

Critical language and visual art: a post-structural analysis

Frikkie Potgieter*

INTRODUCTION

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida (1993:43) quotes the following passage:

It has been much disputed which is the most Excellent of the two Arts, Sculpture, or Painting, and there is a Story of its having been left to the determination of a Blind man, who gave it in favour of the Latter, being told that what by Feeling seem'd to him to be Flat, appear'd to the Eye as Round as its Competitor (Richardson 1972:23–4).

Derrida's (1993:43) commentary at this point is, 'if the blind man's mute fingers indicate "yes" to sculpture and "no" to painting, speech is enough to invert things'. Although this can be read as hinting at the ascendancy of language over visual art, of concept over form, for my present purpose it sets the stage for the problem of the relation between words and visual art. What I also have in mind here are the 'crits' conducted at art schools, where visual works of art are verbally criticised and analysed with educational intent.¹

With crits as my primary focus, this article is,

however, also concerned with the theoretical understanding of the limitations and potential of the broader discursive criticism of visual works of art. Furthermore, as indicated in the title, I will be looking at this problem specifically from a post-structural position. So, the question I investigate from a post-structural position is: what are the limitations and potential of the interaction between words and images in art criticism in general, and during crits in particular?

On starting this article I was aware that owing to my engagement with the word/image relationship I was facing a quagmire, specifically regarding the insight that if we could 'say' art we would have no need to make art. In this regard Eagleton (1990:2) writes:

Aesthetics is ... always a contradictory, self-undoing sort of project, which in promoting the theoretical value of its objects risks emptying it of exactly that specificity or ineffability which was thought to rank among its most precious features. The very language, which elevates art, offers perpetually to undermine it.

* Frikkie Potgieter is a Lecturer in the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at the University of South Africa.

In my case, however, I was faced with a double bind as I was not only going to write on ineffable art, but also on the way one talks about ineffable art, making it an act of second-reflection. Moreover, as people, as I will shortly argue, are imbedded in language, a conclusive analysis is impossible. Nonetheless, I trust that my writing on verbalising about art does not undermine, but helps to elevate visual art.

The first part of my argument is that the qualities that make visual works of art truly unique and fascinating are qualities that do not *correspond* with any existing aspect or thing. Therefore, they are ineffable qualities. The second part of my argument is that during crits the most appropriate manner of engaging with these ineffable qualities is through metaphoric language. Engaging with a work of art using metaphoric language is in preference to just looking at the work on the one hand, or, on the other hand, attempting to interpret and analyse the work objectively.

My method for arguing the above is historic and hermeneutic rather than analytical. By this I mean that instead of starting anew, I enter the historic 'game' by telling how certain modern and postmodern thinkers of the continental Western tradition, have arrived at a point similar to 'my argument' in the paragraph above. Thinkers I chose to engage with for reasons that will become apparent as the text develops are Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure and Derrida.²

This article has three parts. In the first part, 'The correspondence paradigm', I give an historic overview of this paradigm applied to the fields of language and art. Provisionally stated, correspondence thinking assumes that something is truthful or meaningful when it corre-

sponds to some pre-given structure or pattern. In the summary and application of this part, I apply correspondence thinking to analyse the limits and potential of discursive criticism in the visual arts.

In the second part, 'The deconstructive phase', I use post-structural thinking to deconstruct the correspondence paradigm of knowledge, language and art. In the summary and application I analyse and interpret the meaning of this deconstruction for our understanding of the limits and potential of discursive criticism in the visual arts.

As the above deconstruction can be construed as an annihilation of meaning without setting alternatives in its place, I argue in the third part, 'Reconstruction through metaphor', that this is not necessarily the case. Here I attempt to show that the very same thinking that rendered the correspondence paradigm of knowledge, language and art untenable also opens up an optimistic, creative, metaphoric view of both art and the discursive criticism of art.

THE CORRESPONDENCE PARADIGM³

By way of introduction I find it insightful to touch on the correspondence method of knowledge systems in general, as most knowledge systems have in common that truth occurs in some correspondence manner. Simply stated, this correspondence paradigm holds that humankind is presented with surface structures or patterns that possess some hidden code or method which, when broken or correctly applied, reveal a 'deeper' truth than the one that was initially present on the surface.

Bacon (1928:375), an early spokesperson of the empirical, correspondence method of the

natural sciences, claims that the nature of true human knowledge is 'to discover the form, or true specific difference, or nature-engendering nature, or source of emanation (for these are the terms that come nearest to a description of the thing)'. Here Bacon describes knowledge as the *discovery* of 'something', some truth that has always existed.

Modern academics working in the humanities, such as Comte, Spencer, Bentham and Mill, searched for a similar method for the human sciences.⁴ In Gadamer's (1976:5) words they endeavoured to 'establish similarities, regularities and conformities to a law which would make it possible to predict the individual phenomena and processes'. Baradat (1979:141) makes a similar point by saying that in Marx's time it was generally believed that 'just as there were laws governing other natural elements, there might also be natural laws governing human beings'.

The traditional view of language as representation or correspondence

The traditional view of language sees language as a convenient tool that acts as mediator between humans and reality. Edwards (1990:66) calls this view of language, language as representation, as it assumes a transparent, stable, one-to-one correspondence between sign and thing, and between sign and concept. As Edwards (1990:67) explains, 'The sign thus becomes a representative, a deputy, a handy substitute for the thing itself.' Language as representation thus implies an unproblematic correspondence between language and a true, pre-existing reality.

