Cory D. Crawford

Relating Image and Word in Ancient Mesopotamia

Abstract: This chapter investigates theoretical and practical relationships between ancient Mesopotamian images and texts. It starts with observations drawn from studies outside and inside the field, finding most prominently a problematic tendency to view images through linguistically motivated frameworks that are in part the legacy of biblical and Protestant notions of verbal and textual supremacy. Efforts to obviate the reduction of images to texts, however, are seen in some recent alternative approaches to the co-presence of image and text in ancient Mesopotamian material culture. Finally, it is suggested that ancient Mesopotamians related images and texts in dynamic ways that challenge modern assumptions about their separability and categorization, as exemplified in the Late Bronze Age statue of Idrimi from Alalakh and the Iron Age Esarhaddon treaty tablet at Tell Tayinat.

Keywords: text and image, iconoclasm, agency, Idrimi, Tell Tayinat

Cory D. Crawford: Ohio University, 210 Ellis Hall, Athens, OH 45701, e-mail: crawfoc1@ohio.edu

Introduction

Many of the best-known examples of ancient Near Eastern artworks are pictorial as well as textual. The continued philosophical inquiry into the relationship between these two dimensions of production – significant in its range as well as new depth – justifies the continued exploration of the image-text nexus in theoretical as well as practical frameworks. The historical compartmentalization of the study of the ancient Near East into philology, art history, and archaeology has resulted in the frequent parsing of analytical work into separate studies with cropped foci.[1] Rather, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, students of such objects are “constrained to take on the subject of the image/text [problem], not as a kind of luxury ‘option’ for the amateur, the generalist, or the aesthete, but as a literal, material necessity dictated by the concrete forms of actual representational practices” (1994: 89). As we shall see, the behavior of texts and images in the ancient Near East is neither straightforward nor circumscribed by modern experience; texts need not function to encode propositions

1 For more on the compartmentalization of the field, see, among others, Winter 1997; Bahrani 2003. As Michael Squire (2009) points out, something similar has been the case in Classics.

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about the world any more than images to represent things in it. Furthermore, the very division into categories of image and/or/versus text runs the risk of reifying ontological boundaries not necessarily operative or impermeable in ancient Mesopotamia. Rather, texts could act as pictures and images could tell stories, and thereby they often explore, collapse, and challenge the permeable line between “the” two, if we were to admit one.

Adding to the problem of the sometimes-rigid separation of works into “visual” and “verbal” is the fact that scholars have traditionally favored the latter. Texts have historically taken center stage in the discipline while images have had to fight from the wings for attention as primary and not derivative sources of information and sites of analysis (cf. Winter 1997; Uehlinger 2007). As the present volume attests, however, the field is changing, and it is one of the purposes of this paper to highlight some of the important studies that take advantage of the confluence of image and text in the analysis of ancient Near Eastern material culture as a way of highlighting profitable directions for the future. After an investigation of major shifts in the study of depiction and writing intended to illuminate some of the commitments and hazards of modern viewpoints, I will turn to recent studies that exemplify approaches to and central issues concerning ancient Near Eastern “imagetexts.”[2]

Hierarchies in Philosophical Treatments of Image-Word Relations

The ancient Near East itself, at least through the Persian period, produced no extended philosophical or exegetical treatise on the relationship between the arts or on aesthetics as far as the extant records admit (cf. Winter 1995). The closest one comes is perhaps in biblical discourses on idolatry, which attempt alternatively to collapse the divine statue into the (non) god depicted, identifying the god with the mundane aspects of its production, or to imply the opposite, namely that the other god-statues were capable of response (1 Samuel 5; Isaiah 19). At the same time, of course, the verbal communion came to be vaunted as the privileged mode of communication with Yahweh (cf. 1 Kings 19). The divinely *written* ten commandments (lit.‹*ăśeret haddəbārîm*: “the ten *words*”) proscribe the making and worship of a carved image (*pesel*) or likeness (*təmûnâ*) of gods and apparently any mimetic depiction.[3] The extreme end of the polarity is expressed in the so-called “Name Theology” of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, in which the tangible interaction between Yahweh and Israel

2 Following Mitchell (1994: 89, n. 9), I will use the term “imagetext” to indicate concrete examples of compositions that bring together textual and visual dimensions.

3 Exodus 20:4–6; cf. Deuteuronomy 5:8–10, which seems to extend the prohibition to any kind of image making. On this see Schmidt 1995: 82.

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is mediated by his name and voice, not his presence or sight (cf. Richter 2002; Sommer 2009).[4] This difference is not described simply as a matter of convention or of proscription based on cultural identity markers, but as one of ontological symmetry with the divine: "Yhwh spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape – nothing but a voice" (Deuteronomy 4: 12). Beyond these famous injunctions, the classic biblical statements on images are the "icon parodies" of second Isaiah and Jeremiah (e.g., Isaiah 44: 9–20; Jeremiah 10: 1–16). Nathanial Levtow (2008) locates these parodies specifically within the practices of Mesopotamian image production but also more generally in the way sociopolitical struggles for power were manifest in the targeting of enemy deities.

In the apparent reaction of these traditions to Mesopotamian practices we see both the association between images and ontological realities they reflect as well as the effort to make a strong division between visual and verbal expression. In this sense they also constitute the first historical documentation of the way the word-image dichotomy comes to map onto cultural struggles. The argument advanced, namely that the reason not to produce divine images is because Yahweh himself did not engage the Israelites visually, is not a purely philosophical claim; it is embedded in a broader struggle against the imperial presence of Assyria and Babylon. Such mappings onto cultural divisions are familiar territory in the nexus of words and images. As many have noted, the values implied in the image-text relationship are frequently reproduced in fundamental socio-political relations, including gender, race, and, as in the present case, religion.[5] The biblical discourse is particularly important in this light for its role in the modern effort to recover the Assyro-Babylonian past. In many ways, this role primed the emerging field to find and resurrect the idolatrous Other in the material record and concomitantly allowed these iconoclastic discursive practices of the Iron Age to reverberate in the modern era. They are thus crucial to unpack in order to better approximate ancient Near Eastern understandings of the relationship.[6]

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4 There are very important visual components of the Israelite religion, but almost all texts of the Hebrew Bible are anxious in the extreme about the (un)mediated sight of Yahweh, either depicted or "live." So while cherubim and other (even figural) cultic objects are described, one finds no clear indication of statues of Yahweh himself.

