

Ut pictura poesis? The poetics of verbal imagery

Sonja Zeman

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Zeman, Sonja. 2018. "Ut pictura poesis? The poetics of verbal imagery." In *Expressive minds and artistic creations: studies in cognitive poetics*, edited by Szilvia Csábi, 233–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190457747.003.0011>.

Nutzungsbedingungen / Terms of use:

licgercopyright

Dieses Dokument wird unter folgenden Bedingungen zur Verfügung gestellt: / This document is made available under these conditions:

Deutsches Urheberrecht

Weitere Informationen finden Sie unter: / For more information see:

<https://www.uni-augsburg.de/de/organisation/bibliothek/publizieren-zitieren-archivieren/publiz/>



CHAPTER 10

Ut Pictura Poesis?

The Poetics of Verbal Imagery

SONJA ZEMAN

Imagery experience is not a species of picture-viewing.

Thompson, 2007a, 154

10.1. *UT PICTURA POESIS*

When reading literary texts, we intuitively get the impression of “seeing” mental pictures in our mind’s eye: We have the feeling of mentally walking around in wonderlands, joining tea parties, and attending the tournaments of knights of ancient times like Percival and Lancelot who vanquish their armor-clad antagonists right before us, and we get the sensation to see how Proust’s (1913–27, 48) narrator puts “one of those squat, plump little cakes called ‘*petites madeleines*’” to his mouth that let him and us lose our times in the detailed sceneries of his imagery stream of memory.

Given this dominant intuition, poetic texts are often described by drawing analogies to pictures of visual arts. This tradition goes back to antiquity, as reflected in the analogies between poetry and painting in Plato’s *Republic* X, the Horatian *ut pictura poesis*¹ doctrine and the rhetorical ideal of “*enargeia*” and “*evidentia*” that are aimed at making the content of subject present before the recipients’ eyes (*demonstratio ad oculos*). In this way, the principle of “vividness” (German *Anschaulichkeit*) has become an aesthetic convention since the early modern age, and the poet has turned into

a “painter with words” (Müller, 2007, 64ff). Uncoupled from its origin as a rhetorical device that serves for the efficacy of the oration’s *persuasio*, the image-like quality of poetry as a “speaking picture” (Sidney, 1970, 18) has even been seen as a defining feature of poetry itself. According to Krieger (1967) and Clüver (1998), it is the “mimetic impulse,” that is, the “desire for descriptions to have the same vividness and impact on the senses as the signs displayed in space for direct visual inspection” (Clüver, 1998, 14), that constitutes the basis of poetry per se.

As a result, “literary pictorialism”—as I call in the following the open class of literary phenomena that are commonly discussed as “visual” and “image like”—is a central object of investigation in literary studies. But how does the pictorial impression arise from textual language that consists of nothing more than “monotonous small black marks on a white page” (Scarry, 2001, 5)? And what is actually their relationship to vision, picture-viewing, and imagination? Such questions refer to the semiotic process of meaning-making as a mental activity based on cognitive structures—and are hence central object of investigation for cognitive poetics. Against this background, it comes as a surprise that, despite the abundance of references to the image-like character of literary art, there are neither systematic criteria nor a descriptive taxonomy of verbal imagery. Instead, the “pictoriality” and “image likeness” of literary texts have remained rather intuitive concepts that rely on intuitive prescientific notions of “vision” and “picture.”

This chapter aims at looking behind such notions by modeling the interrelationship among literary pictorialism, vision, picture-viewing, and mental imagery. The line of argumentation runs as follows: Based on a terminological clarification of the core concepts, Section 10.2 isolates the basic semiotic mechanisms of vision, picture-viewing, and mental imagery by taking into account considerations of picture philosophy, cognitive semiotics, and neuropsychology. Against this background, Section 10.3 investigates the semiotic dimension of exemplary instances of literary pictorialism with respect to their visual and pictorial character. A comparison of visual poetry, onomatopoeia, figurative language, and the historical present shows that descriptions in terms of vision and image likeness are insufficient because they blur the different aspects of the semiotic process. To investigate the interaction between the semiotic dimension and the reader’s experience, Section 10.4 takes a detailed look at ekphrastic descriptions. The analysis shows that the literary core concepts pictoriality and vividness are only surface phenomena that are not directly linked to the phenomenal experience of vision and image likeness. This result is discussed in Section 10.5 against the background of recent neurocognitive

studies, leading to the conclusion that the vague notions of verbal imagery should be abandoned in favor of a general model of representation in terms of poetic iconicity.

10.2. THE PICTURE–POETRY ANALOGY REVISITED—OR: WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

There are various literary phenomena that are described in analogy to visual and pictorial terms. The list comprises stylistic devices such as metaphor and figurative language, epitheta, ekphrastic expositions, onomatopoeia, text types like the “picture poems” [*Bildgedichte*], visual poetry, and *carmina figurata*, but the usage of spatial deictics and grammatical means such as the historical present have also been characterized by their “pictorial vividness” (see Al-Joulani, 2010, for an overview). Such descriptions seem yet paradoxical if seen against the background of Lessing’s (1766) canonized doctrine of a dichotomic difference between painting and poetry. How can poetry that is based on unmotivated verbal signs be “like an image”?

This question is not easy to answer as it has remained an open question of what an image actually is (see, e.g., Mitchell, 1984; Boehm, 2006; Elkins and Naef, 2011). Intuitively, images are supposed to be representations on a two-dimensional material surface that are perceived visually, whereby the representing content and its represented referent are related by resemblance. Such definitions thus refer to three different dimensions of an image: its physical condition as an object, the perceptual relation between an observer who visually perceives it (vision), and the representation of a depicted object and its appearance in the real world (“resemblance”); see Figure 10.1.

