The Vertigo of Technology and its Uncanniness

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Abstract: Published for the first time during the 1930's Great Depression, Vertigo is a "wordless novel", according to its author Lynd Ward. This work marks the historic moment when various technologies are integrated to the urban life, such as the train, the telephone and the cars, showing how these changes interact with the capitalist crisis lived at that time. Thus, Ward recreates multiple sensations of vertigo using the woodcutting technique in this precursor of the graphic novel. This article relates the impacts of technology to the notion of uncanny and the reception of this work among artists.
Keywords: vertigo; Lynd Ward; technology; the uncanny.

Resumo: Publicado pela primeira vez durante a Grande Depressão dos anos 1930, Vertigo é um "livro sem palavras", segundo seu autor Lynd Ward. A obra marca o momento histórico em que diversas tecnologias são integradas à vida urbana, como o trem, o telefone e os carros, ao mostrar como essas mudanças interagem com a crise do capitalismo vivida na época. Assim, Ward recria múltiplas sensações de vertigem a partir da técnica da xilografia, utilizada neste precursor do romance gráfico. Este trabalho relaciona os impactos da tecnologia à noção de estranho e à recepção dessa obra no meio artístico.
Palavras-chave: vertigem; Lynd Ward; tecnologia; o estranho.

Résumé: Cette étude porte sur Vertigo de Lynd Ward, paru pendant la Grande Dépression des années 1930. S'agissant, selon l'auteur, d'un "livre sans un seul mot", cet oeuvre établit des rapports parmi la crise du capitalisme et les nouvelles technologies qui venaient de faire partie de la vie urbaine. On propose un débat concernant la réception de cet ouvrage et des effets de ces technologies sur la notion "d'inquiétante étrangeté". Cela permet de comprendre mieux le sentiment de vertige en le lisant, provenant du procédé de la xylographie d'après lequel Ward a créé ce précurseur du roman graphique.
Mots clés: vertige; Lynd Ward ; technologie ; l'inquiétante étrangeté.

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Introduction: indefinable works

To what do we associate the sensation of vertigo? The narrative entitled *Vertigo,* by Lynd Ward, offers us some suggestions. Published for the first time in 1937, its position among the other pictorial works by Ward is a rather strange one – or maybe uncomfortable. It reappeared in the editorial market only a few years ago, in 2009, but it is recognized by some critics as the precursor of the graphic novel (or almost), by others as something which is close to comics (or almost). It is often referred to as a "wordless novel" (or close to wordless). Ward himself called it simply a pictorial narrative. This is – or is supposed to be – a silent novel.

Considering some of Will Eisner's studies (such as *Comics and Sequential Art,* 1985), maybe it could be analyzed as part of the "sequential arts". Scott McCloud (in *Understanding Comics,* 1993), however, prefers relating it to "comics", even if the work in question doesn't quite fit this concept. Finally, Santiago García (in *A Novela Gráfica,* 2012), calls it a wordless novel, which is, nonetheless, "in the frontier of conventional comics" (GARCÍA, 2012:92).

Still, *Vertigo* is praised as Ward's masterpiece. It is a work which breaks free, in part, of the "stereotype of the moralizing fable", according to García (2012:92). Besides, it "almost reminds" one of the contemporary graphic novels, he says, for including, in its final scene, a moment where the story is "cut" in the exact instant when the sensation of movement and of vertigo is captured, for example.

The problem of definition remains, though. Our notion of sequential arts might be too ample, according to McCloud (1993:7)[2]. Defining it as comics, on the other hand, is also questionable, since it has the inconvenience of presenting only one picture per page, no frames, and no speech bubbles[3].

Despite all that, García (2012:100) identifies in the contemporary graphic novels, such as Will Eisner's works, a connection with the wordless novels by artists like Ward, Otto Nückel and Frans Masereel. The details that motivate this comparison point exactly to what still makes them so "strange" in our XXI century reader's eyes. Reversely, these characteristics are also what make these works so "alternative" and respected sometimes: one frameless picture in each page, the theatrical or dramatic treatment of the characters' gestures and the sceneries.

