

# *Words and Images in Dialogue*

An analysis of multimodality in artworks by William Blake and Allen Ginsberg

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## **ABSTRACT**

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## **Essay Summary**

This essay presents a multimodal analysis and interpretation of an annotated photograph by Allen Ginsberg from 1953 and an engraved plate titled *Laocoön* by William Blake from circa 1818. The aim is to propose a method for analysing and interpreting how words and images interact as multimodal elements to create meaning. The proposed method is in turn adapted from existent approaches to multimodal images from the field of sociosemiotics. In the essay mainly sociosemiotic and cultural historical perspectives were used to interpret the results. The results showed the photograph by Allen Ginsberg to combine the multimodal elements in order to document both his private life as well as that of the Beat generation. In the *Laocoön* the combination of multimodal elements produced a veritable delta of possible meaning through the integration of word and text ranging from political commentary to art critical debate.

*Keywords:* Multimodality, Sociosemiotics, Laocoön, William Blake, Allen Ginsberg

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose, Questions and Perspectives

This essay is the materialisation of my interest in the communicative relationship between words and images and how they interact in multimodal art. It is an interest which originates from my own personal enthusiasm for different types of visual structures and systems and so I wanted to analyse two artworks that both contain words and images without allowing either to take precedence over the other. The first artwork I have chosen for this analysis is a line engraving by English poet and artist William Blake: an intaglio engraved plate from around 1818 which reimagines the well-known Hellenistic sculpture group *Laocoön and His Sons* but surrounds it with a cloud of engraved text.<sup>1</sup> In the plate text and image vividly interact and I chose it partly for that reason but also because it implicates an older recognisable symbol, which might in turn influence how we view the text. The second is an annotated photograph by Beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg taken in 1953 entitled *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat...1953*.<sup>2</sup> It was chosen both for the visual similarities to the first artwork but also for the clear divergences in medium and layout, since it is a photograph and the text is written underneath the image. Both these artworks, though created almost 100 years apart and with an Atlantic between them, showcase combinations of written text and visual images interplaying to varying degrees. Since they use different modes to communicate we can then consider them to be multimodal artworks. It is that multimodality I would like to gain further understanding of through this venture.

The aim of this essay will be to better understand how the different multimodal elements communicate and how they might produce different meanings together than they would apart. To do this I will use a method interpreted from previous theories and research into the investigation of multimodal artworks. Put more concretely I want to understand: how is meaning produced between written text and visual images? And, how do they differ in the two artworks chosen for this essay?

In order to do this I have chosen to use sociosemiotics as one of my theoretical frameworks and to base my approach on a multimodal analysis developed by Swedish language scholar Anders Björkqvall in his book *Den Visuella Texten*.<sup>3</sup> In his book Björkqvall presents a holistic method for analysing what he refers to as multimodal texts, which incorporate images and words, intended for

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1 Blake, William, *Laocoön*, 1818, [Line engraving], The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, U.K.

2 Ginsberg, Allen, *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat...1953*, 1953 [Gelatin silver print, printed 1984-1997] The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, U.S.A,

3 Björkqvall, Anders, *Den Visuella Texten: Multimodal analys i praktiken*, Hallgren & Fallgren, Stockholm 2009.

language and communication students.<sup>4</sup> As my second theoretical base I have chosen to interpret the artworks through a cultural historical perspective in order to contextualise my findings and underscore how meaning is dependent on cultural and sociopolitical contexts. I would however wish to underscore that this essay is not about creating an entirely new method from scratch but reinterpreting an approach of a preexisting method. I will expand on this in the chapter on theoretical methods and approaches.

## 1.2 Previous Research, Criticism and Limitations

As far as other materials used in the essay are concerned there are only a few books which directly deal with Blake as a multimodal artist since most focus on either his poems or the illustration. An useful exception has been W.J.T Mitchell's *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*<sup>5</sup>. For this essay Julia M. Wright's book *Blake, Nationalism and the Politics of Alienation* has helped situate the *Laocoön* plate in a sociopolitical context.<sup>6</sup> Erik McCarthy's Ph.D. thesis *William Blake's Laocoön: The Genealogy of a Form* and has also been invaluable.<sup>7</sup> As far as Ginsberg is concerned there are far less books that address his work as a photographer than those on poetry. However, Jane Kramer's *Allen Ginsberg in America* has aided in the understanding of Ginsberg's political radicalism.<sup>8</sup> *Screaming with Joy: The Life Allen Ginsberg* by Graham Caveney also gave insight into his documentary attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

The sources for this essay were selected from a large roster written about either artist. Though appearing reliable there are certain problems albeit of different kinds for either artist. The main problem with the larger Blake studies is their antiquation. Most new studies cite the most well-known Blake scholars, David V. Erdman and Northrop Frye, even though their respective magnum opuses were published in the 1950s. So potentially newer research coming to light might fall into the shadow of the unquestioned classics of the field. I have been conscious of this throughout the selection and reading process. With Allen Ginsberg there are other issues. As prolific literary figure many of the books on him tend to mythologise both Ginsberg and the Beat movement resulting in more anecdotal than scientific work. With my cultural historical perspective I hope to situate Ginsberg in a less chimerical context.

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4 Björkqvall 1009, p. 8-9.

5 Mitchell, W.J.T, *Blake's Composite Art: A study of the Illuminated Poetry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1978.

6 Wright, M. Julia, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation*, Ohio University Press, Ohio 2004.

7 McCarthy, Erik, *William Blake's Laocoön: The Genealogy of a Form* (Ph.D.) University of Kansas, 2007 [electronic resource] Accessed 2015-05-25

8 Kramer, Jane, *Allen Ginsberg In America*, Fromm International Publishing Corporation, New York 1997.

9 Caveney, Graham, *Screaming With Joy: The Life of Allen Ginsberg*, Broadway Books, New York 1999.

As far as how my past education has prepared me for this essay I have history within several different humanistic fields. Besides the years of my art historical studies I have previously been involved in Film studies at *Stockholm University* (where the presence of multimodal communication was often highlighted) as well as in Language studies at *Gothenburg University* where I studied Linguistics. After spending several years analysing and interpreting both novels, poems, films and different types of visual and conceptual artworks I am confident that I have the critical tools to conduct this essay in a creative and capable way. Similarly my years within the academic sphere have taught me the value of pragmatism as far as the scale of a project is concerned and thus I have opted to focus primarily on the approach towards multimodality in only two artworks. Further limitations have been studying Ginsberg primarily as a photographer rather than a poet and choosing not to include comparisons between the *Laocoön* with other work by Blake. The latter might have been possible in a longer thesis but would exceed the scope of this essay and instead I have treated the engraved plate as somewhat of an anomaly in Blake's catalogue. A final limitation is the empirical material, for beyond the two artworks themselves (which I have only viewed as online scans) there is none.

### 1.3 Theoretical Approaches and Method

Now I will chart the theories used in this essay and outline my method of analysis. Since the aim of this essay is to map the multimodal word and image relationship I have chosen sociosemiotics as one of my theoretical bases. In the artworks words and images meet in several different ways, not only on the page but also conceptually in our consciousness. We recognise differences between letters and pictures and become aware of an *interaction*. The sociosemiotic perspective in this essay plays into that since it hinges on meaning being produced through social interaction.<sup>10</sup> In this art historical context that interaction is not only between the words and images but also between the viewer and artwork. The sociosemiotician that has inspired my approach and from whom I have extracted terminology is Swedish language scholar Anders Björkqvall and his book *Den Visuella Texten: Multimodal analys i praktiken* (*The Visual Text: Multimodal Analysis in Practice*, my translation.)<sup>11</sup> The book itself is primarily intended for language and communication students and showcases a comprehensive analysis of multimodal elements, however, I believe it will be fruitful within an art historical context as well. I have used Björkqvall's method by loosely following the structure of his book and so divided my own analysis into the categories of meaning that he presents

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10 Björkqvall 1009, p. 8.

