

## Editor's Note: The Language of Images

One of the most striking features of modern culture has been the intensive, almost compulsive, collaboration between practitioners of the word and practitioners of the image. We inhabit a world so inundated with composite pictorial-verbal forms (film, television, illustrated books) and with the technology for the rapid, cheap production of words and images (cameras, xerox machines, tape recorders) that nature itself threatens to become what it was for the Middle Ages: an encyclopedic illuminated book overlaid with ornamentation and marginal glosses, every object converted into an image with its proper label or signature. The quintessential modern experience of this new "book of nature" is the stroll through the scenic wonders of a national park with a plastic earphone that responds to electronic triggers embedded at strategic locations along the path. A recorded commentary provides a continuing gloss on what is an exclusively visual experience (since printed signs remind you not to go beyond the margins of the path or to touch anything). This experience is in a very real sense a "pictorializing" of nature; the technology was first developed for conducting tourists through picture galleries, and the electronic guides often assist the tourist by telling him which spots in the park are ideal for taking snapshots.

The sort of collaboration which has produced our modern, secular, and profane book of nature has its more sophisticated counterpart in the worlds of art and literature. We have not quite reached the state described by Robert Browning ("Does he paint? He fain would write a poem— / Does he write? He fain would paint a picture"), but we do find what amounts to a symbiotic relationship between verbal and pictorial modes in modern art and literature. "Modernism" in literature has, since the beginning of this century, been haunted by the spirit of "imagism," and the modern criticism of literature has been dominated by spatial, synchronic, architectural models such as formalism and structuralism. Modern painting, on the other hand, while it has ostensibly sought to create nothing more than the "pure" image—abstract, nonverbal, free of representation, reference, narrative, and even the contamination of a verbal title—has in fact become more dependent on an elaborate verbal apologetics, the ersatz metaphysics of "art theory."

It is no wonder that, in this climate, art historians and literary critics have begun to collaborate as well. This collaboration generally has, at

least in its most fruitful moments, little to do with any programmatic “interdisciplinary” designs but is more likely the result of following out the imperatives of a problem central to a single discipline. Ernst Gombrich did not turn to psychology because he wanted to set up some sort of comparison with the arts but because the problem of pictorial illusion required this sort of move. If some of the barriers between art history and literary criticism seem to be falling in the spate of recent publications on “interrelationships of the arts,” it is not because either discipline has forfeited its claim to territorial rights or rigor but because scholars have found themselves straying onto common—if sometimes disputed—ground in the pursuit of their disciplines. The encounters have not always been peaceful: art historians tend to regard literary critics as victims of the tyranny of the word who babble incomprehensible jargon and neglect the silent, wordless immediacy and presence of the art object; literary critics see art historians as slaves to the tyranny of the eye who fuss over brushstrokes and color fusion while ignoring the really important question of what a painting *means*. Nor do scholars from either field look with particular favor on their own members who venture abroad; at worst they are regarded as renegades or apostates, at best as curiosity seekers who are interested in exotic, marginal subjects. Despite these prejudices, however, there are venerable precedents in both fields for the kind of apostasy we are describing here. The notion of pure “autonomy” has never really had the kind of hold over literary criticism that might be suggested from the amount of publicity it has received, and the greatest art historians of the twentieth century, Panofsky and Gombrich, have been exemplary renegades. Their example has given courage to scholars and critics such as those included in the following collection who have found themselves exploring the no-man’s-land between the realms of word and image.

There comes a point, of course, when the no-man’s-land between disciplines becomes so heavily cultivated that it begins to look like a “field” in its own right. It would be tempting to label this as the domain of aesthetics, the study of “art in general,” but that would be to lose the particular topic which these essays have in common. The topic is the image, and the field which seems to be emerging from it is an expanded version of the discipline which Panofsky called “iconology,” the historical study of the logic, conventions, grammar, and poetics of imagery. Iconology thus contains its tributary discipline, iconography, in the way that philology contains lexicography, the study of meanings of individual words. The following essays are united by a concern with the rules for encoding and deciphering imagery in the various arts and in the structure of perception and consciousness. They investigate the ways we interpret imagery, from representational or illusionistic picturing to abstract patterning (what Adrian Stokes called “the image in form”), from imagery in the literal sense (graph-

ic or plastic artifacts such as pictures, statues, buildings, ornamental designs) to the various metaphoric extensions of the concept of imagery in literature, music, and psychology. They are also concerned with the ways imagery interprets us, in the sense that our attempts to understand the world and our own creations are organized by tacit images, subliminal structures by which we represent to ourselves the orders of time, space, and language.

