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AN INTERMEDIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF SEEING IN 'NEO-MODERNIST' ITALIAN WRITING

Curzio Malaparte, Giovanni Testori, and the Visual Arts (1944-1960)

ABSTRACT: While the role of the visual arts in modernist writing has become well-established, particularly in the Italian context (Palazzeschi, Bontempelli, Savinio), the centrality of the image in text continued well into the postwar period. 'Neo-modernist' writing perpetuated modernist style and form via Proustian *ekphrasis* albeit with different objectives: namely re-capturing the aura of the art object in a moment of cultural homogenization and presenting social critique of the "affluent society" through altered modes of perception and phenomenology of seeing (Merleau-Ponty). This paper focuses on how Curzio Malaparte and Giovanni Testori engage in strategies of intermediality and visualization as key aspects of a literary style at the threshold between modernist form and novel postwar subjectivities. Malaparte, through a wide range of pictorial references in *La pelle* (1949), wrests painting from an idyllic antiquarianism, and instead employs it as a crucial vector of memory and vitality. A similar approach to visualization occurs in Testori's *Dio di Roserio* (1954), where the imagistic subjectivity of the main character paints a Brianza textured by Cezanne, hurtling towards the destruction of solidarity wrought by the *boom economico*. A close examination of visibility in Malaparte and Testori's fiction offers a powerful rebuttal to the hegemonic position of neorealism in Italian culture after World War II, which prescribed to varying degrees a cultural politics dependent on "realistic" representation in service of a new humanism, and shows the continued relevance of painting in mid-century European fiction and neo-modernism.

KEYWORDS: Italian modernism; Neo-modernism and the visual arts; Malaparte; Testori.

The interpretative malleability of defining modernism continues to pose a challenge for understanding 20th century culture. The world of the moderns is defined by estrangement, alienation, rupture, and more than any one correlative: crisis.¹ But how does this help us situate literature and other artistic mediums as modernist? A crucial

¹ The significance of the concept of crisis in the historiography of modernism comes in large part from Reinhardt Koselleck (Koselleck 1988).

requirement must be to expand it away from its conceptual origins, as a label to read the works of canonical Anglo-American authors, and engage with modernisms in different linguistic and geographical contexts and traditions. The specific task of addressing Italian modernism has taken off in the last twenty years, leading to new literary and cultural genealogies that directly impact our understanding of transnational cultural networks, the role of translation in creative production, modernism under fascism, among many other areas of interest (Somigli and Moroni 2004; Ben-Ghiat 2001; Donnarumma 2006; Cangiano 2018). This paper is concerned with addressing under the rubric of Italian modernisms, the neo-modernism of postwar Italian fiction and its intermedial engagement with the visual arts, most specifically painting. A number of Italian authors into the 1960s, influenced particularly by Proustian *ekphrasis* and immersed in an artistic milieu which included Etruscan, Renaissance, and Baroque art, alongside *pittura metafisica*, maintained a linkage between fictional writing and painting (Pratesi 2023; Jewell 2004). Two authors in particular, Curzio Malaparte and Giovanni Testori, prioritized the image in their literary texts in order to provoke the reader to face some of the most pressing problems in postwar Italy: the social, moral, and economic devastation caused by fascist Italy's participation in World War II and the subsequent full-scale anthropological mutation of the *boom economico*. I argue that the literary techniques of pictorialism and *ekphrasis* employed by Malaparte and Testori, in addition to a more general intermedial poetics influenced by the visual arts and the history of art, is a continuation of discernable modernist experiments in form that emphasize narrative fragmentation and vision as impressionist and provisional. The presence of painting in the prose of both authors centers the constitutive role of the subject and their imaginative faculties in the description and narration of an external reality undergoing tectonic historical changes. Although much work has been done to broaden the influences of modernism to include mass culture and the proliferation of different types of media (Pease 2011), both Malaparte and Testori are culturally revanchist in their desire to preserve certain hierarchies of cultural production. While Malaparte was certainly influenced by other mediums, most notably cinema, both Testori and Malaparte still consider the artwork as a privileged hermeneutical space. The visual arts as they are referenced, reworked, and transposed into their writing open the enclosures of past historical time and cultural tradition, allowing new ways of seeing the present. Their engagement with the history of painting, therefore, stands in marked contrast with postmodernist deployments of visual culture in text that instead seek to highlight pastiche, reproduction, and the destruction of any distinction between "high culture" and mass culture (Jameson 1991, 280).

