

Point, Dot, Period...
The Dynamics of Punctuation
in Text and Image

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Edited by

Laurence Petit and Pascale Tollance

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INTRODUCTION

POINT, DOT, PERIOD... THE DYNAMICS OF PUNCTUATION IN TEXT AND IMAGE

LAURENCE PETIT AND PASCALE TOLLANCE

As a rule, punctuation does not draw attention to itself. Punctuation marks are sometimes described as “discreet signs” which easily pass unnoticed although they play a key role in the articulation of meaning. Paradoxically, it is when we cast ourselves back in time and look at a text written in *scriptio continua* that we become truly aware of punctuation, as if our now familiar points and commas had to disappear for us to start seeing them. Even when we pay special attention to these small marks in the text, we rarely see them *for themselves*. Punctuation is usually considered to play an ancillary role, its main function being to separate and divide, to introduce order and clarity, to put an end to the limitless slipping of meaning induced by the various combinations that letters and words can form.

That punctuation needs to make itself visible first (by becoming either hyper-visible or invisible) for us to start heeding it is amply demonstrated in this volume, where it is examined side by side in the text and in the image or in various attempts to crisscross them. The reservations that some might feel about bringing together what they consider to be two different semiotic systems can be addressed first by foregrounding a terminological hesitation: should one talk about “punctuation *signs*” or about “punctuation *marks*”? If we agree that there are rules about punctuation, we are equally forced to admit that they are in no way codified (as spelling is for example). Some even dispute the term “sign” as punctuation cannot be described as a system of signifiers to which a particular signified is attached. In Pierce’s tripartite semiotic structure, punctuation “signs” might be closer to indexes or signals, but what they draw our attention to cannot be fixed: all we can say is that they hail, indicate, accentuate,

working like so many arrows or pointed fingers. Equally, their complex, plural, and flexible nature allows them to take on an iconic value, as emphasized by the smileys, frowneys and other emoticons that have added their variety to our text messages—or, for that matter, as already brilliantly illustrated by Sterne and his “tristramography”, to quote Pierre Szendy.

The iconic function of punctuation is clearly a bridge between text and image, but to focus exclusively on that particular aspect would prove reductive. The point plays as large a part in abstract art as it does in figurative painting; for a painter like Kandinsky, it possesses primarily a dynamic function, notably in its relation to the line. Its discretion or visibility, together with its role in the “definition” of the image, is an issue in various forms of visual art, not least in photography.¹ The point also plays its part as “vanishing point”, and in the case of the moving image, it possesses the same temporal relevance as it does in a written narrative: montage is yet another form of punctuation. We might thus need to go back to Kandinsky’s definition of the point as “the ultimate and most singular union of silence and speech” to find its main relevance at the junction of text and image: the point is not outside language (although it might elude all signification) and this includes the “geometrical point” to which the painter is referring. Conversely, punctuation remains fundamentally silent (although it might play an essential part in the process of signification). Text and image meet where they find themselves equally striving for “a poetics of punctuation” (Henri Meschonnic). To go back to the terminological hesitation mentioned earlier, we can suggest that the joint examination of text and image is one way of underlining that the textual point is *also* a mark, a score on the page and, conversely, that points or lines on a canvas are *also* signs of sorts. Etymological considerations turn out to be valuable. Roland Barthes has made much of the *punctum*, reminding us that in Latin the point is also a puncture, a small hole or a wound. Likewise, Pierre Szendy draws from the Greek equivalent of the *punctum*, the *stigma* or *stigmê*, and invites us to consider the point as a mark, an imprint or even as the bruise left by a blow.

A crucial consideration when intersecting text and image is the idea, famously stressed by Lessing, that the text includes a temporal dimension which is absent in the image. If anything, punctuation seems at first sight to be one of the hallmarks of this difference as it rules the logical and

¹ For more on punctuation in photographs and texts, see Laurence Petit and Pascale Tollance, eds. “Photographic Text(ure): The Grain and the Dot” (*Image and Narrative*, 15-2, 2014).

chronological development of the text, determines units and sequences (sentences, paragraphs, chapters) and retroactively seals signification by cutting into the metonymic chain. By contrast, when placed in front of an image, one can only echo the question voiced by one of A.S. Byatt's characters in the short story "Crocodile Tears": "How do you decide to stop looking at something?" The point—or full stop in British English—subsumes the main role of punctuation since to "punctuate" has to do with determining the sense of a text—whether you write it, read it or comment on it. With his famous "point de capiton" (quilting point), Lacan used at one stage the sentence and the retroactive effect of punctuation as a model ("a spatial artifice" in his own words) to represent the subject—a subject which can be described as "punctuated" insofar as its determination by the signifier marks itself at some nodal points which interrupt the endless slipping of the signifier above the signified. And yet, punctuation unleashes its full potential when it stops behaving quite as expected: when the point appears more like a pause than a stop (a period in American English), when it generates ambiguity or uncertainty, when it introduces gaps or intervals (multiplying to form so-called "dots" or "suspension points"). The best books do not end with their final point, they go on, demand to be reread or read in a different manner, to the extent that one *can* ask "How do you decide to stop reading something?" Instead of locking meaning, punctuation can become the artisan of Derridean *différance*. Many texts (and not just poems) elude all temporal logic or shatter continuity, obeying the imperatives of what is sometimes termed "spatial form"—a form subject to another punctuation, one might say. Yet, what is introduced by the "spatialisation" of narrative is often not just a substitutive order but the suspension of sense—both as meaning and direction.

