

# The Transformation and Transmission of the Immediate

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## The Three Elements of Verbal and Visual Art

Verbal and visual art join three elements: source, meaning (or phenomenological poetic image), and environment.<sup>1</sup> The relationship among these three elements evolves as the boundary between source and environment, two static entities, is transcended by meaning, an active entity.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator challenges the perception of boundaries as they pertain to narrative and meaning.

But Marlowe was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative, then, is a contained entity capable of transmitting an uncontained "meaning." Therefore, while the source and the environment remain fixed, and meaning actively

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<sup>1</sup> Phenomenological poetic image is a term I am borrowing from Bachelard 1964. Bachelard's use of the term is summarized nicely in his introduction. Bachelard bases the definition on the experience of the reader: "The reader of poems is asked to consider an image not as an object and even less as a substitution for an object, but to seize its specific reality. For this, the act of the creative consciousness must be systematically associated with the most fleeting product of that consciousness, the poetic image" (xix).

<sup>2</sup> Conrad 1899:6.

permeates space and “illuminates.” The halo around the moon is the illumination that results from the interconnection of source and environment.

## Transcending Boundaries

Michael A. Fuller’s “Pursuing the Complete Bamboo in the Breast” is an analysis of East Asian literary theory as it pertains to visual and verbal art. According to Fuller, art joins external experiences to internal responses, “something *outside* mak[es] contact with an *inside*.”<sup>3</sup> Fuller outlines three essential components to artistic expression: the internal, the external, and the spirit.<sup>4</sup> The spirit purportedly mediates between the internal and external, laboring to eliminate the distinction between the two until the artist himself becomes a “transparent receptacle.”<sup>5</sup> The objective of East Asian art forms, therefore, is to combat the confinements of distinction and capture the immediate as the artist “grasps the cognized inner object and adequately represents it to the world as a work of art.”<sup>6</sup>

The dissolution of the boundary between source and environment is sometimes a physical event that takes place during the production of visual art. Su Shi’s response to Wen Yuke’s painting of “Yundong Valley Leaning Bamboo” stresses that when creating bamboo paintings, the mind and hand must be “mutually responsive,” indicating that the external has been

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<sup>3</sup> Fuller 1993:6.

<sup>4</sup> In this analysis, I will correlate the internal with source; the external with environment; and, the spirit with meaning or poetic image

<sup>5</sup> Fuller 1993:17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

internalized and the “observed” has been “familiarized.”<sup>7</sup> The art therefore is a projection of the mediating “spirit” that connects the artist to his environment. The image, whether a visual image or a phenomenological poetic image, shines through once the boundary between internal and external dissolves.

In 1085, Su Shi wrote a poem titled “At Guo Xiangzheng’s house I got drunk and painted bamboo and rocks on his wall. Guo wrote a poem to thank me and also gave me two ancient bronze swords”:

空肠得酒芒角出。肝肺槎牙生竹石。森然欲作不可回。吐向君家雪色壁。

When my empty stomach got wine, the shoots began to sprout.

My innards, all jutting angles, grew into bamboo and stones.

Dense, they became active, not to be turned back.

I spat them onto the snow-white walls of your house.<sup>8</sup>

Su Shi’s humorous poem playfully addresses the three components to artistic expression: source, environment, and image.<sup>9</sup> The “innards” of the artist respond to an external catalyst (the wine) and the two react to project visual art, cutting through the boundary between source and environment.

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<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the final product, whether it is verbal or visual art, has neither distinctly internal nor distinctly external origins, but rather is a harmonious blend of the two.

<sup>8</sup> Fuller 1993:9.

<sup>9</sup> In this case, the source is the poet himself, the environment is the “snow-white walls” of the house, and the image is the meaning.

## Fusion

In his introduction to *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard outlines communicability as it pertains to the dissemination of a poetic image. Bachelard suggests that the poetic image “expresses us by making us what it expresses ... it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore the transmission of an image has a transformative effect on the reality of the subject.

Bachelard draws reference to Rilke as he explores the “intimacy of fusion.”<sup>11</sup> The concept of fusion can simultaneously project inwardly and outwardly. Rilke explores fusion in the context of ‘interiorization’ when he references “the lost house:”

I never saw this strange dwelling again. Indeed, as I see it now, the way it appeared to my child’s eye, it is not a building, but it is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form. Thus the whole thing is scattered about inside me, the rooms, the stairs that descended with such ceremonious slowness, others, narrowed cages that mounted in a spiral movement, in the darkness of which we advanced like the blood in our veins.<sup>12</sup>

Here the memories of the speaker are preserved through the interconnection of himself and his home.