Pioneering studies, including *Pictorialist Poetics* and *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, have since the 1980s highlighted the importance of visual readings of modern literary texts (Scott 2009; Bal 1997), creating interdisciplinary and intermedial

connections that showcase the increasing contamination, appropriation, and exchange between different mediums and forms. Such a cross-pollination becomes ever more evident and appropriate considering the deluge of images in mass society created by photography, cinema, television, and the need to explore how those modes of seeing become transplanted in written text. The importance ascribed by Malaparte and Testori in their respective texts to the multiplication of vision and the tenacious attempt to actualize a “critical realism,” in contrast to both a *letteratura impegnata* or an insular subjectivism, is in large part realized through strategies of visualization and allusions to art as a means to expand how texts engage with images in order to position them as a crucial means of understanding reality.² This is despite the dominant tendency until recently to read Malaparte as antimodern and Testori as neo-realist (Buonuomo 1982).

Even if classically the relationship between word and image was most closely associated between poetry and painting, fiction has the capacity to “paint” visual images and engage with artwork through actual and notional ekphrasis.³ Artworks appear and play crucial roles, for example, through a wide range of 19th century novelists, including Balzac, Zola, D’Annunzio, Wilde, Huysmans, and Maupassant (Muhlstein 2017). This continued into the early 20th century and perhaps in an even more intense fashion as Laura Marcus argues. “Many modernist writers turned with exceptional frequency and fullness to the visual arts, in their endeavors to define and work through questions of aesthetics and ideology ... to this extent, literary modernism is a visual culture” (2015, 240). In the 20th century, modernist authors including Wyndham Lewis, Aldo Palazzeschi, and Marcel Proust, are regarded by critics and scholars as engaged not only with the history of painting in their writing but also with creating “images littéraires” (Bal). In Proust, and in many works of modernist fiction, the multiplication of the sensible is produced by the privileging of vision in text, both through intermedial experiments in form and through an explicit use of the visual arts in prose. Both

² György Lukács, in his *Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, uses the term critical realism to find a middle ground between modernism and social realism. Critical realists engage with modernism through a “critical detachment” which is able to use different stylistic techniques while simultaneously returning to an objective whole or context where those sensations or perceptions take place in. Critical realism is attentive to the ways cultural hegemony molds human behavior, and holds in high esteem the place of perspective, the use of detail and structure, which for Lukacs are dismissed by both modernists and naturalist writers. The notion of *letteratura impegnata* or *littérature engagée* was an influential current in fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, due to Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).

³ Since at least the Roman poet Horace, who wrote in his *Ars Poetica* “Ut pictura poesis” (“As is painting, so is poetry”), painting and poetry have been seen as complementary and symbiotic “sister arts.” Despite the obvious sensorial, cognitive, and experiential differences between image and text, W.J.T. Mitchell contends that both “have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange and other forms of intercourse.” W.J.T. Mitchell, “Word and Image,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 49.

Malaparte and Testori were deeply influenced by modernist writing's incorporation of visual culture and wrote critically on modern art. What though, is the significance of labeling the works of Malaparte and Testori as neo-modernist, instead of as merely exceptions to the rule or as late prodigy of a modernism that had run its course? One important feature that distinguishes neo-modernism from modernism, is a change in historical perspective, one that is articulated in various strands as apocalyptic, millenarian, or irremediable. Emphasis switches from the disorientation of straddling two worlds to the complete subsumption of the old world and its concomitant features under the rubric of a new and totalizing form of economic and cultural development that hasn't been fully mapped out yet (the *humus* of postmodernism). The desire to chart the anthropological transformations of the postwar period is carried out in neo-modernist fiction by both experimenting in a form that hints at the phenomenological disorientation of the rapid change and laying a final brick in what Jean-François Lyotard called a "metanarrative" of culture and historical sense no longer seen as adequate or even alive (1984). Pier Paolo Pasolini famously articulated this sentiment in similar fashion when he mourned "la scomparsa delle lucciole" (2015) and the last text that Malaparte wrote was *Mamma marcia*, a lamentation of postwar Italy as the figurative embodiment of a rotting corpse that somehow continues to live. Tiziano Toracca's claim that a neo-modernist text is distinguished from a modernist one in part by its attention to the "sfera pubblica dell'esistenza," defined more concretely as, "eventi storici, trasformazioni sociali, questioni etiche e politiche, diagnosi del tempo, critica del costume" (2022, 5) is a strongly plausible one, and a key to unlocking our own tired "metanarratives" of 20th century literary schema. If neo-modernist fiction hyperbolically narrates the "crisis" of postwar culture, it does so from a sense that that reality can be understood and investigated even as it gestures towards the future as irreconcilably different. Tyrus Miller in his seminal study *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (1999), posits that the category of late modernism (i.e. neo-modernism) both elucidates "an alternative depiction of modernism" (1999) that had already run its course and was already beginning to be canonized by the 1930s with the prospect of novel perspectives on mid-century culture: "late modernist writing...strongly anticipates future developments" (7). If modernism has been relegated to an increasing antiquarianism and our contemporaneity is still defined by postmodernism, then the firmament of our present milieu comes, in part, from a mid-20th century neo-modernism. In continuity with modernist authors from Marcel Proust to Virginia Woolf, the pictorial writing of Malaparte and Testori serves to destabilize the observational self. It is however laden with an additional caveat: the bleeding of the visual arts into narrative prose is not employed as a sort of synesthetic clarion call to the crises of modern existence, but rather as a bookend to the continuous, iterative existence of European culture, and an appeal

