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INTRODUCTION

Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.
Paul Klee, *Schöpferische Konfession* (*Creative Credo*, 1920).

“Another Way of Telling”

“Une photo est toujours invisible : ce n’est pas elle qu’on voit”. Roland Barthes (1980, 18) maintained that endless plots hide behind any photograph, and wondered about their narrative and visual context.¹ We usually consider photographs as instantaneous depictions, which only exist in a dimension of pure synchronicity—each fixing a *punctum* in the course of time. On their borders, however, their narrative power poses a number of questions about what lies beyond, namely, about what happened before the photographer took the picture or after he did. In Lacan’s terms,² photographs arouse a desire to just glimpse what lies beyond their margins, and to imagine what they cannot show. “Telle est la Photo : elle ne sait dire ce qu’elle donne à voir”, according to Barthes (1980: 156). While presenting images surrounded by silence, photographs are impelled by this very silence to hunt after a story. After all, a narrative drive is usually triggered by the workings of desire (Brooks 1984).³

Photography—as John Berger (1982) put it—is “another way of telling”, with a specific narrative language which differs from, and combines in various ways with the language of written narrative: “Yet it might be that photographic ambiguity, if recognised and accepted as such, could offer to photography a unique means of expression. Could this ambiguity suggest another way of telling?” (Berger 1982, 92). Berger’s answer was yes, of course, but defining this photographic “way of telling” is a complex task, because the very notion of artistic “language” turns out to be deeply text-centric, and to neglect the specificity of pictures. In “What Do Pictures Really Want?” (1996), W.J.T. Mitchell maintained that pictures ask their

¹ On Barthes’ ideas on photography see Bachten 2009 and Nachtergaele 2012.

² Lacan 2013 [1958-1959]. On “optical unconscious” see also Krauss 1993.

³ On the role of desire in image theory, see also Mitchell 2005, 57-75.

viewers to be taken for what they are. Photographs may be compared to literature, but nevertheless remain something different: “Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language” (Mitchell 1996, 82). For the past thirty years at least, the intersections between literature and photography have given rise to a wide and steadily growing field of research thanks to the proliferation and mixture of various forms of verbal and nonverbal communication which have added up to the ‘mimetic capital’ of contemporary culture and society. While both literature and photographs give voice to a narrative need (Armstrong 1999), they rely on quite different means, whose comparability is at the same time undeniable and questionable. The challenge consists in unravelling a tangled dialectics of analogies and differences.⁴

Even if a snapshot seems to be instantaneous, photographs always evoke the passing of time, thus pursuing a narrative effect (Sontag 1977). For some years now, teenagers from all over the world have been used to tell their stories by sharing images on Instagram or videos on Snapchat, waiting for textual comments by their friends. In this respect, literary theory has been lying behind and still lacks a critical lexicon apt to understand and describe the transformations imposed on narrative language by the explosion of images in contemporary society (Jameson 1991). Our age has been called a “post-photographic” era (Mitchell 1992),⁵ as our traditional habit of separating images from texts no longer holds in a society where communication incessantly mixes and contaminates these two dimensions. Investigating the narrative structures and rhetorical strategies of phototexts and the interactions images and words weave together calls for an inter-semiotic analysis aiming at drawing up the contours of a new lexicon.

Literature and Photography

Ever since the time of its invention in the XIX century (Hamon 2007), photography has become one of the steadily recurrent features of the

⁴ A scholarly bibliography on literature and photography can be found in Lambrechts and Salu 1992, beside what has been done within various national cultures. In English, see Hunter 1987, Schloss 1987, Hughes and Noble 2003, Brunet 2009; in French, Mourier-Casile and Moncond’huy 1996, Ortel 2002, Hamon 2007, Stafford 2010; in German, Hoesterey and Weisstein 1993, Krauss 2000; in Italian, see Marcenaro 2004, Dolfi 2005-2007, Alù and Pedri 2015, Albertazzi 2017; in Spanish, Barraco, Lemagny 1998. The notion of “mimetic capital” is due to Stephen Greenblatt; for its visual version, see Osborne 2000.