As the point becomes the vector of instability, it loses its subservient position. It starts to matter differently, to weigh more. Rather than taking part in the construction of the whole it may undermine it, introducing fragmentation, displacing the attention towards the detail, making what ordinarily looks smooth grainy. Punctuation can become the opposite of articulation, the points in the text or in the image turning into holes which can swallow the whole. Barthes's *punctum* marks the presence of something piercingly significant which, for that very reason, freezes the process of signification or cancels signification altogether. Pierre Szendy proposes to see punctuation as a series of "coups de poings" (a play on words whereby "point" is replaced by the homophonic French word meaning fist or punch): punctuation can have a knock-out effect. The poetics of punctuation emancipate the point or rather stress the fact that it

is fundamentally free of all determination *per se*. As a “zero marker”, the point can take on many values while, at the same time, punctuation can take on many forms whether it be in black or in white, the blank having its own major role to play. But the zero marker can indicate what remains an empty place, a void or a null which is not a “nothing”: everything in the text or in the image can hold or be held by what is, or what becomes like, a blind spot—a point where you can no longer see yourself or hear yourself. Interestingly, Lacan’s punctuated subject becomes in later developments a subject whose speech is saturated / hollowed out by a silent *jouissance* which bores its holes into the text in the same way as it marks the limits of the omnipotent gaze in the image.

Punctuation thus asserts its place at the intersection of body and language: it highlights the bodily dimension of language, whilst, conversely, bringing out the sense in which any gesture is caught in the field of creation, whether the hand that forms the dot and scores the page holds a pen or a brush. Although textual punctuation allows the reader to pause and breathe, it also has to be thought totally independently from that respiratory function. The body that leaves its mark in punctuation is a body traversed by language and reinventing a language in which what cannot be put into words can nevertheless be written—or rather perhaps, must be written. Critics insist that punctuation cannot be reduced to the imitation of the spontaneous movements of oral speech. It can grow and develop to cover all the modulations of affect, but what it leaves on the page or on the canvas is a grammar which encrypts affect and marks the limits of its translation. However enjoyable the invention of smileys and other signs miming an ever-wider variety of feelings, punctuation is at its most powerful when it eludes all codes, or when it ruptures the code, inscribing the body as hole(s) rather than whole. Whether we are looking at the image or the text, we are sometimes irresistibly led to challenge boundaries when describing punctuation: “visual music” (Serça), gestural grammar, gymnastics, choreography, boxing (Szendy), punctuation forces us to rethink how we think of language, what it does and not just what it is. As a temporal—and not just spatial—inscription of the body, the *punctum* or *stigma* can be approached as the trace of an event. This event can be considered to be recorded by the image or the text as a whole, or in each and every separate scoring or sentence. For Pierre Alféri, sentences are not “descriptive”, they are “creative” (“instauratrices”); each of them is a “gesture” or an “act”, the “articulation of momentum”.

The articles that follow offer the reader ample proof that punctuation is no light matter, although it often turns out to be quite playful, or at least

involves the possibility of play in the widest sense of the term. Through the diversity of subjects and approaches favoured by the authors, it is the inventive and transformative power of punctuation that emerges: the richness and variety of its language and its role in the dynamics of the text or the image—or the dynamics of the one *with* or *through* the other. Whether the papers consider separate or hybrid art forms, each of them foregrounds both the visual nature of punctuation and the discursive and critical power of “mere” dots and lines.

Our investigation starts in the visual field where the dot / point begs our attention either because of its hypervisibility (showing itself where it is not desired or expected) or because of its conspicuous absence (going missing where one might have expected it). Either way, it becomes a disturbing or disruptive element which challenges continuity, uniformity and a sense of the whole. The dot / point has found itself opposed to the line in the field of illustration when it came to choosing between various techniques of reproduction. Sophie Aymes focuses on a transitional period (between the 1890s and the 1920s) when traditional wood-engraving started to make room for photomechanical processes. In her examination of the arguments for and against the two techniques, Aymes shows how the issue of faithfulness in “translation” became key—faithfulness not just as resemblance, but as the ability to preserve a trace of the creative process. The threat of losing the line, “broken into dots”, meant the threat of losing the energy of the line and the vitality of the gesture. The question became acute with the need to use mechanical engraving involving dotted patterns (as in half-tone or Ben-Jay techniques) to enhance tonal effects. In the eyes of its detractors, the “translation of flat washes into lines and dots” gave the image “a mechanical aspect”; to some, the dots as used in Ben Jay “seemed to threaten the original image with dissolution”. Against the dynamics of the line, the dot came to be seen as “the mark of a series of repeated and discontinuous gestures”, where in the words of Klee “the very movement of life is collapsed into a series of instants”. The advent of the mechanical dot thus raised the spectre of the loss of aura Benjamin connected more largely with reproducibility.

Against the background of this aesthetic debate, Roy Lichtenstein’s famous dots stand out as particularly compelling. The mechanical aspect of the technique used (compared to the effect produced by Ben-Day) is no longer something the artist deplors but what he seeks in order to “erase man’s part” and reach a form of impersonality, as Hélène Gaillard argues. Far from wanting to preserve the vitality of the gesture, Lichtenstein tries to demolish the “excessive cult of the gesture” as when he reproduces some of Pollock’s paintings. Interestingly, the dot is no longer used to

produce a particular effect, to enhance light or colour, as with Seurat or Signac. As Gaillard insistently points out, “the dot becomes a semantic rather than a stylistic element”; “it does not so much engage the eye as the mind”. The dot is here to instil trouble, to question the notion of representation and the role of art. Whilst deconstructing perception and exposing its own artifice, the dotted surface of the painting performs a disfiguration, which, interestingly, places some of Lichtenstein’s pictures within a long tradition: for Gaillard, the dot that “wounds the human aspect” of his figures exposes the “fragility of the flesh” in what can be seen as a new species of *memento mori* or *vanitas*.

Punctuation can become a challenging notion in the case of the moving image, all the more so when narrative is seemingly absent. From Lichtenstein’s hyper-visible dots we move to the dissolution of both spatial and temporal dots in the video art of Ailbhe Ní Bhriain. The watery element which pervades the images of the video artist seems to affect the form itself as landmarks, contours and definitions become blurred in what Valérie Morisson describes as “hybridized dreamscapes” or “a landscaped timelessness”. To a large extent Ní Bhriain manages to erase punctuation: not only does she take us from one place to the next smoothly and without transition but she superimposes images that mix and merge and turn her work into a kind of “labyrinth”. At the same time, we could argue that in this fluid world, punctuation finds itself redefined rather than purely cancelled. Morisson underlines “the dilation of the instant” which gives prominence to certain images, creates places “of pure interruption or interval”, presents us with “folds rather than lines and points”. In comparing Ní Bhriain’s art to an art of the fugue, she brings out the role played by what is defined as “contrapuntal” composition. Beside points of “suspension”, we find “points of tension” between the different images which are articulated vertically or horizontally—thresholds and windows turn into eloquent images of connection and separation. What prevails then in these images which largely deal with exile and memory is a form of indeterminacy produced by deterritorialisation: the loss of centre, the loss of roots make room for “drifting anchor-points” which bear the trace of both “connectedness and permanent instability”.

