

THE CORRELATION OF IMAGE AND TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ART

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The twentieth century witnessed the changeover from text (book) to image. The change of the paradigm from the textual to the visual is connected with the increasing significance of visibility and the importance of the modes of seeing in the field of visual culture. The boom in information technologies recorded since the 1990s has played a seminal role in the dynamic shaping of this phenomenon, which is characterized by the diverse forms now available: film, video, internet, post-photography, advertisements and the mass media. These not only accelerate the formation of new visual forms but they also help shape the changing perception of art. Within the context of digital visual culture, a change occurs in the relationship between text and image, which becomes more flexible, more diverse and more open. The increase in intertextuality and hybridity of media art is interlinked with these processes.

The topic *Image versus Text* implies a relationship between visual representation and language. Through the range of issues covered, this field deals not only with the sphere of art history and its relationship to the history of literature, particularly linguistics and text analysis (Mitchell 2004, 79), but also touches upon the phenomenon of visual culture that has often been discussed in recent years. With the growth of information technologies and the digital revolution, this subject area has experienced a rapid growth since the 1990s.

On the one hand, the boom in new media brought an all-embracing use of computers in both society and the private sphere, and the mass spread of the internet also strengthened their position, but on the other hand, digital technologies generated new practices and strategies that began having an impact on the character as well as the reception of the arts. The 1990s marked a turning point in visual culture as a global phenomenon, where new critical practice began to focus on questions concerning the relationship between visibility and various ways of seeing.

The category of the visual goes beyond the portrayal of art, which is in a sense Eurocentric and essentially post-Romantic. It opens up a space for the comparative study of the origin and functions of the aesthetic criteria of modern Europe and America, as well as other typologies and hierarchies created by people in an effort to cope with the seeing and the seen (Herbert 2004, 514).

The different ways of seeing and their functions such as gaze, glance, visual pleasure or supervision become key concepts. These means of perceiving are associated with the important role played by the technologies of seeing that are based on the equipment that enters into a mutual relationship with institutions, discourses, bodies and configurations. From this perspective it is obvious that equal attention should be paid to questions concerning visibility and various forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpretation) and that visual experience and literacy cannot be fully explained by the model of textuality. The change from linguistic paradigm to image paradigm and/or the change from text to image thus implies a post-linguistic and post-semiotic re-discovery of the image (Mitchell 1994, 16). In addition to psychoanalysis, feminist philosophy and post-structuralism (particularly deconstructivism) phenomenology becomes increasingly important within this framework.

In asserting the opinion that seeing is primarily a problem of shaping identity and social interpolation, Foucault's idea of the panopticon and Lacan's idea of the gaze have been proved useful (Herbert 2004, 515).

Clearly, in addition to gender, aspects of race, class or nationality are also reflected in the issues of visibility which are tied to different values, interests and power systems.

The issue of *Image versus text?* raises a number of questions relating to the variable character of the relationship between visibility and textuality and in my contribution it has become a stimulus for exploring correlations between image and text in contemporary media art. The main features of these works of art based upon digital technologies are their high degree of flexibility, adaptability and repeatability, which enable a variety of relationships between the iconic and textual components to be created. Through their operating systems, computers and new technologies provide different means of visual representation, which also enable an implicit critique of the classical modes of representation to take place. Furthermore, the ease of reproducibility, the capability of rapid transfer and parallel distribution to several places are all characteristic features of electronic and digital information, regardless of whether they are images, texts or of an audiovisual or acoustic nature.

If we consider that the basic principles of visual media work include, in addition to the "cut and paste" method, other special programmes, such as morphing, which enables an unlimited range of image manipulations in terms of identity, then it is evident that the new technologies both remove the boundaries between reality and fiction, and take part in the simulation and fictionalization of reality. The computer, however, not only alters the image but also the text—whether it is the print or verbal dialogue and sound used in videos, video films, or other digital forms. Both images and words can thus not only tempt but also deceive and lie. In the computer age, it is no longer the case that seeing or hearing is believing.

