

Readings/Rereadings

Vedere con il disegno, or Art is Made with the Eyes

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When an artist writes

The title of this book is a synesthesia. It makes you think of a text based on the suggestions that art, by its nature, is called to evoke. Manfredo Massironi was a visual artist –or rather: a ‘visual operator’, as he defined himself– who never loved conventions. We would not expect methodical writing from one of his books. On the contrary, he follows the artists (Paul Klee, Vasilij Kandinskij, György Kepes, among others) who, when writing about visibility, adopt a scientific rigor.

A witness of his time

The book *Vedere con il disegno*, published in Padova by Muzzio editore 1982 and republished in 1989 without changes except for the cover (figs. 1, 2), has the classic format of 17 × 24 cm. Bound in sixteenths, 192 pages plus an introduction of 12 additional not numbered pages, paperback with 132 black and white illustrations. Composed in transitional fonts, title in lowercase (even the publisher forgoes the use of capitals), it adopts a rigorous asymmetric grid based on a column of 10 cm inside for the text and larger images, a column of 4.5 cm outside for the notes, captions and smaller images.

The text is divided into an *Introduction* and four parts, plus a *Preface* by Sergio



Fig. 1. *Vedere con il disegno*. Cover of the first edition (Padova: Muzzio editore, 1982).

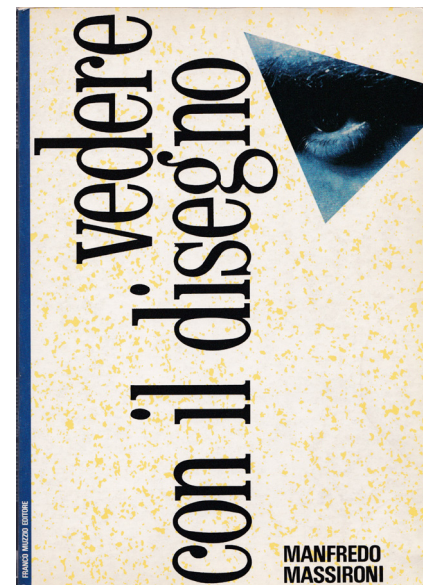


Fig. 2. *Vedere con il disegno*. Cover of the second edition (Padova: Muzzio editore, 1989).

Los, director of the series that hosts the volume, a figure very close to some members of the Enne group (of which Massironi was a co-founder). Los writes mainly about Carlo Scarpa, as well as about himself, and does not anticipate or add much to the contents that follow. The author's brief *Introduction* immediately declares the aim of the work: to explain how the language of drawing works by relating the processes of perception of images to the processes of production of signs.

A double keystone

Sign and perception are the two key words of the first chapter, entitled *Structural components of drawing*. With a didactic approach, Massironi shows the countless mental processes to which drawing can adapt, and that drawing itself stimulates in the observer: Views, diagrams, schemes, sketches, executive drawings, pictograms, brands, geometric constructions, optical illusions, illustrations, project and survey tables serve as examples to demonstrate that drawing is a tool capable of documenting reality, but only if there is an appropriate interpretation of the signs by the observer. The designer and the observer trigger two reversible processes, keystones of the perceptive-interpretative mechanism, entirely based on the significant power of signs. Recalling the still recent works of Rudolf Arnheim, Massironi analyses the function of the line as an object, as an outline and as a filling texture; then the function of the plane, which can accommodate the drawing of objects arranged in a perpendicular or inclined position with respect to the optical