5 See, among others, Mitchell (1994: 151–81, especially 162–65), for a discussion of the word-image implication in discourses of race and gender; see Bahrani (2003) for the implications of the colonial roots of ancient Near Eastern art history and its role in discourses of alterity, and Schwartz (2006) on the assertion that words and images require higher and lower forms of cognition. The problem of image-text relations inscribed in Western religious contexts is of course not limited to the biblical contest between Israel and Mesopotamia. Squire (2009: 94) succinctly relates another example, to cite only one, in his summary of G.E. Lessing's position in his *Laocöon*: Lessing "decried the infiltration of a (French Catholic) penchant for the picturesque into the (German Protestant) realm of pure and proper poetry."

6 Cf. the detailed discussion in the first three chapters of Bahrani 2003.

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One of the chief mechanisms of the transmission of biblical logocentric values, and, indeed, a turning point in image-text relations in the West, was the Protestant Reformation. Luther himself did not articulate an absolute iconoclasm: he worked from the analogy that just as Christ's material existence was a necessary medium between God and man, so could images mediate between man and faith in Christ's material absence; they become "a vehicle for contemplating the divine" (Squire 2009: 27). As such, Luther established a clear hierarchy between words and images such that the image was subjected to the word. He saw a positive value in depiction through its potential to provoke the mind to higher thought, and thus it was in some sense an evil necessitated by the ignorance of the masses and the imperfections of the flesh. Depiction was of value insofar as it pointed the way toward something greater than itself, namely, the *Word*.[7]

This two-part move – the affirmation of a word-image dichotomy and the ranking of the former above the latter – would provide a model that proved difficult to escape, even for works without explicit theological commitments. Squire has charted how Luther's legacy of linguistic imperialism was carried forward by major figures of art history and aesthetics, especially Winckelmann, Kant, and Hegel, even while they would channel earlier ideas of material dualism deriving ultimately from classical thought. These thinkers in one way or another, argues Squire, propagated the Protestant mode by emptying images of significance and locating their power instead in individual minds (2009: 15–89). Of particular note is Kant's subjugation of the image to the sublime that also marks his inheritance of the biblical tradition: "Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth" (Kant 1987: 135§29).

This Protestant move would also disrupt what was one of the richest conversations about the nature of the relationship of verbal and pictorial arts, which produced the first explicit theoretical concern for the relationship between image and word. Greek philosophical efforts to conceptualize the relationship between the so-called sister arts understood painting and poetry, among other arts such as music, to possess related capacities for representing and expressing mimetically.[8] Plutarch famously quoted the late-sixth-century BCE poet Simonides as saying that painting is silent poetry and poetry vocal painting (*Glor. Ath.* 346 F; cf. *Poet. Aud.* 17 F). Such concepts are evinced in practice through, for example, the verbal technique of *ekphrasis*, "a

7 On Luther's language hierarchy, see Koerner 1993; on the aftermath of Luther's stance toward images, see Squire 2009: 15–89.

8 Stephen Halliwell (2009: 12) reminds us that the usual translation of *mimesis* as "imitation" "does scant justice to the ways in which Greeks used interpretations of mimesis to wrestle with problems, in modern terms, both of representation and of expression. The status of mimesis intersects, moreover, with issues of truth and falsehood/fiction, especially in poetry, and different versions of mimesis cover a spectrum stretching from 'world-reflecting' realism to 'world-creating' idealism."

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type of speech that worked an immediate impact on the mind of the listener, sparking mental images of the subjects it 'placed before the eyes'" (Webb 2009: 193).[9] Plato and Aristotle characterized visual and verbal arts as possessing the ability to represent the same things by different means, although Platonic thought saw tangible images as secondary to conceptual forms.[10] The concern for the relative capacities of the arts would coalesce in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition ("as with painting, so with poetry,") immortalized by Horace in the first century BCE, which thrived in Europe from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries before it was challenged beginning in the eighteenth century, most directly and famously by Gotthold Lessing. Lessing's investigation led him to the conclusion that the different capacities of painting and poetry were fundamentally circumscribed by another dichotomy, that of space and time. Painting presents its content synchronically but in space, and poetry only exists diachronically and is unbounded by spatial parameters. These differences were not neutral in value; they were bound by the same Lutheran hierarchies mentioned above. Poetry was, for Lessing, pure content while painting the mere form thereof.[11] His ideal, like that of Kant, was that the image became invisible as it entered the imagination, that it thereby attained the limitless potential of thought: "In poetry a robe is no robe. It conceals nothing. Our imagination sees through it in every part;" further, "what pleases us in a work of art pleases not the eye, but the imagination through the eye" (Lessing 1874: 40, 43 respectively). Thus Lessing too tilts the tables toward the verbal arts, owing to their greater proximity to the boundless imagination.

Perhaps it is not insignificant that Lessing's orientation engaged with a pre-Peircean semiotics: "the same picture, whether presented to the imagination by arbitrary [that is, linguistic] or natural [that is, pictorial] signs, must always give us a similar pleasure, though not always in the same degree" (Lessing 1874: 43).[12] This facet of his thinking brings us to another crucial development in the study of image-text relations, one that gained momentum after the seminal work of Ferdinand de

9 Webb's work shows that *ekphrasis* is much more than the verbal description of works of art; it was rather a *technique* that could be applied to anything seen, such as battle scenes or storms. See, however, Goldhill's contention (2009) that the existence of descriptions of works of art that circulate as discrete texts, together with the interplay between authors using the technique, justifies its being called at least a tradition, if not a genre.

