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The Possibility of Trans-Medium and Trans-Boundary: Remapping Intertextuality Across Modernist Visual Arts and Anglophone Fiction

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Abstract

For a long time, the relationship between literature and visual arts, which respectively use textual and visual symbols as their mediums, has been a subject of academic attention and reflection. The Western modernist period witnessed an exceptionally close interaction between language and image. Represented by Anglophone modernist fiction, both literature and visual art in the early 20th century exhibited an inward turn, with their transformations in form and concept revealing a high degree of intertextuality and mutual reflectivity. The dramatic changes of modernity prompted both to reflect on the concept of aesthetic autonomy, while the shift in the perception of space and time led to breakthroughs in their respective media. The flourishing of urban cultural exchanges and the advancement of modern transportation provided the material conditions for their cross-boundary interactions. The close intertextual engagement of the two wove a new chapter of aesthetic modernity. Their attempts to cross media and boundaries revealed new possibilities for cross-artistic connections in the new era. The innovative explorations in their connections collectively reflected the multiple facets of “modernity”, reflecting aesthetic modernity's dynamic contradiction to instrumental rationality and its adherence to aesthetic autonomy.

Keywords: Modernist Visual Arts, Anglophone Fiction, Cross-Art Comparison, Aesthetic Modernity.

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Textual art and visual art, akin to a pair of inseparable twins, have long captivated academic inquiry, particularly in their intricate interplay of language and image, poetry and painting. These artistic forms manifest both distinct identities as separate art forms, rooted in their respective temporal and spatial media, while simultaneously evolving a sophisticated network of

intertextuality that bridges their formal and conceptual boundaries. As W. J. T. Mitchell stated, "The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself the privileged status of a 'natural' access to reality. At certain moments, this struggle seems to develop into a natural exchange along open boundaries". [1] In terms of their distinctions, it is generally believed that text is more suited for expressing language and ideas, while images excel at preserving visual memories; reading text is mediated by time, whereas viewing images and sculptures is mediated by space—these differences seem to predestine them to a parallel relationship.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ancient parallel lines between literature and art began to intersect in new ways. The intensification of modernity spurred a wave of artistic revolutions in the Western visual art world, while literature gradually moved beyond the tradition of linear narrative, giving rise to experiments such as psychological realism and stream of consciousness. In the Anglophone literary scene, figures such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf formed small, elite circles with visual artists. Together, they ventured beyond the ancient tradition of mimesis, transcending the constraints of medium. Against the backdrop of modernity, they wove a tightly intertextual tapestry between fiction and visual arts. How did modernist Anglophone fiction achieve cross-media and interdisciplinary integration with visual arts? What internal and external factors contributed to their unprecedented connection?

From previous research, the rich visual imagery in Anglophone modernist fiction and their strong comparability with visual arts have already garnered significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally. Current literature on their relationship primarily focuses on case studies of representative writers and their connections to visual arts. For example, Diane Filby Gillespie's book *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (1994), Marianne DeKoven's doctoral dissertation "Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism," and John Trombold's doctoral dissertation "John Dos Passos's U. S. A.: Futurist Avant-Garde and Popular Culture" all highlight the undeniable close ties between the two. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of comprehensive research reviewing and examining the reasons and background for the "union" between Anglophone fiction and visual arts during this period.

This essay discusses the internal and external motivations behind their collaboration, exploring how Anglophone modernist fiction and visual arts achieved formal innovation through trans-medium and trans-boundary attempts, with the aim of providing a better understanding of the overall relationship between literature and visual arts during the Western modernist period.

I. Transcending Media: The Particularity of the Relationship Between Language and Image in Western Modernism

The long-standing traditions of the “unity of poetry and painting”, as well as pictorial narratives, demonstrate the close connection between textual art and visual art. However, in terms of their distinctions, it is generally believed that text is more suited for expressing language and ideas, while images are better at preserving visual memories. Reading text is mediated by time, whereas viewing images and sculptures is mediated by space. These boundaries between the two seem to predestine them to a parallel relationship. The particularity of the relationship between language and image during the Western modernist period lies in two aspects: first, the radical changes brought by modernity blurred and even broke down these barrier-like boundaries, creating conditions for their theoretical interconnectedness; second, the dramatic shifts in the external environment challenged traditional literary and artistic forms and strategies. The avant-garde reforms in visual arts not only set an example for innovation in the literary world but also, based on breakthroughs in their respective views of autonomy and medium, revealed greater intertextuality and reciprocal mapping in their forms and concepts in response to the new realities of modernity.