11 Björkqvall, Anders, *Den Visuella Texten: Multimodal analys i praktiken*, Hallgren & Fallgren, Stockholm 2009.

(which will be outlined further on) as well as by extracting terminology to describe the different visual and textual resources that can create meaning in multimodal artworks. I have also considered the different meanings produced by those resources in my own results. As such I do not implement the method fully but renegotiate it for the needs of my own approach.

Sociosemiotics as a field is a rather late entry into the realm of semiotics (the study of signs). It is based on the notion of signs as pliable changeable inventions produced and continuously effected by social situations and interactions. Therefore a sociosemiotic perspective implies not a quest for definite static meaning but rather for possibilities of meaning, or as I shall refer to it, meaning-potential.<sup>12</sup> The potential for meaning — particularly that which allows for the potential to change in different cultures and contexts — is one of the reasons I have chosen this theory. Together with the cultural historical perspective it can contextualise the combination of words and images in either artwork. Another concept occurring in sociosemiotic theory (recurring at several junctures in this essay) is experiential metaphor. It proposes that meaning which is produced in one facet of our lives can by metaphorical comparison produce meaning in another unrelated facet. This means we can recognise meaning-potential by experiencing similar meanings in other situations.<sup>13</sup> A simple example is comparing time to money as both run out.

Other terms that also reoccur are semiotic modalities and semiotic resources. The former are the distinct elements cooperating to create meaning in multimodal art (simply different modes such as words or pictures).<sup>14</sup> Semiotic modalities have different qualities influencing their interpretations and those qualities are the semiotic resources that depending on their arrangement create different meaning-potentials.<sup>15</sup> Meaning-potential however is not universal or inherent but socially and culturally dependent. A shift away from signs having fixed meanings.<sup>16</sup> Björkqvall goes as far as to suggest that meaning-potential is the materialised results of social interaction produced by communication.<sup>17</sup> To structure the analysis I have based it on four categories of meaning (described as metafunctions) from Björkqvall to guide the reader through the process. The categories are the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunction as well as a non-metafunction typographical analysis.<sup>18</sup>

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12 Björkqvall 2009, p. 15.

13 Björkqvall 2009, p. 129.

14 Björkqvall 2009, p. 13.

15 Björkqvall 2009, p. 14.

16 Björkqvall 2009, p. 15.

17 Björkqvall 2009, p. 8.

18 Björkqvall 2009, p. 11.

Beyond the sociosemiotic perspective I also use a cultural historical perspective. Since sociosemiotic theory considers signs as culturally dependent meaning-potentials the second perspective will help place them as objects in their respective cultural and sociopolitical circumstances. Though the sociosemiotic and cultural historical perspective are the two main perspectives in this essay instances of historiographical and biographical perspectives might also be implemented in order to analyse historical circumstances which influenced either artist in the constructions of their artworks. Having mapped the theoretical foundation for the essay I will now present the shape of the method beginning with the ideational metafunction and continuing on through the rest of the categories.

In the ideational metafunction Björkqvall describes how semiotic modalities (text and images together or apart) can present different versions of the world. In visual images we look at the visual components such as how figures or things interact. Their interaction can make their reality appear dynamic or static.<sup>19</sup> There are different processes attached to these interactions and they are often determined by so called vectors (rather briefly described as versatile indicators of actions taking or having taken place). Vectors take different shapes such as gazes, pointing fingers or tools like arrows or weapons. If vectors present some sort of change or action they are then considered narrative and dynamic processes whereas processes without vectors are conceptual and static.<sup>20</sup> Understanding the vectors helps us to see how different semiotic modalities interact with one another. It is prudent to analyse their presence as well as their absence. Conceptual processes can instead produce meaning-potential by placing figures in proximity to symbolic signs of cultural significance. Both artworks chosen for this analysis are ripe with pointing, weapons and all manner of gazes and so studying the vectors is a productive first step. A second step then is to study the *when* and *where* presented visually (Björkqvall defines this as the *circumstance*) i.e. the background of the artworks to understand what kind of situation the process has been anchored in.<sup>21</sup>

Here we move from the study of relationships *within* multimodal artworks to the relationship established with the observer and how it enables communication between us and the semiotic modalities. Björkqvall calls it the interpersonal metafunction. In his book written text (or language actions) place different levels of demand by either offering, stating, appealing or asking question.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Björkqvall 2009, p. 62.

20 Björkqvall 2009, p. 63.

21 Björkqvall 2009, p. 68.

22 Björkqvall 2009, p. 32.



Likewise image actions can produce demands or offers by meeting or averting a gaze.<sup>23</sup> Other semiotic resources for image actions are facial expressions and movement.<sup>24</sup> Well integrated image and language actions have higher interactive potential and are then a communicable action.<sup>25</sup>

Another tool producing meaning-potential is distance (not real distance but symbolic distance by framing or cropping).<sup>26</sup> An extreme close-up might indicate intimacy while an image showing only the upper body may appear social (as when somebody is sitting across from you). It is an example previously mentioned experiential metaphor. Distance as a semiotic resource can clarify why one image appears more approachable than the next.

The communicative relationship with the observer is also dependent on the reliability of the semiotic modalities, i.e. their modality, and if they appear more or less real. That realness is dependent on what reality the artist is presenting; in other words what code-orientation it uses.

Since *reality* is such a broad term I will adopt the phrase Björkqvall uses for that concept: code-orientation. One such orientation is the naturalistic code-orientation which intends to present the natural world we experience through sight.<sup>27</sup> Code-orientations appear as different sets of scales — wherein the naturalistic is one scale — and the semiotic resources determine either a high or low modality.<sup>28</sup> Modality is marked as unreliable if a semiotic resource seems unrealistic. Colour saturation, level of detail, depth, light and contrast can all produce either realistic or unrealistic modality. This is particularly interesting in photographs like Ginsberg's *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat... 1953*.

Another way to study multimodal art is the composition of semiotic modalities. In Björkqvall the composition — i.e. the organisation — of multimodal elements in the visual room falls under the textual metafunction.<sup>29</sup> Here meaning-potential comes from the organisation of elements on the horizontal-vertical axis, foreground or background placement as well as connections in layout.<sup>30</sup> Some semiotic resources for this are framing, visual rhyme and contrast.<sup>31</sup> There are also different compositional schemas that produce meaning differently, for instance the left-right schema

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23 Björkqvall 2009, p. 36.

24 Björkqvall 2009, p. 37.

25 Björkqvall 2009, p. 38.

26 Björkqvall 2009, p. 39.

27 Björkqvall 2009, p. 117.

28 Björkqvall 2009, p. 113.

29 Björkqvall 2009, p. 84.

30 Björkqvall 2009, p. 84.

31 Björkqvall 2009, p. 89.

associated with a known-new schemata where established information is usually placed ahead of new information.<sup>32</sup> The high-low formation divides information into an upper and a lower part where general information is situated above and specific information below.<sup>33</sup> There is also a centrum-periphery dimension where one element is surrounded by other elements and the outer elements become dependent on the central element to contextualise them.<sup>34</sup> In the compositional part of the analysis visual prominence is also an important factor. Visual prominence means that certain components are presented larger than other and therefore indicate to be of more value than those which are smaller.<sup>35</sup>

Considering the written text as a semiotic modality we then move on to the last of the four categories; the typographical analysis. Here we also return to the idea of experiential metaphor. Typography plays an interesting role in multimodal texts since it allows for variations of font types and similar semiotic resources to have meaning-potential. However typographical meaning is not as systematically organised as some of the other semiotic resources. For while experiential metaphor opens up for different forms (such as the variables applied to fonts like bold or cursive attributes) to become meaningful by association to and with past events we must in turn consider that meaning to be contextually relative.<sup>36</sup>

In this introduction I have declared my intentions as well as method of analysis and theoretical frameworks. In the following chapter I will first describe the two artworks separately (presenting transcripts of the written text at the end of each description) and then bring them together for the analysis that will be loosely divided into the four categories. Upon concluding the analysis there will be an interpretation integrating the theoretical perspectives and after that a conclusion followed by the bibliography and appendix.

