The Word for a Thousand Pictures

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One could say that a picture is worth a thousand words. In fact, it’s been said so many times that those seven words in sequence—whatever they’re worth—have accrued enough saying to be called a saying. As if everything but the physical act of their phonetic production had worn away from some prior, proper, or possible task of meaning. A saying about the value of a picture: How better to state the inflationary poverty of saying as such?

Not just speech, though—the material values that words, in and of themselves, have the power to set. For instance, there is even some truth to be found in this truism. A picture is worth a thousand words: I can think of no more economical way to say that truth is only ever a jargon. For in its most notorious connotation, jargon is a slightly more tactful term for the crass economic functions of language—accumulation, residual rights, circulation. And as Derrida has explained in the context of a discussion about performativity, the possibility of any word at all to signify as part of a communicative language depends on the accumulation of systematic meaning that it gains in the process of circulation. He calls it “iterability”: to speak a word and have it mean something relies precisely on the capacity of speech to “cite,” to reiterate the entire history of this accumulation almost instantly, and to add to it in turn. Still, like the saying, the truism, and rhetoric, the bad reputation of jargon derives from a suspicion that only the material procedures of language circulate through it, that the heavy trade of a tongue by its professional speakers leads to an accumulation of linguistic exchange-values that have nothing to do with use-value, which is to say, nothing to do with the circulation of truth, meaning, or ideas. In fact, this process of circulation is often treated as if it actually resulted in the evacuation of meaning from words instead of the palimpsestic accumulation of meaning that appears to occur when a jargon is passed around, an evacuation where words cannibalize their souls but not their bodies; once again, the best metaphor is that of currency inflation. This is surely why Adorno is content to treat jargon as a term for the wholesale commodification of language under capitalism without any real qualification in his writings on the culture industry—why he doesn’t see any need to reflect on the density of his own writing or the specialized language it requires. Jargon is the vulgar materialism of language.

And yet, anti-jargon sentiment could hardly be identified with the straightforward Marxist project that it so has in British and American cultural studies, where scholars have long insisted upon the necessity of writing about popular culture and images in terms accessible to the people. On the contrary, like all words the term jargon carries its own implicit values, and when used as an accusation—as it inevitably is—these values also accrue in a highly specialized account of the truth. I’ll get right down to brass tax: for all its anxiety about rampant exchange, the discourse against jargon is also quite often a discourse of the free-market. The jargon of anti-jargon in the academy today, for instance, is an intellectual expression of that abiding faith in economic liberalism—and more specifically, the latter’s inherent ability to automatically realize both the public
interest and the public good—which indeed founds the notion of the liberal arts education, which is to say, the modern university. An academic multiculturalism: this is perhaps what the great liberal philosopher William James imagined when he extolled the virtues of the liberal arts curriculum. But it is not for nothing that the free-market values undergirding every American discourse of liberalism—yes, multiculturalism, too—is what survives in the brand of interdisciplinary scholarship being so vehemently promoted in humanities programs by college administrations today. Because diversification is always the final watchword of liberalism, whether it concerns the marketplace, society, or the academy, in liberal thought the anxiety of some kind of heterogeneity that doesn’t fall within its parameters is often expressed as hostility toward some irrational force of homogeneity. Here, the ill repute of jargon has to do with the way it impedes circulation. Scholars who use jargon cannot win grants to fund their work from private corporations and institutions that do not understand their self-enclosed words and traditions of thought, and as a result, they depend more on university funding; scholars who use jargon cannot easily expand their readership or release a spoken word album that might appear on the Times bestseller list because they speak in unreasonable ways; scholars who use jargon cannot hold appointments in three different departments that are all desperate for new faculty because they speak a language of only one party-line. In short, scholars who use jargon are not high-return investments.

If one of the most prominent charges against jargon has to do with the excess exchange of “empty” or “nonsensical” words, then, the other has to do with the embargoes that jargon effectively sets up on the free trade of scholarship in the humanities. Accordingly, it is not so much the rampancy of exchange itself that makes jargon bad; it is the rampancy of exchange in a closed market; it is the communicative incest that breeds that other irrational bugaboo of liberalism, the faction; it is the possibility of non-holistic, or more to the point, inefficient circulation. Whatever else it is, in the context of the academy jargon is the very linguistic breeding ground of radicalism, both political and intellectual. To speak in jargon is to betray a basic American truism—a jargon to be sure—that all differences are equal and can as such be recuperated into some commensurable social whole; it is to speak the material evidence of a social, economic, cultural, intellectual, ideological, and economic division that cannot automatically be recuperated or traded. The materiality of jargon is the last instance of an economy that does not, in the last instance, uphold the

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truism of the last instance—unless, of course, the economy in question is the economy of language.