Regarding the primary functions of textual art and visual art, from their origins, language has been more inclined to express emotions and ideas. Whether spoken or written, as the most common means of communication and expression, people tend to use language rather than lines to convey meaning and emotion. In contrast, painting, which records visual images, is more inclined to reproduce past mnemonic images. As Debray states in his famous work *The Life and Death of Images*, images were born in tombs, “primitive images became living substitutes for the dead” [2]. Their initial purpose was to remember a past existence, a once-living being with a smile and appearance. Painting records the most expressive moments, capturing the symptoms of human existence. This process is like the gaze of Medusa, the Gorgon: once the gaze of the past is cast upon her, it is immediately petrified, and living memories are solidified into images. Literary art and visual art each possess a distinct natural affinity: the former with abstract concepts and emotional expression, and the latter with intuitive, concrete imagery and memory.

So, how do language and visual arts establish a basic connection? Language can also describe real existing images, and picture can directly point to and reflect thoughts and ideas. The inevitable connection between literature and painting often arises from the common representation of “images.” “Images” refer to vivid, realistic scenes. In the long exploration of the precise reproduction of “images”, literature and arts have formed a long-standing tradition of mimesis dating back to the classical period. When humans in prehistoric civilizations invented writing, language, existing in a continuous temporal sequence, could be preserved in the form of text. At that time, painting, as a mature skill, was mastered by a few. The mnemonic function of images in painting was often replaced by writing because the descriptive nature of writing could also largely reproduce the scenes of the time. For literature, this created a “realistic” (*enargeia*, the vivid description of visual experience in words) based “pictorial competition.” Louis Marin, in his *On Representation*, said that the process of textualizing images or creating pictorial texts prompts

“things to inhabit words, to become present and self-evident on the verbal surface.”[3] Nevertheless, the visual spatiality constructed by language and writing is always constrained by its temporal linear characteristics. The reproduction of real scenes has to rely on the continuous accumulation of language details in a linear sequence of time. We see that in the Western realist fiction of the 19th century, which developed the tradition of mimesis to the extreme, the detailed and all-encompassing descriptions often piled up into lengthy volumes. However, the visual spatiality constructed by words can never match the intuitiveness and concreteness of pictorial arts. On the other hand, from the perspective of the visual art world, the 19th-century realist painting school also brought the mimetic nature of art to the extreme, with extremely delicate realistic brushstrokes even achieving a photo-like effect that could deceive the eye. But at the same time, while painting reached the pinnacle of imitation, the development of modern technologies such as photography prompted a group of visual artists outside the academy to begin to think about the ideality and self-sufficiency inherent in painting itself, and to consider its possibilities for expressing ideas and thoughts. A modernist wave originating in visual arts was brewing.

What truly brought modernist visual art and textual art closer was that, in this wave, visual arts nearly abandoned its pursuit of realistic imitation, which they excelled at, and turned towards the exploration of abstract expression, thereby approaching the expression of abstract thoughts and emotions, which are more akin to literary arts. This exploration of expressive functions has been termed the “linguistic turn” in modern arts. As Saussurean linguistics revealed in its “Copernican revolution,” the relationship between signs and things is artificial and arbitrary. This “arbitrariness of signs” represents and corresponds to a “modern logic” that, to a certain extent, negates the deterministic relationship between subject and object in the logocentric tradition. From this perspective, “artistic language” can exist as an independent, self-sufficient system of signs because its relationship to the object world can be arbitrary, without a fixed one-to-one correspondence. It is no longer a reliable tool for representing the world, thus completely dismantling mimesis—a near-“instinctual impulse” long present in visual arts. “Artistic language,” or the subjectivity it represents, was placed in an ontological position. By “severing” the chain between form and external systems, the generation of meaning can only originate from the internal rules of the sign system. Thereby, modernist visual arts, based on continuous formal experimentation, have established their independence, self-sufficiency, and autonomy.

While visual arts took the lead in directing their innovations towards the beauty of expression, realistic literature, which had long been preoccupied with depicting linear narratives and the all-encompassing “images” of the real world, began to lose momentum. Meanwhile, the subjectivity that had been fermenting for a long time through Romantic literary theories and irrationalist philosophies continued to evolve. Literature began to revert to its most intimate functions with language and writing—self-expression and the display of emotions and thoughts—thus achieving a kind of reconciliation with visual arts in terms of the expression of

beauty. The stream-of-consciousness fiction and psychological fiction that flourished during this period are manifestations of this reconciliatory trend. This focus on the need for inner expression ultimately stems from the various manifestations of modernity. Just as Saussure's theories of "the arbitrariness of the sign" and "the dissociation of the signifier and the signified" suggest, people can no longer rely on the external world to generate meaning. On one hand, as Adorno said, the imitation of reality implies a compromise with the everyday instrumental rationality of capitalism.[4] On the other hand, when the canopy of religion no longer bathes its subjects in divine light or offers spiritual solace, and when a sense of nihilism permeates every soul wandering in the mechanized production of factories and the modern metropolis, both literature and visual arts begin to turn inward, focusing on people's own hearts and the primal notions and thoughts hidden deep within. To a certain extent, it can be said that literature and art have shifted their focus from the competitive imitation of "images" to the expression of inner emotions and thoughts.