The concept of IMAGE thus comprises a bundle of features, but not all of them are characteristic of all the literary phenomena previously listed. Whereas, for instance, visual poetry is visually perceived, this does not hold for the “acoustic images” of onomatopoeia. Similarly, figurative language is

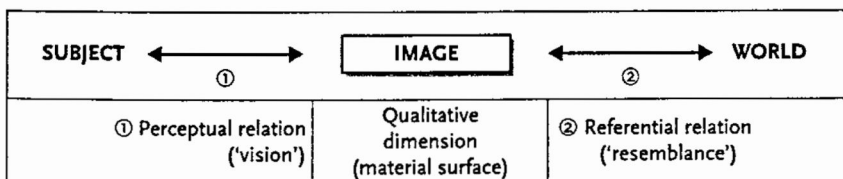


Figure 10.1: Conceptual dimensions of IMAGE

not a visible representation on a material surface; neither is it exclusively linked to visual impressions as it can refer to synesthetic mental images that comprise multisensory impressions. So if we abstract from the fact that the printed words on a page are perceived visually—and obviously, this cannot constitute the visual character of literary pictorialism as this would be the case for all instances of written verbal language—it is not primarily their perceptual character that makes them visual.

Concerning the referential relation, onomatopoeia and visual poetry share with a prototypical image the feature that they display a certain resemblance between the denoting sign and the denoted object of reference. However, although this resemblance can (but must not, see Section 10.3.1) be based on figurative resemblance in visual poetry, this does not hold for onomatopoeia. Metaphors and similes, on the other hand, are defined in terms of conceptual resemblance, but their pictorial character is rather seen in the fact that they refer to concrete, that is, visible, details.

This is, of course, a very abridged, simplistic overview (see Section 10.3 for differentiation). It is also not comprehensive. It cannot be so because all poetic features could in this way be described as image like, considering the fact that linguistic signs show degrees of iconicity, independently from being used in literary texts or not, as pointed out, for instance, by Wittgenstein (2003 [1921], 4.011), Jakobson (2007[1960]), and Mitchell (1984, 512). Yet, what Table 10.1 shows is that the different phenomena are linked to each other not by sharing a single common property that would make them visual or pictorial, but rather by a loose family resemblance in which each phenomenon shares different (but not all) features with the prototype IMAGE—whereby the prototype itself remains an

Table 10.1. PROPERTIES PROTOTYPICALLY ASCRIBED TO IMAGE AND IMAGE-LIKE LITERARY PHENOMENA

	Perceptual relation	Physical dimension	Referential dimension
IMAGE	visual	visible	figurative resemblance
Onomatopoeia	auditory	audible	acoustic resemblance
Visual poetry	visual	visible	figurative/conceptual resemblance
Figurative language: metaphor & simile	multisensory	mental	conceptual resemblance/ concreteness
Ekphrastic description	multisensory	mental	concreteness

intuitive notion as neither visibility nor figurative resemblance is a sufficient property to define a picture.

At first sight, definitions in terms of figurative resemblance seem to adequately describe the “natural” iconic quality of images in contrast to the (more) arbitrary and conventional character of verbal signs. However, not every picture does necessarily depict an object in its natural appearance—some colored strokes on a painting by Kandinsky are enough to make an observer acquainted with abstract art recognize a horseman. In this sense, images—like verbal signs—are based on iconicity *and* convention (cf., e.g., Goodman, 1976; Kjørup, 2013). Furthermore, abstract paintings may have no figurative content at all but refer to some representational content that transcends the visual appearance of a representation. Resemblance is thus not exclusively tied to the figurative, visible content of the pictorial surface that “derives from what can be seen in it *and* can be brought under non-abstract concepts, such as table, map, window, woman” (Wollheim, 2001, 131), but may cross the borders between different sensory and mental perceptions (Elleström, 2010). In this way, visibility is not a sufficient feature to define an image (as already seen in the trivial fact that both images (may they be figurative or not) and written words are visually perceived (Scholz, 1991, 86ff).

As a result, pragmatic definitions have attributed the nature of the image to the intention of the observer, who *sees* a material surface *as* a picture that stands for something else (see, e.g., Sachs-Hombach and Schirra, 2010, in the tradition of Jonas, 1962). An image can thus be seen with respect to three different aspects: its physical condition as an object, its pictorial surface, and its representational content, which is perceived as having a certain referential relation to its referent within the real world (may the latter be visible or nonvisible). Picture-viewing—in contrast to visual perception—thus constitutes a double semiotic process; see Figure 10.2.

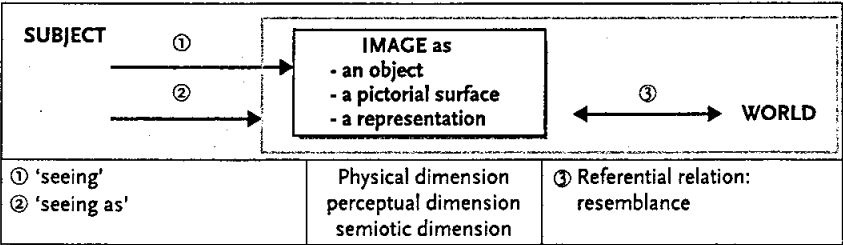


Figure 10.2: Double semiotic process

Vision as a perceptual category and picture-viewing as a semiotic category are thus not the same. In a prototypical case, picture-viewing is based on visual perception because the observer of an image must be visually aware of the surface as a visual stimulus that is perceived as a representation. The grasp of the representation as such is, however, “fundamentally an interpretative, not a perceptual, activity” as the observer has to acknowledge the representation as a sign that stands for something else (Wollheim, 1998, 218; Gregory, 2009). Picture-viewing is thus a complex process that presupposes that the visually perceived surface is seen as an object and as a representation at the same time. This twofold process—termed “seeing-in” by Wollheim (1998, 221)—is prior to any experience of any kind of referential relation between a representational content and its reference in the real world (similarly Hopkins, 1998; Thompson, 2007b, 289; Sachs-Hombach and Schirra, 2010, 22). The process of picture-viewing of figurative depictions thus involves three different aspects: (1) the visual perception of the material surface, (2) the semiotic dimension of seeing the image as a representation that stands for something, and (3) the experience of an iconic relationship between the depicted entity and its appearance in the real world (cf. Jonas, 1962, 167).

