

Weingarden, Lauren S.

Representation and signification in the visual arts

In: *Alexandr Veselovskij a dnešek : (materiály konference konané ve dnech 22.-24. října 1996)*. Kšicová, Danuše (editor); Pospíšil, Ivo (editor). Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1998, pp. 91-97

ISBN 8021018798

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/132444>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFICATION IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Lauren S. Weingarden (USA)

In this paper I discuss the place of art history within an interdisciplinary practice called „word&image“ studies, a phrase defined by the International Association of Word&Image Studies (IAWIS). Grounded in semiotic methods, „word&image“ studies examines the relationships and interactions between verbal and visual processes of communication – both production and reception – that take place in the artistic or literary field. Here the notion has been accepted that 'word' and 'image' are not autonomous entities but discursive practices that share codes from different sign systems.¹

While „word&image“ studies seeks to treat verbal and visual signs coequally, in practice it tends to prioritize the verbal over the visual text. More often than not, the visual image is treated as a totality that mediates the „hidden“ meaning of the written text. As an art historian I seek to remedy this imbalance. Crucial to this remedy is that art historians and non-art historians learn to read the visual image as a non-verbal text. Such a textual reading involves describing and translating artistic conventions as linguistic codes with which the artist or object visually speaks. Here formalist methods of describing pictorial elements – such as line, color, brushwork, spatial and figurative representation – can be adapted to the semiotic strategies of „word&image“ studies. These elements can be read as signs that signify artistic conventions and theoretical practices. As such they function as carriers of social systems, cultural values, and ideological concepts. This semiotic/structuralist method facilitates a more balanced reading of visual and verbal texts that share the same socio-cultural discourse.

In addition to formalist methods, iconography compliments the semiotic practices of word&image studies. Formulated by the German art historian Erwin Panofsky (in 1932), iconography provides a method of interpreting pictorial themes by investigating literary texts as sources for visual symbols,

¹ Cited from Hoek, L. H.: *Interactions: the Bulletin of IAWIS-12* (April 1994). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Third International Conference of Word&Image Studies (Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, 1993) and will be published in the forthcoming *Proceedings* (Editions Ridopi B.V., Amsterdam, Atlanta).

narratives, and allegories.² Panofsky limited his references to the Old and New Testaments and classical literature. More recently, however, art historians have expanded the range of (written) textual sources, making iconography especially adaptable to semiotic methods, particularly that of structuralism. Taken together, iconography and structuralism facilitate viewing works of art as visual articulations of cultural sign systems.³

To illustrate this approach to word&image studies, I examine Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881) and its relationship with Charles Baudelaire's modernist agenda and Émile Zola's naturalist novel. Such an approach demonstrates a methodology in which verbal and visual texts are treated as reciprocal but independent signifying systems. I have chosen *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* for two reasons. First, Manet was associated with Charles Baudelaire and Émile Zola, both as personal friends and as literary writers who practiced art a modernist mode of visual parody independent of, but coincident with, literary methods. However, since parody is most often associated with literary techniques, and more recently with Zola's naturalist novels, I examine how visual parody functions through the technical and iconographic elements distinctive to the painted medium.

Literary historian Linda Hutcheon's definition of modern parody is central to my investigation of the reciprocities between Manet's and Zola's works.⁴ As Hutcheon shows, modern parody is inherently double-coded since it inscribes both „continuity“ with, and „critical distance“ from, the old text in the new text. Hutcheon further shows that, more often than not, irony is both the cause and effect of parody. Indeed, irony itself is double-coded, it holds at least two entities or concepts in contrastive positions. Consequently, when parody produces a doubling effect between the new text and the old (parodied) text, this effect induces an ironic attitude or situation for the viewer/ reader. Just such a viewer/reader recognizes the artist's or writer's inversion of traditional

² See Panofsky's explication of his method in *Iconography and Iconology: „An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art“*, originally published in „*Studies in Iconology*“ (1939); rpt. in: *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Garden City, 1955, pp. 26-54.

