

Translating marginality into art: A multimodal approach

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1. Introduction

As Antonio Prete suggests in his 2011 *All'ombra dell'altra lingua. Per una poetica della traduzione*, translation can be considered an ethical and political act since it represents the ability to welcome and host the other within one's own linguistic space (Taronna, 2016: 31). This space may be one of potential freedom: in a world where geographical and political zones are defined by borders, languages on the other hand can be more easily crossed. In the contemporary scenario of mass migration across the Mediterranean, translation is increasingly connected with the image of hospitality, both as a practice and a metaphor. This essay explores the way in which recent migrants' counter-narratives in the visual arts are symbolically "translating the margin" and are giving voice to lost narratives. Multimodality will provide the tools to analyze both the linguistic and visual aspects of the two artworks proposed.

2. A Multimodal approach

Multimodality is a semiotic approach used to analyse different forms of communication: written and spoken language, static and moving images, sound, music, gestures, motion and the use of space (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 2013; Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). The theory of multimodality can be considered an extension of linguistics going back to Ferdinand de Saussure and

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Charles S. Peirce. However, the possibility of extending linguistic concepts to visual and audio-visual texts was first put in practice in France in the fifties and sixties by semiologists such as Roland Barthes and Christian Metz. It was introduced in England only in the seventies, during the so-called “linguistic turn” in humanities and social sciences, whereby any kind of text – including cultural and social phenomena – was to be explained in linguistic terms. Thus, from the point of view of semiotics, multimodality represents a continuation of this theoretical tradition, but closer to social, rather than structural, semiotics.

Among the most important researchers of multimodality, many were proponents of “social semiotics”, in so far as they directed their attention to the living reality of the language in use, in opposition to the abstract system, or grammar – an approach that derives from Michael Halliday’s Systemic functional linguistics, which holds communication to be socially motivated and situated. According to a survey by Kay L. O’Halloran, Halliday’s research was extended to semiotic resources such as: visual images (O’Toole, 1994; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006 [1996]); mathematical symbols and images (O’Halloran, 2005); sound and music (van Leeuwen, 1999); space and architecture (O’Toole, 1994); printed text (Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006 [1996]; van Leeuwen, 2005 etc.); video texts and websites (Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Djonov, 2006, 2007; Iedema, 2001; O’Halloran, 2004a, 2004b) and 3-D websites (Pang, 2004).

Multimodality refers to a multiplicity of modes (spoken, written, digital and print media, gesture, 3-D objects and websites) through which semiosis takes shape. The theory of multimodality aims to examine the social nature of meaning-making practices operating in multimodal texts (these are syncretic texts, drawing on different semiotic resources). As Theo van Leeuwen puts it: “Critical discourse analysis has also moved beyond language, taking on board that discourses are often multimodally realized, not only through text and talk, but also through other modes of communication such as images” (quoted in Wodak, 2009:16). Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s sociosemiotics applies the metafunctions of language identified in the seventies by Halliday to visual communication, establishing three different types of meaning:

1. Halliday’s ideational function becomes the representational meaning (conceptual or narrative);
2. The interpersonal metafunction becomes the interactive meaning (the relationship between the observer and the world represented in an image);

3. Halliday's textual metafunction becomes the compositional meaning (referring to the arrangement of the elements in an image) (Todoli, 2006: 22).

Multimodal analysis is thus oriented towards a more direct and explicit relationship with social theory and practice, and towards ever increasing contextualisation and interdisciplinarity, despite the fact that some of the criticism directed at this theory concerns precisely its textual nature, at odds with the approach of Media and Cultural Studies, which are said to emphasise the context and the interpretative role of the audience (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 2013: 99). Although for a long time the field of visual communication used to be a prerogative of the two latter disciplines, in addition to Film Studies and Semiotics, starting from the nineties, linguists such as Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Kay O'Halloran, Antony Baldry and Paul Thibault developed models of analysis drawing on critical discourse analysis, which explore how language, images and other modes of communication combine in the making of meaning. As Julia Todoli et al. pointed out, Kress and van Leeuwen in particular emphasise context, interpretative community and the design/production/distribution triad:

Every instance of communication demands an interpretative community. And interpreters must have specific semiotic knowledge at any level. For instance, at the level of distribution, it is important to know if one is dealing with a reproduction or with an original, and this fact has relevant consequences in their interpretation. At the level of design and discourse, one must bear in mind the role of interpreter, and in this case Kress & van Leeuwen agree that a certain type or design (e.g. a movie conceived for entertainment) has not to be necessarily interpreted this way (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001: 8).

