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The Form of the Audiovisual Relationship

Every phenomenon is a fabric of relations. [...]
Relations do not exemplify objects; objects exemplify relations.
G. Bachelard (Bachelard 1934, 143, 147)

But the relationship comes first; it *precedes*.
G. Bateson (Bateson 1979, 133)

Abstract: By taking the audiovisual image as a phenomenon technically made up of a web of relationships or as a spatio-temporal form, or also as a system, it appears neither as an aggregate nor as a set and even less as an accumulation of parts, but rather as a unitary being which cannot be reduced to its individual components, made up of heterogeneous parts, which carry out different functions within the same *organization*. The audiovisual can, in fact, be interpreted as a spatio-temporal flow, whose component units, placed in continuous metamorphic and morphogenetic movement, continually transform the space and time of experience, and consequently perception, sensibility, emotional disposition, understanding, and interpretation.

1 *Aisthesis* and *sensorium*

Knowledge of complexity places at the centre of research into things the relationship between things and the inside of things. On the basis of this principle, aesthetics can be conceived as a form of specific relationship and it can be linked back to the original meaning of *aisthesis*, that is, the experience of the senses, understood as the faculty of perceiving–feeling and the correlated understanding and interpreting.

It can be taken more precisely as the „sensibility to relationship“, or, taking up the terms used by Bateson:

By ‘aesthetics’ I mean a *pattern that connects*. [...] My central thesis can now be approached in words: The pattern which connects is a metapattern. It is a pattern of patterns (Bateson 1979, 11; cf. Bateson 1972; Bateson – Donaldson 1991; G. Bateson – M.C. Bateson 1988; Bateson – Mead 1942; Bateson 1958).¹

¹ Cf. also the September-October 1992 issue of the journal „Aut Aut“ devoted to Bateson, n. 251. On the relationship between Bateson and the static and audiovisual image cf., among others, Ma-

This concept of aesthetics as a disposition, a model, a schema, a configuration, a texture, or as an epistemic-sensible system, adopted at the level of the individual, society, and the human species, is correlated first and foremost with the relational function proper to the *sensorium*, a notion that we borrow principally from Marshall McLuhan to designate the organ of experience, and that we can define as a whole in which perceptions, sensations, the sensibility and the emotional sphere, as well as the understanding are integrated according to psychological, anthropological, social, cultural, and, naturally, aesthetic models, which interweave natural, social, and individual history². The *sensorium* is therefore the organ thanks to which the world becomes knowable, usable, and liveable; it is at the same time the system by virtue of which we enter into a relationship with aesthetic phenomena, by allowing ourselves be grasped by them and by interacting with them on a concrete and an abstract level.

In this perspective, aesthetics expresses a sensory and epistemic relationship and it is at the same personified, historically situated, and subjectively determined. It is a unitary and a triple quality that includes the individual and social dimension and the dimension of the human species, in which, once again, natural history and social and individual history are fused and confused, with their resulting determinations and even indeterminacies.

In this context, moreover, aesthetics can be taken as the origin and at the same time as the result, in both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic sense, of the primary sensory and epistemic relationship which is produced by the *sensorium*, and which precedes and also presides over the other types of relationship with the alterity of the world.

Aisthesis, considered from this perspective, appears in effect – in the words of Bateson quoted at the beginning of this article – as „the relationship that comes first“ or as „the relationship of relationships, the meta-relationship“, which implies experience and knowledge understood as understanding and interpretation, based above all on Paul Ricoeur and Edgar Morin’s concepts of the generative complementarity which exists between explanation and understanding³.

rabello 2011, and 2018. On Bateson’s thought cf., among others, Pizziolo – Maicarelli 2003; Manghi 2004; Bertrando – Bianciardi 2009.

² On the notion of *sensorium* used here cf., among others, McLuhan 1964, and 1977; McLuhan – Fiore 1968; Gibson 1966, and 1986; Ong 1967, and 1991, 47–60. The notion of the aesthetic experience of the audiovisual used here is indebted to Sobchack 1992; D. Chateau 2012; S. Shaviri 2010 M.Hansen 2012.

³ The notion of understanding used here is based principally on the studies on *Verstehen* and *Einführung* which were first developed by German historicism, phenomenology, and,

The relational essence is moreover the nucleus that the *sensorium*, *aisthesis*, and *episteme* have in common and it is at the same time the sphere of inquiry and the methodological perspective of a possible *complex aesthetics*, that is, the principal hypothesis that we are investigating here in relation to the audiovisual.

