

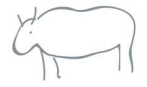
INTRODUCTION SILVIA FERRARA



UNDERSTANDING
the PROCESS OF
CREATION

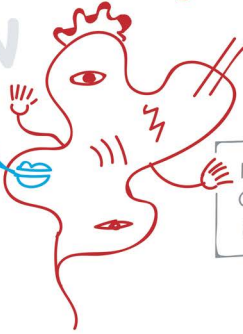


ANIMAL
SYMBOLICUM
(CASSIRER)



LANGUAGE?

TALKING
IMAGES



A SOCIETY OF
GRAPHOMANIACS



IMAGES

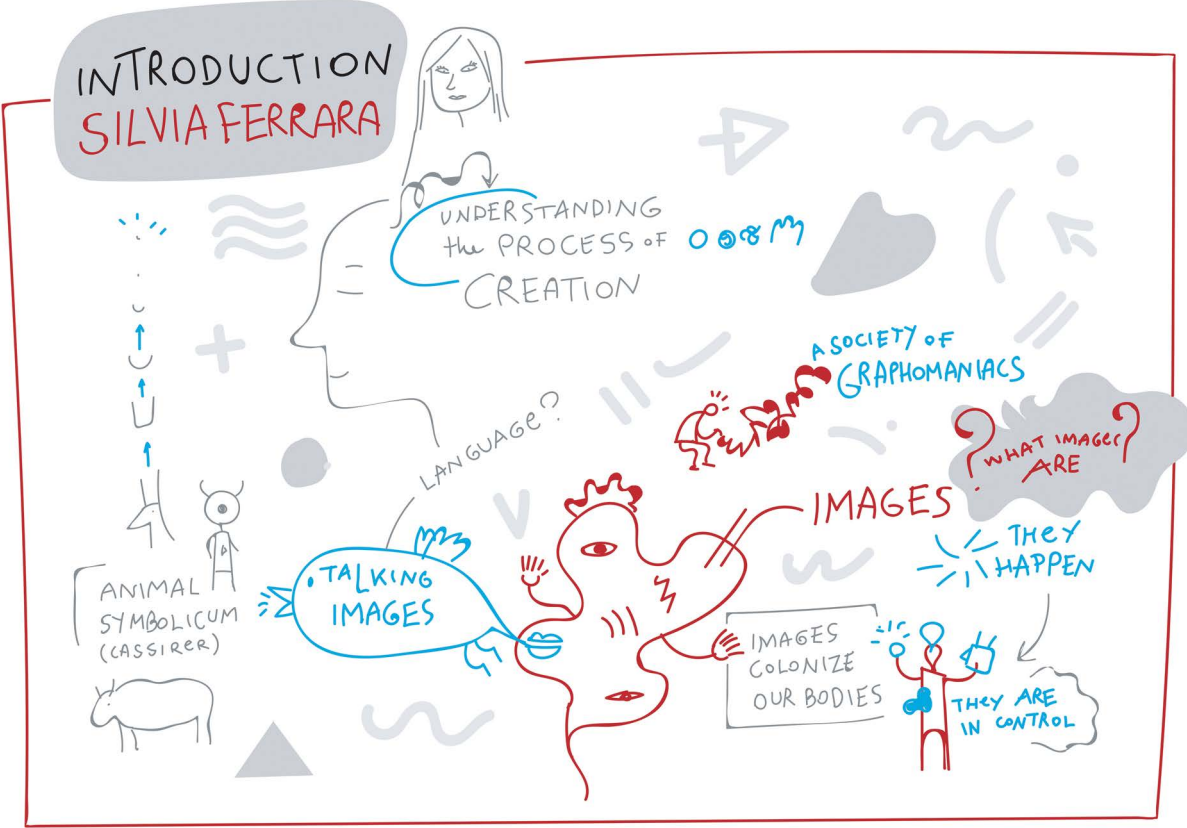
WHAT IMAGES?
ARE

THEY
HAPPEN

IMAGES
COLONIZE
OUR BODIES



THEY ARE
IN CONTROL



Introduction

Can Images Talk?

