

# Written Worlds, Visual Worlds

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Art's long history has evolved with the evolution and cross-fertilizing effects of diverse cultures over the centuries. The realization of works that depict or realize inventively the visual world are analogous to the way writers construct fictions. One should understand that fictions are largely a reconstruction based on experience in the real world. As extrapolations, pictorial art can involve descriptive phrasing or, as was the case with the Surrealists re-contextualizing images and fragments, even object product elements and these pictorial or visual devices become a comment on the transformation of our ways of envisioning the world we live in. When we look at a Magritte painting that may include elements that for all intents and purposes look real, but are in fact construction, we are experiencing a form of visuality in art that is comparable to the magic realism of authors like Borges. The long history of art often follows a trajectory that parallels that of the state of economy and of industry. If we consider Turner's Romantic landscapes they occur at a point when the landscape was in transformation under early industrialization and hence the pull of imagery was all the more popular for a public seeking assurance in a world of change.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan has had a lot to say on the word versus image segregation in contemporary culture. And he understood the significance of the way the public reads a confusion of signals and symbols in new media culture. As McLuhan has commented, "The neat packaging job of perspective and pictorial space filled with familiar objects has become irrelevant to human problems of experience." For McLuhan space no longer involves perspective in the traditional sense, but instead is a "sensorial" where a range of effects including those of sound, speech, the visual environment all compete together, and thus have changed our vision of art as a window for contemplation or configuration of a narrative. McLuhan believed auditory space has changed our reading and experience of visual space. As he says, "Our visual experience is now a mosaic of items assembled from every part of the globe. Moment by moment. Lineal perspective and pictorial organization cannot cope with this situation." For McLuhan, later in life audience was the cause of any work of art, including fiction or pictorial interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

The sculptor and artist Moholy-Nagy's book *Vision in Motion* already identified with the fluid state of visuality in an environment when he wrote stating the "true artist

is the grindstone for the sense" he sharpens eyes, mind and feeling; he interprets ideas and concepts through his own media. Everything is relational, for Moholy-Nagy, just as for McLuhan rhetoric becomes the language for interpreting an age of relational technologies that transform our reading of space and the visual world, whether printed or painted.<sup>2</sup> In his book *Through the Vanishing Point*, McLuhan identifies the illumination of verbal space through the visual to be a central tenet of the poetical interpretative vision. This is something seen in William Blake and equally Rene Magritte. Avant-garde aesthetics often became preoccupied with this synaesthetic dimension of transference of labels and meanings. The verbal medium is so completely environmental as to escape all perceptual study in terms of its plastic values.<sup>3</sup>

Cezanne believed the painter takes hold of a fragment of nature and "makes it entirely painting. Likewise Georges Braque write that a painting does not seek to reconstitute an anecdote but rather to constitute a pictorial event."<sup>4</sup> And so the artwork exists in a world of its own, in fact as a fictive world, completely segregated from its sources in experience. And so there is a refusal of the source of the object or image within the painter's conception and process. As such art is no longer a container or inventory of real world physical objectifications. The painting is neither a subjectification of real world experience but exists as its own reification of the artist's vision.

And yet the real world and separate artwork exist within continuum of expectation that is quite similar when we arrive in the sphere of a new technology world where cause and effect are cellular, removed from the physical context of life, and of the world we live in. The narrative or visual pictorial construction thus, becomes something else when the audience's expectation and sensation is no longer based in a physical, material world but instead is referential and informational. Images - pictorial or written - are given value or weight according to the volume, and the delivery, and yet there is no reflection or contemplation associated with this visual universe being presented. And so the confusion becomes one where imagery, fluidity are confused with the world of the artist that assumes and accepts a cosmos, a continuum of experience based on association both verbal spoken and visual sensory. The reduction of a fluid language of experience is something Jerry Mander has expressed in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*: "In separating images from their source, thereby deleting their aura, television, photography and film remove the image from their context of time and place."<sup>5</sup> This removal of context likewise exists in the world of art, where images with no conceptual, pictorial or visual location or locus are accepted as being works of art. And so from television's removal of context, we now have a tele-visual and hyper-spatial world that exists in parallel with the experiential environments we live in, depend upon our sustenance and well-being. And so pictorialism, and the fictional initiatives are replaced by a collaging, a layering, and decontextualized re-combination of images as if in a story but their constitution is less reflective, less contained by consciousness. Indeed the pictorial and fictional is now a form of animation that relies on an absence of experiential and contextual framing. This identifies the art of our era, its lack of framing, and its uncontained unedited capacity to distract its audience, who are the people bring a value and definition to what is called art.

