An "iconological turn" in literary and cultural studies and the reconstruction of visual culture

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Abstract

In the present era, there has appeared a shift in literature and culture: from traditional verbal writing to the newly emergent picture or image writing. As a result, a visual culture has come into being severely challenging the traditional verbal culture. Writing with words is challenged by writing with pictures or images, so is the criticism and studies of today's literature and culture. Confronted with such a challenge and irresistible trend, traditional criticism and studies with words should more or less shift its focus to that of iconological criticism, and iconological studies. But in any event, the rise of iconographical writing does not necessarily mean the degradation of verbal writing and the reading and appreciating habit of human beings, but on the contrary, it will promote the heightening of the reader's aesthetic perception, enabling the reader not only to interpret a verbal text, but also a visual text toward a reconstruction of visual culture. Since translation is viewed as a sort of "rewriting," the essay also deals with cross-cultural intersemiotic translation. To the author, it is a newly emergent research area long overlooked by both traditional verbal-centric translation scholars or semioticians.

Keywords: *iconological turn; iconological criticism; cultural criticism; cultural studies; visual culture; cross-cultural intersemiotic translation.*

Réne Wellek once regarded the twentieth century as a real "age of criticism" as compared with the nineteenth century when romantic theory dominated the critical imagination for a long time. If his affirmation is true of the latter part of the twentieth century, we could further affirm that, upon entering the age of globalization, there has also appeared a shift in current literature and culture: from traditional verbal writing to

Semiotica 176–1/4 (2009), 29–46
DOI 10.1515/semi.2009.059
0037–1998/09/0176–0029

the newly emergent picture or image writing. As a result, a visual culture has come into being severely challenging the traditional verbal culture. Furthermore, the writing with words is also challenged by that with pictures or images. Confronted with such a challenge and irresistible trend, traditional criticism and studies with words should also more or less shift its focus to that of pictorial criticism, or iconological studies. So should translation studies, since translation is a sort of rewriting (Lefevere 1992) in another language and another system of signs as well. It is true that when we reflect on what we underwent in twentieth century literary and cultural studies, we could easily find that in the late 1980s Western critical circles, when people felt that postmodernism had already been on the decline, they tried to predict what would appear in literary and art criticism in the years after postmodernism. Some people predicted that in the age after postmodernism there would appear a critical mode not chiefly by verbal means but by images, which anticipated the advent of an age of iconology both in creative writing and theory and criticism. Obviously, the major mode of literary creation will gradually change from verbal writing to image or picture representation, along with which a new critical mode will come into being: image criticism or iconological studies.[1] In this sense, a new critical approach exclusively to pictorial texts will appear in current literary and art criticism and studies.

1. Iconological criticism and the advent of an "iconological turn"

In dealing with iconography and iconology, art historian Dana Arnold writes "... iconography and iconology are important parts of art history. Iconography encompasses the study and interpretation of figural representations, either individual or symbolic, religious or secular; more broadly, the art of representation by pictures or images, which may or may not have a symbolic as well as an apparent or superficial meaning" (2004: 95). Although Arnold tries to distinguish between the two terms, I here try to use them interchangeably since semiotics is an interdisciplinary research discipline bridging up the gap between verbal and visual culture, with iconology more of cultural and theoretic significance.

At present, along with the shrinking of elite literary market and the rise of popular culture in the age of globalization, the aesthetic standard of people's visual perception has also largely changed: from focusing on the reading of the verbal text chiefly to focusing more on the reading and appreciation of the visual text. There has even come an age of iconology as an inevitable consequence of postindustrial society in postmodern literature and art. Then people might well raise the questions: What is char-

acteristic of the age of iconology? If there is indeed such a "turn" in contemporary literary and art criticism and studies, then what is the difference between it and the verbal writing and criticism? In this aspect, I will first quote the brief and precise summary by American scholar of picture theory W. J. T. Mitchell, who has not only in the past decade energetically promoted picture theory but also made careful studies of it as well as enthusiastically called for such an "iconological turn" in contemporary literary and cultural criticism and studies:

