Chion’s⁸ “trans-sensorial perceptions.”

The imperceptibility and therefore the absence or weakness of the visual and auditory perceptible has given rise to trans-sensorial thought, which, firstly through the imagination, emphatically completes the sense, literally moving it outside the audio-verbal-visual, elsewhere and other.

The imagination therefore underlies both the mediation between visible and invisible and audible and inaudible and the translation from the experience of the sensorium to the abstraction of thought. A long-lasting philosophical tradition, going at least from Kant to Heidegger, and from Sartre to Deleuze and beyond, has pointed out the multiple elaborative functions of the imagination, some of which need only be mentioned here. Besides conserving the traces of what is perceived and reproducing them even without sensorial stimuli, the imagination projects its own interpretative schemes and paradigms on perception and percepts, and thus, in a constant interrelation with perception, memory and language, it exercises a triple function, reproductive, creative and interactive. In particular, the imagination effects a mediation between sensorium and language, between *mythos* and *logos*, making them complementary, in that it links sensible configurations with a need that we might call “pre-linguistic” and that selects the most pertinent semantic possibilities, but without yet defining them. The need for language, necessarily brought forward in this

8 See Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, ed. by Richard Taylor, vols. I, II, III (London: Taurius, 2010).

indeterminate way, may subsequently operate following a double function: one more closely linked to the *logos*, which discriminate between semantic pertinences and impertinences, directing them towards known meanings and concepts, and one more rooted in the *mythos*, which can creatively regenerate the processes of perception and imagination, introducing new semantic and conceptual schemes.⁹

The imagination therefore performs its own mediatory function, intervening in the vast and dynamic sphere where there are numerous reciprocal relations between the principle of *mythos* and that of *logos*, or, to fall back on Edgar Morin's effective definitions, between analogical, symbolic and mythological thought and logical, rational, empirical thought.¹⁰ In Morin's epistemology, the two types of thought are inserted in a complex dialogic not only because they are complementary yet at the same time antagonistic, but also in that each of them is partly incorporated in the other. This makes it clear why Merleau-Ponty glossed Kant's formulation according to which in knowledge imagination works to the benefit of the intellect, and was able to state how instead in the aesthetic dimension and specifically in cinema, the intellect works to the benefit of the imagination.¹¹

From the aesthetic-epistemic perspective that we take here, the imagination, in relation to trans-sensorial thought, may be considered as a transmuter, which, through the action performed between the iconosphere and the verbal sphere, is able to bring into being potentially infinite quantities and qualities in the context of a third sphere, that of ideas or the noosphere, where *mythos* and *logos* intersect.

9 See among others Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Emilio Garroni, *Immagine Linguaggio Figura* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005); Id., *Creatività* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010); Pietro Montani, *Tecnologie della sensibilità* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2014).

10 Edgar Morin [1986], *La Méthode 3. La Connaissance de la Connaissance* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); Id., *La Méthode 4. Les idées. Leur habitat, leur vie, leur mœurs, leur organisation* (Paris: Seuil, 1986); Id., *La Méthode 5. L'Humanité de l'Humanité. L'identité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); Id., *La Méthode 6. Éthique* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: NRF-Gallimard, 1996).

Indeed one of the expressive conventions of the aesthetics of audio-verbal-visual media — even beyond the various historical-cultural and aesthetic determinations, linked to genres, formats implicit in different media or devices — wants the expression of a precise meaning to be entrusted first to the resources of the imagination and, secondly, to be made explicit by the word, often the spoken word.

More rarely, the aesthetic-epistemic process happens the other way; whether due to the primary opening to the stimulus typical of the sensorium and the subsequent link with the imagination, which in turn the latter has with thought; or due to the direction of the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development of analogical, symbolic and mythological thought and of logical, rational, empirical thought.

When language intervenes after the event in the audio-verbal-visual media and further opens the polysemy of the image following original or novel possibilities, the word-image dialogic takes on a recursive loop structure, in which the reciprocal metamorphic influence between the iconic and sound forms takes place on the basis of the inter-retro-action between analogical, symbolic and mythological thought and logical, rational, empirical thought, mediated by the imagination.