Silvia Ferrara and Ludovica Ottaviano

Images and writing belong to different realms, whereby by writing we refer to the script or system that notates language, rather than text. If writing can be made of pictures, it is all too often treated as an instrument whose *raison d'être* is the mere recording of sounds (Daniels 1992; Gelb 1963; Sampson 1985). By the same token, not all images become writing by necessity or inevitability, and when they do, the moment in time when an image becomes a sign is shrouded in mystery. This book taps into the territory in which both realms tread, and delves deep into the interstices of their confines, to explore how, in our history and prehistory, we have used images as if they were writing and writing as if it were pictures.

Our exploration is inspired by the concept of the 'Pictorial Turn' (Mitchell 1995, 2015), a critical reassessment of visual culture that challenges the supremacy of textual/linguistic media over the visual, by highlighting the hybrid nature of media, combining sound, pictures, text, and images. With this in mind, the volume aims to trace the nuances existing in these relations, their stark divisions and contextual hybridity, the situations in which the two coalesce or confront each other, by embracing their role in cognition, memory, and communication. Rather than the image-text relations ranging from discontinuity to integration and interaction (Mitchell 2015), we have explored image-writing relations. However, in a way similar to Mitchell's, we have aimed to go beyond the idea of picture as a material object that does not transcend its medium. We have favored cases in which pictures are freed of the shackles of their contingency, to treat images that can be seen in memory and metaphor; in discourse, cognition, and imagination; their relations to writing; their interplay in norms; and relations of designation, description, and classification. In certain respects, as much as image-text can be complementary, so can images and the shapes of writing.

In this, language plays a part in the endeavor, to be sure, but we have tried to avoid giving it pre-eminence or to skirt it altogether, as if it were, somehow, parasitical to the effectiveness of images as standalone communicative devices. It is true that in the last two decades, studies of scripts,

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ancient and modern, have moved away from a strictly language-bound appreciation of writing, focusing instead on the social practices, the cultural meanings, and the cognitive dimension of what writing can represent, especially in all its non-alphabetic varieties and its non-linguistic modes of expression (Houston 2004; Houston and Stauder 2020; Overmann 2016; Zsolnay 2023). The result is that we can now, with less epistemological panic than a generation ago, be at ease in claiming that what writing can do is much more than recording the sounds of a language.

The purpose of this book stems from that prompt and in a way subverts the agenda: Can images do what writing does as well as writing does it? In a way, scholars of scripts have oftentimes overstressed and magnified the efficiency of scripts as the be all and end all of codified systems, assuming that scripts provide accurate transmissions of meaning and the specificities of a message in a more complete and faithful way (e.g., Coulmas 2003; Daniels and Bright 1996; DeFrancis 1989) than any other means of communication. This is a fallacy, strengthened by the fact that scripts as things transmitted and adapted can present deficiencies, redundancies, or can be ill-suited for the notation of specific languages.

This book first challenges the divide between art and writing, icons and texts, orality and literacy, picture and picture-writing, and then lays the groundwork for blurring the all too often set and rigid lines of partition between them, in the hope of opening avenues toward more nuanced approaches to the many ways in which we, as humans, leave traces behind. The result is that this book is only *prima facie* about the visualization of symbols. What we aspire to show is the array of codified gestures *through symbols*, the processes of engagement and perception of *symbols*, their logical ordering, their flexibility, hybridity, immediacy, and, ultimately, their prompt from imagination.

This book is, therefore, not about polarizations, nor is it about oppositions, that of images that move into the realm of iconic signs and into writing, versus tangible pictures (Elkins 1999) that fail to evolve into proper writing. In the chasm between literacy and everything else, we question the idea that the conceivable alternative of images remains that of maturing into art. This perspective is bound to underplay their eloquent and expressive potential. In reaction to this, our primary goal is to move beyond the binary notion of either/or. Indeed, there are immense and layered nuances of intermediate situations, as Severi would claim (Severi 2015, 13), in which no exclusive use of the spoken word nor that of the linguistic sign dominates. Addressing this problem and the ‘teasingly schematic’ (Wengrow in Severi 2015, xv) anatomy of separations – the oppositions of words/images and writing/art – requires that we see all this in action, crucially embracing a layered approach, incorporating semiotic, archaeological, cognitive, and anthropological perspectives.

