
Liliane Louvel. *Poetics of the Iconotext.* Ed. Karen Jacobs. Trans. Laurence Petit. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 212 pp., £ 60.00.

The present volume introduces the work of French literary critic and theorist, Liliane Louvel, to an English speaking audience through selections from her works *L'œil du texte: Texte et image dans la littérature anglophone* (1998) and *Texte/Image: Images à lire, textes à voir* (2002). Louvel's work in text/image studies is influential and well-known in Europe, and the collection of her essays in *Poetics of the Iconotext* is a timely and much needed translation to be placed along, and in dialogue with, the Anglo-American debates on text/image studies; debates that similar to Louvel's study rethink the Horatian *ut pictura poesis*, the ancient trope of *ekphrasis*, the rhetoric of the Sister Arts rivalry, and Da Vinci's *Paragone*. The majority of text/image studies in Anglo-American literature focus on specific authors or movements and trace a historical trajectory of interarts relations, which navigates through texts that appear open to the interarts mode. In these single-author or movement studies (examples include studies on Edith Wharton, Iris Murdoch, Henry James, D.H Lawrence, the realist novel, and modernist women writers among others), critics depart from a set of literary texts and read the presence of the image in the text in the framework of a particular author's concerns or a period's aesthetic priorities. Louvel's work departs significantly from those textually and culturally motivated studies to offer a work of interarts theory. It is, therefore, better received alongside works such as W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994) and Mieke Bal's *Reading Rembrandt* (1991).

Karen Jacobs' introduction situates the work within a critical climate that gradually returns to a New Formalism, and which attends to the "demanding

pleasures of literary and pictorial form” (2), having nonetheless moved on from the New Critical isolation of the literary text. Louvel’s elegant concept of “The Infinite Dialogue Between Text and Image” (chapter 2), a well-wrought dialectical concept that captures the large chronological and relational spectrum of text/image interaction, provides a useful vantage point from which to address the plurality of the concept. Louvel’s prose is lyrical and suggestive, employing metaphor and a plethora of linguistic schemata to articulate the modalities of this fertile dialogue. Her study is specific in its aims but expansive in its references to British and American fiction, offering a series of valuable insights into the *modus operandi* of the image within the text. In the three part structure of the volume we encounter chapters on theory that are complemented by case studies on specific authors and texts. Louvel’s work presents a detailed typology for text/image relations, a tool that can potentially aid researchers in classifying and differentiating the rich corpus of iconotexts. The term ‘iconotext’ is defined in the first few pages as a paradoxical term that “merge[s] text and image in a pluriform fusion” (15), joining two irreducible objects to create a new object. The focus of the book is located in text/image dialogues within fiction specifically, refraining from discussion of poetry but also of genres where text and image coexist, such as graphic novels or comic strips, or even illustrated volumes in the Blake tradition. For Louvel the objects of interest are moments when an image is “translated or converted into words”, cases when the image generates the text, and times when, via its insertion in the text, the image interrupts the narrative flow and causes a “freeze-frame” effect (14–15).

Part I entitled “Text/Image: The Infinite Dialogue” lays the theoretical foundations for the subsequent differentiations and typologies, and circumscribes the object of enquiry, warning against projections of arbitrary visual associations, but rather insisting on attending to the organic and structural relationship between text and image. Key concepts such as ‘image’ and ‘representation’ are defined in the context of Louvel’s study, to then facilitate a discussion on the relationship between literature and painting across centuries. In revisiting the different incarnations of the *ut pictura poesis credo*, Louvel provides a lucid historical background to this long-lived analogy, highlighting the turning points of the comparison, from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica* to Lessing’s *Laocoon* and Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*. The emphasis on the presence of the pictorial arts within the literary text is subsequently refined with a focused discussion of the figure of *ekphrasis*. Here Louvel is engaging with the critical corpus on *ekphrasis* generated in the 1990s, one comprised of works by Heffernan, Krieger and Mitchell.¹ Accord-

¹ James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*

ing to Louvel the circularity of paradigmatic ekphrastic objects, from the shields to funereal urns, is reflected in the structure of circular fictional narratives beyond the well-known poetic examples; and the insertion in the flux of narration of such static objects spatializes narrative, thus complicating the time-space dichotomy proposed by Lessing (45). Louvel, however, supports the paragonal energy inherent in *ekphrasis* and its gendered character (whereby the male text envoices the female image); both are aspects of *ekphrasis* which have received sufficient reflection and revision by more recent studies on *ekphrasis*.² A number of differentiated terms are adopted, defined and contextualized by Louvel, as she embarks on her significant project to offer a detailed account of the life of this pluriform concept: the ‘iconotext’. Therefore, she finds useful the differentiation between *ekphrasis* and *hypotyposis* (a concept also encountered in Krieger) whereby “hypotyposis does not concern an art object identified as such, but rather evokes a painting indirectly, thus producing a ‘painting effect’” (51).

