

Immagini e parole, a new Italian collection of essays by E.H. Gombrich, brings a significant contribution to a seventy-year long debate in Italy and abroad.

Review of:

Immagini e parole by Ernst H. Gombrich, edited by Lucio Biasiori, Roma: Carocci Editore, collana "Saggi", 2019, 224 p., 73 b. & w. illus., 20.40 €, ISBN 9788843086115

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In May 2019, the Italian publisher Carocci put out an interesting collection of essays by Ernst H. Gombrich, never before published in Italian, titled *Immagini e parole* ('pictures and words'). The volume is edited by Lucio Biasiori, historian of the Early Modern Age at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa and author of several reliable studies – often coordinated by Carlo Ginzburg – on figures and movements that marked the history of the Lutheran Reformation in Italy, as well as on Machiavelli. The unusual configuration of this remarkable editorial project may be partly due to the fact that Biasiori is a disciple of Ginzburg – a scholar who, since his famous *Indagini su Piero*¹ (and indeed since his earlier methodological incursions into the 'evidential paradigm'² and his studies on Titian from the 1970s³) is known for frequently combining history and art history. Further reasons are suggested in the extensive and well-annotated introduction,⁴ which puts great stock into interdisciplinarity ('Gombrich was much more than an art historian: he was also a theoretician of perception, an outstanding populariser, and, as he often self-proclaims in the essays of this collection, a historian *tout court*'⁵) – clearly one of the criteria, if not the main one, for Biasiori's selection.

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Indagini su Piero. Il Battesimo, il ciclo di Arezzo, la Flagellazione di Urbino*, Turin: Einaudi, 1981.

² Carlo Ginzburg, 'Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario', in Aldo G. Gargani (ed.), *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane*, Turin: Einaudi, 1979, 57-106. English edition: 'Clues. Roots of an evidential paradigm', in *Myths and the historical method*, Engl. Transl. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore (ML): John Hopkins University Press, 1989, 96-125.

³ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Tiziano, Ovidio e i codici della figurazione erotica nel '500', in *Tiziano e Venezia*, conference proceedings (Venice, 27 September - 1 October 1976), Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1980, 125-135. English edition: 'Titian, Ovid, and sixteenth-century codes for erotic illustration', in *Myths and the historical method*, 77-95.

⁴ Lucio Biasiori, 'Introduzione. "Das Wort zum Bild". Gombrich, le parole e le immagini', in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Immagini e parole*, edited by Lucio Biasiori, Roma: Carocci Editore, collana "Saggi", 2019, 9-23.

⁵ 'Gombrich non fu uno storico dell'arte. Fu molto di più: teorico della percezione, scrittore e divulgatore straordinario e, come non esita a definirsi più volte nei saggi di questa raccolta, storico senza ulteriori specificazioni'. Biasiori, 'Introduzione', 10. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are my own.

The essays by Gombrich collected in this volume cover a considerable time span, from 1950 to 1998. During that period, the two terms that compose the title of the collection ('pictures' and 'words') have evolved in their cultural meaning, and possibly even in their semantic one: Gombrich had the merit of recognizing a connection that was destined to become crucial in the decades to come. Perhaps he was not the first: in March 1948, two years before Gombrich's Slade Lecture 'Pictures and Words' at Oxford in 1950 and a few days before his own death, Fritz Saxl had given a lecture titled 'Why Art History?' on the new cultural and social role of images at the Royal Holloway College in London; and one needs hardly mention the earlier and common lesson of Aby Warburg. Gombrich was also certainly not the last to address this topic. 'Pictures and Words', the title of the first essay included in Biasiori's eponymous collection, was mirrored in a study by Meyer Shapiro⁶ that is considered both a founding text of modern art semiotics and a radical alternative to the protocol laid out by Erwin Panofsky in *Studies in Iconology*. *L'immagine e la parola* ('picture and word') is also the title of the Italian edition of Donald James Gordon's *The Renaissance imagination*, edited by Stephen Orgel.⁷

Many additional examples could be mentioned, not least the transition from Richard Rorty's 'linguistic turn'⁸ to William J.T. Mitchell's 'pictorial turn'⁹ or to Gottfried Boehm's 'iconic turn'¹⁰ in the early 1990s. The return of images¹¹ and their logic discussed by Boehm,¹² Mitchell's theorization of the languages and desires of images,¹³ Mieke Bal's 'images to be read',¹⁴ and Horst Bredekamp's notion of images that look back at us¹⁵ are all products, in a way, of the explosive expansion of the iconosphere that marked the second half of the nineteenth century – a phenomenon

⁶ Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the illustration of a Text*, The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1973. The influence may concern more than the title itself: see 106-107.

