

Philosophical Discourse on Image and Text (A Historical Analysis of Image and Text Relationship)

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Abstract: The relationship between image and text has been a topic of debate since the Ancient Greek era. Plato considered image as more natural than text, therefore the image is readily understood. Simónides de Ceos has begun the sister arts tradition between image and text, by his phrase *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). In contrast to the Ancient Greek, Modern thinkers tend to sharply distinguish between image and text. We can trace modern philosophical discourse on image and text from Leonardo da Vinci's superiority of painting over poetry, Lessing's distinction of painting and poetry, Burke's words as the sublime medium, Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's medium specificity, to Rosalind Krauss's grid of modern art. This study examines discourse on image and text relationship in the historical analysis view. Eventually, the researcher attempts to answer the problem of image and text relationship, in the light of contemporary and multimodality theories.

Keywords: Image, Text, Ancient Greek, Modern, Multimodality

This study examines discourse on image and text relationship in the historical analysis, from the Ancient Greek to the Contemporary era. The philosophers across periods have posed questions related to image and text, such as what is text? What is image? Can they substitute for each other? How do image and text relate? As will be shown in chapter 1, the Ancient Greek and Middle Age thinkers emphasize image in its connection to truth and reality, as well as the sister arts of image and text. Chapter 2 will explore Modern philosophers' sharp distinction of image and text. Finally, after having expounded Ancient and Modern theories on image and text, we will answer the problem of image and text relationship in the light of contemporary and multimodality theories.

This research was inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology* (1986) which discusses what thinkers say about image, and what difference between image and text. However, this essay is different from Mitchell's book. Mitchell's *Iconology* intends to build a theory about image in its relationship with textuality and ideology. This research does not try to produce theory, only would like to understand the relationship between image and text, and prefer to solve the problem of image and text in the contemporary and multimodality perspectives.

1 Image and Text Discourse on The Ancient Greek and Middle Age

The relationship of visual and verbal representation has a very long history in philosophical discourse. (Mitchell 2015, 40). Ancient Greek philosophers display their interest in the origin of images and text. Plato has begun debate on the difference between image and words in his dialogue, *Cratylus* (360 BC). Plato distinguishes 'word' as artificial and conventional signs,

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whereas ‘image’ is natural and readily understood. (Bateman 2014, 12; Mitchell 1986, 75). In this dialogue, Socrates says to Cratylus, “...still you must say that the signification of words is given by custom and not by likeness, for custom may indicate by the unlike as well as by the like”. (Plato, *Cratylus*). A good image can be produced by someone “who by syllables and letters imitates the nature of things, and gives all that is appropriate”. (Plato, *Cratylus*). This dialogue implies that Plato considers image is more natural and understandable than text, since the image is based on likeness.

However, for Plato, an image is only a shadow of real substance. The concrete world is an insubstantial image. It is a mere shadow world of the ideal sphere of forms. (Mitchell 2005, 86). In *The Republic*, Plato writes “An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while the reality is beyond him” (Plato, *Republic*, §601, c). For example, a painter who creates an illusory shoemaker does not understand what shoemaking is. He makes an image based on the colors and shapes he can see. (Plato, *Republic*, §601, e). An artist by creating images becomes being far removed from the truth. (Plato, *Republic*, §605, b).

In reaction to Plato, Aristotle highlights art as imitation, but also its potency to give something absent in the actual by involving imagination. In *De Anima*, Aristotle makes distinctions between perception and imagination. He writes, “ the sense is that which is receptive of the sensible forms without the material, as wax receives the seal of the signet-ring without the iron or gold: if it takes a gold or bronze seal, it does so not insofar as the seal is gold or bronze”. The sense is such-like and in accord with logos. (Aristotle, *De Anima*, II.12). “Imagination is a different thing from both perception and reflection. It does not come about without perception, and without it, there is no supposing. But it is also evident that thought is not the same as supposing. (III.3). Imagination, then, is the power to reproduce this impression without sensory stimulation of the object or Phantasia. (Mitchell 1986, 14).

