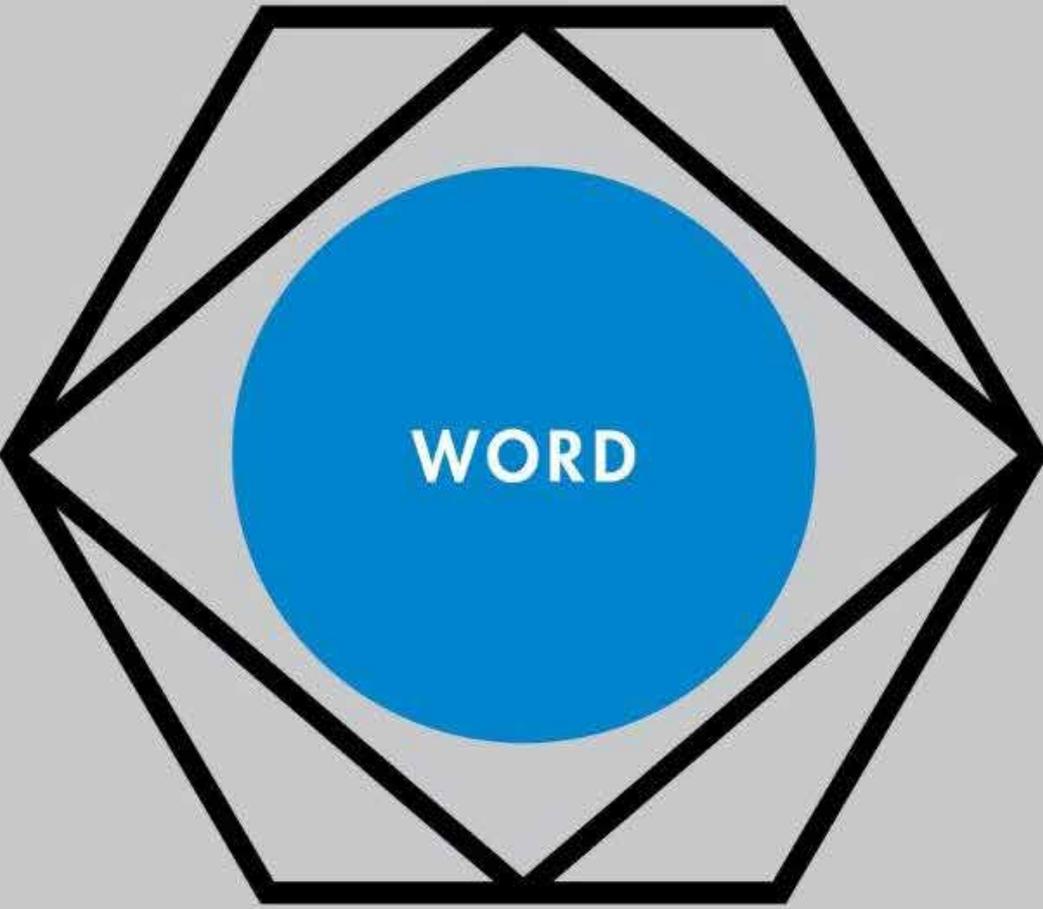


BEYOND LANGUAGE,  
BEYOND IMAGE



**WORD**

MARIAM MOTAMEDI FRASER

Word

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# Word

## Beyond Language, Beyond Image

Mariam Motamedi Fraser

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خانه ای آرام و

اشتیاق پر صداقت تو

تا نخستین خواننده هر سرود تازه باشی

احمد شاملو «سرود آن کس که از کوچه به خانه باز می گردد»

‘a quiet home and  
your frank fervor  
as the first reader of each new song’

Ahmad Shamlou, ‘Rhapsody of One Returning Home from the Alley.’

# Introduction

Words are the first material of scholarship, the most common material that scholars work with, yet it is difficult to see them as participants in this project, with a force and productivity of their own. In their daily and pragmatic guise as ‘denotative signs,’ a diverse range of relations with words, often bodily and affective, are ignored, overlooked or neglected. Indeed for all that the air is thick with words (Katamba 2005, 3), we mostly do not think of words at all.

Rather than conceive of words as primarily instrumental, this book asks instead after the sound, feel, touch, taste, place, position, speed and direction of words and how this matters in their uses. Usually, it is literary writers, who are attentive to the work and play of words, and artists, who are attentive to materials, who best capture the sensuous and somatic aspects of words. The writer Eudora Welty’s ‘love for the alphabet’ precedes her being able to read the letters (Welty 1984, 9). And: ‘[i]n my sensory education I include my physical awareness of the word. . . . The word “moon” came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a word’ (Welty 1984, 10). But as this book illustrates, literary writers and artists do not have a monopoly on evocative and provocative word encounters.

*Word* begins from the premise that while words are ubiquitous, *relations* with words are mostly rather narrowly defined. Commonly, and not unjustifiably, words are understood in relation to language where their

significance derives from their role as arbitrary points or marks in a system. As such, words signify conceptually, syntactically and phonetically (Harkness 1983, 5). Their histories are the histories of letters and alphabets (Sacks 2003). Their connections are established largely with reference to other words in strings of verbal meaning.<sup>1</sup> On occasion, words are conceived of as images (which may be immaterial, or may be actually drawn). This book is an invitation to extend these apprehensions and, in particular, to cultivate relations with words that do not travel first through language and discourse. The implications of these ‘alternative’ word-relations may be political (see especially chapter 3), sensual (see especially chapter 4) or methodological (see especially chapter 5). They may be epistemological (chapter 1) or experiential (chapter 2). Importantly, it is not the intention of *Word* to extract words from structuralist semiologies only to send them back to the European Renaissance, to their role as a ‘final index of the Real,’ or to their Romantic incarnation as mystical substance (Harkness 1983, 7). Instead, this book seeks to explore what is done and undone when words are released from word-word associations and enter into multidimensional collaborations with other sorts of creatures. It is a supplication, of sorts, to recognize and remember those nonlinguistic word-relations that already exist, and to bring new word-relations into being. It asks after the kinds of relations that are possible with words, today and in the recent past, and the kinds that are forbidden. *Word* does not dispute the contemporary conception and uses of words as components of conscious thought and knowledge; it proposes, however, that they are also participants in assemblages that are complexly nondiscursive, and that these aspects are undoubtedly connected.

In short, and in common with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this book does not assume that the value or efficacy of words is confined to purely linguistic and conceptual systems of differences. The relations between words and language are important, as I will illustrate, but language is not the only route through which words acquire meaning and relevance. It is for this reason that *Word* seeks to make sprightly leaps in and across the fields not only of language (briefly), but also science, religion, print, typography and digital technologies, sense, sensation and embodiment (able and disabled), art and performance. It does so without attempting to be

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1. Or at least, they are in the Greco-Roman tradition where, as Marc Baratin et al. explain, ‘this unit was constituted for its speakers in a way that was not independent of the process of the formation of its grammar’ (Baratin et al. 2014, 1243). See the philosophical dictionary entry of Baratin et al. for an illuminating account of conceptions of the word ‘word’ in European languages (and especially in Greek, Latin and French).

exhaustive, or comprehensive, and without holding to any single theoretical framework. *Word* mobilises a range of diverse vocabularies most of which find shelter under terms such as *word-worlds*, *word-kinds*, *word-relations* and *word-assemblages*.<sup>2</sup> These are roomy definitions.

