

The Singular Countenance: The Visage as Landscape, the Landscape as Visage¹

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我吴兴山水清远，甲于天下。生其间者，得其灵淑之气，每借笔墨以抒写其性真。如赵松雪、钱舜举、王叔明、唐子华辈，皆足以名当时而传后世。逮时易世殊，讲求者鲜，一二俗学之徒，但私一隅，遂至家尸户祝，而流易莫挽。求所谓六法者，能者绝无，知者亦仅有矣。

(Shen Zongqian [沈宗騫] (1781) *A Skiff on the Ocean of Painting*, p. 1)

Abstract

The article shows that, in the effort to convey a notion of the singularity of the beloved face, especially in tragic settings, often human cultures resort to nature, and adopt animal, vegetable, and even mineral metaphors in order to rhetorically transfer the singularity of their shapes to that of the facial representations. This trend develops across cultures in world literature but imposes itself with particular emphasis in those traditions, authors, and texts that posit a systematic correlation between the microcosmos and the macro-cosmos, between body and nature, and between the face and the landscape.

Keywords: face, singularity, semiotics of culture, landscape painting, portrait

1. Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral Metaphors of the Face

The narrative poem *Chang Hen Ge* (长恨歌; lit. “*Song of Everlasting Regret*”) is one of the most accomplished literary works of the Tang dynasty.² Composed by the renowned Chinese poet Bai Juyi,³ it recounts the tragic love story between Emperor Xuanzong of Tang⁴ and his favorite concubine, the epical beauty Yang Guifei (Figure 1).⁵

Figure 1. *Imperial Consort Yang Guifei Teaches a Parrot to Chant Sutras*, Liao dynasty (907-1125), Liao Tomb of Mountain Pao



In the poem, which dates from 809, metaphors flow from the natural landscape to the face of the concubine, and vice versa. First, the poem tells us that the beauty of Yan Guifei’s face was incomparable to those of other girls:

六宫粉黛无颜色。

liùgōng fěndài wú yánsè.

All of the powdered faces of the ladies in waiting from the six palaces paled in comparison.

Then, we are told, in the ensuing description of her countenance, that only flowers

could evoke her beauty (Figure 2):

云鬓花颜金步摇，

yúnbìn huāyán jīnbùyáo,

She had dark black hair, and the face of a flower, with golden jewelry dangling from her hair.

Figure 2. Hosoda Eishi. 1756-1829. About 1800-20. *The Chinese Beauty Yang Guifei*. London: British Museum



But then there is the turning point of the poem, which precisely revolves around Yan Guifei's face. History goes that in 755, An Lushan⁶ marched into the capital with the Anshi Rebellion. Emperor Xuanzong fled southwest with Yang Guifei (Figure 3). At Mawei Relay Stop, however, the soldiers accompanying them demanded the execution of the girl, blaming her and her cousin for the rebellion and the decline of the dynasty. Yang Guifei then hanged herself in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple in Mawei village.

Figure 3. Ch'ien Hsüan, or Qian Xuan. 1250-1300. Detail showing Yang Guifei Mounting a Horse. Detail from a scroll. Washington: Freer Gallery of Art



At this stage, the poem evokes for one last time the beauty of the concubine's face not anymore with a vegetal but with an animal metaphor: Yan Guifei's eyebrows resemble the feelers of a moth. Animals, however, are also the last, tragic witnesses to her beauty and death:

宛转蛾眉马前死。

wǎnzhuǎn éméi mǎ qián sǐ.

The writhing fair maiden, whose long and slender eyebrows resembled the feathery feelers of a moth, died in front of the horses.

Here the turning point takes place; in one of most memorable verses of Chinese poetry, Bai Juyi writes that

君王掩面救不得，

jūnwáng yǎn miàn jiù bùdé,

His Majesty covered his face, for he could not save her.

In this case, it is not the extraordinarily beautiful face of Guifei to be at the center of the poem's attention, but that of the Emperor, a face that he covers in shame and despair.