Matters become even more complicated when taking into account that the experience of picture-viewing cued by poetic texts is not based on “real” pictures but mental images. In colloquial terms, mental imagery is referred to as visualizing or “seeing something in the mind’s eye.” Mental images are thus different from real pictures in that they are not necessarily linked to an external visual stimulus and are, as such, not experienced as stable and permanent (Mitchell, 1984, 507). These “quasi-pictures” are the result of *“the mental invention or recreation of an experience that in at least some respects resembles the experience of actually perceiving an object or an event, either in conjunction with, or in the absence of, direct sensory stimulation”* (Finke, 1989, 2, emphasis in the original). It is thus not the resemblance between a mental representation and its referent to the real world that is at stake, but the resemblance between the *experience* of mental imagery and the whole process of picture-viewing (see Figure 10.3). This is supported by the fact that the experience of holding a visual image in mind correlates with observable saccadic eye movements (cf. Holšánová, 2008, 157ff; Thomas, 2014 [1997]). According to Thompson (2007a, 2007b) and Thomas (2014 [1997]), mental imagery is thus not a kind of representation, but rather an enactment of a possible perceptual experience (Thompson, 2007b, 291). As a quasi-experiential simulation, mental imagery is in this sense neither picture-viewing (Thompson, 2007b, 297) nor exclusively visual, but perceived in all modalities (Dennett, 1991, 58; Kuzmičová, 2012, 26).

Visual perception, picture-viewing, and mental imagery—although linked by certain affinities—are thus different processes. As seen in the

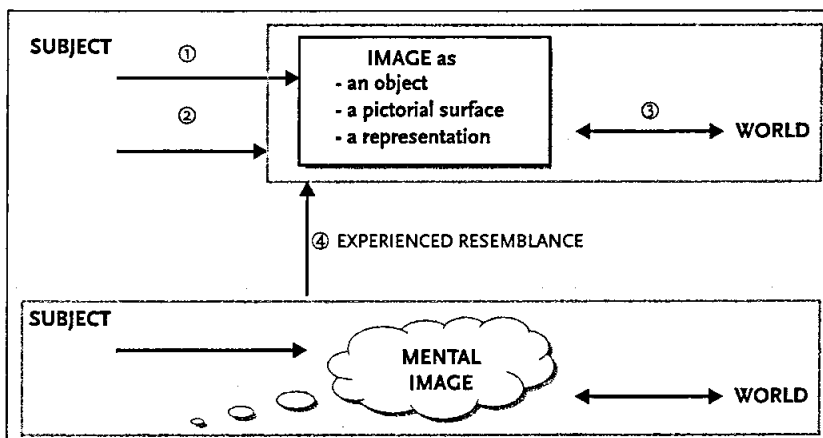


Figure 10.3: Mental imagery as experienced simulation of picture-viewing

next section, this differentiation is crucial because it allows for isolating the different factors that trigger intuitive impressions of visuality and image likeness of literary pictorialism. In this respect, it is shown that such impressions are a result of the fact that picture and language are based on the same principles of iconicity, as defined in Figure 10.2.

10.3. HOW IS VERBAL IMAGERY IMAGE LIKE?— THE SEMIOTIC DIMENSION

To specify the relationships among literary language, vision, image, and mental imagery, the following paragraphs take a look at different phenomena of literary pictorialism. Obviously, this overview is only an illustration; the examples are not full-fledged literary analyses. What the examples are meant to show is (1) that the notions of visuality and image likeness conflate different aspects of the perceptual, physical, and semiotic dimension and, by neglecting the processual aspect of picture-viewing and mental imagery, fail to adequately describe the poetic function of literary pictorialism. Furthermore, the examples demonstrate (2) that the differentiations in Figures 10.2 and 10.3 allow for a more precise answer to the question of what lies behind such intuitive experiential impressions as pictoriality and vividness.

10.3.1. The Visuality of Visual Poetry

A good point to start in order to specify the relationship between literary language and its image likeness is visual poetry, also termed spatial,

concrete, optic, and picture poetry (Elleström, 2016, 446; Borkent, 2015, 8), as it seems to share many features with a prototypical image (see Table 10.1). Visual poetry is commonly defined as poetry that is “seen” rather than “read” (Elleström, 2016, 447), whereby the form of the poem that is depicted on a two-dimensional surface corresponds to its semantic content. This is most obvious in the *carmina figurata* as a subtype of visual poetry. *Carmina figurata* are configurations of verbal signs that build the shape of an object, as, for example, the letters of a word for “egg” are arranged in the gestalt of an egg (see the poem *ᾠόν* [“egg”] by Simmias of Rhodes (~325 B.C.E.) discussed in Elleström, 2016).

With respect to the perceptual dimension, visual poetry is not restricted to the visual domain including typography and spatial arrangements, but can also employ kinesthetic and manual elements such as page turns, size, and bindings (Borkent, 2015, 8) and is, as such, a multimodal composition. With respect to its visibility, visual poetry is a priori not very different from other written poems, as “all written poetry is visual as such” (Elleström, 2016, 440). The difference from other kinds of poetry is not the fact that the poem is “seen,” but rather that it is seen in a different manner from what commonly applies to the visual experience of verbal cues. As a default, a written page is perceived as an arrangement of differentiated and disjoint characters that do not share any resemblance with the concepts they denote. Yet, a written page can also be seen as a two-dimensional configuration in which the ratio of white and black sections is relevant (i.e., as a syntactically dense system in the sense of Goodman, 1976).² Visual poetry is thus based on a hybrid act of *seeing-in*: The characters are seen as verbal as well as visual signs that stand for something else at the same time. It is thus not primarily the perceptual, but the semiotic process that is at stake. In a similar vein, Elleström (2016, 439) has come to the conclusion that “visual poetry” must be “something other than visuality.”

