

Perspectives on Imagery A Text-Image Complementary Relationship

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Abstract

The work of art exposes the soul of the artist, but it also brings order in the existential chaos. The one that has to complete it has to go through an artistic transformation, travelling to other spaces and times. This happens in Leonardo da Vinci's famous work of art, "The Last Supper" which, having a great complexity of symbols and significations, has always been a source of inspiration for other artists and arts (literature, film, photography), interested not necessarily in the biblical theme, but especially in that particular mise-en-place. The proposed study shows the way in which both renewing art and perceiving it becomes possible and presents the most accurate means of drawing the viewer inside the magical circle of creation. The theme especially aims at the complementary text-image relationship, extended to various verbal or nonverbal arts.

Keywords: The Last Supper, imagery, image, arts, creation

Artistic and theoretical syntheses are always temporary, but they maintain their value through repeated, more complex revisions. Lessing classifies arts according to the means of the realization criterion, as fluent or stable, successive and simultaneous. A classification of the distinct arts belongs to Kant, who ranks them by the word (poetry and rhetoric) or by the gesture (architecture, sculpture, painting). In reality, arts permanently merge, leading to a unification that fills the existential emptiness, while the beholder feels more intensely, more thoroughly, introducing him into the world of "beauty".

Sociologists and aestheticians support the ubiquity of image in everyday life, because an image appears to be easier to perceive than a word, the writing of Gutenberg being replaced by television, cinematography and video. The introduction of the image in communication is not a novelty; a look *en-arrière* sends us to the pictographic type of writing, to the Egyptian hieroglyphics, represented through beings or things. To make a distinction between word communication and image communication, one needs good knowledge of the field, otherwise, this hard work would not lead to a concrete result.

The Dutch sculptor Schasfoort supports teaching visual communication in school "as a second mother tongue" (INSEA Congress, Lisbon, 1994). By placing the image in front of the word, the artist underlines the existence of a history of

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facts and culture. Closely following painting and sculpture, the silent film has been labeled as a universal art, because, in English "I see" actually means "I understand". All artists want to bring into existence through serene images delicacy, transcendence and beauty. But a work of art is not just a classification of the world through which the artist's soul is exposed; it is the product of an arrangement; the anchorage from life to art marks the walk to another existential order. Inside a unit, all the elements of art are linked together and determine one another. A work of art leads to unexpected effects on the beholder and makes the art lover have forever renewed expectations. Due to an accurate retrospective, the art admirer can follow the evolution of Leonardo da Vinci's work of art, *The Last Supper*, whose meanings still compete in aesthetic perception.

Leonardo da Vinci's famous work of art, a mural painting, in tempera and oil, is painted on one of the walls of the dining room of Santa Maria delle Grazie church in Milan. Measuring 460x880 cm, the painting of the Florentine artist, complex through its multiple symbols and significations, is the most duplicated painting in brushwork, photography, movie scenes, not necessarily recalling the Supper itself, but more precisely the mise-en-place designed by Leonardo (1st Addendum).

The harmony of colors and the arrangement of proportions" make the image sing", an aggregate of emotions transmitted by the exquisite work of da Vinci. Plastic art is accomplished through contemplation, a sequence of scenes and the registry overlapping that lead to open perspectives. Due to a synthetic, global perspective, the image thematically enters the scriptural scene of Christ's Last Supper, the way it is described in the Gospel of John (13:21). Da Vinci does not avoid the strictness of logical thinking, and, based on an analytical view, one can notice in the geometrical center (at the cross-bracing) an essential element of the composition - Jesus Christ. Though not consciously perceived, this center acts upon the beholder, giving him balance, the same as it gives balance to the image itself. In da Vinci's Last Supper, the geometric centre is in unison with the main interest centre and is placed on Jesus' forehead, the key-character, placed off three windows, an allusion to the Holy Trinity, the background being represented by the sky.

