

# Symposium

## The Time to Read and the Patience to See

*Jacques Delaruelle*

*'I have a disease: I see language—Hearing deviates to scopia.'*

*Roland Barthes*

It was Roland Barthes who, after Sartre, reminded the French students of my generation that 'power was present in the most delicate mechanisms of social exchange: not only in the State, in classes, in groups, but even in fashion, public opinion, entertainment, news, sport, family and private relations'. Indeed his *Mythologies* (1957) became such a seminal reference that from the early 1970s onwards, an obligatory component of the modern Humanities was to learn how to detect the presence of power in language which was (in Barthes' words again) 'the object in which it is inscribed for all of human eternity'.<sup>1</sup> Two generations separate the Protean career of this mentor of my youth from the inquisitorial puritanism of his more recent epigones in the Anglo-Saxon world. And in this lapse of time, his legacy of *Sapientia*, ('no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as much flavour as possible'), seems to have been reduced to a standardised urge to identify the stratagems of power in discourse or the perpetrators of politically incorrect thoughts. Of course Barthes never was merely a decoder of signs or a stern prosecutor of *la pensée bourgeoise*. He was a shrewd interpreter of images and a somewhat fetishistic lover of *littérarité*; and if, as a critic, he excelled in tracing the hidden truths of power and desire, it is mostly as an inventor of theoretical fictions, or as a subverter of systematic theory, that he proved himself to be most original. It is strange to see his conceptual libertinage, or even the more technical essays of his Brechtian phase, being used as evidence in the trial of literate culture that is presently conducted in the name of Communication.

But it is not to muse on the oddity of his posthumous situation that I open this essay with a reference to Roland Barthes. The reason for recalling his semiological redefinition of power as an ideological

(and not simply political) object is the relation it bears to the current redefinition of 'reading' and the so-called visual literacies. It is not simply that Barthes' semioclastic enterprise has become a grim fixation on the hidden truth of all texts as power, but that the structural complement of this concern with the invisibility or, more exactly, the opacity of power, is the utopia of a possible transparency in language and society. It is this dream of immediate visibility which, to my mind, spurs the current redefinition of literacy. It is argued, for example, that words should be identified visually as graphic signifiers rather than 'sounded' by those who learn how to read.<sup>2</sup> Yet evidence in the field suggests that learners do not benefit from this redefinition of the written word as an almost exclusively visual sign. And even though a tentative return to the old methods is currently taking place, I am told that children raised with television find it harder to distinguish the vowels of new words, or extract themselves from the omnipresent aural and visual hubbub of their domestic circumstances.

It is also contended that by never making their rhetorical premises clear, English teachers, albeit unconsciously, may have served the interest of a class that always sought to establish the principle of its social privileges as a kind of innate cultural superiority. But such proclivities to naturalise culture or desocialise education have been criticised to the point where, to be 'literate' now implies an ability to read, past the explicitly signified utterance of a text, its connoted subtext, or the scriptor's position in the socio-cultural hierarchy. What seems to have been forgotten is that if language at once defines and signifies a relationship between parties engaged in the process of communication, it also coincides with intentions. Inasmuch as our questions tend to presuppose their answers and our theories to reproduce their premises: if we listen to language, language speaks through the subject; if we listen to a person in order to learn a foreign language, we are more interested in the unfamiliar syntactic constructions or the unforeseen usages of terms we thought we understood. But when we listen to a person personally, we no longer perceive the organisation of his speech or the paradigms to which his words belongs. Then, it is the subject who speaks, and not language.

Literary works, whatever their genre, respond unfavourably to intellectual attack. And though it is not the place to argue that readers ought to frame apart the object of their attention or show the detached interest so magnificently criticised by Pierre Bourdieu, I would still like to contend that an anti-romantic prejudice can impair the practice of reading by systematically opposing the essence of a work to the

