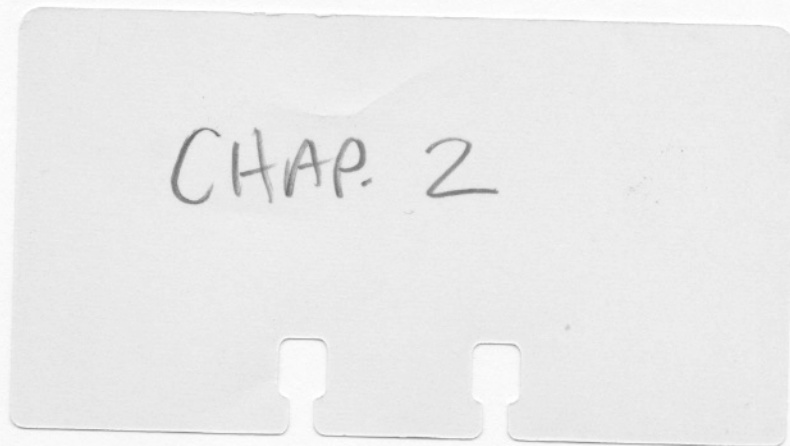


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Simon Morley

**Writing on the Wall**

**Word and Image  
in Modern Art**



**University of California Press**  
Berkeley Los Angeles

'All that is solid melts into air,' declared Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their stirring evocation of the modern era in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and, as if in response to these new forces, written words began to overflow into the wider environment, sometimes in the most chaotic ways. Where once they had largely been confined to ordered ranks on the pure white of the book page, they now seemed to roam uncontrollably within the vertical visual field – on walls, shopfronts, billboards, advertising pillars, street signs, passing vehicles, even people (the sandwich-board man became a common sight in the late nineteenth-century city street).

The narcotic effect of these transformations is vividly captured in a travel book about Paris written by an Italian, Edmondo de Amicis, in 1878:

Here is splendour at its height; this is the metropolis of metropolises, the open and lasting palace of Paris, to which all aspire and everything tends. Here the street becomes a square, the sidewalk a street, the shop a museum, the café a theatre, beauty, elegance, splendour dazzling magnificence, and life a fever. The horses pass in troops, and the crowds in torrents. Windows, signs, advertisements, doors, facades, all rise, widen and become silvered, gilded and illumined.... Oh, Heavens! A gilded advertising carriage is passing with servants in livery, which offers you high hats at reduction. Look at the end of the street. What! Half a mile away there is an advertisement in titanic characters of the *Petit Journal* – 'Six thousand copies daily – three million readers!' You raise your eyes to Heaven, but, unfortunately, there is no freedom in Heaven. Above the highest roof of the quarter, is traced in delicate characters against the sky the mane of a cloudland artist who wishes to take your photograph.... So there is no other refuge from these persecutions except to look at your feet, but alas, there is no refuge here even, for you see stamped upon the asphalt by stencil plate an advertisement which begs you to dine on home-cooking in rue Chaussée d'Antin. In walking for half an hour you read, without wishing to do so, half a volume. The whole city, in fact, is an inexhaustible, graphic, variegated and enormous decoration, aided by grotesque pictures of devils and puppets high as houses, which assail and oppress you, making you curse the alphabet.<sup>2</sup>

While certainly familiar to us today, this visual cacophony of word and image was clearly a heady new experience in the mid-nineteenth century, and the city is envisaged by De Amicis as a fabulous spectacle, a monstrous text composed of words and images that are there not so much to be deciphered or understood as to be taken in passively through all the senses. It seemed that words were everywhere and De Amicis emphasizes that this



17 Edouard Manet *Woman Reading* 1878–79  
Words disappear under the artist's virtuoso paint handling. Only the signature is legible.

script is at once public and impersonal. The principal aim might be to persuade, but the visual impact appears to the author to be, at least in this context, largely decorative, a rich display, though one that could also be perceived as aggressive and suffocating. The effect leads the author to say that he wants to 'curse the alphabet', a sentiment echoing the criticisms levelled at the mass media by some self-appointed custodians of 'high' culture, though his more obvious delight in the typographic jungle of modern Paris would also find its counterpart in the work of artists and intellectuals. Anyway, to resist the lure of the spectacle, De Amicis declares, would be futile and, as the tone of his book suggests, rather boring.