Covering one's face in despair is a traditional gesture across many cultures,

starting from the immense literary and visual tradition of Agamemnon veiling his face at the moment of sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia, in this case too, the sacrifice of a beloved woman in order to save the city. A fresco discovered at Pompeii, and now in the Archeological Museum at Naples, is a 1st Century AD Roman copy of a lost 4th Century BC painting by Timanthes,⁷ depicting the tragic episode (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A fresco discovered at Pompeii, now in the Archeological Museum of Naples, 1st Century AD Roman copy of a lost 4th Century BC painting by Timanthes depicting the sacrifice of Iphigenia



In western poetry this gesture of veiling the face has countless instances, for instance in 17th-century French poet Racine⁸ who, in his *Ifigénie*, writes that

Le triste Agamemnon, qui n'ose l'avouer,
Pour détourner ses yeux des meurtres qu'il présage,
Ou pour cacher ses pleurs, s'est voilé le visage.

Distraught Agamemnon, daring not to approve,
To ensure that no murders fell under his gaze,
Or to cover his tears, wore a veil on his face.⁹

But in the case of Emperor Xuanzong, the gesture also meant finally ending, with Guifei's tragic death, the irresistible influence that she could exert on him. The

rebellion is, indeed, sedated and when he returns to the slopes of Mawei, as the poem reads:

不见玉颜空死处。

bù jiàn yù yán kōng sǐ chù.

He did not see her face of Jade, he only saw the abandoned place where she had died.

A third metaphor, a mineral one, evokes here the face of the concubine, but also initiates, in the poem, the process of her transformation. Metaphors start to flow back: the Emperor cannot see her face of Jade, but later on we are told that

芙蓉如面柳如眉，

fúróng rú miàn liǔ rú méi,

The lotus plants were like her face and the willow trees were like her eyebrows.

Guifei's face is transfigured into nature, as the Emperor starts to see her countenance everywhere.

2. A World-Literature Trend

Many elements of this tragic story belong to the common imaginary of world literature. Affirming the incomparable beauty of a woman's face, for instance, occurs in many works of 13th-century Italian poetic movement *Dolce Stil Nuovo*.¹⁰ The Italian national poet, Dante, in the *Vita Nuova* ["*The New Life*"] evokes the unique countenance of his beloved Beatrice: "Color d'amore e di pietà sembianti / non preser mai così mirabilmente / viso di donna" ["The colour of love and the semblance of pity / no woman's face has more miraculously / shown"] (Vn XXXVI 4 3). As regards the possibility that only metaphors taken from nature might render the beauty of a female face, another absolute protagonist of world literature, William Shakespeare, opens the twentieth of his love sonnets by the verses "A woman's face with nature's own hand painted / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion". Also, the indelibility of a beloved woman's face, and its turning into an internal, inerasable image is at the center of one of the sonnets composed by Miguel de Cervantes in *El curioso impertinente*, ["*The Curious Impertinent*"], one of the "exemplary novels" inserted in the *Quixote*:

“Podré yo verme en la región de olvido, / de vida y gloria y de favor desierto, / y allí verse podrá en mi pecho abierto / cómo tu hermoso rostro está esculpido” [“My heart repented of its love for thee / If buried in oblivion I should be, / Bereft of life, fame, favour, even there / It would be found that I thy image bear / Deep graven in my breast for all to see”].

The depiction of an ineffably beautiful female face through vegetal, animal, or mineral metaphors is, then, a cross-cultural phenomenon in world-literature. Italian semiotician Patrizia Magli, who has devoted an essay on literary representations of the face, underlines, indeed, that these depictions contain “un uso particolare del linguaggio che proprio del linguaggio sembra cancellare la mediazione per toccare direttamente i sensi, i nervi, le emozioni” [“a particular usage of language that indeed seems to erase the mediation of language itself so as to directly touch the senses, the nerves, the emotions”] (2016, p. 16).

But this is just an illusion, of course: the passionate words of the poet seek to capture the uniqueness of a beloved face and its irresistible lure, yet they cannot escape the conventionality of language: what is singular must take shape into what is common, so that only the uniqueness of natural forms can metaphorically offer a way out of the paradox. Hence, a complex dynamic obtains between face, representation, and nature. On the one hand, nature is evoked to render, into language, the singularity of a face, as well as its utmost beauty; on the other hand, nature, from which a face emerges, does not acquire only its singularity but also its aura, a shadow of intentionality, and a sparkle of agency. In the floating flowers of lotus that emerge from the pond of Mawei, the Emperor can see the unique beauty of Guifei, yet this singularity simultaneously seeps through the plants, bestowing upon them the irresistible countenance of the concubine. As Bai Juyi writes about the Emperor’s reaction to this both natural and human site:

对此如何不泪垂。

duì cǐ rúhé bù lèi chuí

Upon seeing this, how could he hold back the tears?

