

MICHELA MESCHINI

IMAGE AND INSIGHT: TABUCCHI AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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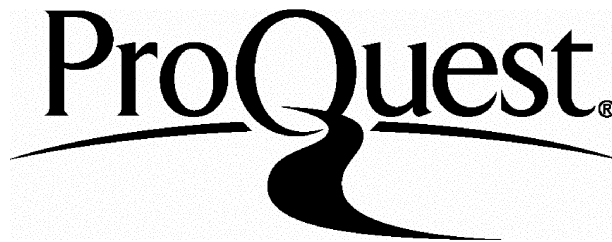
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ABSTRACT

Within the domain of the parallel studies of literature and the visual arts, the fiction of Antonio Tabucchi decidedly represents a crucial area of investigation. References and allusions to painters and paintings, cinematic quotations and photographic passages constitute an integral part of the author's writing, giving shape to a narrative world that is deeply affected and permeated by the visual. By focusing on relevant works, this thesis analyses the role of the visual arts in the fiction of Tabucchi. It examines the ways in which painting, photography and cinema inspire the imagery of the author, informing the themes and structures of his novels and short stories. In the process of doing so, it also investigates the issue of visibility, showing how the relation between text and image constitutes a central impulse to Tabucchi's literary project. For the author, literature and visual art are not mutually exclusive, but shed light on one another. They are neither rivals nor sisters, but are linked by a relation of complicity, through which word and image, the verbal and the visual combine to make sense in a play of dialectical tension.

Given the interdisciplinary scope, this study draws both on literary criticism and art theory. Its principal objective is to develop a thematic profile of Tabucchi's work, offering critical insight into one of the most prominent contemporary Italian writers, one whose fiction has not yet been the object of a comprehensive study. From the privileged perspective of the visual, it proposes a thorough interpretation of Tabucchi's poetics, as originating from the interplay between text and image, while also attempting to position his work within the contemporary debate on postmodernism.

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ABBREVIATIONS OF TITLES

<i>GR</i>	<i>Il gioco del rovescio</i>
<i>DPP</i>	<i>Donna di Porto Pim e altre storie</i>
<i>NI</i>	<i>Notturmo indiano</i>
<i>PE</i>	<i>Piccoli equivoci senza importanza</i>
<i>FO</i>	<i>Il filo dell'orizzonte</i>
<i>VBA</i>	<i>I volatili del Beato Angelico</i>
<i>AN</i>	<i>L'angelo nero</i>
<i>Requiem</i>	<i>Requiem: Un'allucinazione</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Sostiene Pereira</i>
<i>UGFP</i>	<i>Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro</i>
<i>Sempre più tardi</i>	<i>Si sta facendo sempre più tardi</i>

For full bibliographical information, see *BIBLIOGRAPHY*

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this study sprang primarily from a personal interest in the fiction of Antonio Tabucchi. My first encounter with Tabucchi's prose dates back to the preparation of my BA dissertation. While working at it, I had the occasion to analyse some works of fiction by the Tuscan writer and I was struck by the thematic density and richness of his writing. In particular, I was puzzled and intrigued by the frequent allusions to the world of painting, which I sensed were important but I could not quite easily grasp. At the time I thought that I would have liked to explore the role of painting in Tabucchi's work, because I surmised it could offer me a privileged perspective from which to interpret and understand the writer's literary enterprise. Luckily, the occasion to do so was offered to me by this doctoral research, in the course of which my original focus on painting widened to include other forms of visual arts that are equally relevant in Tabucchi's texts, such as cinema and photography. As a result, my long-term fascination with Tabucchi's writing and my amateurish passion for the visual arts jointly converge in this study, accounting both for its flaws and strong points.

Recognized as one of the most significant contemporary Italian writers, Tabucchi was born in Pisa in 1943 and is Professor of Portuguese Literature at the University of Siena. He is the author of numerous novels and short stories that for their formal and thematic qualities have attracted the attention of literary critics, in Italy and abroad. In 1994 his novel, *Sostiene Pereira*, became a bestseller, granting him mass popularity. This fame has been a controversial matter of discussion in the Italian literary circle, where the persisting separation between elite culture and mass culture, leads many critics to see in the market success of a book the proof of its lacking literary value or at least of a shrewd authorial compromise between artistic goals and the logic of the market.

Nevertheless, before achieving widespread fame, Tabucchi was already an established writer and intellectual. During the Eighties his fiction had gained the attention of major critics and scholars, while his translations from the Portuguese of the works of Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) had initiated the Italian readers to the poetry of one of the most complex and extraordinary literary figure of the twentieth century. Centred almost

exclusively on Pessoa, Tabucchi's activity as editor and translator comprises the following works: *Una sola moltitudine*, *Il libro dell'inquietudine*— both published in collaboration with Maria José de Lancastre - *Il marinaio*, *Lettere alla fidanzata* and *Il poeta è un fingitore*. These editions of Pessoa's works were followed by a collection of essays, entitled *Un baule pieno di gente* (1990).¹ In these essays Tabucchi comments on the themes and values characterizing the fictional world of the Portuguese poet, to whom he is deeply indebted for his conception of life as fiction, as well as for his pluralistic and heteronymic vision of the self. Conceived of as a literary *alter ego*, Pessoa is a constant presence in the fiction of Tabucchi. The life and poetry of the Portuguese poet constitute an endless source of inspiration and reflection for the Tuscan writer, who constantly represents and recreates, through his writing, the image, or rather the multiple images of his literary father.

Tabucchi's narratives have also caught the attention of postmodern critics that devoted to them a considerable amount of studies. They discovered in the fiction of Tabucchi the postmodern cohabitation of seemingly opposite elements, such as realism and unrealism, engaged literature and pure literature, highbrow and lowbrow elements, formalism and 'contentism'. In combining together these different elements, Tabucchi seems to positively answer the postmodern literary dilemma of whether "it is possible to have a non-comforting, rather problematic novel that at the same time is pleasurable".² Despite the author's reluctance to accept the tag of a postmodern writer, it is undeniable that, in many of its expressive and semantic values, his fiction appears to ideally fit into the requirements of a postmodern literary code. The concern for themes relating to the ambiguous perception of time and history, the investigation of the multiplicity of the self, the conception of life as intimately tied to fiction, are all constitutive elements of his

¹See *Fernando Pessoa: Una sola moltitudine*, ed. by Antonio Tabucchi and Maria José de Lancastre (Milano: Adelphi, 1979-84), *Fernando Pessoa: Il libro dell'inquietudine*, ed. by Maria José de Lancastre (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1986), *Fernando Pessoa: Il marinaio*, trans. by Antonio Tabucchi (Palermo: Sellerio, 1988), *Fernando Pessoa: Lettere alla fidanzata*, ed. by Antonio Tabucchi (Milano: Adelphi, 1988), *Il poeta è un fingitore: Duecento citazioni scelte da Antonio Tabucchi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988), and *Un baule pieno di gente: Saggi su Fernando Pessoa* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990). Tabucchi has also translated into Italian the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Sentimento del mondo: Trentasette poesie scelte da Antonio Tabucchi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987).

²Jansen Monica, 'Postmodernism in Italy', in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema, A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, 11 (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), pp. 387-395 (p. 391).

writing, providing a deep insight into the epistemological and ontological knots of postmodern thought. After all, is Tabucchi himself, to provide us with a useful definition of postmodernism. In *Requiem*, the so-called Seller of Stories describes a restaurant, with a literary menu where the various historical and artistic movements coexist and overlap, as a postmodern place characterized by a perplexing plurality of styles and models and by an ambiguous relation to the past:

è un posto con molti stili, [...] è un ristorante con molti specchi e una cucina che non si sa bene cos'è, insomma, è un posto che ha rotto con la tradizione recuperando la tradizione, diciamo che sembra il riassunto di varie forme diverse, secondo me è in questo che consiste il post-moderno (*Requiem*, p. 113).

In accordance with a postmodern poetics oriented towards multiplicity and polymorphism, Tabucchi conceives of literature as a form of expression open to other languages and working in close interaction with them. Music, cinema, painting and photography, are the favourite interlocutors of his fiction, which seeks and finds its identity, in the constant tension towards heterogeneous expressive forms. Without rejecting the specific verbal means of representation he has at his disposal, and exploring its potentialities in crossing the borders with the other languages of art, Tabucchi aims ~~to~~ ^{at} the ultimate impossible goal of writing through images, manifesting in this aspiration, the symptoms of what he himself defines as an “iconic temptation”, that in various ways, permeates and informs his fiction.

For its intense visual character, Tabucchi's writing seems expressly conceived to be translated into moving images. Several stories have in effect been transformed into films, some of which have earned the writer mass consensus and popularity: first and foremost *Sostiene Pereira*, filmed by Roberto Faenza in 1996, and interpreted by Marcello Mastroianni, but also the short novels *Notturmo indiano*, *Il filo dell'orizzonte* *Requiem*, and the tale 'Rebus', which have attracted the attention of art directors, not so much for the plot as for the distinctive visual quality of the narration.³ The pervasive visual inclination of Tabucchi's prose is further testified by his collaborations with two

³ *Notturmo indiano* was filmed by Alain Corneau in 1989, *Il filo dell'orizzonte* by Fernando Lopez in 1993, *Rebus* by Massimo Guglielmi in 1989 and *Requiem* by Alain Tanner in 1998.

Italian artists, namely Tullio Pericoli and Davide Benati.⁴ ^{is} ~~These~~ collaborations, together with the cinematic adaptation of Tabucchi's stories, will not be the object of my analysis, which will focus, on the contrary, on the author's employment and appropriation of visual images within his narrative world.

The main aim of this study is to understand the reason why Tabucchi incorporates visual arts into his fiction, and to explore the modes, meaning and technique of the conversion of visual art experience into literary forms. The ways in which art works and imagery are embedded in the narration, the functions and meanings of the frequent allusions to visual arts, and the modalities in which the relation between pictures and writing, image and text is fictionally configured, will be the objection of my analysis. In Chapter One I shall outline a general profile of the author's writing, as revolving around the issue of the visual. My points of departure will be some visual metaphors used by the author in his fiction and capable of accommodating various aspects of his poetics. While discussing the implications of concept-images such as "microprospettive" and "il filo dell'orizzonte", I shall also try to situate Tabucchi's writing within the growing domain of studies on postmodernism. By doing so, I do not intend to label Tabucchi as a postmodern writer, but to show how ^h his fiction reflects the central issues of postmodern theories, especially of those that address ethical and historical problems such as Lyotard's, Vattimo's and Hutcheon's. In the following chapters, I shall develop a triple itinerary, relating respectively to the relationship that the work of Tabucchi entertains with painting, photography and cinema. In Chapter Two I shall focus on the occurrence of painting in Tabucchi's texts, pointing out its value as a major factor for creating and reverberating meanings. Two instances will be especially illustrative of this point: the presence of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in the tale 'Il gioco del rovescio', and the mentioning of Bosch's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* in the novel *Requiem*. Both narratives deal with renowned paintings of the past, whose iconic suggestion becomes crucial not only in the organization of the texts within which the images are incorporated, but also, and more importantly, in the construction and understanding of the poetical

⁴ With regard to Tabucchi's collaborations with Tullio Pericoli and Davide Benati see respectively by Tullio Pericoli, *Tanti saluti* (Milano: Rosellina Archinto, 1988), and *Woody, Freud e gli altri* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988), and by Davide Benati, *Fiamme: Catalogo della mostra* (Modena: Cooptip, 1989), and *Terre d'ombra* (Brescia: Nuovi Strumenti, 1986).

system of the author. Chapter Three will examine the textual presence of photographic images, underlining their intimate relation with themes dear to Tabucchi's fiction, such as memory, death, identity and nostalgia. Sontag's and Barthes's speculations on photography will provide the conceptual frame of reference for this part of my investigation. Finally Chapter Four will explore the thematic aspects entailed in the presence of cinema. I will start by tracing a description of the modality through which cinema emerges in the stories and from this descriptive pattern I shall attempt to draw a network of possible meanings, explaining the various roles played by the presence of cinema in the economy of the text. This analysis will then provide the ground from which to infer a comprehensive interpretation of the writer's idea of cinema as the emblem of the dialectic relationship between reality and fiction.

VISUALITY AND NARRATION

1.1 Writing through Images

From his very first novel *Piazza d'Italia* (1975), to his latest fictional work *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi* (2001), Tabucchi has always shown in his writing a deep and complex responsiveness to visuality and the visual arts. His entire literary production is pervaded by a marked visual sensitivity that matches up and pieces together a variety of styles, genres and narrative strategies, tackled and experimented with by the author over a period of almost thirty years. Far from implicating a graphical iconicity in the text, this all-encompassing visualizing tendency underlies the semantic values and structural meanings of Tabucchi's narratives, on many occasions involving also the linguistic strategy of his texts.¹ The narrative occurrence of visual images, whether they be real or unreal, material or evanescent, artistic or banal characterizes the unfolding of Tabucchi's stories, giving shape to a narrative discourse whose generating force stems from the visual. Pictorial descriptions, selection and close up of iconic details, recurrent visual fantasies and dreams are all invariable features in Tabucchi's writing. So too are references to painters and paintings, cinematic quotations and photographic passages.

¹ In Tabucchi's work we do not find the insertion of material pictures, nor do we come across the presence of iconic signs in the unfolding of the verbal discourse. With the exception of a few scenes in the first two experimental novels *Piazza d'Italia* (Milano: Bompiani, 1975; Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993) and in *Il piccolo naviglio* (Milano: Mondadori, 1978) - in which the linear succession of writing is interrupted by the spatiality of a different textual configuration - and the insertion of a map in the post-script of *Donna di Porto Pim* (1983), the visuality of Tabucchi's writing is always metaphorical, that is to say that it is an effect of the narrative discourse.

This profound and enduring fascination for the world of images has often been recognized by Tabucchi as a major aspect of his writing. In an interview with Andrea Borsari, he talks of the decisive influence exerted by the visual arts, in particular cinema and painting, on his mode of storytelling and traces back to his childhood the discovery of the possibility of writing through images:

Le arti che più mi hanno influenzato sono le arti visive, sostanzialmente la pittura e il cinematografo. Credo di essere arrivato alla narrativa attraverso la pittura, perché da bambino guardavo molte figure, figure di quadri celebri [...]. Ho capito che si poteva raccontare attraverso le figure, e così mi si è aperto un mondo.²

The images that have affected the author's creative imagination are those of the masters of Italian Renaissance art. Coming from Tuscany, Tabucchi grew up surrounded by the works of "Masaccio, Botticelli, Leonardo, il Beato Angelico, Brunelleschi, Vasari" and, as he explains to Carlos Gumpert, this made him develop an aesthetic sensibility based essentially on the visual rather than on the aural: "Ho avuto sempre davanti agli occhi la bellezza attraverso le forme, non attraverso i suoni".³ The same considerations can be found in Anna Botta's interview, during which the author restates the priority of painting as the art that most "fascinates" him and justifies his preference, by stressing the dominant role played by the visual in his perception of the world.

Things reach me more readily through my eyes than through my ears. For example, I can't listen to music, while I feel a very strong aesthetic emotion in front of a painting. Obviously it's something structural, genetic. Things I see move me much more than those I hear.⁴

Though ruled and governed by the visual, the fictional imagination of Tabucchi is not immune from the spell of the aural. References to the world of music, especially popular and classical music, are quite common in his stories, where they mingle and overlap with

² Andrea Borsari, 'Cos'è una vita se non viene raccontata? Conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi', *Italienisch*, 13 (1991), 2-23 (p. 9).

³ This and the previous quotation are taken from Carlos Gumpert, 'La letteratura come enigma ed inquietudine: Una conversazione con Antonio Tabucchi', in *Dedica a Antonio Tabucchi*, ed. by Claudio Cattaruzza (Pordenone: Associazione Provinciale per la Prosa, 2001), pp. 17-105 (p. 49).

⁴ Anna Botta, 'An Interview with Antonio Tabucchi', *Contemporary Literature*, 35 (1994), 421-40 (p. 433). Parts of this interview were first published in Italian: Anna Botta, 'All'ascolto di 'rumori di fondo' fatti scrittura', *L'anello che non tiene*, 3 (1991), 83-97.

the frequent allusions to the visual arts. *Requiem*, for instance, is one of the novels in which, as we will see in the next chapter, painting figures prominently. Yet, its very title contains a patent musical allusion, which is confirmed by the author in the introduction to the novel. In it, Tabucchi claims for his *Requiem* the status of “una sonata” deprived of solemnity and grandeur, thus resorting to a comparison with the art of music to describe the unpretentious tone and style of his prose, whilst at the same time providing a suggestive declaration of poetics, where the writer is equated to a musician.⁵

Se qualcuno osservasse che questo *Requiem* non è stato eseguito con la solennità che a un *Requiem* si addice, non potrei che essere d'accordo. La verità è tuttavia che ho preferito suonare la mia musica non con un organo, che è uno strumento proprio delle cattedrali, ma con un'armonica, che si può tenere in tasca, o con un organetto, che si può portare per strada. Come Drummond de Andrade, ho sempre amato la musica a buon mercato; e, come egli diceva, *non voglio Händel come amico, e non ascolto il mattinale degli arcangeli. Mi basta quel che la strada mi ha portato, senza messaggio, e, come ci perdiamo, si è perduto* (*Requiem*, p. 8; author's italics).

Along with musical allusions, various voices populate and inform Tabucchi's fiction, thereby bearing further witness to the unavoidable presence of oral stimuli in his creative process as well as in every narrative process. The tales “Voci” and “Voci portate da qualcosa impossibile dire cosa” - respectively in *Il gioco del rovescio* and *L'angelo nero*, focus exactly on the issue of orality, narrativizing the notion of the text as a polyphonic medley of voices. Tabucchi claims in fact that every writer is, in principle, a good listener and that most of his stories spring from other people's narratives or are “stolen” from occasional conversations because, he argues ironically, “la vita è troppo breve per poter vivere un numero sufficiente di esperienze: è necessario rubarle”.⁶

These remarks account for Tabucchi's extensive use of intertextual strategies and for the distinctive polyphonic nature of his writing. As Julia Kristeva has shown, far from

⁵ With respect to Tabucchi's use of paratextual conventions see Manuela Bertone, ‘Antonio Tabucchi: il gioco del peritesto’, *Gradiva*, n.s. 4 (1988), 33-39.

⁶ Gumpert, p. 48. Analogous remarks can be found in ‘Incontro con Antonio Tabucchi’, in *Gli spazi della diversità*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale *Rinnovamento del codice narrativo in Italia dal 1945 al 1992*, ed. by Serge Valvolsem, Franco Musarra, Bart Van den Bossche (Roma-Leuven: Bulzoni/Leuven University Press, 1995), II, pp. 651-68 (p. 661). Whereas further reflections on the writer as a good listener are contained in ‘Antonio Tabucchi: Come nasce una storia’, in *Scrittori a confronto*, ed. by Anna Dolfi and Maria Carla Papini (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998), pp. 181-201 (p. 182).

being a merely decorative addition to fiction, intertextuality is a crucial factor in its conception and composition. “Any text”, she argues, “is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another”.⁷ This is all the more so for Tabucchi’s fiction. The voices, so to speak, of past authors deeply permeate his narrative world, giving shape to a complex web of quotations, references and allusions that multiply the semantic resonance of his texts. Fitzgerald, Kafka, Rilke, Pirandello and Montale are some of the writers whose voices, together with Pessoa’s omnipresent voice, reach the author’s world most profoundly – be it directly or indirectly, openly or obliquely. This citational tissue is further complicated by the presence of numerous self-quotations through which Tabucchi multiplies his own voice within his fictional world. After all, as the author has suggested, his stories spring from a “background noise” that he eventually manages to turn into written form. Referring to a cluster of short narratives collectively entitled *I Volatili del Beato Angelico* he talks of “un «rumore di fondo» fatto scrittura” (*VBA*, p. 10). By saying this, Tabucchi alludes to the multiplicity of voices arising from the depths of his subjectivity, which demand to be uttered through the written page. Moreover, as in *Requiem*, he resorts here once again to the domain of the aural to define narratives that, as the title overtly announces, are deeply marked by visuality. This further testifies to the relevance assumed by the joining together of the aural and the visual in his prose.

Despite the significant presence of aural stimuli, the author’s main narrative impulse comes from the visual. As he himself has claimed, images have a powerful impact on his fictive imagination, reaching it more directly and intensely than sounds. Accordingly the realm of the visual is regarded by Tabucchi with a more compelling and gripping narrative force than the realm of the aural, and his fiction bears witness remarkably to these claims. Although his stories spring from “background noise”, they are in fact eminently visual. The inner humming and buzzing, the so-called “ronzii” (*VBA*, p. 10), that accompany the author in the course of his creative process, succumb to the power of the visual, once they are transposed into the written page. Memories, regrets, fantasies and desires, that is to say, all those states of consciousness encapsulated in the

⁷ Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialogue and the Novel’, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell 1986), pp. 34–61 (p. 37).

writer's "background noise", are represented in the text by means of visual images. These take the form of cinematic projections, coded visual icons, photographic evocations and pictorial details. Together with proper literary quotations and allusions, visual images contribute to the complex intertextuality of Tabucchi's fiction. They give shape to a dense and sophisticated tissue of visual citations that are symptomatic of what the author himself suggestively defines as "la tentazione iconica" of his writing.⁸

This pervading visual tendency endows Tabucchi's fiction with the Calvinian quality of "visibilità". In his American lesson on "visibility", Italo Calvino identifies the principal factors contributing to the creation of a visual writing. "L'osservazione diretta del mondo reale, la trasfigurazione fantasmatica e onirica, il mondo figurativo trasmesso dalla cultura ai suoi vari livelli, e un processo d'astrazione, condensazione e interiorizzazione dell'esperienza sensibile" are for Calvino the constitutive elements of the visual imagination.⁹ These creative procedures can also be seen at work in Tabucchi's fiction. The author freely and effectively fuses together, in his writing, the direct observation of the real with the oneiric transfiguration of it, the employment of cultural images with the creation, by way of abstraction and internalization, of inner images. From the combination of these compositional strategies, derives the distinct "visibility" of Tabucchi's narrative discourse. In it visual images crystallize in definite, clear-cut forms that compellingly imprint themselves in the memory of the readers. This method of visual condensation and enhancement concerns both real and mental images, thereby conferring on the prose a pervasive and intense visual force that allows us to describe it as "icastica".

As will be shown in the following chapters, the recurrent references and allusions to the visual arts are major factors in the creation of sites of "visibility" within the narrative discourse. In each chapter, these moments of "visibility" will be analysed in depth in relation to specific art forms central to Tabucchi's writing, such as painting, photography and cinema. The two paragraphs that follow will focus instead on two metaphors or concept-images, borrowed from the domain of the visual. Far from being

⁸ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', in *Piccole finzioni con importanza*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Università di Anversa, May 1991, ed. by Nathalie Roelens and Inge Lanslots (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 147-66 (p. 161).

⁹ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988), p. 94.

confined to the texts in which they occur, these metaphors take on artistic and philosophical values, allowing us to read the poetics of the Tuscan writer in terms of “visibility”.

1.2 “Microprospettive” and “morceaux choisis”

Before analysing in detail the modalities in which the relationship between text and image is narratively configured, it is worth examining the significant presence of visual and optical imagery in Tabucchi’s fiction. From the visual domain the author appears to draw principles of poetics and categories of interpretations of reality, which deeply contribute to shape his notion of literature as well as his vision of the world. The idea of “microprospettiva” is a case in point. The term encapsulates the notions of distance - both temporal and spatial, gaze and perspective, and appears in the short story “Voci” in *Il gioco del rovescio*,¹⁰ where the narrator defines it thus:

nella vita ci sono tanti tipi di prospettive, le cosiddette grandi prospettive, che tutti ritengono fondamentali, e quelle che io chiamo microprospettive, che saranno insignificanti, lo ammetto, ma se tutto è relativo, se la natura concede che ci siano le aquile e le formiche, perché non si può vivere come le formiche, domando, di microprospettive. [...] La microprospettiva è un *modus vivendi* [...] è una forma di concentrare l’attenzione, *tutta* l’attenzione, su un piccolo dettaglio della vita, del tran-tran quotidiano, come se quel dettaglio fosse la cosa più importante di questo mondo; ma con ironia, sapendo che non è affatto la cosa più importante di questo mondo, e che tutto è relativo (*GR*, p. 130).

According to this explanation the microperspective corresponds to a philosophy of life. It applies to a *modus vivendi* based upon a relativistic approach to reality as distinguished from a way of living that relies, instead, on the all-embracing, totalizing aim of “macroprospettive”. With its focus on the tiny, seemingly inconsistent details of life, the microperspective proposes a piecemeal vision of the world that is necessarily open and plural. It is precisely for these reasons that it also demands to be accompanied by the

¹⁰ *Il gioco del rovescio* was first published in 1981 (Milano: Il Saggiatore), but throughout my study I shall refer to the second expanded edition of the collection, published in 1986 (Milano: Feltrinelli) and including the author’s preface together with three new tales. Furthermore, it is worth noting here that the occurrence of the concept of “microprospettiva” within a tale, “Voci”, which is deeply and entirely focused on the aural, further testifies to the recurrent intersection of the visual and the aural as pointed out in the previous paragraph.

ironic awareness of its being, in spite of everything, only a fictional construction, a way amid many of looking at the world or, as Goodman would put it, “a way of world-making”.¹¹ The existential context within which the microperspective is first introduced soon extends to other positions of philosophical and poetical order.

These can be best illustrated by critically examining Tabucchi’s idea of the microperspective in the light of an essay he wrote for the journal *Alfabeta* in 1985 – only a few years after the publication of *Il gioco del rovescio*. In it the author stresses the importance of a relativistic conception of the world. He argues that: “La Relatività non è soltanto un concetto della fisica: può anche essere una visione esistenziale” and, as we will see later, it can also turn into a mode of writing. In accord with this relativistic view the author suggests that literature ought to be capable of accounting for the contingency and fragmentariness that characterize our present-day experience. It should therefore reflect our contemporary awareness “del relativo, del non sistematico, del non totalizzante”, rejecting every abstract and totalizing system, aiming at imposing on reality a fictitious unifying view. Being at the antipodes of any absolute ideology, “il senso del relativo” even represents for Tabucchi a therapeutic practice, or rather, a sort of antidote to traditional literature, “che com’è noto, mira sostanzialmente all’Assoluto”.¹²

A few years later, these views were confirmed by the author in the course of a conference debate. While discussing the ways in which his fiction relates to the real, Tabucchi reiterates his beliefs in the value of relativism as a mode of understanding. He argues that relativism is the inevitable response to a reality that is increasingly complex and indecipherable, one that manifests itself as partial, fragmentary and full of gaps. “E’ molto difficile avere uno sguardo totalizzante, unitario su una realtà così composta e complessa e direi anche piena di buchi come la nostra”, Tabucchi states, adding that this relativistic attitude cannot but have profound repercussions on artistic practices: “in questo mondo diventato assolutamente relativo anche la scrittura diventa relativa, e anche la rappresentazione della realtà diventa relativa”.¹³

These remarks clearly echo postmodern thinking, notably Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern condition as that characterized by an “incredulity” towards what he calls

¹¹ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1978).

¹² Antonio Tabucchi, ‘Doppio senso’, *Alfabeta*, 69 (February, 1985), 3.

¹³ ‘Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 155.

“grand narratives” or “metanarratives”, identifying with these terms any theory or system claiming to provide all-embracing universal explanations of the world. Lyotard argues that, in our time, faith in grand or metanarratives is no longer possible, so that knowledge and meaning have to be sought in locally constructed narratives that he names “little narratives”.¹⁴ It hardly needs to be pointed out that Tabucchi’s macro and micro perspectives bear striking resemblance to Lyotard’s grand and little narratives. As little narratives are, in Lyotard’s view, the postmodern alternative to grand narratives, so microperspectives are, in Tabucchi’s philosophy, the plausible alternative to macroperspectives. Both little narratives and microperspectives work to contest any totalizing representational impulse and to counter the ambition towards unity and comprehensiveness inherent in grand narratives or macroperspectives.

It is part of living in a composite and plural postmodern world that we can no longer rely on absolute and universally valid explanations but must construct little, partial, open narratives. To put it in Tabucchi’s words, it can be said that we must live by microperspectives to make sense of our increasingly complex world. The notion of microperspective is therefore the narrative correlate of a vision of the world based on relativism and postmodern “incredulity”. Accordingly, not only does it constitute an existential category but it is also a key principle of writing. As such, it presides over the author’s creation of his fictional world, affecting all its aspects.

A first instance of the microperspective principle – one that is even far too evident – is the orientation of Tabucchi’s fiction towards the concise narrative dimension of the short story. As the writer has often declared, he finds himself more at ease with the short story than with traditional novelistic forms. His fictional imagination appears to find its best expression through what we may call narrative microperspectives: short stories, brief novels, narrative sketches, fragments of stories and quasi-stories. These are the various literary forms upon which his oeuvre is built. The author’s predilection for these narrative modes can be motivated by a structural and stylistic search for the Calvinian qualities of “quickness” and “exactitude”,¹⁵ insofar as the concentration and rhythmic tension of

¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 60.

¹⁵ See the chapters on ‘Rapidità’ and ‘Esattezza’ in Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*, pp. 31-53 and pp. 55-77 respectively.

Tabucchi's prose fits perfectly into the narrative economy and condensed temporality of the short story – be it a tale or a short novel. However important they may be, formal and stylistic strategies are not the only reasons behind Tabucchi's preference for brief narratives. The choice of writing short stories also implies, to some extent, the refusal of grand narratives in favour of little narratives. It corresponds, in other words, to the literary enactment of the postmodern condition of “incredulity” postulated by Lyotard. As we have seen, Lyotard's position is echoed in varying degrees by Tabucchi's comments on life and literature. The author has in fact claimed that today every representation of the real is necessarily and unavoidably relativistic, bearing witness to the epistemological uncertainty with which contemporary authors approach the world. On other occasions Tabucchi has further elucidated this point, stating that present-day writers proceed tentatively because they have lost solid and categorical points of reference, and above all because they have lost “delle fiducie nella decifrazione della realtà”.¹⁶ The author's mode of writing reflects exactly this loss of faith in the possibility to understand and interpret the world as a whole. The construction of minor narrative perspectives, that is to say of short stories, could therefore be seen as highly symptomatic of postmodern scepticism towards traditionally exhaustive and self-contained narrative modes.

Many critics have commented on this distinctive feature of Tabucchi's writing. Paccagnini observes that the short story is a narrative form that favours the construction of plotless stories, structured by associations and allusions:

La dimensione del racconto resta comunque per Tabucchi ancora il banco di prova della creazione di atmosfere, che si muovono liberamente per tessere di *puzzle*, per associazioni, fuori dalla costrittività d'un intreccio, per realtà interiori espresse sulla pagina solo per allusioni.¹⁷

These remarks lead us on to another important aspect of Tabucchi's writing: the internal organization of his stories by “tessere di *puzzle*”. If the notion of the microperspective is to be found in the author's choice of brief and concise literary forms, it is also true that it deeply affects the formal and thematic construction of his narratives. There are indeed many instances that show the microperspectival organization of Tabucchi's stories. On a

¹⁶ ‘Antonio Tabucchi. Come nasce una storia’, p. 184.

¹⁷ Ermanno Paccagnini, ‘Il viaggio a rovescio di Tabucchi’, *Lecture*, 51 (May 1996), 115-22 (p. 119).

thematic level, this emerges from the tendency to centre the narrative on minor and seemingly insignificant events of daily routine that once amplified through dreams and memories, take on an almost metaphysical resonance. The interstitial sites of ordinary existences, or what Anna Botta calls the *infra-ordinaire*,¹⁸ are the main objects of Tabucchi's narrative world. They are brought to light and put into relief by means of a microperspectival focus that acts as a magnifying glass, creating a fictional atmosphere that is both magic and realistic. As Lepschy has felicitously suggested, Tabucchi's narratives take the form of "splinters of existence [...] which disintegrate as they are presented".¹⁹ On a formal and stylistic level, this microperspectival focus corresponds to a narration based on the selection, cutting-out and zooming in of details. Characters and situations are outlined by microperspectives, fragments and sideviews rather than being wholly and thoroughly represented. Likewise, the narrative develops and unfolds through the succession and accumulation of fragmentary traces and clues, mostly taking the form of visual details. This method of narrative construction combines close-up shots with detailed awareness, thereby justifying the reading of Tabucchi as a minimalist writer,²⁰ while at the same time confirming the thoughts of Linda Hutcheon on postmodern fiction. According to the Canadian critic, postmodern writing is oriented towards "the ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline – all those things that threaten (the illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture".²¹ The "ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline" is precisely the main object of Tabucchi's fictional microperspectives. They revolve around details and the particular, focusing on all those out-of-place things to which the author is temptingly attracted: "le cose fuori luogo esercitano su di me un'attrazione irresistibile, quasi fosse una vocazione, una sorta di povera stimmate priva di sublime" (*PE*, p. 7).

The notion of the microperspective is also frequently thematized within

¹⁸ Botta, 'An Interview with Antonio Tabucchi', p. 426.

¹⁹ Laura, Lepschy, 'Antonio Tabucchi: Splinters of Existence', in *The New Italian Novel*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Lino Pertile (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 200 – 218 (p. 200).

²⁰ Renato Barilli has defined Tabucchi's writing as minimalist in 'Spino e Anastasia', *Alfabeta*, 95 (1987), 29. Tabucchi has always shown his reservations towards those critical definitions that are likely to turn into restrictive labels. With regard to minimalism he has argued that "minimalisme est un mot vide. Je suppose qu'on a dit que j'étais minimaliste parce que je montre une grande attention aux détails et à la description visuelle. Il ne s'agit pas de minimalisme donc, mais d'une technique narrative", François Poirié, 'L'inquiétude d'Antonio Tabucchi', *Art press*, 126 (June 1988), 44-46 (pp.45-46).

²¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).p. 86.

Tabucchi's stories. As we will see in the next chapter, some narrative situations bearing on painting are founded exactly on the concept of the microperspective. This is the case of the scene in 'La battaglia di San Romano', in which the narrator breaks down an image piece by piece with the intent of focusing at length on each of its fragments. And it is also the case of the Copyist in *Requiem* – a character who is commissioned to copy only isolated details of paintings. Equally, the notion of the microperspective will be seen at work in the chapter on photography. We may consider, by way of illustration, the “blow-up” sequence in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, during which Spino centres his investigation on a photographic enlargement, or Amelia's retrieval of her past by means of photographic details. Another significant narrative moment calling into question the microperspective is the final scene in *Notturmo indiano*. It provides an exemplary case of such a metaphor, one that is worth examining here for the complex metafictional implications it entails.

In this scene the narrator converses with Christine, a French photographer to whom he sets out to describe the novel he is writing, which is to say the novel we are reading: *Notturmo indiano*. The narrator maintains that rather than a novel his book is a collection of diverse pieces and fragments: “è un pezzo qua e uno là, non c'è neppure un vera storia, sono solo frammenti di una storia” (*NI*, p. 101). Christine replies to this explanation by mentioning a book of photographs she once published, whose first picture consisted of an enlargement, showing the upper body of a black man, his arms raised as if in celebration of victory. This photograph was followed by another one, showing the image in its entirety. In the second picture the black man is set in context and we see that he is running away from a policeman who is firing a gun at him. “Il mio libro si chiamava *Sudafrica*”, Christine concludes, “e aveva un'unica didascalia sotto la prima fotografia che le ho descritto, l'ingrandimento. La didascalia diceva: *Méfiez-vous des morceaux choisis*” (*NI*, p. 102).