Another feature of media artwork is that in addition to intertextuality, the strategy of appropriation is often applied in the sense that specific creative procedures, works of art or their fragments, from art history or from the field of visual culture (for instance film, internet, video, post-photography, mass media, advertisements), are incorporated and it is the context that is then emphasized. A huge database—the library of graphics, photographs, videos, audio recordings, software codes and texts is provided by the web, where these components are available at a single click of the mouse (Manovich 2001, 130) and users can then alter and use them according to their own creative aims. It is rather paradoxical of digital visual culture that although all the different means of representation are computer-based, the dominance of photographic and cinematic imagery becomes ever greater (Manovich 2001, 180).

I would like to explore the varied and elastic nature of the relationship between image and text in media art in selected examples from the contemporary Slovak and international art scene. In what follows I put forward four problem areas.

Dominance of text over image

The first, less common, group of works is that presented exclusively or primarily through text—where a catalyst triggers various associations of meanings; an appropriate example is Jenny Holzer's light installation, 'Untitled' (1990). It is composed of texts that move on horizontal displays, so-called LEDs (light-emitting diodes in red, green and yellow colours) placed in horizontal rasters on the walls of the interior. In banal statements appropriated from everyday life and from the mass media, the author alludes to the different ways in which language is misused with the intention of manipulating people and which can later be subscribed to their behaviour and interpersonal relationships. Truisms, such as *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise* or *If you're Considered Useless No One Will Feed You Anymore* that stream out in a chaotic mix of five languages, reminiscent of the tower of Babel (Drutt 1996, 18), confirm the sarcastic and critical background of Holzer's work that includes socio-political subtexts and feminist connotations. The artist also displays her LEDs in public places addressing people through laconic texts that have a sort of "anti-aphoristic" form. Placed next to the image billboards, these texts undermine the alluring one-dimensional visual images that conceal the deceptive contents produced by the increasingly cunning strategies of the advertising industry. In juxtaposition, Holzer's means of expression is the written moving text that serves as a critical vehicle operating within visual culture.

With regard to the subject of this article, we should mention one of the key representatives of conceptual art—Joseph Kosuth—who since 1965 has favoured word/text/language in his creations. He considers them to be basic building blocks and systematically subjects them to analytic research based on the premise of researching the relationship between the idea and the way in which it is represented (Kosuth 1991). Kosuth emphasizes the contexts within which he uses texts, most

often art history, philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis. However, he has also delved into mass culture and the sociopolitical sphere. These last two areas became the domain of the younger generation of neoconceptualists who appeared on the visual art scene during the 1980s. Their work reflects the problems of contemporary reality. They interlink conceptual art with Duchamp's dadaism and the interest in the revival of pop-art with current trends.

The video installation by Peter Meluzin 'Aber Achtung...' [But Beware...] (1994) shares similarities with Kossuth's linguistic research and with the reflexivity of neoconceptual art with added elements of irony. It is based on an Alvin Toffler quotation in three languages—Slovak, English, and German which alternate on the colour monitors of five television sets covered in brand-name wrapping. Placed on the shelves they suggest a warehouse or a shop selling electronics and point to the ambiguous character of this product that is both a mass medium and a work of art. Partially perforated cardboard packages do not make for a comfortable reading of the pulsating texts. This might be a signal that understanding and supporting the new media will not be easy in Slovakia. On the other hand, the artist realizes that the benefits of the new technologies, although a fact of evolution and progress, may cause problems for many people dealing with the demanding changes in contemporary life. Toffler's text therefore remains current:

What we are witness to is the rise of video logic, which brings with it a completely different grammar. But beware: we are not proceeding from a culture controlled by the logic of literature to a culture governed by the logic of the screen, but we are moving towards chaos, where the logics will multiply and come together until a future culture emerges that is unrecognizable to the eyes of today (Toffler 1994, 7).

