

Text and image

Anne-Marie Christin* **Interdisciplinary studies on 'Text and Image', which began in the 1970s, have now taken on a position of some importance. They pick up and develop those theories which, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, considered the association of the arts in terms of the Horatian 'Ut pictura poesis'. These studies, however, confront a major theoretical difficulty, inherent in the retention of Euclidean categories in our conception of vision and painting. A comparison with cultures in which the ideogram flourishes—in particular those of China and Japan—should allow this difficulty to be resolved.**

Should painting and literature be seen as two distinct art forms with nothing in common, or do they complement each other? This question runs through the whole history of Western aesthetic theory, though, strangely enough, with long gaps. From the 16th century through to the 1760s, the two art-forms were linked in a formula taken from Horace: 'Ut pictura poesis'. The emergence of a style of painting giving a striking illusion of reality in Italy around 1425, in which the figures were much more evocative than words could be, was the first reason for this linkage. This style of painting also showed that plastic thought could attain a high degree of abstraction, since its basic laws, those of linear perspective, are drawn from geometry. Visual representation was, for the first time, seen as a *cosa mentale*, to use Leonardo da Vinci's term, in the same way speech is, and it successfully challenged the realist pretensions of speech. The rivalry between the two arts, the *paragone*, took on the form of a dialogue, but there was also real competition between them.

The challenging by Manet, in the mid-19th century, of the Renaissance model of representation through a kind of painting based on the surface texture of the canvas and the materials used, caused poets—Mallarmé foremost among them, for whom Manet was a beacon—to re-examine their own art in the light of a new revolution.

This, in turn, was to give rise to a great comparative movement very different from what had gone before. In the first instance, it was just artists themselves, both poets and painters. Then it grew until it was accepted by critics. However, this came about surprisingly slowly. The ambiguity of the word 'ut'—an 'as' that could be applied to both terms—so that it was possible to give precedence either to painting or to poetry—came to be replaced by the apparently more objective, but in fact more evasive, 'and'. For the past 15 years or so, 'Text and Image' studies have been growing in Europe. The use of the simple word 'and' shows that people have given up the idea of subordinating the linkage between the two arts to rhetoric in the way they used to, but also that they do not want to go any further. They want to express, at the surface level, two unlinked realities without conferring on them any status other than just expressing them in a supposedly neutral way. This seems to be an admission that the link must exist, but without its being accepted, or its underlying principles sought out.

Albert Skira and Gaëtan Picon's project in founding the 'Sentiers de la création' series at the end of the 1960s and the texts that came out in it show this intuition and this desire which, at the same time, went with a basic reticence that typifies 'text and image'. This is not the fault of the creative artists—quite the contrary: Claude Simon's *Orion aveugle*, Yves Bonnefoy's *L'Arrière-bays*,

* Translated by Barbara Wright.

René Char's *La Nuit talismanique*, Henri Michaux's *Emergences-résurgences*, or Jean Tardieu's *Obscurité du jour*, to name but a few from the series, prove what interesting things the writers (invited by Gaëtan Picon to express themselves on or about painting) had to say, and count among the most important contemporary French texts. The very form of the book that these authors had to work with—the rare and broad dimensions of Elephant folio, with intense white paper which it was hard to let go of, and which left, all round the text (sometimes printed in a font like that of early books, as if the memory of the quill had yet to fade, or else in manuscript form) a vast area for the visual and the dreams it inspires (margins or images) a form at once free and tempting—called for a special kind of writing, with a speculative gaze dwelling in it from the very outset. By giving writers access to the up-to-date techniques of fine-art printing, this series played as fundamental a role in the history of 'text and image' as *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Francesco Colonna (Venice, 1499) or *Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* by Charles Nodier and Tony Johannot (Paris, 1830).

Neither *Les Mots dans la peinture* by Michel Butor nor Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes* can truly be counted as theoretical texts. Their coming out in a collection intended for dreams expressed through material rather than abstract analysis ought to preclude this. However, this was the function they came to take, on the one hand because of the distance each keeps from his chosen subject—in Butor's case graphic inscriptions in Western painting and, in Barthes's, Japanese painting, which was fundamentally foreign to him—but on the other hand because each author chose to turn his contribution into a survey. They were humanists undertaking amateur surveys, with all the peculiarities of such writers: having marked independence of thought as far as any commonly-held beliefs on the institutional level are concerned, but at the same time an uncritical openness to the prejudices of the age which they fail to question because of having no special project in mind. The opening of *Les Mots dans la peinture* is a good example of this:

It is possible to study the relations between words and other sorts of images in many civilisations: let us content ourselves with a very

rapid glance at Western painting since the end of the Middle Ages.

Words in Western painting? Hardly has the question been put, than it is clear that they are innumerable, but that they have scarcely been studied. An interesting blind-spot, this, since the presence of these words actually destroys the major wall constructed, in our teaching, between literature and the arts (Reference 1, p. 7).