This anecdotic photographic scene is important for many reasons. To begin with, it obviously metafictionally refers to the novel within which it is itself contained. Like the photographic blow-up, *Notturmo indiano* is a *morceau choisi*, an enlarged detail of an untold story, a microperspective in a missing context. Secondly, it casts doubt on the epistemological truthfulness and validity of any selected detail. As the photographic caption warns us, fragments isolated from their context are unreliable: “*Méfiez-vous des*

morceaux choisis". Hence, insofar as it is a *morceau choisi*, the novel too is unreliable. This distrust is not just limited to *Notturmo indiano*, it extends to the author's fiction as a whole and to all fiction in general. Just like *Notturmo indiano*, all Tabucchi's narratives are nothing but *morceaux choisis*, since they are enlarged details detached from their context. It is also true that to some extent every representation - be it narrative or photographic, verbal or visual is a *morceau choisi* for it is inescapably the result of an act of selection and framing, construction and manipulation, which is arbitrary and mystifying. As the photograph of the black man shows, every act of zooming in falsifies the context. Every act of framing is in itself an act of interpretation that alters the meaning of what it purports to represent. Thereby every representation is in some way a misrepresentation, a deceitful and unreliable account of a missing context.

This crucial unreliability of every artistic representation calls into question a third important aspect foregrounded in *Notturmo indiano*'s photographic passage: the tension between reality and illusion. The juxtaposition of the two photographs shows exactly this tension and as such, it is representative of what Livorni calls the *trompe-l'oeil* effect of Tabucchi's fiction.²² As the French term clearly indicates, *trompe-l'oeil* implies visual deception. In it what appears to be one way is suddenly shown to be another way, just as the photographic enlargement represents a scene that is immediately turned into its opposite. Far from being merely visual, the optical illusion played out by *trompe-l'oeil* has also metaphysical implications.

Jean Baudrillard compares *trompe-l'oeil* to surrealism, claiming that both belong to a metaphysical dimension, since their purpose is to undermine the principle of reality. As he puts it, "they undo the evidence of the world". According to Baudrillard, the "surprise" or "shock" of *trompe-l'oeil* does not reside in the illusion of reality, but quite the opposite, "in the sudden failure of reality and the giddiness of being swallowed up in its absence".²³ What is most at stake in *trompe-l'oeil* is therefore the loss of the scene of the real. This is the metaphysical dimension that, for Baudrillard, is implied in the visual

²² Ernesto Livorni, 'Trompe-l'oeil in 'Notturmo Indiano' di Antonio Tabucchi', in *I tempi del rinnovamento in Italia*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale *Rinnovamento del codice narrativo in Italia dal 1945 al 1992*, ed. by Serge Valvolsem, Franco Musarra, Bart Van den Bossche (Roma-Leuven: Bulzoni/Leuven University Press, 1995), I, pp. 431-53.

²³ This and the previous quotation are taken from Jean Baudrillard, 'The Trompe-l'oeil', in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. by Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 53-62 (p. 57-58).

deception of *trompe-l'oeil*, and we can say that it is also implied in the photographic *trompe-l'oeil* of *Notturmo indiano*.

By deceiving our gaze and through it our understanding, the photographic enlargement of the black man points, as we have already said, to the unreliability of every representation of the real, but in doing so, it also problematizes and puts into question the very concept of reality. While revealing to us that the fictional world is nothing more than a construct, the photographic *trompe-l'oeil* also creates the suspicion that reality may equally be a construct, a “simulacrum”, as Baudrillard would say, a world staged and framed. Framing the real is a misleading and illusory operation - “Il visibile senza cornice è sempre un'altra cosa” (*NI*, p. 15) -, but it is nonetheless the only way through which we come to represent and understand the real.

This insoluble contradiction brings us back to the visual metaphor of the microperspective. In the very definition of the latter we find encapsulated the ambiguous relationship of illusion and reality. As Tabucchi says through his narrator in ‘Voci’, to live by microperspectives implies the concentration of one’s own attention on a detail *as if* that were the most important thing in the world, “ma con ironia, sapendo che non è affatto la cosa più importante di questo mondo, e che tutto è relativo” (*GR*, p. 130). To live by microperspectives is therefore an operation based on “*as if*”. It combines reality and illusion and requires the coexistence of opposite attitudes, demanding at one and the same time trust and incredulity, conviction and scepticism. In the same way as *morceaux choisis*, microperspectives are enlarged details, which have been framed and de-contextualized. Like the former, they cannot be relied on as real, but are to be taken ironically, as manufactured images of reality, that cannot but be fragmentary, provisional and incomplete. Nevertheless, despite their partial and ambiguous nature, *morceaux choisis* and microperspectives affect and condition our apprehension of the world. Possibly, - and this is the doubt that *trompe-l'oeil* creeps into our minds - every approach to the real and every understanding of it, cannot but be dependent on them. Ultimately, what emerges from *Notturmo indiano*’s photographic passage is, on the one hand, a metafictional reflection on the nature of artistic representation as a necessarily partial and deceiving microperspective of life, an unreliable *morceau choisi*, and, on the other hand,

the suspicion that by the same token, the real is nothing but a construct, an illusion, a fictional microperspective.

1.3 “Il filo dell’orizzonte”

Another significant concept-image borrowed from the visual domain is that of “il filo dell’orizzonte”. From this expression Tabucchi took the title of one of his short novels, in the conclusive note of which he gives the following definition: “il filo dell’orizzonte, di fatto, è un luogo geometrico, perché si sposta mentre noi ci spostiamo. Vorrei molto che per sortilegio il mio personaggio lo avesse raggiunto, perché anche lui lo aveva negli occhi” (*FO*, p.107). Described as something that the protagonist carries in his eyes, the horizon is that thin line that frames the gaze, while being at the same time inscribed within it. It is not something firmly fixed, on the contrary is mobile and shifting, as Tabucchi writes, it moves as we move. The epistemological issues at stake in this visual metaphor are significant. In its intrinsic instability, “il filo dell’orizzonte”, like the concept of the microperspective, bears witness to a relativistic vision of the world, while also testifying to that “radical epistemological and ontological doubt” that according to Hans Bertens lies at the heart of the postmodern *weltanschauung*.²⁴ The horizon corresponds to our vision’s vanishing point. It is the limit of our field of vision. As such it traces the fragile and mutable border between what we see and what transcends our gaze, that is to say that it draws the line between what we know and what is beyond our understanding. Similarly to microperspectives, the concept-image of the horizon is then used by Tabucchi to address the issue of knowledge by means of visibility. It points to the interrelation between seeing and knowing that is so often thematized in the author’s stories and can therefore be seen as the visual emblem of his epistemological and ontological code of uncertainty, to which corresponds a narrative code of suspension and elusion.

Tabucchi’s tendency to create allusive and indefinite texts is one of the topics most frequently discussed among his critics and one of the major qualities of his stories, which

²⁴ Hans Bertens, ‘The Postmodern Weltanschauung’, in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. by Douwe Fokkema & Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986), pp. 9-52 (p. 35).

he himself calls non-stories, open narratives, deprived of traditional developments and solutions.²⁵ This aspect of his writing can be explained in the light of his idea of literature as “presenza della possibilità”. “Scrivere è dare vita alla possibilità”, Tabucchi tells Andrea Borsari,²⁶ alluding, through this statement, to the provisional and hypothetical nature of the fictional world. On another occasion Tabucchi has made clear both the ~~historical~~ and private reasons behind his need to conceive of the real as hypothetical. He has claimed that “l’incapacità di esprimere un giudizio forte sul reale, il bisogno di proporlo come ipotesi” can be regarded as “un fatto privato esistenziale” but it also expresses the uncertainties of our present-day worldview. Tabucchi concludes that “forse a uno scrittore come me, in un momento storico come il nostro, il reale può apparire del tutto ipotetico”.²⁷

The author’s avowed incapacity, or perhaps refusal, to express a strong opinion on the world, clearly echoes postmodern theoretical positions, and in particular Vattimo’s “pensiero debole”. In the wake of Lyotard, the Italian philosopher has claimed, that our mode of thinking can no longer accept the existence of absolute truths. Instead it is oriented towards provisional epistemological horizons, in which relative truths are tentatively and doubtfully proffered. The force of Vattimo’s “pensiero debole” could be said to be founded on the precariousness and instability of an epistemological horizon that is temporally and spatially determined and that, much as Tabucchi’s “filo dell’orizzonte”, moves as we move.²⁸

While illustrating the forms in which his “pensiero debole” is articulated, Vattimo even talks of “pensiero della prossimità”, which he further defines as “un pensiero dell’errore; o meglio dell’erranza”. With these expressions he refers to “quel tessuto di erramenti che soli costituiscono la ricchezza o, più semplicemente, l’essere della realtà”.²⁹ As a manifestation of the “weakness” of postmodern thought, Vattimo’s

²⁵ In the interview given to Franco Marcoaldi ‘Spegnete il mondo, per favore’, *L’Espresso*, 19 October 1986, pp. 187-92 (p. 188), Tabucchi claims that *Il filo dell’orizzonte* “è un romanzo per modo di dire. Perché è sospeso, non ha né inizio né fine. Semmai potrebbe essere il capitolo di un romanzo mancante, che non c’è”. Likewise, referring to *Notturmo indiano* he says: “je crois que à la fin est un non-livre. C’est un livre qui évite la solution”, ‘Incontro con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 658.

²⁶ Borsari, p. 12.

²⁷ ‘Incontro con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 656.

²⁸ See Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds, *Il pensiero debole* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1984).

²⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità: Nichilismo ed ermeneutica nella cultura post-moderna* (Milano: Garzanti, 1985), p. 177.

“pensiero della prossimità o dell’errore” lays emphasis on errors and mistakes as gateways to the real. It asserts the crucial and somewhat paradoxical role of doubts and uncertainties in every process of understanding and interpretation. This aspect of Vattimo’s position seems to apply closely to the fiction of Tabucchi. The author’s narratives show a remarkable and pervasive fascination for what Vattimo terms as “pensiero dell’errore”. This finds expression in all those misunderstandings, reversals, riddles and mistakes, which invariably haunt the existence of Tabucchi’s characters. In their private and metaphysical quests, they constantly stumble on misunderstandings, follow misleading and incongruous paths, proceed by errors and mistakes in the vain attempt to reach a truth that unfailingly escapes them. It is obvious that Tabucchi’s misunderstandings are also very akin to Berten’s “epistemological and ontological doubt”. Mistakes and uncertainties, doubts and errors seem to provide on equal terms the privileged, yet paradoxical means, through which the characters tentatively and doubtfully approach and understand, or rather misunderstand, their lives. While they fail to solve the enigmas that puzzle them, the narratives fail to provide a certain and unequivocal conclusion and remain suspended and unresolved. After all, in the words that Tabucchi puts into the mouth of the narrator in ‘Rebus’, to tell a story is like “proporre un rebus che non ha soluzione, o ha una soluzione che è inevitabilmente quella che ebbe e che io ignoro” (*PE*, p. 30).

Deprived of a denouement, the author’s stories have also an uncertain and indefinable genesis. “Dove comincia una storia?”, the protagonist of ‘Staccia Buratta’ wonders, “le storie accadono e non hanno un principio. O almeno quel principio non si vede, sfugge, perché era già iscritto in un altro principio” (*AN*, p. 53). Both the beginnings and endings are hard to grasp. Their elusiveness is a sign of the inconsistency and nothingness from which stories spring out, for as Tabucchi repeatedly asserts things are driven by nothing: “Come vanno le cose. E cosa le guida: un niente” (*PE*, p. 71).³⁰ Likewise his narratives are prompted by “nothing” and lead to “nothing”. They belong to the domain of the hypothetical, the virtual, the potential. Their borders are marked by the

³⁰ The same statement returns as a sort of catchphrase in Tabucchi’s most recent narrative work to date, *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, p. 27, 41, 109.

elusive line of the horizon that constantly and subjectively moves, defying any clear and certain solution.

Far from being confined to the novel to which it gives its name, “il filo dell’orizzonte” is therefore an important visual metaphor accounting for aspects of a poetical and philosophical order. As we have seen it structures and orientates the existential adventures of the characters, while also informing and shaping all the stories and with them the author’s narrative project as a whole. With regard to the first point, it can be said that all Tabucchi’s characters, like the protagonist of the eponymous novel, carry “il filo dell’orizzonte” in their eyes. By virtue of its shifting nature, the horizon signals metaphorically the characters’ tension towards an unattainable desire, their quests for something beyond reach. As for the second aspect, to the extent that it constitutes the vanishing point of the field of vision, “il filo dell’orizzonte” signals the presence of what one might call “places of indeterminacy” within Tabucchi’s fiction.³¹

So far we have pointed out only some of the structural and thematic aspects foregrounding the indeterminacy of Tabucchi’s fiction. We have mentioned the lack of traditional narrative developments and solutions and the presence of mistakes and misunderstandings as the structuring motifs of the stories. Further crucial factors of semantic indeterminacy are to be detected in the thematic occurrence of dreams, fantasies and memories that along with misunderstandings frequently also take on a structuring role within the narration. Strictly interrelated with the world of dreams and reveries are the indefinite temporal locations of the events, which are invariably suspended between past and present, reality and imagination. The temporal displacement of the fictional situations produces a doubling of the planes of reality, thereby profoundly contributing to the semantic elusiveness of the text.

Brian McHale’s concept of “zone” seems particularly suited to describing these textual sites of indeterminacy. As McHale explains, the “zone” is “a kind of between-worlds space”.³² It delimits a border area between reality and illusion, in which the temporal and spatial experience assumes paradoxical connotations and the traditional

³¹ I borrow this expression from Paul Ricouer who in turns borrows it from Roman Ingarden. See Paul Ricouer, *Time and Narrative*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), III, p. 167.

³² Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 58.

categories for the comprehension of the world are radically subverted and destabilized. The oneiric situations and temporal shifts occurring in Tabucchi's fiction precisely generate ambivalent narrative "zones". They blur the borders between reality and unreality, giving shape to twilight areas where nothing is definitely determined but everything is virtually possible. In the author's words, the "zone" could be described as "un sogno che sai di sognare, e in questo consiste la sua verità: nell'essere reale al di fuori del reale" (*VBA*, p. 40). The concept of the "zone" also accounts for the fantastic dimension of Tabucchi's fiction. Delimiting a textual area of ambiguity and suspension, the "zone" generates in the readers an ontological and epistemological uncertainty, which is very akin to Todorov's fantastic hesitancy. In his seminal study on the fantastic as a literary genre, Todorov gives a definition of the fantastic as a form of hesitation triggered by the absence of answers.³³ To the extent in which it focuses on borderline events and deprives the plot of unambiguous solutions, Tabucchi's narrative not only perfectly illustrates Todorov's theory of the fantastic as hesitation, it also re-interprets this hesitation in the light of postmodern thinking as "an attitude of suspensiveness", which in Wilde's words, "implies the tolerance of a fundamental uncertainty about the meanings and relations of things in the world and in the universe".³⁴

Indeterminacy in Tabucchi's fiction is not simply a matter of content. It also concerns style. Vague and elusive themes are conveyed and represented by means of an equally elusive prose, which Roelens aptly describes as "ellittica, rarefatta, concisa e reticente".³⁵ Likewise Paccagnini claims that Tabucchi's fiction is characterized, in linguistic terms, by the selection of words that are "leopardianamente" vague, indeterminate and allusive.³⁶ This observation is supported by the author's own remarks. He affirms that the search for indeterminacy underlies his expressive choices: "Preferisco

³³ Tzevan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975). See also the following analyses on the relationship between Tabucchi's fiction and the fantastic: Flavia Brizio, 'Dal fantastico al postmoderno: *Requiem* di Antonio Tabucchi', *Italica*, 71 (1994), 96-115; Angela Guidotti, 'Aspetti del fantastico nella narrativa di Antonio Tabucchi', *Studi novecenteschi*, 56 (1998), 351-65; Michela Meschini, 'Notes Towards an Analysis of the "Fantastic" in Tabucchi's Fiction', *Forum Italicum*, 33 (1999), 353-62.

³⁴ Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 132.

³⁵ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', 147.

³⁶ Paccagnini, p. 118.

sempre la parola fluida, un po' indistinta e fluttuante [...] Quando scrivo, cerco di trovare un lessico adeguato, che evochi senza imporre, che suggerisca senza costringere".³⁷

Various linguistic indicators bear witness to the author's intent to suggest things rather than to fix them down. A first instance of linguistic indeterminacy can be detected in the syntactical construction of the narrative discourse, frequently based upon the use of hypothetical clauses and verbal moods such as the subjunctive and the conditional, that grammatically speaking are "nonrealizing" moods. Symptomatic of an all-encompassing hypothetical mode is also Tabucchi's preference not so much for assertive statements as, conversely, for expressions of doubts and uncertainty such as "non so", "sembra", "mi pare", "forse". Finally the link between language and indeterminacy is also exemplified by the frequent use of litotes and euphemisms - tropes that attenuate and round off the prose, rendering it all the more vague and ambiguous. The following excerpts effectively demonstrate these points, showing the way in which Tabucchi's prose frames the events in an overall perspective of conditionality:

Chissà se fu per rompere quell'incantesimo che uno di loro si mosse, ed è impossibile dire se fu Tiago o Michel, e forse fu perché intuiva oscuramente il sortilegio che li imprigionava, che pronunciò quelle parole come se fossero uno scongiuro (AN, p.35; the italics are mine).

Forse cerca un passato, una risposta a qualcosa. Forse vorrebbe afferrare qualcosa che un tempo gli sfuggì. In qualche modo sta cercando se stesso. Voglio dire, è come se cercasse se stesso, cercando me [...] Feci una pausa come se fosse un momento cruciale (NI, p. 103; the italics are mine).

As emerges from these two passages, the fictional situation - its characters, narrators, events, time and space, can be entirely represented in the key of "as if". According to McHale this is paradigmatic of the hesitancy and tentativeness of postmodern fiction. In its deliberate "turning down or attenuation" of grand narratives in favour of little narratives and in its refusal of "metaphysical foundationalism" in favour of the so-called "weak thought", postmodern fiction tends to adopt a conditional and hypothetical perspective. It chooses to narrate in the mode of "as if".³⁸ This tendency is metaphorically

³⁷ Borsari, p. 12

³⁸ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 24–26. We have already seen that "as if" is inherent in the concept of the microperspective too, one might add that it

implied once again in the visual concept of the horizon. Being subject to constant movements and adjustments the horizon is the hypothetical, ever changing frame of our gaze. As such, it visually epitomizes the “*as if*” of any form of knowledge and the structural and almost genetic indeterminacy of any form of narration.

After having illustrated the indeterminacy of Tabucchi’s texts in semantic and linguistic terms, we may also try to investigate it in terms of reading. Once again Ricoeur’s speculations serve our purpose. The French philosopher claims that indeterminacy can have a twofold value in relation to the act of reading. It can indicate simultaneously the lack of determinacy of the text and an opposite semantic redundancy of the text:

Every text, even a systematically fragmentary one, is revealed to be inexhaustible in terms of reading, as though, through its unavoidably selective character, reading revealed an unwritten aspect in the text. It is the prerogative of reading to strive to provide a figure for this unwritten side of the text. The text thus appears, by turns, both lacking and excessive in relation to reading.³⁹

What Ricoeur calls the “unwritten side of the text” appears to be precisely the ultimate goal of Tabucchi’s fiction. By avoiding clear and reassuring solutions, the author seems to orient his readers towards the pursuit of a sort of textual beyond, that the narrative only suggests by means of fragments and glimpses. These inevitably fail to link up and to compose in a clear, readable picture where meanings are unquestionably formed once and for all, thereby forcing the readers to look ceaselessly for a solution or rather for multiple solutions, all of which are plausible since they are hypothetical. Just like the narrator of ‘Rebus’, the ultimate aim of the readers consists in seeing the full picture, in which all the elements of the narrative interweave and make sense: “E poi, sa come è la vita, è come una tessitura, tutti i fili si intrecciano, è questo che un giorno vorrei capire, vedere tutto il disegno” (*PE*, p. 32). Yet, the complete “disegno” of the text fails to materialize. It is subject to the shifting framing of “il filo dell’orizzonte”, hence it constantly changes, assuming from time to time different shapes, without ever attaining a fixed, stable and unequivocal form. If, as Ricoeur claims “it is the prerogative of reading to strive to

underlies the concept of literature altogether, since the relationship between reality and fiction, life and literature is unavoidably rooted in it.

³⁹ Ricoeur, p. 169.

provide a figure for this unwritten side of the text”, it seems, then, that Tabucchi’s readers can never succeed in visualizing this “figure”, since their interpretive act is constantly challenged and undermined by the presence of missing pieces and blind spots. Perhaps, if it ever materializes, this picture does so in an ontological beyond, which may be reached only through Pessoa’s spectacles.

As the narrator of *Notturmo indiano* informs us, on his deathbed Pessoa asked for his spectacles: “Era molto miope e volle entrare dall’altra parte con gli occhiali” (*NI*, p. 58). The conclusive lines of *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa* show us again this optical prosthesis. In taking leave of “questo teatro d’immagini che chiamiamo la nostra vita” (*UGFP*, p. 54), Pessoa expresses his paradoxical request to wear his spectacles, as if they were a symbolic instrument bridging the gap between life and death. Pessoa’s spectacles seem to constitute the necessary means to transcend the mutable border separating the visible from the invisible, light from darkness, vision from blindness. They may therefore be considered as a metaphor for the visionary metaphysical eye of an author, Pessoa, who with his literature has attempted to reach the line of the horizon, in the awareness ~~the~~ “la letteratura, come tutta l’arte, è la confessione che la vita non basta”.⁴⁰ th
Lat

As I have tried to illustrate thus far, several aspects of Tabucchi’s *weltanschauung* are bound up with key concepts borrowed from the visual domain. The notion of the microperspective and the visual metaphor of “il filo dell’orizzonte” are two major instances of this. Both concepts play an essential role in the definition of the author’s poetics. They account for various aspects of his writing, ranging from matters of structure and form to questions of style and content. While subsuming representational strategies and thematic questions, they also extend to positions of a philosophical order. In the notion of microperspective is encapsulated a relativistic vision of the world, whereas in “il filo dell’orizzonte” is symbolized an epistemological and ontological attitude of uncertainty that affects every approach to the real as well as every representation of it. It is obvious that these visual metaphors in many ways overlap and complement each other. Moreover, as has been shown, they both reflect the central tenets of postmodern thinking,

⁴⁰ Fernando Pessoa, *Il poeta è un fingitore*, p. 14.

such as for instance Lyotard's notion of "incredulity" towards grand narratives and Vattimo's theory of "weak thought". To a greater extent, then, they are symptomatic of the radical indeterminacy and elusiveness characteristic of the postmodern vision of the world, and consequently, of postmodern fiction. Lastly, by using visual and optical imagery, to allude to the chain of cognition and signification, Tabucchi bears witness to what Mitchell calls the "pictorial turn" of modern thought that "has re-oriented itself around visual paradigms".⁴¹

⁴¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 70.

PAINTING

2.1 Rewriting *Las Meninas*.

Tabucchi's first collection of short stories is entitled *Il gioco del rovescio* (1981) and is made up of a series of tales dealing with the ambiguous reality of existence. In the prefatory note to the second edition of the book, the author declares that the inspiration for the collection originated from the discovery that "una certa cosa che era "così" era invece anche in un altro modo" (*GR*, p. 5). The hidden nature of people and events, to which Tabucchi alludes in his note, is illustrated throughout the book by a variety of cases, where an apparently univocal reality unexpectedly discloses its unsettling reversal. Each story is characterized by a sudden and unpredictable twist in the plot, aiming to arouse existential reflections rather than mere surprise.

In the eponymous tale of the collection the all-pervading idea of the "rovescio" is expressed by the metaphor of the backwards game. The tale was the first to be conceived and, as the author explains, "del suo spirito modella tutti gli altri in un'analoga visione delle cose" (*ibid.*). The novella significantly opens up with a reference to the renowned painting of *Las Meninas* by Velázquez:

Quando Maria do Carmo Meneses de Sequeira morì, io stavo guardando *Las Meninas* di Velázquez al museo del Prado. Era un mezzogiorno di luglio e io non sapevo che lei stava morendo. Restai a guardare il quadro fino alle dodici e un quarto, poi uscii lentamente cercando di trasportare nella memoria l'espressione della figura di fondo, ricordo che pensai alle parole di Maria do Carmo: la chiave del quadro sta nella figura di fondo, è un gioco del rovescio (*GR*, p. 11).

Velázquez's painting marks the genesis of the story and reappears in the end, enclosing the tale in a circular pattern that is a recurrent feature in Tabucchi's works. The canvas is not described in its entirety, but is simply evoked through a detail: the figure in the background that the narrator tries to retain in his memory. Significantly, he does not comment on the aesthetic quality of the painting, nor does he indulge in its iconography, his gaze focusing exclusively on the figure in the background, that according to Maria do Carmo, is the key to understanding both the painting and the backwards game.

Maria do Carmo is the ambiguous character around which the narrow plot and the many themes of the story are organized. She is the author as well as the main player of the backwards game, which is a game going back to her childhood and consisting in the ability to reverse words.

Il gioco consisteva in questo, diceva Maria do Carmo, ci mettevamo in cerchio, quattro o cinque bambini, facevamo la conta, a chi toccava andava in mezzo, lui sceglieva uno a piacere e gli lanciava una parola, una qualsiasi, per esempio *mariposa*, e quello doveva pronunciarla subito a rovescio (*GR*, p. 14).

Over the years the original linguistic nature of the game is invested with an existential quality and what used to be a simple pastime for children becomes the ruling principle of Maria do Carmo's life. The woman devotes her existence to the construction of a reversal of herself, attempting to live her own life as a game of backwards, in which reality and fiction are intimately intertwined. Masked under the existential game she has played her whole life, her true identity remains unknown. This is revealed in the conversation between the narrator and the husband of the woman, during which, the former is abruptly confronted with the doubt of having been sentimentally linked to a woman he might have never really known: "Nuno Meneses de Sequeira si alzò, andò alla finestra, dischiuse leggermente le imposte. Vorrei toglierle un'illusione, disse, quella di aver conosciuto Maria do Carmo, lei ha conosciuto solo una finzione di Maria do Carmo" (*GR*, p. 21).

This unsettling revelation, about Maria do Carmo, is neither confirmed nor refuted by the narrator. Moreover, rather than casting light on the identity of the woman, the various elements of the plot render it more obscure and elusive. We do not know whether she was a rich landowner or the daughter of exiles, a political reactionary or a republican

activist, a gifted liar or a woman suffering from nostalgia. All we know is that she created fictional identities, by reversing the reality of her existence into a bewildering plurality of images, which escape a univocal meaning. Swinging between opposite realities, the character of Maria do Carmo reflects the uncertainty discussed by the author in the introduction to the book, that is the uncertainty arising from the discovery that “una certa cosa che era ‘così’ era invece anche in un altro modo”. By saying so, Tabucchi reveals a key quality of the backward game, in which opposite elements are not mutually exclusive but cohabit and stand side by side, suggesting to us a content which is impossible to pin down with unequivocal exactitude.

In the wake of the unsolved duplicity of the character’s identity we find the ambiguous legacy that Maria do Carmo bequeaths to the narrator in the form of an encoded written message. Delivered to the latter by the husband of the woman, this peculiar testament consists of an ambiguous word, whose reversal can be read in two different languages. The original linguistic nature of the backwards game is, therefore, restored. The word is “SEVER” and its reversal, “REVES” (*GR*, p. 23; author’s capitals), can be interpreted either as the French word for dream, or as the Spanish term for reversal. The message carries a double meaning and the impossibility to define a clear content challenges once again our understanding.

As well as alluding to the inconsistency of life, as sharing the indefinite nature of dreams, the message can also signify the opposite, pointing to the value of dreams as capable of compensating the lack of meanings in life. It may also allude to the value of dreams as possible reversals of life, inasmuch as the overlapping of the different meanings taken on by the word “reves”, suggests the innermost affinity between dreams and reversals.¹ This is further reflected in the oneiric and nostalgic atmosphere that pervades the entire story, absorbing the actual events and filtering the narrator’s perception of the world. After all, the unfolding of the plot is marked by oneiric moments and it is precisely in a dream that the narrator finds the key to interpret the meaning of the

¹ With regard to the value of dreams in Tabucchi’s fiction see Laura Lepschy, ‘Filling the Gaps: Dreams in the Narrative Fiction of Antonio Tabucchi’, *Romance Studies*, 19 (1991), 55-64; Manuela Bertone, ‘Tabucchi sognatore’, *Allegoria*, n.s. 13 (1993), 157-62; Nives Trentini, ‘Towards a Study of Dream in Antonio Tabucchi’, in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Bruno Ferraro and Nicole Prunster (= *Spunti e Ricerche*, 12 (1997)), pp. 71-96.

ambiguous message. Trying to link up the various fragments of sense in the story, the protagonist encounters once again the painting of Velázquez, but this time, in a further reversal, it is the picture that unexpectedly pays him a visit, appearing in his dreams together with the mysterious word “reves”.

Pensai che la parola spagnola e quella francese forse coincidevano in un punto. Mi parve che esso fosse il punto di fuga di una prospettiva, come quando si tracciano le linee prospettiche di un quadro, e in quel momento la sirena fischiò un'altra volta, la nave attraccò, io scesi lentamente dalla passerella e cominciai a seguire i moli [...] i moli erano le linee prospettiche che convergevano verso il punto di fuga di un quadro, il quadro era *Las Meninas* di Velázquez, la figura di fondo sulla quale convergevano le linee dei moli aveva quell'espressione maliziosa e malinconica che mi ero impresso nella memoria: e che buffo, quella figura era Maria do Carmo (GR, p. 24).

In a conflation of meanings all the various traces of the story converge towards Velázquez's painting that functions thereby as the semantic pole of the text. According to the irrational rules of the unconscious, the painting contains the image of Maria do Carmo. The oneiric imagination of the narrator superimposes her features to the silhouette standing in the background of *Las Meninas*, thus completing the connection that had been established at the beginning of the tale between the death of the woman and the contemplation of the painting.

Unanimously celebrated as Velázquez's masterpiece, *Las Meninas* is a very controversial picture. Since its intellectual rediscovery in recent decades it has been the object of much speculation, eagerly focusing on the reading of its complex imagery. Together with other challenging iconographic features, such as the background mirror and the portrayal of the painter himself, the man appearing in the doorway is one of the most debated elements of the canvas. Distanced in the far right end of the picture and reduced in scale, the figure seems to be relegated to an apparently peripheral location. Yet, as demonstrated by the impressive number of studies that the picture has inspired, the doorway man is the geometrical focus point of the image.² The relevance of this most

² See Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, 'Reflections on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 429-47. The authors ground their arguments on an in depth formal examination of the painting, leading to a scientific refutation of John Searle's '*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representations', *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1980), 477-88. They prove that "the vanishing point in *Las Meninas* is not in the mirror at all",

perplexing figure is therefore asserted by the very rules of construction of the image and is corroborated by its additional formal properties.

Standing in a brightly lit doorway, the man pauses to look back across the depicted space. Seemingly unrelated to the court scene represented in the foreground, the man actually partakes of a complex set of relations with the other subjects of the canvas.³ Furthermore his appearance inside the pictorial space is highlighted by the soft luminosity of the doorway from which he sharply emerges. The door recess is a traditional artistic device, widely exploited by painters across the centuries and as André Chastel claims, it is used by Velázquez as a way “de garnir le fond, d’animer la composition [...] et de lui ajouter comme une dimension nouvelle par la vibration de la lumière et la suggestion de l’espace”.⁴ The doorway indeed creates at the back of the image the “dimension nouvelle” of a receding space that counteracts the unusual outward orientation of the painting, suggested by the foreground group portrait, where most of the personages look out into the viewer’s space.

Given such formal connotations, the man in the background stands out as a figure rich in ambiguities. In his seminal essay on *Las Meninas*, Michel Foucault observes that the enigmatic visitor appears “from the outside on the threshold of the area represented”,⁵ simultaneously inside and outside the scopic regime of the picture. Though unclear and indeterminate, his presence has the force of “an irruption” and leads Foucault to the following conjectures:

as assumed by Searle, but “it is located at the bent of the elbow of the figure standing in the open doorway at the back of the room” (p. 434). d

³ See Emily Umberger ‘Velázquez and Naturalism II: Interpreting *Las Meninas*’, *Res*, 28 (Autumn 1995), 94 –117. Umberger points out the structural link between the man in doorway and the figure of the painter at work, as well as the formal correlation between the door area and the adjacent mirror’s surface.

⁴ André Chastel, ‘Le figure dans l’encadrement de la porte chez Vélazquez’, in *Fables, formes, figures II* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), pp. 145 - 55 (p. 148).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. by A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 11. For its complex intellectuality Velasquez’s painting has attracted the attention not only of art specialists but also of philosophers and historians. Foucault’s study is one of the most influential and is likely to have been well known to Tabucchi.



Figure 1. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, Madrid, Museo del Prado

We do not know where he has come from: it could be that by following uncertain corridors he has just made his way around the outside of the room in which [...] characters are collected and the painter is at work; perhaps he too, a short while ago, was there in the forefront of the scene, in the invisible region still being contemplated by all those eyes in the picture.⁶

Whatever his provenance, the visitor is able to peep into the representation without being seen. What is more important is that from his position he can see what is being represented on the canvas that Velázquez is painting, whose vision is on the contrary forbidden to the onlooker, for whom only the back of the canvas is visible. The man in the doorway hence represents the reversal of the real spectator. Unlike the real spectator, he can see what Velázquez is painting, that according to Foucault is the image “*par*

⁶ Foucault, pp. 10-11.

excellence".⁷ Yet this image is concealed from us and remains stubbornly invisible. But what image does the canvas contain? What image is being painted or about to be painted by Velásquez? This is the question that the narrator asks Maria do Carmo, because like the man in the doorway, she can see the world from a unique perspective. Perhaps that is why she has that melancholy, inscrutable expression. From her point of view beyond existence, outside life and its representation, her gaze can grasp the image that nobody else can see. While dreaming, the narrator says to Maria do Carmo:

Ho capito perché hai codesta espressione, perché tu vedi il rovescio del quadro, che cosa si vede da codesta parte?, dimmelo, aspetta che vengo anch'io, ora vengo a vedere. E mi incamminai verso quel punto. E in quel momento mi trovai in un altro sogno (*GR*, p. 24).

Overlapping with Maria do Carmo's image, the mysterious man becomes the symbol of the ultimate backwards game, in which life is reversed into death. Just as all the perspective lines of the painting verge towards the figure in the doorway so all the manifold aspects of the backwards game represented in the text, converge towards the vanishing figure of Maria do Carmo. This interplay of images corresponds to the conclusive moment of the tale that indeed does not conclude, for the evocation of the painting does not provide the events with a univocal interpretation, but multiplies the semantic layers of the text, leaving the story suspended and unresolved. As a matter of fact the very end of the tale coincides with a question that remains unanswered. The narrator asks Maria do Carmo what she can see from the reverse viewpoint she occupies. The question hints at metaphysical issues defying any possible answer and eluding any obvious and certain meaning. The metaphorical search for the image of the canvas, that is the impossible image of life, rests on an open ending. Tabucchi seems to suggest that if there is a solution it is an uncertain one, akin to vision and dreams. That is why the narrator migrates from one dream to another, constantly failing to grasp a meaning, which is perpetually evoked and indeterminately deferred. As the image of Velásquez resists the gaze, so the meaning of things resists interpretation and withdraws into the invisibility of the unconscious.