Another aspect of the traditional view is that it implies a *natural*, unchanging relationship

between sign and reality. Here it is useful to think of Saussure's (1986:142) word *langue*, which he used to refer to a stable, inter-subjective language structure. In other words, a pre-existing language structure that is readily available to all users of a language.⁵

Language as expression

Language as expression is another example of a correspondence view of language, but in this case it is one where language has the added dimension of responding to individual needs or expression. Language as expression tries to overcome one of the failings of the common sense correspondence view of language, namely that the common sense view does not explain the creative, dynamic aspect of language, the fact that language changes over time. In Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* (1971:136) he pays homage to an early exponent of the expressive view, namely von Humboldt, with the following words:

Without altering the language as regard its sounds and even less its form and laws, *time* – by a growing development of ideas, increased capacity for sustained thinking, and a more penetrating sensibility – will often introduce into language what it did not possess before. Then the old shell is filled with a new meaning, the old coinage conveys something different, and the old laws of syntax are used to hint at a differently graduated sequence of ideas. All this is a lasting fruit of a people's *literature* and within literature especially of *poetry* and *philosophy* (Heidegger's emphasis).

In the expressive, correspondence view of language expounded by von Humboldt, individuals, specifically poets and philosophers,

have it in their power to introduce new coinage or originality to a fixed, 'deep' language system. Language can thus be manipulated consciously and expressively to create new meaning. In the expressive view of language, language thus corresponds to the creative *intention* of gifted individuals.

Art as mimetic correspondence

As in the case of language, art as correspondence, or *mimesis* as it is generally known in artistic parlance, is the standard account or assumption about art until the demise of formalist modernism around the middle of the twentieth century.⁶ Starting with the Middle Ages, I proceed by giving a brief historic account of significant developments in the mimetic view of, and approach to, art.⁷

In the Middle Ages the artist's task was not to depict pictorial reality, but rather the divine biblical order, one imbued with harmony, truth and goodness.⁸ Haldane (1992a:10) sums up Aquinas's view of beauty in the following manner: 'beauty is a *transcendental* quality identical in an entity to that things *being*, its *unity*, its *goodness* and its *truth*. Moreover, according to Aquinas, it is part of what it is to be a transcendental quality that everything possesses it' (Haldane's emphasis). In the Middle Ages successful art was thus understood as art that corresponds with the harmony, truth and goodness that are present in everything created by God. Because all of God's creation possesses beauty, artistic beauty was regarded as a heteronymous entity.

From the heteronymous mimesis of the Middle Ages a gradual shift occurs and towards the end of the Renaissance and in the Baroque, one finds the ascendancy of art theories such

as generalisation, idealisation and order in variety. These theories have in common that a particular, ontological aesthetic quality exists. The nature of this quality is one that projects order, perfection and harmony. Successful art was regarded as art that corresponded with this pre-existing, ontological aesthetic quality that was present in only certain things and configurations of things. In this regard, Tilghman (1991:25) points out that the eighteenth century drew the conclusion that a discipline such as *fine art* existed which distinguished itself from other disciplines through a special connection to the aesthetic. He writes that this 'was thought of as a discovery about the essence of both art and the aesthetic'. Thus, around this time it becomes appropriate to speak of autonomous mimesis.

Next I discuss Kant's argument that it is specifically the artistic genius who has the talent for discovering true aesthetic harmony and beauty. However, before I continue with this, it is necessary to point out that one of the abiding ideas in philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular is that humanity is characterised by a rift between humans and nature, between subjectivity and objectivity, and that truth resides wherever this fissure can be reconciled – wherever subjectivity and objectivity correspond. As regards this correspondence, Kant's analysis of the 'artistic genius' can be interpreted as an exemplary argument for the possibility of a reconciliation between subjectivity and objectivity.

Stated in a nutshell, Kant (1952:168–183) argues that beauty is a nominal thing as such, an ontological aesthetic quality. Furthermore, beauty cannot be pinned down to discursive concepts as it depends upon the 'free play' of the human faculties of understanding. This is

also the reason why one cannot be taught to create beauty. However, the artistic genius has, through the benevolence of Mother Nature, received a special talent that gives him or her unmediated, intuitive access to the aesthetic thing as such. In this regard Kant (1952: 169) writes, 'where an author owes a product to his genius, he does not himself know how the *ideas* for it entered into his head'. Furthermore, '*Genius* is the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art' (168). Although the artistic genius does not know how the ideas for his creations enter his mind, these ideas are nonetheless his as he has received them from Mother Nature. Thus, whilst the artistic genius brings his individual talent to fruition, he also brings forth a reconciliation with a pre-existing aesthetic ontology. Stated in terms of the concerns under discussion, the artistic genius manages to bring forth a correspondence between individual subjective originality and a supposed aesthetic ontology.

