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VISUAL COMMUNICATION – THE TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS IN GÜNTER GRASS' NOVEL *DER BUTT*

Abstract

We are living in an age of visual communication, where the image has taken over the first place as primary message carrier. The concept of “visual communication” has been often discussed not only in literary science but also in text linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. The issue of text-image connections and of “visual writing” as well as the fact that our time appears to stand for a technological and digital revolution have also led to the emergence of a new branch in text linguistics namely, visual communication linguistics¹.

Keywords: visual communication and art, verbal vs. graphic, language and art,

The beginning of a symbiotic relationship between the text and the image actually goes back to the earliest manifestations of writing. When language began to be “textualized” there was a fundamental change in its use and effect, since thereafter language not longer depended only on the sense of hearing, but also on sight. Language as manifest in texts thus started to be *visually* perceived, and its effect came to be similar to the one of images. On the one hand, from the evolutionary point of view, it is clear that the visual sign system preceded articulate language. The multidimensional process, on the other hand, began with the inscription of signs (and subsequently letters) on various material surfaces. It has continuously developed and will never come to its end, because it is a process not only of symbiosis between text and image, but also of mutual influence and interpenetration of different sign-systems in which what is *textual* becomes *visual*, and the other way around.

The history of writing, as presented, for instance, by Harald Haarmann (see especially Haarmann 1996), implies an evolution from pictorials (that is, graphic representations of “scenes” or “tableaux”, either ritual-mythological or domestic), to pictograms (such as the representations of plants, animals, humans, implements etc., like the ones included among the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs), to ideograms or logograms (such as the Chinese signs, which now look abstract, by extreme stylization of earlier pictograms), and eventually to alphabetic signs (which may be designated as phonograms, since they are meant to indicate sounds). In a more recent work, Haarmann (2011) focuses on what he considers to have been the earliest “high culture” of Europe, namely the “Danube civilization”, which, among other particular features, also appears to have made use of the earliest form of script. In a special chapter, focused on the “Danube script” (*Donauschrift*), Haarmann makes the following statements (2011: 193, my translation): “In all the writing systems of early civilizations one can identify visual motifs of particular forms of signs. It thus appears that in each original script there were a certain number of signs whose forms were inspired by symbols of the pre-script period.” The interesting thing is that, in the epilogue-chapter of the same book, Haarmann (2011: 257-265) addresses the issue of the “prolonged continuity” that appears to connect the symbolic representations of “Old Europe” and the

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¹ The field is also known as *Bildlinguistik* in German linguistic studies, as introduced in Diekmannschencke/Klemm/ Stöckl, 2011.

works of art created by modern artists such as Constantin Brancusi (Brâncuși in Romanian) and Henry Moore – see sculptures presented in Figures 96, 97, 99 and 100 included in the chapter under discussion.

Other specialists were preoccupied with the text-image relationships such as the ones manifest in the calligraphic works which had not only the usual functions of written language, but also an artistic function belonging to the domain of visual arts. The contents of a text thus become as important as its external form, and the text-sense is completed by its form (cf. Wolf 2000: 289). After the debates on the *pictorial turn*² and, subsequently, on the *iconic turn*³ in the early 90's, there occurred a certain a revolution in approaches to image. Many linguists/semioticians developed their own theories of visual communication and analytical methods concerning the vast realm of the relationship between visual and verbal signs.

The issue of whether the visual or the verbal sign is primary has also been the subject of many studies that aimed to explain the privileged status of words over pictures/images and also to explain whether it is appropriate or not to consider that there is priority of language over other types of sign systems. A fundamental work concerning the study of signs and the importance of the non-verbal sign belongs to the American philosopher C. S. Peirce (1977)⁴, who developed a system for sign analysis designated as “trichotomic”, as it includes iconic, indexical and symbolic categories of meaning, thus providing a wider perspective for the interpretation of visual signs.

