



Introduction

by Janice Carlisle, Professor of English

For nearly three thousand years, philosophers have been fascinated by and worried about the relation between words and images. Some formulations stress the similarities between the two media, as Simonides did in the sixth century BCE when he called poetry "a speaking picture." Other thinkers emphasize the differences between word and image, as Lessing did in the eighteenth century when he called them "friendly neighbors" who, despite their neighborliness, should always be separated by a strong fence. More recently, one literary theorist, W. J. T. Mitchell, has argued that there is no image without words and no word without images: all representations, verbal and visual, are, according to Mitchell, "imagetexts." How words work with or against images and how images work with or against words are topics that have become increasingly relevant in the past decade, even though – or perhaps especially because – we live, as postmodern theorists tell us, in an age of simulacra, an age in which images have taken the place not only of words but also of things.

The readings and topics and, most important, the units written for this seminar explore the various ways in which pictures write, the ways in which they communicate information and meaning; but they also explore how writing creates images, how it pictures. There are numbers of ways in which the two media combine: pictures may constitute languages like those built up out of words, pictures often make claims or tell stories, words can morph into pictures, and, most often, words define or explain pictures, just as pictures illustrate words. Central to many of our discussions in this seminar were the ideas that Scott McCloud develops in the sixth chapter of *Understanding Comics* when he sets out different possible ratios between writing and pictures. But we also explored Otto Neurath's attempts in the 1930s to create a universal language of symbols called ISOTYPE and Susan Sontag's famous attack on images that applied to the 1970s the lessons of Plato's cave. The purest example of picture writing that we read is a novel by Lynd Ward that he wrote entirely in wood engravings. Other readings were classic examples of works created by the interaction of words and images: William Hogarth's narrative in pictures, *Industry and Idleness*; *The Story of Ferdinand*, a picture book by Monroe Leaf; and two recent graphic tales, *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Included among the theorists who provided perspectives on this material were, along with McCloud, Edward R. Tufte, J. Hillis Miller, and W. J. T. Mitchell. Visits to the Yale Center for British Art and the Peabody Museum allowed us to think about the kind of teaching that is made possible when students are challenged to use words to make sense of the art objects or cultural artifacts that they are seeing.

Two of the Fellows in the seminar provide in their curriculum units compelling statements about the nature and significance of its subject. Matthew Kelly points out the pressing need to understand how images function – how they create a particular kind of meaning with a particular kind of power – when he uses the term *art* to encompass all forms of visual imagery:

. . . media literacy – another name for the ability to use images, interpret images, and place images in context – is a relatively new emphasis in our comprehensive curriculum. While media literacy is usually construed in terms of electronic media, the truth is that almost every manufactured or artificially prepared surface that students see is designed or decorated in a way intended to influence their attitudes or behavior. They absorb, as we do, symbols and images telling them what to buy and how the things they buy establish social status. They are conditioned to obey these messages as unconsciously as we adults follow the yellow lines telling us not to drive into opposing traffic on the way to work. These symbols are created by professionals, professionals who have honed the tools of their craft in the tool shed of the fine arts and design. If students need to know one thing about images, it's this: art is all around us, and it's asking for your money. Art is everywhere, and it wants your brain.

Crecia Cipriano, who was the coordinator of the seminar, puts very clearly in her unit the conclusions that we reached when we had finished our readings and discussions:

Throughout the course of this seminar in Picture Writing, we have discussed the complex interplay between words and images, dissecting varied levels of effectiveness in terms of expression of information. A clear, uncluttered, and meaningfully selected or created image can say more on its own than it would if language were to be lazily or carelessly added, just as an effective and purposeful linguistic message might be obscured by vague or overpowering images. But when both language and image are consciously and carefully selected and combined, words and image can work in synergy to convey meaning most clearly, on perhaps a more holistically felt level.

As these two excerpts suggest, the subject of the relation between words and images became less a problem to solve than an opportunity to think about the communicative potential of two fundamental forms of media.