Beyond the convergence of functional values, the interconnection between visual arts and literature during this period is also reflected in their joint subversion of the traditional medium-based division, turning towards a shared embrace of the synchronic conception of space and time. In 1776, Lessing, in his renowned work *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, elaborated that "the sequential progression in time belongs to the realm of the poet, while space belongs to the realm of the painter." [5] This famous assertion was widely accepted for a long time thereafter. The notion that literature is an art of time and images are an art of space almost became a definitive conclusion for distinguishing between literature and visual arts. However, this concept encountered a turning point with the revolutionary shift in the perception of space and time at the dawn of the 20th century. Einstein's theory of relativity was a crucial catalyst in this conceptual upheaval.

Lessing's view aligned with the absolute space-time conception of Newtonian classical mechanics dominant in his era. According to this view, time and space are independent of each other, unrelated, and exist separately from matter and motion. Consequently, literature and visual arts, mediated by time and space respectively, were deemed to have insurmountable barriers between them. In contrast, according to Einstein's relative space-time theory, time and space are no longer considered as opposites. There is no absolute time or absolute space. The determination of whether two objects in different spatial motions have a temporal sequence depends on whether there is a causal relationship between them. Before a definite causal connection is established between the two, they can be regarded as existing simultaneously within a certain relative space. Thus, space becomes intertwined with time and even accommodates the contradictions of synchronicity. Moreover, the development of modern traffic means such as automobiles, airplanes, and telephones, along with the heterogeneous, fragmented, and kaleidoscopic appearance of modern urban landscapes, continuously created possibilities for experiencing synchronic spatiality in real life. Both theoretically and practically, under the backdrop of

modernity, time and space increasingly became an inseparable unity. The synchronic conception of space provided conditions for literature and visual arts to break through the barriers of their traditional medium-based views.

So, what specific conditions facilitated their practical interaction during this process? The novel, as the epitome of modernist literary achievement, also serves as a crucial medium reflecting the close connection between the two arts during this period. In the United Kingdom and the United States, which were distant from the epicenter of European artistic trends, what specific pathways and conveniences enabled their literary circles to absorb and integrate visual arts across boundaries?

II. Crossing the boundaries: the Pathways of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Paris, Berlin, Milan, and other epicenters of modernist visual art movements, though rooted in Europe, exerted a profound influence that transcended continental boundaries, even reaching the literary circles of the United Kingdom and the United States. What conditions enabled this cross-continental impact? Broadly speaking, during this period, the increasing frequency of intercontinental exchanges not only provided novelists with opportunities to "go out" but also facilitated the "coming in" of modernist visual arts. The flourishing of modern urban culture, epitomized by museums and cultural salons, continually created spaces for like-minded elites to interact and collaborate. The establishment and widespread circulation of international magazines established a public forum for the free exchange of ideas among literati and artists. Building on this foundation, major cities in the UK and the US, such as London, New York, and Chicago, developed their own cultural spheres of influence, akin to Paris's Left Bank. These developments laid the material groundwork for the interdisciplinary collaboration between Anglo-American novelists and modernist visual arts.

The development of modern communication and transoceanic transportation broke down barriers of space and geography, accelerated population mobility, and enhanced international exchanges. This, in turn, enabled Anglo-American novelists to "go out" and engage directly with European modernism in the authentic atmosphere of Paris's Left Bank. Antony Giddens, in his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), pointed out that "global travel, which had been ongoing for centuries, reached a 'take-off' stage in the 1920s, with the dense mobility provided by modern transportation technologies reaching an unprecedented level in history." [6] In this trend, it was quite a spectacle to see American novelists, driven by aesthetic pursuits, residing or settling overseas, even creating a literary myth of "self-exile". [7] Their collective spiritual pilgrimage to the European continent was both a form of nostalgia for the solid traditions that Europe represented and a curiosity to understand and absorb the modernist culture that emerged there. Almost every leading figure in American modernist fiction, such as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood

Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, went through this process. This act of leaving the country and establishing one's own uniqueness and self-sufficiency through encounters with "otherness" in arts and culture is akin to the necessary "leaving home" experience in the growth of a young person. The "alienation" and loneliness experienced in a foreign land are essential conditions for achieving "enlightenment" and self-awareness through self-reliance. The precondition for all this to happen is the increasing development of intercontinental transportation and communication, as well as the growing frequency of mass tourism, which has enhanced the mobility of modernity.