These lines show the originality of Michel Butor's undertaking at the time and how far it over-stepped the bounds of conventional wisdom, especially in academia. It cannot be denied that the publication of *Les Mots dans la peinture* helped bring about the first University courses on this subject, whether in literature or in art-history departments. Nevertheless, Butor's stance remained that of a mere *dilettante*: even though he recognized that the analysis of writing in painting in Western art would entail comparison between cultures with an alphabet and those using a different system of writing, he never got involved in this, most probably in part because he would not have enjoyed it so much, but above all because he could not see the point of it.

These same limited objectives, an aesthetics—novel and yet restricted—can be found in Roland Barthes. *L'Empire des signes* tells of the author's reactions to Japan, pointing up the differences, explaining what surprised him, but all the time it is marked by his firm desire to *keep his distance*:

I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allow me to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own.

In truth, this book is at its best when the author tells of his frustrations rather than his discoveries and—the sections on food and theatre excepted—shows, a year after the publication of *Les Mots dans la peinture* and even more clearly, that the rediscovery in the West of the links between text and image had to come from a comparison with other cultures, especially in Asia. But Barthes's book is so conceived that it cannot reach any conclusion. This comes out

clearly in the opening lines:

The text does not 'gloss' the images, which do not 'illustrate' the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*. Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs.

There was indeed something 'Japanese' in this mixture of pictures and words that Barthes had got involved with, but this did not seem to be the aspect of Japanese culture that most interested him. He came to Japan with his mind filled with a question that had dominated discussion in a theoretical field that had not yet received official recognition in France, and in which Barthes, as we know, was a leading specialist: that is, the sign. What had brought him to Japanese culture was, as he clearly states on the inside cover of his book, 'the workings of the sign in the form closest to his own convictions and fantasies'. 'The Japanese sign is empty: its significance vanishes. There is no God, no truth, no moral *at the base* of these signifiers which rule *uncontested*' (Reference 2, p. 3, p. xi and inside cover).

Still, there were paradoxes in his wonderment. Was it not contradictory, for example, to decry the naivety of those who seek the essence of the East, while he himself was trying to apply to the East entirely Western semiotics? Was the reason why the sign, in Japanese culture, seemed empty, not that the very idea of a sign (in the sense that Barthes understood it) could not be applied to it?

This, in my opinion, is the crux of the matter. In the 1970s, the new theoretical departures, inspired by the way the image was taking over from the text in the media that had recently come to the fore—advertising in particular—had understood that the image had to be brought within their ambit. This is why people were ready to admit that the image had a noble historical pedigree, or to make flattering references to Far-Eastern culture. What they could not admit was that the image had the slightest heuristic interest. Thus, what looked like the triumph of the image in no way compromised the traditional values of Western thought. All it really meant was that language was losing out. It was taken as proof that language was dying.

This was clearly formulated in 1962 by Michel Foucault in *La Naissance de la clinique*. He saw a clear difference between the 'discursive' gaze of 18th-century anatomists—a brief period of euphoria, a golden age with no future, in which seeing, saying and learning to see by saying what one saw communicated in an immediate transparency' (Reference 3, p. 117)—and the mere 'glance' of 19th-century anatomists, 'silent, like a finger pointing, denouncing. [. . .] The glance is of the non-verbal order of *contact*, a purely ideal contact perhaps, but in fact a more *striking* contact, since it traverses more easily, and goes further beneath things. [. . .] This is no longer the ear straining to catch a language, but the index-finger palpating the depths' (Reference 3, pp. 121–122). 'Open up a few corpses', wrote Xavier Bichat: 'you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate.' 'The living night is dissipated in the brightness of death', said Foucault (Reference 3, p. 146), for whom death was also to be found in

the new turn given to medical language. It is no longer a question, by means of a bi-univocal placing in correspondence, of promoting the visible to the legible, and of turning it into the significant by means of the universality of a codified language; but, on the contrary, of opening words to a certain qualitative, even more concrete, more individualized, more modelled refinement [. . .]. To *discover*, therefore, will no longer be to *read* an essential coherence beneath a state of disorder, but to push a little farther back the foamy line of language, to make it encroach upon that sandy region that is still open to the clarity of perception but is already no longer so to everyday speech' (Reference 3, p. 169, author's italics).

Les Mots et les choses, published in 1966, was intended to show that the notion of 'literature' came about in the 19th century as a direct consequence of this clinical approach to language. However, an unfortunate analysis of the influence of the visual on the verbal meant that any subsequent attempt at literary creation—insofar as this could be nothing more than an attempt to *return to life something already dead*—would necessarily be either an illusion or a failure. Thus, words, which people thought to have been bereft of soul, having become surgical instruments if not

that on which the operation was conducted, could henceforth only express a sterile and narcissistic emptiness:

At the point at which language, in the sense of disseminated words, becomes the object of knowledge, it reappears in an entirely different mode: the silent and cautious commitment of the word to the whiteness of the paper, where it can have no sonority, no interlocutor, where it has nothing else to express but itself, nothing else to do but to shine in all the radiance of its being (Reference 4, p. 313).