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32 Björkqvall 2009, p. 88.

33 Björkqvall 2009, p. 90.

34 Björkqvall 2009, p. 90.

35 Björkqvall 2009, p. 87.

36 Björkqvall 2009, p. 129.

## 2. Approaching Multimodality

### 2.1 *Laocoön*

The plate presents an image of three men situated on a pedestal. Around this central image and filling the rest of its rectangular space is a swarm of text written for the most part in English though there are instances of Greek and Hebraic letterings as well. Among the bodies of the three men there are two large snakes which snare around them as well as strike the two men furthest to the left. The bearded man in the middle — the priest *Laocoön* — is larger than the other two — his sons — and reaching his left hand (gripping a snake) up into the air above him. We see one of the serpents biting into his right side. The son to his left also raises his left arm while using his right to grab at the head of a snake where it bites into his torso. To the right of *Laocoön* we find the second son somewhat less entangled. He is undoing a snake tail that has coiled around his ankle and is looking back at the terrible scene. The central figure looks up almost as though his eyes are rolling back into his head while the son to the left (similarly to the son on the right) gazes inward at the rest of the group. All three of them are naked except for a shroud of fabric hanging from the shoulder of the son on the right.

Not unlike the coiling snakes the paragraphs of written text (which are engraved throughout the background of the image) also twist and turn. Paragraphs of text run both vertically and horizontally along the sides of the image as well as above it and even appear to bend around the shapes of the men themselves. A number of words appear in between their limbs. Underneath the figure there are also several lines of text written in a more linear traditional fashion. And where *Laocoön* shoots his left hand into the air the written text almost appears to veer out of the way (as though bent out of shape from the power of his punch). Across the heads of the respective serpent the words Good and Evil hover ominously and throughout the sentences we find instances of Greek and Hebraic symbols. There is, however, only one instance of writing on the actual image itself and that is along the base of the pedestal where there is a note saying, "Drawn & Engraved by William Blake."<sup>37</sup> Overall there appear to be around nine paragraphs written horizontally and about twelve written vertically as well as a number of sentences which slant across the page in the same shape as the figures. The intricate and small lettering of the text contrast against the large-limbed men and enormous snakes. The written text almost appears as a locus cloud swarming in the space above, around and between the painted figures. It fills what might otherwise have been a white background with a strange asymmetrical pattern and though the written text appears more mannered in the far

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<sup>37</sup> Blake, *Laocoön*, 1818.

corners of the engraving it ultimately descends into chaos where it comes into contact with the central figure. There it bends along the shape of the *Laocoön* thus disbanding the vertical and horizontal orientation.

A transcription of written text from William Blake's *Laocoön* plate can be found below and includes all of the written text except for the line "Drawn and Engraved by William Blake" found on the *Laocoön* figure and the possible new title given to it by Blake, which reads, "Jehovah [in Hebrew] and his two sons Satan and Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomon's Temple by three Rhodians, and applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium." Also not included is the inscription, "The Angel of the Divine Presence" written in Greek and Hebrew nor the words "Good" and "Evil" over the head of each serpent.<sup>38</sup>

***Top left of plate***

SPIRITUAL WAR: Israel delivered from Egypt is Art deliver'd from Nature and Imitation.	1
A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect; the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.	2
You must leave fathers and mothers and houses and lands if they stand in the way of Art.	3
The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination; that is God Himself, the Divine Body, [Hebrew] Jesus; we are His Members.	4
It manifests itself in His Works of Art: In Eternity all is Vision!	5
The true Christian Charity not dependent on Money, the life's blood of poor families; that is on Caesar or Empire, or Natural Religion.	6
Money! which is the great Satan or Reason, the root of Good and Evil, in the Accusation of Sin.	7
Prayer is the study of Art.	8
Praise is the practice of Art.	9
Fasting, etc. all relate to Art.	10
The outward Ceremony is Antichrist.	11

***Encircling the three figures.***

Good and Evil are Riches and Poverty, a Tree of Misery propagating Generation and Death.	12
The Gods of Priam are the Cherubim of Moses and Solomon, the Hosts of Heaven.	13
Without unceasing Practice nothing can be done: Practice is Art. If you leave off you are lost.	14
Hebrew Art is called Sin, by the Deist Science.	15
All that we see is Vision; from Generated Organs, gone as soon as come; permanent in the Imagination; consider'd as nothing by the Natural Man.	16
Satan's wife, the Goddess Nature, is War and Misery, and Heroism a Miser.	

***At head of plate.***

Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on, but War only; by pretences to the two Impossibilities, Chastity and Abstinence, Gods of the Heathen. (Read Matthew x. 9, 10).	18
He repented that He had made Adam (of the Female, the Adamah); and it grieved Him at His heart.	19
Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed.	20
The Gods of Greece and Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams. (See Plato's Works.)	21
What can be created can be destroyed.	22
Adam is only the Natural Man, and not the Soul or Imagination.	23
Divine Union deriding and denying Immediate Communion with God. The Spoilers say: 'Where are His Works that He did in the Wilderness?' Lo! what are these? Whence came they? These are not the	24

38 Blake, William. Sampson, John, ed. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, Oxford University Press, London, 1908, [electronic resource] Accessed 2015-05-25.

Works of Egypt, nor Babylon, whose Gods are the Powers of this World, Goddess Nature; who first spoil and then destroy Imaginative Art, for their Glory is War and Dominion.  
 Empire against Art. (See Virgil's *Aeneid*. Lib. VI. v. 848.)

***To right of plate***

Jesus and His Apostles and Disciples were all Artists. Their Works were destroy'd by the Seven	26
Angels of the Seven Churches in Asia, Antichrist, Science.	
The Old and New Testaments are the great code of Art.	27
The whole business of Man is the Arts, and all things, common.	28
No secrecy in Art.	29
Art is the Tree of Life.	30
God is Jesus.	31
Science is the Tree of Death.	32
For every pleasure Money is useless.	33
There are States in which all Visionary Men are accounted Mad Men: such are Greece and Rome,	34
such is Empire or Tax. (See Luke ii. 1.)	
The unproductive Man is not a Christian, much less the Destroyer.	35
What we call antique gems are the gems of Aaron's breast-plate.	36
Is not every Vice possible to Man described in the Bible openly?	37
All is not Sin that Satan calls so—all the Loves and Graces of Eternity.	38
Christianity is Art and not Money. Money is its Curse.	39
<b><i>At foot of plate.</i></b>	40
If Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour.	
Art degraded, Imagination denied, War governed the Nations.	

