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Paper Title: The Fluctuating Influence of Words in Word-Image Combinations

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The Fluctuating Influence of Words in Word-Image Combinations

Abstract

This article proposes a tool for understanding combinations of words and images from the linguistic as well as the iconographic perspective, in order to provide a possible solution for a gap in word-image research by attempting to gauge the role of words vis-à-vis images in forming the meaning of word-image combinations. Taking into account diverse approaches like Áron Kibédi Varga's criteria for word-image relations, semiotics and Erwin Panofsky's systematization of iconography, a basic model for the interpretational process of word-image combinations is presented and applied on a variety of examples including William Blake's plates, 20th century avant-garde art, artists' books and comics. Furthermore common implications inherent in word-image combinations, such as the enhancement of the audible dimension through visual cues are pointed out.

Word-Image Combinations Today

The somewhat cumbersome phrase word-image combination has been chosen as a neutral and more specific alternative to terms like iconotexts and imageword. The word-image combinations with which this article is concerned include key works of modern literature

(namely *Finnegan's Wake*¹ and *Un coup de dés*²), artists' books and paintings as well as the more popular comics and graphic novels.

Notably the very existence of concepts like W. J. T. Mitchell's 'imagetext', or the even broader notion of iconotext, reflect the current prominence of multi-modal forms of communication and expression.³ Yet, despite this present recurrence, the precise nature of word-image interactions is rarely explored. To date Áron Kibédi Varga remains one of the few scholars who attempted to systematize the range of word-image combinations.⁴ By combining Varga's concepts with the broader tools of semiotic and visual analysis, the methodology proposed here is applicable for a variety of situations where words and images are juxtaposed, including paintings incorporating words, collages, calligrams and other forms of visual poetry. The methodology aims to aid in answering the following interlinked questions:

What happens when a word nears a picture?

How far can the word be influential as a linguistic instead of as an iconographical entity?

Which changes in word-image combinations can render its form or iconicity more important than content?

¹ Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake*, New York: Penguin 1999.

² Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Paris: La Nouvelle Revue Française 1914.

³ Mitchell, W. J. T., *Picture theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994.

⁴ Varga, Áron Kibédi, "Criteria for describing word-and-image relations," *Poetics Today* 10 (1989): 31-53.

Fundamental as these questions may appear it is noteworthy that answers to them on an overarching scale are rarely attempted. Instead of considering such fundamental questions regarding the role played by words and images in meaning-making, the concentration has been on their difference and the supposed word-image dialectic. Thus Joseph Hillis Miller sees the co-existence of word and image as a conflict, paradoxically present in the shared root of ‘graphic’⁵. To a certain extent this idea of a word-image conflict also seeps through Mitchell’s concepts as in the case of the ‘image-text’, which proposes a “high-tension” visual-verbal relationship discernible, for instance, in William Blake’s poetry or the even more oppositional image/ text with the slash standing for a “problematic gap, cleavage or rupture in representation (by the words and images)”.⁶ While the notion of a word-image dialectic is thematized by instances of interaction between words and images, the proposed method takes the wordiness or literal meaning of the word as its departing point due to the prevalent textual orientation of interpretation,. Further it is the extent to which a word’s linguistic significance may pervade as well as the influence of the iconical nature of the word and its surroundings in word-image combinations that calls for a combinative theoretical approach. Before elaborating the method itself to summarize the context of theories in which it has been engendered.

Construing meaning via words and images: Theories of iconography and semiotics

⁵ Miller, J. H., *Illustration*, Cambridge: Harvard University 1992, 75

⁶ Mitchell, *Picture theory*, 89-91.

Traditionally, the difference between arts based purely on words or images was construed as a contrast between temporality and spatiality, as classically explained by G. E. Lessing. However in cases where the visual dimension of the word (or word iconicity) is prominent, these distinctions are blurred, entailing methodologies that account for both words and images. In this respect, semiotics has probably been the most prolific field due to its precept of regarding both words and images as signs.

The diversity of word-image combinations has led to specific methodologies varying according to the kind of word-image combination. There are, for instance, several works on the interpretation of comics, particularly from the semiotic perspective, as in the texts by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle and Thierry Groensteen, or Scott McCloud's more praxis-oriented books. Amongst the attempts to understand the workings of visual poetry, Willard Bohn's books like *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914 – 1918* and *Modern Visual Poetry* are particularly prominent.⁷ However in his attempt to develop an aesthetics of visual poetry, Bohn left out the Dadaists due to their supposed break between the signifier and the signified. Yet, as Umberto Eco, resorting to various scientists including the Gestalt psychologists and the biologist Ralph S. Lillie, points out, there is a psychological tendency to construe meaning even in the apparently meaningless, to look for relationships among elements solely on the basis of their

⁷ Bohn, Willard, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry: 1914-1918*, . London/ Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993; Bohn, Willard, *Modern Visual Poetry*, sLondon/ Toronto: Associated University Presses 2001.

