

Aspect Change and Poetic Charge as Tools for Artistic Research in Literature

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Abstract:

Literature produces images by putting the words in the best possible order; non-literary writing, reflection, argumentation, analysis, and critique are done by writing, too. Both modes of writing use language as their material. By using the different status and value of autonomous and discursive modes of writing we can find a departure point for supporting a productive methodology in artistic research in literature.

A selection of instruments borrowed from philosophy and visual arts connect to show an experiential and practice-based approach, such as ‘aspect seeing,’ the concept of poetic charge and images in language. Aspect seeing is a crucial perceptive and cognitive mechanism and apt to disclose interrelations between production and interpretation of literature.

Spelling It Out

It is time to host a discussion about practice-based investigations of literary art forms and to let literature finally emerge in the panorama of practice-based research in the arts. Literature is a field of art. Literary production means creating artworks by using written language. There is no reason why this area of creative practice should be less suitable or more problematic for artistic research than any other field, be it visual arts, music, theatre, performance, dance, or composition. On the contrary, offering institutionalised practice-based PhD research opportunities in literature is overdue. But it may just require more careful looking, as text looks like text—ordered letters on paper—and without reading it one cannot tell what the text is like—either in terms of sort or quality.

In the past discourse on ‘artistic research’—which historically departed from visual arts towards live performance formats and finally arrives in the field of literary art forms¹—specific suggestions and claims have been made regarding

1 Corina Caduff, “Literatur und künstlerische Forschung,” in: Corina Caduff et al., eds., *Kunst und Künstlerische Forschung*. Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2010, pp. 108–117: here p. 108.

the matter and methods by which art and research should connect, interrelate, and depend on each other. In the current discussion on artistic research in the field of literature, one can try to turn its late arrival to the debate into an advantage: let us employ some of the freedom regained from previous arguments on artistic research in other fields. In this contribution, I wish to put forward a few ideas concerning some possibilities for research in literature by comparing it with other, more established fields of artistic research.

To reflect on practice-based methodologies, I borrow terms from the discussion of iconology such as verbal images, as well as mechanisms active in the psychology of recognising images: aspect seeing, experiments from perception, operations with images in language, and the collision between image and text. Aspect seeing in particular, I suggest, could be used as a powerful tool for developing methodologies where autonomous writing (literary texts) and written analysis, reflection, and research create intelligent interaction. The literary critic Ezra Pound contributes his valuable concept of 'poetic charge' to this discussion.²

Aspect seeing is concerned with possible interpretations. Aspect change reveals different possible meanings. The switch between different aspects results in the understanding of a work (image, concept, thought, experience) on several levels. For all artworks, it holds that these interpretations are potentially unlimited in scope, open to subjectivity and personal undertones. Using words for making art means re-using words, which have been in others people's mouths before. Language is a shared practice. Literature is at the forefront of the modification and development of language. Literature is the shadow that language casts on our habits; it mirrors the changes of language—literature pushes its borders.

Words in Visual Arts

As a practitioner of language-based art, I have participated in the early discussions in the Netherlands on 'third cycle' studies in the arts early on.³ Since my first attempts, as of 2003, to establish fruitful methodologies between artistic practice and education at Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, and academic studies and research at the University of Amsterdam, I have witnessed a

² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934). London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

³ For example, I participated in "The Third Cycle: Artistic Research after Bologna," Conference, 10–11 October 2007, Felix Meritis Centre, Amsterdam. For more see: <http://www.ahk.nl/en/research-groups/art-theory-and-research/conferences/>, date of access: 17 Sept. 2018.

remarkable process of transformation: the initial refusal to connect artistic and academic (i.e. writing) methodologies in institutional formats has yielded to valuable collaboration between the two institutes. The University of Amsterdam now offers an MA programme in Artistic Research and, together with the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, the transdisciplinary Honours Programme Art and Research, which was developed in 2006.

Over the same period, the status of written language as sole material in visual arts and of writing as an autonomous means of expression has changed as well. In some areas of visual art, written language gained its autonomous status via materialisation, such as in conceptual art's use of writing in forms of spatial and graphic presentation, or when making books become an independent genre of the visual arts.⁴ But conceptual art is not literature, and writing by artists is not (quite) literature either. Throughout the last decade, more and more visual artists have published novels. First studies have now been made of artists' writing and its qualities and shortcomings.⁵ Nowadays, literary writing should gain adequate status in the field of artistic research in its own right: writers—not only visual artists who happen to write—should have access to an adequately improved infrastructure of doing third cycle research.