Alongside Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical debates on the role of image in art, Simónides de Ceos addresses image and text relationship by his phrase ‘ut pictura poesis’ (as is painting, so is poetry). Simónides says “Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens,” (“poetry is speaking picture, painting is silent poetry.”) Several centuries later, Horace quoted Simonides’s phrase in his work, *Ars Poetica* (c. 19 BC), as he wrote “Poetry resembles a painting. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance.” (Horace in Golden 2010, 400)

As has been shown, for Plato, image is more closely to reality since it is made based on likeness, while text on custom and convention. However, image-making makes art far away from the truth. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle appraises imagination as the power of art to show what is absent in reality. Furthermore, Simónides and Horace believe in the interchangeability of image and text and this conviction has a significant impact on the future discourse.

During the middle ages, the ‘image’ concept has a role to explain the relationship between God and his creature, for example, the doctrine of man as the image of God. As Augustine writes in *Confession*, “Thanks to Thee, O Lord...We behold the face of the earth decked out with earthly creatures, and man, created after Thy image and likeness, even through that Thy very image and likeness (that is the power of reason and understanding)...” (Augustine, *Confession*, Book XIII). Augustine distinguished between image, likeness, and equality. ‘Image’ includes the idea of likeness, as we can not say to be an image of something else unless it is in some way like it. Image-likeness is somehow dependent on an original. For example, the image-likeness of a child to its parents, or a painting to its original. Meanwhile, equality means some decisive feature in two or more things that is identical. There is no logical relation between equality and being an image. Two things may be equal without being related

as an image and original, for example, two equal eggs. (R.A. Markus 1963, 125). Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, (part I, question 93, art.1), follow Augustine, explains that the image of God is manifest in man, “there is some likeness to God, copied from God as from an exemplar”. However, this likeness is not equal. In man, the likeness to God is not perfect, but imperfect.

Middle Age thinkers have a resemblance to Ancient Greek philosophers, especially in their interest in images concerning truth and reality. Ancient Greek philosophers were concerned with image as a copy of reality, while Middle Age thinkers consider the image as a copy of God.

2 The Modern Debate about Image and Text Relationship

As has been shown, the Ancient Greek and Middle Age thinkers were interested in the discourse of image and text relationship, especially in the metaphysical realm. For Modern philosophers, the image and text relationship debate is in epistemology, aesthetics, and semiotics realms. The modern debate of image and text was presented by Leonardo da Vinci’s superiority of painting over poetry, Lessing’s distinction of painting and poetry, Burke’s words as the sublime medium, Clement Greenberg’s and Michael Fried’s specificity of medium, and Rosalind Krauss’s grid of modern art. Modern philosophers emphasize the sharp distinction between image and text.

In “Paragone of Poetry and Painting” (1500), Leonardo Da Vinci argues the superiority of painting over poetry. He says “The eye, which is called the window of the soul, is the principal means by which the central sense can most completely and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature; and the ear is the second, which acquires dignity by hearing of the things the eye has seen.” (Da Vinci, *Paragone of Poetry and Painting*). For Da Vinci, vision is the ultimate sense since historians to mathematicians cannot write their reports without seeing what they observe. Therefore, the eye is more important than the ear. Furthermore, Da Vinci confronted the painting with poetry. According to him, the painter with his brush can tell what they see “more easily, with simpler completeness and less tedious to be understood” than the poet with his pen. If the poet call painting ‘dumb poetry’, the painter calls poetry ‘blind painting’. (Da Vinci, *Paragone of Poetry and Painting*).

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing distinguishes between painting and poetry. He argues that painting uses forms and colors in space as means of imitation, while poetry uses sounds in time. In “Laocoön, an essay upon the limits of painting and poetry”, Lessing writes: “If it is true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry, — the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time.” (Lessing 1887, 91). Literature is temporal art because the reading and articulation of literature occur in time. The events that are represented in literature also occur in time. Painting is a spatial art because the medium is colors and forms in space. For Lessing, the relation of literature and painting is a kind of homology. He calls it a “convenient relation” (Lessing 1887, 91; Mitchell 1986, 98-99).