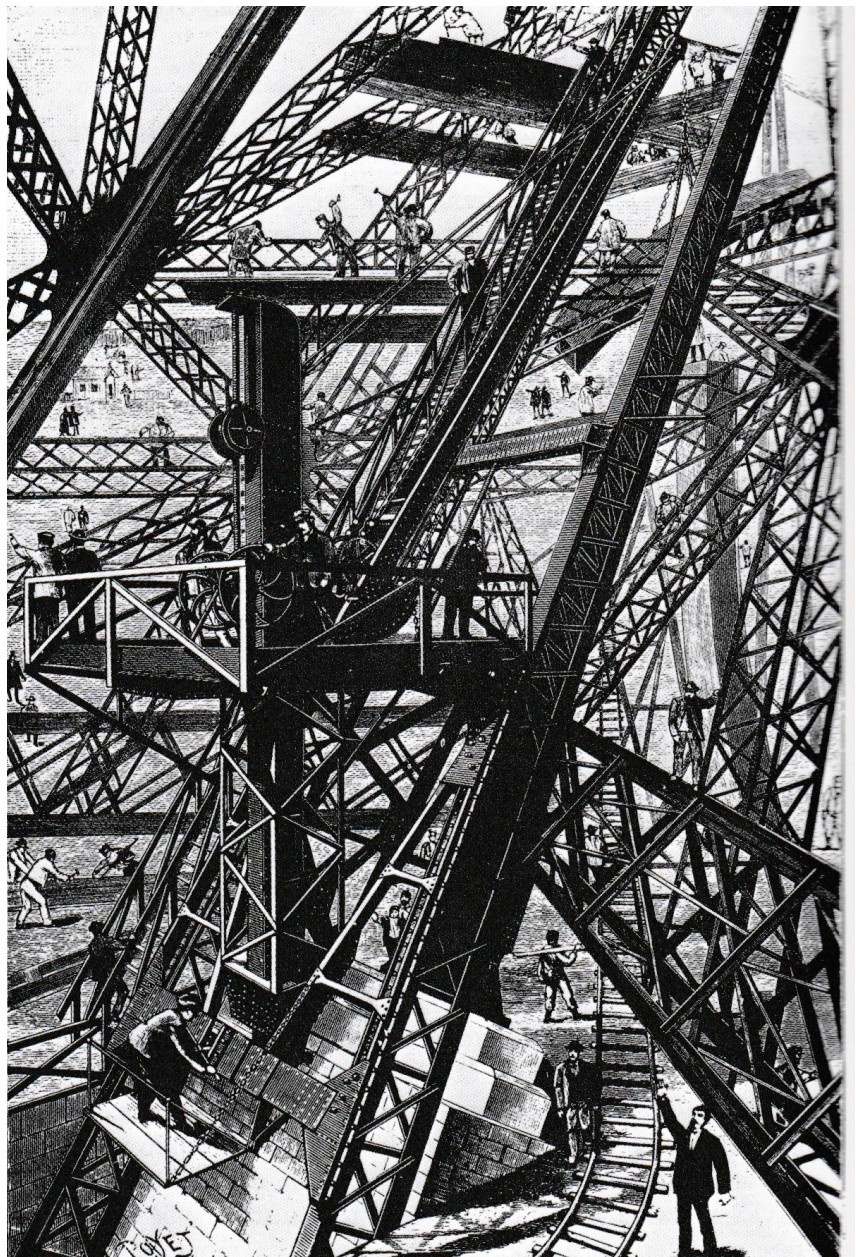
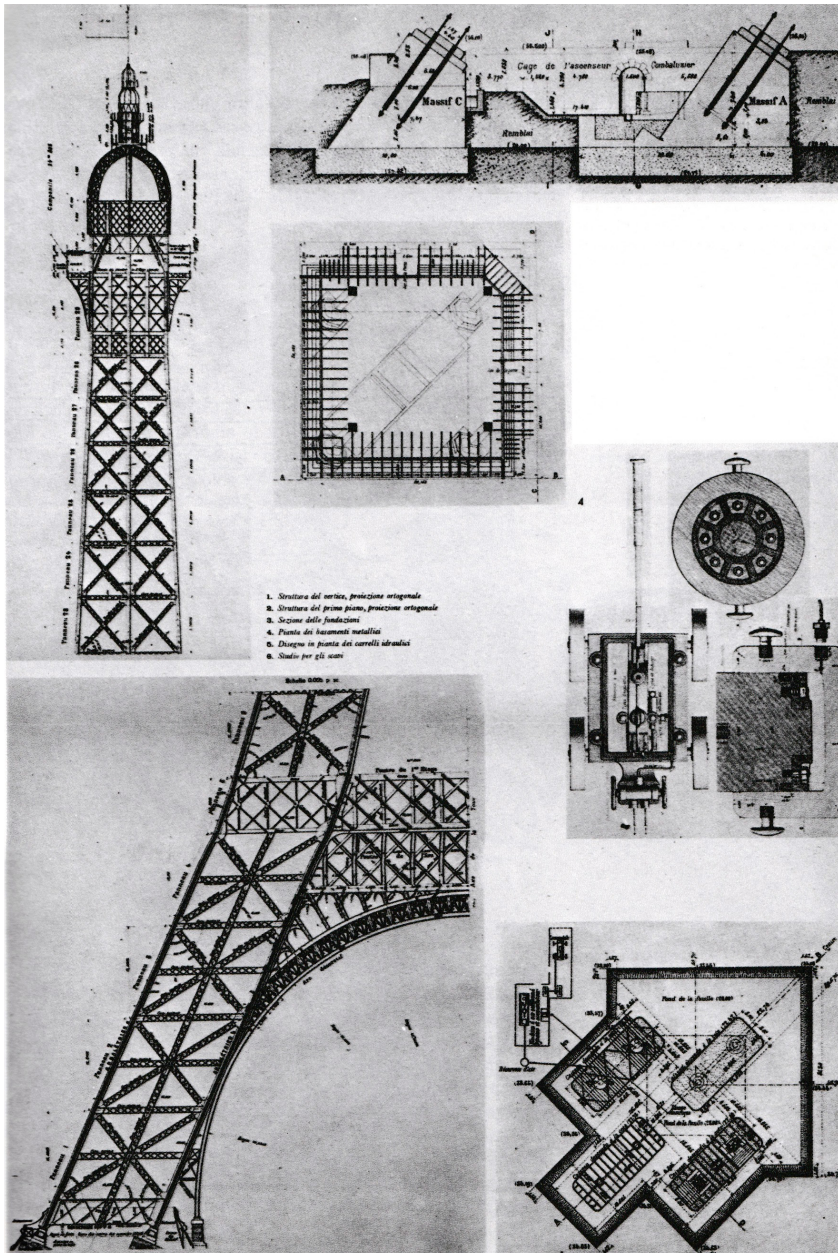


