

## CLASSICAL PRESENCES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. *Classical Presences* brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

# Rethinking Lessing's *Laocoon*

*Antiquity, Enlightenment,  
and the 'Limits' of Painting  
and Poetry*

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the significance of human actions is an artistic achievement, historically realized (and correctable); it is not a philosophical insight. Artworks and practices are not only—as in Aristotle—evaluable or intelligible in terms of a transcendental account of *praxis*. For Lessing, artworks and practices are a way in which we come to grasp what it is to act, and how human actions function as modes of our overall self-understanding.

The deliverances of narrative renderings are brought to our awareness, for Lessing, not by virtue of a metaphysical account of human action that is available independent of the contemplation or creation of artworks. Rather, the unfolding of artistic practices that grapple with or work through particular actions—Laocoon's cry, say—are essential to the understanding, not just of a particular action, but to a fuller understanding of what human actions *are*, what they can teach us.

Lessing's focus on the limits of painting and poetry, then, is not intended to present transcendental criteria according to which the different arts can be evaluated in medial terms. Rather, in my view, it is intended to show how the criteria according to which certain artworks or practices yield a deeper understanding of human life are themselves graspable in and as the achievements of specific artworks and practices.

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### Image and Text in Lessing's *Laocoon*

#### From Friendly Semiotic Neighbours to Articulatory Twins

*Jürgen Trabant*

*Laocoon*, there can be no doubt, is one of the most interpreted and analysed texts of world literature. With that in mind, this chapter will not attempt an 'interpretation' pure and simple. Rather, on the occasion of the essay's 250th anniversary, and rethinking Lessing's essay from my own academic perspective (as a scholar interested in the historical anthropology of language), I approach *Laocoon* as a pre-text for some broader remarks on its main subject: the duality of image and language (or more precisely, text). Yet this statement is already an interpretation and a transgression. Is *Laocoon* about image and language? It is, of course, about *Mahlerey* und *Poesie*—about the visual arts (first and foremost, but not only, about painting), and about poetry (that is, about literature and the verbal arts). But as such, or so I argue in this chapter, the essay can also be considered as a contribution to a general theory of language and image.

*Laocoon* is often read—including by many in the present edited volume—as a text that advances and defends the priority of poetry. I consider the following sentence as conveying a different message:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lessing 1984: 91. For the German, see Lessing 2012: 130: 'Doch, so wie zwey billige freundschaftliche Nachbarn zwar nicht verstatten, daß sich einer in des andern innerstem

But as two equitable and friendly neighbours do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance . . . so also with painting and poetry.

'Two equitable and friendly neighbours (*zwei billige freundschaftliche Nachbarn*): this is the principal lesson I would like to take from Lessing. *Mahlerey* and *Poesie*, or image and word, are fair and friendly neighbours. The remarks that follow are an attempt to tease out that relationship.

In my research group in Berlin, we call the basis of this friendly neighbourliness 'symbolic articulation'.<sup>2</sup> We attempt to figure out what precisely this is: to ask what—as Lessing puts it—'the intimate domain (*das innerste Reich*)' is, as indeed to ask what the 'extreme frontiers (*die äussersten Grenzen*)' of image and language might be. Our view is that, contrary to Lessing's topographical metaphor, the neighbours share to a great extent one and the same intimate domain, and that the two domains are not so well delimited by borders.<sup>3</sup> Actually, we would change the topographical metaphor: text and image are neighbours in superimposed floors of a shared house rather than denizens of separate castles in contiguous territories.

## Historical Prelude

I consider *Laocoon* to be one chapter in a discussion of the duality of image and language that in fact reaches back much longer than 250 years. The novelty of Lessing's essay is not so much the discovery of new characteristics of image and word but rather a new positioning of these two semiotic modes, or semioses. After Winckelmann's iconolatric appraisal of Greek culture—following the celebration of the image—the word is reintroduced into the discussion, while image and language are

Reiche ungeziemende Freyheiten herausnehme, wohl aber auf den äussersten Grenzen eine wechselseitige Nachsicht herrschen lassen . . . : so auch die Mahlerey und Poesie.' The page numbers throughout the chapter refer to McCormick's translation and to Vollhardt's German edition. On *Laocoon* as an ideological defence of poetry, see Mitchell 1986 and more recently (from a different perspective) Beiser 2009; cf. also the chapters by e.g. Mitchell, Squire, Giuliani, Beiser, and Grethlein in this book.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://www.kunstgeschichte.hu-berlin.de/forschung/laufende-forschungsprojekte/symbolic-articulation/>.

<sup>3</sup> And, as Mitchell would say, there is no border police: cf. Mitchell 2003: 52.

not opposed to one another as rivals struggling for hegemony but rather juxtaposed as 'friendly neighbours'. The comparison of image and word is situated here in the realm of the arts, as *paragone* of *Mahlerey* and *Poesie*. However, I take the message of *Laocoon* to be of a more general importance for human cognition and communication—for semiosis, as indeed for a theory of the human.

