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Maria Giulia Dondero

The Language of Images

The Forms and the Forces

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Maria Giulia Dondero

The Language of Images

The Forms and the Forces

Foreword by Virginia Kuhn

 Springer

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Foreword

It was my great pleasure to work with Maria Giulia Dondero during the time she was finalizing this translation of this, her most recent book. Over the course of the six weeks spent as a visiting researcher at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, my home institution, we enjoyed many long conversations about a range of topics associated with visual studies, semiotics, academic disciplinarity and the odd trajectory by which certain theories take hold while others are left to obscurity. These conversations highlighted many convergences in Dondero's work and my own, or rather parallel efforts, each one deviating slightly but always productively. Examining a few of the more salient overlaps is a useful demonstration of the ways in which this book may form a bridge of sorts, one that spans the francophone and anglophone worlds and connects Dondero's enhanced semiotic theory with the algorithmic processes for image examination that links our current efforts. Here I focus on some of the most germane areas in this connecting effort, and I do so with some liberties taken in order to open this text to a more general audience.

Sketching her argument for a theory of 'uttered enunciation' with regard to the language of images, Dondero remarks, almost in passing, that narrativity in still images has seldom been considered by visual semioticians, due to the 'cumbersome opposition, inherited by the contemporary world, between the spatial arts and the temporal arts'.¹ Although for many years I have argued that current academic disciplines, having coalesced during the era of print literacy, need rethinking for a digital era, I had not thought of the rift in this way. It certainly rings true in my own trajectory as I moved from art history (spatial art) to language and cinema (temporal arts). Indeed, in the early 1980s as an undergraduate, I co-wrote a gallery catalog for an exhibition titled 'French Master Caricaturists: Daumier and Gavarni,' which featured a fairly extensive corpus of the work of these two political satirists. The extensive research that my co-author and I undertook for the project was written mostly in French, with a few relevant books in German. We each had some serious translation to do. Two things about that experience are relevant here: First, the

¹Page 26.

images that I glossed in the catalog—I handled the Daumier work, my colleague wrote about Gavarni—were done in a purely formal way, or what Dondero refers to as a plastic way. History was considered of course, but no overarching theory or methodology was outlined, at least explicitly. Years later, when I returned to academia and pursued a doctorate in rhetoric and cinema with a heavy emphasis on the digital, I was somehow lulled into the false notion that all scholarship is now translated into English. Arrogant as this may sound, in all fairness, I was in a department of English and the structuralists and poststructuralists we were studying, many or most of whom were French such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes *were* translated into English.

I belabor my own story as a way of suggesting the extent to which disciplinary divides are both productive and problematic. In fact, in my work with graduate students over the last decade, I find that a multi-disciplinary approach like my own is more the rule than the exception, potentially further separating the spatial and temporal arts, or at least creating gaps in what is considered pertinent scholarship. Thus, while I was not conversant with the francophone school of semiotics before, I now appreciate its path and I understand Dondero's foundations in the work of Greimas and Focillon but also her frustration with the reliance on verbal language as the 'global interpreter' of all other semiotic systems. Indeed, for at least the last two decades, my work has been premised on the fact that digital technologies are nearly as amenable to images as they are to words. As such, we have an expanded semiotic palette from which to make meaning, and, by extension, we must be able to both interpret and produce the language of images. Put another way, critical engagement must include the ability to 'read' as well as to 'write' with this emergent language. For me, this is a matter of large-scale literacy, but it is also an analytical stumbling block since a word cannot adequately account for the 'excess' of meaning in an image; it cannot be that 'global interpreter' of all semiotic systems.

The question then becomes, how do we establish both a theory and a notation system that will allow the examination of vast corpora of the images that bombard us in the contemporary world? This is where I believe Dondero's theory of 'uttered enunciation' may hold most promise. While the technology needed to mediate among human and computer vision is not yet able to handle this challenge, a solid methodology will be vital to its anticipation. Computer vision algorithms are necessary to filter visuals and subject them to human analysis, much of which will require words and non-digital intervention. One of the main difficulties of discussing an image-based system on its own terms is that we have no native way of communicating (native to our bodies) except in gestures and vocal tonality (once we get devices implanted in our bodies, perhaps we will be able to talk in pictographs and memes). Human gestures, however, do have representation and building on Aby Warburg, Dondero argues for a system that accounts for the forces that animate the form, those that result in gestures, even in the face of the inherently static nature of an image. Isolating and labeling the forces in these forms will be massively helpful in training computerized processes.