Visiting Jaipur recently, I met the artist Vinay Sharma whose grandfather was an astrologer with great understanding of cosmology, as was his father. Sharma engages with history by integrating visuals and texts from the past into paper pulp that then becomes the beginning for his artwork. While there I became aware that Sharma plays with notions of calligraphy and “writing” as an abstract language. The “content” of his writing is non-existent, and in fact these are visual devices within a composition. I was struck by the viscosity of his idealized calligraphy, and written forms that are nevertheless not writing at all in some cases. Juxtaposed next to antique texts within a single work of art they appear to awaken a sense of the origins of art, and of writing and their close relation to each other. The written images nevertheless have a weight and significance that we read visually. Here we see that the common ground between writing and painting reaches far back into time. Ancient maps, methods of recording numbers, and symbols all were integrated into writing and were visual as well hence the common ground between the visual and the written. These forms are nevertheless detached from reality, a separate world that holds within it great visual spiritual and cognitive. Ananda Coomaraswamy in his book *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* has made us aware that in artistic tradition associated with sacred Hindu and Christian art, mediaeval Christian and Hindu art was treated as a linguistic endeavor, much as Sharma treats the written, or appearance of writing and codified visual forms (fictional and pictorial) in his painting. And here we return to the origins of the recorded image itself, even the phonemes that relate to sound, where the written and the pictorial are in effect inseparable. We see this in many ancient forms of art, that exist in lines, as multi-level event recordings... As Howard Nemerov comments, “the characters of iconography were dictated at least as much by the codified formulas of priesthoods as by any free observation of the physical world.”<sup>6</sup>

The conception of landscape in painting is a point to consider. While for the Western artist landscape was much a window whereby the world is objectified, quantified, and given symbolic weight, for the Chinese or Japanese the landscape is painted just as it is constructed in traditional gardens. The traditional Japanese garden is thus a painting in three-dimensions to be experienced as such. The reference points of a garden exist outside time, and have a reference that is inter-generational and largely conceptual. Land and performance artist Dennis Oppenheim’s *Preliminary Test for 65’ Vertical Penetration* (1970) is a work that conceived of the artist’s involvement with an aesthetic and ultimately linguistic point of perception. Oppenheim reduced the gap between the viscosity of a scene and the person perceiving actually by challenging the standards of contemporary art. A photo document of this event shows Oppenheim sliding in a line down a mountain tracing a line. This is to witness an intervention into the idea of historicity, and the challenge is to modernism, the progressions that succeed each other, in terms of the mind-body affirmation that contemporary art often seeks and entraps itself in her, ultimately building its own container, its confines, its “property”. The landscape is written on by the artist’s body, a sublime comment on the objectification of the subject, in this case landscape, in art, and equally on the person doing the perceiving, the artist in this case.

The dualism inherent to Romanticism’s vision of nature, to modernism’s aesthetic program of objectification of the artwork as identifiable property follows the conventions of a historical viewpoint. Dennis Oppenheim’s *Preliminary Test for 65’ Vertical Penetration* is indeed intentional and a very visual scar on the land, and non-art as object land at that. This human scar would have been something the Romantic painters in England or the Hudson River school would actively have sought to remove in their sublime erasure of evident discontinuities in our reading of “nature”. It is an “editing” and visual effect that we use the finest video and TV advertising today. Sublimity sells product with great efficiency. That product could be a minimalist sculpture or a tract of land. As Uvedale Price commented in surveying the picturesque in the land in 1810,

“The side of a smooth hill, torn by floods, may at first very properly be called deformed, and on the same principle, though not with the same impression, as a gash on a living animal. When a rawness of such a gash in the ground is softened, and in part concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of vegetation, deformity, by this usual process, is converted into the picturesque; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc., which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque state, are often considered as such by a leveling improver.”<sup>7</sup>

Here we see the dislocation and re-textualizing of the landscape in the early Romantic era. The landscape is not as it appears, but needs to be “converted into the picturesque”, and so we become aware of the objectification of the world, much as animals were categorized by Darwin, and plants by Paracelsus.