Also, purely linguistic signs and images in their concrete configurations are imbued with an aesthetic flair. They are forms of the sensible; they are audible and visible, heavily implicated in bodily enactments. If speech is universal and every community has a fully developed spoken language, similarly, images are also pervasive in all cultures and at all times – in a spectrum of representations from the earliest symbol-making in Upper Paleolithic times to the contemporary pop cultural practice of graffiti art. This has been integral to human social practices, relational properties embedded in our deepest cultural evolution. Thus, their implication with cognitive mechanisms, negotiating physicality, engagement with the physical environment, and mental processes (perception, inference, remembering, and the carrying out of an intention) is an essential feature that needs to be addressed.

Images do not work in a vacuum, but are often ingredients of composite associations (Wengrow 2014) and of the relationships between the parts to the whole, for instance, the idea of the face for the whole body, or the idea of the body as image, which has been the focus of many but not all societies (Descola 2021). This implies, almost by definition, the potential of compositionality and the rearrangement of components to create metaphorical or unexpected representations, that are images or pictures of a different, abstract kind, even impossible in reality or fantastical. This potential for abstraction offers clues into how our imagination and the ability to create symbols can take center stage, as the resulting association of combinatorial entities at work together.

And even if writing, strictly defined, belongs to a more circumstantial, situated realm, more prone to pre-conditions or more rigid in compositional force, it still can work in ways that are equally metaphorical or combinatorial, especially in its primordial iconic nature. However, as opposed to images, it is neither innate, nor is it universal. It is not part and parcel of our biological architecture, and historically speaking, it is relatively rare, emerging only in the last few thousand years. Its development was neither predictable nor expected, yet it occurred more than once in our evolution, as an original and independent creation. Writing consists of stable, conventional mappings between symbols and meanings, with systematic sound notation as the guiding system. Its earliest forms are enduring images (Morin, Kelly, and Winters 2020) that, in cultural evolution become more compressed and schematic in shape (Kelly et al. 2021). But their inherent iconicity is a vestigial residue that lingers, although not readily apparent in most of the scripts in use today.

In this property, their distance from iconography and art in general is less apparent than hitherto assumed. Indeed, even in the past, writing systems like the Chinese script or the Egyptian hieroglyphics show that semantic information is intricately embedded *within* the characters, altogether

merged *with* and *hybridic to* their shapes. This embedding makes a semantic route to meaning more viable than in alphabetic languages, offering an alternative that goes beyond systematic phonetic decoding (Handel 2015; Perfetti and Harris 2013). Evidence supporting this can be found in psycholinguistic and neurological imaging studies, which show significant differences in how the brain processes written Chinese compared to other writing systems (Perfetti and Tan 1998; Zhou et al. 1999).

The binary oppositions of words/images and reading/seeing are also to be dispelled empirically. Elkins argues that there are no pure acts of ‘reading’ or ‘viewing’; a close examination of a visual artifact often reveals mixtures of both (Elkins 1999). He suggests that any act of reading relies on a finite number of customs and strategies, which are also often at play when we look at things. Conversely, the ways we look at images – varying in order, speed, and method – often come into play when we read. Elkins claims that ‘pure writing’ does not exist (see also Robertson 2004), as each writing system incorporates pictorial elements, such as calligraphic forms, cursive scripts, and even the pictorial nature of letter shapes.

What, then, is the significance and role of these images? Several examples illustrate how systems of symbolic, codified images can be utilized by people who do not share a common language. These graphic codes have existed both before and after the emergence of writing and have accompanied oral traditions. This raises another question: What distinguishes more codified forms, such as semasiography, from less codified ones? According to Morin, the emphasis should be on the importance of conventional (or standardized) mappings between symbols and meanings. In this sense, semasiography and writing systems are highly codified, whereas visual art forms like paintings, graffiti, comic books, and so on, are not (Morin 2023).

