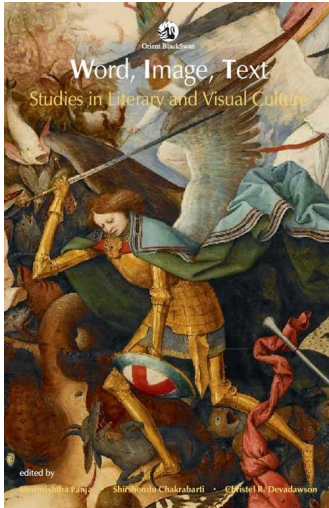


## BOOK RECEIVED AND REVIEWED

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### *Word, Image, Text: Studies in Literary and Visual Culture*

Shormishtha Panja, Shirshendu Chakrabarti & Christel Devadawson (Ed)



Orient Blackswan,  
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Review  
By Debasish Lahiri

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The idea of vision and the idea as vision have a very long history. Idea derives from the Greek verb meaning 'to see'. This deep etymology signals towards the fact that the way one thinks about the way one thinks in Western culture is guided by a visual paradigm. In such a scheme of things looking, seeing and knowing become perilously intertwined. Thus the manner in which one comes to understand the concept of an 'idea' is deeply bound up with issues of 'appearance' of picture, and of image. As the early Wittgenstein had stated, a picture is a *fact*, and a *logical* picture of facts is an idea.

In fact 'visual culture' has emerged as a history of images rather than a history of art. The visual never comes pure; it is always contaminated by the stain of other senses, touched by other texts and discourses. It is not now a question of replacing the blindness of the 'linguistic turn' with the 'new' blindnesses of the 'visual turn.' To hypostasize the visual risks of reinstalling the hegemony of the 'noble' sense, the visual, we may argue, is 'languaged,' just as language itself has a visual dimension.

*Word, Image, Text: Studies in Literary and Visual Culture* approaches the content and form of Western intellectual history in terms of how they 'look'. The manifest phono-logo-centrism of the volume about 'visualising' culture attests to this point. A general pattern emerges in the essays of the volume whereby we begin from visual forms and talk and theorize and achieve understanding of those forms through mental constructs. The book, in fact, takes off from the complaint that the siblings Poetry (*read* literature) and Painting have fallen into a disquieting ekphrasis and need to be called back from their esoteric exiles on the margins of modernity. This project of mutually re-membering the tattered body of Western art and literary copia under a metaphysical cupola begins in the Early Modern period and extends to the 19th century visual stratification of political power in revolutionary France.

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*Word, Image, Text* is an inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse with images, effecting the imbrication of visual and verbal experience. The book goes on to insist that there are no purely visual and verbal media, pictures without words and words without pictures. The editors have taken a classically deconstructive approach to the binary opposition between image and text, or the visual and the discursive, insisting that neither image nor text can be construed as a pure entity standing free of the other.

The five Early Modern essays themselves contextualize such diverse visual objects as frontispiece design, gardens, Titian's drawings, European influence on Mughal paintings and Peter Brueghel's paintings. Stuart Sillars attempts to inflect the nexus between Ingo Jones's depictions of the 'arch' in his frontispiece design for *Salmacida Spolia* and Shadwell's *The Tempest or, The Enchanted Island*. Sharmistha Panja reads two narrative poems by Shakespeare in conjunction with two of Tiziano Vecelli's paintings on corresponding themes, thus retracing a line of argument, first inaugurated by Erwin Panofsky, that Shakespeare might have actually seen the painting *Venus and Adonis* by Titian. Panja's essay reminds one of John Doeblner's essay in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33 (1982) entitled "The Reluctant Adonis: Titian and Shakespeare" (from which source she does cite) but being very short surveys of the image-text of Shakespeare's Ovidian essay it misses the use both Titian and Shakespeare make of animals for implicit comment on the scene.

James Yoch's reading of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* brings together the dynamism of old pagan religious season-cycle drama with the fashionable design of Italian country houses in an attempt to work out an escape from the clutches of earthly time to the consolation of eternal transfiguration. Davinder Ahuja's work concentrates on the agonistic possibilities in Peter Brueghel's painting and Rabelais's writing, seen as manifestations of the twin tropes of *adagia* and *aporia*, as both wrestle against Christian teleology and spatial logic in favour of a secular rendition of experience.

Almost Hazlittian in its relish for Claude Lorrain's landscape painting the opening essay of the section, that looks at the 18th and 19th century European contributions, connects Lorrain's artwork with the labours of the newly developing cult of nature poetry in the early 18th century. The second essay of this section is devoted to the perusal and interpretation of the modes of intertextual political commentary generated by cartoons, caricatures and controversial literature in revolutionary France.

The book further ventures into the realm of 19th and 20th century Indian and Sub-Continental art and seeks to correct the misconception regarding the praxis of geo-political art-talk as a lazy escape route from the rigours of the labour of 'art-history'. The book claims to see a largely uninterrupted philosophical and philological exegesis through the shifting, asymptotic movement of time in the Sub-Continent. The appeal thus made seems to be towards an appreciation and interpretation of art inter-temporally, an interstitial mode of metaphysically rendering all time contemporaneous through the praxis of criticism. From a study of notions of time, as evinced in the figures of Lord Gomateshwara and the fasting Buddha; moving through colonial representation of India as an oriental Arcadia and the strangeness of the Indian 'everyday life' reflected in the 'otherness' of the Mowgli-figure in Lockwood Kipling's illustrations; tarrying by the enormous intellectual and artistic significance of the archive of photos by Kaye and Watson called *The People of India*; till we reach

O.P. Vijayan's cartoons and short fiction read as ways of negotiating Indian modernity, the essays seem to drive the reader into ever burgeoning areas of scrutiny.

The final section of the book is given over to abstract animadversions on the theme of experience as projected in the visual mode. In the first essay of this section Nietzsche's interpretation of Raphael's *Transfiguration* is used as a footstool to mount a proliferating discourse on the otherness of the experiential self itself. The second essay that also brings up the rear of the volume is by the only practicing artist among the contributors to this collection. It brings us intimately close to an artist's understanding of the long duree of existence as seen through the project of sustained self-portraiture. This self-portraiture takes on board the ensemble of similar attempts in the lives of artists as disparate as Rembrandt and David Hockney.

*Word, Image, Text*, thus, emerges as a positive and spirited attempt to redress the balance in traditional literary scholarship of veering towards the verbal. To borrow a phrase from Derek Walcott's poem *Tiepolo's Hound*, that talks of the 18th century artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's painting *Apelles Painting the Portrait of Campaspe*, the editors have managed to 'watch from the painting's side' the world of the unfolding text.

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