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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction: To fasten words again to visible things: The American imagetext

Welcome to this special issue of the *European Journal of American Culture*, dedicated to the subject of the 'American imagetext'.

The essays that follow arise from a conference that we organized at the University of East Anglia in 2011, where we sought to provide an open and receptive arena for the investigation of American cultural products and ideas occurring at the intersection of word and image. Both of us scholars in American literature and visual culture, and both feeling keenly the need for a stronger presence of word and image research in American Studies, we sought to create a forum in which like-minded researchers might come together in an event of creative and intellectual exchange. We were delighted – and a little surprised – when our call for papers received over 90 enthusiastic responses.

We were also delighted to be able to host keynote addresses from three of the most established and eminent theorists in that field: W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago), Miles Orvell (Temple University) and Mick Gidley (Leeds University), and were very grateful to delegates travelling from eleven

countries and four continents. The conference invited speakers to consider the product and practice of the interrelations of image and word in the widest sense, encouraging, as we wrote in the call for papers, 'a theoretical approach that considers, for example, any aspect of science, historiography, theology, iconology, art history, multicultural and transnational study, film and media studies, poetry scholarship, and cognitive psychology'. Scholars from the international interdisciplinary community responded to this wide brief with energy, creativity and warm collegiality, and the gathering saw three days of presentations and conversation across the breadth of image and text studies, taking in (but not restricted to) abstract art and the manifesto, the discursive contexts for design and architecture, photographic mediation and photo books, artists' books and notebooks, illustrated novels and graphic literature, posters and textual art, concrete poetry and ekphrasis.

Initially, we had intended 'imagetext' to refer loosely to W. J. T. Mitchell's coinage of the term. For Mitchell, the 'imagetext' is a mixed form, a combination of images and words, born out of the semiotic impossibility of separating its two components into a single pair of defining terms or static binary opposition. As such, the imagetext resists stabilization in any one set of relations that might manifest in accounts of perception, cognition, communication, aesthetics and media. Recognizing the 'word and image' label as deceptively simple, Mitchell, in his seminal *Picture Theory* (1994), enquired after new approaches to the reception and study of mixed media, hoping to trace verbal–visual interactions to issues of power, value and human interest. When we began to plan the conference in 2010, over 15 years after the publication of *Picture Theory*, it was largely to address a perceived paucity of this type of focused research into word–image relations as they occur in our discipline – a discipline in which issues of power, value and human interest play pivotal roles. Eventually, the semantic scope of our use of the term 'imagetext' grew wider; not least to incorporate some of the excellent papers we received on the interactions of words and images in imaginative and philosophical processes, as well as in the spatio-temporal relations involved in museum studies and in the digital humanities. Our established remit was still to challenge the implied confrontation between image and text in approaches such as the traditional ekphrastic model (widely understood as the verbal representation of visual representation), or by more recent inversions of the same dichotomy. We hoped for, and were lucky enough to hear, a variety of papers that crossed disciplines and methodologies to examine how words and images have fused, collaborated or met in the modern American imagination to advance our comprehension of cultural and intercultural relations.

We took as our point of departure Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous edict that for its citizens, 'America is a poem in our eyes'. Emerson was in part appealing to a waning sense of national pride, and in part expressing the belief, lodged in transcendentalism, that words and images share a unique and 'radical correspondence' that might enable the American poet 'to fasten words again to visible things', and thus create a clearer path to the understanding of Nature and humankind's place in it. Walt Whitman answered Emerson's call of course, and, by presenting a photographic portrait of himself as surrogate for his signature on the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass*, offered himself in image and text as – literally – embodying and standing for the idea of America. The porosity of disciplinary boundaries between American Studies, literary studies, film studies, cultural studies, visual studies, design history and art history – the main areas represented by the scholars who spoke at the conference – opens

up real opportunities to take the exploration of these material, philosophical, discursive and physical relationships in new directions. However, there is still an ongoing tendency in mainstream disciplinary practices to define academic rigour in what might be called Greenbergian terms, seeking a 'purity' of product and neglecting, for example, study of the roots of language in pictures, or the role of language as a mediator for exhibition and printed spaces. Culturally too, this concentration on the separation of forms of expression leads scholars to overlook the importance of intertwined visual and textual relations to the expression of American character, culture and identity. 'Visual literacy', which holds the promise of allowing for more activity at these boundaries, remains a nebulous and confusing term, although James A. W. Heffernan's coinage of the term 'picturacy' in *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (2006) indicates a semiotic approach to the visual image that might allow for movement beyond representation and narrative to an understanding of the verbal interventions in our experience of the visual. The work of Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and indeed of Mitchell is still exciting and necessary, but these citations are now canonical, and there is a pressing need for scholarship in image–text relations to be made more various, more theoretically adventurous and more culturally and historically penetrating.

The following essays, along with those being prepared for an allied edited collection, represent an excerpt from this ongoing critical work. Modern in temporal scope, and broad in formal range, they are organized chronologically, beginning with Romantic responses to the paradigm-shifting innovation of the daguerreotype, and ending with the polypoems of D. Fox Harrell, whose most recent work explores the relationship between imaginative cognition and digital computation. Despite their diversity, the essays contain areas of thematic overlap: each of them is concerned with notions of identity – be it ethnic, national or personal – and each with the cognitive processes involved in visual–verbal representation and interaction. Importantly, all the essays treat both image and text as integral, equal and essential elements of the cultural products and processes under discussion. In this special issue, our aim is not to present a definitive theorization of the American imagetext, nor is it to trace its history. Rather, we hope that the essays published here offer interesting insights into how one might read images and texts in terms of the aesthetic practice of their combination.

