

PAZIENZA IN HIS LIMITS.
LIVING EXPERIENCE
AND ICONOTEXTUAL PRACTICE

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“Patience has a limit, Pazienza no!”

A. Pazienza

The analysis of the relationship between verbal and visual textualities can find a favored object of study in the comics: an “iconotextual” device characterized by features comparable to other traditional artistic works – in order to limit ourselves to the “narration by images” mechanically copied we can think about the “moral series” by William Hogarth, not to mention but the “narration through (mechanically copied) images”, it shows. The comparison between its figurative elaboration and at least a meaningful part of its verbal solutions, comics show some differential specificities: beyond the inscription of the words in the balloon – with voices and thoughts of the represented subjects –, the writing often attends the images with an evident descriptive intention – irreducible to the didactic “reason” – in this way configuring themselves as a form of *ékphrasis* wherein the correspondence with the other medium doesn’t limit itself only to its relationship with an effective or imagined picture – as in each case of “modern” *ékphrasis*¹ (“actual” or “notional” *ékphrasis*² –, or to the coincidence between the writer and the

1 On the modern conception of *ékphrasis* and its relationship with the classical meaning of the term and the “crisis” made by the contemporary artistic practices see Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini*, pp. 11-23.

2 On the distinction between actual *ékphrasis* and notional *ékphrasis* see Hollander, *The Poetics of Ékphrasis*, pp. 209-19. On the unsolved problems of those definitions see Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini*, p. 48: «It is clear – and Hollander soon realizes this – that the borders between the two forms are

visual artist (in other occasions already emerged and found in other occasions³), but it involves also the lead time of the two texts.⁴ The antagonism between writings and images (or pictures), that is the continuous redefinition of the respective limits and borders, in the objects that will be analyzed right there, and in many other not considered objects, solves itself in the space and lead time of a single work. It expresses itself in a single (re)production, showing, in from a certain perspective, the ambiguities and the meaningful tensions of a complex unity articulated in many ways.

The cultural experience of Andrea Pazienza, totally characterized by a constant practical and theoretical comparison with the expressive possibilities and limits of the different figurative and verbal media, acquires in this view a paradigmatic feature. The conceptualization of the “limit”, in particular, obtains a theoretical centrality, confirmed by Pazienza himself in some autobiographical fragments, which proves the intentional and radical exercise of a subjectivity exceeding the traditional forms of the representation by pictures:

Before writing comics I used to paint denouncing pictures. It was a period wherein I couldn't avoid doing that. But my pictures were bought by pharmacists who put them in their bedrooms. The picture kept on pulsing in that atmosphere: I considered this fact not only as

constantly put in crisis precisely by the linguistic creativity of the authors, who were interested since the classical antiquity to show the rhetorical potentiality of their description which programmatically exceed the artwork. Moreover it is just the mimetic modern *ékphrasis* that seems to be the place where the rhetorical models, tested by the ancients, are recovered. It is hard to distinguish between the two *ékphrasis*, already in Filostrato» (translation is mine).

3 It is also the case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's “double works”: see Maryan Wynn Ainsworth, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Double Work of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1976); see also J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Mirror's Secret. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art’, *Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), 333-49.

4 The time, according to Hillis Miller, is irrelevant in the mutual “overwriting” relationship between the two media. See Miller, p. 335.

a contradiction but also as an enormous limit. My desire of writing comics starts from that.⁵

The adhesion to the comics, that is the adhesion to the production of cultural objects characterized by a high communicative potential – determined by the “inexpensive” mechanical reproduction, by the specificity of a device which combines visual and verbal facts – corresponded to the participation to the “autonomous” movement emerged in Italy during the Seventies;⁶ in fact it guaranteed a partial “overcoming” of the contradiction which, at least in Pazienza hypothesis, existed between the traditional artistic activity and the political exercise, even if, meanwhile, it offered further occasions of comparison with the specific characteristic – with the limits and possibilities – of the representation and its forms, as in the last page of the first episode of *Le straordinarie avventure di Pentothal* (1977-1981), a realistic and dreamy narration, adherent to material conditions, experiences, needs and desires of the social antagonism emerged in particular in Bologna in 1977⁷ (see fig. 23). This page was added substituting a previous page unknowing the facts of the March 1977: the murder of the militant Francesco Lorusso, the correspondent conflicts between the police and the demonstrators and the raise of the radical praxis;⁸ through it Pazienza exalted the happened resolution of a certain retard, recognized by himself, of the cartoon device compared to the living process and in particular to the practices of the autonomous movement. The page shows the protagonist (Pazienza’s alter ego) a radio which reproduces the tactical information promulgated by “Radio Alice” («Comrade! Don’t

5 Andrea Pazienza, ‘Il plesso solare e la tecnica del fumetto’, *Il Grifo*, 23 (1993); reprinted in Andrea Pazienza, *Paz: Scritti, disegni, fumetti*, ed. by Vincenzo Mollica (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p. 47.