By the "language of images," then, we mean three sorts of things: (1) language *about* images, the words we use to talk about pictures, sculptures, designs, and abstract spatial patterns in the world, in art, and in the mind; the interpretive discourse a culture regards as appropriate to its image systems; (2) images regarded *as* a language; the semantic, syntactic, communicative power of images to encode messages, tell stories, express ideas and emotions, raise questions, and "speak" to us; (3) verbal language as a system *informed by* images, literally in the graphic character of writing systems or "visible language," figuratively in the penetration of verbal languages and metalanguages by concerns for patterning, presentation, and representation.

It is readily apparent that the second and third meanings of the language of images (images "as" and "in" language) entail what logicians might call a category mistake. The realms of language and imagery, like Lessing's poetry and painting, and Kant's time and space, are generally regarded as fundamentally different modes of expression, representation, and cognition. Language works with arbitrary, conventional signs, images with natural, universal signs. Language unfolds in temporal succession; images reside in a realm of timeless spatiality and simultaneity. To speak of "imagery" or "spatial form" in temporal arts like music or literature or to claim that imagery has temporal or linguistic power is to commit a breach in decorum, or, to put it more positively, to make a metaphor. But the metaphor is hardly a daring or novel one. On the contrary, it is one of the most familiar tropes in the criticism of the arts, a sort of institutionalized violation of common sense whose most famous and enduring formulation was crystallized in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*. The interesting question, then, is why common sense keeps violating itself this way, erecting barriers between different symbolic modes only to find more ingenious ways of transgressing them. A corollary to this question is the problem of discriminating the various ways in which the barriers are erected and transgressed, and determining whether these activities have a history. Elizabeth Abel's essay, "Redefining the Sister Arts," provides a chapter in this emergent history by showing how attempts to reinstate the distinctions between verbal and pictorial art in the nineteenth century were accompanied by attempts to forge new links between the arts at levels other than those of subject matter and genre. The peculiar relation of language and imagery, their tendency both to invite and resist comparison, is, as Abel shows, a difference which is not a

timeless “given” but a product of historical transformations in the cultural status of symbolic modes. Ernest Gilman makes a similar point in discussing the constitutive assumptions of a composite verbal-pictorial form, the seventeenth-century English emblem book, which, far from being merely derivative of continental predecessors, redefines the relation of word and image in ways that reflect the iconoclasm and mistrust of idolatry in a Protestant culture.

While Abel and Gilman illuminate the language of images by exploring historical transformations in the relation between verbal and pictorial expression, the other essays in this collection tend to confront the phenomenon of imagery “in” and “as” language. Leo Steinberg shows how the hidden “lines of destiny” in Michelangelo’s late paintings adumbrate the artist’s autobiography, thus turning a single graphic image, an instantaneous dramatic scene, into an implicit narrative with a stipulated direction of reading in the composition. Gerald Mast explores the way “natural” and “conventional” symbolic systems interact in the earliest film narratives to produce complex combinations of formal abstraction and photographic realism. John Searle applies the methods of philosophy of language to Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in order to clarify the potential for paradox in classical pictorial representation. Joel Snyder and Rudolf Arnheim examine the image as a psychological and perceptual structure—Snyder in an examination of the historic identification of linear perspective with “natural” visual perception, and Arnheim in an account of the mental structures or gestalten which provide us with stable patterns of cognition and cogitation. Robert Morgan and I explore the role of imagery in its abstract incarnation as spatial form in the temporal arts of music and literature.

It is a cliché of this kind of preface that the following group of essays makes no pretense to being exhaustive or comprehensive. The effort has been rather to suggest by a diverse assemblage of specialized forays into the language of images the amazing variety of historical and theoretical problems that are comprehended by the notion of an iconology. I trust it is also clear that the boundaries of this field, much less its methodology, are not yet defined, nor its value and validity demonstrated. Is this a sterile formalism, an elaborate intellectual form of iconophilia and idolatry? Or is it a genuinely historical discipline in search of shareable data, verifiable (and falsifiable) hypotheses, a method, perhaps, of demystifying the subliminal images which determine our patterns of thought—even our methods themselves—and a way of restoring liminality, the aura of the sacred, to those images which, upon reflection, seem worthy of it?—W. J. T. Mitchell