From a theoretical point of view, *Word* can be said to have developed out of a suspicion, shared with Gilles Deleuze, of the ‘cult of language’ (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 34), and of the obediences that ‘order-words’ compel from life, thought and bodies (Deleuze and Guattari 2005). But its evolution is perhaps more profoundly connected to two of my own personal experiences of relations with words, one of which has been life-long, the other of which is recent. With regards to the former: it is that I come from two languages, English and Farsi, and I come from them differently. To live inside more than one language is anyway to have some insight into the wild and often hallucinatory uniquenesses that language-worlds deliver. But unlike Ariel Dorfman’s experiences of English and Spanish, I would not describe myself as a ‘multiple, complex, in-between person,’ nor am I ‘shared by two equal languages’ (Dorfman 1998, 42). Better to say that I am linguistically lopsided, with an aggravating knowledge of Farsi that comes and goes according to the company it is keeping. Of a Farsi that bubbles up and flows along when I am in motion—literally, in transition—on aeroplanes and buses, in trains and in taxis, on the metro with strangers in Iran. And of a Farsi that dries up all too quickly, with friends and family, especially if, like me, they speak the language of ‘the enemies . . . “the Great Satan,” and its closest ally, the United Kingdom’ (Borjian 2013, xiii).

It is painful to be locked out of the fullness of a language, and especially one as deeply resonant as Farsi. But if one has to be thus excluded, as I am (for reasons to do with family, history, biography, ability, as well as a touch of *taqqieh*), then Farsi is at least a language that in its generosity allows for many points of nonlinguistic and nondiscursive entry. Words, in Iran, furbish walls and buildings in nearly every town, city and village. Sonorous speech is the texture of everyday life; in poems, for example, that are daily read on the radio, or in the coffeehouse fables of *naghāl* narrators, or in the diversity of theatrical genres, ancient and modern, that come to life on streets and in theatres (or that are more recently hidden away from them). Statues and national monuments venerate the lives of writers and poets, and I have not even arrived yet at the sound of the *azān* (see chapter 3 for more on the call to prayer). This is how, over time, I have come to build my own connections with Farsi in some secret and precious ways and places that are

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2. When I write of words ‘in and of themselves,’ I will use inverted commas, for it is not words *per se* but rather word-assemblages to which I am referring.

hidden from the harsh glare of language and my failures. It is how I have become attentive to ‘alternative’ connections with words more generally.

And now a new relation with words emerges, a personal relation that is more recent, and that could be described as acute rather than chronic, when a close friend, Colette, was diagnosed with upper motor neurone disease (MND) in September 2013. ‘The salient quality of this particular neurodegenerative disorder,’ the historian Tony Judt wrote of his own experience, ‘is that it leaves your mind clear to reflect on past, present, and future, but steadily deprives you of any means of converting those reflections into words’ (Judt 2011, 4). This is one of things that MND seems to me to steal—words, rather than language. Words, in their material, sensory and sensual independence. Today, Colette types her words into a tablet and then plays them back in a voice of her choice, in the wry smack of an Australian called Alan who says the most outrageous things that Colette would never get away with (not in her ‘own’ voice, she wouldn’t). As I try to travel with her, in the limited ways I am able, I learn through their disappearance how words are made meaningful through embodied relations. I learn that, as in language, some words need to be exchanged in the very same substance. Which is why I too pick up the tablet, so that I too can speak in Alan. But once the speech-machine is in my hands my index finger hovers, a head-hanging dullard, this stupefying hesitation, until finally I am reminded that I am holding Colette’s voice captive, in my possession, and that I now have two voices at my command, while she, my friend, has none.

This introduction begins by raising three issues that are relevant to *Word*. Somewhat counterintuitively, these issues are important because they will *not* be explored as discrete topics in the book that follows. Instead, they can be understood as thematic forces that emerge again and again under different circumstances and in different guises. It is this combination, of being significant but nevertheless implicit, a kind of invisible stitching, which leads me to foreground them here. The first concerns words and images, or words as images, for this is one of the more obvious ways in which words are (potentially) dispossessed of their relations to language and discourse. The second refers to language, and how it is conceived of, for while this book does not for the most part address itself to linguistic word-world relations, it is nevertheless useful to have a touchstone for how I understand them. The third pertains to nonconscious cognition, for if *Word* is at all successful in dislodging words from their place in language—at least a little, or on occasion—then it necessarily raises the question of ‘other’ modes of thinking and knowing. Having addressed these three themes, I will introduce in the final two parts of this chapter my own methodological

orientation to words, which I have borrowed from the historian Caroline Walker Bynum's (1997) work on wonder, and the structure and content of the book, chapter by chapter.

## WORDS AND IMAGES

In the fifteenth century, Mir Ali al-Tabrizi dreamed of flying geese. Afterwards, he perfected a calligraphic style called *nasta'liq*, which is known as the 'hanging script' (Porter 2006, 20). al-Tabrizi's dream suggests to me that his words are part of bird-worlds, or that they are bird-words, but the legend that accompanies an example of the script (see figure 1) seems blithely to assume that if these words are of birds at all, then this is only on account of their being bird-like. Which is to say: these words are like birds when words are like images.<sup>3</sup>



The "bird-like" shapes of some letters in *nasta'liq*

Figure 1. Schimmel 1990, 29

Schimmel, Annemarie, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, I.B.Tauris, 1990, 29

To say that the word *parandeh*, which means 'bird' in Farsi, is bird-like when it is written in the *nasta'liq* script is to treat it as something to look at rather than as something to read. It is to put aside or to temporarily suspend the symbolic dimension of the word (that conventional aspect of the sign that pertains to discursive meaning) and to look at *parandeh* much as one might look at a picture of a bird by an artist. *Parandeh*, when it is written or painted or carved or printed in elegant script, turns—to quote from the

3. By which I mean, in this instance, like graphic images. As Martin Jay notes however, the word 'image' is ambivalent and 'can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena' (Jay 1994, 9). This ambivalence is revealing, Jay continues, of 'a close, if complicated, relationship between sight and language' (Jay 1994, 8). I return to the relations between vision and words in chapter 2.

title of an exhibition of calligraphy from the Middle East—*Word into Art* (Porter 2006). All words written in the *nasta'liq* script, to the extent that they look like birds, flutter close to the image.

In this section of the introduction I outline some of the issues that are raised by the perception of words as images. My remarks will be intentionally general because I am exploring words and their visual dimension throughout this book and especially in chapters 2 and 4. In view of the detail that is to follow, I begin here with ‘a commonplace,’ as Jay David Bolter puts it, which is ‘that we are living in an age dominated by visual representation’ and that, as such, ‘the balance between [the] verbal and [the] visual’ has shifted (Bolter 2005, 19; cf. chapter 2, this book). This means not simply that visual representation dominates over verbal, but that the word itself is ‘revealed’ to be an image: ‘[t]he word is an image after all’ (Moulthrop in Kirschenbaum 2005, 137). Or perhaps one might say, less theatrically, that in this ‘postalphabetic era,’ ‘the boundaries between word and image have never been more permeable’ (Kirschenbaum 2005, 137).