As for linguistics, in the early 80's the Romanian linguist Eugeniu Coseriu developed his own “text-linguistics of sense” (*Textlinguistik des Sinns*), by which he aimed to explain how “text-sense” emerges from various relations due to which the linguistic sign functions in the speech act. Coseriu (1981: 137) deals with issues such as the relations of signs with other signs, or the relations between signs of a particular text with signs of other texts⁵. And, in regard to aspects of direct importance for the present article, Coseriu focuses on “the knowledge of things” (*Kenntnis der Sachen*), that is, more abstractly, on the network of relations between signs and our knowledge of the *designata*. From such a perspective all the relations implied by a text and the corresponding evocations that reflect the extra-linguistic reality actually constitute the text-sense proper.

Later on, the well-known Italian semiotician and fiction writer Umberto Eco presented the language system as something that what represents human beings as such, that is, as “semiotic animals” (1986: 12). In Eco's view, language encompasses the whole of the “human significance”, which thus appears to be a primary communication code. Other relevant theories on the text-image relations were formulated by a series of authors, such as Barthes (1977), and Martin (1992), each of them with particular ideas regarding the classification of the text-image relations and the possible relationships between the two sign systems under discussion.

Last but not least, in 2014 Leslie Ross published her book entitled *Language in the Visual Arts – The Interplay of Text and Imagery*. In her introduction Ross states that written language might be said “to ultimately derive from pictures” (see also Haarmann's vision above), and then she makes the following observation of direct interest for the present article:

Although the written and pictorial modes of human communication are distinctly different and function well independently of each other, this book is concerned with what happens when the two modes are directly and deliberately combined.

Not surprisingly, since she is a specialist in history of art, Leslie Ross first focuses on written “labels” and “messages” attached to paintings (see especially page 8 of her introduction). However, she resorts to other angles and perspectives too, as clearly indicated by the titles of her chapters, which reflect issues such as “pictures in words/ words in pictures”, “words as images” or “monumental and moving words”. As for “deliberate combination” of the “written and pictorial modes”, I have my own choice of a really representative creator (see below)

² W. J. T Mitchell used the formula *pictorial turn* in his work *Bildtheorie* (1992).

³ After the example of the *linguistic turn* (Rorty 1967), the formula *iconic turn* was introduced by Gottfried Boehm in 1994 in his *Was ist ein Bild?* (1994). The latter aimed to develop a science of the image in following the example of the general science of language.

⁴ C. S. Peirce *Semiotics and Signifcs* (1977).

⁵ At that time Coseriu did not use the notion of *intertextuality* with the sense that was to be developed by subsequent specialists in text linguistics.

After this brief introduction to the theoretical fields of visual communication and of text-image relationships, respectively, I will focus on the particular creations of an artist-and-writer who, in my opinion, is most illustrative for the issue of the interdependent relationship between the visual and the verbal. Such an issue simply cannot be overlooked in interpretations of one particular novel published by the author I chose to discuss.

The German novelist and 1999 Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass is mostly known for his first novel, *The Tin Drum*, as well as for his harsh social criticism and for certain shadows in his youth. What is not widely known about Grass, as a controversial figure, is that he initially was a sculptor and a graphic artist and he subsequently turned to fiction writing, apparently in order to achieve a “more complete” expression of his views and ideas. We might say that he reached literature via plastic art. Also remarkable is that each of his major literary works stimulated his parallel creation of particular graphic or plastic works. The world of his drawings and sculptures remained in a close and interdependent relationship with the text-world of his prose and poetry.

When Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1999, the argument of the Nobel board was that he was an author “whose frolicsome black fables portray the forgotten face of history”⁶. Grass himself found the question of whether he was first a plastic artist or a fiction writer to be silly but somehow understandable. He had never seriously thought of it, as we may understand from the following statements:

Verbally or graphically (*zeichnerisch*) speaking, it is the gray values (*Grauwerte*) which create the shades and steps of our reality and which blur it or make it transparent. Only paper is white. It must be stained and provided with a living – either solid or breakable – outline, or be populated with words (*mit Wörtern besiedelt*), which will narrate the reality anew, and each time differently.⁷

The two forms of art in which Grass was active as an original ambivalent creator did certainly stimulate each other. However, a certain degree of opposition/difference between drawing and writing may rise when an idea becomes “visual” when put into words, or when it becomes “verbal” as a sign (Grass 1986: 7).