⁵ Two years after Mitchell, Batchen wrote about “post-photography” (1994, 46-51).

literary imaginary. Writers looked at its power to represent (and reproduce) reality with mixed and doubtful feelings: some of them, like Edgar Allan Poe (1840), were fascinated by the new art; others, like Nathaniel Hawthorne (1851) or Charles Baudelaire (1859), caught there an indefinable danger. Nevertheless, they all ran up to famous photographers to have their portraits taken. Nadar, for instance, portrayed Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, and Baudelaire himself. At the end of 19th century many writers, like Émile Zola or Giovanni Verga, were amateur photographers (Mormorio 1988). Realist writers considered photography both as a metaphor and a model for the new kind of realism they were pursuing (Sciascia 1983). Zola thought that “you cannot say you have thoroughly seen anything until you have got a photograph revealing a lot of points which would otherwise go unnoticed, and which in most cases could not be perceived” (1900, 396).

Years later, Walter Benjamin (1931) would find in photography the best evidence for his notion of modernity as the age of “technological reproducibility”. Technological progress deprived art of the “aura” it once had, that “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 2008 [1931], 23). Yet, when Benjamin noticed that all new technological advancements were constantly being replaced by newer ones, as it happened with cinema replacing photography, he also discovered that they reveal traces of a forgotten past, thus disclosing, in his view, precious tokens of an unforeseen future.⁶ Forty years before Benjamin’s essay, in his book *Bruges la Morte* (1892), Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach for the first time mixed a written text with photographs. It was the beginning of the phototext, a new artistic form which would later widely prosper. Actually, inserting images into literary texts belonged to an age-long tradition including miniatures, emblems, maps, etc. Yet, phototexts were something different, something that challenged all literary conventions (Hughes, Noble 2003); they blurred the difference between truth and fiction, extended the limits of *ekphrasis* and questioned the very notion of literary realism.⁷ For a long time, critics had banned these “hybrids” from the canon of high literature, relegating them among various forms of journalism; their focus was instead either on the

⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman investigated photography’s “capacity of foresight” in his book on hysteria (1982).

⁷ The genre “phototext” with its intersemiotic implications is at the centre of a huge critical debate. See for example Bryant 1996; Hughes, Noble 2003; Coglitore, Cometa 2016.

text or on the images, without realizing that photography was overturning all the rules of communication (Warner Marien 2002).⁸

In disparaging phototexts one rehearses a traditional objection to the circulation of images, namely, iconoclasm. “Photography is a vulgar addiction that is gradually taking hold of the whole of humanity,” wrote Thomas Bernhard in *Auslöschung* (Extinction, 2013 [1986], 14), and further added “given the proliferation of photography, (humanity) will take the distorted and perverted world of the photograph to be the only real one”. After all, any discourse on “iconology” “opens the space for a discourse on the ‘fear of images’” (Mitchell 1986: 3). However, since James Agee and Walker Evans worked together on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), this new hybrid language has become increasingly frequent in contemporary literature (Rabb 1995). “Whether he is an artist or not, the photographer is a joyous sensualist, for the simple reason that the eye traffics in feelings, not in thoughts”, Evans wrote in 1969 (171), and the attention he paid to the emotional value of photographs has been taken as a model by many writers since.⁹ Many authors found both their subject-matter and a new kind of writing in the ways photography captures the visible—or the invisible. Conversely, many photographers found in literary language new insights to enliven their work (Baetens-Bleyen 2010).¹⁰ W.G. Sebald’s books—from *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) to *Austerlitz* (2001)—remind us that photographs, once symbols of modernity, nowadays contain the traces of its destruction: great railway stations of 19th century may be seen as ruined temples of a time that is gone forever. Apparently an art of pure immanence, photography continuously shows the passing of time. In its voids and silences are threads of endless narrations, that go either back into the past, searching through public and private memory, or forward toward the future, suggesting new fictional worlds.¹¹

⁸ On medias portraying violence, see for example Brothers 1997 and Butler 2009.

⁹ On Evans’ opinions on photography, see Morris Hambourg *et al.* 2000.