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<sup>10</sup> Bachelard 1964:xxiii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Alternatively, the fusion of inhabitant to home can have an externalization effect. In the chapter titled “House and the Universe,” Bachelard dissolves separations between home, environment, and subject and presents the house as “an instrument with which” man can “confront the cosmos.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, the home relationship between home and environment becomes synonymous with that of inhabitant and environment, and the home becomes an amplification of the inhabitant’s relation to the universe. Bachelard captures the essence of unification and projection in a passage that “describes the house’s human resistance at the height of a storm:

The house was fighting gallantly. At first it gave voice to its complaints; the most awful gusts were attacking it from every side at once, with evident hatred and such howls of rage that, at times, I trembled with fear. But it stood firm ... The already human being in whom I had sought shelter for my body yielded nothing to the storm. The house clung close to me, like a she-wolf, and at times, I could smell her odor penetrating maternally to my very heart. That night she was really my mother. She was all I had to keep and sustain me. We were alone.<sup>14</sup>

The house in this case adopts a human nature that links *her* to the experiences of *her* inhabitant. The emotions of the inhabitant are thereby intrinsically linked to the house and the house becomes an extension of the human experience.

Bachelard presents a phenomenological critique of poetry in which distinct elements such intimate space, the home, the subject, and the outside world become congruous and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 44-45.

interrelated. Just as “behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter,” Baudelaire muses in *Les paradis artificiels* (p. 280), “Isn’t it true that a pleasant house makes winter more poetic, and doesn’t winter add to the poetry of a house?”<sup>15</sup> The distinction of inside versus outside simultaneously qualifies space and intertwines the respective realities of interior and exterior.

### **The Externalization Effect**

Objects are capable of becoming vessels for exteriorization, causing the distinctions between “inner and outer, subject and object, [to] collapse.”<sup>16</sup> Artistic objects can both dissolve boundaries and project transformations of atmosphere and space. Therefore, poetic images are timelessly encapsulated within modes of expression that are poetic if not in structure then in nature, and the message remains waiting to manifest itself in what Gaston Bachelard refers to as “a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche.”<sup>17</sup>

The “externalization effect” is manifest in the relationship of armor to a warrior in Hittite and Greek traditions. According to Hittite tradition, a warrior’s shield was made of cowhide and was a literal manifestation of his lineage. Therefore, the strength and identity of the individual was projected through the shield. This example of the “externalization effect” is consistent with the writings of Bachelard as the interconnection of individual and object (house, verbal art, or, in this case, shield) renders a platform for the transmission of intangible substance.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 39, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Fuller 1993:7.

<sup>17</sup> Bachelard 1964:xv.

The portrayal of Achilles' armor in the *Iliad* re-orientes the concept of source and demonstrates the manner in which meaning is amplified through the connection between subject and environment.<sup>18</sup> The experience of those admiring Achilles' armor is analogous to the phenomenological transmission of Bachelard's 'poetic image.' In the case of Achilles' armor, the bronze is not a distinct entity but rather an extension of Achilles; the bronze is a physical medium through which Achilles radiates:

He [= Achilles] put it [= his armor] on, the gifts of the god, which Hephaistos had made for him with much labor. First he put around his legs the shin guards, beautiful ones, with silver fastenings at the ankles. Next he put around his chest the breastplate, and around his shoulders he slung the sword with the nails of silver, a sword made of bronze. Next, the shield [*sakos*], great and mighty, he took, and from it there was a gleam [*selas*] from afar, as from the moon, or as when, at sea, a gleam [*selas*] to sailors appears from a blazing fire, the kind that blazes high in the mountains at a solitary station [*stathmos*], as the sailors are carried unwilling by gusts of wind over the fish-swarmed sea [*pontos*], far away from their loved ones. So also did the gleam [*selas*] from the Shield [*sakos*] of Achilles reach all the way up to the aether.

*Iliad* 19.368-379

Here, the armor does not reflect light—it projects light. However, the armor shines only as a projection of Achilles, demonstrating the fusion necessary for transmission.

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<sup>18</sup> In this case, meaning is the splendor emanating from Achilles, in other words, his *persona*.

## Fluidity and Fixity

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing dissects the fixity of visual art in contrast to the fluidity of verbal art. In “Laocoön, An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry,” Lessing explains that “since the [visual] artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view.”<sup>19</sup> Lessing goes on to cite Homer’s classification of visible and invisible actions, a distinction that “cannot be made on canvas, where everything is visible, and visible in precisely the same way.”<sup>20</sup> However, the study of screen art in East Asia is an opportunity to re-evaluate the perception of visual art as a fixed medium.

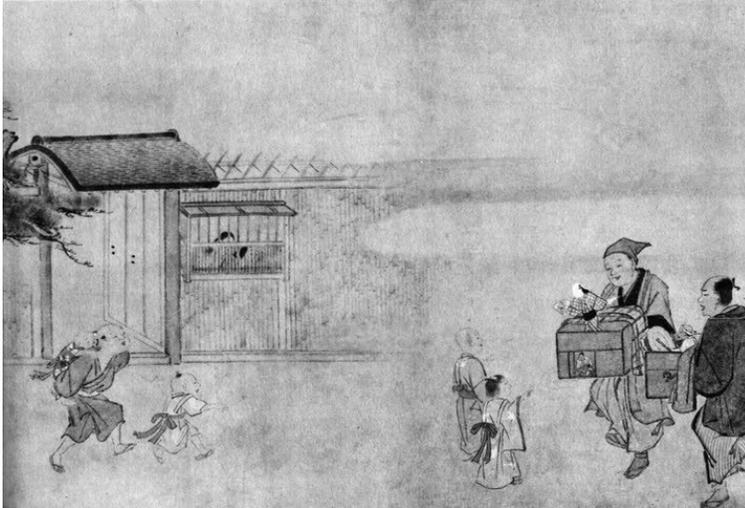
In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Japan, an early Edo artist named Hanabusa Itcho broke away from the orthodox style of the Kano School to explore the musings of the ancient philosopher Zhuangzi as he contemplated the power of perspective, juxtaposing rigidity with flux and “floating” with “fixity.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lessing 1887:16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>21</sup> Screech 2012:272.



