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Introduction: Visual Poetics

Ten years ago, strolling with me around the Italian town of Urbino, French literary scholar Philippe Hamon wondered what would come after semiotics, which he could not imagine disappearing. When I pointed out that semiotics was not alone on the academic literary scene, reminding him of the insistent presence of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, Hamon replied: "But those are all variants of semiotics!" Indeed, the characteristic of a powerful theory near exhaustion is that it appears to subsume everything around it. The exhaustion of a theory or paradigm is not evident in its disappearance but, to the contrary, is evident in its overwhelming presence, which is accompanied by an increasing lack of specificity.

Semiotics is still around, and its possibilities are far from being fully mapped, let alone exploited. Yet literary studies has been in need, for some time now, of a new impulse to make semiotics work. Such an impulse has occurred in the formation of a field of study that takes semiotics at its interdisciplinary word. Beyond the multidisciplinary gathering of fields of application, semiotics has inspired a variety of scholars in the cultural sciences to explore the truly interdisciplinary connections among their fields. These scholars explore the ways in which theory and criticism, and visual and verbal arts can inform each other to increase their insights into each field and at the same time into the arbitrariness of some of the limits between them. Although some general sense of a semiotic basis underlies these endeavors, their activities do not stand out as specifically semiotic; rather, they are characterized by what I have begun to call "visual poetics."

The field whose outlines are apparent in this volume is perhaps better known under the more restricted and slightly clumsy name of "word and image," or under the more encompassing one of "comparative arts." The former is the title of a journal, a newly founded international society, and a special issue of *Poetics Today*, guest-edited by Wendy Steiner, who was one of the forerunners of the discipline. The latter is the title of a new program at the University of Rochester, whose founding members—Michael Ann Holly, Norman Bryson, and myself—are all involved in the present special issue. I consider both "word and image" and "visual poetics" as sections of the larger field of comparative arts, and the relations between the three titles deserve some clarification.

Comparative arts, at least as it is conceived at the University of Rochester, is meant to be an interdisciplinary endeavor intended to overcome the limitations imposed by academic traditions and to increase the fruitfulness of theories and methods developed in each of the cultural sciences for the others. The recent flourishing of film studies has shown how profitable such an open-

ness and such genuine interdisciplinary thinking can be. Drawing upon semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, philosophy, besides the more obvious disciplines like psychology of perception, literary studies, and visual analysis, film studies has given itself a convincing profile in no time. Comparative arts is an attempt to expand this interdisciplinarity to the entire range of "arts," or interpretive disciplines: art history, literary studies, film studies, but also cultural anthropology and history.

Along with film studies, "word and image" is another starting point, be it less spectacularly successful because more limited in scope and more traditional in methodology. Associated with this name are analyses of the interrelations between literary texts and the images used to illustrate them. The classical case, almost a field in its own right, is Blake, and the subtle, yet far-reaching analysis of two poems-with-plates presented here by Harriet Guest and John Barrell shows that the subject is far from being exhausted.

The phrase "visual poetics" indicates an approach which is more modest in scope than comparative arts and more profoundly interdisciplinary than word and image in its initial limited sense. As it is presented in this volume, it is a poetics in the first place: an approach to literature, although also applicable to other arts, it is comparable to rhetorical, psychoanalytical, or sociological poetics. But unlike these, it is defined not by affiliation with a theoretical paradigm but by a specific cognitive basis, or bias if you wish, upon which it draws for its heuristic tools and for its overall perspective. Acknowledging the profoundly spatial and visual input indispensable in all cognition and the subsequent impossibility of severing the visual domain from the verbal, a visual poetics tries to overcome the word-image opposition implanted into our culture from antiquity on. Turning its back to commonplace notions of verbal art as temporal, it tries to make characteristics of visual analysis like perspective and vantage point, but also less obvious elements like indiscreteness, composition, and even color, work for literary analysis.

