



## From Letters to Texts and Images, from Texts and Images to Letters: Catching the Reader's/ Spectator's Gaze

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The article demonstrates that letters can play a visual role close to that played by images. Calligraphy, typography, calligrams, palindromes and anagrams are as many ways of attracting the reader's/spectator's attention and bringing to the fore the material quality of a text. Linguistic games also offer vivid instances of hybrid effects. They all play a part similar to that of anamorphosis. Numerous novels, such as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, play with the many visual possibilities of letters. Conversely, numerous pictures include letters in their own mode and apparatus not only as signatures but also as simulacra of speech, sound and language. Contemporary art enjoys using letters as the very matter of their production. Ranging from Mantegna to street art, going through Magritte and the works of the Art & Language group, to quote a few, letters partake of visual systems of expression and production.

The article interrogates the functions of images either when they figure in a text and *font image* (make up an image) or when they are part of a picture or an image. In our digital age, words and images, letters, lines and colours are part and parcel of our relationship to the multimodal world which we inhabit.

**Keywords:** letter, image, text, visual system of expression and production, multimodality.

“What's in a letter,” to parody Juliet's interrogation on the artificiality of language:<sup>1</sup> a manuscript ? an address ? a message ? or is it the paper or the screen it is inscribed on ? or if we use our magnifying glass, the minimal part of an epistolary message ? the sign or scriptural trace one can recognize as a “letter” on/in a “letter” ? Combined with others, a letter makes up a whole letter (message). The Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer was fascinated by letter receiving, letter reading, letter writing and letter sending. He repeatedly consigned to canvas the various activities linked to them. In this text I am going to concentrate on the microscopic, on letters as the minimal entity or component of our European way of writing but I will choose to study it when it departs from its original (subaltern, as it were) function by paying attention to it as a major scriptural sign.

Letters as signs, as visual traces, can play a role close to that played by images. Calligraphy, typography, calligrams, palindromes and anagrams are as many ways of attracting the reader's/spectator's attention, bringing to the fore the material quality of a text. Linguistic games also offer vivid instances of visual hybrid effects (see Salman Rushdie and Fanny Howe). I will try to show that they all play, in more ways than one, a part similar to that of anamorphosis.

Numerous novels, such as Sterne's well-known *Tristram Shandy*, play with the many visual possibilities of letters. We will see that again with Mark Z. Danielwski's *House of Leaves*, amongst others.

Conversely, numerous pictures include letters in their operative mode and apparatus, not only as signatures, but also as simulacra of speech, sound and language. Contemporary art, of course, enjoys using letters as the

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet: “What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet.” (2. 2. 46–47)

very matter of their production. Ranging from Mantegna to street art, going through Magritte and the Art & Language group, to quote but a few, letters partake of visual systems of expression and production.

In this text, I will interrogate the functions of images either when they figure in a text and *font image*, that is, make up an image, or when they are part of a picture or an image. In our digital age, words and images, letters, lines and colours, are part and parcel of our relationship to the fast-moving multimodal world which we inhabit.

Writing and drawing share the initial gesture, that of the hand tracing an arabesque or a line. On cave walls, lines drawing out forms are still perfect. The etymology of “graph” and “graphic” stems from “*graphos*,” “*graphein*,” “to trace,” “to inscribe,” “to carve,” and hence “to engrave,” too. It thus means both “to write” and “to paint,” but probably drawing came first and preceded writing.

Signs and letters make up texts, and their very textuality is like a textile or the fabric of what is readable on a tablet, on a thin skin of wood, on a page or a scroll or a wall or a stone. We need a sure “hand” for all these activities.

In-between drawing and writing, some handwritings are close to drawings. The best example is possibly Arabic calligraphy, with its beautiful cursive letters, dots and flourishes. It is deemed to be an art in its own right. In Istanbul there is a Museum of Calligraphy.

Ancient ways of writing testify to the proximity between writing and drawing, like hieroglyphs, which are as many pictures to read, their meaning asking to be deciphered. One also thinks of pictograms, incisions made on earthen backgrounds, or tablets (Sumer), Chinese ideograms.