This is not at all to say that the use of jargon is inherently radical, whether in a conservative or progressive sense. Even the greatest defenders of the radical possibilities that jargon can hold for developing new ways of thinking would have to admit that depending on how one uses it, jargon can indeed bind minds into familiar pig-paths of thought and language. But the term jargon only really serves its enemies, that is, people who are willing to say something is uninteresting, stupid, or meaningless strictly because they do not understand the terms of the ideas in which it deals. Jargon
of course, all this talk about speech and writing may not tell us everything. If the truism *A picture is worth a thousand words* holds some truth about the economization of language for which jargon is the epithet, then jargon cannot just be about the materiality of words. To begin with, this saying can only economize language because it sets the latter's losing trade-rate at a picture, because a picture holds some value equivalent to the accumulation of language, and thus to jargon. That is, both the saying and the jargon it summons want to trade words for a picture. We could at least do them the service of a metaphor, which Paul de Man has already described as “a language of desire” that attempts “to recover what is absent” of the sensual world. Let’s call them tattoos and see what happens. After all, whatever anonymous voice it is that utters such sayings in the ears of every speaker—the “one” of speech that means both “us” and “someone else,” “anyone else”—does in some sense tattoo its patterns on the skin of a language. Intimacy with a language means knowing the truncated phrases written permanently in that “one’s” idiomatic folds, and written so well that the graphic pattern they form grows familiar enough, over time, to be co-substantial with skin itself, to be the truth of that skin’s living experience.

If philosophy has insisted on any truth at all in the last century or so, it is along these basic lines. Truth, it is said—let alone the truism—is just an enduring figure of speech. Like the metaphorical coin whose proper exergue rubs off between the hands of Anatole France, Nietzsche, and Jacques Derrida. Passing it from one text to the next so that it gains in value each time, France, Nietzsche, and Derrida have each used the metaphor of the coin to render another detail in the same rough scenario: the elision of metaphor with truth, the enfolding of rhetoric with being, and the resulting blur between philosophy and literature. Nietzsche says it best, or anyhow, most memorably:

> What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses, coins which have their obverse *effaced* and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.

Contemplating the history of this proposition as it runs through Western thought, from the erection of metaphysics in Athens to the demolition of it in Paris, Derrida very famously declared metaphor to be philosophy’s “blind spot.” Because the very notions of truth, objectivity, the total horizon of being, and so on, are all predicated on the erased value of particular metaphors that might in fact be exchanged for others, knowledge—philosophical or otherwise—can never exit the economy of language to reflect on it unencumbered. Hence the metaphor of the blind spot: referring to Plato’s privileged metaphor of the Good—the sun—Derrida observes that the ultimate metaphor of thought is in fact a bad one, which is to say, an optic metaphor that nevertheless precludes the sort of sensual, and in this case visual, comparison that a
good metaphor demands. One is, he suggests—we are—taught from the beginning that the truth of the Good can never be sensually verified, so we might as well give up on any direct apprehension or proof that it is in fact what it says it is. We are in turn allowed to forget the image and instead equate the sensation of vision with an amorphous sensuality that must, to be trusted, be appraised by the only currency for thought, the word. The rich trade in metaphor in Western philosophy is literally a product of its blindness to images; it is the material substitute for that blindness, the price our words pay because they cannot be pictures—cannot even think pictures.

In this sense, Derrida's own investment in the circulation of the coin metaphor makes up the very substance of his argument about the relationship between metaphor, truth, and the scopophobia of Western philosophy: it binds together the genealogy of philosophical discourses on truth that he traces in order to find metaphor there each time, the unseen culprit skulking in the background of every photograph from the crime scene of a notorious unsolved mystery. How could he make this highly convincing and even radical case against philosophy’s use of metaphor without buying into the jargon that is its material substance? And yet, if Derrida’s intervention in this argument consists of expanding it to comment on the larger disciplinary discourse in which both he and Nietzsche themselves participate, then his argument also elides metaphor with jargon; the coin metaphor, and arguably the coin of metaphor in general, become recognizable as privileged forms of philosophical jargon, and only then become visible as problems. It is after all the accumulation of coin metaphors that first occasions Derrida’s inquiry into the economy of metaphor.

It is likewise the accumulation of the metaphors he cites that allows him to argue that philosophy cannot exit the economy of metaphor as such, to say nothing of the coin metaphor in particular—let alone the imagery it uses to conceal that economy’s blind spots.

All of this is to say that I am not even convinced that metaphor is the right term for the figure of speech to which Derrida and Nietzsche attribute the linguistic production of truth. For even in Nietzsche’s phrasing, it is only “after long usage” that these “illusions” of meaning “seem to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding.” In other words, the appearance of identity that metaphor would describe between a particular claim to the truth and the truth itself is not ultimately secured by the appropriateness of metaphor, that is, by a convincing appearance of identity between this truth and truth as such, between the imagery used and the thing for which it stands in; this appearance of identity is itself secured by the ongoing exchange of one term for another and the truth-values that accrue to a point at which the “nation” that specializes this economy simply forgets that it is speaking a specialized language and citing a code, that is, forgets it is speaking a jargon. It is secured by the seemingly natural survival of the words themselves in the flux of communal communicability—in short, by the inflationary economics at hand in the physicality of the saying.