juxtaposition.⁸ The interpretational process of word-image combinations is also largely based on forming links between the literal and visual elements. Subsequently the break between the signifier and signified only entails greater interpretation leeway or openness for the reader. Eco explains the concept of the open work across a variety of media. One of the most prominent examples is *Finnegan's Wake*, which is seen as a literary counterpart to the openness in the visual arts (for instance in John Cage's music or Alexander Calder's *Mobiles*). This is noteworthy because it hints towards the general openness in the more abstract arts in contrast to the specificity of words. While descriptive information can be conveyed more compactly by images, even the most figurative and descriptive of images cannot make up for the exactness of words or numbers, as in the case of dates or proper names. Indicating the playful element of open works Eco describes *Finnegan's Wake* as embarking on an adventure of disorder.⁹ In addition according to Eco, the book is also about itself. Part of this self-reflexive element is brought in by the very act of playing with words, of undoing the conventions of language, because the unexpected, new formations automatically create an awareness of the ways in which words usually function.¹⁰ This was one of the reasons why Johan Huizinga considered the aspect of play as a significant element in poetry. As will be

⁸ Eco, Umberto, *L'œuvre ouverte*, trans. by C. Roux de Bézieux, Paris: Seuil 1965, 96. Lillie discussed the tendency of living organisms to complete an incomplete experience in his paper "Randomness and Directiveness" in *Naturalist* 82 (1948).

⁹ Eco, *L'œuvre ouverte*, 293.

¹⁰ The fact that Joyce's wildest experiment with language and literary structure occurred when he was almost blind is slightly ironic as it seems that the loss of sight was complemented by a loss or deconstruction of the physical word and of linguistic conventions.

shown (through, for instance, examples of concrete poetry) the rejection of conventional arrangements of words coincides with the rejection of the meanings usually attached to the word. Even while functioning at extremely abstract levels in the case of every word, a certain, however minimal, quantity of meaning stems from its visuality.

In the theory Lawrence R. Sipe proposes for understanding text-picture interactions in picture books, the term used for describing text-picture relationships is ‘synergy’, which is explained by resorting to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “the production of two or more agents... of a combined effect, greater than the sum of their separate effects”.¹¹ For explaining the nature of this relationship in word-image combinations, he uses the semiotic notion of transmedialisation or the interaction of information transmitted via different media. Hence the process of interpreting word-image combinations can be divided into the interpretation of images and that of the words, whereby a holistic understanding is attained through combining the outcomes of the analyses of both. As Sipe concludes, “transmediation goes back and forth – oscillates – in a potentially endless process”.¹²

One of the key methods for the analysis of images alone is iconography. Introduced by Aby Warburg and later honed by Erwin Panofsky, the method of iconography is the recognition and contextualization of artistic motifs and themes. In his three-step methodology Erwin Panofsky added iconology as the formal step following pre-iconographical and iconographical analyses. What Panofsky construed as the primary and

¹¹ Sipe, Lawrence R., “How picture books work: A semiotically framed theory of text-picture relationships,” *Children`s Literature in Education* 29.2 (1998): 97 – 108, 98.

¹² Ibid., 106.

secondary levels of iconography involve recognizing objects and specifying their nature i.e. construing the material used for artistic representation as a particular entity and placing it in relation to the represented surroundings. While Panofsky resorted to figurative works for the illustration of his methods, the interpretation of abstract works of art would inevitably entail the mergence of the primary and secondary levels of interpretation (recognizing the painted forms as objects and attributing significance to them by recognizing themes or motifs). Although the analysis here do not go to the extent of interpreting “symbolical' values” for revealing overarching “underlying principles” for an epoch, it does have the same basic feature Panofsky proposed for iconology, or the third level of analysis, namely “a method of interpretation which arises as a synthesis rather than as an analysis.”¹³

In the case of analyzing texts the extent to which the construal of meaning is dependent on the reader was also underscored in Eco's theories. Eco's notion of the open work requires the reader's active participation in completing the work, whereby multiple possibilities of interpretation, of construction and reconstruction are available. Its significance as a meta-model for modern and contemporary art is elaborated in the French translation of *Opera aperta*, *L'œuvre ouverte*, as follows:

Le développement de l'art moderne est... lié à une sorte de principe d'indétermination, en vertu duquel les formes lorsqu'elles représentent avec le maximum de clarté une structure possible du cosmos (ou les modèles ouverts qui

¹³ Panofsky, Erwin, *Studies in iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York: Harper & Row 1972, 8.

permettent de le définir), ne fournissent plus aucune indication concrète quant à la manière dont on peut *modifier* ce cosmos.¹⁴

(The development of modern art is... linked to a sort of principle of indetermination, due to which the forms, when they represent with maximum clarity a possible structure of the cosmos (or the open models that permit defining it) do not offer any concrete indication of the way one may *modify* the cosmos.)