Precisely because of its polemic denial of the word-image opposition, visual poetics is also an approach to visual art which is truly a "poetics." Acknowledging the profoundly discursive nature of all semiosis and the subsequent impossibility of basing the analysis of visual art on a specific ontology or substance, a visual poetics tries to make recent developments in literary theory and philosophy work for visual analysis. Although none of the contributors to this collection believes that differences between the arts can and need be easily ignored, they all believe that serious reflection on the possibilities of mutual collaboration has much to offer for the study of literature and the visual arts.

The essays collected here present themselves in sets of two or three, each illuminating a different aspect of visual poetics. The first two papers, by Norman Bryson and A. Kibédi Varga, raise initial theoretical questions concerning

the very possibility of visual poetics. They each have something positive and something negative to say. If the volume opens with the most skeptical contribution, it is because Bryson's three books of visual poetics, *Word and Image* (1981), *Vision and Painting* (1983), and *Tradition and Desire* (1984) offer the most spectacular, substantial presentation of the field. If even the scholar who can be considered the founder of visual poetics expresses some skepticism toward assimilation of poetry and painting, his attitude is bound to reassure those who, cautious if not suspicious about this kind of new wave in scholarship, might be tempted to dismiss it right away. Bryson begins by challenging the well-known, often challenged but still widely held view represented by Lessing's *Laokoön* according to which images stand still while texts flow through time. Rather than questioning the latter, he undermines the former, more appealing idea. Images do *not* stay still, and whoever believes they do should spend some time in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, where one gets easily seasick by the movement of Rothko's most radical paintings. Drawing upon Barthes's attempt to sever texts from both the referent and the author, Bryson develops a sense for intertextuality as the basis of visual mobility. Yet he does not want to take the radically deconstructionist position for images that he adopts for texts, because, in his view, images are bound by the materiality of their construction. Bryson, who is inspired by Bourdieu in this paper, shrewedly uses the word "embodiment" to develop his ideas of the materiality of the image. This embodiment constitutes the limit of intertextuality and the token of uniqueness. One can challenge, in turn, the assumption that texts because of their sheer reproductability are not "embodied." Further, I would suggest that the limits to the intertextual flow that he wishes to protect for painting might also apply to texts, where the semiotic freedom is equally limited by the power relations which determine the validity of interpretations. Bryson certainly raises important questions which demonstrate how productive semiotics can be, not only for literature and painting alike, but for the assessment of their interrelations.

A. Kibédi Varga has been involved in word and image for a long time. In his paper he assesses the possibility of paintings to narrate. Visual stories can and do exist, not only as series of paintings or of scenes within one painting, but also in other forms, which Varga discusses. The problem he tackles is this: how can a painting move from (the representation of) one action to an entire story? Perceiving three recent developments in narratology—the Proppian grammar-of-stories, the psychological study of understanding and memory, and the anthropological study of the function of story-telling in a culture—he examines what a visual narratology can contribute to each.

After these two pieces of theoretical reflection, Michael Ann Holly and Ernst van Alphen explore visual poetics as an interpretive strategy for reading verbal texts. Holly examines a genre of writing that has been assimilated into literature in the wake of Hayden White's *Meta-History*: early historiography,

in Holly's case, the famous works of nineteenth-and early twentieth-century cultural history. Unlike White, Holly does not establish rhetorical categories which are presumed to predominate in the writing of historical periods, but rather, posits a self-reflexivity that makes the historiographic text resemble, reflect, or construct the object it sets out to describe. In the structure of Burckhardt's writing on the Renaissance she recognizes the principles of pictorial representation characteristic of the period with its richness of detail and its geometric principle of composition. Similarly, in Henry Adams's writing on medieval art, she recognizes the heterogeneity that characterizes the object. The semiotic relation between text and visual object she brings to the fore can be seen as a diagrammatic iconicity in Charles Sanders Peirce's sense.

Van Alphen proposes to read literary texts visually, and he demonstrates his poetics with a Dutch postmodern text. He shows how this novel, which can to a certain extent be read realistically, gains its depth from a play with visuality that originates in the main character's upbringing by a silent father: "in the beginning was the image." The novel seems to propose a visual reading, but by its own self-reflexivity it also proposes to read other works in this way. Van Alphen engages in a dialogue between literary/visual and theoretical discourse that draws its insights from the refusal of theoretical mastery learned from deconstruction. While Holly explores the possibilities of visual poetics for historical intertextuality, van Alphen's approach, which, as typically postmodern, is also period-bound, is more functional and systematic.

