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Critical Response

I

Semiotic Elements in Academic Practices

Mieke Bal

1. Blots and Traits, Marks and Dots: Toward a Visual Semiotic

James Elkins ends his article in the summer issue of *Critical Inquiry* on an enticing note: "The incoherence of pictures begins here, with the admission that things are very strange indeed" (James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, Traits, Contours, Orli, and Splendores: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 21 [Summer 1995]: 860). This attention to incoherence, and an interest in strangeness, indeed, strangeness as a primary heuristic tool, was the leading principle of my book *Reading "Rembrandt,"* which advocated an approach to images as well as texts that would take vision and textuality as semiotic modes rather than ontological media.¹ It would make sense to feel that this was a congenial essay with which I could productively engage since, I expected, it would productively engage with my work.

In the chapter "Recognition: Reading Icons, Seeing Stories" of that book, I discuss the art historical approach par excellence, iconography, and try to negotiate the disciplinary boundaries between art history and, say, a more semiotic approach to images by giving iconography maximal

We asked a number of scholars if they would like to respond to James Elkins's essay, "Marks, Traces, Traits, Contours, Orli, and Splendores: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures." Mieke Bal kindly took us up on our offer—ED.

1. This interest in images and texts as modes rather than essentially incommensurable media is primarily an approach that, needless to say, has heuristic advantages but is not necessarily built upon a denial of differences that may be irreducible. See for instance *Vision and Textuality*, ed. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (Durham, N.C., 1995).

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FIG. 1.—Rembrandt van Rijn, *One of the Magi Adoring the Infant Jesus*, c. 1635, 178 × 160 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet. From Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt: A Critical and Chronological Catalogue* (1954), plate 115.

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benefit of the doubt and reframing it as potentially useful for a semiotic analysis. My main concern in that chapter, as in the book as a whole, is to do justice both to semiotics's thrust toward interpretation—its project to articulate conditions of interpretability—and art history's placing priority—in theory if not always in practice—on the visibility of images.² Indeed, the book firmly contends with the tendencies in each to turn its back to the other, art history by giving priority to recognition and similitude, semiotics by reducing visibility to language.

In the chapter, I discuss, among other examples, an ink drawing of an Adoration within the context of developing a perspective on visual narrative (fig. 1).³ By that term I meant a specifically visual mode of "narrating," not a visual rendering of a previously articulated story. This would be a mode that would exploit while simultaneously overruling the public's tendency to jump to narrative conclusions, for example by identifying this particular scene as an Adoration although only one "adorer" is present, and no detail of this man identifies him as a "king" or "wise man" per the Nativity story. Hence, I tried to assess the image's *semiotic*: its ways of meaning making, which include appealing to a common "language" (recognition) as well as offering marks that do not necessarily overlap or reconfirm that recognition.

It may be useful to recall the major junctures of my argument, as it affects directly the thrust of Elkins's polemical view of semiotics. I began by describing the image as follows:

The conjunction of figures—a kneeling old man, a woman holding a child before him, the woman herself—functions as the skeleton of a fabula recognized as the core event of a well-known story. But [I proposed] to take one step back and stay with the slightly more abstract formulation of the conjunction. . . . a diagonal series of elements from right-top to left-bottom . . . three heads bowing [fig. 2], three bodies, divided into two opposed groups.



FIG. 2

2. Some of my most serious discussions with art historians turn precisely on my sense that art history's priority is with the historical, not the pictorial or visual status of images. And because "history" is problematic and far from unified as a concept, the dogmatic status it gets sometimes even precludes insight into the historical aspect itself. Yet arguments tend to be based on an unargued claim that art historians somehow "know better" what images represent and what meanings are historical.

3. See Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 210-14; hereafter abbreviated *RR*.



FIG. 3

The two groups are separated and linked again: subject-action-object as one group, complicated . . . by an indirect object at the other side of a separation. The woman sits with her knees open and holds a baby that has no strength to stand on its own; its arms, for example, hang like those of a [rag] doll [fig. 3]. The feet of the baby are continuous with a very bold line, almost a blot of ink, between the woman's thighs [fig. 4]. In terms of bold versus light lines . . . this blot is the central focus of the drawing. [RR, pp. 210–11]

In terms of the categories that Elkins contends with—but, as I will argue, misunderstands—this blot, typically visual, nonnarrative, apparently “meaningless,” is “subsemiotic.” This is not to say that it is nonsemiotic, let alone “visual babble,” but that it is *potentially* semiotic, on the condition that it is being processed as such. For that processing, syntax needs to be activated, and this is where iconography and semiotics begin to diverge. In this case, I argued that the blot, once semiotically framed, even becomes *the* central, crucial sign of the image, the one that is capable of turning the recognized story around and offering a new one, on the basis not of a leap to language but of sheer visual existence.