Interestingly Eco's emphasis on the degree of creativity accorded to the viewer/ reader/ listener has a parallel in Thierry Groensteen's systematization of comics. In addition to this semiotic basis, it is Groensteen's emphasis on regarding the word-image combinations in comics as an interactive whole that makes him particularly relevant for this article. Similar to the methodology developed here, Groensteen proposes the principle of 'iconic solidarity' as the most flexible way of looking at comics and according to which all that is seen is linked for creating meaning.¹⁵

These theories and their accompanying methods share two key similarities that are relevant for this paper, namely the tendency to link elements that coexist and the reader's role in generating meaning. For interpreting word-image combinations, the problem of classifying them should be addressed. A concise systematization of word-image

¹⁴ Eco, *L'œuvre ouverte*, 289.

¹⁵ Comics are consequently read "as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated... and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*." (Groensteen, Thierry, *The System of Comics*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2007, 18).

relationships is lacking and more than twenty years after its publication, Áron Kibédi Varga's article, "Criteria for Describing Word-and-Image Relations" remains the main attempt at defining the kinds of word-image combinations, sketching out their linkages as well as possible ways of looking at them.

Áron Kibédi Varga's criteria and their problems

Varga's article is supplemented by a diagram, 'Taxonomy of word-and-image relations' (34).¹⁶ This begins by distinguishing between word-and-image relations at the object-level and meta-relations. The relevant region for word-image combinations comes under object-level relations, and more specifically, under simultaneous relationships between word and image i.e. where both coexist in a single instant or simultaneously instead of successively. Such kinds of word-image combinations are then divided into single instances and series. Recalling Aristotle, Varga points out that 'single' instances have an argumentative function as opposed to a series, which fulfill a narrative function (35 – 36).¹⁷ The division between series and single instances being based on the aspect of time, the third division in Varga's chart is based on 'morphology' or the spatial disposition of words and images. Word-image combinations manifest what Varga calls identity of spatial disposition.

Varga distinguishes between two kinds of identical forms, namely calligraphy and calligram, which also includes other kinds of visual poetry. For him it is calligraphy that

¹⁶ Varga, "Criteria," 34.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

is the most wholesome mergence of word and image since in visual poetry the ‘direction’ of the mergence is always the same i.e. “the letters and the words... imitate the image, never the other way round.”¹⁸ He also declares that “[t]he more intensely word and image are united, the more difficult it becomes to perceive or read them.”¹⁹ Yet as long as words remain recognizable, the meanings attached to them have the upper hand in steering interpretation. Indecipherable words on the other hand function as iconic forms, and similar to other images, call for iconographical analysis.

Varga places words and images that are clearly distinguishable from one another under the category of ‘separated’, which is opposite ‘identity’ in the diagram and which in turn contains three, overlapping possibilities of word-image combinations where the words and images are supposedly separate. Ironically it is here that it becomes evident how fine, and often non-existent, the line between words and images is. The distinctions under the ‘separated’ category are problematic since words can function as both words and images at the same time, consequently causing an overlap not only within the subdivisions of separated word-image combinations but also between the notion of identical and separate words and images. In the case of expressive typography or onomatopoeia in comics for instance, the words, while being recognizable and distinct from the accompanying pictures, do function as both words and images. Varga also acknowledges the instability within the category of ‘separated’ word-image combinations when it comes to visual poetry, like Tristan Tzara or Pierre Garnier’s poems, where the words while being distinct from any accompanying images “refuse to be read” since those words do not

¹⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁹ Ibid.

allow meaning to be automatically attached to them.²⁰ Consequently their physical or iconical form acquires prominence. Interestingly Bohn likens visual poetry to Surrealism due to its striving towards a “supreme point”, which in visual poetry is the resolution of contradictions between words and images.²¹ On the other hand, a primordial link between the acts of making words, making marks and making images is present in several languages: The German ‘schreiben’ stems from the Old Icelandic ‘skrifa’, the verb for scratching and painting and similarly the verbs for writing and painting are identical in ancient Gothic and Egyptian.²² The potential for a cross-over between words and images was therefore always present.

The construal of separated or distinct words and images, which ignores the iconicity of words, is linked to regarding word-image relations as conflicting. This is an outcome of the inevitability of hierarchies in word-image combinations. The presence of hierarchies is also apparent in Varga’s taxonomy, where the category of composition or syntax – which entails taking the word-image hierarchy into account - is placed opposite the above discussed categories of spatial disposition.

Generally words are the dominant element in word-image combinations. However certain kinds of combinations - Varga mentions collages – can dismantle the usual hierarchy of words. Another means of at least unsettling, if not completely dismantling, the dominance of text, is the employment of unexpected titles, both poetic and banal, for respectively complementing and freeing the image, such as those in Surrealist works.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

²¹ Bohn, Willard, “Theory and Practice of Visual Poetry,” *Neohelicon* 17.2 (1990): 229 – 237, 230.

²² Senner, Wayne M., “Theories and myths on the origins of writing: A historical overview,” *Origins of writing* ed. by idem., Lincoln/ London: University of Nebraska 1989, 1 – 26, 4.

