



PRESENTATION: THE 2010 WORD & IMAGE CONFERENCE IN DIJON TEXTE ET IMAGE : LA THÉORIE AU 21ème SIECLE WORD AND IMAGE: THEORY IN THE 21 st CENTURY

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PRESENTATION: THE 2010 WORD & IMAGE CONFERENCE IN DIJON
TEXTE ET IMAGE : LA THÉORIE AU 21^{ème} SIECLE
WORD AND IMAGE: THEORY IN THE 21st CENTURY

Sophie Aymes-Stokes, Marie-Odile Bernez, Christelle Serée-Chaussinand

In 1994, *Interfaces* 5 published papers from an interdisciplinary conference entitled “Image/Language” on the theories underlying the connections between image and text. The event was organised in Nice in 1993 by Michel Baridon, Michel Fuchs and John Dixon Hunt. At the time, Michel Baridon felt that some clarification of the debate was needed, and the conference gathered young specialists of literature, linguistics, art history and the history of sciences who worked together to theorise a “new partition between language and image” (“un nouveau partage entre le langage et l’image”)¹ resulting from the increasing presence of images in our society. In spite of their respective disciplinary biases they all worked towards reaching a common understanding: “Il y a un effort à faire pour franchir l’obstacle que représente la langue du spécialiste”, acknowledged Baridon who added: “L’épistémologie nous sert ici de guide. Elle touche à tous les domaines de la connaissance et lance des ponts entre scientifiques et littéraires. Dans une revue comme la nôtre, elle est la trame même des liens que nous essayons de tisser. C’est par elle que passe toute tentative de théorisation” (7-8). Issue 5 of *Interfaces* – which is reproduced in this number – contains among other contributions papers by John Dixon Hunt, W.J.T. Mitchell and Jean-Michel Rabaté as well as by Marie-Odile Bernez and Maurice Géraud. Michel Baridon also provided a survey of research centres and periodicals, and an up-to-date bibliography devoted to the question, in which he carefully listed the then most recent major contributions to text/image theory in the fields of arts and literature, psychology, linguistics and sciences. His concluding words were “les perspectives qui s’ouvrent sont neuves et profondes [...] Tout cela n’ira pas sans beaucoup de travail [...] mais toute démarche novatrice court des risques qui sont à la taille de ses ambitions, et qu’est-ce qu’un chercheur qui recule quand une voie s’ouvre ?” (246).

Those encouraging words were to find an echo in Dijon in June 2010 when the most recent *Interfaces* conference attempted to look once again at the question of the theories underlying the interactions between image and text. It was held in memory of Michel Baridon, the founder of our review, who made his life an example of interdisciplinary work, since he was able to embrace many

¹ *Interfaces*, n°5, 1994 (dossier « La théorisation de la relation image/texte/langage »): 6.

fields of knowledge, from eighteenth-century England to garden history and the history of sciences. As a true gentleman and genuine lover of mankind, he will be fondly remembered by former colleagues and generations of students. A part of the grounds of the University of Burgundy is now devoted to his memory, with a small remembrance garden, including trees and a stone bench and plaque, inaugurated during the conference. This was also a way of marking the return of the *Interfaces* conferences to Dijon, after being hosted for many years either in Paris by Paris-Diderot or in the United States by The College of the Holy Cross. The partnership between the three universities was renewed by both Frédéric Ogée (Paris-Diderot) and Maurice Geracht (Holy Cross) who kindly agreed to chair sessions. Some of the participants in the 1993 conference were back, among whom Jean-Michel Rabaté and John Dixon Hunt, one of the guest speakers associated from the start with Michel Baridon's studies on landscape gardening in the eighteenth century. Our other guest speaker was Liliane Louvel who gave a presentation of her current research. Young researchers were also given an opportunity to present their on-going research in two workshops devoted to them.

Part of the conference took place at the Musée Magnin and the Musée des Beaux Arts in Dijon. Our third guest speaker, the artist Simon Morley, gave a lecture on the themes developed in "Messagerie", the exhibition-residence organized at the Musée des Beaux Arts in parallel to the conference. Inspired by the 'phylactères' or banderols carrying divine messages found in the religious paintings of the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Morley created a series of six artworks presented in different media (paintings on canvas, monumental linen banderols or videos) and engaging in dialogues of greater or lesser distance with the Old Masters' pieces. From *MessagerieI* – a series of 4 monochromes painted in gold – to *MessagerieIII* – a video showing a banderol furling and unfurling in dark infinite space twined with mysterious sounds recorded in outer space – to *Untitled* – a most striking installation consisting in seven scrolls covered in letters and spelling together the word S-I-L-E-N-C-E, the visitor was invited to reflect upon the visual poetry of language, what Lyotard calls its 'figuralité'.²³ Sharing his time between South Korea and England, Simon Morley is both an accomplished artist and established theorist. Over the past ten years, his works have been presented in London and internationally in no less than 70 solo or group exhibitions. Morley's practice and research are mainly concerned with the interface between words and images as for example in "Virus" (2005), "Messagerie" (2010) or his "Book-Paintings" and "Label-Paintings" where he re-creates covers of books or wall-labels in museums. The editor of Utopia Press, Simon Morley published *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art* in 2003 (Thames & Hudson and California University Press).