The audiovisual is taken, *in specie*, in its essence as a medium, that is to say, as we will see later, in its multiple mediating functions, technologically carried out. Hence, in reflection on the audiovisual, we will refer to the notion of dispositive, understanding it as the relational substance described by Francois Albera and Maria Tortajada:

The dispositive is a schema, a dynamic play of relations which articulates discourses and practices with one another; a schema which is to be elaborated out of this basis, this apparently modest work tool describing the dispositive in three terms which, in each case, in every research project, have to be entirely redefined and understood in their reciprocal relations: the spectator, the machinery, the representation (Albera – Tortajada 2015, 44; cf. Bellour 2012; De Gaetano 2014; Cometa 2016; Eugeni 2017).

Assuming these perspectives, we will attempt to investigate some of the many typologies and qualities of aesthetic relationships that are part of a larger network of interrelations – which naturally, as we said at the beginning, also includes the person who is investigating.

2 The Multiple Unity

Our inquiry, therefore, moves in the first place towards some of the aspects of the relationships within the audiovisual and their connection with the *sensorium*.

As we move further along this path some questions immediately arise, such as: how to correlate the parts and the whole, the elements to each other, and also to their context? How to connect autonomy and dependence, cooperation and antagonism, continuity and discontinuity, or cause and effect between the components of the audiovisual? What functions does relationship take on in this image? And what type of relationships exist between the parts of the audiovisual? What implications do these relationships have on those that exist between the various instances of the *sensorium*?

By taking the audiovisual image as a phenomenon technically made up of a web of relationships or as a spatio-temporal form – according to a long lasting and

later, by Gadamer's hermeneutics. The notion refers above all to Gadamer 1975, 1986, 2012, and 2014; Ricoeur 1974, 1977, and 1991; Morin 1986, 1991, 2001, and 2017.

prolific tradition of studies that goes from Gestalt psychology to phenomenology and the neurosciences – or also as a system, it appears neither as an aggregate nor as a set and even less as an accumulation of parts, but rather as a unitary being which cannot be reduced to its individual components, made up of heterogeneous parts, which carry out different functions within the same *organization*.

The organization of the audiovisual is, therefore, unitary and at the same time multiple, it is cohesive and coherent even though it is polymorphic and polysemic, as it is made up of different orders of relationship or inter-retro-action – opposition and antagonism or synergy understood as reciprocal influence or dependence, etc. – which exist between the heterogeneous and dynamic macro-entities which are the iconic and the auditory forms.

Both forms, far from existing as separate and autonomous entities, interweave to create an iconic and auditory structure of multiple and variable inter-retro-actions that interact within a unitary organization, such as to create a single whole able in turn to generate other inter-retro-actions outside it, first and foremost those between author and spectator – figures (the spectators) whom we always implicitly take in the plural.

The multiple audiovisual unity does not constitute the mere sum of its individual components but rather their articulated arrangement in multiple inter-retro-actions which have a productive or generative property: the emergence of phenomena⁴ and interpretations that derive from the systematic organization has qualities totally or partially different compared to those of its elements considered autonomously⁵.

We can add, however, that the entire system of the audiovisual also constitutes in itself something less than the sum of its parts, since the qualities of these parts are inhibited to a greater or lesser degree by the overall organization.

Sergei M. Eisenstein placed among the former in an exemplary way the substance of this organization of the audiovisual as a „dramaturgical system“, based on a „dramaturgical polyphony“, and he elaborated an artistic method for the creation of the audiovisual conceived in terms of a „synthetic spectacle“ created by dynamic, iconic, and auditory integration, in which

⁴ The notion of aesthetic phenomenon used here is indebted in particular to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (and in part Husserl) and it refers to what cannot be considered to be a reproduction, a duplicate, and alteration, a copy of the authentic original, or an artificial derivation, but rather as that which possesses its own original character. Cf. in particular Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964, 1968, 2007. Cf. also Franzini 2001.

⁵ For an illustration of the fundamental principles of the complex thought referred to here, cf., among other, Gembillo–Anselmo 2013.

all the sectors of cinematographic expression must enter to form part of the film as dramaturgical elements. [Each] a more suitable interpreter of a unitary content, grasped at a particular moment of its elaboration (Eisenstein 1970, 121–122).