The anthropological perspective on images offers a methodological approach that allows us to transcend the binary architecture of oppositions expounded above, thereby opening the horizon of possibilities (Severi 2015). As Belting proposes, images are embodied in a medium and take place in our living bodies as they are generated and experienced in our bodies. Across all times and places, images are more than the product of perception and are always the result of personal and collective knowledge and intention. Emerging from a symbolic cycle of creation and perception, they mutually influence each other, shaping our understanding of and interactions with the world (Belting 2011). In this context, Belting suggests that ‘images are in control’ as they colonize our bodies, shaping and reflecting our history and nature. Furthermore, images are also temporal; as societies evolve, they discard outdated versions and create new ones, mirroring changes in self-perception and societal values.

Though the multi-modal, multi-layered architecture of images across cultures, we can explore their many roles in transmitting and communicating

not just information, making its retrieval possible, but also delve deep into their involvement with memory and emotions. This approach challenges the conventional Western dichotomy between ‘aesthetic’ or artistic ‘objects’ and language, recognizing the possibility for open-ended situations in which images can express their communicative, emotional, and intimate potential independently, yet beyond any close shackle to language.

This is even more true today, if we consider the digital use of images in communication that has taken prominence, with modes of communication such as emojis, which have become almost conventionalized, and, for the most part, cross-cultural. As suggested by Morin, ideography (or semasiography) may be a viable option (Morin 2023). Thanks to digital communication, graphic signals are indeed becoming as fast and effortless to send as spoken words or gestures. The amount of information which participants in a digital interaction can share has, as a result, exploded, to the point that it can rival the exchange during face-to-face, synchronic verbal communication. If the continuous use of emojis, gifs, and other digital images lays the groundwork for a potential standardization with precise, shared, and cross-cultural meanings, then these visual forms can constitute a novel and reenacted recipe with which we can, and perhaps will, communicate in the future.

Therefore, this volume delves into the *mise en scene* of how images can talk, examining the ways in which they can create, hold, and convey enduring meanings. The authors investigate the nature and function of images as visual signs, defining what constitutes an iconic sign and, crucially, what does not. The interaction of images with other forms of communication, such as writing and speech, is also a key focus. Our exploration will highlight the remarkable ability of images to directly engage human emotions, narrate complex stories, and deliver messages that transcend the barriers of language and literacy. Simultaneously, we will explore how the effectiveness of image-based communication depends on a delicate balance of representation, symbolic meaning, recognizability, cultural preferences, and individual or collective perception. These elements are vital to determine how value can be attached to an image, and to what extent its meaning can be standardized, perceived, and transmitted. Ultimately, our goal is to trace the connections between images, marks, symbols, language, and writing, how they interplay, and if they do so successfully.

Images, Symbols Inside and Outside the Boxes: Structure of the Book

Talking Images is divided into four parts, each exploring a different aspect of the relationship between images, representation, symbolic meaning, and perception. From the earliest symbol-making to the interplay with writing

systems, from the reinterpretation of ancient communication devices to modern semiotic approaches, this book offers a comprehensive examination of the communicative power of images.

The first part, **The Earliest Images, Symbols, and Cognition**, embarks on a journey back to the origins of human symbol-making, looking into behavioral modernity of the first *Homo sapiens* and human representations from the Holocene period. In ‘Marks, Signs, Symbols: Behavioral Modernity and the Early *Homo sapiens*’ ([Chapter 1](#)), Enza Elena Spinapolic scrutinizes the archeological evidence of geometric engravings related to the African Middle Stone Age, from ~110 kya BP to ~63–60 kya BP, associated with the emergence of early *Homo sapiens* in the continent through a strictly archaeological approach which acknowledges the centrality of the material aspects.

The following chapter, ‘Between Nature and Culture: Interpreting Changes in Human Representations During the Early Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia’ ([Chapter 2](#)), by Marion Benz and Joachim Bauer, charts the continuities and changes in human representations as societies transitioned from hunter-gatherer bands to sedentary farming communities in northern Mesopotamia, from the 11th to the 8th millennium BCE. The interdisciplinary approach they embrace weaves together insights from various fields, from neuroscience to prehistoric studies, painting a vivid picture of the cultural transformations that accompanied these societal shifts.