¹⁰ See among writers Michel Tournier, Julio Cortázar, Georges Perec, John Berger, Bruce Chatwin, W.G. Sebald, Javier Marías, Antonio Tabucchi, Paul Auster, Orhan Pamuk, Gianni Celati, Geoff Dyer, Annie Ernaux; among photographers, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, André Kertész, August Sander, Ferdinando Scianna.

¹¹ On Sebald’s use of photographs, see Long 2007 and Patt 2007.

“Reality Effect”

Photographs embedded in literary texts may have various functions, ranging from mimetic to rhetorical or symbolic dimensions, but they always end up undermining the literary categories of *fiction* and *nonfiction*, enlarging on what George Didi-Huberman elsewhere called “fantasy of referentiality” (1984, 74).¹² Photos undermine the verisimilitude of a verbal text, bringing about inconsistencies and non-correspondences in the reader’s referential expectations, which in turn trigger off his desire to insist on further interpreting those very images. Photographs seem to stand for documentary evidence, visibly and transparently telling the truth and mirroring reality, but what they actually do is endowing narrative with a “reality effect” (Barthes 1968). On the one hand, indeed, photographs accompany (or interrupt) the text, giving visibility to a story which may be thus further clarified, but which may also be questioned by pictures. On the other hand, photographs are the objects of a (direct or indirect) textual explanation that interprets (or misinterprets) them, telling in words what photographs only allude to. In all cases, they alter both the initial reading situation and the type of text the reader was expecting, thus upsetting one’s perception of what is real and what is not, blurring the borders separating written and unwritten worlds.¹³

The intersections between text and pictures in phototexts operate on a deeper level than the mere search for referential sources. They involve (and in turn contaminate) the specific rhetorical strategies and formal conventions of both literature and photography, the ways they represent and interpret reality, and the ways they get in touch with their readers (or viewers). Photographs can be used either as testifying evidence of the real, or as a device manipulating truth (Armstrong 1999); they can be the musical key that sets the narrative rhythm of writing, or an element of discontinuity and estrangement (Krauss 1993); they can go back in time or far away in space, summoning up the past or imagining new possible future developments (Ceserani 2011); they can induce opposite sentiments in readers, from excitement to repugnance; they can carry political messages, contributing to shape the collective imaginary (Jameson 1991). Literature and photography are mirror images of the archive, liable to bring back memory’s shadows; at times they preserve the past, at times they transform it into something else, opening false “postmemorial” tracks (Hirsch 1997). Describing the relationship between literature and photography implies

¹² Didi-Huberman discussed the evidential import of photography in *Images malgré tout* (2008), focusing on four photographs taken at Auschwitz in 1944.

¹³ For an historical survey on photographic theory, see Hershberger 2014.

investigating several types of referentiality once mimetic representation is done with, and steadily re-drawing the borders between visible and invisible, speakable and unspeakable, truth and fiction.¹⁴ “Photographs are chunks of time you can hold in your hand” Angela Carter (1967, 15) used to say; cutting out and trimming out the real, a photograph allows us to see the invisible. It comes as no surprise that Proust and Nabokov drew their metaphors for the interplay of mind and memory from the realm of photography.

Borders of the Visible

The current issue of *Cosmo: Comparative Studies in Modernism* (13/2018) offers a collection of essays exploring the questions and debates mentioned above by following the many paths meandering between literature and photography in modernist, postmodernist and contemporary literature, art and culture. The volume is partly based on an international conference held in Turin by Centro Studi “Arti della Modernità” (Università di Torino) in November 1917.¹⁵ A further *Cosmo* issue (14/2019) will gather more contributions centering around related but different topics. Crossing borders significantly describes the central core of our collection and informs the common traits of most contributions where intersections between literature and photography are examined from various scholarly angles.

Phototexts are more than a mix of genres or artistic languages: they shape self-sufficient artworks presenting photographs as enigmas that words try to decipher, turning narrator and readers into hunters in a wild-goose chase. Furthermore, a photograph’s way of telling highlights a number of mansided, often diverging narrative models that have been widely practised but seldom theoretically analysed. When inserted in literary texts, photographs concur in redefining the traditional categories of “true”, “false” and “verisimilar”, and may reconfigure the very notion of realism, or better, the “antinomies of realism” (Jameson 2013). In order to outline a possible taxonomy of phototexts, one could start from comparing them to former iconotextual traditions and defining the rhetorical effects they have on readers, or tracking up the persistence or discontinuity of symbolic figures that may highlight historical transformations of the cultural imaginary.