The degree to which intention and interpretation will match depends on context: a traffic sign will be interpreted according to the intention of the producer in a crossroad, but it will be interpreted very differently if we look at it displayed as an *objet trouvé* in an art gallery (Todoli, 2006: 34).

The investigation of this kind of multimodal research, strictly connected to critical discourse analysis, can thus be directed towards the implicit and not merely explicit aspects of communication, to the choices made both consciously and unconsciously, to the role and importance of the context, to the recipients as well as to the audiences. As David Machin and Andrea Mayr claim: "Texts will use linguistic and visual strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface, but

which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends” (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 9). Thus, multimodal critical analysis focuses on the assumptions, the absences, the ideas carried by images and words, as well as the other modes being employed, in order to reveal the dynamics of power that underlie communication.

More specifically, the multimodal analysis of a text can take as its focus: the analysis of the semantic field (with particular attention to the word connotation, overlexicalisation, suppression, opposition and the use of verbs); the analysis of iconography (looking at attributes, setting, foregrounding, gazes, poses); strategies of classification of social actors (personalisation and impersonalisation, collectivisation and individualisation, nomination and functionalisation, the use of pronouns); strategies of visual communication (such as the position of the observer with respect subjects of the image), the representation of action (more specifically, material, mental, behavioural and relational processes); linguistic strategies of concealment (primarily nominalisation and presupposition); persuasion strategies (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole); the use of modals and evasion strategies (*ibid.*).

The criticism levelled at this kind of approach tends to emphasise the epistemological sense of the term “critical” and the problem of the corpus – since what is at issue is the production of qualitative, rather than quantitative analyses, often focused on a single text or on a limited number of items – as well as its apparently overambitious aim to bring about a change in the society. Henry Widdowson, for instance, takes issue with the excessively interpretative nature of its analyses, does not consider this discipline a method, and claims that what it does is anticipate interpretation that supports a pre-existing belief rather than using analysis to support a theory.¹ The critics practicing this discipline, nevertheless, appear well aware that: 1. the debate about language, power and ideology harks back to Plato and Aristotle and that Media, Cultural and Film Studies have already addressed the question of visual contribution to signification; 2. that the aim of their work is to offer an additional investigative tool, which, after choosing a text to be analysed, seeks to demonstrate that what is at stake is not merely an interpretation, but a systematic and analytical study.

¹ Widdowson (1998: 136-151).

What follows is an example of how a multimodal approach may serve to analyse multi-semiotic and intermedial art products, such as German photographer Kevin McElvaney's 2015 *Project#RefugeeCameras* and Ethiopian director Dagmawi Yimer's 2014 video-art *Asmat/Names*.²

3. *Project#RefugeeCameras*

Project#RefugeesCamera is a collection of pictures taken by refugees themselves during their journeys across the continent towards Germany. In 2015, McElvaney distributed fifteen waterproof cameras and pre-paid envelopes to migrants in Izmir, Lesbos, Athens and Idomeni, asked them to document their own stories and send the cameras back (only seven returned, one was lost, two were confiscated by border authorities, two are still in Turkey because the people were arrested, three are missing). In his words: "I was searching for ways to visualise this well-documented, historic event in another way, and realised that we always photograph and talk about refugees, but don't give them much of a voice."³

So, the aim of the project was that of providing a new narrative of the migrant crisis from the refugees' point of view, away from the "colonizing" gaze of Western photographers who are mostly in search of sensational pictures rather than real human stories. In the project statement McElvaney claimed to be aware of the difficulty of avoiding such a gaze: he specifies that his aim was to let the refugees decide what to include and what to exclude from the narration. Indeed, the pictures that were returned show the perspective of the people directly involved and tell real life stories and emotions, passages across water and on trains, people on boats, shores, in camps, their relationships and kinship.