material conditions of its production. The suggestion, for instance, that 'a sense of wonder' might have oriented the writing of novel or a poet's work would probably be dismissed as a nonsense in educated (i.e., 'literate') circles, or brushed aside with the argument that only a detailed study of the writer's belonging to a sociological field, would reveal the principle of his/her curiosity. Equitable as it may sound, this assumption negates the transcendental possibility, or the self-transforming power of the work of art on an *a priori* basis and is therefore not value-free. Similarly, the thesis that social inequity can be found registered in the fabric of a culture's highest achievements is by no means less prejudiced than the view according to which great works, be they philosophical, artistic or literary, are by definition apolitical, or more optimistically still, on the side of the oppressed. It is of course true that the notion of a conspiracy against 'the people' at work in the literary canon coincides not only with Barthes' conception of language as fascist, but also with the properties of a medium by means of which it once was possible to control the collective memory of a social grouping.<sup>3</sup> And it is evident that the cold protocol of the written phrase, or the detachment of speech from its context of production, also contribute to current misgivings about classical notions of literary excellence. Yet to become genuinely critical, such notions would have to be counterpointed with the realisation that from the Renaissance onwards, literate culture has been both an expression of social privilege and the medium through which the legitimacy of social privilege could be effectively attacked. In most cases, however, that point seems to be deliberately ignored or suppressed!

One reason for this partiality is the degree to which the anxious fascination with 'reading/writing' as an aspect of the power/knowledge equation, and its perceived solution, the so-called visual literacies, agrees with the logic of a society dominated by the categories of seeing. With its double promise of emancipation from a despotic linguistic order and effortless intellectual gains, such a response to the reality of illiteracy as the one offered by the apostles of Communication seem ideal. In reality, it is as destructive as it is illusory! Technological 'hype' and the enthusiasm for our Brave New World that emanates from the Media-Study departments should not make us forget how disastrous the abandonment of deliberate slowness in the act of reading/thinking has been to contemporary culture. For at the same time as fast writing and reading define not just journalistic criticism, but every sphere of activity dominated by the technocracy of Communication, serious artists and thinkers are *de*

*facto* excluded from the public debate, and we can see for ourselves that to the profusion of academic niches in which 'writing' is taught (and literature banned) corresponds the near-total absence of serious public and literate publications.

This redefinition of the public intellectual life by a principle of visual immediacy also implies a system that organises its own opposition and locates it *de préférence* in the arts or certain quarters of Academia. Elsewhere, our *humanitas* barely extends beyond the register of the video clip, the publicity message or the headline of the printed media. To the intolerance of the slightest syntactical complexity shown by the Press industry corresponds the presumed impatience of its consumer (reader) whose formative references are primarily visual. The reading habits of the latter implies a visual apprehension of words that are literally flashed to the mind as so many neon signs or ready-made slogans. But they forbid the *retour sur soi* of reflexivity or the withdrawal from appearances associated by Hannah Arendt with the thinking activity itself. Because they are to be grasped at a glance, the sentences printed in our newspapers can hardly hope to signify any nuance, paradox or uncertainty. It is sometimes argued that the crisp, punchy and above all direct style preferred by professional journalists is intended to let the facts speak for themselves and demonstrate an ability to bear witness without the hindrance of an intellectual involvement. But the anti-discursive mode of the Press mostly intimates that its referent is no longer a *cosa mentale* but a *cosa visuale* meant to be viewed in passing, then lost from sight as one turns the page and forgotten the next instant. Produced (literally) by the form (i.e., format) of the mass-media, an inattentive attention has come to define a way of seeing/understanding that is both fluid and passive, and whose object cannot be retained by the memory. The prevalent expectation to get to the point straight away and see what signs stand for without the detour of interpretation also signifies an end to the ambition of seeing past the tautological evidence of things as things or of experiencing over a period of time their metamorphosis into ideas. In other words, the object of communication is processed in such a way that it is deemed valid in one respect only.

Having more or less transmuted the whole process of communication into a visual happening, our society cannot but assume a certain transparency of the individual as a moral agent. Discretion becomes not simply an outmoded virtue but a sign of civic impropriety, and few people still doubt the intrinsic badness of privacy. This ideal candour infects not just public life, but the private realm as well. And

saturated with the knowledge that 'power is present in the most delicate mechanisms of social exchange: not only in the State, in classes, in groups, but even in family and private relations', most of us now appear anxious to believe that only 'power' is the enemy. Thus in a world where the ideal of 'freedom' clashes with the demand for 'equality' and no longer evokes a politically acceptable utopia, the meaning of 'responsibility' or 'authority' becomes restricted to a notion of potential guilt. And this is precisely how the verb 'to understand' evolved to denote a willingness to demonstrate a lucidity that is essentially a readiness to point an accusatory finger towards something or someone with the intimation that it, he or they bear a responsibility in the workings of a bad order of things. The target of such an understanding can be a person or a group defined by parameters such as age, race, gender, religion or whatever standard behaviour believed to define them as such. It can be a conception of happiness, a way of life, or more abstract ideas like 'the West', 'Patriarchy', 'Democracy' or 'Beauty'. But always the essence of the activity remains the immediate identification of a guilty party by visual means or the instantaneous deciphering of coded iconic messages.