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into The Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke says that drawing can present a very clear idea of objects but it can only affect the objects. On the other hand, the verbal description can provide a very obscure idea of the object but is capable of raising a stronger emotion by the description. Even, Burke calls verbal description ‘the best painting’. (Burke 1909, 42). He writes “...the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger emotion by the description than I could do by the best painting.” (Burke 1909, 42)

For Burke, the word is the only communication method capable of affecting passions. Word can operate without presenting any image at all. (Burke 1909, 42). Words are the sublime medium precisely because they cannot provide a clear image (Mitchell, 1986, 125). For him, in reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions. (Burke 1909, 42). Burke compares the image that is raised by poetry and painting. “The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind” and “painting...can only affect simply by the images it presents” because they are imitations of nature. For Burke, poetry makes “the mind is hurried out of itself, by the crowd of great and confused images”. (Burke 1909, 44-45). Only “in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions” (Burke 1909,45).

Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried undermine ‘the sister arts’ tradition between image and text. Throughout the ninth and seventeenth century, Simonides’s and Horace’s *ut picture poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) are misconstrued as different aesthetic dialectics. (Timothy Erwin 2017, 33). Modernist tends to evacuate language, literature, narrative, and textuality from the field of visual art. (Mitchell 1994, 244). Modernists suppose that “visual art either cannot or need not, to be formulated in words”. They involve certain resistance to language. (Mitchell 1994, 217). Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried are the leading thinkers who insist on the purity and specificity of media. They are rejecting hybrid forms, mixed media, and anything that lies “between the arts”. (Mitchell 2015, 126). In his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön”, Clement Greenberg provides a defense for abstract painting’s purity. According to Greenberg, “the avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society... It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive.”(Greenberg 1940, 4). Furthermore, every art is hunted back to their mediums, isolated, concentrated, and defined. “It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself,” (Greenberg 1940, 6). Meanwhile, Michael Fried in *Art and Objecthood* writes “The concepts of quality and value..., the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.” Fried identifies theater and theatricality are at war situation with the modernist. (Fried 1967, part VII). Both Greenberg and Fried emphasize the specificity of medium, in which every medium has its own raw material characteristics, that affect the specific technique to manipulate them.

Rosalind Krauss argues that modern art discovers the grid that marks their novelty. She writes in *Grids* (1979): “There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal... In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one.” For example, Cubism, De Stijl, Mondrian, and Malevich have discovered the grid which is a place to land in the present time, out of reach of everything that went before. (Krauss 1979, 52). Krauss observes the pre-War cubist painting and the grid that they announce as “modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to the narrative, to discourse”. According to Krauss, the barrier between the arts of vision and language has been almost totally successful in making visual arts exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of language. (Krauss 1979, 50). Krauss also describes a medium as a “self-differentiating” entity in “The Post- Medium condition.” (Mitchell 2015, 129). In “Two Moments from the Post-medium Condition”, she identifies the traditional medium that is supported by a physical substance (and practiced by a specialized guild), whereas the contemporary medium by “technical support,”, refers to contemporary commercial vehicles, such as cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit. The Post-Medium condition considers the obsolescence of

the traditional mediums and their obligation to seize from that support “a new set of aesthetic conventions”. (Krauss 2006, 57).

3 The Contemporary and Multimodality Perspective on Image and Text

As we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, a philosophical debate about image and text has occurred from Ancient Greek to Modern, whether both of them can substitute one another, or be confined exclusively in their own medium. Modern’s sharp dichotomy between image and text has been neutralized since Ernest Gombrich’s and Nelson Goodman’s notion of verbal and non-verbal representation. Moreover, contemporary thinkers and the emergence of multimodality theory offer an insight, especially on how image and text relate to each other. Multimodality underscores the intertwined relation between image and text.

