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Meta-Representations, Self-Referentiality, Impossible Pictures

1.

Probably all natural languages have sayings and idioms attesting to how language looks after itself: it can cast light on its own nature, on its uses and on the meanings it may express. In other words, language contains a theory relating to itself. For instance, I am thinking of expressions in various languages indicating that an understanding of verbal communicative acts constitutes elementary understanding, or I am thinking of other expressions indicating that many actions must be performed verbally: for example, linguistic means are required in order to make a valid undertaking or oath, to call someone to account, or to give an explanation, and so forth. In Hungarian, such expressions are: "néma gyereknek anyja sem érti a szavát" [even the mother of a speechless child cannot understand his words], "szóból ért az ember" [only words that have been told can be understood], "szaván fogni valakit" [take someone at his word], "szavát adni valamire" [give one's word for something]. Perhaps a similar role is played in English by the following idioms: "a word to the wise is enough," "speak up if you want anything," "take at his word," "give his word," and so forth.

Based on this peculiar capacity of language or on a theory of language expressed in language, it is easy to argue that a comprehensible communicative intent always supposes an explicit act of speech or a comprehensible communicative intent is expressible – if necessary – with an explicit act of speech. This means we must assume that verbal communication takes precedence over other forms of communication. In this way we quickly arrive at the linguistic primacy hypothesis, or more precisely, we encounter the basic semiotic principle which, after Lotman, is understood to mean that our primary semiotic system is natu-

ral language. In the following, I shall call this the *primacy hypothesis.* However, we often feel encouraged to revise this hypothesis, as the relationship between language and the other semiotic systems, or between verbal communication and other forms of communication, raises numerous difficult questions that are worth reexamining.

In the following, having narrowed the problem to the relationship between the verbal and the visual, I should like to examine several *pro* and *contra* arguments. As Mitchell has pointed out, the debate on the relationship between the verbal and the visual has tended to be marred by the idea or attitude that one of them must defeat the other: "One must precede the other, dominate, resist, supplement the other." (Mitchell 1994, 28)

It is worth paying attention to Mitchell's warning, but an examination of the "primacy hypothesis" itself makes it hard to avoid the trap of describing the relationship between the verbal and the visual in terms of radical difference and otherness.

2.

What, indeed, is the primacy hypothesis and from what is it derived? In what sense can one say that elementary understanding is the understanding of a verbal communication?

In response to these questions, the following answers may be given:

a) The linguistic primacy is true in a quantitative sense because one can express more in words than in pictures or visual codes. For example, by using language, one can say something that cannot be depicted. The narratives of the battles of Austerlitz and Borodino in *War and Peace* (1869) or the narrative of the Battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) outmatch any possible visual representations of the battles. Is it even possible to paint what even Fabrizio (Fabrice) del Dongo did not see? Nor can paintings and photographs compete with the long description of Lake Como in *The Betrothed* (1827). All this means that the domains the two forms of expression can address in a referential manner differ greatly from each other.

b) Yet just as Manzoni could describe in words Lake Como as a natural landscape, we can also use verbal means to describe pictures, sculptures and other visual works of art. And thus we arrive at the problem of ekphrasis, which is so much discussed nowadays.

Evidently, in most instances, words cannot replace the visual spectacle, or more exactly our experience of that spectacle. However, it is also true that words are needed in order to interpret pictures. We cannot dispense with words when giving meaning to pictures, for this is the very purpose of art history. Art history analyses and interprets pictures in the medium of language, while barely being able to avoid presenting their reproductions.

It may even happen that a verbal description almost replaces a picture in the sense that it precisely and completely conjures up and renders visible the picture for the reader, who then undertakes the work of analysis and interpretation on this basis. At any rate, Foucault's study of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* came very close to this ideal. I think the popularity of his study is due as much to this feat as to the hypothesis the author wished to prove through his analysis. I believe this to be so, even though Foucault adds:

> But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. (Foucault 1970, 10)

c) The relationship between the visual and the verbal expression is asymmetric. The content of visual representations can be expressed in words to a far greater extent than we can represent visually the content of verbal descriptions. While it appears to be evident that art history can only analyse and interpret pictures verbally, it is almost impossible to imagine the reverse of this. It would be difficult to visually represent (in pictures) the explications of art history. Of course, the question arises: what does "to a far greater extent" mean here? What general validity may we attribute to the statement concerning the asymmetry of the visual and the verbal? For it would be quite possible to provide several counter-examples to the asymmetry hypothesis, including such artistic illustrations in literary works as Botticelli's drawings for the *Divine Comedy*.

