FROM SUB- TO SUPRASEMIOTIC: THE SIGN AS EVENT[i]
MIEKE BAL

5:4

If we want to assess to what extent we can circumscribe the signifying units called signs and understand our dealings with them, we must delimit the field of signs and meanings in two directions. At one extreme there are the subsemiotic technical aspects of the works of art. Although they all contribute to the construction of signs, stylistic variation, light and dark, composition, or more technical aspects like brushstrokes, paint thickness, and lines are not, a priori, signs in themselves; not any more than in a literary text sheer ink on the page, mere punctuation marks, and syntactic structures are. Although they are part of what make us interpret the work, we do not give them meaning in themselves, except in some truly special cases. [...]

At the other extreme, there are the suprasemiotic holistic aspects of the works. Although there has been a tendency to conflate the concepts of 'text' and 'sign,' and, by extension, of 'work' and 'sign,' I think such a conflation only displaces the problem of what kinds of encounters signs and meanings are. [...] The consequence of such a position is that the compound sign will be subdivided into discrete units, and this division will become a gesture at best either of articulation or of slicing up, delimiting, what supposedly adds up in the whole. This subdivision is held more acceptable for verbal than for visual art; indeed, the distinction between the two is often based on the very assumption that verbal works are composed of discrete units whereas visual works are 'dense.' The distinction is deceptively self-evident and can be deconstructed only by reversing it and arguing that to some extent verbal texts are dense – the sign of the effect of the real cannot be distinguished from the work as a whole on which it sheds a specific meaning – and that visual texts are discrete, which sometimes, and in some respects, they are. The distinction is untenable, but it nevertheless reflects different attitudes of reading that operate conventionally for each art. [...]

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Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (Figure 5.3), housed in the National Gallery in Washington, represents a woman in a blue dress, holding a balance above a table; on the wall, in the background, is a painting of the *Last Judgment*. Light streams in from a stained-glass window at the upper left. It is a strikingly still painting. It avoids narrative – both the anecdotal and the dynamic. Instead it presents an image in terms of visual rhythm, equilibrium, balanced contrasts, and subtle lighting. [...]
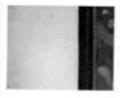
Svetlana Alpers, I assume from her *Art of Describing* (1985), would call this a descriptive painting. It is a painting that appeals to visuality if ever there was one, a case for Alpers' opposition to Italian infatuation with narrativity. Any

FIGURE 5.3
Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*
c. 1662–4. Source: National Gallery,
Washington, DC. **See colour Plate 1**

attempt to read the painting as a narrative can only misread it. It is a surface carefully balanced for visual experience, where the appeal to visuality is worked out in the tiniest details. On the upper left part of the painting, in the white wall near the represented *Last Judgment*, is a nail, and near that nail, a hole in the wall. The minutely detailed work of painting is so highly emphasized in these tiny details that both inside the hole and next to the nail we can see a shadow. The soft, warm light streaming in from the window on the upper left touches these two irregularities in the wall, as if to demonstrate that realistic description of the world seen knows no limits. [...]

For me it was the nail and the hole that the light made visible, produced; that instigated a burst of speculative fertility. When I saw this nail, the hole, and the shadows, I was fascinated: I could not keep my eyes off them. Why are they there? I asked myself, Are these merely meaningless details that Roland Barthes would chalk up to an 'effect of the real'? Are these the signs that make a connotation of realism shift to the place of denotation because there is no denotative meaning available? Or do they point to a change in the significance of the *Last Judgment*? Do they suggest that the represented painting which [...]

is there to balance the work, to foreground the similarity, the rhyme, between God and this woman, has been displaced from an earlier, 'original' position to a better, visually more convincing balance, leaving only the telltale trace of a nail hole? As it is, the woman stands right below God, a position that emphasizes the similarity between judging and weighing. Also, the separation between the blessed and the doomed is obliterated by her position, suggesting, perhaps, that the line between good and evil is a fine one. But in the midst of this speculative flourish, I am caught up short by the remembrance that we are looking at a painting of this balance, not at a real room. The painter surely did not need to *paint* the nail and the hole, even if, in setting up his studio, he actually may have displaced the *Last Judgment*.

[...]

In the painting, narrativity so blatantly absent on first – and even second – glance is found to have been inserted by means of a sign that makes a statement on visuality. The visual experience that encodes the iconic association between woman and God is not displaced but, on the contrary, underscored by this narrative aspect. We imagine someone trying to hang the painting in exactly the right place. We are suddenly aware of the woman's artificial pose: Instead of changing the painting's position, the artist arranging his studio could simply have changed the woman's place, or his own angle of vision. All of a sudden something is happening, the still scene begins to move, and the spell of stillness is broken.

The nail and the hole, both visual elements to which no iconographic meaning is attached, unsettle the poetic description and the passively admiring gaze that it triggered, and dynamize the activity of the viewer. Whereas before the discovery of these details the viewer could gaze at the work in wonder, now he or she is aware of his or her imaginative addition in the very act of looking. The work no longer stands alone; now the viewer must acknowledge that he or she makes it work, and that the surface is no longer still but tells the story of its making.