The relationship between spatial dot and sequential point becomes particularly apparent when text and image are brought together, made to intersect or interact: when the text looks at the image, describes it or makes it speak; when it borrows its language or imposes itself as visual; or when the image punctuates the text, as is the case with Sebald. In the next four papers, points and dots are yet again seen largely as elements of

disturbance or events which break the spatial continuum of the image or the page. Roland Barthes's *punctum* thus features in pride of place as the mark of a piercing detail which shatters our powers of speech. More than in any other genre, it is in poetry that one expects the textual point to become hyper-visible and to heighten "the visual mode of existence of language" (Serça). This becomes all the more apparent when the poem engages in dialogue with the visual arts or when the language of the visual arts turns into a particularly apt tool to describe the text. Proof of this is to be found in the way Jennifer K. Dick uses Kandinsky's theories on the line and the dot to analyse the very singular use of the full stop / period in Anne Carson's poetry. Even when the painter's approach is displaced (the point is the beginning for Kandinsky; in the case of the poems it marks the end of each line), it is very much in dynamic terms that Carson's text begs to be examined. Because it appears where it is not expected ("deciding to no longer remain comfortably in its proper place"), the point becomes both louder and more elusive in its silent insistence, a paramount expression of Kandinsky's "ultimate and unique union of silence and speech". Dick analyses the multiple effects produced by these end points in terms which associate space and time, or space and rhythm: Carson's "The Life of Towns" becomes a "landscape of stutters". The point is no longer an inert, fixed mark, it is a locus of tension, it is in motion, "pushed ever *forward* by a force, that of the line which does not want to be halted by the substance of the void, the nothingness that is the endpoint". Dick also shows that in its disruptive presence, the point draws attention to itself, forces us to take it into account but is not an end in itself; at the same time as it breaks down the whole (leading to "a corruption of the whole"), it also obliges us to pay more attention to the words and images by slowing things down and by creating unexpected articulations and new possibilities of meaning. To emphasize how one feels compelled to read Carson's poems visually and dynamically, Dick finally draws her own pictures of some of the poems—pictures which come to resemble very much some of Kandinsky's geometrical figures.

Another singular use of punctuation is to be found in the work of Irish poet Paul Durcan, a poet who has repeatedly asserted his desire to break down the boundaries between text, image and music, as well as his joy in weaving them together. *Ekphrasis* is the particular mode of their encounter on which Cathy Roche focuses here. A selection of Durcan's poems show the poet's attempt to capture the effect produced by such or such a painting and its translation in formal and stylistic terms. Once again punctuation emphasises both motion and stasis. The extensive use of parataxis—sometimes coupled with nominal sentences—appears as an apt

way of circling around the fixed object of the gaze, weighing the poem with the power of immobility, turning it into some other kind of object too. But the poet also tries to convey the movement he sees in some paintings in the layout of his text—as when he forms a spiral with the help of white punctuation to convey visually the “spirals” of sensations provoked by Fat Molly’s kisses. Above all, and beyond this kind of mimetic exercise, Durcan’s *ekphrasis* conveys affects and a *jouissance* which tends to locate itself in some points of detail. The dash proves to be in this case as precious a tool as the full stop. It can be used to frame a vision or to interrupt the movement of the eyes and create a close-up effect, as in “The Happy Throng” where eyes focus on eyes. Or it can cut out and isolate a detail which unleashes a wave of feeling sometimes conveyed by the overwhelming disappearance of punctuation—a “bottomless” feeling such as that provoked by the vision of two bottoms in “The Pine by the Sea, after Carlo Carrà”.

“Points of detail” is also very much what Christelle Serée-Chaussinand concentrates on in her examination of poems by MacNiece, Mahon, Heaney and Muldoon. Here again, the poems are described as “visual poems” and are often inspired by paintings. But it is to the particular genre of the self-portrait that the author devotes her attention, a genre where what turns out to be regularly experienced is the failure to capture oneself fully and the encounter with something that eludes the gaze in the picture. Basing her analysis on Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*, Serée-Chaussinand develops the notion of “aperspective”, this limit of specularity which, in the words of Derrida, “ruins” all self-portraits. The point, when it appears, becomes a “blind spot”, a vanishing point or a hole like MacNiece’s stars which turn out to be nothing but “Holes, punched in the sky”—unless the picture is punctured by something which remains completely outside the field of vision. In the correspondence between blind spots and points of “inarticulacy”, one finds a perfect example of what Barthes develops through his “*punctum*”: what affects us with the most piercing power fails to be grasped. To use another of Barthes’s key notions, the point then fully partakes of the “writerly”.

The point as “*pointe*” (sharp end in French) is also at the heart of Liliane Louvel’s considerations in an essay which deals with fictional texts conjuring up virtual images (Woolf, Finley) or including images, and more particularly photographs (Sebald). Whereas Serée-Chaussinand emphasises the failure of experience and the limits of representation that are made apparent with the irruption of the *punctum*, Louvel concentrates on both the arresting power of some piercing details and the creative impulse they trigger (using notions such as Hefferman’s “pregnant moment”). The point

stands in sharp contrast with what is otherwise shapeless or nebulous—Louvel’s examples are pervaded by clouds, fog or steam, out of which something “comes to the point of view” (Deleuze). Basing her analysis on Deleuze, Louvel argues that “[the point of view] is not a variation of the truth which depends on the subject but the condition under which the truth of a variation is made apparent to the subject”. The point once again marks the limit of the gaze as it is a point from which one finds oneself gazed at as much as gazing (as George Didi-Huberman argues in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*). But it is also approached mainly as the trace of an event (“a reading event”, in the words of Louis Marin) which opens out a mental space. As Louvel focuses on the interplay between text and image, she chooses to call this “third space” “intermedial”, a point of intersection between text and image. To underline the dynamic power of the points she studies, Louvel also draws upon Jeanette Winterson’s pun on “art objects”, focusing on these moments where what suddenly meets the eye is felt to be a force “standing in the way” of death or of “the lie against life”.