² LYOTARD, Jean-François. *Discours, figure*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1971.

³ An interview with Simon Morley on "Messagerie" is included in the attached CD-Rom.

The 2010 conference aimed to both commemorate past achievement and look to the future. In this respect it is worthwhile reflecting on a rich legacy. The perusal of early publications shows how word and image studies developed into a critical field and a discipline in their own right while seeking to define new theoretical ground: in the proceedings of the First International Conference on Word and Image, held in Amsterdam in 1987 at a time when Panofsky's hermeneutic model was still the leading paradigm for art historians, Oskar Bätschmann advocated the displacement of logocentric criticism by "the establishment of a pictorial logic": "we speak of reading paintings, of the 'language of sculpture' or the 'languages of art', we think of the problem of how to read a picture' [...]. Seldom do we say that a picture has spoken to us".⁴ A theoretical repositioning was being engaged by art historians such as Hans Belting and scholars such as W.J.T. Mitchell who steered away from textual supremacy in interartistic and intersemiotic comparative methods in order to account for what Mitchell would term "the pictorial turn" and Gottfried Boehm the "iconic turn". It was time for the image to strike back, observes Bernard Stiegler.⁵ A distinct critical practice was required to expose the nature of the interactions between image and text and to show that they could not be reduced to semiotic analogy: in *Interfaces* 5, Mitchell advocated "critical practices that might facilitate a sense of connectedness while working against the homogenizing, aesthetic tendencies of comparative strategies and semiotic 'science'" (17). The latter was a reference to the "semiotic turn" performed by scholars such as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, based on the elaboration of a "neutral, scientific metalanguage" that favoured "textual-linguistic descriptive frameworks" (29). These remarks however should not downplay the critique of iconography by semioticians such as Louis Marin or Meyer Schapiro who paved the way for the shift from intersemiotic transposition to the notion of reciprocal interaction between image and text.⁶

Issue 5 of *Interfaces* stressed the necessity to escape from what was seen as a theoretical deadlock and to move beyond academic partitions which originated in the binary model of the Sister Arts and the Paragone described as fundamentally agonistic (see Gabriele Sprigath's article for instance). The future lay rather in critical cross-disciplinary propositions that would take into account what Mitchell called the "suturing of the visual and the verbal" between image and text (25) and explore what Baridon called "la porosité du langage à l'image" (238), and that would theorise image/

⁴ *Word and Image* vol. 4, n° 1, January-March 1988: 14. Edited by John Dixon HUNT, S.A.VARGA and Theo D'HAEN.

⁵ STIEGLER Bernard, "'Iconic Turn' et reflexion sociétale". *Trivium*. 2008. <http://trivium.revues.org/index308.html>

⁶ See for instance the preface of Hubert DAMISCH ("La peinture prise au mot") to Meyer SCHAPIRO's *Les mots et les images. Sémiotique du langage visuel*. Paris: Macula, 2000. Original title: *Words, Scripts and Pictures, Semiotics of Visual Language* (1996).

text as a “site of dialectical tension” (37). The theoretical turn enacted in the last decades of the 20th century triggered the shift from intersemioticity to intermediality and the emergence of “cross-boundary concepts” countering “the logic of the closed system”, according to Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fatima Lambert who note that “the present currency of a relational nexus, as theoretically averse as it is to binary oppositions, entails a reading of the intermedial that underscores notions like contamination and hybridity”.⁷ It certainly sanctioned the cross-over between disciplines as a working procedure and brought emblematic composite works such as William Blake’s under renewed critical scrutiny. Of course the change in artistic practices since the post-war period and the advent of postmedia practices from the mid-1980s induced and reflected this repositioning.⁸

One of the consequences was that building theory stemmed from the object under scrutiny – the configuration of a given imagetext, to use the expression coined by Mitchell – and not from the top-down imposition of art history’s narratives or the metalanguage of semiotics, which was seen as a way to resist the lure of totality and the historicism of classic grand narratives (*Interfaces* n°5, 15-17). This proved fruitful in a variety of ways, as shown in Europe for instance by the elaboration of new theoretical concepts such as iconotexts by French and German scholars Alain Montandon, Liliane Louvel and Peter Wagner in the course of the 1990s.