Fig. 3. Louis Poyet. *Grues de montage, lors de la construction de la Tour Eiffel (1887)* (1982, fig. 49, p. 40).



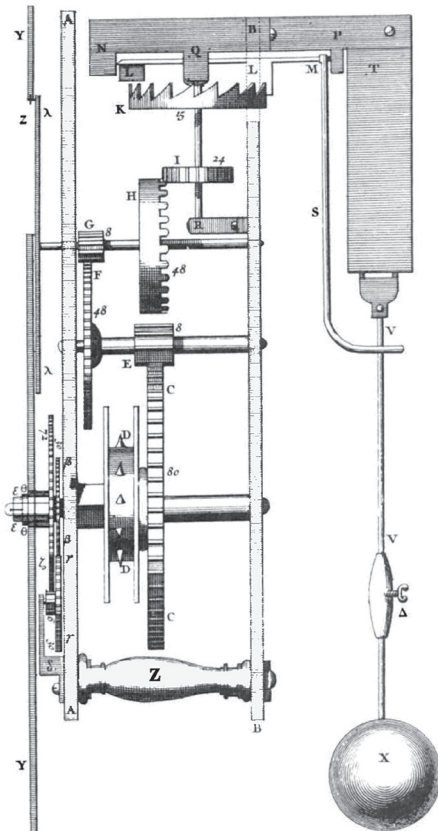
axis. The latter is an unconventional but effective way to distinguish the two-dimensional world of Mongian projections, ideal for technical drawing and signage, from the three-dimensional world of perspective projections, intended for figurative representations. The author chooses two different representations of the Eiffel Tower to show two antithetical ways in which it is possible to represent the same object (figs. 3, 4). A reflection on the analogies between perspective and images with a taxonomic function follows. Apparently, they are two different ways of reproducing reality. But just as perspective is based on the construction of a rational, continuous space, in which the parts are regulated by precise metric ratios, taxonomies also follow rational, rigorous and stable rules, placing all the elements in a condition of logical continuity.