The beauty of these handwritings is sometimes breathtaking : in Beijing I saw people drawing ideograms with huge brushes on pavements with water. As it was very warm, their poems slowly evaporated “into thin air.”

## Letters as Pictures

1/ Bringing to the fore the materiality of letters-as-texts/letters-in-texts, literature has made great use of this most primary component of writing. I will first consider letters in texts and will pay special attention to the visuality of their imaging power.

**A/ Linguistic games, anagrams:** with Rushdie and Howe we shall see that the twinkling effect of those visual games is close to that produced by anamorphosis when the senses are confused and vision is blurred.

Certain rhetorical forms, tropes or figures like palindromes may cause this effect and are often foregrounded thanks to block letters: ROMA, EVA or HANNAH may be read both ways. HANNAH being perfectly symmetrical, EVA is also AVE, the hailing of the Virgin Mary in Annunciations. Another very classical palindrome is DOG/GOD; one encounters it, for instance, in Patricia Highsmith’s novel *Found in the Street*. In the novel there is a double illusion or “double exposure” when a linguistic anamorphosis doubles as a *trompe-l’œil*, when a card found on an old eccentric dog owner, called “GOD’s owner,” turns out to be a collage: “Jack... noticed above the door a square card edged in brown with black lettering : PREPARE TO MEET THY DOG. Linderman had pasted DOG over what must have been GOD. It was one of the cards that sold at souvenir shops” (222; capitals in the original). Here the pun plays on memory and the lingering image while the eye has to focus and adjust its gaze. GOD has lost His aura: the inversion of DOG/GOD and spiritual and temporal values has already been prepared a few pages before: “Bob Campbell stepped into his path. He wore a black gown and a dog-collar, or God-collar, like a preacher. ‘Jack, you may enter the kingdom of Heaven, I’ve decided. Elsie’s already there. We love her, we love her !’ Bob spoke with fervor.” (165) There is nothing religious about this kind of fervour.

Another instance of this palindrome, which seems to be a great favourite with a number of authors, is to be found in Fanny Howe’s *The Deep North*. In Howe’s text things are more complex as the eye has to arrange the letters into a meaningful pattern: “‘You old fraud’, she teased. ‘You old goose. Do geese see God ? Can you say that backwards ?’ ‘Do...gee...see...odd, go...dog ?’ ‘Try again ! It’s a palindrome !’” (52).<sup>2</sup> Marked by the dots, the text is stretched out and disfigured in the way the skull is in Holbein’s famous painting *The Ambassadors*. Anamorphosis then can be drawn out by letters as a visible object producing “a reading event,” when the reader stops in his/her tracks.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for this example to Bénédicte Choier-Fryd.

Another instance of the space of the letter as image-space may be the use of anagram.

The Irish writer John Banville is wont to integrate games on letters into his postmodern practice : *Athena* (1995), a novel saturated with pictorial references and *ekphrases*, plays with anagrams of the author's own name under the (dis)guise of painters' names: Johann Livelb, Job van Hellin, Jan Vibell, L.E. van Ohlbijn. The visual anagrammatic/morphotic game includes Holbein's name under "L. van Hobelijn," "J. van Hollbein," "van Ohlbijn," and Bellini's under "Giovanni Belli," although Banville has deprived it of its last syllable. "Watteau/Vaublin," which is used in Banville's earlier novel *Ghosts* (1993), re-appears in *Athena*. The reader is seized with vertigo at such narcissistic use and abuse of letters.

Lise Guilhamon has detected Carrollian characters in In G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948); such characters appear in the shape of lexical constructions. For instance, the burlesque shadow of the nonsensical "Jabberwocky" looms behind the phrase "his jabberwock shadow" (quoted in Guilhamon 79), while Humpty Dumpty gives birth to "does a humpty dumpty" (Desani 354). Guilhamon concludes that the characters are generated by linguistic rules or hypotexts in a way similar to the workings of anamorphosis; Carroll's fantasy creatures appear from within the very language of Desani's book.