Works like Cy Twombly's *Leda and the Swan* show how the presence of meaningful titles affects the abstractions in paintings and heavily influences their interpretation.²³

What could otherwise be seen as a mere menagerie of scribbles is united and ascribed significance by the title, since allusions to water and the swan's down can be made out but are not recognizable as such without external clues. This applies to all of Twombly's *Leda and the Swan* works, with their increasing frequency of reds and incomplete heart shapes, connoting both desire and violence. In comparison to single instances, word-domination is lesser in series, especially due to the independence of narrative potential and comparative clarity of the subject-matter of successive pictures. Even when they are, as with *Leda and the Swan*, abstract, a series of pictures nonetheless creates a context and specifies the signifying possibilities to some degree.

It is important to underscore that although hierarchies are frequently seen as conflicting, they are not necessarily so; rather one can – and for word-image combinations should – regard them as symbiotic since meaning is engendered through interaction, through the functioning linguistic and verbal elements and is dependent on the viewer/ reader to varying degrees. Granted that one aspect – either the word or the image – is more dominant than the other, an interaction between the two does exist. This is the basis of the interpretational theory for word-image combinations that will now be concretized and applied.

Interpretational paths for word-image combinations

²³ Twombly, Cy, *Leda and the Swan*, 1962. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The model for interpreting word-image combinations which will be applied in the following cases (figure 1) is also intended for cases where the typography or placement plays a willful role in contributing to the meaning of the words as in *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*). Despite the diagram's inevitable simplification, it proposes considering word-image combinations as unities where literal and visual dimensions complement each other and interact for the generation of meaning.

The interpretational process is first steered by the most striking element, which can either be the images (including other visual aspects) or the literary denotations and connotations, whereby the literary connotations are proportional to the clarity and comprehensibility of the word. If a word is comprehensible, in that it is not only recognized as a word but its meaning is also clear, it will play a dominant role in the interpretational process, which due to its dependency on the reader's literacy already brings in a subjective element. As explained by Varga's discussion of syntax, a word as far as it is discernible supersedes its physical form or iconicity. The less dominant aspect of form will nonetheless contribute to the word's connotations. Yet although the iconicity of words is always present, it plays a negligible role in the case of familiar or conventional typefaces (i.e. in this text). It is when the word is not recognizable that its physical form stands out. The reason why the incomprehensibility of the image is not mentioned in the diagram is because even the most abstract of images, such as forms and colors do carry some, however vague, meaning; they are more evocative than isolated letters and call for iconographic interpretation. As will become apparent through this model's application on word-image combinations, the iconical aspects - encompassing

the iconicity of the words as well as images - interact with the literal meaning, bringing in visual and auditory dimensions to the words.

Word-image combinations from Blake to Batman:

Implications from materiality to musicality

Although word-image combinations have existed since the inception of writing itself and numerous examples have persisted through the centuries, such as the initials in medieval illuminated manuscripts, I will like to begin with William Blake, who with his doppelbegabung as both poet and painter is an important figure in the discourse on word-image combinations.

The visual quality of Blake's words, for instance in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, contributes to what Mitchell describes as "the heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of the visible and the readable..."²⁴ This fluctuation between visual and verbal elements, whereby the former glides into the latter is evident in most of the etchings Blake made for his poems. In *The Fly*, the form of the title does not merely mutate into decoration but echoes the accompanying illustration in that the 'T' reflects the shape of the outstretched branches of the tree at the right.²⁵ The fineness of the line and the lightness of the writing recall the delicacy and fleeting nature of the fly, which the poem emphasizes. *Spring*, another poem from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

²⁴ Mitchell, *Picture theory*, 88.

²⁵ Blake, William, *The Fly*, 1789/ 1794. Relief etching. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, Connecticut, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, copy F, object 48.

interacts not only with the page, but with the form of the book itself.²⁶ The poem extends across two pages and it is noteworthy that the first word of the first sentence on the second page – “Little” – is echoed at the bottom right corner of the first page, away from the main body of the text. Consequently the role of “Little” as a visual marker takes precedence over its function as an adjective, especially since this is the second time it occurs on the first page as well. Nevertheless such experiments with layout are limited in Blake’s prints.

About a century later, it was Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* that established layout and typography as a significant, iconic aspect of words. In the absence of illustrations, the literal content is even more dominant than in Blake’s prints. The interaction between the form and arrangement of the words and their connotations is not merely complementary but to a certain extent alters the role of the words, introduces new connotations even though their original meanings (both denotational and connotational) persist. On the first page of *Coup de dés*, the large font for “Jamais” (“Never”) establishes its importance for the subject-matter of the poem and makes the word scream out in contrast to the others that remain quieter despite being in block letters. Likewise the tumbling arrangement affects the connotations of the words on the next page; the diagonal, descending placing of “blanchi étale furieux” (“raging whitened stalled”) lends weight to each word and visualizes the process of unfolding. Moreover certain words are singled out by their placement, like “Abîme” (“Abyss”) and “aile” (“wing”), which by being situated at opposing ends form the main dialogic pair on this page.

