1. The “Linguisticality” of Understanding

My goal here is relatively unambitious. I will not claim to explain consciousness, nor to solve, once and for all, the mind-body problem, nor even to gauge the usefulness of the concept of the “literary mind” for the future of cognitive linguistics. I will, however, be indirectly concerned with the place of this concept in epistemology, for I do have the impression that certain questions in the philosophy of mind will resist all attempts at “naturalization”. My intuition is that the neurosciences will never be able to replace philosophy by turning all of its problems into empirical questions about the brain. Ultimately, this means, perhaps, that the question of the literary mind needs to be analyzed in the context not merely of linguistics and neurology, but also in the context of these philosophical problems, that is, in the light of debates concerning materialism, functionalism, naturalism, dualism, and so on.

I do not intend to pursue these debates here. Yet I do think that we need to be aware that many formulations of this concept of a “literary mind” invoke (explicitly or implicitly) what has been called the “linguisticality of understanding” – which is one rough translation of Gadamer’s term Sprachlichkeit.1 In a sense, a similar position was formulated by Wittgenstein – by the “first” Wittgenstein, at least – with his famous slogan, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (5.6). And many other philosophers and essayists have, in one way or another, equated thought and language – all thought and language – in such an intimate way. For instance, this identity is the presupposition behind Orwell’s Newspeak (1984) as well as his essay on “Politics and the English Language”. Now it may turn out that we are wrong to equate thinking and language in this way. Perhaps we should seek a more pluralistic vision of thought that would lead not only to a literary mind but to a plastic mind as well, or to some combination of the two. Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen, as Wittgenstein would have it, but perhaps there are things of which we cannot speak that we can manage to think about nonetheless. And this might mean that the notion of the literary mind is only part of the story. In other words, the question that needs to be

1 I take the term from David C. Hoy (Hoy 5-7 and passim).
asked is whether or not the narrative aspects of the mind are as fundamental and all-encompassing as certain philosophers seem to imply. Does the concept of the linguisticality of understanding exhaust the concept of the mental? Does it even exhaust the concept of understanding?

Yet my main interest is aesthetics, and my primary goal in this paper will be to understand what the concept of a “literary mind” can contribute to some of the perennial questions of this field. Briefly put, does everything that has been said or could be said about “the literary mind” also amount to a definition of art in general? I take this search for some kind of a definition to be the central question in aesthetics, one that determines our answers to the other questions, such as the nature of interpretation or the relation of art to ethics. My project, then, is to measure the relevance to aesthetics of all that has been said about the literary mind, about the central role of metaphor and of cognitive mapping, about “blending”, “sorting” and so on. My suspicion – which I announce at the outset to ruin all the suspense of this paper – is that however convincing these concepts may be in their own fields, they remain largely irrelevant to both theoretical aesthetics and practical criticism.

2. The Investment in Metaphor

I would like to start from John Searle’s basic assumption “that the philosophy of language is a branch of the philosophy of mind” (Searle vii). This reasonable suggestion is something he can be seen to share with more radical linguists and philosophers such as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner. My own assumption will be that the philosophy of literature (or of art more generally) is also ultimately a branch of the philosophy of mind. In the case of literature, it seems clear that, because of its status as language, certain principles or concepts of the philosophy of language will automatically be relevant. And if the philosophy of language can indeed be seen as a special case of the philosophy of mind, then it will be difficult to deny that literature can be approached or understood from this perspective. I mention Lakoff, Johnson and Turner since they have conducted highly influential analyses of this very relation between literature and the mind. The theory of metaphor has been at the heart of recent efforts to redefine literary studies in terms of cognitive science. Metaphor does indeed seem likely to provide the basis of “literary cognition” sought for by many theorists; it has been central to many of the most prestigious works in literary theory – works on those “margins” between philosophy and criticism that have dominated poststructuralist thought. Indeed, poststructuralism has tended to blur or deny the

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2 References to the works of Lakoff, Johnson and Turner will be included in the text with appropriate abbreviations when necessary. The volumes under consideration are Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By; Lakoff, Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things; Johnson, Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor, Lakoff and Turner, More Than Cool Reason; Turner, The Literary Mind. See Works Cited.
distinctions between science and poetry; it has often argued that all thought is essentially metaphoric or implied that both science and poetry are founded on metaphor.