The most interesting thing in this text, from our point of view, is that, without wanting to—as its ironic tone shows—it clearly states how, on the contrary, by the end of the 19th century, literature had opened up a radically new path for artistic creation. *Un Coup de dés* by Mallarmé is at the heart of this confusion. What was new about this work was that its underlying conception of writing and seeing was completely at odds with that to which Foucault would adhere, and that this was at once the inspiration of the work and a demonstration of the concept. Far from being seen as breaking through the surface in a deleterious way, the viewer's gaze is at once an intellectual and a tactile experience of the surface, the whiteness of which thus had two values—that of the medium for the expression of ideas and also the visual substance of that medium reduced to its purest form—on which the writing is not a pale reflection of speech, but the metamorphosis of speech into a performance with undreamt-of expressive possibilities:

Paper has a function every time an image spontaneously ceases or recedes, in the expectation that others will follow. Since, as ever, there is no question of regular speech or verse—rather of prismatic subdivisions of the Idea, for the length of time they cooperate with the writing, in some precise spiritual setting, it is at random intervals, near to or distant from the main idea, varying according to likelihood, that the text emerges. [. . .] The fictional element will emerge and vanish quickly, true to the mobility of the written word, characterised by fragmentary halts in a sentence which was of capital importance from the introduction of the title and onwards. Everything takes place in a foreshortened, hypothetical manner; there is no linear story (Reference 5, pp. 405–406).

However, the theory according to which the (alleged) triumph of the image meant that language was dying inevitably led to the view that a blank on the page could only ever represent an 'absence' or a 'lack'. How could a semantic intention be seen in a blank, when this intention was given no verbal expression? This was a major theoretical obstacle due to the West's enduring blind-spot when it comes to images, for which room can only be found provided they are explained or actualized through words.

This blind-spot comes out again in Roland Barthes's texts from the 1980s. In *La Chambre claire*, he wrote: 'what characterises the so-called advanced societies is that today they consume images and no longer, like in the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more "false" (less "authentic")' (Reference 6, pp. 118–119). When he talks about photographs of himself, he is even more categorical: 'When I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person' (Reference 6, p. 14).

Who is to be believed? Foucault, Barthes or Mallarmé? It is not—as it might at first seem—just a question of a school of thought one belongs to. True, in the great Structuralist movement, which sprang up on the edges of linguistics, the proper model for seeing and perceiving was that of verbal enunciation (Barthes wrote, in *L'Obvie et l'obtus*: 'What is it, in fact, to "perceive"? If, according to certain hypotheses of Bruner and Piaget, there is no perception without immediate categorisation, the photograph is verbalised at the very moment it is perceived; or better still: it is perceived only when verbalised' (Reference 7, p. 17)—or again: 'In theatre, in cinema, in traditional literature, things are always seen *from somewhere*, this is the geometric basis of representation: there must be a fetishistic subject in order to project this tableau. This point of origin is always the Law, law of society, law of struggle, law of meaning' (Reference 7, p. 96)—this point of view, being in a form that only made its principles and its consequences more radical, is no more than a restatement of the most ancient view that the West had formulated of what it means to see.

Gérard Simon insists, quite rightly, on the importance of not assimilating Greek thought to our own. The propositions of Euclidean optics are the product of a culture, the norms of which have

become foreign to us. But it is also by virtue of all that is illusory in it that such an idea of permanence is of interest to us; this means, actually, that the propositions of Euclid were in harmony, partly erroneously but nevertheless essentially, with certain directions of Mediterranean civilization which were of long duration and so powerful that they could not be dislodged by the discoveries of science.

Euclid's two first postulates, as we know, are as follows.

1. Straight lines radiating from the eye cover great distances.
2. The figure defined by these visual rays is a cone with its point at the eye and its base at the limits of that which can be seen.

In 1604, Kepler was to prove, in his *Ad Vitellionem paralipomena, quibus Astronomiae pars optica traditur*, that sight was not a matter of 'visual rays', but a screen in the form of the retina. Descartes took cognizance of this discovery in 1637, in *La Dioptrique*. However, it is surprising to see that the main change he makes is to shift the notion of the vector, which he had been forced to give up, from the perceptual to the intellectual plane. The entirely novel theoretical implications of a model of sight based on a *flat surface* did not interest him at all. As the obsessive recurrence of Kepler's diagram of the eye throughout his treatise shows, he is only interested in the mechanical side of the eye, and only insofar as this enables him, not only to separate thought from material objects, but also from the object by which objects are perceived, thus freeing the subject from the uncontrollable (and hence attractive) influence of 'mental images'—an influence which had dominated it from ancient times.

But because of this, through the 'I think therefore I am', it was the *formulation of thought* by which Descartes replaced optical geometry, as if, hanging on to a system which experience had just shown to be ill-founded, he merely wanted to move it up to an abstract, ideal realm, which this very failure had allowed him to construct. This is why it is fair to say that it is within Descartes's system—which at first sight would seem to refute them—that Euclid's propositions came to find their true coherence. In so doing, it may well be true that they lost some of their original reason for being, but, on the other hand, they acquired a

usefulness as a teaching tool, thanks to which they were able to survive through to the end of the 20th century.

