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REVIEW OF MARIA DONDERO'S "LANGUAGE OF IMAGES: THE FORMS AND THE FORCES"

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ABSTRACT | Maria Dondero's recent publication, *The Language of Images: The Forms and the Forces*, extends arguments formulated within the tradition of visual semiotics to develop focused discussion of three concepts: the materiality of the substrate of images, the force of enunciation in visual analysis, and the metavisual, as an approach to aggregate images and corpora.

KEYWORDS | artwork, photography, visual thinking, big image data, semiotics.

The concept of a "language of images" has a history within modern art and aesthetics, as well as in the intellectual traditions of structuralism and semiotics. Maria Dondero's carefully constructed work, *The Language of Images: The Forms and the Forces*, is specifically situated within the latter tradition, in current semiotics that builds on long-standing formal premises.[1] This emphasis distinguishes the outlook of visual semiotics from what came to be known as visual studies within the British and American contexts—where concerns shifted to analyses of the ideology of representation, the politics of subject positions, and role of images in structuring power relations in society. By contrast, visual semiotics has developed mainly through the persistent scholarship of eminent French and Swedish scholars, crucial contributions from the Belgian "Mu" group, and a cohort of South American advocates who form the core of its International Association. The methods of visual semiotics are largely absent in current Anglo-American academic circles where formalist analysis itself came to be associated with a particular now-historicized modernist claim to universality. Whether visual studies and semiotics will inform each other ahead remains to be seen, but as Dondero shifts her attention from fine art images to

computationally processed visual corpora, she demonstrates the value of semiotics for analysis of current cultural issues.

Dondero's argument makes three major points: the substrate demands attention in its material properties; the theory of enunciation is essential to visual analysis; the study of large corpora of visual images in digital form offers an opportunity to think about semiotic analysis in relation to current technologies through a notion of the *metavisual*. Throughout, Dondero calls on the work of her peers and immediate predecessors in the community of visual semiotics such as the eminent figures Jean-Marie Floch and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, among others. Her basic frames of reference are canonical works by mid-20th-century linguists, Louis Hjelmslev, Émile Benveniste, and André Greimas. Her arguments are rooted in their classic works, but, as she notes, none of them were concerned with the materiality of the sign, the specificity of inscription, the realities of production, or the tangible existence of instantiation. Their abstractions were central to their linguistic formulations: a sign, a word, a phoneme were components independent of specific existence. The power of the descriptive systems these figures

provided remains relevant—that the differences between the semiotics of language and that of images is inherent in the difference between the unambiguously discrete character of linguistic signs and the impossibility of identifying a similar structure in visual images. No "grammar" of images exists. No unit of unambiguous signification can be identified in the visual arts. This is a well-known and standard formulation of this distinction, but for Dondero, this leads to the intriguing investigation of the complexities of the gaze in contemporary photography as well as in processes of automated analysis in the work of Lev Manovich and others. This raises questions of whether computational processing has actually found a way to address the issues of discrete properties of visual signification through an approach to feature recognition.

Dondero poses a crucial point about production, and the importance of reading substrates—the techniques of inscription—that, as she notes, have "never been addressed by Greimasian semiotics" (9). The abstraction of both "expression" and "content" from these specific techniques is problematic, in Dondero's view, because it ignored the role of material instantiation, the very foundation on which any image can be described and analyzed. Greimas refused to believe that language was the "global interpreter of all other systems of signs" (9). But granting visual images their own status as semiotic expressions is only part of her agenda. Recognizing the systems in which images circulate and do their work is what drives her attention to substrate. She develops her discussion of the substrate by addressing the way that standard difficulties of distinguishing "form" from "substance" can be resolved by attending to each independently (131). "The substrate is that which embodies

the form" and cannot be confused with the "ground" on which a "figure" appears in compositional terms (131). A similar discussion occurs in Matthew Kirschenbaum's 2008 publication, Mechanisms, where he makes the distinction between formal and forensic materiality. Dondero's doesn't reference Kirschenbaum, Lisa Gitelman, or N. Katherine Hayles, or other work that has focused intensively on materiality of signification in linguistic, visual, and digital modes. This probably has as much to do with the peculiar siloes created in academic discourse, European/American divides, and digital/semiotic distances than with an aversion to these positions, which, in fact, she would be likely to share—even if they are formulated somewhat differently. Intellectual networks are neither self-evident or readily apparent, even in a networked world, without points of contact among communities and academic discourses have their own boundaries. But while some of the aforementioned critics tend to literalize materiality, seeing it in descriptive terms as if meaning were inherent in its properties, Dondero approaches substrate as an active element of a semiotic system, where its value is derived dynamically through relational play. Here the work of Jacques Fontanille provides her point of departure, and, with Everado Reyes, she has complexified the levels at which substrate enters into meaning production (138).