Much of the impetus for the current re-evaluation of metaphor comes from the deconstructive turn in literary theory and the swing towards pragmatism in philosophy. This can be seen clearly in the work of Richard Rorty. One of Rorty's main points was that the dominant metaphor of the "mind's eye" was just an accident of history: "There was... no particular reason why this ocular metaphor seized the imagination of the founders of Western thought" (Rorty 38). Of course, if one could show that there is a reason for the prevalence of this metaphor – in other words, if one could justify it in some sense, then one would be well on the way towards refuting certain aspects of Rorty's pragmatism. Indeed, in the same passage, Rorty himself goes on to admit that the mind's eye metaphor was a "powerful" one (41) – though he never fully explains why some metaphors are "powerful" and others are not.

In any case, both the centrality and the plasticity of metaphor have become standard elements in contemporary reappraisals of art. Lakoff makes metaphor essential to his entire project. In *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, he contrasts the traditional view of the mind with the new view that he is defending. For Lakoff, "reason has a bodily basis" and his new view takes "imaginative aspects of reason – metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery – as central to reason, rather than as a peripheral and inconsequential adjunct to the literal" (xi). It is important to understand the goals of the argument: "If we understand reason as merely literal," writes Lakoff, "we will devalue art" (xvi). All of this shows quite explicitly how revising epistemology is seen as a means of justifying art. The same position is taken up in his collaborative work with Mark Turner:

The Western tradition, which has excluded metaphor from the domain of reason, has thereby relegated poetry and art to the periphery of intellectual life – something to give a veneer of culture, but not something of central value in one's everyday endeavors. (214-215)

In recent decades, those who feel the need to justify literature have generally sought to underline its cognitive content and/or its moral efficiency. Like many others, Lakoff and Turner emphasize both; theirs is a dual-pronged approach which holds not only that metaphor has a cognitive dimension but that it will both reflect and influence everyday values. Lakoff, Turner and Mark Johnson exemplify in fact a typical strategy used by those who wish to valorise fiction and art on the basis of their cognitive status. The strategy involves the following steps:

1) Connect knowledge and truth to metaphor in some direct way.

We have seen how Rorty makes this connection. Lakoff and Johnson make the same point in *Metaphors We Live By* when they argue that "truth is always relative to a conceptual system that is defined in large part by metaphor" (159).
2) Show that metaphor is untranslatable.

The non-translatability or non-paraphrasability of metaphor is one of the standard points in almost all contemporary treatments of metaphor. It is essential as a means of denying any subservience of metaphor to literal meaning (which would imply a subservience of art to science). This leads to the next step:

3) Make metaphor a defining characteristic of art.

Lakoff and Johnson argue, for instance, that metaphor "is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness" (193). This seems to define the aesthetic as that which is embodied in metaphor. If the first three points are granted, it is easy to impose the final step in the demonstration:

4) Conclude that art gives us some untranslatable truth, that art is thus knowledge.

Indeed, if art is the realm of metaphor, and metaphor is the key to truth, how could art not be the key to fundamental understanding?

Briefly put, if metaphor can be shown to be cognition, and if literature is the realm of true metaphor, then literature is cognition. I'm not saying, of course, that this is the explicit or conscious argument, but it does seem to be the motivation behind much that is written about metaphor. Why else have so many studies been devoted to this particular linguistic phenomenon?