Part II is the richest and most original contribution of Louvel’s study, comprised of three chapters which present her tools for describing the different degrees of textual pictoriality under her elegant concept of “pictorial saturation” (89). In chapter three, entitled “Narrative Figures of the Pictorial Image”, the many ways the pictorial image is inserted in the text are identified, defined and differentiated. The proposed typology draws on Genette’s categories as outlined in *Palimpsests*, and the first umbrella term to serve the new schema is “transpictoriality” (66), which identifies moments when texts transcend their boundaries to include the pictorial. Louvel acknowledges that the terms proposed might be fraught with a media-specific undertone, being overtly identifiable with pictorial discourse, whereas her contribution aims at an intermedial vocabulary. In the subsequent parts of chapter three a range of terms are introduced: “interpictoriality” (when an image or a painting is specifically “quoted” in the text, or alluded to) (60–63); “parapictoriality” (when the image is to be found in the paratext, for example on the dust jacket) (68–70); “metapictoriality” (when either the image or the text is offering a comment on the other system) (73); “hypopictoriality” (in novels or short-stories in particular where a particular image becomes the Genetian hypertext, being re-written, transformed or imitated) (66–68); “archpictoriality” (which designates the presence of pictorial genres in the text, for example still life or portrait) (63–66); and the most allusive of all, “mnemopictoriality” (which designates “the memory of the painting in the text”) (57). This detailed

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). W.J.T Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

² See Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman, *In the Frame: Women’s Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

typology of how the pictorial is included in narratives is amply explained and analysed, with Louvel drawing examples from a rich range of sources within and beyond the canon of Anglo-American literature, while at the same time offering close readings on postmodern texts such as J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, John Banville's *Ghosts* and Robertson Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone*. Shifting her focus from modes of insertion when the image functions *in absentia*, to moments when the work of the iconotext is performed *in praesentia*, Louvel illuminates cases when the physical presence of the image punctuates the text, discussing works by Julian Barnes, Paul Auster and A.S. Byatt. The differentiations here are again multiple and encompass illustration, chapter headings and the images to be found in the paratext.

So as to qualify her notion of pictorial saturation, Louvel revisits in chapter four a number of critical studies that grapple with definitions of the 'pictorial', acknowledging the need to establish an interarts vocabulary to aid such criticism. Textually unsupported analogies between painter and writer prompted by the *Zeitgeist* approach, a term proposed by Marianna Torgovnick in her study *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel* (1985), are met with suspicion by Louvel. She advocates against "facile connections", the fault of many interarts critics, who for example take a window scene or a woman at a balcony to suggest paintings by Renoir and Degas, or a description of English countryside to evoke Constable (76–77). What Louvel suggests, in contrast, is "not to try to place a writer's work within a pictorial system, but rather to wonder to what extent this is possible, or even necessary and legitimate" (89). Lacking an established interarts vocabulary that describes the varied relations between the pictorial and the textual with precision, critics are often asked to create their own terms with hazy results for Louvel. To this end her own typology outlined at the end of chapter four moves away from the mode of insertion of the previous chapter to consider degrees of pictoriality, with texts having higher or lesser 'pictorial saturation'. The seven terms proposed here are increasing in pictorial intensity and include "the painting-effect, the picturesque view, the hypotyposis, the tableau vivant, the aesthetic arrangement, the pictorial description, and finally the *ekphrasis*" (90). Louvel acknowledges that the point of her schema is not to present a rigid classification, but "to follow the mobility of a text as well as its extreme fragility" (99) and to attend to the significance of this alternative discourse that at times reinforces and challenges the textual world.

Following on from the typology of the ways an image can be incorporated in the text and the degrees to which a text is saturated by an image, chapter five turns to the functions of the image, presenting "A Pragmatics of the Iconotext". Identified as "a privileged space, the space where one may read the stakes and the knowledge of the text" (101), the iconotext can function as a substitute and a

supplement to meaning (Derrida); it can inform the reader and situate the text within the real, functioning as a token of authenticity; it can also establish a sense of complicity with the reader in sharing a common mental image. Louvel contributes to this ongoing discussion on the function of the iconotext two new metaphorical models: the paternal model, in which the image generates the narrative, and the maternal model, in which the image is embedded and contained in the narrative. Operating on the level of the macro-text, and either giving rise to the narrative or becoming the desired object of a quest, the paternal model can be seen in operation in texts such as Poe's "The Oval Portrait", Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Banville's *The Book of Evidence*. Louvel identifies an intermediate stage in which the image is a "work-in-progress" (109), with the process of its creation and its creator being at the centre of attention. The paradigmatic text which uses the creation of the image to refer to literary process is Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, but Louvel enriches the examples of this trope with an astute analysis of Ackroyd's *Chatterton*. The maternal model considers the text at micro level and attends to the fleeting moments within a narrative when extraordinary images of objects come into view; when "the image constitutes a sort of pictorial islet" (118). The image in this case functions as a revelatory source on characters, since these moments are often focalized by a particular narrator, but also pose ethical considerations through notions of forgery and falsehood. Finally, within this maternal model Louvel sees the iconotext as suspending the reading momentum, and opening up a space for contemplating the poetic quality of the text, as well as for commenting on art and aesthetics in a self-reflexive manner.