The violence that the saying threatens is, like the violence that declaring a truth threatens, the threat that jargon seems to pose to those who fear it: the threat that a
community grown deaf to the bizarre specializations of its own language is imposing the truisms, values, and codes of that language beyond its own finite borders—even though all of it is, in the end, just an irrational and undemocratic echolalia. The quasi-metaphorical or catachrestical quality of jargon begins this procedure—the community coins its argot precisely because the terms coined assume a provisional, though it must be said non-sensual, identity with what they are meant to describe or effect—and it ends with a quasi-metaphorical moment as well—a truth and the truth appear identical, like red and passion—but only the inflationary exchange of language that jargon names can actually broker the appearance of such a linguistic economy. And the violence that jargon purportedly entails—the gussying-up of otherwise “true” or widely recognizable experiences and with an inappropriately ornate, seemingly ill-fit terminology—would seem to describe quite precisely the sort of non-sensual comparison that metaphor cannot.

Isn’t this finally the crux of deconstruction itself as a philosophical endeavor? To pervert a language that eschews images, one must speak it; to dismantle a century’s worth of jargon, one must actually take the time to learn it, to enmesh oneself in the community whose linguistic boundaries it marks—at the risk of never leaving it. Just the same, when seen this way, Derrida’s treatment of metaphor in fact seems the wrong metaphor for both truth and the saying about pictures with which we began, or at the very least, Derrida’s metaphor for metaphor—the coin borrowed from Western philosophy’s jargon of truth—may be just as bad for it as Plato’s metaphor is for the Good. For indeed, while Derrida’s appropriation of this metaphor and its sensual drive makes all too visible both the fear of the image that founds Western philosophy (rather than simply preoccupying it) and the particular economy of values that scopophobia secures—most notably those of the Word, the Father, and the Word of the Father—it surely does patronize the scopophobic economy of jargon that it patronizes.

Perhaps most importantly—given the metaphor of the blind spot—in his own iteration of the coin metaphor and the discussion of metaphor it sets off, the ultimate stake of the philosophical problems that Derrida traverses still appears to be rhetorical, or more specifically, the stake of naming. While he details Plato’s own inattention to the material status of the image quite carefully, he does scarcely anything more to reconceive that status—for instance, by turning his thought to another way of understanding the status of the image in relation to thought, to metaphor, to materiality, or to language in general. He does not really ever speak of an image. The same could be said of de Man’s notion of both metaphorical language and the larger rhetorical category of the trope, which de Man describes rather beautifully as “a substitutive relationship that has to posit a meaning whose existence cannot be verified,” and which thus makes of all sensuality the ultimate material of language. I love this work, and de Man deals with the sensuality of literary metaphor in moving ways that I would not give up. But it unavoidably implies that metaphor, and by extension jargon, remains linked to the image, more or less, as the enclosure of an abstract sensual perception in the nominal shell of language. And while this way of putting matters makes all language something like the saying, it does not amount to quite the same thing as our saying unless “a thousand words” is just a metaphor for metaphor, or for excessive language in general—in which case, the materiality of the picture should nevertheless hold a far more sordid relationship to the materiality of words than the act of naming alone.
Given the scopic emphasis of the term *spectacle* and the economic process that Guy Debord coined this term to describe, it seems likely enough that the fascinating 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* would have quite a lot more to say about both the nature of this relationship and the materiality of pictures more generally. And yet, provocative as it is, this work seldom even mentions either the image or what makes *spectacle* spectacular outside the most famous line of the essay: “The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.” For Debord too, then, another sort of coin metaphor is in order: the image serves as a trope for the impoverished materiality that accumulates in the excess exchange and valuation of capital. More simply put, it is a metaphor for the *merely spectacular* value of money.

In this respect, it is not very surprising that virtually all of the recent invocations of Debord’s work (and there have been several!) treat the materiality of spectacle—if they ever get past the metaphor of money to begin with—as a problem strictly of and for language, and one that derives precisely from the *immaterial materiality* of pictures. In *The Coming Community*, for instance, Giorgio Agamben writes, “It is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans . . . [and] the alienation by capitalism of language itself, of the very linguistic and communicative nature of humans, of that *logos* which one of Heraclitus’s fragments identified as the Common.” Emphasizing both the staggering cost of losing this “communicative nature” and the only potential for its ultimate recovery, Agamben then quickly concludes that “in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.” Here, the pictorial occasion of spectacle is perhaps still worth a thousand words; for Agamben, the latter is simply traded out for the impoverished currency of the former.

Accordingly, *spectacle* names the *apparent* accumulation of communication—even a metaphor of accumulation, where the image stands in for a form of materiality that its own materiality by definition cannot capture—and thus almost immediately displaces the real use-value value that meaningful linguistic or social exchange might have. Working in a similar vein, Paolo Virno gives the title “Language on the Stage” to his brief section on spectacle in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, where he argues primarily that the labor of spectacle in the Post-Fordist era entails the mere performance of “linguistic competence,” so that communication becomes a commodity in its own right. In each of these two accounts, then, the materiality of language once again holds the place for an image to which we remain blind. Jargon becomes a purely linguistic metaphor for this immaterial-because-only-material picture, and spectacle the name for it, in what turns about to be a theory of jargon that does not yet realize itself as such.

