

Introduction: Kicking the habit

A sheet of rippling purple silk with a central vertical incision: that is what Fig. Intr.1 most obviously seems to depict. But for the vast majority of those who originally saw this advert in the glossy Sunday supplements of the British broadsheets in the 1980s and 1990s, the significance of the picture was abundantly clear. The image advertised not a band of cut silk, but a brand of cigarettes – Silk Cut.¹

A ‘metonym’ is how semiotic theory might label the image.² As the iconic representation of a missing name, the picture directly associates the signifier (cut silk) with the signified (Silk Cut). On first impressions, the choice of communicative strategy might seem relatively straightforward. The advertisement followed growing popular and governmental pressure for companies to avoid depicting the actual tobacco products manufactured. Rather than associate a particular sort of cigarette with a particular sort of identity – a Marlborough manhandled by the strong but wistful Marlborough county cowboy, for instance – Gallaher Group, who owned the Silk Cut franchise, masterminded less overt ways of figuring their product.³

The advertising campaign, managed by Saatchi and Saatchi, proved a resounding success. By the early 1990s, Silk Cut had become the bestselling brand of cigarettes in the UK. What Saatchi and Saatchi knew, indeed what they quite literally cashed in on, was that the image superseded any single metonymic function ascribed to it. Certainly, viewers make sense of the image in terms of a textual reference-point (both the brand name which they had to supply and the government health warnings below); and the image surely does remind viewers of the verbal metaphor – that, far from

¹ The following analysis has learnt from the insightful mini-lecture on Silk Cut advertisements given by Robyn Penrose in David Lodge’s fictional novel, *Nice Work* (Lodge 1988: 220–4), together with the full discussion of the psychology of Silk Cut images in McIntosh 1996. I have also benefited, more generally, from Barry 1997: 273–9 (on the emotional appeal of American cigarette advertising), Hilton 2000 (on smoking in British popular culture) and Tinkler 2006 (on some of the gender issues evidently at play).

² For a user-friendly introduction, see e.g. Chandler 2007: 129–33. Bogdan 2002: especially pp. 1–22 and D. Crow 2003 provide two attempts to formulate systems of visual semiotics.

³ Vaknin 2007 offers a basic picture-guide to the history of tobacco advertising in the twentieth century: Silk Cut advertisements are discussed on pp. 99–101.