The last part entitled "Poetics of the Iconotext" is comprised of two chapters. In chapter six, entitled "Variations on the Pictorial", Louvel turns to optical instruments and visual objects that could also generate rich iconotexts. Objects such as mirrors, maps, optical instruments, *tableaux vivants* and tapestries diversify the discussion, that has thus far been largely focused on painting, to reveal a manifold and varied world of reflections, projections and screens within the texts. The eye-glasses in Edith Wharton's fiction receive an insightful commentary, as does the reflecting, polished breast-plate in a short-story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Attention to these devices and reflections enables new and unexpected readings on how to "open the eye of the text" (147). The discussion subsequently extends to photography and cartography, drawing firstly on photography's evidential and documentary value, and its unsettling deployment in texts such as Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, which complicates the referential nature of the photographic image while retaining its function as a link to the past and memory. The map with its associations of discovery, travel and adventure is another variation of the pictorial which gives Louvel the opportunity to broaden her discussion to earlier iconotexts such as Thomas More's *Utopia* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Pro-*

gress. She finally considers topographic descriptions and mental maps in Twain, Coetzee and Ondaatje, establishing that the “cartographic eye of the text” designates the literary text as an open, fragmentary space that resembles a network, contrary to the finite, framed and “foreclosed” space of the painting (168).

In the final chapter entitled “Beyond the *Paragone*: Towards a Poetics of Pictorial Rhythm”, Louvel revisits Lessing’s dichotomy and argues for the cohabitation of the “arts of simultaneity” and the “arts of continuity” (171). She proposes the concept of rhythm as way to partially resolve the oppositional energy created through the transaction and comingling of the two media. She focuses not only on moments of stasis created by *ekphrasis* or pictorial description, but also on the rhythmic punctuation created in the text by the recurrent presence of the image. Employing a metaphor of sound, harmonics, and noise, whereby the image returns as “an insistent musical motif, recognizable and yet always modified” (178), Louvel sees the image as existing in a state of flux, appearing and reappearing to define the degree of pictoriality of a text. This pictorial rhythm is read initially in scenes taking place in painting galleries in the work of Banville, Wharton and Wilde. Attending to this back and forth pacing in front of art works, Louvel reads the texts as being punctuated by the movement of the characters’ eye and body as they engage with the artworks. Ultimately, these descriptions result in “a narrative technique aiming at triggering micro-narratives combining descriptive pause and narrative regime into a syncopated rhythm” (174). The question of rhythm is further explored by approaching the image as the voice of the text, which punctuates with colour and lines, and also with visual markers of punctuation such as Woolf’s ellipses or Sterne’s dashes. Finally, the discussion of the interpretative potentials of pictorial rhythm is concluded by asserting its association with speed, going against the traditional static connotations of the image and seeing it as enclosing within it a type of “visible force”, where the ancient “*energeia*” is manifested as “textual energy” (186).

In this important volume Louvel proposes a nuanced, detailed and differentiated vocabulary of interarts criticism seeking to clarify the ambiguous status of the image in the text after establishing the “pluriform” figure of the iconotext, which indeed throughout her discussion emerges as an abundant “pool of meaning” (101). Her insistence on the importance of form – and in particular on the moments when text and image figures converge and interact with one another – reaffirms “the ethical stake of comparative practice” (187), ultimately encouraging a welcoming of the other. Louvel’s prose is dense, interweaving theoretical considerations with carefully chosen case studies and illuminating textual examples, brimming at the same time with insightful readings of the major iconotexts within 19th and 20th century Anglo-American fiction. The English speaking reader will find here a range of Francophone sources on text/image relations, which add

to, and extend beyond, the established concerns in the field, bringing with them a different set of cultural and aesthetic priorities. Louvel's work is an ambitious, albeit necessary, contribution to a field of interarts criticism, that is in need of more sophisticated theoretical schemata. Yet, as with all theoretical manifestations, her project's ultimate success lies in its dissemination; it rests, in other words, on the terms being adopted by a wider critical community, which will put the terminology and typology offered here to creative and interpretative uses, as they are now in possession of more sophisticated critical equipment to attend to the infinite dialogue between word and image.

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