3. The Face between Nature and Culture

As a vast literature indicates, the face is the most versatile interface of human

interaction: most known societies simply could not function without faces. Through them, human beings manifest and perceive cognitions, emotions, and actions, being able, thus, to coordinate with each other. The centrality of the face is such that it is often attributed to non-human entities too, like animals, plants, objects, or even landscapes and, in certain circumstances, countries and cultural heritage. Symmetrically, defacing people literally means denying their faces, debasing their humanity. Such centrality of the face is the outcome of biological evolution, as well as the product of cultural post-speciation and social contextualization. On the one hand, as Darwin already showed in a seminal essay, the facial expression of some emotions, like shame, cannot be faked; on the other hand, countless cultural devices can alter faces, from makeup to tattoo, from hairdressing to aesthetic surgery.

The social centrality of the face manifests itself also in the omnipresence of its representations. The human brain is hardwired to detect face-shaped visual patterns in the environment, as the phenomenon of pareidolia or the syndrome of Charles Bonnet indicate; at the same time, most human cultures have extensively represented the human face in multifarious contexts, with several materials, and through different techniques, from the funerary masks of ancient Egypt until the hyper-realistic portraits of present-day digital art. Depicting the face, moreover, plays a primary role in religions, with Christianity setting the long-term influential tradition of a deity that shows itself through a human face whereas other traditions, like Judaism or Islam, strictly regulate the representation of the human countenance so as to avoid blasphemy.

Since the face is so central in human behavior, facial images that are considered as produced by a non-human agency receive a special aura throughout history and cultures, as if they were endowed with extraordinary powers. Furthermore, since in many societies the face is read as the most important manifestation of interiority, ‘non man-made’ images of faces are attributed a status of authenticity and earnestness, as if they were the most sincere expression of some otherwise invisible agencies.

4. Micro- and Macro-Cosmos of the Face

Thus, on the one hand cultures seek to grasp the singularity of a face by seeing it as emerging from nature; in the case of a beautiful face, that is particularly evident: only the uniqueness of nature, and not the universality of culture, can explain its lure.

Italian poet Dante devotes most of chapter VIII of book III of his philosophical work *Convivio* to explain the theory, inspired by Aristotle, that matter in the face actualizes all its potentiality, and becomes entirely shaped by the form of the soul, because it is exactly in the face that the soul expresses itself the most. The singularity of the face, thus, derives from its metaphysical relation with nature. The doctrine of the subtle dialectics between the macro-cosmos and the micro-cosmos that already Aristotle situates in the human face, and Dante interprets in his spiritual aesthetics of the beloved face, touches its highest point of sophistication in the cabbalistic theories of Renaissance humanists, and find an extraordinary visual expression in the paintings of Italian artist Arcimboldo, and in particular in his *Nature morte reversibili* or *Reversible still lives* (Figure 5):¹¹

Figure 5. Reversible head with basket of fruits, 1590. New York: French & Company



The painting can be seen either as a basket replete with singular natural elements, mostly leaves and fruits, or as the unique face emerging from their composition. French semiotician Roland Barthes wrote a text on Arcimboldo in 1978, then republished in *L'obvie et l'obtus*. This anthology of semiotic analyses by Barthes seeks to penetrate the balance between the inertial value of language and the rebellious impact of writing. The French semiotician, therefore, reads Arcimboldo under a duplicitous light: on the one side, his creation seems to display a combinatorial rhetorics; on the other, Barthes

concludes that “ces têtes composées sont des têtes qui se décomposent. Les têtes d’Arcimboldo sont monstreuues parce qu’elles renvoient toutes, quelle que soit la grâce du sujet allégorique, à un malaise de substance: le grouillement” [“these composed heads are decomposing heads. Arcimboldo’s heads are monstrous because, independently from the grace of the allegorical subject, they all point at a substantial malaise: swarming”] (1982, pp. 133-134). Barthes, however, mostly related this swarming effect with an impression of death, whereas Arcimboldo subtle depiction of Renaissance cabbalistic thought probably also meant to visually render the emerging of the ultimate singularity of nature in the human face.

