LANGUAGE, IMAGE, PHOTOGRAPHY – THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PICTURES

Lavinia Hulea, University of Petroşani

Abstract: With the instauration of abstract art in the cultural environment, literature and verbal discourse appear to have been repressed in order to let free course to visuality; in terms of perception, abstract art, unconstrained by temporal sequences, allegories or anecdotes, and relying on intuition and "pure vision" has come to be considered as a reaction against the inclusion of the literary elements in painting, "in the long struggle of painters to attain the respectability enjoyed by poets." Meanwhile, photography has been termed as a paradoxical entity, where two-fold messages coexist and determine its peculiar character: that of being a "natural"/ codeless/ objective message as well as a "cultural"/ code-possessing/ "invested" message, a condition which subsequently might determine questions regarding the overlapping of photography and language. The issue is, partly, dealt with in terms of the determination of both photography and language to maintain their distinctive features and resist to image-text transfer, in an attempt at preserving their purity, and partly, in terms of visual and verbal interactions – so evident in mass media – that allow unconstraint exchanges.

Keywords: language, image, photography, distinctive features, interaction

In the opinion of Gilles Deleuze (1988: 60-1), the apparently irreconcilable relation between image and word resurfaces whenever representation and discourse are called under all-encompassing auspices (be they mimesis, semiotics, etc.), in an attempt at finding grounds for a unitary and interdisciplinary code:

"Speaking and seeing, or rather statements and visibilities are pure Elements, *a priori* conditions under which all ideas are formulated and behaviour displayed, at some moment or other. …

In Foucault, the spontaneity of understanding, …, gives way to the spontaneity of language …, while the receptivity of intuition gives way to that of light (a new form of space time). …

… one of Foucault's fundamental theses is the following: there is a difference in nature between the form of content and the form of expression, between the visible and the articulable (although they continually overlap and spill into one another in order to compose each stratum or form of knowledge). … But …, Foucault, contrary to what we might think at first glance, upholds the specificity of seeing, the irreducibility of the visible as a determinable element."

In the twentieth century, one of the approaches attempting at finding out the commonalities shared by language/ words and images, the comparative method, carried out its strategy, founded on the criticism of the "Sister Arts", relying on several arguments that strengthened the idea that

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formal analogies were inherent in all arts and that dominant historical styles display structural similarities between texts and images. (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 57)

Meanwhile, other scholars (Hagstrum, 1993: 16-45), exploiting the same critical trend, limited their assertions to outlining the part played by the comparisons between the visual and the verbal arts in poetics and rhetoric and their influence on artistic and literary practice. The operational framework accordingly theorized comprised a series of differentiations between the iconic and the symbolic signs that represented the foundation of the comparative analysis itself.

Although the comparative method aimed at rendering a thorough synthesis of both the visual representation and the verbal discourse, there are theoreticians (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 87) who considered that the approach had its own limitations which could not be overlooked:

"The first is the presumption of the unifying, homogeneous concept (the sign, the work of art, semiosis, meaning, representation, etc.) and its associated 'science' that makes comparative/ differentiating propositions possible, even inevitable", which is paired with the inability to notice alternate histories or durablepracticesthat are not congruent with the main pattern of historical periods (for instance, the antirealist theories of the sign):

"Recent attempts to connect verbal and visual arts, for example, tend to suffer from unreflected transfers, or they painstakingly translate the concepts of the one discipline into the other, inevitably importing a hierarchy between them. … Alongside the official records of reception, one must posit another world of looking, even before it can be specified in order to make it legible; against the 'monotheism' of synecdoche, and its molar constructions, analysis has to assume the persistence of a 'polytheism' of hidden and dispersed practices of looking at works of art, which while never giving rise to the consolidated forms of the review, the essay, the treatise, nevertheless constituted 'reception' and 'context' as historical realities." (Bal, Bryson 1991: 174-187)

With theorists having long been arguing on the need of a comparative approach required by the study of the relations between texts and images, a shift towards questioning the relations between mediahas surfaced and stressed the necessity of regarding such relations not only in terms of their analogy or resemblance, but also in terms of difference and opposition. The main issue, here, appears to involve the already fixed patterns that have strived to delineate a typology of "interpretative protocols" and summary of situations allowing the deployment of the relation text/ image.

It is perhaps worth mentioning some of the twentieth-century considerations upon the text-image relation in film and theatre that has turned out to be governed not only by its technical conditioning, but has asserted itself as a representation that implied social, political, and institutional antagonisms. Certain critical opinions (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 91) consider that, when analyzing the possible relations between texts and images, what really matters is not to term such connections as a difference or resemblance between the two items; instead, it would be more relevant to show how such resemblances or antagonisms operate and why it is significant to perceive the meaning – if any – of the manner words and images share similarities or are definitely opposed.