Later, with the rise of modernism proper, a formalist line of movements can be distinguished, which was still working within a mimetic paradigm. I am thinking of the well-known rapid succession of reductive formalist style-isms of late modern art: cubism, futurism, constructivism, abstract expressionism, minimalism and so on. In this linearity new artists or generations saw themselves as facilitators in a progressive, autonomous process of aesthetic ordering, where art supposedly followed internal, aesthetic laws to achieve its eventual aim: to correspond with the essence of art and the aesthetic. However, as is well known, this endeavour eventually ended in actions producing black paintings, compositions based on chance, erased drawings and so on. In my

view these actions announce the self-realisation that no particular aesthetic essence exists for art to correspond to.

Summary and application

According to the traditional language as correspondence model, people sharing a common language should have the same language structure, the same 'langue' at their command, ensuring unproblematic communication. According to the language as expression model, when trying to understand what a new expression means, one should inquire what the creator of the new expression *intended*. These two models taken together and applied to the crit scenario, means that lecturers should be able to make creative suggestions for improvements to artworks with a reasonable assurance that students see accurate approximations of that which they intend.

According to the correspondence paradigm of the Middle Ages, the visual artwork or the image is of secondary importance to the *word*. Works of art were primarily evaluated according to the degree that they conformed to or corresponded with a written canon, in this case predominantly the Christian Bible. Concerning public art commissions today, one often finds that artists, art academics and 'informed' art lovers clash with patrons, and an 'uninformed' public as the first group tend to uphold the notion of objective artistic criteria, whereas the last group is more concerned with ideological content. Likewise, whilst critting, it is (was) generally believed that personal ideologies and convictions should be left out of account and that only 'objective' artistic criteria should apply.

From the late Renaissance through to modern

times, the general practice was that successful works of art received canonical status through the approval of connoisseurs and critics, and subsequently became exemplars for other artists to follow. Applied to the crit scenario, this means that lecturers, due to study, experience and a greater exposure to the canon of the day, should be in possession of a 'refined' critical standard against which the work of 'unrefined' students can be judged. Furthermore, especially in the case of the language as correspondence model being valid, lecturers should be able to communicate verbally the reasons for their judgements, that is, in which respects critted works comply or do not comply to the canon.

However, even in Kant's time, Western art already prized works that set new standards, works that were endowed with originality; ones that could become *new* exemplars for others to follow. Such works can be understood as those that discover aspects of an aesthetic ontology that had not been discovered before. Applied to the crit scenario, lecturers themselves may be artistic 'geniuses' in the Kantian manner thereby enabling them to see what it is that works lack in order for them to become new discoveries. Furthermore, especially in the case of the language as expression model being valid, talented lecturers should be able to communicate their insights by describing things that do not yet exist. In this scenario it is surreptitiously demanded that students decipher this creative use of language, thus enabling them to see what the lecturer *intends*, or, put differently, see the image in the lecturers' head. In a manner of speaking lecturers become 'prophets' or intermediaries of 'Mother Nature'.

In this part I attempted a brief account of the correspondence paradigm of language, but

more specifically of art. Furthermore, I have applied correspondence thinking to analyse some of the limits and potential of discursive criticism in the visual arts. This supplies me with a platform for the next part, where I show how post-structural language theory deconstructs this paradigm.

THE DECONSTRUCTIVE PHASE

Although truth as correspondence has on most counts been very useful in the controlling of nature and in bringing about technological development, humans have come to realise that much that is crucial to their condition cannot be fruitfully addressed by the correspondence method. In this respect Hume (1896:470) already drew a distinction between facts and values by emphasising that 'virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects'. After many centuries of trying, all attempts at *discovering* universal, timeless ethical conduct, or definitive artistic criteria for that matter, have met with little success. In matters such as ethics and aesthetics we simply do not seem able to *discover* correct answers that lie in wait somewhere, in the manner that Newton was able to deduce his laws of dynamics from causal relationships.

If post-structuralism means anything concrete, it means a convincing undermining or deconstruction of the correspondence paradigm, and as a consequence of the possibility of attaining a closure of truth. Applied to the field of art, this means a convincing deconstruction of two of the main tenets of modern aesthetic theory as developed in the previous part: firstly, the view that successful art corresponds to an autonomous aesthetic quality and, secondly, that the artistic 'genius', the autonomous subject, controls the mechanisms for

discovering this supposed autonomous aesthetic quality.

In the main body of this part I give an introduction to the post-structural view of language. I start by explicating the argument that all thoughts and meaningful experiences are mediated by language, and draw the conclusion that this deconstructs the idea of an aesthetic ontology. Secondly, I investigate the nature of language in order to deconstruct the idea that the artistic 'genius', the autonomous subject, is in control of the creation of meaning.

On the idea that all thoughts and meaningful experiences are mediated by language

In reaction to the common sense correspondence view of language, some early 'language philosophers' such as Herder (1969) and von Humboldt (1988) and later ones such as Russell (1961) and Wittgenstein (1958) argue that no meaningful thoughts exist independent of language. With regard to this, Wittgenstein (1958:2–3, 16–17) reflects on Augustine who wrote that when he was a baby, who could not yet understand language, he wondered what the grown-ups were saying. Wittgenstein points out that it is not possible to wonder what people are saying if one does not possess language in the first place. According to Wittgenstein, the mistake that Augustine made was to confuse the processes that are at work when one learns a second language, with the processes that may be at work when one does not possess language at all.

