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978-0-521-62499-2 - On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them

James Elkins

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On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them

In this innovative, interdisciplinary study, James Elkins argues against the assumption that images can be adequately described in words. In his view, words must always fail because pictures possess a residue of “meaningless” marks that cannot be apprehended as signs. *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* provides detailed, incisive critiques of fundamental notions about pictures: their allegedly semiotic structures; the “rational” nature of realism; and the ubiquity of the figure/ground relation. Elkins then opens the concept of images to non-Western and prehistoric ideas, exploring Chinese concepts of magic, Mesopotamian practices of counting and sculpture, religious ideas about hypostasis, philosophical discussions concerning invisibility and blindness, and questions on the limits of the destruction of meaning.

James Elkins is Associate Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is the author of *The Poetics of Perspective* and *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*.

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Preface

This book might well have been titled *The Antisemiotic*, since much of what I have to say here runs against the tendency to interpret images as systems of signs, or – in the looser but more prevalent formula – as examples of visual language. But such a title would not be quite right. I have no global objection to contemporary semiotics except perhaps for the occasional claim that it is an optimal, transparent, or transtheoretical approach to visual artifacts. Instead, I am concerned with those places in pictures where the inevitable linguistic or semiotic model stops making sense, becomes counterintuitive, or begins to contradict what is actually happening.

What I care about is *difficulty*: too often, reading the art historical literature, it can seem as if pictures are relatively easy to write about, to put into words. Certainly interpretations might be hard to come by, and it can be trying to arrange the evidence in a convincing manner, but it appears as if pictures themselves present no problems: everyone knows how to apply theories to them, how to describe them, and how to pose and solve problems about what they mean. What gets lost here is the picture *as picture*, as a mute collection of funny-looking smears and shapes that somehow lends itself to practically endless streams of eloquent historical writing. This book is an attempt to make pictures more difficult. It is antisemiotic only for the contingent reason that semiotics is the most powerful way of modeling how pictures embody meaning, and so alternate accounts have to balance themselves against what semiotics claims. But in a wider sense I will

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be arguing against any theory that makes interpretation easy. My central claim is that images are complex in the only ways that a structure can be truly complex: they are partly inside and partly outside systematic, linguistic, logical, and mathematical structures of meaning. *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* is an attempt to say what happens in this inchoate half-light between the splendor of rational representation and the darkness of nonverbal marking; and along the way I want to make the case that that twilight makes images far more compelling than they are when they are treated, as the history of art tends to do, as aggregates of signs and symbols. If what I say here contributes to some skepticism about the claims of semiotics, then it will have fulfilled part of its purpose; but if it makes pictures as a whole into confusing, daunting, unexpectedly obdurate objects that possess formidable defenses against quick readings, then it will have done what I wanted it to do.

Inevitably, pictures are used to tell stories about people, places, institutions, historical events, and many other things, and it can come to seem as if they are principally opportunities to tell those stories. But first and last, pictures are not the narratives of art history: they are stubbornly illegible, weirdly silent, “meaningless” artifacts where all our best attempts at understanding fall apart. I imagine a version of pictures in which a miscellany of ill-matched and ill-behaved marks congregate into assemblages that sometimes look as if they possess linguistic sense and then dissipate into rudimentary “meaningless” elements. The sequence of chapters in this book is meant to replay that phenomenological disappointment.

Part One, “Elements,” concerns the various forms that present themselves as the rudiments of all images: marks, lines, traces, edges, outlines, surfaces, and fields (in Chapter One); light, shade, and middle tone (Chapter Two); and figure and ground (Chapter Three). In each case my purpose is to show how the apparently stable, irreducible elements of images give way under pressure of inquiry into much more detailed, unruly, historically specific practices that cannot support a simple translation into signs or narratives.

It is often assumed, for example, that graphic marks are allied to written marks, but are more complex since their meaning depends

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differently on their form. In that account, a graphic mark remains both mysterious (since it is infinitely variable and replete with meaning) and second rate (since it cannot become a legible sign as long as its meaning depends so intimately on its form). Most ways of describing pictures assume graphic marking is not susceptible to exact description, but potentially ready to be tightened into the more rigorous arenas of writing and notation. Chapter One attempts to write a theory of the graphic mark: to say what graphic marks are, if they are not simply meaningless “visual elements” or analogues of written signs. I propose some can be described, and their kinds enumerated, and that they are best thought of as neither consistently semiotic nor nonsemiotic. Acknowledging their mixed nature places a special burden on accounts of pictures because it means they cannot bypass illegible marks in favor of easier to read pictorial signs. Chapter One is the only explicitly antisemiotic portion of the book, and I have put it first to suggest the fundamental nature of the decisions we make about how pictures carry meaning: if pictures are orderly systems of signs, then semiotics can be said to be an optimal tool; but if there is something partly irrational and opaque about the building blocks of signs, then semiotics (and linguistic models in general) may appear more as simplifications than as adequate models.