In the audio-verbal-visual media, the imagination may determine a concurrence between the polysemy of the image and that of the word, indefinitely opening the semantic risk. This occurs more easily when the poetic dimension of the language is invoked, even independently of the use of poetry in the strictest sense of the word. In this case, the word-image dialogic intensifies the transmutation performed by the imagination between analogical, symbolic and mythological thought and logical, rational, empirical thought. When verbal tropes are accompanied by iconic tropes — *trópos*: translation —, the trans-sensorial thought intervenes, implying the exchange both from one sensorial sphere to another and from one semantic field to another, concrete/abstract, phenomenal/symbolic.¹²

12 On this point, see Paul Adams Sitney, *The Cinema Poetry* (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

In this free play of exchanges of forms and meanings, we believe that there is to be found a particularly important potential, from both an aesthetic and an epistemic point of view. We shall now try to investigate the complex relationship between these two dimensions, as it is found in the audio-verbal-visual media, by means of the analysis of some extracts from works taken as *exempla*, first having duly given a brief terminological and methodological clarification.

If, on the one hand, it is clear that in the framework of this study, the aesthetic instance is meant in its original sense, deriving from αἴσθησις: “sensory perception”, and going back to the Homeric *aïou* and *aïthou*, which means “I perceive”, “I am breathless, I am trying to breathe”; on the other hand, it must be clarified that the epistemic dimension examined here concerns analogical, symbolic and mythological thought more than logical, rational, empirical thought. It is thus different from knowledge as understood in the scientific sphere, which, as is known, is defined as *comprehension* — from the Latin *cum-pre(he)ndere*, “take together”: contain in itself, accept spiritually, account for something.

The meaning given to comprehension here refers, in particular, to a sort of subjective knowledge, which, in Gadamer’s hermeneutic terms, represents an “experience of truth” that changes one who undergoes it.¹³ In this sense, comprehension refers to the notions of *Verstehen* and *Einführung*, originally studied by German historicism and Husserlian phenomenology. However, it does not only concern the empathic-imaginative simulation used between subjects to obtain theoretical and practical inferences on the other — as traditionally happened and happens in studies developed by Dilthey, Simmel, Wittgenstein and Collingwood onwards; it rather concerns, *in extenso*, being introduced into an occurrence in which a particular sense emerges.

Moreover, comprehension is taken here in its two-fold and hierarchical articulation — just as it is conceived in the perspective of Morin’s complex epistemology.

13 See Hans Georg Gadamer [1960], *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen: Mohr, 2010).

At a first level, which we could define as *fundamental comprehension*, in the dialogic between analogical, symbolic, mythological thought and logical, rational, empirical thought, the first of the two thoughts is preponderant. What is particularly important at this level of comprehension is the psychological processes of identification, projection and transfer, which derive from perceptive, sensorial, emotional and affective solicitation. Particularly in the context of aesthetics, thanks to the use of the imagination, these may concern human beings and other beings of the cosmos, guaranteeing a deep involvement of the sensibility and an intense aesthetic participation, though always accompanied by an awareness of the distinction between the real and its aesthetic representation.¹⁴ To quote Gadamer's words: 'He who comprehends is already always in an event in which a particular sense asserts itself'.¹⁵

A first example of fundamental comprehension may be found at the beginning of the film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987) by Wim Wenders, which shows the image of a man writing on a sheet of paper some words from the poem *Als das Kind Kind war* (*When the Child was a Child*, 1987)¹⁶ by Peter Handke — a well-known Austrian novelist, poet, dramatist and screenwriter —, recited by a voice-over as a sort of nursery rhyme:

14 On this point see Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*.

15 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 558.