During the seminar the Fellows and I visited the Yale Center for British Art, as I had done with another group of Fellows in 2011. The results of our conversations there were as remarkable in 2013 as they had been two years earlier. Sheila McBride explains in her unit how we went about discussing a specific painting by J. M. W. Turner titled *Wreckers – Coast of Northumberland, with a Steam-Boat Assisting a Ship off Shore*. Half of the Fellows were asked

to notice visual features and elements of a painting at the [YCBA] without allowing us access to the painting's title or wall notes. Only after extended noticing and naming of what we could see, were we encouraged to interpret, analyze, and finally view the wall notes about the painting. Our discussion of this painting was much deeper, more insightful, extensive, and exciting than of other paintings where we did not follow this process.

This exercise allowed us to test a method of looking at images developed by Linda Friedlaender, Curator of Education at the YCBA, in collaboration with Dr. Irwin Braverman of the Yale School of Medicine. This pedagogical approach has been widely employed at the YCBA with students ranging from those attending kindergarten to those in medical school. First-year medical students, for instance, are trained to be better observers and therefore better diagnosticians. The means to that end are deceptively simple: those looking at an art object for the first time are asked to do precisely that – to look without the aid of any other information than what the piece of art itself offers. Only after all the details of, say, a painting have been noted is the viewer encouraged to offer an interpretation of those details (see <http://news.yale.edu/2009/04/10/class-helping-future-doctors-learn-art-observation>). On our visit to the YCBA,

we complicated this process a bit by designating the rest of the Fellows as a kind of control group: they examined *Wreckers*, again looking carefully before interpreting, but they were told in advance its title, and they were given the information about it on the wall label: painted by Turner in the first half of the 1830s, it depicts a scene during a furious storm as people on the shore gather the debris from a ship that is breaking apart. As the wall label explains, wreckers were groups of people who lured ships onto rocks or other dangers so that they could salvage their contents when they went aground.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Wreckers - Coast of Northumberland, with a Steam-Boat Assisting a Ship off Shore* (1833 and 1834), oil on canvas. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

By seeing what happens when viewers of an art object are challenged to look at it before being told what it is or what it means, we were experimenting with an approach that is particularly pertinent now that the Common Core State Standards discourage what is called "frontloading," the practice of introducing students to an assigned reading by providing contextual information before those students have had a chance to grapple with it on their own. As Sheila McBride establishes in her thoughtful commentary on the recent debate over frontloading, this pedagogical strategy is second nature to those of us who teach in the humanities; but, as Shelia puts the point, "The consensus this past year is clear: most pre-teaching is out with the tide." Frontloading is, I realized, my usual practice: if I am teaching an essay by Susan Sontag, for example, I assign the essay and tell students a bit about Sontag, the role of public intellectuals at the time when she was writing, and her assumptions about the education level of her readers. In ways that I had not expected, the

experience that the Fellows and I had at the YCBA made most of us feel more comfortable than we had been with the idea of dropping from our lesson plans the frontloading of information about context, the kind of information that might well offer our students interpretations that would limit, rather than increase, their understanding of a text.

The results of our experiment were, I think, genuinely remarkable – as they had been in 2011. Most of the Fellows looking at *Wreckers*, whether they knew its title and subject or not, focused on features like the ship in danger, the steam-boat in the darkest part of the canvas, and the castle-like structure towering unmoved during the storm. Yet in both cases most of the Fellows paid most attention to the human figures on the shore, people who, although they occupy the foreground of the painting, seem dwarfed by the drama being enacted on the sea and in the sky above them.



Turner, *Wreckers*, detail. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

After listing all the visual details that they saw in the painting, the two groups – one of them still without any information about the painting – began to offer interpretations of *Wreckers*, interpretations that turn traditional readings of this painting upside down. While one of the Fellows who knew what the people on the shore are doing remarked that they constitute an image of community, the group working with only what the painting itself said emphasized that point repeatedly and elaborated on it much more extensively than did their better-informed counterparts. What these Fellows saw – and here I am quoting the notes that April Higgins took – was a depiction of people doing "what they need to do to make it through the day," people "risking [their] lives," "working together, helping one another." This interpretation emphasizes the value of group effort, the coordinated straining of the people against the force of the sea, evident in the postures and groupings of the figures. In this reading the castle represents the forces that oppress workers like those on the shore: it is "pristine, untouched"; and this nameless, faceless image of power highlights, by contrast, the humanity of the people below it. The obvious moral evaluation offered by the title of the painting – that the wreckers depicted in it are criminals, if not murderers – was undermined by a positive reading of the coordinated, almost heroic, action taking place in the foreground of the painting.