The enhanced mobility of modernity not only meant that novelists from the UK and the US could easily "go out," but it also provided favorable conditions for "bringing in" modern visual arts. "Bringing in" can at least include two aspects: visual artists who arrived with the transoceanic immigration wave, and authentic artworks that were transported by sea and air and exhibited in shows. Regarding the immigration wave, according to Norman Cantor's definition in his book *Twentieth Century Culture* (1988), the period from 1900 to 1940 was the climax of modernism, during which intercontinental exchanges became universally frequent. This included not only the exchange of ideas and cultures between countries but also the transoceanic immigration between the Old and New Worlds.[8] Taking the United States, which is geographically distant from the European continent, as an example, the impact of this immigration wave was particularly evident in the influx of people between the two World Wars. The visual artists who arrived with this immigration wave even gradually undermined the position of the European continent as the center of modern art trends, creating a tendency for this center to shift towards New York. Until after World War II, with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism known as the "New York School," the center of Western modern arts officially moved from Paris to New York. [9] In response to this immigration boom, the art critic Royal Cortissoz at the time even bluntly stated: "America is being invaded by foreigners, which endangers political stability. Modernism is heterogeneous with America, and it is threatening our artistic republic in the same way." [10]

The "bringing in" facilitated by convenient communication and transportation was not only of "foreigners" who invaded the art world but also of the vast and brilliant new works of modernist visual arts showcased in exhibitions. On February 17, 1913, an international exhibition of modern art works, which had been planned for two years, was grandly held at the Armory in New York. The exhibition was on a large scale, displaying 1,250 works by Post-Impressionist and Cubist artists from Europe and America, including Gauguin, Matisse, Cézanne, Picasso, Duchamp, and George Bellows. Since then, the exhibition has lifted the curtain of the American modern art revolution. Although the exhibition was fiercely criticized by the press at the time, its subsequent ripples have had a continuous impact on the cultural field, including literature. The same thing happened in the UK. In December 1910, the "Monet and Post-Impressionist Exhibition" was successfully held at the Grafton Art Gallery in London, planned by Roger Fry

and others. Two years later, the second Post-Impressionist exhibition was also successfully organized, marking the landing of modernist visual art from the European continent in the UK. Judging from the results, although the initial introduction was met with public astonishment and even condemnation, the thinking triggered by its bold forms and artistic concepts has continuously fermented in all walks of the cultural field. It made the rising star in the field of fiction, Virginia Woolf, exclaim, "Around December 1910, the human figure changed"[11]; it made the traditional realist writer Arnold Bennett wonder, "Is what we have been doing nothing but a naive realism?" [12] The prerequisite material conditions for all this to happen are the advanced means of transportation and communication, the enhanced mobility of modernity, and the convenience it brings to cultural exchanges.

In addition to the establishment of these visual art exhibitions, another closely related practical necessity was the founding of museums in various places. According to Richard Brettell's discussion in *Modern Art 1851–1929* (1999), museums are "themselves a modern creation. They have played the most essential role in the globalization of art in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries." [13] In his view, art museums, like lithography and photography, have profoundly altered the course of art history. It was the frequent visits of artists to art museums and the rise of museums and art schools in many European and American cities that fostered the formation of modernist values among generations of artists such as Manet, Picasso, and Léger. With the rise of mass tourism, representing popular culture in the process of modernization, visual artists, young writers, and all modern tourists alike made visiting museums a major part of their travel experience. These public institutions, on the one hand, brought together the elite groups of artists and writers, and on the other hand, bridged the gap between elite art and the general public by taking on the role of introducing modern art to the masses, thereby expanding the influence of modernist visual arts. In 1929, the opening of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York to the public signified the institutionalization of modernism as the official model of representation for the 20th century.[14] Art exhibitions that toured various locations and stable exhibition sites all contributed to enabling novelists and writers to access avant-garde artworks and facilitated cross-disciplinary collaboration between literature and the visual arts.

In addition to traveling exhibitions and the promotion of visual arts by museums, the burgeoning urban culture saw the emergence of salons, clubs, galleries, and so on, which provided a platform for daily exchanges between novelists and visual artists. From 27 Rue de Fleurus in Paris to 46 Gordon Square in London, and then to 291 Fifth Avenue in New York, these geographically distant locations were nonetheless interconnected through their shared pursuit of modern aesthetic forms. They became iconic geographical coordinates in the history of modernist culture. In Paris, the capital of art, visual artists and many "exiled" British and American writers flocked to the Left Bank of the Seine as if attending a feast. This vibrant scene is depicted in Woody Allen's classic film *Midnight in Paris* (2011), where Stein's 27 Rue de Fleurus, Beach's bookshop, Gide's studio, and over two hundred large and small cultural salons and galleries scattered