We are brought back to the Surrealist’s and Rene Magritte whose paintings presaged the disappearance of a conscious interpretation of the material reality, collaging and bringing together synchronous fragments of the dream experience. And yet the dreams were drawn from the repetitive, the continuity of daily life, as it was for Magritte. “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a Pipe) came to mean much more than simply the object being represented. The painting itself became a representation of what a painting potentially should be conceived of or interpreted within the public imagination. Here viscosity and verbal reality meet. They exist as mutually independent signals or symbols within a painting. The painting itself represents a point of transition in contemporary evolving culture. The significance of the object or event the environment was becoming transformed by mass production, large economies of scale. What replaced it was, in Magritte’s conception, of his paintings as “material signs of freedom of thought.”<sup>8</sup> And so, even if the visual and verbal cues in Magritte’s paintings cancelled out their potential rational significance. These paintings defy the pictorial and fictional worlds they describe. They are less about any potential pictorial narration than the description of various states of being. The material, even bourgeois significance of these works was that they sought to erase the composure they affect as paintings. As Magritte commented, “In both the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life, our thought does not manifest its freedom to its fullest extent. It is unceasingly threatened or involved in what happens to us. It coincides with a thousand and one things that restrict it. This coincidence is almost permanent.”<sup>9</sup>

Magritte's is ironically a logical, even rational approach, something that underscores the unconscious and dream logic of Surrealism, all this in a world where objects – manufactured and natural – intersect with increasing volume as industrialization further made its mark on the world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And yet the long history of word and image are, as Ernst Cassirer makes clear, endlessly intertwined, the image begetting a language and the word begetting a symbolic and pictorial legacy, often interchangeable, and co-related. As Cassirer so cogently comments in *Language and Myth*, “In the course of (that) evolution, words are reduced more and more to the status of mere conceptual signs. And this process of separation and liberation is paralleled by another: art, like language is originally bound up entirely with myth, Myth, language and art begin as a concrete undivided unity, which is only gradually resolved into a triad of modes of independent spiritual activity. Consequently, the same mythic animation and hypostatization which is bestowed upon the words of human speech is originally accorded to images, to every kind of artistic representation.”<sup>10</sup> The magic of word and of images has its origins in common ground. There is thus this interchanging of metaphors, between the visual and the written worlds. The seemingly fictive character of art and of fiction stem from similar origins, and share a language that is so similar in many ways, but the writer and the artist, from whatever generation transform our experience into a way of revealing, not only the self but the other, bringing it all together.

As myths evolved, so did language structure. Language evolved out sense of what being was or could be. Mythopoetic potential emerges from this sense of a specific moment in time, and in place. Non-Spaces of environment, as the anthropologist Marc Auge has made clear in *Non-places: an Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, are places that no one inhabits but we simply pass through daily like perpetual nomads. These non-places (shopping centre, highways, airports, and public plazas) are akin to the words and images we immerse ourselves in. The mass of moving peoples worldwide have become separated from experience or identity and become approximations that establish disorientations. Time is flattened, and the individual shares anonymity and near invisibility with millions of others. Ernst Cassirer identified the separation of *ego* from *being* in explaining the spiritual depth and power of language when he wrote, “The ‘is’ of the copula almost unfailingly goes back to a sensuously concrete original meaning; instead of conveying mere existence or a general state of being, it originally denoted a particular kind and form of appearance; especially being in a certain place, at a specific point in space.”<sup>11</sup>

In contemporary art as with contemporary fiction the objecthood now ironically manifest in the use of E-readers, and screen bred imagery, digitalized and extemporized by web technology caricatures expression and creative fiction as something that supersedes any placement within a physical sphere of context which is the key to cosmology. Uwe Poerksen has gone on to make clear in her book *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* that words themselves have no meaning, no specificity in the context of transferral and research that characterizes digital and information technologies. Words like sustainability, development, project, strategy, and problem now are universally applied regardless of context, or situation. Words are effectively

like Lego blocks – interchangeable, without reference, and capable of re-combinations. If words, like visual art now no longer exist as manifestations of a physical world, experiences are interchangeable, and a cosmological worldview is threatened.

Incoherence, a lack of focus no longer situates place with time, with an old and new paradigm. We may consider the visual worlds of an art of distraction of our era, and the corresponding written as literal places of the imagination. These places use disorientation as a language that mirrors the extemporized experience of our times. Art and fiction are part of a shock doctrine that enables further manipulation of populations as identity becomes disenfranchised. Disorientations are not fictions, and yet with new technologies the sense of what a story, of what a narrative, and a myth become equivalent of a cut and paste layered non-site. The non-site for the arts – pictorial – as text or image – is the screen. Mediatic and informational overload challenge a worldview based on permanence. The world we live in is actually a micro-context. The editing, and the shock effect of digital word and image is the accepted creative currency for our era but it need not be! Continuity, a sense of place, of the moment in time, and of everlasting wisdom, or consciousness, is at the origins of the human journey. They can be part of that journey in our times as well. Words, images, evoke worlds that extend our sense of being, always in place with space and time.

#### Notes and References

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