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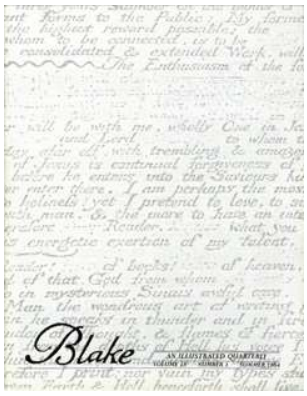

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Reviewed by Stephen Leo Carr

Language is an intricate and elusive object of study, yet language increasingly offers many disciplines a privileged model *for* study. This is perhaps most obvious in structuralist and poststructuralist writings, which insistently return to, and revise, Saussurian linguistics as a seemingly inevitable movement of their inquiry. Such theories have fostered a renewed attention to the role of language in earlier works, in Freud and Wittgenstein, for example, whose complex discursive practices further their use of language as a means of questioning, modeling, and understanding their subjects. It is no surprise, then, given the impressive genealogy and current prestige of language as a critical metaphor, that even fields removed from the direct influence of such theoretical developments should adopt issues and terms made relevant by more systematic uses of linguistic or, more generally, semiotic models. Undoubtedly, even casual redeployments of language metaphors can produce useful insights. But the danger here is of studies in which a haphazard use of critical commonplaces and an atheoretical electicism gloss over the fundamental uncertainties and anomalies that maintain language as such a richly complex model for critical study.

W.J.T. Mitchell recognizes—indeed emphasizes—the diversity of interests in *The Language of Images*, a collection of fourteen essays, most of which first appeared in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Mitchell's introduction identifies three meanings for its title: (1) "language *about* images" (how we describe and discuss images); (2) "images regarded *as* a language"; and (3) "verbal language as a system *informed by* images" (how pictorial and spatial images structure language). I suppose this generous definition of the project is in keeping with *Critical Inquiry*'s insistence on an "ideology of pluralism."[1] Yet it seems *too* generous, especially since the category of "language *about* images" seems to have included any piece reflecting slightly on critical practice. I do not see that the essays by Steinberg, Mast, Arnheim, Gombrich, Searle, and Morgan have much very directly to do with *language*. Several of them do challenge received critical *concepts* (e.g., Mast, Morgan) or clarify how a specific problem should be conceived (Searle's "*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation" neatly lays out the issues raised by Velasquez's painting). But none of them extends his analysis to the particularities of language, to the ways critical terms represent—or constitute—images in useful or misleading ways.

What is at stake here is not the "unity" of a collection of essays, which seems a trivial and fruitless complaint. In one sense, it would be unfair to charge contributors with not concentrating on what an editor (or reviewer) names as the unifying concern of the collection. But as I read and reread this volume, it became increasingly clear that what distinguished the best essays was their serious attention to language, especially to the complexity of the exchanges between verbal and visual systems. And what marked the less successful essays was lack of specific concern for language, or else a relatively uncritical or even mistaken notion of language. Quite apart from abstract questions of whether the title is appropriate, "the language of images" would seem to designate the close involvement with verbal-visual exchanges needed to develop further our understanding of images. Studies that shy away from considering the reciprocal interactions of language and images are ignoring what is crucial to either the production or interpretaion of both verbal and visual art.

The difficulties arising when the complexity of such interactions is slighted are exemplified by Rudolph Arnheim's "A Plea for Visual Thinking," which claims that higher level thinking "is impossible without recourse to perceptual images" (176). Arnheim attacks the view of perception as a neutral gathering of data with no effect on the way we think, and argues that perception significantly mediates the information it makes available to thought. This may offer a useful if unremarkable corrective to some benighted psychologists. But Arnheim himself falls prey to a similar positivistic error by denying language's role in perception or in the production or interpretation of images used in thought. He treats language as a simple "reflector" of thought, as a way of "codifying" its results, as "only a set of references to facts that must be given and handled in some other medium" (172, 173, 175). This scientistic reduction of language is necessary to isolate a purely visual thinking as a necessary component of information processing. Yet even the simple schematic diagrams Arnheim uses to illustrate his thesis always depend on linguistic operations for their conceptual value. One of Arnheim's figures, for example, is derived from a