Much of my analysis was an attempt to *describe* this sheet. As with all description, I did that by appealing to a common language, since this is basically a figurative work, a representation, but not to more of the commonly known story than the visual image warrants. This “semiotic attitude” is informed by the notion that semiosis requires common ground, both in the specific sense of codes and of material access, and also in the more diffuse sense of context: to make sense of a male figure, for example, you need to have some basic knowledge of the concept “man.”

The woman is holding the baby up to the man, as if to hand it over to him. This action is clearly distinguished from a static pose by . . . a tension in the arms signified by the distance, just a little longer than necessary, between the woman's body and her hands, which also affects the representation of the arm [fig. 5]. . . . The man looks old.



FIG. 4



FIG. 5



FIG. 6

He does not look up to the child the story wants him to adore. He is not kneeling either; he is squatting. He has his hands ready to take the baby and put it into his lap [fig. 6]. [RR, p. 211]

My argument against recognition as the primary method of meaning making, then, went on like this: "If we link these elements together to form a narrative syntagm . . . we hardly [see] the standard scene of the ostentation and adoration of the child. Action, not a still pose, is being depicted" (RR, p. 211). The "subsemiotic" element of the blot is now able to take over, to become not just semiotic but even, in another term misunderstood by Elkins, suprasemiotic. As

the center of the syntagm it becomes the trigger to the new story.

The bold line-blot, the effort represented in the arm, and the emphatically powerless infant can be processed as a delivery scene. The woman is "right now" pulling the baby out of her body and handing it over to the elderly man. In other words, this fabula is not congruent with the iconographically recognizable scene, which in fact tends to obliterate rather than emphasize the [specifically visual elements, and would have, I presume, no use for the blot]. Yet it is a fabula, and if it needs to bracket the official story temporarily, it certainly does not contradict that story, but only conflates the Nativity with the Adoration; by representing both in one scene, they shed an unexpected light on both. [RR, p. 211]

My reading, which, I claim, is both more semiotically responsible and more firmly based in visuality than iconographic readings allow, is even compatible with—more than compatible with: supportive of—historical or theological dogma.

The bodily details of the woman support the view that a bodily event is being represented. The infant's feet are not visible; they seem to be still in the birth canal. The woman's face is elaborated while her eyes are not; she must come across as actively laboring at birthgiving. [RR, p. 211]

Thus the interpretation triggered by the blot sustains the paradox of Christ's full humanity.⁴

4. See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York, 1983).

What Elkins takes to be dismissive of visuality because, reading too hastily, he fails to see my efforts to define visuality beyond figurative categories, is in fact a thorough investigation of what visual signs—subsemiotic, potential signs; discrete or replete signs; suprasemiotic clusters of signs ready to become texts—can be outside of the frequent conflation with linguistic categories that Elkins—just like Norman Bryson and me—rightly rejects.⁵ I elaborate for visual texts the narratological concept of focalization as the most productive, because almost medium-neutral, concept from literary semiotics.⁶

Focalization is . . . at stake in the presentation of the two groups in relation to profile, and it is . . . our willingness to see the image as other than unified that will help us to see striking and significant details here. The man is seen from the side, and therefore the narrative makes a statement on his pose only. The woman, in contrast, is represented in three-quarter view, between profile and facing the viewer, so as to include her opened womb in the representation. If we read the image realistically, this would be a technical mistake, for as a consequence of this difference much of the iconographic as well as the narrative story is suspended. The man's hands do address nothing in particular, nor does he face the child; if technique were taken to coincide with realism, the drawing would be a failure. [RR, p. 212]

But, lest Elkins be led to think I am back to talking about visual babble, obviously it is *not*.