The existing decorative elements, not to be unvalued, do not replace the expressive faces of the apostles, amazed by Jesus' confession: "I truly speak to you, that one of you will betray Me" (Mathew 26, 23; John 13, 21). In this iconic spectacle, the image of the apostate Judas is easy to notice, a solitary posture, like Messiah himself, a fact that adds to the drama of the work of art; in contrast with the disquietude of the others, Jesus' presence brings calm and balance, and his opened palms mean inside tranquility, an open invitation to easiness and resignation. The compulsory interpretation imposed by da Vinci leads the beholder to the magistral image of Jesus, separated from the others due to his serenity and acceptance of what had already been established. As regards the

geometry of the painting, the painter allocates the elements of the painting, directing visual observation on the forms and the main character, obtaining closure or remoteness, from the big picture to the panoramic picture: the apostles divided in four groups, each group made of three members, equally placed to the left and right of Jesus, Jesus Himself in the center. The entire group is disposed on one single plan, in the background – the ideal world – the opening that allows us to see the sky, down – the earthly elements – the table companions. On a more profound examination of the painting, the art lover is attracted by different geometrical surfaces, from the bottom of the room to the forefront, while the white color of the table cloth and the blue of the sky retouch the murmur of the shapes. The monotony of the composition is avoided by the distinct salience of the profiles and of their dramatic expression: amazement, terror, anxiety, guilt, turmoil, Messiah's face is enlightened by the blue of the horizon which insidiously acts on the subconscious of the spectator, offering the impression of tranquility and divine protection.

Examining the details of the painting, full of symbolic meanings, one cannot miss out Jesus' chromatic, different from that of the apostles, in red (it produces tension as it awakes the congenial system) and blue (it calms down, invading the congenial system), a balanced chromatic unified by the three windows in the back, a symbol of opening in/towards divinity. Jesus is painted without a halo and beard, very different from the traditional iconographic image, while the apprentices, noticeably fidgety and exaggerated in gestures, are painted in a naturalist manner. Also, researchers are trying to understand the painter's choice in food that does not correspond to the Bible (bread, fish, salt, wine, citrus fruit), or the salt cellar spread in front of Judas, or his empty plate, or the reason there is leaven bread there. Without encouraging the various interpretations which are more or less relevant, the conclusion seems to be the same: the painting is full of conflicting, ambivalent meanings and symbols; the work of art is still voided of religious meaning.

An arch over time is needed in order to remember that *The Last Supper* in the field of iconography has appeared in Christian art very early, since the time of the Roman catacombs. The first representations were based on symbols: bread, fish, vine, table, holy cup. After the 4th century, the scene gained powerful religious and artistic meanings. The scene is painted in the Holy Altar, as the Sacrament of the Apostles; the six placed at the right of Jesus receive the bread, His body, the other six, at the left, His blood – the symbol of the holy cup. The holy sacrament represents a dialogue with God, The Holy Thursday *Gloria in excelsis* calls upon the parishioners, by saying: "From the food of the Master and from His immortal feast, come, believers, to a high place, bearing in mind thrifty thoughts, to alleviate ourselves." (Mathew 28, 20)

In the Orthodox iconography, the same scene takes place around a semicircular table; all the characters face the beholder, a fact that facilitates the

communion with the believers (2nd Addendum). In this scene, too, the eye cannot avoid Jesus, depicted a little bigger than the others, a fact that is not surprising at all. Jesus is the only character wearing a halo, a divine sign, the others being deprived of it, and Judas being easily noticeable because of his treacherous gesture. The same as in other representations, the faces of the prentices give away their amazement towards the words of Messiah. Judas, placed on the left, dips the bread in a plate placed far from his reach, coming apart from the homogeneous group, a movement accompanied by Jesus' line: "The one that has eaten from the same bowl as me will be the one to betray me." The details complete the work's message: Jesus' clothes painted in blue make us think of the fight between the sky and the earth, blue and white fighting together against red and green, the same way the confrontation between Saint George and the griffin is represented in the Christian iconography. The same fleck, but a darker one, somehow incumbent, is used when painting the canopy and it expresses the detachment from the values of this world and the lift of the uncaged soul towards God.

Undoubtedly, da Vinci, through his work of art, continues to cause numerous challenges, full of symbols and significations, the same way Da Vinci's Code, written by Dan Brown, does. However, a special attention should be given to the movie *Viridiana* (1961) directed by the Spanish director Bunuel, that remakes the scene of the Last Supper, replacing Jesus and his apostles with a grotesque group, in the middle of which a blind beggar is triumphantly placed (3rd Addendum). The movie deals with the theme of debasement of the heroine in the title, criticizing church, too, transposed in good will. The scene of the orgiastic feast, on the background of the rhetorician Mesia de Händel, intercepts the tension between chaos and order, decay and grandeur. The cinematographic art of the 1960's - 1970's startles with some of the directors' lack of inhibition, whose radical techniques and language have been retained in the world of movie. The mystery and the irresistible, the attributes of the European avant-garde, constantly accompany three iconic figures: Michelangelo Antonioni - with the sensation of time alienation and control, Ingmar Bergman - through his philosophical profoundness and Luis Bunuel - through his surrealistic image of the bourgeoisie. Along his constant obsession of blurring the boundaries of freedom, Bunuel consolidates his unique style towards a somewhat discrepant display of the real world, breaking the already famous classical paradigms.

