

Painter's Word

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1. Auflage 2016. Buch. 259 S. Hardcover
ISBN 978 3 631 66783 5
Format (B x L): 14,8 x 21 cm

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Edyta Frelik

Painter's Word

Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley
and Ad Reinhardt as Writers

Transatlantic Studies in British and North American Culture

Edited by Marek Wilczyński



PETER LANG
EDITION

1. Pre-Text

American poet and literary scholar Charles Bernstein, a prominent member of the group who identify themselves as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, opens his essay “Words and Pictures” with this question: “What is the relation between pictures and writing?” This is a fundamental question the present study will address by looking at the writings of three twentieth-century American painters: Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley, and Ad Reinhardt. It is a question that has never been answered in a way that resolves the issue definitively, once and for all. Bernstein’s essay is used as the starting point here because it represents one of the most insightful and self-reflective approaches found in contemporary critical literature on the subject. Having posited the question, he continues with what seems a typical reflex response, appropriately given in poetic form:

... My first answer is no –
no relation – they are as different
as sky and earth, nothing in
common. This would be to imagine
pictures to be experience, the subjectivity
I am always seeking and being rebuffed
by – or that there is any other, above
or beside.
What is the relation of the visual to
the verbal? Are they not separate
realms – races – each with their own civilization?
And what more can we do then
pay each tribute at the temples
which are their Art? Difference
is power, but it is also regret.
The bird sings as sourly at noon
when accosted by wolves as he does
in famine’s moonlight.¹

This poetic “Introduction” serves as the pre-text to ten subsequent sections in which Bernstein tries to understand and explain the reasons behind the impulse that prompted him to answer the question in such an unequivocal, reflexively responsive and yet unreflective manner. Though necessarily biased, or skewed – after

1 Charles Bernstein, “Words and Pictures,” in *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 114–15. Page references subsequently cited in the text.

all, his expressive medium of choice is language – his self-scrutiny aims at identifying certain universal traits in modern and postmodern thought that account for the convoluted history of the discourse on the matter at hand, a history marred by the persistence and apparent irreconcilability of the word/picture dichotomy and marked by periods of under- and overvaluation of one or the other.

Bernstein cleverly begins by exposing the paradoxical nature of the “spell of dualism,” which manifests itself in “the difference in the perception of space and time” with regard to the visual arts and literature. On the one hand, he observes: “The visual image overwhelms: erecting itself foresquarely before the eyes – the trees, the sky – looming and total, assuming acquiescence in its presence.” This is so because “a picture seems to be apprehended all at once, a geometric simultaneity, while words are experienced in pieces, a duration that never transcends its utter sequentiality” (115). On the other, however, he points out that certain visual arts, because they are dependent on duration, “[share] a unique kinship with writing” (116). The best example is film, which naturally bridges the perennial critical gap between the realms of the visual and the verbal. Bernstein writes: “Understanding film provides a method for understanding language, since in its nonlexicality, its grammar of shots and angles, it may contain the essence of the linguistic” (116). Noting that “no doubt writing and painting also share a common origin,” he points out that films offer “the most striking visual equivalent of a sentence” and that of all kinds of moving pictures “silent film – by virtue of its silence – may have the most intimate connection with writing” (116).

Having invoked “this silent totality of obtruding objects, conspicuously present to the eyes” (118), Bernstein follows the second section, appropriately titled “Silence,” with a third, titled “A School for Senses,” in which he reflects on how consciousness processes visual data. The most important overall conclusion of his discussion of the psychology of sight, based upon Piaget’s theory, is that there is no such thing as direct perception and that we “see” not because we have eyes but because we have a complex multilevel information processing system that allows us to organize perceptions. As an indispensable cognitive instrument, visual language performs functions that are essentially of the same kind as those of verbal language and other “forms of socially exchangeable meaning” (119). In section four, “The Oars of Perception,” Bernstein takes issue with the structuralists and argues that, while “perception is totally subscribed to the population of the social body” (122), there are no universal structures; at the same time he asserts that what we perceive as phenomena are not a physical reality but “the product of a mediation by the membrane of consciousness, which is language.” This is to say, whether filtered by “the membrane of consciousness” or some “unalloyed substance external to our processing” (122), such phenomena are verbal “actualizations of such a reality” (124).