painting entitled "The Sensation of Flight": it depicts several rectangles and a cross, all tilted so that they are oriented on the diagonal from lower left to upper right. Arnheim claims that "one can take cognizance of the picture by simply looking at it" (176). Yet the way we construe this image is never simply a matter of visual apperception. Guided by the title, for example, I may "see" the figures as floating upwards and to the right. Given a different *verbal* cue, I would "see" it differently, as, say, a schematic aerial view of "buildings" in a landscape, or as an abstraction of a "hammer" falling on several surfaces, or even (curiouser and curiouser) as several "rectangles" and a "cross" oriented along an invisible "diagonal." Language always supplements perception: altering the semiotic context will lead viewers to construe features of images differently. Since Arnheim ignores language, he oversimplifies how even simple diagrams come to signify, to say nothing of far richer and more problematic pictorial or phenomenological images.

Even as intriguing and at times brilliant an essay as Leo Steinberg's "The Line of Fate in Michelangelo's Painting" falters because it does not attend to the signifying process with the care that more concern for the "language of images" should entail. Steinberg discerns a descending diagonal in several of Michelangelo's paintings, and he uses this "line of fate" as the geometric basis for speculative, yet richly detailed and suggestive readings of these images. What he does not explain, however, is how an abstract linear construction, especially one not strongly marked by compositional devices, can carry such a heavy burden of meaning. Steinberg takes for granted an audience familiar with the elaborate appatatus of modern art history and formalist aesthetics, and thus comfortable with interpretations based on abstract formal relationships. Armed with such formidable mechanisms for producing readings, clever critics may discover any number of significant configurations. But such interpretations, however ingenious, ignore the question of *reading*, of how images function *as* a language: instead, they reproduce quite standard disciplinary methods of constituting visual meaning, even if they present themselves (as this essay sometimes does) as extravagantly iconoclastic. This is too bad. Steinberg makes several acute comments on how art historical discourse seems to blind viewers to remarkable qualities of an image. Moreover, he develops an interesting critical technique by studying small variations among contemporaneous copies of Michelangelo's images: the different visual qualities produced by these variants allow him to articulate the significance of minute details that ordinarily fall beneath the threshold of critical vision. Steinberg's method should be especially interesting to students of Blake, who was a reproductive engraver and who also "copied" himself —with significant variations—in (re)producing his illuminated pages.

The three best essays in the volume carefully explore the verbal-visual exchanges that underlie the production and interpretation of images. Ernest B. Gilman's "Word and Image in Quarles' *Emblemes*" is an exemplary study of the problematic interactions between verbal and visual components in a genre too often dismissed as unsophisticated. Gilman challenges the traditional view that image and text in emblem books are "commensurate and reinforcing," that they are "complementary codes" with "each holding the key to deciphering the other" (61.) He argues instead that text and design interrogate their own inadequacies as representations of divine truths. Quarles' use of Catholic images for a logocentric English Protestant culture distrustful of sight, moreover, transformed the emblem till it was "not a transparent sign pointing toward a spiritual meaning but an impediment to what [a viewer] would truly wish to see" (77). What Gilman demonstrates is the difficulty of reading emblems: the text does not simply articulate its image's meaning nor does the design simply "illustrate" its accompanying poem. There are problems with this essay: Gilman discusses a rather arbitrary selection of emblems without explaining why these emblems are privileged or how they enter into and effect the dynamics of the whole book. But his emphasis on the illegibility of emblems and on the conflicting movements of text and design seems to me to open the issue of the "language of images" in a way that prevents a quick reduction of one medium into a reflection or repetition of the other. This historical study begins to provide a new general understanding of verbal-visual relations: it seems appropriate, therefore, that the essay should end with a reference to Blake, whose practice radically extends the movements Gilman discerns in Quarles' emblems, and who thus forces a recognition that text and design need not be "commensurate and reinforcing."

Probably the most innovative and farreaching theoretical account of the "language of images" is Joel Snyder's "Picturing Vision," which demonstrates the need to replace resemblence theories of "natural" correspondences between image and world with historical analyses of the conventional relationships between images and language. Snyder shows that Gombrich's influential critique of a "realistic" connection between an image and the object it represents merely displaces the question of "natural" resemblences to the visual experience of viewers, to the way certain images stimulate what Gombrich treats as the "automatic" or "programmed" (and hence "natural") mechanisms of sight.[2] Snyder argues instead that it is not some unchangeable fact of visual experience that paintings seek to emulate. Rather, emerging styles of pictorial representation provide models for describing visual experience with the result that our understanding of how (or even what) we see changes with different systems of making images. It is because we first "picture vision" (that is, define it in terms of the pictorial laws or methods of a culture) that we can then treat pictures as

accurate representations of vision.