10 *Republic* 10; *Poetics* 25. For summary treatments of Greco-Roman approaches to the problem, see Halliwell 2009 and Besançon 2000: 13–62.

11 Lessing's critique of course continues to provoke response: Irving Babbitt's *The New Laokoon* (1910), Greenberg's "Toward a Newer Laocoön" (1940), Krieger's "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited" (1967) and Squire's "Toward an Older Laocoön," (2009: 90–193) center around the agenda set by Lessing, the former two explicitly concerned to reinforce the boundaries, while Krieger sought to collapse them (or at least to show how the verbal arts can become plastic and spatial). Squire seeks to obviate the Protestant structures completely and to recover the Classical dimensions of the convergence of texts and images.

12 For a detailed treatment of Lessing's semiotics, see Wellbery 1984; see also Todorov 1973.

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Saussure on systems and structures of linguistic signs. Saussure's elucidation of meaning in language as dependent on systems and dichotomized signs would reshape a welter of disciplines and provide the grist for many a theoretical mill, eventually tilting the word-image relationship in favor of the former, since it was held up as the key not just for languages but for human meaning-making in general, including pictorial imagery. While this is not the place to undertake a survey of the bewildering variety of approaches that carry the banner of semiotics, common threads in the study of signs carried assumptions that would transfer to the study of images as signs. In the study of signs the locus of contact between sender and receiver (speech) is removed from the analytical focus (meaning). That is, in language, phonetic production (the signifier, in Saussurean terms), while crucial, is a vehicle for something more important, the concept indicated by the sound (that is, the signified). As such, crucial to the study of language, at least for Saussure, is the mutual intelligibility of the sender and receiver, the successful transmission of the concept through the medium of language. Speech is inherently representational, therefore, in that at the point of interface the focus of interaction amounts to a series of indices, signs standing in for something not present.[13]

The move to consider visual art as representational is one that requires art to be a system of signs pointing to absence. It is a move that fixes the outcome of the analysis before it has taken place. As we saw with Lessing, while language is comprised of arbitrary signifiers (there is nothing inherently equine in the sound "horse," for example), visual arts in contrast rely on "natural" signifiers, where the signifier was directly related to the essence of the thing signified. A depicted tree must embody recognizable arboreal characteristics for its meaning to be understood. This requires, however, that the depicted tree be, as with linguistic signs, an indicator to a reality beyond itself of necessarily greater interest to the observer, whether audience or analyst. This is thus another way of making the familiar claim that the chief value in depiction is to point to a greater reality beyond itself at the same time forcing it into a linguistic model. Seen as a representation, its presence is null; it disappears as the content lying behind its form emerges in the mind (Wollheim 1977).

In the wake of Saussure and Peirce, the semiotic approach to visual arts intensified in the twentieth century.[14] Studies proliferated, and continue to do so, in which depiction is understood as representational and indicative, as a sign system or systems, as if such were self-evident. This notion is even operative in Erwin Panofsky's influential tripartite process for decoding pictures in *Studies in Iconology* (1939). His well-known opening vignette illustrating the levels of inquiry by describing one

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13 This is not to say that language is exclusively indicative; important exceptions are, of course, performative speech, such as speech acts, and onomatopoeia.

14 I do not mean here to collapse the work of Peirce and Saussure, who differed in scope, subject, and of course conclusion about the nature of the sign. I mean only to group them in their attempt to understand signs.

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man tipping his hat to another on the street is, tellingly, an act of communication and thus, from the outset, has subsumed the question of image understanding to the process of meaning made between senders and receivers. The sorts of cultural knowledge needed to accomplish a study that accounts for the entire horizon of an image amount in fact to the search for texts to explain images. Panofsky's iconology, which he apparently abandoned at the end of his life (Squire 2009: 79), promised an analytical method attuned to images and delivered instead a sublimation of images to words. Roland Barthes (1977: 15–51), to cite another well-known example, consistently and unapologetically treated images as messages to be decoded, including photography, often understood to be the most mimetic of arts, and tried to get at the "rhetoric" of the image. Apparently unencumbered by the Protestant views described above, Saussurean approaches took the word-image relation in a new direction but arrived at a familiar destination: words hold the key to understanding how images work.[15]

The strong reaction seen in the "new art history" against Panofsky's method was enabled by more particularly Peircean semiotics (Harris 2001). The semiotic approach was hailed by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson (1991: 176) as holding out the potential for a neutral "supradisciplinary" theory, its roots in texts "largely a historical accident."[16] The unquestioned assumption, however, that art objects are indeed part of a sign system is where the hierarchy is most present, where the reduction is most complete. About their claim, Mitchell (1994: 99, n. 31) similarly responded that "they underestimate … the extent to which semiotics privileges textual/linguistic descriptive frameworks. Far from avoiding the 'bias of privileging language,' semiotics continually reinstates that bias."

Nelson Goodman's (1976) approach to a variety of sign systems took structuralism in a direction that attempted to avoid the linguistic framework of structuralist thought and its concomitant hierarchies. Its title notwithstanding, *Languages of Art* is an attempt to treat visual depiction alongside other symbolic systems (music notations, maps, charts in addition to language) without assigning values to one over another.[17] In order to do this, he avoids differentiating the arts on the basis of conventional versus

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15 It was, of course, not just to the study of visuality that Saussure's project was applied. It was also hailed as a means of understanding "symbolic" behavior as well. As Catherine Bell (1992) incisively showed, however, this resulted in problematic understandings of ritual and effected a similar subjugation. In that case as well one finds a familiar privileging of verbal understanding over ritual production, abetted by a Protestant distaste for ritual not unlike the distaste for images. Bell's work on ritualization as a solution might be fruitfully brought into the conversation here were there more space to treat it.