> For anyone who is skeptical about the need for/to picture theory, I simply ask them to reflect on the commonplace notion that we live in a culture of images, a society of the spectacle, a world of semblances and simulacra. We are surrounded by pictures; we have an abundance of theories about them, but it doesn't seem to do us any good. Knowing what pictures are doing, understanding them, doesn't seem necessarily to give us power over them ... Images, like histories and technologies, are our creations, yet also commonly thought to be "out of our control" — or at least out of "someone's control," the question of agency and power being central to the way images work. (Mitchell 1994: 5–6)[2]

When Mitchell first raised this question in 1994, computer was not so widely used as today, especially in China. In the field of literary creation and criticism, verbal criticism was very forceful, with visual or iconological criticism almost "marginalized" without any followers. Furthermore, people seemed not to have realized that a new age of iconology was to come along with the process of globalization in culture. Mitchell, engaged in both literary criticism and art criticism in an interdisciplinary way, had already predicted the tendency of the shift of critical attention in the near future. As he put in a conference held in Beijing in June 2004, when we turn to *Time* magazine in the turn of the century, we easily notice that the appearance of cover figures in different times implies different significances: when a cloning sheep appears on the cover, it actually indicates that the myth of the invincibility of mankind has been damaged and the "post-humanist age" has already come. But on the cover of the magazine after the September 11th incident, there appeared an image of the burning WTC buildings.[3] So it is not surprising that the weakening theories cannot explain the tragic but living reality. Undoubtedly, these images are far more advanced than those created by people in ancient times, and they are largely supported and even produced by contemporary high technologies in such an age of digitalization, which have not only renovated them but also made them truthfully fabricated again. We cannot deny the fact that when this age has already come around us and influenced our life and work, we are immediately reminded of the rising photographical genre both in the West and in China in the past few years. This is also a

comprehensive art crossing the border of different arts and disciplines and even crossing space and time. The rise of this art does anticipate the birth of a new genre in the age of globalization: photographical genre. As this genre is characterized by both pictorial representations as well as additional verbal explanations, I just call it an iconographical writing in order to distinguish itself from traditional photographical writing with pictures functioning merely in a subsidiary way.

In speaking of images, diagrams, and metaphors, semioticians have also made careful studies in distinguishing between the three kinds of iconic signs. To them, "Images are characterized by having simple qualities in common with their object. If a piece of a red carton is used as a sign exhibiting the color of the paint you want to buy, then it functions as a simple iconic sign, an image, of the desired color"(Johansen 2003: 98). Although they do not touch upon iconographical criticism, they have already demonstrated implicitly that images signify themselves both iconically and metaphorically. But in the verbal-centric text, images are only used as an additional form of inserted pictures to the written text, while in iconographical writing, images to a large extent occupy a dominant and central place of the whole text. Therefore, iconographical writing is of many postmodern characteristics. It not only indicates the decline of verbal writing and the rise of iconographical writing, but also predicts the rise of iconological criticism devoting to this sort of writing. It is true that in a postmodern society when people's life is colorful and full of choices, they cannot be simply satisfied with traditional verbal writing and criticism, for reading itself has become a sort of cultural consumption and aesthetic enjoyment. And reading should also be a "pleasure," according to Roland Barthes. During their daily routine, people are easily "aesthetically" tired of reading various documents either on the computer or in paper form. Therefore, in order to meet the aesthetic requirement of the broad masses of people or consumers, there has appeared a sort of new writing and criticism characterized by transmitting information chiefly by means of image or picture. This undoubtedly embodies the spirit of time in such a postmodern era when language is no longer the only major means of transmitting information. Thus the advent of a pictorial turn in contemporary literary writing and criticism is an inevitable event beyond one's expectation and resistance.

2. Postmodernizing iconographical criticism

Although the postmodernism debate has been carried out in international academia for over thirty years, and its coming into China was an event in

the late 1980s and early 1990s, to reflect on the issue of modernity in different cultural contexts reminds us that its specter is still lingering. Matei Calinescu, whose work *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987) is now largely quoted and discussed in the Chinese context, puts literary postmodernism in the framework of modernity, viewing it as one of the five faces of modernity, thus expanding the domain of literary and cultural modernity.[4] Fredric Jameson also pertinently points out, "No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern" (2002: 94). Actually, in dealing with the issue of postmodern in comparison with that of modern, Jean-François Lyotard affirmed long ago that those appearing earlier are not necessarily modern, while those coming later are not necessarily postmodern.[5] This is just the paradox of the postmodern within the larger frame of the modern. When we observe iconographical writing, it will certainly be true, especially in associating it with the current Chinese literary and cultural tradition.