The individuation of nature in the human face, however, follows a path that cultures can also reverse. A thin but visible thread links the works of Italian mannerist painter Arcimboldo with those of present-day Chinese artist Huang Yan, born in Jilin in 1966. In them, the human face is used as a canvas for the depiction of landscapes in the traditional style of the Song dynasty. A complex dialectics ensues, through which the spectator is left puzzled and uncertain whether to recognize first the face, the landscape, or the pictorial cultural heritage inscribed in both. The result is reciprocal overflowing, with the face emerging from nature, and nature emerging from the face, and both emerging in the close relation between the Chinese face and the Chinese visual culture (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Huang Yan (黃岩), landscape painted on face. Private collection



5. A Spiritual Cartography of the Face

In painting landscapes on faces, indeed, Huang Yan explicitly refers to the Daoist philosophy of the body, which can be compared with the one underpinning Arcimboldo's portraits and exerts a similar influence on the Chinese art of face depiction.¹² Indeed, as late Yuan painter and scholar Wang Yi¹³ writes in the first extant Chinese treatise on portraits, dating from the 14th century, that is, *The Secrets of Painting Human Figures* (写像秘诀) “凡写相须通晓相法”, [“whoever paints a portrait must be thoroughly familiar with the rules of physiognomy”].

Physiognomy, in traditional China, is part of a larger array of specialized doctrines currently called “somatomancy”, or the art of predicting the future through the examination of the body. Wang Yi, in particular, took most of his physiognomic knowledge from the *Shenxiang quanbian* (神象全编), the *Complete Guide to Spirit Physiognomy*, compiled by Yuan Zhongche (袁忠彻), alias Gongda or Jingsi, of the early Ming dynasty (1367-1458). A late Ming edition, preserved in the National Central Library of Taipei, Taiwan, contains a graph depicting a traditional rule of Chinese physiognomy: “the face [should] be divided into Five Mountains (*wuyue*) and Four Rivers (*sidu*)”. The Five Mountains are the forehead, chin, nose, right cheekbone and left cheekbone; the Four Rivers are the ears, eyes, mouth and nostrils. In this rule, that is clearly inspired by the Daoism understanding of the relation between nature, body, and human personality, the face is read as if it was a landscape, but simultaneously the landscape is read as if it was a face (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Shenxiang quanbian*, *Complete Guide to Spirit Physiognomy* (神象全編), compiled by Yuan Zhongche (袁忠徹), alias Gongda or Jingsi, of the early Ming dynasty (1367-1458). A late Ming edition, preserved in the National Central Library of Taipei, Taiwan



Early Chinese manuals of portraiture advise painters to use traditional Chinese face physiognomy in order to memorize the face as a landscape during its depiction. It must be underlined, indeed, that in China the pictorial genre of the portrait flourished after that of the landscape, so that seeing the former as an instance of the latter would allow painters to render the singularity of a visage, memorize its individual features, and manifest their psychological relevance. At the same time, in this exercise of individuation, the relation between the human face and the cosmos is never lost: in the 16th-century Chinese encyclopedia *Newly Edited and Thoroughly Enlarged Complete Book of the Ten Thousand Treasures from the Exquisite and Intricate of the Forest of Scholars for Practical Use by All under Heaven* (Xinban quanbu tianxia bianyong wenlin miaojin wanbao quanshu, 1612), the author inserts a mnemonic rhyme meant to help the portrait painter to remember a crucial operation: he must detect the secret geometry of an individual face, so that the proportion of the cosmos might appear through it:

Horizontally, divide into five eyes;

Vertically, measure three planes.

[Consider] the eight directions [heaven] and the four quadrates [earth],
and you will thoroughly comprehend the entire cosmos!