6 See Mauro Trotta, *Andrea Pazienza o le straordinarie avventure del desiderio*, in *Settantasette: La rivoluzione che viene*, ed. by Sergio Bianchi and Lanfranco Caminiti (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 1997), pp. 204-11.

7 *Le straordinarie avventure di Pentothal* was published on the magazine *Alter* since April 1977.

8 See *In ordine pubblico*, ed. by Paola Staccioli (Roma: Associazione Walter Rossi, 2003), pp. 93-104, and pp. 165-66.

scatter tonight, at the end of the various meetings», don't scatter), an alarm clock in front of the only visible Pentothal's eye, a flag which affirms Lorusso's political and ideal survival («Francesco is still alive and he fights with us!»). Omitting an iconological interpretation, the element which suggests considerations about the specific characteristics of representation is the expression of protagonist's thoughts: «Expelled... I'm totally expelled». This assumption – also related to the political “infertility” of the comic illustrator detected and stigmatized by the most traditional fringe of the movement – starts from the admission of the “limits” of the comics determining the above-mentioned gap art/life and consequential extra-artistic efforts, as affirmed by Pazienza in the endnote of the page:

When I was working to these pages in February 1977 I believed I was drawing a flash, being totally in error because instead it was a beginning. If I had had this presentiment, I would have waited for this beautiful March and I would have drawn it. So I don't know what I have to do. Twenty days ago I gave all the material to *Linus*, but – God! – many things have changed during this time and many other things will change till the day wherein the comic book will be published; I feel bad and idiot because I haven't thought about it. Drawing a comic isn't not like writing for a daily paper, if you understand what I mean. So I draw this page and try to give it to *Linus* to replace the last original page with it, hoping to make it on time. The last original page had the sentence «so it's the end» – in place of the typical “end” placed in the lower right corner – which now has the wrong overtones. Good Heavens! I swear you, I believed it was a flash, instead it was a beginning. Yeah! Andrea Pazienza, March 16th 1977.⁹

In this writing Pazienza compares the temporality of his own practice with the practice of the “daily paper”, but similar considerations can emerge also during the analysis of the texts of the 1977 movement which attests the radio supremacy – metaphorically attested in *Pentothal* with the representation of an ever updated “Radio Alice” – over the other textual, “clean”

9 Andrea Pazienza, *Le straordinarie avventure di Pentothal*, in *L'arte di Andrea Pazienza* (Roma: Panini, 2004), p. 32.

and “paralyzing” practices – different from the real “dirtiness” found by Hans Magnus Enzensberger¹⁰ – traditionally used in the antagonist political activity:

To break every demand of cleanliness, the delay of writing in comparison to the real process: the (clean) text speaks about the Movement, but only to paralyze it, to crystallize it, to show it motionless inside categories which – made in the past – want to constrain the present to retrace the past. To write, in this way, a dirty text. A dirty book about Radio Alice, like so “Radio Alice” broadcasts dirty texts. The “moving” text is dirty because it contains much a part of real experience which cannot be reduced within formalized categories, within linguistic codes universally understandable. The code, this common denominator of the comprehensibility, is called into question; outside the code, we comprehend ourselves only from another common denominator of comprehensibility, that is the participation to a process, that is the collectivized experience. Radio Alice broadcasts in Bologna since February 9th 1976. The premise on which the collective worked for more than a year, before starting transmissions, is the analysis of the obsolescence of the written language, of the codified media – within the political code, too – rather than the transformation of the needs of the Movement. It’s not possible to propose an analysis of the “metropolization” of the figure of the social class using a so such a “clean”, slow and ritual medium: the flyer. This one played an extraordinary role when a vanguard had to extend and develop in the masses a revolutionary intention during the Sixties. But when the levels of knowledge raise, and especially when the circulation of the experiences uses communication channels more persuasive than the flyer (for example the internal demonstration, the exemplary act), it is necessary to transform the language of the Movement.¹¹

10 See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien’, *Kursbuch*, 5 (1970); partially reprinted in *Piccole antenne crescono: Documenti, interventi e proposte sulla vita delle radio di movimento* ed. by Paolo Hutter (Roma: Savelli, 1978), p. 129.

11 Collettivo A/traverso, *Alice è il diavolo: Sulla strada di Majakovskij: testi per una pratica di comunicazione sovversiva*, ed. by Luciano Cappelli and Stefano Saviotti (Milano: L’Erba Voglio, 1976); reprinted with the title *Alice è il diavolo: Storia di una radio sovversiva*, ed. by Franco Berardi and Ermanno Guarneri (Milano: ShaKe, 2002), pp. 112-13.