¹⁴ On “postmemory” and photographs, see Hirsch 1997 and 2012.

¹⁵ Centro Studi “Arti della Modernità”; see: <http://centroartidellamodernita.it/>.

As we know that the camera's click fixes its object stealing away time, some of our essays explore the relationship between photography and time (Baetens, Streitberger, van Gelder 2010) by investigating the use of photographic images in the literary representation both of historical past and personal memory. Narrating the past always implies a kind of oxymoron: on the one hand, the text sets up a pact with the reader warranting an objective, referential account; on the other hand, in its struggle to recall what does not exist any longer, it opens up to distortions and reworkings (Lejeune 1975). Playing with the "magic carpet" (Nabokov 1966, 139) of memory is a complex game, which deals more with an act of reinvention than with remembrance. Photographs are perfect tools for this ambiguous "postmemorial" literature, both in the field of historical past and of personal/literary memory. An historical moment can be witnessed by visual and narrative means or, on the contrary, be allegorically reconstructed in the search for alternative post-memorial truths. Narrative fiction and history thus coexist and partially overlap in two interconnected, yet partly independent levels of the texts. Interchanges between literature and photography play a relevant role in depicting and re-imagining the spaces and places of contemporary society (Westphal 2007). Photography in particular not only represents but also performs new social practices (Rancière 2003): they are part of a wider "discourse", as Michel Foucault sees it, that concurs in defining the identities of places, cultures and societies influencing political views. Photographs are also involved in fashioning personal identities, or in legitimating alternative views of public figures, such as politicians or artists.

A theory of phototexts should also consider the question of their authorship. Photographic books usually have side-texts composed by writers; literary writing is often enriched by photographs. However, such co-authorship can take many different forms (Hughes-Noble 2003), and sometimes it is not easy to ascertain whether the text tends to prevail over the images or the other way around. The dialogue between writers and photographers started during the 19th century, with more suspicions than enthusiasms. Ever since the time of Agee and Evans, this partnership has stirred up poetical divergences, or else given rise to various types of intermedial interrelations. When inserted in other artworks, photographs may take up significant meta-literary connotations. Many novels—from Adolfo Bioy Casares *La invención de Morel* (Morel's Invention, 1940) to Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des aulnes* (The Erl-King, 1970), include self-reflexive meanings one can detect in plots or characters. The same could be said of many movies, such as *Blow Up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni, where the photographer's eye stands for the filmmaker's. Thanks to its

ability to detain time and reproduce reality, photography was often considered an ideal metaphor for other forms of *poiesis* (Stoichita 2006). Photography supplies writers with a kind of visibility that subverts the traditional conventions of realism often supplying a perfect tool for postmodernist experiments.

In keeping with our comparative and international approach, theory and close reading (or viewing) intertwine in most essays, offering a network of possible cross-references, as well as highlighting the ways in which different cultural traditions cross-fertilize each other while keeping their own age-long identity. A comparative perspective is crucial if one is to map the rhetorical forms of what is by now generally deemed a kind of pervasive intertextuality or “transmediality” (Ryan 2004), while trying to understand “why photography matters” (Thompson 2013) in a field where various media are integrated in their search for new artistic possibilities.¹⁶