With respect to its referential dimension, visual poetry seems characterized by a certain similarity between the configuration of words and the gestalt of the denoted referent. However, this relationship is not necessarily based on a figurative resemblance with respect to the appearance in the world. Besides the very fact that an egg-shaped configuration of words is not a natural depiction of a real egg and can only be seen as such based on an interpretation by the observer, most instances of visual poetry do not show pictorial depictions of visible objects; see, for example, Eugen Gomringer’s *Silencio* as a paradigmatic example (discussed in McAllister, 2014, 239; Borkent, 2015, 150):

- (1) silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio

The poem makes “visible” the abstract concept SILENCE that cannot be perceived visually in the real world. Like the *carmina figurata*, it has to be read in a hybrid form, that is, as verbal characters and a spatial configuration. The poem hence signifies on the verbal and visual dimension at the same time: “Verbally, it paradoxically engages the word’s semantic ‘silence’ and its phonetic sound. Visually, it spatially arranges sites for semantic and phonetic effects (i.e., the individual words) in order to produce the hollowed, block shape” (McAllister, 2014, 239). Unlike the *carmina figurata*, it does not, however, figuratively depict a visual object, but refers to a conceptual analogy among the absence of sound, the absence of words, and the absence of printed characters. Only the latter can be perceived visually, whereby the visual perception of absence can be made visible only by the opposition between printed and nonprinted segments on the page. The beauty of the poem results from the fact that the verbal signs denoting the concept of *silencio* are unable to represent a resemblance to its concept that paradoxically becomes visible only by omitting the denoting characters. There is thus no figurative relationship between the denoted concept and its verbi-visual representation, only a conceptual resemblance in which the omission of written words stands for the acoustic quality of silence.

10.3.2. The Iconicity of Onomatopoeia and Phonaesthemes

Similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to onomatopoeia, that is, linguistic expressions that acoustically resemble the sounds they denote and are as such described as “acoustic images” (Sonesson, 1994, 72). Obviously, onomatopoeia are not primarily visual but refer to acoustic sensations. Their image-like character is linked to the fact that they display an iconic relationship between the denoting and the denoted sound. The relation between form and concept is thus not entirely arbitrary, but based on resemblance. Yet this resemblance is partly conventional (Saussure, 1969, 102) as the words of the denoted sounds in different languages are not exactly the same—compare, for example, English *cock-a-doodle-doo* versus French *cocorico*. This is particularly evident for “associative onomatopoeia”

(Bredin, 1996, 560ff) that directly denote not a class of sounds but a thing that is associated with a certain sound, for example, *whip*, whose acoustic form seems to give an impression of the buzzing sound of a whip stroke. The resemblance is thus linked to an experienced correlation on a sensory level: the onomatopoeic effect of the sound of [s], for instance, is active in words that denote an acoustic term such as *whisper* but is not experienced as onomatopoeic in a word like *sister* (cf. Bredin, 1996, 559).

This is even more obvious with respect to phonaesthemes, that is, phoneme clusters that do not correspond to morphematic segments but are connected with certain, usually sensory-based meanings (see Abelin, 1999). Examples are words with the onset *fl-* that denote movement through the air (*fly*, *flail*, *flit*, *flit*, *fling*), or with the onset *gl-* that are associated with the semantic field of light and vision (*glisten*, *gleam*, *glow*, *glaze*). Phonaesthetic form–meaning pairs are neither exclusively visual nor auditory but are based on the synesthetic connection among sound, size, and movement (Bergen, 2004). As such, phonaesthemes are—in combination with other kinds of phonological iconicity (Schmidtke, Conrad, and Jacobs, 2014, for an overview)—often used in poems to create a “synaesthetic picture,” as in this poem by Lee Emmett:

(2) Running Water (Onomatopoeia)

water plops into pond
 splish-splash downhill
 warbling magpies in tree
 trilling, melodic thrill
 whoosh, passing breeze
 flags flutter and flap
 frog croaks, bird whistles
 babbling bubbles from tap

This view thus shows that phonaesthemes, onomatopoeia, and sound symbolism are not visual or pictorial. Rather, these display different degrees of iconicity (see Tsur, 1992; Klepanski and Łecki, 2002; Bergen, 2004; Schmidtke, Conrad, and Jacobs, 2014). What is psychologically real is the perceptual *experience* of multisensory resemblance (Bergen, 2004).

10.3.3. The Figurativity of Figurative Language: Metaphor

One of the most paradigmatic examples of verbal pictures is figurative language. However, with respect to stylistic devices such as hyperbole,

metonymy, and simile, their image likeness is not straightforward, as shown by the example of metaphor being the most common trope in literary texts (Kreuz and Roberts, 1993, 154). Despite the extensive controversies on the subject (see among many, Gibbs, 1994; Fauconnier and Turner, 2008; Semino and Steen, 2008), there is general consensus that the function of metaphor is not to depict an object in the world but to “represent the representative character of a representation by representing a parallelism in something else” (Sonesson, 1994, 77, with reference to Peirce). The definition refers to two different processes: the mapping or transfer (μεταφορά [‘transfer’]) of a concept in a concrete conceptual domain in a more abstract target domain, and a certain kind of similarity or analogy between these two concepts. Correspondingly, the image-like nature of metaphor has been linked to two different aspects:

- (i) **Concreteness:** Metaphor refers to concrete concepts whose referents in the real world can be “seen.” In the metaphor *love is a bird*, the abstract content (LOVE) is “visualized” by reference to an entity in the real world that can be visually perceived (BIRD).
- (ii) **Resemblance:** Metaphor refers to concepts that lie behind the literal meaning. In this respect, metaphor presumes an interpretation that is based on the assumption that the concepts LOVE and BIRD share certain semantic features. A metaphorical expression like *love is a bird* signifies the denoted object (i.e., “love”) by indicating a parallelism between the two related concepts LOVE and BIRD.