## 2.2 *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat... 1953.*

The Ginsberg photograph is a black-and-white snapshot depicting two men and below them (separate from the photograph) a handwritten annotation. The two male figures appear at the centre leaning towards the right side of the frame. Both are lit bright white by the fabric of their similar, though not identical, short-sleeved shirts. We know from the text, which will be detailed further on, that the image portrays writers William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. The two are interlocking in a light-hearted brawl on a couch and while Burroughs (the older and taller of the two) leans over his opponent Kerouac turns to face the camera to makes an open-mouthed expression of mock-horror. In the photograph both the men wield weapons but where Kerouac is armed with an indiscriminate black object Burroughs brandishes a wavy knife. In the photograph we only see Burroughs profile but he has thin neat hair and is dressed in a white tennis shirt with high-waisted dark trousers fitted with a leather belt. Since Kerouac is closer to the camera we only see his upper body (somewhat robuster than Burroughs and wearing a simple white t-shirt) as he turns over his shoulder to look at the photographer.

With the camera lens slightly askew (ever-so-slightly tilted) the background appears to lean to the left while the two men seem to be falling together towards the right. In the top right corner the corner of a painting is visible which portrays a shadowy figure with bony fingers and a luminous

mouth. Besides the painting the background is domestic, sporting walls with striped and flowery wallpaper and a patterned couch. A single wooden panel runs down the wall behind Burroughs head. The image is starkly lit so there is a high level of contrast between light and dark. So much so that the wallpaper dissolves completely into shadow to the left (as does the pattern of the sofa in the lower right corner of the frame). So luminous is the fabric of their white shirts that it dampens the shades of the wallpaper and glints silvery across the metal clasp of Burroughs belt.

The written text in the photograph appears beneath the snapshot. There we find four lines of handwritten annotation detailing what appears in the photograph above it. The font — being handwritten and done so in heavy cursive — is difficult to read. It is linear, running from left to right horizontally, and four words have been underlined (two literary works). Now before I continue to the formal analysis I will transcribe the text as I have read it, divided into four lines.

Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in mortal combat with snaky moroccan dagger and broomstick club	1
on my couch in 206 (street, East Seventh) Manhattan. Jack came in on weekends from Richmond Hill, Bill	2
was staying with me in a little East Village apartment editing <u>Yage Letters</u> , Jack engaged in <u>The Subterraneans</u>	3
love affair, Fall 1953. Allen Ginsberg.	4

## 2.3 The Multimodal Analysis

Now that I have described the two artworks separately I continue into the analysis where the Ginsberg photograph and the *Laocoön* plate will be analysed together in a structure loosely based on the categories presented in the previous chapter. This will also ease the transition into the following chapter where they will be interpreted and the different theoretical perspectives implemented.

Starting off with the ideational function we begin by considering how the two artworks have created their individual realities. In the *Laocoön* we do this by first looking at how the figures interact with each other in the artwork and by searching for the vectors which facilitate that. Vectors, as previously described in the introduction, are implements that can indicate change in an image and thus portraying it as a dynamic event. Those implements can be both part of a body or separate tools.<sup>39</sup> In the *Laocoön* there are several different types of vectors involved. First and foremost there are the gazes made by the three figures in the central drawing. The figure furthest to the right looks inward at the rest of the group while the figure to the far left looks inward and upward where his father is grappling with the serpents. As for *Laocoön* himself he gazes into the text-laden space

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39 Björkqvall 2009, p. 63.

above.

The vectors of the gaze in turn shift our attention to the two snakes striking at the figures. The snakes can under these circumstances also be considered vectors. So while it is clearly a narrative process we might even consider it them as simultaneous processes working as one and binding together the group in different ways (since both the gazes and snakes are vectors). However the snakes only strike *Laocoön* and the left son. Björkvall does cite that the processes can place figures in hierarchal relationships and thus it is possible that this would place the two which are struck by the snakes in a subordinate position.<sup>40</sup> This could also be a way of connecting the two in a more significant way. There are also traces of the conceptual process at work, where symbolic signs — in this case Hebrew and Greek lettering — are placed near the central figures.<sup>41</sup> Though not explicitly stated in Björkvall there are also phrases which appear to have religious connotations that I believe could imbue meaning by their proximal placement to semiotic modalities. The phrase, "The Angel of the Divine Presence" which appears over the central figures head is one such instance.

As in the *Laocoön* there are several vectors involved in the Ginsberg photograph. First and foremost there are gazes. Burroughs stares intently down at Kerouac who in turn tilts his head back to look at the camera vis-à-vis the photographer and us. But beyond the gazes (which are unmet between the men) there is also the interaction of the two aiming weapons at one another. The vectors there take the shape of external things; the snaky moroccan dagger and the broomstick club. If we again consider the processes capable of creating hierarchical relationship we find that while Kerouac may be subordinate to Burroughs on one level (due to the gaze) the two might rather be more equal where both implement tools as vectors.

Where the *Laocoön* presents copious amounts of written text the photograph taken by Ginsberg only uses it sparingly. The annotated text is a run-on sentence containing four componential phrases divided by comma signs. They appear dynamic since they bind together the figures of the text. To determine how a text can be more static or more dynamic we look at how the components of the sentences have been bound together. If they do bind they in turn present more dynamic situations where a change has taken place.<sup>42</sup> The figures (besides being portrayed as bound in, "...mortal combat,") are described as *staying*, *editing* and of being *engaged* either with each other or with

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40 Björkvall 2009, p. 62.

41 Björkvall 2009, p. 73.

42 Björkvall 2009, p. 61.

other activities.<sup>43</sup> So both the *Laocoön* plate and the Ginsberg photograph present visually and textual dynamic and narrative processes.

The last part of the ideational metafunction in this essay looks at the when and where (in other words the *circumstance*) of the artworks.<sup>44</sup> It is another point of divergence between the two. The circumstance in the Ginsberg photograph reveals a domestic interior wherein we see flowery and striped wallpaper with some furniture and to the left a painting. It is mostly conventional though the slightly tilted camera angle makes the backdrop appear marginally askew. It is underneath the photographic image that the written text appears while in the *Laocoön* Blake has the image and the written text interact to a greater extent. In his background the plate swirls with black lettering against the otherwise white background while the annotated text in the Ginsberg photograph (though also placing black text on a white background) is written in straight lines.

Now continuing on from how the characters interact with each other we can begin to look at how the relationship between the observer outside of the artwork is established with the figures within it. To understand how that communicative relationship is enabled we move into the next category of analysis (the interpersonal metafunction) where we look at the meaning-potential of language and image actions. When analysing language actions we look at the written text to see if it contain mainly offers, statements, appeals or questions.<sup>45</sup> In the *Laocoön* there are almost exclusively statements being made which is considered to be one of the two more offering language actions. That means they place less of a demand on the observer for a response<sup>46</sup>. However the onslaught of proverbial statements made in the *Laocoön* (though in fact not proverbs but aphoristic maxims) appear more demanding than they do offering. This could be explained by the fact that language actions are susceptible to social contexts, which is why certain language actions might at times appear contradictory of their conventional abilities as offers or demands.<sup>47</sup>

If we then study the image actions in the *Laocoön* we find (since there is no gaze directed at the observer) that they too offer rather than demand. The two outer figures gaze inward while *Laocoön* himself looks up. Since Björkqvall has stated that body movements and facial expression play a role we could also consider that, while no gaze is directed at us, the bodies which are contorted in pain — wincing where the serpents strike — could also place a kind of demand for empathy on the

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43 Ginsberg, *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat...1953*, 1953.