Literature needs no other material than written language to exist. Literary production gains its impact solely from the printed word, detached from its particular visual appearance. Nevertheless, literature is—as all art forms—concerned with images, and literary writing can be called a particular form of using verbal imagery.⁶ We remember that the Linguistic Turn preceded the Pictorial Turn and that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has taught us to pay attention to the language games we play as well as to the images we recognise and produce by using language.⁷ Text is first-rate material for both creating verbal imagery *and* for letting language do the work of reflecting on it. Words and sentences are—in our language habits—unexpectedly packed with metaphorical expression.

4 Ulises Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books" (1975), in: *Ulises Carrión: We Have Won! Haven't We?*, ed. by Guy Schraenen. Amsterdam: Museum Fodor, 1992, pp. 53–54.

5 Ilse Van Rijn, *The Artists' Text as Work of Art*, dissertation. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities, 2017.

6 Cf. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

7 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1953.

Images in Language

The American language philosopher Benjamin Lee Whorf has pointed out poignantly how little we can say without metaphors. Whorf claimed that nearly *all* linguistic instruments we use on a day-to-day basis rely on metaphorical transfer and non-linguistic experiences (such as shared bodily experiences or certain shared physical and perceptive set-ups).⁸ The philosopher and writer Fritz Mauthner argued that:

It is impossible to arrest the conceptual content of words permanently. Therefore knowledge of the world through language is impossible. It is possible to arrest the *motive* content of words. Therefore art is possible through language, verbal art, poetry.⁹

The philosophers Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin fortified the *imageness* of language by claiming that “language is essentially metaphorical.”¹⁰ Literature is made of language—yet it augments its own conventions in a complex texture of what is said *indirectly*, *how* it is said and even what has been left *unsaid*.

On one side, written language as plain everyday language is made to *communicate* operational matters for enabling smooth interaction with others in the world. Its *aim* is reached when the *meaning* has come across, or the other responds as one intended. The language philosopher Rudi Keller argues that “language is wanting to influence.”¹¹ Academic writing, we may say, aims to communicate the chain of thoughts in an argument.

On the other side sits a poetic language with a manifold of less pragmatic but more complex mastery. I believe that for a discourse on artistic research in literature, the notion of poetic charge should be taken into consideration. Ezra Pound introduced the concept of poetic charge into the classification of literature. Literature is “language charged with meaning,”¹² he claimed, and

8 Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956, pp. 145–146.

9 Quoted from: Allan Janik/Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (1973). Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996, p. 129 [emphasis mine]. Cf. Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache. Zweite, überarbeitete Auflage*. Erster Band: *Zur Sprache und zur Psychologie* (1906). Frankfurt am Main et al.: Ullstein, 1982, p. 97.

10 Janik/Toulmin (1996), *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 128.

11 Rudi Keller, *Sprachwandel: Von der unsichtbaren Hand in der Sprache*. Tübingen, Basel: UTB Francke, 1994, p. 20.

12 Pound (1951), *ABC of Reading*, p. 28.

“great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.”¹³ However controversially Pound’s work has been debated, his notion of poetic charge is of great value in discussing possibilities and establishing artistic research in literature.

Poetic Charge

How does this concept prepare us for useful artistic research in literary practice? Where can we see and understand the differences between (just) language and (good) literature? According to Pound the degree of poetic charge helps to define the difference between language and literature. The degree of poetic charge thus defines the degree of ‘literariness,’ maybe even its value.

With regard to words and literature, the degree of charge is measured in the currency of meaning. Currency, like current itself, speaks of a flow—a stream of values and ideas. The charged object holds possible meanings. It is a container for accumulated potential directions of meaning and aspect. Similar to a metaphor, or to any image in language, its possible meanings are stored and need to be recuperated, harvested, or discovered. Pound sketches just three possible ways to stuff the charge into language, namely:

[P]hanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader’s imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you use groups of words to do this. Thirdly, you take the greater risk of using the word in some special relation to ‘usage’, that is, to the kind of context in which the reader expects, or is accustomed, to find it.¹⁴

In the contemporary discourse on poetry and its reciprocal relationship to mental processes, the literary critic Raoul Schrott (together with neuroscientist Arthur Jacobs) based his claim partly on a continuation of this poetic charge established by Pound.¹⁵ Each successful metaphor, every *aspect* of the qualities of every single word, syntax, and rhythm and every detail that turns interpretation of a piece of text into *meaning* owes its load and puissance to its level of poetic charge. Pound’s metaphor of a *charge* of a word excellently connects the notion of *current* (from physics as in electrical charge), *currency*

13 Pound (1951), *ABC of Reading*, p. 27.

14 Pound (1951), *ABC of Reading*, p. 37.

15 Arthur Jacobs/Raoul Schrott, *Gehirn und Gedicht: Wie wir unsere Wirklichkeiten konstruieren*. Munich: Carl Hanser, 2011, p. 484.