Drawing means choosing

The second chapter, *Emphasis and exclusion in drawing*, shows how each drawing emphasizes some elements and simultaneously excludes others. This particularly delicate choice makes an image something very different from what it represents. However, the process of emphasis/exclusion tends to leave no gaps because perception is the reference of visual experience and is sufficient to give completeness to the image. Drawing, therefore, is a profoundly critical act, based on a choice of emphasis and exclusion. From this point of view, "an object exists twice, three times, many times. Indeed, each object is, for the purpose of representation, multiple different objects, and each representation tends to put in

Fig. 4. S.a., Some construction drawings of the Eiffel Tower (s.d.) (1982, fig. 50, p. 41).

Fig. 5. Christiaan Huygens. *Horologium Oscillatorium* (1673) (1982, fig. 63, p. 70).



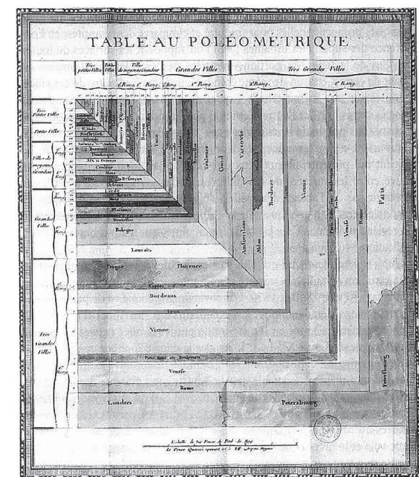
brackets, without completely excluding them, the other possibilities of existence of the object, to particularly exalt one of them" (p. 67; trans. of the text is by the author). The section, for example, focuses on parts and connections of the internal structure of an object and deliberately eliminates all connotations relating to its external appearance (fig. 5). However, Massironi observes, exclusion does not only concern the act of drawing. There is a mechanism of exclusion also in the observation of the representation, and in this game of losses there is something irreducible: it is the core of communication, that is, "the thing that is being discussed independently of what is being said about it or through it" (p. 74). And just as the sender loads the message with communicative intentions, which fill the content level of the message object, so the receiver fills with his own contents all the gaps that derive from the reading process, further relaunching the subtle game of emphasis and exclusion. The central theme of the first chapter returns, therefore: the double keystone constituted by the awareness of the one who draws and the awareness of the one who observes.

Drawing: semantic exposure

The third chapter deals with the relationship between *Drawing and the problems of communication* and addresses them from a predominantly semiological point of view. Massironi observes that designers (painters, graphic artists, architects, engravers, etc.), when dealing with the theory of representation, always focus on techniques and almost never on the meaning of images; they leave this task to scholars of verbal language who, for obvious reasons, apply procedures

to figurative analysis that have been tested for texts and are therefore unsuitable for the purpose. Recalling the work of the authors who have provided the most important contributions on the topic (Umberto Eco, Tomás Maldonado, Georges Mounin, Jacques Bertin, as well as the less recent but still valid Charles Sanders Peirce), and warning against the inadequacy of the methods of linguistic analysis applied to graphics, Massironi insists on a theme that is central to him: drawing is not a tool for representation, but rather for clarification and explanation. Diagrams and graphs are a very clear example of this: they do not represent objects, but rather qualities, quantities, distributions, subdivisions and reciprocal relations between phenomena (fig. 6). The differences between perspective, orthogonal projections and axonometry clearly highlight the role of drawing

Fig. 6. Charles-René de Fourcroy. *Essai d'une table poléométrique, ou amusement d'un amateur de plans sur la grandeur de quelques villes* (1782) (1982, fig. 77, p. 99).