44 Björkqvall 2009, p. 68.

45 Björkqvall 2009, p. 33.

46 Björkqvall 2009, p. 33.

47 Björkqvall 2009, p. 33.



viewer. Such emotional demands are not presented in Björkqvall but could be a potential factor in the production of meaning-potential in artworks. A keen reminder is that offers and demands are not negatively or positively charged concepts but simply different levels of interactions between observer and subject matter. An image that offers rather than demands might not engage the observer in the same way, but it can allow for him or her to inspect the artwork at greater ease. So we could refer to the *Laocoön*, where there is such an interactions between the language action and image actions, as what Björkqvall would call a communicable action.<sup>48</sup>

In the Ginsberg photograph there is considerably less text. The four lines consist only of a single sentence — a statement — and as such the language action is more conventional and offering to the observer than it is demanding. In the photograph the image action denies us eye-contact with Burroughs but grants us it from Kerouac where he tilts his head back to look at the camera. The meaning-potential of eye-contact is that there is a higher level of demand placed on the observer which elicits more engagement.<sup>49</sup> The body movements of Burroughs and Kerouac are interlocking though not as in such a powerful manner as in the *Laocoön*. Rather their muscles appear somewhat slack. Their facial expressions are divergent since the former appears more reserved while Kerouac contorts his face in an expression worthy of a Venetian mask. We find that the symmetrical positioning of the bodies (almost as if in a dance) and the exaggerated face made by Kerouac makes the image appear rather theatrical. So here we see that there are two opposing actions in the Ginsberg photograph; the offer of the language action and the demand of the image action. The possibility of one of these resources encroaching on the other (an offering language action either weakening or strengthening a demanding image action or vice versa) will be elaborated on in the interpretative chapter.<sup>50</sup>

The two artworks also place the observer at different lengths from the figures portrayed within. As previously mentioned by Björkqvall one of the semiotic resources for creating symbolic distance between the observers and the artworks is by cropping the image.<sup>51</sup> In the Ginsberg photograph the characters have been cropped so that we only see half of Kerouac and slightly more of Burroughs. The symbolic distance here places Kerouac and Burroughs within a social distance from us and as such the figures appear more approachable than if they would have been situated at a further distance.<sup>52</sup> The *Laocoön* on the other hand places us at a considerable distance from the figures. So

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48 Björkqvall 2009, p. 38.

49 Björkqvall 2009, p. 37.

50 Björkqvall 2009, p. 38.

51 Björkqvall 2009, p. 39.

52 Björkqvall 2009, p. 41.

far, in fact, that we can see their whole bodies. Here experiential metaphor plays a part since there is meaning-potential which is derived from our own experiences.<sup>53</sup> We know instinctively that the symbolic distance between us and the two men in the Ginsberg photograph would allow them to hear us if we spoke. That in turn might make us feel closer to them emotionally. Symbolic distance is however more complex than assuming that the artist wants us to emotionally connect to subject matter which appears closer. But symbolic distance can highlight certain qualities of a figure as well as indicate some important part of its meaning.

Moving on we can also consider how modality plays into the meaning-potential of the photograph. As explained in my introduction modality is the level of reliability of whatever version of reality that the artwork presents (that reality referred to as a code-orientation).<sup>54</sup> As the multimodal artwork in this case is a photograph it is subjected — whether it wants to or not — to the possible prejudices of the medium. Photographs have a long history of being used for documentation and of presenting reliable images of our natural world. Whether or not photographs necessarily produce reliable images is a separate matter but what we can say is that if a photograph does use its semiotic resources to attempt a resemblance to the natural world it does underscore that documentary vein of its medium which in turn wants to project a naturalistic code-orientation. In the Ginsberg photograph modality is marked (meaning it becomes noticeably different from the natural world we are expecting it to present) where the contrast between light and shadow is too high, where the colour saturation is too low (i.e. shot in black-and-white) and where the focus is blurry<sup>55</sup>. This is a clear example of where a perspective besides the sociosemiotic theory becomes useful since we need to contextualise our findings. We must consider that the marked modality as far as colour photography is concerned might have changed due to technological advancements. In the 1950s when cameras were not as readily capable of photographing colour the lack of colour saturation might not have marked the modality as clearly as it does today. It is possible that the modality in the *Laocoön* is different since it is a man-made artwork and not a photograph but it is likely to be naturalistic since Blake wanted the image that he engraved to resemble the original *Laocoön* sculpture. The modality is marked where the detailing is too great as well as due to low colour saturation. Blake himself was not a champion of *mimesis* and so the modality is also marked where Blake allows for his imagination to influence the portrayal of the figures.

Leaving modality we continue to the compositional part of the analysis (which belongs to the

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53 Björkqvall 2009, p. 129.

54 Björkqvall 2009, p. 113.

55 Björkqvall 2009, p. 119.

textual metafunction). The composition — the organisation of multimodal elements within the artwork — is important because in a sense it ties together the different modalities with all of their different semiotic resources. Earlier in this essay I presented some of Björkqvall's possible compositional schemas with which we can attempt to dislodge meaning-potential. They exemplify some recurring structures often used to present information. To see which schemas are used in the *Laocoön* we have to look at the organisation of the multimodal elements on the plate. In doing so we find that the *Laocoön* consist of the image depicting the Trojan priest and his sons positioned within a framework of written text. Presented in such a way the most fitting schema, as far as visuality is concerned, appears to be the centrum-periphery organisation. However, the centrum-peripheral schema is not facilitated only by the visual elements (i.e. an object situated within the borders of another object) but also by the idea that the outer elements rely on the central figure for some level of contextualisation.<sup>56</sup> Entertaining that possibility we can then look at some of the text presented around the *Laocoön* (which mainly consists of statements concerning religion, money and art). Beneath the figure we find what appears to be a new title which reads, "Jehovah [in Hebrew] and his two sons Satan and Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim / of Solomon's Temple by three Rhodians, and applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium", however, since the image of the *Laocoön* is so widely recognisable it then suggests that the title may have been altered for some reason pertaining to the artist's own attitudes towards the sculpture group.<sup>57</sup> If so we can then read some of the other lines such as, "What we call antique gems are the gems of Aaron's breast-plate" or "The Old and New Testaments are the great code of Art" as suggestive of Blake possibly indicating that the *Laocoön* could have been wrongly attributed to Classical origins rather than a Hebraic heritage. In turn this could also be a way for Blake to criticise the preoccupation with neoclassicism present in his contemporary society.

However, the original sculpture group has also been used as an exemplum in the aesthetic debate of ideal art beginning with Johann Winckelmann and continued by among others Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Keeping that in mind we can also propose that such lines as, "Hebrew Art is called Sin, by the Deist Science" and "Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed" as being in some way part of that aesthetic debate. The centrum-peripheral schema could however be reductive of the complexity of the plate. We find that while it does allow us to trace certain associative relationships such as the *Laocoön* groups relationship to neoclassicism or the aesthetic debate there are many other subjects also brought up in the plate. A better approximation could be, considering the

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56 Björkqvall 2009, p. 90.

57 Blake, *Laocoön*, 1818.

complexity of the composition, that rather than all outer text being contextualised by the central object that the written text is more like King Minos labyrinth and *Laocoön* in turn the Minotaur residing within it. In other words the text is there both *for* and *because of* the central image. However Björkvall does note that schemas often interact (both with each other and other semiotic resources) and because of this we will conduct a more holistic interpretation in the next chapter where other semiotic resources will also be brought in.<sup>58</sup>

In the Ginsberg photograph the centrum-periphery schema is absent so we consider some of the other organisational principles instead. Since the artwork is divided up into the semiotic modalities (with the image above and text written below) we first consider the high-low constellation. The high-low schema is usually connected to an organisational principle where more general information is placed in the upper part of the image while more specific information is then presented below.<sup>59</sup> One contemporary example of could be where email addresses and contact information are usually presented at the bottom of a homepage while more general information is presented above. Björkvall attaches the high-low composition to experiential metaphor by comparing it to a general sky below a more concrete earth.<sup>60</sup>

This schema is realistic in the Ginsberg photograph since the upper part of the artwork is made up of the photograph itself while written text is presented below where it details the event above. However, similarly to the *Laocoön*, the text does more than simply describe the events taking place above but also situate the visual image in a context (detailing the date, year and place). Compared to the more radical layout of the *Laocoön* the organisational composition in the Ginsberg photo is rather more traditional.