When letters are re-shuffled they confuse vision and have to be re-arranged to go back in memory and call up literary references. This can be done from the standpoint of the Empire "writing back," to quote Rushdie. And let us not pass by the delightful plays on letters and words that Rushdie regales us with in *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* or *The Satanic Verses* where English and Hindi are superimposed and create hybrid effects thanks to portmanteau words, enhanced by the use of typography once again, with letters in italics.

I was both and nothing : a jewholic-anonymous, a Cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was – what 's the word these days ?-atomised. Yessir: areal Bombay mix. *Bastard* : I like the sound of the word. *Baas*, a smell, a stinky-poo. Turd, no translation required. Ergo, *Bastard*, a smelly shit ; like, for example, me. (Rushdie 8)

Of course, the stakes are high here and the question of the British domination of the English language and identity is put to the fore through the non-fusion between the varied components.

Figures of speech such as paronomasia or hypallage playing on whimsical nomad letters may suggest unfathomable meaning, as in Desani's "honi ! soot quay Malay-pence" (105) [on the analogy of "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*," motto of the Order of the Garter], which can only be grasped after hearing it when the ear helps the eye to see.

Linguistic *trompe-l'œil* may also play on onomastics when fictitious characters borrow their names from "real" characters, thus producing a play on false/true effect. George Perec is good at those games when he calls his characters "Rorschach" or "Bartlebooth" (hiding "Bartleby"). He can also paly on two languages: like "COIN A CHAT" in his most famous novel *La vie mode d'emploi* (*Life: A User's Manual*).

B/ **Typography** may be used to make up an image. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is replete with such visual games and *trompe-l'œil* effects, which fool the eye: calligrams appear under the shape of a bullet hole (232) or mimicking an explosion (233). The very last page of the novel includes acknowledgements and thanks, and "Yggdrasil," the name of the nordic mythological tree which is printed vertically, in the shape of a tree, through a complex apparatus mixing dots and empty spaces, putting us in mind of the sky/earth dichotomy (709). The tree conceals a text which mimicks its signified. Danielewski mixes anamorphosis and *trompe-l'œil* when he simulates a snapping rope with "sn-ap" (294–295), the word being snapped into two. Similarly, the character Navidson falls backwards and his fall is represented on the page with letters. One can first see the line of the fall, then one reads the text turning the book round for it is printed backwards, like the fall.

Navidson is

s

in

k

i

n g.

Or the stairway i s t r e t c h i n g,

expa n d i n g. (289)

The letters taking up the vertical space of the page are literally *sinking*, are then *stretched out*, *expanding*. Numerous other examples of *trompe-l'œil* are to be found in the book, such as false Braille characters (423), Morse code (97, 101, 103), Mr Truant's obituary (584), fake notes (43). The typography also mimicks an old typewriter case when the reader is presented with the pages of a found manuscript (100).

Let us consider another extreme use of letters, or better, their significant *absence* in literature, under the guise of a lipogram. For, of course, even the disappearance of a letter may be highly symbolic and poignant, as George Perec has brilliantly illustrated with his novel *La disparition (The Void)*. In this novel, the letter "e," called the "feminine" letter in French is absent from the text. This *tour de force*, for the letter is the most common one in French, is also of high significance as the novel tells of Perec's family's terrible fate in Vichy France: they were taken to the Drancy internment camp and then to extermination camps in Germany, never to return again, whereas he, as a little boy, escaped.

Graphic effects and letter games have of course been age-old scriptorial devices: Sterne used them in *Tristram Shandy*, as well as Joyce, Apollinaire, e.e. cummings, to quote just a few.

C/ "**Visual poetry**" stands first and foremost for instances of the visual quality and manifold uses of letters both as images and as poems: Apollinaire's calligrams but also Francis Ponge's "*objeus*" are famous.