The third and last section of this volume focuses on the space of the page (conceived as “a phenomenal space”, in the words of Chantal Delourme) to pursue its examination of the visual, material and sensory dimension of punctuation. While we continue to explore “the ultimate and unique union of silence and speech” through the various texts covered, the question of voice becomes paramount. The accent finds itself further displaced from “What do we see?” to “What do we hear in what we see? What do we hear in what punctuation silently inscribes on the page? Punctuation, or “the silent voice of the eye”, can be thought to solicit the ear in a special manner insofar as we consider it as the inscription of the rhythms of a live voice with its stops and starts, its lulls and pauses, its need for breathing spaces. But as the mark of a written—and conceivably writerly—voice, it is not to be thought just as the *transcription* of the bodily dimension of speech. In the articles that follow, punctuation appears largely as the locus of *différance* (instead of being at the service of a fixed, clear and univocal sense, as its main function is largely thought to be); it marks the presence of enunciation as an act which suspends or withholds meaning as much as it calls for it, and that involves affect or *jouissance / joui-sens* as much as sense. Unsurprisingly, in all the texts that follow, punctuation is found to be a critical tool which subverts Master narratives—among which the colonial narrative. It becomes not just a subtle and efficient political instrument, but reflects an ethical position in which the text must undermine all position of authority,

including its own. That punctuation should strike the eye—that the voice should be there to be seen—is not just a means of heightening its eloquence. It becomes a way of making sure that in the “unique union of silence and speech”, silence does not go unnoticed but carries weight or bores its hole into the text.

The article which opens this section highlights the amount of thought and work that goes into the choice to keep, add or remove a small “sign” of punctuation, and the difficulty there is in pinpointing the value and effect of that sign—whether we are looking at a Wordsworth poem or an article from the *New Yorker*. Lynn Blin thus follows the vagaries of one particular punctuation mark which turns out to be “far more subtle and subversive than the simple grammatical rule may lead us to believe”. The semi-colon offers a particularly good example of how elusive the punctuating gesture might be: a hybrid creature—“the love child of a period and a comma” (Rosakis)—the semi-colon hovers in an indeterminate, in-between zone, which might partly explain why some use it sparingly and reluctantly (the English are known to be far less fond of it than the French). The particular power of that “funny”, intriguing sign is first and foremost to invite or beg the reader to stop and reflect a little longer than he might have done, to “build an expectation” or to give greater weight to what is being said. Another word for it would be “resonance”, the notion that the semi-colon adds something like “vibrato”, potentially disturbing those who like a “clear sound”. The undefinable supplement that the semi-colon seems to possess makes it particularly apt at expressing nuance or dealing with situations with “no easy answers”; then we can count on it “to tread softly”. It also means that metaphor might be after all the best way to approach it: to those who want to keep their eyes peeled, “the most intimate of punctuation marks” “keeps [the sentence] suspended, it keeps it awake”.

Claude Maisonnat, for his part, discusses the fiction of Joseph Conrad by first addressing a slightly tricky theoretical point, i.e. Lacan’s “point de capiton” or “quilting point”. Conceived as an anchoring point which can put a stop to the endless slipping of the signifier, the quilting point is nevertheless not a key which would deliver a final meaning but “a moment”, “a scansion”, a logical operation. Maisonnat thus describes it as “a structural, invisible, silent operator”, “the invisible operator of the point-function” or “a blind spot in the signifying chain” which holds together what might appear heterogeneous, and yet which possesses no fixity or definition. The point which is most worthy of attention according to Maisonnat is not the full stop which closes the sentence and determines its meaning on a conscious level. It is not its shadow either—something

which would allow us to order the same elements around a fixed, unconscious meaning. It is the point which is loaded with silence (and *jouissance*) and which brings out the presence of an ever-elusive cohesion—an invisible cement which we emphasize when we talk about the text's *voice* as opposed to its *discourse*. Maisonnat examines the various points in Conrad's fiction where the text allows us to trace the presence of this silent voice: the proliferation of markers such as spaces, dashes and suspension points is noteworthy but, equally, that same voice can be found to resonate in the recurrent phoneme "or" that pervades the text of *Heart of Darkness* or in striking narrative ellipses. We find here an equivalent of the recurrent "points aveugles" that puncture the image—blind spots in the voice which point out that what holds the text together escapes mastery and remains "out of the picture". Interestingly, rather than piercing through the fog as in Liliane Louvel's selection of texts, these points can be grey, fuzzy areas in Conrad's prose, which caused E.M. Forster to term his fiction "misty in the middle as well as at the edges".

Starting with a quotation by Lacan according to which reading and writing consist in "apprehending and fixing punctuation", Chantal Delourme also examines how the reader can challenge that notion and how punctuation can set the text in motion rather than fix it. The task may seem all the more difficult when the common reader adopts the voice of the critic, but when that critic happens to be Virginia Woolf, we are not surprised to find punctuation endowed with a wealth of possibilities. Woolf's metacritical gesture ruptures master narratives (in particular those which lock identity into opposed sexual roles), but leaves the hole gaping instead of filling it again, opening the space of *différance* and plurivocality. The gap which forms is not to be conceived as a void but becomes a speculative, creative space, a "hermeneutic scene calling out for meaning"; the silence produced by dots is "a silence which thought must acknowledge and cope with". Room is made for play and creation as the use of humour and irony demonstrate. On what she calls the "enunciation switchboard", Delourme notes how punctuation works in two directions, dramatizing both the "after-the-event troubling effects of meaning" and "the very possibility of a meaning to be". The notion of "play" turns out to be all the more appropriate as Delourme follows every nuance and "dramatic" effect of speech on a page which becomes a "scene" or a "stage" as well as "a seismograph of affect". The binding of sense and sensation is enacted through what she calls a "critical performance" which makes room for the other also by including that "someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page" (Woolf). The transformation of the dot into a blot and then a doodle in the fifth chapter of *Orlando* finally

enhances the graphic nature of punctuation as well as the humorous dimension of its disruptive effects, something “beyond sense”, which, however delightful, scores the page with what can also be seen as “a haunting blind spot”.