This interpretation is highly original. When I asked an art historian how a Turner scholar reads *Wreckers*, the

answer could not have been further than it was from the interpretation that the Fellows had developed: according to this expert, the painting is a "sublime" depiction of "the cruelty of man added to the cruelty of nature." Such a reading makes unquestionable sense, visualized, as it is, in the composition of Turner's painting, the forms of the people aligned in parallel with the form of the breaking waves, so that the human world and the natural world might seem to be comparable forces, collaborating with each other to cause pain and death. Yet the Fellows' reading of *Wreckers* enriches that idea, making it possible to see the painting as an ambiguous, rather than judgmental, statement about the extremes of human life, blending and contrasting light and dark as the tones of the painting do.

This kind of enriched understanding characterizes all the curriculum units that the Fellows in this seminar are presenting here. The variety of their topics and of their approaches is impressive, and the units span grade levels from kindergarten to high school; the subjects covered range from language arts and social studies to foreign languages. Yet all the units share the same goal: to widen students' perspectives by making a number of different connections, not only between word and image, but also between past and present, the foreign and the familiar, students' experience and that of other peoples. I have arranged the units in groups that emphasize the differences between perspectives that are historical and geographical and cultural, although the lines between these categories blur in obvious and, I think, productive ways. Readers of this introduction will also notice my repeated use of words that use vision as a metaphor for understanding – the noun *perspective* and the verb *to see*, in particular – and that use is not simply the inevitable stylistic outcome of the topic of this seminar, but a tribute to the numbers of ways in which the writers of these units ask their students to see subjects, phenomena, and even themselves in entirely new lights.

Many of the units present ways of linking past and present. The first unit published here is by Katie Adams, and it deserves this placement because she asks her students to write in pictures, after first showing them how the written forms of language emerged many millennia ago from the drawing of pictures. Katie sees as analogous the developmental level of most of her students and of the pre-historical peoples who first realized that images have the power to communicate from one human being to the next. This conjunction allows her to set forth a series of activities that encourage her students to see that they have capabilities that they have not recognized:

I want [my students] to understand that they are capable of being great writers by communicating their thoughts and ideas in drawing images and pictures, as people have been doing for thousands of years. My unit is designed not only to help students see themselves as writers, but also to feel comfortable and confident in their ability to communicate their thoughts in the developmentally appropriate practice of drawing pictures and images.

When even young students grasp the narrative potential of images, they can become writers without having to use words. April Higgins, a middle-school teacher, plans to teach the meaning of the social contract by having her students read the graphic novel *The Girl Who Owned a City*, written by Dan Jolley and illustrated by Joelle Jones and Jenn Manley Lee. Also using classic theories of the role of government by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, this unit sets the plot of the graphic novel, in which children are left alone in a world without adults, against the history of the increasing complexity of human social organizations from the family to the nation state. In her defense of graphic fiction, the teaching of which still tends to make parents and some teachers more than a bit nervous, April provides an argument to assuage their fears:

In reality, graphic texts are not just comic books with a new name: they are narratives, memoirs, historic fiction, and even nonfiction. Graphic novels today are written for readers of all ages and

can be highly sophisticated. With a diversity of genres and writing styles, graphic novels can be used in the classroom to introduce or expand students' knowledge of a particular topic or theme.

Like Amanda Taggart, whose unit I describe below, April uses her unit to let us see how graphic texts can, in general, enrich what happens in the classroom and, in particular, make concrete an abstract concept like the social contract.

