The "I" and the "Eye"
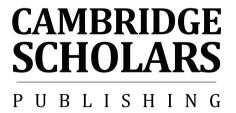
The "I" and the "Eye":
The Verbal and the Visual in Post-Renaissance Western Aesthetics

By

Pragyan Rath

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

"We are the Backyards"
—Gayadri Devi G.

Praise for the Book

"In *The 'I' and the 'Eye'*, Pragyan Rath provides a perceptive analysis of the shifting dialectics of the verbal and visual arts ignited by Lessing's *Laocoön*. Rath's linking of word/image theories to political economy is fine-tuned, and it illuminates the under acknowledged role of intermedial aesthetics in the shaping of cultural attitudes, such as the privileging of mental over manual labor. This is a well-conceived and well executed scholarly work, which will be welcomed by intermedial scholars and cultural historians alike."
—Kathleen Lundeen, Professor of English, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225

"Clearly argued and well grounded, this ambitious study is particularly impressive both for its scope and for its ability to coordinate what might otherwise have been seen as 'purely' aesthetic issues with the social and political circumstances that they reflect, and that give them their cultural force. Its focus is on the question of identity through the intersection of visual and verbal representation, but this question is pursued along historical and philosophical lines that disclose the deeper issues at stake."
—Ernest B. Gilman, Professor of English, NYU Department of English

"Pragyan Rath's erudite critical examination of the dialogue that exists in the arts, history, and society between poetry and painting, the verbal and the visual, and between labors of the mind and the body is a *tour de force* of cultural knowledge. The author brings forth into contemporary aesthetics and cultural studies the discourse developed in Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1776). Lessing's argument favoring the superiority of poetry over painting is subjected to critical examination and brought into the aesthetic debates of the Twentieth Century as initiated in the writings of the art critic Clement Greenberg and others. Taking the thesis a step further, the author's analysis extends the discourse on this topic to contemporary Marxist cultural theory as in the writings of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. This comprehensive study is a valuable contribution to contemporary aesthetics and critical theory."
—Curtis L. Carter, Professor of Aesthetics, Marquette University, USA

"Dr. Pragyan Rath's work, *The 'I' and the 'Eye'*, which is a revised version of her doctoral dissertation done at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, is a historical exploration of the relationship between the verbal and visual art since the Enlightenment in Europe represented in its philosophical and aesthetic tension in Lessing's work *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), which inaugurated a long-drawn debate in the West between the social implications of this relationship based upon the hierarchization of aesthetic categories. By using Lessing's valorization of the verbal over the visual as a take-off point Dr. Rath has explored the intricate trajectory of this distinction to understand the nature of social ideologies that determined such dichotomies. She returns to the question of art as 'Ut Pictura Poesis' celebrated in Horace to suggest the philosophical genesis of that tension. Through her readings of Walter Pater and Clement Greenberg, as representatives of the 19th and 20th centuries of art criticism respectively, she weaves her historical peregrination with critical references to Kant, Adorno, Benjamin, Peter Bürger, W. J. T. Mitchell and many others. She tries to understand Lessing's valorization of the verbal over the visual arts in terms of the 18th century's privileging of the mind over senses. Through her thorough examination of the various art movements and criticism she tries to understand the reasons for the difficulty in maintaining such a distinction in the face of the 'loss of cultural hierarchisation of a class in …mass commoditization'."
—Prafulla C. Kar, Director, Centre for Contemporary Theory, Baroda, Formerly Professor of English, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India

"This scholarly study examines the relative valuations made of poetry and painting from the late eighteenth century to the present. It combines aesthetic and social analysis which revolutionises our understanding of both. Pragyan Rath has done what few have achieved: re-written the history of art. A splendid work."
—Prof. Gary Day, Department of English and Creative Writing, De Montfort University Leicester

"This is an ambitious project that explores some of the most difficult and enduring questions in modern aesthetics and political theory. Rath takes us on a journey that is very much alive to the special signature of an historical context and the way that context informs and cross-references all modes of production, including intellectual and art practices. With Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön* as her departure point, we learn how word

and image, poetry and painting, the verbal and the visual have been compared and evaluated over several centuries, their differences hierarchised and explained as the 'natural' limitations of the art genres themselves. Rath contests these seemingly innocent classifications by illuminating the political prejudice that informs them. Not only is there a valorisation of intellectual work over physical work in these arguments, but an insistence that these categories should not be confused.