for the reader to expand their perceptive capacities in the construction of a new mid-century one.

Painting (Neo-Modern) Images with Words: Uses of Visualization and *Ekphrasis* in the poetics of Malaparte and Testori

In a letter titled “Lana caprina” published in the spring 1940 edition of the literary magazine *Prospettive*, Malaparte creates a clear collocation between the development of the war and the need for a literature that can respond to its cultural and social effects and transformations. “Sullo sfondo di questo infelicissimo dramma europeo, i problemi dello spirito, quelli della cultura, e della letteratura in particolare, acquistano un’importanza tanto maggiore, quanto più gravi sono i problemi politici che la guerra pone in gioco” (Malaparte 2014, 358). Written in June 1940, shortly after the entrance of Italy into the war with Malaparte drafted as a captain in the Alpine Regiments, the letter acts as a manifesto criticizing a generation of writers who responded to the outbreak of First World War with tropes of bravura and sacred duty. Through his two most significant novels *Kaputt* (1944) and *La pelle* (1949), Malaparte hybridizes his prose into an unstable mixture between reportage and autofiction in order to move beyond the mimesis of realism, hinting at the wholesale transformations of life caused by total war. The use of images in this breakdown of mimetic reliability is a critical formal choice that grafts onto the unreliable narrator the simultaneous derealization of experience with a recourse to the sublimity of the visual object as narrated in diegesis. *Kaputt* and *La pelle* can be read in a neo-modernist prism for how the mobilization of visual referents canonically held in the Western history of art are used to narrate the apocalypse of the Second World War, aestheticizing spectacular violence and corroding a sense of separation between the narrator’s subjectivity and exterior events. The duality of continually layering onto the literary text canonical works of art that act as metonyms of Western civilization with a description of a world totally destroyed (“Eravamo...i due soli esseri umani sopravvissuti alla distruzione del mondo”; Malaparte 2010, 340) creates an unresolved tension regarding the meaning of history and the inheritance of past cultural transmission – two themes critical to neo-modernist fiction. The continued influence on Malaparte’s style from Surrealism (Sica 2008), which laid focus on inner subjectivity, and modernist authors such as Marcel Proust (Monaci 2024), who saw the literary text as investigating how recollection and association shape interiority, put him

out of sync with the turn towards a politically-engaged naturalism under Neorealism by the mid-1940s in cinema and literature.⁴

However, it is precisely on account of these complex tendencies that Malaparte's fiction proves crucial in portraying trauma, total war, and selfhood. The continual detournement of fixed conceptual categories and boundaries, from literary structure and genre to allegory and hyperrealism, emphasizes the epistemic breakdown caused by the scale of the Second World War. Notorious for how his baroque and surrealistic style documented the monstrosities and crimes committed during World War II, Malaparte is an author who in particular grapples with the importance of image in text via *ekphrasis* and the history of painting. The necessity of eliciting the contours of the invisible and the surreal from the folds of everyday life, and approaching them through the autonomy of an art structured equally through observation as much as imagination shapes an essential aspect of Malaparte's war writings. As Lucrezia Ercoli writes, "La sua concezione dell'arte si erge sulla tesi di fondo del realismo magico: solo rinunciando alla pura mimesi, l'arte svela l'enigmatica verità di una realtà irragionevole" (2011, 67). For twenty years, Malaparte worked with and was influenced by surrealist and magical realist movements, both as a prominent editor and cultural commentator for the literary magazines "900" (1926-1927) and *Prospettive* (1937-1941) and as a fiction writer who incorporated many surrealist elements in his short story collections *Fughe in prigione* (1936), *Sangue* (1937), and *Donna come me* (1940). In 1926, Malaparte together with the writer Massimo Bontempelli (1878-1960) founded the cultural magazine "900" as a forum to articulate new artistic and literary forms, and publish works of prose in line with those considerations. Although Malaparte collaborated with Bontempelli on "900" for only a year, he published the article "La folie du 'Seicento' italien", finding strategies of the *stupore* in the Baroque Seicento much as Bontempelli had done in the Quattrocento, and frequently employed the technique of *stupore* throughout his prose fiction. Malaparte's poetics and writings are equally shaped by the Italian reception of Surrealism in the 1930s. In a series of articles published in 1939-1940 in the magazine *Prospettive* which became one of the principal disseminators of Surrealism in Italy (Martellini 2014, 82),

