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## PICTURA & SCRIPTURA

### 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY THEORIES OF TRADITION-BASED CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

#### SUMMARY

Our life is spent among pictures and words. Whatever we think, do, or sense, whatever we reflect upon, those experiences we can also formulate in words. It seems that language as a sign system perfectly coincides with our complete knowledge of the world and of existence. In spite of this, sometimes we may feel that our vision rather than words ties us more firmly to ‘reality’. Is not the case often that we notice something first by the help of our primary sensation (seeing, hearing, touching) and only after that do we start to meditate on it and verbalize it? On the other hand, we also have good reason to be sceptical about the possibility of a ‘neutral’ way of seeing, a sensation that is unbiased by our consciousness, the already existing experiences and concepts – which, of course, can all be verbalized, too.

The nature of words and pictures has been vexing humankind since the most ancient times. Today, in the midst of the new multimedial revolution, these questions are as pertinent as ever. But it is useful to remember, that another long cultural period, embracing the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque, already centuries ago achieved such a complexity and subtlety of cultural symbolization that is still worth examining in order to gain important insight about our own culture, too.

My present book is concerned with the relationship of words and images and with the mechanisms by which they build up culture – either independently from each other, or, more often, in cooperation. Another central aspect of my study is how words and pictures have been used by various interpretive communities and how the theorists of these communities tried to explain their nature and possible relationship. Text and image – as two quite closely connected media and sign systems of communication – have, of course, inspired all sorts of poetics and rhetorics since the time of Classical Antiquity. As of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the group of theorizing artists and philosophers have been joined by sociologists of culture, semio-

ticians, behaviorist and cognitive psychologists as well as other professionals, coming from almost every disciplines of the human, social, and life sciences. Beyond the general questions outlined above, my most specific project is to gather, assess and contextualize the history of this theoretical thinking from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, more or less, till today.

In my narrative – which is not going to be a ‘grand narrative’ so suspiciously looked at today, rather a *Literaturbericht* as Jürgen Habermas called his major work in 1967 – I am going to bring together the various programs of semiotics, philosophy, art historical and literary iconography and iconology, all of which have tried to give an account about the nature and relationship of words and images. The review of theories, however, is not meant to be for its own sake, let alone to cover an encyclopedic scope. Its structure and emphases coincide with my own interests and convictions I have developed during the roughly twenty-five years while studying these ideas.

Next to revisiting cultural theories, my project also has a very practical aim. As a Renaissance-scholar, in my teaching and research I invariably have had to face the challenge: how would it be possible to interpret artworks, ideas, customs, and social practice of past cultural periods in such a way that the examiner could find a healthy balance between historical accuracy and a relevant, up to date theory. The first step is, I propose, that we dismiss the above mentioned and often isolated categories such as literary, visual and other artworks, customs and habits, folkways and social practice, but, instead, we develop the notion *cultural representations*. The more we study culture the clearer we see that pure realisations of one or another medium are hard to find as opposed to the great variety of mixed media and *Gesamtkunst* effects. If we work with the concept of cultural representations, it will be easier to see the connecting links and intricate relations between different sign systems, media, and ways of expression. The term “cultural representation” also reminds us of one of the most important developments in recent cultural theory, that is the acknowledgement of the crucial role of pragmatics in the process of interpretation, meaning the examination how an interpretive community uses a cultural product. As we are aware of the fact, in one community something may function as a religious object or practice, while in another the same thing will be a catalyzer of esthetic reflection. Although this book is not intended to offer extensive case studies from early modern culture (with two exceptions: a study of the semiotics and hermeneutics of Michael Maier’s occult symbolism and

a survey of the research of Shakespeare's verbal and theatrical imagery), I hope that its readers from among medieval and Renaissance scholars will find it useful when analyzing cultural representations that are tradition-based, i.e. having fixed and shared meanings within an interpretive community. No doubt, tradition-based representations abound in our present-day culture, too, but it was the period preceding Romanticism that used them most extensively. Thus the theories discussed in my book can be particularly useful for those who engage in the interpretation of preromantic artworks, customs, or rituals.