To begin, Sarah Thwaites aligns fundamental philosophical concerns regarding imagination, mimesis and reflection with early developments in camera technology. Her essay looks at the compositional and technical functions of light and darkness as they are found in the daguerreotype and demonstrates how this material use of light can be read as informing a larger nexus of metaphorical and symbolic interpretations that animate nineteenth-century Romantic and transcendentalist discourses about time, space, perception, imagination and the creative act. Thwaites' essay follows this play between the figurative and literal through episodes in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, tracing it back into Melville's use of Goethe's (equally figurative) colour theory, into theories of transcendent space and the sublime and into the play of light and dark in the gothic double. Because of the way the daguerreotype plate fixes time, and because it appears to flicker between positive and negative versions of the same images, the realities of fixing an image with light provide a fertile ground for imaginative and symbolic extrapolation as it occurs in written forms. The daguerreotype, and the discourses that surround it, Thwaites argues, offer a unique opportunity to examine the intersection of metaphorical and materialist modes as it manifests in Romantic thought and writing.

Examining the representation of Romantic thought in twentieth-century America between the wars, Francine Weiss looks at the relationship between image and text in the production of a luxury reprint edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* published in 1941 by the Limited Editions Club. (These limited editions indeed may prompt a larger case study of the role of images in the repackaging of classic texts as luxury goods: at the time of writing, the most sought after Limited Editions Club reprints are a signed 1935 edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* with illustrations by Henri Matisse and an edition of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* with plates by Picasso (1934)). Weiss reveals the conflict between the publisher, George Macy, and the commissioned photographer, Edward Weston. Weston was deeply unhappy about the way Macy moved the photographs back to a more straightforwardly illustrative mode through the use of captions and titles; Weiss' essay argues that Macy's captions recast the rich ambiguities of Weston's images as 'unadulterated and uncomplicated patriotism'.

Nicole Sierra's contribution furthers the exploration of collaborative imagetext books by exploring the cohesions and disjunctions between word and image in Donald Barthelme's postmodern collage stories. Sierra traces the source material for these composite creations to Victorian illustrative images and banners contained in the Dover Pictorial Archive books, and, conceptually, through Max Ernst's early-twentieth-century surrealist collage work. Barthelme's reuse of dislocated images and phrases is not nostalgic, she argues. Instead, the found objects act like fetishized artefacts of a distant culture, constructing 'a dreamlike space' where, as with many of the works studied in this issue, the indexical and symbolic properties of the image are used to suggest to the reader new associative structures and paths. In their own late-twentieth-century context, these non-narrative associative structures, Sierra argues, can be read as Barthelme's acknowledgement of and response to the intense 'all-at-onceness' of the new hybrid informational environments outlined in Marshall McLuhan's postmodernist theories of new 'mixed media' systems of representation.

In the twenty-first century, mixed media find a digital platform. Zara Dinnen's essay offers a timely investigation of the widely perceived opacity of computer code via an original critique of the representation of programming in two recent, well-known films, *The Social Network* and *Catfish* (both 2010). Her approach provides a fresh perspective on the correspondence between image and text in digital media, focusing on the increasing use of graphic icons and other visual ciphers to form a visual language of digital communications. Dinnen considers code as a complex imagetext; code is a method of communication whose semantic properties render it unreadable in a human context, but whose persistent presence opens new approaches to digital literacy. By focusing on the ways in which the films 'represent, or produce, an awareness of code in the everyday', Dinnen indicates the intricacies and even impossibilities of narrativizing computational processes, providing insight into the ways digital culture figures as a hidden engine of our daily experience in a rapidly globalizing world.

Hazel Smith's article contributes to a wider understanding of digital humanities and the semiotics of computer code via an investigation of the generative poetics of African American D. Fox Harrell. Exploring 'one of the most radical developments in new media' – the emergence of interactive computational strategies to generate texts and images – Smith examines how Harrell's work prompts new considerations of the ways we perceive and

interrelate with digital imagetexts. Her contention that generative interactive media can provide valuable new paths into the study of visual–verbal relations is grounded in her understanding of such computer platforms as 'algorithmic imagetexts', where image and text share the same algorithmic, generative process while remaining separate entities. Harrell's work allows Smith to question the relationship between iconic and symbolic signs as well as cognition and computation; Harrell's polypoems blur the distinction between image and word, and his use of interactive, generative systems aims to overturn cultural assumptions tied to the representation of ethnic identity. Smith's essay provides a fitting open-ended conclusion to the journal, indicating the possibilities in imagetext practice and scholarship for innovative, relevant and exciting advances in a truly interdisciplinary study.

The impressive responses to our original call for papers, the profoundly positive reactions to the conference and the high calibre of research reflected in this journal have demonstrated to us the importance of continuing and expanding our project. Now working at separate universities, we are building on our work in image–text relations, as well as on a synergy of American Studies scholarship between Queen's University Belfast and UEA. Plans for the near future include establishing a network for academics and practitioners. More information on the course of the project is available via americanimagetext@gmail.com.

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