d) The primacy hypothesis has a strong structural purpose that has long been emphasised. This can be summed up in the assertion that other semiotic systems are also "languages." When, therefore, we speak of the "language of painting" or visual language in general, we are using the term "language" in a literal sense rather than metaphorically. This means that our visual expressions create structures

similar to linguistic ones (even though they do so with less strictness and formality): for instance, they include both syntactic and semantic dimensions, the *langue* and *parole*, or the distinction between code and text, multi-layer articulation and so forth. I mention here this problem of structural arrangement merely for the sake of order, and I shall not return to it in this paper.

e) An inherent possibility of language is to become the meta-language of itself and of other non-verbal "languages." This relationship does not hold in reverse, or, at least, special practices and certain cultural and institutional circumstances are necessary for it to be realised in reverse. Obviously, the relationship indicated in points b) and c) is also related to this. Yet, as Jakobson has clearly shown, we can speak of a metalinguistic function in the strict sense when in the course of the communicative act the message relates to the code, or when we seek to control, clarify or even alter the *code*.

For this reason, the following should be stated: Although the existence of a metatext is clearly made possible by a metalanguage, the metatext itself – for instance, a critical study of a literary work – is not a metalinguistic phenomenon, as it is still a *text.* It is not a part of the *langue*, but is a *parole-act.*

Concerning pictures, we ought to say the same. Without a doubt, there are examples of what we may call "metapictures." Still, a metapicture is a visual communicative phenomenon at the *parole* level, and it is not an element of a set of signals at a supposed visual metalinguistic level. The question arises: what makes the metavisual act possible? Is it some kind of visual metalanguage? Or is it a natural language serving as a metalanguage of the visual languages? The second answer seems to be the more plausible one.

3.

Let us examine the extent to which the foregoing statements can be criticised or defended and the degree to which they support the primacy hypothesis.

a) A criticism of the quantitative interpretation of the hypothesis could be that it reflects the traditional culture dominating verbal texts. The current range and increasing role of visual communication proves, however, that the visual form of expression is completely autonomous; it bears meaning in itself, and often cannot be replaced by a verbal form of expression. In my view, this current important cultural change does not affect the relationships identified in points

a), b), and c) of the previous section, that is, the quantitative differences between the referential domains of the two forms of expression, and the asymmetry arising between them. The fact that visual means have acquired an extraordinary role in all fields of life does not rule out, in a logical sense, the superimposition of the visual world that fills our culture onto language, which is still the ultimate basis for interpretation and the assignment of meaning.

Later on, it will be worthwhile examining separately the problem of the counter-examples undermining the asymmetry hypothesis – including literary illustrations – thereby it will be worthwhile comparing the visual transpositions of verbal communication with the cases of ekphrasis, that is, with the verbal descriptions of visual representations.

b) One of the strongest arguments for the primacy hypothesis is the "argument from metalanguage." It would seem difficult to deny that a peculiarity of language, not shared by any other human (and non-human) means of communication, is that the metalinguistic function is contained within it, and it is precisely this feature that allows language to serve as a metalanguage for non-verbal systems.

Yet even concerning this rather uncontroversial issue, doubts may arise.

On this point, the primary need is for exact definitions. First, as I have already mentioned, we must be able to differentiate clearly – and in a practical sense – between metalanguage, which relates to the code, and *metatexts*, which relate to texts. A *metatext* is, for example, criticism of a poetic text, inasmuch as it describes the given text in the critical metalanguage. In addition, it fulfils a *metalinguistic function*, inasmuch as it reconstructs the poetics serving as the basis for the text or the underlying code generating the text.

A complicating factor is that *poetic texts themselves also* speak of their poetic nature, rendering visible in some way or other the code that generates them. Put briefly, poetic texts are *themselves* self-referential, and this attribute also plays a role in evoking the poetic effect. This, is turn, gives rise to the need for a further distinction: we need to distinguish the *self-referentiality* that is peculiarly characteristic of poetic texts from the manner in which the *critical metalinguistic discourse* relates to the text.