The intriguing relationship between words and images was first summarized in the classical adage, *ut pictura poesis*. My first chapter reviews the history of this concept also touching upon some basic definitions of literary and cultural theory, such as "what is poetry," "what is a picture," "what is art." In the same chapter, further developing the typologies of W. J. T. Mitchell and A. Kibédi-Varga, I offer a full matrix of picture typology and word-image relations.

The second chapter introduces an important turning point in the history of theory when semiotics – so far having specialized in the study of conventional sign systems – recognized that it could not proceed with investigating the rules and logic of communication without taking into consideration the study of conventionally shared cultural symbols – up to that point the exclusive domain of iconography and iconology. The semiotics of culture started booming in the 1970s, the time of late structuralism. This is when Juri Lotman became known all over the world and this is when Umberto Eco declared that "it may be that, given a code assigning its meaning to certain minimal expressions, overcoding will assign additional meanings to more macroscopic strings of these expressions. Rhetorical or iconological rules are of this sort" (*Theory of Semiotics*, 1976, 134). At the same time in the United States Thomas Sebeok published an article of Hubert Damisch under the telling title, "Semiotics and Iconography." Eco urged semioticians to pay greater attention to the pragmatics of signs, in other words to take more seriously the fact that the meaning of signs is not simply encoded in themselves, rather, it is generated during the usage, the application of the signs in certain extra-systemic contexts. In the other 'camp,' Damisch encouraged art historians to use semiotics in order to reveal the possible systemic nature of cultural symbolisation.

I find this turning point crucial in regard of present theory as well as of assessing the perspectives of future research. Because of this, I have decided to start my historiographical

narrative from this point of development, as if *in medias res*, before looking back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to examine the then separated stories of the rise of semiotics and iconography.

The third chapter is devoted to the foundations of the theory of signs as developed in Ferdinand de Saussure's *semiology* and Charles Sanders Peirces' *semiotics* later systematized by Charles William Morris. My treatment, naturally, does not aim at giving a comprehensive picture of early semiotics, I have been concentrating on two aspects: first, I have gathered what these theoreticians had to say about the relationship of textual and visual codes; secondly, I have looked at how they considered the nature of signification and the strategies of interpretation. Throughout my book I am constructing a history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural theory in the context of the ever increasing interest in pragmatics, and, in my opinion, precisely this is what connects the 'linguistic turn' of formalism and structuralism to the 'pictorial turn' of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. While structuralism ambitioned to precisely and scientifically differentiate among the various media based on a meticulous description of their physical structure, postmodern semiotics today argues that it is the pragmatics of the interpretive community that determines what we see as a picture and what as a text. One particular novelty of this chapter is that I contrast Saussure's binary and Peirce's triadic systems from the viewpoint of poststructuralist theory, based on Derrida's and Floyd Merrell's criticisms of Saussure's negatively biased treatment of writing as opposed to orality.

The fourth chapter discusses Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms as something that prepared a bridge between formalist semiotics and phenomenological iconology. The following chapters, consequently, introduce the genesis of art historical iconology, looking back at the Renaissance beginnings (Cesare Ripa) and concluding with the interpretation of Aby Warburg's revolutionary iconography. The 'Warburg School' was of utmost importance in modern art history as well as cultural theory. I am discussing in details the achievements of the two greatest representatives of this school, Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich, not forgetting about the rather severe attacks either, that recently have been directed against them from the side of poststructuralist art historians (e.g. Donald Preziosi). My aim is to keep balance: show the limitations of their theories, at the same time give due credit to their monumental and groundbreaking work. In this context I give a whole new assessment of Panofsky's famous programmatic essay of 1940, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," and of Gombrich's magisterial 1948 study on symbolic images, "Icones Symbolicae."

The seventh chapter is devoted to the theory of the emblematic way of seeing as a general mode of symbolic expression. The particular importance of this aspect is marked by the fact that the emblematic way of seeing can be identified as the main representational logic of the long period between classical Antiquity and the Enlightenment. Within this larger topic I examine the recent vogue of emblem studies and their theoretical backgrounds (in the works of Peter Daly, Daniel Russell, Bernhard Scholz and others). The tripartite emblem – as developed in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century – today is seen as a generic paradigm for multimedial sign systems. The last unit of this chapter reviews the history of the study of Shakespeare's verbal and theatrical imagery as an interesting case study of this discipline.