16 But see Bal's (1991) contention that the very division between the visual and the verbal is artificial and essentializing, though the objection, below, to semiotics as neutral remains a problem.

17 He clarifies in the introduction that vernacular expediency required the title be *Languages of Art* rather than *Symbol Systems of Art*, but that the latter is what was intended (Goodman 1976: xi–xii). In this way he is particularly indebted to the work of Saussure and not to that of Peirce. Though he does not make it explicit, he also advances a subtle ("wonderfully cagey") reaction against semiotic interpretation (see Mitchell 1991: 25–26).

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natural signifiers, arguing instead for systems that prefer more or less dense and replete signifying structures. Density for Goodman operates in an inverse relation to differentiation of the system. Languages are less dense because their constitutive elements are more differentiated, differentiation in language being necessary to the functioning of the system, as Saussure showed. Thus for Goodman pictorial depiction is more dense because less strictly differentiated in its elements. As Mitchell (1986: 67) summarized Goodman, the meaning of an image "depends rather on its relations with all the other marks in a dense, continuous field. A particular spot of paint might be read as the highlight on Mona Lisa's nose, but that spot achieves its significance in the specific system of pictorial relations to which it belongs, not as a uniquely differentiated character that might be transferred to some other canvas." Symbols themselves are more or less replete, in Goodman's terminology, depending on the numbers of properties of the symbols that are taken into account. Since more properties of a picture are implicated in its understanding, the picture is more replete than, say, a linguistic grapheme.

Goodman's theory not only accounts for movement between systems but also requires an understanding (or recovery) of the conventions determining the viewing. Thus "a paragraph may be turned on its side and 'read' as a city skyline; a picture may be riddled with alphabetic characters, and may be constructed to be read from left to right in a descending series of sequences. … What determines the mode of reading is the symbol system that happens to be in effect, and this is regularly a matter of habit, convention, and authorial stipulation" (Mitchell 1986: 70). While, thus put, it seems Goodman was largely successful in avoiding the gravitational pull of linguistic imperialism, to my mind such a system describes not just the conventionality of perceiving art, but of viewing in general. As Goodman (1976: 103) himself noted, "what one can distinguish at any given moment by merely looking depends not only upon native visual acuity but upon practice and training."[18] The features of objects – not just depictions – in our visual field are just as semantically loaded as they are in photographs, paintings, and sculptures.[19] It seems that, so read, Goodman is getting at the roots of human perception and cognition, which themselves are caught up in the question of word and image and whether there is a neurological divide between them.[20]

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18 In addition to being an extreme conventionalist, Goodman self-identified as an iconoclast – that is, he argued against resemblance and likeness and in favor of reference and denotation (for example, Hopkins 2006: 156). As Mitchell (1986: 153) notes, however, this is because he leaves out the *roots* of reference (which would presumably require notions of resemblance, similitude, and the like) and focuses instead on the *routes* of reference.

19 For in-depth and recent engagements with and corrections of Goodman, see Kulvicki 2006 and Schwartz 2006.

20 Schwartz (2001) argues that a spatial emplotment of points on a line makes a salient semantic distinction between different types of symbol systems, adding another dimension, as it were, to Goodman's hypothesis.

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It is often claimed in studies of visual representation that seeing a depiction is categorically different from reading a description because the former requires only basic perception but the latter involves higher cognitive processes. Cognitive scientists have shown, however, that the issue is not so simple (Schwartz 2001). Reading appears to be subsumed in the sub-modality of vision and, once learned, is difficult to distinguish from other types of perception. Literate people do not choose to read or not to read a series of shapes that could be construed as well formed utterances in their language. The difficulty involved in "turning off" the perception of words in favor of "basic" perception is illustrated in the Stroop color-word test, whereby subjects are given a list of color words (red, blue, yellow, green) that are themselves set in colored font not corresponding to the colors named. Results of the study demonstrate that subjects have much greater ease reading the color words than naming the color of the ink. This apparently shows reading to be automatic and throws the question of relative cognitive processes between language (at least, written language) and vision into relief.

Another question raised by examining the word-image problem at the neurological level, and by the possibility raised in the discussion of Goodman that viewing pictures and viewing in general are governed by convention and semantic relationships, is that of relative response.[21] Neurological studies of perception indicate that there is a biological basis for the relationship between the experience of viewing a thing and the experience of viewing a depiction of the same thing. The experience is close enough that studies of nonpictorial spatial perception frequently give their subjects pictures to view (Hecht et al. 2003: xii), instead of being made to go physically into the environment relevant to the study. Further, the discovery and ongoing study of "mirror neurons" – cells that simulate in the brain actions observed or generally perceived as if the viewer were experiencing it directly – suggest that at the level of imitative response the difference between observing images of actions ("representations") and observing the actions "live" to be smaller than is often admitted.[22] This research also shows that mirroring activity is not confined to singular perceptual modalities – vision, hearing, olfaction – but can be triggered by a variety of stimuli, including seeing (including the written word) and hearing.[23] Seen in this light, the cognitive gap between words and images, at least at an experiential level, narrows.

21 The literature on picture perception as specialized viewing is voluminous. See, recently, Wollheim 1989 and 1998; Hecht et al. 2003; Hopkins 2006; Lopes 2005 and 2006; Schwartz 2006; Kulvicki 2006 and 2009.

22 Of the abundant literature on mirror neurons and their implications in a wide variety of human behavior, see Pineda 2009. For theoretical considerations and limitations, see Uithol et al. 2011. For an exemplary study of action simulation in response to pictures, see Ponseti et al. 2006, which showed mirror neuron activations imitating sexual behavior when subjects viewed pictures of aroused genitalia corresponding to the subject's sexual preference.