There are dozens of other stylistic devices that could be dealt with, but they aren't promising as justifications of art – *Zeugmas We Live By* hardly seems likely to do the trick. Martha Nussbaum, for example, insists, in *Poetic Justice*, on the value of metaphor in *Hard Times*: "the persistent exuberant metaphoricity of the language of *Hard Times* is no mere game, no stylistic diversion; it goes to the heart of the novel's moral theme. Even while the novel portrays the Gradgrind schoolroom, it cannot help comparing one thing to another, seeing one thing in another..." (43). It is clear that Dickens teaches us to value "fancy" and what Nussbaum calls the "metaphorical imagination" (36). "The novel calls on us to interpret metaphors," concludes Nussbaum. "But we can now say more: the novel presents itself as a metaphor. See the world in this way, and not in that, it suggests" (43). All of this tends to reinforce the rough syllogism, presented above, connecting literature to cognition via metaphor.

This mystique of metaphor is so prevalent that even more literal minded philosophers get caught up in the enthusiasm. Though he is eager to demystify metaphor in many ways, Donald Davidson begins "What Metaphors Mean" with the claim that metaphor is "the dreamwork of language" (200). I admit that this is a rather pretty formula – as is Nelson Goodman's image of metaphor as "moonlighting" (104). But it does contribute to the mystique, since "dreamwork" sounds promising and mysterious. The idea that dreams
reveal hidden truths and secrets is not something that Freud invented, and to see metaphor as *dreamwork* seems a way of granting it some mysterious explanatory power. The question is, do we want to define cognition in this way? Is the act of *refining* conceptual tools or descriptive resources an act of cognition? Do we want to say that cognition involves just adding to vocabulary? I can invent a word, *trizz*, for example, which designates all philosophers who prefer steak to spaghetti. I now have a “concept” that was not previously part of my vocabulary and thus am able to make comparisons that were not possible before this admittedly minor “paradigm shift.” Such categories can be invented *ad infinitum*. But do we want to identify cognition with the creation of potentially endless categories of classification?

Back in the fifties, Max Black was already talking about metaphor in terms of isomorphism and mapping. His general concept of the mapping of different “models” from one domain to another seems close to Goodman’s conception of metaphor as the transference of symbol schemata. The idea of “mapping” is of course essential to the theories of Lakoff, Johnson and Turner. When I call Roger a pig, I am mapping certain qualities of one animal onto those of another. All of this has grown quite familiar, and we can find it in all sorts of approaches or disciplines. Douglas Hofstadter is an example of someone who is not often quoted in these contexts and who was working out similar ideas at roughly the same time. Though he doesn’t use the term *metaphor*, Hofstadter sees the same kind of process as essential to all thought: “I claim that it is such perceptions of isomorphism which create *meanings* in the minds of people” (50). This is very close to I.A. Richards’s emphasis on all thought being metaphorical – as expressed in his famous claim (in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*) that metaphor is “the omnipresent principle of language” (92).

“There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action, and speech,” writes Lakoff. “Every time we see something as a *kind* of thing... we are categorizing” (5). Richards had already written, in 1936, that “all thought is sorting” (30). Lakoff makes this into a general rule: “SEEING TYPICALLY INVOLVES CATEGORIZING.” (127). And this brings us back to the basic strategy I am trying to underline: if all thought is sorting, then metaphor is the key operation of the mind. And if literature is the realm of metaphor, then it is fundamental in establishing our relation to the world.

### 3. From Speculation to Bankruptcy

Elsewhere I have spent much time discussing some of the fallacies of this cognitive theory of metaphor, but this will not be necessary here. For in the realm of aesthetics, it turns out, quite simply, that there is no need to refute the cognitive theory of metaphor. As an aesthetic theory (at least), it ends up in

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3 On Richards, see Shusterman 1988.

total self-destruction. I have been dealing with Lakoff and Turner, so perhaps it would be best to use them again to show how the theory self-destructs. The following quotation from More than Cool Reason can be taken as a manifesto of the new vision of metaphor:

It is commonly thought that poetic language is beyond ordinary language - that it is something essentially different, special, higher, with extraordinary tools and techniques like metaphor and metonymy, instruments beyond the reach of someone who just talks. But great poets, as master craftsmen, use basically the same tools we use; what makes them different is their talent for using these tools, and their skill in using them, which they acquire from sustained attention, study, and practice.

Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it. It is omnipresent. (xi)

The key element is the emphasis on the *ordinariness* of metaphor. I should like to argue that, however useful it may be elsewhere, the Lakoffian approach ends up trivialising both literature and science in this emphasis on the ordinary. Though they may be giving linguists and cognitivists essential tools of analysis, Lakoff and his colleagues are failing to grasp the specificity of art. For example, Lakoff and Turner examine five basic metaphors of death which are “used naturally, automatically, and largely unconsciously” in understanding a poem by Emily Dickinson (8). But that’s just the point: these unconscious mechanisms are not where the real interest of poetry lies. If metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language, if the ordinary mind is always already a *literary* mind, then aesthetics is going to need a separate theory of metaphor that would distinguish these ordinary mappings from whatever else that is going on in the realm of art. Linguists may be wise to underline the ubiquity of the ordinary metaphors by which we live, but in doing so they portray a mind that may be “literary” in a sense of the term that has absolutely nothing to do with art.

4. When Art is Not

I am, of course, being somewhat unfair to the cognitivists, since their explicit goal was never really the definition of art. Yet they do seem to be saying sometimes that metaphor is both a necessary and sufficient condition of art, so my argument is not entirely irrelevant. I am also being unfair insofar as the aforementioned definition of art has proved incredibly elusive, and the very idea of a substantive definition, a definition giving its essence, so to speak, is no longer fashionable. This is certainly the case for the various defenders of the “Institutional Theory of Art” (such as Danto, Dickie or Goodman) and I admit that I subscribe to such a view. If the theory of metaphor and the literary mind cannot help us, how are we to proceed? There might be other ways to stipulate a certain number of necessary conditions for the exis-
Aesthetics and the Literary Mind

I intend, therefore, to turn one of Goodman’s famous slogans upside down, asking not “When is art?” but “When art is not?” Are there elements, practices, attitudes or contexts the absence of which would render art un conceivable? Could some radical change in our neurological status or the ontology of the world make it impossible for art to exist? To ask such questions is not to renew the attempt to give a substantive definition of “what art is” (the concrete question rejected by Danto and Goodman). By asking such questions, one is not seeking the essence of particular forms of art but rather certain pragmatic characteristics of the institution as a whole. In the double thought experiment that follows, I envision radical changes that would eliminate the possibility of art.

Let us imagine beings who are conscious and intelligent, but totally free of all affectivity. They live in a society with a social structure based on pure rationality, since they have absolutely no emotions. Of course, they do have appetites and desires, since their bodies require food and sexual intercourse. Yet these are mere biological necessities that they carry out without the slightest passion. Would art exist in such a society? The official answer to this question, according to the National Broadcasting Company in 1966, was Yes, an answer that provoked some consternation for the young cosmologist and philosopher that I was at the time. My hero back then was Mr Spock – a native of the Planet Vulcan, and like all Vulcans, a being of pure logic, emotions having been eliminated in the distant past of his species. The early episodes made it clear that Spock could understand, intellectually, the existence of emotions; he could recognize, in his human friends, the signs of love or sadness, but he could not feel such things himself. He could neither laugh nor cry, and he constantly shocked Dr McCoy, his humanist foil in the series, by brutally applying the Utilitarian Calculus to all moral problems, for, as we might have expected, pure and heartless logic automatically leads to the ethics and politics of Utilitarianism.

