

Transcendent Topologies:

Structuralism and Visual Writing

tom hibbard



LUNA BISONTE PRODS

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TRANSCENDENT TOPOLOGIES:

STRUCTURALISM AND VISUAL WRITING

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*One
and the same
has
lost us, one
and the same
has
forgotten us
~ Paul Celan*

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*This collection of prose writings is respectfully
dedicated to my cousin, Bill Dawes.*

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LOGOS, DISCOURSE, DARING AND THE GENEALOGY OF THE VISIBLE: ATTEMPTING A STRAIGHTFORWARD INTRODUCTION

“The physical world does not merely display arbitrary regularities; it is ordered in a very special manner.”

– Paul Davies

In *Rethinking Globalism*, Manfred Steger, in his introductory chapter writes, “Globalization researchers have increasingly turned toward historical issues, raising the particular question of whether globalization is primarily a modern phenomenon or a process that has unfolded for millennia.” As civilization begins a new millennium, it seems that consideration of these sorts of questions is worthwhile. What does the temporal vantage at this particular moment amidst the generations of humankind reveal to us, if anything, about the directions in which we are collectively traveling? What sorts of measurements, themes, finitudes, alterations are we able to detect? Examining the evolution of conceptualities and categories assesses the basic progress of various fields of study and especially revisions and advances in ways human beings think. Usually progress in specific fields of study parallels a general thematic progress in social patterns and philosophical understanding. Recently, certain influential writings have together demonstrated a sense of a new philosophical perspective under such headings as Postmodernism, Quantum Science, Relativity, Climate Change, Structuralism, Globalism. This perspective is found in such writings as Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1961, first published in a complete edition in English 2006), Emmanuel Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. II* (1961), Jean Baudrillard’s *The Illusion of the End* (first published in the U.S. 1992), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *anti-Oedipus* (1972), Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* (1970), Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and many more. But this new perspective, loosely outlined, could also include such books as Loren Eiseley’s *Unexpected Universe* (1964), Werner Heisenberg’s *Physics and Philosophy* (1958) and environmental writings such as James Lovelock’s *Gaia* (1979), Vandana Shiva’s *Earth Democracy* (2005) and Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work* (1999). All of these writers and works more or less share the use of such memes as, from Deleuze, “rarified nature of...space,” “unusual movements,” “new dimensions,” “revolutionary thresholds.”

And not only is each statement in this way inseparable from a multiplicity that is both “rare” and regular, but each statement is itself a multiplicity, not a structure or a system. (1)

In the reviews in this collection, the intent is an examination of certain artworks in the light of what is considered basically Structuralist terminology. But in most of the discussions here, the real engine of new terminologies and “a new way of thinking” is the variety of unprecedented spinning

vantages and viewpoints from which our planet imposes a radically unfamiliar, disorienting set of parameters. No longer do we have simple clear-cut frames of reference of up and down, north and south, winter and summer, but, rather, we have gravitational and nongravitational, finite and infinite, invisible and visible, the same and the Other, the Self and the Other, linear and nonlinear, Classical and Structural (or Quantum). We have incomprehensible measurements of contradictory phenomena about which we are able only to speculate and extrapolate as, for now, we remain infinitely alone in incomplete worlds where we have no strictly rational way of proving their existence.

Foucault's historical approach, in which he focuses on the ways speculative ideas "open up" evolving knowledge toward advanced strategies and more effective methodologies of caring, is greatly illuminating. He shows the way in which abstract study and thought come to manifest themselves as innovative visibility or visibilities, buildings and organizations, needed and beneficial in serving society. Foucault portrays this absorbing type of development in separate texts concerning three different well-recognized sectors of society: medicine, mental health and sexuality. Foucault's Semiotext(e) tract *The Politics of Truth* also makes use of the historical approach.

One of the most interesting fields of study today, in which Structuralism most certainly is relevant, is the search for the origins of the universe—a subject Foucault does not broach but many others do. Also, the search for the origins and meaning of language is a parallel area of consideration, in which the application of Structuralist ideas provides insightful questions and answers. Emmanuel Levinas speaks of "this bond between expression and responsibility, this ethical condition" that is "the essence of language." With Levinas, heterogeneity and multiplicity are the condition of existence. Invisibility and visibility remain connected. Only allowing the Other brings the Self into being. Deleuze, discussing Foucault, states much the same thing. "The subject who sees is himself a place within visibility." In the same way Levinas connects "expression and responsibility," Deleuze connects "the articulable and the visible." Visibility is the ultimate achievement of the complex discourse of Structuralism and globalism.