At the same time, regardless of the extent to which this distinction is necessary, from the viewpoint of poetic self-referentiality, we can only draw a very thin boundary between the two poles – and so it is customarily ignored. Evidently, the poetic message can only refer to itself and can only render visible its own formal structure where it also reveals, in an explicit manner, the code that brought

into being. Accordingly, in this way a metalinguistic component is added to the self-referentiality of the poetic text; that is to say, it becomes a part of the operation of the poetic function guaranteeing the poetry of the text.

In terms of the critical discourse, it is much easier to determine the boundary. The metalinguistic components of the poetic text remain entirely *within* the text, for which reason it may be read as a *metatext of itself*. Criticism, however, in view of its basic function, always relates to *another text* as *its metatext*. It is not *self-referential* in character. Rather, it has a *referential* function, and as such it shares an affinity with scientific types of discourse.

Let us extend what has been said so far about the visual language. Is it not possible to discover in pictures, as works of art, the same kind of self-referentiality that characterises poetic texts? Cannot a picture as an aesthetic message refer to itself? And since the boundary here is so thin, can it not also take on a metalinguistic function?

It is difficult to give answers of general validity to these questions. At any rate, the presence of certain thematic elements can often assist us in interpreting a picture *as a metapicture* and in discovering in the picture the entwining of *poetic self-referentiality* and *metalinguistic logic*. If there is such an example, then it must be Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. I shall return to this below.

4.

First, however, I should like to say a few words about the issue of illustrations produced for literary works and ekphrasis.

a) Theoretically speaking, one of the most important issues is whether illustrations are *translations* or *interpretations* of the illustrated text. The answer clearly depends on the kind of relationship we suppose exists between translation and interpretation. Whatever this may be, it is apparent that an illustration cannot be separated from the literary text. To identify and interpret even Botticelli's Dante illustrations with their fully independent messages, we still require a title – which tells us, for instance, that the drawing in question depicts Beatrice and Dante ascending to the Heaven of the Moon.

The asymmetry hypothesis noted above also applies here. Unlike a pictorial illustration of a literary text, a verbal description is not an illustration of the picture. But nor is it always an analysis, interpretation or intermedial translation, as

it may be suitable for representing – without any reference to physical objects – an existing or non-existing picture. More exactly, it may function as if it were a picture. This is unadulterated ekphrasis; it is what Dante called, with reference to the works of art described in one of the most special parts of the *Comedy*, "visible speech" ("visibile parlare").[1]

The classic example of a description of a *non-existing* picture is the Shield of Achilles. Meanwhile, we find an excellent example of the verbal representation of an *existing* visual model in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Adso, the hero of the novel, describes the main gateway to the abbey as follows:

> Two straight and unadorned columns stood on either side of the entrance, which opened, at first sight, like a great arch; but from the columns began two embrasures that, surmounted by other, multiple arches, led the gaze, as if into the heart of an abyss, toward the doorway itself, crowned by a great tympanum, supported on the sides by two imposts and in the centre by a carved pillar, which divided the entrance into two apertures protected by oak doors reinforced in metal. (Eco 1984, 28)

This description, which goes on for several pages, acquaints the reader with the main gate of the Moissac Abbey. (Ickert-Schick 1986, 34) The description conjures up a visual image of the gate. More exactly, it creates this image, for in theory there is nothing to prevent a reader, with the necessary powers of imagination, from visualising the gate and from subsequently being able to identify it, even though he may never have seen the Moissac Abbey or a photograph of it. This is not altered by the fact that Eco merges into Adso's account a description of a very similar tympanum adorning the middle gateway of the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene at Vézelay. (Ickert-Schick 1986, 35) We see here how the author uses verbal means not only to exert a general visual effect, but also to create a specific image of a clearly identifiable object. To emphasize once again, this achievement is not the result of an act of translation or interpretation, but is made on the plane of perception, in the sense that a verbal description is capable, in terms of content, of evoking almost the same objective perception as produced in us by visual stimuli.