23 See, for example, Bastiaansen et al. 2009; Caetano et al. 2007. It bears noting that even the idea of singular perceptual modalities, long a given in neuroscience, has been challenged directly (Uttal 2001). At the very least, the information from sensory modalities is processed in a way that makes sense

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At the level of experience, then, the question of representation and (versus) resemblance becomes a more pressing issue. If looking at a picture potentially bears an experiential congruence with the presence of the thing depicted, one is forced to ask whether representation is a sufficient conceptualization of depiction. Strict theories of pictorial representation as opposed to resemblance continue to be advanced, corrected, and challenged.[24] As Squire (2009: 116) put it with regard to Greco-Roman antiquity, "our language of 'representation' conspicuously fails in this regard, since in antiquity images held the promise of direct 'presentation' – of superseding or effacing their purely representative function." Particularly important to the theoretical challenge of maintaining the "presence" in representation are approaches focused on the viewer's response to the work of art, not necessarily to what it stands in for or represents. In his attempt to articulate a theory of art that could embrace non-Western art objects as easily as Renaissance painting as well as avoid the pitfalls of semiological approaches, Alfred Gell (1998) drew on anthropological models of distributed personhood to argue for the consideration of art objects as agents mediating social roles. Mitchell (2005: 7) similarly asked why it is that people "behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing, and leading us astray?" As others have argued and as we shall see below, these studies articulate a position much closer to emic ways of approaching art objects in the ancient Near East than theories of representation strictly understood.[25] They also carry important ramifications for understanding the conjunction of image and text, since, at least for Gell, the depiction need not be figural to exercise agency.[26] Discussion of agency requires attention to a variety of aspects of the materiality of the object in question, including textual representation as well as production and emplacement. It need not assume a divide between textual and iconographic spheres and, as such, may better approximate ancient Near Eastern modes of interaction, appreciation, and response.[27]

In sum, the history of the study of the image-text problem is one that has tended to see pictorial media as subject to or unlocked through verbal media. Some theoretical and neurological work has attempted to provide a basis for understanding them

of even conflicting information from different streams, such as in the McGurk effect, where sound perception is dramatically altered by tampering with visual (but not aural) stimuli.

24 For critical discussions of resemblance versus representation, see Hecht et al. 2003; Schwartz 2006.

25 This is not to say that pictures *cannot* represent – a quick study of the development of writing proves otherwise – but that representation need not be the defining characteristic of depiction as it has been almost exclusively.

26 Indeed, as Porter discusses (2010), non-figural objects, such as jars and bricks, can be seen as mediators of agency. This relies on a different visual experience from that with a figural image, however, and it usually (though not always) is not marked in the same way as the image (*ṣalmu*).

27 See also, in this same vein, Freedberg 1989; Elkins 1997.

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as blended areas along a continuum. These observations have direct bearing on the study of the ancient Near East, both in the history of the discipline and the study of individual objects. It is to this that we now turn, first to the pitfalls and promise of previous studies and then, as an important caution to binary approaches, to the statue of Idrimi as an example of an ancient negation of difference between text and image.

Relating Images and Texts in the Ancient Near East

Images and texts in the ancient Near East co-occur in a wide variety of objects and contexts, including wall reliefs, ornamental wall tiles, bronze doorbands, cylinder and stamp seals, stelae, inscribed tablets with seal impressions, painting on pottery, inscriptions on votive objects and statuary, stone thresholds, and the list goes on. The types of inscriptions borne on objects appear as varied as the object types: labels, captions, curses, biographies, laws, treaties, and so forth. It also bears noting in this light that the methods of bringing together texts and images complicate the picture. In most cases it appears that multiple classes of trained workers (engravers, masons, scribes) were involved in the production of these objects. Though this division of productive labor at the point of creation would undoubtedly contribute to the division of analytical labor in modern receptions, the objects nevertheless were perceived singularly, their texts and depictions co-present for the viewer's examination. Perhaps most vexingly, the problem of images and texts extends to categories in which the two are not conjoined materially but in which nevertheless the question of the relationship is raised. Most obvious in this regard is the question of mythology (Steinkeller 1992; Sonik, this volume), in which scenes known from textual sources are only rarely congruent with imagery attested in the archaeological record.[28] Also to be dealt with as a problem of representation is the literary (ekphrastic) description of material objects, such as those discussed by Thomason (2004: 155–57; see also Squire 2009: 96; Mitchell 1994: 151–81). To this one would add collections of texts that were apparently drawn from inscriptions on objects, such as Akkadian statuary, but whose original has been lost to history (Cooper 1990; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011; Eppiheimer, this volume). In sum, the material relations between texts and images in ancient Mesopotamia are manifold, and this fact alone enjoins attention and flexibility in the approach to individual items and classes.

In the context of the abundant ways in which images and texts were physically and conceptually brought together, approaches to the problem seem to have come, with important exceptions, to settle most comfortably on the division between text

28 Even though Steinkeller seems at points to be motivated toward the use of imagery to reconstruct ancient literature, he recognizes the problems inherent in yoking the texts too closely to the images. For a similar debate concerning Homeric epic and/in Greek art, see Snodgrass 1998, contra Johansen 1967, and the criticism of both in Squire 2009: 124.

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and image, between philologist and art historian (Bahrani 2003). The relationship between the textual and visual materials at the level of the academy has been rehearsed in several publications, mostly by scholars trained in and attentive to visual material (for example, Winter 1997; Bahrani 2003; Porter 2010). As should be expected from the above observations, what emerges is an overwhelming priority of texts, not simply in quantity of studies, but also in methodology, at least in part because of broader philosophical trends treated above.