Heidegger (1971:134) makes a similar point as the one above: 'In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and

within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else'. This can be seen as a precursor to Derrida's (1976:158) well-known statement that 'there is nothing outside the text'. According to Rorty (1981:140), what Derrida means by this is 'that a certain framework of interconnected ideas – truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation – ought to be abandoned'. Rorty emphasises these, as they all have a correspondence view in common, one where truth and meaning correspond with some pre-existing, true reality.

For more insight into why Derrida would argue that 'there is nothing outside the text', it helps to refer back to some of the insights of Saussure (1986:148) as he was in many respects a precursor of post-structuralism, especially with regard to him emphasising that there are no 'ready-made ideas before words'. In his *General Course in Linguistics*, Saussure (1986:148–151) starts by distinguishing between the material signifier (a sound, for example), and the concept or signified (that which the sound means). Despite doing this, he undermines this distinction in the very same text by also expressing the view that the linguistic sign in actual fact refers both to the signifier and to the signified: a sound – image meaning (Saussure 1986:150). For example, the signifier (the sound 'tree', for example) plus the signified (the concept or image of a tree) together form a sign that refers to an actual tree. This undermines the idea that an *analyse* relationship exists between the linguistic sign and a reality apart from language. In this respect Saussure (1986:167) writes that there are no positive terms and that terms get their meaning by differing from other terms or signs. He writes 'in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference

generally implies positive terms between which the differences is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. This means that in language there is no transparent, one-to-one relationship, no analysable correspondence between a term and a thing, feeling or concept outside of language itself.

At this point it is insightful to consider 'abstract' terms. When someone declares, for example, that he or she love someone, this can *correspond* with many things: I want to sleep with you/I will care for you/I want you to care for me/I am prepared to make a commitment/I like being with you, and so forth – and each of these meanings again has meanings of its own – and so on. This is why Saussure (1986:161–65) made the point that language functions like a chain, where one change affects the whole structure. According to him (1986:162) 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others'. Echoing this Derrida (1982:11) writes,

the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.

Allison (1978:101) explains as follows: 'Following Saussure, Derrida maintains that any linguistic sign is generated by the system of signs: it *is* only by reference to the other signs within the system'.

One can sum up here by saying that Saussure, Derrida and post-structuralism in general, question a straightforward correspondence

between the linguistic sign and a reality outside of language itself. Therefore meaning is generated by constructions of differences between signs within the system. Those who take post-structuralism seriously, thus argue that the only meaningful reality we can know is created by language, and that language should therefore not be seen as a 'tool' for unlocking a pre-existent reality.

However, an additional consideration here concerns the stability of language itself. This is important, because if language has a stable structure, as writers such as Chomsky (1957) and Culler (1975) imply, it might be possible to obtain stable knowledge if one could only fathom the secrets of language itself. If this is not the case, however, if the very medium through which we comprehend reality, language, is radically labile, no final closure, no absolute truth is possible at all. Indeed, if the nature of language is such that we as individuals do not control it, but that it controls us, this decentres the individual subject in the act of creating new meaning.

On the metaphoric instability of language and the decentring of the subject

Although Saussure should be credited for the insight of doing away with the distinction between the linguistic sign and reality, he nonetheless tried to give order and stability to the study of linguistics by making reductive moves, of which the most significant for the purpose of this article is the distinction he drew between 'langue' and 'parole' (Saussure 1986:142). I say this as Saussure's 'langue' implies the existence of a kind of meta-language, an origin, a centre, a norm against which particular language acts can be measured and to which they are necessarily drawn

to comply. In this regard he writes: 'As soon as we give language ('langue') first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass ('parole') that lends itself to no other classification'.

According to Derrida, there is, however, no ideal regulation in language, as language functions as a complicated interactive network of signs. Furthermore, there is no exchange (as in telephone exchange) that keeps an eye over the whole network. Language is more like the Internet than the old-fashioned telephone exchange. Moreover, language contains signs that, metaphorically speaking, have fallen out of the language net, but are still present in the sea, and therefore might again show up in the net. This is why many unforeseeable things can happen in language. Allison (1978:101) explains as follows:

It (a linguistic sign) has meaning ... only because it is different from the other signs that are not presently in use, different from the other signs which lie in reserve, which ground or subtend the present speech. The meaning of a word is thus 'decentered'.

So it is wrong to see the meaning of language as generated by a set of *analysable relations* between a network of linguistic signs. In this regard Derrida (1973:101) writes,

the possibility of distinguishing between the sign and the nonsign, linguistic sign and nonlinguistic sign, expression and indication, ideality and nonideality, subject and object, grammaticalness and nongrammaticalness, pure grammaticalness and empirical grammaticalness, pure general grammaticalness and pure logical grammaticalness, intention and intuition, etc., is deferred *ad*

infinitum ... Their possibility is their impossibility.

What Derrida therefore says is that there is no ontological or teleological regulation in language. There simply is no fully analysable 'langue' that keeps a watchful, regulatory eye over 'parole'.

In considering the play element in language, post-structuralism questions the traditional distinction between metaphorical, poetic language and literal, philosophical language. The point that Derrida makes is that there is no manner in which 'literal' philosophical language can escape metaphoric play. He (1982:209) writes, 'metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety'. Neal (1988:209) comments as follows:

In *White Mythology*, Derrida demonstrates the futility of trying to expunge the trace and reveal the origin behind it. In principle, of course, concepts ought to be separable from the metaphors that express them. In fact, however, not only is such an attempt difficult, the terms and procedures to separate the two are themselves metaphorical. There is no way for metaphysical discourse, or any discourse for that matter, to free itself from rhetoric. *White Mythology* reveals even 'concept', 'foundation', and 'theory', as metaphors.