⁴What neorealism was, both for cinema and for literature, provoked a strenuous debate and it ultimately eluded easy definition. Carlo Bo summarized the following: "Il fenomeno del neorealismo italiano, almeno in letteratura, è nato da una suggestione polemica e dalla necessità di risolvere su altri piani e con altre voci un problema di espressione che aveva raggiunto delle forme rigide, chiuse mentre si toccavano certi punti alti della prosa d'arte" (2015, 16). The sort of codifiable definitions given by Zavattini were largely rebuked by even authors seen as the most clearly neorealist, such as Vittorini or Pavese. Its literary aesthetic is broadly connected with a privileging of social realism, documentary, the witness, and a certain ethos of humanism. Neorealism's notion of culture as a conciliatory venue that would cement the newly created First Republic as antifascist while engaging with the rapidly urbanizing and literate Italian population were accomplished however by marginalizing literary practices and authors that did not properly atone for political collaborationism or directly participate in its concern for mimetic realism.

Malaparte sought to create stylistic connections common between the baroque, magical realism, and surrealism which could be exploited in the provocation or revelation of the strange, grotesque, and astonishing in experience, in order for art to enlarge its expressive forms. Malaparte sees in Surrealism a means for the reactivation of enchantment through an art work's relentless refusal of the objective world, and its insistence on its own logic, a theme which also surfaces in his fascination with archaic forms of the sacred.⁵



Figure 1. "Pagamento del tributo" Masaccio, c. 1425



Figure 2. Photo of the Piazzale Loreto massacre in Milan, August 10, 1944. Italian soldiers of the Repubblica di Salò killed 15 partisans, under orders from the Nazi SS. Mussolini's corpse would be displayed in the same piazza in April 1945.

Referents to the history of art and the prioritized place of the image over the plot in Malaparte's postwar fiction act as rhetorical devices to produce forms of *ekphrasis* that

⁵ Martellini on Malaparte's interpretation of *stupore*: "Espressione di un'arte non intesa a meravigliare, ma ad inventare e creare di nuovo la realtà, a leggerla non nella sua logica e nel suo realismo obbiettivo, ma in modo magico" (81).

compel the reader towards unsettled modes of perceiving technology, war, and the totalitarian state. While writers such as Henri Barbusse, Ernst Junger, or Aldo Palazzeschi had used imagistic techniques influenced by Futurism and Surrealism to describe the novelty and brutality of World War I, Malaparte is engaged throughout his novels with the continued relevance of painting and its ways of seeing not as superimposed on existing referents out-there in the world, but as perceptive compositions of the world *itself*. The necessity of creating new forms of what Italo Calvino describes as *visibilità* corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, where perception, memory, consciousness, and imagination are equally accounted for as valid mechanisms for the construction of narrative and reality.⁶

Works of art explicitly referenced by Malaparte include paintings of the Italian Renaissance, the Spanish Baroque, and pastoral painting of Naples and Vesuvius.⁷