Calligrams, such as Apollinaire's, offer a double reading when a water spout reads as a poem or vice versa whilst form and verse have to be read/seen conjointly. In *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la guerre et de la paix* (1913–1916), the calligram "*La colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau*" is deemed an instance of "concrete poetry" or even "*poème objet*."

Another lesser known instance is that of the Scottish poet Alec Finlay who plays with fonts, letters and spaces between words and uses small-scale woodblock engravings which he calls "*word-mntns*," as pinpointed by Camille Manfredi.<sup>3</sup> Finlay is strongly indebted to Francis Ponge and John Cage's mimograms and this is borne out by his collaborative project *A Company of Mountains*. He leaves labels (botanic mostly) *in situ* to pay homage to each of the selected sites on the Isle of Skye. The letters are arranged in minimal poems, mere traces, and registered by a photographic picture pointing the reader's gaze towards the view of/on nature (Manfredi 124–5). With the Scottish examples we have already entered "the silent world of painting," as Virginia Woolf called it. The hybrid forms that letters can take on when they become very visual indeed can also be seen in the sister art of image, when image uses letters to make an *œuvre* or includes them in its own form of art.

## When Letters Make up Pictures

The intermedial transaction is an artistic negotiation which works on the oscillating mode, when image bargains its inscription with/in the text and resorts to transposition and dialogue. Then, the *changer-writer* of the text screens the image, thanks to the riddle of language. This is what Marcel Broodthaers has cunningly represented with his diptych *Gedicht/Poem/Poème-Change-Exchange-Wechsel* visually figuring what I am trying to express: the poetic *ex-change* between image and language, beyond the paragonal paradigm. In the Museum of Modern Art in Barcelona, I was arrested by Broodthaers's two framed "pictures" presented as traditional easel-paintings but with a post-Duchampian twist to them. Such work is a "montage" visually representing what takes place when words as signs become images and vice versa, according to an *ex-change* operation, an operation of conversion or transposition. Both painter and poet are presented as potential *changers*. Looking at the framed "pictures," one may notice symmetrical effects: in each frame three columns, the titles of which point to an inversion on a chiasmus-like pattern, according to the languages used: German, English, French and vice versa. Thus "*poème*" folds onto "change," etc., pointing to the visual rendering of the transposition. Furthermore, numbers are converted into letters for the visitor, who is lured by the sum-like appearance of the columns, suggested by the inscriptions, the black underline and the red ink as in an account-book, and assumes that s/he is looking at sums. But what s/he is looking at are as many letters, initials, those of the artist himself, M.B., his signature. And count as s/he may, s/he will realize that the numbers and the sums, which do not correspond from frame to frame, seem to signify that 258 M.B. in English corresponds to 28+10+12 M.B. in German and to 6+25+45 M.B., in French, once the converting operation has been done. The symmetrical

<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to Camille Manfredi's *Making Space: Reinventing Nature in Early Twenty-First-Century Scotland*, pp. 129-130.

effect of the chiasmus operates a visual conversion from term to term. The chiasmus presents a mirror image of the two panels on the mode of a diptych, thus quoting its pictorial heritage, that of Flemish and Italian painting. The device shows the passage from numbers to letters, corresponding to the conversion of the visual into language, of the symbol into image, the visual here not being rendered by a sign system but signified by visual obviousness. For what the spectator has to do first and foremost is to stop to read and consider the two panels pairing two simple black frames and three columns of scribbles. But they linger on one's mind for a long time.

In painting great use is made of letters as part and parcel of their own pictorial process or device. They may even appear to point to a voice or a person and may sometimes be seen as the very breath (*le souffle*) of an image. There are a number of instances of letters/words in/on painting, such as Magritte's famous painting of a pipe under which we find the handwritten inscription "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*"; it is entitled "*La trahison des images*" ("The Treachery of Images"). The injunction comes forth from the painting itself denouncing the age-old illusion of representation. The object must not be confused with its representation.

The sentence is like a voice uttering a warning, like an enunciation.