The typographic manifestos of the futurists and the dadaists, Jay Bolter and Matthew Kirschenbaum argue, and the graphic designers associated with Bauhaus and De Stijl, laid some of the groundwork for ‘this broad-band cultural shift to the visible spectrums of language’ (Kirschenbaum 2005, 137). In the later part of the twentieth century, this shift was lent new intensity by desktop publishing and especially the arrival of the Apple Macintosh in 1984 which contributed in the 1990s to ‘the “deconstructive” graphic design of Neville Brody, David Carson, and their cohorts—before *Wired* (and countless Madison Avenue imitators) domesticated its grunge aesthetics for the new .com economy’ (Kirschenbaum 2005, 137). The emphasis on the visual dimensions of words can also be situated, Kirschenbaum continues, in the context of the increasing number and variety of visual artefacts and methodologies that have been enfolded into academic and especially ‘mainstream “textual” scholarship’ (Kirschenbaum 2005, 138). This phenomenon is in part a consequence of the consolidation of those domains that inhabit the borders between the visual and verbal arts, of the ascendancy of cultural studies, of new historicism, and of the establishment of new media and digital culture as legitimate subjects of academic enquiry. ‘I myself wouldn’t have it any other way’ (Kirschenbaum 2005, 138), Kirschenbaum finishes.

One might imagine that, in view of *Word*’s intention to put words into as many diverse relations as is possible, this intensification of the visual aspect of the written word would be welcomed. Graphic designers, Bolter writes, make ‘the word immediate and sensually apprehensible by insisting

on its visual form rather than its symbolic significance' (Bolter 2005, 19). It is not the case, however, that 'the word as image' inevitably or necessarily releases it from the logic of language. In his introduction to Michel Foucault's *This Is Not a Pipe*, James Harkness suggests that, through *resemblance*, there creeps into painting, which is 'in theory an exclusively visual production,' a 'secret, inescapably linguistic element: "This painted image *is* that thing"' (Harkness 1983, 8, emphasis in the original). It is precisely in this way, by way of its resemblance to birds, by way of its being *bird-like*, that the word *parandeh* in the *nasta'liq* script remains tied to the 'burden of discourse' (Harkness 1983, 8). Indeed one might say that the word flies straight into the cage of the sign for now the image—the word 'bird,' written in a birdy script—and the object it signifies coincide. *Parandeh*, in *nasta'liq* script, is a rare example of a written word that is also iconic.<sup>4</sup> Or that hovers provocatively between two types of writing, the pictorial (in which a thing is designated by a drawing) and the alphabetic (in which the sounds of words are analysed and reconstituted). Or perhaps it is calligraphic, as well as calligraphic.

As well as the question of the relation of the word-as-image to 'the world' (which may remain stubbornly denotative), there is in addition the problematic and partly empirical issue as to how or when a shift from 'word to image,' or, more broadly, from 'word culture to image culture' might be established. I will be drawing on Elizabeth Eisenstein's ([1979] 2009) epic study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* to suggest in chapter 2 that even the first of these so-called transformations, the transformation from 'image culture' to 'word culture' that was ostensibly delivered by the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, has yet to be settled. Thus while many theorists accept the truism that contemporary new media have inaugurated a form of image culture that is historically unmatched (see Rotman's [2008] justification of this kind of claim in his chapter 4), there are also plenty of reasons to be wary about too hastily identifying a 'paradigm shift.' In chapter 2, my focus lies on how even the very definition of a word and an image can be differently constituted by changing relations between words and senses.

Which brings me to a related point. Although I opened this section with a discussion of several of Kirschenbaum's claims regarding the ubiquity of words-as-images, his purpose is in fact to slow this story down, particularly with regard to computing where, he states, 'images remain largely opaque in the algorithmic eyes of the machine' (Kirschenbaum 2005, 139).

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4. This is unusual, because verbal icons are more commonly associated with spoken words, like 'cuckoo,' because they are onomatopoeic.

Kirschenbaum's argument is that, despite numerous declarations regarding the fluidity of the boundaries between text and image, 'it is . . . precisely the data's unequivocal computational status as *text* that permits the software to produce . . . remarkable visual displays' (Kirschenbaum 2005, 149, emphasis in the original). The broader and more relevant issue that Kirschenbaum is raising here—that is shared by *Word*, and that does not turn on the resolution or not of this particular computing problem—is that 'one cannot talk about words as images and images as words without taking into account the technologies of representation upon which both forms depend' (Kirschenbaum 2005, 141). This is a crucial point, one that is not confined solely to technologies of representation (although this is a significant part of it) but can rather be extended to the very many elements and relations that constitute a word as an image, or not, in its spatio-temporal specificity. It is for this reason, on account of a word's contingency, that I will use Gottfried Semper's theory of matter in chapter 4 to argue that a visual word is better understood not as a 'petrified image' (which implies an unchanging entity) but rather as a 'structurally stable embellishment' (Spuybroek 2011, 94)—which is to say, a temporary outcome of a process.

I want to briefly illustrate this point about specificity and contingency by highlighting how difficult it can be to define what kind of a sign a word is in advance.<sup>5</sup> In *Iconology* (1986), W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that, if the 'war of signs' between poetry and painting has been especially tenacious,<sup>6</sup> then this is in part because the differences between them appear to be so fundamental. 'Each art,' Mitchell writes, 'lays claim to certain things that it is best equipped to mediate, and each grounds its claim in a certain characterization of its "self," its own proper essence. . . . poetry, or verbal expression in general, sees its signs as arbitrary and conventional—that is, "unnatural" in contrast to the natural signs of imagery' (Mitchell 1986, 47). Thus it is, Mitchell continues, that most semiologists will identify signs on the basis of their 'appeal to a "share of convention" divided with some proportionate share of nature' (Mitchell 1986, 65–66, references and emphases omitted). From this perspective, a photochemical photograph<sup>7</sup> and a word—to take a seemingly exaggerated example—would seem to be almost directly opposed, for a word is usually considered to be determined almost entirely by

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5. Which is not to suggest that words are always signs. See my discussion of this below.

6. Mitchell proposes that, since the end of the eighteenth century—a timeline that he derives by including 'everything from the eidophusikon to . . . computers'—this war of signs has been cast more neutrally as 'text versus image' (Mitchell 1986, 50).

7. This brief discussion, in keeping with the theorists on which it draws, focuses on photochemical rather than digital photography.

convention, while a photograph shares so high a proportion of nature that it can be explained with reference to ‘the real.’ Rosalind Krauss writes:

photography is an imprint or transfer off the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus generically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches. For technically and semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes. (Krauss 1999, 110)<sup>8</sup>

Or as John Berger puts it in his distinctively quiet style, ‘the primary raw materials’ of a photograph ‘are light and time’ (Berger 2013, 61).

Although this carving up of signs along the axis of nature/motivation and convention/arbitrariness might seem intuitively ‘right,’ it is nevertheless itself convention, specific to a world-view in which ‘the real,’ as Krauss puts it, is conflated with the physical, and is available for explanation by the natural sciences. It is only within this particular matrix that a photograph appears to be *of* the world, while a word is distant from it. In striking contrast, I will be exploring in chapter 3 how words too can be a ‘sample’ of the world—a sample of the world divine. Chapter 3 is an extensive engagement with the implications for words of the divinity of the Qur’an. Suffice it to note here that, when compared to the Godly motivation of the Qur’anic text, photography, shaped as it is by histories of human inventions and conventions, could be said to be almost wholly arbitrary. It is on account of this relation to divinity that the Qur’an, like the photograph in other circumstances, seems neither to be mediated by, nor to require, interpretation. Indeed some might say of the Qur’an, as Roland Barthes does of a photograph, that it is a ‘message without a code’ (Barthes in Mitchell 1986, 60).