Image 1: Gestures and theatricality (WARD, 2009: no page number)

[2] That is because sequential arts (like the cinema) are usually made of images which are sequential in time, not spatially juxtaposed, like comics.
[3] According to McCloud (1993:20), only one panel can't be considered comics, but a cartoon, for example. Between one panel and another, the reader completes the idea suggested by the juxtaposition of images. A contemporary exception might be Will Eisner, who also makes whole page compositions.

Although the dispute for a more suitable concept – comics, sequential art – is a very curious and significant discussion, it is not this article's main goal to defend one of those terms presently. Neither is the idea of describing a legacy of wordless novels and its consequences for the graphic novels. This study intends to use the conceptual dispute as a means to observe the "strangeness" of *Vertigo*, by Lynd Ward, in various perspectives. What constitutes, therefore, its "uncanniness"?

Why it is, therefore, that *Vertigo* is renowned among other pictorial works, even after decades of its disappearance in bookstore shelves? What can a silent novel say so loudly that it is not forgotten? What is the extension of the vertigo it provokes?

Vertigo and other arts

Vertigo was made using the technique of woodcarving. Lynd Ward is described by critics as a master in the art of carving wood and producing magnificently detailed prints. He would work for months making panels and if anything, the slightest detail, went wrong, he would throw it away and begin again. Hence, for the 230 prints in *Vertigo*, many more were discarded.

The book was first published in the United States during the Great Depression. It is divided in chapters, with no numbers to mark them. The title of each chapter is the name of its main character, followed by subchapters dividing the sequence of images in years, months and days.

There are three characters in the narrative and its stories are organized in different temporal spaces. After the start of each chapter, there is a sequence of panels that serves as a kind of prologue reporting the events that happened up to that point. It's in this space that The Boy and The Girl first meet, for example.

The vertigo caused by this work seems to be connected to various elements.

Historically, the turn of the 20th century brought many vertiginous innovations. The first heavier-than-air flights happened then. The telephone became part of the routine of the big cities, which transformed progressively with the shapes of the higher buildings. The train, moreover, was seen as one of the greatest synonyms of modernity, of progress. A great part of these machines were incorporated by Ward in *Vertigo*.

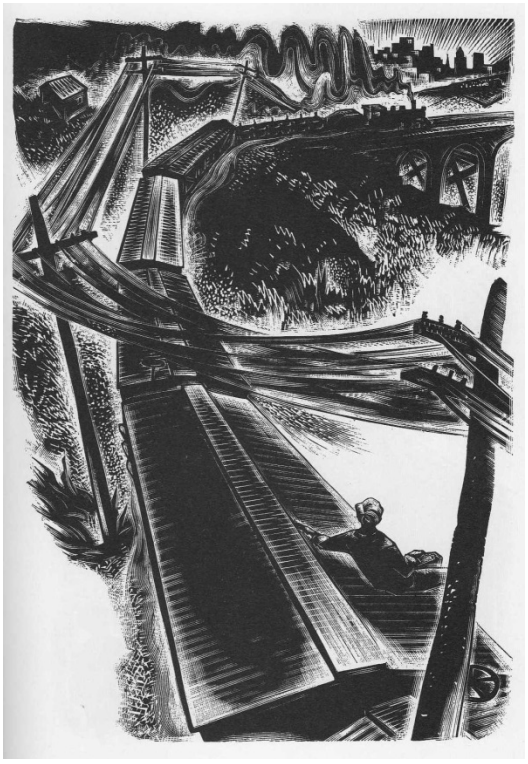

Image 2: The Boy on the train (WARD, 2009: no page number)

The first "wordless novels" appeared in the 1920's and are connected to the experimentation with longer narratives. David A. Beronä (apud GARCÍA, 2012) considers that the publishing of comic strips in newspapers of that period made its development easier and that it was also influenced by the great power of the silent film industry.