Further, as Dondero admits, for a purely image-based system to work, it must allow for an image to comment upon another image, and she builds a compelling overview of the way this interaction works since images frequently do refer to each other. In addition, I suggest that an image can be ‘cited’ when part of it is pulled from the whole in order to say something new. This is most easily demonstrated in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, a 1972 BBC television series that explores the impact of mechanical reproduction of paintings from the past.² Berger shows, for instance, the ways in which a portion of Bruegel’s *The Road to Calvary* can be isolated, shifting its meaning accordingly; highlighting one area, it becomes a ‘straightforward devotional image’ while another detail suggests a simple landscape, or perhaps a history of costuming.³ This relationship is consonant with Dondero’s ‘mereological’ connection. It is an association of the part to the whole, what I refer to as a metonymical relationship. It is also a one-way street in that the part can never stand in for the whole; if one isolates a face from a painting of allegorical depiction, it becomes merely a portrait and will not refer back to the allegorical representation.

This brings me to another feature of Dondero’s approach which I find useful and as such attractive: her schema does not foreclose other interpretive strategies, since it is not based solely in a universal language of images, but rather one that recognizes generalized imagistic connotations but also appreciates the particular ‘status’ of an image, or what I refer to as its placement in a discourse community. This opens a space for cultural analyses that can add another layer of meaning. For instance, in an excellent overview of Tintoretto’s *Susanna and the Elders*, Dondero demonstrates the ways in which irreducible forces animate this painting, directing the gaze in several and often conflicting ways both within and outside of the frame. Here the convincing argument is enhanced, in my view, by the larger economy of images of its time and the cultural work they perform. Here again, I refer to *Ways of Seeing* and Berger’s discussion of the difference between nakedness and nudity. Noting that *Susanna and the Elders* are a frequent subject in European oil painting of the Renaissance, Berger argues that this is an example of the latter: the nude. The woman depicted is simply a trope, an object. Since the subject matter is religious, this trope allows the patron to display a nude freely and without rebuke. It becomes an alibi, in essence. Older versions of this topic do not include the mirror that Tintoretto adds, thus implicating the woman herself as she becomes both subject and object of the gaze. The addition of the mirror becomes more frequent as it both allows the pleasure of the male gaze, while it also serves to show women as vain.

²This impressive series was based on the work of Walter Benjamin and was later turned into a book. Unsurprisingly, it is the book form which has been a staple in many visual studies classes, while the original filmic version is largely neglected but accessible since its digitization. The filmic version instantiates many of the ideas in my own, as well as Dondero’s conception of a language (both langue and parole) of images.

³*Ways of Seeing*, episode 1, 13:50 to 15:50. 1972.

This reading does nothing to violate Dondero's method; rather it enhances it (and vice versa), adding evidence for the 'irreducible forces' identified within her reading.

The final aspect of productive alignment between our work concerns processes of production and versioning: Dondero calls for the inclusion of multiple versions of an image, whether they be different formats of the same digital image, or the sketches and studies conducted as preparation for painting. Ultimately, these 'paratexts' can inform and add nuance to the study of images, regardless of their era or genre. In my work, this is mainly an issue of archival practices—especially as digital formats change and platforms become obsolete in a short space of time—these paratexts can act as clues to the original functioning of an inexecutable computer program. Multiple versions are useful for providing training data for computer vision algorithms even as they can also function as metadata that aids the potential recreation of an image that is no longer accessible. Until computer vision algorithms are better trained at image detection, this metadata can also provide a useful layer of meaning, enhancing the strictly formal processes carried out by computers.

For all of these reasons, the schema outlined in *The Language of Images: The Forms and the Forces* is quite compelling and can open up new avenues of exploration for large corpora of image-based media, in the current state of things even as it anticipates a future of ever larger and more numerous databases and the enhanced algorithmic processes that are sure to come in the near future.

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Chapter 1

Introduction



How are images to be studied, described, and analyzed given the current state of semiotic knowledge? Should we focus on a single image or should we select a series of images in order for each to become comprehensible? May this be done by identifying affinities in terms of genre, status, filiation, or should this rather be done on the basis of form and composition, as seen in the past in the traditions of Warburg and of French semiotic structuralism? The latter had notably sought to identify “shared diagrams”¹ within visual productions which stemmed from highly diverse traditions using a wide variety of mediums. Today, these shared diagrams are sought to be identified within large collections of images (“big visual data”² or “big image data,”³ depending on the author), and this search is carried out using the tools built in the field of computer vision which will be addressed in this book.

A very rich debate has long concerned the role of images in society and vice versa. Is it a matter of understanding images through the study of audiences, of interest groups, and of cultural institutions? Or is it a matter of understanding society itself through images, as proposed by visual ethnography and anthropology, and as proposed by Lev Manovich’s cultural analytics in the field of computer science? Such are the numerous questions this work seeks to address, by arguing for levels of mediation between the structures which organize and shape images and the social statuses which overlie and orient their interpretation. The image corpora analyses presented here aim to understand not only the specificity of *visual grammar*, but also the social *statuses* and the interpretive frameworks which govern the functioning of the images. To this end, it is necessary to start with a methodology for the observation

¹Fabbri (1998).

