

Text and Picture in Different Situations

If according to the medievalists Jacques LE GOFF and Jean-Claude SCHMITT image was the most expressive word that characterized the Middle Ages, the present Western culture can be described with the word 'text'. Text as a medium in books, magazines, articles, as a message in newspapers as well as an advertising medium. We live in a culture of texts. What do text and picture mean? How great is the significance of the Bible? What was the culture in the medieval period like? How does the transmission of meaning from the text world to the pictorial representation work? Why is symbol so important in this transmission? What are the present relations between text and image?

It is almost impossible, or at least maybe too bold, to write about text and image in general. Both are important parts of culture and are deeply rooted in our consciousness. They are not only mutually connected but are also inevitable parts of societies subject to the process of civilisation. As such they can be neither ignored nor can they be fully defined or conceptualised. Therefore it is our aim not only to inspect their mode of influence but also to point out the various aspects of their mutual influence. Furthermore, we would like to show how they are related, and how they benefit from each other in the sphere of art and societal system.

Defining Text and Picture

An artistic picture is a created imitation of reality. It always has a form, context and function. From the aesthetic point of view it is what a person is presented with in a moment, especially in a moment of relative immobility. Picture has two meanings according to the lexis of aesthetics. We will not focus on picture as an item of imagination and mental image, but will rather examine picture as a presentation of a person or a thing in art.

We usually look at a picture to challenge our dreaming through colours and shapes. A picture feeds our attention, supplies new stimuli and evokes feelings. We could say that the creation of a picture belongs to the natural expressions of humanity. Text is appropriated with picture with regard to noetic, epistemological, social, class, ethical, sensual and other aspects of existence and practice. A picture can have very different functions – it can be anything from a subject of veneration to a purely documentary material.

We understand text as a sequence of expressions with a marked beginning and end that creates an autonomous unit with internal cohesiveness. The identities of many cultures are linked to text. Jurij M. LOTMAN in his book *Text and Culture* states that thanks to the concept and the used view of European culture, the term of culture is viewed as a term that is related to the writing that is a base of the culture. Everyone understands that the text expressed in writing, on which we are focusing in our study, is a complex composition of a number of words and letters or even textual sub-units.

The word, as a unit, records ideas. Text is a sign of civilisation within the framework of such a culture which is focused on expanding the number of texts and it does not rely on building up a collective memory. Thus the text has its own value and necessity. The spirituality of word and its meaning for the existence of humanity is underlined also by the Bible. Before the world was created, the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1,1).

What is valid for textual expressions is valid in a special way for visual representations. Picture and text have a number of common features. The basic feature of most texts and pictures is *polysemy*. That means that both of these elements of culture can have a different interpretation at the same time with regard to the fact that every “reading” of any text or picture becomes a structure that takes into account the principles that are typical of it and at the same time includes the elements of individual creativity (the term “to read a picture” is linked with icons and we will use it in a different sense too).



Bible as the Great Text

In general, text as a window offers a variety of interpretation possibilities to various levels of thinking, with regard to its polysemantic character. It is very different, however, in case of the Bible. None of the literary works of art has influenced the cultural history of humanity to such a great extent as the Bible. Christian culture is based on the biblical text and its images. It presents itself with their help, it draws inspiration from them when developing, and a productive and continuously changing process originates, as both of the elements are creative. The meaning of the Bible, as a sacred and true text, is tremendous for all the aspects of human society. It pervades our existence more than we can imagine.

We agree with Umberto Eco who with regard to the above mentioned states about the Bible: “The Bible must have a sole meaning, i.e. the

¹ Eco Umberto, *Arte e bellezza nell'estetica medievale*. Bompiani, 1997. 182.

one intended by the Lord, its author, and it must signify only one thing.”¹ The image that originates as an impetus from the Bible can be read as a text. The image, the bearer of faith as an evidence, the image as an impetus for a growth of spiritual values, as a message of the text by which the image was inspired. The greater and the richer the textual message, the greater and the stronger is the image message.