⁶Merleau-Ponty in his 1961 essay "Eye and Mind" writes, "The idea of universal painting, of a totalization of painting, of painting's being fully and definitively accomplished is an idea bereft of sense. For painters, if any remain, the world will always be yet to be painted" (1994, 148). The painter, through an awareness of the world's relentless changing of form, refuses the construction of discreet and finite processes which would definitively define it, in a similar way to how Roland Barthes describes, in contrast to the Author, how the scriptor, "is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now" (1977 145). Images, and the visual arts, offer a crucial means by which to resurrect perception and imagination out of the dirge of habit, predictability, ignorance, and assumptions. For Merleau-Ponty, the first task in constructing a new phenomenology of seeing is to reduce the distance between subject and object through a process of reversibility where both monism and dualism are superseded. "The seer is caught up in the seen... to emigrate into the world, to be seduced and captivated by it, 'so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen' (47). Instead of insisting on a discrete self that observes phenomena taking place adjacent and outside of oneself, depth is accrued through a continual reversibility of positions between that which is seeing and that which is seen, to an extent where the "invisibility" of the supposedly exterior entity is able to be seen or articulated through a mode of vision. Reversibility for Merleau-Ponty, must be cojoined with vision which acts as a jumpstart to the multiplication of virtuality. "Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside – the fission whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself" (136). Vision is an intimately personal process, inextricable from the singularity of the seer and their modes of expression and style. It is not merely perception, but an awareness of being incarnated in the world in a specific spatial-temporal realm, and creatively developing "fascination" so that this sense becomes a vision facilitated by a personal mediation of meaning, not only a passive view (Merleau-Ponty 1994; Barthes 1977; Calvino 1988).

⁷In *La pelle*, the dwarfs of the Pendino di Santa Barbara in Naples are a direct descendant of Velázquez and, "la fronte di quelle nane è scavata delle stesse profonde rughe che solcano la fronte delle orribili vecchie di Goya." Maurizio Serra, Malaparte's biographer makes the argument that representations of Naples in *La pelle* fundamentally altered the popular imagination of the city: "Ciò che Malaparte distruggeva scientemente era la tradizionale immagine pittorresca di Napoli come città 'annema e core' diffusa nel mondo intero dalle cartoline e dalle canzonette. Napoli prendeva ora il posto di Jassy e della

Martínez Garrido argues that the presence of artworks becomes a totem of a dying European culture, and thus functions as a visual metaphor for social transformations underway: “La laudatio alla bellezza-artistica e al peso determinante che la cultura classica del Mediterraneo ha avuto nella formazione dell’immaginario europeo; entrambe sparite definitivamente, secondo l’autore, dopo l’arrivo dei soldati americani e la vittoria degli alleati nel 1945” (2017). Despite his engagement with Western visual culture and its pivotal role in the representation and narration of destruction and war, Malaparte maintains an ambivalent attitude towards its future comprehensibility due to the rise of mass culture and a changing European culture.⁸

Malaparte’s narrator often detaches himself from his immediate setting, especially in moments of extreme violence, where descriptions of aerial bombings and massacres resemble extant works of art. The use of pictorial analogy and the flight from realism in the description of battles, massacres, pogroms, and mass killing also raises ethical problems regarding aesthetics, testimony, and the responsibility of the witness. In “Il processo,” the eleventh chapter of *La pelle*, young fascists shot by communist partigiani of the Divisione “Potente” are transfigured from a pile of corpses into a mountain of grey plaster in the guise of the early Renaissance painter Masaccio (Fig. 1). “Parevano dipinti da Masaccio nell’intonaco dell’aria grigia. Illuminati a picco dalla luce di gesso sporco che cadeva dal cielo nuvoloso, tutti tacevano, immoti, il viso rivolto tutti dalla stessa parte. Un filo di sangue colava giù per gli scalini di marmo” (2010, 307). This imposition of Masaccio’s imprimatur and the careful choreography of the bodies both gives them a dignity that otherwise would not be available to them, but also distances us from the act of death in a way distinctly different from earlier uses of the corpse as a blurring of boundaries. Deeply disillusioned by the prospect of a redemptive postwar future, the layering of art onto contemporary violence then becomes a way to memorialize while creating distance from the trauma of the present (Baldasso 2022, 172-198; Martínez Garrido 2017, 146). This idea of *ekphrasis* in Malaparte could also be applied to how the death of an impoverished young woman, Concetti, in an air-raid in Naples, when placed in the palazzo of Prince of Candia, is “transformed” into the Clorinda of Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, rendered into painting notably by Tintoretto, Nicholas Poussin and Artemisia Gentileschi (Fig. 3). “Quel cadavere, disteso su quella tavola, dava alla scena un tono chiaro e quieto, faceva della sala, della gente, un paesaggio pieno di serenità, dominato dall’indifferenza alta e semplice della natura” (253). The proximity of the naked corpse being washed to the imposing wall panels recounting Tasso’s poem, mixed with the assault of colors, porcelain, candelabra, and crystals allows the narrator

Bessarabia, di Varsavia e dell’Ucraina, nella sua descrizione dei disastri della guerra, che restavano fondamentalmente gli stessi, a est come a ovest, a sud come a nord del mondo” (2012, 345).