The sense that metaphor is indeed just a matter of naming is not unique to figures associated with the set of ideas that some might dismiss, by way of a neat explanation, as the jargon of the linguistic turn. In the same casual manner as a jargon that has simply forgotten it is a jargon, this rough understanding of the relationship metaphor
describes between language and images seems all but obvious to a number of thinkers whose allegiances squarely outside the boundaries of a community that might finally boil everything down to what Derrida would call a “generalized writing.” In fact, the most adamant efforts to think the image outside of a linguistic paradigm—think Deleuze’s work on cinema—effectively arrive at the same point by insisting on the very lack of reciprocity between one medium and the other; metaphorical language, from this perspective, could still only hope to set an unfair price on the incommensurate stuff of the image.

Similarly, some of the most fascinating theorists of cinema who speak of metaphor treat the latter in much the same fashion, leaving both vision and images as the realms of a sensual possibility that can only be perverted by the very prospect of linguistic exchange, whether cinematic or verbal. For instance, the great avant-garde filmmaker and theorist Stan Brakhage begins an essay called “Metaphors on Vision” by beseeching the reader:

Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of “Green”? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the ‘beginning was the word.’

Metaphor, here, must be understood in a similar sense to the one we found in Derrida and de Man, even if for opposite reasons: “Green” is a trope, a metaphor, for a visual experience—and even an image, in the scheme of Brakhage’s own work—that can only be sold out by the coin of language. In fact, for Brakhage, all language can be understood as a production of blindness in an even deeper sense than for Derrida—even if it is a pictorial language such as Hollywood continuity editing; codification of any sort literally prevents us from seeing images. A picture is worth a thousand words, but despite appearances they are all different words, and not ever quite the right ones anyhow.

Of course, to watch a Brakhage film is in many respects to inhabit the task that his words collectively name. When I look at the film Nightmusic (1986), for instance, I see fat dabs of red, green, and blue paint pulsing in shifting formations at one rhythm for a few seconds, and then another before shifting again. Off and on I look by reflex for recognizable objects and signs in the fluctuating abstract color patterns, but I also recognize a pleasure of seeing that falls outside the pattern of recognition. If we may use the term “pictures” to speak of Brakhage’s films in the colloquial sense, then, here are some that would seem to defy, if any picture could, what we have said about both pictures and jargon, both in the odd lines above and in our thousand-fold acts of saying. They are expressly designed to stage the possibility of an image whose sensual materiality cannot be exchanged according to any set rate of meaning, cannot circulate
to a point where it codifies into a given community’s jargon or the accumulation of translations it inscribes. And yet, as Brakhage himself no doubt realized—after all, he did write—even his images are not without their exchange rate. For instance, Brakhage has said that the film mentioned above is meant to capture the experience of seeing with his eyes closed in a mood of sorrow, and perhaps ironically, it is this linguistic capture of the image that introduces the film on the DVD collection of Brakhage’s work. Also, on quite a different register, as part of the canon of American avant-garde cinema, we name that film and others abstraction. The visual aesthetic that materializes in his images has perhaps even become a trope for it: look-alike films grace the backdrops of a thousand indie rock concerts. Splendid and enigmatic as many of these films remain in the synaesthetic overflow of sound and image, then, they circulate throughout the cultural economy as the same familiar sort of metaphor for seeing that Brakhage would like to unmoor endlessly, again and again, wherever it rests. As artsy ambient backdrops, they signify the materialization of an aesthetic community that heralds abstraction even as it affects a new mode of blindness to it and a new business for it. In short, they have become a jargon: perhaps bearing the threat of an incoherent and meaningless expression of nonsense outside the community that speaks it, but rich with the codes of accumulations that have accrued through that exchange for anyone within it.

In this sense, one could say that Brakhage’s films have lived out the very same itinerary of perception that he describes in his writing: they began as a raw visual expression of his own subjective perception but end up, finally, caught up in the linguistic economy of naming, valuation, and objectification that attends the jargon of the cultural and intellectual marketplace. To appraise the situation in these terms would, after all, provide us with a particularly tragic example underwriting the jargon of another familiar, even shopworn name from Marxist discourse, one that comes with its own well-iterated promise of inevitability: commodification.

But maintaining this scenario comes with a price: it requires that we disavow the materiality of the picture as surely as Plato, Derrida, and de Man did. In this specific case, it means pretending that Brakhage’s pictures were in fact the same thing as his own subjective vision, rather than the projection of some part of it on a screen that is not his retina. And before we read or re-read Walter Benjamin, before the problem of mechanical reproduction even enters the historical frame, every picture already entails the kind of biopsy that Samuel Weber, channeling Heidegger and Benjamin at once, has translated into the word “emplacement”: that enclosure which attends every extraction for the purpose of circulation, a procedure which makes some small sample of the sensual world an object of technicity, something invested with the aura of a “here this is” as well as the potential to rearrange and re-place whatever there is “there” elsewhere.\(^1\)

