

THE TRADITION OF COMPARISON OF ARTS

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Summary

This chapter presents a history of the relationship among the different arts, emphasizing in this scenario, the role yield by literature. From Renaissance theories onwards and the resumption of the antique classic tradition which occurred over this period. The text presents the transformation of the concept of relationship among arts from the French classicism, to the 18th century, emphasizing the *Laocoon* treatise by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). The author also presents in a summarized fashion the circumstances of the debate during romanticism up to the mediatic turn that occurred at the end of the 20th century. This turn meant a radical change in the history of this issue.

1. The humanistic *doctrine of ut pictura poesis* and the issue of the competition between the arts.

"There is such a proportion between the imagination and the effect as there is between the shadow and the umbrageous body. And the same proportion exists between poetry and painting because poetry uses letters to put things into the imagination, and painting renders things really outside the eye so that the eye receives the similitudes as if they were natural; and poetry renders what is natural without that similitude, and [things] do not pass to the *impressiva* [a term, probably coined by Leonardo] by way of the visual virtue as [it happens in] painting." (da Vinci 1992: 179s.) With these words, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) opened his debate against poetry and in favor of painting: while the first was conceived only as a shadow of the object, represented through letters, which strived to reach the imagination, to painting he attributed the possibility of *really* posing things before the eyes, as if they were *natural*, as if they were *nature* itself. It becomes clear in this statement, to what extent the *paragone* – an Italian term meaning

“comparison”, but in the context of the arts implied also “competition” – is an issue that encompasses a) a reflection on mimesis or “imitation” in the arts, b) the subject matter of the work of art (the real denoted) and c) the mode of reception of the *medium* of each art. Here are three basic elements involved in communication: the work, the denoted and the receiver. The emitter or author of the work, is not usually accounted for in theories of comparison of the arts, with the exception of cases that delve into a theory of “imagination”, that is, of the role it plays in our aesthetic activity and its connections with our cognitive faculties. Through the tradition of the *paragone* and through the theory of the many forms of reception of each art, one may be able to scan the history of the concepts of imagination, that is, the history of the structuring of one of the most mysterious parts of our mental apparatus. This history shall culminate at the end of the 18th century in the special function that Kant as well as the romantics has reserved to it.

The history of the *paragone* of the arts is also a history that begins with Humanism and its attempt to “restore” Antiquity, which means to build a modern Europe, from the ruins of texts, constructions and images. If one comes to think of “Modern Age” from the renaissance Humanistic point of view, one shall see that this is the age of the *paragoni*: because it is the age of construction of a new kind of man; and any identity is only constituted by means of dialog with the Other. It is easy to understand the articulation of the many levels of competition, which coexist in Modernity: competition between Modernity and Antiquity, between nations, between languages and between the arts. All of them are articulate through the notion of *mimesis*, since to say *mimesis* is to say *translation* and *ut pictura poesis*. Imitation of the world solely exists by means of its translation, of its re-codification, whether by means of words or by means of new images. In the concept of art in the Renaissance – of which in a certain way many fundamental dogmas remain intact until the 18th century – all arts derive from presupposition of the *mimesis* that unify them.

The competition between poetry and the visual arts could only develop due to the acceptance of *similarities* between these two fields of arts. The motto of the *ut pictura poesis*, employed to identify the tradition of the translatability of the arts, derives from Horace’s famous poetic passage.

Poetry resembles painting [*ut pictura poesis*]. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance. This one prefers a darker vantage point that one wants to be seen in the light since it feels no terror before the penetrating judgment of the critic. This pleases only once, that will give pleasure even if we go back to it ten times over.

Horace, *Ars Poetica* 361-365. (Translated by Leon Golden, in:
<http://www.english.emory.edu/DRAMA/ArsPoetica.html>)

Renaissance artists never attained a set of precepts and rules as rich as the set of poetic rhetorical treatises inherited from Antiquity. They learned to think art from the theoretical framework of the letters. Roger de Piles (1636-1709) lamented the fact that both Antique treatises about painting, and the paintings themselves, had been destroyed. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), the first renaissance painter who decided to lessen the painter’s disadvantage regarding poets, based his *On Painting (De Pictura, 1435)* on

rhetorical and theoretical works of antique poetry. The theory of painting, as a discourse on image, was only able to be articulated from the *logos* – the sister/enemy field of poetry. Thus, Alberti followed Cicero in his definition of the aims of poetry (the *docere, delectare, movere*) as well as the peculiar ciceronian component elements of discourse, which can be found in his definition of painting (with the exception of *refutatio: exordium, narratio, confirmatio, peroratio*). The subject is also divided into: *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, actio* and *memoria*. In his translation to the visual arts he obtained: *circumscriptio, compositio, receptio luminum*. (Leclercle 1987: 13)