In our *Focus* section—*Theories of the Phototext*—starting from American photographer and art theorist Allan Sekula, **W.J.T. Mitchell** follows the *long durée* of a figure, the sphere, which shaped the political unconscious of Western society from 17th century emblem books up to contemporary art. Along with the metaphor of the ship of fools, the sphere is an image that makes the “worldly madness” of contemporary politics visible and thinkable. **Marie-Laure Ryan** classifies photographs in literary texts dividing them into various groups: photos as factual documents that complement language in nonfictional literary texts such as autobiographies; deceptive use of photos in fictional texts that try to pass as factual texts; non-deceptive use of photos which break the frame of a fictionalized storyworld and assert the real-world reference of the text; ambiguous use of photos in texts that hover between the factual and the fictional; use of photos as tangible, obviously fictional objects that can be taken out of the text. **Magali Nachtergaele** focuses on Barthes’ theory of photography as expounded in *La Chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida*, 1980), in order to describe the role of photographs in the reworkings of memory. Images were for Barthes a sort of imaginative sparkle possessing a collective and political meaning. Nachtergaele discovers an undertext of *Camera Lucida* among Barthes’ papers, little-known articles, and the whole repertoire of images from his previous works. Her essay shows that *Camera Lucida* is a visual and committed manifesto for minorities. **Artur Mamcarz-Plisiecki** analyses the relationship between literature and photography from a rhetorical perspective. Writers and photographers use different materials, but they have a common ground and purpose, that is,

¹⁶ On the intersemiotic aspects of narrative, see also Armstrong 1999 and Jakob 2006.

telling a story that will be interesting to the audience. This essay attempts to transfer the critical terms defining narration onto a visual plane by showing that both fields employ similar rhetorical devices and stylistic means, such as metaphor, simile and symbol. **Silvia Albertazzi** examines the role of photography in Geoff Dyer's works, showing how it affects the structures and modes of his writing both on the narrative and non-narrative level. In her view, Dyer relies on a comprehensive poetics in which text and image create a unique rhythm. **Luigi Marfè** chooses a geocritical approach, focusing on Luigi Ghirri's research on landscape and its intersections with John Berger's and Gianni Celati's works. They all were searching for new ways to rethink "landscape" and "inscape" to counter our contemporary "destruction of experience" (Agamben 1978). Ghirri imagined his photographs of ordinary places as an "atlas of the gaze", meant to collect feeble "appearances" of possible re-enchantment.

The second session of the issue—*Percorsi*—is divided in four parts: *History, Memory, Postmemory; Places, Cultures, Society; Writers and Photographers; Photographs, Narrative, and Metanarrative*.

In *History, Memory, Postmemory*, **Jens Brockmeier** analyses *Nox*, a phototext by Anne Carson based on a collection of texts, notes, and photographs of material mementos the author put together and glued into a peculiar notebook to make sense of her dead brother's life. A mental representation of absence, *Nox* simultaneously shows presence and absence, words and images, past and present. **Chiara Nannicini Streitberger** explores the uses and types of photographs in literary works focusing on concentration camps. Nevertheless, photography seems to retain its function of authenticating individual testimony. **Nourit Melcer-Padon** investigates the role of photography when conjuring up personal memories connected to the Shoah. Focusing on Ida Fink's *Traces: Stories* (1998), Melcer-Padon sees photography in literary texts as a "trace" of a "vanishing memory". On the one hand, a photograph taken in a concentration camp anchors the discourse to an historical, indisputable truth; on the other, what it reveals is nevertheless fragile and prone to misinterpretations. **Margareth Amatulli** analyses the interaction between pictures and written text in *Le Voile noir* (1992) by Anny Duperey, an autobiographical phototext that recalls the trauma of her parents' deaths using her father's photos. In her mourning process, photos become transitional objects helping her to fight amnesia and investigate her parents' personality. In **Tatjana Kielland Samoilow's** essay the description of catastrophes in contemporary narratives becomes a specific *topos* with a codified imagery that goes beyond the aesthetic dimension and leads to a political/ethical discourse. In postmodernist phototexts, a

metaphorical image can link together different catastrophes, such as the Utøya massacre of many Norwegian teen-agers (2011) and the Shoah. Photographs create a cultural and historical continuity and at the same time undermine any fixed meaning.