Ernest Gombrich employs ‘the language of art’ as a loose metaphor. He also undermines the distinction between natural and conventional. In *Art and Illusion*, he writes: “Everything points to the conclusion that the phrase ‘the language of art’ is more than a loose metaphor, that even to describe the visible world in images we need a developed system of schemata”. This conclusion is in contrast with the traditional distinction between words as conventional signs, and painting as ‘natural’ signs to imitate’ reality. (see Plato, chapter 1). According to Gombrich, it is a plausible distinction, but it has led to certain difficulties. In fact, primitive art and child art use a language of symbols rather than ‘natural signs’. Children’s art does not deal with seeing but rather on knowledge, or ‘conceptual images’. “The child—it is argued—does not look at trees; he is satisfied with the ‘conceptual’ schema of a tree.” (Gombrich 1960, 71). Picture and diagram are not transcripts of an object but a picture that is made by trained observers. For example, medical workers have been trained to read the diagrammatic maps of muscles and illustrated anatomies.” (Gombrich 1960, 68). The lack of relevant schemata makes the observers fail to understand the picture.

In *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman finds that the differences between the sign-types result from use, habit, and convention. The distinction between images and texts, pictures and paragraphs, is drawn only by practical differences in the use of symbols, not by a metaphysical divide. (Mitchell 1986, 69). The representational is different from verbal, “primarily through lack of differentiation” and “through density” in the symbol scheme. (Goodman 1968, 226). In a picture, every mark, color, line contains semiotic potential. (Mitchell 1986, 67). Every difference would make a difference. (Mitchell 1986, 69). In this sense, a picture is denser when compared with text.

Marshall McLuhan also confirmed the hybridity of media by emphasizing that “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical”. McLuhan mentions that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 2001a, 26), because media are so pervasive affect our “personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, and social life”. No part is “untouched, unaffected, and unaltered” by media (McLuhan 2001a, 26). McLuhan focuses on the electric technology that reshapes and restructure patterns of our social and personal world. For him, society is more determined by “the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication”. For example, the alphabet in today’s various media is absorbed by the very young child unconsciously (McLuhan 2001a, 9). The instantaneous electronic communication produces, what McLuhan calls, “global village” (Mitchell 2015, 95). The speed-up of the electronic age is an instant implosion that disrupts the fragmented culture, as he writes: “Our specialist and fragmented civilization of center-margin structure are suddenly

experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole. This is the new world of the global village.” (McLuhan 2001b, 106).

In his book *The Future of Image*, Rancière brings ‘the distribution of the sensible’ issue in the modern and postmodern visual arts, in which “image” and their connections to a narrative or affective become the center topic. (Mecchia 2008, 314). According to Rancière, “the images... are not primarily manifestations at the properties of a certain technical medium, but operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them.” (Rancière, 2007:3). Through discussion of the paratactic juxtaposition of images in cinema and the affirmation of the existence of "sentence-image," Rancière how visual and linguistic forms of expression and perception are not, and have never been, clearly distinguishable. (Mecchia 2008, 315).

Eventually, the multimodal perspective answers the specificity of a medium in Modern philosophy. In *Multimodality, The modes and media of contemporary communication*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen address the multimodality mode of representation. According to them, multimodality has replaced the monomodality approach that only has high value to the writing. In contrast, multimodality crosses the boundaries between various art, media, and disciplines. (Kress and Leeuwen 2001, 1). Multimodality analysis in media studies emphasizes the combination of media (Bateman 2014, 6) and its relation to various disciplines, that range from anthropology, philosophy, politics, psychology, visual media, cultural studies, linguistics to semiotics. (Çoşkun 2015, 40). The transformation from the medium of writing-printing to the screen has marked the decline of monomodality mode. The combination of writing and image on the dominant screen medium has an enormous effect on humans’ cognition and affective, culture, relation to the world, and knowledge. (Kress 2003, 1). Kress argues that the multimodal analysis is necessary to interpret the different modes of representations from the image, sound to verbal that operate in unified technology, such as television shows, film, apps on the smartphone, to AI home robots. (Kress and Leeuwen 2001, 1-2). Finally, along together with Gombrich’s question to the naturalness of image, Goodman’s practical difference between image and text, McLuhan’s media as the extensions of humans’ faculty, and Rancière’s distribution of the sensible, Multimodality theory asserts that image and text are intertwined connected and not sharply separable one another.

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