The slight mismatch between the two sides of the scene emphasizes the radical separation between the man who can only receive the child, and the woman who is actually producing it: between human and divine groups, between natural and supernatural events. The mismatch is [a] most radical, because self-conscious, narrative sign. [RR, pp. 212–13]

So far, I hope it is clear that my reading was primarily *visual*, but—avoiding medium-essentialism—at the same time *meaning oriented* and focused on *meaning production*. This makes it a visual semiotic (which is not the same as “semiotic art history,” as Elkins confusingly phrases it).

The strongest lines are those that determine the woman's pose as the attitude of birthgiving, including the strange bench she is sitting on and which would be very uncomfortable if she were merely resting. The blot obscuring the child's feet and indicating [the opening of, or

5. See Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 174–208.

6. For this concept, see Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto, 1985).



FIG. 7

continuity with, her body] is continued in a strong line toward her left foot [fig. 7]; this foot in turn has detailed toes firmly planted on the ground. The man's hands ready to receive the child, his knees strongly displaying the pose of squatting, not of kneeling, and his bowed head are all drawn in bolder lines

than the rest of him. Finally, the careful delimitation of the two groups' spaces literally draws a line between them and separates radically the self-absorbed face of the woman and the firmly drawn face of the man. Over this line the infant is to be handed. [RR, p. 213]

Now I will discuss the mark of the *trait*, or perhaps I should say the mark as a sign (which is again "subsemiotic" because it is at first only potentially meaning producing). This mark of the *trait* shares with the mark of the blot—a surface—prime of place, functioning as a sign that even becomes suprasemiotically relevant; it organizes the visual narrative. For

the line between the two separated realms, a little higher up at the level of the man's knees, is so incongruous that it draws attention to its own [apparent] futility, thus again accenting its [potential] sign status as well as the sign status of the other lines. This line, I [suggested], can work as a hyphen (and almost literally looks like one) [fig. 8]. A hyphen is relevant in this context: By convention it is a minimally semanticized grapheme that separates *and* connects at the same time. Iconically it is a sign that "looks like" its meaning, thus representing separation and connection simultaneously. Is it visual or verbal? As the fine line between verbal and visual signification, this hyphen demonstrates that that fine line ultimately cannot be drawn. [RR, p. 213]



FIG. 8

Apelles' story, after all, is a myth.

The example made my case for the claim that semiotics, on the condition that it respect and examine *visuality* on its own terms, can yield interpretations that encompass iconographic or historical method but that go far beyond them. The interpretation is *narrative*, but it substantiates the claim that

narrative reading is fundamentally different from pre-textual and iconographic reading. It is a reading, rather than a recognition, of a narrative structure. And it is a visual reading, based on the visual signs of a nonvisual, but equally nonverbal, manner of representation. [RR, pp. 213–14]

2. Modes of Argumentation

I have elaborated this single example to enable readers of this journal to follow the argument in all its complexity and nuance, to follow the line, even the mode, of argumentation rather than merely judge the results. I submit that Elkins's discussion of the concept of the mark is not only congenial with the above discussion but is *following* its main tenets, indeed is a reiteration of its main claims. Yet, the first half of his long article takes issue with my work as a major example of semiotics's failure to theorize visuality as a meaning-producing practice and images as meaningful "texts" (my word, not his). The question that I now wish to address is, Why is it that Elkins, who seems so clearly engaged with the same kind of questions—how to develop a visual semiotic—and who ends on a note that could almost be a quotation, if not of my words, then at least of my project, spends half of his lengthy essay attacking the very works that he is implicitly following? I am interested in this question not to get back at Elkins, not even to counter his criticism, but because it pertains to two important areas of academic work in general: that of modes of argumentation and their epistemological productivity, and that of the confusion between disciplines and paradigms.

My interest in modes of argumentation goes back to my first work on narratology but has been increasingly important recently, as I have been more and more dissatisfied with such academic practices as the use of illustrations, binary logic, "oedipal criticism," and "trashing."⁷ When asked to respond to Elkins's article I agreed because I like discussion. I also felt ill at ease with some aspects of the text; having semiotic behavior in my bones I sensed an iconic relation between the lengthy, pompous, and incomprehensible title of the essay and the length of the text itself, which, I feared, could well point to an equally pompous incomprehensibility. After reading the article my mood turned to the parodic, and I felt like titling my response "Wordiness, Parasitism, Trashing, Unexamined Dogmatism, Pedantry, Poor Scholarship, and Cliché: Nonsemiotic Elements in Academic Writing." But then I understood what was happening: my irritation had turned into imitation—parody *is*, after all, a form of imitation. This brought me uncannily close to the oedipal criticism I had been examining in another case. So, instead of falling into that trap, I decided to write about it.