In *Viridiana*, it seems that the Spanish director brings the world of movie in the street, among usual people, allowing them to freely act in order to be clearly depicted at their worst. Not by chance, the group of tramps, a bunch of feeble-minded people, is to be got off on the right foot, by Viridiana, a pious young woman and a future nun. The gentleness of this woman will hustle against the violence and brutality of this grotesque group that, even worse, will dishonor her. Bidding defiance to the sick humor of the movie, the scene of the famous feast can be unbound starting with the simple positioning of the blind man, the omphalos -

a false master of the earthly equilibrium, that sets into sightless conflict the various forces of nature and reason, a conflict that has the role to settle things down, by giving them a new life, a new purpose. Therefore, Viridana, the representative of order and equilibrium, will lose when confronted with this dirty gang, because evil, in all its dimensions, cannot be eradicated by one particular enlightened mind. She herself will be the victim of perdition; few saints cannot bury such a vast darkness. It is not parody and cynicism that bring the importance of the climax of the movie presenting the famous scene of the Last Supper, but the hidden message of the director addressed to the clergymen, generally speaking, regarding human condition: order and harmony can be overturn at any time, the boundary between value and nihilism is feeble, religion can measure and verify anytime, each person's Credo.

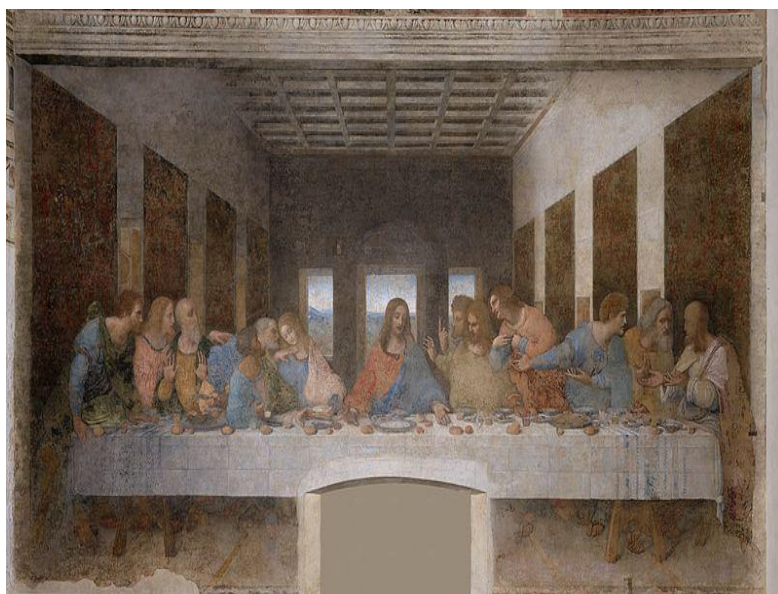
Da Vinci's fresco can be found in modern painting, too, (*The First Supper* - Susan Dorothea White) or in the field of publicity, the case of Marithé și François Girbaud being well known, artists who have chosen an original version in order to promote their business. The advertisement designed to represent it, considered to be a parody of the Supper, has been prohibited after the decision of the Court, "*Croyances et libertés*" and the Conference of the Bishops of France. The image corresponds to that by da Vinci through the positioning of the twelve female characters and one male character, photographed from the back, replacing the apostles with women. The table, voided of table posts, around which the twelve young women sit, Jesus Himself being represented by a female character, undoubtedly sends to the role women have in the world and in the religious field. It renders the image of the woman in the modern times (the presence of a radio in the painting), the impact it has on the world of fashion (the characters wear woman clothes, the male character is displayed from the back) and the woman's creative force to support the Universe's equilibrium. A woman is situated in the middle of the painting, and underneath there is a dove, the symbol of peace and divinity, which rests on a hand that does not belong to any of the characters already depicted. Briefly put, it could be a direct reference to da Vinci's message, a signature of the painter or the hand of divinity (4th Addendum).

The gates of art remain wide open. The constant recursion to the past, by simply admiring the painting, shows that value always gains new meanings and by redefining itself, it lives in the most sensitive of hearts. Even through fragments, art keeps an order that characterizes the human being inside its religious, artistic or social life.

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ANNEX 1



ANNEX 2



ANNEX 3



ANNEX 4