Charles Sandison's computer-generated 'Living rooms' (2001) is a text-based installation, where simple words express the fundamental concepts of our existence: man, woman, food, father, mother, child, old-age and death, is an example of a conceptual family tree. The words are projected onto a wall in a darkened room, where they react with one another and then combine. They create microstories built according to a programme that is reminiscent of a minimized version of virtual reality, where the limits of the body, time and space are transcended. The closed circle of the work with its internal mental rhythm brings it closer to the biological organism but it may also be a metaphor for a book that writes itself or a self-generating open narrative that is composed of those terms that can be eternally programmed, changed, and varied. The viewer becomes part of the simulated system, a sort of matrix into which the discourse of media and the theory of psychoanalysis is projected, yet there is no means of intervening (Hirvi 2001, 244).

Balance between image and text

In spite of the fact that iconic works dominate in contemporary media art and visual culture, some artists use the extensive opportunities provided by the new

technologies for experimenting, with the aim of forming multilayer relationships and combining visuality and textuality.

The video 'Measures of Distance' (1988) made by Mona Hatoum, a Lebanon artist living in London, shows the symbiosis of a video image—the artist's mother is shown taking a shower, a scene recalling a moment of intimacy in her home in Beirut—with a letter written in Arabic which overlays the images like a shower curtain. Simultaneously, a letter is read in English by the author and fragments of the dialogue between the two women can be heard in the background. Mona Hatoum's video work carries a transcultural code and describes a mother/daughter relationship as if doing away with the geographical and generational distance. It also deals with questions of intimacy and the erotic. These take on significance within the context of the current global discussion on gender issues concerning Arabic women, together with a breaking down of prejudice and patriarchal stereotypes. Hatoum extended the semantic space in this multi-layered video by careful synchronizing the visual image and the text presented in three modifications: an Arabic written version of the letter, its verbal English translation and the dialogue of the women.

Experiments based on the juxtaposition of the relationship between image and text (written and spoken language) formed the basis of the research conducted by the American video artist Gary Hill. He favours not just poetry and literature but also philosophy and explores the essence of language and its role in creating consciousness as presented by Heidegger and especially the French poststructuralists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

An example of Hill's video artwork that is based on ambiguous video collages, is his black-and-white video-sound installation "Beacon (Two versions of the imaginary)" from 1990, where he confronts the relationship between image and text (discursive and non-discursive). In this work, a rotating tube hangs down from the ceiling and from one open end projects a video film with three people—man, woman and child onto the wall and from the other end it projects the text from the book—Blanchot's essay "The Gaze of Orpheus".

The moving tube distorts both the images and the words of the text; they cannot therefore be perceived simultaneously and the work is an allusion to a fascination of visual images in an ambivalent relation to the spoken language. Whereas on the one hand, the artist points to the harmony of language and image which leads to consciousness, on the other hand, he ironically confronts the potential threat of language being erased by technology (Himmelsbach 2003, 307-308).

Approaches aimed at harmonizing image and text are characteristic of the narrative films and video installations of the Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila. These are multi-layered psychological stories projected onto multiple screens, e.g. *Consolation Service* (1999) or *The House* (2002). They contain elements of documentaries, fiction and film, where the visual story revolves around either the internal monologue of the female protagonist or the communication of several

characters. Meaning is primarily imparted through a dialogue-based sound track. Since the characters in her films speak Finnish, the author uses English subtitles to preserve their authenticity (Zbikowski 2003, 282-285).

The Slovak artist Pavlína Fichta Čierna is also aware of the importance of verbal language in video films and her soundtracks are mostly of the monologue variety. Many of her videos exhibit signs of social documentaries and, thanks to the author's empathy, they penetrate deeper below the surface of the seen reality. Čierna portrays women and men who have gone beyond conventional social standards and cultural norms and unveils their individual character ('Janka Saxonová', 2002, 'With Maroš', 'About Jozef', both 2003). Čierna's video films also have English subtitles, which helps them to be accepted abroad and to meet with increasingly good responses (see Rusnáková 2004, 70-83).