People of every era would regard themselves as "modern," but when "modern" appears, postmodern has already germinated within it as its opposite form. So from a historical point of view, we find that modern is often mixed up with postmodern, for there is no absolute distinction between the two. It is especially true in China where almost all the Western theoretical concepts and cultural trends, when coming into China, are metamorphosed in the Chinese context subject to various constructions and reconstructions. Since artists and art critics have greater imagination than empirical scholars of social sciences, they would rather make more creative constructions of various "translated" or "borrowed" Western concepts. Iconographical writing and criticism are certainly characterized by breaking through the order of space and time and liberating artists and art critics from a limited sphere of imagination and critical intervention. It was long echoed in ancient Chinese characters from which people could get the meaning even by guessing what is implied in the image of a character. In my previous discussion of various versions of postmodernity, I point out that applied to literary and art criticism, postmodernity could also be used as an interpretive code crossing the limit of space and time, from which we can interpret all the literary and art phenomena of different cultural backgrounds in different periods of time without tracing back to their historical sources or original national identities (cf. Wang 1997). In carrying on iconographical criticism of literature and art, I think it particularly appropriate.

Undoubtedly, of all the characteristics of postmodern art, a very conspicuous one is that the representation of meaning is indeterminate; that is to say, the artist cannot express what he means to say in a definite way,

thus leaving much space for readers/interpreters to function in a dynamic and constructive way. So, in a postmodern sense, the reader/audience actually plays the unique role of both an interpreter and critic with great artistic attainments. If we think that modernist art is still characterized by possessing a sort of totality or an idea of centrality in the text, then postmodernist art is characterized by being "fragmentary" in structure and "decentralizing," "deconstructive," and indeterminate in meaning. A postmodernist text usually leaves a vast space for readers to read and interpret, thus enabling them to be engaged in creative interpretation and dynamic construction. Readers in a postmodern sense are both interpreters and critics. As a result, they interpret the text usually in a pluralistic way. It is true that the reader/interpreter of each generation has his own orientation of theory and evaluation, and the ideas put by readers/interpreters of each generation gradually form a history of reception and interpretation of a work of art. So, in this sense, as an inevitable consequence, postmodernity in literature and art actually marks the advent of an iconological era. In such an era, the photographical genre first appears before us. As I have illustrated previously, "iconographical writing" is different from traditional photographical writing as the latter is still verbal-centered with images as subsidiary means of representing the meaning. While in iconographical writing, what occupies the central part of the text is image that itself signifies rather than by any other means. Thus the postmodern characteristics of iconographical writing here are all the more conspicuous.

Obviously, we cannot but admit that early postmodernist art is of certain avant-garde sense, but on the other hand, it often manifests itself as being nostalgic, tending to return to the primitive. To apply this duplicity to the interpretation of the characteristics of iconographical writing is quite appropriate. Some people think that iconographical writing with images as the major means is nothing but a fabricated literature and art, namely, it combines the photographic technique of high technology, especially finding embodiment in the increasingly digitalizing tendency of postmodern photography, and the aesthetic ideal inherent in the human mind, thus creating a "new" and "second" nature with the photography which truly and aesthetically describes nature and the verbal appeal full of interpretive tension. This is quite close to the so-called "photographical realism," indicating the return to the worship to nature and primitive totem. Thus iconographical writing characterized by crossing the boundary between words and images is different from any other genres with three major characteristics: depending on images, appealing to technology, and turning to pluralistic interpretations.

