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Remaking Meaning Across Modes: Marginality and Transduction in the Verbal and Visual Construction of Migration

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Abstract

This paper considers the linguistic and multimodal strategies adopted to describe the theme of migration in both textual and visual representations, by drawing on the theoretical notion of transduction (Kress 2010). The transition from one semiotic mode to another is analyzed with reference to the representation of mass migrations in J. Conrad's short story "Amy Foster" and J. Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, in order to shed light on the meaning-making process emerging from this modal shift. The combination of linguistic and visual structures in specific socio-historical contexts makes the "transmodal redesign" (Mavers 2011) a semiotic relocation in which the past travels into the present. However, the shift is not only temporal; the reshaping of meaning also arises in a space made up of multiple semiotic intersections, appropriations, and entanglements (Newfield 2014) which generate, in turn, new meanings. As a consequence, the transmodal moment becomes itself a moment of cross-over, an in-between, so that the discourse on marginality does not only refer to the crossing of geographical boundaries or to the individual dislocation experienced by the migrant, but also concerns textual, multimodal, and semiotic transitions.

1. Introduction

In a well-known passage of *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said defines the migrant as the incarnation of intellectual freedom, embodying the "unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies" of culture. The migrant is a figure "between domains, between forms, between



homes, and between–languages.”¹ Said’s reference to ‘decentered and exilic energies’ establishes a connection between the tropes of migration and margins, via conceptual constructions involving change, relocation, fluidity, so that margins become the site of new energies to be released, and new meanings to be created. As a moment of cross-over, the notion of marginality extends beyond the crossing of geographical boundaries, spanning social, political, cultural, and linguistic areas. In terms of language and modes of expression, it also confronts verbal, visual and multimodal spheres.

This study aims to show how different semiotic modes can be adopted to make meanings and deliver messages about the cultural ‘movements’, the ‘transitions’ underlying the notion of migration, by considering the role of interstices and semiotic margins in its textual, visual, and multimodal representations. In looking at the textual and visual strategies adopted to describe migration from a multimodal critical discourse perspective, a few aspects will be considered, that is, how modal shifts impact on meaning, how they create new meaning, and how the modification of meaning entails a semiotic relocation in which the past travels into the present. The notion of transduction quoted in the title of this article is intended in ‘theoretical’ terms, as an ‘external semiotic action’, and not as an ‘internal’, cognitive process happening in the brain (Kress 2010)².

2. Representing migration: semiotic margins and cross-modal mobility

The concepts of ‘cross-modal mobility’ and ‘trans-semiotic mutation’ (Newfield 2014) have been studied in a range of disciplines, such as literature, art, photography, and also

¹ Said’s passage reads as follows: “[...] Yet, it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation is today the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and the artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange.” (Said 1993, 403).

² The application of transduction in the educational field, which defines children’s making of meaning as a crucial aspect of the learning process (Kress 1996), has also been left out.



communication, anthropology, architecture,³ while the term ‘transmodal’ has been used by a number of scholars to refer to the semiotic changes taking place when a concept or a topic shifts from one representational mode to another. These modes of representation include many discourses and critical fields, such as psychology, music, art. The term ‘transmodal translation’, for example, has been applied to the field of cinema studies, while the exploration of the transmodal in media has developed into transmediation. Here, the concepts of cross-modal mobility and ‘trans-semiotic mutation’ will be considered by looking at the verbal and visual representations of migration in two different texts, Joseph Conrad’s short story *Amy Foster* and Jacob Lawrence’s collection of paintings *The Migration Series*.