Another semiotic resource at play in the Ginsberg photograph belonging to visual prominence — how different elements within the artwork are portrayed as having more or less importance — is that of size. The photographic image takes clear precedence over the written text simply by being much larger. But while the photograph does take a visual precedence over the written text that does not in turn mean that the text is meaningless. Björkvall cites that since the element, though it may have less visual prominence, is still present and therefor carries meaning.<sup>61</sup> Björkvall also lists size and differences in colour as possible font variables for visual prominence in written text, but beyond

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58 Björkvall 2009, p. 100.

59 Björkvall 2009, p. 87.

60 Björkvall 2009, p. 96.

61 Björkvall 2009, p. 103.

those variables I suggest we should also consider the fact that certain words have been underlined and then in turn been marked as more important. It positions them as being different and thus according to Björkvall as having some significance separate from the other words.<sup>62</sup> The two words which have been marked in the Ginsberg photograph are *Yage Letters* and *The Subterraneans* which were then the yet to be published literary works that Burroughs and Kerouac were working on at the time. It underscores their shared vocation as writers. There are also traces of a right-left organisation as far as a known-new schema is concerned. The written text first exclaims, "Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in mortal combat with snaky moroccan dagger and broomstick club..." which is likely the first thing the observer would noticed when inspecting the photograph.<sup>63</sup> What follows is a more detailed account of each figures living situation and romantic affiliation as well as practical information about the time and place. The written text in the *Laocoön* also involves visual prominence indicative of phrases which might carry deeper meaning. For instance, "The Angel of the Divine Presence" (which is written once in english but again in much larger Hebrew lettering directly above the *Laocoön*) which is a phrase Blake used as a synonym of Satan.<sup>64</sup>

According to Björkvall compositions can either delineate semiotic modalities or bind them together.<sup>65</sup> In the case of the Ginsberg photograph the two modalities are presented as being two separate entities. For while the modalities are framed as a unit the two do not touch. Similarly the *Laocoön* plate uses visual rhyme to bind its elements together. Though there are linear sentences in the written text there are several passages which curl and snake across the page. Particularly the paragraph, "The Gods of Priam are the Cherubim of Moses and Solomon The Hosts of Heaven / Without unceasing Practice nothing can be done Practice is Art / If you leave off you are lost" where it whorls round the priest *Laocoön* and his upward reaching fist.<sup>66</sup> Allowing the written text to follow the movements of the visual image can be seen as a way of binding the two of them together. Björkvall mainly suggests colour to influence visual rhyme but by a similar principle shapes should be able to harmonise a multimodal relationship.<sup>67</sup>

In the final part of this analysis we look at the typography and how it might produce meaning-potential in either artwork. Since typographical meaning is connected to experiential metaphor the

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62 Björkvall 2009, p. 100.

63 Ginsberg, *Bill Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in Mortal Combat...1953*, 1953.

64 Damon, Foster S. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, University Press of New England, Hanover 1988, p. 23

65 Björkvall 2009, p. 85.

66 Blake, *Laocoön*, 1818.

67 Björkvall 2009, p. 108.

process of analysing it is less systematic than that of the previous functions.<sup>68</sup> The written annotation by Ginsberg is written in cursive and appears to be handwritten. It is informing of Ginsberg himself having written the text. The meaning-potential usually connected to handwritten text is of it being personal, traditional and handmade.<sup>69</sup> There is little which distinguishes one part of the text from another thus binding the sentence and integrating it as a whole.<sup>70</sup> In the *Laocoön* we instead find traces of the artist's occupation as an engraver. The text is less connected than with Ginsberg thus imbuing it with a more fragmented meaning-potential.<sup>71</sup> Certain words throughout the text are also bolded which can underscore stability and importance. Both the bending of written text in the *Laocoön* and the leaning typography in the Ginsberg photograph infuse the artworks with the a sense of movement.

Now that I have journeyed through the four categories of my analysis I will begin an interpretation of the results where the different semiotic resources will be brought together and examined with the help of the theoretical perspectives.

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68 Björkvall 2009, p. 100.

69 Björkvall 2009, p. 140.

70 Björkvall 2009, p. 140.

71 Björkvall 2009, p. 141.

### 3. Interpretations

Whereas we in the analysis pinpointed semiotic resources which produced singular instances of meaning-potential we now combine them in more complex ways. Here we also consider how our theoretical perspectives interact with the results.

We began the analysis with gazes as a semiotic resources and how establishing eye-contact showed divergence between the two artworks. In the *Laocoön* none of the figures looked at us but turned to one another or looked away. As a singular semiotic resource it was suggestive a low level of demand on the observer — much less so than the eye-contact by Kerouac in the Ginsberg photograph — however the nonexistent gazes in the *Laocoön* also offered the observer to study the circumstance of the artwork (the text-filled background) in a less distracted way. Whereas the eye-contact in the Ginsberg photograph displaces the text to an ancillary position by placing it under a more demanding image the semiotic modalities of the *Laocoön* interact more. The lack of interaction between the figures themselves might even help focus our attention on the more dynamic text where it moves throughout the plate. Whereas the annotated text in Ginsberg tethers the image *to* a context we find that the text in the *Laocoön* is an integral part *of* the context. This somewhat lacking integration of semiotic modalities in the Ginsberg photograph was particularly clear in the compositional analysis where the artwork was so readily divided into a high-low schema.

But consider also the cultural historical position held by the original image of the *Laocoön*. The lack of eye-contact in the Blake version could be indicative of meaning-potential but in turn we must also consider the fact that Blake did not come up with this design himself. Having first depicted the *Laocoön* in 1815 as a commissioned engraving (to accompany an article by John Flaxman in Abraham Reese's *Cyclopaedia*) it was only a few years later when he reengraved it for personal reasons that the surrounding text was added.<sup>72</sup> The *Laocoön* as a symbol was prevalent at that time (portraying a Hellenistic sculpture group rediscovered in 1506) and had been the subject of aesthetics debates of the sister-arts in the eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup> So while we can read the gazes as being offering or demanding the formal choices made by Blake are likely also influenced by the original design (where no gazes are met either).

Whereas we have a social distance to the figures in the Ginsberg photograph the *Laocoön* places us

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<sup>72</sup> James, David E., "Blake's Laocoön: A Degree Zero of Literary Production", PMLA, 1983:4, p. 226.

<sup>73</sup> McCarthy 2007, p. 7.

further away. This greater symbolic distance combined with the lack of eye-contact gives the image a rather inert quality compared to the demanding inclusiveness of the Ginsberg photo. By engraving the *Laocoön* group in entirety and positioning it a traditional frontal position Blake underscores it as a cultural object. The circumstance is a tapestry of written text which anchors the narrative process of the image in an array of statements. So the relationship between the semiotic modalities both underscore the *Laocoön* as a sculpture (which comes with its own cultural heritage) but also places it in a new circumstance and so in some way attempts to re-contextualise it.

In order to garner further insight we can consider more of the semiotic resources and how they interplay. Beginning with the visual organisation — the composition — the centrum-periphery schema appears to be the best fit in a strictly visually sense. But as we know the centrum-peripheral schema uses its central element to contextualise the surrounding elements. In the analysis I drew some conclusions from such a relationship. We found signs the the maxims which make declarations about art could be an opposition to the sculpture groups Classic origins as well as criticism of neoclassicism as a style or even an entry into the aesthetic debate propagated at that time by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. But since the *Laocoön* is emblematic of many things any single meaning of the written text would then change depending on what we associate the sculpture group with.