Itcho's focus on the power of deconstruction and "liminality" sparked controversy as it interfered with social and cultural constructs.<sup>22</sup> Favoring connectivity over fixity, Itcho's visual artistic expression encapsulated a response to boundaries and barriers that dismantled distinction and intertwined static and fluid. Itcho chose to portray interactions between members of disparate social classes and presented them amidst backdrops that gave the impression that the subjects were floating free of their environment. In other words, the subjects are not tied to the landscape, infusing a sense of fluidity within the rigid social hierarchy and the fixity of visual art.

The evolution of the screen in East Asia challenges the dynamism of fluidity and fixity as it pertains to verbal and visual art respectively. The screen in Chinese traditions was not only a vessel for externalization, but also a mode of visual art that welded static mediums with *spatial fluidity*. Screens in ancient China had psychological, cultural, and artistic value; they simultaneously divided, unified, and qualified space.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 273.

## Verbal and Visual Art

Visual art can behave similarly to verbal art by also dismantling boundaries and projecting meaning. Bachelard's reference to J. B. Pontalis brings to mind the union of verbal and visual. Pontalis posits that "verse always has a movement, the image flows into the line of the verse, carrying the imagination along with it, as though the imagination created a nerve fiber."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the relation of verbal art to visual art is in essence analogous to the manner in which spectral illumination relates to the shining moon. East Asian screens question the perceived roles of visual art as they possess qualities of verbal art—namely, the capacity to transmit meaning through the interconnection of subject and object, environment and source.

Initially, the screen was a "three-dimensional object that differentiated an architectural space," next it was "a two-dimensional surface for painting," and finally it was a "painted image that helped construct pictorial space and supply visual metaphors."<sup>24</sup> Screens therefore evolved from a ritual instrument to a canvas for art to a subject of Chinese art.

Screens originally functioned as dividers that both demarcated areas for specific purposes and also "qualified" them, transforming a single space into multiple, definable spaces.<sup>25</sup> In "The Double Screen," Wu Hung addresses the contradiction inherent in Chinese ritual art as he confronts hierarchy with continuity.<sup>26</sup> The relationship between the screen and the emperor in ancient China embodied the duality of distinction and cohesion. Screens originated as

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<sup>23</sup> Bachelard 1964:xxviii.

<sup>24</sup> Wu Hung 1997:26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 10, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

fundamental parts of imperial ritual in which they instilled a sense of continuity amidst division. The screen functioned as not only an “external object” and spatial barrier, but also an “extension” of the emperor.<sup>27</sup> The emperor was ceremonially connected to the screen; he sat in front of the screen and it framed him. Therefore the screen was a visual projection of the emperor’s power, wedding meaning to medium, and consequently transforming the surrounding space.<sup>28</sup>

However, the screen ultimately evolved from a part of a spatial whole to a construct of pictorial space.<sup>29</sup> According to literature from the Han period, this change took place once the emperor ‘turned around’ and faced the screen, consequently disrupting the connection between the screen and the emperor. Subsequently, the screen became a locus for artistic expression and evolved to hold not only a metonymic spatial value (at once separating and unifying) but also an intrinsically artistic one. There was a “separation and interaction between the surface and the image” that granted the screen validity as a “medium for painting.”<sup>30</sup> The evolution of the screen aligned visual and verbal art forms and demonstrated the capacity of visual art to convey meaning.

The frame surrounding the art depicted on the screen, a physical divider of space, infuses elements of continuity within the screen. Wu Hung explains that screens came to be framed by

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>28</sup> In this case the meaning is the emanating power of the emperor; the medium is the unified visual presentation of the emperor and the screen; and, the environment is the court.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

patterned prints, illuminating contradiction as “framing distinguished ‘text’ from ‘context’” and patterning “dismissed distinctions between individuals physical entities.”<sup>31</sup>

As screens were interactive forms of visual art, they are not solely static, as Pontalis classifies visual art to be. Rather, screens are further examples of how the interaction between subject and environment transforms the immediate and transmits meaning. From the joining of inhabitant and home, to the interconnection of visual artist and visual art, to the wedding of a warrior to his armor, to the intrinsic link between screen and atmosphere, boundaries between source and environment dissolve amidst the illumination of meaning.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

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