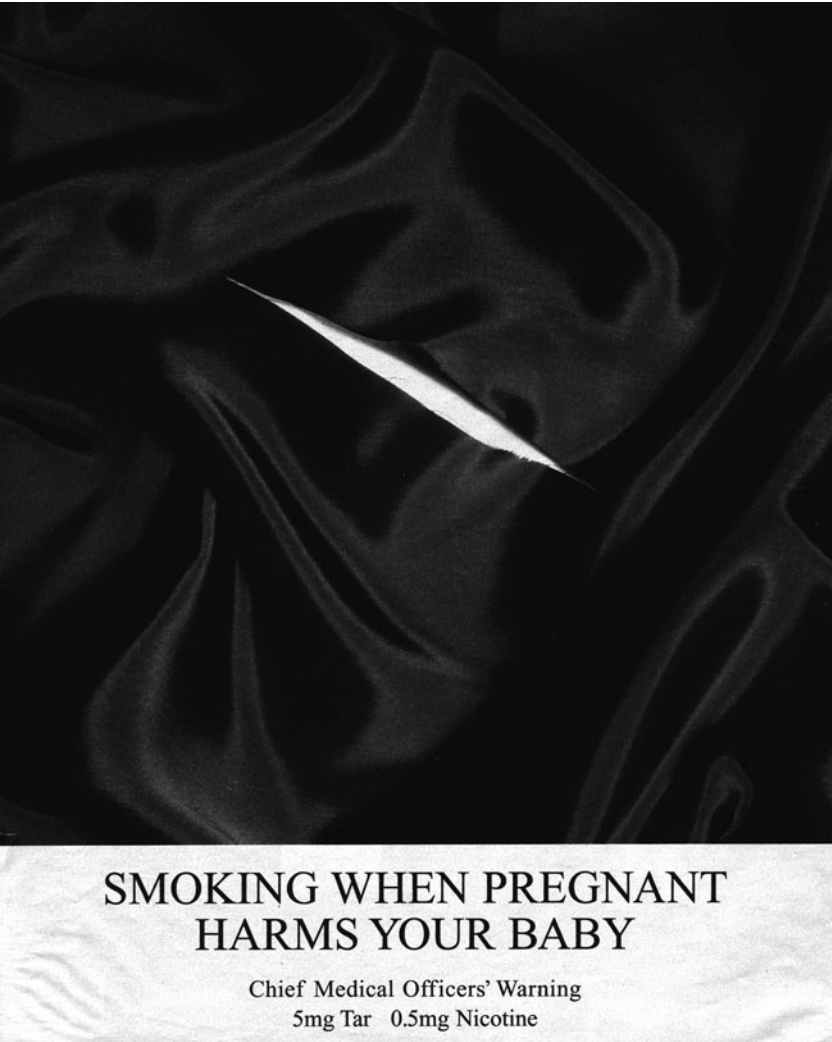


Figure Intr.1 Advertisement for Silk Cut cigarettes, part of a marketing campaign managed by Saatchi and Saatchi between 1983 and 2003

inducing bronchitis, emphysema and lung cancer, smoking Silk Cut actually leaves our throats feeling smooth as silk. But the picture could not be reduced to a textual caption; it conjures up other thoughts and reflections, mediated at once by verbal and visual means.

For one thing, this is no ordinary silk: it is dyed a luxurious shade of purple. The image depicts something not just rich and exclusive, then, but something imperially so. These associations are further complicated by the incision in the centre of the picture. Is this just a ‘metonymic’ reference to

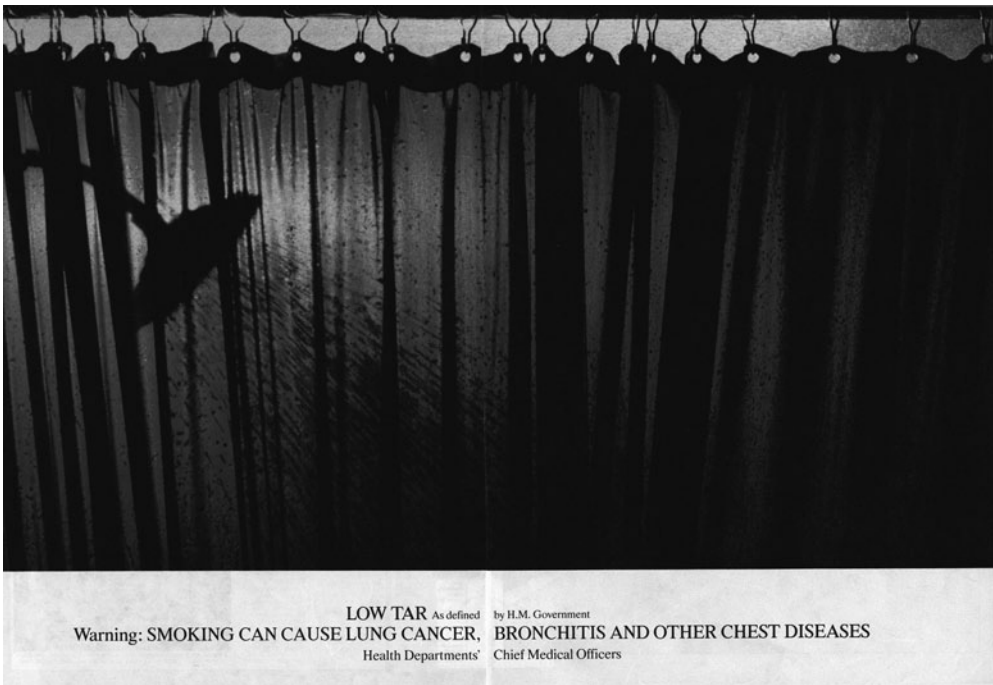


Figure Intr.2 Additional advertisement for Silk Cut

a brand? Or does it allude, for example, to the 1986 restrictions imposed on tobacco advertisements, and hence to Silk Cut (as it were) ‘cut’? To answer that question, we need to remember that this picture was just one in a series of images advertising the product, all designed in the familiar tricolour of black, white and purple. Most showed not the ‘cut’ itself, but the potential – or rather threat – of incision: a knife perched over a silk thread, a chainsaw draped with purple silk, a silhouetted pair of scissors projected over a silk sheet. These adverts were all designed to suggest an incision that is yet to come. Far from suggesting some innocent ‘trim’, however, these ‘cuts’ promised a particularly violent series of slicings, slittings and slashings (themselves ‘censored’ here). One of the most striking depicts the silhouetted profile of a shower-head behind a purple silk curtain (Fig. Intr.2). The allusion is to the iconic shower scene of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*, in which viewers saw the psychotic motel-owner, Norman Bates, commit the rape-cum-murder of his unwitting victim, Marion Crane. And yet the reference to this most sensuous and sadistic of Hollywood episodes can leave little doubt: we are dealing, so to speak, with ‘Silk Penetrated’ as much as with ‘Silk Cut’.