A graph in the book visualizes this theory of proportions and correspondences between micro- and macro-cosmos (Figure 8):

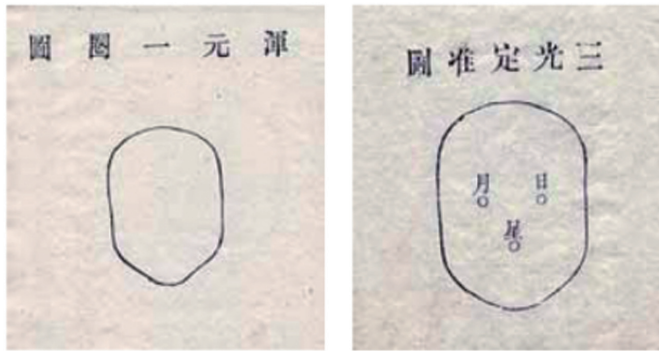
Figure 8. 16th-century Chinese encyclopedia *Newly Edited and Thoroughly Enlarged Complete Book of the Ten Thousand Treasures from the Exquisite and Intricate of the Forest of Scholars for Practical Use by All under Heaven* (*Xinban quanbu tianxia bianyong wenlin miaojin wanbao quanshu*, 1612)



The modern development of the Chinese literature on portraiture makes it even more evident that the face constitutes a new pictorial challenge for an art, the Chinese one, that had been traditionally devoted to other subjects, such as landscape or calligraphy, and that, in depicting these subjects, had also sought to visualize their hidden nature of visual forms more than the replica of an original. Influenced by Daoism, Chinese traditional landscape painting neither mimics a scenery nor idealizes it but seeks to unveil its secret formula and connection with the whole, thus resonating with western painting influenced by cabbalistic humanism. When facing the issue of depicting the

face, then, Chinese art and art theory compare it to a landscape whose inner harmony must be manifested, as it is particularly evident in the *Secret Formula for Painting Portraits* (*Xiezhen mijue*), composed by artists and theoreticians Ding Gao (d. 1761) and his son, Ding Yicheng (1743 – after 1823) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: *Secret Formula for Painting Portraits* (*Xiezhen mijue*), composed by artists and theoreticians Ding Gao (d. 1761) and his son, Ding Yicheng (1743 – after 1823)



Instead of starting the portrait from the nose, as it was customary, they actually think of the creation of a portrait as that of a micro-cosmos. First, the circle of the primordial chaos must be drawn (*hunyuanjuan*); this stage is prior to the separation of heaven and earth, which takes place through the collocation, within the circle, of the sun and the moon, that is, the two eyes. The heaven then remains above the line of the eyes, the earth below it, and the positing of the nose completes the diagram of the three elements departing from which the entire face will be depicted. Following the Daoist framework, then, graded washes are added as pictorial embodiment of Yin, whereas flat washes as expression of Yang, thus creating those distinctions, within the chaos, that let the secret formula of each face emerge.

6. Conclusions

A cognitive, emotional, and even pragmatic feeling of singularity seems to spontaneously emerge in the perception of the human face; the more this face belongs to an individual who is construed as emotionally close, the more the generic idea of a human face yields to the particular notion of a singular visage. Somatic distinctions

among faces are easier to detect in one's ethno-cultural group, even more so in one's family, and the face of the beloved one appears as unique, as similar to no other face, as irreplaceable. In an era of growing individualism, one's face is perceived exactly as the visage of the beloved one, as resembling to no one other. Representations of the human face, and especially those compelled by the desire of keeping present or presentify in both perception and memory the vanishing image of a beloved countenance, struggle, therefore, with the paradox of singularity: the simulacrum hardly renders the uniqueness that perception attaches to the beloved visage.

The article has shown that, in the effort to convey a notion of such singularity, especially in tragic settings, often human cultures resort to nature, and adopt animal, vegetable, and even mineral metaphors in order to rhetorically transfer the singularity of their shapes to that of the facial representations. This trend develops across cultures in world literature but imposes itself with particular emphasis in those traditions, authors, and texts that posit a systematic correlation between the microcosmos and the macro-cosmos, between body and nature, and between the face and the landscape. On the one hand, artists like Arcimboldo, inspired by Cabbalistic thought, seek to detect the human face in stereotypical representations of still life; on the other hand, artists like Huang Yan project the pictorial representations of landscapes on that of human countenances. The comparison and contrast of the two aesthetic attitudes let not only similarities but also differences between them emerge. As the tradition of Chinese physiognomy indicates, especially if compared with the Greek and Western one, whereas most western representations of the singularity of the face seek to render it through the adoption of natural metaphors, primarily pursuing a mimetic intent, most Chinese representations of the face visually study and depict it through the lenses of landscape painting, seeking not to reproduce the singularity of the appearance but, in line with Daoist aesthetics, to detect the singularity beneath the appearance. If the West represents the face through the landscape and other natural metaphors so as to express its uniqueness, the East rather refers to the activities of both the observation and the representation of nature as a source of that spiritual attitude that is necessary in order to uncover what is secretly unique in what is manifestly common.