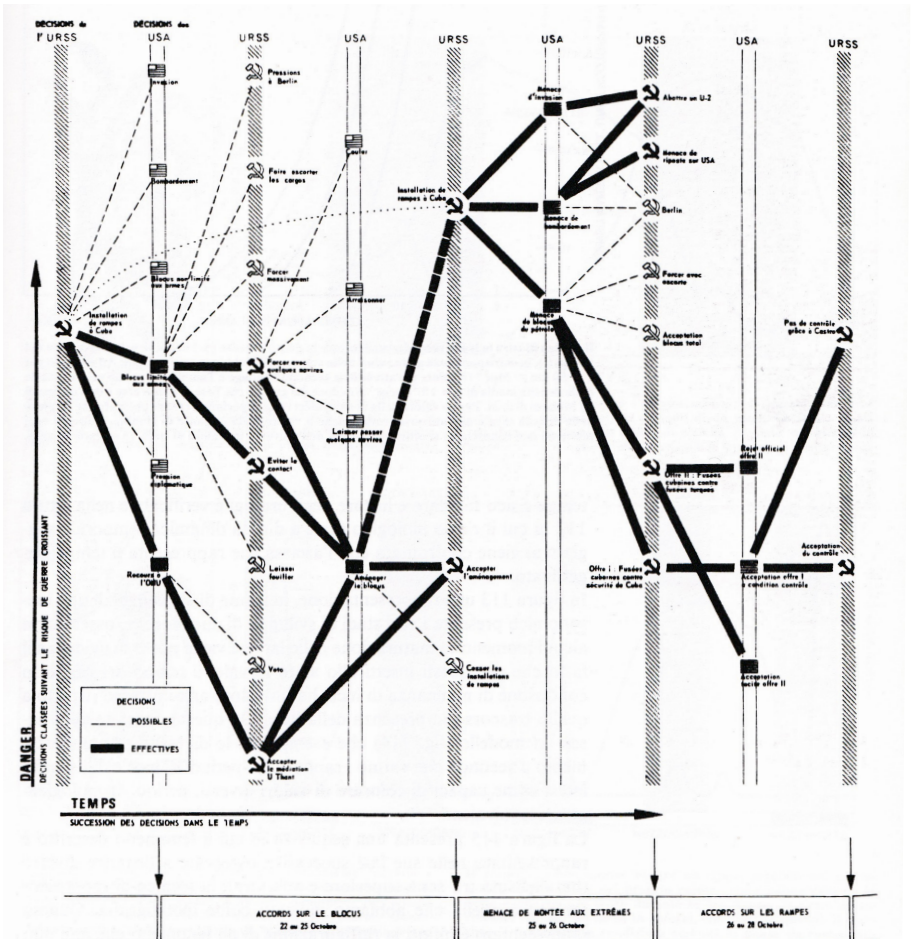


as a semantic exposure. Each of these forms of representation is based on codes that clarify and explain only some of the infinite qualities possessed by an object. They function as "semantic chains that are able to convey particular and specific contents" and are nothing more than "languages for the image" (p. 93). The author compares verbal expressiveness and the expressiveness of drawing, highlighting the differences between the world of objects communicated more effectively by images, and the world of concepts, conveyed more pertinently by words. He does so through a long series of assertions, close to aphorisms, in which the rules of the two communication systems are highlighted through a large series of examples.

There is, however, an area of overlap between language, which proceeds through concepts, and perception, which relies on objects: it is pictography. If, for example, a pictogram represents a man, it is valid for all men, regardless of their external characteristics. A pictogram therefore reproduces a concept, an idea. From the pictogram derives the ideogram, a broader term from a semantic point of view. It presupposes a process of categorization whose graphic translation is based on codified rules (frontal representation plane, line as margin, absence of shades, omission of the background, centrality of the figure etc.).

The reasoning extends to the "marginal conditions in which a communicative instrument stops and seeks help from another"; in particular, to those cases in which "verbal discourse withdraws to leave space for those modes of graphic signification that integrate and expand its communicative limits" (p. 112). A theme that will be developed further on.

