Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)
MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS. Literature and Discourse as Forms of Dialogue
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-16-7
Section: Language and Discourse

RELATING IMAGES AND DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Culture theorists have noticed, during the last two centuries, the emergence of a series of approaches meant to protect language and its literary counterpart from the visual 'invasion'. The picture is turned into a main topic of debate, in the terms language used to be discussed, that is, both as a model to be emulated by the other arts and as an unsettled issue. Although the last decades of human history are considered to be the era of image-making, there are still important problems to be developed, beginning with a thorough definition of pictures, continuing with the manner pictures operate on their audiences, and ultimately focusing on the relation between image and discourse.

Keywords: images, discourse, relation, metalanguage, metapicture

With postmodern age (the second half of the twentieth century), visual representation acquired new forms of imitation, simulation, and illusion, owing to the tremendous development of technology. Critical opinions consider that such an emphasis on visual representation should not be equated with a return to mimesis, since we rather deal with a "rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality." (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 16)

It has been asserted that the issue is to find answers to the manner visual images are perceived by audiences, which imply as many possibilities as the various forms of reading: decoding, interpretation, practices of observation, visual pleasure, etc.

One of the first approaches that targeted at rendering an overall critique of pictorial perception, focusing on picture as a concrete symbol of a polyvalent cultural domain, belongs to Erwin Panofsky. In his book *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1991: 67-8) that displays a vast history of Western religious, scientific, and philosophical thought, he also approaches the question of the spectator, whom he sees as a 'subject' and whom he opposes to the visual image treated as an 'object':

"Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to sable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual: for these rules refer to the psychological and physical condition of the visual impression, and the way they take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective 'point of view'. Thus the history of perspective may be understood … as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self. Artistic thinking must have found itself constantly confronted with the problem of how to put this ambivalent method to use. It had to be asked … whether the perspectival configuration of a painting was to be oriented toward the factual standpoint of the beholder …; or whether conversely the beholder ought ideally to adapt himself to the perspectival configuration of the painting. … In all these questions, the 'claim' of the object (to use a modern term) confronts the ambition of the

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subject. The object intends to remain distanced from the spectator …; it wants to bring to bear, unimpeded, its own formal lawfulness (its symmetry, for example, or its frontality)."

Further, the spectatorial perspective, striving to enlighten the comprehension of the visual representation, was approached by Jonathan Crary, in *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1996: 5-6), where he questioned visual representation, in connection to scientifically grounded accounts of visual perception that determined its double-sided character residing in its functioning both as a mental and as a bodily activity. And with him again, the 'observer' comes to detain a main place in the critique of visual culture and appears to oppose to the perceptions of it by traditional art history:

"… the problem of the observer is the field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible. Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification. … Most dictionaries make little semantic distinction between the words "observer" and "spectator", and common usage usually renders them effectively synonomous… Though obviously one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations" And "whether perception or vision actually change is irrelevant, for they have no autonomous history. What changes are the plural forces and rules composing the field in which perception occurs? And what determines vision at any given historical moment is not some deep structure, economic base, or world view, but rather the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface. It may even be necessary to consider the observer as a distribution of events located in many different places. There was never or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident. Instead there are more or less powerful arrangements of forces out of which the capacities of an observer are possible."

Postmodernism also witnessed theorists' quest for finding out appropriate manners of defining the new "iconology", broadly seen as the "study of the general field of images and their relation to discourse", which appropriated the "critical encounter with the discourse of ideology." (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 25)

In the opinion of W. J. T. Mitchell, in order to reconstruct iconology, analyzes have to leave aside comparative studies of visual and verbal art and to approach both image and language as the fundamentals of human subjects.

As critics have already shown, modernist aesthetics and the subsequent postmodern speculations largely focused upon self-reference, in order to reach to the meaning of picture and to find out common grounds capable of uniting even the radically opposed trends in modern art. Meanwhile, self-reference has brought into discussion the "second-order discourse", which reflects upon "first-order discourses" (W. J. T. Michell, 1994: 31), namely, the issue of metalanguage. The central question that regards pictures' metalanguage refers to their capability of displaying reflections on themselves, which represents the capability of supplying a second-order discourse that 'tells' something about the pictures. Accordingly, to attempt at giving the thorough representation of certain pictures in order to show their self-referentiality (metapicture) as well as the manner they reflect on themselves means to resort to ekphrasis.

In his theory of pictures, Mitchell (1994: 33) noticed that metapictures, or the pictures that refer to themselves, deal with a so-called representation of first and second degree, which

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requires, in order to exist, a series of concentric levels that exhibit a "picture-within-a-picture".

Further considerations on the nature of metapictures resulted in acknowledging the capability of all pictures to become metapictures, owing to their reflection on the nature of pictures. Ultimately, Mitchell (1994: 40) supports the idea that all visible marks might become metapictures, as long as they reflect upon the nature of the visual representation (for example, Necker cube, Appelles's single stroke signature, etc.); metapictures have come to be perceived as devices that enable the understanding of pictures, and their analysis also legitimated the approach of the point of view of the observer. While discussing picture identity, critics have focused on a series of issues that set forth the correspondence between image/picture and the viewer's eye; on delineating the status of metapictures within their cultural environment, and the relation between pictures and words, emphasis is set upon both the manner pictures 'speak' to us and the manner we are used to refer to pictures.

Metapictures, originated in popular culture, have subsequently been reconsidered by the art history, philosophy, and science and shifted from an auxiliary status, as ornaments and illustrations, to a main one, as canons that exemplify theories of picturing and vision and, even more significant, the "infinite relation of language to painting." (Foucault, 1982: 53): "Two principles, I believe, rules Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The first asserts the separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes it). ….The second principle that long ruled painting posits an equivalence between the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond." (1982: 32) And, Foucault goes further in asserting that: "These two principles constituted the tension in classical painting, because the second reintroduced discourse (affirmation exists only where there is speech) into an art from which the linguistic element was rigorously excluded. Hence the fact that classical painting spoke - … - while constituting itself entirely outside language; … hence the fact that it provided, …, a kind of common ground where it could restore the bonds of signs and the image." (1982: 53)

According to 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 trying to mediate the two fields – the comparative method – carried out its strategy, founded on the criticism of the 'Sister Arts', relying on several arguments that strengthened the idea that 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)

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Meanwhile, other literary scholars of the period (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 durable practices that 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 media has 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.

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:

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"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 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.

Yet, recent theories (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1994: 103) have noticed that neither the comparative method nor the concept of the medium (be it visual or verbal), as a mixed and heterogeneous entity, despite their resistance in time as theoretical approaches, represents answers to the issue of the existing relations between visual representations and texts. Composite representations or images-texts seem to require an analysis of the representations themselves, assumed as metapictures of their media, in order to reveal their heterogeneity.

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These critical observations appear to undermine the emphasis on the pure media, set forth by the modernist aesthetics, so that the attempt to find out unitary principles guiding all arts, irrespective of their being literary or visual, comes out as a vain strife and strengthens the twenty-first-century assertion that all media are mixed media and all arts are composite arts.

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