Of course, while this account provides its own comforts, too, I am not happy with its jargon for the materiality of the image, either. For it is not simply the frame that makes a picture a picture any more than it is a name that that sets a price on it. That is, we have already rejected the idea that the materiality of language in general—and metaphor in particular—has contact with the materiality of the image strictly because it bounds the latter’s sensuality as an object for exchange. Frame, seen this way, is just a
metaphor for name, and an extension, in this much, of the jargon of metaphor that has gained such an unremarkable sense of currency with everyone. But is this really all we can say about it? What if the “vulgar” exchange of Brakhage’s films as products of art-cinema abstraction was always one of the thousand words written into its value as a picture? Or rather: what if this itinerary from subject to object does not simply signify the perversion of an image through language, metaphor, jargon, or the reproductive economies they embody and support, but rather, the basic perversity that animates the word, the sight, and the aesthetic quality of picture in the first place?

Perhaps neither the coin metaphor nor the coin of metaphor is the only form of currency in this economy. Perhaps metaphors of blindness are not so different from blindness, and recognizing the rhetorical nature of truth reveals as little about the logic of our pictorial truisms—a picture is worth a thousand words—as the jargon of a scopophobic philosophy. That is to say: since the saying with which we began does want to trade in both words and pictures, perhaps returning to both it and the metaphor we gave it will allow us to learn something new, something about pictures, jargon, and metaphor. And if we truly are trapped in the space of metaphor, which is different from being trapped in the jargon built around it, then the only way to change it may very well be to ask: what is the name of the coin to the name of the tattoo?

There is, to be sure, a robust tradition of name-based tattoos. There is the ever-popular name-of-the-mother, for instance, the name of a lover, or the name of some much desired metaphor taken for metal: MOM, WINONA, JUSTICE. But if anything, these name-based tattoos serve as a metaphor for the saying only because they invert the scenario described so succinctly by Derrida and his predecessors. That is, they give a distinctly stable material body to the notion of the saying, literally cutting into the skin to the same degree that they cut against the economy of metaphor embodied by the coin of Western philosophy heretofore. If the tattoo is a genre of writing just like philosophy, then it is one where the name gains power precisely because it ventures the same spectacular risk as jargon: outlasting the fleeting conference of “truth” in any sense at all, whether rational or sensual, whether confirmed by words of thought or the evidence of sight. Mothers, lovers, ideals: the pain of having a tattoo surgically erased—an operation that is just as likely to succeed only halfway as it is in the graphic analogy—necessarily includes the realization that all of these things are indeed particular values exchangeable for others. Just ask Johnny Depp, whose body began smooth and with the famous tattoo Winona Forever across it, but after two children with another woman and what seems like a lifetime in the same old skin and the same old magazines, bears a more sardonic mantra in its place: Wino Forever. A good metaphor, for all that anxiety about its sensual capacity to make one thing appear identical with another—and in the worst-case scenario, even metamorphose into it—would never sustain such a painful discontinuity. No, the tattoo of a name hews much closer to the threat posed by sayings and jargon, summoning both the rigidity of words and their potential to outlast the truth they declare. Rather than a coin that loses any claim of particular meaning because the exergue wears off to leave the smooth heft of metal as its sturdier base, we must imagine the part of a currency that is only
currency, and nothing more. We must imagine the possibility of an exergue or inscription suspended indefinitely with its metal worn away.

I cannot say that I would not like to linger on the image of this possibility that hangs in my mind. And yet, while this metaphor is perhaps a better one for the saying of jargon in general, it has not yet really upset the economy of language guaranteed by that same old coin as it circulates on and on through philosophy, from one account to the next. And in this much, it has not yet become a good metaphor for the particular saying with which we began, let alone the jargon it summons. A picture is worth a thousand words. Perhaps we should instead begin from the supply-side of the picture. For in the jargon of this saying—or at least the metaphor that has accumulated around it—the object of passion tattooed on the body of language is for something of another kind, something whose voluptuous detail may well exceed the quantifiable limits of what its own body can say. The passion of the saying is for another kind of body that is more precise and more enveloping at once, immeasurable and yet appraised with precision at the value of its own dissipation.

Put this way, anyone can see that the body inspiring it belongs not to the name of a mother, not quite to the name of a lover, not to the vengeance of philosophy’s forefathers, and not even to their currency today. Instead, it belongs to what we might call, most economically, a whore. Not the word *whore*; *whore* is not a name even in the way that *mom* inevitably is. The intimacy of the name *mom* necessarily signals that the essence of being a mom always means being someone’s mom. In contrast, the “one” of language could not tattoo *Whore* on its body and thus serve as the simple substitution for some *one* whore. If the word *whore* names anything at all, it is the potential for any woman to be a whore, to the exchangeability of a thousand women, to the tropic flesh of female body and soul. Not the word *whore*: after all nothing in this word signifies a passion for this potential, either. No, a tattoo declaring its passion for *whore* could only render itself outside the space of the name. This tattoo would have to show us the excess of both beauty and number, the infinite sensual accessibility, that *whore* connotes. And the very prospect of showing such things raises a problem that the trope cannot quite resolve if we understand it in the quintessentially substitutive, linguistic sense that has become such an ordinary jargon we hardly think of it. Namely, a simple linguistic substitution in place of the unverifiable is already a way of bounding the unbounded—the possibility of infinity and number do not quite coexist in this rather formulation, which makes of the trope an exchangeable version that marks precisely the absence of that unexchangeable, “unverifiable” referent. Something else, perhaps some aesthetic quality, would have to bridge this gap by showing us something of the passion for *whore*. But what is the aesthetic of loving a whore, and what would it have to do with this infinitized quantity?