⁷ Foucault, p. 6; author's italics.

Despite the circular structure of the tale, marked by the evocation of Velásquez's painting, the story does not conclude. The various elements of the plot are vague and undetermined: on the one hand the identity of Maria do Carmo remains hidden behind the game to which she has devoted her whole life, and on the other, her posthumous message, far from explaining the backwards game, increases its ambiguity. The word "reves" is a symbolic clue handed down to posterity not so much for the interpretation of the game of reversals as for its perpetuation. The framing of the possible solution in a dream and the passage from that dream to another dream suggests the inevitable receding of the possibility of deciphering once and for all the sense of the reversal. Just as in Velásquez's painting the canvas frames a territory inaccessible to the spectator, so the dream outlines an area where meanings are never definitely established. The backwards game is then complicated by a multiplicity of reversals, showing the ceaseless exchange of truth and invention, reality and fiction, life and death.

Within a story constructed in the manner of a charade, where the meanings are formed by means of gaps and associations, the mentioning of Velásquez's enigmatic picture has a strong evocative power. The intriguing game of perspectives and *mise en abyme* of the painting provides the grounding principle both for the formal and the conceptual aspects of the tale, suggesting a reading of the backwards game in terms of a game of gazes and distances. On a thematic level this is exemplified by a number of passages in which the narrator filters the events through a fictive distance, which corresponds to a way of reversing things.

In the train to Lisbon the character is overwhelmed by the displacing impression of watching himself from the outside, which implies the reversing experience of seeing himself as another person. He comments on his impression as follows: "Era una sensazione che non avevo mai provato e mi venne da pensare che aveva qualcosa a che fare col rovescio" (GR, p. 14). The instability of the gaze experienced by the narrator implies the reversal of roles between subject and object, which in visual terms corresponds to the mutual exchange of observer and observed enacted in Velásquez's painting. This metamorphosis occurs also in relation to the lover's roles. While recollecting the most significant stages of his love affair, the narrator muses on Maria do

Carmo's invitation to live their life together as if it were "un revés", and to swap identities with one another: "per esempio stanotte, tu devi pensare che sei me e che stai stringendo te fra le tue braccia, io penso di essere te che sto stringendo me fra le mie braccia" (*GR*, p. 17).

At other times the narrator distances himself from the events by means of dreams, memories and imagination. When memories and reveries occur, the notion of distance calls into question the motif of *saudade* to which it is closely related. *Saudade* is a complex Portuguese word that holds a variety of concepts and meanings. To clarify its significance, Tabucchi has often resorted to a comparison with "il disio dantesco", asserting that like the latter *saudade* subsumes a wide gamut of attitudes and emotions, indicating simultaneously "uno slancio, un rimorso, un'aspirazione". It could therefore be described as a blend of feelings, oscillating between melancholy and desire, resulting in an intense longing "per le cose che avrebbero potuto essere e che non sono state".⁸ *Saudade* is a leit-motif of Tabucchi's fiction, and makes its first appearance in this short story where it is defined as "una categoria dello spirito" (*GR*, p. 12), characterizing the Portuguese soul. As the narrator affirms during his conversation with the Spaniard, *saudade* is a distinctive quality of a country that has given to the world "poeti malati di lontananze" (*GR*, p. 15) and is radically different from the Spanish *salero*. Apart from being a national attribute it is also a significant feature of the game of reversals: the narrator notes that "a suo modo anch'essa era un rovescio" (*GR*, p. 23). In the story it acts as an underlying theme, providing the necessary emotional frame for the distancing desire, which makes it possible to grasp the reversed aspects of life and to bring them into light.

⁸ Romana Petri, 'Intervista con Tabucchi', *Leggere*, 61 (June 1994), 70-71. In this interview Tabucchi explains the difficulty of translating into other languages the term *saudade*: "La *saudade* è una parola che gode nomea di intraducibilità in ogni lingua. In italiano si traduce nostalgia, ma in portoghese la parola "nostalgia" esiste di suo, esistono nostalgia e *saudade*, ma sono due cose diverse. Forse in italiano ci sarebbe una bella parola per tradurla, però una parola arcaica, disusata. Io la *saudade* l'avvicino molto al disio dantesco [...] Ecco, quel disio è una parola molto complessa che indica uno slancio, un rimorso, un'aspirazione. La *saudade* può essere nostalgia del futuro, un desiderio di futuro, e inoltre nostalgia per le cose che avrebbero potuto essere e che non sono state" (*ibid.*). Analogous considerations on the concept of *saudade* can be found in Botta, 'An Interview with Antonio Tabucchi', p. 425.

The notion of *saudade* is essential to the character of Maria do Carmo. During her walks across Lisbon in company of the narrator, Maria do Carmo follows “un itinerario fernandino” (GR, p. 12), that is an ideal itinerary in the pursuit of *saudade*. Fernando Pessoa is a constant subtext to her words and gesture and provides her with the most intense image of nostalgia and desire: “una persona è alla stessa finestra della sua infanzia, ma non è più la stessa persona e non è più la stessa finestra, perché il tempo cambia uomini e cose” (GR, p. 16). *Saudade* is also implied in the final image of the story, in which the perspective lines of the painting are transformed into piers. Evocative symbols of distances and departures, piers are images borrowed once again from Pessoa, who writes “ogni molo è una nostalgia di pietra”.⁹

On a structural level the notion of distance appears to inform the temporal organization of the story, constantly shifting between past and present. The changes occurring in the temporal points of view adopted to recount the events seem to translate into narrative terms the spatial and visual values of Velásquez’s perspective. As noticed by Lepschy, the articulation of the tale in sections textually marks the alternation of past and present, conferring to the story a “geometrical structure”.¹⁰

The painting itself seems to function as a means of creating effects of distance within the tale. The dramatic event of the death of Maria do Carmo is not directly narrated but is located and framed within the emotional distance of the painting. Moreover the significant intervention of *Las Meninas* at the very end of the story allows the narrator to filter the unsettling discovery of the many aspects of Maria do Carmo’s life and to convey the essence of the backwards game through the vision of an image. Nevertheless, as previously observed, the eliciting of the painting does not provide a solution to the story. The visuality of the picture serves to fill in a gap and at the same time to signal it. This gap does not regard the inevitable distance between the artistic image and the literary one, but it has to do with the problem of representation and its ontological limits.

⁹ Pessoa, *Il poeta è un fingitore*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Lepschy, ‘Antonio Tabucchi: Splinters of Existence’, p. 203.

The question of representation is primarily defined in semantic terms. The painting is intended to provide the means to interpret the reversal, while at one and the same time concealing it behind the proliferation of a multiplicity of meanings, deriving from the continuous deferral of the solution to the game: a solution that probably does not exist, or if it does, it is partial and incomplete, just like a dream. Rather than supplying visual unity and coherence the image becomes the signpost of an inevitable void. This void is not determined by a lack of meanings but derives on the contrary from the unfeasible possibility of seizing hold of a stable and permanent meaning that is not subjected to the destabilizing power of the game of reversals. It is therefore the ambiguous nature of the backwards game and its virtually endless potentiality in creating a multiplicity of meanings to determine this semantic vacancy.

Monica Jansen interestingly associates this circularity and plurality of meanings to the image of the spinning flywheel that overwhelms Alvaro de Campos: “Maria do Carmo [...] recitava qualche verso dell’Ode Marittima, il passo in cui il piccolo piroscapo disegna la sua sagoma all’orizzonte e Campos sente un volano che comincia a ruotare dentro il suo petto” (*GR*, p. 13). Jansen notes that “il volano nel petto di Alvaro de Campos” reappears emblematically in the “condizionatore d’aria che ronza nella stanza d’albergo del protagonista” and it acts as “una forza centrifuga che si sprigiona dal racconto e che impedisce tesi univoche di lettura”.¹¹

Similarly, *Las Meninas* stirs up within the story an uncontrollable proliferation of reversals, since it is itself an unsolved enigma that replicates the riddle of the tale rather than clarifying it. Consequently while giving visual evidence to the backwards game, the image endorses the reticence of the narrative, marking an ontological distance from meaning, which is shared both by the pictorial and the literary representation. Whether iconic or verbal, representation is assimilated to a game of reversal, in which reality and fiction, truth and invention are subjected to an endless permutation of roles, whose meaning resides in an unfathomable territory, which can be the territory of dreams or that of the invisible canvas painted by Velázquez.

¹¹ Monica Jansen, ‘Tabucchi: molteplicità e rovescio’, in *Piccole finzioni con importanza* (see ‘Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi, above), pp. 137-46 (p. 145).

It is exactly this zone of semantic indeterminacy, where meanings can be attributed but never exhausted, to guarantee the possibility of a representation that is not fixed once and for all, but is mutable and changing, as mutable and changing as Maria do Carmo's identity as well as the identity of the implied spectator.

In the visual game enacted by the painting, the spectator is a key player, just as the reader is a major player in the game of storytelling. Fusing together reality and fiction, Tabucchi aims at breaking down the boundaries of the text, actively involving the reader in the construction of meanings and trapping his mind in a loop of reflections. Likewise the painting of Velázquez seeks to break the limits of the canvas, revolving around a point outside the picture space, the spectator, that the image suggests but does not contain.

Tabucchi's tale fits into a rich tradition of both critical and creative works that have been seduced by the Baroque painting of *Las Meninas* and its philosophical implications.¹² The reason for my lengthy inquiry lies, however, in the inaugural value taken on by this short story within the literary production of the author. 'Il gioco del rovescio' is the first tale of Tabucchi's first collection of short stories and it starts with a pictorial citation, which is the first intertextual reference to the world of painting appearing in the author's oeuvre. As Greco has noted, "l'autore ha voluto partire esplicitamente da *Las meninas* di Velázquez per segnare un punto fermo nella sua opera", within which this tale represents "una dichiarazione di poetica [...] un punto di arrivo e di partenza".¹³

The picture raises questions on the very notion of representation, its meanings and limits, introducing into the writing of Tabucchi the metafictional reflection on the relationship between reality and illusion. By doing so *Las Meninas* becomes the iconic emblem of what can be defined as the poetics of reversal, one that revolves around paradoxes and ambiguities and profoundly affects the succeeding literary works of the

¹² A comprehensive examination of the influence of *Las meninas* on modern culture is offered by Caroline Kesser, *Las Meninas von Velázquez: eine Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Reimer, 1994).

¹³ Lorenzo Greco, 'I giochi del rovescio di Antonio Tabucchi', in *I segni incrociati: Letteratura Italiana del '900 e Arte Figurativa*, ed. by Marcello Ciccuto and Alexandra Zingone (Viareggio-Lucca: Baroni, 1998), pp. 849–62 (p. 852). The paradigmatic value of this short story has also been pointed out by Paccagnini who notes that "'Il gioco del rovescio' viene posto in posizione forte, all'inizio, quasi dichiarazione di poetica", p. 118.

author. This new vision of things also coincides with the narrative debut of a variety of themes and expressive strategies destined to become distinctive features of his fiction.

First and foremost, it is important to stress the adoption of a narrative measure, such as the short story, which seems particularly congenial to the author. This goes together with the use of an allusive and elliptical narrative mode that is radically different from the style and tone characterizing his first two novels, namely *Piazza d'Italia* and *Il piccolo naviglio*. 'Il gioco del rovescio' presents us with a prose sustained by a complex intertextuality and numerous semantic gaps, by means of which meaning is implied rather than stated. And we will see that this will be a major characteristic of Tabucchi's mode of storytelling.

With regard to the thematic sphere, we have already discussed the importance of dreams and *saudade*. As pointed out by Stefano Tani, along with the notion of reversal, these categories will become, "tecniche narrative ed elementi essenziali della voce narrante e dell'atteggiamento esistenziale di Tabucchi".¹⁴ However, both themes are intimately connected to another, more significant narrative motif: Pessoa. The allusive presence in the tale of the Portuguese poet has a strong inaugural value. From this occurrence onwards, Pessoa will be a persistent motif in the fiction of Tabucchi, where he will appear at times as a character, at others as a quotation or a submerged presence. The whole tale is to some extent a tribute to the versatile poet, whose poetry has profoundly affected the idea of the reversal. Just as Velázquez is the master of the backwards game in painting, so Pessoa is the master of reversals in the literary art. He has re-invented his life through a number of heteronyms, which embody his different selves. It is not surprising therefore that Maria do Carmo thinks of him as the master of the "juego del reves", because he has grasped "il risvolto delle cose del reale e dell'immaginato" (*GR*, p. 13). Maria do Carmo's judgement is echoed by Tabucchi's words. In *Un baule pieno di gente*, the writer defines Pessoa as "il più sublime poeta del rovescio" who has been capable of creating a literature that "evade dal piano testuale-esistenziale per attuarsì nell'ontologico-metafisico".¹⁵

¹⁴ Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno: Dal romanzo medio degli anni sessanta alla giovane narrativa degli anni ottanta* (Milano: Mursia, 1990), p. 155.

¹⁵ Tabucchi, *Un baule pieno di gente*, p. 8.

It follows that in virtue of its very nature, the game of reversals forms the gateway to the “ontological-metaphysical” plane. This implies the breaking of the textual boundaries and the intermingling of reality within the representation and the reality outside it. This interplay of the planes of reality is the main quality of Pessoa’s poetry, and it is also an essential Baroque feature,¹⁶ leading to the breaking of the bounds of the pictorial space in *Las Meninas*. Indebted both to the poet and the painter, Maria do Carmo applies to her own life the artistry in reversing the real and the imagined. Her game is not confined within the tale, but in a further reversal transcends the textual space, stretching over the reality outside the text, because as Monica Jansen claims, quoting José Cardoso Pires, “nell’avventura della scrittura il gioco del rovescio non ha scadenza”.¹⁷

Playing with the indistinct border separating reality from fiction, the backwards game resides at the very core of the art of representation. It is the motivation and the very pulse of the act of creation that in its various forms, whether they be verbal or visual, constantly reverse the terms of the relation between the reality of life and the reality of fiction, attempting to reach what Tabucchi calls the “paradossale autenticità della *finzione vera*”.¹⁸

2. 2 Quoting Pictures

The same collection of short story hosting Velásquez’s painting provides other instances of the relation between text and images, though with completely different implications. In the tale ‘Paradiso celeste’ we find a considerable array of pictorial allusions, fostering a reflection on the ideological values of art as a social and political form of fiction. Along with art quotations, the story subsumes a conspicuous number of literary and cinematic references, through which an all-embracing impression of artistic sensitivity and

storie

¹⁶ Some significant considerations on Baroque art are inserted into the tale. It is worth mentioning the narrator’s definition of Soror Violante do Céu because it expresses the essence of the backwards game: “è una grande poetessa barocca, ha passato la vita a sublimare il desiderio per un mondo al quale aveva rinunciato (GR, p.16). This bears resemblance to Tabucchi’s definition of Pessoa as a poet capable “di *abdicare al reale per possedere l’essenza del reale*” (author’s italics); Tabucchi, *Un baule pieno di gente*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ Jansen, ‘Tabucchi: molteplicità e rovescio’, p. 145.

¹⁸ Pessoa, *Il poeta è un fingitore*, p. 11.

refinement is finely conveyed. All the narrative elements of the tale effectively contribute to evoke a pretentious atmosphere of social grandeur, which is reflected in the elegance of the ambience and in the formal naming of the main characters, called “Madame” and “Monsieur”. They are portrayed as people of high culture and strong aesthetic sense and their thoughts are primarily defined in relation to their visual appreciation of art objects and beautiful things.

The image of this upper class milieu is sanctioned by the central and relevant presence of the Japanese art of Ikebana, to which Madame devotes her daily efforts. As well as defining the sophisticated social grace of the ambience, the art of Ikebana constitutes a key narrative device for the progression of the plot. It is after all the name of a floral arrangement, “Paradiso celeste”, which brings to light the reversal of the aesthetic world, showing the hidden side of a counterfeit society.

In fact, within the tale art is used as a device to successfully address the issue of deceit and simulation under its many aspects. Several textual passages lay emphasis on this point. Both the episode of the fake pictures of Utamaro and the narrator’s lies about her tastes stress exactly the notion of simulation. Another case in point is Madame’s hair colour. It is so flagrantly unnatural as to be accepted the way it is, because as the narrator observes “la finzione dichiarata è molto più accettabile della finzione finta” (*GR*, p. 105). Eventually, the notion of artifice is dramatically underscored by the deft disguise of criminal commerce under the charming and innocuous pseudonym of “paradiso celeste”. Given such a scale of simulation, it is then only grammatically incidental, the parenthetical statement, with which, before recounting her story the first person narrator declares her fascination with deceit: “(allora avevo tutta una mia teoria sulla gamma della finzione)” (*ibid.*).

The various episodes concerning the interplay of art and simulation are frequently shot through with irony. An instance of this is the moment when the narrator chooses to talk about Dufy, simply because she knew his works from the pictures of a calendar, hanging on the wall of the provincial art gallery where she used to work and get bored. The narrator represents an ironic version of the traditional character of the connoisseur. The rhetorical language, with which she aims to impress Madame Huppert, humorously

contrasts with her personal thoughts. On the one hand her passion for Dufy is justified to Madame by the quality of the artist's pictures where "l'allegria mediterranea canta sulla tela", whereas on the other hand she comments that "per essere più esatti, Dufy mi usciva anche dalle orecchie" (GR, p. 107). Together with Dufy and the big names of French art such as Matisse, Bonnard, Corot and Millet, the story hosts a large number of art objects which are accurately described: from the antique Belle Epoque vase, serving as the base for an Ikebana, to the exotic statuette that Monsieur Huppert brings from Africa. Ironically enough, in such an aesthetically saturated environment, anything can be a masterpiece, from a service letter to a pineapple mousse,¹⁹ and the beauty of a natural landscape can overcome the artistry of Dufy's works: "stava calando il crepuscolo sul lago, e dalla nostra posizione era proprio una pittura, altro che Dufy" (GR, p. 109).

Inserted into conversation passages where the characters express their tastes and their fondness for pictures, art serves as a social and cultural notation. It also functions as a device to foster the narrative discourse, fusing characterization and action. For the narrator art and culture are a means of gaining personal prestige and social elevation, whilst for Monsieur Delatour art is subordinated to the logic of capitalism, functioning as a means of wielding power and increasing commercial profits. On a more profound level the aesthetic backdrop represents the channel through which the duplicity of a cultivated society is conjured up, suggesting how cultural elevation corresponds to the mastery of deception but does not guarantee an ethic of civilization. By means of an allusive strategy, Tabucchi expresses in the tale the central conflict between civilization, as symbolized and measured by art, and the radical forces of society such as exploitation and imperialism, on which this civilization rests.

This tale illustrates the special economy and richness of pictorial allusions, whose presence in the narrative is never gratuitous or merely ornamental. However, unlike the reference to Velásquez's *Las Meninas*, here art quotations are primarily used as plot devices, though their function is also that of displaying the value of art as a form of

¹⁹ Despite the aesthetic aura that pervades the tale, the term "capolavoro" is used only twice with reference to a pineapple mousse, (GR, p. 120) and to a letter the narrator writes to the art gallery to denounce the fake Utamaro's pictures (GR, p. 113).

simulation, or rather, according to the main topic of the collection, to show the disquieting “rovescio” of the art world.

On occasions specific allusions to artistic paintings and painters are inscribed in more complex narrative operations, involving description, action, as well as the process of interpretation. A very interesting example of this more articulated interaction between text and image can be found in an episode of *Notturmo Indiano* (1984), where the allusion to Mantegna acquires a forceful narrative resonance. As explained by the author, the novel is a “Notturmo in cui si insegue un’Ombra” (*NI*, p. 9). The metaphysical and existential search of the narrator is marked by a series of encounters, which in different ways contribute to his quest for “the other”, or rather for himself as another. Among the various characters, we find an enigmatic Indian man, having the appearance of a “magra ombra”. The man abruptly questions the narrator about the meaning of our bodies, with a tone that is more meditative than interrogative:

«Che cosa ci facciamo dentro questi corpi», disse il signore che si stava preparando a stendersi nel letto vicino al mio. [...] «Forse ci viaggiamo dentro», dissi io. [...] Lui disse: «come ha detto?», «Mi riferivo ai corpi», dissi io, «forse sono come valigie, ci trasportiamo noi stessi» (*NI*, p. 39).

The narrator tries to answer the question by replying that perhaps our bodies are nothing but suitcases, inside which we travel. Yet the real response to a question that may have no answer is another question. Thus, curiously enough, after a preliminary description of the setting, the narrator asks an absurd question: “«Lei conosce Mantegna?», gli chiesi. Anche la mia era una domanda assurda, ma non meno della sua, certo” (*ibid.*).

On a first reading the name of the painter appears to bear no evident link to the episode. The quotation of one of the masters of fifteenth century western art sounds rather bizarre both within the specific scene of the conversation and the broader context of the narrator’s journey across India. This baffling effect engendered by Mantegna’s name is overtly intentional. It partakes of a displacing attitude that informs the entire novel and is linguistically foreshadowed by the frequent use of adjectives like “absurd” and “incongruous” as well as by the numerous expressions of doubt, with which the narrator

accompanies his perception of the real. Nonetheless on closer inspection the sudden and unexpected reference to Mantegna appears far less absurd than it seemed initially, acting as the point of convergence of a set of meanings and functions.

The key to interpreting the quotation can be sought in the narrative context surrounding the “absurd” question of the narrator. The little sentence featuring Mantegna’s name immediately follows the description of the ambience where the encounter takes place. In the passage Tabucchi insists on the visual and chromatic qualities of the space, thus anticipating, in a way that will be clearer later, the iconic value of the apparently nominal allusion to the artist. The Retiring Room of Bombay’s Victoria Station is connoted by a symbolic blend of shades of light that confers on the space the unlikely semblance of an aquarium. In the suspended atmosphere of the room, the figure of the Indian man emerges in a vivid and significant manner.

Sopra la porta c’era una *veilleuse* azzurra, come nei vagoni dei treni notturni. Misturandosi con la luce gialla che veniva dalla finestra creava una luce verdolina, quasi un acquario. Lo guardai nella luce verdastra, quasi luttuosa, vidi il profilo di un volto aguzzo, con un naso leggermente aquilino, le mani sul petto (*FO*, p. 39).

The Indian man is portrayed in a passive posture that closely resembles the horizontal, resting position of a dead man and, as pointed out by Palmieri, he is “definitely reminiscent of Andrea Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*”.²⁰ In any case the evocation of the celebrated painting is not only aroused by the supposedly resting position of the man, but also by the special radiance of the scene. The aquarium like glow of the room and the greenish, almost funereal light enfolding the figure of the Indian, are both intensely suggestive of the peculiar tonality of Mantegna’s picture, where the foreshortened image of the dead Christ is rendered by chalky grey shades and watery greenish nuances. Light is a fundamental expressive device in both the image and the text, constituting a further element of affinity between them. Nevertheless, despite these similarities, the power of the visual allusion does not rely on precise formal correspondences between the picture and the text.

²⁰ Giovanni Palmieri, ‘Antonio Tabucchi’s Iconic Temptations’, in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays* (see Trentini, above), pp. 125-40 (p. 127).

In actual fact, there soon emerges a major difference in perspective between the Indian man, who is seen in profile, and the image of Mantegna where Christ is frontally displayed. This discrepancy makes it possible for us to surmise a contamination between the picture of the *Dead Christ* and another religious painting by Mantegna: the *Death of the Virgin*, in which the Virgin is portrayed in profile and her figure is framed by an aquatic view, probably showing the lake of Mantua. Whether deliberate or not, this superimposing of iconographic features testifies to the complex semantic overtones contained in the allusion to Mantegna. It equally shows that the value of the quotation is to be looked for in the common layers of meanings that both the narrative and the images entail, with reference to death and inaccessible metaphysical questions. The parallel with the *Dead Christ* or with the *Death of the Virgin* is thereby further justified by the mournful connotation of the narrative scene, immersed in a light that is “quasi luttuosa”, and is reinforced by the religious overtones entailed in the eccentric conversation taking place between the Indian and the narrator.

The subject matter of their discourse rapidly shifts from the dirge of the Jain,²¹ wailing for the wickedness of the world, to the martyrdom of the apostle Thomas, from the philosophical implications of western practical terminology, to the gospels, reaching a significant climax in the mentioning of Christ. These topics confer on the scene an oddly hieratic quality, tempered by the pauses and misunderstandings that repeatedly break the flow of the conversation.

The motif of the journey as a metaphor of life is also addressed throughout the dialogue, providing the conceptual frame for the episode. As we have already seen, the conversation sets out from the comparison of human bodies to suitcases, and this very image also brings the chapter to a close. The Indian takes his leave of the narrator, saying: “Suppongo che non avremo più occasione di vederci secondo le sembianze sotto le quali ci siamo conosciuti, queste nostre attuali valigie. Le auguro un buon viaggio” (*NI*, p. 43).

²¹ The distant lament of the Jain is a mourning sound that deeply connotes the atmosphere of the episode, metaphorically accompanying the veiled evocation of Mantegna's *Dead Christ*. Considering the subject of the painting, which as the original title says is a *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, the moaning voice may also represent an additional clue for the disclosure of the visual allusion.



Figure 2. Andrea Mantegna, *The Dead Christ*, c. 1490, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera



Figure 3. Andrea Mantegna, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1461, Madrid, Museo del Prado

This greeting is of course not only related to the contingent train journey the narrator is about to embark on, but also, and more importantly, to his voyage across life.

Besides, it is worth noting that within a novel structured as a quest, this episode acts as a *mise en abyme* of the main theme of the story, fittingly defined in the narrator's reply to the Indian who asks him about the nature of his search: «È un pellegrinaggio?», chiese lui. Dissi di no. O meglio, sì, ma non nel senso religioso del termine. Semmai era un itinerario privato, come dire?, cercavo solo delle tracce» (*NI*, p. 41). Eventually, when at the end of the chapter, the Indian confesses that he is approaching the final destination of his human journey – «Vado a morire», disse, «mi restano pochi giorni di vita» (*NI*, p. 42) - the various narrative traces converge towards the unveiling of the iconological allusion encrypted in Mantegna's name, highlighting its central role in the definition of the semantic value of the episode. An indirect quotation of famous paintings therefore fulfils the purpose of finely suggesting a complex overlapping of meaningful associations that could not be conveyed so convincingly through verbal means.

Adding to the importance of the citation is the fact that far from being circumscribed to the episode in which it appears, it emphasizes the mysterious atmosphere of the entire novel, which revolves around the motifs of the double, the unknowable and the hidden significance of things that the narrator tries in vain to decipher. The naming of Mantegna, a master of pictorial illusionist effects, could in fact be indicative of the all-pervading conceptual illusionism of the novel. This is visually reflected by the conspicuous presence of *trompe-l'oeil* effects that Tabucchi adopts to reproduce the idea of the ambiguity of reality.²²

The semantic reverberation of the reference is coupled with the important role it plays in the narrative discourse. The allusion to the Italian artist is contained within a dialogic scene, where it occupies a central place, supplying visual description and fostering the narration. Within the scene the quotation is also used to achieve comical effects, as illustrated by the tight sequence of misunderstandings originating from the fact that the interlocutor does not know who Mantegna is. Therefore the name is believed to

²² As discussed in Chapter One, a major instance of *trompe-l'oeil* can be found in the final scene of *Notturmo indiano*. As regards all the passages of the novel raising *trompe-l'oeil* effects see Livorni.

designate first an Indian, then an animal and lastly a friend of the narrator.

One final observation regards the little textual space reserved to the quotation in comparison with its pivotal role. Throughout his works Tabucchi manifests a proclivity for quotations and allusions. In the wake of this narrative attitude that corresponds both to a technique and to a principle of poetics, on several occasions pictures are embedded in the story in the form of quotations. This procedure bears resemblance to the fictional occurrence of cinematic art that, as we will see in Chapter Four, is also mainly referred to by way of brief and succinct citations. The reference to Mantegna is one of the most economic art quotations to be incorporated into Tabucchi's fiction, but in spite of its striking brevity it is endowed with multiple functions. It could be observed that to some extent the verbal conciseness of the reference translates into narrative terms the foreshortening perspective of the painting. As the latter is adopted to bring about dramatic effects, the brevity of the quotation contrasts with the extensive influence that its encoded iconic suggestion exerts upon the event, strengthening emotional and meditative values.

2.3 The Iconic/Ironic Muse

References to visual art are also an overriding feature of a collection of short stories published in 1987, under the evocative title *I volatili del Beato Angelico*. As explicitly announced in the introductory note, rather than a traditional collection of tales this volume is an extraordinary array of narrative fragments, arguably without precedent in Tabucchi's own oeuvre.²³ Sustained by its intrinsic heterogeneity, the book experiments with thematic and expressive modes, exhibiting a considerable number of motifs and literary genres, within the limited space of narratives that are fragmentary and incomplete. The author himself underlines the suspended nature of his stories that he aptly defines as "lacunose prose", "quasi-racconti", "romanzi e racconti mancati", "schegge alla deriva sopravvisute a un tutto che non è mai stato" (*VBA*, p. 9-10).

²³ A comparison may be established with the earlier collection *Donna di Porto Pim* (1983), however, apart from purely external qualities such as the common brevity of the narratives, the two volumes manifest a totally different conception. *Donna di Porto Pim* shows a substantial unity of inspiration and uniformity of themes, for all its stories relate to the Islands of the Azores, whilst quite the opposite, *I volatili del Beato Angelico* is characterized by a significant plurality of narrative motifs.

The origin of these incomplete narratives is to be sought in equally inadequate muses: “muse zoppe”, the author says, such as “ipocondrie, insonnie, insofferenze e struggimenti” (*VBA*, p. 9). Despite their defective nature, these domestic understated muses are nonetheless important. They have the power to surface all those aspects of our existence that commonly escape our attention, to disclose the “zone interstiziali del nostro quotidiano dover essere” (*ibid.*), where the debris of our experiences lie neglected and undisturbed. In the effort to probe the unknown spaces of our daily lives, the tales collected in the book take the form of questions without answers. They are like “creature sotto formalina con quegli occhi troppo grandi degli organismi fetali – occhi che interrogano” (*ibid.*), because, as Tabucchi maintains, the inquiring dimension is a distinctive quality of what is unfinished and incomplete.

The issue is then to find out what these defective stories ask, what and whom they are questioning. It may be argued that a first query is addressed to images. After all, as the author himself puts it, his tales are endowed with eyes, “questioning eyes”, to be precise, which may possibly be wide open in order to detect “answering” pictures. It seems therefore that a response to the incompleteness of the text may be found in the world of images, deemed capable of compensating the defective nature of the written world.

Pictorial suggestions indeed play a key role in the book, notably in the tale giving its name to the collection, where the images of Fra Angelico inspire a story permeated by a gently fantastic atmosphere. More importantly, we also find in ‘I volatili del Beato Angelico’, the iconic equivalent for Tabucchi’s defective muses. The flying creatures of the Florentine painter are but imperfect angels, dropped one day on earth, in order to be represented by the artist in his religious frescoes. Like Pirandello’s characters in search of an author, these creatures are looking for someone to give them a shape, a form, in other words an image.

Utterly imperfect in their physical nature, Fra Angelico’s fantastic creatures are both endearing and disturbing. The first is a “creaturina rosea, dall’aspetto morbido, con delle braccine giallastre come quelle dei polli spennati” (*VBA*, pp. 11-12), the second hovers in the air “come un libellulone” and the third is “un essere rotondeggiante” equipped with “una coda verdolina a spazzolone”, (*VBA*, p. 17). Their colourful

appearance contrasts with their intimate frailty. Most of the terms used to describe them emphasize the precariousness of their flimsy bodies that - as much as those of any unfinished imperfect beings - are vulnerable and fragile. The creature resembling a big dragonfly exhibits, for instance, “degli arti fini fini che si aveva paura a romperli a maneggiarli: e quasi traslucidi, verde-chiaro come gli steli del grano non ancora maturo” (*VBA*, p. 18), whereas the other two creatures recall, to some extent, the fragility of delicate defenceless babies. Adding to the oddity of their appearance is the fact that their uncanny expressions possess an inquiring quality.

Given such connotations, Fra Angelico’s flying creatures must relate, parodically, to Tabucchi’s narratives. They closely resemble embryonic forms, being thus reminiscent of the author’s fictional larvae, which are unable to rise to the status of proper stories. The tale seems to act as the visual translation of the writer’s sense of his own artistry. Just as the painter’s visionary imagination is haunted by bizarre erratic figures, halfway between angels and “volatili”, so Tabucchi’s inventive fantasy is disturbed by eccentric muses, “muse zoppe”.

It is worth noting that the term “volatili”, employed by Tabucchi to designate Fra Angelico’s angels, has a somewhat ironic connotation, being commonly used in Italian to define birds or any winged animal. For their hybrid quality, Fra Angelico’s creatures are far less similar to elegant birds than to insects or poultry. As seen above, one creature is explicitly compared to a dragonfly and another to a plucked chicken, but once appropriated and reworked by the painter they are transformed into graceful angels: the former takes the shape of the angel appearing to Christ in the *Agony in the Garden*, whilst the latter becomes the pink angel of *The Annunciation*. Pictorial sources are openly declared by the author. Each creature corresponds to an angel depicted by Fra Angelico in the cells of the monastery of San Marco. Yet the correlation between text and image is somewhat peculiar, inasmuch as the text does not simply borrow images from the painter’s frescoes, but recreates these very images, tracing their imaginary evolution from “volatili” to angels, that is to say, from unformed beings, lurking in the mind of the artist to heavenly creatures, fully materialized into a visual image.

Our claim that images may represent a response to the incompleteness of the text seems therefore discredited by the fact that the text too completes the image. In a mutual exchange of expressive means and suggestions words and images complement each other, showing in this very act their respective defective nature. Rather than a remedy to the incompleteness of the text, images might well represent a reminder of this incompleteness and instead of being opposed to words they could be seen as mirroring them, for they share the same imperfect and defective nature.

Through the metaphor both surreal and ironic of the ‘volatili’, the tale praises exactly what is lacking and incomplete as the necessary source of art. Coupled with the equally unusual image of the “muse zoppe”, the “volatili” become the iconic/ironic paradigm of Tabucchi’s “limping” vision of the world. The author self-mockingly suggests that he could well be reincarnated as a “pollo zoppo” and acknowledges his penchant for what is tentative and abortive or, in other words, “zoppicante”:

Evidentemente c’è qualcosa di zoppicante non soltanto nella mia prosa, non soltanto nei miei libri, ma evidentemente anche nella mia maniera di vedere il mondo, e anche, credo, più onestamente, nella mia maniera di vivere. Credo d’altronde che una maniera zoppicante di vivere la vita caratterizzi le persone che hanno dei dubbi.²⁴

Besides recalling a “limping” reality, the term “volatili” also evokes the notions of volatility and randomness. Fra Angelico’s “volatili” are drifting creatures, floating in the air. They belong to the outer space of a fantastic dimension where desire and imagination intersect, giving shape to fleeting images, suspended between reality and illusion. In virtue of their erratic and volatile nature they might well figure in Calvino’s study on the notion of “leggerezza” in literature. Among the figural images of “lightness” exemplified by Calvino, we find in fact a number of flying or suspended objects, indicating the melancholy projection of aspirations and desires. Inevitably anchored to its opposite, “lightness” is for Calvino “quella speciale modulazione lirica ed esistenziale che permette

²⁴ ‘Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 150

di contemplare il proprio dramma come dal di fuori e dissolverlo in malinconia e ironia”.²⁵

Consistent with this definition, Fra Angelico’s creatures may be seen as images of “lightness”, dissolving in melancholy the secret drama of their creator. This drama takes the form of a juvenile love that haunts the painter, resurfacing vividly and relentlessly in connection with either the shape or expression of the flying creatures: “somigli alla Nerina”, Fra Angelico says to one of the angels, “una ragazza che conobbi una volta e che si chiamava Nerina” (*VBA*, p. 18). The painter finds in the angelic creatures the visual embodiment of a desire that returns persistently in his mind and in his art. By giving visual shape to that desire, he succeeds in projecting and dissolving the “weightiness” of life into the “lightness” of artistic representation.