From enunciation let us move on to another voice and a sacred one at that which can be heard in religious painting of the Annunciation that stage the divine Word and the moment when it incarnates into the Virgin Mary. Even Dante representing the scene evokes a visible speech: "it did not appear to be a silent image...one would have sworn that he said AVE and on her attitude there was impressed that speech '*ESSE ancilla Dei*' exactly as a figure is sealed on to wax" (Dante, quoted in Gombrich 126). A painting by Fra Angelico representing the scene and kept in Cortone is interesting to study as Daniel Arasse has demonstrated in his famous book on Annunciations. This painting is similar to the fresco in Cell 3 of the Convent of San Marco in Florence. But there is a major difference and two anomalies, as Arasse has pointed out. The Archangel Gabriel addresses the Virgin according to the three hailings. The Virgin answers in the usual way: "I am God's servant." What is of note in this painting is the way the letters are traced and the differences between the two protagonists, which perhaps corresponds to a difference in their status and their voices.

Here are the two anomalies, according to Arasse:

The Angel's words are readable by the faithful inside the church but Mary's answer is written from right to left and inverted from top to bottom : MUUT VBMD ALLICA ECCE (so to be reversed here). This way of writing from right to left can be found in quite a few Annunciations but not generally speaking with the text upside down. The latter may be seen as addressing the figure sculpted in the *tondo*: perhaps not because this figure is not God the Father but that of a prophet as the scroll shows as the traditional attribute of prophets. So Mary's answer seems to be addressed to an invisible and secret "reader." (Arasse 137)<sup>4</sup>

On top of this the decisive words "*fiat mihi secundum*" ("let it be done to me [according to Thy Word]") do not figure in the painting but are *hidden by*, or better, *contained in*, the Christ-like column, God's most secret place, so that He is present but unknowable in this event. "The column thus 'visualizes' what is hidden but happens then – the Incarnation" (Arasse 139).

## Sign-atures

Of course, letters in paintings may also point to their makers. Once the painters gained their status as *artists* and were no longer viewed as *craftsmen*, they proudly signed their achievements.

What is of note here is that through the varying arrangements of letters a painter could inscribe the singularity of his personality and his name. Thanks to pictorial means (Whistler's butterfly signature), colours, (Courbet writing his name in red letters), graphic signs, choice of letter cases (Picasso signing with almost childlike letters) and flourishes, the painter made himself visible.

An example is provided by the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna, who chose to sign his name in many different ways graphically and linguistically: "Andreas Mantignia" or "Andreae Mantegnae," translated into Latin, or with Greek characters, a "pendant" as it were of his taste for introducing self-portraits or characters closely looking like himself in his paintings. The *sign-atures* are as many ways of pointing out to the author of

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<sup>4</sup>Translation mine. LL

the work by playing the role of so many index/indices like: “I have painted this,” “here is my work.” With Mantegna we have “*OPUS ANDREAE MANTEGNA*” in *Christ with the Olive Trees*.

Another instance is provided by Albrecht Dürer in *The Adoration of the Holy Trinity*: “*ALBERTUS DÜRER NORICUS FACIEBAT ANNO A VIRGINIS PARTU 1511*” (“Albrecht Dürer from Nüremberg created this in the year 1511 since the Virgin gave birth [to Jesus]”).

Inscribing the letters of one’s name may be a way of testifying to one’s presence like Van Eyck’s famous flourish of a signature on the canvas of *The Arnolfini Betrothal* “*Johannes de Eyck fuit Hic*” (“Jan van Eyck was here”) above the date 1434. Like a signature at the bottom of a notary’s bill, van Eyck’s signature testifies to the reality of the betrothal. This, in fact, reminds us that this was part of the task ascribed to painters who played the role of quasi-ambassadors, special emissaries sent to a foreign court to take back the portrait of a future spouse. Painters often played this double role, which was van Eyck’s, too, when he was sent to Portugal to prepare the wedding of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy to Princess Isabella of Portugal, which took place in Bruges in January 1430. The signature and the sentence painted on the Arnolfini portrait are larger than life, larger than the painting’s celebrated mirror: it is remarkable for it is beautifully penned in a superb cursive handwriting with flourishes, strokes and decoration, a proof of the painter-as-draughtsman’s skill. Today we might describe it as an instance of self-advertisement.

