

Philipp Horst

Language / Art

Artistic Representation between Poetry, Concept and the Visual

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**Artistic Representation
between Poetry, Concept and the Visual**

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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Tel. (0651) 41503, Fax 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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*The temple of art is built of words. Painting and sculpture and music
are but the blazon of its windows, borrowing all of their significance
from the light, and suggestive only of the temple's uses.*
(J.G. Holland)

Ubique Media Daemon
(Blixa Bargeld)

1. Introduction, Opening

Aim

This interdisciplinary study sets out to outline a significant change in the concept of mediality with regard to the use of language in the visual arts. To achieve this, examples from three major currents of art history, Modernism, Conceptual Art and New Media Art are taken. The focus will lie on the usage of two core media – language and the visual – and it will become clear how both the concepts and the usage of these concepts have changed.

The perspective is twofold: on the one hand, close readings of literary texts will extract modes of the visual as used by poets. On the other hand analyses of pieces of visual art will demonstrate how these artists incorporate linguistic messages within their modes of artistic utterance. In addition the artistic positions will be contextualised within their time and culture; their meaning will be evaluated with regard to its political message. The approach is thus part of an interdisciplinary cultural studies reading of literature and visual art.

In 1987 W.J.T. Mitchell described a fundamental change of paradigms, a change from textual modes of representation towards visual modes of representation.¹ This has become known as the “pictorial turn”.² Although contemporary mass media are undoubtedly dominated by visual messages, language plays an important role in our society and the art it produces. The pictorial turn, one tends to think, is at least partially countered by this tendency to use language. One should not go so far and call it a ‘linguistic turn’, but it is striking how important language is in contemporary art.

History

Many authors have been studying the relation between the verbal and the visual. Horace introduced the Latin phrase *Ut pictura poesis* to compare painting with poetry. Translated literally, this means “as is painting, so is poetry,” and many intermedial theories were based upon this text. Horace argues that both painting and poetry should be analyzed by close ‘reading’. In this approach Horace goes back to the work of

¹ Mitchell, W.J. T., *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, 1987, p. 23.

² Brosch, R., Rippl, G., “Word and Image: Intermedial Relationships”, in: Bode, C., Domsch, S., Sauer, H. (eds.), *Anglistentag 2003 Proceedings*, 2004, p. 124.

Plutarch, who himself attributed the quotation “Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens” (“Poetry is a speaking picture, painting is a silent poetry.”) to Simonides of Keos in Plutarch’s book *De Gloria Atheniesium*.³ Another important precursor is Plato. For him, both the art of painting and poetry give us a false simulation of the real.⁴ With this idea he anticipates the Postmodern concept of the simulacrum that will be introduced later on. In the following centuries different positions reflected Horace’s ideas and stated the supremacy of one medium over the other. The first writer to fundamentally doubt this approach was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. He was fundamental for the idea that we would today call intermedial. In 1766 he published *Laocoön* and challenged the theoretical idea of *Ut pictura poesis*. Basically, Lessing considered poetry an art of time and painting an art of space.⁵ In the chapter on the American poet William Carlos Williams (3.2.4.) this problem will be dealt with again. In the context of this study it is interesting that Lessing mentions a “confusion of media” that occurs when one tries to transgress the border between time and space too frequently.⁶ With this he foreshadows the notion of medium as used in Language Art – a term that in this study will be used for all artistic positions incorporating language and the visual. The central dialectic between painting and poetry as initially developed in *Ut pictura poesis* reveals our general inability to create using only *one* sense, i.e. we cannot shut out the single senses, our perception is a mixture of hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling. The question of which sense is more ‘natural’ and less arbitrary is an endless one, yielding mostly unsatisfactory results.⁷

Core media

In the context of this study pieces of art will be analysed that are realised in two core media – language and the visual. Following Barthes’s theory of signs, a core medium is understood as a semiotic system that transports a certain message, or certain messages. A medium is a carrier of meaning and can take various forms. Barthes realised that many different aspects play a role in the reception of art (to name just a few: the viewer, the paratexts, the room, the book, the other artists in the exhibition or in the volume, etc.), but for the sake of clarity I will focus on the two core media.

Language as a core medium in the arts uses linguistic signs and the rules of grammar. The rules set by grammar guarantee that language, both spoken and written,

³ Preminger, A. (ed.), *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 1986, p. 288.

⁴ Cf. the online Grove dictionary of Arts at http://instruct.westvalley.edu/grisham/1b_grove.html (as accessed 01.05.08).

⁵ Cf. Lessing, G. E., *Laocoön, An essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, New York, 1984 (1766), p. 91-97.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. Harvey, J., in University of Chicago’s online *Theory of Media* dictionary http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/glossary2004/utpicturapoesis.htm#_ftnr ef2, (as accessed 01.05.08).