The volatile quality of Fra Angelico’s creatures could be extended to the entire collection, since it can be read as the figurative emblem of delicate surreal stories, revolving around memories, fantasies and dreams. Instances of what we might call fictional “lightness” abound in the book. However, in the pages that follow I shall briefly examine only one narrative, whose interaction with painting seems enlightening in this respect.

More akin to a *poème en prose* than to a conventional short story, ‘La Battaglia di San Romano’ finds inspiration in the triptych of the same name by Paolo Uccello as well as in two studies concerning the painting and clearly indicated by the author in the closing note attached to the text. One of these studies is that of “P. Francastel (*Peinture et société*, Lyon 1951)”. It focuses on the panel, which is in the National Gallery. As Tabucchi informs us, Francastel observes, upon examining the image, that Paolo Uccello “impiega simultaneamente diverse prospettive, fra le quali una prospettiva sfuggente in primo piano e una prospettiva «a scomparti» nel fondo” (*VBA*, p. 57). The second study mentioned in the post-script is that of “A. Parronchi (*Studi sulla dolce prospettiva*, Milano 1964)”. Parronchi analyses the panel, which is in the Louvre.

Lo studioso esamina l’uso pittorico delle foglie d’argento delle corazze, supponendo che ad esse siano dovuti effetti di riflessione e moltiplicazione delle

²⁵ Calvino, *Lezioni americane*, pp. 20-21.

immagini. La tavola del Louvre, in sostanza, conterrebbe la dimostrazione di un gioco prospettico [...] secondo il quale «è possibile situare in tal modo lo specchio che il riguardante veda nell'aria, al di fuori dello specchio, l'immagine di una cosa che è fuori dal suo occhio». La tavola di Paolo Uccello, in tal modo, offrirebbe la rappresentazione non di esseri reali, ma di fantasmi (*ibid.*).

Struck by these theories and by the complex orchestration of the image, Tabucchi attempts to translate its composite perspective into the textual space of the narrative. In the process of doing so, he moves from the spatial dimension of the picture to the temporal dimension of the text, creating a story in which the present vanishes into the convoluted perspective of the past, a past whose image is as complex and intricate as that of the pictorial space. In Tabucchi's literary equivalent of the painting, time is captured at random in a sequence of visual details that fail to link up in a comprehensible image. The uncertain temporality of the story emerges from a number of disorderly images, whose overall meaning is hard to decipher, such as the landscape of Castiglia, Orson Wells, Hemingway, a car, a road and ultimately an orange, on which all the elements together awkwardly coexist for a moment:

è stata un'immagine improvvisa riemersa dal pozzo della memoria, e su quell'arancia ho cercato le lunghe strade della Castiglia, e una piccola automobile che correva credendo di entrare nella vita attraverso la tenda di turaccioli di una pagina di Hemingway, e invece ho visto solo una buccia d'arancia (*VBA*, p. 55).

The memory of the narrator is so overloaded with rapidly changing, rapidly substituted images that it shortcircuits ironically on the skin of an orange. Unable to visualize his past and to make sense of it, he starts piecing together the dispersed fragments of his life and superimposes them on the picture of *La battaglia di San Romano*, in order to find an unattainable correspondence between the geometric construction of the painting and the maze-like unfolding of time. In the passage that follows knowing and seeing are traditionally associated and the visual image is used as a metaphor for the construction of a clear and certain meaning.



Figure 4. Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, c. 1450, London, National Gallery

Avevo scomposto il quadro pezzetto per pezzetto dividendolo in un fitto reticolato e avevo fotografato ogni quadratino del reticolato; sarà un lavoro lungo e minuzioso fatto di pazienza, di sere interminabili con la lente e la lampada; la crosta della cornice dilatata dall'ingrandimento è un'epidermide piena di rughe e cicatrici fa quasi senso, si capisce che fu un organismo vivente, e ora è qui come un corpo cadavere e io lo notomizzo per dargli un senso che ha perduto col passare del tempo e che forse non era il suo, come cerco di darlo a quel pomeriggio sulla strada di Madrid e so che gliene sto dando uno diverso, perché il suo vero senso lo aveva solo in quel momento, quando io non sapevo che senso aveva, e ora che era un senso fatto di giovinezza e Spagna oleografica e romanzi di Hemingway è una lettura di ciò che sono ora: è a suo modo un falso. (*VBA*, p. 56).

This extensive quotation corresponds to the final passage of the tale and finely illustrates the narrative “lightness” that, as argued above, informs the collection. The inner drama of the first person narrator takes here the form of a stream of consciousness ruled and dominated by images. Mental “pictures”, summarizing the essence of the narrator’s remembered life, and real ones, symbolizing his process of understanding, are juxtaposed and overlapped in a visually conceived scene, combining close-ups and distant perspective. What we might call the microperspectival focus of the narration with regard to real images, such as the painting and its frame “dilatata dall’ingrandimento”, contrasts

with the distant perspective characterizing the narrator's mental "pictures" of his youth. Anchored to a handful of obsessively recurring details, the memory of the protagonist recedes along the line of the past to the point of becoming unavoidably inaccessible. The author seems to suggest that however close and accurate, the inspection of the past is bound to fail, for it corresponds to the illusion of grasping the meaning of things retrospectively, of finding the full picture in which all the components make sense in a clear and incontrovertible way. In the awareness that the meaning of the past is locked away, the narrator questions his attempt at giving it a meaning that may be radically different from its original one. The interpretation of the painting as "una rappresentazione non di esseri reali, ma di fantasmi" (*VBA*, p. 57) may then provide the key to understanding the final sentence, in which the narrator defines his reading of the past as "una lettura di ciò che sono ora: è a suo modo un falso" (*VBA*, p. 56).

From what has been hitherto examined there emerges a different use of the visual arts in *I volatili del Beato Angelico*. The citational appropriation of the image, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is here replaced by the use of paintings as sources of inspiration for the narrative, providing it with an all-encompassing iconic subtext. In virtue of this different mode of interaction, painting becomes the starting point for the narrative process as well as the pretext for creating a fantastic fiction, shifting between the oneiric and the marvelous and connoted by the Calvinian quality of "lightness".

2.4 Vision and Blindness

Though included in the same collection examined above, 'La traduzione' deserves special attention. To be sure, it shares the "lightness" characterizing the other tales and its narrative use of painting does not substantially differ from what has been previously observed. Once again, a work of art is the source of inspiration for the story, however, the implications ensuing from this one case are far-reaching and worth mentioning, insofar as they touch upon a crucial issue in the relation between text and image.

First and foremost it is important to note that 'La traduzione' represents an interesting example of ekphrasis. It takes the form of a monologue, in which the narrator

reproduces by means of words a pictorial image. Yet the traditional mode of the ekphrastic discourse is to some extent subverted and complicated by the fact that the very description of the work of art is tied in with the narrator's personal assumptions on that work. Rather than simply describing the painting the narrator represents it, or better still, as the title suggests, he translates it, though he does so in a very unusual way.

The piece starts with the evocation of the dominant colour of the image: a summery bright yellow flooding the pictorial space and overwhelming the figures scattered on it.

È una splendida giornata, puoi starne certo, anzi, direi che è estate [...] Vuoi sapere da cosa lo deduco, oh, beh, è facilissimo, come dire?, basta guardare quel giallo. [...] Sì, il giallo, e quando dico il giallo intendo proprio il giallo, che non è il rosso o il bianco, ma proprio il giallo, esattamente giallo. Il giallo, quello là a destra, quella macchia a stella di giallo che si espande sulla campagna come se fosse una foglia, un bagliore, insomma qualcosa di questo tipo, dell'erba seccata dalla calura, mi faccio capire? (*VBA*, p. 62)

As in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, the picture is bathed in light and its chromatic features are assigned a key role in the construction of the pictorial space. This quality will be revealed as important at a later stage, for it is one of the clues disseminated in the text, leading to the identification of the painting. Neither painter nor painting is, in fact, ever mentioned, and as is apparent from this passage, there are no textual markers actually indicating the presence of pictures. The narrator might well be speculating on a natural landscape in front of him, rather than on a painting, were it not for the fact that near the end of the tale he informs the reader that the story is set in a museum.

Equally remarkable is the fact that the passage takes the form of a colloquial conversation in which the narrating voice constantly demands the attention of an interlocutor that is never represented but only implied throughout the text. Several utterances have in fact a phatic function, stressing the narrator's intention to establish or to check the interaction with his interlocutor: "Vuoi sapere da cosa lo deduco", "mi faccio capire?". These kinds of expressions figure prominently in the narrative discourse. They inform the linguistic construction of the text and, as will be shown later, play a part in the decoding of its meaning.

As the passage continues, it introduces other pictorial objects such as the house that comes out of the yellow and seems sustained by the colour itself and the woman in black who is crossing the bridge. Far from neutrally describing these figures, the narrator animates them, changing the picture of a single moment into a narrative of successive actions. The woman in black, for instance, is perceived as being in motion and her intrinsic static nature as an image is completely challenged by her being absorbed into a temporally evolving situation. It is as if she were taken out of the painting and recreated through fiction. In contrast with the traditional function of ekphrastic literature of simply reproducing the still moment of painting and in accordance with recent theories, stressing the “storytelling impulse” of the ekphrastic discourse,²⁶ Tabucchi narrativizes the image, placing it in the temporal flux of the text and providing it with a past and a future. Whereby the woman in black with the parasol might be a widow who is about to fall victim of the bridge:

La vecchia signora non lo sa, poverina, nemmeno so lo immagina, ma ora muoverà un altro passo e sarà un passo fatale, credi a me, sicuramente metterà il piede su un perfido meccanismo, ci sarà un clic innavertibile, le corde si tenderanno, le assi sospese a leva si stringeranno come mandibole e lei resterà lì dentro come un topo, nella migliore delle ipotesi, perché nella peggiore tutte le sbarre che uniscono le assi, quelle pale un po' sinistre, se ci pensi bene, scatteranno per combaciare con esattezza millimetrica e lei, zacchete, resterà schiacciata come una frittella (*VBA*, p. 63).

As shown by this passage, when verbally reproducing the image, the narrator tries to explain it by constructing a narrative that goes far beyond what the image by itself implies. We may deduce from this, that the verbal translation of the painting proves to be not so much inaccurate as untrue. But why does the narrator “translate” the picture in the first place and above all what picture does he “translate” and for whom? Towards the end of the tale the narrator invites his interlocutor to connect together the various clues scattered within the text and adds a most important indication by mentioning Impressionism and impressionist landscapes. Linking up all the textual elements, Palmieri

²⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, ‘Ekphrasis and Representation’, *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 297-316 (p. 298). The critic defines ekphrasis as the “verbal representation of a graphic representation” and contends that the narrative tendency is essential to the “ekphrastic mode”, (*ibid.*).

claims that the painting in question is *The Langlois Bridge* by Van Gogh, “specifically the one kept in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. In it the painter represented, in the sunny summer weather of Provence, a small drawbridge over a canal. [...] A woman dressed in black, carrying a parasol, is crossing it”.²⁷ There exist many versions of the same picture, which vary slightly from one another, but Tabucchi’s ekphrastic representation seems to correspond faithfully to the version identified by Palmieri. Contrary to what has been argued with regard to Mantegna’s quotation in *Notturmo indiano*, we are not confronted here with a contamination of elements borrowed from more than one painting, but with an ekphrastic contamination of verbal and visual aspects, which ultimately produces a new narrative version of Van Gogh’s painting.

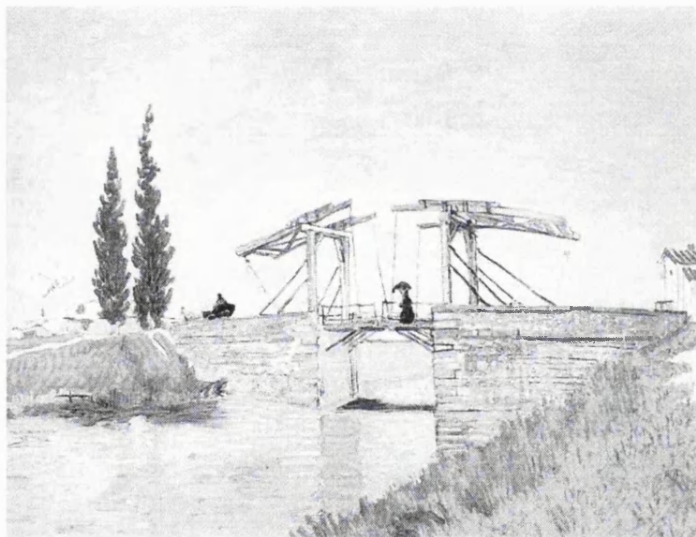


Figure 5. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Langlois Bridge*, 1888, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum

Another important aspect disclosed only in the final lines of the tale concerns the identity of the silent interlocutor, for whom the narrator has translated the image into words. Much to his surprise the reader finds out that the implied character is blind. In accordance with the evocative style of the narration, the blindness of the character is only suggested through a few details such as the walking stick and the presence of some threatening steps. Yet, however brief and vague, this final information is doubly

²⁷ Palmieri, ‘Antonio Tabucchi’s Iconic Temptations’, p. 132.

significant for the comprehension of the text. On the one hand it obviously produces a remarkable twist in the plot, casting new light on the understanding of the fictional situation. Whereas, on the other hand, with regard to the meanings implied in the narrative, it prompts the reflection on the interplay of vision and blindness as intrinsic to the relation between text and image.

In the figure of the blind interlocutor we can immediately recognize a subtle allusion to the reader as a blind viewer. This association is linguistically corroborated by the use of a second person narrative, in virtue of which the fictional discourse easily shifts from the implied character to the actual reader. Similarly, the frequent employment of phatic expressions also encourages the correspondence between the character and the reader, as both sharing emblematically the same blindness. As the former is unable to view the painting and requires verbal information on it, so the latter is denied the visual perception of images and can apprehend them only by means of a narrative “translation”.

In the light of this, the question we formerly posed as to why the narrator “translates” the image must be put differently and we must ask why the writer does so, or to be precise, why he uses ekphrasis and what this implies with regard to the interaction between images and words. It might be answered that ekphrasis is used as a self-reflexive device, enabling the author to address the issue of textuality and to reflect on the notion of representation as shaped by the interaction of vision and blindness. The irreducible tension between visible and invisible that emerges from this short story is the same tension that informs the relationship between visuality and narration, image and word: it is on the written page that the image is made invisible being exposed to the substantial blindness of the text. Yet, while preventing the reader from seeing, the text replaces the image with its “translation/invention”, which asserts the faculty of language to recreate the visual rather than purely reflecting it. By appropriating and rewriting art pictures, the author reaffirms the ability of fiction to create and re-create images that are no longer seen but are destined to be read and listened to. The ultimate task of the writer consists therefore in depicting images for blind spectators, translating the visual into the verbal and replacing sight with listening, vision with hearing.

2.5 The “Iconic Temptation” of Writing

The novel *Requiem*, originally written in Portuguese and later translated into Italian,²⁸ provides us with a remarkable instance of the relation between painting and literature, one that will enable us to conclude our survey of Tabucchi’s fictional art gallery. About halfway through the novel, we find a chapter focusing for the most part on the triptych of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Bosch. The textual occurrence of the painting plays a significant role in the unfolding of the plot, marking a visionary climax in the existential journey of the protagonist, who is busy wandering around the streets of Lisbon in an attempt to come to terms with his past. As in ‘Il gioco del rovescio’, the city of Lisbon provides the visual backdrop for the narration. The topography of the town, described with accuracy and precision, represents the realistic setting against which the introspective adventure of the protagonist unfolds.

Among the various places marking his quest we find the Museum of Ancient Art, where the triptych of Bosch is displayed. The narrator pays a visit to the painting as if it were one of the many characters, “vivi e morti sullo stesso piano” (*Requiem* p. 7), that he encounters in the course of the story. The moment in which he stands before the painting assumes major importance in the text. As he views the complex and impressive iconography of the picture, he realizes that “Bosch dipinse la tempesta che si era scatenata nell’anima del santo, dipinse un delirio” (*Requiem*, p. 78). Not only does the sentence summarize the subject of the painting, but also and more significantly reflects the main theme of the novel that, as the subtitle reads, is “un’allucinazione”, in which the

²⁸ Tabucchi wrote *Requiem* in Portuguese - *Requiem. Uma alucinação* (Lisboa: Quetzal Editores, 1991); throughout my study I shall refer to the Italian translation (1992) - because, as he claims in the introductory note, he needed “una lingua che fosse un luogo di affetto e di riflessione” (*Requiem*, p. 7). During a debate he has further explained his choice of a language that is not his mother-tongue as follows: “Mi sono reso conto che molti ricordi che io ho della mia vita passata in Portogallo non esistono se li penso in italiano. E siccome questo era un libro che, seppur mascherato da romanzo, tirava in ballo molti ricordi personali, evidentemente non poteva che essere scritto nella lingua in cui io ho questi ricordi, cioè in portoghese”, ‘Incontro con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 652. On the linguistic genesis of *Requiem* see also the reflections made by the author in Tabucchi, *Autobiografie altrui: Poetiche a posteriori* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003), pp. 15-39. In the novel itself Tabucchi calls attention to the linguistic nature of its text. At a certain point, the narrator refuses to communicate in a language other than Portuguese, justifying his will as follows: “preferirei parlare portoghese, questa è un’avventura portoghese, non voglio uscire dalla mia avventura” (*Requiem*, p. 17).

living co-habit with the dead, the past intrudes into the present and dreams and memories are inseparably intertwined. Hallucination is also a word that occurs frequently in the text. The narrator often resorts to it to state his uneasiness and estrangement and to cast on his experiences a pervasive sense of ambiguity and indeterminacy. Early in the novel he avows: “neanche so perché mi trovo qui, è come se fosse un’allucinazione”(Requiem, p. 16). What is said with regard to the painting can therefore be extended to the text itself, since the delirium of the saint visually expresses and replicates the hallucination of the narrator. While the former is haunted by horrifying creatures, the latter is beset by the ghosts of his past: “Oggi per me è un giorno molto strano, sto sognando ma mi pare che sia vero, e devo incontrare delle persone che esistono soltanto nel mio ricordo” (Requiem, p. 19).



Figure 6. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1505-06, Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga

For its visionary quality Bosch's painting serves to reinforce the delirious and oneiric atmosphere of the narrative, functioning as a *mise en abyme* of its essential motifs and concerns. It also casts a nocturnal and unsettling atmosphere on the otherwise “sunny”

hallucination of the narrator, whose adventure takes place in a deserted Lisbon on a scorching mid-summer Sunday.

Notwithstanding the strong impact of the painting as a whole, the attention of the narrator is caught by a detail: the flying fish with two figures on its back, depicted on the right-hand panel of the triptych. The incorporation of the painting into the text through the selection and isolation of a single figure is a method favoured by the author and has been earlier pointed out with regard to the textual occurrence of *Las Meninas* in 'Il gioco del rovescio'. Similarly to the treatment of *Las Meninas*, Bosch's masterpiece is not thoroughly described but is simply evoked by means of a single detail. Moreover, as the importance of the figure in the background of *Las Meninas* is explicitly stated by Maria do Carmo in the initial lines of the tale, so the central role of the flying fish is immediately, though metaphorically, stressed by the fact that it appears abnormally enlarged, as if it were seen through a magnifying lens. Bosch's fish is in fact being reproduced on a much larger scale by the Copyist – the character in the novel who copies isolated details of the painting, exemplifying in his practice Tabucchi's notion of the microperspective.

Guardai la tela che stava dipingendo e vidi che stava riproducendo un dettaglio del pannello laterale destro, nel quale si vedono un uomo grasso e una vecchia che viaggiano per il cielo a cavallo di un pesce. La tela che dipingeva era almeno due metri di larghezza per un metro di altezza, e le figure di Bosch, ingrandite a quelle dimensioni, producevano uno stranissimo effetto: erano una mostruosità che sottolineava la mostruosità della scena (*Requiem*, p. 74).

The fish is a figure that recurs frequently in Tabucchi's writing, assuming over the span of his literary production a rich variety of associations. It reappears in various narrative contexts from which it derives from time to time different meanings. Whatever its diverse narrative functions, the fish is, at any rate, always connoted in negative terms, being inscribed in disturbing and unsettling situations or causing the characters pain and discomfort. In accord with this prevailing negative association, Bosch's fish appears in this passage as an unpleasant sight. It is hideously big and its 'monstrosity' highlights the nightmarish atmosphere of the entire picture on the one hand, while producing a strong effect of defamiliarization on the other. The latter is further reinforced by the discovery

that Bosch has not depicted a sea bass, as the narrator has always erroneously assumed, but a tench: a fresh-water fish that “vive nei pantani e nei fossi”, as the Copyist explains, “un pesce che ama il fango” (*Requiem*, p. 78). It goes without saying that such a definition conceals a symbolic meaning behind its first informative value, charging the image of the fish with dark and ambiguous overtones. The foul nature of the tench alludes to the sexually promiscuous adventure of the two human figures on its back that, according to the Copyist, are about to engage in a diabolic assignation: “È a cavallo di quella tinca grassa che questi due personaggi vanno incontro al diavolo, [...] questi due stanno per avere un incontro diabolico” (*ibid.*). The fish is thus iconologically associated with evil and depravity – negative connotations that are reinforced by the gastronomic comments of the Copyist who describes the tench as a greasy fish, one that is very difficult to digest.



Figure 7. Bosch, detail from *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*

It is worth noting that the motif of the fish also recurs in two tales that are just about concomitant to the composition of the novel, namely ‘Notte, mare o distanza’ and

‘La trota che guizza tra le pietre mi ricorda la tua vita’. In the former, the surreal ambience of the story is strengthened by the sudden and inexplicable appearance of a sea bass, “caparbia, oleosa, moribonda” (*AN*, p. 49), while in the latter, as the title anticipates, a trout is insistently present, being at the same time a poetic metaphor and a good dish. Together with the short story ‘Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa’, both tales are collected in *L’angelo nero* - a book published in the same year as *Requiem* but whose composition precedes the latter’s²⁹ - and contain in embryo some relevant elements of the novel. In addition to the fish, we find in these stories characters later developed in *Requiem*, such as Tadeus and Isabel. They are first mentioned together in ‘Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa’, where the narrator is haunted by the spectre of Tadeus, whose sardonic voice awakes in him the painful recollection of the unhappy Isabel. As argued by Merola, in this short story Tadeus “manifesta un’influenza negativa, spingendo il protagonisti sull’orlo del suicidio e lasciandolo ancora metaforicamente in preda alle vertigini di un modo di narrare che forse lui stesso gli ha ispirato”.³⁰

Tadeus reappears later in ‘Notte mare o distanza’, in which he is portrayed as a charismatic yet duplicitous poet, keeping under his spell a group of young disciples. His most distinctive feature is once again his voice: nasal and sarcastic. Moreover, towards the end of the story, we find a visual image that clearly echoes Bosch’s painting: Tadeus sits astride on the back of the sea bass. There is a baleful, malevolent sneer in the figure of Tadeus and in his words there is a scathing and derisive hint that poetry is nothing but deception and pretence, as we later find in *Requiem*.

In the novel he is no longer a voice, but a character with a proper identity. His full name reads Tadeus Waclaw Slowaki and he is a Portuguese writer of Polish descent, who has dedicated all his life to mock the world.³¹ Even on his deathbed, in an ultimate

²⁹ With regard to the chronological relation between these two works see Anna Dolfi, ‘Il puzzle del rimorso: “Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa” di Antonio Tabucchi’, in «*Leggiadre donne...*»: *Novella e racconto breve in Italia*, ed. by Francesco Bruni (Padova: Marsilio, 2000), pp. 261-78. The author examines the correlations between *Requiem* and the short story ‘Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa’ and claims that it would be important to establish “una relazione genetica tra i due testi [...] A stare a una privata dichiarazione dello scrittore *Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa* sarebbe stato scritto tra l’88 e l’89, *Requiem* sarebbe stato invece iniziato a Parigi nel gennaio del 1991”, (p. 277, n. 39).

³⁰ N. Merola, ‘Letteratura che finisce in pesce’, *L’indice dei libri del mese*, 8 (1991), 8.

³¹ With regard to the symbolic meanings possibly encrypted in this name and implying a correspondence between the character and its creator see Giovanna Tessitore, ‘In limine scripturae: *Requiem di Antonio*

cynical attempt to deceive people, Tadeus writes “è stata tutta colpa dell’herpes zoster” (*Requiem*, p. 40; author’s italics), which constitutes a message as cryptic and enigmatic as Maria do Carmo’s.

The *herpes zoster* had already appeared in the tale ‘Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa’,³² and the narrator links it somehow to Isabel, an enigmatic female figure, probably a past lover who committed suicide. However, only at a later stage in the novel will the message acquire a meaning in which all these puzzling textual traces – the fish, the characters migrating from one story to another and the *herpes zoster* - will make sense, shaping an interpretative pattern dominated by the themes of guilt, sin and repentance. Together with characters, coded signs and iconic clues, we find in all three short stories of *L’angelo nero*, the common allusion to the sense of poetry and art, as inevitably associated with sin and temptation, falsehood and repentance. This complex cluster of motifs is best illustrated in a passage of ‘La trota che guizza tra le pietre mi ricorda la tua vita’ in which the protagonist, an elderly poet, reminiscent of Eugenio Montale, expresses the following considerations on art:

La poesia è menzogna, ho mentito per tutta la vita, tutta la scrittura è menzogna, anche le cose più vere, mi assolve, per favore, non ho fatto altro che mentire [...] tutta la scrittura è un peccato contro se stessi [...] per tutta la vita mi sono immolato, mi sono sacrificato, ho peccato contro me stesso [...] (*AN*, p. 103).

All these motifs coalesce in the novel, where they are significantly conjured up by Bosch’s *Temptation*. After lingering on the image of the fish in the painting, Tabucchi passes without transition to questions of artistic representation and inspiration, putting into the mouth of the Copyist the claim that “l’ispirazione è fondamentale per la pittura” (*Requiem*, p. 70). As noted by Dolfi, the Copyist is a mirror-image of the writer, “anche

Tabucchi’, *Critica letteraria*, 103 (1999), 363-93 (pp. 381-83), and Anna Dolfi, ‘Il puzzle del rimorso: “Voci portate da qualcosa, impossibile dire cosa” di Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 271.

³² The narrator overhears part of a conversation between two tourists, from which he catches the following scraps of information: “è una malattia che oggi si può controllare [...] è un virus simile all’herpes zoster” (*AN*, p. 27). The virus of the “herpes zoster” also affects other narratives of the same period. See for instance the dream of Cecco Angiolieri in Antonio Tabucchi, *Sogni di sogni* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1992). Manuela Bertone has linked *Requiem* to *Sogni di sogni* in ‘Tabucchi sognatore’, 157-62.

per la capacità che ha quest'ultimo [...] di recuperare e di variare, di dilatare *ad libitum*, di creare da un particolare un racconto".³³

The metafictional value of the Copyist's reflection on inspiration is immediately disclosed by the narrator's reply: "Eh già assentii, senza l'ispirazione la pittura non è niente, le altre arti nemmeno" (*ibid.*). This assertion can be explained in relation to Tabucchi's remarks about the deep and lasting appeal of Bosch's painting to his imagination. He claims that in a particular moment in his life he regularly visited the triptych in search of inspiration, in search of "un segreto narrativo che andasse al di là dell'esegesi del dipinto".³⁴

The narrative key offered to the writer by the puzzling universe of the picture originates in fact from extrapictorial considerations. While viewing the painting the narrator converses with the Copyist who informs him that in the past the picture had attributed healing powers to it, for a virus called *herpes zoster*, also known as St Anthony's Fire.

E' un virus molto strano, disse il Copista, pare che tutti ce lo portiamo dentro allo stato larvale, ma si manifesta quando le difese dell'organismo sono infiacchite, allora attacca con virulenza, poi si addormenta e torna ad attaccare ciclicamente, guardi le dico una cosa, penso che l'herpes zoster sia un po' come il rimorso, se ne sta addormentato dentro di noi e un bel giorno si sveglia e ci attacca, poi torna a dormire [...] ma è sempre dentro di noi, non c'è niente da fare contro il rimorso (*Requiem*, p. 79).

The virus of the *herpes zoster* acquires here an important meaning that sheds light on the interpretation of the novel as a whole, whilst at the same time showing its complex intertextual links with the short stories of *L'angelo nero*. The periodical repose and resurgence of the virus suggests an analogy with remorse as something that comes and goes, upsetting for some time someone's life and then resting. The disease is thus explicitly associated to the unconscious. This brings to mind the narrator's remarks in the initial lines of the novel, when he realizes that he has contracted the contagious disease of

³³ Dolfi, 'Tabucchi, 'L'angelo nero' e gli animali inquietanti', in *Bestiari*, ed. by Enza Biagini and Anna Nozzoli (Roma: Bulzoni, 2001), pp. 305-328 (p. 320).

³⁴ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', p. 161.

the unconscious: “l’Inconscio uno se lo prende, è come una malattia, mi sono preso il virus dell’Inconscio, càpita” (*Requiem*, p. 18). It also sends us back to the image of the fish that, as Tabucchi himself says to Andrea Borsari, can be read as a coded visual icon of the unconscious: “Credo che in me abbia funzionato l’immagine psicanalitica del pesce che sta nel fondo e si trova a contatto con il fango e che ogni tanto affiora in superficie. Dunque una metafora dell’inconscio”.³⁵ Eventually and more importantly, this revelatory moment, in which the metaphorical value of the *herpes zoster* is disclosed, allows us to apprehend the narrator’s hallucinatory adventure as the surge of the unconscious, the overflow of guilt and remorse.

As obliquely suggested in the tales of *L’angelo nero*, through the various intertextual traces disseminated therein, guilt and remorse are indeed the main concerns of the novel and are explicitly addressed by Pessoa in the final chapter. In the same way as in ‘Il gioco del rovescio’, the Portuguese poet is, in fact, a pervasive subtext to the novel, deeply affecting its themes and meanings. His ghost looms over the narration and marks from the very beginning the hallucinatory adventure of the protagonist. Nevertheless Pessoa is never explicitly mentioned.

The novel shows at the outset the narrator on the pier of Alcântara, waiting for a mysterious “tizio”, who is not identified but is described as “forse il più grande poeta del ventesimo secolo” (*Requiem*, p. 13). At the end, twelve hours later, the narrator is on the same pier, in the company of an eccentric “Convitato”, who is repeatedly connoted as Pessoa. The author puts into his mouth the following words: “le mie emozioni mi vengono solo attraverso la finzione vera [...] la verità suprema è fingere” (*Requiem*, p. 124), which are clearly reminiscent of Pessoa’s poetry, specifically, of his most famous

³⁵ Borsari, p. 18. With regard to the image of the fish, Monica Jansen traces back to Portuguese Surrealism the origin of this metaphor, establishing an interesting parallel between Tabucchi’s imagery and Alexandre O’Neill’s: “L’immagine del pesce è legata anch’essa al surrealismo portoghese. [...] [Tabucchi] ha in mente un pesce specifico che è la cernia di Alexandre O’Neill, poeta portoghese che è stato uno dei fondatori del movimento surrealista in Portogallo. [...] Nella poesia di O’Neill la cernia è simbolo del rimosso, che cova in ognuno di noi ed il poeta esorta il lettore a seguirla prima che sia troppo tardi”, in Jansen, ‘*Requiem*: una mediazione fra ‘vera finzione’ e ‘verità pratica’’, in *I tempi del rinnovamento* (see Livorni, above), pp. 421-29 (p. 426).

verses that read: “Il poeta è un fingitore./ Finge così completamente/ che arriva a fingere che è dolore/ il dolore che davvero sente”.³⁶

Even the very image of the pier – which significantly marks the beginning and the conclusion of the protagonist’s adventure - contains an oblique allusion to Pessoa, since as we have already seen with regard to ‘Il gioco del rovescio’, piers are symbols of *saudade*. The itinerary of the narrator unfolds therefore around the elusive yet ubiquitous presence of Pessoa, which we are made to infer from a conspicuous set of clues. It begins with a missed appointment with the poet and reaches its conclusion with the encounter of the poet, portrayed as a mysterious “Convitato”, with whom the narrator has dinner in a Post-modern restaurant, while discussing life and literature, reality and fiction. In the course of their conversation, the “Convitato” defends the importance of guilt as the main source of inspiration for the artist, saying that “tutti siamo colpevoli [...] di essere nati, forse, e delle cose che sono successe in seguito” (*Requiem*, p. 122). He equally asserts the value of disquiet, arising from guilt and remorse, as the ultimate aim of fiction: “non crede che sia proprio questo che la letteratura deve fare, inquietare?”, Pessoa asks the narrator and goes on to say, “da parte mia non ho fiducia in una letteratura che tranquillizza le coscienze. [...] Preferisco l’angoscia ad una pace marcia” (*Requiem*, p. 119).

Coupled with the “virus” of remorse, disquiet presents itself as an interpretative key to the text. It is important to note that the hallucination of the narrator stems from the reading of the *The Book of Disquiet* by Bernardo Soares, one of Pessoa’s heteronyms. Early in the story, the protagonist finds himself strangely removed from the scene of his reading, which is the countryside in Azeitão – and catapulted in another reality, which corresponds to his hallucination. He expresses his spatio-temporal displacement as follows:

neanche saprei spiegare quel che sto dicendo, diciamo che stavo ad Azeitão, conosce Azeitão?, ero nella casa di campagna di certi amici miei, sotto un grande albero che c’è là, un gelso, mi pare, stavo disteso su una sdraio di tela a leggere un libro che amo molto e ad un certo punto mi sono trovato qui, ah, adesso mi ricordo, era *Il libro dell’inquietudine*, lei è lo Zoppo della Lotteria che rompeva inutilmente

³⁶ Pessoa, *Il poeta è un fingitore*, p. 13.

le scatole a Bernardo Soares, ecco dove l'ho incontrata, in quel libro che stavo leggendo sotto un gelso in una casa di campagna di Azeitão. L'inquietudine ce l'ho io, disse lo Zoppo della Lotteria, anch'io ho l'impressione di essere uscito da un libro (*Requiem*, pp. 16-17).

This is a telling metafictional move generating multiple planes of reality within the text and creating what Brian McHale calls the “Chinese-box” structure, typical of most postmodern narratives.³⁷ Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* constitutes the metanarrative frame of the novel: it prompts the hallucination and signals its conclusion - at the end of the story the narrator is transported back to the initial situation, the countryside in Azeitão - thus showing the circularity of the diegesis, without however enclosing or circumscribing the plurality of meanings it generates. *Requiem*'s world is thereby inscribed within another text and mediated by it.