The *paragone* of image and language is as old as our cultural tradition. Words and images have always been treated together, mostly as enemies or rivals. Yet language and image are old companions, for they have the same fundamental function or, better, the same double function: communication and cognition. There is no theory of language without reference to the image and, as far as I can see, no theory of images without reference to language.<sup>4</sup>

However, the positions of these semioses differ considerably in our two ancient traditions—that is, the theologico-religious and the philosophico-scientific traditions, namely the biblical and the Greek. In order to understand the broader intellectual backdrop of *Laocoon*, it is therefore necessary to say something about each in turn—albeit, of course, painting in deliberately broad brushstrokes.

The Bible clearly sides with language against the image. The divine 'Word' creates the world and Adam accomplishes that creation by the invention of names for God's creatures. The second commandment is very clear: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness.' The New Testament too praises the Word, the *logos*: 'In the beginning was the Word', as the opening of St John's Gospel puts it (*ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος*).

The tradition of ancient Israel prioritizes the word and the ear, while the Greek tradition proves generally more in favour of the image and the eye. As perhaps the most important 'classical presence', one might begin here with Plato. For Plato, words are understood to have a double function: if they are didactic and communicative (*didaskalikon*), they are also cognitive (*ousias diakritikon*, that is, 'discriminating being'). Plato discusses the cognitive function of words in the *Cratylus* by asking whether they are images (*eikones*), and thus depict their meaning by nature (*physis*) or whether they do so by human imposition (*synthékê*). The thinking derives from a long discussion that words are not appropriate

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bredekamp 2010.

images of the world (*ta pragmata, ta onta*) and that, therefore, it would be better to have direct knowledge of the world without words. From here, by the way, results Europe's deep longing for a language-free way to knowledge, and the language-critical attitude of philosophy and science. Plato treats the problem of the cognitive impact of words in terms of visual semiosis, and he explicitly compares the making of words with painting and drawing.

Aristotle has a solution for Plato's problem about the word being a poor *eikôn*: for Aristotle, the word simply does not have to depict the world, it does not have to be an image; it is merely a sign (of an image). Aristotle clearly separates the image and the word by attributing different functions to them: cognition and communication. In Aristotle's famous pages on language in *De interpretatione* (which would be the linguistic credo of Europe for millennia), language and image are related, but they are linked to two different functions.<sup>5</sup> The cognitive function is fulfilled by images, for the mind makes (mental) images of the world (*pathêmata tês psychês*), mental inner representations that are pictures: *homoiômata*, 'likenesses'. Thought is an image that is homologous with the world and its actions (*ta pragmata*). And—even as a mental image—thought is visual; the likeness is based on vision. It is also haptic: the likeness is impressed on the mind like an impression on wax (it is stamped: *typos*).<sup>6</sup> Haptic or visual, thought is image. Words, on the other hand, have nothing to do with cognition, their function is communication. They amount only to communicative sound or voice (*ta en têi phônêi*), and this sound is not similar to the thought it transports. The word is sign (*sêmeion*) not image, and as such, it is 'arbitrary' (*kata synthêkên*) and not very important. The Aristotelian term *kata synthêkên* ('according to tradition', 'according to convention') is the source for the extremely ambiguous modern term 'arbitrary' which we will also find to be an important term in *Laocoon: willkürlich*.<sup>7</sup> And, again, one might note that calling the word a *sign* (*sêmeion*) is clearly a visualization of that phonetic production.

This pagan Greek preference of the image and the eye will be thoroughly demolished by medieval theology, especially by St Augustine's

<sup>5</sup> Arist. *Int.* 16a.

<sup>6</sup> For the thinking, cf. especially Platt 2006.

<sup>7</sup> On the arbitrariness of signs in Lessing's *Laocoon* and beyond, see Beiser's and Lifschitz's contributions to the present book.

polemical stance against the body. The body is evil, the flesh is sin: *concupiscentia carnis*. Worse than anything else is the concupiscence of the eyes (*concupiscentia oculorum*). It follows that images are evil. The only source of truth is sacred words (*uerba diuina, eloquia diuina*); thus the ear seems to be preferable to the eye, and words are better than images. But even these sacred sounds are still carnal, flesh, *caro*; therefore they will be completely immaterialized.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the Renaissance witnesses a liberation from the Christian repression of the body, and first of all, of the eye. The concupiscence of the eye comes back after a thousand years of suppression: the image returns. Leonardo celebrates its triumphant superiority. And, in the wake of the image, the word too retrieves its body—and its soul. The word, from Aristotle onwards only a secondary device for communication, regains its rhetorical splendour and its philosophical dignity.<sup>9</sup> The humanistic appraisal of the specific qualities of Latin precedes the discovery of the aesthetic, poetic, and cognitive nature of language in all its manifestations.