Amy Foster was written by Conrad in 1901 and published the same year in the *Illustrated London News*. It is the story of a journey from the physical margins of Eastern Europe to the perceived geographical, cultural, and ideological centre of Europe. It is the story of the failure to adapt to that hegemonic centre. The marginality of the emigrant, a man who comes from the ‘eastern range of the Carpathians’ (Conrad 1974, 121) acquires a central role, imposing itself on the text and changing the course of action. Yanko Goorall’s initial journey by train leads him to the mouth of the River Elbe where he embarks on a ship. Before reaching the ship, he has travelled for many days, experiencing sickness and unable

³ Newman (2014) states that “Architect Lindsay Bremner argues that her study into the ever-changing, evasive city of Johannesburg is ‘nomadic’, undertaken and represented through movement and the connections between writing, photography, pedagogy, architecture and city-making (2010). Clingman considers the ongoing metamorphoses and mutations in the work of artist William Kentridge (both across different art forms and within individual texts at the micro-level) as the central creative principle in his work which he calls ‘the art of transformation’ (2011). ‘Transformations’ in its plural form is the term used by Pahl to describe children’s meaning-making in nursery education (1999). Finnegan, writing as an anthropologist, describes the varied, complex and constantly shifting, performed textualities of communities as ‘serial transformations’ (2002, 179-200). In media education, Semali calls the cross-modal process ‘transmediation’ (2002), a term used also by Sanders in a recent book on integrating literacy, the arts and multimodality in English curricula (2010, 110). Iedema advances the term ‘resemiotization’, to be used as a tool in multimodal discourse analysis for tracing processes of semiotic translation in relation to larger socio-historical processes and issues of institutional power (2003). ‘Transmedia’ is widely used to name the phenomenon of the circulation and convergence of content across a range of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006), while the term ‘transmedia traversals’ is used by Lemke to convey a sense of a ‘dynamic semiotic cycle in which users interpret what is being displayed to them across many media’ (2007)”.



to distinguish night from day. Multitudes of people, ‘whole nations’, travel with him. Goorall’s descriptions exemplify Conrad’s impressionist writing and retain a level of abstraction which introduces images that may also represent the migrations which took place in different historical periods, crossing geographical boundaries and time limits, too. His story leads back to Conrad’s own personal story of migration and exile, and at the same time looks ahead to other migratory movements represented by artists and writers at a later time, such as *The Migration Series* (1941) by Lawrence, in which the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North is described. Originally titled *The Migration of the Negro*, the 60 paintings by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence are shared between MoMA in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. The collection can be easily recognized as having a social purpose. Scenes of labor, families, daily life, and especially journeys – namely, ‘the’ journey that would permanently change the country – are dealt with. Struggle, hope, solitude, the attempt at integration are also portrayed in this visual narration.

The two stories have obvious common points in terms of authorial perspective and composition. Conrad and Lawrence experienced movement and relocation as part of their young lives, and this affected their personal existence as well as their artistic careers.⁴ Both authors relied on the narrative strategies of oral literature for the composition of their works. Lawrence’s paintings were drawn on the many stories about migrants he had listened to during the years of his Harlem youth,⁵ while Conrad took the inspiration for “Amy Foster” from an anecdote he had been told by his friend Ford Madox Hueffer about a German

⁴ At a very young age, Lawrence moved from Atlantic City to Easton, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia, and then he finally settled in Harlem with his mother at the age of thirteen. Also Conrad, as the son of two exiles, spent much of his childhood travelling. He moved to Vologda, in northern Russia, with his parents when his father was exiled, and after their death he went back to Krakow. At the age of sixteen he left Kraków for Marseilles where he joined the French Merchant Navy and kept on travelling by sea across different countries.

⁵ Jutta Lorenzen describes in detail the influence of orally transmitted stories on Lawrence’s *Migration Series* by also quoting from Lawrence himself: “I grew up hearing tales about people ‘coming up’, another family arriving. People who’d been ... in the North for a few years, they would say another family ‘came up’ and they would help them to get established...” (Gates, “New Negroes” 20). Even the library he frequented so assiduously was not only a haven of books, but a place replete with orally transmitted tales” (Lorenzen 2006, 572).



castaway who was the sole survivor of a shipwreck (Conrad 1926, 118). However, these works have been chosen for a comparative analysis not only because their authors shared a common destiny and their treatment of migration contains aspects of similarity. Rather, the choice was suggested by the fact that the multimodal representation of the same subject determines an expansion of meaning that is instrumental for a thorough understanding of cultural and social elements linked to migration itself.