First, when we say that it depends on images, it simply means that people had already had the habit of appreciating "works of art" long before

written words came into being. At the time, people based their records of historical events, descriptions of natural scenery, portrayals of familiar persons, and even their aesthetic appreciation of works of art on their representation with images and understanding of these pictures or images. If we admit that Western languages based on the composition of Romanized letters are characterized by separating meaning from form, then Chinese based on glyph is now still largely characterized by guessing the meaning from form. Along with people's ability of verbal expression becoming stronger and stronger, they less and less depend on image. But even so, the art with images representing natural scenery and portraying people is still developing and getting more and more independent from verbal means and evolving into the birth of various schools of painting. As a result, it becomes an independent art parallel to literature, the art of language. This is one of the reasons why Chinese calligraphy could truthfully represent one's ideal and aspiration and reflect one's principle of interpersonal communication as well as his state of mind. Undoubtedly, those who can understand the art of calligraphy and interpret the meaning inherent in it must be very good at ancient Chinese characters and classical poetry, for in classical Chinese literature, poetry is implied in picture, and picture in poetry as well. Furthermore, they must fully understand the unique characteristic of calligraphy. In contrast, the development of photography very much depends on the development of contemporary optical technology: on the one hand, it should truthfully represent the original form of people and nature, but on the other hand, it cannot but realize this goal of representation with an aesthetic and selective eye.

Thus we have the second characteristic of iconographical writing: appeal to contemporary science and technology. Since this newly emergent genre is different from other genres in that its verbal part only functions in a subsidiary way, or plays a role of additional explanation, it cannot replace the subtle description of nature and psychological depiction of characters in literary works. But on the other hand, its imagery part should be fulfilled by the photographer with his camera. That is to say, the quality of representation varies on the quality of the camera, the techniques of the photographer and his aesthetic ideal of selecting the scenery. Although the technology of Xeroxed copy is a result of the modern period, the rapid development of digitalization and optics has largely speeded up the innovation of the camera and the renovation of photography, enabling people more and more to depend on their direct observation and appreciation of natural scenery. As we all know, the scenery or historical events reflected in the image are by no means objectively naturalistic record, but rather, the "second nature" reconstructed by people

based on their aesthetic observation and selection by various artistic means. It comes from nature, but it is higher than nature as it has undergone the photographer's aesthetic selection and his artificial beautification and reconstruction. It not only implies people's desire for a better and more beautiful nature, but also represents their instinct of trying to beautify nature and pursuing the perfect combination of man and nature.

Third, when we speak of iconographical writing's appeal to interpretation, it simply means that the images represented in the text are highly condensed with rich content. For instance, a static picture actually contains the significance of dozens or even hundreds of moving images. So, the additional written explanation cannot precisely describe what is implied in the picture since its interpretive part only functions as a guide to one's reading and appreciation. The profound connotation can only be discovered through the reader/appreciator's dynamic understanding and constructive interpretation. Therefore, the reader/appreciator should be endowed with greater ability of reading pictures and more subtle aesthetic perception. And he actually plays a role of image translator and interpreter. As for image and art translation, I will discuss these in the last part. In other words, the more experiences the reader/appreciator has collected in his horizon of expectation, the more precise and adequate interpretation of the image he could make. So, in this sense, iconographical writing does not mean the degradation of verbal writing and the reading and appreciating habit of human beings, but on the contrary, it promotes the heightening of his aesthetic perception, enabling the reader not only to interpret a verbal text, but also a visual text. The reader is not only in the position of passive appreciator, but more in the position of dynamic interpreter and constructive re-creator. The reader's aesthetic perception has thereby been heightened from the originally simple ability of reading words to the now sophisticated capability of reading images and appreciating works of art in a dynamic and aesthetic way. In this sense, the transgressing characteristic of iconographical writing also requires its appreciator to have a greater ability of both having an interdisciplinary knowledge and appreciating various types of art. In a word, without a strong verbal ability and precise and subtle artistic representation, a photographer can hardly be able to construct a colorful imagery world, or these fragmentary images would only remain some raw materials in his hands. Thus, we could say that the rise of iconographical writing does not mean the end of verbal writing, but rather, it means the condensation and sublimation of the latter. But even so, when iconographical writing has developed to a perfect stage, it still cannot replace the significance and value of verbal writing.