The last three chapters give an account of the stormy debates triggered by the emergence of a new perspective brought about by poststructuralism. The 1990s witnessed the birth of the 'new iconology' and of 'postsemiotics' which challenged as well as renewed the interest in tradition-based systems of symbolization. Chapter Eight discusses poststructuralist iconology through the works of Nelson Goodman, W. J. T. Mitchell, Hans Belting and Jean Baudrillard. Goodman features in my review as a representative of 'extreme conventionalism,' which lead to a complete abolition of any structural differentiation between words and images. His standpoint is illuminated by his famous example of the rugged right hand margin of a typed page, which, when turned with ninety degrees, can be viewed as the contours of a mountainous landscape. Mitchell's has particularly important role in my narrative, since he can be credited with the very foundation of the 'new iconology' with his 1986 monography, *Iconology*. His greatest contribution to cultural theory has been that he proposed (and in his 1994 *Picture Theory* further reinstated) the completion of descriptive-interpretive aspects of iconology with the 'political' dimensions, that is with the examination of iconophobia and iconophilia, iconoclasm and fetichism. One of his groundbreaking conclusions runs as follows:

*One claim of Picture Theory is that the interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such: all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no "purely" visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism (Picture Theory, 5).*

Relying on revisionist theory as well as on his own practical observations, Mitchell asserts that the differences between images and language are not merely formal matters, rather,

they are linked with fundamental ideological divisions. In practice, “they are linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between ‘hearsay’ and ‘eyewitness’ testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described),” etc. He borrows Michel de Certeau’s terminology to describe these differences: “a heterology of representation.” Mitchell’s postmodern concerns, of course, are not limited to the examination of modern art and the problems of modernism. He tries to embrace the whole history of iconophobia, iconoclasm and iconophilia, reaching back to the ancient practice of ekphrasis, the Renaissance emblems, or the ‘multimedial program’ of (pre)Romanticism, as we know from his excellent studies of Blake’s composite art.

The very same political aspect of the pragmatics of images has been studied by the German art historian, Hans Belting, in his monumental work, *Bild und Kult* (1990). His, and Mitchell’s views are complemented in my narrative by Baudrillard’s apocalyptic account of the debasement of images in our postmodern age (*Simulacres et simulation*, 1981).

As one of the collateral effects of poststructuralist iconology, the achievement of Erwin Panofsky has been subject to diminution while Aby Warburg has been ‘rediscovered’ and celebrated as a proto-postmodern hero whom cultural studies, even feminism can identify as a predecessor. My chapter, “Poststructuralist Reception: the Case of Warburg” deals with this development and concentrates on the recent career of Warburg’s essay on the Hopi snake dance ritual – written in a mental asylum in 1923 and reflecting on his experiences among the Pueblo Indians in 1896. This section is perhaps the most personal part of my book. Not only because Warburg’s writing is also very personal and engaging, but because I conducted a rather extensive research about this essay, working in archives on two continents, studying Warburg’s handwriting and original photographs, and, finally, with my anthropologist wife visiting the Hopi reservation in Arizona (in 2001) with the purpose of following Warburg’s footsteps as close as possible. Not being embarrassed by my obviously positive biases, I think that the interpretation of this postmodern Warburg-reception is very important in understanding the newest trends of cultural theory.