3. From verbal to visual: modal shifts and the creation of meaning

In the comparative analysis of the two texts, the verbal and the visual are considered as two equal modes that illustrate the same themes of migration and marginality. According to G. Kress, visual texts are independent, internally organized and structured, and convey their own specific messages, so that “language and visual communication can both be used to realize the ‘same’ fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, [each doing it] by means of its [sic] own specific forms” (Kress 1996, 17).⁶ This generates relationships which are neither predictable nor stable, but completely apt for negotiation. Sometimes words expand images to create a wider vision, other times images problematize and reframe the representation of the same concept expressed in words. As different modes have different potentialities and limitations, there may be losses and gains in the process of multimodal meaning-making. What one should look at is the final, comprehensive idea one gets from the relationships emerging through the comparison of different modes. As far as this analysis is concerned, it is precisely from textual and visual ‘margins’ that new meaning on migratory practices is created.

⁶ Kress also specifies that “[t]he relation between picture and text is not one of illustration. The picture does not duplicate the text, it does not represent visually what has already been represented linguistically. Nor is there a relation of ‘anchorage’ (Barthes 1996, 116) in which the text elaborates the information given in the picture without providing new information [...] visual structures of representation can either be narrative, presenting unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements, or conceptual, representing participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning” (Kress 2014).



Conrad's prose is famous for what is known as its 'impressionistic' quality, that is, the author's descriptive ability to depict images before the reader's eyes. His artistic credo expressed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* – "my task [as an author] is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel [...] it is, before all, to make you see" – has been interpreted as the illustration of his impressionism. An example of Conradian visual images evoked in verbal structures is given in "Amy Foster" (AF hereafter) in one of the descriptions of Yanko Goorall's journey: "Before that he had been travelling a long, long time on the iron track. He looked out of the window, which had a wonderfully clear glass in it, and the trees, the houses, the fields, and the long roads seemed to fly round and round about him till his head swam" (Conrad 1974, 114). A reading of these lines in comparison with two panels of *The Migration Series* (MS hereafter) – *Panel 6* and *Panel 38* – will shed light on some interesting elements concerning the subjective perception of the migrant moving from one place to another. The comparative semiotic reading of words and images introduces subjective vs. objective points of view. The narration of Yanko Goorall's journey in Conrad's text has, in fact, a strongly personalized, individual outlook. The figure of the emigrant is dominant in the narration ("he had been travelling", "he looked out of the window", "trees, houses, fields flied around him", "his head swam"),⁷ and the scene is one in which what is seen (houses, trees, fields) produces a sense of circularity and dizziness. The two pictures selected from MS, instead, display a double connotation in terms of movement: *Panel 5* portrays linear movement – the one you would actually get on a train – while *Panel 38* portrays circular movement.

⁷ However, it is worth noticing that in these few lines recounting part of Yanko's train journey, the protagonist's position in terms of *visual perspective* is one of marginality. He is looking out of the window at the main scene perceived through his own eyes.



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Panel 5



Panel 38

Both paintings present an impersonal description (there is no presence of a subjective 'I' experiencing the landscape). Therefore, while in Conrad the migration journey is essentially the adventure of an individual, in Lawrence's painting migration can be considered as a 'depersonalized movement in space'. However, through a more careful semiotic reading, *Panel 38* features the same idea of circularity and dizziness as expressed in AF. By looking at the panel we get the visual representation of a wobbling head ('his head swam', in Conrad's text). And even if the images lack a material subjective presence (no people are depicted), subjectivity is 'translated' from the written text to the visual one in *Panel 38* via the circular lines of the iron track and the consequent sense of 'dizziness' they evoke, which exclusively refers to human perception. Naturally, the 'new meaning' related to 'dizziness' and circularity arises from the semiotic reading of the painting in relation to the short story, so that Conrad's words work as captions to Lawrence's panel. Such transductions are further developed by other lexical and visual-semiotic choices throughout the two texts.