(as in value of exchanging goods and meaning) and transport (as in *loaded* by meaning). It is a good example of showing the aspects of a word in practice. At the same time, the *level* of poetic charge brings us to the main claim of literature as a very suitable discipline for conducting artistic research. The extreme form of poetically charged language, distilled as poetry, has not one but many meanings. However, literary disciplines such as prose and poetry do also consciously operate with the poetic charge of single words and their syntax correlates with one another. If “good literature is language charged with meaning to an utmost degree,”¹⁶ artistic research in literature must discuss, identify, and courageously wire this poetic charge.

The process of unloading the text from its poetic charge is based on mechanisms of aspect seeing. Aspect seeing is a concept which has been popularised—if not introduced in the philosophy of language—by Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹⁷ To do so, one needs to understand that the peeled layers are singular aspects of the words and sentences. Aspect seeing and poetic charge are directly related to each other: simply put, several aspects can *hide* within one verbal expression. Depending on the particular sentence, a manifold of different meanings can be captured simultaneously; *unpacking* them is part of the interpretation. Carefully unfolding the layers and tracing them (also in written form) is part of literary critique: wiring the text, searching the poetic freight, and *saying* what the possible meanings are. However, this operation can also be spelled out in the literary text itself. In this sense, artistic research finds its climax in literature. Being the author of the material and *showing* through firsthand autonomous writing where the seams are is more than critique. The seams reveal locations of aspect change, the transfers from understanding, and what constitutes (good) literature.

Aspect Seeing

We are all fluent in aspect seeing (most of the time we do it unawares). Every punchline is dependent on aspect change. Often in a joke, a word or an expression has several specific meanings in different contexts. The discovery of the *other* contexts produces the shift in meaning and with it the surprised laugh. But the ‘understanding’ of an expression, which uses metaphorical rather than analytical descriptive texts, requires the mechanisms of aspect seeing. Aspect

16 Pound (1951), *ABC of Reading*, p. 27.

17 Cf. Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*.

seeing displays unexpected meanings. It is a core mental action, which allows us to match and sort (visual) perceptions and to compare contexts in which non-visual verbal patterns of meaning occur. In order to understand the concept of aspect seeing and aspect change in the arts and its important role in artistic research in literature, a brief summary of these correlations will be provided.

What is aspect seeing? It is the moment of discovering another meaning in something. It is the sudden awareness of a *second image* occurring from a visual or verbal sign. It is the *aha moment* of seeing another signification—getting the joke. The most rudimentary examples are visual displays of gestalt psychological icons such as the rabbit-duck illusion.¹⁸ Do not dismiss it just because it looks like a simple game. The mechanism of aspect change is elementary in the finest and most subtle interpretations of artworks, in visual art, literature, and music. Aspect seeing is the core principle of the “capacity to see something *as something*”¹⁹—understanding beyond plain and literal meaning, and thus interpreting and understanding art.

In short, aspect seeing is an essential plug-in in our processing of the world and an essential tool for making and discussing art in general. However, it turns out that so far mostly only scholars familiar with Wittgenstein make use of this term. One aim of this contribution is to make the term and its valuable realm accessible and to introduce it into the discourse of art and artistic research. Another aim is to test it with regard to setting up a practice-based methodology for artistic research in literature. Current trans-disciplinary research in the overlapping fields of artistic practice and cognitive sciences profits from the understanding of perception as a *productive* (rather than passive) mental process. The contemporary study of interpretation conceptualises the sensual processes involved in the arts—especially seeing and hearing—as active poetic interaction between the work and the audience or perceiver.²⁰

Aspect change reveals what one sees or discovers in an image, whether it is optically or mentally visible. Perception is an active process. Seeing is “action in perception,”²¹ and *seeing* is a metaphor for understanding an image,

18 Based on Joseph Jastrow's illustration: Joseph Jastrow, “The Mind's Eye,” in: *Popular Science Monthly* 54 (1899), pp. 299–312, and “Kaninchen und Ente,” in: *Fliegende Blätter* (1892). Cf. also: Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 194.

19 Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 213 [emphasis mine].