³ See for example, Baxandall, M.: *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Oxford, New York, 1972.

⁴ Hutcheon, L.: *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York, 1985), pp. 24, 34, 52-68. Hutcheon distinguishes between the verbal or semantic function of irony (antiphrasis) and irony as „an evaluative strategy that implies an attitude of the encoding agent towards the text itself, an attitude which in turn allows and demands the decoder's interpretation and evaluation“ (p. 53).

methods of representation or narrative structures. The practice that joins the construction with the recognition of such inversions constitutes ironic parody which, during the nineteenth century, became consonant with modernity.

Baudelaire's critical writing on contemporary Parisian art and culture provides a discursive context for reviewing Manet's relationship with Zola. Indeed, both Manet and Zola developed parodic devices in response to Baudelaire's definition of modernism as a state of incessant paradox, surprise, and change. In *The Painter of Modern Life* (1862) Baudelaire also defined the ironic „double composition“ of modern beauty. Modernity, he writes, is the constant contradiction between „an eternal, invariable element,“ and „a relative element“ – „the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions.“ According to Baudelaire, the artist can achieve this aesthetic dualism and, ultimately, cultural renewal, by triggering in the viewer „the shock of surprise.“ The artist does this by rendering the familiar unfamiliar and by presenting „the ever-new which eternally elude[s],“ but still refers to, „the rules and analyses of the school.“⁶

Baudelaire's definition of modernity is grounded in an earlier German romantic tradition of ironic self-reflection. As defined by the German writers, irony is a self-induced critical reflection upon the constant contradictions of the finite and infinite, the self and the non-self. Central to this definition of irony is the mirroring effect involved in the subject's recognition of a double self. However, during the course of the nineteenth-century, the focus of ironic self-reflection shifts from the internal self to the external medium of artistic representation. Baudelaire thus celebrated this self-doubling, what called „se dé-doubler,“ as the essence of both artistic creation and modern life.⁶ Since Manet

⁵ Baudelaire, Ch.: *The Painter of Modern Life*. In: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Jonathan Mayne, trans. and ed. London, 1964, 11; and *The Exposition Universelle* (1855). In: *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*. Jonathan Mayne, trans. and ed. London, 1965, pp. 124-25.

⁶ Baudelaire, Ch.: *On the Essence of Laughter*. In: *The Painter of Modern Life*, pp. 154, 164. The dictionary translation of „se dédoubler“ is „to be divided into two,“ and of „dédoulement“ is „dividing [or splitting] into two.“ (Cassell's French-English/English-French Dictionary, ed. Denis Girard [New York, 1962].) In translating Baudelaire's term „se dédoubler“ as „rapid self-doubling“ (la force de se dédoubler rapidement“), I am following Paul de Man's interpretation of Baudelaire's concept of irony. Furthermore, I borrow the term *dédoulement* from de Man, who uses it to explain the „reflective activity“ connoted by Baudelaire's use of the infinitive verb form se dédoubler; that is, as an activity of „self-duplication or self-multiplication.“ See de Man, P.: *The Rhetoric of Temporality*. In: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis, 1983, pp. 212-13. Jonathan Mayne, however, translates *se dédoubler* as „self-dividing.“

took Baudelaire's essay on the painter of modern life as his aesthetic guide, his work demonstrates how the ironic attitude becomes externalized in the parodic techniques of his medium.

My examination of Manet's Baudelairean modernism begins with identifying an iconography of ideal female types and their pictorial representations. In his early paintings, such as *Olympia* (1863), Manet parodied the familiar themes of museum masterpieces so as to „shock“ the viewer and thereby initiate critical self-reflection. In these works a mirroring effect takes place in the viewer's memory. For example, the viewer of *Olympia* (self-) reflects upon the pictorial tradition of Venus-types images and then contrasts these images with this modern goddess of (illicit) love. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* the Painted mirror provides a pictorial illusion that functions as a parodic device. As such it triggers contrastive associations with a pictorial tradition of mirrored feminine beauty. This tradition includes Velasquez' *Venus with the Mirror* (1642; a.k.a. *Rokeby Venus*), Titian's *Woman at her Toilet* (1512), and Ingres's noctemporary portraits of aristocratic and bourgeois women, such as Comtesse de Haussenville (1845).