One of the much debated but rather univocally admired protagonists of semiotics and postmodern theory is Umberto Eco. His prolific scholarly and literary output is characterized by a strong instinct to sense the changes of critical opinion in such a way that he never follows the shifting trends, rather brings them in motion. In this process he does not hesitate to revise even

his own previous standpoints. His recent book, *Kant and the Platypus* (1997) is a critique of his own former *Theory of Semiotics*, at the same time it is one of the last words in the discussion on the relationship of words and images. He revisits the infamous ‘iconism-debate’ of the 1970s and broadens his investigations of the “lower threshold of semiosis” by referring to the newest results in cognitive life sciences. Thanks to this interdisciplinary research he has identified *Alpha-modality*, i.e. semiosis directly based on perception (hypoicon, picture); and *Beta-modality*, i.e. semiosis filtered through culture- and negotiation-based cognitive types. In the second case semiosis is only possible if the sign is recognized as having intentionally been produced as a sign (a smoke-signal as opposed to a natural fire). It seems that we encounter here two entirely different mechanisms as if to prove: *non ut pictura poesis*. The fact is, however, that the two modalities always blend with each other, often inseparably. Even the most perfectly symbolic system (language) has elements of primary iconism (onomatopoeia, metaphors, figures), while even the recognition of hypoicons is not absolutely free from cultural conditioning. The divide between Alpha and Beta modalities may change from person to person according to criteria that cannot be determined as a set of rules. An unpredictable complex of conditions and circumstances is active here. As in the example I offer at the conclusion of my last chapter:



The first two signs – in spite of the fact that they are stylized – work in Alpha-modality, although not exactly in the same way: in case of the first the interpreter has to recognize that it is a language-specific code, because only in English are “I” and “eye” phonetic homonyms. As for the second sign, one may debate whether that pictogram could be considered the hypoicon of the human heart at all, this conventional association, however, will surely be more automatic than the association of the heart with love, which is probably even more culture-specific. While the first two signs work from Alpha-modality to Beta-modality, in the case of “N” and “Y” Beta-modality comes first: one has to recognize that these are letters of the Latin alphabet. As a next necessary step, one has to identify these characters as the abbreviation for New York City, this is what Eco would call “iconographical overcoding.” Although this act of interpretation seems to use Beta-modality, we should also notice that the sign “NY” by now is so common in visual culture (on T-shirts, posters, mugs and other memorabilia) that its recognition does not necessarily mean linguistic decoding, the very visual shape in Alpha-modality can also automate

recognition in the same way as if one was confronted with a picture of the twin towers of the (already tragically annihilated) WTC.

As I see presently, Eco's approach exposed in his *Kant and the Platypus* has succeeded in developing such a healthy compromise between rigid structuralist semiotics and ruthlessly conventionalist and over-politicized poststructuralism that can serve as a platform for a variety of further research.

To sum up: the main purpose of the present book is to offer an up-to-date conceptual framework and a working methodology to study culture, more precisely, cultural representations based on the traditions of Europe. Although these representations mostly date from earlier periods, they are still with us and their influence has not stopped being effective. My theoretical investigations take three paths: I am discussing questions related to 1/ the ontology and phenomenology of words and images (semiotics, picture-theory); 2/ the reception and hermeneutics of textual/visual images (iconography and iconology); 3/ the pragmatics of images (the function and usage of images in social practice, i.e. cultural theory).

#### INFORMATION ON THE AUTHOR

**György E. SZÖNYI** is the director of the Institute of English & American Studies at the University of Szeged, Hungary. He is a cultural- and literary historian with special interest 1/ in the Renaissance, 2/ the role of the occult in early modern culture and contemporary literature, 3/ in cultural theory, especially the relationship of words and images. He is the organizer of the internationally appreciated colloquia, "Iconography East & West" (1993, 1998, 2003).

Books: *Secret Sciences and Superstitions* (in Hungarian, Budapest, 1978); *'Exaltatio' and Power: Christian Magic and Occult Symbolism* (in Hungarian, Szeged, 1998); *Gli Angeli di John Dee* (Rome, 2004); *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation Through Powerful Signs* (SUNY Press, 2004, forthcoming); *Pictura & Scriptura. 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theories of Tradition-based Cultural Representations* (in Hungarian, Szeged, 2004, forthcoming). He has also edited several collections of essays, e.g.: *European Iconography East & West* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); *The Iconography of Power* (with R. Wymer, Szeged, 2000); *The Iconography of the Fantastic* (with Attila Kiss and Márta Baróti-Gaál, Szeged, 2002).



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