Snyder substantiates this apparently paradoxical idea most impressively by showing that photography does not offer neutral evidence for the "realism" of Western pictorial conventions. He reminds us that "cameras represent the *incorporation* of those schemata into a tool designed and built, with great difficulty and over a long period of time, to aid painters and draughtsmen in the production of certain kinds of pictures" (231). It is because we first built cameras so they would duplicate pictorial conventions that we can then treat some paintings as "photographically" realistic. He makes a similar argument about the enduring "realistic" pictorial convention, perspectival representation. By examining Alberti's *De Pictura*, Snyder shows that this technique was not an inevitable discovery, but an artificial construction of sight. Contemporary pictorial styles enabled Alberti to redefine medieval theories of vision, and thus to develop a rational theory of sight that could then be used as the basis for a rationalized system of pictorial representation. As with photography, perspectival compositions seem "true" to visual experience because we have so insistently "pictured vision" in terms of pictorial perspectivism.[3] Snyder concludes that "there are no end runs that get us out of language or depiction to the really real" (246). His essay suggests that images are never innocent records: even the most "natural" pictorial features can never simply be referred to some alleged fact of visual experience, but must be interpreted in terms of the discursive, technological, and metaphysical systems that almost literally make them visible. Not just emblematic or iconographic details but the style and formal properties and subject matter of paintings can only be adequately "seen" by being "read."

W.J.T. Mitchell's "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory" likewise has significant theoretical consequences for the study of relations among the arts. Mitchell shows the pervasiveness of spatiality not only in literary texts but also in critical terms (e.g., "form," "structure," "levels" of meaning) used to describe them.[4] He thereby neatly collapses the dichotomy between literature as a "temporal" and painting as a "spatial" art that has been a commonplace since Lessing, not so much by arguing for some empirical presence of "spatial form" in certain texts (as Joseph Frank did about modern literature) as by reflecting on the uses of language that underlie and sustain that opposition. He shows how spatial metaphors tend to be effaced and forgotten when convenient, or else reified into abstract qualities of the object of study. Mitchell suggests that we accept these metaphoric "'contaminations' as an inescapable part of literature and the languages of criticism and"—what is more to the point—"work for a systematic understanding of the ways in which the infections are carried" (281). His own immediate concern is to develop a general theoretical and historical mapping of the multiple forms of spatiality associated with literary texts. But his consideration of this particular problem shows an exemplary attentiveness to the subtle and historically variable exchanges that occur reciprocally between language and images. Mitchell rightly criticizes claims about "universal" or "intrinsic" features of verbal or visual media, and argues for a methodologically rigorous understanding of the multiple possibilities of interart relations.

Mitchell's thoughtful reflections on language and images makes the inadequacies of other essays in the volume only too apparent. Howard Nemerov's thesis—that "painter and poet want to reach the silence behind the language, the silence within the language" (9)—may be an appropriately "poetic" conceit, but it is the kind of abstract, ahistorical generalization that Mitchell deftly reveals as an oversimplification. Nemerov has simply universalized a post modern cliché in disregard of the many divergent goals of the real historical men and women who wrote and painted. Elizabeth Abel studies a particular historical interaction between the arts, that of Baudelaire and Delacroix, but her conclusions—that "both manage to create a harmonious atmosphere" (51) and "to synthesize movement with form" (52)—are generalizations that reproduce the commonplaces of literary criticism. Despite its announced adaptation of "structuralist" methods to study underlying patterns in the artistic ordering of materials, this essay lacks the precision and detail that Mitchell shows to be necessary for systematic understandings of interart relations.