Both aspects have to be relativized. First, the equation “concrete = can be seen” is questionable, as seen in the fact that a metaphor like *love is a fever* does not refer to an entity that is visually perceivable. The difference between literal and concrete concepts is thus a matter of degree and not exclusively linked to visibility. Metaphors can map across various sensory domains, as is obvious with respect to synesthetic metaphors such as *loud colors* and *sweet smells*. Second, the similarity between the two concepts is not objectively given but constructed. This holds in particular for literary metaphors and expressions in *chiffre*³ that cannot be dissolved in a straightforward manner, as the *chiffre* in Paul Celans’s poem “Schwarze Milch der Frühe” [“Black Milk of the Dawn”]. Hence there is a clash between the literal semantics of an expression within its context that is responsible for its assigned meaning (cf. also Leezenberg, 2001, 186), and thus, in the sense of Peirce “a mental fact” (1931–1958, §7.457). This brings us back to the semiotic dimension as the figurative meaning is not based on a perceptual act of seeing, but once again an interpretative act of *seeing as*.

10.3.4. The Vividness of the Present Tense

A grammatical feature that is prominently described as a visual literary device is the historical present, that is, the usage of a present tense for denoting past events. Traditionally, the historical present is attributed to the effect of “visualizing and representing what happened in the past as if it were present before his [i.e., the narrator’s; Author’s (S. Zeman’s) note] eyes” (Jespersen, 1924, 258). This visual impression is considered to dramatize the story “by making the audience feel as if they were present at the time of the experience, witnessing events as they occurred” (Fleischman, 1990, 75). This does not so much hold for the historical present in its narrow sense (i.e., a present tense that is used in alternation to the preterite and denotes events that are temporally prior to a reference point), but rather for the narrator’s present, which interrupts the narrative progression by inserting a static description as a “tableau” (similar to ekphrastic descriptions; see Section 10.4). In this way, the present tense simulates a presence of the story world. This impression can be reinforced by the narrator’s invitation for the reader to observe—or even enter—the depicted scene in his “imaginative projection” (cf., e.g., Fludernik, 2003, 385):

(3) You shall see them, reader. Step into this neat garden-house on the skirts of Whinbury, walk into the little parlour – there they are at dinner
[. . .] You and I will join the party, see that is to be seen, and hear what is to be heard. At present, however, they are only eating; and while they eat we will talk aside.

(Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, Chapter 1)

This pattern seems to trace back to the medieval tradition in which the epic poet sings what he “sees” as if observing the events happening before his eyes (see Fleischman, 1990; Bakker, 2005; Zeman, 2016). In this sense, imaginative projection makes reference to the perceptual dimension but is, first, as the invocations of the narrator indicate, not exclusively visual (*see that is to be seen, and **hear** what is to be **heard***). Second, the narrator’s comments are more than mere vivid pictures of the represented scene placed in the “mind’s eye” of the listener but draw attention to the illusion of an actual communicative situation. So what actually triggers the visualizing effect is—next to the concrete details of the descriptive context—the experienced simultaneity among the process of reading, narrating, and the story world. The simultaneity effect is thus closely linked to the simulation of a common reference frame that is shared by the narrator and the reader. Hence, the visuality of the

historical present does not concern the perceptual dimension of seeing, but the perspectivization process that links story and discourse levels. As such, the visualizing effect of the present tense is merely a surface phenomenon of its perspectivizing function.

Zeman (2013, 2016) argues that this perspectival constellation is the source construction for canonical occurrences of the historical present in alternation to the preterite, as in Example (4).

(4) One day, when I was sitting all alone, In comes Philotas from a victory. . .

(Example from Fludernik, 1992, 7; emphasis mine)

Also, these instances do not concern the perceptual, the physical, or the pictorial dimension and are, as such, neither pictorial nor visual. The impression of vividness is thus not necessarily due to the visual character of verbal means.

10.4. HOW IS VERBAL IMAGERY LIKE "PICTURE-VIEWING"?— THE EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION

The comparison of the different phenomena so far has revealed that verbal pictures are much less visible and pictorial as intuitive descriptions and reading impressions would suggest. This, however, does not yet fully explain what triggers the impressions of pictoriality and vividness. Vividness as a "key term in discussions of mental imagery" (Troscianko, 2013, 189) is another concept that has remained a rather vague notion because it has referred both to vividly visible (German *anschaulich*) descriptions and to vivid emotional reading experience. In this respect, the rhetorical tradition distinguishes between detailed representation (*enargeia*, *evidentia*) that effects the visual impression of a mental picture and its affect-theoretical counterpart (*energeia*) (Müller, 2007, 62ff), that is, between the level of detail and the level of emotional intensity (Troscianko, 2013, 195). To examine the interrelationship between the semiotic dimension and the reader's experience, a look at "word paintings" in ekphrastic descriptions is thus instructive as they comprise both aspects in interaction.

In its literal sense, ekphrasis means "to tell in full" and is, in its original rhetoric meaning, linked to "the vivid description of places, persons, and things," whereby it is commonly assumed that vividness results from "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Scott, 1994, 403).⁴ The visual character of descriptions has thus been attributed to the concreteness of the depicted details. However, similar to metaphor, ekphrastic

descriptions are not restricted to concrete entities that are perceived by vision, but commonly refer to multisensory perceptions. It is thus not so much the concreteness, but the rich amount of details given. Like pictures, ekphrastic descriptions make explicit in full what verbal language usually leaves underspecified, as in the synaesthetic example of Proust's famous passage:

(5) She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses,

[...]