Logocentrism—and phallogentrism which, either metaphorically or in a naively realistic way ('the tongue is a phallus that talks' (Reference 7, p. 210), wrote Barthes) seeks its justification through it—thus take on board the Euclidean hypothesis of the 'visual ray'. However, it also presents it in a warped form: it is seen as an idealized act symbolizing a subject, whereas, in the Greek tradition, as Gérard Simon has shown, 'it is not an abstraction, but a reality, albeit a reality which has become literally inconceivable for us, given that it is concerned with a *projection, both material and psychic*, made up of elements, water and fire, analogous to those of inert matter, although still conveying sensation. In short, the equivalent of a long, invisible arm is reaching to dip straight into the colour and luminosity of things, to bring them back to our soul' (Reference 8, pp. 301–302, author's italics).

Perhaps, however, we should lend more weight than that which is generally given to Euclid's *second* postulate. The credence that has been given to it through the ages has never been thrown in doubt, for the excellent reason that all Western research into optics and perception has always been based upon it. This may explain the shift from a kind of seeing-as-touching to the theory of the dominance of the subject and the dominance of the gaze, which was to prove fatal. It is not the source from which the 'visual ray' emanates that invalidates the 'visual ray' theory, but the object on which it comes to rest.

The problem of recognizing figures has such a basic role in Western notions of perception (as is proved by the extraordinary importance we give that of resemblance) that it is hard for us, even today, to imagine another way of thinking about it. However, in order to relativize this point of view, all we need do is tell ourselves that when we see a form or a figure, we are drawing a distinction between it and the material it is made of; that is to say the spatial object is as real and as visible as the form, and so closely linked to it that, in what we call 'optical illusions', it can compete with the figure and become a figure in its own right.

However, the expression 'optical illusion' is very revealing of the *a priori* objectivizing that governs our relationship with the visible world.

What interests us in this phenomenon is not the mechanism that produces it, which is one of 'perceptual conflicts'—two forms appearing together in a place where there should be one or the other—but the problem of the object we perceive, of whether it does or might exist. Ptolemy's reaction is

to explain how sight can go wrong. The greater part of his book is devoted to this, which, for him as for those who came after him, is the central question of optics. It is not seeing that worries him, but being wrong. Before Kepler, Galileo or Descartes, optics was solely concerned with the propagation of light, and, through this, explaining sight is no more than a brief prelude to the unending logic of appearance. Every treatise, from Ptolemy to Vitellio, confirms this (Reference 8, p. 304).

All the writings on optics in antiquity deal with these two questions: how does sight reach that which is? Then, at much greater length: how can it be wrong? Reflection and refraction do not interest Ptolemy for their own sake, but only because they break the 'visual ray', which thus becomes 'incapable of fulfilling its function, which is to see the real thing in its real place' (Reference 8, p. 305). This helps us to understand why the definition that the Ancients gave of the image was extremely reductionist. To quote Gérard Simon's excellent formulation, for the Ancients, seeing an image meant 'seeing a thing where it is not' (Reference 8, p. 306). The profound change Kepler was to bring into this view was to lay down the principle that 'from being an *obstacle* to distinct vision, refraction, with good convergence, has become an express *condition* of distinct vision' (Reference 8, p. 324, author's italics)—but even so, his reasoning, like Descartes's after him, bore only on objects, since Descartes was unable to count the eye itself among those objects. The soul/body dualism presupposes the manifestation of the object.

It is not at all certain that Merleau-Ponty's point of view, even though he claims it is the very opposite of Descartes's, is actually very different from that which Descartes expressed in *La Dioptrique*. On the contrary, did he not attribute even greater importance to the object when he wrote: 'The eye works the wonder of opening up to the soul that which is not soul, the blessed realm of things, and their god, the sun' (Reference 9, p. 83)?

Situating the gaze within the body, he in fact reifies it still further: 'It is enough for me to see something to be able to go to it and to reach it, even if I do not understand how that is achieved by the nervous system. My mobile body is of account in the visible world, it belongs to it, and this is why I can direct it within the visible' (Reference 9, pp. 16–17).

It must be conceded that Merleau-Ponty's argument is original in that it leads him to analyse the experience of painters, and does so through that which is peculiar to his view of perception, the exploration of the surface. He quite rightly observes that Descartes only makes a passing reference to this in *La Dioptrique*. However, it has to be said that Descartes gives a much better account of it than Merleau-Ponty, noting how, 'on a surface which is completely flat', painted or engraved figures, 'to represent an object better [...] ought not to resemble it' (Reference 10, pp. 165–166), which is to say he clearly shows the close correlation between *mimesis* and the privileged status the West gives to objects, and suggests—albeit fleetingly—that the painted surface can represent shapes which have no link to things. The space Merleau-Ponty thinks he sees in painting also brings about a metamorphosis, but this metamorphosis has nothing to do with depiction or creation in the intellectual sense of the word that painters would claim ('What is essential in our art is there', Cézanne would say, 'in what our eyes think'). This space is just a *locus*, a kind of subjective paradise that justifies the strange and mythical realism which Merleau-Ponty would have us believe reveals Being.