3. Deconstructing the artificial boundary?

"Crossing the border" and "closing the gap," as frequently used concepts in the early period of the postmodernism debate (Fiedler 1972: 80), are also frequently used in promoting contemporary cultural studies in China characterized by crossing the border between elite culture and popular culture and closing the gap between high culture and low culture (Wang 2003). In speaking of the relations between verbal writing and iconographical writing, it is particularly appropriate. In contemporary critical circles and comparative literature, one of the hotly discussed topics is so-called "crossing borders." Literary scholars have raised such questions: Where does the border of literature lie? If we just extend it a bit further, where does the border of literary studies lie? Will the rise of cultural studies finally engulf literary studies? Some conservative elite literary scholars are very much worried about the "transgressing" practice by the newly rising young scholars of wide range of knowledge fearing that literary scholars of the new generation may well cross the "border" of literary studies proper entering other research domains, for instance, the field of fine arts, etc. Others might well question the legitimacy of studying images by literary scholars. To me and other more open-minded literary scholars, or more specifically, comparatists, such a "transgressing" practice is not only characterized by postmodern interdisciplinary studies of literature: subverting the hierarchy of literature and art and deconstructing the increasingly narrowed disciplinary border, thereby paving the way for the interdisciplinary studies of literature and art, but also characterized by comparative literature studies in an interdisciplinary way. In the Chinese context, comparative literature has from its very beginning been practiced according to the most frequently quoted definition given by Henry Remak:

> Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (Remak 1961: 3)

Even developed to the present time, when comparative literature in its traditional Eurocentric sense is supposed to be "dead," a New Comparative Literature should, according to Gayatri Spivak, "always cross borders" (2003: 16). That is one of the very reasons why comparative literature in China has never died although it has in recent years been severely

challenged by the rise of Cultural Studies. For it not only crosses the border of languages, but also the border of disciplines as well as that of cultural traditions.[6] Since iconographical writing and its criticism were not introduced until after the postmodernism debate in China, I will regard it as a newly emergent genre, or a product out of the postmodern culture.

As a consequent product of the postmodern society, the rise of iconographical writing, like Internet writing, has appeared along with the rapid development of information and electronic technologies of postindustrial society. Its unique characteristics determine that it could only appear in such a postmodern society in which people strongly pursue reading images rather than reading books. It is not surprising that after a tedious daily routine, what people want most is to get relaxed rather than just continue their hard work at books or professional journals. So they want to joyfully but aesthetically consume cultural and artistic goods so as to satisfy their visual demand. Since various images are composed of colorful pictures appealing to their visual desire, they could easily and aesthetically enjoy themselves by reading these pictures. Its difference from traditional imagery art lies in that it progresses along with the development of contemporary Internet technology: in a vast Internet world, numerous ''netizens'' freely give full play to their imagination and verbal expression in such a fictional cyber space to make up various kinds of vivid stories and fabricate and even collage colorful pictures or images. No doubt Internet literature is filled with both good and bad works, some of which as ''cultural snacks'' are only consumed once and immediately discarded. The same is true of Internet art as everybody may access the Internet and function as a sort of free ''artist.'' But we cannot deny the fact that the few elegant works of art from the Internet may well gradually manifest themselves as excellent works of art, whose artistic value will be discovered by future researchers. They will also involve themselves in the list of canonical works of art. Moreover, Internet literature may enable quite a few really excellent works of art that are ''marginalized'' in contemporary marketization to be appreciated by broad masses of people so that they will be ''re-canonized.'' In this sense, Internet writing is also characterized by ''crossing the border'' and ''closing the gap'' in a postmodern way. Then, how could iconographical writing and its criticism with images as their major means of representation ''cross the border''? To me, it manifests itself in the following three aspects.

First, the major means of representation of iconographical writing is image or picture rather than word. Words here still play an important role, but no longer the major role as they used to play, thus subverting the binary hierarchy between words and images and enabling these colorful images to be full of narrative potential. Similarly, it has left the

reader/interpreter a vast space of imagination in which they are free to make various constructions and reconstructions. It has also closed the artificial gap between readers and critics, enabling every reader with certain artistic attainments to participate in the activity of literary appreciation and criticism. The final completion of the construction of meaning largely depends on the dynamic participation of the reader and his communication and interaction with the implied author.