It is against this intellectual historical backdrop that Lessing found himself. The Enlightenment still celebrated the return of the body, while the German Enlightenment in particular celebrated Greece. Winckelmann overemphasizes the image; German hellenophilia is, in general, a celebration of the image or iconolatry. By contrast, Lessing's *Laocoon* challenges this exclusive concentration on the image by reintroducing the word into the *paragone*.

### Lessing's *Laocoon*

Returning now to 1766, and to Lessing, we find the structural difference between poetry and visual art sketched in chapters 15 to 17 of *Laocoon*. Lessing, in the sixteenth chapter, takes a semiotic stance. He develops an aesthetic semiotics or a semiotic aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> The passage I must quote is known by heart by all serious readers of *Laocoon*:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Trabant 2003 (especially the first chapter).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mack 2011 and Waswo 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wellbery 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Lessing 1984: 78. For the German, see Lessing 2012: 115: 'Wenn es wahr ist, daß die Malerey zu ihren Nachahmungen ganz andere Mittel, oder Zeichen gebraucht, als die Poesie; jene nemlich Figuren und Farben in dem Raume, diese aber artikulierte Töne in der Zeit; wenn unstreitig die Zeichen ein bequemes Verhältniß zu dem Bezeichneten haben

If it is true that in its imitations painting uses completely different means or signs than does poetry, namely figures and colours in space rather than articulated sounds in time, and if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.

Objects or parts of objects which exist in space are called bodies. Accordingly, bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting.

Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions. Accordingly, actions are the true subjects of poetry.

To my mind, there are at least six points that need emphasizing in Lessing's famous words here. Allow me to run through each of those six points in turn:

1. Lessing discusses the 'signs' or *Zeichen* of *Mahlerey* and *Poesie*. Their opposition is based on the opposition of the senses—between the eye on the one hand, and the ear on the other.
2. The signs (or, more exactly, the signifiers) differ materially:
  - a. *Mahlerey* uses figures and colours in space: *neben einander, das Coexistirende*.
  - b. *Poesie* uses articulate sounds in time: *auf einander folgend, das Consecutive*.
3. The materiality of the signs determines the content, because there has to be a 'suitable relation to the thing signified' (*bequemes Verhältniß zu dem Bezeichneten*).<sup>12</sup> Lessing establishes an iconic relationship between signifier and signified in *Poesie* as well as in *Mahlerey*. This means that both *Mahlerey* and *Poesie* are structurally 'images' with a 'similarity' between the two levels.<sup>13</sup>

müssen: So können neben einander geordnete Zeichen, auch nur Gegenstände, die neben einander, oder deren Theile neben einander existiren, auf einander folgende Zeichen aber, auch nur Gegenstände ausdrücken, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen.

Gegenstände, die neben einander oder deren Theile neben einander existiren, heissen Körper. Folglich sind Körper mit ihren sichtbaren Eigenschaften, die eigentlichen Gegenstände der *Mahlerey*.

Gegenstände, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen, heissen überhaupt Handlungen. Folglich sind Handlungen der eigentliche Gegenstand der *Poesie*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the importance of the phrase, see the contributions in this book by e.g. Squire, Giuliani, Beiser, and Lifschitz.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stierle 1984, Giuliani 2003: 22.

4. From this third point stems a semantic opposition between different sorts of signs:
  - a. Spatial, *neben einander geordnet*: signs designating juxtaposed objects such as bodies.
  - b. Temporal, *auf einander folgend*: signs designating successive objects such as actions.
 These material and semantic oppositions (signifiers + signifieds) clearly define the 'inner territories' of the neighbours: figures, colours, and bodies, versus articulated sounds and actions.
5. At this point, it is worth noting that there is some overlapping at the 'outer borders'. Since bodies also exist in time and actions also cling to bodies (space), both cross the borders but behave in a very cautious way in the realm of the other: painting shows only one temporal moment of bodies, while poetry relates to only one spatial property of actions. This delicate overlapping is tolerated with 'mutual forbearance' (*wechselseitige Nachsicht*) by the neighbours.
6. Finally, in chapter 17, Lessing adds a further criterion of delimitation: the temporal signs of poetry (words) are not only successive, but also arbitrary (*willkürlich*). The old Aristotelian tradition of the word as an arbitrary sign (*kata synthékên*) enhances the opposition between word and image. Lessing does not argue to this effect explicitly, but we have to assume that spatial signs—colours and figures—are not arbitrary. Lessing does not say so because it would have been utterly superfluous: images are iconic, of course, since *colore e disegno* imitate the object. But, notwithstanding that difference (arbitrary versus iconic), poetic texts *as a whole* are images/icons made of arbitrary signs.<sup>14</sup> As temporal-successive entities they designate temporal objects, i.e. actions, their temporality depicting the successive-ness of the actions. But the *articulirte Töne* do not themselves depict anything. This is perhaps one of the most profound insights of Lessing's semiotic aesthetics: the literary text is an image made of arbitrary signs (and *Mahlerey* is an image made of iconic signs).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Vollhardt's discussion in Lessing 2012: 453.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein 1963, pointing out that any utterance is an image: 'Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit' (para. 4.01). On the tension between the arbitrariness and iconicity of literary texts in Lessing's *Laocoon*, see also the chapters by Beiser and Lifschitz in this book.