It should not be surprising at this point that the idea of reading images as texts has been a captivating one and continues to inform studies of Mesopotamian art and architecture. It has proven to be especially attractive in studies of the extensive Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs (for example, Reade 1979; Winter 1981; Russell 1993; Lumsden 2004). On a broader scale, however, communication in general – understood as fundamentally linked, at least at the theoretical level, to assumptions and frameworks derived from specifically verbal communication – has also been held up as the defining characteristic of Mesopotamian visual production. Michalowski (1990) characterized Mesopotamian art as an early communicative system (with literature and writing), explicitly understanding images as a semiotic code. May (2012: 6) similarly situated the destruction of images and texts in the ancient Near East within symbol systems. A main theme of the 2004 ICAANE (Kühne et al. 2008) was dedicated to art history (including architecture) as visual communication defined, in Saussurean terms, by messages, senders, and receivers.[29] Far more common than these explicit treatments that are unapologetically logocentric are, of course, studies in which the assumptions outlined above operate in the background, including those that without explanation crop the focus to exclude the visual dimension and to include the text only, or vice versa.[30] On the other hand, some recent trends have gained traction in showing the possibilities for moving away from the model of language and communication and even away from the strong bifurcation of text and image altogether.

Irene Winter (1985) sees the relationship between the text and imagery on the Stele of the Vultures as one of independent goals that were nevertheless held in tension in their incorporation on the single stele. Moreover, she noted the different modes exhibited in the visual content on the obverse and reverse of the stele as evoking mythic/historical, iconic/narrative, or temporal/eternal dimensions. Even exploring here the beginnings of narrative art, with the concomitant reliance on literary studies of narrative, Winter (1985: 28) uses this as a way of getting at what Mitchell (1994: 89) called the "whole ensemble of relations between media," stressing

29 See in particular the treatments in Kühne et al. 2008 by Bonatz, Pucci, Sievertsen, and Orthmann. Pucci's (2008: 545) statement is indicative: "It is a well-known fact that art through its images carries a form of communication. Such communication exists between a sender – that is the artist and his customer – and the receivers of the information, those who will see the works of art."

30 There are also the rare studies in which ancient Near Eastern texts are classified visually as icons themselves. See, for example, Levtow 2012 and discussion below.

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in the end as she did the "*affective*, as opposed to the merely *reflective*, properties of the monument – the fact that monuments *constitute* the objects they represent as much as they mirror them, and are thus active agents in projecting particular responses in reception."

The correspondence of textual and pictorial narrative has been widely discussed in regard to Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs from Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh. Winter (1981) had argued for a dynamic but unexpected interaction between the images of the throneroom of the northwest palace at Nimrud with the "standard inscription," the latter being especially interesting for a lack of direct correspondence with the scenes shown pictorially. Winter posited that the royal aspects generally enunciated in the inscriptions – which were inscribed in some cases right over the surface of the scenes, without regard for background – were evinced in the pictorial representations even though a direct correspondence was lacking. Russell's (1999) extensive study of available texts and images takes this further, discussing not only the relationships between the two evidenced in the reign of a particular monarch, but also charting the changes made by successors as themselves results of a dynamic interaction of word and image. He dispenses with the need to find semantic correspondence between visual and verbal data; even though, in the case of Assurnasirpal, the texts and images had "nothing to do with each other" at the level of direct content but that the "generalized, universalized image of the king, insistently reinforced through endless [textual] repetition, exists as a parallel to the more concrete images expressed in the sculptures" (Russell 1999: 213). This would not remain the case, as, for example, Tiglath-pileser III would not only introduce labels to the wall reliefs, he also brought text and image into closer correspondence. This was not a one-way, teleological development, as Sennacherib and Assurbanipal would reject long annalistic texts on wall reliefs altogether. Assurbanipal, however, did greatly expand the use of epigraphs, which bring text and image into an indexical relationship. About these, Russell (1999: 216) says that "on the one hand, it is tempting to say that pictures have finally triumphed over text, and it is true that the visible texts now seem slavishly to follow the story of the pictures." On the other, he goes on, the narratives may well have provided the source from which the images were executed. "Therefore, while a walk through the palace would have left no doubt that pictures had triumphed over words as the dominant mode of public expression, every one of these pictures probably began as a text, a genesis whose fossil remains are visible on the relief surface in the form of epigraphs" (Russell 1999: 216). While Assyrian kings exhibit changing preferences for verbal and visual correspondence, the dynamic interplay between the two is maintained and developed in a fusion of innovation and tradition. The case of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs and texts reveals the willingness of Assyrian patrons and artisans to experiment and react to verbal and visual interchange.

Zainab Bahrani's (2001) study of the Warka vase also attempts to move beyond the basic assignment of narrativity to the imagery. Arguing that the self-referentiality of the object (on which is depicted an object identical in shape to itself) allows it to be

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treated as the visual version of a performative speech act, she calls into question the suitability of the binaries essence/appearance and signifier/signified because the Warka vase itself blurs these distinctions: "The circular referentiality in these works cannot be explained in the limited understanding of narrative as a form of communication of a singular meaning via different but parallel codes of reference. They cannot be understood as the vehicle or the site of the passage of meaning because they are performative images" (Bahrani 2001: 22). Her (2003: 185–201) later discussion of the altar of Tukulti-Ninurta makes similar claims about the altar that depicts one identical to itself with the (doubled) monarch approaching it, with the added interest, for our purposes, of being complicated by an inscription that refers to the god Nusku, while the symbol on the depicted altar refers apparently to Nabu. Such disjunction provides fertile ground for reflection, and Bahrani (2003: 197) harmonizes the two by arguing for the transfer of the usual Nabu symbols to Nusku.[31] Thus in both of these images, as with other Assyro-Babylonian "object self-portraits" (Cheng 2007), the bifurcation of word/image as well as of representation/presence are called into question in ways that suggest a dynamic interplay left underexamined in previous work.