To sum up what I mean by the term, oedipal criticism is a mode of

7. On illustration, see Bal, "The Politics of Citation," *Diacritics* 21 (Spring 1991): 25–45; on binary logic, see Bal, "Metaphors He Lives By," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 185–207; on oedipal criticism, see Bal, "His Master's Eye," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 379–404; on trashing, see Bal, "Narratology and the Rhetoric of Trashing," *Comparative Literature* 44 (Summer 1992): 293–306.

argumentation that is parasitic, leaning on the object it is in the process of dismissing; an oedipal critic repeats what he opposes, distorts it, and makes a claim very similar to the one dismissed but for which he claims authority or, to stay with the vocabulary, paternity. Oedipal criticism is by no means confined to men; it rages, for example, in women's studies, as Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen Moglen have demonstrated in a well-known article in *Signs*.⁸ The mode shows in the similarity of the claims and the authoritative tone in which distorting accounts of the object of criticism are put forward as "obvious," and as obviously wrong. Let me point out how Elkins's piece is oedipal, but since I am more interested in analyzing the mode of argumentation than in proving that he is wrong, I will not make a comprehensive list of all his "symptoms"; hence, the purpose is not to prove that he is wrong and I am right (although the reader may reach such a conclusion).

The essay begins by positioning itself within and against art history ("art history lacks" [p. 822]). I will return to this opening in the next section. The second sentence, in contrast, positions the essay, quotes Charles Sanders Peirce's definition of the sign ("if a sign . . . is 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'"), declines to analyze that definition, and argues that "then every mark in a picture is also a sign." This he sets off against what I claim is iconography not semiotics ("that would spell trouble for accounts of pictures that take *sign* to mean the forms that are made out of the marks") (p. 822). This reduction enables him to oppose meaningful signs to meaningless marks. What we get then is a fresh start: after reducing his opponent to the binary logic he himself is engaged with, he needs the full length of this exceedingly wordy paper to reach the conclusion with which I began, and that, I hope to have shown, is very, very close to mine. The closeness makes me happy; the repression of it, which entails regression, makes me sad.

Academic life is about learning and continuity as well as about controversy and dispute. These two ways of getting the business of knowledge production done intersect and interlock. They should not be confused, which happens at the cost of regression and nonproductivity. As in real life, each academic generation learns from the previous one, then sets out to do it better. Moreover, each to a certain extent needs to invent the wheel anew. Blindness to what can usefully be employed to make progress entails waste of intellectual energy and loss of available insight.

The lack of full attention to Peirce's definition is such a blindness. The element of the definition that is missing in the elaboration of Elkins's

8. See Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen Moglen, "Competition and Feminism: Conflicts for Academic Women," *Signs* 12 (Spring 1987): 493-511.

claim is “to somebody,” while the second half of the definition is not quoted. That second half theorizes the *interpretant* shaped in the mind of that “somebody.” It also theorizes semiosis as *process*. Had Elkins bothered to finish Peirce’s sentence, his entire objection against the notion of “sub-semiotic” would have fallen flat. For that notion refers to process; *sub* does not mean *non* but *not-yet-fully*. Hence, it does not “exclud[e] painted or drawn marks from visual semiotics by denying them the status of signs,” let alone constitute a “strateg[y]” to allow something (“semiotic art history”) to “get under way” by “suppressing the semiotic nature of marks in order to proceed with readings that hinge on narrative” (p. 823). On the contrary, as the above analysis of the Rembrandt drawing demonstrated, attention to marks sharpens a conceptualization of narrative that is maximally visual; and Elkins is the one who represses his parasitism of my attention to marks in order to throw narrative back into the domain of the linguistic. Binary logic is, here, the structural presupposition that Elkins mobilizes without seeming to notice it.