Fig. 7. Jacques Bertin. *La crise de Cuba* (1967) (1982, fig. 110, p. 149).



A successful neologism

The title of the fourth chapter does not suggest any great innovations (*Drawing as a tool for scientific investigation and information*), but the incipit immediately goes to the heart of the matter: "There are mental productions that have the characteristic of being structured only in a visual manner" (p. 119): in some cases, drawing is the only expressive form to be able to transmit a content. The representation of the benzene ring, for example, allows us to inform about both the quantitative and qualitative composition of this hydrocarbon. Even if the drawn shape has no connection with the real configuration of the compound, it shows the components, the reciprocal relationships between them and, therefore, summarizes all the knowledge necessary to understand the element in question. In this case, as in the numerous other examples reported, the drawing is configured as a hypothetical and non-exclusive model. This type of representation is widely used in scientific journalism and in all cases in which it is necessary to visualize something that does not have a shape. These are representations that cannot be experienced perceptually and, therefore, lack rules of graphic execution. To define them, Massironi coined the term '*ipotetigrafia*' ('hypothetigraphy'), that is, the "graphic product that contributes to giving visual form to hypotheses formulated to explain the behaviour or functioning of natural conditions intuited or observed experimentally and of which it constitutes an explanatory model" (p. 126).

Science has been using hypothetigraphy for a very long time; in the past through allegorical figures, then through increasingly rigorous notations. For example, a vector is characterized by length, inclination, direction and point of application. Its graphic coding can isolate, define and rigorously express all the elements that characterize a force. But hypothetigraphy can go much further: it arises from an intuitive process and, therefore, it is not possible to establish its outcomes *a priori*, but only to reconstruct a taxonomy in reverse to identify its internal structure. Usually, the process starts from the need to express data provided by measurements; the latter are arranged within a formal, graphic or plastic structure, characterized by rigorous geometries, and it is precisely this geometrization that allows the observer to identify it as an abstract and non-verisimilitude configuration, precisely because it is the description of non-visible phenomena (fig. 7). It also highlights once again the fact that perception does not only consist in acquiring and processing external data, but also internal data to the observer. From a graphic and projective point of view, hypothetigraphy prefers points and lines in frontal view. Furthermore, it always requires a caption, in order to promote, through a well-structured interaction between visual and verbal, an unequivocal understanding: abstract lines, characterized by a low degree of motivation, need to be supported by a text that associates them with the hypothesized and schematized phenomenon.

Occam's razor of representation

I discovered Massironi's book in 1996, reading *L'oggetto della raffigurazione* by Giovanni Anceschi (Milano: ETAS libri 1992). The subject of the two works is the same, but *Vedere con il disegno* is more structured, didactic, ordered, methodical, iterative. It helped me a lot in my studies, however I have never recommended it to students because I fear they would not appreciate it, and I would be disappointed. It is a book I am fond of, like those records in which there is a song that reminds you of something and therefore becomes precious: but only for you.

The book shows its age, and this makes it even more fascinating. It is based on a simple idea, common in the Seventies, that the work of art is made half by the artist and half by the observer. I think this idea of a horizontal art may seem weird to those who were born and live in a world of ever greater imbalances. The concept of hypothetigraphy for me is a crowbar, an Occam's razor that I use to quickly and mnemonic classify graphic representations. Some time ago I wrote an article on this very subject, on the ways in which hypothetigraphy can be sought, evoked, imposed, avoided, rejected by a drawing [1]. I reread it a few days ago, and it didn't seem very convincing to me. It's right that it should be this way: the aura of a reading cannot be reinfused into a writing. You must change your point of view. A drawing sees differently, and perhaps manages to illuminate the corners that words are forced to leave in shadow.

Note

[1] See Colistra, D. (2020). Ubique sunt leones. In *XY digitale*, n. 9-10, pp. 78-91 <<https://dx.doi.org/10.15168/xyv5i09-10.168>>.

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