Second, the beautiful and elegant pictures in the iconographical writing are to a large extent produced by the high technology and digitalization in the postmodern society, which seems to make art's imitation of nature return to the primitive stage of mankind. But these pictures, on the one hand, are closer to nature proper, but on the other hand, they are more subject to artists' aesthetic beautification. Thus it crosses the border between art and nature, and even between art and science, enabling the description of nature and imitation of nature to become once again the sacred responsibility of postmodern artists. Since postmodern art is also characterized by being nostalgic like its predecessor modern art, art has now returned to its original imitative nature.

Furthermore, the third characteristic of iconographical writing lies in that it narrows the distance between author and reader, or between photographer and appreciator, enabling them to communicate and carry on dialogue on the same ground. In this way, the wider the reader's horizon of expectation, the more and richer content he could discover in the imagery text. Thus, iconographic writing does not at all degrade the function of the reader, but on the contrary, it greatly highlights his dynamic understanding and creative and constructive interpretation. And the final completion of constructing the textual significance chiefly depends on the communication and dialogue between the reader and the author. It is this sort of plural communication and dialogue that makes the textual meaning interpreted in a pluralistic way.

If we say that Jacques Derrida's critical theory has deconstructed the long-standing logocentrism and, inspired by it, ecocriticism has deconstructed anthropocentrism, then where does the deconstructive force of iconographical writing and its criticism lie? It just lies in its forceful deconstruction of the verbal-centric mode of thinking and writing, and emancipating the creative and critical imagination of artists and art critics.

4. Translating images: Toward a cross-cultural intersemoitic translation

From a cultural perspective, we could view translation as a change from one culture into another chiefly by means of language or, as Lefevere

defines, a sort of "rewriting" of culture in another language. In today's global context, we still remember what Roman Jakobson described fifty years ago about translation from a linguistic perspective. Although his definition covers three aspects of translation, translation scholars usually only focus on the change between different languages, viewing it as translation proper, while neglecting a ubiquitous phenomenon: intersemiotic translation. Now let us look at how Jakobson defines the three senses of translation:

1. Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (Jakobson 1992: 145)

Here, Jakobson recognizes that translation is a kind of "interpretation" either by means of verbal signs or nonverbal signs, which certainly leaves some space for future researchers to exploit and develop. It is true that to Jakobson, from a formalistic-linguistic point of view, only the second type of translation should be dealt with as translation proper. He obviously overlooks an important factor: intercultural translation, which, as a type of translation in its broad sense, is actually more and more attractive to contemporary cultural studies scholars. The other factor excluded by him from the domain of translation is certainly intersemiotic translation. After all, as a linguist, he cannot totally overlook the function of sign in the study of translation, thus he still puts intersemiotic translation in the third category, which has left behind him a vast space for us to explore and further elaborate.

In the past decade, some cases derived from translation practice have caused such questions to be raised before translation scholars: Is Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* into contemporary English regarded as translation as it is a sort of "intralingual translation"? In the Chinese context, is Wang Yuanhua's translation of classical Chinese literary theoretical work *Wenxin diaolong* (The Mind of Literature and Carving Dragons) into modern Chinese to be viewed as translation? If the answers are affirmative, since it is no easy job to translate the above two classical pieces into contemporary languages, then, it simply means the breakthrough of the limit of translation and the expansion of traditional domain of translation.

When we talk about intersemiotic translation as a unique type of translation, we have full reason to affirm it. In dealing with the influence of

contemporary changes on the notion of translation, Wolfgang Iser pertinently points out,

> We usually associate translation with converting one language into another, be it foreign, technical, vocational, or otherwise. Nowadays, however, not only languages have to be translated. In a rapidly shrinking world, many different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for a mutual understanding in terms not only of one's own culture but also of those encountered. The more alien the latter, the more inevitable is some form of translation, as the specific nature of the culture one is exposed to can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar. In tackling such issues, interpretation can only become an operative tool if conceived as an act of translation. (Iser 2000: 5)

Apparently, to Iser, interpretation is undoubtedly of a sort of translatability, which depends on what to be translated. "Interpretation is therefore bound to be different," which depends on the following cases:

1. when certain types of text, such as holy or literary ones, are transposed into other types, such as an exegesis of canonical texts or cognitive appraisals of literary texts;
2. when cultures or cultural levels are translated into terms that allow for an interchange between what is foreign and what is familiar, or when entropy is controlled, or when "reality" is to be conceived in terms of interacting systems;
3. when incommensurabilities such as God, the world, and humankind — which are neither textual nor scripted — are translated into language for the purpose of grasping and subsequently comprehending them. (Iser 2000: 6–7)

Here, Iser does not mention the translation of art works and other types of visual texts, but from the different types of cultures he discusses, this sort of interpretive translation also contains art works and those composed of images and various signs. Therefore, the interpretation of these texts should be viewed as an inevitable translation of great potential development.

As interlingual translation is done between two different languages, we should also consider the intersemiotic translation crossing the boundary of language as well as that of culture when we deal with this unique type of translation. Great translators and art theorists, like Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Ernst Gombrich (1956), all have great attainments in translating and interpreting verbal and iconographical texts. A pictorial text with few explanatory words, once read by them, will be interpreted and translated into verbal text full of content. To Benjamin, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the

fabric of tradition'' (1970b: 225). Thus the ''task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [Intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original'' (1970a: 76). But all the above Western theorists, including Benjamin himself, translate images within the Western cultural tradition, thus not reaching the plane of cross-cultural intersemiotic translation. Gombrich, in his lifetime, was very interested in Chinese language and painting and even tried to master the Chinese language so that he could directly appreciate and more effectively interpret Chinese art. But his good wish could not be realized. It is true that his superb interpretations of classical Chinese paintings through the intermediary of English should be recognized as a sort of cross-cultural intersemiotic translation, but as we know, since he did not understand Chinese, and the historical background of Chinese art possessed by him is far from enough since he got it largely from the English translation, his interpretation is therefore rather incomplete. Moreover, he made his interpretations of classical Chinese paintings largely on the basis of ready-made materials in English or other Western languages by his precursors plus his own aesthetic intuition, so he has not reached the plane of cross-cultural intersemiotic translation. He only completed his intra-intersemiotic translation within the Western cultural context.

Obviously, translation from French into English or from French into German also crosses the boundary of language, but it cannot be compared with translation from any Western languages into Chinese, for there is huge difference between Chinese culture and Western culture and between the two linguistic systems. In this sense, the cross-cultural interlingual-intersemiotic translation must have the following premises: (1) it must be the translation crossing the boundary between different languages; (2) it must be the translation crossing the boundary between different cultural traditions; and (3) it must be the translation or interpretation crossing the boundary between different arts and disciplines. To this standard, the above theorists have not achieved very much in cross-cultural intersemiotic translation due to their own limit. But Chinese artist and literary translator Fu Lei (1908–1966) did this although the value of his practice has not yet been recognized by international scholarship.[7]

Many years later, Roger Hart put forward the concept of ''contextual turn'' (1999: 59) in dealing with cultural translation from an anthropological perspective, which is also effectively applied to the discussion of translation of art. In effect, translation of art should also call for a ''semiotic turn'' apart from the ''contextual turn'' as it transcends the domain of context. It will certainly contribute a great deal to the ''intersemiotic translation'' formulated by Jakobson. In the current era, the traditional linguistic-oriented definition of translation does not fit into the rapid

development of contemporary culture, with the domain of translation more and more expanding. It particularly has a vast space of development in the translation of images and pictures. According to Wyatt MacGaffey, "Translating art begins with framing and reframing the physical experience of encountering art, which for most people takes place in a museum or gallery. The style of the museum's building and its announcements of the kind of art within go far toward shaping the visitor's self-definition and his or her sense of the experience to come" (2003: 255). But even so, translations of art are different from those of verbal texts, for the former are "always approximate, but good ones are best regarded as works of art in their own right" (2003: 257) as there are some impediments to translation in art:

> Impediments to translation in art include the art idea itself, which contains a set of invidious moral distinctions closely related to the ideological functions of art in modern society. Such distinctions are created, maintained, opposed and eventually changed by political action, including critical commentary, translation and retranslation. If elements of chauvinism, racism and condescension should be eliminated, translators still face the basic anthropological problem that societies (by definition) vary in their institutional structure. (MacGaffey 2003: 263)

Thus translation of art, one of the categories of intersemiotic translation, should be much more complicated open for more theoretic debate.