The next four units – by Kimberly Towne, Sara Delman, Patricia Kephart, and Sheila McBride – also use images to bring historical subjects alive. Kimberly, a middle-school art teacher, looks back to British culture in the Victorian period at a time when the awareness of the rights of animals developed in tandem with new ways of picturing animals. In her combination of art and literature and community service, Kimberly makes connections between distant times and both the present and the future contributions that her students could make to the welfare of others. She employs Victorian artistic depictions of animals by Edwin Landseer and Harrison Weir, along with Anna Sewell's novel *Black Beauty*, to pique her students' interest:

Children enjoy looking at art that shows animals and reading stories about animals. I believe this unit will provide the students with an engaging unit that teaches a larger concept by using examples that they will find appealing. Sixth-grade students are coming to middle school and are trying to figure where they fit and how to progress from being children to teenagers to ultimately adults. It is an awkward and confusing stage. I want this unit to influence the way they see the world and how they perceive the impact one person can make on that world. I want them by the end of the unit to feel that they can successfully make a difference, however small, in their world

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Even farther afield than Victorian England, the Greece of the fifth-century BCE, when Sophocles wrote and presented his plays, is the subject of Sara Delman's unit, which she has prepared for her eleventh-grade AP English class. Sara recognizes a major difficulty that her students have when they read *Oedipus Rex*, and she plans to address it directly: her project asks her students to focus on the chorus precisely because they find that element of that tragedy so confusing and even irrelevant. Sara demonstrates how pictures drawn from a wide range of media – strange bedfellows that they are – can come together to make the historically foreign more familiar:

In this unit I'm attempting to teach the text *Oedipus Rex* by focusing mainly on the chorus and by teaching students about the incredibly important function of the chorus in classic Greek tragedy. We will use images of the Greek theatre as well as stills and clips from productions of *Oedipus Rex* to examine the role and function of the chorus in the tragedy. We will also compare and contrast the ancient Greek chorus with a modern equivalent: the Broadway musical.

As Sara says elsewhere in her unit, "Even my most chaotic after-lunch class can pay rapt attention as soon as there is a video or a picture up on my document camera"; and she therefore uses a time-honored practice from the discipline of art history by showing her students two images side-by-side so that they will have new ways to see what might otherwise seem a merely alien to their own experience.

Rounding out this group of units are two dealing with American history and presenting pedagogical approaches that can be adopted in both language-arts and social-studies classes. In her curricular plan, Sheila McBride uses paintings to help her middle-school students as they read *Forge*, a young-adult historical novel by Laurie Halse Anderson; and Patricia Kephart turns to picture books so that her fifth-grade students will recognize the significance of the contributions that women have made to the history of the United States. In

addition to her commentary on the matter of frontloading, Sheila demonstrates how teachers can take advantage of the holdings in the Yale University Art Gallery, which include portraits of many of the historical figures depicted in *Forge*, who comprise, as she says, "Benedict Arnold, the Marquis de Lafayette, George and Martha Washington, Charles Willson Peale, and Baron von Steuben," along with lesser known people such as "Agrippa Hull - a free African American from Massachusetts; Oneida warriors; [James] Baumfree and [Elizabeth Baumfree or] Bett, parents of Sojourner Truth and slaves of a Colonel Johannes Hardenburgh." Most important in this unit is, as Sheila explains, the fact that its "images and assignments"

direct student thinking to the contradictions in early American history between our founding fathers' ideals - "All men are created equal" - and their tolerance of or active engagement in slave-owning. Students will learn that 5,000 African Americans fought in the American army, but many times that number fought for or joined the British side. The historical contradictions that underlie America's early history are central to this novel and this unit.

Patricia Kephart's project undertakes an equally significant re-visioning of the past when it proposes to add women's accomplishments to the customarily male-dominated realm of American history. Reading picture books will allow her students to make connections, not only between pictures and past lives, but also between those lives and the students' potential in the present and future:

Without pictures my street-smart city dwellers would be hard-pressed to imagine Stagecoach Mary Field's wild 1880s Montana. Equally unimaginable to them is Eleanor Roosevelt absorbing political knowhow as FDR's supportive wife among the elite of 1920s New York. Illustrations set the historic scene, color the emotions, and make the story accessible by bridging cultural, generational, and linguistic gaps. Women who made their mark on America encourage this generation to conquer their fears and follow their dreams.