The page being scored with the traces of affect or turned into a stage where the motions of the mind are dramatized is also an apt description of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*. It is the role of white punctuation that is more particularly scrutinized here, the zero value of the blank space emphasizing the impossibility to lock punctuation into a system. “A zero, null, a vacuum” is how the narrator describes herself—a definition which applies to her as a character, but which also marks, once again, the blind spot or the vanishing point from which the voice echoing through the text must be seen. The blank space subjects the text to an extreme fragmentation but also materialises a zero point where it can unmake itself and start again. As the novel turns into a collection of 266 sections, it is the possibility of calling it a “novel” or labelling it in any other way which is put into question. Punctuation stirs up trouble with genre in a narrative which also concerns itself with gender as the voice of Magda, the rebellious daughter, endlessly drills holes into the Paternal figure and tears to pieces the colonial order. While its corrosive action affects the speaking subject who can be seen as “a hole” around which a story writes itself, it also clears and redistributes the space so as to mark the place on the page of the body silent and silenced by history. *In the Heart of the Country* reflects the desire for another language where the illusion of the full subject must be punctured (the “I” being “perhaps” a mere “a dot of light”) in order to allow a silent language of affects, motions and gestures to resonate. From that angle, the blank is not just the void concealed by a mere fiction, it is woven into the desire for “a grammar which has never been recorded”, a grammar of the body and its gestures to reach out to an invisible other.

In *All One Horse* by Breyten Breytenbach, punctuation brings together ethics and aesthetics in the work of another South-African author famous for his opposition to the apartheid regime—and who paid a heavy price for it. In a context where the language of oppression and propaganda reigned supreme, the writer uses the point to introduce a split which shatters the figure of the omniscient and omnipotent author himself—hence the signature by a certain “A.Uthor” in the Preface to the book. *All One Horse* is the only text in this last section to include pictures, but in this particular instance the drawings are described as “strangely absurd while the text that faces them is—apparently—systematically disconnected therefrom”. The status of these drawings as possible illustrations is all the more paradoxical

for that reason, and the reader is left to puzzle over what is “a formal oddity if not an aesthetic aberration altogether”. The use of the point as both a splitting and linking tool reflects the dynamics of a collection which brings together what is “odd” and disconnects what is thought to be one and single, which associates plenty and lack, profusion and aporia. Once more, punctuation is used in a manner which prompts the multiplication of hermeneutic possibilities, but above all it marks the desire to point and point out, to challenge representation and by-pass signification in order to promote deixis and designation instead. The power of contestation of the book lies in the way in which it removes boundaries, avoids “fetishistic stasis” and fixed identities—asserting the cryptic and resistant power of language in the manner of surrealist poetry. Just like Coetzee’s novel, Breytenbach’s collection can be said to be both de-punctuated and over-punctuated. It goes to show that a point too many or minus a point can turn into skilful political weapons.

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PART I

THE PUNCTUATION OF THE IMAGE: THE DISRUPTIVE POWER OF THE DOT

CHAPTER ONE

LINES OR DOTS?

REPRODUCTION PROCESSES IN HANDBOOKS
ON ILLUSTRATION, 1890s-1920s

SOPHIE AYMES

In his autobiography *The Adventures of an Illustrator* (1925), Joseph Pennell recalls the time when he was given his first commission, a drawing reproduced by photomechanical process in 1881 in *The Century*. It was an exciting period for American illustrators:

[...] soon it became an age of experiment. [...] There was no standard, no system; the illustrator worked as he wished, the photographer copied his drawing on the block, and the wood-engraver reproduced it, and the photographic engraver, just beginning, experimented too. I made some of the first drawings for the Ives Screen process—known commercially as the Levy Screen, and for Ben Day. (Pennell 1925, 64)

This generation of draughtsmen had to adapt to new reproduction techniques and American periodicals turned into experimental platforms that reflected the advances of photomechanical process, superseding wood-engraving which had been the dominant reproductive technique up to the 1880s. By his own account, Pennell was “one of the last to draw on wood” in his country—that is draw his illustrations in reverse on woodblocks that were then engraved—“or rather the earliest to escape the drudgery of it” (Pennell 1925, 85).

The development of nineteenth-century illustrated books and periodicals relied on the technological union of engraved image and type. Photographic processes, on the contrary, emancipated the artist from the reproductive engraver. This intermediary stage had often been resented by artists but it was bypassed from the 1880s, as described by numerous contemporary narratives shaped on the teleological model of the decline and fall of media (Bann 2001, 15-41). Pennell witnessed the demise of the traditional

wood-engraver, and although he regretted the passing of the craft, he immediately recognised what artists could gain by photomechanical reproduction:

Wonderful work was done by these engravers—but till the advent of photography, by means of which the artist's drawing was preserved by being photographed, all the originals were destroyed in the engraving and the engraver was the supreme critic and final authority—for nothing remained but the engraved block. (Pennell 1925, 85)

Yet by the turn of the twentieth century, black and white artists often expressed their concern that their art would be reduced to mechanical effects with the pervasive use of process. They were anxious to preserve the vitality of the graphic line because it was considered to be the trace of the individual imprint on the artist's mind and of the artist's creative gesture.

This paper examines the responses of illustrators who had to accommodate to new technological imperatives in order to guarantee a faithful reproduction of their works. Process made it possible to reproduce line drawings, yet in the case of halftone (also called the “screened process”) and of mechanical tints such as Ben Day, the original line was broken into dots that many thought undermined the autographic originality of drawings. This paper explores some of the handbooks on the art of illustration published from the 1890s up to the 1920s. They targeted the younger generation of illustrators and art school students who had to become acquainted with a large variety of media and reproduction techniques (constantly being updated) and they taught them how to draw for process and develop competing strategies to ensure the best reproduction of their drawings. Beyond the issue of faithfulness, what was at stake was the preservation of the power of images. This paper aims to show how this underlying concern was embedded in the graphic culture of illustrators and related to the conception of illustration as imprint.