Where Saussure and the broad philosophical tradition gave preference to so-called literal language, Derrida questions whether one can draw such distinctions at all.

In the aforementioned regard Derrida analyses Aristotle's argument that if one could recognise metaphors in scientific discourse that would be a method of making scientific discourse absolutely clear. In his response to

this Derrida (1982:246–53) points out even the language that Aristotle used in his attempt to unmask metaphors was brimming with metaphors. 'All the concepts which have operated in the definition of metaphor always have an origin and an efficacy that are themselves "metaphorical"', writes Derrida (1982:252). Derrida's point is simply that no language can escape the figurality of language. One can summarise here by saying that if post-structuralism is correct, language is a labile, complicated, metaphoric play of similarities and differences, without any recourse to a pre-existing reality outside of language itself. Or, put differently, all meaning is a metaphoric interpretation of a metaphoric interpretation.

At this point a question arises regarding the implications of the above emphasis on the metaphoric instability of language, to one's cherished notions regarding individual, self-willed creativity. I continue by arguing that post-structuralism deconstructs the artistic 'genius' by insisting that the individual subject is not fully in control of language, but that more correctly, language is in control of the subject.

One can start by pointing out that the notion of individual *presence*, the idea of the sovereignty of the individual subject, one of the cornerstones of metaphysics, has become problematic from a post-structural position. Today we question Descartes' (1960:75–91) thinking 'I', the 'I' that doubts everything, but itself doubting everything, as this still implies a sovereign act; a subject that is transparent to itself, thinking directly without the mediation of language. Derrida (1984:125) explains: 'The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure *cogito* of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it

simply tries to resituate it'. In Derrida's view a 'true self' not subjected to the powers of language, is simply a fiction.

In this regard Heidegger (1971:193) asks whether people always speak their language, and comes to the radical conclusion that language, in fact, speaks people. According to him, '*die Sprache spricht*'. Wood (1980:498) explains Heidegger's insight as follows: 'one takes possession of language for granted, and treats self-expression or communication as its essence. In doing so one forgets that language is a condition for one having anything to express, indeed for one being a subject at all'. So, both Heidegger and Derrida agree that the subject always operates from a non-transparent language structure that makes pristine self-knowledge impossible.

If post-structuralism holds, a point has been reached where the creative acts of the individual cannot be neatly separated from the network of linguistic signs within which that individual operates. Kearney (1988:253) gives a near-apocalyptic interpretation of this: 'The humanist concept of "man" gives way to the anti-humanist concept of intertextual play. The autonomous subject disappears into the anonymous operations of language'. Post-structuralism thus decentres the autonomous creative subject by arguing that the individual has no way out of, and no absolute control over, the infinite play of language.

Summary and application

In rebuttal of the correspondence paradigm of language and the crit scenario, post-structuralists would argue that there is no recourse to a 'langue', a natural language that is readily available to all users of a language. This is why particular language acts,

such as the language used during crits, are not immediately transparent for everyone present to understand. Only after complex mediation has taken place, in other words, only after students have for some time been exposed to the particular language game of discursive art criticism, will crit language become meaningful to them. Furthermore, lecturers and students should take cognisance of the ruptures that are likely to occur when existing or imaginative visual images are described. They should especially keep in mind that people very seldom see what others intend them to see from verbal descriptions.

Seen from a certain angle it can be argued that post-structuralism's insistence that all meaningful experiences are mediated by language represents a return to the Middle Ages when the *word* came before the *image*. Although this may be true in the sense of a denial of the existence of an autonomous aesthetic quality, it certainly is not true in the sense of setting up a hierarchy where the word comes before the image. In this regard the *word* of the Middle Ages and the post-structural *word*, differ vastly as the former is 'logocentric' and the latter decentred. In Neal's (1988:175) words, 'logocentric' is 'Derrida's shorthand term for any meaning that pretends to emanate from speech, logic, reason, the Word of God, or any other absolute origin that precedes and escapes the infinite play of writing'. Applied to the crit scenario, the post-structural *word*, denies the existence of 'deep' criteria for evaluating the ethical or the artistic content of works of art. In a similar manner it also denies the possibility of stepping outside one's language and one's personal biases when evaluating works of art.

The insight that all meaning is mediated by language effectively deconstructs the notion

of an aesthetic ontology. Moreover, the insight that language or signs have a life of their own that is beyond the control of the calculating subject, decentres the artistic 'genius' in the act of creation. These insights taken together mean that the notion of a pre-existing aesthetic ontology that lies in waiting somewhere in the depths of a metaphysical superstructure for the artistic 'genius' to discover and present to the world has become fallacious. Applied to the crit scenario, both students and lectures should abolish the idea of timeless, universal rules and criteria for the making and evaluating of works of art and, secondly, abolish all notions of a *particular* artistic talent as such; a talent for the discovering of 'deep' art.

RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH METAPHOR

As the above deconstruction can be interpreted as an annihilation of meaningful art as well as the deconstruction of all meaningful discursive criticism of visual works of art, I argue in this part that this is not necessarily the case.

