

L'acte d'image en littérature / The Image-act in literature (1880-2020)

Call for papers

Musée L, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
18th-19th April 2024

Conference organized by Anne Reverseau (FNRS / UCLouvain)
With the cooperation of Andrés Franco Harnache and Yorik Janas (UCLouvain)

The concept of image act (*Bildakt*)

Over the last fifteen years, the renowned work of Horst Bredekamp's *Image Acts: A systematic Approach to Visual Agency* [*Theorie des Bildakts*], and the entire collection "Actus et Imago" (De Gruyter), has popularized the notion of image performativity, particularly through the concept of "image act" [*Bildakt*]. This concept, applied initially in the analysis of traditional artifacts and artworks (Da Vinci, Dürer, etc.), and more recently for a greater variety of commercial and multimedia images (W.J.T. Mitchell 2005; Vladova 2016), has contributed to the proliferation of a whole range of academic works. This is the case for practical uses of images in social exchanges (André Gunthert, among others), aesthetic practices (i.e. Eco, Augé & Didi-Huberman, 2011, Cutton 2012, Bartholeyns 2016), and in literature studies beyond the classic analysis on ekphrasis and illustration common in the word and image scholarship (i.e. Grojnowski 2002, 2011; Bloomfield & Zenetti 2012). The flexibility of the term has, in consequence, proven to be useful in redefining image by its practical (i.e. Hans Belting), and social uses (i.e. Carlo Severi), bringing a different lens of analysis to literary criticism.

Image performativity for writers

Following the research initiated in 2019 within the frame of the project HANDLING, which aims to study the actions of visual objects on literary creation, the primary objective of this conference is to study the "image agency" in French-speaking and non-French-speaking literature from the late 19th century to the present day. In particular as it relates to its effectiveness, but above all its "efficiency" and the possibilities it opens up beyond the causal relationship between the artwork and the creator's initial intention (Vouilloux 2011). The concept of *Bildakt* proves useful in this matter as it allows for highlighting relationships between writing as a practice and the images involved in it, rather than those only between text and image as traditionally acknowledged; and, second, the *Bildakt* permits to focus on concrete/material images—favoring an artifactual approach to the problem. Where does the performativity of images lie in literature? Are there image acts specific for the literary practice? What typology of literary image acts can be proposed? What stages, modalities, and degrees should be observed in what can be defined as "intermedial practice" (Oberhuber 2011) or "intermédialité agissante" [active intermediality] (Reverseau 2021)? This comparative reflection, comparative in terms of language but also of media, fully participates in the expansion of visual studies into literary criticism.

We thus welcome papers that stem from the work of Guido Isekenmeier and Ronjo Bodola with their research group “Studies in Literary Visuality”, which analyzes visual practices in literature, as well as research on intermediality (Bernard Vouilloux, Wolfgang Hallet, Bettina Thiers), or the anthropological approach to iconographic gestures (Severi 2003, Belting 2004). We also invite researchers to reexamine traditional literary questions, such as the notion of source, influence, or ekphrasis from the perspective of the visual studies and image act in a large sense. Submissions could explore questions such as, how to address the action of an artifactual image in a writing process? And, can an image be an "exogenesis", as understood by the scholars of genetic criticism (De Biasi 2020)?

The question of the image act in literature thus converges with genetic perspectives, the image as origin for writing (such as a portrait serving as a source for a poem – Mallarmé, Supervielle, etc.), or documentation (such as a photographic archive serving as documentation for a novel – Zola, Duras, Claude Simon, and more recently Camille de Toledo, etc.), but also nourishing a larger discussion on poetics, as it examines how writing is stimulated at different stages through the contemplation or manipulation of images, no matter if appropriated or produced by authors.

In line with Anne-Cécile Guilbard's recent reflections on the writer as a “regardeur” (viewer) of images (2021) and the foundational works of Liliane Louvel (2010), we hope to address the question of ghost images (Guibert 1981) and buried images resurfacing through the creative act. Whether individually or in a stream, whether ancient or contemporary, self-owned or stolen, images are generally fetishized by writers, acting upon literary creation in numerous ways. Writers can use an image while “à la recherche du déclencheur” [searching for a trigger], as Michaux wrote, or “à court d’arguments verbaux” [when words are lacking], as Elsa Triolet once said (1969: 107). It is mainly this “imaginogène” function (Michaux, 2004: 614) of visual objects for writers, especially those which Bernard Vouilloux calls “les écrivains de l’image” [writers of the image] (2020: 168), that this conference is concerned with. This is a function sometimes made explicit by writers when composing their archives, such as with Christian Prigent when gathering “iconographic documents” along with all his manuscripts at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC). The archival gesture, like the documentary gesture of accumulating documents for writing (Cécile Portier, 2021), is also a critical gesture.

The question of the “image gesture” (Kisiel 2021) in literature thus seems to redefine the notion of illustration by making a Copernican turn: there are cases in which the writer “illustrates” the images by writing texts to accompany them, as Michel Butor once said (1964-1976).

Conference details

Since 2019, the research of the HANDLING group (UCLouvain) has focused on how writers manipulate images, how they interact with images by collecting, storing, arranging, and commenting on them. However, any reflection on image gestures should also be concerned by how images act upon writers and their texts, reflection and we would like to close the project with.

For this conference – the final one of the ERC project –, we strongly encourage concrete case studies (unique cases or comparisons between two or three cases) concerning the chronological span of the project (1880-2020), although some panoramic studies will be accepted too. We invite specialists in French and Francophone literature, as well as specialists from other cultural and linguistic areas, to apply – strictly or broadly – the concept of the image act to their respective fields. Presentations can be given in English or French, and we strongly encourage submissions working on Hispanic, Germanic, Dutch, Lusophone, Italian, etc. corpuses, preferably when compared to a Francophone corpus.

The conference proceedings are due to be published by the winter of 2024 in an innovative digital format allowing for multilingual and multimedia content.

Please send your proposals (between 250 and 350 words, accompanied by a bio-bibliography) by October 1st, 2023, to anne.reverseau@uclouvain.be. The scientific committee will provide a response by November 1st, 2023.

Organising committee

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HANDLING Research project (2019-2024) : <https://sites.uclouvain.be/handling/>

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