⁸ For further theoretical considerations on the changing function of the art object in a consumer society see Adorno 1998).

and his fellow guests to act as spectators: “noi contemplavamo dalla soglia quella scena dolce e viva” (255-256).



Figure 3. “Tancred Baptizing Clorinda” Domenico Tintoretto, c. 1586-1600



Figure 4. “La danza di Salomè” Filippo Lippi, 1464.

In these examples, *ekphrasis* is taking narrative episodes of ad-hoc retributive justice and civilian casualties of air raids and transforming them into an image lending solemnity, gravitas, and a sense of purpose behind their deaths. The transcendence of art for the narrator, even amidst suffering and at the expense of bearing witness, comes during a reconnaissance mission in his hometown of Prato to see if there are any German soldiers still stationed there. He remembers an earlier evening when Jack, the American officer, and the narrator Malaparte, saw lights glimmering over the city.

Io dicevo a Jack: ‘Sono gli occhi delle Madonne e degli Angeli di Filippino Lippi.’ ‘Perché mi vuoi far paura?’ diceva Jack. ‘Sono le lucciole.’ Ed io, ridendo, gli dicevo: ‘Quel tenue bagliore laggiù, presso la fontana che canta nell’ombra, è il bagliore dei veli della Salomè di Filippino Lippi... bisogna essere un concittadino di Filippino Lippi, per capire che non sono le lucciole, ma gli occhi degli Angeli e delle Madonne di Filippino (319).

This passage shows not only that, “la guerra, in quanto evento tragico, è qui chiaramente contrapposta alla bellezza cromatica e armoniosa degli affreschi di Filippo Lippi” (Martínez Garrido) but also underscores the insistence on aesthetic escapism to sustain a sense of identity as European and Italian for the narrator. Salvatore Francesco Lattarulo interprets the role of art in this episode as a form of consolation: “Solo la

bellezza dell'arte, pare essere il vibrato monito dell'intellettuale libero, può a conti fatti 'ingentilire' le brutture di Caino" (2016, 188). It is important however to emphasize, the subjective nature of the narrator's observations, and the allusions and appearances of art in the wasteland of the Italian Civil War are fleeting and contingent. The interspersions of art throughout the text serves not as an expressionist vision of the eternal autonomy of art, but as the final abnegation of its force, reduced to spectral images confused with glowworms (Fig. 4). Pictorial references and the construction of image in general allow Malaparte's oeuvre to simultaneously be grounded in a cultural continuity and the fashioning of radical new experience. Elucidating the function of the image in Malaparte's fiction allows the possibility to reconceptualize the fragmentation of experience through technological total war as *ekphrasis*, and consider other genres besides testimony and realism as dutifully "authentic" in the narration of violence.



Figure 5. "Herodias" Francesco Cairo, before 1635.

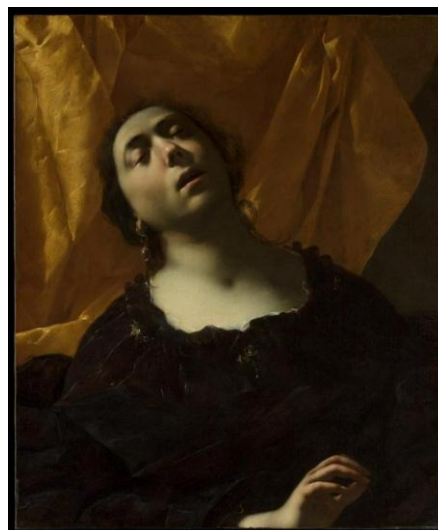


Figure 6. "Erodiade con la testa del Battista" Francesco Cairo, c. 1635.

Testori, born a generation after Malaparte, chronologically charts the path from the carnage of Naples and Rome in the 1940s to the explosion of economic growth in the Pianura Padana in the 1950s-60s. Testori, a painter, art critic, playwright, and fiction writer, was always inextricably intermedial. "La mia vera biblioteca è appesa ai muri" Testori remarked (Dall'Ombra 2003, 29), highlighting both his role as collector, and his refusal to limit the confluence of mediums.¹ His initial published writings in the 1940s were art reviews. He had his breakthrough with a 1952 essay on the Lombard painter

¹ In another instance, when asked who were his literary influences, Testori said "sono tutti pittori" citing Tanzio da Varallo, Caravaggio, and Cairo (Cappello 1983, 3).