Santiago García identifies similarities between the wordless novels and one kind of silent movie: the urban symphony. In this genre, the protagonist is no longer one individualized character, but a collective entity in the modern city. In Ward's works, the same phenomenon can be noticed. In his story the masses – a "social class" – are also a character. In *Vertigo*, however, this is presented in a different way. The protagonists are individuals once more. They have names and they are separated from the crowd, in a sense, since it is their personal stories being told. Even then, their names are only "categories" (The Girl, An Elderly Gentleman, The Boy). Their individuality is presented in sceneries where comparisons to the others surrounding them can't be avoided. So they are represented in queues waiting for jobs, or in the middle of a strike, for example.

Image 3: People on strike (WARD, 2009: no page number)

The plot has a certain degree of complexity, due in part to the possibilities of interpretation opened by the sequence of images. The links between one picture and the next are more suggested than imposed on the reader. In the beginning, The Boy and The Girl meet, fall in love and seem to visualize a promising future for themselves, but are confronted with the reality surrounding them. The economical crisis causes unemployment, debt, poverty, and eventually hopelessness. She starts as a talented violinist, for instance, but can't follow this career later on.

Time, space and style

Ward's technique is rich in detail. It is possible to see the light and the shadows, the pleat of the fabrics, the sense of depth and movement, and people's expressions and feelings. Still, in some

moments, the faces of the characters inhabiting the story can't be distinguished clearly one from the other. Again, the concept of social entity seems to gain more space than the representation of individuality.

Dramatization also has a key role in the characterization of places and people. Certain lines and details convey extreme realization transmitted by the light and others give way to the surmounting power of the shadows. These are the prints where the black is most prominent. The whole world inside that panel then seems to grow closer, tighter, maybe suffocating.

The black and white colors and their contrast are also what separate the beings and objects, and what delineates them. The images can be placed at the center or the margins of the white paper, occupying, thus, different positions, and emphasizing only some aspects of what is being depicted. Thus, it is possible, as it happens in cinema and photography, to observe the focus on somebody's face, for instance, as in the Elderly Gentleman's.

Image 4: Focus on the eyes (WARD, 2009: no page number)

The way time is divided is also cause for some vertigo. The storyline seems to travel faster with every page turned. It begins within the space of years, while the Girl's life story is being told. When it gets to the Elderly Gentleman's, it has already diminished to 12 months. It gets even faster when it reaches the Boy, whose story lasts for seven days. It's as though we, as spectators, are riding the roller coaster at the end of the book. Similar to what happens with the expectations for a brighter future, when we get to the end of this ride, there is no more sense of hope and no more time, only vertigo.

These sensations are well tuned with the speed of communication experimented by society with the installation of new faster technology in everyday's life. Time seems to be faster now. It is not necessary to write letters if one can call someone using the phone and speak and listen to voices that are not in the same room, but might be far away. It gives the whole sense of communication a kind of distance and proximity at the same time, as it seems to be set in a void space. Technology sometimes is almost close to magic if you can't control it.

It becomes, though, a part of people's lives. It could be considered, then, an extension of the human body, a kind of *prosthesis*, a concept discussed by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), as commented by Tom McCarthy (2010). McCarthy calls attention to the relation between technology and melancholia. The technology would be a *prosthesis* so as to aid a feeling of loss. Hence, the telephone was "originally conceived as a hearing aid, an artificial ear, the camera an artificial eye, and so on" (McCARTHY, 2010:7). With these prosthetic organs, according to Freud, man becomes magnificent, "a kind of god with artificial limbs", although “those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times" (FREUD apud

McCARTHY, 2010:7). Each of these appendages occupies the space of an absence, a loss.

Image 5: Gentleman on the phone (WARD, 2009: no page number)

The temporal and spatial organization of this novel makes it closer to other technologies already mentioned: the photography and the cinema. The close-ups, the richness of detail, of contrast in black and white, the position of the images on the page, the sequence in which the story is told, the passage of time are all characteristics that make the narrative work, the plot develop.

The size and shape of each panel, along with the sequence in which they are presented, also determine the way the passage of time is understood and, therefore, the way the story is read. Because time is not perceived in this case from the juxtaposition of images in the space of one page, like comics in general, the interpretation of their sequencing is more complex. There is no precise way to know how much time has passed from one panel to the other. How long does each scene last? The only moment when this passage of time is clear is between subchapters (years, months, days). In many cases, though, it is

possible to feel and understand how long these internal intervals are through the individual reading of each panel and then from the reading of them as a group of images in sequence.