In the field of contemporary translation studies, Walter Benjamin's discussion of the task of the translator has largely been quoted by translation scholars of cultural perspectives not only in the West but also in China. According to Benjamin, even if a work of art as a product of a particular period, it still contains a sort of "translatability." The excellence of a superb reader-translator simply lies in that he could find this translatability and echo with it and finally translate it into the target language. In this sense, an excellent translation must be the result of the mutual and harmonious communication and dialogue between the original author and the translator. But this harmony does not necessarily mean that the version should be a hundred percent faithful to the original, for the translated version is far beyond the simple copy of the original, but rather, it must be superior to the latter and exploit the inherent meaning of the latter thereby giving the latter an "afterlife" and "continued life" (Benjamin 1970a: 71). This is particularly true of art translation as artistic images and aesthetic signs have far greater space of interpretation and translation than a verbal text. Although it is impossible to reach the plane of complete faithfulness, if the translator has closely approached the original meaning, it should be viewed as a successful translation. Benjamin

discussed literary translation many years ago, but we could further elaborate it in comparison with art translation. That is, in translating a literary work from one language into another, no matter how different the translators might be, the translated versions cannot be totally different; in translating a work of art, things will be different, for an art translator functions more like an interpreter, and his artistic attainments directly influence his exploitation and interpretation of the profound meaning of the original work. Thus, for verbal translation, there might be a relative standard, but for visual translation, it is hard to find such a standard. The translator's work may well pave the way for constructing a sort of visual culture.

At present, iconographical writing and its criticism are rising as a sort of avant-garde artistic and critical experimentations, which, like all the other historic avant-gardes, remains isolated without many followers in the Western context.[8] But they will rapidly develop along with the development of the digitalization in the age of globalization, especially in the Chinese context, where there were long traditions of glyph and poetic painting as well as pictorial writing. Its vast space and huge potential for development will be more and more clearly realized.[9] So, in this aspect, we comparatists and semioticians should also give full attention to this newly emergent field of research. Although in the age of globalization, elite literary and art creation seems to be shrinking, "In any case, the avant-gardes did not fail because they were not radical enough or audacious enough, or because they were not doing things proper. In this sense, at least, art is absolutely not in control of its own fate. It does not determine its own destiny, as the word 'autonomy' might suggest" (Eagleton 2004: 13). But even so, iconological criticism and studies will grow healthily along with some other newly emergent critical and research trends, such as ecocriticism, post-humanist criticism, gender studies, and diaspora studies.

Notes

1. As for the theoretical description and elaboration of iconological criticism in Chinese, cf. Wang (2004).
2. It is not surprising that the Chinese translation of Mitchell's *Picture Theory* was published in 2006 and sold very well.
3. See the Chinese translation of Mitchell's speech in Mitchell (2005).
4. Cf. Calinescu (2002). It is one of the most frequently quoted works in the Chinese context on the discussion on modernity and its relevant issues.
5. Cf. Lyotard (1984). It should be indicated that this work has more than four translations in Chinese, but more from English than from the French original.

6. As for detailed descriptions and analyses of comparative literature in current China, cf. Wang (2006a).
7. As for my detailed discussion on Fu Lei's cross-cultural intersemiotic translation, cf. Wang and Liu (2008).
8. During the International Conference on Literature and Visual Culture held at Duke University on October 6–7, 2006, Jane Gaines expressed her disagreement with my call for such a "iconological turn" in literary and cultural criticism. To her, although Mitchell, the most productive picture theorist in the United States, has enthusiastically promoted his picture theory, he almost has no followers. But this case is not true in the Chinese context, where there will surely be a great interest in iconographical writing and criticism.
9. In another long article of mine in Chinese, I simply describe the current era as a "post-theoretical era" and summarize the major orientations of the development of Western critical theories. Cf. Wang (2006b).

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