In the audiovisual, therefore, the unfolding in space and time of heterogeneous elements consists of a becoming of interacting dynamic forms and sensible stimuli as well as phenomenic and interpretive compositions or emergences.

The iconic forms and auditory forms can, in turn, be considered as just as many complex systems, in as far as they organize their respective components – luminosity, darkness, chromatism, dynamics, sound, noises, music, speaking or singing voices – according to further inter-retro-actions, from which a *flow* emerges which is at the same time unitary and multiple both in phenomena and interpretations.⁶

The continuous and discontinuous metamorphosis of the iconic and auditory systems constitutes, in fact, a single audiovisual phenomenic flow with a generative quality, which produces, in space and time, progressive changes to the qualities of inter-retro-actions, which inform the semantic functions and status, as well as the interpretations of the individual components. The role, the value, the objective, and the sense of each of the two systems – auditory or iconic – are just as many emergences placed in constant transformation by the other, according to a principle of interdependence.

In the phenomenological perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the audiovisual film seems to be

An extremely complex form inside of which a very great number of actions and reactions are taking place at every moment. [...] The joy of something lies in its showing how something takes on meaning – not by referring to already established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or special arrangement of elements (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 55, 58).

It is a conception that is very similar to that of the „organicity of the work“ expressed in almost the same period by Eisenstein, concerning both framing as the living cell of the overall organism of the film and the development of the „line of movement of the concrete elements of representation“ as the productive dynamic factor of the „generalized or abstract image of the theme“, that is to say, of the semantic and interpretative emergences that originate from the aesthetic experience and understanding of the audiovisual (Eisenstein 2010).

⁶ On the notion of flow in relation to the aesthetic experience and the procedurality of the creation and succession of sensations in particular cf. Deleuze – Guattari 1994.

In the phenomenological approach or the organicistic one that we have referred to here, just as in a perspective of complex aesthetics, even the most infinitesimal dynamic unity that makes up the audiovisual image manifests the complexity of the whole, according to a hologrammatic or synecdochic principle of *pars pro toto* and *totum pro parte*.

In this perspective, the minimum dynamic unity of the audiovisual can appear almost like an atom, that is to say, an entity that exists by virtue of a *field of energetic forces* which are inter-retro-active among its dynamic components, placed in a perpetual fluctuation and connection with the entities of the context.

The synergic inter-retro-actions between the heterogeneous systems of the audiovisual determine a metamorphosis and a morphogenesis that take on a generativity that is both dual and unitary: that of a phenomenic kineticism and that which is intrinsically correlated to *dynamis*, both emotional and interpretative, which is proper to the experience of the image in motion.

3 *Dynamis and energeia*

The audiovisual explicates an aesthetic relationship that invests time, the transitory, and becoming, developing the intensive function of the aesthetic experience of the image.

Horst Bredekamp has described how static images have been historically recognised and can still be recognised today as having an intrinsic strength originally defined, in Greek, by means of terms like *energeia* and *dynamis* and, in Latin, by words such as *vis*, *virtus* or *facultas* (Bredekamp 2018).⁷

In the kinetic and audiovisual image, *dynamis* is above all an emergence of the metamorphosis and morphogenesis of a technically produced dynamic system and at the same time the producer of energetic forces that interact with the sensorial, emotional, and cognitive sphere during the aesthetic experience of both creation and fruition.

This interaction, let us remember, has constituted and still constitutes the primary nucleus of certain ideas of the kinetic and audiovisual image, which in the ambit of film studies were historically formulated first and foremost by Sergei

⁷ The notion of *dynamis* used here does not only refer to the emotional component, and hence only partly concerns the power of images, the scopic regimes, and the ways of seeing taken into consideration, for example, in the vast plan of Freedberg 1989; Massumi 2002.

Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Edgar Morin, Gilles Deleuze, and others.⁸

The *dynamis* or *enargeia* proper to the audiovisual image, in particular, is correlated to a coalescence of the different components of the *sensorium* by virtue of the unavoidable link between aesthetic experience and the technical dimension.

By taking the concept of *phenomotechnique* formulated by Gaston Bachelard in aesthetic terms, we can easily see how, concerning the audiovisual, the technique generates the fundamental kinetic phenomenon, which consists, as we have seen, of iconic and auditory morphogenesis and metamorphosis, in which multiple „dynamogenic powers“ are inherent (Bachelard 1985, and 2000).⁹

The advent of the kinetic image and its development as the audiovisual has introduced, through *techne*, a new experience, notion, and sense of the transitory and of movement, which, not by chance, have arisen at the centre of a broad arena of studies defined as still/moving field, devoted to the status of images between immobility and motion (Plantinga 2009; Mullarkey 2009; Laine 2011; Colman 2014).