Rath follows the shifting genealogy of this way of thinking into the modern avant-garde movement and discovers a sustained attempt to dehistoricise value judgements so that they appear as universal truths. However the irony here, and it is a difficult one to grasp, is that these arguments tend to endure because they morph over time. Rath's persistence in explaining how continuity can be maintained through apparent discontinuity is cleverly managed, and the implications of her insights have broad analytical application. In sum, this is an erudite and provocative argument about the cross-fertilisation of historical, economic, political and philosophical forces in all forms of cultural production, especially those that pretend to creative isolation."
— Vicki Kirby, Associate Professor, Sociology and Anthropology, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, The University of New South Wales, Sydney

"I have read this fine manuscript and consider it an original and very smart contribution to studies in aesthetics and the intersection of the verbal and visual arts. I am deeply impressed with the depth of research and the acuity of insight that Professor Rath brings to this discussion. This will be an influential study that will surely be referenced by generations of future scholars. I expect that *The 'I' and the 'Eye'* will find a home in many research libraries and scholarly collections across the globe. I am happy to recommend it with great enthusiasm."
—Donald E. Hall, Jackson Distinguished Professor of English, Chair of the Department of English, West Virginia University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I confess that I make an ambitious attempt to historically explore the complex and ever evolving interaction between the verbal and the visual forms of art; a journey of interrogation that commences with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), then goes through Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) and finally culminates in Clement Greenberg's "Towards a Newer Laocoon [sic]" (1940). Apart from being on opposite sides of the spectrum of modernity (Lessing in the late eighteenth-century, Pater in the late nineteenth-century, and Greenberg in the mid twentieth-century); Pater and Greenberg also serve as significant moments in the history of modern avant-garde aesthetics for their "strategic" reference to Lessing and his opposition to the phenomenon of *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry"). The phenomenon finds its genesis in the works of the Greek poet, Simonides of Ceos, as proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986, 116). It is later formalised by Horace in "Ars Poetica" (19 BC–10 BC; 18 BC) and has since then maintained its classical aesthetic heritage. It is with Lessing's *Laocoön* that *ut pictura poesis* regains prominence in a completely different way: Lessing disrupts the seemingly democratic fraternity of the verbal and the visual arts forever in the most poignant and critical manner.

Lessing uses the antique sculpture and Virgil's verbal description of the fate of Laocoön and his sons to formally divide the "verbal" and the "visual" into two separate aesthetic categories with distinct boundaries. In the light of Mitchell's *Iconology*, Lessing's argument is interpreted in the following manner: painting is a concrete expression of "degraded" sensory faculties, and poetry is the "sophisticated" representation of imagination through words. Thus, Lessing's dichotomy establishes a "prejudicial" hierarchy between the mental or intellectual labour and the manual or physical labour. His valorisation of the verbal over the visual arts derives more from social valorisation of the mind over the body than from purely aesthetic criteria. My attempt has been to read the verbal-visual opposition as the "I" and the "eye" dialectic. The changing functions of the "I" (mental cognition/imagination, or content/subject) and the "eye" (visual perception or form) are identified as social functions within the larger spectrum of modernity. More specifically, the changing ideological functions of both

these categories have been located within a historical framework of modern aesthetics that begins with Lessing, goes through Pater and then culminates in Greenberg. In this capacity, the verbal and the visual art forms also emerge as sites for forms of social conflicts. Both these positions become pervasive tropes for my work, which further raise the question of political engagement—or disengagement—of the artist with reference to the nature of social valorisation of artistic activities as intellectual and/or manual labour.

I begin with the Introduction or The Dialectics of the Verbal "I" and the Visual "Eye", which describes the over all effort of my work.

Detailed research begins in Chapter One or The Denial of *Ut Pictura Poesis*: Lessing and the Enlightenment Aesthetic. I concentrate on Lessing's opposition to the *ut pictura poesis* tradition within the larger philosophical and material tendencies of those times. *Laocoön* is discussed in order to identify the philosophical rationale behind the separation of the verbal and the visual arts into two mutually exclusive aesthetic provinces. In the process, I discover echoes of classical and medieval philosophies in Lessing. The role of classical poetics is examined—particularly as they are articulated by Plato in *Republic* (380 BC), Aristotle in *Poetics* (335 BC) and Horace in "Ars Poetica"—in shaping Lessing's classification. While classical aesthetics attempts to distinguish good art from bad art on moral grounds, Lessing claims to understand the differences between the verbal and the visual arts as differences based on "natural" limitations of the medium of representation of the individual art form. With Horace, however, the criterion of "mutual relationship" between the art forms gains more popularity. The critical inquiry here is the "need" for Lessing to attack Horace's *ut pictura poesis* at its very core, centuries later, with his definite fixation of artistic boundaries that must not be trespassed.

Moreover, the Platonic debate between reason and passion is replaced by the soul-body conflict, as it emerges in St. Augustine's and also in voluntarist doctrines of the medieval period. The resulting stress on the empirical as a source of non-empirical knowledge, particularly advanced by the parallel development of modern science, establishes a suitable historical lineage from which Lessing might have derived his aesthetic categorisation. My confidence in the lineage is strengthened when I realise how Lessing incorporates Descartes's distinctively "modern"[1] mind-body dualism into his (Lessing's) aesthetic categorisation amidst the empiricist and rationalist debate on the same. I chart the course of Lessing's rationality that draws from the Cartesian mind-body dualism emerging in Descartes's "*cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am") in *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (1637, 53–54) and Burke's sublime-beautiful

debate in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Lessing also anticipates Kant's sublime-beautiful debate from the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). He [Lessing] valorises the sublime potential in poetry and the arbitrary signs. He declares paintings and their natural or physical signs as incompetent in their capacity to represent the formless and limitless concept of the sublime. Though he indirectly anticipates Adam Smith's labour theory from the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) in his consideration of "value" as labour acquired, it is also what kind of labour involved that decides the value in the case of Lessing: mental labour is valorised over the physical.