The next step in examining Manet's Baudelairean modernism involves a formal analysis of Manet's painting techniques and their parodic functions. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* Manet followed Baudelaire's advice to present the „ever-new“ by both eluding and alluding to academic practices. Manet thus conceived his techniques in direct opposition to academic methods of pictorial illusionism. He therefore represents his cognitive experience of modern Parisian life by replacing academic with anti-academic techniques;⁷ he replaces compositional hierarchy with uniformity; smooth surface finish with sketchlike broken brushmarks; subtle light/dark shading with broad, flat planes and patches of color; one-point perspective spatial depth with spatial incongruity. Taken together, these technical inversions subvert academic expectations for experiencing the painted surface as an extension of the viewer's space.

Manet's formal inversions also signify his own artistic self-doubling, constituting the ironic attitude that Baudelaire prescribed for the painter of modern life during the creative process. According to Baudelaire, the artist first immerses himself in the dynamic urban flux. He then isolates himself to criti-

⁷ Richard Shiff examines how modernist anti-academic techniques were formulated as inversions of traditional academic techniques in: *Remembering Impressions*. *Critical Inquiry* 12. Winter 1986, pp. 439-448; *The Technique of Originality: Innocence and Artifice in the Painting of Corot, Monet, and Cezanne*. *Studies in Visual Communication* 8. Autumn 1982, pp. 2-32; and *Representation, Copying, and the Technique of Originality*. *New Literary History* 15. Winter 1984, pp. 335-363.

cally reflect upon the capacity of his medium to trigger the viewer's response to these multifarious conditions. For Baudelaire, the fragment form and a consonant technique of imperfection offered the best means to this end.⁸ We thus encounter in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* a surface of fragmented brushmarks as well as depictions of fragmented forms. Seen up close, fragments of pure pigment do not physically cohere on the canvas surface. From a distant view, the mirror image frames a fragment of an overall ambience and fragments the objects and figures reflected therein. The disconnected gazes between the foreground figures add to the psychological fragmentation of the whole. At the same time, these painterly and figurative fragments do cohere as the mirror-image of the contradictory, ironic condition apropos of modern life.

The sustained doubleness and „the playing with multiple conventions“⁹ that subvert pictorial illusionism, are the visual markers of ironic parody that situate *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in a discursive space shared with the naturalist novel.¹⁰ A structuralist comparison of subversive visual forms with the novel's verbal ones reveals that the mirror-motif is foremost among the parodic features and ironic effects that Manet's painting shares with Zola's naturalist methods. As in *Olympia*, when the mirror is not an actual presence in the novel, the mirror-motif takes the form of a self-reflective dialogue between the reader and the text. It is the earlier nineteenth-century romance novel's mimetic realism and idealist plot-development that provide the naturalist novel with a mirroring motive. The new novel effects ironic inversions of the older narrative structure and heroic character types.¹¹ In the first case, as literary historian David Baguley observes, an ironic (naturalist) narrative effects „contrast[s] between a character's hopes, ideals, aspirations and ensuing plight.“ While the reader's expectations are met at the novel's inception, its „banal ending“ subverts those expectations by denying resolution or re-

⁸ See: Baudelaire, Ch.: The Painter of Modern Life. In: The Painter of Modern Life, 9-10, pp. 27--28; and Salon of 1845. In Art in Paris, p. 25.

⁹ Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ My historical account of the naturalist novel and Zola's codification of naturalism generally follows David Baguley's account in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision*. Cambridge and New York, 1990. On „parody“ as a naturalist literary device and its ironic effects, see pp. 142-163, 179-180; and Baguley: An Essay on Naturalist Poetics: The Journal of the British Neo-Formalist Circle, 12, April 1987, p. 50.