The final point I want to make with regard to words and images is that the debate about their relation does not have to be tied inescapably to whether a word is an image (or not), or which is what, and so on. In chapter 4, for instance, I explore how the problems that John Berger identifies with and for the photographic image have much in common with the problems with and for words when their meaning is not understood to derive primarily from language. These problems concern, principally, continuity and discontinuity, arbitrariness and deadness, linearity, memory

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8. Although note that Charles Peirce considered photographs to be a composite of iconic and indexical signs (Mitchell 1986, 59–60).

and experience. It is not my aim in chapter 4 to suggest that words are *like* photographs or, more broadly, that words are like images. I will not even be suggesting that words might, on occasion, *act* like photographs or images. Instead, the chapter addresses the conceptual similarities and differences, with respect to meaning, that are raised by single photographs (and single photographs in sequence) and by words that have been ‘extracted’ from language.

Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick, in their introduction to *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media*, suggest that

[t]he persistent distinctions historically between ‘visual culture’ and ‘print culture’ are symptomatic of what sociologist Bruno Latour calls modernist thinking: the binary-based thinking that posits radical paradigm shifts from one communications medium to another or from one form of writing technology to another. Latour thus gives us an insight into the history behind the persistent narrative of the binary, explored here as word/image. (Hocks and Kendrick 2005, 3)

In this section I have offered a number of different reasons as to why it would be problematic to endorse—or at least, to endorse in advance—the distinctions between words and images (as well as the distinctions between ‘word cultures’ and ‘image cultures’). I have suggested that these distinctions may not hold for conceptual and/or empirical reasons, and that they have a tendency to close down the potential inventiveness of analysis by confining it to an interrogation of what words and images ‘are.’ For me, the value of Latour’s thesis—which distinguishes between the work of ‘purification,’ on the one hand, (the work that seeks to differentiate between ontological zones) and hybridity on the other (the endless entanglement of diverse elements)—lies not in its potential support for the notion that words *are* hybrids, but in its ability to explain the often jarring divergences between the theories, histories, philosophies that are told for and about words, and empirical experiences of them. I purposely exploit this tension in chapter 1, where it structures the narrative, and it remains an issue throughout this book. To return to my opening vignette, for instance: although Foucault would argue that the shape of a calligram will inevitably dissipate in favour of ‘the linear, successive unfurling of meaning’—thus illustrating that ‘*the calligram does not say, cannot yet say: This is a flower, this is a bird*’ (Foucault 1983, 24, emphasis in the original)—the claim is surely more complicated if one considers the specificity of the image and of whether the reader-spectator can or cannot understand the language. For while, to a non-Farsi speaker, the word *parandeh* is pictured as a static tableau, to the person who sees in Farsi, the meaning of the word ‘unfurls’ with the

flying, with the flight of the bird. *Parandeh*, written in the *nasta'liq* script and read by a Farsi speaker, is a word and an image together, both, in their immediacy, a word and an image in motion.<sup>9</sup>

Attention to images (for example to words-as-images) is often considered to be part of the reason why many new media theorists are disposed towards Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'machinic semiotics.' This is because, Janell Watson writes, it 'focuses less on language and symbols than on image, data, sensation, movement, subjectivity, and global political economics. Like the interactive networks of new media, this machinic semiotics brings together a diverse array of elements operating at many registers and affecting multiple senses, often below the level of conscious cognition' (Watson 2010, 245). Although I am sympathetic to the Deleuze and Guattari/new media alliance, the problem with this view, for me, is that it often assumes both that 'old' and new media forms are constitutively different, and, further, that this difference is or should be reflected in the tools with which they are analysed. Ganaele Langlois makes the case directly: '[a] text in its conventional understanding consists of a set of meanings expressed through signs, be they visual, written, audio, etc. Traditionally, text-focused methodologies deal with content in its linguistic and social aspects rather than with the technological or material context that enables the production and circulation of signs' (Langlois 2011, 9).

Words, however, are 'produced and circulate' (as signs perhaps, or maybe not) on both sides of this perceived divide and, as such, they scratch at some of Langlois's assumptions. While almost unavoidably linguistic, they are also nearly always material (chapter 2), political (chapter 3), and sometimes better understood as sensation, gesture and movement (chapters 4 and 5). These characteristics suggest that the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's machinic semiotics cannot be determined by the media-form to which it is 'applied.' From the perspective of *Word*, the very opposition between 'conventionally understood text + analysis of the linguistic and social' and 'new and digital media forms + analysis of technocultural assemblage' looks like a kind of discrimination that is designed to keep words in their place. It is with a mind to enabling words to step *out* of place (and

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9. Such questions, which concern empirical conditions, would of course be a distraction for Foucault who is more fundamentally proposing that 'what we can see' and 'what we can say' are irreducible to one another and divided (Deleuze 1992). This gap (or at best the interplay) between seeing and saying is a defining feature of Foucault's epistemology. '[I]t is no exaggeration' Mitchell writes, 'to say that the little essay on Magritte, and the hypericon of "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" provides a picture of Foucault's way of writing and his whole theory of the stratification of knowledge and the relations of power in the dialectic of the visible and the sayable' (Mitchell 1994, 71).

especially out of language) that, in the following section, I briefly outline why Maurizio Lazzarato's Guattarian understanding of 'signs and machines' is a fitting scrim for this book.

### LANGUAGE. OR RATHER, 'EXIT LANGUAGE.'<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the themes of words and images, and of nonconscious cognition (see below)—which I am discussing in this introduction because they inform the analysis that follows in *Word*, but are not developed directly therein—I *do* address language, as a topic in itself, in this book. In chapter 1, I explore how different conceptions of the operations of language, as they are understood in a focused number of histories, impact on words. With this exception however, *Word* is for the most part not an engagement with words in language, nor does it seek to make any contribution to linguistic theory. It does not assume, for example, that words necessarily (or exclusively, rather) function as signs in language, or even that they inevitably function as signs at all. In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's critique of 'the modern idea of signification,' this book, taken as a whole, implicitly contests the notion that all sign-systems are overcoded by language and/or that there is any 'system of relations that determines life in advance' (Colebrook 2010, 252). *Whether* a word is a sign, what kind of sign it is *if* it is, and what kinds of relations it might enter into, is an open question. It is an open question for this book, but one that is largely of interest only because, on a day-to-day basis, words are routinely understood to serve as 'no more' than near-transparent delivery vehicles for meanings that originate or are generated *elsewhere* (see also my discussion of words-as-inscriptions in chapter 2). Maurizio Lazzarato's account of signifying semiologies provides one explanation as to how it is that words and word-relations could come to be so diminished. This is the first of three contributions, which I will introduce here, that his analysis of signs and machines makes to *Word*.