In the audiovisual in particular, dynamism constitutes a multi-dimensional and polyfunctional phenomenon which changes according to a vast range of spatio-temporal manifestations and visual and auditory configurations. It can be natural or anthropic, spontaneous or artificial. Movement can to the same extent be technically produced and perceived, both consciously and unconsciously, in its variables of slowness and speed and in its rhythmic, visual and auditory determinations: dynamism of the image in space (movements of the camera, zoom, etc.) and in time (the length of the frame), between images (different types of montage and the rhythmic dynamism of montage, etc.) as well as between the images and sounds (synchronization, vertical montage, mixage, etc.).

In the aesthetic experience of creation, movement promotes, more or less consciously and intentionally, the iconic and auditory composition of every expressive, representative, dramatic, and dramaturgical factor of the audiovisual, in the fluid dimension of space and time. Reflecting on the overcoming of the dialectic between dynamic image and sound, in formulating the concept of audiovisual „harmonic“, Eisenstein identified among the former movement as the

⁸ Cf. among other, Eisenstein 1987, 2010; 2018a, and 2018b; Arnheim 1969; Ragghianti 1976; Morin 2013; Deleuze 1989, and 2013; Bertetto 2016, 27–45.

⁹ On the aesthetic implications of the notion of *phenomenotechnique* formulated by Bachelard cf. Alloa 2016, 36–55. On the metamorphic deformations of images and the „dynamogenic powers“ in Bachelard’s thought, cf. Boccali 2017, in part. 71–76 and 112–115.

factor of synthesis between time and the three dimensions of space, referring to the theory of special relativity:

Possessing such an excellent instrument of knowledge as the cinema, even only from the point of view of its original phenomenon, the perception of movement, we will soon be used to orienting ourselves in the fourth dimension.¹⁰

Let us remember that, some years later, Erwin Panofsky interpreted the function of synthesis carried out by audiovisual movement in the well-known terms of the „spatialization of time“, to which we can, reciprocally, add, the dynamization of space (Panofsky 1955).

The audiovisual can in effect be interpreted as a spatio-temporal flow, whose component units, placed in continuous metamorphic and morphogenetic movement, continually transform the space and time of experience, and consequently perception, sensibility, emotional disposition, understanding, and interpretation.

Dynamism can also be understood as a relais between the process of the aesthetic experience of creating and fruition.

In the fruitive aesthetic experience, the multiple orders of movement activate the primary perceptual phenomena. At the origin of the processes of understanding and interpretation there are stroboscopic and stereokinetic effects, synaesthesia and related proprioception, sensory-motor and empathic implications of mirror systems, sensations and emotional reactions.

The solicitation of the *sensorium* complex and of the psychic and interpretative correlative, operated by the audiovisual dynamism in both clear and conscious and implicit and unconscious terms, activates a fundamental kinesthetic phenomenon that performs some key-functions: from the sensory and emotional „resonance“ caused by the iconic and sound rhythm or speed to the symbolic abstraction of the gesture or movement of natural and artificial elements.

If the audiovisual cannot be conceived as a chaotic and random „Brownian motion“ of autonomous particles – from the frame to the pixel, from the light to the sound phenomenon, from the chromatic to the rhythmic form – it is because, as David Böhm noted,

10 „The visual harmonic cannot be realised in the staticity of a piece. [It] is an authentic element... of the fourth dimension. Even though it remains in three-dimensional space, and even though it is spatially unrepresentable, it can only be born and consist in the fourth dimension (three dimensions plus time). The fourth dimension? Einstein, Mysticism? It is time to stop being afraid of the „bugbear“ of the fourth dimension. Possessing such an excellent instrument of knowledge as the cinema, even only from the point of view of its original phenomenon, the perception of movement, we will soon be used to orienting ourselves in the fourth dimension [...] The applicative value of this procedure is enormous“ (Eisenstein 1996, 257).

it is made up of different moments which together change the space and time of the vision. It is a potential to change the point of view of the author and the viewer on the world. The dynamic image includes me in the world and the whole world in me. The flow of images connects the author and the viewer to the becoming of the world, to its becoming chaos and order (Bohm 2005, 135).