Other hermeneutic models have been provided by anthropology and material culture. They have refreshed the way we look at objects as artefacts and played a role in the move beyond the binary opposition between words and images, which, John Dixon Hunt reminds us, were originally part of the same fabric and not conceived of as conflicting elements but interlocked as in a dance. And, as he puts it, “it takes two to tango” (*Art, Word and Image*, 35). Hans Belting, for his part, has defined the “task of a new iconology” that takes into account the transmission and circulation of images, the role of the body as living medium and the interaction of mental images and physical images.⁹

The latter brings us to note another consequence of this revaluation, namely a renewed critical look at the specificity of images and more precisely at their efficacy, power and impact on the reader-viewer,

⁷ HOME, Rui Carvalho & LAMBERT, Maria de Fatima (eds.). *Writing and Seeing. Essays on Word and Image*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006: 11, 13.

⁸ HUNT, John Dixon, LOMAS, David & CORRIS, Michael (eds.). *Art, Word and Image: Two Thousand Years of Visual/Textual Interaction*. London: Reaktion Books, 2010: 226.

⁹ BELTING, Hans. *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001. French translation: *Pour une anthropologie des images* (2004). His argument is summarized in “Images, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology”. *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005): 302-319.

and to the specificity of the visual knowledge they provide and of their “puissance imageante” whether it derives from looking at paintings or reading texts. Such an orientation has notably benefited from crossovers into a variety of fields such as pragmatics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and cognitive sciences, and has informed particular critical trends variously represented in Europe and North America by Georges Didi-Huberman, Liliane Louvel, W.J.T. Mitchell, Pierre Ouellet, Barbara Stafford, and Bernard Vouilloux to name a few.

These observations merely hint at the wealth and variety of recent publications and at the ongoing theoretical process in the field of Word & Image studies. If in the light of contemporary artistic practices, it may be argued that “the simple conjunction of image and text seems almost antique, an emblem of a bygone cultural era” (*Art, Word and Image*, 232), the papers given at the 2010 conference show that there is a bright future ahead of us. Since the article written by Michel Baridon in 1994, researchers have strolled, marched and possibly sometimes stumbled along the ways that he said were opening then, and we concur with Griselda Pollock who notes that we now stand “at several cross-roads” and that we need to “maintain the momentum of the momentous intellectual, cultural revolution in the arts and humanities that characterized the last quarter of the twentieth century while adjusting to the different field of analysis created by it”.¹⁰

This new issue of *Interfaces* opens with a commemorative part centred on the 18th century dedicated to the memory of Michel Baridon. **John Dixon Hunt** gave a presentation on *ekphrasis* in the garden, drawing attention to the way theory should illuminate works of art, and how art should not be used simply to prop up theory. How does meaning emerge in the garden? How are the different art forms summoned up in our experience of the garden? John Dixon Hunt took us through Rousham and the different interpretations of it with gusto and his “*Ekphrasis. Déjà vu all over again*” provides one fine example of what eighteenth-century artists, so keenly aware of the correspondences of the arts, can bring to modern theory.

The other two contributors to this first part, Benoît Tane and Laurent Châtel also drew from the eighteenth century to question modern theory. In “Pour une approche des figures. Entrer dans le roman illustré au XVIII^e siècle” **Benoît Tane** explores the reader/viewer’s reception of 18th-century illustrated novels from pragmatic, material and technical points of view. He invites us to open the book, cross a threshold and experience a shift in perspective as he focuses on the “dispositif” of the literary scene, which exposes the transgressive nature of representation.

¹⁰ POLLOCK, Griselda (ed.). *Conceptual Odysseys. Passages to Cultural Analysis*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. Preface “New Encounters: Arts, Cultures, Concepts”: xiii. Introduction by Mieke BAL about the circulation of concepts.

Laurent Châtel also looks at 18th-century illustrated books in “The Resistance of Words and the Challenge of Images: Visual Writing in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain”. He discusses attitudes to illustration and distinguishes relational patterns ranging from distrust to emulation at a time when words and images were increasingly overlapping.

The second part of this collection of essays opens with “Pour une critique intermédiaire” by our guest speaker **Liliane Louvel**. Liliane Louvel has built on literary criticism, art history, visual studies and phenomenology to recast the critical approach to literary texts and lay the foundation of a new theory of intermediality. In her previous works she showed how to “open the eye of the text” and her latest research focuses on the concept of “pictorial third” as in-between or third space between the verbal and the visual.