In *Signs and Machines* Lazzarato (2014), drawing on Félix Guattari, identifies three semiotic systems, or 'sign machines.' These are: 'natural' a-semiotic encodings, like genetic codes (which this book does not discuss at all); semiologies of signification, which include both signifying and a-signifying semiologies (which is the focus of most of this section); and symbolic semiologies (which I introduce only briefly towards its end). Although none of these machines are defined on the basis of, or with reference

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10. Guattari in Lazzarato 2010, 507.

to, human language (see below), one of them in particular, signifying semiologies, certainly *feels* as if it should be, for its organization in terms of ‘reference/denotation, signification, representation’ (Lazzarato 2010, 509) carries with it an all-too-human familiarity and common-senseness: signs refer to, denote or represent things in the world. And yet all of these functions, as Lazzarato understands them, constrain and circumscribe signification. Denotation, for example, ‘sets up a bi-univocal relation between the sign and the designated thing’ such that *this* denotes *that* and nothing further, while reference and representation (to which I will return below) tether ‘the sign to its referent’ and in this way authorise a ‘dominant reality’ rather than floating and uncertain multidimensionality (Lazzarato 2010, 509). It is in these kinds of ways that significations become “‘automatic” and . . . stable’ (Lazzarato 2010, 509). And it is for these kinds of reasons that this signifying semiology, Lazzarato writes, should be understood for what it is: a ‘veritable war machine’ (Lazzarato 2010, 509).

To what end do signifying semiologies drain and impoverish (Lazzarato 2010, 509) words and their worlds? One reason for foregrounding the nonhuman dimension of these sign machines is that it allows Lazzarato to explore how semiologies of signification and a-signification (to which I return in a moment) are structured by and service the needs of capitalism. For capitalism, in order to function effectively, requires ‘translatability, equivalence, comparability’ (Lazzarato 2010, 508). The purpose of the signifying sign machine therefore—the machine that ‘structures, polices, and clamps down significations’—is to reduce heterogeneity, ‘multivalence and mutlireferentiality’ (Lazzarato 2010, 509). ‘In contemporary capitalism’ Lazzarato writes, ‘this semiotic politics is at work on individuals from birth. Semiotic initiation is the earliest “labor,” prior to any other’ (Lazzarato 2010, 508). Children are initiated, for instance, not only into their ‘mother tongue’ but also into ‘codes of getting around the street, a certain complex relation to machines, to electricity, and so on’ (Guattari in Lazzarato 2010, 508).

Two further aspects of this machinic semiotics—its treatment of representation and subjectivity—implicitly inform the analysis of words in this book. To take the issue of representation first: the problem with representation, as Lazzarato explains it, is that it ‘divides up the world into a mental world or symbolic world (a world of images, representative icons, and symbols) and a “denoted real”’ (Lazzarato 2010, 510). This division is deleterious because it distinguishes signs (which are the object of Lazzarato’s analysis) and words (which are the object of mine) from the real and thus from their ability to act ‘on’ it. ‘[R]epresentation,’ Lazzarato continues, ‘makes signs “impotent” because they do not work pragmatically

upon the “real,” they do not transform it directly. They require the mediation of consciousness and representation and the subject’ (Lazzarato 2010, 510). Although I do not use Lazzarato’s theoretical vocabulary in chapter 1, the analysis therein could nevertheless be understood in terms of an investigation into the implications (for words) of the different and changing configurations of elements that Lazzarato considers to be central to this signifying semiology: word-signs, ‘the real,’ representation, consciousness, and subject/subjectivity.

Importantly however, for Lazzarato, this collection of elements is not to be taken as natural or given. On the contrary, in order to understand how capitalism functions as a ‘semiotic operator’ (Lazzarato 2010, 509), it is necessary to detach subjectivity from the human, and language from human subjectivity. Or to put that conversely, to confer a-subjectivity (a-‘for-itself’) and the power of enunciation onto living and material assemblages. Human subjectivity does not, according to Lazzarato, have ‘an existential status of exception’ (Guattari in Lazzarato 2010, 506) and autopoietic power, which is ‘the power of self-production that immanently secretes its own rules and modalities of expression,’ can be extended to machines (Lazzarato 2010, 506).<sup>11</sup> This is the third important aspect of Lazzarato’s conception of semiotics for *Word*, for it opens the door to an analysis that asks not what words subjects use, but in what word-assemblages (which are diverse in their composition) subjects are produced or even extracted. Investigating the words that subjects ‘choose’ (consciously or not) is an urgent project, but it is beyond the scope of this book, which focuses on non-linguistic relations with words. This is not to suggest, however, that such relations do not also have a bearing on power and politics. For instance: although this book does not address ‘hate speech,’ it examines how different word-relations can create grounds for hate (see, for example, chapter 3) and how they can engender discrimination and prejudice (chapter 4). The point, for now, is that subjects and their capacities are defined and to some degree determined by the assemblages—in this book, the word-assemblages—in which they are situated. To give a parallel example, taken from Tiziana Terranova’s analysis of Lazzarato (on debt and autonomy), one does not so much *use* a smart phone, a search engine or a social network, but rather becomes part of its constitution—‘under the direction and management of

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11. ‘Machine,’ in Lazzarato’s Guattari-inflected vision, does not refer to a tool or technology that extends a pre-given subject or living being. Instead, living beings, along with multiplicities of other components, together constitute assemblages that are not only technical in nature, but also, as Lazzarato would have it, ‘scientific, social, theoretical, economic, aesthetic, immaterial, and so forth’ (Lazzarato 2010, 505).

the corporation who “own” the operating system, the algorithm or the servers and has the control of the proprietary technology’ (Terranova 2014). Although Terranova is referring to corporations, the point arguably applies as readily to the philosophy-, language- and religion-machines that seek, with more or less success, to direct, manage and delimit words and word-encounters (see chapter 1, this book).

Lazzarato’s conception of machines as sites of enunciation inevitably gives rise to a critique of theories of language which are organized around human subjectivity, *even if* that subjectivity is understood to be an effect of the performativity of language. This is because, for Lazzarato, it is not and cannot be language which ‘acts,’ for language, as I have already noted, is locked within a semiotic triangle that dispossesses the sign of the capacity to intervene in the real. It is not language which produces effects, Lazzarato argues, but micro-political power relations (which are productive language). ‘Language’s power to act,’ he writes, ‘as exercised in the Greek *polis* and an assumption still implicit in all these theories since Hannah Arendt, is no longer sufficient to describe the “political word.” In the contemporary public arena, the production of the word is organized “industrially” rather than “theatrically”’ (Lazzarato 2006).<sup>12</sup> ‘Capitalism,’ as Deleuze and Guattari put it, ‘is profoundly illiterate’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 240). The unsatisfactory politics of discourse, narrative and signification is evident in the way that it reduces power ‘to an icon, an image, a representation for contemplation (about which, in reality, we are rarely fooled)’ (Lazzarato 2014, 123), while all the time a-signifying semiotics course through the veins of bodies, ‘partial and modular subjectivities,’ and ‘non-reflexive consciousness’ (Lazzarato 2014, 89). A-signifying semiotics or a-signifying signs—‘signs of power,’ ‘power signs,’ or ‘sign-points’ (Lazzarato 2010, 513)—are distinguished from signifying signs because they are not mediated by consciousness, representation or by a subject. Instead, ‘[a] relation of a new kind is established between sign and referent,’ Lazzarato writes, in which signs ‘do not represent or refer to an already constituted “dominant” reality. Rather, they simulate and pre-produce a reality that is not yet there, that is there only virtually’ (Lazzarato 2010, 513).<sup>13</sup>

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12. Thus it is no longer the cultural and intellectual elites in law, literature, education and religion that unify society, but rather the ““signage” language’ of industry and technocracy and ‘private enterprises’ (Lazzarato 2010, 505–06, references omitted). It was Pier Paolo Pasolini, Lazzarato writes, who first recognized that the transition from capitalism to neocapitalism coincided with a transformation of language (for more on Pasolini, see Lazzarato 2014, chapter 3).