Each iconic and sound component receives its own function from the entire audiovisual form because it is introduced into a dynamic current that establishes, between the previous and subsequent parts, the spatial-temporal, emotional and interpretative relationships, according to complex dynamics of inter-retro-action.

The dynamis thus reveals itself to be the energetic factor within which the latent and manifest emotional and semantic links circulate in audiovisual system.

A complex principle of order, chaos and aesthetic organization is constantly renewed by the audiovisual dynamism and, at the same time, it consists of an epistemic principle of abstraction. The overall movement gives a sense of the articular, and the particular feeds the sense of the overall movement, and both found a system of abstraction or an ecosystem of abstraction.

The dynamogenic powers is therefore one of the fundamental factors of the *energeia* of the audiovisual image, as it carries out multiple and heterogeneous relational functions between the iconic and the sound sphere, between the dimension of space and that of time and, through them, between processes of perception and understanding, of sensitivity and interpretation, and between the order of phenomenal and that of abstraction.

Between all these opposing entities a dialogic is established which is at the origin of the impression of a peculiar reality of the audiovisual, which consists of an antagonistic, complementary and generative interrelation between representation and reification, between the aesthetic experience and the aesthetic consciousness, between participation and distancing, between explanation – which logically and rationally distinguishes the audiovisual image and the referent – and understanding – which unifies them analogically and symbolically.

In this way, the audiovisual dynamis manifests its own unidual, technical and at the same time phenomenal substance, and reveals how its energetic quality (*energeia*), in radiating, establishes a multidimensional and multifunctional relationship with the different levels of the *sensorium* that it mobilizes simultaneously: from perception to sensation, from sensitivity to the emotional sphere, from understanding to interpretation.

Consequently, it also emerges that the mobilization of the various components of the organ of the experience activated by *energeia* consists, first of all, in a fundamental action of mediation between them, that is, in a reciprocal relationship with a recursive ring, which is activated as in a sort of helical and bi-univocal

circulation between the different levels of the *sensorium*, on other words, a reversible circle that continuously moves from perceptive degree gradually up to interpretative one and vice versa and which culminates in the recursion between understanding and explanation.

The correlation between the organization of the audiovisual system and that of the *sensorium*, during the aesthetic and epistemic experience, was placed at the center of Eisenstein's theory. According to the theory of Latvian artist, the work of art concerns us precisely because a dual process takes place in it: an impetuous ascent following the lines of the highest levels of consciousness, and simultaneous penetration, through the means of form, in the most subterranean layers of sensory thinking. The antithetical separation of these two lines of movement determines the considerable unitary tension of form and content (Eisenstein 2018).

One of the fundamental principles of the aesthetic-epistemic process consists, in fact, in intelligibility through the living – or more generally, what is perceived as animated – and not through the physical, the particular and not the general, the concrete and not the abstract.

A principle that has as its counterpart a pensementism by virtue of which abstraction becomes a continuous emergence of the entire phenomenal universe: in the one-to-one helical circulation between the different levels of the *sensorium* complex, a „flow of reciprocity“ is taking place between the phenomenal, in its manifestations through forms, and the related analogical, symbolic and mythological interpretation, as well and logical, rational and empirical.

The primary factors for activating the relay between the perception of the phenomenal and the processes of understanding and explanation are the multiples instances of imagination and memory. This is particularly evident when, in the aesthetic experience of the audiovisual, the recursive and reversion dialogic of understanding and explanation is generated by the inter-retro-action between the iconic and the verbal. That is, when the audiovisual can be defined as „audio-verbal-visual“, then a dynamic balance is determined between the sensory thinking and processes of analogical thought, symbolic, mythological and logical, rational, empirical thought.

In the aesthetic experience of the audio-verb-visual, the overall mobilization and equally addressed to the different instances of the *sensorium* system and the correlated processes of understanding and explanation can be expressed, we believe, in terms of a „trans-sensorial thought“ or precisely, as Susan Sobchack argues, of a unification and, at the same time, of a discernment between sensible phenomenon and abstract sense, between sensible and rational knowledge (Sobchack 2004).

Observing the internal relations of the audiovisual system, it emerges therefore how the dynamis constitutes the fundamental factor of a mediation between the different extended and epistemological orders.

The audiovisual appears, therefore, from a relational perspective, in its primary function and in its substance as a medium, precisely as it is a complex system and vice versa, it is a complex system precisely in that it activates multiple forms and orders of relationship or mediation.

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