Chapter Two continues the exploration of pictorial marks by examining how certain marks – especially light, shade, and half-tone – are said to work in the service of naturalism and illusion. The chapter is set as a critique of E. H. Gombrich’s theory of naturalism, especially that portion of it I take to be essential: the claim that Western artists have built their powers of illusion by accumulating methods for rendering visual phenomena. One such method is the sticky paint that Rembrandt used to model skin; another is the *splendor*, the gleaming highlight that makes many objects look more three-dimensional. Against Gombrich’s theory, which I think is the best account of naturalism we possess, I argue two things. Namable methods can explain very little of any given picture, and therefore they are at best parts of a working theory, not yet capable of explaining realism; and more important, methods do not tend to work in an orderly way, but rather as mobile signifiers of naturalism, antinaturalism, and other mean-

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ings. My examples are Michelangelo's drawings from 1505 to around 1530, when the *splendor* came to be "misused" in a number of ways, until it even took on the function of its opposite (that is, of deep shadow). *Anti-splendor* is a name for that entirely illogical form, which usurps the place of the *splendor* and sometimes works against naturalism within a naturalistic setting. The *splendor* and its non-naturalistic opposite stand for the possibility that the most important way Western pictures make sense as pictures – that is, their mimetic function – might be the least understood.

Chapter Three concludes the initial investigation of pictorial marks by considering the relation of figure and ground, which can be considered as an analogue to the more elementary notion of central mark and surrounding surface. I survey the figure/ground relation as it appears in a number of disciplines, beginning with Aristotle's concept of matter and form, and then ranging through phenomenological accounts, Gestalt psychology, neurobiology, experimental psychology, and some recent uses in art history that depend on Lacanian psychoanalysis. The figure/ground relation emerges as a much less consistent and complete model than it is often taken to be, and the chapter uses portions of different accounts to show how any pictorial model that depends on the notion of a structural figure/ground relation is incompatible with what happens in actual pictures.

Each chapter in Part One contributes some terminology to the critical description of pictorial incoherence, but remains within the Western discourses on pictures and images. The three "Voyages" of Part Two pursue the sources of incoherence by exploring images that do not depend on concepts developed from the Greeks onward. Each moves a little further from the familiar ground of art historical accounts: first into prehistoric pseudowriting, then to the origins of pictures in the ancient Near East, and finally to historical texts on pictures written more or less independently of the Western tradition. The three chapters are intended to suggest how much more is out there and to show that unusual comparative material can make Western ideas seem even less stable.

The first "Voyage" explores the minimal requirements that an image must possess in order to be perceived as writing, or as a pic-

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ture. I consider spacing, character sets (signaries), and other criteria, using the example of the undeciphered prehistoric Vinča script from southeastern Europe. If the Vinča culture had developed a full writing system before it faded, it would have achieved the earliest writing, predating the first Mesopotamian script by a thousand years; but as it stands it satisfies some criteria of writing and fails others. For the study of pictures, the curious thing is the imbalance between what we require of pictures and of writing. Although a marked surface needs to fulfill some half-dozen criteria in order to be perceived as writing (and the criteria are to some degree relative to culture and context, but not wholly specific to modern Western conventions), a set of marks does not need to fail each criterion in order to be experienced as a picture. The inquiry is therefore aimed at loosening the grip of the word/image dichotomy by demonstrating how writing and pictures can be conceived as *sets of properties*, so an image might be a picture only on balance, and contain a certain degree of writing. The chapter's concluding example, a print by Andrea Mantegna, goes to show that ordinary pictures can satisfy virtually all the criteria of writing. Since there are many such criteria, it does not always make sense to speak of "words" and "images" as a pair; instead, it becomes helpful to speak of the *degree of writing* in any given image.

That argument is aimed again partly at linguistic theories of images, in that it is a way of urging that sign systems may not be applicable to pictures because writing and pictures both already share various criteria of writing, and neither can make a strong claim to have *more* of the criteria than the other. In my view, that mingling of writing and picturing makes pictures richer than they would be if it were only a matter of demonstrating where the structures of writing – considered as a fundamentally different activity – might have analogues in picturing. Chapter Five takes a different subject matter and applies the same strategy, arguing that pictures should also be tied to the apparently unrelated subject of counting, and especially to the history of the natural numbers. The research which opens that possibility has been done in the last decade by the archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat; her argument is essentially that in the ancient Near East, writing evolved from counting, and counting was per-

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formed at first with the help of small clay sculptures called tokens. In my reading of her work, that common origin can be extended, linking counting, three-dimensional and relief sculpture, pictures, and numbers. The new affinities suggest that pictures might signify the way numbers do, and vice versa. Thus the uniqueness of pictures, and the relations between them, might be best understood by thinking of some properties of numbers.

With pictures, writing, counting, and relief sculpture all related to one another, Chapter Six, "Different Horizons for the Concept of the Image," sets out to expand the field of "picture" beyond Western limits. (Throughout this text, I use the word "image" for variety, in place of "picture"; the optical resonance of the word "image" comes into play only in specific instances.) The chapter is a speculative piece, intended to bring out some contours of the concept of pictures by reading texts written in three very different cultures: eighth-century India, ninth-century China, and sixteenth-century Persia. Each of them involves notions of images that go substantially beyond what has been described in the West, and together they suggest how confined some of our ideas are and how many meanings are waiting beyond the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture that are still so much admired by the Western history of art. A picture becomes substantially more confusing when the Western armature is weakened, and Chapter Six is meant to bring out some of the most fundamental and abstract links images between images and other conceptual domains.