In *Places, Cultures, Society*, **Alessandra Mascia** analyses the multivolume album *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878) documenting the studies on hysteria conducted by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. The photographic medium was not a neutral witness, but itself a tool to influence the insurgence of hysteria. In years when photography seemed fit to unveil human character, on the contrary, this photographic gaze turns back on itself, seduced by the density of images. **Caroline Blinder** investigates how *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) by Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava pushed beyond previous photographic studies of Harlem and beyond the boundaries set by phototextual collaborations. The book positions itself in a no-man's land where something "subversive" appears: a space where the compelling narration by a fictitious character and the equally compelling photographs question the wider landscape of Harlem. **Anke Pinkert** maintains that photoliterary spaces disrupt institutionalised versions of public memory. While official memorial technologies tend to shut out alternative interpretations of history, underground photographs embedded in literary archives animate different historical possibilities. Pinkert focuses on a novel by Uwe Johnson and on its use of a fictionalised photograph of street protests in 1953 GDR, showing that a political message gone underground still continues to orient readers. **Sabrina Grillo** focuses on the way Juan Negrín's photographs are broadcast in today's Spain. He was the last head of government in the Second Republic of Spain. Her aim is to understand how photography contributes to shape or undermine a politician's character over a period of time.

In *Writers and Photographers*, **Diego Mormorio** tells us how famous writers reacted to the invention of photography, analysing the letters and diaries of some of the most important French writers of the 19th century. In their views, photographs duplicated life and its anxieties, offering new ways to embody the *spleen* of modernity. **Cinzia Scarpino** addresses the best-known partnership by a writer and a photographer. By juxtaposing Evans' photographs and Agee's text, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* rests on the unsettling tension between the desire to bear witness to social facts and the constructed character of all witnesses. Scarpino focuses on the evolution of their documentary aesthetic from realism toward experimental modernism, and from an exposé of social injustice toward a fragmented epic. **Laura Quercioli Mincer** comments on a conversation

between Zygmunt Bauman and Mirosław Bałka, when they discussed one of the latter's visual artworks: a wall full of photographs, textual fragments and other sketches. Starting from the tragedy of the Shoah, the conversation focuses on the testimonial value of literary and photographic storytelling. **Carmen Concilio** concentrates on the collaboration between two South African artists, Ivan Vladislavic, with his novel *Double Negative* (2012), and David Goldblatt, with his photographic album *TJ. Johannesburg Photographs 1948-2010* (2010). The essay aims to detect the various possible intermedial interrelations between “fictional” narrative and “real” photos, as well as the two authors' ethical and aesthetic stance. **Marius Christian Bomholt** investigates *El truco preferido de Satán* (2012), a work by the Spanish poet Jenaro Talens, which features fragments from Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, paired up with photographs by Alberto García-Alix, a chronicler of the *movida madrileña* in the 1980s. This concoction resembles a “parallax”, in Slavoj Žižek's words (2006): “We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see”.

In *Photographs, Narrative, and Metanarrative*, **Elisa Bricco** focuses on mini-phototexts, a hybrid genre bridging narration and description, fiction and reality, which has become a pervasive creative practice, and only recently caught critical attention. By analysing a few artistic and literary examples the essay investigates forms and interactions ranging over a widespread mediality. **Roberta Coglitore** investigates the meta-literary relationship connecting text and images in *Leggenda privata* (Private Legend, 2017) by Italian writer Michele Mari. This book is an example of *autofiction*: the photographs from an album of the writer's childhood offer a different perspective on his own life unsettling the gist of private and public, visible and invisible, fact and fiction. **Silvia Cucchi** investigates the relationship between temporality and desire in Walter Siti's *Autopsia dell'ossessione* (2010), where the language of photography becomes one of the structural elements of the novel by conveying a dualistic opposition between the absolute and reality.

In *Letture*, the last section of the issue, **Katarzyna Thiel-Jańczuk** concentrates on *Baudelaire. Les années profondes* by French psychoanalyst and writer Michel Schneider. She relies on Barthes's reflections on “myths”, and focuses on the notions of imitation and representation as applied to biography and portrait. **Francesca Tucci** addresses *Einmal. Bilder und Geschichten* (Once, 1994) by Wim Wenders, where the filmmaker attempts to experience life in a photographer's shot. Writing and images are linked by the idea of “disposition” (*Einstellung*), both a privileged focal stand for the photographer's eye and a narrative device supporting the whole story.

Elisa Carandina analyses the tension between referentiality and fictionality in paratexts, photographic media, and graphic novels (Baetens 2008). Focusing on Rutu Modan's *Ha-nekes* (2013), Carandina analyses the idea of framing as a way to define the borders separating, or connecting text and context, reality and fiction, what is seen and what is shown.

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