Seeing gives me, and is alone in giving me, the presence of what is not me, of what simply and fully exists. It does so because, in terms of texture, it is the concretion of a universal visibility, of a unique Space which separates and reunites, which underpins all coherence (even that of the past and the future, since it would not exist if they did not all belong to the same Space). [...] This ultimately means that the characteristic of the visible is to have a lining of invisibility, in the strict sense of the term, which it renders present like a certain kind of absence (Reference 9, pp. 84–85).

In a way that is all the more regrettable because it would seem, at first sight, to have opened up

the West to a quite *different* kind of thought, whereby that which can be perceived through the senses is not unconnected to the mind, whereby the visible and invisible are joined, the last sentence of the above passage, as soon as it is measured against the ideas of a civilization that really did defend these kinds of values (such as the Chinese do), can be seen as the clearest demonstration of the fact that Merleau-Ponty—despite all he said and hoped—had been unable to escape from the conceptual system of his own culture and had fallen into the traps it laid. In Chinese thought, the invisible is not the ‘lining’ of the visible and ‘absence’ does not engender meaning. François Jullien has put this too well for me to be able to resist quoting him at some length.

The Idealist tradition of the West has frequently considered the visible and the invisible as opposites: one is only appearance, the other is the sole reality. Now, in so far as it does not pose the question of ‘being’, scholarly thought categorically disregards this distinction between appearance and reality. The Process [as perceived in China] is viewed as one in which the visible and the invisible could not possibly constitute two radically separate worlds, as in Western ontology, but instead are closely interdependent, in relation to the single axis of becoming: on the one hand, there is the *course* of the world, invisible and continuous, omnipresent but never identifiable, and, on the other hand, the infinite diversity of its *individual happenings*, concrete and determined, emanating constantly from the world or being reabsorbed by it. The invisible course reveals itself continually through its phenomenal manifestations and these, in turn, give direct access to it. Interdependence and collaboration, the articulation linking the visible and the invisible can only be profoundly modified starting from the global and unambiguous optic which is that of the Process (Reference 11, pp. 97–98, author’s italics).

In China, there is neither subject nor object, just pure *appearance*, which—as Chinese geomancy shows, just like Chinese medicine (which does not practise dissection but treats the body instead at its surface through acupuncture)—insofar as it is the channel through which the invisible emerges into the visible, finds its purest expression in that which is least considered in the West, namely

the void. This is why painting is so valued in Chinese culture that it is reserved for the lettered. Not because it makes it possible to reproduce objects—quite the reverse—but because its surface, chosen for what it is and what it might bear in the light of philosophical values, is the place where the vibrancy of the void can be, in a certain sense, and alone can be made ‘visible’, not through logic or reason, but by the intuitive wisdom of seeing.

Chan Shih: On three square feet of paper, the part which is (visibly) painted occupies only one third. On the rest of the paper, it seems that there are no images; and yet images exist there eminently. Thus, the Void is not nothing. The Void is a painting.

[. . .]

Huang Pin-Hung: Painting a picture is like playing chess (the game of Go). First ‘available points’ are arranged on the chess-board. The more there are, the more one is sure to win. In a picture, these available points are the voids. . . . In painting, much is made of the Void: of the Great Void and of the Little Void. It was in that context that the sages of Antiquity used to say: Space can be filled to the point of being air-tight, while nevertheless containing voids in which horses can gambol to their heart’s delight (Reference 12, p. 63).

Here we have a wealth of images in which the painter does not seek to reproduce reality, but in which he or she shows how deeply the visual images of his or her world dwell within them, and how that is where their creativity stems from:

Wang Yu: The mountains and the caves rise from the very soul of the painter!

Shen Tsung-Ch’ien: The universe is made of vital impulses and painting is executed by means of the Paintbrush-Ink. Painting does not reach the point of excellence until the impulses emanating from the Paintbrush-Ink harmonise in such a way as to be at one with those of the universe. A coherent path then emerges through the apparent chaos of phenomena. What is important, thus, is that the Idea of all things should already be established in the heart of the artist, so that the execution of the painting—spontaneously combining elements which are diluted–concentrated, bright–dark, gentle–powerful, virtual–manifest—should be

dynamised by the vital flow inhabiting the Universe. All the superior quality of a painting is at that cost (Reference 12, p. 46).

This is why Chinese painting, artificial as it may be—both because of what it is and how they wish it to be—has to be shown in a natural setting. Its real value is not as the work of an artist. It is that it initiates those who see it into the basic rhythms of the universe, the artist being no more than an intermediary—vitaly important, but provisional—in an experience the aim of which is harmony between man—any one whatsoever who may stand before it—and the world.