Francesco Cairo (1607-1655), and began publishing throughout the 1950s in Roberto Longhi's magazine *Paragone*. Longhi, one of the most important art historians of the 20th century in Italy, read many drafts of Testori's fictional works, and as Davide Dall'Ombra claims, "correggeva, talvolta influenzandone profondamente la stesura" (2024, 100). Testori began writing *Il dio di Roserio*, his fictional debut in 1951, shortly after meeting Longhi. He continued writing while preparing the catalogues for two shows: the 1953 "I pittori della realtà in Lombardia" at the Palazzo Reale in Milan and the 1955 "Mostra del manierismo piemontese e lombardo del Seicento" in Turin. The infusion of visual art is inseparable from Testori's written work, and can be most explicitly highlighted in his poems *Suite per Francis Bacon* and his 1969 play *Erodiade*, which takes material inspiration not only from the biblical story of John the Baptist but also from one of Francesco Cairo's most famous pictorial subjects, Herodias, the mother of Salome. Much like Malaparte, Testori was fascinated with the artwork of the 17th century and developments in figuration and *chiaroscuro* in the wake of Caravaggio. Their mutual interest in the carnal and visual expressions of ecstasy or *stupore* give both of their usages of the visual arts in writing a sense of morbidity, of figures in liminal zones between death and life, aesthetic imprints that are not only meditative *memento mori*, but also figural gestures of the anthropological mutations at work in modern warfare and its postwar aftermath.

In her reading of Cairo's paintings of Herodias, the art historian Bronwen Wilson writes, "Death is prolonged through its spectacle that betrays the limits of representation in the face of death... the horror of the separation of the head and its mutilation appeals to the beholder to reassemble mentally the violated parts back together again" (2011, 372). The presence of Cairo's Herodias, at the threshold of boundaries marking subject from matter, life from death or pleasure from agony, runs through Testori's tragic female heroines (Figs. 5-6). A figure that appears in almost all of his literary works, they lay bare the dysfunction and discontent of the Milanese periphery's subproletariat, showing their fragmentation and disaggregation in the machine of a new economy and expanding city. Their decay and ostensibly tragic ends, instead of resting in a morbid petrification, becomes a polemical jolt for new forms. Arialda, the protagonist of the eponymous play (1960), stands out in her cry against the injustice of life that render her spectral yet defiant. In the play's final lines Arialda cries out for death to come and take all of the living, following the abandonment of her suitor Amilcare and as her son Eros is dying after a car crash. "E adesso venite giù, o morti. Venite. Perché se i vivi son così, meglio voi. Meglio la vostra compagnia. Venite tutti. E portateci nelle vostre casse" (Testori 1976, 227). Arialda is intoning the apocalypse, seeing nothing better on the horizon than the complete destruction of her social universe. In its tragic, but insistent valence, however, her deathly embrace could be fatalistic, but not nihilistic or absurd. Its indictment of economic precarity ideologically rendered as destiny is a rebellion towards

non-existence against her very disenfranchisement. Testori takes from the baroque painting of Cairo an insistence on the sacralization of the flesh and the iconographic quality of the destitute.



Figure 7. "Paessagio sul fiume (Adda)" Ennio Morlotti, 1955



Figure 8. "Gli amanti" Ennio Morlotti, 1950.

Testori's *I segreti di Milano* cycle (1954-1961), composed of short stories, novels and plays including *Il dio di Roserio* and *L'Arialdia*, can be considered, as Luigi Cepparrone argues, a series of frescos on the *boom economico*'s transformation of Italian national life, and the production of enormous interstitial zones of cultural and social impoverishment (2018, 119). Read in large part alongside the Roman novels of Pier Paolo Pasolini or Vasco Pratolini's chronicles of the working-class in Florence, Testori's stylistic