## Language and Image

Lessing's comparison is the model for the following sketch: in *Laocoon*, the friendly neighbours *Mahlerey* and *Poesie* mutually shed light on each other's structural properties. The concept of articulation will allow us to contemplate the commonalities and the differences between image and language in a somewhat deeper way.<sup>16</sup> Articulation is mostly understood phonetically, as the fact that the vocal organs produce distinguishable (and connected) movements, such as Lessing's *articulirte Töne*. And, of course, these sounds constitute the specificity of language. But language is not only phonetic articulation. It has a second—or rather first—level of articulation: it articulates thought, and thus introduces distinctions into the chaos of our perceptions. The word is an *organon diakritikon tês ousias*, as Plato argued in *Cratylus* (388b–c)—an instrument that discriminates the being.

Yet this articulation of the world is not specific to language but rather also shared by the image. It is the fundamental movement of any cognitive activity, introducing distinctions into the indeterminate chaos of the world. Gottfried Boehm calls the first step of the creation of an image 'contrast'.<sup>17</sup> This insight can be generalized for human cognition: introducing contrast is the first moment in the articulation of human thought—and hence of human signs. But language has the specific structural feature of a second articulation, the phonetic articulation.

As in Lessing, image theory and language theory may benefit from one another. To make this point, I start (i) with some considerations concerning images, before (ii) approaching the same points from a linguistic perspective.

### (i) Defining the Image

Before proceeding, it is first necessary to say something about how images have been defined. Everyday intuitions about images might include such statements as the following:

- a. An image is something made by human beings, an artefact.
- b. A prototypical picture is flat, often square.
- c. An image does not move.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Trabant 1998 (especially the fourth chapter).

<sup>17</sup> Boehm 1994: 332.

- d. An image is something to look at.
- e. An image represents something.
- f. An image is 'similar' to what it represents.

Now, recent theories of the image as well as the development of the arts have shattered these common opinions. Against such *idées reçues*, the following arguments have been made:

- a. Pictures are not necessarily manufactured artefacts. Lucretian cloud formations, bizarre stones or roots—formations of nature—also amount to images.
- b. A picture is not necessarily a surface, nor is it square. This view was due mainly to the dominance of painting. But since antiquity an *imago* or a *simulacrum* has been a three-dimensional object, a statue rather than a flat object. The biblical 'image' of the second commandment was a plastic artefact. Even flat pictures are not completely flat.<sup>18</sup>
- c. Pictures do move: the *tableau vivant* already manifested the tendency towards movement. Pictures 'wanted' to have life and time. They have become very much temporal and 'consecutive', *nacheinander*, ever since Lessing's time. And pictures have certainly moved all the more since the invention of cinema. Pictures are cinematography, 'the writing of movement', and today the prototypical picture is a movie. Movement, that is, time and life, has been introduced into the image. Lessing's immobility of images—atemporal spatiality—today concerns only a specific kind of picture.
- d. Visuality: new theories of the image have cast doubt on the visuality of images. As John Krois famously wrote, 'you do not need eyes for pictures'.<sup>19</sup> The blind draw cats and tables without ever having seen them. Their drawings render their spatial and haptic experiences, not their visual experiences. The sensory basis of the image is considerably enlarged—from the eyes at least to the sense of touch.
- e. It is now questionable whether pictures always represent something. What is represented in an abstract painting or in a monochrome picture? Modern art has emancipated the picture

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Krämer 2012: 79.

<sup>19</sup> 'Für Bilder braucht man keine Augen': Krois 2011: 132–60.

from objects, from *das Bezeichnete*, and from the task of representation, *Darstellung*.

- f. The most frequently discussed quality of images is certainly their very 'iconicity', namely the 'similarity' with what they represent. It has been called their 'naturalness' (Plato's *physis*). This similarity has traditionally been considered the essential quality of the image, and one of its main differences as compared with language, the latter being considered as 'arbitrary' (with only very few iconic qualities).<sup>20</sup> The term 'iconicity'—the essence of being an icon, an image—means just this: similarity with the object represented. Now if images no longer represent anything, there cannot be any similarity with a represented object. Even where pictures still refer to an object and seem to be similar to it, this similarity has been questioned. The image has at the very least been bereft of its 'naturalness'. Umberto Eco, for example, has insisted on the 'arbitrariness' or 'conventionality' of images:<sup>21</sup> he shifted the iconicity from the objects and the material images to the subjective perception processes which are the same for objects as for images.