How innocent, then, is the incision with which we opened (Fig. Intr.1)? Are those really ripples of silk? Or are they the contours of a face, its left cheek gashed? On further inspection, is this really a gash, or are we staring at a pair of lips – perhaps even at the suggestive form of a vagina against the tantalising curves of a female body ('silk slut')?⁴ As the allusion to *Psycho* confirms, such images seem to sell both sex and death simultaneously. Even the compulsory government warning below is subsequently turned into a luring selling-point: the pictures appear to make a seductive fantasy of the violent fate verbally prophesied below ('SMOKING WHEN PREGNANT HARMS YOUR BABY', 'SMOKING CAN CAUSE LUNG CANCER, BRONCHITIS AND OTHER CHEST DISEASES', 'SMOKING KILLS').⁵

Whatever else we make of these various 'iconotexts',⁶ it is clear that the marketing minds behind them were privy to a profound truth: while processes of finding meaning in pictures can be macro-managed – steered for the end gain of financial profit – they cannot be confined. Saatchi and Saatchi trade upon the image's refusal to be reduced to some fix-all 'meaning' – the special power of the visual to manipulate our thoughts and actions, even to the extent of our subsidising a painful and premature death. If these marketing gurus understood how images work, however, they also knew that, in a world of ever-tightening societal pressure and governmental legislation, they could hide behind a very different rhetoric. A sliced loaf of bread in a purple silk bread-bag; a purple silk cloth lain with domestic table knives; an iron with spiked studs beside a purple sheet: did these images not merely denote a brand rather than connote a lifestyle? Does the picture not just signify 'cut silk'? Was anyone who said otherwise not simply over-reading things?

The power of such imagery is confirmed by its appeal to a particular target audience: women. These pictures, precisely as pictures, promised to fulfil a variety of fantasies that viewers might bring to them. Anyone who smokes Silk Cut (or indeed who smokes *any* brand?), it seems, can hope to escape the humdrum of their desperate housewife existence: just imagine

⁴ With this in mind, note how subsequent posters reversed the colour arrangement, showing a *purple* slit now shown against a *white* background . . .

⁵ Following the argument of McIntosh 1996, who reads such images in terms of the Freudian associations of *eros* and *thanatos*. Of course, government health warnings also served as familiar points of reference, associating the more esoteric images that developed with a recognisable genre of advertising imagery. But the 'official' reproduction of these health warnings in black Times font and block capitals arguably backfired: when seen against such imagery, the verbal warnings smack of something officious, impersonal and therefore unimportant.

⁶ For the term, see Wagner 1995: 12 and 1996a: 15–17, discussed further in Chapter 5 below.



Figure Intr.3 Additional advertisement for Silk Cut

the orgiastic bloodiness of true sexual release – succumb and take a dance with death. Not for nothing does one image show the familiar Silk Cut scissors merging into cancaning fantasies – into surrealist dancers whose sexual prowess threatened the patriarchy with the ultimate snip (Fig. Intr.3). And yet, as the *Psycho* reference confirms, this visual rhetoric could hold seductive appeal for male viewers too – in promising to fulfil some of their deepest and darkest desires.