In the light of such investigations, there is further questioning of the criterion that Lessing uses to legitimise his aesthetic valorisation of the verbal and also the criteria of

(i)   the larger philosophical appreciation of the sublime; and
(ii) the economic interpretation of labour;

both deeply reflected in Lessing's aesthetics. In the process, the social division between "art" as liberal arts and "craft" as mechanical arts, also argued by David Summers in *The Judgement of Sense* (1987) and Malcolm Barnard in *Art, Design and Visual Culture* (1998), establishes the material tendencies of Lessing's age. With the help of Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), E. P. Thompson's *Customs in Common* (1993), Gary Day's *Class* (2007) and David Hawkes's *Ideology* (2007), I develop a social history of the conflict between the rising middle class and the reigning aristocrats, and thus evolve a study of the "patterns of valorisation" in a capitalist society that is infested with the bourgeois desire for social priority and the fear of the loss of traditional priority by the aristocrats. Occasions like the sumptuary laws that restrict mingling of classes inform Lessing's aesthetic position against artistic trespassing, which also (seem to) privilege poetry. In the process, the denial of *ut pictura poesis* reproduces the underlying prejudices of the Enlightenment aesthetics: the sovereignty that Lessing seems to grant each of the arts is not, however, based upon any notion of a democratic and equitable division of labour and profit, but is in fact a defence of the entrenched capital of an aristocracy of hereditary powers and rights.

In Chapter Two or *Ut Pictura Poesis* as "*Anders-Streben*": Walter Pater and the Late Nineteenth-Century Aesthetic, I examine the fate of Lessing's aesthetic hierarchy in Pater's revaluation of the visual as a

significant aesthetic category in *The Renaissance*, written a century after Lessing in 1873. While recognising the exclusivity of the arts and hence the critical prowess in Lessing, Pater also formulates the condition of "*anders-streben*," in which:

> [. . .] in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an *Anders-streben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces. (Pater 123)

In this regard, the visual art is compared with the verbal in its capacity to aspire for the condition of the ideal art—music—where the conflict between material medium (body) and mind (idea) is resolved, or in a Hegelian sense, the "ontic" separation of the Kantian phenomena and noumena is no longer "ontic" but relative and is finally synthesised in the *Geist*. However, even Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) posits Absolute Spirit as the highest level of consciousness, and in *Aesthetics*, romantic poetry is declared as the highest form of art: the incorporeal is valorised. In contrast, while following the Hegelian methodology of synthesis, Pater declares music as the ideal form of art. The *ut pictura poesis* earlier denied by Lessing is the basis for the confraternity of these arts that share a mutual or reciprocal frustration with limits, and where each one lends force to the other to achieve the condition of music. In effect, no form of art is declared as purely physical or mental: thus, Lessing's hierarchy "seems" to dissolve.

Music may be interpreted in Pater as a particular trope that holds all the arts together, such that the verbal and the visual become important in their capacities to attain that condition, and not for their existing circumstances. I locate Pater's position regarding music within a larger historical context of what constituted intellectual forms of arts and their subsequent academic forms of institutionalisation: music has been the first of the arts to be included in the respectable community of the liberal arts because of its equation with mathematics, and subsequently, other forms of arts that entered the esteemed bower of the liberal arts had to prove their intellectual composition in similar ways. The question here is: in what capacity is music a better choice for Pater than poetry so as to be free from ideological imperatives that had imprisoned Lessing? I say it is not.

The argument here is that the "need" for an ideal art stems from the "need" to democratise the verbal and the visual arts and such a ploy is also a defence of the late nineteenth-century aesthetic of the entrenched capital of a bourgeois class of powers and rights in the face of rising working

class agencies. Using Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848); Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961); Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984); Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1988); Crossick's "From Gentleman to the Residuum" (1991); Marcuse's "The Affirmative Character of Culture"; Hawkes; Day and Donald E. Hall's *Subjectivity* (2004), I reconstruct the conflict between social agencies of the working class and the dominant wealthy class of nineteenth-century England. The propagation of middle class virtues through fiction and other forms of art circulated amidst the working class is also a systematic conditioning of working class taste resulting in further division of that class into skilled and unskilled "selves". Jacques Rancière's *The Nights of Labor*: *The Workers's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (1989) and the integration of Rancière in Patrick Joyce's *Democratic Subjects*: *The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (1994) discuss the ambiguous relation between the proletariat and the intellectual. Pater also uses the concept of "virtues" (*Renaissance* x) in place of Lessing's "limits" to show how different arts can aspire for the condition of music; just like the working class artisan, who internalises the middle class virtues to aspire for a higher social status or patronage by and inclusion into the dominant community of the society. In the process, possibilities of revolution or even protests are ironed out.