Word and image in the initial sense, as the study of relations between text and illustration, is convincingly renewed by the two papers that represent the approach. Arie-Jan Gelderblom begins by assessing the approaches to Dutch art, conceived of, first, as photographic realism, hence purely visual; then as emblematic and, hence, purely "verbal"; finally, Svetlana Alpers characterized it as descriptive, not in the realist sense but in the Barthian sense: as a rhetorical effect. The allegorical art Gelderblom studies does not fit any of these approaches because it is not unified. As a heterogeneous mixture of "discourses," the illustrations as well as the texts themselves, in his case country-house poems, defy any hierarchy between realism and fantasy, descriptive and figural, fact and figure. Gelderblom ends with appealing suggestions about the implications of his analysis, which lead to a view of the "politics of landscape" and the "semiotics of place."

The latter thread runs from Gelderblom's paper to that by Harriet Guest and John Barrell. They also explore the political implications of the relations between text and image and the possibilities of the semiotic transaction of meaning that these relations offer. They analyze two different relations between poem and illustration: one in which the image proposes one possible, even plausible, interpretation of the song, and one where the proposed interpretation is actually problematic. The text, as they write, refuses to authorize the visual

interpretation unambiguously. Their profound analyses end also on thoughts about the political and critical potential of the word-image analysis and the historical position of this particular mixed discourse.

John Neubauer and Timothy Mathews explore the possibilities of visual reading with two classic examples: the case of Goethe, whose writing is so often characterized as "morphological," hence, visual, and that of Apollinaire, whose involvement with cubism is well known. Both authors avoid easy acceptance of the visual informedness of the writing. Neubauer begins by stating that Goethe's writing undermines the notion of visual poetics. The strong interest in science and the interest of founding in writing a superior reliability for the visual (*Anschauung* is the key word) has pushed previous scholars to overrate Goethe's investment in the visual. In fact, the analysis of one novel demonstrates that visual poetics should not be an easy transfer from one art to the other, and as long as the debate is phrased in terms of observational reliability, the opposition will grow rather than diminish.

Mathews studies a favorite period in visual poetics: the rise of cubism and concrete poetry. Although relations between the two arts are undeniable and consciously pursued, it is by no means obvious that we know how to approach these works. In an elaborate response to Marjorie Perloff's recent study *The Futurist Moment* (1986), Mathews works through the problems of interpretation of art forms which "make forms of expression out of otherness itself."

After the papers exploring visual reading, the volume ends with three papers practicing the reverse: reading the visual. Three literary scholars analyze visual works: Linda Hutcheon studies postmodern photography; L. A. Cummings, gothic cathedrals and cityscapes; and Alice Benston, the paintings of Balthus. The analysis of photography as the visual art form which challenges assumptions of uniqueness may entice the reader to go back to Bryson's materialist claim for the image's distinctness. Cummings and Benston develop a reading of visual images beyond the word-image opposition. Cummings's concept of seriality is in itself a challenge to the atemporality of the image. As a genuine "chronotopos" in the literal sense, seriality is an interpretive strategy that manages to overcome the opposition which blurs our insight into the style characteristic of the late Middle Ages. Benston uses the theater as interpretive model, an art form equally mediating between the visual and the verbal. Her analysis of Balthus's sometimes disturbingly voyeuristic paintings of naked young girls explains why they are not necessarily only that: as theater, they give the voyeuristic object of vision status as a subject of acting.

The essays collected here do not give an overview of visual poetics. They do propose various approaches connected to this new field. It is hoped that they will raise questions and stimulate the development of further possibilities.

The collection grew out of the conviction that the relations between the arts have something more to offer than the study of each art can offer alone.

Mieke Bal
Rochester and Utrecht, January 1988