The Visual Psychology® Method for understanding organisational complexity and human complexity

by *Enrico Cerni*[*]

Reading about the Visual Psychology Method brought back to my mind another method, that of Edgar Morin: the six-volume work through which the French philosopher constructs his architecture of thought on the theme of Complexity. It is not only the use of the word *method* – masculine in Italian, feminine in French – that connects this volume to Morin's work. It is not just about the title, the surface. I recognised deeper elements of similarity and resonance: reading Visual Psychology evokes, in several passages, the key concepts of complex thinking. Even when not explicitly cited, they allow us to trace parallel and tangent lines. And we know that, for Federica, clearly drawn lines are important.

First of all, the author brings together and establishes a dialogue between two fields that are not usually associated: psychology and graphic recording. These are her two professions, developing the dialogue; yet what emerges in her text are also two fundamental dimensions of her existence. Almost as if the answer to the question "what do you do?" follows the question "who are you?", with all the identity implications that such a shift entails. This happens to some fortunate few, who have managed to tailor for themselves a profession woven from passion, gratitude, and conscious commitment, rewarded by the appreciation of human beings

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with whom they build relationships. I believe this is what has happened, and continues to happen, for Federica: a passionate creator of her method, capable of transmitting positive energy in both team and one-to-one professional relationships.

In the book and in the method, psychology is added to graphic recording, but the result has greater value than the sum of its parts, since an emergent phenomenon develops, new, irreducible, original, with properties different from those of its components. Let me offer a couple of examples from complexity theory to clarify the concept. Hydrogen is a flammable substance; oxygen supports and facilitates combustion; water – H_2O, composed of hydrogen and oxygen – extinguishes fires: the emergent phenomenon of water has characteristics different from those of its components. A second example: organisations understood as complex, living systems composed of individuals, procedures, and tools. Within organisations, cultures, memories, narratives, and habits develop, emergent phenomena not attributable to any single constitutive element.

The same applies for the method proposed in the book: the result is not merely the sum of psychological knowledge and representational skills, but something more. The volume allows unexpressed potential, playfulness, and generativity to surface, going beyond techniques and frameworks. What emerges is precisely this "going beyond," this pushing the gaze a little further, imagining beyond the horizon line, toward a time when the method will be more widely adopted, when other psychologists will use colours, adding the minor personal variations necessary for the method to be embodied in the person facilitating the relationship.

The twentieth-century writer Piero Citati described the Odysseus of the *Odyssey* as the hero "of the many-coloured mind." That hero appears metamorphic, varied, multifaceted, endowed with *metis* – practical intelligence – and is a symbol of human complexity, capable of using the most appropriate words, adapting to every context, and modifying his behaviour according to the situations he encounters. It seems to me that with this method, if applied with discipline, both the visual psychologist and the person engaging in the practice can expand the palette of their mental colours. And the same seems true for the teams involved. Expansion, extension, development: these are the three words I felt resonating within me during the reading.

Drawing is, first and foremost, an act of awareness: it means wanting, after reflecting. Wanting to dismantle a system consolidated over time. Wanting to have fun – *divertĕre*, in Latin – meaning to move away from the status quo, to leave established paths, to abandon well-trodden roads. Wanting to choose – for instance, in selecting a colour – reclaiming one's manual engagement, which opens access to forms of learning different from purely cognitive ones. The mark of a coloured marker on a blank sheet opens the door to wonder, amazement, and enchantment at what one did not think possible, and yet is.

The Visual Psychology approach is undoubtedly innovative ("a revolutionary act in the world of business," as stated in the first chapter), and is explained in a simple way. After all, complexity and simplicity are often interconnected: the metaphor most frequently used by complexity scholars to represent a complex system is that of a flock of birds in the sky. A flock is a self-organising system; it flies according to rules determined by its components; its movements are unpredictable; it changes depending on the context (winds, currents, rain influencing its nonlinear motion); and it is itself composed of complex elements—the individual birds. This image, this graphic representation, is both simple and complex: simplicity and complexity embrace one another, just as psychology and graphic recording do in the book.

Unitas multiplex is an expression often used by Edgar Morin: unity does not eliminate multiplicity, and multiplicity does not dissolve unity. This book is structurally organic and at the same time composed of different parts. A first part explores the method and its various possible applications, offering very concrete, almost operational guidance on tools and techniques. A second part analyses the cognitive functions involved in the method, with a deeper look at how the brain works, and at perception, attention, memory, and learning.

This volume gives a name to new ground: "*new plants renewed with fresh foliage*." Odysseus is no longer *Nobody*, as he thought when facing Polyphemus in the cave of the Cyclops: content now takes on form, even if still mutable and dynamic. Odysseus becomes the hero of the many-coloured mind. And we with him. The Visual Psychology Method gains the depth of a discipline with its own identity, a clear usefulness, and a purpose: it helps us understand organisational complexity and – more broadly – the complexity of human beings.