Within this main frame are encapsulated other significant metafictional moments, taking the form of *mise en abyme*. At a certain point in the story the narrator mentions an unspecified novel, “una storia balorda, una storia senza soluzione” (*Requiem*, p. 90), he wrote a long time ago. This story “without solution” bears striking resemblance to *Requiem*. It could be none other than the book we have in front of us, yet this identification is apparently problematized by the fact that, one day the story got out of the author's hand, turning unexpectedly into reality. Thereby it is no longer fiction but actuality, or rather, as much as every narrative, it questions and breaks the traditional borders between reality and fiction.

A second major instance of *mise en abyme* regards, as we have already pointed out, the triptych of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Bosch's painting constitutes the visual counterpart of the hallucination of the narrator/author, insofar as the delirium of the saint - who has the same name as Tabucchi³⁸ - reflects the delirium of the visionary

³⁷ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, pp. 112-130

³⁸ Tessitore argues that the name of the saint may also contain allusions to Pessoa, who was born on 13 June 1888, on the day of Saint Anthony of Lisbon and whose full name was Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa. “Sulla base di questa interpretazione tutti i riferimenti a Sant'Antonio sarebbero non riconducibili all'io narrante e da questi all'autore, ma a Pessoa, come se l'io narrante volesse incontrare, per liberarsi dalla sua eccessiva dipendenza pessoana, la sua molteplicità eteronimica, prima dell'appuntamento con il poeta ortonimo nell'ultimo capitolo del romanzo. O potrebbe essere lui stesso a moltiplicarsi nei vari personaggi del romanzo, assumendo analogamente a Pessoa, una pluralità di voci”, see Tessitore, ‘In limine scripturae: *Requiem di Antonio Tabucchi*’, p. 385, n. 62.

narrator and with it the delirium of the writer, haunted by the disquieting images of his unconscious and beset by the “iconic temptation” of his writing.³⁹ Framed and mediated by the text of Pessoa, *Requiem* is a novel embedded within another narration, which also in turn embeds within itself other representations, in the form of textual and visual *mise en abyme*. The cumulative effect of these metafictional strategies is to destabilize the solidity and autonomy of the fictional world, laying bare its constructing principles and showing the self-reflexive nature of every representation.

Inserted into such a complex intertextual system, the motif of disquiet cannot but acquire a central role. To some extent it frames and generates the novel, deeply affecting every aspect of it. It could be argued that disquiet or in Portuguese *desassossego* might be read as another term for *saudade*. As we have seen at the beginning of the present chapter, Tabucchi associates *saudade* with “remorse”. On other occasions he defines *saudade* as an “existential ill”, “a state of lack”, “a situation of privation”, a “continual malaise” that inevitably affects his characters, bringing them to action and functioning therefore as “a narrative force”.⁴⁰ Like *saudade*, disquiet is intimately linked to memory and remorse and generates in the narrator a state of lack and uneasiness, which is at the basis of his introspective search for the past. Irredeemably affected by the “virus” of “remorse”, the narrator wrestles throughout the novel with his own conscience, in an attempt to resolve his inner conflicts and overcome his intrinsic anxiety. In order to do so, he must live his hallucination, summoning the dead and taking leave from them through a *Requiem* that, as Anna Botta rightly observes, aims at “bringing peace once again (re-qui-es = rest again) where there is none (in-qui-es = no rest)”.⁴¹ Thus, the narrator’s state of disquiet is the “narrative force” of the novel and the generating principle of a questioning literature, which does not offer reassuring solutions but is deliberately suspended and unresolved.

³⁹ ‘Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 161.

⁴⁰ Botta, ‘An interview with Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 425. It is worth mentioning, here, that in *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, melancholy is ironically defined as a disease whose symptoms include physical restlessness: “Il medico mi ha detto: lei è il classico caso di homo melancholicus. Ma Dürer ha disegnato la malinconia seduta, ho obiettato, per la malinconia ci vuole una sedia. La sua è una malinconia differente, ha sentenziato lui, è una malinconia mobile”, p. 41.

⁴¹ Botta, ‘Antonio Tabucchi’s *Requiem*: Mourning Modernism’, in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays* (see Trentini, above), pp. 143-157 (p. 145).

Notwithstanding the etymological meaning of the Latin word *Requiem*, it seems that no definitive rest is achieved by the narrator, but perhaps an ambiguous and precarious state of peaceful unease, a sort of serene anguish, which is equally shared by the reader. By failing to produce unequivocal truths and to solve the mystery surrounding the protagonist's encounters with the dead, the text does not answer the narrative questions it raises in the mind of its reader. On the contrary, it extends to the latter the state of disquiet of the narrator. It might be said that for the narrator to find his tranquillity he must eventually hand over to the reader the burden of his disquiet. Romana Petri argues that this is exactly what constitutes the fascination with Tabucchi's fiction that succeeds, for the critic, "in quel difficilissimo scopo letterario che non è altro se non prolungare il proprio racconto nella mente del lettore".⁴² Accordingly, the doubts and uncertainties of the narrator of *Requiem* transcend the text and penetrate into the reader's mind, infecting it with the "virus" of disquiet.

This process is characteristic of all Tabucchi's fiction and in Nathalie Roelens's view, it has the merit of having the readers brought back to life, by making them responsible "nel senso che devono dare un **RESPONSO** al testo".⁴³ Roelens's remarks find confirmation in Tabucchi's. The author has repeatedly professed his faith in "una letteratura interrogativa che, piuttosto che dare delle risposte pone delle domande".⁴⁴ For its intrinsically enigmatic nature, this kind of literature requires the active participation of its readers, engaging them in the construction of the meanings of the text. The interpretative act is thus envisaged as a constant transaction between text and reader, and as such is invested by Tabucchi with ethical values:

Mi pare che ci deve essere per forza questa co-responsabilità del lettore; non si deve leggere impunemente insomma. Leggere significa assumere delle responsabilità [...]. Allora si può anche entrare dentro il racconto e risolvere ciò che è stato lasciato in ombra, ciò che può sembrare un enigma; può essere lasciato al lettore.⁴⁵

⁴² Petri, 'La grande digestione del mondo', *Leggere*, 43 (1992), 71.

⁴³ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', p. 149 (author's capitals).

⁴⁴ Borsari, p. 8.

⁴⁵ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', p. 163..

This is precisely what Linda Hutcheon terms as “the politics of address”, characteristic of postmodern art and theory, “which self-consciously work to ‘situate’ their production and reception and to contextualize the acts of perception and interpretation”.⁴⁶ Endorsing the strategies of this textual politics and creating a fiction that is deliberately and self-consciously interrogative and enigmatic, Tabucchi aims at making the reader into a conscious and responsible collaborator, to whom he can hand over, as a legacy, his narrative enigmas. The doubts and uncertainties raised by his fiction go beyond the boundaries of the text and intrude into real life, for they are embodied and actualized by the reading subject. What the “politics of address” suggests is the recognition of a central responsibility of the writer and the reader alike in constructing meanings and representations. Being given such a central role, the reader comes to represent the vanishing point of the perspectival lines of the text. Just as the figure in the background of Velázquez’s painting, the reader becomes the key to the backwards game in which reality and fiction are inseparably intertwined.

It might be concluded that like *Las Meninas*, Bosch’s *Temptation* appeals to the author for its enigmatic power and for its complex imagery. Furthermore, in the same way as Velázquez’s painting turns out to be the visual paradigm of a poetics of reversal, Bosch’s triptych plays a major part in mirroring and conveying the main themes of the novel, acting as the iconic equivalent of Tabucchi’s poetics of disquiet. These poetics are not mutually exclusive but share indeed a number of salient features. Firstly, both equally call into question the relationship between life and fiction, while problematizing at the same time the role of the reader. Secondly both are inscribed within the same complex intertextual dialogue that Tabucchi’s fiction engages with the poetry of Pessoa and they are, to a greater extent, influenced by Pessoa’s art.

These common features, and particularly the latter, lead us to draw a possible conclusion on the position of Pessoa’s mastery within Tabucchi’s fiction. In ‘Il gioco del rovescio’ the author invokes Pessoa as the master of the game of reversals, and he introduces him into his art in order to legitimize it. In *Requiem* he reworks his master’s figure through parody and irony in order, it seems, to get rid of the cultural and existential

⁴⁶ Hutcheon, p. 134.

anxiety that his master generates in him. The unconditional acceptance of his master's legacy that Tabucchi openly professes in 'Il gioco del rovescio', becomes deeply problematic in *Requiem*, where Pessoa's figure is rendered through an unprecedented ironic distancing. It could therefore be argued that 'Il gioco del rovescio' and *Requiem* show respectively the appropriation and the questioning/surpassing of the earlier master's work.

As emerges from this analysis, painting constitutes a primary source of inspiration for Tabucchi. The illustrious masterpieces from the history of art exert a particular appeal to the author's imagery, providing his fiction with thematic suggestions and representational techniques. Paintings and painters, art objects and pictorial images are often the constitutive elements of his narrative world, playing a major role in the definition of the semantic values and structural meanings of his fiction.

With regard to the ways in which art works are embedded in the narration, it is possible to detect the presence of a pattern, which rules and shapes the interplay of text and image. The narrative incorporation of pictures is chiefly articulated by a process, in which two opposite modes of interaction are involved. On the one hand painting appears in the text through a process of semantic dissemination, whilst on the other it emerges from an operation of narrative circumscription. The two procedures are not mutually exclusive but act in conjunction, endowing the references to works of art with a simultaneous quality of concentration and dispersion. As the textual occurrences of Velásquez's *Las Meninas* and Bosch's *Temptation* show, famous works of art emerge from the diegesis in a vivid manner, giving shape to visual narrative islands where symbolic meanings are concentrated. As we have seen, neither Velásquez's painting nor Bosch's are thoroughly described. Instead they are evoked through iconic details - the man in the background and the fish respectively - that are put into relief and inflated with meanings.

The detailing technique of selection and zooming of visual images confers a somewhat unusual quality on the appearance and treatment of painting in Tabucchi's works. Specific art allusions frequently become the focus of the narration, performing a

wide range of functions. In *Notturmo indiano*, the mentioning of Mantegna serves as a mode of condensing and reverberating the meaning of the novel, while in the short stories of *I volatili del Beato Angelico* painting is an all-pervading source of inspiration, emphasizing the meanings of the narratives, while also pointing to questions of poetics. In 'Il gioco del rovescio' e *Requiem* the interaction between fiction and visual art emerges in all its complexity. The former work revolves around the visual enigma of *Las Meninas*, while the latter reaches its climax in Bosch's *Temptation*. Both the paintings, with their complex and mysterious images, replace and indirectly suggest what cannot be otherwise expressed, enacting a process of repetitions and mirrorings that illuminate the meanings of the texts in which they are inscribed, rendering their structure simultaneously clear and complex. They also stretch beyond the narrative, integrating questions of a poetical and ontological order. *Las Meninas* can be seen as the iconic suggestion for Tabucchi's poetics of reversal, while *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* can be read as the visual metaphor for the author's poetics of disquiet. In only one case are references to painting merely employed as plot devices. Unlike the other occurrences examined, in 'Paradiso celeste' painting serves solely to intensify the atmosphere of the story.

It is worth noting that all the features outlining the profile of decadent writing, such as studio settings, artists' lives and achievements, aesthetic talent and aspirations are not issues with which Tabucchi's fiction is concerned. Nor are his narratives definable in terms of *Kunstroman*, inasmuch as art apprenticeship plays but a minor role, if any, in the lives of his characters. Far from underpinning artistic topics, painting is strictly connected to the various thematic contexts in which it is inscribed, intervening in the narrative as an effective means of visual translation and superimposition of meanings. The work of art is thereby relevant for its intrinsic visuality and the conceptual values ensuing from it, rather than for its purely artistic qualities.

The way in which visual discourse is narratively developed, allows a reading of Tabucchi's approach and use of pictorial art in terms of knowledge and intellectual comprehension. The dominant significance that painting assumes in his fiction appears inevitably dependent on its functioning as a means of knowledge, and as a visual instrument, which enables a deeper insight into the matters of existence. Hence looking at

pictures is not so much conceived as an aesthetic experience involving feelings of beauty and pleasure, but rather as a cognitive and enlightening event, usually disturbing and unsettling.

PHOTOGRAPHY

3.1 Photography and the Pathos of Time Past

In her influential treatise *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggests a connection between photography and nostalgia, laying emphasis on the temporal implications entailed in the photographic enterprise, as the sources for melancholic desire:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. [...] All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.¹

A central issue in the theory of photography, the notion of photographic temporality is effectively expressed by the critic in all its complexity, pointing out the dual and contradictory relationship that photographs entertain with time: simultaneously arresting it and confirming its incessant flow. The commonplace belief in the photographic power to immobilize time is countered by the partaking of photographs in the realm of "mortality, vulnerability, mutability". While recording a specific moment in life, photographs negotiate with duration and transience. They represent at one and the same time an act of grabbing hold of time, by freezing it, and a proof of its unpreventable thawing, as Sontag metaphorically puts it.

The idea of time intrinsic to photographs has also stirred up the attentive interest of Roland Barthes, whose well-known speculations on the essence of photography revolve around the same temporal quandary highlighted by Susan Sontag. In *Camera*

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 15.

Lucida, the French writer formulates the concept of the photographic *punctum*, to indicate the motionless moment, stolen from the flow of life and forever fixed on film. “This [...] *punctum*”, Barthes argues, “which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (*that-has-been*), its pure representation”.² Accordingly, photographs are envisaged as representations of time rather than of objects, they are temporal images in which “Time is engorged”. This inflation of time qualifies the photographic image as atemporal, as “an enigmatic point of inactuality, a strange stasis, the stasis of an *arrest*”,³ states Barthes. The critic’s identification of photography and time bears directly upon the unique position held by the photograph in its relation to what has been, to the time past. But this relation presupposes a gap, resulting from the distance between the photographed event and the moment in which it is perceived and acknowledged. The sense of temporal arrest, suggested by the photograph, can therefore be configured only against our innate sense of duration and becoming, of which the photograph is a contradictory, but nonetheless irrefutable sign. It is exactly the consciousness of this gap, separating the past preserved in the picture from the present of its recognition, the compelling force that prompts nostalgia for Susan Sontag and yields ecstasy for Roland Barthes.

The “engorgement” of time enacted by the photograph, through the overlapping of past and present, stillness and duration, results in the enhancement of the tension between the viewer and the photograph, a tension that takes the form of what Barthes calls the “photographic *ecstasy*”.⁴ Akin to Sontag’s notion of pathos, as the aura surrounding the photographic subjects, Barthes’s idea of the “photographic *ecstasy*” is strictly connected to his notion of *punctum* as the intensity of the visual composition - intensity that transcends the mere forms of the composition to take on a profound and “lacerating” temporal value. The *punctum* corresponds to the unique relationship that

² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 96. Introduced for the first time in *Camera Lucida*, the notion of *punctum* and the notion of *studium* form for Barthes a binary structure that functions as a conceptual grid for the analysis of photographs. The *studium* indicates those aspects of the photograph which are culturally and historically codified, whereas the *punctum* is something transversal to the cultural and personal sphere of the viewer, “a condition that arises from the *noeme* of the unique medium of photography”, as Nancy Shawcross describes it, in *Roland Barthes on Photography: the Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 85.

³ Barthes, p. 91.

⁴ Barthes, p. 119.

photography engages with time. It is the piercing detail resurfacing what has been and disclosing the photograph's potential for the pathos of distance. Acting as a "wound",⁵ as a cut breaking through the referential surface of the image, the *punctum* animates the spectator, opening up the possibility of comprehension: "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think",⁶ sums up Barthes. At the heart of the nostalgic ecstasy of the photographic vision, lies therefore the amplification of the sense of time fostered in the spectator by the very nature of photography.

3. 2 Photographic Memories

Sontag's and Barthes's deliberations on the temporal and emotional values of photography seem to apply closely to the narrative presence of photographs in the works of Tabucchi. Particularly germane to Tabucchi's treatment of photography is the crucial association between photographs and time, which is advanced by both critics. It must be said that the motif of time and memory is an all-encompassing subject matter in the fiction of Tabucchi, where it functions both as a means of psychological insight and theoretical knowledge. Frequently turned into an act of seeing, the experience of memory is, above all else in the author's writing, a visual event and even more specifically a photographic one. In most narratives, characters are engaged in the remembrance of things past and their fictive existence is haunted by memories taking the visual forms of photographic images. An instance of this association between memory and photography is to be found in the short story 'Stanze', in *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (1985), where the thoughts and recollections of the female protagonist are summed up and conveyed by means of family photographs. Amelia, the elderly sister of a distinguished academic, has spent her entire life in the shadow of her brother, who is now seriously ill. One evening, while making her way home from the church, she starts thinking of her house, surveying its rooms, its furniture and the various objects present therein. Like the

⁵ In his effort to explain and clarify the idea of *punctum*, Barthes insists mostly on the emotional and affective connotations of the term, for *punctum* "is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument [...] A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)", pp. 26-27.

⁶ Barthes, p. 21 The italics are mine.

moving eye of a camera, her mind flows through the places of her daily existence, superimposing on the spatial dimension of the house, the recollection of the past. Among the familiar objects prompting her memories, there are some photographic portraits of her brother and herself:

Sul cassettone con la specchiera, di fianco alla finestra, ci sono i ritratti. Sono quasi tutti ritratti di Guido e di lei [...] quelli di mamma e papà insieme ha voluto tenerli lei in camera sua, sul suo cassettone. Camminando, Amelia guarda quei ritratti e pensa a come passa il tempo. Come passa il tempo (*PE*, p. 65).

As observed by Lepschy, Amelia views the photographs only through “her mind’s eye”.⁷ The images are not physically present but belong to the character’s memory and are apprehended through her internal gaze, the mobility of which is metaphorically indicated by the woman’s act of walking: as she walks her way home, she looks at the photographs in her mind. The inner gaze of the character subtly establishes the association between seeing and remembering, whilst her actual physical movement spatially reflects the unfolding of memory.

The interrelation between the temporal and the visual is further reinforced by the fact that the evocation of the photographs immediately elicits in the character the reflection on the passing of time. As she thinks of her family pictures, Amelia is overwhelmed by the sense of time: she repeatedly says “come passa il tempo” and further on in the text she slightly amends this remark, saying “com’è strano il tempo” (*PE*, p. 67). Despite their fixed and static nature, photographs, as Sontag puts it, “testify to time’s relentless melt” and what Amelia reads in the sequence of snapshots she vividly recollects, is precisely the inexorable flow of time: “Amelia guarda la fotografia accanto e sono già passati dieci anni” (*PE*, p. 66).

Most of the narrative unfolds through the syntagmatic succession of photo-images, each of which chronologically announces the next. Memory is thus turned into an act of vision and the vision of the past is made into a series of images. Through this photographic visualization of time, the character’s most intimate feelings come to light: her love for her father, her faded memory of her mother, her initial pride in her brother,

⁷ Lepschy, ‘The Role of Memory in Antonio Tabucchi’s *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*’, in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays* (see Trentini, above), pp. 61-69 (p. 66).

later turned into hatred and resentment and her own bitterness for the choices she made - if she ever made any. Reflected in the faraway moments captured by the camera, Amelia discovers “le pieghe dell’animo” (*PE*, p. 69), those unknown recesses of the mind, which are the unsettling result of the slow, though incessant, action of time on people and events. She herself figuratively perceives time, in one of her most intense thought, as a humming subterranean river: “Amelia [...] pensa di nuovo al tempo. Le sembra quasi di sentirlo scorrere [...] è come un ronzio, il rumore di un fiume sotterraneo” (*ibid.*).

This image, combining the visual and the aural, introduces the reflection on hate that leads in turn to the suspended conclusion of the story, showing Amelia about to give her brother an injection. Together with the sense of time, hate is, indeed, the photographic *punctum* that, in Barthesian terms, shoots out of the picture and pierces the character, opening up a wound in her consciousness. As the character herself says, hate is elusive and fuzzy-edged, yet if it cannot be imprisoned by words, it nonetheless emerges poignantly from pictures. Looking at the photograph of her brother’s graduation, all that Amelia can feel is hate. The picture shows brother and sister like a bride and groom. At the time Amelia was young and unaware of her future, but now, after years of service to her brother, she is aware of resenting this image: “Amelia sa che odia quella fotografia. Ha imparato a odiarla molti anni dopo, quando ormai odiarla non aveva più senso” (*PE*, p. 67). The mental photograph that follows finely suggests the reason for Amelia’s feelings of hatred. In this final picture she has grown older and her inner change is summed up in her lips: tight and diffident, vigilant of words and life. By means of this rapid photographic jump the author suggests vividly and poignantly the withering of Amelia’s youthful enthusiasm into bitterness and disillusionment.

The insistence with which this short story refers to the photographic helps to express the sense of time. The emotional charge of the former implies a density of reference to the latter. While visually displaying the feelings and thoughts of the character, photographs ultimately suggest the inevitable passing of time. After all, they exist in the narrative only as mental images, emerging from the temporal flow of the character’s memory. And it is exactly because they are but visual recollections, that they reveal all the more clearly and, therefore, all the more intensely, the essential impossibility of pinning down time. Finally, their textual evocation seems to point to the

author's desire to create a visually based diegesis, capable of eschewing the impasse of the verbal, as defined by the character at the beginning of the story:

Pensa come è falsa la scrittura, con quella sua prepotenza implacabile fatta di parole definite, di verbi, di aggettivi che imprigionano le cose, che le candiscono in una fissità vitrea, come una libellula restata in un sasso da secoli che mantiene ancora la parvenza di libellula ma che non è più una libellula. Così è la scrittura, che ha la capacità di allontanare di secoli il presente e il passato prossimo: fissandoli. Ma le cose sono diffuse, pensa Amelia, e per questo sono vive, perché sono diffuse e senza contorni e non si lasciano imprigionare dalle parole (*PE*, p. 64).

This metanarrative reflection on writing makes its impact felt, and I have cause to return to it later. Now it suffices to say that in the very middle of the passage – a passage on writing - we find a visual image: the dragonfly caught in a rock. This bears striking resemblance to the image of butterflies “anesthetized and fastened down”, employed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* to address photography.⁸ Whilst the image of the dragonfly is used by Tabucchi to express the power of words to capture and pin things down, the image of butterflies is used by Barthes to exemplify the power of photographs to freeze and arrest life in motionless images. The same simile is thereby employed by both authors, but with respect to different arts, one being visual the other verbal. In the light of this, the consideration on writing that Tabucchi puts in the mind of Amelia might also be expanded to photography.

3.3 Photography, Time and Identity

Together with the theme of memory, photography figures prominently in *Il filo dell'orizzonte* (1986), a short novel, whose structure and motifs are very similar to those of *Notturmo indiano* and *Requiem*. All three narratives are constructed and organized as quest novels, in which the respective main characters are involved in searches, entailing multiple meanings.⁹ In *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, the protagonist, Spino, is engaged in retracing the steps of a stranger, who has been killed in a police raid. However, as will

⁸ Barthes, p. 57.

⁹ With regard to the theme of the quest see Luigi Surdich, ““Uno che si cerca e si cercherà sempre”: la “quête” di Antonio Tabucchi”, *Il Ponte*, 54 (1998), 79-97.

soon become evident, the quest for the “other” functions as a pretext for the character to trace an inner itinerary, leading to the discovery of his own identity. In the same way as in *Notturmo indiano* and *Requiem* the existential journey of the protagonist unravels against the background of a concrete geographical space, combining the familiar with the uncanny. In this case the setting is that of an Italian city that, though unnamed, is mapped out with mimetic exactitude. The city is Genoa and its unique atmosphere vividly emerges from a significant passage, in which its landscape is represented through a sequence of visual images, including a reference to photography:

Ci sono giorni in cui la bellezza gelosa di questa città sembra svelarsi: nelle giornate terse, per esempio, di vento, quando una brezza che precede il libeccio spazza le strade schioccando come una vela tesa. Allora le case e i campanili acquistano un nitore troppo reale, dai contorni troppo netti, come una fotografia contrastata, la luce e l'ombra si scontrano con prepotenza, senza coniugarsi, disegnando scacchiere nere e bianche di chiazze d'ombra e di barbagli, di vicoli e di piazzette (*FO*, p. 73).

The rapid succession of images, disclosing the “bellezza gelosa” of Genoa, is a fine example of Tabucchi’s figurative discourse. What is striking in this passage is the progressive intensification of visual impressions. Introduced by the simile of the “vela tesa”, the visuality of the scene is then strengthened by the comparison of the city to a photograph and finally reaches its climax in the metamorphosis of the topographic space into an abstract image of “scacchiere nere e bianche”. With its varied landscape, the city of Genoa constitutes the concrete physical geometry, in which Spino’s eccentric adventure of self-discovery is inscribed.

Unlike the numerous first person narrators that populate Tabucchi’s fiction, about whom we know nearly nothing, Spino is a character whose existence is fully exposed to the reader. We know about his job, friends, partner, habits and even his taste in films. Yet, despite these details his quest remains nonetheless mysterious and enigmatic. He seeks the identity of an unknown dead man, whose body has arrived at the morgue where he works. Like an indefatigable detective, driven by the invincible compulsion to probe reality, he tries to connect the various implausible traces he comes across in the course of his private investigation. Among the clues available to Spino, photographs play a key role. They make their appearance in the early stages of the novel, when Spino observes

the photograph of the anonymous dead man in the newspaper. It is actually this photograph that discloses the true motivation behind his compelling need to investigate reality. Looking at the snap, Sara, Spino's companion, notes that "Con la barba e vent'anni di meno potresti essere tu" (*FO*, p. 32). This remark provokes in Spino "una specie di smarrimento" and indicates the existence of another search that runs parallel to his search for the "other": the search for himself.

In the same way as in *Requiem* and *Notturmo indiano*, the motif of the quest shows existential implications and brings to the fore the problem of identity. It is however, emblematic that in this case the shift from the 'I' to the 'other' operates through the intervention of photography. As the privileged medium through which we explore and confirm our identity, photography constitutes in the novel a necessary step on the way to the character's self-awareness. Personal photographs, especially, play a key role in the definition and construction of Spino's sense of self-identity. They are an integral part of the very search in which he is engaged, calling attention to its existential and metaphysical nature. In the photograph of the young dead man Spino sees himself. The identification with the stranger leaves him shaken, insofar as the discovery of himself in the 'other' implies the recognition of himself as 'another'.

Right at the centre of the novel, that is to say right at the centre of Spino's investigation, we find another photograph, one that takes Spino closer to the understanding of himself, whilst at the same time orienting the reader towards the construction of the meaning of the narrative. In the pockets of the dead man Spino finds a contact print showing a family scene. He constructs his own darkroom in his house and prints an enlargement of the image, in an attempt to find the definitive, irrefutable evidence he is looking for. The progressive visual definition of the photograph is thoroughly described. The image hesitates to emerge from the bowl of reagent. It seems to be reluctant to appear from the past into the present:

Nella vasca del reagente i contorni sembrava stentassero a delinarsi, come se un reale lontano e trascorso, irrevocabile fosse riluttante a essere resuscitato, si opponesse alla profanazione di occhi curiosi ed estranei, al risveglio in un contesto che non gli apparteneva. Quel gruppo di famiglia, l'ha sentito, si rifiutava di tornare a esibirsi sul palco delle immagini per soddisfare la curiosità

di una persona estranea, in un luogo estraneo, in un tempo che non è più il suo.
(*FO*, pp. 54-55).

This is only a small segment of the lengthy reflection, introducing Spino's perusal of the photo enlargement. The passage focuses on the gradual process of appearance of the image and, as noticed by Ceserani, is a moment of "*blow-up* à la Cortázar (or Antonioni)".¹⁰ As appropriate to a novel that adopts - even if only superficially - the structure and expressive modes of a detective story, the protracted description of the blow-up aims at generating suspense in the reader. Yet, contrary to traditional detective fiction, no sudden revelation follows from the image: nothing to untangle the intricate puzzle of the narrative and satisfy the reader's expectancy for a clear and unequivocal solution. The infractions to the conventional code of the detective novel are frequent in the story.¹¹ As an improvised investigator, Spino follows unusual and misleading paths, gathering a wide range of clues and indications that fail to connect and make sense. Equally decisive in the economy of the story are the numerous omissions that punctuate the character's search. The reader is thus called upon to undertake the challenging task of filling in the gaps and interpreting the clues of an enigma that has less to do with the identification of the dead man and the reconstruction of the mystery surrounding his death than with the identification of Spino's inner existentiality and the reconstruction of his private drama.

The moment in which the photo enlargement is contemplated precisely emphasizes the complexity of this double mystery. It subtly draws attention to the projection of Spino's personal drama on what is initially and misleadingly presented as an investigation about the identity of a cadaver. The slow, gradual emergence of the picture from the bowl of reagent points metaphorically to the resurfacing of Spino's past. He is aware, indeed, that the technical operation of blow-up hides his temptation of

¹⁰ Remo Ceserani, 'The Art of Fixing Shadows and Writing with Light: Tabucchi and Photography' in *Antonio Tabucchi: A Collection of Essays* (see Trentini, above), pp. 109-124 (p. 114).

¹¹ Like many other contemporary writers, Tabucchi consciously borrows the suspense-creating devices of popular fiction and turns them to his own purposes. With regard to *Il filo dell'orizzonte*'s deviations from the classic detective story see Stefano Tani, 'Il filo del silenzio', *Il Ponte*, 43 (1987), 174-77, Monica Jansen, 'Tabucchi, Sciascia e il giallo-verità', *Incontri*, 14 (1999), 23-34 and Walter Geerts, 'Il poliziesco epistemico. Un filone narrativo dell'ultimo ventennio: Calvino, Malerba, Pontiggia, Tabucchi', in *Il romanzo poliziesco da Gadda al Gruppo 63*, ed. by Marie-Hélène Caspar, *Narrativa*, 2, (Nanterre: Université Paris X, 1992), pp. 95-103.

evoking ghosts – “ha capito che stava evocando dei fantasmi”(FO, p. 55) - and these ghosts, as will soon become clear, have to do with his life, rather than with the dead man’s past. Before literally coming into sight, they are however announced by a series of interesting reflections on the ambiguous power of photography.

As he waits for the image to appear, Spino’s ponders on the ability of photographs not only to make present what is past and irrevocable, but also to multiply an unrepeatable instant of life, making it visible a countless number of times. By doing so, photographs remove instants of life from their context and stretch them out across the years, exposing their intimacy to the scrutiny of foreign eyes.

Losca virtù delle istantanee! Sorridono. E quel sorriso ora è per lui, anche se essi non lo vogliono. L’intimità di un istante irripetibile della loro vita ora è sua, dilatata nel tempo e sempre identica a se stessa; e visibile infinite volte, appesa gocciolante a uno spago che attraversa la cucina (FO, p. 55).

What at first glance seems to be a passage in praise of photography, reveals on closer inspection a significant ambiguity, finely expressed by the character’s initial exclamation: ‘losca virtù delle istantanee!’ This remark clearly suggests that some sort of hidden violence is to be perceived in the capacity of photography to reproduce instants of life. Several linguistic aspects of this passage and the one quoted earlier underscore, in fact, the brutality intrinsic to photography. Terms like, “riluttante” “profanazione”, “estranea/i”, and negative expressions such “si rifiutavano di tornare ad esibirsi”, “anche se essi non lo vogliono”, all contribute to define photography as a ruthless seizure of moments in life, an illicit act of abduction and serialization of the real. This perception of photography as something disturbing and unsettling is strengthened by further expressions in which the author refers to the technical process of photo development as the “ignobile stratagemma della chimica”, linking past and present by means of “una complicità coatta”, “un equivoco compromesso” (*ibid.*).

Significantly enough, by using such expressions, Tabucchi seems to extend to photography the quality that in the short story ‘Stanze’ he had attributed to writing, denouncing its “prepotenza implacabile fatta di parole definite, di verbi, di aggettivi che imprigionano le cose” (PE, p. 64). Here photography appears to be as bogus and tyrannical as writing. If words are capable of imprisoning things, images are no less

powerful in pinning down life, freezing it in a still moment. Words and photographs share the same “implacable” vocation to define and represent things, thereby circumscribing and imprisoning them. The correlation between writing and photography that had been briefly addressed at the end of the earlier paragraph is thus restated and confirmed by the implications entailed in the thematic presence of photographs in *Il filo dell’orizzonte*.

Abducted and eradicated from the context that holds it in place, the family picture that Spino is about to contemplate appears frail and inconsistent. When scrutinized under the detective magnifying glass, it offers at first the sign of its reluctance: a scratch that in the blow-up has taken on proportions gigantic enough to blur vision. This scratch cuts diagonally across the picture. It indicates the relentless decay of things, “l’inevitabile usura delle cose” (*FO*, p. 55), that is exemplified in many other passages of the novel, where time performs its unpreventable action of corrosion and erasure on objects, images, people and memories. The “detriti” that recur obsessively in the narration are the irrefutable evidence of the inescapable effect of time on things.¹² The dead man without name and without past is significantly “un detrito dell’architettura delle cose, un residuo” (*FO*, p. 35) and the morgue is the site where “i detriti della scena, prima della definitiva scomparsa fanno qui un’ultima sosta” (*FO*, pp.10-11). The eroded print too is a “detrito”, a waste fragment of someone else’s life, which is reluctant to make public, under the probing eyes of a stranger, the privacy of the meanings it conceals. Nonetheless the traces of bygone days captivate Spino irresistibly. The ghostly hints of other lives, contained in the photograph, encourage him to engage in the detective project and to construct meanings from these ephemeral but tentative clues. Forced by the chemical process and by Spino’s desire of knowledge, the image eventually surrenders itself to interpretation: “si offre suo malgrado a una decifrazione” (*FO*, p. 55).

As I have attempted to show, the scene of the blow-up is very elaborate in its preparation of the voyeuristic moment and it definitely calls the position of Spino, the onlooking subject, into question. This scene represents photography as an act of

¹² Walter Geerts observes that Tabucchi develops in his works “una semiologia del tempo roditore”, which is particularly relevant in *Il filo dell’orizzonte*, where time is closely associated with death: “Il tempo, nel *Filo dell’orizzonte*, lascia solo vestigia di morte ed è per sfuggire alla morte congelatrice che Spino, assumendo la morte del giovane, assume l’apprendimento della propria morte”, ‘*Il filo dell’orizzonte* di Antonio Tabucchi: una lettura della morte’, in *Piccole finzioni con importanza* (see ‘Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi, above), pp. 113-24 (pp. 117-18).

distortion of the real, an “ignoble stratagem of chemistry” to relive what is forever lost and irretrievable, whilst at the same time describing the vision of the photograph as an equally condemnable act of violence, a “profanation” of the past. As the onlooking subject, Spino takes on the role in the scene of an impatient voyeur, eagerly trying to turn the image into a pure field of observation, in order to see and understand, to reach and penetrate its truth. The process of photographic blow-up involves the transformation of the character into the unique spectator of the image. It is an image in which he perceives simultaneously the spectacle and the *spectrum* of the past. In the conflicting relationship between the character and the blown-up photograph is, thereby, staged the hostile confrontation between a voyeuristic gaze and its reluctant object, between the desiring subject and the unattainable object of his desire.