In rearranging his paintings in different lights, the collector will be inspired as much as possible by the season, so that, not only the subject and the atmosphere of the painting, but also its style, may be in harmony with the mood at different times of the year (Reference 13, p. 106).

In the same way, using a common medium, poetry and painting complement each other through the same basic wisdom. In part, this is because the same brush-strokes bring each to life, but also because the idea of the void, real or suggested, is essential to both arts. François Jullien quoted the commentary of an 18th-century philosopher, Wang Fuzhi, on a quatrain (the favourite form of Chinese poetry, because the reader finds in it the same concentration of symbol as in painting):

Lord, where do you live?
Your maidservant lives in Hengtang.
The boats stop, just long enough for a question...
And if they were from the same village?

In this poem, continues the philosopher, 'the inspiration which is infused into the ink stretches to infinity in every direction and, in the blanks of the text, the meaning is ever-present' (Reference 14, p. 99).

In the West, we had to wait until the 19th-century, until Mallarmé brought the *notion of the blank* into poetry, and nearly another century went by before anyone could give a commentary on *Le Coup de dés* in any way comparable to Wang Fuzhi's, without its seeming odd or just plain silly. How can we account for this time-lag? Painters and poets are alike, whatever their society. Both draw together the images and words of their culture—however different these may be—with the same

desire to make them yield more subtle shades of meaning and expression. Of course, the successive traditions in the West, all based on *Creation* myths, on the need to account for the origin—of which the division of the world into objects and the progressive emergence of the notion of the 'subject' are a consequence—(whereas China had, for millennia, foregrounded the unchanging and unspoken obviousness of the *Process*)—have weighed heavily on our artistic imagination. However, I think the real sticking points were the result of a concourse of circumstances, and were peculiar to a given point in time and for that reason also easier to overcome, even if only by accident.

What helped introduce Chinese conceptions of the role of the painter and the poet to our poets and painters—sometimes with a surprising time-lag—was a result of the way in which certain specific elements of their art were interpreted, not by artists themselves, but by society at large which, while seeming to encourage and protect them, in fact had them under its control. The West's stubborn refusal to *envisage the void* and, as a result, to *see* it, to give any objective value at all to the spaces on surfaces of paintings or pages, certainly did not prevent painters and, perhaps not writers themselves (who long remained attached to what had been a spoken medium)—but at least copyists and some publishers—from exploring these surfaces. Yet it was to be a long time before European landscape broke free from the anecdotal window behind a portrait and itself became a fully-fledged subject for painting. Another aspect of blindness is that concerning the art of memory. See, in this connection, Reference 15.

Alberti, at once an artist and a theorist, provided invaluable evidence for pointing out to us, at the outset of the Renaissance, the very moment when visual arts thought they had found their origins in the texts of Antiquity—those of Aristotle or Vitruvius—but when they also discovered a new space, free at last from the influence of the sacred, a purely human *continuum*. This shows to what extent the double hypothesis of the literary function of art, defined in terms of narration and of a visual model grounded on the object—or, what amounts to the same, the figure—proves that '*pictura*' and '*poesis*' were indeed 'sisters', as was said at the time, but also how their respective roles are skewed by the priority given, not just to the literary aspect, but a narrowly discursive function,

consisting of a succession of *units*. Even as the lay-out of the picture was at last being seen as a surface where *screen imagination*—the starting-point of all the great inventions linked to sight (the image, agriculture, writing) opened up new paths to the imagination (and, of course, Leonardo da Vinci was eager to explore these)—the space of the picture, for Alberti, either disappears to give way to pure transparency ('What is painting', he asks, with reference to Narcissus, 'but the art of embracing [. . .] the surface of the pool?' (Reference 16, p. 61)), or exists broken up into little pieces. Any surface, in this space, is limited, its void being enclosed within a picture-frame that serves to engender a composition which, formal as it may be, is nevertheless meaningful. 'First of all', he explained, 'on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen, and I decide how large I wish the human figure in the painting to be' (Reference 16, p. 54). The processes of 'circumscription' and 'composition'—for Alberti the first stages of perception ('reception of light' being the third and last)—consist of delineating a figure while outlining its 'surface', then of restoring the structure of its constituent parts: '. . . the several surfaces of the object seen are fitted together; the artist, when drawing these combinations of surfaces in their correct relationship, will properly call this composition' (Reference 16, p. 64).

It is hardly surprising then that, on this screen that is a pure convention, and in an almost accidental way, the aim is to ensure that the figure being painted should be like a sculpture. 'In painting I would praise', wrote Alberti, '—and learned and unlearned alike would agree with me—those faces which seem to stand out from the pictures as if they were sculpted, and I would condemn those in which no artistry is evident other than perhaps in the drawing' (Reference 16, p. 82).