13. To be clear: where signifying semiologies contribute to social subjection (by manufacturing individuated subjects and identities for example), a-signifying semiologies

Lazzarato's analysis begins to illustrate how words can come to be ambushed, trapped and kidnapped inside the narrow and restricted confines of the sign machines that organize language. As well as analysing signifying and a-signifying sign machines, Lazzarato also discusses the symbolic semiologies that precede capitalism (but which can be identified within capitalism, in some pockets, such as in love or passion). These symbolic semiologies are 'pre-capitalistic' insofar as their translatability or equivalence is *not* 'accomplished through a formalization of the expression (the signifier) that seizes power over the semiotic systems' but, rather, 'by a social assemblage' (Lazzarato 2010, 508). A social assemblage, Lazzarato continues, 'wards off the manifestation of a single signifying substance, of a signifying synthesis, of a system that hierarchizes and subordinates other modalities of expression' (Lazzarato 2010, 508).<sup>14</sup> An example of a single signifying substance would be a structuralist conception of language.

If I were to 'choose' a semiology for words,<sup>15</sup> then the polyvocality and multidimensionality of symbolic semiologies would certainly be intuitively appealing to me, and conducive to the tenor of this book. Such a semiology would have to be specifically defined, however, in Lazzarato's terms and *not* in terms of the word-relations that characterize archaic medievalism or the 'age of resemblance' as Foucault conceives of it (see chapter 1). These are, in my view, too tightly bound up with 'Western' narratives about religion, science, and Enlightenment to make them either politically or empirically persuasive. I critique that narrative, on both these grounds, explicitly in chapters 1 and 2 and implicitly throughout the rest of this book. The reason that I feel compelled to distance myself from such esoteric word relations here however—and to draw attention to my critique of them—is because I have been surprised how often, during the course of writing *Word*, words in medieval worlds have made an appearance. It is also because, to my even greater surprise, I find that my own 'heart-relation' with

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dismantle the individuated subject in the service of 'machinic enslavement.' These two semiotic modes mostly, however, operate together: 'signifying semiotics effectuate a molar processing of subjectivity that targets, solicits, and interpellates consciousness, representation, and the individuated subject, whereas a-signifying semiotics effectuate a molecular processing of the same subjectivity, mobilizing partial subjectivities, states of non-reflexive consciousness, perceptual systems, and so on' (Lazzarato 2014, 124).

14. Although Lazzarato identifies 'the tribe' and 'the community' as examples of social assemblages, I would prefer to define them in terms of their operations (their nonsynthesizing modalities of becoming and endurance, as described above), rather than by their content.

15. 'If' is an important qualifier here because, as I noted earlier, words do not *have* to be conceived of in terms of signs and semiologies.

words is best defined by what the historian Caroline Walker Bynum describes as a medieval concept of wonder. I examine the key characteristics of this concept in the penultimate section of this chapter—after, that is, I have addressed the third and final issue that runs like a seam through *Word*, which is that of nonconscious cognition.

### CONSCIOUS AND NONCONSCIOUS RELATIONS WITH WORDS

In her profound and moving account of migrants dying, Yasmin Gunaratnam explores how the ‘body’s activities can bypass subjectivity, reason and knowing’ (Gunaratnam 2013, 55). Importantly, Gunaratnam warns against the consolation that such activities are bodies ‘speaking,’ or that ‘the body’s lines of flight’ can be transformed into language: ‘the non-verbal is precisely not language,’ she writes, quoting Thomas Csordas (Gunaratnam 2013, 44). What I want to clarify here however, both with regard to my understanding of Gunaratnam’s work and my own analysis in this book, is that nonverbal modes of living and dying do not necessarily *also* exclude words. It is quite possible, indeed it is likely—and this, in short, is the central argument of *Word*—that, as well as words in language, there are uses and experiences of words that are ‘precisely *not* language’ (my emphasis) and that this is so because there are many ways of engaging with words, even if they are not always or even often recognized. One of the critical propositions of *Word* is that the implications *for words* of the numerous different challenges to language that have been launched over the last three centuries—challenges that I will be documenting in every chapter in this book<sup>16</sup>—cannot be determined by the consequences of such provocations *for language*. As the first chapter of this book explicitly illustrates, theories and histories of words and language may well be divergent. When Gunaratnam shows how bodies live worlds differently to how we speak of them, and to how they speak of themselves, she is referring to words in language, which usually means words in chain-relations with other words. But as she also illustrates, dying brings a diversity of relations with words to the fore, which is partly why it obliges ‘care . . . [to] become artful in its responsiveness’ (Gunaratnam 2013, 55). The nonlinguistic experience, the untranslatable, undecideable, maybe even the unintelligible experience,

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16. Of language as ‘not present’ to itself for example (in chapter 1), as diminished by the visibility of writing and especially print (in chapter 2), as incidental to the divinity of the Qur’an (chapter 3), as an obstacle to memory and experience (chapter 4), as imminently doomed to extinction in favour of gesture (chapter 5).

is an inspiration not just to learn to be affected therefore (where affect is an alternative resource to language), but also *to be affected to learn* (Gunaratnam 2012). In her book, Gunaratnam (2013) demonstrates how ‘the unspeakable’ can be turned into a prompt for trying to create new kinds of connections, including new kinds of word-connections. Words *themselves* are not enervating, as Gunaratnam, who is not only an academic but also a short-story writer and a poem maker, of course knows.

It is not surprising to me that Gunaratnam should find music and dance to be more analogous to living and dying than she does ‘the rationalities of conscious thought’ (Gunaratnam 2013, 6). The ‘alternative’ (by which I mean nonlinguistic) word-relations that I will be exploring in *Word* have the effect of bringing exactly this issue—which might be described as ‘non-conscious cognition’—to the fore. In chapter 3, for instance, in my analysis of some of the implications of the divinity of the Qur’anic text for words (and for interfaith relations), I will be drawing on what the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind calls ‘hearing with the heart,’ a hearing that ‘bypasses’ conscious textual comprehension (Hirschkind 2001, 2006). I further develop this and other theories of listening in chapter 5, where I explore the value of a ‘sonic methodology’ that is based not on the discursive dimensions of speech, but rather on the sounds of it. It is on account of this focus on ‘un-thinking’ relations with words in this book—and these are only two of several examples that will I be discussing—that, as I proposed earlier, it is worth pausing for a moment longer on the theme of cognition.

The term ‘nonconscious cognition’—which I will be deploying very loosely—is inspired by N. Katherine Hayles’ article ‘Cognition Everywhere,’ in which Hayles distinguishes between thinking and cognition. This is how she describes the difference:

To avoid confusion, I will reserve ‘thinking’ for what conscious entities such as humans (and some animals) do, and ‘cognition’ as a broader term that does not necessarily require consciousness but has the effect of performing complex modeling and other information tasks. On this view, we can say that while all thinking is cognition, not all cognition is thinking. In this respect the cognitive nonconscious is qualitatively different from the unconscious, which communicates with consciousness in a number of ways. Accordingly, I will call consciousness/unconsciousness ‘modes of awareness.’ (Hayles 2014, 201)

For Hayles, cognition serves, in part, as an analytic term for use in the explanation of neuropsychological processes.<sup>17</sup> For me, it is enabling of a

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17. Hayles goes on to propose, for example, that the reason the cognitive nonconscious is distinguished from the unconscious is because it ‘operates at a lower level of neuronal organization not accessible to introspection’ (Hayles 2014, 201).

rather more general concept, ‘nonconscious cognition,’ which I find to be a helpful tool to think with, a tool through which novel word-relations can be explored and generated.<sup>18</sup> (And indeed I find variations on this term in the literature on which I draw throughout this book.)