The current culture has relegated the Bible to the religious sphere of life; it is linked with denominations or text interpretations or with the notions regarding the mission of image. The picture as a decoration of modern churches has been lost in comparison to Baroque or Classicism. In the past, the presence of image was manifested as one of the possibilities to express our faith, but now a “net, simple or even strict” church architecture has the leading place.

Relation of Text and Picture in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts

The close relation between text and image can be documented by many cultural treasures. The illuminated manuscripts from the medieval period belong to the most intriguing and plentiful examples. They point out a very sensitive relation between text and picture. These manuscripts include paintings that supplement the Biblical text. As a matter of fact it was the picture that dominated the medieval period, and its importance for the text was underlined by the Bible as an inspiration source of messages and the bearer of education as well as the source of God’s Word. Image and text were the basis of the medieval culture, and in their combination the words of the Bible were transmitted into an artistic image.

The relation between picture (illumination) and the Biblical text is not as simple as it may look at the first sight. There is a silent struggle between the text and its illuminated counterpart. It is quite frequent that one of them is clearly emphasized in the book. Though the meaning and contents of a picture correspond to the message of the illustrated text and there is a close relation to the text, the illumination, as a pictorial reflection of the text, exists autonomously, as the contents of the picture has its own functional structure. Thus the illumination has its own notional value, quite often without any relation to the text of the Bible.

Transferring Text into Pictorial Form

When transferring text into a pictorial form or reflecting a Biblical text in images, the artist first of all makes her-/himself familiar with the text and analyses it. The transfer of a Biblical text into an artistic picture form is done through a process during which the transmission of a mental image or idea that originated after reading a Biblical text into a visually perceivable picture happens. Prayer; the determination of key items in the text, the attributes that characterise a relevant topic; the reduction of textual items into a simpler expression through a picture; the choice of artistic figurative and abstract expressions; the creation of symbols for the display of action.

Expressing the sacred text in a pictorial form is of course complex. Medieval culture considered the intricacy of this book just a primary and shallow impression. When creating the picture where the basis is the Bible, the problem lies in the discovery of rules. Umberto Eco maintains that correct rules are those that are situated under the surface, whereby it is also necessary to remove all the false procedures. If the Bible was written *digito Dei* (by God's finger), then the Lord represents the principle of its identity and the text of the Bible cannot evoke contradictory meanings. How is it with the picture then? Can the picture created on the basis of a Biblical text evoke contradictory notions? If yes, how to avoid this?

On the one side there is the viewer and on the other side the author of the picture. The artists interpolate qualities of their creative activity into the picture so that the picture might be the bearer of a valuable message, as the topic and its contents create a valuable text. As pictures are created for various objectives their perception has various purposes. The viewer, as Erich MISTRÍK states, with regard to her or his full aesthetic perception, needs to achieve a certain psychical distance from what is going on in the work of art to differentiate his/her present feelings, evoked by the work of art -the picture- from herself or himself as an undivided personality.

There are two processes present: perception and experience. The values and experiences can only be brought about by such an art that wants to show and evoke feelings. It is such a picture that offers the viewer a creative dialogue. And it may happen only through symbols

and signs, because the transformation of ideas and spiritual notions, without further specifications of interpretation, can be best transferred through symbols and signs.

Symbols of Image and Text

Symbols animate and remind of what is not present at the moment. They not only record ideas, they also start chains of associations that help to decode the meanings of symbols. A picture full of symbolic imagery represents a truth that could be difficult to understand otherwise. Thus it is one of the tasks of the symbol to create a relation between the visible and the invisible world. It is possible to transfer interpretation from the textual world into the pictorial world by means of a symbol. And vice versa, the meaning of a symbolic interpretation of a topic can be at times better understood through words. We agree with Carl Gustav JUNG who claims that symbols not only provide the historical interpretation of the world, but also the theological one. Thus thanks to symbols it is possible to represent the text of the Bible.