Since words do not yet show, maybe an image—that thing to which one jargon was blind—is in order. People of course speak of visual tropes, and we can certainly begin to speak of this aesthetic and this image accordingly. Like a linguistic trope of any sort, a caricature of a woman who perhaps appears to exist for nothing but the purpose of sexual exchange could effectively stand in for the sensual absence of any particular woman who might be described in this way—perhaps even for woman as such, one could argue. We could even cite this visual trope for a certain kind of promiscuity. But
what is the nature of this promiscuity? Why would a caricature of \textit{whore} be so exchangeable, and how might the pleasure of this exchangeability materialize in it? Once again, a metaphorical resemblance or sense of identity could not secure such an operation alone, nor could the strictly substitutive function of the trope. That is, the caricature would not have such profound currency because it bore a specific resemblance to every single actual whore, substituting each time most effectively, nor would the conceit of affection arise from the “loving” sensual fact of the resemblance. After all, the kinds of visual “tropes” that threaten to assume a metaphorical sense of

identity with people of a given gender, race, or sexuality are insidious precisely because they do not survive on any necessary resemblance between the two to remain operative, significant, or rather, in circulation. They are a jargon that appears inappropriate and strictly the material stuff of images to anyone who does not see them as natural expressions of the truth, and even as expressions of fondness for the bodies they distort. What bigot with a painted pickaninny in the yard wouldn’t claim this ornament to be an expression of familiarity and even affection? What stuffed gollywog hasn’t been nuzzled? What angel in a centerfold not jerked upon? They are all exergues without metal; they are indelible tattoos that will only disappear from our economy of expressions if they are finally erased from the body—a painful and perhaps even impossible task, since the queering of a jargon that might make materialize it as such only ever results in a dubious kind of self-parody: \textit{Wino Forever}.

Rather than a sensual specificity or echo, then, it is perhaps instead some aesthetic quality of the picture itself that makes it tropic, and perhaps both the trope and jargon are linked to the materiality of the picture as something more than just vulgar instances of circulation: trade, accumulation, and the excess of exchange. But if the materiality of the image was sacrificed in the name of naming—in the name of a metaphor of the Good (however bad)—what should we call it now?

Perhaps it’s not necessarily a matter of \textit{calling} it something just yet. Imagine, then, the infinitely reproducible and reproduced curves of a woman’s body, perhaps a full-color rendering of a 1940s pin-up girl. Her waist narrows at a point where the shape of an hourglass and the symbol for infinity may or may not touch; the curves of her legs stretch longer than they ought to, punctuated on each end by a soft exaggeration of some sort, either the taut derriere or the tiny, distended arch of a foot that points its miniscule toes into the bottom of a high-heeled shoe; the bosoms, the hair, are also rounded off; only the pert nose, the cheekbones, and the lashes spike forward. But then, perhaps I have said too much already. Nothing requires that the woman in the tattoo look like a forties pin-up. In fact, the contours of her body could summon any feminine ideal whatsoever provided they fill out the aesthetic contours that appear roughly approximate to those of the trope itself: too little embellishment to belong to one woman and no other, but enough to warrant approximately three-and-a-half double-spaced pages of utterly resplendent verbiage. If not a picture. Or a magazine full of pictures. Or a movie full of girls made up to look like the pictures.
To put things most squarely, a picture: is this not the name for an erotic visual overflow that nevertheless carries the threat of being quantified and exchanged in its very lack of quantified meaning? Does it not emblematize the very aesthetic coincidence between clear figuration and sensual ambiguity that makes the trope into an infinitized marketplace for the valuation of this one, that one, and any other? Does the word picture not invoke the commerce and apportionment harbored within every unkempt sensation, including that ephemeral, potentially even disembodied experience of vision called an image? A picture, after all, gives up to anyone a kind of ecstasy that is by rights only given with a kind of impropriety, for it gives up what cannot ever be a given—the world as an object of sensuality—by giving up to anyone the subjective specificity that founds sensuality as such. Whether it shows something abstract or realist, familiar or unthinkably strange, a picture is always figurative in one very basic sense: it figures the act of looking that always occasions the material circulation of an image to begin with. Ever the game of whoring, to look at a picture is always to look at something that by definition has already been looked at in a particular way—and who knows by whom! It is the fucking of seeing: your eyes against the insides of someone else’s, regarding as object something sensual and thus most properly possessed as the very ground of that someone’s most precious secret, subjectivity itself.