experimentation and engagement with the visual arts in creating modes of multi-perspectivism has been critically undervalued. An essential aspect in understanding Testori's oeuvre, in addition to the influence of 17th century painting, is the importance of modern art, from Paul Cézanne to Ennio Morlotti. As Giuseppe Frangi writes, "gli interessi di Testori siano da subito trasversali tra arte del passato e arte contemporanea" (2023). The lessons of impressionism, expressionism, and abstraction present themselves in the text on the centrality of impression on perception, and the need to never completely fix a perspective from a monolithic, univocal position. *Il dio di Roserio*, Testori's first fictional work, works in a neo-modernist poetics largely through its insistence on impressionism and fractured perspectivism, while simultaneously presenting a deep critique of the new neo-capitalistic logic of instrumentalizing human life through competition (Toracca 2022, 175-186). The relevance in the novella of the disjointed Brianza landscape and the stylistic configuration of passerbys, neighbors, citizens, and people in general into abstracted containers (in relationship with the degeneration of the human in form both in Cairo and Bacon) was influenced by Testori's interest in the 1950s in the work of Cezanne, Morlotti, and Renato Guttuso. Morlotti, in particular, was a source of inspiration, with Testori writing several articles and curating catalogues on his work. In a 1956 essay he describes a series of figurative paintings by Morlotti (Fig. 8): "Sono, queste figure, come sunti del disperato amore con cui l'uomo moderno cerca di resistere alle insinuazioni delle prigionie ideologiche, di cogliere dalla vita il massimo di vitalità; di sperimentarla nella sua tumultuosa profondità, nel suo mistero. I lacerti di uno spirito, l'europeo, che non abdica, dopo tutto, alla sua forza: tanto più vividi e sacri, quanto più raccolti sull'orlo di un precipizio storico." In sync with this couple on the canvas, in search of vitality on the abyss of the European mid-century, are the protagonists Dante Pessina and Sergio Consonni, two professional bicyclists who are visualized in the text of *Il dio* more as speeding assemblages of man-machine than fixed naturalist portraits, a consequence of the use of interior monologue with few omniscient descriptions (it was in fact this aspect of Testori's style, that led the first chapter of *Il dio* to be received with mixed reviews from Testori's editors Calvino and Vittorini at Einaudi, and was excised when *Il dio* was included in the 1958 collection *Il ponte della Ghisolfa*). Another influence of Morlotti, the landscape functions in the text again through the use of interior monologue. The outside world is strictly seen through the prism of the characters speeding down the countryside, where optical illusions abound and colors blur. Discussing the centrality of the landscape as a character in *Il dio*, Nicolo Rubbi makes the case that, "la frammentazione va attuandosi in un processo in cui Testori tenta di coinvolgere, e far immergere, il lettore" (2016, 280). It is in some of Testori's most visually arresting lines that the reader is called forth to conjure their own sense of vision. "Si era incominciato a vedere il lago, come se venisse su verso noi, che continuavamo a pedalargli contro...in alto, il lago continuava a venir su...per scomparire poi, nella

nebbia, che continuava a venire su e a confondersi col resto del cielo” (2018, 27). The reader is not seeing Consonni from a distance or merely immersed into his psychological states, but is seeing with him as the lake and sky seemingly merge. In a 1953 essay, Testori considers Morlotti’s evolution from Cezanne as consisting of a “naturalismo di partecipazione,” an aspect equally crucial to the narrative strategy of *Il dio*. The visual strategies required to see into Morlotti’s *Paessagio sul fiume* (Adda) (Fig. 7) function in a similar fashion to those of a literary nature in *Il dio*.

The author’s deep engagement with the visual arts, both off the page and formalistically within the texts, anchors him to a deep tradition within modernism of intermediality between “the sister arts” (Hasgtrum 1987). But the additional relevance of intermediality for neo-modernism comes from how its formal characteristic acts as a repudiation of larger postwar historical forces. Testori, in an interview from 1979 frames the problem in terms of how Brianza and the hinterlands of Milan had in the span of forty years become unrecognizable, markedly different from the setting painted in *Il dio*:

La periferia di Milano, per esempio, era straordinaria, era di una umanità! Si passava veramente dalla campagna alla città, gradatamente, senza scossoni. Oggi la periferia è ridotta proprio a quella specie di cubi, dove la gente abita come in carceri, dove non sono stati fatti i minimi servizi, i minimi giardini, le minime possibilità d’ esistere; non ci sono bar, non ci sono luoghi d’incontro, non c’è nulla (1979).

The project of *I segreti di Milano* then becomes an attempt to chronicle that transformation – a modus operandi peculiar to neo-modernist fiction. The recourse to painting and the visual arts in Testori and Malaparte speak to a connection with previous modernist culture, but for purposes that transcend the adoption of experimentalist prose as the inauguration of new (individualist) subjectivities. The intermedial quality of Malaparte and Testori’s writing connects them to the lineage of modernist intermediality but also simultaneously distances them as well. Pure or distilled experimentation of form, a hallmark of modernism, is complemented with and by the authors’ polemical social and political critiques of Italian and European historical development, delivered precisely via their intermedial poetics of vision. Their creation of “images littéraires” to expand the limit of how texts engage with visuality positions them as a crucial means of understanding the role of art in the sensory world.

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