⁷ Donald J. Gordon, *L'immagine e la parola. Cultura e simboli del Rinascimento*, Italian transl. Paolo Cesaretti, edited by Stephen Orgel, preface by Eugenio Garin, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1987. English edition: *The Renaissance imagination*, edited by Stephen Orgel, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

⁸ Richard Rorty (ed.) *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967.

⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Gottfried Boehm, *Was ist ein Bild? Bild und Text*, München: Fink, 1994.

¹¹ Gottfried Boehm, 'Die Wiederkehr der Bilder', *Was ist ein Bild?* 11-38.

¹² Gottfried Boehm, 'Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder', in Christa Maar and Hubert Burda (eds), *Iconic Turn. Die Neue Macht der Bilder*, Köln: Dumont, 2004, 28-43.

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What do Pictures "Really" Want?', *October*, vol. 77, 1996, 71-82. This issue famously contained the questionnaire on visual culture (25-70), with the participation of Svetlana Alpers, Emily Apter, Carol Armstrong, Susan Buck-Morss, Tom Conley, Jonathan Crary, Thomas Crow, Tom Gunning, Michael Ann Holly, Martin Jay, Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann, Silvia Kolbowski, Sylvia Lavin, Stephen Melville, Helen Molesworth, Keith Moxey, D. N. Rodowick, Geoff Waite and Christopher Wood, which triggered a heated debate between established art history and the emerging field of visual studies.

¹⁴ Mieke Bal, 'Reading Art', in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, London: Routledge, 1996, 24-41.

¹⁵ Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.

which Gombrich, back in 1950, had already anticipated. At the beginning of his Slade Lecture, Gombrich mentions that he aims ‘to draw [the audience’s] attention to that fearful problem of the relation of words to pictures’, while admitting that the title is ‘rather cryptic’.¹⁶ And so it remains to this day, while also having acquired additional meanings during the seven decades that separate us from that inaugural lecture.

In this sense, the volume published by Carocci represents a useful contribution to the Italian side of the debate on the relationship between verbal and visual codes¹⁷. Among many possible examples, let me mention the investigations carried out by Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini;¹⁸ or, more recently, Federico Vercellone’s *Il futuro dell’immagine*,¹⁹ whose first chapter is dedicated, once again, to words and pictures; as well as the numerous translations of (and extensive introductions to) the essays by Boehm,²⁰ Mitchell²¹ and Bredekamp.²² All of these examples revolve around or are based on the connection between pictures and words. Biasiori’s volume provides a different point of view on this issue and, quite fortunately, helps us understand its temporal dimension.

The reflection on the relationship between words and pictures dates back to Ovid, Dante,²³ then Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo Da Vinci, Johann J. Winckelmann, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Walter Pater, in addition to the packed line-up of personalities mentioned by Gombrich in his lecture of 1950. In any case, the issue was debated among insightful historians and art historians even before the theories on ‘spectatorship’ and the ‘power of images’.²⁴ While the past twenty years have privileged the relationship between art history and philosophy in order to fruitfully investigate these issues – which did not yet exist in the mid-nineteenth century and which have led to a semantic reconfiguration of the term “picture”, Gombrich’s essay focuses instead on the relationship between history and art

¹⁶ Ernst H. Gombrich, ‘Pictures and Words’ (Slade Inaugural Lecture), in Lauren Golden (ed.), *Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies*, Oxford: BAR International series 996, 91. Italian edition: ‘Immagini e parole’, in *Immagini e Parole*, 25.

¹⁷ The international side of the debate is much too complex to be discussed here. An important analysis of the issue from a Gombrichian perspective can be found in: Richard Woodfield, ‘Ernst Gombrich: Iconology and the “linguistics of the image”’, in *I saperi di Ernst Gombrich: Teoria del visibile e analisi dell’arte*, conference proceedings, Venice, March 2009, organized by Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore, in *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 5, December 2011.

