

Call for Papers

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Visuality of writing in arts and visual communication

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On the one side writing and verbal language, on the other side images and the domain of the visual and the visible. This is how we are accustomed to thinking, from the earliest habits that teach on the one hand the code and regulation of the alphabet and on the other the drawing, up to the well-established barriers that oppose reading and looking and that above all affirm the subordination of writing to the phonic form of language, in fact denying writing the possibility of existing even as a visual artifact.

Nevertheless, Roland Barthes (1970), looking at (or reading) a Japanese calligram and at its thick, dense signs, could ask “Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?”, in fact already overcoming the dichotomies between image and writing proper to Saussurian linguistics (“Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first,” Saussure 1916).

The history of writing is often presented as a long journey of refinement, from the rudimentary mnemonic forms to the approximate representations of petroglyphs and mythograms (Leroi-Gourhan 1964, 1965), to the systematic and functional nature of the alphabet (Gelb 1952, 1963; Février 1984; Bocchi and Ceruti 2002). In between, various other forms of writing make their appearance, traceable to pictographic expressions, hieroglyphic and ideographic systems, property marks, syllabic systems, and more.

This history – which could form the basis for a “semiotic grammatology” – often sees every form of writing facing a double vocation: whether to represent thought content “directly,” or to limit itself to phonematic transcription. In both cases, the graphic and visual dimensions seem to take a back seat, bending to a mere substitute function. However, writing is not only developed as a tool of transcription (of thought as well as orality), but can also become, at the same time, the bearer of an expressive urgency and no longer merely notational. In its practice, in short, writing can also impose itself as an image, if it finds the way to combine reading and looking from that material and graphic dimension that can never fail.

Alongside the writing with notational function to which we are used to, in fact, there have been, as Genette (1976) shows well, both non-transparent but mimographic writings, in which the very elements of written language are such because they resemble the portions of the world to which they refer, and

numerous other contaminations between image and writing. Among these we may recall those contaminations in which alphabetical figures take on figure form, as in Medieval *carmina figurata* or in Hebrew micrography, or undoubtedly have the force of living and active elements on the page, as in visual poetry and concrete poetry.

The syncretic interweaving of image and writing has been addressed by art history and image theory (Schapiro 1996, Freedberg 1989; Elkins 1999), by historians and theorists of visual communication (Harris 2000; Perondi 2012); and finally by semiotic reflection, beginning with the observations of Hjelmslev (1943) first and Greimas (1984) later on the possibility of another reading of writing, starting with a reflection on the complexity of its expressive substance.

Anthropological reflection has also emphasized both the continuity between scriptural and visual forms (Cardona 1981), the complex interweaving of gesture and word from which writing originates (Leroi-Gouhron 1964, 1965), and the common substrate of drawing and writing (Ingold 2007).

We therefore propose to consider the graphic activity of writing as a system of “primary modeling of thought” (Cardona 1981) on a par with language, albeit on different expressive planes. In fact, in our cultural framework, even after the establishment of the alphabet – the grammatological system most dependent on orality – the practice of writing has never ceased to operate as a supra-linguistic system, encompassing language within itself, rather than merely representing it (Derrida 1967). From Roman epigraphy to modern typography, writing, through its choice of writing media and modulation of visual variables (Bertin 1967), goes far beyond the function of “handmaiden of the word.” On the contrary, it translates and materializes in its own mode of expression, and in full autonomy, cultural values and encyclopedic knowledge, ideological orientations, and aesthetic aims, just as it can take charge, in its own way, of the meaning of the written text.

From Alexandrian *technopaegnia* onward (Pozzi 1981), in the arts and poetry, in design and public communication, there are many cases in which writing, alphabetic or otherwise, has been able to take charge of its own autonomous signification, with functions more of visualization or expression than of notation.

In the artistic and poetic field, particular mention should be made of the concrete poetry of the 1950s, the visual poetry and new writing of the 1960s and 1970s (Accame 1981; Pignotti and Stefanelli 2011), as well as the early experiments of the futurist *parolibere* (Fabbri 2009, Bove 2009, Polacci 2010). Then again, the presence of writing in many pictorial works, in the “propositions” of conceptual art or in the “documentations” of narrative art (Fabbri 2020), as well as in tags and street art in general. And inevitably, the visuality of writing is also present in the web and in experiments in digital literature (<www.elo2022.com/>), as well as in comics and other forms of visual communication (Barbieri 2011).

In the field of graphic design, one can mention pop experimentations in advertising language in the postwar period, the production of graphic designers such as Massin, Herb Lubalin, and David Carson or illustrators such as Folon and Steinberg (Massin 1993; Manchia 2013); graphic systems designed to be effective in multilingual communicative contexts, from the first historical example of Otto Neurath's utopically universal Isotype to international pictograms in wayfinding; typographic innovations and the revival of calligraphy.

Contributors will be able to develop the theme of the visibility of writing from objects belonging to different domains (arts, graphic design, design, literature, visual communication) and through multiple approaches (semiotics, anthropology and image theory, art history and theory, communication design, information design, media studies, visual culture), with the aim of promoting dialogue between disciplines and perspectives of inquiry.

Possible lines of research include:

- examples of visual writing in the arts and poetry, particularly in the twentieth century and more recent experimentations
- contaminations between writing and image in graphic design and visual communication
- typeface design between expressive typography and type design
- intersections between notation, expression, visualization
- materiality of writing and calligraphic arts
- uses of pictograms in graphic systems (wayfinding, data visualization, packaging, etc.)
- forms of notation in the arts (music, dance, theater, etc.)
- forms of notation in the sciences (logic, mathematics, chemistry, etc.)
- interpretation of nonalphabetic and/or non-European scripts
- differences between scriptures and multiculturalism.

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Final submission: ~~September 15, 2023~~ → ~~October 15, 2023~~ → **November 15, 2023**

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