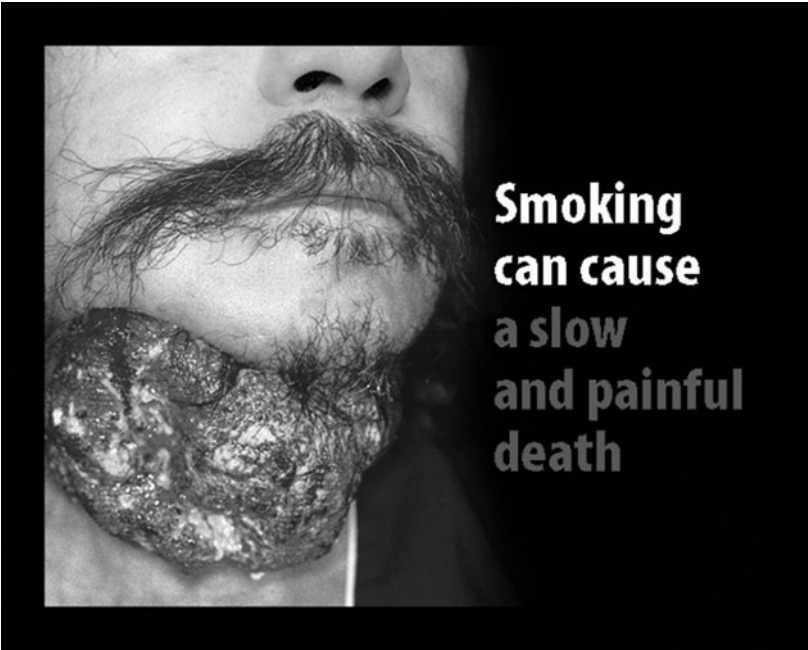


Figure Intr.4 One of fifteen picture warnings legally required to accompany tobacco products sold in the UK from October 2008

When pitched against such powerful visual subliminals, the written health warnings below could have little deterring effect. Because images and texts work together in an embryonic matrix of signification, the enticing visuals control the precautionary verbals as much as the verbals control the visuals: successful advertising can displace, even subvert, verbal admonitions. The British government recognised as much in 2007, when it ordered tobacco companies to display on their products shocking *images* of smoking and its effects – cancer-ridden lungs, monstrous tumours or (revealingly) pictures of sexual impotence. Images, they realised, had to be combated with images (Fig. Intr.4); pictures do things that texts cannot.⁷ The problems surrounding smoking, we might say, are therefore symptomatic of a deeper-lying societal malaise: we are addicted, it seems, to a certain set of *visual* habits.

This is not a book about the workings of a global tobacco industry. Nor is it about mass marketing, or the foibles of modern advertising. Rather, my

⁷ After a public ‘Consultation on the introduction of picture warnings on tobacco packs’ by the UK Department of Health between May and August 2006, the policy was introduced in October 2008: by the end of September 2010, visual warnings must be displayed on all tobacco products sold in the UK. Canada was the first country to implement this strategy, in June 2000.

concern is with the ways in which images and texts function, configured around parallel questions of power, manipulation and resistance. While my interest is a historical one, exploring the relationship between ‘image’ and ‘text’ in Graeco-Roman antiquity, I look to the ancient material in an effort to correct a number of fundamental modern western assumptions about words and pictures – about their function, the mechanics of their interaction, and indeed the strict separation between the two in the first place.⁸

So why begin with images advertising tobacco? Simply put, the scenario brings home the stakes of my project. We all know the statistics about smoking: an estimated 364,000 people are admitted to National Health Service hospitals in Britain each year because of smoking-related illnesses, and some two thirds of all teenagers who smoke will die as a direct consequence of their tobacco addiction. Of course, it would be wrong to blame advertising alone: other social factors are certainly involved. But there can be no doubt that the appeal of smoking has relied on a visual campaign that glamorises the act of doing so.⁹ In this sense, at least, our fatal tobacco habit stems in significant part from a fatally habitual naivety about images and how they work.¹⁰ We continue to suffer from what Anne Marie Seward Barry astutely diagnosed as a lack of ‘visual intelligence’.¹¹ Despite (or rather because of) what another critic has called the ‘pictorial turn’ of our twenty-first-century ‘information age’,¹² with its relentless recourse to images as a means of constructing and manipulating our thoughts and actions, and its increasing mediatization of world events, we are still much better at *consuming* images than at critically *engaging* with them.¹³ As I hope to show, moreover, our

⁸ For a related attempt to situate the study of Classical visual culture within post-modern visualities, see Giuliani 2003: 9–18.

⁹ See Slade 2001.

¹⁰ The British government arguably recognised as much when it finally passed the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act in 2002. While the European Union has effectively banned such advertising in Europe, tobacco remains the second most heavily marketed consumer product in the USA: over 15 billion dollars are currently spent on tobacco advertising in America each year.

¹¹ Cf. Barry 1997: 338: ‘What is needed to achieve visual intelligence is a paradigm shift in our thinking away from logocentric bias . . .’ For one attempt to articulate how these issues relate to not only contemporary religion and art, but also a post-Enlightenment tradition of science, see Latour 2002.

