

**Concilio, Carmen; Festa, Maria (eds) (2016). *Word and Image in Literature and the Visual Arts*. Milano: Mimesis International, 397 pp.**

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The picture on the book cover reproduces a poster advertising an engraving company. It shows a man, a brush in his right hand, concentrated on his painting; the slogan above goes: “ILLUSTRATION BEATS EXPLANATION”. The poster evocatively ushers the reader into the recurrent theme of the essays in the volume. It brings the suggestive power of images to the foreground, but also reminds us of the long-standing competition for primacy between word and image, while being evidence, at the same time, of how words and images can throw light on each other.

The essays collected in the volume all address the intersection between visual and verbal codes in the most varied contexts. Besides providing a theoretical background to the implications of such an intersection, the essays deal with the relationship between literary classics and the cinema or the graphic novel, they concentrate on the writers’ capacity of creating images out of words, they discuss the hybrid nature of works that combine different languages: images that range from photographs and drawings to films intertwined with the most diverse written texts – fiction, poetry, articles, reportages. The multidimensionality of the works taken into account by the contributors to the volume appears to be a fundamental constituent of counter-canonical aesthetics that would allow to render more appropriately the complexities of our world and, more specifically, to lend a more open eye to postcolonial realities. Several essays in fact deal with postcolonial issues and the connected phenomenon of contemporary migrations.

Interesting parallels are also drawn between pieces of writing and images which did not originate within the same project, but connect with the same discourse. For instance, Carmen Concilio, in her essay “South-Africa’s New Archive. Literature, Photography and the Digital Humanities”, associates a well-known photograph by David Goldblatt with a passage from Nadine Gordimer’s *No Time like the Present*, an excerpt from NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* and a chronicle published in the online journal *Johannesburg the Salon*, to show how they converge to convey the same message about the Zimbabwean refugees’ aspirations frustrated by

political failures in South-Africa. Similarly Chris Ledochowski's shots of life in South-African townships relate to the description of the same places in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* or in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*. Further on Concilio observes how all David Golblatt's "photographic errands" are complementary to Ivan Valdislavić's "latest literary urban errands, both fictions and non-fictions" (71). This similarity has produced a deliberate cooperation between Golblatt and Valdislavić, whose novel *Double Negative* was written to accompany the former's photographic project of *T. J.*; besides working as a metaphor of the protagonist's diasporic conscience divided between Johannesburg and London, the title *Double Negative* is interpreted by Concilio as an allegory of the relationship between novel and photo album. One of Valdislavić's short stories, *Journal of a Wall* and some fragments from his *Portrait with Key* find their 'material' equivalent in the walls decorated by William Kentridge, as Paola Quazzo points out in her essay. Both the writer and the visual artist - each through their own language - attach manifold meanings to the idea of wall: a symbol of prevarication and seclusion that can be turned into a manifesto of freedom and creativity, a meeting point, the metaphor of an urban space - be it South-African or worldwide - that keeps the multilayered memories of the people inhabiting it.

A further interplay between visual and verbal codes is highlighted by Ilaria Oddenino in "Portraying Migration in Contemporary Europe: Two Comparative Approaches", where she compares the reportage *Lettre à une Calésienne* (first published in the French journal *Revue XXI*) by Emmanuel Carrère and the film *Fuocoammare* by Italian director Gianfranco Rosi. What the two works have in common is not just the topic they treat (namely the plight of migrants who reach Europe from Africa crossing the Mediterranean and the attitude of the local people and authorities, no matter whether Italian or French) but also the authors' approach to the issue: both journalist and director tell stories of migration adopting the partial - if not stereotyped - vision of the residents embodied by two imaginary characters (a woman from Calais and a boy from Lampedusa) as the starting point of their narrations, blending thus documentary and fictional elements.