Lessing has used the incidental prejudice of the physical labour as a rational estimate to realise the value of the verbal narrative, which apparently uses mental labour. Pater uses the incidental institutionalisation of socialism as a rational estimate to realise the intellectualism of the ideal art that equates both mind and body, like the political proclamations of equality propagating similar rights to every section of the capitalist society. However, in a capitalist system of production, which by virtue of being the competitive system it is, equality in economic status is not possible. In other words, "*Anders-streben*" becomes proxy for the condition of artistic limitations rather than artistic unity: Pater does not broadcast the establishment of an association of similar kinds of arts, but encourages the "need" for different art forms to reciprocate to and fulfill each other's limitations in order to achieve the "Ideal", so that the proclaimed limitations of lesser arts remain advertised. The underlying realisation is that the marginalised form of art is flawed; it has to be flawed, and what qualifies that art to be "flawed" is subject to the section of society that is privileged to idealise what it is to be "flawless".

In Chapter Three or *Ut Pictura Poesis* vs. Pure Art: Greenberg's Modernist Aesthetic, there is a paradoxical inversion of Lessing in Greenberg's "Towards a Newer Laocoon [sic]" written in 1940. He

declares his defence of the visual as his modernist formalist aesthetic. His formalism in my account is preoccupied with Lessing's questions of intellectualism and the fate of the artistic media in a market-driven world. He understands Lessing and the nineteenth-century aesthetic practices by understanding their historical emergence as predominantly a bourgeois enterprise. In this capacity, he unearths a "pattern" in Williams's sense of the word from *The Long Revolution* (63), which also locates the visual in a certain state of subservience. While appearing to analyse the cultural context of the emergence of a certain kind of aesthetics in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, his own conclusion of "pure non-objective abstract art" of the twentieth-century is an attempt to place his aesthetic at the end of a historical process and yet also beyond it: the abstract art in the Hegelian sense is the result of a historical process of aesthetic conflict; yet the purity of the abstract art arises from a Kantian judgement of taste. I have used Paul Crowther's "Kant and Greenberg's Varieties of Aesthetic Formalism" (1984), J. M. Bernstein's *The Fate of Art* (1992) and Stephen Melville's "Kant after Greenberg" (1998) to demonstrate the Kantian and Hegelian conflicts in Greenberg's aesthetic.

Moreover, I also discuss the following texts in short; namely, Ingres's and Delacroix's paintings on Paganini, Constable and *The Haywain*; Courbet and *Burial at Ornans*, along with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Stevens's "Anecdote of a Jar", and also Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer", to effectively depict the issues that emerge in Lessing and Greenberg.

Greenberg reintroduces Lessing in his aesthetic formulations of faithfulness to artistic media. Like Pater, he also eulogises music as the most faithful of art forms and hence the most pure, though he does not take into account the likes of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris,* both of which include musical passages that effectively replicate urban street sounds. Unlike Pater, however, he denies the reciprocity of art forms to attain the condition of music. He claims that such reciprocity is a technical illusion and is actually an act of subservience, which also entails loss of artistic individuality. This propels Greenberg to defend the visual arts on account of that very limitation that Lessing prescribes for them: their natural affinity to their physical media. His interpretation of the verbal signs, as signs that determine culture and are socially conventionalised thus conventionalising culture all over again, also equates him with Saussurean theory about the conventional character of the verbal signs as argued in the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) and Lévi-Strauss's categorisation of the sign as primitive and/or modern in *The Savage Mind* (1962). Verbal signs are social signs and hence cannot

free themselves of the oppressiveness of culture; "social" for Greenberg is the dominant bourgeois class. Thus, he understands the visual sign as a sign that can and must relinquish a known referent (the idea) by "pure" display of its physicality.

Through David Cottington's *Modern Art* (2005), Lawrence Rainey's "The Cultural Economy of Modernism", T. J. Clark's "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" (1982), Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *Eros and Civilization* (1966) and along with our usual suspects, Day, Hawkes and Hall, I manage to sketch the economic predicament of the bourgeois society in the times of the Great Depression. Greenberg's denial of Pater's utopia comes at a time when bourgeois culture is losing its exclusivity in the face of mass co-existence, already emerging from systematic integration of middle class taste, by and into the working class, over time. Technology (machine) converts "selves" into commodities measured against the value of money, such that, every individual is commoditised in economic terms. The underlying threat is the loss of cultural hierarchisation of a class in the face of mass commoditisation. However, the defence of the visual and the denial of *ut pictura poesis* in favour of purity of art form is a defence of the entrenched capital of an aristocracy of hereditary powers and rights: this time the intention is to create a new system with same hierarchies but represented differently; a new culture that is not accessible to the masses. Such a discussion is located amidst the cold war scenario between America and the Soviet Union and the political affinity of Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism with America as against the European avant-garde movements like Dadaism or Surrealism or, the popular art or "kitsch".