To start with, the deconstruction of the correspondence paradigm of art criticism has the potential of raising an awareness of imbalances of power, of prejudiced, elitist, biased art criticism. One says this as the deconstruction of old or existing canons built on correspondence foundations, privileging certain classes, sexes, and races may lead to the emancipation and reappraisal of artistic 'voices' that were previously silenced by those very canons. Thus there has been a shift worldwide, but specifically in South Africa, towards *inclusivity* and *diversity*: sincere attempts at bringing marginalized art closer to the centre. Applied to the crit scenario, this would mean that lecturers should open them-

selves up to take seriously forms of artistic expression that were formerly unacceptable.

A second argument against the accusation that post-structuralism annihilates meaning is that one should not conflate 'deep' meaning with conventional and institutionalised meaning. What I particularly have in mind here, is that although post-structuralism would deny the existence of a deep universal artistic canon, it would not deny the possibility of a surface canon created by the 'art world', the broader, global art institution itself.⁹ Applied to the crit scenario, the task of the lecturer would be to expose students to this institutionalised canon, whilst at the same time emphasising that what they are being exposed to is provisional and conventional.

However, entertaining a canon that is provisional and conventional, does not mean giving oneself over to nihilism, to meaninglessness. One should be wary of old habits that equate meaning with *deep* meaning, with correspondence, as it is perfectly possible to live a life where never-ending surface networking is experienced as very fascinating and intriguing, as utterly meaningful. In Nietzsche's (1967:298) struggle against correspondence thinking, he makes this point as follows:

'Truth' is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining – not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the 'will to power'.

Furthermore, 'truth does not count as the

supreme value, even less as the supreme power. The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change ... counts as more profound, primeval, 'meta-physical' than the will to truth, to reality ...' (Nietzsche 1967:453). In a slightly less rhetorical fashion, Degenaar (1986:108) makes a similar point as follows: 'man is a meaning-giver who cannot disengage the meaning he creates from the process, which brings it forth'.

A third argument against the accusation that post-structuralism annihilates all meaning (one hinted at by the quotes above), is that whilst it is true that the metaphoric instability of language deconstructs the correspondence paradigm, it also inaugurates an understanding of art as a place for the creation of new meanings. Here there is the option of not only providing space for previously silenced voices, but providing space for voices that do not yet exist. I see this space as the replacement of the correspondence paradigm with the metaphoric paradigm of art.

As regards artistic metaphor and the creation of new meaning, Heidegger (1971:62) goes as far as saying that metaphors ('projective saying' in his words) not only create new meaning, but that they actually bring a new world, a new concrete reality into being. In *On the Way to Language* (1971:62) he suggests that even a practical, scientific accomplishment such as space travel, was made possible by metaphor, by projective saying: 'if the word framing that order and challenge had not spoken: then there would be no Sputnik'. One can explain this by saying if no one had articulated the dream of flying, humans would still not be flying.

In the following quote from *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger (1986:275) plays literal

language off against figurative language to make the point that it is the metaphoric aspects of a work of art that brings a new world into being by making that which is currently ineffable, effable:

Poetry (read metaphor) is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is. Actual language at any given moment is the happening of this saying, in which a people's world historically arises for it and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed. Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world.

So in Heidegger's view, it is not a matter of interpretation making the metaphoric work of art understandable in a literal manner, but rather a question of the metaphoric work of art setting up a new concrete reality.

One is now in a position to do a post-structural re-reading of Kant's artistic genius, thereby rehabilitating Kant by instating him as a precursor of the metaphoric view of art.¹⁰ Here I take my cue from Cohen (1975:671) who writes that in his estimation the products produced by Kant's genius are no other than metaphoric products. Cohen writes,

metaphor may be the best available example of what Kant called products of genius. Genius, according to Kant, is the capacity to produce things which are 'original', and hence things which cannot be made sense of by means of any rules of explication, but which nevertheless do make sense.

One can substantiate this further by quoting Kant (1952:180) himself, who writes that the artistic genius possesses a talent

for laying hold of the rapid and transient play of the imagination, and for unifying it in a concept (which for that very reason is original, and reveals a new rule which could not have been inferred from any preceding principles or examples) that admits of communication without constraint of rules.

Furthermore, Kant (1952:168) described the artistic genius as someone who has a talent 'for producing that for which no definite rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule'.

However, there is one respect in which the Kantian as well as the Nietzschean creator of metaphoric products differs from the post-structural one. I say this because in Kant's case the artistic genius is an individual creator, whereas the post-structural genius is but one player in the inter-subjective, inter-textual creation of meaning.¹¹ Today the artistic 'genius' is no longer the anguished individual discovering aesthetic depth in his ivory tower (or Nietzsche's superman, for that matter), but is rather someone that knows how to operate within the inter-subjective, inter-textual networking of meaning in the making. In an application to the crit scenario, the lecturer's task would no longer be to nurture individual 'talent', but rather to encourage students to participate in this inter-subjective networking of new meaning.