Notes

- 1 A first version of this article was presented as a keynote lecture at the symposium "The Semiotics of Cultural Heritage; Special Focus: Representing the Face across History and

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- 2 For an introduction, see Nugent, 2004, Waley, 2005, and Owen, 2006.
- 3 Also Bo Juyi or Po Chü-i; Chinese: 白居易; Taiyuan, China, March 3, 772 – Luoyang, China, September 8, 846.
- 4 8 September 685 – 3 May 762; also commonly known as Emperor Ming of Tang or Illustrious August, personal name Li Longji, also known as Wu Longji (Chinese: 武隆基) from 690 to 705, was the seventh emperor of the Tang dynasty in China, reigning from 713 to 756.
- 5 Yongle, China, 26 June 719 – Mawei Station, Xianyang, Shaanxi, China, 15 July 756. Often known as Yang Guifei (Yang Kuei-fei; simplified Chinese: 杨贵妃); see Palm, 1993.
- 6 5 February 756 – 29 January 757; see Liu et al., 1960, Yao, 1962, and Pulleyblank, 1982.
- 7 Timanthes of Cythnus (Greek: Τιμόνθης) was an ancient Greek painter of the 4th century BC. On the “Timanthes Effect”, as the author of the present essay calls the rhetorical expedient of veiling the face to express extreme sorrow (but also, in some cases, extreme beauty) in literature and painting, see Leone, 2011.
- 8 Jean-Baptiste Racine; La Ferté-Milon, Kingdom of France, 22 December 1639 – Paris, Kingdom of France, 21 April 1699 (aged 59); see Barthes, 1963 and Alonge, 2017.
- 9 On the veil in Racine, see Barthes, 1963, p. 28: “il y a d’ailleurs un objet racinien qui exprime cette sujétion spéculaire, c’est le voile” [“There is, moreover, an object in Racine that expresses this specular subjection, that is the veil”].
- 10 See Arveda, 1992.
- 11 See Kaufman, 2009, 2018 and Delle Rose, 2018; see also Beran et al., 2017.
- 12 See Sommer, 2014.
- 13 Wang Yi (simplified Chinese: 王绛); ca. 1333-unknown; see Yang et al., 1997, pp. 154, 185, 243.

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Eastern Europe (Croatia), Visiting Senior Professor at the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies, Warsaw (PIAST), and Visiting Fellow at CRASSH, University of Cambridge. His work focuses on the semiotic study of cultures, with particular emphasis on religion and images. Massimo Leone has single-authored ten books, *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; 242 pp.), *Saints and Signs: A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010; 656 pp.), *Sémiotique de l'âme*, 3 Vols (Berlin et al.: Presses Académiques Francophones, 2012), *Annunciazioni: percorsi di semiotica della religione*, 2 Vols (Rome: Aracne, 2014, 1000 pp.), *Spiritualità digitale: il senso religioso nell'era della smaterializzazione* (Udine: Mimesis, 2014), *Sémiotique du fondamentalisme: messages, rhétorique, force persuasive* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2014; translated into Arabic in 2015), *Signatim: Profili di semiotica della cultura* (Rome: Aracne, 2015, 800 pp.), *A Cultural Semiotics of Religion* (in Chinese) [Series "Semiotics & Media"] (Chengdu, China: University of Sichuan Press, 2018, 210 pp.), and *On Insignificance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 226 pp.; Chinese translation 2019), edited forty collective volumes, and published more than five hundred articles in semiotics, visual studies, and religious studies. He has lectured in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. He is the chief editor of *Lexia*, the Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication, University of Turin, Italy, and editor of the book series "I Saggi di Lexia" (Rome: Aracne) and "Semiotics of Religion" (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter). He directed the MA Program in Communication Studies at the University of Turin, Italy (2015-2018) and is currently vice-director for research at the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin, Italy.