Another presupposition is “building block,” or accumulative, semantics, a widespread fallacy that also informs the misunderstanding about “discreteness” as the basis of meaning production in language. It shows in phrases such as “graphic marks somehow build to make signs,” “fundamental units”—a Saussurian concept Bryson and I reject—“atomic units,” and so on (pp. 823, 825, 826). The presupposition informs the argument against our claim that verbal texts don’t produce meaning on the sole basis of words as building blocks. Again, Elkins argues against this without noticing I am on his side; but tilting at windmills has the nasty effect of eating up all his intellectual energy. As a result, the outcome of the argument doesn’t amount to a whole lot.

In order to emphasize that I am less interested in fighting back than in understanding this piece as a sample of an academic practice that bothers me, I wish to draw attention to an equally damaging case of regressive oedipalism. Missing the point altogether of Derrida’s *Mémoires d’aveugle*, a title where the singular form of the second noun obviously matters for even the most basic understanding of the book, Elkins first pluralizes *blind*, as English ambiguity allows, then adds a rather pedantic footnote (see pp. 835–36 n. 29) in which he takes the condescending tone that comes with oedipal criticism—taking the place of the “father” entails condescension—to express regret that Derrida has been so unintelligent as to not distinguish actual blindness, blind people, and the logic of drawing based on a notion of blindness.

To make matters worse, blinded as Elkins is by a literalizing, limited understanding of the writers he construes as opponents, he commits the unbelievably elementary blunder of taking Derrida’s concept of writing as a linguistic bias. Whoever has so much as begun to read *Of Grammatology* or *Writing and Difference* cannot possibly and in all seriousness think

that, let alone construct a lengthy argument against "writing" in such terms.⁹ Again, here is a view, if not a vision, that Elkins could profitably have used to develop his own ideas about the mark in its wake, thus getting a fabulous starting point for free—one that is so semiotic that it suspends the distinction between language and images.

In addition to its parasitism, extreme simplification of the opponent, and repression of the writer's own presuppositions, oedipal criticism comes with an antagonistic mode of reasoning that has been taken to task by philosophers of science.¹⁰ Of the discursive features that characterize this mode I would like to highlight three. All three are ideological codes: structures of thought that "ground" the production of meaning so as to make these appear natural and inevitable. The first one is hierarchical thinking, which Karen J. Warren calls "Up-Down" thinking.¹¹ This code structures arguments in terms of comparative positioning, wherein it is assumed that what matters, in the logic, is that one party—irrespective of which party is at a given moment in a given debate—is always doing better, having more value, or otherwise "naturally" positioned "above" the other.

The pervasiveness of that code, as well as the difficulty of eliminating its automatic acceptance, becomes obvious when we consider it in light of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's view of "metaphors we live by."¹² The vertical structuring of space is the most central metaphor in their catalogue. And whereas Lakoff and Johnson go so far as to consider this metaphor truly natural, a consequence of the upright station of the human species, I would rather see it as a catachresis, a metaphor whose original literal counterpart has been lost. Catachreses present the advantage of passing for self-evident, which makes them an easy means of communication. But they also obscure their own connections to the speaking subject; thereby they become self-serving and therefore easy to use as ideological vehicles. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines *catachreses* as follows:

9. See Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, under the title *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, 1974); *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967), trans. Alan Bass, under the title *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978); and *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'Autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris, 1990), trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, under the title *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago, 1993).

10. See Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals* (Minneapolis, 1985), and Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, N.H., 1987) and *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991). For a comparison between antagonistic argumentation and an alternative model, see Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (forthcoming).

11. Karen J. Warren, "A Philosophical Perspective on the Ethics and Resolution of Cultural Property Issues," in *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* ed. Phyllis Mauch Messenger (Albuquerque, N.M., 1989), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated "PP."

12. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980).

concept-metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced, and yet their seriousness cannot be ignored.¹³

Lakoff and Johnson's decision to consider such catachreses as "natural" thus unwittingly becomes a strategy of precluding their being examined as presuppositions.