Again, the immediate decoding of their constituent signs has very little to do with the slow, complex and, above all, patient translation of the marks left by a creative agency formerly known as 'reading'. The activity now going under that name has become a kind of scanning process, a Pavlovian response to the non-equivocal intimations of signs which instead of 'referring to the Object which they denote by virtue of being really affected by that object ... refer to the Object which they denote by virtue of characters of their own' (C. S. Pierce). In other words, if it is possible to deduce the existence of a fire from a column of smoke, or, if footprints in the sand told Robinson Crusoe that another man lived on his island, no such indications are given in the semantic object which functions as an arbitrarily indicative device. As a sign, it does not resemble anything or evoke anything in the mind of those who look at it without prior knowledge of what they are supposed to see. Insisting on the dumb factualness of the denoted object, 'it' implies that 'it' is nothing other than what its tag or label says. There can be no ambiguity, no divergent interpretation or symbolic meaning, let alone Barthesian third message, indeed the whole operation consists in identifying a ready-made thought designated by a coded image. And to illustrate this type of understanding with an example borrowed

from my habitual field, let me briefly sketch how the notion that painting can be read as a coded iconic sign is inculcated.

In the twilight of their half-sleep during classes of art history/theory, art students are often presented with a great many slides and a pinch of knowledge to go with them. It is expected that they will then be able to identify works, by the name of their authors first, then by their title, and then depending on the culture of their teachers, by their place in an *œuvre*, the circumstances of their original creation, their relationship with other works, contemporary or not. In effect, the meaning of each work is taught as a conventional affair for the most part and the consequence of an identification process that is a matter of cultural competence (i.e. literacy) primarily. At no time is aesthetic judgement expected to play a part in the process. There can be no imaginative connection, no 'analogical' link between the painting defined as a coded iconic sign and what it refers to. Understood in that way, works of art come to signify no more than the name of their author, an instance of a historical style or a typical case of Patriarchal dominance or Eurocentric ideology. Thus an essential dimension of art is lost, and more particularly the signifying possibility of what Immanuel Kant called the Aesthetic Idea.

By aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever (i.e. concept) being adequate to it, and which language, consequently can never quite get on level terms with or render completely intelligible. <sup>4</sup>

What typifies the aesthetic idea is that it makes one think a lot in the absence of concepts, and therefore allows the possibility of multiple associations which corresponds (in Kant's words again) to 'the rapid and transient play of the imagination'. If, as a structure of aesthetic signs, a work of art cannot, properly speaking, signify ideas, it is simply because it embodies them, or because it is in itself an idea. Inseparable, the expression and the content of a work of art must be experienced simultaneously: meaning cannot be severed from the physical presence which conveys it and our co-presence to it. By contrast, the iconic 'reading' of a work of art can only be described as a participation in a semiotic ritual during which it is only possible to declare 'yes, I see ...'. But all that one sees then is a frozen image or the sign of a conventional denomination. Numerous artistic statements can best be understood as answers to the question 'do you see what I see?' rather than 'do you see what I mean?'. And the consequence of

this fixation on the object's immediate appearance as an artistic sign is the waning of its expressive power, an end to the possibility (grammatical or aesthetic) of thinking past the evidence of what we see here and now, or to articulate the as-yet-unclear thoughts whose origin lies in the actually-lived encounter with some form of Beauty.