1 "This was the speech made visible" (*Purgatorio*, X. 95. In Dante 1995).

b) For my next example, let me borrow from Dante who presents in Cantos X and XII of his *Purgatorio* a whole series of visual works of art – "live caryatids," reliefs, sculptures, and floor drawings. As already noted, for Dante all of this was "visible speech." The following extract is particularly instructive:

> At this, I turned my face and saw beyond
> the form of Mary–on the side where stood
> the one who guided me–another story
>
> engraved upon the rock; therefore I moved
> past Virgil and drew close to it, so that
> the scene before my eyes was more distinct.
>
> There, carved in that same marble, were the cart
> and oxen as they drew the sacred ark,
> which makes men now fear tasks not in their charge.
>
> People were shown in front; and all that group,
> divided into seven choirs, made
> two of my senses speak–one sense said, "No,"
>
> the other said, "Yes, they do sing;" just so,
> about the incense smoke shown there, my nose
> and eyes contended, too, with *yes* and *no.*
>
> (*Purgatorio,* X. 49–63)

Irrespective of whether or not the poet succeeds here in creating a realistic spectacle (in my view, he does), it is easy to see his expectation: the sculpture has to be perfectly realistic and to impact on all our senses. Meanwhile, he, as the poet, is resolved that his poem should depict the spectacle in an appropriate fashion:

> What master of the brush or of the stylus
> had there portrayed such masses, such outlines
> as would astonish all discerning minds?

> The dead seemed dead and the alive, alive:
> I saw, head bent, heading those effigies,
> as well as those who'd seen those scenes directly.
> (*Purgatorio,* XII. 64–69)

These purgatory works of art *do not exist*. We do not even know whether Dante was emulating models – and, if he was, what these models might have been. Accordingly, we can say that Dante *is not describing* existing works of art but *is creating* non-existent works of art by verbal means. This is a rare phenomenon, but it is not unique: it is sufficient to cite once again the Shield of Achilles or to think of Adrian Leverkühn's symphony.

For this reason, there is a theoretical difference between the description of the Moissac Abbey gate and the example taken from Dante. In terms of our topic, however, perhaps it is better to state that the two examples do not differ from each other in principle; rather, they represent different degrees of verbal evocative strength on the same scale.

c) The Purgatorio examples are noteworthy because Dante chooses a narrative language for the visual representation: in the case of the reliefs, he relates in detail the story they represent, while in the case of the floor drawings, he compresses the story into a single characteristic and dramatic motif. Evidently, this reflects the fact that for him visual art is narrative art in a certain sense.

Descriptive evidence of this narrative-like, or "historical," approach to imagery is the verb "storiare," which appears in the description of the relief depicting Trajan and the widow, and which means "to decorate with historical forms or scenes" ("Quiv' era storiata l'alta gloria del roman principato" [X. 73–74]). The poet's wish is that we should perceive the relief as a divine miracle, for as God's work it does not only seize the moment (as do works of men), but also expresses the successive motifs of the dialogue between the Emperor and the widow. Similarly, the expression "visible speech" aims to unify the simultaneity of vision and the successivity of speech.

Our example would seem to be an excellent instance of the old dilemma that arises when one interprets the relationship between the visual and the verbal, namely how to bridge the gap between simultaneous (visual) representation and narration. Pictures are conventionally regarded as the field of *spatial perception*, but expectations relating to pictures often include the assumption that visuality can also be granted narrative features – at least through some divine miracle.

d) We can add to the series of existing and non-existing works of art (evoked or created by verbal means) a further element: impossible pictures, among them the paradoxical drawings by the artist Escher. In their pictorial form, his paradoxical drawings cannot even exist, as they contradict the logic of space and the spatial and physical conditions of existence. Here too, language has resources that allow for descriptions outside the limits of visual representation, creating visual effects that cannot be achieved by visual means. Let me once again take an example from Dante who, in the final vision of the *Divine Comedy*, portrays the Holy Trinity as three circles of equal circumference and diameter, coincident with each other and in three colours. The poet apparently creates an impossible picture by using the medium of language:

> [...] In the deep and bright
> essence of that exalted Light, three circles
> appeared to me; they had three different colours,
> but all of them were of the same dimension.
> (*Paradiso,* XXXIII. 114–117)

Evidently, it would be quite difficult (indeed impossible) to represent figuratively Dante's last vision, as it is shown by the attempts of many artists. (See Figure 1 and 2 for some examples of illustrations of the final scene of *Paradiso*)

This visually impossible picture raises a further question, for it is part of a series of visions – indeed, it is one of the first visions –, which we can read as the synthetic image of the whole of history.