In 1977, Grass published his most important fiction work, *Der Butt*⁸, which can be said to have represented a new height in the literature of postwar Germany. The novel presents the history of men and women (or, rather, Man and Woman), of matriarchate and patriarchate, from the early Stone Age to the present. The central theme was inspired by the folktale of “the fisherman and his wife” (*Der Fischer und seine Frau*), as recorded by the Grimm Brothers. In Grass’ novel the talking fish of the tale, a flatfish (*Butt*) becomes a central character and a true spirit of the world (*Weltgeist*). He – rather than “it” – stands for the conscience of humankind. Eventually he is held responsible for the ills of the patriarchate, and he is eventually brought to trial by women.

Along with his work on the flounder-story, there began a phase of direct and close relationship between the graphic/plastic and the literary creation of the artist. The drawings and etchings helped him in the conception of the flounder’s tale, and they appear to be comments and interpretations of the novel as well as further food for thought, for both the author and his public.

⁶ <http://www.nobelprize.org>

⁷ It was with some difficulty that I produced an approximate translation of Grass’ statements, which I may label as “graphically expressive”. The original passage reads: „Wörtlich oder zeichnerisch genommen: es sind die Grauwerte, die unsere Wirklichkeit tönen, stufen, eintrüben, transparent machen. Weiß ist nur das Papier. Es muß befleckt, mit harter oder brüchiger Kontur belebt oder mit Wörtern besiedelt werden, die die Wahrheit immer neu und jedesmal anders erzählen” (Grass 1986: 7).

⁸ Already in 1978, Richard Manheim published his English translation of *Der Butt* into English, under the title of *The Flounder*. Unfortunately, I do not have that translation at hand (therefore I will use my own translations of excerpts from *Der Butt*); I will, however, use the term *flounder* in referring to the special central character of Grass’ novel. I consider that an analysis of the original novel in parallel with its English translation would be quite interesting, not only for translation studies. In that respect, at this point I will only observe that, true enough, English *flounder* (= Romanian *cambulă*) does designate a kind of flatfish, but for German *Butt* (more precisely for what Grass presents as *Steinbutt*) I would prefer a more “etymological” translation, by English *turbot*. That term, of Scandinavian loan, originally was a compound (meaning something like “thorn-flatfish”) whose second element was actually a cognate of German *Butt* (see the *turbot* entry in AHDEL). I will return to all these in an article to-be.

Besides the flounder as central character, to whom the author dedicates many passages of the text as well as an important amount of graphic works, there also are drawings or etchings for each of the important folktale figures of the novel, such as the mythical three-breasted Aua, the flounder-kissing Dorothea, or Sophie with her phallic mushroom-hat. In Grass' own view, drawing makes mythical and never-heard-of things become tangible (Grass 1986: 7); graphic representations allow the multi-talented artist to go as deep as possible into the world of an old tale and then to recreate it according to his own vision⁹.

The Stone-Age narrator of the novel (as Grass' alter-ego) introduces himself as creator of images; but he also mentions that the "motherly-divine" Aua got angry and forbade him to do it again. Her explanation was that *she* had never seen anything like that before, and that "it was only imagined, therefore not true"¹⁰. According to the author himself, the confrontation with the concrete world is actually a theme of his novel. It is not only about the graphic representation of the mythical "never-seen" characters just for the sake of "materialization", but also about the image as a touchstone for what is written. Grass considers that "the verse is endangered by the prattle of arbitrary interpretations"; and he adds: "It is only after its translation into the graphic image that the word metaphor proves to have stability"¹¹.

As already mentioned above (in regard to the principles of Coseriu 1981) a higher text-sense emerges from the special interlocking relationship between the sign to other signs (or, in our special case, between writing and drawing). It is not only about text-sense as "completed" by graphic means, but also about the so-called *Ekphrase*¹² as means by which a verbal text makes something visible, as in a description of a work of art.

There are numerous "picturesque" presentations of the flounder in the text of Grass' novel, and each of them can be referred to a corresponding drawing or etching entitled *Der Butt*, by the same creator. As we know from Grass himself¹³, part of those graphic representations actually preceded, the writing of the novel that contains many passages like the following one (*Der Butt*: 41, my translation):

As in all flatfishes (*bei allen Plattfischen*), his eye-axis (*Augenachse*) is set aslant in relation to his wry mouth (*Schiefmaul*), which gives him the nine-time-smart (*neunmalklug*) as well as malicious look that I will call intermediary sight: he has a squinting-furtive vision of time.¹⁴



Großer Butt (Great Flounder) Etching 1977

⁹ Cf. Brandes 1998: 69.