The second code Warren foregrounds is "value dualism," and subsequent disjunctive argumentation, which is part of the larger category of binary thought ("PP," p. 11). This is one way of ordering the chaos of elements that make up one's environment, but, although pervasive, it is surely not the only possible principle of ordering. The problem with this structure—and the up-down metaphor is part of it—is the three-tiered manipulation it brings about. First, the multiple issues and positions, values and possibilities involved in a debate are reduced to two groups (reduction). Second, these are polarized into two opposites (polarization). Third, the opposites are hierarchized into a positive and a negative (hierarchization). None of these three moves are "natural" or inevitable, yet all three are so commonly applied that they easily appear so.

The third code in Warren's analysis is a "logic of domination" ("PP," p. 12). This code impels participants in a debate to think, and interpret, in terms of winners and losers. And obviously, as soon as that code is applied to a situation, we are already in court, and only one party can win. These structures of thought all push toward an outcome that reconfirms them instead of questioning their universal validity. It is easy, although distressing, to see that oedipal criticism, defined as it is by a pervasive and motivating unconscious desire to replace the "father"—the authority, the predecessor—on his own terms, would be almost naturally drawn toward such a logic. It makes for an academic practice, however, that gets us nowhere. For it remains repetitive at best, reductive at worst, and dismissive in all cases of everything that has been done so far, so that the oedipal child-become-father can reign alone, in splendid isolation.

3. *Disciplines, Paradigms, and Fields of Inquiry*

But this is not quite all there is to it. The mode of argumentation analyzed explains why, in my view, Elkins's piece destroys what it should cherish and is suicidal in the process, but it does not explain the attraction of such prose—an attraction evidenced by the double hyperbole of its publication in all its wordiness and lengthiness and of the invitation, addressed to a number of the representatives of the area the paper addresses, to respond to it. Clearly, some people, and the editors of this (my

13. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, 1993), p. 213.

favorite) academic journal are among them, liked it. This is not explained by the general attraction of oedipalism alone. I now want to address the issue raised by the shift, in Elkins's discourse, from "art history" to "semiotics" to "semiotic art history" and his avoidance of the more obvious phrase "visual semiotics."

For a long time I used to begin presentations about art by stating that I am not an art historian and that my work on art is not to be considered art historical. While this remains true, I am now convinced that this disclaimer does little good; it hardly protects my work from evaluation from the wrong premises, whereas it bars my access to the only place where the academic study of images is authorized. This predicament has recently impelled me to reflect on the status of the two elements Bryson and I joined by that tricky conjunction *and*.

Semiotics is a common denominator for a number of related theories pertaining to "the social life of signs," as Ferdinand de Saussure called it. "It" can be called a discipline but is not established as such; with the exception of Umberto Eco's chair at Bologna, and perhaps one or two others that I don't know of, there are no chairs, and certainly no departments, of semiotics. One of the reasons is that semiotics does not have a clearly delimited object; it has something to say about the objects studied within a variety of disciplines, and disciplines, as we all know, tend to be primarily defined by their object, or subject matter. Semiotics is perhaps best indicated as a perspective, one that combines an awareness of the systemic nature of cultural expressions of all kinds with an interest in the "life" of signs.

As a consequence semiotics is—in my interpretation at least—primarily positioned in the present and will look at the past as part of the present; it takes works, or signs, from the past not as determining the present but as a part of it—the past as always "worked over." Semiotics has a history of its own that claims roots in medieval philosophy and began explicitly at the turn of the century with, simultaneously but without contact, Peirce and Saussure, the former a logician, the latter a linguist who was largely responsible for "linguophobia" in semiotically inclined nonlinguists, such as art historians. Its most recent history has shown a shift of interest, influenced notably by feminist theory, from the hardcore theorists whom some call system maniacs to thought about the social embeddedness of cultural practices more congenial to cultural studies than to logic and linguistics.

In contrast to semiotics, art history is in the first place a discipline, institutionally well established, based on subject matter and methodology. Subject matter and methodology are closely related through the key notions that define the discipline: art, defined both as quality and as visual, and history; in other words, aesthetics, visuality, and reconstruction of the past. Art history, too, has itself a history that informs its presupposi-

tions.¹⁴ But the histories of disciplines not only inform their methodology; they even determine their identities on a much more contingent level. Thus it is due to a variety of factors that the academic study of art is called “art history,” not “art studies,” like literary studies or the equivalent of musicology. The consequence of this difference is, for example, that the historical approach to art is the only legitimate one, whereas in literary studies the choice of a historical approach over a critical, analytical one needs to be argued for, and its methodology cannot be taken for granted.