16 Here is the part of the poem *Song on Childhood* which was composed for the film and is recited in it several times: 'When the child was a child, | It walked with its arms swinging, | wanted the brook to be a river, | the river to be a torrent, | and this puddle to be the sea. | When the child was a child, | it didn't know that it was a child, | everything was soulful, | and all souls were one. | When the child was a child, | it had no opinion about anything, | had no habits, || it often sat | cross-legged, | took off running, | had a cowlick in its hair, | and made no faces when photographed. | When the child | was a child, | It was the time for these questions: || Why am I me, and why not you? | Why am I here, and why not there? | When did time begin, and where does space end? | Is life under the sun not just a dream? | Is what I see and hear and smell | not just an illusion of a world before the world? | Given the facts of evil and people. | does evil really exist? | How can it | be that I, who I am, | didn't exist before I came to be, || and that, someday, I, who I am, | will no longer be who I am?'

When the child was a child, | It walked with its arms swinging, |
wanted the brook to be a river, | the river to be a torrent, | and this puddle
to be the sea. | When the child was a child, | it didn't know that it was
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| and made no faces when photographed.

The voice-over goes on reciting, even over the images of the opening credits until it is replaced by music, over which there first appears a dynamic aerial view of some city blocks, and subsequently the figure of a man standing on a ledge who is looking down and on whose shoulders there are wings that appear and disappear in double exposure. The image shows what the man was presumably looking at below, namely the coming and going of the crowd, in which stands out a motionless little girl who seems to be looking up towards the man, who, however, has disappeared from the image, letting us glimpse the ledge of the bell-tower where he was before. Then we have the image of a little girl on a bus, who, looking up presumably at the man on the ledge, says to her friend: 'Look!'

In this audio-verbal-visual sequence, the poem fulfills the task of defining the relationship with the world peculiar to childhood, assimilating it to what follows in the film, first by the children, who are the only ones to perceive the symbolic presence of the angels, and then by the angels, the only ones able to grasp the inner life of the human beings and listen to their thoughts. That, in fact, is what the following sequence shows, where there is the image of a man walking in the street carrying a baby in a sling, while a new voice-over says: 'The delight of lifting one's head out here in the open'. On these words an image opens up of a bird circling among the clouds and the voice-over adds: 'On seeing the colors, in all men's eyes, enlightened by the sun'. From this moment of the film, images follow each other of different urban contexts, with children, adolescents or adults in the centre, all accompanied in the same way by their various voice-overs, which express their thoughts in the form of a fragmentary and poetic interior monologue. In this way, even in the heterogeneity of fleetingly

presented situations and characters, it will be possible to reach a profound comprehension of each of them, their experience, their fears, aspirations, needs, frustrations, etc., implementing as many psychological processes of identification, projection and transfer and using trans-sensorial thought creatively — as happens in the sequence just described, where the vision of the bird's flight in the sky and the evocation in words of the light in the people's eyes appear to merge together in a sense of freedom and fullness.

We can select another particularly effective example of solicitation of fundamental comprehension through word-image dialogic in Andrey Tarkovsky's autobiographical work *Zerkalo* (*The Mirror*, 1975). The author's subjectivity is expressed in the non-chronological dramatic structure, which uses a sort of stream of consciousness to interlace and mix various levels of representation — childhood memories, oneirism, historical memory, present reality — with citations of his own films and paintings by Brueghel and Vermeer, as well as in the literary-style introspection, which is entrusted to poetry and uses, among others, the recitative „Und siehe da, der Vorhang im Tempel...“ taken from the *Johannes Passion* by Johan Sebastian Bach, or the opening words of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The voice-over by Andrey's brother Arseny Tarkovsky — who is known to have been one of the most important Russian poets of the 20th century — recites the poem *Pervye svidaniya* (*First meetings*, 1962)¹⁷ in a sequence of the film during which childhood memory