¹⁰ My translation after *Der Butt* (ed. 1977): 33.

¹¹ My translation after Grass 1986: 8.

¹² Here is an excerpt from the German version of Eco's book on translation: „Wenn man erörtert, wie ein verbaler Text etwas sichtbar macht und anschaulich darstellt, kann man das Problem der Ekphrase nicht ignorieren, das heißt der verbalen Beschreibung eines bildlichen Werks, ob Gemälde oder Skulptur [...]“ (Eco 2006: 247).

¹³ As quoted in Brandes 1998: 57.

¹⁴ Since I feel I could not possibly be precise enough in my translation, here is the original: „Wie bei allen Plattfischen ist seine Augenachse im Verhältnis zum Schiefmaul schräg verkantet, was ihm den neunmalklugen und zugleich tükischen, ich sage zwischensichtigen Blick gibt: er schielt zeitraffend“.

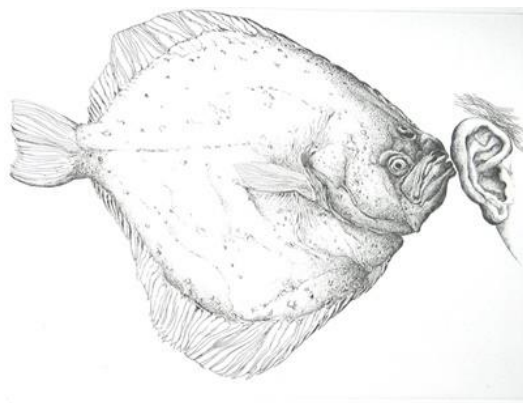


© Der Butt (The Flounder) Etching, 1982

In many of Grass's presentations of the flounder he uses one of his favorite devices, namely the pun. From the chapter about "how the flounder was caught" I translated the following excerpt (*Der Butt*: 32):

There spoke the flounder.

I am not sure whether it was his wry-mouthed address (*seine schiefmäulige Ansprache*) that amazed me more than the flat fact (*die platte Tatsache*) of catching a broad-billeted (*breitgelagert*) flounder in an eel-basket (*Aalreuse*).



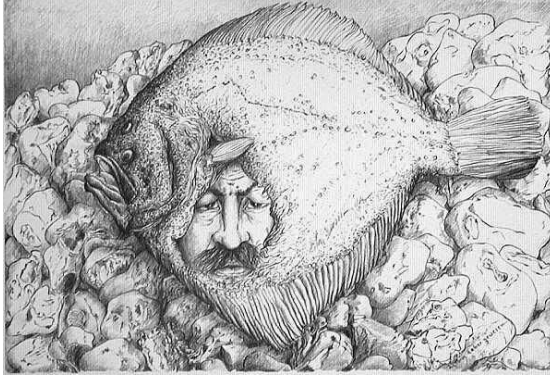
Günter Grass
Der Butt (The Flounder), 1977

The now famous cover drawing of the first edition of Grass' novel presents the flounder as a spiritual adviser, whispering into the ear of the fisherman/narrator/author, and giving him all necessary information. In the literary text the writer uses a metaphorical presentation in order to underline the "all-knowing" character of the flounder (*Der Butt*: 43):

And the flounder kept us up-to-date. I had to just call and the swimming newspaper (*die schwimmende Zeitung*) would come straight away.