It is notable that although Hayles situates her analysis of the cognitive nonconscious in the broader context of interpretation in the humanities, she explores this topic largely with reference to computational and technological devices and affordances, and in relation to neuropsychology. In chapter 5, I will be interrogating Brian Rotman’s account of nonconscious cognition, in *Becoming Beside Ourselves* (2008), which draws on a similar set of resources (especially parallel computing, and evolutionary neurobiology and neuropsychology). Rotman’s position is less qualified than is Hayles’: recent developments in these fields, he argues, do not so much put the (Western) humanities at a crossroads, as Hayles would have it,<sup>19</sup> but rather promise to entirely obliterate global alphabets (I say ‘promise’ for this, for Rotman, is something to be welcomed). One aspect of my critique of Rotman—which I mention here because it is also relevant to Hayles—is that one does not require recourse to new media, or to high-end technologies or even to the neuro-disciplines in order to identify enduring examples of nonconscious cognition.<sup>20</sup> As I will illustrate in chapter 3, ‘hearing with the heart’ (to return to my earlier example), *like* the models of nonconscious cognition described by Hayles and Rotman, shifts cognition away from ‘the mental world of the participant’ and situates it, instead, ‘between participants, or within the system as a whole’ (Hayles 2014, 202). Although the nonlinguistic word-relations that I will be exploring in this book are rather humble, they can nevertheless, potentially,

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18. Nevertheless, this seems an appropriate moment to note that *Word* does not anywhere address psychoanalysis, which is a domain in which nonconscious relations to words are exceptionally well theorized. The reasons for this are many, but they include among them my own lack of expertise, which I consider to be prohibitive. It bears repeating that this book is not intended to be an exhaustive account of either cognitive or noncognitive word-relations (!), nor is it an attempt to ‘cover’ social theory comprehensively.

19. ‘Today the humanities stand at a crossroad. On one side the path continues with traditional understandings of interpretation, closely linked with assumptions about humans [as thinking selves, whose thought originates in the conscious/unconscious] and their relations to the world as represented in cultural artifacts. . . . The other path diverges from these assumptions by enlarging the idea of cognition to include nonconscious activities . . . which syncopate with conscious interpretations in a rich spectrum of possibilities’ (Hayles 2014, 216).

20. Just as one does not require new media—as I have already remarked—to deploy Deleuze and Guattari’s machinic semiotics (which, like ‘the cognitive nonconscious,’ also displaces the subjectivity/consciousness/interpretation triad).

have powerful analytic and experiential implications. They also have the advantage of being nimble.

Nonconscious cognition, as I have already noted, will be an important theme in this book. It is not my intention, however, to celebrate it as an end in itself, regardless of its many attractions, among which Hayles lists its speed, its openness to ‘the world’s capacity for infinite surprise,’ and its ability to displace some of the solipsistic, deluded and authoritarian consequences of ‘mak[ing] [the] self the primary actor in every sense’ (Hayles 2014, 204). I will give just three reasons here for not valorising nonconscious cognition *per se*. First, and perhaps most obviously, nonconscious cognition is not only not inherently desirable, it is also very often actively *undesirable*. Although Hayles concludes her analysis of the abuse of the temporality of automated trading algorithms in financial markets by observing that ‘not all uses of the cognitive nonconscious are exploitative or capitalistic in their orientations’ (Hayles 2014, 212), it remains the case that many of them are. Indeed, insofar as machinic capitalism (see above) is ‘a parasite on the feelings, movements, and becomings of bodies, tapping into their virtuality’ (Parisi and Goodman in Hayles 2014, 212), it is likely to be a ‘strange attractor’ for devices and systems that operate in the register of the cognitive nonconscious. ‘We term this mode of affective programming “mnemonic control.”’ Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman write, ‘a deployment of power that exceeds current formulations of biopower’ (Parisi and Goodman in Hayles 2014, 212).

It is also, second, worth being careful I think about claims such as this one—which appears in the first line of Hayles’ article—that ‘[a] massive shift is underway in our intellectual and cultural formations’ (Hayles 2014, 199). As I will be rehearsing in chapter one, the foregrounding of consciousness, and particularly the consciousness of ‘Man’ in relation to beliefs and agency (Seth 2007, 60), is the product of a specific intellectual history (what Sanjay Seth calls ‘modern’ and ‘Western’). One might be wary therefore of reinforcing the authority of *this* history—as if it were universal—by asserting that it is coming to an end, and particularly that it is coming to an end by way of an opposition (between conscious and nonconscious cognition) that would appear to be internal to it. Herein lies the value, I think, of modest analyses of entities such as words which are often able to prise apart some of the most ‘naturalized’ relations by showing how differently they can or could be configured. It is in this context that my suggestion that it is possible to identify abiding, but altogether less high-tech, versions of nonconscious cognition acquires, I hope, some further significance.

Finally, and rather differently, the eventuation of these challenges—the challenges posed ‘not just to rationality but to consciousness in general,

including the experience of selfhood, the power of reason' (Hayles 2014, 199) and, one might add, to writing—alongside the 'ruin' of 'the university' (Readings 1996) should not pass unnoticed. Indeed, the timing is curiously reminiscent of the explosion of theories deconstructing the subject which neatly/nearly coincided with civil rights movements, women's movements, lesbian and gay pride as well as anticolonial independence struggles. Perhaps it is no accident that these critiques of consciousness are emerging at precisely the moment when intellectual life in many university systems is undergoing a tectonic overhaul, and when online participatory media platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter) are simultaneously offering 'a constant stream of user-produced meanings . . . [a] seemingly infinite "semiotic democracy," where anybody can say anything and have a chance to be heard' (Langlois 2011, 1). It is worth being wary of one's own territorial investments, especially when they are threatened.

These three themes or issues, of words and images, language (or more accurately, sign machines), and nonconscious cognition, recur repeatedly, if differently, and more or less implicitly, throughout this book. Nevertheless, they are at once too broad and too specific—the potential subjects of books in themselves—to be the focus of what follows in *Word*, which does not seek to foreground any particular aspect or implication of nonlinguistic word-world relations (see below for more on this point). It is for this combination of reasons that I have felt compelled to draw attention to them here, in the introduction. In the final two sections, I want to briefly address Caroline Walker Bynum's medieval concept of wonder as it too has helped to shape *Word*, before concluding with a summary of the chapters.

### WONDER: A POLITICS OF PRESENCE

In her brilliant Presidential Address, which was delivered to the American Historical Association annual meeting in New York in January 1997, Walker Bynum makes a case for wonder as a methodological tool for historical analysis. Its usefulness and value, however, does not seem to me to be specific to medieval (or indeed any kind of) history, even though Walker Bynum's understanding of this concept, being specifically medievalist, is somewhat counterintuitive. Wonder is relevant to *Word* for quite a number of reasons, the first of which—in the spirit of counterintuition—is that it skates so perilously close to everything that *Word* would like to avoid. (And, in this way, keeps the book alive to the dangers). These things include: an 'enthusiasm' for words which is 'expropriative and appropriative' (Walker Bynum 1997, 4); a relation with words that is characterised

by a particular kind of *stupor* or *admiratio*—the kind that serves as a lure for knowledge and which, through its acquisition, leads to wonder’s ‘own destruction’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 5) and the use of wonder or of a world ‘awash in wonders’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 3) as a route to reenchantment. The purpose of this book is not to fetishize words or to turn them into objects—like a narwhal horn or a jewel brought back from a mission (Walker Bynum 1997, 4)—nor is it dispel ‘ignorance,’ to act as a corrective, or to provide a set of rationalizations that will still a relation of wonder with words. As for reenchantment: this is not, for me, a compelling aspiration.