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According to Mitchell, literary and visual media comprise a large variety of relations that may range from disjunction (involving visual representations that have no textual reference) to the fully identification of the two codes (the verbal and the visual), which abolish distinction between writing and drawing, as it is the case of certain of Blake's image-text combinations. The common-place image-text relations (the manner they are displayed by illustrated newspapers, for instance), setting forth the relation of subordination between the two media, are opposed to what the theorist has called the "experimental" relations between words and images:

"The image/ text problem is not just something constructed 'between' the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue *within* the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes." (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 95)

Though part of the twentieth-century criticism emphasized the prevalence of unmixed (that is, strictly visual or verbal) media and the need of discussing the image/text division in connection with mixed media (illustrated books, film, and television), pure visual representations have nonetheless been perceived by others as recipients for textuality, as long as writing literally becomes part of the visual representation and pure texts, at their turn, literally acquire visuality, owing to the fact that they possess a written visible form:

"Viewed from either side, from the standpoint of the visual or the verbal, the medium of *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the 'literal' (letters) and the 'figurative' (pictures) on which it depends. Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the 'imagetext' incarnate… That images, pictures, space, and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up in a verbal discourse does not mean that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/ listener 'sees' nothing. That verbal discourse may only be figuratively or indirectly evoked in a picture does not mean that the evocation is impotent, that the viewer 'hears' or 'reads' nothing in the image." (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 95)

The defenders of purism in painting support the avoidance of all contamination of the visual medium by language and contingent media that represent the "textual" items, which disturb the purity of visual arts and should be, as a consequence, eliminated. Frequently, pure visual representations of this sort have been connected to abstract painting, which claimed its supremacy over a whole range of mixed visual representations. And, as it has been already asserted by critics, the same is true for the literary medium, which is considered, by purists, legitimate to display the same quest for purity and dismissal of visuality.

American criticism has pointed out that comparing the visual medium with the literary medium should not be considered a compulsory operation focusing on distinct systems interconnected either by similarities or by differences. Instead, they have shifted attention from the purist to the composite media and started approaching the issue by analyzing the manner language enters painting (via paintings' titles, for instance, that are supposed to give answers to a series of interrogations regarding its type, location, relation with the image, etc.) and visual

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representations are "immanent in the words".While it has been asserted that the main characteristic of visual representations is a mixed medium incorporating histories, discourse, and institutions, words are also considered to possess an appropriate visuality that is incumbent in the discourse itself and includes represented places and objects, formal arrangements, printing, etc. Nonetheless, it has been inferred that painting usually acquires textuality easier than language, which, in order to "become visible", has to resort to writing or to the gesture.

With the instauration of abstract art in the cultural environment, literature and verbal discourse have been repressed in order to let free course to visuality. Yet, while one of the main doctrines of abstract art stipulates the elimination of the represented object, it, nonetheless, continues to preserve content and subject matter.

Clement Greenberg (1989: 133-4) operates a differentiation between content and subject matter and asserts the idea that content represents what the artists have in mind at the moment they elaborate the work of art. In his opinion, all works of art should have content, although abstract art has to leave aside "literature" (the narrative elements in traditional painting), in its strife to outline a clear delimitation between the arts of vision and the art of language. The aim of abstract painting appears, consequently, not to be an artistic strife, void of all content, ranging the work of art within the field of the formal and the decorative:

"The tendency is to assume that the representational as such is superior to the nonrepresentational as such; that all other things being equal, a work of painting or sculpture that exhibits a recognizable image is always preferable to one that does not." And while 'quality' is the only matter that is important in art, "The presence or absence of a recognizable image has no more to do with value in painting or sculpture than the presence or absence of a libretto has to do with value in music. … it is granted that a recognizable image will add conceptual meaning top a picture, but the fusion of the conceptual with aesthetic does not affect quality. … The critic doubting whether abstract art can ever transcend decoration is on ground as unsure as Sir Joshua Reynolds was when he rejected the likelihood of the pure landscape's ever occasioning works as noble as those of Raphael."

In order to understand the shift operated by abstract art, it is important to evaluate the manner such paintings, without represented objects, might possess a subject and initiate theoretical concepts. One of the most obvious changes operated by abstract art is acknowledged to be the shift from the manner traditional art used to deal with temporality; in terms of perception, abstract art, unconstrained by temporal sequences, allegories or anecdotes, is perceived instantaneously.

Such a perception relying on intuition and "pure vision" has been considered as a reaction against the inclusion of the literary elements in painting "in the long struggle of painters to attain the respectability enjoyed by poets. This objective attained, painting was ready to … shed its reliance on literature and turn its attention to the unique problems of its own medium." (Mitchell, 1994: 227)

If abstract art appears to have narrowed the interference with the word element, when dealing with photography, critics generally support a two-fold presentation of the relations existing

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between language and photography: one of them approaches the differences between the two fields, emphasizing the concept of photography as an objective transposition of "visual reality", while the other one stresses the idea that, in fact, photography has been incorporated by language.