The theory of arts emerges from a double dependence to poetry: firstly it depends on rhetorical and poetic treatises; secondly – and in great part deriving from this fact – the very conception of painting and sculpture in the beginning was highly linguistic. In order to work with images, painting is submitted to precepts and above all to concepts inherited and translated from literature. While poetry was sporadically compared to painting in the Antique by theoreticians such as Aristotle, Horace or Quintillion – as well as in Horace's poetic verse mentioned above –, in Modernity these sporadic comparisons, which had a purely illustrative role, gained an importance that did not exist in their original contexts.

The painter “submits” himself to the tutelage of the *logos* in various circumstances: 1) as an intersemiotic *translator* of rhetoric and poetic concepts, and therefore as a theoretician himself, and 2) as *creator* of paintings mainly dedicated to the representation of *narratives*, i.e. of the *logos* and of History. The painter makes use of the poet's *history* for his invention. An hierarchy of arts (from historical painting, to portrait, landscape, genre painting and still-life painting) starts to outline itself in the 15th century, and gains an extremely austere character with French classicism. Historical painting holding a favored position in this hierarchy, also renders evidence of the valorization of the Idea over the material elements in art. By virtue of the supremacy of *inventio*, it could be possible to state the translatability among the arts.

Thirdly, in order to accomplish this new position, the painter ought to be a *pictor doctus*, a copy of the *doctus poeta* (an erudite with a wide background in *reading*): Without this extensive knowledge he could not do right to the *decorum* or *convenevolezza* doctrine, which consisted in the prescription, emphasized by Horace, and others, of a necessary convenience among the many components of representation, such as age, gender, human type and geographical origin of the represented person. Finally, the painter is submitted to a strict code of social rules, regarding moral, political and religious aspects. In this latest sense, painting becomes an *illustration*, a more immediate and uncomplicated didactic way of reaching what writing cannot accomplish; one ought to remember the fundamental role attributed to it during the Reform and counter-Reform. Since the Renaissance, painting has been in a certain manner, a painting of and about words, an icon-logy. Its aim is also to bring to the mind of the beholder the words that it contains in itself: a painting wants to be read, translated into commentaries; it wants to become a text once again.

It was taken for granted, that there is a structural similarity between painting and poetry that would allow a transposition of the *ornamenta* of the first to the second. However, in the treatises on painting, the comparison to poetry goes beyond the plain adaptation of

concepts and codes; it also developed a historiography (of art), which attempted to accomplish a specular history of the two arts. A correspondence between the main characters of each of them was created: Zeuxis was seen as a Homer, Michelangelo as Dante, Giotto as Petrarch. Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538-1592) in his *Treatise on the Art of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura, 1584)*, not only stated – as Alberti – that the representation of History was the most elevated aim of a painter, but also established a clear parallel between the History of the two arts: Leonardo was seen as the “translator of Homer’s animation and dignity”, Caravaggio, the translation of “Virgil’s impulse and greatness”, Michelangelo of “Dante’s deep obscurity”, Raphael of “Petrarch’s pure majesty” and “Tiziano of Ariosto’s diversity”. In turn, Alberti established the correspondences surface/letter, members/syllables, and body/words.

In this series of mirrors concepts inherited from philosophy, Neo-Platonism above all, are also reflected with its opposition between the eye and the spirit (visible/Idea). This became a commonplace in renaissance Neo-Platonism, with its pantheist concept of the world, claiming sight as the central function of the senses. This centrality existed because the world was seen as in itself a divine *writing* and our eyes as the doors which accessed knowledge. (Gombrich 1948) The painter should not represent the individual object; this did not matter, it wasn’t worth representing. He sought at representing the macrocosm by means of the microcosm. Painting searched for the universal, for the *type*, that is, for the absolute Beauty. The sensual sphere is despised by the humanist theory and by French classicism, the factual element of art (the *elocutio*) is irrelevant in a certain way; the Ideas are what really matter.