The direct antecedents of Dante's three circles are Joachim of Fiore's Trinitarian circles in the *Liber figurarum* (Figure 3):

Evidently, the teachings of Joachim, which were considered heretical, could not be espoused openly by Dante. Yet, it has long been known that the prophetic beliefs of the Calabrian abbot exerted a profound influence on Dante's thinking. This is why Dante places Joachim in Paradise and attributes prophetic abilities to him:

> [...] and at my side
> shines the Calabrian Abbot Joachim,
> who had the gift of the prophetic spirit.
> (*Paradiso*, XII. 140–142)

Dante's reference to Joachim's "prophetic spirit" clearly relates to the abbot's prophecy of the third Age, the Age of the Holy Spirit, and to the idea of conceiving history as a whole as a Trinitarian structure. His three – green, blue, and red – circles symbolise the Trinity, but they are also an image of history. Joachim of Fiore, one of the first great Western philosophers of history, conceived history in the form of a Trinitarian structure that included both the past and the future. History, he thought, would pass through three theoretically separate and independent ages, progressing towards the final goal. In the *Divine Comedy*, as mankind's representative Dante travels through the three realms of the afterlife, and we are left in no doubt that his journey is also a historical one. Would it be overstepping the mark to see in his circles this image of history? Is it possible that history, like God, can be represented with the help of a single picture?

5.

Finally, I shall return to the *Las Meninas* (Figure 4).

The quotation below is an extract from Foucault's famous analysis that conjures up the painting:

> Rather than pursue to infinity a language inevitably inadequate to the visible fact, it would be better to say that Velázquez composed a picture; that in this picture he represented himself, in his studio or in a room of the Escurial, in the act of painting two figures whom the Infanta Margarita has come there to watch, together with an entourage of duennas, maids of honour, courtiers, and dwarfs [...] We could then add that the two personages serving as models to the painter are not visible, at least directly; but that we can see them in a mirror; and that they are, without any doubt, King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana. (Foucault 1970, 10)

I would like to add here that the canvas and easel can be seen from behind the left side of the picture, while the painter is looking at his invisible models or at us, the viewers, who are outside the picture and who occupy their place on this side.

Here I should note that Foucault's description and analysis of the picture were called into question by Daniel Arasse on the grounds that Foucault was unacquainted with the history of the painting's creation – which was first revealed during the restoration process – and that the original painting, which had been concealed by over-painting, revealed something quite different: the manner in which this originally dynastic painting had been transformed by changes in the order of succession within the royal family.

I think this historical circumstance does not alter what we see – and what Foucault saw. We find it unquestionable that the painting we see expresses strongly both self-referentiality in the poetic sense and the metalinguistic function relating to its own codes. This is precisely what Foucault is saying when he concludes that this painting by Velázquez is "the representation, as it were, of Classical representation" (Foucault 1970, 16), on which he subsequently bases his entire classical epistemology.

What interests us, however, is that we do seem to have found an example that calls into question our belief that the metalinguistic function is the privilege of verbal language. Of course, the example is an extraordinary one. As W. J. T. Mitchell says:

> The formal structure of *Las Meninas* is an encyclopaedic labyrinth of pictorial self-reference, representing the interplay between the beholder, the producer, and the object or model of representation as a complex cycle of exchanges and substitutions. (Mitchell 1994, 58)

But let us not rush to conclusions. In order to determine that *Las Meninas* is the representation of a representation – moreover a Classical one –, Foucault himself was required to employ a verbal analysis that covered every detail and utilised all opportunities of linguistic creativity. Metapictures – like all pictures – are embedded in the discourse about pictures. In this regard, the main consequence of Foucault's analysis was that it effected a change in the discourse that served as a condition for the picture's reception. Mitchell pointed this out when he wrote: "If Foucault had not written about Las Meninas, it would still be a great masterpiece, but it would not be a meta-picture." (Mitchell 1994, 58)

We see, therefore, that meta-pictures do exist, but their "meta" quality derives from their being used as metapictures. Indeed, one could obviously show that even in visual language the possibility of self-referentiality is far broader than

indicated by the famous cited examples. Even so, it seems likely that pictorial self-referentiality, even at this general level, is secondary to the discourse in which a given picture is embedded.

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