Furthermore, the dramatic lines of movement and action can be compared to the blurring effects sometimes used in photography to emphasize that the object was moving. In other moments they look similar to the techniques which experiment with the reflection of light. They seem to follow experimentation in these other arts such as happened along the years with comics, using what fits them and discarding what doesn't.

Words

Another element of *Vertigo* appears to be very significant to the way it is read and interpreted in relation to these media: the incorporation of words.

One question might be asked at this point, though: wasn't it a *silent* novel?

On the one hand it is silent: there are no speech bubbles and no narrator to introduce each chapter. On the other hand, there are words inscribed in the images. There was one example already presented above: a sign seen when the Boy is in the middle of a strike. There are more cases: a notice of wages being reduced by 20 percent, showing a line of workers in protest or maybe despair; more signs – "Fight for the Union!" – the words in a cart pushed by the Boy as a child – "Corner Grocery" – a chart showing the Elderly Gentleman's company's (decreasing) profit, etc.

In a way all these characters are connected. The Gentleman and the couple, Boy and Girl, never do meet, and they leave in different situations, but they are in the same crisis together. The words presented in those scenes seem only to increase that link among people. Every sentence read points to the Depression.

Thus, is it possible to say that in *Vertigo*, in the place of sound, there is silence? The same question might be asked of silent movies, which also have dialogues and information, but on frames interposing shots. So, there are actually a good number of words in this novel. And there are also sounds: the sounds of the streets, of the people shouting for justice, of the train on the railway, the Girl playing her violin. They are not as visible as today's highlighted dialogues in graphic novels or movies, but they are there, in their quiet way.

Even the fact that they are not so explicit might provide us with a greater sense of silencing of the characters in the story. They shout, but no one hears. They talk on the phone, but nothing of it reaches us. The loss itself – and the melancholia – is always glued to the technologies trying to assuage them.

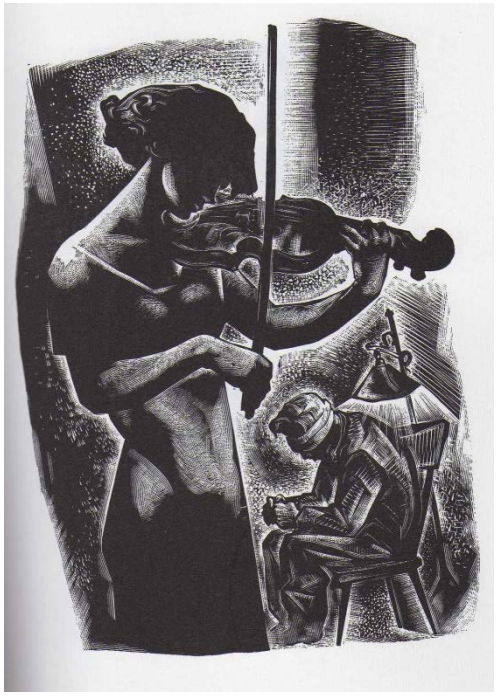

Image 6: The Girl playing the violin (WARD, 2009: no page number)

These sounds can be seen as noises, intrusions perhaps. It reminds us of the growing explosion of sounds on the streets of the great metropolises in the beginning of the XX century. There are too many people living there, and much noise. The darkness is invaded by lights with lamps and vehicles and buildings. The apparent stability and immobility of each print is not as stable and motionless as expected at first glance. Ward shows us life, movement, sound, suffering and happiness as we engage in his wood carved world.

The Uncanniness of Vertigo

It's clear that Ward's work can be related to the technologies and compared to the new Medias booming in the beginning of the last century. But *Vertigo*'s place in the history of comics or sequential arts

(or graphic novels) is still uncertain. After all, as close as it is to photography, cinema and graphic novels, it can't be placed among any of them in terms of categorization. It certainly incorporated a bit of each but it is none of them.