For example, both *Panel 6* from MS and a further extract from AF describe a moment of the migration journey when crowds of people are gathered on means of transport (train and ship, respectively).

It was a low timber dwelling — he would say — with wooden beams overhead, like the houses in his country, but you went into it down a ladder. It was very large, very cold, damp and sombre, with places in the manner of wooden boxes where people had to sleep, one above another, and it kept on rocking all ways at once all the time. He crept into one of these boxes and laid down there in the clothes in which



he had left his home many days before, keeping his bundle and his stick by his side. People groaned, children cried, water dripped, the lights went out, the walls of the place creaked, and everything was being shaken so that in one's little box one dared not lift one's head (Conrad 1974, 114).⁸



Panel 6

From a first reading, it may seem that the written text contains additional levels of description and perception with respect to the image. In fact, it focuses on the emigrant's insight of 'soundscape' which underlines the presence of human beings - not only water dripping and walls creaking, but also cries and groaning. On a semiotic plane, this description, delivered through Yanko's hearing, conveys the sense of fear, solitude and anguish experienced by the migrants. After entering a very large room, the protagonist of Conrad's story 'creeps' in to one of the boxes and lays down there, enhancing the reader's understanding of what Yanko is experiencing. The final lines of the extract convey the

⁸ This description was inspired by images the author had seen on migrant ships in Brema, when he was returning from Adelaide in 1899 (Cfr. Stape 2009, 55).



representation of the 'crowd' in terms of sight and sound, that is, the room being packed with many people whose moaning we can hear through Yanko's ears. We all know that human perception is harder to detect in a visual text. Yet, the 'meaning' of a few verbal images by Conrad's writing is visually conveyed in the panel: the 'low timber dwelling', the 'ladder'/corridor,⁹ the place being 'large, cold, damp and sombre', the 'wooden boxes where people had to sleep' and the final image where 'in one's little box one dared not lift one's head' can be 'seen' in the panel. There is concordance between the images evoked in the written text and those displayed in the visual one up to the point that some elements of the written lines are transduced in the painting, they actually 'travel' in the visual representation. Human feelings and human perception are also visually conveyed in *Panel 6*. The sense of fear and discomfort is expressed through the migrant's eyes (represented as short vertical lines), and by their (half) faces, partially hidden under the blankets ('one dared not lift one's head'), and in one case hidden by the migrant's own hands (top left hand-side of the panel).

4. From the margins to the centre: multimodal connections and semiotic transitions

An analysis of *Panel 6* according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's critical framework, will exemplify further important elements concerning migration and marginality. Lawrence depicts the train coach as a symmetrical, linear, and proportioned space. The straight lines demarcating the train corridor from the right and left seats (where the migrants are gathered) are framing devices which do not work to disconnect the elements of the layout (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 26). Rather, some repetitions of shapes and colors function as connective devices integrating the pictorial elements into a coherent and significant unit. For example, the repeated shapes of the benches delineate a visual layout emphasizing multiplicity and conveying the sense of the 'crowd'.

⁹ Even if the ladder is replaced by a corridor in the painting, the two elements fulfil the same function in terms of visual effect.



The distribution of information value in the painting makes significant use of the visual dimensions of centre and margins, so that marginal elements become central. In the left-hand corner, a mother feeding her child is featured; a suitcase is placed in the central corridor, next to her. An apparently minor detail in the general representation, the suitcase is given crucial centrality in the visual space of the panel. It attracts the reader's attention due to its position, foreground placement, and color contrast, too. The bag contains, in fact, clothes revealing bands of colors (all the colors of the panel are contained in the suitcase). A complex interaction of factors, such as size, the sharpness of focus, position, color(s), give 'weight' to the case and concurr in establishing its perpetual salience in the image layout (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 33). As one of the three key aspects of visual composition, together with information value and framing, salience determines the weight that elements have in a layout in relation to others, regardless of their position. In this case, however, salience is not only an aesthetic quality of the suitcase, it also guarantees its semiotic relevance, making it a catalizer of all the relationships and meanings contained in the painting.