Despite its reluctance, the image eventually yields itself wholly to the character’s scrutinizing gaze. Hung dripping on a string that crosses the kitchen, the print is fully exposed before Spino’s eyes: enlarged and ready to be attentively inspected. Each detail of the photograph is accurately recorded in the narration: a man reading a newspaper, a woman appearing at the threshold of the house and of the picture, two children, a girl and a boy sitting on a step, and a dog partially out of frame. In the print Spino reads much that is intimate and unknown even to the people caught within the image. The countenance of the man, for instance, betrays some kind of sadness and the gaze of the boy is lost beyond the lens, as if it were attracted by something out of frame: “I suoi occhi sono persi oltre l’obiettivo, come se stesse seguendo nell’aria un’apparizione, un evento ignoto agli altri fotografati (*FO*, p. 56).¹³ It is an ordinary family portrait, showing a slice of quiet daily life. Yet, there is something disturbing about it. Spino lingers over the image, trying to find out the Barthesian *punctum* that pricks him, making him feel ever more uneasy. His attention is then caught by a detail: the name of the newspaper that

¹³ It is worth noting that this picture bears striking resemblance to a photograph of Pessoa’s family described by Tabucchi in *Un baule pieno di gente*. In this photograph Pessoa is a young and melancholy boy. His gaze, like the gaze of the boy in Spino’s photograph, is lost beyond the lens: “Seduto a metà scala, a fianco della sorellina, ma da lei discosto, Fernando adolescente, un giovanottino esile con le spalle cadenti, le mani intrecciate su un ginocchio, la bocca stretta da una impercettibile piega malinconica e gli occhi persi oltre l’obiettivo”; p. 33. This photograph is published in Maria José de Lancastre, *Fernando Pessoa: Uma fotobiografia* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1981), pp. 86-87.

the man, probably the father, is reading. It is an Argentinian name and this discovery suddenly stirs up his emotional imagination:

Ora sa cosa stanno fissando gli occhi del ragazzo. Alle spalle del fotografo, immersa nel verde, c'è una villa padronale rosa e bianca. Il ragazzo fissa una finestra con le persiane chiuse, perché quella persiana può socchiudersi lentamente, e allora... E allora che cosa? Perché sta pensando questa storia? Che cosa sta inventando la sua immaginazione che si spaccia per memoria? Ma proprio in quel momento, non per finzione, ma reale dentro di lui, una voce infantile chiama distintamente: "Biscotto! Biscotto!" Biscotto è il nome di un cane, non può essere che così (*FO*, p. 57-58).

While scanning the photograph, Spino's gaze takes unexpectedly the path of memory and imagination. The movement of his physical eye, skimming over the surface of the print, is taken over by the inward projection of his reminiscent eye, absorbing the picture in his memory. Moving without transition from the photograph to his consciousness, his material gaze melts with his inner gaze, mixing one field of vision to another. It could be said that the physical enlargement of the print triggers a metaphorical close-up view of Spino's consciousness. The blown-up photograph seems to turn, with a sudden twist, into a blown-up memory. What's more, in this process the distinction between the subject observing and the object observed is effaced. Spino's desire for knowledge comes to coincide with the image he is viewing and what started as the investigation of some potential photographic evidence develops into an introspective voyage of self-discovery.

In this respect it is important to notice the point of tension that brings about the shift from photography to memory. The gaze of the boy, lost beyond the lens, is the crucial photographic detail, by means of which the memory of Spino joins and intersects with the photograph. The impact of this moment is immediate and revelatory for the character: "Ora sa cosa stanno fissando gli occhi del ragazzo". The boy is not only the main character in the snap. He is also the main objective of Spino's search. He is the unknown dead man. As a result, the conjunction of Spino's internal gaze with the stare of the boy, and the superimposing of his vision on the latter's, strikingly emphasize the identification of the character with the object of his search.

A further consideration raised by this most important passage concerns the fact that the gaze of the boy is not wholly contained within the photograph, but transcends it.

Significantly, it is said to be lost beyond the lens. This implies that it breaks through the referential surface of the image, reaching an imaginary space behind the photographer, thereby opening up a new dimension, the dimension of Spino's memory. By being simultaneously inside and outside the image, the boy's gaze is a photographic detail for which we must scan beyond the edges of the frame. It produces a temporal amplification of the photograph, prompting in Spino thoughts and recollections that ultimately lead him to an out-of-frame investigation. In doing so, it fully corresponds to Barthes's idea of the photographic *punctum* as a "subtle *beyond*", taking the spectator outside the frame of the photograph, in a symbolic space where, as Barthes puts it, "I animate this photograph and [...] it animates me."¹⁴

As something that transcends the photographic image, the *punctum* is also endowed with an intrinsic invisibility. Towards the end of the passage we find out that the boy is staring at a window where the shutters are closed. The intent look of the boy, or rather Spino's intent look, is to some extent deprived of his object. There is nothing to see, but closed shutters. Following an interesting trajectory, the boy's gaze springs out of the photograph, goes beyond its frame, only to become framed once again in a window, which is rendered symbolically invisible by the closed shutters. The window is a blind spot and the gaze of the boy (and of the character) ultimately rests on this invisibility. The gaze, lost beyond the lens, is clearly a metaphor for desire. Whereas, the closed window, preventing the boy (and the character) from seeing, signals the impossibility for desire to achieve its object. Nevertheless, in an ultimate, passionate attempt to peer inside the window, in aid of his memory, Spino prompts the intervention of his imagination. However, his effort proves unsuccessful and the shutters remain closed: "perché quella persiana può socchiudersi lentamente, e allora... E allora che cosa? Perché sta pensando questa storia? Che cosa sta inventando la sua immaginazione che si spaccia per memoria?" (*FO*, pp. 57-58).

What is also very striking is that in this increasingly vivid photographic hallucination, the visual ultimately gives way to the aural, for the ambiguous recollection of the character surprisingly shortcircuits on a voice, a child's voice, to be precise, which distinctly calls a name, possibly the name of a dog. It is as if the voice were an alternative

¹⁴ Barthes, p. 59; (author's italics).

to the disturbing split of vision and, all the more so, to the impossibility of vision, which is figuratively signalled by the closed shutters. What we see at play, then, in this eminently visual episode is the encounter of the visible with the invisible, in which the former vanishes into the latter.

In spite of its too clearly proclaimed visuality, the blow-up scene contains, in fact, strong allusions to invisibility. First and foremost the very concept of blow-up calls into question invisibility, since blow-up vision can make things clearer, while at the same time preventing from seeing clearly. Secondly, the blown-up print is intended to provide Spino's investigation with some kind of visual evidence, but as we have seen, this fails to happen, and the perusal of the print is turned into a moment of reverie. Consistent with this, the photograph is absorbed into Spino's consciousness, becoming a blank surface on which he projects his recollections. In this process, the blow-up becomes paradoxically invisible, insofar as it is replaced by the images stemming from the character's mind. Last but not least, it is worth stressing, with regard to the issue of invisibility, the importance of a diegetic element that we have mentioned earlier: the scratch slashing the surface of the print. This scratch is something that hinders sight and is all the more significant for it is the very first visual detail that Spino comes across while viewing the photograph. It represents a blind field within the surface of the photograph, and as such it is the visual sign of its semantic reticence.

Reluctant to reveal what it does not contain, the photograph offers no more than ambiguous and tentative clues that are difficult to decipher. Far from presenting enlightening solutions and shedding light on the dead man's mystery, it makes it more complex, confusing it with Spino's personal drama. In order to find at last a key – however vague and incomplete - to interpreting this elusive drama, the reader might well engage in a search that takes him outside the frame of the photograph.

To begin with, in the passage immediately preceding the blow-up scene, we find a reference to a poem by Rilke, which focuses on the photograph of the poet's father: "avrebbe avuto voglia di parlare di una poesia che ha per oggetto la fotografia del padre e che per tutto il giorno ha ripetuto a memoria" (*FO*, p. 54). Importantly the mentioning of this "literary" photograph, paves the way for the most intense photographic moment of the novel. Even more importantly this photograph focuses on the poet's father, thus

calling attention to the presence of the figure of the father in the family snap that Spino enlarges and analyses. It is also worth bringing to mind, that in the photographic figure of the father Spino senses some kind of sadness. Towards the final stages of the novel, we come across another illuminating literary quotation. Spino writes down on a piece of paper the following Shakespearean verse: “Piange? Chi era Ecuba per lui?” (*FO*, p. 97). A few lines later, the author takes care to help the reader decode the allusion, suggesting that Spino is the weeping “actor” who sees himself in Hecuba. The theme of identity and the splitting of human personality is thus restated, but with broader implications. In the thoughts that follow the Shakespearean words, Spino engages in an act of recognition, that leads him to retrieve his true inner self, or rather, what he no longer knew about himself. Significantly, in this moment of self-discovery, the figure of the father tacitly, yet intensely, emerges from his mind.

Ha pensato alla forza che hanno le cose di tornare e a quanto di noi stessi vediamo negli altri. E come un’onda che lo avesse investito tiepida e travolgente ha ricordato un letto di morte e una promessa fatta e mai mantenuta. E ora quella promessa reclamava una realizzazione, ma certo, trovava in lui, in quell’inchiesta, un suo modo di compiersi (*FO*, p. 98).

Although this passage does not offer explanations and solutions, it subtly suggests the secret motivations inherent in Spino’s search. In his attempt to reconstruct the identity of an unknown dead man is to be detected not only his need to reconstruct his own true identity but also his need to recognize himself in “others”, just as the Shakespearean actor sees himself in Hecuba. Accordingly, the search for himself as the “other”, becomes the search for the meanings of life – a search that is inexhaustible, because its object is like the edge of the horizon, which moves with ourselves. In the following quotation, Spino hangs the paper, on which he has written the verse by Shakespeare, on the washing line on the terrace and starts looking at it, in the same way as he had contemplated earlier in the novel the blown-up print. Once again, he tries to decipher meanings, establishing connections between things in life:

Così ha preso il foglio sul quale aveva scritto l’interrogazione su Ecuba e lo ha appeso con una molletta al filo dei panni del terrazzo, è tornato a sedersi nella stessa posizione e lo ha guardato [...] stabilendo di nuovo un nesso fra quel foglio

che si agitava nella penombra e la linea dell'orizzonte che piano piano svaniva nel buio (*FO*, p. 100).

Within such a novel as *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, where everything is to be deciphered, photographs are mysterious text whose meanings must be teased out in a private act of decoding. They are a key part of a complex network of clues, signs and memories within which the character's search unfolds and makes sense. While seeking his innermost identity, Spino discovers through photographs the disturbing, yet illuminating, vision of the double, in which he becomes the "other".

3.4 Photography, Mourning and Nostalgia

Along with time, memory and identity, photographs also reveal a deep complicity with Tabucchi's art of nostalgia. Time and nostalgia are, indeed, closely interrelated. Whether it is called 'ecstasy' or 'pathos', the nostalgic quality of photography is intimately tied to the temporal dimension of experience, ensuing from the way in which photo-images affect our sense and feeling of time. Yet, if photographic memories lead in 'Stanze' to the discovery of hate, more often they are accompanied by the melancholic feeling of *saudade*. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, *saudade* is a major motif within Tabucchi's fiction. First introduced in 'Il gioco del rovescio', it cuts across the author's narrative world as an all-pervading feeling, affecting the perception of things and connoting the atmosphere of events and situations. In various contexts, it underscores the emotional value of the photo-images, functioning for the characters as iconic stimuli to start exploring "[la] geografia dei ricordi" (*PE*, p. 25).

Memory and nostalgia are closely connected to another narrative motif, informing Tabucchi's vision of the world: the sense of death. This is a further aspect endorsing the correspondence between Sontag's and Barthes's reflections on photography and its narrative use in the novels and short stories of Tabucchi. Photography's association with death is repeatedly stressed by Barthes throughout *Camera Lucida*, which is in itself a book that "bears witness to this kinship most poignantly", as Christian Metz has noted, since it "was written just after (and because of) the death of the mother, and just before

the death of the writer".¹⁵ According to Barthes, photography introduces in modern society the experience of what he names "*flat Death*",¹⁶ indicating with this expression the abduction of the object out of the real world into another world, into the timelessness of the *flat* photographic print. Therefore while ratifying the existence of what it shows, photography also substantiates death, confronting us with the transience and loss advocated by the "*That-has-been*" of any represented object and event. Reducing time to a standstill, a motionless point, and simultaneously testifying to its relentless passage, photography cannot eschew from recalling and participating in death and mortality. As Sontag asserts, photographs are "*memento mori*". They allude to death, whether it takes the form of stasis or the appearance of ageing and decay, yet what is more touchingly important is that they point surreptitiously to the viewer's death.

Memory, nostalgia and the feeling of death are the main motifs informing the novel *Sostiene Pereira* (1994), where photography plays a key role. Various orchestrated throughout the narration, these motifs appear from the very beginning as the elements shaping the protagonist's life. A middle-aged journalist, living in Lisbon in the years immediately preceding the Second World War, Pereira is a survivor of his own past. Obsessed by the thought of death, he leads a secluded life, made up of loneliness and resignation, locked in a safe world of memories, which resembles death rather than life. As he himself acknowledges, his existence is a non-existence, is like "una finzione di vita":

Si chiese: in che mondo vivo? E gli venne la bizzarra idea che lui, forse, non viveva, ma era come se fosse morto. Da quando era scomparsa sua moglie, lui viveva come se fosse morto. O meglio non faceva altro che pensare alla morte [...] La sua era solo una sopravvivenza, una finzione di vita (*SP*, p. 15).

The suspicion of living a semblance of life assails Pereira's consciousness in the moment when the outside reality of a world on the verge of catastrophe collides with his private world, subtly prefiguring the significant change that is about to take place in his life. Lacking in events and pleasures, Pereira's existence is summed up in the ritual consumption of sugary lemonades and omelettes, with which he compensates his

¹⁵ Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', *October*, 34 (Fall 1985), p. 83.

¹⁶ Barthes, p. 92.

solitude. His monotonous routine unfolds between the office, where he prepares the cultural page of a small afternoon newspaper the *Lisboa*, and his home in Rua da Saudade, where, as the name of the street significantly suggests, he indulges in private memories and dreams, sharing them only with the portrait of his dead wife.

Nell'ingresso [...] davanti alla libreria, [...] c'era il ritratto di sua moglie. Quella fotografia l'aveva scattata lui nel millenovecentoventisette, era stato durante una gita a Madrid, e sullo sfondo si vedeva la sagoma massiccia dell'Escorial (*SP*, pp. 15- 16).

The photographic portrait of Pereira's wife is the symbolic space where the themes of death, remembrance and nostalgia converge. The photograph is soon introduced, in the second chapter, as Pereira's mute interlocutor, with which the old journalist engages in regular, affectionate monologues: "Sostiene Pereira che da un po' di tempo aveva preso l'abitudine di parlare al ritratto della moglie. Gli raccontava quello che aveva fatto durante il giorno, gli confidava i suoi pensieri, gli chiedeva consigli (*ibid.*). In the illusion of continuing to share his daily life with the phantasmic presence of his wife, Pereira converses with her photograph – a ritual act that guarantees him the escape into the past. Acting as a real character, the picture is a major presence, understood throughout the narrative, accompanying Pereira in his inner journey from acquiescence to awareness and marking, at the same time, the narrative evolution of his dramatic persona.

Usually circumscribed to few lines, Pereira's dialogues with the portrait of his wife focus on the "event" that has occurred in his real life, upsetting and disturbing it. As explained by doctor Cardoso, "l'evento è un avvenimento concreto che si verifica nella nostra vita e che sconvolge o che turba le nostre convinzioni e il nostro equilibrio, insomma l'evento è un fatto che si produce nella vita reale e che influisce sulla vita psichica" (*SP*, p. 121). The unexpected encounter with Monteiro Rossi and his fiancée Marta is for the old journalist the cause of existential disturbance and change. The young couple is actively involved in the fight against totalitarian regimes, keenly defending the republican ideals in which they believe. The exuberant youth of Monteiro Rossi, more than his political faith conquers Pereira, engendering a slow but wilful process of self-awareness that will unsettle his life, drawing him out of his voluntary seclusion in the past and freeing him from the oppression of dictatorship. Employed by Pereira to write

advance obituaries for the cultural page of the *Lisboa*, Monteiro Rossi is, in truth, a young man in love with life, who reminds Pereira of the son he has never had, as he promptly informs his wife, while chatting with her picture:

Ho trovato un ragazzo che si chiama Monteiro Rossi [...] potrebbe avere l'età di nostro figlio, se avessimo avuto un figlio, mi assomiglia un po', gli cade una ciocca di capelli sulla fronte, ti ricordi quando anche a me, cadeva una ciocca di capelli sulla fronte? Era il tempo di Coimbra (*SP*, p. 35).

As shown by this example, Pereira's photographic dialogues are always suffused with *saudade*. They tend to shift from the recording of the journalist's everyday life to the affectionate revisitation of the past. This temporal swinging uncovers the interplay of past and present inherent in the relation with the photographic image. It is as if the Barthesian *punctum* - the temporal intensity of photographs - lacerates the photographic surface, transforming the conflation of time in the picture, in an engorgement of feelings in the viewer. Traversing past and present and superimposing them on one another, the photographic temporality pierces through the surface of the image, opening it up like a wound. The image of the past is thus "touched with pathos", as Sontag says, and reveals its "elegiac" power, arousing in Pereira melancholy and desire and blending them together.

This overlapping of feelings results in that particularly deep form of desire that is *saudade*: an intense longing for what could have been but has not been. For Pereira this longing has an object in the son he wanted but never had, but there are also aspects of this feeling that remain secret and untold. They are hinted at and briefly alluded to by the reference to a past indicated as the "time of Coimbra". This unspecified remote time is kept away from the space of the narration, belonging to dreams that Pereira refuses to tell, because, as he repeatedly claims, they have nothing to do with the story. Despite the protagonist's assertion, the recurring dreams, which are evoked but never narrated, cannot be easily dismissed. They suggest moments of bliss, in which Pereira retrieves his true inner self. The impression of happiness that this recovery leaves in Pereira is the oneiric aftertaste recorded by the text, as the trace of a possible different life Pereira could have had, but did not have.

Quel pomeriggio, sostiene Pereira, fece un sogno. Un sogno bellissimo, della sua giovinezza. Ma preferisce non rivelarlo, perché i sogni non si devono rivelare, sostiene. Ammette solo che era felice e che si trovava d'inverno su una spiaggia del nord oltre Coimbra (*SP*, p. 79).

The moment of *saudade* is always tactfully interrupted by Pereira's self-censorship that far from suppressing it, enhances its role in the story. The reticence of the novel comes to coincide with the most intense expression of *saudade*, which is emphasized precisely by the silence the text imposes on it. That is also illustrated by the childhood memories that towards the end of the novel start intruding on Pereira's life. Like dreams, childhood memories correspond to textual ellipsis and express the same indefinite yearning, surrounding the photographic moment.

Si mise a fissare le braccia delle palme che si agitavano al vento e pensò alla sua infanzia. Trascorse una buona parte del pomeriggio così, pensando alla sua infanzia, ma questa è una cosa di cui Pereira non vuole parlare, perché non ha niente a che vedere con questa storia (*SP*, p. 173).

The dialogue with the photographic portrait seems to ideally expand in Pereira's unspoken dreams and memories. The nostalgic feeling cautiously evoked by the photograph is soon held back to be resurfaced in the unconscious of involuntary memories and dreams, as the acute sense of the underside of Pereira's manifest existence. Intensified by the elusiveness of its object, the feeling of *saudade* seems bound to remain implicit and unspoken. It can only take the fugitive shape of oneiric images and memories or be elicited by the silent presence of a photograph, as the fading smile of the portrait of Pereira's wife seems to imply. To Pereira's monologues the photograph responds with a distant smile: "Il ritratto di sua moglie gli sorrise con un sorriso lontano e Pereira credette di capire" (*SP*, p. 87). The silent smile acts as a sign of the reticence of the past, that despite the illusory closeness of its photographic representation, is however lost and irretrievable.

The photo, taken by Pereira whilst on a trip to Madrid - a trip he can hardly remember - is a slice of time, forever imprisoned on the film and forever lost, whose clandestine visual presence discloses its irreducible distance. No matter how vague and hazy, the photographic image is the secret witness of Pereira's ethical turmoil. It accompanies Pereira in the crucial change of perspective, from the projection into the

past to the visiting of the future, assisting the revolution enacted in his consciousness by a new ruling ego, taking over the leadership of his “confederation of souls”.¹⁷ The profound change upsetting Pereira’s life culminates in the “nostalgia del pentimento”, a feeling that encompasses past and future, forcing him to come to terms with a new self, one that leads him from the passive acceptance of the events to the awareness of his responsibilities as a journalist, and above all as a human being, living under a dictatorship. Despite Pereira’s alleged recovery from the past, the photograph continues to exert its power until the very end of the story. While escaping from Portugal, after having publicly denounced the murder of Monterio Rossi, assassinated by the Salazar police, Pereira takes with him the picture of his wife, once again talking out loud to it, as if it could reply: “prese il ritratto di sua moglie. Ti porto con me, gli disse, è meglio che tu venga con me. Lo mise a testa in su, perché respirasse bene (*SP*, p. 206).

Pereira’s attitude shows a sort of animistic conception of the photograph, according to which the image is believed to retain a material trace of its subject. In point of fact his relation with the portrait consists in a series of ritualized gestures, underpinning the belief in the reality of the image. He usually handles the image with extreme tenderness and care, as if it could feel and suffer from the effects of the material situation around it, he says goodbye to it, by waving his hand, apologizes to it for being late, and puts it in his suitcase, facing upwards, so that it can breath freely, “perché sua moglie aveva avuto bisogno di aria tutta la vita e pensò che anche il ritratto avesse bisogno di respirare bene”(SP, p. 103).

Not a mere object but “an emanation of the referent”,¹⁸ the portrait is endowed with physical qualities. In the illusory faithfulness of her photographic reproduction, Pereira’s wife survives as a photo-ghost, smiling at him from the shelf of his library. Her image is a surrogate possession of what has now vanished and represents Pereira’s emotional relationship with an encumbering past that permeates and invades his claustrophobic present. Because of its stillness and fullness, the photograph shows with

¹⁷ A great role in Pereira’s existential revolution is played by Dr Cardoso whom Pereira meets in the thalassotherapeutic clinic in Cascais. Dr Cardoso explains to Pereira the theory of the confederation of souls and the ruling ego and encourages him to stop haunting the past and start dropping in on the future: “la smetta di frequentare il passato, cerchi di frequentare il futuro [...] cerchi di buttare nel rigagnolo il suo superego e dia spazio al suo nuovo io egemone” (*SP*, pp. 158-159).

¹⁸ R. Barthes, p. 80.

strong evidential force that something has been there, in front of the camera. As such, it takes on the value of a fetish, leading Pereira to conduct that strange form of existence, which is more akin to death than life. Unable to overcome the loss of his cherished wife, - “non ha ancora elaborato il lutto” (*SP*, p. 158), observes Dr Cardoso - Pereira lives attached to a past existence, that the photo suggests and symbolizes. And this past existence is in Barthesian terms a “*flat Death*”.

In his 1915 essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ Freud describes the elaboration of mourning as a highly absorbing process of abstraction from reality and rejection of it. However, once this painful work is completed, the subject is able to regain his freedom and independence from the past:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition [...] This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit [...] and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. [...] When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.¹⁹

Pereira’s shift from his wistful seclusion into the past to his active involvement in the present precisely corresponds to the work of mourning as described by Freud. The protagonist frees himself bit by bit from the haunting presence of his lost wife, whose existence he psychically prolongs by clinging to her photographic portrait, “through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis”. The issue at stake in Pereira’s obsession with the image of his wife resides in his relationship with the past, from which he cannot distance himself. The appearance of life past, contained in his wife’s image, grants him a sense of security and stability, which is put into question as soon as he is called to face the historical present in which he physically lives. The memorial retrieval of things past discloses then the ephemeral sense of belonging attached to them, the photograph revealing the absence from which it originates. At this point as Freud puts it, “respect for

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by J. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), XIV, 243-58 (pp. 244-45).

reality gains the day” and Pereira’s ego “becomes free and uninhibited again”.

The power of the photographic image resides in the peculiar re-actualization of the past, one that photographs have the faculty to enact, conferring to what the camera has recorded the form of an intangible reality, which is nevertheless real. The reality of the photograph is attested by its indexicality, that is by its referring to something that has undeniably been there and captured by the camera. It is precisely this indexicality to engender in the viewer a peculiar sense of contiguity between image and referent, leading to the strong impression of reality conveyed by photographs. Yet, the reality of photographs belongs to the past; flattened on a surface and enclosed in a frame, the image is nothing but a trace, an index of what has been. Like a shadow, real but unattainable, the photograph corresponds to what Barthes calls “the ectoplasm of ‘what-had-been’: neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch”.²⁰ Similar to Barthes’s ideas, is Sontag’s definition of the distinctive quality of the photographic image, as “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence”.²¹ Close to becoming a fetishist of the past, as Dr Cardoso warns him, Pereira is confined in the virtual reality of memories - a reality he can no longer touch, in Barthes’s words - while his thoughts still revolve around “a token of absence”: the remote presence of his wife.

An emblematic link between the recovery of things past and the photographic experience is thus established in *Sostiene Pereira*, where both memories and photographs are presented as the nostalgic traces of an absent life. Through the overlapping of proximity and distance, past and present, life and death, the duplicity of the photographic image mirrors the uncertainties of memory. Acting as a residual form of life, photography draws an uncertain line between presence and absence, whereas memory shows his duplicitous side of possession and loss. In the dialectical oppositions underlying photographic art, some affinities with literary activity are perhaps to be discovered. Explicitly referring to Susan Sontag, Tabucchi points out the link between photography and literature as both sharing the same dialectic of presence and absence: “La Sontag dice che una persona fotografata (che non c’è più, che è morta) è contemporaneamente la

²⁰ Barthes, p. 87.

²¹ Sontag, p. 16.

testimonianza di una presenza, e la testimonianza di un'assenza. Credo che la letteratura sia sostanzialmente la stessa cosa".²²

In the light of these considerations, it may be concluded that photography is chiefly used by Tabucchi to emphasize the existential and emotional overtones of his stories, in which family portraits and private pictures play a key role in the definition of the characters' inner selves and identities. For their private and personal nature, the photographic images appearing in Tabucchi's narratives invariably give rise to the overflow of feelings and emotions, whether these be hate and resentment or melancholy and nostalgia, as we have seen respectively in 'Stanze' and *Sostiene Pereira*. Photographs are also connected in both narratives to memories and reveries. In 'Stanze', Amelia visualizes her life by means of photographic recollections, whereas in *Sostiene Pereira*, the photographic portrait of Pereira's dead wife epitomizes the protagonist's attachment to the past. More importantly, in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, although photographs serve to address and problematize the issue of identity, they are ultimately and inextricably linked to the remembrance of time past. In Spino's search, memory and photography are inseparably intertwined, merging together the temporal and the visual, and leading the protagonist to the construction and understanding of his own identity as a process of representations and self-representations unfolding over time.

The intimate interrelation between photography and memory, which in various forms and degrees characterizes Tabucchi's fiction, echoes remarkably the speculations of both Sontag and Barthes on the essence of photographic art. Both critics have equally pointed out, that in comparison to other arts, photography possesses an additional dramatic temporal value, which prompts in its spectators the aching feeling of time. It is exactly this temporal awareness that the photographic moment fosters in Tabucchi's characters, allowing them to retrieve, however precariously and transitorily, fragments and glimpses of their past. Borrowing Gesualdo Bufalino's words, it could be said that photographs consent to Tabucchi's characters "la riappropriazione fulminea di una

²² 'Antonio Tabucchi. Come nasce una storia', p. 190.

scaglia di tempo perduto”.²³ This re-appropriation of the past is never merely appeasing or consoling, but on the contrary is imbued with ambiguity and concern. For if on the one hand photographs are a privileged visual means by which to connect the present to the past, on the other hand they constitute, by the same token, a powerful way to underline the illusion and deceptiveness of this very operation. In other words, photography resuscitates the past, while signalling its irreducible distance from the present, immobilizes time while confirming its inevitable passing, shows us a presence while bearing evidence to an irrevocable loss. Being based on such insoluble aporias and paradoxes, photographs are used by Tabucchi to represent the past and to problematize it on equal terms. By resorting to photo-images the author points to the irreconcilable ambiguities of memory, which is represented as an act of loss and retrieval, presence and absence, conjunction and separation. Ultimately, the essentially contradictory nature of photography also alludes to the ambiguity inherent in any act of representing in the present the events of the past, thereby calling attention to the contradictory nature of fiction itself.

²³ Gesualdo Bufalino, ‘La forza dell’immagine’, in *Gli scrittori e la fotografia*, ed. by Diego Mormorio (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1988), pp. 80-82 (p.82).

CINEMA

4.1 A Passion for Films

Since its introduction to the public, cinema became established not only as a new revolutionary art form, but also as an essential experience in everybody's life. Universally acknowledged as a groundbreaking narrative medium, the seventh art greatly contributed to the development of innovative modes of expression and representation, whilst fostering, at the same time, the birth of a new visual culture, deeply affecting every level of society. Going to the cinema and watching films rapidly became a widespread social practice, capable of attracting people on a mass scale and of crossing the borders between class, gender and age. Accordingly, the movie theatre took on an increasingly important role in people's lives and experiences, turning into a privileged place for the performance of a collective social ritual: the cinematic vision. Together with the advent of a unique language, cinema brought about the emergence of the cinematic society, that is, a society of spectators and voyeurs, a society whose imaginary was increasingly shaped and affected by the filmic projection, a society ever more reliant on the cinematic screen for the construction of its knowledge and identity.

A great number of writers and intellectuals bear witness to the overwhelming power of the new medium. Walter Benjamin, Jean Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes, to cite only some of the most prominent critics of the twentieth century, could not fail to record in their studies the impact of cinema on modern culture and society. More importantly, far from being mere scientific analyses, their reflections on cinema assume significant autobiographical connotations, drawing intensely upon the authors' personal memories as

film spectators. While Benjamin recalls his enthusiastic reactions of wonder and awe at the sight of the first cinema projections, Sartre indulges in extensive and detailed reminiscences of his frequent trips of childhood to the film theatre and Barthes explores the psychoanalytic implications of the screen as a catalyst for long forgotten memories and feelings.¹ Whatever the differences, the cinematic experience appears to have invariably played a part in the authors' early education and upbringing, retaining a central role throughout their lives and resurfacing vividly and dramatically like the remembrance of a first love.

The memorable and somehow poignant encounter with the big screen also left significant traces in the writings of a whole generation of Italian authors such as Leonardo Sciascia, Gesualdo Bufalino, Attilio Bertolucci, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino and many others who have been painstakingly summoned to give evidence in Gian Piero Brunetta's studies on Italian cinema.² Unquestionably one of the most suggestive accounts on cinematic initiation is offered by Calvino's 'Autobiografia di uno spettatore'. In this remarkably interesting essay cinema is presented as a crucial, almost necessary event in the biography of contemporary writers. As the title suggests, the author traces his own portrait as a film spectator, recovering through the images of a private cinematographic memory, the sense of his early encounters with the screen. Calvino writes:

Ci sono stati anni in cui andavo al cinema quasi tutti i giorni e magari due volte al giorno, ed erano gli anni tra diciamo il Trentasei e la guerra. Anni in cui il cinema è stato per me il mondo. Un altro mondo da quello che mi circondava, ma per me solo ciò che vedevo sullo schermo possedeva le proprietà d'un mondo, la

¹ With regard to Walter Benjamin see 'A Berlin Chronicle', in *One-Way Street and Others Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, New York: Verso, 1995), pp. 293-346 and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-258; Jean Paul Sartre's cinematic memories are contained in *Les mots*, edited by David Nott (London: Methuen, 1981); Roland Barthes's meditations can be read in 'Leaving the Movie Theater', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 345-349.

² See Gian Piero Brunetta, *Buio in sala: Cent'anni di passioni dello spettatore cinematografico* (Padova: Marsilio, 1989); see also by the same author *Storia del cinema italiano: Il cinema del regime 1929-1945*, 2nd edn. (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), pp. 301-333.

pienezza, la necessità, la coerenza, mentre fuori dello schermo s'ammucchiavano [...] i materiali della mia vita che mi parevano privi di qualsiasi forma.³

The discovery of another world, one alternative to reality, is for Calvino the very motivation behind his adolescent ritual practice of going to the cinema. By exchanging normality with the excitement of the film experience, cinema lures the spectator into a world that however imaginary imposes itself upon the actual world and eventually supersedes it. The cinematic screen is therefore perceived as more real than reality itself and everything that takes place on it has a strong power of seduction, which anticipates to some degree, the seduction successively exerted on the author by the “other” world of writing. The apprenticeship carried out in the projection rooms thereby lays the foundations for the writing activity, as if the cinematic vision were the originary moment of an unconscious encounter with the realm of fiction, whose potentials will be fully realized at a later stage.

The claim that the access to the visual domain of cinema precedes the conquest of the world of books is a common trait in Calvino's generation and is even more so for the following ones. To a greater extent than their predecessors, the most recent generations of writers seem predisposed to construct their personal *Bildungsroman* within the walls of the movie theatre, associating with its symbolic obscurity the undergoing of a compelling process of cultural and emotional upbringing. “Le mie emozioni cinematografiche”, claims Tabucchi, “precedono quelle della lettura dei libri che ho scoperto soltanto nell'adolescenza. Prima c'era stata la scoperta del cinema”.⁴ And as recalled by the author, this outstanding discovery occurred between the late Forties and the early Fifties, retaining therefore all the mythical aura of an exciting childhood adventure. With these remarks Tabucchi fully endorses the overall conception of the cinematic experience as expressed by Calvino's generation. And in so doing he ideally completes Brunetta's list of the Italian writers who have been influenced by the cinematic experience, or to be more precise, he extends that list to the subsequent generation, that is to say, the

³ Italo Calvino, ‘Autobiografia di uno spettatore’, in *Romanzi e racconti* (Milano: Mondadori, 1994), III, 27-49 (p. 27).

⁴ Lorenzo Buccella, ‘Antonio Tabucchi: “Cinema, amore mio”’, *L'Unità*, 5 August 2002, p. 8

generation of writers who were born during the Second World War and whose cinematic initiation took place over the following decades.

Sharing with a growing number of authors the double status of writer and cinephile, Tabucchi can indeed be regarded as a highly representative exemplar of that modern human species, labelled by Brunetta as *homo cinematographicus*.⁵ The author's enduring passion for the big screen is certainly one of his most striking features and, in the course of time, it has not failed to catch the attention of both journalists and critics. On several occasions, during interviews, conference debates, or whenever invited to comment on his relationship with the cinema, Tabucchi repeatedly acknowledged the paramount value of cinematic art not only within his fictional world but also in his personal experience, since it belongs, as he clearly points out, to both his cultural formation and to his private, emotional background.

Il cinema riviene, ritorna molto nella mia narrativa; credo che sia un fatto di formazione. Io appartengo ad una generazione che si è formata guardando del cinema, guardano dei film. Quindi appartiene ad una formazione culturale e appartiene anche a una formazione sentimentale, il cinema.⁶

Being part of a generation who grew up at the movies, Tabucchi tends to regard cinema as an ideal point of reference, guiding the evolution of his early knowledge of the world as well as affecting the construction of his sentimental identity. All the same, this latter aspect is given more emphasis in other assertions made by the author, thus gaining a certain prominence in his approach to cinema. "My relationship with the movies has always been one of great passion",⁷ the writer claims, clearly underscoring the importance of the 'feeling' factor in defining his interest in films as well as his experience as a spectator.

The indisputable aptitude of the seventh art in giving life to another world, as Calvino says, or in encouraging the free flowing of imagination, "viaggi con la fantasia", as Tabucchi puts it, is paralleled by its power in producing a wide gamut of emotions that

⁵ Brunetta, *Buio in sala*, p. XIV.