¹⁸ Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini (eds), *Teorie dell’immagine*, Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2009. Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Turin: Einaudi 2016.

¹⁹ Federico Vercellone, *Il futuro dell’immagine*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2017

²⁰ Gottfried Boehm, *La svolta iconica*, edited by Maria Giuseppina and Michele Di Monte, Rome: Meltemi, 2009.

²¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Pictorial turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, edited by Michele Cometa, V. Cammarata, Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2017.

²² Horst Bredekamp, *Immagini che ci guardano. Teoria dell’atto iconico*, edited by Federico Vercellone, Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2015. German edition: Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*.

²³ Giovanni Pozzi, *Sull’orlo del visibile parlare*, Milan: Adelphi, 1993. This collection of essays is in some respects similar, will all due distinctions, to the collection under discussion.

²⁴ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

history. Gombrich claims that the relationship between words and pictures has a pedagogical usefulness, and that ‘the more we know about a picture and the context in which it was meant to stand, the more chance we have to understand it’.²⁵ The crucial importance of the context as a point of encounter, dialogue and mutual understanding between words and pictures, as Gombrich reminds us, was first underlined by Warburg and, from a different perspective, by Johan Huizinga,²⁶ Francis Haskell, and Michael Baxandall. If we consider some of Gombrich’s observations on the relationship between the iconography of performance and the iconography of painting, mentioned in the essays ‘Celebrations in Venice of the Holy League and of the Victory of Lepanto’ from 1967 and ‘The Evidence of Images’ from 1968, we should probably also add the name of the Russian scholar Yuri Lotman, sadly often overlooked in western art history. In an extensive essay from 1979,²⁷ Lotman reflected on the theatricalization of history and on the representation and duplication of reality in figurative arts and, in another essay from 1990,²⁸ on the intrinsically textual nature of history in terms of its documentary, literary and visual sources.

1950, the year of Gombrich’s essay ‘Pictures and Words’ that gave its name to Biasiori’s volume, also saw the publication of Roberto Longhi’s ‘Proposte per una critica d’arte’ (‘Art criticism proposals’) in the journal *Paragone*.²⁹ In this article, too well known to be detailed here, Longhi presents his view on the function of words with respect to pictures: to serve as secondary sources that highlight the evolution of tastes and the formulation of judgment. Longhi, too, believes that this evolution started, at least in Italy, from Dante and the latter’s mention of Franco Bolognese’s ‘smiling parchments’.³⁰ However, in Longhi’s account, in Italy the process almost stops with Marco Boschini in the mid seventeenth century, only to resume in France well into the nineteenth century, where it ends with the historical novel: ‘whoever attempts to reproduce the “time” of a given artwork, be it recent or ancient, will find that in order to recompose the ineffable multiplicity of its founding features, there

²⁵ Gombrich, ‘Pictures and Words’, 94. Italian edition: ‘Immagini e Parole’, 35.

²⁶ Johan Huizinga, ‘The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought’, inaugural lecture, Groningen, 1905.

²⁷ Yuri M. Lotman, ‘Teatral’ny yazik i zhivopis (K probleme ikonicheskoy ritoriki)’, in *Stat’i po semiotike kul’tury i iskusstva*, Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskyy proekt, 2002, 388-400. English edition: Yuri Lotman, ‘Painting and the language of the theatre. Notes on the problem of iconic rhetoric’, in Alla Efimova, Lev Manovich (eds), *Tekstura. Russian essays on visual culture*, Engl. transl. Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 45-55.

²⁸ Yuri M. Lotman, ‘The problem of the historical fact’, in *Universe of the mind. A semiotic theory of culture*, Engl. transl. Ann Shukman, introduction by Umberto Eco, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1990. The Russian edition was published later: Yuri M. Lotman ‘Problema istoricheskogo fakta’, in *Vnutri myslyashchikh mirov*, Moscow: Yaziki russkoy kul’tury, 1996. Silvia Burini curated an Italian translation based on a revised edition of the text, drawn from Lotman’s archive and published in Russian under the title *Semiosfera*, Sankt-Petrburg: «Iskusstvo-SPb», 2001, 335-338. See Silvia Burini, *Jurij Lotman e il problema del fatto storico*, in Marcello Serra et al (eds), *La exuberancia de los limites. Homenaje a Jorge Lozano*, Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2013, 23-28.