So much for the elements that go to make up the image. The image, however, has another aim, since 'the great work of the painter is not a colossus but a *historia*' (Reference 16, p. 71). This is where the surface of a picture comes to play a role, by varying the gaps between the different figures shown in such a way as to make clear the relationships between them, which implies the presence, on the surface, of areas of *void*. But the way Alberti talks about this shows that,

although he well understands the usefulness of such areas of void, and although he takes account of the gaps between his figures, he does so only in the name of meaning and a literary kind of meaning at that: 'I disapprove of those painters who, in their desire to appear rich or to leave no space empty, follow no system of composition, but scatter everything about in random confusion [. . .] for, as paucity of words imparts majesty to a prince, provided his thoughts and orders are understood, so the presence of only the strictly necessary numbers of bodies confers dignity on a picture. *I do not like a picture to be virtually empty, but I do not approve of an abundance that lacks dignity. In a "historia", I strongly approve of the practice I see observed by the tragic and comic poets, of telling their story with as few characters as possible*' (Reference 16, p. 75).

For R. W. Lee, in his book, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*¹⁷, that which, in Alberti, was just a traditional and virtually obligatory reference to rhetoric and literature, later became, from the 16th to the 18th century, an absolute dependence. However, perhaps the strangest feature of this association of some four centuries, based as much on a misunderstanding as on a justified intuition, is that when, in 1765, Lessing, in his *Laocoön*, tried to sort the matter out and define the *limits of painting and poetry*, he merely further underlined the mistaken approach of which painting had, from the outset, been a victim. Whereas he contrasts the two art-forms as being, on the one hand, an art of space (i.e. painting), and on the other, an art of time (i.e. poetry), it is not, as one might think, with a view to showing the importance of what can be done with the surface of a painting—about which he seems to care little. His notion of space, derived entirely from the contrast drawn from the primacy of narrative, leaves out the whole question of the continuum. The aim of *Laocoön* is to show that the fragmentation of language, which by nature is successive, discursive and expressive, cannot be confused with figurative representation, which is simultaneous and cumulative. 'Objects or parts of objects which exist in space are called bodies. Accordingly, bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting. Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions. Accordingly, actions are the true subjects of poetry' (Reference 18, p. 78). But Lessing's

refusal to envisage plastic composition other than in terms of figures—he sticks to Alberti's analysis of perception, Alberti being obviously one of his points of reference—has a paradoxical consequence that the title of his book reveals. Beauty in painting is, for him, not something that comes from imagination underlying the picture, but from the compact and closed nature of sculpture: only in this way could he admit that the picture should be deprived of speech. 'The beauty of an object', he explains, 'arises from the harmonious effect of its various parts, which the eye is able to take in at one glance. It demands, therefore, that these parts lie in juxtaposition; and since things whose parts are in juxtaposition are the proper subject of painting, it follows that painting and painting alone can imitate material beauty' (Reference 18, p. 104). No void is possible here: the 'colossus' which, for Alberti, should only be one element in the '*historia*', now takes over completely.

It is easy to understand why Maurice Denis's dictum, dating from 1890, was so well received: 'Remember that a picture—before being a war horse, a nude woman or some sort of anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colours in a certain order'.¹⁹ It affirms that painting is, as Lessing would have wished, independent of the '*historia*', but equally of any kind of representation. Above all, it sees the first specific characteristic of painting as being the spatial dimension of its medium.

This dictum by Denis is both essential and authoritative. Albeit by way of reaction against the Naturalist tendencies that had come to the fore in the meanwhile, it acknowledges the two great events that had revolutionized Western art some 20 years earlier: firstly, Manet's invention of a kind of painting in which the treatment of the plastic surface overrode any notion of 'subject'—or at least took over the 'subject' for its own benefit as a kind of allusive reflection, an extra pleasure for the memory; and secondly, the discovery of Japanese prints.

These two events are closely linked. The engravings of Hokusai or Utamaro, with their flat silhouettes and calligraphic swirls, had confirmed Manet in his liking, inherited from Franz Hals and Velasquez, for the primacy of visual analysis over the realistic representation of forms. However, these engravings also brought to him a heightened awareness of the mystery of how the painted

likeness can be suggestive of enigmas, through the use of a certain shade of black. Of course, landscape painting had, for some time, accustomed people to just looking at the space within a picture, to just looking through the 'window', opened by Alberti, at the river, and only the river, where Narcissus turned into a flower. However, Western imagery still held on to its humanism, and people still felt the same need as Alberti and Lessing had done, each in his own way, to make cohesion the guiding principle of painting. In Japanese prints, the main function of the even surface of the engraving was to show where the *breaks* came. Between reality and art, between figures which were not linked by any discourse or myth, but only a chosen point in the passage of time, there is the same ink, the same brush-stroke, the same paper. This art-form is radically simultaneous: the forms and the voids—these gaps which, in the West (if they are visible at all) must either carry meaning or be seen as a tragic flaw—are as decodable as the rest. For there can be no doubt that shapes and gaps are meant to *be read*, and it is no mere chance that, as in Chinese painting, Japanese writing is naturally part of the print: both are part of the same system, which belongs to the world of visual thought, within which (unlike the naive and restrictive desire to bring objects together in units or 'signs'—which amounts to the same thing—as Western theoreticians still do today) a *response is sought from different things*. European poster-painters, like Bonnard—or 'Nabi japonnard', as he was nicknamed—were the first to understand just how far—that is to say, up to and including writing—the image cried out for and drew upon an amalgam. In so doing, the image was calling on the intelligence of the human gaze which, long before, had been able to find words on tablets of stone or clay from ideograms, and which had seen, in the sky or on the scales of tortoises, messages sent by the gods to mankind.^{20,21}