throughout the area became their gathering spots, forming a "movable feast." Stein's salon was perpetually filled with distinguished guests, and the lively debates on what defined modern art and modern writing marked the earliest intellectual collisions between modernist ideas in literature and the visual arts. In London, a similar scene unfolded every Friday evening at the Bloomsbury Group's gatherings. Figures such as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf, and E. M. Forster—representatives of the avant-garde artistic and literary ideas of their time, including art critics, novelists, poets, scholars, and painters—came together to indulge in collective revelry and lively discussions, embracing new artistic concepts and exploring the possibilities of modernist formal revolutions. In New York, Alfred Stieglitz, inspired by the spirit of modern art, gathered a group of American artists, including John Marin, Arthur Dove, and Alfred Maurer, through galleries like "291" and the "Intimate Gallery," following the Armory Show. As a champion of modernist art, he strategically aligned prominent literary voices such as Sherwood Anderson with the aesthetic principles of visual modernism, expanding its creative influence across disciplines. These various forms of salons, galleries, and clubs in the UK and the US promoted modernist visual arts and their revolutionary aesthetic ideas, creating cultural spheres of influence in different geographical areas. While Paris remained the epicenter, the radical new aesthetic impulses of modernism began to germinate beyond its geographic confines, propelled through transcontinental avant-garde networks. At the same time, these gatherings of elite literary and artistic figures made cross-disciplinary dialogue and intellectual integration between the novel and visual arts an increasingly possible reality.

Moreover, the international dissemination of modernist avant-garde magazines during this period provided a public platform for the exchange of ideas between the two fields. Transoceanic communication technologies made it possible for international magazines to be published and distributed across different countries. Modernist magazines such as *The Transatlantic Review*, *The Little Review*, and *Broom* became arenas where artists and novelists could make their mark and voice their opinions. These magazines often adopted a diverse and open approach, transcending geographical boundaries to feature works from various countries. For example, *Broom* published literary and artistic works from France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, and Australia, among others. Its subscription advertisement stated: "Published in Rome, 3,266 miles from New York, 4,269 miles from Chicago, and 6,277 miles from San Francisco." These figures illustrate the magazine's global reach, making it a bridge for international literary and artistic interaction. In these magazines, photography, painting, and literature were often published together, breaking down geographical boundaries and creating the possibility of transcending disciplinary ones. Although the forms and media of art may differ, their simultaneous appearance in avant-garde magazines often conveyed a similar modernist artistic temperament, prompting reflection on their interplay and interaction. The emergence of many such international print media objectively facilitated exchanges between different countries, regions, and disciplines, creating a shared pool of intellectual resources. This provided favorable conditions for Anglo-American novelists to

understand the cutting-edge developments in modernist visual arts, participate in the latest literary experiments, and contemplate the connections between the two.

III. Intertextual Dialogue between Modernist Visual Arts and the Anglophone Fiction

The close connections between visual arts and the world of fiction, as well as with the Anglo-American novelistic circles, during the modernist period were due not only to the conceptual reasons that brought them closer but also to the material conditions that facilitated their dialogue and exchange. These factors made the relationship between language and image in the modernist period more distinctive and closely interactive than in previous historical stages.

The renewal of functional and medium-based perspectives has led to the diminishing of the long-standing "parallel" and "oppositional" dimensions between literary and visual arts. In this modernist revolution, visual arts have exerted an attractive and guiding force not only on literary arts but also on the entire modernist cultural system. Modern visual arts, starting with Impressionism, have gone through various periods and styles, including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Primitivism, Futurism, Expressionism, etc. In the development of these movements, there is a certain continuity in the experimental advancements of some aspects and elements. Generally speaking, the main innovations and their inspirations for the art of the fiction are mainly reflected in the following areas:

A. New Representations of the "Image"

As previously mentioned, the competitive imitation of the "image" has long constituted the mimetic tradition in both literature and painting. The persistence of this tradition is evidenced by the continued existence of realistic visual art movements in modern visual arts. However, from Impressionism to subsequent movements, this characteristic has progressively weakened, replaced by an increasing emphasis on diverse and abstract visual landscapes. The remnants of realistic visual imagery in modernist visual arts are most evident in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, which are temporally closer to the realist tradition. These movements have not entirely abandoned the tradition of imitation; the images they depict are still recognizable to the naked eye. However, their techniques distinctly reflect modernist features, such as "rough" brushstrokes, objects not strictly measured by physical proportions, and the absence of three-dimensional depth.