Drawing on the multimodal approach, it is possible to analyse this art product on two levels – verbal and visual – following the display of both pictures and captions on the project website. A series of comments will be made in order to show the socio-semiotic implications of such a work and its counter-narrative potentialities. On one hand, the idea of providing refugees with the essential equipment to narrate their stories represents a counter-act of narration; on the other, the necessary

² See the project websites <http://kevin-mcelvaney.com/refugeecameras/> and work: <https://vimeo.com/114343040>.

³ See the project websites <https://www.vice.com/sv/article/9bgpvv/kevin-mcelvaney-refugee-journey-photos>.

postproduction editing work by McElvaney may be seen as an act of interpretation of the original data.

On the project website, divided into seven sections, great importance is given to the photographic equipment (Camera #1, #2 etc.), perhaps because the journey of the cameras in the envelopes is considered the ultimate adventure. This form of impersonalisation drives the attention to the object, rather than the people, and it evokes an illusion of objectivity (Machin and Mayr, 2012), as if the pictures had been taken by the cameras themselves with no human intervention. Furthermore, the cameras are numbered, which prepares the viewer to receive a certain amount of inputs and reminds us of the feeling that migration is a multiple experience. The second element displayed on the page is the first name of the photographer/refugee (no last name is provided), followed by his country of origin.

FIGURE 1

e.g.: Camera #1 (camera 6 out of 15) Photographer: Zakaria (Syria)



The first picture of each section is that of a notebook (positioned on an orange background, which recalls - or is? - a real lifejacket) in which each photographer wrote something in his own language; instant photos of the people are also attached. A short biography is provided in the caption, with details of the place and the date on which cameras were received, and a reference to that person's story and the geo-political situation at the time. These elements are extremely important because they help create an intimate relationship of trust with the viewers: they become aware of the fact that "boat people" (the ones that we usually watch wearing orange lifejackets on TV) are real people, with real lives and their own cultures (expressed, for example, by their handwriting in another alphabet).

The pictures are then shown in the various sections in a certain order decided by McElvaney; it is possible that he also selected the pictures that he received not on the basis of their quality alone. This point is crucial because it demonstrates the difficulty to achieve the goal of the project, which was that of total "non-intervention" in the process of narration. The act itself of deciding the sequence of images and the images that were left out makes objectivity almost impossible. Furthermore, the captions direct the attention of the viewer to what is salient in the pictures - according to McElvaney - adding information that is not there and that is not verifiable. The result is an interesting socio-semiotic experiment that also speaks to the extreme difficulty of reaching objectivity and neutrality in the narratives of migration.

Some of the captions are descriptive, such as "A refugee covered in a blanket, while standing in line", and add no further meaning to the image, which shows exactly what the caption says. Others, such as "Refugees sit in front of a toilet *in an overcrowded train from Macedonia to Serbia. A ticket costs about 25 euros*" (italics mine), do not only describe the images but comment on them, adding information that viewers could not otherwise infer. There is a tendency to reinforce the meaning of the images, especially when wet clothes and overcrowded means of transport are concerned. Indeed, uncomfortable circumstances and hardship are emphasised and made salient.

TABLE 1

List of captions transcribed verbatim from the website (the text in italics is mine)