Present or past, the visible is like the articulable: they are the object not of a phenomenology but of an epistemology. (2)

Visibilities are not defined by sight but are complexes of actions and passions, actions and reactions, multisensorial examples, which emerge into the light of day. (3)

Visual writing is not detachment from meaning, nor is it proof of the end of history. Rather, visual writing is an interrogation of "silence and response" as evidence of the relevance of the invisible and the imaginary. It is not an agenda but a means of perceiving a radically fundamental notion of reality. Visual writing is the result of a prolonged search for "presence" in an incomprehensible, infinite universe. Thus begins our study of the new art form of "visual writing."

The Encoded Logos

Around 1930, in England, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "Language is of interest to me as a phenomenon and not as a means to a particular end." Although this is an early indication of the transformation language was undergoing at that time, others had done quite a bit of thinking on the subject somewhat earlier. In 1911, Ezra Pound, along with a new generation of artists, writers, musicians, sailed from U.S. shores to Europe to begin the journey of "modern poetry" and Modernism. With the idea of Imagism, Pound introduced into writing several important notions in terms of poetry that remain influential to this day, these notions being such things as vibrant factuality, no unnecessary words, fragmentation, artistic and historical types of composition and symbolic interactions and settings. The word "Imagism" first appeared in Pound's introduction to his own book of poems, *Riposts* (1912). In *Cathay* (1915), ostensibly a collection of Chinese translations, Pound for all practical purposes introduced the idea of "objective correlatives." This idea is captured in his brief 1913 poem *In a Station of the Metro*

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (4)

Objective correlatives are similar to teaching with the use of examples, something Pound advocated in *ABC of Reading*. In a more complicated sense, objective correlatives seek conveyance via a relational and objective equivalence. "Petals on a wet, black bough" conveys the writer's sense of seeing the human faces in the crowded metro station. This sort of equivalence Pound intuitively learned from Oriental poetry.

T.S. Eliot applied the idea of objective correlatives in all of his poetry, particularly *The Wasteland*, transposing it from Pound's Oriental setting into a modernist and globalist setting. In his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot speaks of elitism and superficial attitudes toward art and culture not abstractly in so many words but with the lines "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo." This is an example of an objective correlative.

Studying daily in museums in London, the Imagists developed their interests, especially in Oriental art and poetry. They became attracted to haiku and wrote criticism on the value of the Oriental style of writing, along with the Oriental style of language ("pictographs," "ideograms"). Pound, schooled in many different languages, including Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Chinese and Japanese and Medieval English, eventually brought all of them together in his *Cantos* in unabashed Cubist cultural and linguistic diagrammatic collages that constitute what would seem the first works of multiculturalism, pluralism, visual writing and even globalism. The idea of Cubism was, in art, to reduce paintings to fundamental shapes and structures and, in writing, to irreducible elements of collective human thought and knowledge systems. The *Cantos* of Pound are undoubtedly the beginnings of Structuralism.

At approximately the same time that the Imagists were developing their ideas in England, German avant-garde artists and writers were developing their idea of Expressionism. Expressionism and Imagism are similar in that the plane of meaning on which the artworks function is non-linear and conceptual. Expressionism is different from its predecessor Impressionism in that it sacrificed the

detailed painting of light and the flux of reality for an abstract, fundamental and unchanging (permanent) presentation that allowed the



Expressionists to speak of broad social and economic problems and, also, “eternal values.” Perhaps because of German science, Expressionism gave rise to a philosophical theory of reality. Thus the ephemeral sensual sunlit Impressionist gardens of Giverny and Cote d’Azur became, with Expressionism, the remote and categorically colorful, peaceful, timeless and archetypal “Eternal Garden.” The Expressionist painters often depicted such settings as blue cities, red forests or

fantasy-colored (or sometimes, conversely, black-and-white) agrarian and “nature” landscapes in the same manner. Portraits attempted to capture a psychological and human essence. This conceptual assemblage-type of stratified representational perspective is well demonstrated in Jakob van Hoddis’ quintessentially Expressionist poem *End of the World* (first published in 1911).