¹² On the ‘pictorial turn’, see Mitchell 1994: 11–34, and p. 106 on ‘the increasing mediatization of reality in postmodernism’; cf. Mitchell 2002: 240–1. The classic positive assessment of this ‘visual turn’ is Baudrillard 1981, but compare also Stephens 1998 on both the attractions and dangers of moving from a predominantly verbal to a predominantly visual culture.

¹³ See Schroeder 2002: especially pp. 160–72, concluding: ‘I do not agree that consumers have become visually literate from exposure to images. To me this is like claiming that someone who eats a lot ultimately becomes a good cook due to exposure to good food’ (p. 165).

naivety in dealing with images is bound up with a larger set of assumptions about how the visual relates to the verbal.

A residual logocentrism pervades the academy: there remains an assumption that pictures are less valuable, less active as cultural determinants, and less worthy of critical interrogation (indeed even study) than texts; an unspoken hypothesis that, since 'l'histoire des mentalités' is constituted by texts alone, responses to images must follow verbally determined patterns of cultural response.¹⁴ John Dillenberger nicely summarises the point when he states that 'the visual as the Bible of the illiterate and the unlearned . . . has been transformed into the visual illiteracy of the learned'.¹⁵ It is not only traditionally text-centred disciplines – subjects like history, English and comparative literature, as well as Classics – that have often been guilty of the charge. As Donald Preziosi has argued, art history too has often tended to work within a similarly 'logocentric paradigm of signification'.¹⁶

It is with this tradition of logocentrism that the present book takes issue. It is by no means the first to draw attention to the logocentric bias of so much art history, Classical and otherwise.¹⁷ Where this book is different, however, is in its historicist concern with the origins and derivation of academic logocentrism, and with the cultural (and indeed theological) remove of Graeco-Roman antiquity.¹⁸ Asking *where* these attitudes come from, *when* they took shape, and *how* they have influenced our thinking, the book begins by locating the immediate genesis of our assumptions about texts and images in the 'visual theology' of the sixteenth-century Reformation.¹⁹ Modern presumptions about the hegemony of the text and

¹⁴ This idea of logocentrism derives from Derrida 1974, an invective against the traditional western philosophical bias towards signified over signifier. I use it here to refer both to the literal privileging of verbal over visual communication, and more generally to the mistaken predisposition to differentiate between 'referent' and 'sign', valuing the former over the complex hermeneutics involved in responding to the latter.

¹⁵ Dillenberger 1999: 19. Dillenberger's dictum relates to St Gregory the Great's early seventh-century defence of images in terms of their ability to make known the Gospels to those unable to read: see below, p. 29.

¹⁶ Cf. Preziosi 1989: 15–16: 'Coincident with the implicit notion that the work of art is in some way a revelation of Being or of a Truth that is already present (in the mind, in culture, and in society) is the notion that the artwork's *modus operandi* is that of saying: the work reveals, expresses, re-presents some prior meaning or content. Indeed . . . the art of art history is inextricably grounded in a logocentric paradigm of signification, and the business of the discipline is addressed above all to the task of reading objects so as to discern produced meaning, to hear the Voice behind what is palpable and mute.'

¹⁷ One thinks in particular of the work of James Elkins – especially Elkins 1998 and 1999.

¹⁸ Compare e.g. Elkins 1999: 257–9, who explicitly avoids commenting upon the origins of what it calls the 'hysteria' of so much contemporary art history.

¹⁹ My concern with 'visual theology' corresponds with the recent explosion of interest in what might be called 'theological aesthetics' – the intersection between visual culture and religion.

the servitude of the image, the first chapter suggests, are grounded in what we might broadly call ‘Lutheran’ ideas about knowing God – the claim that the divine could be experienced not by material means, but by ‘faith alone’. Of course, Martin Luther was famously tolerant of images, much more so than a number of theologians who followed in his wake (Huldrych Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, John Calvin etc.). But, as we shall see, that tolerance came at a substantial price. In resisting the art of the Renaissance Christian tradition, embodied in not only the painting and sculpture of Catholic Italy but also the arts of Catholic Flanders, recently turned mimetic, Luther prescribed a new set of working assumptions about what images are and how they (should) function; he sealed this visual ontology with an apparently God-given authority, implicating it within a new set of Christian devotional rituals.²⁰