(Proust, 1913–1927, 48)

In Example (5), the ordinary event of eating a biscuit is subdivided into several subevents that are usually not explicitly verbalized in everyday language. In this way, the passage extends the paradigmatic axis and simulates the syntactic density of a picture. Whereas the creation of a text world based on verbal cues requires the complementation of unspecified details by the implied reader (Iser, 1974 [1972]), descriptive passages function like "instructions for how to imagine" (Scarry, 2001, 6; Troscianko, 2013, 195) by providing a rich amount of cues to fill in the gaps and create a coherent picture (cf. also Collins, 1991, xiiff).

According to Scarry (2001, 104), the richness of detailed instructions is linked to the impression of givenness of the narrative world. This *effet de réel* seems to be supported by the fact that the extension on the paradigmatic level of the story correlates with a temporal extension of the reading time. That would suggest that the prolonged reading time should lead to a simultaneity effect and to a mental enactment of the described action, leading to the impression that we almost feel the crumbs touching the palate. However, the relation between the degree of details and the feeling of presence is not straightforward. As Kuzmičová (2012) has shown, the presence effect is related to the degree of granularity: If a passage transgresses a certain level of details, it slides into a kind of slow motion and leads to an unnatural effect and, as a result, to reinterpretation: "The more elaborate a static description of an object, the higher the 'risk' of conceptualization and defamiliarization" (Kuzmičová, 2012, 40). This holds in particular for

minor details that are not experienced consciously in real life. As a result, the passage is seen as an object of reflection, while an experience of presence is prevented. In other words, the act of seeing becomes an act of *seeing as*. In this way, the amount of details is not directly linked to the emotional intensity of the picture. Similarly, long detailed descriptions are often skipped by the reader (Troschianko, 2013, 195).

This raises doubts whether ekphrasis is an illusion that induces an *effet de réel*, as argued by Krieger (1967, 1992). In Example (5), it is not just the simulation of the tasteful experience of the cookie that is at issue. Rather, the verbalization of usually underspecified subevents draws attention to the meaning behind the visible. Descriptive passages thus rely on a tension between the process of *seeing* and *seeing as* and, as such, display a similar semiotic structure as the process of picture-viewing. According to Riffaterre (1981, 125), the primary function of literary description is not to make the reader “see” something from the external world but to make him understand something that the representation does not show. In a similar vein, Wandhoff (2003, 11ff) argues that the description of visual art (i.e., ekphrasis in its narrow sense), because of its defamiliarizing effect, obscures its meaning rather than adding visual qualities and pictorial presence. According to his view, ekphrasis cannot be seen as a “window to the real world” or a strategy of visualization.

This becomes obvious by instances of structural mimesis that are not linked to primarily visual or auditory sensations. An illuminating example is the description of a fighting scene in the medieval *Prosa-Lancelot*. To conquer the castle *Dolorose Garde*, the story tells us that white knight Lancelot has to fight successively against twenty individual knights. Instead of picturing one fight as an example of all other fights, the *Prosa-Lancelot* describes five duels in detail, each one after another (*Prosa-Lancelot*, 156–58). In this way, the narrative representation is not only descriptive on the level of the narrated world, but also on the discourse level, as it iconically reflects the successive efforts and exhaustion of Lancelot—an exhaustion that is increasingly empathized by the reader, who can feel how tired Lancelot must have been as the Lady of the Sea announces to him at the end of the day that the rule dictates that all battles have to be fought in one single day and, as a consequence, all the five duels that have been won so far have been won in vain. The plot thus continues depicting the first fight of sixteen further ones—after that (i.e., fourteen pages later), the remaining knights take flight. The descriptive value of this passage is not so much linked to the impression of mental images as an enactment of experience, but cued by the iconic similarity between the iteration of the fighting scene and the iteration of the narrating process.

In sum, vividness is thus not directly linked to pictorial features. Neither is the phenomenal experience of mental picture-viewing directly linked to the visibility of the poetic devices. This raises the question about what stands behind the experience of mental imagery: Are there really images?

10.5. BEYOND VISUALITY: ARE THERE MENTAL IMAGES?

As seen in the previous sections, the description of literary pictorialism is much committed to the rhetorical *ut pictura poesis* tradition that draws a strict separation line between picture and word. Such a premise is yet problematic for at least two reasons. First, as shown in Section 10.3, notions like pictoriality and vividness are commonly used as prescientific notions that are based on an intuitive reader's experience of image likeness as well as on an intuitive concept of what an image is. As such, they blur the distinction both between the perceptual concept of seeing and the semiotic dimension of *seeing as*, and between the experiential reality of subjective experience of imagery and its phenomenological status as an internal representation. In this respect, verbal imagery is much less visible and pictorial as intuitive descriptions and reading impressions would suggest. Second, the dichotomic distinction between picture and word has been seen as problematic. What is at stake with respect to the investigated phenomena of literary pictorialism is a certain relation of resemblance between the denoting sign and the denoted referent, and, as such, the mutual interplay between iconic and noniconic properties as shared by both verbal and visual symbolic systems. It is hence the semiotic double process of *seeing as* as described in Figure 10.2 that can serve as a descriptive taxonomy for both verbal and pictorial signs. In this sense, the investigation of literary pictorialism takes us "beyond the word-image opposition" (Clüver, 1998, 29) and thus to "semiotic multimodality" (Elleström, 2013, 28).

Similar conclusions have recently been drawn in the imagery debate that is concerned with the question of whether the phenomenal experience of mental imagery on the neural level is linked to mental representations of pictures or verbal propositions. Pictorialists like Kosslyn assume that mental representations are experienced as pictures with spatial representational properties and are hence quasi-pictorial (Kosslyn, 1980; Kosslyn, Ganis, and Thompson, 2006). In contrast, descriptionists argue that the experience of mental images is merely an illusion that is generated on the basis of propositional structures of mental language (Pylyshyn, 2002).