While photographers such as Eugène Atget provide us with a visual record of this new word-landscape [16], we look for it largely in vain in the paintings of the major avant-garde French artists of the 1860s and 1870s – at least in any legible form. So, we might get the excitement of Paris as a visual experience in Impressionist art, but unlike De Amicis and his visitors we are not meant to linger long enough to decipher any of the typographical detail. Instead, these works seem to demand that we be immersed in an instantaneous impression. Time after time, the Impressionist painters blur and smudge parts of their compositions where words might have been read. Indeed, the optics of Impressionism seems to aim at a kind of verbal illegibility. The typography on the cover of the journal the woman holds in her hands in Edouard Manet's 1878–79 painting, *Woman Reading* [17], for example, is completely obliterated, transformed into a dynamic display of brushwork.<sup>2</sup> This erasure of written text signifies the triumph in painting of the seeable over the sayable, of the direct experience of reality over the kind of mediated discourse *about* reality typical of mainstream 'Salon' painting. Indeed, Manet seems to pit the passive, 'feminine' act of reading against the more 'masculine' activity of vigorous painting-performance. His signature, on the other hand, boldly parades itself across the surface, defying this anti-verbal censure. But such legible script in fact serves merely to reiterate the fact that the whole painting is to be understood as a kind of calligraphic 'handwriting' – an 'indexical' sign that is a record of the gestures of the hand that traversed the canvas as it responded to complex visual sensations. With a directness not available to verbal language, the technique itself constitutes a tangible sign of the work's authentic connection to the author, and one that the signature merely affirms in more conventional fashion.

Manet's painting also tells a story of changing norms and modes of readership. Due to the kind of far-reaching social and economic transformations recognized by Marx and Engels, the activity of reading had shifted from the ordered and essentially private confines of the book to the more open, anonymous and expansively public formats of newspapers, and the kind of journal the young woman in Manet's painting is reading. Near universal literacy meant that the act of reading itself no longer provided the basis for class distinctions and hierarchies, and this traditional indicator of social and cultural privilege began to be supplanted by the more fluid and less overt distinction between those who read the newspapers, and the cultural elite who read books, enjoyed poetry and perused cultural periodicals. These new social conventions would be of endless interest to the Impressionists, and while we may not be able to share in the content of the



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18 Gustave Caillebotte *Interior* 1880

A fragment of text plays its part in conveying a mood of *anomie* and breakdown in communication.

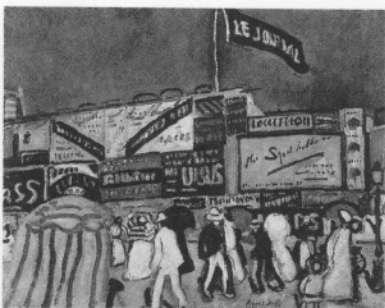
journals, newspapers and books that populate Impressionist paintings, we are nevertheless able to recognize from their settings the formation of specifically modern customs of readership and social discourse. The gentleman's absorption in his newspaper in Gustave Caillebotte's *Interior* (1880), for example, plays an important role in conveying the overall mood of *anomie* that pervades the work, and the private act of reading here also signifies a wilful act of non-communication.

There was now a huge market for books, newspapers and journals. The mass circulation newspapers exploited the visual aspects of typography in unprecedented ways, varying font sizes and faces, and breaking up rows of tightly ordered text with assertive advertisements and bold headlines. Technological change also directly affected the way words were produced. Paper manufacture improved in terms of speed and quality, and the mechanization of printing led to an increased efficiency in terms of both volume and turnover. The development of new methods for mass producing metal type for presses – notably the Linotype and Monotype machines –



19 **Jean Béraud** *Colonne Morris* 1870  
The ubiquitous Morris Column created a new kind of public space for reading.