Joseph Pennell (1857-1926) and the British artists Henry Blackburn (1830-1897), Harry Furniss (1854-1925) and Edmund Joseph Sullivan (1869-1933) wrote handbooks on the art of illustration that chronicled the changing working conditions of graphic artists and the apparition of new processes. These books had reproductions of illustrations that were accompanied with ekphrastic descriptions underlining the characteristic aspects of the various processes thus exemplified. Less well-known than the other three authors, Henry Blackburn was an art critic and a writer, the author of travel narratives and of a biography of Randolph Caldecott. In

1893 he gave a series of lectures at the Royal Society of Arts as part of the Cantor Lectures on modern technology, which he later published in *The Art of Illustration* (1894). Also a transitional artist, Harry Furniss had learned wood-engraving and collaborated with wood-engravers such as Swain before starting to draw for process (Cordery 60-1). He was a prominent caricaturist, cartoonist and book illustrator. In *How to Draw in Pen and Ink* (1905) and *More about How to Draw in Pen and Ink* (1915) he provided autobiographical anecdotes and practical advice on periodical illustration which derived from his public lectures. The American illustrator, lithographer, etcher, writer and art critic Joseph Pennell founded the short-lived Society of Illustrators in 1894 in London and gave lectures on illustration at the Slade School of Art in 1892, which were published in *Modern Illustration* (1895), followed by *The Illustration of Books* (1896). Having worked extensively for illustrated periodicals, he welcomed the introduction of modern processes. A gifted illustrator and a painter, Edmund Sullivan was also an influential teacher, working as lecturer in Book Illustration and Lithography at Goldsmiths College. His two handbooks *The Art of Illustration* (1921) and *Line: An Art Study* (1922) derived from his teaching and his artistic practice.

Line and Always Line

In 1921 Edmund Sullivan wrote in his *Art of Illustration*: “Line, Line, Line, and always Line, as expression of the essential form in the simplest and most direct manner should be the aim of the stylist with the pen, as with any other point” (Sullivan 1921, 189). Born in 1869, then in his early fifties, Sullivan was still steeped in Victorian visual culture, when the graphic line was paramount. Citing school handbooks and books of calligraphy that foreground the artistic, commercial and educational value of penmanship and drawing, Gerard Curtis has pointed out that the line was a fundamental iconic sign: “‘the line’, whether drawn or written, functions as a trace that constitutes the sign of meaning” (Curtis 1995, 27). The illustrators who welcomed the introduction of process stressed that it gave very good results for black and white illustrations and therefore seemed to “free” the graphic line. These artists generally turned to pen and ink because the pen gave the best results: “Stick to the pen,” urged Harry Furniss, “and the pen will pull you through” (Furniss 1905, 42). Line drawings were reproduced as line blocks, which belong to the category of

relief prints.¹ The two artists often cited as outstanding examples of draughtsmanship and whose work reproduced particularly well were Phil May and Aubrey Beardsley. Malcolm Salaman, a prominent advocate of graphic art, wrote that they “were content to let their lines speak through the photographic medium” (Salaman 1914, 8). By 1921, when Sullivan’s *Art of Illustration* was published, process allowed for the reproduction of most forms of graphic expression, as he remarked in the opening lines of the book.

Back in the 1890s the artist no longer needed to work with the constraints of reproductive engraving in mind as process produced a facsimile of pen and ink line drawings which seemed to preserve the artist’s creative gesture. This was pointed out in 1894 by Henry Blackburn who sought to promote a better understanding of process in Britain: “there is no question that ‘the handwork of the artist’ can be seen more clearly through mechanical engraving than through wood engraving [...]. The individuality of the artist is better preserved, by making his own lines” (Blackburn 1894, 57-8). Such technical shortcuts were praised by Joseph Pennell. A prominent lithographer, he was instrumental in promoting the revival of lithography and underlined that it was “a perfectly autographic” technique: “the less intervention—even mechanical intervention—there is between the artist and his work, the better” (Pennell 1896, 120, 113). According to him, the same principle applied to process:

These processes or methods of reproduction [...] are quite mechanical, or should be; in fact the less evidence there is of any intervention on the part of the operator or maker of the photographic plate, the better it will be for the work which is being reproduced. (155).

This “artless process” was useful to illustrators and could not threaten artists (Pennell 1898, 39).

In *Modern Illustration*, Pennell refers to a common genealogy of lines and letters, of drawing and writing, which tied in with a conception of the line as “hieroglyphic” that had gained currency from the mid-nineteenth century (Curtis 1995, 33-4). Process was revolutionary because it supposedly bypassed the limitations of the printing-press for the first time

¹ This paper is concerned with relief prints, and not intaglio and planographic prints. Line blocks are blocks in metal in which the drawn lines of an original drawing appear in relief. The technique involves the making of a mould or metal facsimile by stereotyping or electrotyping. The first experiments date back to the 1830s and photographic negatives of original drawings started being used from the 1860s. See Gascoigne (1995, 71-2).

“since the days when all writing was but picture-making” (Pennell 1898, 34). Calling printing “a questionable blessing,” Blackburn concurred: the “apparent necessity of running every word and thought into uniform lines, has cramped and limited our powers of expression” (Blackburn 1894, 18).