In Chapter Four or Art and Beyond, I raise the question of political engagement—or disengagement—of the "intellectual" in the light of my interpretations of Lessing, Pater and Greenberg. The relation between the critic and the artist becomes interesting, particularly amidst the cultural crisis in the face of neutralisation of class distinctions in capitalist and late-capitalist economic conditions. In this context, I discuss the plight of the traditional "intellectual" in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts", written a year before Greenberg in 1939. In the process, I also trace the evolution of the artist from the position of an artisan to that of a critic and a historian in an exploratory study of three works of art on the myth of Icarus, namely, one poem by Ovid, one by Auden, and a painting by Breugel; all contained in Auden's poem. It is in Auden's despair over the death of the intellectual that I question the demarcated roles assigned to the artist as the intellectual labourer and the ploughman as the manual labourer: I use Anthony Low's *The Georgic Revolution* (1985); Heidegger's "The Question Concerning

Technology" (1977) and "The Origin of the Work of Art"; James Heffernan's *Museum of Words* (2004); Alexander Nemerov's "The Flight of Form" (2005); and Matthew B. Crawford's "Shop Class as Soulcraft" (2006) among others to strengthen the argument.

It is in the context of Greenberg's differences with Benjamin, that I find a possibility to relate Greenberg's "purity" to Adorno's concept of the "new" from *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) as well as with Benjamin's interpretation of the loss of "aura" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935). I conclude from Bürger that the modern artist and critic alike are obsessed with a desire for trans-historical categories: Greenberg's "purity" and even Adorno's "newness" are means of reaffirmation of the need for artistic "aura". In the light of Bürger, I contend that the "newness" is in fact not "new" or the "purity" is not "pure" when it comes to the act of defining the category of art. Rather, "new" or "pure" are terms used for the packaging of the commodity status of the work of art (Bürger 61). Thus Lessing, Pater and Greenberg may be seen as entrepreneurs of intellectualism, who have been packaging art in a way that best provides maximum profit to their organization/institution/ society/culture/history. Or, in the light of Michael Kelly's *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (2003), one may say that aestheticians like Hegel, Greenberg or even Adorno, who have arrived at a historical evolution of philosophical positions of the Absolute Spirit, or the "pure" non-objective abstract avant-garde art, or the category of "newness" for modern art, in their individual capacities, have also made an effort to realise, in the final position achieved, the trans-historicity of their philosophical interests that translate into universal truth claims.

I argue that Lessing, Pater and Greenberg in their philosophical encounters with art attempt to be iconoclastic in their efforts to dehistorcise art and, in the process, develop a condition of artistic disinterestedness underlying which is their philosophical interest to develop a universal philosophy of art. My attempt has been to unearth the philosophical "interest" underlying Lessing's universal physical laws of aesthetics, Pater's utopian law of Ideal art, and Greenberg's purified universality of the physical form or medium. And that is possible "only" if one attempts to historicise Lessing's, Pater's and Greenberg's processes of dehistoricisation of art. In this capacity, I have looked at philosophical aesthetics as a history of diffusions, displacements and idealist reparations of class division. So is it possible at all to re-conceive art forms in any social space without hierarchy of classifications? With the help of Heffernan's *Cultivating Picturacy* (2006), I use Magritte's pipe painting to establish the possibility of interpreting the verbal and the visual as fluid

categories. Moreover, through Vicki Kirby's deconstruction of the Saussurean system of signification in *Telling Flesh* (1997), it is possible to understand the pluralistic nature of signification itself. And finally with Rancière's "The Politics of Literature" (2004) and *The Politics of Aesthetics*: *The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004/2007), we may also understand the nature of politics as inherent in aesthetics itself.

Finally, in the Epilogue or The *Choreographia* of the Verbal vs. the Visual Dialectics, I summarise my entire effort and establish my agenda for my work as a post-script.

On the whole, I have attempted to chart the course of the verbal and the visual arts

(1) as disparate historical practices that emerge in their attempt to defend the entrenched capital of an aristocracy of hereditary powers and rights; or

(2) as philosophies of the "I" and the "eye" that emerge as a history of diffusions, displacements and idealist reparations of class division.

In the process, I have discovered Lessing and his struggle between the verbal and the visual as the proxy for a Laocoön struggling to save his two sons, in a particular history of acknowledgement of limits; the capitulation of those limits to perilous alterities; their attempt to then open the space of alterities without sacrificing the autonomy and agential power of the individual critic/artist always imagined exemplarily as the creative artistic subject; and their disastrous capitulation to totalitarian control which becomes the negative point of departure for the artistic tendencies usually grouped under the rubric of postmodernism. The verbal and the visual arts as sites for forms of social conflicts become a pervasive trope for my work in the act of aesthetic location of the autonomous, autotelic, self-certifying "thing in itself" in a work of art. Twentieth-century aesthetic developments all trace back to this critical post-Kantian starting point, which has long been anticipated by Lessing in the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the Enlightenment.

It is the postmodernist aesthetic that provides future vantage point when dealing with the issues outlined in this work. In Cottington's words, no newer forms of counteraction and resistance towards controlling orthodoxies of the culture industry have developed in recent times of visual dominance in advertising, television and films, such that oversaturation of them in the visual and the print media has led to closure of any space from which they might be questioned (40). It would be interesting to think

about the possibilities of the opening of such spaces or develop a theory of the failure to do so for future research.

PREFACE

IN DEFENCE OF "SPECTRES"

There are two strands along which I try to steer my argument: one, which relates the word-image problematic to developments in the history of philosophy; and the other that relates it to socio-economic and political developments. Both are legitimate enterprises, but adopting both these very large adventures makes for a very large body of expectations from my work, because my readers will expect me to be thorough with my analysis of both. But inevitably, because of the enormity and perhaps discreteness of the two, there are gaps in my accounts of both, and these create problems for me, because I do not satisfy either of them fully. This is one of the questions that I need to address.