20 **Raoul Dufy** *Posters at Trouville* 1906  
The artist incorporates the texts of billboards into his depiction of a fashionable French seaside resort.



pushed aside the traditional process of cutting punches, making matrices, and casting type in hand-moulds – practices that had remained virtually unchanged since the time of Gutenberg. This new and infinitely more efficient technology transformed the nature of the print shop. Meanwhile, the invention of lithographic printing in the early nineteenth century had the effect of freeing lettering altogether from the restraints imposed by metal type. Using the same tool to produce both word and image, it allowed for much more spontaneous and gestural writing, produced by the drawing or brushing directly onto stone or metal the image and text with oil-based ink or wax crayon.

The publishers of newspapers, like the manufacturers of goods, recognized that in order to attract the consumer within the busy and chaotic public spaces of the new commodity-driven economy, words needed to be eye-catching enough to make a direct appeal to the senses. There was, therefore, a growing demand from the burgeoning economy for public advertisements – the bold colourful combinations of word and image that were soon, as De Amicis observed, covering all available urban surfaces. The most obvious result of this was the design of a large number of visually assertive typefaces – called ‘display’ faces – that were intended to grab the public’s attention. Both traditional and new printing methods now employed an unparalleled variety of shaded, expanded, condensed, ornamented and decorated letterforms. These styles were visually stronger, brasher and more exaggerated than conventional letters, and brought into play the third dimension, manipulating forms into extreme distortions. On shop fascias and in advertisements lettering was compressed or expanded, made to slope backwards or sit out from the supporting surface.

We get a glimpse of one of these new display faces through the window in Caillebotte’s painting. A rather sober, elegant line of gilded letters is clamped to the façade of the building opposite – probably it is the name of a *brasserie* or hotel. Caillebotte employs this word fragment as part of his larger narrative of alienation and social fragmentation, and by depicting only a partial view of the word, essentially neutralizes its status of legibility, reducing the letters to spatial figures in a pictorial composition. The more fashionable Jean Béraud, meanwhile, because he remained essentially illustrative and anecdotal (in spite of being influenced by Manet and the Impressionists) provides the kind of detail necessary for us to be able to read many of the advertisements and other public notices he depicts. Indeed, Béraud returned again and again to the abundance of street typography to be found in the chic quarters of Paris, and *Colonne Morris* (1870), for example, features a particularly characteristic piece of such word-clad street furniture, one designed specifically for the purpose of carrying publicity posters. Somewhat later, the more radical Raoul Dufy would also respond to the new urban wordscape, and in a work painted in the popular seaside resort of Trouville he captured some of the dynamism of advertising that had been evoked by De Amicis. Across the Atlantic the Ashcan School painter John Sloan, in *Hairdresser’s Window* (1907), provides a lively record of the cheaper kind of public signage that covered Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Sloan also evidently delights in the wordplay manifested in the texts and the work represents an early example of what will become a dominant theme for

American artists – the mass media.

By the late nineteenth century had resulted in public almost every urban conservative French ‘Nothing is really of from today...[as] the anxieties was the vo important artists – a Lautrec [22] – to cor verbal barrage. Such posters were often n examples were regu pioneer of poster art appeared around Pa of the medium of lit drawing and the ble and strong colour er an optimistic tenor & particularly innovati and the bold and ex dramatic use of visu printed text evident image not seen sinc part of a much broa which led to further typography. Mutabil alphabet, as orname and trailing wisps so under a mass of cur within printed comp emphasized asymm further liberated fro within the environr

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American artists – the vernacular and popular wordscape spawned by the mass media.