End of the World

The bourgeois’ hat flies off his pointed head;
Wind echoes with a screaming sound.
Roofers fall off roofs down to the ground,
and flooded coastlines seem to be ahead.

The storm is here. Crushed dams no longer hold.
The savage seas come inland with a hop.
Everybody has a cold,
And trains off rotten bridges drop. (5)

**

During this time, vis-a-vis poetry and linguistic philosophy, the Image became more associated with conceptuality and visibility. Rather than discursive sentences, language presented itself more as an artwork and a representation. The image expressed the power of language in a colorful complexity. But the power of the image went beyond mere colorfulness. It embodied all sorts of moral, ethical, structural, social, scientific ideas and qualities. The image became the *logos*. A Greek word that in early times had many meanings, among them, “order,” “reason,” “word,” “discourse,” “law;” the *logos* was for Aristotle a division of rhetoric corresponding to rationality, as opposed to “pathos” and “ethos.” In modern times, the term represents language in a somewhat originary and mythic manner that also carries a sense of anthropology and ontology (existence). Unconfined to simply literary venues, the *logos* brought in associations with cave drawings, murals, graffiti, archeology, petroglyphs and scrolls, along with the patterns discernible in galaxies and atoms. In mid-20th Century, McLuhanism stated that “the medium is the message.” Though McLuhan himself considered writing and books antithetical to his interests in electronic media, his teaching held particularly true for the medium of language and writing. It was precisely the message of language *as a medium* that the *logos* expressed. The interest in language increasingly became the meaning and significance of language itself rather than the meaning of words, sentences, descriptions and so forth. At that time, the field of linguistics took on a

heightened scientific aspect. It focused on the significance of language as an anthropological and cosmological artifact, on the same scale as planet earth itself. Science in beginning its study of the origins of the universe contributed to the study of the origins of language. The unfathomable origins of matter and language revealed similarities. For Max Planck the new balance and spacing and the strange materiality discovered in the physical world reflected similar qualities regarding language and the *logos*. Language (the *logos*) preceded Creation.

In 1950, the publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Grammars* marked the appearance of language with the same ambiguous, minimalistic autonomy as Sartre's philosophical redefinition of existence and Existentialism. With its scattered paragraphs, erratically numbered; its inclusion of small diagrams; its inclusion of schematic designations; its spontaneous journalistic format with hit-or-miss entries; *Philosophical Grammars* placed language on the plane of sketchy poetic speculation, entirely fitting with new multiple global and structural dimensionalities.

Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language. (6)

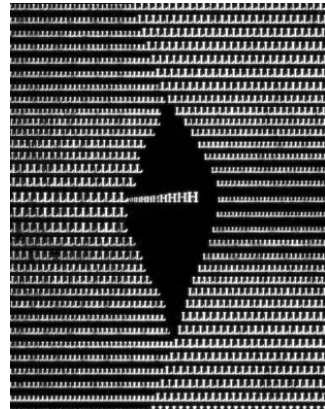
...just as the sense of a sentence seems like the shadow of a fact,... (7)

[A picture] is not a thought, not an intention; whatever accompaniments we imagine for it, articulate or inarticulate processes, or any feeling whatsoever, it remains isolated, it does not point outside itself to a reality beyond. (8)

Whether "presence" or "the trace," whether Being or inanimate nothingness, the *logos* and language inhabited the creation of everything in the universe. The qualities and characteristics they embody establish humankind in general, its societies, its nations, its moralities, its modalities, its social contracts, politics, its body, its consciousness, fields of study and agencies and faculties of interaction. The *logos* is the template of everything artificial and, in a sense, man-made in human life: organization, structure, communication, space, system, religion, law. But the *logos* and language are also the foundation around which all life revolves. As Derrida states in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*,

... it suffices to underline a law of structure: the moment of foundation, the instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. (9)

The *logos* is the anterior foundation of the institutions, civilizations and life of humankind. As Levinas argues, the introduction of the *logos* does not take away freedom from the individual but, rather, provides the very structure that constitutes freedom. All of the characteristics and qualities of the *logos* must be and must be represented as—just as is truth—inherent and inviolable (“inalienable”) rather than proscriptive. They do not limit; they are our limits. The Image became the non-graven image of Mankind.