My last example of a text quoting “letters-as-pictures” comes from a most unstable background. In “The Fascination of the Pool,” a short story by Virginia Woolf, the narrator describes the way in which a placard announcing the sale of the farm of a mill “curiously” fascinates one, “one knows not why” (26). When one watches the ripples of the pool, one thinks that “one could trace the big red letters in which Romford Mill was printed in the water. A tinge of red was in the green that rippled from bank to bank” (26). The materiality of the minimal signifier - letters, paradoxically inscribed on the liquid surface of an endlessly moving element - stands out. Furthermore, “[t]he red and black letters and the white paper seemed to lie very thinly on the surface, while beneath went on some profound under-water life like the brooding, the ruminating of the mind” (26). What is pinpointed by the narrator is the powerlessness and superficiality of writing, condemned to surface, while deep down thought remains beyond reach. Drops for thought, as it were.

Always conscious of the rivalry between writing and painting, Woolf, in a sense, emulates painting and abstract art in particular, when a nuance of red, tinted with green, ripples from one bank to the other.

### Letters as Art

This leads me on to the final part of this talk: letters as a full pictorial tool. The porosity of the exchange between word and image, literature and the visual arts, is illustrated by the work of the late American painter Cy Twombly in which letters are used *per se*, as part and parcel of his main technique, much to the bafflement of many visitors to his latest retrospective exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Cy Twombly makes great use of handwriting and huge dim (often pencilled on canvas) letters, and this amply illustrates the power of letters. He uses mythology and endlessly writes the names of gods and demi-gods. Twombly is even the author of a pencilled picture advocating the union of painting and writing.

The Scottish plastician Ian Hamilton Finlay (1926 - 2006), famous for his enchanting Little Sparta garden, combined poetry and visual words in works such as “Dove Dead in the Snow.” His ironic installation “*Je vous salue Marat*” (1989), produced together with Julie Farthing, uses neon signs.

The French visual artist and poet François Dufrêne (1930 – 1982) also resorted to letters and words in his work, as is illustrated by his 1977 *Cantate des mots camés* (*Cantata of the Dizzy Words*).

The Art & Language group was founded in the late 1960s and included a number of British “conceptual” artists, who used letters and words to compose very visual messages. The group insisted on the use of language and attempted a shift away from “non-linguistic” forms of art.

Graffiti and street art, of course, make great use of letters for their decorative or expressive value. In that context, letters may be understood as signatures or as shouts, as a very powerful means of expression from those, who demand to be recognized in the life of their city. The creative range of letter fonts or cases painted from the can is extraordinary. There are numerous examples.

I hope I have shown that the porosity between writing and drawing, letters and lines, points to their common origin, that is, the human hand which holds the pen or the pencil. The pleasure we derive when tracing letters or shaping forms can be traced back to the quest for eidos or morphé. The swift evolving means

of communication, massively using digital and electronic tools in information technology, together with the use of screens, keys instead of paper, canvas or pens and brushes, may make this pleasure obsolete for future generations. Even as we speak, tracing by hand, irrespective of whether we are writing or drawing, is gradually being replaced by pressing keys and using infography, for instance, when an electronic pen draws shapes on screens, thus augmenting the distance between hand and result.

This technical revolution, in the sense in which Walter Benjamin defined it, may be said to dissolve the aura of handwriting or drawing, but also results from what he identified as the necessary terms for the advent of a new technology (he was thinking of photography): the exhaustion of existing forms and traditions, the appearance of a new technology and the necessity to fill in a need which a changing society requires. Letters as epistolary means of communication and letters as complex art objects will take on different forms in the future. However, let us trust that artists will not be replaced by machines and that our children will still be able to enjoy the fruits of the age-old exploration of the visual potential of letters.

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