²⁶Blake, William, *Spring*, 1795. Relief etching. British Museum, London, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, copy A, object 4/5.

Hence although the literal content is clearly the most striking, it is complemented by the form and placing of the words, which contextualizes their significance within the poem. This kind of word iconicity is different from Blake's where the writing is more figuratively pictorial. Whereas Blake's words had a pictorial quality, Mallarmé imbued words with visuality in another way i.e. solely through the layout and variations in the typeface such as different font sizes. Despite being typed, the iconicity of the words in *Coup de dés* is largely moulded by their layout, which contributes to their meaning. In the absence of images and in their liberal interaction with the blank space of the page, the words also exist as forms. In Blake's case the word covers the page, is aestheticized, in Mallarmé's it lies *in* the page and *is*, attempting to dissolve form and meaning, and is consequently the wholesome interweaving of the visual and verbal or 'imagetext' instead of 'image-text'.²⁷

The role played by the arrangement of the text in *Coup de dés* is conveyed by one of Marcel Broodthaers' several works on it in multiple media from 1969. In an aluminum book-object of *Coup de dés*, the words are absent and only the lines are marked out, which, by enhancing the visual quality of the layout, also bring out its auditory implications since the dark lines represent the fall or intonation of the words against the white blankness of silence. The audible or even musical implications in experiments with words is well-expressed by Joyce's phrase "verbivocovisual", which aptly describes the multimodality of word-image combinations as well as unusually formed or placed words, whereby the verbal, the vocal and the visual not only merge but appear to co-exist (Joyce

²⁷Mitchell, *Picture theory*, 89. Imagetext is defined by Mitchell as "synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text." (Ibid.)

341).²⁸ The influence of *Finnegan's Wake* on experiments with word-image combinations is noteworthy. Augusto de Campos mentioned *Finnegan's Wake* in his manifesto of concrete poetry, and more recently Katharina Bazarnik and Zenon Fajfer have referred to him in their theoretical essays and creative works. It is noteworthy that all three of them cite “verbivocovisual”.²⁹ Moreover as Sipe’s overview of studies on text-picture relationships in picture books shows, the adjectives used by various scholars to describe the interaction between words and images have been borrowed from music and range from ‘counterpoint’, ‘contrapunctual’ and ‘antiphonal’ to ‘duet’ (Sipe 97).³⁰ That the dimension of sound can acquire prominence in word-image combinations by being visualized through the word’s iconicity is evident not only in Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*, but also in the presence of onomatopoeia (or sound effects, abbreviated to sfx) in comics. Interestingly enough, a recent DC supervillain is also called Onomatopoeia. Created by Kevin Smith and appearing first in *Green Arrow* and later the first issue of *Batman: Cacophony*, his speech is limited to onomatopoeic words. Smith’s declaration that this character cannot be transposed to film highlights the uniqueness of the sfx

²⁸ The phrase occurs in the play directions after the Butt-Taff dialogue: “*Up to this curkscrew bind an admirable verbivocovisual presentiment of the worldrenowned Caerholme Event has been given by the Irish Race and World.*”

²⁹ De Campos, Augusto, *Concrete Poetry: A manifesto* (1956), trans. by John Tolman. <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/concretipoet.htm> (Retrieved May 15, 2010); Bazarnik, Katarzyna, “A New Literary Genre?” *Insistent Images* (= *Iconicity in Language and Literature*, vol. 5), ed. by Olga Fischer, Christina Ljunberg & Elzbieta Tabakowska, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007, 191 – 208.

³⁰ Sipe, “How picture books work,” 97.

feature to comics.³¹ Such a word-image mélange is predominantly visual and vocal but bound to two-dimensions and would lose its effect in film, which includes actual sound.

The two means of emphasizing the iconicity of words – namely through the form of the letters, as with Blake or through the arrangement as in the case of Mallarmé – are merged in the poster-collages by Filippo Marinetti. Compared to Blake and Mallarmé, Marinetti had a more militant agenda and his aim to free the word led to the enhancement of its visual aspect vis-à-vis both form and layout. In collages like *Bombardamento, Zang, Tumb Tuum* (comprising of pasted paper and typeface) the words like “Zang”, “Tumb” and “Tuum”, are onomatopoeic and their connotations stem from their phonetic quality, which in this case are violent.³² These connotations are enhanced by the formal or iconical appearance of the word (strikingly similar to the sound effects of comics) as well as the surrounding outlines of bombs. Similarly in Isidore Isou’s *Manifeste de la Poésie lettriste*, the aim of liberating the word not only provokes the splitting of words into letters or the creation of new ones but is also accompanied by destructive and rebellious undertones.³³ Subversion and the blurring of boundaries between words and images, therefore, often go hand in hand.

Collages - which Varga had considered as word-image combinations that can elude the hierarchical tendency of word-image relations - can nonetheless also illustrate how one tries to read meaning into word-image combinations by departing from the words since

³¹ Brady, Mark, “DiDio on Kevin Smith, Batman and Onomatopoeia”

<http://www.newsarama.com/comics/080724-SmithBatman.html> (Retrieved June 1, 2010).