Not only did process preserve the artist’s lines, but it also seemed to retain the creative impulse linking the brain to the hand to the pen and informing the trace left on paper. In other words, process seemed to make it possible to restore the indexical traces of the artist’s touch and handwork. Pennell recognised that the camera’s ability to record all iconic signs gave it an immense advantage. In *The Illustration of Books*, he advised young artists to use pen and ink and gave practical indications so as to ensure the best effect when printing “the vital line full of meaning” (Pennell 1896, 34). These authors describe the pen as an extension of the hand endowed with sensitivity and elasticity. Pennell described it as “a most sensitive implement” (35), “almost like living things” (36). Analogies with music were frequent when it came to describe the act of drawing: both Sullivan and Blackburn compared drawing to playing the violin, the latter considering that the graphic line was “an instrument with one chord” (Blackburn 95). Sullivan, in particular, stressed the importance of handwork and “gymnastics in penmanship” (Sullivan 1921, 48) and praised Beardsley’s rhythmic strokes. The line, he wrote, is “as sensitive and as expressive as the violin” (54), a comparison also made by Wassily Kandinsky in *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) (Kandinsky 1947, 99). Most importantly the line must retain its elasticity and its “flexibility under pressure” (Sullivan 1921, 93), so that the hand responds smoothly to the command of the brain (94). To that effect Sullivan gave practical advice on the choice and use of pens, and he explained that pen and ink allowed the artist to preserve the continuity of unbroken graphic lines:

For decorative purposes such as Aubrey Beardsley’s a stiffish, not very flexible, pen is the preferable instrument, and one that will hold a good supply of ink, in order to get the whole of a long line in one **rhythmic** stroke, **otherwise the line may be broken**; and if this is not avoided there is considerable **expenditure of nerve** in resuming the line, and since pen drawing necessarily is a nervous task, any unnecessary expenditure should be avoided. (49-50, emphasis mine)

These authors describe a shorter production line, with the demise of the reproductive engraver, and a new freedom granted to the artist whose gesture is liberated from former constraints and whose creative line remains unbroken. Indeed, process seemed to counteract the main drawback of engraving, described by Tim Ingold as “the disconnection of

the gestural movement from its graphic inscription” (Ingold 2007, 139). Ingold shows that with the advent of the printing press, the text was no longer viewed as woven (as in the hand-written manuscripts) or hand-drawn but made up of static lines of assembled type. When a drawing was engraved, the line lost its elasticity: “[it was] killed dead as a door-nail by the mechanical engraver,” said Sullivan about facsimile reproduction (Sullivan 1921, 83). Likewise, Blackburn thought that the page in a modern printed book looked like an industrial artefact produced by mechanical means: “[the artist’s thoughts are] drawn out in lines together as in the making of macaroni!” (208). This is also the reason why Furniss and Sullivan urged students to “Study Nature!” (Furniss 1905, 2). Considering the shapes of leaves, Sullivan explained: “Nature, as artist, appears to work much more by hand than by machinery. [...] She does not turn out an eternal series of exact replicas” (Sullivan 1922, 44). Handwork as the basis of creative craft was a defining feature of the graphic arts as against mechanical production. Indeed the industrial division of labour had entailed “the decomposition of skill into the components of creative intelligence on the one hand, and routine or habitual bodily techniques on the other” (Ingold 2007, 127). This opposition between art and technology, quality and quantity, craft and industrial manufacturing underscores responses to process according to whether it was seen as ancillary to artistic expression or merely as a mechanical and technical means that did not involve artistic intervention.

Mechanical Pursuits

With process came new challenges, especially with the reproduction of tone. Although it supposedly freed the artist from the interference of the wood-engraver, process blocks were often touched up by a “mechanical engraver in metal or gelatine” (Pennell 1896, 67) who had to restore or deepen the lines when the blocks were too shallow, which was often the case in the 1890s. The final stage of process printing involved either intaglio or relief printing. The engraver’s intervention was described as an addition to the artist’s touch when the block maker was proficient. Without this intervention, the picture was thought to be greyish, inert and dull.

Illustrators were facing new constraints and had to take into account the demands of the process-block makers. With process came a new freedom but also a new responsibility for the artist: “The illustrator [is] called upon suddenly to take the place of the wood-engraver in interpreting tone into line,” warned Blackburn (ix). Twenty years later an artist such as W. Heath Robinson was typically praised for the self-imposed discipline that allowed

him to surrender “to the conditions imposed by process reproduction” (Johnson 1916, 223) and Furniss exhorted students to give “every chance to the camera for reproduction” (Furniss 1905, 28).

More generally, the ambivalent response to process was shaped by opposed visions of photography. The camera provided a fascinating replica of reality but was also perceived as a purely mechanical medium, a “senseless machine” (Pennell 1896, 88) that did not select details. Nowhere is the contrast between the hand-drawn line and mechanical reproduction more acute than in the case of halftone and Ben Day, two techniques involving the use of dotted patterns for tonal effects, and which Pennell refers to in the introduction to this paper. Blackburn insisted that the development was a crucial one: “It is little short of a revolution in illustration, of which we do not yet see the end” (Blackburn 1894, 152). Halftone took facsimile to new heights as it became possible to “disseminate raw images of reality which had not been interpreted and altered by the hand of artist or craftsman” (Gascoigne 1995, 34). More than line blocks, it encapsulated the characteristics of photography—especially for its detractors. Writing about the demise of wood-engraving, Charles Holme pointed out that the process block “fought on its own ground, the ground of ‘tone’, the ground of the ‘camera’ (Holme 1899, 106).

Halftone was first pioneered by W. Henry Fox Talbot in the early 1850s. It was then perfected in the 1880s and regularly used in the 1890s to reproduce the tones of original washes, painting and photographs. The Levy screen (or Ives screen process) cited by Pennell earlier on was a form of halftone experimented by the American inventor Frederick Ives. Halftone involves photographing an original drawing through a screen which is “placed during exposure between the photographic transparency and the light-sensitized printing surface” (Gascoigne 1995, 74a). Here is Pennell’s description in *Modern Illustration*:

By the half-tone process, a photograph is made of a drawing with either a microscopically ruled glass plate or screen in front of it, which breaks up the flat tones into infinitesimal dots, or squares, or lozenges; or else, there is impressed into the inked photo, in some one of a dozen ways, a dotted plate which will give the same effect. These dots, squares, or lozenges **lend a grain** to the flat washes, **translating** them into rectilinear relief, yielding a printing surface,—accomplishing, in a word, the same end as the wood-engraver’s **translation** of flat washes **into lines and dots**. The great **objection** hitherto to half-tone process has been, especially in large reproductions, that the squares or lozenges produce a **mechanical** look which is entirely absent from a good wood-engraving, the very essence of engraving being variety and, therefore, interest in the **lines** drawn with the **graver**. (Pennell 1898, 45; emphasis mine)