Intro	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Single-Use Cameras returned in a <i>waterproof and tear-resistant envelop</i>, which already has the stamps and the address on it [<i>emphasis on the difficult journey the envelops have undergone</i>]; 2. I started to give single-use cameras to refugees in Izmir and went from Lesbos via Athens to Idomeni next [<i>descriptive</i>];
Camera #1/Photographer: Zakaria (Syria)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The engine of Zakaria's dinghy. He was sitting in the last line [<i>descriptive</i>]; 2. The view to the front. Like many other refugees, he was in an <i>overloaded</i> dinghy, which keeps between 50-60 people [<i>emphasis on crowds</i>]; 3. As his dinghy comes closer to the coast of Chios, a Greek fisherman escorts and guides his boat to a <i>safe harbour</i> [<i>emphasis on safety vs danger</i>]; 4. An <i>exhausted</i> woman between other refugees on the <i>overcrowded</i> dinghy [<i>emphasis on the woman's condition</i>]; 5. A <i>young man</i> looks relieved inside the camera and holds a <i>young girl</i>, after they arrives in a <i>safe harbour</i> [<i>emphasis on the age of the people and on safety</i>];
Camera #2/Photographers: Hamza/ Abdulmonem (Aleppo, Syria)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A <i>young boy</i> stands with his <i>wet clothes</i> on the stony beach right after they stranded in a <i>safe harbour</i> [<i>emphasis on the age of the people, on safety and on the condition of the clothes</i>]; 2. Refugees help each other to get off the dinghy. <i>There have been no volunteers to help</i> [<i>added information</i>]; 3. Hamza holds up two boys after all refugees left the dinghy [<i>descriptive</i>]; 4. After walking up and down the hills, towards the next village, the group takes a break. They are covered in <i>wet clothes</i> and just have a <i>bit water</i> with themselves [<i>emphasis on hardship</i>];
Camera #3/Photographer: Firas (Iraq)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refugees stand around a fire. Because the <i>wood was wet</i>, they <i>burned trash and their last clothes</i> to keep themselves warm. They had to stay outside the buses [<i>emphasis on deprivation, and added information</i>];

	<p>2. Refugees looking out an <i>overcrowded</i> train in Macedonia. On the right side you can see <i>a mother, who holds her crying kid in her arms</i>. The door were not able to close and have been open during the drive [<i>emphasis on crowds and on the condition of the kid</i>];</p> <p>3. <i>In Serbia the refugees used a stop to search for berries and other food in the forest nearby. Many run out of money until that moment</i> [<i>added information</i>];</p>
Camera #4/Photographer: Amer (Syria)	<p>1. Amer and his brother Hashem stay in front of the ferry in Mytilini port, Lesbos. <i>This ferry brings tourists and refugees from Greek islands to Athens</i> [<i>added information</i>];</p> <p>2. Refugees sit on the floor in an <i>overcrowded</i> train in Germany [<i>emphasis on crowds</i>];</p>
Camera #5/Photographer: Dyab (Syria)	<p>1. Dyab's wife and son Kerim on a bus station, <i>where buses stand in line before they reach Idomeni</i> [<i>added information</i>];</p> <p>2. Son Kerim and Dyab's wife are covered in blankets in a transfer camp in Macedonia [<i>descriptive</i>];</p> <p>3. Son Kerim is <i>joking around</i> with other kids in a train compartment on their way to Germany [<i>emphasis on the emotional condition</i>];</p> <p>4. Son Kerim jumps around and smiles after arriving in their temporary sleeping-room, <i>probably in Germany</i> [<i>added information</i>];</p>
Camera #6/Photographer: Saeed (Iran)	<p>1. A father from Syria sleeps with <i>his child in his arms</i> on a bus from Athens to Idomeni [<i>emphasis on relationship</i>];</p> <p>2. Authorities hand out papers to refugees, who are allowed to take the train through Macedonia. <i>Refugees who didn't receive a paper because of invalid or wrong documents had to return to the Greek side of the border</i> [<i>added information</i>];</p> <p>3. Refugees sit in front of a toilet in an <i>overcrowded</i> train from Macedonia to Serbia. <i>A ticket costs about 25 euros</i> [<i>emphasis on crowds, and added information</i>];</p>

Camera #7: Photographer: Mohammad (Syria)

4. A volunteer entertains the *younger refugees* outside a camp between Croatia and Slovenia. The kids try to imitate his tricks [*descriptive, emphasis on age*];

1. Mohammad and his friends wait inside a transfer camp to Macedonia. *Processes like this can take hours or even days* [*added information*];