As Thompson (2007b, 274) has shown, the conundrum—propositions or pictures?—cannot be solved against the background of the premise of a dichotomic distinction between verbal and visual systems, but has to take into account the differentiation between the phenomenological status of the symbolic format, the content of the semantic representation, and the bodily sensory and motor experience. As in literary pictorialism, the semiotic dimension is seen as a connecting link. According to “enactive” theories, mental imagery “is constituted by (partial) enactment of the perceptual acts that *would* be carried out *if one were actually perceiving whatever is being imagined*” (Thomas, 2014; emphasis in original), and is, as such, based on an intentionalistic perception of *seeing as*. Because the content of this perceptual experience is not pictorial, there is, according to Thompson (2007b, 297), no reason to assume that the simulated visual experience is some kind of a mental picture. Imagery experience is thus “not a species of picture-viewing” (Thompson, 2007b, 291), but rather the re-presentation by a perceptual simulation: “In sum, we could say that to visualize X is to mentally re-present X by subjectively simulating or emulating a neutralized perceptual experience of X” (Thompson, 2007b, 292).

This view is in line with the previous observations that have shown that it is not the resemblance between imagery and picture-viewing that is at issue, but the resemblance between the *experience* of mental imagery and the semiotic process of picture-viewing as a whole. Similarly, the crucial link between the perceptual dimension of seeing and the experience of mental imagery has been seen in the mechanism of *seeing as*—and, as such, in poetic iconicity as the semiotic dimension that comprises the creation of meaning based on resemblance (Elleström, 2016). In this way, the investigation of literary pictorialism has taken us not only beyond the word-image opposition but also into the very heart of cognitive poetics, which is, according to Freeman (2007), “in essence an exploration into poetic iconicity.” The observations in this chapter support her claim: The exploration of poetic iconicity is able to model the “gap” between mind and world, between *seeing* and *seeing as*.

NOTES

1. Literally, “as is painting so is poetry.”
2. Syntactic density refers to the fact that formal elements in pictures are ordered without “gaps” while linguistic characters are “always syntactically differentiated” (Goodman, 1976, 163ff, note 17). As a result, literary works are not syntactically dense by definition (cf. Elgin, 2012, 399).

3. Cipher, encrypted sign.
4. Occasionally, the scope of ekphrasis is narrowed to the description of images of visual arts, be they paintings from art history or fictional works of art like Achilles' shield in Homer's description. In the following discussion, the term is used in its wider notion.

LITERARY WORKS

- Proust, Marcel. 1913–1927. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Volume 1: *Swann's Way: Within a Budding Grove*. New York: Vintage.
- Prosa-Lanzelot. Nach der Heidelberger Handschrift Cod. Pal. germ. 147, editiert von Reinhold Kluge*, edited and translated by Hans-Hugo Steinhoff. 1995. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2 volumes.

REFERENCES

- Abelin, Åsa. 1999. "Studies in Sound Symbolism." <http://www.ling.gu.se/~abelin/ny%20inlaga.pdf>. Accessed July 1, 2015.
- Al-Joulani, Nayeef Ali. 2010. "Ekphrasis Revisited: The Mental Underpinnings of Literary Pictorialism." *Studies in Literature and Language* 1(7): 39–54.
- Bakker, Egbert. 2005. *Pointing at the Past. From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bergen, Benjamin K. 2004. "The Psychological Reality of Phonaesthemes." *Language* 80(2): 290–311.
- Boehm, Gottfried, ed. 2006. *Was ist ein Bild?* Munich: Fink.
- Borkent, Michael. 2015. "Cognitive Ecology & Visual Poetry: Toward a Multimodal Cognitive Poetics." PhD diss., University of British Columbia. <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/52703>. Accessed July 1, 2015.
- Bredin, Hugh. 1996. "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle." *New Literary History* 27(3): 555–69.
- Clüver, Claus. 1998. "On Representation in Concrete and Semiotic Poetry." In *The Pictured Word, Word & Image Interactions 2 [Text 12]*, edited by Martin Heusser. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 13–41.
- Collins, Christopher. 1991. *The Poetics of the Mind's Eye. Literature and the Psychology of Imagination*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Elgin, Catherine Z. 2012. "Making Manifest: The Role of Exemplification in the Sciences and the Arts." *Principia* 15: 399–413.
- Elkins, James, and Maja Naef, eds. 2011. *What Is an Image?* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Elleström, Lars. 2010. "Iconicity as Meaning Miming Meaning and Meaning Miming Form." *Iconicity in Language and Literature* 9: 73–100.
- Elleström, Lars. 2013. "Visual Iconicity in Poetry: Replacing the Notion of 'Visual Poetry'." http://www.academia.edu/11137016/Visual_Iconicity_in_Poetry_Replacing_the_Notion_of_Visual_Poetry. Accessed July 1, 2015.
- Elleström, Lars. 2016. "Visual Iconicity in Poetry: Replacing the Notion of 'Visual Poetry'." *Orbis Litterarum* 71(6): 437–72.

- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. 2008. "Rethinking Metaphor." In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Raymond W. Gibbs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 54–66.
- Finke, Ronald A. 1989. *Principles of Mental Imagery*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fleischman, Suzanne. 1990. *Tense and Narrativity. From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Fludernik, Monika. 1992. "The Historical Present Tense in English Literature: An Oral Pattern and Its Literary Adaptation." *Language and Literature* 17: 77–107.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2003. "The Diachronization of Narratology." *Narrative* 11(3): 331–48.
- Freeman, Margaret H. 2007. "Poetic Iconicity." In *Cognition in Language: Volume in Honour of Professor Elżbieta Tabakowska*, edited by Władysław Chłopicki, Andrzej Pawelec, and Agnieszka Pokojńska. Cracow: Tertium, 472–501.
- Gibbs, Raymond W. 1994. *The Poetics of Mind. Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gregory, Richard. 2009. *Seeing Through Illusions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1976. *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (2nd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Holšánová, Jana. 2008. *Discourse, Vision, and Cognition*. "(Human Cognitive Processing 23)". Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Hopkins, Robert. 1998. *Picture, Image and Experience. A Philosophical Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1974[1972]. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jakobson, Roman. [1960] 2007. "Linguistik und Poetik." In *Roman Jakobson: Poesie der Grammatik und Grammatik der Poesie. Sämtliche Gedichtanalysen*, edited by Sebastian Donat and Hendrik Birus. Berlin: de Gruyter, Vol. 1, 155–216.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1924. *The Philosophy of Grammar*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jonas, Hans. 1962. "Homo Pictor and the Differentia of Man." *Social Research* 29(2): 201–20.
- Kjørup, Søren. 2013. "Resemblance Reconsidered: Confessions and Concessions of a Conventionalist." In *Origins of Pictures. Anthropological Discourses in Image Science*, edited by Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Jörg R. J. Schirra. Magdeburg, Germany: Halem, 110–31.
- Kleparski, Grzegorz, and Andrzej M. Łecki. 2002. "Dash, Splash and Hush: Arbitrariness Versus Onomatopoeia." *ZESZYTY* 6: 33–64.
- Kosslyn, Stephen Michael. 1980. *Image and Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kosslyn, Stephen Michael, Giorgio Ganis, and William Ladd Thompson. 2006. *The Case for Mental Imagery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kreuz, Roger J., and Richards Roberts. 1993. "The Empirical Study of Figurative Language in Literature." *Poetics* 22(1–2): 151–69.
- Krieger, Murray. 1967. *The Play and Place of Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Krieger, Murray. 1992. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kuzmičová, Anežka. 2012. "Presence in the Reading of Literary Narrative: A Case for Motor Enactment." *Semiotica* 189: 23–48.
- Leezenberg, Michiel. 2001. *Contexts of Metaphor*. Amsterdam and New York: Elsevier.

- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. [1766] 1984. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McAllister, Brian J. 2014. "Narrative in Concrete/Concrete in Narrative: Visual Poetry and Narrative Theory." *Narrative* 22(2): 234–51.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 1984. "What Is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15(3): 503–37.
- Müller, Jan-Dirk. 2007. "Evidentia und Medialität. Zur Ausdifferenzierung von Evidenz in der frühen Neuzeit." In *Evidentia: Reichweiten visueller Wahrnehmung in der Frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Gabriele Wimböck. Berlin and Münster: Lit, 59–81.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931–1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 4 volumes.
- Pylshyn, Zenon W. 2002. "Mental Imagery: In Search of a Theory." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25: 157–238.
- Riffaterre, Michael. 1981. "Descriptive Imagery." *Yale French Studies* 61: 107–25.
- Sachs-Hombach, Klaus, and Jörg R. J. Schirra. 2010. "Homo Pictor and the Linguistic Turn: Revisiting Hans Jonas' Picture Anthropology." *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations* 9: 144–81.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1969. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.
- Scarry, Elaine. 2001. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, Grant F. 1994. "Ekphrasis and the Picture Gallery." In *Advances in Visual Semiotics: The Semiotic Web 1992–93*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok. Berlin: de Gruyter, 403–21.
- Schmidtke, David S., Markus Conrad, and Arthur M. Jacobs. 2014. "Phonological Iconicity." *Frontiers in Psychology* 5. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3921575/>. Accessed July 1, 2015.
- Scholz, Oliver Robert. 1991. *Bild, Darstellung, Zeichen. Philosophische Theorien bildlicher Darstellung*. Frankfurt: Klostermann.
- Semino, Elena, and Gerard Steen. 2008. "Metaphor in Literature." In *Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Raymond W. Gibbs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 232–46.
- Sidney, Philip. 1970. *An Apology for Poetry*, edited by Forrest Robinson. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Sonesson, Göran. 1994. "On Pictoriality: The Impact of the Perceptual Model in the Development of Pictorial Semiotics." In *Advances in Visual Semiotics: The Semiotic Web 1992–93*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok. Berlin: de Gruyter, 403–21.
- Thomas, Nigel J. T. 2014[1997]. "Mental Imagery." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/mental-imagery/>.
- Thompson, Evan. 2007a. "Look Again: Phenomenology and Mental Imagery." *Phenomenology and The Cognitive Sciences* 6: 137–70.
- Thompson, Evan. 2007b. *Mind in Life. Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Troscianko, Emily T. 2013. "Reading Imaginatively: The Imagination in Cognitive Science and Cognitive Literary Studies." *Journal of Literary Semantics* 42(2), 181–98.
- Tsur, Reuven. 1992. *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive: The Poetic Mode of Speech-Perception*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wandhoff, Haiko. 2003. *Ekphrasis. Kunstbeschreibungen und virtuelle Räume in der Literatur des Mittelalters*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2003 [1921]. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus, Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Wollheim, Richard. 1998. "On Pictorial Representation." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56(3): 217–26.
- Wollheim, Richard. 2001. "On Formalism and Pictorial Organization." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59(2): 127–37.
- Zeman, Sonja. 2013. "Vergangenheit als Gegenwart? Zur Diachronie des Historischen Präsens." In *Sprachwandel und seine Reflexe im Neuhochdeutschen*, edited by Petra Maria Vogel. Berlin: de Gruyter, 236–56.
- Zeman, Sonja. 2016. "Orality, Visualization, and the Historical Mind. The 'Visual Present' in (Semi-)Oral Epic Poems and its Implications for a Theory of Cognitive Oral Poetics." In *Oral Poetics and Cognitive Science*, edited by Mihailo Antović and Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas. (Linguae & Litterae 56.) Berlin: de Gruyter, 168–96.