It is true that my work is sketched on a very large canvas. My attempt has been, however, to combine broad strokes with detailed spot work—in other words, I have tried to formulate large arguments, but have always provided detailed sample analyses throughout my work. My attempt in this has been less any grandiose attempt at completeness than the attempt to historicise major turning points in the history of the relationship between word and image. My Occam's razor cut away all but a handful of issues in this complex and surely interminably exciting relationship. So I will not deny the gaps or lacunae, but I cannot feel guilty about them either, because for a short project like this, they are inevitable. I believe my work illuminates Lessing's distinctions in considerable detail and not only historicises them, but also sketches their career before his own statements and afterwards. This is in defence of my procedural parts.

The two strands that the insightful reader/critic delineates are of course separate, and need individual and exclusive attention. But it has been my own conviction that a material history of cultural practices must also address the division of disciplines that cut into and disintegrate our own critical efforts. This division is particularly familiar to everyone in technological and managerial institutes, like the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, where I completed my doctoral thesis, or the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, where I am presently teaching Managerial Communications. The unequal size of the technology/management/

humanities/social sciences departments and centres describes well our own fractured moment in history.

Developments in philosophy and the philosophy of the arts are not just ideal or merely metaphysical abstractions, but have their roots in the same soil from which social, political, economic, and cultural life emerges. The second strand of my argument tries to integrate cultural production to social, political and economic production regimes, and I would say the first strand does the same to philosophical production lines. Together, these strands comprise the focal sharpening that makes us think we live in a world, a world naturally implying a collective whose parts exist always within the possibility of contact with every other part or parts.

So yes, I believe the binaries that I have tried to foreground must be tethered to a fundamentally material history if our own senses and our minds must function to the fullest extent of their possibilities. This liberation into confluence must be the form in which we can envisage and redesign the collectivities in which we lead our lives if we are to avoid the costliness and wastefulness of authoritarianism and exploitation.

There is also of course, the spectre of Marx to deal with? My arguments are very clearly and greatly influenced by Marxian modes of analysis. Marx never theorised explicitly about the specific problems that I try to address in my work, but his text was a good and symptomatic one, so I used it. In other words, my work uses Marxian analysis at times, but it is not necessarily Marxist; indeed, it is postmodern in many ways more than merely Marxist. Marx's general theory about the way the base and superstructure work informs my work as well as the work of the Marxists whose works I use in the course of my work. But, I know, this is a polemical point, and I would like the readers to keep this in mind.

The work here draws a lot from other works and their fields and yet, I humbly state, this work still attempts to stand out. Crawford in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009) discusses the social valorisation of intellectual labour over manual labour in contemporary service-oriented vocations and academies. I have a few sections on the division between "art" or intellectual arts or what came to be known as the liberal arts, and "craft" or mechanical arts. Crawford talks about the persistence of similar divisions or patterns in the contemporary education scenario of technical subjects. I am interested in developing possible "behind the scene" motifs of such divisions, and that is what I have been engaging with throughout my work. Crawford is significant not merely for his questioning of a certain kind of priority of labour, but more for the delineation of supplementary and infinitesimal divisions within technical and managerial labour itself,

divisions that have affinities with traditional priorities. I have discussed the development of traditional priorities and what that might lead to.

While Gillespie in *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008) does what the title prescribes, I look at the social conflicts that develop into aesthetic classifications; where theology is "also" a form of social conflict.

I have been looking at art and literature in the context of socio-political issues. Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004/2007) argues, on the other hand, that the arrival of the flat surface of the canvas has its own politics, and is not necessarily the way the avant-garde proclaims is the case, i.e., through social politics. He further argues that aesthetic is the artistic phenomenon adhering to a particular regime of the sensible. The idea of such a regime has become foreign to itself, like Kant's genius, who is unaware of the laws it (he/she) produces. Modernity is a poor name for this aesthetic regime of the arts. He therefore claims that the avant-garde attempts to define the subject who best fits in the new human vision and appropriates the connection of the aesthetic and the political to this new vision. I am interested in the politics of the avant-garde that makes such appropriations possible.

Hawkes in *Ideology* (2007) succeeds in providing a review of the history of the term ("Ideology") and in the process, also outlines the evolution of modern philosophy and thought. It goes into an interesting discussion about "ideology" and how it is used over different times. I provide a review of the history of classification of the verbal and the visual arts that starts in a particular way in Lessing. My attempt has been to read the verbal-visual opposition as the "I" and the "eye" dialectic, and also to locate them as changing ideological functions within a historical framework of modern aesthetics that begins with Lessing, goes through Pater and then culminates in Greenberg. In this capacity, the verbal and the visual art forms also emerge as sites for forms of conflicting ideologies.

I have used Day's work in *Class* (2007) as the base on which I build my social theory of aesthetic classification. I look at the conflict between the verbal forms and the visual forms of arts as possible sites of class conflicts.