³² Marinetti, Filippo, *Bombardamento, Zang Tumb Tuum*, 1915. Private Collection.

³³ Isou, Isidore, “La Manifeste de la Poésie lettriste,” *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947, 11 – 18.

they provide the most direct clues regarding possible meanings. Faced by pieces like Pablo Picasso's *Guitar, Sheet Music, Glass* (comprising of pasted papers and newsprint, gouache and charcoal on paper), the newspaper scrap and even the piece of sheet music will be seen as indicators of more specific information in contrast to the broader and vaguer implications of the images from which a guitar's shape is the only obvious form.³⁴ By containing part of the newspaper's title - "Le Jou" from Le Journal - as well as the headline referring to war - "Le bataille s'est engagé" ("The battle begins") - a contrast against the homely wallpaper background and the allusions to music is created. The glass, possibly the cubist sketch of an indefinite form on a cream scrap of paper, can then be seen as incorporating the tension of the situation, the transience and uncertainty of conditions under war. Naturally, the collage's title itself, creating a word-image relationship where the two elements are physically separate, contributes to the collage's interpretation. In contrast to Marinetti's collages, however, the stronger presence of images in most of Picasso's pieces makes the purely visual aspects play a more dominant role in creating meaning, entailing iconographical analysis or the attribution of forms to objects and gleaning their connotations.

Similarly although the words in Kurt Schwitters's collages are often easy to read and comprehend (for those knowing the language) the meanings that can be attached to the are fewer and vaguer, which is further exacerbated by the fact that most of them do not carry titles (e.g. *Untitled*, 1928).³⁵ Not only are varying possibilities open, vaguely steered by the literal and visual content of the collage, but the interpretations are likely to

³⁴ Picasso, Pablo, *Guitar, Sheet Music, Glass*, 1912. McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas.

³⁵ Schwitters, Kurt, *Untitled*, 1928. Jasper Johns' Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

be more subjective. Collages like these with no obvious, clear meaning exemplify the aforementioned tendency highlighted by Eco of construing meaning and deducing relations in all juxtaposed elements. Notably both Schwitters and Jacques Villeglé's images, by virtue of their direct but random inclusion of the everyday are frequently seen as mirroring the collective reality. Having Dadaist leanings, Schwitters had described his Merz-works as striving towards a connection between everything and the world. Similarly Villeglé's collages of printed matter from the everyday furthered the project of *nouveau réalisme*. However, Villeglé's collages are more 'lacerated', to borrow the artist's adjective for the many lacerated posters ('*affiches lacérées*') made from placards torn from urban spaces. In most of these collages the material is so tattered that the words are largely incomprehensible consequently diminishing their signifying role in comparison to the pictures. While pictures are often kept intact, the references are usually temporally and culturally bound, relevant for those who are familiar with the actual advertisements, people and issues. Yet where both words and images are inconstruable the collage can be analyzed as an abstract image.

The collages were examples of how - despite partially balancing out the inevitable hierarchy in word-image combinations - the interpretation of word-image combinations will be dominated by the words as long as they are construable. However in the case of collages that retain familiar typefaces (such as those of newspapers, or tickets) or contain descriptive, clear images, word iconicity plays a minimal role apart from contextualizing the origin of the words. Modern experiments in poetry have taken up the iconical aspect of words and furthered the innovations by Blake and Mallarmé in a slightly different way from the collages, whereby the words, by usually remaining comprehensible, play a

prominent role in forming the entire work's meaning through functioning as both words and images. Importantly, in works like collages and visual poetry, the tendency is to treat words as visual material, as exemplified by Robert Smithson's remark: "My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas".³⁶

For modern visual poetry Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la Paix et de la Guerre 1913 – 1916*, was a major step in the direction of using words as material, as visual elements constituting pictures instead of functioning as abstract signifiers.³⁷ Yet although the image serves as a vague indicator of the content in calligrams like *Reconnais-toi* and even *Il pleut*, both of which have an immediately striking and recognizable form (particularly the female visage in *Reconnais-toi*), the words are ultimately dominant. Additionally in Apollinaire's calligrams, the aspect of temporality becomes noteworthy. Not only is the meaning of the calligram altered in the course of time as the signifying weight shifts from the directly perceived image to the more slowly read words but by comprising of words, the image re-constitutes itself with their flow. The calligrams also exemplify another facet of word-image combinations, namely that owing to the co-existence of words and images, the distinguishing attributes of spatiality and temporality that were traditionally accorded to them are blurred. Apollinaire's calligrams ultimately qualify as more complete instances of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' than the illustrated text as proposed by Wendy Steiner.³⁸

³⁶ Smithson, Robert, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, ed. by Jack Flam, Berkley/Los Angeles/London: University of California 1996, 61.

³⁷ Apollinaire, Guillaume, *Calligrammes*, Paris: Gallimard 2002.