This, I think, is why more than a century elapsed between the stage when a poet 'left the initiative', not merely 'to words', but to the page into the syntax of which they fell like constellations, and the stage when it becomes possible to envisage a commentary on this poem. Through his friend, Eugène Lefébure, the Egyptologist, Mallarmé was well aware of the intimate link between text and image in ideographic writing—Egyptian, Mesopotamian or Chinese, as the case may be—and that

these signs, which could, according to circumstances, be interpreted as sounds, words or just visual markers, owed their floating identity, their alternating character, to the medium in which they appeared. The reader, judging the gaps between them, could give the values he wanted to them through the exercise of his/her choice. Writing derives from the image. That is why it will again return to it. If the expression 'text and image' has any meaning, it is predicated on the assumption that this use of 'and' does not mark some unimportant and accidental coming together, but rather constitutes the essential link between visual elements of different kinds brought together on the same medium, which is, in fact, the origin of the writing. However, for this, it is equally important to realize that looking does not just mean identifying objects or eliminating 'the other', but *understanding voids*, which in turn means inventing.

REFERENCES

1. M. Butor (1969) *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Paris, Skira, 'Les Sentiers de la création'. Here and where the published translation is not indicated, the translation is by Barbara Wright. Page-references in the text are to the English translation indicated.
2. R. Barthes (1970) *L'Empire des signes*. 'Les Sentiers de la création', Paris, Skira, p. 7, p. 5 and inside cover; (1983) *Empire of Signs*. Translated by Richard Howard, London, Jonathan Cape.
3. M. Foucault (1962) *Naissance de la clinique*. Paris, PUF, p. 118; (1989) *The Birth of the Clinic*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan, London & New York, Routledge.
4. M. Foucault (1966) *Les Mots et les choses*. Paris, Gallimard.
5. S. Mallarmé (1976) Preface to *Un Coup de dés n'abolira le hasard*. Paris, Gallimard, 'Poésie'.
6. R. Barthes (1980) *La Chambre claire*. Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, pp. 182–183; (1984) *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, London, Flamingo.
7. R. Barthes (1982) *L'Obvie et l'obtus*. Paris, Seuil, p. 21; (1986) *The Responsibility of Forms*. Translated by Richard Howard, Oxford, Blackwell.
8. G. Simon (1981) Derrière le miroir. In *Le Temps de la réflexion, II*, Paris, Gallimard.
9. M. Merleau-Ponty (1964) *L'Œil et l'Esprit*. Paris, Gallimard.
10. R. Descartes (1637) *Dioptrique*, IV. In (1953) *Œuvres et lettres*. Paris, Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', p. 204; (1985) *Optics*. Translated by Robert Stoothoff in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press.
11. F. Jullien (1989) *Procès ou Création: Une Introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois*. Paris, Seuil.
12. Quoted by F. Cheng (1979) *Vide et plein*. Paris, Seuil.
13. P. Ryckmans (1984) *Shitao: Les Propos sur la peinture du moine Citrouille-amère*. Paris, Hermann.
14. F. Jullien (1992) *La Propension des choses: Pour une histoire de l'efficacité en Chine*. Paris, Seuil.
15. A.-M. Christin (1995) *La Mémoire blanche*. In *Rhétorique et Image: Hommage à A. Kibedi Varga*. Amsterdam, Rodopi (in press).
16. L. B. Alberti (1435) *De pictura*; (1991) *Painting*. Translated by Cecil Grayson, London, Penguin.
17. R. W. Lee (1967) *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*. New York, W. W. Norton.
18. G. E. Lessing (1776) *Laocoön*; (1984) *Laocoön*. Translated by E. A. McCormick, Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press.
19. M. Denis (1912) Définition du néo-traditionnisme. *Art et critique*, 23 August 1890, reprinted in *Théories (1890–1910): du symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Occident, p. 1.
20. A.-M. Christin (1985) *La Déraison graphique*. *Textuel*, No. 17, Université Paris 7, pp.5–11.
21. A.-M. Christin (1995) *L'Image écrite*. Paris, Flammarion, 'Idées et recherches'.

Author's biography:

Anne-Marie Christin is Professeur à l'Université Paris 7, Directrice du Centre d'Etude de l'Ecriture, CNRS, Paris. Her main interests are in the aesthetics of Word and Image and in the inter-connection between Western and Eastern art-forms. She has written books on Eugène Fromentin (*Fromentin ou les métaphores du refus; Fromentin conteur d'espace*), has edited works of Fromentin (*Un Été dans le Sahara; Dominique*) and is the editor of many works on literature, criticism and theory about writing.