When artists express a subject based on a text from the Bible, the presented topic assumes the function of a symbol. The subject becomes the bearer of a much wider meaning than it originally was. Symbols are linked with chains of associations. Associations are necessary in order to understand the links and relations at the level of both text and picture. The word *symbolleien* was used in expressions meaning “to hide, to cover, to collect”. Thus the word from the Bible is rather uncovered than covered. The visible image uncovers its meaning in its substance. We can decode the pictured text in the picture through the symbols.

The variability of image represents a fertile soil for an artist as it provides her or him with a wide scale of picturing. Diarmuid MCGANN² describes this meeting with the text that contains a symbol as follows: First, the reader perceives the text with a barrier or a distance. When we enter the text, we move from the position of a viewer to the position of one who analyses and who has a scientific attitude at the same time. We analyse and decode the text based on its internal structure and we ourselves explain it.

² MOORE Robert L., *Carl Jung and Christian Spirituality*. New York, 1988.

Image and Text under the Doctrine of Dictatorship

The contemporary art of Central Europe still 'feels the touch' with image and text that were connected with an ideology (Nazism or Communism) and with its doctrine during and after the Second World War. Fear, deception and lie were widely symbolised in art of that period.

Dictated by an ideology and in an oppressive political system, the liberty of text and image is often connected only to the individual concept of the artist. She or he transformed art by symbols if she or he wanted to escape ideology. These symbols have been identified as the basis of neomodernism, as Mária ORIŠKOVÁ describes this period. Symbols were transformed into innovations of meanings which wanted to find their originality. On the other hand, the image of the "real culture" was linked to the dominant categories, such as cleanliness as aim, decorum as effect, historicism as operation, museum as context, artist as original, work of art as a unique object.

The name of the culture that wanted to be free and independent during the era of the Eastern Block could be the *code culture*, as there were only two ways of dealing with text and image for those who did not want to give up the connection with liberty in art (e.g. dissidents or emigrants). The first one was the way of escape and isolation with searching for new transcendence. The second one was the way of opposition against society and its authority.

Text and picture were divided into official and unofficial. The vicious circle of the totalitarian regime went from lies to hide-outs and back. ORIŠKOVA quotes Roland BARTHES, who maintains: "Every text as image has another foregoing image or text, and there is no original and definitive meaning called »textuality«." ³ A truthful meaning of text and image has now started to appear. Universality and true value is in the present time more and more important, maybe even more in the realm of text which seems to have a larger influence today than the realm of image.

³ ORIŠKOVA M, *Double Voice*. Bratislava, 2002. 166.

Image and Text in Today's Art

A new point of view concerning the terms *picture* and *text* is visible in contemporary art. Independent and individual existence is emphasized. Text and picture transform again their context in the name of pluralism. Artists have started to produce a different deformation as a new reality through the unity of form, context and function of text and picture. It is visible in their symbiosis. The traditional point of view has lost its importance. Tradition is overshadowed by new styles, which are based on a different notion of text and image. Let us just mention lettrism, based on the notion of script, experimental poetry or interpreted book.⁴

In all contexts of societal and political systems, we should remember that in general, picture and text help human beings to expand their consciousness about themselves, about the world and God. Text as well as picture is the bearer of both spheres of knowledge – sensual and intelligible.

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Zuzana ŠICKOVÁ-MEŠKOVÁ was born in 1977 in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia. She is Roman Catholic, an assistant of French language in the Comenius University, Bratislava. She studied art education and French in Bratislava, and art history in the University Blaise Pascal in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Her individual expositions include *CROUS* in Clermont-Ferrand (June 2002) and *Con-Tiki* in Bratislava (December 2002). She participated in the following collective exhibitions: *BB-art*, Banská Bystrica (June 2003), *Maison de Mandrin*, Brioude (France, April 2003), *Omine High School*, Mine City (Japan, September 2002) and *University in Hradec Králové*, (Czech Republic, April 2001). She made the cover illustration of the book *Price of Life* (Banská Bystrica, 1998).

⁴ *Dictionary of International and Slovak Art in the Second Half of 20th Century*. Bratislava, 1999.