³⁸ Steiner, Wendy, *The Colors of Rhetoric. Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982, 144

Likewise the conclusion of Augusto de Campos' *Concrete Poetry Manifesto* emphasizes the materiality and hence the visual aspect of the words: "CONCRETE POETRY: TENSION OF THING-WORDS IN SPACE-TIME".³⁹ Furthermore, it is evident that, as in Marinetti's case, the notion of giving the word life once again leads to the transformation of the word into an image. The dynamism of the word emphasized by the manifesto is expressed in De Campos' 'poem-clips' and holographic poems, as for example, in *hearthead* (1980), where the words in the clip are steadily broken and separated by brackets but remain recognizable as constantly altering words.⁴⁰ This destruction is more complete in the holographic poem *poema-bomba / são paulo* (created with Moysés Baumstein in 1987) where the letters of the title are scattered in multicolored ether.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it soon becomes apparent that the letters are a disintegration of the title and its violent connotations are expressed by the prominence of red ether that engulfs the words.

Since concrete poetry and affiliated currents like spatialism produced some of the richest examples of word-image combinations and interactions, it is worthwhile looking at some more examples. In the early 60s Jiří Kolář produced several concrete poems dedicated to contemporary artists. These comprised of letters from the artist's name assembled in such a way as to mimic the most distinguishing visual motif in the artist's œuvre. Thus Kolář's

³⁹ De Campos, *Concrete Poetry Manifesto*.

⁴⁰ De Campos, Augusto, *hearthead*, 1980. Augusto de Campos - Site Oficial – UOL, <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/poemas.htm> (Retrieved May 15, 2010).

⁴¹ De Campos, Augusto/ Baumstein, Moysés, *poema-bomba / são paulo*, 1987. Artist's collection.

Hommage à Lucio Fontana mimics the shape of Fontana's famous slashes.⁴² Likewise *Brancusi* has the clean curvilinear shape characterising Constantin Brancusi's sculptures.⁴³ Depending once again on the extent to which the letters are discernible, these poems by Kolář essentially work as images, however the letters within the forms confirm the results of the images' iconographical analyses. It is hardly surprising that in the same years Kolář also created pieces like *Rasierklingengedicht (Razorbladepoem)* – a three-dimensional piece comprising of several strands of razorblades joined by barbed wire and hanging from a horizontal rope.⁴⁴ Since the only discernible words are the brand names and numbers on the blades, the piece is essentially interpreted as an image, this time with limited collaboration of the words in meaning-making. Yet the visible brand names like 'Vitez', 'Zenit' and 'Favorit' eventually acquire stronger connotations as nouns or adjectives rather than as proper nouns. These however are dependent on the viewer's knowledge or frame of reference; upon seeing 'Vitez', which is Czech for victor, a French-speaker, for instance, is likely to be reminded of 'vitesse' or speed.

Instances of word-image combinations based on the visual aspect of individual letters, where the words serve more exclusively as visual material and have limited literal significance include Hansjorg Mayer's *Alphabetenquadratbuch* pages where patterns created by superimposed letters transform the letters into decorative motifs that are

⁴² Kolář, Jiří, *Hommage à Lucio Fontana*, ca. 1960, in: Garnier, Pierre, *Spatialisme et poésie concrète*, Paris: Gallimard 1968.

⁴³ Kolář, Jiří, *Brancusi*, 1962, in: Donguy, Jacques, *Poésie expérimentale. Zone numérique (1953 – 2007)*, Dijon: Les presses du réel 2007.

⁴⁴ Kolář, Jiří, *Rasierklingengedicht*, 1962, in: Donguy, Jacques, *Poésie expérimentale. Zone numérique (1953 – 2007)*, Dijon: Les presses du réel 2007.

otherwise unreadable.⁴⁵ Similar techniques of using letters as purely visual matter were also used by other artists, including Dieter Roth.

In contrast to concrete poetry which regarded words as matter, the poets of the spatialism movement claimed to regard words as energy.⁴⁶ Yet, the physical or material form of the letters remained dominant, thereby remaining proximal to images as in most concrete poetry. This can be seen in Pierre Garnier's poems where the words are often broken into letters and frequently combined with geometrical shapes to emphasize the abstraction and rejection of concrete connotations of both.

Before concluding, it is necessary to consider word iconicity in more detail in order to determine the extent to which it influences the interpretation of words as words or as images. In doing so it is important to bear in mind that in word-image combinations the word's existence as word and as image is constantly fluctuating.

Although Varga emphasized the more pictorial aspect of non-Latin based scripts, onomatopoeic instances in comics, where the shape of the word is radically transformed and usually colored, also acquire comparable pictorial qualities.⁴⁷ The difference between familiar and unfamiliar scripts, whereby the latter take up a visual quality more quickly is also evident in the comparison of sound effects used in comics with those in manga - the latter's Japanese characters appear to undergo more radical mutations and acquire iconic qualities more fluidly. And underscoring the close connection of the sound effects with the other images in panels, onomatopoeic words are not usually altered in

⁴⁵ Mayer, Hansjorg, *Alphabetenquadratbuch*, 1965. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁴⁶ Garnier, *Spatialisme*, 24.