There is another series of drawings corresponding to the same part about "how the flounder was caught" (the first and the second time). Those drawings show "man inside flounder" (*Mann im Butt*), more precisely they show the author's self-portrait integrated in the body of the flounder, under the side fin. It appears to be a graphic representation of the Jonas-motif, which implies initiation by engulfing followed by rebirth. The reference goes further back (as suggested in Hille-Sandvoß 1986) to the Jewish legend about a young man first swallowed by a fish and then by the Leviathan itself. The journey into the deep was meant to reveal secret knowledge through which he is allowed to reach valuables. One may certainly think of the Leviathan when Grass' specifies that the particular flatfish that he regards as "my own" is one known as *Steinbutt*; the latter has "pebblelike bony bumps" on its skin, which makes it different from other flatfishes that Grass enumerates in the following passage, which, for my own reasons, I will give in the original:

Dabei gibt es den Glattbutt, den Heilbutt, den Goldbutt, den Strufbutt. Meiner war und ist ein sogenannter Steinbutt, der dem Glattbutt zwar ähnelt, doch buckeln kieselsteingroße Verknöcherungen seine Haut (*Der Butt*: 41).



Mann im Butt (Man in Flounder), Etching, 1977

I chose to give this excerpt in the original because it directly reflects Grass' keen sense of his native tongue, which happens to be richer than other languages in lexical elements of the category that a German linguist, Hans-Martin Gauger (1971), designated as "transparent words", *durchsichtige Wörter*. What Gauger referred to was mainly words that are transparently based on other words of the same language; and in that respect we may analyze the very compound-and-derivative *durchsichtig*, which combines *durch* 'through' and *Sicht* 'sight' (the latter also having *sichten* 'to catch sight of' among its derivatives)¹⁵. Grass proves to be a master in his choice of transparent and quite evocative terms of the German language (see, in the quotation above, names of fishes such as *Glattbutt*, *Goldbutt* and *Steinbutt*, literally meaning 'smooth-flounder', 'gold-flounder' and 'stone-flounder', respectively); but he is even more impressive in creating his own compounds and derivatives, by which he somehow recreates both reality and the German language "anew" (see *kieselsteingroße Verknöcherungen* above, or see *neunmalklug* 'nine-time-smart' in another quotation of the present article).

To return to Grass' graphic works, there is another series of drawings with the title *The Kiss* (see, for instance, the picture of *Kuß I*), related to a recurrent motif in Grass' novel, namely Ilsebill-kisses-the-fish. There is a certain erotic tension rising from these graphic works dedicated to the unreal meeting of the woman (in several hypostases) and the cold fish. By insisting on the effects of the "fishy" kiss Grass appears to suggest that women allowed men and the patriarchal system to "deface" them, that is to make them lose their true identity. Such an idea is graphically expressed in Grass's kiss-drawings by the marked change in the facial physiognomy of the fish-kissed woman, the features of the flounder being transferred onto her face after the kiss. As for Grass' wording of such aspects, I will give some translated excerpts from *Der Butt*: 171-174. To mark is the particular (and specific German) opposition between *Mund* ('human mouth') and *Maul* ('animal's mouth, muzzle'), and the more or less discreet replacement of the former by the latter (in the first excerpt).

The flounder said nothing, but he offered Dorothea his crooked mouth (*sein schiefes Maul*)[...]. They kissed long. A suck-kiss (*Saugkuß*). They kissed without closing their eyes. [...] She was changed after the kiss. Her mouth (*ihr Mund*) had, even if not so obviously, curled up (*verzogen*). [...] With a slightly

¹⁵ In regard to the high degree of *Durchsichtigkeit* of the German language, in comparison with other languages, let me observe that *durchsichtig* (as based exclusively on "native" material) is itself more transparent for German speakers than *transparent* (a French loan) is for English speakers. More to the point, all the German names of flatfishes in the quotation above are native-and-transparent, unlike English *flounder*, *plaice*, *turbot* and *brill* (which were borrowed, according to AHDEL, from Norman French, Old French, Scandinavian and Cornish, respectively), and also unlike Romanian *calcan* and *cambulă*, as non-transparent flatfish-names borrowed from other Balkan languages (according to DELR, vol. II, 2015.).

crooked mouth (*mit leicht schiefem Maul*) she immediately wanted the flounder to tell her how many women he had kissed before.

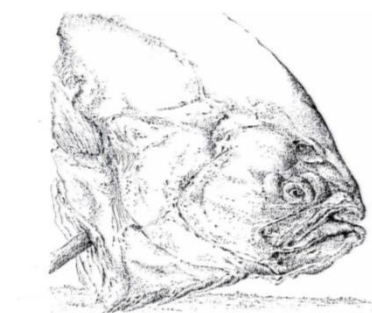
When Dorothea came back, I could see that her mouth (*ihr Mund*) had curled up and was sideways canted in relation to her eye-axis.

