Picturing the Language of Images
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Edited by

Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit
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INTRODUCTION

PICTURING THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGES

NANCY PEDRI AND LAURENCE PETIT

In his 1980 collection of essays entitled The Language of Images, W. J. T. Mitchell hailed the increased collaboration between “practitioners of the word” (Language of Images 1), or literary critics, and “practitioners of the image” (Language of Images 1), or art historians, that made the “no man’s land” “between the realms of word and image” “[begin] to look like a field in its own right” (Language of Images 2). More than thirty years later, “text and image”—as the field is now most frequently called—has indeed become a well-established discipline in the humanities, and the collaboration between literary scholars and art theorists—thanks to critics like Mitchell, among others—is intense and fruitful.

If this field of study has indeed expanded so much during this period of time, removing the image “from the custody of art history” (Language of Images 7) and opening it up to areas of investigation as diverse as painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, cartography, typography, graphic design, architecture, film, and comics, the boundaries of this “new iconology”, which were “not yet defined” in 1980 (Language of Images 7), still remain hazy precisely because of its interdisciplinary nature. For the same reason, so does its methodology. As Mitchell himself makes clear in his famous 1986 book Picture Theory, despite an obvious “pictorial turn” (Picture Theory 11) or gradual proliferation of images in postmodern culture, there is still “no general theory of the image” (Language of Images 7). Contrary to what the title may suggest, Picture Theory does not claim to be a theory of pictures, but rather an “applied iconology” concerned with “investigat[ing] the interactions of visual and verbal representations in a variety of media, principally literature and the visual arts” (Picture Theory 4-5).

In the wake of Mitchell’s influential work, the present collection of essays, Picturing the Language of Images, likewise does not pretend to offer a homogeneous approach to the ever-expanding field of text-image
relations, and is in no way limited to one topic or one methodology. Instead, it brings together established and emerging scholars from around the world to provide a broad exploration of the complex interaction between the verbal and the visual in a variety of media (such as literature, painting, photography, film, and comics, to name but a few) and across time (from the 18th century to the 21st century). These critics—coming from backgrounds as diverse as literature, art history, book design, and the visual arts—draw on different methodologies and reading practices to inform their applied analysis of the interplay of words and images in multimodal texts and artefacts. Within these various semiological, cultural, and historical perspectives concerned with matters of perception, representation, and cognition, the “language of images” is alternately construed, as in Mitchell’s original collection of essays, as the language about images—the interpretive discourse about images—or as images as language—the semiotic view of images as texts to be deciphered—or as images in language—that is to say “verbal language as a system informed by images”, as Mitchell puts it (Language of Images 3). Let us specify that by “images” we mean a particular type of image within the “family of images”, as Mitchell calls it in his book Iconology (Iconology 9), images that refer to a special kind of visual representation, either as concrete, visual objects or as the virtual, phenomenological appearance that those objects provide for the beholder. Such images are then to be understood as graphic images, and thus designate mostly paintings, drawings, and photographs, but also maps, tableaux, calligraphy, and cinematic images.

In the present collection of essays, contributors examine and challenge the relationships between texts and images from a historical, cultural, theoretical, and generic perspective, while emphasizing the illuminating or destabilizing effects of this interaction for the reader / viewer. By analyzing texts that incorporate visual images or visual images that incorporate text, the authors consider the forms and modalities that the debate on texts and images and their relation has taken over time and space from its origins in the Sister Arts tradition to the more recent discussions of the proliferation of images in today’s visual culture. Essays highlight how the old historical tradition of comparing the sister arts, painting and poetry, on the basis of how they resemble each other (Horace’s famous doctrine of “Ut Pictura Poesis”, “as in painting, so in poetry”), compete with each other (the just as famous rivalry, or “paragone” between the arts), or “illuminate” each other (Lessing)1 has increasingly been challenged by structuralist and post-structuralist

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1 For a detailed analysis of this tradition, see, in particular, Praz and Hagstrum.
theorists concerned with the status of both image and text as signs to be read and interpreted, as well as with the ability of images to resist interpretation.\textsuperscript{2} Emphasis is placed on the textual components of images and the graphical elements of texts according to the tradition of Ut Pictura Poesis, their joint nature as signs according to semiotic tenets, or the fundamental resistance of images to interpretation and verbalization according to poststructuralist theories, whose antisemiotic statements foreground the instability and opacity of the image.\textsuperscript{3} Issues of history, memory, trauma, and nostalgia are also addressed, while formal issues are raised through discussions of innovative iconotextual strategies that attempt to break the boundaries between the verbal and the visual. Whatever the focus, but particularly in cases of ekphrasis—the verbal

\textsuperscript{2} The semiotic approach carried out by such seminal critics in the field as Wendy Steiner, Marianna Torgovnick, Norman Bryson, and W. J. T. Mitchell, to name but a few, does not, however, fundamentally question the tenets of the sister arts tradition. Text and image, working together in a relationship of “analogy,” as Liliane Louvel emphasizes in \textit{L’Œil du texte} (87), are still considered as emulating each other, or competing with each other, but the difference resides in that the focus of semiotics is no longer their parallel history, but their parallel status as signs. Only recently, in “Reading Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition, has Mieke Bal tried to contest the tradition of comparing the arts by saying that critics should refrain from analyzing the parallels between verbal and visual arts to consider instead the effects produced by the two codes as they function together within hybrid narratives. Radically questioning the value of the preposition “and” that “emphasizes the difference, and perhaps the incompatibility, of the two concepts” (27) in such phrases as “Word and Image”, “Text and Image”, or “Literature and the Visual Arts”, and showing how “and” can equally, and just as usefully, be interpreted as meaning “in”, “on”, and “as”, Bal advocates an approach that would show how “the visual and verbal arts interpenetrate, influence, and inform each other” (19). She is echoed in that by Louvel who, in \textit{Texte/Image}, sees the need for the relation between text and image to be re-thought “not in the agonistic mode, but in a complementary and cooperative mode” (12). For Louvel, the relation between text and image can be compared to a “dialogue” functioning “in the manner of an oscillation, a translation, or a transaction” (Louvel, \textit{Texte / Image} 12).