Fundamental to Luther’s ideas about visual communication was the separation between a picture’s ‘internal’ qualities – its composition, stylistic texture and colour – and the ‘external’ ideas about its subject, content and meaning according to which viewers make sense of it. This was not a wholly new critique, nor was Luther’s separation between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the image without earlier parallel. To some extent, at least, a related ideology can be found in Plato, in an intellectual history of the ‘idea’ as a ‘concept in art theory’ first probed by Erwin Panofsky in 1924.²¹ But Luther alone managed to turn this visual ontology into habitual ritual practice – into something so natural to the western modern mindset as to deceive us into thinking that it holds true for all other times and places. Even when

If, as Morgan 1998: 3 argues, ‘the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief’ (cf. also Morgan 2000), it seems clear that ‘religious formation’ and ‘practices of belief’ have also affected certain modes of viewing. Thiessen 2005 provides a useful guide to the most important writings on the subject within a Christian tradition, while Brent Plate 2002 offers a stimulating cross-cultural reader.

²⁰ In situating the genesis of ‘Modernism’ in the Reformation, I am in one sense adding an intellectual historical dimension to the ground-breaking political, economic and sociological analysis that Max Weber wrote in the early twentieth century (see Weber 1985, with helpful commentary in Bataille 1991: 129–32). To oversimplify, Weber’s thesis was that modern rational capitalism is itself the product of the Reformation, and specifically Calvinism – that our own modern western market economy stems from a reformed Protestant model of spending, whereby, in contrast to the inflated expenditure of Catholicism, productivity was high and consumption low. Like Weber’s argument, my own ideas ultimately descend from Hegel – specifically, Hegel’s thesis that the Reformation emancipated ‘art’ from religion. Rather than viewing the Reformation as some idealist final chapter in the unfolding of ‘Absolute Spirit’, however, I contend that Hegel diagnosed a historical phenomenon only to operate within it; that Hegel thereby *essentialised* the Lutheran conceptual framework that he surveyed (cf. below, pp. 65–71).

²¹ For a translation, see Panofsky 1968. Although deeply sensitive to theological issues, Panofsky conspicuously downplays the specific contributions of Reformation theology.

the church pews stand empty, the residual Lutheran presumption remains, whereby word is privileged over image, and image is treated as word.²²

Because it is theologically grounded, the Lutheran ontology of words and images is historically, socially and culturally contingent. One of the aims of the first chapter is therefore to explain how these ideas have come to exert so powerful an influence on our collective modern attitudes, analysing first their rationalisation in German aesthetic theory, and second their institutionalisation in art historical practice. But the chapter also sets out to refute the Lutheran position, demonstrating why the ascribed Lutheran ontology of the visual will *always* fail the image. We have in fact already witnessed this failure. The magical power of the Silk Cut image, after all, lies precisely in the truth that visual signifiers cannot be reduced to invisible signifieds. But we have also seen the command of this conventional Lutheran rhetoric. In arguing that it was ‘content’ that mattered, not ‘form’, Saatchi and Saatchi could look to a much longer tradition of aesthetics, ultimately descended from a theological imperative.

The first chapter provides a wide-ranging survey, and deliberately so. But what does this cast of unabashedly modern critics, philosophers, and indeed theologians, have to do with the particular subject of the book – image and text in Graeco-Roman antiquity? As I hope to show, my opening frame is intended to extend my arguments beyond the cultural study of Graeco-Roman antiquity, tackling a still larger intellectual history. At the same time, however, I remain convinced that it is only after contextualising and problematising our own ideas of ‘images’ and ‘texts’ that we can hope to interrogate Graeco-Roman ideas in historical perspective. As always, understanding the past coalesces with understanding the present: no exploration of how images and texts engaged with each other in antiquity can afford to overlook the extent to which modern epistemological scaffolding continues to prop up the framework of the questions that we ask. Looking at antiquity, in short, involves cross-examining our own working assumptions.

It is to this issue of historical perspective that the second chapter explicitly turns. After surveying the Lutheranism of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s classic distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘painting’ in his *Laocoon*, I look back to Graeco-Roman antiquity itself. While Lessing’s eighteenth-century analysis literalises the Lutheran segregation of form from content, wrenching the

²² Cf. Braider 1993: 13, on the ‘deep ambivalence towards the incorrigible “carnality” of visual art reflected in the way Western culture has consistently privileged the spiritualizing scriptural Word, the simultaneously hieratic and aristocratic intelligibility of the Text, over the vulgar visibility of idolatrous pictures’.