The minimal element of figuration, then, arises from the invitation and the desire to find value in another’s incommensurable line of sight. For instance, to call one of Brakhage’s most subjectively internalized visions-on-celluloid a picture would call attention to the fact that he found this internal image meaningful enough, and coherent enough—even in its lack of a fixed or recognizable code—to share with others as a materialization of the mystery of vision. It contains just enough specificity to say something, but not so much that all has been said. At the opposite extreme, the kind of picture most often dismissed as such entails a sort of figuration more common to the language of the trope, for instance, our pin-up. It contains just enough specificity to say anything, but not so much that any one thing has been said. Even this sort of picture, for all its familiarity, can be endlessly inscrutable. Isn’t the perversity of the picture bound up with this threat, with the possibility that its subjective particularity will either distort the world or be distorted by it?

Yes, a ready perversion, that is what makes the picture so dangerous for Western philosophy: it does not simply substitute a purely subjective sensual expression for some lacking objective reality, nor does it simply subject the sensual plenitude of reality to the objectifying procedures of an exchangeable but ultimately inappropriate code; it does not simply trade between truth and lie, meaning and nonsense. Far worse, it makes a material spectacle of the objective world’s sensuality, which is to say, it embodies the failure of every effort to sunder any one of the above alternatives from the acts of perversion through which our perception, in fits and starts, both animates and embalms its truths. The word picture, then, describes a figure in its own right: a curve running along an asymptote that is always pointing at one end toward the unnamed live infinity of the sensual world, and at the other, toward the total enclosure of that world in a necrotic inventory—
without ever touching either. Or rather, the materiality of the picture is the coincident perceptual traversal of this asymptote in a moving act of exchange.

In “The Cinema of Poetry,” the filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini arrives at a closely related point about the cinematic image. Crafting a jargon of cinematic language from the splicing of linguistic terminology with new prefixes, he writes that “cinema, or the language of im-signs, has a double nature. It is at the same time extremely subjective and extremely objective (an objectivity which, ultimately, is an insurmountable vocation of naturalism). These two essential aspects are closely bound together, to the point of being inseparable, even for the needs of analysis.” For Pasolini, this doubleness arises from nothing so much as the poetic act of linguistic creation that separates the arts of cinema and literature. He writes:

Every language is recorded in a dictionary, incomplete but perfect, of the sign-systems of his surroundings and of his country. The work of the writer consists in taking, from this dictionary, words, like objects arranged in a drawer, and in making a particular use of them—particular insofar as it is a function both of the writer’s historical situation and of the history of these words . . . . In return, the act of the filmmaker, although fundamentally similar, is nonetheless much more complex. A dictionary of images does not exist. There are no images classified and ready for use. If by chance we wanted to imagine a dictionary of images, we would have to imagine an infinite dictionary, just as the dictionary of possible words remains infinite.

For Pasolini, then, the making of a picture is an even more fundamentally poetic act than the writing of poetry; it must create language and reality anew each before using them. As the passage above suggests, though, he is hardly blind to the potential for objectifying aesthetic codes and conventional tendencies in cinematic language. On the contrary, this potential is also what founds that doubleness of cinematic language. For as Pasolini sees it, all people have a kind of cognitive dictionary of images they recognize intuitively; it is just that this dictionary is “irrational” and “oneiric” rather than rule-bound, drawing from the subjective stuff of dreams and memory rather than the rational order of a pre-determined language. Hence the “directly metaphorical” quality that Pasolini sees as the distinguishing quality of cinematic production: invoking at once the power of metaphor to constitute a new vision of the world and the naturalistic criterion of resemblance on which it nevertheless relies, Pasolini sees the poetry of cinema as a poetry haunted by prose, and the cinematic picture as a subjective language constructed only of objects.

This understanding of metaphor opens up yet another way to understand our truism. A picture is worth a thousand words: If the generative act of making a picture—the very thing that suspends it between subjectivity and objectivity, rationalization and the irrational—is the paradox of invention and recapitulation that here defines metaphor, then the labor of making a picture may really be worth the labor it takes to make a thousand words. This prospect allows for a more satisfying notion of metaphor, too: it is no longer bound strictly to words and their tale absence, but on the contrary, to the sensuality of figuration that makes and re-makes the very material of representation.
The imbrications of exchange-value between the excess of language and the excess of pictures in the lines written above would certainly suggest something similar. And yet, Pasolini himself would seem opposed to this particular appropriation of his words—not least because he sees the paradox of metaphor described above as the fundamental point of distinction between words and images. So we are still left to wonder: what would it mean to describe the asymptote that pictures follow in our truism from an infinity that subsumes language and back again to the latter’s ultimate material codification? Where in the perforations of this asymptote, which neither ascends all the way to infinity nor serves finally as the instrument of the picture’s incarceration as definition, should we situate our thoughts?