17 Arseny Tarkovsky, *First Meetings*, 1962, in Andrey Tarkovsky, *A Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas, 2003): ‘We celebrated every moment | Of our meetings as epiphanies, | Just we two in all the world. | Bolder, lighter than a bird's wing, | You hurtled like vertigo | Down the stairs, leading | Through moist lilac to your realm | Beyond the mirror. | When night fell, grace was given me, | The sanctuary gates were opened, | Shining in the darkness | Nakedness bowed slowly; | Waking up, I said: | “God bless you!”, knowing it | To be daring: you slept, | The lilac leaned towards you from the table | To touch your eyelids with its universal blue, | Those eyelids brushed with blue | Were peaceful, and your hand was warm. | And in the crystal I saw pulsing rivers, | Smoke-wreathed hills, and glimmering seas; | Holding in your palm that crystal sphere, | You slumbered on the throne, | And — God be praised! — you belonged to me. | Awaking, you transformed | The humdrum dictionary of humans |

merges with the actual present through a montage constituting the word-image dialogic. The daytime image of a woman who first observes a man walking away across a meadow and then in turn walks slowly through a wood towards home is accompanied with the lines: ‘We celebrated every moment | Of our meetings as epiphanies | Just we two in all the world. | Bolder, lighter than a bird’s wing, | You hurtled like vertigo | Down the stairs, leading | Through moist lilac to your realm | Beyond the mirror’. On the word “mirror”, the image of a little boy, in a farmyard at dusk, appears first to observe the previous scene and then to walk away, exiting from the shot and letting us glimpse his semi-naked little sister left sleeping on the ground and their mother who bends down and picks her up. The scene is accompanied with the words: ‘When night fell, | grace was given me, | The sanctuary gates were opened, | Shining in the darkness | Nakedness bowed slowly’. At this point the image-word dialogic becomes more complex not only due to the verbal-visual resonance between the darkness of the scene and the expression “When night fell”, but above all due to the interior and semantic resonance between the gesture of the mother that appears in the image and that of the lover evoked in the poem: they mirror each other in the sense of love and giving that both express, albeit in different ways. The close-up image of Aleksey eating together with his sister and slowly placing a handful of sugar on a cat’s head is linked by analogous exterior and semantic symmetry to the profanation of the gesture of baptism, evoked by the lines: ‘Waking up, I said: | “God bless you!”’, knowing it | To be daring’.

In this sequence, the word-image dialogic is structured on deep semantic echoes, which symmetrically reflect the specularity of

Till speech was full and running over | With resounding strength, and the word you | Revealed its new meaning: it meant king. | Everything in the world was different, | Even the simplest things — the jug, the basin — | When stratified and solid water | Stood between us, like a guard. | We were led to who knows where. | Before us opened up, in mirage, | Towns constructed out of wonder, | Mint leaves spread themselves beneath our feet, | Birds came on the journey with us, | Fish leapt in greeting from the river, | And the sky unfurled above... | While behind us all the time went fate, | A madman brandishing a razor’.

two of the levels of representation — childhood memories and actual present —, in which the same situation is symbolically mirrored: the abandonment by Oleg, the protagonist's father and *alter ego* of the author, Aleksey, of his wife, Maria, and the abandonment by Aleksey of his wife, Natalia. It is no accident that the parts of the protagonist's mother and wife are played by the same actor (Margarita Terekhova); this enriches the sequence and the whole film with emotional-affective ambivalences and semantic ambiguities, which are very effective in soliciting what Wittgenstein defined "resonance"¹⁸ of comprehension, or in our terms, of fundamental comprehension, developed with regard to the deep psychology of the author and his *alter ego* Aleksey. In fact, this sequence shows how the combination of polysemy of the image and of the word may render the concrete/abstract, phenomenal/symbolic translation complex and creative, by using a recursive loop structure to intensify the transmutation achieved by the imagination between analogical, symbolic and mythological thought and logical, rational and empirical thought.