²Dondero (2018).

³Klinke (2017).

of images by means of which to analyze their identifying and distinguishing compositional features, but also to identify all the affinities which may help to understand the images thanks to the relations they establish between one another within social domains such as art, science, politics, and advertising.

This book bases its methodology upon multiple levels of analytical pertinence which are interrelated and stratified. We will thus focus in turn upon the *substrate* carrying the forms (the canvas, the photochemical paper, the software, the screen), upon the *genre* (namely the portrait genre), and upon the *status* of the images (artistic, scientific, or other). These issues have remained relatively unaddressed to this day, research in visual semiotics having only seldom devoted attention to these three parameters. Prior research has rather attended, on the one hand, to general issues pertaining to visual perception (Groupe μ 1992), and on the other hand, to issues pertaining to the description of forms (Floch 1985).

It is to an introduction to the semiotics of images that the following chapters invite, as well as to a critique of the analytical methodology of semiotics and of its general theory of meaning. More specifically, our proposals develop three major areas of reflection: 1. Enunciation in the context of visual language, that is, the observational system which may be associated with images; 2. The associated notions of metaimage and of metavisual; and 3. The question of the medium, or of the substance of the image's plane of expression as substrate, application, and gestural act of inscription. It is the attention devoted to the substance of expression, and not only to the form of expression, which will enable us to illustrate the relationships between the forms and the forces, between the stabilization of the visual features and of the productive gestures, and between the setting of the image's composition and its narrativity.

1.1 How Does One Look at an Image?

The objective of this book is to address images by means of a renewed semiotic perspective. This is a perspective which seeks to be complementary to the one adopted by French semiotician Floch (1985, 1986). In his works, Floch mainly devoted himself to the plastic and figurative analysis of images, leaving aside the truly *dialogical* aspect of the relation between the image and the space of the observer. We will therefore investigate the transposition of the theory of enunciation, formulated in linguistics, into the field of visual discourse.

The question of enunciation, and namely the relationship between the image and its observer as inscribed within the image itself (*uttered enunciation*), appeared to constitute the issue which, in semiotics, governs all others, namely the relations between both the plastic and figurative dimensions, as well as the relations between

expression and content (semi-symbolism⁴). Indeed, as we will see, the theory of enunciation is also useful for examining the process by which the image's planes of expression and of content are established⁵ (enunciative act⁶).

Using the analysis of the theory of enunciation as foundation, an attempt will first be made to address a central question raised by several disciplines and fields of investigation: How does one look at an image?⁷ The question may be broken down as follows: By what means, by which compositional strategies, and by which manners of topological organization can the image predispose/configure a *model observer*?⁸ If, as asserted by Marin (1993) and by other historians of art following him, the image configures, by means of its spatial strategies, a model observer, or a *simulacrum of the ideal gaze*, wouldn't the empirical observer, made of flesh and bones, be free in his or her act of gazing? Does the image pre-configure a cognitive and passionate position for the observer to which the spectator must adhere and conform, or, conversely, may he or she elect to deviate from the observational simulacrum provided by the image, and if so, in what way?⁹

The sciences of language provide answers to these questions through the theory of enunciation, such theory constituting the tool for analyzing the *simulacra* of communication. In this respect, it is useful to stress from the onset that the goal of the semiotic approach is not to interpret the image, but to analyze it, that is, to shed light upon what is *commensurable* among all possible interpretations. According to the perspective of Algirdas Julien Greimas and the School of Paris,¹⁰ what determines the commensurability of interpretations is the discursive organization of the image, which provides reading *constraints*. In counterpoint to this conception of the analysis of images, interpretation would rather be understood as an appropriation of historically and

⁴Semi-symbolism concerns the relation between categorial oppositions, including the homologation between oppositions on the plane of expression and on the plane of content. For example: "above: below = celestial: terrestrial."

⁵This is in following with the works of Jacques Fontanille on the semiotics of imprint and namely Fontanille (2004, 2011) where the enunciation's reference position ensures the distinction between expression and content.

⁶On the notion of "enunciative act" in semiotics, see Fontanille (1998), as well as this book's last chapter which addresses the notions of substrate and application.

⁷It is a question which has also been posed several times in art history. This text will limit itself to citing Fried (1980) and Arasse (1996).

⁸Regarding the notion of "model reader" in the context of literature, please refer to Eco (1979). As concerns images, it is necessary to distinguish between the "delegate observer" directly represented within the image (Thürlemann 1980) and the types of perspective which open various routes into the painting for the penetration of the spectator's gaze.

⁹In this respect, it would be fruitful to apply Michel de Certeau's theories regarding consumer cultures to the field of visual artifacts. As concerns visual semiotics and the theory of enunciation as the subversion of a totalitarian strategy, see Dondero (2015b).

¹⁰For a clear, complete and updated overview on Greimasian semiotics, see Broden (2017).