These deconstructions of some essential features of the image render it much more similar to language. W. J. T. Mitchell has argued that the image is 'contaminated' by language: images are, like language, at least temporal and moving, and they are not similar to the object (if there is any object).<sup>22</sup> In the following remarks I proceed still further in the direction of this argument, in order to explain how the 'contamination' of the image by language is something still starker.

### (ii) *Image and Language*

After summarizing some of the radical ways in which traditional definitions of the image have been challenged, I here want to introduce language back into the equation. More specifically, I return to the six definitions of images introduced earlier, rethinking them in light of a comparison with language.

<sup>20</sup> This, at least, is the trivial understanding of Saussure's *arbitraire du signe* (Saussure 1916); it was fiercely criticized by Roman Jakobson in 1965 (see Jakobson 1971), who insisted on the essential presence of naturalness (which is to say, iconicity) in language.

<sup>21</sup> Eco 1972 (esp. chapter B.1.ii).

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell 1984b: 529.

a. Are natural forms images? Calling natural forms images is comparable to saying that natural forms are words—that, for instance, the roaring thunder is a word. Both statements are animistic statements. No word is made by nature; language is human action. Hence words are artefacts and language is the formative organ of thought, 'das bildende Organ des Gedanken', as Humboldt put it.<sup>23</sup> Words are human formations of the world. This fact confirms the intuition that no image is made by nature, and that images too are human actions or artefacts: they are intrusions of the human into the natural world, *Ein-Griffe*, or human additions to the natural world. It is true that the formations of nature—for example the apparent shapes that clouds seem to comprise in the sky (cf. e.g. Lucr. 4.129–42 and Phil. VA 2.22)—have sometimes been said to approach the beautiful figurative shapes of humans. However, it is the human glance that renders such formations 'images': our creative act of looking turns clouds into recognizable figures. Likewise, the beautiful stone or the bizarre root is elevated into 'imageness' or iconicity through a human action. By this human action the natural object becomes an artefact, even if no additional material formation has taken place.

b. and c. Space and time: Just as temporality was introduced into the image, spatiality has become an essential trait of words. Nothing is more spatial than sound. Leibniz already knew that sound is 'environment', covering 360 degrees of the space.<sup>24</sup> Don Ihde has likewise shown the 'globality' or roundness of sound.<sup>25</sup> This surrounding spatial quality of sound is one of the major evolutionary advantages of language. Hence it is not possible to limit words to time: image and word exist together in space and time.

d. Visuality: Krois is right, for tactility or manualness has to be added to the visuality of the image: the image is visual and tactile. Language, on the contrary, is not visual or tactile, but audible and vocal. From this perspective, Lessing's traditional opposition between the eye and the ear can be maintained. The price of this statement, however, is to disregard—for the sake of the argument—the massive presence of written language in our culture that seems to undermine the eye-ear opposition. But let us

<sup>23</sup> Humboldt 1999: 54.

<sup>24</sup> For Leibniz's thoughts here (first published in 1765), see Leibniz 1966: 39.

<sup>25</sup> Ihde 1976.

assume that even the most visual representation of language is still based on its vocal characteristics.

This very important addition to the image, its 'manualness', discloses at the same time a profound structural parallelism between the two forms of semiosis. The image, like language, is situated in a proactive, reflexive, and reciprocal bodily movement. The complicated motricity of language was first described by Wilhelm von Humboldt. As Humboldt noted, the word is a vocal production that must be perceived by the ear of the producer of the vocal sound him- or herself (otherwise articulation does not function). It is then heard by the ear of the other: *my voice—my ear—your ear*.<sup>26</sup>

For in that the mental striving breaks out through the lips in language, the product of that striving returns back to the speaker's ear. . . . In appearance, however, language develops only *socially*, and man understands himself only once he has tested the intelligibility of his words by trial upon others.

In an analogous way, the image is made by the 'hand' with the reflexive guidance of the eye (and/or the sense of touch) of the maker and then perceived by the eye (or the hand) of the other: *my hand—my eye (and hand)—your eye (and hand)*. In other words: beneath the distinction *hand/eye* versus *voice/ear*, we have a structural parallelism between exteriorization (voice, hand), self-perception (ear, eye, or touch), and reception (ear, eye, or touch)—finally accompanied by a corresponding parsing in the other.