**

Modern ontology does not omit bleakness. Visual writing is an attempt, using all the creative power of art and literature, at depicting and revealing the nature of the *logos* and unveiling of language. Of course, it might also be simply defined as “writings or artworks using typographical, letteral, cursive, punctuational, grammatical marks and accoutrements.” The works of visual artists are made out of the material of language. At the same time, visual writing—visual poetry, vispo, Vizpo, asemics, asemic writing. “poem objects”—is the journey of the *logos* of Creation—in all its beauty, complexity, dauntingness, discouragement and meaning. The number of versions of the *logos* is infinite. Yet the consistency and identity of the *logos* is discrete and distinct (separate) and not “everything.” Each version of the *logos* shares qualities and characteristics with all others. The *logos* is an infinitely divisible totality of the Other. One of its qualities is simplicity; yet another quality is complexity. In all contexts, the *logos* is contradictory and paradoxical. Included in the *logos* are “factual errors,” inconsistencies. Yet the *logos* is also, at all times self-affirming. It is a representation that is elusive and always an exteriority, but nothing is outside the *logos*. The *logos* is an immanence. It is radical and prominent, like the stormy prophetic poetry of *Old Testament* prophets. But it is also stable, orderly, sturdy, common, and reassuring, like the writings of the New Testament. It is at the same time uniform and varied. Writes Lefebvre,

Structure [the *logos*] is the model, an unconscious or preconscious representation in what exists. (10)

The search for structures reaches the discrete and stable elements of realities. (11)

Especially, like an axiom, the *logos* is, in a large number of stages, varieties, alphabets, scripts appearing in all societies and nations since the beginning of time and before, the same for everyone. Language is so closely intertwined with the development of civilization that it carries the weight of witness and evidence. The point of talking about the *logos*, the point of making artworks that attempt to manifest and describe the *logos* is that doing so uncovers secret worlds and a mysterious blossoming of life so that humanity in the chaotic self-denial of its inescapable present is able to recover and hold on to the beauty of its environment and reconnect with its future. In the battle that centers on “everyday life,” amidst desensitization, “miniaturization,” displacement, collaboration and exile is found the fulfillment of a transcendent global promise. Concerning such terms as “Structuralism,” “Post-Structuralism,” “postmodernism” and, on the other hand, “visual writing”—our job is not as strict arbiters of words that these writers and artists

rarely used themselves or applied to themselves. Our job is to rediscover and traverse the spaces, continents, oceans and infinities of their journey.

As Baudrillard writes, “It is here that language and theory alter their meaning.” In the struggle against negation and literalism, we seek the guidance of an adventure of greater immensity. The *logos* expresses the inexpressible. If society remains the source of anxiety and alienation, only discovering deeper realities will calm our fears. If visibility is the source of nothingness, then we must remember and hearken to the invisible in order to maintain confidence, curiosity, activity and daring.

It is at the extremities of this monotony, this insignificance, this indifference of our systems, that the sequences, unfoldings, and processes—which no longer proceed from cause and effect—appear. (Jean Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*) (12)

In this way, we ourselves, along with our fellow human beings, experience loneliness and terror as we face the worst. Like existentialists, heroically persevering without a reason, we, in our heightened perception, in our transforming perspectives, in our economies and ecologies of nothingness, steadfastly pursue language, visibility, “visual writing,” the Self, the Other and triumph against death, non-Being and self-annihilation.

Notes:

1. *Foucault*, Gilles Deleuze, London, 1999, p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
3. *Ibid.* p. 50.
4. “In a Station of the Metro,” Ezra Pound, *Poetry Magazine*, 1913.
5. “Weltende,” Jakob van Hoddis, *Der Demokrat*, 1911.
6. *Philosophical Grammars*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Berkeley, 1974, p. 161.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
8. *Ibid.* p. 148.
9. *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida, New York, 2002, p. 57.
10. *Critique of Everyday Life Vol. II*, Henri Lefebvre, London, 2002, p. 158.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
12. *Ecstasy of Communication*, Jean Baudrillard, Paris, 1988, p. 85.

Artworks:

1. de Villo Sloan, untitled.
 2. Jim Leftwich, “visual writing.”
 3. Jim Leftwich “visual writing.”
 4. de Villo Sloan, untitled..
- Leftwich artworks from a shoebox he sent me.
Sloan’s artwork from internet posts.