When Images Interact with Writing, the second part of the volume, navigates the complex intersection of visual images and the development of writing systems, using examples from ancient Iran and the Classic Maya civilization. This section highlights how the emergence of writing systems was deeply intertwined with imagery, blurring the lines between seeing and reading. Kathryn Kelley’s chapter, ‘Images Hidden in Script: The Invention of Writing in Ancient Iran’ ([Chapter 3](#)), argues against a stark separation between visual icons and written symbols, using the proto-Elamite script (c. 3200–2900 BCE) as a case study. Kelley proposes that this ancient script was an amalgamation of visual traditions, crafted to convey information within an exclusive circle of literates, while simultaneously drawing on broader visual cultures.

In ‘Emblem Glyphs: Orthography and the Political World of Classic Maya Scribes’ ([Chapter 4](#)), Mallory Matsumoto delves into the political iconography of the Maya civilization during the Classic period (250–900 CE), positing that emblem glyphs were not just linguistic markers but were also composed with a keen graphic sensibility, reflecting and reinforcing political identities and hierarchies.

The third part, **Images Outside Their Boxes**, transcends traditional boundaries to explore how images function outside their contexts and mediums, including 19th-century interpretations of non-European writing

systems and the storytelling methods in comic books. Christopher Pinney's chapter, 'Europe's Other Writing: "Ominous Hieroglyphics" and Belated Ekphrasis in the 19th Century' (Chapter 5), guides readers through the peculiar world of English almanacs, where Egyptian hieroglyphs served as cryptic forms of knowledge and communication, part of a 'other' visual lexicon. These 'ominous hieroglyphics', Pinney suggests, constituted an alternative network of visual discourse, revealing much about the cultural undercurrents of the time.

Roma Chatterji's 'Aghori – The Voyage of an Anti-Hero: Comic Book Images and the Art of Storytelling' (Chapter 6) discusses the unique multimodal narrative power of comic books. Chatterji's analysis sheds light on the sophisticated visual strategies that comic book artists employ to engage readers, from the lettering with the graphic power to convey emotions to the dynamic sequencing of images.

Finally, the fourth and concluding part, **Representing Images through Lines, Bodies and Language**, interprets the transformation of images through a spectrum of expressive forms, including calligraphy, facial tattoos, and the semiotic evolution from expressive to denotative signs. Adriana Iezzi's chapter, 'Art from Calligraphy: Chinese Writing Turns into Pictorial Images, Performative Actions, Design Products, and Graffiti Works' (Chapter 7), ventures into the dynamic realm of Chinese calligraphy. Iezzi highlights how this form of art, inherently multimodal, has undergone a contemporary metamorphosis, displaying its versatility and influence across various domains of visual and performing arts.

In 'Facial Scripts: The Semiotic Journey of Maori Tattoos from Colonial Gaze to Cultural Revival' (Chapter 8), Massimo Leone offers an examination of the archaeology of the Maori facial tattoo, Moko, tracing its trajectory from its ancestral roots, through colonial fascination, to its digital manifestations through facial filters. This analysis provides a window into the Maori's rich cultural tapestry, underpinning the dual role of the Moko as a script and a medium for personal and collective expression.

Concluding the fourth part of the volume, Claudio Paolucci's 'From Expressive Sign to Denotative Sign: On Some Semiotic Passages Connected to the Invention of Writing' (Chapter 9) questions the semiotic shift from expressive to denotative signs within the context of the development of writing. By examining the diagrammatic relations inherent in expressive signs, Paolucci elucidates how these relations facilitate the emergence of denotative signs, offering a nuanced perspective on the semiotic underpinnings of writing.

With this structure, *Talking Images* aims to offer a comprehensive and insightful examination of the communicative power of images across time and cultures. By weaving together archaeological, anthropological, cognitive, historical, and semiotic perspectives, the volume not only enriches

our understanding of visual culture from its prehistoric beginnings but aims to open new avenues of contemplation, into a future, a world, that is increasingly multimodal. While the trajectory is willfully launched towards a more ethereal, intangible sphere, we still wish to show the enduring force of images in shaping human thought, culture, and identity, inviting readers to reconsider the visual underpinnings of communication in a new, agile, unexpected, but still powerful light.

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