¹¹ On the mirror-topos in the naturalist novel see: Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, 51, 75; and Baguley, *Parody and the Realist Novel*. University of Toronto Quarterly 55, Fall 1985: pp. 99, 103, 104, 105.

demptive closure.¹² In Zola's *L'Assommoir*, for example, the author incisively details the slow degeneration of the anti-heroine, who rises above her rural origins, achieves bourgeois prosperity in Paris, and finally succumbs to material indulgence, poverty and death by alcoholism and starvation.

Similar to the naturalist writer's ironic subversion of the novel's narrative structure, Manet's painting of a mirrored reflection initiates and then disrupts a conventional way of „entering“ the painting. The male patron's frontal reflection in the mirror reinforces this ironic rupture. His distant gaze and the absence of his figure in the frontal plane deny our expectations for an outwardly gazing or inwardly turning figure to aid our entrance into the pictorial space.

Both the mirrored café-concert scene and the centrally placed barmaid invite another iconographic analysis, this time in terms of the naturalist novel. In fact, Manet's barmaid recalls the anti-heroine of the „fallen woman“ around which naturalist novels often revolve. Just as the café-concert scene is a synecdoche of the modern city and the demi-monde, so the barmaid signifies a modern urban type.¹³ Her lowly labor marks her displacement in a bourgeois urban society as well as her inevitable degeneration in attempting to rise above her impoverished rural origins. More often than not the anti-heroine succumbs to prostitution for material and social gain, as witnessed in Zola's novel, *Nana*. Such a course of events, what Baguely calls the „entropic“ metatheme of the naturalist novel, narrates the moral, social, and ethical decay brought on by modernization and predetermines the novel's *banal* – rather than resolved – ending.¹⁴

Notwithstanding these verbal and visual analogies I've just reviewed, I doubt that Manet completely endorsed Zola's entropic view. I do believe, however, that a discursive space of word&image studies can accommodate similarity as well as difference between visual and verbal texts. On the one hand, the modern character-types and the dematerialized ambience in Manet's painting evoke an atmosphere of incessant decay associated with the naturalist novel's narrative of decay. Conversely, the same ambience also evokes Baudelaire's celebration of modernity, as that state of incessant flux and contradictions urbanism engendered. Manet's painting can thus evoke an affirmation

¹² See note 10 above.

¹³ See for example: Clark, T. J.: 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère. In: *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*. Princeton, N.J., 1984; and Reff T.: *The Café and the Cafe-Concert*. In: *Manet and Modern Paris*. Washington, D.C., 1982, pp.73-77.

¹⁴ See Baguely, *Naturalist Fiction*, pp. 209-210.

of these conditions as a source of cultural renewal. To retrieve this view we simply need to decode the technical formal means of representation already inscribed in Manet's medium and the pictorial iconographic types encoded in the history of visual representation.

Resumé

La représentation, la signification et les conventions dans les arts visuels: la contribution de l'histoire de l'art à l'étude des rapports entre les textes et les images

En tant que membre du Comité de l'Association Internationale pour l'Étude des Rapports entre le Texte et l'Image (AIERTI) et, jusqu'à cette année, la seule historienne de l'art au sein du Comité, j'ai pu observer que les chercheurs, issus pour la plupart d'une formation en littérature comparée, donnent la priorité au texte verbal plutôt qu'au texte visuel dans leurs analyses des relations entre le texte et l'image. Dans la présente communication, je discuterai des méthodes convenables, susceptibles de corriger cette disparité. Je vais exposer les moyens permettant d'intégrer une analyse formelle et iconographique (empruntée à l'histoire de l'art) à une analyse sémiotique et structurale (empruntée à la critique littéraire). Ceci dans le but d'explorer la façon dont les textes visuels fonctionnent conjointement aux textes verbaux dans les discours culturels et historiques.