Other limits of the representation – which guide ourselves to the hypothesis about the “self-referring” and “simultaneous” *ékphrasis* described in the introduction – are explored in some pages of *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* (1984-1986), a diary through images and words, an autobiographical but at the same time “personal and political” work about a generation of activists during the years of the so called “reflux”:¹²

the “full” pages of Pompeo deal with everyone, through the expedient of the autobiographical tale. They deal with the vices and the virtues of who is looking for his own direction. They deal with the tragedy of a generation that lived the arrival of the heroin in the territory.¹³

In *Pompeo* (the last Pazienza’s alter ego) the visualization of the experience and in particular of the protagonist’s drug addiction is often accompanied by a third person description which reinforces, by words, what the pictures show or could show; namely it is accompanied by an *ékphrasis* – its lead time is inseparable from the lead time of drawing – of “artistic” images, realized or realizable, produced or suggested by the writer-describer himself. This correspondence between description and material and ideal figurative representation accompanies the narration to the last picture (see fig. 24): Pompeo-Pazienza, recently survived a heroin overdose and fled in the countryside, shows himself chained to a birch and knelt near a ravine. Upward a text describes and interprets gestures and thoughts:

He was sitting there and he thought. He thought they were his last thoughts. And to whom he could dedicate them to. He felt his face, the wind and the ground. He smiled. A puff from his lips swept away a little insect from the chains... There, the chains scared him. Some tears, in order to take a little bit of time?¹⁴

¹² *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeo* was published in the magazine *Alter* since 1985.

¹³ Davide Toffolo, *Lo strano complotto*, in Andrea Pazienza, *Pompeo* (Roma: L’Espresso-Panini 2006), p. 11.

¹⁴ Pazienza, *Pompeo*, p. 131.

But the suicide, revealed only in its intention by the drawing, doesn't materialize itself in a picture, which backs away leaving the burden of representation to the words: «He threw himself as if he had been, suddenly, pushed».¹⁵ The “final” image, between the two options of representation offered by comics, namely picture and writing, obtains a visual form in the words, through the description of an imagined “scene”, necessarily “artistic” – considering that it is a story about a drawn “actor”¹⁶ – but unrealized. The hypothesis about the subjective “reasons” pertaining to this scene could evoke Lessingian ghosts¹⁷ to which the intention of this work substitutes, exorcizing them, a comparison between the real Pazienza's experiences and the Pompeo's (re)produced story. This one, in the pages which precedes the imagined death, shows practices and effects of a failed suicide through the representation of an intentional and lethal heroin intake:

15 Pazienza, *Pompeo*, p. 131.

16 A specificity of the comics, in the light of an *ékphrasis* theory, maybe the “structural” relationship between the image evoked by the description and its artistic objectification, even if it is unrealized; in particular, the description of a not drawn image have to lead to a picture in the imagination of the author and the reader.

17 «If the artist, out of ever-varying nature, can only make use of a single moment, and the painter especially can only use this moment from one point of view, whilst their works are intended to stand the test not only of a passing glance, but of long and repeated contemplation, it is clear that this moment, and the point from which this moment is viewed, cannot be chosen too happily. Now that only is a happy choice, which allows the imagination free scope. The longer we gaze, the more must our imagination add; and the more our imagination adds, the more we must believe we see. In the whole course of a feeling there is no moment which possesses this advantage so little as its highest stage. There is nothing beyond this; and the presentation of extremes to the eye clips the wings of fancy, prevents her from soaring beyond the impression of the senses, and compels her to occupy herself with weaker images; further than these she ventures not, but shrinks from the visible fullness of expression as her limit. Thus, if Laocoon sighs, the imagination can hear him shriek; but if he shriek, it can neither rise above nor descend below this representation, without seeing him in a condition which, as it will be more endurable, becomes less interesting. It either hears him merely moaning, or sees him already dead», G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon* (1766), trans. by Edward Calvert Beasley *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, with an introduction by T. Burbidge (London: Longman-Brown-Green-Longmans, 1853) pp. 16-7.

The following morning Pompeo was using two big syringes of 5cc, both of them plunged in his right arm. There were dissolved more than four grams of heroin. It was a lethal dose. Wasn't it? Now the problem is to be able to press entirely the pistons of the syringes at the same time without losing immediately consciousness.¹⁸

Surviving the overdose he will find, in another way and in other "forms", his end. An its "mimetic" description – without artistic metaphors and practices, only in part different by from the figuration but adherent to the concrete – will be offered, *ex post*, by the "real" report: Andrea Pazienza, drawer and "autonomous" like Pentothal-Pompeo, died due to a heroin overdose in his location in the Montepulciano country on June 16th 1988.

18 *Pompeo*, p. 107.