However, during this period the painters’ (and sculptors’) self-assurance was still trying to overcome the prejudice concerning manual labor, inherited from Antiquity. Modern painters had to underplay the disapproval of mechanical arts stated in the works of Aristotle for instance, and elevate art to the dignity of a liberal art. Leonardo da Vinci’s theory of the *paragone* ought to be understood in this context. It attribute a central role to sight such as rarely was seen in writings since Antiquity.

2. Leonardo da Vinci’s Paragone

Following this brief digression of an introductory nature – let us come back to Leonardo da Vinci’s citation. As has been seen, da Vinci wanted to invert the traditional hierarchy of the arts, which established the supremacy of poetry over painting, reasoning in terms of a greater *immediacy* and *strength* of the “signs” used in painting. Despite the fact that he does not yet employ the term “sign”, we can already perceive the future division that will be established between the natural signs (of art) and the arbitrary or artificial signs (language as sounds and writing employed in poetry). Leonardo wants to convince us of the “virtues” of vision, the “*virtù visiva*”: painting is able to, by its own means, “effectively pose things before [our] eyes”, “as if they were natural”. However, this “posing before the eyes” is also a codified effect drawn from rhetorics and poetics of Antiquity, related to the concept of *enargea*, the *evidentia* of Latin rhetoric. The *immediacy* of effect that penetrates through the “*virtù visiva*” is, for Leonardo, a characteristic of human physiology. The objects named by the poet reach the *impressive* “in a very confused and very slow manner”. (Da Vinci: 221)

The “*virtù visiva*” not only is considered to be more vivid. It is also seen as more universal – also in this point superior to the particular languages of each “nation”. Painting “needs no interpreters of different languages as letters do. [Painting] satisfies the human species immediately, not differently than things produced by nature do, and it satisfies not only the human species but also other animals...”. (Da Vinci: 187) The conclusion which Da Vinci derives from this fact, is entirely unfavorable to poetry: to it remains the representation of words as graphic signs: “Painting represents the Works of nature to the [common] sense with more truth and certitude than words or letters do, but letters present words to the [common] sense with more truth than painting does.” (da Vinci: 187) Sight is for Leonardo “the most noble sense”, the one closest to reality: “The imagination [*la immaginazione*] does not see as excellently as the eye sees”, (da Vinci: 199) the imagined things remain for a short time in our *memory*. Once a painter aims at sight, he shall always be ahead of the poet in *imitation* – and the *mimesis* is, evidently, for this era, the ultimate end of painting. “And if you, poet, want to describe the Works of nature with your simple profession, by feigning different places and the forms of various things you will be overcome by the painter’s infinitely [greater] proportion of power.” (da Vinci: 197) – As shall be seen, this negative conception of the poetic description and the valorization of the “immediate” presence of painting (i.e. the valorization of *enargea*), will remain until the 18th century and shall constitute a fundamental principle in the structuring of Lessing’s *Laocoon*.

By virtue of this immediacy, painting is able to represent beauty, which greatest feature is “the divine proportionality of the members composed together at one time.” (da Vinci: 249) For Leonardo “the poet, when he describes the beauty or ugliness of a body, demonstrates it to you member by member, and in different times”, while “the painter makes you see everything at once.” (Da Vinci: 247) Addressing *enargea* as the aim of all arts, Leonardo makes it explicit that *pictura* should be the ideal of *poesis* and not the contrary, as had been stated up to then.

Leonardo da Vinci also praises the speed of reception of painting over the reception of poetry. He admits that the only thing which is missing in painting are sounds; nevertheless: “Therefore, we will say that poetry is the science that most highly serves the blind, and painting does the same for the deaf. Yet painting is more honorable to the same [extent] that it acts through the better sense.” (da Vinci: 203) Leonardo further asks himself: “Who would not want to lose his [sense of] hearing, as well as smell and touch, before losing his [sense of] sight?” (da Vinci: 202) Even the adage which Plutarch attributed to Simonides of Ceos (c.556 BC-468 BC): “painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking picture” is contradicted by Leonardo in his immovable defense of painting: “And if you were to say that painting is a mute poem, is not [poetry] itself mute if there is no one to recite it, or to explain what it represents?” (da Vinci: 207) Furthermore, since art aims *mimesis* in its most extreme sense of a new presentation of the represented object, painting is the queen of the arts as well as of historiography: it is the most exact in representation, and its understanding is less tedious, while poetry is just a “blind painting” (da Vinci: 208) it lacks the accomplishment of images. A person “born blind will never understand anything that the poet demonstrates.” (da Vinci: 215) Also the consequences that da Vinci infers from this line of argument, will be fundamental for the tradition that was later addressed by G.E. Lessing in his *Laocoon*: since poetry only reaches the “naturalness” of painting when it is a dramatic poem –