By the late nineteenth century, changes in commerce, law and technology had resulted in public advertising reaching overwhelming proportions, with almost every urban wall a potential billsticking opportunity. As the conservative French writer Maurice Talmeyr declared dejectedly in 1896: 'Nothing is really of a more violent modernity, nothing dates so insolently from today...[as] the illustrated poster'.<sup>21</sup> The specific context for Talmeyr's anxieties was the vogue for the 'artistic poster', a fashion that allowed several important artists – among them Pierre Bonnard [23] and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec [22] – to contribute rather more directly to the public visual and verbal barrage. Such was the success of the format that special editions of posters were often made for collectors and exhibitions mounted, while examples were regularly stolen from walls and advertising columns. The pioneer of poster art was Jules Chéret, whose striking advertisements first appeared around Paris in 1866. Chéret exploited the fluidity and spontaneity of the medium of lithography, which permitted swift calligraphic letter-drawing and the blending of word and image. Simple design, large format and strong colour ensured that posters were effective from a distance, with an optimistic tenor guaranteeing broad appeal. Bonnard would prove to be a particularly innovative force in this field, also influencing Toulouse-Lautrec, and the bold and exaggerated drawing, the limited colour scheme and the dramatic use of visual contrast between rounded hand-painted letters and printed text evident in their work, signals an intimacy between word and image not seen since the Middle Ages. But the 'artistic poster' was merely part of a much broader revolution in the decorative arts – Art Nouveau – which led to further important innovations in the field of letter-making and typography. Mutability invaded the once ordered and stable domain of the alphabet, as ornamentation became increasingly extravagant, with scrolls and trailing wisps sometimes almost burying the original shapes of letters under a mass of curves. Both the structure of letters and their arrangement within printed compositions were transformed as new concepts of layout emphasized asymmetry and curved or diagonal settings. Words were being further liberated from the closed form of the printed book, roaming instead within the environment as boldly visual phenomena.

Behind the organic excess and *joie de vivre* of Art Nouveau, however, economic forces and the accompanying new technologies were unleashing energies that, as Marx and Engels had foreseen, modern society was ill-equipped to understand or control. While literacy was becoming universal, and words and images through the exigencies of commerce were being disseminated throughout the urban environment, these phenomena also had the effect of undermining confidence in language as the cheapening and dehumanizing impact of the mass media was felt. Indeed, a major consequence of these huge changes was that despite the obvious signs of confidence and exuberance, and of progress and change for the better, late nineteenth-century culture was for many shadowed by a growing sense of profound doubt and suspicion. This was a crisis rooted in the recognition that language no longer necessarily bound man to a tangible world.

Instead, science, philosophy and art were converging on the recognition that



21 John Sloan *Hairdresser's Window* 1907  
A more downmarket kind of advertising populates Sloan's painting of New York's Lower East Side.



22 **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec** *Aristide Bruant dans son cabaret*  
 (Aristide Bruant in his Cabaret) 1892  
 Artists join in the advertising boom, in the process creating a new  
 kind of visually assertive lettering style.

language was merely an opaque man-made construction without any claim to universality or objectivity. This would have far-reaching implications. 'What, then, is truth?' asked Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s. He could answer only that far from being some universal, underpinned by the *Logos*, 'truth' was merely a 'mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to the people.'<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, scientific progress and technological progress were themselves to blame for this crisis. The non-verbal semantic systems of mathematics were becoming central to the way in which man explored and understood his world, and the expansion and success of the exact sciences undermined confidence in any world that could be revealed by mere words. But the crisis also had important social and political implications. Marx, Engels and their followers exposed the ways in which language was always caught up in oppressive social hierarchies. They showed the contaminating link that exists between material and intellectual power, between the form of language and who controls it. There were also psychological dimensions to this pervasive sense of doubt. Sigmund Freud demonstrated that we cannot be said to be in control of our thoughts and actions. In his theory of psychoanalysis, language was cast against a backdrop of a body that pressed upon it, a speaking body that through needs and desires manifested in dreams, slips of the tongue and other instances of involuntary use of language, was always saying something different from any conscious discourse.

As we will see, the modern period as a whole is deeply scarred by the legacy and continued ramifications of this crisis. It created a situation in which artists became aware that the signs they use no longer render a coherent and believable account of reality, and as a result, faith in the power of word and image would often be replaced by an all-pervading scepticism. Adrift in a world where language gives no convincing access to truth, to the real, or to the self, writers and artists could no longer assume that meaning would be generated through precise verbal or visual equivalents for things, nor that reality might be accessible, as the Romantics had hoped, through the temperament of the individual. For the Impressionists, at least, the solution seemed to be to grasp the present and to seek to represent it as an incandescent moment of pure perception, and in this context words were literary invaders from the realms of reflection and memory. Such emphasis on the visual experience alone would continue to preoccupy many artists well into the twentieth century but it would also be increasingly challenged by more confused and confusing attitudes as different kinds of relationship between the verbal, and the visual and between the signs they used and the world they shared, were formulated and explored.

23 **Pierre Bonnard** *France-Champagne* 1891  
 This design for a brand of champagne blends word and image in  
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