For Heffernan in *Cultivating Picturacy* (2006), while words typically frame and regulate our experience of art, he also explains how pictures can contest the authority of the words we use to interpret art. For me, the contestation is at a social/material/political level as well.

Cottington's work in *Modern Art* (2005) is a splendid introduction to the same, the central movements, ideas, and controversies. Mine is more about the politics of the avant-garde, but also the politics of aesthetic

classifications that reveal the politics of the modern avant-garde movement.

Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005) helps me establish the larger connections between religious and economic history, so as to locate the verbal and the visual struggle in the larger struggle of human existence.

Stallabrass's *Contemporary Art* (2004) helps further the investigation of the issues raised in my work. He looks at contemporary art and not specifically the division of the arts. But his presentation of the cultural conflicts helps me theorise about the division of arts, a division that has been discussed at length in my work.

If Heffernan's *Museum of Words* (1993/2004) is a poetics of ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery, mine is a politics of the classification of arts from Lessing to Greenberg.

Hall's *Subjectivity* (2004) explores the history of theories of selfhood, from the classical to the present, and demonstrates how those theories can be applied in literary and cultural criticism. I explore the history of classification of the arts as begun by Lessing, which is also a history of such classifications from the classical era to the present. Thus, I demonstrate how such classifications can/have been applied to literary and cultural criticism.

While Milind Malshe writes on the Aesthetics of Literary Classification (2003), mine devotes itself to the politics of aesthetic classification as developed in Lessing.

In the lines of Kelly's *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (2003), I contend that Lessing, Pater and Greenberg in their efforts to arrive at their philosophical position through historical analyses have nevertheless translated their ideologies into universal truth claims.

In contrast to Richard Eldridge's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (2003), I have attempted to chart the course of Western philosophies of art as historical practices rather than leave them as pure history of philosophy.

Jonathan E. Schroeder's *Visual Consumption* (2002) has had a strong influence on my work. While he concentrates on the visual representation in the market, I concentrate on the verbal/visual dichotomy in aesthetics as an emerging practice from the social divisions produced by and in the market.

Like Andrew Edgar, and Peter Sedgwick's edition of the *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* (1999), I am redefining key moments in aesthetic theory and history of the modern avant-garde, but through the conflict between the verbal and the visual arts.

In the light of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1999), my work concentrates on the aesthetic classification between the verbal and the visual arts as also the aesthetic and by extension, the cultural logic of capitalism and late-capitalism.

I go beyond Summers's *The Judgement of Sense* (1987) to show how the rise of aesthetics culminates in the formation of the modern avant-garde. In the light of such co-relations, there is further questioning of the criterion that Lessing uses to legitimise his aesthetic valorisation of the verbal. In the process, the social division between "art" as liberal arts and "craft" as mechanical arts, as argued by Summers and also by Malcolm Barnard in *Art, Design and Visual Culture* (1998) establishes the material tendencies of Lessing's age.

I have used Kirby's analysis of nature and culture division in *Telling Flesh* (1997) to understand verbal and visual division as also a part of the nature/culture dialectic.

I have expanded Jay's issues on the social position of "vision" in twentieth-century French thought in his *Downcast Eyes* (1993) into a history of the social valorisation of "vision" in modern avant-garde thought as and from the moment when Lessing developed his limits of "vision" way back in the Enlightenment.

In the light of Thompson's *Customs in Common* (1993), I am looking at aesthetic customs in common (similar issues packaged differently at different defining moments of the modern avant-garde movement).

Similarly, when considering Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), I am also looking at the ideology of the aesthetic classification of the verbal arts and the visual arts in particular.

Rancière problematises the category of the working class, which till then has been propagated as ideologically distinct from the dominant class, in his seminal work, *The Nights of Labor* (1989). I use a similar format to problematise class conflicts as also aesthetic conflicts.

Mitchell in *Iconology* (1986) looks at Lessing in detail. I take up Mitchell's analysis of Lessing to analyse the modern avant-garde movement.

Wellbery does extensive work on Lessing in *Lessing's Laocoon* (sic) (1984). I am also looking at Lessing's Laocoon (sic) as semiotics in the Post-Renaissance Western Aesthetics, but more as the politics of the semiotics derived.

I completely follow Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984). I am more interested in the division of the arts that eventually culminate in Bürger's thesis on the avant-garde.

I extend the verbal–visual controversy identified by Niklaus Rudolf Schweizer in *The Ut Pictura Poesis Controversy in Eighteenth-Century England and Germany* (1972) into the avant-garde controversy of the twentieth century.

Williams's *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (1963), and *The Long Revolution* (1961) have influenced my work tremendously. I also look at the verbal and the visual clash within the framework of culture and society but within 1766 and 1940.

I am particularly thankful to Ernest Gilman, Professor of English, from the NYU Department of English, for not merely being the external examiner of my thesis, but also for letting me know the basic problems inherent in my ambitious work. On his recommendation, I read Anthony Low's *The Georgic Revolution*, Heffernan's *Museum of Words*, Kelly's *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*, Donoghue's work on Pater, and Steiner's *The Colors of Rhetoric*.