[...]

[...] Whenever a literary scholar, moved by the commendable intention of putting an end to the current proliferation of interpretation, stands up to claim that some details in realistic texts have no narrative function, that they merely serve to produce an 'effect of the real' (Barthes, 1968) or an effect of verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*; Genette, 1969), someone else responds that the examples given do have a narrative function after all, if only one looks hard enough. There seems to be a resistance to meaninglessness that invariably looks convincing. As a consequence, we continue to assume that everything in a work of art contributes to, and modifies, the meaning of the work.

But if everything in a work of art participates equally in the production of meaning, then how do we know what texts and images are 'about' and why? In other words, which signs convey, or trigger, which meanings? One answer is that there is no answer because texts and images do nothing, the interpreter invents the meaning. Putting the question differently, we may ask, On what basis do we process verbal and visual signs? The debate is particularly

troublesome in literary theory because the question interferes with the apparent obviousness of the answer. We assume we know what signs are and which signs we process because we know what a letter, a word, and a sentence are, and we assume that words are the units we call signs in verbal works.

Here, visual poetics reminds us of this assumption's untenability, by forcing us to ask what the visual counterpart of a word is: Is it an image, as the phrase 'word and image' too easily suggests? Mulling over this difficult equation, we become less sure that words are, in fact, the 'stuff' of verbal signification.

The problem of delimiting signs and delineating interpretation – of distinguishing interpretation from description – is related. Since readers and viewers bring to the texts and images their own cultural and personal baggage, there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined meaning, and the very attempt to summarize meanings, as we do in encyclopaedias and textbooks, is by definition reductive. Yet as soon as we are forced to draw from these views the inevitable conclusion that 'anything goes' and that interpretation is a futile scholarly activity since it all depends on the individual interpreter, we draw back. We then turn around, trying to locate, in the text or image, not a meaning, but the 'occasion' of meaning, the thing that triggers meaning; not fixity, but a justification for our flexibility.

[…]

The view of signs to which I [adhere…] posits the basic density of both verbal and visual texts. I use the term 'density' in Goodman's (1976) sense: as conveying the fundamental inseparability of individual signs, as the opposite of discreteness. This view eliminates at least one difference between discourse and image. Resisting the early Wittgenstein's anguish about, and sympathizing with his later happy endorsement of, the cloudiness of language, I contend that the same density that characterizes visual texts obstructs the propositional clarity of verbal texts.[2] Thus, separate words cannot be taken to rule interpretation, and the ideal of 'pure' propositional content longed for in the *Tractatus* is untenable: the elements of a proposition cannot have independent meaning. This recognition means that the difference between verbal and visual texts is no longer one of the status and delimitation of the signs that constitute them. And the visual model, apparently predominant, overwhelms the concrete particularity of the signifier, giving rise to 'cloudiness' in each medium. Hence, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* mourns the fact that there is no nondense language, whereas later, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein denounces the positivistic illusion that makes visuality the basis of interpretation, sacrificing both the signifier and the activity of semiosis. In this later work he endorses the view he earlier regretted, that language is as dense as pictures. This may not make language visual, but it does displace the difference between the two media.

Yet the density of both visual and linguistic signs is not really the issue. Rather, it is the dynamism of signs that the recognition of their density makes possible that is at issue. The perception of signs as static can be traced to the atomistic view of verbal signs, itself a relic of early structuralism which, in its turn, had inherited it from more explicitly positivistic schools of cultural scholarship.[3] The problem and source of this atomistic view are the semiotic positivism that claims

ontological status for the sign. If the sign is a 'real thing,' then signs must be numerable, hence discrete and intrinsically static. A radically dynamic view, however, would conceive the sign not as a thing but as an event, the issue being not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs, but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation of work–reader interaction. Wittgenstein's concept of language games posits a dynamic view of the sign, which makes signs as *active*, and requires them to be both deployed *according to rules* and *public*. *A sign, then, is not a thing but an event*. Hence the meaning of a sign is neither preestablished and fixed, nor purely subjective and idiosyncratic.

Although this view seems to open the discussion to a paralyzing infinitude of phenomena, this apparent problem disappears as soon as we acknowledge that sign events occur in specific circumstances and according to a finite number of culturally valid, conventional, yet not unalterable rules, which semioticians call 'codes.' The selection of those rules and their combination leads to specific interpretive behaviour.

NOTES

1. *Editor's note:* The opening paragraphs of this selection outlining the concepts of sub- and suprasemiotic marks appear in Bal's original text as a lengthy footnote. It has been included here as a theoretical supplement to the main text.
2. Footnote removed.
3. Footnote removed.

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THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE
GUNTER KRESS AND THEO VAN LEEUWEN

5:5

The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public