Anetta Mona Chisa, a Rumanian artist who studied in Slovakia, but now lives in Prague, has produced the visually and textually striking short video loop, 'What the fuck are you staring at?!' (2001). She not only undermines the standard modes of reception of artwork by introducing subversive components, but she also deconstructs the conventional image of women as submissive beautiful beings, thereby casting doubt on the common norms of women's behaviour. The video depicts an attractive young woman, who behaves aggressively towards the viewers—she swears vulgarly in English, like the controversial performances of some pop stars. Her active body movements, attacking gestures and the furious expression on her rebellious face correspond to her rude verbal attacks addressed to the viewers. Image and text are closely intertwined in this video, the soundtrack—a monologue—supports the visual side of the moving image and refers back to the feminist background of the work.

The huge challenge of the internet has provoked many artists into creating a number of different artworks and has led to an explosion in internet projects. The global network has become an effective means of real, bilateral communication with the public: it enables artists to gain feedback from viewers. Interestingly, Russian internet artists were rather quick in their profiling—the best known being Olia Lialina and Alexej Shulgin. Knowledge of the Russian avant-garde film tradition and experience in working with narratives and screen-based visuals have been an asset in their web projects. In rapidly adapting them to the needs of the computer screen and for the purpose of interactivity, they tried to find a balance between text and image. Inspired by the theory of Sergei Eisenstein, they also made use of parallel montage. Olia Lialina's intimate 'My Boyfriend Came Back From the War' (1996) tells a dramatic story on a personal level, while the project of Alexei Shulgin entitled 'Hot Pictures' (1994) is an electronic photogallery. The artist displayed photographs of well-known and less well-known, but nonetheless remarkable artists who are not adequately appreciated in the country they come from. These are accompanied by Shulgin's critical commentaries directed at the conservative cultural management of galleries and museums in Russia (Greene 2004, 36-38).

The Dominance of the Image

A relatively large group of media work falls into this category, where the power of the visual image dominates over the text or verbal language. The authors who work with digital technologies have a wide range of rapidly developing software programmes at their disposal. These enable the use of new artistic approaches and strategies, particularly the creation of untraditional images through animation or other computer-based techniques. In this way, time can be slowed down and stretched out till it comes to a halt, or conversely, it can be accelerated. Douglas Gordon's video '24 hour Psycho' (1993) is a prime example of the way in which images without text or sound can be played around with. This Scottish artist often uses appropriated found footage. Gordon freely works with the classic Hitchcock horror, extending its time to 24 hours and thus altering the viscosity of the moving film images. The artist therefore suppresses not only the rhythm of the story, but he also denies the existence of a story altogether by eliminating the sound and the dialogue. On the other hand, new details, unnoticed in the original film, come to the fore, revealed by slow motion shots and through their projection onto screens placed in the gallery. Watching this video is a different experience from the way in which film is viewed in the cinema, where there is only one viewpoint on offer; instead the visitors of the gallery are able to experience the video film on the basis of physical motion. They can even start watching the film at any point regardless of the linear development of the story, which is, in this case, also undermined. The way the video is perceived is dependent on an assumption of knowledge of the context of Hitchcock's film. Gordon then plays with these connotations, altering and deconstructing them (Geržová 2003, 46-63). Gordon does something similar when he takes old medical and psychiatric films and selects particular sequences from them which he then projects in variously modified versions onto large screens in the gallery ('Hysterical' 1995, 10 ms -1, 1994).