I propose a new jargon of for the materiality of pictures and a new picture for the materiality of jargon. I propose that the asymptotic function of all figurality—that material condensation of what nevertheless remains immaterial in every representation—is precisely what holds this chiasmic economy together. Indeed, if picture names the materiality of the image, and thus the threat of commerce, rampant exchange, hallucinatory communication that has always attended it in virtually every jargon of Western philosophy, then the disgrace of every picture is that it visually embodies the materiality of jargon—and vice versa. Pictures are the jargon of vision and jargon is the picturing—or better, the spectacularization—of words. Indeed, jargon abides the very same asymptotic logic that the picture does: not in the end really veering between the empty exchange that its accusers proclaim and the radical intellectual poetry of its defenders, between the lack of old tropes and the plenitude of new metaphors, but rather, spectacularizing the failure of any attempt at all to sunder these two possibilities in their very materiality.

While jargon, as we saw, is often cited as an economic objectification that paralyzes the free trade of communication allegedly basic to humanity, for better and for worse it is, on the contrary, like the picture: a fervor for communicability over and against the impediments of discontinuity—between one way of thinking, seeing, or being and another—most often animates it. That is, one person or another presumably only bothers with learning a communal jargon in order to make still ideas speak to one another in moving and socially constructive ways, and one person or another presumably only bothers with constructing a new jargon because the economy of language is in fact insufficient to think the world whenever it is perceived anew—just as the unexchanged singularity of one’s own jargon is insufficient to bring that perception into a meaningful social being. The founding of meaning in any new word already foretells the problem of counting; this is the mourning of jargon. Similarly, while the picture, as we saw, is often thought to circulate so freely and so dangerously because it both satisfies and incites the sort of free trade of communication allegedly basic to humanity—whether this shared humanity is said to arise from a wellspring of irrational suggestibility, compulsory training, or rational common decency—rethinking the picture as jargon suggests that the former circulates so freely, for better and for worse, because the apparent sediment of any representational code signifies through an excess as Real as any other. That is, the infinite aesthetic opacity of
a picture’s jargon may be forgotten, but it is never quite reduced to number, either; looking at it often aligns the eyes of a community through a misalignment that is just as spectacular as anything else.

A picture is worth a thousand words, then, not because those thousand words represent the excess of metaphor, the accumulation of a trope, an abstraction that defies any name, or the production of an altogether new language, but instead, because they represent the intersection of all of these possibilities at once, which is to say, because they embody jargon. Marxist thought has regarded both pictures and jargon with such strong suspicion for much the same reason: because they are the gaudiest known expressions of the figurative excess through which every economy is founded in the first instance of representation.

If a picture is worth jargon, then, it is not simply because the two operate on words and images in parallel, setting an exchange rate between the two that is in some way sound, whether mathematically or economically. It is also because the expanding economy of jargon is at once always issuing from and trying to keep up with the expanding economy of pictures; the accumulation of material codes they describe to one another and through one another—whether in the form of a community, a convention, a set of values, or an idea—is mutually sustaining in its very disproportion as excess. For instance, in a New York Times review of the twentieth and final debate between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the Democratic primary process, Alessandra Stanley attributed the candidates’ changing fortunes to the excess of an economy that inverts the trade between pictures and words that has guided us so far. “Television is not biased,” she wrote, “it’s relentless: one word (‘frontrunner’) can launch a thousand pictures.”

Stanley’s chiasmic paraphrase of our now well-worn saying does a lot to indicate how deeply the economic excess of contemporary visual culture is bound up with both politics today and the accumulation of jargons and pictures that I have described—no doubt in excess—above. Indeed, where I come from, we have a word for those “thousand pictures” and the political order they now secure, and I have already said it more than once: spectacle. A journalist writing for the wider audience of The New York Times would not openly traffic much with either my people or our words in print, and in the end, when one does it is most often to repeat words we have already said a thousand times before. But in this case, I cannot help but wonder if Stanley hasn’t already begun to recognize better than we have the most basic challenges that spectacle poses for life, philosophy, and politics where they converge at this moment. The disdain for jargon that resounds in the academic marketplace, the cultural marketplace, and the political marketplace is itself one of these challenges. So if we are to speak against it from the most radical, impassioned parts of our minds, I suspect a new intellectual community with new eyes will have to begin building a new dictionary of words to trade—words that know how to speak the value of at least one picture, and with any luck, at least a thousand more and a thousand more after.

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Notes

2 In one translation widely circulated in anthology form, Adorno and Horkheimer compare language under the culture industry to the jargon of totalitarianism: “If the German fascists launch a word like ‘intolerable’ over the loudspeakers one day, the whole nation is saying ‘intolerable’ the next. On the same pattern, the nations against which the German Blitzkrieg was directed have adopted it in their own jargon. The universal repetition of the term denoting such measures makes the measures, too, familiar, just as, at the time of the free market, the brand name on everyone’s lips increased sales. The blind and rapidly spreading repetition of designated words links advertising to the totalitarian regime.” (70) Compare this statement to Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous description of the “paradoxical” quality of the cultural commodity, which is “so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly equated with use that it can no longer be used.” (68) Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment of Mass Deception,” in Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks. Revised Edition. Meenkashi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).
10 Ibid.
14 In her path-breaking reconception of Jacques Lacan’s proposition that “the Woman does not exist,” Joan Copjec has done more than any other theorist to make evident the tropic function that women hold in the linguistic economy of both Western theory and


16 Ibid., 36.