The essays by Gilman, Snyder, and Mitchell highlight the values of a self-reflexive critical stance toward theoretical suppositions about art and its interpretation. Without some such metacritical questioning, the subtle interpenetrations of language and images may be effaced, and we may continue to construe the "language of images" by means of the interpretive decisions and methods most congruent with received disciplinary self-understandings. Thus, when Guilio Carlo Argan defines iconology as a kind of "philological" study, he names Panofsky, the inventor of this field of study, as "the Saussure of art history" (17). The analogy is an unhappy one, for Saussure attacked the inadequacies of philology, and redefined linguistics in diametrically opposing ways to the diachronic study of language development. Like the confusions about spatial metaphors that Mitchell traces, this faulty comparison is not a trivial mistake, but underlies a basic problem of Argan's argument. If "iconology" is a kind of "philology," then why should it be exempt from the well-established critiques of that form of linguistic study? Can one construct a valid historical "series" of images (see p. 16)? If so, do such series significantly determine the meaning or function of an image? It may be possible to answer these sceptical questions, or to define a synchronic aspect of iconology to supplement its historical concerns. But Argan seems unaware of the need to consider such issues. His ambitious proposal for

future study, therefore, seems on closer examination to be mainly an apology for the traditional historical discourse of art criticism.

The "language of images" announces what would be, in terms of contemporary academic institutions, an "interdisciplinary" project. But this volume often fails to live up to what its title promises. Some essays seem limited to a single medium: the studies of film by Gerald Mast and Christian Metz, for example, are competent essays, but do not even begin to address the general theoretical issues of the "language of images." Other essays (e.g., those by Argan, Abel, and Steinberg) remain confined within the respective disciplinary boundaries of their writers even as they consider untraditional topics. Still others (Arnheim's and Gombrich's) are simply "crossdisciplinary": they rewrite the problems of one discipline (art history) in the dominant codes of another (psychology), using its different terms and procedures to produce the *effect* of a novel "solution." What these diverse efforts have in common is a fairly uncritical acceptance of received disciplinary methods of constituting meaning and value. As a result, exchanges between language and images are too quickly assimilated by conventional interpretive strategies, and the potential challenge to methods and categories developed for more singlemindedly homogeneous works in either verbal or visual media is substantially deflected. If an "ideology of pluralism" may occasionally engender the debates about critical assumptions that are its prime rationale and justification, like all "ideologies" it also serves established interests. And one interest of "pluralism" is the preservation of relatively stable institutional bases from which a continual array of competing perspectives may be safely generated. In the case of this collection, its potential "interdisciplinary" quality never emerges from the contention of alternative disciplinary claims to authority.

Both the successes and, in a more oblique manner, the failures of this collection underscore the importance of attending closely to the multiple ways language and images interact. Though Blake is mentioned in only a few brief asides, the volume may usefully serve as a stimulus and a caution for all those involved in understanding the verbal-visual dynamics of his works of illuminated printing. There have been relatively few recent attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of how text and design interrelate in Blake's pages, Mitchell's *Blake's Composite Art* being the most notable exception. And in the absence of sustained theoretical reflection, it is too easy simply to hurry through the question of Blake's verbal-visual exchanges, and to find refuge in some such trusty strategy as the discovery of a textual "referent" that can be used to identify the characters, action, and meaning of a design. *The Language of Images* identifies an area and a problem in need of much further historical and theoretical inquiry. Our understanding of Blake will benefit from all such investigation. But given the current state of this critical field, it may well be that the study of Blake's illuminated printing offers an especially effective way of intervening in the general issue of the "language of images."

[1] See Mitchell's "*Critical Inquiry* and the Ideology of Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 609-18, for a revealing statement of the journal's position. Though Mitchell is aware of the social and economic underpinnings of ideology, he tends to discuss it as a set of practices and beliefs that individuals can adopt or reject at will.

[2] Snyder refers to *Art and Illusion*, but his critique also applies to Gombrich's contribution to this volume, "Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye." Gombrich asserts "there are certain classes of experience to which we are programmed to respond from birth, while others are readily assimilated to this initial stock" (212). He identifies the convention of the "eye-witness principle" (representing nothing that could not be seen by a single individual) as what best matches our visual "programming."

[3] The geometric theory of vision that underlies perspective has been so long dominant in Western culture that Snyder's conclusion may still seem counter-intuitive. I refer sceptical readers to Colin Murray Turbayne's neglected classic, *The Myth of Metaphor*, which challenges the hegemony of the geometric model by adopting Berkeley's linguistic theory of vision and showing it to be equal or superior to geometric theories.

[4] Robert Morgan's "Musical Time / Musical Space" likewise demonstrates how spatial images permeate what is conventionally defined as the temporal art of music. For more discussion of these views, see Leon Surette's challenge to the "spatiality" of form, "Rational Form in Literature," and Mitchell's defense, "Diagrammatology," *CI*, 7 (1981), 612-21 and 622-33.