If we first look at the case for the plate as criticism of the sculptures lineage and connection to neoclassicism we find that it only leads to other possible meaning-potentials. In the maxims, "What we call antique gems are the gems of Aaron's breastplate" and, "The Old and New Testament are the great code of Art" as well as the retitling of the image (which reassigned it as a portrayal of Jehovah with his sons Satan and Adam, "...as they were copied from the Cherubim / of Solomon's Temple by three Rhodians, and applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium") seems indeed to be suggestive of a non-Classical but rather Hebraic origin and in turn possibly criticism of the dominant neoclassical style at that time. But since Blake lived in a particularly politicised society the fact that he criticises the dominant style could propose some level of political commentary in the *Laocoön* plate. Blake scholar Erik McCarthy makes a similar point and goes as far as suggest that Blake was criticising the failing of the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars by using the *Laocoön* as a symbol that had ideological value both for England and France in what McCarthy describes as a competition for cultural hegemony. McCarthy continues that in this context that the *Laocoön* was used since, "...the aesthetic values and principles of neoclassicism served to legitimise imperial



power."<sup>74</sup>

However the association of the *Laocoön* with aesthetic debates brings us back to Johann Winckelmann's treatise on art and more importantly Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's response to it. Though Blake's *Laocoön* is rarely considered an entry into this debate (perhaps due to the unconventional structure or the lack of mention of the *Laocoön* by name in the engraving) and if it does belong in that canon of interpretation — as I believe it does — it is not a claim made explicitly or independently in either of the modalities. But that is why we must consider Blake as a multimodal artist, or as a composite artist, who produces meaning through an amalgam of synthesised modalities, or as Blake scholar W.J.T. Mitchell describes it, "...an interaction between two vigorously independent modes of expression".<sup>75</sup> Being atypical in form we ought therefore also approach in the *Laocoön* in an atypical way.

In the essay Lessing wrote about the *Laocoön* he separated painting from poetry on the division that poetry had the power of narrative but was a slave to linearity while painting could present many things at once but only at one point in time.<sup>76</sup> We also know that Blake was likely aware of Lessing through fellow painter Henry Fuseli who held lectures about Lessing at the height of his and Blake's friendship.<sup>77</sup> It is therefore possible that the anarchistic autopsy of spatiality and linearity — the bewildering mixture of words and images — where sentences trail both horizontally and vertically (even bending along the shapes of the figures) is a formalistic criticism of Lessing's ideas. Julia M. Wright in her *Blake, Nationalism and the Politics of Alienation* makes a similar point and goes as far as calling the *Laocoön* plate almost a work of daredevilry, citing the plate as, "...Blake's cocky demonstration that he can exceed the limitations of painting and poetry delineated by Lessing [...] his *Laocoön* is a refutation of Lessing's thesis, and Fuseli's dictum [the Austrian painter's pro-classical sentiments], delivered with a flourish."<sup>78</sup>

But while the components of the written text might be partially contextualised by the central figure itself there are instances where it deviate from the central-peripheral structure. For instance the phrase, "The Angel of the Divine Presence," (written above the central male character both in English, Hebrew and Greek) has origins which are not contextualised by the sculpture group since it is a figure from Blake's wider philosophical system. It is the guise of Satan when he pretends to be

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74 McCarthy 2007, p. 68.

75 Mitchell 1978, p. 3.

76 Wright 2004, p. 6.

77 Wright 2004, p. 7

78 Wright 2004, p. 15.

God.<sup>79</sup> In the analysis the fact that the serpents struck Laocoön and his left son (which Blake renamed Satan and Jehovah) seemed incidental. But knowing that the central figure is not God but the Devil in disguise (thus the snakes only strike Satan, though in different shapes) presents a rather complex narrative which is told not only through images or text but in an exchange between the two. This position is underscored by the visual prominence of the maxim since it is larger than some of the surrounding text. Blake could also be underscoring the shapeshifting nature of the Devil by also translating the maxim into Greek and Hebrew. In the ideational metafunction we also found the possibility of a conceptual process wherein Blake might have connected the figures to symbolic words to indicate meaning-potential which is exactly what we have done here. This salmagundi of recurring themes (ranging from God and Imagination to subjects Blake opposed such as money, materialism and neoclassicism) does suggest the plate as a kind of summary of Blake's philosophical standpoints. McCarthy also proposes this and goes as far as to call it a final coda, "...a remarkable compact summation of Blake's entire literary and artistic output[...]"<sup>80</sup>

So as we have seen that compositional schemas might yield interesting meaning-potential on certain levels (since the image of the *Laocoön* figure is such a potent mediator) but that it can also be reductive of the complexity in an artwork like the *Laocoön* plate. This complexity may also be what makes the plate appear so demanding (though it presents no demands in either language or image actions) since the unconventional layout and cryptic maxims together produce a question in itself. Julia M. Wright is not wrong when describing it as a jigsaw puzzle.<sup>81</sup> The emotional demand of the turmoil and pain presented through the suffering of the *Laocoön* figures could also add to this (even at the symbolic distance Blake has placed us from them). So we find that the meaning-potential is infinitely varied depending not only on which maxims we study but also by what associations the sculpture group produces. So though I previously compared of the modality in the *Laocoön* to the Minotaur roaming the confines of its Cretan maze it may be more applicable to consider the plate a compass wherein the image of the *Laocoön* is the needle (sensitive to context and relative to both word and image associations).

The Ginsberg photograph is different. Though its figures might be more autonomous of art historical association they present a more engaging scene than that of the Trojans. A sense of inclusion is heightened by the eye-contact with Kerouac. But gazes are not only a resource for offers or demands but also function as vectors (displaying dynamism or passivity). So Kerouac

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79 Damon 1988, p. 23.

80 McCarthy 2007, p. 9.

81 Wright 2004, p. 5.

demands something of us with his gaze thus placing us in a somewhat subordinate position to him (or at least a reciprocal position as interactors). But studying vectors we find that Kerouac himself is subordinated by Burroughs gaze upon him. This is one reason why the photograph does not appear as demanding as it could have done because by placing Kerouac in an underdog position (practically turning to the observer for intervention) the demand of the surrounding elements is weakened. The image instead appears rather playful. This may also be due to how the vectors presented Burroughs and Kerouac as equal interactors even though the written text describes them in mortal combat as well as because the image actions appeared theatrical and thus rendered Kerouac's expression histrionic rather than one of real terror.

Similarly the circumstance also weakens this demand (since domestic interiors are more easily associated with family snapshots than gratuitous violence) as does the juxtaposition of strange weapons in that domestic sphere which gives the photograph a rather theatrical air. The relationship between the text and the image is also influential since the annotation by Ginsberg is a statement and as such offering rather than demanding. So the demanding image is not only weakened by other semiotic resources but also by its connection to another semiotic modality. The annotation does describe Burroughs and Kerouac fighting though wielding rather domiciliary weapons (such as a broomstick club) and goes on to describe their socialising and living together. It underscores an intimacy rather than the violence one might expect from a photograph of a brawl.

We can also consider the modality and code-orientation in the Ginsberg photograph (which we deemed as being naturalistic) where the modality was marked by high contrast, low colour saturation and blurriness. The latter two do mark modality but also work together with the written text to strengthen the artwork as a reliable documentation of reality. Ginsberg also strengthens a historical contextualisation by dating the time and place in the annotation. It is a reliability which is grounded in our presumptions of what a photograph from 1953 ought to look like (more likely to be black-and-white and if taken in a domestic sphere with a portable camera also less likely as sharp as by today's standards). So while the modality marks a deviation from the naturalistic world visually it comes across as a reliable documentary photograph. Here the semiotic modalities affect one another. The written annotation appears more likely to be true when connected to the image (since there is visual proof of the event described and because the marked modality makes it seem unlikely the image has been tampered with in an editing program). Even the circumstance of the background where the framing is slightly askew and thus imperfect emphasises this. And also since the language action in the annotation is a statement and not a question or an appeal but simply *offers* us

information we are also less likely to question it since it does not demand anything of us in return.