The Impressionists' en plein air practice constituted a radical epistemological shift, as their pursuit of transient atmospheric effects through rapid brushwork sought to transcend Realism's stabilized representations of light by privileging perceptual immediacy over pictorial verisimilitude. From Post-Impressionism onwards, through Expressionism and Surrealism, the

visual connection to realistic imagery has increasingly diminished. This paradigmatic shift emerged from a growing awareness among avant-garde practitioners that the epistemological inadequacy of mimetic representation—rooted in nineteenth-century positivism—had become irreconcilable with modernity's fragmented consciousness, necessitating radical aesthetic strategies to articulate the disjunctive temporalities and multiplied perspectives of industrial urban experience. For instance, Impressionists observed the variability of objects under different times and light conditions, while Futurists noticed the differential continuity of moving objects, and Analytical Cubists recognized the multifaceted nature of objects. These discoveries and reflections were often prompted by concepts and perspectives closely related to evolving modernity, such as the development of optics and color science, which shattered the fixation on fixed colors and led Impressionists to focus on changing objects. The introduction of the concept of synchronic space also overturned traditional views of space and time, prompting Futurists to consider how to create synchronic representations of moving objects. Interrogating modernity's polyphonic materialities through distinct epistemological vantage points, visual artists crafted a revolutionary iconographic system that transcended surface mimesis, articulating the fragmented sensorium of modern experience via a radical reconfiguration of the modernist visual lexicon.

B. The Transition from Representation to Expression

The modernist rupture with figuration—manifested through its categorical rejection of mimetic imperatives and embrace of non-representational abstraction—constituted an epistemological reorientation of aesthetic praxis, transposing art's ontological inquiry from external verisimilitude to the phenomenological investigation of subjective interiority, thereby reconstituting the human subject as both agent and locus of modernist aesthetic discourse. As modernist visual arts increasingly departed from realistic "images," the role of the subject in creation grew more significant than that of the object, opening up the canvas to the unfathomable and more freely expressive "images" of the mind. While early Impressionism still prioritized the cognition and reflection of the objective world in artistic expression, the positions of subject and object were reversed in later Expressionist and Surrealist works. The distorted and twisted realistic elements now served entirely to reflect the subject's mental cognition and emotional expression, shifting the focus of artistic appreciation from "imitating the object" to "imitating the subject". Impressionism first attempted to incorporate the self's keen visual perception of the ever-changing world into the canvas. For example, in the Rouen Cathedral and Water Lilies series, the thousand moments of nature could leave a thousand different visual impressions on the subject. The desire of Post-Impressionists to express subjective imagination began to break through realistic imagery, as seen in Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, where the huge, curling nebulae and burning stars in the sky represent the intense struggle and turmoil of the subject's soul. From early Expressionism to post-World War II Abstract Expressionism, Expressionism increasingly used abstract imagery to express inner feelings. In Munch's *The Scream*, the

extremely distorted face, the shrill scream, and the intense inner anxiety are conveyed through an abstract and shocking image. David Hume once analyzed two opposing driving forces in art history in his book *Abstraction and Empathy*: "One is empathy, which reflects a secure and trusting relationship with the world, resulting in a kind of naive humanistic art, such as classical Greece and Renaissance Italy; the other is abstraction, which reflects an anxious and fearful relationship with the world, resulting in a kind of procedural geometric art, such as African, Egyptian, and Byzantine art".[15]The increasing abstraction in modern visual arts is a stress-induced protective response to the continuous breakdown of the trust relationship between humans and the objective world, and it is the aesthetic manifestation of the deepening nihilism of modernism acting on people's minds.

C. The Incorporation of Time Elements

Modernism's interrogation of temporal and synchronic spatial dimensions evolved through a stratified progression of formal and conceptual iterations, constituting an avant-garde experimentation that radically reconfigured artistic paradigms in dialogue with Einsteinian relativity and Bergsonian *durée*—a visual epistemology that destabilized Newtonian absolutes while materializing the spatiotemporal anxieties of industrial modernity. As a spatial art, Impressionism was the first to incorporate time elements into the representation of changing objects. The grouped depiction of the same location's scenery demonstrated this ambition. Later, Analytical Cubism broke through the shackles of single-perspective viewing, presenting the abstract visual experiences of different perspectives of the same object on the same canvas, achieving synchronicity of different spatial visualities. Synthetic Cubism created the collage technique, where objects from any time and space could appear simultaneously on the same canvas, further expanding this synchronicity. Futurism, on the other hand, focused on the continuity and dynamic changes of objects in continuous time. They froze moving objects into different frames and displayed them together on a flat surface, achieving a synchronic representation of time elements. By innovating forms to represent time elements, the spatial limitations of spatial arts were somewhat broken, in line with the synchronic concept of relative space-time mentioned earlier.

These breakthroughs in visual arts—whether in new modes of visual presentation, the tendency to "turn inward," or the construction of a synchronic conception of visual space—are all formal innovations that have adapted to the overwhelming new realities and cognitions of modernity. They have thus established a modern aesthetic that stands in opposition to instrumental rationality and possesses a certain degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy. As Marcuse stated, "The form, autonomy, and truth of aesthetics are interrelated phenomena. They are all social and historical phenomena, yet they transcend the arena of social history." [16] The active response of visual arts to the new changes brought about by modernity is the fundamental reason why its innovativeness can exert a guiding and leading role in the field of literature, and even in the entire cultural domain.