Postcolonial Italy is the focus of Pietro De Andrea's essay too. It deals in fact with three Italian films, Ermanno Olmi's *Il Villaggio di Cartone*, Gabriele Del Grande, Khalid Soliman Al Massiry and Antonio Agugliaro's *Io Sto con la Sposa*, Daniele Gaglianone's *La Mia Classe* and Wu Ming's short story *Momodù*. They all tell migrants' stories and all, though in different ways and degrees, adopt counter-canonical aesthetics, either disrupting spaces, or mixing real and fictional elements, or blending genres and languages, or reversing the chronological order of events. This last is the case of *Momodù* that is narrated backward, from outcome to origin (which is materially reflected by the order of the chapters going from 13

to 0); thus the truth about a crime supposedly committed by a Gambian immigrant is progressively uncovered to reveal that the accusation was built up to cover the misdeed of a *carabiniere*, whose hate for migrants is rooted in the Italian colonial past. The upside-down structure of Wu Ming's story, as well as the hybridity and fluidity of the films taken into account represent a kind of aesthetics that takes on a political value. This is exactly the point De Andrea makes: the non-canonical modes of narration analysed contribute to the dismantling of a hegemonic reading of the phenomenon of migration and work as a denunciation of the absurdities and cruelties of European policies relating to it.

In her essay Luisa Pellegrini presents two further works that join words and images to address once again the issue of migration: *Asylum Seekers*, produced by the cooperation of three professional photographers and two anthropologists, is a photo book that deals with the issue from an ethnographic/sociological point of view, and *Mare Nostrum*, a graphic novel by Fabio Visintin, where the bodies of drown migrants, drifting in the salt water that envelops their tragedies in a sort of surreal atmosphere, tell their stories to the animals of the sea, the only ones capable of listening to them sympathetically.

Another interesting example of connection between verbal and visual elements is *Lives of Shadows* by the Canadian writer Barbara Hodgson. In her original novel the images interact with the narrative threads and temporal leaps at different stages and with different functions, as Maja Duranovic observes: the intersection of photographs, postcards, maps, drawings, old newspaper articles, Arabic inscriptions gives a visual perspective to the words, complements the readers' mental images and provides them with clues to identify the characters, or, as in the case of newspaper clippings, it serves to challenge the official narration of the bombings of Damascus by juxtaposing it to the fictional characters' reports of their daily experiences of war.

Teju Cole's deliberate effort to interweave literature and photography is the subject of Maria Festa's essay. As Festa indicates Cole's blending of words and images shows his attempt to produce a narrative where both have equal value. However Cole's essays also provide us with reflections about photography in terms of what it reveals or hides, of its relationship with memory and history. In Cole's fictional work, whether complemented by images or not, photography is central: unlike his novella, *Everyday is for the Thief*, where photographs are meant to give a more substantial view of Lagos and Nigeria, or his journal *Punto d'Ombra*, where they preserve the memory of his wanderings around the world, the novel *Open City* does not display images, yet, as Festa writes, the reader is led to look at words using eyes as a camera.

The end of Apartheid in South Africa gave international visibility to photographic reportages unknown till then; this opened a previously un-

explored perspective on the nature of photography and its interpolation with literary and narrative discourse, while tackling the new realities of the Rainbow Nation. In this context Concilio gives account of a seminal work notable for its hybridity: *blank\_Architecture, Apartheid and After* by Hilton Judin and Ivan Valdislavić. The compedium combines photos, drawings, maps with essays covering disparate fields ranging from sociology to urban planning, advertising and short narrative fictions. Concilio also touches on post-Apartheid Digital Humanities and Web Archives. The flourishing of these currents is to be found in such initiatives as the online journal, *The Johannesburg Salon* or the VIADUCT 2015 Platform launched by the University of Johannesburg, or the Web Project *Twenty Journey* initiated by the three photographers, Sean Metelerkamp, Siphon Mpongo and Wikus de Wet. All these works concur to discuss the question of the responsibility of the artists who represent contemporary South-Africa and, more in general, our present world, and they do so by bringing together the most diverse codes: still and moving images, poems, travel impressions, narratives. All this shows how photo essays is establishing itself as a powerful and effective new genre, as a new cultural phenomenon and, because of its hybridisation of words and images, it turns out to be particularly versatile and apt to read our postcolonial era.

In our 'network civilisation' images have acquired a tremendous power: to paraphrase Paul Virilio, they can be an instrument of freedom revealing the obscure side of reality, yet they could also obliterate reality, substituting it with an illusory virtual one. The centrality of images in shaping public opinion poses an urgent demand for tools to interpret and discriminate. The volume edited by Concilio and Festa provides us with critical keys towards a healthy understanding of the impact images have on our comprehension of the world, but it also shows us how they can usefully interact with words.