The vertigo in this case is caused, then, by the speed of time and movement propelled by the technologies, by the invasive sounds, the propaganda, the trajectory of each character (and so many others) towards a greater sense of depression, and even by the survival of different Medias (the silent cinema giving space to the new cinema, the radio, the photography, etc.).

The final roller coaster print is a last materialization of the different types of vertigo involved in the narrative. The dramatic feeling of disorientation is translated in the characters' expressions and the steep curves and vertical positions of the railway and passenger car.

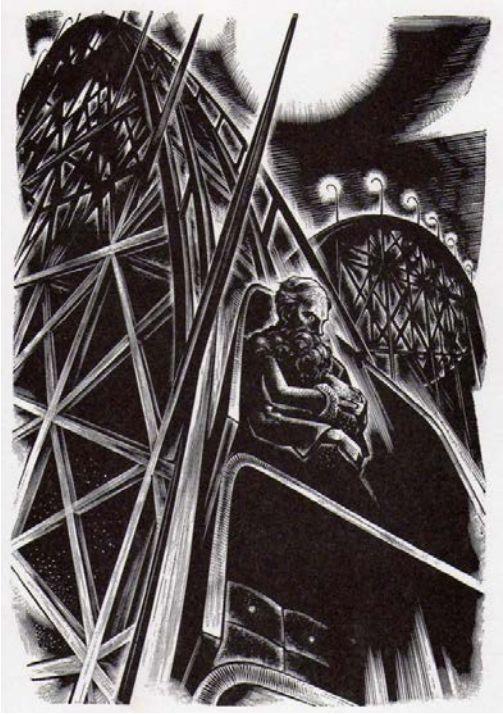

Image 7: Couple on the roller coaster (WARD, 2009: no page number)

In what sense is the vertigo perceived in this work of art related to Freud's and Jentsch's concept of *uncanny*?

Jentsch and Freud diverge on what they consider to be *uncanny*. According to Jentsch, the uncanny is close to the feelings of uncertainty, uneasiness, and unfamiliarity. It could be the reaction to something foreign and distant from somebody's reality. In this case, animated objects which appeared to be inanimate (or vice versa) would be good examples. In Freud's study on the uncanny, however, he refutes this explanation of the concept, after concluding that what is unfamiliar isn't always uncanny.

Freud presented a great extent of philological meanings involving the word Unheimlich (uncanny). He found that *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *"Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich"* (FREUD, 1919:225). This way, the familiar and unfamiliar are close relatives and not quite opposite.

Still, both authors agree that automata (self-functioning mechanisms), for instance, could cause the sensation of something uncanny. For Jentsch, when imitations of the human body appear to be united with bodily or mental function, the uneasiness can be even stronger. He argues that "the finer the mechanism and the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance" (JENTSCH, 1906:10). When some kind of "lifeless thing" is part of an organic creature this fantastic effect can also be reached.

Could the notion of *prosthesis* as an extension of the human body – such as mechanisms like the telephone, the trains and the camera – be connected to this sense of uncanniness? It seems coherent to think

so. And they could be a part of what makes *Vertigo* so strange. However, alongside this characteristic, there are others.

Ward's expressionist style leads to a dramatic narrative populated by characters that increasingly face loss, as said before. The strength of the depiction of their feelings can't be pushed away and so accompanies the reader in his own journey through the prints up to the final moment of vertigo.

Finally, it might be possible to affirm that not only the growing technological city causes an uncanny impression on the characters but also that the reading of this work causes a similar impression on the reader.

Considering the automata and the monsters this study has been pointing out, it is interesting to mention two other works which bear close relation to this analysis.