²⁹ Roberto Longhi, *Proposte per una critica d’arte*, with an introduction by Giorgio Agamben, Pesaro: Portatori d’Acqua, 2014.

³⁰ Dante, *Purgatorio*, XI, 82.

neither is nor could be any other method than the equally critical method of the historical novel – evocative, polysemous...'.³¹ To Longhi, therefore, words do not grant access to our understanding of the past as visualised by pictures: the word-picture relationship has no agenda. Which is why Longhi chose to practice a kind of hyper-writing, believing that words can

establish with precision the formal qualities of figurative works, [therefore] we believe that [...] it is possible and useful to formulate and express the work's formal fabric with the appropriate wording, through a kind of verbal transfer whose literary value is solely [...] contingent on its relationship with the artwork that it aims to represent. We believe in the possibility of certain verbal equivalences between certain visions, provided that these equivalences emerge almost genetically, i.e. following the artwork's gradual creation and expression.³²

This general perspective formed the bedrock of Italian art history for most of the twentieth century, in sharp contrast with the conclusion reached by Gombrich, who claimed instead that 'There is no hope of establishing any kind of complete correspondence, a two-way traffic which would allow us to reverse the process, of translating pictures into words and back again into pictures without loss'.³³

The publication of the *Storia dell'arte italiana* in the late 1970s³⁴ inaugurated a new understanding of the verbal code in relation to the visual one, merging the two in the notion and expression of a dynamic context. Unsurprisingly, the same years saw the publication of numerous Italian editions of studies by Gombrich, from *A cavallo di un manico di scopa*³⁵ to *L'eredità di Apelle*,³⁶ and of Carlo Ginzburg's *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia*³⁷, featuring the chapter 'Da Warburg a Gombrich. Note su un problema di metodo' ('From Warburg to Gombrich. Notes on a

³¹ 'chi si cimenti nella restituzione del 'tempo' di questa o quella opera d'arte, vicina o remota che sia, trova alla fine che il metodo per ricomporre la indicibile molteplicità degli accenni più portanti non è né potrebbe essere in essenza diverso da quello, anch'esso 'critico' del romanzo storico: metodo evocativo, polisenso...'. Longhi, *Proposte*, 18.

³² 'stabilire esattamente le qualità formali di opere figurative, [per cui] noi pensiamo che [...] sia possibile ed utile stabilire e rendere la particolare orditura formale dell'opera con parole conce e acconce, con una specie di trasferimento verbale che potrà avere valore letterario, ma sempre e solo [...] in quanto mantenga un rapporto costante con l'opera che tende a rappresentare. Ci pare che sia possibile creare certe equivalenze verbali di certe visioni; equivalenze che procedano quasi geneticamente, a seconda cioè del modo con che l'opera venne gradualmente creata ed espressa'. Roberto Longhi, 'recensione a Enzo Petraccone, Luca Giordano', *L'Arte*, vol. 23, 1920, 155-156.

³³ Gombrich, 'Pictures and Words', 92. Italian edition: 'Immagini e parole', 28.

³⁴ *Storia dell'arte italiana*, Turin: Einaudi, 1979-1983.

³⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, *A cavallo di un manico di scopa: saggi di teoria dell'arte*, Italian transl. Camilla Roatta, Turin: Einaudi, 1976. English edition: *Meditations on a hobby horse and other essays on the theory of art*, London: Phaidon Press, 1963.

³⁶ Ernst H. Gombrich, *L'eredità di Apelle*, Italian transl. Maria Luisa Bassi, Turin: Einaudi, 1986. English edition: *The heritage of Apelles*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1976.