I was thus shocked and saddened as I watched Mr Spock, in a later episode, pick up his Vulcan Lyre and begin to sing. The fact that he was apparently deriving pleasure from the act made things even worse. How could this being of pure logic consider music to be anything else but a mere configuration of sounds, having perhaps certain mathematical and formal relations that one could study, having no doubt a cathartic role for those species burdened with emotions, but having no visible utility or rational goal? I could have understood a scene where Spock might investigate music or even test his own dexterity - but for him to enjoy a tune now and then seemed totally out of character. NBC had defined him as an emotionless creature, and much of the humour of the series came indeed from his inability to decipher figures of speech or the jokes of his colleagues. How could a being of pure logic be moved by art?
As an adolescent philosopher, I was thus postulating some necessary connection between affectivity and art. I should mention that the producers of *Star Trek* also went off course at warp speed when they disfigured Spock’s home planet with some horribly baroque architecture, where it seemed to me that Bauhaus would have been more convincing. But aside from these two examples of bad taste, most of the science fiction I have come across since has confirmed my intuition, giving us passionless robots and computers who can do no more than feign a comprehension of emotion or art. As sensory beings, the Vulcans might perform exercises to sharpen their perceptual abilities, but these operations would not be accompanied by the slightest affectivity. In their world, there should be no difference between a television test card and a *Fra Angelico*.

At this level of generality, our theory of art is connected to basic facts of the human condition, facts involving ontology, physiology and consciousness. I would like to argue that the existence of art has something to do with our status as 1) individualized entities 2) living in a space-time continuum 3) without telepathic capacities. To see the impact of this, let us leave Mr Spock for a moment and visit a parallel universe inhabited by a unique being which I shall call *The Infinite Sponge*.

This multi-cellular creature is not only infinite and eternal, it also happens to fill up its universe entirely and to be composed of cells in constant, instant and total telepathic contact with each other. They exist in a form of perfect harmony and symbiosis and share a single, undivided consciousness. Since I am a rather poor historian of philosophy, I am unable to say to what extent my Infinite Sponge was already dreamed up long ago by Leibniz or Spinoza, but I hope the reader will allow me to pursue my thought experiment nonetheless. Let us suppose, then, that unlike Spock, the Infinite Sponge could conceivably experience emotion – nothing in my thought experiment forbids it explicitly, at least. But there is one thing that has been eliminated from the picture: In the world of the Infinite Sponge, motion is impossible, for there is no such thing as distance. Here it would make no sense to speak of communication, exchange or interpretation, since a single infinite consciousness occupying the totality of space would not have to worry about hermeneutics. Interpretation, like movement, derives from the distance between individuated beings, and this separation cannot exist in the universe of the Infinite Sponge. The monad need not, and indeed cannot, express its being. It *is*, and that is all.

Without the need or the possibility of affectivity, expression and interpretation, art could not exist. I would like therefore to use these two examples to suggest that motion and emotion, in the senses that I have implied, are in some way necessary – though not sufficient – conditions of art. I realize that I have only argued intuitively, but it does seem intuitively correct to assert that art would not exist for a being without emotion or for a being without spatial differentiation. For the being of pure logic, art would be superfluous; for the Infinite Sponge it would be totally inconceivable.
5. Narrativity, Visual Thinking, and Pure Plasticity

I have so far suggested that the presence of metaphor cannot be taken to be a necessary or sufficient condition of art, and that the theory of the literary mind does little to advance aesthetics. One might object that, though I have shown these things not to be sufficient conditions, since they can be found elsewhere, I have not proved that they are not as necessary to the institution as the motion and emotion I have just examined. Could it not be claimed that some kind of narrativity is a necessary element in all art? Could it not be claimed, moreover, that the visual thinking that I mentioned at the outset as a possible complement to the literary mind, is itself steeped in narrativity?

Behind the theory of the literary mind is the assumption that narrativity is ubiquitous. This implies, of course, that not only is all art necessarily narrative in some sense, but that all thought will be structured in this way. Mark Turner makes this relatively clear:

...principles of mind we mistakenly classify as 'literary'—story, projection, and parable... make everyday life possible. The literary mind is not a separate kind of mind. It is our mind. The literary mind is the fundamental mind. (i)

This is from the preface to his work, but further down the page we encounter a slight modulation in his position:

Story is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories. (i)

The difference seems to be that, where the first statement appears to be making a more absolute claim, the second statement concedes that though this principle is “basic”, there may indeed be other forms of experience that are not organized in terms of narrative. But the general drift of the argument is indeed to suggest that everything, or almost everything, that goes on in the brain is based on the fundamental principle of narrativity.