The concept of enunciation that Dondero invokes derives from linguistics, and analysis of subject positions identified by what are called "deictics" and "shifters." These include terms like "here" and "there" and "you" and "I" which identify positions within a speaking system. The term "you" has no specific referent outside of the context of use, and the word is used to distinguish the "speaking" and the "spoken" subjects

of articulation. This formulation, from Émile Benveniste, maps onto many modes of speech, but also, power relations within other "regimes" as Michel Foucault described them.[2] The concept of an *enunicative system* informed film theory, enriched by feminist theory in texts like that of Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman and others for whom "the gaze" was an object of considerable analysis. But while the topic of enunciation had a vogue, it has fallen away in the current work on visualization, screen images, and other newer media forms, with a handful of exceptions. Seeing Dondero revive it is encouraging, as enunciation brings a potent framework to the study of power relations structured into visible form.

For her study of enunciation, Dondero focuses on portraits and their argumentative power. What is present, absent, made evident in the modes and models of communication that are embodied in portraiture in classic and innovation modes? Drawing on a range of examples from Renaissance painting to contemporary photography, Dondero engages with the compositional strategies that organize the gaze and the reflexivity inscribed in the image. Her inquiry is driven by classic principles of an "expressing" author and an "apprehending" viewer. In addition, she poses questions about temporality and narrative extension and the apparent paradox of identifying these within a single still image. Her analysis of painted and photographic portraiture examines the conflicting forces introduced through the structuring point of view of gazes within them. She performs a masterfully detailed analysis of Tintoretto's 1555 painting, *Susanna and the Elders*, a work that loses none of its disturbing qualities over time. This is followed by analysis of various photographs whose structures produce tensions, including a long study of the work of Sam Taylor-Johnson, among other contemporary artists.

Towards the end of her book, she shifts to discussion of what she terms the *metavisual* to look at diagrammatic and scientific images. Here the work of James Elkins comes to mind, along with Peter Galison and W.J.T. Mitchell (whom she references), among others, who have paid attention to scientific imagery within critical frameworks. Dondero uses the term *metavisual* to refer to images that are aggregates of visual information, such as those produced in astronomy or immunology in which multiple objects of analysis are present. She also uses it to refer to the analysis of corpora of images. The *metavisual* extends her investigations beyond single images produced within a fine art context to works that serve research purposes or are themselves the subject of research at scale. Manovich's work offers a singular point of investigation, his cultural analytics having been developed within a digital humanities framework using massive computational processing. Over the last several decades, Manovich's approach has built an increasingly sophisticated platform for the analysis of "features"—those graphical qualities that can be specified and disambiguated for automated, quantitative, statistical analysis. While other work on processing visual images has been done within the commercial as well as government-military sectors, Manovich's work has focused on graphical and photographic representations—*Time* magazine covers, manga drawings, and the faces and locations that appear in *Selfie-City*. Projects like Image-Net, for instance, and the technical expertise of the IEEE visual sub-section, continue to engage neural networks in advancing the capacities for artificial intelligence in the

realm of the visual. Recognition and classification, based on high level capacities for discernment combined with human tagging and processing, keep pushing the limits of what is possible. Biases and other ethical issues inhere in such work, and are the subject of their own study and apprehension, but these automated systems are increasingly integrated into operational activities (airport screenings, public surveillance, police databases, and so on). The need for critical skills of analysis will only increase as this technology "improves" in its accuracy and power.

Dondero's insistence on rigorous distinctions and precise, even rule-bound, thought in her systematic approach results in a tendency to elaborate her own terminology. For example, on page 41 where she reiterates "four modal relations between enunciator and enunciate—exposure, inaccessibility, obstruction, and accessibility" and in the paragraph immediately following suggests that they be associated with "modes of existence" in "four orders: virtualization, actualization, realization, and potentialization" (41). Juggling the specificities of these abstractions and their categorical classification of visual configurations requires attention and commitment to this specific system. This sometimes feels labored, and the language, though usefully parsed to create a nuanced vocabulary, may not find adherents willing to upload

its particulars for their own use. I find her analysis at its best when it becomes discursive and descriptive rather than trying to hammer out a rule-bound set of terms. Her highly specified vocabulary will likely find its best reception within the community of visual semioticians from which it springs. But her three fundamental concepts--substrate, enunciation, and the metavisual—should find a broader audience.

Visual images play a greater and greater role in mediated communication, knowledge production, and information representation and transmission. The elaborate care which Dondero brings to creating a systematic analytic framework is an essential contribution to the current research required by the overwhelming conditions of networked and social media. By reviving the concept of enunciation, identifying the power relations of images as expression and articulation, Dondero reminds us that the formal descriptive systems of semiotics have not been exhausted. New research along these lines continues. A synthesis of this formal, rigorous, and careful work with the theoretical claims of cultural studies and critical theory would advance the frameworks for study of visual images in all of their complexity and cultural force. When this occurs, the study of "forms" will be fully engaged with the analysis of "forces" in the multivalent sense.

NOTES

[1] Maria Dondero. *The Language of Images: The Forms and the Forces*. (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2020.

[2] Émile Benveniste, "La nature des prénoms," 253.

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Cover image: Cédric Honba Honba. Evolution of the same formal pattern through different periods of the history of art and images (enhancement of the shapes in red).

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