⁴⁷ Varga, "Criteria," 37.

manga translations. Ultimately the functioning of words as words or as images is a tussle between the word's legibility and its pictorial transformation as well as the extent of the reader's familiarity with the script. Hence despite the frequent presence of a key containing the meanings of the two or three kanji characters used in the visual poems by Seiichi Niikuni, for those unfamiliar with the script, the visual content is the most striking aspect, (particularly since the poet has a tendency of including characters with similar forms). The same would hold for calligraphy in other languages, like Arabic, where once again the words are likely to be treated as images depending on their comprehensibility.

Testing the limits of word iconicity, hovering on the boundary between words and images, calligraphic words are clearly different from unadorned word types. Thus in spite of being painted, John Giorno's words in his many poem-paintings function essentially as words with their abstract connotations containing the greatest signifying power instead of their pictorial quality. In *Eating The Sky*, which is a painting of its title, the blue background can easily be seen as referring to the sky and the different colors for "Eating" and "The Sky" - yellow and white respectively - as emphasizing the incongruity of the juxtaposed words.⁴⁸ Such an interpretation is clearly rooted in the denotations and connotations of the words. Nonetheless, the poster-like nature brings in an auditory dimension that was already utilized by Mallarmé with his variations in the placing and size of the words. Covering the top half of the canvas, "Eating" with its thicker lettering screams out in contrast to the thinner, white letters of "The Sky".

By frequently including words in the canvas in varying styles and with abstract forms, Cy Twombly's paintings and drawings further highlight the extent to which word iconicity, or the visual form accorded to words can be expressive e.g. the femininity of color and

⁴⁸ Giorno, John, *Eating the Sky*, 1989. Artist's collection.

form, as well as carelessness in *Wilder Shores of Love* where the title is untidily scrawled in red across the upper half of the painting.⁴⁹ This phrase is also rich in intertextual connotations since it alludes to one of the main characters, Jane Digby, in Lesley Blanch's book *Wilder Shores of Love*.⁵⁰ Therefore, other than its indexical quality, the written script or typography itself carries specific connotations that are woven with the meanings conveyed by the surrounding text and images. Conventions in displaying or transforming words lead to the association of certain meanings with certain typographies. Such visual expressivity of words is especially apparent in the different kinds of lettering used for different characters in various comics and graphic novels like the alternative Batman tale of *Arkham Asylum*, where the characters' natures as well as mood are conveyed by the script.⁵¹

These examples not only demonstrate the interpretational model's suitability but also allow the deduction of prominent implications in word-image combinations. It is also noteworthy that all of the discussed works manifest one or more of the following factors that can be regarded as implications of word-image combinations: Interaction with space, materiality of the word, and musicality. Lastly, word-image combinations are often the outcomes of rebellious or destructive acts, which in the course of their destruction also reveal the workings of both words and images, making such works self-reflexive.

⁴⁹ Twombly, Cy, *Wilder Shores of Love*, 1985. Artist's collection.

⁵⁰ Bann, Stephen. "'Wilder Shores of Love': Cy Twombly's Straying Signs," *Materialities of Communication*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. by William Whobery, Stanford: University of Stanford Press 1994, 198 – 214.

⁵¹ Morisson, Grant/ McKean, David, *Arkham Asylum. A Serious House on Serious Earth*, New York: DC Comics 2004.

The influential role of words in indirect or obscure word-image combinations

In generating meaning through the repeated interaction of information from literal and pictorial channels, word-image combinations (even on print) are fluid. Even when it is not blatantly prominent, the iconical nature of the words and their surroundings does influence their meaning, albeit to a more limited extent. To return to the two questions posed at the beginning: For understanding how word-image combinations work or what happens when a word nears a picture, it is necessary to determine the extent to which the word functions as a picture i.e. the prominence of its iconic aspect as opposed to the textual or literal one. The main assumption of this methodology is that as long as the word is legible and comprehensible, its literal aspect is likely to be the defining factor contributing to its meaning and that of the work, including the accompanying images. When the word becomes illegible or the reader/ viewer is unable to comprehend it (as in the case of an unfamiliar script) then the word functions foremost as an image and its iconic nature as well as the iconographic standing of the surrounding images plays the dominant role in forming the word-image combination's meaning. So the two questions posed at the beginning are closely connected: The end of the word's existence as a word with denotations and connotations renders its form more important than content and ascribes greater weight to surrounding images, especially if they are figurative.

The assumption propelling the analytical method employed here is that when the word is comprehensible, it usually dominates the work's meaning. Nonetheless the final meaning of every word-image combination results from an interaction between the literal and

iconical aspects of the words and images. Meaning is consequently created not only by the interaction of verbal and visual elements but is also molded according to reader/viewer's frame of reference.

Figure 1 Interpretational paths for word-image combinations