Also like Sheila, Patricia has taken advantage of the fact that the Yale Gallery of Art has made available on line a wealth of visual images that anyone can download and share with students. Her unit offers an equally rich resource for teachers in its impressively extensive list of picture books and the criteria that she has developed for evaluating their effectiveness.

Through their innovative and quite different pedagogical methods, Crecia Cipriano and Matthew Kelly, from whose curriculum units I have already quoted, are planning both to teach foreign languages and to broaden the perspectives of their students in geographical and cultural terms. Crecia begins her unit, specifically designed for eighth-grade students in her French classes, by explaining how confused she felt as a tourist in Paris, and she builds on that experience to create ways in which to conquer her students' even greater unfamiliarity with that city: they will build personal maps of Paris that allow them to "choose locations to explore based on interest and curiosity rather than on top-ten lists of best-known, must-see spots." Using icons and images, Crecia's students will develop a sense of Paris as a knowable city - one likely, I think, to make them more committed to learning the language spoken there. Matthew, who teaches Spanish in high school, adds the perspective of history to those of culture and geography so that he can introduce his students to Spain and Mexico in the twentieth century. Matthew takes art objects and architecture as the visual texts of his project, helping his students to discover the significance of crucial periods in the histories of both countries, Spain under the rule of Franco and Mexico governed by Institutional Revolutionary Party. As he explains, the objects that he has chosen for analysis "are important because they are present in the lives of millions of citizens of Spain and Mexico. They provide a window on the Mexico and Spain of living memory, on political and social forces very much alive in these countries today." Particularly of interest in this unit is its

demonstration of how a "dictatorial state" employs images to consolidate its power.

Finally, the curriculum units written by Julie So and Amanda Taggart help students learn about phenomena and circumstances unlike their own, with Julie introducing her northern-California kindergarteners to the kind of weather that they have never experienced (think snow) and Amanda Taggart broadening the cultural perspectives of her ninth- and tenth-grade students in her English classes by asking them to read Marjane Satrapi's memoir-graphic-novel *Persepolis*. Julie has developed a wide variety of ways to use the subject of weather to interest and, I predict, delight her students: at times the class becomes an art studio; at other, a science lab. Because her students are second-language learners, as Julie says, they need to build the prior knowledge that they are expected to have but often lack, yet they have ample capabilities to be successful learners:

Amusingly to me, young children, with their curious eyes, hands, and bodies, seek to understand the world around them, and they are naturally intrigued by science. This is one of the reasons why I can't wait to introduce a unit that will focus mainly on science standards, using strategies to connect images and words for deeper comprehension of weather and how it affects the world and earth's inhabitants.

Amanda Taggart plans to address a comparable lack, this one in her high-school students' knowledge and understanding of the history and culture of the Middle East; and she uses a visual metaphor in her subtitle to signal that she would like students to see with something other than their standard "American Lens." In a fashion befitting the concluding unit in this seminar, Amanda Taggart's remarks on what she plans to accomplish in her project provide a comprehensive account of the value of focusing on the relation between word and image:

Visual literacy must be explored in the English class curriculum in order to prepare students for our visual world. In addition, to be prepared for the global world, students must have an understanding of cultures from outside the United States. By reading the graphic-novel-memoir *Persepolis*, other supplementary texts, and by seeing photographs and videos, students will learn about Iranian history and culture. Furthermore, they will take ownership in the development of their visual and verbal literacy

The subject of visual literacy has entered the English class as well as many others; and a wide range of teachers will want, I think, to take advantage of the thoughtful, resourceful, and inventive approaches to their subjects that these curriculum units set forth.

As a collection of pedagogical strategies and of viewpoints on important theoretical issues, these units are remarkable, as I have said, because they all share similar goals. Each of the Fellows in this seminar sees that the interplay of words and images has the potential to empower his or her students – to make it possible for them to think, for instance, that their commitment to social action really could make a difference or that they too might have a significant role to play in the life of our nation. More generally, the enriching perspectives of these curriculum units offer a wide variety of opportunities to the students lucky enough to be taught by their authors to be empowered as thinkers. That is, I would argue, the goal of the best of instructors, and I am grateful to have had a chance to work this summer with the genuinely exceptional teachers whose units are featured here.

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