After the widening gyres of Part Two, the final part of the book, "Destructions," returns to the central notions of incoherence, opacity, and difficulty. "Destructions" are global sources of meaninglessness, as opposed to the sometimes macroscopic markings in Part One. Thus Chapter Seven is about the deliberate pursuit of disorder, and the final chapter describes how pictures are tied to what cannot be pictured – to the invisible and the inconceivable. Each is a way of conceiving pictures as objects whose meanings necessarily and continuously fail.

What happens when artists become uninterested in using pictures to make sense, and set out instead to make pictures harder to see or

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understand? Chapter Seven concerns the intentional creation of difficulty and how picture making seems to resist being turned away from sense. Western discourse is replete with words describing order (symmetry, harmony, eurhythmy, clarity, and so forth), but there are relatively few words for their opposites that are not formed by merely adding negative prefixes (such as disorder, asymmetry, dissonance, disharmony, unclarity). Chaos is the principal exception, but it is not exact enough to be widely useful in describing pictures. The “Nine Steps Down the Ladder of Disorder” in Chapter Seven are strategies for destroying the signs of order in pictures, beginning with the most easily overturned ideals such as symmetry and lighting, and proceeding toward impossible acts of destruction including the disruption of rhythm and the elimination of form. The nine steps show how disorder is not a simple absence, but a structured field of possibilities, so that pure, buzzing confusion is as elusive as perfect harmony and clarity. The incoherence of pictures, in other words, is not a vacuum waiting to be filled by rational signs, but a structure with its own laws and sources of meaning.

The final chapter presents a theory of the invisible, and of the ways that each image implies absent forms. I begin from Georges Didi-Huberman’s argument that the impulse to try to record visceral, numinous religious experiences strained the conventions of narrative religious painting in the Renaissance and resulted in excessive and failed experiments. His central example is Fra Angelico’s false-marble dado panels in San Marco, where paint is splattered instead of controlled for naturalistic purpose; he understands those panels as evidence of an attempt to capture the hypostatic meaning of the incarnation: the paint commemorates the base material that Christ became. I take Didi-Huberman’s account as a special case of a more general phenomenon, according to which pictures are composites of forms that are mimetic and those that work against mimesis and often cannot find places in the image at all. The chapter explores four such failures or absences, which I call the unrepresentable, the unpicturable, the inconceivable, and the unseeable. Together they form the outlines of the invisible field of objects that cannot be pictures in any given case, and I argue that every image shows signs of those absences by

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calling to mind what it cannot be. The book concludes with an envoi, gathering the observations of the three parts into some thoughts on the limits of description.

None of this amounts to claiming that pictures fail to make sense at all, but rather that they routinely escape attempts to have them make the kinds of orderly sense that art history desires. It is a central purpose of this book to stall interpretations that find words too easily. The book is written against any account that takes a picture and merely says what is in it, as if a picture were a *dramatis personae*, an ekphrasis without an original, or a convenient kind of inventory. Whenever the description of a picture could do without the picture, I am suspicious. I do not think we do well by our experience of visual artifacts when we bypass large portions of pictures because they are “subsemiotic,” “merely formal,” comprised of “dense” signifiers, unnamable, non-narrative, inenarrable, nonverbal, “purely visual,” “uncoded,” “meaningless,” or otherwise not amenable to historical and critical sense. Parts of pictures are disorderly, unpredictably irrational, inconsistently incoherent, and ill suited to stories of symbols or visual narratives; we tend to ignore those aspects in favor of readily retrievable meanings. But those abandoned elements are *what pictures are*, and they are among the most conceptually and linguistically challenging objects of inquiry.

Several readers have helped shape this book. Whitney Davis read the manuscript with exemplary diligence and acuity, and identified crucial structural weaknesses. David Carrier and an anonymous reader made exacting and perspicuous comments on the organization and direction of the argument. Joel Snyder and Tom Mitchell read a draft of Chapter One, and Philip Alperson and two anonymous readers helped with earlier versions of Chapter Two. In addition, I thank Denise Schmandt-Besserat for a gracious review of my assessment of her theories, Michael Rabe for information on Parsi texts, Stanley Murashige for help with Chinese sources, and Kirtana Thangavelu for thoughts on South Indian Kalamkari painting. Rudolf Arnheim and Steve Yantis (of the Department of Psychology, Johns Hopkins University) read Chapter Three and suggested a number of new ref-

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erences. I also thank the editors and anonymous readers at *Semiotica* and *New Ideas in Psychology* (I retracted earlier versions of two essays, in order to publish them first here). And last, I thank my mother, for nearly a year of work tracking down the copyright owners of the illustrations.

Chapter One is revised from "Marks, Traces, Traits, Contours, Orli, and Splendores: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 822–60, and the subsequent exchange with Mieke Bal ("What Do We Want Pictures to Be?" *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 590–602). Chapter Six is forthcoming in the *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*.

September 1997
Chicago, Illinois

J. E.