The more established disciplines are, the more they are influenced by the structure within which they exist. Art history, if such a unifying label makes sense at all, “behaves” differently, not only according to historical period, but also according to the country in which it functions and the organization of the academy there. Differences in academic politics on the very superficial, almost incidental level clearly forbid us to take the unification of the discipline too easily for granted. So the first point I want to make is that my critics cannot speak in the name of the discipline but only in their capacity as art historians, and even then, really, not all of them. I am now speaking of all critics who claim identity as art historians, whose disparities I think indicate the confusion of visual semiotics with art history. Neither semiotics nor art history is unified, and when we speak of either one it is not always clear whether we are referring to an academic discipline, a theoretical perspective, or a conventional, even dogmatic, position.

For example, when Bryson and I say that we don’t seek to replace art history but to offer a reflection “from the outside,” we are stating the obvious, namely, that art history, even if considered in the abstract, has elements that semiotics has no business with. Thus, semiotics is not conducive to inquiries about attribution, patronage, connoisseurship, economic conditions, studio practices, and the age of wood panels and pigment; nor does it have a stake in reconstructing social relations between artists and the biographies of individuals.

This difference between, and lack of unity within, art history and semiotics compels me to maintain, on the one hand, that Bryson and I were not seeking to replace art historical practice with semiotic analysis, and on the other hand, that we did and do want to solicit reflection on that practice, both from the outside by challenging the dogmas that the discipline in its splendid isolation takes too easily for granted, and from the inside by contributing to the academic study of visual images.

So are we, or aren’t we, facing a problem of partial incompatibility between disciplines, indicated by the difference between “semiotic art history” and “visual semiotics”? What we are looking at is, I think, much more a problem of what Thomas Kuhn has described as a difference in

14. See Michael Ann Holly’s writings, especially *Past Looking* (forthcoming).

paradigms: the body of theories, philosophical starting points, values, and key examples that characterize and to a certain extent fix the domain and mode of operation of a group of scholars. One of the typical consequences of paradigms is a difference in emphasis of what you deem important, informative, futile, or banal; what you accept as "normal practice" versus what you reject as inadmissible, for example "tampering with the image," which from a semiotic point of view is a practice of making a point visually and for an art historian is an outrageous abuse of a work that ought to be left alone.¹⁵ Paradigms even entail a certain blindness to the value members of the rival paradigm attach to their findings and positions. Of course, this holds for all paradigms, including the one I adhere to, and hence it explains that it is always easier to notice the blindness of the other than your own.

How do we know we are facing paradigm difference? One question that helps us to notice paradigm differences is the question of relevance. For example, while art historians, like other historians, take for granted the relevance of the reconstructions of past practices and meanings they seek to uncover, semioticians, like other more systematically interested scholars, might say, "But why?" or "So what?" and find the results banal. Conversely—and admittedly speculatively—art historians might find reflection on the conditions of meaning making, according to the grounds on which the attribution of meaning takes place, irrelevant because in their view historically undistinguished.

Paradigms can also be noticed by their dogmas, and I have already pointed out a few in the previous section. One other dogma worth mentioning has to do with historicity, the notion that because he addresses the ancient mythical anecdote about Apelles and discusses at length a number of commentaries on it, Elkins can claim without further self-reflection that he is being historical. This is obviously not the case; on the contrary, by this very transhistorical sweep he universalizes the discussion of the mark. Another dogma is the bond between visuality and a somewhat autonomistic if not positivistic epistemology, for example when he recommends that we take "a close, patient look at marks and try to say *what really happens in pictures*" (p. 832; my emphasis). Such statements, along with phrases like "the nature of pictures," essentialize the media (p. 832). Thus they turn a blind eye/I to attempts, here represented by Derrida's concept of writing as well as by my own analysis of the "hy-

15. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962) and "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice," *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago, 1977), pp. 320–39; rpt. in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee, Fla., 1986), pp. 383–93. I am purposefully offering a rather banal example because it pertains to the most practical side of what I analyze as academic practice and hence shows that there is an intimate connection between such practical things and the tolerance, or lack of it, of interdisciplinarity.

phen,” to overcome such essentialism in favor of a more flexible view of semiotic modes that allows us both to do justice to visuality and to historicize images.