Lessing shall come to the same conclusion: “The duty of the poet is to feign the conversation of people, and only these words are presented naturally to the sense of hearing because only these words are created naturally by the human voice, and in all other respects he is outdone by the painter.” (da Vinci: 203) The representation (*mimesis*) encompasses Nature as a paradigm.

In his *paragone* Leonardo still discusses the reasons for the exclusion of painting from the hall of the liberal arts and tries to prove that it is as noble as music and astrology – and superior to poetry – and that it therefore should be included as liberal art as well. He seeks the valorization of the artist’s *mental* work, emphasizing his *inventio* and underplaying his *dispositio* or *elocutio*: another characteristic feature that makes the dependant relationship of the pictorial theories concerning the rhetorical explicit. This underpinning of the invention was a central dogma of the *ut pictura poesis* doctrine of that time, which shall only be questioned with the development of the theory of *reception* of the arts in the 18th century. It is only by virtue of this valorization of invention, in opposition to the execution of the work itself, that the translatability among the arts could be stated. If it is the Idea that matters, the means to reach it are changeable. There is a clear metaphysic conception of signs which implies a detachment of the *signifiant* and the *signifié*. Leonardo’s “primary semiotics” still understands the medial element, the “sign”, as something external, which plays no role in the construct of meaning. (Kohle 1989: 13)

With the intent of praising painting, Leonardo transfers to sculpture all the blemish of being a manual art: “Sculpture is not science but a very mechanical art, because it generates sweat and bodily fatigue in the executant.” (da Vinci: 257) – Despite his effort to revert the rigid structure of the liberal arts by raising painting above poetry, Leonardo’s undertaking did not imply the overcoming of the humanist paradigm of *ut pictura poesis*. In fact, it did not reach further than Alberti, which means that he defended his art with “tooth and nail” yet from the point of view of the familiar field it share with poetry. There is only competition, I repeat, where there is space for equality, where there is ground for intersection. This common ground not only involved *mimesis*, but a whole plethora of coded precepts borrowed from the rhetoric and the art of poetic. In some points, however, it’s undeniable that Leonardo stood alone, especially in his radical defense of naturalism and in his defense of *virtù visiva*. But even his naturalism is full of idealism; since also for him, painting addressed the universal, the typical. The universality that he attributed to sight in opposition to the particularity, which would be connected to *logos*, in a certain way goes against the humanistic concept of language as a universal mean of communication, but was an essential part of the body of neo-platonic ideas embodied by the painters of his time. His ideas spread, even if in a restricted manner in the beginning, and many subsequent theoreticians defended similar thesis. As stated by Lecercle (1987: 43), among other merits, by means of his writings, Leonardo was the first to set up a general comparative theory of the mimetic arts. Very few followers embraced his project with the same persistence as he did, and his theory would only revive and develop to an elaborate extent in the 18th century.

3. The French classicism: transforming painting into scripture

In the 17th century, authors as André Felibien (1619-1695) and Charles Le Brun (1619-

1690) further developed the humanistic doctrines related to *ut pictura poesis*. The typification of gesture, facial expression, of dress, etc., more and more submitted painting to a number of rules, nearly all following the precept of the representation of History. The different genres of painting were distributed over a strict hierarchy, which ranged from the representation of still life, to landscapes, to the painters of live animals, to reach the painting of men (“the most perfect work of God on earth”), where the painter became an imitator of God. However, portrait painting did not constitute the prime of art. In order to reach it, one had to surpass the representation of only one person to the representation of a group of people, that is, “it should deal with history and fable; it should represent the great actions as much as Historians would, or the pleasant themes such as poets would”. The escalade continues, reaching the “allegoric” representation of “great men”. (Félibien 1725: V, 310) – Rensselaer Lee synthesized the situation of painting in this period with the following words: “in applying the rules of poetry to painting critics like Félibien and Le Brun had so intellectualized the pictorial art that its primary Character as a visual art capable of affecting the human imagination only through its initial power over the sense of sight, was largely neglected.” (1940: 254)