[...] her eyes were now also slightly crosswise (*quer*) and canting towards the crooked mouth (*zum schiefem Mund*). She came back fish-eyed (*fischäugig*), just as I will draw her, whenever Ilsebill will sit still for me.



Günter Grass
Kuß I (Kiss I), 1975
Etching

“I write down on what remains”¹⁶ states the author in the poem *What I write about*¹⁷. What is left over? It is mostly head-and-bones that remain of a consumed fish, and that is what Grass wanted to render by images and by written words. And again he dives into a mythical past, as he refers to the motif of the *Stangenfisch* (which I will literally translate as “pole-fish”) and to the heathen festival of Mestwina. As part of that spring festival, children would carry long poles on which fish-heads were fixed. And again Grass had the pleasure of an enumeration of fishes: ritually displayed were heads of sturgeon (*Stör*), haddock (*Dorsch*), Vistula-salmon (*Weichsellachs*) and bottom-catfish (*Grundwels*); but, “in front of all fishes” (*allen Fischen voran*) there were “wry-mouthed squinting-eyed flounder-heads” – *quermäulige schiefäugige Buttköpfe* (*Der Butt*: 107).



27 Butt I (1973)

Butt I (The Flounder I), Etching 1973

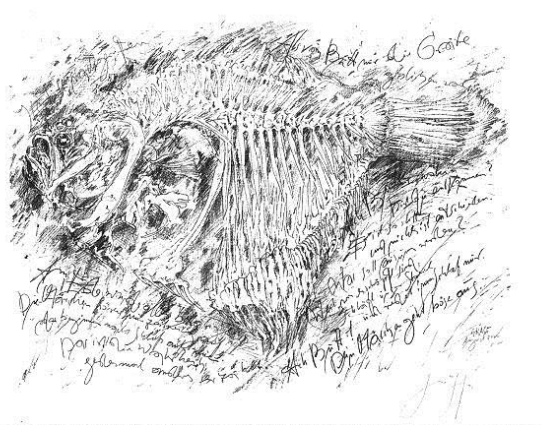
¹⁶ *Was übrig bleibt, schreibe ich auf* (*Der Butt*: 14).

¹⁷ *Worüber ich schreibe* (*Der Butt*: 14).

In the last part of the novel the flounder is caught, or, rather, as he was tired of serving men, he allows feminists of the late 70's to catch him. He offers to help women run the world again, but instead of taking his offer the feminists decide to bring him to trial, as a war criminal, for his many offenses against womankind. After the trial the story of the flounder comes to an unfortunate end. He is found guilty for the many year of oppression of women and sentenced to exile on the island of Mon. The flounder is downcast not only literally but also graphically. A series of drawings by Grass represent not only the remains of the fish, but also the dead flounder on the table, with his mouth open and his eyes closed, ready to be cooked (see below),. As for written representation, two decades after *Der Butt* Grass published a graphic-poetic entitled *Oh flounder, your tale has an ill end* (*Ach Butt dein Märchen geht böse aus*), which speaks for itself. As for the flounder, we are told (in verse) that he is no longer allowed to speak: "You have nothing to say any more./ You've done it for centuries./ We will simply switch you off." And the final blow is: "Without a text are you not even funny any longer" – *Ohne Text bist du nicht mal mehr komisch*.¹⁸



Butt mit Messer (Flounder with Knife), Etching 1977



Als vom Butt nur die Gräte geblieben war (As there were only the bones left of the Flounder), Etching 1977

Grass certainly is impressive in his *Werk und Wirkung* (cf. Wolff 1985). The arguments and facts presented above, as selective as they are, can sustain the conclusion that by inter- and trans-artistic devices, either by "paper populated with words" or by "copper on stone"¹⁹, Grass directly addresses sight, but he is also evocative enough to stir the other senses, especially touch and taste. We may say he is a master of synesthesia. In simpler words, Grass is a nine-time-smart maker of telling pictures and graphic writings.

¹⁸ See Grass 1996: 3

¹⁹ See title of Margull 1986.

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