Bill Viola's contemporary videos, which are projected onto LCD monitors are intentionally still, silent and textless, thus the first impression is one of static photographic portraits of men and women. Viola presents the whole expanse of the human psyche in individual video portraits, where time has been drawn out to focus on people in various states ranging from stillness to excitement to mysterious or ecstatic states. The absolute silence, absence of verbal components and text allows the viewer to concentrate on the way in which the image has been ingeniously altered through the manipulation of both time and motion. These evocative videos are often inspired by art history—they are based on the religious iconography of painting and Viola fills them with a similar spirituality and emotional depth. One such example is a video showing a group of young people entitled 'The Quintet of the Astonished' (2000). Its catalyst was the painting by Hieronymus Bosch 'Christ Mocked' (1490), although references to Caravaggio's painting 'Weeping Mary' can also be found in this video (Hansen 2004, 242-249). It is as if Viola was returning to the means of expression used in classical painting,

but he then artfully wipes them away, at the same time mixing them with the opportunities provided by the new technologies, and thus he introduces into this context the passing of time and motion together with the immateriality and repeatability of the image.

Peter Rónai is an artist working within the Slovak art scene who uses small LCD monitors without sound and text but in different semantic messages. These have become the emblems of his video sculptures and video installations (see Rusnáková 1997). He incorporates them in montages made of everyday objects—readymade or found objects. Their particular aspects refer to his individual mythology. Rónai permanently explores transformations of his own identity by using his post-photographic portraits based not only on family snaps but also photographs from photo booths, which he then adjusts through morphing. They are inserted into specific contexts: cultural, philosophical, political, and social, whereby they gain intertextuality and ambiguous dimensions. The author's characteristic self-irony and ironic skepticism is almost always present, forming a commentary-like thread that runs through them (e.g. *AutoReverse*, 1997).

Discrepancy between image and text

In this category, we find media artwork where image and text are either not synchronized or these two components are in total contrast. This is mainly the case in videos and video films where dialogue forms the focal point of the sound track. This, of course, is linked to both the idea and content of such works of art.

The video of Gillian Wearing with the numerical title '*10 – 16*' serves as an excellent example (1997). She portrays a group of adult men, whose male conversation, she wittily undermines by gradually replacing it with a dialogue between boys: teenagers aged between ten and sixteen. The contrast between the video image of the mature men and the spoken text—dubbed over by the boys' voices—is not only grotesque, but also creates almost absurd language games that are incompatible with the real image. It is the evidence of the ease with which not only the image but also the sound track can be manipulated and inserted into a different context. Wearing's video brings the viewers associations related to individual memory and childhood memories which are fading away with age. The author thus reminds them of this carefree period and allows them, at least in their minds, to travel across time and return to its miraculous countries.

The video installation of the Slovak author Dušan Záhoranský '*Telenovela*' (2001) bears a certain parallel to Wearing's video. The telenovela format represents a transcultural phenomenon that spreads like a virus and easily infiltrates many television sets across the world. In addition to the imported Latin American telenovelas, north American products remain classics. Záhoranský chose the serial *JAG* and subjected it to critical reflection with humour. The author presents an identical image sequence projected on four TV monitors in four dialogue versions.

These are dubbed versions, where the original dialogue of the hero—a charming colonel and a captured environmentalist take off in different directions: for instance, the text is altered so that they change positions or the articulate human speech is replaced by cats meowing. Another version is the presentation of dialogues dubbed into different languages, where the actors' parts follow one after the other in Slovak, Polish, German, Hungarian and Romany, producing laughter. The third (unrealized) version would have been dependent on the interactive participation of viewers attending an international exhibition, who would have been allowed to try out their own dubbing, thus distancing it further from the original and giving it a more personal significance (Čarný 2001, 105-107). Záhoranský's video installation turns the logic of the media manipulation targeted at the viewer back on itself so that it is the medium of television instead that is being manipulated, indicating the reversibility of these practices.

The artwork outlined above shows how the relationship between image and text in contemporary media art is representative of an open and varied collection of work within the context of visual culture. The dramatic influence of digital media has meant a move away from binary opposition towards a more flexible form, where a variety of modifications occurs between the two entities in favour of intertextuality and hybridity. A permanent monitoring and analysis conducted from several different perspectives can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of these works.

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