Reading was the apprenticeship by means of which individuals traditionally learned how to detach themselves from the perpetual recurrence characteristic of what Hannah Arendt termed *Vita Activa*: 'the way of life chiefly devoted to keeping oneself alive'.<sup>5</sup> And reading, before writing, was that initial step in the constitution of that particular 'self' to which the specific 'intelligence' of art corresponds. However, even amongst students of the humanities, reading, it would seem, is less readily tolerated, or at any rate less willingly practised than writing. The latter remains an unavoidable necessity: One needs 'to know writing' or 'to do writing' in order to use a computer or to sit for one's exams. Writing is deemed productive, but not reading, unless it is redeemed by writing. So one reads as little as possible whilst gorging oneself on a visual diet of the most indifferent quality. Besides, reading takes time, and no-one has any of that precious commodity to spare. The widespread habit of reading whilst doing something else, like falling asleep, travelling or listening to music, is but an expression of this universally perceived shortage of time. As a consequence, fewer are those who manage to read with the fully attentive presence to themselves required for any intelligent translation of the words on the page and their coming to life in the story that one tells oneself as one reads. To quote one of my countrymen whose name I have forgotten, though it could be Montaigne: 'lire, c'est se lire'.<sup>6</sup>

Mindful not to endorse the repulsive Ivory Tower theory according to which the world where one reads is an oasis (a beach, a bed or a philosopher's chamber), we must acknowledge that (slow) reading does not agree with an economic system whose every product must be purchased, consumed and then immediately forgotten. For it is not enough to say that the necessity of slowness which defines reading as a interpretative process is negated by the very pace of our world. To meditate on an image or to reflect on a cluster of poetic sentences, and all that 'ruminating' aspects of the literate activity, breach the productive imperative which is for the most part an obligation of conspicuous hyper-activity. Thus 'reading' in the old sense of the word, also perceived as an anti-social form of leisure, has become a suspect activity. Quoting by contrast, with its tacit reference to authority, is much more positively regarded. Whilst the practice of

quotation requires constant attention to the context of reception, the activity of a reader depends on a capacity for self-oblivion and detachment from immediate circumstances that is completely at odds with the spectacular conformism of our times. Silent, out of reach, disconnected, invisible: no-one can tell what thoughts are entering his mind. Hence the urgency to identify the potential dissidents that (slow) readers are and promote 'writing' as an alternative. Moreover if it is relatively easy to control what people read, it is much more difficult to control how they read. And it is generally with the expectation that he will make good use of them, that a child or a student is given 'good', that is to say useful or edifying, books to read. Another commonplace is that the pleasures of reading are indissociable from the joys of learning: we learn to read and we read to learn. Less socially acceptable is the proposition that one also reads to read, and reads to delearn. But only such a disinterested interest will give readers the freedom to suspend moral judgement and benefit from what Milan Kundera describes as the paradoxical wisdom of the novel.

Suspending moral judgement is not the immorality of the novel, it is its *morality*. The morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before and in the absence of understanding.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most banal and widespread idea apropos reading is that it fosters self-enrichment or the acquisition of a specific (and generally practical) knowledge. In other words, it is justified as an activity which increases our capital of references: to know more, one assumes, is to be more. Only 'reading' as a possibility means infinitely more than intellectual accumulation. For it is while reading that the citizens of a once-literate-world used to form, reform and finally formulate themselves. This is less likely to happen when the communication tools supposed to facilitate every mental operation, in fact create the massive non-response state, the aphasia or the aggressive imbecility that prostrate the Spirit. But this imaginative impotence has become banal and is no longer perceived as a problem. Increasingly the relevance of a cultural product boils down to its entertaining power, or more exactly 'to its ability to take possession' (almost in the sexual sense) of its targeted audience. The electronic media require no participation on the part of their viewers, only the happy acquiescence, the distracted attention secured by the iconic packaging of their message.

The consequences of the trend towards new literacies in the visual arts are just as serious as they are in the literary domain. For only in reading, understood in its deepest hermeneutic sense, lies the possibility of a connection between the self and the not-self, the particular and the general or the private and the public without which art, in the Modernist acceptance of the term, ceases to be a possibility. Notions such as 'the naked eye', 'back to the old Masters', or the dichotomy between art as idea and art as expression, basically reflect the intolerance for complexity that typifies a culture having bowed out to the mass-media. Harold Rosenberg once suggested that of all the reasons that tend to make artists suspicious of theory, the most widely shared was that 'the function of ideas consists in placing art at the mercy of non-artists'.<sup>8</sup> But indirectly, I think, his suggestion also was that the intellectual powerlessness of artists causes them to find themselves in the situation of being told what to think and become illustrators of received ideas. I am not convinced that the alternative to this ancillary state is the refusal of all theory epitomised by Jackson Pollock loosing himself in the 'ritual' of his painting or the rejection of all aesthetic references in post-Duchampian art.