Marian Feldman also departs from the model of language and communication in the examination of art objects. One of her more recent works (2010) exemplifies the power of the concept of agency in the depiction of Hammurabi and Shamash on the stele of Hammurabi in its role as an agentive object.[32] Citing, among others, the work of Gell (1998) on art objects as mediators of social relations, she argues that the developments of perspectival rendering had direct bearing on the way the viewer was drawn into the scene. These developments therefore acted with agentive force in relating the viewer to the subject matter. Further, the new technique of rendering perspective, argues Feldman (2010: 161), goes hand in hand with important political changes in the Old Babylonian period to show the agency of the object "as operating as a central component in the fashioning of the 'subject' that found expression in new ways of *seeing* the relationship between subject and king." Putting this together with Stephanie Langin-Hooper's (n.d.) argument that the visual aspect of the monument cannot be understood without reference to the visual dimensions of the text inscribed below the relief, one is able then to connect the perspectival shift in the upper scene with the changing social role of law during the period as the territorial state emerges from the city-state network. Thus the relationship between image, text, and viewer plays a role in constituting as well as reflecting changing political relationships. Taken together, these studies of text and image on the stele of Hammurabi show the combination of word and image to be greater than the sum of

31 But see the important objections in Feldman 2004 and the discussion of the problems of correspondence in comparison below.

32 For other studies of agency in the ancient Near East, including theoretical reactions from historians of ancient art, see Osborne and Tanner 2007, especially Winter's (2007) essay in the volume.

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its “parts” and that such objects narrow the modern assumed distance between verbal and visual modes of display.

The Statue of Idrimi

A final example of conjoined text and image indicates a further dimension of ancient Near Eastern approaches to imagetexts.

The statue of Idrimi was discovered broken and buried in a temple complex at Alalakh in 1939 by C. Leonard Woolley (Fig. 1) (Smith 1949). It depicts a bearded man in “provincial style” (Barnett 1950) seated on a chair, his left hand curled into a fist resting near his lap, his right hand clapped across his chest. An inscription follows the contours of the body and covers the shoulders, chest, arms, and skirt of the figure such that the entirety could be seen by a frontally positioned viewer. This inscription has been the clear focal point of analytical attention. The modern significance of the statue of Idrimi has been squarely located in the contents of its inscription: “what makes it significant,” according to Speiser (1951: 151) “is a long inscription of over a hundred lines”; Albright (1950:14) similarly hailed it as a “document of great historical importance.” Indeed, it is the inscription that continues to attract the greatest analytical attention (for example, Liverani 1972; King 1987; Westbrook 2008), especially in light of its apparent divergence from Assyro-Babylonian historiography and similarity to biblical narrative (for example, Sasson 1981; Van Seters 1997). Perhaps most logocentric is Oppenheim’s (1955: 199) evaluation: “The lifeless features of the sculpture, the struggle of the artist with the articulation of its dimensions, the barbaric misuse of the linguistic vehicle, the abominable paleography, etc., should not detract from an adequate appreciation of the *literary* merits of this autobiography” (emphasis added).

Often overlooked – I would argue because of scholarly engagement with the inscription in published form instead of the object itself – is the fact that the final lines, labeled 102–104 in the *editio princeps* (Smith 1949: 10, 22–23) run vertically down his beard, beginning at the level of the fold of his right eye and running down to the point at which it meets perpendicularly the level of the main inscription, the block of text comprised of lines 1–23 (Fig. 2). Following Oller (1977), who discovered a crucial lacuna in pre-1977 publications of ll. 102–104, we read: “I was king for 30 years. As for my deeds (*mānaḫtiya*), I wrote them on my image (*ṣalmīya*). Let one continually look at (*liddagal*) them; let them [the deeds] continually bless me.”[33] As the positioning immediately suggests, the content of these lines, sometimes dubbed a “postscript” (for example, Oller 1977), do not function as a typical conclusion or epilogue (Sasson 1981),

33 Oller (1977: 168) argues that the signs of the verb at the end of line 103 should be restored *li-⸢dag⸣-gal-šu-nu*.

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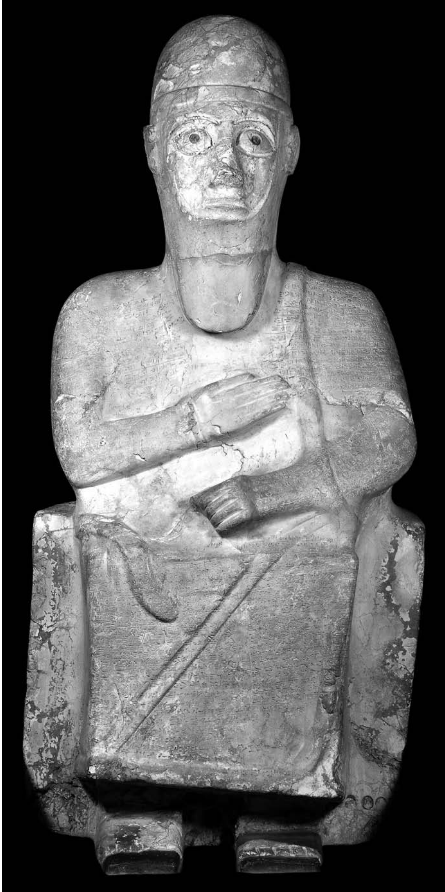

Figure 1: The Statue of Idrimi.
© Trustees of the British Museum.

either in linguistic or spatial context. The customary conclusory curses against future vandalism that so frequently constitute the last lines on monuments occur here in ll. 92–98, followed by an (also irregular) appendix identifying Sharruwa in the third person as scribe and invoking a blessing on him in ll. 98–101. At this point in publications and translations scholars usually place ll. 102–104, without noting that we have moved to the head of the statue, and back to the (spatial) beginning of the inscription. One presumes this is due to the fact that it speaks of inscribing the statue in the past tense and that the audience can now therefore consult it.