⁶ 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', p. 156.

⁷ Botta, 'An Interview with Antonio Tabucchi', p. 434.

leave indelible traces on the memory of the spectator, as “qualcosa di contagioso”.⁸ It is precisely this contagious constellation of feelings, this surge of emotions accompanying the world presented on the screen, that lies at the heart of the author’s avowed “pleasure in films”, one that “has stayed with me and continues today” concludes Tabucchi.⁹

Without losing in its overall complexity, cinema is conceived of as a composite phenomenon, embracing different issues, nonetheless, it is ultimately sensed and experienced by the author as a deeply rooted emotional encounter, intimately bearing upon the distant time of childhood. A major issue also in Calvino’s ‘Autobiografia di uno spettatore’, the crucial relationship between cinema and childhood is indeed a *leitmotif* in contemporary cinematographic memoirs, and by restating such association, as the following remarks show, Tabucchi stresses intensely the importance of cinema in his life and also, self-consciously mythologizes it.

Dal cinema ho avuto molto, ho avuto ciò che si può definire illusione. Il cinema è una grande fabbrica di illusioni, così come lo è la letteratura. D’altro canto, il cinema è narrativo, è narrazione visualizzata, per cui come narratore mi sono sempre sentito attratto da esso. Inoltre, per me il cinema è la mia infanzia, è la mitologia della mia infanzia [...] quella stagione mitica che veramente oggi giorno un po’ confondo con il sogno.¹⁰

Drawing upon Tabucchi’s suggestions, it can therefore be concluded that the cinematic experience carries out a plurality of functions, acting simultaneously as a powerful source of cultural and moral values, emotional suggestions and creative inspiration. As a virtual repository of ideas, feelings and emotions the screen mirrors an ideal life, blurring the boundaries between the imaginary and the real and thus becoming the object of a haunting and durable passion, the passion for a life desired, one very much resembling the nature of dreams.

⁸ This and the previous quotation are taken from, Lorenzo Buccella, p. 8

⁹ Botta, ‘An Interview with Antonio Tabucchi’, p. 434.

¹⁰ Gumpert, p. 52.

4.2 Recollecting Images

As a result of Tabucchi's long-lasting passion for films, his fiction shows a remarkable interest in the seventh art. From the very first novel, *Piazza d'Italia*, to the writer's latest work, *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, cinema is a recurrent presence, which is relevant throughout the narrative, conferring particular values to it. Whether it is in a noticeable and manifest way or in an epigrammatic and less obvious one, a great number of cinema quotations are incorporated in nearly all Tabucchi's fictional works. Films that are landmarks in the history of cinema, such as *The Battleship Potemkin*, *Gilda*, *Casablanca*, *Vacanze romane*, appear in his narrative stories, along with the ghosts of Hollywood celebrities and celluloid heroes like Ava Gardner, Humphrey Bogart, Rita Hayworth, Lauren Bacall, Grace Kelly and Orson Wells. These are only a few of the numerous movie stars featured in his fiction and contaminating it with cinematic radiations. Nevertheless, despite its importance, cinema is not a major all-encompassing subject, rather it is a recurring element, frequently and randomly scattered within the text. It takes the form of a submerged theme that "ritorna", "riviene", as stated by the writer himself. It is "qualcosa" that comes back in the text from a collectively shared imaginary or from the past of a private life experience.

According to this shifting value, cinema is not rewarded with an overt and conscious presence, rather it comes as a hidden and subconscious theme, intermittently reappearing in the text in the form of sporadic, almost casual quotations. The author's familiarity and his fascination with cinematic art are therefore expressed mainly by frequent, as well as laconic, references and allusions to films and actors. Less often, cinema is also present in a more articulate way, coming in relation to some of the fictitious characters: either they are keen cinema enthusiasts, as in the case of Spino and Sara in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, or they have a profound familiarity with movies, which results in connecting crucial experiences in their lives to film images. In several stories the presence of cinema also takes the form of indirect references to the experience of watching a film, its perception and its spectatorship. In only one case does cinema provide the author with the subject matter for a whole story revolving around memories and addressing the impossibility to change the past, as in the tale 'Cinema'. Though deftly

disguised in elusive forms, Tabucchi's connivance with cinema - as he himself designates his relationship with the seventh art¹¹ - deeply permeates his fiction, performing different duties and taking on various meanings.

The appeal exerted by cinematic art does not only apply to the content of Tabucchi's novels and short stories, but it also affects the formal configuration of his narrative. Together with thematic recurrences, various formal and expressive features of his fiction closely resemble the cinematic organization of discourse. This emerges clearly from the debut novel *Piazza d'Italia*, whose narrative composition draws significantly upon the cinematic montage. Tabucchi has often claimed that cinematic grammars affected his *modus operandi* to a much greater extent than literary theory and that Eisenstein's essays on montage were far more influential than any abstract narratological precepts, since they provided him with an essential understanding of narrative construction. Following Eisenstein's instructions, the author built up his first experimental novel in the form of a cinematic sequence of shots, arranged and juxtaposed to produce meaning and dramatic effects. The discontinuous, yet suggestive, unfolding of the narrative in *Piazza d'Italia* results, indeed, from the skilful combination of narrative scenes, according to relationships of contrast and affinity, capable of subverting the linearity of events, while engendering meanings and associations in the manner of film montage. With his wonted irony, Tabucchi claims that after having written the novel and realizing it was somewhat traditional, he made a drastic decision: scissors at hand, in the moeviola of his house, he dedicated himself to a patient operation of cutting and editing, as if the manuscript were a cinematic reel.¹²

The radical experimentation of this first novel finds no further development in the following works, where the author turns to more extensive and conventional narrative structures. However, cinema keeps providing him with unique devices and techniques, involving a distinctive temporal organization of events and situations. Time shifts,

¹¹ Tabucchi claims that "La letteratura dei nostri giorni è una letteratura che è evidentemente molto composita, è fatta di materiali eterogenei, di linguaggi eterogenei che vengono da altre zone. Certamente, credo di avere molta, come dire, familiarità che ho espresso e anche molta connivenza con il cinema, con il fumetto anche e anche con la canzone popolare, con la canzonetta", 'Dibattito con Antonio Tabucchi', p. 154.

¹² 'Antonio Tabucchi. Come nasce una storia', p. 183.

circular movement of the narrative process, iterative modes, flash-backs and flash-forwards and the alteration of the chronological perception of time are some of the constructing devices that Tabucchi's stories share with the narrative system of cinema. In the light of this twofold connection with the seventh art, bearing both expressive and thematic implications, the issue of the meaning of cinema within Tabucchi's fiction is complex to explore and posits many questions.

On a first reading, the constant allusions to cinema appear to be solely decorative and marginal diegetic details, which a somewhat inattentive author has randomly scattered within the text. Yet a more accurate analysis releases all the cinematic quotations from a seemingly ancillary position. Far from being gratuitous plot ornaments they play a precise functional role within the fiction. First and foremost as part of a narrative strategy devoted to bringing forth a potential iconic dimension of literature, the frequent allusions to cinema foster the association between word and image, carrying out an important visualizing function that can be well defined as an attempt to translate the verbal into the visual. According to such a task, the presence of cinema aims to compensate the inability of prose to convey visible images, by way of suggesting visual configurations that complete, enrich or simply explain and summarize the meaning of the words. Correspondingly on a denotative plane, the primary function of the numerous, yet brief, cinema quotations is that of portraying either a character or a place, an action or a situation, in an incisive and straightforward way.

A number of short stories provide various instances of the use of cinema references as devices offering an iconic equivalent for the words. The tale 'Paradiso celeste', included in the collection *Il gioco del rovescio*, is a case in point. As we have already seen in the chapter on painting, the story is woven with a great number of cultural quotations, containing many direct references to painters and works of visual arts. Coupled with these are also numerous references to cinema. While recounting her work experience as a refined secretary in the aristocratic house of Madame Huppert, the female narrating voice, cites renowned Hollywood stars such as Humprey Bogart and Ava Gardner as well as painters such as Matisse, Utamaro, Dufy and writers like Françoise Sagan. At a certain point in the narration, while introducing the character of Madame

Delatour, in order to describe her faded beauty and the sternness of her physical appearance, the narrator resorts to a comparison with Grace Kelly: “Da giovane doveva essere stata uno splendore; ora coltivava il tipo di bellezza austera, alla Grace Kelly, ma più altera e fredda” (*GR*, p.117). In the establishment of an association with the well-known actress, Tabucchi gives visual shape to the disdainful, regal bearing of the character, also suggesting a feigned upper class atmosphere, imbued with fictitious values. Similarly in describing the Saint Laurent suit that she has eventually decided to wear for her job interview, after giving a detailed account of the very good quality of the tailored article, which has “spalle quadrate con imbottitura rigida, risvolti larghi con due bottoni”, the narrator concludes by inserting a visual note that sums up in an image the former verbal description: “Una cosa di classe: su “Vogue” ne indossava uno identico Deborah Kerr appoggiata alla veranda del suo ranch” (*GR*, p. 104). These references to film stars have a double function. On the one hand they act as visual comments to the text, while on the other they represent a descriptive shortcut for portraying the characters and events, which the plot is made of. In ‘Altri frammenti’, a miscellany of reflections and notes about the Azores, Tabucchi seals up the few lines dedicated to the succinct portrayal of Rupert, associating him with an actor: “Rupert ha i capelli molto rossi, le lentiggini, un volto divertente da Danny Kaye” (*DPP*, p. 35). The comparison, as well as defining the external qualities of Rupert, also suggests some features of his personality by hinting at his lively nature.

In the tale ‘Lettera da Casablanca’, the brevity of a comparison provides a means to effectively translate into images the description of a performance. While recalling his first successful show as a cabaret singer, the first person narrator, a transvestite, describes himself indulging in voluptuous movements, dancing slowly, with sensuality, in front of a clapping audience in the restaurant night-club “O Bichinho”. The long recounting of the event has a particular relevance in the tale and is pervaded by an intrinsic visual dimension. The description is built on a sequence of visual details, through which the author attempts to achieve a metamorphosis of the male protagonist into the colours and shape of a visible womanly figure. In order to create this image, Tabucchi consistently lingers on visual elements such as the heavy silvery make up, eye-catching beaded dress,

high heeled shoes, black gloves, red curly wig and importantly the spotlight, which illuminates the protagonist, following him along the stage with its blue glow. In this visual crescendo we find some incorporated cinema quotations. Their purpose is to effectively gather up the various visual fragments of the former description, in vivid, well-defined images. We are therefore invited to associate the narration to film scenes, linking the protagonist to the images of two famous actresses: he strolls with glamorous movements imitating “Rita Hayworth in Gilda” and sings “alla maniera di Doris Day” (*GR*, pp. 38-39). Far from merely portraying attitudes and gestures, these references to celluloid images cast a mythical aura over the scene, endowing it with a magical unreal attractiveness.

In an analogous way cinema is mentioned in ‘Il Piccolo Gatsby’, a short story contained in the same collection. Like the tale ‘Paradiso celeste’, ‘Il Piccolo Gatsby’ is disseminated with quotations from songs, cinema and literature. In introducing his wife, the narrator points out her resemblance to Lauren Bacall: “tu eri una splendida Nicole, la facevi perfettamente, somigliavi a Lauren Bacall” (*GR*, p. 83). The role of this reference is ambiguous in so much as the resemblance with Lauren Bacall is also connected to the affinity with the character played by the actress, namely, Nicole, the memorable heroine of Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*. Likewise, in the novel *Il filo dell’orizzonte*, the description of Corrado, a journalist and a dear old friend of Spino, is not linked to an actor but to a typical dramatic role:

A vederlo rintanato dietro la scrivania, con quell’aria da bambino imbronciato che a volte Corrado assume quando ha troppo lavoro, Spino ha pensato che come sempre Corrado amava recitare un po’ la parte del capopagina cinico, un personaggio che al cinema hanno visto tante volte insieme (*FO*, p. 49).

The allusion to film roles and stereotypes functions here, once more, as a device to typify a character, but at the same time it stresses the emotional value of cinema, as a place of affection and memories, the mentioning of which suggests the friendship between Spino and Corrado. In a similar way, in the tale ‘Rebus’, the attitude of a character recalls episodes from Western films: when Albert happens to drink more than usual, he enjoys hurling the jug on the counter “come nei film di cow-boys” (*PE*, p. 31). By resorting to a

comparison with movies scenes, the author implements the instant visual translation of a narrated action.

Cinema has a visualizing role also in Tabucchi's most recent novel, *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro*. The reference to the motion picture world is here contained in the name of one of the main characters, the lawyer Loton. As explicitly stated by Dona Rosa, Loton is the lawyer's nickname, thus called, because of his striking resemblance with the English actor Charles Laughton. Unable to pronounce the name properly, Dona Rosa alters Laughton to Loton. The related dialogue between Firmino and Dona Rosa is shot through with humour and irony. Firmino is the young protagonist of the novel. He is both a journalist and a detective, combining together qualities of earlier characters such as Spino in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, Pereira and Monteiro Rossi in *Sostiene Pereira*, and retaining also some features of the unnamed and enigmatic protagonist of *Notturmo indiano*. Firmino is investigating the case of the beheaded man and asks Dona Rosa for the name of a good lawyer in Oporto:

Dona Rosa fece un sorriso e prese fiato.

- Fernando Diego Maria de Jesus de Mello Sequeira, disse
- Caspita, esclamò Firmino, che nome
- Ma se lo chiama così non lo conosce nessuno, aggiunse Dona Rosa, bisogna dire avvocato Loton, questo è il nome con cui tutti lo conoscono a Oporto.
- E' un soprannome?, chiese Firmino.
- E' un soprannome, rispose Dona Rosa, perché assomiglia a quell'attore inglese grasso che recitava sempre nei ruoli dell'avvocato.
- Vuol dire Charles Laughton?, chiese Firmino.
- A Oporto si dice Loton, tagliò corto Dona Rosa (*DM*, p. 94).

The irony of the sequence is generated by contrasting the practical wisdom of Dona Rosa with a weakly spoken objection of Firmino, as well as by the disproportion between the contracted nickname Loton and the very long and pompous family name that needs a big breath to pronounce. In this context the function of the cinema quotation is that of squeezing the physical features of the character into a name. As a matter of fact the introduction of the lawyer is contained in the onomastic indication, Loton/Laughton, that as soon as it is uttered evokes the physical appearance of the man, superimposing on the fictional character the features of the English actor.

As these examples demonstrate, the world of cinema provides the author with a remarkably heterogeneous human typology from which he freely draws faces and attitudes, actions and qualities. The physical and psychological prototypes borrowed from the screen are then added to the narrative, endowing it with an allusive intertext, by which the actors are the visible “double” of the characters in the fiction. However, not only do cinema references serve to delineate and typify characters, they also concern places and settings. In ‘Rebus’ a cinema quotation is employed to synthesize, by way of adding visual notes, the description of a squalid room in a small French hotel: “una stanza con una tappezzeria vecchia e mobili ordinari, in quegli anni molti alberghi erano così, del resto basta vedere i film con Jean Gabin” (*PE*, p. 40). Likewise, in ‘Cambio di mano’ the unstylish scenery of an opera theatre, meant to reproduce Mantova’s Renaissance palace, is denigrated as only being good “per uno studio di posa cinematografico” (*PE*, p. 124). Besides characterizing a place, the sentence raises new issues, addressing cinema as a patent illusion, as something that is overtly false and distastefully fictitious. This aspect returns in the latest collection of short stories *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi*, where cinema (American cinema, to be precise) is once again called up to give visual evidence to a descriptive passage, stressing the inelegant pretentiousness of contemporary architectural renovations. Appalled by the radical conversion underway in what is no longer his home, the narrator observes: “E le persiane verdi della portafinestra erano state sostituite con una vetrata scorrevole, come in certe case dei film americani” (*Sempre più tardi*, p. 83).

By way of their visual immediacy, cinema evocations can therefore condense and sum up in a few words, the images of characters and places, actions and attitudes. As a result descriptions tend to be replaced by *ad hoc* analogies and comparisons, conferring visual evidence to the narrative: characters are compared to actors, places to cinematic settings and attitudes to cinematic roles. This leading visualizing function is the main argument in Rosy Prudente’s brief study on the narratological value of cinema within Tabucchi’s works. According to Prudente, cinema acts as a visual supplement of the text, fostering in the reader the association between words and images and prompting a direct and immediate understanding of concepts and situations. It is indisputable that in the

economy of the narrative, cinema does play a part as “supporto funzionale” of the diegesis.¹³ There are, however, further implications that must be accounted for. Tabucchi’s purpose is not just the traditional one of ‘making the reader see’ characters and settings in vivid detail, but also of ‘making the reader feel’ events and situations. As a deeply emotional moment cinema serves exactly this purpose. Hence, far from being limited to ‘showing’, cinema allusions take on a broader value as a means for foregrounding the psychological overtones of the narrative. Furthermore, by projecting screen images upon the text, these allusions trigger a sort of cinematic mythopoiesis that ideally changes and amplifies the narrative. They recall a world outside of fiction, which is nonetheless embedded and superimposed on the world of fiction, thus contributing to the enactment of an intertextual game, constantly displacing the narrative between two different levels of reality: one being cinematic and the other textual.

4.3 The Unreal Reality of the Cinema

As will be clear from the following examples, there are several aspects in Tabucchi’s fiction that allow a reading of the visual value of cinema, in terms of illusion and unreality. On various occasions the intrinsic iconic nature of cinema evocations is broadened to such an extent as to incorporate a wide range of perceptions and impressions that transcend purely visual connotations. In order to suggest a particular atmosphere and to enhance the perceptive dimension of a certain moment in the story, the writer often resorts to parallelisms with films. Rather than visually denoting characters and places, in such occurrences, references to cinema are employed to represent happenings and events. This is best illustrated in two short stories, respectively ‘Piccoli equivoci senza importanza’ and ‘Notte mare o distanza’, in which cinema is used as a source of impressions other than visual ones. While, in the former tale, the parallel with films serves to emphasize the deceiving reconstruction that events undergo in memories, in the latter the affinity with cinema aims to underline a fantastic perception of reality.

¹³ Rosy Prudente, ‘Film e personaggi di film nella narrativa di Antonio Tabucchi’, *Cinema nuovo*, (May-June 1993), 42.

At the opening of 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza', episodes spontaneously arising from the past overlap in the narrator's mind with the present event of a trial. This shifting movement involves two different temporal dimensions, creating certain crossed and fading images similar to those of an old film.

Li ho guardati sedersi, come assistendo a un rituale incomprensibile e lontano ma proiettato nel futuro, e l'immagine di quegli uomini gravi seduti dietro il bancone sovrastato da un crocifisso si è dissolta sotto l'immagine di un passato che per me era il presente, proprio come in un vecchio film (*PE*, p. 9).

While attempting to give an account of the absurd situation he is witnessing, the male narrating voice cannot but compare it to the remote images of a film. Further on, in order to reassert the temporal displacement of his consciousness, he reiterates the analogy to an old movie, reinforcing and pairing it, this time, with the suggestive visual metaphor of a calendar, whose dates mingle and overlap, denying any reassuring temporal organization of thoughts and events: "in un attimo, sempre come in un vecchio film [...] il tempo ha cominciato a fare la giostra senza ordine, tipo foglietti del calendario che volano via e si riappiccicano l'uno sull'altro" (*PE*, p. 13).¹⁴

In 'Notte mare o distanza' the aptness of cinema in distorting the normal chronological succession of the events provides the basis for representing the hallucinated perception of a past experience, ambiguously suspended on the uncertain border separating memory from imagination. The episode is imagined following an inverted order, just as in a backward cinema movement: "e allora la sua immaginazione, di lui che se ne stava dopo tanto tempo a immaginare quella notte, spingeva i quattro amici all'indietro, come un film proiettato a ritroso" (*AN*, p. 32). An analogous role is played by cinema in the tale 'Gli incanti', where the young protagonist witnessing the death of his cousin's cat, Cecè, experiences a slow perception of time: "vidi succedere l'incidente con una lentezza impressionante, come certe cose al rallentatore che avevo visto al cinema" (*PE*, p. 58). The analogy with cinematic devices, such as rewinding and slow motion, helps to suggest the temporal interpolation of the perceptive experience of the narrators,

¹⁴ A thematic and linguistic analysis of the treatment of time in the tale in question can be found in Anna Lepschy, 'The Role of Memory in Antonio Tabucchi's *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*', pp. 61-69.

and more importantly, it charges the events with unreal and fantastic connotations. This is further proof that cinema is not confined to a strictly visualizing function and that its ability in arousing images is closely connected to its power in engendering impressions and states of mind. As a matter of fact, one of the foremost qualities of cinematic language has always been the creation, by way of visual images, of a complex microcosm of sensations and emotions, whose fascination is aptly summed up in the expression: “it was like a film” or “it was like being in a film”. This is the phrase most commonly used by Tabucchi’s characters to define their fantastically real perception of people and events. A case in point is an episode of *Notturmo Indiano*. The ambiguous protagonist while discussing wine with the maître of the Mandovi Hotel, begins to enjoy the verbal skirmish and declares “mi sentivo come in un film, e il gioco mi stava quasi piacendo” (NI, p. 94). But what is it like to be in a film? Once again constructed on a comparative mode, the expression does not only highlight an impression and a state of mind, but goes further, implying fictionality. By comparing his situation to a filmic one, the narrator explicitly refers to a relation of affinity involving the experience of events, ambiguously suspended between reality and illusion.

According to a linguistic perspective it is worth noting that the formula most frequently used to introduce cinema quotations is “come in un film”. The comparative adverb “come”, characterizes nearly all the expressions cited so far: “come avevo visto fare a Rita Hayworth”, “come nei film di cow-boys”, “mi sentivo come in un film”, “come un film proiettato a ritroso”, or it is occasionally replaced by the variant comparative formula “alla maniera di Doris Day”, “alla Grace Kelly”. In these expressions cinema is without exception the term of comparison for characters, places, situations and events. It is used to express similarities and affinities between narrative and cinematic elements and to provide a visual comment to words. Nevertheless, in some of the examples examined, the value of the reference to cinema is dual and the significance splits. On the one hand the use of cinema as a device to elicit visible images seems to contribute to attaching the narrative to reality, while on the other hand, it seems that by evoking an iconic correspondent for the discourse, cinema references also involve the issues of illusion and unreality. They recall a fiction beyond the narrative, thus increasing

the planes of reality of the text and underscoring at the same time its irreducible unreality. Accordingly, the presence of cinema within Tabucchi's fiction fulfils two different purposes: it contributes to a general and immediate effect of actuality, yet it confounds at the same time the status of reality, suggesting an alternative world of fiction within and beyond the text. The two opposite aspects are closely interrelated and they are somehow contained in the notion of cinema itself. Since its rise to a predominant art form, cinema has always been regarded as an apparatus capable of reproducing reality to a greater extent, when compared to the other arts. Nonetheless, the cinematic version of reality, no matter how perfect and lifelike, is but a copy of reality, a pure simulation of it. Thus, whereas some enthusiasts praised cinema for its realistic power others, on the contrary, focused on its potentiality as an illusionist instrument, praising its ability in making the real more real than reality itself.

This twofold value of cinema is revealed in some quotations mentioned above. For instance, in 'Il Piccolo Gatsby' Tabucchi establishes a double correspondence between the character of the tale and both the actor and the movie character. In so doing he stresses the presence of a twofold level of reality and draws attention to the inevitable merging of the actual figure of the actress, Lauren Bacall, with that of the fictional character she embodies, Nicole. Despite being employed as a tool to suggest the immediacy of images, thus conferring on them a realistic value, the cinema quotations seem to take on further significance, as factors contributing to displace the narrative. The story of the postman from Philadelphia, in *Notturmo indiano*, serves to illustrate this point. While delivering mail, as he always does, the postman is struck, one day, by a curious vision. He sees the sea at the end of a familiar street. The sight is all the more absurd and fabulous because he has never seen the sea before, and has an idea of it only because he has known it through the big screen: "Il mare io l'avevo visto solo al cinema o sulle cartoline che venivano da Miami o dall'Avana" (*NI*, p. 84). As usual the reference to the reality of cinema has more than one simple meaning. In this case a new value is conferred to cinema as a sort of abridging tool for reaching some kind of knowledge. This is also shown in another occurrence in the tale 'Paradiso Celeste'. Asked for an account of her literary preferences by Madame Huppert, the female narrator quotes the novel *Le*

nevi del Kilimangiaro by Hemingway, whose cinematic adaptation had been a shortcut to it, as the brackets suggest “(avevo visto il film con Ava Gardner)” (*GR*, p. 106). However, besides this value, the presence of cinema in the episode of the postman from Philadelphia entails deeper meanings, suggestively addressing the complex issue of the relationship between reality and illusion, or better still, between reality and its various representations. As illustrated above, the postman’s experience of the sea is filtered by representations of it. Whether they be postcards or screen images, sheer representations of the sea precede its very reality, somehow changing and affecting it. Hence, far from just reflecting the real, in a baffling and unexpected twist, images recreate it, giving life to what Jean Baudrillard names as the “precession of simulacra”,¹⁵ that is to say, the precedence of images over reality to such an extent as to utterly subvert and reverse the relationship between the real and the imaginary.

A closer inspection reveals that, a few pages earlier in the same novel, the author had already hinted at the ‘precession’ of images on reality, noticing that sometimes our perception of things is permeated by overwhelming images derived either from books or from films. Describing the Hotel Zauri, in Goa, the narrator lingers on the following thoughts: “Alberghi così popolano già il nostro immaginario: li abbiamo già trovati nei libri di Conrad o di Maugham, in qualche film americano tratto dai romanzi di Kipling o di Bromfield: ci sembra quasi familiare” (*NI*, p. 80). The narrator affirms that what we see was *already* in our imaginary. As a result, our familiarity with the real increasingly relies upon the imaginary, since the actual world is preceded and shaped by its literary and cinematic images. The pairing of cinema and literature also implies that the observation spoken by the character “mi sentivo come in un film” could be changed into “mi sentivo come in un romanzo”. Both films and novels belong to the fictional domain of the simulacra and as such they seek to recreate the very reality they reflect, thus succeeding in transforming and effacing it. Once embedded in the narrative, the illusory world of cinema functions as a further diaphragm between reality and its literary representation, making the actual world withdraw and recede behind ever-increasing layers of simulacra. The observation of the postman from Philadelphia, acts therefore as a

¹⁵ For the notion of simulacra see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser

reminder of the unreality of things we aspire to or we know through the fiction of cinema or literature. The unreality of the sea at the end of a street in Philadelphia is equivalent to the illusion of the images projected on the big screen. Cinema provides the appearance of reality but it is not reality in itself. Accordingly, the issue of visualization, connected to the presence of cinema, entails a fundamental question of whether it is used for realistic effects or on the contrary to produce a visionary dimension, capable of making reality problematic, by way of suggesting an overall metaphoric image of life, as the only possible image we can experience.

4.4 The Dream Screen

In the light of what has been hitherto said, it emerges that by “making us see” cinema achieves two opposite effects: on the one hand it produces a reality effect, whilst on the other hand it engenders a fantastic effect. The clusters of ideas, notions and feelings relentlessly ensuing from screen images and situations, aim at turning the visual role of cinema into a visionary one. In the first place it is worth noting that cinema, on many occasions, is closely connected with dreams and memories. It has already been shown that, when it is used with the purpose of suggesting a fantastic and hallucinated perception of events, it inevitably elicits memories and oneiric activities. This is exemplified by the two short stories ‘Piccoli equivoci senza importanza’ and ‘Notte mare o distanza’, in which whenever the narrator lingers on private thoughts, cinema enters the narrative. With regard to the connection with dreams, *Notturmo indiano* provides many examples. During the visit to the library in Goa, the cinema quotation is inserted in a dream. In the austere setting of the library, all of a sudden the narrator finds himself facing a grotesque and awesome old man who is scrutinizing him. He overcomes the frightening feelings provoked by the imposing vision by mentioning cinema. Spontaneously and inadvertently he pronounces these sentences, which sound incongruous in the context of the narration: “Lei assomiglia ad Ivan il Terribile, dissi, o

(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

meglio all'attore che lo interpretava", and further on he adds: "Mi riferivo a un vecchio film", "mi è venuto in mente un vecchio film" (*NI*, p. 77).

This bizarre utterance is justifiable by recalling what Tabucchi said when qualifying the relationship with cinema as something that "ritorna". In this case a cinematic memory returns in the text from the unconscious, even in the most absurd of situations. Furthermore the affinity with *Ivan il Terribile* is stated by an enunciation in which the narrator makes clear the point that he is referring to the actor and not to the character in general. This clarification sounds the more peculiar and unexpected the more we consider that it is enclosed in the fantastic dimension of a vision, of which the reader is informed only later on in the tale. The usual operation of visibly shaping a character is here complicated by the fact that the character in question is a ghost, belonging to a further level of fiction, that of the dream, enclosed within the fiction of the novel. The old man is a character of the dream and the dream is an element of the fiction of the narrative. These different levels of reality, embodied within the text, are also intersected by a double plane of reality entailed in the cinema quotation. This is pointed out explicitly in the amending of the sentence by the narrator, who feels the need to split the actor from the role he plays. Under a more general viewpoint, the distinction between the character and the actor can also be interpreted as relating to the separation between writer and first person narrator, that is to say, between the author and his characters. It is exactly such a distinction that the novel in question deliberately tends to blur and confuse, mirroring it in the quest structure of the narration where, by means of a final unexpected twist, the roles of the searching and the searched are reversed. This example shows how the seemingly plain use of cinema as a direct way to characterize events and situations is thus given resonance and invested with deeper meanings.

Another episode in the same novel provides material for a closer inspection of the latent significance entailed in the presence of cinema. In the passage in question there are no references to actors and films. Cinema emerges in a more subtle way, coming in an unusual circumstance. The protagonist is relaxing in a sumptuous room of the Taj Mahal Hotel and the window he is staring at provides the ideal screen for projecting his thoughts: "le pesanti tende di velluto verde scorrevano dolci e morbide come un sipario,

io le feci scorrere sul paesaggio e la camera fu solo penombra e silenzio” (*NI*, p. 35). The outside world fades away behind the curtains and the obscurity of the hotel room recalls the darkness of a cinema during the film vision, fostering the free overflow of thoughts. The narrator’s daydream is thus assimilated to a film projection. The only difference with cinema is that the protagonist himself projects on the surface of the curtains his own dreams. The movie he watches originates from his personal memories and reveries, whose flow carries him from the hotel room to the open space of a Mediterranean setting, amidst the friends of his youth. The idyllic scene appears to be ambiguously hanging between the status of dream and memory: “Ma non era un sogno, era un ricordo vero: guardavo nel buio della camera e vedevo quella scena lontana che mi pareva un sogno perché avevo dormito molte ore” (*ibid.*). Whether in the form of dreams or in the shape of memories, the narrator’s thoughts run freely, making feelings and emotions resurface. The images and events recollected from the past are so vivid and real to the point that the daydreamer can hardly tolerate them: “E quando quei ricordi assunsero contorni insopportabili, nitidi come se fossero proiettati da una macchina sulla parete, mi alzai e uscii dalla camera” (*NI*, p. 36). The reference to cinema projection explicitly becomes linked to a fantastically real perception of things. What the protagonist cannot bear is the lifelikeness of his memories, which despite their realistic semblance are pure shadows, like the illusions projected on a cinema screen. Only by the abrupt interruption of their virtual projection, can the narrator shake these memories off and return to his reality.

The merging of dreams and cinema is similarly shown in ‘Storia di una storia che non c’è’, a small fragment of the collection *I volatili del Beato Angelico*. The parallel with cinema is here employed not to pursue a realistic visual effect, but to suggest an indistinct and vague atmosphere of unreality. Referring to a story written a long time ago the author compares its reappearing from the past, with both the oneiric activity and the filmic image:

Quella storia scritta molto tempo fa sbuca di nuovo dall’oscurità di altri comò, da altri fondali. La vedo in bianco e nero, come di solito sogno; e tutto con una leggera nebbia, un velo sottile che la ammorbidisce e la smussa. Lo schermo su cui è proiettata è il cielo notturno di un litorale atlantico” (*VBA*, p. 61).

The correspondence between cinematic vision and oneiric projection, highlighted so far, discloses profound affinities with Christian Metz's theory of the "imaginary signifier". While rethinking film studies in psychoanalytic terms, Metz has pointed out that at the heart of film fascination is the problem of the illusion of the real. Metz argues that like the imaginary, cinema is founded on an inevitable paradox, consisting in the combination of a strong impression of reality with the palpable absence of this very reality.

The unique position of the cinema lies in this dual character of the signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree, from the very outset. More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over to its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present.¹⁶

The spectator becomes then a secondary screen, on which the impressions of reality aroused by the filmic vision are placed. Whence the establishment of a dialectic rapport between the inner visual field of the spectator and the cinema screen. This rapport, constituting the true nature of the cinematographic event, finds expression in the fiction of Tabucchi, where, by reversing the roles, the author represents his characters as the virtual spectators of their own unconscious projections. Through the presence of a symbolic screen – be it the Atlantic coast or a windowpane – the characters' thoughts materialize into a gaze and the imaginary signifier gains access, though temporarily, to the domain of the visible.

In *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, a novel in which, along with photography, cinema is also conspicuously present, dreams, reveries and memories are again combined together in an imaginary cinematic projection. While meditating on the possible name of the mysterious victim, Spino attempts to recall the previous night, but surprisingly the only image he can remember is that of a film:

Ha pensato un attimo alla notte passata e non ha ricordato niente, che curioso, l'unica immagine che gli è venuta in mente è stata la diligenza di una vecchia pellicola che sbucava dalla parte destra dello schermo e si ingigantiva in primo

¹⁶ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by C. Britton, A. Williams, B. Brewster, and A. Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 45.

piano come se fosse diretta su di lui bambino che la guardava dalla prima fila del cinema Aurora (*FO*, p. 27).

As in an intricate maze, memory, imagination and film images are intermingled together, one rising from the other. The actual circumstance vanishes under the reappearance of a childhood memory, regarding a film scene in which the image of a speeding stagecoach is so real as to give the impression of coming out of the screen. The cinematic representation superimposes its semblance on the contingency of the story, just as the counterfeit reality of film images tends to overlap with reality itself. Furthermore the realistic detail of the name of the movie house, called "Aurora", underlines the affective values involved in the occurrence of cinema. Spino is so sentimentally linked to cinema that he even calls the corpses he looks after in the hospital with actors' names. From the vision of the old film image he will in fact derive the name for his unknown dead man. The themes of death and of the inconsistency of life, which deeply pervade the novel, are thus combined with the symbols of a fictitious immortality, that is, the immortality guaranteed by the cinema: "c'era un cavaliere mascherato che la inseguiva al galoppo, poi il postiglione imbracciava il fucile e nello schermo esplodeva uno sparo fragoroso mentre lui si tappava gli occhi. "Chiamalo il Kid", ha detto" (*ibid.*).