20 Cf. Jacobs/Schrott (2011), *Gehirn und Gedicht*.

21 Alva Nöe, *Action in Perception* (2004). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

even when created by verbal language. The sharing of the details one spectator or reader has discovered enriches the perspective of the other. Critique of artworks is based on the belief that sharing the aspects one has discovered enlarges the spectrum of meaning inherent to an image, a piece of music, a text, or other art forms. One *aspect* is a part of the *spectrum* of possible meanings.

How should artistic research in literature be written? The presence of texts by critics and scientists—which are in beauty, aptitude, and attitude comparable to the literature they examine—makes it particularly hard to identify the exact seam between autonomous and discursive texts. Yet, this issue has been addressed within literary criticism by scholars and leans against some of the complaints put forward by Ezra Pound along with his daring set of criteria for classifying “good literature.”²² In literature, artistic research should be supported when it hosts a reflection upon what could be arguably called good literature. There are ways to point out the value of literary texts. And there are ways to identify the writers whose practices invite reflection *outside* of autonomous texts and who display genuine interest in unriddling and carefully observing the artistic processes involved—their own or otherwise. This knowledge could or should be applied to the young generation of artistic research in literary fields.

Saying vs Showing

Autonomous writing takes advantages of first-level writing (informative, as a messenger, descriptive, analytical, academic), which we could call modes of *saying*, and transforms it into second-level writing (poetic, metaphorical, constructed, indirect, inventive), which in turn operates within modes of *showing*. This *saying-showing* dichotomy we owe again to Wittgenstein; Janik and Toulmin put it like this:

Much of the difficulty that people have experienced in interpreting the *Tractatus* [*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921] revolves around the fact that both ethics and logic relate to what can be ‘shown’ but not ‘said’ . . . In the first place, it refers to what the world has in common with its representation, its mirror, that is, language. Secondly, it refers to the

22 Pound (1934), *ABC of Reading*, p. 39.

poetic power of language to convey the ‘meaning of life.’ Language can represent experience, but it can also infuse experience with meaning.²³

It is this transformation of (any artistic language) material, which elevates a text from merely instructive, descriptive, informative, or authoritative into a kind of transmitter of poetic, surprising, or experiential meaning. The awareness and exploration of such mechanisms are crucial for the artistic autonomy of a writer-researcher. Especially in the context of ‘third cycle’ artistic research, the examination and reflection of one’s own artistic literary production will have to deal with the differences between both textual modes: autonomous poetic writing (*showing*) and reflection on such textual production (*saying*). Awareness of the saying-showing dichotomy offers itself as a potent method to find better, more sovereign ways of reflecting on literary production from the perspective of one also practising autonomous writing.

But how exactly should one employ the saying-showing dichotomy in artistic research writing practice? How should one experience and train for aspect seeing? For literary work, the colliding parts—discursive text and literary autonomous text—are not as easy to distinguish as when image and text meet. In the collision between image and text, such change can be demonstrated step by step, as we know from the ‘Lambregts Method’ based on work by the Dutch artist Lambertus Lambregts.²⁴

The ‘Lambregts Method’ can act as a display of aspect change in simple terms: an image is subtitled with different texts, which contribute to a shift in the aspects we can detect in the image. Within the methodology for conducting artistic research in literature, the actual visual image is replaced by autonomous text. This swap is based on the saying-showing distinction by Wittgenstein. Literature is an art form, it *shows*. Literature has this in common with other art forms. Looking into the capacity of seeing aspects—first from image in collision with text, later ideally in transfer from autonomous literary writing with reflexive text—could be used as a methodology for artistic research in literature. In the book *Het extragegeven*, Lambregts repeats this image on every second page, accompanied by a single sentence on the facing page:

23 Janik/Toulmin (1996), *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 139.

24 Lambertus Lambregts, *Het extragegeven*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Harmonie, 1974.



FIG. 13.1 Lambertus Lambregts, *Het extragegeven*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Harmonie, 1974.

policeman and man | policeman with man | policeman with arrestee |
 policeman with man, who complains | policeman passing by a bystander
 | man passing by a policeman | policeman with detective | policeman and
 his brother | father and son | “come to the car.” | “would you come with me
 to the car?” | “have you been to the hairdresser?” | “may I make a call to the
 business?” | dead trees | “irovdja norc, ilye mrozhec!”²⁵

²⁵ My translation.