Up to this point in my discussion of the metaphoric creation of new meaning, I have not problematised the literal/metaphoric distinction, nor for that matter the word/image distinction. Regarding the former, traditionally, metaphor is understood as a relation between literal and figurative meaning, transparent and vague meaning, essential and decorative

meaning, concrete and abstract meaning, original and imaginative meaning and so on. Derrida (1984:123) expresses this as follows: 'The term metaphor generally implies a relation to an original "property" of meaning, a "proper" sense to which it directly or indirectly or equivocally refers ...'. However, as I argued previously, this 'proper' sense does, in fact, not exist, simply because we have no access to a true reality that is not already mediated by language. The downside of this is that the relationship between literal and figurative meaning is not fully analysable, but the upside is that this very non-analysability opens up the possibility of an excess of meaning. Regarding this, Cilliers (1990:3) writes that meaning is 'the effect of play, and not *determined* by relationships. Instead of pinning it down, the interactive nature of the sign allows meaning to proliferate, to be excessive'.

Regarding the word/image distinction referred to earlier, Derrida (73:101) holds the view that besides not being able to distinguish between the literal and figurative, one can also not distinguish between the 'linguistic sign and nonlinguistic sign'. However, acknowledging that one cannot draw an absolute distinction in this regard does not stop one from also acknowledging the existence of an aspect of visual works of art that 'literal language' (in as much as any language can be literal) cannot pin down. Here I echo Nietzsche (1955:238) where he writes,

What sort of thing do we copy down, we mandarins with our Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of the things that *can* be written? What are we able to copy down? Only, alas, what is about to fade and lose its fragrance! Only departing and exhausted thunderstorms, alas, and belated yellow feelings! Only birds, alas, who flew till they

were weary and lost their way, who can be caught in the hand – in *our* hand! We immortalize what has not long to live, what can no longer soar – tired and hollow things!

Surely the space where the visual work of art *cannot* be written, must be the space where it is at its most effective, where it does its specific kind of metaphoric work that cannot be done in any other manner. I find it crucial that we acknowledge this space, otherwise there would be no need to make visual works of art in the first place.¹²

At this point it is insightful to reconsider Derrida's remark that 'there is nothing outside the text', as this can easily be construed as proclaiming the ascendancy of language over visual art. Here, however, one should keep in mind that the fact that we require some sort of language structure to make sense of reality, does not equate to saying that every aspect of life that is meaningful to us is effable (in as far as anything is effable). In my estimation it is erroneous to say that one has an *idea* that is so profound that it cannot be expressed in words. Whereas it is perfectly acceptable to say one has had an experience, a puzzlement, a confrontation, or that a visual work of art has evoked an emotion, that that cannot be adequately expressed in 'literal' language. In this regard Derrida (1984:123–24) is also careful to indicate that he does not believe that there is nothing outside of language:

I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language' ... to

distance oneself ... from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying there is *nothing* beyond language.

However, one can go far further back than Derrida by pointing out that Kant himself tottered on the brink of an abyss, realising, but not fully acknowledging the existence of a space where words are inadequate to experiences in general and to aesthetic experiences in particular. I say this because where Kant (1952:175–76) discusses the original ideas of the artistic genius, he describes originality as a

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 get on level terms with or render completely intelligible.

In my estimation he therefore recognises the gaps and the fissures in attempting to pin down aesthetic experience, the fact that successful visual works of art contain qualities that are 'literally' ineffable. I can now summarise at this point by saying that those qualities in visual works of art that make them particular and interesting, are also the parts where they are at their most metaphoric and ineffable.¹³

CONCLUSION

Having defined metaphoric creativity as an important aspect of a visual work of art, one is clearly faced with a predicament when it comes to critting students' works. For what 'literal' words does one use, and what criteria does one apply to crit meaning in the making?

What in reality and what kind of 'literal' language *corresponds* with the unforeseeable? The only way I see out of this predicament, is to follow the route suggested by Hillis Miller (and others), namely that 'the only weapon against a metaphor, is another metaphor, along with an awareness of our linguistic predicament in not being able ... to declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else' (in Neal 1988:152). Following Miller, I would suggest that on confronting the space that really matters in visual works of art, the metaphoric space, the space at the verge of new meaning, lecturers have no option other than responding with creative metaphors themselves.

Applied to the crit scenario, I conclude by saying that one important task of lecturers is to participate with the meaning in the making in the works of students by engaging metaphorically with the works – and perhaps good works are those that inspire lecturers to do this well. Or, seen from a slightly different angle, perhaps 'good' works are those that inspire lecturers to use metaphors creatively and 'bad' ones those that only elicit merely 'literal' observations.

NOTES

- 1 I could not find the word 'crit' in my dictionaries, but will nevertheless use it in this article as it has surely earned acceptance locally. From now on I will also omit the quotation marks.
- 2 With regard to Kant, I develop a subtext by revising the standard, modern reading of his aesthetic as one that expounds the ascendancy of reason over imagination, when in fact in many ways his writing on aesthetics does the opposite. By doing this, I hope to instate him as a precursor of postmodernism, giving back some prestige to a modern intellectual and artistic

tradition that has in recent years been accused of having been an accomplice in the kind of enlightenment and modern rationalism that led to atrocities such as the Nazi gas chambers.