The halftone process may have been seen as a “mechanical makeshift,” Pennell noted, it had nevertheless an advantage over engraving, the ability to render “the brush-marks and the washy or painty look of the original” (46). He even found that in some cases, the print may look like an etching or a mezzotint: “if the line is delicate or the drawing is thin, the screen over it gives a tint which is pleasing, at times makes it look like an etching somewhat”. The “grain” redeemed the mechanical aspect of halftone and in a way justified its use. Sullivan also had a balanced view but he judged that “flat mechanical tones of lines or dots” were only acceptable when used by artists, and inappropriate when left to the “process man” (Sullivan 1921, 196). Blackburn expressed more reservation, judging that “results from wash drawings [...] are uncertain, and generally gloomy and mechanical-looking” (Blackburn 1894, 235). He warned his readers against the loss of meaning and form entailed by the reckless use of halftone, as the original wash drawings were likely to turn into “meaningless smears and blotches” (140), “splashes, and spots, and stains” (152). The tonal values of the original appeared to be veiled as by a “film of gauze” (158). **[Figure 1]**

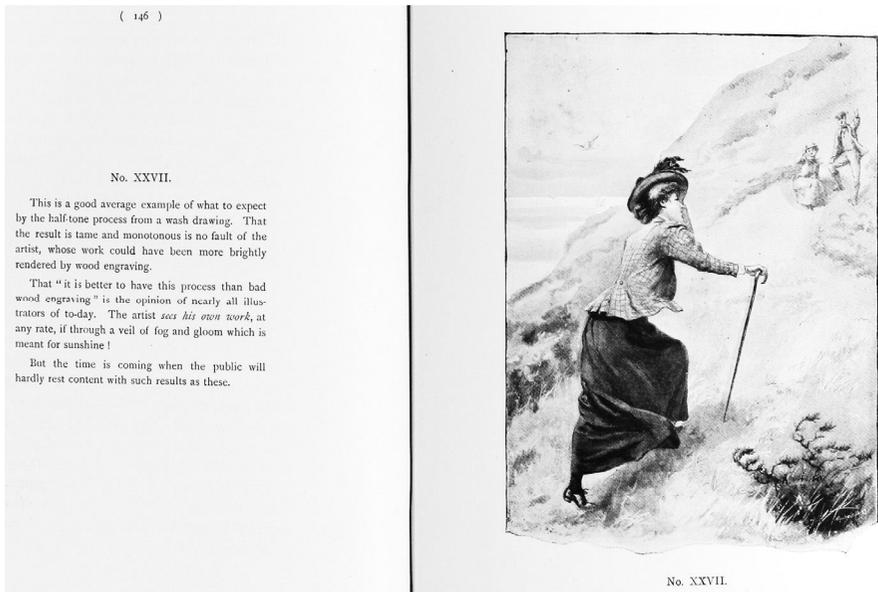
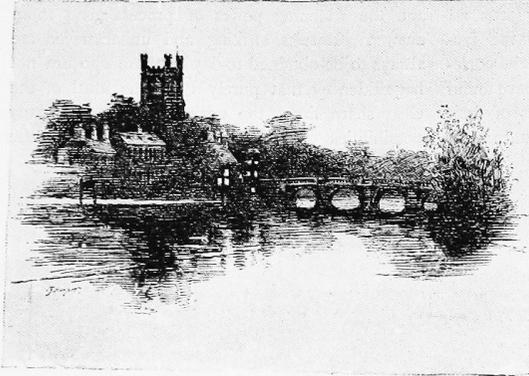


Figure 1: Blackburn, Henry. 1894. *The Art of Illustration*. London: W. H. Allen: 146-7.

Drawing for Reproduction

joy to the practitioner in black and white. Dark thunder clouds hovered over the place when the present writer sat down to sketch, and lent a fine impending juicy air to the scene that seemed incapable of translation into pure line. Therefore,

delightful ground tint everywhere ; it gives the appearance of the drawing having been made upon a grey paper or prepared cardboard, but, truly, the only paper used was a common, rough make that would be despised of the lordly amateur. Here



HENLEY-ON-THAMES: NIGHT. LINE ZINCO BLOCK, SHOWING APPLICATION OF MECHANICAL TRANSFER TINT

you see the tricky half-tone process, inconstant and irresponsible as Puck, on its best behaviour, and I think it has secured a very notable result.

In appearance somewhat similar, but with the grey tint differently applied, is this drawing of *Henley-on-Thames by Night*. Here is a pure pen-drawing, scratched and scribbled to blackness, without much care for finesse, the tint being reckoned upon to assuage all angularities. The original drawing was then lightly scribbled over with blue pencil to indicate to the process-man that a mechanical tint was required, and note was especially sent that the tint was to be squarely cut, not vignetted, and that no framing lines were to be

placed round it. The result seems happy. This is a line block, not half-tone.

Figure 2: Harper, Charles G. 1893. "Drawing for Reproduction: Mixed Drawings and Drawings not Made for Reproduction". *The Studio* vol. 1: detail from 198.

More derogatory still were Blackburn's comments on Ben Day, another technique used to get tonal effects by breaking tone into dots in areas earmarked by the draughtsman for shading: these "mechanical dots" only yielded "inartistic results": "nothing but high pressure or incompetence can excuse this mechanical addition to an incomplete drawing" (132). The Ben Day was a shading medium developed by Benjamin Day at the end of the 1870s in order to provide manufactured tints that were to be used pervasively by cartoonists and commercial artists. Initially transferred from "transparent flexible sheets embossed on one side with a pattern of dots, stipple, line or other" (Gascoigne 1995, 63b), it was then used for line blocks. At first sight it may be hard to tell the difference between a Ben Day and a halftone, and Gascoigne explains the distinction: "In a mechanical tint the dots will all be of the same size, as well as being in a regular pattern. In a true halftone the grid will be regular but the dots will vary in size" (63c). The use of mechanical tints