Séverine Letalleur proposes a useful synthesis of current trends in intermedial studies in “Théories linguistiques / théories esthétiques : la quête du sens et du sujet” and describes new epistemological orientations prefiguring a new era of intellectual porosity. She focuses more particularly on the involvement of the reader/viewer and she shows how the intermedial dialogue between image and text mirrors the subject’s relation to the world construed as ontological oscillation.

The next five papers focus on specific media and chart new theoretical paths in specialized fields. **Laurent Mellet**’s “From defining to categorising: a history of film adaptation theory” provides a thorough review and discussion of the critical literature on film adaptation and its theoretical implications from the early publications in the 1950s to the most recent studies, especially as far as the central issue of fidelity is concerned. He suggests that theory has lagged behind adaptation and that a way of moving forward is to re-examine categorization.

In “Towards Multimodal Narratology” **Grzegorz Maziarczyk** explores the correlation between recent developments in contemporary fiction and in narratology. He discusses the categories derived from multimodal discourse analysis and examines the intermedial potentialities of the book in connection with novels by Mark Z. Danielewski, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Haddon, Reif Larsen, Salvador Plascencia, Graham Rawle, and Steve Tomasula.

In “Vers une nouvelle iconographie de la culture postmoderne”, **Laurence Petit** explores the new visual “literacy” generated by photography in the context of the pictorial turn defined by W.J.T Mitchell and Simon Morley. She focuses on the socio-cultural approach promoted in recent English and Canadian publications from a post-colonial perspective reconciling global theoretical premises and national specificities.

Anaël Lejeune's "Robert Smithson : Ceci n'est pas un site" proposes an analysis of Smithson's concept of non-site as unravelled calligram in which the constant tension between image and text mirrors the ultimate impossibility of representing reality and the experience of site but also creates a new dimension that neither image nor text can evoke on their own.

In "Art et langage : contre la sémiotique, une sémantique, de l'art", **Isabelle Davy** questions the widely accepted notion of the superiority of the linguistic paradigm in the context of the iconic turn as stemming from a skewed understanding of Benveniste's concept of interpretative relationship. After discussing Hubert Damisch's reading of his work and Henri Meschonnic's critique of semiotic analogy, she retrieves the interpretative, semantic function of language in the heuristic process of meaning-making and applies it to the analysis of two of Bill Viola's video installations.

The next two papers deal with modern and/or contemporary literature. In "Les Subaltern Studies sont-elles pertinentes pour relire l'histoire de l'art occidental ?", **Nella Arambasin** examines the fictional figure of the mute female servant in the light of Subaltern Studies and she exposes how the Western discourse of art history is deconstructed in texts by Michèle Desbordes, Julien Gracq, Hermann Broch, Jean-Michel Ribes and A.S. Byatt, and how decentred vision is achieved through pictorial references.

Simone Grossman's "La fiction sur l'art abstrait, entre *Ut Pictura Poesis* et *Ut Pictoria Theoria*" analyses how the reception of abstract painting and the debates it has triggered are fictionalized in the texts of French and Quebecois authors Yasmina Reza, Philippe Poloni and Jean Pelchat. She explores the paradox that is inherent to the literary representation of non figurative art and the critical discourse it ironically provokes among uninitiated viewers, especially in the context of postmodern Quebec.

The closing paper "Vers l'écriture 'des illettrés' contemporains" is by the Russian artist **Olessia Koudriavtseva-Velmans** who presented three videos at the conference. Her recent work is part of an ongoing project showing how Pope Gregory's definition of art as "the Book of the Illiterate" has found new currency in modern and contemporary art. Her interest in the means of establishing a universal iconographic language is shared by our third guest speaker **Simon Morley** who produced this issue's art offering, entitled "The Atomic Bomb" and presented in Morley's most recent exhibition in London entitled *A Short History of the Twentieth Century* (Art First, Feb.-March 2011). A meditation on key events or figures of the last century, the exhibition offered a number of works involving a variety of techniques frequently used by the artist: acrylic monochromes stained by texts-fragments (dates, names, signatures, book-titles, etc.), watercolours, paragraph paintings or photographs. The three

words in “The Atomic Bomb” – originally designed with bits of dead flora coming from South Korea – are watercolours painted in *trompe l’œil* effect. As in similar pieces in the exhibition, the delicacy of the floral arrangement (in reality as well as on canvas) contrasts sharply with the monumentality and/or savagery of the stated reality.