From a cultural historical perspective this documentary impulse is in line with Ginsberg's artistic output. In both his poetry and photography Ginsberg tended to focus the lens on himself. In such a way his photography corresponded to his poetry since both facilitated a creative outlet for combining art with autobiographical impulse. In his book *Screaming With Joy: The Life of Allen Ginsberg* author Graham Caveney places this autobiographical impulse into a larger literary tradition of American autobiographical writing reaching back to the Puritan settler, continuing past Henry David Thoreau and onward to Norman Mailer. Caveney writes of Ginsberg as taking part of, "...a tradition wherein Americans wrote using their experiences not as private memoir but as public declaration. [...] In placing his queer shoulder against America's wheel, he forces us to consider the queerness of the wheel itself."<sup>82</sup> Likewise, in her book on Ginsberg, Jane Kramer documents a conversation between poet Basil Bunting and Allen Ginsberg wherein the latter (horrified that Bunting had thrown out the unused lines from his autobiographical poem *Brigg Flats*) expressed his own attitudes to the documentation of his life, saying that,

More and more. Like I'm beginning to see my poetry as a kind of record of the times — my impressions of what's going on, like what's going on in terms of how my being responds to it. I don't know. It may not last, but I think it's maybe useful in that it helps clarify the present.<sup>83</sup>

However considering the photograph today it has surpassed the position of a personal documentation and entered into the realm of *Beat Generation* nostalgia. The cultural capital now attached to Allen Ginsberg is dependent on his integral involvement in the construction of the Beat myth. In the photograph we find traces of the associations (juxtapositions between grimness and hyper activity, male camaraderie and Felliniesque characters suspended on a wire between tragedy and comedy) which continue to fuel the Beat myth to this very day. The portrayal of a wild Kerouac and crazy Burroughs, in mortal combat so to speak, certifies them as radical personas. Even the typographical meaning-potential plays into this portrayal adding the quickness and movement of cursive handwriting. Not perfect but scribbled across the page and not preoccupied with if the observer can easily read what is written. We found in the analysis that the typographical meaning-potential of handwriting was of the text being personal as well as traditional and handmade. By not typing out the information these factors only contribute to the artwork as a historical document which predates our technological advancements.

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82 Caveney 1999, p. 3-6.

83 Kramer 1997, p. 144.

The combining semiotic modalities (the scientific detailing of facts communicating with a vigorous image of an event) also gives the artwork an anthropological edge that goes beyond the chronicling of a circle of friends. The event being not only a tussle between colleagues but a counterculture movement taking form. This anthropological air is further insinuated by the violence of the tribal weaponry (moroccan dagger and broomstick club) in the annotated text which further prompts a comparison to ethnographical film. Ethnographical film being a type of visual anthropology described as a practice where a film camera is used as,

[...] a research tool in documenting whole, or definable parts of, cultures with methodological awareness and precision [...] Precursors of ethnographic film can be seen in the earliest actualities and travel films, which often included ethnographic subjects that appealed to audiences' curiosity about this exotic and the 'primitive'.<sup>84</sup>

Ginsberg had himself only become seriously interested in the medium of photography after 1959 and the making of the film *Pull My Daisy* directed Robert Frank.<sup>85</sup> The film, not unlike the photograph, was a way of framing the Beat movement and combining creative spirits. The annotated text adds to this where it names both the writers involved and their literary works (which are underlined to underscore their importance). Without the annotated text the connection to the Beats themselves would fall away as might some of the more ritualistic overtones that are produced by the descriptions of the primitive weapons.

We have throughout the analysis and interpretation found that the semiotic modalities of the Ginsberg photograph often match. Burroughs and Kerouac bind together and thus enforce the narrative action of the visual image while the written text also binds together its components (both through syntax and by the integrative meaning-potential of the typography). However even though such matches exist (as where the modality of the photograph strengthens the meaning of the written text) the semiotic modalities ultimately remain separate from one another. While the demands may be strong and the written text well-integrated those qualities only serve to enforce the distinctive modalities rather than unify them. They influence each other rather than co-operate.

In the *Laocoön*, on the other hand, we often found the individual semiotic resources to be rather weak (nor the text or the image appear demanding in the analysis) and the typographical meaning-

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84 Kuhn, Annette & Westwell, Guy. *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, Oxford University Press, London 2012 p. 143.

85 Pivano, Fernanda, *Allen Ginsberg: 108 Images*, Umberto Allemandi & Co, Turin 1995, p. 8.

potential was fragmented. But Blake carefully intertwines the two semiotic modalities and so the meaning-potential is produced by the interaction between them. The written text even physically interacts with the visual image. So while the semiotic modalities in the Ginsberg photograph simply present one descriptive text and one narrative photograph the *Laocoön* presents a cohesive whole. To remove one from the other would be akin to harvesting a vital organ while dividing the semiotic modalities in Ginsberg would be relatively easy in comparison. The fragmentation (noted in the typographical analysis) and the integration of modalities which themselves are rich in meaning-potential is what makes the *Laocoön* the more communicative of the two. Though less explicitly engaging it presents a certain level of open-endedness which allows for greater production of meaning-potential.

Now that I have concluded the interpretive chapter of this essay I will draw some conclusions of the results as well as consider how and in what ways this approach has been useful in the analysis of the communicative relationship between words and images in art.

## 4. Conclusion

In the *Laocoön* Blake produces a commentary on art, politics as well as his own philosophical opinions by weaving in a cultural symbol into his own ideological fabric while Ginsberg instead documents those closest to him — people integral to his art and his own identity — and then later annotates and presents this souvenir as rather more anthropological token; a relic of counter culture Americana counterculture from a wilder freer past. Blake situates the very emblem of aesthetic debate in a frame of his own writing — a new context — while Ginsberg frames his very own context by focusing the lens on his own social circle and romantic entanglements.

To summarise the interpretation we found that there was no lack of meaning-potential in the multimodal relationship in either of the artworks though they do produce that potential in very different ways. In the artwork by Ginsberg written text was used to connect the observer to the figures in the photograph (which strengthened a connection to a historical context detailed in the written annotation) and at first that appeared to make it more engaging than the *Laocoön*. However Blake instead integrates two modalities which contain a multitude of individual meanings and thus invites the observer into his work by a richer availability of meaning-potential.

At the beginning of this essay it was not clear if adapting Björkvall's theories would be fruitful for the analysis and interpretation of multimodal artworks but it has now become clear that, though originally intended for research centred on language and communication, it can be a pliable and effective approach to the field of art as well. Particularly the bringing together of the many separate instances of meaning-potential throughout the analysis and allowing them to cross-fertilise in the interpretative chapter has rewarded many interesting results.

The approach brought to light very different sides of either artwork but could perhaps have gained more interesting results had more divergent artworks been chosen. In the future other theoretical perspectives could also be implemented in order to produce more varied results. While the main theoretical perspectives implemented in this essay (cultural historical, sociosemiotic among others) were invaluable in the contextualisation of meaning-potential produced by the *Laocoön* plate and the Ginsberg photograph it could be interesting as well as advantageous to perhaps add feminist perspectives in order to see how different multimodal elements work together to create hierarchal structures both visually and textually.

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