2. Refugees use every corner to find a place to sleep. A *young boy* can be found between this group of men [*emphasis on age*];

3. *Covered in blankets*, refugees are standing in line in front of a temporary refugee camp while the dawn already begins [*descriptive, with emphasis on the condition*];

4. A refugee *covered in a blanket*, while standing in line [*descriptive, with emphasis on the condition*].

The captions point the viewers' attention to specific traits of the images, emphasising the physically and emotionally taxing conditions of the refugees' journey. The result of the interplay between the verbal and the iconic is that the colonizing gaze is not completely absent, as in the original intent of Kevin McElvaney. However, the pictures give a certain degree of ontological validity to the single stories of migration, which, in the official media, mostly focus on the "mass of people". As a form of counter-narrative, they serve the cause of the refugees more than, or in combination with, reportages by famous photographers or journalists. In Hamburg, the exhibition showed prestigious photographers next to these images taken by refugees, so that visitors could "compare these images and get a feeling for the whole situation in an absolutely new way".⁴ It is worth stressing that the two modes of communication described above (language and images) should not be considered separately but rather in the way they intersect holistically, since they both contribute to the production of meaning.

⁴ See <https://www.vice.com/sv/article/9bgpvv/kevin-mcelvaney-refugee-journey-photos>.

4. *Asmat/Names*

Asmat/Names (*in memory of all victims of the sea*) is a video-art product created to commemorate the victims of October 3, 2013, when 368 people died in a shipwreck off the Italian island of Lampedusa. It is a hybrid art product, which combines different media, such as documentary images (of the flashmob organized in Lampedusa on the anniversary of the tragic event), drawings (by Luca Serasini) and graphic effects. After a long socio-political statement, addressed to the governments of Africa and Europe and to all the people in the West, a female voice-over (by Eden Getachew Zerihum) recalls the victims' names and their translation while a graphic visualization of the names in Tigrinya characters is projected. Restoring the victims' dignity by pronouncing and translating their names, in a litany that lasts ten minutes, is a powerful act of re-narration. In the words of the director:

The Lampedusa tragedy has confronted all of us with a new element: for the first time the authorities have been able to reconstruct all, or almost all, the names of the victims. This has never happened before. In *Asmat* I wanted to force my spectators to listen to all of them, from first to last. I did not limit myself to making a consolatory spot, to be quickly consumed between one film and the other. I wanted to defy the attention and patience of the public in order to bring back the numbers of the tragedy to the reality of names. It takes ten minutes to read the 368 names of the victims of Lampedusa. Imagine how long it would take to read all 900 names of the last tragedy. Unfortunately this time no one can tell with precision who they are (Ponzanesi, 2016).⁵

By acknowledging that names are tragically “separated by their bodies” when dead in the waters of the Mediterranean cannot be identified, memory is restored and the representation of death is made, somehow, possible. The sound of the woman's voice changes from the initial lullaby to a tone of denunciation when she speaks to governors, from the song she sings to Lampedusa to the more neutral style in which she reads the list of the dead. In the statement that accompanies the video on Vimeo, we read:

Names without bodies. On October 3rd 2013 many young people with names such as Selam (peace) or Tesfaye (my hope) left us all at the same time. Naming our children is a way of telling the world about our hopes, our dreams, our beliefs, or about the people and things we respect. We choose

⁵ See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20403526.2016.1217627>.

meaningful names for our children, just as our parents did for us. For years these names, and their load of flesh and blood, have left their birthplaces, going far from home, composing something like a written message, a message which has reached the threshold of the Western world. These names have defied manmade boundaries and laws, have disturbed and challenged African and European governments. If we understand why and how these names fell so far away from their meaning, we might be able to transmit an endless message to our children and through them to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Although the bodies they belonged to are gone, those names linger on because they have been spoken and continue to live even though they are removed from their human constraint. Deafened by a chaos of poisoned words, we can't hear them. But those syllables are alive because they have been inscribed in the cosmos. The film's images give space to these names without bodies. They are meaningful names although it might be difficult for us to grasp their meaning. It is necessary for us to count them all, name each and every one to make us aware of how many names lost their bodies on one single day, in the Mediterranean Sea.