I doubt that we could accuse Wordsworth of plagiarizing Turner or Lakoff, but we can indeed find in his writing an analogous formulation of this omnipresence of narrativity. The poet endorses this principle of the inevitability of story in the middle of a curious poem called Simon Lee (1797):

My gentle Reader, I perceive
How patiently you’ve waited,
And now I fear that you expect
Some tale will be related.

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in every thing. (302)

I would like to argue that Wordsworth is right, that there is indeed “a tale in every thing”, and that this is true for a very simple reason: Any identifiable object, or any representation of such an object, is automatically situated in a
social or natural context that is essentially temporal and thus sequential. To recognize a thing is to recognize its place in this sequence, in this story.

One might sum up this point with a slogan: No representation without narrativity! Any form of thought – including art – that is involved in representation will automatically possess the structures that Turner underlines in his work on the literary mind. But what about those forms of art that are not involved in representation? Could we not have a reverse slogan that would claim, No narrativity without representation? Though there may well be a tale in every thing, what if the work of art includes no recognizable object? If a work rejects representation, does it not thereby reject narrativity?

To answer these questions, I’d like to take a very bad example. If I can show that even this bad example will resist being reduced into an illustration of the literary mind, I will have gone a long way towards showing the limits of the theory for aesthetics. My bad example is taken from photography, and it is bad precisely because photography has always been an art connected to the real and thus to narrative sequence. Moreover, it is an art where the process of production is itself a question of sequence and causality – so a picture seems to be the kind of Wordsworthian thing that will necessarily have a tale. Take, however, the following image whose copyright has been granted to me by a contemporary photographer:

![Image]

This work is characteristic of a school of macrophotography that de-realizes natural objects, that uses special techniques in order to turn a recognizable object of the natural world into an abstract pattern of shapes and colours. This is a bad example, since there is, in a sense, a “thing” that has been represented. It is the kind of work of art that pushes people towards a futile effort of identification. We all know the habitual reflex of the uninitiated when confronted with abstract art – the habit that I call the it-looks-like-a reflex. We should recall how the artists of Minimalism rejected all efforts of identification, or projection of meaning. Remember people such as Frank Stella claiming “What you see is what you see”. My example is bad because
there is indeed a thing that could be identified – but the whole purpose of the
work is to make this identification impossible and irrelevant. Indeed, for
many of these photographers, the distinction between photography and ab-
stract painting is problematic, and in some cases it is impossible to know if
one is looking at a painting or a photo, for the artists often mix the media in
undiscernible ways.

A second technique for injecting narrati vity into this artwork would be to
emphasize the genetic process behind the piece. The artist took out her cam-
era, attached her macro lens, produced an image, developed it, cropped it or
modified it in some way, and all of this, in a sense, is the tale of this object.
The argument, however, doesn’t work, because as an artwork, this piece isn’t
about its modes of production. There is of course a story behind it – but this
story doesn’t enter into its appreciation.

A third and slightly more legitimate way of injecting narrativity and se-
quence into the work has to do indeed with the appreciation involved. For
the work will invariably produce a sequence of eye movements, and this, too,
can be seen as a story. Unlike the genetic process, these eye movements are
indeed part of appreciation, in a sense. But only in a sense – for, when asked
what the work was about, we wouldn’t want to answer something like “Well,
first your eye starts in the middle, and then it goes up to the top, and then
you focus on the thin lines on the left side, and then you go down to the bot-
tom.” This is the story of our reception, but we wouldn’t want to say that it is
the essence of the work.