To summarize, the changes in visual arts during this period have provided literature with at least the following inspirations to break away from the traditional realist route:

Firstly, the new representations of "images" in modernist visual arts have inspired the renewal of visual presentations in literature. As mentioned above, images can intuitively imitate and represent the world through vision, and words can similarly construct vivid texts or pictorial effects through description, thereby partially replacing the function of images. The tradition of using text to imitate realistic visual images has a long history. In the modernist phase, although literature (specifically novels) generally focuses more on the inner world of the subject, the linear continuity of text as a temporal art allows it to accommodate more precise content compared to visual arts. Therefore, pictorial descriptions or visual textual narratives, which have been a functional aspect of text since its inception, still exist in this stage and continue to interact stylistically with visual arts. The "image-texts" in realist novels often correspond to the images in realistic painting styles; while modernist novels, although significantly reducing their documentary and narrative aspects, still retain some visual narrative elements that are often imbued with new artistic elements and styles from the prevailing artistic trends. This interplay between verbal images and visual images is particularly evident in movements that privilege the primacy of visual perception, such as Impressionist art which has relatively unified pictorial style. While Expressionism's conceptual cohesion resists conventional stylistic categorization, as its formal heterogeneity stems from a shared commitment to psychological immediacy and emotional authenticity rather than adherence to codified aesthetic principles. For example, the hazy sea fog in Joseph Conrad's novels and the colorful prairie scenery in Willa Cather's works evoke the typical brushstrokes of Impressionism. At its core, the identification with modernist visual arts in terms of pictorial strategies is a direct response to the profound changes in visual perception during this period. Visual arts were the first to give concrete form to these new perceptions, and literary texts quickly absorbed these innovative methods through their visual descriptions.

Secondly, the modernist emphasis on abstraction and expressiveness in visual arts has prompted a corresponding "inward turn" in literature, redirecting its focus toward subjective experience and psychological depth. While the incorporation of modernist visual elements into textual visuality alone may not be sufficient to shake the foundations of realist literature, the trend of shifting focus from the external objective world to the internal subjective realm fundamentally challenges the mimetic basis of realist literature. Tracing the evolution from Henry James's psychological realism, which presaged this literary shift, through D. H. Lawrence's psychologically charged novels during modernism's zenith, to the stream-of-consciousness masterpieces of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, these works collectively demonstrate a decisive departure from traditional narrative craftsmanship and plot-driven storytelling. Instead, they closely attend to individual subjective experiences and the state of human existence. Literature, like visual arts, has turned towards the expression of abstract emotions and inner feelings. At its core, this "inward turn" reflects the imperative of self-construction within the broader process

of subject formation that characterized the modernist era.

In mid-19th century Europe, amid increasing social differentiation, the process of subject formation underwent a fundamental division: the emergence of a rational, bourgeois-aligned modern subject stood in tension with the simultaneous development of an irrational, volitional, and sensuous counter-subject. As the rational subject, empowered by "instrumental rationality," unleashed unprecedented productive forces for humanity, the sensuous subject was compelled to assume the vital role of constructing meaning amidst the disintegration of traditional metaphysical and religious value systems during the pivotal transition from the 19th to the 20th century. The source of enlightenment shifted away from the fragmented remnants of tradition, instead emerging from the immediate expressions of the inner self—a transformation that marked the division of the rational subject into an autonomous sensuous subject. As some critics have pointed out, "The emergence of modern culture, in a sense, is motivated by a poetic protest against spiritual desolation."^[17] Visual arts were the first to retract the mimetic impulse, using the allegorical language of images to speak to the soul, thereby highlighting the power of the sensuous subject standing in opposition to instrumental rationality. Literary arts, in turn, retraced their steps to express the abstract ideas and emotions that are closely related to language, more directly revealing the chaotic mysteries of the subjective world. As Heidegger observed, this development transforms art into an object of aesthetic experience, positioning it as a profound expression of human existence—a fundamental phenomenon that signifies the very essence of modernity's emergence.

Thirdly, the modernist visual arts' groundbreaking investigation of temporal dimensions within their traditionally spatial medium has catalyzed a revolutionary shift in literature: it has liberated narrative from its conventional linear constraints, enabling the discovery of innovative spatial storytelling techniques that transcend the boundaries of temporal art forms. As previously discussed, the investigation of temporal dimensions within modern visual arts has evolved through a progressive intellectual trajectory, culminating in a profound integration of the synchronic conceptualization of space-time relations. In this context, the linear narrative techniques of literature, which are bound by the temporal medium, have become increasingly anachronistic as the synchronic view of space and time has gained widespread acceptance. Theorist John Berger stated: "It is almost impossible to unfold a narrative in a straightforward manner according to time. This is because we are constantly interweaving elements that cut across the main storyline. In other words, we do not regard a particular point as an infinitesimal part of a single, linear narrative, but rather as an infinitesimal part of countless mainlines, like the center from which rays of starlight radiate in all directions. The consequence of this awareness is that we are always compelled to consider the coexistence and extension of multiple times and possibilities."^[18] The traditional novel's linear path of beginning, development, and conclusion no longer aligns with the current emphasis on the simultaneity of space and the contingency of events (in Jung's terms). "If writers continue to adhere to the traditional method of writing,