In the opinion of Victor Burgin **(**1986: 51), it is language, actually, which assaultsphotography, beginning with the moment viewers look at photographs; the result is a permanent mixing of words and images that are recurrent in the viewers' memory. And he goes further by asserting that the permanence of two separate forms of communication, images and words, whose origins he finds in the Neo-Platonist belief that the language of things is more profound than the language of words, represents a shortcoming in viewers' perception of photography.

Roland Barthes(1977: 17-9), on the other hand, sets forth a dual character of photography which, he claims, involves the fusion oftwo types of messages: a code-possessing one, identified with the "art" of the photograph, and a codeless one, the equivalent of the photographic analogue. Barthes subsequently develops a conception of the message in photography divided into denotation, representing the non-verbal character of the photograph perceived as an analogy of reality, and connotation, pointing to the photograph's textuality or the reasons for having taken the photograph, the choice of the subject matter or of the technical parameters. This equation is considered to have set forth at least two valid assertions: the first one states that a permanent connotation of a photograph is that it is a plaindenotation without a code; the second one connects photograph's denotation/ representation with its meaning/ textuality. And, while photographs are considered to transmit literal reality, the "reduction" operated by photography should not be perceived as a transformation:

"In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up … a code between the object and its image. Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*; from which proposition an important corollary must immediately be drawn: the photographic message is a continuous message. … This purely 'denotative' status of the photograph, …, in short its 'objectivity', has every chance of being mythical. … In actual fact, …, the photographic message too – at least in the press – is connoted. … The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art'… of the photograph); … here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code.*"

Photography is termed as a paradoxical entity, where two-fold messages coexist and determine its peculiar character: that of being a "natural"/ codeless/ objective message as well as a "cultural"/ code-possessing/ "invested" message, which has subsequently led to questions regarding the superimposing of photography and language. The issue is, partly, dealt with in

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terms of the determination of both photography and language to maintain their distinctive features and resist to image-text transfer in an attempt at preserving their purity, and partly, in terms of visual and verbal interactions – so evident in mass media – that allow unconstraint exchanges.

Photography has also brought about the assertion that it could be analyzed from the perspective of its being a copy/ an analogy of reality, dispossessed of any "investments in value", and hence, whenever objectiveness is looked for, reality should be thoroughly copied.Yet, opposite considerations find the prospect of photography as an analogy of the world inappropriate because "what it represents is fabricated, because the photographic optic is subject to Albertian perspective (entirely historical)" and because three-dimensionality is transformed into two-dimensionality. (Barthes, 1977: 88)

Visual representations may also be discussed in terms of the power they exert on audiences. In the opinion of Mitchell (1994), there are two manners, according to which pictures may exert their power: the first one has been designated "illusionism" and is considered to represent the capacity of pictures to take power over the viewer,through simulating the existence of objects, spaces, and actions, as it is the case of the trompe-l'oeil or of cinematographic effects. Despite various verbal constructions tending to merge the different meanings of illusionism and illusion (for instance, "aesthetic illusion"), theorists appreciate that illusionism should not be mistaken for illusion, as it stands for a self-conscious use of illusion, while illusion itself is to be interpreted as delusion, arising from animal dissimulation and imitation.The second manner, called "realism", has been acknowledged as an emersion into reality that does not captureits spectators under its power, but allows them to make use of the representation itself, with a view to exert power over the world.

In other words, illusionism has come to be considered as an action "directed at a free subject that has to be addressed, persuaded, entertained, deceived" (Mitchell, 1994: 326) and may be understood as operating according to a manner similar to that of ekphrastic processes.As far as realistic representations are concerned, their power is asserted as being directed towards objects. And, while illusionism theories are acknowledged to address to an audience, whose responses are perceived as sentimental, impressionable, and intuitive, realism theories appear to address to a rational and scientifically sceptical spectator.

Despite their resistance in time as theoretical approaches, neither the comparative method nor the concept of the medium, as a mixed and heterogeneous entity, appear to represent ultimate answers to the issue of the existing relations between visual representations and texts (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 103). If, on the one hand, the effectiveness of pictures emerges as a dominant characteristic of the visual medium, composite representations or images-texts appear to require an analysis of the representations themselves, assumed as metapictures of their media, in order to reveal their heterogeneity. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the pure media, set forth by the modernist aesthetics, with both the visual arts and the literary art preserving their distinctive identities, is counterbalanced by the strengthening of the twenty-first-century assertion that all

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media are, in fact, mixed media and all arts are composite arts, determining unconstraint exchanges between the visual and the verbal.

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