- 3 Throughout this article I am primarily concerned with the Western tradition.
- 4 See Watson (1895) in this regard.
- 5 This ideal language he distinguishes from 'parole' which he uses to refer to individual language acts and individual users' competence in the use of 'langue'.
- 6 I will subsequently explain why formalist modernism can be understood as a form of mimesis.
- 7 In the light of the fact that with the invention of mechanical and digital technologies, the artist is no longer burdened with the task of naturalism or pictorial mimesis, I have decided to exclude this from the discussion.
- 8 See Kearney (1988:114–150) in this regard.
- 9 See Dickie (1974) for an explanation of the institutional theory of art.
- 10 See Note 2.
- 11 However, even this interpretation of the Kantian genius can be rehabilitated as Kant (1952:169) did write: 'where an author owes a product to his genius, he does not himself know how the ideas for it entered into his head'.
- 12 Having acknowledged this space, it is, however, also necessary to acknowledge a space where 'normal' discursive concepts ('dead language' in Kant's (1893:220) terminology) also work hand in hand with both our art making and our appreciation of art.
- 13 One can illustrate this by noting that 'literal' descriptions of the non-conceptual aspects (in as far as one can uphold this distinction) of works of art connote very little meaning. For example, should one describe the red sky in a painting with the words 'the sky is red', this is just about devoid of impact. Whereas, describing the

same sky with 'the all pervasive red sky with foreboding of violence' does seem to carry some impact. Therefore it seems to me that when words try to capture the metaphoric content of visual works, language out of necessity becomes radically metaphoric itself. In this manner the metaphors we create to speak about the ineffable metaphoric content of works of visual art, holds the potential of enriching our experience of those qualities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allison, D. B. 1978. Derrida and Wittgenstein: playing the game. *Research in Phenomenology* 8:93–109.
- Bacon, F. 1928. *Bacon selections*, edited by M. T. McClure. London: Scribner's.
- Baradat, L. P. 1979. *Political ideologies: Their origin and impact*. 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Chomsky, N. 1957. *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Cilliers, F. P. 1990. The brain, the mental apparatus and the text: a post-structural neuropsychology. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 9(1):1–8.
- Cohen, T. 1975. Figurative speech and figurative acts. *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (19):671.
- Culler, J. 1975. *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. London: Routledge.
- Degenaar, J. J. 1986. Art and the meaning of life. Published Paper. Cape Town: Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies of the University of Cape Town.
- Derrida, J. 1973 (1967). *Speech and phenomena: and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1976 (1967). *Of grammarology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1982. *Margins of philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1984. Jacques Derrida, in *Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers*, by R Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . 1993. *Memoirs of the blind. The self-portrait and other ruins*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Descartes, R. 1960. *Discourse on method and meditations*. New York: Bobbs-Merril.
- Dickie, G. 1974. *Art and the aesthetic: An institutional analysis*. Ithaca: London.
- Eagleton, T. 1990. *The ideology of the aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Edwards, J. C. 1990. *The authority of language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the threat of philosophical nihilism*. Florida: University of South Florida Press.
- Gadamer, H-G. 1976 (1960). *Truth and method*. Translated and edited by G. Barden and J. Cumming. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Haldane, J. 1992a. Aquinas, Thomas. In *A companion to aesthetics*, edited by D. E. Cooper. Oxford: Blackwell:9–11.
- . 1992b. Medieval and Renaissance aesthetics. In *A companion to aesthetics*, edited by D. E. Cooper. Oxford: Blackwell:279–283.
- Heidegger, M. 1971. *On the way to language*. New York: Harper & Row.
- . 1986. The origin of the work of art. In *Deconstruction in context: literature and philosophy*, edited by M. C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:256–279.
- Herder, J. G. 1969 (1772). On the origin of language. In *J. G. Herder on social and political culture*. Translated by F. M. Barnard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:86–179
- Hume, D. 1896. *A treatise of human nature*. Reprint from the original edition in three volumes. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Kant, I. 1893 (1781). *Critique of pure reason*. London: Bell.
- . 1952 (1790). *The critique of judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Kearney, R. 1988. *The wake of imagination: Ideas of creativity in Western culture*. London: Hutchinson.
- Neal, J. 1988. *Plato, Derrida, and writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois.
- Nietzsche, F. W. 1955 (1886). *Beyond good and evil*. Chicago: Henry Regnery.
- . 1967 (1901). *The will to power*, edited with commentary by W. Kaufmann. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Richardson, J. 1972. An argument on behalf of the science of a connoisseur. In *Two discourses: 1719*. London: Scholar:23–24.
- Rorty, R. 1981. Nineteenth-century idealism and twentieth-century textualism. *Monist* 64(2):155–74.
- Russell, B. 1961. *The basic writings of Bertrand Russell*. London: George Allen & Unwin:107–137.
- Saussure, F. 1986. *Course in general linguistics, in Deconstruction in context: Literature and philosophy*, edited by M. C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 141–168.
- Tilghman, B. R. 1991. *Wittgenstein, ethics and aesthetics: The view from eternity*. London: MacMillan.
- Von Humboldt, W. 1988 (1795). *On language: The diversity of human language-structure and its influence on the mental development of mankind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, J. 1895. *Comte, Mill, and Spencer*. New York: MacMillan.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958 (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd edition. Parts 1 and 2. Oxford:Blackwell.
- Wood, D. 1980. Style and strategy at the limits of philosophy: Heidegger and Derrida. *The Monist* 63(4):494–511.