Indeed, I don’t know how I would describe the “essence” of the work,
and I’m not certain that I even need to try. The limits of my language are the
limits – no, not of my world, but of my linguistic expression. That’s quite a nice
tautology, but my goal is to point out that I can experience abstract art, I can
even think about it, give it attention, sense the spatial relations, without nec-
essarily needing, or being able, to translate this visual thinking into any pre-
existent vocabulary. I could, again, invent a vocabulary – some word or
words to designate stringy whiteness coming out of a thick whiteness on a back-
ground of black configured in a certain way – indeed, I have just described, rather
awkwardly, an aspect of my visual experience. But it is true that I had the
visual experience before I assembled the vocabulary, and that my description
doesn’t do justice to the experience itself. If it did, if the description were
enough, then anyone who wrote “Lisa Gherardini and her enigmatic smile”
on a sheet of paper would possess an authentic Leonardo.

All of this is leading to a claim that the mind is also involved in plastic op-
erations that cannot be reduced to the literary. I do not mean only that per-
ception involves realms of sensation that have little to do with narrativity,
but that thinking itself can take place in visual rather than verbal forms. This
was a point made by Rudolf Arnheim, with his study of Visual Thinking pub-
lished back in 1969, but we can also find similar positions in the work of Paul
Valéry who wrote that “the graphic can grasp the continuous that language
cannot grasp; it surpasses language in power and precision." And before Valéry, Bergson as well had claimed that thought could take place both as image and as concept:

We have but two means of expression, the concept and the image. It is by means of concepts that a system develops; it is via images that it intensifies, when the system is pushed back towards the intuition from which it descended...⁵

The point is, therefore, that any theory of the mind should try to take into account these plastic considerations. And we’d also have to add that there must be a musical mind as well, with its own use of sequence that doesn’t quite amount to narrativity. When Keith Jarrett sits down at his piano to improvise, there is no story that he needs to tell, but we can indeed imagine that he is thinking “Well, first I’m going to this, and then I’m going to do that” – where this and that refer not to narrative content but rather to specific configurations of sounds. Clearly, thinking this and that amounts to thinking without being “story” or “parable” or anything else.

But the conclusion will also be that if the mind, the fundamental mind, does indeed turn out to be musical, literary and plastic, then this fact will tell us nothing about the specific nature of art. “Everything is what it is and not another thing,” wrote Bishop Butler, and unless we decide that art is really just another ordinary thing, it will continue to deserve a specific effort towards theorization. The problem is, of course, that a definition of art that gets too specific will end up being easily refuted (as being no more than the product of a particular culture with an eye on a particular practice), and a definition that gives only the broadest outlines as to what has to be there – as exemplified by my thought experiment – will not satisfy those of us who are looking for a key. To say that art involves, necessarily, some dimension of affectivity that gets attached to the kind of movement involved in hermeneutic practice is not to say very much. But I’m afraid that the Institutional Theory can say no more – so I will leave you with my own hopelessly vague yet pragmatic definition of a work of art:

Any object, event, performance (or combination of the above) destined for hermeneutic contemplation of some sort, with (in certain cases) attendant sensorial qualities and effects, yielding emotion, or pleasure, or intellectual interest, or some combination of the three, these aspects being in some way connected to the qualia or phenomenology of the contemplation itself.

Such a definition does little to prescribe artistic practice. Nor will it, in itself, further interpretation. But I think it does eliminate Spock and the Infinite Sponge from the institution of art, and it leaves room for more investigation into certain special operations of the literary, plastic and musical mind.

⁵ My translation. Valéry quoted by Didi-Huberman: "Le graphique est capable du continu dont la parole est incapable; il l'emporte sur elle en évidence et en précision." (278).

⁶ My translation. Bergson in Didi-Huberman: "Nous n'avons que deux moyens d'expression, le concept et l'image. C'est en concepts que le système se développe; c'est en image qu'il se resserre quand on le repousse vers l'intuition d'où il descend..." (276).
Works Cited