Theories of language and image do not often consider this parallelism, because they approach their objects from different angles: images are mostly approached and reflected upon from the standpoint of the beholder (your eye), not from the perspective of the producer (my hand and eye).<sup>27</sup> Words, by contrast, are mostly reflected upon from the standpoint of the producer (my voice), not from that of the receiver (your ear). Grammars, dictionaries, and rhetoric are originally instructions

for the production of sentences and texts. Is this so because everyone is a producer of words ('an animal that has *logos*': *zôon logon echon*), but not necessarily—which is to say, biologically—a producer of images? I think we are necessarily also animals that have images (*zôa eikones echonta*, as it were): humans gesticulate and thereby create visual signs, images. Merleau-Ponty's concept of *geste* seems to be appropriate to mediate between the phonetic-acoustic and the muscular-visual embodiments of human thought.<sup>28</sup> The so-called philosophy of embodiment provides precious insights in this respect and is now moving toward a comprehensive theory of image and language.<sup>29</sup>

e. Representation: Words always represent something: they have meaning, that is, an objective intellectual content. They are not mere cries: an expression (*Ausdruck*) of the self or an appeal (*Appell*) to the other.<sup>30</sup> The image, on the other hand—as modern art teaches us—no longer 'represents' or 'depicts' anything. This 'non-representativeness' of the image would be a rather astonishing difference to language, given that 'representing something' is certainly the most deep-rooted traditional semantic feature of the term 'image'. However, the comparative view of language and image rather confirms that images too essentially 'represent'.

But at this point we have to look a little closer at the term 'representation'. Three points strike me as significant here:

1. Representation, *Darstellung*, is, according to Bühler, the specific semiotic function of language.<sup>31</sup> *Darstellung* is the establishment of a relationship to the world. According to Tomasello's semiogenetic account, pointing to the world is specifically human.<sup>32</sup> Animals do not point to the world but rather express their emotions and appeal to others; they do not show something in the world to others. Pointing to the world, *deixis* for the sake of the other, *Darstellung*—this is the fundamental gesture of human semiosis, not only of language.

<sup>26</sup> Humboldt 1999: 56, translating Humboldt 1903–36: vii.55: 'Denn indem in ihr das geistige Streben sich Bahn durch die Lippen bricht, kehrt das Erzeugniß desselben zum eignen Ohre zurück. . . . In der Erscheinung entwickelt sich jedoch die Sprache nur *gesellschaftlich*, und der Mensch versteht sich selbst nur, indem er die Verstehbarkeit seiner Worte an Andren versuchend geprüft hat.'

<sup>27</sup> Thus also Bredekamp 2010: 52.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945 (especially the first, third, and fifth chapters).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Noë 2015.

<sup>30</sup> *Ausdruck*, *Appell*, *Darstellung* in the sense of Bühler 1934 (translated as Bühler 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Bühler 1934. <sup>32</sup> Tomasello 2008.



2. Likewise *Darstellung* is connected to the ocular-manual system as well as to the vocal-auditory system. With these pointing gestures, humans show something in the world to one another, they 'articulate' the world: they 'grasp' something in the world, contrasting it to something else (Boehm). This action is 'cognitive articulation'. Plato called the word an *organon diakritikon tês ousias*, an instrument to make differences in the existing world. Already in Plato this articulation of the world was the common task of images and words. Hence *Darstellung* cannot be confined to words alone.
3. With regard to those images that seemingly do not represent any object in the world, the 'grasping' of the world (Bühler's *Darstellung*, representation) has to be seen in a new way. Representation-articulation is not primarily a 'mental stamp' the mind receives from without, a 'representation' in the mind (*Vorstellung*) linked to a material thing (sign). It is rather first and foremost a *creation*: it is 'making something visible' (Krois 2011: 69). Therefore, the image does not have to 'represent' something outside it; by making something visible it points to that making, to the hand and to its creation, to its own creativity, in the image itself. This is how Merleau-Ponty describes the word: as a gesture that contains and creates its meaning in itself.<sup>33</sup> We can extend this description to the image: the image is a gesture, and its meaning a world.

f. Similarity: What about the traditional view of similarity as the very core of the image? Does 'iconicity' mean similarity with the thing represented? Humans point to something in the world for the other. In the absence of the object, humans 'dance' the object, they mimic the object with their bodies. They may draw the object, sing the object, reproduce the object in clay, wood, or other materials. Mimesis follows *deixis-Darstellung*. Mimesis reacts to the absence of the object by recreating the object; it makes the object visible, hence the similarity. Similarity creates the presence of the object in its absence. Mimesis enables pointing to the absent: the *simulacrum* contains *deixis*. Pointing and pantomiming are two aspects of the same phenomenon.