\textsuperscript{3} See, in particular, Elkins for whom images resist interpretation and verbalization if only because, as he points out in the case of paintings, large portions of pictures are made up of material, “graphic marks” (xii) that are “sub-semiotic” (xviii), “merely formal” (xviii), “irrational” (xiii), “incoherent” (xviii), and ultimately “opaque” (xiii). See also other postmodern critics such as Geoffrey Batchen, John Tagg, Louis Althusser, Allan Sekula, and Victor Burgin, who emphasize the inherent lack of essence of the image, particularly the photographic image, which they see as indistinguishable from the very discourse that produces it.
representation of a visual representation (Heffernan 3)—essays use the interplay between texts and images to provide a reflection on the limits of representation, as well as to rethink the very acts of reading and viewing.

Divided into nine sections, *Picturing the Language of Images*, with its thirty-three essays, covers a wide range of traditional as well as newer subfields or points of interest in the study of word-and-image relations, while consistently emphasizing the subversive and transgressive nature of the image.

The first section, entitled “Verbal and Visual Literacy”, is comprised of three essays concerned with visual aesthetics and its relation with language. In the opening essay, Liliane Louvel rethinks Foucault’s notion of the “infinite dialogue” between the arts in terms of a transaction, an “ex-change” akin to a financial exchange, which takes the form of an interartistic or intermedial transposition. Through her historical survey of the modalities of this transposition, Louvel stresses the importance of the notion of iconotextuality and introduces the concept of “pictorial third”, which she develops at length in *Le Tiers pictural* (2010), as a more appropriate concept to describe the personal, intimate negotiation at stake for the reader / viewer in the interplay between text and image. Interestingly, the second essay, by Jacob Bodway, which also tackles problems of aesthetics but from a totally different perspective—the debate on a so-called “universal”, “true” language of painting in the 18th century—, places a similar emphasis on the personal in its relation to vision by highlighting William Hogarth’s assertion of the uniqueness of each individual’s viewing experience. Finally, Jean-Pierre Montier, who also addresses aesthetic and political issues in their relation to subjectivity and truth in his discussion of Elsa Triolet’s novel *Ecoutez-voir*, highlights the paradoxical nature of this iconotext whose profusion of images, in an apparent demand or quest for authenticity, reveals in fact the highest degree of unreality, thus placing the competition between text and image on the side of semantic drift and lack of meaning.

The second section, entitled “Iconotextuality and the Limits of Representation”, brings together three essays concerned with the fascination, power, and ultimate impossibility of representation. All three essays examine texts that strive to transcend their own nature as texts by blurring the limits between the verbal and the visual, thus destabilizing the reader and defamiliarizing reading practices. In her discussion of Angela Carter’s “A Story in Geometric Shapes”, Pascale Tollance shows how this hybrid text—which befits Louvel’s notion of iconotext—attempts to prompt vision just as much as it bars it, resulting in a celebration of the power of the invisible. Likewise, Joana Konova’s study of Goethe’s
Picturing the Language of Images  

*Elective Affinities* reveals how the text, through the staging of *tableaux* in an intricate chain of textual and pictorial representations, re-enacts the infinite dialogue between art and life and interrogates the very nature of representation in its destabilizing play with artificiality and illusion. Finally, Emile Bourdarot examines how A. S. Byatt, in her novel *Still Life*, explores the limits of representation by endeavouring to depict “the thing itself” and to infuse her novel with the qualities of still life paintings, a genre whose oxymoronic nature provides a perfect metaphor for the illusory nature and ultimate impossibility of representation.

Concerns with the nature of representation as inherently misrepresentative of what it sets out to represent are also at the heart of the third section, entitled “Ekphrastic Strategies”. The four essays that make up this section provide a reflection on ekphrastic moments or gestures as fraught with political and ethical significance, as well as powerful tools of resistance and instability. In her analysis of Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès argues that the ekphrasis presented in the penultimate chapter is anything but a lull in the narrative or a moment of stillness and contemplation, but works instead as a catalyst for the political contents of the novel. Kim Gorus, for her part, contends that Peter Verhelst’s creation, through the use of ekphrasis or “textual pictures” in his novel *Tonguecat* partakes of a work-in-progress strategy similar to Duchamp’s that aims at unsettling the reader and giving him or her agency over the artwork. Sarah Gardam also addresses issues of power, as well as gender, in her discussion of ekphrasis in A. S. Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories*. She shows how the ekphrastic gesture in these stories enables a many-levelled interrogation of visual and verbal (mis)representations of women, thus going beyond the power of the artwork itself. Finally, using Robert Mueller’s concept of mnemesthetics, Sean McGlade brings together the ekphrastic gesture and the recording of memory as two creative interpretations of representative visual images to discuss how both John Banville’s and W. G. Sebald’s uses of ekphrasis in *The Sea* and *The Emigrants* lend intentionally destabilizing authority to their texts.

The fourth section, entitled “Graphic and Illustrative Strategies”, explores further the unsettling power of images in their interplay with texts by showing that illustrations, in their various graphic or photo-graphic forms, serve purposes other than merely decorative, referential, or documentary. Together, the essays collected in this section purport that illustrations often mask or obscure the texts they are associated with and exert a strong subversive or transgressive power. Such is the case in Walter Crane’s Victorian illustrated albums which, as Francesca Tancini explains in her essay, revolutionized graphical and editorial formats by