So what does wonder bring that is positive? Wonder describes a relation. This relation is defined, as Walker Bynum understands it, by three features: ‘it is a response to facticity; it is a response to the singular; it is deeply perspectival’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 13). All three of these characteristics are pertinent to the analysis of words in this book. To take the second one first (for I have, in a sense, already addressed it): this book is concerned not just with the *specificity* of the relations that constitute word-assemblages, but also with the singularity that necessarily follows from it. For instance: it is not the aim of this book to generalize about words, but rather to propose that there is political, ethical, intellectual and emotional purpose in cultivating an attentiveness to the particularity—if not, on occasion, the uniqueness—of word-assemblages and their uses. It is on account of their singularity that word-assemblages can also be said to be ‘deeply perspectival’ (Walker Bynum’s third characteristic). For as Walker Bynum suggests, an entity cannot be wondrous without an observer who believes it to be so: ‘if you do not believe the event,’ Gervais of Tilbury (ca.1150–ca.1228) said, then ‘you will not marvel at it’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 24).

Which leaves only Walker Bynum’s first characteristic, facticity. Facticity describes, simply, a relation to something present. ‘To medieval thinkers,’ Walker Bynum writes, ‘human beings cannot wonder at what is not there’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 3). Facticity is especially important to *Word* because this book seeks, first and foremost, to address words in their there-ness. This is in direct contradistinction to those absences that so often, too often, wash over and flood them, whether this is because words are customarily considered effectual only when they withdraw from the world to which they are pointing (when they recede, that is, into pure functionality), or whether it is on account of the absence that is perceived to lie at the heart of language (for in the modern concept of signification there can be no knowledge of ‘pure presence,’ only knowledge that is mediated by signs [Colebrook 2010, 252]). Indeed, this book not only explores the absences that are problematically associated *with* words—problematically,

that is, from *Word's* point of view—but also the absences that are attributed to them. This approach to absence situates *Word* among that ‘bedraggled’ group, as Eric Leigh Schmidt puts it, that considers the zeal with which many critics and theorists pursue and identify absence—the ‘explanatory predilection to take away’—to ‘itself [be] a historical phenomenon’ (Schmidt 2002, 33). There will be at least three occasions in this book where I attend to the implications, usually political, that are perceived to follow from the identification of absent referents. In chapter 1, in relation to a cluster of academic disciplines that include Oriental studies, Area studies and postcolonial studies; in chapter 3, in relation to (the construction of) fanatical words (as well as so-called fanatical subjects) and in chapter 4, in relation to any unit, be it a word or a photograph, that is extracted from a perceived continuity (such as language, time or the weather).

Interestingly, particularly in view of the problematic legacy of ‘self-referentiality’ that I discuss in chapter 1, Walker Bynum considers the three aspects of wonder (facticity, singularity and perspectivalism) to be especially helpful in combatting ‘the danger of being trapped by the multiple readings of texts open to—but, we may fear, reflective only of—us after the linguistic turn’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 1–2). For Walker Bynum, wonder is not so much a philosophical answer to or rebuttal of what, writing in the late 1990s, she calls postmodernism, but rather a useful orientation to objects of analysis that avoids or at least displaces some of the sense of lifelessness that can follow when meaning is suspended (if not absented) or always considered suspicious. Disgust, playful delight, terror, solemn astonishment, mischief, dread. These are just some of the emotions that Walker Bynum identifies as medieval ‘wonder-reactions’ (Walker Bynum 1997, 15–16). In its more modern manifestation, she associates wonder with strange things that are unheard of (Walker Bynum 1997, 25). With such strange things, one might say, that they point not only towards ‘the stark impossibility of thinking *that*’ (Foucault 2002, xvi), as Foucault would have it, but to the stark impossibility of think *all that*, as I would prefer to put it, and more. It is with strange things and stark impossibilities in mind that I turn now to the final section of this introduction, which briefly explains the structure of this book and the subjects of the chapters that follow.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES

It is not words *per se* that is the object of chapters 1 and 2 but rather the *relations* of words to two domains in which they are often considered—mistakenly, I argue—to be central. These are the domains of language

(chapter 1), and of print and printed stories (chapter 2). As an exploration of changing conceptions of words (from the time of the language of Adam through to contemporary poststructuralist theory), chapter 1 necessarily raises a series of epistemological issues or, in the rather broader terms of this book, it examines the epistemological implications of a series of different word-world relations. These relations are shaped, I argue, not just by science and ‘modernity,’ as a post-Enlightenment narrative would have it, but also by histories of religions and colonial conquest which everywhere leave their suffocating imprint. Indeed the theoretical cul-de-sacs with which chapter 1 concludes seem to leave little hope for words to recover from what I show is their disestablishment in language. It is with a lighter step therefore that chapter 2 takes its cue from ‘post-poststructuralist’ attention to material and sensory assemblages in order to investigate the fate of words in print and in printed stories. This chapter addresses in particular how vision and visuality, the oral and the aural, conscribe or enable what it is possible for words to ‘do.’ Gesture is a key theme here (especially when it comes to contesting the vision/oral binary) and throughout the book.

Although chapters 3, 4 and 5 are focused on particular topics, they nevertheless have several dimensions and purposes. Chapter 3, for example, both interrogates, in some considerable detail, the implications for words of divine-word encounters and at the same time connects those implications to geo-political ‘clash of civilisations’ discourses and to the construction of fanatical words and subjects. In illustrating the profoundly different worlds that words bring with them, and how such worlds organize and reorganize the relations between, especially, subjects and ‘reason,’ this chapter expands and strengthens some of the critiques of the histories and theories of words that I began to develop in chapter 1. Similarly, in chapter 4, by using John Berger’s analysis of photographs to explicate what words and photographs might learn from each other, I extend and further develop the discussion of sensory word-relations that I introduced in chapter 2. One of the main arguments in chapter 4 is that sensory and sensual experiences of words do not necessarily attach themselves to corresponding sets of sense-organs (eyes for vision, ears for hearing, etc.). Drawing on the unlikely combination of auto/biographies of Helen Adams Keller, who, on account of her deafness and blindness was accused of stealing words, and the artist Farniyaz Zaker, who fabricates words and puts them into motion, chapter 4 proposes that word-relations are developed through *cross-* and *multi-*sensory adventures. Finally, in chapter 5, all the preceding chapters, but especially chapters 3 and 4, are mobilized as resources in my critique of Brian Rotman’s *Becoming Beside Ourselves*, in which Rotman argues that the ‘return’ of gesture in parallel computing and motion capture technology

will ultimately lead to the end of the alphabet and all that it has instituted (God included). Although much of chapter 5 is dedicated to contesting this claim, I also draw on Rotman's thesis—differently—to develop an alternative, and altogether gentler, conception of the relations between words, sound and gesture, particularly as it opens up a participative sonic methodology. This project, which proceeds by way of an analysis of Shirin Neshat's video installation *Turbulent* (1998), returns me to Farsi, and to the relations between words and language.