This is quite puzzling in view of the fact that it is sight that is usually considered the most important of the human senses, and thus the visual is presumed to trump the verbal. Indeed, Bernstein observes that “assumed to be responsible for processing the most important information about the world, eyesight is the sense most associated with survival” and, accordingly, “is imagined to be split off from the other senses and from language, and assumed to be an autonomous realm, the *sine qua non* of truth, its own evidence – ocular proof” (124). This “naïve empiricism” stands in stark contrast with the “cultural bias toward verbal over visual language as the currency of intellect as well as commerce.” The paradox is that, on the one hand, verbal skills are prized more than visual skills, the assumption being that “verbal syntax is basic to knowledge, visual syntax esoteric,” and, on the other, “there is a tacit acceptance of the visual as brute reality: the objects that we apprehend appear to make a claim to exist outside of language, silent exemplars of physical fact” (125). The result of reification of objectness in Western culture is that “the truth-value of verbal discourse” is often called into question, a phenomenon that, Bernstein points out, is visible, for instance, in how we respond to news reporting: pictures are usually perceived as neutral conveyors of information about the world, whereas verbal reports are often read as ideologically biased and manipulative. “What is difficult to see,” the critic explains, “is that the visual realm is as fully constructed, as fully a syntax, a rhetoric – a language – as is the verbal” (126). Offering a quick overview of how and why throughout history different cultures and epochs have privileged or, conversely, depreciated one or the other, he traces the development of “visual literacy” (the title of section number five) in the pictorial arts and literature of the West. With respect to this study, one observation he makes is particularly relevant: “Painting, to a large extent, has moved toward acknowledging, or foregrounding, the qualities of the visual as discourse; it has been one of the most developed of the arts in terms of its consciousness of its own language” (132). But because Bernstein is himself a writer, a man of letters rather than pictures, he does not pursue this important idea but, quite understandably taking verbal language for granted, focuses on how the wall of separation between word and image can be dismantled from the side of verbal language. He cites examples of twentieth-century poets who “flirted” with “a poetics of sight” (the title of section six) – Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and Paul Zukofsky, to name a few – though he explains that the narrower category of “optics” is a more appropriate term here. Via the correlative to “sight” – “insight” – he arrives at the concept of “vision” (section seven) and then offers two “case studies” (section eight): one of Blake’s “visionary physics” and another regarding Zukofsky’s “valorization of [physical sight].” He then takes up the idea of “language turning upon itself” (153) by contrasting insight with

reflection in section nine. He points to the role of such figures as T.S. Eliot, Laura (Riding) Jackson and Williams in making “the materials of literature and literary tradition” (155) the object of reflection and thus facilitating overthrowing “the straitjacket of received forms” in modern and postmodern poetry (156). In a bow to his L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E colleagues, Bernstein cites as an example one of them, Ron Silliman, who uses “spaces between sentences” to make visible the “shadow” (section ten) that thought reflects into the world.

Bernstein concludes his brilliant essay with remarks he titles “Pictureless Words” (section eleven). Following Wittgenstein, he observes that only in “a languageless world” could “a picture [hold] us captive” (160). In response to that observation, he suggests an alternative to “the deafening repetition of either/or.” Per Bernstein, “*Inhearing* [sic] in a poetics of vision or reflection (as if to counter a visualist frame of reference in these terms) is a poetics of sound” (160). He closes poetically, just as he began, coming indirectly full circle to the opening question: “... with poetry we / try other than to / set down or / sound the way / of the world / we see / and still are / in” (161). But what if “we” are not just poets, but *painters* who with *words* try other than to set down or *picture* the way of the world we see and still are in?