³⁷ Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia*, Turin: Einaudi, 1986.

methodological problem'), partly based on the beginning of Gombrich's essay on 'The Evidence of Images'.³⁸

This new trend in Italian art history, which somehow bridged the gap with the more strictly philosophical or stylistic approaches of the past, led in the same years to the organization of several exhibitions, including *Architettura e Utopia nella Venezia del Cinquecento* ('Architecture and Utopia in fifteenth-century Venice') in 1980, and *Giulio Romano*, in 1989, where significantly Gombrich acted as honorary president of the scientific committee (and not only because of his studies). Manfredo Tafuri (as well as Lionello Puppi, with his careful mediation between philology, documental research and context) put forward the idea that the history of artistic culture should not be limited to the history of painting, but should be expanded to include the architectural, urban, political, scientific and cultural fields. This is the background against which we must approach today these essays by Gombrich, while also reiterating the fruitful impact that his teaching had in Italy.

A few last considerations before concluding this lengthy analysis. In his essay 'Celebrations in Venice of the Holy League and of the Victory of Lepanto' (which, speaking of anticipations, dates back to 1967), Gombrich examines the depictions of the lavish events that took place in Venice in the autumn of 1571. A mysterious Raffaello Toscano describes, in particular, the staging of musical performances, art exhibitions as theatrical elements, in the merchant shops around the Rialto area: 'The pièce de resistance, apparently, was an illuminated pyramid which turned round on its axis, with statues or paintings of four divinities'. This modern *periaktos* of sorts, 'never before seen or written on paper',³⁹ could represent a significant trace of Giulio Camillo Delminio's famous *Theatro della memoria*, a work included in the aforementioned exhibition *Architettura e Utopia nella Venezia del Cinquecento*.⁴⁰ In 'The evidence of images' Gombrich deplores the limited enunciative capacity of the visual code:

Language can form propositions, pictures cannot. It seems strange to me how little this obvious fact has been stressed in the methodology of art history. We speak of the expression of *Weltanschauung*, of the world view of the artist, but we would look in vain for the illustration of even the most central philosophical propositions, such as *Universalis sunt ante rem* or *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.⁴¹

³⁸ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The evidence of images II: The priority of context over expression', in C.S. Singleton (ed.), *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, 1969, 68-104. Italian edition: 'L'evidenza delle immagini', in *Immagini e parole*, 63-126, especially 64-5.

³⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Celebrations in Venice of the Holy League and of the Victory of Lepanto' in *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art presented to Anthony Blunt*, London, 1967, 62-8. Italian edition: 'Le celebrazioni veneziane per la Lega Santa e la vittoria di Lepanto', in *Immagini e parole*, 49-62, here 58-60.

⁴⁰ On that occasion, I challenged the hypotheses of Francis A. Yates, Corrado Bologna and Lina Bolzoni, and suggested a connection between Delminio's hermetic descriptions in *L'idea del Theatro* (1550), *Tipocosmia* (1561) by Alessandro Citolini (who died in London in 1582) and several plates of Robert Fludd's *dell'Utriusque Cosmi* (1617-1618)

⁴¹ Gombrich, 'The evidence of images II', 97. Italian edition: 'L'evidenza delle immagini', 121-2.

Times have clearly changed since that passage was written in 1968. If Gombrich's claim could have raised some objections even back then, contemporary Information and Communication Technologies now provide multiple possible relations within the context of the visual code – in other words, a syntax of pictures. While some recent methodological studies (especially by Boehm and Bredekamp) have been seriously addressing the problem, in procedural terms their approach remains extremely theoretical. In the concrete practice of understanding the 'logic of pictures', much remains to be done. While waiting for the first results of the laborious project 'Venice Time Machine', jointly coordinated by Frédéric Kaplan at EPFL and by Ca' Foscari University, one can mention, to conclude, the visual telling experiences recently tested in exhibitions by artists that are particularly in tune with public taste, such as Kandinsky (*Kandinskij il cavaliere errante. In viaggio verso l'astrazione*, Milan, MudeC, 2017⁴²) or Grisha Bruskin (*Alefbet. Alfabeto della memoria*, Venice, Querini Stampalia, 2015), but which could fruitfully be applied to artworks of the early modern age, or indeed of any time.

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⁴² Giuseppe Barbieri, *Visualtelling. Kandinskij e il multimediale nell'arte*, in *Kandinskij il cavaliere errante. In viaggio verso l'astrazione*, edited by Silvia Burini and Ada Masoero, Milan: Il Sole24Ore Cultura, 2017, 113-117.