Paradigms are both narrower and wider than disciplines. Sometimes, within one discipline you can have a paradigm split, which you see when so-called schools create a split. Thus, in the Netherlands—and the social-geographical specification matters—the discipline of literary studies is totally split into two paradigms called, by the side that initiated the split, empiricists versus hermeneuticists, and by the other side, which considers itself a victim of that split, “those amateur sociologists who only count words or book buyers versus those who have something really interesting to say about literature itself.”¹⁶ Clearly, this is a difference of paradigm, not of discipline; the split divides the discipline itself.

To talk about paradigms rather than to treat two such diverging fields as if they were equally unified has a number of advantages. It helps us to understand not only why we don’t understand one another but also why some art historians get along with some semioticians, and others do not. Now, it is quite normal, historically speaking, that whenever an established discipline experiences the emergence and growth within its midst of an alternative paradigm, the more conservative crowd, which is happy enough with the status quo, will become defensive. Yet, it is of crucial importance for the health, even the survival, of a discipline to ultimately let innovations—which only appear as alienations—get a serious chance against the danger of stultification. Such tensions are moments when paradigms are easily disguised as disciplines, whose structurally established position is easier to defend than something as “vague” and vulnerable, discussable, as a paradigm. Thus, instead of acknowledging the innovative approach their more adventurous colleagues propose and at least engaging in a discussion, disciplinarians on the defensive will consider these others alien invaders who have no business coming in. The boundaries of a discipline turn out to be so dogmatic that the idea of discussing them seems threatening. This defensiveness is stultifying, and that is, I think, unfortunate.

Paradigmatic allegiance explains blindness and dogmatism and has a positive effect in that it protects and facilitates the everyday business of routine research. But explanation is hardly justification. Such allegiance easily becomes a brick wall against innovation, a wall behind which one feels justified to turn a deaf ear to what others have to say. According to Kuhn, paradigms *need* to be revolutionized after a while, hence the title of his book. One way to do that is to allow those “aliens” to come up with

16. This is not a quotation but a fairly faithful rendering of what Dutch literary scholars tend to say; of course, since I cannot give a precise source I am solely responsible for the formulation.

their outrageous ideas, take them seriously, and read their writings carefully.

Paradigms become seriously dangerous, hampering intellectual development, when they come to coincide with disciplines. For the boundaries of a discipline are based on the conventions and history of something as mundane and incidental as an academic organization, and we all know it. Boundaries and self-definitions are not "natural," and any serious proposal to reconsider and redefine them ought to be addressed. Being established is no protection. Cultural objects are not the exclusive property of a discipline or institution. The phrase "semiotic art history," even when used in a piece on signs and meaning, is symptomatic of a retreat within the walls of disciplinary protection.

There is much left to say about Elkins's article, many points to argue, many misconceptions and mistakes to point out, for example, the confusion between Peirce and Kristeva in the unproductive dichotomy between "semeiotic" and "semiotic" and the argument about Nelson Goodman that essentializes the latter's position (see pp. 823, 828); I chose not to do so. It seemed to me of more interest for readers of a journal that made its mark (pun intended) as the best available one in the area of interdisciplinary cultural analysis to analyze the issues the article raises that are not exactly those the authorial voice addresses. On the one hand, I have focused on issues pertaining to the *practice* of cultural analysis these readers are all, in one way or another, engaged in; on the other, I have tried to put on the table the hidden monodisciplinary obsessions lurking within interdisciplinary pretensions. The latter pertains in particular to the issue of visual semiotics as, importantly, *not* semiotic art history. It is to visual semiotics that I find myself being drawn because it does challenge semiotics to articulate tentatively, hesitantly, but decisively and innovatively not "what really happens in pictures" but what (some) pictures can make their viewers do, as "something which stands *to somebody* for something in some respect or capacity" (p. 822; my emphasis). Listen better to Peirce, look better at pictures, in order to, at long last, get beyond linguistic semiotics, naive historical dogmatism, and oedipal criticism alike; beyond "art history" as the free place for such criticism that others have, fortunately, proven it no longer is; into true interdisciplinarity, difficult yet rewarding.

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