At a higher level of comprehension, which we could define as *complex comprehension*, logical, rational, empirical thought proves to be pre-eminent in the dialogic with analogical, symbolic and mythological thought. This pre-eminence does not exclude but is indeed essential to the deep involvement of sensibility that occurs in fundamental comprehension and that is, as it were, incorporated and assimilated so as to be overcome in its contingent aspects and particular expressions and to allow a wider and higher understanding. In fact, what Morin defined as "meta-point of view" intervenes in complex comprehension; this is a point of view on a point of view, which offers the opportunity to activate a two-fold observation of the real. As is typical of fundamental comprehension, this is immersed in the specific definitions of the real and maintains the psychological processes of identification, projection and transfer, and *at the same time*, it withdraws from the previous one and includes it in a wider

18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: Critical Essays* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

overview so as to grasp the general or universal meaning. One of the main outcomes of complex comprehension, which derives from the use of the meta-point of view and explains the pre-eminence it gives to logical, rational and empirical thought, consists in the possibility of developing not only reflexivity but also self-reflexivity and hence self-criticism: to the “experience of truth”, which is already implied by fundamental comprehension, is thus added, in complex comprehension, a potential transformation of the one who understands.

In the scene of milk and strawberries at sunset, taken from the film *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957), in a few moments the image-word dialogic, moving to the symbolic, opens unexpected opportunities for complex comprehension. The characters of the work symbolize the three stages of the human being, according to Kierkegaard’s concept: the Juggler represents the aesthetic stage; the Squire, the ethical stage; the Knight, the religious stage. To these is added Death, who appears several times to the Knight, immersed in an existential and spiritual crisis. In the film, therefore, not only the characters, but also their actions and their words, are all taken in a sense that cannot be, as it were, literal, but symbolic, and in some scenes, it acquires a very wide significance, which, returning to Kierkegaard, could be defined existential. The scene in question offers exemplary evidence, in that it forcefully imposes on logical, rational, empirical thought the continuous transcendence of the levels of experience and interpretation that is typical of the meta-point of view. In this scene, the image shows all the characters — apart from Death — sitting in a meadow at dusk; the Juggler is murmuring and playing a sweet melody on his lute, while his wife is offering bowls of freshly milked milk and freshly picked wild strawberries to the Knight, who at first refuses them and earnestly, clasping his hands and interlacing his fingers, says: ‘To believe is to suffer. It is like loving someone in the dark, who never answers’. The Juggler’s wife then again offers the Knight the strawberries and milk and he finally accepts, smiling and adding: ‘How unreal that in your company. It means nothing to me now’. The shot, which firstly just included the face of the Knight, the Juggler and

his wife, now expands and, in an effect of chiaroscuro given by the light of the low setting sun, also shows the Squire and the cart on which Michael, the Juggler's son, is sleeping: 'I shall remember this hour of peace: the strawberries, the bowl of milk, your faces in the dusk, Michael asleep, Joseph with his lute. I shall remember our words'. The Knight again picks up the bowl full of milk and, after drinking, concludes: 'I shall bear this memory between my hands, as carefully as a bowl of fresh milk. And this will be a sign and a great content. Something to believe in'. The lyricism of the scene is given by the symbolic value of the word and the image, whose dialogic places both on a poetic level, independently of the fact that the text they recite does not belong to a poem. The image-word dialogic indeed strengthens the symbolic and poetic value that the two elements would have if taken individually. What is concretely shown and named — the milk, the strawberries and the dusk light — is symbolically taken in its wider semantic and existential value. In confirmation of this, there is, in particular, the coincidence between the image where the Knight drinks from the bowl held in his hands and the final words which refer to holding in the hands, keeping carefully and accepting a comforting truth in which to believe. If, on the one hand, it is thanks to the identification, projection and transfer with the Knight that it is possible to share the existential revelation he has obtained and make it one's own, on the other hand, it is by virtue of the meta-point of view obtained that it is possible to reach a complex comprehension on one's own way of experiencing life, as well as that of other human beings.

In the work *The Tree of Life* (2015) by Terrence Malick, the complex comprehension concerns the experience of life, probing the depth, vastness and mutability of human feeling and thought in the sphere of family love and the cycle of birth and death. It also concerns the relationship that all this has with nature and its processes of creation and destruction, order, disorder and metamorphosis. The image-word dialogic is conducted with a high degree of symbolism, by virtue of the semantic evocation, ambivalence and uncertainty that are imprinted on the subtraction, elision and essentiality of the iconic and verbal forms of expression.