The first is Ward's illustration of the 1934 edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

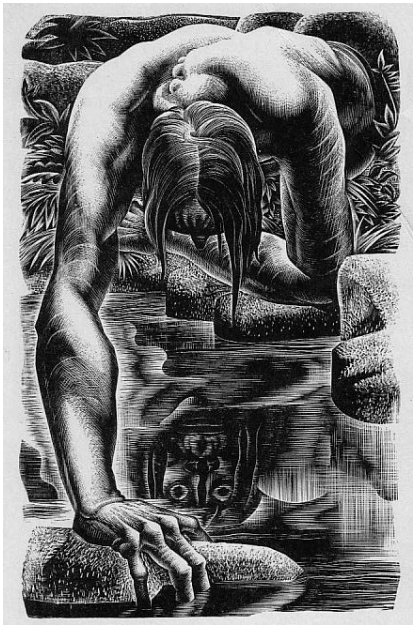

Image 8: The monster gazes into a pool (WARD, 1934)

Looking at Frankenstein's monster as it gazes into a pool, the richness of detail observed in *Vertigo* is once more perceived. This is a creature created from machines and pieces of dead human bodies. Strangely, the face of the monster in the water reminds one of the wide-eyed Elderly Gentleman (shown in section 3) looking at nothing in particular – or at us. The focus is directed to his face, as if there was some invisible camera pointing at him.

What can be seen in both their gazes? Is it fear, surprise, sadness? The same uneasiness catches us as we try to describe it.

In a very different sort of way, Paul Auster's novel *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) presents the awkward story of a little boy who learns how to fly. After all sorts of tests and experiments, he manages to get his feet off the ground and literally fly. This narrative – coincidentally or not – is also set in the 1930's, beginning two years before the Crash in 1929. Although the narrator is in 1993 looking back at his young self named Walt, the sensations of walking on water and hovering above the audience's heads are still vivid for him.

It is crucial to add, though, that Walt only managed to fly after lots of pain was inflicted upon him, along with physical and mental tortures. He even loses part of his finger, which is kept as an amulet by his master. It is only when all hope of anything happening leaves him that the boy manages to finally fly. He feels his body is weightless, he feels as though he is walking in emptiness.

This sequence of states – despair, giving up, and conformation – is the first step for the boy whose destiny is the heights. When with the gift of his newfound skills he discovers that it can cause fright and wonder on people, he uses it in showbiz. What the audience feels is

astonishment, awe, maybe even uncanniness. But people wish to feel it. They pay for it, as they pay to watch a movie at the cinema. That is the price of art: to feel that something strange is also wonderful. In that way, Freud seems to be utterly right. *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* can be quite similar.

Thus *Vertigo*, a masterpiece, can be said once again to combine most of the elements connected to the Uncanny and finally mark us with the feeling its title professes. The representation of the couple embracing in the roller coaster (and perhaps being embraced by it) could be compared with the words of the boy who flies in *Mr. Vertigo's*:

> Rather than fill me with ecstasy or gladness, this breakthrough overpowered me with dread. I didn't know myself anymore. I was inhabited by something that wasn't me, and that thing was so terrible, so alien in its newness, I couldn't bring myself to talk about it. I let myself cry instead. I let the tears come pouring out of me, and once I started, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to stop. (AUSTER, 1994: 59)

This description of Walt's experience, to which we associate that of Ward's characters, seems to fit the world's situation in the beginning of the 20th century. At least one side of the situation, since the whole magnitude of it would be impossible to describe. Strangely – or familiarly? – a similar situation afflicts the world at the beginning of the 21st century when Auster is writing, and when Ward is rediscovered. There is a new economical crisis then, and other unfinished wars happening.

Would these novels, decades apart, be referring to a common issue? Is this issue also the terminological confusion still making the comics and sequential arts field uncomfortable?

Comics' authors and theoreticians such as Scott McCloud recognize the importance of examples like Ward for arts in general and also mention the strangeness they represent. Ward's graphic novel isn't a graphic novel, but one of its precursors. It's a wordless novel which, however, *has* words. It doesn't fit any safe categorization, but it is respected by the arts even when ignored by them.

It is as though the strangeness of this work caused vertigo on researches looking for a safe placement for it. In addition, it is in this sense that it is still possible in our century to discuss what *graphic novels* are and if they even exist.

Perhaps it is not necessary to place *Vertigo* anywhere safe, with the "big arts", for example, but to recognize the importance it has among them. It is a work which won't fit normality, since it is built for uncanniness.

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