While these may have temporally been the last lines incised onto the statue, they perhaps fit better as a standalone composition. When one considers the content of these lines in conjunction with its material presence, a different picture emerges. The plural in the last clause must refer to the achievements of Idrimi, not to a putative plural audience (Oller 1977). What is perhaps most remarkable about these lines is the conceptual and visual bridge they form between the ruler/statue, the inscription, and

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Figure 2: Detail, Statue of Idrimi.
Photo courtesy Benjamin Spackman.

the ruler's past. They are conscious of their representation of cuneiform not only as speech, but at the same time as the past events inscribed on the body of the ruler. Lines 102–104 point literally to the inscription on the body not only as a type of epigram or even cartoon speech bubble (Sasson 1981: 313), but also to the cuneiform signs as a visible instantiation of Idrimi's deeds. We recall that the lines enjoin not an act of reading, as had been supposed before Oller's re-examination, but an act of iterative *viewing*, as indicated by the probable use of *dagālu* in the Gtn stem.[34] In light of this verb, the fact that the inscription runs not from the mouth of Idrimi, but from his right eye to the deeds presented in the inscription gains added significance. Thus

34 Cf. CAD s.v. "*dagālu*."

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the viewer is visually as well as verbally enjoined not to read or to inspect the inscription solely as a text, but rather to *see* the deeds of Idrimi by viewing the inscription on his body, to connect the eye to the inscription as does the statue itself. It is significant in light of this claim to note that the inscription as a whole does not extend to the throne on which he sits – it is confined to the body of Idrimi himself. Thus, in what amounts to a kind of verbal hypallage, the acts of the ruler cling ontologically to him, visually constituted and open to the viewer's devoted gaze (compare Winter 1992; 2000). We see a conscious effort to effect, in other words, a visual reckoning with what is treated in the academy almost exclusively in its literary or linguistic dimensions. If we accept Sasson's (1981) contention that, owing to the rare colophon invoking the blessing of the scribe Sharruwa (ll. 98–101), the inscription is better understood as "memorial" written by Sharruwa in the first person rather than an autobiography commissioned by the king or his successor, we see immediately the impact of the convergence of image and text for Sharruwa's own political purposes. If indeed responsible for the final configuration of the stele, Sharruwa has ensured the difficulty of reading the inscription as other than *auto*biography by his placement of the narrative on the body of the king. He has also indicated a mode of viewing image *and* text as constitutive and ontological rather than representational, incorporating verbal and visual in the *ṣalmu* (Bahrani 2003: 121–48).

The idea of texts as available for visual reckoning is one that dovetails with the concept of object agency and with previous studies of the visual dimensions of text in the ancient Near East (for example, Russell 1999: 230; Langin-Hooper n.d.; May 2012). One of the clearest examples of a textual object as a mediator of social relations is found in the recent discovery of a cuneiform "oath tablet" inscribed with a vassal treaty of Esarhaddon in Building XVI – a long-axis temple – at Tell Tayinat (Harrison and Osborne 2012; Lauinger 2012). The tablet, pierced horizontally, likely for mounting on a wall, was found in situ in the cella along with amulet-shaped tablets, suggesting that it was placed there specifically for display and even that it was found where it fell from its mount (Harrison and Osborne 2012: 137).[35] If the excavators are correct in their argument that the tablet was placed in the inner sanctum for display, we might conclude that this placement was intended to ensure the subject's adherence to the terms of the treaty through its *viewing* (Steymans 2006). This idea finds perhaps its strongest evidence in the text itself, where the governor of Kunalia is commanded to "guard like your god this sealed tablet of the great ruler on which is written the *adê* of Assurbanipal … which is set up before you" (Lauinger 2012: 112; see also Scurlock 2012: 178).[36] Like the words inscribed on the body of Idrimi, the Tayinat

35 The discovery of tablets in temples is not unusual. For examples from Assyria proper, see discussion in Harrison and Osborne 2012: 137.

36 Lauinger (2012: 178) shows clearly that the object of the verb "guard" (*naṣāru*) is the tablet itself and not specifically the words of the oath. He suggests, furthermore, that "the verb might convey the sense of obeying or heeding the (divine) sealed tablet's stipulations as if they were divine commands" (*ibid.*).

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oath tablet was a visual instantiation of past events, in this case an oath mediating a relationship between Assyria and its vassal. The agentive status of the item, further, might be supposed from the ritualized obliteration of such tablets, parallel to the mutilation of figural images during conquest or other social upheaval (Levtow 2012; Scurlock 2012).

Conclusions

I have hoped to lay out here some of the most pressing concerns with and prevalent approaches to the relationships between word and image in the ancient Near East and to show that there might be something crucial gained if, rather than asking how Mesopotamian rulers and patrons communicated, signaled, and broadcast their messages, we examined how their imagetexts instantiated, constituted, and embodied their authority, presence, or history. Although this and previous studies have highlighted the (often undue) influence of logocentric hierarchies in differentiating image and word, it is not to say that semiotic or representational approaches must be excised from the discipline – rather, that they take their place beside analyses that appreciate texts and images in their material and ontological dimensions. Neither can be reduced to the other. Images can signify, and texts can be iconic. With Winter (2007: 61–62), I would say that "instead of having to choose 'art as a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it,' one is enjoined to see art both as a system of meaning encoding propositions about the world and as a system of action intended to change the world, precisely because the excitation generated by the work lies in the interaction between the two." My concern here has been to show that the terminal reduction of images, or indeed, the whole of the Mesopotamian visual (and textual) corpus, to messages, statements, and narratives runs the risk of eliding the material presence crucial for their reception and of ignoring positive native indications of how such were to be reckoned with. It risks blinding the observer to the ways in which non-verbal dimensions such as materiality, presence, and agency might inform the study of texts known to us and to ancient audiences exclusively through their material presentation as well as to the dynamics of the reciprocal interaction of text and image on such objects. The hope is that laying bare some of the hidden assumptions that tend strongly to inform studies of imagetexts can open the conversation to a richer appreciation of the dynamic ways ancient Mesopotamians negotiated the relations between language and depiction.

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