Visuality and Translation in Literary Art: Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky* and *A Book from the Ground*

What is the relationship between word and image in the context of literature and art? Due to the preeminence of the “logos” (words, speech, ideas) in classical Western philosophy, the former has traditionally been accorded an exclusive status in textual theories. In the recent two decades, with broadened definitions on what makes a text, scholars have come to recognise the primacy of images in the production of meaning. The pictorial turn in critical theory signals this shift from a dominant focus on the verbal to an engaged interest in the complex interactions between word and image, that is, between linguistic and visual texts. At the heart of the issue is representation: the media-specific forms of expression and the ideologies—“the systems of power and canons of value” (Mitchell 1986, 1)—imbricated in such forms. In this iconological age, communicative forms are characterised by hybridity and multiplicity, such that a monomodal approach to representation has become theoretically outmoded. As W.J.T. Mitchell tells us, “the interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such: all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism” (Mitchell 1994, 5; see also Mitchell 2013).

An antidote to “the impulse to purify media” is to adopt an intersemiotic approach to text. Such an approach gives rise to a composite verbal-visual figure—the imagetext, defined simply as “composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (Mitchell 1994, 89n1).1 To Mitchell, one of the best exemplifications of this figure in Western literature is William Blake’s illustrated books, which feature different image-text combinations, ranging “from the absolutely disjunctive (‘illustrations’ that have no textual reference) to the absolutely synthetic identification of verbal and visual codes (marks that collapse the distinction between writing and drawing)” (91). Such multimodal works exhibit the “flexible, experimental, and ‘high-tension’ relations between words and images” (91), and demand a “double literacy” (89) on the part of the reader. Importantly, imagetexts do not exist in literature for the sake

1 This definition applies to the word as a run-on compound. Cf. definitions of “image/text” and “image-text”, where the oblique and hyphen respectively denote rupture and relation between the two concepts in question (Mitchell 1994, 89n1).
of mere aesthetic innovation; they further carry a political value that responds to prevailing ideological assumptions. It is in this sense that imagetexts are “a site of conflict, a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation” (91); in certain contexts they can even become “precisely motivated interventions in the semipolitics” (91) of a particular medium.

In the light of the pictorial turn that is still unravelling today, how should we think the relationship between literature and visuality, as embodied in the imagetext? What are the “politics of inscription” (Mitchell 1994, 109) involved in the articulation of imagetexts? This chapter attempts to answer these questions from the Chinese perspective, by examining two works by Xu Bing. Xu Bing is one of the most eminent contemporary Chinese artists today, widely celebrated in international art circles for his innovative and often philosophical treatment of linguistic material in visual art installations. To discuss his works under the rubric of literature may seem somewhat anomalous at first, for visual creations are, “by default”, more properly suited to the field of fine arts. But institutionalised boundaries, as we know, are disciplinary straitjackets that often fail to capture the generic fluidities of experimental practices, which constantly strive to negotiate and destabilise these boundaries. The line between the literary and non-literary becomes even less relevant in the case of Xu Bing’s artworks, in which text and textuality are central themes, just as they are in literary criticism.

In the following sections, I look at two literary art works by Xu Bing with complementary titles: *Tianshu* or *A Book from the Sky* and *Dishu* or *A Book from the Ground*. These works take shape in various material forms,