Artistic Research in Literature

How can these references help to construct productive research methodologies for practice-based reflection on literature? What is their use for ‘third cycle’ research in literature? Generally, as in other artistic disciplines, an artist with a PhD does not guarantee better artworks regarding autonomous quality. No productive and confident writer needs to conduct artistic research on literature to improve his or her output or to decorate his or her practice with a ‘third cycle’ academic degree. In the past few decades, the discussion of practice-based research in the arts has been overhauled thoroughly: an artist’s confidence or his or her oeuvre does not have to be upvalued by scientific methods nor should it be influenced by academic analysis.

Artistic research involving written work can create a special situation when the field of arts under scrutiny is literature. Writing *and* reflection on writing literary texts both take place in writing and threaten (or promise) to become self-reflective. Language itself can be described by language only by being self-reflective. Language is a host for our imagination and images associated with our perception and interpretation. Some of these processes are based on what Wittgenstein called the language game. Language games involve the awareness of a plurality of contexts and influences into which words are exposed when formulated into a meaningful expression, utterance. Literature is the high point of watching language games in action. Exposing one’s literature to a mode of reflection, critique, and analysis could be a fine and adventurous enterprise. Being able to host the notions of aspect change elegantly, saying-showing and speech acts within one’s work could help deliver mature and independent reflection. Authors of literary works often are surprised to hear readers’ interpretations that absolutely make sense and chime with the author’s opinion, yet s/he has not willingly “put it into the text.”²⁶ In other words, the reader (or viewer)—although not the maker of the work—is a qualified interpreter of or partaker in it. After finishing a work, an author (of most genres, not only literature) is both the producer and receptor of a work. Into the gap between reader/viewer and author, I aim to slip aspect seeing as a methodological tool.

The understanding of aspect seeing and poetic charge as proper tools for writing and thinking about literature is a truly sensational position for conducting artistic research. Again, no good writer’s work should need to undergo

26 Juli Zeh, *Treideln, Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling und Co., 2013, p. 172.

such research for any other reason than pure interest in one's own (subconscious) operations. Spelling out the poetic charge ruins the joke. Displaying all aspects explains the punchline. But in no field of art, can writing take over both modes as naturally as in literature: autonomous writing and discursive writing can be developed into a unique interplay between those two modes—saying and showing.

Aspect seeing is discovering the construction. Aspect seeing is seeing not only *what* is shown, described, or depicted but revealing *how* the construction of the image is made. This aligns with the more general question of how writers write. In my opinion, artistic research in literature is a promising possibility of gaining insight into writers' progression. There are a great many ways of writing, yet, in the context of artistic research in literature, the reports from the writing desk become most pressing. Some publications by authors *about* their creative writing have given vivid insights into the practice of choosing and ordering words to create a whole image. The *Frankfurter Literaturvorlesungen* and other hybrid formats on authors and authorship have a long tradition. In her lecture on poetic strategies, Juli Zeh provided an insight into some writers' conditions such as dealing and struggling with daily routines and readiness for the 'real' work.²⁷ Franz Kafka was a forerunner in revealing such issues, as we know. When to write? How to resist distraction and self-doubt? How to prepare the 'subject,' material, and the plot, or how to avoid it? How to include variations in the work? In literature, like in other art forms, the relationship between author and work remains precarious. Writing can go wrong with every added word. Every sentence is a new beginning. Failure looms at the beginning of every sentence. After every full stop, every comma, a clause can invert the meaning of the preceding words. Writing is dangerous: it relates time and word, breath and sentence. This particular condition of writing is (perhaps comparable with the act of composing musical scores) an important focal point of artistic research in literature. Similar to the experiences of being inside *and* outside of a text (as the literary artist conducting artistic research), oscillating to and fro between production and perception/reflection, a writer can tell us about the processes of writing and writing *about*.

The call for artistic research in literature thus relates to the possibilities of reflecting on the practice of writing. But the possibility of artistic research in literature promises to go beyond discursive qualities. The relationship between

27 Zeh (2013), *Treideln*, pp. 78–79.

autonomous and reflexive text can be woven together much tighter than in any other field of the arts. Language games could be used as a tool so that the creation of aspect change can be organised at a high frequency.

Outlook

At the moment it is essential to try to foresee which chances will bring about artistic research in literature and what the possible obstacles to this might be. These questions shift their focus from the work itself to the author and back again. Artistic research in literature can be a chance to gain insight into very delicate and utterly precise shifts in meaning. A slowed down focus on the transfer of sense through images in language and close investigation of how to write (and read) autonomous texts are possible ways for artists and their audience to become aware of the changing aspects of making utterances. Artistic research in literature could produce a laboratory for (metaphorical) meanings and pure ways of writing—beyond using language merely as a vehicle.

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