The way in which Spino's dream takes place shows affinities with the aforementioned episode of *Notturmo indiano*, where the protagonist projects his thoughts on a virtual screen. Once again, the imagination is framed by a window and the obscurity of the setting resembles the darkness of a movie theatre: "lui guardava fuori dalla finestra e la notte era calata" (*ibid.*). The window provides a sort of tangible support for the projection in the external world of the character's inner feelings, while the dim light creates the ideal condition for releasing the flow of imagination. The same novel provides other interesting recurrences of cinema. Indeed, throughout the narrative, Spino relentlessly falls prey to a sort of introspective voyeurism, through which film shots and screen images forcibly intervene in his thoughts, overcoming and unsettling them. A case in point is the episode, taking place in a monumental cemetery. Spino is deep in thought, sitting at the top of an impressive flight of steps, when abruptly a movie enters his imagination. "Gli è venuta in mente la corazzata Potemkin, come ogni volta che vede una

scalinata enorme e bianca, e poi anche un film ambientato nell'epoca fascista che gli era piaciuto per la scenografia" (*FO*, p. 91). However, it is not only the place which elicits images from the cinema. The character himself, for a moment, feels part of a film: "Per un attimo gli è parso che anche lui stesse vivendo la scena di un film e che un regista dal basso, dietro una macchina da presa invisibile stesse filmando il suo stare lì seduto a pensare" (*ibid.*). Unlike the examples examined so far, in this passage the character is in the movie. His position has been reversed and he is no longer an external observer, watching the projection of his memories, but is caught within the film that an invisible director is shooting and an unknown spectator might be watching.

The association of cinema with memories is also illustrated in the short story 'Lettera da Casablanca'. In this case, cinema is contained in a name as in Tabucchi's last novel, but unlike it, here its presence has not as much a visualizing function as being instead invested with emotional and affective values. Giosefine is the female name with which the first person narrator signs his letter and is also the name he chooses to be remembered after, asking his sister to write it on his tombstone. The name belongs to the childhood of the narrator and is derived from the famous actress and entertainer Josephine Baker:

Giosefine, dovuto questo nome al fatto che avendoli noi portati una volta al cinema in città a vedere Quarantasette morto che parla con Totò, nel film luce si vedeva la celebre cantante negra francese col suddetto nome che ballava con un copricapo bellissimo fatto con foglie di palma (*GR*, p. 28).

Despite recollecting the vivid image of the actress, such enunciation does not have a mere visualizing function. It brings to the fore the narrator's early experience of the theatre as an intensely emotional event, capable of marking his memory with lifelong traces. These are metonymically represented in the movie star's name, after which he chooses to call himself. Significantly enough, he also slightly amends the original name of the performer, changing Josephine into a more familiar Italianate version: Giosefine. This is a word in which childhood reminiscences and movie images intermingle, engendering nostalgic feelings for a state of happiness that is distant and irretrievable. It also acts as an echo of

dreams and yearnings developed in childhood and tenaciously enduring in the memory for the rest of the narrator's life.

Cinema provides a sort of visual anchor for memory also in 'Voci portate da qualcosa impossibile dire cosa': "ti ricordi ancora quel vecchio cinema che poi andò bruciato, ti ci portavo da bambino a vedere Charlot" (*AN*, p. 22). Memory is again intertwined with cinema in the short story 'La battaglia di San Romano', where the narrator recounting a visit in Spain, finds Orson Welles shooting Falstaff and recalls his impressions: "e mi parve la cosa più naturale del mondo trovare quell'omone barbuto col sigaro in bocca, vestito con un giustacuore, seduto su una seggiola nel chiostro cistercense" (*VBA*, p. 54). In more articulate terms memories are intrinsically linked to cinema in the tale 'Dolores Ibarruri versa lacrime amare'. Dolores Ibarruri evokes her child Piticche, through a discourse full of digressions, many of which relate to cinema: "Il film che mi è piaciuto di più si chiama *Vacanze romane*, fra i pochi che ho visto, ma quello me lo ricordo come se fosse ieri, con Gregory Peck, a me piaceva molto Gregory Peck, l'attrice non me la ricordo era molto fine" (*GR*, p. 98). The report of Dolores Ibarruri takes the form of a stream of consciousness, in which free floating thoughts lead the speech to frequent deviations and repetitions. She remembers that instead of going to Rome, as had been planned, she went with her family to watch *Vacanze romane*. The film represents a sort of surrogate for the missed trip and the narrator is so emotionally linked to it that she is even capable of recalling with extreme accuracy an entire scene:

Andammo a vedere *Vacanze Romane*, portammo anche il bambino, anche se per un bambino di undici anni forse era un film noioso, comunque si vedevano tanti monumenti di Roma, c'è una scena molto divertente quando lui e lei vanno a visitare certi monumenti e a un certo punto lui infila la mano nella bocca di un mascherone di pietra che c'è nell'atrio di una chiesa e che la leggenda dice che se uno dice una bugia la bocca gli morde la mano, si gira verso di lei, ah ecco era Audrey Hepburn, e mi pare che le dica ti amo, e a quel punto dà un grido e ritira il braccio senza la mano perché l'ha nascosta nella manica della giacca, e tutti e due ridono e si abbracciano (*ibid.*).

This extensive reminiscence lays significant emphasis on the value of cinema as "festival of affects" as Barthes puts it.¹⁷ By reliving in a transport of melancholy the unattainable

¹⁷ Barthes, 'Leaving the Movie Theater', p. 346.

romance of the film scene, the protagonist aims to remove and exorcize the images of an unpleasant past. In the long film sequence is then foreshadowed the aspiration to serenity and tranquillity that Dolores Ibarruri, “la pasionaria”, in vain tried to reach in her difficult life.

It is worth underlining the fact that cinema has always positive connotations within Tabucchi’s fiction. It is mainly associated with feelings of joy and delight, with aspirations to happiness and satisfaction and with a sense of comfort and solace. It represents an idyllic dimension in which to shelter from the fears of real life. Cinema is also alluded to as a haven for desires of wonder and exotism, where things acquire an appealing sense of remoteness and distance. This intrinsic fantastic value is exemplified in ‘Paradiso celeste’, where the African stories recounted by Monsieur Huppert evoke in the narrator a charming world of fiction: “A sentirlo parlare mi pareva di ripiombare nelle mie letture scolastiche o nei sogni della mia infanzia, nei racconti di Tarzan, nelle avventure di Cino e Franco, nei film di Ava Gardner e di Humphrey Bogart” (*GR*, p. 115). In this quotation, cinema is once again listed soon after narrative and dreams. In so doing Tabucchi clearly points out its value as a form of fiction, as a source of imaginary and visionary thoughts as well as a source for dreams.

As illustrated in the short story ‘Staccia Buratta’, cinema also appears to be an inexhaustible receptacle for personal and collective myths. The female protagonist of the tale, in the effort of trying to tell herself her own story, recollects her forgotten ambition to be an actress: “sei una stupida, si disse, sei proprio una bella stupida, non ti ricordi più che da ragazzina volevi fare l’attrice” (*AN*, p. 60). Then she concludes that in a way she has been a great actress all her life, acting in a comedy or in a moving drama, playing a role that partly she has consciously chosen, partly has been dispensed to her by life. The same aspiration to be an actor appears in *Donna di Porto Pim*. The writer remembers that when he was a child, he once read a book by Chateaubriand, given to him by his uncle, whose lifetime desire was to take up acting: “Me lo regalò un mio zio che coltivò per tutta la sua non lunga vita il sogno di fare l’attore” (*DPP*, p. 34). That reading left a lasting impression on him and it had represented, somehow or other, a useless yet necessary “phare de la nuit”. It is important to consider the point in which the quotation is

enclosed in the text. It is part of a meditation on delusions and on the enchanting, though deceptive, power of words that can guide people's actions and thoughts, in misleading directions.

As exemplified in the tale 'Incanti' and in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, cinema also represents a form of evasion and a way to escape the grievous and disturbing reality of the present. 'Incanti', as the title suggests, is a story pervaded by a sinister spellbound atmosphere, in a fashion reminiscent of Henry James' fiction. For the young protagonist cinema is not just a form of entertainment, even though it is listed together with the ice cream shop, but is the only way to escape from a foreboding and disquieting situation in which evil happenings regularly occur. The arrival of the uncle, who usually takes the child and his cousin to the cinema, is then the only comforting expectation: "lo zio Tullio sarebbe arrivato l'indomani, sicuramente ci avrebbe portato in gelateria, al cinema all'aperto davano *Il figlio di Tarzan*, forse ci saremmo andati la domenica sera" (*PE*, p. 52). The film is mentioned twice again, once after an evil incident "naturalmente del figlio di Tarzan non se ne parlò nemmeno, del resto chi ne aveva voglia?" (*PE*, p. 54) and later on "Purtroppo *Il figlio di Tarzan* era finito, c'era un film che non potevamo vedere perché era vietato ai minori" (*PE*, p. 59). The recurrence of the reference to the film articulates the moments of the story, at the same time marking the changing of the young boy's initial hope into disappointment.

Also for the main characters of *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, cinema is a way of escaping a reality lacking in wonder and passion. As previously pointed out, cinema is accorded much attention in this novel, and a comparison with the very short examples examined hitherto will confirm it. The topic is introduced in the novel at the beginning of the second chapter, where Tabucchi describes the habits of the cinema lovers, Spino and Sara: "Il sabato sera, di solito vanno alla Lanterna Magica. E' un cineclub in cima a Vico dei Carbonari" (*FO*, p. 13). The location of the "cineclub", where the characters habitually spend their Saturday evenings, symbolically guarantees their undisturbed immersion in the filmic vision. Isolated at the top of an up-hill alley overlooking the town, the "cineclub" provides the characters with the ideal place where they can detach from the real world in order to abandon themselves to the lure of the imaginary: "Sotto di

loro precipita la disordinata geometria della città, le luci dei paesi del golfo, il mondo” (FO, p.14). The spatial distance of the secluded place is underpinned by a temporal remoteness: the degraded ambience, the very name of the movie theatre “Lanterna Magica” and the retrospective therein projected, all ultimately point at a distant past. Within the context of this double distance, simultaneously real and symbolic, Spino and Sara’s ritual appointment with cinema represents a sort of therapy to relieve the pains of life, which would otherwise be liable to swamp them. The screen becomes for the mature couple the space on which to project their own most secret fears and desires, whilst at the same time granting them an unlimited source of myths and images, shaping their memories and dreams. After having been to the cinema, they usually relax in a bar, where they contemplate their innermost fantasies, borrowing images from their favourite movies. Sara lingers mainly on dreams of departures, in which film scenes freely interact with her personal desires, taking her away from a dreary life. In a beautiful passage, all imbued with melancholy and nostalgic feelings, Spino imagines Sara’s dreams, contaminating her reveries with film images from the movie *Acque del Sud*:

C’è un transatlantico, nelle sue fantasie, con una sdraio in coperta e un plaid per ripararsi dalla brezza marina: e alcuni signori in pantaloni bianchi, in fondo al ponte, giocano a un gioco inglese. Ci vogliono venti giorni per arrivare in Sudamerica [...] il Sudamerica è piccolo nello spazio di un sogno. E’ un film con Mirna Loy che a Sara è piaciuto molto (FO, p.15).

For Spino and Sara, cinema is a sort of no man’s land, where they can cultivate chimerical aspirations, secret wishes and unsaid desires. It is a virtual space offering comforting thoughts and pleasant images with which they can make up for their forgotten ambitions, missed opportunities and unrealized ideals. Discussing films becomes for the couple a palliative to confront routine life and to avoid problems never solved. In order to deviate the conversation from painful topics, concerning the regrets for a degree not achieved and the fears for a commitment he is not ready to make, Spino “parla di pellicole. La Lanterna Magica ha fatto due retrospettive dedicate a Mirna Loy e a Bogart, perfino *Strettamente confidenziale*: c’è materia in abbondanza per i loro pettegolezzi” (FO, p. 17). The detachment from reality, together with the abandonment to the enticement of the screen, spurs in the characters what Edgar Morin suggestively calls “la

sécrétion d'imaginaire".¹⁸ Predictably enough, this discharge of thoughts and desires is accompanied by *saudade*. As Amberg claims, cinema takes on the value of a "*metaphor for wishful thinking*",¹⁹ reflecting and fuelling, by virtue of the very tension between reality and unreality that characterizes it, the modes of nostalgia and desire.

It is worth noting that in Tabucchi's most recent works, such as *Sogni di sogni*, *Requiem*, *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa* and *Sostiene Pereira* neither actors nor films are mentioned and the cinematic evocations marking the works of the Eighties are largely replaced by dreams and oneiric experiences. In *Sostiene Pereira*, for instance, the inner world of the protagonist is not objectified in outward filmic projections, nor does it resurface from screen images or film shots, but finds expression in a compelling oneiric activity that captivates him so much so as the riveting power of cinema spellbinds Spino and Sara. It seems that Pereira's ghosts can do without the movie theatre, since in the novel in question the "other" world of cinema is replaced by the "other" world of dreams. The same holds true for *Requiem*, being, as the subtitle suggests, a hallucination in the form of a novel, as well as for *Sogni di sogni* and *Gli ultimi tre giorni di Fernando Pessoa*, the former being a collection of dreams in the form of very short stories and the latter a delirium in the shape of a narrative. Tabucchi's alternate use of cinema and dreams seems to point to their analogous value as narrative means introducing into the text the moments of regression and inward contemplation, through which the characters disclose their inner self. This is further supported by the kinship existing between the regressive nature of Pereira's dreams and the value of cinema as a compensatory experience for Spino and Sara. Whereas Pereira shelters himself in the lightness of dreams, Spino and Sara take refuge in the movie theatre. For the couple of cinephiles, cinema represents the artificial dream through which they can temporarily live the illusion of another existence.

¹⁸ Edgar Morin, *Le cinema ou l'homme imaginaire: essai d'anthropologie sociologique* (Paris: Minuit, 1978), p. 210.

¹⁹ George Amberg, 'The Ambivalence of Realism: Fragment of An Essay', in *The Visual Arts Today*, ed. by Gyorgy Kepes (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1960) p. 153.

4.5 'Cinema'

Together with *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, the tale 'Cinema' demands special consideration, since it represents a favourite text from which to infer a provisional conclusion on the meaning of cinema in Tabucchi's fiction. It is the last tale of the collection *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (1985), and as the title patently suggests, the story draws its plot and motifs from the world of cinema, which is extensively present as the material ambience where the events take place. The story unfolds against the backdrop of a cinematographic set where the last sequence of a film is being shot. The film is the remake of a successful movie dating back to twenty years earlier and rather unexpectedly, it features the same actors of the past in the leading roles. The remaking of the film provides the two main characters with a second chance to meet up and resume a love story that ended on the set of the original film. Given such a premise, it is no wonder that the tale is imbued with nostalgia and melancholy. These feelings pervade indeed the entire collection of *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*, for they are inevitably related to the characters' strenuous attempt to probe their past, in order to make sense of the "equivoci" of life. However, in the tale in question, the unfeasible recovery of the past and the nostalgic feelings ensuing from it, are connoted by an all-encompassing melodramatic atmosphere, which is intentionally artificial and overemphasized. This melodramatic ambience is referred to in the text as "il melò" and is conveyed by means of a mock-romantic tone that helps the author address with benevolent irony the puzzling issue of reality and its (mis)representations.

The tale opens with the shooting of the last scene of the remake, located in a train station of a small town on the Riviera. According to a compositional method that is characteristic of Tabucchi's storytelling, the same scene concludes the tale, thus conferring circularity on its structural organization.²⁰ The long introductory description is constructed in the guise of an opening film sequence. It gradually orientates the reader within the narrative, directing her/his attention from detail to detail, in order to outline the

²⁰ The structural and semantic circularity of Tabucchi's narratives has been pointed out in Chapter Two, with regard to *Requiem* and 'Il gioco del rovescio'.

full picture of the scene and eventually to rest on the main characters. After having presented the small deserted train station, the narrative focuses on the stationmaster, swiftly recording his actions and his facial expressions, pauses briefly on the workmen and on the old woman waiting for the train and finally lingers on the accurate portrayal of the female character. Like the camera eye the narration traces a spatio-temporal sequence of events, following the movements of the character from the gate to the waiting room, from the cast iron stove to the bench. At the same time it gives shape little by little to her physical appearance, by showing in successive close-ups her features as well as her clothes, attitudes and gestures.

This apparently plain opening description contains in actual fact some “equivoci”. Subtly embedded in the sequence are key elements of the narrative, whose meaning must be sought for in the unfolding of the plot or reconstructed in relation to other texts. Let us consider, for example, the use of the term ‘ragazza’ to address the female character. This term will reveal its equivocal meaning only at a later stage, when it will turn out to designate a middle aged woman playing in the remake the same role of “ragazza” she played twenty years earlier. Likewise, the imminent rain hinted at by the stationmaster - “guardò dubbioso il cielo carico di nuvole. Sporse una mano oltre la pensilina per sentire se cominciava a piovere”, (*PE*, p. 131) - is not just a decorative element of the plot, since, as the author informs us in the introductory note to the collection, ‘Cinema’ “deve molto a una sera di pioggia, a una piccola stazione della riviera e al volto di un’attrice scomparsa” (*PE*, p. 8). Therefore rain is one of the inspiring motifs of the tale and as such, it instantly casts a nostalgic atmosphere on the scene. But as the concluding part of the story shows, it also helps to undermine this very atmosphere by disclosing its conventional and artificial nature. At the very end of the tale, in fact, rain reappears, coming not from the sky but pumped by the crew: it is an artificial rain, a *mise-en-scène* like everything else in the film and possibly, in life too.

Fece un cenno agli operai affinché mettessero in azione le pompe. “Forza”, lo incitò, “sta cominciando a piovere, lei è Eddie, per favore, non un patetico innamorato...metta le mani in tasca, si stringa di più nelle spalle, così, bravo, venga verso di noi...sigaretta ben pendente fra le labbra...perfetto...gli occhi per terra (*PE*, p. 150).

This passage also contains an ironic reference to the final rainy sequence of the cult movie *Casablanca*, from which various other elements are appropriated and reworked by the text. The male character, introduced shortly after the female lead, is a hardhearted fellow whose manners and attitudes closely resemble those of Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, not to mention his clothes, characterized by a belted trenchcoat and a felt hat pulled down over his forehead. Also, the name of the female character, Elsa, is an adaptation of Ilsa, the character played by Ingrid Bergman as Bogart's co-star.

Significantly enough, throughout the narrative, the characters are named after their film roles, as if their identity coincided with the parts they take up in the movie. This confusion between cinema and life is indeed the crucial "equivoco" of the story. From the very beginning, the author fosters in the reader the misunderstanding between the reality of cinema and the reality of the text. He starts the tale superimposing the film sequence on the narrative scene, without providing the reader's attention with signals indicating that the scene presented is a film sequence embedded in the text. This is disclosed only further on in the tale, when the clapperboy intervenes to stop the shooting, marking the shift from one plane of reality to the other. The dual nature of the characters as protagonists of the story and of the film is thus revealed and their personae begin to swing unremittingly between their roles in life and on the screen.

Driven back to the cinematographic set by the illusion of reliving their previous experiences, the characters indulge in reminiscences of their past love story and recount their lives to each other, while attempting to find a reason or a logic behind their choices. But they are unable to make sense of their existence: life resists interpretation and no certain meaning emerges from their inquiry of the past. If ever there was a reason behind what happened, it inevitably was an equivocal reason: "Volevo farti un dispetto", the female character replies to the question of why she got married to another man, "questa fu la prima grande ragione, ma forse non lo sapevo bene" (*PE*, p. 137). Interlaced with memories is the characters' yearning for another life. They would like to change the past and to make up for their missed opportunity, but a great number of elements in the story seem to indicate that there's no time for a second chance. In the seaside resort where the film is being shot everything points to the end of season: shops are closed, café chairs are

stacked up, tables are empty and even the echo of the characters' footsteps conveys a feeling of winter. Everything in the air indicates that "si è fuori stagione" (*PE*, p. 140), as the female character remarks. With her sceptical attitude and assertions, the female character opposes the male character's will to revert time.

Strongly and repeatedly the man expresses his wish to get the past back and to pick up where they left off twenty years earlier. During their lunch break, he performs a peculiar declaration of love, constantly shifting between his real self and his film role, his innermost feelings and their representation. Both the actors disguise their thoughts and emotions in the movie script, repeatedly taking shelter in their film roles, to the point of blurring the borders between reality and cinema and showing in the end that "è tutto un film" (*PE*, p.143). This reminds one of the reflections of the narrator of 'Piccoli equivoci senza importanza': "La parte che uno si assume diventa vera davvero, la vita è così brava a sclerotizzare le cose, e gli atteggiamenti diventano le scelte" (*PE*, p. 15).

The illusion of remaking life in the same way as they are remaking the film - "Facciamo girare la pellicola al contrario, ritorniamo al principio" (*PE*, p. 143) the male character asserts - is ultimately denied by the very film they are in, whose title is a reminder of the impossibility to go back and change the past: "Ti stai dimenticando il titolo del film", the woman remarks, "non si può tornare indietro" (*ibid.*). Time rejects repetition. Only on the screen can the past be regained, but in a spurious way: the actors look older and their acting is overdone, they are but the caricature of themselves. The cinematic concept of "remake" therefore is at the heart of the author's reflection on the contrast between the remaking of a film and the impossibility of changing life.

The tale is also a mosaic of quotations and intertextual references. We have already ascertained the implicit presence of the film *Casablanca*. Being a major cinema romance, this cult movie functions as an allusive undertext, underpinning the themes and motifs of the narrative. All the same, far from being celebrated, this film is reworked by the text in ironic terms, as if it were the symbol of a modern form of tragedy, which is necessarily low-key and understated. This parodying value characterizes all the other cinema quotations, too, for they refer to clichés and stereotypes of the motion picture world. A case in point is the portrayal of the film-maker as a young avant-garde

intellectual. He is fond of direct takes and is characterized by a bearded face and a long scarf. He is so “*moderno*” that “Sembra uscito dai Cahiers du Cinéma” (PE, p. 135). Though attributed to the characters, these remarks may be seen as disclosing Tabucchi’s opinions. As a matter of fact, avant-garde cinema does not seem to appeal to the author. Earlier in the same collection, the narrator of ‘Anywhere out of the world’ dismisses French authorial cinema as being overly intellectual. “L’alternativa è la retrospettiva francese, scene lentissime e intellettuali con la sciarpa, e poi le complicazioni della Duras, scartato” (PE, p. 73). Curiously enough, the image of the scarf connoting the avant-garde director, returns, once again, as the figurative hallmark of a pretentious intellectualism.

It is also worth mentioning here that this quotation from ‘Anywhere out of the world’ provides us with a consistent list of films that seem to account for Tabucchi’s cinematic taste.

I film degli anni Cinquanta, la tua passione. [...] c’è un festival John Ford, una delizia, puoi rivedere *The Horse Soldiers*, un po’ noioso, *Rio Grande*, *A Yellow Ribbon*. [...] Da qualche parte danno *Casablanca*, cinema Alpha ... Però cosa avrà fatto Ingrid Bergman quando arriva a Lisbona e sullo schermo appare *The End*? (PE, p. 73).²¹

Mainstream American cinema of the Fifties seems to rank high within Tabucchi’s filmography. In his fiction Westerns and Romances are the most recurrent filmic genres. This reflects his preference for escapist movies, while at the same time confirming his sense of cinema as an affective rather than intellectual experience.

Going back to the tale ‘Cinema’, various other references make up its complex intertextual web. Partly incorporated into the narrative we find the song Lili Marleen, performed by the troupe of actresses that together with the female character are involved in the staging of a musical. Lili Marleen is a German folksong, but is also the title of a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of the major proponents of the New German

²¹ Sometimes the characters seem to act as the spokesmen of the author. In ‘Incanti’ we find that “la Flora era eccitatissima perché al Don Bosco davano un film con Yvonne Sanson, che era la sua attrice preferita” (PE, p. 60), whereas in ‘Il piccolo Gatsby’, in an informative way the narrator lets us know that the screening of the novel *Tender is the night* “per la verità non era piaciuto a nessuno, nemmeno a Mister Deluxe” (GR, p. 82). In ‘Il gioco del rovescio’, the policeman checking documents at the customs point between Spain and Portugal, asks the narrator if he likes Totò: “le piace Totò? Moltissimo, dissi io, e a lei? Io ho visto tutti i suoi film, disse lui, mi piace più di Alberto Sordi” (GR, p. 13).

cinema, for whom melodrama became a sort of manifesto. Finally, as a way of rounding off this puzzling grid of quotations, the female character quotes Francesca Bertini, a famous Italian actress of the Twenties, whose role she has to take up in a show that in an ultimate game of *mise en abyme* is called “Cinemà cinemà”.

Significantly situated at the conclusion of a collection of “Malinconie, ricordi forse ingannevoli, inutili rimpianti, comprensioni tardive, errori sciocchi e irrimediabili” (*PE*, p. 7), this tale celebrates in both nostalgic and ironic terms, all those little misunderstandings that affect people’s lives, irrevocably modifying the course of things. As pointed out by Lepschy ‘Cinema’ is a truly Pirandellian tale.²² It pays its respects to the seventh art, as the emblem of the equivocal relationship between reality and fiction and between feelings and their representations. It also gives voice to the equivocal romance of our contemporary lives, for as Tabucchi claims, we live in a world in which “forse per pudore“, tragedy has been replaced by melodrama, which is “la nostra maniera povera di essere tragici”.²³

From the analysis carried out so far, it emerges that cinema is assigned various functions within Tabucchi’s fiction. It is used to describe characters and places, to suggest atmospheres and feelings and to illustrate situations and events. The author establishes affinities with actors and resorts to parallelisms with movie scenes, in order to make immediately visible either the physical qualities, attitudes, temperaments or the gestures of a character. Sometimes, concise cinema allusions have the function of evoking a place and an ambience, while on other occasions, they highlight impressions and events. Whether in relation to a character, or a situation, a place or a feeling, cinema quotations always provide an iconic equivalent for the narrative, condensing in visual images the verbal statements. In addition to this primary visualizing role, the cinema also acts as a concentrating factor, allowing the writer to focus various themes in few words. According to these values, cinema seemingly contributes to shape the narrative in realistic terms. Nonetheless if, by virtue of their intrinsic visuality, the cinema references achieve an

²² Lepschy, “The Role of Memory in Antonio Tabucchi’s *Piccoli equivoci senza importanza*”, p. 64.

²³ Gumpert, p. 56.

impression of reality, at a closer insight their presence seems to conceal unreality. On the one hand characters and events draw concreteness from a corresponding visual reality, evoked by means of cinema associations. On the other hand the whole story is displaced by a continuous shift between two different levels of fiction, that of the text and that of cinema. By alluding to movies and actors, Tabucchi expands the planes of reality of the text, playing with the fragile line separating what is real from what is unreal. Consequently the references to cinema appear to be part of an intertextual game that questions the concept of reality itself. In the many examples where cinema is closely connected to memories and dreams, the function of portraying a character is overcome by the function of amplifying the dimension of the narrative and reversing and interchanging the terms of the relationship between life and fiction. The question of whether cinema is used for its realistic value or used rather by virtue of its unreality, is intimately incorporated into the question of whether fiction relies on the reality of life or whether life depends on the illusion of fiction.

CONCLUSION

While surveying the textual presence of the visual arts within Tabucchi's work, the reader is bewildered by encountering numerous types of pictures, ranging from well-known canvases to metropolitan murals, from photographic portraits to cinematic scenes. In this postmodern art gallery, the most diverse artistic styles and forms are assembled together to create a composite and heterogeneous collection of images, where the masterpieces of western art stand close to anonymous pictures, high art is juxtaposed with commercial icons and real images mingle with oneiric ones. Given such a complex array of images, it proves difficult here to outline a comprehensive interpretation, capable of accounting for all the narrative occurrences bearing on the visual arts. In the preceding reflections I have explored in detail specific aspects of Tabucchi's interest in the visual domain. Each section was envisaged to examine the modalities through which specific art forms find expression in the practice and conception of the art of fiction. Now I shall attempt to show how these different aspects intersect and fit together to offer a plausible interpretation of Tabucchi's "temptation" for the visual.

The relation between fiction and the visual arts is played out in Tabucchi's work through the insertion of visual images into the narrative discourse. These images are borrowed from the realms of painting, photography and cinema, and far from being decorative of the diegesis, they take on a central role in the definition of the structural and semantic values of the texts that incorporate them. In this respect they act as an effective narrative means of concentration and superimposition of meanings, even when their occurrence is limited to a brief quotation or a few lines. In other words, visual images and scenes based upon the visual act as objective correlatives to complex states of mind for which the author has no single word. When references to the visual arts gain in length and purpose, stretching over a broader narrative space on the one hand and affecting a wider semantic domain on the other, images become the semantic pole of the text. In 'Il gioco del rovescio' and *Requiem*, famous paintings constitute, for instance, the focus point of the narration, while in *Il filo dell'orizzonte* and *Sostiene Pereira* a complex set of narrative motifs converge in the textual representation of photographic images. The insistent evocation of works of visual arts - be they famous paintings, private photographs

or Hollywood films, emphasizes the importance of the domain of the visual as a constitutive dimension of Tabucchi's fiction, and a privileged means through which the writer conveys his vision of life and literature.

In addition to their function as catalysts of the narration, the allusions to visual arts play a major role within a complex intertextual system of quotations and self-quotations, which deeply connotes Tabucchi's fiction. The iconic memory of the author gives life to a significant citational tissue based upon the visual and made up of pictorial allusions, cinema quotations and photographic references. Along with a number of musical and literary quotations, these visual suggestions generate intricate webs of possible meanings and associations, strongly contributing to complicate the interpretative horizon of the reader. Through the frequent use of quotations, the writer enacts a process of appropriation and reworking of other cultural texts, thus producing constant effects of displacement and estrangement within his own fiction. As Edward Said claims, quotation is a rhetorical device that fulfils a number of different and even contrasting functions. Yet, whatever its role, it is a "constant reminder that writing is a form of displacement":

quotation can serve to accommodate, to incorporate, to falsify (when wrongly or even rightly paraphrased), to accumulate, to defend, or to conquer - but always, even when in the form of a passing allusion, it is a reminder that other writing serves to displace present writing, to a greater or lesser extent, from its absolute, central proper place.¹

While questioning the centrality and autonomy of the text, Tabucchi's citational strategy also belongs to a narrative mode centred on semantic suspension and indeterminacy. Within the context of stories that unfold and develop by way of allusions and omissions, the presence of visual images takes on a strong evocative power and an important cognitive value. Photographs, paintings and film images are essential features in the reconstruction of a meaning that offers itself only in a "limping" way, by means of gaps and variable associations. They become the iconic clues, necessary to trace the multiple semantic patterns of Tabucchi's narrative fiction. At times they are associated with the existential themes of time, memory, death and identity, such as is the case with

¹ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings, Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) p. 22.

photographs, on other occasions they set in motion a complex cluster of motifs that lead ultimately to the definition of poetical issues, such as illustrated by painting, while elsewhere, they point to the insoluble tension between life and fiction, such as we find in the references to cinema. Whatever their narrative function or semantic connotation, visual images are never called up for their artistic or aesthetic quality, but for their intrinsic visibility and for the conceptual values ensuing from the latter in its dialectical relation to the narrative world.

Visibility is a crucial concern for Tabucchi. All his characters perceive and grasp the world through their eyes. Their sensations and impressions are chiefly visual, and their existential and metaphysical searches incorporate visualization as an important step along the way. They are all viewers, observers, spectators, in other words, voyeurs. Sometimes they are even reduced to pure gaze, as is the case with the narrator in *Notturmo indiano*: “guardai con maggiore voluttà, con la perfetta sensazione di essere solo due occhi che guardavano mentre io ero altrove, senza sapere dove” (*NI*, p. 37). While in between reality and dreams, the only bodily function that the characters continue to master is the ability to see. The object of their gaze is both an outside and inside reality and the former often becomes a metaphor for the latter. As a result, their visual experience is invariably turned into a conceptual event, an epistemological and ontological moment of discovery and self-discovery, during which meanings are simultaneously formed and deconstructed, attained and lost. The act of viewing discloses thus its importance as an act of deciphering, and the moments of vision become moments of knowledge and understanding, subjected though they are to postmodern doubts and incredulity, to fragmentariness and ambiguity.

Consistent with this cognitive tension, the characters are not attracted by the formal and aesthetic qualities of the pictures they contemplate, but rather by their enigmatic and mysterious content and by their ambiguous relation to the real. Upon examining the problematic of visuality in Proust, Mieke Bal points out that in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, “the search for pleasure makes common cause with the search for perception, which is the basis for knowledge”.² Unlike Proust’s use of visual

² Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, trans. by Anna-Louise Milne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 242.

moments, Tabucchi's recourse to the visual does not lay emphasis on aspects of perception and sensation. In the writer's fictional world the visual arts are not sources of voluptuous and sensualist pleasure, but rather of an affective and cognitive awareness that gradually and tentatively comes into sight. To put it differently, visual images are for Tabucchi the necessary instruments for the attainment of a deeper epistemological and ontological insight into the matters of life and fiction. They give access to a desired knowledge, that remains nonetheless irreducibly "other". As such they always act as mediator between different narrative dimensions and planes of reality.

The sliding of the text between opposite fictional realities is a constant in Tabucchi's work and it always entails references to the visual arts. Within the unfolding of the narratives, images always constitute some sort of visual interface linking adjacent, but different, worlds. They are the point of intersection of past and present, memory and imagination, reality and dream, identity and otherness. It is precisely in this function as mediators between an inside and outside reality that the visibility of images is put into question and the act of viewing is transformed into a moment of vision. From being repeatedly associated with memory, dreams and the unconscious, images attain a unique status. Whatever their nature, they are absorbed into the interiority of the characters, where they are stored consciously or unconsciously, until they re-emerge in dreams or memories, altered and displaced, yet loaded with possible meanings and suggestions for interpreting reality. Through this process of inward projection, the materiality of images is effaced, and the moment of visual contemplation is turned into a moment of inner vision.

This is exemplified by most visual episodes in which images are not directly observed, nor are they apprehended in their physical concreteness, but on the contrary, they emerge from recollections and oneiric states. A case in point is the reappearance of *Las Meninas* in the conclusive lines of 'Il gioco del rovescio', where the image, stored by the narrator in his mind, resurfaces unexpectedly in his dream. Equally illustrative of this point are the mental cinematic projections of the narrator in *Notturmo indiano* and of Spino in *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, or again the photographic memory of the character in 'Stanze'. Even when the visual image is directly contemplated, its materiality is promptly overshadowed and swallowed up by its unconscious resonance or by the thoughts and

associations that it arouses in its viewers. This is best exemplified in the episode centred on *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and in the photographic blow-up of *Il filo dell'orizzonte*, in which the act of viewing is suddenly turned into a moment of visionary insight.

This process of internalization has important implications, for it compromises the primary quality of the visual image, that is to say its visibility, by rendering it invisible. The invisibility of the image entailed in Tabucchi's treatment of the visual arts ultimately points to another form of invisibility, namely the invisibility that characterizes the transition from image to text, from the visual to the verbal. Given this, we may thus ask if the constant intertextual references to visual images are used by the author to grant the text a visuality that is necessarily foreign to it, or conversely, to foreground its intrinsic non-visuality. Or, to put it differently, we may eventually ask why the writer constantly measures the verbal against the visual, why he turns to the visual arts when creating his fictional world.

It may be concluded that the author's impulse to appropriate and rework the visual arts leads not only to the superimposing of the visual on the verbal, but also to the affirmation of the very powers and capacities of the latter. For Tabucchi, literature and visual art are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other. They are neither rivals nor sisters, but are linked by a relation of complicity, through which word and image, the verbal and the visual combine to make sense in a play of dialectical tension. Through their specific means, they deal with the mystery of representation, trying to reach the meaning, profound and always deferred, of the ambiguous link between life and its image.

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