The way from *deixis* to mimesis seems specific to the eye-hand system. But this duality of *deixis* and mimesis is just a universal feature of human

semioses. The phonetico-auricular system of language also points to the world while imitating it, making the world audible. Iconicity (pantomiming, mimicking) is not specific to the visual. The *simulacrum* can also be vocal-auditive. Cratylus in Plato's dialogue conceived of words as phonetic *eikones* (and Socrates rather sides with Cratylus against the radical conventionalist Hermogenes). Roman Jakobson (1971)—and linguistic research on 'naturalness'—insisted on the presence of icastic procedures in language, against Saussure's rather shortsighted refusal of any linguistic mimesis.

### Sound Articulation

Language, however, makes an additional step towards an (incomplete) emancipation from mimesis through its very specific material structure. That is a decisive move in the cognitive technique as well as in the evolution of mankind: humans invent the articulation of the voice. Humans choose, for the production of words, from the unlimited possibilities of the movements of the vocal organs, certain types of those movements in a limited number (between 10 and 140) and they establish regularities to combine these vocal movements. The number and the phonetic qualities of the so-called 'phonemes', as well as the possibilities of their combination, differ from language to language. Language does not only articulate the world, it has a 'second articulation'. The functional parallelism of language and image we have so far demonstrated (artificiality, dual corporeal system in the form eye-hand and ear-voice, pointing-articulating, *deixis*-mimesis) ends here. Not articulation as such but rather *double* articulation is the structural feature that differentiates image from language. There is no such thing as phonemic articulation in the manual-ocular system. Only the vocal-auditory system allows the production and combination of a limited number of movements of the vocal organs to produce words and utterances.

Lessing mentions colours and figures as the basic material elements of *Mahlerey* and 'articulated sounds' as the basic material elements of *Poesie*. They are, however, incomparable since there is no second articulation of colours or figures in the visual-chirotic realm. There are no typified gestural elements in a limited number and with certain rules of combination for the construction of semantic units in the visual medium (only alphabetic writing will be such a system, but it is only the structural

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1945: 214: 'La parole est un geste et sa signification un monde.'

image of phonetic language, not a semiotic system of its own). From antiquity onwards, language is called 'articulated' since it is one of the fundamental linguistic insights that speech is made up of parts that are jointed, that it is not just an undifferentiated, continuous melisma or cry. Lessing does not yet have a more elaborate knowledge of the implications of his expression 'articulated sounds'. Actually, it is only Humboldt who, in his article on alphabetic script of 1824, will develop an encompassing theory of articulation based upon a clear phonological conception of linguistic sounds.<sup>34</sup> Phonetic articulation is the basis of 'arbitrariness' since it allows an infinite production of words, of semantic units that are not pictures, through the endless combination of a small number of elements. Phonetic articulation enables the explosion of human culture because this specific structure allows humans to think and communicate everything.

### Evolutionary Conjectures: Twin Birth

The friendly cohabitation of *Mahlerey* and *Poesie* in Lessing's *Laocoon* was based on the common iconicity of texts and images, on the 'suitable relation to the thing signified' (*bequemes Verhältniß zu dem Bezeichneten*).<sup>35</sup> In my story the neighbours become even friendlier. Some of Lessing's differences tend to disappear: space and time, *Körper* and *Handlung*, *das Coexistirende* and *das Consecutive* vanish as profound differences. Therefore, the *articulirte Töne*, the specific linguistic articulation, becomes the very centre of the difference.

Lessing's friendly cohabitation might also be explained by the evolutionary account of a neighbouring evolution of words and images. While Lessing does not refer to such a genetic relationship of image and word, he could have found it in works by his contemporaries Vico or Condillac. In Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1744), image and language 'nacquero gemelle', they are born as twins and develop in a parallel manner, 'caminarono del pari' ('walked side by side').<sup>36</sup> Vico was a professor of rhetoric and hence knew that *actio* and *vox*, gesture and voice, always go

together. In the beginning, the visual-gestural twin is stronger than the vocal one, but later the vocal aspect becomes increasingly important until, in modern times, vocal language is the dominant semiosis. And only in modern times is language 'conventional' ('voci convenute da' popoli', par. 32), and thereby seemingly 'arbitrary' ('a placito', par. 444). Underneath this superficial arbitrariness, however, language always stays 'natural', that is, iconic. In Vico, the question of the *paragone* of image or language is resolved in the most peaceful way: visual and vocal semioses are iconic twins.

In Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), the 'cry of passion' and the deictic movements of the body (*action*) are the origins of human semiosis. Condillac imagines a primordial semiogenetic scene in which the vocal and the gestural collude: a speechless proto-human cannot reach an object he desires. He produces a movement—*action*—towards the object, accompanied by a vocal production, a cry of passion. This complex behaviour is visual-objective (*deixis*, 'representation') and phonetic-subjective ('expression' and 'appeal' in Bühler's terms) at one and the same time. An observer with an innate instinct for pity comes to help. This intersubjective success of the semiotic behaviour slowly transforms it into an intentional activity. The complex sign becomes vocal, the vocal sound switches from passion (appeal and expression) to representation, and the primordial cry becomes increasingly articulated sound. Action and sound are brothers, but with rather different functions, contrary to Vico's scenario, and they develop, as in Vico, into separate but parallel semiotic systems.