Donald E. Hall, the Chair of the Department of English of West Virginia University, has been very kind to provide insightful suggestions. I incorporated E. P. Thompson and Raymond Willaims.

Kathleen Lundeen, Professor of English from Western Washington University, has been invaluable for me. Her recommendation of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris* is very significant for my work. In my discussion of Keats's urn and Stevens's jar, I have also described the technological movement from a handcrafted urn to a mass-produced jar as an illustration of Benjamin's argument in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"; a valid suggestion from her. I did try. She recommended Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, where both as a philosophy teacher and a motorcycle mechanic, Crawford grapples with the cultural discrimination that privilege "knowledge workers" over manual labourers, and, in Lundeen's words, to a degree he succeeds in deconstructing that binary.

I am particularly grateful to Rajiv C. Krishnan for helping me understand how to position myself when taking into account the problematic relation between my philosophical historicisation of the verbal and visual conflict, and the politicisation of the material history of times when these divisions were encountered. I am particularly thankful to him for helping me fend for myself when it comes to the specters of Marx.

I have many people to acknowledge and thank, and that would require a separate section. I would merely say at this point that my work hopefully should make us think we live in a world, whose parts exist always within the possibility of contact with every other part or parts. In the words of

Vicky Kirby, then, I attempt a synaesthesia of ideas, to which the reader contributes much more, even while reading, reflecting and interpreting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I earnestly dedicate the following passage to my supervisor, Dr. Milind Malshe, Professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IITB).

> I retain the consciousness of an admiring and grateful disciple. Now, the disciple's consciousness, when he starts, I would not say to dispute, but to engage in dialogue with the master or, better, to articulate the interminable and silent dialogue which made him into a disciple—this disciple's consciousness is an unhappy consciousness. Starting to enter into dialogue in the world, that is, starting to answer back, he always feels "caught in the act," like the "infant" who, by definition and as his name indicates, cannot speak and above all must not answer back. [. . .]. He feels himself indefinitely challenged, or rejected or accused; as a disciple, he is challenged by the master who speaks within him and before him, to reproach him for making this challenge and to reject it in advance, having elaborated it before him; and having interiorized the master, he is also challenged by the disciple that he himself is. (Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", 31–32)

I shall always remain the disciple and a sincerely grateful one at that.

I am very thankful to my panel members from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (H&SS) without whom this work would have been incomplete. Dr. V. Sarma has completely transformed my interpretation of Magritte's pipe painting, such that I had to grapple with my basics in a completely new way. Dr. V. Sirola has encouraged me tremendously to pursue philosophical discourses in new ways. I want to particularly thank Dr. R. Panda for being very encouraging, kind and helpful to me.

I earnestly thank Dr. P. C. Kar, Director of the Forum of Contemporary Theory Baroda, for library and workshop facilities. Thank you for your encouragement, generosity and enthusiasm. Mrs. Kar has been kindness personified and an enthusiastic intellectual in her own right. Nishat is the best librarian, and Devendra has always been helpful in a way that only he can. And all those books and theories that even the Forum cannot supply, Upendra can and has, anytime and anywhere.

Arvind Da and Vidya Tai have been very kind to me during my stay in Baroda, and made it possible for me to see all those paintings in the Baroda museum.

I am sincerely grateful to James Heffernan, Professor Emeritus of the Department of English at Dartmouth College and author of *Museum of Words*, who has always been ready to give me some kind of feedback for my work, though he does not even know me in person. He also recommended Dr. Gilman for my work. I also extend my gratitude to John Roberts, Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Wolverhampton, School of Art and Design, and Curtis L. Carter, Professor of Aesthetics from Marquette University. I am particularly grateful to Vicki Kirby, Alexander Nemerov, Peter Bürger, and Gary Day: their work showed me where I could go with my arguments.

I am very grateful to Nandini for lending me articles from Cornell University and helping me just the way she did in my MPhil days. Anooja and I had different kinds of dissertations to produce, and she beat me at that! Madhavi has been the "Florence Nightingale" to me...do I need to say more than a warm "woof"? I have much to learn from Mythili. Had it not been for Sherline, I could not have got on with Lessing.

Annapurna and I have a common destiny that ties us together. We joined together, fought together, and most significantly watched and almost wrote the most innovative theses on films (Khans and Vijay Thalapathy) that only we can watch. I particularly remember and miss Sharminda.

If anyone knows how to write, format, and deliver a thesis, no one can do that as well as Chaitali. She taught me two most important skills, which I am still not familiar with—commonsense and self-independence.

Gayadri has been the most consistent factor of my life in IITB apart from my work. She, apart from my mother, is my worst critic and my best appreciator. I am not good at digesting the criticism, but I wait for the praises, and they do come!

I am privileged to do research in IITB. It has offered me the most convenient Internet service, wonderful library facilities, prompt medical services (I fell sick twice) and variety of activities to enjoy, and above all, a generous funding to take part in national and international conferences. It has offered me a sense of timeless and luxurious life that I shall always urge for. I am particularly grateful that I have been a student of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences; a department that perhaps houses the most computer literate and technically sharp students, most of them developing such acumen after coming here and all by themselves;