If we harked back to the times when art emancipated itself from the Church, the State and the various aristocracies of money, we would find as a primary source the desire of being as complete or as unspecialised as possible. Artists, in the critical sense of the word, cannot be described as 'creative' specialists, or specialised workers who know how to apply the best skills to make the most splendid objects. Their work no longer aims at the production of fine objects, but vies to realise 'happiness' in the practice of art. Consequently to 'read' a work of art is to discover how its maker responded to the force of his circumstances, that is with what inventiveness, courage or lack of it; it means to learn how such or such a decision was taken and then sustained in the work; and it means also to experience how exposed the work itself remains to the summons of our own circumstances. That is precisely what Ortega Y Gasset suggested when he proposed to call the Classics before 'a court of shipwrecked men to answer certain peremptory questions with reference to real life'.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, Nietzsche or more recently, Hannah Arendt likewise believed that the primordial question answered by works of art is that of *eudaimonia*, *bona vita* or the 'good life'.

From this perspective, I cannot but associate the Modernist striving for control over the means of artistic production with Courbet's ambition of being 'a worker' in the full sense of the word, so

presciently acknowledged by Marx when he described the artist as the last worker, that is, as the last free worker. For if we cared to remember the battles fought in the name of a libertarian Socialism in the second half of the past century—episodes to which so many artists and artisans associated themselves—we would recall a battle fought in the name of human dignity at work and understand better the vital connection of all the arts with *eudaimonia*. Unfortunately, the recollection of such moments in history tends to make one feel a little gloomy as one realises that a very large number of people come to the visual arts precisely in the hope of transcending their linguistic and social powerlessness. Often, in the process of interviewing candidates for admission at the school where I teach, it is painfully obvious that their most immediate need is not art, but functional literacy or, more plainly still, grammar. Without it, studio practice is most likely to capsize into the indulgent routine of those who simply ignores the cultural tradition to which art belongs since image makers successfully emancipated themselves from their conditions of civil servants or domestic employees.

At the most simple level, the collapse of the Modernist project—one of cultural and political emancipation—coincides with a loss of functional literacy amongst the young and their increased vulnerability to economic exploitation. The imposition of Competency Based Training in TAFE art schools (or the transformation of university art schools into colleges of graphic design and computer technology) corresponds both to this situation and to the cultural amnesia which causes the ideal of the worker as a complete individual to be once again forsaken. The dismemberment of the latter into so many specialised areas of professional expertise suggests why illiterate artists are no longer considered unqualified to produce significant art. But when artists are forced back in the situation of painting cultural emblems, or providing decorative signs of intellectuality, they can only find an iconic definition for their name: a signature style, a sign to be 'read' at a glance, and without the shadow of a thought.

#### Notes

- 1 Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural lecture, Collège de France', *A Barthes Reader*, London, 1982, pp.459–60.
- 2 At this point, I was reminded of Barthes' own self-diagnosis quoted in the exergue from Martin Jay, in *Downcast Eyes, The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*, Berkeley, 1994, p.438.

- 3 'To speak and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate: the whole language is generalised *rectio*', Barthes, p.460.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Analytic of the Sublime §49, trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford, p.176.
- 5 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1958, pp.12–13. It goes without saying that here I am thinking about historical (as opposed to oral) societies and do not only mean the reading of literary texts.
- 6 The expression can be understood as signifying either to read is to read one's own story in what one reads, or/and: to read is to read to oneself.
- 7 Milan Kundera, 'The day Panurge no longer makes people laugh', in *Testaments Betrayed*, London 1995, p.7.
- 8 Harold Rosenberg, 'Art is a special way of thinking', in *Art & Other Serious Matters*, Chicago, 1985, p.318.
- 9 Jose Ortega Y Gasset, 'In Search of Goethe from Within', in *The Dehumanization of Art*, Princeton, N.J., 1968, p.137.