As far as color is concerned, a wider discourse must be introduced to demonstrate how its semiotic value expands the 'meanings' presented in Conrad's text. Color in MS and in the specific panel under analysis retains a number of symbolical denotations pertaining the semantic field of migration and marginality. Lawrence uses color in repetitive patterns from the first to the last of the panels of MS. The collection, in fact, was not executed panel by panel, but color by color: green, red, yellow, blue, brown, and black are used throughout the whole series to represent different semiotic relocations, that is, the same color appears sequentially in different paintings with different symbolical meanings, so that they create a rhythm throughout the panels while featuring, in some cases, semantic divergence. For example, in *Panel 27* yellow denotes hope and expectation when used for the stockings and hat of a girl waiting to leave among the crowds. Conversely in *Panel 49*, it is used as the color of a segregating fence. Therefore, it both symbolizes the hardship of migration and the hope behind every migratory movement.



Panel 27



Panel 49

Lawrence's use of color is made even more complex in *Panel 6*, where people are united two by two on the same bench by a monochromatic cover. Apart from hope (the yellow stockings and hat in *Panel 27*) and segregation (the fence in *Panel 49*), color denotes here 'a sense of the communal' by symbolizing the 'appeal to collectivity', a quality that has been identified by Jutta Lorensen as typical of Lawrence's series.¹⁰ To return to the bag, each color contained in the suitcase – together with all its semantic implications – is also reproduced outside, in the blankets covering the migrants. This allows the viewer to establish a visual connection among the various elements of the painting and see it as a whole. It also allows him/her to maintain contact with the picture's overall meaning and recognize the authenticity of its subject matter. The interpersonal metafunction is here

¹⁰ Jutta Lorensen identifies a 'resounding note of the communal' as a prevalent theme in MS. That is, crowds are not a mass of individuals, of single people who do not know each other. Rather, they fill a packed train with 'an appeal to collectivity' which is visually delivered through color. In her words, 'The painting exhibits a train compartment filled with people and with Lawrence's migration colors. Under its logic twoness, each bench unites two voyagers through the migration colors, thus reinforcing the resounding note of the communal, a prevalent theme in the Migration Series' (Lorensen 2006, 577).



guaranteed by the object, the suitcase, which is 1) the symbolical (and visual) centre where notions and meanings about migration are gathered; and 2) an exemplification of the way in which the painter engages with the viewer to make new meaning. The visual margins of the painting in which the migrants are portrayed are not 'ancillary, dependent elements' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 30); instead, they connect to the visual centre (the suitcase) thanks to the semiotic value they are attributed by salience.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the comparison between *Panel 6* and Conrad's extract shows how the painting problematizes and amplifies the verbal representation. While the written words express feelings of solitude, fear and desperation, the painting expands the views of the emigrants' journey to a more positive outlook through details of visual marginality and/or centrality that are instrumental to convey a dimension of human connection and solidarity which is not to be found in the short story. This could be demonstrated more thoroughly by expanding the comparative reading to the whole corpus of MS, in order to show how the semiotic analysis benefits from the convergence of diverse signifying systems. Different modal representations of migration raise the topic to a universal level, triggering collective critical insights into migrant travelling, but also into individual and personal migrant experiences. By relying on multiple resources, the transmodal shift firmly merges time and space becoming a moment where different migrations meet to prove that they are not so different. The newly created meanings apply to late nineteenth century Eastern European migrations, early twentieth century American migrations, and the current migration crisis in Europe. At the same time, these social messages reflect the variety of histories and contexts every migration is subject to as the result of complex realities operating throughout time, and across boundaries and societies. Investigating migrant experiences from different angles and critical perspectives, concentrating on those 'decentred energies' of culture gives us a deeper knowledge of facts, but also a deeper conscience of what migration really is.



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