Le Brun made a famous speech praising Poussin’s painting “The Israelites gathering the Manna” for not only being able to unite all expressions represented around a central theme, but also for having reached a temporal unit in the fashion of a theatre play: with its opening, middle and closing. Poussin himself, when he had finished this work, sent it to Chantelou, requesting his friend to compare it to chapter twenty of the *Exodus*: “Read the story and the painting, in order to know if each detail is appropriate to the subject.” (Apud Lee 1940: 224) The work was created to be read and compared to the reference text. Everything in the picture should be adequate to the expression of its biblical theme.

Poussin, who probably never read Descartes, defended ideas which were quite close to those of the philosopher, especially concerning his despising of the senses and his valorization of knowledge under the auspices of reason. Precisely this valorization of reason is found in Boileau’s *Poetic Art*, a small treatise on poetics, which profoundly influenced French classicism.

This rationalism manifested itself in the language conception of the time: if for Descartes there existed no hindrance for translating our thoughts into words, for Le Brun the *spiritual part* (*partie spirituelle*) is regarded as independent of signs both in painting, and in language in general. The ideas are universal, only words – seen as labels attached to objects – change from language to language. Thoughts are independent of their *medium*: once again we find here an absolute translatability, i.e. we are confronted with the paradigm of *ut pictura poesis*. In terms of the theory of translation, this is the baseline for the conception of translation as *belles infidèles*: the final text is beautiful, because it is capable of perfectly adapting the message of the original text to the language of arrival. It is only inaccurate in respect to the form and the words of the text of origin. The paradigm of *beauty* goes hand in hand with the idea of universal *logos*. (See Zuber 1995)

Language is split between its rational and material element. It is believed that the first one is independent from the second. Along this line of thought, Le Brun, values the

drawing in detriment of *colors*: drawing corresponds to the *logic line* of thought, and coloring to a “mere” ornamental and sensual element of language – the metaphors – and, therefore are dispensable. During his *Conference on the general and individual expression* (*Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière*) he reaffirms the existence of a symmetry and an immediate and clear mirror-like correspondence, between the signifier and signified. Le Brun wants to codify “the universal language of gesture”. The subject as body is a malleable substance – similar to wax – that adapts to emotions and promptly translates them. He describes the *types* of expression of each emotion. In this sense, the head is regarded as the most important part; it is a *raccoursi* (summary) of the body. Each feature of the face should remit to a passion, in the same manner as a grapheme automatically calls for a phoneme during its reading. The individual does not matter, only the schematizing character of the *logos* is of relevance. Each part of the body and face receives an assigned place, according to its ability in expressing codified passions in the most *clear* and *direct* manner, thus, allowing it to be translated into determined *names*. The eyebrows are the most important feature of this typology, due to its simplicity – proximate to that of the traces of writing. (Démoris 1986: 51 s.) Herewith, painting gains a kind of dictionary, of which letters are these typified expressions. Thus the universality, which Leonardo claimed for painting, would be conquered for it – even if by means of its submission to the model of writing, which for Leonardo, as has been seen, represents the opposite of nature.

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Márcio Seligmann-Silva holds a Ph.D. from the Free University of Berlin, a post-doctorate from f author of the following books: *Ler o Livro do Mundo*. *Walter Benjamin: romantismo e crítica poética* (Iluminuras/FAPESP, 1999), *Adorno* (PubliFolha, 2003) and *O Local da Diferença* (Editora 34, 2005); edited the following volumes: *Leituras de Walter Benjamin*: Annablume, 1999), *História, Memória, Literatura: o Testemunho na Era das Catástrofes* (UNICAMP, 2003) and *Palavra e Imagem, Memória e Escritura* (Argos, 2006) and co-edited *Catástrofe e Representação* (Escuta,2000). Translated works from Walter Benjamin, G.E. Lessing, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, J. Habermas, among others. Many of his essays have been published in books and magazines in Brazil as well as overseas.