‘What are you thinking?’ says Jack’s voice-over, after he has apologized to his father on the phone after an argument, while he is going around his office, where there are other people. ‘As I lost you?’, adds Jack’s voice-over, accompanied by a long shot of a tree near the office window, with sun rays filtering through its foliage. On the image of an ocean wave breaking loudly, the voice-over continues: ‘I departed’. On the words ‘I forgot you’ Jack appears with his face in his hands that are wet with water from a puddle, in which his figure is reflected, now immersed in a rocky desert. In this sequence, the correspondence between the semantic ambiguity and the formal essentiality both of images and words places both elements on the side of the symbolic. The transformation of the subjects of the performance and of the contexts, as well as fragmentary laconism of the interior monologue, open the sense indefinitely, and by disorientating the fundamental comprehension with regard to the protagonist, solicit it to grasp his interior plurality: who is Jack addressing? His father who he was speaking to on the phone? His dead brother he was badmouthing to his father? Himself, as in an act of self-criticism? Or perhaps God, who was indirectly evoked at the start of the film? All these hypotheses remain plausible, validating various levels of interpretation, from the literal to the symbolic, since the images interlace reality with oneirism, in a sort of stream of consciousness, which includes childhood memories right from the start of the film. The iconic and verbal polysemy is thus moved to the highest degree, intensifying the concrete/abstract, phenomenal/symbolic relationship and powerfully invoking the imagination. Shortly after this sequence, the image of Jack’s mother as a young woman appears, as she walks in a wood with a distressed expression on her face and observes the rays of the sun through the foliage of the trees. On this image, the woman’s voice-over bursts out: ‘Oh, God! Why?’ On these words, a long series of images starts off, showing the metamorphic dynamism of forms, colors, lights of planets, stars, galaxies, deserts, volcanoes, oceans, rivers, rocks, plants, animals, and puts next to them that of cells, blood vessels and some organs of the body of a mother and human fetus. In a continuous and flowing passage from macroscopy to microscopy, from the cosmos

to the human microcosmos, from phylogenesis to ontogenesis, the movement of life appears in its metamorphic multiplicity and unity, thanks to combinations and fusions or confusions of images which bring out the similarity or repetition of the same elements or processes. Jack's mother's words maintain semantic uncertainty in that they first seem to be an exclamation of grief for Jack's brother's premature death, which Jack had evoked on the phone to his father; subsequently, with the start of the images of the life of the cosmos and of man, they appear as the expression of stupor at existence itself, in its various forms and manifestations. With the words: 'Oh, God! Why?', what only seemed to be a flashback with Jack's childhood memories of his brother's death becomes also a sort of flashback on the history of life in the cosmos, with a transition from the point of view, which first was to be found in the singularity of an existence, and subsequently becomes a meta-point of view extending out of all proportion towards the horizons of the many-sided unity of lives. Around these same words, not only is the thematization of death interlaced with that of life, but the birth of all beings, and not only humans, observed in their similarity, opens up the question of the possibility of a single divine creation. The aesthetic-epistemic relationship between concrete/abstract, phenomenal/symbolic is here structured in a semantic-metamorphic recursive loop and seems thus to move towards a relationship between immanence and transcendence.

From the fundamental comprehension concerning the subjectivity of Jack and his mother, caught in their existential anxieties, we thus reach a complex comprehension, which regards the subjectivity of all beings in similar vital processes. Reflexivity and self-reflexivity, forcefully provoked, are moved towards an interrogative on the relationship between human existence and other existences and between oneself and the cosmos.

This and many other audio-verbal-visual works, besides the ones examined here, show how the aesthetic experience, being a subjective participation in the metamorphosis of sound and verbal iconic forms, may epistemically experience the world and itself as an ongoing experience, from which potentially arises the question on one's own or other's being, and maybe action, too.