following the sequence of time and a continuous plot, they will inevitably find themselves in a tight spot, unable to fully express their ideas. Therefore, it is necessary to break away from the traditional concept of the linear extension of three-dimensional space and time, and to seek new ways to handle the spatial and temporal relationships within a work." [19]

Through their persistent deconstruction of representational integrity in mimetic imagery, modern visual arts have successfully assimilated and articulated temporal concepts, thereby inspiring contemporary writers to transcend the constraints of linear narrative structures dictated by logical rationality and to explore innovative narrative possibilities through more liberated modes of artistic expression. If the clear and coherent linear narrative corresponds to the high degree of logic of the rational subject, then what is the narrative strategy that corresponds to the irrational will of the self? Modern visual arts convey sensuous cognition through abstract visual forms and allegorical means, often reflecting ambiguity and polysemy. In accordance with this paradigm shift, the abandonment of linear signification and rational narrative structures—traditionally associated with logic, precision, and order—enables the unrestrained emergence of heterogeneous, fragmented, ambiguous, and fluid elements from the subconscious realm of irrational will, manifesting freely within the dreamlike textual space. Thus, in the highly experimental stream-of-consciousness texts of modernism, "free association" becomes a rule of narration, where text fragments that do not conform to causality or temporal sequence are "piled" together, unrestricted, like thoughts freely drifting in a dream, creating a space of synchronicity. From the structured confines of linear logic to the fluid expanses of ambiguous inner consciousness, from the representational clarity of realism to the subjective complexities of modernism, novelists have undergone a profound metamorphosis: they have evolved from rational subjects endowed with precise signification capabilities into modern souls grappling with "aphasia".

Furthermore, it is particularly noteworthy that the concept-driven aesthetic paradigm, which permeates all modernist visual art movements, has served a dual transformative function: it has not only provided the literary realm with a vital theoretical framework for artistic renewal but has simultaneously catalyzed equally radical conceptual innovations within the visual arts themselves. The pursuit of novelty and change in visual arts during the modernist period ultimately manifests as an effort to achieve aesthetic autonomy through formal innovation. Underlying all formal innovations resides the fundamental primacy of artistic concepts, while the sustained emphasis on aesthetic autonomy has elevated conceptual frameworks to an unprecedented level of significance in the creative process. This phenomenon arises, as previously discussed, from a fundamental paradigm shift in artistic evaluation: the criterion for assessing a work's merit has transitioned from its degree of correspondence and fidelity to the external world to its capacity to authentically express internal concepts and emotions in alignment with the subject's psychological and existential needs. Consequently, the visual arts have achieved a state of aesthetic independence, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, wherein the

creator's conceptual expression has emerged as the central driving force and defining characteristic in the formation of artistic movements. The differentiation between artistic movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, Primitivism, and Expressionism primarily stems from their distinct conceptual foundations and creative premises, with formal and stylistic variations following as secondary manifestations. This concept-driven paradigm becomes particularly pronounced in subsequent movements like Abstract Expressionism, where stylistic distinctions are less discernible. During this transformative period, visual artists increasingly prioritized conceptual frameworks as the essential precursor to artistic production. This conceptual emphasis has consequently elevated the significance of their manifesto-like declarations and written conceptual statements in scholarly research. These conceptual frameworks, through their interactions with literary figures, have frequently served as direct catalysts for the formation and evolution of literary theories, thereby facilitating a cross-disciplinary resonance and mutual enrichment of artistic concepts in practice.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, both intrinsic and extrinsic factors have collectively facilitated the intertextual resonance between modernist visual arts and English fiction, culminating in their convergence toward an aesthetic community. The dramatic transformations of modernity prompted both fields to reconsider their perspectives on artistic autonomy, while the shifting conceptions of time and space led to breakthroughs in their respective medium theories. The flourishing of urban cultural exchanges and advancements in modern transportation provided tangible material conditions for their cross-disciplinary interactions. Their intensive intertextual engagement has woven a new chapter in aesthetic modernity, with their trans-medium and trans-boundary endeavors revealing novel possibilities for inter-artistic connections in the modern era. The innovative explorations within their interconnectedness collectively reflect the multifaceted nature of "modernity," embodying aesthetic modernity's dynamic contradiction to instrumental rationality and its steadfast commitment to artistic autonomy.

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