From the point of view of multimodality, *Asmat/Names* offers a possibility to meditate on the role of intermediality: the drawings, the documentary images and the graphics (the visual) synaesthetically cooperate with the voice-over, the music and the sound of the sea towards the creation of a suspended and lyric atmosphere. The drawings represent the story of a tragedy that cannot be narrated by real images (maybe because it is too painful) whereas real images of people dancing in the sea, covered by white bed sheets, are used as a metaphor of the impossibility of recognizing the bodies, of giving them an identity. The names in Tigrinya characters seem to overwhelm the viewer; they (graphically) appear and move towards the screen facing the audience, asking to be remembered.

At the beginning of the video, after a sort of lullaby sang by a woman's voice, the viewer is taken down into the water, made to feel claustrophobic, by the interplay of the muffled sound of the sea and the images of water and wreckage. The first words pronounced, "you who are alive", appear on screen in subtitles translated in English and implying that other people, not the viewers who are still alive, died. So, the narration starts from the assumption of death, without mentioning it or representing it. It is taken for granted. A series of drawings representing shipwrecks, people swimming, mothers with children are then shown while the woman makes her speech to the politicians of both continents.

With the powerful statement "we are more visible dead than alive", inviting the viewer to remember that migrants and death existed before the tragic event of October 3, which attracted media attention,

the litany starts: 368 names are mentioned with their translation. In the words of Paola Zaccaria:

Cartographies of names on water float like fluid maps. Names without bodies, this is the new geo-corpo-graphy of migration [...] Translation reveals meanings that are common to all cultures (peace, hope, light...) and it even teaches the untranslatability of certain names that are the same in some Mediterranean languages (Zaccaria, 2017: 42, translation mine).

The images in the background portray people covered by white bed sheets in water, so that they appear all the same, a mass of floating bodies. The camera plays on the water surface and underneath it, so that we manage to see just portions of the bodies until, from the bottom of the sea, the names start to emerge and come towards the viewer. Hundreds of names in the Tigrinya alphabet mingle faster and faster on the screen, evoking all the people lost in the water of the Mediterranean. The last names are pronounced on the image of a black sea and the last sound heard is that of water. In this video-art product all the communicative modes and media are given importance, separately and synaesthetically. The visual and the verbal are intertwined in a way that leaves the viewers free to decide what is salient, without showing the disaster or documented images of shipwrecks or dead bodies. The intention is not so much to refer visually to the tragedy, as much as to recall it and all the tragedies at sea.

5. Conclusions

Both these projects were meant to disrupt the narrative of migration as it is told by powerful official media, which describe this “mass phenomenon” from the outside, erasing individual voices. As shown over the previous pages, they attempted to achieve a more ontological narrative in various ways, since their artistic natures and potential audiences are varied. The intervention of an editor is crucial in this process since, as McElvaney’s case showed, interferences may occur and the existing gaze of the dominant culture may result in a mistranslation of reality. However, both projects tried to bring the experience of migration closer to people’s everyday lives by giving a voice to those who usually go unheard and by eliciting an emotional response. As Elif Shafak – a Turkish multilingual writer, gender and masculinity studies scholar and feminist – suggests in her 2017 Ted Talk “The Revolutionary Power of Diverse Thought”:

[...] We have entered a new stage in world history in which collective sentiments guide and misguide politics more than ever before. And through social media and social networking, these sentiments are further amplified, polarized, and they travel around the world quite fast. Ours is the age of anxiety, anger, distrust, resentment and, I think, lots of fear. But here's the thing: even though there's plenty of research about economic factors, there are relatively few studies about emotional factors (Elif Shafak).⁶

Translating the condition of marginality into art represents a creative possibility for an otherwise incommunicable geo-political and human condition; it may affect our daily lives positively by strengthening the need to focus personal attitudes, public research and political agendas, as Shafak proposes, on emotional factors as well.

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⁶ See https://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_revolutionary_power_of_diverse_thought/up-next.

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