Michael Tomasello offers a related, modern semiogenetic story: only humans point to the world with communicative intentions, he argues, and only humans imitate the world (apes do not ape!)<sup>37</sup> By this semantic or cognitive orientation—*Darstellung*—their semiosis differs profoundly from that of any other primate that is exclusively 'pragmatic': 'expression' and 'appeal' in Bühlerian terms. According to Tomasello, deictic and mimetic gestures—the eye-hand system—are the first and fundamental movements of human symbolization and communication. There are no semiogenetic twins. The phonetico-vocal system takes over later. Semiosis moves from the hand to the mouth, or from the hand to the

<sup>34</sup> Cf. 'Die Gliederung ist aber gerade das Wesen der Sprache; es ist nichts in ihr, das nicht Theil und Ganzes seyn könnte' ('Ueber die Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau' (1824): Humboldt 1903–36: v.107–33, at 122).

<sup>35</sup> Lessing 1984: 78 (= 2012: 115). <sup>36</sup> Vico 1986: para. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Tomasello 2008.

'face' in the terms of Leroi-Gourhan (1964–5). Leroi-Gourhan suggests that the phonetic and the gestural systems are even 'friendlier neighbours' than Tomasello allows. They are closer since they are not semioses that follow one another in evolution but rather semioses that develop *at the same time*: 'nacquero esse gemelle e caminarono del pari', as Vico says. They are born as twins and develop in parallel.

In Tomasello it is not very clear why, after the establishment of the visual-manual system, the phonetico-auditive apparatus takes over the functions of pointing and pantomiming, or why sound becomes semantic after the gesture. The phonetico-auditive system is, according to Tomasello, first specialized for expression and appeal; it points, as it were, to emotions, to the inner world, and only later does it follow the visual gestural system in pointing and pantomiming the external world. Yet why does the vocal system pass from the expression of emotions to the representation of the outer world?

My proposed solution to this puzzling transition from the gestural-visual to the phonetico-auditive consists in stating that no such transition actually takes place.<sup>38</sup> The two systems are not specialized in the sense that the visual refers to the outside world while the auditive concerns emotions and the inner world. I would suggest that both systems *have the same functions* from the outset. They deal with the objective world as well as with emotions and appeals. Visual gestures, or movements of the body, are not specialized for reference to objects but rather also express emotions and appeal. And the phonetico-auditive apparatus does not merely express emotions or appeal to others but refers to the world too. When humans point to the world and pantomime it, they do so also with their voice and mouth—*la face*—not only with their hands. The whole body participates in *Darstellung*.

We must not forget that the mouth—before the human upright position—was the main organ of apprehension and was hence directed towards the world. It is true that with the erect position the hand becomes the main organ of material apprehension and that the mouth is liberated from that function so that it can switch to symbolization. Yet there is no reason why the mouth should not maintain its chief direction towards the world. Mouth and hand seize the world, both form the *Be-Griff* (con-cept).

Therefore, there is no radical transition from the gestural-visual to the phonetico-auditory and no dramatic turn of the latter from emotion to cognition, from interiority to exteriority. Since the 'hand' shifts from locomotion to prehension, both systems now grasp the world. The human being becomes—as a whole—more semantic; both systems point to the world while 'dancing' it.

In a further evolutionary step, however, the phonetico-auditory system becomes more important for symbolization. First because the *face* is liberated from the task of material prehension, and second, since it develops the new miraculous system of symbolization: the mouth—the *face*—develops the most sophisticated means for the prehension of the world, phonetic articulation. This allows the specifically human articulation: an articulation of everything, the infinite appropriation of the world through words.

## Conclusion

I conclude my reflections on image and word with a further glance back at *Laocoon*. Lessing has shown the way towards friendship between the visual-manual and the vocal-auditory semiosis. He has liberated the old *paragone* from the sterile enmity of image and word. His comparison between poetry and painting is situated within a reflection on the arts: the common ground of that comparison is the iconicity of both. I have tried to demonstrate that this common ground is much greater than often assumed, and that it is not restricted to art: it consists in an anthropological parallelism of human cognitive activity and of the embodiment of thought. Drawing further on Lessing's ideas, we can find more substantial analogies of these two semioses and also delve more deeply into the decisive structural difference that is due to the second articulation.

Hence, once again: image and the word occupy two floors in a shared house rather than two different houses with gardens that overlap at their margins. Aby Warburg's intuition may have been right when he assigned the ground floor of his library to the image while locating the word on the first floor (on top of the image). This seems to me the correct topographical situation of the friendly neighbours who are ultimately twins: 'nacquero esse gemelle.'

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Trabant 2013.